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The Psychology of Conversion

The psychologist, like the rest of us, can regard conversion from two points of view — as a fact to be studied at its face value or as an event over-shadowed in importance by some prior consideration (as exemplified by the physiological theory of William Sargant).

In this fascinating and unusual paper, based on that read to the VICTORIA INSTITUTE on 2nd February, 1974, Mr. Baker discusses both approaches. After showing that Sargant's views can be explained away by the very theory he uses against others, the author argues strongly that the conversion experience is personal, is not to be dismissed as nothing but a physiological phenomenon and has definite defining accompaniments which should be regarded as a norm for the Christian.

Attention has recently been drawn¹ to changes in the words Christians commonly use to describe God's work in bringing men 'from death to life'. In the 1890s the expression 'being saved' was most frequently used; in the 1930s this had changed to 'being converted'; and today's phrase is 'being committed'.

These changes of wording reflect a shifting emphasis with respect to who exactly is the passive, who the active, agent in dealings between God and man. Salvation involves a passive man rescued by God who is all-active. Commitment, by contrast, is a man-made decision about God: a man either does, or does not,

commit himself to God, who by implication is passive in the process. Conversion falls somewhere in between on the continuum defined by these two extremes, in that while it does not conjure up in the mind the same degree of helplessness as does salvation, it is generally used in the passive voice and so does not claim, as does commitment, to be the work of the converted person.

Further, deeper, differences come to the surface in this terminology when each term is prefaced by the words 'the psychology of'. 'The psychology of commitment' raises no one's eyebrows, for even in secular psychology it is a fairly mundane topic of study, whether of commitment to the Communist Party, to vegetarianism, or to any cause or movement. At the other end of the scale, 'the psychology of salvation' strikes one perhaps as a little in bad taste. It grates on the Christian ear, arousing as it does the feeling that an experimental examination of God Himself is entailed. Between the psychology of commitment which is commonplace, and the psychology of salvation which is out of place, 'the psychology of conversion' provokes neither boredom nor distaste, but acceptably arouses interest among most Christians. For them, it is often experienced as a racy, somewhat daring subject to consider, laced as it is with a tinge of heresy which whets the intellectual appetite. It gives an anticipated feeling of power at being let in behind the scenes, almost as if being initiated into the secrets of some mysterious and hidden rite — but without the onus of one's being held responsible for participation in the experimental analysis of God. It seems to me to have the same ambivalent attraction for Christians as spectator-participation in a dangerous sport like motor-racing holds for adolescent-minded adults.

The ambiguity of interpretation observed both in the term 'conversion' and in the phrase 'the psychology of conversion' exemplifies an ambiguity of a more general nature: any statement or event which is interpersonal and therefore complex may be subjected to a dual evaluation. It may be taken at face-value, by investigating *what* was stated or *what* took place; or, the evaluator may read more into it by investigating the *perpetrator* of the speech or happening. Let us, for example, announce,

“The Prime Minister is neurotic”. Some listeners will turn to their neighbours and comment, “I always knew he was — and now this psychologist agrees with me !” (Conversely, the comment might have run, “Rubbish ! There’s nothing whatsoever wrong with him. What nonsense these psychologists talk”.) These listeners have made a *content* evaluation of what was announced. Other listeners may think to themselves, “Now why should he have wanted to say *that* about the Prime Minister — I wonder what his motive was for that aspersion ?” Rather than take the announcement at face-value, these hearers have reacted to the *source*, as distinct from the content, of what was said. A stereotype of their reaction is that of the psychiatrist, faced with a patient infuriated by the lack of progress in his treatment: the psychiatrist listens calmly and then asks in a detached manner, “It’s interesting you feel you have to get so aggressive towards me — I wonder what’s *really* troubling you ?” Naive or annoying as each method of evaluation respectively, may seem, both are valid and both useful on appropriate occasions.

If we now turn from the Premier and the psychiatrist, and attempt to assess a newly-converted Christian, we find as expected that a duality of interpretation is possible. We may take the event at face-value (“Hasn’t Jim changed since he ‘went forward’ at the Billy Graham meetings” — plus a catalogue of observed differences in behaviour); or we may join a currently rather larger group who act the plotty psychiatrist and try to ‘look beneath the surface’ (“What on earth did they do to him at Billy Graham’s Crusade to make him into *that* ?”). It is interesting to note that this duality of interpretation so often seems to go unnoticed by Christians and non-Christians alike, when they hear talk of the psychology of conversion. Their immediate assumption as soon as the phrase is mentioned is that they must sniff along the trail of ‘psychology’ which will lead them to uncover the ‘truth’ about ‘conversion’. In recent years the feeling has been generated that the only way of looking at the topic is to go behind the scenes with the psychiatrist. Yet it is obvious, even if overlooked, that another perfectly sound method of evaluating conversion would be simply to take the psychological aspects of

the phenomenon at their face-value. Both foci of attention, on the surface or under it, are equally valid.

We shall attempt to deal with 'the psychology of conversion' from both points of view — the psychology of converted men and women (its content), and the psychology of the process that seems so to speak, to have got them converted (its observable source). (The way in which these two approaches are presented is reminiscent of the contrast between vitalism and materialism. While vitalists were no less guilty, some materialists developed into ideologists whose aim was to destroy vitalism. For instance, the four top physiologists of the nineteenth century — Du Bois-Raymond, E. W. von Brücke, von Helmholtz and Karl Ludwig — pledged themselves into a private club, the *raison d'être* of which was to demonstrate physiology as 'nothing but' physics and chemistry. From this, the next step was to show that psychology is 'nothing but' physiology (which itself is 'nothing but' physics and chemistry). Between them, these four physiologists trained or taught the three psychologists whom history has shown to have had the controlling hand in ushering their discipline through to the twentieth century: Wilhelm Wundt, Ivan Pavlov and Sigmund Freud. Thus the seeds of materialism were sown into modern psychology.)

The Processes of Conversion: its Observable Source

To many people the expression 'processes of conversion' still brings the name of William Sargant to mind. As an exponent of the materialist view of conversion, Dr. Sargant remains the best known popular author on the subject. His latest book appeared only recently in 1973² and is again pumping out the same theses, basically, that startled the public in 1957 when *Battle for the Mind*³ was published. Because I believe most Christians still feel a little worried at what Sargant says about 'the physiology of conversion', I shall spend some time in assessing his work as expressed not only in the time-honoured best seller, but also in his autobiography.⁴

According to Sargant, what happens to the individual who is converted is 'nothing but' what the Russian materialist Pavlov observed happening to his experimental dogs. Pavlov found that by bringing dogs to a state of collapse, via various methods, a state of hypersuggestibility could be engineered during which new behaviour patterns could be implanted — permanently in some cases. Sargant claims that the same pattern of events takes place in the manufacture of human converts. This is his hypothesis insofar as Christians are concerned, although he attempts to link this up with many other sorts of behaviour-changes, such as brain-washing and certain psychiatric treatments. (It will be apparent that this *scheme* fails to account for the many Christians who have not experienced a sudden conversion.) The aim of the thesis seems to be, that if what has until now appeared to be a spiritual phenomenon can be shown to have such humble origins as the manipulation of dogs, then its value is undone: it is discredited once and for all.

This aim is similar in nature to trying to show, for example, that the paints Picasso used were of such and such a hue, and such and such an intensity — and therefore his works of art are contrived and valueless. However, when such a blatant example of this sort of 'logic' is used, the sheer blatancy shows up its illogicality. The trouble with *Battle for the Mind* and books like it is that they never spell out their logic with clarity. They work, like many advertisements, by innuendo, simply suggesting what might or might not be the case — and allowing you to draw the conclusions they want you to arrive at. Sargant's book is riddled with statements such as the following: "[such and such a piece of information] is further evidence [if any were needed] for the point we have been making, namely, that among the readiest victims of brainwashing or religious conversion may be the simple healthy extrovert".^{3a} The word to focus on is that little insertion, 'may' — the readiest victim *may* be . . . Now to the average reader going through the many, many statements of this nature, the recollection of what the book says will be that Sargant says such and such *is* the case — this will be what he remembers of the book. In fact what Sargant actually did was to suggest that such and such *might be* the case. But that is hardly what sticks

in people's minds. Were you or I, though, indignantly to accuse him of propagating a doctrine that had upset hundreds of Christians, all he has to do is to turn round and plead innocency: "look at my words — I only said such and such *might be* the case". The nature of the case is, then, one that is backed by innuendo, the technique of advertising rather than of science.

But innuendo and suggestion alone do not fully account for the tremendous popularity and impact of Sargant's book: other factors must be noted for a more complete appreciation of its effects.

The book reached an audience with itching ears. Its public *wanted* to hear the sort of things Sargant had to say. Only three years before, quite remarkable success had attended the preaching of the evangelist Billy Graham at Harringay — and the 'scientific man' of the fifties had received quite a slight. *Battle for the Mind* helped to restore the image which Harringay had tarnished. Taking this line of reasoning a little further, Sargant's readership, already wanting to hear what he told them, comprised a rather suggestible audience, much too ready to believe what the Doctor had to say. Moreover, the book itself does not just give a bare outline of its thesis, but goes into turgid detail on page after page through chapter after chapter presenting time and again what might concisely have been said in about a dozen pages.

So . . . not only does Sargant have a suggestible audience, but again and again he assails them with his one message. This message is not one that is presented as true or false, but like good advertising it only *suggests* that what it says might be true. On top of this, there is a further ambiguity: the writer is a medical man, a Dr., the sort of person you can trust. But, while appearing as a medical man, he writes as an advertiser — a nasty combination at the best of times, especially for people who are ready to put their faith in 'what the doctors say'.

However, let us not be so cynical as to say Sargant did all this deliberately, when we insinuate that his book was in fact nothing but a massive exercise in brainwashing. Let us at least

assume he did not callously engineer the whole thing. (It is this callousness attributed to those who brought people to conversion — the sort of callousness attributed to Peter on the day of Pentecost, or to Wesley as he crusaded in Britain — which is one of the more hurtful aspects of Sargant's book. For instance, Sargant not only suggests that Wesley engineered his part in the eighteenth century awakening, but that he did so knowing full well that all he was doing was using certain techniques to force people to do what they did not really want to do.) We shall assume that in implanting his ideas into the British public, Sargant did not fully realise that he was laying an almost impenetrable barrier of cynicism in the mind of the lay public towards Christian evangelism in the next few years.

Lest it should be thought too harsh simply to rebound by insinuation his own subject-matter onto himself, evidence is now presented which points to the fact that Sargant himself became a convert to his ideas by being 'brainwashed' himself. Briefly, he worked non-stop as a civilian during the years of World War II, doing a tremendous amount of good work and introducing valuable innovations in psychiatric practice. It was in June 1944 that for the first time he read Pavlov's experimental work on dogs. Then about August of the same year he came across a copy of Wesley's journal, and reading Wesley's accounts of his preaching and the conversions that followed it struck him that there might be a link between the experiments of Pavlov and the conversions under John Wesley. All this time he had been working hard, and, as he says, "as civilians throughout the war, we had been badly undernourished and easily tired".^{4a} Stresses were enormous: "during the long Blitz, several very normal members of the hospital staff showed signs of breaking down".^{4b} Then just after reading Wesley and Pavlov, the Sargants took their first holiday for years; he contracted a cold while out walking and it turned to severe pneumonia. Sargant insisted on being taken back to London, and "my wife somehow brought me back to Graylingwell — with a high temperature and gasping for breath; I was nearly delirious on arrival . . . it was a severe virus pneumonia, complicated by poisoning from the sulphonamide drugs with which I was first treated . . . my temperature again rose sharply and I

had now developed infective hepatitis. Two subsequent relapses of this unpleasant liver disease . . . left me deeply jaundiced for some weeks. Five years of incessant and fatiguing work on civilian wartime diet had weakened my resistance".^{4c}

Now, what has all this to do with brainwashing? Well, let me quote one of the ways Sargant tells us that Pavlov induced collapse states and subsequent hypersuggestibility in his dogs. This was to "tamper with the dog's physical condition by subjecting it to long periods of work, gastrointestinal disorders, fevers, or by disturbing its glandular balance. The advantage taken of debilitation and other changes of bodily function in human beings for their political and religious conversion will be discussed later . . . Pavlov found the new behaviour pattern occurring afterwards might become a fixed element in the dog's way of life, though it had long recovered from the debilitating experience".^{3b}

The point is that one could interpret Sargant's falling ill just after subjecting himself to the joint stimuli of Pavlov and Wesley as similar to the experience of the dog just cited. But, if the similarity were to be more than just a figment of the imagination, reinforcement of the ideas from Pavlov and Wesley would have to succeed, not just precede, the debilitating illness. In fact we find that what Sargant did with his unexpected spare time in convalescence is just what is required to fit our hypothesis. He says, "Although my wife nursed me . . . she had to go back to work long before I recovered. So I fended for myself all day . . . However, my slow convalescence allowed me to read a great number of books from various sources".^{4d} With what did he fill his mind during this possibly hypersuggestible stage? He tells us, "During my convalescence, I read all the books I could find on the subject of sudden religious conversion".^{4e} In a run-down state, therefore, Sargant receives the stimulus of Pavlov and Wesley together; and in a suggestible state, he reads all he can to reinforce the ideas gathered just before the breakdown in health (and I can hardly imagine him not rereading the Wesley/Pavlov material at the same time).

Having looked at the man and his method, a brief look at his message is in order. Dr. Lloyd-Jones in his *Critique of the*

*book, Battle for the Mind*⁵ has made almost all the relevant points — although I think he mistakes the book for a piece of scientific research, and evaluates it as such. In addition to the points he makes, I think it can hardly be overstressed that the book provides the antagonistic non-Christian with a provocative weapon against domineering evangelism by Christians. For, just as the publication of Darwin's theories have led to the seemingly ineradicable popular conception of the truth of the theory of evolution, so Sargant's book seems to have served a similar purpose with respect to the popular conception of evangelism. Sargant is possibly the more difficult to deal with because there is much that is a correct statement of the facts woven in to the insinuation that his analysis of treatment for shellshock, 'brainwashing', abreaction therapy, and the like, *also* covers true Christian conversion. He makes the same mistake as did Sennacherib, two thousand five hundred years ago. Because the gods of Hamath, Arpad, Sepharvaim, Hena, etc. had not delivered their inhabitants from his power, Sennacherib foolishly assumed that the God of Jerusalem could not resist his armies, either (2 Kings 19: 10–13). It was a false generalisation, as is Sargant's.

If it is true that evangelism in Great Britain is all the more discouraging now, its audience being more cynical because accepting Sargant's false generalisation as true, then the very thing to avoid at all costs is a desperate evangelism that in its desperation begins to utilise some of the selfsame Pavlovian techniques that *Battle for the Mind* highlights, so as to get visible 'results'. It is no good our thinking that if God used Balaam's ass or any other unlikely instrument to do his work, then He will use evangelism based on psychology pure and simple — that is as false a generalisation as Sargant's. Our textbook on evangelism is the Bible and its principles — it is these we should seek to follow.

To close this section on the processes behind conversion, I would like to suggest a tentative psychological alternative to the account of conversion based on the model of Pavlovian conditioning. There *are* striking similarities in the psychological aspects of reports of concentration camps, thought reform colleges,

mass hysteria episodes, and so-called 'revivals'. A common feature is discernible in the various studies published, which is the removal from the subjects concerned, of their *normal frame of reference*. For example, the internees of concentration camps had no court of appeal whatsoever; they had no property rights, no personal privacy, and so on. All the things they normally measured their lives by, all their personal yardsticks and criteria, were stripped from them. Again, in the famous Orson Welles broadcast, "The Invasion from Mars",⁶ the listeners who went berserk, who got hysterically worked up, turned out to be those who lacked sufficient presence of mind to make an independent check as to whether the broadcast represented fact or fiction, say by 'phoning the radio station involved; also, the play was about outer space which few then (1938) had knowledge of, so that an organised frame of reference just was not available.

In spiritual matters, the 'natural man' has a very poor frame of reference. If at any time they begin to become real to him, he has no prior frame of reference to deal with them, and feels compelled either to dismiss them as unreal or hallucinatory, or to receive some external frame of reference and allow it to become his own.

To put a person into a situation where his habitual frame of reference is deliberately and progressively made inadequate is to unnerve him and to distort his judgment; experiments⁷ also provide evidence to show that under these conditions susceptibility to attitude change is enhanced. However, to reverse the operation and supply the person with a frame of reference where previously he had none gives relief and improved performance (see, for example, experiments by Hudson⁸). So to the person disoriented under deep conviction of sin, sudden conversion would give purpose and meaning, relief at having categories with which to make sense of one's life. (Let me stress that I am talking here about *psychological* issues in sudden conversions, which parallel the spiritual realities taking place at the same time. If the psychological effects *only* take place, resulting in a testimony to changed feelings, meaning to life, etc. with no reference to sins forgiven, one would doubt the so-called 'conversion'.)

The Characteristics of Conversion: its Content

The second way of evaluating 'the psychology of conversion' calls for an examination of the psychology of the convert. There being a dearth of psychological studies on the topic of converted Christian men and women, and no bogey like Dr. Sargant to attack, one lacks a clear frame of established reference, and the following section is the more open to justified criticism.

William James⁹ contrasted the psychology of the converted man with that of the religious but unconverted man. In doing so, he enunciated the great principle which divides these two sorts of people: converted persons belong to the grouping of mankind that we may call 'twice-born', whereas sincerely religious persons who are unconverted are members of the 'once-born' group. Quite apart from the second birth as a spiritual fact as far as God is concerned, this experience of being 'born again' is the over-riding psychological characteristic of the converted person, and as such it has far-reaching implications for the psychology of that individual.

The religion of the once-born person directs him, in the words of James, "to settle his scores with the more evil aspects of the universe by systematically declining to lay them to heart or make much of them, by ignoring them in his relative calculations, or even, on occasion, by denying outright that they exist. Evil is a disease; and worry over disease is itself an additional form of disease, which only adds to the original complaint. Even repentance and remorse . . . may be but sickly and relaxing impulses. The best repentance is to up and act for righteousness, and forget you ever had relations with sin".^{9a} F. W. Newman¹⁰ describes the God that such people worship: "They see God, not as a strict Judge, not as a Glorious Potentate, but as an animating Spirit of a beautiful and harmonious world, Beneficent and Kind, Merciful as well as Pure. The same characters generally have no metaphysical tendencies; they do not look back into themselves. Hence they are not distressed by their own imperfections: yet it would be absurd to call them self-righteous; for they hardly think of themselves *at all* . . . They no more shrink from God than

a child from an emperor, before whom the parent trembles: in fact, they have no vivid conception of *any* of the qualities in which the severer Majesty of God consists. He to them is the impersonation of Kindness and Beauty . . . They have a certain complacency and perhaps romantic sense of excitement in their simple worship".^{9b} The once-born person, then, is the man who "looks on all things and sees they are good".^{9c} Examples from history would perhaps be St. Francis or J. J. Rousseau. Their type of religion has been called 'the religion of healthy-mindedness'.

The quotations cited are intended as a backcloth against which to view the person who is our real object of study: the second-born man. If the once-born man has a way of deliberately minimizing evil, the habit of the second-born is to maximize it. He is persuaded that the evil aspects of life are of its very essence, and that a consideration of them is what really brings the meaning of the world home to us. Listen to two examples: Luther looks back on his life with the following words — "I am utterly weary of life. I pray the Lord will come forthwith and carry me hence"; and in reply to the Electress Dowager who had just wished that he might live another forty years, he says, "Madam, rather than live forty years more, I would give up my chance of Paradise". Robert Louis Stevenson states — "There is indeed one element in human destiny, that not blindness itself can controvert. Whatever else we are intended to do, we are not intended to succeed; failure is the fate allotted". Such extremes always perceive the "worm at the core of all our usual delights", and to them the only relief healthy-mindedness can give is something like, "Stuff and nonsense, get out into the open air; cheer up old fellow, you'll be all right before long, if only you will drop your morbidness!" However, the troubles of this person lie too deep for *that* cure. As James points out, the very fact that we *can* die, that we *can* be ill at all, is what perplexes him; the mere fact that we now are alive and well for a moment is irrelevant to *that* perplexity. What he needs is a life not correlated with death, a health not liable to illness, a kind of good that will not perish. Needless to say, such people feel burdened with life; these sick souls need to be twice-born, psychologically speaking, *in order to*

be happy (quite apart from their need, spiritually speaking, to be reconciled with God).

The cure for 'sick souls' is no mere reversion to natural health — it is a process of redemption. The sufferer when converted is saved by what feels and seems to him to be another birth, the arrival of a deeper kind of conscious being than he could enjoy before (see ^{9d}). Prior to conversion, he perceived the dual nature of his personality (*Romans 7: 24*); after the second birth not only is there not a return to a 'healthy-minded' psychology, but he retains too a dual conception of the external world — the universe is still two stories deep, the natural and the spiritual. Not until the resurrection of the body will life — both internal and external — take on a unified rather than a dual nature.

Another feature which does not change is the experience both before and after conversion of a 'living death'. This disenchantment with a world perceived as death-like in quality was previously due to self-interested feelings of hopelessness and sadness; upon conversion the same death to self may now result from a God-concern rather than self-interest alone. Henry Scougal describes it as a kind of voluntary death, where love for God takes the form of a self-dereliction, a wandering out of ourselves. Paradoxically, at the same time the individual becomes dear to himself because he is so to the Other (and anything He holds dear must necessarily be dear to the individual).¹¹

However the psychologically-felt ills for which he sought remedy are gone: the short transitory nature of life changes for the twice-born. Security is his, since conversion has linked him with a permanent Other, whose love is permanent, who always reciprocates his love, who is supremely worthy of love, who because He has an infinity of love can enable the twice-born to suffer any number of rivals without suffering a diminution of reciprocation. The born again man has at last found an Object of love and regard which is untouched by the imperfection seen both in himself and his world.

To close, I have sought — unsuccessfully I fear — to present something in the last part of this paper which seems difficult to put into words. At best it has been palely descriptive. But with the description as it stands, one finds in the words of William James [who though he belonged to the twice-born type¹² had deep insight into the minds of his once-born friends — Editor's addition] a verbal picture of the once-born person which seems to come uncomfortably close to the psychologies of many today who profess second birth and consider themselves 'converted'. Small wonder Christ said, "Ye *must* be born again" (*John* 3: 7), knowing that no true fruit — as measured by the psychology of the twice-born — would grow otherwise.

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DISCUSSION

R. L. F. Boyd (President). You referred to the spiritual realities behind the phenomena of conversion. In what sense are these realities in any way distinct from the observable effects on subjective experience of the conversion?

Reply: One way of distinguishing between spiritual realities and subjective experience in conversion is to be trite and state that the former

are non-observable and the latter may be observed. However this is not strictly true; the distinction must be refined — the former are not yet observable, whereas the latter are so already. The reality of any compact is seen when that compact comes under test. In the spiritual compact which comes into being at conversion (although cf. *Romans* 8: 29) through faith in Christ's mediating work, there is only one acid and public test of its reality — acceptance by God at the end of time (*Matthew* 25: 34). Until that time, faith is the only evidence and assurance that we have (*Hebrews* 11: 1).

R. E. D. Clark. Sargant claims that the effectiveness of Wesley's evangelism was connected with his incessant preaching of hell fire which served to arouse tension and make his hearers suggestible. It is worth drawing attention to Ian Ramage's book, *Battle for the Free Mind*, 1967, esp. Chap. 6 where the author points out that Sargant cannot have read Wesley's published sermons. Ramage tells us that of 40,000 sermons of which Wesley left notes only one can be traced which was about hell and it converted no one! To the poor who responded to his preaching, Wesley stressed the love and tenderness of God. It was only to the well-to-do that he preached sternly but such sermons largely failed to influence those who heard them. The revival excesses which worried Wesley a good deal were almost confined to the early period 1739-43 at Bristol.

Reply: Thank you for the data on Wesley. As to the point about Sargant it is only fair to point out that he does not in fact claim to have read Wesley's published sermons. His claim is to have read Wesley's journal, from which he quotes, together with several biographies. My knowledge of Wesley's sermons is poor, but my suspicion is that while only one sermon may have been unearthed dealing solely with hell, virtually all his preaching will have contained some reference to the judgment of an offended God. If this were not the case, would Wesley's evangelism measure up to the Biblical pattern of true preaching? I think not.