ABSTRACT

Object Relations, Identity Formation, and Transitional Space in Religious Conversion

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Conversion between broad religious groups is a life transformation undertaken by 15% of Americans, yet it has seldom been studied closely from a psychodynamic perspective. The psychological study of conversion began with a Protestant paradigm of sudden and total transformation of the self, and over time came to characterize different manifestations of conversion to more diverse religious groups. Research on conversion has primarily sought to understand whether conversion is essentially a psychopathological phenomenon, and has led to a multiplicity of both positive and negative, at times contradictory, findings. Research has shown that conversion is associated with insecure attachment, neurotic personality factors, and emotional crisis, and that it may have salutary outcomes in terms of behavioral regulation, sense of meaning, and attachment to God and significant others. Yet only one study has characterized the psychodynamic processes underlying conversion.

The present study aimed to characterize the psychodynamic processes underlying religious conversion in light of the total history and personality of the religious convert, thereby contributing to a psychoanalytic conceptualization of religious conversion. The study utilized in-depth interviewing and the Object Relations Inventory to investigate the motivations and psychodynamic uses of conversion for nine converts to Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. The study showed that the psychodynamic factors involved in conversion contain both common and idiosyncratic elements. The study supports previous findings regarding a common narrative trajectory of conversion, including difficulties in the family of origin, an orientation toward religious problem-solving, and positive encounters with religious figures and ideas. Religious
choice was shown to be idiosyncratic and based on the central psychological conflicts of the individual. The psychodynamic uses of conversion included the regulation of emotional and somatic states, narcissistic equilibrium, defensive operations, identity formation, and transitional space functioning. The study demonstrates that religious conversion is integrally related to central psychodynamic conflicts, and that it is a powerful catalyst for psychodynamic change. It is hoped that the study will inform the work of both clergy and to contribute to the cultural competence of mental health practitioners working with religious converts.

*Keywords*: religious conversion, transitional space, object relations