

CONVERSION AND ITS CONTEXT: TOWARD HUMAN DIVINITY

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Within the conference “Theoretical and Practical Approaches to Religious Conversion”, hosted by Belgrade Youth Centre (*Dom omladine Beograda*), topical Collected Works were published under the name of *Conversion and its Context: theoretical, methodological and practical approaches to religious conversion* edited by Prof Zorica Kuburic, PhD, and Srđan Sremac, MA, and published by “Centre for Empirical Research of Religion” (Centar za empirijsko istraživanje religije – CEIR) from Novi Sad. At the beginning of the *Prologue* the editors of this edition raised the question: whether, and to what extent is the problem of conversion present in the current domestic religious studies and what is the position of the mentioned phenomenon in the religious – theological observations?

With the remark that our scientific holdings are relatively empty regarding religious conversion, the editors of the Collection emphasize that the mentioned subject must have a significant place in present and future academic researches, not just because the mere concept of conversion represents a unique spiritual realization of human being, but because conversion is in and according to itself the bearer of new religious identity, which occupies the area both of religious and psycho-social reality.

The Collected Works *Conversion and its Context* aspire to actualize the theme of religious conversion from different theistic (theological) approaches, out of which resources psychology and sociology of religion draw the part of their knowledge, but also some other religious disciplines.

Thematically, the Collected Works are divided into two parts: *Psycho-Social Approaches to Religious Conversion* and *Theological–Anthropological Approaches to Religious Conversion*, which are comprised of fifteen texts of different authors. After the *Prologue*, the Collection begins with *Vladeta Jerotic’s* paper with the subject *What Needs to be Changed in Ourselves?* by which he asks always actual question which each individual needs to find an answer to. Jerotic stresses that the change (conversion), as individuation and/or conversion, is a permanent process due to constant progressive (Eros) and regressive (Thanatos) drives which continue the battle for power. Only after intimate knowledge that human being is not just conscious, subconscious and unconscious but also an above-conscious, the necessary conditions for emerging of mystical experience and true religious change are created.

The abovementioned continues with the work of *Zorica Kuburic* entitled *Conversion to the Religion which Speaks to You* in which she presents and analyses interviews with the converts. Research results testify that there is an optimal period of conversion,

that it is a part of a person's maturation, and that it originates in the phase of identity formation. The search for existential purpose – through conversion – leads to God who creates the sense of security, peace and being the chosen one, opposed to countless temptations and fears which have existed up to that moment.

Danijela Gavrilovic, in the paper *Conversion as a Form of Revitalizing Religiosity*, discusses the possibility that a phenomenon of religious conversion could be understood as a form of revitalization of religiousness, underlying the fact that intensification of religious pluralism and conversion in sociological literature can be interpreted and understood in different manners. The author underlines that if – in the examples of conversion – we can note an increase in the number of converts and intensification of the religious practice and deprivatization, we can conclude that through conversion we can revitalize religiosity.

Dragana Radisavljevic – Ciparizovic, in the paper *Pilgrimage and Conversion: The Influence of Conversion on the Religiosity of Pilgrims in Serbia*, deals with the question of influence of conversion on the religiosity of pilgrims in Serbia on the sample of 25 Roman Catholic and 25 Orthodox believers, through in-depth interviews which were performed in Belgrade during 2007. Although the results point out that religiosity is significantly influenced by family, for the progression of the religious life conversion and its practical implications are of vital importance.

From a standpoint of Eastern Christianity, *Tatjana Radic* in the paper *Orthodoxy as a Spiritual-Therapeutic Method for Curing Drug Addicts*, wants to remind us of the idea of monastery healing, i.e. application of therapeutic methods within frames of monastery life. The author discusses the issues of healing in total institutions, then, what kind of influence does the community have on that process, and, at last, she analyses the issue of conversion at the monasteries rehabilitation centers (*protégés*). The interviews were conducted in the Centre of Crna Reka in Ribarice village near Novi Pazar and in the Community "The Land of Living" in the village of Brajkovac nearby Lazarevac.

Continuing the previous paper, *Srdjan Sremac* opens a new research chapter under the title *The Social Construction of Conversion: Narrative Analyses of Conversion Testimonies of Former Drug Addicts*, managing to bring together into dialogue the problem of conversion and theory of social constructivism, underlying the narrative approach as the key theoretical–methodological concept while researching testimonies of conversion of former drug addicts. The author concludes that social–constructionist concept in the research of the conversion has its clear perspective in the area of the practical theology.

The previous text presents a good introduction for the second part of the Collection which begins with the paper of *Ksenija Magda* with the title *Contextualization of Paul's Experience of Conversion and its Implications for Contemporary Christianity* aspiring to establish a couple of important facts regarding the relationship between context and the conversion. That is, by observing the example of the missionary ministry of the apostle Paul and by a methodological application of the thought on "geographical consciousness" of geographer R. Sacks, the author points out that the context in which the supernatural impulse is happening is almost as important as the impulse itself. If we manage to understand the forces of context for the religious experience of an individual, we shall realize that the conversions are essential product of the quest for purpose in the place where one lives.

Dimitrije Popadic takes us back to the Bible sources of conversion problem, but also to a nature, meaning, place and role of the religious conversion in the lives of individuals and a society, with a special view on the event of Saint Apostle Paul's conversion. With the paper *Biblical Parameters of Conversion with Reference to the Conversion of Saint Apostle Paul* the author wishes to underline that the conversion is a specific experience of the Holy which has in it intensive and effective community with God, and the result of which is cognitive – moral renewal or conversion.

Sergej Beuk's work with the title *The Protestant-Calvinistic Perspective: A Theology of Renewal and Conversion* aims to present essential postulates of the renewal problem and conversion from the perspective of systematic Calvinist (Reform) theology, with the accent on the fact that the whole Christian spiritual experience can be understood through renewal and conversion of not just an individual but the church as well. The conversion is a religious need of the highest level, but also the intimate fact which relates to all areas of human existence and from the moment of the election, along the renewal, up to conversion and further, an individual gets into the contact with the Creator.

Nikola Knezevic with his paper *Theosis from the Perspective of Orthodox Tradition with Reference to the Roman Catholic and Protestant Understanding of the Terms theosis–sanctificatio*, marks the area of dialogue between secular and Christian, and especially orthodox anthropology. Through its Biblical and Church Fathers' learning, it moves an individual towards eschatological designation, with unlimited God given potentials for improvement. That is a place of conversion: it is deification – merciful element by means of which, together with the Sacrament, is involved in the creation of the Body of Christ church.

Sacramental life of the church and believers in modern ages is the subject of *Antonio Aras* and his work *The Sacrament of Repentance and Confession in the Conscience of Today's Believer: Repentance as a Possibility for Achieving a New Way of Life*. The author wishes to demonstrate the impulses which could serve the believers on how and what to confess, and priests who conduct the confession. The confession and repentance can not become formality; they must become the factors of conversion, giving the possibilities for the realization of a new way of life which represents a new existential dynamism within the church.

Isak Asiel with the text *Conversion and the Meaning of Jewish Identity* underlines that, according to Talmud, Abraham who fought against pagan idols, established one God, and by the means of this act he became the first convert to monotheism. Rabbinic literature comprises discussion on structural ceremonial process (Giyur) through which, a non-Jew becomes a Jew, but it is not understood as a ceremonial formalism, but has in itself coded meanings, because it brings to the convert not just new religious, but national identity as well. The convert repeats what Jewish people did in the moment of its origin, entering into union with God.

Gorazd Anrejc, with the title *Contemporary Roman Catholic and Protestant Views regarding Conversion of the Jews to Christianity*, reminds us that ethical awaking after the Holocaust, new self-critical relationship towards Anti-Semitism in Christian theology and a new stand point in the Biblical studies, which points at the fact that original Christianity is to a large extent an integral part of Jewish world, and that it has influenced so many western theologians to revise their ideas regarding missions among

Jewish people.

Zivica Tucic in his paper *Ancient Books of Needs and the Question of Conversion* analyses texts from liturgy books from the modern perspective, underlying that it is an ancient practice which can seem archaic and unusual today. As Orthodox church has rarely performed missionary work aiming not at mass baptizing of non-believers but insisting on the act of volunteering, we can observe the problem of conversion from the same standpoint: it must remain the intimate act of an individual and must be performed with dignity and sublimity without offending previous religious beliefs and feelings.

In the Appendix, Dragoljub B. Djordjevic presents a paper titled *Conversion of the Roma to Protestantism (models, factors, explanation)* introducing the mentioned term in the domestic sociology of religion and Roma studies, with the intention to express new process of mass inclusion of Roma into small religious communities of protestant–evangelist provenance. In the case of Serbian Roma population, the resistance towards their conversion into Protestantism we can notice a constant resistance of majority religious communities both toward Roma people and toward those Protestant churches whose spreading is present.

Although, by its nature mystic and intimate, conversion as a phenomenon has its clear historical, psycho-social and theological dimension, which should not be disregarded. What can be seen as an objection is the lack of Islamic perspective of the problem of religious conversion, which is a very present subject both in the media and among the scientific public.

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