A semi-structured interview study was conducted among 11 ‘Born Again’ Christians eliciting their conversion narratives. Informants emphasised the importance of embodying the Holy Spirit and developing a personal relationship with Christ in the process of conversion. The Alpha Course played an important role in this process.

Keywords: religious experience; conversion; evangelical; narrative

Introduction

In his critical review of studies attempting to account for religious conversion, Gooren (2007) notes the conventional conversion approaches suffer from disciplinary biases and furthermore almost all of the conversion approaches conform to the typical social science bias of tending to reduce religion to social-economic or psychological factors. Psychologists largely focus on personality and crisis, sociologists stress social networks and institutional factors, and anthropologists explore social and cultural factors. Only rarely do authors attempt to synthesise approaches from various scientific disciplines. There are exceptions however (See Gooren 2007; Gooren 2010, Rambo 1993). Notable omissions from the literature however include the impact of religious experience and theology on the conversion process. Most approaches ignore what people believe in (i.e. beliefs and doctrines), why this is so important to people, and how they express their religious feelings in prayer, rituals, emotions, or phenomena like speaking in tongues.

The core of nineteenth century evangelicalism was the experience of conversion. This conversion was not simply something that people believed – though belief or faith was essential to it – but rather something that happened to them, a real, intensely emotional event they that went through and experienced as a profound psychological transformation resulting in a fundamentally altered sense of self and identity as a new kind of Christian. As James (1958 [1902]) asserts in The Varieties of Religious Experience, to understand religion in its own terms we need to turn to emotion and experience:

If religion is to mean anything definite for us, it seems to me that we ought to take it as meaning this added dimension of emotion, this enthusiastic temper of espousal, in
regions where morality strictly so called can at best but bow its head and acquiesce. It ought to mean nothing short of this new reach of freedom for us, with the struggle over, the keynote of the universe sounding in our ears, and everlasting possession spread before our eyes. (46–47)

This project was set up to examine the religious experiences of individuals attending an Evangelical Church in London and more specifically the role of the Alpha Course in engendering these experiences and in the conversion process.

The Alpha Course, religious experience and conversion

The Alpha course is a course on the basics of the Christian faith developed by Holy Trinity Brompton over the last 20 years, most recently by clergyman Nicky Gumbel. It attracts people who want to investigate Christianity, new Christians or those who want to ‘brush up.’ The movement is ‘post-denominational,’ encompassing many churches, movements, and theologies. While the course is run on an international basis, the structure of the course is broadly similar everywhere. Each session starts with a meal, followed by a talk (often a video of one by Nicky Gumbel) and then discussion in small groups all of which facilitate the development of a relationship with Christ. There are also away days which include prayer and teaching on the on the topics contained in Gumbel’s book *Questions of Life* (2003) and it is here that many attendees have significant religious experiences ranging from sensing the presence of the Holy Spirit to speaking in tongues and healing.

The overall purpose of the small group, along with the course as a whole, is to help bring people into a relationship with Jesus Christ.... We have found that the group of about twelve is the ideal size. I do not think that it is a coincidence that Jesus chose a group of twelve. (Gumbel 1994, 903)

Alpha is heavily influenced by Charismatic Christianity (Hunt 2004), focusing upon experience rather than intellect. The underlying aim is to encourage participants to learn of the ‘charismatic’ worldview in the Alpha Course, have it ‘confirmed’ by accepting and experiencing the Holy Spirit, and then to live as a committed Christian rejecting previous ‘secular’ (in ‘charismatic’ terms, it can include non-‘charismatic’ Christianity) existence and to enter into a new (‘charismatic’) Christian existence. This process involves a personal transformation and a re-orientation of the self, from secular to sacred, accepting a ‘charismatic’ worldview which sees communication with God through the ‘embodiment’ of the Holy Spirit who guides their thoughts and actions (Watling 2005).

Each session slowly prepares participants to experience, embody and accept the Holy Spirit in their lives. There is an emphasis on the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Topics include the infilling of the Spirit; speaking in tongues and healing via prayer. The 10 sessions ‘gently’ lead participants to the experience of Christianity and discuss 15 themes. The first six sessions focus on a number of issues: the evidence for Jesus, the meaning of the resurrection, the truth of Christianity, reading the Bible, prayer. At the end of the third session, each individual is invited to join in a prayer which adds a promise to ‘follow and obey Jesus as Lord,’ and an invitation to God to enter the petitioner's life ‘through the Holy Spirit.’

The seventh session, ‘How Does God Guide us?’ prepares participants for the experience of embodying the Holy Spirit through discussing: Who is the Holy
Spirit, What does He do?; How does God guide us?; and How can I be filled with the Spirit? The final sessions focus upon a number of issues: Does God heal today?; What about the church?; How can I make the most of the rest of my Life?

Methods

An interview study of a population of 11 ‘Born Again’ Christians (M = 5, F = 6) was undertaken over a period of six months in 2009. The researcher attended the church in question as a member of the congregation for two years prior to the study as a participant observer and informants were recruited from members of the researcher’s home group. Further informants were recruited by a snowballing technique. She also attended the 10 week Alpha Course.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually in the informant’s home or in the church in which informants were asked to provide detailed narratives of their conversion experiences and their impact upon their lives. Specific questions involved their experiences of attending the Alpha Course and away day, the experience of being baptised in the spirit, the events leading up to it, the type of gifts received (speaking in tongues, prophecy, healing, visions and voices, the impact on their faith, commitment and everyday lives and finally individuals were asked how they knew it was the Holy Spirit communicating with them. Interviews were transcribed and rigorously analysed through Miles and Huberman’s (1984), data reduction, display and conclusion drawing method.

The church in question is a broad evangelical/liberal Church of England congregation based in a relatively affluent London borough. The majority of the approximately 300 members are white British, although a substantial minority are black. A number of services are held throughout the week and include Holy Communion, Common Worship and Evening Prayer – there are also more informal contemporary services held. The majority of congregation members are middle class and in employment, and range in age from teenagers to elderly, with the majority being in their 30s to 50s. A large number of congregants have children and there is a well attended children’s group on a Sunday morning. Several informants revealed personal experiences of observing speaking in tongues, and one had participated in the practice, although not in this specific church. Personal testimonies are rare although visiting speakers may talk about their experiences of coming to faith and, in so doing, recreate their own experiences of conversion (see Stromberg 1993).

The nurture/guidance/discipleship of the congregation is a major force in cultivating, shaping, and guiding these interviewees in their journey of faith. There is a drive, on a regular basis, to involve new congregation members in a range of activities within the church, such as Sunday stewarding, church administration, the Sunday welcome team, the Sunday children’s groups, becoming a member of the Church PCC or the youth club. The church also tries to be very active in the community and encourages reaching out and into the community – there are lots of weekly activities that go on including house groups of about 10 people where new members share their new-found faith, pray together, read the Bible, and hear testimonies of other members concerning how the Holy Spirit has impacted on their lives. Thus experiences are shared and a process of emotional bonding is facilitated. All new members are encouraged to attend regular Alpha groups which last 10 weeks and are generally held in the church. There is an ‘away day’ in a local hall where individuals are encouraged to discuss the Holy Spirit and it is here that many
people have religious experiences including speaking in tongues, prophecy and being ‘slain in the spirit’ – religious behaviour in which an individual falls to the floor, an event perceived as a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit, often associated with the practice of laying on of hands.

Results
Informants typically described similar religious experiences. Slowly they came to embody the Holy Spirit who guided everything that they did. Most of the informants did not describe a sudden coming to faith, a ‘road to Damascus’ experience, but rather spoke of gradually coming to a decision to commit to a belief that was already present in them, in a passive, background way. A theme emerged of a gradual, ever developing, journey – of coming from a vague Christian-influenced background where Christian beliefs were present but not necessarily prominent. Informants described making an active decision to commit to Christianity and God after a period of seeking information and consideration. For most, being ‘Born Again’ required a sense of placing God at the centre of their life, and committing to a personal relationship with him. This relationship became their ultimate concern. This led to a greater sense of meaning and the feeling that God was in control.

Those attending the Alpha Course emphasised experience and relationships over and above Biblical teachings. Religious experiences engendered by attending the Alpha Course were cited as important factors in increasing commitment and faith. Of the 11 informants who participated in this study, four had come to conversion through the Alpha course. Two case studies below indicate the importance of embodying the Holy Spirit in conversion experiences.

Mary, a 45-year-old woman was brought up in a Christian house but emphasised that during her formative years, Christianity had impacted little on her. Her faith developed slowly after joining the church. She described a distinct moment when she underwent a significant religious experience at an ‘away day’ as part of the Alpha Course. This experience strengthened her nascent faith. When asked about her ‘conversion’ to Christianity, she stated:

A gradual thing…although there was this one incident, I went on a day course, we’d been studying this course called The Way of The Spirit, some Bible studying course, and we went to this day Christian centre, and the author of the book was there preaching about it along with lots of other Christians, and you know some people have these different gifts and this guy had, well, he went around touching people and they would fall over. Now, I think the power of the Spirit was working through this person and I don’t know how it happens but I’ve seen it on TV and I’ve heard about it, how people can be just prayed over, a hand over, and people can get a real sense of heat, something moving, so much so, so powerful it will blast them down to the ground – now in the past I would have been sceptical about that but it happened to me, and I can’t explain what it was that day, people were singing and there was some prayer and this person came up to me and just, I don’t think he even touched me, and I fell to the ground…the term I use is being slain in the spirit, and I had no chance to react other than that I just found myself laughing, I was so surprised and shocked…but to me that was testimony that the Holy Spirit can move…

Informants mentioned that deepening religious faith was associated with God taking over control of their lives and letting go of personal responsibility. There was a loss of autonomy to varying degrees. For instance Lynn, a woman in her 60s had been
‘in and out’ of Christianity for many years although she had always had considerable doubts about her faith. Her experiences of the presence of the Holy Spirit and her relationship with Christ, both of which were facilitated by attending the Alpha Course, had impacted strongly on her desire to lead a Christian life. She spoke about how becoming ‘Born Again’ had changed the locus of control in her life:

Oh yes, I know the big difference – the big difference is I would have had to have been in control, I would have had to rectify the situation and I would have out of fear, would have been probably with the best intentions but by being so fearful, not really working within the situation, almost trying to get the situation to work…

She went on to develop this idea:

I think it’s a good coping mechanism because at least you don’t retreat into your own little world – you face it, and I would confront and face, and that’s still a good thing but what I would do because I was coming from a place of fear and blackness or unknown…so I guess what’s different now is again, it’s that letting go, letting God think for me, I still confront it, that’s where I was doing the right thing but I need to be open and I need to be compassionate and I need to not be ruled by fear, and where it is fearful, knowing that I’ve got that faith to say, ‘OK, I don’t understand this but I’m going to leave it with you and I’m going to see, I know I have to leave this with you,’ and I’ve found that in all the traumatic incidents where I’ve found that feeling of being Christ-centred, things have actually worked out really well…

Conclusion

Religious experiences still play a central role in evangelical/charismatic conversion. This study was set up to examine the religious experiences of individuals converting to Evangelical Christianity. Although numbers are small, religious experiences played a part in the conversion process for some of our informants. This is in line with previous authors such as Neitz (1987) and Poloma (2003) who emphasise the importance of religious experience in the growth of religious commitment. Embodying the Holy Spirit and developing a personal relationship with Christ are integral to the conversion of new members attending this evangelical church. This study indicates the importance of the Alpha group in preparing potential converts for this embodiment. Not only do the sessions teach participants about the Holy Spirit, they create the expectation that they will have specific religious experiences. We fully support the contentions of Gooren (2010, 108) which underscore the necessity for all researchers of evangelical/charismatic conversion to recognise the importance of subjective religious experience in the conversion process.

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References


