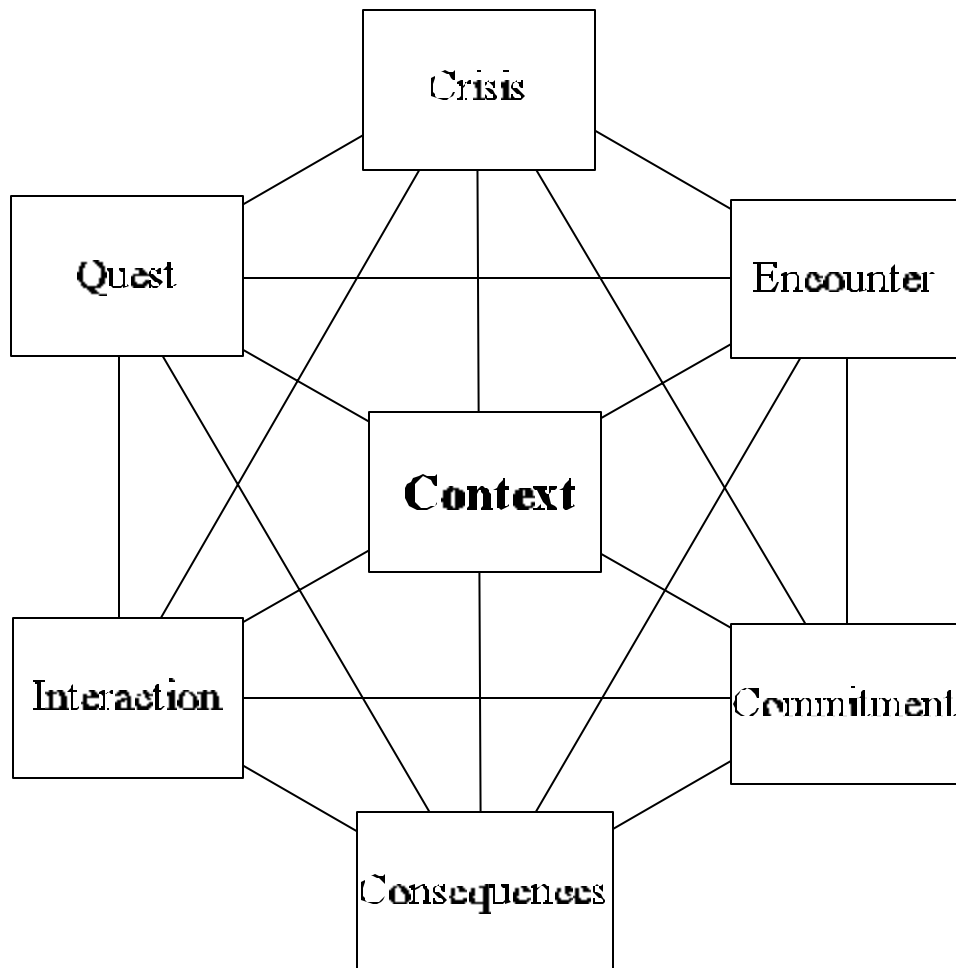


INTR 546: Evangelism and Church Planting
Additional Issues Related to Conversion

Conversion as a Socio-Cultural Process

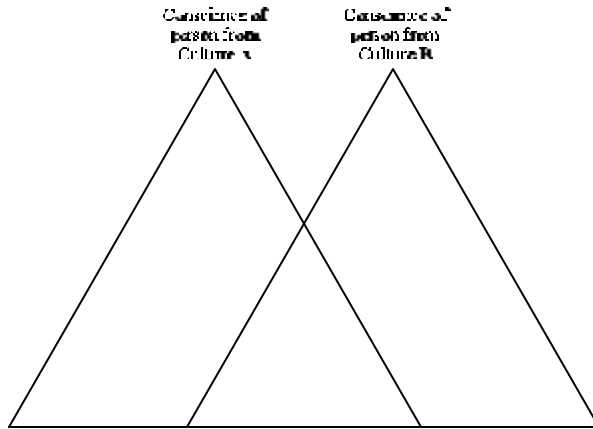
On the following page a chart illustrating conversion as a process in a social and cultural context is outlined (from Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp. 168-69). Below are the stages seen as an inter-related system:



Missionary Elencics: Conscience and Culture

(Summary of Robert J. Priest, *Missiology* 22:3 (July, 1994): 291-316.)

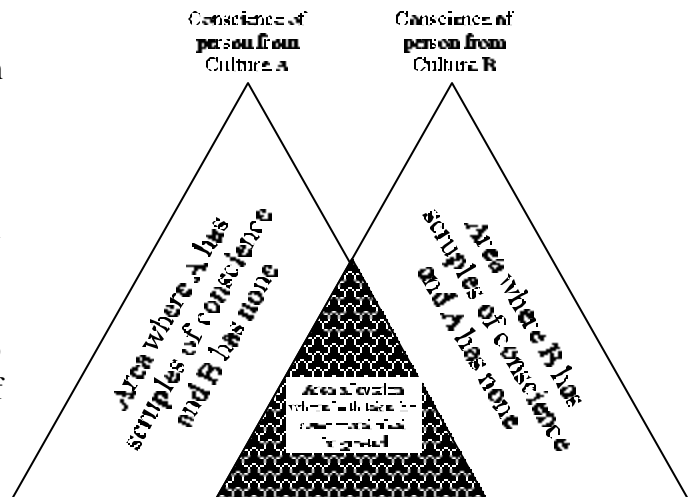
1. The faculty of conscience is culturally universal (Romans 2:1-15; 2 Corinthians 4:2; 1 Corinthians 10:25, 27).



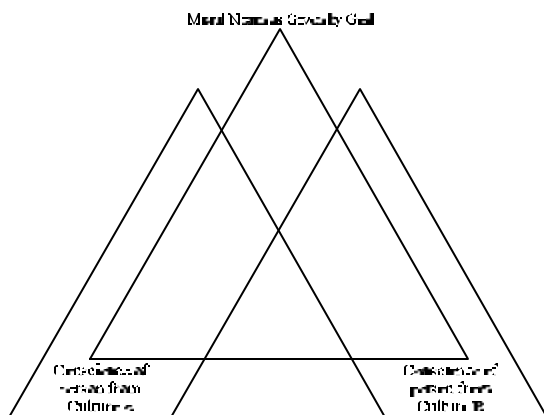
2. The faculty of conscience is a natural faculty and is thus capable of being studied, analyzed, and understood through empirical methods.
3. The content of conscience is fallible and variable.
4. The content of conscience is directly dependent on learned cultural meanings, norms, ideals, and values.

5. The content of conscience is likely to be shared by members of a given cultural group.

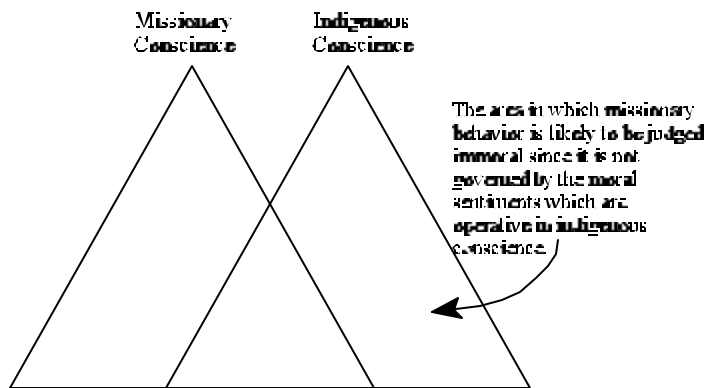
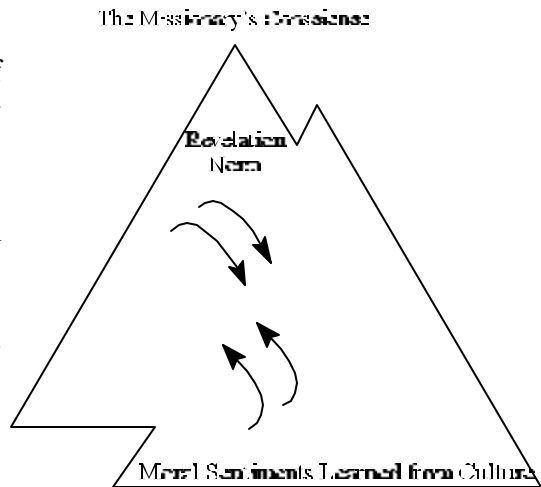
6. In an intercultural situation there will be both significant overlap and marked discontinuity between the consciences of interactants. But it is not the overlap which interactants will tend to notice. Rather it is in the area of discontinuity- specifically where one's own conscience speaks and the other's does not.



7. In an intercultural situation each interactant will thus tend to condemn the other morally for behavior about which the other has no conscience.
8. The content of conscience is sufficiently close to God's own moral standards as to be God's initial reference point in revealing our own moral failures and need of grace.



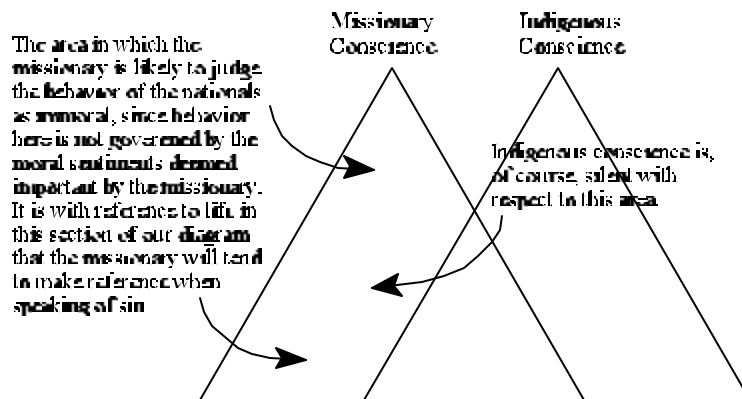
9. While human consciences do extensively agree with and overlap with morality as revealed in Scripture, there are also significant areas of discontinuity between consciences as shaped by culture and what is revealed in Scripture. Conscience on its own is not sufficient to unerringly guide us into sanctified moral understandings.
10. The missionary's conscience has been shaped by his or her culture as well as by Scripture, and his or her conscience seldom clearly distinguishes the two.



11. In the cross-cultural context, the missionaries who attempt to live an exemplary life and "be a good witness" will naturally tend to do so with reference to their own consciences rather than with reference to the conscience of those to whom they speak. The result is that their actions - in areas addressed by native consciences but unaddressed by the missionaries (or differently addressed by theirs) - will tend to be judged immoral.

12. Missionaries, whose message entails ideas of sin and judgment, will naturally tend - as already noted - to speak of sin with reference to matters about which their conscience speaks and native conscience is silent - with the result that native conscience does not work to support the message.
13. Missionary proclamation which stresses sin with reference to that which missionary's conscience deems sinful, and native conscience does not, has the effect of calling the listeners' attention to cultural discontinuity - implying that the call to conversion is a call to abandon one's own culture for that of the missionary. This confusion of gospel and culture has two possible results:
- a. People refuse to convert because of the implication that conversion is a conversion from one culture - their own, which they are familiar with, successful in terms of, and believe is good - to the missionary's national culture - which is alien and may even seem immoral.

- b. Or people may choose to convert precisely because of the implication that conversion is a conversion from their own culture to that of the missionary - such conversion being a cultural conversion rather than genuine conversion to God in Christ.

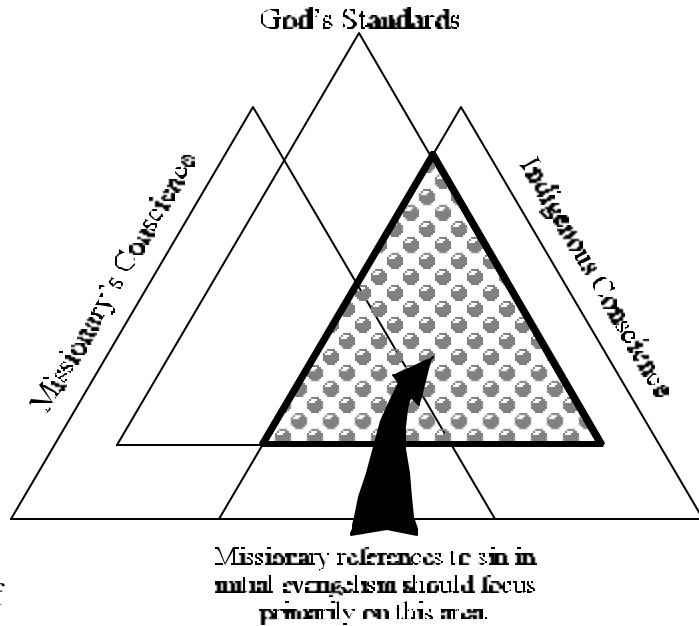


14. Preaching about good and evil in terms of missionary conscience rather than native conscience results in conversion and discipleship which bypasses native conscience and leads to converts accepting, relating to, and experiencing a new set of rules and norms - not through deep personal conviction, but as a new system of taboos.
15. Conversion and discipleship which bypass native conscience may lead to superficial conformity or to a compartmentalized conformity.
16. Conversion and discipleship which bypass native conscience may well create a situation where the missionary feels the need to take the role of policeman.
17. Conversion and discipleship which bypasses native conscience often create a structure of dependency and paternalism.
18. Conversion and discipleship which bypass native conscience may well lay the groundwork for a breakaway, independent church (cf. Dye 1976:37).
19. Missionaries need to understand the role that culture has played in the formation of their own conscience, and need help in distinguishing scruples grounded in transcendent biblical moral truth from scruples shaped, at least in part, by conventional cultural meanings.
20. The missionary must seek to understand native conscience.
21. The missionary must seek to live an exemplary life in terms of the virtues and norms stressed by the people he or she is attempting to reach.
22. In initial evangelism the missionary should stress sin, guilt, and repentance principally with reference to native conscience - particularly that aspect of their conscience which is in agreement with Scripture.

23. With conversion, the content of conscience is not instantly changed. But under the tutelage of a new authority - the Word of God - the conscience of the believer who is growing in sanctification will be gradually changed in certain needed areas toward greater conformity with the written Word.

24. After conversion the believers' relation to their own conscience (which still differs from that of the missionary) remains central to their own spiritual well-being.

25. The methods used by missionaries to disciple native converts must be grounded in:



- a. A radical eschewing of any authority but that of Scripture.
- b. A deep humility which recognizes that, as a cultural expatriate, one is not in a good position to authoritatively and unilaterally declare how biblical principles should be applied to cultural particulars.
- c. A serious respect for the consciences of believers and for the work of the Holy Spirit and Scripture in directing their consciences.

Motives in Conversion

- 1. The results of J. Waskom Pickett's massive study (*Christian Mass Movements in India*, commissioned in 1928; the results were published in 1933):
 - a. Motives in conversions in mass movements in ten areas of India could be placed in four basic categories (p. 161):

| Motive | Percent |
|--|---------|
| "Spiritual motives" (including "all answers that had been recorded under the heads 'seeking salvation,' and 'convinced by the preacher,' and also all such answers as 'to know God,' 'to find peace,' 'because of faith in Jesus,' 'because of love of God,' etc.") | 34.8 |
| "Secular motives" (including "all answers that had been recorded as 'sought help of the missionaries,' 'in hope of education for the children,' 'for improved social standing,' 'had agricultural service,' and 'had medical service,' and also all answers that revealed a hope of personal gain not definitely spiritual, such as 'to marry a Christian girl,' 'because the landowners oppressed us,' etc.") | 8.1 |

| | |
|---|------|
| "Social reasons" (including "all answers checked as 'family being baptized,' and 'brotherhood was being baptized,' and all such answers as 'I didn't want to remain a Hindu when my relatives were Christians,' or 'My people told me to do so.'") | 22.4 |
| "Natal influences" (including "those whose replies were entered as 'child of Christian parents.' Their parents were Christians when they were born or became Christians while they were quite young, so that they were brought up in the Christian faith.") | 34.7 |

- b. In terms of Christian attainment, the following results were noted:
- i. Those who became Christians with "spiritual" and "natal" motives showed a better advantage in Christian attainment.
 - ii. In spite of the above, however, Pickett states (p. 164): "The smallness of the margin between Groups 1 and 2, we venture to say, will surprise many of our readers who have not supposed that a purely secular motive, . . . may lead to conversion and a wholesome, productive religious experience. Likewise the nearness of Group 3, in many of these tests, to Group 1 will surprise people who have not already discovered how God uses social forces to bring men under the influences of the gospel."

The only actual percentages that Pickett presents concerning the achievement of believers from the different "motives" categories are as follows:

| Category | Spiritual | Secular | Social | Natal |
|---|-----------|---------|--------|-------|
| Refrain from working on Sabbath | 50.7 | 32.2 | 37.1 | 67.1 |
| Married by Christian rites (if married after becoming Christian) | 85.8 | 79.8 | 71.3 | 96.0 |
| Homes are free from signs of idolatry | na | 93.2 | 94.8 | na |
| Regularly attend church services | na | 70.0 | 75.0 | na |
| Contribute to a church | na | 90.5 | 91.4 | na |
| Regularly confess themselves as Christians to their non-Christian neighbors and on official records | na | 86.8 | 84.1 | na |

- c. In all of this, we see that the motives of a person coming to Christ are not crucial in determining whether or not (s)he will continue with Christ.

Mass or People Movements

1. Defined: "A people movement results from the joint decision of a number of individuals--whether five or five hundred--all from the same people, which enables them to become Christians without social dislocation, while remaining in full contact with their non Christian relatives, thus enabling

other groups of that people, across the years, after suitable instruction, to come to similar decisions and form Christian churches made up exclusively of that people" (*Understanding*, rev. ed., p. 335)

2. The change in terms with time (see Recker, "What Are People Movements?", p. 79): from

Mass movements
to
Group conversion
to
People movement
to
Multi-individual conversion
to
Multi-individual mutually-interdependent decision.

3. The significance of people movements in history (according to church growth):
- a. "The story is too well known to need recapitulation. We merely call attention to it. Christendom arose out of **people movements**. The only continent where most of the population became even nominally Christian was the continent which was won to Christ in a long series of People Movements" (McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, p. 38).
 - b. "At least two-thirds of all converts in Asia, Africa and Oceania have come to Christian faith through people movements . . .
". . . The great growth of the future is likely to be by people movements. It is inconceivable that any other pattern will bring the nations to faith and obedience . . . The people movement is the God-given way by which social resistance to the Gospel can be surmounted." (McGavran, *Understanding*, rev. ed., p. 336)
4. The method of people movements:
- a. Multi-individual: many people participate, each making up his or her own mind.
 - b. Mutually-interdependent: those making the decision for Christ are well known to each other and make it in light of what others are going to do.
5. The webs of communication:
- a. Kinship
 - b. Clan
 - c. Agemate (or other) societies, clubs, etc.

- d. Friendship
- e. Occupation or trade
- f. Social status

Types of Conversion

N.B. Bear in mind the discussion on motives above!

1. Cultural conversion

- a. Conversion in which the opportunities offered by moving out of one culture and into another are the focus of attention rather than commitment to Christ.
- b. Often in the Colonial era indigenous peoples had difficulty distinguishing missionary from explorer from settler from administrator; they all looked the same. When they converted, it may have been to access the power and advantages gained by aligning themselves with the colonizers.
- c. At times the missionaries themselves took up the three C's (Christianization, civilization, and commerce) as their banner, and sought to make people culturally Western as part of their Christian goal.
- d. In Oceania, this took the form of Cargo cults, which promoted the promise of material goods to adherents, who expected to receive cargo (just like the missionaries and/or military personnel).

2. Emotional/psychological conversion

- a. In some situations, the emotional feelings towards another generate a desire to convert which is a spiritualized form of maintaining (or gaining) closeness to the object of desire.
- b. If the attachment to Christ never grows its own roots beyond the attachment to the object of affection, then the emotional convert will revert if the relationship is broken.
- c. In other cases, camp settings provide strong emotional responses which can generate conversions which may or may not last.
- d. We should never seek to deny the importance of emotions in the conversion process, but we should also not use them manipulatively to the purpose of gaining converts.

3. Relational conversion

- a. Kinship affiliations chart the religious course of many lives (“My family is Christian, therefore I am Christian)
- b. Peer group pressure in individualistic cultures can result in conversions that are relationally driven.
- c. In collective cultures, mass movements include participants who are “going along” with the group because it would be a violation of cultural mores to say “no” when everyone else is saying “yes”—group cohesion is more important than individual will.

4. Socio-Economic conversion

- a. As with cultural conversion, the potential gain through conversion (e.g., access to food for a refugee, or status for an outsider). Christians in Muslim countries are often treated as second-class citizens, and livelihood for self and family may depend on conversion to Islam. On the other side, Muslims often accuse Christians of the practice of financial inducements to convert.
- b. While this supposed gain may be more imaginary than real, it still offers enticement to convert.
- c. Workers among the poor should be particularly sensitive to this possible motivation and ensure that the socio-economic issues are not dominating the process.

5. Syncretistic conversion (Christo-paganism)

- a. Conversion takes place within the frame of the worldview of the convert.
- b. When the worldview is one which lends itself to incorporation or amalgamating new religious elements into the old ones, the effect may be a syncretistic approach to conversion.
- c. Syncretistic practices may be visible or may go underground.

6. Spiritual conversion: The simple reality is that no person can have a sanctified desire to come to Christ since they are not yet Christians!