

# The sociology of conversion narratives: A conundrum, a theory, and an opportunity

Andrew M McKinnon

## Abstract

Using Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative to consider Lofland and Stark's classic 'Becoming a World-Saver', I address a fundamental conundrum in the sociology of conversion. If the conversion story is told in the new light of the new discourse –brought about by the conversion—how can the sociologist use it to explain the conversion and the factors that led to it? We consider the extent to which the sociology of religion has conflated the necessary elements of narrative structure for the stages of conversion. Taking into consideration more recent research, the paper makes a case for careful and comparative sociological study of conversion narratives—considered as narrative accounts. I argue that doing so further opens up avenues for research, particularly if we consider the audiences for whom the stories are told and the purposes the stories serve, and a ultimately constitutes a sound basis for considering the processes of conversion themselves.

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Andrew.mckinnon@abdn.ac.uk

Sociology does not trade in the phenomenology of religious experience-- rather, our theories rely on *accounts* of religious experience. The difference is important: an account has already given symbolic shape to the experience, such that it may be understood both by those who had the experience and by the sociologist who asks about it. Such accounts typically take the form of a story, or narrative (Yamane 2000). Here I contend that the structure of narrative has given shape of some of our basic theoretical work on the sociology of religious conversion; disentangling the event from its subsequent narration is anything but straightforward.

While sociologists have often used the stories respondents tell as sources of data about religious experience, values, beliefs and practices, we have less frequently taken an interest in the stories themselves—as stories (Wuthnow 2011). This needs more attention, given the ubiquity of stories and story-telling in human societies. Unfortunately, sociologists of religion have sometimes seemed tone deaf to the tenor of religious narratives encountered in the field, especially in the elicited accounts that individuals use to explain their beliefs, commitments, and actions.

Conversion narratives, while typically providing the most basic data for sociological theories of conversion, also pose a fundamental conundrum, as Snow and Machalek's observed in their work on the convert as a "social type." One of their key findings from interviews with converts to Nichiren Shoshu, a Buddhist sect, is that conversion is marked by "biographical reconstruction." They show that for the convert the past is not only shattered; the disjointed pieces are reassembled in accordance with the new universe of discourse and its grammar. Some aspects of the past are

jettisoned, others redefined, and some are put together in ways previously inconceivable (1983, 266).

The convert, Snow and Machalek show, has entered a new understanding of the world and must reinterpret their life before conversion accordingly. Thus, the conversion story is told from the vantage point that is the product of the event that the sociologist hopes to use the story to explain. Most problematically, this typically includes the respondent's description of the state from which they have been saved, which often becomes a sociologists' variable, and used to explain the likelihood of conversion (Heirich 1977).

While Snow and Machalek's theory of the convert as a social type has been subject to criticism (Staples and Mauss 1987), subsequent studies of conversion have typically found their claims about biographical reconstruction theoretically cogent as well as useful for empirical research on converts to groups other than Nichiren Shoshu (Staples and Mauss 1987; Jindra 2014; Stromberg 1993; Darwish 2018). While biographical reconstruction is more or less continuous through the life-course (Ricoeur 1992)—meaning that the problem addressed here is ubiquitous—religious conversion typically provides a more acute reconstruction, and therefore poses a greater challenge for the sociologist; it also makes religious conversion “good to think” with (Levi-Strauss 1962, 132).

In order to provide firm theoretical foundations for thinking about the problem of conversion accounts, I bring Paul Ricoeur's work on narrative to bear on the sociological consideration of conversion narratives. I then use what we learn from Ricoeur about the emplotment of narrative to revisit Lofland and Stark's classic, paradigm-inaugurating, theory of conversion in “Becoming a World-Saver” (1965). Looking at Lofland and Stark's theory in the light cast by Ricoeur shows how the theory of conversion reflects the logic of narratives at least as much as it shows a silhouette of conversion processes. It may be possible to look

*through* narratives to the mechanisms at work in the processes of conversion; to do so, however, we must be able to discern more clearly the shape of the narrative through which we look at those processes. Otherwise we are likely to find ourselves unable to distinguish the narrative foreground from the social processes in the background, or indeed, we risk mistaking the foreground and the background.

#### PAUL RICOEUR AND THE THEORY OF NARRATIVE

In this essay, I attend to Ricoeur's magisterial three volume study, *Time and Narrative* (1984, 1985 and 1988), which is arguably the single most important philosophical analysis of either time or narrative (Dowling 2011), paying more limited attention to his subsequent work on narrative identity (Ricoeur 1992). With the exception of medical sociology, which has adopted narrative identity as part of its theoretical toolkit (Ezzy 1998), we sociologists have largely ignored Ricoeur's thought—especially his work on narrative. In fact the last major study of Ricoeur's work by a sociological theorist preceded the bulk of his work on narrative (Thompson 1981). Likewise, the anthology of Ricoeur's writings most likely to be consulted by social scientists, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Ricoeur 1981) does not include Ricoeur's subsequent work on narrative. It may be that sociologists are to some degree repaying the philosopher for his own pointed inattention to our own tribe's writings. While Ricoeur does refer on occasion to Max Weber, even key French sociologists, including Emile Durkheim and Pierre Bourdieu, are pointedly absent throughout his oeuvre.

The primary objective of *Time and Narrative* is to bridge a fundamental antinomy that has plagued the philosophy of time since antiquity. The first of two basic positions, stemming from Aristotle, treats time as an objective, natural phenomenon, marked for example by the movement of the sun and moon and planets. The other, which was

inaugurated by Augustine in *Confessions*, is what will subsequently develop into the phenomenology of time: Augustine understands time in terms of the subject's experience of time passing. Ricoeur argues that both approaches bring something essential to our understanding of time, even if the two positions contradict one another.

Ricoeur argues that in order to maintain their accounts of time, subjective theories repeatedly sneak "objective" or "natural" elements (like death) into their discussions. Likewise, the objective accounts of time smuggle in subjective notions to prop up their objective accounts of time; they lean on notions like before and after, the very perceptions on which the phenomenology of time depends. Narrative, however, bridges the objective and the subjective, understandings of time. All cultures and societies tell stories, and it is narrative that makes possible what Ricoeur calls "human time". Human time (which the sociologist can justifiably call "social time") is not held hostage by the aporia at the heart of traditional philosophies of time. Narrative connects subjective time to events in the world, and gives meaning to objective time; it thus mediates between these two positions and the experience of time that each represents.

A narrative is first and foremost a form of discourse with a plot that moves from beginning, through the middle, and to an end. Events are arranged into a sequence ("emplotted"): "in accord with the irreversible order of time common to physical and human events" (67). The sequence of events, and development of characters, must be both meaningful and intelligible (65), and imply a causal sequence of "one thing because of another" when stitched together in a narrative (Dowling 2011, 5). Events which do not figure in the development of the plot, or show the development of the characters, need to be pushed to the background, or else refigured so that they contribute to an arc running from beginning to end. Each event must be preceded by the events that caused them, and

followed by events to which they contribute. Relationships between events, and their effects on characters that act and suffer the actions of others, must be “probable” (to use Aristotle’s terms), or in less technical terms, they must be plausible and cohere with our understanding of how the world works.

Ricoeur follows Aristotle’s understanding of tragic narrative (the model for all narratives in Ricoeur’s theory) as “discordant concordance”. Discordance, such as meaningless and unmerited suffering, brings chaos and anomie; these are made “concordant” as they are integrated into the arc of the plot and resolved, or at least given meaning by finding their place in the narrative. In this context, Ricoeur draws our attention to two terms of analysis which appear in Aristotle’s discussion of complex tragedies, such as Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*: *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*. In Aristotle’s *Poetics*, *peripeteia*, (“strokes of fate, terrifying and pitiful events, a profound error” (1991, 32), designates the key problem to be resolved or given meaning in the course of a tragic narrative plot. *Peripeteia* is essential in any story. Even if those who do not know Aristotle’s technical term will recognise its indispensable function in a story. Jerome Bruner demonstrates this when he asks “what, then, is a story?”

Everyone will agree that it requires a cast of characters who are free agents with minds of their own. Given a moment to think about it, they’ll also agree that these characters have recognizable expectations about the ordinary state of the world, the story’s world, though these expectations may be somewhat enigmatic. And again, with a moment’s thought, everybody agrees that a story begins with some breach in the expected state of things—Aristotle’s *peripeteia*. Something goes awry, otherwise there’s nothing to tell about. The story concerns efforts to cope or come to terms with

the breach and its consequences. And finally there is an outcome, some sort of resolution (Bruner 2002, 16-17).

The coherence of any narrative depends on the relationship of the events narrated to the conclusion of the story, and how it resolves or gives meaning to the *peripeteia*. Only from the perspective furnished by the end of the story do the beginning and middle of a narrative make sense (Kermode 2000). It is for this reason that the experience of a second hearing or second reading of a narrative will always be different than our first encounter with it. This is most obvious when we think, for example, of a murder mystery. On re-reading the story we already know how it ends; all of the clues will seem obvious even if we could not see them beforehand. Neither the ending nor the story will anymore be a mystery.

The moment of recognition, or *anagnorisis* in Aristotle's terms, is one of the key moments of a narrative; it is the confluence point where the awareness of the narrator, the characters in the story, and the audience meet. While it is not as essential as *peripeteia*, it is a commonly occurring feature in certain narrative forms, and we will be familiar with its role in stories of religious change. William Dowling explains:

Ricoeur has from the beginning described emplotment as a *telos* or movement towards a destined or predetermined end. As one looks back on a completed series of events in a plot, it does look something like unity or simultaneity in the causal chain. Within the horizon of the story, the moment that the plot reveals itself as *telos* is what Aristotle called *anagnorisis*, or recognition—in Oedipus Rex, that moment of terrible clarity when everyone sees that *this* outcome, though wholly unforeseeable from any previous perspective, was inevitable all along... it was entirely unforeseeable; yes, we now see that it was inevitable after all (2011, 9).

The *anagnorisis* is the narrative equivalent of the punch-line in a joke; it is the moment that makes the build-up of everything that has come before suddenly meaningful, in religious language it is an “epiphany” or a “revelation”.

Narrative transforms lived experience of an event as it is refigured as an element in a narrative. We do not live life as characters whose lives are emplotted in a story; we live facing forward into a future as yet unknown. In telling a story retrospectively, even one drawn from our own life, we can only do so from the perspective of one who knows the ending of the story, looks back, and orders the events with that ending in view (Kermode 2000). In a story, the beginning and middle can *only* be told so that they lead to an already given conclusion. Multiple hearings of the same story will, of course, shift our perspective. On first hearing a narrative, an audience will have a perspective that is closer to, though clearly not identical with, the perspective of lived experience, unable to see the ending. On a subsequent hearing, the audience joins the narrator’s perspective, and hears each element in light of the end of the story.

I can only tell the story of who I am from the point at which I tell the story, not knowing how life will subsequently unfold. I nevertheless need to tell the story in such a way that the conclusion, itself only a rest-stop at the moment of telling, makes sense. So, events, experiences, thoughts and actions from the past need to be made consonant with the outcome at the point at which I have arrived (Ricoeur 1992). A different point in time, and a change in my self-conception means that I will inevitably tell a different story about how I have arrived where I am. Thus, to anticipate the argument presented below, a convert’s story will be different than the one that will be told by someone who has subsequently left the faith to which they had previously converted. That does not mean that apostates’ stories are any more, nor any less true than those of current adherents, but the



end point, and the perspective from which they are told has inevitably shifted, and the narrative along with it (Johnson 1998). This does not mean that there is no experience that can be subsequently related, but the way we tell stories necessarily shapes and conveys those experiences for ourselves and for others.

While Ricoeur does not think that life-lived is reducible to life-narrated, neither does he think that they can be separated; each can only exist in a reciprocal or dialectical relationship with the other. Human life and action is inescapably symbolic. Our actions and life experiences are shaped by the stories we have absorbed from a young age—children learning a great deal of what they know of the world from hearing and subsequently telling stories. At the same time, narrative is assembled from the raw material of life; this is as true of fiction as it is of historical, sociological, or autobiographical narratives. For Ricoeur, then, narrative is *mimetic*. This does not simply mean that art “imitates” life; rather, the configuring of life into narrative is both active and creative, shaping the stuff of life into story. We can only understand stories because of this relationship between life and story. As Ricoeur puts it, “our familiarity with the conceptual network of human acting is of the same order as the familiarity we have with the plots of stories that are known to us” (1991, 28).

Ricoeur contends that the basic framework of the narrative as we have outlined it, is universal, but particular narratives are socially patterned, and those patterns or genres change over time, and differ by social group (though he leaves this facet under-developed). We can only understand the growth and change of narrative traditions, as the interaction between the creative acts of emplotment and the sediment of previously emplotted narratives. In contrast to those who see tradition as that which does not change, Ricoeur argues that tradition can only live if it is dynamic. A tradition develops out of its own past as it responds to new contexts and takes up new directions. Thus, for example, the genre of

the novel -- which continues to bear the traces of the fact it was once a new ('novel') genre in its very name—was born of the creative employment of imagined events refigured in a particular way. This way of organising fictional events sediments over time into an established genre. Henceforth, all developments in the history of the novel consist of creative adaptations or responses to the genre's past (Ricoeur 1985). The same can, of course, be said of conversion narratives, many of the guiding principles of the genre developed within eighteenth and nineteenth century Protestant Evangelicalism (Hindmarsh 2005).

#### NARRATIVES OF CONVERSION: A PROBLEM AND AN OPPORTUNITY

Lofland and Stark's (1965) "Becoming a world saver" marked the beginning of a renewed interest in, and a more sophisticated sociological understanding of, religious conversion. James Richardson (1979) has rightly argued that it inaugurated a new paradigm in the study of conversion. It is still the most cited and influential sociological theory of conversion, even if those who have taken up the argument do so with modification (Rambo 1993). Even if Lofland and Stark do not have the last word on conversion, their article is a classic that functions as prototype for sociological thinking about conversion, and as such is a useful argument to consider in relation to Ricoeur's theory of narratives.

Lofland and Stark's article deals with conversion to a 'deviant perspective,' a new religious movement referred to in the article as the Divine Principles, or DP (a pseudonym they gave to The Unification Church). While Lofland and Stark's conversion theory is based on a study of converts to the DP, they view the theory as applicable to all conversions to deviant perspectives; they also express doubt about whether the theory should be extended to those who adopt a 'widely held' perspective (1965, 862). Lofland and Stark's conversion

process plots the journey of converts from (1) pre-conversion conditioning factors (experience of tension and a tendency towards religious solutions); (2) through seekership; (3) to a “turning point”; this is followed by (4) the development of affective bonds with members of the group, (5) which need to be stronger than those bonds outwith the group (especially the convert’s family of origin); and finally (6) to the intensive interaction that solidifies and maintains membership in the religious group.

In this section, we superimpose Lofland and Stark’s process of conversion to a deviant perspective over Ricoeur’s account of narrative as outlined above. When seen in this way, it illuminates how Lofland and Stark’s process parallels the necessary structure of any narrative. This throws into question the extent to which Lofland and Stark may have mistaken the logic of emplotment for stages in the process of conversion.

Lofland and Stark’s theory begins, as Ricoeur argues all narratives must, with the set-up of a problem or situation for which the protagonist (the “pre-convert”) will seek resolution and or improvement. They explain that

[p]erhaps the strongest qualitative generalization supported by the data is that pre-converts felt themselves frustrated in their rather diverse aspirations. Most people probably have some type of frustrated aspiration, but pre-converts experienced the tension rather more acutely and over longer periods than most people do (Lofland and Stark 1965, 867).

The acute tension experienced by the pre-convert is a necessary element of the narrative they tell; there is good reason to doubt if it reflects the lived experience at the time (Heirich 1977). Converts’ stories of how they arrived at the point they have must begin with a problem to solve: there can be no narrative without *peripeteia*; the ending (as converts) requires a problem that conversion addresses. There is nothing to suggest that Lofland and

Stark superimposed the *peripeteia* on the stories that they were told. Indeed, it seems more than likely that the converts themselves told their story accordingly, narrating an experience of tension pre-conversion. Nevertheless, there is no way to know if the converts *experienced* tensions more acute or of longer duration than that which all flesh is heir to, or if this is a consequence of the logic of emplotment. Whether they did or not experience greater tension, the end of the story requires a beginning, for the teller of the tale, just as it does for the sociological analyst of the tale. The people whose stories are recounted are the converts (the end of the story), so they need to have a problem that sets their journey towards conversion in motion; something must provide the set-up for the story that follows.

The next step in Lofland and Stark's theory is largely explained in terms of the character of the protagonists: in their search for a solution to their troubled lives, pre-converts are inclined to seek religious, rather than, say, psychiatric or political solutions. Those who will end the story as religious converts must first become *religious seekers*, rather than political activists, or seekers of psychiatric services. Those who convert have sought to find "some satisfactory system of religious meaning to interpret and resolve his discontent, and each had taken some action to achieve this end" (1965, 868). Again, the proto-religiosity of the protagonist highlights those elements that foreshadow that ending to the story, which the constructor of a religious tale will select and highlight, just as the autobiography of a political activist will select and highlight proto-political impulses in the backstory. For Ricoeur, this is simply how we make sense of our own lives, and attempt to maintain the sense of continuity of self.

In the unlikely scenario that the narrator of a conversion autobiography does not offer proto-religiosity in the back-story, a listener would inevitably find the story lacking plausible character development. Without it, an interviewer or other interlocutor faced with such a

gap would find the explanation of how the narrator became a follower of DP as yet unaccounted for and seek it out. Assuming some flexibility in the interview schedule, they would likely probe for the proto-religiosity at an earlier stage in light of which the ending makes sense.

Finally, the story reaches a crisis, or turning point, accompanied by the recognition (*anagnorisis*) that points towards the resolution of the narrative. Hence, before their conversion to the Divine Precepts

all pre-converts had reached or were about to reach what they perceived as a "turning point" in their lives... each had come to a moment when old lines of action were complete, had failed or been disrupted, or were about to be so, and when they faced the opportunity (or necessity), and possibly the burden, of doing something different with their lives (870).

Thenceforth the outcome of a successful and lasting conversion depends on the convert developing affective relationships with members, on not being successfully opposed by non-members (in particular, family and friends) who might oppose their involvement in the group, and is solidified by intensive interaction with members. Whether the final step is a part of the process of conversion or its consequence has been a matter of subsequent debate, though research has largely confirmed that most converts have a relationship with someone in the group with whom they hear the group's message before they are converted to it (Heirich 1977; Smilde 2005).

There is little reason to doubt that Lofland and Stark's theory is faithful to the accounts provided by followers of DP. The fact that Lofland and Stark do not seem to take into consideration that what they have been provided are "accounts" is more problematic (Snow and Machalek 1984). Although the sociological conceptualisation of "accounts" had

yet to be named—Scott and Lyman’s article was published three years later (1968)—the problem had been widely recognised for some time (Mills 1940). Scott and Lyman describe an account as:

a linguistic device employed whenever an action is subjected to valuative inquiry.

Such devices are a crucial element in the social order since they prevent conflicts from arising by verbally bridging the gap between action and expectation. Moreover, accounts are "situated" according to the statuses of the interactants, and are standardized within cultures so that certain accounts are terminologically stabilized and routinely expected when activity falls outside the domain of expectations (1968, 46).

Certainly conversion to a “deviant” religious group is an action that is likely to be both surprising and subject to evaluation; as a consequence, a rationalising narrative is expected of the convert.

There is an even more fundamental question, however. Have the respondents refigured their lived experience into a narrative format that produces the effect of the stages of a successful conversion in Lofland and Stark’s theory? In other words, is the theory a mirror of the process of conversion or of the necessary structure of a narrative? The consolidation of the conversion story, as summarised by Lofland and Stark, begins with the *peripeteia* of troubled lives and the frustrated aspirations of the pre-converts, and this inaugurates the “journey” or “search”, which experiences several setbacks and frustrations, before arriving at a solution to these troubles. Long ago Heirich has provided evidence that strongly suggests that the troubles, or the sinfulness, of the pre-convert, is exaggerated post hoc (1977) to show the effectiveness of the religious conversion itself: there is typically no control group that would allow us to identify whether the pre-converts are more troubled

than their non-converting peers. Looked at in narrative terms, however, there is no need to see this as exaggeration –let alone fabrication— but simply as selecting, highlighting and configuring events that necessarily must lead to the conclusion of the story that is being told, where the protagonist is a follower of the DP. Few people never experience any tensions, frustrations, failings or crises that could not—retrospectively—be called upon as a justification for a decision to convert to a deviant perspective. These selected events would be completely out of place if the narrator were telling a professional history to pitch why they were the ideal candidate for an advertised post, or of the history of a relationship that justify their reasons for petitioning for divorce. Each of these stories could be told by the same person having lived the same life, but they would highlight distinct sets of events and causal sequences that lead to a different end point. Here, the analytic difficulty overlaps with—even if it is not identical to—a problem more familiar to sociologists: converts have been sampled on the dependent variable. Seldom do studies of conversion compare converts to non-converts, or even converts to different communities of discourse, though this is becoming more common (Jindra 2011).

The account of *peripeteia* and the challenges to overcome them, comes to a head in a “turning point”, a moment of *anagnorisis*, which shows the way to the conclusion; this identity, as a follower of the Divine Precepts, seems to have been inevitable after all. The conclusion of the story shows retroactively how the member of the deviant religious group arrived where they did: it creates the troubled beginning (the *peripeteia*) and shows the configuration of events that follow to the conclusion as a causal sequence. That conclusion corresponds to the social location of the narrator at the time they tell the story, as followers of the Divine Precepts. Insofar as respondents are telling a “religious” narrative about their

lives, the events in the story need to be told in such a way as to lead to this, and no other, end, which gives significance to all that comes before it

#### WHAT PURPOSES DO CONVERSION STORIES SERVE?

As we have shown, a conversion narrative is not simply a string onto which causal variables are threaded in sequence. Rather, the narrative structure stages and selects facts, shapes events and experiences, thrusting some into the spotlight, and leaving others in the shadows or waiting in the wings. Institutions and communities have expectations and assumptions about what kind events, characters, moods and actions are relevant and appropriate to the salient stories of those who belong to, or interact with them (Bruner 2002). Many groups maintain norms about how certain kinds of stories are to be told; members are often guided by explicit or implicit templates and schemas that correspond to accepted cultural rules and institutional prerogatives, and these convey a worldview. What is as true of secular institutions like the courts (Bruner 2002), or of communities of discourse, like academic social science (Czarniawska 2004; McKinnon 2006) is no less true of religious groups and the stories that they tell themselves, each other, and the world.

Stories are not just representations constructed according to a particular logic of assemblage, to narrate is also to act upon the self, upon the community to which one belongs, and on the world beyond the community of belonging. Conversion narratives are stories told with three primary purposes. First, the narrator of a conversion story, by telling stories in the manner of their adopted tribe demonstrates that the teller is a competent member (Beckford 1978). Second, by narrating their own conversion, the narrator enacts the identity of the convert; the recounting does not just describe a process that has already happened, it is a means of enacting the convert's narrative identity (Stromberg 1993).



Finally, conversion stories are told as invitations to potential recruits and other outsiders; they constitute a defence of the narrator's conversion and an invitation to recreate the story for themselves, to share the same experience and benefit of conversion as described by someone who promotes it from the perspective of first-hand experience. These purposes refine the tales told by converts, often sedimenting into tradition-specific genres of conversion narration.

Lofland and Stark do not claim that their theory applies to conversion to 'widely held' perspectives (1965, 862), though they do assume that their stages of conversion would apply neatly to stories of conversion to other deviant perspectives. Subsequent research has shown that conversion narratives to "deviant perspectives," just as to "widely held" perspectives, are in fact both a good bit more varied. For example, as Beckford (1978), shows, Jehovah's Witnesses tell stories that make the Watchtower Society the protagonist of the conversion story, reflecting Witnesses' theology and ecclesiology. Likewise, compared with Lofland and Stark's converts to DP, they take most of the drama out of the *anagnorisis*, employing rubrics of slow, measured recognition of the truth as it is portrayed by the Watchtower Society, rather than flashes of inspiration and sudden change.

Considering a range of mostly "widely-held" perspectives, Nancy Ammerman observes that each religious tradition has their own set of stories, and adopting a religious identity is in part a matter of learning to participate in those stories (2003). Different religious communities tell distinctive variants of the conversion story. This is being increasingly recognised as a broader set of case-studies are considered; some of these studies even allow for direct comparison between the narratives of different traditions. Thus far, however, comparative narrative research has tended to make realist assumptions, treating the differences between conversion narratives as differences in the process of conversion to

different groups (Smilde 2003, 2005; Jindra 2011; Rambo and Farhadian 2014; Jindra 2011; Paloutzian 2014, Ammerman 2014). More comparative research on the narrative construction of different faith group identities, the boundaries they maintain between themselves and the world, and the process of crossing that boundary, is needed. Until we have a clearer view of those discursive practices, such realism risks failing to distinguish the the processes of conversion from the narratives that relay them.

For some religious traditions, personal conversion narratives are the *sine qua non* of religious identity construction, Protestant Evangelicalism being the most obvious example (Kling 2004; Hindmarsh 2005). It seems likely that evangelical conversion stories have functioned as the implicit prototype of conversion (both within the field of religion, and within the field of scholarship), but in fact variation is found there as well. Recent research has shown that those adopting “born again” identities in Venezuela (Smilde 2003) and Malawi (Manglos 2010) have tended to cast conversion above all in moral terms. Morality has certainly not been absent from the genre of evangelical conversion story as it developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century English speaking world (Hindmarsh 2005); however, like Beckford’s *Witnesses* (1978), these stories have emphasised the convert’s newfound *belief*. By contrast, in these two different Global South contexts, conversion where some form of Christian belief is itself widely held, being “born again” is understood as conformity to a particular (and often rigid) understanding of godly living. The convert mends their ways, but they are assumed to have already taken the propositional content of the faith for granted.

The definition of the term “conversion” is a matter of some disagreement in the literature (Rambo and Farhadian 2014); it is also not universally accepted among the world’s religious traditions. Muslims, for example, are more inclined to talk about reversion to Islam. Given that Muslims do not share the Christian’s belief in original sin, submitting to

God is a return to the state in which the convert was born (Van Nieuwkerk 2014). In this, there is a surprising parallel with the neo-pagans studied by Erin Johnston, who describe their newfound adherence to neo-paganism as a realisation that “I was always this way...” (2013), despite the fact that most had previously been active participants in other religious traditions. In both cases, the change may be radical and decisive while return or continuity provide the dominant theme. Viewed from a sociological, rather than a theological perspective, these claims cannot be taken literally, but they do say something important about how the believers conceive of their adoption of a new religious identity.

Conversion stories are often told in formal and informal rituals of belonging within the community itself. By the time a sociologist comes to hear the respondent’s conversion experience, the interviewee has already learned the genre. We often have the sense when the story we hear has been well rehearsed. Extraneous details have been carved away and its edges have been worn smooth, and convenient details stick out. Such repeated stories are usefully thought of as *ritualised* stories (McKinnon 2018). This is particularly the case in religious traditions where telling one’s “testimony” is a regular feature of worship (where it will be addressed to insiders) and/or evangelistic services, where it is more likely addressed to outsiders, irrespective of whether any are present (Harding 2000; Kling 2014).

Consistent with Ricoeur’s explication of narrative identity (1992), Peter Stromberg (1993) has argued that conversion narratives do not describe the self, but rather constitute it. That is, conversion narratives do not simply describe the journey to the present self, but also act upon the present self: the teller of a conversion narrative constructs and maintains a change of self-understanding, both in terms of their state of salvation, and that from which they have been saved (*peripeteia*), as well as the nature of the epiphany (*anagnorisis*) that brings one into agreement with the community of the saved.

None of this should be taken as the denial of a prior experience that is subsequently narrated. Life-lived, even if it is always already symbolic, precedes its subsequent narration (Ricoeur 1992). However, the experience as recounted—to the self, to the community of belonging, or to the outsider—has already been assigned meaning as it is emplotted. Experiences take on new significance when placed in relation to other events and characters within a narrative structure where they become caused by preceding events and causes of those that follow. The narrative frameworks of the community provide the relevant terminology, identifying an event as a conversion *per se*.

Stories may be meant to inform, to instruct or to entertain; they are, however always also meant to persuade, even if only to persuade the hearer of their own coherence and plausibility. Often, though, the story is told to persuade the hearer of something more—it forms an argument for the truth or efficacy of a view of the world. Even more than an argument, it is an invitation from the hearer to the same conversion, to enter the same story, and thereby share the same experience. The conversion story told to an outsider attempts to re-describe not only the teller's, but implicitly also the hearer's, current experience in the terms the teller's past state, from which they, too, need to be, and can be, saved.

## CONCLUSION

Lofland and Stark's theory has functioned as one of the key prototypes for the sociological theory of conversion. Looked at in the light cast by Ricoeur's work on narrative, we can see that the authors have conflated their description of the process of conversion with the structure of narratives by means of which converts tell of their experiences. Subsequent research on conversion has provided a broader empirical base from which we can begin to

grasp the diversity of conversion narratives. These have generally been framed in realist terms, providing insight into the mechanisms and processes of conversion, even when they are self-consciously styled as narrative inquiries. Following on insights from Ricoeur, I have suggested the need for further, comparative work on the sociology of religious narratives, and the way that these are shaped by the purposes for which conversion stories are told. Such works holds the promise of a firmer foundation for understanding the processes themselves while taking fuller account of the cultural and institutional organisation of communities to which people convert.

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### **Note on contributor**

Andrew McKinnon is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Aberdeen, where he is also Director of Postgraduate Research in the School of Social Science. His research and

teaching is primarily in the areas of social theory and the sociology of religion, and he takes particular interest in global Anglicanism.

CORRESPONDENCE: Andrew McKinnon, School of Social Science, University of Aberdeen, Edward Wright Building, Dunbar Street, King's College, Aberdeen, UK, AB24 3QY.

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