

Religious Conversion and Spiritual Transformation in Sociology and Social Work

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Abstract

This article discusses the relationship between religious conversion and both the social science of sociology and the profession of social work. After outlining the concept of religious conversion from both a secular and a Christian perspective and touching on spiritual transformation, I discuss how these concepts have been treated from a sociological perspective, and then review their connection and application to social work practice, theory, and research. Curiously, even though religion and spirituality are now often discussed in social work, the concepts of religious conversion and spiritual transformation have found almost no entrance into the field, unlike in sociology. This paper documents my effort to understand why this is the case, and then explores arguments for and against the use of these concepts in social work practice, theory, and research.

Keywords: religious conversion, spiritual transformation, spirituality, sociology, social work, spiritual competence, disciplinary differences

I have been interested in religious conversion for some time, questioning why people leave religion for another, why they convert to a specific religion instead of another, or why they become religious without having a religious background at all. For some time, I conducted research on religious conversion from a social scientific background, and despite my background in social work, this research was based mainly in the sociology of religion.

In recent years, I have found my way back to the social work profession, with a research focus on homelessness and poverty, faith-based organizations, and religion and spirituality. Within these broader themes, I am currently interested in how spiritual and religious tools utilized by different faith-based shelters can support those affected by homelessness when they take steps out of their present situations.

In this article, I discuss the relationship of religious conversion and the slightly broader concept of spiritual transformation with both the social science of sociology and the profession

of social work. Thus, I will first outline the concept of religious conversion, discuss how it has been treated from a sociological perspective, and then review its connection and application to social work practice, theory, and research. Curiously, even though religion and spirituality are now often discussed in social work, the concepts of religious conversion and spiritual transformation have found almost no entrance into the field, unlike in sociology. I will investigate why this is the case, and then explore arguments for and against its use in social work practice, theory, and research.

What are Religious Conversion and Spiritual Transformation?

The term “religious conversion” is often described as a sharp turn (Gillespie 1991) or important change in religious belief. But scholars do not generally agree on one definition, and there are many different takes on this concept (e.g., Snook, Williams & Horgan 2019; Rambo 1993; see also Jindra 2014).

The distinctions we commonly find in the social scientific literature include sudden versus gradual conversions, conversions involving large versus minor changes, crisis versus process conversions, and conversions due to network influence or personal agency (e.g., Bankston et al. 1981; Rambo 1993; Richardson 1985; Snow and Machalek 1984). In this context, let us look at a couple of definitions. For example, Gooren (2010: 3) views conversion as “a comprehensive personal change of religious worldview and identity.” It is sometimes also conceptualized as an element of “spiritual transformation,” which refers to changes in “meaning system” and applies to shifts in the spiritual realm more generally (Paloutzian 2005: 334-336). In my earlier work (Jindra 2014), I defined religious conversion as a comprehensive shift in religious beliefs, potentially including both the intensification of beliefs that one already has and/or the adoption of a novel faith.

From a Christian perspective, the term religious conversion denotes a turning toward God, and the experience of redemption through belief in the Trinity. The acquired conviction is that even though we are all sinners, we are saved by Jesus Christ through his sacrificial, substitutional death on the cross. We do not earn salvation, but it is freely given to us by the grace of God. In Hebrew, conversion is called “*nacham* and *shub*,” and in the Greek language, “*metanoia* and *epistrophe*” (Conn 2006:5). The words *nacham* and *metanoia* indicate “a turning from (sin),” while *shub* and *epistrophe* designate a “turning towards (God)” (Conn 2006:5; emphasis in the original). The historian David Kling (2000) also illustrates how in the New Testament conversion is not described primarily as an answer to personal guilt and shame (e.g., personal crisis experiences), but as a response to God’s calling. He contends that “the authors of the New Testament emphasize the divine origin of change” (Kling 2020:52).

Religious Conversion in Sociology and Additional Disciplines

In sociological discourse, the concept of religious conversion is more commonly used than the concept of spiritual transformation. In the discipline of sociology, many theorists have debated the character of religious conversion, the factors contributing to it, and its effects on the individual. The focus is more strongly on network influence than on personality factors or pre-existing crisis experiences (as is the case in other fields such as psychology). That is, instead of honing in on crisis experiences of prospective converts, sociologists are more likely to point out the influence of friends, family members, and colleagues in a person's trajectory towards conversion. This trend began with Lofland & Stark (1965) and has continued since then (Snow & Machalek 1984), with more recent works also highlighting the influence others have on conversion, such as Stark and Finke's *Acts of Faith* (2000) or David Smilde's *Reason to Believe* (2007), among others.

Sociologists (and psychologists) highlight certain elements that are considered necessary for a phenomenon to be considered a religious conversion. For example, they point out that conversions are characterized first by a transformation in a person's "universe of discourse." Second, they entail a "radical change" in the personal sense of self. And third, they involve a "reconstruction of one's biography" in light of the new religious beliefs, indicating that converts view their past from the perspective of their new faith (Snow and Machalek 1984:169, 170, 173, see also Hood, Hill & Spilka 2009). Some research, for example, has outlined how among the Jehovah's Witnesses, conversion stories are often told as "accounts," and showed how these accounts are heavily influenced by guidelines stemming directly from the "Watchtower movement," the organization of the Jehovah's Witnesses (Beckford 1978). But other authors, such as Stromberg (2008), conceive of conversion narratives not as pure accounts, but rather focus on how a conversion narrative itself can lead to a transformation for the person who tells it. This social constructivist approach is less extreme than Beckford's (see also Jindra 2020; 2014).

While the concept of religious conversion has attracted a good amount of attention especially since the 1970s (Snow and Machalek 1984), overall, it has been discussed and debated not only in the discipline of sociology, but also in theology, religious studies, anthropology, psychology, and history. One thinks of the important key works in the field of religious studies (e.g., Lewis Rambo's famous *Understanding Religious Conversion*), psychology (e.g., William James' *The Varieties of Religious Conversion*), anthropology (e.g., Henri Gooren's *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*), and history (e.g., David Kling's comprehensive *A History of Christian Conversion*). In many of these disciplines, the concept has been discussed for years, and some works, such as Rambo and Farhadian's *Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, have focused on conversion in many different disciplines.

Religious Conversion and Spiritual Transformation in the Field of Social Work

Over the past few decades, several articles in the field of social work have been published on the relationship between social work, spirituality, and religion, after some periods of contention between social work and theology (e.g., Holloway & Moss 2010). To this new group of researchers belong scholars such as Beth Crisp (2017), Sheila Furness and Philip Gilligan (2010), David Hodge (e.g., 2018; 2005a; 2005b; 2004), and Michael Sheridan (2012; 2009), who all discuss the importance of considering religion and spirituality in social work. Thus, the field has moved toward a serious consideration and inclusion of matters spiritual and religious in theory, practice, and research (more on this below).

In addition, today there is ample evidence stemming from several disciplines (such as psychology and sociology) that religious beliefs and the participation in a religious community have positive impacts on people's well-being, ranging from a sense of "self-forgiveness" and stronger self-esteem (e.g., Krause 2017; Schieman et al. 2017), to better physical and mental health (e.g., Koenig et al. 2012) and quality of life and happiness (e.g., Cox & Hammonds 1989; Ferris 2002). Numerous pathways are considered to contribute to these effects, such as a feeling of unconditional acceptance that religion can convey, a stronger and more secure sense of identity (Paul 1999), participation in a community which supports well-being, and possibly a healthier lifestyle (e.g., Ferris 2002; Koenig et al. 2012).

In addition, several articles have pointed out the positive effects that religious and spiritually oriented programs have on people's recovery from addictions (Lovett & Weiss 2020; Neff & McMaster 2005; Sremac & Ganzevoort 2013; Sremac 2014, among others), and on the way inmates cope with prison life (e.g., Kerley 2014).

However, curiously, and in contrast to the discipline of sociology, despite the newfound focus on religion and spirituality and the knowledge of its positive influence, the concept of religious conversion has hardly found entrance into the literature on social work practice, theory or research directly, for example, in social work journals. There are exceptions to this, such as an article on the role of religion and religious conversion in helping people cope with addictions (Yee 2000). Some articles on the need for decolonization in social work mention the past use of forced religious conversions among missionaries (e.g., Razack 2009; for more see below). But overall, not much literature exists on this topic. This is largely true also when the broader term spiritual transformation is substituted for religious conversion, though there are some exceptions (e.g., Danzig & Sands 2007).

Why is this the case? Perhaps we cannot know for sure, but one possible reason religious conversion or spiritual transformation have not been considered in the field of social work could be its applied focus, in contrast to sociology's stronger concentration on theoretical matters. And the absence of the concept of religious conversion is also likely due in part to the ethical implications its use would have.

Before turning to the ethical implications of applying the concept in the field of social work, an outline of how knowledge about religious conversion and spiritual transformation could possibly be beneficial to social work can be drawn.

Why the Concepts of Religious Conversion and Spiritual Transformation Could be Beneficial for Social Work

Discovering the gap in the literature mentioned above, I became interested in the possible applications of these concepts for social work theory, practice, and research. In recent years, I have completed interviews and observations at an evangelical Christian homeless shelter where religion and spirituality were important aspects of daily life, influencing the daily morning community meeting (through prayers and daily devotions), Bible-based classes, and the interactions between the (Christian) staff and its residents. In previous work, we employed toolkit theory (Swidler 2001) to understand this, because prayer, devotions, and religious classes can all be seen as religious tools which can help people understand and tackle their deeper issues, what the director of the shelter called “deep wounds and hurts.” That is, the staff believed in the power of the Christian faith (and Christian conversion) to help residents tackle their traumatic experiences and, with the help of the religious community, staff, and eventually the church, to heal from them. At the same time, staff and residents often also talked about spirituality and the belief in a “higher power,” as is also common in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) circles (see also Jindra & Jindra, in press; Jindra 2018).

And while I have certainly talked to some residents on whose lives these religious beliefs and practices did not have any impact at all, for some, a real transformation seemed to be happening because of what can best be described as a religious conversion or a spiritual transformation. One middle aged woman, for example, talked about the depression and addictions she had developed over the years, and which led her eventually into a downward spiral ending with homelessness. After having experienced a religious conversion even prior to coming to the shelter, and really taking the shelter and the religious toolkit provided by the shelter seriously, she grew in her faith, felt loved, forgiven, and overall much better about herself. Others shared these experiences, though by no means all or even most residents talked about the conversions or spiritual transformations they had experienced while at the shelter.

This is just one anecdotal example of many that illustrate the power certain religious beliefs had for residents’ well-being and their biographical trajectories in the long run, sometimes after they had experienced a religious conversion or spiritual transformation. In my earlier research on religious conversion, I also documented some of its positive effects on converts’ sense of well-being, identity, and relationships (Jindra 2014).

Considering this example, one argument in favor of taking religious conversion more seriously in social work is that it renders approachable what actually happens when people

experience such a phenomenon. Many interviews that researchers have completed and analyzed involving religious conversion, such as Stromberg (2008) and Popp-Baier (2008) help us understand how exactly a religious conversion is experienced and what its consequences are. For example, Peter Stromberg (2008), in his excellent book on the use of language in conversion, showed how the repeated narrating of religious experiences can lead to “transformative” experiences of the self. I would argue that the same is true for spiritual transformation.

From a social scientific point of view, the question is therefore not whether God intervenes directly in someone’s life, but whether the experience of a conversion leads to a change in a person’s self-concept, goals, and possibly long-term biographical development, as well as how that happens. How does a person’s life and biographical trajectory change after the experience of a religious conversion, under the influence of the new system of belief? Can a person take steps towards turning his/her life around, after having adopted a new religious belief system (Popp-Baier 2008)? In this sense, using the concept of religious conversion or spiritual transformation in understanding what goes on in practice settings might be beneficial, depending on the settings. It might, in the long run, also contribute to new theoretical developments in the field of social work.

Ethical Considerations

One of the reasons why social work has not paid attention to the concept of religious conversion is likely a concern about ethics. How does this concept relate to the basic principles and ethical mandate of the social work profession?

First, it must be acknowledged that religious conversion can be a controversial concept, more so than the more generic term spiritual transformation. As the literature cited above highlights, it has been used by missionaries to force religion upon groups of people, with sometimes horrible consequences (e.g., Kling 2020), and can thus be related to the discourse on colonizing and decolonizing in social work (e.g., Al-Natour & Mears 2016; Razack 2009). Razack, for example, in an article advocating a “decolonizing pedagogy” in social work, observes that in past practices,

social work also operated through missionary activity, which resulted in controlling the minds of the natives through spiritual and religious conversion. Social work is not innocent of historical abuses associated with colonial practices, especially and foremost among Aboriginal peoples. (2009:11)

But what about its current possible relation to the field of social work? The basic principles of social work practice and the principles outlined in the National Association of Social Workers *Code of Ethics* (2008) which apply in this context are guided by the values of

“service,” “social justice,” “dignity and worth of the person,” “importance of human relationships,” “integrity,” and “competence.” The social worker’s ethical responsibilities to clients are derived from these values. The ethical responsibilities which apply to the setting of the evangelical Christian homeless shelter discussed above are “commitment to clients,” “self-determination,” “informed consent,” “competence,” “cultural awareness and social diversity,” and “avoiding conflicts of interest.”

Applying these ethical principles to the concept of religious conversion, I contend that it makes a difference whether religion is forced upon people in a specific setting, or is just offered as an available tool. While the former goes against the self-determination and empowerment mandate of the Social Work *Code of Ethics*, and also violates the principles of “informed consent,” “competence,” “cultural awareness and social diversity,” and “avoiding a conflict of interest,” the latter does not necessarily have to do so. If freely chosen, religion can be a tool for empowerment, self-reflexivity, and hope for the future, instead of oppression. While the particular shelter I observed did not put pressure on people to convert, it did make attendance at daily community meetings and other classes (as part of the daily structure in the program) mandatory for the first six months of a person’s stay, and staff hoped that residents made use of the religious/spiritual tools the shelter provided. During this time, I have also witnessed some residents who did not adopt the religious beliefs, language, and behavior, and still gained from being in the program. In addition, residents were informed of the Christian nature of the shelter upon coming in through an intake interview.

Thus, while some could argue that this specific shelter’s religious context constitutes a violation of clients’ self-determination, informed consent, cultural awareness and social diversity, and avoiding conflicts of interests, I don’t think the case is clear-cut. Other scholars, however, have pointed out how some Christian homeless shelters do indeed coerce people into participating in religious rituals and use religion as a factor of oppression (e.g., Stivers 2011; Wasserman & Clair 2010). And as Hodge (2018:128) points out, in some cases, “spiritual insensitivity can harm clients.”¹

This debate also has connections to the larger debate about paternalism, neoliberalism, and governmentality, which has played out in the broader literature in sociology, anthropology, and political science. In the current literature, a Neo-Foucauldian view contending that nudging people to improve their situations is oppressive and focuses on individual responsibility where social responsibility should be is prevalent (e.g., Fairbanks 2009; Hackworth 2010).

In this vein, some have written about the importance of “relational work,” defined as work that “typically involves engaging with clients over time on major life changes involving, for example, daily practices, coping skills, attitudes, and goal-setting” (Jindra, Paulle & Jindra

¹ In addition, I want to clearly distinguish the concept of religious conversion from sexual orientation “conversion therapy.” Conversion therapy has been shown to be harmful to clients (e.g., Horner 2010).

2020:161). These authors highlight that besides having potentially negative effects, relational work can also be a positive influence, and call for “empirically grounded and theoretically advanced insights into how relational work supports the disadvantaged to make the changes they want to make” (Jindra et al. 2020:161). I would argue that the same could apply to the study of religious transformation, and its potential effects in selected nonprofit or social work settings.

However, a broader concept than religious conversion might be preferred for social work theory, and research, since religious conversion is still, at least in the Western context, tied to its Christian roots (e.g., Kling 2020). That is, applying the concept could be seen as going against social work’s mandate to be culturally competent, to respect client self-determination, to honor informed consent, and to avoid conflicts of interest, and understandably so. Using a broader concept of a religious and spiritual “toolkit” (Swidler 2001) or “spiritual transformation” (Paloutzian et al. 2005) opens up the avenue to consider the role of clients’ faith in many different traditions, faiths which do not necessarily include the concept of conversion (e.g., Buddhism), or of a generic sense of spirituality.

David Hodge has written about the role of spirituality and religion in social work practice regardless of the specific religious tradition involved. His work is important in this regard, because he is both a strong advocate of considering the role of religion and spirituality in the field, but also very careful in its application. He and other authors have outlined ideas to address religious and spiritual needs in social work practice, while considering ethical issues in the process (Furness & Gilligan 2010; Hodge 2018, 2005b; among others).

As one example, based on an article by Sue, Arredondo and McDavis (1992) on the importance of a multicultural perspective in the field of counseling, Hodge has developed the role of “spiritual competence” as part of practice in social work (e.g., Hodge 2018, 2004). Spiritual competence, in Hodge’s view, is first being aware of “one’s personal value informed worldview” and its underlying “assumptions, limitations, and biases” (2018:126). Second, the competent practitioner needs to take “an empathic, strengths-based understanding of the client’s spiritual worldview” (2018:126), which, as Hodge points out, does not necessarily mean that the practitioner agrees with the client’s views. And finally, the practitioner must come up with plans for intervention “that are appropriate, relevant, and sensitive to the client’s spiritual worldview” (2018:126). Thus, what is important in practice involving spirituality and religion is clients’ self-determination. Likewise, social workers need to avoid insensitivity towards their clients’ belief systems. To achieve spiritual competence, Hodge proposes that social work practitioners “develop their levels of spiritual competence by practicing self-assessment, consultation with knowledgeable peers, learning about the religious norms of frequently encountered groups, and demonstrating epistemological humility in work with clients” (2018:135).

In sum, the social work practitioner must understand his or her own beliefs as well as the client's religious and/or spiritual beliefs to see the strengths that the client draws from it, and then come up with interventions based on that understanding.

Concluding Thoughts

In this article, I have first outlined the concept of religious conversion in general, and then specifically in the field of sociology. I have noted its curious absence, including the absence of the broader concept of spiritual transformation, in the field of social work, and then discussed various potential reasons for it.

There are arguments to be made that in social work theory, research, and practice, we should focus on religious and spiritual toolkits (Swidler 2001) or the broader concept of "spiritual transformation" (Paloutzian 2005) instead of on the concept of religious conversion, honoring social work's ethical principles described above. But taking this into consideration, I argue that, especially when it comes to faith-based non-profits or when working with religious populations, we would be able to understand the process of religiously influenced change more completely by including the concepts of religious conversion and/or spiritual transformation instead of leaving them out, whatever one's personal opinions are on the subject. Religious conversions and spiritual transformations, of course, also happen in other religions, not just Christianity, and these concepts could shed light on what happens when working with clients of other faiths as well. At the very least, I find it curious that these concepts have not found entrance into the discussion in social work, and I hope this article is a step in the right direction to discuss this absence. As a start, the numerous research articles and books written on the subject in the field of sociology, but also psychology, religious studies, and anthropology, would be helpful to consider.

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