



# Psychology of Anomalous Experiences

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## Conversion

- Conversion is studied within psychology of religion from the perspective of social psychology;
- Conversion is studied particularly in the context of young people joining New Religious Movements, or becoming serious about their own religion; some times also falling out of religion (deconversion);
- There are two types of conversions: gradual and sudden;
- Most studies have focussed on the psycho-pathological elements contributing to conversion: influence of deprivation (Stark, 1965; Brainbridge, 1992) or brain-washing (Richardson 1985; Machalek and Snow 1993);
- Several studies have suggested that most conversions do not last – unless supported by the same context.

## What is Conversion?

For Coe (1916) conversion entails:

- Transformation of the self;
- Comes through a definite process (not same as maturation);
- Makes radical changes;
- Leads to a higher direction;
- Occurs in a context.

Coe, G. A. (1916). *The psychology of religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

## Lofland: Types (Motifs) of conversion

- **Intellectual:** people pursue alternate theodicies, and seek personal fulfilment by reading books, watching television, attending lectures and in other impersonal ways.
- **Mystical:** sudden burst of insight such as visions, voices, or other paranormal experiences.
- **Experiential:** active exploration through trial and error of religious options.
- **Affectional:** interpersonal bonds such as the personal experience of being welcomed by members of religious groups.
- **Revivalistic:** crowd conformity to induce new behaviour and beliefs together with emotionally powerful music and preaching.
- **Coercive:** involves intense and coercive pressure on the person to participate.

Lofland, J., & Skonovd, N. (1981). Conversion motifs. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 20(4), 373-385.

## Rambo’s Integrative Model of Conversion

Rambo, L. R. (1993). *Understanding religious conversion*. New Haven: CT: Yale University Press.

Process	Factors
Stage 1: Context	Factors that facilitate or hinder conversion
Stage 2: Crisis	May be personal, social, or both
Stage 3: Quest	Intentional search on part of potential convert
Stage 4: Encounter	Recognition of other R/S option
Stage 5: Interaction	Extended engagement with new R/S option
Stage 6: Commitment	Identification with new R/S reality
Stage 7: Consequences	Transformation of beliefs, behaviours, or identity as result of new commitment

## “Hearing Voices”

Types of hearing voices:

- Auditory hallucination:
  - These torment the hearer; not coherent; not relevant to the context.
  - About 30% of hearers suffer this, and need psychiatric support.
  - Usually, they begin after a trauma (70% associated with sexual abuse)!
- Supportive & Inspiring Voices:
  - Internal promptings that improve the quality of life for the listener.

Loewenthal, K. M. (2007). *Religion, Culture and Mental Health*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## Religious Possessions

### Three types of possessions:

1. **Religious possession** that resembles trance: this always occurs in the context of a religious ritual (but when they come out of it, they function well);
2. Those that occur out of the context of ritual: having symptoms of psychopathology, could be multiple personality disorder (MPD) > "**Dissociative Identity Disorder**" (Freed & Freed, 1967, p.86). This is associated with past memory.
3. **Possession-like behaviour** that is a coping mechanism in a situation of intolerable social stress, usually familial, encountered by a socially subordinate individual. Common among young women in traditional societies.

## Religious Possessions as MPD

### David Spiegel & Etzel Cardena (1991) - criteria for diagnosis of MPD:

1. The existence within the person of two or more distinct personalities or personality states (each with its own relatively enduring pattern of perceiving, relating to, and thinking about the environment and self).
2. At least two of these personalities or personality states recurrently take control of the person's behaviour.
3. There is an inability to recall important personal information that is too extensive to be explained by ordinary forgetfulness or by an organic mental disorder (eg. blackout during alcohol intoxication).

## Not all Possessions pathological

### Spiegel and Cardena (1991) add:

- "it must be observed that many religious experiences labelled as possession ought not be considered pathological. They may have individual and social value, whereas other types of possession, particularly outside of a ritual context, are dysfunctional and may resemble to a greater or lesser degree what is known in Western psychiatric nosology as MPD, although with major differences in clinical profiles" (p.374).
- Anthropologists may find the cause of possessions predominantly in culture; whereas psychiatrists may find that MPD is "almost always caused by specific traumatic instances in the *past*, usually during childhood, and that those instances are more often than not instances of sexual abuse" (Spiegel & Cardena, 1991).

## Possession-Like Behaviour 1

- "Many cross-cultural studies have made it abundantly clear that demon-possession is usually a means by which an individual in a socially subordinate role can respond to and cope with circumstances that cannot be effectively dealt with otherwise - most of the time, those circumstances arise from intrafamily conflicts" (Davies, 1995, p.81)
- "We are concerned here with a widespread use of spirit-possession, by means of which women and other depressed categories exert mystical pressures on their superiors in circumstances of deprivation and frustration when few other sanctions are available to them" (Lewis, 1985, p.39).

## Possession-Like Behaviour 1

From a research in India, "In most of the cases, the victim is a young woman who suffers severe psychosocial problems.... Because of conflicts in interpersonal relationships, sexual matters, and her status in the family, the victim suffers from severe anxiety, which is relieved through demon-possession (primary gain). After being possessed, she receives attention, sympathy, and concern from others, as well as relief from responsibilities (secondary gain)" (Shekar, 1989, p.87).

Spiegel, D., & Cardena, E. (1991). Disintegrated Experience: The dissociative disorders revisited. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 100(3), 372.  
 Shekar, C. (1989). Possession Syndrome in India. In C.Ward, *Altered States of Consciousness and Mental Health*. Newbury Park: Sage.  
 Davies, S. L. (1995). *Jesus the healer: possession, trance, and the origins of Christianity*. New York: Continuum.  
 Lewis, I.M. (1985). *Religion in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## Glossolalia (Speaking in Tongues)

Watts, F., Nye, R. & Savage, S. (2002). *Psychology for Christian ministry*. London: Routledge.

- Early scientific studies likened speaking in tongues (ST) to "loose jargon of a maniac" (Le Baron cited in Watts, Nye, & Savage, 2003). Now no such views, but more open.
- **Are the sounds in ST stand for a language?** "Tongues does not have a syntactic structure of a real language; the sounds generated often bear striking resemblance to the typical phonemes of the speaker's own mother tongue; and the variety of phonemes is quite restricted. Characteristics such as echoing a key sound are common, for example, 'she mya, ne kiya, sonoriya e-kiya'" (Watts, Nye, & Savage, 2003, p.33).
- Often individuals tend to produce similar patterns of sounds when they ST.

## Glossolalia 2

- However, ST is just sounds either. They are speech-like in rhythm, tempo and intonation.
- There seems to be certain level of learning to ST; particularly letting go of self-control. "People become better and more fluent with practice" (Watts, Nye, & Savage, 2003, p.35). The context seems also important influence in rendering ST possible.
- Imitation type of ST (not spontaneous) is distinguishable from the real glossolalia.
- Speaking of language completely unknown to the speaker of ST is very rare.
- Several studies have shown there is no association between ST and any mental disorder or pathological regression.

Feature	Mystical State	Psychotic State
Hallucinations	Often visual, typically elderly, wise counsellors	Predominantly auditory; often accusatory
Vocabulary	Religiously imbued word choice, generally harmonious connotations: God, Christ, soul; peace, spirit	Frequent themes of illness and deviance
Personal role	Individual as self-negating vessel for higher power	Personal grandiosity and omnipotence
Affect	Ecstatic; joyful	Indifferent or terrified
Duration of state	Transient, usually hours, resolves completely	May persist for months or years and leave residual delusion, reduced social function
Withdrawal	Facultative: eventual return to share experience with others	Obligatory; progressive isolation
Disordered speech output	Glossolalia (speaking in tongues): output language is unknown and incomprehensible to speaker; fluency retained	Thought disorder: output may contain neologism and bizarre associations, but is predominantly in known language; thought blocking may occur
Cultural compatibility	Beliefs are recognized as valid by others in the patient's culture or subculture	Beliefs are rejected by others in the patient's culture or subculture

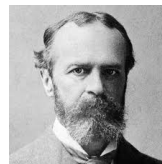
## What is religious experience?

- It includes a whole range of subjective experiences in which individuals report to perceive (see, hear, feel) something out of the ordinary that is related to transcendence.
- It is often in the context of religion, but sometimes out of it; generally mediated through nature, silence and meditation.
- 'Mystical experience' is related to the generic religious experience, but is often within a particular religious tradition.

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## James: Religious Experience as an altered consciousness



William James  
1842-1910

"Our normal waking consciousness (as we call it) is but one special kind of consciousness whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there are potential forms of consciousness entirely different." This consciousness could be triggered by religious experience.

James, W. (1960). *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Glasgow: Fountain Books.

## James: Characteristics of Religious Experience - 1

- 1. INSIGHT INTO REALITY:** The religious experience gives a direct insight into the depths of reality, which cannot be gained by pure intellection. The knowledge gained through this is real and significant.
- 2. UNITY:** In this experience of knowing there is no subject-object dichotomy, but an integral undivided consciousness. As a result, the privacy of the individual self is broken into, and invaded by an universal self, which the individual feels as his own.
- 3. TRANSCENDENCE OF TIME & SPACE:** The subject passes into an realm of eternity. One experiences positive feelings like joy, peace, love, etc. One does not view death fearfully.

## James: Characteristics of Religious Experience - 2

- 4. SENSE OF SACRED:** The presence of sacredness in reality is recognised - what some religions call, "God". Whatever the subject experiences, they are experienced as "numinous" - clothed in glory, charged with intensity of being.
- 5. TRANSIENCY:** Just as the mystical experience is always "given", it cannot be prolonged by effort. It just passes into an afterglow and remains as a memory, though it may recur.
- 6. INEFFABILITY:** The content of the experience defies all lingual expression. No adequate report of its contents can be given in words. One has to have the experience of the same, to adequately comprehend it. Like, one should have been in love to understand a lover's state of mind.

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**James: Outcome of Religious Experience – ‘Saintliness’, a set of inner conditions**

1. A feeling of being in a **wider life** than that of this world's selfish little interests; and a conviction, not merely intellectual, but as it were sensible, of the existence of an Ideal Power – God or abstract moral ideas, civic or patriotic utopias, or inner versions of holiness or right – something larger than our life.
2. A sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing **self-surrender** to its control.
3. An immense **elation and freedom**, as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down.
4. A shifting of the emotional center from the self to a loving and harmonious affection towards everything around (**compassion**).

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**Practical Consequences of Saintliness 1**

1. **Asceticism.** The self-surrender may become so passionate as to turn into **self-immolation**. It may then so overrule the ordinary inhibitions of the flesh that the saint finds positive pleasure in sacrifice and asceticism, measuring and expressing as they do the degree of his loyalty to the higher power.
2. **Strength of Soul.** 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. Come heaven, come hell, it makes no difference now!

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**Practical Consequences of Saintliness 2**

3. **Purity.** The shifting of the emotional center brings with it, first, increase of purity. The sensitiveness to spiritual discords is enhanced, and the cleansing of existence from brutal and sensual elements becomes imperative. Occasions of contact with such elements are avoided: the saintly life must deepen its spiritual consistency and keep unspotted from the world.
4. **Charity.** The shifting of the emotional center brings, secondly, increase of charity, tenderness for fellow creatures. The ordinary motives to antipathy, which usually set such close bounds to tenderness among human beings, are inhibited. The saint loves his enemies, and treats loathsome beggars as his **brothers**.

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**Cases for Discussion**

1. **The Case of Sijali (F, 17):** There is a weekend retreat in a boarding school after the end of term exams. Following week they will be going home. During the Catholic service of Eucharistic Adoration, Sijali bursts out shouting: often senseless noise and sporadic phrases: *siendi, siendi, siendi* (! am not going)! You are asked to counsel Sijali soon after the service. She is still in a daze!

**Cases for Discussion**

2. **Read Aneel's Story**  
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