Spirituality, Ethics, and Relationship in Adulthood: Clinical and Theoretical Explorations

Edited by

Melvin E. Miller

&

Alan N. West

PSYCHOSOCIAL PRESS
Madison Connecticut

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Spirituality, ethics, and relationship in adulthood : clinical and theoretical explorations / edited by Melvin E. Miller & Alan N. West.

p. cm.

Chiefly papers presented at the Society for Research in Adult Development Symposia, 1994 to 1996.

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 1-887841-29-6

1. Adulthood—Psychological aspects—Congresses. 2. Maturation (Psychology)—Congresses. I. Miller, Melvin E. II. West, Alan N.

BF724.5.S68 1999

155.6—dc21

99-39480

CIP

Manufactured in the United States of America

14.

Conversions across the Culture War Divide: Two Case Studies

Lene Arnett Jensen

On the basis of an analysis of public debates pertaining to issues such as abortion, sexuality, and family policy, the sociologist James Davison Hunter (1991, 1994) argues that contemporary America is experiencing a "culture war." The culture war pits groups that tend toward "orthodoxy" against groups that tend toward "progressivism." It is cultural in the sense that the two sides have markedly different moral conceptions. For example, those who are orthodox hold that moral precepts are revealed to humans by a transcendent authority, whereas those who are progressivist emphasize human agency in understanding and formulating moral precepts. It is a war in the sense that the two sides often engage in acrimonious exchanges.

In my research, I have found that the public division pointed out by Hunter between orthodox and progressivist outlooks also finds expression in ordinary Americans' moral evaluations and reasoning (Jensen, 1997a, 1998). In-depth interviews and questionnaires have shown that fundamentalist

This research was supported by a grant to Richard A. Shweder from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Mid-Life Development, Gilbert Brim, Chair.

Baptists (representing the orthodox side) and mainline Baptists (representing the progressivist side) are markedly divided in their moral evaluations and reasoning on issues such as divorce and abortion. This division has been found within groups of young, midlife, and older adults.

The present aim is to explore the appeal of orthodoxy and progressivism, as well as the rejection of these worldviews. A phenomenological account will be given of two conversion experiences: one from orthodoxy to progressivism, and the other from progressivism to orthodoxy. Following sociologists such as Travisano (1970) and Heirich (1977), a conversion experience is understood as a radical change in identity and worldview. In McGuire's (1982) words, a conversion is a "transformation of self concurrent with a redefinition of one's central meaning system" (p. 49).

Here, the converts were two men. One was a highly conservative Southern Baptist minister who left his job and orthodox worldview behind. He now describes himself as "liberal," and is enrolled in a clinical psychology program. The other man was a self-described "atheist" with "rather liberal" views who went from trying to prove Christians wrong to himself adopting an orthodox worldview. He is now a member of a fundamentalist Baptist church. This chapter will provide an account of the men's conversion experiences in their own words—what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983) calls "experience-near" concepts. Their accounts will also be related to the theories and observations of social scientists regarding religion, the culture war, and conversion experiences—what Geertz calls "experience-distant" concepts.

THE CULTURE WAR

James Davison Hunter's Analysis

Before turning to the two case studies in leaps of faith, I will review the literature on America's culture war. Hunter (1991, 1994) has examined the opposing political alliances that have

been forged on a wide variety of current issues in American society, including those pertaining to abortion, sexuality, family policy, and the content of education and media (see also Bellah, 1987; Jensen, 1995; Neuhaus, 1990; Wuthnow, 1988, 1989). He has also examined the moral and political discourse of public figures. On the basis of his analyses, Hunter argues that the old lines between religious denominations have collapsed when it comes to moral and political issues. It is no longer the case that moral debates tend to divide different religious denominations, such as Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Instead, according to Hunter, a new division has occurred within religious denominations and in American culture more generally. It is a division that is vividly seen in the political arena, but the political clashes reflect a deeper division over the sources of moral authority and the extent of individual autonomy. Hunter suggests that American people and groups are divided in terms of what he calls "the impulse toward orthodoxy" versus "the impulse toward progressivism" (p. 43).

Briefly described, those who are orthodox share a commitment to transcendent authority, an authority that is independent of, prior to, and more powerful than human experience. In the orthodox view, this transcendent authority originated a moral code and revealed it to human beings. Different religious traditions have different conceptions of the sources through which transcendence communicates its authority (for example, Jews look to the Torah and the community that upholds it; Protestants look to the Old and New Testaments). However, all orthodox regard moral precepts as given to humans by a transcendent being, and they regard these precepts as sufficient for all times and circumstances. Accordingly, moral precepts ought not to be altered to accommodate societal changes, or new human understandings, or individual differences. Rather, individuals and societies ought to adapt themselves in accordance with the moral precepts ordained by the transcendent authority.

In contrast to the orthodox, progressivists stress the importance of human agency in understanding and formulating moral precepts. They reject the view that a transcendent authority directly reveals itself and its will to humans. Instead

moral (and spiritual) truths are expressed by humans. Progressivists vary in the basis on which they arrive at moral precepts. Some progressivists draw upon scientific evidence about the human condition. As pointed out by Hunter (1991), this approach is derived from the intellectual tradition of Enlightenment naturalism. Other progressivists draw upon their personal experiences. This approach is derived from the intellectual tradition of Enlightenment subjectivism. However, progressivists unite in a focus upon human understanding and formulation of moral precepts. Progressivists also unite in regarding moral precepts as changeable, because human and individual understandings evolve and societal circumstances change.

As should be clear, Hunter's categories of orthodoxy and progressivism are broad and a caveat is necessary. While American culture might show a marked division between impulses toward orthodoxy and progressivism, this should not be taken to mean that all political groups—let alone all individual Americans—can be classified neatly into two camps. The categories describe two general types, and it is recognized that some groups and individuals possess characteristics of each.

Ordinary Americans and the Culture War

In his writings, Hunter (1991, 1994) primarily focuses upon the views of publicly active figures and groups who are orthodox and progressivist. He does not analyze the moral reasoning of ordinary Americans who might tend toward orthodoxy and progressivism, respectively. In research with ordinary Americans, I have found that they also give voice to orthodox and progressivist moral outlooks (Jensen, 1997a, 1998). Next, I will provide a brief description of this research.

An interview study and a questionnaire study were carried out with fundamentalist Baptists, representing the orthodox side, and mainline Baptists, representing the progressivist side.[1]

[1] The interview study included 40 participants and the questionnaire study included 120 participants, with equal numbers in each group. The fundamentalist Baptists attended independent Baptist churches that self-identify as "fundamentalist." The mainline Baptists attended a church that has a dual affiliation with the American Baptist Churches/USA and the Southern Baptist Convention. The latter, affiliation, however, is regarded as historic.

The participants ranged in age from 19 to 84 years. The studies included only members of one religious tradition in order to capture the extent to which the division between orthodox and progressivist views is occurring within traditions, as Hunter (1991, 1994) describes it.

Results of the two studies showed that the orthodox and progressivist groups were markedly different in their moral evaluations of such practices as suicide, divorce, and abortion. Orthodox participants were generally more likely to evaluate these practices as morally wrong compared to progressivist participants.

The orthodox and progressivist groups also differed markedly in their moral reasoning. The participants' reasoning was analyzed in terms of Richard Shweder's (1990) three ethics of autonomy, community, and divinity. These three ethics entail different conceptions of the moral agent. Briefly, moral reasoning within the ethic of autonomy centers on the individual's rights and well-being. Within the ethic of community, the focus is on persons' obligations and relations to members of their social groups, such as family and nation. The focus of the ethic of divinity is a person's adherence to sacred guidelines and quest to connect with the divine.

In both the interview and questionnaire studies, progressivists reasoned more in terms of the ethic of autonomy than did orthodox participants. Orthodox participants reasoned more in terms of the ethic of divinity than did progressivists. However, progressivist and orthodox groups seldom differed significantly in their use of the ethic of community. These findings on the moral reasoning of orthodox and progressivist participants were consistent within groups of young, midlife, and older adults (Jensen, 1997a).

The results suggest that the public moral division detailed by Hunter also finds expression in ordinary Americans' moral thought. The orthodox and progressivist groups differed markedly in their moral evaluations of right and wrong, and in their moral reasoning. Orthodox participants repeatedly emphasized divine guidelines in explaining their moral views. In their

view, God provides human beings with moral precepts. These precepts are given to humans in order that we may to the best of our abilities fulfill God's purposes for us. In the orthodox view, the moral precepts should serve to structure communal life and the lives of individuals. God has indicated that such practices as divorce, abortion, and ending one's life are morally wrong, except in a few particular circumstances. If individuals and communities allow these practices, they are defying God's will. Rather, individuals and communities ought to adhere to the divinely ordained moral precepts.

The progressivist participants focused considerably less on God's word, will, or agency in human affairs and the lives of individuals. Instead, they focused more upon the choices that we must make in life. In explaining the basis upon which choices are made, progressivists often referred to how individuals have the right to make choices. They also often referred to the outcomes of choices. For example, they considered whether the choices are useful and whether they lead to happiness for the self (and for others). The progressivists, then, emphasized that each individual to a large extent is free to make autonomous choices. Thus the progressivist participants were less willing to demand adherence to moral codes than the orthodox adults because they gave more consideration to individual inclinations. For example, they were less willing to set limits on the extent to which individuals might divorce, or have an abortion, or commit suicide.

Different Morals, Different Worldviews

As I have argued elsewhere, the division in moral evaluations and reasoning between the orthodox and progressivist groups has its basis in their different and more comprehensive worldviews (Jensen, 1997b). Typically, a worldview provides an account of what it means to be human, the nature of reality, and the reasons and remedies for human suffering (Walsh & Middleton, 1984; see also Berger, 1967; Luckmann, 1963).

Briefly, the orthodox participants' moral reasoning is based upon a worldview that regards humans as created by God,

subject to God's authority, and striving to be in the presence of God in the next world. According to the orthodox worldview, we are living in a increasingly corrupt world where the inherent human propensity for sinful behavior is not kept properly in check. To overcome this state of affairs, we ought to follow God's guidelines. If we do this, according to the orthodox worldview, human suffering is alleviated in this world and we gain entry to God's heavenly realm.

In contrast, progressivist moral reasoning is based upon quite a different worldview. This worldview focuses upon this world, and upon individual rights and communal needs within it. It holds that every human being has considerable rights to self-determination and self-expression. What limits these rights are the responsibilities to others that come from living in society. In this world, human suffering is alleviated and progress occurs when we institute practices that respect individual rights and reduce social injustices.

TWO CASE STUDIES

Given the marked differences between the two worldviews, conversions from orthodoxy to progressivism and from progressivism to orthodoxy are striking experiences. They are also experiences that may offer insights into the appeal as well as the rejection of the worldviews. In the following, a case study in each of these two kinds of conversion experiences will be presented.

The case studies here are drawn from my interview study with mainline and fundamentalist Baptists (Jensen, 1998). As described above, participants in this study were asked to respond to general moral practices such as divorce and abortion. They were also asked to describe a memorable personal moral experience. In response to this request, two men recounted their conversion experiences.[2] Table 14.1 provides a demographic sketch of the two men.

[2] It might be noted that only 25% of the orthodox interviewees indicated that they had grown up attending a fundamentalist or evangelical church. Among the progressivist

TABLE 14.1
Demographic Profiles of John and Kyle

	From Orth. to Prog.	From Prog. to Orth.
Name	John Scott-Warner	Kyle Schultz
Childhood Religion	Southern Baptist	None
Present Religion	Mainline Baptist	Fundamentalist Baptist
Age	45	38
Race	Caucasian	Caucasian
Marital Status	Married	Married
No. of Children	0	5
Education	Postcollege	Postcollege
Occupation	Ph.D. Student	Professor in Mathematics
Salary	$36,000-50,000	Above $50,000

John Scott-Warner[3] grew up the son of a conservative Southern Baptist minister, and at the age of 23 became a Southern Baptist minister himself. However, in 1988 at the age of 37, he had become so dissatisfied with his position and the views that he was expected to preach that he decided to leave his job. Instead, he entered a Ph.D. program in clinical psychology. In the years that followed, John proceeded to leave his orthodox worldview further and further behind. He withdrew his membership from the Southern Baptist Convention and instead became a member of a mainline Baptist church. Today, he describes himself as "liberal" and liberated. In John's own words: "I identify so much with women's issues because I was kept in my place for such as long time. I was oppressed. . . . I'm one of the Virginia Slims commercials: 'You've come a long way baby!' "

Kyle Schultz has also experienced quite a change in his worldview, albeit a very different one. He describes it in the following way: "It's an amazing transformation. Because I was not only an atheist, I was also rather liberal. Now I'm a Christian and somewhat conservative. So the majority of my views have

interviewees, 80% indicated that they had grown up attending a mainline Protestant church.

[3] The names of the participants have been changed in order to protect their confidentiality. However, the names used here were chosen so as to resemble the men's own names in key respects. This was done in recognition of the fact that naming practices often reflect an underlying worldview. For example, in line with their own names, a biblical name was chosen for John but not for Kyle. Also, a hyphenated last name was chosen for John but not for Kyle.

changed a great deal." Kyle's mother came from a Mormon background and his father from an Episcopalian one. However, the family did not attend church when Kyle grew up and his parents wanted their children to decide independently upon their worldviews and spiritual beliefs. Explaining his parents' philosophy, Kyle said, "[They] didn't want to impose anything on us whatsoever. . . . The way I was raised was that everyone has their own choice and [that] you should be basically free to do anything you want. [We had] no religious training whatsoever." However, in the course of what Kyle estimates to be a 12-year process beginning shortly after college, he adopted an orthodox worldview. Today at age 38, Kyle is a member of a Baptist church that self-identifies as fundamentalist, and he and his wife are home schooling their five children in an effort to ensure that the children embrace the orthodox worldview.

Caveats

I have chosen to detail John and Kyle's conversion experiences because they speak to the appeal of orthodoxy and progressivism as well as their rejection. However, before proceeding, several caveats are necessary. First, John and Kyle's experiences may provide insights into the phenomena of conversion, orthodoxy, and progressivism. As with all case studies, however, their experiences cannot easily be generalized. In many respects, John and Kyle's conversions may be unique. When their individual accounts overlap with more general social science findings pertaining to conversion and religion, this will be pointed out.

Second, the two case studies detailed here pertain to persons whose conversion experiences have occurred within the specific religious and philosophical traditions of Baptism and atheism. Their conversions are described as switches from orthodoxy to progressivism and vice versa in line with Hunter's (1991) evidence that the commonalities within progressivist and orthodox outlooks (respectively) carry across different religious denominations and philosophical traditions. However, it

should also be kept in mind that there are important differences in the theological and moral conceptions between different Protestant groups, as well as between Protestants and other religious and philosophical traditions.

Third, the case studies are limited to two men. It is possible that women and men differ in their conversion experiences, as well as in what they find attractive or objectionable about orthodoxy and progressivism. Recent research has examined the appeal of Orthodox Judaism to women who came from non-Orthodox backgrounds or who had fallen away from Orthodox Judaism (Davidman, 1991; Kaufman, 1991). Among other things, the women in this research recounted being strongly attracted to the clearly delineated gender roles within Orthodox Judaism, and to the high regard for the roles of wife and mother in the Orthodox Judaic community. The question of whether women and men differ in their conversion experiences to orthodoxy and progressivism is interesting, and one that research has yet to address.

Finally, John and Kyle's conversion experiences are striking because of the radical changes occurring in their worldviews and identities. However, the striking quality of their conversions should not be taken to mean that they are deviant. Sociologists have urged that conversions not be regarded as "odd experiences" (Heirich, 1977, p. 677) or as a "fringe" phenomenon (Greil & Rudy, 1983, p. 5), but rather as a fundamental, though not necessarily common, part of human experience. As Heirich (1977) suggests, a conversion can be regarded as an experience at the individual level akin to Thomas Kuhn's (1970) notion of a paradigm shift occurring at the group level—an occurrence that Kuhn also regards as fundamentally part of human history.

From Orthodoxy to Progressivism: John's Account

Let us now turn to the two conversion experiences, beginning with John's account. John's conversion was extended and gradual. He described it as "a decision that I made over a long term. It wasn't very quickly done." Key events in John's conversion occurred many years apart. He resigned his position as a Southern Baptist minister in 1988 at the age of 37, but only 6 years later at the age of 43 did he withdraw his membership from the Southern Baptist Convention. Only by then did he entirely dissociate his views and identity from the Southern Baptist community. Only by then had he finally come to the view that, "I am not one of these people. I can't in any way endorse what they're saying."

The extended nature of John's conversion sets it apart from the mystical conversions that was the primary focus of scholars such as William James (1902/1936), Edwin Starbuck (1911), and E. T. Clark (1929) in the earlier part of this century. These conversions occurred suddenly and often dramatically in persons who experienced a loss of control and a sense of being subject to forces outside of themselves. Instead, John's conversion fits better with John Lofland and Norman Skonovd's (1981) notion of an "experimental" conversion. This kind of conversion involves a slow and tentative transformation of identity with behavioral changes often preceding gradual changes in beliefs (for examples of experimental conversions, see Davidman [1991]; Straus [1979]).

Since John's conversion took place over an extended period of time and involved several different events, it may be helpful to preview the key themes of John's account before turning to his own words. John began by describing his initial discontent with his job as a minister. Then followed an event that was pivotal to his resignation from his job. In the course of the next 6 years, John increasingly dissociated himself from the Southern Baptist Convention on matters of faith, morality, and politics until another pivotal issue led him to withdraw his membership from the convention. John ended his account by assessing his conversion as a process that has been conducive to his psychological health and sense of freedom. However, he also pointed out that his conversion has had negative consequences in that he has experienced an estrangement from his family and some of his friends.

Discontent and Tension

As just mentioned, John began by describing how he had become increasingly discontented with his job as a minister. His discontent went hand in hand with strong emotional tension. John explained:

> I grew up as a Southern Baptist and was a Southern Baptist minister. . . . I grew up in a minister's family. What I realized [was that] I lived in a glass house growing up, and I chose to live in a glass house even [as an adult]—always exposed to public view. What I realized was [that] living in a glass house is a very tentative kind of arrangement. It's very bounded and the freedoms are very, very limited. . . . In essence, I was really discovering that I couldn't have my own views. I could have them privately but I couldn't have them any other place, except in very limited ways. So, that began to be a very troubling thought.
>
> And I realized that *personally* and psychologically, it was very limiting as well. Because I kept feeling caged up and limited. Not that I wanted to go out and (laugh) paint the town red or anything, it's just that I felt constricted. I felt this noose tied around my neck.

John's description fits with the sociological theory that discontent and acute tension are key elements in the onset of the conversion process (Lofland & Stark, 1965). Sociologists studying conversions to such different worldviews as Orthodox Judaism (Davidman, 1991; Kaufman, 1991) and the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step program (Greil & Rudy, 1983) have described stress and tension as important initial incentives toward conversion. However, Heirich (1977) has argued that converts may not experience more stress than nonconverts. When comparing a group of Catholics who converted to Pentecostalism and a control group of Catholics who did not convert, reports of stress-producing circumstances were high in both groups but did not distinguish them. Still, even if converts do not have more stress-producing circumstances in their lives than nonconverts, they may respond to the circumstances by experiencing more tension and discontent (Lofland & Stark, 1965).

A Pivotal Event

John's discontent with his job culminated with the occurrence of what he describes as a "pivotal" event:

> The pivotal event, I think, in all of this was a very strange staff meeting where I worked [at the state headquarters of the Southern Baptist Convention]. . . . One of the employees had just been promoted to a new position. [After his promotion, someone] had gone to the executive director who was the head of the staff [and had] said: "Did you know that this man that we've just given this job to . . . goes with his wife to [X City] and that they go to bars and they actually *dance* in these bars." So, at this very strange staff meeting all of this came to light. This man [who had just been promoted] basically had agreed that he had *repented* of doing this and he would not do it any more. He didn't [profess repentance] to us, but to the executive director.
>
> And I thought, there's something Mickey Mouse about this. And I think that was a real turning point. Because I grew up in a very strict environment where going to bars, much less drinking, and certainly dancing were all wrong. And, I saw this little parade come out, . . . this man keeping his job (laughs) by basically saying, "if it means my job, I won't do it any more." Because I couldn't imagine him *agreeing* to do it for any other reason. Because obviously, he didn't see it as being harmful or wrong. And yet, he had to do it in order to remain in the good graces of the organization. So that had some jarring effect on me right there, but I think it had much stronger effects later on. I see it now as a pivotal event. I just felt myself personally constricted and [I] had to do something to get out of that very constricting environment.

Following this event, John "shifted out of that denominational work and into counseling." He had become interested in clinical work through his wife's influence. According to John, she worked as a clinician and "enjoyed it very, very much. And I saw it as a very, very interesting and desirable option."

John's mention of his wife's influence and encouragement conforms to the observation that social support is often crucial to conversion experiences. Sometimes converts actively seek out encouragement, support, and affirmation of the changes

they are undergoing (Straus, 1979). Organizations also often seek to promote conversions to their worldview by assigning mentors or guides to persons who are in the process of converting (Beckford, 1978; Davidman, 1991; Greil & Rudy, 1983). The attempt by organizations to foster a supportive and loving environment has been referred to as a "hooking" technique by Lofland (1978). When converts find themselves almost exclusively surrounded and supported by persons who are encouraging their conversion, Lofland (1978) describes the situation as one of "encapsulation."

Increasing Dissociation from the Old Worldview

In spite of having given up his position as a minister, John still sought to maintain some ties to the Southern Baptist Convention. However, over time "there were issues . . . that led me [to] say: 'I will not be a Southern Baptist anymore, and I will never *ever* be associated [with them] again.' " Thus John increasingly dissociated himself from his old worldview on issues of faith, morality, and politics. This dissociation came to a head over the stance of the Southern Baptist Convention toward gays and lesbians. John explained,

> [In] getting away from that Southern Baptist background, I think the pivotal point came . . . [when] a decision was made at the national level . . . that they would break ties with any church that either ordained a gay or lesbian person, or endorsed a union between . . . gay and lesbian people. I think it had been building with me for a long time. Because it seemed like every politically oriented decision that was made at that national level just grated against me—totally! They were all restrictive, oppressive, and notions of no choice. . . . [It] culminated for me in the gay and lesbian issue. . . . It was just a matter of saying, "I am not one of these people. I can't in any way endorse what they're saying." And yet, I don't have a *disdain* for those people. I just have a disdain for—uh—I just can't tolerate being a part of that kind of attitude. So for me that's been a real moral decision: It's not right for me to be a part of that.

At this point, it would seem that John had experienced a thorough transformation of his worldview and his identity. Most sociologists define such a complete transformation as a conversion (e.g., Heirich, 1977; McGuire, 1982; Travisano, 1970). However, Robert Balch (1980) has argued that some converts only act like believers. They use the prescribed language and engage in the prescribed behaviors, but have not experienced sweeping changes in their beliefs and personality. In the case of John, however, he described his conversion as a comprehensive transformation of his worldview and sense of self.

He regarded this transformation as a moral one. Many social science analyses of conversions include descriptions of converts framing their experience in moral terms. But the moral dimension of conversions has seldom been made explicit in the literature. A recent exception is Debra Kaufman's (1991) account of non-Orthodox women's embrace of Orthodox Judaism. She argues that their conversions represent a quest to "make moral sense of their lives" (p. 7). Greil and Rudy (1983) have also described how conversions to the worldview of Alcoholics Anonymous involves "taking moral inventories"(p. 19). It is possible that the present case studies highlight the moral dimension of conversions because the accounts were presented in the context of an interview pertaining to morality. Still, it may be useful in future research on conversions to explore their moral meaning in more detail.

Costs and Benefits

John ended his account of his conversion by assessing its costs and benefits. He explained that he has become estranged from his family and some of his friends.

> [My decision] has [had] a lot of implications for me, because my parents basically don't know too much about . . . my struggle. I'm not sure that they're ready to hear that now, or maybe ever will be. You know, I've kind of moved away from a whole set of friends, although I still have some friends—a very few—who I

> feel like I can talk openly with. . . . Some of the early contacts I had with former minister friends, just talking more openly than I'd ever talked before about issues, it scared the living daylights out of them (laughs). . . . A lot of people that we know, it's too difficult for them.

Many social scientists have described the estrangement from family and friends that accompanies conversions (e.g., Ammerman, 1987; Davidman, 1991; Kaufman, 1991). The convert's new ways of behaving and thinking make it difficult to interact with family and friends who maintain the old worldview. There is often a mutual distrust or outright disdain. One could describe this estrangement between the convert and her old community as the flip side of encapsulation. It is not only that the convert is embraced by a new community, it is also that an old community is left behind. The former experience is often joyful, but the latter can be very painful.

While John regretted his loss of intimacy with family and friends, he rejoiced in his new sense of freedom. He described how he felt liberated behaviorally and mentally.

> There certainly were constrictions about how a person is to act. One of the ironies of all of this—it's kind of amusing to me—is that my wife and I have *really* enjoyed taking dancing lessons (laughs). . . . One of the ministers that I knew in seminary . . . jok[ed] about pulling the shades down, turning the music on, and dancing. That's the kind of thing that people have to live by. There's just a restriction on *behavior.* But there was also a restriction on *thought.* . . . It somewhat stifled my development mentally, psychologically. It kept me in my place. . . . I was oppressed. I felt depressed.

John's understanding of the positive side of his conversion is framed in a progressivist discourse. Like many of the other members of his current church community who were interviewed for the study described above (Jensen, 1998), John makes frequent use of an ethic of autonomy. Thus, in explaining why his conversion has been for the better, John indicates that it has led to an improvement in his psychological health, allowed him more freedom of expression, and increased his opportunity for self-development. From this new

progressivist stance, John regards his old worldview as confining and constricting.

From Progressivism to Orthodoxy: Kyle's Account

As is to be expected, Kyle Schultz's understanding of the virtues and vices of orthodoxy and progressivism differs markedly from John's. But many aspects of Kyle's conversion resemble John's: Kyle's conversion also spanned many years; its onset was marked by increasing disillusionment with the old worldview; social support was crucial to Kyle's identity and worldview transformation as were certain pivotal events; and Kyle regards his conversion to the new worldview as a source of relief.

As with John, Kyle's conversion in many ways conforms to Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) concept of an experimental conversion. Thus Kyle's identity transformation was gradual. With some sense of regret, he explained "early on after I became a Christian . . . I always felt I had been cheated or maybe I didn't do it right, because I didn't have a dramatic conversion. Lots of people can tell you the exact day and the time. I can't do that. It was a much more slow and gradual process." In fact, Kyle's conversion occurred over a long time period. He estimates that the "whole process . . . probably took 12 years."

In addition to its experimental quality, Kyle's conversion included elements of other types of conversions. As in mystical conversions (Clark, 1929; James, 1902/1936; Starbuck, 1911), Kyle had the sense of being subject to forces outside himself. He said, "at times I think I see God's providence and His hand in directing me to the point where I could make the decision for Him." Kyle's notion that his conversion was divinely preordained fits well with the emphasis upon God's will and agency within the orthodox worldview. In her study of conversions to Orthodox Judaism, Lynn Davidman (1991) also reported frequent references to preordination.

Kyle's conversion, furthermore, includes elements of what Lofland and Skonovd (1981) term an "intellectual conversion," where the person independently seeks out information

about the new worldview from sources such as books and television. As will be described in more detail shortly, Kyle recounted how his conversion followed his decision to read the Bible and literature pertaining to biblical times. Lofland and Skonovd argue that intellectual conversions mostly are a recent phenomenon resulting from the increasingly privatized nature of contemporary religion (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Berger, 1967; Luckmann, 1963). Thus, Kyle initially read the Bible and related literature on his own rather than in the company of others.

Disillusionment and Discovery

Kyle's disillusionment with atheism and discovery of fundamentalism began in the context of his reading the Bible. Initially, he read the Bible not for religious inspiration but in order to prove to his Christian acquaintances how wrong they were.

> I'd always claimed to be an atheist, as early as I can remember. . . . I could see no reason why there had to be a God. I tended to always enjoy the sciences and mathematics, so it was easy to say: "Well, man can do all this stuff, so there is really no place for a God." But growing up I had run into a variety of [Christians], and most of them I had put off. But the thing that struck me was [that] I can *say* there's no God, but now they say there *is* a God. So when I argue[d] with them, they kept bringing up this Bible, . . . and I felt [that] in order to debate them appropriately and to show them that they were wrong, then I had to know what they were talking about.
>
> So I started studying the Bible to find out all the little things I could to trip them up, and make them look foolish, and to show them that they were absolutely wrong. And so early on I was able to find some little things here and there. . . . But then there was a guy, I guess when I was in high school, [who] knew the [Bible] inside and out, and I couldn't trip him up. . . . No matter what, he went back to the basic fact that it [was] his faith. So [I said to myself]: "Well, now I need some historical proof that this is not true. I can't argue with people using the Bible because that's all based on faith. They either believe it or they don't. So I need to find some historical proof to show that the Bible's obviously in error."
>
> And as I started trying to find things to show the Bible was in error, I could never find them. I kept trying to find evidence and the evidence I had kept pointing to the fact that this was true.

Kyle's account focuses upon his discovery of what was to become his new worldview. Compared to John, he is less overt about his disillusionment and discontent with his old worldview. Yet, it is evident that as Kyle began to consider the Bible to be God's true word, he was moving away from atheism. The tension that he seems to have experienced is suggested by some analogies that he applied to his conversion. He described it in terms of the head-splitting difficulties involved in solving a mathematical problem.

> I'm a mathematician and whenever you're trying to prove a theorem, it kind of works the same way. You knock your head on the wall and you try 400 different ways to prove this thing. Then one day you'll sit down and it'll just come to you. And Man! How stupid can I be? Why didn't I see that? Well it was kind of that same feeling.

Kyle also likened his experience with his old worldview to the frustrations of "paddling upstream." Apparently, he was beginning to feel exhausted and exasperated with his attempts to find truth in atheism and falsity in faith.

Social Support

Kyle's emerging notion of the Bible being God's true word received support from the woman who was to become his wife and from her pastor. Speaking of this time, shortly after his college years, Kyle said:

> During this time I had met Susan, and Susan was already a Christian. And she introduced me to her pastor, and I started

talking to him. He was such a neat guy. He accepted me where I was. . . . . We'd have lots of discussions. And then on things I really thought should make a difference to Christians, things like abortion, evolution [and] a variety of different topics, he would say, "that's between you and God." He said, "really the only concern I ha[ve] is whether you are going to believe in Christ as your Savior or not. 'Cause I'm worried about your eternal soul." He said: "Once I have that taken care of, then I'll leave it up to God to convince you one way or the other on all these other aspects. They're minor as far as I'm concerned."

Nobody had ever approached me that way before, because I could always get them to argue on the aspects, which really took away from the central message they were trying to get to me. So I guess I had never heard what the central message was, which was for my eternal life. And so he presented it that way, and tried to give me the evidence he felt would support it: [About] Christ being the Son of God, and why He died, and [the] fulfilling of all the prophecies, . . . and so on. So, I just couldn't conclude anything other than the fact that that had to be true. So I went ahead and made that . . . leap of faith. For me it was more a step than a leap at that point.

To Kyle, as to John, it was important to receive encouragement and affirmation from persons whom he felt close to and respected. For both men, such support was offered by their spouse or spouse-to-be, among others.

A Pivotal Event

While Kyle now considered himself a Christian in matters of faith, he still retained ties to his old worldview and identity. For example, he still maintained his old moral outlook on issues such as abortion for years after he had converted. According to Kyle, it was a pivotal event that finally made him change his outlook on the issue of abortion.

> After I first became a Christian, there were a lot of issues I felt: "Well, I'm really not sure about these. People tell me this is what God says, but I really don't know." And I just really tried not to think about them too much. Then as you mature as a Christian you get closer to God, and you study His Word more, and He reveals more and more things to you.
>
> In terms of abortion, I'd always viewed it like many pro-choice people do: "Well, it is better to [have an abortion] than [to] let [the child] grow up and be abused and so on and so forth." At one time I wanted to be a psychologist, and I had worked with some abused children. You could see how bad their lives were, and so it was easy to justify in my mind: "Okay, sure, it's better to be killed in the womb than born."
>
> But then Susan and I had a miscarriage. Susan in essence gave birth to a 12-week old fetus. And when she miscarried, the doctor took it and he asked if we wanted to see it. And so, being scientifically oriented I said, "Sure, yeah, I want to see it." He put it in my hand, and at that point in time when I actually looked at it, I realized what that really was. That was my child. I guess from that point on . . . it really dawned on me that this is not just a fetus. This is not just some thing that's [been] hanging around in there and becomes viable at some point in time. This is a child, that died. You know, it made a big enough impact that from that point on I viewed abortion as wrong. . . . It would have been our fifth [child]. We actually already had four. [A] part of me knew [abortion] was wrong, but it had never really become totally concrete for me until that point.

Kyle, like John, described a situation involving a moral issue as pivotal to his complete identity and worldview transformation. However, unlike John, he again attributed some of his transformation to God's will rather than his own exclusive choice—an account consistent with his orthodox worldview.

Relief

Kyle did not discuss the costs of his conversion, as did John. However, like John, he discussed its positive implications.

> [Becoming a Christian] was amazing to me because I never thought it would happen. It was very comforting. It was like a great burden was lifted, because I no longer had to disprove

> this thing. I could finally accept something that was actually true. . . . Now I could just accept what [God] had to give me, and now the journey was an enjoyable journey. Now it was just to know Him better, and to use what He is going to give me so that I could actually be more of what He wanted me to be.

Kyle frames his account of the positive implications of his conversion in an orthodox discourse. Like many of the members of his current church community (Jensen, 1998), he repeatedly invokes God's will. Thus Kyle sees his conversion as an opportunity put in his way by God, in order that he may fulfill God's purpose for him in this world. From this orthodox stance, Kyle's old worldview fails to lead in the direction of truth. Kyle's conception of the appeal of orthodoxy echoes the observations of Davidman (1991) and Kaufman (1991) who find that converts to Orthodox Judaism are attracted to its claims to clear and absolute truth.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the case studies of John and Kyle show many similarities in their conversion experiences, and many of these aspects have also been observed in other social science studies. Both men experienced discontent and frustration at the onset of their conversions. The progress of their conversions was significantly aided by the social support of persons to whom the men felt close. Also, both men specified events that were pivotal to the transformations in their worldviews and identities, and in both cases these events involved a moral issue. Finally, John and Kyle agreed that their conversions have afforded them a sense of relief.

But, of course, John and Kyle's conversions were also markedly different. John followed a path from orthodoxy to progressivism, whereas Kyle took the route from progressivism to orthodoxy. Thus the two men have markedly different understandings of the appealing and aversive characteristics of these two worldviews. To John orthodoxy with its claims to absolute truth is confining and constricting, whereas to Kyle it is affirming and assuring. To Kyle progressivism with its attention to individual autonomy is subject to the vagaries of time and individual desires, whereas to John it is a source of refreshing freedom.

REFERENCES

Ammerman, N. T. (1987). *Bible believers.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Balch, R. W. (1980). Looking behind the scenes in a religious cult: Implications for the study of conversion. *Sociological Analysis, 41,* 137–143.

Beckford, J. A. (1978). Accounting for conversion. *British Journal of Sociology, 29,* 249–262.

Bellah, R. N. (1987). Conclusion: Competing visions of the role of religion in American society. In R. N. Bellah & F. E. Greenspahn (Eds.), *Uncivil religion: Interreligious hostility in America.* New York: Crossroad.

Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart.* New York: Harper & Row.

Berger, P. L. (1967). *The sacred canopy.* Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, Doubleday.

Clark, E. T. (1929). *The psychology of religious awakening.* New York: Macmillan.

Davidman, L. (1991). *Tradition in a rootless world: Women turn to Orthodox Judaism.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Geertz, C. (1983). *Local knowledge: Further essays in interpretive anthropology.* New York: Basic Books.

Greil, A. L., & Rudy, D. R. (1983). Conversion to the world view of Alcoholic Anonymous: A refinement of conversion theory. *Qualitative Sociology, 6,* 5–28.

Heirich, M. (1977). Change of heart: A test of some widely held theories about religious conversion. *American Journal of Sociology, 83,* 653–680.

Hunter, J. D. (1991). *Culture wars: The struggle to define America.* New York: Basic Books.

Hunter, J. D. (1994). *Before the shooting begins: Searching for democracy in America's culture war.* New York: Free Press.

James, W. (1936). *The varieties of religious experience.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday. (Original work published 1902)

Jensen, L. A. (1995). The culture war and psychology: A review of Lifton's *The Protean Self. Culture and Psychology, 1,* 393–401.
Jensen, L. A. (1997a). Culture wars: American moral divisions across the adult lifespan. *Journal of Adult Development, 4,* 117–121.
Jensen, L. A. (1997b). Different worldviews, different morals: America's culture war divide. *Human Development, 40,* 325–344.
Jensen, L. A. (1998). Different habits, different hearts: The moral languages of the culture war. *The American Sociologist, 29,* 83–101.
Kaufman, D. R. (1991). *Rachel's daughters: Newly orthodox Jewish women.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
Kuhn, T. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Lofland, J. (1978). Becoming a world saver revisited. In J. T. Richardson (Ed.), *Conversion careers: In and out of the new religions.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
Lofland, J., & Skonovd, N. (1981). Conversion motifs. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 20,* 373–385.
Lofland, J., & Stark, R. (1965). Becoming a world saver: A theory of conversion to a deviant perspective. *American Sociological Review, 30,* 862–874.
Luckmann, T. (1963). *The invisible religion.* New York: Macmillan.
McGuire, M. (1982). *Pentecostal Catholics: Power, charisma, and order in a religious movement.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
Neuhaus, R. J. (1990). Fundamentalism and the American polity. In N. J. Cohen (Ed.), *The fundamentalist phenomenon.* Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans.
Shweder, R. A. (1990). In defense of moral realism: Reply to Gabennesch. *Child Development, 61,* 2060–2067.
Starbuck, E. D. (1911). *The psychology of religion.* New York: Scribners.
Straus, R. A. (1979). Religious conversion as a personal and collective accomplishment. *Sociological Analysis, 40,* 158–165.
Travisano, R. (1970). Alternation and conversion as qualitatively different transformations. In G. P. Stone & H. A. Farberman (Eds.), *Social psychology through symbolic interaction.* Waltham, MA: Ginn-Blaisdell.
Walsh, B. J., & Middleton, J. R. (1984). *The transforming vision: Shaping a Christian world view.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
Wuthnow, R. (1988). *The restructuring of American religion.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Wuthnow, R. (1989). *The struggle for America's soul: Evangelicals, liberals, and secularism.* Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans.