

**Redeeming authenticity:  
an empirical study on  
the conversion to Christianity  
of previously unchurched Australians**

by

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## Abstract

Christian church attendance and religious affiliation in Western countries is declining. Decreasing proportions of people are raised in the Church. However, Christians are called to bear witness to the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ. The purpose of this research was to investigate why some previously 'unchurched' people become Christians: thus, encouraging and enabling more effective engagement by Christians in conversion. Combining social scientific practice with theological reflection revealed a substantive theory of religious conversion contextually located in late modernity/postmodernity.

The research began with the lived experiences of previously unchurched Australians, who recently converted to Christianity. It used critical realist grounded theory to answer research questions about the conversion process; the roles of other Christians and God in conversion; and the deep processes occurring within these converts. Twenty-seven South Australian churches with high proportions of new converts were invited by NCLS Research to advertise the research to new converts. This and additional purposive sampling yielded ten previously unchurched participants, who had become Christians in the past two years. Semi structured interviews generated rich data, which was analysed using iterative and in-depth grounded theory methods.

The research found that following initial exposure to Christianity, participants experienced a catalyst that encouraged them to further explore Christianity. They began to engage in various spiritual practices, usually following a specific invitation. Having made a series of decisions to continue to explore and engage, they reached a point where they called themselves 'Christian'. Converts generally had a positive perception of other Christians, and understood them to have been helped by their faith; to live differently because of their faith; to share openly with others; to be deeply hospitable; and to allow room for complexity, doubts and questions in their faith. God was understood to be loving, powerful, patient, accepting and forgiving. In addition, God was seen to work through others; curate unique conversion experiences; be present; speak; help; grow the participants; and to have acted in the past in creating, sacrificing, redeeming, and Jesus dying. Converts experienced *affects* as they journeyed towards Christian faith. a yearning or wanting more; a desire to live better or become who they are; a sense that faith relates to everyday life; a sense of welcome, warmth, belonging and homecoming; a sense of knowing; and, because of their fledgling faith, they saw things differently.

For those I interviewed, conversion can be understood as resulting from their desiring, observing and experiencing relational authenticity. Religious conversion is fuelled by a desire for authenticity. God enables authenticity to develop and flourish. Religious conversion is resourced by Christians who embrace and exhibit authenticity in their personal, social and spiritual lives. This genuine authenticity is relational in nature: focusing not (only) on the self but also on relationship with God and significant connection with, and responsibility toward, others. This understanding rightly



challenges the notion of authenticity as a narcissistic actualisation that prioritises the self over external relationships and responsibilities. When relational authenticity is sought, and realised, healthy transformation results. This transformation sees new converts 'becoming' the people they were created to be: unique persons who see their worth and their responsibilities in the light of their relationships with God and with others.

## **Declaration**

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed: Lynne M Taylor      Date: 9 June 2017

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# Part A: Background



# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This chapter serves as an introduction to my thesis. It begins 'at the end' by briefly outlining the substantive theory that has been revealed by my research. It then situates my study in two key contexts: first within the academic discipline of practical theology; and secondly in the societal context of today's 'secular' age. Next, the chapter introduces my initial conceptual framework before noting the significance of this research. I conclude this chapter by outlining the content of each chapter of the thesis. But first, a 'spoiler'.<sup>1</sup>

## **Spoiler alert: beginning at the end**

This thesis argues that the experience of conversion to Christianity in Australia today can be understood as resulting from a deep-felt desire for what I call 'relational authenticity'. This relational authenticity was both observed and experienced by those I interviewed, particularly through their interactions with Christians. The relational authenticity they desired and experienced was enabled by God.

In order to argue and understand this, we need to go on a journey to hear about the research process that led to this discovery. Therefore, where possible this thesis reports my research journey chronologically. It describes the conceptual framework with which I began the research process; the data gathering; the rigorous analysis undertaken; the results as they emerged; and the resultant theory. But the reader, unlike the researcher as the journey unfolded, has already heard the 'spoiler alert'. You can read this thesis aware of my conclusion that "It is all about authenticity."<sup>2</sup>

Some readers may already be twitchy: uncomfortable about the appropriation of a term that can so easily be equated with narcissism and the very worst of individualism.<sup>3</sup> Hence the need for a double meaning in my thesis title, *Redeeming authenticity*. Yes, I argue that genuine, relational, authenticity can be redeeming. As people desire and experience relational authenticity, they can be drawn into a relationship with God. This was the experience of those I interviewed. But I also argue that authenticity itself needs 'redeeming'.

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<sup>1</sup> The Urban Dictionary defines a 'spoiler' or 'spoiler alert' as "a term to describe when crucial elements of a movie are about to be revealed." INDIExCORE, "Spoiler Alert," Urban Dictionary, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=spoiler%20alert>. Accessed 7 December 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Research memo, 10 June 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Philosopher, Charles Taylor, argues convincingly that genuine authenticity is not narcissistic. For example, Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 35; 40.

Authenticity needs to be understood and reframed theologically.<sup>4</sup> The experiences of those I interviewed, as well as reason, scripture and tradition, can help us work towards redeeming authenticity.<sup>5</sup>

## The research question/s

The purpose of this research was to explore the question: *Why are unchurched people in Australia becoming Christians today?*<sup>6</sup> As I began my research, however, I had a slightly different question, asking: *In what ways do new Christians describe their experiences of turning to God?* I was interested to learn what internal, external and spiritual factors were at work in people's experiences of becoming Christians. I wondered if there were any patterns or processes common to people as they converted to Christianity.<sup>7</sup> These questions provided initial impetus and guidance for this research.

Later, my research questions were clarified and simplified to one key question and three sub-questions. My main question and three research questions became:

Why are unchurched people in Australia becoming Christians today?

- What is the process by which non-Christians journey towards a relationship with God?
- What is the role of other Christians in the journey to Christian faith?
- How is God at work in this process of faith-finding?

## Briefly defining conversion

When choosing my research participants, I defined conversion pragmatically, seeking participants who had "begun considering [themselves] a Christian in the past two years."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This echoes theologian, Brian Braman's, call for "a more adequate understanding of the real meaning [of] authentic human existence, one that takes seriously the intellectual, moral, and religious aspirations of the person." Brian J Braman, *Meaning and Authenticity: Bernard Lonergan and Charles Taylor on the Drama of Authentic Human Existence*, Lonergan Studies (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 6.

<sup>5</sup> I also prefix authenticity with the term 'relational'. I discuss the rationale for, and benefits of, this addition in Chapter 11.

<sup>6</sup> By 'unchurched' I mean people who have had no, or very limited, previous involvement in the Christian church.

<sup>7</sup> I also identified several 'wonderings' related to these questions. What draws people towards God? What appeals in terms of the character of God? What appeals in terms of Christianity? What pushes people away from their current reality? Were there things from their past that new converts were keen to leave behind? What part do other Christians play in people's turning to God? Is there any 'prerequisite' knowledge and are there 'prerequisite' experiences to conversion? Are there particular stages of life when people tend to be more open to God?

<sup>8</sup> Facebook advertisement [www.facebook.com/conversionresearch/](http://www.facebook.com/conversionresearch/) Accessed 31 March 2014. See Appendix 1.



More generally, I see conversion as a human response to God's initiative that involves a reorientation of one's life towards God.<sup>9</sup>

## **Situating the study in its context/s**

This research sought to discover how God was at work, drawing people to God, so that, as Christians, we could work to enhance those processes. My research questions and this desire situated my study in two key ways. First, as my purpose in asking these questions was missiological, I chose to consider the questions from the perspective of practical theology. I trusted that practical theology provided the best means by which to explore God's agency as well as the personal and social processes surrounding conversion. Secondly, because I was interested in the faith journeys of *unchurched* people, I needed to be aware of the context beyond the walls of the church. Thus, I looked to secularisation theory to illuminate the current sociocultural context. I explore these two contexts next.

## **A work of practical theology**

This project is a work in practical theology, underpinned by the concept of *missio Dei*. As such, it begins from the assumption that God is active in the world today. Further, the research is attentive to the processes and aims of practical theology. Thus, the research explores our contemporary reality with a view to becoming involved in what God is already doing in the world God loves.

## ***Within a framework of missio Dei***

The concept of *missio Dei* provides a missiological framework for this project. The Bible tells the story of God creating humans to live in covenantal partnership with God.<sup>10</sup> The Old and New Testaments describe God as providing frequent opportunities for this covenant potential – neglected, forgotten and broken by humans – to be restored.<sup>11</sup> Such an understanding of God and God's activity in the world is foundational to the concept of *missio Dei*. God is at work in the world, bringing about God's kingdom on earth.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Gordon T Smith, *Transforming Conversion: Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010). 3; Colin Brown, "Conversion," in *The New International Dictionary of the New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 353.

<sup>10</sup> Stanley J Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville, KY and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 202.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Green, *The Meaning of Salvation* (Vancouver: Regent College, 1998), 12; Christopher JH Wright, *Salvation Belongs to Our God: Celebrating the Bible's Central Story*, Christian Doctrine in Global Perspective (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 87; Christopher JH Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 48.

<sup>12</sup> Johannes Verkuyl, "The Kingdom of God as the Goal of the *Missio Dei*," *International Review of Mission* 68, no. 270 (1979): 168.

A missiology that embraces the concept of *missio Dei* begins “with the basic assumption that the triune God is the Lord of [the] world and at work within it, and that the Church’s task is to point to [God’s] acts, to respond to [God’s] demands, and to call [hu]mankind to this faith and obedience.”<sup>13</sup> This understanding of *missio Dei* moves away from an understanding of mission as “about us” and what “we do” and towards an understanding of mission as God’s agenda and God’s heart.<sup>14</sup> Many missiologists have come to emphasise “God’s initiative in mission and the spontaneous, joyful participation in it of grassroots Christians.”<sup>15</sup> This understanding rightly places “mission at the heart of God, the Trinity” and understands the Church to be “missionary by its very nature.”<sup>16</sup> *Missio Dei* sees the task of Christians as discovering what the Holy Spirit is doing in the world and getting involved.<sup>17</sup> The Church and Christians are agents in the workings of God.<sup>18</sup>

Underpinning this project, therefore, are two foundational assumptions. First, God is at work in the world, seeking reconciliation with, and between, people and the world. Secondly, one of the many ways we can begin to understand how God is at work today is by exploring the experiences of people who have recently converted to Christianity.

### ***Using the resources of practical theology***

My research question, “Why are unchurched people in Australia becoming Christians today?” could be considered from various perspectives. One might pursue Biblical studies considering how conversion occurred in the New Testament. Another may undertake sociological research on social causes or consequences of conversion. Someone else could

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<sup>13</sup> World Council of Churches, *Christians in the Technical and Social Revolutions of Our Time: World Conference on Church and Society Official Report* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1967), 179. This is discussed (as formative for Lesslie Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology) in Michael W Goheen, “As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You’: Lesslie Newbigin’s Missionary Ecclesiology,” *International Review of Mission* 91, no. 362 (2002): 357.

<sup>14</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 21.

<sup>15</sup> This was the emphasis of the Edinburgh 2010 Centenary of the World Missionary Conference and represented “a broad consensus in Western mission thinking at the present time.” Kirsteen Kim, *Joining in with the Spirit: Connecting World Church and Local Mission* (London: Epworth Press, 2010), 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

<sup>17</sup> Phrases like this are often used to describe the task of mission. This particular phrase is often attributed to former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. See, for example, *ibid.*, 21. However, its origins appear to be part of an organic change that happened during the second half of last century. Theologian, James Dunn, noted in 1981, “Over the past decade I have often heard the church’s mission defined in terms of ‘recognizing where God’s Spirit is at work in the world and cooperating with him in that work’.” (From his 1981 essay, reprinted as James DG Dunn, “Rediscovering the Spirit (2),” in *The Christ and the Spirit: Volume 2 Pneumatology* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1998), 72.) (Rt Rev Rowan Williams himself describes this phrase as “one of the mantras” of the ‘Fresh Expressions’ movement in the UK and acknowledges he has “no idea where it started.” Steve Taylor, Email, “Rowan Williams Transcript”, 15 March 2013.)

<sup>18</sup> The distinction between the Church universal and the local church will be made by referring to the former with a capital “C”.

do the same through a psychological lens. One may engage in theological reflection on the character of God. Another might study conversion through the ages. Each of these approaches has the potential to help us to better understand why people today are becoming Christians.

At the same time, each of these approaches tends to highlight one aspect of conversion at the expense of the others. In reality, the lived experience of conversion to Christianity involves social processes; psychological processes; and the agency of God. Atonement theories<sup>19</sup>; process models of conversion<sup>20</sup>; conversion careers<sup>21</sup>; conversion motifs<sup>22</sup> and the like, offer potentially helpful, but partial, models and explanations for a complex phenomenon. Because of this very complexity, key figures like psychologist, Lewis Rambo, frequently call for an interdisciplinary approach to be taken to research on the topic of conversion.<sup>23</sup>

The discipline of practical theology provides a means of theological reflection that is accustomed to drawing on the wisdom inherent in a range of academic disciplines. Although it has only relatively recently been recognised as a separate discipline, people have been 'doing' practical theology since New Testament times.<sup>24</sup> The ways practical theology has been understood and undertaken has changed over time and it continues to be a diverse

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<sup>19</sup> For example, Richard V Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B Eerdmans, 1999); John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Scottsdale, PA and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1986); Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); Alan Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015); Linda D Peacore, *The Role of Women's Experience in Feminist Theologies of Atonement*, Princeton Theological Monograph (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010); James K Beilby and Paul R Eddy, eds., *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> For example, Lewis R Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> For example, Henri Gooren, "Towards a New Model of Conversion Careers: The Impact of Personality and Contingency Factors," *Exchange* 34, no. 2 (2005).

<sup>22</sup> For example, John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1981).

<sup>23</sup> For example, Lewis R Rambo and Matthew S Haar Farris, "Psychology of Religion: Toward a Multidisciplinary Paradigm," *Pastoral Psychology* 61, no. 5-6 (2012). Also, for a discussion of the importance of interdisciplinary work on the psychology of religion, see Raymond F Paloutzian and Crystal L Park, "Integrative Themes in the Current Science of the Psychology of Religion," in *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (New York: Guildford Press, 2005). It is interesting to note, however, that Paloutzian and Park do not name theology or religious studies among their dialogue partners. *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> The term 'practical theology' emerged in late eighteenth century Germany, where it was generally used to apply theological principles to matters such as worship, preaching, church governance and Christian education. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison, "An Introduction to Pastoral and Practical Theology," in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 2.

discipline which embraces a wide range of research forms.<sup>25</sup> Today, practical theology particularly emphasises theological reflection, both in considering how Christian faith is outworked in the world, and in viewing the world in which we live through a theological lens.<sup>26</sup>

In considering the current context, practical theology pays particular – overt – attention to human experience.<sup>27</sup> This is both because the gospel is something to be lived and because God is at work in people's lives today.<sup>28</sup> As such, practical theology, like *missio Dei*, invites us to consider how God is at work in the world, and how Christians can be engaged in bringing God's best to the world.<sup>29</sup>

John Swinton and Harriet Mowat offer the following definition of practical theology:

Practical Theology is critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world.<sup>30</sup>

There are four key points within this definition, although I would like to push further on one of them. First, practical theology is *critical*: it does not simply apply theological understandings to situations: rather, it evaluates such theological understandings in the light of lived experiences. Secondly, practical theology is *theological* at its core. It uses each of the formative factors (or sources) of theology as a framework for understanding and interpreting. Thirdly, practical theology concerns itself with both the Church and the world. Fourthly, the primary task of such theology is "to enable faithful living and authentic Christian practice."<sup>31</sup>

This definition is helpful, although Swinton and Mowat's third aspect requires a more overtly transcendent emphasis. Yes, practical theology is concerned with the practices of the world

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<sup>25</sup> John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006), 3.

<sup>26</sup> Elaine L Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, vol. 1 (London: SCM, 2005), 2-3.

<sup>27</sup> As McFague reminds us, practical theology is not alone in this. "All statements about God rest on the shaky sands of human experience." Sallie McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World: Some Reflections on the Doctrine of God," *The Ecumenical Review* 65, no. 1 (2013): 28. Rosemary Ruether suggests Scripture and tradition, the so-called "objective sources of theology ... are themselves codified collective human experience." Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 12.

<sup>28</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology, Qualitative Research*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Stanley Hauerwas likens Christian faith to a dramatic performance of a classic play; interpreted by actors aware of the original meaning of an ancient text, making sense of that text in the light of their current context. Stanley Hauerwas, "Bonhoeffer: The Truthful Witness," Homiletics Online, <http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/interviews/hauerwas.asp>. Accessed 30 July 2014. Practical theology seeks to resource the Christian community in their performance of God's metanarrative. Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology, Qualitative Research*, 4-5.

<sup>30</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology, Qualitative Research*, 6.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

and the Church, but it is also concerned with the activity of *God* in the world and should therefore, be undertaken in ways that allow God's activity to be acknowledged and investigated.<sup>32</sup> Andrew Root notes this inherent weakness in much practical theology when reflecting on his own empirical research. He argues that "while the empirical turn has helped practical theology better attend to the lived and concrete experience of human beings, it has also made the theological more difficult [due to the way that] empirical methods obscure transcendence in favor of immanence."<sup>33</sup>

I propose adapting Swinton and Mowat's definition of practical theology as follows. (This definition takes transcendence and the activity of God in the world more fully into account.)

Practical Theology seeks to discern and participate in the *missio Dei* by engaging in critical, theological reflection on the experiences and practices of the world, and the experiences and practices of the Church. Practical theology's goal is resourcing and encouraging faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world.

A key aim of my research is to discern the activity of God, the *missio Dei*, in the world today. I start by investigating the experiences of individuals as they find faith in God, drawing on Scripture, Tradition and Reason to understand these Experiences.<sup>34</sup> Within Reason, wisdom and understanding from psychology, sociology and other disciplines are utilised alongside theological insights.<sup>35</sup> The aims of my project are to resource and encourage faithful participation in the activity of God in the world today. All of this is consistent with the aims of practical theology.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Swinton and Mowat affirm this, acknowledging that practical theology is a response to the work of God in the world and the related human experience. See *ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Root, "Regulating the Empirical in Practical Theology," *Journal of Youth and Theology* 15, no. 1 (2016): 44. Root argues that using the research paradigm of critical realism can help avoid such reduction. I discuss my own use of critical realism in Chapter 2.

<sup>34</sup> Christian theology is traditionally understood to draw upon a variety of sources. These can be broadly categorised as Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience (Alister E McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 120.)

<sup>35</sup> This is not to suggest that such disciplines become a subset of theology, rather that the social sciences offer key insights in understanding and interpreting the reality of lived experience today. Theologians, James Woodward and Stephen Pattison, see practical theology as a meeting place between religious belief, tradition and practice; and contemporary experiences, questions and actions: a place where an enriching, critical and transforming dialogue occurs. Woodward and Pattison, "An Introduction to Pastoral and Practical Theology," 7.

<sup>36</sup> An alternative framing is offered by practical theologian, Richard Osmer. He notes four tasks of practical theology: the descriptive-empirical task; the interpretive task; the normative task; and the pragmatic task. The first gathers information to help "discern patterns and dynamics." The second uses resources from other disciplines to help explain those patterns and dynamics. The third uses overtly theological resources to interpret and to guide responses. The final task involves "determining strategies of action" to bring positive change; and remaining reflexive. Richard Robert Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B Eerdmans, 2008), 4. This thesis attends to all four tasks.

## **A changed and changing context**

Practical theology “is always attentive to the *context* of human culture and human experience.”<sup>37</sup> Just as Jesus called his disciples to understand the signs of the times, so we too are called.<sup>38</sup> To understand why people are becoming Christians in Australia today, we need to be attentive to the context that is Australia today. We begin with some statistics about religious affiliation and practice.

### ***Christian countries?***

Australia has a conflicted religious history. Its first peoples were and are deeply spiritual, though this was unacknowledged by generations of settlers. When the British penal colony of Australia was established in 1788, its recognised religion was Anglicanism. However, a third of convicts were Roman Catholic, although they were not allowed to worship until 1820. Further, “the majority Anglican convict population also scorned institutional religion.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, after settlement, the spiritual and religious climate of Australia was characterised by conflict and disinterest.<sup>40</sup>

Despite this, Australia came to be seen as a “Christian country.”<sup>41</sup> In 1966, 88% of the Australian population stated an affiliation with a Christian religion; with just 0.8% stating they had no religious affiliation. By 1981 the figures were 76.4% and 10.8%, respectively.<sup>42</sup> Today, the proportion of the population stating in the national census that they are affiliated with a Christian religion is decreasing. While in 2001, 68.0% of population were affiliated with Christianity; this dropped through 63.9%, in 2006, to 61.1%, in 2011. At the same time, the proportion of people reporting they have “no religion” increased from 16%, in 2001, through 19%, in 2006, to 22%, in 2011.<sup>43</sup>

Of course, Australia is not alone in this declining religiosity. Across the Tasman, in Aotearoa New Zealand, the proportion of people reporting no religion also continues to increase: but beginning from an even higher value. In 2013, 42% of those who responded to the Census question on religious affiliation stated said they were of no religion. This has increased from 20%, in 1991, through 30%, in 2001, and 35%, in 2006. New Zealand also has low levels of

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<sup>37</sup> Terry A Veling, *Practical Theology: On Earth as It Is in Heaven* (London: Orbis, 2005), 8-9. Original emphasis.

<sup>38</sup> Luke 12:54-56.

<sup>39</sup> Carole M Cusack, "Religion in Australian Society: A Place for Everything and Everything in Its Place," *Modern Greek Studies (Australia and New Zealand)* 13 (2012): 29.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Bruce Wilson, *Can God Survive in Australia?* (Sutherland, NSW: Albatross, 1983), 11.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>43</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Losing My Religion?" *Australian Social Trends, Nov 2013*. (2013) 4102.0.

affiliation with Christianity: from 68%, in 1991; dropping to 54%, in 2001; 49%, in 2006 and 42%, in 2013.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, in Britain, in 2011, 59% stated a Christian religious affiliation: a percentage that has fallen dramatically from 72%, in 2001. At the same time, the percentage of “non-religious” grew from 15% to 25%.<sup>45</sup> Even the USA is now not immune from this decline in religiosity. While in 2007, 78% of the population identified as Christian, by 2014 that had dropped to 71%. Conversely, the religiously unaffiliated in the USA grew from 16% to 23% over the same period.<sup>46</sup>

These figures are all indicative of a decline in religiosity. Longitudinal data from the World Values Survey (WVS) provide some additional insight, with results from selected questions shown in Table 1.1.<sup>47</sup> Like the data on religious affiliation, the WVS data suggest declining religious belief and practice.<sup>48</sup> Decreasing percentages of respondents in Australia report regularly attending worship services: down from 25% in 1995 to 17% in 2012. Belief in God is also declining, down from 79% to 64%. Close to half the Australians surveyed reported that they never, or practically never, pray. Or, conversely, nearly half of Australians pray, at least sometimes. Most Australians (91%) consider that “the church is beneficial for their community.”<sup>49</sup>

Research undertaken in 1991, in the UK, reported that of recent converts interviewed, 76% “had a reasonably prolonged contact with a church during childhood.”<sup>50</sup> Around two thirds of Protestant attenders in Australia reported that “one or both of their parents were also church attenders.”<sup>51</sup> Further research suggests that, in Britain, “only about half of parental religiosity is successfully transmitted, while the absence of religion is almost always passed on.”<sup>52</sup> In

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<sup>44</sup> Department of Statistics, “Religious Affiliation,” *2013 Census QuickStats about Culture and Identity*. (2014). The Census scheduled for 2011 was delayed until 2013 due to the Christchurch earthquake in February 2011. The 1991 data is from earlier Statistics New Zealand records held by the author.

<sup>45</sup> Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 43.

<sup>46</sup> Kara Powell, Jake Mulder and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 15.

<sup>47</sup> “World Values Survey 1981-2014 Longitudinal Aggregate,” ed. World Values Survey Association (Madrid: JDSYSTEMS, 2015). Based on Morgan Gallup Polls, Wilson places church attendance at 33% in 1955. Wilson, *Can God Survive?*, 17.

<sup>48</sup> I have included data from New Zealand and the USA as it offers interesting comparisons with the Australian results.

<sup>49</sup> “Social Shifts, Spiritual Trends: Christianity in Australia Today.” McCrindle (2012): 8. Of those surveyed who do not regularly attend church, 88% consider church beneficial to the community; and 43% stated churches were personally beneficial for them.

<sup>50</sup> John Finney, *Finding Faith Today: How Does It Happen?* (Swindon, UK: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1992), 12.

<sup>51</sup> John Bellamy, Sharon Mou and Keith Castle, “Social Influences Upon Faith Development,” *NCLS Occasional Paper 5*. NCLS Research (2004): 10.

<sup>52</sup> David Voas and Alasdair Crockett, “Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging,” *Sociology* 39, no. 1 (2005): 11. This is based on research on young people aged 16-29 years. Voas and

Australia, “around 40% of adult children of attenders are themselves churchgoers for all ages up to 60.”<sup>53</sup> In addition, civil marriage ceremonies now significantly outnumber religious ceremonies in Australia.<sup>54</sup> Interdenominational data is difficult to access, but while in 1954, 206 of the 1000 babies born were baptised into the Anglican Church; in 2004, this had declined to 54.<sup>55</sup>

Table 1.1: Selected religiosity measures

		1994-1998	2005-2009	2010-2014
Attend religious services at least monthly	Australia <sup>56</sup>	25%	20%	17%
	New Zealand	21%	19%	19%
	USA	45%	46%	43%
Attend religious services never or practically never	Australia	44%	49%	52%
	New Zealand	44%	48%	48%
	USA	17%	24%	30%
Pray at least once a day	Australia			17%
	New Zealand			22%
	USA			45%
Pray never or practically never	Australia			45%
	New Zealand			39%
	USA			17%
Believe in God	Australia	79%		64%
	New Zealand	64%		57%
	USA	96%		93%
Believe in hell	Australia	34%	38%	33%
	New Zealand	26%		28%
	USA	70%	71%	70%

One could look pragmatically at the religiosity measures presented above and conclude that Christianity, or at least the Church, is in terminal decline. Increasing numbers of people have no affiliation with Christianity. Transmission rates of parental religiosity are low. These

Crockett reported that where both parents attend church, “there is a 46 percent chance that the child will do so. Where just one parent attends, the likelihood is halved to 23 percent.” *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>53</sup> David Voas and Ingrid Storm, “The Intergenerational Transmission of Churchgoing in England and Australia,” *Review of Religious Research* 53, no. 4 (2012): 386. Sociologist, Callum Brown, points out that quantifications such as those reported in this section are “not neutral and social-scientific measures of religiosity, but ... products of discourse.” Callum G Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009), 14. Such aspects of religiosity are measured primarily because they are quantifiable, not because they give the most informative data.

<sup>54</sup> In 2007, 63% of marriages were conducted without a religious ceremony. David Lockhart Hilliard, “Australia: Towards Secularisation and One Step Back,” ed. Callum G Brown and Michael Snape, *Secularisation in the Christian World* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2010), 9.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> The Australian data reported here was gathered in 1995, 2005 and 2012.



quantifiable measures tell us something about religiosity in these countries. They help us identify the reality of our current context. Some look at figures such as these and declare our world is secularising. Others continue to refute secularisation. Still others take a more nuanced approach to understanding the complex processes surrounding religiosity and secularisation. It is to the contested idea of 'secularisation' that I turn next.

### ***Secularisation theory***

"Secularisation is happening, yet secularisation theory is wrong."<sup>57</sup> So spoke sociologist, Callum Brown, about the British context. Similarly, sociologist, Christian Smith, called 'time' on the search for uniform and standardised generalisations that reduce complex social processes to simplified causalities. Specifically, Smith pleads, "We should stop thinking in zero-sum terms that either the secularization theory or the religious economies theory is true."<sup>58</sup> What do Brown and Smith mean, and why is it important?

Many 20th century social theorists, sociologists and even some theologians saw as inevitable the secularisation of humankind in the light of the emergence of a modern, rational enlightened world. Various dates were predicted, by which time humans would have "outgrown" their "belief in the supernatural."<sup>59</sup> According to sociologist, Rodney Stark, Thomas Woolston was the first to set a predictive date when, in 1710, he forecast Christianity would have ended by 1900. Frederick the Great and Voltaire both revised this estimate to earlier dates. Although 1900 passed others, including Auguste Comte, Frederick Engels and A. E. Crawley, still considered religion would be superseded by the science offered by sociology or socialism.<sup>60</sup> No dates were set by these men, nor by Max Weber, or Sigmund Freud, who also considered religion would "soon" be obsolete.<sup>61</sup> In 1966, Anthony Wallace declared that religion was in the process of becoming extinct, although he acknowledged this could be a long-term process. Similarly, Bryan Wilson described secularisation as a long-term process. In 1968, Peter Berger announced that by the 21st century, secular culture would have taken over, and any religious believers were likely to be "only found in small sects."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, x.

<sup>58</sup> Christian Smith, "Future Directions in the Sociology of Religion," *Social Forces* 86, no. 4 (2008): 1579. See also, Christian Smith, *What Is a Person?: Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 299-304.

<sup>59</sup> Rodney Stark, "Secularization, RIP," *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 249.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 249-250.

<sup>62</sup> "A Bleak Outlook Is Seen for Religion," *New York Times*, 25 February 1968. Peter Berger later recanted this position. Peter L Berger, 29 October, 1997, interview 30; Stark, "Secularization, RIP," 250.

Yet, despite these dire predictions, religion and spirituality have not disappeared from mainstream public life.<sup>63</sup> As reported above, while religious belief and practice are declining in Western countries, they have not vanished. Further, at the same time as this decline across some measures of religiosity, there has been a “major upsurge of interest in spirituality within the Western world.”<sup>64</sup> Personal spirituality is increasingly being understood as an intrinsic part of who we are as human beings and, as such, crucial to life and wellbeing.<sup>65</sup>

Does this mean secularisation is not occurring after all? Divergent opinions exist. Steve Bruce, a key proponent of secularisation theory, uses Bryan Wilson’s definition, posited in 1982, which sees “secularization as the decline in the social significance of religion.”<sup>66</sup> Bruce understands “the social power of religion, the number of people who take it seriously, and how seriously anyone takes it” to be three interrelated phenomena.<sup>67</sup> At the other end of the secularisation spectrum, Rodney Stark never accepted what he calls “secularization prophecies.”<sup>68</sup> He operates from an economic model, which critics point out “rests on a rather simple, unidimensional model of secularization as a decline in individual belief and practice or ... in aggregate levels of religious demand [due to a decline in individual belief].”<sup>69</sup> Pointing to the still high levels of religious belief and practice in (then) late 20th century USA, Stark and his colleagues argued that secularisation is not occurring.<sup>70</sup>

Others, like Christian Smith and Callum Brown, rightly suggest we need to look deeper. They propose it is time to stop trying to reduce the hugely complex social, spiritual and psychological phenomenon of spirituality and religiosity to a dichotomised either/or: *either* we are secularising *or* we are not. Instead, Christian Smith concurs with philosopher, Charles Taylor, in arguing we need to understand our context as imbued with “multiple modernities.”<sup>71</sup> ‘Modernity’ and the forces that lie behind it “can actually be received,

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<sup>63</sup> Donald Earl Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>64</sup> John Swinton, *Spirituality and Mental Health Care: Rediscovering a 'Forgotten' Dimension* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2001), 11.

<sup>65</sup> This is particularly recognised within the field of health care, for example, in nursing where spirituality is seen to be “a fundamental part of providing holistic nursing care” Jane Dyson, Mark Cobb and Dawn Forman, “The Meaning of Spirituality: A Literature Review,” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 26, no. 6 (1997): 1183.

<sup>66</sup> Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Stark, “Secularization, RIP,” 251.

<sup>69</sup> Philip S Gorski and Ates Altinordu, “After Secularization?” *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (2008): 57.

<sup>70</sup> Stark, “Secularization, RIP.” See also, Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Faith: Why the World Is More Religious Than Ever* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2015).

<sup>71</sup> Smith, “Future Directions,” 1563.

developed and expressed in significantly different ways in different parts of the world and ... by different communities living in single societies.”<sup>72</sup>

This helps makes sense of our current reality. While modernisation certainly had “some secularizing effects ... it has also provoked powerful movements of counter-secularization.”<sup>73</sup> The collapse of Communism, the spread of Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism, the Islamic upsurge, and the rise of interest in spirituality, all contest any predicted secularisation.<sup>74</sup> Even in the supposedly most secular enclave of Western Europe, German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, announced in October 2001 that the world had entered a “postsecular” age, where “religious and secular worldviews could coexist and even enter into dialogue with one another.”<sup>75</sup> In looking to the Australian context, sociologist, Gary Bouma, points out that “secular societies are not irreligious, antireligious or lacking in spirituality.”<sup>76</sup> In fact, he argues, “spirituality is not on the decline, ... religion is growing in strength.”<sup>77</sup> What has changed is that religion and spirituality are no longer the sole domain of the Church.<sup>78</sup>

How can we understand this? Charles Taylor helpfully distinguishes between three different conceptions of ‘secularity’. ‘Secularity 1’ is concerned with the “retreat of religion in public life.”<sup>79</sup> The public spaces of modern Western society have become essentially free from any formal connection with religion. There are clear distinctions or differentiations between the religious; and the political, economic and social aspects of society.<sup>80</sup> ‘Secular 1’ relates to

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 1571.

<sup>73</sup> Peter L Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview," in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter Berger (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999), 3.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 7-8. David Martin, "The Evangelical Upsurge and Its Political Implications," in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter Berger (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999), 37. “Between 1991 and 2008, the share of Russian adults identifying as Orthodox Christian rose from 31% to 72% ... [and] the share of Russia’s population that does not identify with any religion dropped from 61% to 18%.” Pew Research Centre, "Russians Return to Religion, but Not to Church," *202.419.4562*. (2014): 1. Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead suggest that “those forms of spirituality in the West that help people to live in accordance with the deepest, sacred dimension of their own unique lives” are growing (Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Religion in the Modern World (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 7.) Also, see their conclusions (ibid., 148-150.) See also, Gary D Bouma, *Australian Soul* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 61-62.

<sup>75</sup> Gorski and Altinordu, "After Secularization?" 56.

<sup>76</sup> Bouma, *Australian Soul*, 5.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 6. Interdisciplinary scholar, David Tacey, argues that our secular society has “given birth to a sense of the sacred and yet our sacred traditions are failing to recognise the spiritual potential.” David John Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality*, (Hove & New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2004). 19. He goes as far as to argue that “secularism is a mask or pose which hides our longing for the sacred.” Ibid., 118.

<sup>79</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 423.

<sup>80</sup> This relates to Bruce’s ‘social power of religion’ discussed above.

this distinction between secular and sacred. Understood like this, the secular is mundane, earthly, or temporal, in contrast with the sacred's inherent relatedness to the divine.<sup>81</sup>

'Secularity 2' relates to "the decline in [religious] belief and practice."<sup>82</sup> This decline is illustrated in the sorts of statistics presented above. It is where 'secularisation theories' have often directed their attention. Such theories consider whether, and/or how, modernity's disenchantment in the wake of scientific and technological advancement leads inevitably to decreased religious participation and belief.<sup>83</sup>

'Secularity 3', by contrast, relates to the changed "conditions of belief."<sup>84</sup> This third construct understands religious belief to be optional, contestable and contested. Rather than offering a reductive explanation for our changed context – along the lines that increased rationalism leads to decreased religiosity – a 'Secular 3' understanding acknowledges there is now room for immanence without transcendence; for a humanistic end goal of human flourishing, with no allegiance required to anything beyond that flourishing.<sup>85</sup> "It is in this sense that we live in a 'secular age' even if religious participation might be visible and fervent."<sup>86</sup>

It is this changed 'condition of belief' which is the underlying context of my thesis. As religious belief is now optional, why do some people opt to become Christians today? What processes were involved? What role did new converts understand other Christians and God to play in the conversion process?

## **My initial conceptual framework: a starting point**

In this section, I introduce my initial conceptual framework. I presented this at my Research Proposal Presentation in May 2013, and it guided the early development of my project.<sup>87</sup> But before I introduce this framework, I need to make a brief comment about my chosen methodology of 'grounded theory'. The next chapter provides a thorough explanation of my research design, including the rationale behind this selection. However, I note here that grounded theory uses a different starting point from other research methodologies. My research began not with a theory to test, but with the data itself. Grounded theory is itself an

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<sup>81</sup> James KA Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B Eerdmans, 2014), 20-21.

<sup>82</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 423.

<sup>83</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 21. Stark continues to refute such a theory. Stark, *Triumph of Faith*, 185-204.

<sup>84</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 423.

<sup>85</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 20-23.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>87</sup> At Flinders University, 'Research Proposals' are presented six to twelve full-time equivalent months into the project. They are examined by a committee comprising the supervisors, the School Research Higher Degree Coordinator, and internal and external readers.

appropriate methodology for *building* a conceptual framework from existing literature.<sup>88</sup> The conceptual framework posited here was, therefore, only a starting point; an acknowledgment that I came to this project with a range of understandings and assumptions, held lightly, but providing some initial framework or scaffolding for what the research may reveal. My initial conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1.1.

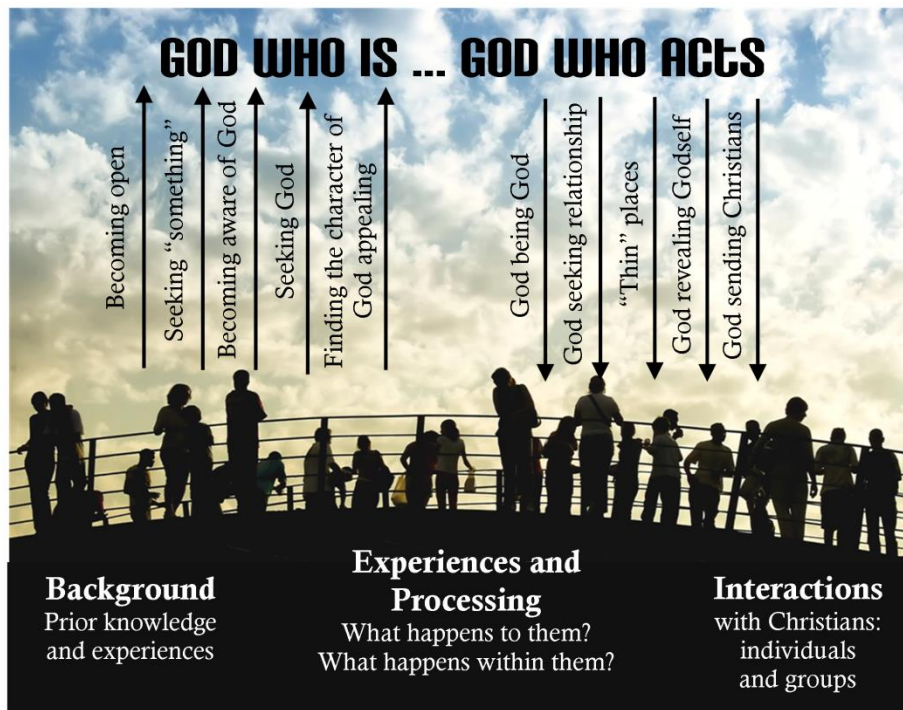


Figure 1.1: Initial conceptual framework<sup>89</sup>

Five key concepts guided the development of this initial conceptual framework. Each of these are described briefly below:

### Concept 1: Biblical understandings of conversion

The New Testament describes a range of ways in which early disciples and followers of Jesus experienced conversion, from Paul's dramatic 'blinding light' in Acts 9 to the slow processes of conversion that the disciples experienced. The New Testament thus demonstrates there is no 'one' way to convert.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Yosef Rafeq Jabareen, "Building a Conceptual Framework: Philosophy, Definitions, and Procedure," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 8, no. 4 (2009): 54.

<sup>89</sup> While the upward pointing items on the left could be read as occurring sequentially, I did not assume that this is the case.

<sup>90</sup> Ian Hussey, "A Theology of Church Engagement: A Reflection on the Practice of the Early Churches," *Colloquium* 44, no. 2 (2012): 210-212.

## **Concept 2: The Triune God**

God, as Father, Son and Spirit, created humankind for relationship with God, provides repeated ways for this relationship to be restored, and is active in the world today, drawing people to God. Thus, God *is* God (the ontological or immanent trinity) and God *acts* in the world (the economic trinity). I presume the interaction of the 'economic' Trinity in the world, but also acknowledge that the very 'being' of God (God's immanence) is potentially attractive to converts.<sup>91</sup>

## **Concept 3: Other Christians/the Church**

Other Christians (individually and in community) are important in the conversion of others. Old Testament scholar, Christopher Wright, goes as far as to call "the people of God" the "primary agent of the mission of God."<sup>92</sup> Thus, I need to be attentive to the role of other Christians in the conversion process.

## **Concept 4: Background**

People's background and the ways they interpret and process that background are likely to impact on whether they convert to Christianity. For example, to what extent do people require an experience of Christianity or a relationship with a Christian to become converted?

## **Concept 5: Experiences**

Are there particular experiences that render people more open to Christianity? Examples of this could be a serious illness, losing a loved one, having a child, or moving towns.<sup>93</sup>

These five concepts, and the conceptual framework shown above, guided my early research. It was only ever an initial framework, what Miles and Huberman described as "simply the current version of the researcher's map of the territory being investigated."<sup>94</sup> I anticipated it would change throughout my research project.

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<sup>91</sup> See Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (London: Burns and Oates, 1970), 22. Rahner states "the 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity."

<sup>92</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 27.

<sup>93</sup> Snow and Machalek's situational factors, for example. David A Snow and Richard Machalek, "The Sociology of Conversion," *Annual Review of Sociology* 10 (1984).

<sup>94</sup> Matthew B Miles and A Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, 2 ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 20.

## The significance of this study

God invites us into the life-giving mission of the Triune God and empowers us to bear witness to the vision of abundant life for all in the new heaven and earth. How and where do we discern God's life-giving work that enables us to participate in God's mission today?<sup>95</sup>

The above statement is contained in the opening paragraph of the 2013 affirmation on mission and evangelism prepared and published by the World Council of Churches' Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (WCME). This document acknowledges the "changing landscape" that is our world today and reaffirms that "all Christians, churches and congregations are called to be vibrant messengers of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the good news of salvation."<sup>96</sup> This call motivated my research. If that is our calling as Christians, churches and congregations, how can we best fulfil that calling? My findings make significant contributions to our understanding of why some recipients of such a message chose to become followers of Jesus.<sup>97</sup> In the process of making these discoveries, this research also adds significantly to the wider body of academic knowledge about religious conversion. Also of significance is the way this study uses a research paradigm potentially very useful for empirical practical theology. I discuss these contributions next.

## Contributions to missional engagement

*Missio Dei* sees the first task of mission as discerning what the Holy Spirit is doing in the world.<sup>98</sup> Studying the conversion narratives of those who have recently converted to Christianity was an excellent starting point for understanding what the Holy Spirit was doing in their world. The point of this discernment is to enhance human participation in God's mission. A better understanding of the processes by which people convert to Christianity potentially enables more effective engagement by Christians in those processes.<sup>99</sup> Being aware of the *common* aspects of conversion processes can help Christians enhance the process. Understanding the *diversity* of conversion experiences can help communication of the Gospel to people from diverse backgrounds: people with unique experiences and stories.<sup>100</sup> Thus, by describing the processes and motivations surrounding conversion, and

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<sup>95</sup> Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, "Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes." World Council of Churches (2013): 1.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 2. (The phrase "changing landscape" is used in the title of this paper.)

<sup>97</sup> Theologian, Gordon Smith, notes that often the language used in relation to conversion does not resonate with the experience of new Christians. More importantly, "If our language about conversion does not portray how people *actually* become Christians, our approach to evangelism will not correspond to the ways in which the Spirit brings people to faith in Christ Jesus." Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 2.

<sup>98</sup> Dunn, "Rediscovering the Spirit (2)," 72. See more in Kim, *Joining in with the Spirit*, 34-36.

<sup>99</sup> Kim, *Joining in with the Spirit*, 21. World Council of Churches, *Christians of Our Time*, 179.

<sup>100</sup> Scot McKnight and Hauna Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith: Stories of Conversion and Apostasy* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 235.

by considering how Christians are, and can be, involved in conversion processes, this research has the potential to enable and encourage more effective involvement by the Church and Christians in conversion processes.

### **Contributions to academic scholarship: positing a new theory and bridging some gaps**

In addition, this study adds to the body of knowledge about conversion to Christianity. I posit a new substantive theory about why individuals convert to Christianity in 21st century Australia, grounded in the experiences of recent converts. This theory is both significant and comprehensive, considering the role of all agents in the conversion process. Further, it is contextually located in late modernity/postmodernity.

As well as positing a new theory of conversion to Christianity, I contribute towards bridging five gaps in the literature. The first gap relates to the specific reasons *why* people convert to Christianity. The second gap relates to who is studied. The third and fourth gaps lie between theological and biblical understandings of conversion, and the lived experiences of contemporary people; and social science research on conversion, and theological reflection. The final gap is methodological. My research demonstrates the usefulness of critical realism as a research paradigm for practical theology, as well as the appropriateness of grounded theory as a methodology for research about religious conversion.

Most recent research on conversion overlooks the reasons *why* people choose to convert to Christianity, focusing on processes rather than motivations.<sup>101</sup> Like sociologist, David Yamane, I consider that “an adequate explanation of an individual’s decision to convert must account not only for the mechanisms but also the meaning of and motivation for conversion.”<sup>102</sup> My research attends to this gap.

Very little other research on conversion has deliberately selected new converts from unchurched backgrounds.<sup>103</sup> While it is well-accepted that conversion narratives are socially constructed and reconstructed as converts develop in their Christian faith, other research

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<sup>101</sup> More generally, “current work on conversion in Evangelical Christianity is rare.” Anna Stout and Simon Dein, “Religious Conversion and Self Transformation: An Experiential Study among Born Again Christians,” *World Cultural Psychiatry Research Review* (2013): 29.

<sup>102</sup> David Yamane, *Becoming Catholic: Finding Rome in the American Religious Landscape* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 52.

<sup>103</sup> One exception is minister, Kevin Finlay’s, Master of Ministry thesis: Kevin Finlay, “Coming to Christian Faith in New Zealand in the 21st Century” (MMin, University of Otago). Finlay interviewed previously unchurched people who had become Christians in the past ten years. However, there is still much more opportunity for biographical reconstruction in that time period than in the two years I adopted. *Ibid.*, 29.



has not 'controlled' for that by purposively sampling new Christians.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, extant research on conversion to Christianity does not focus on people from unchurched backgrounds. My purposive sampling method is unique and significant in providing a clearer picture of the experiences of recent converts from unchurched backgrounds.

Generally, theological and Biblical scholarship is not tested empirically. Similarly, there is a gap between social science research on conversion and theological reflection. The insights of social scientists are rarely assessed theologically or missiologically. There are some exceptions which I discuss in later chapters.<sup>105</sup> My research both considers theological perspectives empirically, and reflects theologically on conversion insights from social science.

Finally, and related to the above, my research makes two key methodological contributions. My use of critical realism as a research paradigm is a useful model for future practical theology research. My thesis demonstrates how critical realism allows the agency of God to be considered alongside social and personal processes. This makes a significant contribution to the discipline of practical theology which has, in embracing the benefits inherent in social science research methodologies, tended to neglect giving attention to the transcendent.<sup>106</sup> Similarly, grounded theory enabled me to discover a theory of conversion that was grounded in the lived experiences of recent converts. While I drew insights from a range of academic disciplines, I was not limited by their perspectives.

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<sup>104</sup> Bruce noted the problem of narrative reconstruction among the reasons for a decline in sociological interest in conversion studies. An emphasis on the poetics of conversion recognises that the retelling of one's conversion story is a social construct: one has specific aims in the telling that affect the structure and content. Further, structures generally adhered to in conversion narratives impact on how others understand and tell their own stories. This understanding led to general distrust of the accuracy of narratives for research purposes. Steve Bruce, "Sociology of Conversion: The Last Twenty-Five Years," in *Paradigms, Poetics and Politics of Conversion*, ed. Jan N Bremmer, Wout J van Bekkum, and Arie L Molendijk (Leuven, Paris and Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2006), 7-9. See also, Timothy J Steigenga, "Religious Conversion in the Americas: Meanings, Measures and Methods," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34, no. 2 (2010); Timothy J Steigenga and Edward L Cleary, "Understanding Conversion in the Americas," in *Conversion of a Continent: Contemporary Religious Change in Latin America*, ed. Timothy J Steigenga and Edward L Cleary (London: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Peter G Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Brian J Zinnbauer and Kenneth I Pargament, "Spiritual Conversion: A Study of Religious Change among College Students," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 1 (1998): 176-178; Snow and Machalek, "Sociology of Conversion," 175-178.

<sup>105</sup> For example, Scot McKnight, *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002); McKnight and Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith*; Dong Young Kim, *Understanding Religious Conversion: The Case of St Augustine*, (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012); Grace Milton, *Shalom, the Spirit and Pentecostal Conversion: A Practical-Theological Study* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015); David J Zehnder, *A Theology of Religious Change: What the Social Science of Conversion Means for the Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011).

<sup>106</sup> Root, "Empirical Practical Theology," 45.

## Structure of the thesis

Grounded theory studies are often presented differently from other theses, particularly because of the unique way extant literature is used in grounded theory. I have endeavoured to report my research chronologically: in the order in which it unfolded. The thesis is, therefore, presented in three main parts. The first provides a background to my study. The second part reports my research findings. The third part discusses my research and presents my substantive theory of conversion.

In **PART A**, this **first chapter** has introduced my research. I began with a ‘spoiler’ in which I briefly outlined my substantive theory of conversion. I then described why this is a work of practical theology. Next, I alerted the reader to our changed and changing ‘secular’ context. I introduced the conceptual framework I had developed early in my research, before noting the significance of this research. I conclude this introductory chapter by outlining the content of each chapter of the thesis.

**Chapter 2** outlines my research design. This design comprises three components: research philosophy, methodology and methods. Critical realism provided an ontological and epistemological framework for my research. Grounded theory served as my research methodology. In the section describing my method, I detail my rigorous process of data generation and analysis.

**Chapter 3** provides a preliminary literature review. It begins with the Bible, before moving to sociological and psychological understandings of religious conversion. This chapter introduces models that have been extensively used in conversion research.

**PART B** of my thesis reports the findings from my research. It is divided into five chapters, beginning with an introduction, and concluding with a postscript. **Chapter 4** introduces my research participants. It then names the three agents who participate in the process of people becoming Christians in Australia today and briefly outlines the role each plays in conversion. Finally, it introduces the six distinct affects that contribute to the conversion process.<sup>107</sup>

**Chapter 5** describes the process by which participants became Christians. This process involves: having an initial exposure to Christianity; experiencing some sort of catalyst that encouraged them to explore Christianity; receiving invitations to engage in various spiritual practices; engaging in spiritual practices; making a series of decisions to say “yes” to deeper

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<sup>107</sup> I explain my use of the term affects in Chapter 4.

involvement in the Christian faith; and, ultimately, embracing Christianity. The chapter also considers the affects the participants experienced as they journeyed towards faith.

**Chapter 6** reports on the role of other Christians in conversion. Other Christians impacted directly on the conversion process described in Chapter 5, including on the affects the converts experienced. In addition, those I interviewed observed other Christians being helped by their faith; living differently because of their faith; sharing openly and honestly with non-Christians; being deeply hospitable; and allowing room for doubts, questions or complexity in faith. The role of other Christians in mediating the affects the participants experienced is also explored.

**Chapter 7** considers the agency of God. The participants identified attributes of God that were significant in their conversion. Further, they experienced God working through others; God curating unique conversion experiences; God being present; God speaking; God helping; God growing them; and God's past activity. The chapter concludes by noting God's role in mediating the affects the participants experienced.

**Chapter 8** draws attention to some aspects missing from the data. I outline how sin; heaven; rational aspects of conversion; and dramatic conversion events were largely absent from the conversion narratives.

**PART C** includes the discussion and conclusions. Again, it begins with a brief introduction (**Chapter 9**), which reiterates my findings and introduces my substantive theory of conversion.

**Chapter 10** compares my own work with the extant literature on conversion. It describes how the research paradigm of critical realism enabled me to be attentive to the agency of God in conversion. It then considers psychologist, Lewis Rambo's, stage model of conversion in the light of my own data. It notes how my multi-dimensional model of conversion helpfully extends and develops Rambo's model.

**Chapter 11** explores the link between relational authenticity and conversion to Christianity. It demonstrates that for those I interviewed, religious conversion was fuelled by a desire for authenticity. It describes how God enables authenticity to develop and flourish, because of who God is; God's ongoing activity in the world; and who God created humans to be. The chapter then outlines how religious conversion is resourced by Christians who embrace and exhibit relational authenticity in their personal, social and spiritual lives. Thus, the chapter describes my substantive theory of conversion to Christianity.

**Chapter 12** concludes the thesis. I describe the limitations of my research and outline the significant contributions I made. Several practical implications of the research are presented: implications for faith formation, for practical theology research, and for research on conversion. I describe some avenues for future research.

### **One final note**

Because this project draws on wisdom from a range of disciplinary perspectives, there are bound to be names unfamiliar to the reader. Therefore, when I name a source for the first time in each chapter, I prefix their name with their discipline. Where possible, I use the descriptor they used at the time they wrote the item cited. If that is not clear, I use a current term.

## CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH DESIGN

### Introduction

There are many ways that research questions can be addressed. The methodology and methods used are determined by the research question itself, as well as by the researcher's understandings of both "how social reality should be studied" and "how research methods and practice connect with the wider social scientific enterprise."<sup>1</sup> As my project is situated within practical theology, I am also attentive to how research is undertaken within that discipline.

My research design comprises three main components: research philosophy, methodology and methods. The research philosophy (sometimes called a research paradigm or worldview) provides an ontological and epistemological framework for my research.<sup>2</sup> The research methodology (which needs to be consistent with the chosen research philosophy) "is a set of principles and ideas that inform the design of a research study."<sup>3</sup> Research methods are the "practical procedures used to generate and analyse data."<sup>4</sup> Each of these three elements must be consistent with each other, and must represent an appropriate way of answering my research question. Together, all three elements comprise the research design.

My research question asks why people are becoming Christians in Australia today. As a Christian, I am interested in discerning how God is at work in the world, with a view to encouraging and resourcing the involvement of other Christians in those processes. In this study, I address my focus to one specific way God is at work: drawing people as they become followers of God.

This chapter introduces the reader to my research design, describing and justifying my chosen research philosophy, methodology and methods. At the end of the chapter it will be clear that a research methodology of grounded theory, undertaken from a critical realist perspective, was a very appropriate approach for my research. The chapter also describes my research method or procedure: how I performed my data generation and analysis. I begin by introducing my research philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 19.

<sup>2</sup> John W Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014), 5-11.

<sup>3</sup> Melanie Birks and Jane Mills, *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide* (London: Sage, 2011), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

## Research philosophy

The term 'research paradigm' or 'research philosophy' has been used in a wide variety of ways.<sup>5</sup> Methodologist, Egon Guba, helpfully defined a research paradigm or philosophy as "a basic set of beliefs that guides action."<sup>6</sup> As such, one's research philosophy both provides an appropriate framework for, and encompasses, one's ontology, epistemology and research methodology.

This section on research philosophy introduces my broader research paradigm, including the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin my research. To demonstrate the efficacy of my chosen research philosophy, I outline the main paradigms dominant in social research, considering each one's potential appropriateness to my research project.

### Positivism

Positivism names the philosophical system that recognises "only that which can be scientifically verified or which is capable of logical or mathematical proof ... therefore rejecting metaphysics and theism."<sup>7</sup> Positivism was the dominant paradigm in the physical sciences for over 400 years, and in the social sciences, as they developed last century.<sup>8</sup> In positivism, quantitative methodologies that enabled scientific verification of hypotheses were used to test and prove 'facts' and 'theories.' The aim of such science was "to *predict and control* natural phenomena."<sup>9</sup> Because of positivism's inherent rejection of theism, this

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<sup>5</sup> Linguist and philosopher, Margaret Masterman, named (at least) 21 ways Thomas Kuhn used the term "paradigm" in his seminal 1962 work: Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). Masterman notes that these 21 usages can be broadly divided into the categories of metaphysical (or philosophical) paradigms; sociological paradigms (a "set of scientific habits" that precede theory); and artefact or construct paradigms that help with puzzle solving and are useful when you know the outcome, but are not certain of how to get there. (As reported in Margaret Masterman, "The Nature of a Paradigm," in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. I Lakatos and A Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 61-67.)

<sup>6</sup> Egon G Guba, "The Alternative Paradigm Dialog," in *The Paradigm Dialog*, ed. Egon G Guba (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990), 17.

<sup>7</sup> "Positivism," <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/positivism>. Accessed 13 May 2014. (From the French word *positivisme*, as coined by philosopher Auguste Comte.)

<sup>8</sup> Methodologists, Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln, argue that positivism's "'received view' ... dominated the formal discourse in the physical and social sciences for some 400 years." Egon G Guba and Yvonna S Lincoln, "Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 108. Others point to the dual emergence of sociology and positivism from the early 19th century. For example, Kees Van der Pijl, *A Survey of Global Political Economy*, 2.1 ed. (Sussex: Centre for Global Political Economy, 2009), 60. For a helpful discussion, see Shelby D Hunt, "On the Rhetoric of Qualitative Methods: Toward Historically Informed Argumentation in Management Inquiry," *Journal of Management Inquiry* 3, no. 3 (1994).

<sup>9</sup> Guba, "Alternative Paradigm Dialog," 19. Original emphasis.

approach was inappropriate for my research, which has a foundational assumption about the existence of God.

## Paradigm wars

Throughout the 1980s, so-called 'paradigm wars' saw new qualitative methodologies struggle to find their place in academia. A key question considered at that time was whether emerging qualitative methodologies were to be *added* to existing methodologies within the, then, current paradigmatic reality, or whether they were representative of a *new* way of thinking: essentially an incommensurable paradigm.<sup>10</sup> Looking back, it is possible to see more clearly the development of new paradigms that reflected new ways of thinking both about the world in general and, more particularly, about how research could or should be undertaken.

The 'Alternative Paradigms Conference', held in 1989, sought to clarify, explore and legitimise the (then, new) alternative paradigms of postpositivism, critical theory and constructivism.<sup>11</sup> Together with positivism, these four paradigms framed qualitative inquiry at that time. By the late 1990s, a proliferation of academic writings, forums and courses related to qualitative methodologies had emerged. It was increasingly recognised that a range of paradigms undergirded these new ways of doing research.<sup>12</sup>

## Postpositivism

The research paradigm postpositivism emerged as "an attempt to respond in a limited way ... to the most problematic criticisms of positivism."<sup>13</sup> Postpositivism uses falsification instead of verification, asserting that while it is not possible to verify that a belief is *true*, it is possible to reject *false* beliefs. Postpositivists believe that "a reality does exist" but that knowledge of reality is limited by the limitations of the researcher.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, while postpositivism acknowledges the subjective influence of the researcher on the research undertaken, it attempts to minimise this influence and attempts to achieve objectivity, by being aware of, and removing, such biases. In so doing, postpositivism fails to consider any positive effects the research may have on the participants and on the subject matter itself, as well as potentially disregarding the personal strengths and unique insights the researcher brings to

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Donmoyer, "Take My Paradigm ... Please! The Legacy of Kuhn's Construct in Educational Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 19, no. 1 (2006): 19.

<sup>11</sup> Egon G Guba, ed. *The Paradigm Dialog* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990), 9.

<sup>12</sup> Norman K Denzin, *Qualitative Inquiry under Fire: Toward a New Paradigm Dialogue*, (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009). 13.

<sup>13</sup> Guba and Lincoln, "Competing Paradigms," 109.

<sup>14</sup> Colin Robson, *Real World Research*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 27.

the study. In addition, postpositivism takes an approach of researching *on* phenomena and subjects, rather than researching *within* or together *with* them. Postpositivism's striving for objectivity does not sit comfortably with the emphasis within practical theology on participative forms of research; nor with the concept of theology as a performative craft or praxis.<sup>15</sup>

## Constructivism

Social constructivists accept and embrace complexity in research. They appreciate that one's context influences the formation of meaning.<sup>16</sup> Such understandings appear consistent with my research question and approach. Christian identity is formed socially. My emphasis on the experiences of *recent* converts attests to my commitment to understanding context.<sup>17</sup> But the constructivist paradigm also holds to a relativist ontological position that denies "the existence of an objective reality" and asserts that individual realities are social constructs.<sup>18</sup> This is at odds with Christian theology. While our *understanding* about God is indeed 'constructed', God transcends this flawed construct.<sup>19</sup>

## Emancipatory approaches

The term "emancipatory approaches" is sometimes used to name what Guba and Lincoln call "critical theories."<sup>20</sup> These approaches seek to overcome the power imbalance inherent in postpositivism and constructivism by focusing research on traditionally marginalised groups; analysing inequities; considering how political and social action result from research into inequities; and by using an emancipatory theory to guide the research.<sup>21</sup> The outcome of

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<sup>15</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology, Qualitative Research*, 255; Emmanuel Y Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2006), 21-25.

<sup>16</sup> Creswell, *Research Design*, 8-9. Sociologist, Kathy Charmaz, advocates for a constructivist approach to grounded theory. See, for example, Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*, *Introducing Qualitative Methods* (London: Sage, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> As recent converts move into the Christian context (for example, through church involvement) their theological understandings develop and change.

<sup>18</sup> Jane Mills, Ann Bonner and Karen Francis, "The Development of Constructivist Grounded Theory," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5, no. 1 (2006), 2 Accessed 22 November 2012.

<sup>19</sup> This is discussed in Gordon D Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985). See, for example, *ibid.*, 26. where Kaufman says "theology is ... essentially an activity of imaginative construction." André Droogen's 'methodological ludism' potentially offers a way to use a constructivist paradigm while allowing for the potential of theistic explanations for the phenomenon researched. See, for example, André Droogers, "The Third Bank of the River: Play, Methodological Ludism, and the Definition of Religion," in *Playful Religion: Challenges for the Study of Religion. Essays by André Droogers and Peter B Clarke*, Grace Davie, Sidney M Greenfield, Peter Versteeg, ed. Anton van Harskamp, et al. (Delft, The Netherlands: Eburon, 2006). I became aware of the potential of methodological ludism to act as a research paradigm in the final stages of my PhD, so did not use it myself.

<sup>20</sup> For example, by Robson, *Real World Research*, 28.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*



such research should be a transformation of the world studied.<sup>22</sup> While these are noble aims, my research question does not lend itself to such an approach. While it could be argued that Christianity in Australia today is becoming increasingly marginalised, Christianity still operates from a position of strength and relative power.

## **Participatory approaches**

In a similar way to emancipatory approaches, participatory action frameworks emphasise communal and holistic approaches in research. Such research is not merely about the researcher gaining knowledge, “but rather a process of knowledge, learning and change on both sides.”<sup>23</sup> In participatory research, the researchers participate with “societal members to produce social change or implement a social policy or organized response to a problem.”<sup>24</sup> The process of research itself brings about change in the object being studied.

Practical theologians, John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, consider practical theology to be a form of action research, which is a participatory approach.<sup>25</sup> They note both practical theology and action research involve action-reflection and both desire transformative outcomes. However, Swinton and Mowat regard practical theology as differing from social science participatory-action approaches in that practical theology aims to move towards *faithfulness*, rather than simple problem solving.<sup>26</sup>

While participatory action reflection would often be an appropriate paradigm for practical theology, my research question required a different approach. I researched the experiences of people who had no social or geographical connections. Further, in my research there was little opportunity for transformation except as a result of any personal reflection the participant did during or around the interviews. Similarly, there was no obvious place for participatory action-reflection to shape communal practices. In studying recent converts to Christianity, and in making my findings available, my research will inform the practices of other Christians, in order that the lives of more non-Christians may be transformed by coming to know God. But the research participants themselves did not stand to benefit from the research.

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<sup>22</sup> Guba, "Alternative Paradigm Dialog," 24.

<sup>23</sup> Uwe Flick, *Introducing Research Methodology: A Beginner's Guide to Doing a Research Project* (London: Sage, 2011), 7-8.

<sup>24</sup> David L Altheide and John M Johnson, "Reflections on Interpretive Adequacy in Qualitative Research," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2011), 583.

<sup>25</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology, Qualitative Research*, 254-260.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

## **Transformative worldview**

Psychologist and methodologist, John Creswell, categorises critical theory, together with participatory action frameworks, in what he names the “transformative worldview.”<sup>27</sup> Creswell notes the potential for research to “be intertwined with politics and a political change agenda to confront social oppression at whatever levels it occurs.”<sup>28</sup> This combination of these paradigms has merit, but still does not resonate with the aims of my research, for the same reasons as given above in relation to participatory approaches.

## **Pragmatic worldview**

Creswell adds an additional paradigm or worldview that he calls the “pragmatic worldview.”<sup>29</sup> The pragmatic worldview emphasises the research question or research problem, and follows whatever approaches best address that problem or question. Creswell argues that pragmatism, in freeing the researcher from any one philosophical position, provides in itself a philosophical base from which to work. Pragmatists frequently turn to mixed methods to gain the best understanding of a research problem and are concerned with “applications – what works – and solutions to problems.”<sup>30</sup> Such an approach has potential resonance as I am more committed to my research question than to any paradigm listed thus far. But there is still one paradigm to explore.

## **Critical realism**

The perspective now called ‘critical realism’ developed largely in response to the positivism dominant in social science from the 1930s. While many people influenced critical realism’s development, it is appropriate to name British philosopher, Roy Bhaskar, as its key proponent.<sup>31</sup> When Bhaskar first posited ‘critical realism’, he separated the ontology (which he called transcendental realism) from its application within the social sciences (critical naturalism). It was only over time that these two aspects were brought together as ‘critical

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<sup>27</sup> Creswell, *Research Design*, 9-10.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>31</sup> Berth Danermark, Mats Ekstrom, Liselotte Jakobsen and Jan Ch Karlsson, *Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, Critical Realism: Interventions (London: Routledge, 2002), 4.

realism'.<sup>32</sup> There are, therefore, two distinct aspects to critical realism: a philosophical aspect and a more 'practical' social scientific aspect.<sup>33</sup>

At a philosophical level, critical realism acknowledges that every "attempt to understand and explain the world starts from our concepts of it."<sup>34</sup> This immediately recognises the subjective nature of research, including the influence of those undertaking the research. But critical realism also acknowledges that there *is* an objective reality, albeit one "our knowledge of ... is conceptually mediated."<sup>35</sup> Thus, critical realism avoids the epistemic fallacy, which infers that there is no objective world ontologically because there is no epistemologically objective view of the world; thereby, allowing "epistemology completely to swallow up ontology."<sup>36</sup> Instead, critical realism allows for an objective reality (the intransitive dimension), while acknowledging the subjective nature of knowledge (the transitive dimension); thus clearly differentiating between ontology and epistemology.<sup>37</sup>

Bhaskar considers that there are three ontological strata or domains; the empirical, the actual and the real.<sup>38</sup> The empirical domain is what we experience and, therefore, can observe. It is separate from the actual domain "where events happen whether we experience them or not."<sup>39</sup> Further removed is the "real" domain, which includes mechanisms which "can produce events in the world."<sup>40</sup> This ontological stratification provides a framework for understanding the relationship between the experiences we can reflect upon and their

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<sup>32</sup> Bhaskar's first book on critical realism, *A Realist Theory of Science*, was published in 1975, and republished in 2008. Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> These can be related to Masterman's understanding of Kuhn's paradigms, with the first fitting her philosophical or metaphysical category and the practical overlapping the sociological and construct paradigms - see footnote 5 above. Masterman, "Nature of a Paradigm," 65-67.

<sup>34</sup> Danermark et al., *Explaining Society*, 15. This is consistent with a Kantian transcendental approach. Bhaskar, ix.

<sup>35</sup> Danermark et al., *Explaining Society*, 15.

<sup>36</sup> Margaret S Archer, Andrew Collier and Douglas V Porpora, "Introduction," in *Transcendence: Critical Realism and God*, ed. Margaret S Archer, Andrew Collier, and Douglas V Porpora, Critical Realism: Interventions (London: Routledge, 2004), 1.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 2. Despite this, because much of this framework of critical realism relates to ontology, critical realism has been frequently placed merely as an ontological position within postpositivism, or within postpositivism and critical theories. Denzin and Lincoln, for example, place critical realism as the ontological position within postpositivism (Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2011), 100.) Guba places critical realism as the ontological position for both postpositivism and critical theories. Guba, "Alternative Paradigm Dialog," 20. However, in placing it merely as an *ontological* position, critical realism's scope is limited and its potential to offer a fresh and integrative *paradigm* for research inquiry is lost. Limiting critical realism to an ontological position thus fails to acknowledge the significant epistemological and methodological implications of critical realism.

<sup>38</sup> Bhaskar, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Danermark et al., *Explaining Society*, 20.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

causes. Bhaskar demonstrates the relationship between the real, the actual and the empirical in tabular form, as shown in Table 2.1 below.<sup>41</sup>

Table 2.1: The distinctiveness of Bhaskar's Real, Actual and Empirical Domains

	Domain of Real	Domain of Actual	Domain of Empirical
Mechanism	✓		
Events	✓	✓	
Experiences	✓	✓	✓

Aware of the value of such an approach, researchers from a range of disciplines have called for critical realism to be recognised as a research paradigm.<sup>42</sup> Sociologist, Christian Smith, advocates for the use of critical realism as an “alternative metatheoretical basis” for sociology of religion.<sup>43</sup> Social work scholar, Carolyn Oliver, notes that such a framework helpfully spans the traditional realist/relativist divides of the usual social science paradigms.<sup>44</sup>

Theologian, Arthur Peacocke, argues that “critical realism is ... the most appropriate and adequate philosophy concerning religious language and theological propositions.”<sup>45</sup> Critical realism acknowledges that while our metaphors and descriptions of God are “partial and inadequate,” nonetheless they enable us “to speak realistically of God,” not least as we recognise these metaphors and descriptions to be revisable.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Adapted from Bhaskar, 2.

<sup>42</sup> For example, see the following: Sociology: Andrew Sayer, *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach* (London: Routledge, 1992). Human geography: Henry Wai-chung Yeung, "Critical Realism and Realist Research in Human Geography: A Method or a Philosophy in Search of a Method?" *Progress in Human Geography* 21, no. 1 (1997). Operations research and management science: John Mingers, "The Contribution of Critical Realism as an Underpinning Philosophy for OR/MS and Systems," *Journal of the Operational Research Society* 51, no. 11 (2000). Social work: Carolyn Oliver, "Critical Realist Grounded Theory: A New Approach for Social Work Research," *British Journal of Social Work* 42, no. 2 (2012). Historical sociology: George Steinmetz, "Critical Realism and Historical Sociology. A Review Article," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40, no. 1 (1998).

<sup>43</sup> Smith, "Future Directions," 1563. See also, Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 90-98. In fact, Smith argues that “the way forward for sociology is critical realist personalism.” *Ibid.*, 494. ‘Personalism’ recognises the “natural social ties and obligations” inherent in human persons. It speaks of human beings as ‘persons’ rather than individuals, unable to be reduced to “fundamentally rational, self-interested, exchange-making calculators of costs and benefits.” *Ibid.*, 101-102.

<sup>44</sup> Oliver, "Critical Realist Grounded Theory," 372-373. Oliver’s article refers specifically to positivist, postpositivist, constructivist, and critical paradigms. It follows the work of Stan Houston, who offers critical realism as a helpful alternative paradigm to postmodern constructionism and its inherent relativism. Stan Houston, "Beyond Social Constructionism: Critical Realism and Social Work," *ibid.* 31, no. 6 (2001).

<sup>45</sup> Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming- Natural, Divine, and Human*, Enlarged ed., Theology and the Sciences (London: SCM Press, 1993), 14.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15. Peacocke points out that religious experiences are best understood as means of encountering God, and should be interpreted alongside the religious experiences of others. Such interpretation should be, I suggest, attentive to all the sources of theology.

Similarly, theologian, Alister McGrath, argues that critical realism, in the form introduced by Bhaskar, has an important contribution to make to Christian theology, despite the “depressing fact” that it “has yet to be taken seriously by most Christian theologians.”<sup>47</sup> Practical theologian, Andrew Root, has recently advocated for the use of critical realism in empirical practical theology.<sup>48</sup>

Critical realism sees science as a practice that is “primarily a concrete, practical, social activity among others, aiming in one way or other at influencing – transforming, improving, modifying, manipulating – the reality of which it itself is a part.”<sup>49</sup> This emphasis on science as practice resonates with the field of practical theology and its emphasis on practice and transformative outcomes.<sup>50</sup>

In terms of my research, critical realism’s stratified understanding of reality allows for a clear separation between people’s *empirical* experiences around their conversion and the *actual* activity of the *real* God in producing events that may or may not lead to such experiences.<sup>51</sup> Christian theology asserts that God is active in conversion processes. Critical realism provides a framework to consider people’s experiences of this activity: those times when they have, in some way at least, been impacted by; recognised; acknowledged; and/or responded to the activity of God in their lives. Consistent with critical realism, my research

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<sup>47</sup> Alister E McGrath, "Transcendence and God: Reflections on Critical Realism, the 'New Atheism', and Christian Theology," in *Critical Realism and Spirituality*, ed. Mervyn Hartwig and Jamie Morgan (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), 164. McGrath argues that what is called 'critical realism' in the North American theological context is different, largely reduced to “a recognition of the active involvement of the knower in the process of knowing.” This is the ‘critical realism’ of theologians such as Bernard Lonergan and N. T. Wright. *Ibid.*, 165. For a helpful overview, see chapter 2 of Raymond K Meyer, "An Evangelical Analysis of the Critical Realism and Corollary Hermeneutics of Bernard Lonergan with Application for Evangelical Hermeneutics" (PhD, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007). Note Meyer’s use of the word “epistemology” in this chapter heading (“An overview of critical realism epistemology”), demonstrating the lack of emphasis on ontology in North American theological critical realism. For a broader discussion, see Andrew Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism: Ambiguity, Truth and Theological Literacy*, New Studies in Critical Realism and Spirituality (Abingdon, UK and New York: Routledge, 2013). Education scholar, Brad Shipway, noted this “‘religious’ strain of critical realism predat[ed] ‘secular’ critical realism.” Brad Shipway, "Critical Realism and Theological Critical Realism: Opportunities for Dialogue," *Journal of Critical Realism, Alethia* 3, no. 2 (2000): 29. He argues that the development of what he calls ‘theological critical realism’ can be traced back to the liberal Protestantism of the nineteenth century, though it particularly grew out of the work of Ian Barbour from the 1960s. Finally, the “critical realism” advocated by sociologist, Christian Smith, is Bhaskarian in origin and form. But Smith, understandably given his discipline, concerns himself with social and societal causal effects, rather than with considering divine agency. Smith, "Future Directions," 1575-1581.

<sup>48</sup> Root, "Empirical Practical Theology." Root draws on Margaret Archer in understanding critical realism, and thus uses the term as McGrath, Archer et al. and I do. See also, Andrew Root, *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> Danermark et al., *Explaining Society*, 24.

<sup>50</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology, Qualitative Research*, 254-260.

<sup>51</sup> Margaret S Archer, Andrew Collier and Douglas V Porpora, "What Do We Mean by God?" in *Transcendence: Critical Realism and God*, ed. Margaret S Archer, Andrew Collier, and Douglas V Porpora, *Critical Realism: Interventions* (London: Routledge, 2004), 25.

acknowledges the ontological distinction between the mechanism causing the patterns of events, the events, and the observable experience itself.<sup>52</sup> Critical realism acknowledges the existence of mechanisms that are not themselves generally directly viewable, and provides a way to study the empirical while acknowledging the potential causes of those experiences.<sup>53</sup> My question of why people are converting to Christianity in Australia today is bound up in a broader question, similarly attentive to the 'mechanisms' behind the events experienced. How is God at work, drawing people to God, today? Thus, a research paradigm or philosophy of critical realism is very appropriate for my study.

Thus, critical realism provides an appropriate philosophical framework for my research.<sup>54</sup> It is suitable both ontologically and epistemologically, particularly in the way it provides a space for an ontological realism to coexist with an epistemological relativism. As such, critical realism offers an alternative to both naive realism and radical constructivism.<sup>55</sup> Critical realism also provides a way to acknowledge a mystical dimension within the phenomenon of religious conversion, while utilising the wisdom and insight inherent in the social sciences.<sup>56</sup>

Working within the field of practical theology, my ontological framework is wider than the social ontology generally considered by social scientists. I assume the existence of God, who is active in the world today. This is consistent with a realist ontological position, which "asserts the ontologically objective existence of reality, independent of our beliefs about it," in this case, the existence of God.<sup>57</sup> A critical realist approach acknowledges that "what is real is real even if it does not act or otherwise manifest itself in a way that is observed."<sup>58</sup> In my research, I am not seeking to 'prove' the existence of God, rather I take God's existence

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<sup>52</sup> Bhaskar, 7. Bhaskar originally uses the word "causal" here, though later acknowledges he has used "causal" to refer "both to the antecedent event, condition or agent which triggers a mechanism and to the mechanism ... itself." Ibid., 244. Thus, it is more appropriate to separate the agent from the event as I have done here.

<sup>53</sup> Danermark et al., *Explaining Society*, 22.

<sup>54</sup> Sociologist, Ines Jindra, used a framework of critical realism for her extensive study of religious conversion. However, while she was attentive to the content of religious beliefs, she did not go as far as to consider divine agency. Jindra was primarily concerned with interaction between the person and the social, and the way that causal mechanisms (related to background experiences, religious groups and social networks) led to different experiences as articulated in conversion biographies. Ines W Jindra, *A New Model of Religious Conversion: Beyond Network Theory and Social Constructivism*, vol. 14, Religion in the Americas (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2014). See Jindra's appendix for a brief outline of her understanding and use of critical realism. Ibid., 199-201.

<sup>55</sup> Joseph A Maxwell, *The Value of a Realist Understanding of Causality for Qualitative Research*, (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2008). 165; Archer, Collier and Porpora, "Introduction," 1-2.

<sup>56</sup> Critical realism avoids the two major critiques of many studies of religious experience, as outlined by Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 3. These critiques are a refusal to explain the experiences of believers, for fear of reductionism; and an isolationist approach that refuses to engage social scientific methodologies.

<sup>57</sup> Archer, Collier and Porpora, "Introduction," 1.

<sup>58</sup> Archer, Collier and Porpora, "What Do We Mean by God?" 25.

and activity as givens as I explore people's experiences of entering into relationship with God.<sup>59</sup> As theologian, Mark McIntosh asserts, there exists a reality "too real to be ... dragged back into the mind's manipulations."<sup>60</sup>

Epistemologically, I am aware that there is much more to the world what can be 'proven' by following a purely scientific or positivist approach. Social and spiritual realities involve highly subjective processes. Researchers bring their own experiences and understandings to the data generation task. The research process itself has the potential to shape the participants as they share their stories. Experiences help create meaning. At a broad level, this is in keeping with a relativist epistemological approach. Again, critical realism provides an appropriate framework for this epistemological position.<sup>61</sup>

Overall, critical realism provides a robust research paradigm within which to study religious conversion. Interestingly, some scholars have specifically advocated for critical realism as an appropriate philosophical base for the methodology of grounded theory.<sup>62</sup> Grounded theory is my chosen methodology. My rationale for choosing grounded theory is discussed in the next section of this chapter.

## Research methodology

While a research paradigm or philosophy offers an ontological and epistemological framing for one's research, a research methodology narrows this framework down to a specific approach to research. The research methodology must be consistent with the research philosophy behind it, as well as appropriate for answering the research question under investigation. The chosen methodology, in turn, suggests suitable research methods, or tools, that the researcher uses to undertake their study.

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<sup>59</sup> At this point, my specific research question is impacting on my ontological position. If I were studying a more purely social or psychological phenomenon, such as an organisational structure or group process, I could comfortably embrace a relativist ontology. But because my research is about people's experiences of God, I need an ontology that provides a framework that can acknowledge the existence of a real God beyond our understanding.

<sup>60</sup> Mark Allen McIntosh, *Divine Teaching: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Malden MA, Oxford and Melbourne: Blackwell, 2008), 17.

<sup>61</sup> I later became aware of Filomeno Aguilar, who, for similar reasons to my own, adopted critical realism as a research paradigm in his study of conversion in the Philippines. Filomeno V Jr Aguilar, "Experiencing Transcendence: Filipino Conversion Narratives and the Localization of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity," *Philippine Studies* 54, no. 4 (2006).

<sup>62</sup> Yeung, "Critical Realism in Human Geography."; Stephen Kempster and Ken W Parry, "Grounded Theory and Leadership Research: A Critical Realist Perspective," *The Leadership Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (2011); Oliver, "Critical Realist Grounded Theory." Archer et al. describe the "second premise of critical realism" as judgmental rationality; whereby there is comparative evaluation of existing arguments, which can result in "reasoned, though provisional judgements about what reality is objectively like." Archer, Collier and Porpora, "Introduction," 2. This process has resonance with the iteration essential in grounded theory.

I used a methodology of 'grounded theory'. This section outlines why this was the most appropriate methodology for my research question. I begin by providing a working definition of grounded theory; after which I outline its history and purpose before naming the key theoretical influences on grounded theory (including paradigmatic or philosophical considerations). I then go on to discuss the role of the researcher in grounded theory, before describing how sampling, data collection and analysis occur, including discussing the use of extant literature in grounded theory. I then outline how quality is assured in grounded theory, before discussing how the findings are represented. Finally, I introduce some critiques or weaknesses of grounded theory, as expressed by others, along with a description of how I addressed these concerns.<sup>63</sup>

### **What is grounded theory?**

Grounded theory is not for the faint hearted! "Grounded theory is an interpretive process that depends upon the sensitivity of a researcher to tacit elements of the data or meanings and connotations that may not be apparent from a mere superficial reading of denotative content."<sup>64</sup> Essentially, grounded theory provides "a systematic, inductive, and comparative approach for the purpose of constructing theory."<sup>65</sup> Rather than 'testing' an existing theory "grounded theory is a research strategy whose purpose is to generate theory from data."<sup>66</sup> Thus, grounded theory allows the empirical data to guide the development or discovery of a theory that is grounded in the lived experience of the research participants.<sup>67</sup>

Because it does not test extant theory, grounded theory is particularly, although not exclusively, useful in areas where theory is yet to be developed. Grounded theory requires an open-minded researcher who gathers data and undertakes a three-stage analysis process of finding conceptual categories in the data, finding relationships between those categories and then conceptualising and accounting for those relationships in the formation

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<sup>63</sup> These dimensions are named as the key features of a research methodology by Shalini Lal, Melinda Suto and Michael Ungar, "Examining the Potential of Combining the Methods of Grounded Theory and Narrative Inquiry: A Comparative Analysis," *Qualitative Report* 17 (2012), 3, <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17/lal.pdf> Accessed 15 April 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Roy Suddaby, "From the Editors: What Grounded Theory Is Not," *Academy of Management Journal* 49, no. 4 (2006): 639.

<sup>65</sup> Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, "Introduction: Grounded Theory Research: Methods and Practices," in *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (London: Sage, 2007), 1.

<sup>66</sup> Keith F Punch, *Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches* (London: Sage, 2005), 155.

<sup>67</sup> John W Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007), 63.



of theory.<sup>68</sup> Emerging theories can be tested in subsequent data gathering that asks questions specifically about the developing theory, thereby honing and verifying the theory.<sup>69</sup>

As such, grounded theory enables the researcher to move beyond simply describing people's experiences to the generation or discovery of a theory to explain those experiences.<sup>70</sup> The resultant explanations for the experiences are linked "very closely to what happens ... in the 'real world'."<sup>71</sup>

Using grounded theory as a research methodology reduces two potential dangers. First, the danger of using empirical data merely to prove or disprove the theory under study and, therefore, missing other insightful information in the data. Secondly, the danger of so directing the data collection in light of the theory under investigation, that potentially insightful information is not gathered since it was not deemed useful before the study began.

As a methodology, grounded theory provides a framework for research that acknowledges the end goal of theory formation, be it substantive or formal. While grounded theory provides a series of steps to be followed in the form of a "set of flexible guidelines that demystify the analytic process," it is more than the sum of its steps.<sup>72</sup> The specific (and rigorous) tools and techniques will be discussed when I outline my research process, below.

### ***Relevance to my research:***

There are many general theories relating to Christian conversion that are generated from disciplines within theological and biblical studies, from the social sciences, psychology and even economics.<sup>73</sup> However, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, significant gaps exist between the social scientific theories and theological reflection, and theological reflection and empirical data.

Clearly it is not possible to test all these theories at once, if at all. Selecting just one theory to study limits the researcher to 'proving' or 'disproving' a theory that may or may not have any, let alone the best, resonance with the empirical data. Such an approach seems, at best,

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<sup>68</sup> Punch, *Introduction to Social Research*, 157; 205; Susan Gasson, "Rigor in Grounded Theory Research: An Interpretive Perspective on Generating Theory from Qualitative Field Studies," in *The Handbook of Information Systems Research*, ed. Michael E Whitman and Amy B Woszczyński (Hershey, PA: Idea Group, 2004), 80.

<sup>69</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 112-128.

<sup>70</sup> Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 63.

<sup>71</sup> Martyn Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide: For Small-Scale Social Research Projects*, 4th ed. (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2010), 107.

<sup>72</sup> Kathy Charmaz, "A Constructivist Grounded Theory Analysis of Losing and Regaining a Valued Self," in *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, ed. Frederick J Wertz, et al. (New York: Guildford Press, 2011), 165.

<sup>73</sup> I introduce these in Chapter 3.

risky and, at worst, a waste of time for the participants and researcher alike. Grounded theory offers a way, through intense and careful analysis, to arrive at a theory of conversion to Christianity that is grounded in the experiences of recent converts.

Social science research on conversion has tended to focus on the *processes* around conversion rather than on the deeper reasons *why* people convert.<sup>74</sup> At the same time, theological and biblical reflection that relates to the topic of conversion focuses on the attributes of God, or biblical accounts of people coming to faith in God.<sup>75</sup> This theological scholarship has rarely been investigated empirically to assess what attributes of God or the Gospel contribute to people's decisions to become Christians today. For this reason, there is little empirically-based theory about the reasons why people convert to Christianity that I could test. As psychologist, James Pratt, said in 1920: "The best way to study conversion is to go directly to typical examples of it and let them speak for themselves, before consulting the opinions of others, whether theological or psychological, on the interpretation of the phenomena."<sup>76</sup> That is what I did.

## **History and purpose of grounded theory**

Grounded theory developed as a research methodology from the 1960s, largely in response to two major concerns from researchers unenamoured with the status quo. First, quantitative methodologies dominated the social sciences and some researchers were aware that not all questions can be addressed quantitatively: particularly, but not exclusively, questions that relate to social processes. This awareness was related to the fact that the qualitative research being undertaken at the time generally lacked a cohesive methodological framework. As a result, qualitative research was often viewed as "impressionistic, anecdotal, unsystematic, and biased."<sup>77</sup> While it was quantitative researchers 'looking in' who made this critique, qualitative researchers like, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, also realised that qualitative inquiry lacked and required "systematic guidelines" to improve the quality of qualitative research, and in so doing counter the criticism of advocates for quantitative methodologies.<sup>78</sup> The second concern relates to the generation of new theory. While theory generation is generally agreed to be an essential part of the social research enterprise, the

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<sup>74</sup> Maha Al-Qwidi, "Understanding the Stages of Conversion to Islam: The Voices of British Converts" (PhD, University of Leeds, 2002), iii.

<sup>75</sup> Some of this is introduced in Chapter 3. Other such theological reflection is drawn upon in Chapter 12.

<sup>76</sup> James Bissett Pratt, *The Religious Consciousness: A Psychological Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1920), 125-126.

<sup>77</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 5.

<sup>78</sup> Ciarán Dunne, "The Place of the Literature Review in Grounded Theory Research," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 14, no. 2 (2010): 112.

tendency was for research to merely test the existing theories. Glaser and Strauss were dissatisfied with this deficiency.<sup>79</sup> The purpose of grounded theory, therefore, is to develop theory grounded in the data that is generated and analysed. Data is prioritised over extant theory. This approach allows for the discovery or development of new theory.<sup>80</sup>

Glaser and Strauss discovered in grounded theory a method of analysis that was academically rigorous and authentically scientific, helping to legitimate qualitative research within academic disciplines. Their 1967 book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, made “the first major attempt to codify and systematize implicit methodological strategies for analyzing qualitative data and moving the analysis into explicit theoretical statements.”<sup>81</sup> Grounded theory, thus, served to address what Glaser and Strauss described as the “embarrassing gap between theory and empirical research.”<sup>82</sup> It did so by providing several practical guidelines that enabled researchers to rigorously construct from raw data theories that related to social processes.<sup>83</sup>

As well as providing a methodology for theory formation, grounded theory also provided a framework to understand social psychological and social processes.<sup>84</sup> Thus, grounded theory helps us understand what lies behind the actions and experiences that can be empirically observed. In the language of critical realism, grounded theory can help us understand the *real* and the *actual* by analysing the *empirical*.

Since its inception, grounded theory has developed in different ways. Today there are at least three different ‘versions’ of grounded theory: the Glaserian; the Strauss and Corbin; and the Constructivist (developed by methodologist, Antony Bryant, and sociologist, Kathy Charmaz).<sup>85</sup> Each of these represents different paradigmatic or philosophical underpinnings,

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<sup>79</sup> See Barney G Glaser and Anselm L Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967), 2. They state, “We would all agree that in social research generating theory goes hand in hand with verifying it.” See also, Jamie Harding, “Grounded Theory,” in *The SAGE Dictionary of Social Research Methods*, ed. Victor Jupp (London: Sage, 2006), 131.

<sup>80</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 80-82.

<sup>81</sup> Frederick J Wertz, Kathy Charmaz, Linda M McMullen, Ruthellen Josselson, Rosemarie Anderson and Emalinda McSpadden, *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis: Phenomenological Psychology, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Research, and Intuitive Inquiry* (New York: Guilford Press, 2011), 57.

<sup>82</sup> Glaser and Strauss, *Discovery of Grounded Theory*, vii.

<sup>83</sup> Dunne, “Literature in Grounded Theory,” 122.

<sup>84</sup> Wertz et al., *Five Ways*, 57.

<sup>85</sup> Bryant and Charmaz, “Introduction,” 10. Norman Denzin further divides these into seven different versions, “positivist, postpositivist, constructivist, objectivist, postmodern, situational, and computer assisted” Norman K Denzin, “Grounded Theory and the Politics of Interpretation,” *ibid.*, ed. Alan Bryman and Kathy Charmaz, 454.

meaning there are variations in the ways grounded theory is understood and undertaken. I suggest these require the addition of a critical realist approach to grounded theory.

### ***Relevance to my research:***

The question of *why* people convert to Christianity to Australia today is best answered qualitatively.<sup>86</sup> As a highly complex phenomenon, conversion needs to be understood within the context of the personal lives of new converts. A qualitative approach is necessary to mine these rich data. Grounded theory provides a proven, academically rigorous process by which to examine and analyse data generated to reveal the reasons why some people in Australia convert to Christianity today. The methodology of grounded theory also helps address the gap between extant theory on conversion and the lived experiences of new converts.

### **Key theoretical influences on grounded theory**

Early writing on grounded theory presented a set of methods, or strategies and techniques, that researchers could use. To begin with, grounded theorists did not make explicit the methodological and philosophical framework from which they operated.<sup>87</sup> In part, this was because grounded theory's two proponents, sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, approached the research question they collaborated on from different perspectives.<sup>88</sup> From the outset, this suggests that there is room for a variety of paradigmatic approaches surrounding a methodology of grounded theory.<sup>89</sup>

Each of the three major approaches to grounded theory commonly named today is based on different research philosophies. Glaser is the least explicit in his philosophical framing.<sup>90</sup> He appears to take a realist approach to research and argues for a "discovery of truth that emerges from data representative of a 'real' reality."<sup>91</sup> While some have argued that Glaser operates from a critical realist perspective within postpositivism, such an interpretation is based on a simplified understanding of critical realism as a postpositivist version of realism.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> I am exploring the unquantifiable. Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 10.

<sup>87</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 5.

<sup>88</sup> Strauss is a symbolic interactionist, recognising that the researcher's background and understandings influence how research is undertaken: a reality that needs to be acknowledged and accounted for within the research process (ibid., 53.) By contrast, Glaser's postpositivist approach required objectivity in research.

<sup>89</sup> Jane Mills, Ysanne Chapman, Ann Bonner and Karen Francis, "Grounded Theory: A Methodological Spiral from Positivism to Postmodernism," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 58, no. 1 (2007): 73.

<sup>90</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 5.

<sup>91</sup> Mills, Bonner and Francis, "Development of Constructivist Grounded Theory". 3.

<sup>92</sup> See, for example, Merylyn Annells, "Grounded Theory Method, Part I: Within the Five Moments of Qualitative Research," *Nursing Inquiry* 4 (1997): 121.

Strauss and Corbin operate from a relativist ontological position, embracing pragmatism and symbolic interactionism as a philosophical framework, while retaining a realist epistemology.<sup>93</sup> The third most common approach to grounded theory today is overtly constructivist, with Kathy Charmaz and Antony Bryant the key researchers associated with this position.<sup>94</sup>

### **Relevance to my research:**

As argued above, these three philosophical approaches did not offer the best framework for my research question. However, there is room within grounded theory for other philosophical frameworks.<sup>95</sup> One such philosophical framework is that of critical realism. In fact, researchers across a range of disciplines advocate for combining the methodology of grounded theory with a philosophical framing of critical realism. Human geographer, Henry Yeung, argues that critical realism is a “philosophy in search of a method.”<sup>96</sup> He advocates for the use of critical realism as grounded theory’s philosophical framework. Similarly, in the discipline of social work, Carolyn Oliver argues that, “critical realism offers a solid philosophical base for social work research.”<sup>97</sup> She suggests that grounded theory and critical realism, together, “offer an accessible and congruent approach of particular relevance to social work.”<sup>98</sup> Stephen Kempster and Ken Parry recognise the potential for critical realism to frame newly developing grounded theory research on leadership.<sup>99</sup> It is, therefore, appropriate to combine the methodology of grounded theory with a critical realist approach to answering a research question.

Grounded theory, thus, provides an appropriate methodology for a project using a research paradigm of critical realism, including practical theological research undertaken from a critical realist perspective. However, practical theologians do not commonly use grounded theory as a primary methodology. Similarly, critical realism is not often used as a paradigm for theology.<sup>100</sup> My use of both grounded theory and critical realism in this project provides an opportunity to assess the value of each, and both in combination.

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<sup>93</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 5; Charmaz, "Losing and Regaining," 168.

<sup>94</sup> See, for example, Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*. Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory* (London: Sage, 2007).

<sup>95</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 5.

<sup>96</sup> Yeung, "Critical Realism in Human Geography," 51.

<sup>97</sup> Oliver, "Critical Realist Grounded Theory," 371.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>99</sup> Kempster and Parry, "Grounded Theory and Leadership Research."

<sup>100</sup> A recent exception is Andrew Root: Root, "Empirical Practical Theology."; Root, *Christopraxis*.

## Relationship of the researcher to the phenomenon, process and participants

“Renowned grounded theorists have highlighted the importance of bringing personal experience into the research arena when conducting a grounded theory study.”<sup>101</sup> In fact, the research project that led to the ‘discovery’ of grounded theory was on a topic of deep personal relevance to researchers, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. Both men had suffered a close family bereavement before embarking on the research that resulted in their book, *Awareness of Dying*.<sup>102</sup> Bryant and Charmaz note this is not unusual. A personal motivation is often present for researchers embarking on grounded theory.<sup>103</sup>

The various approaches to grounded theory position the researcher differently in relation to the phenomenon under investigation, the research process and the research participants. Glaser advocated for the researcher beginning the research process with as few predetermined reflections on the topic as possible, so as not to be influenced by pre-existing theories and biases.<sup>104</sup> Such an approach is consistent with Glaser’s postpositivist position. However, a weakness of such an approach is that it neglects to acknowledge the researcher’s potential to bring his or her own skills, history and insights to the research task.<sup>105</sup>

Other approaches to grounded theory – such as the Strauss and Corbin, constructivist, and I suggest critical realist, approaches – recognise the subjective influence of the researcher on the phenomenon under investigation, the research process and engagement with the participants. As Kathy Charmaz says: “A grounded theory approach encourages researchers to remain close to their studied worlds.”<sup>106</sup> Such personal engagement with the topic under study helps in synthesising and interpreting the data, and understanding processual relationships.<sup>107</sup>

Critical realist grounded theory can place both researcher and researched “within the field of inquiry.”<sup>108</sup> This approach requires “the researcher to prioritize and analyse the interaction

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<sup>101</sup> Karen J Hoare, Jane Mills and Karen Francis, "Dancing with Data: An Example of Acquiring Theoretical Sensitivity in a Grounded Theory Study," *International Journal of Nursing Practice* 18, no. 3 (2012): 242.

<sup>102</sup> Barney G Glaser and Anselm L Strauss, *Awareness of Dying* (Chicago: Aldine, 1966). As reported in Bryant and Charmaz, "Introduction," 7.

<sup>103</sup> Bryant and Charmaz, "Introduction," 7.

<sup>104</sup> Barney G Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory* (Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press, 1978), 2-3.

<sup>105</sup> Glaser goes on speak of the importance of being “steeped in the literature.” *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>106</sup> Kathy Charmaz, "Grounded Theory in the 21st Century," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 508.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Charmaz, "Losing and Regaining," 169. Charmaz is discussing constructivist grounded theory here, but this also applies to other (non-postpositivist) forms of grounded theory.

that occurs” between the researcher and participant, operating from the assumption that “it is impossible to separate researcher from participant in the generation of data.”<sup>109</sup>

Sometimes, the understanding of the relationship between researcher and participant is more pragmatically than philosophically driven as it is often centred “in relation to the outcome of data collection.”<sup>110</sup> However, undergirding this (for those who are not positivists) is the understanding that data is *generated* rather than *gathered*.<sup>111</sup> The researcher brings to the research process their own thinking and their own history, which “create a point of referral and interrogation for themselves, and subsequently the reader, in relation to their theoretical analysis.”<sup>112</sup>

### ***Relevance to my research:***

The phenomenon of conversion is something I feel strongly about. A motivation for undertaking this research was to understand conversion better, with the aim of helping Christians be better involved in others’ conversion processes. Grounded theory is among a suite of methodologies that allows the researcher to be subjectively ‘invested’ in the topic under investigation.<sup>113</sup> It provides guidelines for rigorous investigation and analysis.

Because I have both experienced and observed conversion, I brought that history to the research process. As well as increasing my theoretical sensitivity, my experiences meant there was a sense of rapport with participants, who described something they knew I affirmed. This increased their comfort with the research process, as they did not need to ‘defend’ their experiences.

Critical realist grounded theory provides a framework to explore the activity of God and other Christians that lies behind the empirical descriptions participants gave of their conversion experiences. In a cooperative process between researcher and participants, we generate data, seeking to better understand why those researched converted to Christianity.

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<sup>109</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 56.

<sup>110</sup> Lal, Suto and Ungar, "Combining Grounded Theory and Narrative Inquiry". 9. Lal et al. contrast this with a narrative inquiry methodology in which “relational issues are meant to be at the center of every phase of the process.” Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 73.

<sup>112</sup> Jane Mills, Ann Bonner and Karen Francis, "Adopting a Constructivist Approach to Grounded Theory: Implications for Research Design," *International Journal of Nursing Practice* 12, no. 1 (2006): 11.

<sup>113</sup> I wrote a memo on 20 February 2013, titled “Assumptions.” In it I noted, “I go into my project with the following assumptions: (1) There is a God; (2) God is at work in the world, drawing people to Godself; (3) Often/generally others are involved in this process in people’s lives: individuals [other Christians], the Church; (4) There are push and pull factors [involved] in people’s decisions to convert to Christianity [and] (5) It is good to turn to God.” It was appropriate to name these beginning assumptions.

## **The process: Sampling, data collection and analysis**

In grounded theory, the process by which data sampling, collection and analysis occurs is rigorous and structured while, at the same time, being highly intuitive and reflexive.

Sociologist, Carolyn Wiener, provides a helpful summary of the basic process of data collection and analysis in grounded theory.<sup>114</sup>

1. Data gathering, analysis, and theory construction proceed concurrently.
2. Coding starts with the first interview and/or field notes.
3. Memo writing also begins with the first interview and/or field notes.
4. The constant comparison technique is used to tease out similarities and differences and thereby refine concepts.<sup>115</sup>
5. Theoretical sampling is the disciplined search for patterns and variation.
6. Theoretical sorting of memos sets up the outline for the writing of a paper or book.
7. Theoretical saturation is the judgment that there is no need to collect further data.
8. The endpoint is the identification of a basic social process that accounts for most of the observed behaviour.

These eight elements of grounded theory are explained further below, followed by a discussion of how the literature is used in grounded theory.

### ***Grounded theory is an iterative process***

Grounded theory is an iterative process in which data gathering, data analysis and theory construction occur concurrently. The data collection and analysis process “begins with gathering inductive data but relies on moving back and forth between data gathering and analysis.”<sup>116</sup> Thus, data coded early are re-coded as the categories become clearer.

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<sup>114</sup> Carolyn Wiener received her initial training in grounded theory from its founders, Glaser and Strauss. Bryant and Charmaz, *SAGE Handbook*, xxvi-xxvii. This framework comes from Carolyn Wiener, "Making Teams Work in Conducting Grounded Theory," in *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (London: Sage, 2007), 301-308. Each item is quoted from Wiener's headings.

<sup>115</sup> The word 'concept' is sometimes used within grounded theory literature to refer to the developing theory (see, for example, Harding, "Grounded Theory," 132). Birks and Mills on the other hand point out that “everything is a concept” (Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 89). They distinguish between low level concepts, medium level concepts and high level concepts. *Ibid.*, 89-93.

<sup>116</sup> Charmaz, "Losing and Regaining," 166.



## **Coding**

The various levels of coding essential to grounded theory are given different names by different theorists.<sup>117</sup> Most simply, the first level of coding breaks the data apart.<sup>118</sup> The second level begins to link the codes together in categories. The final level of coding specifies and begins to theorise about possible relationships between these categories.<sup>119</sup> The level of coding undertaken directly relates “to the level of conceptual abstraction the researcher is developing at the time.”<sup>120</sup>

### *Initial (or open) coding*

Initial coding is a reflexive process whereby the researcher undertakes a line by line process of reading and defining what they see in the data. Codes that emerge directly from the data are attributed to the data: codes that “are active, immediate, and short.”<sup>121</sup> These codes “generally take the form of either gerunds and/or *in vivo* codes.”<sup>122</sup>

In the initial coding, the researcher is advised to “remain open to what the material suggests and stay close to it. Keep your codes short, simple, active and analytic.”<sup>123</sup> Using codes that reflect action rather than topics “curbs [the researchers’] tendencies to make conceptual leaps and to adopt extant theories before we have done the necessary analytic work.”<sup>124</sup>

While the researcher’s theoretical sensitivity should be acknowledged, an open mind is essential to good initial coding.<sup>125</sup> The codes assigned to data are not preconceived, nor are they assigned from extant theory. Rather, the codes “*arise from* the researcher’s interaction with the data” itself.<sup>126</sup> When theoretical categories do fit the data, these, and the theory that

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<sup>117</sup> For example: Substantive and theoretical (Judith A Holton, "The Coding Process and Its Challenges," in *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (London: Sage, 2007), 265.); initial, focused, axial and theoretical (Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 47-66.); initial, immediate and advanced (Melanie Birks, Ysanne Chapman and Karen Francis, "Memoing in Qualitative Research: Probing Data and Processes," *Journal of Research in Nursing* 13, no. 1 (2008).)

<sup>118</sup> Holton, "Coding," 265.

<sup>119</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 63.

<sup>120</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 94-95.

<sup>121</sup> Charmaz, "Grounded Theory in the 21st Century," 517.

<sup>122</sup> Gerunds are “verbs used as nouns that always finish with ‘ing’.” Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 93. *In vivo* codes are captured from participants’ actual words, where they represent a broader concept from the data. Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 50.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 46; Barney G Glaser, *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis: Emergence vs Forcing* (Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press, 1992), 23.

<sup>126</sup> Charmaz, "Losing and Regaining," 165. (Original emphasis)

surrounds them, can be used to shape the developing theory, provided the extant theory has “earned its way into the emerging theory” by demonstrating its fit.<sup>127</sup>

Initial coding is called ‘open coding’ by some, as it speaks of opening the data up. In initial coding the researcher codes “the data in every way possible.”<sup>128</sup>

### *Intermediate coding*

Intermediate coding (also known as selective coding, axial coding and focused coding) involves tentatively grouping codes to form categories.<sup>129</sup> This grouping and coding is undertaken when specific codes seem to “account for the data better than others.”<sup>130</sup>

There is a sense in which the data that has been taken apart in the initial coding is put back together in new ways, by making connections between, and within, the categories that are being identified. Patterns and relationships are discovered, creating “categories [that] are multi-dimensional and may consist of a number of sub-categories that together explain the broader concept.”<sup>131</sup> In intermediate coding, the researcher asks which “initial codes make the most sense to categorize [their] data incisively and completely.”<sup>132</sup> Earlier data is likely to need to be re-coded in the light of these developing categories.

Within these categories are properties that need to be identified and explained. The interrelationships between the categories are articulated. Identifying categories and interrelationships enables conceptual depth to develop.<sup>133</sup>

### *Advanced coding*

Ideally, at the end of intermediate coding, a core category is identified “that encapsulates the process apparent in the categories and sub-categories constructed.”<sup>134</sup> This core category is a connecting point for all the data that has been gathered. Once identified, any further data collection has the aim of “theoretically saturat[ing] the core and related categories and sub-categories.”<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity*, 4.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>129</sup> Anselm L Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Procedures and Techniques for Developing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 123-142; Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 57-60.

<sup>130</sup> Charmaz, "Losing and Regaining," 165.

<sup>131</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 98.

<sup>132</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 58.

<sup>133</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 98.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

## **Memo writing**

As with coding, memo writing also begins with the first interview and field notes. Memoing continues throughout the project, as memos record both procedural and analytical reflections. These reflections provide an 'audit trail' of steps taken that clearly show how operational decisions were made, how coding was undertaken, and how theory was formed.<sup>136</sup> The very process of memoing helps to bring theoretical integration.<sup>137</sup>

Charmaz distinguishes between procedural memos, which record the research process, and analytical memos, in which the researcher discusses and analyses the codes and categories being assigned. Analytical memos, therefore, enable the "categories [to] become more abstract and theoretical."<sup>138</sup> By contrast, Birks, Chapman and Francis use the mnemonic "MEMO" to describe and distinguish the various functions of memoing. These four functions are: mapping research activities, extracting meaning from the data, maintaining momentum, and opening communication.<sup>139</sup> I found this categorisation more helpful than Charmaz's as it recognises that procedural adjustments and analytical discoveries often go hand in hand.<sup>140</sup>

Glaser called the writing of theoretical memos the "core stage in the process of generating data, the bedrock of theory generation."<sup>141</sup> He advocated pausing to memo any time an idea occurred, and named the goal of memoing as being "to theoretically develop ideas (codes), with complete freedom into a memo fund, that is highly sortable."<sup>142</sup>

Birks and Mills suggest such a bank of memos is one of the three elements necessary in an integrated grounded theory. These three elements are: an identified core category, theoretical saturation of the major categories and a thorough collection of analytical memos.<sup>143</sup>

## **Constant comparison technique**

The constant comparison technique is a fluid process of analysis, coding, reanalysis and recoding. It occurs as data are compared with data, data are compared with categories, and

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>137</sup> Holton, "Coding," 258-261.

<sup>138</sup> Charmaz, "Losing and Regaining," 165.

<sup>139</sup> Birks, Chapman and Francis, "Memoing," 70.

<sup>140</sup> In the second edition of their book, Strauss and Corbin divided memos into operational, coding and theoretical memos (Strauss and Corbin, *Procedures and Techniques*). However, in their third edition, Corbin and Strauss chose to "get away from thinking about memos in a structured manner" as they considered that "novice researchers often become so concerned with 'getting it right' that they lose the generative fluid aspect of memoing." Juliet Corbin and Anselm L Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008), 118.

<sup>141</sup> Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity*, 83.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 114-115.

categories are compared with each other.<sup>144</sup> This constant comparison technique, thus, teases out similarities and differences in codes and categories, thereby, refining the developing theory. Interrogating the relationships between one's own data and the "fundamental aspects of human existence" helps the work become more theoretical.<sup>145</sup>

### ***Theoretical sampling***

In grounded theory, sampling is first 'purposive' and then 'theoretical'. This means that participants are selected based on their perceived ability to add data that develop, and then further test, the theoretical categories being established. This contrasts with approaches that seek to ensure demographic or other representation.<sup>146</sup> Subsequent data generation occurs in response to, and seeks to contribute to, the developing theory.<sup>147</sup>

### ***Writing grounded theory***

When it comes time to writing up a paper or thesis, theoretical sorting of memos can provide the outline or framework for the argument. Grounded theory studies are, therefore, often reported in a narrative style as the research process and discoveries are described.<sup>148</sup> The theory itself takes centre stage and is argued with reference to the empirical data and the existing literature.<sup>149</sup> The very action of writing is also a key part of the greater analysis process, as connections become clearer in the writing.<sup>150</sup>

Two key guides for writing grounded theory findings are the memos themselves and the coding, categorising, conceptualising and theory formation that occurs in the analysis phase. These well-considered memos, and the theory-forming processes and revelations found within, provide a framework for writing up the findings.

A common way that research findings are presented within grounded theory is as a "storyline."<sup>151</sup> Birks and Mills suggest the use of TALES as a mnemonic containing the guiding principles of storyline production.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>145</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 179.

<sup>146</sup> Charmaz, "Losing and Regaining," 167.

<sup>147</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 69-73.

<sup>148</sup> Denise O'Neil Green, John W Creswell, Ronald J Shope and Vicki L Plano Clark, "Grounded Theory and Racial/Ethnic Diversity," in *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (London: Sage, 2007), 489; Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 118.

<sup>149</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 151.

<sup>150</sup> See Chapter 8 of *ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> "Storyline has a dual function in grounded theory in that it assists in production of the final theory and provides a means by which the theory can be conveyed to the reader." Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 118.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 119-123.

- Theory takes precedence. While the research findings should be readable, the point of grounded theory is to develop or discover theory. Therefore, theory must be evident in the final product.
- Allows for variation. “Inconsistencies” in data should be incorporated into the report rather than hidden.
- Limits gaps. Storyline can clearly identify gaps in the theory; these gaps can be filled by returning to the data, or the field if necessary.
- Evidence is grounded. The storyline emerges out of the data, rather than being “imposed on the analysis.”<sup>153</sup>
- Style is appropriate. Storyline can be used in a variety of presentation formats, including a formal academic thesis.

### ***Theoretical saturation***

Theoretical saturation occurs when “there are no new codes identified in later rounds of data generation or collection that pertain to a particular category, and the category is conceptually well-developed to the point where any sub-categories and their properties/dimensions are clearly articulated and integrated.”<sup>154</sup>

### ***A theory that is grounded in the data***

The endpoint of grounded theory is the identification of a “basic social process that accounts for most of the observed behavior that is relevant and problematic for those involved.”<sup>155</sup>

### ***Use of the literature in grounded theory***

There are different opinions about how researchers should use the literature in grounded theory. Glaser described grounded theory as “a perspective on both data and theory” and named “being steeped in the literature” as an essential way of gaining theoretical sensitivity.<sup>156</sup> However, he strongly advocated not reading the literature until *after* the theory “seems sufficiently grounded and developed.”<sup>157</sup> Glaser named “the first step in gaining theoretical sensitivity ... as enter[ing] the research setting with as few predetermined ideas as possible.”<sup>158</sup> This means that data can be observed without filtering it through existing understandings.

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>155</sup> Wiener, “Teamwork in Grounded Theory,” 306. Wiener is referring to the discovery of one core category that integrates the developing theory. Her use of the word “problematic” is not helpful when considering research on positive processes or phenomena such as conversion.

<sup>156</sup> Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity*, 3.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

Glaser and Strauss initially suggested researchers should “at first, literally ... ignore the literature of theory and fact on the area under study, in order to assure that the emergence of categories will not be contaminated by concepts more suited to different areas.”<sup>159</sup>

However, as they had already acknowledged: “The researcher does not approach reality as a *tabula rasa* [blank slate].”<sup>160</sup> Rather, what Glaser and Strauss were communicating was the need for researchers to begin the research process by being open to going where the data takes them: developing or discovering the theory as the data reveals it. Literature is thus best seen as ‘data’ on the same level as other data, including empirical data.<sup>161</sup>

Psychologists, Karen Henwood and Nick Pidgeon, speak of “theoretical agnosticism” as an appropriate starting point for grounded theory research.<sup>162</sup> While it is impractical to begin the research process unaware of extant theory, it is appropriate to approach open-handed, subjecting any preconceptions to rigorous scrutiny.<sup>163</sup>

Nursing researchers, Hoare, Mills and Francis, describe acquiring theoretical sensitivity as “dancing with data.”<sup>164</sup> They suggest that researchers need to engage in a process of data gathering, analysis and review that sees them approaching and stepping back from the data, following logical paths and guiding the participants’ reflections. They name “reading the literature, open coding, category building, reflecting in memos” as well as “doubling back on data collection” as essential steps in developing a grounded theory.<sup>165</sup>

There are, therefore, three key guidelines to using the literature in grounded theory. First, approaching the research task with an open mind to what may be revealed. Secondly, using the literature as data, and considering it alongside other data. Thirdly, engaging in a ‘dance’ with all the data, including the literature, empirical data, and the developing codes, category and theory.

### ***Relevance to my research:***

Grounded theory provided me with a rigorous and tested way of generating and working with qualitative data. In a project such as mine, where I was not relying on existing theory, but, rather, allowing the data to guide the analysis, grounded theory provided procedures and

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<sup>159</sup> Glaser and Strauss, *Discovery of Grounded Theory*, 37.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>161</sup> Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity*, 8.

<sup>162</sup> Karen Henwood and Nick Pidgeon, "Grounded Theory in Psychological Research," in *Qualitative Research in Psychology: Expanding Perspectives in Methodology and Design*, ed. PM Camic, JE Rhodes, and L Yardley (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003), 138.

<sup>163</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 80-83. See also, Wiener, "Teamwork in Grounded Theory," 298-299.

<sup>164</sup> Hoare, Mills and Francis, "Dancing with Data."

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

guidelines that allowed me to travel uncharted territory. I describe this research method in the next major section. In terms of the 'TALES' mnemonic: My research revealed a substantive theory of conversion. Part B outlines the research findings and Chapter 11 describes the theory these results and other reading revealed. 'Inconsistencies' in the data were allowed for: incorporated into the report rather than hidden. The way I use Meg's story to point out exceptions provides clear examples of this. Occasionally, I returned to participants to ask clarifying questions that limited gaps. I used an extensive range of literature to illuminate what the interview data was revealing. My evidence is grounded, with the storyline emerging out of the data, rather than being imposed. I have written in a style appropriate to an academic thesis.

### **Criteria for quality appraisal and representation of the findings**

Birks and Mills name three major categories for evaluating grounded theory research. These categories relate to researcher expertise; methodological congruence; and procedural precision.<sup>166</sup> The criteria relating to researcher expertise are common to any research. These include skill in scholarly writing; familiarity with the selected methodology; appropriate use of methodological resources; and clear articulation of limitations to the research project. Their second set of criteria relate to methodological congruence. These are clear articulation of the research paradigm; appropriateness of grounded theory as a methodology for the question under investigation; congruence between the research aims and outcomes; presentation of a theory; and identifying and addressing philosophical and methodological inconsistencies. The third set of criteria relate to procedural precision in grounded theory research. These relate to evidence of memoing; an appropriate audit trail; good data and resource management; correct application of grounded theory principles; logical connections between the data and theory; evidence that the resultant theory is grounded in the data and is credible; and attention given to potential applications of the findings.

#### ***Relevance to my research:***

The reader will find evidence of each of these criterion in my thesis. Many are addressed in this chapter on research design. The others are met in the results, discussion and conclusion chapters.

### **Critiques of grounded theory and how they are addressed in this research**

As in all methodologies, there are potential weaknesses in grounded theory. Some critiques of grounded theory are common to all qualitative research methodologies. Others are

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<sup>166</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 153-154.

specific to grounded theory. Some critiques relate to poor researcher practices. All of them should be considered by grounded theorists as they undertake their research. These weaknesses and critiques of grounded theory are considered next, along with a brief description of how I addressed them.

### ***General critiques of qualitative methodologies***

Some critiques made of grounded theory are common to any qualitative methodology that uses “inductive, open-ended, intuitive approaches to data-gathering and analysis.”<sup>167</sup> Such criticism represents a philosophical or paradigmatic difference of opinion. Much recent research on conversion has been undertaken qualitatively, “using narrative methods in order to capture the ‘bricolage’” of converts.<sup>168</sup> A qualitative methodology was essential for my research that sought to understand the deep personal process of becoming a Christian. My research question required an inductive, intuitive approach that ‘opened up’ people’s stories as I sought to understand why they had become Christians. Grounded theory provided a rigorous means by which to do this.

### ***Critiques specific to grounded theory***

Charmaz points out that a “number of the criticisms of grounded theory reflect an incomplete understanding of the logic and strategies of the method.”<sup>169</sup> Other critiques represent potential weaknesses that can readily be addressed. Some erroneously understand grounded theory as claiming itself to be a theory.<sup>170</sup> This is understandable, given its name. But, as I have already described, grounded theory is a means of developing theories that are grounded in the data. Five critiques of grounded theory are explored next.

### ***Use of the literature***

Charmaz noted that the way the literature is used in grounded theory is often misunderstood. She points out that in grounded theory, the literature is *always* used, by researchers who are knowledgeable in the field they are studying, *once* they have begun to identify concepts from the data.<sup>171</sup> One of the things that appealed to me about the methodology of grounded theory is the unique way the literature is used. As researchers from a wide range of disciplines consider the topic of conversion from different perspectives, a methodology that did not require me to be locked into one theoretical framework, but rather allowed the data to

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<sup>167</sup> Kathy Charmaz, “‘Discovering’ Chronic Illness: Using Grounded Theory,” *Social Science and Medicine* 30, no. 11 (1990): 1164.

<sup>168</sup> Pierre Beaucage, Deirdre Meintel and Geraldine Mossière, “Introduction: Social and Political Dimensions of Religious Conversion,” *Anthropologica* 49, no. 1 (2007): 14.

<sup>169</sup> Charmaz, “Discovering Chronic Illness,” 1163.

<sup>170</sup> For example, Gary Thomas and David James, “Reinventing Grounded Theory: Some Questions About Theory, Ground and Discovery,” *British Educational Research Journal* 32, no. 6 (2006): 771.

<sup>171</sup> Charmaz, “Discovering Chronic Illness,” 1163-1164. Original emphasis.



shape the analysis, was most appropriate. Therefore, my very topic helped ensure I used the literature appropriately. It was my desire to see what the data said for itself that initially directed me towards the methodology of grounded theory. While I sought to increase my theoretical sensitivity by reading widely, I was ever conscious of not forcing my data into existing categories or theories.

### *Fragmentation of data*

A further criticism of grounded theory is that the coding and data fragmentation necessary for grounded theory can cause the unique stories and experiences of each person to be lost in the desire for “finding patterns across cases.”<sup>172</sup> I was aware of this danger throughout my research and countered it by being attentive to the strengths and principles of narrative approaches to research. I viewed each story as taonga, or treasures, to be valued.<sup>173</sup> I considered the entirety of each participant’s story, as well as significant anecdotes within it, as I undertook my research and analysis. Together, these guidelines meant that I valued and considered the richness of the whole of the narrative even as I fragmented it to analyse it.

Of course, narrative approaches to research have their own weaknesses. Before the 1960s, narrative research focused on ‘what’ the stories told us, as the stories themselves were understood to directly represent human experiences. More recently, greater nuances have been recognised and researchers have become attentive to how language is used in storytelling; to whom the stories are being told; the reasons why they are told; and how the listener or interviewer influences what stories are told and how they are told.<sup>174</sup> Narratives are not accurate accounts of experience. Rather, they are best understood as “modes of performance, of ordering, of remembering, of interacting.”<sup>175</sup> To address this potential weakness of narrative inquiry, I balanced Swinburne’s “principle of testimony” with an awareness of the subjective nature of narratives.<sup>176</sup> Thus, while I generally took to be genuine the religious experiences reported by those interviewed, I was aware that the narrative description presented about that experience was constructed. Extending a critical realist approach to grounded theory gave a framework to understand this. I acknowledged that the participant’s descriptions of their experiences of conversion were a narrative construct of their experiences: experiences of actual events. In turn, my interpretation or

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<sup>172</sup> Lal, Suto and Ungar, "Combining Grounded Theory and Narrative Inquiry". 13.

<sup>173</sup> “Taonga” is a Maori word meaning “treasure” or “something prized” be it tangible or intangible. John C Moorfield, "Maori Dictionary," Te Whanake, [www.maoridictionary.co.nz/index.cfm?dictionaryKeywords=taonga](http://www.maoridictionary.co.nz/index.cfm?dictionaryKeywords=taonga). Accessed 10 April 2013.

<sup>174</sup> Lal, Suto and Ungar, "Combining Grounded Theory and Narrative Inquiry". 4-5.

<sup>175</sup> Paul Atkinson, "Narrative Turn or Blind Alley?" *Qualitative Health Research* 7, no. 3 (1997): 343.

<sup>176</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 322.

assessment of those experiences provided a description of what had occurred, but did not “capture all the nuances” of the experiences shared.<sup>177</sup>

To reiterate: I addressed grounded theory’s danger of losing the unique nature of stories by being attentive to the principles of narrative research. In turn, critical realism provided a frame for me to address the potential weakness of a narrative approach by being aware that narratives are performances, rather than strictly accurate accounts.

### *Contextual nature of data*

Sometimes contextual elements can be overlooked in grounded theory as the data are broken open. At a macro level, I addressed this by selecting research participants who shared the common context of having come from no church background to embracing the Christian faith. At a micro level, I sought to keep the entirety of their stories in mind even as I coded their data. The small sample size helped, as I could remember details of all the participants’ stories.

### *Simplified conclusions*

Grounded theory has also been critiqued because of having “a tendency to produce simplified representations of complex phenomena.”<sup>178</sup> While this is sometimes the case, it is generally indicative of poor research processes. The constant comparison technique enables broader understandings to resource the discoveries being uncovered in the data.<sup>179</sup> As I demonstrate in the coming chapters, the substantive theory of conversion I discovered would not be classified as simplified.

### *Restricting interpretation*

Some consider that a rigorously applied grounded theory methodology can inhibit the interpretive aspects essential to qualitative analysis.<sup>180</sup> I followed the guidelines in relation to grounded theory as carefully as I was able, to ensure that mine was a genuinely ‘grounded theory’ study. But I was aware that grounded theory is an intuitive process, rather than a legalistic one: a process that required flexibility as well as careful attention.<sup>181</sup>

Being aware of the criticisms and potential weaknesses of grounded theory helped ensure I addressed them in my research. I used the principles of grounded theory rigorously. This included being flexible and responsive to where the data was taking me, rather than bound

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<sup>177</sup> Oliver, "Critical Realist Grounded Theory," 374.

<sup>178</sup> Lal, Suto and Ungar, "Combining Grounded Theory and Narrative Inquiry". 13.

<sup>179</sup> Suddaby, "What Grounded Theory Is Not," 636.

<sup>180</sup> Lal, Suto and Ungar, "Combining Grounded Theory and Narrative Inquiry". 13.

<sup>181</sup> Charmaz writes of “playing” with data. Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 70-71.

by a strict series of steps. The extant literature increased my theoretical sensitivity and, together with the empirical data and my memos, provided rich fodder for the constant comparisons essential to grounded theory. I used the strengths of narrative inquiry to ensure I did not lose sight of the context and entirety of the participants' stories. Thus, I addressed these concerns and undertook a genuine grounded theory project, that resulted in a substantive theory grounded in the lived experiences of research participants, and resourced by extant theory.

### **Grounded theory was an appropriate methodology**

This section has described grounded theory and outlined why it was a very appropriate methodology to use to address my research question of why people are becoming Christians in Australia today. The key reasons are as follows: First, as religious conversion is a highly complex phenomenon, grounded theory provided a rigorous way to investigate this qualitatively. Secondly, there are many theories of religious conversion from the broad disciplines of theology and social science. A grounded theory approach meant one theory was not reflected on to the exclusion of others. Rather, grounded theory provided a methodological framework by which a substantive theory of why people become Christians today could be developed. Similarly, grounded theory also enabled me to address gaps in the literature relating to a lack of emphasis within social science on the reasons *why* people convert; and a lack of empirical research reflecting theological reasons for conversion. Thirdly, grounded theory is a useful methodology when studying contextually rich data, such as religious conversion.<sup>182</sup> Using the methodology of grounded theory, with critical realism as a philosophical framing, enabled me to discover, or uncover, a substantive grounded theory about conversion that "connects to people's lived experience and also provides explanation and sense-making."<sup>183</sup>

### **Research method**

The following section describes my research method or procedure. The research tools I used, and the process by which the research occurred, was in keeping with a critical realist approach to grounded theory. They were the most appropriate tools and process by which to address my research question, "Why are people becoming Christians in Australia today?" While the steps are sometimes recorded here sequentially, data generation and analysis

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<sup>182</sup> Kempster and Parry, "Grounded Theory and Leadership Research," 117.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

occurred concurrently, in keeping with the iterative nature of my grounded theory methodology.<sup>184</sup> As much as possible, therefore, I report the research process as it unfolded.

## **Limitations**

This project had two major limits imposed by others. First, it is a doctoral thesis and, therefore, limited to 100,000 words. Secondly, the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee of Flinders University of South Australia (SBREC) imposed recruitment restrictions, which limited participation. These limitations are discussed in the forthcoming Ethics section, and in Chapter 12.

## **Delimitations**

The primary data generation for this research was delimited to adults who have converted to Christian faith in the past two years, so comprise only Christians. They were all newcomers to Christian faith; they were Australians who spoke English as their first language; and they were over eighteen years of age.

In addition, only people who had made their way into church were likely to hear of and, therefore, participate in the research. Only churches with five or more people meeting the criteria were initially contacted by NCLS Research.<sup>185</sup>

A further delimitation that must be noted is that my research concerned itself with conversion narratives, rather than “testimonies of imitation and vocation.”<sup>186</sup> Thus, the research considers how people came to become followers of Jesus, but does not focus explicitly on how that reorientation impacted their ongoing lives. That said, where participants did name consequences of conversion in their interviews, I report on that.

## **Running a pilot interview**

Following the acceptance of my research proposal, I ran a pilot interview to test my proposed questionnaire.<sup>187</sup> Rich data were revealed and the participant was positive about the experience of being interviewed and the way the questions I asked elicited the full story of her conversion. I did not make any changes to the proposed questions after this pilot interview.

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<sup>184</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 10.

<sup>185</sup> I explain my recruitment procedure in the section on recruitment and selection, below.

<sup>186</sup> Alan Jacobs, *Looking before and After: Testimony and the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B Eerdmans, 2008), 10.

<sup>187</sup> This was in May 2013.

## **Ethics**

Ethics approval was granted by the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee of Flinders University of South Australia (SBREC). The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research names respect for human beings, research merit and integrity, justice, and beneficence as essential values in ethical research.<sup>188</sup> These were upheld in my research in the following ways.

In terms of merit and integrity, my project contributes to the body of knowledge on conversion, uses an appropriate methodology and builds on existing knowledge. As to justice, I clearly communicated with the potential participants and did not demand too much of them, just one 45 to 90-minute interview, plus the opportunity to review the transcript of the interview. Results of the research project will be made available through a range of publication methods, including being available to the participants. Regarding beneficence, I anticipated that participants would be happy to share their conversion stories, but was aware that painful memories could have been recalled. I was prepared to stop the interview if participants did become upset. One participant clearly had some ongoing issues, and I ensured she had someone appropriate to talk to after the interview. I also followed up with her, personally taking her transcript to her so she could review it. This gave me the opportunity to check her wellbeing. The conversion narratives of all participants were respected and treasured. I carefully ensured participant's conversion accounts were heard, recorded and reported respectfully. While the small number of participants made anonymity impossible to guarantee, participants' details were kept confidential and names and some other details changed to preserve anonymity as much as possible.

## **Data storage**

Transcripts (audio and hard copy) were stored in a locked filing cabinet in an office at the Adelaide College of Divinity (the theology campus of Flinders University) and in my home office. All computer files were stored on a password-protected laptop, with backup files stored in a locked cabinet. Now the thesis is completed, data files will be stored at an approved Flinders University site, as per the requirements of the ethics committee.

## **Interviewing**

I began my data generation by interviewing people who had recently become Christians. I used semi-structured interviews to explore their experiences around conversion. It was

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<sup>188</sup> National Health Medical Research Council, *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007), 11-13.

necessary to interview people directly rather than rely on published sources in order to gather the specific information in the same general format. This enabled me to develop a grounded theory about why previously unchurched people are becoming Christians in Australia today.<sup>189</sup> This section describes the process by which I recruited, selected and interviewed participants.

### **Recruitment and selection**

I sought to identify twelve people to interview. I adopted a purposive sampling approach where participants were selected based on their *relevance* to the topic under investigation and their *knowledge* and experience of conversion.<sup>190</sup> Thus, participants were recruited and selected based on their recent conversion to Christianity, while having had no, or a very minimal, Christian upbringing.<sup>191</sup>

My initial recruitment strategy was to use the services of NCLS Research to approach churches with a high number (or proportion) of likely converts.<sup>192</sup> I had realised that cross-tabulating three questions from the 2011 National Church Life Survey (NCLS) would enable us to identify churches with a high proportion of people who had not attended church five years ago; who had experienced much growth in their faith in the past twelve months; and who now attended church at least monthly. Together, these three variables provided the best indication of churches that had new converts to Christianity. Therefore, I approached NCLS Research and they identified twenty-seven urban or regional South Australian (SA) churches with high numbers (or proportions) of converts, based on responses to those questions.

Director, Dr Ruth Powell reported the procedure they used as follows:

Starting with 2011 NCLS data, we calculated a new variable identifying newcomers to church life in the past five years, who had had much growth in faith in the past year, and who attended church generally at least monthly. The data was then aggregated to give church-level data, i.e. the proportion of each church's attenders that met the above criteria. From knowing this proportion and the overall number of attenders at each church, the number of attenders meeting the above criteria were calculated. From this national database of churches, only SA churches were selected, and only those churches that were classified as urban or regional (not rural). From this list,

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<sup>189</sup> See also, Edwin D Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Study into the Growth of Religious Consciousness*, 3rd ed. (London: Walter Scott, 1911), 22.

<sup>190</sup> Denscombe, *Good Research Guide*, 34-35.

<sup>191</sup> Cucchiari was aware that a convert he interviewed may have "told [a different] story one year after her conversion as she did six years after the event" when he interviewed her. Salvatore Cucchiari, "Adapted for Heaven': Conversion and Culture in Western Sicily," *American Ethnologist* 15, no. 3 (1988): 429. See also, Zinnbauer and Pargament, "Spiritual Conversion," 176-178.

<sup>192</sup> I was aware that Ian Hussey had successfully used a similar approach in his research on newcomers to Australian churches Ian Hussey, "The Engagement of Newcomers in Church Attendance" (PhD, Australian Catholic University, 2010).

only those churches with five or more newcomers meeting the above criteria were chosen, forming a final list of 27 SA churches of various denominations.<sup>193</sup>

In November 2013, NCLS Research contacted church leaders from those twenty-seven churches, sending them a request for assistance and information about my research.<sup>194</sup>

Researchers generally find people very willing to share their stories of conversion to Christianity. Such sharing is a central ritual of the Christian faith: an opportunity to celebrate and reaffirm that faith.<sup>195</sup> Therefore, I anticipated that it would be relatively easy to recruit my twelve participants. In reality, it proved more difficult than expected, for two main reasons: First, I limited my potential pool of participants to those who had become Christians in the past two years; and, secondly, because of restrictions placed by the SEBRC.

Interviewing people new to Christianity ensured that participants had experienced limited opportunity to reinterpret their conversion experiences in the light of subsequent theological reflection or narrative norms. This kept their telling of their experiences around conversion as 'fresh' as possible.<sup>196</sup> It is not possible to study religious experience, only retrospective accounts of that experience. When the experience and the telling of that experience are temporally separated, "The experience and its expression can be very loosely coupled indeed."<sup>197</sup> Therefore, I was keen to keep the experience and the telling as temporally close as possible.

The SBREC was concerned about possible coercion from ministers approaching potential participants directly, and about ensuring anonymity of participants when my findings were written up. Therefore, they imposed restrictions, requiring amendments to my initial ethics application. Churches could only place notices on noticeboards and in newsletters. Ministers were not permitted to make direct approaches to potential participants. Potential participants

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<sup>193</sup> Ruth Powell, Email, "Letters to Churches Have Gone Out", 8 November 2013.

<sup>194</sup> Churches from the following denominations were approached: Anglican, Baptist, C3, Churches of Christ, CRC, Lutheran, Catholic and Uniting Church. The documents sent out are shown in the following appendices: Appendix 2: The NCLS Research letter; Appendix 3: Letter of Introduction; Appendix 4: Information Sheet; Appendix 5: Sample newsletter advertisement; Appendix 6: Sample noticeboard advertisement.

<sup>195</sup> Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation*, 3; Allison Berg, "How I Was Saved: Christian Faith Narratives in Contemporary Society" (MA, Marquette University, 2012), i; Cecilia Castillo Ayometzi, "Storying as Becoming: Identity through the Telling of Conversion," in *Selves and Identities in Narrative and Discourse*, ed. Michael Bamberg, Anna De Fina, and Deborah Schiffrin (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2007), 43.

<sup>196</sup> See Chapter 1 for a brief discussion of narrative reconstruction.

<sup>197</sup> David Yamane, "Narrative and Religious Experience," *Sociology of Religion* 61, no. 2 (2000): 175. I was aware that I could potentially have extended critical realism's three layers to five: a fourth layer being hermeneutic – how the experience was interpreted – and a fifth layer, narrative – how they then spoke about that experience. But rather than formalise such a categorisation I opted to simply remind myself that what participants described was an interpretation, and then communication, of what they had experienced.

needed to contact me directly. I was not permitted to approach people who had expressed a willingness to be involved to a third party. This achieved the stated aim of avoiding potential coercion and ensuring anonymity for the participants. However, it also added an onus on the potential participant. They needed to be the one initiating contact with me, when they may have perceived they had already consented by indicating to someone else their willingness to participate.<sup>198</sup> Both these factors made recruitment more difficult.

In the initial round, just one potential participant approached me, and a fruitful interview was undertaken. Around that time, I was approached by church leaders and administrative staff from at least four of the twenty-seven churches contacted by NCLS Research. Each indicated their willingness to inform others about my research.<sup>199</sup> But despite this willingness, and, at least in part, because it was not possible for these people to inform potential participants directly, no further participants were forthcoming. At the same time, I was conversing with others who indicated they knew people who met the criteria, whom they considered may be interested in participating in my research. But there was no mechanism for such people to hear about the research unless they happened to attend a church where there was a notice about my research on the noticeboard or in the church newsletter.

In March 2014, aware this recruitment strategy was flawed, I submitted an amendment to my ethics application. I sought permission to place an advertisement on the internet. Upon receiving permission, I established a Facebook page, placed my information sheet in a publicly accessible location on the internet and emailed this information to people who had previously indicated they knew potential participants.<sup>200</sup> This revision attracted one further respondent immediately, and provided a mechanism by which I could inform and remind people about my research. A second minor amendment, in June 2014, granted permission to use Skype and telephone technologies, and to include Australian participants from beyond the state of South Australia.<sup>201</sup>

The Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide included an advertisement about the research in their July 2014 newspaper.<sup>202</sup> This yielded one participant who subsequently withdrew from the

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<sup>198</sup> On at least three occasions someone tried to give me the contact details of someone who had expressed to them a willingness to be interviewed. These people did not all contact me, and one was particularly insistent I contact them directly.

<sup>199</sup> I did not receive a list of churches so unless they specifically told me, I am not certain how the ministers I spoke with became aware of the research.

<sup>200</sup> [www.facebook.com/conversionresearch](http://www.facebook.com/conversionresearch) Accessed 31 March 2014. (Shown in Appendix 1).

<sup>201</sup> I did not end up interviewing anyone outside of South Australia.

<sup>202</sup> "Research into Conversion," *The Southern Cross*, July 2014, 24.



research.<sup>203</sup> Another potential participant, concerned about being recognised, opted not to participate.

When required, I administered a brief screening questionnaire with potential participants.<sup>204</sup> This ensured I interviewed only those who had recently converted to Christianity and did not include any who were simply affiliates or adherents.<sup>205</sup> All respondents 'passed' the screening questionnaire, as they had recently converted and now self-defined as 'Christian'. Interview times and locations were generally set during this screening phone call.<sup>206</sup>

### **Conduct interviews**

My data generation began with semi-structured interviews. Through these, I heard the participants' descriptions of their conversion experiences.

#### *Use of semi-structured interviews in grounded theory research*

Interviews are the most common qualitative method of data collection.<sup>207</sup> They are also frequently used as the primary mechanism for data generation in grounded theory.<sup>208</sup> I used semi-structured interviews as they are "ideally suited to experience-type research questions" such as my investigation of people's experiences around conversion.<sup>209</sup> Interviews permitted "an in-depth exploration" of the participants' experiences of becoming Christians.<sup>210</sup>

In semi-structured interviews, "the researcher has a list of questions but there is scope for the participants to raise issues that the researcher has not anticipated."<sup>211</sup> Therefore, semi-structured interviews are especially appropriate in the methodology of grounded theory, as the responses of participants guide the process of theory formation. Semi-structured interviews provide the flexibility to follow "where the conversation takes you," responding to what the data are revealing.<sup>212</sup> They enabled me, as researcher, to have a schema of

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<sup>203</sup> Claire withdrew on 2 September 2014 after the interview and transcription was completed, and analysis begun. Therefore, I had to remove her data and the codes that were unique to her from the NVivo database. I had interviewed her on 1 August 2014.

<sup>204</sup> The screening process is shown in Appendix 7. Potential participants who emailed me often gave sufficient introductory information meaning the screening questionnaire was not required.

<sup>205</sup> Henri Gooren, "Conversion Careers in Latin America: Entering and Leaving Church among Pentecostals, Catholics, and Mormons," in *Conversion of a Continent: Contemporary Religious Change in Latin America*, ed. Timothy J Steigenga and Edward L Cleary (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

<sup>206</sup> I wanted the option of allowing the exact order of interviews to be influenced by the data gathering and generation as they unfolded.

<sup>207</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners* (London: Sage, 2013), 77.

<sup>208</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 74.

<sup>209</sup> Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*, 81.

<sup>210</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 25.

<sup>211</sup> Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*, 78.

<sup>212</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 75.

potential topics to be addressed and questions to be answered, but to be very flexible about the order in which the issues were covered, and questions asked. More importantly, there was flexibility to develop different yet relevant ideas.<sup>213</sup> My role as interviewer was to coordinate or guide the conversation, with the “aim of generating fodder for the developing theory.”<sup>214</sup>

The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed me to ask for more detail, or explore parts of the story more thoroughly, and to ask about the thoughts, feelings or actions of the participant. There was opportunity to return to earlier points, and to check for accuracy by restating what the participant had said. Thus, key information could be explored more deeply to better uncover the gems that the participants were revealing.<sup>215</sup> As much as possible, however, I used a ‘stream of consciousness’ approach, letting participants tell their stories without interruption.<sup>216</sup>

### *Interview preparation and procedure*

Whenever possible, I undertook the interviews in person. This ensured I could observe the non-verbal cues which, along with verbal cues, gave clues into what would be the most appropriate path for the interview to take.<sup>217</sup> Seven interviews were held in person.

Participants who lived too far away to be interviewed personally were interviewed via Skype (two participants) and Skype-telephone (one participant).<sup>218</sup> All interviews were conducted at a location of the participant’s choice, ensuring it was somewhere they felt comfortable in.<sup>219</sup>

When beginning the interviews, I presumed that the experiences participants told me about would largely be positive ones or experiences that found some sort of positive resolution in their conversion to Christianity. Just one participant revealed deep unresolved pain. I used Kathy Charmaz’s four key principles for when painful or uncomfortable experiences were retold in interviews.<sup>220</sup> First, the comfort level of the participants’ is much more important than “obtaining juicy data” so I sought to hear their stories as they were comfortable to reveal them, rather than to uncover anything they did not want to reveal.<sup>221</sup> Secondly, I paid close

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<sup>213</sup> Denscombe, *Good Research Guide*, 175.

<sup>214</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 75.

<sup>215</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 26.

<sup>216</sup> Robert Atkinson, *The Life Story Interview*, vol. 44, *Qualitative Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA; London and New Delhi: Sage, 1998), 31.

<sup>217</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 75.

<sup>218</sup> I used telephone when Skype was unavailable as a technology. This participant later withdrew from the study. Those not interviewed in person all lived over 400 km from my home in Adelaide.

<sup>219</sup> Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*, 91. When we met personally, it was in their home, my home, or a meeting room at the Adelaide College of Divinity (Flinders University Theology Department).

<sup>220</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 30.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

attention for when to probe, and often just listened, allowing the story to unfold in ways that were comfortable and appropriate for the participants. On occasion, the information being imparted was not directly relevant to my research, but it was important for the participant to share it, so I allowed space for them to continue to speak. Thirdly, I sought to understand their experience from the participant's perspective and validate its significance to the person.<sup>222</sup> Finally, I ensured that ending questions were slanted towards positive responses so interviews would end positively.

Novice interviewers tend to "work through their often-extensive interview schedules in a rather 'bureaucratic' and mechanistic manner," which risks missing data or topics being revealed by participants.<sup>223</sup> I sought to avoid this first issue of the manner of the interview by being aware of the potential problem during each interview, and then reflecting afterwards on how I did. To address the second issue, I did two main things. First, I chose to keep a deliberately open mind and tried to develop as broad a theoretical sensitivity as possible by reading widely. Secondly, when it came to coding, I coded the initial interviews very extensively, deliberately seeking to open up rather than close down what was being revealed. Even as codes and categories became clearer, I retained a focus on the totality of each narrative.

Instead of aiming for an objective detachment, I acknowledged that the "interviewer plays an active role in the interview, co-constructing meaning with the participant."<sup>224</sup> To this end, it was important that participants knew that I was a Christian. Therefore, as part of the introduction to my research I stated that I was a Christian who was interested in better understanding how God is at work in Australia today.<sup>225</sup> In doing this, I also sought to build rapport and help the participant feel at ease.<sup>226</sup> At the beginning of each interview, I also thanked them for participating, introduced my research, including ensuring they had reviewed the 'Information Sheet' and 'Letter of Introduction'. I asked if they had any questions, before getting their consent forms signed.<sup>227</sup>

Due to the iterative nature of grounded theory research, I anticipated that the questions used, and the way they were asked, may change throughout the project. I was therefore

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<sup>222</sup> Swinburne, *Existence*, 304.

<sup>223</sup> Katja Mruck and Günter Mey, "Grounded Theory and Reflexivity," in *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (London: Sage, 2007), 522.

<sup>224</sup> Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*, 79.

<sup>225</sup> It was also crucial that I considered how my "practices and values may have shaped the data produced" as I am aware that being a person of Christian faith also impacted upon how I heard and analysed the data. *Ibid.*

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>227</sup> The consent form is shown in Appendix 8.

flexible in my approach.<sup>228</sup> I was also aware that early participants may need to be recontacted to be asked questions that came to be understood as important in later interviews. I confirmed specific details with three participants after the interviews.

I acted as a guide through the interviews, being both flexible and responsive and, above all, listening well.<sup>229</sup> I was aware that “listening is listening, not interpretation.”<sup>230</sup> Narrative researcher, Robert Atkinson, sees interviews as having the potential to change both listener and teller. He also reminds the researcher of the privilege it is to listen to another’s story. This was very clear as I had the privilege of listening to people share their conversion stories. The potential for the interview process to change the participant was most evident in Olivia’s story. She concluded at the end of the interview, “Obviously, I picked up as we were going through [the interview], that my overriding thing has been seeing how God has worked in other people’s life to eventually draw me to God.”<sup>231</sup> It was fascinating to watch this dawn on Olivia as we explored her conversion story together in the interview.

I developed and used a guided and flexible set of questions that sought to draw out the participants’ conversion narratives, helping me discover what drew them to become Christians. As I developed the questions, I was attentive to three main resources. First, I had become aware of a suite of “Grounded theory interview questions” that Charmaz outlined.<sup>232</sup> I used the style and form of these questions to develop my own. Secondly, from reading the literature about conversion, I had developed a conceptual diagram illustrating potential push and pull factors in conversion (Figure 2.1). Thirdly, Zinnbauer and Pargament had developed a “Motivation for change” schema, which I included among my questions.<sup>233</sup> I developed my interview questions aware of these three resources.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 75.

<sup>229</sup> Atkinson, *Life Story Interview*, 34.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Olivia, interview by Lynne Taylor, 5 September, 2014.

<sup>232</sup> Kathy Charmaz, "Qualitative Interviewing and Grounded Theory Analysis," in *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 679-680. In fact, it was my discovery of these questions, that so resonated with what I was attempting to discover, that first made me aware of the methodology of grounded theory.

<sup>233</sup> Zinnbauer and Pargament, "Spiritual Conversion," 180.

<sup>234</sup> The interview procedure and questions are shown in Appendix 9.

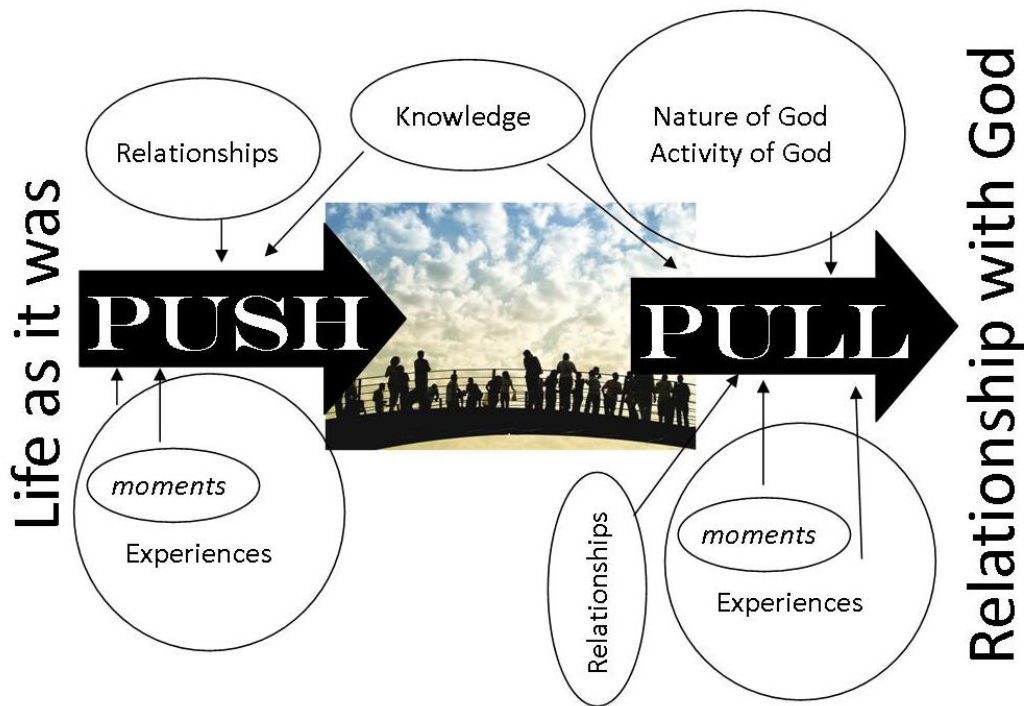


Figure 2.1: Potential push and pull factors in conversion

During the interviews, it was important to keep my research questions at the forefront of my mind, to ensure the data generated was of value to my research, rather than just being interesting. At times, it was appropriate to move the conversation on to ensure we stayed on track. But at other times, as mentioned above, I allowed information unlikely to be relevant to my study to be shared as it was important for the participant to articulate it.

The interviews were audio recorded. After each interview, I wrote field notes that included notable details of interview, such as the physical environment and any interruptions that had occurred. At that time, I also recorded my immediate responses to the data along with relevant non-verbal cues from the participant. After each interview, I listened to the recording and made preliminary notes, both in relation to the data being generated and, particularly initially, to improve my interviewing technique.<sup>235</sup>

#### *Pausing the interview data generation*

The interviews were held between March and December 2014. By the end of 2014, I had completed ten interviews. Following Claire's withdrawal, I was left with nine interview transcripts that I had permission to use. While I had originally hoped for twelve respondents,

<sup>235</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 182.

the themes were already becoming clear. Therefore, I decided to spend the summer further analysing the data that had been generated, and later to assess the need for further data.

### ***Transcription of interviews***

I transcribed the interviews as soon as possible afterwards, using 'Transcription Buddy' software.<sup>236</sup> This program enables the transcriber to easily control the recording, setting 'Playback', 'Pause' and 'Step back' parameters that automatically pause and rewind the recording as it is playing. This technology greatly assisted the process of transcribing each interview. Completing the transcription between interviews helped me reflect on, and improve, my interviewing technique. When requested, I returned transcribed interviews to participants for them to check for accuracy. This also allowed them to note any personal or potentially identifying information they did not want included in publications.<sup>237</sup> Speech from the interviews has generally been quoted verbatim, with only major disfluencies and grammatical errors removed to enhance the ease of reading.<sup>238</sup>

### **Analysis**

In the Methodology section, I outlined how grounded theory analysis is undertaken. This section describes the specifics of my analysis process. Several "rules", taken from Glaser's work guided my coding.<sup>239</sup> I kept my research question at the forefront of my mind while coding.<sup>240</sup> This focus helped ensure I became neither distracted nor overwhelmed by the data. I asked when coding, "What is happening in the data?"<sup>241</sup> Once categories had been identified, I asked, "What category does this incident indicate?"<sup>242</sup> I analysed the data line by line, pausing to memo ideas that occurred to me during the coding process. I engaged in this line by line coding throughout the entire analysis process.

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<sup>236</sup> [www.libertyrecording.com/TB\\_main.htm](http://www.libertyrecording.com/TB_main.htm) Accessed 1 August 2014.

<sup>237</sup> Wertz et al., *Five Ways*, 7.

<sup>238</sup> Katherine Bischooping, "Quote, Unquote: From Transcript to Text in Ethnographic Research," in *Doing Ethnography. Studying Everyday Life*, ed. Dorothy Pawluch, William Shaffir, and Charlene Miall (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2005), 144.

<sup>239</sup> Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity*, 56-61.

<sup>240</sup> At the beginning of the project, when I presented my research proposal, my research question was: "In what ways do new Christians describe their experiences of turning to God?" Three sub-questions were: 1. Why do people turn to God? 2. What are the internal/external/supernatural factors at work in individuals' experiences of turning to God? 3. Is there any pattern or process common to individuals as they convert to Christianity? Later, I was delighted that my primary research question was able to change to be more overtly about discovering: "Why are unchurched people in Australia becoming Christians today?" My sub-questions were: What processes happen for people as they journey towards a relationship with God? What is the role of other Christians in the journey to Christian faith? How is God at work in this process of faith-finding? This change was possible because the data itself was revealing *why* people were becoming Christians, not just recording their descriptions.

<sup>241</sup> Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity*, 57.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

Therefore, after transcribing each interview, I began coding, seeking to discover common themes about why people convert to Christianity in Australia today and, ultimately, to discover a theory that provided explanations for those experiences. Coding between interviews meant responses from those already interviewed, and the emerging theory, had the potential to focus and inform the questions asked of future participants. I initially coded 106 nodes to the first transcript, which was Sarah's. While clearly unwieldy, this was a necessary first step in the analysis process. At this earliest stage, I did not know what the data was revealing and needed to code widely. I have included all these original nodes in Appendix 10, and present those beginning with the letters a, b and c in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2: Sarah's initial nodes

Node	Frequency
Accept other people	1
Acceptance	1
Acceptance of self	1
All the weight had lifted	1
Baptism	1
Baptism as gift	1
Because of the Lord's support	2
Being taught by God	2
Beyond words	1
Bible	4
Blaming God	2
Bring you back	1
Character of God	1
Christian family [her grandson]	6
Christian friend	9
Christian practices	10
Church involvement	2
Connection	1
Consistency in encouraging faith development	4
Contented	1
Coping with negative life experiences	1
Couldn't see	2

After this initial coding of Sarah's interview, I paused the coding process as I waited on more interviews. I was reading widely, particularly about secularisation and grounded theory. In August 2014, I applied for, and was upgraded from, a Masters to a PhD.

Between July 4 and September 9, 2014, I conducted six more interviews, balancing transcription and beginning analysis. In early September, I printed the 390 nodes I had identified to date, and began tentatively grouping them into categories, which I coded with coloured symbols.<sup>243</sup>

'Becoming a better person'; 'becoming myself'; and 'seeing things differently' were already becoming apparent as significant categories. As well as coding directly into NVivo, I experimented with coding a printout of Luke's transcript. It did not reveal anything that coding directly in NVivo had not.

Around this time, I spent two weeks away from my computer and, as well as holidaying, I took the opportunity to listen to the recordings of the interviews again and to write and draw conceptual diagrams as I listened. This helped ensure I did not lose sight of the entirety of the narratives as I broke the data apart for analysis.<sup>244</sup>

As I prepared to present a paper on my research at the *Urban Life Together* conference in Melbourne in October 2014, I realised there were some 'surprising' elements absent from the data. I wrote my paper attentive to those missing elements and to what seemed to be replacing them.<sup>245</sup>

I added a 'sense of belonging'; and a 'sense of knowing' to my developing categories. I also realised that some action was required on the converts part towards accepting what God was offering. 'Appealing' other Christians who issued invitations were crucial. I recognised the conversion process was both 'natural' and 'supernatural' and coined the word super/natural to express this juxtaposition. I wondered to my supervisors whether I would need to complete all twelve interviews as themes were already becoming clear.

I attempted a conceptual diagram to express the learnings to date (see Figure 2.2). However, I realised this was not capturing the entirety of the discoveries.

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<sup>243</sup> Unfortunately, I had already printed them out and begun this process of categorising when Claire withdrew from the study. Therefore, I needed to identify and remove nodes I had printed that had only been assigned to her.

<sup>244</sup> My conceptualisation of Luke's interview is shown in Appendix 11.

<sup>245</sup> I discuss this further in Chapter 8.



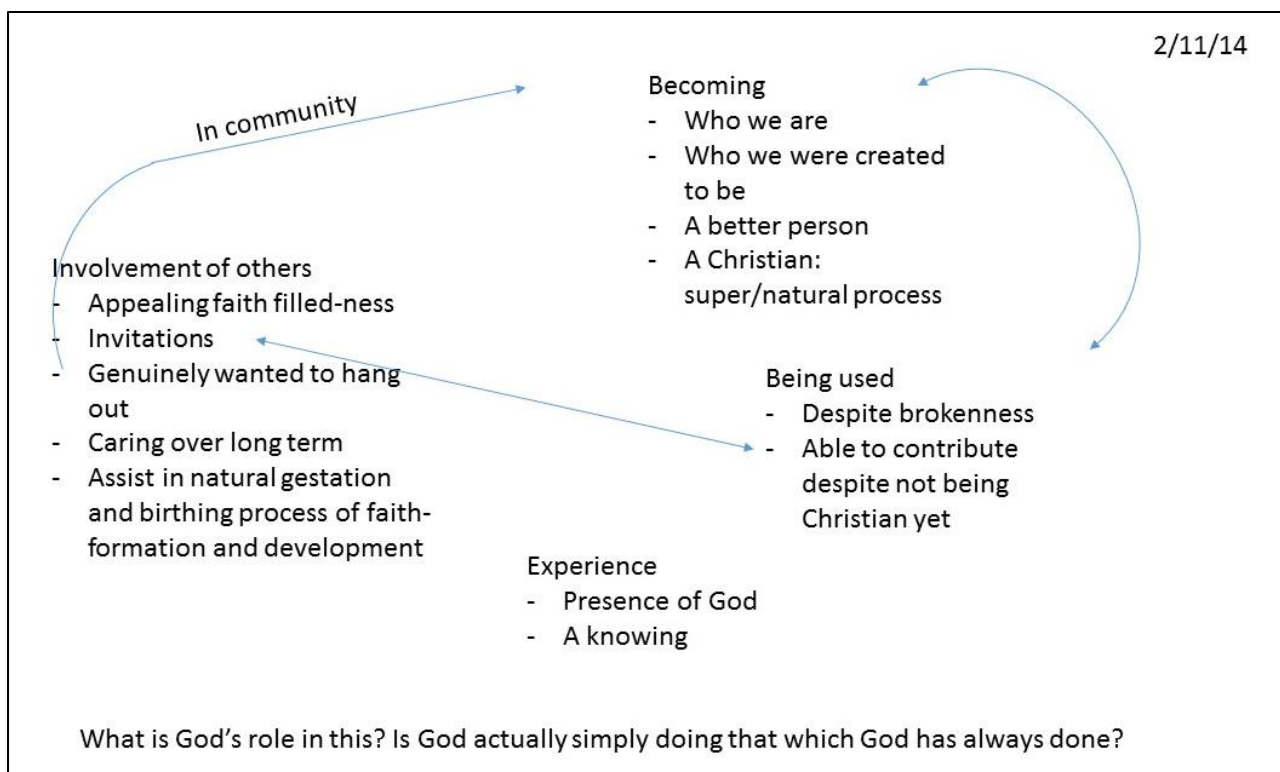


Figure 2.2: Conceptual diagram attempt, 2 November 2014

A memo I wrote the next day noted,

One of my sticking points has been the fact that my early nodes seem to sometimes fit in more than one place when creating my node structure. Therefore, I am asking myself, "What is the most important thing about this node?" and, where necessary, assigning text to multiple nodes.

*For example:*

Prayer is a form of "Christian Practice" and therefore is coded under [that heading].

However, Jean being INVITED to pray with her friend is most importantly an "invitation", though praying with her also comes in as "Prayers being answered" (as they were).

I could have called "Prayers being answered", "God at work", but "Prayers being answered" is much more specific.

Links need to be acknowledged between the nodes that are not arranged in tree-relationships. I am still not certain how this is done.<sup>246</sup>

I had earlier noted that:

NVivo only allows for hierarchical relationships between nodes and categories, where often my nodes can be assigned to more than one category. Am I coding badly?

<sup>246</sup> Research memo, 3 November 2014.

Should I be able to assign a higher-level category, or is there methodological room for some sort of weaving, whether or not that is possible within NVivo.<sup>247</sup>

I opted to continue to code the same data to multiple nodes if that seemed best. I also started coding directly to the categories I had developed. I recoded earlier interviews to these intermediate codes. As I wrote in a memo on 3 November 2014:

I have reached a stage where my initial coding now seems unwieldy and challenging. It is highly complex and contains loads of nodes that seem to interrelate with one another.

As well as breaking the data down by coding, I have been reading and listening to transcripts again, taking a more macro approach to the stories of faith-finding that I have been uncovering.

Coding should be a tool that serves me and my data, not something that is tying me in knots. [At the same time] I also have concepts that are developing nicely.

Therefore, I am considering coding my next interviews directly (but not exclusively) for the developing concepts. This would enable me to see if they are as present as I suspect they are, and if there is large tracts of data uncoded by them.

My concern is that I will lose the richness of the data. But what I am doing at the moment is not sustainable, and is not helping the data to be more ordered and more easily used.

I am going to code one interview in this way and see what happens...

Satisfied with the success of this approach, I sorted the existing codes into categories.

I also attempted different ways of conceptualising the data. I explored four categories: Becoming; Belonging; Knowing; and Seeing things differently. I was reading in each of these areas, attempting to understand what was happening for those I interviewed. I noted, "These [four categories] all seem to be experiential. Is there any[thing] cognitive in any of them?"<sup>248</sup> I had already identified the importance of affect although, at that stage, I did not realise its significance.

I reported the following to my supervisors:

This research seems to be identifying four interrelated themes and categories that help us to understand why people are becoming Christians today.

First, there was a sense of "becoming." Put most simply, people were seen to be becoming "themselves"; becoming whom they were created to be. There is clear

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<sup>247</sup> Research memo, 30 October 2014.

<sup>248</sup> Post-it note, November 2014

resonance here with Kierkegaard's work on the self, and how one can only truly find oneself in God.<sup>249</sup>

Secondly, a sense of belonging was hugely critical for new Christians. The most settled Christians had found a strong sense of belonging within a Christian church community. Other participants expressed a longing for such a sense of belonging or community.

Thirdly, participants prioritised a sense of "knowing" over any cognitive "understanding." When it came down to it, they simply "knew." They found it difficult to find words to describe the process; it was more than there was a connection on a deep level and they found themselves in a place that "made sense." Similarly, it seems that "believing" may need to be viewed differently than it is currently; as more holistic and less cognitive. I need to explore Abby Day's work on believing. Somewhere along the road to [the] Enlightenment we reduced belief to an intellectual embracing of a set of propositions, rather than something that affects us on some level deeper than the purely cognitive.

Fourthly, a result of their newfound faith was that they saw things differently.<sup>250</sup>

Significantly, by this stage I had separated out the roles of each agent: God, the convert and other Christians. I (rather optimistically) sketched a framework for my results and discussion chapters (see Appendix 12). I sorted my nodes down to twenty-two major (parent) codes (see Appendix 13).<sup>251</sup> I printed these parent nodes and their dependents out and began reflecting on each one.

The next few weeks were spent completing interviews, transcribing, coding and reconceptualising my data. I continued to reflect on entire transcripts as well as coding the data apart.

At that time, the highlighters and post-it notes came out. I used the parent codes I had identified above as a starting point for secondary coding directly onto printed copies of the transcripts. This proved to be an essential step towards clarifying the data.

Having done this, I devised a very complicated conceptual framework, which served as a necessary step towards clarity (see Appendix 14). I was still attempting to place all the data on one single plane: to devise a model that captured the entity of the process, as well as the role of each of the agents within that process, and the affects converts were experiencing. Yet I was also aware that each agent had distinct roles to play.

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<sup>249</sup> I am referring here to Daphne Hampson's work on Kierkegaard. Daphne Hampson, *Christian Contradictions: The Structures of Lutheran and Catholic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>250</sup> Report to supervisors, 19 November 2014.

<sup>251</sup> With their dependents, there were over 300 nodes.

It was significant to reach a point in late January 2015 where I had identified five key themes, each with subthemes. These are shown in Figure 2.3.

**A: The five themes (and their sub-themes) are as follows**

- 1) Having an initial awareness of Christianity (or God) that was positive or appealing
  - a) Being exposed to Christianity
  - b) Christians being appealing in some way
  - c) This initial awareness may include actively seeking to know more about Christianity or spirituality
- 2) Experiencing a trigger, which may be associated with
  - a) Challenging life experiences and/or
  - b) A dissatisfaction with life as it was
- 3) Receiving an invitation, and having a reason to accept it
  - a) Being invited to engage in spiritual practices
  - b) Having a reason (or excuse) to accept invitation (this links with item 5 below)
- 4) Encountering Christianity as something that is positive
  - a) As Christians
    - i) Act differently
      - (1) Passionate
      - (2) Caring
    - ii) Share openly
    - iii) Provide a sense of welcome, community, warmth or belonging
  - b) Having a positive experience of church
  - c) Having opportunities to
    - i) Use gifts and talents
    - ii) Become a better person/become who they are
  - d) Being allowed to have questions or doubts: there being room for complexity
  - e) Experiencing something supernatural
  - f) Experiencing a sense of
    - i) Knowing
    - ii) Feeling right
    - iii) Feeling at home
    - iv) Making sense
    - v) Yearning/wanting more
    - vi) Seeing differently
  - g) Experiencing God as
    - i) Making a difference in people's lives
    - ii) Powerful
    - iii) Loving
- 5) Making a series of decisions
  - a) To engage in spiritual practices
  - b) To go deeper
  - c) To live better
  - d) To keep saying, "Yes".

*Figure 2.3: Five themes, 20 January 2015*

However, it was clearly still unwieldy. I tried two more conceptualisations (shown in Figure 2.4 and Figure 2.5). I linked the new framework back to the paper-based codes and itemised which participants I had already coded to each category. The strength of these categories is demonstrated in the saturation indicated by the ticks (see Figure 2.6).

**B: Nine themes (and subthemes)**

- 1) God being at work in deep ways, causing
  - a) Super/natural encounters with God (empirical)
  - b) Yearning/wanting more (actual)
  - c) Knowing/Feeling right/making sense (actual)
  - d) Feeling at home/sense of homecoming (actual)
  - e) Seeing differently (actual)
- 2) Having an initial awareness of Christianity (or God) that was positive or appealing
  - a) Being exposed to Christianity
  - b) Christians being appealing in some way
  - c) This initial awareness may include actively seeking to know more about Christianity or spirituality
- 3) Experiencing a trigger or catalyst, which may be associated with
  - a) Challenging life experiences and/or
  - b) A dissatisfaction with life as it was
- 4) Receiving an invitation, and having a reason to accept it
  - a) Being invited to engage in spiritual practices
  - b) Having a reason (or excuse) to accept invitation (this links with item 5 below)
- 5) Encountering a faith that
  - a) Relates to everyday life/resonates
  - b) Makes a difference in people's lives
  - c) Helps people
    - i) Live better
    - ii) Become who they are
  - d) Has room for doubts and questions, complexity
- 6) Encountering Christians who
  - a) Act differently
    - i) Passionate
    - ii) Caring
  - b) Share openly
  - c) Provide a sense of welcome, community, warmth or belonging
- 7) Experiencing God as
  - a) Making a difference in people's lives
  - b) Powerful
  - c) Loving
- 8) Engaging in Christian practices (and being resourced to do so)
  - a) Attending church (and having a positive experience: feeling/resonance)
  - b) Reading the Bible
  - c) Praying
  - d) Fellowship
  - e) Worship
  - f) Using gifts
  - g) Sharing faith
- 9) All in good (God's?) time
  - a) Process takes time
  - b) Making series of decisions.

Figure 2.4: Nine themes, 17 February 2015

**C: And then a third way of looking at it:**

- 1) Having an initial awareness of Christianity (or God) that was positive or appealing
  - a) Being exposed to Christianity
  - b) Christians being appealing in some way
  - c) This initial awareness may include actively seeking to know more about Christianity or spirituality
- 2) Experiencing a trigger, which may be associated with
  - a) Challenging life experiences and/or
  - b) A dissatisfaction with life as it was
- 3) Receiving an invitation, and having a reason to accept it
  - a) Being invited to engage in spiritual practices
  - b) Having a reason (or excuse) to accept invitation (this links with item 5 below)
- 4) Engaging in spiritual practices (and being appropriately resourced to do so)
  - a) Going to church, *and experiencing that as*
    - i) *Welcoming (out-in/Christians)*
    - ii) *Engaging/resonating/relevant (in-out/God)*
  - b) Enjoying fellowship (hanging out) with Christians
    - i) *Who are (positively) different (passionate/caring)*
    - ii) *Who share openly*
    - iii) *Who help create an environment of welcome/warmth/belonging*
  - c) Reading the Bible
  - d) Praying
  - e) *Being allowed to have doubts/questions/room for complexity*
  - f) Using gifts
  - g) *Saying "Yes"*
  - h) Sharing faith
- 5) In God's/good time
- 6) Resulting in them
  - a) Becoming who they are/living better
  - b) Having a sense of knowing/rightness/making sense
  - c) Seeing differently
  - d) Feeling at home
- 7) Where is the God-stuff in this?
  - a) Supernatural
  - b) Making a difference
  - c) Attributes: Powerful/loving.

Figure 2.5: Seven themes, 18 February 2015

19-1-2015 (Linking new framework to paper-based codes)		G	H	J	L	M	MM	O	S	T
Other connections										
3	Inviting	✓	rich about	✓	✓	✓	richer invited	✓	✓	✓
1,4	Sharing	richer about			✓		✓	✓		✓
1,4	being supported		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
4	providing sense of care (warm, welcome help etc)		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Convert										
2	exp a trigger	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	been seeking / thinking about & wants to know			✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
1	expulve is identity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	engage in sp practices	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	the way of church	✓	✓	✓	✓	?	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	using gifts & abilities		✓	?	✓	?	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	desire to live better / <sup>with</sup> grace		✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
5	making decisions <sup>with</sup> grace	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	focus on presence		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
4	<del>...</del>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
3	having ideas to help / be	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	challenging idea / distribution	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Word										
4	knowing (atvatorga)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	
2,4	Supernatural coming		✓	?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	making choices & ppd lives	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓
4	seeing <del>...</del>		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
4	seeing deeply	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
4	knowing of word	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
4	knowing - aware / getting					✓	✓			✓

Figure 2.6: Linking new framework to paper-based coding<sup>252</sup>

<sup>252</sup> In this figure, 'M' is Meg, and 'MM' is Mary.

In late February 2015, I realised I needed to separate the agents and affects (Figure 2.7). This conceptualisation identified four dimensions, comprising three agents and one set of affects. I finally had a simple framework, yet one that enabled a rigorous and thorough examination of the data. I returned to NVivo to code specifically to these categories. The five elements that related to the convert became the first dimension of a model of conversion, while the affects experienced were the second dimension. The other agents – other Christians and God – were the third and fourth dimensions. They required much more conceptual and coding work, which I undertook over the coming months.

#### Four dimensions: three agents, plus one set of affects

##### Convert:

1. Has an initial exposure to Christianity
2. Experiences a trigger or catalyst (challenging life experience and/or dissatisfaction with life as it was)
3. Receives invitation/s to engage in spiritual practices (and has a reason/excuse to accept those invitations)
4. Engages in spiritual practices and is appropriately resourced to do so (attending church/reading the Bible/praying/fellowshipping/worshipping/baptism/spending time in devotional activity/small group/using gifts/sharing faith)
5. Makes a series of decisions: saying “Yes”

##### Other Christians:

1. Are perceived positively by converts
2. Are seen to be helped by their faith
3. Live differently as a result of their faith (passionate, caring)
4. Share openly with others including non-Christians
5. Are deeply hospitable
6. Allow room for doubts/questions/complexity in faith (cf Luke’s it’s difficult)

##### God:

1. Acts with super/natural experiences
2. Makes a difference in others’ lives
3. Is seen by convert to be powerful
4. Is seen by convert to be loving
5. Overall sense of divine timing (combo of readiness/desire and intervention)

##### Convert is affected:

1. Sense of relevance of faith to everyday life
2. Sense of resonance/knowing/feeling right/making sense
3. Feels welcome/warmth/belonging/sense of home-coming
4. Sense of yearning/wanting more
5. Wants to live better/become who they are
6. Sees things differently

Figure 2.7: Dimensions, agents and affects, 20 February 2015



At that time, it was also clear that I had sufficient data generated. I would not do any more interviews, and the quantitative phase I had initially thought would be required was also superfluous. It was better to continue to work with the existing data, analysing and interpreting it further, rather than adding more data.

I was continuing to read widely. For example, I had begun to explore Charles Taylor's work on secularisation which, in turn, introduced me to his writing on authenticity. I explored other theorists who considered non-cognitive ways of knowing, as well as recently published research on conversion.

I realised I needed to separate my results chapter into three separate chapters: one for each of the agents. Again, this helped me more clearly differentiate the process, agents and affects.

In July 2015, I presented a paper at the ANZATS conference in Sydney, Australia.<sup>253</sup> In preparing for this paper, I looked specifically at the role of other Christians in conversion. A combination of paper-based and NVivo coding enabled me to thoroughly explore this dimension of the data and to conceptualise it. After presenting at ANZATS, I was invited to present the paper at 'Research Hour', a public presentation hosted by Uniting College for Leadership and Theology, South Australia. Following that, I was invited to present a revised, 'lay', presentation at St Stephen's Lutheran Church, Adelaide. Each presentation, and the questions and comments that followed, further strengthened my understandings.

Next, I turned to consider how participants perceived God's role in conversion. In coding for this, I used a critical realist framework that separated who God is (the 'real') from what God did (the 'actual') and how that activity of God was experienced (the 'empirical'). I added a fourth layer: the 'interpretive'. This layer acknowledged that things experienced could be understood in different ways (see Figure 2.8). While this separation was helpful in coding and understanding the data, I realised it would be clearer to report this data thematically.

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<sup>253</sup> An 'as presented' version of this paper is included in Appendix 15.

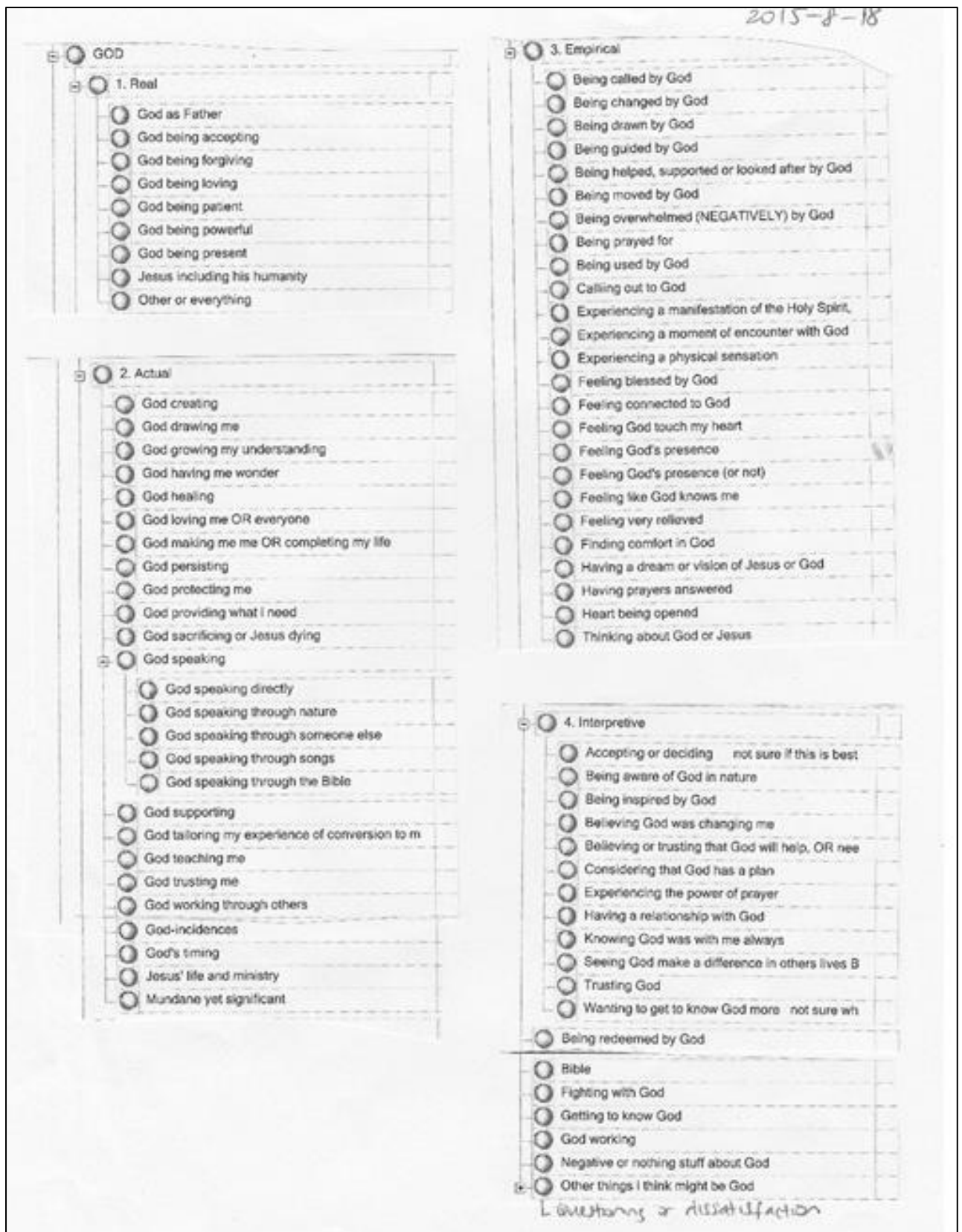


Figure 2.8: Coding God, 18 August 2015

I searched in NVivo for key words related to God's role in conversion, enabling me to check that all the occurrences that should have been coded to the above nodes had been coded. I

noted in a memo, “Done two [of the four dimensions] so far. Very pleased with accuracy to date.”<sup>254</sup>

Another conference abstract deadline caused me to step back and look at the entirety of the data. The International Association of Mission Studies conference, held in Seoul, South Korea, in August 2016, had the theme, *Conversion and Transformation*. Abstracts were due in August 2015. It was at this point that my overarching theme – the core category – of ‘authenticity’ came to light. I submitted an abstract that I later realised represented my substantive theory of conversion.<sup>255</sup> I had identified my core category, the major categories were saturated, and I had amassed a thorough collection of memos, both analytic and theoretical.<sup>256</sup> The key concept – authenticity – was a key aspect of human existence.<sup>257</sup>

It was then time to pause, as I took four months away from my PhD research as my family relocated from Australia, home to New Zealand. This is also a good place to stop telling the story of analysis and to allow the data to speak. But first, a few technical matters need to be mentioned.

### ***Analytic tools used throughout***

I employed three important analytic tools throughout my research:

1. Constant comparative analysis with “constant comparison of incident to incident, incident to codes, codes to codes, codes to categories and categories to categories” ensured that data was considered alongside what had been already been discovered, allowing a rigorous and iterative approach to data gathering and analysis.<sup>258</sup> This constant comparison happened throughout the project. I sometimes had a sense that breaking up and coding the data had resulted in losing something of the overall sense of the data. In those instances, I returned to the original transcription. It was not that the coding had revealed anything incorrectly, rather it risked missing a wider framing that had the potential to enhance the overall understanding of my research questions. Thus, it was necessary to always be mindful of the context and the totality of each story shared. In later coding, when considering how parent and child codes related to one another, I was guided by

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<sup>254</sup> Research memo, 17 August 2014

<sup>255</sup> This abstract is shown in Appendix 16. The final presentation (including revised abstract) is also provided, in Appendix 17.

<sup>256</sup> As per Birks and Mills’ three elements of an integrated grounded theory. Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 114-115.

<sup>257</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 170. Later, as I worked with this key concept, it was clear that the sub-categories of the research process; roles of other Christians and God; and affects were well integrated within this core concept. Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 99.

<sup>258</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 11.

nursing researcher, Linda Sweet's, wise question, "Is it (the child node) a sort of (the parent node)?"<sup>259</sup>

2. The software package NVivo was used to assist in the analysis of the data. This was invaluable, particularly in the initial coding and once categories had been identified. However, also essential were my highlighters and post-it notes. Many times, I needed to get off-screen and have the freedom to code visually and vibrantly.
3. I used memoing throughout the project. I began memoing in MS Word, but once I began using NVivo, I recorded many of my memos there. This increased the potential for easy analysis of my memos, but NVivo did not have a built-in spell check, so I found a frequent tension between getting memos out of my mind and onto 'paper', and the need to go back and check my hastily recorded notes for spelling and grammar. I also recorded memos in my diary, which made chronological searching easy. In addition, I provided thorough reports to my supervisors each time we met. These reports also recorded my research journey. Two brief sample memos follow, and a sample supervisors report is provided in Appendix 18.

**MEMO: Where we sit determines what we see**<sup>260</sup>

Conversion has been occurring for hundreds of years. Scholars have been more seriously studying the phenomenon of conversion for over a century.

The study of conversion is quite simply a multi-disciplinary activity, with people from different disciplines seeing it differently. Some, most notably Lewis Rambo, have long called for an interdisciplinary approach to this vital topic. A seeing that asks how others see; that utilises the wisdom and insight of others to shed light on areas that fall within our own shadows.

**MEMO: Being a better person**<sup>261</sup>

Luke says, "Yeah I think the sort of ideas that are being talked about is something that could really like make me a better person."

This motivation of being a better person has resonance with Sarah's awareness that she needed to show unconditional love to others.

In this instance, it wasn't about being saved from something as much as moving towards something: again, a reorientation perhaps.

***Literature review as data collection***

Grounded theory is inductive. Therefore, the researcher is to "collect the data first. Then start analyzing it and generating theory. When the theory seems sufficiently grounded and

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<sup>259</sup> Linda Sweet ran brilliant NVivo training as part of Flinders University Professional Development.

<sup>260</sup> Research memo, 24 October 2014.

<sup>261</sup> Research memo, 25 August 2014.

developed, *then* we review the literature in the field and relate the theory to it through the integration of ideas."<sup>262</sup>

Before settling upon grounded theory as a methodology, I had begun a literature review that exposed me to research on conversion from a range of disciplines, including psychology and the sociology of religion. While this theory did not *determine* the questions I asked, it was in the back of my mind as I undertook the interviewing and coding. I sought to be open to what such academics had observed without framing my investigations according to their parameters.

During data collection and analysis, I continued to read widely to increase my theoretical sensitivity, particularly to further explore the concepts and categories the data were revealing. There were moments of deep resonance between the interview data and the data acquired through reading more theoretical works, and other empirical studies.

Initially, I read widely on psychological and sociological research relating to conversion both to Christianity and to other faiths. I also reviewed material that came within the framework of Christian Theology (for example, Atonement Theory, Missiology, Biblical Studies). Later, as categories were being revealed, I read across a range of disciplines that illuminated the data.

### ***Position of the researcher***

I am a Christian. Like all researchers, I am subject to the sorts of theoretical biases that are a result of my background and understandings.<sup>263</sup> I positioned myself "*within* the research process rather than above, before, or outside it."<sup>264</sup> In an early memo, I wrote:

A methodology of grounded theory sits very comfortably with an emphasis on experience as starting point for this theological reflection, but I will need to be careful to walk the balance between allowing my theoretical sensitivity [to] be enhanced by the other formative factors [of theology], whilst not allowing extant theory to "force" my data generation or analysis. I think I can achieve this by coding early and diligently and maintaining a stance towards the primary data that has it as the most important thing: primary even!<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity*, 31.

<sup>263</sup> Lewis R Rambo, "Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change," *Social Compass* 46, no. 3 (1999): 260-261.

<sup>264</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 180.

<sup>265</sup> Research memo, 28 February 2013.

## A final note on religious experience

The primary source of knowledge of God is religious experience. ... Like all human experiences, ... religious experiences are fallible. [But that] does not vitiate religious experience as a source of knowledge, only as a source of infallibility.<sup>266</sup>

Religious studies scholar, Ann Taves, distinguishes between naming things as “religious experiences” and taking an attributional approach: considering “experiences deemed religious.”<sup>267</sup> At a surface level, like sociologist, Ina Jindra, I concur with Taves’ preference for the latter – all experiences have an interpretive dimension.<sup>268</sup> For example, seemingly ‘natural’ experiences can be understood to have profound spiritual significance. Conversely, moments of divine encounter can be viewed as banal. But Taves’ approach has the tendency to reduce religious experiences to “the interaction between psychobiological, social and cultural-linguistic processes” and to ignore God.<sup>269</sup> Once again, critical realism provided a framework for avoiding such reductionism.<sup>270</sup> I applied the participants’ own categorisations when conceptualising their religious experiences/experiences deemed religious.<sup>271</sup> Swinburne’s principles of credulity and testimony provide room for spiritual experiences, and the subsequent descriptions of them, to be believed.<sup>272</sup>

As pastoral theologian, Emmanuel Lartey, reminds us, “Theologians need to take more seriously people’s reports and stories of religious and other experience in their formulations and reflections.”<sup>273</sup> Theologians need to engage in “deep and active listening” that discerns the “footprints ... of God” in our world.<sup>274</sup>

## Concluding comments

In this chapter, I have described my research process and the philosophy behind it. I demonstrated how critical realism provided an appropriate ontological and epistemological framework for my research, allowing me to acknowledge God’s role in religious conversion, while using the wisdom and insight from the social sciences. Grounded theory provided a structured way of discovering a theory of conversion to Christianity that is grounded in data generated from the lived experience of recent converts. It provided a mechanism for

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<sup>266</sup> Archer, Collier and Porpora, “What Do We Mean by God?” 25-26.

<sup>267</sup> Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 14-15.

<sup>268</sup> Jindra, *A New Model of Religious Conversion*, 8.

<sup>269</sup> Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 8.

<sup>270</sup> Of course, critical realism still requires deliberate attention to the agency of God. Jindra used critical realism alongside Taves’ “experiences deemed religious” and (as discussed above) neglected to attend to any activity of God in the lives of converts.

<sup>271</sup> Jindra, *A New Model of Religious Conversion*, 8.

<sup>272</sup> Swinburne, *Existence*, 293-327.

<sup>273</sup> Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 111.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

“systematically analysing data sentence by sentence by constant comparison as it is coded until a theory results.”<sup>275</sup> Rigorously applying the guidelines and procedures inherent in the methodology of grounded theory helped me avoid the potential dangers of either unsystematically recording common sense impressions, or limiting the analysis to a few major categories. Semi-structured interviews enabled rich data to be gathered. I embarked on a rigorous analysis process. The process of writing up my results further clarified the categories.<sup>276</sup> Having introduced my research design, we turn, in the next chapter, to a preliminary literature review.

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<sup>275</sup> Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity*, 16.

<sup>276</sup> At times, I realised I needed to change my coding, or adjust which nodes belonged in which categories. The project continued to be iterative.

## CHAPTER 3: PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a brief review of my preliminary reading on religious conversion. As mentioned in the previous chapter: “The place of the literature review in grounded theory research has long been both disputed and misunderstood.”<sup>1</sup> Regardless of whether it would be *ideal* to be free of theoretical preconceptions before approaching one’s data generation and analysis, it is likely (for many reasons) to be impossible to do so.<sup>2</sup> I became aware of grounded theory as a methodology during my initial literature review. In fact, it was a growing sense of unease at the idea of investigating one theory at the expense of others that led me to discover and adopt the methodology of grounded theory.

As I had already begun reading, I clearly could not ‘unread’ what I had learnt. Fortunately, the methodology of grounded theory means that I can learn from, but not be constrained by, extant literature and theory. This does not mean taking a pick-and-mix approach of selecting elements from each theory to test or prove before cobbling them together into an unintegrated whole. Rather, it means allowing the data from the converts themselves to shape and reveal a substantive theory, while being aware of the insight existing wisdom and understanding may provide.

In this chapter, therefore, I introduce the literature I used as I began my journey of discovering why people become Christians in Australia today. This serves as an orientation to the topic of religious conversion, alerting the reader to the complexity of the topic and the breadth of approaches that could be taken. The chapter also references other related literature published since I began my data generation.

Religious conversion occurs today as people convert to Christianity, Islam, Judaism and other religions.<sup>3</sup> Like all social phenomenon, religious conversion is complex. If we allow for the potential of supernatural involvement, religious conversion becomes even more complex. Not only are we seeking to understand what is happening for converts psychologically and sociologically, but also trying to grasp the role of the Divine in conversion.

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<sup>1</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 165.

<sup>2</sup> Charmaz helpfully suggests that Glaser and Strauss’s intention was to “free new scholars from the shackles of old ideas.” Ibid. This allows researchers, including beginning researchers, to discover new theories rather than to merely test or apply old theories.

<sup>3</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 1.



## Beginning with the Bible

While my research has always had an interdisciplinary focus, one of my key starting points were the images of the atonement described by missiologist, John Driver.<sup>4</sup> Conversion involves human response: a turning towards God. This turning is possible because of God's redemptive acts, including atonement. In the 1980s, Driver was concerned that contemporary understandings of atonement were based on Constantinian presuppositions of propitiation and expiation; the wrath of God; sacrifice; and satisfaction. Driver sought to broaden such understandings in order "to reflect more faithfully the pluralism of the New Testament".<sup>5</sup> As he pointed out, the New Testament's atonement images are metaphors the apostles used in different settings, with different audiences, to communicate what they had experienced because of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.<sup>6</sup> In the breadth of images used we can begin to discover the diversity of ways that atonement can be experienced.<sup>7</sup>

Driver's categories successfully broadened understandings of the atonement, returning them to a deeply Biblical basis. However, these atonement images were first century concepts, representing how the earliest followers of Jesus described their understanding of atonement. What concepts would resonate today?<sup>8</sup> There was no evidence of empirical work about the contemporary resonance of atonement images. While this represented a 'gap' in the literature, it also represented a risk. What if no atonement images I tested resonated with recent converts? Further, I was becoming increasingly concerned that an emphasis on atonement would not capture the entirety of participants' experiences of coming to faith.<sup>9</sup> To address these concerns, I turned to empirical investigations of conversion, wondering what such work had revealed about the motivation, process and experience of conversion.

## Turning to psychological and sociological understandings

The study of the psychology of religion began around the turn of the twentieth century as American psychologists, including G. Stanley Hall, James H. Leuba, Edwin Starbuck and

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<sup>4</sup> Driver, *Understanding the Atonement*. I was first introduced to Driver's "gates of the cross" by Gordon Miller, who reported them in a 'Leadership Letter' when he was the Churches Liaison Officer for World Vision New Zealand.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>7</sup> The ten images of the atonement that Driver identifies are: conflict, victory and liberation; vicarious suffering; archetypal images; martyrdom; sacrifice; expiation and the wrath of God; redemption and purchase; reconciliation; justification; and adoption into family. Ibid., 19-29.

<sup>8</sup> Various contemporary images of atonement are reported in my "Experience of Atonement" article in Appendix 19.

<sup>9</sup> Research memo, June 2012.

William James, considered the topic of religious conversion.<sup>10</sup> This earliest research on conversion (later called the James-Starbuck thesis) was generally positive towards religion, and saw conversion as a personally integrating or unifying phenomenon.<sup>11</sup>

These scholars generally studied dramatic conversion events.<sup>12</sup> However, as early as 1929, psychologist, E.T. Clark, noted that two-thirds of the converts he studied had experienced a gradual awakening to Christianity: a slow growth that resulted in spiritual transformation.<sup>13</sup> Clark understood the variation between his data and Starbuck's was indicative of a trend away from a crisis-type awakening, towards a smoother process of faith development.<sup>14</sup>

Despite this perceived change, psychologists continued to focus research on "sudden, intense experiences of religious self-reorganization."<sup>15</sup> Further, while the earliest researchers had been positively disposed towards Christianity, many later scholars agreed with Freud's understanding of religion as being pathological.<sup>16</sup> What resulted was a very limited paradigm that saw conversion as:

1. Having its prototype in the Pauline experience<sup>17</sup>
2. Sudden, dramatic and emotional, even irrational

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<sup>10</sup> For more examples of the earliest work, see Christopher White, "A Measured Faith: Edwin Starbuck, William James, and the Scientific Reform of Religious Experience," *Harvard Theological Review* 101, no. 3-4 (2008).

<sup>11</sup> Ralph W Hood Jr, Peter C Hill and Bernard Spilka, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2009), 213-214.

<sup>12</sup> White, "Measured Faith," 440.

<sup>13</sup> Elmer Talmage Clark, *The Psychology of Religious Awakening* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1929), 48. Just 7% of those researched experienced what Clark called a "Definite Crisis Awakening" where religious transformation was preceded by a personal crisis. A further 27% of respondents reported a conversion event as an "Emotion Stimulus." *Ibid.*, 47. In this, "gradual religious growth was interrupted by an emotional event that was suddenly followed by religious transformation." Hood Jr, Hill and Spilka, *Psychology of Religion*, 214.

<sup>14</sup> Clark, *Religious Awakening*, 50.

<sup>15</sup> Hood Jr, Hill and Spilka, *Psychology of Religion*, 212. Clark noted that prior to his study "writers on the psychology of religion [had] generally concentrated their attention on the radical conversion experiences to the relative neglect of milder types of awakening." (Clark, *Religious Awakening*, 36.)

<sup>16</sup> "Freudian scholars have tended to regard religious conversion as a regressive, disintegrative, and pathological phenomenon." Dong Young Kim, "Rambo's Interdisciplinary Approach to Religious Conversion: The Case of St Augustine" (DTheol, Boston University, 2011), 25. For a discussion of the impact on conversion studies of Freud's determinist approach, see James T Richardson, "The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1985): 166.

<sup>17</sup> Acts 9:1-19. While this is one experience of conversion, theologians and biblical scholars would be quick to point to examples of other types of conversion from the New Testament and Church history. See, for example, Joel B Green, *Conversion in Luke-Acts: Divine Action, Human Cognition, and the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015); Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament*. Peace argues that Paul's experience was seminal, and involved "insight, turning, and transformation." (*ibid.*, 13.) He points out that these elements were present in the conversions of Jesus' disciples, but occurred as a process over a period of time.

3. Experienced by a convert who was a passive agent acted upon by external forces (traditionally seen to be an omnipotent God, although later emphasis was on “unconscious psychological influence”)<sup>18</sup>
4. Entailing a dramatic transformation of self, including a break with the past; at the extreme “an apparent total negation of the old self and the implantation of a new self”<sup>19</sup>
5. Resulting in behaviour change caused by a change in beliefs
6. Occurring once only and being permanent
7. Generally occurring in adolescence.<sup>20</sup>

By the 1950s, however, psychological research about conversion (in fact, the psychology of religion in general) had waned so thoroughly that in 1958, psychologist of religion, Walter Clark, wrote: in “recent years a kind of shamefacedness becomes apparent among those scholars who mention [the study of conversion]” and that scholars “hasten to explain that conversion was much overemphasized in the old-fashioned theology, that it is largely abnormal and unnatural, and that much more satisfactory results can be obtained by the gradual process of religious growth.”<sup>21</sup> Mild and gradual conversion experiences were generally agreed to be “progressive and maturing,” while more sudden, dramatic conversions were less healthy.<sup>22</sup>

The advent of new religious movements (NRMs) in the 1970s, saw resurgence in research on conversion, predominantly from researchers who had a social psychological or sociological emphasis and an interest in studying deviant religious experiences.<sup>23</sup> The convert continued to be generally viewed by psychologists as a passive protagonist, and conversion was frequently understood to be a response to human weakness, triggered by a life crisis. ‘Brainwashing’ and ‘coercive persuasion’ were the most popular psychological

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<sup>18</sup> Richardson, "Active vs Passive Convert," 165.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 164-165.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Houston Clark, "Conversion," in *The Psychology of Religion: An Introduction to Religious Experience and Behavior* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 188.

<sup>22</sup> Joel Allison, "Adaptive Regression and Intense Religious Experiences," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 145, no. 6 (1968): 452.

<sup>23</sup> Pamela Chandler Lee, "Christian Conversion Stories of African American Women: A Qualitative Analysis," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 27, no. 3 (2008): 240. There are many examples of such research. For example, Robert W Balch and David Taylor, "Seekers and Saucers: The Role of the Cultic Milieu in Joining a UFO Cult," *American Behavioral Scientist* 20, no. 6 (1977). Unconventional and small religious groups were highly disproportionately represented in the literature on conversion. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2000), 18-19.

explanations for conversion.<sup>24</sup> In such studies, religion was generally viewed as irrational, pre-modern and endangered.<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, sociologists began to understand converts as active rather than passive, recognising that “conversion is not something that is done to the hapless individual; it is something the knowing choosing individual accomplishes.”<sup>26</sup> There was a growing understanding and emphasis on the social, psychological and cultural influences on individuals as they convert. Some recognised that belonging to, and participating in, a faith community precedes belief. Beginning to act or behave as if one believes causes one to question, re-evaluate and reinterpret one’s history.<sup>27</sup>

As well as seeing converts as active, conversion has now come to be understood as involving a *process* of radical personal change rather than a sudden *event*.<sup>28</sup> Sociologist, James Richardson, noted the movement towards an “activist” paradigm of conversion, which suggests that:

1. Conversion or spiritual transformation occurs gradually
2. Conversion or spiritual transformation is rational rather than emotional
3. The convert or transformed person is an active, seeking agent
4. There is self-realisation in the humanistic tradition
5. Belief change follows from behaviour change
6. Conversion or spiritual transformation is not permanent; it may occur several times
7. Conversion or spiritual transformation occurs in early adulthood and continues
8. No one experience is prototypical.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Snow and Machalek, "Sociology of Conversion."; Dick Anthony and Thomas Robbins, "Conversion and 'Brainwashing' in New Religious Movements," in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, ed. James Lewis (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Sociologists generally rejected the brainwashing thesis, noting there is no evidence new ideas can be introduced after initial brain function distortion. Bruce, "Sociology of Conversion," 3.

<sup>25</sup> Beaucage, Meintel and Mossière, "Introduction," 11.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce, "Sociology of Conversion," 5. The importance of self-change was emphasised, seeing the self not as “mechanical, but rather a dialectical process of creativity and reflection.” William B Bankston, Craig J Forsyth and H Hugh Jr Floyd, "Toward a General Model of the Process of Radical Conversion: An Interactionist Perspective on the Transformation of Self-Identity," *Qualitative Sociology* 4, no. 4 (1981): 280. See also, Lorne Dawson, "Self-Affirmation, Freedom, and Rationality: Theoretically Elaborating 'Active' Conversions," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29, no. 2 (1990).

<sup>27</sup> David G Bromley and Anson Shupe, "Just a Few Years Seem Like a Lifetime: A Role Theory Approach to Participation in Religious Movements," in *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, ed. Louis Kriesberg (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1979), 181.

<sup>28</sup> Steigenga, "Religious Conversion in the Americas." Zinnbauer and Pargament, "Spiritual Conversion," 162.

<sup>29</sup> The activist paradigm was so-named by James T Richardson, "The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research," *ibid.* (1985). This summary of the activist

This new paradigm rightly emphasises process over event, but two significant weaknesses have now been introduced. First, while the traditional model of conversion had room for an active God as external agent, the contemporary model of conversion can readily ignore supernatural influence.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, the emphasis on rationality has neglected giving attention to affective processes.<sup>31</sup>

By contrast, psychologist, Chana Ullman, highlighted the affective in conversion, likening conversion to “falling in love.”<sup>32</sup> Her research suggested conversion involved forming a new relational attachment to an authority figure (a replacement father figure, perhaps); to a caring and accepting group of peers; or to an “unconditionally loving transcendent object.”<sup>33</sup>

Having provided this background, it is appropriate to turn to two comprehensive models of conversion developed by sociologists, John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, in 1981, and psychologist, Lewis Rambo, in 1993.<sup>34</sup> These scholars successfully distilled extant literature into useful heuristic frameworks.<sup>35</sup>

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paradigm is drawn from Hood Jr, Hill and Spilka, *Psychology of Religion*, 212-213. Hood et al. add the phrase “spiritual transformation.”

<sup>30</sup> An accurate model of conversion needs to fit with a synergistic theological perspective “in which the active participation of both God and the human are indispensable.” Adam Dodds, “Regeneration and Resistable Grace: A Synergistic Proposal,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 83, no. 1 (2011): 30.

<sup>31</sup> Hood et al. consider it is debatable whether the old paradigm is being abandoned in favour of emerging paradigm (as is argued by Richardson in Richardson, “Active vs Passive Convert.”) or that the nature of conversion itself has changed over time (John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” *ibid.* (1981).) They consider it most likely that both types of conversion continue to occur. Hood Jr, Hill and Spilka, *Psychology of Religion*, 216.

<sup>32</sup> Chana Ullman, *The Transformed Self*, Emotions, Personality and Psychotherapy (New York: Plenum Press, 1989), xvi.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

<sup>34</sup> A third framework from Snow and Machalek’s 1984 “stock take” of research on conversion named five main models or understandings of the reasons for conversion. However, they also observed that while process models of conversion may describe a natural history, they did not necessarily define a causal relationship. The five models or understandings they named are: 1. Psychophysical responses to coercion and induced stress (brainwashing or coercive persuasion); 2. Predisposing personality traits and cognitive orientations: “The causes of conversion reside ‘within’ the psyche of the individual, rather than ‘outside’ in the form of situational and social influences.” (Snow and Machalek, “Sociology of Conversion,” 180.); 3. Tension-producing situational factors (crises). However, Snow and Machalek note that as converts look back on their lives pre-conversion, they are prone to exaggerate or over-emphasise their pre-conversion problems; 4. Social attributes and the structural availability of converts; and 5. Social influences. *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> While not the only models of conversion, these two were selected as they are both holistic and enduring.

## Conversion motifs

Sociologists, Lofland and Skonovd, identified six “conversion motifs” from conversion research undertaken prior to 1981. These are intellectual, mystical, experimental, revivalist and coercive motifs (see Table 3.1).<sup>36</sup>

Table 3.1: Lofland and Skonovd's conversion motifs<sup>37</sup>

		Intellectual	Mystical	Experiential	Affectional	Revivalist	Coercive
Major variations	Degree of social pressure	Low or none	None or little	Low	Medium	High	High
	Temporal duration	Medium	Short	Long	Long	Short	Long
	Level of affective arousal	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High	High
	Affective content	Illumination	Awe, love, fear	Curiosity	Affection	Love (and fear)	Fear (and love)
	Belief-participation sequence	Belief-participation	Belief-participation	Participation-belief	Participation-belief	Participation-belief	Participation-belief

In the “intellectual” (or activist) motif – then relatively uncommon – conversion begins with seeking knowledge.<sup>38</sup> The “mystical” (Damascus Road or Pauline) conversion motif, historically the best known, dominated research in the early part of the twentieth century, perhaps because of its apparent biblical basis and the prevalence of this type of conversion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>39</sup> Converts are deeply moved and often struggle to articulate what occurred. “Experimental” converts come to faith following pre-conversion active participation in a religious group. The “affectional” motif emphasises the importance of community and belonging, where personal relationships with practising believers is crucial to the conversion process. “Revivalist” conversions are considerably less common than they were in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and those converted at public meetings today are more likely to be experiencing a culmination of their conversion journey than a sudden and dramatic conversion-event. “Coercive” conversions relate to “brainwashing” and “cult mind control.”<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs."

<sup>37</sup> Model adapted from *ibid.*, 375.

<sup>38</sup> Emphasis on privatised religion and a (now internet-enhanced) increased accessibility to a range of resources and information meant Lofland and Skonovd expected this motif to increase in significance

<sup>39</sup> As already noted, this represents a very limited understanding of conversion in the Bible.

<sup>40</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," 376-383.

While Lofland and Skonovd's paper is cited by many, very few scholars have empirically tested these motifs.<sup>41</sup> Theologian and sociologist, Derek Tidball, analysed the conversion accounts provided in the application materials of prospective Bible College students, classifying the clear majority of accounts as "affectional."<sup>42</sup> Psychologists, Ali Kose and Kate Loewenthal, noted the predominance of "intellectual, experimental and affectional motifs" among British converts to Islam.<sup>43</sup> Despite its scant use in empirical studies, the model remains helpful as a heuristic device.

### **Rambo's stage model of conversion**

Psychologist, Lewis Rambo, rightly acknowledged that conversion is complicated. It "is a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations."<sup>44</sup> Rambo suggested a stage model for conversion, primarily as a strategy for organising complex data about conversion, aware that the "stages" named are multiple, interactive, cumulative and dynamic, and not necessarily sequential. Rambo's model – which names the seven stages as context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences – is shown in Figure 3.1.<sup>45</sup> Each is described next.

"Conversion takes place within a dynamic context."<sup>46</sup> This *context* includes the wider world, as well as the more immediate milieu of family, friends, neighbourhood, ethnic group and religious community. These two contexts interrelate and intersect; at times integrating, at times undermining each other. Some of the many forces and agents that make up the context impede the conversion process, while others facilitate conversion. Conversion impacts back on how the context is viewed and understood.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ali Köse and Kate Miriam Loewenthal, "Conversion Motifs among British Converts to Islam," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 10, no. 2 (2000): 102. Peter Halama, "Empirical Approach to Typology of Religious Conversion," *Pastoral Psychology* 64, no. 2 (2015): 187. (Halama notes the lack, but does not address it.)

<sup>42</sup> Derek J Tidball, "The Social Construction of Evangelical Conversion: A Sideways Glance," in *Finding and Losing Faith. Studies in Conversion*, ed. Christopher Partridge and Helen Reid, Studies in Culture and Religion Series (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 101.

<sup>43</sup> Köse and Loewenthal, "Conversion Motifs among British Converts to Islam," 101.

<sup>44</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 5. He notes that: "(a) conversion is a process over time, not a single event; (b) conversion is contextual and thereby influences and is influenced by a matrix of relationships, expectations, and situations; and (c) factors in the conversion process are multiple, interactive, and cumulative. There is no one cause of conversion, no one process, and no one simple consequence of that process." *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>45</sup> Model adapted from *ibid.*, 17. See also, Lewis R Rambo and Steven C Bauman, "Psychology of Conversion and Spiritual Transformation," *Pastoral Psychology* (2011).

<sup>46</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 20.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-43.

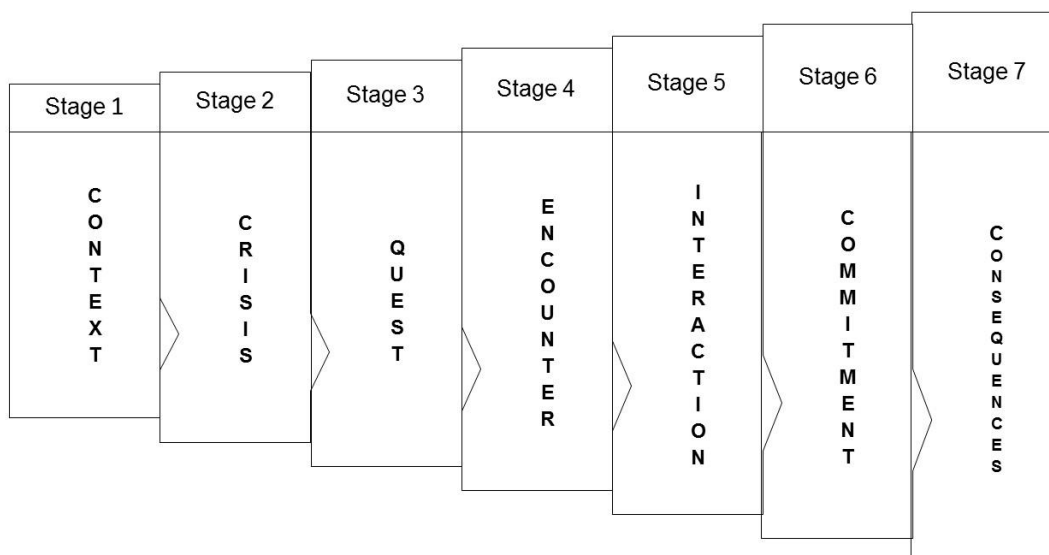


Figure 3.1: Lewis Rambo's Stage Model of Conversion

It is generally accepted that some sort of *crisis* – “religious, political, psychological, or cultural” usually occurs before conversion.<sup>48</sup> Crises can be dramatic, calling “into question one’s fundamental orientation to life” or be milder: like a final straw.<sup>49</sup> The ten catalysts for crisis Rambo identified are: mystical experiences; near-death experiences; illness and healing; dissatisfaction with how life is; a desire for transcendence; altered states of consciousness; a desire for a more stable sense of self or for transformation; pathology; apostasy; and externally-stimulated crises.<sup>50</sup>

The convert is an active agent in conversion: engaged in a *quest*. Questing relates to motivation and assumes “that people seek to maximise meaning and purpose in life, to erase ignorance, and to resolve inconsistency.”<sup>51</sup> Questing is an ongoing process that tends to intensify during times of crisis. Some questing is active, while other questing is a passive openness to external influence.<sup>52</sup>

Rambo uses the term *encounter* to talk of engagement with an advocate of the new religion rather than about an encounter with God. These advocates respond to different motivations for conversion, and engage different ‘strategies’. Five potential benefits of conversion may

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 48-55. While much work by psychologists considered converts to be emotionally ill and, therefore, seeking a cure, humanists tended to see conversion as part of a healthy person’s seeking for transformation and growth. Ibid., 52.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 59.



be communicated: "(1) a system of meaning (cognitive); (2) emotional gratifications (affective); (3) techniques for living (volitional); (4) charisma (leadership); and (5) power."<sup>53</sup>

*Interaction* includes the four dimensions of relationships, rituals, rhetoric and roles.<sup>54</sup>

Relationships "create and consolidate emotional bonds to the group."<sup>55</sup> This enables people to feel deeply accepted and connected, to gain new perspectives on life, and provides surrogate relationships for those lacking strong or healthy familial bonds. Such relationships can provide stability for people struggling with aspects of life, and a shared experience with others holding the same beliefs. Trust is crucial, as is validating the new belief system by observing others' transformed lives. Relationships "provide the environment in which faith can be nurtured," by offering friendship and/or a place where issues of faith and spirituality can be safely explored.<sup>56</sup> Rituals provide a form of embodied or holistic knowledge and are a way of "acquiring, transmitting, and displaying forms of knowledge."<sup>57</sup> Ritual teaches lessons, functions as repetitive reinforcement and helps people learn how to act in different ways which, in turn, informs attitudes about life. Rituals also help create a sense of belonging.<sup>58</sup> Rhetoric "provides an interpretive system, offering guidance and meaning to the convert."<sup>59</sup> The way things converts perceive and explain changes; generally, in keeping with the organisations espoused understandings.<sup>60</sup> Roles "consolidate a person's involvement" in the new religious group.<sup>61</sup> Roles have two dimensions; expectations in relation to beliefs and cognitions about what actions are appropriate; and enactments or conduct. Like establishing relationships, engaging in rituals and embracing rhetoric – taking on the roles of the new religion – can occur before or after the actual conversion.<sup>62</sup>

There are five common elements of the *commitment* phase. Decision making occurs after evaluating the benefits of converting over not converting.<sup>63</sup> Rituals include declaring that commitment, often publicly.<sup>64</sup> Surrender is an inner process of commitment, or yielding of control. Testimonies are narrative accounts of conversion, generally demonstrating language

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 81;66-101. See also, Bromley and Shupe, "Role Theory," 160-161.

<sup>54</sup> Rambo is drawing on sociologists, Arthur Greil and David Rudy's, work on encapsulation. Arthur L Greil and David R Rudy, "Social Cocoons: Encapsulation and Identity Transformation Organizations," *Sociological Inquiry* 54, no. 3 (1984).

<sup>55</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 107.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 110. See also, *ibid.*, 108-111.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 114. For more, see Theodore W Jennings, "On Ritual Knowledge," *The Journal of Religion* 62, no. 2 (1982).

<sup>58</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 113-118.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-121.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-123.

<sup>63</sup> Social, cognitive and spiritual factors may all be considered.

<sup>64</sup> For example, in baptism.

transformation and biographical reconstruction. Motivational reformulation occurs as converts discover a new motivation for living.<sup>65</sup>

Rambo also identified a range of *consequences* of conversion. These can be socioculturally, psychologically and/or theologically framed. Rambo noted several consequences he called “theological.”<sup>66</sup> These are a “sense of relationship with God;” a “sense of relief from guilt;” “sense of mission and a reason for living;” engagement into a “new community”; new ways of understanding reality; and transformed lives.<sup>67</sup>

Rambo’s stage model of conversion continues to be used extensively in conversion research. We return to it in Chapter 10.

Largely neglected from both these models, as from the empirical research that underpinned them, was attention to either the content of religious beliefs, or the agency of God. Practical theologian, David Horn, writes:

In claiming objectivity, the social sciences have sought to describe religious practices as if they were separate from the theological traditions out of which they spring. But how can a process that claims to be theologically neutral describe accurately practices that are theologically rich?<sup>68</sup>

This lack was partially addressed in sociologist, Ines Jindra’s, 2014 monograph based on research on converts to a range of religions.<sup>69</sup> Jindra opted to “look at the explanations most given by scholars, and add [her] own research to come up with [what she called] a comprehensive sociological model of religious conversion.”<sup>70</sup> She certainly achieved a thorough sociological explanation, attentive to both personal and social processes, as well as to the varying content of different religions. She pointed to the ways that different backgrounds, different network influences, different levels of convert reflexivity and different felt needs led to embracing different faith expressions. Her comparative approach adds

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<sup>65</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 124-141.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 160-162.

<sup>68</sup> David Horn, "Assessing Empirical Research on Euroamerican Religious Conversion, 1950–2000" (DTheol, Boston University, 2002), 5.

<sup>69</sup> Jindra had previously published several journal articles that I was aware of in this early stage of my research: David A Knight, Robert H Woods Jr and Ines W Jindra, "Gender Differences in the Communication of Christian Conversion Narratives," *Review of Religious Research* 47, no. 2 (2005); Ines W Jindra, "Religious Stage Development among Converts to Different Religious Groups," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 18, no. 3 (2008); Ines W Jindra, "Comparing Biographical Backgrounds of Religious Founders and Converts to Those Religions: An Exploratory Study," *Pastoral Psychology* 58, no. 4 (2009); Ines W Jindra, "How Religious Content Matters in Conversion Narratives to Various Religious Groups," *Sociology of Religion* 72, no. 3 (2011); Ines W Jindra, Robert Woods, Diane Badzinski and Jenell Paris, "Gender, Religiosity, and the Telling of Christian Conversion Narratives," *Journal for the Sociological Integration of Religion and Society* 2, no. 1 (2012).

<sup>70</sup> Jindra, *A New Model of Religious Conversion*, 1.

much to conversion scholarship. However, like most, Jindra neglected to account for any divine agency.

## Current emphases on conversion research

In psychological research today, less attention is paid to religious conversion than to the broader topics of religious change and spiritual transformation.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, the emphasis in sociology of religion tends to be on conversion careers, including disaffiliation.<sup>72</sup> This sociological research sits comfortably alongside recent qualitative scholarship on people leaving the church in the post-Christendom West.<sup>73</sup> Rational choice theory continues to be expounded by some as a general theory of conversion.<sup>74</sup> I introduce some of this literature in my discussion chapters, where it illuminates the primary data gathered from interviews.

## But what about God?

The agency of God is generally omitted from research about religious conversion. Anthropologist, Peter Stromberg, spoke of the need to “bracket the miraculous nature of the [conversion] event.”<sup>75</sup> Sociologist, Christian Smith, while calling for attention to be paid to the *content* of religious beliefs, fell short of suggesting researchers attend to divine action.<sup>76</sup> But to ignore God’s role in conversion research seems illogical.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Raymond F Paloutzian, "Psychology of Religious Conversion and Spiritual Transformation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R Rambo and Charles E Farhadian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>72</sup> Sociologist, Henri Gooren, understands conversion to be a continuum rather than a single event, and has popularised the term “conversion careers” to describe the journey taken through pre-affiliation, affiliation, conversion, commitment to (perhaps) disaffiliation. Henri Gooren, "Reassessing Conventional Approaches to Conversion: Toward a New Synthesis," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46, no. 3 (2007). Gooren’s work comes out of the Latin American context (particularly Brazil) where researchers have observed a more fluid, less dramatic, moving in and out of religious organisations. Steigenga and Cleary, "Understanding Conversion."

<sup>73</sup> See, for example, Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond the Evangelical, Pentecostal & Charismatic Churches* (Wellington: Philip Garside, 2000).

<sup>74</sup> Chee Kiong Tong, *Rationalizing Religion: Religious Conversion, Revivalism and Competition in Singapore Society*, vol. 13, *Social Sciences in Asia* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2007); Robert Barro, Jason Hwang and Rachel McCleary, "Religious Conversion in 40 Countries," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 1 (2010).

<sup>75</sup> Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation*, 14. Sociologist, Filomeno Aguilar, rightly argues that Stromberg “removes the divine from discussion [and] depicts a conversion narrative as a simple language game.” Aguilar, "Experiencing Transcendence," 588.

<sup>76</sup> Smith, "Future Directions," 1564-1565.

<sup>77</sup> Theologian, David Zehnder, sought to use both social science and theology to understand conversion. Zehnder, *Theology of Religious Change*. However, Zehnder is monergistic in his approach, thereby considering that salvation is completely the work of God. Thus, he sees active seeking to be part of a selfish quest. While sociologists can take human active participation too far (for example, Straus calls conversion "a personal ... accomplishment" in Roger A Straus, "Religious Conversion as a Personal and Collective Accomplishment," *Sociology of Religion* 40, no. 2 (1979).), Zehnder's unwillingness to see the convert themselves as an active part of the conversion process

It was at this point in the research process that I settled upon grounded theory as my research methodology. I, therefore, stopped trying to discover from extant literature a conversion theory I could test. Instead, I turned my attention to how new converts to Christianity described their experiences.

## **Now to the data!**

It is time now to turn to the second part of my thesis. In this, I report the results of my research as I discovered them: largely unencumbered by the theory they eventually revealed. Therefore, I report the data in several chapters. The three main results chapters (Chapters 5, 6 and 7) relate to the convert and the conversion process; the role of other Christians in conversion; and the ways participants perceived God to be active in the conversion process. These chapters are bookended by a brief introduction and a chapter reporting elements absent from the data.

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limits the value of his work. In fact, he argues that “active religious seekership will continue to be a challenge to the church.” Zehnder, *Theology of Religious Change*, 52. While reviewer, Lincoln Mullen, describes Zehnder as a “rare theologian” because of the way he “has done the difficult work of crossing disciplinary boundaries to bring back the fruits of fields not his own,” Mullen questions Zehnder’s tendency to abandon the correlation method he aspires to when he finds the social science at odds with his monergism. Lincoln Mullen, “A Theology of Religious Change: What the Social Science of Conversion Means for the Gospel, by David J. Zehnder,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 15, no. 1 (2012): 249. My project, by contrast, begins from a synergistic perspective that understands individuals to be active participants in the conversion process; an understanding that finds considerably more resonance with the work of social scientists on conversion. Therefore, I can offer a more integrated synthesis of social science research and its implications for how the gospel can best be communicated today. See also, Erin Elizabeth Dufault-Hunter, “Personal Transformation and Religious Faith: A Narrative Approach to Conversion” (PhD, University of Southern California, 2005), 30-31.

# Part B: Results

## CHAPTER 4: INTRODUCTION TO RESULTS

Part A introduced my research questions, the reasons why they were pertinent, and outlined how I intended to answer them. To reiterate: the aim of this research (my primary research question) is to discover why unchurched people in Australia are becoming Christians today. I considered three sub-questions. What is the process by which non-Christians journey towards a relationship with God? What is the role of other Christians in the journey to Christian faith? How is God at work in this process of faith-finding? These questions, and why it was appropriate to ask them, were introduced in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 outlined my research design. It introduced critical realism as my research paradigm, grounded theory as my research methodology and semi-structured interviews as my research method before describing the process by which I analysed my data. Chapter 3 then presented a preliminary literature review. Thus, Part A introduced my research questions, their significance and described how I addressed them.

Part B presents my data to the reader, revealing both the common themes and unique elements of each person's story. As each of the nine interview transcripts contained a unique story of faith-finding, this introductory chapter provides anecdotes about each participant to provide key insights into their conversion narratives. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 then explain the process by which those I interviewed became Christians by outlining the roles of each of the three agents – the convert, other Christians and God – and describing the affects the participants experienced as they journeyed towards Christian faith. Chapter 8 notes some themes that were largely missing from the data.

This brief chapter does three things. First, and predominantly, it introduces my participants. Each participant has a unique story of finding faith. I include pertinent details about them and their contexts before introducing each one through a series of anecdotes. Secondly, this introduction briefly introduces the three agents who participate in the process of people becoming Christians in Australia today. It names each agent (the convert themselves, other Christians and God) and very briefly outlines the roles other Christians and God play in the conversion process. Thirdly, this introduction names the six distinct affects that are part of the participants' stories of coming to faith.

### **The participants**

The participants were a diverse group from a variety of religious backgrounds. Some had previously been involved in 'New Age' spirituality, others were atheists before their conversion, some were uncertain about spiritual matters and others had been completely

disinterested in religion and spirituality. While some had no previous sense of spirituality, others perceived themselves to be deeply spiritual. Both males and females, their ages ranged from their late teens to their 50s. Some had not completed high school, while others were well qualified, one to Masters' level. None had attended church in recent years before beginning their spiritual search, although some had attended as children. While most found themselves in Uniting churches, others attended Baptist, Anglican and Pentecostal churches. A summary of information about the participants, including pseudonyms, demographic information and crucial details about their backgrounds is provided in Table 4.1. This table provides the reader with a reference point to help understand the results within the wider context of each participant's life and story.

Table 4.1: The participants

	Age	M/F	Openness	Previous belief in God	Church settled in
Grace	<20	F	Closed: atheist	Rejected: silly/ridiculous/atheist	Uniting
Hamish	30s	M	Very closed: atheist	Rejected: "militant evangelical atheist"	Uniting
Jean	30s	F	Unformed: little exposure	Maybe: because made a difference in another's life	Uniting
Luke	20s	M	Unformed: church school	Unformed	Baptist
Mary	50s	F	Open: 'New Age'	Loved God, but 'New Age'	Anglican
Meg	50s	F	Closed: 'New Age'	Believed in God, but 'New Age'	Pentecostal
Olivia	20s	F	Unformed: wondering	Knew God existed because made difference in others' lives	Uniting
Sarah	50s	F	Open: "always spiritual"	Knew God existed, God in nature important	Baptist
Tallulah	30s	F	Open: church as child	Believed	Uniting

## Anecdotes

Having provided this summary information, it is now appropriate to present an anecdote about each participant.

### Grace

Grace's boss invited her to church not long after she had broken up with her girlfriend. Grace accepted the invitation, and has been attending church ever since. She said several times that church just "felt right," like she should be there. When she says of Christian faith, "it just kind of made sense" she is talking of a deep sense of resonance, of "knowing," rather than an intellectual or rational sense-making.

Grace has struggled in the past with chronic mental illness, and the worst that can bring. She finds the Psalms helpful as she can relate to fact they are "dark and gloomy." This makes

her “feel normal.” A benediction sung at church reminds Grace that God loves her and is present all the time, even when she does not feel God’s presence.

Grace has a volunteer role as a first-response ambulance officer. Her new faith, as well as the support of other Christians like her work colleague, minister, youth pastor and small group, all help her “not feel so isolated.” She says: “Talking to God has helped me to find the strength in myself” to cope with this significant work.

Grace was previously an atheist. She used to think of religion as “silly” and that it “can’t be true.”<sup>1</sup>

### ***Hamish***

Two years before our interview, Hamish noticed a flash of gold leaf in his bookcase, pulled out a Bible and started to read. This was the beginning of a six-month process that saw him move from being a “militant evangelical atheist” towards a deep relationship with Jesus.

Atheism had started to feel dry. Hamish would watch multiple ‘YouTube’ clips of the atheist “greats,” wanting atheism to be all he needed, but he kept being drawn back to the Bible and God. He describes this six months as a time of “fighting with God.” He didn’t want to be exploring faith as he was, but something in him had changed.

Hamish used the internet as a resource, and it was progressive Christianity that he turned to initially. From this, he discovered that he would not need to throw out his intellect, or his understandings of philosophy and science, to be a Christian. Their emphasis on social justice appealed to him. He discovered in C. S. Lewis a man with a similar story to his own.

One night while letting the dog out to go to the toilet, Hamish looked up at the stars and heard “the heavens declare the glory of God.” A profound moment, mundane, yet divine; it was the point at which he realised, “I’m a Christian now.” Hamish felt God was there, that God loved him, and that God had arms open for him.

There is a sense that Hamish has always been seeking the truth and found, in Christianity, an objective truth. However, the truth he found has a complexity that Hamish was willing to embrace. Hamish is not afraid of investigating the context, the genre and the intent of Bible passages. While he was seeking a framework to understand a wider truth, he did not need to

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<sup>1</sup> Grace, interview by Lynne Taylor, 4 July, 2014.



have all the loose ends tied up, to have everything fully explained and full accounted for. Rather, Hamish has room for a complex faith system that cannot be fully explained “away.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Jean**

Jean’s first introduction to Christianity came as she sought to provide religious education for her Catholic School pupils. A diligent teacher, Jean wanted to teach them well, and started internet research to help her understand so she could impart. Jean also heard the children witnessing to their own faith, in terms of God providing security and comfort for them.

Around the same time, the father of Jean’s friend, Liz, was having health problems and Liz would ask Jean to pray with her for her father. Liz found this comforting, and the father enjoyed better health. This made Jean realise that prayer can make a difference.

Years later, Jean took her young son to ‘mainly music’ at a local church.<sup>3</sup> She realised she did not want him to have the same questions about faith that she had while growing up with no Christian contact. At ‘mainly music’ they were welcomed; made to feel part of a family. Jean started attending an ‘Alpha’ course run by the church, again, experiencing warmth and welcome. One week she realised, “This is what I want” and she started going to church, where, again, she was welcomed into a warm extended family. She and her son were later baptised.

Her new-found relationship with God has “completed” Jean’s life. It is not that she was aware of a gap before, but since becoming a Christian she feels a degree of integration that was not there previously.

Motivated by a desire to raise her son well, Jean embarked upon a relationship with God. This has found her embraced by a wider community, experiencing a sense of belonging and enjoying a much greater integration and wholeness in life. In addition, Jean’s faith provides a framework for her being a better person.<sup>4</sup>

### **Luke**

Luke was loved into the Christian faith by friends who were there for him through a difficult time. He suffered a serious accident after he had been married for only seven weeks,

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<sup>2</sup> Hamish, interview by Lynne Taylor, 2 August, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> ‘mainly music’ (correctly spelt without a capital) is a music and movement programme run by local churches for pre-schoolers and their caregivers. Each class contains some Christian content in terms of the songs sung.

<sup>4</sup> Jean, interview by Lynne Taylor, 9 September, 2014.

shattering his “awesome life.” The accident resulted in ongoing physical and mental health issues as well as the tedium of legal machinations.

At a time when he wondered if the professionals working on his case cared about him as a person, his Christian workmates welcomed him into their lives and church. He heard stories of faith growing through the reality of life from them and observed their passion for life.

One of his friends invited him to a conference run by their church. Luke went; keen to “hang out” with his friend. While he didn’t “agree with everything” he heard in the personal stories shared, he was drawn in. Luke names this conference as a key time in his faith journey, as his heart was opened to God. He started attending the local church, deciding, “I think this is something that would make me a better person.” At church, he again encountered a welcoming group who wanted to spend time with him: willing to discuss his thoughts and ideas even though he wasn’t a Christian.

Luke recalls the struggles he faced after his accident and attributes his eventual healing to God. He remembers one occasion when he cried out to God, “I don’t think I can do this anymore” and then remembers, “at least for a moment, a weight gone.” He “chose to believe” that God was healing and restoring him.

Luke lives his life looking out for others – he works in a professional caring role, has a servant heart and sees his acts of service as worship to God. Intelligent and thoughtful, Luke carefully considered his decision to become a Christian. Not interested in following a fad, he is in for the long haul.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Mary***

Mary always longed for God. Even as a child she had deep yearning to “go home” that she later recognised as a longing to be with God and Jesus in heaven. This desire led her into 27 years in the ‘New Age’ movement. Her personal goal was to become closer to God: to “become one with God.” She ran ‘New Age’ groups and courses and was told she had reached a “good level” of enlightenment. But Mary began to wonder if ‘New Age’ was a “deception.”

Her mind kept returning to Jesus and she started to read the Bible and seek information on the internet about the Bible. A Christian workmate told Mary she needed to repent and accept Jesus. Initially, Mary was “baffled” by the notion of needing to be “saved”:

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<sup>5</sup> Luke, interview by Lynne Taylor, 21 August, 2014.

“incredulous” asking would Jesus not take her to heaven if she didn’t say the words. But she prayed the prayer, confessing general rather than specific sins, and cried afterwards.

Mary had no intention of going to church, although she understood from the Bible that fellowship was important. She could not get past the negative experiences of her childhood and adolescence, believing Christians to be “narrow-minded, unaccepting and judgmental.” Ironically, it was her atheist and ‘New Age’ housemate who first took her to church. Seeing a Christmas Carol Service advertised, she suggested they go together. Arriving at church, Mary felt like she had come home. The yearning of her childhood was realised.

Mary continues to dream of God being close to her physically, as well as emotionally. Looking back, Mary can see the protection and presence of God throughout her life. She senses that Jesus finally said, “That is enough: it is time to get on the right path.” Jesus was the instigator and catalyst of her faith journey. When asked about her motivation for change, she says she had none; Jesus decided that it was time for her to change.<sup>6</sup>

### **Meg**

Like Mary, Meg was heavily involved in ‘New Age’ spirituality before becoming a Christian. She attended church desperate to be delivered from the demonic forces that possessed her. She went forward for “exorcism” but – having “no idea what [she] was doing. Absolutely none” – she was, instead, encouraged to pray a “salvation prayer.”

Sometimes as she reads the Bible and attends church, Meg realises she already “knows” what she is being told. This makes her realise that God has been speaking to her in the past. Looking back, she also sees how God looked after her before she became a Christian.

Meg continues to struggle with demonic possession. She spends a lot of time on deliverance and repentance. While some Christians have tried to help her, they often become frustrated and discouraged, meaning Meg lacks the relational and spiritual support she needs to thrive. Meg has a desire to see others come out of ‘New Age’ like she has, and longs for the church to be a place of healing for people like her. Meg has faith that God “is more powerful” than the forces that assail her, but longs for healing.<sup>7</sup>

### **Olivia**

Olivia’s knowledge of God began in a choir she joined as a child. The repertoire they sang included religious songs, and she sensed something different about some of the people

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<sup>6</sup> Mary, interview by Lynne Taylor, 10 December, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Meg, interview by Lynne Taylor, 3 November, 2014.

singing with her: they believed what they were singing and had something no one else had. She sensed that God was somehow there.

Choir was the one place where Olivia could encounter something of God. Her mother is “anti-God” and, thus, Olivia had been excused from any religious, or chaplain-run, input at her state school.

The choir songs left her wondering. Years later, a teaching role at a Catholic school was the impetus for her to find out more about the Jesus who “died for our sins,” who was featured on posters the children had made. That phrase, completely unfamiliar to her, made no sense. She decided to go to church to learn more.

Internet research identified two churches that met the criteria she had set: having evening services with young people to get to know, not being too traditional or institutionalised, and with older people offering wisdom and experience. Ten minutes after she thought about going to one of these churches, a university friend texted her to invite her to church. The invitation was to one of the two churches Olivia was considering.

Olivia reckons churches have an image-problem as what she got certainly was not what she was expecting. It was a short, relaxed service with music that appealed to Olivia. The service was followed by a fundraising dinner, where information was shared about an upcoming missions trip. People were welcoming and kind. Her friend had paid the meal donation on Olivia’s behalf. There was a sense of community Olivia found remarkable.

Olivia attended again at Easter at her friend’s invitation. She wanted to know more. She also attended the following week without her friend and found people welcoming. She was invited to a small group, given a Bible (containing study notes, which helped her understand the Bible for herself), and participated in a discipleship programme with others in the church. Eventually, she decided to be baptised.<sup>8</sup>

### **Sarah**

As a child, Sarah knew God had made “this planet” and she appreciated its beauty. She has always been very “spiritual,” and was drawn to Buddhism because of the focus on unconditional love.

Sarah met Christian friends who talked about their faith and “stood by” her when life was challenging. A “light bulb moment” happened at their home, when she experienced a sense

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<sup>8</sup> Olivia interview.

of “white light around” her and “an overwhelming sense of warmth.” Tears and laughter followed. Sarah knew then that God “was real” but continued to “fight.”

Even while knowing God was “powerful and loving and accepting,” Sarah endured more than ten years of “a really, really dark place.” She prayed, but received no answers. She valued the support of her loyal Christian friends during that time. Looking back, Sarah thinks this was a “lesson in unconditional love and [being] non-judgement[al].” She realises she was also afraid to respond to God.

Eventually, Sarah reached the point in her challenging life when she knew she had “to let someone in.” She accepted an invitation from her grandson to attend church with him. This coincided with awareness that she could not “do this on [her] own anymore.” She smiled as she described sensing God’s presence at church that day. The pastor preached a message that “touched [her] heart incredibly.” He was “non-judgemental about anybody” and “the Lord was just moving through him.” When speaking to him afterwards, they both cried and he said, “I can see the Lord in you, Sarah.”

When Sarah was baptised, she felt “like [she] had come home.” It was as if “all the weight had lifted.” She now “feels so contented.” Today, Sarah is confident in her relationship with God: “It’s like a knowing. And I everywhere I look I just see his love. You know I feel his presence really, really strongly in me.” Sarah delights in helping others.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Tallulah***

Tallulah, invited by a non-Christian friend, started attending a play group at a local church. She then received a personally-addressed letter inviting her to attend a special church service and lunch. Recently separated from her husband, she appreciated that the play group leader had invited her; decided to attend, and enjoyed the service and meal.

After that initial positive experience of church Tallulah kept going, and her “relationship with God started from there.” She remembers one occasion at church when “God was speaking” to her and that “was kind of odd but awesome at the same time.” She experienced a sense of peace as God was present with her.

Tallulah found the sermons, “applicable to ... everyday life.” Tallulah particularly appreciated hearing others share stories of their faith. Once she started to get to know God it was “a bit like a drug; you want more of it.” As Tallulah learned to pray, she became more aware of God’s presence in her life.

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<sup>9</sup> Sarah, interview by Lynne Taylor, 12 March, 2014.

A new job in a supportive Christian workplace was an answer to her prayer for work, and an opportunity to grow towards Christian faith. She knew that some aspects of her life were unhealthy and valued the support to change.

Tallulah is aware of, and appreciates, the great diversity of Christians: whether you are “conservative or ... prim and proper ... [or] cool ... you can ... still love God.” Recently, Tallulah has established a not-for-profit organisation committed to social justice and she is glad of, and inspired by, the many ways that Christians engage in social justice.<sup>10</sup>

## The three agents in the conversion process

As I analysed and coded the data it became clear that the converts themselves, other Christians and God all played specific roles in conversion. The roles of each of these three agents are very briefly outlined in Table 4.2. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 then report this data in detail.

Table 4.2: Agents involved in participants becoming a Christian

<b>CONVERT</b>	Has an initial exposure to Christianity
	Experiences a trigger or catalyst
	Receives invitation/s to engage in spiritual practices (and has a reason or excuse to accept those invitations)
	Engages in spiritual practices
	Makes a series of decisions: saying “yes”
	Embraces Christianity
<b>OTHER CHRISTIANS</b>	Provide initial exposure to Christianity
	Invite participation in spiritual practices
	Resource engagement in spiritual practices
	Are seen to be helped by their faith
	Live differently because of their faith
	Share openly with others including non-Christians
	Are deeply hospitable
	Allow room for doubts/questions/complexity in faith
	Helped non-Christian friends
<b>GOD</b>	Has specific attributes
	Works through others
	Curates a unique experience
	Is present
	Speaks
	Helps
	Changes or grows people
	Has acted in the past.

<sup>10</sup> Tallulah, interview by Lynne Taylor, 11 December, 2014.

## The affects experienced by the converts

As well as these three agents' crucial roles in people becoming Christians today, the converts experienced a series of affects as they journeyed into a relationship with God. These affects are shown in Table 4.3 and discussed at the end of each of the results chapters where attention is paid to the ways the affects relate to the activity of each agent.

Table 4.3: Affects experienced by the converts

Sense of <b>yearning/wanting more</b>
Wants to <b>live better/become who they are</b>
Sense that faith <b>relates</b> to everyday life
Feels <b>welcome/warmth/belonging/sense of home-coming</b>
Sense of <b>resonance/knowing/feeling right/making sense</b>
<b>Sees things differently</b>

I am using the term *affect* here in its broader psychological or philosophical sense, aware that affective processes contrast with cognitive processes. Psychologist, Robert Zajonc, was a key figure in beginning to redress the imbalance caused by a 20<sup>th</sup> century over-emphasis on cognitive reasoning. He highlighted the importance of affects, as distinct from cognition, in information processing.<sup>11</sup> Later research emphasised the interactive nature of the relationship between affect and cognition: both inform each other.<sup>12</sup> My use of the word "affect" recognises "that many bodily (and mental) processes take place subliminally, below the threshold of awareness."<sup>13</sup> While some of the affects identified in my research certainly had cognitive components, the subliminal nature of their formation must not be understated. Therefore, they are best understood as affects.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Robert B Zajonc, "Feeling and Thinking: Preferences Need No Inferences," *American Psychologist* 35, no. 2 (1980).

<sup>12</sup> Joseph P Forgas, "Feeling and Thinking: Summary and Integration," in *Feeling and Thinking: The Role of Affect in Social Cognition*, ed. Joseph P Forgas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011): 456.

<sup>14</sup> It is notable that in 1905, psychologist, Edwin Starbuck, stated: The "feeling life draws *directly* from experience, and not through the mediation of the cognitive processes; that is [the feeling life] is itself a direct source of knowledge." Edwin Diller Starbuck, "The Feelings and Their Place in Religion," *American Journal of Religious Psychology and Education* 1 (1905): 183. In 2000, psychologist, Joseph Forgas, wrote, "Research on affect and cognition is now one of the most rapidly growing endeavors in psychology." Joseph P Forgas, ed. *Feeling and Thinking: The Role of Affect in Social Cognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), xiii. The nature of affect's impact on thinking and behaviour is disputed. While some still consider that "affect has a disruptive, dangerous influence on thinking and behavior," others believe "that openness to feelings is a useful, and even necessary, adjunct to rationality and to effective social thinking." Forgas, "Introduction," 1. Similarly, the exact relationship between affect and cognition remains disputed. For an example of affect being seen as a primary response system, independent of cognitive functions, see Robert B Zajonc, "Feeling and Thinking: Closing the Debate over the Independence of Affect," in *Feeling and Thinking: The Role of Affect in Social Cognition*, ed. Joseph P Forgas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

With this background information set out and available to be referred to, we now turn to the research results. We begin, in Chapter 5, by considering the converts themselves. Specifically, this next chapter reports on the process by which participants came to call themselves Christian and the affects they experienced along the way. This addresses both my primary research question of why unchurched people in Australia are becoming Christians today; and my first sub-question about the process by which people come to embrace the Christian faith.

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2000). Others propose a more integrated approach. Forgas notes that some of the distinction that exists results from different definitions of cognition being used. (Forgas, "Introduction," 5.)



# CHAPTER 5: THE CONVERT AND THE CONVERSION PROCESS

## Introduction

Chapter 5 describes the process by which participants became Christians and the affects they experienced as they journeyed towards this faith. In doing so, this chapter about the convert addresses my first research sub-question, “What is the process by which non-Christians journey towards a relationship with God?” In addition, by being attentive to the affects the participants experienced, the chapter also directly addresses my primary research question of why unchurched people in Australia are becoming Christians today.

This is a very long chapter. However, because it outlines a process – a process that is not always linear in nature – I am reluctant to divide it into two chapters. This introductory section and the following diagram (Figure 5.1) provide a brief synopsis of the process undertaken by converts and the affects they experienced as they journeyed to faith. The main body of the chapter then elaborates on the process and the affects. (As outlined in the previous chapter, I am using the term *affects* in its psychological or philosophical sense.)

## The process

My research demonstrated that participants came to faith by a process of having an initial exposure to Christianity; experiencing some sort of catalyst that encouraged them to explore Christianity; receiving invitations to engage in various spiritual practices; engaging in spiritual practices; making a series of decisions to say “yes” to deeper involvement in the Christian faith; and, ultimately, embracing Christianity. This process is shown in the top half of Figure 5.1. While these five steps generally occurred sequentially, some participants engaged in spiritual practices before being invited to do so by other Christians. The first sections of this chapter discuss each step of this process in turn.

## The affects

The final section of the chapter focuses on the affects participants experienced as they journeyed to faith. These affects reveal what was happening at a deeper level for the participants throughout this process of coming to faith. The affects experienced (and the relative significance of each) varied between participants but can be broadly categorised as yearning or wanting more; having a desire to live better or become who they are; a sense that the Christian faith relates to everyday life; a sense of welcome, warmth, belonging or home-coming; a sense of resonance, knowing, feeling right, or making sense; and seeing

things differently. These affects are shown in (the bottom section of) Figure 5.1 and are described in the last section of this chapter.

In summary, Chapter 5 outlines the process by which people became Christians, and discusses the affects participants experienced that relate to this process of coming to faith.



Figure 5.1: Conversion process and convert affects

## Having an initial exposure to Christianity

Each participant experienced some initial exposure to Christianity before embarking on their journeys towards Christian faith. Most frequently, this exposure to Christianity was mediated by a relationship with a Christian friend, family member (typically a grandparent) or work colleague; and/or links with a church school. However, other types of exposure were also significant for participants. Dreams of Jesus were very important for one participant. For another, involvement in a secular choir provided an essential background to Christianity. Another participant indicated having a sense of God's presence and engagement with her during a stage musical and movie. Another was introduced to Christianity as a means of finding freedom from demonic possession. These various means, while not always positively experienced by the participants, all provided an exposure to Christianity very early in the participants' faith journeys. They are shown in Table 5.1 and described more fully below.

Table 5.1: Initial exposure to Christianity

	Christian			Church-run				Church School, as			Other			
	Friend	Colleague	Family member	Church service	Conference	Alpha programme	Preschool group	Pupil	Parent	Teacher	Dreams	Choir	Movie/show	Need for Deliverance
Grace		x	x											
Hamish	x		x	x					x					
Jean	x		x			x	x			x				
Luke	x	x	x		x			x						
Mary		x		x							x			
Meg	x													x
Olivia	x									x		x		
Sarah	x												x	
Tallulah				x			x							

## **Christian friends, colleagues and family members**

Christian friends, colleagues and family members often played a key role in providing participants with an initial exposure to Christianity.<sup>1</sup> This frequently began many years (or even decades) before the participant began to seriously explore Christianity.

### ***Christian friends and colleagues***

Christian friends or colleagues often helped participants become aware of the Christian faith. This occurred most positively when the participants had mutual, caring and open relationships with their Christian friends. This was certainly the case for Olivia, whose Christian friends at university expressed warmth, welcome and an openness that Olivia valued. Jean's friend, Liz, had a vibrant faith that she shared with Jean in two specific ways. First, Liz acted as a resource person as Jean explored the Christian faith so she could teach her class about it.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, Liz invited Jean to pray with her for her (Liz's) father who was unwell. Luke met a group of Christians at his work: colleagues who quickly became friends. These friends demonstrated to Luke the power of their faith. Grace and Mary also had work colleagues who shared aspects of Christianity with them. Sarah had longstanding Christian friends who supported her through some very difficult years. These friends were with Sarah when she had a supernatural encounter with God, long before she became a Christian.<sup>3</sup> Christian friends of Meg's flatmate tried to help Meg in her struggles. Thus, Christian friends and colleagues frequently helped participants become aware of Christianity through their actions and examples.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Christian family members***

Three participants mentioned Christian grandparents as a minor part of their faith formation. Grace, having stayed with her grandparents "a couple of times," had only been to church twice as a child.<sup>5</sup> Hamish's mother came from a Christian background: he mentioned his maternal grandparents being "at church every Sunday, small groups, Bible study, don't smoke, don't drink."<sup>6</sup> Jean's grandmother "used to go to a church."<sup>7</sup> Hamish and Jean both described positive perceptions of these Christian grandparents. Luke mentioned that his

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<sup>1</sup> This section presents data on the role Christian friends and family played in providing participants with an initial exposure to Christianity. The wider role that Christians played in the conversion process is the entire subject of Chapter 6.

<sup>2</sup> Jean was teaching at a church school at the time: more on this later in this section.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah's supernatural experience will be described in Chapter 7.

<sup>4</sup> Christian friends were a negative influence when perceived as "pious ... [or] legalistic" for instance, as Hamish perceived his Christian high school friends to be. Hamish interview.

<sup>5</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>6</sup> Hamish interview. His father's family were atheists.

<sup>7</sup> Jean interview.

mother's "family background is Catholic," which meant he attended church schools.<sup>8</sup> There was no indication that any of these grandparents were actively engaged in encouraging the faith formation of their grandchildren: it seems their involvement could be classified as passive, although sometimes prayerful.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, Christian friends and family members provided participants with an initial exposure to Christianity. Friends may have begun to mediate this awareness of Christianity years before the participant began to seriously explore faith for themselves. Work colleagues were generally more recent influencers while grandparents played a more passive role.

### **Previous involvement in church or church-run events or programmes**

Some participants had been introduced to Christianity as a result of attending church services, a church-run conference, an 'Alpha' programme, or taking their child to a preschool group run by a church. In some instances, this had taken place many years before they began their spiritual search. Other times it occurred during their very early exploration of Christianity.

#### ***Church services***

Three participants had some historic involvement in church life. Hamish's mother took him and his brother to Sunday School "a little bit" when he was a child but they were "asked not to come back" after the boys got into a fight with another child.<sup>10</sup> Mary was brought up in an Orthodox Church. While she "loved going to church" to "sing songs" about Jesus, there was much she disliked about church. She attended until, as a young teenager, she was old enough to refuse to go.<sup>11</sup> Tallulah also sometimes attended church as a child, and had occasionally visited church while at university. Tallulah considered that having had an experience of church as a child made it easier for her to return to church later in life. By contrast, Hamish and Mary's past church involvement did not seem to contribute positively to their later faith formation.

#### ***Programmes run by the church***

Luke went with his work colleagues to a conference run by their church. This was an important part of his early journey to faith, introducing him to the Christian faith, and encouraging him to continue exploring Christianity. He was "not quite sure if [he] agree[d] with everything that was being said," but was struck by how "genuinely passionate" the

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<sup>8</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>9</sup> Hamish commented, "I knew [my grandpa] had prayed for me for a long time." Hamish interview.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Mary interview. More about Mary's experiences of church as a child is presented in Chapter 6.

attenders were.<sup>12</sup> Jean was reintroduced to Christianity at a ‘mainly music’ programme run through her local church. This happened years after her experiences with her Christian friend and working at a church school. ‘mainly music’ provided a path for her into the ‘Alpha’ course and then to church.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Tallulah found her way back to church via a play group run by her local church after a non-Christian friend invited her and her daughter to attend with her. Programmes run by local churches were, therefore, important in providing an initial awareness of the Christian faith.

### **Involvement in church schools**

Four participants specifically mentioned church schools in their interviews; from the perspectives of a pupil, parent, and teacher. Their experiences are reported in this section.

#### ***As pupil***

Luke attended church schools (both Catholic and Anglican) where he gained “an idea of God.” But he was “put off a lot [as] ... it was very regimented ... [and] formalised ... and [he] didn’t really see the relevance of [Christiaity].” Luke reflected on his church schooling here:

I knew about God but not about the relational side of it. [I didn’t learn] much about Jesus and that sort of thing. It was really about: you go to church and this is the script for the service. So, it was very ritualistic. [It wasn’t about] knowing the more intimate side, it was more like, “Oh there’s Christianity and there’s Buddhism and there’s Islam and there’s Judaism.” And, really, even though I went to a Christian school ... that was the way they taught religion. So, when we did religious studies through the school it was about that. Like Islam has five pillars of faith ... and something about Christianity that I can’t even remember. I can remember more about Islam than I do about Christianity [laughs] going through a Christian school. Yeah, it was more from that perspective that I was taught religion.

Luke’s involvement in church schools appeared to have a minor and mildly negative influence on his understanding and perception of Christianity.<sup>14</sup>

#### ***As parent***

Hamish’s son began attending a church school shortly before Hamish began to explore the Christian faith for himself. His son came home from school with questions and learnings that Hamish’s wife (who also was not a Christian) forbade Hamish from disputing. While Hamish

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<sup>12</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>13</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 4, ‘mainly music’ is a church-based music group for preschool children and their caregivers ([www.mainlymusic.org](http://www.mainlymusic.org)). ‘Alpha’ is a course designed to enable people to explore the Christian faith. ([www.alpha.org.au](http://www.alpha.org.au)).

<sup>14</sup> Luke interview.

“wouldn’t say that it was necessarily that [his son] had begun at a Christian school [that started his faith explorations]” it was certainly a timely event in Hamish’s faith journey.<sup>15</sup>

### ***As teacher***

Church schools were highly significant in Jean and Olivia’s faith journeys, but in fascinating and unexpected ways. Both these women were teaching in church schools. Being professionally dedicated, they were aware that they needed to know more about Christianity in order to be good teachers in that context.

Jean read, researched on the internet and talked with a Christian friend about Christianity so she could effectively teach religious content to her class of primary school children. The children in her class demonstrated to Jean their benefits from the Christian faith. She “really liked the way that the children [in her class] would talk about God and would find ... a friend in him and sort of find that security and that comfort in him.” Jean saw their faith as a “really lovely kind of security for a little person to have.” But it was another five years before Jean began to explore Christianity as a faith option for herself.<sup>16</sup>

Olivia’s commitment to teach well also greatly influenced her decision to attend church. She wanted to better understand the significance of the Christian faith, as she knew it was important in the schools she taught in. It was at one such school that she was struck by the Easter posters the children had drawn, wondering what they meant, and figuring they must be important because of how many were on display. Teaching at church schools, thus, encouraged Olivia to “learn a bit more about” Christianity.<sup>17</sup>

Church schools impacted positively on the faith development of Jean and Olivia, as they sought to be good teachers in them. Being a pupil in church schools was a neutral to negative factor in Luke’s faith development. Hamish’s son attending a church school possibly contributed slightly to Hamish’s faith journey, exposing him to Christianity as experienced through the eyes of his child.

### **Other means of exposure to Christianity**

Four participants were exposed to Christianity in additional and unique ways. These were dreaming about Jesus and God; involvement in a secular choir; attending a musical and movie; and seeking deliverance.

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<sup>15</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>16</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>17</sup> Olivia interview.



### ***Dreaming about Jesus***

While Mary had attended church as a young child, her very early awareness of Christ came through dreams. She explained:

I do remember very clearly all my life that around the age of five I started having, for quite a long time, intense dreams of Jesus, where I would be like in a magical forest with Jesus and he would be playing with me and playing with the animals. [These dreams occurred] on a very regular basis. So, I've always remembered it and it was always pretty much from memory the same theme, like in this forest with the animals and Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

Mary has always had a sense of love for Jesus and a desire to be with God and Jesus. As a young child, the thing she liked about church was “sing[ing] the songs” about Jesus. Jesus was always real to her and she yearned for a deeper relationship with Jesus and God. Mary initially embraced ‘New Age’ spirituality and became deeply involved in it. It was through supernatural encounters, like her dreams of Jesus, that Mary became aware of Jesus Christ.<sup>19</sup>

### ***A secular choir***

Olivia’s first exposure to Christianity came at the secular choir she sang in for ten years as a child and teenager. Her mother was anti-Christian to the extent that Olivia was excluded from any school classes involving religious instruction or input from the school chaplain. At choir though, Olivia could discover a little about the Christian faith as the choir occasionally sang “songs ... about God” and she wondered, “What is this about?” Olivia’s vocal teacher added to this tiny, but growing, engagement with Christianity by having Olivia learn songs that were “quite oriented towards praising God.”<sup>20</sup>

### ***Entertainment media***

For Sarah, the stage show *Jesus Christ Superstar*<sup>21</sup> and the movie *The Passion of the Christ*<sup>22</sup> were both important in making her aware of the Christian story. *Jesus Christ Superstar* “resonated with [her] just incredibly” and God “was talking to [her]” as she watched *The Passion*. Thus, the entertainment media was significant in introducing Sarah to the Christian story.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>21</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus\\_Christ\\_Superstar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_Christ_Superstar) Accessed 2 May 2017.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0335345/> Accessed 2 May 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Sarah interview.

## **Seeking deliverance**

Meg believed that Christianity offered a means for dealing with the darkness that had overtaken her life. She was seeking exorcism from demonic forces and was introduced to Christianity as a way of finding freedom from such powers.

Being exposed to Christianity before they began on their journey of faith formation was an important dimension of each participant's story of coming to faith. Christian friends and family members; work colleagues; church schools; dreams, watching movies and stage shows; participating in a choir; and seeking deliverance all provided an early exposure to Christianity for the participants. All participants reported having some initial knowledge of the Christian faith as they embarked on their faith journeys.

## **Experiencing a catalyst**

Each of the participants described some sort of catalyst that encouraged them to begin to explore Christianity seriously. Some catalysts were ongoing. Other catalysts are better understood as relating to a particular incident. Within each of these categories (catalytic incidents and ongoing catalysts) were both positive and negative catalysts. These different types of catalysts are described in this section.

### **Catalytic incidents**

Grace, Hamish, Luke, Olivia and Tallulah all spoke of incidents that motivated them to explore Christianity. Some catalytic incidents were positive and some were negative. These catalytic incidents are represented in Table 5.2 and reported next.

*Table 5.2: Catalytic incidents*

		Grace	Hamish	Luke	Olivia	Tallulah
Negative	Breakup	x			x	x
	Accident			x		
	Overstepping a line					x
	Other				x	
Positive	Noticing		x		x	

### **Negative catalytic events**

Four participants reported negative incidents that acted as a catalyst for their exploration of the Christian faith. These incidents related to relationship breakups; an accident; and a sense of personally overstepping a line.

Grace, Olivia and Tallulah all experienced a relationship breakup that acted as a catalyst to their exploration of Christianity. Grace went through a “dark patch” after she broke up with her girlfriend and it was around this time that she accepted her colleague’s invitation to attend church.<sup>24</sup> Olivia’s relationship breakup was one of many events that occurred around the same time. In fact, it seemed that “everything fell apart all of a sudden” as her long-term relationship broke up, she had to move out of her flat, her mental health faltered and she had difficulties at work.<sup>25</sup> Tallulah had separated from her husband and had “quite a hard divorce.” In addition to the divorce, Tallulah experienced a “defining moment” when she found herself “throwing up in the toilet after drinking too much ... and thinking, ‘You’ve got to change your life’.”<sup>26</sup> Luke was in a serious car accident that caused him debilitating and ongoing physical and mental health issues. For each of these three participants, these specific events were important catalysts on their journeys to faith.

### ***Positive catalytic events***

Hamish and Olivia experienced positive catalytic events that related to them noticing something and exploring it further. Hamish noticed a Bible and Olivia noticed a series of posters about Easter.

Hamish was catalysed into exploring Christianity when he noticed a Bible on his bookcase. The noticing led to reading the Bible, which led to six months of further investigation of the Bible and of the Christian faith.<sup>27</sup> A sudden noticing of something that had been in his home for some time was a key catalyst in starting Hamish on his journey towards Christian faith.

For Olivia, seeing several posters about Easter on display at the church school where she taught acted as a catalyst for her faith journey. These posters, made by the school children, had pictures of the cross and the words, “He died for our sins.” Olivia realised she had “actually never really thought about [the cross] before” and decided “probably it could be kind of helpful ... to know a little more about this.” The posters that children had prepared as part of their own education acted as a key catalyst for Olivia’s faith journey.<sup>28</sup>

### **Ongoing catalysts**

As well as these catalytic incidents, other catalysts acting over a longer period encouraged participants to explore Christianity. Again, these ongoing catalysts could be either positive or

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<sup>24</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>25</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>26</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>27</sup> Hamish’s reading of the Bible is further discussed below.

<sup>28</sup> Olivia interview.

negative in nature. Negative ongoing catalysts named by participants included dryness or dissatisfaction; unhappiness; spiritual malaise; mental malaise; physical malaise; family troubles; and a sense of not being cared about. These, along with the various positive ongoing catalysts (each experienced by only one participant) are shown in Table 5.3 and discussed below.

Table 5.3: Ongoing catalysts

		Grace	Hamish	Jean	Luke	Mary	Meg	Olivia	Sarah	Tallulah
negative	Dryness/dissatisfaction		x			x		x		x
	Unhappiness						x	x		x
	Spiritual malaise						x			
	Mental malaise	x			x		x	x		
	Physical malaise				x		x		x	
	Family troubles								x	
	Sense not cared about				x					
	Other				x					x
positive	Spiritual search					x				
	Dreams					x				
	Other		x	x						

### **Negative ongoing catalysts**

Several negative ongoing things acted as catalysts to participants exploring Christianity. These are discussed below.

#### *Dryness or dissatisfaction*

Hamish “started to feel really, really dry and wasn’t quite sure where it was coming from.” Reflecting, Hamish realised: “The further along I kept going with atheism, the drier I got, the less human I got, I suppose.” Previously held atheist understandings did not explain the love he had for his family. He recognised that continuing his current trajectory “would lead exactly to what [he] kept professing, which was just nothing.” This was at odds with his growing sense that “nothing wasn’t all there was.” He would listen to recordings of atheist, Christopher Hitchens, “completely destroy” the fundamentalist Christian he was arguing with, but Hamish realised what Hitchens was “saying ... doesn’t mean anything either.” Feeling like existentialism was a “real cop-out” and that “theories of the multiverse” required “such amazing ... flights of fancy,” Hamish came to “see that it was easier to believe in God than it was to believe in what science was saying in some respects.” The “dry feeling that [he] was getting” combined with growing intellectual misgivings about atheism to cause a deep

dissatisfaction with his existing value system and beliefs. This dryness and dissatisfaction acted as a significant catalyst for Hamish's faith-exploration.<sup>29</sup>

Mary, Olivia and Tallulah also spoke of a dryness or dissatisfaction helping to catalyse their spiritual search. Mary always "struggled because nothing was completely satisfying." This dissatisfaction fuelled, and was fuelled by, her spiritual search.<sup>30</sup> Olivia spoke of feeling "a bit unsatisfied" even before "all [the] bad stuff [described above] happened." She summarised her experience in this way:

I'd felt like everything [had been] going great, but I still wasn't satisfied. I still didn't really... I was like, "If this is life, this is kinda shit" [laughs]. ...I suppose that partly had contributed to (you know) everything falling apart.<sup>31</sup> But even if stuff is good, I could see that there was something missing and then when everything went crap, it's like you know there's something missing anyway 'cause I'd felt that before.<sup>32</sup>

Tallulah knew she "had to change the way [she] was living her life" but "didn't know how that was going to [happen]." She was dissatisfied with life as it was and longed for change. This helped catalyse her spiritual search.<sup>33</sup>

### *Unhappiness*

For both Olivia and Tallulah, this dissatisfaction was linked with feeling generally unhappy. Olivia said she felt "really unhappy."<sup>34</sup> Tallulah realised she was "not happy," feeling "lost and alone."<sup>35</sup> But it was Meg who suffered the most from deep unhappiness, describing herself as "so broken-hearted." This broken-heartedness had (decades earlier) driven Meg's spiritual journey into the 'New Age' movement and had led to the spiritual malaise that is described next. Sadly, Meg's unhappiness was not resolved by the time of our interview.<sup>36</sup> For each of these three women, feeling unhappy helped catalyse their exploration of Christianity.

### *Spiritual malaise*

Meg's unhappiness, and her long involvement in the 'New Age' movement, caused her a serious spiritual malaise that debilitated her and had served as the major catalyst for her exploring the Christian faith. This spiritual malaise was experienced as ongoing and frequent spiritual "attack." She described incidents in which she was aware of "satanic spirits" in her

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<sup>29</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>30</sup> Mary interview. Mary's spiritual search is discussed below.

<sup>31</sup> Like her relationship breakup and mental health declining, described above.

<sup>32</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>33</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>34</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>35</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>36</sup> Meg interview.

home harming her. Meg knew she was not in a healthy place and that she needed help to get out of it. In exploring Christianity, Meg was desperately seeking a solution for this spiritual malaise.<sup>37</sup>

### *Mental malaise*

Meg understood her spiritual malaise was linked to her mental malaise: she suffered mentally as she suffered spiritually. Grace, Luke and Olivia also suffered personally from the effects of mental illness and this malaise was a partial catalyst to their exploring Christianity. I have already mentioned the “dark patch” that Grace went through after she broke up with her girlfriend. But this was not an isolated incident, Grace had struggled with “chronic mental illness” for many years previously.<sup>38</sup> Olivia’s “mental health got not particularly well” and she “had to quit one of [her] jobs and [she] lost one of the other ones.” “It was right after that that [Olivia] started going to church.”<sup>39</sup> One of the results of Luke’s accident was a battle with “depression and anxiety” so severe that it caused him to “dissociate” and “feel like [his] consciousness as a human [was] taking a back seat.”<sup>40</sup> Their mental malaise contributed to Grace, Luke, Meg and Olivia’s spiritual searches.

### *Physical malaise*

As well as mental malaise, Luke’s accident had caused ongoing physical health challenges. These contributed to the overall sense of malaise that helped catalyse his exploration of Christianity. Meg too had suffered “an injury ... [and was] physically sometimes not ... able to look after [herself].” She lacked supportive people she could ask for help and this also contributed to her beginning to explore the Christian faith.<sup>41</sup> Sarah had problems with her family (reported next) that caused her to get “quite sick.”<sup>42</sup>

### *Family troubles*

Sarah spoke of having a “stress[ful] childhood” and had been in an abusive relationship when she had her children. One of her children suffered from mental illness and, now, drug addictions. Sarah cares for a grandchild and balances care for this child with his mother’s rights and need for contact with him and vice versa. Sarah acknowledged that as well as becoming physically sick, this caused her to be “very, very stressed and it was ... just overwhelming ‘cause nearly every day or every second day there was some drama going on

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>39</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>40</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>41</sup> Meg interview.

<sup>42</sup> Sarah interview.

[with her child] and it has been going on for over ten years.” This ongoing family difficulty culminated in Sarah hearing God encourage her to go to church.<sup>43</sup>

### *Sense of not being cared about*

When asked what had motivated him to explore Christianity, Luke replied, “I think it was getting a sense that [none of the professionals assigned to help him after his accident] really cared about [him].” This was in stark contrast to the care he received from his Christian friends (which will be reported in Chapter 6). This sense of not being cared about helped catalyse Luke’s journey to Christianity.<sup>44</sup>

### *Other*

Luke and Tallulah both named other things that acted as catalysts to their exploring Christianity. Luke “was really just looking for help.”<sup>45</sup> Tallulah “was really struggling with finding the balance of life.”<sup>46</sup>

### ***Positive ongoing catalysts***

Ongoing catalysts could be positive as well as negative, such as those experienced by Hamish, Jean and Mary. I have already mentioned the way that Hamish’s son attending a church school contributed to his faith exploration.

Unlike the other participants, the only catalyst Jean mentioned was a positive one. Jean was inspired by a desire for her young son to have the opportunity to explore faith: an opportunity that she herself had not had. After attending ‘mainly music’ with her son, Jean started to have questions about faith. She wanted her son to be able to explore such questions as a child. She realised, “You can have sport, you can have music, you can [have] friends, but you know church would be one of those things that he could always have as well. And you know he will make that choice when he is older, but I definitely wanted to give him that experience in his life as well.” There had been other events that had “put questions [about faith] into [her] head” but up to that point she had not done anything about them. The catalyst, of her desire for her son to have an opportunity she herself had missed out on, was what Jean named as spurring her into an exploration of faith.<sup>47</sup>

Mary experienced a life-long desire to be closer, ever closer, and even closer to the God she had always loved. Despite having “many, many [spiritual] experiences, ... it was still never

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. (This is reported in Chapter 7.)

<sup>44</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. Meg also named a need for help, but did not consider that she received the help she sought.

<sup>46</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>47</sup> Jean interview.

good enough.” She articulated it as follows: “I just needed God in my life. And [I] needed God so [much], like it was just a craving. And I was trying to work out how I can get God closer.” Thus, one of Mary’s ongoing positive catalysts was a desire to connect with God in intensely deep ways. The dreams about Jesus that Mary was having also acted as catalysts for her to explore Christianity.<sup>48</sup>

Importantly, these catalysts, whether positive or negative, in an incident or ongoing, were generally followed by, or coincided with, invitations (generally extended by a Christian) to engage in a variety of spiritual practices.<sup>49</sup> These invitations are explored in the next section.

## **Receiving an invitation and having a reason to accept it**

Participants indicated that they had been invited to engage in a variety of spiritual practices, generally by people with whom they already had a positive relationship. Significantly, they frequently articulated a reason or excuse for accepting those invitations. This section reports on the invitations to be involved in spiritual practices that were specifically mentioned by the participants, and any reasons (or excuses) they reported for accepting those invitations.<sup>50</sup>

### **An invitation to what?**

While all but one participant specifically mentioned being invited to attend church services, the invitations extended (and accepted) were for involvement in a much broader range of spiritual practices. Participants discussed being invited to join a small group; to attend something else run by the church (for example, a conference or ministry event); to participate in some way in worship services; to engage socially in fellowship (including eating together); to pray; to learn more about Christian faith; and to attend worship services. Table

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<sup>48</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>49</sup> Spiritual practices are defined in different ways by different people. (For a helpful brief summary, see Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C Bass, “A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C Bass (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B Eerdmans, 2002), 20.) I am using the term to mean those activities described by participants that helped to form them spiritually. Spiritual practices include both “ascetical and spiritual disciplines and exercises” (as per Dykstra and Bass’ second definition), as well as some of the more informal practices incorporated in their first definition. Ibid. Communal spiritual practices include “attending religious services, engaging in intimate dialogues as well as formal discussions with fellow believers, undergoing religious education, and seeking out spiritual guidance when distressed.” Annette Mahoney and Kenneth I Pargament, “Sacred Changes: Spiritual Conversion and Transformation,” *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 60, no. 5 (2004): 490. Note that my data demonstrate that the word ‘fellow’ is unnecessary: people engage in spiritual practices before they are themselves believers. Personal spiritual practices include: prayer, Bible reading and study, worship, and more. For a thorough exploration, see Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015).

<sup>50</sup> This section only considers those instances when participants mentioned a specific invitation to engage in such practices, while the next major section more generally considers participants’ involvement in spiritual practices.



5.4 shows the variety of spiritual practices participants reported being invited to participate in. More detail about those invitations is reported below.

Table 5.4: Spiritual practices participants were invited to

	Grace	Hamish	Jean	Luke	Mary	Meg	Olivia	Sarah	Tallulah
Church	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Small group				x			x		
Church-run ministry			x	x					x
Fellowship				x	x		x		
Participate in church				x	x				
Pray			x						
Other					x				x

Jean was the only participant who did not specifically mention being invited to attend a church service. Instead, she talked about two other invitations she received. The first invitation Jean mentioned was extended about five years before she became a Christian. This was an invitation to pray with her friend, Liz, whose father was unwell. Jean described it as follows:

One of my really, really good friends ... her father was going through chemotherapy and cancer and she would often say, "Please just ... come and pray with me." And I would kind of think, "What can I... how is that going to make a difference because I am not religious" and I didn't understand it. But she just felt so comforted by it that I would just sit there and pray with her. And you know he's not in perfect health, but like, it was just such a, it was the first time I really thought, "Wow this can make a difference as well." He's just defied so many odds and you know knowing that he has had so many people praying for him is a big part of their lives. So yeah, that just kind of got me thinking as to maybe this prayer stuff is real.

The only other invitation Jean mentioned in the interview was an impersonal invitation to attend an 'Alpha' course run by her local church.<sup>51</sup> Thus, Jean did not specifically mention an invitation to attend church worship services, instead talking about being invited to pray with a friend and to receiving a general invitation to attend the 'Alpha' course.<sup>52</sup>

Each of the other participants mentioned being invited to church. These invitations were generally received before they had decided to become Christians, although both Hamish and Mary had already made a commitment to God before they accepted an invitation to attend church. For Hamish and Mary, their backgrounds made it unlikely that they would have accepted an invitation to church before they had established a relationship with God.

<sup>51</sup> The church that ran the 'mainly music' group she attended.

<sup>52</sup> Jean interview.

Hamish, as an atheist, would not have wanted to attend church (except perhaps to tell the Christians there why their faith was flawed) and Mary, due to negative childhood church experiences of exclusion and aggression, had no desire to return to church. It seems likely that both Mary and Hamish needed to establish a relationship with God before they would attend church.

The invitations to church were generally reported to be very casual or informal, offering an opportunity to explore church rather than implying that church would answer all the participants' life questions, or solve all their problems. Grace was invited to "come along to church and see what you think and ... see what happens."<sup>53</sup> Hamish's aunt sent him a Facebook message that began, "Oh, Hamish if you are looking for a church..."<sup>54</sup> Luke also described the invitation from Rob as being very casual: "And then after [attending the church conference] Rob was like, 'Why don't you come down to [church]?'"<sup>55</sup> The exception to this casual approach was Meg, whose invitation appeared to be more of a summons. She described it: "And then this guy, who was a pastor, rang me and he said (and this was at 5 pm), 'Go to [a local Pentecostal church] where [an international speaker] is going to be there'."<sup>56</sup> Apart from Meg's experience, there was an informal and open-handed approach to the offering of invitations to church. The general sense was that church was something to consider: an option to explore.

Both Luke and Olivia mentioned being invited to join a small group. These small groups provided relational contact for them. They also provided Luke and Olivia with an environment for discipleship and growth in their fledgling Christian faith to occur.

The first invitation Luke mentioned was to a church-run conference. Tallulah's reintroduction to church was via a church play group.

Luke, Mary and Olivia were invited to fellowship with Christian friends. Mary and Olivia both spoke of invitations to share meals. Luke was invited "to a lot of different events."<sup>57</sup>

Luke was invited to participate in the worship band at church. Similarly, Mary was invited to participate in the worship service. She speaks positively of this: "I've been sort of fortunate enough to be asked to, if I want to do [Bible] readings as well. So, I love that. I get to do

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<sup>53</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>54</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>55</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>56</sup> Meg interview.

<sup>57</sup> Luke interview.

readings and just participate in small ways.”<sup>58</sup> Both Luke and Mary valued the invitations and opportunity to be involved in church services.

Two participants mentioned being invited to other things. When she first started attending church, Mary was invited to sit with a woman at church who helped her to understand and participate in worship. Tallulah mentioned that she had previously (while occasionally attending a different church several years earlier) been invited to join a church sports team. However, as she did not play that sport, she did not take up the offer.

Thus, invitations were extended not just to attend church services, but to engage in various spiritual practices. These practices met a variety of social and spiritual needs for the participants.

### Invited by whom?

Participants described the person who did the inviting in some relational, positive or personally relevant way. Table 5.5 shows the relationship between the participant and those who invited them. This is reported further in this section.

Grace said her manager at work who invited her to church was a “reformed addict.”<sup>59</sup> This suggests that Grace (who herself struggles with mental illness) saw it as significant that her colleague’s life had been changed. Hamish, who had earlier not enjoyed attending his friend’s church, attended the church recommended by his Christian aunt. Jean was invited to pray with a close friend. Later, having received a warm welcome at her ‘mainly music’ group, Jean accepted a general invitation to attend the ‘Alpha’ course in order to learn more about Christianity.<sup>60</sup> Luke’s caring workmates invited him to a church conference, to church, and to socialise with them, while others his own age from the church (who clearly demonstrated their interest in Luke as a person) also invited him to other things.

Table 5.5: Who invited?

	Grace	Hamish	Jean	Luke	Mary	Meg	Olivia	Sarah	Tallulah
Friend			x	x	x		x		x
Colleague	x			x					
Relation		x						x	
Other			x		x	x			x

<sup>58</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>59</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>60</sup> Jean interview. The ‘Alpha’ course was advertised at ‘mainly music’.

Meg's invitation to church was extended by a pastor whom Meg believed was trying to help her overcome dark forces in her life. Olivia was invited to church by a trusted friend, and then found herself among a caring group who invited her to dinner and to join a small group. Sarah was invited to church by her beloved grandson, who said, "Grandma, you've gotta come to this amazing church [that he was attending]."<sup>61</sup> Tallulah was invited to a church-run ministry by a non-Christian friend and then to a church service and meal by a church leader whom she had met through that ministry and liked. These inviters were generally people with whom the participants had a positive relationship: people they were prepared to trust; and people they wanted to spend time with.<sup>62</sup>

It was not always Christians who did the inviting. Tallulah's initial invitation to play group was extended by a non-Christian friend who enjoyed attending the church-run group herself. One invitation to church was also extended by a non-Christian. Mary explains:

It was through [my 'New Age' flatmate]. [The church is] where she catches the bus just outside the church [down] the main road. She knew that I was going through Christian things and [had] become really interested in Jesus and [was] having dreams, I was having dreams of Jesus at the time as well. She looked up and they had a banner for [a] carol [service] at the church and said, "Why don't we go?" And said she'll come with me. And she wrote down the times and everything. And I had really no intentions of going [to church] anywhere [before she invited me].<sup>63</sup>

Each of these participants had caring Christians in their lives who were prepared to invite them to engage in spiritual practices. Equally, those inviting Christians clearly had non-Christian friends in their lives whom they could invite. In addition, the Christians lived and acted in ways that were attractive to, and engendered trust among, their non-Christian friends.

### **What kind of invitation?**

Invitations were most often delivered personally: generally, verbally one-on-one, or via personal letter or message, although some invitations mentioned were in the form of general or impersonal invitations. This is shown in Table 5.6 and reported in more detail in this section.

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<sup>61</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>62</sup> This was less true for Meg who did not know well the minister who invited her.

<sup>63</sup> Mary interview.

Table 5.6: Form of invitation

	Grace	Hamish	Jean	Luke	Mary	Meg	Olivia	Sarah	Tallulah
Personal	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Impersonal			x		x				

All the invitations to church mentioned by participants included a personal dimension. Grace, Luke, Meg, Mary, Olivia and Sarah all received verbally-delivered personal invitations to church, while Hamish received a Facebook message from his aunt (who lives in a different country) recommending a specific church and Tallulah received a (personally-named, addressed and posted) letter, inviting her and her daughter to church and a meal following the service. Mary’s personal invitation to church was extended by her flatmate. But this invitation could not have been issued unless before this, the church itself had issued a general invitation, in this case, by advertising their carol service on a banner outside the church. Thus, a direct personal invitation was a crucial part in the process for each of the participants who mentioned being invited to church.

Other invitations were also delivered personally although Jean became aware of an ‘Alpha’ course the church was running through non-personal means. First, as it was “spruiked ... a bit at one of the ‘mainly music’ sessions” she went to and, secondly, via a letterbox drop in her street. But a personal invitation was also part of Jean’s story as she had been invited to pray for her friend’s father many years earlier.<sup>64</sup>

Both personal invitations and advertising material played a role in people becoming Christians. However, it was the personal invitations that were most prevalent and significant.

### **Having a reason, or excuse, to accept that invitation**

Participants generally articulated a reason – sometimes an excuse – to accept the invitation to engage in spiritual practices that was extended to them. Their reasons for accepting the invitation varied hugely, from wanting to spend more time with Christian friends, to hearing God speak directly to them. The invitations that resulted in participants engaging in spiritual practices were not necessarily the first such invitations they had received. Generally, the invitations mentioned were invitations they accepted, and were the specific invitations that led to the significant events or markers on the participants’ faith journeys.

<sup>64</sup> Jean interview. ‘Spruiked’ is an informal Australian verb meaning to advertise or promote.

Grace was going through a difficult time when her boss (whose own life had been transformed) invited her to church. Hamish had already decided he was Christian when his aunt recommended he try a church that had a minister who was known to their family. As Hamish recalled his mother “talk[ing] about how she remembered [that minister] preaching up a storm,” he decided to “give that [church] a go.”<sup>65</sup>

Jean realised she didn’t want her son to have the questions about religion that she had. Rather, she “would like for him to grow up at least knowing about [Christianity].”<sup>66</sup> Luke wanted to spend more time with the Christians he had worked with, because he liked them and because he saw that they cared for him. Mary, like Hamish, had decided to become a Christian but had been avoiding going to church.<sup>67</sup> When her flatmate, recognising the significance of Mary’s spiritual quest, invited her to a local carol service, and offered to go with her, Mary, despite having had no plans to attend church, decided, “All right, I’ll go.”<sup>68</sup>

Meg went to church thinking she would have an opportunity to receive deliverance. Olivia had decided she wanted to know more about the Christian faith so she could be a better teacher in the church school context she worked in. Sarah went to church because her grandson wanted her to, and because God was speaking to her saying: “Sarah you have to meet, you have to be surrounded by like-minded people. ... You can’t keep doing this on your own.”<sup>69</sup> For Tallulah, the reason was less strong, although she was clear that she wanted to “build a relationship with God and listen to the sermons.”<sup>70</sup>

Thus, each of the participants had some reason or excuse for accepting at least one of the invitations to engage in spiritual practices they had received.

## **Engaging in spiritual practices**

Participants reported that they engaged in a variety of spiritual practices, both as they journeyed towards becoming Christians and following their conversion. The various spiritual practices they reported undertaking are shown in Table 5.7 and discussed in the next section.

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<sup>65</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>66</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>67</sup> Because of negative childhood experiences of church, as mentioned earlier.

<sup>68</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>69</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>70</sup> Tallulah interview.

Table 5.7: Spiritual practices engaged in

	Grace	Hamish	Jean	Luke	Meg	Mary	Olivia	Sarah	Tallulah
Attending church	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Reading the Bible	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Praying	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Fellowship	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
Worship	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
Baptism			x	x	x	x	x	x	(x) <sup>71</sup>
Small group	x		x	x		x	x		
Using gifts		x		x		x		x	x
Sharing faith	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

### Attending church

All participants had attended church either before or reasonably soon after, becoming a Christian. Each of these experiences were unique and are reported below.

Grace reported that, in response to her colleague’s invitation: “One day [she] just went to church.” Because church “felt right [she] went back the next week and the next week.” While church sometimes clashes with other Sunday commitments, Grace tries to “get [to church] as much as [she] can.”<sup>72</sup>

The strength of Hamish’s willingness to attend church was demonstrated by his returning to (a different) church after a negative experience at the first church he tried. Hamish first attended a Pentecostal church with a friend and “did not like that at all.” He left during a sermon in which the preacher expressed anti-homosexual sentiments, sentiments that seemed to be appreciated by the congregation, who “had a bit of a chortle.” At that point, Hamish “got up and ... walked out” thinking, “I don’t see where Jesus is here right at this moment.” Despite this, and following his aunt’s recommendation, Hamish tried attending a Uniting church and “felt at home. Felt [it was] the right place to be.” Hamish did his homework, “read[ing] up on the Basis of Union and look[ing] at a few things on the [UCA] website.”<sup>73</sup> He appreciated the congregation’s, and the wider Church’s, commitment to social justice as well as the “mishmash of people” who were part of the church. However, Hamish acknowledges, “that’s not to say that if I had got to the Lutherans or the Pressies or the

<sup>71</sup> This is bracketed because Tallulah was baptised after I interviewed her.

<sup>72</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>73</sup> The ‘Basis of Union’ is the founding document of the Uniting Church in Australia.

Baptists first that I would have not have stayed there. But yeah, I got to the Uniting Church and went, 'Yeah, this is it'.<sup>74</sup>

Jean decided to attend church services during the 'Alpha' course she participated in, and that was essentially the moment she decided to become a Christian. She described her experience as follows: "It was maybe ... half a dozen sessions [into the 'Alpha' course] that I felt like this is really what I want in my life and I want to know more and I want to, you know, start going to church." When she first started attending church she found it "quite overwhelming" because there was "a lot to take on board." But Jean had an overall sense she described as "that feeling of being in the right place." Jean is now a regular attender at her local church, finding church participation to be a vital part of her week.<sup>75</sup>

After his friend invited him, Luke "started going [to church] a bit more." He found the church services to be refreshingly different from the way he remembered the services at the church schools he attended. He commented, "Wow at the Baptist church they've got, like, a drum set and ... electric guitars up there. And going through school was all like church pipe organs and the choir still wore the very traditional gowns and everything. So, I was kind of like, 'This is totally different'. So, it was good." Overall, Luke found the church he attended to be a welcoming and engaging place, where passionate and committed people shared their stories.<sup>76</sup>

Mary had suffered "horrible experiences" of church as a child and, despite having decided to become a Christian, was understandably reluctant to attend church. However, she knew from her reading of the Bible that church attendance was an important part of Christian faith. Mary described her experience of finally attending her local church as follows: "I went to church and I sat in the pew and it was the most wonderful feeling. It was so emotional. It was like, I'm home. It was that feeling of being home. And I've been going every week now." Mary was "overwhelmed with how beautiful [church] was and ... just didn't want to go out." While she "knew a couple of the people there ... but not well", Mary found a welcoming church environment. She said,

They all embraced me and looked after me and one of the elderly ladies, who has become a very dear friend, she told me to come and sit in front with her, and she helped me. I still have trouble following the parts in books where the priest is going on, so she helps me find my location where I'm supposed to be in the book and they all, they just, they gave me such a positive loving experience to be with them.

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<sup>74</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>75</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>76</sup> Luke interview.



Mary noted that not everyone has such a positive experience of church. Speaking of her friends in 'New Age' she said, "A lot of them went to the churches and the first church or two they went to, they said it was awful. They felt the churches were really cliquey and they didn't belong and stuff and it took them a while to find their church. So, I guess I was even lucky in that regard."<sup>77</sup>

Meg went to church because she wanted to be delivered from demonic possession. She had previously been "to a few churches and they told [her that she] had a mental problem. They had never heard of demons." Attending a Pentecostal church, she received prayer for deliverance and "did [her] salvation prayer." She has "been going to church ever since."<sup>78</sup>

Olivia had attended church with a Christian friend on previous occasions, but "hadn't really thought about it too much." As she started to explore Christianity, she decided she wanted to go to church. She had narrowed down her options to two possible churches, when her friend phoned and invited her to one of them. She went along and "it was nice and so [she] sort of sat on that experience for a little bit and then eventually [she] went back around Easter time of that year. And [then she] just sort of decided to go and stick it out for a bit."<sup>79</sup>

When Olivia "first started [attending church she] didn't really feel like [she] knew what [she] was singing about, and ... felt a bit uncomfortable 'cause [she] didn't know any of the songs." But she "liked the style of the music and the style of the service" which she described as "quite ... relaxed." She commented: "So, I think if I'd gone to a service where there was more ... [formality and rituals], I would have felt even more uncomfortable. So I think that lack of formality and rituals sort of helped me to be able to connect with it a bit more." She noted that "even just simple stuff like standing up to sing and stuff ... feels really unusual when you're not used to that culture." Thus, the informality of the church she attended "helped it to be more accessible to [her]," but she "still had that sort of hesitancy, [wondering] 'Is this what I'm supposed to be doing now?'"<sup>80</sup>

Olivia was pleasantly surprised by how engaging church was. When asked if there was anything that appealed about church that had made her consider attending, she commented:

Whatever the opposite of appeal is. That would have been how I would have viewed the church. Like very unappealing; like, I suppose, before going I really viewed it as, like, I suppose like an institution that wants people to do things a certain way. That is essentially how I viewed the church before actually going. I think that's a really big image problem. ... 'Cause I was really turned off by that. Like I was obviously

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<sup>77</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>78</sup> Meg interview.

<sup>79</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

interested in knowing more about God, but even as I went [to church] I wasn't really like that keen on the fact that church has this really bad reputation. So, I wasn't really too sure what to expect.

When Olivia had been searching on the internet for a church, she had specific criteria. She wanted a church “with younger people; something that [met] at night time; something that wasn't too traditional [but that] ... had structure in place to help people grow and develop.” She did not want a church “to [have] that institutionalised, ‘do things like this,’ kind of attitude. But equally [she didn't want] a church that ... completely ditch[ed] everything that anyone older than us knows.” Olivia's previous perceptions, contributed to by the very architecture of churches, was that churches are “institutionalised and ... they want to tell you what to do.” For this reason, she had been previously disinclined to attend church and commented: “Maybe if the church had seemed like ultra-appealing I would have gone to find out more sooner.”<sup>81</sup>

Sarah had a sense of God being present with her when she first went to church with her grandson. As well as feeling God's presence, Sarah experienced a deep sense of connection with the minister. She described meeting the minister after the service:

And I just went up to him when we shook hands and I said: “I've just come because my grandson wanted me to come” and I just was holding [the minister's] hand and I can just remember and he was just looking at me in my eyes and we both just started crying and I said: “I know now why the Lord told me to come here, um because, because of you and you really touched my heart.”

Sarah also then received an affirmation that God was active in her life, as the minister said to her, “I can see the Lord in you, Sarah ... you're just beaming.” Sarah's first experience at this church was a positive one and she has attended there since.<sup>82</sup>

Tallulah attended the church service and meal that she was invited to by her play group leader. She described the service and meal as “a great experience” in a “really nice community.” Tallulah “kept going back to church” after her first positive experience and her “relationship with God started from there.” Tallulah's stated aim in going to church was to develop a relationship with God and to listen to the sermons. She found “some of the sermons really interesting and applicable to ... everyday life,” “enjoying the life lessons that she was extracting from [them].” Tallulah realises she was “making church more of a priority [in her life].” The church she initially attended was “very traditional” and sang hymns that she “didn't really relate to,” but Tallulah valued the personal testimonies that were shared in the minister's absence: testimonies that made her realise the story behind people's faith and that

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Sarah interview. Sarah's perceptions of the minister and her sensing God's presence at church are discussed in Chapters 6 and 7.

“sometimes their faith came or grew [as] a result of something that happened in their life.” Tallulah “felt close to God” in church, a “more intense” feeling than she experienced in her everyday life. She has since moved on from that first church, “because it was quite traditional” and now attends a church that is “more modern and is quite a large church and very family-focused.” She noted that her “history of growing up in the Uniting Church made a big difference in [her] coming back to church,” reflecting that “if [she] hadn’t had that [she would not have been] 100% comfortable just walking into a church.”<sup>83</sup>

Thus, each participant had a unique story of how they came to attend a church. Attending church was an important part of their journeys to the Christian faith.

### **Reading the Bible**

As well as attending church, each participant reported engaging in the spiritual practice of reading the Bible, sometimes before, and always after, they became Christians. In this section, I outline key information on how reading the Bible helped the conversion process. A summary of this information is presented in The Bible was an important part of Grace’s journey to faith. What Grace read in the Bible “just [made] sense” to her. This encouraged Grace to explore and continue in the Christian faith. Grace appreciated reading the Psalms as they are “related to life ... and describe how you feel.” This was important for her as she journeyed to faith: as she realised it was “normal” to struggle at times with life and with faith.

The Bible was crucial in Hamish’s conversion story. Before he became a Christian, Hamish used to “cherry-pick” verses from the Bible to argue with Christians. But one day he began to explore the Bible further. “Walking past [his] bookcase, ... out of the corner of [his] eye flashed a bit of gold leaf, and [he] went, ‘What was that?’” Realising it was a Bible, he decided to “pay attention” to it: not just once, but many times as the Bible “just kept being in [his] field of view.” Hamish found it difficult to understand the King James Version that had been on his bookshelf, thinking it was “just written for old people.” But “for some reason [he] just thought, ‘I’ll just google bible translations and see what else is there.’” He found the New International Version “a bit easier to read.” Reading John’s gospel, he realised, “This is really powerful stuff,” as God spoke to him through what he was reading. It was this encounter with the Bible that began the “six months of a real fight with God” that ended with him declaring his Christian faith.

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<sup>83</sup> Tallulah interview.

Table 5.8. More detail about what they heard or learnt from God as a result of reading the Bible is reported in Chapter 7.

The Bible was an important part of Grace’s journey to faith. What Grace read in the Bible “just [made] sense” to her. This encouraged Grace to explore and continue in the Christian faith. Grace appreciated reading the Psalms as they are “related to life ... and describe how you feel.” This was important for her as she journeyed to faith: as she realised it was “normal” to struggle at times with life and with faith.<sup>84</sup>

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Table 5.8: Reading the Bible

	Key points
Grace	Bible “just makes sense” <b>Psalms:</b> Related to life and describe how you feel
Hamish	Previously used Bible to argue with Christians Seeing “flash ... of gold leaf” was beginning of conversion story Needed readable translation “This is really powerful stuff. I’ve never read it like this before”
Jean	God “knows me better than I know myself” Importance of daily Bible reading
Luke	Importance of “becoming really familiar with the story of Jesus”
Mary	As a child loved reading stories about Jesus Knew Bible said people should go to church for fellowship, but was resistant
Meg	Didn’t read the Bible after deliverance, making her susceptible to spiritual attack When reads Bible becomes conflicted/under spiritual attack, but sees importance of reading it, and is finding it easier to read it as she becomes “freer”
Olivia	Didn’t have a Bible before a small group member gave her one Needed study notes and devotional material to help her understand the Bible

<sup>84</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>85</sup> Hamish interview. More on this in Chapter 7.

Sarah	Meditates on Bible when overwhelmed: gets answers
Tallulah	"Stories of Jesus and the way he treated people" as key thing appreciated in Bible Stories in the Bible parallel with Tallulah's own experiences Devotional book "usually gives you something that relates to your life" Did Bible study courses.

Jean started reading the Bible after she began attending church. Reading the Bible helped her realise that God knows her and this helped her to trust God. Jean prioritises daily Bible reading as it helps her in her everyday life: particularly helping to “bring [God] closer again.” Jean emphasises that it is important to take time to “properly read” the Bible, rather than “doing it on the run or in passing.”<sup>86</sup>

Luke was aware that there was so much in the Bible: such “a lot to digest” and decided to focus initially on just two things: specifically, Jesus’ commandments to love God and love your neighbour. Reading the Bible, “becoming really familiar with the story of Jesus,” taught, encouraged and challenged Luke as he journeyed to faith.<sup>87</sup>

As a child, Mary loved to read stories about Jesus. These stories provided her with a background understanding of Jesus. Years later, as her disillusionment towards ‘New Age’ grew, and she explored Christianity seriously, Mary read in the Bible that “people should really also go to church for fellowship.” This helped her realise she needed to overcome her resistance to attending church, meaning she was willing to accept an invitation to attend a Christmas Carol service. Mary now loves to read the Bible to learn more about God.<sup>88</sup>

Meg struggles to read, or listen to, the Bible. She was given a Bible about a year before she became a Christian, but did not like what she read in it, so had “never read the Bible before [she] got saved.” Because of her background in ‘New Age’, Meg experiences “[spiritual] warfare” as she reads the Bible. She finds this “exhausting” and “a physical war on [her] body.” At the same time, she knows that the Bible “is the truth.”<sup>89</sup>

Olivia was delighted to be given a Bible by someone in her church and, later, to be given a daily devotional booklet. The study notes included in the Bible helped her to “understand [the Bible] more.” Also, the devotional guide she was given “made a really big difference ... [helping her to] grow ... to understand God and to come to know God better too because

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<sup>86</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>87</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>88</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>89</sup> Meg interview.

then [she] had ... [reflection] questions that were ... focussed on observing some things about the passage as well as connecting [the Bible passage] to [her] own life.”<sup>90</sup>

Sarah finds that meditating on scripture helps her “get ... answers” that resource her everyday life. These answers can be both encouraging and challenging.<sup>91</sup>

Tallulah enjoys the time she spends reading the Bible devotionally. She finds that “stories or readings from the Bible ... can definitely parallel with things that [she has] experienced with God.” Her “devotional books ... usually give you something that relates to your life and then give you a passage to read in the Bible.” That helped “build [her] biblical knowledge.” Daily devotional books also help her “start the morning thanking God for all the blessings” God has given her. In addition, Tallulah did some tertiary study, which helped to build her knowledge and understanding of the Bible.<sup>92</sup>

Reading the Bible was important for each participant as they journeyed to Christian faith. It continues to be important to them as they grow in their faith.

## Praying

Each of the participants reported praying to God as part of their process of coming to faith, reporting eight distinct aspects of prayer that were part of their faith journeys. These are shown in Table 5.9, along with an indication of which participants reported experiencing those aspects of prayer. Details about these various aspects of prayer are provided below.

Table 5.9: Praying to God

	Grace	Hamish	Jean	Luke	Mary	Meg	Olivia	Sarah	Tallulah
<i>Being prayed for</i> <sup>93</sup>		x	x			x		x	
Learning about prayer	x		x			x			x
Praying for themselves	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Praying for others	x		x		x				x
Praying regularly			x						
Saying grace								x	
Prayers being answered	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Unanswered prayers		(x) <sup>94</sup>				x		x	

<sup>90</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>91</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>93</sup> This item is italicised because they did not necessarily participate in being prayed for.

### ***Being prayed for***

While not always a Christian practice that they participated in, it is worth mentioning that those interviewed found it significant and meaningful that faithful and caring Christian friends were praying for them. Details about who prayed for the participants, and when they were prayed for, is given in Table 5.10 and discussed below.

*Table 5.10: Being prayed for by others*

	Prayed for by:	When
Hamish	Grandfather Long-term friends	Before conversion Before conversion
Jean	New church friends	During process and after conversion
Meg	New church friends	After conversion
Sarah	Long-term friends	Before conversion

Hamish knew his grandfather “had prayed for [him] for a long time.” Also, after becoming a Christian, Hamish learnt that a Christian friend had also “always prayed” for him. She had specifically prayed that the passion she observed within Hamish would become directed towards God. Hamish commented: “I really, really loved that they [told me they prayed for me].”<sup>95</sup> Jean was grateful that her new Christian friends “would care about [her] enough to pray for [her] and what [she] need[s] or need[s] help with.”<sup>96</sup> Meg also mentioned people praying for her. She longed that their prayers “for joy ... and happiness” would be answered. Many prayed for deliverance for Meg, and Meg frequently participated in this praying. She continued to pray with other Christians after she became a Christian, doing what she described as “soul stuff. Clean[ing] up [her] soul.” Sadly, at the time of our interview Meg thought that “no-one wants to pray with [her] because then the demons come and attack them, so they say.”<sup>97</sup> For Sarah, the faithful prayers of her Christian friends over many years were a source of comfort. Although her life was hard, she knew she had the prayer support of caring friends. The willingness of faithful and caring Christians to pray for them, before or after they became Christians, was particularly significant for Hamish, Jean and Sarah.

### ***Learning about prayer***

Three participants specifically mentioned learning about prayer. The places and ways they described learning about prayer are shown in Table 5.11 and discussed below.

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<sup>93</sup> This item is italicised because they did not necessarily participate in being prayed for.

<sup>94</sup> This item is bracketed because Hamish was happy that his prayer (for God not to be real) was unanswered.

<sup>95</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>96</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>97</sup> Meg interview.

Tallulah observed that she “didn’t really even know how to pray and ... couldn’t believe that [she] had forgotten that after going to Sunday School.” However, it did not take long for her to understand “what prayer was about and how [she] could connect to God that way.”<sup>98</sup> Jean learnt about prayer as part of the ‘Alpha’ course, while Grace learnt about it during small group studies. Each of these women mentioned prayer several times during their interviews. Learning how to engage in the spiritual practice of praying was a significant part of their faith journeys. Meg was told to pray by other Christians.

Table 5.11: Learning about prayer

	Detail
Grace	At small group
Jean	At Alpha
Meg	Told to pray by Christians
Tallulah	Reminded how to pray Ongoing learning

### **Praying for themselves**

Eight participants talked about specific things that they prayed for themselves: for guidance or clarity; for patience; for strength; for an end to suffering; for deliverance; and instead of worrying. Table 5.12 shows who prayed for those various things. It was not always possible (or desirable) to separate prayers prayed before conversion from prayers prayed after conversion. They are, therefore, reported together below.<sup>99</sup>

Table 5.12: Praying for themselves

Praying...	Grace	Jean	Luke	Mary	Meg	Olivia	Sarah	Tallulah
For strength	x	x					x	
For guidance and/or clarity		x		x	x	x		x
For patience		x						
For an end to suffering			x		x		x	
For deliverance					x			
Instead of worrying								x

<sup>98</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>99</sup> Note that the conversion process diagram presented in Figure 5.1 shows clearly that engaging in spiritual practices occurred both before and after participants called themselves Christians.



Grace, Jean and Sarah all mentioned praying for strength. Jean prays for strength “on a daily basis.”<sup>100</sup> Sarah prayed for strength, specifically, when she was sharing her testimony in church. Grace reported receiving strength after praying.

Jean, Mary, Meg, Olivia and Tallulah all prayed to seek guidance from God when they were deciding about their faith and life. For Jean, this was in relation to a challenging life situation she was facing. Mary prayed for guidance in learning how to communicate her faith with her ‘New Age’ friends. Meg prayed a very specific prayer that someone would come and guide her in relation to the spiritual attack she was suffering. Olivia prayed about whether she should be baptised, and then about whether she should tell her anti-Christian mother that she was being baptised. Tallulah prayed for God’s guidance to find a new job.

Jean prayed and prays for patience as a mother. Luke, Meg and Sarah all longed for an end to their suffering, and prayed for this. There was a sense of desperation in their prayers, as well as an honesty about the situation they were in, and their need to get out of it. Meg also prayed specifically for deliverance. Tallulah recommended prayer as better than worrying, although not to the extent that the prayer becomes “a copout.”<sup>101</sup> Hamish described praying a prayer of surrender to God, but not praying for himself.

### ***Praying for others***

Four participants talked specifically about praying for others (Table 5.13). Grace and Tallulah spoke of praying for friends or family members who were going through difficult times. They both had faith that God would act in others’ lives. I have already mentioned Jean praying for her friend’s father. Both Jean and Mary also prayed that someone they loved would come to know God for themselves. Praying for others was a natural outworking of these women’s faith.

*Table 5.13: Praying for others*

Praying for others...	Grace	Jean	Mary	Tallulah
That God would help them	x			x
For healing		x		
That they would come to know God		x	x	

<sup>100</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>101</sup> Tallulah interview.

### **Praying regularly**

Jean spoke explicitly of the need to pray regularly. There is a clear sense that she relies on God’s provision of “patience and strength” as she juggles family and work commitments.<sup>102</sup>

### **Saying grace**

Sarah was the only participant to specifically mention saying grace before meals as a part of her faith journey. Her Christian friends always said grace, a simple spiritual practice that Sarah noted and participated in when she was with them. (It was after saying grace, as they were sharing a meal together, that Sarah had the supernatural encounter described in Chapter 7.)

### **Prayers being answered**

Each of the participants experienced prayers being answered, whether their own prayers or the prayers of their Christian friends (Table 5.14).

Table 5.14: Prayers being answered

Prayers...	Grace	Hamish	Jean	Luke	Mary	Meg	Olivia	Sarah	Tallulah
For someone else’s healing or wellbeing	x		x						
For their own wellbeing	x		x	x	x				
For guidance			x				x		x
For a specific answer						x			
That they would become Christians		x						x	

Grace’s faith was strengthened when her prayers for a friend were answered. Her friend, who was “getting bullied a lot,” is now “getting there ... getting better [as a result of the prayer].”<sup>103</sup> Similarly, Jean’s faith was developed by the health her friend’s father enjoyed, after they prayed for him for healing from cancer.

Grace, Jean, Luke and Mary all had prayers in relation to their own well-being answered. For Grace, “talking to God has helped [her] find strength within herself.”<sup>104</sup> After she became a Christian, Jean’s faith was strengthened by an answer to prayer for guidance and clarity that felt like a “weight lifted.”<sup>105</sup> Luke also felt that same sense following a desperate prayer for help. He remembers “feeling very relieved. ... It just felt, at least for a moment, like [he] had

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<sup>102</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>103</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Jean interview.

the weight lifted off [him].”<sup>106</sup> Mary’s prayers, expressed as a deep yearning for God, were at least partly answered in the dreams about God and Jesus that she experienced, and at church.

Jean, Olivia and Tallulah all considered that God had answered their prayers for guidance, and were positive about the decisions they had made. It was receiving clarity about a specific challenge that caused Jean to feel like a weight was lifted from her. Olivia made good decisions, following God’s guidance. Tallulah obtained a satisfying job, having prayed about this need. She has also experienced help and guidance from God as she set up a not-for-profit organisation.

Meg reported having a very specific prayer answered. She articulated it as follows:

One day I said “OK, God.” I said, “I want the person who knows exactly what is going on here [to come]” because I had [demonic] things coming on my bed, walking like, [a] fellow with big hooks and [it was] scratching boxes and biting me and stuff. And I said, “I wanna know exactly what’s going on and I want that person at my place tomorrow.” Well, lo and behold, that person rocked up. And they knew exactly who the witch was.

This answer to prayer was important for Meg as she journeyed towards faith. It demonstrated that God heard her prayer. It also provided her spiritual insight that helped her in her struggles.<sup>107</sup>

Hamish and Sarah spoke of friends praying that they would come to know God. Those prayers were answered.

These answered prayers were faith developing, faith strengthening or personally affirming for participants.

### ***Unanswered prayers***

Both Meg and Sarah spoke of unanswered prayer. Meg had unanswered prayers after she became a Christian, when the deliverance from evil that she desperately sought did not occur. Meg was deeply frustrated about this, but also realised that deliverance may take a long time. She explains:

Well, ... I have done so much repenting and renouncing: intense repenting, renouncing, deliverances, decreeing and praying. ... Christians look at me like obviously you’re doing something wrong because you’re not free. And then people say, [Jesus] died at the cross and you’re free. So therefore, you shouldn’t have any

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<sup>106</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>107</sup> Meg interview.

demons. And then you've got the other people who've come out of that stuff, saying ... they've taken years to get out of it.<sup>108</sup>

Sarah experienced unanswered prayer before she became a Christian, while she was in “those dark, dark places [where she] was praying and ... wasn't getting any answers.” At that time, she asked God, “Why, why are you doing this to me? Why are you making me suffer so, so, so much when all I am doing is trying to help people and be there for people?” Looking back, she sees that time as one of learning and growth, and considers that God allowed the pain for the sake of her resulting growth.<sup>109</sup> Neither Meg nor Sarah wanted to allow unanswered prayer to stymie their faith, although Meg seemed to be near the end of her ability to cope.

It must be noted that Hamish also experienced an unanswered prayer. At the beginning of his journey to faith, he “essentially prayed to a God [he] didn't believe in for six months, not to be true.” Hamish is happy that particular prayer was unanswered.<sup>110</sup>

### ***Non-Christians started praying before they were Christians***

Participants did not wait to become converted before they began to pray. Rather, their praying was frequently an important dimension of their coming to faith. Each of the ten aspects of prayer outlined in Table 5.9 was experienced by at least one of the participants before they became Christians. Despite the repetition, it is worth noting several examples of pre-conversion prayer, gleaned from the reported experiences of eight of the nine participants.<sup>111</sup> Hamish demonstrated this pre-conversion prayer most clearly when he prayed despite not believing God existed. Jean prayed for her friend's father, and saw those prayers answered. Luke cried out to God for help before he became a Christian. Mary was in constant communion with God. Meg prayed for help and deliverance. Olivia prayed for guidance as she decided about committing to the Christian faith. Sarah cried out to God throughout her darkest years. Tallulah prayed her way through her journey to faith. Prayer was an important part of these participants' journeys to faith.

### **Fellowshipping**

Fellowship with Christians was an essential part of the conversion process for all but one of those interviewed. Only Meg did not speak about fellowship. In this section I report salient details that demonstrate the importance of the spiritual practice of fellowship in the conversion process. Much more could be said about the interactions between the

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>110</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>111</sup> Only Grace did not mention praying before she was a Christian.

participants and Christians and so the role of other Christians in the conversion process is the focus of Chapter 6. This section serves to highlight a few key points specifically related to fellowship. Table 5.15 provides some details about the form and impact of fellowship that participants reported, and then this is discussed below.

Table 5.15: *Fellowshipping with Christians*

Fellowship with Christians	Grace	Hamish	Jean	Luke	Mary	Olivia	Sarah	Tallulah
Helped or supported the participant	x			x			x	x
Was expressed in social time together	x	x		x	x	x	x	
Included discussing matters of faith together	x	x	x	x	x	x		
(in small group)	x		x	x	x	x		

Grace, Luke, Sarah and Tallulah all specifically mentioned ways that fellowship with Christians had helped or supported them. Grace found her church community, and particularly her small group, to be “really helpful” and very supportive as she navigated some personal challenges.<sup>112</sup> Luke was full of praise for the ways his Christian friends helped him. A key part of Sarah’s rationale for attending church was the need for her to be supported by others.

For Grace, Hamish, Luke, Mary, Olivia and Sarah, fellowship with Christians involved spending time socially with them in church and social groups. Grace knew people were available when she needed someone to talk to. She meets regularly with her church small group and often sees the people from that group “in the [local] community.”<sup>113</sup> Hamish talked about becoming friends with people in his church. Luke was welcomed into a community of friends who ate together and spent their spare time together. Mary enjoyed meals with a couple from her church, and with her minister. Olivia enjoyed sharing meals with her church friends. Those meals contributed to the “sense of community” that Olivia valued and enjoyed.<sup>114</sup> Sarah experienced many years of fellowship with her Christian friends before she decided to embrace Christianity for herself.

As well as spending time together, for many of the participants, fellowship included discussing matters of faith. Grace and Olivia both discussed faith with their small groups. Olivia “ask[ed] a lot of questions” and listened as others made “insightful comments about

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<sup>112</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Olivia interview.

what God was saying to them through the [Bible] passage [they read together].” When Olivia was invited to contribute, she would “just be like, ‘I’ve got nothing. Not sure yet; too early’.”<sup>115</sup> Jean enjoyed asking “so many questions” and learning “so much from” the Christians she fellowshiped with during the ‘Alpha’ course.<sup>116</sup> Luke appreciated the opportunity to both hear and share ideas about faith in the small group he was part of. Mary discussed faith with her minister and with friends from church. She was also part of a small group for a year. For Hamish, discussing matters of faith was an aspect of fellowship that took place online as well as with friends and his aunt. It was important that Hamish realised that there was not just one way to understand and interpret scripture. “That [realisation] really helped [him] accept God.” The internet provided Hamish with a breadth of contact and fellowship with other Christians that was essential for his journey to faith.<sup>117</sup>

Therefore, engaging in the spiritual practice of fellowship with other Christians was an essential part of the conversion process for all participants, except Meg. This fellowship sometimes occurred as Christians helped or supported the participants. It was also expressed in them spending time together socially. In addition, such fellowship included discussing matters of faith together, often – though not always – within the context of a church-run small group.

## Worshipping

Each of the participants, except Meg, spoke about worshipping God. This was most frequently, but not exclusively, expressed in relation to singing Christian songs. Table 5.16 shows details participants shared about worshipping God through singing songs in church. It outlines what they experienced during corporate sung worship as they journeyed towards embracing the Christian faith, and how they responded to that experience.

Table 5.16: *Worshipping by singing songs in church*

		Grace	Hamish	Jean	Luke	Mary	Sarah	Olivia	Tallulah
What	Felt God's presence		x						
	Lyrics speak into life	x		x		x	x		x
	Wondering							x	
	Music more than words				x				
Re s	Goosebumps		x						x

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>117</sup> Hamish interview.

Comfort	x	x	x			x		x
Opens heart					x	x		x
Action						x		

Hamish spoke most explicitly of feeling God’s presence with him during sung worship and while listening to music. This sense of God’s presence resulted in him getting “goosebumps” and feeling comforted.<sup>118</sup>

Grace, Jean, Mary, Sarah and Tallulah all talked about the lyrics of songs sung during church worship speaking into their lives. Like Hamish, Tallulah can often get “goosebumps” when she “feels so passionate about the words and [enjoys] the music [of worship songs].”<sup>119</sup> For Grace, hearing God speaking into her life through the words of worship songs resulted in a sense of comfort in, and reassurance of, God’s presence with her. Jean also experienced hearing and singing “songs that ... really just seemed to fit into [her] life.”<sup>120</sup> As for Grace, this experience of song lyrics speaking into Jean’s life brought her comfort. Mary felt a deep resonance with certain hymns that “triggered [her] yearning” for God.<sup>121</sup> For Sarah, singing worship songs about the attributes of God brings a sense of comfort and reassurance; opens her heart to God; and reminds her of how she wants to live.

As has already been reported above, sacred songs sung in a secular choir caused Olivia to perceive there was something good about Christianity. Later, after becoming a Christian and while attending an interdenominational conference, Olivia found it “really interesting ... to see that people [of different denominations worship] differently.” Olivia’s curiosity was evident again, demonstrating the importance for her of observing and wondering about, the Christian faith outworked and expressed.<sup>122</sup>

In these instances, worship songs sung in church were important parts of the conversion process. Participants also reported other times when they engaged in the spiritual practice of worship.

In addition to his experiences with sung worship, Hamish recounted another story of worshipping God. One day while praying, he “imagined [himself] just prostrated ... before God, on [his] knees, saying, ‘I want to give myself to you, Lord’.” This act of worship led to his renewed commitment to actively serving God.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>120</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>121</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>122</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>123</sup> Hamish interview.

Luke demonstrated a broad understanding of worship when he described obedience to God as a form of worship. Specifically, he described doing an act of service (willingly “picking up all these dog poo” from their lawn) as an act of obedience to a God who calls people to have “a servant’s heart.” Luke notes “it is about your mindset, not just your actions.”<sup>124</sup>

Worship was an important spiritual practice that all participants, except Meg, mentioned engaging in. The worship described was most often sung worship experienced within the context of a local church service. Other worship mentioned included obedience to God in a menial task, and experiencing a sense of surrender to God. Most participants found engagement in the spiritual practice of worship significant for them.

### Being baptised

Six of the participants mentioned being baptised. In addition, Tallulah has subsequently been baptised. There were denominational distinctives in participants’ experiences around the spiritual practice of baptism. Detail about who was baptised and the denominational affiliation of the church they attended are shown in Table 5.17.

Luke, Meg and Sarah attended churches of denominations that practised believer’s baptism. They were all baptised between becoming Christians and being interviewed. Luke waited until he “felt strongly enough that [he] really believe[d] in Jesus and so decided to get baptised.” He had “been christened as a baby,” but noted that “you don’t get much say in that.”<sup>125</sup> Meg spoke incidentally of being baptised in relation to one of the times Jesus appeared to her.<sup>126</sup> Sarah decided to get baptised around the time of her birthday: “The Lord just said [to her], ‘Right, for your birthday, you have to get baptised.’ And so [she] just went up to [the pastor] and said, ‘I wanna get baptised.’” She described being baptised as follows: “It was just like, it was coming, like I came home. Like all the weight had lifted. ... When I got baptised I just feel so contented. I don’t want for anything anymore.”<sup>127</sup>

Table 5.17: *Being baptised*

	Baptised?	Denomination
Grace		Uniting
Hamish		Uniting
Jean	Yes, with son	Uniting
Luke	Yes	Baptist
Mary	Yes	Anglican

<sup>124</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> This is reported in Chapter 7.

<sup>127</sup> Sarah interview.



Meg	Yes	Pentecostal
Olivia	Yes	Uniting
Sarah	Yes	Baptist
Tallulah	(Later)	Uniting

The other participants attended churches that would generally practise infant baptism. Neither Jean nor Olivia were baptised as children, and both were baptised in the Uniting Churches they settled in. Jean and her young son were baptised together. Olivia had been told about baptism during the discipleship programme she attended. It had been presented as one possible way to respond to what she had learnt during the study. This “got [her] asking the question of whether [she] wanted to be baptised.” It took about three months for her to be “sure” it was the “right [thing] to do.” Olivia observed that if she had been asked immediately after the discipleship study programme if she wanted to be baptised, “The answer would have been ‘no’.” But, “one morning when [she] woke up [she] was like, ‘That’s it. I’ve got to do this. I’ve got to get baptised’.” At that stage, it seemed “like if [she] wasn’t to [get baptised], it was almost ... like going against God and ... not acknowledging [her] faith.”<sup>128</sup>

Mary was baptised by immersion at the beach having “managed to talk [her] priest into giving [her] a full immersion baptism.” Previously, she had been baptised as an infant.<sup>129</sup> Grace and Hamish did not mention baptism at all. Similarly, Tallulah did not talk about baptism in our interview, but has since been baptised.

Mary and Meg both reported being baptised in the Holy Spirit. Mary linked this with speaking in tongues and with being better equipped to witness to her friends. Meg also spoke in tongues when she was baptised.

### **Using their gifts and talents**

Five participants reported using their gifts and talents since they became Christians. While these involvements generally began after they had become Christians, they are worth mentioning, as using their gifts and talents was an important spiritual practice for those participants. These are shown in Table 5.18 and presented in more detail below.

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<sup>128</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>129</sup> Mary interview.

Table 5.18: Using their gifts and talents

	Hamish	Luke	Mary	Sarah	Tallulah
In church	x	x	x		
Beyond the church		x		x	x

Hamish has become involved in worship leadership and preaching. Luke had previously helped with both music and Sunday School at church. Mary has done readings in church.

Sarah is involved mentoring a young girl in a local school. Luke has dreams of establishing a repository of open-source information that would enable cheaper production of an essential resource. Tallulah has established a not-for-profit organisation, tackling a much-needed issue. All these relate to social justice and concern for others.

### Sharing their faith

Seven participants specifically mentioned faith sharing in their interview. Mary and Meg seemed the most desperate to see others like them become Christians. Hamish, Jean, Luke, Sarah and Tallulah also spoke of witnessing to others.

Hamish reflected on how Christians today could better communicate who Jesus is. Jean spoke of “drop[ping her faith] into conversation without even noticing that [she is] talking about it. It’s such a happy part” of her life. But she does not want to argue about her Christian faith. She recognises Christianity “has been such a wonderful change in [her] life and [she doesn’t] want anyone questioning that.” She realises that she “can’t fight back very well when people try to disprove what [she is] experiencing.”<sup>130</sup> Luke sees that he is “really the only person that [his] kids have to show them about [the Christian faith]” and takes that responsibility seriously.<sup>131</sup> Sarah says of her faith sharing: “Now I just sing [God’s] praise and everyone that I talk to [who] isn’t a Christian I just talk about ‘Yes, I go to church’ and the fear [that I used to experience] is gone which is so good.”<sup>132</sup> Tallulah is keen to tell people that she “believe[s] in God and [goes] to church regularly and it’s something that is really important in [her] life.” She is sometimes reluctant to refer to herself as a Christian because “that sometimes does come with [negative] connotations ... especially if people don’t know a

<sup>130</sup> Jean interview. This seemed to relate to an inability to come up with quick responses to family members keen make her “change her mind and is confronting about it,” rather than any personal uncertainty.

<sup>131</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>132</sup> Sarah interview.

lot about Christianity.” Tallulah is aware how important it was in her faith journey that she was working in a Christian environment and encourages other Christian workplaces to consider hiring non-Christians.<sup>133</sup>

Mary longs to effectively communicate the gospel with her ‘New Age’ friends. While a Christian friend recommended that she “move [away] from” her ‘New Age’ friends, Mary “thought maybe God wants to work with [her] to help them as well.” She is aware that “if [she] move[s] they’ll just think really badly of Christian people, like [she] used to. And then they’ll be even further away from being helped.” Mary hopes and trusts “that maybe in some way God will work on [her] in such a way that [God through her] could save them as well.” Unable to know how to best communicate the gospel to these friends, Mary keeps “praying and praying every night for [her] friends to be saved.” She hopes that “when the Holy Spirit works a little bit more strongly in [her, she] can work out how to ... best write up a little booklet [that explains about sin]. ... Something that would be helpful rather than something that would make [her friends] think that [she had] gone like one of those [other Christians].” Mary is aware that many of her ‘New Age’ friends do love Jesus “so much” and they pray, but she does not know “if it is enough or not.” Mary is also aware of the irony, that “first of all [she] was trying to get everybody into ‘New Age’ and now [she is] trying to get everybody to be a Christian.”<sup>134</sup> Like Mary, Meg is concerned that people in ‘New Age’ can be helped to get out of ‘New Age’. She understands that such people need a lot of support and care and is not confident that the Church is currently equipped to provide it. Meg seems uncertain about how to help, but is deeply motivated by the need for ‘New Age’ people to be supported out of ‘New Age’ and into the Christian faith.

Overall, this section has reported on the spiritual practices that participants commonly engaged in. These were: attending church; reading the Bible; praying; fellowshiping; worshipping; being baptised; using their gifts and talents; and sharing their faith. Engaging in these practices was a crucial part of the conversion process.

## **Saying “yes” to the process**

The next element in the conversion process is the convert calling themselves a Christian. But first, I want to highlight the series of decisions participants made that kept them engaged and active in the whole of the conversion process. This series of decisions is represented by the central arrow that separates the process from the affects in Figure 5.1. Participants made multiple ongoing decisions: saying “yes” to engagement in all elements of the

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<sup>133</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>134</sup> Mary interview.

conversion process, before ultimately saying “yes” to God and the Christian faith. This section reports on the times participants said “yes” during each element of the conversion process.

### **Initial exposure**

Participants were not always able to say “yes” or “no” to some of the initial exposure to Christianity that they experienced. Having Christian family members, or attending a church school, were not things they chose for themselves. Other types of exposure, and the participants’ *responses* to all types of exposure *were* matters of choice. Grace accepted her colleague’s invitation to church. She noted: “Neither [of my parents] like church stuff ... [but] I just ended up choosing [to attend church].”<sup>135</sup> Hamish and his wife chose to send their son to a church school, saying “yes” to potential exposure to Christianity despite their contrary beliefs. Hamish also chose to have a Bible accessible on his bookcase. Jean opted to work in a church school and then actively sought help for teaching Christian content to her class. Luke said “yes” to becoming friends with his Christian colleagues. Mary was always saying “yes” to anything she felt might enhance her relationship with God. Meg said “yes” to seeing if Christians could help her overcome her difficulties. Olivia initiated a deepening of relationship with her Christian friend. Sarah stayed friends with her Christian neighbours long after they had moved interstate. She also said “yes” to watching *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The Passion*. Tallulah accepted her friend’s invitation to playgroup. In all these situations, participants said “yes” to what they did not realise were the early stages of their conversion process.

### **Catalysts**

As was the case for initial exposure to Christianity, some catalysts that caused participants to explore Christianity (particularly the negative catalysts) were things that participants had limited or no control over. But how the participants responded to both positive and negative catalysts was certainly a matter of choice.

Grace realised she was not in a good place mentally and accepted an invitation to attend church, hoping that it might help her. Hamish said “yes” to picking up the Bible that caught his attention, and then he sought to understand the Bible better by looking at other Bible translations. He was also actively seeking ways to address the dryness and dissatisfaction he was feeling. Jean gave her son the exposure to Christianity she had herself missed out on as a child. Luke sought help to address the mental and physical malaise he suffered as a

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<sup>135</sup> Grace interview.

result of his accident. He realised that the faith of his Christian friends had something to offer him. Mary's sense of dryness also led her to action. Meg said "yes" to things she hoped would help her find mental, physical and spiritual health. Olivia said "yes" to noticing: to being attentive to the words of songs sung in choir and to the posters on her school wall. She then allowed herself to wonder about those things: another active participating in the conversion process. After years of resistance, Sarah finally agreed to attend church. Tallulah acted, realising she needed to stop drinking excessively. Her desire to say "no" to unhealthy choices led her to say "yes" to exploring Christianity. Each of the participants actively said "yes" in response to the things that catalysed their faith journey. They were all active and engaged in the initial stage of the conversion process.

### **Invitations to engage in spiritual practices**

Participants said "yes" to invitations to engage in spiritual practices. Every such acceptance said a little "yes" to the conversion process. With the possible exception of Meg's invitation to church, there was no sense of participants being forced or coerced. Rather they said, and continued to say "yes" to a series of invitations to participate in a range of spiritual practices.

### **Engaging in spiritual practices**

Participants continued saying "yes" with every spiritual practice they engaged in. They attended church and said "yes" to repeat attendance. They read the Bible and continued to explore it in deeper ways. They prayed and kept praying. Except for Meg, they fellowshiped with other Christians and they worshipped. Many were baptised. They said "yes" to opportunities to use their gifts and talents. As they engaged actively in spiritual practices they said "yes" to ongoing participation in the conversion process.

Jean's story helpfully illustrates how saying "yes" to one spiritual practice led to engagement in other spiritual practices:

I ... started going to the 'mainly music' programme with my son. ... And it was starting to go to 'mainly music' that [made me think] I don't want [my son] to have the questions that I've got in my head at the moment. I would like for him to grow up at least knowing about [the Christian faith]. And then if he wants to make that decision for himself then he can do that when he is older. ...

And then from there I started, I did the 'Alpha' course. ... [I] just thought I'll go and learn some things about religion and I'm either going to get it or I'm going to go, "No it's not for me." And I kind of wanted to know more and had more questions and wanted to go back and it was maybe ... half a dozen sessions in that I felt like this is really what I want in my life and I want to know more and I want to, you know, start going to church. And that was my first step: ... that I wanted to start going to church. And then, yeah, from there I started going to church and spoke to [the minister] about baptism for [my son] and myself 'cause I was never baptised as a child. And, yeah,

did a little bit of (well not really study), but just talking to [the minister] about what it meant and what it means to me and then we were both baptised [a year ago].

Jean said “yes” at each of these transition points. She could have exited the process at any stage, but remained engaged.<sup>136</sup>

Hamish’s story provides another example of this. His initial journey to faith focused around his engagement with the Bible and his ongoing saying “yes” to deeper investigation of the Bible. He “just grabbed” his Bible and thought, “I’m just going to have a flick through and have a good chuckle... about what these silly Christians believe.” He “just happened” to read John’s gospel. As time passed, Hamish “just kept picking up a Bible.” He kept reading and exploring: both reading the Bible and reading and listening to insights from Christians about its meaning: “the more [he] read and the more [he] looked into it, it really changed [him].”<sup>137</sup>

Olivia’s discipleship group members were asked how they would respond to what they had learned. This gave them all the opportunity to consider what might be next for them in terms of their spiritual development. It made Olivia wonder, “OK, what is holding me back from [being baptised] at the moment?”<sup>138</sup>

Like Jean, Hamish and Olivia, all the participants’ engagement in spiritual practices encouraged further participation and deeper engagement. They said “yes” to engaging in spiritual practices and this engagement led them further in and further on the journey to Christian faith.

### **Saying “no”**

Participants did not always say “yes” to the conversion process. While I did not specifically ask questions about times they said “no,” Sarah shared that she spent many years resisting and fighting with God. She now realises that “fear held [her] back” from entering into the relationship with God she had known for years that she was invited into.<sup>139</sup>

While Sarah articulated it most clearly, she was not the only participant to have said “no” in the conversion process. For example, Grace’s “best friend is a Jehovah Witness.” It seems likely, due to the high priority the Jehovah’s Witness faith places on evangelism, that Grace would have been invited by that friend or her family to explore religion.<sup>140</sup> But Grace did not

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<sup>136</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>137</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>138</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>139</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>140</sup> Andrew Holden, *Jehovah's Witnesses: Portrait of a Contemporary Religious Movement* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 56.

do so, thinking that “everything [related to religion] was silly ... and didn’t make sense.”<sup>141</sup> Hamish wanted God not to be true, and tried to say “no” to God’s existence, but proved unable to do so.

Ultimately, the stories I heard were of people who had said “yes” to the conversion process. They accepted and engaged in the process. They decided to be Christians and/or started defining themselves as ‘Christian’. This final element of embracing Christianity is discussed next.

## **Embracing Christianity**

Each of the participants’ stories of embracing Christianity was unique in terms of location and form. In terms of form, many of the ‘decisions’ occurred almost incidentally: more a realisation than a decision. There was often a sense that they were acknowledging something that had happened to them over a long period. In terms of the location for this final element of the process, most happened privately at home, or again, incidentally.

Grace simply “called [herself] a Christian [one day].” She laughed as she recalled this, saying, “It just kind of happened, I suppose. I just went to church for so long and then I thought, ‘Yeah. I guess I am [a Christian]. Yeah’.”<sup>142</sup> This understated realisation was not unique to Grace. For others too, the final element in the conversion process was more a realising or naming what had happened for them over a period of time than a dramatic event.

Hamish’s conversion experience, transforming him from a self-described “militant evangelical atheist” to dedicated follower of Jesus, had the potential to be highly dramatic, but also ended up delightfully understated. He told the following story:

And then one day [six months after he had noticed and started reading his Bible] I had to let my little dog out to go to the toilet, [at] 3 o’clock in the morning. [I] looked up at the stars. And in my head I heard, it sounds strange but I will say it, I heard “the heavens will declare his majesty” when I was looking up at the stars. And I sort of just went... I didn’t fall to my knees, I didn’t burst out crying, I just went, “Uh. I’m a Christian now” and walked back inside.

He recalls, “It wasn’t a ground-shaking thing. I didn’t burst into tears; fall on my knees, any of that kind of stuff. It was just, it was really mundane but at the same time really divine.”<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Hamish interview.

Once Jean realised she wanted to understand Christianity for the sake of her son, Jean made multiple small (and relatively quick) decisions. These decisions culminated in her being baptised as an expression of her new-found Christian faith.

Luke, having journeyed with his Christian friends for many months, realised one day that he believed in Jesus and decided to get baptised. He had considered the Christian faith for some time, “reading a lot of the commentaries and listening to different opinions and then sort of deciding for [himself].”<sup>144</sup>

Mary’s Christian colleague impressed on Mary the need for her to be “saved.” This workmate led Mary in a prayer where she “verbally ... accepted Jesus as [her] Lord and Saviour.” This occurred very early in Mary’s faith journey. While it was undoubtedly significant for her, it seems to have been almost pre-emptive. Fortunately, Mary continued to journey and deepen her faith, even though this experience had “baffled” her as she struggled to understand how the Jesus whom she loved could do anything other than accept and love her.<sup>145</sup>

Meg had what could be understood as a ‘classic’ evangelical conversion experience of responding to an altar call. Except that she was seeking deliverance rather than conversion. She describes it as follows:

I went [to church], still thinking I am going to have an exorcism, not understanding what an evangelist was. And walked in and spoke to one of the guys there and I was like, “You know about demons?” and he was like, “Oh yeah” and so I went there and did my salvation prayer and they did a deliverance and before I knew it I was a born-again Christian. So, I had no idea what I was doing. And so that was it.

Like Mary, Meg continued to engage in spiritual practices that helped her to deepen her developing Christian faith.<sup>146</sup>

Olivia had reached a point where she realised she “believed in God but [she] wasn’t really sure if [she] wanted to become Christian.” The discipleship programme run by her church had helped her “learn the basic stuff” about Christianity and to realise that “everyone occasionally has doubts,” which she found reassuring. Shortly after completing this course, she decided to be baptised.<sup>147</sup>

Many years passed between Sarah experiencing a supernatural encounter with God and her accepting a relationship with God. It was decades before she attended church with her grandson and later decided to be baptised. Together these three events (supernatural

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<sup>144</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>145</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>146</sup> Meg interview.

<sup>147</sup> Olivia interview.



experience; attending church; and being baptised) marked key points of Sarah's conversion process.

Tallulah's embracing of the Christian faith was also "definitely a gradual journey." She went to church to build a relationship with God. Her employment within a Christian agency "skyrocketed [her] faith" largely because of the contact with other Christians it gave her.<sup>148</sup>

Each of these experiences was unique. Conversion 'moments' or 'decisions' were generally low-key and understated. They occurred as a natural, though highly significant, marker on a faith journey that had been months, or even years, in development.

The sections above have described the process by which participants came to embrace the Christian faith for themselves. In doing so, they have answered my first research sub-question, "What is the process by which non-Christians journey towards a relationship with God?" The next section, on the affects experienced by the participants, directly addresses my primary research question of why unchurched people in Australia are becoming Christians today.

## **Affects**

Detailed analysis of the conversion narratives revealed six affects participants experienced as they became Christians. These affects illuminate why participants chose to become Christians, by uncovering what was happening at a deeper level throughout the conversion process for the participant. The affects experienced were: yearning or wanting more; having a desire to live better or become who they are; a sense that the Christian faith relates to everyday life; a sense of welcome, warmth, belonging or home-coming; a sense of resonance, knowing, feeling right, or making sense; and seeing things differently. These are shown diagrammatically in the bottom section of Figure 5.1.

The different affects were mediated to by different extents by the three agents in the conversion process. The ways the affects were mediated by other Christians, and by God, will be outlined in Chapters 6 and 7, respectively. In this section I discuss ways these affects were mediated by the convert themselves. There is some repetition from the previous sections in this chapter. This is necessary as I highlight the affects that participants experienced and illustrate them from their interview transcripts.

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<sup>148</sup> Tallulah interview.

## **Yearning or wanting more**

Participants reported experiencing a deep sense of yearning or wanting more. They often actively mediated this sense as they allowed the sensation and sought to address it. There are examples of participants mediating this sense of yearning through each element of the conversion process.

### ***Exposure***

Olivia mediated this affect during 'exposure' to Christianity. Her wondering seems like a precursor to a yearning: an observing that came before an exploring. Olivia allowed herself to "wonder" and that wondering was tinged with desire for something more than she had experienced for herself. As Olivia watched Christians singing songs about God, she could tell the faith of those Christians enriched their lives. That realisation made Olivia wonder and yearn. This wondering-caused-yearning stayed with her for many years.<sup>149</sup>

### ***Catalyst***

Mary's spiritual search, which acted as the primary catalyst for her conversion process, was characterised by a deep yearning for God to be present with her. This was a yearning that she had experienced since she was a child: "Even when [she] was about eight or ten [years old, she] just wanted to go home [to heaven]." She experienced what she called a "yearning for God." Even though she was "experiencing much, much more [of God] than most people" this experience "still wasn't enough for [her]." The dreams about God that she was having just before she started focusing her spiritual search on Christianity left her "devastated" upon waking as her sense of God-with-her vanished. Mary's yearning or wanting more of God expressed and fuelled the life-long spiritual search that eventually catalysed her conversion process.<sup>150</sup>

A sense of yearning also occurred for others during this catalytic time. Meg was desperate for something more: something different than the struggles she was facing. The fact that Olivia was unsatisfied with her life caused her to yearn for something more than her current reality. Olivia also had a sense that "there was more [to the Christian faith] than what [she had] been exposed to."<sup>151</sup> Sarah's realisation that she "had to have a relationship with God," was also expressing a deeply felt desire or yearning.<sup>152</sup> Hamish's sense of dryness fed his yearning. He "felt that [he] had got to the end of ... atheism and [he] was just staring into the abyss. There was just nothing left there." This sense encouraged Hamish to begin (and then

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<sup>149</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>150</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>151</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>152</sup> Sarah interview.

continue) exploring Christianity.<sup>153</sup> Tallulah knew she needed something different in her life: knew she needed to change how she was living. This yearning for something different catalysed and resourced Tallulah's faith explorations.

### ***Engaging in spiritual practices***

Luke's desperate prayer for help was an expression of his yearning. Similarly, Meg's frequent "calling out to God and Jesus" in prayer was an expression of yearning.<sup>154</sup>

### ***Saying "yes"***

Grace experienced a yearning as a sense that she "really wanted to change [although] she didn't know how [to]." This led her to accept an invitation to church and invitations for deeper involvement in church and the Christian faith.<sup>155</sup> There was a sense of Hamish wanting more in his continual returning to read the Bible: "something in him just kept" being drawn to the Bible.<sup>156</sup> Mary keeps saying "yes" to things that grow her spiritually as she is "still not where [she wants] to be with God." Her saying "yes" is in response to (and also catalyses) Mary's sense of yearning.<sup>157</sup>

### **Having a desire to live better or become who they are**

Like the affect "a deep sense of yearning or wanting more," the affect "having a desire to live better or to become who they are" was actively and primarily mediated by the participants themselves. This section reports ways participants mediated this yearning throughout the conversion process, particularly as they experienced a catalyst, engaged in spiritual practices and chose to embrace Christianity for themselves.

### ***Catalyst***

Hamish's desire to live better was part of his catalyst in the conversion process. He "didn't like who he had become" and was actively seeking ways that he could remedy that.<sup>158</sup> In a similar way, Sarah was "trying to be nonjudgmental and have unconditional love [for her daughter despite] hurting so much." In Christianity, she saw a way she could so live.<sup>159</sup> Jean was desperate to be a good mother and realised her lack of understanding of spiritual matters impeded her ability to help her son learn, grow and develop. Thus, Jean's desire to be a better mother helped catalyse her spiritual journey. Tallulah was aware of the potential

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<sup>153</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>154</sup> Meg interview.

<sup>155</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>156</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>157</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>158</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>159</sup> Sarah interview.

impact of her unhealthy behaviour on her daughter and explored the Christian faith as a potential way of helping her become a better person.

### ***Engaging in spiritual practices***

Participants engaged in spiritual practices, recognising and hoping such participation would help them to live better, or become who they were. Luke articulated this most clearly when he said that after the church-run conference he attended, he realised “the sort of ideas that are being talked about ... could really ... make [him] a better person.”<sup>160</sup> Jean prays every day for patience so that she can be a good mother to her son. When she attended the ‘Alpha’ course, the discussion about sin, while “quite confronting ... just sort of brought [her] back to trying to be a better person. Being the person God wants [her] to be.”<sup>161</sup>

### ***Embracing Christian faith***

Embracing Christian faith enabled the participants to define who they were in the light of their faith. When Jean is in danger of “getting angry and having a bit of road rage,” she reminds herself, “That’s not who I am. That’s not who I want to be.”<sup>162</sup> Once he had embraced Christianity, Luke found new ways to be a good husband, and the strength and desire to enact them. Similarly, Tallulah’s parenting was enhanced by her Christian faith.

### **A sense that the Christian faith relates to everyday life**

The sense that the Christian faith relates to everyday life was predominantly mediated by other Christians and, to a lesser extent, by God. Participants enhanced this sense by engaging in spiritual practices. Stories told by two participants demonstrated ways their actions contributed to that affect. Sarah relied prayerfully on God to give her words to say to a young friend she was seeking to help. Her dependence, and God’s action in being present, grew her sense that her Christian faith related to everyday life as she received God’s help while seeking to help someone else. For Tallulah, learning life lessons from the sermons she heard enhanced her sense that the Christian faith relates to everyday life. For many, reading the Bible deepened this sense. Thus, the sense that Christian faith relates to everyday life was enhanced by participants engaging in spiritual practices.

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<sup>160</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>161</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

### **A sense of welcome, warmth, belonging or home-coming**

The affect “a sense of welcome, warmth, belonging or home-coming” was also primarily mediated by other Christians.<sup>163</sup> Participants accepted the sense of warmth, welcome, belonging or home-coming and, at times, worked to facilitate it, particularly through engaging in spiritual practices. But it was primarily because of the actions of others that they experienced a sense of welcome, warmth, belonging or home-coming.

### **A sense of resonance, knowing, feeling right, or making sense**

The affect “a sense of resonance, knowing, feeling right, or making sense” was largely mediated by God. The converts themselves contributed to it in two ways. First, when they allowed that sense to develop: essentially saying “yes” to what they were experiencing. The second way the convert themselves mediated this affect was when they acted to resource and deepen their faith. These two dimensions are illustrated below.

First, Grace, Jean and Sarah’s narratives showed them allowing this sense of resonance to develop. Grace called her newfound faith “one of those things that you just know.” She was prepared to suspend her earlier “closed-minded[ness]” and allow faith in God to make sense at a deep level.<sup>164</sup> Jean was “pretty open” to Christianity, which made it easier for Christianity to “feel really right.”<sup>165</sup> Sarah was prepared to embrace the “knowing” she experienced that was “so hard to put into words.”<sup>166</sup> In each of these examples, the participants were saying “yes” to ongoing, deepening participation in the conversion process.

Secondly, as well as the participants allowing that sense of resonance by simply accepting it, they acted in ways that helped them to experience that resonance. This particularly occurred during three elements of the conversion process: initial exposure; engaging in spiritual practices; and embracing Christianity.

In terms of initial exposure, Sarah chose to watch the stage musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which resonated deeply with her.

Once Mary started engaging in the spiritual practice of reading the Bible, she began to have the sense that the Christian faith “was the Truth.”<sup>167</sup> Grace and Jean’s experiences of attending church also mediated this affect. Grace “just felt that [she] should be [at church]”

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<sup>163</sup> The ‘home-coming’ aspect was primarily mediated by God.

<sup>164</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>165</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>166</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>167</sup> Mary interview.

and acted on that feeling. Songs sung and sermons she heard at church “made sense” to Grace.<sup>168</sup> Jean “felt like [church] was the right place to be and sort of lost [herself] in the music and words.”<sup>169</sup> Hamish kept exploring Christianity until he found a “very liberal” expression that “felt comfortable” to him.<sup>170</sup>

Many of the decision points, the moments when participants became Christians or called themselves Christians, were characterised by that same sense of feeling right. That affect both caused, and was a consequence of, the participants’ decisions to embrace Christianity.

### **Seeing things differently**

The affect “seeing things differently” was primarily mediated by God, but required the convert’s active participation. In many respects, this affect represents a culmination of the conversion process as the participants’ eyes were opened to new ways of seeing and understanding. It is helpful to offer Hamish as an example. Hamish did the work of noticing his Bible, reading it, continuing to read it, talking with his Christian friends, exploring online resources, listening to music, and choosing to believe. As a result, Hamish began to see things differently. He started to “see God in everybody.” Hamish summarises as follows: “I think [God] gave me the lens to be able to see that all creation is his and that everything coming out of it is working for good and there is beauty in all of it. Even when it is not explicitly ... proclaiming him. He is still there.”<sup>171</sup>

### **Concluding comments**

This chapter has addressed both my first research sub-question, “What is the process by which non-Christians journey towards a relationship with God?” and my primary research question of why unchurched people in Australia are becoming Christians today. To do this, the chapter has described the process by which participants became Christians and the affects they experienced as they journeyed towards this faith.

My research demonstrated that participants came to faith by a process of having an initial exposure to Christianity; experiencing some sort of catalyst that encouraged them to explore Christianity; receiving invitations to engage in various spiritual practices; engaging in spiritual practices; making a series of decisions to say “yes” to deeper involvement in and, ultimately, embracing the Christian faith. As they journeyed to faith, participants experienced six affects:

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<sup>168</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>169</sup> Jean interview. Once again that required her to allow herself to rest into that sense of resonance.

<sup>170</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

yearning or wanting more; having a desire to live better or become who they are; a sense that the Christian faith relates to everyday life; a sense of welcome, warmth, belonging or home-coming; a sense of resonance, knowing, feeling right, or making sense; and seeing things differently.

Overall, this chapter has focused on the convert's role in the conversion process. The next chapter explores the role of other Christians in conversion.

# CHAPTER 6: THE ROLE OF OTHER CHRISTIANS IN THE CONVERSION PROCESS

## Introduction

While Chapter 5 detailed the process by which participants became Christians, this chapter outlines the role other Christians played in conversion. Therefore, it addresses my second research sub-question: “What is the role of other Christians in the journey to Christian faith?” In addition, as in Chapter 5 this chapter describes the affects the participants experienced as they discovered and embraced Christianity for themselves: specifically, the affects related to the involvement of other Christians in their lives. In doing this, the chapter directly addresses my primary research question of why unchurched people in Australia are becoming Christians today. Therefore, this chapter considers the roles other Christians played in conversion and the affects participants experienced that directly related to the engagement of other Christians.

Other Christians played a crucial role in conversion. An exposure to Christianity is generally resourced through, or at least enhanced by, engagement with other Christians.<sup>1</sup> Christians often invite non-Christians to engage in spiritual practices and then resource such engagement.<sup>2</sup>

As well as these things that impacted directly on the conversion process, the converts had observed specific things about their Christian friends and colleagues. They saw Christians being helped by their faith; living differently because of their faith; sharing openly and honestly with non-Christians; being deeply hospitable; and allowing room for doubts, questions or complexity in faith. These ways Christians acted were hugely significant in the participants’ continuing to say “yes” to the conversion process. Figure 6.1 shows the role of other Christians in conversion.

The bottom section of this same diagram shows the affects the participants experienced (the same affects that were presented in Chapters 4 and 5). These affects are yearning or wanting more; having a desire to live better or become who they are; a sense that the Christian faith relates to everyday life; a sense of welcome, warmth, belonging or home-coming; a sense of resonance, knowing, feeling right, or making sense; and seeing things

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<sup>1</sup> This was discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>2</sup> This is reported as a separate section towards the end of this chapter.



differently. Many of these affects were mediated by the ways participants perceived other Christians and of the ways the other Christians acted.

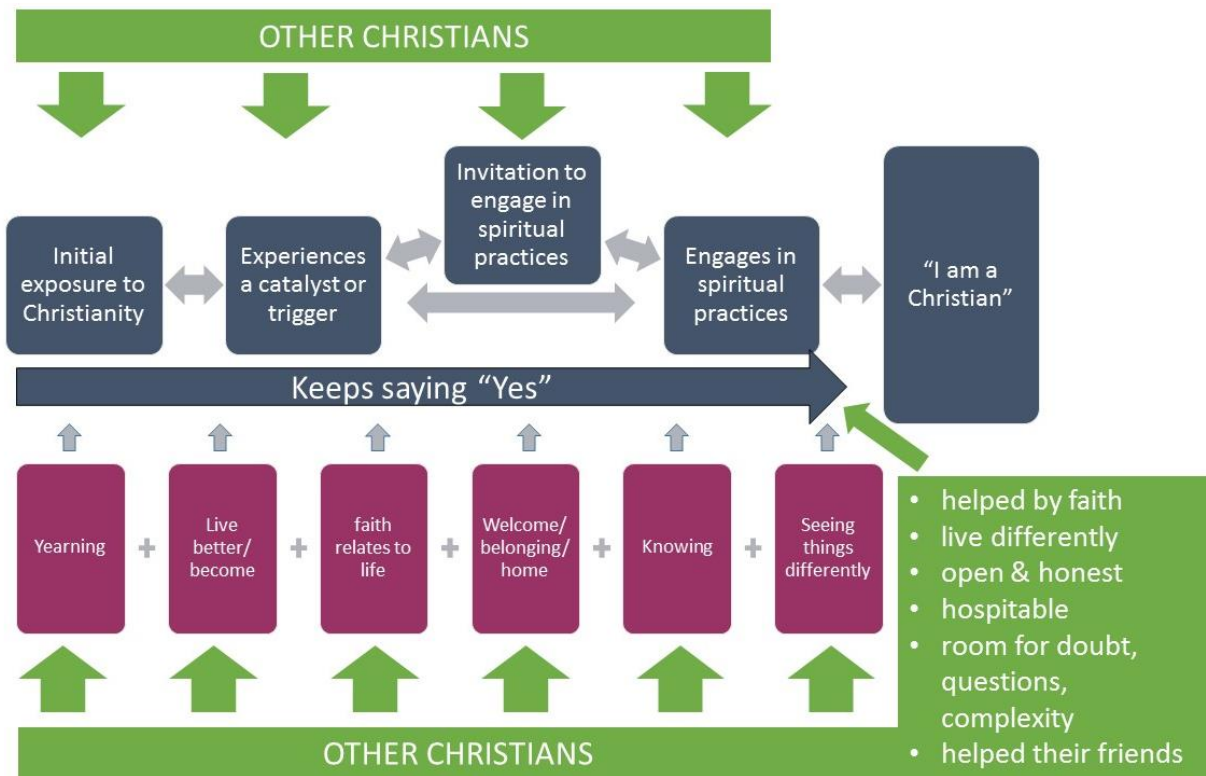


Figure 6.1: Role of other Christians on the conversion process

## Other Christians were helped by their faith

Five of the participants mentioned specific ways they observed their Christian friends and colleagues being helped by their faith. As Table 6.1 shows, participants saw their Christian friends receiving healing, comfort and other benefits because of their faith. While mentioned by five participants, the sense that other Christians were helped by their faith was particularly important for Jean, Luke and Olivia.

### Receiving healing or restoration

Grace and Jean both mentioned seeing some healing in their Christian friends. Grace appeared to attribute her boss’s recovery from addiction to her Christian faith.<sup>3</sup> Jean spoke of the impact of prayer on her friend’s father who had cancer: many people were praying for him and while “he’s not in perfect health,” she attributed the healing he had received to the power of prayer.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> She described her boss as a “reformed addict.” Grace interview.

<sup>4</sup> Jean interview.

Table 6.1: Participants' perceptions of how Christian faith helped other Christians

How faith helped	Detail
Healing or restoration	Grace's boss was a "reformed addict." The father of Jean's friend received healing through prayer.
Comfort or security	Jean's schoolchildren found comfort in their faith. Jean's friend found comfort in her faith. Jean's schoolchildren found security in God's love for them.
Other	Sarah's teenage grandson appreciated church, and demonstrated a strong faith. Luke saw his friends' "experiences with Christ and what their faith gave them." Luke's friends were happy despite difficulties in their lives. Olivia saw Christians getting "something really precious" from faith. Olivia observed God working in people's lives.

### Receiving comfort and security

In addition, Jean observed Christians receiving comfort and security because of their faith. She perceived that Christian faith brought comfort to her friend whose father was unwell. Similarly, the young children in the class Jean taught found both security and comfort in knowing that God would "be [their] friend," even when they "had a horrible day at school and [feel like they] have no friends."<sup>5</sup>

### Other ways Christians were helped

Luke, Olivia and Sarah each noted other ways they saw Christianity making a difference in their Christian friends' or family members' lives. Sarah noticed a strength of faith in her grandson's life, which was instrumental in her decision to attend church with him. Luke mentioned that "hearing [his friends'] experiences with Christ and what their faith gave them" helped him appreciate the power of Christian faith. Luke also noted that, despite his Christian friends having difficulties in their lives, they were still happy. This made Luke consider how "it's important to have, to believe in, something more than yourself and more than what you can see around you." Realising this was critical early in Luke's faith journey. Seeing the difference faith made in his friends' lives gave Luke hope that his wellbeing could be enhanced.<sup>6</sup>

Like Luke, Olivia noticed that her Christian friends were helped by their faith. In fact, this was the main thing that attracted her to the Christian faith. As she reflected at the end of our interview, "I picked up as we were going through [the interview] that my overriding thing has

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Luke interview.

been seeing how God worked in other people's life to eventually draw me to God." She noted that her Christian friends "seemed to get something really precious out of [the Gospel message]. And [Olivia] was, like, really keen to know what that was."<sup>7</sup> The story that most clearly illustrates a participant seeing the faith of their Christian friend helping them is the story of Olivia's friendship with a Christian I will call Hannah. Hannah experienced a family tragedy that she talked about with Olivia after Olivia had offered her condolences. Olivia says:

That was kind of how I got to know her. ... We talked a lot about [the tragedy] and how Hannah saw God's role in her life and in [the tragedy]. ... And you know, obviously it wasn't so much at that stage like she was trying to evangelise or anything, like she was just literally telling me like how it was for her and how she viewed her relationship with God .... So I felt like it really ... made a big impact on me. To be able to talk to her and just, I dunno, I guess see where her head was at. And I was just really listening, mostly.

Olivia's perception that Hannah's Christian faith helped her contributed to Olivia's own exploration of Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the participants observed Christians being helped by their faith, both during their everyday lives and in particularly challenging circumstances. These observations were important for Jean, Luke, Olivia, Grace and Sarah, as they decided to explore the Christian faith for themselves.

## **Other Christians lived differently because of their faith**

Hamish, Luke, Jean, Olivia, Sarah and Tallulah all spoke of observing Christians living differently because of their faith: either differently from how they had behaved before they became a Christian or, more commonly, different in contrast to how non-Christians lived. The perceptions of participants in terms of the ways that other Christians acted and were different are shown in Table 6.2 and elaborated on below.<sup>9</sup>

### **Acting differently**

The different ways other Christians acted included behaving in ways that were different from how they used to live before they were Christians; giving to, or doing things for, others; being

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<sup>7</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that each 'x' simply states that an aspect was present. They neither quantify how many times each was noted, nor do they indicate the relative importance of each broader category.

self-sacrificing; engaging in social justice activities; or, in direct contrast with non-Christians, being warm and welcoming.<sup>10</sup>

Table 6.2: Other Christians live differently as result of faith

		Hamish	Jean	Luke	Olivia	Tallulah
Acting differently	Contrast with how used to live	x	x			
	Giving to/doing things for others	x	x			x
	Self-sacrifice		x			
	Social justice	x				x
	Warm and welcoming				x	
Being different	Having something "special"	x	x	x	x	x
	Passionate	x		x		x
	Compassionate	x				x
	Seeing differently	x				
	Unspecified				x	x

### ***Different before and after***

Hamish and Jean both spoke of a contrast in Christians between their life before and after becoming a Christian. Hamish described a Christian friend who, before he became a Christian, was, like Hamish himself, a “hard drinking [and] partying kind of guy, [who] loved to swear constantly.” Hamish saw this friend’s life transformed and, in that transformation, Hamish witnessed another way of living.<sup>11</sup> Before Jean became a Christian, she did not understand the distinction Christians made between “‘before I was a Christian’ and ‘now’,” wondering “how can you just separate before and after like that?” Once she became a Christian, Jean understood this juxtaposing “before” and “after” as she experienced it for herself.<sup>12</sup> Olivia noticed her Christian friends “change and grow and develop,” making them even better people. Observing this helped draw Olivia to God.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Giving to, or doing things for, others***

Three participants spoke of Christians giving to, or doing things for, others. Hamish and Jean both mentioned a Christian grandparent who would “do anything for anybody”<sup>14</sup> or who was “incredibly giving.”<sup>15</sup> For Tallulah, the unselfishness of Christians and their willingness to help

<sup>10</sup> Christians being warm and welcoming is included as a separate section below. It is included here because Olivia mentioned it in direct contrast to the way that non-Christians behaved.

<sup>11</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>12</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>13</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>14</sup> Hamish interview. (Speaking of his grandfather.)

<sup>15</sup> Jean interview. (Speaking of her grandmother.)

others was key in her conversion. Such people were “the sort of people that [she likes] to be around.”<sup>16</sup> The actions of Christians helping others and acting unselfishly were an important part of these participants becoming Christians.

### ***Acting in self-sacrificing ways***

As well as this more general *helping others*, participants spoke specifically of Christians acting in ways that were self-sacrificing. Jean observed Christians’ self-sacrificial approach to life. For example, she recognised the sacrifice and risk involved in a Middle Eastern family from her church converting to Christianity and being baptised.<sup>17</sup> She also deeply appreciated the “self-sacrifice [she had observed in Christians] of giving up [their] time and money and [their] life to do things for other people.”<sup>18</sup> Tallulah spoke of appreciating the way Christians were prepared to “give up their time to volunteer,” including organising housing (with church families) for asylum seekers.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Engaging in social justice***

Similarly, Hamish and Tallulah both spoke positively of Christians’ commitment to, and engagement in, social justice activities. Very early in Hamish’s journey to the Christian faith, he was drawn to an online preacher who had a “real passion for social justice” and a “passion for compassion.” Hamish was drawn to a Christianity that “walk[ed] the walk.”<sup>20</sup> Tallulah similarly appreciated people who were engaged in social justice. Seeing other Christians engaging in social justice activities and living in ways that were self-sacrificial were important factors in some participants becoming Christians.

### ***Acting in warm and welcoming ways***

Olivia mentioned Christians behaving differently to non-Christians in the warm and welcoming attitude that Christians demonstrated towards others. Olivia observed that the Christians she had met while at university “were ... quite warm and welcoming to everyone regardless of the fact that all the other people were like dissing<sup>21</sup> them behind their backs.” This was important for Olivia as she journeyed to faith.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>17</sup> The congregation was asked to refrain from taking photographs of the baptisms as it could be dangerous for family members back home to be associated with Christian converts.

<sup>18</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>19</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>20</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>21</sup> Dissing is a colloquialism, meaning ‘disrespecting’.

<sup>22</sup> Olivia interview. While other participants spoke of Christians being warm and welcoming, only Olivia made the explicit differentiation between Christians and non-Christians in this regard.

## **Being different**

In addition to the ways that non-Christians observed Christians *acting* differently, there were also ways that non-Christians saw Christians to *be* different, at a deep level. Participants viewed Christians as having an intangible something special, as being passionate, as being compassionate and as seeing things differently.

## ***Something special***

Hamish, Jean, Luke, Olivia and Tallulah all spoke of seeing something special in their Christian friends or family. Hamish could “see God in [his] grandpa.”<sup>23</sup> Jean observed a difference in the children she taught, who were “just so happy.”<sup>24</sup> Luke noted that their faith conferred something on his friends, and also those friends were “keen, [with] heaps of energy ... and really excited.”<sup>25</sup> Olivia “could tell that [the Christians she knew] were, like, different people than [*sic*] people who didn’t believe in God. Like, they obviously got something that no one else had.” Specifically, Olivia perceived that “something” made them “joyful and really, nicer people, and a bit more thoughtful.” She also named the fact that the songwriters of the Christian songs she sang in her choir “sound[ed] so joyful as they were writing their songs.”<sup>26</sup> The Christians she met also intrigued Tallulah. She perceived that they “were really special for some reason and perhaps that could be their faith.”<sup>27</sup> This intangible *something special* was a vital part of both Tallulah’s and Olivia’s stories of coming to Christian faith, as well as being noted by Hamish, Jean and Luke.

## ***Being passionate***

Hamish, Luke and Tallulah all spoke of the passion that they observed in Christians. Hamish observed this passion in the online minister whose sermon podcasts he followed. Luke contrasted the passion that he observed in his Christian friends with the apathy he saw in non-Christians of his generation. He noted that “even though [he] didn’t agree with everything that [his Christian friends] were saying [their passion] really drew [him] in.”<sup>28</sup> Tallulah noted the passion she observed, after she became a Christian, in Christians who were willing to engage in civil disobedience for the sake of social justice. Thus, it was important for some participants to witness Christians’ passion.

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<sup>23</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>24</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>25</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>26</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>27</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>28</sup> Luke interview.

### ***Being compassionate***

Tallulah and Hamish both spoke of Christians being compassionate. Again, Hamish observed this in the online minister: specifically, in relation to social justice. Tallulah also saw this compassion expressed in acts of social justice: specifically, the “unselfishness and the compassion of the church community.” She found this compassion and unselfishness appealing.<sup>29</sup> Thus, these two participants highlighted the importance for their faith journeys of Christians being compassionate.

### ***Other***

As well as these shared dimensions, Hamish and Sarah made two notable observations. Hamish observed that his Christian friend could see “the love of God in other people.” As a result, Hamish realised that was what the Christian faith was about: “being able to see that kind of stuff.”<sup>30</sup>

Sarah contrasted the way she could talk with her Christian friends about things of importance, with not being able to do so with her non-Christian friends. At a time when she was fearful and isolated, Sarah longed for friends with whom she could talk meaningfully. She said:

The friends that [she] did have ... they were into smoking marijuana and [she] never liked that, and drinking a lot and [she didn't] like that, and [she] couldn't talk to people because they just didn't seem... Everything that was coming out of their mouths was just pointless to [her] and it wasn't meaningful.

By contrast, the Christian neighbours Sarah met a little later provided an environment of openness, honesty and genuine caring.<sup>31</sup>

Three participants did not specifically mention ways that Christians behaved differently because of their faith. While Grace did not directly say that she observed Christians living differently, she alluded to it in her description of her boss's recovery from addiction. Neither Meg nor Mary spoke of Christians living differently because of their faith. Meg described her interactions with other Christians in terms of them helping her (or sometimes not helping her) rather than making any observations about their faith. Similarly, Mary's responses to my questions were always about her own relationship with God rather than about the faith she observed in others.

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<sup>29</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>30</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>31</sup> Sarah interview.

This section has outlined the ways participants perceived Christians to live differently from non-Christians. These perceptions can be broadly categorised as relating to either Christians acting in different ways to non-Christians, or Christians simply being different from non-Christians in some (positive) way.

## Other Christians shared openly with non-Christians

For many respondents, having Christians sharing openly with them was a vital part of their conversion story. This sharing can be categorised in three main ways: being open with others; sharing stories, experiences or testimonies; and sharing insights. As well as these ways other Christians shared openly with non-Christians, Luke made two perceptive comments that highlighted the importance of sharing openly. These three dimensions are summarised in Table 6.3 and presented, along with Luke’s additional comments, in more detail below.

Table 6.3: Christians shared openly with non-Christians

Types of sharing	Detail
Being open	Being open about their experiences
	Being open about who they were
	Talking about hard things
Sharing stories and experiences:	of life before and after becoming a Christian
	of experiences with Christ and what their faith gave them
	in personal stories, including of difficult times
	of experiences at spiritual retreats
	as testimonies shared in church
	about their relationship with God
Sharing insights	Describing verses from the Bible
	Sharing insights from the Bible
	Telling how they viewed their relationship with God in the light of difficult experiences
	Sharing general learnings from other Christians

### Being open

Luke, Olivia and Tallulah all spoke of Christians being *open* in some way. Their Christian friends were honest with them about the reality of their lives. This honest sharing was an important aspect in them coming to faith. Luke’s Christian work colleagues and the people in the small group he joined were “open about who they were.”<sup>32</sup> Tallulah’s playgroup leader

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<sup>32</sup> Luke interview.



was “really open,” sharing about the “trials” her family had experienced.<sup>33</sup> I have already described the impact on Olivia of her friend Hannah sharing about her family tragedy.

Strongly connected with this sense of openness, was honesty. The Christians in these people’s lives were prepared to share about the challenges they faced. Tallulah’s friend sharing her trials, and Olivia’s friend sharing about her tragedy, are examples of this. There was no sense that these Christians were sugarcoating their experiences for the sake of making the Christian faith look more appealing. The openness and honesty of Christians were important in their non-Christian friends finding faith.

### **Sharing stories and experiences**

Another important dimension of openness was the sharing of stories, experiences and testimonies, as mentioned by Jean, Luke, Mary, Olivia and Tallulah. This sharing took the form of expressing a contrast between life before and after becoming a Christian; sharing personal stories, including stories of difficult times; and sharing about the impact of their relationship with God. Some of this sharing occurred one-to-one, some in the context of a small group, and some via testimonies presented in church services.

While Jean did not initially grasp the concept of Christians differentiating between what their lives were like for them before and after they came to faith, Christians sharing in this way became important in her own journey to faith. Luke and Tallulah both appreciated hearing personal stories and testimonies in church. Such testimonies made Tallulah “realise that people had a story behind their faith.”<sup>34</sup> Hearing people share about the impact of their faith on their lives was important for Luke, showing him the value of having faith. Mary appreciated hearing from nuns she worked with about their experiences at spiritual retreats. Tallulah asked many questions of her Christian friend, “finding out about her relationship with God.”<sup>35</sup> As Olivia said, “Seeing how someone else sees their own relationship with God is sort of more convicting” than being told of the likely benefits of a relationship with God.<sup>36</sup>

### **Sharing insights**

As well as sharing their personal experiences, Christians shared spiritual insights with their non-Christian friends. Participants mentioned friends describing verses from the Bible, sharing insights from the Bible and explaining how – including within the reality of difficult experiences – they understood their relationship with God. This sharing of insights,

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<sup>33</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Olivia interview. The word ‘convicting’ is used commonly in Australia as an adjective.

particularly insights that related to the personal experiences of Christians, was crucial for some participants' faith formation.

Luke made two additional comments that are pertinent to understanding the importance of Christians sharing openly. When asked if there was anything particularly about the Gospel that appealed to him, Luke replied, "I think it is probably more with the disciples of Jesus and their take on hanging out with Jesus and their experience of it all." This, along with his other responses mentioned above, indicate that Luke was drawn to Jesus through the lives and experiences of Jesus' disciples: both the disciples of the Bible and his own friends, the disciples that Luke knows today. His faith developed as he heard shared the experiences of those disciples. In addition, we see the priority Luke placed on sharing honestly with others when he says, "It's a bit like when a [friend] tells you something really personal about them, [you know] they trust you enough." Luke valued honest and open sharing, and found such sharing in his relationships with Christian friends and at church.<sup>37</sup>

To recap, for many respondents, the fact that other Christians shared openly with them was important. Christians were open with their non-Christian friends; they shared stories and experiences about their faith and life; and they shared the insights they were learning about life and faith. As Olivia said:

Whenever anyone would talk about how they were personally affected or how they thought of their relationship with God, that had so much more of an impact on me than, yeah, than people telling me how it could be, or how it might be for me. You know? 'Cause it's much more convicting to hear, hear their stories and their thoughts and their feelings.<sup>38</sup>

## **Other Christians are deeply hospitable**

All respondents, except Meg, described multiple ways that other Christians were hospitable towards them. Meg did not experience this sense of hospitality; however, she demonstrated an intense longing for a greater sense of belonging in, and support from, her church community. The words used to describe this sense of hospitality and the frequency with which they arose in interviews are shown in Table 6.4.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>38</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>39</sup> While I am generally reluctant to quantify qualitative data, the variation in these figures was so striking they deserved to be reported here.

Table 6.4: Ways other Christians express hospitality

	Grace	Hamish	Jean	Luke	Mary	Meg	Olivia	Sarah	Tallulah
Friendly/friends	1	1		2	1		1		
Relationship/family		2	3				2		
Community			4	1			6		1
Open	1			2					
Accepting	2			1					
Welcoming			4	3			5		
Warm			1				5		
Eating together				1	2		2	2	
Getting to know				1			1		
Other					3		3		2
TOTAL	4	3	12	11	6	0	25	2	3

## Relational

Participants often described the hospitality of other Christians in relational terms, saying churches were *friendly*, like a *family*, or evoked a *sense of community*. Three of the respondents (Grace, Luke and Olivia) described people in churches as friendly, while Hamish and Mary both indicated that some people in their churches had become their friends. For Jean and Olivia, it was particularly important that church had a family-like quality. This relationality was an important expression of hospitality.

Both Jean and Olivia highlighted how vital it was for them to experience a sense of community, while Luke and Tallulah also mentioned being in community. Jean greatly valued the “sense of community” she experienced at both ‘mainly music’ and at church. Jean linked this sense of community to her strong feeling of belonging to her local church.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Olivia deeply valued the sense of community she found in her church: something she had not experienced before. The people she was meeting at church were demonstrating “kindness and ... a sense of community and ... love and all those other wonderful qualities.”<sup>41</sup> Together, these factors combined to help Olivia, like Jean, experience at church a sense of community and belonging.

<sup>40</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>41</sup> Olivia interview.

Luke also spoke of his church as a community, valuing being part of the church community he belonged to. Tallulah's primary sense of community came from her Christian work environment, rather than her church. Her workplace was "supportive" when she experienced a family health crisis and she attributes much of her faith development to the environment she is in at work.<sup>42</sup>

### **Open and accepting**

Particularly for Grace and, to a lesser extent, for Luke, other Christians demonstrated they were deeply hospitable by being open and accepting. As a lesbian, Grace had not been sure that those in church would accept her. While still worried that others who did not know of her sexuality would not accept her if they did know, she found that those who knew were accepting towards her. She said: "They are not really stereotypically, they are not really the people to exclude you or like hate you or anything like that. So, I think that was very accepting."<sup>43</sup> Luke appreciated being able to contribute to conversations about God and spiritual things before he was a Christian. He reported it in this way:

The guys [were] very open about things and being very accepting that even though I wasn't hard core Christian, or whatever, still were happy to spend time with me and talk, like actually discuss my thoughts and ideas and not just blow it off as "You're not Christian so we don't really care what you have to say" sort of thing.<sup>44</sup>

For Luke and Grace, other Christians expressed hospitality through acceptance.

### **Warm and welcoming**

Jean, Luke and Olivia all spoke of the very welcoming atmosphere they experienced at church and with Christians. For Jean, there was an immediate sense of feeling "welcomed and warm and like part of a little family when [they] went to 'mainly music'."<sup>45</sup> Luke was "welcomed ... by the guys" at church.<sup>46</sup> Olivia found the Christians at church, like the Christians she had encountered at university, to be both warm and welcoming. Being welcoming to others was a crucial way some churches and Christians expressed genuine hospitality.

When a sense of warmth was mentioned, it usually went together with that welcome. Jean spoke of warmth in relation to the welcome she and her son received at 'mainly music'. Olivia most frequently used the word warm or warmth coupled with the word welcome,

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<sup>42</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>43</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>44</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>45</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>46</sup> Luke interview.

although she also mentioned feeling “so much kindness and warmth from all the people in the congregation.”<sup>47</sup>

## Eating together

Some participants I interviewed described enjoying hospitality as they ate together with Christians. Luke, Mary, Olivia and Sarah each mentioned sharing meals with Christians as a significant part of their journey to faith. Beginning in the earliest stages of getting to know them, Luke used to “catch up with [his Christian workmates] for tea.”<sup>48</sup> Mary’s minister and other friends at church invited her to their homes for meals. Mary mentioned that these meal invitations were ongoing even though she and the minister disagreed on a number of theological matters. Sarah ate with her Christian friends. In fact, it was during one such meal that Sarah experienced the supernatural event I discuss in Chapter 7. (Eating together with these Christian friends was Sarah’s only explicit mention of the hospitality of other Christians.) Olivia was amazed by the first meal she experienced at church: a fundraiser that took place after a shortened evening service. She described it as follows:

And so it was ... dinner with everyone, which was really nice. Like, I just like, I literally just didn’t think that kind of thing happened [*laughs*] in real life. Like, it’s the kind of thing you’d see on *7th Heaven*<sup>49</sup> or something and I’d just look at them having dinner and be like, “That doesn’t happen, does it?” [*Laughter*] Like all in the community [eating together at tables] with like little table cloths.

Asked about her impressions of participating in that dinner she continued:

It was just so unusual to me. Um, ‘cause I never really experienced [a] type of community like that before, and like people were so welcoming even though they didn’t know me and I think they were making donations to dinner but my friend had known that they were doing that and she’d donated dinner for me. ... So, that was like massively kind and, yeah. It was just kind and friendly and like warm and welcoming and sort of a real surprise that there could be this sense of community where I had never really felt any before.

While having the shared meal as part of the church service was a one-off event, Olivia’s church friends “usually go to dinner after the service, which is nice.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, eating together was, and continues to be, a crucial part of the faith journey of at least four of my research participants.

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<sup>47</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>48</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>49</sup> *7th Heaven* is a TV series about a minister and his family. The show ran from 1996-2007 <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0115083/> Accessed 30 March 2016.

<sup>50</sup> Olivia interview.

## **Getting to know and becoming known**

Luke and Olivia both spoke of getting to know (and becoming known by) other Christians as they journeyed to faith. Luke specifically mentioned that his Christian friends “were pretty interested in [him] as a person and [wanted] to know a bit more about [him] and invite [him] to a lot of different events.”<sup>51</sup> Olivia mentioned that eating together and participating in a small group helped her to get “to know everyone.” She commented, “I think that helped me keep coming back to wanna learn more as well.”<sup>52</sup>

## **Other**

Some additional perceptions were mentioned by only one participant. Mary’s Christian friends helped her practically as an expression of hospitality. They gave her “a lift somewhere for church” and helped her find the right place in the liturgy service book. She also spoke of feeling “really comfortable” in the presence of her church friends, again demonstrating that they were hospitable.<sup>53</sup> Olivia’s Christian friend was hospitable in paying for Olivia’s meal at the fundraising dinner mentioned above. Other Christians Olivia met at church “took ... initiative” in getting to know her. This could be reported as a part of being welcoming, but seems worth a special mention due to it being deliberate and active rather than merely responsive and reactive.<sup>54</sup> Tallulah mentioned feeling “included” by her play group leader: again, an expression of hospitality.<sup>55</sup>

The hospitality and welcome that participants received from other Christians was key in their coming to faith. Unlike the other participants, Meg did not experience such hospitality from other Christians and this was a lack that hindered her spiritual development up until the time of our interview.

## **Other Christians allow room for doubts and complexity**

It was important for most respondents that other Christians allowed room for doubts or complexity in faith, including accepting different opinions on theological matters. The Christian faith did not need to have all the loose ends tied up before it was embraced by these participants. The ways participants expressed this are shown in Table 6.5 and elaborated on below.

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<sup>51</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>52</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>53</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>54</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>55</sup> Tallulah interview.

Table 6.5: Complexities, questions and doubts seen as okay

Participant	Perception	Complexity or Doubt
Grace	People were “open to other people and to other people’s interpretations and opinions.” Her small group had questions about the Bible.	Complexity of faith
Hamish	Realised he didn’t need to “throw out [his] intellect” to become a Christian.	Complexity of faith
Luke	“My friends ... weren’t hey I’m a Christian, it’s awesome being a Christian. Believing in Jesus is going to solve all your problems.” They cared about Luke, and they had “all of this faith even though [their own] life hasn’t been great.”	Complexity of faith
Jean	Likened her own conversion to Thomas’ experience “all of a sudden [saying] ‘My God’.”	Doubts
Mary	Has different opinions to her minister, which he works to accommodate.	Complexity of faith
Olivia	Reassured by people sharing that “everyone has doubts and you don’t ever feel like you know everything.” You can commit to God before you know everything about God. You don’t need to be “good enough” or know enough to become a Christian.	Doubts Complexity of faith
Tallulah	Appreciates that there are “different types of Christians ... conservative or sort of prim and proper and then there’s sort of like the cool Christians.”	Complexity of faith

### Doubts are okay

It was important for Jean and Olivia to know that it was acceptable to have doubts. Jean likened her own conversion to Thomas’ experience of believing, having previously doubted that Jesus could be alive again. She says, “It’s almost, I kind of all of a sudden went, ‘My God’.”<sup>56</sup> Olivia was reassured by the fact that people have doubts about their faith and yet still choose to believe in God. Thus, both Jean and Olivia found it reassuring to hear from other Christians that it is acceptable to have doubts.

### Faith is complex

It was also important to many participants that Christian faith was recognised as complex, and could include differing opinions on some matters. Grace and Mary both mentioned the importance of being open to other people’s interpretations and understandings, while Hamish realised he could still use his intellect while having faith in God. Luke valued hearing

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<sup>56</sup> Jean interview.

of the faith his friends embraced, despite their struggles. It was important for Olivia that she did not need to understand a certain amount of information about Christianity before she could become a Christian, while Tallulah valued the differences she observed between Christians she knew. Thus, faith was recognised as complex.

Grace was grateful people accepted her. As discussed above, she was not sure this would be the case.

Mary has some interpretations of Scripture (of the creation story and Revelation, for example) that differ from her minister's opinions and from most of her church.<sup>57</sup> Her minister accommodates her views, as she describes here: "Father John, bless his heart ... if I ask him a question, he'll explain it in two ways: "This is how I was taught, but this is how you would believe it." And I think that is just so heart-warming that he would take the trouble to do that."<sup>58</sup> Father John does, however, tell Mary if he perceives that there is "something major that [she] is off." In this way, Mary's minister allows her to hold different opinions about some matters of faith, acknowledging faith's complexity.<sup>59</sup>

It was important for Hamish to realise that he did not need to "throw out [his] intellect" to become a Christian. Hamish had previously perceived Christianity to be at odds with his "understanding of science and biology" but discovered that "so many people, millions of people, didn't [understand Christianity in that way]." This awareness that others, "even going way back to the third or fourth century, didn't necessarily hold [the] Genesis [creation story] as a literal account; more like a poem that holds the truth of what God was doing in the world" was crucial for Hamish as he "wrestled with [faith] intellectually and spiritually." He found the Progressive Christian Channel<sup>60</sup> and Home Brewed Christianity<sup>61</sup> to be helpful resources as he "bridge[d] the gap" between no faith and faith. There was no need for Hamish's Christian faith to be simplified down to platitudes.<sup>62</sup>

Luke appreciated the way his friends offered their own – at times difficult – lives as an example of the value of having faith, rather than simply telling him that "believing in Jesus is going to solve all your problems." This allowed room to struggle, despite faith, which appealed to Luke's honesty as well as resonating with the reality of his everyday life.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> It was also important for Mary that there was someone in her church who interprets scripture in a similar way to her.

<sup>58</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian> Accessed 1 June 2014.

<sup>61</sup> <http://homebrewedchristianity.com/> Accessed 1 June 2014.

<sup>62</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>63</sup> Luke interview.



Tallulah was glad that there are “different types of Christians.” She valued the fact that there is no need to all conform to one way of being a Christian, but that everyone: “conservative, or sort of prim and proper ... [or] cool ... [can] still be a Christian: [can still] have a strong faith.”<sup>64</sup>

Christians allowed room for doubts or for a complex faith. This room for doubt or complexity was important for participants as they came to accept faith for themselves. They did not have to be doubt-free. Christianity was recognised as diverse and complex.

### **Other ways Christians were perceived positively**

Participants described other positive ways that they perceived Christians. Most frequently these related to Christians being genuinely, nice people. The small group Grace attended was made up of the “best people out.”<sup>65</sup> Luke wanted to spend more time with the Christians he met at work. Meg spoke of meeting some “lovely Christians.”<sup>66</sup> Olivia liked the Christians she met and could “get to know the character [of God] through [them].”<sup>67</sup> Sarah’s Christian friends were “never pushy” and very faithful, supporting her for many years. It was important to Sarah that she was not judgmental about others, and when she went to church she sensed a similar value in the minister, commenting (in relation to the sermon), “I just thought, ‘Oh my goodness this man is non-judgemental about anybody.’” Sarah was also struck by the way this preacher at the first service she went to “was physically crying on stage” as he preached. This suggests a vulnerability and authenticity that Sarah appreciated.<sup>68</sup> Tallulah described her church community as made up of “nice” people, particularly the “lovely” play group leader. Tallulah was also glad of her Christian friend whom she “could chat to ... about things.”<sup>69</sup>

Hamish was glad of the practical nature of Tim Keller’s online sermons. Jean appreciated the diversity in her ‘Alpha’ group. Mary liked the theological perspective of the “fundamental Christians [who] would take the Bible fairly literally.” She also mentioned the nuns she worked with being “genuinely interested in what [she] was doing and [her] experiences with God.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>65</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>66</sup> Meg interview.

<sup>67</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>68</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>69</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>70</sup> Mary interview.

## Other Christians helped non-Christians

Each of the participants mentioned ways that other Christians had helped them personally. This help can be categorised in four main ways (as shown in Table 6.6). Other Christians helped participants through difficult times; by offering general support, care or prayer; to understand things about Christianity; and through deliverance and spiritual warfare.

Table 6.6: Ways Christians helped participants

	Grace	Hamish	Jean	Luke	Mary	Meg	Olivia	Sarah	Tallulah
Through difficult times	x			x		x		x	x
By offering general support, care or prayer	x		x		x			x	
To understand things about Christianity	x	x	x		x		x		
Through deliverance or baptism in Spirit					x	x			

### Through difficult times

Grace, Luke, Meg, Sarah and Tallulah all named specific ways that their Christian friends had helped them through difficult times. Grace found church people and her Christian boss helpful as she struggled with chronic mental illness. Similarly, her boss and pastor both helped her after she broke up with her girlfriend. Grace's Christian friends also helped her to "find" herself. She saw the assistance that they provided as being "like having God helping" her: other Christians were acting towards Grace as God's agents.<sup>71</sup> The help Luke's Christian friends gave him during the difficult time he experienced after his accident was of paramount importance in his conversion. Meg saw that a Christian friend was "searching ... to help her."<sup>72</sup> Sarah's Christian friends "stood by" her for decades and "would send ... [her] messages [while] all they'd see in their prayers was that [Sarah] was just in a dark tunnel that's all they could see and they were praying for [Sarah] the whole time."<sup>73</sup> Tallulah's Christian work colleagues were supportive following a family member's distressing health diagnosis.

### By providing support, care and prayer

Jean and Sarah named ways that Christians provided some sort of general support, care or prayer through times that were not particularly challenging. Jean's church ministers helped

<sup>71</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>72</sup> Meg interview.

<sup>73</sup> Sarah interview.

her by being very supportive as she explored the Christian faith. Sarah's new friends from church offered her practical and spiritual support. Grace also found the people in her church "so supportive."<sup>74</sup>

### **To understand faith**

Grace, Hamish, Jean, Mary and Olivia named ways that other Christians helped them understand the different dimensions of the Christian faith. Grace's small group helped her with this. While Hamish received a lot of his initial Christian input via the internet, his aunt also helped him to understand more about Christianity, particularly after he had become a Christian. Those at the 'Alpha' course Jean attended helped her "to understand things."<sup>75</sup> Like Hamish, Mary relied on the internet for much of her early Christian input, but it was a Christian colleague who led her through a process of repenting and accepting Jesus.<sup>76</sup> People in Olivia's church helped her by giving her a Bible and a devotional guide. These simple gifts were vital in Olivia's conversion and discipleship.

### **In other ways**

Following Mary's baptism and confirmation, two priests visited her in her home and "baptised [her] in the Holy Spirit so [she] can speak in tongues."<sup>77</sup> Meg has experienced multiple deliverances facilitated by Christians she understands to be helping her.

These four specific ways that they perceived other Christians to help them were important in the participants finding faith. All participants named at least one way that other Christians helped them as they found faith, and in the early days of their Christianity.

### **Other Christians invited non-Christians to participate in spiritual practices**

In Chapter 5 I introduced receiving an invitation to participate in spiritual practices and having a reason to accept that invitation as an essential part of the conversion process. In this section I consider the involvement of other Christians in issuing those invitations. Other Christians issued invitations that were personal, diverse and multiple. The specifics of what other Christians invited participants to are shown in Table 6.7.

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<sup>74</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>75</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>76</sup> It is not certain that this helped Mary to understand faith, though she perceived her friend was genuinely trying to help her.

<sup>77</sup> Mary interview.

Table 6.7: Invitations other Christians extended

	Grace	Hamish	Jean	Luke	Mary	Meg	Olivia	Sarah	Tallulah
Attend church service	W	R		W/F		CL	F	R	CL
Pray together			F						
Attend 'Alpha' course			(CL)						
Attend a church-run conference				W/F					
Participate in a small group				F			F		
Participate in a worship service				?	?				
Eat together				W/F	CL/F				
Other: Sit together					?				

Key: Invitations were issued by: W = work colleague; R = relation; F = friend; CL = church leader; ? = unspecified. Brackets indicate the invitation was not personal in nature.

### Invitations were personal

Each of the research participants described receiving a personal invitation from other Christians to engage in (at least one) spiritual practice. These invitations came from work colleagues, relations, friends and church leaders. In some cases, particularly for Luke, the person inviting was both a friend and a work colleague. As already described in Chapter 5, these personal invitations were very important in the participants' journeys to embrace the Christian faith.

### Invitations were diverse

As well as being personal, invitations were also diverse. Other Christians extended invitations to participate in a range of spiritual practices. An invitation to attend a church service was the most frequently mentioned invitation, with all participants except Jean and Mary mentioning (unprompted) an invitation to attend church extended by another Christian.<sup>78</sup> Four participants spoke of receiving personal invitations to engage in other spiritual practices such as praying together (Jean); attending a church-run conference (Luke); participating in a small group (Luke and Olivia); participating in a worship service (Luke and Mary); and eating together (Luke and Mary). Mary also mentioned being invited to sit with a new Christian friend at church.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>78</sup> It was Mary's non-Christian flatmate (rather than a Christian) who invited her to attend church. Jean did not mention being invited to church.

<sup>79</sup> Other invitations were not personal; for example, Jean's invitation to the 'Alpha' course.

## **Invitations were multiple**

Other Christians extended not just one, but multiple invitations. This was explicitly mentioned, without specific questioning, by Jean, Luke and Olivia. Jean's friend often asked Jean to pray with her. Luke was invited to many different things by his Christian work colleagues and, later, by the Christians he met at church. Olivia's friend invited her to church several times. In fact, Olivia had attended church occasionally with her friend before the visit that she now marks as a key point on her faith journey.

It was crucial that other Christians invited the participants to engage in spiritual practices. These invitations were personal, diverse and multiple in nature.

## **Other Christians resourced participation in spiritual practices**

Other Christians also resourced non-Christians as they engaged in spiritual practices. This has already been reported above as one specific way that Christians helped participants. This resourcing was not always provided by people known personally to the participants. For example, for Hamish, Jean and Mary, the internet provided resources that fuelled their spiritual search and their developing discipleship. Jean explored the internet when she was trying to understand the Christian content she was meant to teach her young class. Hamish spent hours on the internet, trawling through various websites that helped him to understand the Christian faith. Mary also spent time learning about Christianity on the internet. The resources these people encountered were placed on the internet by other Christians who will probably never know how important they were for people's faith journeys.

As well as internet resources, other Christians resourced participation in spiritual practices by participating in small groups alongside the, then, non-Christians and by providing physical resources (for example, giving Olivia Bible reading material).

## **Other Christians were not always helpful**

While participants perceived Christians in all the positive ways outlined above, their perceptions of other Christians were not always positive. In most cases, any negative perceptions of Christians were perceptions of different people other than those the participants encountered in the instances reported above. In some cases, however, those same people were perceived negatively on some occasions, and positively on others.

Negative perceptions of other Christians (made by Hamish, Jean, Mary, Meg, Sarah and Tallulah) fell into three major categories. Other Christians were viewed as judging or disapproving; other Christians were seen as hypocritical or not acting as Christians should;

and other Christians did not understand or help. In addition, there were some other reasons named by a few participants (see Table 6.8).

Table 6.8: Ways other Christians were unhelpful

	Hamish	Jean	Mary	Meg	Sarah	Tallulah
Judging/disapproving			x	x	x	
Hypocritical	x	x	x		x	
Not helpful	x		x	x		
Other	x		x	x		x

### Judging or disapproving

Mary, Meg and Sarah all described times they perceived other Christians as judging or disapproving. This was Mary’s understanding of Christians even after she had been seriously exploring the Christian faith for some time. The fact that she saw Christians as “narrow-minded and so sort of unaccepting of everybody and judgmental” slowed her faith development, as these perceptions meant that she did not want to attend church. Mary also described an incident with her Christian work colleague that occurred after she had become a Christian. The same colleague who had led Mary in a prayer to “verbally repent” and accept Jesus had been berating her about some lifestyle choices she was making.<sup>80</sup> This colleague told Mary that she could walk into a room and sense whether someone was a Christian, telling Mary: “With you, you’re not it.” This caused Mary to question whether she was “born again.”<sup>81</sup> Meg also said that she had experienced “some not so nice Christians come at [her]” since her conversion.<sup>82</sup> Sarah had previously struggled with the judgmental attitude of her Christian friends who had told her that Buddhism was bad. Sarah herself had felt a sense of resonance with some Buddhist teaching and felt that her friends’ attitudes were “not ... loving and [were] judgmental.”<sup>83</sup>

### Hypocritical

Sarah, Hamish, Jean and Mary all observed behaviours in other Christians they perceived as hypocritical. Sarah perceived the judgmental attitudes she encountered (as reported above) to be not “very Christian-like.”<sup>84</sup> Hamish described some “two-faced” behaviour he

<sup>80</sup> Mary was still sharing a home with her ‘New Age’ flatmate, and was still in contact with other friends in the ‘New Age’ movement.

<sup>81</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>82</sup> Meg interview.

<sup>83</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

had observed, with Christians “professing love of Christ and not drinking and smoking, but gossiping and bitching about people behind their backs constantly.” This “used to really stir [him] up. Fire [him] up a lot [before he became a Christian].” In fact, “as an atheist [Hamish] always used to say, ‘You know, I’d become a Christian if it wasn’t for all the Christians’.” In Chapter 5 I described the incident where Hamish walked out of church, after disagreeing with the sermon.<sup>85</sup> Jean reported that her mother had disliked the way Christians judged others. Priests in the church Mary attended as a child “were really aggressive” to the point of one arriving at church “with a black eye because the night before he’s been brawling in the pub.” There was a culture of drinking in this church, where “after every service everybody would go to the hall [next to the church] ... get drunk, come home, beat up everybody.”<sup>86</sup>

## Unhelpful

Hamish, Mary and Meg described ways that Christians had not helped them or had not understood their needs. Hamish felt that Christian extended family members had not been as supportive as they should have been when, years earlier; his immediate family suffered health issues and a bereavement. This lack of help contributed to Hamish’s initial rejection of Christianity. Mary recounted an incident where Christians encouraged a new Christian to leave her ‘New Age’ husband: essentially helping her to “disappear” because “he wasn’t good for her.” This made Mary “really, really angry at [the new Christian] and ... at the Christians [who had taken her in and hidden her] and ... at Christians in general.”<sup>87</sup> Meg named several ways that other Christians had neither understood her nor helped her. She felt that Christians had not understood her situation; they did not offer the help she needed; their faith was too simplistic; they rejected her; they disapproved of her; but mostly they did not provide the supportive, helpful environment that she so desperately needed.

There were other ways participants found other Christians unhelpful as they journeyed to faith. Hamish disagreed with the prosperity doctrine some Christians espoused. Mary encountered Christians who had no room for complexity in their faith. Meg struggled to find a community of welcome and belonging. Tallulah, still raw from her recent separation, was on the receiving end of some social ineptitude, when she was asked: “Where’s your husband?” while having a cup of tea after a church service. That made her feel “really uncomfortable” and contributed to her unease about that sort of social interaction in church.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>86</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Tallulah interview.

Despite these negative impressions or experiences, participants decided to continue to explore and, ultimately, embrace Christianity. Hamish described how he was still able to be helped by his aunt, even though “there were parts of her faith that [he] didn’t necessarily think were on the right path and stuff that [he] would probably need to be wary against.”<sup>89</sup>

## **Affects**

In this chapter, I have described the role other Christians played in the conversions of those I interviewed. We now return to the affects that participants experienced as they journeyed to faith. These affects are shown above in Figure 6.1. In this section, I discuss specific ways that interactions with other Christians contributed to participants experiencing these affects. The reader may notice some repetition from earlier in this chapter and from the discussion of affects in the previous chapter. This repetition is important as I now note the specific interrelationships between the role of other Christians and the affects experienced by the participants.

### **Yearning or wanting more**

The affect *yearning* or *wanting more* was enhanced by observing other Christians who *had something* that the participants did not themselves enjoy. These observations were heightened when other Christians shared openly with participants. Other Christians also supported this yearning by providing spiritual resources (for example, Olivia’s Bible and devotional material) or direct spiritual assistance (for example, in Meg’s case where a pastor was involved in spiritual deliverance with her).

### **Desire to live better or become who they are**

Observing other Christians being helped by their faith, and living differently as a result of their faith, contributed to participants’ desire to live better or to become who they are. It was important for Olivia to realise that she did not “need to attain some sort of really high level of ... knowing stuff and being able to be a really good person” before she became a Christian, rather that she was a “work in progress ... and that God’s gonna help.” This awareness grew through Olivia’s engagement with other Christians.<sup>90</sup> Luke also experienced this affect following discussions with people in his small group. Jean discovered in families in her church a model for her own parenting.

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<sup>89</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>90</sup> Olivia interview.



### **Sense that faith relates to everyday life**

Each of the positive perceptions that participants had of other Christians contributed towards the sense that faith related to everyday life. Participants observed the difference the Christian faith made in the lives of their Christian friends (as they observed other Christians being helped by their faith, or living differently because of their faith). These perceptions helped create and maintain a sense that faith related to everyday life. Participants heard examples of this in the stories their Christian friends shared openly with them. The deeply hospitable ways Christians behaved towards their non-Christian friends also contributed to participants' growing sense that faith relates to everyday life. This could be attributed simply to the contrast participants witnessed between the levels of open hospitality demonstrated by Christians, compared with that of non-Christians and, therefore, be categorised as *living differently*. It was, however, such a key dimension of Jean, Luke and Olivia's stories, that it warrants specific mention. These participants found among their Christian friends a level of community that provided a significant support for their everyday lives. This community and support was a practical demonstration of the benefits of faith: a demonstration that often began early in the faith journey of participants. Finally, by allowing room for doubt and complexity in faith, other Christians helped some participants realise it was not necessary to neglect or reject one's intellect to be a Christian. Each of these positive perceptions of Christians contributed to participants' sense that faith related to everyday life.

### **Sense of welcome, warmth, belonging and/or homecoming**

The participants' sense of welcome, warmth and belonging was primarily, and directly, mediated by other Christians. Participants' sense of homecoming or feeling at home, however, was mediated primarily by God, although it was also influenced by other Christians. The genuine hospitality participants encountered from other Christians meant the participants felt accepted, supported, welcomed and part of a community, or family, of care. The fact that other Christians were prepared to share openly with participants also helped participants feel accepted and welcome. The way that Christians were open to complexity in faith was important in Grace, Luke, Mary, Olivia and Tallulah experiencing a sense of belonging. Olivia's sense of homecoming was partially mediated by her sharing meals with church attenders either at, or after, church.

### **Sense of knowing**

Participants reported three minor ways that their sense of *knowing* was directly mediated by the engagement of other Christians in their lives. First, where respondents reported a sense that church was the right place for them to be; this was partially influenced by the welcome

they received from other church-goers. Secondly, the fact that Christians accepted a diversity of opinions appeared to help both Grace and Hamish as they moved from considering Christianity to be irrational or flawed, to having faith. Thirdly, Jean likened her own coming to recognise Jesus as God as like the experience of Thomas who had moved from doubt to acceptance. These three exceptions aside, the sense of knowing that participants articulated, is much better understood as being mediated by God rather than mediated by other Christians. This will be discussed in Chapter 7.

### **Seeing things differently**

The affect *seeing things differently* was also primarily mediated by God. This affect was, however, modelled by other Christians sharing openly, living differently because of their faith and having room for doubts and complexity; and resourced by other Christians providing specific input. For Hamish, talking to his Christian friends about their faith made him realise “that it was really just about love” and being able to see God’s love in others. This was a key dimension of Hamish’s conversion as he changed “from quite an arrogant, self-centred and self-loathing person to someone who had a lot of compassion and could see... God in everybody.” The fact that other Christians had room for doubt and complexity in their faith helped Hamish to be willing to see things differently.<sup>91</sup> The ‘Alpha’ course helped Jean to “look at things in a different way and be so grateful for what we have.”<sup>92</sup> After Meg had been warned of the danger of Reiki by a Christian friend, she began to “see” dark spiritual forces.<sup>93</sup>

### **Concluding comments**

This chapter has described the role other Christians played in conversion. It has also outlined how the affects the participants experienced as they discovered and embraced Christianity for themselves related to the involvement of other Christians in their lives. Participants saw that Christians were helped by their faith; lived differently because of their faith; shared openly and honestly with non-Christians; were deeply hospitable; and allowed room for doubts, questions and complexity in their faith. Participants also reported that Christians helped their non-Christian friends in various ways as well as extending invitations to non-Christians to engage in spiritual practices and resourcing that engagement. They often provided an initial exposure to Christianity. Participants’ positive encounters with other Christians were crucial in their journeys to faith, encouraging them to continue to explore the

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<sup>91</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>92</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>93</sup> Meg interview.

Christian faith for themselves. They contributed to the affects the participants experienced: particularly the sense that faith relates to everyday life, and a sense of welcome, warmth, or belonging.

The chapter has addressed my second research sub-question: "What is the role of other Christians in the journey to Christian faith?" In addition, the chapter directly addressed my primary research question of why unchurched people in Australia are becoming Christians today. The next chapter reports how participants described God's role in conversion.

# CHAPTER 7: GOD'S ROLE IN THE CONVERSION PROCESS

## Introduction

Chapter 6 described the role other Christians played in the conversion process that I outlined in Chapter 5. This chapter reports the participants' perspectives on God's role in conversion. I take a critical realist approach in reporting this as, where appropriate, I separate the participants' perceptions that relate to the 'real' God; from the 'actual' activity of God; and the participants' 'empirical' experiences of that activity as it relates to their conversions.

The chapter describes God's role in the conversion process and reports on the affects the participants experienced as they discovered and embraced Christianity for themselves: specifically, how these affects related to God's involvement in their lives. The attributes of God (God's love, power, patience, acceptance and forgiveness); God's working through others; God's curation of a unique experience; God's presence; God's speaking; God's help; God's growing; and God's past activity, are all outlined.

This chapter, therefore, addresses my third research sub-question: "What is God's role in the journey to Christian faith?" In addition, as in Chapters 5 and 6, this chapter describes the affects the participants experienced as they discovered and embraced Christianity for themselves: specifically, the affects related to God's involvement in their lives. This chapter, therefore, helps answer my primary research question of why unchurched people in Australia are becoming Christians today.

## Attributes of God

Five specific attributes of God were named by participants as important in their conversions: God's love; power; patience; acceptance and forgiveness. In addition, three participants talked about God as a father, but this was not an attribute of God that was instinctively appealing for any of those participants. This section reports on each of these attributes.

### God's love

Table 7.1 provides a simple representation of aspects relating to God's love that participants reported in their conversion stories. I coded references of God's love to 'real' when participants spoke of the attributes of God that related to God *being* loving. References were coded to 'actual' when participants talked about God *loving them or others*. When participants reported *feeling or experiencing* God's love, I coded those experiences to

'empirical'. Some participants spoke of *seeing or interpreting God's love in others*, and these were coded to 'interpretive'. Finally, I coded participants' references to how they acted, or perceived they should act, in response to God's love, to 'response'.

Table 7.1: God's love

		Grace	Hamish	Jean	Luke	Mary	Meg	Olivia	Sarah	Tallulah
Real	God is loving		x	x				x	x	x
Actual	God loves	x	x	x		x	x		x	x
Empirical	Experiencing God's love		x				x		x	
Interpretive	Seeing God's love		x				x		x	
Response	How to live?	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x

For Grace, a benediction often sung at her church made her “feel like ... [God] actually loves you.” The words of the song themselves do not speak of God's love. Rather, they are a prayer for God's help in everyday life. Grace's appreciation of these words relates to her realisation that God is with her, actively helping her to live well. The fact that God loves Grace helps her to live well.<sup>1</sup>

Hamish was drawn to God by the love of God. As he said: “The Gospel of John is what really cemented it for me because he was just talking about how ... everything just has just been done out of love; love and relationship. That really spoke to me.” This growing understanding of God as loving was foundational to the rest of Hamish's conversion story as he realised the loving God had “all of creation in his heart.” Hamish saw that “Christ is ... for everybody. Has love for all, irrespective ... [of whether] they know who he is or not.” This view of God as loving shaped Hamish's conversion experience. At his moment of deciding to become a Christian, Hamish experienced an empirical realisation of the actual love of God. He describes it, thus: “I just looked up and all at once felt ‘Yes, God is here, he loves me, and I've just got to open my arms to the free gift that he's giving me’.” This experience changed how Hamish lived as he accepted God's love and realised that God wants people “to love ... to be in relationship with each other.” Thus, the love of God – real, actual and empirical – was crucial in Hamish's conversion story, and continues to shape how he sees and lives his life.<sup>2</sup>

Jean mentioned appreciating Matt Redman's song “10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord)” which attributes God as being “rich in love and slow to anger.”<sup>3</sup> This song inspired her to live and

<sup>1</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>2</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>3</sup> Matt Redman and Jonas Myrin, “10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord),” (Said And Done Music, 2011).

love well in her own life as “we’re here to love and not be angry.” But it was the “actual” love of God that was most important in her earliest exposure to the Christian faith: she was teaching children at a church school “that God loves everybody.” Similarly, when she began attending ‘mainly music’ with her son, the songs sung there reminded Jean that “God loves me, God loves you.” Since her conversion, Jean is grateful for the freedom she has (in contrast with Christians who live in some Muslim countries) to “love [her] God.” Jean knows that God is loving and that God loves her and, like Grace and Hamish, this knowledge helps and inspires Jean to live well.<sup>4</sup>

Luke did not speak at all about the love of God. But this was not necessarily because the love of God was not important to Luke. Rather, “love” seemed not to be a word he used frequently. In fact, Luke only used the word “love” three times in the interview. He used it once, when speaking of the “support and love” he received from his Christian friends, and twice, when I asked him what Bible verses had been significant for him as he was drawn to God. In response, he named Jesus’ commandment to “love God and love your neighbour.”<sup>5</sup> It seems likely that the absence of speaking of God’s love was due to his general lack of use of the word, rather than due to a lack of appreciation of God’s love for him. For Luke, loving God and loving neighbour were appropriate ways to live in response to God.<sup>6</sup>

Mary knew from a very young age that God and Jesus loved her. Thus, she “grew up loving Jesus very passionately.” She experienced dreams in which God and Jesus were physically present with her, interacting with her, touching and holding her. Knowing she was loved by God, and loving deeply in response, drove Mary’s faith journey throughout her entire life. It caused a yearning for an ever-deeper relationship with God. By contrast, she was dissatisfied with human relationships, and even with the earth itself: which she does not “even like the smell of.” Mary loves God and Jesus wholeheartedly in response to their love for her. God’s love inspires her love and that love motivates her life and spiritual quest.<sup>7</sup>

Meg had been told that God loves her and, on some level, she believed that, but her experiences of ongoing spiritual bondage resulted in disappointment, even anger, with God. While this anger caused her to feel guilty, she was unable to shake the sense that God’s “unconditional love [should] be setting [her] free [from demonic possession] instantly.” She did not feel God’s love and this was a source of grief for her. Meg attributed her inability to

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<sup>4</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>5</sup> Luke’s lack of use of the word “love” contrasts with Hamish who used the word “love” 35 times in our interview.

<sup>6</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>7</sup> Mary interview.

“feel that love from Jesus and feel that love towards Jesus [to] the demons [that possess her].” Despite wanting to feel deeper love towards God, she found herself unable to do so.<sup>8</sup>

Olivia knew that God was loving and caring, and she experienced that love and care through the love of other Christians. She understood that she, in turn, was to demonstrate God’s love to others. Her knowledge of God’s love inspired Olivia to act in ways that were loving.<sup>9</sup>

God’s unconditional love was key in drawing Sarah into relationship with God. This, along with God’s accepting and forgiving nature is an attribute that was attractive to Sarah: not least because they are all attributes she herself longed to exhibit. Sarah saw these characteristics of God demonstrated in the way God acted, and she experienced being taught about them by God.<sup>10</sup>

Tallulah understood that God’s love motivated God’s action in sending Jesus to earth. Like Sarah, Tallulah also had an appreciation for God’s unconditional love, particularly as it was demonstrated by Jesus. Tallulah saw being grateful for God’s love, and loving God, as appropriate ways to live in response to God’s love for her. God’s love, real and actual, inspired her devoted response.<sup>11</sup>

## God’s power

Five participants (Hamish, Luke, Meg, Sarah and Tallulah) mentioned aspects of God’s power in their conversion narratives. Table 7.2 shows the dimensions those aspects relate to.

Table 7.2: God’s power

		Grace	Hamish	Jean	Luke	Meg	Sarah	Tallulah
Real	God is powerful					x	x	
Actual	God acts with power		x		x			
Empirical	Experiencing God’s power		x		x	NO	x	x
	<i>Prayers being answered</i> <sup>12</sup>	x	x	x	x	x		x
Interpretive	Seeing God’s power		x		x	x		x

<sup>8</sup> Meg interview.

<sup>9</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>11</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>12</sup> This is italicised as these were reported in Chapter 5.

When, Hamish, as a fervent atheist, started reading the Gospel of John, he found it “powerful.”<sup>13</sup> God acted with power in inspiring the Bible and Hamish experienced that power when he read the Bible. Hamish reported his life was transformed by God. He interpreted this change as being a result of experiencing God’s power. Others also found the change in him “quite powerful.”<sup>14</sup>

Luke experienced God acting with healing power and restoring Luke’s mental and physical health. He interpreted that healing as being from God: he “chose to believe that it was God who was making a change” in him. In addition, Luke saw “the power of having faith” when he observed the faith of his friends.<sup>15</sup>

Meg knew that God was powerful. She described God as “the most powerful person in the world” and “more powerful” than the dark forces that assailed her. While she longed to experience that power for herself, Meg still had faith in a God who has “got it in hand ... [and] knows what he’s doing.”<sup>16</sup>

Sarah believed in a “Higher Power” long before her Christian friends began to introduce her to God. Later, she was with those friends when she had an experience of God’s presence that demonstrated God’s power to her.<sup>17</sup>

Tallulah experienced God’s power through answered prayer. She had been praying about getting a new job and believed it was because of prayer that she saw a job advertised and became employed by a church-based organisation. Tallulah also credits God’s power for the successful establishment of the not-for-profit organisation she initiated.<sup>18</sup>

As already reported in Chapter 5, six participants mentioned their prayers being answered. God’s power was experienced through these answered prayers.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> I report the power of the Bible as a dimension of God’s power, as Scripture is ‘God-breathed’ or ‘inspired’ by God (2 Timothy 3:16), thereby making the power of the Bible attributable to the power of God.

<sup>14</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>15</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>16</sup> Meg interview. When I interviewed Meg, she was experiencing a time of struggle in relation to both her everyday life and her Christian faith. She commented: “I guess if you spoke to me a couple of months ago, I would [have] been better, a different, at a different [place]. I would have been at a better, better mindset then.” Some of what I heard in the interview is a result of this struggle, yet her faith remained.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah interview. This is described, below, in the section on God being present with Sarah.

<sup>18</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>19</sup> This has been reported in Chapter 5, as these answered prayers were a vital part of the conversion process for those participants.



## God's patience

Table 7.3 shows how participants reported perceiving God's patience.<sup>20</sup> Hamish, Jean and Luke each spoke about God being patient. Hamish experienced God being patient with him as he journeyed to embrace the Christian faith. He noted that he needed "a bit of time and a bit of patience [and] luckily God has got a lot of that."<sup>21</sup> Jean and Luke saw patience as an attribute of God that they themselves (as young parents) wanted to demonstrate more. For Jean, patience was linked with God being loving and slow to anger as expressed in the song "10,000 Reasons."<sup>22</sup> She wanted to be similarly loving and slow to anger.<sup>23</sup> Luke appreciated God's patience at a time when he himself needed patience to deal with waiting for the court case relating to his accident to be resolved. As he said: "Patience is probably the big thing that drew [him to God]."<sup>24</sup>

Table 7.3: God's patience

		Hamish	Jean	Luke
Real	God is patient	x	x	x
Actual	God acting patiently	x		
Empirical	Experiencing God's patience	x		
Interpretive	Seeing God's patience			
Response	How to live?		x	x

## God's acceptance

Only Sarah and Tallulah mentioned God's acceptance. When asked about any songs that were meaningful for her as she was drawn to God, Sarah spoke of songs that told her of God's "unending love and acceptance ... and forgiveness."<sup>25</sup> She also spoke of realising how loving and accepting God was long before her conversion. Tallulah mentioned being struck by Jesus' response to the Samaritan woman at the well: where others ostracised her, Jesus accepted her. For Sarah, in particular, but also for Tallulah, God's accepting nature was an important part of their conversions.

<sup>20</sup> The first column shows the dimension of God referred to, and the second column, the specific ways it relates to God's patience.

<sup>21</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>22</sup> Redman and Myrin, "10,000 Reasons."

<sup>23</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>24</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>25</sup> Sarah was unable to recall the specific names of the songs. Sarah interview.

## God's forgiveness

As reported above, Sarah mentioned acceptance and forgiveness together. When asked what attributes of God drew her to God, she named forgiveness and unconditional love.<sup>26</sup> Hamish spoke of forgiveness in terms of Jesus offering Peter forgiveness by inviting him to say three times that he loved Jesus: juxtaposing with the three times Peter had denied Jesus. Hamish saw that as “an amazing display of God's forgiveness and the constant opportunity to come to him.” This needs to be read alongside Hamish's comment that “we don't need to keep prostrating ourselves and constantly asking for forgiveness. Once we have repented then we have repented.” Hamish appears to see God as constantly forgiving, with Christ's death having enabled that forgiveness. Jesus “died on the cross for the sins of the whole world. And it was done then” rather than requiring our constant repentance. Hamish tempers this by acknowledging that “we're going to keep sinning but as long as we keep lifting [our sins] up to God [we receive forgiveness].”<sup>27</sup>

## God as father

While Hamish, Mary and Olivia all spoke of the idea of God as a father, it was never mentioned as an attribute that drew them to God. When I asked Mary and Olivia what it was about the character of God that appealed to them, they both told me that their relationships with their fathers were dysfunctional. They then spoke of ‘God as Father’ in relation to their own negative experiences with their fathers. Rather than seeing ‘God as Father’ as instinctively a positive image, they had worked to understand what ‘God as Father’ meant in the light of their own challenging reality. It seemed that they perceived ‘God as Father’ to be an attribute that *should* have attracted them to God, but it was not. Both Mary and Olivia took the time to explain that to me. That said, Mary now relishes and “craves” a relationship with a father-figure.<sup>28</sup> Hamish was the only other participant to mention ‘God as Father’. Before his conversion, Hamish likened God the Father to a mafia family business: “You know like the father makes ya, then he sends the son down to say, ‘Hey, if you don't pay up your dues you're going to get your knees broken’ sort of thing.” Following his conversion, Hamish appreciated the “divine relationship” Jesus had with the Father and the Holy Spirit, but it was Jesus, not the Father, who was the most attractive member of the Trinity for Hamish.<sup>29</sup> So

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<sup>26</sup> “Unconditional love” has already been described in the section on God's love. Forgiveness is better seen as an activity of God rather than an attribute, so is reported here.

<sup>27</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>28</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>29</sup> Hamish interview.

while 'God as Father' was mentioned by three participants, it was not an attribute of God that attracted any of them to Christianity.

## **God working through others**

One of the key ways that God was at work in conversion was in, and through, the lives of the Christian friends of the participants. God made a difference in the lives of other Christians and helped them become people whose lives and faith were attractive to their non-Christian friends. As Olivia said, "God was really showing [her] ... how God works through people."<sup>30</sup> Chapter 6, on the role of other Christians in the conversion process, has already reported on the ways other Christians assisted in conversion. That data are not repeated here, although the specific ways that God spoke through others are reported in a separate subsection within the 'God speaking' section.

## **God curating a unique experience**

The common aspects of the process of participants coming to faith have been reported in Chapter 5. However, although the conversion narratives contained common elements, God curated each conversion experience uniquely.<sup>31</sup> God's activity can be divided into two categories. First, things that name what was happening internally for each participant and, secondly, aspects that relate to the conversion process itself. I report on both aspects in this section.

### **An internal stirring**

Most participants spoke of an internal stirring that they attributed to the activity of God.<sup>32</sup> The nature and implications of these stirrings are reported in this section. Participants used different words to describe this stirring. I often used the word "drawn" in my interview questions, and this word was used by Hamish, Luke, Mary, Olivia and Tallulah. Hamish, Olivia and Sarah spoke of God "moving."<sup>33</sup> Hamish, Jean and Mary spoke of a sense of questioning or dissatisfaction that they attributed to God's activity. Olivia talked of God "growing [her] understanding," "having [her] wonder" and "calling" her.<sup>34</sup> Luke mentioned his

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<sup>30</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>31</sup> The term 'curating' (from the Latin *curare*, meaning 'to take care') is generally used to refer to the ways items in a collection or exhibition are selected, organised and looked after. Curation is a highly skilled task, done attentive to each element of the collection as well as to the overall exhibition. The term, therefore, communicates the care and attention evident in each element and element of each convert's conversion process. "Curator," Wikipedia, [www.wikipedia.org/wiki/curator](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/curator). Accessed 3 June 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Grace and Meg did not report experiencing this.

<sup>33</sup> Hamish interview; Olivia interview; Sarah interview.

<sup>34</sup> Olivia interview.

“heart [being] opened.”<sup>35</sup> Mary was always “thinking of Jesus.”<sup>36</sup> Despite different words being used, the participants were talking of a kind of ‘stirring’ they experienced and spoke of in different ways. For that reason, I am reporting these experiences by participant, rather than by artificially separating the different ways they described this stirring. In some cases, there is a clear differentiation between God’s ‘actual’ activity and participants’ ‘empirical’ experiences of that activity. In other cases, there are less clear boundaries between the ‘actual’ and the ‘empirical’.

### ***Hamish***

Hamish became aware of God as he began his journey towards Christian faith. Noticing a flash of gold leaf in his bookcase at home drew him to pick up his Bible and begin to look through it. Over the next days and months, he kept noticing the Bible. As he said: “Things of God just kept being there for [him] whenever [he] needed them.” Hamish likened this experience to being a “moth [drawn] to a flame” as he “was just completely drawn” into a relationship with God.

Hamish also spoke at length about experiencing, as an atheist, a growing questioning or dissatisfaction with his life and beliefs.<sup>37</sup> While he continued to watch YouTube clips of “Hitchens and Dawkins and Dennett and all [his] heroes ... something had changed, and it was all just dry bones.” Hamish “knew ... [his] love for [his] wife and children was more than just [the] biological urge to reproduce or care for [his] offspring [that the atheists said it was].” Hamish’s dissatisfaction was also personal. He articulated it as having a “God-shaped hole”: “I’d look inside myself and it was just one big black empty hole and [there was] nothing really there to fill it.” Alongside this inner stirring was a sense that atheism and science, like religion, required “leaps ... of faith.” After several months of this stirring, Hamish said to God, “Yeah, okay God, you’ve tapped me on the shoulder long enough. I will listen to you now.”<sup>38</sup>

### ***Jean***

Jean experienced “a few little events that ... happened with [her] religious friends” that made her think about Christianity but she “didn’t do anything about them for quite a while.” Her conversion narrative indicates that these events were part of God stirring a faith-interest within her.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>36</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>37</sup> This has been reported in Chapter 5, when I described the dryness Hamish experienced.

<sup>38</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>39</sup> Jean interview.

### **Luke**

Luke's "heart was opened" when he attended a Christian conference with his friend. Following this, it was God bringing about healing and comfort in Luke's life that "really started to draw [him] closer to Jesus."<sup>40</sup>

### **Mary**

Mary has always felt drawn to God. As a child, she felt "such an ache in [her] heart that [she] wanted to be with God." Initially, this led her into the 'New Age' movement, where she sought to "feel and experience God." Her "whole goal was ... to be closer to God." After decades of involvement in 'New Age' and, despite spiritual leaders there telling her she was becoming "enlightened," the spiritual experiences she was having did not satisfy her. Her dissatisfaction and ongoing "drive ... to know God more," eventually led Mary to consider that "maybe the 'New Age' [was] the deception." This drew her to consider and then embrace the Christian faith.<sup>41</sup>

### **Olivia**

Olivia's negative life experiences highlighted the fact that there was something lacking in her life and "God drew [her] to knowing him through that." She did not know enough about God to be drawn directly to the character of God. Instead, she was drawn by observing how God had been "active in other people's lives."

Having journeyed towards faith for a long time, Olivia decided one morning to get baptised. She understood that "God's Spirit was moving" in her and she was "ready" and "called" to be baptised. "God was moving in [her] life" previously as well: "God kind of had [her] wondering about [Christianity] for a really long time," but it was "something that [she] occasionally thought about and then sort of forgot about again."<sup>42</sup>

### **Sarah**

Sarah reported that God spoke to her, encouraging her to attend church. There, she experienced "the Lord ... moving" through the preacher. Sarah was deeply affected by that first sermon she heard there.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>41</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>42</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>43</sup> Sarah interview.

## **Tallulah**

Tallulah experienced a “nagging feeling” she believed was God stirring her. She spoke of “being drawn back” to God.<sup>44</sup>

## **The process**

Each participant’s conversion story was unique. It seems that God started with their current reality and, aware of each personality, curated a conversion experience that allowed them to be, and become, who they were. A summary of God’s direct role in this process is shown in Table 7.4. These roles all related to the actual and empirical realms of God’s activity: specifically, to the direct activity of God, as perceived by the converts themselves.

*Table 7.4: God curating a unique conversion process*

	Actual	Empirical
Grace		Known by God
Hamish	Tailored experience God's timing	Fighting with God
Luke	Tailored experience God-incidences	Known by God
Mary	God's timing	
Olivia	Tailored experience God's timing	
Sarah		Fighting with God
Tallulah	God persisting Tailored experience God's timing	

Hamish and Luke most clearly articulated this sense of a unique or tailored experience of conversion. Hamish explained it as follows:

So, God understood that it needed to be gradual for me. And I needed to be shown a few doors. And God even showed me a few doors to exit out of as well. ... God understood that I was the kind of guy who would need to be carefully prodded and poked in the direction. And that I was going to try my hardest to do it my own way. So ... God really understood that this is the way it was going to work for me. ... [It] was very much a tailored experience to Hamish Smith.

God is seen here as invitational, not imposing on Hamish. Rather, offering opportunities for both response and retreat. This allowed Hamish to move at his own pace into a relationship with God.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>45</sup> Hamish interview. (Like the first name “Hamish”, “Smith” is also a pseudonym.)

Luke's story was also unique. He found his experiences with God and faith before conversion "really fit with [him] and [his] personality and with the way that [he] likes to approach things." He said, "So I guess that's why it was a gradual process. 'Cause God knew that was the best way to speak to me."<sup>46</sup>

Olivia recalled that "God made the circumstances right for [her] to be able to go [to church] at that particular time." She also noted that "God ... sets it up so that we can have those good relationships [with Christians]."<sup>47</sup>

Tallulah's opportunity to work in a Christian workplace "really fuelled her [faith development] along." She considers that "maybe God knew that was what [she] needed to get [her] where [she is] ... like the express lane, 'cause otherwise it might have taken [her] a lot longer." In hindsight, Tallulah thinks it was "really crucial [that she had] a job that [she] was passionate about, with like-minded people."<sup>48</sup>

Linked with this personal fit is a sense that, as Luke articulated it: "God knows us so well."<sup>49</sup> It was also very important for Grace that her personal struggles were understood by God.

There was a strong sense of God's good timing in many of the conversion stories. Grace was invited to church at a transitional time, just after she broke up with her girlfriend. Hamish considered that God allowed him to walk on the wrong "path" for a long time, to the point of a growing dissatisfaction with atheism, before beginning the stirring that led him to Christian faith.<sup>50</sup> Mary similarly believed in the sovereignty of God's timing in her conversion, saying, "And I think probably Jesus said, 'Oh well, enough's enough now; time to get back on the right path'."<sup>51</sup>

Olivia's story most clearly demonstrated God's immaculate timing. Olivia had recently moved out of her (extremely anti-religion) mother's home and was, therefore, free to attend church if she wanted to. She had decided to "find a church to go to." She had done some internet research and narrowed down the list of possible churches to attend to two. "Literally ... ten minutes later" her friend messaged her "just completely out of the blue" and invited her to church. There was a sense of wonder as Olivia told me: "And it just like happened to be one of the churches that I had been looking at." As she said, "I definitely think that was a God-thing." God's timing was perfect: Olivia's friend invited her to church when, due to her

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<sup>46</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>47</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>48</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>49</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>50</sup> Hamish interview. There is more on this stirring in the next section.

<sup>51</sup> Mary interview.

changed living circumstances, she could attend, and just as she had been investigating what church she might like to attend. The church to which she was invited was one that had appealed to her as she researched potential churches.<sup>52</sup>

Luke spoke of experiencing “a series of coincidences that just seemed too convenient to be coincidences.” For example, he was placed for field education in a workplace full of Christians: a workplace he later got a permanent job in. Luke attributes God with causing such so-called coincidences that were crucial in his faith development.<sup>53</sup>

God’s persistence was expressed most clearly in Tallulah’s conversion story, although there were echoes of it in the other stories as well. Tallulah attributed the nagging feeling she experienced to “God sort of persisting with [her].”<sup>54</sup>

Linked with this persistence was the way Sarah and Hamish fought with God. Hamish spoke of fighting with God for six months as he tried to maintain his unbelief in the face of his growing awareness of God. Sarah similarly fought with God, but her fight lasted much longer. She said, “It took me ten years of knowing that [God] was there and I was meant to be with Him, but I just resisted it.” Part of the reason for her resistance was because she found God “too overwhelming,” and was, therefore, not comfortable to engage in a relationship with God. While she was aware of God’s presence, Sarah was afraid to surrender to that presence.<sup>55</sup>

Each of these anecdotes and reflections were part of unique processes of people being drawn into relationship with God. It seems God was aware of each person and curated a process that was appropriate for each of them.

## **God being present**

This section reports on ways the participants experienced God being present with them. Grace indicated that she had not experienced a tangible sense of the presence of God. Hamish, Jean, Luke, Olivia and Tallulah each mentioned a small number of times when they had known God present with them. Mary, Meg and Sarah all had several such encounters that were very important to their spiritual journey. In terms of the nature of those experiences, participants described different ways they perceived God was present with

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<sup>52</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>53</sup> Luke interview. I have, therefore, called them ‘God-incidences’ in Table 4.

<sup>54</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>55</sup> Sarah interview.



them. These different experiences of God being present are shown in Table 7.5 and discussed further below.

Table 7.5: God being present

	Grace	Hamish	Jean	Luke	Mary	Meg	Olivia	Sarah	Tallulah
Knowing God with me always	A				I	I			
God being present		A					A	A	
Feeling God's presence		E		E		E		E	E
Moment of encounter								E	
Deliverance/exorcism/Holy Spirit					E	E			E
Physical sensation								E	E
Aware of God in nature								E	
Dream or vision					E	E			
Feeling God touch heart								E	
Feeling connected to God			E		E			E	
Feeling God's presence through music	E	E		E	E			E	E

A= actual; E = empirical; I = interpretive

## Grace

Grace was the only participant who said she had not experienced feeling the presence of God in some tangible way. Despite this, Grace still knew God was with her. As she said, "I've never felt his presence and I've never, you know, seen him or anything like that. I just, I just know." Grace had a knowledge of God that was deeper than an experience. She knew God was *actually* present with her. Grace also said that a benediction sung regularly at her church helps her "feel like [God is] there all the time." Knowing God is present with her brings Grace comfort and reassurance.<sup>56</sup>

## Hamish

Hamish felt a sense of God's presence when "listening to music," reporting that "Hillsong worship [songs] would always give [him] goosebumps."<sup>57</sup> He was moved by "all the classic 'get your hands up in the air and wave them around like you just don't care' songs." But God did not just speak to Hamish through worship songs. He also found "artists like *Gungor* [and] *Ascend the Hill* (pretty rocky sorts of bands) [were] still really speaking truth through their

<sup>56</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>57</sup> Based on Hamish's description of other things that gave him goosebumps, it is reasonable to conclude that God was making Godself known to Hamish through the music.

music.” “Looking back,” he says, “it ... really feels like ... the Divine hand ... the Holy Spirit was moving around me and through me and through the people that I knew.”<sup>58</sup>

## **Jean**

Jean experiences God’s presence during quiet times in which she connects with God. When she makes the effort to spend time praying and reading the Bible she considers that she has “a better day.”<sup>59</sup>

## **Luke**

Luke sensed God’s presence with him as he cried out to God in despair, longing for healing and restoration. He got “a sense that God was actually there [with him].” Despite being a gifted musician, Luke did not have any songs that were particularly meaningful for him on his faith journey. He noted that, for him, “Just playing the instrument is [his] way of worshipping. ... And the sort of musicality of it ... speaks more [to him] than the actual words.”<sup>60</sup>

## **Mary**

Mary has been having spiritual experiences all through her life. The first such experience involved a blue light manifesting in front of her when she was an infant. Her family sought deliverance from an exorcist and the “blue light stopped coming.” While the success of this exorcism suggests that it was not God causing the blue light, Mary wonders if this experience served to protect her from a family member who would otherwise have caused her harm, “Because [the light] freaked [the potential perpetrator] out no end, more than it freaked anybody else out.”

In addition to this earliest experience, Mary had many other encounters that she attributes to God being present with her in some way. When she was five years-old, Mary started dreaming of interactions with Jesus. These dreams happened regularly, and continued throughout her life, particularly in the months just before her conversion. In more recent dreams, she experienced God being physically close to her, “holding [her] hand” and “pressing up against her.” She acknowledges that she “crave[s] that masculine, fatherly, figure that [she] can trust completely, that [she can] feel so safe in.” In those dreams, that longing was met. In other dreams, she walks hand in hand with Jesus on the beach, or meets God in his mansion.

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<sup>58</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>59</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>60</sup> Luke interview.

Mary also experienced the presence of God when she was prayed for to receive the Holy Spirit. She is now able to speak in tongues.

Mary “loved to sing the songs [of Jesus]” as a child. Today she loves “the really old hymns; the Charles Wesley hymns.” She gets emotional when she sings them, often crying. Mary resonates with what she imagines to be Wesley’s experience as he wrote them, saying: “I imagine when he was writing [the hymn] he would have felt the pain of separation from God and that yearning so deeply and [the yearning] comes through [in] the songs.” The hymn then “triggers [Mary’s] yearning and wanting to go home [to heaven]. And [her] love for God.” In hearing and singing songs about God, Mary felt God present with her.<sup>61</sup>

## **Meg**

Like Mary, Meg has experienced dreams and visions of Jesus. The first she recounted in our interview occurred when she was in the ‘New Age’. She was doing a meditation and “call[ing] out to God and Jesus” and she “had a vision [in which she] asked who [her] guiding angel, or guide, was, and this guy came with a [shepherd’s] hook and long hair. [When she] said, ‘who’s that?’ ... [the others with her] said it was Jesus.” Jesus appeared to her in the same way when she “got baptised ... and [she] spoke in tongues straight away.” Jesus “appeared to [her] again one week later. ... [She] fell over backwards on the ground [and Jesus] appeared to [her] again.”<sup>62</sup> Sometimes she has seen Jesus’ face. At other times, she has seen “his robe and his belt.” On another occasion, when Meg was praying with a friend, “God ... came down like a statue” and Meg and her friend both “saw Him at the same time.”

In hindsight, Meg is aware that God “has been with [her] the whole time.” God has “kept her safe.” Sometimes at church she has experienced a sense of joy at God being present with her.<sup>63</sup>

## **Olivia**

Olivia had a sense that God “was just there and ... occasionally [she] would ... wonder about it.” This wondering was predominantly caused by the difference God had made in the lives of Christians she encountered.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>62</sup> Meg confirmed this was an experience of being “slain in the Spirit.” Meg interview.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Olivia interview.

## Sarah

Sarah enjoys a deep awareness of God's presence with her. She experiences God guiding her. She is also aware of God's presence in others. When her grandson invited her to church, "God was in [her] head" encouraging her to attend. She described attending that first church service as follows: "Oh my goodness, if the Lord just wasn't there smack in my face when I ... turned up at church this one morning." The sermon preached "touched [her] heart" because God was "moving through [the preacher] so well." God was also present when Sarah was baptised. In those times, before and after her conversion, Sarah had a deep awareness of God's presence with her.

However, these were not Sarah's first experiences of God's presence. It was almost two decades earlier when Sarah had felt and seen God present with her around her friends' meal table. She described that experience as follows:

A light bulb moment happened when I was at this family's house for dinner with my [children]. ... We'd just said grace, we were sitting around talking and, this this was the moment where I thought, "Ohhhhh" [intake of breath], I actually [realised God] is real, because he touched my heart, like. We were sitting around eating and ... talking. ... And then I just started shaking and they knew something was happening. And then we all just stopped eating and it was like they were saying something to me, "Sarah, you, you know he is here; like, why are you holding back?" I just started crying but I just felt like it was a moment where (it is so hard, it's beyond words) but it was like white was all around me for a split second around the table and then I just let loose with this crying. And then there was this, this, amazing warm feeling going through me.

She recalls: "That was the moment when I really realised how powerful and loving and accepting [God] was and that if I asked for help he would be there." Sarah has continued to experience "[God's] presence really, really strongly ... [as an] incredible warmth that goes through [her] body and [she feels] really secure and know[s] that [she is] not going to come to any harm."

Even before this supernatural experience of God's presence, around 20 years before her conversion, Sarah was aware of God in nature. She saw God as creator of the world and, in appreciating the beauty of nature, was aware that she was grateful to God as creator.

Since her conversion, Sarah has felt "so connected" to God, attributing God with "guiding [her] words and [helping her discern] what to do next," as she works in a mentoring and care relationship with a young person. She considers, "it was just like [God] was there ... telling me what to say [to this troubled young person]."

Sarah finds that some songs "put [her] in another place." She loves to listen to "Amazing Grace" and "Lord of Lords" particularly when she is feeling "really down." The songs

resonate with her because they are talking about attributes of God that are significant for her.<sup>65</sup>

## **Tallulah**

Tallulah experienced the presence of God “almost like a peace, and like God was beside [her] and [she] didn’t have to worry.” She felt this presence in church more than in her “everyday life.” Sometimes Tallulah felt this presence “even like an adrenaline going through [her] body” causing her to “almost get goosebumps.”

When Tallulah attended a meditation workshop at a local church she had an experience “of feeling really calm and just sort of floating through clouds and just being really close to God.” It “felt really strange” and she wasn’t sure “if it was just [her] brain running away with [her], but it felt pretty real: ... weird but ... amazing.” Worshipping God through music also makes Tallulah “feel closer to God.”<sup>66</sup>

These experiences of God being present with them were important aspects of participants’ faith journeys.

## **God speaking**

All the participants reported that God had spoken to them as they journeyed towards Christian faith. All mentioned God speaking to them through the Bible. Hamish, Luke, Mary, Meg, Sarah and Tallulah had all experienced God speaking directly to them. God had spoken through songs or music to six participants (Grace, Hamish, Jean, Mary, Olivia and Sarah). Hamish, Jean and Sarah had heard God speak through someone else. Luke reported (and Sarah alluded to) God speaking to them through nature. These experiences of God speaking are described in this section.

### **God speaking through the Bible**

God spoke through the Bible to each of those interviewed. Sometimes God spoke directly through a specific passage or verse of scripture. Other times a theme or concept captured someone’s attention. Sometimes, as with Mary and Meg, the Bible was confirming things they already “knew.”<sup>67</sup> At other times, the Bible enhanced their understanding, as happened for Tallulah. Other times God spoke through the Bible and challenged them (for instance, Hamish, Luke and Sarah). Sometimes God encouraged them through the Bible (for instance,

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<sup>65</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>66</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>67</sup> Mary interview; Meg interview.

Grace and Jean). Table 7.6 provides a summary of what God communicated through the Bible.

Table 7.6: God speaking through the Bible

Pseudonym	Key points
Grace	<b>Psalms:</b> Related to life and describe how you feel Realised God has a plan for her
Hamish	Attention caught by Bible on shelf Needed readable translation <b>John:</b> "really stood out" to him. Everything is done for love. Jesus' "Do you love me?" to Peter "display[ed] God's forgiveness" Recognised Bible as "truth" Heard God as "voice in his head" speaking <b>Psalm</b> 19:1
Jean	<b>Jeremiah:</b> I have a plan for you: God "knows me better than I know myself" Importance of daily Bible reading Resonates with story of Thomas having a moment of revelation and saying, "My Lord and my God." Similar to her situation, and encourages her hope that her non-Christian husband that "will open his life [to God]" <b>1 Corinthians</b> 13:4-7 reminds her of her love for her husband.
Luke	Love God and love your neighbour Don't worry/every hair on your head is numbered Sacrifice your own desires for others
Mary	<b>Genesis</b> initially made her angry with God but now she loves the story of "how [God] created things" Knew Bible said people should go to church for fellowship, but was resistant Loves <b>Revelation:</b> especially about new heaven and new earth When read Bible, the "little voice" that told her the 'New Age' was a lie went away "Knew" things already that reading the Bible confirmed
Meg	When reads Bible becomes conflicted/under spiritual attack, but sees importance of reading it, and it is easier to read it as she becomes freer
Olivia	Study notes included in Bible help her understand what God is saying
Sarah	"When I get really down or overwhelmed I just go to the Bible and just mediate and I get my answers" Likes the <b>Psalms</b>
Tallulah	"Stories of Jesus and the way he treated people" = key thing appreciated in Bible Stories in the Bible parallel with Tallulah's own experiences.

God spoke to Grace through the Psalms, helping her realise that God "knows how you feel and what you wanna do and makes it feel normal." This comforted and reassured Grace. She also acknowledged that God "must have a pretty good plan" for her; this is referencing Jeremiah 29:11.<sup>68</sup>

God caught Hamish's attention through the physical presence of a Bible on his bookcase. Once Hamish obtained a readable translation of the Bible and began to read it, "John's

<sup>68</sup> Grace interview.

gospel ... really, really stood out” to him. The overarching theme that God spoke to Hamish from the Bible was love and relationship. God also spoke to Hamish through the Bible about Jesus’ life and ministry. Hamish saw in Jesus’ actions the best way to live, and he realised what he was reading was “the truth”: a truth he had been searching for all his life. He learnt about some attributes of God through reading the Bible, like God’s forgiving nature. Hamish “wrestle[s]” with other parts of the Bible, but he “really enjoy[s] the wrestle.” In addition, as will be reported in in the next section, it was words from the Bible that God spoke to him the night that he realised (or decided) he was a Christian.<sup>69</sup>

Jean “quite often revisit[s] ... [the passage in] Jeremiah that says, ‘I have a plan for you; a plan for you to prosper’.”<sup>70</sup> On the “few” occasions when she has struggled with why “things have happened,” things that seemed “unfair or particularly testing ... [Jean] quite often turn[s] back ... to remember that [God] knows [her] better than [she knows] herself and that what [she wants] is not necessarily the best plan [for her].” God reminds her that she will “be looked after and that whatever is meant to be will be put into place.” God also spoke to her through the passage about Thomas who, having doubted that Jesus had been resurrected, had “that moment of revelation and [said to Jesus], ‘My God’.”<sup>71</sup> Jean resonated with Thomas’ experience of suddenly recognising Jesus as God and is reminded of her response whenever she reads or recalls that story. This passage also encourages Jean’s hope that her non-Christian husband “will open his life [to God].” In addition, God speaks to Jean about her marriage through 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. She and her husband had chosen, as non-Christians, to have this read at their wedding. Now it reminds Jean of “why [they] got married and why [they] love each other.”<sup>72</sup>

Luke was struck by “the two commandments that Jesus gave: ... Love God and love neighbour.”<sup>73</sup> Aware there was so much to learn from the Bible, Luke “thought if [he] can just pull out two things from [the Bible] ... it [had] to be those two and that’s probably what [he] really clung onto from the initial stage [of his faith journey] and still ... hold[s] onto.” Luke was also encouraged by hearing that God “knows ... every hair on your head [so you] don’t [need to] worry about tomorrow.”<sup>74</sup> In addition, God spoke to Luke through the passage in the Bible that says, “a man should sacrifice himself for his wife.”<sup>75</sup> Aware that today this is unlikely to mean “actually [physically] sacrificing yourself to save your wife,” Luke sees it being about

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<sup>69</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>70</sup> Jeremiah 29:11.

<sup>71</sup> John 20:27.

<sup>72</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>73</sup> Matthew 22:36-40.

<sup>74</sup> Matthew 10:30 and Luke 12:7.

<sup>75</sup> Ephesians 5:25.

“sacrificing your own wants and desires for your wife” and for other people. Words spoken by God from the Bible have changed the way that Luke lives and acts.<sup>76</sup>

Mary’s initial exposure to the book of Genesis made her “very angry with God,” but now she loves the story of “how [God] created things.” As she explored Christianity, God began to speak to her through the Bible. Reading about the need for Christians to fellowship together helped her realise she needed to overcome her resistance to attending church. The passages from the Bible that particularly speak to Mary are from Genesis, Revelation and 1 Thessalonians 4:16. She is desperate to be with God in heaven and those passages describe heaven and earth and her future in heaven.<sup>77</sup>

When Mary was in the ‘New Age’, “there was always this little voice in the back of [her] mind that would always say, ‘liar. It’s not true’.” Once she started “reading the Bible, and understanding the Bible and God’s word, that voice went away.” She attributed that voice to God. When Mary read the Bible “it made perfect sense” because she “knew those things” before she read about it in the Bible. God was speaking to her through, and before she read, the Bible.<sup>78</sup>

Sometimes when Meg reads the Bible, she goes, “Wow, it is all written.” She is amazed that “something [written] that long ago” is true to her experience today. God particularly speaks to Meg through the Psalms, and as she “gets freer and freer [spiritually, she] can read and then ... understand [the Bible] more.”<sup>79</sup>

God speaks to Olivia through her daily devotional reading. She reads a Bible passage and makes connections from it with her own life.

God speaks to Sarah through the Bible when she meditates. The answers she gets are not always comfortable: “Sometimes they are really hard and sometimes [she] has to look at [herself] and go, ‘Wooo ... was I really doing that?’ or ‘I shouldn’t have reacted like that’ or [she feels] guilty that [she] reacted like that.” But then she hears directly an encouraging message from God.<sup>80</sup> Specific passages that speak to her are the Psalms and the Lord’s Prayer.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>77</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Meg interview.

<sup>80</sup> See the next section.

<sup>81</sup> Sarah interview.



Tallulah learns much about God and faith from her Bible reading, particularly from “stories about Jesus and the way he treated people.” God speaks to Tallulah as she recognises parallels between the Bible and her own life, and is challenged to live differently.<sup>82</sup>

Each participant experienced God speaking to them through the Bible. Most often this was a source of encouragement; and sometimes there was a sense of challenge or rebuke involved. Often what the participants heard was linked in some way with their everyday life.

### **God speaking directly**

Most of the participants reported God speaking to them directly. Hamish, while “wary to say that [he] heard God’s voice in [his] head,” named “a couple of occasions” when he believes God spoke directly to him. The first occasion was just before he decided (or realised) he was a Christian. On this occasion, he heard a voice saying “the heavens will declare his majesty.”<sup>83</sup> The second time was at a retreat when he “once again [heard in his] head, not any particular voice or tone or gender, just saying ‘Hamish. Get up and let’s just do the walk together’.” These occasions marked significant decision-points in Hamish’s faith journey. In the first, he called himself a Christian and, in the second, he gave himself to God again.<sup>84</sup>

Luke experienced God speak directly when he learnt his wife was expecting their first child. He “felt God saying to [him], ‘Luke, you are ready for this; I’m trusting you to raise this child’.” Luke was grateful for God’s assurance of trust, and for the opportunity to raise their child.<sup>85</sup>

Mary heard God speak directly in dreams, speaking in ways that responded to her deep yearnings for closeness to God. In one dream God asked, “with a twinkle [in his eye]”, after pressing close against her, “Is that close enough?” In another dream God comforted her as she cried, asking, “What’s wrong? Why are you crying?” God was speaking directly into Mary’s greatest desire: for connection with God. As a child, Mary understood the direct revelation she had received from God to supersede what her parish priest might say. She describes it thus: “I ... remember when I was going to church and when the minister would ... talk about something and say ‘Oh, this or this or that’ and I would think in my mind, ‘I know that is not true because Jesus told me it wasn’t true’.” There were other times when she was aware that she “knew [things] even before [she] read it in the Bible.” She

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<sup>82</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>83</sup> Paraphrased from Psalm 19:1 and as reported in Chapter 5.

<sup>84</sup> He had just prayed, “I want to give myself to you, Lord.” Hamish interview.

<sup>85</sup> Luke interview.

understands that “Jesus must have told [her] when [she] was young and just planted [the knowledge and understanding in her].” She says, “It’s so strong within me.”<sup>86</sup>

Similarly, when attending church, Meg experienced confirmation of things she had previously heard directly from God. She realised, “[God’s] been speaking to me [in the past]. Stuff that I wouldn’t have known ‘cause I never went to church... when I go to church now I’m, ‘Ooh it has been God speaking to me. Yes, it has been God’.”<sup>87</sup>

Sarah recounted several instances of God speaking directly to her. These communications started long before Sarah was a Christian, when God would ask her, “Why are you fighting me?” God speaking directly to Sarah was instrumental in her accepting her grandson’s invitation to attend church. At that time, God was encouraging Sarah out of her isolation, saying, “You can’t do this on your own anymore. You have to let someone in.” Sarah was also encouraged by God reminding her, “You’re only doing the best that you can with what you’ve got.”<sup>88</sup>

I have already described Tallulah’s experience of God being beside her in church. She said this was “almost like God speaking to her.” On another occasion, “God [spoke to her] really clearly... It was almost like God was telling [her] off.” As a result, she “changed like that [clicks fingers],” realising she was behaving in an unreasonable manner, and changing her behaviour accordingly. Tallulah is also aware of God “speaking into [her parenting],” helping her to be a better mother.<sup>89</sup>

Each of these participants described specific moments when God spoke to them. God’s words changed their lives.

### **God speaking through other people**

As well as speaking directly and speaking through the Bible, God also spoke through other people. The chapter on the role of other Christians in the conversion process could, of course, legitimately be seen as a dimension of God speaking through other people. Nevertheless, in this section I report on specific instances Hamish, Jean, Luke and Sarah heard God speaking through others.

God spoke through other people to Hamish, particularly through books and websites. “Liberal, progressive” thinkers he discovered on the internet helped him transition from

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<sup>86</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>87</sup> Meg interview.

<sup>88</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>89</sup> Tallulah interview.

atheism to Christian faith. They helped him understand God more. Tim Keller’s “down to earth [and] very practical” sermons “helped [Hamish] a lot.” In addition, books by C. S. Lewis – “whose story really jelled” with Hamish’s own – and N. T. Wright spoke to Hamish. These books offered “a real introduction into the story and the person of Jesus.”<sup>90</sup>

In our interview, Jean described a conversation with a friend who unknowingly provided the answer to a question Jean had been asking of God for some time. Jean remembers: “It was one of those moments when I went, ‘That’s your answer. You’ve just been given your answer.’ And it totally changed my view.” This encounter brought much-needed healing and provided a very specific hope and direction for Jean’s future.<sup>91</sup>

God used a speaker at a Christian conference to speak to Luke in the account reported above of Luke hearing from God through the Bible. Similarly, when Sarah first attended church with her grandson, “the Lord was speaking through [the preacher].”<sup>92</sup>

In each of these instances, God spoke to those interviewed through another person.

### **God speaking through nature**

Luke was the only person interviewed who directly mentioned God speaking to him through nature, although Sarah indicated that she knew God was creator long before she embraced Christian faith for herself. Luke recounted a story about a tree in their backyard that, during a storm “completely broke in two.” Months later when he looked at the tree again “it was ... growing really well.” This made Luke think, “Wow, even when ... we’re broken we can still grow.” This was of great encouragement to Luke, who considered himself to be broken. He realised, “God can still make me useful.”<sup>93</sup>

### **God speaking through music**

As well as being present through music (as reported above), God sometimes spoke to participants through music. This was particularly true for Jean and Olivia.

God spoke to Jean through songs sung at her son’s ‘mainly music’ group when she had just started exploring the Christian faith. These songs helped Jean understand that God was loving and had created the world.<sup>94</sup> She observed her son being “so happy when he was

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<sup>90</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>91</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>92</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>93</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>94</sup> See the sections on God’s love, above, and God acting the past in creation, below.

singing those songs.” More personally, once Jean had started attending church, some songs seemed “like [they were] a message just for [her].”<sup>95</sup>

Olivia is a gifted singer who, as a child, was first introduced to God through songs sung in her choir. Because of such songs “about God or about the sacrifice that Jesus made,” Christianity became “something [she] wondered about.”<sup>96</sup>

This section has reported on the many ways that God spoke to research participants as they journeyed towards Christian faith. God spoke through the Bible; directly; through others; through nature; and through music.

## God helping me

Each participant reported ways they perceived God had helped them. This help included healing, protecting, supporting, comforting, guiding, teaching and blessing. These aspects of God’s actual activity (as experienced empirically by the participants) are shown in Table 7.7 and are discussed below.

Table 7.7: God helping

	Grace	Hamish	Jean	Luke	Mary	Meg	Olivia	Sarah	Tallulah
Healing				x					
Protecting					x	x			
Supporting	x		x					x	x
Comforting		x							x
Guiding	x		x		x			x	x
Teaching		x				x	x	x	
Blessing			x	x				x	x
Other	x								

## Healing

Luke considered that it was God who healed him from the mental illness he suffered after his accident. He attributed his healing to “the healing power [of] Christ.” Having his health restored was a key factor in Luke’s journey to the Christian faith.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>96</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>97</sup> Luke interview.

## Protecting

God protected both Meg and Mary from danger. Mary considers that God protected her from abuse by causing the “blue light” that manifested in front of her, “freak[ing] out” the family member who would otherwise have abused her.<sup>98</sup> Meg believes that “God ... kept [her] alive a few times” when she was in physical danger because of her involvement in the ‘New Age’.<sup>99</sup> Grace also alluded to God keeping her safe at times she tried to harm herself.

## Supporting

Grace, Jean, Sarah and Tallulah all spoke of God supporting them. This support was experienced in a variety of ways, and was often understood as being answers to prayers.<sup>100</sup> Grace knew God was with her, and this knowledge provided her with support. After praying for “guidance and clarity,” Jean found herself with a “changed ... outlook ... and help to deal with things that [she] had been really struggling with.” This new outlook transformed her.<sup>101</sup>

Sarah, despite still having “traumatic things ... [going] on in her life,” now “manage[s] them a lot better ... with God’s support.” She considers that “if it wasn’t for the Lord [she] wouldn’t be able to have coped” with these difficulties. Sarah also believes “it is only because of the Lord’s support [that she is] starting to open up a bit to other people.”<sup>102</sup>

God “helped [Tallulah] through” when she received a distressing family health diagnosis. She considers that the “diagnosis came at the perfect time, ‘cause [she] had God to help” her.<sup>103</sup>

## Comforting

Hamish and Tallulah spoke of God comforting them. Hamish sometimes gets “a real comforting sense” from God when he is listening to music as well as at other times when he has heard God speak to him.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, Tallulah “was finding [a] sort of comfort in [God]” as she deepened her relationship with God and felt God’s presence with her.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>99</sup> Meg interview.

<sup>100</sup> See Chapter 5.

<sup>101</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>102</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>103</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>104</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>105</sup> Tallulah interview.

## Guiding

Grace, Jean, Mary, Sarah and Tallulah all described ways that God had guided them. In addition, Meg had experienced a vision of Jesus when (still involved in the 'New Age') she asked who her spirit guide or guiding angel was. Grace believed that God "guided her" to church.<sup>106</sup> Jean's prayer for guidance was answered. Mary considers that "maybe the Holy Spirit is guiding" her and helping her discern truth.<sup>107</sup> I have already mentioned Sarah experiencing God "guiding [her] words."<sup>108</sup> Tallulah was glad to "just let God guide [her]" as she embarked on an ambitious community service project. She knows that despite her flaws, "God still loves [her] and is still guiding [her]."<sup>109</sup>

## Teaching

Participants who spoke of God "teaching" them were generally describing discipleship rather than cognitive understanding. However, Olivia named her progression of learning about God as follows:

I first learnt that [God] existed at choir. And then I first learned that there was something more to it than what I understood at school where I was teaching. And then I first started to actually learn what it was about at church.

In addition, Olivia spoke of God "[growing] her understanding of how he can be active in other people's lives."<sup>110</sup> Hamish "will never say that God has finished teaching [him] stuff 'cause every day [God] is showing [Hamish] something new and showing where [he] might not have got it quite right."<sup>111</sup> Meg wondered out loud during our interview, "Is that what you're trying to teach me, God, to be desperate for you?"<sup>112</sup> Sarah considers that over the course of her life, "God ... was just teaching [her] one really big lesson. Some really hard knocks and ... learning about herself and how to deal with other people and accept other people [non-judgmentally]." Looking back, Sarah sees that in her darkest days of unanswered prayers, what God taught her helped her "to be strong enough to cope with what [she has] to cope with now."<sup>113</sup>

Those interviewed reported God helping them. Different people experienced that help in different ways: through healing, protecting, supporting, comforting, guiding and teaching.

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<sup>106</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>107</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>108</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>109</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>110</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>111</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>112</sup> Meg interview.

<sup>113</sup> Sarah interview.

## God blessing them

Four participants spoke of God blessing them. Generally, this awareness of being blessed was something that came over time. They did not come to faith *because* God was blessing them. Rather, they *recognised* God's blessing after they became Christians. Jean tries to "look at all [the] positives and those beautiful things that God has given us" because she thinks: "That is what we should be delighting in and rejoicing in."<sup>114</sup> Luke considers God "blessed him with a child."<sup>115</sup> Sarah considers she is "just so blessed" to be able to help others.<sup>116</sup> Tallulah realised that being able to "see the blessings all the time" is something that develops over time. Sometimes she says, "God, you just keep blessing me" as she feels "so blessed and thankful."<sup>117</sup>

## Other

Grace spoke specifically of God helping her to find strength within herself. Also, God helped her to "find herself."<sup>118</sup> This was a significant consequence of her new faith.

## Needing help or trusting God would help

Mary, Meg and Olivia all spoke of needing help from God, or trusting that God would help them. Mary is aware that she needs God's help as she seeks to witness to her friends, but she is confident that "Jesus had it all under control."<sup>119</sup> Meg lives desperate for God's help. Olivia is aware that God will help her grow and change.

## God changing or growing me

God changed or grew the participants, in a variety of ways. Some spoke of God changing them, completing them, or making them who they are.

Hamish, Jean, Luke, Olivia and Tallulah all described ways that God had changed or grown them. Hamish related this to his conversion and to the resulting "180-degree turnaround in who [he] was and how [he] was." He attributes this wholly to God as he "really didn't want [to become a Christian] at all." Hamish was also aware that he had the potential to "trade one arrogance and exclusivity [that of atheism] for another [that of Christianity]." God changed

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<sup>114</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>115</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>116</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>117</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>118</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>119</sup> Mary interview.

how Hamish viewed the world. This new way of seeing helped keep Hamish from being arrogant about his Christian faith.<sup>120</sup>

Jean's non-Christian husband noted to her that she had "seem[ed] happier lately" and she replied that she had, indeed, *felt* happier lately: that her faith "had completed her life a little bit ... since she started going to church." Jean has a strong desire to "be a good person and to be the person that God wants [her] to be." This is something that she "[tries] to remind herself of every day."<sup>121</sup>

Luke's healing (reported above) was a clear example of God changing him. Luke embraced that change wholeheartedly.

Olivia spoke of God growing her through her small group. God achieved this growth in Olivia as she was "humble enough to ask questions" of the others in her group.<sup>122</sup>

Tallulah thinks that "the change within [her since she became a Christian] has been massive 'cause ... [she] was quite angry and had a short fuse sometimes with [her daughter] ... and all that has changed now. ... God is making [her] into a better person." Her parenting has "completely changed." Tallulah is aware of gifts and passions within her "that are inherent in [her] but [that] God brought ... out." Because of her faith, Tallulah uses those gifts, gifts that otherwise she "probably wouldn't be doing anything about."<sup>123</sup>

## **Negative or off-putting aspects**

Jean, Luke, Mary, Meg and Sarah all reported negative or off-putting things they perceived about God that had hindered their journey to faith. The severity of the negative impact of these things varied greatly.

Sarah's dramatic experience of God being present with her at her friends' house was "too overwhelming." The next day she "didn't want to talk about it," thinking, "If [being in relationship with God] is going to be moments like that I don't know if I can cope with it."<sup>124</sup>

As already reported above, Mary initially struggled with the Bible. Reading it made her angry with God because she thought God made a mistake in placing the "tree of knowledge and that other tree right in the centre [of the garden where they were very tempting to Adam and

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<sup>120</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>121</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>122</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>123</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>124</sup> Sarah interview.



Eve].” She also found it very “distress[ing] knowing that the people [she] really cared about would go [to hell because] they are not saved by the blood of Jesus.”<sup>125</sup>

Like Mary, Meg had bad first impressions of the Bible.<sup>126</sup> Meg’s journey to Christian faith was more about escaping from her past life than it was about moving towards and embracing God and the Christian faith. She still struggles with God not answering her prayers for healing and deliverance. Sadly, she does not “feel God’s love” and wonders why God continues to “allow his children to suffer.”<sup>127</sup>

## **God acting in the past**

Clearly God acted in the past to enable conversion today. This section reports only on those things participants specifically mentioned in this regard: God creating; God sacrificing; God redeeming; and Jesus dying. These fit within the ‘actual’ category of God’s activity. Aspects relating to Jesus’ life as it was recorded in the Bible are reported above, in the section about God speaking through the Bible.

### **God creating**

Jean, Mary and Sarah all mentioned God creating. A song sung at Jean’s son’s ‘mainly music’ group told her that “God made us.”<sup>128</sup> Mary referred to the Genesis creation accounts several times, mentioning God creating humans, light and the Garden of Eden. For Sarah, “nature has always been a really big thing.” She knew long before she became a Christian that “God made this planet, this earth.” Sarah “always saw things as beautiful and ... [was] amazed at that beauty because of how it was created.”<sup>129</sup>

### **God sacrificing**

Jean, Olivia, Sarah and Tallulah all mentioned God’s sacrifice. The fact that God sent his son into the world, coupled with observing new Christians from a Muslim country having to sacrifice a lot to live as Christians “made [Jean] think” about the Christian faith.<sup>130</sup> Olivia had heard about “the sacrifice that Jesus made for us all” through songs she had sung in choir, but “it took a really long time” for her to understand what that meant.<sup>131</sup> Sarah contrasts

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<sup>125</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>126</sup> The particular passage she cited as being off-putting was not actually in the Bible. She reported reading that “God had put someone in the ground for 920 years” which made her think, ‘What a horrible God’.” Meg interview.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>129</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>130</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>131</sup> Olivia interview.

God's sacrifice with her own suffering, concluding: "What I'm going through is nothing compared to what [God] sacrificed."<sup>132</sup> Tallulah linked God's sacrifice in sending Jesus to earth with God's love for us.

### **God redeeming**

Tallulah was the only participant to mention redemption or being redeemed. In her first mention, she linked redemption to God's love in sending Jesus. Later, she spoke of redemption requiring a relationship with God.

### **Jesus dying**

As reported above, Hamish now believes Jesus died for the sins of the world.<sup>133</sup> Olivia read posters at her school that said, "He died for our sins" and "it just didn't make sense to [her] at all." She says she "felt like a real idiot ... walking through the school [reading the posters thinking] 'What is that about?'" She was "more confused by that than anything else," waiting for a long time "for that poster 'he died for our sins' to make sense" to her. Rather than deciding it was too hard to understand, Olivia became determined, thinking, "I'm going to stick with coming to church and stick with this [faith exploration] until I understand where they are coming from with that because this is not making sense!"<sup>134</sup> Jesus' death inspires Jean to "keep following" Jesus and to "keep trying to be that good person."<sup>135</sup> Tallulah links Jesus dying with God's love.

### **Affects**

This final section considers the affects the participants experienced as they journeyed to faith. These were: a yearning or wanting more; a desire to live better or become who they are; a sense that faith relates to everyday life; a sense of welcome, warmth and belonging; a sense of knowing; and a new way of seeing things. I specifically report the ways God mediated these affects.

### **Yearning or wanting more**

The participants' experience of yearning or wanting more was mediated by God. This yearning seems caused by God curating a unique experience of conversion; God being present; God speaking; and God growing participants.

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<sup>132</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>133</sup> See the section on God's forgiveness.

<sup>134</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>135</sup> Jean interview.

Hamish's experience of a growing dissatisfaction with atheism caused a yearning that was a vital part of his unique story of conversion. This can be understood as caused by God stirring him to want more.

Experiencing the presence of God often left participants longing for more. Mary was frequently aware of God's presence with her, but longed for more. God was present with Olivia when she was a child, causing her to "wonder" about faith: facilitating a sense that there is something more out there.<sup>136</sup> Similarly, Tallulah experienced God being present, "persisting" with her.<sup>137</sup> Luke also got "a sense that God was actually there" when he called out to God in a moment of desperation.<sup>138</sup> Often, such an experience of God's presence caused a yearning for more of God's presence. This was particularly evident in Mary's story as she experiences an insatiable desire for God, but was named most clearly by Tallulah, who articulated it as: "[God's presence] is a bit like a drug: you want more of it."<sup>139</sup>

God spoke to Hamish through the very presence of his Bible, keeping it in his "field of view" and drawing him back to it so he kept returning to it and exploring further.<sup>140</sup>

Sarah recognised a deep need within her "to have a relationship with God." Recognising and responding to this need was a key part of her growing in faith.<sup>141</sup> Similarly, Tallulah went to church to "build a relationship with God."<sup>142</sup> This desire for relationship with God was part of a yearning for God.

### **Desire to live better or become who they are**

This affect was also mediated by God. Participants gave examples of wanting to live better, or become who they were, as a result of the attributes of God; God being present; God speaking; God growing them; and God acting in the past. God contributed to the desire to live better and also enabled this desire to be met. God's activity in the past (through Jesus' life, death and resurrection) provided the means by which participants could live in new ways and become the people they were created to be. God's attributes inspired participants to live better, particularly in relation to their parenting, and love and patience towards others. Participants often sensed God speaking, encouraging them to live in better ways and

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<sup>136</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>137</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>138</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>139</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>140</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>141</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>142</sup> Tallulah interview.

assuring them of God's help as they did so. God was clearly at work inspiring and assisting the participants to live better, or to become who they were created to be.

### **Sense that faith relates to everyday life**

God contributed to the sense that faith relates to everyday life through some of God's attributes; by being at work in others' lives; by being present with participants; and by speaking to participants. God being powerful (answering prayers) and God being loving (God is always with us) helped Grace experience this sense. God's work in others' lives helped Olivia to see how faith impacts daily life. God's presence with Sarah as she spoke with her young friend made her realise that she could depend on God in her everyday life. God spoke to Grace through the Psalms and this contributed to her sense that faith relates to everyday life. In each of these instances, participants had a sense that faith related to everyday life. This sense both grew their faith and encouraged them to keep growing their faith.

### **Sense of welcome, warmth, belonging and/or homecoming**

The sense of welcome, warmth and belonging experienced by participants was primarily mediated through other Christians, although there are some examples of it being mediated directly by God: particularly in facilitating encounters with, and learning from, other Christians; and being present with the participants. Feeling a sense of 'homecoming' was generally attributed to God. Olivia experienced a friendliness from church people that she attributed to the activity of God in the lives of Christians, helping them be particularly hospitable and loving. Olivia also sensed that God was "set[ting] it up so [people] can have good relationships with each other."<sup>143</sup> Of course, God worked to transform the lives of the Christians who helped create this sense of welcome and warmth. Jean, Hamish and Mary spoke of feeling like they were "home" when they attended church.<sup>144</sup> Sarah had that same sense when she was baptised. In part, this can be understood as caused by God's presence with them. So, while the sense of welcome, warmth, belonging and/or homecoming experienced by participants was primarily mediated through other Christians, God contributed to that sense both directly and indirectly, particularly the sense of homecoming.

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<sup>143</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>144</sup> Hamish interview; Jean interview; Mary interview.

## Sense of knowing

Much of the sense of knowing that participants experienced was mediated by God. This was a result of God being present; God speaking; God growing the participants; and an intangible sense of 'rightness'.

God's presence with Mary through dreams mediated her sense of knowing. Similarly, Sarah felt God be present with her "touch[ing her] heart," which made her realise "[God] is real."<sup>145</sup>

God spoke to Mary, both directly and through the Bible, instilling in her a sense of knowing. "Before [Mary] read the Bible [she] knew ... things [about God]" that she later read in the Bible.<sup>146</sup> Meg similarly knew things about God before she started attending church and she attributes this sense of knowing to God speaking to her. Hamish received a "comforting sense" from God speaking to him, which contributed to his sense of knowing.<sup>147</sup> God spoke to Grace through sermons and through other people, which further contributed to her sense of knowing.

Olivia "felt like God had really ... moved her," encouraging her to take the discipleship step of baptism. This was an important part of God growing her, and was both mediated by, and contributed to, her sense of knowing.<sup>148</sup>

Finally, respondents spoke of an intangible sense of right-ness that can be best understood as the work of God in their lives. When Grace said that faith "just feels right" and she "just know[s]," and Jean said: "It just feels really right," this seemed indicative of a deep work that was attributable to God.<sup>149</sup> Sarah spoke of the stage show, *Jesus Christ Superstar* "resonat[ing] with her."<sup>150</sup> All these things contributed to the participants' sense of knowing. Similarly, Grace, Jean and Mary all experienced a sense of church "feeling right," which was part of their sense of knowing. While they did speak of others in church being friendly, this sense of rightness was primarily mediated by God.<sup>151</sup>

## Seeing things differently

Seeing things differently was both an important part of the conversion process and a consequence of that process. This affect was primarily mediated by God. Looking back on

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<sup>145</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>146</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>147</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>148</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>149</sup> Grace interview; Jean interview.

<sup>150</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>151</sup> Grace interview; Jean interview; Mary interview.

her past attitudes to Christianity, Grace realised that she had been very “closed-minded” and was now changed.<sup>152</sup> Hamish recounted multiple stories of seeing things differently that he attributed to God: from the initial flash of gold leaf on his Bible; through reading the Bible in new ways and seeing how powerful it was; to recognising God’s love in others. He spoke of seeing things through a “different lens” as he came to embrace Christianity.<sup>153</sup> God “changed [Jean’s] outlook on so many things,” largely by speaking to her through others.<sup>154</sup> Luke attributes God with “open[ing] the way [he] look[s] at things.”<sup>155</sup> Mary considers that God opened her eyes to see the truth of the Bible. Sarah can now “see [God’s] love” everywhere.<sup>156</sup> Tallulah similarly now “see[s] the blessings all the time.”<sup>157</sup> These changes, these new ways of seeing things, were brought about by God.

## **Concluding comments**

This chapter has described God’s role in the process of the participants becoming Christians. It also reported on affects the participants experienced as they discovered and embraced Christianity for themselves: specifically, how those affects related to God’s involvement in their lives. The attributes of God (God’s love, power, patience, and acceptance and forgiveness); God’s working through others; God’s curation of a unique experience; God’s presence; God’s speaking; God’s help; God’s growing; and God’s past activity were all vital dimensions in the faith development of the research participants.

This chapter has addressed my third research sub-question: “What is God’s role in the journey to Christian faith?” In addition, it has helped answer my primary research question of why unchurched people in Australia are becoming Christians today. This second major part of my thesis concludes with a brief section on things that were missing from the data.

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<sup>152</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>153</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>154</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>155</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>156</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>157</sup> Tallulah interview.

## CHAPTER 8: P.S. BUT WHAT ABOUT...

Having reported what my data revealed, it is appropriate to highlight some areas that are missing from the data. I have included (Appendix 20) a copy of the original paper I presented at the *Urban Life Together* conference, held in Melbourne in October 2014.<sup>1</sup> At the time I presented this paper, I was midway through my data generation, and had begun the analysis process.<sup>2</sup> It was too early to speak on what my data were revealing about conversion today, but not too early to wonder about some elements that were *missing* from the data; for example, sin; heaven; being convinced by others; making 'rational choices'; and dramatic conversion 'events'. As these dimensions continued to be mostly absent in future interviews, it is appropriate to consider each of them briefly here.<sup>3</sup> To do this, I examine the conversion accounts from a different perspective: looking for absence rather than presence, and considering what replaces those missing dimensions.<sup>4</sup>

### Sin

None of those I interviewed mentioned 'being saved from sin' as a motivation for, or even a personal consequence of, conversion. Six participants used the word "sin" in our interviews and three did not. How was sin spoken about, and what replaced it when it was not used?

Hamish used the word "sin" in discussing what he called the "orthodoxy" of his faith. He said: "But I suppose I am orthodox in the fact that I believe in the Trinity. I believe that Christ died on the cross for the sins of the whole world." He went on to add: "And it was done then. And we don't need to keep prostrating ourselves and constantly asking for forgiveness. Once we have repented, ... we have repented. We're going to keep sinning but as long as we keep lifting them up to God (I mean, God can see everything anyway) [then we are forgiven]." Here Hamish discusses sin in introducing his own theological position. He later goes on to question what he considers an overemphasis on personal salvation at the expense of a wider kingdom focus:

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<sup>1</sup> This was one of two papers I presented at this conference. I did not submit this paper for publication because it was too early in my research process to be reporting definitively on results. However, my other paper, on an unrelated topic, was published the following year in an edited online book. Lynne Taylor, "Life to the Full: How Local Congregations Can Help Older Adults Thrive," *Urban Life Together: inhabiting our neighbourhoods* (Melbourne: Urban Seed, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> I had completed six interviews; transcribed four; completed initial coding of two interviews; and begun initial coding of one interview.

<sup>3</sup> I have since opted to combine 'being convinced by others' and 'rational choices' as they both relate to rational processes.

<sup>4</sup> Taking this different perspective means there will be some necessary repetition from the previous Results chapters.

But from a social justice point of view, I really think that some parts of Christianity have a real problem with hyper-individualisation. A real focus on personal salvation and, as Paul says, “These are things of children, let’s just move past them now and get onto the real business of helping God in his work to bring the kingdom and the new creation into being, into reality.”

While Hamish *mentions* sin and salvation, they were not instrumental in his conversion narrative. Instead, Hamish spoke of simply accepting the gift that God offers: “I just looked up and all at once felt ‘Yes, God is here, he loves me, and I’ve just got to open my arms to the free gift that he’s giving me’.”<sup>5</sup>

Jean mentioned “sin” three times, each in relation to her desire to be a better person. When sin was spoken about at the ‘Alpha’ course she attended, Jean found that “quite confronting, and [it] just sort of brought [her] back to trying to be a better person. Being the person that God wants [her] to be.” Jean’s second reference to sin was sandwiched between references to being “a good person ... the person God wants me to be” and “trying to be that good person.” Her third mention was in reflecting on the passage from 1 Corinthians 13, read at her wedding. Reading that passage now makes her think of “the sins that [she and her husband] commit against each other” and reminds her of “why we got married and why we love each other.” Once again, she spoke of sin in relation to living better: in this case in remembering the love and commitment she has for her husband. For Jean, any concept of sin related to her desire to be a better person.<sup>6</sup>

Mary was the participant who spoke most of sin, but she spoke of it in relation to how problematic the concept of sin was for her, and continues to be for her ‘New Age’ friends. Her Christian workmate had led her to pray a prayer of repentance, but she “was baffled by it.” She did not confess any specific sins. Rather she “just said, ‘I repent of my sins’.” Mary “couldn’t get her head around” the issue of sin, and struggled for a long time to understand it. Now her “eyes are opened” and she “can feel [sin in herself] every day,” but she is still unable to explain sin in a way that makes sense to her ‘New Age’ friends, although she longs to do so. Her friends are put off Christianity by its emphasis on sin.<sup>7</sup>

Meg spoke of her “sexual sin and drugs,” along with “the ‘New Age’ ... and generational stuff” as having opened her up to demonic possession. However, she focused so much on “repenting [and] renouncing” that those “in the Christian world [told her to] stop repenting,

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<sup>5</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>6</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>7</sup> Mary interview.



renouncing.” It seems her friends perceived her emphasis on her own sinfulness was unhelpful for her personal and spiritual development.<sup>8</sup>

Sin held a fascinating place in Olivia’s journey to faith. She was teaching at a church school, and recalls: “I remember [seeing] all the posters [that] said, ‘He died for our sins’. And I was just like, ‘What?’ Like it just didn’t make sense to me at all; I didn’t actually understand what that was talking about.” But, at the same time, Olivia wanted to discover what the posters meant. She had long had a sense that there was “something more” to the Christian faith; something she found inherently attractive. She decided to attend church to learn about Christianity: both for her own sake, and in order to be a better teacher within the religious environment in which she worked. Olivia’s desire to understand the meaning behind the posters depicting Jesus on the cross was an important catalyst for her journey to faith. She decided not to stop searching until she understood it. But while Olivia was motivated to understand sin, she did not have any sense of personal sinfulness before she became a Christian.<sup>9</sup>

Tallulah linked Jesus dying “for our sins on the cross” with the love of God the Father. She acknowledges that she “probably wasn’t living a great life and ... [is] still not perfect” but she believes that, “in time [she’ll] get better and be more intuitive with God about the direction [she] should take.” While she acknowledged that Jesus died for her sins, this was not an important motivation for her being drawn to God. Like Jean, Tallulah was more motivated by living better.<sup>10</sup>

Grace, Luke and Sarah did not mention sin at all in their interviews. Grace found that the Christian faith “made sense” and “felt right.” She realised it was okay to name the hard stuff of life, and found in the Psalms (and a benediction regularly used at her church) a framework for describing how she feels that assures her that God is with her “even if it doesn’t show.” Grace had recently begun a volunteer role that saw her encountering some tragic circumstances and the Christian faith offered her a way of processing and integrating those experiences.<sup>11</sup>

Luke spoke of his own brokenness and a growing realisation that God could work through broken people. This awareness grew out of two things. First, his observations of, and conversations with, his Christian friends who, like Luke, had experienced “difficult times” in their lives but were “still ... so happy and ... have all this faith even though [their] life [hadn’t]

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<sup>8</sup> Meg interview.

<sup>9</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>10</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>11</sup> Grace interview.

been great.” Secondly, his awareness grew through observing the regeneration of a hibiscus plant (described in Chapter 7). As one who was suffering the ongoing physical and mental health effects of a major accident, those practical demonstrations of growth-despite-brokenness were vastly significant in Luke’s choice to become a Christian. He realised, “Even though I am broken, God can still make me useful.” It seems that for Luke, healing and wholeness were significant motivations in his conversion, rather than forgiveness for wrong-doing. In fact, he describes his pre-accident life as “awesome.”<sup>12</sup>

Sarah had known for a long time that God existed and had (well over a decade earlier) experienced a dramatic physical manifestation of the presence of God. She had been “fighting” God for a long time. But Sarah had a desire to be a better person. Specifically, she was “trying to be nonjudgmental and have unconditional love,” particularly towards her adult daughter, who has ongoing mental health and addiction problems. Sarah, in response to the enthusiastic invitation of a grandchild, and the prompting of “God in her head ... going, ‘Sarah you have to meet, you have to be surrounded by like-minded people’” found herself in a church where the preacher was “nonjudgmental about anybody.” While Sarah’s desire to live generously and love unconditionally and non-judgmentally could potentially be framed as sins that needed to be overcome or forgiven, for Sarah there was a sense that she was living at the edge of what she was personally capable of, and realising she needed help to live a better, more loving, life. This potential is what God offered her.<sup>13</sup>

This section has demonstrated that very few participants reported any sense of personal sinfulness before they became Christians. They did, however, often express a desire to be a better person. Where personal sinfulness was mentioned, it often caused a problem with dissonance (for example, Mary); was not understood (for example, Olivia); or was unhealthily overemphasised (Meg).

## Heaven

Mary was the only participant to specifically mention heaven or eternal life as either a motivation for, or consequence of, conversion. Mary believes that she has “actually been to heaven when [she was a] little girl.” She longs to return to live in heaven with God. She told me: “Every night I go to bed and think, ‘Oh thank God another day is over. One day closer to when I can go home.’ And in the morning, it’s like, ‘Oh well I’ve just got to get through this day, but maybe today.’ You know things like that. It happens like every day for years. So, I am a reluctant human I suppose.” Mary loves to experience dreams in which she is

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<sup>12</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>13</sup> Sarah interview.

engaging at a personal level with God, in God's mansion. Mary's spirituality is unique in this regard. She feels very strongly that heaven is her true home.<sup>14</sup>

The only other mentions of heaven were some allusions to heaven from Hamish. Early in the interview, in talking about how "really, really dry" he felt, Hamish noted that his (non-Christian, but "spiritual") "wife had always said to [him], 'You know all [he] believe[d] was that we were just worm-food and when we died that is all we are.'" In addition, Hamish twice mentioned the injustice of himself, as a "nice person" "going to hell." He remembers in high school, talking to his Christian friends, saying: "You say you're a Christian but you know, you're telling me that I'm going to hell. I'm a good person, but you're telling me I am going to suffer eternal damnation because I don't profess [to be a Christian]." However, he did not believe going to hell would actually be the outcome, saying: "So like, I'm a nice person and you know if I die if [God] is there he's not going to send me to hell." Setting aside the atheist Hamish's desire to proselytise and argue with his Christian friends, these statements seem to be more about a sense of justice in God surely not allowing good people to go to hell, than the attraction of heaven as a motivating factor for conversion. They also highlight Hamish's earlier internal contradictions around what happens after death – being "worm-food" compared with "going to hell."<sup>15</sup>

While Mary talked directly about heaven, the others saw their newfound faith as resourcing their everyday lives much more than being about a heavenly hope. For Grace, "talking to God has helped [her] find the strength within [herself]."<sup>16</sup> Hamish discovered a life-filled, life-giving alternative to the dry atheism he had been holding to. Jean found a new way of looking at things; a weight gone; and strength to cope with the struggles of life. Luke found both healing and strength in his relationship with God. Meg longed for the strength and resources she needed to thrive. Olivia discovered a God active in the everyday life of her friends. Sarah spoke of feeling "like [she] came home" and "like all the weight had lifted" after her baptism. Knowing God has "unending love and acceptance" towards her and all people serves as both a personal encouragement and an inspiration for how she could live.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Tallulah found guidance in her relationship with God and encouragement to make a difference in the world.

In summary, Mary was the only participant to mention going to heaven as a factor in her conversion, while the other participants emphasised the everyday benefits of their faith.

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<sup>14</sup> Mary interview.

<sup>15</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>16</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah interview.

## Being convinced by others and making ‘rational choices’

A third aspect missing from the data were examples of participants being *convinced* by others and making rational choices to become Christians. While talking about faith with others was important for most of the participants, their decisions to become Christians were not due to the skilled arguments or apologetics of Christian friends. Rather, for each participant, the involvement of others, while sometimes including reasoned discussions, was more about a lived testimony of faith-filled-ness; being deeply hospitable; and having room for doubts and complexity in faith. The decisions participants eventually made to become Christians were made in response to deep-felt rather than predominantly rational processes.

The first two dimensions – a lived testimony of faith-filled-ness and being deeply hospitable – are clearly demonstrated in Luke’s story. Luke experienced a sense of community, of belonging, that began with the hospitality, care and concern expressed towards him by his Christian workmates. His sense of belonging grew as those people invited him into their lives and his network of Christian friends expanded. Luke says of attending church, “I think the people were really nice and friendly and welcoming. ... They were pretty interested in me as a person and wanting to know a bit more about me and invite me to a lot of different events. ... And really seemed keen for me to be part of what they were doing as well. I thought, ‘This is great. Everyone [at this church] is so friendly and welcoming’.”<sup>18</sup>

Luke contrasted the care and support he received from his Christian workmates and friends with the attitudes of his professional case workers. “[My Christian friends] seemed to genuinely care about my situation. And it was more of their actions than what they were saying I think. You kind of put two and two together, it was like, ‘Wow, you guys genuinely seem to care about me and be concerned about me’.” By contrast, he sensed he was just a “job” to the professionals who were working with him, asking himself, “Are they actually interested in my recovery? Or are they interested in being able to get the next job from the lawyers or from the doctors or whoever? Is this just one big business deal to everyone; they don’t really care about the outcome.” Hence, the personal care, attention and interest Luke received from the Christians he was meeting helped him to recognise himself as a valued person rather than as a “job” or “business deal.” His friends were not seeking to convince Luke to become a Christian; they were simply caring for, and about, him.<sup>19</sup>

Further, for Luke, the lived testimony of faith-filled-ness was a significant factor in his becoming a Christian. The Christians he was meeting were people he wanted to “spend ...

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<sup>18</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

time” with; people who were “genuinely passionate about something”; people whose faith made a difference in their lives. Luke’s friends demonstrated their Christian faith rather than seeking to convince him with words that Christianity was worth embracing.<sup>20</sup>

Luke’s sense of welcome and belonging was also fed by ongoing invitations to more, and deeper, levels of participation and involvement. Luke received invitation after invitation to share a meal, to attend a conference, to go to church, to participate in a small group, to engage socially in a variety of ways. There was no sense that Luke needed to meet any particular standard in order to participate and belong: “I got invited to a small group and then started going to that and really still didn’t have a great idea about Christianity. The guys [were] being very open about things and being very accepting. ... Even though I wasn’t hard core Christian or whatever, [they were] still were happy to spend time with me and talk, like actually discuss my thoughts and ideas and not just blow it off as, ‘You’re not Christian so we don’t really care what you have to say’ sort of thing.”<sup>21</sup>

In Luke’s story, you get the sense that his decision to become a Christian happened primarily quite internally, as he processed and then decided for himself. Luke’s Christian friends were comfortable to journey alongside him as he asked questions, without feeling any need to convince him of anything; rather, allowing the process to unfold.

Similarly, Sarah had valued the faithful friendship of a Christian couple over decades. It was at their house that she experienced a physical manifestation of the presence of God. They had “stood by her” and supported her for years as she fought and, finally, accepted God. This couple were faithful and constant despite the geographical distance that separated them from Sarah and the length of time it took her to decide to become a follower of God. They loved her and continued to demonstrate their love and care, rather than seeking to convince her rationally.<sup>22</sup>

Grace was invited to church by someone she respected and whose life experiences held some resonance with her own. She was welcomed into a small group of “the best people out,” in a church where she considers the pastoral staff to be available for her. “You didn’t feel so isolated, I suppose”, Grace reflects. While she had previously been an atheist, Grace appreciated open discussions about faith. Christianity “made sense” even on her first visit to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Sarah interview.

church: not because she was convinced by skilful argument, but because something deep within her resonated.<sup>23</sup>

Olivia took some time to “feel entirely convinced” about Christianity. She attributes this to her background of very limited exposure to Christianity as a child. It was important for Olivia to learn from other Christians that “you never really do feel like you know it all” and she found it reassuring that she did not need to be “good enough” to “commit yourself to Jesus.” Again, this is counter to any sense of being convinced by others. Rather, Olivia’s Christian friends assured her that it was okay to have questions and supported her as her conversion process unfolded.<sup>24</sup>

A story from Hamish is also insightful. One of his Christian friends sent him “a video of Jamie from Mythbusters ... at a secular rally talking about how we don’t need God and God is bad ‘cause he lets kids die and this kind of stuff.” While the friend mentioned how dry it made him feel, Hamish saw receiving the video as one of several “options [God had provided for Hamish] to be able to move away from [God].” He valued this opportunity, but continued to say “yes” to exploring Christianity.<sup>25</sup>

While Jean had people from the ‘Alpha’ course “answering [her] questions and helping [her] to understand things,” they too seemed to be responding to the process that was occurring for Jean rather than seeking to try to convince her. In addition, when she attended church for the first time, she had a “feeling of being in the right place” that affirmed her journey to faith. Once again, this sense was primarily emotional rather than rational.<sup>26</sup>

Neither Mary nor Meg spoke of being convinced by others, or making rational choices. Both women, in coming out of the ‘New Age’, were deeply aware of spiritual forces and beings. Their interviews did not feature stories of being convinced by others, or of making choices based on rationality.

Tallulah found the sermons at the church she attended were “interesting and applicable to everyday life.” Like most of those interviewed, her positive interactions with other Christians involved being cared for, valued and resourced in her faith rather than being convinced rationally.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>24</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>25</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>26</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>27</sup> Tallulah interview.

In all these stories, there was very little emphasis on being convinced by others, or making rational choices, although thinking and talking things through was often important. Sarah calls it a “knowing,” which has impacted on the way that she sees the world.<sup>28</sup> Grace spoke of things “making sense.”<sup>29</sup> Others felt at home. These were embodied responses. Those I interviewed became Christians not because they were convinced to do so by others, but as part of a journey towards faith that was resourced by caring and faith-filled Christians.

## Conversion ‘events’

The final dimension that was absent from the accounts shared is any sort of dramatic conversion ‘event’. Rather, processes were described in which the actual ‘becoming’ a Christian was generally a super/natural next step in a long process.<sup>30</sup> The moment they attributed to conversion is more likely to be a moment of recognition that something has occurred rather than a dramatic decision. Such moments, while profound, were almost anti-climactic.

Grace describes the moment she first called herself a Christian: “Well, it was kind of like I just went [to church] and then one day I just called myself a Christian and went, ‘Oh, no, I guess I am [laughs]. It just kind of happened I suppose. I just went to church for so long and then I thought: ‘Yeah. I guess I am. Yeah’.” This understated realisation was not unique to Grace.<sup>31</sup>

Hamish let his dog out to go to the toilet in the middle of the night. “[He] heard [the words not consciously known to him] “the heavens will declare his majesty” when [he] was looking up at the stars. He describes his response: “And I sort of just went ... I didn’t fall to my knees, I didn’t burst out crying, I just went, ‘Uh. I’m a Christian now’ and walked back inside.” God was active, speaking, yet Hamish’s response was understated.<sup>32</sup>

For others, the decision to engage in the spiritual practice of either attending church or being baptised marked a key decision point. While Jean was attending the ‘Alpha’ course, she realised: “I really want to go to church. I really want it and I really want to start learning more.” While “it was quite sudden” it was also a natural progression in the journey to faith that she was on. Jean was later baptised with her son.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>29</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>30</sup> I use the term ‘super/natural’ to affirm that while seemingly *natural*, there was also a clearly *supernatural* dimension.

<sup>31</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>32</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>33</sup> Jean interview.

For Luke, Olivia and Sarah, their baptisms were significant moments that marked their decisions to become Christians. The act of baptism made public a decision each had already made. Luke reported, “I felt strongly enough that I thought I really believe in Jesus and so decided to get baptised.” He named the first Christian conference he attended as the time when his “heart was opened”, but it was months later that he was baptised.<sup>34</sup>

Sarah sensed God telling her to be baptised: “I just decided, the Lord just said: ‘Right for your birthday ... you have to get baptised. That’s your birthday present to you’.” Yet from her very first visit to the church she now attends regularly, her minister could “see the Lord in [her] ... [she was] just beaming.” The presence of God was already revealed in Sarah before she would have called herself a Christian.<sup>35</sup>

Olivia’s baptism also marked a significant point for her faith journey. She woke up one morning and decided to be baptised. She attributes her decision to be baptised to “God’s Spirit moving” in her, and she realised: “This is the right thing to do.” She had come to “believe in God and believe in ... the sacrifice that Jesus made for us all.” Being baptised was the natural demonstration of Olivia’s decision to follow God.<sup>36</sup>

Tallulah’s was also a journey to Christian faith that was “pretty steady” since she first went to church with her daughter. Her faith is about a “relationship with God” that has been deepening ever since that first church visit. There have been times when God has spoken to her and things that sped up the process for her, but it has been more a process of unfolding development than one of dramatic decision moments.<sup>37</sup>

Mary and Meg are exceptions to this slow and natural journey. Both were led by other Christians to pray prayers for salvation prayers. For Meg, this was while attending a church for the first time and, for Mary, it was by a workmate over the phone. Meg did not want to be a Christian; she had gone to church seeking deliverance. Mary was “baffled [and] incredulous” when her colleague asked her, “Are you saved?” When she did pray with her workmate, she “found it quite an emotional experience.” Both now see the prayers as significant in their faith journeys, but these prayers were less natural, more imposed, than the experiences of the others I interviewed.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>35</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>36</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>37</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>38</sup> Mary interview; Meg interview.



But even for Meg and Mary, as for the rest of those I interviewed, there were no clear and dramatic conversion 'events'. Participants were generally drawn into a relationship with God, and made a series of decisions, saying "yes" to the ongoing process of becoming Christians. The specific moments they named as significant in their conversions were generally private, cumulative over time, and/or understated.

## **Concluding comments**

In conclusion, four significant things were 'missing' from this data on conversion today. There was very little talk of personal sinfulness. Rather, participants were seeking to live better lives. Except for Mary, heaven was absent from the narratives. Instead, their conversions enabled them to live well now. Being convinced by others and making rational choices, did not feature in the conversion narratives shared. Conversions generally took the form of a natural unfolding of a process rather than a dramatic conversion 'event'. Each of these absences is significant.

This concludes the second major part of my thesis. Next, I introduce and discuss the substantive theory that was revealed in my research.

# Part C:

## Discussion and conclusions

## CHAPTER 9: INTRODUCTION TO DISCUSSION

Having considered the results of this research in Chapters 4 to 8, I now turn to a discussion about the meaning and significance of the findings from my grounded theory research on people's conversion to Christianity. I begin this chapter by reiterating the major findings of my research: reminding the reader of what the data revealed; as well as what was missing from the data. Then, after briefly introducing the substantive theory uncovered by my research, I outline the contents of the three final chapters of my thesis.

### **The major findings: one process; three agents; six affects**

This section reiterates what my research revealed about why people became Christians in Australia today. It briefly describes the process by which they became Christians; the agents involved in that process, and the affects converts experienced as they journeyed to Christian faith.<sup>1</sup> It then reminds the reader of aspects 'missing' from the data. Finally, it reveals the overall theme discovered through this study, thereby, introducing my substantive theory.

### **What is in the data?**

This research revealed a clear process by which converts discovered and embraced Christianity. The converts had experienced some initial exposure to Christianity. Something had acted as a trigger or catalyst. They had engaged in a variety of spiritual practices: usually following an invitation to do so.<sup>2</sup> They made a series of decisions, actively saying "yes" to each element of the process. Eventually, they called themselves Christians.

Most empirical research on conversion ignored the agency of God and also neglected to fully explore the role other Christians played in conversion. By contrast, I considered, separate from the conversion process itself, the roles other Christians and God played in conversion.

Other Christians played a crucial role in the conversion process. An exposure to Christianity was generally resourced through or, at least enhanced, by engagement with other Christians. Other Christians invited non-Christians to engage in spiritual practices and they often resourced such engagement. As well as these things that impacted directly on the conversion process, research participants had observed particular things about their Christian friends and colleagues. They saw Christians being helped by their faith; living differently because of their faith; sharing openly and honestly with non-Christians; being

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<sup>1</sup> As I noted in Chapter 4, I am using the term affects in its psychological or philosophical sense.

<sup>2</sup> Spiritual practices include: praying, reading the Bible, attending church, attending a small group or Bible study, engaging in fellowship, worshipping, using their gifts and being baptised.

deeply hospitable; and allowing room for doubts, questions and complexity in faith. In addition, other Christians helped those I interviewed in various ways. These actions and positive perceptions were significant in the participants' continuing to say "yes" to the conversion process.

Unsurprisingly, God also played an active role in the conversion process. Those interviewed observed that God had various attributes: being loving; powerful; patient; accepting and forgiving. They reported God working through others; God curating unique experiences; God being present; God speaking; God helping them; God's growing them; and God acting in the past.

Because of the engagement of other Christians and God – and in response to, and contributing to, the conversion process itself – converts experienced six affects as they journeyed to Christian faith. They experienced a sense of yearning or wanting more. They had a desire to live better, or to become who they were created to be. They had a sense that faith related to everyday life. They enjoyed a sense of welcome, warmth, homecoming or belonging. They experienced a resonance or a sense of knowing: Christianity made sense, or felt right. Finally, they saw things differently.

### **What is not in the data?**

Four key areas were absent from the data gathered. Those I interviewed did not speak much about sin; heaven; being convinced by others, or making 'rational choices'; or dramatic conversion events.

## **Introducing my substantive theory of conversion**

"It's all about Authenticity!"<sup>3</sup>

The process I described in my research design (Chapter 2) revealed my journey to this point. Chapters 4 to 8 reported my analysed data. I clearly identified a conversion process; articulated the roles each of the three agents in conversion; and highlighted the affects that the converts experienced as they journeyed towards Christian conversion. As such, my data had revealed insightful, and sometimes unique, discoveries.

But I kept analysing and I kept reading, wondering what else the data would reveal. Eventually, having moved through three major conceptual stages, I reached my substantive theory of why people in Australia are becoming Christians today. I realised: "It's all about

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<sup>3</sup> Research memo, 10 June 2015.

Authenticity.”<sup>4</sup> This one overarching theme captured the totality of the conversion process, the affects participants experience, and the roles of each of the three agents. Religious conversion was fuelled by a desire for relational authenticity. Religious conversion was resourced by Christians who embraced and exhibited relational authenticity in their personal, social and spiritual lives. God enabled relational authenticity to develop and flourish.

The converts themselves, God and other Christians, were all active agents in developing relational authenticity. While there was not a simple one-to-one correlation, each agent was most directly associated with one aspect of relational authenticity. The convert was most clearly active in desiring relational authenticity. Other Christians acted as exemplars or models by exhibiting relational authenticity. God enabled relational authenticity to develop and flourish.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, each affect was most directly associated with one aspect of authenticity. The desire for authenticity was expressed as yearning or wanting more; and having a desire to live better or become who they are. Authenticity was resourced by a sense of welcome, warmth or belonging; and the sense that the Christian faith related to everyday life. Authenticity culminated in a sense of resonance, knowing, feeling right, or making sense; and seeing things differently.<sup>6</sup> Table 9.1 provides a summary of this framing: itemising agent, theme and affects.

Table 9.1: Authenticity and the agents and affects

<b>Conversion</b>	<b>Primary agent:</b>	<b>Key affects:</b>
Is fuelled by desire for authenticity	Convert	Yearning: towards God and away from dysfunction
		Desire to live better
Is resourced by other Christians living authentically	Other Christians	Faith relates to life
		Welcome, warmth
Enables relational authenticity	God	Resonance, knowing
		Seeing differently.

Relatedly, my research revealed that genuine authenticity was relational in nature: focusing not only on the self but also on relationship with God and significant connections with, and responsibility towards, others. This understanding rightly challenges the notion of authenticity as a narcissistic actualisation that prioritises the self over external relationships and responsibilities. Healthy transformation resulted when relational authenticity was sought

<sup>4</sup> Research memo, 10 June 2015.

<sup>5</sup> The interrelationships between these agents and the affects participants experienced were much more complex than this simple table suggests. I have described these interrelationships in the final sections of Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, this was not a linear experience: these affects can be experienced simultaneously and feed into each other.

and realised by converts. This transformation saw new converts *becoming* the people they were created to be: unique persons who saw their worth and their responsibilities in the light of their relationships with God and with others.

This substantive theory of conversion both resonates with, and challenges, the extant literature on conversion to Christianity and on authenticity. To reiterate: Religious conversion was fuelled by a desire for relational authenticity. Religious conversion was resourced by Christians who embraced and exhibited relational authenticity in their personal, social and spiritual lives. God enabled relational authenticity to develop and flourish.

### **But isn't authenticity a dirty word?**

Sometimes when I have spoken in religious settings about authenticity, there has been an intake of breath; a pursing of lips; a shake of the head. The very word, 'authenticity' can push people's 'buttons'. Of course, all language is limited – flawed – a human construct, subject to human interpretation and misinterpretation. But theology has always had the task of attempting to communicate within a framework of flawed language. Metaphor, parable, illustration – all attempt to communicate things of deeper meaning than the words allow. The word 'authenticity' is, of course, no exception. Some contemporary usage limits it to the sort of narcissism that is clearly opposite to Christian values of self-giving love and service. But the same is also true of many of the words used within Christian theology. Words we continue to use because they are the best that we have.<sup>7</sup>

I use 'authenticity' for four reasons. First, because it was profoundly evident in my data, not as a word, spoken by participants, but as an underlying theme that draws together so much of what was spoken. Secondly, 'authenticity' was recognised as significant within the literature including, to a limited extent, within theology. Thirdly, my data provides a frame for challenging any contemporary definitions of authenticity that limit authenticity to less than what it is. Finally, because it has cultural resonance, the term 'authenticity' has missional or apologetic potential. Thus, rather than being abandoned as a concept, authenticity can be reclaimed and reimagined: even redeemed.

### **Coming up in the next three chapters ...**

The next two chapters (which can be read in either order) compare my findings with the existing literature on conversion; and introduce my substantive theory of conversion,

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<sup>7</sup> For a thorough discussion of language and theology, see Jeff Astley, *Exploring God-Talk: Using Language in Religion*, Exploring Faith: Theology for Life (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004). See also, McIntosh, *Divine Teaching*, 18-21.

discussing relational authenticity as a concept to explain why people become Christians today. To do this, both chapters draw on literature that helps us to better understand the meaning of the findings and of my substantive theory of conversion. The reader will remember, from Chapter 2 that, in grounded theory, the placement of the literature review is contested. I opted to present (in Chapter 3) a brief review of some of the books and articles I read before settling on grounded theory as my research methodology and beginning my empirical research. In these next two chapters I draw on that literature and introduce additional literature that further illuminates the research findings. This additional literature is material I read during the data generation and analysis phase: as, and after, the themes of my research were revealed.

Chapter 12 concludes my thesis. I briefly reiterate my research methodology and findings. I remind the reader of my substantive theory of conversion. Then, I discuss the limitations of my research. The chapter then notes some of the many practical implications of my findings, particularly the implications for Christians, churches and other faith-based agencies; and the implications for practical theology as a discipline. I reiterate the significance of the research and conclude with some ideas for future research.

## CHAPTER 10: AGENCY, PROCESS AND AFFECTS (EXTENDING EXTANT LITERATURE)

This chapter considers my data and my discoveries in the light of extant theory and the literature on religious conversion. This both extends and challenges existing understandings; thus, making two unique contributions to understanding conversion. I begin by briefly noting how a research paradigm of critical realism allows the researcher to explore the (often neglected) agency of God. I then discuss in some detail how my discoveries about the multi-layered, multi-agent nature of conversion inform and challenge extant understandings of the conversion process, particularly by comparing my work with that of psychologist, Lewis Rambo.

### Allowing for the agency of God

The spiritual dimension cannot be ignored in religious conversion and it is vital to understand the phenomenon of conversion.<sup>1</sup>

Most empirical research on conversion ignores the agency of God, focusing instead on the psychological or sociological processes around conversion.<sup>2</sup> In sociology, the terms 'methodological atheism' or, later, psychology's 'methodological agnosticism' are used to speak of the researcher's 'bracketing' of, or suspension of judgment about those matters that cannot be empirically verified.<sup>3</sup> Such an approach largely reduces human experience to

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Iyadurai, "Religious Conversion: A Psycho-Spiritual Perspective," *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 31, no. 3 (2014): 191. See also, Joshua Iyadurai, *Transformative Religious Experience: A Phenomenological Understanding of Religious Conversion* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014). Iyadurai argues that the "divine-human encounter ... is central to religious conversion and triggers personal transformation." *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Cucchiari, "Adapted for Heaven," 417-418. Psychologists, Brian Zinnbauer and Kenneth Pargament, noted that "religious conversion involves the sacred" and "spiritual conversion involves a spiritual force" but the significance of these elements was not tested. Zinnbauer and Pargament, "Spiritual Conversion," 165-166. Betty Hendrickson, presenting a brief Master's dissertation taking a phenomenological approach to conversion does take the agency of God into account. Betty Lou Hendrickson, "Discerning God in the Essence of Conversion: A Phenomenological Study" (MA, St Stephen's College, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Mark Jennings, "Breaking Free to the Limit: Playing with Foucault, Otto, and Pentecostal Experience," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29, no. 1 (2014): 42-43; Douglas V Porpora, "Methodological Atheism, Methodological Agnosticism and Religious Experience," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 36, no. 1 (2006): 74; Margaret S Archer, Andrew Collier and Douglas V Porpora, eds., *Transcendence: Critical Realism and God*, Critical Realism: Interventions (London: Routledge, 2004), 63. Theologian, Alister McGrath, calls this "implicit atheism ... more methodological than substantial, involving a principled refusal to engage with issues of divinity rather than to deny them." McGrath, "Transcendence and God: Reflections on Critical Realism, the 'New Atheism', and Christian Theology," 157. Some do argue for a theistic perspective to be embraced within psychology. For example Frank C Richardson, "Psychology and Religion: Hermeneutic Reflections," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 34, no. 3 (2006); Brent S Melling, "Concepts of Divine Action for a Theistic Approach to Psychology," (2013). However, this approach has not been applied to conversion research.



human behaviour.<sup>4</sup> While this is perhaps understandable within the social sciences, theology and practical theology must, by very definition, speak of God.

Further, as theologians, Scot McKnight and Hauna Ondrey, remind us, “Christian conversion is a spiritual phenomenon. ... Ultimately, conversion is what happens between a whole person and the whole God.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, “when we examine faith stories from the angle of sociological [or psychological] categories we run the risk of desacralizing faith.”<sup>6</sup> This potential for desacralising is not just a problem in studying conversion. As practical theologian, Andrew Root, noted in 2016; in emphasising the empirical, much contemporary practical theology runs “the risk of the reduction of reality, upholding the immanent over the transcendent.”<sup>7</sup> Root comments, reflecting on his own empirical research on youth ministry:

I was unfortunately able to separate my qualitative methodological pursuits from my very concept of divine action. I turned to the social sciences to give me direction in my fieldwork, but unbeknownst to me, these very methods actually made it difficult for me to speak of divine action (of transcendence), making it much harder to do the theological.<sup>8</sup>

In 2012, as I embarked on my research, I was acutely aware that, as well as involving psychological and sociological processes, religious conversion is a theological phenomenon. I did not want to reduce my findings to human processes. I hoped my research would reveal a better understanding of the *missio Dei* in relation to conversion. Therefore, despite being unaware of any other practical theologians doing so, I adopted a research paradigm of critical realism, which provided a framework for me to allow for, and explore, the agency of God. As I described in Chapter 2, critical realism acknowledges that reality is stratified. Our empirical methods can never reveal *all* that lies behind what we observe and experience, but our observations and experiences of God *point* to God’s activity and to God. A research paradigm of critical realism successfully allowed me to explore the agency of God in conversion. It meant that rather than attempting to fit the experiences of those interviewed into psychological or sociological processes, I could allow for the potential of God’s activity in the lives of those interviewed. Therefore, I recommend practical theologians consider critical realism when selecting their research philosophy. I discuss this further in my concluding chapter.

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<sup>4</sup> Leigh Berger, "Inside Out: Narrative Autoethnography as a Path toward Rapport," *Qualitative Inquiry* 7, no. 4 (2001): 509.

<sup>5</sup> McKnight and Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith*, 73-74.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>7</sup> Root, "Empirical Practical Theology," 45.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

## Engaging with Rambo's conversion process

As I began coding and analysing my data, I realised that what I was describing in terms of the converts' experiences in coming to Christian faith was, essentially, a conversion process model. This encouraged me to return to key texts on conversion processes to see if there was anything in the models they contained that I may have missed in my data.<sup>9</sup>

As introduced in Chapter 3, Lewis Rambo's 1993 book, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, brilliantly consolidated learnings from conversion research undertaken up to the early 1990s across a range of disciplines.<sup>10</sup> In this book, Rambo introduced a stage model of conversion, primarily as a way of ordering complex data in relation to religious conversion. Rambo's 'Stage model of conversion' is shown, again, in Figure 10.1.

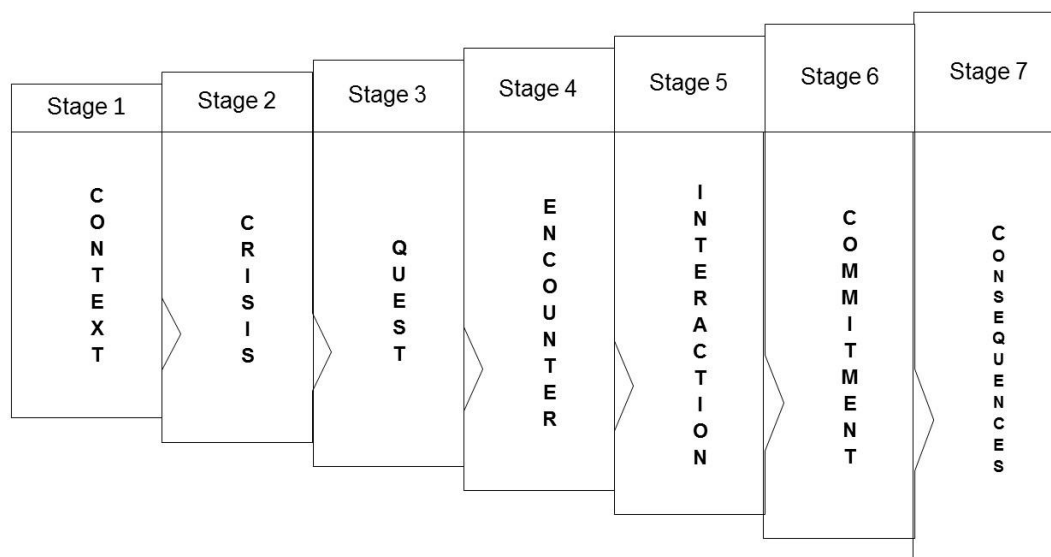


Figure 10.1: Rambo's Stage model of conversion<sup>11</sup>

Rambo's model "offers the most appropriate model through which to explore conversion empirically" and continues to be used extensively for research on religious conversion, including by theologians.<sup>12</sup> For example, Scot McKnight framed his *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels* around Rambo's process model.<sup>13</sup> He and Hauna

<sup>9</sup> Key texts on the conversion process were introduced in the literature review and were synthesised in Lewis Rambo's *Understanding Religious Conversion*. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*.

<sup>10</sup> Scot McKnight rightly calls Rambo's book "exceptional" in the way that it "brings into readable prose a century of research [on religious conversion]." McKnight and Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith*, 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Adapted from Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Grace Milton, "Understanding Pentecostal Conversion: An Empirical Study" (PhD, University of Birmingham, 2014), 67.

<sup>13</sup> McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*.

Ondrey drew heavily on this model in their book *Finding Faith, Losing Faith: Stories of Conversion and Apostasy*.<sup>14</sup> Dong Young Kim used it to frame the conversion of St Augustine.<sup>15</sup> Mark Cartledge considered Pentecostal conversion through Rambo's lens.<sup>16</sup> Grace Milton also used the model for her research on Pentecostal conversion.<sup>17</sup> While each made adaptations to the model, my methodology of grounded theory enabled me to make a unique contribution to scholarship on religious conversion. Rather than using Rambo's model to order and investigate my data, I used my own data to formulate my own model, against which I could assess Rambo's model. I was aware that using any existing model risked simplifying and narrowing the data to pre-set categories. I opted instead to allow the complexity of the data to remain and to speak for itself.

An example of the simplification that can occur when applying data to an existing model is found in *Finding Faith, Losing Faith*. McKnight and Ondrey consider that crisis is "the least understood dimension of conversion."<sup>18</sup> Despite this, they over-simplify this aspect of the conversion process saying, "Here's how conversion always works: a crisis puts a person in a quest mode, a quest to resolve the pain created in the crisis itself."<sup>19</sup> Quite simply, this was not the experience for all the converts I interviewed. There was no personal pain that needed resolving in Jean's story. The experience that acted as trigger or catalyst for her spiritual exploration was a positive one. She attended a 'mainly music' group, experienced some questions about Christianity as a result, and wanted her son to know about the Christian faith so he could choose whether to embrace it for himself. In addition, observing the faith of children at the church school she was employed at, and her friend's father's illness had several years earlier, "put questions into [her] head."<sup>20</sup> Had I insisted on looking for painful crises that needed resolving, I may have missed some of the depths of Jean's narrative. Other participants also described positive experiences that acted as catalysts for their spiritual searches.<sup>21</sup>

Aware of the potential dangers of such over-simplification I, therefore, allowed my data to shape a new model of the conversion process that was grounded in the stories I had heard

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<sup>14</sup> McKnight and Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith*.

<sup>15</sup> Dong Young Kim, "Rambo's Interdisciplinary Approach to Religious Conversion: The Case of St. Augustine" (DTheol, Boston University, 2011); Kim.

<sup>16</sup> Mark J Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit: Rescripting Ordinary Pentecostal Theology*, Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology (Surrey: Ashgate, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Milton, "Understanding Pentecostal Conversion."; Milton, *Shalom*.

<sup>18</sup> McKnight and Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith*, 76.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>20</sup> Jean interview.

<sup>21</sup> This has been reported in Chapter 5.

from recent converts to Christianity.<sup>22</sup> My conversion process model (introduced in Chapter 4) is presented again in Figure 10.2.

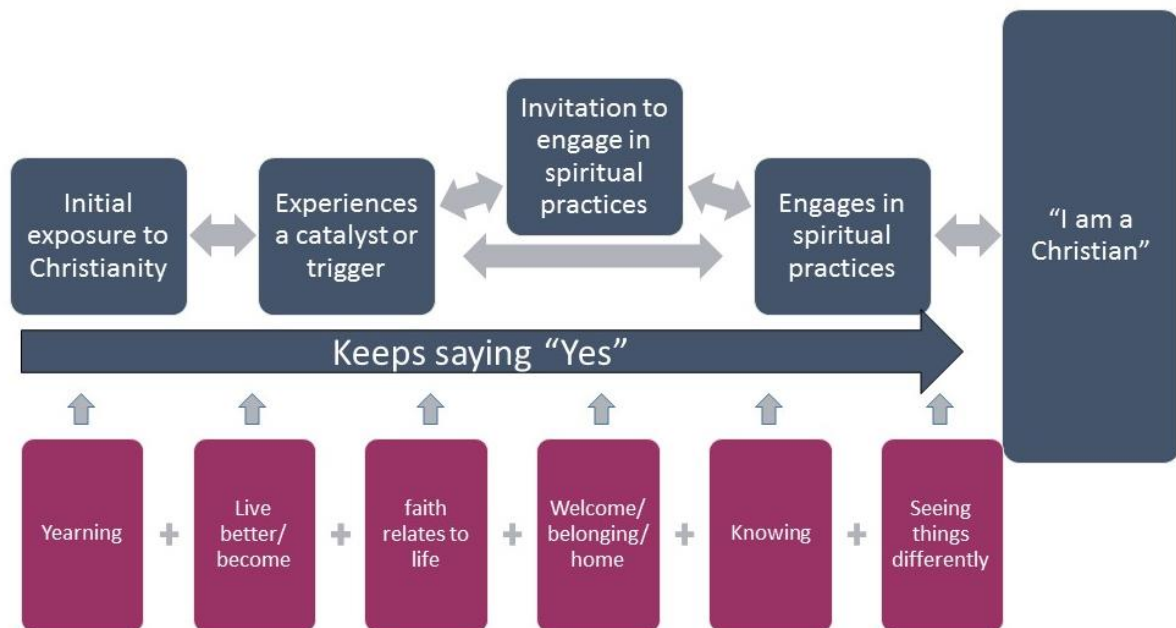


Figure 10.2: Lynne Taylor's Model of conversion to Christianity

There are points of commonality between Rambo's stage model and my own conversion model. Both models depict a process of personal change. I could potentially place my 'exposure' in Rambo's "context;" my 'catalyst' in Rambo's "crisis;" my 'invitation' in Rambo's "encounter;" my 'engages' in Rambo's "interaction;" and my declaration of faith in Rambo's "commitment." But such an appropriation would have neglected much of the detail and nuance contained in my model.<sup>23</sup>

The key differences between Rambo's model and my own are discussed next. First, where I consider each of the three agents (the convert, other Christians and God), Rambo's model focuses on the convert. The second difference is semantic. Rambo speaks of "stages" and "crisis," while I use 'elements' and 'catalyst'. Thirdly, the affects that the converts experience are absent in Rambo's model. My research indicates that those affects infuse the entire process, and naming them as a separate dimension of data means they can be considered during each element of the process, as well as in the light of all three agents. Fourthly, separating out 'engagement in spiritual practices' attends to the significance of this element

<sup>22</sup> Charmaz reminds us of the need to "develop grounded theory methods in ways that preserve empirical realities and complexities without resorting to reductionist analyses." Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 118.

<sup>23</sup> In addition, as Grace Milton pointed out in her PhD on conversion in a UK Pentecostal church, the process Rambo outlined is common to many life-stories, not just narratives about conversion. Milton, "Understanding Pentecostal Conversion," 240.

of the conversion process. Finally, my research suggests that Rambo's "consequences" of conversion are also best understood as infusing the whole conversion process and my attention to the affects experienced is again insightful here. These differences are discussed in some detail next.

### **Difference 1: Being attentive to all three agents**

The first key difference between Rambo's model and my own relates to my attention to the three agents involved in conversion. My research demonstrates that the converts themselves, other Christians and God were all active agents in conversion. Therefore, my conversion process model considers each of those three agents as distinct.<sup>24</sup> Yes, there is a process that the convert is engaged in, but the roles of other Christians and God are best seen as impacting *on* the process, rather than as being *part* of the process itself. By contrast, Rambo considers human interactions from within the context of the conversion process, and allows divine interactions to be neglected entirely.<sup>25</sup>

### ***The agency of God***

My model names God as an active agent in conversion, acknowledging God's role in multiple elements of the conversion process. By contrast, despite seeing "genuine" conversion as a total transformation of the person by the power of God," Rambo's process model of conversion essentially depicts a psychological or social process.<sup>26</sup> In fact, it would be possible to completely ignore the agency of God in Rambo's model.<sup>27</sup> In order to address this lack, it is most helpful to clearly differentiate God's role by considering it as a separate dimension of data: one that, like other Christians, impacts upon the process and the affects experienced.<sup>28</sup> By separating out the agency of God in this way, I was better able to be

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<sup>24</sup> As I have already discussed in Chapter 2, what the research participants reported to me (and what I understood from their reports) was not their *actual* experience of conversion but a narrative *reconstruction* of that experience. While this is relevant to all areas of their reporting, it is doubly relevant when we consider their reporting on the role that the other agents played in the conversion process. Not only were those interviewed constructing a narrative that described an experience: they were also interpreting the activity of others (other Christians and God) and constructing a narrative that sought to describe that activity. My purpose is not to make definitive statements about the nature and activity of other Christians and of God, but rather to seek to understand how that nature and activity was experienced and understood by recent converts. See Yamane, "Narrative and Religious Experience."

<sup>25</sup> As is common in empirical research on conversion, as discussed above.

<sup>26</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, xii.

<sup>27</sup> I have discussed this tendency in Chapter 3.

<sup>28</sup> I have already discussed ways in which my research paradigm of critical realism helped make this possible, as I acknowledged the separation between the real God; the actual activity of God; and the empirical experiences of the research participants.

attentive to the spiritual nature of conversion during the whole conversion process. I discuss God's role in conversion from a theological perspective in the next chapter.

### ***The agency of other Christians***

In Rambo's model, interaction with other Christians occurs within Stage 4, "Encounter" and Stage 5, "Interaction." In these stages, the potential convert encounters an advocate who introduces him or her to their religious beliefs. Such an encounter can be positively or negatively received; and these perceptions can change over time. My data suggests that it is more accurate and useful to acknowledge that such encounters permeate multiple elements of the conversion process. For example, Jean's class and Jean's friend provided an initial exposure to Christianity. Jean's friend invited her to engage in spiritual practices and, later, Christians from her local church encouraged her to participate in, and resourced her engagement in, additional spiritual practices. Likewise, Olivia's friend Hannah was part of providing Olivia with an initial exposure to Christianity; years later Hannah invited Olivia to participate in spiritual practices; and then she and others from the church resourced Olivia's engagement in those practices. Attempting to categorise these encounters into one or two "stages" of the conversion process ironically loses the very *process* nature of these stories. It is more helpful to acknowledge that other Christians (Rambo's "advocates") play a role during multiple elements of the process, as well as contributing to the affects the converts experienced. Therefore, because of the significance of their role, it is appropriate to name other Christians an agent active in conversion: impacting all elements of the process, and contributing to the affects experienced by participants.

In addition, while Rambo spends three chapters of *Understanding Religious Conversion* discussing the role of the advocate, his commentary lacks missiological or theological depth. Rambo describes the advocate; the advocate's strategy; and the nature of the encounter between advocate and potential convert.<sup>29</sup> But he implies that advocates are professional or at least very intentional missionaries, generally working within a cross-cultural context, having a primary aim of converting others to their faith. Rambo's cross-cultural emphasis also sees mission as something that happens far away in other countries, rather than happening locally. By contrast, my data has revealed that the role of other Christians is primarily in the ways that they embrace and exhibit relational authenticity in their personal, social and spiritual lives. Such ways of living resulted in two key affects experienced by the converts: a sense that the Christian faith relates to everyday life; and a sense of welcome, belonging and warmth. I discuss this in further detail in the next chapter.

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<sup>29</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 66-101.

Related to this is Rambo's emphasis on proclamation. Such an emphasis excludes the deliberate or inadvertent witness which occurs as Christians naturally demonstrate or discuss the impact of their own relationship with God, with their friends and colleagues. Rambo speaks of mission as "the intentional effort of a group to proselytize and incorporate new members," contrasting this with "expansion" which happens naturally via the inclusion of the children of members and others "without specific and self-conscious conversion by those members."<sup>30</sup> This is similar to McKnight's framing that distinguishes between socialisation, liturgical and personal decision conversions.<sup>31</sup> As I discuss further in the next chapter, this juxtaposition between the intentional and the natural does not sit well in a secularised 21st century western context. It also does not resonate with my own data, where faith-sharing happens naturally as friends enjoy one another's company and openly share stories of joys and struggles and where non-Christians observe the difference that God has made in the everyday lives of their Christian friends. Like Jesus, these friends were saying, "Come and see."<sup>32</sup> This is an invitation to "come, see and share in the personhood of God through sharing in the personhood of this [faith] community."<sup>33</sup>

In terms of my research participants, Hannah was simply sharing with Olivia the story of how she was coping with a recent tragedy. As a result, Olivia saw the value of Hannah's faith and the difference it made in her life. Jean's experiences with her class and her friend got her thinking about the value of having faith. Neither Jean's friend nor Olivia's friend was seeking to convert their friends: rather they were living their lives, allowing their Christian faith to be authentically, unapologetically and naturally expressed. Olivia and Jean saw that their Christian friends were helped by their faith. This contributed to their own growing sense that faith related to everyday life and contributed to their journeys to faith.

Therefore, it is significantly more illuminating to consider separately each of the three agents. Theologian, Paul Markham, similarly noted the agency of the convert, other Christians, and God in conversion. He argued that:

Christian conversion is a process involving normal human biological capacities. It is characterised by a change in socio-moral attitude and behaviour, and is best understood as the acquisition of virtues intrinsic to Christian faith. Such acquisitions are facilitated through social interaction and participation in practices inherent to the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>31</sup> McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 1-15.

<sup>32</sup> John 1:39.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Root, *The Relational Pastor: Sharing in Christ by Sharing Ourselves* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013), 67.

Christian community. Furthermore, the conversion process should be viewed as the co-operant result of Divine grace and human participation.<sup>34</sup>

Considering each of the three agents – the convert, other Christians and God – allows us to be attentive to the unique role each agent plays in conversion. The findings revealed by this attentiveness are significant for two missiological reasons. First, God and the Christian faith are both highly complex. Christians wanting to communicate about God with others benefit from knowing what it was about God that drew non-Christians to faith. Secondly, and similarly, knowing what it was in other Christians' behaviour that helped in the faith journey of non-Christians can potentially help Christians to behave in ways that help rather than hinder such a journey. I discuss these implications further in my concluding chapter.

### **Difference 2: Semantics: Stage, dimension or element; Catalyst or crisis?**

A second difference between Rambo's model and my own is primarily semantic. First, I chose the term 'element' over Rambo's "stage" to name the various elements of the conversion process. Secondly, I called my second element of the process a 'catalyst' in contrast with Rambo's "crisis." These two differences are discussed next.

Rambo argues that the stages of the conversion process are not (necessarily) sequential. In fact, he presents a series of diagrams (one at the beginning of each of his chapters) that depict the interactions between each stage of the process. Despite this, in naming them stages there is a suggestion that there is a usual order that is followed. Scot McKnight argues for the use of the term "dimensions" rather than "stages." This allows for a "to and fro-ness" and "spiralling" within the conversion process, and acknowledges that different dimensions or stages often occur concurrently.<sup>35</sup> I opted to use the word 'element' when talking about my conversion process model.<sup>36</sup> The two-way arrows between elements illustrate the to and fro-ness of the conversion process.

I called my second element a 'catalyst' or 'trigger' whereas Rambo's model calls it a "crisis." While Rambo defines "crisis" broadly, my data suggests the term 'catalyst' better expresses

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<sup>34</sup> Paul N Markham, "Conversion Converted: A New Model of Christian Conversion in Light of Wesleyan Theology and Nonreductive Physicalism" (PhD, University of Durham, 2006), 5. It is significant that Markham's philosophical work on conversion and my own empirical study reached the same conclusion.

<sup>35</sup> Scot McKnight, "Missions and Conversion Theory," *Mission Studies* 20, no. 1 (2003): 120.

<sup>36</sup> This achieves McKnight's aims, while retaining a sense of distinctiveness from his work. McKnight also considers that "dimensions" allows for a multi-faceted human person: made up of body, soul, spirit and psyche. I am not convinced that such separation is helpful or necessary and, therefore, did not include that among my reasons for adopting the terminology of 'element' over 'stage'. This understanding of McKnight's is also the primary reason I did not adopt McKnight's "dimensions". See Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014), 70-73.



what began each participant's exploration of faith. I have already mentioned the positive catalysts for Jean's faith journey.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Hamish noticing a Bible is better named a catalyst than a crisis. Likewise, Mary's dreams of Jesus were more catalyst than crisis.<sup>38</sup> Sociologist and historian, Filomeno Aguilar, similarly found that "an intensely felt personal crisis need not always occur prior to conversion."<sup>39</sup> Anthropologist, Salvatore Cucchiari, in noting the creative potential of a crisis to serve as a "pivotal moment in the maturing reorganization and reintegration of the self," observed that the state of vulnerability that occurs *around* a crisis is more significant than the exact nature or form of the crisis itself.<sup>40</sup> This sense of vulnerability and potentiality resonates with the experiences of those I interviewed. The catalysts that participants experienced all served to open them up to something beyond themselves. While some catalysts imposed a crisis upon the participant externally, other catalysts more gently invited response to internal processes.<sup>41</sup>

### **Difference 3: Naming the affects**

It's not a rational choice!<sup>42</sup>

I wrote this somewhat playful memo heading in November 2014 as I compared so-called 'rational choice' explanations for religious conversion with the themes that were being revealed from my data analysis. Part of the earliest firming up of my conceptual framework was my naming the affects participants experienced (as they journeyed towards and embraced Christianity) as a separate dimension of data. This separation is a key difference from extant literature on conversion, and a much-needed corrective to current theory.<sup>43</sup> My research identified six positive affects that greatly contributed to the participants' conversion process.<sup>44</sup> Both the fact that I identified and isolated such affects and the ways that I reflected on them, are unique and significant.

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<sup>37</sup> See the paragraph containing Footnote 18.

<sup>38</sup> Mary herself called them a "trigger". Mary interview.

<sup>39</sup> Aguilar, "Experiencing Transcendence," 599.

<sup>40</sup> Cucchiari, "Adapted for Heaven," 427. See also, Stout and Dein, "Religious Conversion and Self Transformation: An Experiential Study among Born Again Christians," 41.

<sup>41</sup> Religious studies scholar, Maha Al-Qwidi, similarly found that a "life shattering or devastating" crisis was not precedent "to all or even most" of the converts to Islam she studied. Al-Qwidi, "Understanding Islam Conversion," 243-244. Al-Qwidi preferred the term, "significant event" which resonates with my 'catalyst'. Ibid., 245.

<sup>42</sup> Research memo, 17 November 2014.

<sup>43</sup> This attention to affect is not new; for example, see Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1931.) Rather, it is recently neglected.

<sup>44</sup> While negative affects were undoubtedly present in the narratives, particularly in Meg's experience of struggle with life and faith, it is reasonable here to focus on those affects that were largely common to all participants. All those largely common affects were positive. These affects are reported in each of the chapters of results. To reiterate, they relate to a sense of yearning; a desire to be a better

In the next chapter on relational authenticity, in introducing my substantive theory of religious conversion, I will discuss how these affects each contributed to the conversion process.<sup>45</sup> But first, in this section, I make a few comments on various approaches to ‘affect theory’. Then I discuss the paucity of meaningful attention to affects in conversion research, particularly in relation to ‘rational choice theory’.

### **Approaches to affect theory**

Emotions play a crucial role in religious belief and commitment.<sup>46</sup>

My reading revealed that my attentiveness to affect was in keeping with the “turn to affect theory” that has occurred in recent years within the humanities and social sciences.<sup>47</sup> But while the significance of affect is widely accepted, agreed meanings are more difficult to come by.<sup>48</sup> The inherited European view sees affect as *distinct from*, and in *opposition to*, consciousness and reason.<sup>49</sup> Affects understood in this way are seen as “non-intentional, bodily reactions.”<sup>50</sup> Sometimes called the ‘Basic Emotions Paradigm’, this understanding narrows affects to selected reflex-like responses (for example, “anger, fear, sadness, disgust and enjoyment”<sup>51</sup>). While readily disputable, this approach “continues to dominate the research” on affect, not least because it is relatively easy to measure empirically.<sup>52</sup>

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person; a sense that faith relates to everyday life; a sense of welcome, warmth, belonging or homecoming; a sense of knowing; and the experience of seeing things differently.

<sup>45</sup> Specifically, this occurred in terms of converts’ desire for relational authenticity; their observing and benefiting from other Christians’ relational authenticity; and God’s enabling of relational authenticity to develop and flourish.

<sup>46</sup> Smith, “Future Directions,” 1566.

<sup>47</sup> Sneja Gunew, “Subaltern Empathy: Beyond European Categories in Affect Theory,” *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 35, no. 1 (2009): 12. See also, Leys, “The Turn to Affect,” 434; John Cromby, “Feeling the Way: Qualitative Clinical Research and the Affective Turn,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 9, no. 1 (2012); John Cromby and Martin EH Willis, “Affect—or Feeling (after Leys),” *Theory and Psychology* (2016). This ‘turn’ could be appropriately called a ‘return’, “given how much interest was paid to religious emotion at the time when the academic study of religion was initiated [at the turn of the last century].” Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead, *A Sociology of Religious Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>48</sup> Nigel Thrift, “Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect,” *Geografiska Annaler* 86, no. 1 (2004): 59.

<sup>49</sup> Gunew, “Subaltern Empathy: Beyond European Categories in Affect Theory,” 14. The origins of this understanding of affect are often attributed to Charles Darwin and William James. Leys, “The Turn to Affect,” 437.

<sup>50</sup> Leys, “The Turn to Affect,” 437.

<sup>51</sup> Thrift, “Intensities of Feeling,” 64. As Leys points out, various categorisations of emotions exist: as “comprising six or seven or eight or nine ‘affect programs’ located subcortically in the brain.” Leys, “The Turn to Affect,” 438.

<sup>52</sup> Leys, “The Turn to Affect,” 439. See, for example, Youngmee Kim, Larry Seidnitz, Youja Ro, James S Evinger and Paul R Duberstein, “Spirituality and Affect: A Function of Changes in Religious Affiliation,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 37, no. 4 (2004). Leys describes the so-called “experimental evidence” for this paradigm as “seriously flawed and ... the theory underlying the paradigm [as] incoherent.” Leys, “The Turn to Affect,” 439.

A more holistic approach, influenced by Freud and embraced by 'appraisal theorists', sees emotions or affects as "embodied, intentional states governed by our beliefs, cognitions, and desires."<sup>53</sup> Seen thus, emotions "come from evaluation of events."<sup>54</sup> But just as the sorts of affects I identified were not simply emotional, neither were they wholly intentional responses.

A third approach sees affect itself "as a form of thinking" neither irrational nor sublime.<sup>55</sup> Emotions are, therefore, "neither wholly reducible to biology nor simply reducible to language."<sup>56</sup> Political analyst, William Connolly, agrees and further extends this definition, arguing that affect fits "partly *within* the orbit of feeling, intention, and consciousness and partly *below* their thresholds."<sup>57</sup>

Theologian, Dale Coulter, offers a similar framing as he points to the close relationship between affects and beliefs. He sees affections as "having a cognitive dimension."<sup>58</sup> As such, "there is an intimate relationship between affections and beliefs so that affections determine beliefs and beliefs shape affective movements."<sup>59</sup> Together, beliefs and affections shape value judgments. Therefore, to understand processes of spiritual transformation, including religious conversion, we need to be attentive to the affective processes that surround conversion. Philosopher, Jamie Smith, argues more organically:

We don't *think* our way through to action; much of our action is not the outcome of rational deliberation and conscious choice. Much of our action is not "pushed" by ideas or conclusions; rather, it grows out of our character and is in a sense "pulled" out of us by our attraction to a *telos*.<sup>60</sup>

Theologian, Ann Christie, also noted the importance of affective responses in shaping and communicating what she calls "ordinary Christology." For example, the Christians she interviewed for her PhD on "ordinary theology" – particularly the women – responded "to

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<sup>53</sup> Leys, "The Turn to Affect," 437. This approach also reduces affects to emotions.

<sup>54</sup> Paul J Silvia, "Cognitive Appraisals and Interest in Visual Art: Exploring an Appraisal Theory of Aesthetic Emotions," *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 23, no. 2 (2005): 120.

<sup>55</sup> Thrift, "Intensities of Feeling," 60.

<sup>56</sup> Cromby, "Feeling the Way," 90.

<sup>57</sup> William E Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed*, vol. 23, Theory Out of Bounds (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 74. Original emphasis. It is also helpful to note sociologists, Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead's conceptual framework of emotions. They understand emotions as "constructed in the interplay between social agents and structures. ... Emotion is 'both-and' rather than 'either/or': both personal and relational; private and social; biological and cultural; active and passive." Riis and Woodhead, *A Sociology of Religious Emotion*, 5.

<sup>58</sup> Dale M Coulter, "The Whole Gospel for the Whole Person: Ontology, Affectivity, and Sacramentality," *Pneuma* 35, no. 2 (2013): 158.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> James KA Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Cultural Liturgies (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 6. *Telos* means end or purpose. Theologian, Paul Tillich's differentiation between ecstatic or self-transcending reason and formal or technical reason is also helpful here. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Existence and the Christ*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 53-59.

questions about the cross ... by giving an emotional (affective) response rather than a doctrinal (cognitive) one.”<sup>61</sup> The resultant Christology draws on “cognitive, affective and conative dimensions,” all interrelated and interacting.<sup>62</sup>

Turning now to focus on personal development, affects are also recognised in psychologist, Seymour Epstein’s Cognitive-Experiential Theory (CET). Epstein attempted to construct a theory of personality “that coherently integrates the most important insights from the classic theories of personality.”<sup>63</sup> In doing so, Epstein moved beyond a focus just on the ‘rational’ and acknowledged the dual roles of the cognitive and the experiential as crucial in the development, and the expression, of the self.

CET is based on “the assumption that people automatically construct an implicit theory of reality that includes subtheories concerning the self, others, the impersonal world, and their interactions.”<sup>64</sup> CET, thus, assumes “that humans operate with two information processing systems, an ‘experiential system,’ which automatically learns from experience, and a ‘rational system,’ which is a verbal reasoning system.”<sup>65</sup> So while the rational is a part of information processing, the experiential is also key.

Epstein understands the rational system to operate “according to a person’s understanding of logic and the consideration of evidence.”<sup>66</sup> In CET, this rational system is seen as “an inferential system that operates according to a person’s understanding of logical reasoning, which is largely, but not entirely, culturally transmitted.”<sup>67</sup> It is this cultural transmission that is particularly interesting. The purposive sampling technique I used in my research (requiring

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<sup>61</sup> Ann Christie, *Ordinary Christology: Who Do You Say I Am? Answers from the Pews*, Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 159.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 160. An alternative approach I could have taken would have been to attend to psychologist John Cromby’s preferred categorisation of (1) emotional feelings; (2) extra-emotional feelings (for example, hunger, thirst, pain); and (3) ‘feelings of knowing’. Using this framing, I could classify my six affects as ‘feelings of knowing’. Cromby gives examples of such feelings being experienced in church as a feeling of being accepted by others and as a feeling of confidence in the future. But I prefer ‘affects’ over ‘feelings of knowing’ for three reasons. First, the reader is less likely to have a pre-existing understanding of the term that differs from the way I am using it; secondly, affects are less likely than feelings to be construed as shallow; and thirdly, one of my six affects was a sense of knowing. Cromby’s term, therefore, risks conflating my six affects into just one, that does not adequately capture their complexity or entirety. For these three reasons, I continue my use of the term ‘affect’. Cromby himself notes that while his categorisation is analytically useful, it is not always experientially accurate. John Cromby, “Beyond Belief,” *Journal of Health Psychology* 17, no. 7 (2012): 948.

<sup>63</sup> Seymour Epstein, *Cognitive-Experiential Theory: An Integrative Theory of Personality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), xi. He did this in response to a challenge issued by Gordon W Allport, ed. *Letters from Jenny* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), 211.

<sup>64</sup> Epstein, *Cognitive-Experiential Theory*, xiv.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

participants to have come from a non-churched background to be included in the study) meant that participants had experienced minimal cultural transmission of Christian values or teachings during their upbringings, and before beginning their (generally recent) journeys towards Christian faith. This could, in part, account for the apparent imbalance of cognitive/experiential knowledge formation. As these participants did not have a cultural background of Christianity upon which to draw, the influence of the experiential and, within that, the affective, was elevated in their spiritual transformation. CET, thus, provides another potential explanation for the strong presence of affects in my research.<sup>68</sup>

### ***Ignoring affects in conversion***

One could reasonably expect that within the study of religious conversion – an intensely personal and complex phenomenon – attention would be paid to the deep processes that occur within the convert.<sup>69</sup> But this is rarely the case.<sup>70</sup> For example, while McKnight and Ondrey noted that, “With all conversions there tends to be an *affective* sense of release and peace,” they opted to fit that data within Rambo’s stage model.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, they named these affects among the consequences of conversion.<sup>72</sup> In so doing, they miss the opportunity to highlight the affective processes that are a crucial part of the journey to, as well as consequential of, religious conversion.<sup>73</sup> Other conversion research claiming attentiveness to affective processes generally limits its scope to relational attachment in a developmental sense and/or as related to levels of attachment to other members of the faith community.<sup>74</sup> As the quantitative methods relied upon in most psychological research are

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<sup>68</sup> CET also provides evidence for the acceptance within some branches of psychology of the presence of affective and/or experiential processing.

<sup>69</sup> The Christian faith is an affective experience before it becomes a theological affirmation. George E Morris, *The Mystery and Meaning of Christian Conversion* (Nashville: WME Press, 2004), 48. Anthropologist, Paul Hiebert, reminds Christians, “We are not God’s lawyers proving the gospel. We are witnesses to a new life, and the affective dimensions are often what first attracts people to the gospel.” Paul G Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 312. See also, Raymond Moloney, “Conversion and Spirituality: Lonergan, Bernard (1904-1984),” *The Way* 43, no. 4 (2004): 12.

<sup>70</sup> In part this would be because the turn to affect occurred after psychological research on conversion had largely been abandoned in favour of a wider emphasis on spiritual transformation. Lewis R Rambo and Charles E Farhadian, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R Rambo and Charles E Farhadian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6.

<sup>71</sup> McKnight and Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith*, 117. Original emphasis.

<sup>72</sup> Understandably, given the wide historical scope of his work, sociologist, Robert Montgomery, is similarly only attentive to emotions experienced *after* conversion. Robert L Montgomery, “Conversion and the Historic Spread of Religions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R Rambo and Charles E Farhadian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 165-166.

<sup>73</sup> The other consequences McKnight notes are intellectual, ethical, socio-political, as well as related to fidelity of faith. McKnight and Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith*, 117-122.

<sup>74</sup> See, for example, Loffland and Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs.”; Coralie Buxant, Vassilis Saroglou and Jacques Scheuer, “Contemporary Conversions: Compensatory Needs or Self-Growth Motives?” *Research for the Social Scientific Study of Religion* 20 (2009); Chana Ullman, “Cognitive and Emotional Antecedents of Religious Conversion,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*; *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 43, no. 1 (1982). In relation to migration, sociologist,

unable to meaningfully measure affects beyond basic feelings, psychologists generally make no attempt to do so. There are some exceptions to this widespread lack of attentiveness to affect within conversion research. These are generally studies of religious conversion that seek to *discover* rather than merely *categorise*, and use qualitative methodologies to do so.<sup>75</sup>

This lack of attention to affect is often simply a matter of neglecting the emotional aspect of spirituality.<sup>76</sup> But one key branch within conversion research deliberately ignores anything resembling affect, embracing instead an economic model known as 'rational choice theory' (RCT). "Rational choice theory follows a long Western tradition of treating emotion primarily as [a] negative influence."<sup>77</sup> It sees emotion as an outcome, rather than as the "critical behavioral process" that it is.<sup>78</sup> Proponents of RCT, key among them sociologists, Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, and economist, Laurence Iannaccone, argue that people become Christians as the result of a cost-benefit exploration. Pros and cons are weighed up and conversion chosen if the pros outweigh the cons.<sup>79</sup> As a general theory, RCT is much disputed, with some critics describing it as false, unfalsifiable, or irrelevant and "unable to address important issues."<sup>80</sup> Specifically in relation to conversion, sociologist, David

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Rebecca Kim, points to the emotional support Korean Americans find in church life. Rebecca Y Kim, "Migration and Conversion of Korean American Christians," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R Rambo and Charles E Farhadian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). See also, sociologists, Won Moo Huh and Kwang Chung Kim, "Religious Participation of Korean Immigrants in the United States," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29, no. 1 (1990). They concluded that Korean immigrants "claim primarily 'religious' reasons and secondarily 'social' or 'psychological' reasons (i.e., meaning, belonging, and comfort) for their [church] involvement." *Ibid.*, 28. Huh and Kim further noted that for the majority of Korean migrants studied, the religious, social and psychological needs were inseparable. *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>75</sup> For example, Richard Patrick Branson, "The Role of the Imagination in the Religious Conversion of Adolescents Attending Catholic Secondary Schools" (PhD, University of Notre Dame, Australia, 2010); Milton, "Understanding Pentecostal Conversion.,"; Christian Smith, "Why Christianity Works: An Emotions-Focused Phenomenological Account," *Sociology of Religion* 68, no. 2 (2007). (However, Smith's paper is not based on any empirical research. James V Spickard, "Does Christianity Work? What We Would Need to Validate Smith's Approach," *ibid.* 69, no. 4 (2008).)

<sup>76</sup> John W Fisher, "Understanding and Assessing Spiritual Health," in *International Handbook of Education for Spirituality, Care and Wellbeing: Part 1*, ed. Marian de Souza, et al. (Dordrecht, Heidelberg, London and New York: Springer, 2009), 70. For a helpful discussion of the relationship between spirit and wholeness, see Swinton, *Spirituality and Mental Health Care*, 16-19.

<sup>77</sup> David J Arkush, "Situating Emotion: A Critical Realist View of Emotion and Nonconscious Cognitive Processes for the Law," *Brigham Young University Law Review* 2008, no. 5 (2008): 1279.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 1275.

<sup>79</sup> As a starting point, see Lawrence A Young, ed. *Rational Choice Theory and Religion: Summary and Assessment* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); C David Gartrell and Zane K Shannon, "Contacts, Cognitions, and Conversion: A Rational Choice Approach," *Review of Religious Research* (1985); Lynn Robinson, "Rational Choice Theory and Religion: Summary and Assessment, Edited by Lawrence A. Young," *Church History* 68, no. 1 (1999).

<sup>80</sup> Lina Eriksson, *Rational Choice Theory: Potential and Limits* (Hampshire, UK and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 7. One of the sociologists who first employed a rational choice perspective, James Coleman, noted his theory "is constructed for a set of abstract rational actors. It then becomes an empirical question whether a theory so constructed can mirror the functioning of actual social systems which involve real persons." James Samuel Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA and London: Bellnap Press (Harvard University Press), 1994), 18. (Cited in

Yamane, concedes that while rational choice theory may “provide a surface-level explanation” for some of his data on conversion to Catholicism, it fails to “account for many of the complexities” present in the data.<sup>81</sup> Sociologist, Steve Bruce, provides a scathing and “detailed critique of the rational choice approach to religion.”<sup>82</sup> Sociologist, James Beckford, notes two broad critiques. First, RCT takes a heuristic device – “hypothetical models of fully rational actors” – and makes “unacceptably rigid claim[s] about the allegedly real motives and processes of human actions.”<sup>83</sup> Secondly, the social context of the individual is ignored. RCT appears “to assume that real-life agents actually perform as socially isolated cost-benefit accountants.”<sup>84</sup> Despite such serious misgivings, RCT is still used in some conversion research today: particularly in macro level quantitative research.<sup>85</sup>

RCT limits our understanding of conversion by neglecting (even discounting) the agency of God, and by focusing on the cerebral at the expense of the experiential: emphasising the rational and ignoring affect. As the first limitation is not unique to RCT, and has been discussed above, I turn my attention to this second limitation. I dispute the RCT approach to conversion research (indeed, the RCT approach to sociology of religion, in general) for two main reasons. First, as already discussed, affect is recognised as significant in the wider literature; for example, in ‘affect theory’ and in ‘cognitive-experiential theory’.<sup>86</sup> Secondly, pragmatically, there are affects clearly present in my data as well as in other accounts of

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Yamane, *Becoming Catholic*, 57-58.) For further critiques, see Raymond Boudon, "Limitations of Rational Choice Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 104, no. 3 (1998); Cucchiari, "Adapted for Heaven." Riis and Woodhead note: "More generally, a model of human beings as rational actors living by cost-benefit calculation is losing credibility as an adequate account of social action." Riis and Woodhead, *A Sociology of Religious Emotion*, 207. The emphasis on rationality in conversion is part of a wider modernity emphasis on "rationality as the essence of human nature." Susan Harter, "Authenticity," in *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, ed. Charles R Snyder and Shane J Lopez (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 383. Philosopher, Charles Taylor, points out that "instrumental reason" is a symptom of our modern world. Instrumental reason reduces people and creatures from interconnected beings to "raw materials or instruments for our projects." Taylor, *Authenticity*, 5. We consider Taylor's work, and this wider concern, in the next chapter.

<sup>81</sup> Yamane, *Becoming Catholic*, 55.

<sup>82</sup> Steve Bruce, *Choice and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice Theory* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>83</sup> James A Beckford, "Developments in the Sociology of Religion," in *Developments in Sociology*, ed. Robert Burgess and Anne Murcott (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 153-154. Beckford also notes that RCT also defines rationality very narrowly, merely in terms of instrumental rationalism.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>85</sup> For recent examples, see Tong, *Rationalizing Religion*; Barro, Hwang and McCleary, "Religious Conversion in 40 Countries." Similarly, psychologist, Sahaya Selvam, offered RCT (along with brainwashing) as one of just two 'process' categories in his model of religious conversion (Sahaya Selvam. "Psychological Trajectories of Religious Conversion: Towards a Comprehensive Model through Systematic Literature Review." Paper presented at *Conversions and Transformations: Missiological Approaches to Religious Change*, Seoul, 2016.)

<sup>86</sup> See also, Paul N Markham, *Rewired: Exploring Religious Conversion*, Distinguished Dissertations in Christian Theology (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2007), 1.

conversion, including those recorded in scripture. Having already discussed my first point above, we turn to the pragmatic.<sup>87</sup>

After writing my “it’s not a rational choice” memo on 17 November 2014, I attempted my first conceptual ordering of the data I had transcribed to date, and categorised 37 of my earliest nodes as relating to ‘feelings’. Over the 2014-2015 summer, I completed, transcribed and coded the remaining interviews. I then re-categorised those ‘feelings’ into the six ‘affects’ I have retained in my substantive theory. By 20 February 2015, following two further conceptualisations, I had uncovered my four-dimensional model of conversion.<sup>88</sup> The six affects I identified greatly help us in understanding why those I interviewed became Christians.

It is interesting that these affects were so clearly apparent to me. Missiologist, Frances Adeney, offered one possible explanation, when she observed that women were more willing than men “to express emotions in ... scholarly work” on mission.<sup>89</sup> While she was primarily speaking of emotions such as “disappointment and anger as well as joy and celebration,” her observation raises the question of whether I, as a woman, was more likely to note and be prepared to highlight the affects converts experienced.<sup>90</sup> Another woman, sociologist, Danièle Hervieu-Leger, noted the growth of “emotional styles of religious practice in various French religious communities” including among Catholic, Jewish, mystical, Islamic and Buddhist faith groups.<sup>91</sup>

However, it was not just women who noted the presence of things beyond the ‘rational’ in data on religious conversion. Aguilar also reported that “to an outsider an apparent intentionality [in the stories of conversion he heard] may lead rationally to faith. The convert’s

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<sup>87</sup> For another thorough critique of RCT, see Dufault-Hunter, "Personal Transformation and Religious Faith: A Narrative Approach to Conversion," 78-78.

<sup>88</sup> The four dimensions are the convert’s process; the role of other Christians; the role of God; and the six affects.

<sup>89</sup> Frances S Adeney, "Contemporary Women's Contributions to Prophetic Dialogue as Mission," in *Mission on the Road to Emmaus: Constants, Context and Prophetic Dialogue*, ed. Cathy Ross and Stephen B Bevans (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 165.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. My qualitative methodology could not reveal any gender-based difference in the number or intensity of affects named by the research participants.

<sup>91</sup> Beckford, "Developments in the Sociology of Religion," 155. Citing François Champion and Danièle Hervieu-Léger, eds., *De L'emotion En Religion* (Paris: Centurion, 1990). The original is in French. For an English language article on the same topic, see Danièle Hervieu-Léger, "Present-Day Emotional Renewals: The End of Secularization or the End of Religion?" in *A Future for Religion? New Paradigms for Social Analysis*, ed. William H Swatos, Jr (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993). Beckford notes other possible explanations and urges further empirical work in different countries. Beckford, "Developments in the Sociology of Religion," 154-156.



perspective, however, requires no such rational justification, for the religious experience is itself the cause of and evidence for faith.”<sup>92</sup>

Yamane concurs with sociologist, Christian Smith, seeing “action as fundamentally moral rather than essentially rational.”<sup>93</sup> Therefore, seeking to discover people’s motivations for conversion to Catholicism, Yamane was attentive to the emotions expressed by those interviewed. Theologian, Mark Cartledge, noted that religious conversion “affects the whole of the person (rational, volitional and affective) and their life in the world.”<sup>94</sup>

Missionary and missiologist, Warrick Farah, noted that, “Interest in Christ is sparked by affective experiences, and understanding seems to come later in the [conversion] process [of Muslims].”<sup>95</sup> Farah draws here on Reinhold Strähler’s work that emphasises the importance of both cognitive and affective dimensions in Muslims’ conversion to Christianity.<sup>96</sup>

In addition, it is absurd to reduce to rational choice the conversion accounts recorded in Scripture and history. The Gospel of Luke records ‘turning’ to God as “a transformation of day-to-day patterns of thinking, feeling, believing, and behaving.”<sup>97</sup> McKnight, having looked at the sociology of conversion in the Gospels, concludes that “for Jesus conversion was a

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<sup>92</sup> Aguilar, "Experiencing Transcendence," 611. Some other recent sociological work on conversion is also more attentive to affect. Fenggang Yang and Andrew Stuart Abel, "Sociology of Religious Conversion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R Rambo and Charles E Farhadian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 150; Yamane, *Becoming Catholic*. Yang and Abel’s work is primarily on ethnic Chinese converts. In the 1980s, the theologian, Chris Walker, argued that “it is not primarily by reason that people are won to Christian faith,” Christopher Channon Walker, "The Process of Conversion: An Inquiry into One Aspect of Salvation, That of the Conversion of Secular Australians to Christianity" (PhD, Claremont Graduate School, 1982), 4.

<sup>93</sup> Yamane, *Becoming Catholic*, 61.

<sup>94</sup> Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit: Rescripting Ordinary Pentecostal Theology*, 80. Theologians, James Woodward and Stephen Pattison, highlight the importance of paying attention not just to the “propositional, the rational, and the logical in life and theology. [Practical theology] needs to find an important place for parts of human experience and data like the emotions, the symbolic, and the irrational if it is fully to address the human condition.” Woodward and Pattison, "An Introduction to Pastoral and Practical Theology," 13. See also, Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 312-331.

<sup>95</sup> Warrick Farah, "Emerging Missiological Themes in MBB Conversion Factors," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 30, no. 1: 15.

<sup>96</sup> Reinhold Immanuel Strähler, "Coming to Faith in Christ: Case Studies of Muslims in Kenya" (DTheol, University of South Africa, 2009). At a methodological level, those who approach the sociology of religion from a phenomenological perspective are similarly attentive to the role of “nonrational religious experience ... at the core of all religions.” Lawrence A Young, "Phenomenological Images of Religion and Rational Choice Theory," in *Rational Choice Theory and Religion: Summary and Assessment*, ed. Lawrence A Young (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 136. However, Young goes on to argue that rational choice models can clarify phenomenological approaches to understanding religious conversion, concluding the nonrational motivations for religious conversion can be explained by wider rational forces. While his argument may make logical (rational?) sense, I remain unconvinced that rational choice theory offers anything that extends phenomenological understandings of religious conversion.

<sup>97</sup> Green, *Conversion in Luke-Acts*, 3.

highly personalized and individualized challenge to awaken to the new possibilities inherent in the kingdom which he was announcing.”<sup>98</sup> Neither of these key ideas is solely, or even primarily, ‘rationally’ driven.

Having rejected rational choice theory as neither supported by the wider literature, by my data, nor by theological reflection, I will add two caveats. First, as I reported in Chapter 5, participants generally reported having some sort of excuse to accept invitations extended to engage in spiritual practices. At that point, they were rationally justifying their decision to say “yes.”<sup>99</sup> But while they may have rationalised their *decisions*, they were *considering* engagement in spiritual practices because of internal process occurring far deeper than any rational choice.<sup>100</sup> Secondly, as I discuss in the next chapter, Hamish’s motivation for conversion grew out of a both a sense of dryness and a related intellectual dissatisfaction with atheism. Many of those interviewed talked about Christianity with their Christian friends. But while the rational was often present, the affective was primary.

Yamane found some, but very few, of those he interviewed were motivated to convert to Catholicism by “utilitarian individualism.”<sup>101</sup> Like RCT, utilitarian individualism is a “basically economic understanding of human existence.”<sup>102</sup> With Christian Smith, Yamane sees RCT as “describing one particular mode of human motivation and action that reflects and embodies a specific moral order situated in a particular place in history and culture.”<sup>103</sup> Thus, RCT and utilitarian individualism are cultural schemas rather than “universal principle[s] of action.”<sup>104</sup> With just 7% of the circumstantial converts to Catholicism he interviewed best categorised as motivated by utilitarian individualism,<sup>105</sup> Yamane concluded that converts act predominantly as “moral actors” rather than “rational actors”.<sup>106</sup>

Sociologist, Chee Kiong Tong, reported younger Singaporeans converted to Christianity in the 1980s as they perceived it to be more “rational” than the traditional Chinese religions

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<sup>98</sup> McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 177.

<sup>99</sup> Montgomery reminds us that “Individuals like to rationalize and justify their decisions.” Montgomery, “Conversion and the Historic Spread of Religions,” 177.

<sup>100</sup> Aguilar concluded that “belief ... is unreflective, but faith results from a conscious process based on the evidence of experience.” Aguilar, “Experiencing Transcendence,” 610.

<sup>101</sup> Yamane, *Becoming Catholic*, 68. Yamane is citing Robert N Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven M Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1985), 336.

<sup>102</sup> Yamane, *Becoming Catholic*, 68.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 69. Yamane is quoting Christian Smith: Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 33.

<sup>104</sup> Yamane, *Becoming Catholic*, 69.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 58. Yamane coined the phrase “circumstantial converts” to describe the phenomenon of being drawn into a new religion for circumstantial reasons rather than because of a conscious search. *Ibid.*, 51

they left behind.<sup>107</sup> Educated Singaporeans, from an education system that prioritised rationalism, were more likely to convert.<sup>108</sup> However, even he does not ignore the affective, arguing that “conversion has to do with a gradual process of cognitive and affective evaluation of the new religion.”<sup>109</sup>

This section demonstrates that an approach that merely addresses reason cannot sufficiently inform a topic like religious conversion. We explore this further in Chapter 12.

As a final note, it is not just studies of religious conversion that have ignored the affective and experiential. This is a symptom of modernity. Sociologist, Donald Miller, speaks of realising –

what was missing in [his earlier research and book] *The Case for Liberal Christianity*: it was devoid of any real understanding of the emotional and bodily dimension of religion. I had wrongly assumed that the mainline Protestant denominations were losing members because of the dissonance between their faith and the culture. Now I realized that part of the problem was the focus on rationalized beliefs. ... religion is more than assent to well-formulated beliefs. ... I was still dichotomizing mind and body, identifying religion more with the head than with the broader range of senses that are incorporated in worship.<sup>110</sup>

Miller, thus, realised that he had, essentially, neglected paying attention to anything beyond the rational.<sup>111</sup> Rambo also later pointed out that, “There are ... experiences, both cognitive and affective, that are distinctive to religion and spirituality ... that should be taken into account when we create theories of conversion.”<sup>112</sup> Christian Smith noted that while “many modern Christians have underplayed the centrality of emotions in the workings of faith, emphasizing instead cognitive beliefs and rational apologetics. But emotions are actually central in human personal and social life generally, and often fundamental in religious faith and experience as well.”<sup>113</sup> All this demonstrates that my attention to the affective processes converts experienced makes a significant and necessary contribution to our understanding

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<sup>107</sup> Tong, *Rationalizing Religion*, 82.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>110</sup> Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 8.

<sup>111</sup> See also, Bruce Wilson, *Reasons of the Heart: A Vision for the New Millennium* (NSW: Allen & Unwin; and Albatross Books, 1998).

<sup>112</sup> Rambo, "Theories of Conversion," 264. In fact, “much of Christian conversion remains in the realm of mystery.” Morris, *Mystery and Meaning*, 20.

<sup>113</sup> Smith, "Why Christianity Works," 169. Transpersonal psychologists, Jorge Ferrer and Jacob Sherman, note that the ‘linguistic turn’ has the, often-realised, potential to limit our understandings of the divine to what can be described in human language. This “linguistification of the sacred” subverts transcendental authority and limits legitimated theological understandings to what can be communicated between “rational human beings.” Jorge N Ferrer and Jacob H Sherman, "Introduction: The Participatory Turn in Spirituality, Mysticism, and Religious Studies," in *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies*, ed. Jorge N Ferrer and Jacob H Sherman (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2008), 6.

of religious conversion today. As Sarah said of her spiritual experiences, “It’s beyond words.”<sup>114</sup>

#### **Difference 4: Engagement in spiritual practices**

In Rambo’s stage model, engagement in spiritual practices occurs as one aspect within Stage 5: Interaction. My model places engagement in spiritual practices as a separate element of the conversion process, recognising that such engagement acts as a catalyst to a further exploration of Christianity. This engagement also often leads to invitations to, and further engagement in, spiritual practices. In addition, in naming engagement in spiritual practices as part of “Interaction”, Rambo suggests that these spiritual practices were generally engaged in collaboratively, with other Christians. My data showed that while engagement in spiritual practices *often* involved interaction with other Christians, it was not *always* correlated with such interaction with other Christians. McKnight and Ondrey addressed this by including among the ‘advocate’ both “human advocates and scriptural advocacy.”<sup>115</sup> In addition, they noted other things that acted in a kind of advocacy role: reading books about Jesus; praying; and attending a prayer group. However, given the significance of engagement in spiritual practices for those I interviewed, it is more insightful to include engagement in spiritual practices as a separate element of the conversion process. I discuss this further in the next chapter.

#### **Difference 5: Consequences of conversion**

Rambo’s model takes specific account of the consequences of conversion as an ending point of the conversion process. By contrast, I included some ‘consequences’ within ‘engagement in spiritual practices’ and into the ‘affects’ shown in Figure 10.2. My framing it in this way is both consistent with my research data, and in keeping with the *process* of conversion. The ultimate consequence of conversion for those I interviewed was what I call ‘relational authenticity’. The next chapter is dedicated to exploring this.

### **Concluding comments**

Rambo provides (as he promises) a two-dimensional stage model that is useful for ordering one’s own data, as well as the body of literature, on conversion. This model has been used by researchers to consider the conversion narratives of a range of contemporary and ancient converts. These researchers and writers have been generally successful at placing the conversion narratives studied within Rambo’s framework. However, in seeking to place one’s

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<sup>114</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>115</sup> McKnight and Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith*, 107.

data within such a model, one runs the risk of flattening the data. My data could probably have fitted within Rambo's model: I could have used it (with some modification) to outline the process by which people come to faith. But doing so would not have answered my research question. It would not address *why* people are becoming Christians in Australia today. In order to consider the *why* I did not flatten my data to Rambo's categories but rather discovered and embraced a multidimensional model that acknowledges the process, the three agents and the affects. Without the multidimensional model I devised, my data would not have revealed its substantive theory of why people in Australia are becoming Christians. Thus, Rambo's stage model of conversion while useful as a tool for ordering data on conversion, is limited in its ability to uncover and explain the complexity of the conversion experience.

This chapter has made two significant contributions to our understanding of religious conversion. First, it has highlighted the appropriateness of critical realism as a research paradigm that allows the researcher to be open to God's agency. Secondly, it has demonstrated the need for multidimensional considerations of conversion process, agents and affects. In doing so, I have challenged RCT theory and extended Rambo's process model of conversion. Having done this, I now turn, in Chapter 11, to my overarching theme of authenticity and, thus, to my substantive theory of why people are becoming Christians in Australia today. To do this, I again consider existing literature alongside my own findings.

## CHAPTER 11: IT'S ALL ABOUT (RELATIONAL) AUTHENTICITY

In introducing and describing my substantive theory of conversion, this chapter discusses the link between conversion to Christianity and authenticity. Therefore, it addresses my research question of why people in Australia today are becoming Christians. The chapter demonstrates first, that for those I interviewed, religious conversion is fuelled by a desire for authenticity: a desire that permeates contemporary culture and that motivated the faith exploration of the participants. Secondly, God enables authenticity to develop and flourish: because of who God is; who God created humans to be; and the ways God has acted and continues to act. Thirdly, religious conversion is resourced by Christians who embrace and exhibit relational authenticity in their personal, social and spiritual lives. In making these three assertions, this chapter provides a theological framework for understanding relational authenticity and its relationship to contemporary Christian conversion in Australia. This framework draws on the lived experience of recent converts to Christianity, as well as scripture, theology and other literature about authenticity.

### **Beginning with the cultural context and ending with a theological definition of authenticity**

The research participants were purposively selected as having not grown up in the Christian church. As such, their formative years were largely uninfluenced by Christian frameworks or understandings, save any that are residual in contemporary Australian culture.<sup>1</sup> It is appropriate, therefore, to begin this chapter with a brief 'secular' exploration of authenticity. This illuminates the background the participants came from; placing their desire for relational authenticity within a wider social context.

### **The desire for authenticity permeates our world**

[The] desire to be authentically one's self has become commonplace.<sup>2</sup>

Business consultants, James Gilmore and Joseph Pine, have a knack of reflecting back to the commercial world the aspirations of contemporary culture.<sup>3</sup> Their 2007 book, *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*, names 'authenticity' as the key aspiration of the

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<sup>1</sup> I have discussed the secularisation of Australia in Chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> Braman, *Meaning and Authenticity*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> For example, B Joseph Pine and James H Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre and Every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 1999).

early 21st century.<sup>4</sup> Gilmore and Pine argue that it is the real that is valued today: as a result of large-scale cultural change, consumers increasingly “yearn for authenticity.”<sup>5</sup> I begin my exploration of authenticity with their book to highlight the extent to which the desire for authenticity has permeated our world. Authenticity has become a commodity. This is our 21st century reality: the context in which my research participants live.

Of course, Gilmore and Pine’s emphasis on authenticity as *experiencing the real* is just one aspect of authenticity. Authenticity, as *living real*, finds popular expression as a key notion of the ‘self-help’ movement.<sup>6</sup> Here, TV megastars like Oprah and Dr Phil remind us “there’s nothing more valuable than authenticity”<sup>7</sup> and define the “authentic self” as “the you that can be found at your absolute core.”<sup>8</sup> More recently, researcher and storyteller, Brené Brown, defined authenticity as “the daily practice of letting go of who we think we’re supposed to be and embracing who we are.”<sup>9</sup> Our contemporary culture is steeped in this idea of authenticity, as being true to one’s self.<sup>10</sup> The desire for personal authenticity “has become commonplace.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Where did it come from, this desire for authenticity?**

The whole point of authenticity as a characteristically modern value has lain in the attempt to regain in some reflective form the unexpressed certainties which are supposed to have structured the pre-modern world.<sup>12</sup>

The desire for authenticity has its roots in cultural change that can be traced back to the Enlightenment thinking of Descartes’ “disengaged rationality” and Locke’s “political

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<sup>4</sup> James H Gilmore and B Joseph Pine, *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Phillip Vannini and J Patrick Williams, "Authenticity in Culture, Self, and Society," in *Authenticity in Culture, Self, and Society*, ed. Phillip Vannini and J Patrick Williams (Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 1. In *Authenticity*, Gilmore and Pine seek to describe to businesses how they can be ‘authentic’: essentially in order to increase their market share.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, Thinking in Action (London: Routledge, 2004), viii.

<sup>7</sup> Lauren McComb, "Becoming Your Authentic Self," *The Oprah Magazine: South Africa* (2011), <http://www.oprahmag.co.za/oprah's-world/news/becoming-your-authentic-self> Accessed 24 August 2016. (Quoting Oprah).

<sup>8</sup> Phil McGraw, *Self Matters: Creating Your Life from the Inside Out* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 30.

<sup>9</sup> Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are. Your Guide to a Wholehearted Life* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2010), 50.

<sup>10</sup> S Rosenbloom, "Authentic? Get Real," *The New York Times*, 11 September 2011; Phillip Vannini and J Patrick Williams, *Authenticity in Culture, Self, and Society* (Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009); Ramon Menendez Domingo, "Ethnic Background and Meanings of Authenticity: A Qualitative Study of University Students," *M/C Journal* 18, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>11</sup> Braman, *Meaning and Authenticity*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard Arthur Owen Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 183.

individualism.”<sup>13</sup> But the world from which Descartes and Locke brought us the ethic of authenticity had itself been influenced by centuries of history.<sup>14</sup>

There are, in fact, echoes of the idea of authenticity in our ancient world. Socrates, for example, 2500 years ago, urged one to “Know thyself.” A thousand years later, St Augustine’s *Confessions* clearly distinguished between one’s inner and outer lives. However, both these thinkers understood the “self” in vastly different ways than it is understood today. Socrates likely held to a cosmological view, where to know oneself was to understand one’s place in relation to the whole. Personal desires and feelings were seen as “negative traits,” and self-knowledge, rather than a precursor to “being yourself,” was an initial step “toward a project of excising what is particular and distinctive in yourself in order to be better able to match the ideal that determines your function.”<sup>15</sup>

Socrates’ cosmocentric understanding contrasts with Augustine’s theocentric basis. Augustine understood humans to be “made toward God, that is, our proper orientation in life is to be God-directed, and so we are only properly and fully human when we are bound to God.”<sup>16</sup> Further, because our “sensual desires and worldly preoccupations turn us away from God,” the goal of turning inwards is “not so much getting in touch with one’s inner self as enabling one to give oneself over totally to God.”<sup>17</sup> Philosopher Charles Taylor articulates this concept from Augustine as: “By going inward, I am drawn upward.”<sup>18</sup>

These thoughts of Augustine and Socrates are consistent with a pre-modern worldview: “A sense that all things are connected by an underlying life force or principle of being.”<sup>19</sup> As well as this connection to some supernatural force, the pre-modern worldview enjoyed a significant sense of connection to context. One’s identity was, therefore, understood to be

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<sup>13</sup> Taylor, *Authenticity*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> In this section, I draw heavily from philosopher Charles Guignon’s monograph *On Being Authentic*. (Guignon, *Being Authentic*.) This book offers a clear and insightful synthesis of the development of authenticity and its implications for contemporary society. The book reads as sympathetic towards the development of authenticity and is positive about its potential today. In his review for *The Heythrop Journal*, philosopher, Robert Doede, called the book “important” noting: “Not only does it offer a fascinating overview of ideas about ‘the good life’ and the meanings of authenticity in Western thought, but it also clarifies and focuses the notion of authenticity, helping us to think critically about its limits, and creatively about its potential for our contemporary world.” Robert Doede, “On Being Authentic, by Charles Guignon,” *The Heythrop Journal* 48, no. 5 (2007): 826. Other views of authenticity exist, and numerous primary sources could be tackled. But they are beyond the scope of this project, which is an empirical investigation into why people convert to Christianity in Australia today.

<sup>15</sup> Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 134.

<sup>19</sup> Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 17.



connected to the spiritual realm, to family, to ancestors and to future generations. This brought a “sense of belongingness, a feeling that one is part of a larger whole.”<sup>20</sup> It also enabled a reverence or sense of awe in response to forces beyond human control.<sup>21</sup> Such a world-view is, in sociologist, Max Weber’s words, “enchanted.”<sup>22</sup> In this enchanted world, “mysterious forces are at work for good and ill” and those forces “generate an underlying order in the world.”<sup>23</sup>

When the world is viewed like this, as an interlocking whole, the inner and outer worlds of the person are seen more as different perspectives on the same reality than as two separate dimensions.<sup>24</sup> There is no inherent basis for understanding the modern concept of authenticity in this pre-modern worldview: “You just are what you do.”<sup>25</sup> Fast-forwarding several hundred years, we arrive at the beginning of the cultural revolution that eventually resulted in today’s late modern or postmodern worldview. At that time, Shakespeare wrote in Hamlet: “To thine own self be true.”<sup>26</sup> This is oft-quoted as inspiration for an ‘authentic’ life.<sup>27</sup> The speaker Polonius, however, goes on to urge the hearer to be true to oneself in order to be true to others. For Shakespeare, being true to oneself had social consequences.<sup>28</sup>

Three crucial developments from the 16<sup>th</sup> century meant that previous ways of living were no longer possible, or desirable.<sup>29</sup> First, the Reformation brought an emphasis on “personal salvation and inwardness.”<sup>30</sup> Religion was redefined as involving an individual relationship with God. A growing preoccupation with one’s intentions rather than one’s actions enabled

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>21</sup> See also, Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1978), 630.

<sup>23</sup> Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>26</sup> Polonius, in Hamlet (Act 1, Scene 3) William Shakespeare, "The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark," (1599-1602).

<sup>27</sup> For example, it is one of the core principles of the ‘Alcoholics Anonymous’ movement, inscribed on tokens given to recovering alcoholics to mark the beginning of their journey to sobriety. <http://www.aatoken.com/2011/04/aa-tokens/> Accessed 24 September 2016. See also, Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 26; David John Tacey, "Spirituality and Mental Health: The Mystery of Healing," in *International Handbook of Education for Spirituality, Care and Wellbeing: Part 1*, ed. Marian de Souza, et al. (Dordrecht, Heidelberg, London and New York: Springer, 2009), 286.

<sup>28</sup> Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 27. As Guignon points out, literary critic, Lionel Trilling, declares this commitment beyond oneself to be demonstrative of the “essential virtue” of sincerity. Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 28-48.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 29. Sociologist, Steve Bruce, also points to the role of the Reformation in “hasten[ing] the rise of individualism and of rationality,” thus threatening religion. “Individualism threatened the communal basis of religious belief and behaviour, while rationality removed many of the purposes of religion and rendered many of its beliefs implausible.” Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 230.

the distinction between one's interior and exterior self to grow. The material world was increasingly seen as a temporary hindrance to be endured before we get to our heavenly home.<sup>31</sup>

Secondly, the scientific revolution caused the world to become 'disenchanted'. Things once mysterious could now be explained. Objectivity became prized. Humans came to understand themselves as knowing subjects who controlled the world. Thus, the anthropocentric world began: a world in which humans have mastery over nature.

Thirdly, the idea of society itself began to be seen, not as "natural or preordained," but as a social construct of convenience or potential benefit.<sup>32</sup> A distinction between one's public and private worlds developed, and the private world became the priority. It was not necessary to be in community to be fully human. The private person was perceived as the "Real Me – the true inner self [as distinct from] the persona (from the Greek word for 'mask') that one puts on for the external world."<sup>33</sup>

While "this new outlook brought with it a breathtaking expansion of human possibilities, ... the sense of what constitutes the aim of life was contracting and shrivelling up."<sup>34</sup> A mechanised view of the world as a Universe rather than a Cosmos meant that, no longer "meaningful and value-filled," the world became "a vast aggregate of material objects in causal interactions."<sup>35</sup> There was seen to be no ultimate reason for these processes: no higher purpose. Human beings became "thought of as essentially minds – as mental containers in which ideas of various sorts circulate."<sup>36</sup> Their primary task was understood to be "gaining knowledge of the external world."<sup>37</sup> That knowledge was gained by taking an objective approach that, again, reduced the person to a mind that processes information, generally alone. The "goal of life [came to be understood as] to increase pleasure and avoid pain."<sup>38</sup> Philosopher, Blaise Pascal (1623-62), was early to see the potential detriment for humanity of such thinking. In contrast to enlightenment understandings, Pascal saw "the

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<sup>31</sup> Sociologist, Callum Brown, argues that rather than "rationality and religion clashing in the Enlightenment," the Enlightenment *boosted* Christianity, as demonstrated by "the robustness of popular religiosity ... between the 1750s and the 1950s." Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 195. It took until the 1960s for secularisation to accelerate. That said, Enlightenment processes created the environment where a privatised faith was normalised and faith itself became optional. (See *ibid.*, 35-39.)

<sup>32</sup> Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 33. Bellah et al. call this "utilitarian individualism." Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 336.

<sup>33</sup> Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 35.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* It was understandings such as these that led to the 'rational choice theory' discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

truest dimension of humanity [as] its ability to awaken to a 'beyond' against which we can see both our greatness and our wretchedness."<sup>39</sup>

Pascal was not the only one disturbed by this highly mechanised and rationalised "radical Enlightenment outlook."<sup>40</sup> The Romantic Movement developed in response, and opposition, to such a view. Guignon notes three key features of Romanticism that are still evident today in the concept of authenticity. First, there was an "attempt to recover a sense of oneness and wholeness" that had been lost in modernity. Secondly, Romanticism posited that "truth" is discovered "by a total immersion in one's own deepest and most intense feelings," rather than "by rational reflection and scientific method." Thirdly, Romanticism considered "that the self is the highest and most all-encompassing of all that is found in reality."<sup>41</sup>

Key Romantic philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, prioritised one's natural instincts over the modern social or societal constructs he blamed for "most of the miseries and corruption of modern existence."<sup>42</sup> The Romantic quest became about turning inward in order to get in touch with something beyond oneself: "something greater than ourselves."<sup>43</sup> The ultimate goal of the Romantic quest was "spiritual autonomy ... [and] the experience of oneness with nature [was] merely a preliminary stage."<sup>44</sup> Thus, romanticism reduced pre-modern Self/Human-Nature-God understandings, first to Self/Human-Nature (as God was seen to be a construct: found within). But as experiences of nature were similarly viewed as constructs, all that remained of the original triad was Self, and a great deal of perceived 'constructing' of their world.

There is an irony here which Guignon clearly articulates. Romanticism grew out of a deep dissatisfaction with the Enlightenment's emphases on explanations, objectivity and control. But due to the strength and logic of modern science, Romantics could not reclaim an 'enchanted' garden/world. Instead they turned deep within themselves to discover and articulate a new reality: one that both enabled and required a separation between the

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<sup>39</sup> McIntosh, *Divine Teaching*, 213.

<sup>40</sup> Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 50.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 51. Guignon illustrates this from literature, including from Friedrich Hölderlin's novel, *Hyperion*, in which Hyperion longs for his lost sense of connectedness and childlikeness, and desires a return to a greater wholeness. See *ibid.*, 51-55. That said, while self-love was understood by the Romantics to always be good, it was also acknowledged that humans have an inbuilt "repugnance" to seeing others suffer. *Ibid.*, 57. (Guignon is citing Jean-Jacques Rosseau.)

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-56.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

material world (that they left the scientists to address) and the “special reality that is ... within the self.”<sup>45</sup>

Romantic philosophers and artists spent much time and energy seeking to understand the Self. In doing so, they came to prioritise subjective truth over objective truth. Rousseau emphasised not finding oneself but, as one searches, essentially making or creating oneself. In this prioritisation of subjective truth and emphasis on creating oneself is what our 21st century western culture expresses as ‘authenticity.’

Of course, coexisting alongside these Romantic sensibilities was the rational, scientific, instrumentalist approach. This approach prioritised objectivity and warned of the dangers of introspection. However, now as then, most people, most often, live with a balance of sense and sensibility in everyday life. As Guignon says (agreeing with Charles Taylor): “Most of us deal with the conflicting demands made on us in the modern world by being instrumentalists in public and Romantics in private.”<sup>46</sup> This polarised way of living has its attendant challenges and contradictions. It feeds – and is fed by – the binary oppositions that our contemporary world thrives on: oppositions such as in/out; up/down; real/fake; public/private; deep/superficial.<sup>47</sup>

Understood in a polarised way like this, authenticity becomes defined by (and can be dangerously limited to) the inner world. Where it is limited in this way, authenticity is only self-focused, neglecting O/other, be they God or human. But to be true, authenticity must permeate, must impact, our outer world. Next, we consider how the end-goal of authenticity is viewed. Is authenticity just about the self, or is authenticity relational in nature?

### **What is the purpose, the goal, of authenticity?**

Authenticity ... has both self and other-referential dimensions.<sup>48</sup>

Guignon sees the contemporary end goal of this authenticity as a truncated focusing on the self he calls “enownment”.<sup>49</sup> He argues that an alternative ideal, opposite to the enownment

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>47</sup> Riis and Woodhead, *A Sociology of Religious Emotion*, 16-17.

<sup>48</sup> Phillip Vannini and Alexis Franzese, "The Authenticity of Self: Conceptualization, Personal Experience, and Practice," *Sociology Compass* 2, no. 5 (2008): 1625.

<sup>49</sup> Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 7. Although Guignon does not mention it, ‘enownment’ was the word some used to translate into English philosopher, Martin Heidegger’s concept of ‘Ereignis’ (particularly his 1930s use of the term). Philosopher, Albert Hofstadter, coined the term in 1976. (Albert Hofstadter, "Enownment," *boundary* 2 4, no. 2 (1976): 369.) Guignon is truncating its meaning here, reducing it from Heidegger’s more social understanding as “the letting-be-own-to-one-another” to an individual sense of self-ownership (ibid.) For more see philosopher, Kenneth Maly’s “Translators Introduction” in Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, *Hermeneutics and Reflection: Heidegger and*

emphasis of authenticity, prioritises “self-loss or releasement” and “urges you to look away from your own personal feelings and needs and to give your life over to something greater than yourself.”<sup>50</sup> While Guignon suggests these are generally understood within contemporary western culture to be opposites, my research suggests that genuine authenticity involves both of these elements.<sup>51</sup> To understand the true meaning of authenticity we need to step back from the ‘individual’ and view the person in context: in relationship with God and in relationship with others and the world. The person we are becoming is made authentic only through interaction with others.<sup>52</sup> Thus, rather than juxtaposing ‘enownment’ and ‘releasement’ against one another, it is more helpful to view both as being required to complete the notion of genuine relational authenticity.

In fact, having adopted a Socratic approach in his book, Guignon’s concluding argument provides evidence of this exact connectedness between enownment and releasement, even as he notes that the former is often prioritised at the expense of the latter. He concludes:

To be fully authentic is to recognize the need to be constantly vigilant in one’s society, to be engaged in political action aimed at preserving and reinforcing a way of life that allows for such worthy personal life projects as that of authenticity.<sup>53</sup>

Seeing authenticity as social brings together releasement and enownment in an integrated way.<sup>54</sup> Theologians, Joann Wolski Conn and Walter Conn, are particularly explicit about the need to dispense with the dualism between self-fulfilment and self-sacrifice. Instead, they draw on theologian Bernard Lonergan’s notion of “self-transcendence” as a “dynamic movement beyond oneself toward the good of others.”<sup>55</sup> Such self-transcendence – moral,

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*Husserl on the Concept of Phenomenology*, trans. Kenneth Maly (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), xxii-xxv. Philosopher, Hubert Dreyfus, is frequently attributed with defining “Ereignis” as “things coming into themselves by belonging together.” (I am yet to find the reference properly cited: the most detail I have found attributes it to 2004 as a date. It seems it may have been in an early podcast). Maly and Emad used “enowning” to capture the movement inherent in Heidegger’s “Ereignis” in their 1999 translation (Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (from Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly, Studies in Continental Thought (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).) Philosopher, Michael Gillespie, notes its link to authenticity (Michael Allen Gillespie, “Radical Philosophy and Political Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought*, ed. Nicholas Adams, George Pattison, and Graham Ward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 390.

<sup>50</sup> Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 7. Guignon linked this “releasement” to *kénōsis* (Christ’s emptying and self-abnegation) as well as to notions of belongingness and togetherness.

<sup>51</sup> I will demonstrate this in the upcoming sections of this chapter.

<sup>52</sup> See Harter, “Authenticity,” 389-390. Harter provides a review relating to the way the self emerges as a result of “deep relational connection with others.” Vannini and Franzese, “Authenticity of Self,” 1624.

<sup>53</sup> Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 162.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>55</sup> Joann Wolski Conn and Walter E Conn, “Conversion as Self-Transcendence Exemplified in the Life of St Thérèse of Lisieux,” *Spirituality Today* 34, no. 4 (1982): 304.

cognitive and affective in nature – is, they believe, “the criterion of authentic self-realization.”<sup>56</sup>

In the same way, Charles Taylor sees both “selfhood and morality ... [as] inextricably intertwined themes.”<sup>57</sup> For Taylor, authenticity has as its starting point the idea that “human beings are endowed with a moral sense, an intuitive feeling for what is right and wrong.”<sup>58</sup> Further, authenticity is not simply about acting in a right or wrong way, it is about being truly authentic to who we are as “true and full human beings.”<sup>59</sup> The word “full” is significant. Genuine authenticity permeates all aspects of life – personal, social, and spiritual – affecting not just the internal world, but also interactions with God, others and the world.<sup>60</sup>

Philosophers, Bernard Williams and Cheshire Calhoun, also stress the importance of the social nature of authenticity and integrity. Williams points out that something other than mere thoughts and feelings are required to stabilise and steady our internal lives. For him, that something is our social context. As he says: “We need each other in order to be anybody.”<sup>61</sup> Calhoun similarly argues that integrity is both a social and a personal virtue. It must result in “standing for something.”<sup>62</sup> Sociologists, Phillip Vannini and Alexis Franzese, observe that the status of, and quest for, authenticity are even more difficult to achieve if attempted individualistically.<sup>63</sup>

From the context of popular culture, Dr Phil and Oprah remind us, “commitments to family, friends and the wider society are not just afterthoughts tacked on to a project that otherwise requires total self-preoccupation. They are integral to the very idea of authenticity as a way of life.”<sup>64</sup> Thus, authentic people must contribute back to the society of which they are a part.<sup>65</sup> One cannot be authentic in isolation.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, 3.

<sup>58</sup> Taylor, *Authenticity*, 26.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> See also, David Augsburg, *Dissident Discipleship: A Spirituality of Self-Surrender, Love of God, Love of Neighbor* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 176. Augsburg defines authenticity as “being a self that expresses mature, complete, balanced, and fully human being [modelled on] Jesus Christ.” Ibid. Of course, such self-transcendence is not a transcendence of our humanity. Rather, it is a transcendence of selfishness. Root, *Relational Pastor*, 141.

<sup>61</sup> Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 200. For a helpful summary, see Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 151-157.

<sup>62</sup> Cheshire Calhoun, "Standing for Something," *The Journal of Philosophy* 92, no. 5 (1995): 235.

<sup>63</sup> Vannini and Franzese, "Authenticity of Self," 1630.

<sup>64</sup> Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 163-164.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>66</sup> Sociologist, Rebecca Erickson, writes of authenticity as “being true to self-in-context or true to self-in-relationship.” Rebecca J Erickson, "The Importance of Authenticity for Self and Society," *Symbolic Interaction* 18, no. 2 (1995): 139.

## Towards defining authenticity

Having briefly explored the prevalence, history and potential purpose of a desire for authenticity, it is time to gather what has been uncovered into a working definition. What is authenticity? Philosopher, Alessandro Ferrara, rightly calls authenticity “a protean concept,” extensively used implicitly, but little agreed upon as a technical term.<sup>67</sup> He identifies at least three major ways academics understand authenticity: in relation to moral theory, cultural critique, and identity.<sup>68</sup> At a popular level, a quick Google image search on the word ‘authenticity’ reveals page after page of images and quotes depicting so-called personal and corporate authenticity.<sup>69</sup>

Aware of, but not restricted by, the plethora of popular and academic understandings around authenticity, Guignon defines authenticity as “the project of becoming the person you are.”<sup>70</sup> This helpfully extends common usage which sees authenticity simply as being true to yourself.<sup>71</sup> However, Guignon’s definition needs to be further nuanced.

There are two distinct aspects in Guignon’s definition. A “project” implies active engagement: work undertaken to achieve an end goal. “The person you are” implies our true selves are available for discovery. Both these aspects need to be explored further and the definition of authenticity strengthened theologically.

The first aspect, authenticity as a “project of becoming”, reminds us that we are not there yet: we are works in progress. Such an understanding both guides and protects. It guides, because ‘projects’ require resources and effort. The authenticity-project is no different. Despite having this potentiality, becoming authentic is not easy: it “takes serious effort.”<sup>72</sup> We need resources to help in our becoming. In part, this is understood to be “because social pressures pull us toward inauthentic role-playing.”<sup>73</sup> But as well as avoiding inauthenticity, effort is also required to form us into our authentic selves. This effort involves engagement in spiritual exercises to help us become authentically ourselves.<sup>74</sup> Understanding authenticity as a “project of becoming” also protects. It points out that we are not there yet: we are works in progress. Understood in this way, we are less likely to inappropriately “vent the feelings

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<sup>67</sup> Alessandro Ferrara, "Authenticity without a True Self," in *Authenticity in Culture, Self, and Society*, ed. Phillip Vannini and J Patrick Williams (Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 21; Vannini and Franzese, "Authenticity of Self," 1623.

<sup>68</sup> Ferrara, "Authenticity without a True Self," 21-23.

<sup>69</sup> See Appendix 21.

<sup>70</sup> Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 3.

<sup>71</sup> Vannini and Franzese, "Authenticity of Self," 1621.

<sup>72</sup> Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 5.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

and desires lying within the darkest recesses of the soul.”<sup>75</sup> We are likely to be more prepared to acknowledge our dark sides and to seek to address them in appropriate ways: to make the effort required to reach our full potential.

There is resonance here in the idea of authenticity as a “project of becoming” with the work of theologian, John Macquarrie. Macquarrie points out that “we are all becoming human, in the sense that we are discovering and, it may be hoped, realizing, what the potentials of human existence are.”<sup>76</sup> Seen thus, authenticity involves realising our potential as humans.

This insight from Macquarrie bridges nicely to the second dimension of Guignon’s definition: that of who we are becoming. Who are we, really? To use Macquarrie’s language, what is our potential as humans? It is Guignon’s second dimension of authenticity that can lead to conceptions of authenticity that prioritise individualism over relationality and focus on the self at the expense of ex-centric connections. But as philosopher Charles Taylor argues, human beings are “fundamentally dialogical.”<sup>77</sup> Therefore, to be authentically ourselves, we must define ourselves in relation to others.<sup>78</sup> An understanding of ourselves as dialogical, as relational, rightly challenges narcissistic and individualistic conceptualisations of authenticity.

Our dialogical nature orients us for relationship, not just with other people, but with God. Psychologist, Lynn Paul, used Fairburn’s “object relations theory” as an interpretive frame for Christian conversion. We will return to this paper later, but here it is appropriate to name her assertion that “the main human drive is a drive for relationship.”<sup>79</sup> Specifically, she notes, this drive is actually a yearning for relationship with God, as our source of ultimate meaning.<sup>80</sup>

Defining ourselves in the light of Christian theology, as Lynn Paul does here, provides a picture of humanity that can healthily frame our understanding of ‘who we are, really’. The Genesis creation stories demonstrate our status as humans. We are created in the image of God: *imago Dei*. Theological anthropology no longer limits the significance of *imago Dei* to assigning humans “certain distinctively human qualities such as freedom, rationality,

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<sup>75</sup> Charles Guignon, “Authenticity,” *Philosophy Compass* 3, no. 2 (2008): 280. Such ‘venting’ is a problematic potential of an extremely narcissistic approach to ‘authenticity’.

<sup>76</sup> John Macquarrie, *In Search of Humanity: A Theological and Philosophical Approach* (London: SCM Press, 1982), 2

<sup>77</sup> Taylor, *Authenticity*, 33.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-36; Susan T Gardner and Daniel J Anderson, “Authenticity: It Should and Can Be Nurtured,” *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 22, no. 4 (2015): 393.

<sup>79</sup> Lynn K Paul, “Jesus as Object: Christian Conversion as Interpreted through the Perspective of Fairbairn’s Object Relations Theory,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 27, no. 4 (1999): 301. Paul points out that this drive is psychological, rather than biological, as Freud asserted.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.



creativity, self-consciousness and so on.”<sup>81</sup> Rather, the significance of *imago Dei* is that it is active: we are created for dialogical, personal relationship with God, and with others.<sup>82</sup> Who we are is best understood relationally. Further, *imago Dei* is better understood as a verb rather than a noun: we are not just created in the image of God, but to image God.<sup>83</sup> We return to this theological exploration in the third major section. But for now, we need to use this concept of imaging God to strengthen and focus Guignon’s definition of authenticity.

### **Thus, we need a relational definition of authenticity**

Relational authenticity is the project of becoming the person you are: imaging the relational God.<sup>84</sup>

At face value, Guignon’s definition of authenticity as “the project of becoming the person you are” leaves room for an individualistic understanding of authenticity that is counter to Christian theology.<sup>85</sup> To not allow authenticity to be hijacked by a narcissistic individualism, I have opted to differentiate genuine authenticity from its shallow and shadow imitations by joining the phrase ‘relational authenticity’.<sup>86</sup> This phrase acknowledges that, created as we are for relationship with God and others, we cannot be authentic in isolation. Seen thus, relational authenticity can be defined as “the project of becoming the person you are: imaging the relational God.”

My definition makes theological Guignon’s definition of authenticity. It names both project and potential, but also provides a distinctly theological framework for both the means of

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<sup>81</sup> Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up*, 69; Grenz, *Social God, Relational Self*, xi. Greek Orthodox priest, John Zizioulas, is generally attributed with fostering “the introduction of Eastern trinitarian theology” into contemporary understandings of theological anthropology. *Ibid.*, 51. However, Markham argues (drawing on Theodore Runyon) that John Wesley, influenced by the Eastern Fathers, and in contrast with his contemporaries “saw the image [of God] as rooted in relationship rather than something that humans inherently possess.” Markham, “Conversion Converted,” 55. However, Wesley’s awareness was of the *imago Dei*’s significance in relationality between humans and God, rather than it reflecting the relationality between and within the Trinity. See Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 13-19.

<sup>82</sup> Alistair McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 19-20; Alistair McFadyen, “Imaging God: A Theological Answer to the Anthropological Question?” *Zygon* 47, no. 4 (2012): 918; Morris, *Mystery and Meaning*, 117.

<sup>83</sup> McFadyen, “Imaging God,” 918.

<sup>84</sup> Developed from Guignon, this is my definition of relational authenticity.

<sup>85</sup> Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 3.

<sup>86</sup> See also, Natalie M Fletcher, “Ethical Selves: A Sketch for a Theory of Relational Authenticity,” *Journal of Philosophy of Life* 3, no. 1 (2013): 83.

authenticity and the end-goal of authenticity. It avoids the twin dangers of individualism and heteronomy.<sup>87</sup> It names the human vocation as being “to bear the divine image.”<sup>88</sup>

In this section I have described our contemporary context and the intense desire for authenticity found therein. I provided some background to the origins of that contemporary desire for authenticity. Having noted the need for authenticity to tend to both self and other, I developed a definition of relational authenticity. Next, we return to my data to discuss how religious conversion is fuelled by a desire for relational authenticity.

## **Religious conversion is fuelled by a desire for relational authenticity**

The quest for salvation is the search for authentic life.<sup>89</sup>

This section establishes that religious conversion is fuelled by a desire for relational authenticity. As I have argued above, it is generally accepted that the desire to be real, to be authentic, permeates our culture. This desire resonates with the experiences of recent converts to Christianity who demonstrated a deep desire for relational authenticity that led them to explore, discover and embrace a relationship with God. My research revealed that the desire for authenticity that leads to conversion was experienced in four specific ways. First, there was a yearning towards God: towards an authentic spirituality. Secondly, there was a desire to be a better person: a more authentic version of themselves.<sup>90</sup> A third type of longing was expressed when remedial help was required to achieve desired authenticity. This was expressed as a yearning away from dysfunction.<sup>91</sup> Fourthly, there was sometimes a further element to the desire for relational authenticity as existing intellectual frameworks were unable to fully explain one’s experiences. Each of these four dimensions of a desire for relational authenticity are discussed next along with literature that illuminates, challenges and clarifies.

### **Setting the scene**

The yearning for sacredness, spiritual meaning, security, and personal engagement with the spirit are the primary needs and longings of the contemporary world.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Joel B Green, *Why Salvation?*, Reframing New Testament Theology (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 12.

<sup>89</sup> Paul S Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 3.

<sup>90</sup> I coded this to the affect “Wanting to live better.”

<sup>91</sup> Together, the first and third aspects constitute most of what I coded to the affect, “Yearning or wanting more.”

<sup>92</sup> Tacey, *Spirituality Revolution*, 20. See also, Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 7.

Abraham Maslow developed a theory of motivation articulating the hierarchy of needs that humans experience.<sup>93</sup> His representation developed from a five-stage schema to the extended model shown in Figure 11.1, which broadens the self-actualisation level. The first four needs on both models are what he calls the basic needs or deficiency needs. The remaining needs can be known as 'growth' needs, as they relate to self-actualisation and being the best that you can be.<sup>94</sup> For Maslow, "authenticity occurs when individuals discover their true inner nature by sufficiently satisfying higher order psychological needs."<sup>95</sup> Maslow understood it is essential to address the lower level needs before the higher self-actualisation needs could be met.<sup>96</sup>

While Maslow's hierarchy is still extensively used today, it is not without its critics. Some note that its emphasis on personal growth unhelpfully ignores realities present at a political, social or societal level that impede or prevent such growth.<sup>97</sup> Maslow was himself concerned with such questions in his later years, wondering, "Why don't more people self-actualize if their basic needs are met? How can we humanistically understand the problem of evil?"<sup>98</sup> In addition, Maslow's original methodology is sometimes questioned.<sup>99</sup> Despite these criticisms and concerns, Maslow's work is still widely regarded and empirical testing affirms the

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<sup>93</sup> Abraham H Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943).

<sup>94</sup> Saul A McLeod, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs," [www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html](http://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html). Accessed 30 August 2016.

<sup>95</sup> Brian Middleton Goldman and Michael H Kernis, "The Role of Authenticity in Healthy Psychological Functioning and Subjective Well-Being," *Annals of the American Psychotherapy Association* 5, no. 6 (2002), <http://www.biomedsearch.com/article/role-authenticity-in-healthy-psychological/95844662.html>. Accessed 10 March 2016.

<sup>96</sup> Maslow, "Human Motivation Theory," 370.

<sup>97</sup> Ruth L Waterhouse, "'Wild Women Don't Have the Blues': A Feminist Critique of 'Person-Centred' Counselling and Therapy," *Feminism and Psychology* 3, no. 1 (1993): 56. This was likely not helped when Maslow did not respond to protect the integrity of his model when psychologist, Carl Rogers, reframed it. Rogers "made self-actualisation the single motivation governing human behavior," ignoring the need for the lower-level needs to be addressed, allowing those needs to be neglected. (See David L Rennie, "Two Thoughts on Abraham Maslow," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 48, no. 4 (2008): 445.)

<sup>98</sup> Nelson Goud, "Abraham Maslow: A Personal Statement," *ibid.*: 450.

<sup>99</sup> Gender studies scholars, Dallas Cullen and Lise Gotell, consider Maslow's only empirical basis to be "his own 1930s' study of the relationship between self-esteem and sexual behaviour in young college women." Dallas Cullen and Lise Gotell, "From Orgasms to Organizations: Maslow, Women's Sexuality and the Gendered Foundations of the Needs Hierarchy," *Gender Work and Organization* 9, no. 5 (2002): 538. While Cullen and Gotell raise in their paper some justifiable concerns about Maslow's research on women's sexuality, their suggestion that this was the only basis for his motivational model is not substantiated in their article. Maslow, himself, indicated that his model "derives most directly ... from clinical experience" while drawing on what he called "the known facts, clinical and observational as well as experimental." Maslow, "Human Motivation Theory," 371. Noting that there was a lack of data to contribute to understanding human motivation, Maslow engaged in what we might today call 'purposive sampling' and researched men and women he considered exemplary, attempting to understand how they had achieved the self-actualisation he observed in them. For more on this, see Rennie, "Two Thoughts." Maslow's sample size was small: he undertook biographical analysis on just 18 people. Only two of them were women. Most were "highly educated white males." McLeod, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs".

presence of “universal need predictors of well-being” while noting that higher level psychological needs may be met, despite some lower level needs remaining unfulfilled.<sup>100</sup> Therefore, while the hierarchy itself may not always be accurate, the factors Maslow identifies are shown to contribute to psychological wellbeing.

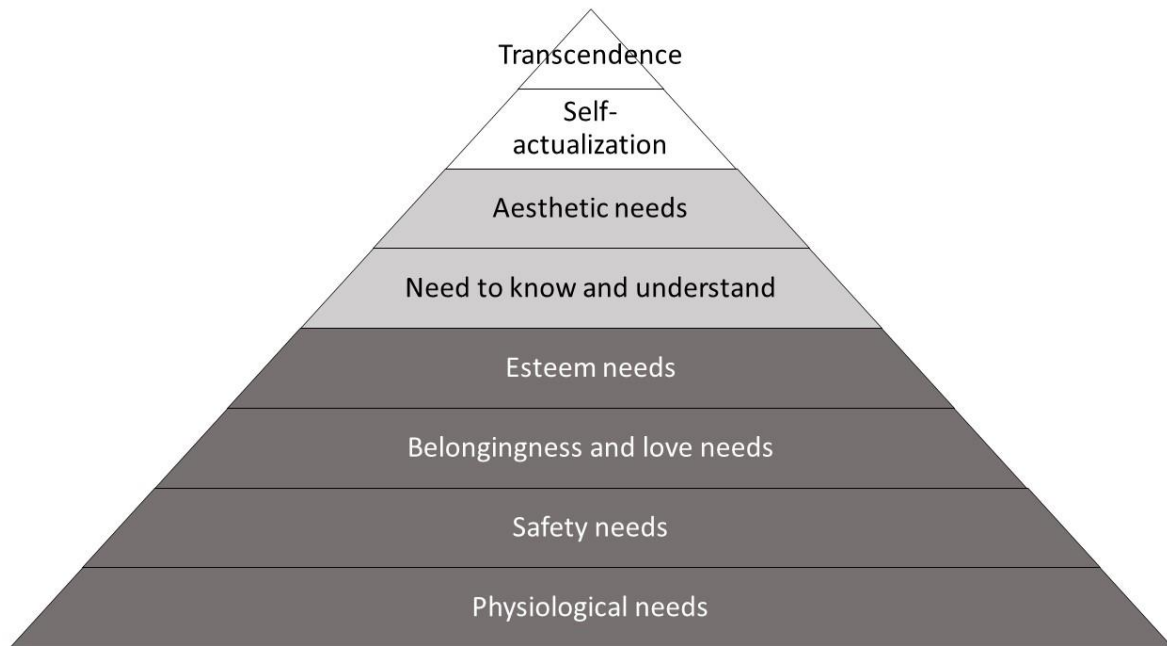


Figure 11.1: Maslow's extended hierarchy of needs<sup>101</sup>

Theologian, Stanley Grenz, asserted that this work of Maslow's marked the end of seeing what we now call self-mastery or self-improvement “as a religious vocation,” and the beginning of a “secularized self-mastery characterized by the autonomous self's quest for psychological health.”<sup>102</sup> However, Grenz also noted the growing dissatisfaction of such an approach as the essentially relational aspects of the self became increasingly recognised.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>100</sup> Louis Tay and Ed Diener, "Needs and Subjective Well-Being around the World," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101, no. 2 (2011): 362-363. For a thorough recent investigation, see Robert J Taormina and Jennifer H Gao, "Maslow and the Motivation Hierarchy: Measuring Satisfaction of the Needs," *The American Journal of Psychology* 126, no. 2 (2013).

<sup>101</sup> Adapted from McLeod, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs".

<sup>102</sup> Grenz, *Social God, Relational Self*, 96. However, Maslow observed that the people he defined as self-actualised were all “dedicated people, devoted to some task ‘outside themselves,’ some vocation, or duty, or beloved job.” Abraham H Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 301. See also, his table of characteristics of self-actualised people. *Ibid.*, 308-309. Maslow did speak of the spiritual nature of life, arguing that “the spiritual life is ... a defining characteristic of human nature.” *Ibid.*, 325. However, he saw spirituality as “attainable in principle” by human effort. *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Grenz, *Social God, Relational Self*, 97;136. I talk more about the inherently relational nature of the self in the following major sections.

Humankind's spiritual nature is increasingly recognised today. Neuroscientist, Andrew Newberg, notes that the way our brains are structured means that religion and God are vitally important in the "self-maintenance and self-transcendence" that is the role of the brain.<sup>104</sup> "Spiritual experience, at its very root, is intimately interwoven with human biology. ... Biology, in some way, compels the spiritual urge."<sup>105</sup> Spirituality is innate.<sup>106</sup> Something deep within us as human beings seeks both ultimate meaning and experiences that are self-transcending.<sup>107</sup>

Practical theologian, John Swinton, helpfully notes the link between spirituality and the Hebrew ruach: the life-breath given to the Adam at creation. Swinton distinguishes between the human spirit, and spirituality: "The human spirit is the essential life-force that undergirds, motivates and vitalizes human existence. Spirituality is the specific way in which individuals and communities respond to the experience of the spirit."<sup>108</sup> He argues that the spirit is what energises our existence as humans, giving purpose and meaning.<sup>109</sup>

Aware of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Grenz's much-needed corrective, and these brief additional insights from Newberg and Swinton, we now turn to consider how religious conversion is fuelled by a desire for relational authenticity. Among those I interviewed, how was their desire for relational authenticity expressed?

### **Affect 1a: Yearning towards God<sup>110</sup>**

I just needed God in my life. And needed God so [much], like it was just a craving. And I was trying to work out how can I get God closer.<sup>111</sup>

Mary was desperate for God. She had spent her life searching, exploring, seeking and desiring God. Fuelled by this desire for God, Mary had whole-heartedly embraced 'New Age' philosophies. But as she spoke with others about the 'New Age', "there was always this little voice in the back of [her] mind that would say, 'liar. It's not true'." For 25 years that voice had

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<sup>104</sup> Andrew Newberg, "Are We 'Hard-Wired' for God?" <http://www.andrewnewberg.com/research>. Accessed 24 June 2014. See also, Brian D Majerus, "Toward an Authentic Knowing of God: The Differentiation-of-Self Construct in Relational Spirituality," *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 12, no. 4 (2010): 289-291.

<sup>105</sup> Andrew Newberg, Eugene G d'Aquili and Vince Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York: Random House, 2001), 8.

<sup>106</sup> Fisher, "Understanding and Assessing Spiritual Health," 70.

<sup>107</sup> Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 4.

<sup>108</sup> Swinton, *Spirituality and Mental Health Care*, 14.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> In many of these headings, I link directly to my results. Here, for example, I am referencing part of my first affect: "A sense of yearning." In making these direct links, I hope to make it easy for the reader to see the connections between my data and my substantive theory. Because I am arguing in relation to my theory, the affects and elements of the conversion process do not always follow the same chronological order in which they are reported in the Results.

<sup>111</sup> Mary interview.

“made [Mary] feel like a fraud.” Eventually, her desire for an authentic spirituality started Mary on the journey of engaging in Christian spiritual practices: a journey that resulted in her becoming a Christian. Something in Mary had been dissatisfied, seeking an authentic spirituality: a connection with God.<sup>112</sup>

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) attributed such a sense of yearning to the fact that we are created *imago Dei*. As he famously wrote: “Thou hast made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee.”<sup>113</sup> Augustine frequently returned to this theme, particularly throughout his *Confessions*: humanity’s longings can only be satisfied by God.<sup>114</sup> Christian theology continues to assert that “humanity is created with a homing instinct for God, an instinct for the discernment of the divine.”<sup>115</sup> Understood thus, the yearning towards God that Mary and the other participants experienced can be seen as a ‘natural’ response to God’s proffered grace.<sup>116</sup> Humanity’s inherent yearning for God is the reason why “even in seemingly godless ages, God lingers as a tantalizing memory or presence.”<sup>117</sup> Charles Wesley goes further, arguing that “this restlessness is actually God’s own longing for us before it is our longing for God.”<sup>118</sup>

Others I interviewed also experienced such a yearning. As a child and teenager, Olivia experienced a ‘wondering’ that triggered a longing for what she observed of Christianity.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Saint Augustine, *Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion*, trans. Albert Cook Outler, The Library of Christian Classics (USA: SCM Press, 1955), 31.

<sup>114</sup> McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 150. Of course, while Augustine noted the deep-felt longing within humanity to God, he also spoke of “intelligence” and the human capacity for “reason” as primary characteristics of *imago Dei*. This, along with his understanding of women’s place in *imago Dei*, needs challenging and extending. Ibid., 349-350.

<sup>115</sup> McGrath, “Transcendence and God: Reflections on Critical Realism, the ‘New Atheism’, and Christian Theology,” 161. Cognitive scientist, Justin Barrett, argues that babies are born with “strong natural tendencies toward religion.” Justin L Barrett, “The God Issue: Born Believers,” *New Scientist* 213, no. 2856 (2012): 41. See also, Justin L Barrett, *Born Believers: The Science of Children’s Religious Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2012); Morris, *Mystery and Meaning*, 48; Moloney, “Conversion and Spirituality,” 124-125. Psychologist, Gerald May, writes, “After twenty years of listening to the yearnings of people’s hearts, I am convinced that all human beings have an inborn desire for God. Whether we are consciously religious or not, this desire is our deepest longing and our most precious treasure. It gives us meaning.” Gerald G May, *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions* (New York: Harper One, 1988), 1.

<sup>116</sup> Markham, “Conversion Converted,” 52. McFadyen notes humans are “active agent[s] ... actively imaging the movement of God who seeks full human flourishing.” McFadyen, “Imaging God,” 923.

<sup>117</sup> McGrath, “Transcendence and God: Reflections on Critical Realism, the ‘New Atheism’, and Christian Theology,” 161. See also, James KA Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 46-63; Eugene Taylor, “Desperately Seeking Spirituality,” *Psychology Today* 27, no. 6 (1994).

<sup>118</sup> Philip R Meadows, “The Journey of Evangelism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, ed. William J Abraham and James E Kirby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 420. “It is God who draws us to Himself, not we who are attracted by God’s perfection.” See also, Hampson, *Christian Contradictions*, 281; Moloney, “Conversion and Spirituality.”

<sup>119</sup> Philosopher, Mark Doorley, notes the importance of ‘wonder’ for human beings. Mark J Doorley, “In Response to the Other: Postmodernity and Critical Realism,” in *In Deference to the Other*:

While she did not respond immediately, Sarah knew she needed to be in relationship with God. Tallulah similarly desired a relationship with God, and this desire kept her returning to church.

But this yearning was not completely satisfied. As I reported in Chapter 7, experiencing God's presence made participants long for more. Tallulah said: "[God's presence] is a bit like a drug: you want more of it."<sup>120</sup> The persistent longing encouraged the participants to explore faith more deeply. Because of her yearning for God, Tallulah attended church with the aim of developing her relationship with God. Similarly, Sarah recognised and eventually responded to her deep-felt need for a relationship with God by going to church. Hamish kept being drawn to reading his Bible. Theologian, Paul Markham, explains this ongoing yearning towards God, drawing on the Eastern theological tradition: "God created humans with a dynamic nature capable of growing in intimacy with the divine creator."<sup>121</sup> Rather than a yearning for a static state, we desire a growing intimacy with God.<sup>122</sup>

Such a desire for an ever-deeper intimacy with God is most clearly illustrated in Mary's story. At the time of our interview, Mary continued to long for closer connection, greater intimacy with God. She dreamt of God, and was upset upon awakening to realise they were just dreams.<sup>123</sup> This longing represents an eschatological hope: a hope for future redemption.<sup>124</sup> Such is the reality of life between Christ's resurrection and return.<sup>125</sup> Mary continues to feel very desperately this juxtaposition of connection with God, not yet fully realised.<sup>126</sup> Practical theologian, Richard Peace, explains this by saying it is as if we have caught "a glimpse of who we are, where our true home is and thus where we belong. And we find that we deeply

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*Loneragan and Contemporary Continental Thought*, ed. Jim Kanaris and Mark J Doorley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 132.

<sup>120</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>121</sup> Markham, "Conversion Converted," 51. See also, Grenz, *Social God, Relational Self*, 52.

<sup>122</sup> Sociologist, Robert Wuthnow, argues that Americans, rather than "dwelling" in a settled religiosity, now engage in a "spirituality of seeking [in which they] increasingly negotiate among competing glimpses of the sacred, seeking partial knowledge and practical wisdom." Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1998), 3. Therefore, faith, no longer inherited, is something one strives for. *Ibid.*, 8. See also, May, *Addiction and Grace*, 180-181.

<sup>123</sup> In Chapter 7, I described Mary's desire for God to be physically close to her. Mary noted she craved for a father figure she could trust. Psychologist, Chana Ullman, also noticed this desire for relationship, sometimes expressed as a desire for attachment to, and protection from, an "omnipotent figure." This desire is also for attachment to "loving peers," as will be discussed later. Ullman, *The Transformed Self*, 20.

<sup>124</sup> Klaus Berger, *Identity and Experience in the New Testament*, trans. Charles Muenchow (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 162. See Romans 8:23; 2 Corinthians 5:1-5.

<sup>125</sup> McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 452; Nicholas Thomas (NT/Tom) Wright, "Paul, Ethics and the Church," in *Ecclesia and Ethics: Moral Formation and the Church*, ed. E Allen III Jones, et al. (London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 87-88.

<sup>126</sup> There was also dissatisfaction for Meg in terms of her ongoing dysfunction. I discuss this later.

desire to be part of that destiny. But then the window closes on this vision and all we are left with is the longing.”<sup>127</sup> This was Mary’s life-long experience.

As I mentioned previously in defining relational authenticity, and as we will explore further later, our identity as humans relates to our created purpose of imaging God. Therefore, our desire for connection with God – our desire to be bound up into this relationality – is, essentially, a desire for relational authenticity: a desire to image the relational God.

This sense of yearning was also recognised by sociologist, Filomeno Aguilar, who categorised some of the Filipino converts he interviewed as “yearners.” The narratives of these converts described “a self in search of personal transformation.”<sup>128</sup> Like Mary’s, their stories indicated they perceived they were in touch with the divine before their conversions.<sup>129</sup> Interestingly, Aguilar did not link this yearning for personal transformation with authenticity. He concluded that the experiences of the converts he studied differed from what he called the “Western ... linear movement from estrangement to authenticity.”<sup>130</sup> It seems that he bases his understanding of that movement on a particular conversion narrative style – requiring “self-deprecation and alienation” – also largely absent in my own research; and on an understanding of ‘authenticity’ that has been largely superseded.<sup>131</sup> Reading through the eight narratives in Aguilar’s appendix reveals evidence of both yearning and a desire to be a better person.<sup>132</sup>

Practical theologian, Grace Milton, settled on the term “wholeness” or “shalom” as a “suitably holistic lens through which to frame a Pentecostal understanding of conversion.”<sup>133</sup> The definition of shalom she embraced has some resonance with my definition of relational authenticity: Shalom is the “fullness and wholeness of well-being, the vital flourishing of all things in right relationships – with God, humanity, and nature at large. Shalom describes

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<sup>127</sup> Richard V Peace, *Noticing God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012), 31-32.

<sup>128</sup> Aguilar, "Experiencing Transcendence," 596.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 598.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* Aguilar cites Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 82-87. In this, (English and comparative literature scholar) Viswanathan links authenticity with an early 20th century Jamesian understanding of both conversion and self. Such understandings have been overtaken by contemporary framings, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

<sup>132</sup> Aguilar, "Experiencing Transcendence," 612-623. Theologian, Andrew Root, recounted the story of the yearning experienced by his friend’s atheist mother as she died of cancer: “Marlen’s brokenness couldn’t keep her spirit from yearning for something transcendent and bigger than herself to come, to arrive. She now hated a God she couldn’t believe in, cursed a Jesus she thought didn’t care.” Root, *Christopraxis*, 4. Despite her unbelief, Marlen yearned for the transcendent.

<sup>133</sup> Milton, "Understanding Pentecostal Conversion," 254.



God's intention for creation and God's promise for the new creation."<sup>134</sup> For the Pentecostals Milton studied, as for those I researched, it "was often an attraction to the idea of wholeness in one particular dimension which prompted their initial conversion."<sup>135</sup>

My research demonstrates that a sense of yearning towards God reflects a movement towards wholeness, transcendence and flourishing. A sense of yearning was also reported in other research on conversion to Christianity. For those I interviewed, this yearning for God represented a desire for relational authenticity. They desired to move towards becoming the people they were created to be. Next, we consider a second affect that also expresses a desire for relational authenticity: the desire to be a better person.

## **Affect 2: Towards being a better person; or becoming who they are**

I think the sort of ideas ... being talked about ... could really make me a better person.<sup>136</sup>

Luke made the above observation, having attended a Christian conference with his workmates. His desire for authenticity was expressed here as a desire to be a better person. Like a 'yearning towards God', this desire was a key driver towards conversion for most of those I interviewed. They described specific ways they had wanted to be 'better' people before they became Christians. It was not that they wanted to be someone they were not. Rather, they wanted to be more the people they were.

Olivia and Jean were both teaching in church schools. They wanted to learn about the Christian faith so they could be better – more authentic – teachers into that specific context. Hamish "didn't like who he had become."<sup>137</sup> Tallulah was aware some of her behaviours could impact negatively on her young daughter. Similarly, Jean wanted to be a good mother to her son. Sarah wanted to love her troubled adult daughter unconditionally.<sup>138</sup> These were all ways they wanted to be better people, more relationally authentic, and this desire fuelled their faith explorations.

They saw in the attributes of God, attributes they themselves aspired to: things that would make them better people, better parents, better friends. For instance, Jean had sung of God:

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<sup>134</sup> Richard J Plantinga, Thomas R Thompson and Matthew D Lundberg, *An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 599. (Cited in Milton, *Shalom*, 205-206.)

<sup>135</sup> Milton, "Understanding Pentecostal Conversion," 272. She elaborates: "It might be realisation of their need for forgiveness and new life, a desire to be identified and accepted as a child of God and part of God's family, or the attraction of being part of a more significant destiny." Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>137</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>138</sup> Christian songs she sang reminded her of how she wants to live.

“You’re rich in love and you’re slow to anger.”<sup>139</sup> She wanted to be more loving and patient. Tallulah and Hamish had heard stories from the Bible of Jesus accepting and forgiving. They wanted to be more accepting and forgiving. Their desire for authenticity was aspirational: they wanted God’s help to live better, to more fully reflect the attributes they appreciated in God.

This inherent desire to reflect, to image, attributes of God should not surprise us. We are, after all, created in the image of God. As an ontological fact, *imago Dei* theologically defines who we are; and as an aspirational ideal, it affects how we live.<sup>140</sup> Those I interviewed yearned for an authentic version of themselves, one that reflected the positive attributes they saw in God and in other Christians.<sup>141</sup> This desire fuelled their explorations of faith, as they came to understand that God could enable them to be better people.

There are two potential dimensions to the affect ‘desiring to live better or become who they are’. One, ‘enownment’, relates to a sense of self-fulfilment; and the other, ‘releasement’, relates to the sense of care and concern beyond oneself to others and to the world God loves. Returning to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and considering his expanded model, self-actualisation corresponds with self-fulfilment; and transcendence with care and concern beyond oneself and/or connecting with something beyond the ego.

While the desire to be better people, as expressed by those I interviewed, was certainly related to their own personal development, it was primarily expressed in relation to their interactions in, and contribution to, the wider world. Thus, their desire to be better people was part of their desire for relational authenticity – becoming who they were, including in terms of responsibility towards others. Their desire for authenticity was not narcissistic, rather it was a desire for Guignon’s ‘releasement’ or Maslow’s transcendence: beyond themselves to others, as well as to God.

Sociologist, David Yamane’s research revealed three cultural schemas that help explain the motivation behind people converting to Catholicism: “familism, expressive individualism, and utilitarian individualism.”<sup>142</sup> In ‘familism’ – essentially a desire to place family first in one’s priorities and engage in a community-focused lifestyle – we can see a desire to be a better

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<sup>139</sup> Redman and Myrin, “10,000 Reasons.”

<sup>140</sup> McFadyen, *Personhood*, 18.

<sup>141</sup> I discuss their desire to reflect the positive attributes they saw in other Christians below.

<sup>142</sup> Yamane, *Becoming Catholic*, 59. For a helpful brief review, see Nancy T Ammerman, “Becoming Catholic: Finding Rome in the American Religious Landscape, by David Yamane,” *American Journal of Sociology* 120, no. 6 (2015). Yamane’s latter two categorisations (experienced by 21% and 7%, respectively, of those he interviewed) draw on the work of sociologist, Robert Bellah, and colleagues in Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 333-334; 336. (Yamane, *Becoming Catholic*, 60.)

person. Yamane cited the example of Stephen, who started attending church after he realised he had been “depriving [his] loved ones of something important” by not being connected to his local community and church. Stephen’s “desire to be a good ‘family man’” thus stimulated his involvement in the Catholic church.<sup>143</sup> Yamane echoed Stephen’s story in others he told, that related to a desire to be a better person. One – Michele – made an overt reference to authenticity when reported she “felt like a bit of a fraud” before making a commitment to move from being a Presbyterian who attended Mass with her family, to formally joining that Catholic church.<sup>144</sup> In total, 72% of those Yamane interviewed alluded to familism as the primary cultural schema framing their motivation for conversion.<sup>145</sup> Yamane noted that this familism “often motivates through negative emotions like shame and guilt.”<sup>146</sup> This was true for some of my participants, for example Hamish and Tallulah. However, even they reported the desire to be better people as a positive motivator towards flourishing more than a negative movement away from dysfunction. This longing to be a better person was most often expressed positively.<sup>147</sup>

According to Pascal, human existence makes sense “if we think of ourselves as having been created to dwell continually in friendship with God, but as having wandered away into a wilderness where we have grown lost, and lost also to ourselves.”<sup>148</sup> This sense of ‘lost-ness’ to oneself can be expressed as a yearning towards God and as a desire to be a better person. Pascal’s ‘lost-ness’ can also inform understanding of the next type of desire for relational authenticity: yearning away from dysfunction.

### **Affect 1b: Yearning away from dysfunction**

I was just so beside myself with these things [demons], coming on my bed, crawling over me, biting me, scratching me. One was actually pulling my blanket down and that’s when I said, “OK God, I know I’m pretty out there but enough’s enough”. So, and when the pastor had bound some stuff, I felt it work. But I was beside myself, absolutely beside myself.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Yamane, *Becoming Catholic*, 62.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>147</sup> Sociologist, Daniel Winchester, noted that the converts to Eastern Orthodox Christianity he interviewed experienced conversion as “the progressive discovery of a latent religious self that was part of one’s life all along.” Daniel Winchester, “Converting to Continuity: Temporality and Self in Eastern Orthodox Conversion Narratives,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, no. 3 (2015): 439. He argues that this analysis of self-continuity differs from evangelical, Pentecostal and fundamentalist conversion “narratives of temporal rupture.” *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> McIntosh, *Divine Teaching*, 214.

<sup>149</sup> Meg interview.

In the aspects explored in the section above, the converts were mostly yearning towards God: toward greater strength and wholeness.<sup>150</sup> But as well as yearning towards God, some longed to escape current difficulties. They had deficiencies and dysfunction that needed overcoming, and they needed remedial help to achieve their desired relational authenticity.

Luke had significant challenges relating to his illness and subsequent isolation. Others were acutely aware that aspects of their lives needed to change. But this yearning away from dysfunction was most evident in Meg's story. Embroiled in the 'New Age' movement and understanding herself to be debilitatingly possessed by demons, Meg yearned for escape and knew she needed external help to achieve it. Her yearning away from dysfunction was remedial. Meg knew she needed to escape her dysfunction before she could live the life she was designed to live: before she could achieve relational authenticity.

While it was very clear in Meg's story, this acknowledgement of a need for something external to help us is not as common today as it was earlier last century. Guignon noted a cultural shift in the 20<sup>th</sup> century from a perceived need to become "something you were not yet" to an understanding of ourselves as already containing our essence.<sup>151</sup> This older conception, Meg's perception, was based on the premise that while one is able to realise their "potential and purpose as a human being," they required external resources in order to do so.<sup>152</sup> By contrast, contemporary popular understandings of authenticity encourage "you to realize and *be* that which you *already are*, [recognising that] the unique, definitive traits [are] already there within you."<sup>153</sup> But obviously, such older constructions, and realities, of the self – as having potential for improvement, but requiring assistance to achieve this – continue to linger. Meg needed, and continues to require, external help to reach her full potential.<sup>154</sup>

There are echoes of Meg's story in the converts Aguilar categorised as "trapped" in his study of Filipino conversion narratives. Like Meg, they were suffering acute dysfunction. Their

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<sup>150</sup> This yearning towards God was a positive desire for flourishing. Theologian, Grace Jantzen, argued that the concept of flourishing (present as 'flourishing' in the Old Testament and in the idea of 'fullness' and 'abundance' in the New Testament) was largely overtaken in post-Reformation Western theology by the concept of salvation (the need for rescue because of deficiency). Both were evident in my data. Grace M Jantzen, "Feminism and Flourishing: Gender and Metaphor in Feminist Theology," *Feminist Theology* 4, no. 10 (1995).

<sup>151</sup> Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 3.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. Original emphasis. Historian, Virginia Brereton, noted this change in the 19th and 20th century conversion accounts she researched. Increasingly, women narrating their conversion stories consider they have within themselves the "power to determine [their] destiny." Virginia Lieson Brereton, *From Sin to Salvation: Stories of Women's Conversions, 1800 to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 123.

<sup>154</sup> At the time of our interview, Meg continued to struggle with demonic possession and general spiritual malaise. We explore this further when we consider the transformational nature of conversion.

situations were essentially pathological and they did not have the personal means to overcome them.<sup>155</sup> Similarly, psychologist, Chana Ullman, concluded “most religious conversions ... occur against a background of emotional turmoil and instability.”<sup>156</sup> Psychologists, Brian Zinnbauer and Kenneth Pargament, observed that subjectively perceived life stress was a precursor to conversion.<sup>157</sup> Many of the situations psychologist, Lewis Rambo, would classify as a ‘crisis’ were challenges or difficulties that required overcoming.<sup>158</sup> Seen thus, such converts were yearning away from dysfunction.<sup>159</sup>

As introduced in Chapter 3, sociologist, Ines Jindra, undertook comprehensive research on conversions to different religions. She categorised seven of the converts she interviewed as having a background that “dealt primarily with problems in the area of family ties and self.”<sup>160</sup> All seven had converted to Christianity. In the three examples Jindra cited, one, John Summer, “became a Christian ... after a night of wild partying and drinking, when he suddenly realized that he was destroying himself.”<sup>161</sup> Another, suffering from low self-esteem and a general sense of unworthiness, saw Christianity offer peace and strength to leave an unhealthy relationship.<sup>162</sup> A third, well used to discrimination in her home country, found Christianity provided “a sense of being God’s child, of being special.”<sup>163</sup> Jindra concluded that “emotions of love and peace and more meaning in life were what attracted converts to Christianity.”<sup>164</sup> These emotions and this sense of meaning were experienced because of their relationship with “a religious figure (e.g. Christ),” and resulted in the converts feeling increasingly at ease with others, and themselves.<sup>165</sup> In these accounts, Jindra linked a

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<sup>155</sup> Aguilar, "Experiencing Transcendence."

<sup>156</sup> Ullman, *The Transformed Self*, 20.

<sup>157</sup> Zinnbauer and Pargament, "Spiritual Conversion," 162;175-176.

<sup>158</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 44-55.

<sup>159</sup> See also, W Paul Williamson and Ralph W Hood Jr, "Spiritual Transformation: A Phenomenological Study among Recovering Substance Abusers," *Pastoral Psychology* (2012). However, these researchers may have encountered reconstructed or socially constructed conversion narratives that followed in the typical format of an evangelical testimony. We explore this further when we consider Affect 6: Seeing things differently.

<sup>160</sup> Jindra, *A New Model of Religious Conversion*, 74.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid. The long-term loving concern of his previous youth pastor was vitally important in Summer's conversion. Summer had also heard God speaking directly to him earlier on that same night, but had chosen to ignore it. Ibid., 42.

<sup>162</sup> Like Summer, this woman also mentioned a supernatural encounter with God as important in her conversion story: "an absolute overwhelming peace, and healing and so much all wrapped into one moment in time." Ibid., 75.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid. Here, Jindra's "e.g. Christ" is a small concession to the agency of God in conversion. She did not note the significance of the supernatural encounters her informants shared.

yearning away from dysfunction with a desire for greater meaning in life.<sup>166</sup> Both are clearly related to a desire for relational authenticity.<sup>167</sup>

Linguist, Cecilia Ayometzi, observed undocumented immigrants in the USA, desperately deprived of essential “social, linguistic, and economic resources,” converting to Christianity and finding in their new faith community the resources they required.<sup>168</sup> Like Meg, these converts perceived they needed help from God to enable their positive change.<sup>169</sup> Because of their conversions, those Ayometzi researched appropriated and sustained a new identity: that of being a Christian. Vitally important in their stories were the relational connections with others in the mission that became part of this new identity. These impoverished migrants were yearning away from dysfunction, and found in the Christian faith a degree of relational authenticity.

Thus, sometimes dysfunction needed overcoming. But this was certainly not the only, or even the primary conversion motivation for those I interviewed. Having considered yearning towards God; the desire to be a better person; and yearning away from dysfunction, we turn to briefly consider the desire for intellectual authenticity.

### **Seeking intellectual authenticity**

I felt that I had got to the end of ... atheism and I was just staring into the abyss.  
There was just nothing left there.<sup>170</sup>

While the desire for relational authenticity was most often expressed as affective or emotional, that was not always the case. Hamish had an intellectual as well as a gut sense that the atheism he had long embraced was seriously deficient. Triggered by a sense of dryness – that atheism “was just dry bones” – Hamish began what sociologists, John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, would call an intellectual quest.<sup>171</sup> Their model (already discussed in Chapter 3) is shown again in Table 11.1.

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<sup>166</sup> While Jindra primarily noted this search for meaning in relation to Christian converts, she also reported that where the significant background issues were *both* cultural social and/or familial disorganisation *and* problems in the area of relationships or the self, two of the converts she researched had converted to Islam and another to Christianity.

<sup>167</sup> Concepts of authenticity and a search for meaning are often linked in the literature. For example, see Marisa Crawford and Graham Rossiter, *Reasons for Living: Education and Young People's Search for Meaning, Identity and Spirituality: A Handbook* (Camberwell, VIC: ACER Press, 2006), 16; Viktor Gecas, "The Self-Concept as a Basis for a Theory of Motivation," in *The Self-Society Dynamic: Cognition, Emotion, and Action*, ed. Judith A Howard and Peter L Callero (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 174.

<sup>168</sup> Ayometzi, "Storying as Becoming," 42.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>170</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>171</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs."

Hamish experienced minimal social pressure from his Christian friends, and also felt God gave him opportunities to opt out of the conversion process.<sup>172</sup> Hamish's conversion process took six months: fitting within the medium "weeks or months" of Lofland and Skonovd's schema.<sup>173</sup> His level of affective arousal was medium as demonstrated in his matter-of-fact experiences and retelling. The key affective content was a sense of illumination, as he became aware of things previously unnoticed, and began to see things in new ways. But, like all those I interviewed, Hamish participated in spiritual practices before becoming a Christian.<sup>174</sup> This belief-participation variation is the single key point of difference with Lofland and Skonovd's "Intellectual" motif.<sup>175</sup> I suggest that, today, behaving and belonging (both aspects of participation) generally precede belief.<sup>176</sup>

Table 11.1: Lofland and Skonovd's conversion motifs<sup>177</sup>

		Intellectual	Mystical	Experiential	Affectional	Revivalist	Coercive
Major variations	Degree of social pressure	Low or none	None or little	Low	Medium	High	High
	Temporal duration	Medium	Short	Long	Long	Short	Long
	Level of affective arousal	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High	High
	Affective content	Illumination	Awe, love, fear	Curiosity	Affection	Love (and fear)	Fear (and love)
	Belief-participation sequence	Belief-participation	Belief-participation	Participation-belief	Participation-belief	Participation-belief	Participation-belief

Hamish's yearning (as well as a desire to be a better person) grew out of his intellectual quest. It was a yearning for self-actualisation, fitting into Maslow's extended motivation

<sup>172</sup> In Chapter 8, I described Hamish's friend sending him a Mythbusters video clip. Hamish saw this as an opportunity from both God and his friend to abandon his spiritual search.

<sup>173</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," 376.

<sup>174</sup> Hamish did not attend church before calling himself a Christian.

<sup>175</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," 376-377. Lofland and Skonovd conflate participation in a "religion's ritual and organizational activities" presuming both happen together. This was possibly a more reasonable conflation when they published in 1981.

<sup>176</sup> A perennial debate in sociology of religion relates to the reasons, meaning and implications of the variation between numbers of people who profess belief in God and those who belong to a church. Grace Davie popularised the phrase "believing without belonging" when she used it as a subtitle in her 1994 book: Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). (She had previously written a journal article of the same title: Grace Davie, "Believing without Belonging: Is This the Future of Religion in Britain?" *Social Compass* 37, no. 4 (1990).) Since then, there has been much discussion, often using competing definitions of both 'belief' and 'belonging'. Davie herself provides a helpful summary in the second edition of her book. Davie, *Religion in Britain*, 78-81. See also, Stuart Murray, *Church after Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), 9-23. It is well beyond the scope of this project to explore this beyond the scant references I make.

<sup>177</sup> Model adapted from Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," 375.

model at the lowest of the self-actualisation level: needing to know and understand. Thus, while the yearning for relational authenticity was most often expressed in affective terms, it was also expressed intellectually, particularly by Hamish.<sup>178</sup>

However, as well as being an intellectual quest, Hamish's desire was towards authenticity. He was rejecting a "social *atomism*" that sees "fulfilment as just of the self, neglecting or delegitimising the demands that come from beyond our own desires or aspirations, be they from history, tradition, society, nature, or God."<sup>179</sup> Hamish realised that he could not explain the love and care he had for his family in terms of some primal need to have them survive to sexual maturity, as atheism would have him do. Dissatisfied with this view of society, Hamish was drawn to faith in God.

### **Do these yearnings relate to human sinfulness?**

[The] corruption of the divine image lies at the root of human unhappiness, and is manifest in a general state of dissatisfaction and restlessness.<sup>180</sup>

Perhaps there was a subconscious awareness of human sinfulness in these yearnings. A yearning towards God is necessary because we are separated from God: when relationship with God is what we were created for. A yearning towards being a better person acknowledges we are not all that we could or should be.<sup>181</sup> Some of the dysfunction participants longed to escape from was caused by sin: be it their own or another's.<sup>182</sup> While participants had no language for sin, their longings may express a deep awareness of what Christians might call an inherent sinfulness.<sup>183</sup>

My research suggested that an awareness of sin is unlikely to be coherently present before conversion, although it may grow in the convert.<sup>184</sup> Writing in 1991, and tracing the change in the conversion narratives of women in the USA from 1800 to the 1980s, historian, Virginia Brereton, reported that many 20th century converts "learn to talk about 'sin' only after their conversions."<sup>185</sup> The language of sin served as a device to make sense of their previous

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<sup>178</sup> Hamish also demonstrated strong affective dimensions to his conversion.

<sup>179</sup> Taylor, *Authenticity*, 58.

<sup>180</sup> Meadows, "Journey of Evangelism," 419-420.

<sup>181</sup> As Jean said, talk of sin "just sort of ... brought [her] back to trying to be a better person." Jean interview.

<sup>182</sup> For example, Luke's accident was caused by the dangerous driving of another. Meg engaged in drug-taking, and what she indicated to be sinful sexual practices.

<sup>183</sup> Sinfulness can, thus, be understood as our failure to live up to our full potential. Walker, "Process of Conversion," 68.

<sup>184</sup> Similarly, Rambo argued that "not many people appreciate" the designation of "sinner," but that where groups emphasise Jesus' redemption from sin, "then a member must own the label *sinner*, [and] must somehow experience that reality in his or her own life." Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 119.

<sup>185</sup> Brereton, *From Sin to Salvation*, 53.



experiences. In the 20th century, rather than focusing on sin, conversion came to be related to acceptance by God or Jesus, or notions of being sheltered, protected and guided. Pre-conversion, narrators saw themselves as “being unloved and unlovable, of isolation, abandonment, and hatred turned inward.”<sup>186</sup> There was less mention of sinful acts and more emphasis on undesirable character traits.<sup>187</sup>

In 1973, psychiatrist, Karl Menninger, wondered, “Whatever became of sin?”<sup>188</sup> He argued that sin, “once a strong word, an ominous and serious word” had disappeared from common usage by the 1950s in the USA.<sup>189</sup> By then, rather than being located *within*, requiring God’s forgiveness, sin became linked to *external* actions and consequential punishments.<sup>190</sup> Sociologist, Colin Brown, also reported decreasing talk of sin in popular language.<sup>191</sup>

Sin is not generally spoken of beyond the walls of the church. It is unsurprising then that escaping sinfulness was not mentioned as a motivation for conversion. Yet, those I interviewed did articulate yearnings that could be understood as desires to move away from human sinfulness – particularly a sinfulness defined in terms of estrangement; or distorted relationality – towards God’s salvation.<sup>192</sup>

### **Reiterating the relational dimension of these desires**

Today rapid social change and intense spiritual restlessness evoke fierce yearning in many people. ... Some observers see this yearning as a quest for meaning, others as a longing for spiritual consciousness or experience. Important as those quests are, we think that they arise from a deeper longing, a longing for a life that adds up to something that is in a deep sense good for oneself, for other people, and for all creation.<sup>193</sup>

In these four types of yearning or longing for authenticity we see authenticity’s relational dimension. The desire for authenticity was not towards a narrow self-fulfilment but, rather, it was a desire to live well amid relationships and responsibilities. Those I interviewed longed for wholeness and health. They sought a relationship with God and desired a spirituality that was true. They aspired to live better: in relationships with friends, family, strangers and work.

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973).

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 23-30.

<sup>191</sup> Callum G Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000*, 1st ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 79-87.

<sup>192</sup> See also, Paul Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” in *A Chorus of Witnesses: Model Sermons for Today’s Preacher*, ed. Thomas G Long and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1994); Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 173-183; Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism: Ambiguity, Truth and Theological Literacy*, 159-167.

<sup>193</sup> Dykstra and Bass, “A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” 16.

Self-fulfilment was defined in terms of relationships with others. Genuine authenticity is relational.<sup>194</sup>

### Other literature on motivations for conversion: desiring relational authenticity?

The desire to be authentic is rich and fully human.<sup>195</sup>

We have already considered four specific ways those I interviewed demonstrated a desire for relational authenticity: a desire that fuelled their faith explorations. I have introduced literature that illuminated each of those four elements. Next, we consider more general literature on motivations for conversion. Do others see a desire for authenticity as a motivating factor in religious conversion?

Religion's potential as a "resource ... to generate meaning in life" is well recognised.<sup>196</sup> The potential of a desire for authenticity to act as a motivating force has also been documented.<sup>197</sup> Sociologist, Christian Smith, brings resource and motivation together when

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<sup>194</sup> Milton similarly emphasised the relationality of conversion and *shalom*. Milton, "Understanding Pentecostal Conversion," 257.

<sup>195</sup> Braman, *Meaning and Authenticity*, 27.

<sup>196</sup> Susan K Fletcher, "Religion and Life Meaning: Differentiating between Religious Beliefs and Religious Community in Constructing Life Meaning," *Journal of Aging Studies* 18, no. 2 (2004): 171. See also, Zinnbauer and Pargament, "Spiritual Conversion," 178. Spirituality "promotes reflexivity, discernment, service, meaning making, and a sense of purpose and vocation that leads to 'self-transcendence, responsibility, and authenticity'." Daniel G Scott, "The Role of Spirituality in Human Development and Identity: An Introduction," in *International Handbook of Education for Spirituality, Care and Wellbeing: Part 1*, ed. Marian de Souza, et al. (Dordrecht, Heidelberg, London and New York: Springer, 2009), 273. (Scott is writing in relation to Douglas Magnuson, "The Contribution of Spirituality to 'Becoming a Self' in Child and Youth Services," *ibid.*, 433.) See also, Charlene Tan, "Reflection for Spiritual Development in Adolescents," *ibid.* Tan quotes Love and Talbot's characteristics of spiritual development, saying that it "involves seeking personal authenticity, genuineness and wholeness as an aspect of identity development." *Ibid.*, 399. (Originally in Patrick Love and Donna Talbot, "Defining Spiritual Development: A Missing Consideration for Student Affairs," *NASPA Journal* 46, no. 4 (2009): 617.) See also, Chaeyoon Lim and Robert D Putnam, "Religion, Social Networks, and Life Satisfaction," *American Sociological Review* 75, no. 6 (2010): 914. Interestingly, the proportion of Australians stating they "often" think about the meaning of life increased from 34% in 1985 to 45% in 1995. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 75. Interdisciplinary scholar, David Tacey, argues of the Australian context: "Many of the ailments that afflict Australians are complex and deep problems that involve questions of meaning and purpose. ... Suffering people are reporting that there is something missing in their lives, and this 'something' may have to do with spirituality." David John Tacey, "Spirituality in Australia Today," in *Sacred Australia: Post-Secular Considerations*, ed. Makarand Paranjape (Melbourne: Clouds of Magellan, 2009), 60.

<sup>197</sup> I have already introduced Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Sociologist, Arthur Neal, noted four key predisposing motives: a "desire to escape from an unwanted self;" a "quest for community;" "the pursuit of meaning;" and "the receptivity to change." Arthur G Neal, "Conflict and the Functional Equivalence of Social Movements," *Sociological Focus* 3, no. 3 (1970): 4. Sociologist, Viktor Gecas, named authenticity – a desire to experience the self as "meaningful and real" – as one of three self-motives or motivations. Gecas, "Self-Concept," 174. Linda George has been credited with being the first to explicitly explore the idea that the self can be enhanced through authenticity. Linda K George, "Self and Identity in Later Life: Protecting and Enhancing the Self," *Journal of Aging and Identity* 3, no. 3 (1998). (See Vannini and Franzese, "Authenticity of Self," 1627.) See also, Phillip Vannini and Sarah Burgess, "Authenticity as Motivation and Aesthetic Experience," in *Authenticity in Culture, Self,*

he argues that one of the reasons “Christianity works” is because of our human desire for “a significant life.”<sup>198</sup> Theologian, Chris Walker, named five “points of engagement” for evangelism with secular people: “the desire for self-transcendence”; “the concern for meaning and direction”; “the desire that life be enjoyable and challenging”; “the longing for fullness of life and maturity”; and “the concern for social justice.”<sup>199</sup> While empirical research on conversion has typically explored process rather than motivation, some writers, drawing on both empirical and theoretical bases, have noted motivational dimensions to religious conversion.<sup>200</sup>

My preliminary literature review included mention of Rambo’s ‘Quest’ stage of the conversion process. Rambo named six human motivations: four from psychologist, Seymour Epstein, (the desire for pleasure and avoidance of pain; the development of a conceptual system; enhancing self-esteem; establishing and maintaining relationships); one from sociologist, James Beckford, (power); and one from theologian, Walter Conn, (transcendence).<sup>201</sup>

Each of Epstein’s four elements are evidenced in the relational authenticity that research participants sought. Meg and Luke’s desires for healing and wholeness are desires to move to pleasure, from pain. Hamish’s desire for a cohesive conceptual system contributed to his faith explorations. The participants’ self-esteem was enhanced in the conversion process. Relationships were vital in each conversion story shared.<sup>202</sup> But there was more.

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*and Society*, ed. Phillip Vannini and J Patrick Williams (Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009). Sociologist, Jill Kiecolt, more generally included a lack of authenticity among the critical factors that lead to a decision to change oneself. K Jill Kiecolt, "Stress and the Decision to Change Oneself: A Theoretical Model," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (1994). See also, Bankston, Forsyth and Floyd, "General Model of Radical Conversion," 281.

<sup>198</sup> Smith, "Why Christianity Works," 169-170. Tacey argues that many Australians, particularly younger ones, are spiritual searchers. Tacey, "Spirituality in Australia Today," 52. See also, Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 506-507; Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 115. Taylor suggests that Western converts often seek something beyond immanence. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 731-735. He argues that “in our religious lives we are responding to a transcendent reality.” *Ibid.*, 768. Tom Wright points to the human desires for justice, spirituality, relationship and beauty: desires that can be fulfilled in Christianity. Nicholas Thomas (NT/Tom) Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: Harper One, 2006), x.

<sup>199</sup> Christopher C Walker, *Connecting with the Spirit of Christ: Evangelism for a Secular Age*, vol. 5, World Evangelism Library (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1988), 24. This book is based on his PhD: Walker, "Process of Conversion."

<sup>200</sup> Yamane, *Becoming Catholic*, 52; Stout and Dein, "Religious Conversion and Self Transformation: An Experiential Study among Born Again Christians," 41. I have already explored some of these above: for example, Markham, "Conversion Converted."; Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament*; Aguilar, "Experiencing Transcendence."; Milton, *Shalom*; Yamane, *Becoming Catholic*; Jindra, *A New Model of Religious Conversion*; Ayometzi, "Storying as Becoming."; Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs."

<sup>201</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 63-65.

<sup>202</sup> Although Meg still lacked the relational support she required.

Beckford argued that the notion of power was eclipsed in the sociology of religion throughout the late 1906s and 1970s as key players encouraged religion to be thought of as “primarily a matter of knowledge susceptible to understanding in the same way as other cognitive products.”<sup>203</sup> The sociology of religion thus became reduced to “processes whereby religion is socially constructed as order, meaning and identity.”<sup>204</sup> Repudiating this, Beckford argued that rather than seeking meaning and identity, what draws people towards religion is a response to “perceived sources of power.”<sup>205</sup> Beckford resisted providing “a precise meaning” for what he called ‘power’. But he noted the change from power as being only seen as having a “functional capacity” to the recognition of six distinct aspects of power he illustrates emerging in the literature. These six aspects are “confounding; convincing; contesting; controlling; cultivating; and curing.”<sup>206</sup>

Among those I interviewed, Beckford’s first, fifth and sixth categories were evident. In “cultivating,” Beckford nuanced the search for meaning to focus on the way converts perceive religious membership may empower them to “cultivate various spiritual qualities, personal goals or social arrangements” rather than their beginning with a specific motivation towards meaning.<sup>207</sup> Luke’s realisation that Christianity could make him a better person could potentially be categorised in this way. In relation to ‘curing’, Meg and Luke both sought healing. Sarah was certainly ‘confounded’ by her supernatural experience. But a point of significant departure from Beckford’s conceptualisation is that Luke, Meg and Sarah all looked to God as the source of the power they sought or experienced, in contrast to with Beckford’s emphasis on human agents of power. In correctly realising there is something more behind the experience of religious conversion, Beckford focused his attention on the human dimension, rather than being open to the possibility of divine activity.

Five of those I interviewed mentioned God’s power as part of their conversion narratives. Meg longed for God to act powerfully in her life and had experienced a measure of that. Luke experienced God’s healing power, and Tallulah experienced the power of answered

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<sup>203</sup> James A Beckford, "The Restoration of 'Power' to the Sociology of Religion," *Sociological Analysis* 44, no. 1 (1983): 12.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 29. He agreed that identity and meaning are key aspects of religion, but was not convinced they were the primary motivation of converts.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 18. In the category ‘confounding’, Beckford discussed what could be called ‘signs and wonders’, although his emphasis is on the human agent, rather than divine source. ‘Convincing’ relates to the declining power of religious language, due to secularisation. Under ‘contesting’, Beckford discusses power struggles between religious groups. Power that ‘controls’ relates to moral power, for example the influence in politics of the ‘moral majority’. ‘Cultivating’ relates to the perceived ability of a religion to help in achieving personal goals, enhance spirituality, or develop sociality. ‘Curing’ relates to faith healing.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

prayer. Hamish found the Bible powerful. But Sarah was overwhelmed by God's power and, for many years, was unwilling to embrace a relationship with God because God was too powerful. Are these experiences indicative of conversion being a response to a perceived source of power? In part, perhaps, although Sarah's reluctance in the face of God's power raises questions about such a theory. Sarah was put off by, rather than drawn to, this power.<sup>208</sup> It is, however, reasonable to see the participants' desire for relational authenticity as more than a search for personal meaning or identity, in that they recognised and responded to a powerful 'something' beyond themselves: something that enabled them to find the multifaceted meaning that they sought. This extends the understanding of the nature and significance of personal identity in the same way my definition of relational authenticity does.<sup>209</sup> The meaning, or relational authenticity that they were seeking is best understood as involving a desire to become the person that they are: including all that it means to be imaging the relational God. This is the power they sought. The power to become all they were created to be, in relationship with the source of that power.

The final motivation for conversion Rambo notes is what Walter Conn calls the desire for transcendence. Conn draws on Lonergan's "types" of conversion, but reframes them slightly as basic moral, affective, critical moral and religious forms of conversion.<sup>210</sup> The first, "moral conversion, calls us beyond ourselves," inviting us to close the gap we realise exists between "the self we are and the self we should be."<sup>211</sup> This represents a desire to be a better person, or become who we are. Affective conversion, which Conn likens to falling in love, transforms us, making possible that change from who we are to who we could be.<sup>212</sup> Each conversion calls us towards the next: motivated by the "primary human yearning for transcendence."<sup>213</sup> Grenz similarly notes that "the experience of longing and desire ... [forms] the foundation for the quest for God."<sup>214</sup> Interdisciplinary scholar, David Tacey,

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<sup>208</sup> See also, Tacey, *Spirituality Revolution*, 110-119. In this paper, Tacey reflects on the spiritual journey of 19-year-old Elizabeth. Her story was like Sarah's in that Elizabeth was afraid to acknowledge God. Elizabeth concluded, however, that she longed for a unified, "real" identity that included a sense of responsibility towards God and other humans.

<sup>209</sup> Taylor notes the link between individualism and a lack of meaning in life. Taylor, *Authenticity*, 4.

<sup>210</sup> "Lonergan specifies cognitive, moral, affective, and religious conversion." Walter E Conn, "Adult Conversion," *Pastoral Psychology* 34 (1986): 225.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 228-229. See also, Ullman, *The Transformed Self*, xvi.

<sup>213</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 64. Conn correlates each of these conversion aspects with one of Erik Erikson's final four stages of development. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to fully address the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, it is worth noting that while helpfully highlighting the potential for adult conversion, Conn has overreached by so closely aligning religious conversion and life stages.

<sup>214</sup> Grenz, *Social God, Relational Self*, 319. Here, Grenz is seeking to offer a brief rehabilitation of the term *eros*.

argues that the incompleteness of the secular life motivates us towards the sacred.<sup>215</sup>

English literature scholar, Helen Wilcox, notes that even in late sixteenth and early seventeenth England, "the fundamental cause of conversion is the deep-seated sense that things could be better."<sup>216</sup>

Historian, David Hilliard, notes the emergence of new ways to be religious; and new forms of spiritual engagement in Australia:

Some observers have charted a rise of popular interest in spirituality, especially among young adults, in reaction to the secularisation of public culture. This is a search for individual religious experience, a desire for 'connectedness' with a larger whole, which is detached from the churches and the idea of 'absolute' religious truth. The sources of inspiration are diverse and eclectic, with ideas circulating internationally through the internet. They include ecospirituality, the teachings and texts of Eastern religions, the 'ancient wisdom' of Aboriginal Australians, Celtic spirituality, and the 'New Age' movement. [In addition, there is now a] willingness to create new rituals of mourning and commemoration unconnected with existing religious institutions, such as roadside memorials for the victims of motor vehicle crashes, and the growing popularity of Anzac Day observances.<sup>217</sup>

These new expressions seem to relate to transcendence, and to embodied or responsive spiritual expressions.<sup>218</sup>

We turn now to consider some additional empirical work on conversion to Christianity and, where it relates to a desire for authenticity, to other faith systems. Beginning with conversion to other faith systems: a desire for authenticity featured in the stories reported in sociologist, Kim Hudson's study of "spiritual but not religious" young women.<sup>219</sup> The spiritual search and development of these women occurred in response to "the various events and experiences of everyday life, and in relation to the ongoing process of developing a sense of self and identity."<sup>220</sup> Their desire for authenticity fuelled their spiritual search. Religious Studies scholar, Marcia Hermansen, similarly reported "white Americans may convert [to Islam] in

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<sup>215</sup> Tacey, *Spirituality Revolution*, 114-118. See also, Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 133-134.

<sup>216</sup> Helen Wilcox, "'Return to Me!' Literature and Conversion in Early Modern England," in *Paradigms, Poetics and Politics of Conversion*, ed. Jan N Bremmer, Wout J van Bekkum, and Arie L Molendijk (Leuven, Paris and Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2006), 89. Wilcox goes on to observe that the desire for heaven was also a feature of these conversions. This was not the case for those I interviewed, as I explore in the next section.

<sup>217</sup> Hilliard, "Australia: Towards Secularisation and One Step Back," 11.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>219</sup> Kim Leanne Hudson, "Spiritual but Not Religious: A Phenomenological Study of Spirituality in the Everyday Lives of Younger Women in Contemporary Australia" (PhD, Murdoch University, 2007).

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, iv. Criminologists, Shadd Maruna, Louise Wilson and Kathryn Curran, reached similar conclusions in their research on prisoner conversions to Christianity. Shadd Maruna, Louise Wilson and Kathryn Curran, "Why God Is Often Found Behind Bars: Prison Conversions and the Crisis of Self-Narrative," *Research in Human Development* 3, no. 2-3 (2006).

part as a response to secularization, anomie, lack of authenticity, and so on."<sup>221</sup> Speaking of British converts to Islam, Islam scholar, Maha Al-Qwidi, concluded, "Most of the converts saw their conversion as part of a continual development in their lives and a return to their 'real selves', rather than a 'transformation'."<sup>222</sup> These examples show that a desire for authenticity leads to conversion to other faith systems, as well as to Christianity.

Scot McKnight described the conversions from evangelical Christianity to Roman Catholicism that he researched as "not a conversion to faith in Christ but a conversion to (what is perceived to be) the fullness of the Christian faith."<sup>223</sup> This could be understood as a desire for authenticity: for a full and authentic expression of Christianity. McKnight named the "desire for transcendence" as the prime crisis for such converts.<sup>224</sup> He reported that they experienced this as four specific desires. These desires related to transcending the human limits of knowledge to find *certainty*; temporality to find connection to the *entire history of the church*; division among churches to find *unity and universality*; and interpretive diversity to find an *interpretive authority*.<sup>225</sup> The first examples he cited in arguing this could easily be read as a desire for authenticity. One, Mary Beth Kremski, "had in her heart a questing for meaning, [saying] 'sometimes it was a search to know how to live – to know the purpose of life in general and my life in particular – or a quest for peace built on a *sure* foundation, rather than on false self-confidence or wishful thinking. In short, I longed for *the real thing: reality*'."<sup>226</sup> Kremski's conversion to Roman Catholicism was fuelled by a desire for relational authenticity.<sup>227</sup> What McKnight calls a desire for transcendence can be understood as a desire for authenticity, a desire to engage in the project and process of 'becoming' who they are.

On a macro level, sociologists, Rodney Stark and Buster Smith, used survey data from the Gallup World Poll to investigate Pentecostal Protestantism in Latin America. Their research contradicted theories asserting that "people will seek supernatural solutions to their thwarted

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<sup>221</sup> Marcia Hermansen, "Conversion to Islam in Theological and Historical Perspectives," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R Rambo and Charles E Farhadian (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 648. 'Anomie' relates to a breakdown of social bonds between an individual and their community. "Anomie," <https://www.britannica.com/topic/anomie>. Accessed 22 December 2016.

<sup>222</sup> Al-Qwidi, "Understanding Islam Conversion," 254.

<sup>223</sup> McKnight and Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith*, 197.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 201-202.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>227</sup> I am resisting the temptation to apply the lens of relational authenticity to all the anecdotes in this chapter of McKnight's, not least because the stories are of people who converted from evangelical Christianity to Catholicism unlike my own research about people who came from no faith to Christian faith. A considerably more robust exercise would be to re-analyse the data he draws on, either using a methodology of grounded theory or through my lens of relational authenticity. I suggest both these activities in Chapter 12 as appropriate for future research on conversion.

social and material desires.<sup>228</sup> Rather, noting the even spread of Pentecostals across many socioeconomic measures, they proposed that the key driver towards Pentecostalism is a sense of “spiritual deprivation” related to a “desire for effective answers to [existential] questions.”<sup>229</sup> This desire for answers to the ‘big’ questions of life related to a desire for authenticity.

### **Any desire for heaven? A brief excursus**

I noted in Chapter 8 that talk of heaven was, except for Mary, missing from the conversion narratives I heard. Minister, Kevin Finlay, similarly found new converts to Christianity in New Zealand did not mention eternal life in their conversion narratives. Like those I interviewed, their conversions were motivated by things that related to their immediate experiences of personal life.<sup>230</sup> The 2012 World Values Survey reported that nearly three quarters of Australians surveyed saw the purpose of religion as being to “make sense of life in this world.”<sup>231</sup>

Brereton noted that conversion has come to be understood as integrative: “an occasion of psychological healing, when a divided, unhappy personality could be integrated,” fostering “the growth of self-confidence, peace of mind, and happiness.”<sup>232</sup> Therefore, women came to talk more about their immediate earthly well-being than about heavenly hope.<sup>233</sup> Their motivation for conversion was increasingly a motivation to live well, here and now.

Many would suggest that this emphasis on the earthly consequences of Christianity is healthy and good. Notably, and controversially, then-pastor and writer, Rob Bell, called for a

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<sup>228</sup> Rodney Stark and Buster G Smith, "Conversion to Latin American Protestantism and the Case for Religious Motivation," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 6 (2010): 2.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 10. Note, they did not present empirical evidence for this assertion. Their empirical work was solely used to refute the ‘deprivation’ thesis.

<sup>230</sup> Finlay, "Coming to Faith in Nz," 69. See also, Stout and Dein, "Religious Conversion and Self Transformation: An Experiential Study among Born Again Christians," 39; Reinhold Strähler, "Conversions from Islam to Christianity in the Sudan," (2009): 16. For a contrasting experience of elderly, churching women, see Fletcher, "Religion and Life Meaning," 176. Converts in India were confident they would go to heaven after death, but Iyadurai did not report this as a specific motivation for conversion but, rather, a consequence. Joshua Iyadurai, "The Step Model of Transformative Religious Experiences: A Phenomenological Understanding of Religious Conversions in India," *Pastoral Psychology* 60, no. 4 (2011): 511-512. Milton reported that three respondents named getting into heaven as a key motivator for conversion. All were children at the time of their conversion. Milton, "Understanding Pentecostal Conversion," 208. As early as 1991, Brereton had noted this de-emphasis on heaven: “Narrators speak freely enough of their undesirable character traits. But the danger is more that they will be condemned to unhappiness in this world rather than that they are threatened with eternal punishment in the next.” Brereton, *From Sin to Salvation*, 51.

<sup>231</sup> "World Values Survey Online Data Analysis," World Values Survey, [www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org). Accessed 1 November 2016.

<sup>232</sup> Brereton, *From Sin to Salvation*, 48.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*



de-emphasis on heaven and hell in talk about God.<sup>234</sup> He argued, “life has never just been about ‘getting in’ [to heaven]. It’s about thriving in God’s good world. ... A discussion about how to ‘just get into heaven’ has no place in the life of a disciple of Jesus, because its missing the point of it all.”<sup>235</sup> Theologian, Murray Rae, agrees that “a salvation construed ahistorically – in terms, for instance, of the immaterial soul’s escape from the conditions of created existence – is not Christian.”<sup>236</sup> Our salvation is deeply tied to creaturely existence, including the past, present and future restoration to how things were created to be. Markham draws on missiologist, Lesslie Newbigin, and theologian, Mark Baker, to argue that an overemphasis on heaven is symptomatic of our highly individualistic Western context.<sup>237</sup> Markham points to John Wesley’s “way of salvation” as a restoration process – a project of becoming, perhaps – that begins on earth and continues until we reach heaven.<sup>238</sup>

This ‘new’ emphasis on the current implications of salvation could be understood as a return to how things used to be understood. Diana Butler-Bass argues that for the first five hundred years of the church’s history, Christianity was seen as a “practical spiritual pathway” that made life better, rather than “a doctrinal system, esoteric belief, or promise of eternal salvation.”<sup>239</sup> The emphasis was on here and now: on living as people who loved God and neighbour, and who, therefore, lived better lives. This included a transformational hope and expectation that challenged the status quo and longed for societal change.<sup>240</sup> The fact that “Christ had conquered death [and therefore] Christians need not fear death” was undoubtedly important, but this was more an overcoming of inevitable death than a distractive emphasis on heavenly life.<sup>241</sup>

Thus, the lack of talk about heaven in my data is likely healthy, and deeply Christian. An emphasis on the immediate implications and requirements of conversion was common to

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<sup>234</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York: HarperOne, 2011). For an insightful exploration of Bell’s book, see Jonathan K Hodge, “The Love Wins Controversy: A Case Study in Religiosity and Social Identity ” (MA, California State University, 2012).

<sup>235</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 179. See also, Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 16.

<sup>236</sup> Murray A Rae, “Salvation and History,” in *God of Salvation: Soteriology in Theological Perspective*, ed. Ivor J Davidson and Murray A Rae (Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 89.

<sup>237</sup> Markham, “Conversion Converted,” 16-17.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 70-71. See also, Richard V Peace, “Conflicting Understandings of Christian Conversion: A Missiological Challenge,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28, no. 1 (2004): 10.

<sup>239</sup> Diana Butler-Bass, *A People’s History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 27.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid. Church historian, Alan Kreider, argued that the Christian faith changed people for the better. That change was attractive to others. Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 13.

<sup>241</sup> Kreider, *Conversion and Christendom*, 16-17.

those I interviewed, and to the early church. This is pleasingly counter to western individualism.

In this section, I have demonstrated that, as well as being a consequence of religion, the desire for what I call relational authenticity can act as a motivation for faith explorations.<sup>242</sup> Pascal described this human yearning as a seeking for God. The “mystical presence of Christ, says Pascal, is the eccentric recentering of humanity, the yearning that purifies all yearning and sets humanity free from all indifference and despair. First one must hear that one has been seeking oneself; and then one must consider if it is not he whom one has, oneself, been seeking. One’s center is beyond oneself in another.”<sup>243</sup> It is to that ‘another’ that we now turn our attention.

## **In the beginning, God. God enables relational authenticity to develop and flourish**

Classically and vitally, regeneration/conversion has its basis in God’s creative love toward humanity and causes and enables the creature to love God in return. This love of God that stoops toward humanity in one seamless revealing, reconciling and redeeming movement is grace, and is the basis of regeneration/conversion. The divine motive is simply that God is love.<sup>244</sup>

The danger of beginning with stories of the participants’ desire for relational authenticity, is that we lose sight of the true beginning point of this story. God. As inferred in the quote above, it is God who enables relational authenticity to develop and flourish. Conversion begins with God’s prevenience: a grace that opens the way for human response.<sup>245</sup> God is seeking us long before our own seeking begins.<sup>246</sup> This theological reality was illustrated in the stories I heard from recent converts: Hamish happened to notice his Bible; Sarah experienced a vision; Mary dreamed dreams of Jesus; and more. In this third major section, we explore how the nature and activity of God has enabled, and continues to enable, relational authenticity to develop and flourish. Two of the affects experienced by those I interviewed – a sense of resonance, knowing, feeling right or making sense; and seeing differently – are particularly related to the agency of God and I discuss these in this section. I also note the way spiritual practices resource this process, as they help us connect with God. In addition, I comment on the importance of having room for doubt and complexity in

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<sup>242</sup> See also, Rambo, "Theories of Conversion," 264.

<sup>243</sup> McIntosh, *Divine Teaching*, 217.

<sup>244</sup> Dodds, "Regeneration and Resistable Grace: A Synergistic Proposal," 31. Dodds talks about the role of humans in regeneration/conversion being to recognise their sinfulness and unworthiness. By contrast, my data suggests that such an awareness is not a necessary precursor to conversion today for people with no Christian background.

<sup>245</sup> Green, *Why Salvation?*, 115.

<sup>246</sup> Morris, *Mystery and Meaning*, 73.

faith; and on the sense of homecoming some experienced, particularly when they engaged in spiritual practices. Each of these is discussed alongside extant literature.

## Setting the scene

God has purposed good things for humanity.<sup>247</sup>

The ways that God enables relational authenticity can be broadly classified in three main categories. First, by creating us *imago Dei* in the first place. Secondly, by working to restore relational authenticity, both in the past and in ongoing ways. Thirdly, by inviting human response to return us to our place of imaging God. The reader will appreciate that these three short points cover a vast array of theological reflection. Each is explored next, in sufficient detail to illuminate the research findings, but leaving plenty of room for further theological exploration.

### ***Creating us to image God***

I have already introduced the significance of humanity's created purpose of imaging God. To reiterate, we are best understood relationally: designed for relationship with God, and with others. Further, as *imago Dei*, we are created to *image* God. The fact that we are created in the image of God, to image God, enables our authenticity. We are who we are, and can be who we can be, because of God. It is appropriate to explore this in a little more detail.

Having outlined a diverse range of potential interpretations of *imago Dei* from Genesis 1:26-27, theologian, Ted Peters, affirms a Barthian view of humanity as being created as a counterpart to God.<sup>248</sup> Seen thus: "We humans are created in relationship to God, a conscious and deliberate relationship."<sup>249</sup> God created us for relationship and desires to be in relationship with us.

This idea that we are made in the image of God, for relationship, represents what theologian, Alistair McFadyen, calls "both an 'is' and an 'ought'."<sup>250</sup> It is simply who we are: an

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<sup>247</sup> Green, *Why Salvation?*, 2.

<sup>248</sup> Peters presents a spectrum of understandings of what it means for humans to be *imago Dei*. Our rational capacity; our ability to distinguish between good and evil; our appreciation of beauty; our capacity to love and worship God; and our physical bodies can all be seen as dimensions of our being *imago Dei*. Other theologians highlight our potential for relationship with God. Eastern thought (following Irenaeus and Origen) contrast image (our original condition) and likeness (our final, supernatural, state). Ted Peters, "Can We Enhance the Imago Dei?" in *Human Identity at the Intersection of Science, Technology, and Religion*, ed. Nancey Murphy and Christopher C Knight, Ashgate Science and Religion Series (Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 218-220. Also Green, *Why Salvation?*, 11.

<sup>249</sup> Peters, "Can We Enhance the Imago Dei?" 220.

<sup>250</sup> McFadyen, *Personhood*, 18.

ontological fact that ascribes human beings with inherent value and worth.<sup>251</sup> Being created in the image of God also represents who we should aspire to be and is “an ideal regulating personal and social conduct.”<sup>252</sup> McFadyen’s language of “conduct” here runs the risk of reducing the implications of the *imago Dei* to personal morality. Much more than that, being made in the image of God is a “vocation ... to which human beings are called, the fulfilment of which constitutes their true destiny.”<sup>253</sup> The *imago Dei* is fulfilled when we reflect God’s “image in the world by being in proper *relationship* with God and the whole of creation.”<sup>254</sup> The word ‘we’ is crucial. New Testament scholar, Joel Green, points out that it is not the individual human person who is “a reflection of the Godhead.”<sup>255</sup> Rather it is the “human community, whose life is differentiated from and yet bound up with nature, and whose common life springs from and finds its purpose (or *telos*) in God’s embrace.”<sup>256</sup> Thus, imaging God is corporate, communal.

Our created potential to image God raises the question of who God is. Who are we imaging, and what does our imaging of God look like? Aware of the patriarchy and androcentrism that has marred understandings of the concept of *imago Dei*, theologian, Mark Medley, highlights God’s inherent relationality with the term *imago Trinitatis*. This recognises our imaging is to the “triune God [who] is characterized by communion, mutuality, and self-giving love” and, further, that “relatedness constitutes God as Trinity.”<sup>257</sup> In this, Medley follows theologian, Catherine LaCugna, who notes that Trinitarian theology is a “theology of relationship” to be understood “within the framework of God’s self-revelation in the person of Christ and the activity of the Spirit.”<sup>258</sup> Theologian, Anne Carr, expressed this relationality of God as

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<sup>251</sup> Christian Smith speaks of the dignity this affords us as human beings. Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 437-438. Smith notes that different belief systems offer different understandings of human dignity. In the above citation, Smith notes Pope Leo the Great’s assertion that everyone has dignity, regardless of whether they are baptised.

<sup>252</sup> McFadyen, *Personhood*, 18.

<sup>253</sup> Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today*, 13-14.

<sup>254</sup> Markham, "Conversion Converted," 55. Original emphasis.

<sup>255</sup> Green, *Why Salvation?*, 11.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>257</sup> Mark Samuel Medley, *Imago Trinitatis: Toward a Relational Understanding of Becoming Human* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), 1-2. See also, *ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>258</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 1. LaCugna rejects a purely immanent understanding of the Trinity, insisting instead that “the mystery of God and the mystery of salvation, are inseparable.” *Ibid.*, 4. See also, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "God in Communion with Us: The Trinity," in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: Harper, 1993).

involving “mutuality, equality, and reciprocity.”<sup>259</sup> Thus, *imago Trinitatis* offers a model for relational authenticity. An authenticity characterised by reciprocity, mutuality and equality.<sup>260</sup>

### ***Acting (in ongoing ways) to restore relational authenticity***

The biblical God longs to reconcile sinful humans, adopting them as children of God, and ... to draw the reconciled new humanity together with all creation into glorious communion within the divine perichoretic life.<sup>261</sup>

### ***Making the way for restoration and return***

As well as beginning to tell the story of human relationship with God, Genesis also describes the initial breakdown of relationship. A human desire for self-determination led to behaviour from Eve and Adam that demonstrated “the denial of human responsibility to God, the willful attempt for humans to make themselves lord of their lives.”<sup>262</sup> This began what Green calls “the basic pattern of the ongoing saga.”<sup>263</sup> In this saga, God’s gracious action is followed by humanity’s refusal of their true vocation, their disobedience, and the consequences of that sin. God then speaks and acts again, this time in forgivingness and reconciliation.<sup>264</sup> This true vocation Green speaks of is, I argue, relational authenticity: moving towards imaging God. Conversion involves a reorientation back towards God, as the source and meaning of life. This reorientation has the potential to result in transformation of relationships with God, self and others.<sup>265</sup>

Thus, God has acted throughout history to restore relationship and re-enable authentic human existence. Theologian, Rudolf Bultmann, a friend and colleague of existential philosopher, Martin Heidegger, noted that “in practice authentic life becomes possible only when man is delivered from himself. ... At the very point where man can do nothing, God steps in and acts – indeed he has acted already – on man's behalf.”<sup>266</sup> While helpfully

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<sup>259</sup> Anne Carr, "Women, Justice, and the Church," *Horizons* 17, no. 2 (1990): 275. Carr draws on theologian, Margaret Farley's earlier work: Margaret A Farley, "New Patterns of Relationship: Beginnings of a Moral Revolution," *Theological Studies* 36, no. 4 (1975).

<sup>260</sup> For more, see Grenz, *Social God, Relational Self*, 183-222.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

<sup>262</sup> Green, *Why Salvation?*, 17.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>264</sup> Note that our inherent likeness to God was not lost when Adam and Eve sinned. Grenz, *Social God, Relational Self*, 185; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 148.

<sup>265</sup> Morris, *Mystery and Meaning*, 64.

<sup>266</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1961), 31.

acknowledging human dependence on God, this has the unfortunate effect of overemphasising the individual effects of salvation.<sup>267</sup>

Liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutiérrez, sees the gospel in broader terms, as the annunciation of good news and denunciation of anything that is dehumanising, or “contrary to fellowship, justice and liberty.”<sup>268</sup> This holistic understanding extends redemptive potential beyond personal salvation to restoring the world, including social and political structures. Similarly, Green uses the term “salvation” to denote “all of the benefits that are graciously bestowed on humans by God.”<sup>269</sup> Seen thus, God is benefactor and not just humans but all of creation is the beneficiary of these gifts of God.

Green considers two interrelated dimensions of salvation recorded in Scripture. Both represent God’s restoration of humanity and creation: Yahweh as healer and as liberator.<sup>270</sup>

In terms of Yahweh as healer, Green notes no distinction would have been made in Bible times between healing and salvation. “Scripture as a whole presumes the intertwining of salvation and healing.”<sup>271</sup> This assertion offers a needed corrective to the narrow understanding of salvation as the need for rescue because of deficiency that dominated post-Reformation Western theology.<sup>272</sup> For Green, God’s healing encompasses reconciliation, a new creation, forgiveness, justification, peace and sanctification. Theologian, Grace Jantzen, uses the term “flourishing” (present as ‘flourishing’ in the Old Testament and in the idea of ‘fullness’ and ‘abundance’ in the New Testament).<sup>273</sup> This flourishing can also be understood in terms of relational authenticity: a becoming of the fullness of the person we are created to be, enabled by God who heals and restores. Whether we term it “flourishing” as Jantzen does, or “healing” like Green, it involves a

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<sup>267</sup> This was in keeping with the Enlightenment presuppositions adhered to in the mid-20th century. Bultmann did have a tendency towards such overemphasis on personal salvation. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 341.

<sup>268</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Ina and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 152;150-156.

<sup>269</sup> Green, *Why Salvation?*, 3.

<sup>270</sup> Green argues we do not sin because we are “only human.” Rather, sin is a symptom of our lost humanity: “a denial of that humanity to which we are called.” *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>272</sup> Mark McIntosh similarly offers this broader picture of salvation. He points out that the most common Greek word used for salvation, was medical: “‘To save’ was ‘to heal’.” He notes that in this context, “healing was rarely conceived in narrowly biological and individualist senses: [rather] healing is a process of restoring harmony for the whole of a person’s existence including, especially, restoring the person to integrity within the community.” McIntosh, *Divine Teaching*, 67. While this helpfully broadens our understandings of salvation beyond legal understandings of “offence and punishment, disobedience and consequent penalty” it still requires further nuancing in a Western context where concepts of healing are generally reduced to medicalised understandings. *Ibid.*, 68. See also, Green, *Why Salvation?*, 34-35.

<sup>273</sup> Jantzen, “Feminism and Flourishing.” See also, Zöe Bennett Moore, *Feminist Perspectives on Pastoral Theology*, Introductions in *Feminist Theology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2002), 120.

recovery that “is set within the network of ... relationships with others and with God, and nested within God’s good creation.”<sup>274</sup>

These metaphors of healing and flourishing speak of potentiality realised and health regained. They resonate with the themes discussed above of yearning towards God, the strengthening aspects of wanting to be a better person, and a restoration of health and wholeness.

However, the Biblical narrative reminds us that, at times, God’s liberation is necessary.<sup>275</sup> The sovereign Yahweh demonstrates “power over chaos.”<sup>276</sup> Jesus brings freedom from evil powers.<sup>277</sup> Such liberation was Meg’s desire as she sought freedom and healing from demonic possession.

In each dimension of this activity of God, we see God’s ongoing desire for “human wholeness - in its physical, psychological, and social dimensions.”<sup>278</sup> God is acting by healing and liberating to restore us towards who we are: imaging the relational God.

#### *Excursus: how was ‘atonement’ experienced?*

One of the key terms Christians use to talk about the ways God reconciles the world to Godself is ‘atonement’.<sup>279</sup> In 1526, William Tyndale was the first person to apply the term ‘atonement’ to the Greek word meaning reconciliation. Later Bible translations also used ‘atonement’ to translate the Hebrew “which expresses the reconciling effect of sacrifice.”<sup>280</sup> The term ‘atonement’, now in common theological usage, implies that a specific event is required to repair the relationship between humanity and God. That specific event is generally understood to relate particularly to the cross, or more broadly, to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Somehow, God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to Godself.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Green, *Why Salvation?*, 45.

<sup>275</sup> Green again notes the inherently communal nature of the Bible stories of God as liberator: a communality countercultural to Western individualisation. *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>278</sup> John T Carroll, "Sickness and Healing in the New Testament Gospels," *Interpretation* 49, no. 2 (1995). This is on page 6 of 11 in my text version of this article (just after footnote 34).

<sup>279</sup> I presented a paper on the experience of atonement at ANZATS, Melbourne, 2016. A journal article from this paper has been accepted for publication in the May 2017 edition of *Colloquium* (see Appendix 19).

<sup>280</sup> Fiddes, *Past Event Present Salvation*, 4.

<sup>281</sup> Martha Gilliss further extends this beyond the activity of the historic Christ, arguing that atonement relates “to the full spectrum of gracious divine actions that make creation ‘at one’ again with God.” Martha Schull Gilliss, "Resurrecting the Atonement," in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, KY and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 125.

The key discovery about ‘atonement’ from my research is that it is not necessary to understand the objective reality and implications of the atonement before experiencing it subjectively. This should not surprise us. As missiologist, John Driver, pointed out, Jesus’ followers experienced Jesus’ life, death, resurrection as the source of atonement before they understood it.<sup>282</sup> The New Testament writers then used images to communicate and explain the reality of what they had experienced. Similarly, CS Lewis famously realised, one “can accept what Christ has done without knowing how it works: indeed, he certainly would not know how it works until he has accepted it.”<sup>283</sup>

For those I interviewed, atonement was experienced in three main ways. First, they saw themselves reflected in the stories of the Bible. Three examples from Hamish’s pre-conversion reading of the Gospel of John illustrate this. Hamish, still then a “militant evangelical atheist,” knew that the love he had for his family could not be explained away by atheism’s rhetoric of biological urges to protect and reproduce. He saw his own love for his family reflected in the Bible’s descriptions of God’s love for the world as the gospel narratives made sense of the relationality he experienced. In addition, Hamish saw himself in the Gospel of John, when he realised that “Christ is ... for everybody. Has love for all, irrespective ... [of whether] they know who he is or not.” At that stage, Hamish was among those who did not know who Christ was. He saw reflected in the Bible a place for himself in God’s story, even in his unbelief. Finally, Hamish saw himself reflected in the story of Peter’s reinstatement in John 21:15-19. Hamish had himself denied Jesus multiple times. He realised that with Peter he was being offered forgiveness and relationship with God. While Hamish “didn’t like who [he] had become” he, like the others I interviewed, did not speak of any sense of personal sinfulness leading to his conversion. Rather, Hamish realised he was being offered a means of restoration and relationship with God. Hamish saw in the Bible not just who he was, but also who he could become: a realising of his potential.<sup>284</sup> God acted by speaking through the Bible, and by having acted in the past in those Biblical accounts. Atonement was experienced as Hamish accepted his own place in those accounts and allowed himself to be transformed.

We are persons in the making... our very self is not complete but is being formed into the image of God.<sup>285</sup>

Secondly, those I interviewed aspired to reflect attributes they admired in their Christian friends and in God. I have already outlined those attributes above and I talk about the

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<sup>282</sup> Driver, *Understanding the Atonement*, 15.

<sup>283</sup> CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons and Co, 1978), 55.

<sup>284</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>285</sup> Fiddes, *Past Event Present Salvation*, 11.



attributes they saw reflected in their Christian friends when we explore Affect 3, below. The key point here is that those I interviewed longed to image God. Their experience of atonement was an experience of restoring what Scot McKnight calls “cracked Eikons into glory-producing Eikons” enabling them to become, authentically, who they were.<sup>286</sup>

Thirdly, God curated journeys to faith that reflected the uniqueness of each person. Because of these experiences and understandings, converts became more authentically who they *really* are: at-one with, and reflecting the image of, the triune God. Each experienced atonement uniquely.<sup>287</sup>

My research thus suggests that theologian, NT Wright, is correct when he surmises: “Perhaps, after all, atonement is at its deepest level, something that *happens*, so that to reduce it to a proposition to which one can give mental assent is a mistake at quite a deep level.”<sup>288</sup>

As reported in Chapter 7, the converts experienced what they perceived to be God acting. They also experienced moments when they just ‘knew’ that God was real and God was for them: moments they attributed to God. To reiterate those results: They observed attributes of God that were appealing to them. They noted that God acted in ways consistent with those attributes. They observed God working in the lives of others. God curated unique conversion experiences for each of them. They experienced God speaking to them; God helping them; and God changing and growing them. In and through these attributes, actions and experiences – as well as through the actions of the other Christians they knew – God was acting to enable relational authenticity to be restored.

### ***Inviting response***

God calls human beings to return to who we are: imaging God. The very language of conversion, as reported in the Old and New Testaments, is responsive. The three New Testament word groups used to express the conversion process are *epistrephō*, *metamelomai* and *metanoēó*. The first and third words are used to describe a ‘turning around’: a reorientation that results in a complete change. The second word expresses a feeling of regret or repentance.<sup>289</sup> Each word relates to human response to God’s proffered

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<sup>286</sup> Scot McKnight uses the Greek term 'Eikon' in place of '*imago Dei*'. Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, Living Theology (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 21.

<sup>287</sup> Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, 108.

<sup>288</sup> Nicholas Thomas (NT/Tom) Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 91. Original emphasis.

<sup>289</sup> Brown, "Conversion," 353.

grace.<sup>290</sup> Similarly, the Hebrew verb *shub*, used over a thousand times in the Old Testament, means to return, turn around, restore or bring back.<sup>291</sup> The Old Testament prophets frequently reminded Israel of who God was, who they were as the people of God, and of their need to return to God.<sup>292</sup> If we see 'who we are' defined in terms of our created reality as *imago Dei*, then this call to return applies even if we have never 'known' a relationship with God. It is an invitation for church and unchurch alike. Humans are invited to return to God. To be nourished by God.<sup>293</sup>

Each conversion narrative represented the unique journey to faith of a unique person. While they had common elements, each was personal. Hamish explained it as follows:

So, God understood that it needed to be gradual for me. And I needed to be shown a few doors. And God even showed me a few doors to exit out of as well. ... God understood that I was the kind of guy who would need to be carefully prodded and poked in the direction. And that I was going to try my hardest to do it my own way. So ... God really understood that this is the way it was going to work for me ... [My conversion journey] was very much a tailored experience to Hamish Smith.<sup>294</sup>

Here, God initiates and invites: not imposing on Hamish, but offering opportunities for both response and retreat. This gentle approach allowed Hamish to move at his own pace into a relationship with God.

Luke's story was similarly tailored to his own personality and experiences: he found that his experiences with God and faith prior to conversion "really fit with [him] and [his] personality and with the way that [he] likes to approach things." He said: "So I guess that's why it was a gradual process. 'Cause God knew that was the best way to speak to me."<sup>295</sup> God invited Luke's response.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> In *epistrophō*, the emphasis is on turning *towards* a new life in Christ, more than a turning away from an old life. This turning results in God's original purpose for the human person being fulfilled. *Metamelomai* refers to a "feeling of repentance of sin" which may or may not lead to a true turning to God. *Metanoeō* expresses a conscious turning from sin, and a changed attitude to life. Each of these words represents the active response of humans to God. F Laubach, *ibid.*, 355.

<sup>291</sup> In the Old Testament, those who return to God receive "forgiveness, ... remission of punishment, ... fertility and prosperity, ... and life." *Ibid.*, 354. The Old Testament prophets looked forward to God's new covenant, to be inaugurated in the Messiah.

<sup>292</sup> Morris, *Mystery and Meaning*, 62.

<sup>293</sup> Katherine Tanner, "Creation and Salvation in the Image of an Incomprehensible God," in *God of Salvation: Soteriology in Theological Perspective*, ed. Ivor J Davidson and Murray A Rae (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 65.

<sup>294</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>295</sup> Luke interview.

<sup>296</sup> My research indicated that, rather than people *deciding* to become Christians, they *realised* they were; or *called themselves* Christian. Their naming of this new reality was more an acceptance of what was, than necessarily a decision. I described this in Chapter 5. (See also, Walker, "Process of Conversion," 11.)

These things that God ‘does’ acting in creation; in ongoing ways of healing and liberating; and in inviting our response, are themselves (partially) demonstrative of who God is. Root speaks of this acting as “the unveiling of God’s self.”<sup>297</sup> God’s being spills out into actions that can be experienced – actions that are inevitable, given who God is.<sup>298</sup> Thus, because of who God is, God’s activity continues today. Human response is invited and required. We make a turning, or reorientation, back towards God, that can return us towards relational authenticity. God has made possible the way for relationships – with God, other humans and all of creation – to be restored. God is active, and invitational, helping us to become the people we are. Thus, God enables relational authenticity to develop and flourish.

### ***Re-enabling relational authenticity***

Conversion or discipleship [are not] the ultimate end of evangelism, but communion with the triune God.<sup>299</sup>

Christ’s coming means our relationship with God can be restored with us “dwelling in God, and God in him.”<sup>300</sup> This is both eschatological hope and developing reality: starting in conversion; continuing in discipleship; and reaching its ultimate fulfilment in Christ’s return. Thus, God re-enables relational authenticity. By loving us, we are enabled to love others.<sup>301</sup>

A lady [I heard speak] said ... she just wants to live a life that is really genuine and full and unique. That’s what I am experiencing now [I have become a Christian].<sup>302</sup>

In the above quote, Tallulah demonstrated she believed it was God who had enabled her to become authentic: to experience a “life that is full, genuine and unique.”<sup>303</sup> How did the ways participants understand God or experience God acting enable their relational authenticity? I have already (in Chapter 7 and, briefly, above) reported on the things participants perceived God did that contributed to their conversions; we explored atonement above too, so I will not repeat that here. Rather, in this next section, I look particularly to the three affects. Two – a sense of knowing, and seeing things differently – were the affects most directly mediated by God. The third – experiencing a sense of homecoming – is also linked with the sense of welcome, warmth and belonging that was mediated by other Christians. But ‘homecoming’ related most directly to God’s agency. These affects also lead us to consider the related

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<sup>297</sup> Root, "Empirical Practical Theology," 60.

<sup>298</sup> Root, *Christopraxis*, 97. In the language critical realism provides, the very being of the real God causes actual actions that we can experience.

<sup>299</sup> Meadows, "Journey of Evangelism," 416.

<sup>300</sup> Albert Cook Outler, ed. *The Works of John Wesley: Sermons 2* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 475.

<sup>301</sup> Meadows, "Journey of Evangelism," 417.

<sup>302</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

themes of engagement in spiritual practices, and the importance of allowing room for doubts and complexity in faith.

### **Affect 5: Sense of resonance, knowing, feeling right, or making sense**

Most of the participants experienced a deep sense of resonance, knowing, feeling right, or making sense. They generally attributed this to the activity of God in their lives, as God was present with them; God spoke to them; God grew them; and God provided an intangible sense of 'rightness'. These experiences of God's activity all created a sense that the Christian faith was somehow 'right'. That God was real.

That said, the participants often struggled to articulate what had happened. As Sarah said: "It is so hard [to describe], it's beyond words."<sup>304</sup> Aguilar similarly reported an interviewee saying, "You yourself need to experience ... You need to have the touch. It's hard to explain."<sup>305</sup> Language is often unable to fully represent all the sensations and emotions of human experiences.<sup>306</sup> This inability to describe in words what one has experienced is particularly true of talk about God, for "God is necessarily a mystery that transcends ... our experience and our language."<sup>307</sup> Compare this with Ephesians 3.19, where Paul speaks of a different kind of knowing, that is a deep-felt love "that surpasses [earthly] knowledge."<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> Sarah interview. As Bishop Brian Wilson says: "Words and images of everyday life never adequately conjure up the 'otherness'" of religious experience. Wilson, *Reasons of the Heart*, 15. See also, Morris, *Mystery and Meaning*, 3; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 6.

<sup>305</sup> Aguilar, "Experiencing Transcendence," 594.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 607. Of course, this inability to articulate things of great personal importance is not just a problem for describing the experiences that lead to religious conversion. People "often live in ways they cannot put into words." Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, viii. See also, Zajonc, "Feeling and Thinking: Preferences Need No Inferences," 157; Samantha J Heintzelman and Laura A King, "On Knowing More Than We Can Tell: Intuitive Processes and the Experience of Meaning," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 8, no. 6 (2013); Epstein, *Cognitive-Experiential Theory*, 13.

<sup>307</sup> Astley, *Exploring God-Talk: Using Language in Religion*, 13. Mystic, Hildegard of Bingen, invented a language she used to describe "not only God's natural world, but all that is spiritually creative and filled with the sap, the *sudor* of divine life, as opposed to the aridity of human sin." Sarah L Higley, *Hildegard of Bingen's Unknown Language: An Edition, Translation, and Discussion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3. Pastoral theologian, Emmanuel Lartey, argues all theology needs to be "tentative" as it "represents our feeble efforts to speak of the eternal one who for ever remains 'beyond'." Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 103.

<sup>308</sup> Ephesians 3:19 (NIV). See also, Darryl Tippens, "Spiritual Formation and the Dance of Embodiment: Lessons from James KA Smith and Augustine," *Leaven* 22, no. 1 (2015): 5. Theologian, Kathryn Tanner, writes of God's "incomprehensibility": not just because we are unable to understand God, but because God is, ontologically, beyond understanding. Tanner, "Creation and Salvation," 61. See also, Root, *Christopraxis*, 216.

But despite their inability to fully articulate it, participants understood God to have been at work in those moments. The sense of 'rightness' or 'knowing' they experienced because of their encounters with God drew them deeper into relationship with God.<sup>309</sup>

As well as accepting this feeling of 'resonance', those I interviewed acted in specific ways to enhance it. The key way they did this was by engaging in spiritual practices. For example, Mary reported that when she sings hymns written by Charles Wesley, she experiences a sense of resonance with Wesley's longing for God. This resonance triggered her desire for God.<sup>310</sup> Thus, engaging in spiritual practices resourced and deepened Mary's faith, as well as the faith of the others I interviewed, as God interacted with them and as they grew and developed. The acquisition of Christian values is facilitated through participation in such practices.<sup>311</sup> We explore this briefly next.

### **Our doing becomes us: a note on spiritual practices**

'Doing' authenticity – as opposed to idealizing about it – is invariably messy and constantly resulting in change and the becoming of self.<sup>312</sup>

Becoming authentic is a project: it takes effort.<sup>313</sup> Guignon argued that becoming authentic "calls for spiritual exercises comparable to those to which religious initiates were formerly subjected."<sup>314</sup> Those I interviewed demonstrated that engaging in spiritual practices was an important part of their becoming Christian, their becoming relationally authentic.<sup>315</sup> This 'behaving' in terms of engaging in spiritual practices, generally preceded 'belonging' and 'believing'.<sup>316</sup> They demonstrated that *our doing becomes us*.<sup>317</sup>

The importance of spiritual practices for faith formation is well recognised, although spiritual practices are often associated with developing spiritual maturity rather than with pre-

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<sup>309</sup> This sense of knowing is not unique to Christian faith formation. Hudson reported that young women embracing spirituality (but not a particular religion) also "described a sense of knowing or 'gelling' with particular ideas and beliefs that resonated with their experiences and understanding." Hudson, "Spiritual but Not Religious," 220. Anthropologist, Peter Stromberg, calls this experience of knowing, an "impression point." Peter G Stromberg, "The Impression Point: Synthesis of Symbol and Self," *Ethos* 13, no. 1 (1985): 59-65.

<sup>310</sup> Mary interview. Meadows talks about this ability of Wesley's hymns to move people on a journey towards communion with God. Meadows, "Journey of Evangelism," 422.

<sup>311</sup> Markham, "Conversion Converted," 5.

<sup>312</sup> Vannini and Franzese, "Authenticity of Self," 1632.

<sup>313</sup> Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 5.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>315</sup> Chapter 5 includes a section outlining the participants' engagement in spiritual practices.

<sup>316</sup> See Footnote 176.

<sup>317</sup> I presented a paper entitled, "Our doing becomes us" at the *Seeing Silence Symposium*, Otago University, March 2017 (Appendix 22).

conversion engagement.<sup>318</sup> Rambo notes that potential converts long to grow and change, but do not know how. Engaging in spiritual disciplines provides them a pathway towards their desired growth.<sup>319</sup> Sociologist, Robert Wuthnow, believes spiritual practices “need to be rediscovered,” as they both set aside a sacred space, and facilitate a growing awareness of the transcendent.<sup>320</sup> Practical theologians, Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass, argue that “it is precisely by participating in Christian practices that we truly come to know God and the world, including ourselves.”<sup>321</sup> Similarly, philosopher Jamie Smith recognises the “formative power of *practices* – communal, embodied rhythms, rituals, and routines that over time quietly and unconsciously prime and shape our desires and most fundamental longings.”<sup>322</sup> Ritual action, such as engaging in spiritual practices, serves as a way of gaining and transmitting knowledge, as well as being a participatory, embodied, act.<sup>323</sup> Anthropologist, Tanya Luhmann, observed the way engaging in the spiritual practice of prayer helped people to hear from God.<sup>324</sup> Some prisoners who convert to Christianity attribute “their conversion ... to deep, private reading of the Bible in their cells.”<sup>325</sup> Lofland and Skonovd

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<sup>318</sup> For example, Tom Zanzig, "Spiritual Transformation: The Heart of Adult Faith Formation," *Lifelong Faith* 6.3 (2012); John Roberto, "Faith Formation with Emerging Adults: Congregational Practices," *ibid.* 4.2; Tippens, "Spiritual Formation and Embodiment.," Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002); Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2012); Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C Bass, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B Eerdmans, 2002); Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*; Thomas G Plante, *Spiritual Practices in Psychotherapy: Thirteen Tools for Enhancing Psychological Health* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2009); Doug Oman, Carl E Thoresen, Crystal L Park, Phillip R Shaver, Ralph W Hood and Thomas G Plante, "Spiritual Modeling Self-Efficacy," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 4, no. 4 (2012): 278-280.

<sup>319</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 84.

<sup>320</sup> Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 16-17. Therefore, spiritual practices potentially resource those who appreciate a spirituality of dwelling, as well as those who engage a spirituality of seeking. For a fuller exploration, see *ibid.*, 168-198. (Wuthnow notes “the resurgence of interest in spiritual practices.” *Ibid.*, 169.) Missiologist, Paul Hiebert, highlights the need to re-create vibrant, transformative, rituals. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 322-324. Theologian, Erin Dufault-Hunter, argues that “personal transformation comes through practices informed and influenced by the central stories of the religious tradition: [including] rituals like prayer, worship, song; skills like meditation or peacemaking.” Erin Elizabeth Dufault-Hunter, *The Transformative Power of Faith: A Narrative Approach to Conversion*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012). x.

<sup>321</sup> Dykstra and Bass, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," 24. Their work implies such practices build on an existing faith or on baptismal vows made on their behalf. For example, they see engagement in spiritual practices as an opportunity to “live into the promises made at their baptism.” *Ibid.*, 28. See also, Sarah Coakley, "Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology," *ibid.* She “presuppose[s] ... the fundamental infusion of grace in the act of baptism.” *Ibid.*, 84. My research, however, demonstrated that such practices can also lead to faith where there was previously none, including among those who had not been baptised.

<sup>322</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 4.

<sup>323</sup> Jennings, "On Ritual Knowledge," 112-113. Charles Taylor suggests the motivation for engaging in spiritual practices might be more related to a desire to replicate the “Wow!” they experience momentarily, than a genuine desire to be formed spiritually. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 518. (His footnote 28 points to another alternative explanation: related to the privatised nature of faith.)

<sup>324</sup> Tanya M Luhmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Alfred A Knoff, 2012), 133.

<sup>325</sup> Maruna, Wilson and Curran, "Why God Is Often Found Behind Bars," 167.

included the 'experimental' as a conversion motif, noting some converts participate in the spiritual and organisational activities of a religious group prior to conversion.<sup>326</sup> Many recognise the need to prioritise "cultivating spiritual experiences and developing religious practices" over articulating, teaching and learning a so-called "Christian worldview."<sup>327</sup> These "tangible, embodied practices ... are conduits of the Spirit's transformative power."<sup>328</sup>

For all of those I interviewed, engaging in spiritual practices, including attending church; reading the Bible; praying; fellowshiping; worshipping; being baptised; using their gifts; and sharing their faith, contributed to their faith formation and their transformation.<sup>329</sup> Once again, these spiritual practices do more than develop internal spirituality. They work to develop relational authenticity as expressed in all areas of relating.

In Hamish's story, we clearly see how engaging in spiritual practices – *doing* – can occur very early in the spiritual journey, and lead towards religious conversion – *becoming* Christian.<sup>330</sup> Hamish began reading the Bible while still a "militant evangelical atheist" and found himself drawn into what he was reading.<sup>331</sup> Wanting to know more, he kept reading, and through this practice, as well as through other spiritual practices, Hamish was changed. He was not seeking to become a Christian. Rather, in many ways he was actively resisting such change.<sup>332</sup> But Hamish's engagement in spiritual practices greatly contributed to his becoming a Christian.

Theologian, Sarah Coakley, notes that spiritual practices illuminate and "start inversely to shape (or re-shape) belief, as a form of identification with Christ begins to flower."<sup>333</sup> Thus, it is unsurprising that engagement in spiritual practices contributed to developing faith, and moved Hamish and the others towards becoming Christian and Christ-like: becoming relationally authentic.

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<sup>326</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," 378-379.

<sup>327</sup> Harold D Horell, "Fostering Hope: Christian Religious Education in a Postmodern Age," *Religious Education* 99, no. 1 (2004): 9.

<sup>328</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 15. See also, Tippens, "Spiritual Formation and Embodiment," 23; Markham, "Conversion Converted," 5.

<sup>329</sup> This relates to an 'experimental' conversion motif. Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," 378.

<sup>330</sup> Sociologist, Robert Balch, similarly argued that "the first step in conversion to cults is learning to act like a convert by outwardly conforming to a narrowly prescribed set of role expectations." Robert W Balch, "Looking Behind the Scenes in a Religious Cult: Implications for the Study of Conversion," *Sociological Analysis* 41, no. 2 (1980): 142.

<sup>331</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>332</sup> He spoke of praying to a God he didn't believe in, asking God not to be real.

<sup>333</sup> Coakley, "Deepening Practices," 84. Psychologist, John Cromby, asserts that "belief [is] something that is lived." (Cromby, "Beyond Belief," 946. See also, Bromley and Shupe, "Role Theory," 181; Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 121-123.

The way engaging in action shapes us has been more generally linked with a move towards authenticity and the trope of performativity.<sup>334</sup> Drawing on performance studies and her own experiences as a backpacker, communication studies scholar, Tracy Shaffer, argued that as well as being socially constructed, authenticity is a “performed achievement.”<sup>335</sup>

In terms of the Christian faith, social scientists, Vincett, Olson, Hopkins and Pain, argue that our secularised, pluralised, consumerised context “de-emphasises propositional belief systems in favour of what they call ‘performance Christianity’.”<sup>336</sup> They note three key characteristics of religiosity in the young people in Glasgow they researched: “mobility, authenticity, and practical expression.”<sup>337</sup> The practical expression of those young people was performative, representing an “embodiment of ritualised practice.”<sup>338</sup> Their practices were transformative, moving the young people towards what Vincett et al. call a “moral” authenticity. Rather than *belief*, the emphasis is on the activity of *believing*, which is “a process, a working out, a performance.”<sup>339</sup> Belief is made real, or authentic, through their actions.<sup>340</sup> While not specifically about the early stages of faith formation, this research points to the increasing importance of *practice* in contemporary Christianity, as a means of

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<sup>334</sup> The term ‘performativity’, with its basis in linguistics, speaks of the ability of language to “function as a form of social action” that creates change, rather than merely describing what is (as constative words do). Jillian R Cavanaugh, “Performativity,” <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0114.xml>. Accessed 8 October 2016. Philip Auslander explores how rock musicians attain and retain ‘authenticity’ by, in their own performances, naming and drawing on “the norms of authenticity for their particular rock subgenre.” Thus, by referencing agreed ‘authentic’ practices, their own work achieves authenticity. Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 72. See also, Vannini and Franzese, “Authenticity of Self,” 1332-1333. Sociologist, Abby Day, follows feminist philosopher, Judith Butler, to extend performativity beyond language to include embodiment, although Day’s work relates more to religious identity than to engagement in spiritual practices. Abby Day, “Propositions and Performativity: Relocating Belief to the Social,” *Culture and Religion* 11, no. 1 (2010): 18; 21; Abby Day, *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>335</sup> Tracy Stephenson Shaffer, “Performing Backpacking: Constructing ‘Authenticity’ Every Step of the Way,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (2004): 139. Shaffer observed that it is in the embodied “doing” of tourism that people “become” tourists. By *behaving* in ways consistent with the norms of “authentic” backpackers, she considers she herself *became* an “authentic” backpacker. *Ibid.*, 141; 143. Of course, backpacking is, generally, a short-term activity rather than a lifelong engagement. An authentic Christian faith cannot be picked up and put down like a backpack, rather, it should permeate the whole of life in an ongoing manner.

<sup>336</sup> Giselle Vincett, Elizabeth Olson, Peter Hopkins and Rachel Pain, “Young People and Performance Christianity in Scotland,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27, no. 2 (2012): 275.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, 278. Note, the word “performance” should not be taken to mean an inauthentic expression. Rather, it speaks of action. See also, Malcolm Ruel, “Christians as Believers,” in *Ritual and Religious Belief: A Reader*, ed. Graham Harvey (London: Equinox, 2005), 255. Ruel speaks here of “believing as the adventure of faith.” See also, James S Bielo, “Belief, Deconversion, and Authenticity among US Emerging Evangelicals,” *Ethos* 40, no. 3 (2012): 260.

<sup>340</sup> See also, McFadyen, “Imaging God,” 931-932.



expressing and developing authentic faith. Engaging in spiritual practices can move people towards genuine Christian faith.<sup>341</sup>

Many of those I interviewed reported sharing their 'stories' or testimonies.<sup>342</sup> The spiritual practice of sharing about one's journey to God can be transformative for speaker and listener alike.<sup>343</sup> More generally, the transformative and identity-forming potential of a performative or narrative 'telling' of our stories itself is well recognised.<sup>344</sup> Ayometzi reports the converts she studied were, in the "routinized practice" of sharing their testimonies, accomplishing at least four things.<sup>345</sup> First, their relationship with God was solidified through the telling.<sup>346</sup> Secondly, their telling named this relationship publicly.<sup>347</sup> Thirdly, the form of the narrative enabled them to reorganise their understanding and articulation of themselves.<sup>348</sup> Fourthly, their stories, in the form common to the faith community, provided a common identity that was shared with other members of that community.<sup>349</sup> Thus their telling – the practice of sharing their testimonies – helped in their becoming as Christians and as members of their faith community. Ayometzi's interest was in the way social identity is created and maintained. But her emphasis on *becoming* and the deeply relational dimension of that becoming suggest a potential movement towards relational authenticity.

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<sup>341</sup> Ayometzi also made the link between doing and becoming. She observed that members of the Spanish Mission she studied "are constantly told that they actually become who they perceive themselves to be only when in fact they engage in doing what they believe themselves to be." Ayometzi, "Storying as Becoming," 53. See also, Yang and Abel, "Sociology of Religious Conversion," 144-145.

<sup>342</sup> Some of those I interviewed had shared a testimony in a formal setting, generally linked to their baptism. I did not specifically explore ways that sharing helped form their faith. However, the very act of participating in her interview with me led Olivia to understand her conversion in new ways. She realised just how vital the role of other Christians was for her.

<sup>343</sup> Brereton, *From Sin to Salvation*, 56; Berg, "How I Was Saved."

<sup>344</sup> For a general discussion, see Chaim Noy, "Performing Identity: Touristic Narratives of Self-Change," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (2004). Linguist, Anna De Fina, describes narrative as "the locus of expression, construction and enactment of identity." Anna De Fina, *Identity in Narrative: A Study of Immigrant Discourse*, vol. 3, Studies in Narrative (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2003), 11.

<sup>345</sup> Ayometzi, "Storying as Becoming," 42.

<sup>346</sup> See also, Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation*.

<sup>347</sup> Historian, Virginia Brereton, noted that with the emergence of fundamentalism from the 1920s, came an increase in the importance of narrative accounts of faith as a means of communicating that you were 'in' the Christian faith. Brereton, *From Sin to Salvation*, 46.

<sup>348</sup> We explore this narrative reconstruction further in discussing Affect 6, below (Affect 6: Seeing things differently).

<sup>349</sup> In these last two points, Ayometzi points to a similar phenomenon in members of Alcoholics Anonymous transforming themselves and their identities as they told their personal stories. Essentially, they were 'restorying' their lives. Ayometzi, "Storying as Becoming," 45-46. See Carole Cain, "Personal Stories: Identity Acquisition and Self-Understanding in Alcoholics Anonymous," *Ethos* 19, no. 2 (1991). Particularly p 20. Elliot G Mishler, "Models of Narrative Analysis: A Typology," *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 5, no. 2 (1995). Particularly page 109.

Many spiritual practices point to the primacy of relationships. There is an intrinsic link between spiritual practices and communion with God and the faith community.<sup>350</sup> The practices involve loving God and neighbour and reflecting on life in the light of God. Often, the spiritual practices participants engaged in were undertaken in community. All related to communion with God. Engagement in spiritual practices, therefore, contributed to a 'becoming' relationally authentic.

As psychologists, Paul Williamson and Ralph Hood, reflecting on the significant spiritual experiences of former substance abusers, noted: spiritual transformation "is not experienced as a once-and-for-all achievement, but as a continual journey in the process of becoming."<sup>351</sup> This becoming was towards who the participants *were* authentically. Mary's mysticism and Hamish's careful processing did not need to be remedied; rather, these characteristics continue to be expressed now they are followers of Christ. Their becoming has been a reorientation, a return towards who they really are.<sup>352</sup>

I leave the last word in this section to Canadian singer and songwriter, Leonard Cohen (1934-2016). "Act the way you'd like to be and soon you'll be the way you act."<sup>353</sup>

### **And a note on the "messiness" of becoming authentic**

Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.<sup>354</sup>

In the quote that began the previous section, Vannini and Franzese talk of the messiness of becoming authentic.<sup>355</sup> My research demonstrated the importance of having room for complexity and doubts – for messiness – in faith. The process of moving towards relational authenticity is not neat. Questions and doubts arise. Practices are, by definition, *practised*. We get better at them, but we do not become perfect. Most of those I interviewed did not expect their faith to be completely 'resolved'. As Grace said about going to church: "It just kind of made sense. Like everything that was being preached and everything that was said and like everything in the Bible just makes sense. Like ... *some of it doesn't* (laughter) but most of it just made sense." Grace accepted that "some of [the Christian faith] doesn't" make

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<sup>350</sup> Sondra Higgins Matthaehi, "Rethinking Faith Formation," *Religious Education* 99, no. 1 (2004): 58.

<sup>351</sup> Williamson and Hood Jr, "Spiritual Transformation," 14.

<sup>352</sup> Of course, there were behaviours that needed changing. For example, part of Sarah's becoming was her moving from her "hermit" tendency into relationship with others. Sarah interview.

<sup>353</sup> Leonard Cohen, "On Self-Actualisation," <http://www.nme.com/photos/music-photos/leonard-cohen-quotes-1846510>. Accessed 14 November 2016. This quote was reported extensively on social media after Cohen's death. I was unable to track its original source. (It is also sometimes attributed to Bob Dylan.)

<sup>354</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 2004), 85.

<sup>355</sup> Vannini and Franzese, "Authenticity of Self," 1632.

sense.<sup>356</sup> Olivia was reassured that Christians had doubts, and that she did not need to fully understand Christianity before she could embrace it. Others similarly appreciated the room for doubts, complexity and variety in Christian understandings. While they experienced a sense of resonance or 'knowing', they did not expect all matters of faith to be completely resolved.<sup>357</sup>

The readiness to embrace complexity is representative of a cultural shift from Enlightenment to 'postmodernity' or 'late modernity'.<sup>358</sup> "Enlightenment realists ... assert at least in theory that the human mind can grasp reality as a whole and hence that we can devise a true and complete description of the way the world actually is. ... They maintain that we can attain sure knowledge in all realms of human inquiry."<sup>359</sup> Such an understanding seems to require a Christian faith that can be neatly and completely explained rationally. But the world has changed. In 1996, Grenz wrote: "Postmodern thinkers no longer find this grand realist ideal tenable."<sup>360</sup> Today, it is not just 'postmodern thinkers' who have changed. Postmodernism (or whatever we chose to call it) has impacted society in general.<sup>361</sup>

Within the Christian faith, some have acknowledged the need for a "willingness to live with tension, ambiguity, and gray areas."<sup>362</sup> Others link doubt to the "effects of sin."<sup>363</sup> But as

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<sup>356</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>357</sup> Even Jean's aversion to arguing about her faith affirms her own willingness to embrace complexity.

<sup>358</sup> It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss the best term for our current age.

<sup>359</sup> Stanley J Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1996), 41.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid.

<sup>361</sup> Richard Flory and Donald Miller, *Finding Faith: The Spiritual Quest of the Post-Boomer Generation* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 10. Doubt is no longer denied, rather, it is becoming "the essence of reality [as] uncertainty [is] a feature of the human condition." Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 8.

<sup>362</sup> Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 99. Psychologist, Kendra Bailey, similarly noted a characteristic of the spiritually mature Christian students she interviewed was that "they had space for pain, doubt, and struggle in their relationship with God." Kendra L Bailey, "Spiritual Maturity in Christian University Students: A Grounded Theory Study of Spiritual Exemplars" (PhD, Biola University, 2014), 110. In describing essential characteristics of the church post-Christendom, theologian, Stuart Murray, includes the need to "welcome questions, eschew simplistic answers and affirm the dimension of mystery in authentic spirituality. [And] churches that encourage expressions of doubt, anger and lament as well as joyful certainty." Murray, *Church after Christendom*, 56. See also, Dave Tomlinson, *Re-Enchanting Christianity: Faith in an Emerging Culture* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008), 2. Later, Tomlinson speaks of mysteries, like the resurrection, being beyond our capacity to understand. They transcend rational categories. Ibid., 71. Theologian, Douglas Hall, calls for "communities of faith to permit doubt and self-criticism" as "the only antidote to religious triumphalism." Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, 18.

<sup>363</sup> As Grace Milton observed in her research on Pentecostal conversion. Milton, "Understanding Pentecostal Conversion," 187;276.

theologian and minister, Dave Tomlinson, suggests, "If you don't have doubts, you actually don't have faith, you have certainty, which is quite a different thing."<sup>364</sup>

A recent empirical investigation of young people's faith development found that churches with growing numbers of young people did not claim to 'have all the answers', rather they were willing to explore questions of faith in genuine ways.<sup>365</sup> The resultant book, *Growing Young*, reported that when young people "have opportunities to express and explore doubts ... doubt is actually correlated with greater faith maturity."<sup>366</sup> Thus doubts, complexity, messiness are not to be feared: *when* those doubts and complexities are explored openly rather than hidden away.<sup>367</sup>

As James Smith says: "We don't believe instead of doubting; we believe *while* doubting. We're all Thomas now."<sup>368</sup> Reassuringly, doubters like Thomas have featured in the Christian narrative since the beginning. Even having seen the risen Jesus, "some doubted."<sup>369</sup> Despite this doubt, the church was established, and continues 2000 years later. A significant part of the reason for our doubts and the apparent inconsistency and 'messiness' of faith, relates to God's mystery. Charles Taylor argues that "those who believe in the God of Abraham should normally be reminded of how little they know him, how partial is their grasp of him."<sup>370</sup> Pretending otherwise is problematic.<sup>371</sup> Despite our best efforts, we are unable to fully understand God. We only have partial knowledge, but any doubts do not need to diminish faith.<sup>372</sup> Rather, as we acknowledge our own limitations, frailty, and inability to fully understand, "God's glory may appear larger and more mysterious."<sup>373</sup> As psychologist, Viktor Gecas, points out, people do not seek consistency so much as meaningfulness. He says: "Individuals can live with considerable inconsistency in their belief

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<sup>364</sup> Tomlinson, *Re-Enchanting Christianity*, 13. This resonates with philosopher and theologian, Søren Kierkegaard's, understanding: "It is through revelation that one knows of a truth at which one could not arrive through reason (and which indeed is not commensurate with reason). ... For Kierkegaard, the truth which Christianity proclaims is a paradox." Hampson, *Christian Contradictions*, 254.

<sup>365</sup> Powell, Mulder and Griffin, *Growing Young*.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>367</sup> See also, the case study of Ruby, in Magnuson, "Spirituality and Becoming Self," 445.

<sup>368</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 4. Original emphasis. See also, Frances S Adeney, *Graceful Evangelism: Christian Witness in a Complex World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 3; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 550-551.

<sup>369</sup> Matthew 28:17 (NIV).

<sup>370</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 769.

<sup>371</sup> Pastor, Jay Bakker, draws on theologian, Paul Tillich, to argue that doubt, rather than a threat, is an important element of the spiritual life, overcome not by repression but by courage. Jay Bakker, *Faith, Doubt, and Other Lines I've Crossed: Walking with the Unknown God* (New York: Jericho Books (Hatchett), 2013), 25-26.

<sup>372</sup> "Our doubt is part of our faith." Adeney, *Graceful Evangelism*, 19.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

systems. What is much more difficult to tolerate is the thought that their world is meaningless and, worse, that they themselves are meaningless.”<sup>374</sup>

### **Affect 6: Seeing things differently**

Somewhere along this journey towards relational authenticity, those I interviewed began to see things differently. This occurred in three interrelated ways. The first related to how they saw *other* things; the second related to how they saw *themselves*; the third, to their noticing *God*.<sup>375</sup> This new way of seeing is also related to the previous affect: a sense of resonance or knowing, and is a result of the entire conversion process.

Hamish’s story provides a helpful example. His ‘seeing differently’ began with noticing the Bible that had long been on his shelf. His ‘seeing differently’ culminated in him being “able to see that all creation is [God’s] and that everything coming out of it is working for good and there is beauty in all of it.”<sup>376</sup> Noticing a Bible began a journey that ultimately transformed the way Hamish saw the world, including himself. He attributed this noticing, as well as this new way of seeing, to God.

Those I interviewed were very new to the Christian faith. But while their spiritual journeys were just beginning, they had already begun to see themselves in new ways. Their reality was becoming defined in terms of their relationship with God. Companionship and relationship with Jesus, and with the community of faith, led them to new understandings. They saw themselves anew in the light of Christ.<sup>377</sup> Mary, for example, became aware of personal sinfulness; and Grace changed from closed-minded to open-minded.

The way that conversion causes us to see things in different ways helps explain the autobiographical reconstruction that converts undertake. Green points to sociologists, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s work on alternation in relation to this.<sup>378</sup> They see conversion as bringing a “rupture” in one’s personal narrative: dividing life into ‘before’ and ‘after’ conversion.<sup>379</sup> Concurring, Green points to the New Testament occasions where

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<sup>374</sup> Gecas, "Self-Concept," 177-178. (This contrasts with Rambo’s view that a desire for greater consistency can be part of the convert’s quest. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 56.)

<sup>375</sup> While the participants generally attributed this new way of seeing to God, or to their faith, other people were also involved. For example, once Meg’s friend had made her aware of the dangers of Reiki, Meg began to see those dangers for herself.

<sup>376</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>377</sup> McIntosh, *Divine Teaching*, 22.

<sup>378</sup> Conversion is, in their words, “the historical prototype of alternation.” Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1966), 177. See also, Rambo, "Theories of Conversion," 265.

<sup>379</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality*, 179. I reported in Chapter 6 how Jean experienced this. Before she was converted, she did not understand such a juxtaposition. After her conversion, she understood it, having experienced it herself. See also, Rambo, *Understanding*

protagonists demonstrate “reshaped allegiances and dispositions.”<sup>380</sup> At these times, God’s liberation is more internal as God brings a new way of seeing and understanding: a new hermeneutic.<sup>381</sup> This new way of seeing “generally comes about through understanding one’s place within the history of God’s purpose, or writing oneself into the ancient story of God’s work.”<sup>382</sup> Thus, conversion begins, and becomes the process of the convert embracing a new way of seeing their own past, present and future.<sup>383</sup>

Lynn Paul offers a slightly different explanation from object relations theory. Internalising Jesus “changes one’s intrapsychic perspective.”<sup>384</sup> The result of this internalising of Christ is seeing things in different ways.<sup>385</sup>

Root points to the role of the Holy Spirit in giving eyes to see: a “new hermeneutic.”<sup>386</sup> Things that previously did not make sense; make sense when “examined through this lens of the logic of the Spirit.”<sup>387</sup> Materially, nothing had changed for Grace when she announced that Christianity “made sense.”<sup>388</sup> Interpretively or hermeneutically, it was different, because she was seeing in a new way. As Epstein points out: “What people believe is a major determinant of how they interpret events, behave, and feel.”<sup>389</sup> Taylor calls this a “transformation of the frame in which people thought, felt and lived before.”<sup>390</sup> Conversion causes us to see things differently.<sup>391</sup>

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*Religious Conversion*, 161-162. However, those I interviewed demonstrated continuity, and becoming, more than rupture. Meg’s (Pentecostal) conversion was the most characterised by rupture of those I interviewed. However, she seemed also most in *need* of rupture. While this greater apparent need was in part due to the way she framed and understood her conversion narrative, Meg undoubtedly had serious dysfunction she needed to escape from.

<sup>380</sup> Green, *Why Salvation?*, 114.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, 79. (Galatians 3:28; 2 Corinthians 5:16.)

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, 114. See also, *ibid.*, 79-80.

<sup>383</sup> Green points to the primacy in such narratives of the spiritual practice of prayer.

<sup>384</sup> Paul, “Jesus as Object,” 304. Other psychological research demonstrated that how you feel – affective processes – can influence what you see. Eric Anderson, Erika H Siegel and Lisa Feldman Barrett, “What You Feel Influences What You See: The Role of Affective Feelings in Resolving Binocular Rivalry,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 47, no. 4 (2011). See also, James W Bagby, “A Cross-Cultural Study of Perceptual Predominance in Binocular Rivalry,” *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 54, no. 3 (1957).

<sup>385</sup> See also, Maruna, Wilson and Curran, “Why God Is Often Found Behind Bars,” 166-167.

<sup>386</sup> Root, *Christopraxis*, 103.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.* Sociologists, David Snow and Richard Machalek, call this “the adoption of a master attribution scheme.” Snow and Machalek, “Sociology of Conversion,” 173. See also, Dufault-Hunter, “Personal Transformation and Religious Faith: A Narrative Approach to Conversion,” 59.

<sup>388</sup> Grace interview.

<sup>389</sup> Epstein, *Cognitive-Experiential Theory*, xvii.

<sup>390</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 730-731. He links this to things making sense “in a wholly new way.” *Ibid.*, 731.

<sup>391</sup> Root, *Christopraxis*, 202-203. Of course, the way we see things needs to be assessed alongside Christian theology. For example, some of Mary’s interpretations were not orthodox.

Cucchiari argues that the ability to reinterpret one's situation "in the light of the new reality breaking in" is actually more significant than any actual change in circumstances.<sup>392</sup> For example, what changes post-conversion for one of his informants is the way that she "understands and appropriates the social and material conditions of her existence and, hence, the way she is reproduced as a person."<sup>393</sup> This was similarly true of Jean who, struggling with facing a medical procedure, attributed God with her realisation that the big picture of good health was more important than how that health was achieved. For both women, their circumstances had not changed. But they saw and understood themselves and their experiences in new ways in light of their conversions. Aguilar also noted the ritualised separation between the pre-conversion self and the converted self: a dividing of life into 'before' and 'after' conversion.<sup>394</sup> Converts saw themselves differently because of their faith.

As well as seeing themselves and other things differently, those I interviewed began to notice God. Their longing for authenticity, and their moving towards that authenticity, opened and awakened them to "the world of the Spirit."<sup>395</sup> At times, their meeting God was overwhelming, like when Sarah had the encounter with God at her friends' dinner table. Other times it took the form of a gentle awareness. For example, Sarah now reports she can "see [God's] love" everywhere.<sup>396</sup> Tallulah similarly sees the blessings of God. As practical theologian, Richard Peace, reminds us: "God's presence pervades our world."<sup>397</sup> We need to develop what Peace calls the "spiritual discipline of noticing God."<sup>398</sup> This is what those I interviewed had begun to do. They had begun to notice God: who was already present and active in their lives and in the world.

Their 'seeing things differently' was both cause for and consequence of conversion. It contributed to the conversion process in that their noticing drew them closer to God. It was a consequence of conversion as they became more attuned to God's presence in everyday life. They were "awakened to perceive God."<sup>399</sup> Their engagement in spiritual practices

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<sup>392</sup> Cucchiari, "Adapted for Heaven," 426.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid., 428.

<sup>394</sup> Aguilar, "Experiencing Transcendence," 601.

<sup>395</sup> Peace, *Noticing God*, 21. Peace attributes this to human response to a God-placed "longing in our hearts for God." Ibid.

<sup>396</sup> Sarah interview.

<sup>397</sup> Peace, *Noticing God*, 14.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

<sup>399</sup> Meadows, "Journey of Evangelism," 418.

resourced this noticing.<sup>400</sup> Their noticing helps create the sense of resonance or knowing already talked about in relation to Affect 5.<sup>401</sup>

Theologian, Dale Coulter, goes as far as to suggest that “transforming affective movements leads to a change in the nature of a person, not only in terms of the values held, but also in terms of the character that *flows* from those values.”<sup>402</sup> If such a change or return occurs – a change also attested to in scripture – then it is no wonder that those I interviewed began to see things differently as they journeyed towards faith.<sup>403</sup> Wesley argues that our spiritual senses are opened by the gift of faith.<sup>404</sup> Neurobiologist, Justin Marshall, demonstrates how birds and fish see things differently due to polarisation and colour filtering. The object seen is not different, but is perceived differently by different creatures.<sup>405</sup> The Bible says much about spiritual blindness and our inability to see things as they really are.<sup>406</sup> Hamish spoke of God giving him the “lens” to be able to see the world as God sees it.<sup>407</sup> For Hamish, and for others, unveiled eyes provided a new way of seeing the world, themselves, and God. They became able to see differently: able “to understand, desire, and live in a world made for communion with God.”<sup>408</sup>

The result of such noticing God, seeing the world in a new way, is what Peace calls “a wholeness to our living.”<sup>409</sup> Peace highlights the relational nature of this wholeness: being present to God, to the world of the Spirit, to each other and to the world.<sup>410</sup> I have termed this wholeness ‘relational authenticity’.

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<sup>400</sup> Peace, *Noticing God*, 15.

<sup>401</sup> Bruce Wilson asserts that theophany (experiences of God breaking through to a human being) are themselves a “way of knowing.” Wilson, *Reasons of the Heart*, 22.

<sup>402</sup> Coulter, “Whole Gospel, Whole Person,” 158. Original emphasis. Coulter argues that an ontological change occurs at conversion as Christ is formed in their soul. Theologian, Bernard Lonergan, was similar aware of the ontic nature of conversion, saying: “The convert apprehends differently, values differently, relates differently because he has become different.” Bernard Lonergan, “Theology in Its New Context,” in *The Lonergan Reader*, ed. Mark D Morelli and Elizabeth A Morelli (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 417. I argue that this apparent ontological change is actually a return to our created status, imaging God. Thus, it is a becoming of who we *truly* are. Christians are not ontologically different from non-Christians. Rather, Christians have *embraced* their true personhood. See also, Root, *Relational Pastor*, 141.

<sup>403</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:18; 5:17

<sup>404</sup> See Albert Cook Outler, ed. *The Works of John Wesley: Sermons 4* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 172-173. Cited in Meadows, “Journey of Evangelism,” 420.

<sup>405</sup> For example, Justin Marshall and Thomas W Cronin, “Polarisation Vision,” *Current Biology* 21, no. 3 (2011): R101.

<sup>406</sup> For example, 2 Kings 6:7; Matthew 13:16; Mark 8:18; Luke 24:31; John 3:3; 1 Corinthians 13:12; 2 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 1:18.

<sup>407</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>408</sup> Meadows, “Journey of Evangelism,” 421.

<sup>409</sup> Peace, *Noticing God*, 15.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.



## A brief note on Affect: 4b Homecoming

When we come home to the love of God everything changes.<sup>411</sup>

We explore this affect more fully in the next major section, but need to note here that the sense of homecoming those I interviewed experienced was sometimes understood as primarily enabled by God. Mary and Sarah spoke of attending church and being baptised, respectively, as feeling like a homecoming. They understood this as being because of God's presence with them. Hamish and Jean also felt at home in church. Similarly, converts to Catholicism said of their conversion "that he or she has 'come home,' or 'entered the fullness of the faith,' or has experienced conversion to the 'truth of the Catholic faith'."<sup>412</sup> Engaging in a relationship with God caused a sense of homecoming.<sup>413</sup>

## Other literature on the role of God in conversion

[The outcome of conversion to Christianity] is the *transformation of identity in Christ*, the conversion of a person in [their] deepest being ... the transformation of an 'I am who I am' to an 'I am who I am in Christ' identity.<sup>414</sup>

As well as the *yearner* and the *trapped*, discussed above, Aguilar's third category of convert is the *swept*. These converts were swept along into a conversion narrative they did not intend to participate in.<sup>415</sup> This heuristic category could categorise Meg's experience of praying a "salvation prayer" when she was seeking exorcism.<sup>416</sup> Similarly, it could frame Hamish's explorations after he noticed the Bible in his bookcase. Like Aguilar's *swept*, Hamish and Meg attributed these experiences to God.

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<sup>411</sup> Elaine Heath, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 82. Before saying this, Heath described the spiritual formation of Thomas R Kelly and Henri Nouwen. Her statement relates to a key point on each of their spiritual journeys when they had "come home" to the love of God. While Heath is not using it to speak of the beginning of one's faith journey, I believe what Mary, Sarah and Jean experienced, in feeling a sense of homecoming, was a glimpse of the developing reality of coming home to God.

<sup>412</sup> McKnight and Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith*, 198. Interestingly, the concept of coming home – to themselves and to a relational community – is also named as vitally important for Wiccan initiates. Melissa Harrington, "The Long Journey Home; a Study of the Conversion Profiles of 35 British Wiccan Men," *Revista de Estudos da Religião* 2 (2002): 26. Their homecoming was to "enlightenment, empowerment, empathy, equality, and joy." *Ibid.*, 46. See also, Winchester, "Converting to Continuity: Temporality and Self in Eastern Orthodox Conversion Narratives," 440.

<sup>413</sup> See also, Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 312; Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 52. Theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, stated: the "essential homelessness of the human spirit is the ground of all religion; for the self which stands outside itself and the world cannot find the meaning of life in itself or in the world." Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, vol. 1: Human Nature, Library of Theological Ethics (Louisville, KY and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 14. (Cited in Walker, "Process of Conversion," 67.)

<sup>414</sup> McKnight and Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith*, 74. Original emphasis.

<sup>415</sup> Aguilar, "Experiencing Transcendence," 605-607.

<sup>416</sup> Meg interview.

There is also resonance with Aguilar's *swept* in the conversions to Catholicism that Yamane reported as representing "expressive individualism," as experienced by 21% of his informants.<sup>417</sup> The examples Yamane cited in this regard included Gail, who was moved spiritually on a retreat she attended. Rachel went to church and "everything just felt so right," saying: "I found myself again."<sup>418</sup> These experiences could be attributed to God's agency, to a process in which converts are 'swept' along by God.

In the scene setting for this chapter, I introduced Green's framework of God as healer. Ayometzi noted the use of the healing metaphor in the Spanish Mission. Members saw the church as like a hospital, where people come to be "cured, healed, or regenerated."<sup>419</sup> According to a sermon preached there, God has "the medicine ... the remedy. ... He [knows] the way to transform that life, that has the desire to be renovated, to be changed."<sup>420</sup>

Green, McKnight, Peace and Driver each remind us of the variety of conversion experiences in the New Testament.<sup>421</sup> Green, referring to Luke-Acts notes that "for Luke, conversion could never be reduced to a human endeavour."<sup>422</sup> However, conversion is also "more than a divine act; it involves a journey with companions and choices as the converted experience an ongoing makeover with respect to their patterns of faith and life."<sup>423</sup> God is at work in conversion, working with, and in, a willing convert and their companions.

So far in this chapter, we have introduced relational authenticity; considered how the converts' desire for relational authenticity fuelled their journeys to faith; and discussed how God enables this relational authenticity to flourish. Next, we turn towards the companions in conversion and consider how other Christians resource the project of relational authenticity, by exhibiting relational authenticity in their personal, social and spiritual lives.

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<sup>417</sup> Yamane, *Becoming Catholic*, 60. In naming these categories, he draws on Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*. Yamane's two other cultural schemas were *familism* (discussed above) and *utilitarian individualism*. I have also already discussed *utilitarian individualism* in Chapter 10, in relation to rational choice theory.

<sup>418</sup> Yamane, *Becoming Catholic*, 68.

<sup>419</sup> Ayometzi, "Storying as Becoming," 51. Note this is Ayometzi's translation of the original Spanish language transcript.

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*, 52. I have removed the linguistic coding from this quotation. Again, this is translated from the original Spanish.

<sup>421</sup> Green, *Conversion in Luke-Acts*; McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*; Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament*; Driver, *Understanding the Atonement*.

<sup>422</sup> Green, *Conversion in Luke-Acts*, 142.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Religious conversion is resourced by other Christians who embrace and exhibit relational authenticity in their personal, social and spiritual lives.**

This section demonstrates that religious conversion is resourced by other Christians who embrace and exhibit relational authenticity in their personal, social and spiritual lives. Those I interviewed clearly articulated things about other Christians who resourced their journeys to faith. They reported that other Christians demonstrated that they were helped by their own Christian faith. They lived differently because of that faith. They shared openly with others, including their non-Christian friends. They were deeply hospitable. They helped non-Christians. They invited and resourced participation in spiritual practices. Enabled by God, these other Christians were, themselves, growing in and exhibiting relational authenticity in their personal, social and spiritual lives. This relational authenticity, exhibited by other Christians, was experienced by those I interviewed in two main ways. First, as a sense that faith makes sense in everyday life; and, secondly, as a sense of warmth, welcome and belonging: enjoyed because of reciprocal, mutual and equal relationships with their Christian friends. These two areas are discussed in this section, after a brief scene setting.

### **Setting the scene**

In the light of the Trinity, being a person in the image and likeness of the divine Persons means acting as a permanently active web of relationships: relating backwards and upwards to one's origin in the unfathomable mystery of the Father, relating outwards to one's fellow human beings by revealing oneself to them and welcoming the revelation of them in the mystery of the Son, relating inwards to the depths of one's own personality in the mystery of the Spirit.<sup>424</sup>

As discussed above, humans are created in the image of the triune God. God is relational and humans too are created for relationship: both with God and with other humans. This orientation towards relationship with other people is articulated in the creation narrative: God created Eve because it was not good for the Adam-man to be alone.<sup>425</sup> Thus, being made in God's image means we are ontologically and aspirationally designed for relationship with others. McFadyen uses the term, "ex-centric" to mean that persons actually *become* centred, become themselves, *by* moving towards others.<sup>426</sup> Thus, we would expect the relationally authentic persons Christians are becoming to impact upon others as Christians 'move towards' others, including their non-Christian friends. For those I interviewed, that very movement is attractive and appealing. Chapter 6 described the significant role other

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<sup>424</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 149. Cited in Grenz, *Social God, Relational Self*, 53.

<sup>425</sup> Genesis 2:18

<sup>426</sup> McFadyen, *Personhood*, 40. Also John D Zizioulas, "Human Capacity and Human Incapacity: A Theological Exploration of Personhood," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28, no. 5 (1975): 408.

Christians played in the participants' conversion processes and I briefly rearticulated that above. These things contributed significantly to the participants' faith journeys.

One of the so-called 'freedoms' of our modern context is our ability to disengage from relationships. But as well as this "individualization [providing] liberation from traditional norms," it concurrently causes a "loss of stability and an increase in insecurity."<sup>427</sup> Charles Taylor explains this instability and insecurity by pointing to the "fundamentally *dialogical*" nature of human beings.<sup>428</sup> Practical theologian, Andrew Root, similarly asserts that relationships are fundamental to who we are as human persons: "the very core of our existence, the source of life."<sup>429</sup> In fact, "It is in the fulfilment of relational or communal life that we reach our full potential as human beings."<sup>430</sup> There is resonance here with the African concept of Ubuntu. Ubuntu understands "the identity of the self ... to be formed interdependently through community."<sup>431</sup> Asian conceptions of the self are also communal.<sup>432</sup> Similarly, Green agrees with Old Testament scholar, Robert Di Vito, that a Biblical understanding of humanity sees "the construction of the self as ineluctably nested in social relationships and, then, the importance of relational interdependence for human life and identity."<sup>433</sup> Insights from neurobiology similarly see "relatedness and communal living [as] the center of human life."<sup>434</sup> Given this deep link between our humanity and our relationality, it is not surprising that relational authenticity demonstrated by Christians was significant in drawing non-Christians into relationship with God.<sup>435</sup>

My research showed that religious conversion was resourced by other Christians demonstrating relational authenticity, and providing environments in which their non-Christian friends could experience such authenticity.<sup>436</sup> This occurred in two key ways. First,

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<sup>427</sup> Ulrich Beck, *Risikogesellschaft: Auf Dem Weg in Eine Andere Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986/1992), 128. Cited in Jindra, *A New Model of Religious Conversion*, 84. (I have not viewed the original, which is in German.)

<sup>428</sup> Taylor, *Authenticity*, 33. Original emphasis. Stanley Grenz speaks of the "ecclesial self," that has its basis "in the Divine love." Grenz, *Social God, Relational Self*, 305; 313.

<sup>429</sup> Root, *Relational Pastor*, 18.

<sup>430</sup> Markham, "Conversion Converted," 56.

<sup>431</sup> Michael Battle, *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me* (New York: Seabury Books, 2009), 1-2. See also, Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 11.

<sup>432</sup> Hazel Rose Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, "Culture and Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation," *Psychological Review* 98, no. 2 (1991).

<sup>433</sup> Green, *Why Salvation?*, 15. Green is citing Old Testament scholar, Robert Di Vito's insightful work challenging modern interpretations of Hebrew understandings of the self. Robert A Di Vito, "Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (1999).

<sup>434</sup> Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini and Richard Lannon, *A General Theory of Love* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 86. Cited in Majerus, "Toward Knowing God," 290.

<sup>435</sup> See Taylor, *Authenticity*, 33; Root, *Relational Pastor*, 18.

<sup>436</sup> This social interaction, along with engagement in spiritual practices, as already discussed, facilitated the development of "virtues intrinsic to the Christian faith." Markham, "Conversion Converted," 5.

as other Christians demonstrated that their faith made a difference to everyday life. Secondly, as other Christians engaged in reciprocal, mutual and equal relationships with their friends, including non-Christians, those I interviewed experienced a sense of welcome and warmth that was significant for their journeys to faith. Observing and beginning to experience the relational authenticity demonstrated by their Christian friends resourced the faith journeys of non-Christians.

### **Affect 3: A sense that faith relates, and makes a difference, to everyday life**

Other Christians demonstrated that Christianity relates authentically to everyday life. They did this by sharing openly and honestly with their non-Christian friends; through the ways they lived differently because of their faith; and at church, including through the sermons preached, and the songs sung. We consider these next, in reverse order.

Tallulah said of her early church experiences:

I found some of the sermons really interesting and applicable to ... everyday life as well. ... I was just really enjoying the sermons and the life lessons that I was extracting from that.<sup>437</sup>

Sarah spoke of the vulnerability and authenticity the minister displayed in the first service she attended. The converts Aguilar studied felt the preacher speak directly to them. For those he interviewed, sermons are “believed to carry a message meant for the individual,” enabling them to connect with the Divine.<sup>438</sup> Many of those I interviewed also commented on the ways songs sung at church named and resourced their current reality. Through those songs, converts recognised the authentic connection between faith and everyday life.<sup>439</sup>

Hauna Ondrey reported comparable findings in one of the three patterns she observed in Roman Catholics converting to evangelical Protestantism.<sup>440</sup> Attending an evangelical church at the invitation of his girlfriend, Jim DiCenso “was struck by the service. The worship was vibrant and the sermon relevant to his life.”<sup>441</sup> The pastor spoke with Jim, telling him about problems that he faced daily. These were the same problems that Jim faced. Ondrey

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<sup>437</sup> Tallulah interview.

<sup>438</sup> Aguilar, "Experiencing Transcendence," 604-605.

<sup>439</sup> Rambo writes of the integration which occurs as theology makes sense in relation to the lived experience of the convert. "Religious symbolism ... seems to parallel and interpret the convert's life experience." Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 83. I have discussed this when considering Affect 5, above.

<sup>440</sup> Ondrey's first two patterns – obtaining assurance of salvation and choosing the authority of Scripture over the authority of the Church – were absent from my data. This is not surprising as the people I interviewed had no (or very minimal) previous church experience, and carried no weight of personal sinfulness.

<sup>441</sup> McKnight and Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith*, 160.

concluded: “In addition to the vibrant worship and applicable message, the community Jim witnessed there was authentic.”<sup>442</sup> Ondrey called the crisis Jim and others like him experienced an “affective” crisis.<sup>443</sup> They “experience Mass as irrelevant and lifeless. The image [they have] of God ... is distant and inaccessible. Finally, they fail to experience authentic community or witness the church body living out the faith.”<sup>444</sup> By contrast, the converts from Catholicism to Protestantism that Ondrey researched encountered in an evangelical protestant church a relationally authentic expression of church life which included “authentic worship, ... a more intimate portrayal of God ... and [a] message preached [that] is embodied in the lives of those in the communities – both lay people and leaders alike.”<sup>445</sup>

Participants perceived that God was making a difference in the lives of other Christians and helping them become the sort of people who reflected God: people whose lives and faith were attractive. In part, this was as they saw the attributes they appreciated in God reflected in their Christian friends. Olivia “could tell that [the Christians she knew] were like different people than people who didn’t believe in God. Like they obviously got something that no one else had.”<sup>446</sup> Specifically, she perceived that “something” made them “joyful and really, nicer people, and a bit more thoughtful.”<sup>447</sup> She wanted to be like that herself. These Christians were living lives that brought glory to God, as Paul encouraged the Philippians to do: they shone “like stars” and were noticed by their non-Christian friends.<sup>448</sup> They demonstrated that faith makes a difference in everyday life.<sup>449</sup>

In addition, those I interviewed saw the connection between faith and everyday life, because their Christian friends shared openly with non-Christians. I have selected two examples to very briefly highlight, from the many experiences reported in Chapter 6. Olivia journeyed with her Christian friend, Hannah after Hannah’s family tragedy. Olivia saw how Hannah’s faith sustained her in this hard time. This called Olivia towards a faith of her own. The earliest experience Jean described in her conversion narrative was of seeing the difference their faith made to the young children she was teaching. Both these experiences occurred years before Olivia or Jean began to explore Christian faith for themselves.

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<sup>442</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>446</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>447</sup> Ibid.

<sup>448</sup> Philippians 2:12-15 (NIV).

<sup>449</sup> See also, Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 109.

While not directly related to the role of other Christians, we should note here that this sense that faith relates to everyday life was further developed as participants engaged in spiritual practices. As they prayed and read the Bible they *experienced* their faith impacting on their everyday lives. This deepened their sense that faith makes a difference.

#### **Affect 4a: Sense of welcome, warmth and belonging**

It was just kind and friendly and like warm and welcoming and sort of a real surprise that there could be this sense of community where I had never really felt any before.<sup>450</sup>

Olivia had never participated in healthy community life before attending a church service with her friend and experiencing what she described above. Similarly, Luke's desperate need for people who genuinely cared for him was met as he became a part of a group of Christian friends. Rather than simply ministering to Luke, Luke's friends welcomed him into their community life together and he became one of them and one with them. Olivia and Luke, along with most of the others I interviewed, described experiencing a sense of welcome, warmth and belonging as they journeyed towards the Christian faith.

Luke's and Olivia's friends exhibited relational authenticity by what Root calls "indwelling" others: by sharing deeply in each other's lives.<sup>451</sup> From what Luke reported, it seems his friends indwelled Luke, first, by acting for him: not to achieve a specific goal, but simply to share in his life. Secondly, they indwelled Luke through communication: by listening and hearing, knowing and being known.<sup>452</sup> Such relationships help meet the deep-felt human need to belong.<sup>453</sup>

Practical theologian, Frances Adeney, noted the "centrality of relationships" for what she calls "abundant life."<sup>454</sup> Human flourishing requires relational connectedness to God, as well as connectedness to other people. This relational connectedness, Root's indwelling, was

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<sup>450</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>451</sup> Root, *Relational Pastor*, 72. Root references John 15:4, and the call to mutual abiding with Jesus (ibid., 75.), and Jesus' presence (indwelling) in the "hungry, homeless and imprisoned (ibid., 73.). Indwelling involves sharing "in something so deeply that what is not part of us becomes part of us" (ibid.). Our lives become entwined, and the other's joy or pain affects us also. Ibid., 74.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid., 73; 76-81.

<sup>453</sup> Christine D Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B Eerdmans, 2012), 3.

<sup>454</sup> Adeney, *Graceful Evangelism*, 100. Adeney's 'abundant life' incorporates the same elements as my 'relational authenticity'. (See ibid., 99.) While the term resonates beautifully with scripture (John 10:10), it holds little contemporary resonance outside the church. Unlike 'authenticity', 'abundance' is not a term in common usage. While this has the potential advantage of providing the space to carefully craft an appropriate definition, this advantage is outweighed by the associated disadvantage of its not being culturally meaningful. Therefore, I use the more missionally-appropriate, 'relational authenticity'.

expressed in relationships characterised by reciprocity, mutuality and equality.<sup>455</sup> Jean's Christian friend asked Jean (then a non-Christian) to pray with her for healing for her father. Olivia (then a non-Christian) supported her Christian friend through her grief.<sup>456</sup> Luke's (pre-conversion) contributions to their small group Bible study were taken seriously and appreciated. These mutual, reciprocal, equal relationships allowed the converts to experience relational authenticity for themselves and facilitated their sense of welcome, warmth and belonging.<sup>457</sup>

Theologian, Cathy Ross, considers the theme of hospitality by employing the biblical metaphor of "the Church as the household of God."<sup>458</sup> She links this metaphor to meanings and consequences "such as welcome of all especially the stranger, nourishment, seeing and listening, risk, marginality and spaciousness."<sup>459</sup> Ross notes that hospitality includes receiving as well as giving, and calls for a "mutually transformative encounter where hospitality is offered and received in a reciprocal manner."<sup>460</sup>

My research indicates that this call for reciprocity needs to be extended even further and considered from the perspective of the *other* as well as from the church. Long before they had any connection with a local church, it was in the act of helping their Christian friends that both Olivia and Jean were drawn towards relationship with God. Later in the conversion process, Luke's appreciated contributions to his small group helped him realise his own value. Christians and churches need to provide space for non-Christians to themselves

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<sup>455</sup> This collection of nouns has been used, particularly by feminist writers and theologians, to characterise healthy relationships. As noted in the previous section, Anne Carr linked these with Trinitarian theology in Carr, "Women, Justice, and the Church," 275. See also, Meghan J Clark, *The Vision of Catholic Social Thought: The Virtue of Solidarity and the Praxis of Human Rights* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

<sup>456</sup> These relationships were genuinely relational, not what Root calls 'relationalistic'. (Root, *Relational Pastor*, 40-41.)

<sup>457</sup> Markham, in taking a fresh look at conversion through Wesleyan eyes, noted that it is as our communal life is fulfilled "that we reach our full potential as human beings." Markham, "Conversion Converted," 56. Sociologists, Chaeyoon Lim and Robert Putman, concluded from their empirical research on life satisfaction and religion that "social networks formed in congregations and strong religious identities are the key variables that mediate the positive connection between religion and life satisfaction." Lim and Putnam, "Religion, Social Networks, and Life Satisfaction," 927. "It is neither faith nor communities, per se, that are important, but communities of faith." Ibid. This points to the importance of communal engagement in spiritual practices. Such networks contribute to life satisfaction because they offer a plausibility structure to faith and life and/or because of the frequent social interactions they provide. Ibid., 929.

<sup>458</sup> Cathy Ross, "Hospitality: The Church as 'a Mother with an Open Heart'," in *Mission on the Road to Emmaus: Constants, Context, and Prophetic Dialogue*, ed. Cathy Ross and Stephen B Bevans (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015).

<sup>459</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid., 70. See also, Kimberly Thacker, "The Value of Authenticity in Postmodern Evangelism," *Journal of the Academy of Evangelism in Theological Education* 17 (2001-2002): 42-44; Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 191-194.



*initiate* the gifts of hospitality. Such reciprocity, giving and receiving, is a crucial part of Trinitarian relationality, and should be a key dimension of Christian practice.

The New Testament encourages reciprocity. While we are called to invite party guests who cannot return the invitation, we are also invited to *be* guests.<sup>461</sup> The Greek word *xénos* simultaneously denotes “guest, host or stranger” and so the New Testament’s *philoxenia* “refers not so much to love of strangers but to a delight in the whole guest-host relationship and in the surprises that may occur.”<sup>462</sup> Jesus acts in the gospels as both guest and host.<sup>463</sup> In Jesus’ interactions, as in the interactions between Peter and Cornelius, the lines between giving and receiving, listening and learning, host and guest are blurred and challenged. Jesus, in the very incarnation as well as in various exchanges where he acted as guest and recipient, “modelled powerlessness and vulnerability.”<sup>464</sup> As a guest, Jesus did not impose upon people, rather, he listened to those he encountered.<sup>465</sup> “He was gracious, showing kindness, courtesy, and charm.”<sup>466</sup> This is the sort of indwelling that drew my research participants into relationship with God. They observed and experienced such relational authenticity in their relationships with Christian friends.<sup>467</sup>

One of the recovering substance abusers interviewed by Williamson and Hood spoke of the significance of being trusted by those in leadership at the mission. The pastor gave him a key to the church and another leader trusted him to collect money from customers of their business.<sup>468</sup> This trust moved the mission’s hospitality and care for others into the realm of reciprocity, mutuality and equality: and risk. This same person (and others) reported ways they sought to help other substance abusers, and the ministry as a whole. Their giving back was a crucial dimension of their “process of becoming” spiritually transformed.<sup>469</sup>

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<sup>461</sup> Luke 10:1-10.

<sup>462</sup> Ross, "Hospitality," 69.

<sup>463</sup> Christine D Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1999), 16-17.

<sup>464</sup> Ross, "Hospitality," 69.

<sup>465</sup> For example, Luke 18:40-42 and John 5:1-8. Practical theologian, David Augsburger, points out the order in Luke 10 is first eat together; then heal; then speak: *diakonia, koinonia, kerygma*. Augsburger, *Dissident Discipleship*, 184.

<sup>466</sup> Adeney, *Graceful Evangelism*, 30.

<sup>467</sup> Theologian, Jean Vanier, has long recognised this need for deep relationality, including the need for mutuality in relationships. As he wrote: “In years to come we are going to need many small communities which will welcome lost and lonely people, offering them a new form of family and a sense of belonging. ... To show them that they are loved and can grow to greater freedom and they, in turn, can love and give life to others.” Note the reciprocity again inherent in those words. Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, trans. Olive Peat, 2nd ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 283.

<sup>468</sup> Williamson and Hood Jr, "Spiritual Transformation," 8.

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

Adeney also noted the need for mutuality in one of the key themes she identified in her “whirlwind tour of women’s mission theologies.”<sup>470</sup> She recognised “the [women’s] emphasis on Christian values, particularly attitudes of humility and willingness to receive from others.”<sup>471</sup> Adeney pointed to missiologist, Sherron George, as being particularly overt about the need for such reciprocity, saying “mutuality was [George’s] paradigm for mission in the 1970s.”<sup>472</sup> Such values help create the sense of belonging crucial for wellbeing.

Returning now to empirical data on conversion, Ayometzi described the Spanish Mission as particularly welcoming: “Above all, they were welcoming, offering friendship and companionship to a group of people [undocumented immigrants] that by definition were the most likely to need such an environment.”<sup>473</sup> A sense of warmth, welcome and belonging was essential for those undocumented migrants.

More generally, while discussing authenticity, above, I mentioned psychologist, Susan Harter’s emphasis on the relational nature of authenticity. In earlier research, Harter et al. observed three styles “that characterize adults’ relationships with [their] partners: self-focused autonomy, other-focused connection, and mutuality.”<sup>474</sup> Their “findings revealed that mutual individuals with mutual partners reported the highest levels of perceived validation and authentic-self behaviour.”<sup>475</sup> While their research was on partner relationships, my research suggests that mutuality in other types of relationships may also be correlated with modelling and experiencing authenticity. As Ross reminds us: “Friendship is a powerful force for good; friendship moves us towards wholeness.”<sup>476</sup> Experiencing a sense of warmth, welcome and belonging helped those I interviewed move towards relational authenticity.

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<sup>470</sup> Adeney, "Contemporary Women's Contributions," 164-165.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid., 165. The other two themes she identified were “the theme of God’s relationality and the claim that places on Christian missionaries to work in love with others” and “the themes of unity, of God’s love for all humanity and of the importance of treating others with respect.”

<sup>472</sup> Ibid., 162. For more, see Sherron Kay George, "From Missionary to Missiologist at the Margins: Three Decades of Transforming Mission," in *Teaching Mission in a Global Context*, ed. Patricia Lloyd-Sidle and Bonnie Sue Lewis (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2001), 41-45. Contemporary practices such as ‘Asset-based community development’ and participatory research methodologies are similarly oriented towards mutuality, reciprocity and equality. "Asset-Based Community Development," Northwestern University, <http://www.abcdinstitute.org/> Accessed 22 October 2016; Lisa Goodson and Jenny Phillimore, *Community Research for Participation: From Theory to Method More* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2012).

<sup>473</sup> Ayometzi, "Storying as Becoming," 50.

<sup>474</sup> Susan Harter, Patricia L Waters, Lisa M Pettitt, Nancy Whitesell, Jennifer Kofkin and Judith Jordan, "Autonomy and Connectedness as Dimensions of Relationship Styles in Men and Women," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 14, no. 2 (1997): 147.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid.

<sup>476</sup> Ross, "Hospitality," 78.

## Other literature on the role of other Christians

The natural state of a human being ... is to be in need of community with another.<sup>477</sup>

We turn now to consider other literature on the role of believers in the conversion process. The fact that other believers play a role in the conversion process is well documented, having been investigated within a range of disciplines.<sup>478</sup> For example, both network theory and social constructivism are offered as explanations for conversion. These sociological theories look not to the personal motivations emphasised by rational choice theory but, primarily, to the relational connections between persons.<sup>479</sup> Generally, sociological research based on network theory found “a strong influence of social networks and interaction with members of a religious group contributing to conversions.”<sup>480</sup> For example, in 1980, sociologists, Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, argued that “interpersonal bonds between members and potential recruits are the essential element” to explain “recruitment to religious cults and sects.”<sup>481</sup> However, it is questionable whether they ‘explained’ recruitment, or merely described what occurred.<sup>482</sup> In his research on Catholic Pentecostals, sociologist, Max Heirich, noted that “the impact of social networks is striking indeed – *for those already oriented toward a religious quest*.”<sup>483</sup> Understood this way, we can see that other believers *resource* existing spiritual quests rather than *causing* such quests.<sup>484</sup>

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<sup>477</sup> McFadyen, *Personhood*, 33.

<sup>478</sup> Bruce, "Sociology of Conversion," 1-3. While popular in the latter half of last century, theories relating to brainwashing have been widely discounted and will not be considered here.

<sup>479</sup> Jindra, *A New Model of Religious Conversion*. Jindra notes that different types of associations occur for different faith groups. “Both network theory and strong social constructivism” better explained conversions to “relatively theologically and socially strict groups” like Jehovah’s Witnesses and Islam, than they explained conversion to the more ‘open’ groups such as Baha’i. *Ibid.*, 115. Jindra emphasised the interrelatedness of “background experiences, ... degree of self-reflexivity and life-course agency” combining to influence conversion choices. *Ibid.*, 121. But while she helpfully looked to the content of the different religious groups studied, Jindra still neglected any attention to divine agency.

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.* 15.

<sup>481</sup> Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, "Networks of Faith: Interpersonal Bonds and Recruitment to Cults and Sects," *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 6 (1980): 1376. See also, Lofland and Stark’s earlier work where they include the development of an “affective bond” with existing converts as one of seven “accumulating conditions” required for conversion. John Lofland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," *American Sociological Review* (1965): 874. Later research by Stark and Smith concluded that converts “seem to be drawn to religion by social ties and because of the spiritual satisfactions it gives them.” Stark and Smith, "Conversion and Motivation," 15.

<sup>482</sup> Sociologist, Max Heirich, had earlier noted the difference between descriptions of *what* occurs and explanations as to *how* it occurs, in relation to the role of believers in conversion. Max Heirich, "Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories About Religious Conversion," *American Journal of Sociology* (1977): 667.

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid.*, 673. Original emphasis.

<sup>484</sup> See also, Azania Thomas, Birgit Völm, Belinda Winder and Tarek Abdelrazek, "Religious Conversion among High Security Hospital Patients: A Qualitative Analysis of Patients' Accounts and Experiences on Changing Faith," *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 19, no. 3 (2016): 246. They suggest those they researched may have changed faith out of respect for others; due to spiritual

Ullman emphasised the importance of other believers in the conversion process. She concluded “the typical convert was transformed not by a religion, but by a person.”<sup>485</sup> Most often an attachment was formed to a father figure, replacing an absent or deficient father. Sometimes it was a group of peers who created a sense of belonging.<sup>486</sup>

Rambo highlighted the importance of establishing a bond between the potential convert and what he calls the advocate. He named “emotional gratification”, including a sense of belonging or community and development of new relationships among the advocates’ “strategy” for conversion.<sup>487</sup> I have already discussed Rambo’s work in this regard, including some of the missiological and theological limitations of his model, in Chapter 10.

Practical theologian, Kara Powell, and her team emphasised how vital strong interpersonal relationships are in the faith development of young people. “It was the *life* shared among the congregation that drew [young people] in.”<sup>488</sup> These researchers concluded that “warm is the new cool: authenticity trumps worship style.”<sup>489</sup> Christian Smith notes “one of the deepest, primordial human needs is simply to belong, to have a place among others.”<sup>490</sup> This need is often met in churches that act as extended family and a relational community.<sup>491</sup>

Berger and Luckmann noted the importance of integration into a community of faith as a means of retaining a sense of plausibility in one’s conversion.<sup>492</sup> This inclusion into a faith community was a crucial part of New Testament conversions.<sup>493</sup> The importance of such integration points to the relational nature of faith and authenticity. Christians “share a common identity, a solidarity, that fosters the new sense of personhood enjoyed by each participant in the ecclesial community.”<sup>494</sup> This solidarity was experienced by some I interviewed, and longed for by others.<sup>495</sup> Next, we consider the ‘not so good’ of interaction with other Christians. In a later section, we explore one example where, sadly, relational authenticity was not experienced.

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modelling; or to gain social advantages. See also, Oman et al., "Spiritual Modeling Self-Efficacy," 278-280.

<sup>485</sup> Ullman, *The Transformed Self*, xvi.

<sup>486</sup> Ullman also noted that “conversion stories revealed a passionate attachment to an unconditionally loving transcendental object.” *Ibid.*, xix.

<sup>487</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 83.

<sup>488</sup> Powell, Mulder and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 164. Original emphasis.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>490</sup> Smith, "Why Christianity Works," 175.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid.*, 176. See also, Yang and Abel, "Sociology of Religious Conversion," 145.

<sup>492</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality*, 176-179.

<sup>493</sup> Green, *Why Salvation?*, 115.

<sup>494</sup> Grenz, *Social God, Relational Self*, 332.

<sup>495</sup> Luke and Olivia delighted in this relationality. Meg longed for it. The others sat between those two extremes.

## The not so good

Understanding other Christians as themselves *becoming* relationally authentic, leaves room for them to be still imperfect. Hamish did not like his aunt's tendency towards a doctrine of prosperity. But if he understands Christianity to be a 'project of becoming', rather than the arrival at a state of perfection, his aunt's perceived imperfection does not need to become a stumbling block for him, particularly if she acknowledges her own imperfections.

Mary's Christian workmate was, at times, unhelpful for Mary's faith journey. Root illuminates this by helpfully contrasting authentic relationality, where the relationship itself is the end goal, with what he calls relationalistic practices. In relationalistic practices, people are encouraged to form relationships with an end-goal of "getting the other person to come to Jesus or come to church."<sup>496</sup> Such an approach requires and permits "individuals" to be "free choosing wills" who have need of influencing in order for them to make good decisions.<sup>497</sup> Seen in this way, the role of other Christians would be in persuading those to whom we relate to choose well: to choose to attend church, to choose to embrace an individual relationship with God, for example. This contrasts with relationships where the relationship itself is the end goal.<sup>498</sup>

A relationalistic approach seems likely to have been behind Mary's colleague's berating of Mary. This colleague had led Mary to pray a prayer where she "accepted Jesus," but later, when Mary did not comply with her colleague's behavioural expectations, the colleague essentially announced that Mary was not really a Christian.<sup>499</sup> Contrast this with the nuns Mary worked with, who, genuinely interested in Mary's spiritual experiences, exhibited authentic relationality in their interactions with her. Fortunately, Mary's faith development was not dependent on this one colleague.

## But ending on a positive note

By contrast, Luke's experience very clearly demonstrates an authentic relationality. In our interview, he never once described his Christian workmates as 'Christian'. They were simply his colleagues, who became his friends. They genuinely desired to be in relationship with Luke, not to influence him but, as Root explains, "For the sake of place sharing, for the sake of being with and being for."<sup>500</sup> Luke's friends seemed to value their relationship with Luke

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<sup>496</sup> Root, *Relational Pastor*, 41.

<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>499</sup> Mary interview. Mary's colleague thought Mary should sever all ties with her friends in the 'New Age'. I discussed this in Chapter 6.

<sup>500</sup> Root, *Relational Pastor*, 43-44.

for its own sake, rather than as a means to evangelise him.<sup>501</sup> This authentic relationality drew Luke into relationship with the God they loved.<sup>502</sup>

## Relational authenticity is transformational

A holistic Christian spirituality, the whole Christian life, aims at attaining authentic relationship with God, with other persons and with the whole created order. Christian spirituality, then, requires justice even as it aims at a full mutuality in love.<sup>503</sup>

When relational authenticity develops and flourishes, healthy transformation results as “the gospel radically alters and fulfils human existence.”<sup>504</sup> This transformation sees new converts ‘becoming’ the people they were created to be: unique persons who see their worth and their responsibilities in the light of their relationships with God, with others and with the world.<sup>505</sup> This transformation sees them becoming people who image the relational God.<sup>506</sup>

In the Bible, “conversion demands rejection of other gods, inclusion in the worshipping community, and ethical transformation.”<sup>507</sup> In the Old Testament, Israel was called to “return to their God.”<sup>508</sup> The New Testament also emphasised the need for transformed lives.<sup>509</sup> Jesus’ words and actions led to radical change in the lives of all those who decided to follow him.<sup>510</sup> The authentic humanity modelled by Jesus our exemplar was characterised by openness to God, and participation in God’s kingdom purposes for all of humanity.<sup>511</sup> That is also the transformative call for all who follow Jesus and seek to image God.

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<sup>501</sup> These friends were inviting Luke to “come, see and share in the personhood of God through sharing in the personhood of [the] community.” *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>502</sup> Meadows also emphasises the need for authentic communities of faith, filled with transformed people who are sharing their lives and their faith with one another. Meadows, “Journey of Evangelism,” 428.

<sup>503</sup> Mark O’Keefe, *Becoming Good, Becoming Holy: On the Relationship of Christian Ethics and Spirituality* (Mulwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), 90. See also, Braman, *Meaning and Authenticity*, 98-100.

<sup>504</sup> Coulter, “Whole Gospel, Whole Person,” 160. See also, Majerus, “Toward Knowing God,” 297; Walker, “Process of Conversion,” 14. Wuthnow noted that “among the people [they interviewed about spirituality], spending time cultivating their relationship with God seemed ... to free them from material concerns and other self-interested pursuits so that they could focus on the needs of others.” Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 192.

<sup>505</sup> As theologian, Daniel Migliore, reminds us, one of the four central questions of theology is, “Does the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ by the community of faith lead to transforming practice in personal and social life?” Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B Eerdmans, 2014), 14. See also, Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 314-316.

<sup>506</sup> See also, Berg, “How I Was Saved,” 58.

<sup>507</sup> Christopher JH Wright, “Implications of Conversion in the Old Testament and the New,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28, no. 1 (2004): 18.

<sup>508</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>510</sup> Adeney, *Graceful Evangelism*, 31.

<sup>511</sup> Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, 319.

In part, relational authenticity is transformative in the way that it integrates persons.<sup>512</sup> For the converts Aguilar interviewed, a “personal relationship with God ... becomes the cornerstone of a new identity.”<sup>513</sup> Milton also points to the centrality of identity formation in conversion. She notes that *shalom* – which you will recall holds much resonance with my ‘relational authenticity’ – is expressed in regeneration, identity and destiny. Regeneration entails the transformation of a new birth. This makes way for a new identity related to the adoption into God’s family and receiving God’s Holy Spirit. Milton’s third category, destiny, also relates to a transformed identity as it speaks of participation in a new narrative of God’s purposes.<sup>514</sup> In each of these processes, there is transformation.

In addition, relational authenticity is transformative in the way that it enables self-transcendence.<sup>515</sup> Thus, relational authenticity points beyond personal flourishing towards Christlikeness and a new centring of “everything on God.”<sup>516</sup> A move towards Christlikeness is a move towards personal transformation.<sup>517</sup> However, this personal transformation is also towards the transformation of the world.<sup>518</sup> Responsibility towards others is, therefore, a key dimension of genuine, relational authenticity.<sup>519</sup> As Taylor says: “A centring on the self ... both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others and society.”<sup>520</sup> Relational authenticity, by contrast, brings a sense of meaning and connection to our wider context.<sup>521</sup> A move towards centring our lives on God means that God becomes the object of worship and purpose. Practical theologians, Olive Fleming Drane and John Drane, define worship as “all that we are responding to all that God is.”<sup>522</sup>

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<sup>512</sup> Brereton, *From Sin to Salvation*, 48. The earliest studies of religious conversion also saw conversion as an integrating force. (For example, William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Collier Books, 1902/1961); Starbuck, *Psychology of Religion*.) The 1970s research emphasis on new religious movements highlighted potential dangers of religious conversion.

<sup>513</sup> Aguilar, "Experiencing Transcendence," 610. Their conversion resulted in a “reconstituted self and a new engagement with society.” *Ibid.*, 585. See also, Smith, "Why Christianity Works," 172-173.

<sup>514</sup> Milton, "Understanding Pentecostal Conversion," 261-269.

<sup>515</sup> Braman, *Meaning and Authenticity*, 48.

<sup>516</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 17.

<sup>517</sup> Tippens, "Spiritual Formation and Embodiment," 19. Cucchiari notes the holistic nature of conversion as involving a transformation of the self which is “marked by new awareness, new social being, and a new relationship to the sacred,” resulting in “more integrative systems of meaning, personal autonomy and moral responsibility.” Cucchiari, "Adapted for Heaven," 418. Acknowledging that we move *towards* relational authenticity acknowledges the eschatological nature of our Christian faith: in our *now* we move towards what is *not yet*, requiring Christ’s second coming for ultimate fulfilment. May argues this sense of “becoming” is characteristic of genuine spiritual wholeness: “Authentic spiritual wholeness ... is always in the process of becoming, always incomplete.” May, *Addiction and Grace*, 181.

<sup>518</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 2.

<sup>519</sup> Tacey, *Spirituality Revolution*, 147. Fletcher, "Ethical Selves," 95.

<sup>520</sup> Taylor, *Authenticity*, 4.

<sup>521</sup> Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 8-10.

<sup>522</sup> Olive Fleming Drane and John Drane, "All in the Family," *Today*, November 1989, 21.

Relational authenticity can be experienced as this sense of being centred on God, and responsive to God, in all we are and do.

The relational authenticity achieved in Christian conversion by those I interviewed was frequently transforming. It enabled the participants to find what they sought. To find their place in relationship with God. To find better ways of living in their interactions with friends, family, strangers and work. To find wholeness and health. But, sadly, this was not the reality for all those interviewed. This next section looks to Meg's story, considering why she had not achieved the relational authenticity she so desperately sought.

### **But...**

Sadly, Meg struggled to discover and realise this relational authenticity. She longed for greater connection with, and support from, other Christians. Coming with complex problems into a church environment that perhaps prioritised easy answers, it seems she frustrated the other Christians around her. She was desperate to help others who were embroiled as she had been in the 'New Age', and was disappointed by what she perceived as the inability of her church to help her and them. While her relationship with God had improved her situation, she was yet to experience the transformation that comes with relational authenticity. To explore what was happening for Meg, we turn to three theologians: Ray Anderson, Catherine LaCugna and Emmanuel Lartey.

It seems likely Meg had a flawed and damaging understanding of the human self. Anderson provides some insight here in his story of working with a similarly troubled woman. As he cared for this woman, and used the scriptures to work to reclaim in her a healthy sense of self, the young woman became restored. Anderson acknowledged the reality of what he called "dark spirituality" that had been impacting on her person. He concluded: "What she needed was a more authentic spirituality which began with her social, personal and sexual reorientation and integration."<sup>523</sup> It seems likely that Meg would benefit from similar care. Meg needed a sense of integration, as well as a healthy sense of self, and she needed others to help her experience this.

Relatedly, Meg lacked the healthy relational context required for healing.<sup>524</sup> This is understandable when one considers LaCugna's assertion that "entering into divine life is ...

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<sup>523</sup> Ray Sherman Anderson, *Spiritual Caregiving as Secular Sacrament: A Practical Theology for Professional Caregivers* (London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2003), 131. See also, Green, *Why Salvation?*, 20-21.

<sup>524</sup> Green points to the way healing is mediated by the people of God. Green, *Why Salvation?*, 44-47.



impossible unless we also enter into a life of love and communion with others.”<sup>525</sup> Although Meg yearned for, and actively sought, such connection with other Christians, she was yet to experience it.

These two hindrances to relational authenticity are part of our present reality in this time of partially realised eschatological hope. While the perichoretic relationality of the Trinity is a model for ecclesial life, this potential for “inclusiveness, interdependence, and cooperation” is marred by human sinfulness.<sup>526</sup> At a personal level, and at a social level, Meg lacked the resources she needed to experience relational authenticity.

Lartey provides a different lens through which to view Meg’s ongoing malaise. He points to Jesus as the suffering servant who had the capability to display supernatural power, but opted to suffer the indignity of crucifixion. Lartey would remind Meg that “the divine presence is not to be gauged by great acts of personal deliverance from trouble and death. [Rather,] the presence of God is to be found in the face of untold trouble and death.”<sup>527</sup> As Meg was aware, God is with her in her darkness.

## Cautions

In this chapter I have discussed my substantive theory of conversion: a theory that is grounded in the experiences of recent converts. I have considered my theory alongside other empirical data on conversion, as well as insights from theology and other disciplines. But what are the potential weaknesses of this theory? Where do the dangers lie?

In his Doctor of Ministry dissertation on conversion, Tim Bueschel alerts us to the reality that US “evangelical churches are struggling to foster conversions that result in a consequential faith as expressed through discipleship.”<sup>528</sup> He points to sociologists, Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, who coined the term “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (MTD) to name the religious framework they tentatively suggest is the “de facto dominant religion among contemporary US teenagers.”<sup>529</sup> MTD is about living a personally moral life and being happy as a result. It is about receiving therapeutic benefits, rather than about discipleship. It is

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<sup>525</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 382.

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

<sup>527</sup> Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 113.

<sup>528</sup> Tim Buechsel, “One Size Fits All? Uncovering Multiple Conversion Avenues for Effective Evangelism” (DMin, George Fox University, 2013), 6.

<sup>529</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press), 162. This book is based on a large-scale empirical study of youth in the USA. It reported many findings from their research, but seemed to need another layer of analysis and consolidation of themes. This was provided several years later by Kenda Dean in Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

based on a creator God who has moral requirements, but limited personal interest or involvement in our lives. But as these scholars and practical theologian, Kenda Dean, caution us, MTD is not the gospel. Rather, “Jesus’ life of self-giving love directly challenges the American gospel of self-fulfillment and self-actualization.”<sup>530</sup> Dean also states that this is not just an issue with young people: teenagers inherited this form of religiosity from their parents.<sup>531</sup>

While the context in the USA is different from Australia, it is still pertinent to ask what their research means in terms of my own theory of conversion.<sup>532</sup> It reminds us that authenticity must be relational and must be based on us ‘imaging’ God. The authenticity the converts I interviewed sought, observed and discovered, did not lead them to the sort of watered-down faith that Smith and Denton described. Coming from a non-church background, theirs was no inherited faith. They witnessed discipleship in action in their Christian friends. They lived differently and saw things differently because of their faith.

Talk of ‘authenticity’ also potentially raises the issue of narcissism. However, even when Grace spoke of God helping her to “find herself,” hers was no narcissistic self-actualisation. Rather she reported “finding herself” in the context of the strength and resources it gave her as she volunteered as a first-response ambulance officer.<sup>533</sup> Grace was demonstrating self-transcendence, incorporating “both authentic self-realization and genuine self-denial.”<sup>534</sup>

Another potential danger of my substantive theory of conversion relates to the emphasis on personal decision, rather than a liturgical or socialisation approach to conversion. Such an emphasis can result in a private, individualised version of Christianity.<sup>535</sup> However, as decreasing proportions of children are raised in the church, so the potential for other types of conversion processes diminishes. For those with no previous church background,

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<sup>530</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 5.

<sup>531</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4. See also, Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 152.

<sup>532</sup> In the USA, three-quarters of teenagers “claim to be Christians and most are affiliated with a religious organization.” Dean, *Almost Christian*, 10. Not so in Australia.

<sup>533</sup> Grace interview. Social work scholar, Douglas Magnuson, notes the potential of involvement in emergency medical services as a means by which young people are shaped, and “become themselves.” Magnuson, “Spirituality and Becoming Self,” 450.

<sup>534</sup> Walter E Conn, “Pastoral Counseling for Self-Transcendence: The Integration of Psychology and Theology,” *Pastoral Psychology* 36, no. 1 (1987): 45.

<sup>535</sup> McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 1-15. Scot McKnight rightly notes that different types of conversions occur, particularly within different Christian faith traditions. He categorises these as representing three different orientations: socialisation, liturgical process and personal decision. In socialisation, the children of Christian parents are nurtured into a Christian faith of their own. Liturgical processes are similar, although they emphasise “key moments and sacramental rituals that are performed by ordained priests empowered to dispense grace.” *Ibid.*, 7. The personal decision orientation prioritises personal faith, and requires one to choose to adopt, or to continue in, a faith system.

conversion as a socialisation or liturgical process is impossible. Christendom models of faith formation and faith transmission lack a missional edge.

It would be possible, although I hope unlikely, to read this thesis individualistically. Please hear the 'relational'. Hear the reminder that it is humanity, in *community*, that images the relational God. Hear the need for mutuality, reciprocity and equality in relationships. That said, a personal response is essential. The concept of 'individuation' offers a way of seeing the "healthy and necessary differentiation of the individual from family/society/culture/people groups/nations. Individuation allows individuals to grow up and make their own decisions."<sup>536</sup> While this individuation is an important part of faith formation – particularly for those who grew up in the church – individualism is counter to gospel values of mutuality, reciprocity and equality.

Finally, I need to confess a fear: that this thesis will be read like Gilmore and Pine's book *Authenticity: what consumers really want*.<sup>537</sup> Authenticity is not a strategy; it is a way of being. We should not seek authenticity as a means to an end: even if that end is noble and good. We should simply be more authentic: because that is who God invites, and enables, us to be.<sup>538</sup>

## Concluding comments

This chapter has introduced and described my substantive theory of conversion. It has described the link between conversion to Christianity and what I call 'relational authenticity'. It demonstrated that the desire for relational authenticity is common in western society. That desire fuelled the faith exploration of those I interviewed. Next, it demonstrated that God enables authenticity to develop and flourish, because of who God is; because of God's ongoing activity; and because of who God created us to be. The chapter then went on to discuss the ways other Christians resource conversion to Christianity by embracing and exhibiting relational authenticity in their personal, social and spiritual lives. In doing so, the chapter has provided a theological framework for understanding relational authenticity and its relationship to contemporary Christian conversion in Australia. The chapter concluded by

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<sup>536</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Releasing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009). 31. Anthropologist, James Bielo, observes emerging evangelicals in the USA balancing an individual faith with a strong commitment to authentic relationships, which he defines as "a desired moral community in which dependence is lived in the everyday." Bielo, "Belief, Deconversion, and Authenticity," 259.

<sup>537</sup> Gilmore and Pine, *Authenticity*.

<sup>538</sup> Theologians, Roger Schroeder and Steve Bevans, make a similar argument in relation to prophetic dialogue, arguing it is more a spirituality than a strategy. Stephen B Bevans and Roger P Schroeder, "Introduction," in *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today*, ed. Stephen B Bevans and Roger P Schroeder (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 2.

noting that relational conversion is transformative; making some comments about one case where such transformation was particularly limited; and making some cautionary remarks. The next chapter concludes my thesis.

## CHAPTER 12: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter ends the story of my research journey towards discovering why people in Australia today are becoming Christians. The chapter points out the significant features of my study. It notes the delimitations and limitations of this research, before stating their practical relevance and making several recommendations for future research and for Christian ministry. I end by reiterating the unique contribution the thesis makes to scholarship on religious conversion and how it works towards redeeming authenticity.

### Looking back

Part A of this thesis began by situating the study within practical theology as a discipline, and in our late modern, secularised sociocultural context. Next, it introduced my research design. The research paradigm of critical realism enabled me to be attentive to God's agency in conversion. The methodology of grounded theory meant I was not constrained by extant theory, instead, I was able to discover a theory of conversion grounded in the lived experiences of recent converts. Qualitative interviews enabled me to generate rich data, which I carefully analysed. Part A concluded with a brief literature review that introduced some atonement metaphors, before noting key sociological and psychological conversion models and insights.

Part B considered each of the three agents involved in conversion separately, along with the affects participants experienced on the journey to faith. Together, these chapters demonstrated both the complexity and the commonality of conversion. Chapter 5 described the conversion process each participant underwent. Chapter 6 reported on the role of other Christians in conversion. Chapter 7 described how participants understood God's role in conversion. These chapters also described the affects participants experienced, as they related to each agent.

Part C discussed my findings. Chapter 10 demonstrated the benefit of critical realism as a research paradigm for research on conversion and discussed my findings in relation to the extant literature about conversion. Chapter 11 introduced my substantive theory of conversion, and discussed the link between relational authenticity and religious conversion.

Overall, I concluded that religious conversion can be understood as resulting from people desiring, observing and experiencing relational authenticity. Religious conversion was fuelled by a desire for relational authenticity. God enabled relational authenticity to develop and

flourish. Religious conversion was resourced by Christians who embraced and exhibited relational authenticity in their personal, social and spiritual lives.

## **Significant features of the study**

This study was significant because it posited a new substantive theory of conversion to Christianity in Australia today. It broke new ground as the first model of conversion based on data from recent converts from unchurched backgrounds. It was also unique in its research design. Its findings were significant and contribute to missional engagement.

## **Research design**

This study made three significant contributions that related to the research design. First, no other research on conversion has only researched new converts; or those from non-churched backgrounds. My research did both, meaning less post-conversion biographical reconstruction had occurred, and an increasing demographic (of unchurched people) was investigated. Secondly, the research demonstrated the value of critical realism as a research paradigm for practical theology. Thirdly, my research demonstrated the appropriateness of grounded theory as a methodology for research on religious conversion. I discuss the related implications for future research below.

## **Research findings**

I explored why unchurched people in Australia were becoming Christians today, describing the multi-faceted conversion process; exploring the role of other Christians in conversion; considering how God was at work in conversion; and naming the affects experienced on the journey to faith. This provided a fresh and deeper understanding of religious conversion.

In so doing, I have contributed towards bridging four serious gaps in the literature. First, unlike most research on conversion, this project was attentive to motivation as well as process. Not satisfied with describing *what* occurred, my research asked *why* people converted. To do so, the research was attentive to the affects converts experienced as they journeyed towards Christian faith, and because of their faith. Secondly, it purposively sampled recent converts from unchurched backgrounds: a growing demographic in our secular age, and a demographic with different experiences of faith-finding than in previous generations. Thirdly, the research empirically investigated some theological understandings around conversion. It noted how non-Christians can experience a yearning towards God; and towards being a better person, or towards becoming who they are; as well as a yearning away from dysfunction, arguing this yearning was towards who God created us to be. It

suggested that a narrowly understood concept of individual sinfulness did not act as a motivation for conversion, although there was some sense of estrangement or distorted relationality. The research discussed how *imago Trinitatis* offered a model for the relational authenticity participants sought. It noted how God's past activity was perceived by participants. It highlighted the importance of engaging in spiritual practices for faith formation, including at the earliest stages. In addition, the findings encouraged accepting doubt and complexity in faith. The research demonstrated that moving towards Christianity caused participants to experience a sense of resonance and knowing, and to see things differently; experiences attested to in Scripture. It discussed the vital role other Christians played at all stages of the conversion process; again, a role described in the Bible. Fourthly, this research reflected theologically on conversion insights from social science. Unlike most research on conversion, mine allowed for the agency of God. It added theological and missiological insights to understandings of the role of other Christians, including noting this interaction occurred at all stages of the conversion process and contributed to the deep affects converts experienced. In separating out the affects, the research prioritised the holistic nature of humans. It named and described relational authenticity as the potential result of conversion.

## **Delimitations**

I noted the delimitations in Chapter 2. Two are reiterated here. First, I deliberately limited my research to people who had come to Christian faith in the past two years, investigating participants' experiences of their initial conversion: those early experiences of moving from not-being-a-Christian to being-a-Christian. In doing so, I successfully heard fresh stories of coming to faith as the participants had less time to reconstruct their conversion narratives based on subsequent theological and personal understandings. This delimitation was a unique approach that achieved my desired aims. Understandably, this meant the study was unable to investigate the ongoing nature and implications of these conversions.

Secondly, I also delimited my research to Australians with English as a first language. However, I have already demonstrated some resonance with conversion stories from other countries, including non-Western ones.<sup>1</sup> As other cultures understand authenticity differently, it is appropriate here to briefly consider the potential relevance of my substantive theory for other contexts, by citing insights from non-Western contexts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aguilar, "Experiencing Transcendence."; Ayometzi, "Storying as Becoming."; Cucchiari, "Adapted for Heaven."

<sup>2</sup> This is not intended to be a comprehensive review. Rather, I am including references I encountered during my research. There is scope for further research in this area.

Sociologist, Ramon Domingo, compared Western and Eastern understandings of authenticity and concluded they were socially constructed and, therefore, vary culturally.<sup>3</sup> Chinese American Philosopher, Xunwu Chen, also compared Western and Eastern notions of authenticity.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to Romantic scholars (who had, in Chen's words, "destroyed the self [by not recognising] its social value"), Chen points out that for Chinese, "authentic existence involves authentic social engagement with others and society."<sup>5</sup> This points to a potential difference between the felt-needs of Chinese converts and Western converts, where Chinese have successfully maintained a communal sense of self. More research is needed on this topic. However, Chinese sociologist, Xiaheng Xie, reported that in China, "people who had been convinced atheists, or simply uninterested in religion, are increasingly looking to religion for answers about who they are, what their existence means and, even, for relief from ordinary suffering."<sup>6</sup> Such existential questions relate to the Western desire for authenticity. Xie concluded that these Chinese found the meaning they sought in Christianity.

Similarly, Korean American sociologists, Won Moo Huhr and Kwang Chung Kim, reported that Korean diaspora found meaning, belonging and comfort in Korean churches in the USA.<sup>7</sup> While this research was from the 1980s, in 2014, Korean American sociologist, Rebecca Kim, concluded this remained the case. While migrants may be drawn to Korean churches for non-religious reasons, this "religious engagement often precedes existential questioning and conversion."<sup>8</sup> Korean practical theologian, Jaeyeon Chung, pointed to the potential for *imago Dei* to provide a theological framework for Korean women developing authentic self-esteem.<sup>9</sup>

In India, theologian, Jonas Jørgensen, reported a recent convert saying that he had "become more Tamil" when he became a Christian.<sup>10</sup> This suggested a link to authenticity, as faith

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<sup>3</sup> Domingo, "Ethnic Background and Meanings of Authenticity: A Qualitative Study of University Students."

<sup>4</sup> Xunwu Chen, *Being and Authenticity*, vol. 149, Value Inquiry Book Series (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004). Chen speaks of authenticity as involving discovering, creating and realising one's self. (ibid., 2.)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>6</sup> Xiaheng Xie, "Religion and Modernity in China: Who Is Joining the Three-Self Church and Why," *Journal of Church and State* 52, no. 1 (2010): 75.

<sup>7</sup> Hurh and Kim, "Religious Participation of Korean Immigrants in the United States," 32.

<sup>8</sup> Kim, "Migration and Conversion of Korean American Christians," 198.

<sup>9</sup> Jaeyeon Chung, "Our Stories, Our Lives: Korean Women, Self Esteem and Practical Theology" (PhD, Emory University, 2008), 208-251. Chung defines authenticity in relation to mutuality and solidarity. Ibid., 5.

<sup>10</sup> Jonas Adelin Jørgensen. "Beyond Mimicry and Replica: Continuity and Discontinuity in South Indian Pentecostal Conversion." Paper presented at *Conversions and Transformations: Missiological Approaches to Religious Change*, Seoul, 2016.



enabled him to connect at a deeper level with his culture. Similarly, in Australia, Aboriginal practical theologian, Aunty Denise Champion, noted, "Christ set me free to be who I am."<sup>11</sup>

In the African context, practical theologian, Victor Counted, noted the importance of authenticity for millennials in Africa.<sup>12</sup> Like me, Counted linked authenticity and the relationality of the Trinity.<sup>13</sup>

These examples, along with the international research already reported, suggests that the desire for relational authenticity was present in non-Western contexts as a motivation for conversion. Thus, authenticity is not just a western concept. However, it is possible that there is not as much existential angst in other, more communal, cultures. Further research is required to test the relevance of my theory in different sociocultural contexts.

## Limitations

As discussed in Chapter 2, this project had two major externally imposed limits. The first, common to all doctoral theses, related to the limited word count of 100,000 words. The second limitation, relating to recruitment restrictions imposed by the SBREC, which limited participation, demands further comment. The resulting small, but purposive, sample size limited the generalisability of the data. However, while my sample was small, saturation of my core categories was readily achieved.<sup>14</sup> Further, while drawing on the particularity of nine conversion experiences, the strong resonance with literature on conversion, from theology and on authenticity suggested it was reasonable to make *moderatum* generalisations on the basis of my findings.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Denise Champion, "Indigenous Christologies: Adnyamathanha (Lecture Presentation)," (Adelaide: Uniting College of Leadership and Theology, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Victor Counted, "Being Authentic Is the New Image: A Qualitative Study on the Authenticity Constructions and Self-Images of Christian Millennials in Africa," *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 19, no. 3 (2016).

<sup>13</sup> Alex M Wood, P Alex Linley, John Maltby, Michael Baliousis and Stephen Joseph, "The Authentic Personality: A Theoretical and Empirical Conceptualization and the Development of the Authenticity Scale," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 55, no. 3 (2008); Grenz, *Social God, Relational Self*. Unfortunately, while Wood et al cite theologian Stanley Grenz, it is from where Grenz is describing Hegel's understanding of the Trinity, which Grenz goes on to challenge and extend.

<sup>14</sup> Stout and Dein used a similar sample size, and also achieved saturation of their themes. Stout and Dein, "Religious Conversion and Self Transformation: An Experiential Study among Born Again Christians," 42.

<sup>15</sup> Mathew Guest, "Friendship, Fellowship and Acceptance: The Public Discourse of a Thriving Evangelical Congregation," in *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context*, ed. Mathew Guest, Karin Tusting, and Linda Woodhead (Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 82. Sociologist, Malcolm Williams, helpfully outlines three possible meanings of generalisations. First, "total generalisations, as in deterministic laws" where the macro is identical to the observed phenomenon in every way. Secondly, "statistical generalisations" where the probability of something occurring generally can be predicted or estimated from the data gathered. Thirdly, "moderatum generalisations" where aspects uncovered in the data can be understood to be

My recruitment yielded more participants from the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) than from other denominations. As I found myself drawing on research from Methodist and Wesleyan scholars, I wondered if there was a link between the Methodist origins of many UCA churches in South Australia and the resonance I was observing between their writing and the experiences of my participants.<sup>16</sup> I wondered if different themes would have emerged in churches of different denominations.<sup>17</sup> This could be explored with further research within different denominations.

In addition, women outnumbered men in the sample. However, women outnumber men by a ratio of 6 to 4 in all the major denominations in Australia, so my proportions were not as divergent as may be first assumed.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, although those I interviewed responded to God in the ways they reported, there was no certainty that the reasons interviewees gave for converting to Christianity would be applicable to a wider population of new converts. Further, there was no certainty that should other non-Christians have those same experiences; they would choose to convert to Christianity. The model and substantive theory I have presented is a simplified depiction of the highly complex real-world phenomenon of conversion to Christianity.

## **Practical relevance of these findings**

This section discusses the practical relevance of my findings, including the implications for faith formation and practical theology. There is much I could say, and this section offers a brief overview.

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“instances of a broader recognisable set of features.” Such generalisations are the basis of inductive reasoning. Malcolm Williams, "Interpretivism and Generalisation," *Sociology* 34, no. 2 (2000): 215. Swinton and Mowat also helpfully note that ideographic knowledge “presumes that meaningful knowledge can be discovered in unique, non-replicable experiences.” Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology, Qualitative Research*, 43.

<sup>16</sup> For example, see Markham’s work on conversion. Markham, "Conversion Converted." Also, theologian, Philip Meadows, contrasted evangelical, or soteriological, and missiological evangelism; with what he called a Wesleyan approach, arguing this combines both evangelical/soteriological and missiological approaches. Meadows, "Journey of Evangelism."

<sup>17</sup> Luke’s Baptist church fitted very strongly within Meadow’s missiological model and the website of the Pentecostal church Meg settled at indicates a strongly evangelical ethos. Meadows, "Journey of Evangelism." I cannot link to Meg’s church website as I need to protect her anonymity, but on the page titled “what we believe” there are multiple references to human sinfulness and fallenness; and to Satan’s domain on earth.

<sup>18</sup> Hilliard, "Australia: Towards Secularisation and One Step Back," 10.

## Implications for faith formation

As theologian, Paul Tillich, argued: "Theology, as a function of the Christian church, must serve the needs of the church."<sup>19</sup> My research has done that. This project was always oriented missionally, hoping the findings would resource Christians as we discern and are involved in the *missio Dei*. For this reason, I opted to adopt and extend the term 'authenticity'. While I could have changed it to 'flourishing' or 'shalom' or 'abundance'; 'authenticity' has cultural traction and, therefore, a greater missional 'edge.'<sup>20</sup>

The research has revealed that as Christians, we can help people realise that their yearnings for authenticity; their desire to be better people; and their yearnings away from dysfunction, can be understood as yearnings towards God. We can point to God as the one who designed and enabled relational authenticity, and invite and resource participation in a range of spiritual practices that form and develop faith. Most importantly, we can continue our own projects of becoming relationally authentic people: imaging the relational God. How do we do that in practice? Here are ten specific actions churches and Christians can take.

First, tell multiple stories of faith-finding: both stories that highlight different experiences, and stories that take different forms.<sup>21</sup> Everyone is unique and the diverse stories of how we found and resource our Christian faith can help others as they explore and deepen their own faith journeys.

Second, do not expect people to understand rationally what they have not experienced for themselves. Speaking of our own experiences can be helpful. Offering contextually appropriate metaphors and images can build understanding. But some things need to be experienced before they can be understood. Atonement, salvation, God's grace frequently fit that category.

Third, the concept of individual sin was often a barrier to faith finding – and not for the reason it should be. Those I interviewed did not *understand* sin before they accepted the Christian faith for themselves. While a *desire* to understand sin helped fuel Olivia's spiritual journey, she did not understand it before she became a Christian. Sin had been problematic for Mary and continued to be so for her 'New Age' friends. Jean reframed talk of sin at

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<sup>19</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Existence and the Christ*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Kimberley Thacker could also see the concept of authenticity's potential for evangelism in postmodern times. Thacker, "The Value of Authenticity in Postmodern Evangelism."

<sup>21</sup> This is one of the conclusions McKnight and Ondrey also draw from their study of conversion. (McKnight and Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith*, 235.) Allison Berg made the same recommendations. (Berg, "How I Was Saved," 66-68.)

'Alpha' in terms of becoming a better person. Understanding salvation as healing, or movement towards flourishing, is likely to be more helpful in our contemporary context.

Fourth, prioritise the relational nature of humanity and of our faith. Avoid relationalistic practices. Be authentic communities of faith: filled with people sharing their lives and their own developing faith with each other.<sup>22</sup> In so doing, create communities of belonging characterised by reciprocity, mutuality and equality. Like Jesus, be guest as well as host.

Fifth, be churches that, like the Psalmists, name the breadth of life experiences. Acknowledge that it is part of the Christian experience to have doubts and questions about faith: embrace those questions and doubts, and explore them appropriately together.<sup>23</sup>

Sixth, invite, and resource, participation in a range of spiritual practices – repeatedly. Recognise the importance of communal engagement in spiritual practices and provide opportunities for such engagement.

Seventh, realise Christians are not the only ones who pray. Except for Grace, each participant specifically mentioned praying before they became a Christian. Therefore, Christians could resource the prayer life of non-Christians.

Eighth, recognise that God is already at work in the lives of non-Christians. Sarah experienced a dramatic encounter with God twenty years before she became a Christian. Do not assume Christians have the monopoly on God's activity. Look and listen for the activity of God in the lives of others. Connect these experiences with the breadth of God's story in a journey of discovery.

Ninth, appreciate that non-Christians can be involved in the process of inviting people to participate in spiritual practices. However, this will only result in people participating in church life if churches communicate what they offer.

Finally, realise that the role of other Christians in the process of conversion can be likened to the role of a midwife in the prenatal, birthing and postnatal care of a baby, born without complications. The process of a baby being born is, essentially, a natural one. The midwife's role is in caring for the mother and baby and in helping provide and create a safe and healthy environment into which the baby is born. Similarly, the 'becoming' of a Christian is, essentially, a process that happens organically: no one can force someone to become a Christian if they do not want to do so, or when the time is not right. Faith grows within people

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<sup>22</sup> Meadows, "Journey of Evangelism," 428.

<sup>23</sup> Powell, Mulder and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 157.

as they open themselves to discovering more about God and the Christian faith. Other Christians provide a supportive and healthy environment into which the new Christian faith is 'born'.<sup>24</sup>

## Implications for practical theology research

In this brief section, I offer three implications for future practical theology research. First, I recommend adopting within the discipline of practical theology a research paradigm of critical realism. Secondly, I advocate for keeping *theology* central to practical theology. Thirdly, I describe how using grounded theory as a methodology can help advance understanding, particularly in complex areas of study where God's agency has previously been neglected.

Practical theology has rightly started with people's experience, but because it has been blind to the possibility that people have *real* experiences with God, it has neglected to wade deeply into conceptions of divine action that would move practical theology toward further unique theological contributions.<sup>25</sup>

My research clearly demonstrated the value of using critical realism as a research paradigm in practical theology. It allowed me to consider the agency of God: that there is something beyond what we experience empirically, albeit something language and metaphor can never fully capture.<sup>26</sup>

However, while critical realism *allows* for God's activity, it does not in itself explain, or even describe, the agency of God. Practical theologians, including those who use a philosophical framework of critical realism, engage in theological reflection to help interpret what those researched experienced as transcendent. I demonstrated one way to do so in the previous chapter, when I considered theological insights alongside the empirical data I gathered on experiences of religious conversion. Seen in this way, theology is a "reflection on a

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<sup>24</sup> Markham also uses this imagery. Markham, *Rewired*, 187. See also, Steve Taylor, *The Out of Bounds Church?: Learning to Create a Community of Faith in a Culture of Change* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 47-56. Of course, like all metaphors, this is a flawed analogy that one cannot take too far. A key role of other Christians is demonstrating what it is like to be a Christian, whereas midwives do not demonstrate what it is like to be a baby.

<sup>25</sup> Root, *Christopraxis*, x-xi.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Root similarly recommends practical theology should embrace what he terms "a *postfoundational* critical realism" as a research paradigm. Root, "Empirical Practical Theology," 56. Original emphasis. This prefixing of 'postfoundational' is potentially helpful for two reasons. First, as Root points out, such prefixing clearly distinguishes postfoundational critical realism from foundational realism, which "contends that reality is [not only] stratified, but also possess-able, because a human knower is able to climb to an objective peak and know all of reality." Ibid. While the 'critical' in critical realism is intended to have this same distinguishing affect, Root's prefixing use of 'postfoundational' is also potentially helpful in clarifying the particularity of the critical realism being proposed. Like many terms, 'critical realism' has been used in different ways. Adopting a prefixed term could allow for a clear and unique definition of critical realism that can be applied within practical theology.

transcendent reality.”<sup>27</sup> Embracing “experiences [of God] as real ... helps practical theology reclaim its theological (normative) center, which it has often been missing since its renaissance in the twentieth century.”<sup>28</sup>

Grounded theory can be a useful methodology for practical theology. This is particularly true for areas of study where God’s agency has previously been neglected. Grounded theory provides a mechanism by which appropriate data can be generated and rigorous analysis undertaken to reveal new theory: theory that is attentive to God’s activity in the world.<sup>29</sup>

## **Ideas for future research**

My research has revealed a substantive theory of conversion in Australia today. Future research can both test and hone this theory.

## **Testing the substantive theory**

There are two key ways of testing my substantive theory. One is quantitative, the other qualitative.<sup>30</sup>

A *quantitative* phase, using carefully crafted questions developed from the substantive theory would be able to address several ongoing questions:

- Is the substantive theory generalisable in a wider Australian population?
- Does it apply internationally, including in both western and non-western nations?
- Given the theory was developed specifically in relation to conversion to Christianity, what points of commonality and difference are there with conversion to other religions?

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>28</sup> Root, *Christopraxis*, 36.

<sup>29</sup> Reflecting on the many empirical studies relating to conversion that I have encountered, there seems to be a disjuncture between studies that seek to test, verify and apply existing theory and research that is prepared to explore and seek to understand. Interestingly, as I reported in Chapter 2, such a critique and frustration contributed to the development (or discovery) of grounded theory as a research methodology: Glaser and Strauss observed research students being required to test and verify extant theory rather than generating new theory. As they said: “We would all agree that in social research generating theory goes hand in hand with verifying it.” Glaser and Strauss, *Discovery of Grounded Theory*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Early in my project, I planned to include a quantitative phase as a second part of the project. As the richness and volume of the data from my qualitative phase became apparent, I dropped the quantitative phase from my PhD project. Including it would have necessitated placing less emphasis on analysing and reporting data from the qualitative phase; thus, reducing the beneficence of the data already gathered.

I intend to explore these questions in my post-doctoral research. This will further strengthen the research and its usefulness for the Christian community and academy.

This substantive theory could also be tested *qualitatively* in different contexts and different cultures. For example, in different countries; among people of different ages; with people who have been Christians for longer periods of time. My research limitations, including gender differences and denominational variation, could also be explored.

### **Honing the theory**

More research is needed on the catalysts for conversion. While my categorisation was appropriate for the data I gathered, a wider cohort of participants could further nuance this. For example, the ongoing catalysts could potentially be further categorised on a continuum from 'internal' to 'external', with items like *dryness* and *dissatisfaction* being classed as 'internal', the *malaises* being placed in the middle of the continuum, and *family troubles* being placed as 'external'.

### **Additional, related explorations**

In addition, there is much scope for research on related topics.<sup>31</sup> It would be particularly worthwhile to investigate understandings of faith formation that move beyond Christendom's models. While such models are helpful for thinking about children of the church, they are less helpful when thinking about the increasing proportion of people who did not grow up in the church.<sup>32</sup>

It would also be interesting to re-analyse McKnight and Ondrey's data on conversion in two ways.<sup>33</sup> One could apply the methodology of grounded theory to the data they gathered. Alternatively, one could begin with my conversion theory and look for the desire for and experience of relational authenticity in their data.

Such further research would broaden our understanding of the *missio Dei* and how Christians can be involved in processes of faith finding.

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<sup>31</sup> For example, asking why people retain faith. Sociologist and pastor, Alan Jamieson, has already done some excellent work on Christians leaving organised religion. Alan Jamieson, "A Churchless Faith: Faith Outside the Evangelical Pentecostal/Charismatic Church of New Zealand" (PhD, University of Canterbury, 1998); Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond the Evangelical, Pentecostal & Charismatic Churches*. Similarly, 'conversion careers' is also a topic worth exploring. I mentioned conversion careers in Chapter 3. For example, see Gooren, "Reassessing Conventional Approaches to Conversion: Toward a New Synthesis."; Gooren, "Conversion Careers in Latin America: Entering and Leaving Church among Pentecostals, Catholics, and Mormons."

<sup>32</sup> Markham, *Rewired*, 180-184.

<sup>33</sup> McKnight and Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith*.

## Final word: It's all about relational authenticity

I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter.... Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order *matters* crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial.<sup>34</sup>

This thesis has made a unique contribution to scholarship on religious conversion. It represents the first model of conversion based on data of recent converts from unchurched backgrounds. My research process was rigorous and transparent. My findings are empirically based and theologically sound.<sup>35</sup> The findings have significant implications for both Christian practice and academic research. Overall, the thesis works towards redeeming authenticity. It reports and discusses how recent converts in Australia moved towards relational authenticity, engaging in the project of becoming who they are: imaging the relational God.

Conversion to Christianity in Australia today resulted from non-Christians desiring, observing and experiencing relational authenticity. An understanding of humans as *imago Trinitatis* provides a framework for understanding and experiencing a genuinely relational authenticity that focuses not only on the self, but also on relationship with God and significant connections with, and responsibility toward, others.

While one could define oneself as an individual existing in isolation from others, or God, this is a gross limitation of the reality of the interconnected web within which we live and thrive. To fulfil one's self, one must be tending to the Other. To neglect the Other - God, other humans, the world - is to neglect an essential part of our humanity. It is good to be self-fulfilled, to become the people we are, as long as that is defined appropriately, recognising that we exist in the context of wider relationships. To be truly self-fulfilled, we must be who-we-are in relationship to others. We must become relationally authentic. Such is the story of my data.

This thesis has highlighted the human desire for relational authenticity and noted how that desire can draw people to relationship with God. Other Christians who embraced and exhibited relational authenticity in their personal, social and spiritual lives resourced non-Christians' movement towards the relational authenticity they sought. God enabled and enables relational authenticity to develop and flourish. The thesis has described how

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<sup>34</sup> Taylor, *Authenticity*, 40-41. Original emphasis.

<sup>35</sup> Most frequently, either the empirical or the theological is prioritised to the neglect of the other. Similarly, most of the past century's discourse on authenticity has involved "theoretical speculation and ideological assumption" rather than empirical investigation. Vannini and Franzese, "Authenticity of Self," 1634.



authenticity can be redeemed, by understanding authenticity relationally. It has demonstrated how the desire for such relational authenticity can be redeeming when it leads to genuine relational connectedness with God and with others.

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# APPENDICES

# APPENDIX 1: FACEBOOK ADVERTISEMENT

## Research on conversion to Christianity

Have you recently (in the past two years) become a Christian?

Are you aged over 18 years?

Do you speak English as your first language?

Would you be willing to participate in research on why people in Australia today convert to Christianity?

Researchers from Flinders University (Theology department) are seeking participants for research on why individuals convert to Christianity. If you are aged over 18 years, from an English-speaking background, have begun considering yourself a Christian in the past two years and are willing to be interviewed about your experiences, they would love to hear from you.

More information: <http://tiny.cc/conversionresearch><sup>1</sup>

or from Lynne Taylor (04 8849 7881, 08 8358 2149 or [tayl0548@flinders.edu.au](mailto:tayl0548@flinders.edu.au))

*This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project number 6155). For more information regarding ethical approval of the project the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on 8201 3116, by fax on 8201 2035 or by email [human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au](mailto:human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au)*

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<sup>1</sup> When I was recruiting participants, this hyperlink linked to the Information Sheet (Appendix 4).

## APPENDIX 2: REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE (NCLS RESEARCH)

*(Printed on NCLS Research Letterhead)*

### Request for Assistance

Dear Minister

NCLS Research has been approached by a Master of Theology student at Flinders University, Ms Lynne Taylor. She is interested in the big question “how is God drawing people to God today?” She hopes to interview people who have recently converted to Christianity in the past 2 years.

Your church took part in the 2011 National Church Life Survey. While NCLS Research is not at liberty to release the survey results for your church to external people, we have identified that your church has a higher than average proportion of newcomers and is in the greater Adelaide region. Therefore it is likely that there will be attenders at your church who become Christians in the past two years.

Lynne has *not* been provided with the name of your church, and she needs your help to reach this group of people to learn from them about the action of God in their lives. We commend this important project to you. We ask you to consider promoting the project and circulate the advertisements in your church.

Enclosed you will find:

- A letter of introduction from Rev Prof Andrew Dutney, Professor, Theology Department, Flinders University
- An information sheet
- A sample ad for your newsletter
- An ad for your noticeboard.

If you would like electronic copies of the information, please contact Lynne directly on [tayl0548@flinders.edu.au](mailto:tayl0548@flinders.edu.au).

Potential participants can contact Lynne directly by telephone on 04 8849 7881 or by email on [tayl0548@flinders.edu.au](mailto:tayl0548@flinders.edu.au).

Yours sincerely

**Dr Ruth Powell**  
NCLS Research  
Director

## APPENDIX 3: LETTER OF INTRODUCTION



Rev Dr Andrew Dutney  
Professor in Theology, Flinders  
University  
Department of Theology  
34 Lipsett Terrace  
Brooklyn Park  
SA 5032

Tel: 08 8416 8431

### LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

Dear Sir/Madam

This letter is to introduce Lynne Taylor who is a Masters of Theology student in the Department of Theology at Flinders University. She will produce her student card, which carries a photograph, as proof of identity.

Lynne is undertaking research leading to the production of a thesis and other publications on the subject of "Turning to God: why individuals convert to Christianity in Australia today".

She would be most grateful if you would volunteer to assist in this project, by granting an interview which covers certain aspects of this topic. No more than one hour on one occasion would be required, though Lynne may recontact you to clarify your answers or ask additional questions if needed. There will also be a later opportunity to complete a brief questionnaire.

Be assured that any information provided will be treated in the strictest confidence and appropriate efforts will be taken to ensure that none of the participants will be individually identifiable in the resulting thesis, report or other publications. However because of the small numbers involved in the research, confidentiality and anonymity may not be able to be guaranteed. Your name and any details about yourself will be changed in the resulting publications, but it is possible that some people who know you well may be able to recognise your contribution, because of the small number of participants.

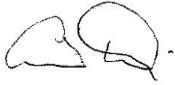
You are, of course, entirely free to discontinue your participation at any time or to decline to answer particular questions.

Since Lynne intends to make a tape recording of the interview, she will seek your consent, on the attached form, to record the interview, to make a transcription of that recording for use in preparing the thesis, report or other publications, on condition that your name or identity is not revealed. The recording will not be made available to any other person, though Lynne seeks your permission to possibly involve skilled researchers (faculty from Flinders University) in the analysis of parts of your (thoroughly de-identified) transcript.

Any enquiries you may have concerning this project should be directed to me at the address given above or by telephone on 08 8416 8431 or e-mail [Andrew.dutney@flinders.edu.au](mailto:Andrew.dutney@flinders.edu.au).

Thank you for your attention and assistance.

Yours sincerely



Rev Prof Andrew Dutney

Professor, Theology Department, Flinders University

*This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project number: 6155). For more information regarding ethical approval of the project the Secretary of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on 8201 3116, by fax on 8201 2035 or by email [human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au](mailto:human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au)*

## APPENDIX 4: INFORMATION SHEET



Rev Dr Andrew Dutney  
Professor in Theology, Flinders  
University  
Department of Theology  
34 Lipsett Terrace  
Brooklyn Park  
SA 5032

Tel: 08 8416 8431

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### INFORMATION SHEET

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**Title:** Turning to God: why individuals convert to Christianity in 21st century Australia

**Investigator:**

Ms Lynne Taylor  
Theology Department  
Flinders University  
Ph: 8416 8420

**Supervisors:**

Rev Prof Andrew Dutney  
Theology Department  
Flinders University  
Ph: 8416 8431

Assoc Prof Carolyn Palmer  
School of Education  
Flinders University  
Ph: 8201 3379

**Description of the study:**

This study is part of the project entitled “Turning to God: why individuals convert to Christianity in 21st century Australia”. This project will investigate why individuals in twenty-first century Australia convert to Christianity, as one way of providing a partial answer to the (much) wider question, “how is God drawing people to God today?” This project is supported by Flinders University Theology Department.

**Purpose of the study:**

This project aims to

- Discover why individuals convert to Christianity today
- Better understand the internal/external/supernatural factors at work in individuals' experiences of turning to God
- Discover patterns or processes common to individuals as they convert to Christianity

**What will I be asked to do?**

You are invited to attend a one-on-one interview with Lynne Taylor who will ask you questions about your experiences of becoming a Christian. The interview will take about 60 minutes. The interview will be recorded using a digital voice recorder to help with looking at the results. Once recorded, the interview will be transcribed (typed-up) and stored as a computer file and then destroyed once the results have been finalised.

It is possible that Lynne may contact you again to ask some additional questions if she wants to explore something that someone was interviewed after you mentioned as important for them. Involvement is voluntary.

If you would like to review the transcript of your interview, you can request this at the time of your interview, or later via the contact details above.

If you are willing, Lynne may involve other skilled researchers (faculty from Flinders University) in some of the coding and analysis of your transcript. Identifying details would be

removed from the transcript before this occurred. These researchers would also be bound by the confidentiality agreement.

**What benefit will I gain from being involved in this study?**

Sharing your experiences will help us to better understand why people become Christians in Australia today. It will also be useful for other Christians as they seek to be involved in Christian mission.

**Will I be identifiable by being involved in this study?**

Although your name will be collected on the consent form you sign, all data will be de-identified once collected so that no identifying information will be published. Once the interview has been typed-up and saved as a file, however, the voice file will be destroyed. Any identifying information will be removed and the typed-up file stored on a password protected computer that only the coordinator (Lynne Taylor) will have access to. Your comments will not be linked directly to you.

**Are there any risks or discomforts if I am involved?**

The investigator anticipates few risks from your involvement in this study. It is possible that you may experience distress as you recall past events from your life. If so you can contact Lifeline on 13 11 14. If you have any concerns regarding anticipated or actual risks or discomforts, please raise them with the investigator.

**How do I agree to participate?**

Participation is voluntary. You may answer 'no comment' or refuse to answer any questions and you are free to withdraw at any time without effect or consequences. A consent form accompanies this information sheet. If you agree to participate please read and sign the form and Lynne will collect it before she interviews you.

**How will I receive feedback?**

Outcomes from the project will be summarised and given to you by the investigator if you would like to see them. You can request this at the time of your interview, or later via the contact details above.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and we hope that you will accept our invitation to be involved.

*This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project number: 6155). For more information regarding ethical approval of the project the Secretary of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on 8201 3116, by fax on 8201 2035 or by email [human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au](mailto:human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au)*

## **APPENDIX 5: SAMPLE NEWSLETTER ADVERTISEMENT**

### **Advertisement for newsletter**

#### **Research on conversion to Christianity**

Researchers from Flinders University (Theology department) are seeking participants for research on why individuals convert to Christianity. If you are aged over 18 years, from an English-speaking background, have begun considering yourself a Christian in the past two years and are willing to be interviewed about your experiences, they would love to hear from you. More information on the noticeboard, or from Lynne Taylor (04 8849 7881, 08 8358 2149 or [tayl0548@flinders.edu.au](mailto:tayl0548@flinders.edu.au))

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project number 6155). For more information regarding ethical approval of the project the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on 8201 3116, by fax on 8201 2035 or by email [human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au](mailto:human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au)



## APPENDIX 6: NOTICEBOARD ADVERTISEMENT



Rev Prof Andrew Dutney  
**Department of Theology**  
34 Lipsett Terrace  
Brooklyn Park  
SA 5032  
Tel: + 61 8 8416 8431  
Andrew.dutney@flinders.edu.au

[www.flinders.edu.au/ehl/theology/](http://www.flinders.edu.au/ehl/theology/)

CRICOS Provider No. 00114A

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### Seeking participants for research on conversion to Christianity

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**Title:** Turning to God: why individuals convert to Christianity in 21st century Australia

Researchers at Flinders University are investigating why individuals in twenty-first century Australia convert to Christianity, as one way of providing a partial answer to the (much) wider question, "how is God drawing people to God today?" This project is supported by Flinders University Theology Department.

#### **Who can participate?**

People aged 18 years and over, who are from an English-speaking background, and who have begun considering themselves as "Christian" in the past two years, are invited to participate.

#### **What will I be asked to do?**

Your involvement would be in granting an interview which covers certain aspects of this topic. No more than one hour on one occasion would be required, though the researcher may recontact you to clarify your answers or ask additional questions if needed.

#### **How do I find out more?**

Any enquiries you may have concerning this project should be directed to Andrew Dutney, Department of Theology, Flinders University, 34 Lipsett Terrace, Brooklyn Park, SA 5032 or by telephone on + 61 8 8416 8431 or e-mail Andrew.Dutney@flinders.edu.au.

#### **How do I agree to participate?**

Participation is voluntary. If you are willing to be involved, please contact either Andrew Dutney (details above) or Lynne Taylor on 04 8849 7881 or [tayl0548@flinders.edu.au](mailto:tayl0548@flinders.edu.au).

**Thank you for taking the time to read this. The researchers hope that you will accept their invitation to be involved.**

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project number 6155). For more information regarding ethical approval of the project the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on 8201 3116, by fax on 8201 2035 or by email [human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au](mailto:human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au)

## APPENDIX 7: SCREENING QUESTIONS AND INITIAL INFORMATION

In my project, I am seeking to interview people who have become Christians in the past two years.

### Inclusion Criteria

- Males and females
- Over 18 years of age
- Able to provide informed consent
- Self defining as a Christian
- Became a Christian less than two years ago
- Judged by primary researcher as able to provide rich, articulate account of their experiences leading to conversion

If respondent meets all these criteria, the following information will be gathered

What time of day would be best for you for an hour-long interview?

- Morning
- Afternoon
- Evening

Are there days that are better than others for you?

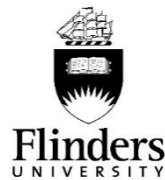
- Weekday (any particular days suit or not suit?) \_\_\_\_\_
- Weekend \_\_\_\_\_

Aware that we will be looking for a quiet place, free of interruptions, where would be most convenient for you to be interviewed?

- At your home
- At Adelaide College of Divinity (Brooklyn Park)
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have any questions for me about the project?

# APPENDIX 8: INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM



## CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH (by interview)

Turning to God: why individuals convert to Christianity in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Australia

I ..... being over the age of 18 years hereby consent to participate as requested in the Letter of Introduction and Information Sheet for the research project on "Turning to God: why individuals convert to Christianity in 21st Century Australia"

1. I have read the information provided.
2. Details of procedures and any risks have been explained to my satisfaction.
3. I agree to audio recording of my information and participation.
4. I am aware that I should retain a copy of the Information Sheet and Consent Form for future reference.
5. I understand that:
  - I may not directly benefit from taking part in this research.
  - I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and am free to decline to answer particular questions.
  - While the information gained in this study will be published as explained, I will not be identified, and individual information will remain confidential.
  - I may ask that the recording be stopped at any time, and that I may withdraw at any time from the session or the research without disadvantage.
6. I agree/do not agree\* to the transcript being made available to other skilled researchers (faculty from Flinders University) who are not members of this research team, but who may assist with the analysis process, on condition that my identity is not revealed. \* *delete as appropriate*

**Participant's signature.....Date.....**

I certify that I have explained the study to the volunteer and consider that she/he understands what is involved and freely consents to participation.

**Researcher's name.....**

**Researcher's signature.....Date.....**

NB: *Two signed copies should be obtained.*

# APPENDIX 9: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND PROCEDURE

## Initial introductions

I will introduce myself and my project very briefly, ensure the respondent understands the consent form and see if there are any questions about the information sheet. We will also discuss the language we will use; are they most comfortable talking about conversion, spiritual transformation, drawn to God, or something else.<sup>1</sup>

## Indicative/Guiding Questions

The questions could be categorised within the framework shown in Figure 1.<sup>2</sup>

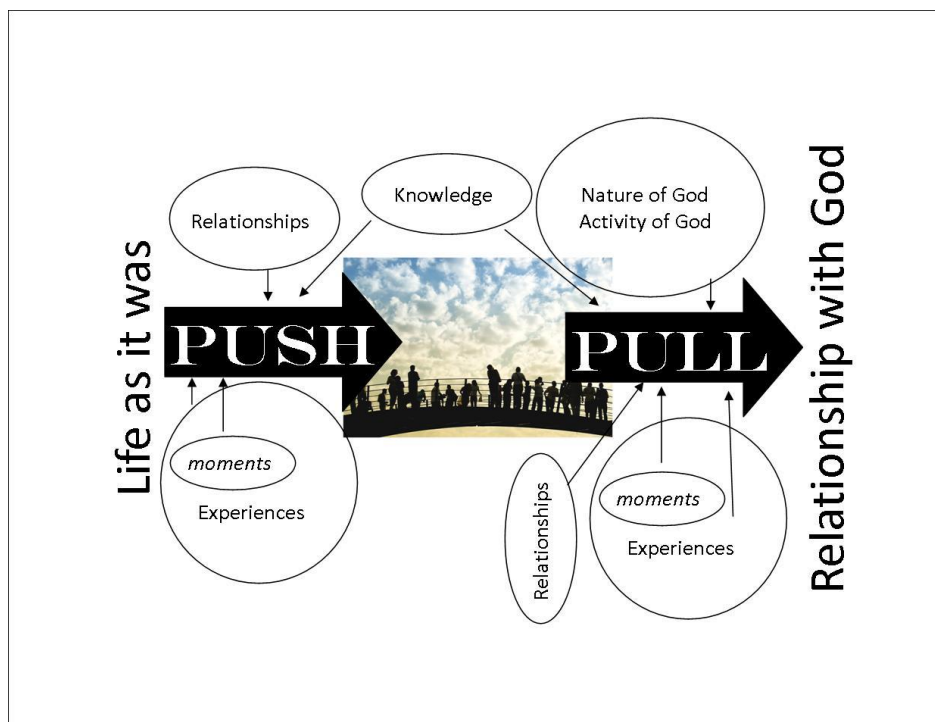


Figure 1: Push and pull factors in conversion

## Experiences

1. Tell me about how you were drawn to God<sup>3</sup>
2. Were there any songs (Christian or secular) that were meaningful for you as you were drawn to God? Why did they resonate with you?
3. Were there any bible verses that were meaningful for you as you were drawn to God? Why did they resonate with you?

<sup>1</sup> This will ensure that the respondent is comfortable with the language used.

<sup>2</sup> This diagram was just for my own purposes. It was not shown to participants.

<sup>3</sup> For the sake of this document the phrase "drawn to God" will be used. In the interview, however, the agreed upon phrase will be used.

4. Were there any books or movies that were meaningful for you as you were drawn to God? Why did they resonate with you?

### **Moments (subset of experiences)**

5. *Would you say that being drawn to God happen suddenly or gradually for you?*
6. *Is there a particular moment you can point to when you became converted?*
7. *[If so] tell me about that*
8. *[If not] tell me how it happened for you*
9. *As you look back on how you were drawn to God are there any other events that stand out in your mind? Could you describe it [each one]?*

### **Knowledge**

10. When did you first learn about the Christian faith?
11. When did you first become interested in the Christian faith?
12. [If so] how was that interest encouraged or kindled?
13. Did you maintain your interest up to the point you were converted or did it wax and wane?

### **Relationships**

14. Who, if anyone, influenced your journey towards God? Tell me about how he/she or they influenced you.

### **God**

15. Were there things that happened that as you were drawn to God that seemed or seem to be supernatural?
16. Were there times for you when God seemed to “break through”; thin places?

### **General pull and pull factors**

17. As you look back, were there particular things that drew you to God? (Listen for
  - a. The character of God
  - b. the gospel
  - c. other Christians
  - d. the Church
  - e. a local church
  - f. Christian faith)
18. As you look back, were there particular things that pushed you away from your life as it was?

### **Motivation for change**

19. Were you specifically looking for a change in your life?
20. Motivation for change vignettes<sup>4</sup>:

---

<sup>4</sup> Zinnbauer and Pargament, "Spiritual Conversion." The statements will be given to respondents (without the headings) for them to select which best describes their experience.

*These vignettes vary along two dimensions, motivation for change and the degree of change sought. Motivation for change is expressed as either high motivation or low motivation. Degree of change sought is expressed as either radical change or minimal change.*

*1. High motivation    Radical change*

*I realised that at this point in my life I needed to change. I was very committed to doing something since the change was important to me. No small change would do either. What I needed was a big change, a radical change.*

*2. High motivation    Minimal change*

*I realised that at this point in my life I needed to change. This change was important to me and I was very committed to it, but I didn't have to shake up my life completely. Small change would do.*

*3. Low motivation    Radical change*

*I felt at this time that my life was OK the way it was. Changing anything was not really important to me. If I made any change it would have to be a big change, but I didn't have a strong desire to do it.*

*4. Low motivation    Minimal change*

*I felt that my life was OK as it was and that changing anything in my life was not really important. If needed any change, small changes would do. Nothing drastic was necessary for me.*

## **Demographics**

- a. Age
- b. Gender
- c. Education background
- d. Ethnicity

## **Ending Questions**

21. Have you ever shared your testimony or prepared an oral testimony?
22. Is there anything you would like to add or clarify?
23. Is there anything else I should know to understand better how you were drawn to God?
24. Is there anything really obvious about your turning to God that you haven't told me?
25. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

## APPENDIX 10: INITIAL CODES, SARAH

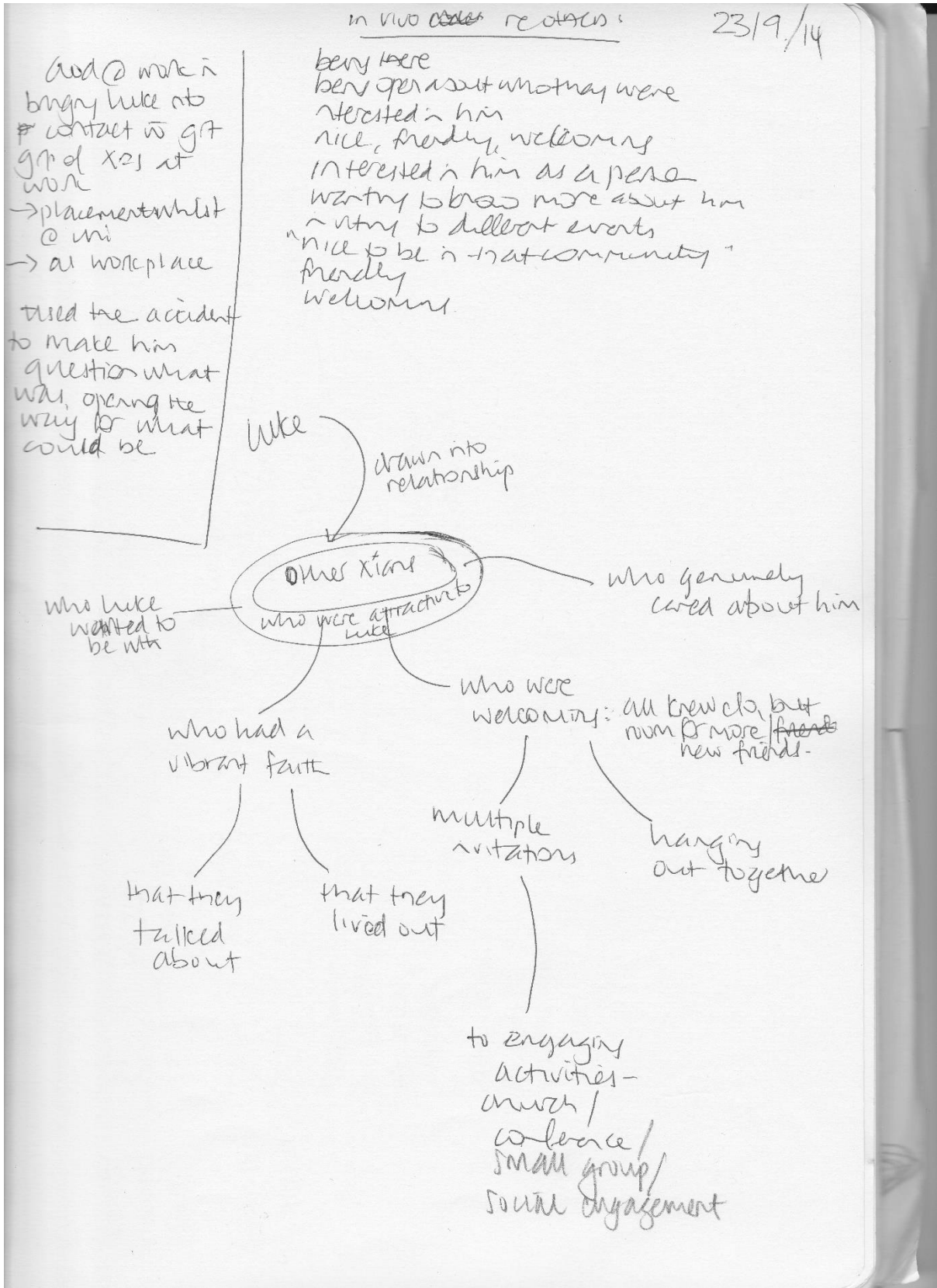
Name	Frequency
Accept other people	1
Acceptance	1
Acceptance of self	1
All the weight had lifted	1
Baptism	1
Baptism as gift	1
Because of the Lord's support	2
Being taught by God	2
Beyond words	1
Bible	4
Blaming God	2
Bring you back	1
Character of God	1
Christian family	6
Christian friend	9
Christian practices	10
Church involvement	2
Connection	1
Consistency in encouraging faith development	4
Contented	1
Coping with negative life experiences	1
Couldn't see	2
Dark places	1
Don't like burdening the people	1
Emotion	2
Fear	2
Fear gone	1
Feeling lost	1
Fighting	1
Forgiveness	1
Friend moving along in faith journey	2
Friend or family positive church experience	2
Get my answers	1
God is real	1
God speaking	3
God was present	4
God working before was Christian	4
God's sacrifice	2
Grace	1
Gradual	1
He is really preaching	1
He touched my heart	1
Helping others	2
Hurting	1
I don't want for anything anymore	1
I was meant to be with him	1
It was a moment	1
Just feel	1
Just resonated with me	1

Knew God existed	1
Knowing	1
Knowing that he was there	3
Lack of love	1
Lack of self-care	2
Learning about myself	1
Learning how to deal with people	1
Light bulb moment	1
Like coming home	1
Like-minded people	1
Long story	1
Long term resistance	4
Long time ago	2
Looking at me in my eyes	1
Making contact	1
Meaningless of life	1
Mediate	1
Movies and shows	3
Need for social interaction	2
Negative life experiences	17
Never pushy	1
No one understood me	1
No one was there for me	2
Non-judgement	5
Opening up to others	2
Overwhelming	3
Physical manifestation	7
Positive experience of church staff	2
Positive experience of minister	2
Prayer	2
Presence of God	1
Realising	1
Resistant	5
Seeking God	1
Self-awareness	1
Separated by distance	1
Shared experience	1
Social isolation	5
Started crying	3
Stood by me	1
Stuck	1
Surrounded by	1
That was the moment	2
The Lord was speaking through him	2
To just keep on going	1
Took long time	3
Touch	1
Touched my heart	1
Transformation	1
Tried to push me	1
Unanswered prayers	3
Unconditional love	3
Unending love	1



Warm feeling	1
Weight lifted	1
You really touched my heart	1
Youth group	1

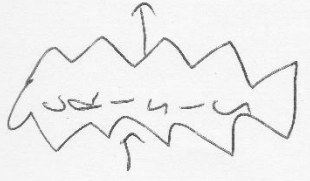
# APPENDIX 11: CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF LUKE'S INTERVIEW



Lucas' Journey

Xianxi as  
Tribesman/  
Bimal

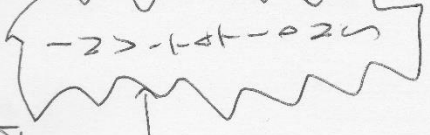
faith-step  
= "route"



"before ~~more~~ e  
accident my  
life was  
awesome"

After = ongoing  
physical -  
mental health  
issues

befriended  
by Xianxi  
who cared/  
genuine  
friendship



Xianxi  
in new light

had witnessed  
player's  
spiteful nature

desire to be  
a better person

decision to be  
bypassed

part of being  
in community

# APPENDIX 12: EARLY RESULTS AND DISCUSSION FRAMEWORK

Results:

1. Introducing my participants:
  - Qualitative phase
  - Quantitative phase
2. What is not in the data
  - Sin
  - Heaven
  - Being convinced by others
  - Rational choices
  - Dramatic conversion “events”
3. What is in the data (order these around themes)
  - Accepting the gift God offers
  - Being used by God despite brokenness
  - Becoming a better person
  - Becoming who we are created to be
  - Immediate benefits
  - Being welcomed into community
  - People caring deeply and faithfully and generously, and for a long time
  - Seeing Christians live their (vibrant) faith in the midst of their (sometimes challenging) circumstances
  - Experiencing the presence of God (or not!)
  - Invitations to participate pre-conversion (or even before any expressed interest).
  - Ongoing invitations for deeper involvement, closer engagement with others
  - A deep sense of knowing/responding/following/allowing
  - Processes where the actual “becoming” is a super/natural next step in a long process. Can be almost anticlimactic, whilst still profound.
  - Lots of Affects

Discussion

1. Cognitive/experiential framed through Epstein’s 15 things
2. Four major themes:

- Becoming
    - i. Who they are
    - ii. Who they are created to be
    - iii. A better person
  - Knowing
  - Belonging
  - Seeing things differently (Bagby: seeing what you know)
3. Role of each of the agents
- God: drawing (more than attracting) (Meadows p420 re longing of God)
  - Convert: actively seeking (or fighting!) but certainly engaged as an active agent
  - Other Christians: inviting and welcoming
    - i. Being appealing (the sort of people you want to hang out with)
    - ii. Giving invitations
      1. To church
      2. To church-run events
      3. To small group
      4. To pray
      5. To participate (even pre-conversion/pre-interest)
      6. To hang out
    - iii. Welcoming
      1. To church
      2. Into a community/family
    - iv. Being open and honest: sharing stories of struggle and faith
  - Church
4. Rambo's stage model? Do the stories frame through this? (also see McKnight's dimensions in Turning to Jesus)

## APPENDIX 13: NODES, DECEMBER 2014

### **Acceptance**

Accepting God  
Accepting oneself  
Accepting other people  
Being accepted by God

### **Affects**

Christian faith has completed my life  
Crying  
Crying out to God  
Difficult to articulate  
Experiencing a moment of encounter with God  
Experiencing a physical sensation  
Experiencing a sense of community  
Feeling an impetus to act  
    Felt should go to church  
Feeling at home (like coming home)  
Feeling comfortable  
Feeling contented  
Feeling dry  
Feeling God's presence (or not)  
Feeling overwhelmed  
Feeling right  
    Christianity feels right  
    Church felt right  
    Feeling like in the right place  
    Just felt right  
Feeling safe  
Feeling secure  
Feeling spent  
Feeling strong enough  
Feeling very relieved  
Finding security and comfort in God  
God touched my heart  
Hurting (in pain)  
It puts you in a different place  
Just made sense  
Knowing  
    Experiencing a sense of knowing  
    Knowing God has a plan for me  
    Knowing that God was there (or would be there)  
Resonated with me  
Sensing that God knows how you feel  
Weight lifted

### **Becoming**

Becoming a better person  
    Being person God wants me to be  
    Bringing up children well  
    Sin  
Finding myself

### **Being open**

Opening up to God  
Opening up to others  
Other Christians being open

### **Belonging**

Being welcomed  
Other Christians being open  
Participating before Christian

### **Bible**

Bible verses  
Experience of the Bible before becoming a Christian  
Learning how to interpret the bible  
Love God and neighbour  
Recalling or remembering Bible passages

### **Christian practices**

Not/ memorising scripture  
Being baptised  
    Baptism as gift  
Being part of a small group  
Going to church  
Importance of daily time with God  
Perception of evangelism  
Prayer  
    Being prayed for  
    Learning about prayer  
    Prayers being answered  
    Praying for myself  
    Praying for others  
    Praying regularly  
    Praying with others  
    Saying grace  
    Unanswered prayers  
Reading or meditating on Scripture  
Sharing my faith with others  
Using past beliefs in current spiritual practice

## **Christians**

Being respected by Christians  
Christian colleague  
Christian family  
    Sharing positive church experience  
Christian friend  
    Christian friend being comforted by prayer  
    Christian friends saying other religion wrong  
    Christian friends sharing about their faith  
    Christian friends sharing bible verses  
    Christians that you want to spend time with  
    Consistency in encouraging faith development  
    Eating together  
    Spending time together  
    Stood by me  
    Talking to Christian friends  
    Trying to push me  
Christian leaders  
Christians compared favourably with non-Christians  
Christians doing things for others  
Christians excited about faith in others  
Christians helping me through difficult time  
Christians sacrificing things for God  
Christians were passionate  
Concern about what other Christians would think  
Other Christians being open  
Positively diverse group to learn with  
Sharing personal stories

## **Church**

Attending a church youth group  
Church as engaging  
Church as welcoming place  
Church contrasts favourably with previous experience of religion  
Church people open and accepting  
Church running conference  
Enjoying church  
Giving back to the church  
God guided to church  
God present at church  
Positive experience of minister  
Sense of family  
Starting attending church  
Supportive church community

## **Cognitive**

What is harder to believe or leap of faith

## **Consequences of new faith**

A positive change  
Being supported by God  
Being used by God  
Christian faith has completed my life  
Christianity doesn't seem so irrational now  
Experiencing God's grace  
Feeling better  
    Fear gone  
    Feeling contented  
    Feeling happier  
    Feeling safe  
    Feeling strong enough  
    Feeling very relieved  
Finding the strength within myself  
Giving back to the church  
Growing as a Christian  
Living differently  
Opening up to others  
Receiving answers

## **Experiencing difficulties**

Going through a difficult time  
Having a difficult experience  
Health challenges  
    Mental health  
Hearing about other's difficult experiences  
Helping me through difficult time  
Lack of self-care  
Life is still difficult

## **God**

Conversion as mundane but divine  
Feeling connected to God  
God being present  
God changing me  
God created the world  
God forgiving  
God guiding  
God healing  
God knows  
    God knows how you feel  
God loving  
God speaking  
    God speaking directly

God speaking through someone else  
Message just for me  
God supporting  
God teaching me  
God working  
God's acceptance  
God's power  
Not sure what it was about God  
What God did for us  
God's sacrifice

### ***Interpersonal relationships***

Being a burden  
Being independent  
Making significant contact  
Need for social interaction with like-minded people  
Need for us to have unconditional love  
Religious beliefs of spouse  
Shared experience

### ***Invitation***

Brave in going when not knowing anyone  
General advertising  
Personal invitation  
Personal invitation to church  
Personal invitation to church-run conference etc  
Personal invitation to hang out  
Personal invitation to small group  
Personal invitation to participate  
Personal invitation to pray

### ***Learning***

Learning about Christianity  
Learning about myself  
Learning how to deal with people

### ***Past***

Appreciation of nature and God as creator  
Being stuck  
Challenging past  
Christian schools  
Convincing others not to be Christian  
Didn't have much to do with Christians or religion  
Experiencing social isolation  
Family religious background

Own baptism as affirmation of christening  
Feeling lost  
Feeling spent  
Going through a difficult time  
Having a difficult experience  
Lack of love as child  
Meaningless of life  
Negative experience of religion  
Perceptions of who they were before becoming Christian  
Previous events had put questions in my head  
Previous religious beliefs  
Always been spiritual  
Atheist  
Believed God created the world  
Believed in a higher power  
Buddhism  
Closed-minded  
God didn't make sense  
God doesn't exist  
Had an idea of God  
Heavily into New Age  
Ignorant about Christianity  
Knew God existed  
Never entertained the idea that it was possible  
PRB Grace  
PRB Hamish  
PRB Luke  
PRB Meg  
PRB Sarah  
Religion can't be true  
Sense of gratefulness  
Strongly against religion  
Taking a cognitive approach  
Thought religion can't be true  
Thought religion was silly  
Trying to live good life  
Trying to help others

### ***Questioning***

Asking questions of God  
Didn't do anything about questions  
Having questions about God  
I tend to question everything  
Letting go of questions  
Not agreeing with everything  
Started questioning



## ***Seeing***

Beauty in creation  
Couldn't see  
I can see now  
Seeing God's love  
Seeing things differently  
Why can't people see

## ***Spouse or partner's beliefs***

### ***Stumbling blocks or obstacles***

Christian friends saying other religion wrong  
Fear

### ***Transitioning to faith***

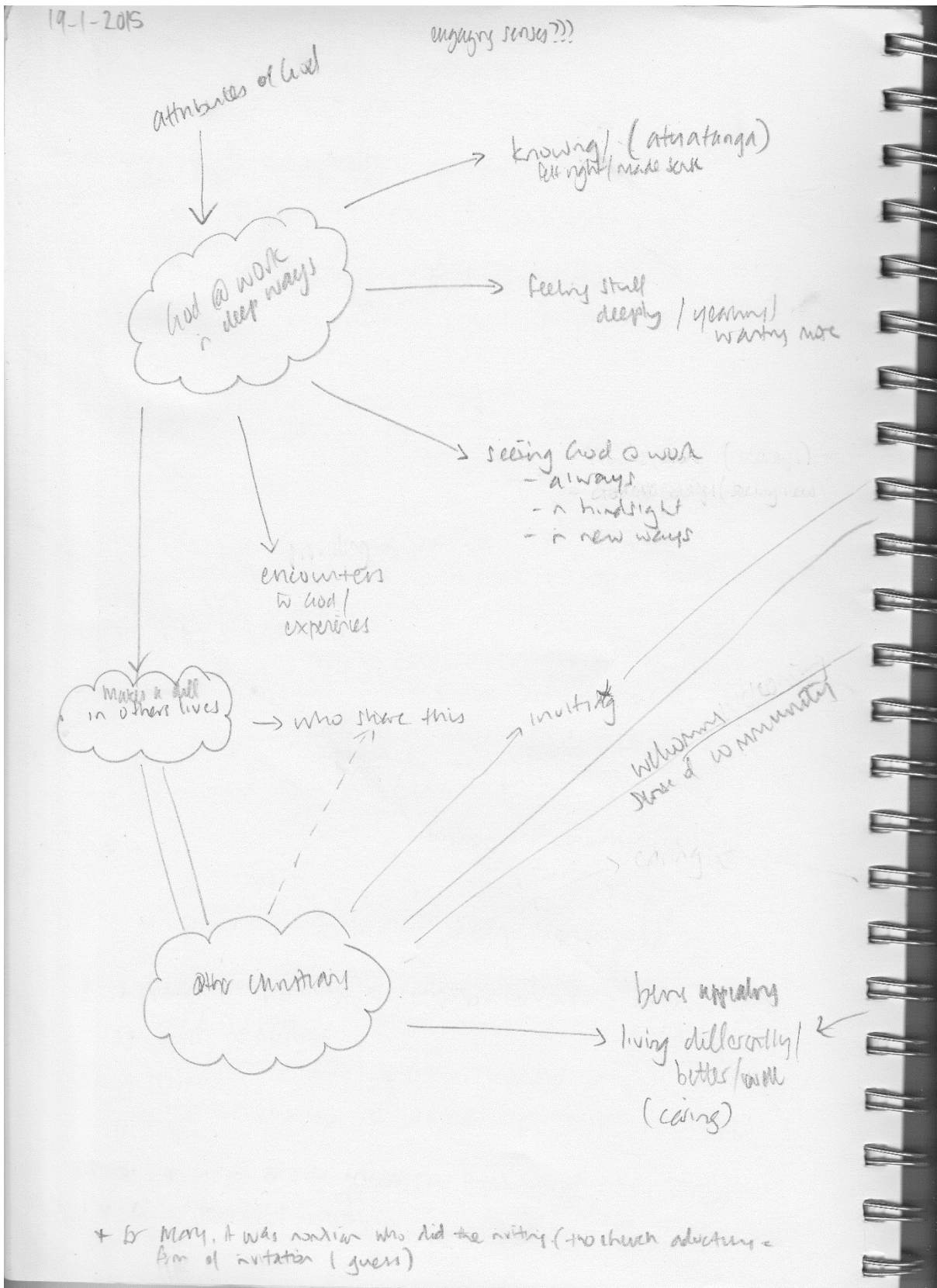
Attending Alpha  
Attending church  
Being drawn  
Being resistant  
Bridging the gap between unbelief and belief  
Considering it more logical to believe in God  
Deciding (for myself)  
Ended up choosing  
Experiencing a change in attitude  
Experiencing a moment of encounter with God  
Feeling dry  
Feeling torn between religions  
Fighting (with God)

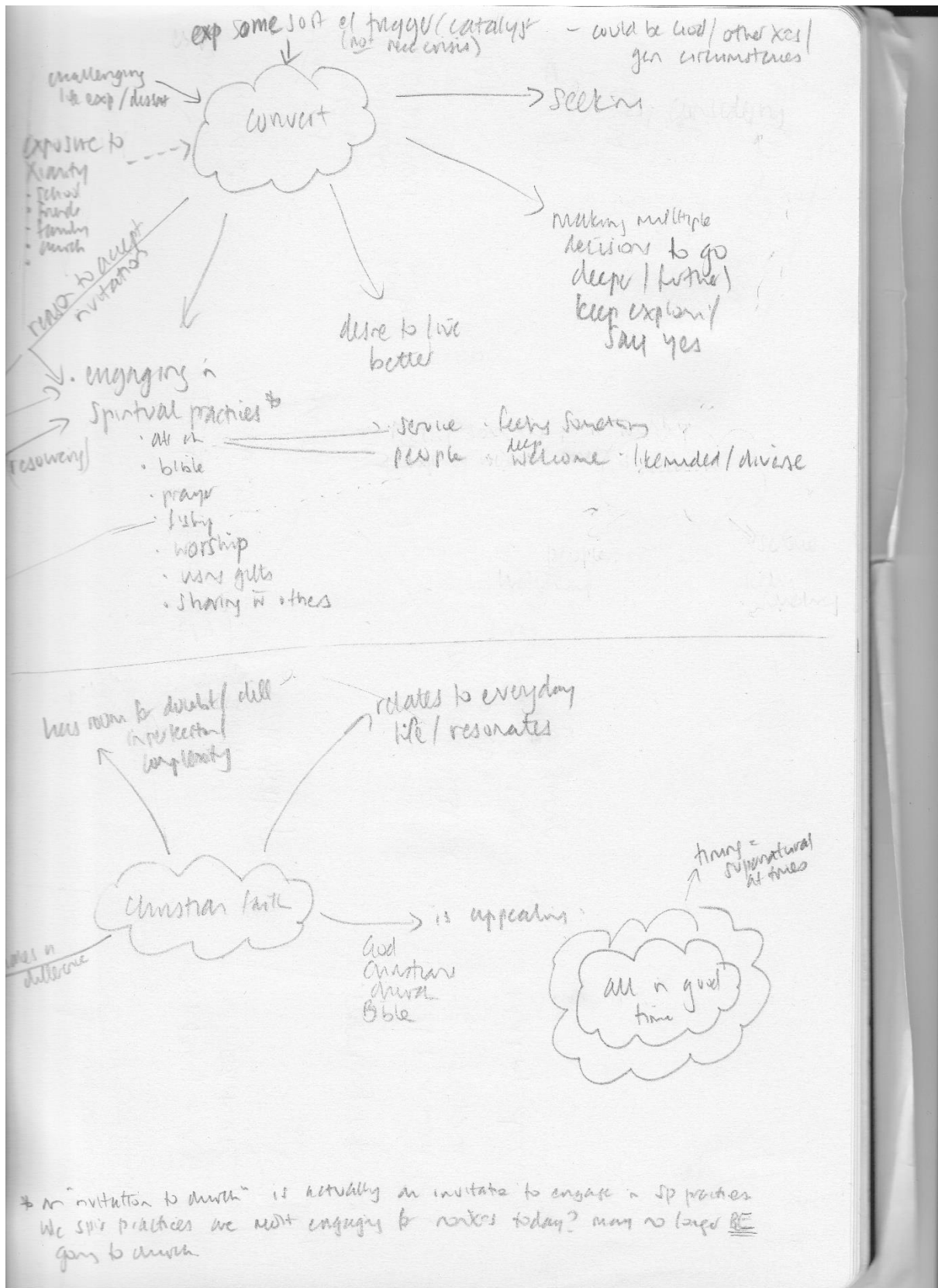
God working  
Heart rather than head  
Helpful resources  
Knowing I was meant to be with him  
Learning about Christian faith  
Length of process  
Making a choice  
Motivation for change vignette  
Movies and shows that were significant  
Participating before Christian  
Reading about Christianity  
Realising Christianity is about love  
Realising God is real  
Realising needed a relationship with God  
Sense of destiny Things happen for a reason  
Something had changed  
Songs that were meaningful  
Starting on the journey  
Telling others about decision to be Christian  
The moment  
    Conversion as mundane but divine  
    Naming self as Christian  
Thinking things through  
Unanswered prayers  
Wanting child to have opportunity to know about God  
Wanting to feel something

### ***Worship***

Acts of service as worship  
Being obedient to God as worship  
Sung worship

# APPENDIX 14: DEVELOPING CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK





NB: These pages together comprise one model that fits on a 'landscape' formatted A3 page.

# **APPENDIX 15: “FINDING AND CHOOSING A LIFE WORTH LIVING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CONVERSION NARRATIVES”**

*Presented at Australia and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools conference, Sydney, 2015.*

## **Introduction**

Historically, one way the church has sought to help people discover a life worth living is by speaking truth. My research shows that the role of Christians in faith sharing today is mediated primarily by engagement in spiritual practices and reciprocal relationships, rather than through proclamation.

## **The research project**

My PhD seeks to answer the question, “Why are people becoming Christians in Australia today?” Why are they finding and choosing, within the Christian faith, a life worth living? It’s a question that can be considered from various perspectives. Social scientists outline social and psychological processes. Theologians and biblical scholars discuss how God could be at work.

It seemed to me that the best way to discover why people are becoming Christians today is to ask some people who have just become Christians. But what questions should I ask them? Looking at the disciplines already mentioned, I quickly anticipated a danger: if I took someone else’s idea or theory and tested it, I ran the risk of missing other significant factors in the stories of the converts I was researching. Yes, their story may fit with that model, or with this idea, but there may be something other than that model or this idea that was actually the Most Important Thing in their story of finding faith. I also had a hunch that all of those disciplines had something to contribute to the whole story of why people become Christians today. I wanted to be able to ask questions that opened up people’s stories, rather than ones that closed them down or narrowed them to consider only certain areas.

With all that in mind, I used a methodology of grounded theory to undertake my research. Grounded theory starts not with a theory to test, but with the data itself. It seeks to come up with, to uncover, a theory that is grounded in the data. The data I started with was the stories of ten people who had become Christians in the past two years: with their telling of the experiences that had drawn them into a relationship with God. I used semi-structured

interviews as a research method to gather very rich data, which I analysed with the help of NVivo and rainbow coloured highlighters.

The participants were, by design, all Anglo-Australian. There were eight women and two men. They came from a range of spiritual backgrounds from “militant evangelical atheist” to someone who desperately loved God and Jesus but from within a New Age framework, to someone who had barely thought about spiritual things.

	Gender	Previous religious beliefs	Previous belief in God	Church settled in
Grace	F	Closed: atheist	Rejected: silly/ridiculous/atheist	Uniting
Hamish	M	Very closed: atheist	Rejected: "militant evangelical atheist"	Uniting
Jean	F	Unformed: little exposure	Maybe: because made a difference in another's life	Uniting
Luke	M	Unformed: church schooling	Unformed	Baptist
Meg	F	Closed: New Age	Believed in God, but New Age	Pentecostal
Mary	F	Open: New Age	Loved God, but New Age	Anglican
Olivia	F	Unformed: wondering	Knew God existed because made difference in others' lives	Uniting
Sarah	F	Open: "always spiritual"	Knew God existed, God in nature important	Baptist
Tallulah	F	Open: church as child	Believed-ish	Uniting

## Discoveries

As I shook the data down, pulled it apart and laid it alongside each other, it became apparent that there were three agents actively involved in the conversion process; there was a clear process that converts followed on their journey to embracing the Christian faith; and there were a series of affects that the converts themselves experienced as they came to Christianity.

## The three agents

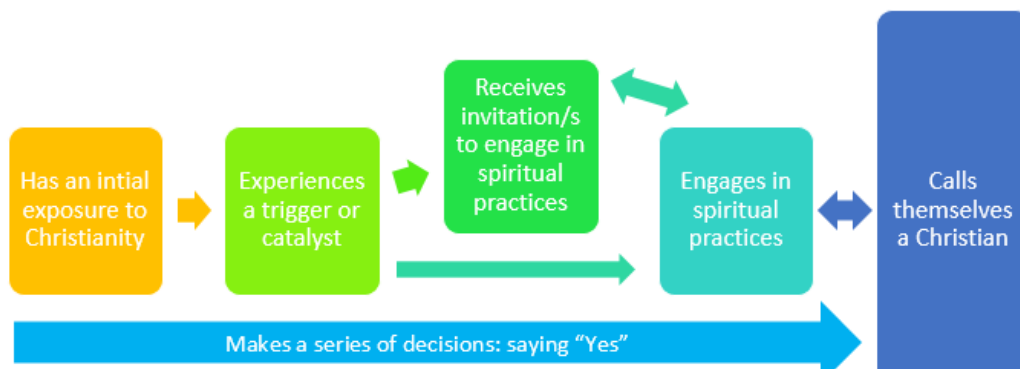
The three agents involved in the conversion process are the convert themselves, other Christians, and God. Each of these are active agents. Conversion to Christianity in Australia today is not something that it imposed on the hapless; rather the converts themselves were actively seeking, considering, and saying “Yes” to a range of opportunities and experiences that drew them, that allowed them to be drawn, into a relationship with God.

Other Christians did some stuff that helped the process and we’ll come back to that shortly.

God was perceived to be at work in the converts’ lives.

## The process

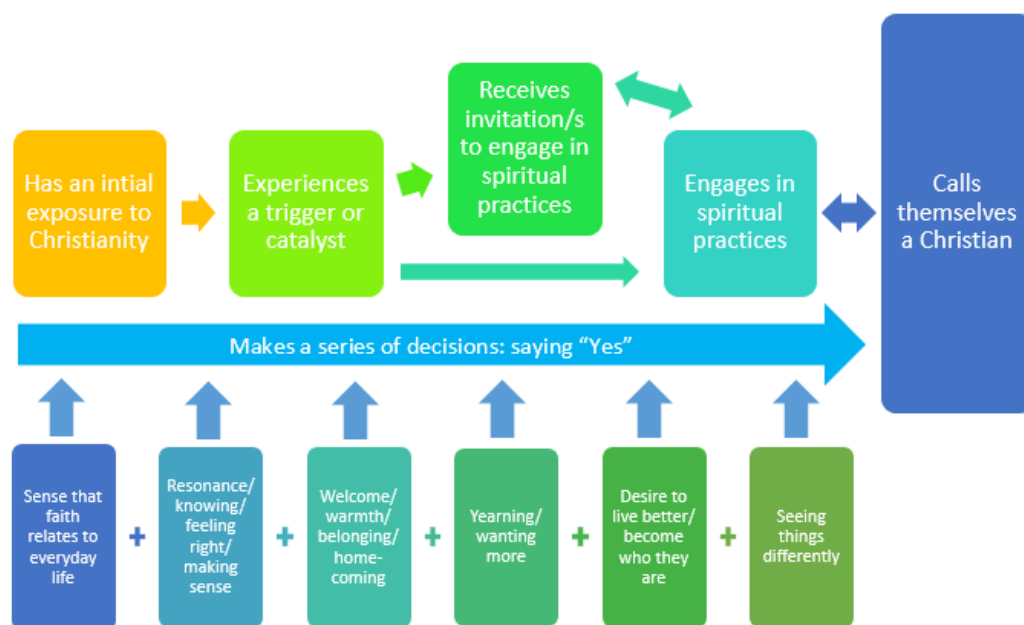
The process by which converts come to choose Christianity for themselves is shown in this slide. (describe)



## The affects



There seem to be six affects that converts experience as they become Christians: six things that they experienced at a deep level. <<Go through them>>



As we put this diagram together, note that these affects also speak to the active role that converts played in the conversion process. These affects helped keep the participants saying “yes” to the process they were engaged in.

### **Introducing Lewis Rambo’s “Stage model of conversion”**

In grounded theory, the literature is treated as “data” to be considered alongside data generated by primary research. So during the process of analysing my interview data, I was reconsidering the reading I had done before starting my interviews, and doing more reading, to increase what is known in grounded theory as my “theoretical sensitivity”.

Lewis Rambo is a psychologist who advocates for an interdisciplinary approach to the study of religious conversion. In his book *Understanding Religious Conversion* Rambo introduced a stage model of conversion, primarily as a way of ordering complex data in relation to religious conversion. While he argues that these stages are not (necessarily) sequential, in naming them “stages” there is a sense that there is a usual order that is followed.

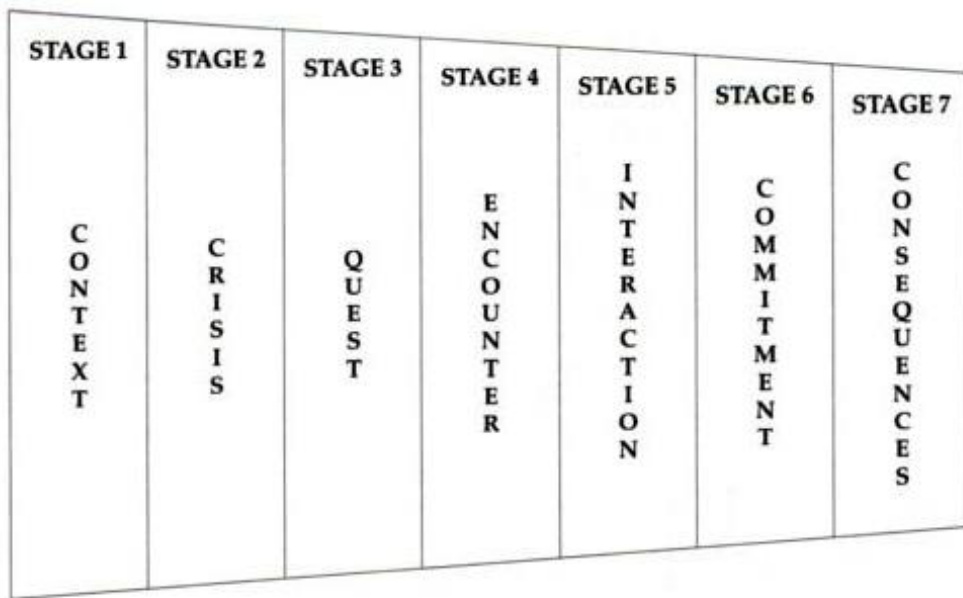


Figure 1 A sequential stage model.

I was interested to compare Rambo's model with mine. There are points of commonality with the "process" part of my own model.

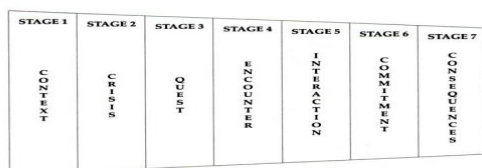
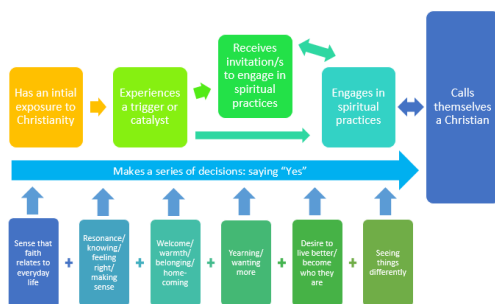


Figure 1 A sequential stage model.



There are some obvious differences. I called my second stage a "trigger" whereas Rambo called it a "crisis". While Rambo defines "crisis" rather broadly, my data suggests trigger is a more helpful term for what began each participant's exploration of faith. Rambo's model takes specific account of the consequences of conversion as an ending point, whereas my



“consequences” are spread through the affects and engagement in spiritual practices. But the two key differences are as follows. Firstly, where I separate out my three agents (and I have two additional models I haven’t shown you yet), Rambo’s focus is based around the convert. The converts’ interactions with other Christians and with God are included within those stages, rather than being considered separately. And secondly the affects that the converts experience are absent in the diagram: again absorbed into particular stages of the process. In contrast, while my research indicates that those affects infuse the process as a whole, my naming them as a separate plane of data means they can be considered at each stage of the process, and in the light of all three agents.

Good PhD students always keep their research questions at the forefront of their minds, lest they become distracted by other shiny things! My research question is “Why are people becoming Christians in Australia today?” Or today, “Why are people finding and choosing, in the Christians faith, a life worth living?” Rambo’s model does not really address that research question. It could give me a “How are they becoming Christians?” but it does not give me a “Why?” In order to answer the “Why?” questions, I need to look explicitly at the role of both the other agents: God and other Christians, and at the affects the converts experience as they journey to finding and choosing in Christian faith, a life worth living.

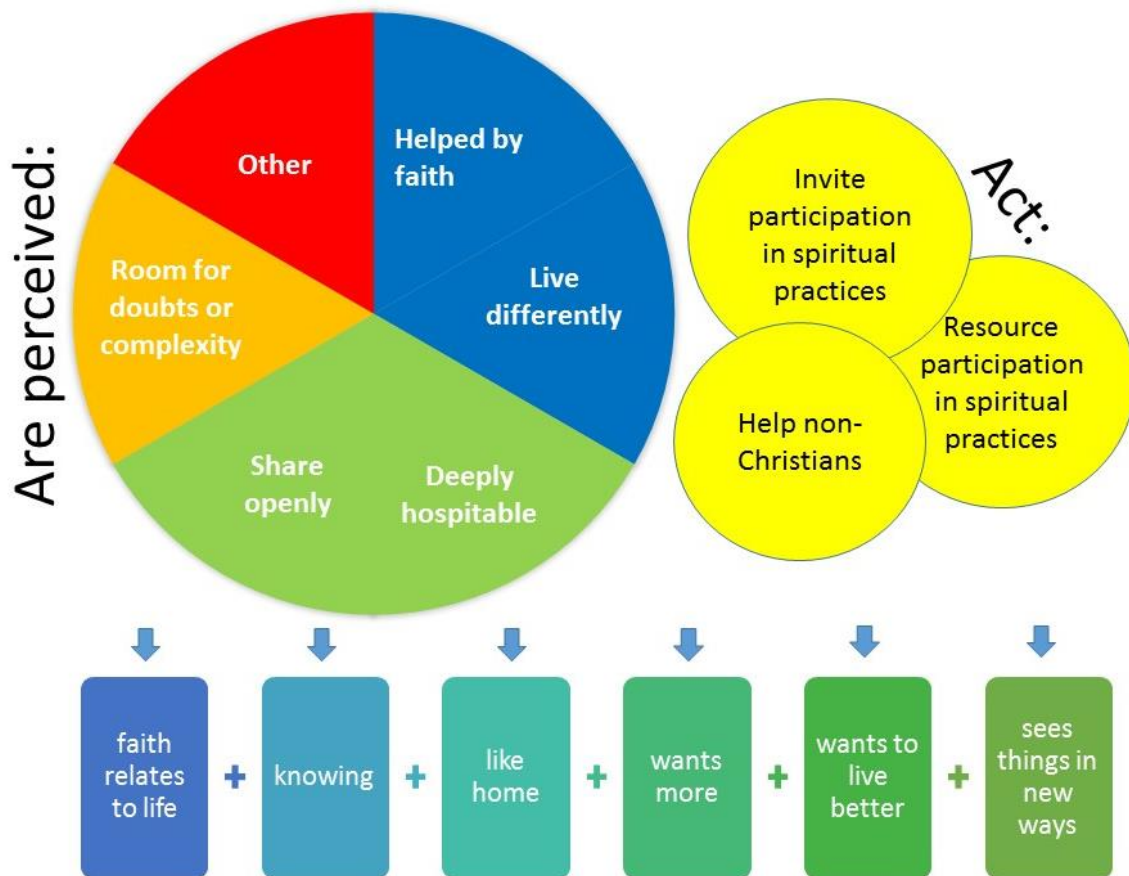
## **The role of other Christians in the conversion process**

So before returning to Rambo’s model, we’ll consider the role other Christians play in the conversion process. When we think about the role of Christians in conversion, we’re likely to think of evangelism, and when we think of evangelism we might think of proclamation. My research indicates that the role of Christians in faith sharing today is mediated primarily by engagement in spiritual practices and reciprocal relationships rather than through proclamation.

As we look at the process by which people become Christians, there are points where the involvement of other Christians is essential, as well as points at which other Christians may be involved in the conversion process. An initial exposure to Christianity is generally mediated through, or at least enhanced by, engagement with other Christians. It is most often, though not always, other Christians who invite non-Christians to engage in spiritual practices.

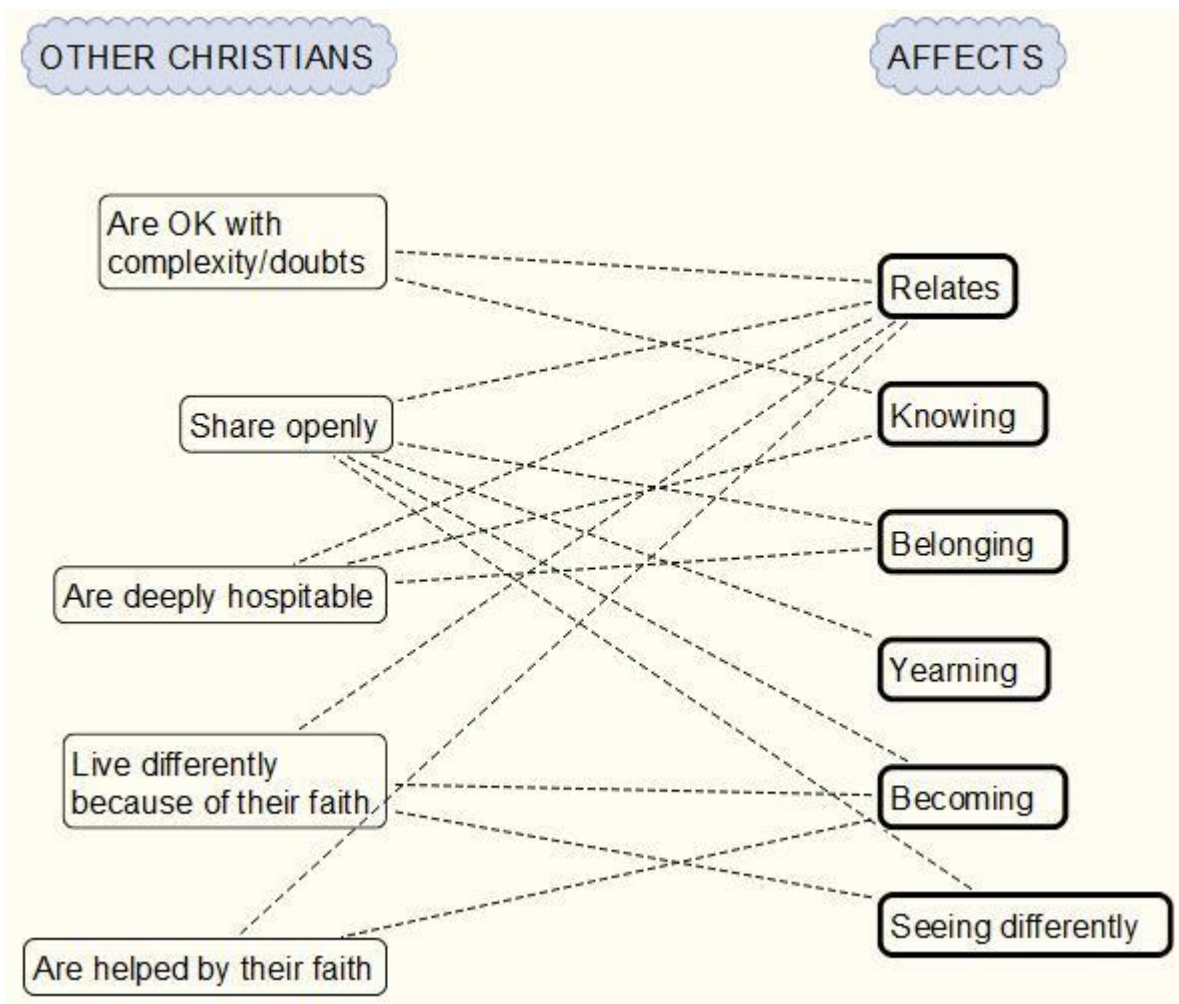
As well as these things that impacted directly on the conversion process, people who recently chose to embrace the Christian faith indicated five common pre-conversion perceptions of other Christian friends and colleagues. They perceived Christians as having

been helped by their faith; as living differently as a result of their faith; as sharing openly and honestly with non-Christians; as being deeply hospitable; and as allowing room for doubts, questions or complexity in faith. They also considered that they themselves were helped by other Christians; and that other Christians invited and resourced their participation in spiritual practices. In a nutshell: Christians were engaged in reciprocal relationships with non-Christians, and they invited and resourced participation in a range of spiritual practices.



**Other Christians mediated the affects**

Once again, the affects that the converts experienced were directly related to that involvement of Christians in their lives.



These interrelationships demonstrate that other Christians helped create and maintain the environment within which participants experience the affects.

## Two tiny stories

Two tiny stories from my research.

Olivia has a Christian friend we'll call Hannah. They have been friends for several years, having met at university.

This story is from those Uni days, long before Olivia was a Christian.

Hannah experienced a family tragedy that she talked with Olivia about after Olivia had offered her condolences. Olivia says, "that was kind of how I got to know her. ... we talked a lot about [the tragedy] and how Hannah saw God's role in her life and in [the tragedy].... And you know, obviously it wasn't so much at that stage like she was trying to evangelise or anything, like she was just literally telling me like how it was for her and how she viewed her relationship with God .... So I felt like it was really like made a big impact on me. To be able

to talk to her and just I dunno, I guess see where her head was at. And I was just really listening, mostly.”

Olivia and Hannah engaged in a reciprocal relationship.

And Jean.

Jean, also completely unchurched, was a teacher in a church primary school. She observed the children she taught being comforted by their Christian faith: she perceived it gave them a sense of security and wellbeing to know that God loved them. At the same time, the father of Jean’s friend Louise was sick with cancer. Louise asked Jean to pray with her. Again, Jean saw the comfort that prayer brought to her friend, plus the healing that resulted for Louise’s father.

Jean’s experience with her friend and her class “just kind of got [her] thinking as to maybe this prayer stuff is real”.

Reciprocal relationship. Engagement in spiritual practices. And teaching at a church school.

## **Returning to Rambo**

According to Rambo, in Stage 4, “Encounter”, the potential convert encounters an advocate who introduces them to the religious beliefs of the advocate. Such an encounter can be positively or negatively received; and these perceptions can change over time. My data suggests that it is more accurate and more useful to acknowledge that such encounters permeate multiple stages of the conversion process. Considering my model and in relation to the brief stories I have just told, Jean’s class and Jean’s friend gave her an initial exposure to Christianity. Her friend invited her to engage in spiritual practices, and later Christians from her local church encouraged her to participate in, and resourced her engagement in, additional spiritual practices. Similarly Olivia’s friend Hannah was part of providing Olivia with an initial exposure to Christianity; later Hannah invited Olivia to participate in spiritual practices; and then she and others from the church resourced Olivia’s engagement in those practices.

Attempting to categorise these encounters into one “stage” of the conversion process ironically loses the very process nature of these stories. It is more helpful to acknowledge that other Christians (Rambo’s “advocates”) play a role at multiple stages of the process, and therefore to name other Christians as a second agent in the conversion process,

alongside the convert themselves, and God. Doing so enables us to consider the multiplicity and complexity of the role that other Christians play.

### **Strengths and limitations of Rambo's stage model**

Rambo provides (as he promises) a two dimensional stage model that is potentially useful for ordering one's own data, as well as the body of literature, on conversion. It has been used by researchers to consider the conversion narratives of a range of contemporary and ancient Christians. However, seeking to place one's data within such a model runs the risk of flattening the data. My data could probably have fitted within Rambo's model: I could have used it (with some modification) to outline the process by which people come to faith. But doing so would not have answered my research question. It would not address WHY people are becoming Christians in Australia today. In order to consider the WHY I must not flatten my data to Rambo's categories but rather discover a multidimensional model that acknowledges the process, the three agents and the affects.

Taking this multidimensional approach enables us to clearly see the role other Christians play in the conversion process. Not just proclaiming. Christians engage in reciprocal relationships with non-Christians; and they invite and resource participation in a range of spiritual practices. They are seen by non-Christians to be helped by their faith; to live differently as a result of their faith; to be deeply hospitable; to share openly with others; and to have room in their faith for doubts and complexities. These ways of acting and being contribute to a range of affects that draw potential converts along a process that has the potential to result in their calling themselves a Christian: finding and choosing a life worth living.

## **APPENDIX 16: IAMS ABSTRACT (AS SUBMITTED)**

### ***Authentic conversion: a tripolar “becoming” of who we are created to be***

Conversion to Christianity in Australia today can be understood as resulting from non-Christians desiring, observing and experiencing genuine authenticity. While the notion of authenticity is often poorly conceived as a narcissistic actualisation that prioritises the self over external relationships and responsibilities, such an understanding is both inadequate and unhelpful.

This paper, in dialogue with Charles Taylor and David Augsburger, argues that genuine authenticity is tripolar in nature: focusing not (just) on the self but also on relationship with God and significant connection with, and responsibility toward, others. Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with recent converts to Christianity, the paper demonstrates first that religious conversion is fuelled by a desire for authenticity. Secondly, religious conversion is mediated by relationships with Christians who embrace and exhibit authenticity in their personal, social and spiritual lives. Thirdly, religious conversion enables personal authenticity to develop and flourish.

The paper suggests that when the authenticity sought and realised by converts to Christianity is tripolar in nature, healthy transformation results. This transformation sees new converts “becoming” the people they were created to be: unique persons who see their worth and their responsibilities in the light of their relationships with God and with others.

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# APPENDIX 17: “AUTHENTIC CONVERSION: BECOMING WHO WE ARE”

*Presented at International Association of Mission Studies Conference, Seoul, 2016.*

## **Abstract**

Conversion to Christianity in Australia today can be understood as resulting from non-Christians desiring, observing and experiencing genuine authenticity. Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with recent converts to Christianity, this paper demonstrates first that religious conversion is fuelled by a desire for authenticity. Secondly, religious conversion is resourced by Christians who embrace and exhibit authenticity in their personal, social and spiritual lives. Thirdly, God enables authenticity to develop and flourish. Influenced by Charles Taylor and aspects of Trinitarian theology, the paper argues that this genuine authenticity is relational in nature: focusing not (just) on the self but also on relationship with God and significant connection with, and responsibility toward, others. This understanding rightly challenges the notion of authenticity as a narcissistic actualisation that prioritises the self over external relationships and responsibilities. When relational authenticity is sought and realised by converts, healthy transformation results. This transformation sees new converts “becoming” the people they were created to be: unique persons who see their worth and their responsibilities in the light of their relationships with God and with others.

*Lynne Taylor is a PhD candidate in theology at Flinders University of South Australia where she is using a methodology of grounded theory to investigate why people are becoming Christians in Australia today.*

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## **Biographical paragraph**

Lynne Taylor is in the finishing stages of her PhD in theology at Flinders University of South Australia. She has worked for many years as a Researcher in New Zealand and Australia, resourcing local churches in their engagement in their local communities and helping denominational agencies evaluate, dream and plan for the future. Lynne has also worked as a lay leader, including in church and congregation planting. She is passionate about helping people connect faith and everyday life; and about understanding the *missio Dei*, so Christians can be involved in what God is already doing in the world. Lynne has recently

moved home to Aotearoa New Zealand, and lives with her husband and teenage daughters in Dunedin, overlooking the beautiful Otago Harbour.

# Authentic conversion: becoming who we are

## Introduction

“It’s all about Authenticity!”<sup>1</sup>

This was my realisation about 12 months ago. I had spent the previous 15 months interviewing recent converts to Christianity and analysing the rich data that resulted from those interviews. My big question was “Why are unchurched people becoming Christians today?” and I realised I had an answer.

This paper explores the link between Christian conversion and authenticity. It demonstrates that God enables authenticity to develop and flourish; that religious conversion is fuelled by a desire for authenticity; and that religious conversion is resourced by Christians who embrace and exhibit authenticity in their personal, social and spiritual lives.

In order to explore this link, I will tell you about my research. Together we’ll see, “it’s all about Authenticity.”

## Methodology and selected findings

The question of why people are becoming Christians today can be considered from various perspectives. Social scientists outline social and psychological processes. Theologians and biblical scholars discuss how God could be at work. However, the lived experience of religious conversion involves all those things: social processes; psychological processes; and the agency of God. Atonement theories<sup>2</sup>; process models of conversion<sup>3</sup>; conversion careers<sup>4</sup>; and conversion motifs<sup>5</sup> offer potentially helpful, but partial, models and explanations for a complex phenomenon.

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<sup>1</sup> Research memo: Lynne Taylor June 10, 2015

<sup>2</sup> For example Richard V Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B Eerdmans, 1999); John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Scottsdale, PA and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> For example Lewis R Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> For example Henri Gooren, "Towards a New Model of Conversion Careers: The Impact of Personality and Contingency Factors " *Exchange* 34, no. 2 (2005).

<sup>5</sup> For example John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1981).



Rather than testing an existing theory that likely offered only a partial explanation, my methodology of grounded theory allowed me to uncover a conversion theory that is grounded in the data.<sup>6</sup> I researched the stories of ten previously unchurched people who had become Christians in the past two years, hearing the experiences that had drawn them to Christian faith.<sup>7</sup>

	Age	Gender	Previous religious beliefs	Previous belief in God	Church settled in
Grace		F	Closed: atheist	Rejected: silly/ridiculous/atheist	Uniting
Hamish		M	Very closed: atheist	Rejected: "militant evangelical atheist"	Uniting
Jean		F	Unformed: little exposure	Maybe: because made a difference in another's life	Uniting
Luke		M	Unformed: church schooling	Unformed	Baptist
Meg		F	Closed: New Age	Believed in God, but New Age	Pentecostal
Mary		F	Open: New Age	Loved God, but New Age	Anglican
Olivia		F	Unformed: wondering	Knew God existed because made difference in others' lives	Uniting
Sarah		F	Open: "always spiritual"	Knew God existed, God in nature important	Baptist
Tallulah		F	Open: church as child	Believed-ish	Uniting

In grounded theory analysis, codes are attributed to the data: codes that “are active, immediate and short”<sup>8</sup>. There is a fluid process of analysis, coding, reanalysis and recoding as data is compared with data, data is compared with categories, and categories are compared with each other.<sup>9</sup> As the coding process is iterative, and constant comparative analysis essential to grounded theory, these coding levels do not occur sequentially. Initial

<sup>6</sup> Therefore, grounded theory was an appropriate methodology to use to undertake research on the (empirically-neglected and complex) phenomenon of contemporary Western conversion to Christianity.

<sup>7</sup> I deliberately chose people who were both previously unchurched, and who had become Christians very recently. The freshness of their stories and understandings meant they had less time to reconstruct their conversion narratives on the basis of their subsequent theological understandings. The interviews were undertaken between March and December 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Kathy Charmaz, "Grounded Theory in the 21st Century," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 517.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

line-by-line coding of the first interview resulted in over 200 codes. Initial coding of subsequent interviews began to hone those codes. Existing literature increased my “theoretical sensitivity”.<sup>10</sup> Subsequent coding and continued attention to the literature enabled me to code and recode interviews with intermediate and eventually advanced codes.

Early in my analysis, I identified there are three agents involved in the conversion process: the convert themselves; other Christians; and God. Each of these are active agents.

### The convert and the conversion process

I devised a model to depict the conversion process (Figure 1). Converts had some initial exposure to Christianity. Something acted as a trigger or catalyst. They engaged in spiritual practices: usually following an invitation to do so.<sup>11</sup> They made a series of decisions, actively saying “Yes” to each element of the process. Eventually they called themselves a Christian.<sup>12</sup>

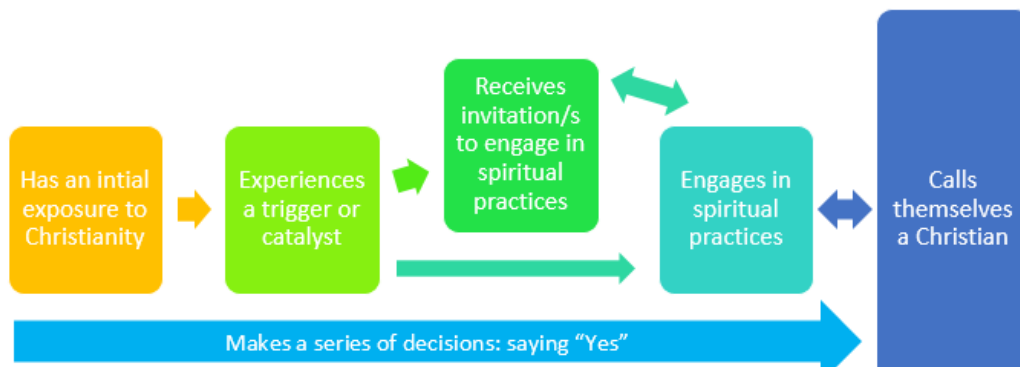


Figure 1: The conversion process

But this model provided only a partial picture.

<sup>10</sup> The researcher’s theoretical sensitivity is both personal (reflecting their insight and knowledge of the area under study) and intellectual (developed by their reading and everyday thinking). See Melanie Birks and Jane Mills, *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide* (London: Sage, 2011), 11. Glaser named “being steeped in the literature” as an essential way of gaining theoretical sensitivity. Barney G Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory* (Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press, 1978), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Spiritual practices including praying, reading the Bible, attending church, attending a small group or Bible study, engaging in fellowship, worshipping, using their gifts and being baptised.

<sup>12</sup> This model has similarities to, but significant differences from, Rambo’s stage model of conversion. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*.

## Other Christians

Other Christians played a crucial role in the conversion process. An exposure to Christianity is generally resourced through, or at least enhanced by, engagement with other Christians. Other Christians invite non-Christians to engage in spiritual practices and often resource such engagement.

As well as those things that impacted directly on the conversion process, the converts had observed particular things about their Christian friends and colleagues. They saw Christians being helped by their faith; living differently as a result of their faith; sharing openly and honestly with non-Christians; being deeply hospitable; and allowing room for doubts, questions or complexity in faith. These ways that Christians acted were hugely significant in the converts' continuing to say "yes" to the conversion process.

## God

Most empirical research on conversion ignores the agency of God, focusing instead on psychological or sociological processes. But religious conversion is also a theological phenomenon. Hoping my research would reveal a better understanding of the *missio Dei*<sup>13</sup> in relation to the conversion process, I adopted a research paradigm of critical realism. This provided a framework for me to explore God's agency. Critical realism acknowledges that reality is stratified and that our empirical methods can never reveal all that lies behind what we observe and experience. But observations and experiences of God point to God's activity and to God.<sup>14</sup>

The converts observed that God had particular attributes: being loving; powerful; patient; accepting and forgiving. They reported that God acted in ways that facilitated the conversion process. For example, God had acted in the past in what they called "creation"; "redemption"; and "sacrifice", and nowadays in ways consistent with God's attributes. Converts experienced God in various ways. They felt themselves to be loved and accepted.

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<sup>13</sup> *Missio Dei* is Latin for 'The mission of God'. A missiology that embraces the concept of *missio Dei* begins "with the basic assumption that the triune God is the Lord of [the] world and at work within it, and that the Church's task is to point to [God's] acts, to respond to [God's] demands, and to call [hu]mankind to this faith and obedience" World Council of Churches, *Christians in the Technical and Social Revolutions of Our Time: World Conference on Church and Society Official Report* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1967), 179. This is discussed (as formative for Lesslie Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology) in Michael W Goheen, "As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You': Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology," *International Review of Mission* 91, no. 362 (2002): 357.

<sup>14</sup> I applied Swinburne's "principle of credulity", and generally took to be genuine the religious experiences reported by those interviewed. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 304.

They experienced God curating unique conversion experiences; speaking; being present; helping them; and changing and growing them.<sup>15</sup>

God's activity was essential for conversion.

## The affects

I also identified six "affects" – things that the converts "felt" at a deep level – that both resulted from and contributed to their continued faith exploration.<sup>16</sup> (I am using the term "affects" here in its psychological or philosophical sense: where affective processes contrast with cognitive processes. Affects are related to emotions and feelings, but are bigger and deeper than mere emotions.)



## The "Aha!"

I had made some insightful and unique discoveries, but I kept analysing and reading, wondering what else the data would reveal. Eventually, having moved through three major conceptual stages, I reached my substantive theory of why people in Australia are becoming Christians today.<sup>17</sup> I realised, "it's all about Authenticity." My data demonstrated that conversion is fuelled by a desire for authenticity; conversion is resourced by Christians who

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<sup>15</sup> The term "curating" (from the Latin *curare*, meaning "to take care") is generally used to refer to the ways items in a collection or exhibition are selected, organised and looked after. Curation is a highly skilled task, done attentive to each element of the collection as well as to the overall exhibition. The term therefore communicates the care and attention evident in each element each convert's conversion process. "Curator," Wikipedia, [www.wikipedia.org/wiki/curator](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/curator). Accessed 3 June 2016.

<sup>16</sup> I don't have time in this paper to name and describe them, but each dimension of my findings reflects one or two of these affects. The affects are: 1. Yearning and wanting more. 2. A desire to live better, or to become the people they really were. 3. Welcome and warmth: a sense of belonging, like a homecoming. 4. A sense that faith relates to everyday life. 5. A sense of resonance: a knowing; feeling right; or making sense. 6. Seeing things differently. Affective processes contrast with cognitive processes. Psychologist Robert Zajonc was a key figure in beginning to redress the imbalance caused by an over-emphasis on cognitive reasoning that had developed over the 20th century. Zajonc highlighted the importance of affects in information processing. Affects are related to, but are bigger and deeper than emotions and feelings.

<sup>17</sup> Throughout this process of analysis, I was careful to remain aware of the broader narrative of each convert's story. As well as breaking up and coding their data, I returned to their entire transcripts to ensure the overall sense of their story and experiences was retained.

embrace and exhibit authenticity in their personal, social and spiritual lives; and God enables authenticity to develop and flourish.

Let me explain.

## What is authenticity?

Charles Guignon defines authenticity as “the project of becoming the person you are.”<sup>18</sup> There are two key aspects to this definition. First, a ‘project’ implies active engagement: work undertaken to achieve an end goal. Secondly, ‘the person you are’ implies our true selves are available for discovery.

## In the beginning, God: God enables Authenticity to develop and flourish

A lady [I heard speak] said ... she just wants to live a life that is really genuine and full and unique. That’s what I am experiencing now [I have become a Christian].<sup>19</sup>

Tallulah considered that it was God who had enabled her to experience a “life that is full, genuine and unique.”<sup>20</sup> In order to understand this, we can see the “person [we] are”<sup>21</sup> defined in the light of Christian theology. The Genesis creation stories demonstrate our status as humans. First, we are created for dialogical, personal relationship with God.<sup>22</sup> Secondly, we are created *Imago Dei*.<sup>23</sup> As an ontological fact, *Imago Dei* theologically defines who we are and as an aspirational ideal, it affects how we live: “our project of becoming”.<sup>24</sup> The *imago Dei* is fulfilled when we reflect God’s “image in the world by being in proper *relationship* with God and the whole of creation.”<sup>25</sup> Mark Medley highlights this

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<sup>18</sup> Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (London: Routledge, 2004), 3. Such an understanding of ourselves as already containing our essence is a departure from the emphasis earlier in the twentieth century on a need to “become something you were not yet.” This older conception was based on the premise that while one is able to realise their “potential and purpose as a human being,” they required external resources in order to do so. By contrast, contemporary popular understandings of authenticity encourage “you to realize and *be* that which you *already* are, [recognising that] the unique definitive traits [are] already there within you.” *Ibid.*, 4. Original emphasis. It seems likely that the truth is somewhere in the middle: we have within us the potential to be our best selves, but we frequently require external assistance to realise that which is already within us.

<sup>19</sup> Tallulah, interview by Lynne Taylor, 11 December, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> The first part of Guignon’s definition of authenticity.

<sup>22</sup> Alistair McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 19-20.

<sup>23</sup> *Imago Dei* is Latin, meaning (we are made in the) “image of God”.

<sup>24</sup> McFadyen, *Personhood*, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Paul N Markham, “Conversion Converted: A New Model of Christian Conversion in Light of Wesleyan Theology and Nonreductive Physicalism” (PhD, University of Durham, 2006), 55. Original emphasis.

relationality in coining *imago Trinitatis*, highlighting that our imaging is to the “triune God [who] is characterized by communion, mutuality, and self-giving love.”<sup>26</sup>

Of course, Genesis also tells the story of the breakdown of our relationship with God. This breakage required God to act throughout history to restore that relationship and to re-enable authenticity. The activity of God continues today. The converts experienced God acting. They also experienced moments when they just “knew” that God was real and God was for them: moments they attributed to God.

This is authenticity. This is who we are created to be: ourselves in proper relationship with God and others. God has made the way for those relationships to be restored. God is active in our everyday lives helping us to become the people we are. God enables relational authenticity to develop and flourish.

## **Religious conversion is fuelled by a desire for authenticity**

Mary was desperate for God. She had spent her life searching, exploring, seeking and desiring God. She said:

I just needed God in my life. And needed God so [much], like it was just a craving. And I was trying to work out how can I get God closer.<sup>27</sup>

Fuelled by this desire for God, Mary had whole-heartedly embraced New Age philosophies. But as she spoke with others about the New Age, “there was always this little voice in the back of [her] mind that would say, ‘liar. It’s not true.’” For 25 years that voice had “made [Mary] feel like a fraud.” Eventually, her desire for an authentic spirituality started Mary on the journey of engaging in Christian spiritual practices: a journey that resulted in her becoming a Christian. Something in her had been dissatisfied, seeking an authentic connection with God. With Augustine, Mary could say: “Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.”<sup>28</sup> Mary’s conversion to Christianity was fuelled by a desire for an authentic relationship with God.

As well as this yearning for God, the desire for authenticity was expressed as a desire to be a better person. Luke, invited to a Christian conference by his workmates, observed, “I think the sort of ideas ... being talked about ... could really make me a better person.” Research participants named specific ways they wanted to be “better” people. They aspired to

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<sup>26</sup> Mark Samuel Medley, *Imago Trinitatis: Toward a Relational Understanding of Becoming Human* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), 1-2. See also *ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>27</sup> Mary, interview by Lynne Taylor, 10 December, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Augustine Confessions FN

attributes they understood God to have. They had sung of God: “You’re rich in love and you’re slow to anger”.<sup>29</sup> They wanted to be more loving and patient. They had heard stories from the Bible of Jesus accepting and forgiving. They wanted to be more accepting and forgiving. Their yearning towards authenticity was aspirational: they wanted God’s help to live better and this fuelled their explorations of faith.<sup>30</sup>

Olivia and Jean were both teaching in church schools. They wanted to learn about the Christian faith so they could be better, more authentic, teachers.

Grace spoke of God helping her to “find herself”. But even this was no narcissistic self-actualisation. Rather she reported “finding herself” in the context of the strength and resources it gave her as she volunteered as a first-response ambulance officer.

In all this we see authenticity’s relational dimension: the desire for authenticity was not towards a narrow self-fulfilment, but in order to live well in the midst of relationships and responsibilities. Seeking relationship with God. Aspiring to live better: in relationships and at work. Self-fulfilment was defined in terms of relationships with others. Authenticity is relational.

In these examples, the converts were moving towards God: toward greater strength and wholeness.<sup>31</sup> But there were also deficiencies and dysfunction that needed overcoming.

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<sup>29</sup> Matt Redman and Jonas Myrin, "10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord)," (Said And Done Music, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> While Philosopher Charles Guignon juxtaposed authenticity’s potential end-goals of “enownment” and “releasement” against each other, recent converts demonstrated that genuine Authenticity involves both those dimensions. Although Guignon does not mention it, ‘enownment’ was the word some used to translate into English Martin Heidegger’s concept of ‘Ereignis’ (particularly his 1930s use of the term). Albert Hofstadter coined the term in 1976. (Albert Hofstadter, "Enownment," *boundary 2* 4, no. 2 (1976): 369.) Guignon is truncating its meaning here, reducing it from Heidegger’s more social understanding as “the letting-be-own-to-one-another” to an individual sense of self-ownership (ibid., 29). For more see Kenneth Maly’s “Translators Introduction” in Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, *Hermeneutics and Reflection: Heidegger and Husserl on the Concept of Phenomenology*, trans. Kenneth Maly (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), xxii-xxv. Dreyfus is frequently attributed with defining “Ereignis” as “things coming into themselves by belonging together” (though I am yet to find the reference properly cited: the most detail I have found attributes it to 2004 as a date. It seems it may have been in a podcast). Maly and Amad used “enowning” to capture the movement inherent in Heidegger’s “Ereignis” in their 1999 translation (Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (from Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly, Studies in Continental Thought (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).) Gillespie notes its link to authenticity (Michael Allen Gillespie, "Radical Philosophy and Political Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought*, ed. Nicholas Adams, George Pattison, and Graham Ward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 390. Guignon linked “releasement” to kenosis (Christ’s emptying and self-abnegation) as well as to notions of belongingness and togetherness.

<sup>31</sup> This yearning towards God can be seen as a positive desire for flourishing. Theologian Grace Jantzen argued that the concept of flourishing (present as “flourishing” in the Old Testament and in the idea of “fullness” and “abundance” in the New Testament) was largely overtaken in post-Reformation Western theology by the trope of salvation (the need for rescue on account of deficiency). Both were evident in my data. Grace M Jantzen, "Feminism and Flourishing: Gender and Metaphor in Feminist Theology," *Feminist Theology* 4, no. 10 (1995).

Luke had significant challenges relating to an illness and subsequent isolation. Others were acutely aware aspects of their lives needed to change. But this yearning away from dysfunction was most evident in Meg's story. Embroiled in the New Age movement and understanding herself to be debilitatingly possessed by demons, Meg yearned for escape and knew she needed external help to achieve it.<sup>32</sup> Her yearning away from dysfunction was remedial. It needed to occur before Meg could achieve authenticity: before she could become the person she was.

Charles Taylor argues that authentic self-fulfilment must pay regard to either "the demands of our ties with others or to demands ... emanating from something more or other than human desires or aspirations"<sup>33</sup>. Converts desired such a *relational*, beyond-self, authenticity. They yearned a spirituality that was true. Wanted to find their place in relationship with God. Aspired to live better, in interactions with friends, family, strangers and work. Longed for wholeness and health. Religious conversion is fuelled by a desire for relational authenticity.

## **Religious conversion is resourced by relationships with Christians who embrace and exhibit Authenticity in their personal, social and spiritual lives.**

I should mention that the play group coordinator [at my church] was a really lovely lady and she was loved by a lot of people in that community too. ... And the letter [inviting me to a special church service and lunch] came from her as well, so I felt really comfortable with her as well. And I think she'd had, like she has daughters and they've all sort of had their trials through life as well and stuff like that. So she's a real realist. Really open and I felt really included with her. And knowing that she might be at church was a nice feeling too cos I had sort of one person I knew there that I felt really comfortable with.<sup>34</sup>

I've mentioned the things other Christians did that helped the conversion process. Essentially, crucially, these Christians were exhibiting authenticity in their personal, social and spiritual lives.

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<sup>32</sup> While it was very clear in Meg's story, this acknowledgement of a need for something external to help us is not as common today as it was earlier last century. Guignon noted a cultural shift in the 20th century from a perceived need to "become something you were not yet" to an understanding of ourselves as already containing our essence. This older conception, Meg's perception, was based on the premise that while one is able to realise their "potential and purpose as a human being," they required external resources in order to do so. (Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 3-4.)

<sup>33</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 35.

<sup>34</sup> Tallulah interview.



They exhibited authenticity by being genuinely warm and welcoming towards their non-Christian friends. Olivia had never experienced healthy community life before attending a church service with her friend. She said of that experience:

It was just kind and friendly and like warm and welcoming and sort of a real surprise that there could be this sense of community where I had never really felt any before.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, Luke's desperate need for people who genuinely cared for him was met as he was welcomed into a group of Christian friends. As humans are "fundamentally *dialogical*"<sup>36</sup> and relationships "the very core of our existence, the source of life,"<sup>37</sup> it is not surprising that such relational authenticity is significant in drawing non-Christians into relationship with God.

At best, these relationships were characterised by reciprocity, mutuality and equality.<sup>38</sup> Jean's Christian friend asked Jean (then a non-Christian) to pray with her for healing for her father. Olivia (then a non-Christian) supported her Christian friend through her grief.<sup>39</sup> Luke's (pre-conversion) contributions to their small group Bible study were taken seriously and appreciated. These mutual, reciprocal, equal relationships allowed the converts to experience relational authenticity for themselves.<sup>40</sup>

Other Christians also demonstrated that Christianity relates authentically to everyday life. By sharing openly and honestly with their non-Christian friends; through the ways they lived differently as a result of their faith; and at church including through the sermons preached, and the songs sung. Tallulah said of her early church experiences:

I found some of the sermons really interesting and applicable to ... everyday life as well. ... I was just really enjoying the sermons and the life lessons that I was extracting from that.<sup>41</sup>

Many commented on the ways songs sung at church named and resourced their current reality. Converts recognised the authentic connection between faith and everyday life.

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<sup>35</sup> Olivia, interview by Lynne Taylor, 5 September, 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Taylor, *Authenticity*, 33.

<sup>37</sup> Andrew Root, *The Relational Pastor: Sharing in Christ by Sharing Ourselves* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013), 18.

<sup>38</sup> This collection of nouns has been used, particularly by feminist writers including theologians, to characterise healthy relationships. In 1990, Anne Carr linked these with Trinitarian theology (Anne Carr, "Women, Justice, and the Church," *Horizons* 17, no. 02 (1990).). See also, Meghan J Clark, *The Vision of Catholic Social Thought: The Virtue of Solidarity and the Praxis of Human Rights* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> These relationships were genuinely relational, not what Root calls 'relationistic'.

<sup>40</sup> Markham, taking a fresh look at conversion through Wesleyan eyes, noted that it is as our communal life is fulfilled "that we reach our full potential as human beings." Markham, "Conversion Converted," 56. We cannot be authentic in isolation.

<sup>41</sup> Tallulah interview.

Religious conversion was resourced by other Christians demonstrating authenticity, and providing environments in which their non-Christian friends could experience authenticity. This occurred first as other Christians engaged in reciprocal, mutual and equal relationships with their friends, including non-Christians. Secondly, other Christians demonstrated that their faith made a difference to everyday life. Observing and beginning to experience this relational authenticity for themselves resourced the faith journeys of non-Christians.

## **Relational authenticity is transformational**

The relational authenticity converts experienced in Christian conversion was transforming. It enabled them to find what they sought, to become who they were. To find their place in relationship with God. To find better ways of living in their interactions with friends, family, strangers, work and world. To find wholeness and health. To become who they are.

My prefixing of 'authenticity' with 'relational' is deliberate. Created as we are for relationship with God and others, we cannot be authentic in isolation. *Imago Trinitatis* offers a model for relational authenticity. An authenticity characterised by reciprocity, mutuality and equality.

## **Conclusion**

I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter.... Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order *matters* crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial.<sup>42</sup>

Conversion to Christianity in Australia today results from non-Christians desiring, observing and experiencing genuine Authenticity. This relational authenticity is made possible by the current and historical activity of God. Seeing humans as made in the image of the triune God provides a framework for understanding the nature of genuine authenticity: focusing not just on the self, but on relationship with God and significant connection with and responsibility toward others.

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<sup>42</sup> Taylor, *Authenticity*, 40-41. Original emphasis.

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# APPENDIX 18: SAMPLE SUPERVISORS' REPORT

Date: 18 August 2015

Lynne Taylor

## 1. What I've done since last meeting (28 July 2015)

- Reading
- Writing
  - Working (a little) on IAMS abstracts
- Seminars/workshops
  - Attended Big Day In
  - Presented at Research Hour
- Research
  - Coding God
  - Realised that the attributes of God (Real) are frequently tied to converts' desires to be better people. God is loving. I want to be loving. God is patient. I want to be patient with my kids. Those attributes were attractive because they were connective with everyday life. (again this is linked with immanence; which along with the notion of authenticity points me towards Charles Taylor)
  - Printed each of the God-nodes and word searches begun to check I have captured them all.
  - Invitations: personal/multiple/diverse
  - Wonder if it is all about Authenticity – Belonging – Connections
  - Wonder if "things missing from the data" stuff (that I presented at Urban Life Together in Melbourne last October) might be for discussion rather than results
- Admin
  - Submitted forms for change to external; plus intermission
  - Approval for scholarship to continue externally (yay)
  - Sorting files
- Other

## 2. Questions, issues

- My God-nodes: do the three dimensions work? What about the fourth?

## 3. What I plan to do before next meeting.

- Finish checking word searches/God nodes
- Write abstract/s for AAMS
- Work on God chapter

## 4. Other

- International Association of Mission Studies Conference (Aug 2016 in Seoul, Korea) is on Conversion. Abstracts by 31 August 2015.  
<http://missionstudies.org/index.php/call-for-papers/>

## 5. The Next Thing

- Continue to check word searches/ God nodes

# **APPENDIX 19: “TOWARDS RELATIONAL AUTHENTICITY: THE EXPERIENCE OF ATONEMENT IN CHRISTIAN CONVERSION TODAY”**

*Final draft of forthcoming publication, Colloquium, May 2017.*

## **Keywords**

Atonement; conversion; authenticity; contextualisation

## **Abstract**

Jesus came so people can experience life to the full: lives at-one with God. Regrettably, Western theology has frequently suffered an overemphasis on the mechanics of how atonement was achieved at the expense of a more holistic view of God’s reconciling work and outcomes. This paper first demonstrates the contextual nature of atonement theories, before outlining some that may resonate with a 21<sup>st</sup> century secular context. It then uses rich qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with new converts to Christianity to explore how atonement is experienced today. Converts demonstrated a desire to image God; they saw their own experiences mirrored in the stories of Jesus; and each experienced a unique journey to Christian faith. The paper considers and extends Serene Jones’ “Christology of mirroring” in light of these experiences. Three key implications for faith formation conclude the paper. First, atonement is experienced before it is understood. Secondly, there is a need to tell multiple stories of faith so the hearers’ own stories (past, current, and potential) can be reflected back to them. Thirdly, atonement should result in relational authenticity: imaging the relational God.

## **Introduction**

The atonement enables relationships with God, self, others and the world to be redeemed: restored to their intended state.<sup>1</sup> Human beings, created in the image of God, to image God, are designed for relationship with God and the world God loves. But relationship has been distorted, and needs restoring. The means by which atonement’s restoration is accomplished is both complex and disputed.

After briefly defining atonement, this paper discusses the contextual nature of atonement metaphors. Then, it points to the nature of today’s vastly changed secular context. Next, it

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<sup>1</sup> Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, Living Theology (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 1.

considers two ways of understanding what atonement means today: first in a sketch from literature considering contemporary atonement images; and secondly from the experiences of recent, unchurched, converts. Finally, it considers implications for how and when atonement is communicated and understood.

## **What is (the) atonement?**

William Tyndale was, in 1526, the first person to apply the term 'atonement' to the Greek word meaning reconciliation. Later Bible translations also used 'atonement' to translate the Hebrew "which expresses the reconciling effect of sacrifice."<sup>2</sup> The term 'atonement', now in common theological usage, implies a specific event is required to repair the relationship between humanity and God. That specific event is generally understood to relate particularly to the cross, or more broadly, to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Somehow, God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to God. Martha Gilliss further extends this beyond the activity of the historic Christ, arguing that atonement relates "to the full spectrum of gracious divine actions that make creation 'at one' again with God."<sup>3</sup>

## **Atonement images are contextual**

In her book *Trauma and Grace*, Serene Jones described hearing one afternoon a World War II veteran and a domestic violence survivor telling vastly different stories of their understandings of Jesus and the cross. The veteran spoke of "God invad[ing] our world to deliver us from the captivity of sin."<sup>4</sup> The abuse survivor spoke of imagining Jesus absorbing blows directed at her: "enacting a self-giving sacrifice that included the spilling of his blood for her."<sup>5</sup> For each, their understanding of the cross resonated with the particularity of their experiences. Struck by the ways "the mirrored cross reflects our story of suffering back to us," Jones coined the phrase: 'Christology of mirroring'.<sup>6</sup> This phrase recognises the place of personal experience in theological reflection.

Theological reflection has always had at least the potential to take particularity into account, as occurred in relation to atonement in the New Testament and throughout church history.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul S Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Martha Schull Gilliss, "Resurrecting the Atonement," in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, KY and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 125.

<sup>4</sup> Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 82.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Problems arise when understandings or cultural frames of yesteryear are imposed on vastly changed contexts. As Douglas Hall attests, “atonement theologies come to be in response to perceived or partially perceived human anxieties and epochal dilemmas.”<sup>7</sup> Ironically, “the problem with atonement theologies is that they are sometimes so perceptive and brilliant that they last long beyond their appropriate time.”<sup>8</sup>

John Driver, writing in the 1980s, was concerned contemporary understandings of the atonement had indeed lasted beyond their appropriate time, being based on Constantinian presuppositions of propitiation and expiation; the wrath of God; sacrifice; and satisfaction. Driver sought to broaden such understandings in order “to reflect more faithfully the pluralism of the New Testament.”<sup>9</sup> The New Testament’s atonement images are metaphors the apostles used in different settings, to different audiences, to communicate what they had experienced because of Jesus life, death and resurrection. But of course, the context of the New Testament was vastly different from our own.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Paul Fiddes considered atonement images alongside the contexts of the eras that prioritised them. He noted that estrangement, loss of potential and rebellion are three characteristics of universal human predicament. While common to humanity, the exact shape and colour of the three elements vary at different times and across different cultures. The atonement metaphors that resonated culturally and temporally also changed. Further, Fiddes noted, atonement metaphors need to *continue* to be adapted.<sup>11</sup> As Alan Mann points out, “we need to read and reread the atonement as time and place change the context in which we are called to communicate the salvific work of Christ.”<sup>12</sup> Such adaption enables the cross to continue to mirror stories of human experience.

## **Our context has changed**

The world is in a period of huge cultural change that has had massive impact on personal religiosity. In seeking to understand this, philosopher Charles Taylor points to three different ways of framing the secularity now part of everyday reality. First, there has been a “retreat of

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<sup>7</sup> Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 130.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Scottsdale, PA and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1986), 11.

<sup>10</sup> In one small example, Berger points to the religious vicariousness present in early Christian texts, including about the atoning death of Christ. Vicariousness made perfect sense to a people aware of one’s ability to stand in for another. But not so in the individualised modern world. Klaus Berger, *Identity and Experience in the New Testament*, trans. Charles Muenchow (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 39.

<sup>11</sup> Fiddes, *Past Event Present Salvation*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 4.



religion in public life.”<sup>13</sup> The public spaces of modern Western society have become essentially free from any formal connection with religion. Religion is now a matter of personal choice: private, and privatised. Secondly, Western countries are experiencing a “decline in religious belief and practice.”<sup>14</sup> This is demonstrated in decreasing numbers of people attending church, or affiliating with religions and denominations. But the primary focus of Taylor’s attention is today’s changed “conditions of belief.”<sup>15</sup> This third construct recognises religious belief is now optional, contestable, and contested.<sup>16</sup>

For people who have grown up in and into this new world, there is no inherent Christian ‘truth’ that informs or guides them. The Bible holds no special authority. Further, understandings of ‘who we are’, and aspirations as to ‘who we can be’, are changed and changing. In this altered context, new ways of understanding and communicating what atonement means are required.

## **Atonement today: contemporary theological understandings**

Having noted that historic contexts gave rise to emphasis on specific atonement theories, and that the contemporary context is vastly changed, it is appropriate to turn to explore understandings of atonement that may resonate today. Several contemporary theologians have offered frameworks for understanding atonement that consider contemporary human experience.<sup>17</sup>

Looking to the New Testament, Joel Green points to five categories that seek to communicate the significance of the cross. These are from all areas of life: “the court of law, ... the world of commerce, ... personal relationships, ... worship, ... and the battleground.”<sup>18</sup> The categories contain common threads. First, each atonement image reflects and responds to a specific human need. Therefore, how one sees and explains the “saving significance of Jesus’ death is tied to our conception of the human situation.”<sup>19</sup> Secondly, atonement is shown to be all-encompassing: cosmologically impacting. As such, it affects not just a person’s relationship with God, but also their interpersonal relationships and their

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 423.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-22; For a helpful summary of Taylor, see James KA Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B Eerdmans, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> The literature selected is unified by two key things. First, an overt commitment to consider how atonement can be understood in the contemporary context. Secondly, a sense of positive openness towards that context, rather than seeing a return to Christendom as the only way forward.

<sup>18</sup> Joel B Green, "Kaleidoscopic View," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James K Beilby and Paul R Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 166.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

relationship with the world. Thirdly, God takes the initiative in atonement. Significant in Green's analysis is the fact that New Testament writers and the theologians that followed them were seeking to communicate the meaning of atonement into the lived experiences of their contemporary context. To use Jones' metaphor, they wanted the cross to mirror their listeners' experiences.

One key contemporary human need is for healthy relationality, a need often expressed as a desire for belonging. Scot McKnight explains humanity's inherent relationality by pointing to the Trinity: three Persons engaged in mutual interdependence. Human beings are made in the image of this relational God, designed to image God.<sup>20</sup> Thus human longing for relationality can be understood as a longing for restoration to such imaging of, and relationship with, God. Jones' 'mirroring' can therefore be extended beyond seeing one's own stories reflected, to a desire to image God.

Despite this created status and potential, estrangement is a recurrent reality. For McKnight, as for Wolfhart Pannenberg, sin is "the universal failure to achieve our human destiny" of imaging the relational God.<sup>21</sup> As such, sin is hyperrelational impacting interactions with God; with self; with others; and with the world.<sup>22</sup> However, in contemporary usage, sin has unhelpfully been reduced "to the *presence* of wrongful actions."<sup>23</sup> As well as being more accurate theologically, it is potentially more meaningful contextually to see sin "as an *absence* of mutual, intimate, unpolluted relating."<sup>24</sup>

An absence of healthy relating results in disconnectedness, not just with others, but also with oneself.<sup>25</sup> Such disconnectedness within oneself relates to a second key contemporary need: the human desire to "live as whole, coherent beings."<sup>26</sup> Thus, atonement has two related purposes: first, restoring the mutuality that ought to characterise relationships and secondly, helping women and men "find their authentic selves, no longer alienated from themselves, the creation, and others."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 21-24.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 23; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1994), 252.

<sup>22</sup> McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 21-24.

<sup>23</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Linda D Peacore, *The Role of Women's Experience in Feminist Theologies of Atonement*, Princeton Theological Monograph (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), 138. Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 39.

<sup>27</sup> Peacore, *Women's Experience of Atonement*, 138.

Considering this desire for wholeness alongside the contemporary misunderstanding of sin, Alan Mann argues that the Gospels should not be read and communicated as means of escaping sinfulness. Rather they should be seen “as narratives of atonement: meaningful stories that can prove meaningful and sufficient for the self, haunted by chronic shame, searching for the presence of mutual, unpolluted relationship, and longing for coherence.”<sup>28</sup>

In making this argument, Mann draws on Douglas Hall. Hall points to the cross of Jesus as demonstrating three things about the human condition. First, the cross demonstrates just how far God would go for the sake of us, God’s creation: “God cares infinitely.”<sup>29</sup> As such, the cross deeply affirms humanity and points to a high anthropology of human potential: the potential to be all that we are created to be. Secondly, human ‘grandeur’ is countered by the ‘misery’ that is also human reality. But the grandeur is God’s design: the misery mistake, misstep. The cross demonstrates that humans are capable of great evil and reminds humanity that “we are loved as prodigals.”<sup>30</sup> Thirdly, the cross demonstrates God’s “compassionate determination ... to bring humankind to the realization of its potentiality for authenticity.”<sup>31</sup> Hall suggests that the contemporary context requires us to pay greater attention to the first and the third aspects of the cross. These have previously been largely neglected, with the second element elevated to disproportionate importance. Returning to Jones, the cross therefore can mirror not just suffering, but also human potentiality.

The cross makes possible what I call ‘relational authenticity’. In Hall’s opinion, “the existentialist term *authenticity* ... is still the best way to speak of what the Bible calls ‘righteousness’ and the doctrinal tradition ‘original righteousness’ ... and the reformers ‘justification’.”<sup>32</sup> I make an overt extension to this term with the prefix ‘relational’. By ‘relational authenticity’, I mean: “The project of becoming the person you are: imaging the relational God.”<sup>33</sup> As Hall argues, the ‘justification’ offered by the cross “is the righting of the human person so that he or she will behave humanly – will become, so to speak, himself or herself.”<sup>34</sup>

Atonement enables restoration of relationship across all areas of relating: personal, social, and cosmological. As such, atonement is not an end but a beginning, making a difference in

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<sup>28</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 79.

<sup>29</sup> Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, 93.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 102. Hall is quick to affirm that human sinfulness is best understood as alienation: a lack of relationality with God and with others.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>33</sup> The first part of this definition is based on philosopher Charles Guignon’s definition of authenticity as “the project of becoming the person you are.” Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (London: Routledge, 2004), 3.

<sup>34</sup> Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, 108.

people’s lives, enabling them to move towards relational authenticity and becoming who they are created to be. Such transformation can result in the kingdom of God being extended personally, socially and cosmologically.

These theological insights on atonement, while illuminating, are all essentially theoretical. How do they compare with the experiences of recent converts to Christianity?

## Atonement today: contemporary experiences

The empirical research that informs this paper began with the lived experiences of previously unchurched Australians, who converted to Christianity in the previous two years.<sup>35</sup> It used critical realism as a research philosophy and grounded theory as a rigorous methodology to answer research questions about the conversion process; the roles in conversion of other Christians and God; and the deep processes occurring within the converts. Twenty-seven South Australian churches with high proportions of new converts were invited by NCLS Research to advertise the research. This and additional purposive sampling yielded nine participants (Table 1). Semi-structured interviews generated rich data, analysed using iterative and in-depth grounded theory methods. While the sample was small, saturation of the core categories was readily achieved and the strong resonance with literature on conversion, from theology and on authenticity suggests it is reasonable to make *moderatum* generalisations based on the findings, and to begin a much-needed conversation about how atonement is experienced today.<sup>36</sup>

Table 1: Research participants<sup>37</sup>

	Age	Gender	Openness	Previous belief in God	Church settled in
Grace	<20	F	Closed: atheist	Rejected: silly/ridiculous/atheist	Uniting
Hamish	30s	M	Very closed: atheist	Rejected: "militant evangelical atheist"	Uniting
Jean	30s	F	Unformed: little exposure	Maybe: because made a difference in another's life	Uniting
Luke	20s	M	Unformed: church school	Unformed	Baptist

<sup>35</sup> No other research on conversion has only researched new converts; or those from non-churched backgrounds. My research did both, meaning less post-conversion biographical reconstruction had occurred, and an increasing demographic (of unchurched people) was investigated. Similarly, I am aware of no other research that has empirically investigated the experience of atonement.

<sup>36</sup> In *moderatum* generalisations, aspects uncovered in the data can be understood to be “instances of a broader recognisable set of features.” Such generalisations are the basis of inductive reasoning. Malcolm Williams, "Interpretivism and Generalisation," *Sociology* 34, no. 2 (2000): 215. Also, see John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006), 43.

<sup>37</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

Meg	50s	F	Closed: New Age	Believed in God, but New Age	Pentecostal
Mary	50s	F	Open: New Age	Loved God, but New Age	Anglican
Olivia	20s	F	Unformed: wondering	Knew God existed because made difference in others' lives	Uniting
Sarah	50s	F	Open: "always spiritual"	Knew God existed, God in nature important	Baptist
Tallulah	30s	F	Open: church as child	Believed	Uniting

Atonement is one dimension of God's activity in the world. Therefore, to understand how atonement is experienced, it is appropriate to consider how participants described God's role in their conversions.

### Struggling to articulate

Participants generally struggled to articulate what about God drew them to the Christian faith. For example, when asked, "Were there any particular things about God that appealed?" Grace replied:

Nope. Didn't make sense. Like I'm a fairly logical person. I think things through rationally but ... [Christianity] didn't make sense to start with. Like when people first told me about it. I'm, "Don't be silly. That's ridiculous." ... [But] one day I just came [to church] and it all made sense.

Grace's story demonstrates the beyond-rational dimension of conversion. She experienced atonement as a deeply-felt sense of knowing before comprehending it.

### Imaging God

Hamish provided the most theologically sophisticated response to that question:

It was Jesus that cemented it for me. Obviously, Jesus being God and understanding that he is fully human. Knowing what it is like to be us but at the same time being God and being in that divine relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit.<sup>38</sup>

Here, Hamish pointed to both the humanity of Christ, and the relationality of the Trinity. Christ demonstrated what it looks like to image God, and to be in relationship with God.<sup>39</sup>

In addition, Hamish, then a "militant evangelical atheist", knew that his "love for [his] wife and children were more than just a biological urge to reproduce or care for [his] offspring."<sup>40</sup> He

<sup>38</sup> Hamish, interview by Lynne Taylor, 2 August, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Joel B Green, *Why Salvation?*, Reframing New Testament Theology (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 144. Ann Christie, "Jesus as Exemplar," ed. Jeff Astley and Leslie J Francis, *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church* (Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013). 77.

<sup>40</sup> Hamish interview.

saw his love for his family reflected in the Bible's descriptions of God's love for the world, and explained in online podcasts and sermons he listened to. Better than atheism, the gospel narratives made sense of the love he felt for his family.<sup>41</sup>

Many mentioned attributes of God attractive to them: most often attributes they aspired to reflect. They reported God was loving; powerful; patient; accepting and forgiving. They themselves wanted to be more loving; patient; accepting and forgiving. Sarah demonstrated this most clearly in the way the attributes that drew her to God (God's "unconditional love and ... forgiveness") were mirrored in her desire "to be non-judgemental and [have] unconditional love" towards her family. Sarah longed to reflect attributes of God.

Those I interviewed had also seen attributes of God reflected in their Christian friends. They perceived that God was making a difference in the lives of other Christians, helping them become the sort of people that reflected God. This was particularly important for Olivia who said:

I was drawn to know the character of God more through the people who already knew him and seeing what their character was like as they got to know [God] better as well. 'Cause ... they did change and grow and develop during that time as well. ... I was intrigued to know God's character more, but I definitely felt like it was through the other people that I knew that already knew him.

Even before she began to explore Christianity seriously, Olivia "could tell that [the Christians she knew] were like different people than people who didn't believe in God. Like they obviously got something that no one else had."<sup>42</sup> Specifically, Olivia perceived that "something" made them "joyful and really, nicer people, and a bit more thoughtful."<sup>43</sup> She wanted to be like that herself, seeing in others who had experienced atonement the potential for her own transformation.

This emphasis on relationality and desire to reflect or image attributes of God relates to humanity's created status. As an ontological fact, *imago Dei* theologically defines who we are; and as an aspirational ideal, it affects how we live.<sup>44</sup> Those I interviewed yearned for an authentic version of themselves, one that reflected the positive attributes they saw in God and in other Christians. This desire fuelled their explorations of faith. Their experience of

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<sup>41</sup> Despite this emphasis on relationality, no participant mentioned 'God as father' as a positive catalyst for their faith. In fact, Mary and Olivia both immediately told me stories of their dysfunctional relationships with their fathers when I asked what about the character of God was attractive to them. It seemed they recognised 'God as father' as an aspect of Christianity, but hastened to separate their own negative experiences of parenting from that.

<sup>42</sup> Olivia, interview by Lynne Taylor, 5 September, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Alistair McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 18.

atonement was an experience of wanting to restore, and then restoring, “cracked Eikons into glory-producing Eikons” enabling them to become, authentically, who they were.<sup>45</sup> As Fiddes says, “we are persons in the making... our very self is not complete but is being formed into the image of God.”<sup>46</sup> The participants’ desire to image God affirms extending Jones’ Christology of mirroring beyond the cross mirroring trauma-suffering lives, to the human desire to reflect the image of the relational God. This positive emphasis resonates with the way those interviewed expressed a desire towards wholeness more than a yearning away from dysfunction. It also helpfully emphasises human potentiality over sinfulness. Further, it places the desire to image God as both cause and consequence of atonement.

### **Seeing themselves in Bible stories**

Participants reported hearing God speak to them through the Bible, moving them towards atonement. Often this occurred as they saw their own lives reflected in stories of the Bible. Two examples from Hamish’s pre-conversion reading of the Gospel of John are illustrative.

Hamish saw himself in the Gospel of John, when he realised that “Christ is ... for everybody. Has love for all, irrespective ... [of whether] they know who he is or not.” At that stage, Hamish was among those who did not know who Christ was. He saw reflected in the Bible a place for himself in God’s story, even in his unbelief.

In addition, Hamish saw himself reflected in the story of Peter’s reinstatement in John 21:15-19. He reported:

I ...was reading [about Peter denying Jesus three times] and I ... jumped through to when the disciples meet Jesus on the beach and are sitting there having a meal of fish and Christ Jesus asks Peter again three times, “Do you love me?” And that to me was such an amazing display of God’s forgiveness and the constant opportunity to come to him. Peter sort of denied him three times, and Christ gives him the opportunity to say three times that he loves him. And [Peter] gets a bit upset that Jesus would ask him three times, but I sort of looked it as like, “Dude, he’s just giving you the opportunity ... to repent of that, just by saying you love him.” ... I found that really powerful.

As an atheist, Hamish had denied Jesus multiple times. He realised that with Peter he was being offered forgiveness and relationship with God. The Bible mirrored Hamish’s experience of denying Jesus, as well as demonstrating how naming a love for God brought forgiveness and restoration.

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<sup>45</sup> Scot McKnight uses the Greek term 'Eikon' in place of 'imago Dei' McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 21.

<sup>46</sup> Fiddes, *Past Event Present Salvation*, 11.

Like McKnight, Hamish saw atonement as a beginning not an end. He noted that:

We've just got it all wrong that we worship power [and] celebrity. ... [Jesus] came and said, "You know what, it's the complete opposite of that, guys. I want you to be humble, I want you to love, I want you to be in relationship with each other. To help each other, and to do it all in my name." ... When you walk down the street and see a dude lying in the gutter, ... Christ would see himself in [that person] and [Christ] would bend down and he would pick him up and he would help him out. I just felt, I just thought, "My God that is just such an amazing thing."

Hamish observed in the Bible that Christian faith impacted not just the individual, but interpersonal relationships, leading to new ways of seeing, and acting towards, others. He saw how he could live mirrored in the Bible and experienced atonement as he embraced that for himself.

### **Experiencing unique journeys to faith**

While containing common elements, each conversion story represented the unique journey to faith of a unique person. Hamish explained it as follows:

So, God understood that it needed to be gradual for me. And I needed to be shown a few doors. And God even showed me a few doors to exit out of as well. ... God understood that I was the kind of guy who would need to be carefully prodded and poked in the direction. And that I was going to try my hardest to do it my own way. So ... God really understood that this is the way it was going to work for me,, [My conversion journey] was very much a tailored experience to Hamish Smith.<sup>47</sup>

Hamish described God as initiating and inviting, not imposing on Hamish but offering opportunities for both response and retreat. This gentle approach allowed him to move gradually into a relationship with God.

Luke's story was similarly tailored to his own personality and experiences. He reported finding his experiences with God and faith prior to conversion "really fit with [him] and [his] personality and with the way that [he] likes to approach things." As he said, "I guess that's why it was a gradual process. 'Cause God knew that was the best way to speak to me."<sup>48</sup>

These examples point to the way that each person's uniqueness was reflected in their conversion story. Like the stories Jones told, each person experienced atonement uniquely.

### **What about sin? A brief excursus**

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<sup>47</sup> Hamish interview.

<sup>48</sup> Luke, interview by Lynne Taylor, 21 August, 2014.



None of those I interviewed mentioned 'being saved from sin' as a motivation for, or even a consequence of, conversion. While six participants used the word 'sin' in interviews, three did not. Three examples from those who mentioned sin are illustrative.

Olivia was teaching at a church school, and recalls: "I remember [seeing] all the posters [that] said, 'He died for our sins'. And I was just like 'What?' It just didn't make sense to me at all. I didn't actually understand what that was talking about."<sup>49</sup> At the same time, Olivia *wanted* to discover what the posters were talking about. She had long had a sense that there was "something more" to the Christian faith: something she found inherently attractive.<sup>50</sup> She decided to attend church to discover more about Christianity: both for her own sake, and in order to be a better teacher within the religious environment in which she worked. Olivia's desire to understand the meaning behind the posters depicting Jesus on the cross was important for her journey to faith. She decided not to stop searching until she understood it and her search took her to relationships with Christians who demonstrated their faith. Olivia observed the effects of atonement, and experienced atonement for herself, before cognitively understanding sin or atonement.

Mary spoke most of sin, but in terms of how problematic the concept of sin had been for her, and continued to be for her New Age friends. A Christian workmate had led her to pray a prayer of repentance, but she "was baffled by it." She did not confess any specific sins. Rather she "just said, 'I repent of my sins.'" Mary "couldn't get [her] head around" the issue of sin. Now her "eyes are opened," she "can feel [sin in herself] every day," but she is still unable to explain sin in a way that makes sense to her New Age friends, though she longs to do so. Her friends are put off Christianity by its emphasis on sin.<sup>51</sup> Mary's understanding of sin was strongly linked to the presence of wrong actions, when an emphasis on broken relationality would likely have been more helpful.

When sin was spoken about at the Alpha course Jean attended, she found that "quite confronting, and [it] just sort of brought [her] back to trying to be a better person. Being the person that God wants [her] to be."<sup>52</sup> Each of the three times Jean mentioned 'sin' were in relation to her desire to be a better person.

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<sup>49</sup> Olivia interview.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Mary, interview by Lynne Taylor, 10 December, 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Jean, interview by Lynne Taylor, 9 September, 2014.

These examples demonstrate two key things. It seems, like atonement, sin is not understood before conversion. However, Christianity's potential for making one a better person, and in restoring healthy relationality hold meaning among secular people.

### **Towards becoming: At-one with God and authentically themselves**

The converts' experience of atonement resulted in a becoming: towards becoming at one with God and towards who they are, reflecting the image of the relational God. Atonement enabled each to begin to realise their potential and become the person they were created to be: authentically themselves, in restored relationship with God and in proper relationship with others and all of creation. They began to image God more fully.

In summary, for those interviewed, atonement was experienced before it was understood. Atonement enabled a restored relationship, with God, others and the self. Jones' Christology of mirroring was seen in the converts' desire to reflect the attributes of God. It was observed in their ability to find themselves in the stories of the Bible. The language of mirroring also speaks to the unique nature of each person's faith journey and to their own uniqueness. The experience of atonement was more about realising potential and right relationship than about forgiveness for sinful actions. Converts' experiences of the atonement resulted in a greater authenticity: a becoming towards the person they were created to be, at-one with God and in restored relationship with others and all of creation. As Tallulah said, "[A woman I heard speak said] she just wants to live a life that is really genuine and full and unique. That's what I am experiencing now [I am a Christian]."

### **Implications for faith formation**

This final section considers three specific implications for faith formation. First, people experience atonement before they understand it. Secondly, telling multiple stories of faith enables the hearers' own stories (past, current, and potential) to be reflected back to them. Finally, the result of atonement is a movement towards relational authenticity. That which is mirrored should lead to a transformed self; a reconciled relationship at-one with God; and significant connection with, and responsibility toward, others and the world.

### **Atonement is experienced before it is understood**

Perhaps, after all, atonement at its deepest level is something that happens, so that to reduce it to a proposition to which one can give mental assent is a mistake at a deep level.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Nicholas Thomas (NT/Tom) Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 91.

My research demonstrates it is not necessary to understand the objective reality and implications of atonement before experiencing it subjectively. This should be unsurprising. As Driver pointed out, Jesus followers experienced Jesus life, death, resurrection as the source of atonement before they understood it. The New Testament writers then used images and metaphors to communicate the reality of what they had experienced. Similarly, C.S. Lewis famously realised, one “can accept what Christ has done without knowing how it works: indeed, he certainly would not know how it works until he has accepted it.”<sup>54</sup>

Some things need to be experienced before they can be understood. The atonement seems to be one of those things. Sharing experiences of atonement can be helpful. Those I interviewed had heard as well as observed the implications of the faith of their Christian friends. But at-one-ment with God is experienced first and then, perhaps, in part, understood.

### **Tell multiple stories**

Human beings are inherently storied.<sup>55</sup> But regrettably many stories told of atonement are no longer “meaningful or sufficient.”<sup>56</sup> Much recent scholarship and reflection on atonement has tended to either reductionism or neglect, both of which distort and limit understanding of atonement. While Paul’s conversion account is often held up as archetypal, the New Testament tells various and multiple stories of people coming to follow Jesus.<sup>57</sup>

Because the context has changed, stories of atonement must change. One aspect is illustrative. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a change from a perceived need to “become something you were not yet” to an understanding of humans as already containing our essence.<sup>58</sup> This older conception was based on the premise that while one *can* realise their “potential and purpose as a human being,” they required external resources to do so. By contrast, contemporary popular understandings of authenticity encourage “you to realize and *be* that which you *already are*, [recognising that] the unique definitive traits [are] already there within you.”<sup>59</sup> In the older way of seeing oneself, atonement tropes of rescue and personal

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<sup>54</sup> CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons and Co, 1978), 55.

<sup>55</sup> For a discussion of the role of narrative in atonement, see Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*. For an exploration of humanity’s storied nature in relation to authenticity, see Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 126-145.

<sup>56</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 48. This is largely due to an overemphasis on human sinfulness and lack of attention to inherent goodness and potentiality.

<sup>57</sup> Richard V Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B Eerdmans, 1999). Joel B Green, *Conversion in Luke-Acts: Divine Action, Human Cognition, and the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).

<sup>58</sup> Guignon, *Being Authentic*, 3.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. Original emphasis.

deficiency resonate: sin and the need for forgiveness make sense. But today, an emphasis on *potentiality* and *becoming* have cultural traction. Communicating atonement as the means for people to become all they can be is a fruitful metaphor for a contemporary culture that emphasises human potential. An extended version of Jones' mirroring could be attentive not just to how stories of struggle are mirrored in the cross, but how human potential is realised in imaging God. This is not to reduce atonement or gospel to something it is not, but rather to follow the example of the New Testament apostles in expressing the experience and meaning of atonement in different ways in different contexts.

Of course, no one story captures the entirety of the narrative. Therefore, multiple stories of faith-finding are needed.<sup>60</sup> Everyone is unique and diverse stories of how Christians find and resource faith can help others as they explore and deepen their own faith journeys. This multiplicity of stories helpfully broadens understandings of atonement.

The stories told should resonate with human need. This paper suggests that for today's post-Christendom context, those stories should recognise the human desire for relational authenticity. They should acknowledge human value and potentiality, as people created to image God. Stories should speak of God's nature and attributes. Finally, the stories of atonement should highlight resultant transformation across all areas of life.

### **With relational authenticity as the goal**

A liberating encounter with God is an encounter with our authentic self 'resurrected' from our alienated self and experienced in and through relationships, healing the brokenness in our relations with our bodies, others, and nature.<sup>61</sup>

Atonement should result in a becoming towards who one genuinely is: imaging the relational God. Such an authenticity is relational and transformational in nature. Relational because humans are made in the image of the relational God. Transformational as it impacts all areas of relationships – with God, self, others and all of creation.

Relational authenticity is enabled by God, who made humans in God's image, and who acted in history and continues to act to restore relationship with humanity. It is resourced by other Christians who themselves exhibit attributes of God. A desire for this relational authenticity motivates faith explorations.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Also, see Scot McKnight and Hauna Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith: Stories of Conversion and Apostasy* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 235; Allison Berg, "How I Was Saved: Christian Faith Narratives in Contemporary Society" (MA, Marquette University, 2012), 66-68.

<sup>61</sup> Peacore, *Women's Experience of Atonement*, 116. Peacore is citing Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

<sup>62</sup> I discuss this further in my forthcoming PhD, *Redeeming authenticity*.

Sadly, conversion does not always quickly result in relational authenticity. Conversely, not all relational authenticity is the result of experiencing the reality of atonement. All humans are made in the image of God, and therefore have the potential to image God. But for those I interviewed, experiencing atonement was crucial in their movement towards relational authenticity.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, atonement today is generally experienced before it is understood. Serene Jones' Christology of mirroring offers a metaphor that considers the variety of human experience, mirrored in the cross, though it needs to be extended to more overtly speak of the fulfilment of the human potential of imaging God as well as healing from dysfunction and trauma. Mirroring is experienced in atonement as people want to themselves reflect attributes and relationality of the Trinity; as they see themselves reflected in the stories of the Bible; and as they experience journeys to faith that reflect their own uniqueness. The experience of atonement can result in movement towards relational authenticity, including restored relationships with self, God, and all of creation.

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## **APPENDIX 20: “GOD AT WORK: INVESTIGATING WHY PEOPLE BECOME CHRISTIANS TODAY”**

*Presented at Urban Life Together conference, Melbourne, 2014.*

### **Introduction:**

Despite dire predictions from social commentators, religion and spirituality are alive and well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. God continues to be drawing people to Godself. How can we understand how God is at work, with a view to better involvement in the *missio Dei*?

This paper introduces my PhD research. It outlines how I am listening to the stories of individuals' experiences in becoming Christians; and beginning to discover insights and discern themes. Appropriate to the stage the research is at, rather than describing concrete themes that are present in the data, the paper instead discusses some absences; things that are not present in the data I am gathering. In conjunction, it notes some emerging themes that could be seen as replacing those absent dimensions. *Theoretical perspectives from psychology, the social sciences and theology that are helpful in discovering how God is at work in people's lives today, drawing them to Godself will be alluded to, if time permits.*

How do we discover why people are becoming Christians today?

### **The process:**

Grounded theory: starting with the stories of people who have experienced the phenomenon under study. In-depth semi structured interviews of 12 people who have become Christians in the past two years: asking why they have become Christians. (Six interviews completed so far.)

Transcribing, coding, analysing, labelling, linking, breaking apart, putting back together.

Discovering themes that may be formed into theories

(These themes will be developed into a (largely quantitative) questionnaire, which tests these themes with a wider cohort of individuals.)

### **Where am I up to?**

Six interviews completed; four transcribed; two initial coding completed; one initial coding begun.

## Some early wonderings:

Reluctant to tell you what I AM seeing because I am still in the early stages of my analysis, but I have realised that there are some things missing in people's stories to date, so I plan to talk about those things that are missing and to offer some reflections about the things that seem to be present in their place.

Not hearing about	Instead
Sin	Accepting the gift God offers
	Being used by God despite brokenness
	Becoming a better person
	?? <i>Becoming who we are created to be</i>
Heaven	Immediate benefits
Being convinced by others	Being welcomed into community
	People caring deeply and faithfully and generously, and for a long time
	Seeing Christians live their (vibrant) faith in the midst of their (sometimes challenging) circumstances
	Experiencing the presence of God (or not!)
	Invitations to participate pre-conversion (or even before any expressed interest).
	Ongoing invitations for deeper involvement, closer engagement with others
Rational choices (though thinking it through was important)	A deep sense of knowing/responding/following/allowing.
Conversion "events"	Processes where the actual "becoming" is a super/natural next step in a long process. Can be almost anticlimactic, whilst still profound.

### Sin

In the four interviews transcribed to date, there was no mention of being saved from sin as a motivation for, or a consequence of, their conversion. The only mention of the word "sin" was from Hamish, a 30-something former "militant, evangelical atheist", who used the word to describe what he defined as the "orthodoxy" of his faith: "But I suppose I am orthodox in the fact that I believe in the Trinity. I believe that Christ died on the cross for the sins of the whole world." He went on to add: "And it was done then. And we don't need to keep prostrating ourselves and constantly asking for forgiveness. Once we have repented then we have repented. We're going to keep sinning but as long as we keep lifting them up to God (I mean God can see everything anyway)."

Here Hamish discusses sin in introducing his own theological position, in which he goes on to question what he sees as an overemphasis on personal salvation, at the expense of a wider kingdom focus: "But from a social justice point of view I really think that some parts of Christianity have a real problem with hyper-individualisation. A real focus on personal salvation and as Paul says, "These are things of children, let's just move past them now and



get onto the real business of helping God in his work to bring the kingdom and the new creation into being, into reality.”

This demonstrates that while Hamish mentions sin and salvation, these do not seem to have been instrumental in his conversion narrative. Rather Hamish spoke of simply accepting the gift that God offers: ... “I just looked up and all at once felt ‘Yes, God is here, he loves me, and I’ve just got to open my arms to the free gift that he’s giving me””.

Luke did not mention sin at all in my interview. Instead he spoke of his own brokenness and a growing realisation that God could work through broken people. This awareness grew out of two things: firstly his observations of, and conversations with, his Christian friends, who, like Luke, had experienced “difficult times” in their lives, but were “still ... so happy and still have all this faith even though [their] life [hadn’t] been great”.

Secondly, the awareness grew through observing the regeneration of a hibiscus plant that “completely broke in two” one night in a storm<sup>1</sup>. “Months later” Luke “went back and looked ... and like it was just growing really well and it made [him] think like ‘wow even when ... we’re broken we can still grow””. As one who was suffering the ongoing physical and mental health effects of a major accident, these practical demonstrations of growth-despite-brokenness were vastly significant in Luke’s choosing to become a Christian. He realised, “Even though I am broken, God can still make me useful.”

It seems that for Luke, healing and wholeness were significant motivations in his conversion, rather than forgiveness for wrong-doing. In fact he describes his pre-accident life as “awesome”.

Sarah had known for a long time that God existed and had (well over a decade earlier) experienced a dramatic physical manifestation of the presence of God. She had been “fighting” God for a long time. Sarah had a desire to be a better person. Specifically she was “trying to be nonjudgmental and have unconditional love”, particularly towards her adult daughter, who has ongoing mental health and addiction problems. Sarah, in response to the enthusiastic invitation of a grandchild, and the prompting of “God in her head ... going, ‘Sarah you have to meet, you have to be surrounded by like-minded people”” found herself in a church where the preacher was “nonjudgmental about anybody”.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a method of theological reflection that Graham, Walton and Ward call "Speaking in Parables" This demonstrates what Graham, Walton and Ward call "Speaking in Parables" as a method of theological reflection Elaine L Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, vol. 1 (London: SCM, 2005), 21-23.

Thus Sarah acknowledged some things that were lacking in her own life, specifically desiring a greater ability to love and live unconditionally and nonjudgmentally. While these things could potentially be framed as sins that needed to be overcome or forgiven, for Sarah there was a sense that she was living at the edge of what she was personally capable of, and realising the need for help to live a better, more loving, life. This is what God offered her.

This is similar to Luke and Hamish's experiences in that they were each seeking to be a better person. Hamish "didn't like who [he] had become. [He] didn't like that [he] was arrogant and that [he] did think that [he] was better than a lot of people". Luke, from a more positive perspective, when attending a Christian conference, was glad to be introduced to "the sort of ideas that ... could really make [him] a better person".

Grace found that the Christian faith "made sense" and "felt right". She realised it was OK to name the hard stuff of life, and found in the Psalms (and a benediction regularly used at her church) a framework for describing how she feels, assuring her that God is with her "even if it doesn't show". Grace had recently begun in a volunteer role that saw her encountering some tragic circumstances: the Christian faith offered her a way of processing and integrating those experiences.

For each of these respondents (and this is a more tentative, developing theme, that I will be looking to see if is repeated in other participants), there is a sense that their conversion provided a path for them to become more fully the people they were created to be. A natural unfolding, or perhaps flourishing<sup>2</sup> of who they are.<sup>3</sup>

## Heaven

None of the participants to date have specifically mentioned heaven or eternal life as either a motivation for or a consequence of conversion.

Illusions to heaven again came from Hamish. Early in the interview, in talking about how "really really dry" he felt, he noted that his (non-Christian but "spiritual") "wife had always said to me that you know all I believed was that we were just worm-food and when we died that is all we are".

In addition, Hamish twice mentioned the injustice of himself, as a "nice person" "going to hell". He remembers back in the 1990s, at high school, talking to his (legalistic) Christian

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<sup>2</sup> To use the language of Grace Jantzen

<sup>3</sup> Where does the fully-humanness of Jesus fit with this? Jesus was fully human: just as he was created to be. Also cf Aunty Denise "Christ set me free to be who I am."

friends, saying, “You say you’re a Christian but you know, you’re telling me that I’m going to hell. I’m a good person, but you’re telling me I am going to suffer eternal damnation because I don’t profess”. He did not believe going to hell would actually be the outcome: “So like I’m a nice person and you know if I die if he is there he’s not going to send me to hell”. Setting aside (the atheist) Hamish’s desire to proselytise (and argue with) his Christian friends, these statements seem to be more about a sense of justice in God surely not allowing good people to go to hell, than the attraction of heaven as a motivating factor for conversion. They also serve to highlight Hamish’s prior internal contradictions around what happens after death (being “worm-food” cf “going to hell”).

Rather it seems that participants experienced more immediate benefits to becoming a Christian, than the promise of a heavenly hope. Sarah spoke of feeling after her baptism “like [she] came home” and “Like all the weight had lifted”. She knows God to have “unending love and acceptance” towards her and all people. This serves as both a personal encouragement and an inspiration for how she could live.

Luke found in his relationship with God both healing and strength. For Grace, “talking to God has helped [her] find the strength within [herself]”; the Christian faith went from being “silly” to “just [making] sense”. Hamish discovered a life-filled, life-giving alternative to the dry atheism he had been holding to.

### **Being convinced by others**

There was very little sense of participants being convinced by others to become Christians. In fact, one of Hamish’s Christian friends sent him “a video of Jamie from Mythbusters ... at a secular rally talking about how we don’t need God and God is bad cos he lets kids die and this kind of stuff”. While the friend mentioned how dry it made him feel, Hamish saw receiving the video sent as one of several “options to be able to move away from [God, which God had provided]”.

While Hamish and Luke both described an intellectual or cognitive dimension to their conversions, the decision to become a Christian was not due to skilled arguments or apologetics. Rather for each of the respondents to date, **the involvement of others**, whilst including reasoned discussions (particular in the cases of Luke and Hamish), was more about two specific dimensions: the lived testimony of faith-filled-ness, and being welcomed into a community of belonging.

These two aspects come together most clearly in Luke’s story: for him the sense of community, of belonging, began with the earliest care and concern expressed towards him

by his Christian workmates. This sense of belonging grew as those people invited him into their lives and as his network of Christian friends expanded and developed.

He says of attending church, "I think the people were really nice and friendly and welcoming... They were pretty interested in me as a person and wanting to know a bit more about me and invite me to a lot of different events. ... And really seemed keen for me to part of what they were doing as well. I thought 'This is great everyone [at this church] is so friendly and welcoming and all of that'."

Luke contrasted the care he received from his Christian workmates and friends with the attitudes of his professional case workers. "[My Christian friends] seemed to genuinely care about my situation. And it was more of their actions than what they were saying I think. You kind of put two and two together, it was like wow you guys genuinely seem to care about me and be concerned about me." By contrast, he sensed he was just a "job" to the professionals who were working with him, asking himself, "Are they actually interested in my recovery? Or are they interested in being able to get the next job from the lawyers or from the doctors or whoever? Is this just one big business deal to everyone, they don't really care about the outcome."

Hence the personal care, attention and interest Luke received from the Christians he was meeting helped him to recognise himself as a valued individual rather than as a job or case.

Further, for Luke, the lived testimony of faith-filled-ness was a significant factor in his becoming a Christian. The Christians he was meeting were people he wanted to "spend ... time with", people who were "genuinely passionate about something" people whose faith made a difference in their lives. They demonstrated their Christian faith rather than talking about how wonderful it was.

The sense of welcome, of belonging was also fed by ongoing and active invitations to more and deeper levels of participation and involvement. Luke received invitation after invitation: to share a meal, to attend a conference, to come to church, to participate in a small group, to engage socially in a variety of ways. There was no sense that he needed to meet any particular standard in order to participate and to belong: "I got invited to a small group and then started going to that and really still didn't have a great idea about Christianity. The guys being very open about things and being very accepting that even though I wasn't hard core Christian or whatever, still were happy to spend time with me and talk, like actually discuss my thoughts and ideas and not just blow it off as 'you're not Christian so we don't really care what you have to say' sort of thing."

In hearing Luke's story, you get the sense that his decision to become a Christian, while a very reasoned thing, was something that happened quite internally, as he processed and decided for himself. Luke's Christian friends were comfortable to journey alongside him, not feeling any need to convince him of anything, rather allowing the process in which he was engaged to unfold.

Sarah had valued the faithful friendship of a Christian couple over decades. It was at their house that she experienced a physical manifestation of the presence of God. They had "stood by her" and supported her for years as she fought and finally accepted God. This couple were faithful and constant despite the geographical distance that separated them from Sarah, and the length of time that it took her to come to the decision to become a follower of God.

Grace was invited to church by someone she respected and whose life experiences held some resonance. She was welcomed into a small group of "the best people out", in a church where she considers the pastoral staff to be available for her. "You didn't feel so isolated, I suppose", Grace reflects.

Hamish: love and relationship; felt like he had come home

### **Rational choices**

Another thing missing from the data to date has been an emphasis on rational choices, though thinking things through was often important. Instead Sarah calls it a "knowing" which has impacted on the way that she sees the world. This has resonance with Seymour Epstein's Cognitive-Experience Theory, which acknowledges both the cognitive and the experiential as ....<sup>4</sup> 4 basic motivations: experience pleasure and avoid pain; conceptual system; establish and maintain relationships; enhance self-esteem. Rambo adds power and transcendence.

### **Conversion "events"**

Also absent from the accounts that have been shared with me are any sort of dramatic conversion "event". Rather processes were described by which the actual "becoming" a Christian was the super/natural next step in a long process. The moment is more likely to be a moment of recognition that something has occurred than to be a dramatic decision; almost anti-climactic whilst still being profound.

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<sup>4</sup> This does not belong here: it is part of the discussion rather than the results...

Grace describes the moment she first called herself a Christian thus: “Well it was kind of like I just went and then one day I just called myself a Christian and went oh, no, I guess I am. [laughs] it just kind of happened I suppose. I just went to church for so long and then I thought Yeah. I guess I am. Yeah [laughter]”

Hamish let his dog out to go to the toilet in the middle of the night. “[He] heard [the words; not consciously known to him] “the heavens will declare his majesty” when [he] was looking up at the stars. He describes his response thus, “And I sort of just went... I didn’t fall to my knees, I didn’t burst out crying, I just went “uh. I’m a Christian now” and walked back inside.”

For Luke and Sarah, both attending Baptist churches, their baptisms were significant moments that marked their decisions to become Christians. Luke says, “I felt strongly enough that I thought I really believe in Jesus and so decided to get baptised.” He names the first Christian conference he attended as the time when his “heart was opened”, making his a long and slow journey of discovery and growth.

Sarah sensed God telling her to be baptised: “I just decided, the Lord just said, ‘right for your birthday ... you have to get baptised. That’s your birthday present to you’.” From her very first visit to the church she now attends regularly, her minister could “see the Lord in [her] ... [she was] just beaming”. This was an interesting reflection on the presence of God revealed in one who would not yet have called herself a Christian.

The act of baptism made public a decision each had reached.

Graham, Elaine L, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward. *Theological Reflection: Methods*. 1. London: SCM, 2005.

# APPENDIX 21: AUTHENTICITY GOOGLE IMAGES





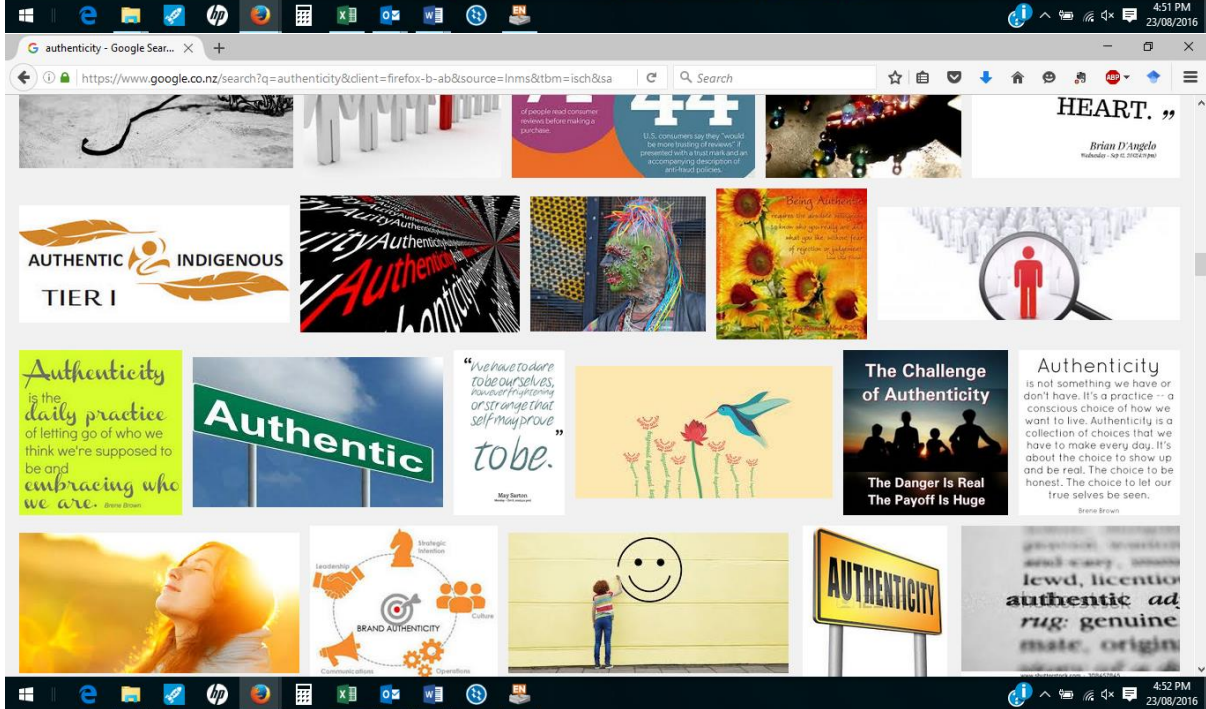
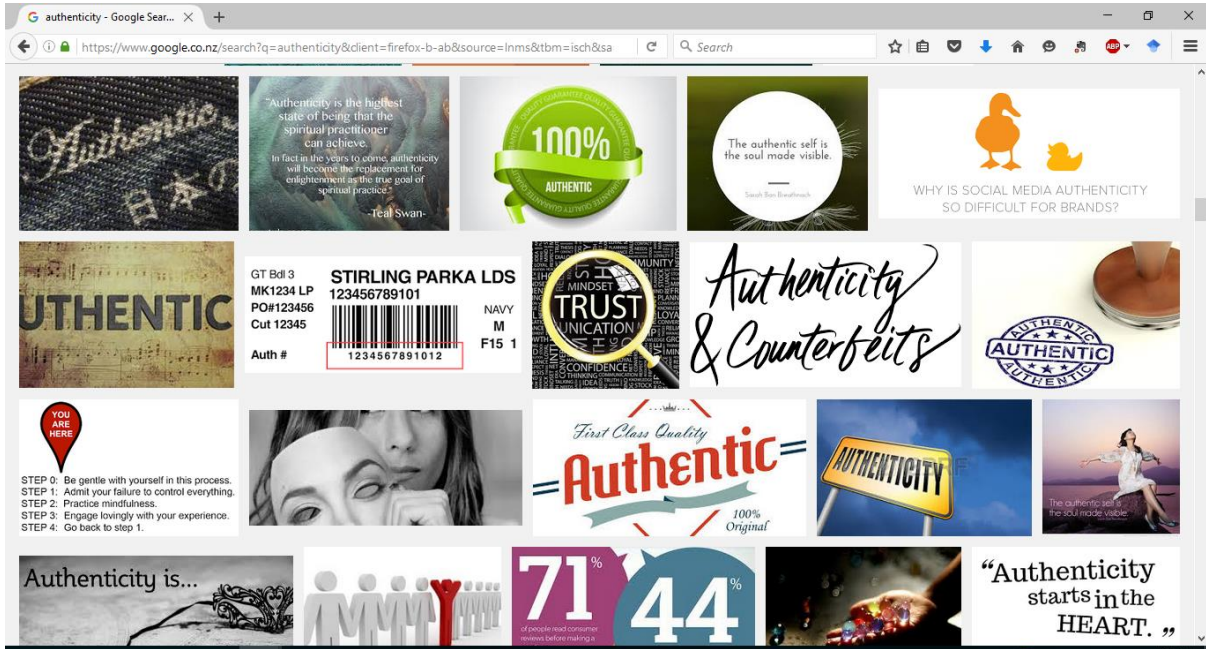
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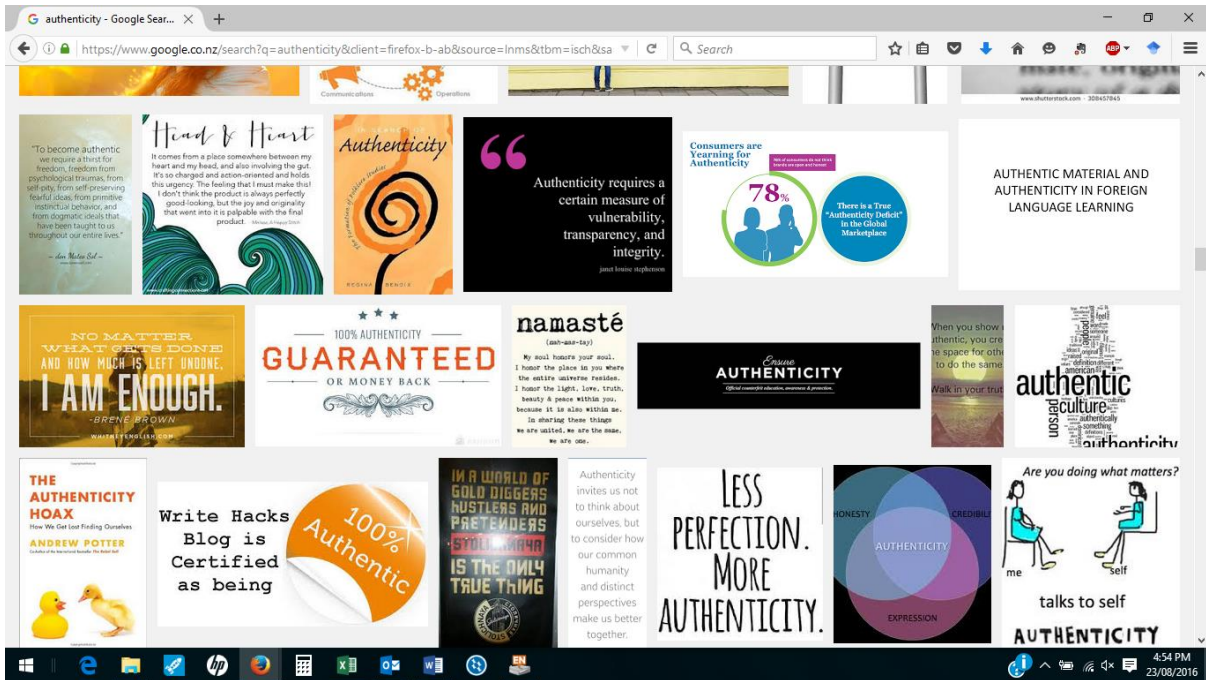
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https://www.google.co.nz/search?q=authenticity&client=firefox-b-ab&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa Search







<sup>1</sup> Google image search "Authenticity". Accessed 23 August 2016.  
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## **APPENDIX 22: “OUR DOING BECOMES US: PRACTISING (IGNATIAN) SPIRITUALITY AND BECOMING CHRISTIAN”**

*Presented at “Seeing Silence Symposium”, University of Otago, 2017.*

### **Abstract**

Actor, Andrew Garfield, prepared for his role as Jesuit priest, Father Rodrigues, in the movie *Silence*, by engaging in a twelve-month period of Ignatian spiritual exercises. For Garfield, the surprising result of this engagement, was his “falling in love with Jesus”. What began as a professional exercise became life-changing.

The importance of spiritual practices for faith formation is well recognised. Spiritual practices facilitate a growing awareness of the transcendent, and provide a means of coming to know God, the world, and oneself. Christians point to the transformative role of the divine in these practices. However, spiritual practices are generally associated with developing spiritual maturity rather than with pre-conversion engagement. Garfield’s experience highlights the potential of spiritual practices to ignite the earliest stages of faith development. Recent qualitative research on the conversion to Christianity of unchurched Australians similarly demonstrated how engaging in spiritual practices often precedes religious conversion.

This paper explores Garfield’s experience alongside stories from other recent converts who engaged in spiritual practices before their conversions to Christianity. It argues that understanding the Christian faith as ‘performative’ provides an explanation for these experiences. The Christian faith is formed and made real through embodied acts of ritualised practice. Therefore, rather than emphasising belief as giving cognitive assent to specific truths, prioritising and resourcing the tangible, performed act of engaging in spiritual practices, including among non-Christians, can be a fruitful model for Christian witness. Such an approach acknowledges that God is already at work in the lives of non-Christians and contrasts intriguingly with 17<sup>th</sup> century Japan’s attempted halting of Christian spiritual practice, as depicted in *Silence*.

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### **Introduction**

Actor, Andrew Garfield, prepared for his role as Jesuit priest, Father Rodrigues, in the movie *Silence*, by engaging in a twelve-month period of Ignatian spiritual exercises. For Garfield,

the surprising result of this engagement, was his “falling in love with Jesus.” What began as a professional exercise became life-changing. His “doing” Ignatian spiritual practices resulting in his “becoming” a Christ-follower.

So today, we explore the role of spiritual practices, not in the maintenance of faith, but in the earliest stages of faith development. We begin with Garfield’s experience of becoming a Christian as he prepared for his role as Father Rodrigues. We then consider his experience alongside my own recent qualitative research on the conversion to Christianity of previously unchurched Australians. My research similarly demonstrated how engaging in spiritual practices often precedes religious conversion. We conclude the paper by returning to the movie *Silence* and briefly considering the role of spiritual practices in the lives of Japanese Christians and Portuguese priests.

## Garfield’s experience

We begin with Andrew Garfield’s experience. Before working on the film, Garfield was (in his own words) “pantheist, agnostic, occasionally atheist and a little bit Jewish, but mostly confused”.<sup>1</sup> Years earlier, he had experienced an encounter with God, in which God met him in a moment of desperation, providing inspiration and a new outlook.<sup>2</sup> But that moment of encounter did not result in an ongoing faith.

Fast forward over a decade and Garfield found himself preparing to play Rodrigues in the movie, *Silence*. A committed actor he prepared for his role by immersing himself in the Ignatian spiritual life. Not just a field trip, or site visit. Rather, 12 months of spiritual practices, including six months of celibacy; a silent retreat; and (still) ongoing spiritual direction.

During that period, Garfield changed from having no relationship with Jesus, to falling in love with him. What happened? Sadly, I haven’t had an opportunity to ask Garfield that question, but his experience did not surprise me. I believe he was formed into the Christian faith through his engagement in Ignatian spiritual practices.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/dec/30/andrew-garfield-never-compromised-who-was-spider-man>

<sup>2</sup> Debilitatingly nervous about an imminent stage performance, Garfield was walking the city, feeling terrified and inadequate. In what he now recognises as a moment of prayer, he named his inadequacy, essentially seeking help. At that point he heard a street performer sing – rather imperfectly – the song, “Vincent”. Garfield recognised that even in the performers imperfection, he had moved, changed, transformed Garfield’s outlook. The singer’s vulnerability and willingness to offer what he had inspired Garfield to also offer what he had. He reported: “And literally the clouds parted and the sun came out and shone on me and this guy and I was just weeping uncontrollably. And it was like God was grabbing my [sic] by the scruff of the neck and saying, ‘You’ve been thinking that if you go on stage you’re going to die. But actually, if you don’t you’re going to die.’”

Christians are well aware of the transformative role of the divine in spiritual practices. We engage in such exercises hoping to connect with God and to be changed: to grow. Yet spiritual practices are usually associated with faith development after conversion, rather than understood as potentially leading to religious conversion. Garfield's experience highlights the potential of spiritual practices to ignite the earliest stages of faith development.

## **The experience of other recent converts**

As I said, Garfield's experience did not surprise me. My research on recent converts to Christianity revealed similar results. Their engagement in spiritual practices was a crucial element of their journeys towards Christian faith.

The empirical research that informs this paper began with the lived experiences of previously unchurched Australians, who converted to Christianity in the previous two years.<sup>3</sup> It used critical realism as a research philosophy and grounded theory as a rigorous methodology to answer research questions about the conversion process; the roles in conversion of other Christians and God; and the deep processes occurring within the converts. Twenty-seven South Australian churches with high proportions of new converts were invited by NCLS Research to advertise the research. This and additional purposive sampling yielded nine participants. Semi-structured interviews generated rich data, analysed using iterative and in-depth grounded theory methods. While the sample was small, saturation of the core categories was readily achieved and the strong resonance with literature from a range of disciplines points to the efficacy and significance of the findings.<sup>4</sup>

I devised a new, multidimensional, model of religious conversion. This is one dimension of that model showing the conversion process itself.

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<sup>3</sup> No other research on conversion has only researched new converts; or those from non-churched backgrounds. My research did both, meaning less post-conversion biographical reconstruction had occurred, and an increasing demographic (of unchurched people) was investigated. Similarly, I am aware of no other research that has empirically investigated the experience of atonement.

<sup>4</sup> In moderatum generalisations, aspects uncovered in the data can be understood to be "instances of a broader recognisable set of features." Such generalisations are the basis of inductive reasoning. Malcolm Williams, "Interpretivism and Generalisation," *Sociology* 34, no. 2 (2000): 215. Also, see John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006), 43.





Talk about model.

Participants reported that they engaged in a variety of spiritual practices both as they journeyed towards becoming Christians, and following their conversion.

	Grace	Hamish	Jean	Luke	Meg	Mary	Olivia	Sarah	Tallulah
Attending church	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Reading the Bible	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Praying	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Fellowship	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
Worship	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
Baptism			x	x	x	x	x	x	(x)
Small group	x		x	x		x	x		
Using gifts		x		x		x		x	x
Sharing faith	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

I want to focus particularly on the engagement in spiritual practices that occurred before conversion.<sup>5</sup> Where participants clearly engaged in these practices before becoming Christians, their data point is highlighted in yellow. Frequently, as for Garfield, this engagement contributed to their later conversion. Two examples are illustrative.

<sup>5</sup> Note two more rows that I am ignoring here.

About five years before she became a Christian, Jean was invited to pray with her friend, Liz, whose father was unwell. Jean described it as follows:

One of my really, really good friends ... her father was going through chemotherapy and cancer and she would often say, "Please just ... come and pray with me." And I would kind of think, "What can I... how is that going to make a difference because I am not religious" and I didn't understand it. But she just felt so comforted by it that I would just sit there and pray with her. And you know he's not in perfect health, but like it was just such a, it was the first time I really thought, "Wow this can make a difference as well." He's just defied so many odds and you know knowing that he has had so many people praying for him is a big part of their lives. So yeah, that just kind of got me thinking as to maybe this prayer stuff is real.<sup>6</sup>

For Jean, this simple experience of praying with her friend made her see value in the Christian faith. Like Jean, other participants did not wait to become converted before they began to pray. Rather, their praying was frequently an important dimension of their coming to faith. Of those I interviewed, only Grace did not report praying before she became a Christian. Hamish prayed despite not believing God existed. Luke cried out to God for help before he became a Christian. Mary was in constant communion with God. Meg prayed for help and deliverance. Olivia prayed for guidance as she decided about committing to the Christian faith. Sarah cried out to God throughout her darkest years. Tallulah prayed her way through her journey to faith. Prayer was an important part of these participants' faith journeys.

But many of these prayers represented moments of engagement, rather than Garfield's sustained engagement in spiritual practices, as he practised Ignatian spirituality.

Hamish's experience of reading the Bible provides an insightful example here, more like Garfield's own. Before he became a Christian, Hamish was what he called a "militant, evangelical atheist." He loved to "cherry-pick" verses from the Bible to use to argue with Christians. But one day he began to explore the Bible further. He says, "Walking past my bookcase, ... out of the corner of my eye flashed a bit of gold leaf, and I went, 'What was that?'" Realising it was a Bible, he decided to "pay attention" to it: not just once, but many times as the Bible "just kept being in [his] field of view." Hamish found it difficult to understand the King James Version he had noticed on his bookshelf, thinking it was "just written for old people." But "for some reason [he] thought, 'I'll just google bible translations and see what else is there'." He found the New International Version "a bit easier to read." Reading John's gospel, he realised, "This is really powerful stuff," as God spoke to him through what he was reading. It was this encounter with the Bible that began the "six months of a real fight with God" that ended with Hamish declaring his Christian faith. Hamish's

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<sup>6</sup> Jean, interview by Lynne Taylor, 9 September, 2014.

ongoing Bible reading; coupled with fellowship and discussion, both in real life and online; culminated in him one day naming a faith in God. He described that experience as follows:

And then one day [six months after he had noticed and started reading his Bible] I had to let my little dog out to go to the toilet, [at] 3 o'clock in the morning. [I] looked up at the stars. And in my head I heard, it sounds strange but I will say it, I heard "the heavens will declare his majesty" when I was looking up at the stars. And I sort of just went... I didn't fall to my knees, I didn't burst out crying, I just went, "Uh. I'm a Christian now" and walked back inside.

Hamish's reading, fellowship, exploration had formed him into a Christian. As for Garfield, Hamish's "doing" the stuff of Christian spiritual practices had "become" him a Christian.

## Engaging the literature

How can we understand these experiences? Of Garfield? Of Hamish and the others I interviewed? The importance of spiritual practices for faith formation is well recognised. Writers like Dallas Willard, Richard Foster and Adele Calhoun are familiar to many exploring personal Christian spirituality. But spiritual practices are generally associated with developing spiritual maturity rather than with pre-conversion engagement.<sup>7</sup>

## How spiritual practices are understood

Ironically, social scientists who study conversion seem more likely than theologians to notice pre-conversion engagement in spiritual practices. Theologians are more attentive to the faith formation of those who are already Christians.

Psychologist, Lewis Rambo, notes that potential converts "want to change and grow religiously," but do not know how, seeking spiritual practices as a means of growth.<sup>8</sup> Yet neither Hamish nor Garfield were specifically motivated by a desire for growth at those earliest stages. Sociologist, Robert Wuthnow, believes spiritual practices "need to be rediscovered," as they both set aside a sacred space, and facilitate a growing awareness of

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<sup>7</sup> For example Tom Zanzig, "Spiritual Transformation: The Heart of Adult Faith Formation," *Lifelong Faith* 6.3 (2012); John Roberto, "Faith Formation with Emerging Adults: Congregational Practices," *ibid.* 4.2; Darryl Tippens, "Spiritual Formation and the Dance of Embodiment: Lessons from James Ka Smith and Augustine," *Leaven* 22, no. 1 (2015); Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002); Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2012); Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C Bass, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B Eerdmans, 2002); Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015); Thomas G Plante, *Spiritual Practices in Psychotherapy: Thirteen Tools for Enhancing Psychological Health* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2009); Doug Oman, Carl E Thoresen, Crystal L Park, Phillip R Shaver, Ralph W Hood and Thomas G Plante, "Spiritual Modeling Self-Efficacy," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 4, no. 4 (2012): 278-280.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis R Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 84.



the transcendent.<sup>9</sup> Thus spiritual practices are formative for spiritual seekers as well as for those who have already embraced faith. But while some I interviewed were spiritual seekers, for others – Hamish, for example; and Garfield as well, the engaging sometimes even preceded a conscious interest in things of faith. And all experienced that deepening awareness of the supernatural because of their engagement in these practices.

Insights from theologians do not *preclude* the potential of spiritual practices to form faith where there is none. But neither do they highlight it. Practical theologians, Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass, argue that “it is precisely by participating in Christian practices that we truly come to know God and the world, including ourselves.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, philosopher Jamie Smith recognises the “formative power of *practices* – communal, embodied rhythms, rituals, and routines that over time quietly and unconsciously prime and shape our desires and most fundamental longings.”<sup>11</sup> This sounds like Garfield’s experience.

Surely this recognition of the formative nature of engagement in spiritual practices requires us to extend our understanding of their significance beyond maturing the faith of those who are already Christians. Part of the reason for failing to notice the potential of such practices to form faith in non-Christians is the Western, post-reformation emphasis on propositional belief systems. It is generally presumed that one first embraces Christianity cognitively: essentially deciding to become a Christian. The experiences of those I interviewed were more experiences of *realising* they had become Christians: they had been transformed.

### **Is there a better way of understanding?**

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1998), 16-17. Therefore, this resources those who appreciate what he calls a spirituality of dwelling, as well as those who engage a spirituality of seeking. For a fuller exploration, see *ibid.*, 168-198. (He notes “the resurgence of interest in spiritual practices.” *Ibid.*, 169.) Also, see Paul G Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 322-324. Hiebert highlight the need to re-create vibrant, transformative, rituals. Also see, Erin Elizabeth Dufault-Hunter, *The Transformative Power of Faith: A Narrative Approach to Conversion*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012). x. Dufault-Hunter says here, “personal transformation comes through practices informed and influenced by the central stories of the religious tradition: [including] rituals like prayer, worship, song; skills like meditation or peacemaking.”

<sup>10</sup> Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C Bass, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C Bass (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B Eerdmans, 2002), 24. Their work implies such practices build on an existing faith, or at the least on their baptismal vows. For example, they see engagement in spiritual practices as an opportunity to “live into the promises made at their baptism.” *Ibid.*, 28. Also see Sarah Coakley, "Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology," *ibid.* She “presuppose[s] ... the fundamental infusion of grace in the act of baptism.” *Ibid.*, 84. My research, however, demonstrated that such practices can also lead to faith where there was previously none, including among those who had not been baptised.

<sup>11</sup> James KA Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Cultural Liturgies (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 4.

Understanding the Christian faith as 'performative' provides an explanation for these experiences. The Christian faith is formed and made real through embodied acts of ritualised practice. Such a way of understanding has contemporary resonance. Social scientists, Vincett, Olson, Hopkins and Pain, argue that our secularised, pluralised, consumerised context "de-emphasises propositional belief systems in favour of what [they] call performance Christianity."<sup>12</sup> They note three key characteristics of religiosity in young people in Glasgow they researched: "mobility, authenticity, and practical expression."<sup>13</sup> The practical expression of those young people was performative, representing an "embodiment of ritualised practice."<sup>14</sup> These practices were transformative, moving the young people towards what Vincett et al call a 'moral' authenticity. Rather than cognitive *belief*, the emphasis is on the activity of *believing*, which is "a process, a working out, a performance."<sup>15</sup> Belief is made real, or authentic, through their actions.<sup>16</sup> Again, while not specifically about the early stages of faith formation, this research points to the increasing importance of *practice* in contemporary Christianity, as a means of developing and expressing authentic faith.<sup>17</sup> Like the experiences of those I interviewed, and of Garfield, it suggests engaging in spiritual practices can move people towards genuine Christian faith.

Therefore, rather than emphasising **belief** as giving cognitive assent to specific truths, prioritising and resourcing the tangible, performed act of engaging in spiritual practices, including among non-Christians, can be a fruitful model for Christian witness.

Ritual action, such as engaging in spiritual practices, serves as a way of gaining and transmitting knowledge, as well as being a participatory, embodied, act.<sup>18</sup> Anthropologist,

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<sup>12</sup> Giselle Vincett, Elizabeth Olson, Peter Hopkins and Rachel Pain, "Young People and Performance Christianity in Scotland," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27, no. 2 (2012): 275.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 278. Note the word "performance" here should not be taken to mean an inauthentic expression. Rather it speaks of action. Also see Malcolm Ruel, "Christians as Believers," in *Ritual and Religious Belief: A Reader*, ed. Graham Harvey (London: Equinox, 2005), 255. Ruel speaks here of "believing as the adventure of faith." Also see James S Bielo, "Belief, Deconversion, and Authenticity among U.S. Emerging Evangelicals," *Ethos* 40, no. 3 (2012): 260.

<sup>16</sup> Also, see Alistair McFadyen, "Imaging God: A Theological Answer to the Anthropological Question?" *Zygon* 47, no. 4 (2012): 931-932.

<sup>17</sup> Ayometzi also makes the link between doing and becoming. She observed that members of the Spanish Mission "are constantly told that they actually become who they perceive themselves to be only when in fact they engage in doing what they believe themselves to be." Cecilia Castillo Ayometzi, "Storying as Becoming: Identity through the Telling of Conversion," in *Selves and Identities in Narrative and Discourse*, ed. Michael Bamberg, Anna De Fina, and Deborah Schiffrin (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2007), 53. Also see Fenggang Yang and Andrew Stuart Abel, "Sociology of Religious Conversion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R Rambo and Charles E Farhadian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 144-145.

<sup>18</sup> Theodore W Jennings, "On Ritual Knowledge," *The Journal of Religion* 62, no. 2 (1982): 112-113. Charles Taylor suggests the motivation for engaging in spiritual practices might be more related to a desire to replicate the "wow!" they experience momentarily, than a genuine desire to be formed

Tanya Luhrmann, observed the way engaging in the spiritual practice of prayer helped people to hear from God.<sup>19</sup> Some prisoners who convert to Christianity attribute “their conversion to deep, private reading of the Bible in their cells.”<sup>20</sup> Sociologists, Lofland and Skonovd included the ‘experimental’ as a conversion motif, noting some converts participate in the spiritual and organisational activities of a religious group prior to conversion.<sup>21</sup>

Many theologians and practitioners recognise the need to prioritise “cultivating spiritual experiences and developing religious practices” over articulating, teaching and learning a so-called “Christian worldview.”<sup>22</sup> They see such “tangible, embodied practices ... are conduits of the Spirit’s transformative power.”<sup>23</sup>

Yet despite this, little emphasis is placed on encouraging engagement in spiritual practices as a means of Christian witness. Discipleship is generally understood as beginning after conversion: usually after that cognitive assent to particular Christian truths has been given. But for all of those I interviewed – as for Garfield – engaging in spiritual practices, including attending church; reading the Bible; praying; fellowshiping; and worshipping, contributed to their faith formation and their transformation.<sup>24</sup>

Returning to Hamish’s story, we clearly see how engaging in spiritual practices – *doing* – can occur very early in the spiritual journey, and lead towards religious conversion – *becoming* Christian.<sup>25</sup> Hamish began reading the Bible while still an atheist and found himself drawn into what he was reading.<sup>26</sup> Wanting to know more, he kept reading, and through this practice, as well as through other spiritual practices, Hamish was changed, transformed. He was not seeking to become a Christian. Rather, in many ways he was actively resisting such

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spiritually. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 518. (His footnote 28 points to another alternative explanation: related to the privatised nature of faith.)

<sup>19</sup> Tanya M Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Alfred A Knoff, 2012).#133; *ibid*.

<sup>20</sup> Shadd Maruna, Louise Wilson and Kathryn Curran, "Why God Is Often Found Behind Bars: Prison Conversions and the Crisis of Self-Narrative," *Research in Human Development* 3, no. 2-3 (2006): 167.

<sup>21</sup> John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1981): 378-379.

<sup>22</sup> Harold D Horell, "Fostering Hope: Christian Religious Education in a Postmodern Age," *Religious Education* 99, no. 1 (2004): 9.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 15. Also see Tippens, "Spiritual Formation and Embodiment," 23; Paul N Markham, "Conversion Converted: A New Model of Christian Conversion in Light of Wesleyan Theology and Nonreductive Physicalism" (PhD, University of Durham, 2006), 5.

<sup>24</sup> This relates to an ‘experimental’ conversion motif. Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," 378.

<sup>25</sup> Sociologist, Robert Balch, similarly argued that “the first step in conversion to cults is learning to *act* like a convert by outwardly conforming to a narrowly prescribed set of role expectations.” Robert W Balch, "Looking Behind the Scenes in a Religious Cult: Implications for the Study of Conversion," *Sociological Analysis* 41, no. 2 (1980): 142.

<sup>26</sup> Hamish, interview by Lynne Taylor, 2 August, 2014.

change.<sup>27</sup> But Hamish's engagement in spiritual practices formed him into becoming a Christian.

Within Christian theology, an approach that acknowledges the potential of spiritual practices to form people towards Christian faith also rightly acknowledges that God is already at work in the lives of all people, including non-Christians. The missionary endeavour is never first the initiative of humans. In the beginning, God. Creating. Acting in ongoing ways to bring reconciliation and to return humanity to its created purpose of imaging God. Seeing engagement in spiritual practices as a way of reforming humanity towards that purpose places God at the centre of the missionary endeavour. Therefore, it is worth inviting participation in spiritual practises of the Christian faith, not just as a means towards Christian maturity but also as a potentially fruitful means of Christian witness.

## Back to the movie

To return to *Silence*. *Silence*, the movie and the book, begins after the conversions have occurred. There are no stories of faith-finding. Only faithfulness, desperation, death and apostasy. I cannot explore from book or movie whether engagement in spiritual practices preceded faith formation in 17<sup>th</sup> century Japan. But we clearly see the importance of spiritual practices for ongoing faith sustenance. We see the desperation of the villagers and their relief in being offered the sacraments of bread and wine; baptism; and confession. We see the comfort of the rosary beads, given sacrificially; then crafted anew from paper and string. We hear Rodrigues' dogged calling to mind of the gospels, the stations of the cross, the prayers of his faith. And the final scene in the movie as he (spoiler alert) cradles a cross in his lifeless hand. Spiritual practices sustained his faith through desperately challenging times.

Further, while desperately bleak and often unfruitful, the experiences of Christian missionaries in 17<sup>th</sup> century Japan eventually led to the conversion to Christianity of Andrew Garfield. Our doing becomes us.

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<sup>27</sup> He spoke of praying to a God he didn't believe in, asking God not to be real.

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