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# Christian Conversion 1902-1993: James to Lewis Rambo

**Timothy Yates revisits three important twentieth-century works on conversion by William James, Raoul Allier and Lewis Rambo. James offers a relatively straightforward three-stage view of conversion which, by the time of Rambo's writing in the 1990s, has evolved into a more complex seven-stage process. Tension, struggle and the recreation of a new identity make clear how radical for the individual is the change wrought in Christian conversion.**

## Introduction

This paper has a limited intention. By revisiting two classic treatments of the twentieth century and one more recent publication, it seeks to reassess the significance of conversion for mission studies. All three of the works have addressed the psychology of Christian conversion and, in so doing, have provided their readers with insight into the psychological impact of the Christian message on human personality and culture, whether within a broadly Christian context, or as a catalyst for change and transformation in primary fields of mission, those areas where, in Paul's terms, the missionary is preaching Christ 'where he has not been named'.

Before examining these treatments further it may be as well to define what is, and what is not, to be considered. First, there is no attempt to deal with conversion as it appears in other religious traditions, though, for example, in our times Westerners are being drawn to Islam and Buddhism and will give an account of 'conversion' to these faiths which may well bear resemblances to what is described by our authorities. Secondly, conversion is not used as a term denoting change of denominational allegiance, as if to describe a Methodist who becomes a Roman Catholic. The subject is specifically conversion to Jesus Christ.

Such Christian conversion has its roots in the NT era, with the earliest accounts being given by Luke in Acts, those of Saul of Tarsus (given three times by Luke, presumably to emphasise its importance), Cornelius (given twice), the Ethiopian treasurer and Eunuch, Lydia and the keeper of the jail at Philippi.<sup>1</sup> In the cases of Saul and the jailer these are explicitly conversions to the risen Christ and calls to action. So, Saul asks, 'Who are you Lord?', and the reply is, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting... go into the city and it will be shown you what you must do.' The

1 Acts 9:1-19; cf. 22:3-16; 26:9-18; 8:26-39; 10:34-48; cf. 11:4-17; 16:11-15; 16:25-34.

jailer asks 'What must I do to be saved?' and receives the answer, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved with all your house.'<sup>2</sup> Cornelius is urged by Peter to trust in the crucified and risen Christ in order to receive the forgiveness of sins.<sup>3</sup> While the idea of turning or returning to the Lord was common in the OT (the verb transliterated *shub* has 1050 occurrences<sup>4</sup>) and is taken up in the 39 uses of the verb *epistrephein* in the NT, as also in the use of *metanoein* in the preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus, describing in both cases a change of mind or direction and allied in Jesus' preaching to a call to recognise the advent of God's kingdom,<sup>5</sup> what differentiates Christian conversion is that the turning is towards the person of Christ. So, Lesslie Newbigin defined it as 'the inner turning of the heart and will to Christ'; but in so doing he is anxious to show that, as in the initial experience of Jesus' disciples in his earthly ministry, there remain three constituents to the experience: (1) a personal relation to him; (2) a visible community; (3) a pattern of behaviour. 'The inner turning of the heart and will', he wrote, 'must neither be separated from, nor identified with, membership in the visible community and commitment to the pattern of behaviour.' The call to repentance and faith is a call to 'turn round in order to participate in this new reality', that is, the kingdom of God, and is 'a commitment to action'.<sup>6</sup>

## William James

While the NT showed little interest in the psychology of conversion, with the emphasis, as Newbigin pointed out, on *action* rather than on *experience*, the three twentieth-century treatments here have all focused on this aspect. William James was a philosopher who taught at Harvard. He was elder brother of the novelist Henry James. They were sons of a father who had been strongly influenced by the Swedish theosophist, Swedenborg. William James belonged to the school known as 'pragmatism', which has been defined as 'the doctrine that the test of the value of any assertion lies in its practical consequences'.<sup>7</sup> This gave him a natural interest in conversion, for conversion may be thought to provide empirical evidence that ideas have identifiable effects. In his work *Pragmatism* of 1907, James argued that 'true ideas are those that can be corroborated and verified... an idea is made true by events'.<sup>8</sup>

The work by which William James is best remembered is his *Varieties of Religious Experience* of 1902, the Gifford lectures at Edinburgh, which one day were to cause Karl Barth some difficulty, when invited to give them, for they are required to be given on 'natural religion'. The ninth and tenth lectures are specifically devoted to conversion, although the rest of the book has a good deal of material which relates to it. His treatment has been fairly criticised as highly individualistic.

2 Acts 9:5-6; 16:30-31.

3 Acts 10:30-43.

4 C. Brown ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Paternoster Press, Exeter 1978, p 353.

5 G. Kittel ed. tr. G. W. Bromiley *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* IV, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1965, pp 722-9.

6 L. Newbigin art. 'Conversion' in S. Neill, G. H. Anderson et al. eds., *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission*, SCM, London 1969, pp 147f.

7 M. Drabble art. 'Pragmatism' in M. Drabble ed. *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, OUP, Oxford 1985, p 452.

8 R. T. Hardy art. 'Pragmatism' in A. Richardson ed. *Dictionary of Christian Theology* p 261.

James' case studies are of individuals in North American or European contexts and relate to their personal experiences. There is little here of the second constituent noted by Lesslie Newbigin as essential to Christian conversion, relationship to the visible community, although changes in behaviour get due recognition. James' distinction between the 'once born' and the 'twice born', which he borrowed from F. W. Newman, has attracted theological criticism: it is held, properly enough, that the NT looks for new birth for all, of which baptism is a sign.<sup>9</sup> 'The distinction made by William James between once born and twice born Christians is a pretty epigram but poor theology. The NT knows only twice born Christians.'<sup>10</sup> Perhaps, however, there is some continuing validity in the phrase as it is used to distinguish between what are often called 'cradle Christians' and, for example, adult converts, who have sometimes become Christians after considerable mental and psychological turmoil. James' examples are of less interest to missiologists than our next writer's, in so far as they are examples of those in a Christian culture 'coming alive' to the Christian message after many generations of a society's exposure to it, rather than a transfer of allegiance from an alternative cultural and religious *Weltanschauung*.

### The unified self

James defines conversion in a frequently quoted sentence: 'to be converted, to be regenerate, to receive, grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance are so many phrases which describe the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided and consciously wrong and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.'<sup>11</sup> In commenting on this, E. Stanley Jones was closer to our original definition in changing the last phrase from 'religious realities' to 'a Person': 'the religious realities are a Person' and 'the divided life is "unified" around a new centre, Christ'.<sup>12</sup> The aspect of the divided self, to which James devoted his eighth lecture, will recur later: he pointed to Augustine, Bunyan and Tolstoy as examples. This unification of the self 'may come gradually or it may occur abruptly... however it comes brings a characteristic sort of relief... Happiness! Happiness! Religion is only one of the ways in which individuals gain that gift. Easily, peacefully and successfully it often transforms the most intolerable misery into the profoundest and most enduring happiness'.<sup>13</sup>

Tolstoy is given as the example of a gradual return over the years to the faith of his childhood but his experience gave renewed 'energy' (Tolstoy's choice of word) in common with other experiences recorded by James.<sup>14</sup> James wrote: 'the personality is changed, the man is born again' and there is a 'new level of spiritual vitality... and new energies.'<sup>15</sup> He gives also examples of sudden conversions, those of the eighteenth-century Christian Henry Aline of Boston and the nineteenth-

9 John 3:3-8; James, *Religious Experience*, pp 80-83.

10 T. H. L. Parker art. 'Conversion' in A. Richardson, *Christian Theology*, p 75.

11 James, *Religious Experience*, p 189.

12 E. S. James, *Conversion*, p 47.

13 James, *Religious Experience*, p 175.

14 James, *Religious Experience*, p 185.

15 James *Religious Experience* p 241.

century French Jew from Paris, Alphonse Ratisbonne, and others to show what a 'real, definite and memorable experience and event a sudden conversion can be' one in which often the subject seems to be 'a passive spectator... of an astounding process performed upon him from above'.<sup>16</sup>

James does not only use 'above' language himself. He recognised that much of conversion may be subliminal: 'the notion of a subliminal self' ought not either to 'exclude all notion of a higher penetration. If there be higher powers able to impress us they may get access to us only through the subliminal door'.<sup>17</sup> Like our next writer, James was aware of the often strange accompaniments to both conversion and revival, the influence of dreams and what one of the authorities he quotes refers to as 'the possession of an active subliminal self'.<sup>18</sup> James concludes on this aspect: 'if the grace of God miraculously operates, it probably operates through the subliminal door'.<sup>19</sup>

James realised that psychology, of itself, is unable to give an account of the source of conversion or even why those aims which have primarily been peripheral become for the subject, in his phrase, 'the habitual centre of his personal energy'.<sup>20</sup> He himself leaves the door open to a spiritual interpretation in a conclusion which may owe something to his father's Swedenborgian views: 'the visible world is part of a more spiritual, from which it draws its chief significance' and 'union or harmonious relation with that higher universe is our true end'.<sup>21</sup> He also recognised that, for the convert or mystic, their experiences can be 'absolutely authoritative in the individuals to whom they come'.<sup>22</sup> To take one prominent twentieth-century Christian, well known to missiologists, who confessed himself sorry for the 'once born' of William James' classification, Stephen Neill: 'for those who can look back on some recognisable experience of conversion in their own lives this is so much more important than anything else that they find it very difficult to take seriously any type of Christian living from which this experience is eliminated' and again 'I have not the smallest doubt that through conversion I become a new man in Christ and that it was literally true that all things became new in Him'.<sup>23</sup>

## Raoul Allier

The second of our twentieth-century authorities on conversion is of great interest to students of mission. Raoul Allier, who wrote as a professor in the University of Paris, published his *La Psychologie de la Conversion chez les Peuples non-civilisés* in 1925. He wrote in his preface that it was during a previous project on moral evil that he stumbled on the periodical of the Société des Missions de Paris called the *Journal des Missions Évangéliques*. This discovery in 1888 fired his imagination with the potential of missionary accounts for an exploration of conversion. In addition to the journal mentioned, he used a number of others, including the *Bulletin de la*

16 James, *Religious Experience* pp 223,226.

17 James, *Religious Experience* p 243.

18 James, *Religious Experience* p 240-1.

19 James, *Religious Experience* p 270.

20 James, *Religious Experience* p 196.

21 James, *Religious Experience* p 486.

22 James, *Religious Experience* p 422.

23 S. C. Neill, art. 'Conversion' *Scottish Journal of Theology* vol. 3, no. 4 (Dec. 1950) p 352; auto-biographical MS pp 60-1; *SJT* vol. 1, no. 1 (June 1948) p 95.

*Mission Romande* (the Swiss Mission) and the *Journal de l'Unité des Frères* (Moravian). He came, he wrote, to the whole study 'entirely disinterested' and had originally intended to include Roman Catholic missions but decided that the differences of operation were such that it would be better to limit himself to Protestants.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, his examples came from a very wide range of fields including Madagascar, New Guinea, Greenland, Central and East Africa, the New Hebrides, Tahiti and Fiji. He used the printed reports of the great missionaries of the Paris Evangelical Mission, François Coillard, Maurice Leenhardt and Hermann Dieterlen and the equally great missionary and renowned anthropologist, Henri Junod, of the Swiss Romande Mission: but did not confine himself to French sources, and accounts from Johannes Warneck among the Bataks and a CMS missionary like Richard Taylor among the Maoris also feature. He was acquainted with the anthropological writings of Levy-Bruhl and with the psychology of Sigmund Freud, including his work on dreams. The work was in two volumes, the first of which divided into two parts 'Les Prodromes de la Crise' and 'La Crise' – *prodromes* appears to originate with the Greek and Latin words (*prodromos, -us*) for a north-east wind which promises a change in weather conditions and can perhaps be translated 'stirrings' or 'winds of change'. His second volume, which will not be handled here, was entitled 'Les Conséquences de la Crise' and the whole, with its treatment of over a thousand pages, must rank as one of the most extensive enquiries into conversion ever undertaken.

### 'Hardening', sorrow and dreams

In the first part of volume one, Allier shows how resistant to conversion may individuals could be. One chief tells Coillard, 'the law of God is hard, difficult' and another tells a Moravian missionary in Greenland 'we could have no objection to conversion if it were not so difficult'. King Sekhome of the Mangorato tribe told the Scottish missionary, Mackenzie: 'for me to accept the way of God is as if I wishes alone to attack... all the hordes of the Matabele.'<sup>25</sup> Debased and debauched habits cause a Tahitian to describe himself as 'in chains', language, writes Allier, 'which is universal' for describing moral experience.<sup>26</sup> There is a clear recognition that the issue of conversion lies in the realm of the will: a chief asks Johannes Warneck, 'Where will I find riches and power if I never make war nor have slaves?'<sup>27</sup>

Maurice Leenhardt produced a new slant on this resistance, what Allier calls 'endurcissement' of hardening against change. He found that it was possible to judge the spiritual position of his hearers by the allure of horses as a means of physical escape from the demands of his message: in one case, a man took himself off at a gallop, in another he retreated to another part of the same valley which had not yet been Christianised.<sup>28</sup> Malagasay parents went to the extent of hiding their infants in 'silos' to escape missionary detection. One African spoke for many in the various fields when he said to the missionary: 'you speak well but my heart is not ready';

24 R. Allier, *La Psychologie de la Conversion chez les Peuples non-civilisés* p 15.

25 Allier, *Conversion*, pp 131-2. (Translation from the French is the writer's throughout.)

26 Allier, *Conversion*, p 149.

27 Allier, *Conversion*, p 141.

28 Allier, *Conversion*, pp 201, 202 n. 2.

of, with a touching faith in the missionary's prayers, as one of Warneck's hearers, 'you ask God who is perhaps able to change me; I am not yet ready.'<sup>29</sup>

As with William James' accounts, there is pain, or what Allier calls 'visible sorrow', before conversion: one woman, Mapati, reported on by Hermann Dieterlen moves from tears to joy.<sup>30</sup> The occurrence of pain and even illness prior to conversion causes Allier to compare the phenomenon with stories recorded of Huguenots in the seventeenth century who became ill after renouncing their allegiance under political pressure. Allier judged that the deep distress before conversion was made up both of the *pain of converting* and, quite as much, of the *pain of not converting*: there was both the sense of an *obligation to change* and a *sense of responsibility for being in a permanent state which was condemned*.<sup>31</sup> He compared it to Paul's heartfelt expression of Rom. 7:19-23. What is at issue is a new 'I', a new identity. In a section which he entitles 'The two mes' he finds universal use of the language of the 'two hearts' by Maoris, New Caledonian Kanaks and Zambezi Africans. Moshesh, the Lesotho chief, said to Robert Moffat: 'before I listened to you I had only one heart, now today I have two.' Allier also gives an interesting example of subliminal factors at work: an African under the influence of chloroform speaks as if he was a Christian believer, although in waking life he is known not yet to be a Christian.<sup>32</sup> A Malagasay who appears to speak with the voice of the persecuting Queen Ranavalona I and associated ancestors gave evidence, as he did, that 'the old "me" repulses what it sees as a menace'.<sup>33</sup>

This led Allier to devote an extensive section to the place of dreams as a factor in conversion, along with hallucinations and 'voices'. Of the first he wrote: 'the number of conversions provoked by dreams is incalculable'. Unlike western missionaries (but not unlike William James, as we have noticed) his subjects are not trained in mind to discount the power of a dream to provoke major change in life. Hermann Dieterlen, at first very reluctant to accept dreams as in any way a source of the divine, admitted that 'it is possible it is not absolutely wrong'; that is, God may have influenced the converts through dreams.<sup>34</sup>

A typical example is of the chief who dreams that he is in the forest and wishes that Christians should pray for him to dispose of his fetishes: this chief, Kasi Ahang of Akropong, was so moved by his dream that he acted upon it.<sup>35</sup> Allier commented on this and other examples: 'it would appear that the moral will, vanquished during waking hours, takes its revenge during sleep: it is the new 'me' which emerges victorious'.<sup>36</sup> Reports of such dreams come from many fields, Kils, Malagasies, Kanaks, Africans from the Congo, Negroes from Surinam (Dutch Guiana).<sup>37</sup> In some cases dreams seem to have prepared the way for the acceptance of the gospel, as appears to have been the case in Nicaragua before the missionaries' arrival or, less spectacularly, in Nias, where an elderly priestess believed that she had been instructed in a dream by the ancestors to pronounce in favour of the new religion.<sup>38</sup> We shall return to the place of dreams in the conclusion of this paper.

29 Allier, *Conversion*, pp 203, 213.

30 Allier, *Conversion*, pp 328-9.

31 Allier, *Conversion*, pp 328-9, 330 n. 1.

32 Allier, *Conversion*, pp 365-6, 351.

33 Allier, *Conversion*, p 364.

34 Allier, *Conversion*, pp 373-4, 374 n. 2.

35 Allier, *Conversion*, pp 380-1.

36 Allier, *Conversion*, p 377.

37 Allier, *Conversion*, p 374.

38 Allier, *Conversion*, p 370.

## Death and rebirth

Allier's treatment of the experience of conversion itself, 'La Crise', makes reference early on to William James. Like James, Allier described conversion as a new release but also as a form of death to reach that point.<sup>39</sup> The call, as given by the missionary Withney to the Malagasies, was to 'abandon yourselves'; but such self-abandonment, Allier recognised, was 'in a certain sense a form of death'.<sup>40</sup> One Malagasay convert, at first powerless to respond to such a call, then described himself: 'I feel myself as revived from the dead.'<sup>41</sup> Henri Junod had noticed how often converts used the formula 'I have been conquered' in the account of their experience. For Allier, it was a clear case of the old 'I' having been overcome.<sup>42</sup> He concluded that, to say that birth was preceded by death was less correct than to say that both experiences coincided or 'arrived at the same instant', and that this was true whether it was a case of gradual or sudden conversion. In both cases it is manifestly real because of the 'new orientation of deep emotions' and 'changes of tastes and aversions'.<sup>43</sup> As conversion is a re-direction of the entire being there is no difference of essential nature between sudden and gradual conversions, though there may be differences of degree.<sup>44</sup>

Even in those cases where conversion is a collective phenomenon, a scholar like Levy-Bruhl had recognised that conversion is incomplete, unless it included the conversion of the individual.<sup>45</sup> Like William James, Allier realised that the experience was authoritative to the individual: 'in the hour of conversion it presents itself as a dawning of the truth', while 'the ideas... acquire a new power of realisation'.<sup>46</sup> We may close this treatment of Allier's work with his handling of the place of the mind and the will in the conversion of the individual:

in the first place conversion is a phenomenon which by-passes the intellectual... it is neither an action of the will nor... of the intelligence... we have seen how it forms a new 'me'. Is not this the matter (of importance) the transposition of values, the emotional and intellectual aspect of this transformation – are not these simply the necessary concomitants of the appearance of this new 'me'? The essence of conversion is neither an excess of tears nor adherence to a formula: is it not rebirth?<sup>47</sup>

It is often difficult to know whether one writer has influenced another, but before leaving Allier it is interesting to notice how closely the analysis of conversion given by the English historian A. D. Nock in his study *Conversion: Old and New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* of 1933 was to Allier's. In his preface and first of his lectures given at Trinity College, Dublin and at Harvard, he wrote: 'as a manifestation both of group solidarity and emergent individualism, it is a sociological phenomenon of the first importance... impulses which lie below the level of consciousness and producing a delicate interplay between this and the

39 James, *Religious Experience*, p 177; Allier, *Conversion*, p 435.

40 Allier, *Conversion*, p 435.

41 Allier, *Conversion*,

42 Allier, *Conversion*, p 436.

43 Allier, *Conversion*, p 531.

44 Allier, *Conversion*, p 548-9.

45 Allier, *Conversion*, p 558 n.2.

46 Allier, *Conversion*, p 525.

47 Allier, *Conversion*, p 526.

intellect.<sup>48</sup> By conversion 'we mean the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from an earlier piety for another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old way was wrong and the new is right'.<sup>49</sup>

## Lewis Rambo

To read Lewis Rambo's study *Understanding Religious Conversion* of 1993 is to become aware of the intensive concentration of the social sciences and psychology on the phenomenon in the years since James and Allier wrote their accounts. Since 1980 alone, Rambo is able to point to some fifteen articles on conversion in learned journals of these disciplines and this apart from the large theological and missiological output. Rambo, who himself experienced conversion and admits himself to be on a voyage of self-discovery on the subject, like Allier before him, discovered in the field of mission studies a welcome resource for his work:

forays into cultural anthropology unveiled an existing discipline that provided new insights into the conversion process... subsequently I discovered missiology, a field of scholarship initiated by missionaries working in cross cultural settings that confront them daily with the complexities of interwoven religious, cultural and societal issues affecting and effecting change.<sup>50</sup>

Rambo has regarded conversion as a radical experience in the precise sense of 'striking at the root of the human predicament', a root which he described as 'a vortex of vulnerability'.<sup>51</sup> He showed himself to share some of William James' pragmatism, when he wrote: 'stated starkly, conversion is what a faith group says it is', though this definition, applied here to sectarian groups, can be inclusive presumably of the Early Church's emphasis on conversion to Christ, with which this paper began. He appealed to A. D. Nock, who had also emphasised the radical nature of conversion in the prophetic religions of Judaism and Christianity and by contrast to pagan religion in the ancient world.<sup>52</sup>

## Stages of conversion

Rambo presents a seven stage sequential model of conversion consisting of context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences.<sup>53</sup> Missiologists have generally urged attention to context. Rambo holds that the context 'shapes the nature, structure and process of conversion' and that conversion takes place 'in a dynamic context'.<sup>54</sup> For western Christianity this has sobering implications in Rambo's view. Religion is in decline and (following Berger) is relegated to the private realm, while a 'unified religious view seems less plausible'.<sup>55</sup> Rambo guesses that in such a context, parents will have more difficulty in retaining their children within the faith; and, further, that a declining religion will proselytise

48 A. D. Nock, *Conversion: the Old and the New in Religion from*

*Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1933, p vii.

49 Nock, *Conversion*, p 7.

50 L. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Yale UP, New Haven 1993, p xi.

51 L. Rambo, *Understanding Conversion*, p xii.

52 Rambo, *Understanding Conversion*, p 5; cf. pp 34f.

53 Rambo, *Understanding Conversion*, p 17.

54 Rambo, *Understanding Conversion*, p 20.

55 Rambo, *Understanding Conversion*, p 28.



(his use of word) less.<sup>56</sup> Looking at non-western societies he notices that certain social scientists see people as active agents of social change and he specifies missionaries as such agents.<sup>57</sup> He wrote: 'in many instances missionaries were rather remarkable people who fought for the welfare of the nations and sought to save them in an altruistic manner.'<sup>58</sup> In terms of conversions, so much depended in his view on 'the "right" potential convert coming into contact, in the proper circumstances at the proper time, with the "right" advocate and religious option. Trajectories of potential converts and available advocates do not often meet in such a way that the process can germinate, take root and flourish'.<sup>59</sup> Such an analysis is borne out by, for instance, the conversion of the Japanese leader, Kagawa, and the American missionaries who met him at his point of need,<sup>60</sup> as with many others. Relationships of this kind are central to conversion experiences for Rambo: he instances the personal influence of C. S. Lewis on Sheldon Vanauken, author of *A Severe Mercy*, or of the Christian industrialist Tom Phillips on Charles Colson as evidenced in Colson's *Born Again*.<sup>61</sup> Like both James and Allier, he identified the element of self-abandonment, whereby a confession of helplessness and an inability to care for the self (as, for example, in many participants in Alcoholics Anonymous) paradoxically begins the road back.<sup>62</sup> Again, like the earlier writers, he discerns that energy is released, previously devoted to an inner conflict now resolved, and becomes 'available for new life'.<sup>63</sup>

If we revert to our original threefold definition of Christian conversion, Rambo gives little on conversion to Christ, though he notes the case of Eldridge Cleaver, whose childhood image of Jesus re-emerged at his conversion 'as a symbol of healing and transformation';<sup>64</sup> perhaps this is assumed, as he moves in a Christian cultural context much as William James. More seriously, he seems to ignore almost wholly the aspect of conversion to community, symbolised for Christians by baptism as both sign of new life and membership of Christ's church. He might reply that, as I have omitted Allier's second volume, dealing with the consequences of conversion, he is entitled to isolate what Allier calls 'the crisis'. Nevertheless, in one who gives so much space to the social context of conversion, it is surprising that so little is given on the social and communal aspect of the convert.

When it comes to behaviour, however, Rambo does offer guidance: the convert has to move from irresponsible to responsible behaviour and this includes intellectual responsibility in the refutation of false ideology. Ethically, the convert learns to transcend personal gratification and begins to live for justice in an 'other-directed' fashion, so that his conversion can be described as socio-political.<sup>65</sup> Finally, he sees the test of conversion in whether it becomes an ongoing transformation:

I would agree that people who convert and remain the same are not really on a path of transformation. They... relive the event over and over again but it

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56 Rambo, *Understanding Conversion*, p 34.

57 Rambo, *Understanding Conversion*, p 56.

58 Rambo, *Understanding Conversion*, p 69.

59 Rambo, *Understanding Conversion*, p 87.

60 W. Axling, *Kagawa*, SCM, London 1932, pp 11-39; C. Davey, *Kagawa of Japan*, SCM, London 1960, pp 1-17.

61 Rambo, *Understanding Conversion*, p 135.

62 Rambo, *Understanding Conversion*, p 135.

63 Rambo, *Understanding Conversion*, p 135.

64 Rambo, *Understanding Conversion*, pp 25f.

65 Rambo, *Understanding Conversion*, pp 146f, 202.

has little power to transform their lives. Change is persistent and important and continuing and most religious traditions expect and foster change by providing ideology and techniques for the on-going development and maturation of their members.<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusion

What does this review of three studies of the psychology of conversion tell us as students of mission? First, it gives evidence of the kind of inner tension involved for individuals personally addressed by the Christian message, what James calls 'the divided self' and Allier the 'two Is'. There is a deep and painful awareness of living in two contexts, of having 'two hearts', a situation too painful to continue without resolution. The resort, for example, to relief by way of galloping horses by Africans is an expression of the tension and pressure on the inner life.

Secondly, there is clear evidence of how much of this struggle goes on subliminally. The example of the man under chloroform is particularly instructive. To say this is not to invite the Christian persuaders to adopt subliminal approaches, a method at odds with a proper respect for the human intellect and will: but it may lead, for example, to a reassessment by western Christians of the place of dreams, for example, in conversion. A Judaeo-Christian tradition which in its source documents contains decisive dreams in the Joseph saga and in the early spread of Christianity, as in the case of Paul at a turning point of his missionary activity,<sup>67</sup> may have to be open, like the missionary Hermann Dieterlen, to the reassessment of the dream world: was William James right that the subliminal door may at times be the route by which external influence is brought to bear? Most primal settings in Africa and elsewhere sit more easily with the accounts of dreams in the OT and NT than do modern westerners.

Again, the radical nature of conversion in the loss of one identity and the development of a new one described by the writers in terms of death and life, should bring home the profound issues at stake in all Christian mission: to quote Stephen Neill:

what is it that has died? It is I myself. It is the self which, in its pride, has organised itself in independence of God and in rebellion against him. And does it want to die? It clings to life with the fury of despair. It is prepared to go to any length, to make any kind of compromise with God, if only it may be let off dying. That is why it is so hard to be converted; that is why we must never lightly use the expression 'faith in Christ'.<sup>68</sup>

The same writer reminds us, in calling for a modern William James, that far from being an adolescent phenomenon alone (a position William James also opposed) many well-known figures of the modern Christian world have been adult converts, including such intellectuals as Bulgakov, Berdayev, Maritain, Marcel, T. S. Eliot, C.

66 Rambo, *Understanding Conversion*, p 163.  
67 Gen. 37:2-11; 40:7-23; 41:1-37; Acts 16:9.  
Loisy, Haenchen, Rackham and Lampe all consider Paul's 'vision' of the Macedonian 'during the night' to have been a dream.

68 S. C. Neill, *What is Man?*, USCL, London 1960, p 41.

S. Lewis, and the Cambridge classical teacher Martin Charlesworth, to whom A. D. Nock dedicated his work *Conversion*, and many others.<sup>69</sup>

Tension, subconscious struggles, discovery of a new identity by way of a form of dying: these factors underline the deeply radical nature of conversion as described by Rambo and the radical personal change which is at the heart of the Christian experience. It can well be asked: what is the justification for focusing on conversion in an international conference devoted to a Christian critique of the world economy? Perhaps, however, there is a connection. For in both cases, at the macro- and the micro-level, the Christian gospel calls for change. In Karl Barth's words on conversion, 'when we convert and are renewed in the totality of our being, in and with a private responsibility we also accept a public responsibility'.<sup>70</sup> Like R. H. Tawney, the Christian economist at the Jerusalem conference of 1928, I do not believe that in order to change society you have to change the hearts of men first;<sup>71</sup> but, in so far as the call to conversion is a call to action, as Lesslie Newbigin's definition suggested, to align a life with the new reality of the kingdom of God and so with the divine will for justice and love, means individual lives so surrendered may indeed contribute, and contribute importantly, to a changed world order, towards that cosmic transformation which the Christian believes to be God's intention.

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69 Neill, art. *Expository Times*, Vol. 89 no. 7 (April 1978), pp 207-8; James, *Religious Experience*, p 12.

70 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1969, p 565.

71 *Report of the Jerusalem meeting of the International Missionary Council 1928*, Vol V, IMC, Jerusalem 1928, pp 164, 169; T. Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century*, CUP, Cambridge 1994, pp 68-9.