

Development and prognosis of conversions with internal conflict

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This chapter is translated from my M.A. thesis and describes a process of a conversion away from belief by people who are deeply involved in church structures (priests, monks or other deeply involved laymen) and step by step they realize that they slowly diverge away from the church. I have depicted five characteristic stages in this process and when you read it, try to imagine three point of views:

Insider - the person undergoing the conversion,

Outsiders - members of his or her referential group or community, and finally the point of view of

Psychology - plain observation and depiction of the process and causality behind.

All these three are blind in some sense. Insiders usually do not understand the mechanisms that govern their behavior and feelings, especially projection of self-hatred. Outsiders do not pay much attention to changes in their friends and are usually very little tolerant to interpersonal differences. And finally cold, impersonal approach of psychology prevents us from feeling the power and intensity that uses to released in these processes.

If you read carefully you can notice that these processes are closely related with sexual addiction among catholic priests, which is discussed these days, and you can find an answer here, why people hate so much the church, which they left, after the conversion, so that we have almost no remedy for them.

I. Latent stage

This stage can be revealed usually only by means of retrospection, as it is only the grounds which led afterwards to the conversion. In the latent stage, neither the person concerned nor his surrounding can observe the approaching changes. The only observable sign is overt or hidden praxis of the person in which precipitate such activities and fantasies, which are incompatible with his conscious attitudes.

These grounds can be various, but there is a common feature, which is an existing discrepancy between what he or she is or does and what he or she wants or strives to be. The subject though considers the discrepancy to be unimportant and surmountable on this stage and, what is more important, the subject does not identify himself with these inclines or strains, which withstand his conviction. The discrepancy can have both psychological and/or moral dimension. Pure psychological can be in a case of immoderate religious perfectionism that contravenes limits of abilities of the person. The subject tasks himself with inadequate demands that he or she cannot naturally fulfill. He or she has consequently feelings of permanent failure. Although we can often meet less striking phenomena like anxiety, hazy feelings of guilt which transform and project on concrete fears and scruples.

The discrepancy can get a moral dimension when it is matter of some sort of inveterate vice in the field of heavy or capital sin. This conflict between activities and attitudes of the patient can be firstly unconscious, but nevertheless it becomes conscious one day. Say the subject realizes his dissatisfaction with himself, his life, his distinctness from environment or somebody (e. g. confessor) points out the discrepancy.

The person tries to cope with this problem, as he considers it to be surmountable and restrainable. He has still the feeling that these activities are not a part of his personality. He takes them to be unimportant, temporary and interim. If the activities disappear, then they were really just a plain habit and everything is all right. Although when the attempts steadily end with failure, it indicates that the source of the discrepancy is in the mind of the person.

II. Stage of striving to overcome the discrepancy, effort to conformity

A crop of unsuccessful attempts to suppress the habit or undesirable tendencies discourages self-confidence of the person, because (like every failure) they mean some sort of frustration, which the person tries to compensate by higher effort to overcome the bad habit. It is just simple result of the law of compulsion to repetition. This way the conflict become even more conscious in the mind of the person and other images starts to stick to it and step by step there appears a complex in the meaning of Jung. On this stage, the person has a need to talk about the problem, because bites of conscience are compensated by his effort to overcome the discrepancy, or to suppress the habit. Discrepancy is still understood as something heterogeneous, but it has shifted to the main problems of him.

III. Stage of inner resignation

The person realizes slowly that it exceeds his limitations to overcome his tendencies or the vice and gets to a conclusion that he cannot be conformable with his reference group (what it is a church in his case) no matter how much he tries. He recognizes he will have to live with the vice or discrepancy possibly all the rest of his life. In this moment, a very important turn point takes place in his mind, which is important first of all from the moral point of view.

The person thought till now that the given deficiency can be overcome, and therefore that he bears his part of responsibility for it. He found out after a few frank and vigorous attempts that he is not able to overcome the discrepancy. Then there appear feelings of personal helplessness and the subject does not consider the reproaches of the others to be valid, as he feels he has made everything possible what was in his potencies.

There appears a sense of injury, but nevertheless he is identified rationally with the reproaches. He rationally agrees with them, but he feels helpless to fulfill them. The more the consciousness of voluntary will, responsibility and involvement disappear, the more (according to the definition) subjective sinfulness disappears too. The person feels that he does not do these activities voluntary and therefore they cannot be ascribed him as a sin.

The further development depends in a good deal on the nature and magnitude of pressures leading to suppression of discrepancy. The presses can be outer, i. e. parents, friends, confessor, etc., or inner, like reproaches of conscience, the image of God in his mind, etc.

When the presses are small, like for instance in the case of smoking, the person can resist them more or less permanently. When they are of categorical nature 'either - or', they can lead to an escalation of a conflict.

The transition can be stepwise: He loses feelings of guilt for the discrepancy, and therefore he starts to put it down as not to be a problem of him, but problem of his environment, which induces him feeling of inferiority, viciousness, etc. At the beginning, the discrepancy looks like doubts or temptation, but it becomes stepwise opener according to the intensity of pressures on the person.

There is very important role of an image of God in the mind of the person too. Such mental representation of God can behave rigidly, and insists die-hardly on suppression of undesirable activities and tendencies with a threat of various punishments (whether it is fear of hell or of failure in work, life, etc.). In such case, it ceased to be the discrepancy what jeopardizes the psychic stability of the person, but it is this image of God. The person usually does not realize that it is only his deformed image of God, but he thinks and lives as if God was such cruel in reality.

The reproaches against God can appear especially in states of exhaustion, when they are strongest. There can appear furies similar to psychasthenic reactions, because the concerned person has got the feeling the God does not take him seriously. It is important to point out that such behavior of God's mental representation is just projection of self-hatred and we can find correlation between tendencies to manipulation and the cruel image of God. Therefore the behavior of mental representation of God is mirroring picture of his own behavioral and cognitive patterns. It is clear that the more vigorously the human is involved in Church's

activities the more vigorous is self-hatred because of losing referential group, and the more hostile is the mirrored behavior of mental God. Unfortunately the human is usually not aware of such interconnections and mechanisms.

Another scenario can be renegation from a church. It happens, when the idea of God is taboo or similarly idealized. The person does not dare to criticize God, but his frustration or inner aggression turns against church and he changes confession.

Some break or disruption, which is hard to verify, marks this changeover quite often and we conclude its existence only from external marks. It is usually a conflict in the relation to God: an unfulfilled promise in a matter which was fundamental for the subject, severe harm he faced, etc. This event is the last straw of injury. The person has got a feeling he is like a chased dog, he still must to fight the discrepancy and God does not give him even that of uppermost importance. We have to realize that the mind of the person is 'top-heavy' and it can lead clear to neurotic signs, because he reconstructs his world-view. It is a period of strong fights that do not although precipitate into observable behavior. Simply said, the human has enough of menacing impulse form his mind and therefore he does not long for any discussion with his environment that can shake his precarious stability. When he ever speaks about his problems then only with people with whom he feels secure.

This break represents the conscious top of the iceberg, which is the previous development. We cannot speak about a pretense, even if it can seem so to the outer observer. This break can later be alleged to be the reason for the turn, sometimes it is kept in secret especially when it is a delicate matter and instead of there is a tendency to talk about "objective" reasons of the conversion. The break take place in the third stage, but we usually find it out only in the fourth stage, when it is already consciously elaborated into some 'official' version.

Such a break is present also in the following story of a veteran about whom G. W. Allport (1976, 53) refers and whom he has known before as an exceptionally devotional man. "When this man was lying in a land of 'nobody' and was awaiting an attack, he prayed. Just in that moment, a grenade exploded just close to him. He has lost an arm, was crooked and blind. In this moment he became a total and militant atheist."

This break is enacted while the other outer activities of the person are maintained further. It takes place in the bosom of him. He does not speak about it or he does but only with people, where he feels himself to be safe and secure, where he will not be blamed. This stage is characterized in piecemeal working out the consequences, which the denial of officially held outlook will have. He forms somehow an official plea. A new conviction is incubating in these days, but the environment does not know about it. The subject continues in hitherto praxis, but there is noticeable less effort and consecutive quenching of emotional relations toward things and people with relation to the problem. This stage gradually verged into the following stage.

From the pastoral point of view, there is important a change in communication. Whereas a good priest or psychologist can prevent upcoming process in the first two stages, it is difficult to get to the core of the matter now. It is very often a process that is not overtly observable. Besides this man should be very careful, as any other reproaches, accusations or even punishments from a position of authority or power will close the possibility of communication for a long time, even if the person still submits himself formally.

Sometimes this stage take place in absence of threatening authority, say when a girl works far away from home - religious parents - as au-pair and afterwards she returns and announces them she will not visit Sunday's masses anymore. The third stage took place aside from parental religious authority, but the prepared official announcement represent already the next stage of open confrontation.

IV. Stage of open confrontation

In some time, the person overcomes inner conflict and reproaches gutter out. In the meantime he reconciles to the consequences, which the confession will bring. Namely the environment can exert great social pressure at him. The person can suffer from imagination of condemnation by his home-folks, community. This imagination cannot be realistic and they are possibly exaggerated, but nonetheless they are an

expression of expected punishment and feelings of guilt. The person starts to show a tendency to speak with people and defend the change in his world-view. He still expects attacks and reproaches in this stage, but he feels himself to be strong enough to overcome them now.

A human is a gregarious creature and his self-evaluation is a reflection of how his environment evaluates him. The more he is convinced about his innocence and his new conviction strengthens, the more he worries into open discussions which have only purpose: To defend his value, his new outlook, and reasons which make him to change his attitudes. Until he succeeds in this, he would not be sure he did right. His bosom is still fussy by overcome turn, and therefore he particularly strives to avoid the discussions about his interior.

Whereas in preceding stage of inner resignation, he pursued people by whom he found understanding and empathy, now, in this stage, he seeks people by whom he expects depreciation or a conflict. From the poignant point of view, there is no reasonable talk with him any more. His interior is though weak, but he did not want to be accepted as some mental cripple, but as a peer, and therefore he does not want to talk about his psychic drives, but only about the "objective reasons" – theology, philosophy or ethics.

There are members of sects in this stage, e.g. witnesses of Jehovah. We have to realize that these people have made a lot irreversible changes in their lives, there are often no way back or forth.

Vehement evangelization is often a defensive compensation of inner dubiety, what they cannot to talk to opponent (us) about. They approach us with expectations of refusal and conflict and therefore it is not of much use to have a talk with them about theology at factual level, because their goal is personal acceptance rather than theology. Nonetheless they cannot concede themselves this fact and we should not cast it to them.

Not to be hypocritical, the only meaningful talk is at the level of personal experiences (albeit it is not easy to induce it): What bring you to God, what you like in the community, at evangelization, what you want your children would be like, etc. Even when the talk seems to be friendly, we have to watch not to let us drift into theological controversy, what their interior is incline to. There is a phenomenon typical of this stage, which is called inveteracy of heart, malice (malitia) in church terminology, in other words, indocility of the person to submit to church authority. Nor even psychologist can reverse the running process. When whoever (say confessor) would send the person to psychologist, he would consider it to be depreciation of his personality unlike the previous stage and namely quite rightly, because he has overcome jet the stage of fight with his psyche. Now he is in a stage, when the conflict moves out in his environment, when he wants to finish the construction of consistent picture of himself not only in his interior, but also outwards. There much depends on the tolerance of environment: When it reacts to the announcement of the change of the person exaggeratedly, then the person expects conflicts in other situations too and the crisis deepens.

There are known cases, when a wife accepted understandingly transvestitism of her husband and the family consolidates surprisingly, as the tension diminished, that ferrets him and that was induced at all the family. The same way, when the only son apostatizes from belief of parents, then the amount of quarrelsomeness is in direct proportion to reaction of the parents and the environment to this change.

Seeking of companionship of people of the same or similar thinking is another characteristic of 3rd and 4th stage. Open breach leads sometimes to the lost of social background – friends, acquaintance. The person shuns sometimes his kith and kin not to have to talk to them about his change. He finds himself in a social vacuum. This feeling of loneliness and abjection are interpreted often as a conviction about his exceptionality and psychological exclusiveness. He has the feeling he discovers inexperienced – that what is out of sight of other people. Dullness and illiberality of the environment confirm him in this. We have to admit he experiences something he has never did before and what he has never heard about from his environment. When a priest abandons a church and starts to live in secular way, it uses to be a great change for him, as the man who was highlighted all time long is just a common citizen. In psychic level, there takes place an identification of the person with his activities. For instance, the entrenched habit that was considered to be a heterogeneous in regard to his personality, is now accepted as proper one and also is defended as such.

V. Stage of consolidation

And as the fourth stage is diminishing, the new world-view is getting accustomed and the human can have outlook at his or her relation to environment. The human builds step by step new social relationships and partly renews the old ones.

The timing and duration of particular stages is different and depends on various conditions. For instance the more reproaches in the fourth stage the worse and protracted his or her adaptation is, and the less any communication is possible between him and the representatives of the former group he belonged to.

In a similar way the course of the whole conversion need not to be so straightforward. We can encounter oscillation between 2nd and 3rd stage and between 4th and 5th one.

Possibilities of therapeutic intervention

Considering the complexity of the whole process, it uses to be not easy to affect it effectively. The latent stage use to be obscure, in the stage of effort to conformity, we cannot predict the future evolving, in the third stage, the human stands off from the other, in the fourth it is almost late to do anything except palliation. It is thus not possible to say that it is subject or anybody else who is responsible for the conversion and that he could prevent it.

We have the optimal possibility of influence the course in the second stage. The striking sign of critical evolving is the existence of insurmountable incompatibility between what the subject wants to be and who he is and what he does. The loss of subjective peccancy or sinfulness is quite alarming phenomenon. From this moment on, every psychological or moral pressure is considered as injustice and is potential fuse that can initiate the irreversible fourth stage. Afterwards it is just a question of chance that we cannot sway when the mentioned break between the second and third stage takes place.