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Joining New Congregations – Motives, Ways and Consequences

A Comparative Study of New Congregations in a Norwegian Folk Church Context and a Thai Minority Context

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1. Introduction

1.1 Problem

The aim of this study is to explore what happens when individuals join new Christian congregations. The study thus focuses on both collective and individual aspects of religion. Concerning the latter, historians and anthropologists have devoted increasing numbers of case studies and sociologists and psychologists have developed numerous theories. Theologians have, however, recently been somewhat reluctant to focus on individual aspects of religion. In the contemporary missiological discussion, to which this thesis primarily hopes to contribute, the focus has therefore been on inculturation and contextualization rather than on the classical missiological motives of individual religiosity, such as conversion and commitment.[1] By exploring what happens when individuals join new congregations, the present study then aims to contribute to a field of research that from a contemporary missiological perspective is only to a limited extent being addressed.

Since this study primarily is set within the field of missiology, which is characterized by a multi-disciplinary approach, several disciplines have been applied as dialogue partners. As missiology is concerned with the mission of God and the purpose of the church, it is part of theology and a dimension of ecclesiology. It thus includes disciplines such as practical and systematic theology. However, as missiology is also concerned with culture and with people of other faiths, theoretical perspectives from non-theological disciplines, including anthropology and sociology, have also been critically applied. The fact that methods and theoretical perspectives from theological as well as non-theological disciplines have been applied, suggests that this thesis might be characterized as an interdisciplinary study.

From what has been said so far, there are reasons to suggest that joining a new congregation is a complex process that involves more than just becoming a registered member of a new community of faith. It is a process that implies involvement and commitment. This suggests that the process must be informed by a dynamic perspective of change. The crucial question to be addressed in this study then is how to understand the change involved when individuals in different

1 Marc R. Spindler, "Conversion revisited: Present understanding of a classic missionary motive," *Missiology: An International Review* 25, no. 3 (1997): 293–295.

contexts join new congregations. While no single theory may account for the complexity of the processes involved, a key concept when exploring religious change is *conversion.* Other concepts, commonly entailed in theories of conversion, are *transformation, commitment* and *intensification.* These and several other concepts that will be further introduced in the next subchapter may hopefully complement rather than exclude each other when exploring the phenomenon of joining new congregations.

While joining a new congregation needs to be understood in terms of change, this perspective is not sufficient to cover the complexity of the process. It is also relevant to ask to what extent the process implies continuity. The reason for this is that joining a new community of faith never takes place in a vacuum. This is the case even when joining a new congregation implies a radical conversion. The process of joining a new congregation thus needs to be approached not only from a perspective of change, but also from a perspective of continuity. In order to complement and materialize the two main perspectives of the study, respectively the individual-collective and the continuity-change perspectives, the study will also focus on two closely related aspects of human life. The question to be addressed is how joining a new congregation influences people's belief systems and behavior.

Since joining a new congregation, as argued above, never takes place in a vacuum, the phenomenon needs to be explored with reference to particular contexts. In order to identify themes and patterns that cut across a great deal of variation, while still taking the uniqueness of each case seriously, a strategy of maximum variation was chosen.[2] Given this strategy and the limitations of a thesis, two distinctively different contexts were chosen for the purpose of this study. While the choice of a two-case design will be explained when further introducing the research strategy, what directed the more specific choice of contexts was that Norway and Thailand in several respects are poles apart. By comparing how individuals in a Thai context, where the church constitutes a tiny minority in a fairly homogenous and strongly religious society, and individuals in a more pluralistic and secular Norwegian context join new congregations, the study aims to identify both common themes and document the uniqueness of each case. However, in order to compare two cases, it is crucial that they both have some characteristics in common. Based on these considerations, the two fairly new Lutheran congregations of Fahoan and Bærland were chosen as context cases in this empirical study.

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2 Both the two-case strategy and the strategy of maximum variation sampling will be further introduced in chapter 1.3.1.

Fahoan congregation is located in a village in the northeastern Thai province of Ubon Ratchathani. Following a rather spontaneous conversion of a man in the village, the growing local group of Christians did for several years gather in private homes. However, in 1994 the group got its own church and was finally approved as a congregation within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Thailand (ELCT). Located a considerable distance from other congregations, the congregation in Fahoan is largely dependent on local initiative and resources. An evangelist, who together with his wife and three children lives on the church premises, is in charge of the congregation, which is also occasionally visited by local pastors and missionaries. The congregation consists mainly of local farmers and their families. Of the more than 100 registered members, a core group of approximately 40 people regularly attend the Sunday service. In addition to this, the congregation also attracts a large number of children through the Children's Development Project, a project running since 2006.[3]

Bærland congregation is located in the southwestern Norwegian county of Rogaland. Belonging to the Church of Norway, the congregation was established in 2001 to cover the need of the local area of Bærland, an expansive neighborhood in the local parish of Ålgård. Initiated by the local parish council in close cooperation with the Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS), which during an initial project period supported the new congregation both in terms of economy and human resources, the congregation gradually managed to support not only the pastor, who had been working in the congregation since it got established, but temporarily also other staff members focusing on work among children and teenagers. While initially established as a congregation for the local area of Bærland, the congregation from the very beginning attracted people also from the wider community of Ålgård and soon gained an average service attendance of more than 100 persons. With the approval of the parish council, in 2006 the congregation thus formally changed its status from being a congregation defined according to geography to become a profile congregation targeting families with children below teenage.[4]

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3 The Children's Development Project is introduced in chapter 2.1.5. See footnote 155.

4 A profile congregation is a congregation which in order to reach people in particular life situations or with particular preferences has a particular profile. A document from the Church of Norway National Council gives the following description of a profile congregation: "En profilmenighet er en menighet som har en bestemt profil på det arbeidet den gjør. Arbeidet kan være rettet mot mennesker med en bestemt interesse eller mennesker som er i en spesiell livssituasjon. […] Begrepet profilmenighet brukes om menigheter med forskjellig profil innen ett sokn. Disse driver sitt arbeid på delegering fra menighetsrådet. Om profilmenigheten strekker seg ut over ett

During my visit the congregation accordingly consisted of families who had more recently moved to the area and families where one or both parents were locals.

There are, as shown above, a number of differences between joining a congregation in a remote village in Thailand, where the Christians constitute a tiny minority in a strongly Buddhist society, and joining a congregation in a local community in Norway, where the majority of the population are already baptized members of the denomination of the new congregation. While my choice of distinctively different cases, as argued above, aims to capture and describe themes that cut across a great deal of variation, a crucial question yet remains to be addressed. The question is whether joining new congregations, which is the phenomenon to be empirically explored in this study, involves processes that might be fruitfully compared with reference to my two cases. Suggesting a preliminary answer to this question, one might expect that the processes in several respects will reflect contextual differences that need to be accounted for. However, sharing the view that joining a new religious fellowship needs to be understood in terms of change, I believe that comparing cases that are distinctively different might in a fruitful way elucidate the phenomenon by capturing elements and themes that are common for both cases.

Based on the preceding reflections, the following research questions were formulated: *How do individuals in the distinctively different contexts of Thailand and Norway reflect on their motives for and ways of joining a new congregation?* and *How do they reflect on the consequences this had for their belief and behavior?* By focusing on the respondents' perspectives on what happened when they joined the new congregations, the research questions are approaching the phenomenon primarily from an inside perspective. This choice of perspective corresponds with my primary aim, which is to describe how individuals experience changes of religious fellowship, rather than describing more objectively the processes involved. In this respect the perspective of the study is more in line with studies within the field of psychology of religion than more sociologically oriented studies. In order to approach the main research questions, several subsidiary questions had to be

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sokn vil den komme inn under begrepet valgmenighet." (Church of Norway National Council 62/05). ("A profile congregation is a congregation that has a certain profile on its work. The work might be directed at people with particular interests or people in a particular life situation […]. The term profile congregation is used about congregations with various profiles within a parish. These congregations are working with delegated authority from the parish council. If a profile congregation reaches beyond a single parish, it will be covered by the term vocational congregation." My translation.) See also "Menighetsutvikling i Stavanger bispedømme", in *Utredning fra en arbeidsgruppe nedsatt av Stavanger bispedømmeråd. April 2005* (2005). 8.

addressed. The basic research questions have thus been broken down to the following questions:

- Reflecting on their *motives* for joining the congregations, which common and specific traits might be discerned and how might these be interpreted in light of the two contexts?
- Reflecting on their *ways* of joining the congregations, how might the processes involved be interpreted in light of the two contexts? Does joining the two congregations involve fundamentally different processes or are the same steps involved, only with contextual variations?
- Related to the distinctively different contexts, which were the main *consequences* of joining a new congregation? This question will be examined with particular reference to reactions from the environment and to changes in the members' belief systems and behavior.

Since the questions above will be elucidated based on in-dept interviews with new members, the phenomenon of joining new congregations will be empirically explored, primarily from an individual perspective. Individuals will consequently be considered *primary cases*. However, as these individuals belong to congregations located in two distinctively different contexts, the two ecclesial contexts will thus be considered *secondary cases* or *context cases*.

Based on what has been said so far, the main aim of this comparative case study then is to explore how the phenomenon of joining new congregations is actualized in two distinctively different contemporary contexts. By focusing on why and how individuals in the two contexts make such decisive steps, and which consequences their decisions have, the study aims to contribute both to the wider field of individual religiosity, and to an ongoing missiological discussion on church planting and congregational development.

1.2 Theoretical perspectives

The aim of this subchapter is to introduce theoretical perspectives that might elucidate what happens when individuals in the distinctively different contexts of Thailand and Norway join new congregations. The idea that directed the choice of theoretical perspectives was, as argued above, a dynamic understanding that joining new congregations involves an element of change. A key question when approaching this task was how to understand the complexity of religious change. In

order to address this question, some key concepts will be introduced, concepts that might account both for a fundamental change of religion and a change of religious fellowship within a religious tradition. Starting with what from a commonsense perspective might appear to be the most radical concept of religious change, the following presentation will first focus on conversion.

While the research community widely discusses the nature of conversion, there is a common understanding that the term is associated with change or transformation. According to *Encyclopedia of Religion*, common definitions of conversion originate from the Greek terms *epistrophé* and *metánoia*, terms that imply an inner transformation; that a person "turns around." [5] However, despite the common understanding that conversion applies to change, scholarly consensus on how to define conversion and to which processes the term can be applied has yet to be achieved.

The lack of consensus concerning how to use the concept of conversion is also reflected by the fact that no single theory currently dominates the field of conversion studies.[6] Rather, the various theories emphasize different dimensions and processes of conversion, each theory growing out of different sets of assumptions and methods of research. The current theories might, reflecting their main foci, according to Farhadian and Rambo, be divided into the following broad categories: personalistic theories, social and cultural theories, religious and theological approaches and finally convergent models, which seek to be interdisciplinary.[7] Each of these categories includes a number of theories that from different scholarly traditions and disciplines try to elucidate the complex phenomenon of conversion. The following presentation will focus in more depth on a few contributions that from various perspectives deal with this complexity of conversion, some contributions widening the perspective by using concepts such as transformation and commitment.

Berger and Luckmann – conversion as reconstruction of identity

According to Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, most renowned for their still much-debated theory of knowledge, religious conversion should be considered a process of radical socialization. In their seminal work *The social construction of reality,* the two sociologists, who are proponents of a social theory of conversion, argue that the maintenance of a conversion is dependent upon a community, a

5 Charles E. Farhadian and Lewis R. Rambo, "Conversion," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones and Mircea Eliade (Detroit: Macmillan/Thomson Gale, 2005), 1969, ibid.

6 Ibid., 1968.

7 Ibid.

fellowship in which the new identity is made plausible.[8] In order for a conversion to be persistent, the authors argue, two social conditions appear to be fundamental.

First, the social setting in which conversion takes place should replicate the setting of children's primary socialization. This implies that the persistence of a conversion largely depends on to what extent the fellowship resembles the setting of the family. The reason for this is that in the process there is a fundamental need for an emotional dependence upon persons holding important positions in the sub-society one is about to enter. These *significant others* are crucial for the reconstruction of identity, which, according to Berger and Luckmann, is the core of conversion.[9]

A second social condition, which according to Berger and Luckmann is a continuation of the first, is that a conversion can only be maintained in a community that confirms the new identity. Introducing a second key concept, the authors argue that the religious community should provide *plausibility structures*, confirming the conversion. Keeping the two key concepts together, Berger and Luckman consider this plausibility structure to be mediated to the convert by significant others, with whom they must establish strongly affective identification.[10] Reflecting on the importance of the religious community, the authors conclude: "To have a conversion experience is nothing much. The real thing is to be able to keep on taking it seriously; to retain a sense of its plausibility. *This* is where the religious community comes in. It provides the indispensable plausibility structure for the new reality."[11]

While Berger and Luckmann's understanding of conversion might be criticized for reducing conversion to a process of socialization, what makes their theory relevant for this study, is particularly their emphasis on the community. Arguing that the maintenance of the conversion is dependent upon a community, a fellowship in which the new identity is made plausible, the theory makes the relationship between conversion and ecclesiology extremely important, recommending that ecclesiology should be seen from the point of view of the family.[12]

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8 The following presentation is based on Peter L. Berger and T. Luckman, *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 149–182.

9 Ibid., 177.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 177–178.

12 This is also a main point in Karl Olav Sandnes' study on conversion and ecclesiology in the Early Church. Sandnes explicitly applies the theory of Berger and Luckman when comparing the fellowship in the Early Church with a new family. See Karl Olav Sandnes, *A new family: Conversion and ecclesiology in the Early Church: With cross-cultural comparisons* (Bern: Lang, 1994), 12–19, ibid.

Bernard J. F. Lonergan – intellectual, moral and religious conversion

A scholar approaching conversion from a quite different perspective is Bernard J. F. Lonergan, a Jesuit theologian who has contributed to academic fields stretching from philosophy to economy, whose normative interpretation of conversion is still frequently referred to by other scholars. In contrast to Berger and Luckmann's sociological approach to conversion, which refers to conversion mainly as a process of socialization, Lonergan's approach might be characterized as multidimensional. According to Lonergan, conversion has three dimensions. "It is intellectual inasmuch as it regards our orientation to the intelligible and the true. It is moral inasmuch as it regards our orientation to the good. It is religious inasmuch as it regards our orientation to God."[13] The three dimensions, he argues, are distinct, so that conversion can occur in one dimension without occurring in the other two, or in two dimensions without occurring in the other one.[14] At the same time, the three dimensions are closely related. Conversion in the one leads to conversion in the other dimensions, and relapse from one prepares for relapse from the others.[15]

Explicating the three dimensions, Lonergan argues that through intellectual conversion a person frees himself from confusing the criteria of the world of immediacy with the criteria of the world mediated by meaning. By moral conversion he becomes motivated not primarily by satisfaction but by meaning. By religious conversion, to quote Lonergan, "he comes to love God with his whole heart and his whole soul and all his mind and all his strength; and in consequence he loves his neighbors as himself."[16]

While the main contribution of Berger and Luckmann is their strong emphasis on the role of the religious community in the process of conversion, what makes Lonergan's theologically oriented theory relevant for this study is the way he describes conversion as a multidimensional phenomena. The multidimensional approach of Lonergan and other philosophically oriented theologians may complement the one-dimensional approach of sociologists such as Berger and Luckman.

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13 Bernard Lonergan, Robert C. Croken, and Robert M. Doran, *Philosophical and theological papers 1965–1980*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan ; 17 (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004), 86.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

Lewis R. Rambo – a typology and stage model of conversion

Lewis R. Rambo, a leading figure within contemporary research on conversion, approaches the phenomenon from yet another perspective.[17] While he, like Lonergan, argues that conversion is multidimensional and, according to his own categorization of conversion theories, characterizes his own model as convergent, which means that it seeks to be interdisciplinary, Rambo's model may also be characterized as personalistic. This is supported by the observation that Rambo, who is a professor of psychology and religion, belongs to a scholarly tradition that argues that what characterizes conversion is individual change. However, the change involved in a conversion might vary considerably.[18] In *Understanding religious conversion,* a seminal work within the field of conversion studies, Rambo thus presents a typology of conversion encompassing several types of interrelated phenomena.[19]

First, Rambo distinguishes between *affiliation* and *intensification.* While affiliation refers to "the movement of an individual or group from no or minimal religious commitment to full involvement with an institution or community of faith", intensification refers to "the revitalized commitment to a faith with which the convert has had previous affiliation, formal or informal."[20] This occurs, he continues, "when nominal members of a religious institution make their commitment a central focus in their lives, or when people deepen their involvement in a community of faith through profound religious experience and/or life transitions like marriage, childbirth, and approaching death."[21] Reflecting on the phenomenon of intensification, Rambo states that this is "the process of personal renewal and the deepening of conviction within one's religious community. Hence, it is assumed

17 Lewis R. Rambo is professor of psychology and religion at San Francisco Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley.

18 Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding religious conversion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), 5. Edwin Zehner presents in his Ph.D. thesis a typology of Thai conversions, with reference to, among others, Rambo. There are six main categories; gradual conversions, experimental conversions, casual or drifting conversions, emotional conversions, social conversions and observation of Christians. Thai conversion stories normally involve several of these conversion types. See Edwin Zehner, "Unavoidably Hybrid: Thai Buddhist Conversions to Evangelical Christianity" (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 2003).

19 Rambo, *Understanding religious conversion*, 172–173.

20 Ibid., 13.

21 Ibid.

that the person is already, to some minimal degree, involved in the community of faith, but that his or her spiritual experience becomes more profound."[22]

Second, Rambo distinguishes between *tradition transition* and *institutional transition*. While tradition transition refers to the movement of an individual or a group from one major religious tradition to another, institutional transition involves the change of an individual or group from one community to another within a major tradition. Referring to the former, Rambo claims that "moving from one worldview, ritual system, symbolic universe, and life-style to another is a complex process that often takes place in a context of cross-cultural contact and conflict."[23] Concerning institutional transition, he claims that this can "involve simple affiliation with a church because of convenience (such as geographical proximity) or significant religious change based upon profound religious experience."[24]

Based on the understanding that conversion is a dynamic and multifaceted process of religious change, Rambo suggests a stage model of conversion. Given the wide range of phenomena encompassed in the typology above, this process-oriented model seemed to be relevant when exploring the religious change taking place in both contexts of this study. Arguing that the study of conversion must include the four components of cultural, social, personal and religious systems, Rambo suggests a model consisting of seven stages.[25]

Stage one identifies the *context* in which conversion takes place.[26] Rambo argues that conversion takes place within a dynamic context encompassing both "conflicting, confluent and dialectical factors that both facilitate and repress the process of conversion."[27] Arguing that context is more than a first stage that is passed through, Rambo claims that it is rather "the total environment in which conversion transpires. Context continues its influence throughout the other conversion stages."[28]

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22 Ibid., 173.
23 Ibid., 14.
24 Ibid., 14–15.
25 Ibid., 7.
26 Ibid., 20–43. On the importance of cultural context from an evangelical perspective, see Hans Kasdorf, *Christian conversion in context* (Scottdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1980). See also Charles H. Kraft and Marguerite G. Kraft, *Christianity in culture: A study in Biblical theologizing in cross-cultural perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2005).
27 Rambo, *Understanding religious conversion*, 20.
28 Ibid.

On stage two a *crisis* occurs, in which disordering and disrupting experiences call into question a person's or group's taken-for-granted world.[29] A crisis can vary in intensity and duration, and might be triggered by the interaction of external and internal forces.[30] External forces may, he argues, range from personal contact, for instance with an evangelist or a family member that triggers a crisis, to colonial contact for the sake of exploration and trade.[31] Internal catalysts for conversion may include mystical experiences, illness, existential questions about the purpose of life, desire for transcendence and pathology.[32] While crises might cause disorder in a person's or group's taken-for-granted world, they might also provide opportunities for reorientation that might not have been discovered if a crisis had not occurred. A crisis might simply be a catalyst for change.

Stage three is *quest*, which encompasses different ways people actively respond to crises.[33] This stage is characterized as an ongoing process, but one that will intensify during times of crisis.[34] Rambo claims that three sets of factors may be helpful in exploring the nature of the quest. First, the *response style* may differ. While converts might sometimes be passive, Rambo's working assumption is that they are more often active agents in their own conversions.[35] Questing for something more or something better than the present situation, he argues, seems to be endemic in human beings.[36] A second important factor influencing the quest stage is what sociologists call *structural availability*. According to Rambo, this refers to the freedom of a person to move from previous emotional, intellectual, and religious institutions, commitments, and obligations into new options.[37] Finally, the quest stage is also influenced by *motivational structures.* Rather than identifying one overriding motivational factor, Rambo suggests that it is more accurate to recognize that people are motivated to convert by a wide variety of factors, which can also change over time.[38] These factors are multiple, complex, interactive, and cumulative.[39]

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29 Ibid., 44–54.

30 Charles E. Farhadian and Lewis R. Rambo, "Converting: Stages of religious change," in *Religious conversion: Contemporary practices and controversies*, ed. M. Darrol Bryant and Christopher Lamb (London: Cassell, 1999), 25–26, ibid.

31 Ibid., 25.

32 Ibid., 26.

33 Rambo, *Understanding religious conversion*, 56–65, ibid.

34 Ibid., 56.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., 166.

37 Ibid., 60–63.

38 Ibid., 63.

39 Ibid., 65.

Stage four is *encounter*, which describes the contact between the potential convert and the advocate for a new religious option.[40] According to Rambo, the potential convert and the advocate relate dialectically to one another. The outcome of the encounter thus depends both on the relative power between the two and also on the particular circumstances in which the encounter takes place.[41] When there is a congruence of interests, the encounter can proceed to interaction. However, often there is a conflict of interest between the advocate and the potential convert. It is thus far from evident that encounter will lead to conversion. Encounter might on the contrary often lead to outright rejection or mere apathy, depending not only on the dialectic relation between the advocate and the convert but also on the relation between the potential convert and the environment.[42]

Stage five is *interaction*, in which the potential convert gets more actively involved and learns more about the teachings, lifestyle, and expectations of the group. At this stage the potential convert is required to begin making alterations in beliefs.[43] According to Rambo, interaction involves several levels. First, *relationships* are often the most potent way of interacting. Through relationship with members of the group, the potential convert gradually learns to know the new alternative. Second, *rhetoric* might provide the convert with a relevant system of interpretation on the intellectual level. This system might however not exclusively refer to the religious sphere of life, but often also to the totality of a persons life.[44] Finally, *rituals* might enable the potential convert to experience religion beyond the merely intellectual level. Through these various levels, the ties between the potential convert and the group become tighter. While the duration and extensiveness of this stage might differ considerably, interaction between the potential convert and the group is crucial also because it prepares both the potential convert and the group for the following stage, which according to Rambo is the consummation of the conversion process.[45]

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40 Ibid., 66–101.

41 Ibid., 167.

42 A relevant contribution to understanding the negative outcome of the encounter between advocates and potential converts in a Thai context is Charles F. Keyes, "Why the Thai Are Not Christians: Buddhist and Christian Conversions in Thailand," in *Conversion to Christianity: historical and anthropological perspectives on a great transformation*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1993).

43 Rambo, *Understanding religious conversion*, 102–123.

44 Ibid., 167–168.

45 Ibid., 168.

Entering the sixth stage, the potential convert faces the prospect of *commitment*, a turning point that according to Rambo includes several important elements. The five most common elements of the commitment stage are decision-making, rituals, surrender, testimony and motivational reformulation.[46] While the *decision to commit* is often expected, the rituals involved might differ considerably, reflecting not only the situation of the convert, but also the traditions and expectations of the group. From the group's point of view, commitment *rituals* are designed to create and sustain loyalty to the group. From the individual's point of view, the same rituals provide public testimony of the culmination of a shorter or longer process.[47] While rituals by nature are visible and expressive, *surrender* might be described as the inner process of commitment.[48] According to Rambo, the potential convert may feel a desire for surrender in order to adjust to the requirements of the group or from an understanding that surrender is a necessary step of spiritual transformation.[49] Surrender is next often followed by *testimony*. According to Rambo, testimony might be described as the narrative witness of a person's conversion, entailing the two interacting processes of language transformation and biographical reconstruction.[50] A convert is learning a new language and is in that sense molded by the group. While some groups require testimony in order to fully include the person, other groups encourage it and still others make no formal use of testimonies. While a rich resource for understanding conversion, personal testimonies have to be treated carefully and consciously, taking into account their character as biographical reconstruction.[51]

Finally, in order to understand religious conversion, it is important also to reflect on the *consequences* of the process.[52] Since conversion by nature is a process,

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46 Ibid., 124.

47 Ibid., 128.

48 Ibid., 132.

49 Rambo argues that surrender entails several elements and needs to be constantly reaffirmed. Ibid., 132–137.

50 Ibid., 137.

51 James A. Beckford, "Accounting for conversion," *British Journal of Sociology* 29 (1978). James A. Beckford, "Talking of apostasy, or telling tales and 'telling' tales," in *Accounts and action. Surrey Conference on sociological theory and methods*, ed. G. Nigel Gilbert and Peter Abell (Aldershot, Hampshire: Gower, 1983). See also Margit Warburg, "Fra konversionsberetninger til konversionsanalyser - kildeproblemer og fortolkningsstategier," in *Dansk konversionsforskning*, ed. Mogens S. Mogensen and John H. M. Damsager (Højbjerg: Forlaget Univers, 2007).

52 Rambo, *Understanding religious conversion*, 142–164.

the consequences of conversion should not merely be viewed as final results, but rather as changes taking place throughout the process. Reflecting on the nature of conversion, Rambo emphasizes that consequences are determined in part by the nature, intensity and duration of conversion. While conversion for some might be a rather dramatic experience, for others it is rather a natural consequence of a process.

While Rambo's process-oriented model of conversion immediately appears to be a relevant key to understanding the change involved when former Buddhists join a Christian congregation, his wide typology may also elucidate the change involved when individuals in a local community in Norway join a new religious fellowship and through this deepen their involvement and make their commitment a more central focus in their lives. There were thus reasons to expect that Rambo's theory would provide fruitful comprehensive perspectives on why and how individuals in two distinctively different contexts joined new congregations and which consequences this might possibly have.

Meredith B. McGuire – commitment as a reciprocal relationship

While some scholars refer to commitment as a stage in the process of conversion, as is the case with Rambo above, others tend to view the two as separate processes. This is for instance the case with Meredith B. McGuire, a contemporary sociologist of religion, who argues that the conversion process is continued in the commitment process.[53] However, common for proponents of both views is the understanding that commitment and conversion refer to processes rather than to one-time events.

What characterizes commitment, according to McGuire, is the willingness of members to contribute to maintaining the group because the group provides what they want and need.[54] Commitment does, accordingly, imply a reciprocal relationship. While the group achieves its goals by fulfilling the needs of its members, the members satisfy their desires by helping maintain the group.[55] Approaching commitment from the perspective of sociology of religion, McGuire argues that the processes by which the group fosters commitment are similar to processes of conversion, as "both processes urge members to *withdraw* from competing

53 Meredith B. McGuire, *Religion: The social context* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Thomson Learning, 2002), 84.

54 Ibid., 85.

55 Ibid.

allegiances and alternate ways of life, and both processes encourage members to *involve* themselves more deeply in the life of the group, its values and goals."[56] These commitment strategies, she claims, are used to some degree by all social groups.

While conversion processes are resolutions of the individual's problems with former meaning systems and former self, commitment processes intend to help prevent the individual's doubts and new problems from undermining the conversion. According to McGuire, then, the final result of conversion is not merely creating new members, but creating members who will invest themselves in what the group is believing and doing.[57] The process of commitment thus ensures the commitment of all members to the group's values and objectives. What the commitment process does, then, is to build plausibility structures for the group's worldview and way of life.[58] While all social groups need some commitment from their members in order to maintain the group and achieve their goals, the level of commitment expected by a group varies.

In addition to approaching involvement in social groups from the perspectives of withdrawal and involvement, McGuire emphasizes also another pair of perspectives. Two common motives for joining social groups, she claims, are a search for *meaning* and for *belonging*.[59] Leaning on Peter L. Berger, she argues that the provision of meaning is particularly important for the understanding of religion because of the ways that meaning links the individual with the larger social group, concluding that attaching meaning to events is a human process.[60] The second motive, the search for belonging, might likewise be understood as an expression of how individuals understand and define themselves in relation to the collective.

What makes a perspective of sociology of religion relevant for this missiologically oriented study is first and foremost that when individuals join new congregations, they are also becoming members of social groups. Regardless of whether individuals join a congregation in a Norwegian or in a Thai context, the perspective of sociology of religion might help increase the awareness that commitment processes despite cultural differences are activated in any context.

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56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 25–38.
60 Ibid., 27. See also Peter L. Berger, *The sacred canopy: Elements of a sociological theory of religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 19.

Paul G. Hiebert – transforming worldviews

Paul G. Hiebert, a recognized anthropologist and missiologist, is another major contributor to the study of religious change. Arguing in his book *Transforming worldviews* that conversion involves real people in their real everyday lives, Hiebert claims that conversion involves a transformation with both spiritual and human dimensions.[61]

Central in his approach to religious change, is the concept of *worldview*. When introducing the concept, Hiebert traces its roots both to philosophy, to the German term *Weltanschauung* introduced by Immanuel Kant and later used by several other philosophers, and to anthropology, where anthropologists through empirical studies found that deep and radically differing worldviews were underlying cultures.[62] At the core of worldview transformations, according to Hiebert, is the human search for coherence between the world as we see it and the world as we experience it. Humans thus seek meaning by looking for order, pattern and unity. Learning then is a process of making sense or giving coherence to our experience. On the surface, Hiebert argues, we do this by compartmentalizing our belief systems into categories, while at a deeper, worldview level we seek, often unconsciously; to integrate these into a coherent structure that makes sense of reality.[63] Before further elaborating his concept of transformation, it is, from what has been said so far, worth noticing that Hiebert's approach to knowledge is more individualistic oriented than Berger and Luckmann's theory, which understands knowledge as a social construction. This difference may reflect a fundamental difference between anthropological and sociological approaches to reality, the former being more concerned with how individuals give coherence to their experience and the latter focusing on knowledge as a social construction. This suggests that Hiebert's model, according to the categorization introduced above, might be characterized not only as a cultural, but also as a personalistic model of conversion.

How then does Hiebert understand transformation? Approaching the concept from an anthropological perspective, Hiebert argues that conversion involves three dimensions of culture, dimensions with close parallels to Lonergan's categorization

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61 Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming worldviews: An anthropological understanding of how people change* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), 307.

62 Ibid. 13–14. For a thorough introduction to the history of the concept of worldview, see David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The history of a concept* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2002).

63 Hiebert, *Transforming worldviews*, 315–316, ibid.

of intellectual, moral and religious conversion, introduced above.[64] Drawing on the insight of several scholars, Hiebert uses a modified version of Morris Opler's dynamic model of themes and counterthemes to analyze worldviews.[65] First, conversion involves cognitive transformation, which refers to changes in beliefs. Next, the process involves also affective transformation, which refers to changes in feelings. Finally, conversion is also a matter of evaluative transformation, which refers to the moral dimension of cultures and their worldviews. Evaluative transformation involves making decisions, which according to Hiebert are not only acts of the will, but are transforming human lives and behavior.[66]

What makes Hiebert's approach to transformation particularly relevant with reference to the distinctively different contexts of this study is his view on how worldviews change. Distinguishing between two kinds of change, Hiebert argues that worldviews change both through growth and through radical shifts.[67] While the first kind of changes, which he characterizes as normal transformations, refers to worldviews changing in response to changes at the levels of the surface culture, the second kind of change is more of a paradigm shift, resulting in a fundamentally changed view of reality.[68]

1.3 Methodology

The aim of this subchapter is to introduce the various steps of the research process, including the choice of research strategy and the process of collecting and analyzing empirical material. While the three steps will be introduced successively, they are not to be understood strictly chronologically, as consecutive and conclusive stages, but rather as steps in a hermeneutical process. This implies, for instance, that the choice of research strategy, which is directing the research process, is

64 Ibid., 312–314.

65 Hiebert's model is based on a model introduced in Morris E. Opler, "Themes as dynamic forces in culture," *American Journal of Sociology* 51 (1945). The three dimensions of the model are also central in the works of Parsons, Shils, Kluckhohn, and their colleagues. See Talcott Parsons and Edward A. Shils, *Toward a general theory of action: Theoretical foundations for the social sciences* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2001). Clyde Kluckhohn, "Recurrent themes in myths and myth making," in *The study of folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965).

66 Hiebert, *Transforming worldviews*, 314.

67 Ibid., 316.

68 Ibid., 316–318.