David Dean Brockman connects spirituality with psychoanalysis throughout this book as he looks at Dante’s early writings, his life story and his “polysemous” classical poem *The Divine Comedy*. Dante wanted to create a document that would educate the common man about his journey from brokenness to growth and a solid integration of body, self, and soul. This book draws the resemblance between Dante’s poem and the “journey” that patients experience in psychoanalytic therapy. It will be the first total treatment of Dante’s work in general, and *The Divine Comedy* in particular, using the psychoanalytic method.

This fascinating study of Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* will be of interest to psychoanalysts, psychotherapists, and psychiatrists, as well as those still in training. Academics and students of psychology, spirituality, religion, and literature may also be interested in Brockman’s in-depth study of Dante’s work.

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A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*

David Dean Brockman
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Acknowledgments

After submitting my document: “A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of *The Divine Comedy*” to Routledge, Taylor & Francis, I learned that Professor Charles H. Taylor and Patricia Finley had published the book *Images of the Journey in Dante’s Divine Comedy* with Yale University Press in 1997. Their inspiration was Carl Gustav Jung’s social psychological and anthropological perspective that differs in significant ways from the classical Freudian perspective. Their impressive scholarly interpretation and art critique of 257 illustrated paintings is derived from the Mandelbaum and from the Dorothy L. Sayers translation. Additionally, Singleton’s translation (without paintings) was used for their study, but I added seven more translations (for a total of ten) by Grandgent, Oelsner and Wicksteed, Longfellow, Sayers, Musa, Esolen, Ciardi, and Hollander and Hollander. Taylor and Finley do point out Dante’s midlife depression and his self-cure to a healthier mind and soul. However, they disregard to mention the familiar transference—countertransference clinical material that is derived originally from the Freudian perspective. Also, they neglect to mention the critically important data from the Parent Loss Research Project at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis published in 1988. Additionally absent is the concept of regression in the service of the ego and the possibility that Latini, Dante’s childhood tutor, may have attempted to seduce him as a child since Dante presumably placed Latini in the *Inferno*’s circle of homosexuals, similar to his retaliatory getting even with Pope Boniface VIII by stuffing him in a crowded Inferno crevice. Another very interesting fact is that the *Comedy* contains three dreams as conceived from the previous day’s events seven hundred years before Freud’s magnum opus *The Dream Book*. More recently, the *Tablet* newspaper reported on a conference attended by theologians, historians, and psychologists that was held at the Anna Freud Center in October 2014 in Hampstead, England. They discussed only the middle canticle, *Purgatory*.

The document “A Psychoanalytic Exploration of the Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*” was conceived and constructed from many late night-endeavors and moments of inspiration during the last five years. I am indebted to my two daughters Pamela Brockman and Sherrill Read for their encouragement, and
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Figure 0.1 Dante and his poem. (Domenico de Michelino, 1417–1491)
Puzzling is the fact that some fail to plunge into the most gratifying spiritual journey, but those that do immerse themselves in a most refreshing astronautically lift-off that boosts them into orbits of remarkable God’s wisdom that then teaches them to share with others a precious selfless love.

**Introduction**

Religious conversion involving a spiritual dimension is a complex process of adoption of a new religious identity that touches on social, cultural, psychological/emotional, phenomenological, and theological issues. There has been a burgeoning proliferation of articles on the topic as indicated by a “Medline search using the words ‘spirituality and health’ returned more than 1570 citations, approximately 750 of which were published within the past three years” (APA newsletter, 42:11, p. 110). Pulitzer Prize winner Studs Terkel interviews many people who express their views in the section on “Hunger for a Faith” in his book *Will the Circle Be Unbroken?* (2001). Another evidence of this interest is the John Templeton Prize for Progress Toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities valued at 1.5 million dollars (2007) given to Northwestern University philosopher Dr. Charles Margrave Taylor for his insertion of a spiritual dimension into discussions of public policy, history, linguistics, literature, and the social sciences. He has persuasively argued that both secular and spiritual solutions are necessary to solve problems of violence and bigotry within the modern world community and governance where conflicts between differing cultures, nationalities, and religious groups are spawning genocidal wars. His most influential book is *Sources of the Self* (1989) and his new book is *The Secular Age* (2007). Taylor’s contributions to the tension between a spiritual world and a “disenchanted” world will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

*Sacred Desire* (Morrison & Severino, 2009), *Becoming Fire* (Severino, 2009), and *Behold Our Moral Body* (Severino, 2013), are three new books in this area. *Sacred Desire* was the winner of the 2014 Eric Hoffer Award in the category of Legacy Nonfiction and integrates psychoanalytic psychology, neuroscience,
and spirituality in a developmental approach to mental health. These three books are significant contributions to the burgeoning literature regarding spirituality and health. Chapters 2 and 3 of my book focus in part on Dante Alighieri’s personal conversion journey. My main focuses, though, are on how he tried to deal with his depression in his early work in troubadour poetry (the very first intellectual scholarly study of linguistics, political philosophy, theology) and finally on his growth in his personal psychological and spiritual journey to Paradise in his magnificent poem *The Divine Comedy*. His stated aim was to educate common man about many topics, including astronomy, geography, political science, poetics, morality, and mental health as well as spirituality. In a sense, Dante behaved like a modern psychoanalyst’s positive countertransference to a patient’s transference.

In order to better understand psychologically Dante’s imagined visual “voyage” to Paradise and reunion with his muse Beatrice (or Christ, or the Virgin Mary) in his little bark of a sailboat, one must unite with him by entering into the poet’s rich and colorful, empathic, allegorical imagination of a spiritual world. This clinical posture as Anna Freud conceived of it is as one where the analyst is empathically positioned midway between the patient’s ego, superego, and the id, but Dante pridefully claimed his spiritual imagined trip was far superior to the one by St. Paul. As a civil judge in Florence, Dante similarly felt his duty was to adopt a balanced and a fair non-prejudiced understanding before each case and to pray for God’s guidance in adjudicating each case.

Spirituality may be defined as

> man’s capability for supernatural union with God; the ‘processing,’ especially of his intellect and will, for contact with God on the level of sustaining grace, and, ultimately of the beatific vision. It is because of his spirit that a person is oriented to God, that he seeks the true, good, and beautiful, which, in their infinite existence are God, that he goes out of himself toward love, which is another name for God.

(Mork, 1965, p. 21)

A spiritual journey may be sudden or prolonged, volitional, or self-surrender (James, 1901–1902, p. 192), carry the traveler from one faith to another, from one point to another within a faith, or from no faith to any faith. In fact, over thirty-five thousand eighteen and older Americans were interviewed by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. What was discovered was that 28 percent had left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion—or no religion at all. If change in affiliation from one type of Protestantism to another is included, roughly 44 percent of adults have either switched religious affiliation, moved from being affiliated with a particular faith, or dropped any connection to a specific religious tradition altogether.

(Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008, p. 5)
This book adds some psychoanalytic observations that differ markedly from the traditional Freudian position. While in the physical realm the term “conversion” is used when transforming one form of measurement to another, e.g., metric to English, or alternating electrical current to direct current, in the spiritual realm it most commonly refers to changing or enhancing one’s religious affiliation. Religious conversion should not be confused with “conversion hysteria,” that is, a classical neurosis involving repression of an unconscious conflict, usually sexual in nature that is unrelated to the topic under discussion here.

Religious conversion can be a relatively sudden event as when St. Paul fell to the ground in a blinding flash of light and was blind for three days (Acts 9: 1–19); or when Constantine saw a Cross of light superimposed on the sun (James, p. 231) or when Oscar Wilde who, having for many years ambivalently considered converting, under some uncertain cloud finally confessed his sins on his death bed, and then received the sacraments. On the other hand, conversion may consist of a longer journey of some weeks, months, or even years. Converts may return to the family’s original faith after many years of living in another faith. It is seeking a spiritual life and a higher set of moral values, instead of pursuing the almighty dollar in a competitive and rapacious greedy business environment.

Two interesting parallel biblical references to conversion within a faith are when one of the seraphim took an ember from the altar and cleansed Isaiah’s lips after confessing his sins (Isaiah 6: 1–9) and when Simon Peter, similar to many modern sinners, fell to his knees and confessed his sinfulness to Jesus Christ (Luke 5: 1–11). Religious conversion can serve as a healing process when there has been a regressive fracture of the personality, or even part of a reversible psychotic process, but this chapter emphasizes the non-pathological, healthy, and constructive forms of religious transformation of the personality. In fact, psychoanalysis has in the past suffered from the myopic view that religious and spiritual experiences are by definition pathological. Conversely, many individuals can tell of their experience of significant enhancement of their total personality through a religious life.

The word “conversion” is etymologically derived from the Latin noun *conversio* and the infinitive verb *vertere*, meaning “to turn,” and *con*, a prefix of emphasis meaning a strong turning or “with” (Lewis, 1985); the Old French word *convertir*, meaning “to turn around, employ, or transform” (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary); the Hebrew words guer (masculine) and g’yoret (feminine) meaning “to convert to” while “to convert from” is m’shumad. Metanoia, the Greek word, is translated as “repentance.” Synonyms are “transformation” (as derived from the patristic tradition) and “regeneration.” Another definition is “to turn in position or direction” or, in theological terms, “to turn from a sinful or irreligious life to one marked by love of God and pursuit of holiness; to turn to godliness”
Psychoanalysis and Spirituality

(Oxford English Dictionary). Dante invented the word “transhumanization.” A. D. Nock’s (1961) concept is

We mean the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.

(Nock, 1961, p. 7)

Furthermore, Nock explains: “The man who returns with enthusiasm will commonly feel he has never grasped the impact of the faith of his childhood” (p. 7). Philosophic conversion as the object of education, a moral, intellectual “turning of the soul,” was already established historically with Plato’s Republic (VI, pp. 522–523). The even more complex term of “religion” is not discussed at length in this work except to simply refer to William James’s definition in his Gifford Lectures: “The feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine” (p. 36) is still as good as any, except that many faiths are communal. In fact, in James’s book Varieties of Religious Experience (1901–1902), he clearly spells out the more complex multiform conscious nature of religious experiences and a conscious “will to believe.” Saintliness, he says

The sense of enlargement of life may be so uplifting that personal motives and inhibitions, commonly omnipotent, become too insignificant for notice, and new reaches of patience and fortitude open out. Fears and anxieties go, and blissful equanimity takes their place.

(Roth, 1969, p. 235)

Tolstoy’s definition is similar

Every religion is an establishment by man of his relation to the Infinite Existence of which he feels himself a part, and from which relation he obtains the guidance of his conduct. . . . True religion is the establishment by man of such a relation to the Infinite Life around him, as, while connecting his Life with this Infinitude and directing his conduct is also in agreement with his reason and with human knowledge.

(Tolstoy, 1899, pp. 213–214)

In order to narrow the field of inquiry, however, “spirituality” is chosen as a more felicitous and manageable term to explore in depth, even though spirituality is also complicated (see The Study of Spirituality, Jones, Wainwright, & Yarnold, 1986). This chapter is devoted to providing substantive descriptions of real, rational, and emotional experiences. In speaking about man’s center
of energy in consciousness, William James says when “a man is ‘converted’ [it] means . . . that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual center of his energy” (James, 1901−1902, p. 183). A satisfactory psychological explanation of the how and why this shift takes place is still not more clear today than it was for James, but what is clear now is a very emotionally moving and memorable experience. Anyone who has experienced a spiritual conversion can but minimally describe the inner experience in cogent psychological language, but it is patently obvious to a convert that he has experienced something he feels to be very unique, powerful, deep, and wonderful. A carefully crafted non-pathological psychoanalytic perspective about this most interesting life event has been missing so far in the current psychoanalytic scientific literature and is much needed to help clarify the meaning and motivation from a psychoanalytic perspective. Chapters 2 and 3 specify how Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* poem makes the same claim.

In human development, conversion of children, adolescents, or young adults appear similar, but there are some significant differences. The child may be wise and profound when she wonders out loud “How can God possibly be everywhere but still be in my little heart?” The child or child-like devout peasant may find peace, affirmation, and meaning for himself in the mystery of the Latin Mass where the images of the Virgin or Jesus Christ appear to be speaking directly to him or the Jewish child finds joy, comfort, identity, and acceptance through participation in the Bar or Bat Mitzvah, Purim, Hanukkah, and Seder celebrations. For example, a seventy-year-old person confided to me that when she was a child of seven, she walked alone to church, where she felt an inner spiritual peacefulness and the presence of God that continues to this day. In addition, it was her intellectual and emotional curiosity that was stimulated by the catechism classes taught by the kind but strict, intelligent nuns. These activities serve the important purposes of establishing a solid core personal and group identity. In fact, Christ advises that for anyone seeking salvation, one must be disposed in a child-like manner. The preadolescent and the adolescent alike question the meaning and purposes of life, why death occurs, and seek relief from the typical corrosive depressiveness, mood swings, and ordinary boredom of that phase of development. The adolescent is often burdened by frankly suicidal thoughts, as well as troublesome guilt and conflicts over sexual and aggressive thoughts and feelings that collide with inner moral and ethical values.

It is in this period of greatest physical and mental growth (twelve to eighteen) that Starbuck (1903) found the highest incidence of evangelical conversions. The young adult or older senior adult questions these same issues in greater depth, especially when confronted with the miracle of birth and the mammoth responsibilities of parenthood, or the death of a close friend, spouse, and mentor who had previously provided much support and
guidance. Other traumatic situations include war, family violence, addictions, terrorist acts, threats of nuclear holocausts, and the multitude of mental and interpersonal conflicts that plague adolescents.

Another threat to personal integrity is when a person is confronted by a serious life-threatening illness in himself (see M. Adler, 1992), a sibling, a child, a parent, or a spouse. Most people in such circumstances review and reflect on the purposes and values of their current life and what is most important to them: their family, their work, their relations to God and their fellow human beings. This kind of situation promotes the seeking of a new faith or a deepening of an already existing faith that results in a developmentally more mature, more structured personality that facilitates rather than interferes with the capacity for introspection and capacities to report on what is being experienced.

Recently, reports of adults who were ignorant of the meaning of various aspects of religious experiences such as certain rituals before they were enrolled in religious education classes found that their identity with that faith was enhanced as well as a deepening of their emotional involvement with their faith (World Jewish Digest, April, 2007). Moreover, since late adolescents are now particularly more capable of formal abstract mental operations than younger children (Brockman, 1984, 2003, 2017; Conn, 1986) they can now describe their rich emotional life of joy, awe, relief, sensations of the presence of the Holy Spirit, a oneness with God, and a transcendence that differs radically from the religious experience that Freud called a pathological obsessional neurosis.

The Phenomena of Conversion

The phenomena of conversion, both modern and ancient, have led to a rich literature beginning with the first ever recorded autobiographical spiritual journey of St. Augustine (Pusey, 1969): his boyhood, adolescence, and the dissolute debauchery of his young adulthood; his Manichean heresy; his escape from his home in North Africa (and his devout hovering mother St. Monica); and, finally, conversion in Milan to the Catholic faith under the direction of St. Ambrose. A modern journey is that of Scott and Kimberley Hahn’s (1993) whose study of biblical scripture gave substance to a solid intellectual foundation for their conversion from Presbyterianism to Catholicism, at the same time resolving some serious marital problems. David and Colleen Currie’s (1996) pilgrimage followed a similar pattern from fundamental Evangelicalism to Catholicism, through David Currie’s study of biblical scripture wherein he found the answers to his questions and doubts about the Protestant theology he had grown up in and had studied in college and seminary.

In between these notable examples is the extraordinary story of the Oxford movement composed of a group of intellectually gifted men in the mid-1800s (The Tractarians), led by John Henry Newman who later became
a Roman Catholic Cardinal in Britain. A hundred years later, another gifted
group of men and women of letters in Britain and the United States also
converted to the Roman Church (Allitt, 1997). Among these were T.S. Eliot
(Trosman, 1977), Edith Sitwell, Dorothy L. Sayers, G.K. Chesterton, Evelyn
Waugh, Graham Greene, Edward Sackville-West, George Sassoon, Hilaire
Belloc, J.R.R. Tolkien, A.C. Benson (son of the Anglican Archbishop of
Canterbury), R.A. Knox (son of the Anglican Bishop of Coventry), Muriel
Spark, and Malcolm Muggeridge, among others (Pearce, 1994). Almost to the
last person of that impressive literary group reported he (she) felt at home,
at peace, and was led to “The Truth” mainly by an intellectual study of the
Bible and the Doctrines of the Catholic Faith (O’Connor, 2001). C.S. Lewis
for many years contemplated conversion to the Roman Church from his
earlier conversion from atheism to the Anglican faith, but he never made the
journey to the Rome Church.

The philosophical school of phenomenology that included Scheler, Hus-
serl, and von Brentano dealt mainly with the observations of consciousness
that Karol Wojtyla (later Pope John Paul II) expanded on in terms of eth-
ics and the conscience. It is interesting to note here that von Brentano was
Freud’s teacher and Scheler and Husserl were Edith Stein’s teachers and men-
tors. Mortimer Adler, the originator of the Great Books program, converted
in 1984 first to the Anglican Church and then to Catholicism in 1999. He says
in his autobiography A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror: Further Reflections
of a Philosopher at Large (1992) that Reason and Revelation are two different
methods of “knowing.” Adler later said he believes in a God that created and
continually sustains the existence of all Reality. He did not base this belief
on any argument using human reason, although he would argue that belief
is not opposed to human reason, that is, it is not irrational or unreasonable.
He thought his belief was what most people would consider faith. Faith is
a gift of God. Theologically, as defined by Fr. J.A. Giambrone, “faith is a
divine, self-attesting reality. It stands as its own premise and serves as its own
end.” Furthermore, he concluded: “faith itself proposes the grounds of its
own assent” (Magnificat, 2012–2013, p. 127). Faith is the act of the intellect
assenting to divine truth under the dominion of the will as moved by God’s
Adolphe Tanquerey asserted “faith is a source of light to the mind, a source
of strength and comfort to the will, a source of merit to the entire soul”
(Magnificat, p. 223).

Taylor defines the origins of man’s modern religious identity using philo-
sophic, literary, and psychoanalytic ideas in Sources of the Self (1989). He traces
disenchantment in the modern era to a shift from romanticism and natural-
ism that included a strong belief in God to a scientific instrumentalism that
professed a strong need to liberate oneself and achieve the potentials of
self-discovery, self-fulfillment, and less reasoned belief in a Supreme Being.
The result is an anemic form of morality. In his more recent book A Secular
Taylor again derives his explanation for what Pope John Paul II defined as the secularization of modern western societies from the fields of philosophy, literature, and political science. Taylor defines secularity in terms of public places, rituals or ceremonials, but mainly in terms of a religious belief in God, whether Muslim, Jewish, or Christian. Taylor also approaches the problem from a historical position. For example, in prerevolution France, the ancien régime consisted of close-knit God/faith-centered rural families in small villages committed to parish life that gave way to urbanization, the industrial revolution, and a science-based intellectual revolution of Copernicus and Freud, and values transferred from clerical authorities to secular and political governmental authorities. Romantic humanistic political philosophers such as Locke and Rousseau took up values like Liberty, Fraternity, and Equality. Indeed, Tolstoy (1899, p. 208) quotes Bertholet, a famous French scientist, who said in 1901 (Revue de Paris, Jan., 1901): “the age of religion has passed, and that it must now be replaced by science.” But F. Collins (2006) asserts that many scientists are believers in God today. Taylor quotes a passage from Bede Griffiths’ book _The Golden String_ (1979, p. 9, see Note 4) that is similar to those of Auden (Kirsch, 2005, pp. 10–11) and Thomas Merton as quoted in Barron (1998).

Taylor calls this spiritual experience a “fullness” while Schiller called it “play” (1967, Letter XV, pp. 101–109) that reminds one of Erik Erikson’s psychoanalytic informed views of creative play (1977) and a “suspension of disbelief.” Taylor believes the religious experience is an “orienting,” “deeply moving,” “puzzled voice of God” and this God is the God of Abraham. Put together these various descriptions of conversion point to an emotional phase coupled with a rational or intellectual phase of human development. Simone Weil’s concept of metaxu refers to this world as a “closed door” or a “barrier,” and the Greek word is translated as a “bridge” (p. 132) in man’s effort to reach out to God.

Conversion from one faith to another or to a faith from no faith when marrying into a devout family who absolutely requires conversion may be simple (for example, a simple personal and informal ceremony when a young adult converts to the Muslim faith) or much more complicated and involved (as with conversion to modern Orthodox Judaism) (Eichhorn, 1965). The groom must undergo a lengthy study process of the Orthodox faith, circumcision (if not already done, a needle is inserted to draw a symbolic drop of blood), immersion in a ritual bath under strict rules of observation by three Orthodox rabbis (Owen, 1987), and the adoption of a Jewish name. Roger Owen’s story of his conversion to Judaism is excerpted in Lamm (1991). What is critically and intrinsically important throughout all the rituals of Judaism is abiding by God’s First Covenant, the 613 Commandments, especially His commandment to exclusively Love the one Lord God (monotheism), and finally and most importantly, following the letter of The Law. Conversion to Orthodox Judaism is usually not encouraged unless based on a very serious
and considered decision. During the Spanish Inquisition many Jewish subjects were forced to convert to Catholicism or face deportation and/or death. Some converted but continued to secretly celebrate the Jewish faith and were known as Conversos or Marranos and spoke a Spanish-like language, Ladino. Some intellectuals were invited back at the major universities when it was discovered that there were too few gentile scholars to fill faculty positions.

The phenomena of conversion are redolent with cognitive and intellectual contents as well as some very important emotions or feelings. For example, in Spinoza’s philosophy (1945[1677]) the emotions in religious faith include awe, joy, excitement, and pleasure in what man loves, as opposed to hate and pain. Converts of all faiths, including Judaism and Christianity, often report they are serenely happy, comforted, contented, secure, “saved,” finally at home where they belong, connected with others of like mind, and peacefully free of anxiety and depression. In fact, many people report a stronger sense of personal identity. They experience life anew as purposeful, meaningful, structured, and directed while they had previously experienced life as chaotic, amoral, hedonistic, alienated, self-serving, empty, or meaningless. James (1901−1902) reported a number of similar experiences in his Gifford Lectures IX and X. Conversions are described as either instantaneous or of longer duration. But the result is much the same, even though a small percentage—6 percent, according to Starbuck (1903)—of the more instantaneous form (Evangelical) may backslide or revert to their former state soon afterwards. Another experience is that many people report a diffusion of light around them in the physical sense (as did St. Paul) or in the metaphorical sense during and for some time after the conversion experience, but in no way are these people hallucinating or experiencing epileptic-like seizures, as some have suggested for the regressive psychopathological forms of conversion (Salzman, 1969).

There are some examples of alcoholics and drug addicts who through the help of Alcoholics Anonymous convert at the depths of helplessness, hopelessness, despair, and depression by a conversion they credit to newly found faith and belief in a supreme being or power greater than themselves to which they attribute their recovery and continuing sobriety. Certain times of life, such as a midlife crisis or epiphany experience, lead to a conversion similar to what Dante described in the opening lines of his Commedia in which he describes the feeling he has lost his way in the middle years of his life. Trosman (personal communication) has referred to this as a reaction to internal or external experiential situations.

Dante’s spiritual journey is recorded in his early writings and culminates in his Commedia where the mourning process focuses on the loss of his love object, Beatrice. Freccero’s (1986) Dante: The Poetics of Conversion is an intensive and comprehensive collection of essays on the hermeneutics of the historical and personal journey of the pilgrim and the poet. Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen converted many people, including the famous American playwright,
journalist/editor, member of Congress (Conn.), and ambassador to Italy, Clare Boothe Luce (wife of Henry Luce, editor and founder of *Time* and *Life* magazines) through his charismatic lectures and personal contacts. Tragically, Mrs. Luce had suffered the devastating loss, in an automobile accident, of her only daughter, a senior due to soon graduate at Stanford University summa cum laude. Mrs. Luce vainly sought help in psychoanalysis, but when that therapy failed her, she found solace in religious conversion, thinking that only through God could she find a reason to live (C. B. Luce, 1947). Other converts were convinced by intellectual criteria, following Einstein’s thought that there must be a supreme intelligence controlling and fine-tuning the universe, as well as the complex organisms of plants and animals including man.

The careful intellectual and theological study of the Sacred Scriptures provides convincing answers for the questions of many a former Protestant (Hahn & Hahn, 1993; Currie, 1996; Ray, 1997); and Pope, 2001), atheist, or agnostic. Some people are in part persuaded by the impressive architecture and the mystical stained glass of the famous basilicas in Rome (St. Peter’s, St. John the Lateran, St. Paul’s Outside-the-Walls, and St. Mary Major) and the large European Gothic cathedrals (York, Chartres, Cologne, and Notre Dame); while others are moved by religious music (the Gregorian chants, Mozart’s and Verdi’s Requiem masses, Handel’s *Messiah*, Mendelsohn’s *Elijah*, Bach’s *St. John’s Passion* and the Kol Nidre of the Yom Kippur service; the mystical Latin or vernacular liturgy involving the mystery of the virgin birth, the Incarnation, Christ’s ministry, the Last Supper, His Passion, crucifixion, and resurrection. The celebration in the Mass of the mystery of the transubstantiation of the wine and bread into the body and blood of Christ convinces others. Prayer and Holy Scripture readings and the exegetical studies offer substantial food for serious intellectual contemplation and discussion in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic studies. Service to the poor and sick is another powerful motivation for some who become missionaries and attend to the medical problems of needy populations who are the starving poor (such as St. Mother Teresa and Dr. Albert Schweitzer). All these motivations can occur singly or in combination for some converts. A. D. Nock (1961) reviews the scholarly history of conversion from the early part of the first millennium AD from before and after Alexander The Great in Greek religion, Roman cults, philosophy, and finally, modern Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

A most striking story is that of Edith Stein who was born the youngest of eleven children into a devout Jewish family in Breslau, Germany, in 1891. Her father died when she was two years of age. The family regularly celebrated the three major Jewish Holy Days (Passover, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur). A very bright student, she gave up praying early on, suffered an adolescent depression, and was indifferent to spiritual issues. She became a University-trained philosopher under Husserl and Scheler, who like Freud’s teacher Brentano, were renowned German phenomenologists. Her summa cum laude Doctoral thesis “The Problem of Empathy” was first published
in 1917 (Stein, 1964). In it she brilliantly explains the occurrence of empathy in the psychophysical being’s transcendental consciousness that takes place in three steps: “the emergence of the experience; the fulfilling explication; and the comprehensive objectification of the explained experience” (p. xiv). Her conceptualization of empathy anticipates Kohut’s work (1971, 1978, 1984). In this work, she differentiated the soul as a theological concept from the mind as a psychological one. Her insights into this phenomenon were also “arrived at independently” (p. xviii) from Freud’s discoveries.

Edith Stein was very active in the women’s movement in Germany before WWI, especially at the university level to facilitate admission to the university as well as to university faculty positions. She lectured on philosophy and women’s rights (other than at the university level) by speeches on the radio and public lectures throughout Germany. She volunteered as a Red Cross nurse in WWI (1914) because she wanted to help alleviate the suffering of the combatants. A chance encounter with an anonymous devout Catholic woman while sightseeing in a church impressed Stein with her quiet spirituality. At the same time, she overheard a peasant murmuring to the statue of Jesus Christ and, upon questioning, the man responded that he was simply having a conversation. Also, while mourning the loss of a colleague in the war, she was deeply moved by the widow’s calm and peaceful management of her grief that offered hope instead of despairing sadness. At age twenty-one, another episode of depression was brought on by questions about the meaningfulness of the monumental loss of life in WWI, as was observed by so many other people, including Freud and C. S. Lewis (Nicholi, 2002). Her depression was somewhat lifted when she attended a Bach concert that included a rousing performance of Luther’s hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” At a friend’s house, she was absorbed into the wee hours by reading St. Teresa of Avila’s mystical journey, so that by the early morning hours she had found “the truth” (Gaboriau, 2002, p. 42). She was moved then to buy a Catholic catechism, a missal, and rushed to ask a priest for baptism into the Catholic Church. In 1933, she was received into the Carmelite order and served in that capacity while translating the letters of Cardinal Newman and the works of St. Thomas Aquinas. She took the religious name of Teresa Benedicta of The Cross. After escaping from the Nazis to Holland, she was later apprehended by the Gestapo and shipped off to Auschwitz along with her sister Rosa, a physician. Although she was granted asylum in a Carmelite House in Switzerland, she refused to leave Rosa behind and accept a safe passage not available to the millions of other Jews. She and Rosa were martyred on August 9, 1942. Many of the survivors of that camp remembered her as a very peaceful, calm, and loving person ministering to everyone else’s needs before her own (Gaboriau, 2002). Under John Paul II’s papacy she was canonized in 1998 (Herbstriht, 1992; Gaboriau, 2002). Throughout her life and ordeal she remained a Woman, a Jewess, a Philosopher, and finally a Saint.
Another unusual story is that of Abraham Isaac Carmel (1964), born Kenneth Charles Cox, who lost both parents in infancy and who, as a boy, memorized whole chapters of the Bible and gave sermons to his elderly adoptive parents. Later, he explored all known religions, converted to Catholicism, became a Jesuit priest for seven years, and finally converted to Judaism where he felt emotionally at home for the first time. Other more recent conversion stories are described in Winner (2002) and Soloveichik (2006).

James (1901–1902) described two types of conversion: volitional and self-surrender. The volitional form appears to be clearly driven at the conscious level and is “usually gradual and consists of building up piece by piece of a new set of moral and spiritual habits” (p. 192), while the self-surrender type takes place suddenly and is characterized by a total emotional giving up of oneself in the experience. It is an exciting journey for the proselyte experientially and for outside observers as well. He feels exhilarated, enlivened, and freed from heavy burdens. On inquiry, they report they are more whole, more integrated, more together, more confident, and more complete. The accompanying elation does not resemble either manic or hypomanic excitement. In fact, it is experienced as a very deep, pleasant, healthy elevation of mood. It is an eagerness to get on with the process and be immersed in the rituals of the faith that continues to provide a settled sense of centeredness and a sense of direction. James quotes Starbuck and his study of adolescents who converted between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. They reported they had experienced “a sense of incompleteness and imperfection: brooding, depression, and morbid introspection, and a guilty sense of sin; anxiety about the hereafter; distress over doubts, and the like” (pp. 185–186). These emotions were relieved or removed entirely. Starbuck concluded that these observations reflected entirely normal experiences of adolescence and “incidental to passage from the child’s small universe to the wider intellectual and spiritual life of maturity” (p. 186). Instead of a neurosis that had crippled the personality, there was a freeing-up of creative talents and gifts.

Theology of Conversion

Conversion, regeneration, transformation, redemption, repentance, or metanoia (Barron, 1998) is well described by many Catholic and Jewish theologians. Only the most salient features of the relevant doctrines of Catholicism and Judaism are dealt with in this presentation. For Catholics, an important first step in conversion is a choice of God-centeredness over self. Next, baptism to be cleansed of sin must take place if it has never been done. Belief in the incarnation of the Word or Logos (and Truth) in the human body of Jesus Christ is a next important step along with belief in the Holy Spirit. The central element of the liturgy of the Eucharist is the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ at the hands of an ordained priest. In order for this sacrament to be genuinely experienced,
the communicant must be appropriately disposed to receiving the sacraments (Brockman, 2004). Conversion is formalized through the R.C.I.A. (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) in which the catechism of the Catholic Church and one’s own personal appropriation of conversion is dealt with in detail. Converts (catechumens or candidates) are encouraged to be more righteous, “to try to live holier lives according to the Gospel,” and to turn away from sin (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2000, p. 217). Other elements are regular reception of the sacrament of reconciliation, spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Charitable giving and tithing are also constitutive of living a life of conversion. It is true for both Christian and Jewish candidates for conversion that they must be receptive to God as the Redeemer who is always seeking to be in a relationship with his chosen people. The Catholic convert (catechumen or candidate) is anointed with Sacred Chrism (holy oil) and then receives the Eucharist at the Easter Vigil. Young Catholic children at age seven or older are confirmed and receive their first communion at a special ceremony. It is interesting that it is around this time (age of reason) that most children have developed the capacity to differentiate right from wrong. Naming and confirmation in the synagogue of a Jewish child precedes by some years the Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies that usually take place at age thirteen.

Conversion to Judaism may be to the Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform movements. However, the Orthodox Movement, especially in Israel, does not recognize conversion to Reform or Conservative Movements. Motivation may be for various reasons but the most common one (over 90 percent) is for the sake of family marriage (Forster & Tabachnik, 1991, p. 43). Traditionally, in the Orthodox faith prospective converts are rejected three times to test their sincerity. When finally accepted, the male Orthodox converts to Judaism must undergo circumcision (if had not already done so), immersion in the ritual bath (mikveh), and serious study for some time with a rabbi. He must abide by the bilateral Covenant between God and the Jews, the 613 Commandments, and, in the Orthodox faith, live by certain dietary laws (kashrut). Other requirements are attendance at the ritual celebrations of various Holy Days: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, the fall festival of Sukkoth, Teshuvah (redemption), Simchat Torah, and the Friday night Shabbats, the service with prayers and blessing of the bread and wine. Other occasions require reading the Haggadah at the Passover Seder, lighting the menorah candles at Hanukkah, and meditating about and revering the one God (Sh’ma) on the Shabbat. All these are very important elements of faith. Furthermore, the convert must choose a Jewish name to add to the change of psychological and spiritual identity as a son or daughter of Abraham. The female convert (Epstein, 1994; Berkowitz & Moskovitz, 1996) must be immersed in the mikveh and follow the same procedures and celebrate the Holy Days as the male, but is not required to attend services. A candidate for conversion may be required to appear before a Jewish court or Beit Din composed of three rabbis to test the candidate’s readiness for completion of the process. Another part of the
process is identifying with a nation of people who have survived for centuries in an alien and hostile environment and have been victims of the Holocaust, but then likely suffering the possibilities of persecution and anti-Semitism. Finally, tzedakah or charitable giving is a very important part of the faith.

Alan Segal’s (1986) scholarly review of the parallel sociological and historical developments of Judaism and Christianity from the time of Abraham to the present provides a longitudinal perspective while Forster and Tabachnik (1991) have documented the alarming frequency of intermarriages (17.4 percent during the period of 1961 to 1965 which rose to an estimated 31.7 percent from 1966 to 1971). Courses of instruction were inaugurated to face this problem. Even in the patriarchal period, the same problem existed, since Abraham forbade his children to marry within the Canaanite culture. Likewise, in the past some priests in concentrated ethnic parishes strongly discouraged prospective brides or grooms from marrying into different ethnic groups, as for example, German, Hispanic, Irish, Polish, Italian, and Black, etc.

Fr. Robert Barron’s (1998) theory of conversion is an in-depth study of modern man from biblical, literary, psychological, and theological perspectives. The biblical perspective centers on the Adam and Eve story in which they disobeyed God’s injunction to not eat of the tree of knowledge and egotistically declared themselves capable of determining their own fate, a path that is interpreted as original sin, which is “inherited” by succeeding generations. The literary references are to Dante’s *Commedia*, Faulkner’s group of stories entitled *Go Down, Moses*, and Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” The time-honored precepts of the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments serve as a daily guide to mental and spiritual health for many people in their daily lives.

Karol Wojtyła’s (Pope John Paul II) doctoral dissertation is an in-depth study of the mystic St. John of the Cross’s understanding of the nature of man’s journey to God. Wojtyła summarized St. John of the Cross’s ideas of the virtue of Faith in terms of fundamental theology, dogmatic and moral theology, religious psychology, and mystical theology. Religious psychology for St. John is more metaphysical than a true depth psychology. What follows is a partial and selected summary of the main points of the dissertation, for the intention here is to present an overview of the Mystical Doctor’s understanding of spiritual experiences that are relevant to the thesis presented in this chapter. Sensory modalities normally provide important information to the intellect and then become integrated with the intellect, but in religious experience sensory modalities such as experiences of a being surrounded by a bright light are understood in the metaphysical sense. It is only through faith that the senses gather the revealed truths and then are permitted to contribute to union with God. First, the virtue of Faith is the central concept. Second, basic to the Mystical Doctor’s theology is the concept of “essential likeness” that no creature possesses since “the divine essence transcends the essence of every creature” (1981, p. 238). Furthermore, since no creature inherently
possesses the proportionate means for “supernatural” union with God, then
God must first offer His unconditional Love to mankind. Ultimately, it is
Faith and Grace that contain the “ontological aspect” that is the special qual-
ity that gives man the capacity or “proportionate means” for Love to achieve
a “supernatural” union. The intellect is thus altered by love and becomes
an “essential likeness” and part of the divine endowment of man’s poten-
tial capacity for love that seeks likenesses and rejects dissimilarities in the
beloved. Finally, the Mystical Doctor’s psychological speculations as reviewed
within John Paul II’s dissertation are described as an effective special “creative
imagination” that is similar in part to the ideas of conversion presented in
this book. Faith, St. John of the Cross claims, is fueled or “vivified” (p. 237)
and processed by man’s love of God and then is executed by the Will. Union
of the soul with God and His lovingly reaching out to mankind takes place
in a kind of “emptiness” and “darkness” in man’s psyche, particularly when
certain higher levels of abstract intellectual thinking are inoperative. But this
spiritually imbued and emptied out intellect is still exquisitely capable of con-
templating the “infinite” (p. 242) and does not rest until it has connected up
with the divine. One of the essential factors of this divine- and love-inspired
intellect is an intentional “beautific vision” of the divine being as exemplified
in the many beautiful paintings of the Virgin and Christ Child and in Michel-
angelo’s magnificent Sistine Chapel ceiling. Mental prayer, meditation, and
contemplation are described as powerful means of effecting and maintaining
union as well.

Psychoanalytic Perspectives

Sigmund Freud’s work (1907, 1908, 1909, 1910, 1913, 1919a, 1919b, 1923,
1927, 1927 [1928], 1939; E. Freud, 1960) has provoked many questions and
posed some very interesting and provocative ideas about religion, thus mak-
ing it a legitimate topic for serious psychoanalytic inquiry. Throughout all the
cited publications, Freud makes the claim that religious practices and religious
faith are a form of obsessional neurosis as derived from the illusory expe-
riences of childhood ambivalent idealizations of paternal imagoes. Freud’s
unabated criticism of religion and his atheistic views were founded and based
on what I consider his clinical and anthropological data (Kung, 1990 [1928]).
The data Freud used besides his own personal (more about that later) experi-
ences to support his theory were from the research of anthropologist J G.
Fraser (The New Golden Bough, 1959; Totemism and Exogomy, 1887), who errone-
ously regarded the Australian aboriginal people as psychologically primitive,
immature, infantile, and to have expressed these personality characteristics in
their religious practices. In Freud’s 1907 paper, ceremonial religious practices
are regarded as clinically similar (meaning not exactly the same as) to obses-
sional acts and defensive efforts against the upwelling of certain portions of
repressed infantile sexual instincts. The same speculative ideas are repeated
in the 1908 (p. 186 ff) and 1909 papers (pp. 169–170, 193, 256, 301–302). In
the 1910 paper on Leonardo da Vinci, Freud suggests that a “personal God is,
psychologically, nothing other than an exalted father . . . [since] young people
lose their religious beliefs as soon as their father’s authority breaks down”
(p. 123). Here, Freud seems to be speaking autobiographically since he was
markedly disillusioned with and lost respect for his own elderly father who
had failed miserably in business and had to rely on charity, and who passively
submitted to a gentile’s insult on the street. In “Totem and Taboo” (1913),
Freud makes his strongest case for the similarity between religious rituals
and obsessional neurosis. But, it is in “The Future of an Illusion” (1927)
that Freud’s most central and most eloquent argument is mounted that an
infantile approach to the personification of nature that he claims is based
on massive childhood helplessness that in turn, promotes a need for supe-
rior fatherly powers of protection. But that idealization of the father later
leads understandably enough to a negatively charged ambivalence toward the
flawed perceived father. Thus, he concluded that religious ideas are born out
of childish illusions and maybe even delusions. The mother’s kind, benevo-
lent, self-sacrificing role, which is perceived by the child as equally powerful,
is noticeably omitted (P. Kramer, 1958). Freud claimed it is exclusively the
father’s powerful protection from overwhelming helplessness that is sought
in a supreme being. Not only is this formulation limited, it is not necessarily
the case in mine and many others’ observations. Rather, it is the positive iden-
tification with and internalization of the father’s power that is modulated by
a realistic sense of humility that frees up the personality to be more creative,
E. Draper (2003) describes this process in terms of transference. In fact,
some converts report their experience as equally and similarly authentic to
a successful psychoanalytic treatment where psychoanalysts frequently hear
their analysis and where patients report that they are delighted with a more
authentic, integrated, and cohesive sense of self.

A quote from the “Future of an Illusion” paper is: “the voice of the intel-
lect is a soft one, but it does not rest till it has gained a hearing” (1927, p. 53).
This thinly veiled attack on the intelligence of believers deserves no comment
except to say that, in many clinical observations, the intellect is without doubt
richly enhanced and is supported also by the testimony of many religious
leaders who publish their observations of religious conversions. In another
paper, Freud’s rather humorous but kind letter to an American physician
about his conversion experience (1927 [1928]) underscores Freud’s atheistic
views. The intellect is always a real part of the emotional processes of mental
life. Schiller’s use of “play” is similar to Erikson’s (1977) notions of the cre-
ative uses of imaginative play from childhood unto adulthood to reduce ten-
sion. Ritvo (1993) suggests a very important element in this process of play in
children—“a suspension of disbelief.” In the conversion process, though, it is
a more of an organized and more or less conscious renunciation of disbelief
and doubt than a suspension and is a creative process that occurs in the non-conflicted sphere of the personality.

As part of the abandonment of his father’s devout Judaism, Freud adamantly refused to allow his wife Martha (nee Bernays) to celebrate any of the Jewish rituals or holidays even though she had descended from several generations of famous and well-respected rabbis in Hamburg, one of whom (Jacob Bernays) published a paper on catharsis. It is interesting to note that after Freud’s death, Martha Freud reinstated celebrating the Friday night Shabbat ritual. Another mystery is that no one knows exactly what the effects were of Freud’s early childhood attendance at the Catholic Mass with his nanny that led to his later atheistic views. He like Abraham Isaac Carmel regaled his parents with the sermons he had heard at mass. Two traumatic events in Freud’s early life was that he recalled bathing with the nanny in her menstrual bloodied water and sometime later she was summarily fired for presumably stealing. One could speculate that both events and particularly the sudden firing of the nanny were traumatic losses of an early intense relationship that could have led to his life-long ambivalent preoccupation with religion, first rebutting it, and finally leading to his strongly avowed atheism and his strong identification with a secular Jewishness. It is said that his philosophy teacher von Brentano “proved” the existence of God to Freud and Silverstein at least three times. What is known, however, is that many Jewish emigrants to Vienna from the outlying provinces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, such as the Freud family, who had left Pribor in Galicia, entered the capital with the strong desire to assimilate and derive the benefits of education and participation in business, government, and the military that was now open to them.

The careful scientist, that for Freud, whose search for scientific truth allows that if the psychoanalytic method is used to discredit religious belief, it must also endure the use of the same methods to rebut his formulations. And so, it seems that he opens the door to the possibilities of a mature mind and personality (such as Mortimer Adler) that can formulate a set of religious beliefs and respond to a desire for connection to and union with God in an experience that is redolent with much affectivity. It is important, therefore, to pursue a serious psychoanalytic study of conversions and religious faith in general. In order to rebut, or at the very least call into question Freud’s views, one must have sufficient clinical and theoretical data to support a rebuttal. Any serious investigation of this subject is clearly a very difficult endeavor, since any criticism of Freud’s assertions involves exploring new territory. Furthermore, the reports in the literature, as cited above, make it clear that these phenomena of conversion reveal that converts undergo a massively revolutionary reorganization, regeneration, and beneficial transformation of the entire personality. More clinical observations and theoretical contributions must be developed to increase our understanding of the phenomena of conversion and religious experience in general. What follows is my contribution to this endeavor.
The sociopsychological studies of Janik and Toulmin (1971) and Schorske (1981) contended that the fragmented psychological, political, sociological culture (especially the relations between the sexes) produced a widespread disillusionment and alienation in the scientific community at the *fin de siècle* in Freud’s day in Vienna in favor of a physical, chemical, deterministic science as a likely substitute for religion and spirituality. Freud was caught up in the fervor of this revolution within the sciences, the arts (literary, architecture, and music) as well as medicine. Freud’s exposure to philosophy (including Schopenhauer’s negative pessimism) at the University and earlier under Franz von Brentano’s lectures left him pessimistic about mankind’s true nature that he really believed to be “trash” (Freud & Pfister, 1963, pp. 61–62).

Over fifty years of clinical observations lead me to consider that the rituals of all faiths do not ordinarily or necessarily promote obsessional behavior or any other symptoms of psychopathology. Instead, my conversations with religious leaders of many different faiths over the years have led me to the conclusion that the rituals of faith regularly provide a quiet ordering, structuring, and transcendental meditative source of tension relief. The many communicants I have talked with who have also visited the serenely beautiful chapels, basilicas, synagogues, and mosques all over the world experience an authentic spiritual oneness with the Creator and the Holy Spirit. My clinical experience with many patients and direct observations of normal people undergoing conversion showed that they experienced enhanced healthier personalities. What I observed was that the convert is aware of a specific deficiency between what he was and what he could be or ought to be, and that this recognition represented a first step in the conscious awareness of a powerful desire for change and a real need for such a change. For some, this change was measured only by small degrees, but for many others, the conscious recognition of the need for change grew more and more as the unconscious and non-conscious elements of the process came into awareness. Major revisions became necessary to establish a more authentic self that works daily to be more humble, more kind and benevolent, less prejudiced, less angry, less passive, less self-centered, less greedy and avaricious, and instead are imbued with a higher degree of moral autonomy than before. I consider the seven deadly sins (pride, anger, envy, greed, avarice, gluttony, and lust) to be creatively described in the literary sense in Dante’s *Commedia* (Chapters 2 and 3 of this book), and especially pride in canticle *Purgatorio* (Singleton, 1973), as parallel to or resembling the psychoanalytic concept of pathological narcissism. It is true that not all converts experience such a progressive felicitous result, but even in those less felicitous results there is still something quite positive. When religious faith is deepened, I observed in clinical settings and in direct observations that there is a calm, serene, but enlivened sense of self that pervades the whole personality without any detectable evidence of obsessional behaviors or any other form of psychopathology for that matter.
One boy, converted at twelve years, reported an all-encompassing oneness with the Creator that was new to him and later, as a mature adult, the same individual experienced the exact same spiritual oneness with many other different ethnic groups. Similarly, the monk Thomas Merton reported the same experience while walking downtown at Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, Kentucky (Barron, 1998, p. 67). Bede Griffiths (1979) described similar experiences. Observations of active unconscious conflicts about racial prejudice, sexuality, parenthood, and the transience of life often melt away in authentic conversions.

Starbuck (1903) describes what is known now as Erikson’s sociopsychological concept of ego identity that is exhaustively reviewed elsewhere (Brockman, 2003, pp. 35–68). It is particularly cogent here since the ego sector in adolescence, late adolescence, and young adulthood (Brockman, 1984) is often enhanced by conversion and entering into religious practices. These converts report a continuing process of consolidation of ego identity and the personality as a whole and for that matter is in part exemplified by a satisfaction in visibly wearing religious articles like the Cross, Star of David necklaces, or head scarves and using beads to say the Rosary, “laying on” phylacteries in daily prayers, and publicly wearing a yarmulke. Also, in the Islamic religion there are strict rules of dress and multiple prescribed prayers during the day. There is comfort in the establishment of a group identity too. Belonging to a faith that is worldwide or a religious and ethnically based people like those of Israel, or belonging to an illustrious ethnic group are powerful motives that are appreciated not only in terms of a healthy pride in the many creative artistic and scientific accomplishments of members of a particular group, but also in a willingness to share in their suffering from prejudice and hatred.

Another source of ego, ego ideal, and superego enhancement is attendance in religious education courses: Bible and Koran Study courses, retreats, and summer camps for children, adolescents, young and older adults which provide powerfully supportive and intellectually enriching experiences that lead to strengthening solid identity formation. The healthy executive and defensive operations of the ego combine to process and develop increasingly complex tactics and strategies to channel previously poorly uncontrolled sexual and aggressive contents from the dynamically repressed unconscious id. There is enhancement of the ego’s sense of reality and reality testing. For example, the transience of life is addressed and processed in a unique way in that there is confidence in the belief of a life in the hereafter. In this regard, it is essential for the catechumen or candidate to relinquish a significant controlling part of his self-centered will. Also, these transformations seem in part to take place in the conflict-free sphere of the personality (progressive neutralization, Kohut & Seitz, 1963, pp. 113–141). Karol Wojtyla refers to the “creative imagination” in St. John of The Cross’s theology of Faith. When narcissistic willfulness is “turned over” to a higher power, the convert experiences a
strengthening of controls rather than a weakening, as well as a pleasurable freed-up form of relief from tension. Previously active dynamically repressed unconscious conflicts about racial prejudices, sexuality, parenthood, and the transience of life issues often melt away following an authentic conversion. Furthermore, one must take into account another executive ego function, namely, the strivings toward health that A. Freud proposed (1965).

In addition to identity formation, overall personality and ego modification and consolidation, any serious examination of religious conversion must certainly survey other sectors of the mental apparatus that include the categorical imperatives (superego). Intrinsic to the superego structure is the ego ideal that encompasses the highest ideals, ethical values, and principles of behavior (Schafer, 1962, 1968). These qualities are focused, revised, and expanded by conversion. As Freud has noted, the superego is a “differentiation within the ego” (1923, p. 28) and is co-terminal with the whole ego. The superego is conceptualized to be a guiding force like a built-in counseling body composed of a multitude of internalizations (imagoes) of previous positive relationships of any substance, particularly those with the parents, other caretakers, teachers, friends, and mentors (Meissner, 1970, 1971, 1972). Freud further claims the superego structure is formally created in part by the so-called resolution or “dissolution” of The Oedipus Complex (Freud, 1924, p. 19, 171–179) and by both biological and historical factors. These internalizations can be harsh, cruel, and sadistically guilt producing, or they may be benign and benevolent (P. Kramer, 1958) (or some of both), that is, derived from the selfless, kind, and loving maternal or maternalized paternal experiences from infancy into adulthood. Kramer’s (1958) thesis is that the benign superego overlaps with the ego ideal. These internalizations strongly influence the religious or spiritual behavior of the convert. The superego is “always closer to the id . . . [and] it reaches deep down into the id and for that reason is farther from consciousness than the ego” (1923, p. 49). Alexander (1925), in fact, suggested that when positive modifications of the superego occur, they are aphoristically described as “where superego was, there shall ego be.”

Freud makes the claim that the ego ideal is “the germ from which all religions have evolved” (1923, p. 37). These internalizations also may be positively or negatively projected onto the Trinity, the Virgin, the Saints, the religious leaders (Christian, Jewish or Muslim), the patriarchs, heroic biblical figures like David, Solomon, Judith, Ruth, Job, Jeremiah, Jesus Christ, the Apostles, Mohammed, etc. However, projections such as these do not explain either the conversion experience or the subsequent spiritual experiences. They merely describe some possible positive or negative contents.

Previous efforts to explain religious experience and the identification of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (The Trinity) in terms of psychoanalytic object relations theory (Rizzuto, 1979), Meissner (1970, 1971, 1972, 1984) or as elemental parts of the developmental theory of ego development (Loewald’s theory of ego formation [Nields, 2003]) are very important and
notable contributions, but unfortunately neglect the deeply felt emotional and cognitive components of religious experience. Rizzuto’s (1979) original work attempted to explain religious experience by means of an internal God representation: “It is not a study of religion but one of one central aspect of the religious experience: the epigenetic, developmental, formation, transformation, and use of the God representation during the course of life” (p. 182). She asserted Freud was correct in assuming God originates in parental imagoes in the mind of the child and on into adulthood and is a real part of a ubiquitous creative illusory experience. This approach, in my opinion, is contrary to the avowed experience of my many clinical observations of those persons whose belief in God and the Trinity is a very real transforming spiritual experience emanating from outside the personality.

Conn’s (1986) unique developmental approach includes the work of Erikson, Kegan, Kolberg, Fowler, and Piaget, which he gathered into an interesting integrated theology of mature adult religious belief. His concept of the self is not consonant with the psychoanalytic literature as derived from Kohut (1971, 1978, 1984) but it does add a useful understanding of mature forms of religious faith. In another context, the clinical assessment of a young adult must take into account the consolidation of the personality through various modalities (Brockman, 2003, pp. 2–3).

Following Freud, other researchers’ work like that of Foxe (1943), Salzman (1953, 1969), Christensen (1963), and Franzblau (1965) are not helpful or constructive, since they regard spirituality and religious faith as pathological or state that some faiths are more mature than others.

The biblical description of Adam’s origin in the Creation story is that he was made in the image of God and God breathed life into him, and so it is thought that all humans are also called to be one with the Divine. This idea is consonant with the notion that man has an inherent moral sense and that which arises from the internalized objects, but this moral sense has to be awakened and nourished to pursue the conversion process. The exceptions to this rule of a natural inborn moral sense are examples of totally evil persons like Hitler and Stalin, though St. Thomas Aquinas would disagree since he believed all men are redeemable (Chapter on Good and Evil, Sec. 115, p. 126).

The question of the location in the mind and personality where all these commonly regarded mystical and mysterious experiences occur has not been made precisely clear before. It seems necessary now to posit that it is quite likely that conversions take place simultaneously or over time in all three topographical areas: the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious, but also in the area that cognitive psychologists (Schelling, 1800 [Heath, 1978]; Ellis, 1995; Mangam, 2001) and neuroscientists (Clyman, 1991; Shevrin, Bond, Brakel, Hertel, & Williams, 1996; Solms, 1997, 1998; Westen and Gabbard, 2002, 1 and 11) refer to as non-conscious activity, since there appears to be a kind of transcendental awe and mystical automaticity inherent in the proselyte’s psyche during conversion. Preconscious, unconscious executive ego,
superego, and ego ideal functioning plus consciously driven decision-making controls are observed in the entire process. And, at the same time, there is a willingness to turn control more or less totally over to the Creator, the Holy Spirit, or Allah. An often-quoted model is Christ’s experience in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prayerfully petitioned God’s Will and not His Own Will to avoid his death on the cross. It would be a mistake to call this neurotic passivity, since He was actively seeking God’s Will, and His Grace to do the work of redemption. Likewise, the convert is actively seeking God’s Will, wisdom, grace, and redemption. One convert reported she felt she was under the control of a benign power outside herself.

Summary and Conclusions

This contribution to the study of conversion has focused on some of the salient phenomenological, social, psychological, theological, and psychoanalytic issues. The all-inclusive definition of conversion must await further study, but what is known at this time is considerable. Conversion, as understood now, is a very emotional and cognitive journey from nonbelief or from lukewarm belief into a profound transformation and regeneration of the entire personality involving remodeling of conscious, preconscious and unconscious activities, as well as remodeling of executive ego functions and the superego. There is a more solid, benign superego alongside integration of moral and ethical values that provides clearer paths for the practice of intimate and group behaviors. The superego is more clarified of archaic destructive contents, relieved of the more gross forms of “sinful propensities,” and is seen to be more solidly benevolent. The ego is modified and consolidated into an identity that is visible even to the outsider as a marked change with greater control over sinful selfishness and residues of unconscious aggressive and libidinal conflicts. Continuing mastery of the seven deadly sins (pride, anger, envy, greed, gluttony, sloth, and lust) that parallel the unconscious psychological experiences of narcissism, rage, greed, pathological defenses, resistance to change, shame and guilt, etc., leads to greater ego strengthening and increased humility. I am proposing that new capacities for processing and channeling of id contents seem to be accomplished through the conflict-free area of the personality by sublimation and progressive neutralization, and become non-conflicted transformations. Furthermore, these processes of conversion seem to take place in the non-conscious arena as well, since there appears to be a kind of automaticity involved. Furthermore, obsessional neurosis or other psychopathology is not encountered in the great majority of religious converts (as Freud and others have claimed) in the three major faiths. Freud’s thesis merely succeeds in making the claim for a “similarity” between religious rituals and obsessionality. Nor is religious experience related to man’s infantile helplessness and disillusionment in the mortal father in favor of the more powerful heavenly father. On the contrary, there seems to be a kind of pacification and regenerative transformation.
of the entire personality. Converts to the specific faiths studied here have experienced something very unique, and that process, whether slow or fast, volitional or self-surrender, encompasses the entire personality.

I have tried to show that the conversion experience, in the main, occurs in a non-pathological but healthy mind and personality. It is an expanding experience enacted in the conflict-free “playful” sphere of the personality. My critique of the thesis that man creates God as an internal representation (Rizzuto, 1979) is that it is contrary to the avowed experience of the various clinical observations I have made where the religious experience was a very real transforming spiritual experience. What Rizzuto has added to our understanding is an explanation of the presence of an internal object relationship with God that is parallel to the profound experience of a religious conversion.

Several notable examples of recent and historically significant conversions are described in some detail to show the how, what, when, and where the conversion process has taken place. The process, as the convert experiences it, is both distinct and remarkably similar in all three major religions—Catholic, Jewish, and Moslem. In Chapter 3 Dante’s personal conversion story and spiritual journey is reported in graphic detail in his original hendecasyllabic rhythm and tercet-rimed poem *The Divine Comedy*. He described himself maturing and developing a healthier unselfish personality. Chapter 2 is a detailed survey of his development as a poet and scholarly intellectual excursions into political theory and linguistics. There are hints of a self-cure of his very serious depression and his selfish sexuality, but these efforts were embryonic, short-lived, and temporary without much solid foundation of spiritual change. He had to suffer the “trials and tribulations” of the Inferno and Purgatory to be cleansed of his seven deadly self-sins and conversion that I have compared to a clinical psychoanalytic process.

**Notes**

1 Flavius Valerius Aurelius Constantinus defeated Maxentius at the battle of the Milvian Bridge over the Tiber. On an oath, he reported many years later to Eusebius the following story. He saw a cross-shaped trophy superimposed over the midday sun along with a text: “By this conquer” and witnessed by many soldiers (Book I, 29–32, p. 81). Later, when contemplating his attack on Maxentius and considering when he should obtain divine aid, he dreamed of a vision of the Cross and Christ appeared to him and “urged him to make himself a copy of the sign” (p. 81). It was known as *the labarum*, “a tall pole plated with gold [and] had a transverse bar forming the shape of a cross. Up at the extreme top a wreath woven of precious stones and gold had been fastened. On it two letters intimating by its first characters the name of ‘Christ’, formed the monogram of the Savior’s title, *rho* being intersected in the middle by *chi*. These letters the Emperor also used to wear on his helmet in later times. From the transverse bar, which was bisected by the pole, hung suspended a cloth, an imperial tapestry covered with a pattern of precious stones fastened together, which glittered with shafts of light, and interwoven with much gold, producing an impression of indescribable beauty on those who saw it” (p. 81). The pole was carried in front of his army (Pamphili Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, p. 81 ([139] 1999).
Mrs. Luce went through psychoanalysis with a prominent psychoanalyst in New York, but the therapy failed, possibly due to countertransference issues, according to her account when she described her analyst’s unwillingness to accept her interest in spirituality and demanding an exclusive focus of the transference to him. She left somewhat improved from her depression and confused state that had prompted her initially to seek analysis and she credited him, however, with much insight (and one reason for conversion) into her confusion and her mourning the loss of her mother, who died eight years before, and her only child nineteen year-old Ann, who was due to graduate summa cum laude from Stanford in philosophy three years before. Both losses were from automobile accidents. Also, Clare Boothe Luce, like Freud, and many others were distressed over the massive loss of life in WW I as well as WW II. The midlife crisis that surfaced over the meaning of life, and her need for sustaining help by a higher power from a threatened fragmenting process was successfully relieved in her conversion to Catholicism with the sensitive and brilliant help of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen. The darkness and the feelings of nowhere to turn that enveloped her reminds one of the dark wood and the fierce beasts that confronted Dante in the opening lines of *The Divine Comedy*.

In Roth’s *The Moral Philosophy of William James* is a quote from W.R. Inge’s book *Christian Mysticism* (1899, p. 326): “that men of preeminent saintliness agree very closely to what they tell us. They tell us that they have arrived at an unshakeable conviction, not based on inference, but on immediate experience, that God is a spirit, with whom the human spirit can hold intercourse; that in him meet all that they can imagine of goodness, truth, and beauty; that they can see his footprints everywhere in nature, and feel his presence within them as the very life of their life, so that in proportion as they come to themselves they come to him. They tell us what separates us from him and from happiness is first, self-seeking in all its forms; and, secondly, sensuality in all its forms; that these are the ways of darkness and death, which hide from us the face of God; while the path of the just is like a shining light, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day.”

Bede Griffiths remembers: “One day during my last term at school I walked out alone in the evening and heard the birds singing in that full chorus of song, which can only be heard at that time of the year at dawn or at sunset. I remember how the shock of surprise with which the sound broke on my ears. It seemed to me I had never heard the birds singing before and I wondered whether they sang like this the year round and I never noticed it. As I walked on I came upon some Hawthorne trees in full bloom and again I thought that I had never seen such a sight or experienced such sweetness before. If I had been brought suddenly among the trees of the Garden of Paradise and heard the choir of angels singing I could not have been more surprised. I came then to where the sun was setting over the playing fields. A lark rose suddenly from the ground beneath the tree where I was standing and poured out its song above my head, and then sank still singing to rest. Everything grew then still as the sun faded and the veil of dusk began to cover the earth. I remember now the feeling of awe, which came over me. I felt inclined to kneel on the ground, as though I had been standing in the presence of an angel; and I hardly dared to look on the face of the sky, because it seemed as though it was a veil before the face of God.

These are the words with which I tried many years later to express what I had experienced that evening, but no word can do more than suggest what it meant to me. It came to me quite suddenly, as it were out of the blue, and now that I look back on it, it seems to me it was one of the decisive events of my life. Up to that time I had lived the life of a normal schoolboy, quite content with the world as I found it. Now I was suddenly made aware of another world of beauty and mystery such as I had never imagined to exist, except in poetry. It was as though I had begun to see and smell and hear for the first time. The world appeared to me as Wordsworth describes it with “the glory and the freshness of a dream.” The sight of a wild rose growing on a hedge, the scent of lime tree blossoms caught suddenly as I rode down a hill on a bicycle, came to me like visitations from another world. But it was not only that my senses were awakened. I experienced an overwhelming emotion in the presence of nature, especially at evening. It began to wear a kind of sacramental character for me.” (Griffiths, pp. 9–10).
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**A Précis of the Mourning Process in Dante’s Early Writings**


A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Dante's Commedia


