

The Nature of Spiritual Transformation

A Review of the Literature

Submitted to
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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION..... 3
 Spiritual transformation as a universal principle
 The example of Cassie Bernall

DEFINING “SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION” 4
 Spiritual transformation in the Hebrew Scriptures
 Spiritual transformation in the New Testament
 Spiritual transformation in the Koran
 What distinguishes spiritual transformation from other religious experiences
 How does the term spiritual transformation differ from other similar terms

EARLY SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH..... 6
 The relationship between age and spiritual transformation
 The relationship between personality and spiritual transformation
 The relationship between stress and spiritual transformation

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES 7
 Six ‘conversion motifs’
 The “old” versus “new” conversion paradigm
 Rambo’s seven stages of transformation
 The “self” and spiritual transformation

RECENT SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH 10
 Zinnbauer & Pargament Study (1998)
 Kirkpatrick Studies (1997, 1998)
 Kose Study (1996)
 Miller & D’deBaca Study (1994)
 Poston Study (1992)
 Kox Study (1991)
 Kirkpatrick and Shaver Study (1990)
 Ullman Study (1989)
 Paloutzan Study (1981)
 Turner Study (1979)
 Heirich Study (1977)
 Seggar and Kunz Study (1972)

REFERENCES..... 15

INTRODUCTION

The single purpose of this study is to review the scientific literature on the concept of spiritual transformation.

Learning more about spiritual transformation as a universal principle advances the donor intent of Sir John Templeton. More specifically, Sir John writes in his book *Possibilities* (2000) that:

*Christians often refer to a favorite verse in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John, describing one or more transformative events in their lives as an experience of having been born again. Christians also describe a variety of important experiences as being filled with the spirit. Their descriptions often concur in asserting that their lives are no longer the same and have been transformed for the better. Independent observers often attest to these changes as well. **Can study of the nature of such changes offer another possibility for developing spiritual progress based on improved understanding of, and appreciation for, spiritually transforming experiences?** (p. 112, emphasis added)*

· ***Spiritual transformation as a universal principle***

In addition to exploring spiritual transformation within the context of the Protestant “born again” experience, this study also examines the matrixes of spiritual transformation in other religious traditions, including Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism. Indeed, one objective of this study is to identify whether there exists a cluster of *universal principles* common to all spiritually transforming experiences, regardless of denomination or a particular religious faith. For as William James once wrote *“the god whom science recognizes must be a God of universal laws exclusively, a god who does wholesale, not a retail business”* (1902: 390).

· ***The inspiring example of young Cassie Bernall***

Pargament (1997) posits that while most of the scientific research and theory in recent years has focused on the conservational nature of religion, *“religion has the transformative power to create radical personal change.”* Perhaps this change can be best exemplified in the life (and tragic death) of Cassie Bernall, a Columbine HS teenager whose entire worldview changed dramatically after her “born again” experience. Utilizing the lens of science, this study seeks to explore the nature of spiritual transformation as experienced by Cassie Bernall and others who have had similar experiences. Our task is not easy. As Rambo (1993) suggests, it is “difficult to understand, predict, and control that which is generally *invisible* to the outsider, mysterious and sacred to the insider.”

DEFINING “SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION”

The appearance of everything was altered; there seemed to be as it were a calm, sweet, cast, or appearance of Divine glory, in almost everything. God’s excellency, His wisdom, His purity and love seemed to appear in everything: in the sun, moon, and stars, in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind.

- Evangelist Jonathan Edwards, describing his own spiritual transformation

For the purposes of this study, spiritual transformation is defined as a dramatic change in religious belief, attitude, and behavior that occurs over a relatively short period of time. There is a consensus in the research that this change usually occurs within three contexts:

- (1) As an intensified devotion within the same religious structure;
- (2) A shift from no religious commitment to a devout religious life; or,
- (3) A change from one religion to another.

Almost one hundred years ago William James captured the essence of this transformation when he wrote: “*To say a man is ‘converted’ means that religious ideas, peripheral to his consciousness, now take a central place, and that **religious aims form the habitual center of his energy***” (1902:276, emphasis added).

· ***Spiritual transformation in the Hebrew Scriptures***

Historically, the verb used in the Hebrew Scriptures to denote spiritual transformation was *shubh*, which means “to return” or “to repent.” In rabbinic literature a *ba’al teshuvah* is literally a “master of return” or “master of repentance.” For example, each year at Yom Kippur every Jew is expected to become a *ba’al teshuvah*, a person who “returns” to God. Interestingly, the contemporary ‘return’ of secular Jews to Orthodox Judaism has been called the *ba’al teshuvah* movement (Klinghoffer, 1999).

· ***Spiritual transformation in the New Testament***

Although the New Testament continues this understanding of spiritual transformation as a “return,” the concept of being “born again” is used prominently to denote a spiritual rebirth into Christ (John 3:3: ‘No one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again’). By the fifth century, Saul’s Damascus road experience and St. Augustine’s conversion experience (when he heard the voice of God telling him to pick up the New Testament and read) have become the two paradigmatic models of Christian conversion.

· ***Spiritual transformation in the Koran***

God in the Koran also “turns” in mercy and forgiveness toward those who “repent” (*taba*, meaning to turn) toward him (5:39/45). However, the Koran asserts that God does not “change” (*ghayyara*) what is in people until *they change what is in themselves* (13:11/12). This is the

reverse of the Calvinistic doctrine of *ordo salutis*, where God, through the Holy Spirit, takes the initiative to change our hearts. (Woodberry, 1992)

· ***What distinguishes spiritual transformation from other religious experiences***

Significantly, *contemporary researchers and theologians share the belief that there is no one cause of spiritual transformation, no one process, and no one simple consequence of that process*. Moreover, it is usually not a single event, but a complex process that includes a complex matrix of people, events, institutions, expectations, and experiences. As G.K. Chesterton, once wrote: “The church is a house with a hundred gates; and no two men enter at exactly the same angle. After a comprehensive review of the literature, Hood and his colleagues (1996:276) identified six criteria that distinguish spiritual transformation from other types of religious experiences. These are:

1. A spiritual transformation is a profound change in the self.
2. The change is not simply a matter of maturation, but is typically identified with a process (sudden or gradual) by which the transformed self is achieved.
3. This change in the self is radical in its *consequences* – indicated by such things as a new centering of concern, interest, and behaviors.
4. This new sense of self is perceived as “higher” or as emancipation from a previous dilemma or predicament.
5. This process occurs within a social medium or context, specifically spiritual transformation entails a religious framework within which the transformed self is described, acts, and is recognized by others.
6. Last, if behaviors from these new ideals and changed habits of life do not follow, then there has been no transformation.

Spiritual transformation is thus understood as a radical reorganization of one’s identity, meaning, and purpose in life. Pargament (1997) suggests that this transformation occurs when an individual begins to feel connected to a spiritual force, identified as God, Christ, Allah, Buddha. This force, he posits, is not only transcendent but also significant to and shaping one’s immediate experience. Those who experience a spiritual transformation feel in touch with this sacred spiritual force that changes one’s worldview, range of emotions, and behaviors. Within Christian theology, the passage in 2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us that this change is indeed a spiritual ‘rebirth’: “The old has passed away, behold, the new has come.”

· ***How does the term spiritual transformation different from other similar terms?***

The term spiritual transformation is used throughout this study to denote what is understood widely in the psychology of religion literature as a “conversion experience.” Interestingly, some

researchers have begun to use the term “quantum change” to highlight the profound nature of this religious experience (Miller & C’deBaca: 1994). However, it must be noted that one’s spiritual transformation can be profound whether it occurs gradually or via a “sudden” experience.

“Spiritual transformation” will be used instead of a “born again experience” to recognize and honor the profound and fundamental changes that occur within individuals who have either converted to religious traditions other than Christianity or have intensified their devotion to these faiths. Although Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism do not use the term “born again,” these traditions clearly recognize the reality of spiritually transforming experiences.

EARLY SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

When researching the nature of spiritual transformation it is important for scholars to recognize that “we stand on the shoulders of giants.” Religious conversion has been a major focus of scientific psychology since the discipline emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. For example, in 1881, G. Stanley Hall delivered a series of public lectures at Harvard University, and a significant portion of his lectures focused on the phenomenon of religious conversion during adolescence. Later the material he presented during those lectures, including his theory of adolescence as a period of “storm and stress,” was incorporated into his classic two-volume study titled *Adolescence*.

- ***Relationship between age and spiritual transformation***

Early investigators often studied the relationship between age and spiritual transformation. Although spiritual transformation can clearly occur at any age, almost all of these early researchers hypothesized that a religious conversion is more likely to occur during adolescence.

- ***Relationship between personality and spiritual transformation***

Unquestionably, William James set the tone for contemporary empirical work in the psychology of religious experience. His classic book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), which emerged out of his Gifford Lectures, partly explored the effects of spiritual transformation on personality and behavior.

- ***The relationship between stress and spiritual transformation***

In addition to James, George Coe (1900) and Edwin Starbuck (1899) conducted empirical research on the experience of spiritual transformation. They concluded independently that the stronger a person’s spiritual background, the greater the chance that the person will report intense religious experiences and undergo a religious conversion during adolescence or in early adulthood. This finding will be discussed in a later section.

Most significantly, however, the empirical research of these early pioneers suggested that spiritual transformation often occurs during and after a period of stress, emotional upheaval, even despair. For example, Starbuck (1899) noted, “the pre-conversion state in adolescent converts involved a sense of sin, dejection, confusion, and depression which was resolved through conversion.” William James (1902) also noted that in the context of religious conversion “Emotional occasions...are extremely potent in precipitating mental rearrangements.” As we shall see, contemporary researchers continue to examine the function and role of stress as a precursor or predictor of a spiritual transformation.

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

Contemporary researchers have focused much of their attention on constructing a variety of useful theoretical models (see Hood, 1995). Many of these theorists, mostly psychologists or sociologists, have developed rather sophisticated classification systems or typologies to highlight and demarcate the nature of spiritual transformation. One highly-cited typology, developed by Lofland and Skonovd (1981), delineates six conversion “types” or “motifs”:

Six “Conversion Motifs”

1. *INTELLECTUAL*: A private, intellectual investigation into a religious faith that results in a spiritual transformation. Generally, the individual experiences little or no external pressure or influence from “believers.”
2. *MYSTICAL*: This “motif” is marked by high emotional intensity, even trauma at times. The Pauline Damascus road experience is a paradigmatic example of this “motif.” The critical period is often quite brief, although a period of stress may occur days or weeks leading up to the critical event (in Christianity, this event is often understood as the “born again” experience). Again, this “motif” is generally demarcated by a high level of emotional arousal followed by an active intensification of belief and religious practice
3. *EXPERIMENTAL*: A very common “motif” in the late twentieth century. People who are “searching” for meaning and divine inspiration frequently “try out” a religion and take on a “show me” attitude. Theology and rituals are explored for meaning and “truth.”
4. *AFFECTIONAL*: The key element in this “motif” is a personal attachment to a practicing believer or believers. A personal and emotional relationship with another person or a group is central to one’s spiritual transformation.
5. *REVIVALISM*: Ecstatic arousal in a group or collective context that has a transforming effect on the individual is the central element of this “motif.” Although Lofland and Skonovd concede that this “motif” is less prominent in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth, spiritually transforming experiences, especially within the context of evangelical Christianity, remain common.
6. *COERCIVE*: A relatively rare “motif,” this type includes brainwashing and coercive persuasion marked by intense pressure on an individual to participate, conform, and confess.

· ***Old versus new “conversion” paradigm***

Richardson (1985) has also studied the characteristics of religious conversion, comparing what he calls the “old” conversion paradigm and the “contemporary” paradigm. His comparison is outlined below:

Old Conversion Paradigm

1. Conversion occurs suddenly
2. It is more emotional than rational
3. External forces act on a passive agent
4. There is a dramatic transformation of self
5. Behavior change follows from belief change
6. Conversion occurs once and is permanent
7. It typically occurs in adolescence
8. The prototype is Paul’s conversion

Contemporary Conversion Paradigm

1. Conversion occurs gradually
2. It is rational rather emotional
3. The convert is an active, seeking agent
4. There is self-realization within a humanistic tradition
5. Belief change follows from behavior change
6. Conversion is not permanent; it may occur several times
7. It typically occurs in early adulthood
8. No one experience is prototypical.

· ***Rambo’s seven stages of transformation***

In one of the most comprehensive analyses of the literature, Rambo (1993) posits a seven-stage model to study and identify the process of spiritual transformation. The seven “stages” are: *context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences*. Rambo suggests that during these processes “relationships, rituals, rhetoric, and roles interact and reinforce one another” (p. 101). These four components will be examined in a later section.

· ***The “self” and spiritual transformation***

Much of the contemporary scientific psychological research examines the relationship between the “self” or personality and spiritual transformation. For example, Paloutzian et al (1999) argue that spiritual transformation experiences appear to have minimal effect on the “elemental” functions of personality (generally known as the Big Five traits or temperaments, these are: whether one is open to experience, conscientious, extroverted, agreeable, neurotic). However, they suggest that spiritually transforming experiences *can* result in profound, life changes at the mid-level functions of personality -- such as goals, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors. Indeed, these researchers posit that “self-defining” personality functions (such as identity, life meaning) do change dramatically after a spiritual transformation.

In conclusion, there appears to be consensus among contemporary researchers that:

- Spiritual transformation influences people's goals, strivings, and identity
- Spiritual transformation seems to have little appreciable effect on basic personality structure
- Certain types of personalities may be more prone to spiritual transformation than others
Religious groups may serve as a vehicle for certain types of personalities

To a significant degree, future theoretical models and empirical research will be based upon these findings.

RECENT SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

After conducting a comprehensive review of the literature, Paloutzian, Richardson, and Rambo (1999) inform us that rigorous empirical studies on the nature of spiritual transformation remain scarce. The studies that have been conducted are, with a few notable exceptions, cross-sectional, retrospective, and focus predominantly on Protestant Christianity. Even more problematic, researchers must graft the scientific triad of observation, experimentation, and measurement onto the reality of spiritually transforming experiences. As Miller and C'deBaca (1994) suggest,

scientific inquiry typically starts with systematic observation to describe the phenomena to be understood. Yet prospective access to such occurrences may not be readily arranged. [Spiritual transformation experiences] as reported in biographies are often, private, unexpected, even uninvited events. They occur on the desert road to Damascus, waiting at the front of the library, lying in a hospital bed, or doing what one has done thousands of times before -- except this time it is different.

With this limitation in mind, the following studies represent the most significant examples of contemporary empirical research in the area of spiritual transformation and religious conversion:

· **Zinnbauer & Pargament Study (1998)**

Major finding: Self-definition changed dramatically for both sudden and gradual converts.

This study examined the nature of spiritual transformation in a sample of 130 Christian college students. Using a screening questionnaire, students who had experienced a dramatic spiritual transformation, students whose spirituality had gradually increased, and religious adherents who did not experience a transformation were selected and a battery of instruments administered. The researchers hypothesized that only those who had experienced a spiritual transformation should undergo statistically significant personal change. However, they found that self-definition changed markedly for *both* spiritual and gradual converts. Other findings included: those who had a spiritual transformation reported more pre-conversion stress and perception of personal inadequacy. These students also experienced significant improvement in their personal competence after their spiritual transformation. The researchers suggest that their study reinforces theories that people can and do use religion as a way to accomplish personal growth goals.

· **Kirkpatrick Studies (1997, 1998)**

Major Finding: A significant relationship exists between an individual's "attachment style" and finding a new relationship with God.

Women readers of the Denver Post newspaper were surveyed approximately four years apart about a variety of religious commitments. The study found that when religion at time T1 was

statistically controlled, those with an insecure-anxious or an insecure-avoidant adult attachment style were more likely than those with a secure attachment style to report finding a “new relationship with God” by time T2. In addition, insecure-anxious subjects were more likely than those who had secure or ambivalent attachments to report having had a religious experience or a religious conversion during this time period. These initial findings were replicated and extended in a follow-up study (1998) in which college students were assessed for their attachment styles and religiousness approximately four months apart. These results were interpreted by Kirkpatrick as supporting the compensation hypothesis in attachment theory.

· **Kose Study (1996)**

Major Finding: *Both cognitive and emotional factors were significant precursors of conversion.*

This study consisted of interviews with 70 converts to Islam (50 males, 20 females). The methods used to select the subjects were snowball and convenience sampling. The study provided only limited support to earlier studies (e.g., Ullman) that found a significant relationship between bad or stressful relations with one’s father and conversion. In regard to religious education, the converts in this study seem to have come from families where there was no strong identification with any religion. 65 percent of the converts came from families that did not belong to a church, or were not active participants in a church. The average age when one converted is 29.7 years. For most of the converts Kose studied, adolescence was a time when they shied away from their childhood religion. Adolescence was not a time when the subjects experienced upheaval or trauma, but a time when they rejected the religion of their childhood. Only 11 percent of the 70 reported that they were practicing their religion of origin prior to conversion. Over a quarter (20%) of the sample reported that they were in search of an alternative to the secular way of life and wanted to reject the materialistic perspective of society. Emotional and cognitive concerns seem to be equal in characterizing the two-year period preceding conversion. 47 percent reported specific concerns that could be designed as cognitive or existential concerns (e.g., meaning and purpose in life) and 49% reported emotional distress during the two-year period prior to conversion. Both cognitive and emotional factors seemed to be precursors of conversion. Finally, the study also demarcated the most motivating factor in the subject’s conversion process: Emphasis on brotherhood, community, and friendliness (10%); Witnessing life of a Muslim and attraction to the culture (10%); Religious doctrines and teachings (27%); Moral ethical standards, social matters, and political ideology (27%); Spiritual, mystical aspect, or inexplicable religious experience (26%).

· **Miller & C’deBaca Study (1994)**

Major Finding: *Subjects viewed their spiritual transformation as a central turning point, a watershed moment.*

Subjects were sought via a newspaper feature story in the Albuquerque Journal, asking for volunteers “who have been transformed in a relatively short period of time – who have had a deep shift in core values, feelings, attitudes or actions.” 52 subjects completed all questionnaires. Subjects viewed their spiritual transformation experiences as central turning points in their lives, watershed moments that divided their memories into before and after. The most common quality of the effects of spiritual transformation was of *liberation*, a new kind of meaning and

perception. A majority of subjects (85%) currently described themselves as either religious (41%) or spiritual (44%). With respect to belief in God, 59% reported having believed in God before their experience, and 83% reporting believing in God now. According to the researchers, the largest immediate shifts were reported as an increase in the “sense of meaning,” a decreased sense of something missing in life, and increased happiness, satisfaction, and a closeness to God. Finally, the researchers found that men reported that *prior* to their spiritual transformation, their five highest values were (in order): wealth, adventure, achievement, pleasure, and being respected. These values were reordered (out of 50) after their spiritual transformations, often rapidly, falling to current priority ranks wealth (50), adventure (29), achievement (26), pleasure (25), being respected (33). In their place, new top priorities for men were spirituality, personal peace, family, God’s will, and honesty.

.. **Poston Study (1992)**

Major Finding: Only 3 of 72 converts to Islam reported an emotional, Pauline-type conversion in which mystical or supernatural factors were perceived.

A questionnaire study of 72 American and European converts to Islam. 69 percent of the subjects were male. Most of the converts were raised as Christians. The average conversion age in this study was 31.4 years. For Poston’s subjects, an advocate or a personal relationship with a current adherent to Islam was the chief motivating factor which the overwhelming majority found significant. 75 percent of the subjects mentioned aspects of the teaching of Islam as being instrumental in their decision to convert, while 60 percent mentioned specific individuals or groups which had influenced them in their decision. Poston’s study also underscores the hypothesis that emotional and crisis-triggered conversions are not common to Islam. Only 3 of the 72 converts reported an emotional, Pauline-type conversion in which supernatural factors were perceived.

.. **Kox Study (1991)**

Major Finding: Converts were more likely than non-converts to report a major life event prior to their conversion.

This study compared a group of young converts to a charismatic Christian denomination to a group of matched controls. 67% of the converts reported personal problems within 3-5 years before conversion, as opposed to 20% of the control groups. Converts were also more likely than the non-converts to report a major life event prior to their conversion (e.g., a move, the death of a parent, or parents’ divorce), although a significant percentage of converts do not report crisis just prior to their conversion.

.. **Kirkpatrick and Shaver Study (1990)**

Major Finding: The researchers found an association between retrospective accounts of child-mother attachment and conversions. In particular, insecure-avoidant attachments were found to predict adolescent and adult sudden conversions.

.. **Ullman Study (1989)**

Major Finding: *Major issues motivating converts were emotional, involving problematic relationships with their father, unhappy childhoods, and a past history of disrupted, distorted personal relationships.*

Published in book form under the title *The Transformed Self: The Psychology of Religious Conversion*, Ullman's research is widely cited as one of the few empirical studies that compares "conversion processes" across different religious groups with matched controls. Ullman studied 10 converts to Orthodox Judaism, 10 Roman Catholic converts, 10 Hare Krishnas, 10 Bahai, and a group of thirty people who served a matched control group. Her research, utilizing a battery of instruments and semi-clinical interviews, compared and contrasted factors such as the amount of trauma or family conflict in the converts' lives during childhood and adolescence, their degree of interest in religious and existential questions, and their degree of involvement with religious groups. Although Ullman initially theorized that the major motivation for conversion was the need for what she called "cognitive meaning," she found, in fact, that the major issues motivating the forty converts (in comparison to the control group) were emotional, involving problematic relationships with their father, unhappy childhoods, and a past history of disrupted, distorted personal relationships. The major differences between the four converted groups and the converted group were on emotional, not cognitive, indices. Her core finding, was that the converts, to a statistically significant level, had absent, weak, or abusive fathers. This serious psychological deprivation and abuse appeared to motivate and inform the person's conversion. Finally, many of the converts established a powerful relationship with a guru, rabbi, priest, or other person in the group to which they were converted and these relationships were absolutely central during the conversion process.

.. **Paloutzian Study (1981)**

Major Finding: *Study confirmed the hypothesis that converts perceive more meaning in life than non-converts.*

This study examined the changes in purpose in life over time following religious conversion. The subjects were 91 students in a large psychology course; 51 experimental subjects were those who indicated that they were Christian believers and 40 were control subjects. The questionnaire consisted of the Purpose in Life Test, the Rokeach Values Survey test, and items to determine the amount of time since one's conversion. The study confirmed the hypothesis that converts perceive more meaning in life than non-converts.

.. **Turner Study (1979)**

Major Finding: *As a result of mass conversions to Protestant Christianity in Chiapas, Mexico, the researcher documented lower levels of poverty, disease, and illiteracy.*

An anthropologist, Turner examined the effects of conversion to Protestantism on the Tzeltal Indians of Oxchuc in Chiapas, Mexico. More than one-half of the town's four thousand inhabitants converted. As a result, Turner noticed changes in the level of poverty, disease, and illiteracy. Roman Catholicism in the area was relatively weak, because no priest was living there.

In addition, the Indians had been exploited by Spanish colonialism, so conversion to Protestantism was an appealing option. Besides being land poor, the Indians were heavy users of alcohol. Intoxicants were available only through the landowners, who charged extremely high prices. Hence, debt was often heavy. Turner reports that the converts were required to abstain from all alcohol. With a decrease in the use of alcohol, people began to save some money and to improve their lot in life. In addition, the high cost of participating in the indigenous fiestas, which were rejected by converts, had previously prevented people from breaking out of the cycle of poverty. And converts who had been taught to repudiate the system of witchcraft were relieved of heavy payments for protection from evil forces. People began to live healthier lives. However, it must be noted that Turner's assessment of the consequences of conversion must be understood and reviewed within the context that Turner was a member of the Wycliffe Bible Translators missionary.

· **Heirich Study (1977)**

Major Finding: Stress as a dependent variable is insufficient to account for conversion.

A statistically sophisticated study of the role of stress, Heirich compared Roman Catholic charismatics and a control group of non-charismatic Roman Catholics in terms of several factors related to stress. Both groups experienced various forms of stress and crisis. Heirich reports, however, that the only statistically significant finding was that charismatic converts "were less likely than others to deny stress rather than more likely to report some stress." He concludes that "stress...is insufficient to account for what is going on."

· **Seggar and Kunz Study (1972)**

Major Finding: A key component of spiritual transformation is self-identifying oneself as a member of a religious group.

These researchers studied new members of the Mormon Church and concluded that conversion to the Church is a gradual process that unfolds when social circumstances are ripe, and that the change in the "convert" was not a change in core beliefs, but rather a slower developmental process whereby the individual became more and more identified with the Mormon Church. This landmark study advanced the theory of "group membership" as a key component of spiritual transformation.