

Conversion

I've done a bit of market-research on this concept, and discovered that (as I suspected) it's not the flavour of the month. In the first place, people associate it with (so-called) evangelical religion, and with a certain combination of hysteria on the part of those claiming to be converted, external pressure or even oppression on the part of people claiming to convert, and falsehood on the part of nearly everybody. It's not that people decide to be deceptive or devious: but the attempt to force a pattern onto a real person's life is obviously open to falsification and prevarication, in the well-meaning attempt to find the lineaments of true religion.

However, I'm not happy with throwing this concept away, because it seems to be basic to Christianity. I think we can find the way to think of it positively and happily, so that the real beauty of the idea can work for us.

The concept begins with the mind; it's a way of meditating on the most precious capacity of our minds – suddenly to transcend themselves in a moment of light or enlightenment: perhaps we could call it *insight*. You can have small insights, which help you to cut a corner or understand something marginal; you can have big insights, which come like a landslide, sweeping aside your greatest problem or your most cherished plan; and then there is conversion, which turns you round and sets you on a completely different track.

Conversion carries within itself the future course of your life: it doesn't leave you paralysed and reduced to jelly. The insight in question here is a total one, and it is great enough to subsume all that went before, and to carry you forward with a whole heart. Against my better judgment I will at this early stage quote Paul talking about his faith:

Circumcised on the eighth day of my life, I was born of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrew parents. In the matter of the Law, I was a Pharisee; as for religious fervour, I was a persecutor of the Church; as for the uprightness embodied in the Law, I was faultless. But what were once my assets, I now through Jesus Christ count as losses; yes, I will go further: because of the supreme advantage of knowing Jesus Christ, my Lord, I count everything else as loss. For him I have accepted the loss of all other things: and look on them all as filth, if only I can gain Christ, and be given a place in him...that I may come to know him, and the power of his resurrection, and partake of his sufferings by being moulded to the pattern of his death, as I strive towards the goal of resurrection from the dead

That experience of conversion is instructive to us, above all in its total re-interpretation of the man's previous experience. Everything is re-valued, shown in a new light, and his priorities have been transformed, and endless consequences flow from the newness of his situation.

But I don't want to go back to the first century or into the life of a saint, or even into overtly religious terms, because I want you to think very *realistically* about this concept of conversion, and to know that we are all in need of the power of this experience, in order to live life fully and properly. It is not enough to see ourselves as items on an assembly-line, trundling along the rails towards a degree and a

professional qualification and a job and a marriage and a mortgage and a gold watch and a pension and a health problem and a little box with brass handles. You can be so busy filling in your module-choices, and negotiating your student loan, that you don't notice the insidious progress of that covenant with the world; and the weary, heavy heart that has to beat whilst it unfolds is labouring for very little, and the spark and joy of human life which you were made for, and deserve to know, is kept from you. The ease of shackling people to the machine is devastating. I long to see the experience of conversion, which enables people to get hold of their lives, and do a bit of soaring, and feel some real idealism, not wistfully or cynically, but as if they already embody something precious and essential, as Paul knew he did.

I remember moments when a fellow-student in the seminary would first put into words the notion that he was getting his strength up to leave the path to the priesthood. In a close-knit community like that, with the sense of a loving family behind him, he would have to say goodbye to all his friends (and, in our case, to the city of Rome and the most beautiful country in the world), abandon years of study, and face up to the task of explaining what had happened to all the people at home who had supported him and prayed for him. I had nothing but admiration for those very honest guys; they displayed the efficiency of the system, and they deserved to be congratulated.

Once or twice a year a student comes to see me feeling very sad and bereft, to say that the studies once accepted with eagerness have lost their charm. This is, I think, an awfully sad thing; the simple act of putting it into words is very hard for people, and is a real achievement. It bears witness to something wonderful, even so: it shows that the student knows it's wrong to go on in a treadmill, slavishly following a wrong choice through to the bitter end.

When a student goes into that path, it isn't precisely a conversion; more a going into the wilderness. It is a terribly important time. In a sense it is a cry for help, a mute prayer for the Holy Spirit to fill the empty heart. It is awesome, but it is better than the enslaved heart going through the motions. What is wanted is something new: precisely that sense of *integrity* we were thinking about yesterday, the sense of a whole personality firing on all cylinders, enthusiastic and alive. The phrase of the Eastern monks, *bringing the mind into the heart* comes back to me; the mind can't work on like a machine, all by itself. It requires the heart to embrace it and strengthen it. Together, heart and mind can be invincible. We can look for that sense of integrity in other people's support or good opinion, though that alone is never enough. What we really need is that personal turning-over of the heart, an inner conviction, that can inspire us definitively and reliably. That, in the world of our studies and our career, might be worthy to be called *conversion*.

I want to return to Paul, who counted all his previous assets as so much rubbish compared to the knowledge of Christ. Lest anyone think that *conversion* made everything easy for him, see how he continues:

Do not think I have secured it already, nor that I have yet reached my goal: but I am still pursuing it, in the attempt to take hold of the prize, for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not reckon myself as having it in my grasp; I can only say that, forgetting all that lies behind me, and straining forward to what lies before me, I am racing towards the finishing-line, to win the prize of a divine, heavenly call in Christ Jesus.

This is brilliant language: the *prize* is indistinguishable from the *call*. Now, a prize is something you are given; a call is something that gives you a direction, gets you on your feet. So Paul's dearest treasure is not a possession at all, but the direction to travel, the urge to respond, the thing that gets him motoring.

I know what this is about, because it is something I know in my own life and in the lives of the people I've been given to care for. The thing about you that is really lovely, and heart-warming, is the presence in your minds and hearts of all the things you haven't yet got. I don't like the language about the University that talks about it as an institution with broad-based funding and academic record. I like the sense that people within it are committed and engaged, sparking one another with real concern for the things we study. If we learn how to do this with passion, unpolluted by the cash-register mentality which is assumed to be our preferred motivation, then there is hope for us.

When we think about the depth and power of the experience of conversion, we recognize that the only way to express it is in relational terms. When you fall for another person, something happens whose lack of limits can be frightening. It is awesome to feel the power another person can take over you, in a very short space of time; it is awesome to know how many ramifications there are to such a love, and that nothing remains unaffected. If the love is returned, it is like the rewriting of the whole map of your life. If it is disastrously unreturned, then you have a very hard time ahead. Either way, the experience calls for nothing short of a conversion. Love and conversion demand each other: love is the oxygen of conversion. Conversion is the necessary, essential demand of love.

It is time to fill in the religious space around which I've tried to tiptoe. The word "God" is a word you can only use if you face up to a huge decision. I can't use it as a trivial, optional, notional word. Either it is the most important word in or out of the Universe, or it is to be consigned to the dustbin. The huge decision is the act of faith. Now, I don't believe that this is a once-and-for-all moment in anyone's life, where the deed is done and we are converts. I believe that it is an option for every day, like a relationship, like a marriage. Every day is a new invitation to pray, a new demand for faith, and a moment of conversion. In the Church we speak of the official prayer – the Divine Office – as *the consecration of time*. As in a relationship with a human being, the daily responsibility to pray can seem more like a treadmill experience than a free one: but it is always an expression of the liberating experience which Paul knew, the one that relativized all other things. Its significance grows with every day we are faithful to it, like a marriage; every sacrifice we make for it is a conversion from other aims and alternatives; day by day we turn over our lives, and each daily choice reinforces our bond with the God of the Covenant. The consistency of these daily experiences unifies many individual acts of fidelity, and the overall fact of conversion is one of huge significance, all-embracing import. The fact that its presence in the everyday can be simple, calm, and understated takes away nothing from its depth and power.

Prayer is being where we are, being who we are. But to enter the depth of our being is to discover the ultimate mystery who is God. He makes us what he wants us to be. That is what conversion is.