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Narrativization of Religious Conversion Experience in the Environment of Evangelical Protestantism in Ukraine

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Abstract:

In the context of this article and in the perspective of interpretational approach we have considered possibilities of sociological analysis of a religious conversion. Based on examples of Evangelical Protestantism communities functioning on the territory of Ukraine the author analyzes peculiarities of building and structuring conversion narratives, a strategy of representation of the religious experience, linguistic means and tools used in this process. A religious conversion is considered as a particular discursive practice or a religious communication related to producing a narrative, which on the one hand reflects changes occurring to a person who passed through a conversion experience, and on the other hand the narrative itself preconditions such changes by means of adaptation of a canonic language of the religious group. Conversion cases considered by the author allow making a conclusion about existence of steady communicative conversion models at the level of Evangelical Protestantism which determinative distinction is reconstruction of the biographical experience in compliance with the “plot” predetermined by a canonic discourse of the considered communities.

Keywords:

[religious conversion](#), [conversion narrative](#), [Evangelical Protestantism](#), [linguistic analysis](#), [conversion discourse](#).

«We are all Protestants today»
P. Berger

Introduction

An important feature of modern society is a process of its individualization, which shows as increase of freedom and possibilities for an individual choice. Unlike previous epochs, individuals are progressively less experiencing a total pressure of social institutions, structures and social groups, because a person is in a situation where searching and making choices becomes kind of “an imperative”. Person break in practical terms free from the rule of religion and all other complicated symbolic systems claiming to produce meanings. However, this situation, called by P. Berger (Berger, 1980, pp. 30–60) a “transition from fate to choice”, appears to be ambivalent, because release from pressure of traditions as well as de-institutionalization of meanings also brings anxiety and fear of uncertainty. Consequently, such uncertainty results in both individual and collective actions aimed at searching meanings and constructing identities. Within the given context, a dynamic expansion of Evangelical Protestantism throughout the world may be considered as a response to the described situation. By means of creating a peculiar subculture irrespective of the territory or history, such religious communities produce readymade meanings and provide them to their members thus enabling them to have a good sense of direction in the modern pluralistic society. In religious groups of this type, the consistency of religion is proved not by a formal belonging, but via immediate involvement in the community of believers with strong regulatory control. At the same time, the constitutive element, based on which all the group practices are built, is the phenomenon of religious

conversion and all personal transformations resulting from it. It is the conversion experience, or “born-again”, that is forming a new identity, allows re-interpretation of all the previous biographical background and makes Evangelical Protestantism so attractive for potential followers.

Conversion: theoretical and methodological approaches

A phenomenon of religious conversion was the object of thorough studies on the verge of XIX – XX centuries. This historical period was marked by the process of religious revival in the North America in the environment of Evangelical Protestantism, and as a result, the phenomenon of conversion came into focus of attention of American psychologists and sociologists of religion (Hood, 2009, pp. 207–210).

Religious experience traditionally was one of the key research areas in the context of psychology, sociology and cultural anthropology. However, the majority of authors working on this topic shared the thesis worded in works of W. James (Джеймс, 1993), that namely religious feelings, and not religious affirmations and beliefs, constitute the essence of religion and religious life. W. James refused to discuss ontology of religious and mystical feelings, and shifted attention to problems of their psychology. Therefore, at the beginning and during the first half of the XX century this problematic remained mostly in the context of psychologism.

Renewal of interest to the phenomenon of religious conversion in the second half of the XX century was related to emerge and expansion of so-called new religious movements and organizations in the Western Europe and the USA. However, the researches that were carried out during

that time were marked not by psychological orientation but rather by an expressed sociological component (Beckford, 1978; Lofland & Stark, 1965; Lofland & Skonovd, 1981). In general, based on the mentioned periodization, there may be highlighted two principal theoretical and methodological approaches in the history of studying the phenomenon of religious conversion, which subsequently were called a “classical” (psychological) and a “modern” (sociological) paradigm.

A classical approach was influenced by a social psychology and considered the process of conversion in the context of a Bible plot of conversion of the Apostle Paul (Saul) on his way to Damascus. In terms of this paradigm, a convert is presented as a passive object affected by the external irrational forces. The dominating role in the process of conversion played by the emotional component related to radical intrapersonal transformation. The conversion process characterized by the suddenness and inconvertibility. W. James defines the religious conversion as follows: *to say that a person “passed through the conversion” means ... that religious ideas, being peripheral in his conscious, now take the central place and the religious goals determine the area of applying his efforts and actions* (Джеймс, 1993, pp. 65–68).

Emerge of so-called new religious movements in 1960–70s and their difference from traditional religions caught the interest of social psychologists and sociologists and encouraged elaboration of a modern conversion paradigm. In terms of a modern approach, the conversion is considered as a gradual process where a convert acts as an active searching subject. The process of conversion is contextually determined and closely related to sociocultural and historical environment, thus unlike

psychologically oriented classical approach, a modern one emphasizes an intersubjective nature of this process. The religious conversion is presented not as a simple act but rather as a process, which may occur over and over again. However, the dominating position in this process is taken by a rational component over the emotional one. A common feature in both classical and modern approaches to the phenomenon of a religious conversion is the result of this process, which shows in radical personality changes, peculiarities of self-perception and re-interpretation of “self” vision (Richardson, 1985, pp. 166–172).

In a number of cases, explanatory models of religious conversion that emerged in 1960–70 years combined elements of both classical and modern research paradigms (Richardson, 1985). Thus, the mostly widely quoted model of religious conversion was a model suggested by American researchers J. Lofland and R. Stark (Lofland & Stark, 1965). Based on materials obtained after studying biographical interviews with followers of the Unification Church in 1965, they singled out seven factors, which availability was considered as a condition predisposing a religious conversion. Lofland and Stark attempted to answer the question “what are the circumstances and what are the mechanisms due to which a person begins to share the world view of the Unification Church”. The predisposing factors of religious conversion identified by the researches did not have strictly determined chronological sequence but rather act as situational determinants: 1) long-lasting and deeply experienced tension condition (deprivation); 2) awareness of a possible way out of such condition in the religious perspective; 3) self-determination as a “religious searcher” (with non-acceptance of a possible problem solution by

means of traditional religions); 4) meeting representatives of a certain religious group at the “turning point” of life; 5) establishing affective connections between potential new converts and members of the religious group (beginning of getting acquainted with the ideology of the group); 6) weakening and gradual neutralization of connections outside the religious group, reaching its culmination in “verbal conversion” or in acceptance of the “oratory of the group”; 7) progressively intensive cooperation with members of the group, and as a result full “conversion” and involvement into activity of the group (Lofland & Stark, 1965). Subsequently the model of Lofland/Stark repeatedly came under criticism both for its linear and static nature and for ignoring a wide sociocultural context.

Later, J. Lofland and N. Skonovd refused from searching universal mechanisms of conversion and suggested so-called “motivational” approach. Lofland and Skonovd define conversion as *fundamental reorganization of identity, meanings and life* (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981). That being said, they note that every conversion process has unique peculiarities and characteristics. Based on this, it is more preferable to differentiate various conversion cases by respective motives. The credit of Lofland’s and Skonovd’s work was consideration of religious conversion not as a linear and universal process but as a phenomenon which is exposed to changes under the influence of sociocultural context and historical circumstances.

They singled out six conversion motives which differentiated every case of religious conversion: 1) mystical motive is related to deep emotional stress or commotion (experience of Apostle Paul); 2) intellectual (self-conversion) is an independent rational search and constructing his own religious identity by the person; 3) experimental

motive supposes initial acquaintance with the religious group without active participation in it and yet subsequent conversion and involvement into the life of the group; 4) affective motive is determined by deep emotional affection and interpersonal links; 5) revivalist motive is related to emotionally colored event, initiating the conversion process; 6) forced motive (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981).

In 1980s, criticism was laid on theories of religious conversion, which combined, on the one hand, considering conditions of deprivation or psychological tension as key factors initiating the conversion process, and the other hand – analysis of peculiarities of religious groups’ ideologies, which suggested possibilities to overcome such conditions. Indeed, acceptance of a certain religious ideology and subsequent interiorization of group values enables person who are in the “religious search” to solve issues facing them. However, it remained not completely clear what exactly determines the choice of a certain religious group when there are similar or identical ideologies. Eventually, the focus of research attention shifted to analysis of social networks’ influence.

Based on results of conversion cases analysis in the environment of American new religious groups (Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons) R. Stark, W. Bainbridge and R. Finke (Stark & Bainbridge, 1980; Stark & Finke, 2000) came to a conclusion that in majority of cases the choice in favor of a particular religious group is determined not by attractiveness of the group’s ideology but rather by the role played by interpersonal connections between the group members and a potential convert. Moreover, so-called strong social ties that act as an environment for recruiting new followers play the defining role in this. In

addition, the researches emphasized that acceptance of a religious group ideology often resulted not from a religious search but from a desire to keep up with the immediate social surrounding or the significant others.

Despite research disagreements and existence of various explanatory approaches to the phenomenon of religious conversion, a common feature uniting them is consideration of conversion as a radical change of personality. Thus, the majority of researchers claim that self-transformation forms the basis of a conversion experience. Besides, representatives of a modern paradigm emphasize that such changes are not merely a consequence of a passive conversion experience, but they rather result from an active search of a convert, it means that a convert takes immediate participation in the process of constructing a new religious identity. Conversion is presented as a *complicated, many-sided process which should be considered through the prism of personal, cultural and social measurements* (Paloutzian, Richardson, Rambo, 1999).

Based on previous research works of Lofland, Skonovd and Stark, L. Rambo suggests a generalized multi-layer model of religious conversion. This model is *not a universal tool but is rather considered by the author as a research strategy for collection complicated empirical data* (Paloutzian, Richardson, Rambo, 1999, pp. 1071–1072). Conversion is considered as a series of elements (stages, phases) which are closely linked. Rambo singles out seven stages: 1) context; 2) crisis; 3) search; 4) meeting; 5) interaction; 6) commitments; 7) consequences. During the conversion process *social connections, roles, rituals and oratory interact and complement one another*. Context is represented as a dynamic field including historical, religious, social, cultural factors,

which simplify or limit the conversion process. *Crisis* is represented as a sense of internal disorientation and awareness of limited options for exiting the situation that encourages a *search* in its turn. *A meeting* is a contact point between a potential convert and a religious group. Further, a meeting supposes an *active interaction* where a convert gets acquainted with the rituals, language and ideology of the group. Stage of *commitments* is associated with the convert’s acceptance of a status of a religious community participant and constructing a new religious identity. *Consequences* are considered by Rambo as not only a culmination of the described process – immediate experience of religious conversion – but also further convert’s actions aimed at maintaining both – such experience and a new identity. Rambo emphasizes that religious conversion is a flexible multilayer process reflecting both external sociocultural circumstances and personal features of the converted.

Narrative conversion research

In his work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Джеймс, 1993) among key characteristics of the religious experience W. James highlights its “unspeakable” meaning the failure of a person who passed through such condition to find words in order to adequately describe it due to lack of words able to fully express the essence of such kind of feelings. A century later, an American researcher Ann Taves in her work *Religious Experience Reconsidered* (2009) suggests differentiating our understanding of religious experience as “an experience sui generis” and “attribution” of religious or mystical component of these or those feelings. *If we want to understand how anything at all, including experience, becomes religious, we need to turn our*

attention to the processes whereby people sometimes ascribe the special characteristics to things that we (as scholars) associate with terms such as “religious”, “magical”, “mystical”, “spiritual” et cetera (Taves Ann, 2009, pp. 8–18). In the given perspective, a researcher’s access to religious experience is possible only through narrativization of this experience by person who passed through it.

A narrative may be defined as a *form and mechanism for arranging individual experience through time* (Ярская-Смирнова, 1997, pp. 38–61). A narrative connects life events of a person, past and future, real and assumed, into a definite chronological sequence. Narratives act as representations; they structure the experience of perception, arrange memory, segment and purposefully arrange every event. In narratives, mechanisms of life history are presented as elements of biographical work on formation of a narrative identity. The last one includes consideration of identity aspects, which are reflected and reproduced in the modus of autobiographical narration. However, it should be taken into account that narrative storytelling is formed within frames imposed by language of sociocultural limitations, which means that narrative is limited by the vocabulary of language used.

Likewise, storytelling about experience of religious conversion may be considered as a peculiar form of autobiographical narratives, where a conversion is considered as a “turning point”. In the majority of cases, narrativization of conversion experience contains reinterpretation and re-assembling of all the previous autobiography in terms of a religious experience a person passed through. Testimonies of newly converted act as a model for analysis and interpretation of their past, as well as

for constructing and maintaining a new religious identity. An explicit factor of this process is degree of penetrating a religiously marked space into the autobiographical narrative that is testified by the process of oratory adaptation to the requirements of this or that religious group. Linguistic changes and adaptation of rhetoric through mastering a language of the group are essential tools for shaping a new language picture, as well as a way of individual and group identity. Included into the narrative these linguistic changes act as unique markers of persons accepting a new ideology.

Researches related to “linguistic or interpretative approach” in social sciences are suitable for consideration of conversion narratives in different ways. Within context of a tradition related to names of Ulmer (Ulmer, 1988) and Luckmann (Luckmann, 1987), attention of researchers is directed to determination of communicative models of conversion, as well as peculiarities of so-called “reconstructivistic genre” which is followed for working out narrations of converts. With the help of a narrative that has a “pre-determined” structure a newly convert confirms his status and legitimates it. A conversion narrative is presented as a discursive practice of self-presentation.

The second type of empirical researches (Snow & Machalek, 1983; Stromberg, 1993) considers a phenomenon of religious conversion in the context of J. Mead’s concept as changes of a “universe of discourse”. Staples and Mauss (1987) highlight those changes that are related to perception and interpretation of his new status by a convert. Such changes are considered as a personality self-transformation, accompanied by changes in oratory and discursive practices, which according to the opinion of Staples and Mauss act as the principal tool for reinterpretation of the biographical

background. Thus, conversion is presented as a process where a convert adopts a new “universe of discourse” and where language and rhetoric perform a function of tools for recording and describing of all changes that happened to him. The researchers focus mainly on strategies of presentation of the religious background considering the religious change in biographical context as reconstruction of previous experience in compliance with the grammar of a new “universe of discourse”. In center of attention there is a narrative and the subject matter are methods of its creation and ascertaining a new identity with their help.

An American anthropologist P. Stromberg in his work *Language and Self-Transformation* (Stromberg, 1993) considers conversion as a process of forming an identity and constituting reality that shows in the language and discursive style of a conversion narrative. Stromberg highlights that through the *use of language in a conversion narrative that enables self-transformation of a convert’s personality and increases a level of involvement into a group ideology*. Thus, the performativity of a conversion narrative, as well as the method of its presentation are defining in the conversion process for Stromberg. On his opinion a religious discourse is an attempt to resolve a deep emotional conflict or crisis — a situation where understanding the reality in the context of existing outlook becomes problematic. In this process a symbolic language serves as a connecting link between deep emotions and convert’s changes, a religious group and social environment.

To consider the way how transformation of a personality reflects in a conversion narrative, Stromberg identifies two forms of a communicative behavior: constitutive and referential. Referential communicative behavior supposes existing implicitly

predetermined background field of discourse that is conventionally agreed by the participants of communication (at the level of a particular social group). Communication is made possible by use of words, which are associated with respective abstractive notions and meanings easily identified and interpreted by the participants of the communication situation. Constitutive form of the communication behavior is considered by Stromberg not as using and appeal to already existing contexts of meanings, but as an immediate creation of such contexts and constituting situations, which meanings depend on conditions where they occur (Stromberg, 1993).

According to Stromberg, a conversion narrative is represented as a practice when people who passed through the conversion experience aims to establish a certain connection between the language of a religious group and their own feelings. Put in other words, converts must learn how to interpret the experience in terms and meanings existing in the group, it means they should take over its canonic language. A canonic discourse including semantic context is represented as a constitutive form of communication and connects canonic language with an individual experience. Stromberg emphasizes that this connection allows to word feelings that were previously impossible to verbalize, or, using the terminology of W. James, to verbalize the things previously “unspeakable”. In this context, a narrative constitutes changes happening to the narrator.

Thus, conversion is considered as a specific discursive practice or a religious communication related to elaboration of a narrative that, on the one hand, reflects changes happening with the person who passed through conversion, and on the other hand – the narrative itself

preconditions such changes through adaptation of a canonic language of a religious group.

Materials and methods

Based on described approaches to consideration of a phenomenon of a religious conversion, methodology of analyzing conversion narratives shall include the following steps:

1. We look at conversion narratives as dependent on a structured discourse. That means that we should examine the respective canonical religious language providing a certain structure and topics for conversion narratives.
2. We investigate conversion narratives as rhetoric by considering the use of religious language in these narratives as a means of achieving certain social effects.
3. We have to realize that conversion narratives are always constructed in the context of particular social interaction (Popp-Baier, 2002, p. 53).

Materials used for research are texts of biographical interviews with members of Protestant churches of Ukraine, gathered in 2013 within frames of a research project – Centre for Urban History of East Central Europe (Lviv, Ukraine) “Religious Life in Modern Ukraine. Transformations and Development Trends”¹. Interviews were held in all major cities of Ukraine (20 interviews in each city), respondents were selected in accordance with confessional map of each region. For the purpose of regional representation, we have selected four city centers: in the South – Odessa, in

the Centre – Kiev, in the East – Donetsk and in the West – Lviv. In total, the sampling included 15 representatives of evangelistic Protestant churches in all cities.

A biographical method and namely the analysis of conversion narratives was chosen as the most adequate methodological research tool. In terms of this approach, narratives are considered not as those objectively reflecting conditions and stages of the conversion process, but rather as biographical constructs. At the same time conversion, experience itself is considered not as a one-time event, but rather as a long-lasting transformation process, where a defining role is played by self-perception in the context of a canonic language of the group. Also, an interpretative approach suggested by C. Geertz is also applicable in such context. He suggests differentiating “thick description” and “diagnosis” as different stages of interpretative analysis of interview texts. According to Geertz, the “thick description” supposes emic positions of a researcher, i.e. striving to understand the system of meanings from the point of view of its carriers; “diagnosis”, in its turn, is aimed to overcome a position of meanings carriers and their interpretation in a wider sociocultural context (Geertz, 1973).

The canonic language of Evangelical Protestantism

In this paper we use a term, Evangelical Protestantism, which includes the whole variety of religious groups, emerged under the influence of Evangelical² and

2 In the English-speaking world, evangelical became a common label used to describe the series of revival movements that occurred in Britain and North America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Contemporary Evangelicalism maintains that religion is a matter between the

Charismatic³ movements in the history of Christianity.

Protestantism in Ukraine is the second largest group of Christians by number of believers after the Orthodox. In 2013 in Ukraine there were 10 613 protestant churches, that made 28.7% of all the registered religious organizations functioning in Ukraine (though it should be mentioned that this refers namely to the number of organizations, but not their fullness). At the same time, protestant denominations are characterized by preserving dynamics of growth of its followers. “All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists” (AUC ECB) remains to be the most powerful and authoritative Protestant church in Ukraine. The second largest, by number of religious organizations, Protestant union is the “All-Ukrainian Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith-Pentecostals”; the third place by quantity is taken by various charismatic organizations.

If Pentecostal communities begin to actively emerge in the South of Ukraine yet in early 1920s, charismatic movement spreads already after breakup of the USSR

individual and God and is therefore above all the experience of the individual that may create a significant link with the divine. The Bible (and not the Church) is the only trustworthy guide in moral and spiritual matters for the individual.

3 The Charismatic Movement is the international trend of historically mainstream congregations adopting beliefs and practices similar to Pentecostals. Fundamental to the movement is the use of spiritual gifts. Among Protestants, the movement began around 1960. Charismatic Christians believe that the gifts of the Holy Spirit as described in the New Testament are available to contemporary Christians through the infilling or baptism of the Holy Spirit. These spiritual gifts are believed to be manifest in the form of signs, miracles, and wonders, including, but not limited to, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, prophecy, healing, and discernment of spirits.

at the beginning of 1990 due to foreign missionaries, mostly from the USA and the Scandinavian countries. The Pentecostals and the charismatic organizations are mostly widespread in the Centre, and in the East and the South of Ukraine. Moreover, in Donetsk region the percent of registered charismatic organizations is the highest – around 11% of their total number in Ukraine.

Evangelistic Protestantism is characterized by a number of basic principles, which serve as basis for building all practices of these religious groups:

1. Faith in divine afflation of the Bible, which is the ultimate authority in all issues relating to faith and everyday life.
2. Faith in necessity of personal acceptance of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit through experience of a religious conversion (usually in the presence of witnesses). Only such experience of a “born again” allows to count on personal salvation.
3. Faith in gifts (charismata) of the Holy Spirit available to every believer who passed the conversion. These gifts include “glossolalia”, faith healing, exorcism, prophecy gift etc.
4. Assurance in necessity of direct connection with Jesus Christ, and faith in his immediate presence in lives of every member of church.
5. Concept of priesthood for all believers whose commitment is pastoral care after each other as well as evangelizing via examples of their personal lives (Popp-Baier, 2001).

These principles further precondition existence of certain attitudes that characterize religious culture of the given religious communities (Csordas, 1987). Attitudes form action models and their accompanying

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specialized “vocabulary” of the group, which is used as the basis for evangelistic discourse. Among these attitudes the following most important may be noted: 1) a special modus of relationship between people and “God as a loving Father” which is used for considering all aspects of the believers’ lives; 2) believers form communities of various orders: groups of studying the Bible, groups by occupation, charitable and missionaries’ communities etc. This ensures constant involvement of the believers into the life of a religious group, without limitation it to merely religious services; 3) all group practices are built based on a special “spirit of community” and include joint worship services, dances, “glossolalia”, devotional healings. Such practices structure everyday life of the believers outside the community as well; 4) great significance is paid to so-called “testimonies” as performative practices that are exercised in form of public speeches made by converts about conversion experience they passed through; 5) perception of the surrounding world in binary opposition of “those, who living in the Spirit and in Christ” and “those who living in sin” (Csordas, 1987; Popp-Baier, 2001).

Conversion process: life «before» and «after»

As stated above, a religious conversion is a flexible multilayer process, reflecting both external sociocultural factors, and personal subjective features of a convert. When analyzing interviews, we tried to single out sense-bearing structure of the narrative, its subject-matter, as well as the way how the narration is defined, through the use of a canonic language of the group, by the discursive practices existing at the level of the considered religious groups.

Analyzing the structure of conversion narratives, we used an integrational approach suggested by L. Rambo as a working model. It defines seven stages of the conversion process: 1) context; 2) crisis; 3) search; 4) meeting; 5) interaction; 6) commitments; 7) consequences. Furthermore, during the conversion process “social connections, roles, rituals and rytorics interact and complement each other” (Paloutzian, Richardson, Rambo, 1999, pp.1072–1073).

The context of conversion is considered by Rambo as a dynamic field, including historical, religious, social, cultural factors, which simplify or limit the conversion process.

Talking about the context, it should be noted that for older respondents (50–60 years) the conversion experience is related to a transitional period of the early-mid 1990s. Along with the social and economic transformation, this period was also marked by pluralism and liberalization of religious life. Along with the revival of activity of traditional confessions, numerous western missionaries began to penetrate the post-soviet countries. The respondents using the language of Evangelical Protestantism characterize the mentioned period as “awakening”.

It was exactly the period when American missionaries preached in cinemas if you remember ...they distributed respecting literature and so on. ...Well, I found myself in such surrounding once, then again and gradually it happened this way ... (Female, 66 years old, charismatic church)

Considering motives of Orthodox Christianity conversion, a Russian researcher L. Ipatova notes that *a social adaptation function of the modern conversion lies in the fact that after doing this a person not*

only finds his unique purpose in life, but also joins an “age-old tradition” of his ancestors which is simultaneously the most influential in his present day social surrounding (Ипатова, 2008, pp. 409–456). Talking about the Ukrainian context it should be noted that the majority of population also identify themselves with Orthodox Christianity in different variations. However, preserving its “authority” an orthodox tradition is not always a resource that “allows to find one’s own unique purpose”. Before Protestantism, many of the respondents had experience of following the Orthodox tradition. Nevertheless, conservatism and formalism of the Orthodox Christianity, as well as distancing of priests from the believers, made respondents search “for answers to questions” among other religious traditions and cultures.

...when I came to church ... I couldn’t find answers to some of my questions. For instance, what I didn’t like, what personality traits. Moreover, when I came to Protestants I saw that I need changes. In the first place changes in order to have different relations at work, with friends. So, I started changing. Changing to for the better (F., 58 years old, Full Gospel Church)

...you know, I’ve been thinking that if the orthodox church was more active and reached almost every person like these missionaries, because, well, we can say that they reach almost every person, maybe I would choose an Orthodox Church” (F., 66 years old, charismatic church)

When it comes to context and preconditions of conversion, it should be stated that five out of fifteen informants had an experience of addiction (drug and alcoholic); three of them also had experience

of staying in custody. This aspect plays an important role in activity of Pentecostal and charismatic organizations, functioning at the territory of Ukraine. An important direction of their missionary work is organization of rehabilitation centers for drug and alcohol addicts as well as so-called “services” in prisons. In this aspect, the process of religious conversion is complemented by release from addiction that is a powerful factor for maintaining and confirming the religious experience a person passed through. Correspondingly, addiction problems as well as related to these difficulties with health, family and immediate surrounding serves for informants as a “crisis” of feelings of internal disorientation and awareness of limited options for exiting the situation.

Probably since the time when problems began in my life, I’ve come to such a condition of my life. I was fully and completely worried about everything and in the first place on a physical level, meaning that illness affected my life. Then it influenced on a financial aspect, I lost everything, I lost everyone, I nearly ended up in the street. And when I ... got into the colony, there, ... once I entered a prayer room, I got acquainted with such people who were the people of God, who lived following the Commandments of Jesus Christ, and eventually I felt like living such life myself, because I understood that neither school, nor the college, nor the army, nor the prison did not change me, instead the Word of God touched my heart and changed my life, I mean Jesus Christ. I accepted Him with my faith into my life, into my heart and He changed my life. And since this happened – it was on the twenty fifth of June 2001. It was a colony, tuberculosis hospital, there I repented and accepted God into my heart (M., Evangelical Christian Baptists, 42 years old).

... I was not going to live no more, because my lifestyle took me to the colony, then for a one more term, later again, I already didn't feel like living. Everybody turned their backs on me. And by chance a New Testament got into my hands. Not even by chance, but the church of Baptists brought New Testaments into the prison... after God came into my life in reality, instead, everything revived including relations with relatives, friends (M., 51 years old, Word of Life Church)

Many respondents give description of a personal crisis as an initiating event or a "turning" point in their lives, which facilitated their further conversion. At the same time, this refers to crises that fully disorientate a person making it impossible to exist in the habitual system of meanings and notions. Consequently, a religious conversion and acceptance of a new "universe of discourse" is one of the possible exits from this condition. Along with this, an important role in this process is played by interpersonal connections between potential converts and those who are characterized by L. Rambo as "advocates" (Rambo, 1993). He considers the latter ones as representatives of immediate social surrounding who initiate the convert's entering into the group and support him inside the community.

..., first of all, by that time I already had friends who also visited these meetings. I was in the army with some of them and together we were looking for various adventures after the army. And later I found out that they visit such meetings and I started thinking about this ... I also had relatives who visited the meetings. So were invited there. And well I had courage to come because I knew people who were already there and they were fine (M., 45 years old, Word of Life Church).

In this case, a potential convert should not be obligatory in the condition of deprivation, and his entering the group with the subsequent conversion is the result of an aspiration to keep up with the immediate social surrounding or the significant others.

...well first my mother joined such a group, and there her acquaintances introduced her to everything, well, and after that gradually and slowly I already got there too ... But I could see that mother began reading the Bible there and ...and the attitude was so good, so I did not object and well later so gradually and slowly I already got there too (F., 66 years old, charismatic church)

Interaction with the group members initiates a process of re-socialization when a potential convert assimilates the group's ideology, standards, values and behavioral patterns. In the course of this process, an important role is played by group support, which is expressed as attention, "warmth" and "taking care" of the new members. The outcome of the described interaction is changing the perspective of self-perception and perception of the world. A convert accepts the group perspective and through this prism he selects, lays emphasis and interprets events and facts. In this case, conversion suggests accepting new criteria for selection. The brightest illustration of such perception selectivity is the reconstruction of autobiography.

As mentioned above, conversion narratives are part of a structured discourse that exists at the level of a group. In this case, it refers to existence of stable communicative models of conversion, with a predetermined "plot" and discursive tools at the level of Evangelical Protestantism. By means of a canonic language, this discourse

defines the corresponding "plot" where the convert's autobiography splits into life "before" conversion and "after" it. At the same time using examples of conversion narratives we can talk about a sort of a biographical inversion when events and memories related to traumatic experience are addressed to the past, and the present is considered as a new starting point and is associated with hopes for future. A new "universe of discourse", as well as acquired communicative means enable the convert to make his controversial biographical background and memories more logical and holistic. Thanks to telling others and himself about his life story, gaps in life and their occurrence become clear and admissible for themselves and others (Rosenthal, 1997, p. 22). In cases where respondents had experience of drug addiction, reconstruction of the autobiography is becoming a tool for constructing a new identity, which helps to overcome the past experience and get free from the social stigma.

...it (life) changed one hundred per cent, it was one way, and then I went in the opposite direction. Repentance has Greek origin, for instance, the New Testament is written in Greek, it sounds as *metanoia*, a word for word translation means to change one's mind, to reconsider. In the Greek army, there is such an order "metanoia" – which means a turnaround by one hundred and eighty percent. Generally, I split my life into two periods: before Christ and after Christ, and it was not life before Christ at all, it was existence or survival, as it may also be called. After the Christ it is life ... (M., 54 years old, Church "The Word of Life")

Conversion process is not completed after the convert enters the group and accepts a new system of meanings. It rather

continues in the process of accepting commitments to the group, which imply that a member should be ready to contribute to the community's activity. Involvement into activity of a religious group and staying among its members performs a function of maintaining a new worldview and a newly formed identity. This is accompanied by weakening of prior social connections, reconsideration of relations with the immediate surrounding and prior reference groups. i.e. with all those who is associated with the life "before Christ" and can raise doubts about the new experience.

In the evangelical groups, such involvement of the believers is ensured by the organizational structure of churches as well as by means of functioning of various interest communities inside of churches (groups of studying the Bible, occupation groups, charity and missionary communities etc.). Many evangelical churches functioning on the territory of Ukraine use either a "cellular" model or "G12" model in building their own organizational structure. As it may be understood from its name, a "cellular" model is a church structure consisting of small home groups (7–5 people), each of which is headed by a leader-mentor. As the number of cells increases the number of group leaders increases too. Consequently, a rather extensive channel of authority emerges which is headed directly by the church leader. A peculiarity of the described model is that major work with the church members is carried out at the group level. This allows paying enough attention to each group member and ensures constant participation in the church life thus preventing its formalization and shaping the belongingness.

...211 people and even more get together in the church and then they are divided into small groups and these groups consisting

of 3–5–7 people each perfectly know each other. They do not have any domination over you, it is a usual discussion of the Bible or a picnic ... (M., 55 years old, Full Gospel Church)

In the “G-12” system that is practiced by charismatic churches, every member has two statuses and two responsibilities. He is a leader for people from his home group and simultaneously he reports to the leader of the group he has initially entered. It is specific that such model does not suggest appointment of leaders, people become leaders as the number of followers’ increases. Within this system, a primary focus is given to an initiative of each particular member. Promotion in authority vertical depends on success of each person, horizontal migration is not limited by anything – everyone has a right to choose a leader at his own discretion. An integral feature of “G-12” model is a “transfer principle”. Put in other words a leader is a conveyor of the pastor’s teachings (or the superior leader) to his group members. The system is characterized by planning and reporting – leaders prepare an annual work plan and report on a monthly basis.

Also inside of the group, various forms of exchanges services are used in order to increase the group fellowship and to grow the group belongingness. This may refer to provision of financial help to those church members who are in need, or patient care, or help for the elderly, or job search etc. A religious community becomes a center of social and cultural life for its members.

...I know that there are people who will pray for me at my first call if I only say that I have this or that, no matter where I would be. If I only ask to help me with something, they will help me. But, I do not owe them

anything, like they do this for me and I should do that for them, absolutely no. They just ordinary people... I can trust them my heart. And they will keep it between us, they will not laugh at me, instead – my grief will become their grief. And their joy will become my joy (M., 55 years old, Full Gospel Church)

An important mechanism of forming group belongingness in evangelical communities is so called public “testimonies”. Conversion testimonies are presented as fundamental discourse practice for self-representation, and all the previous background a person had prior to conversion is reinterpreted from the point of view of the religious experience a person passed through. Testimonies are spoken through orally and usually take place either during Sunday religious service or at the level of small home groups.

In his work *The Hermeneutics of Testimony* (1979), P. Ricoeur was one of the first to suggest consideration of testimonies in the history of Christianity from the perspective of a semantic analysis of the language and terms used in them. In the context of conversion testimonies, Ricoeur distinguishes two storylines: testimony-confessions and testimony-narrations. Testimony-confessions establish connection between the religious experience a person passed through and subsequent changes including the divine intervention or “the acts of deliverance” from an illness, addiction, internal disorientation etc. Testimony-narrations develop as a storytelling where prior experience and events begin to be reinterpreted as preparation to “meeting the God” (Sremac & Ganzevoort, 2013, p. 232).

P. Stromberg highlights that oral conversion testimonies define a certain sample or pattern which converts refer to every time

in situations that require confirmation of the past experience. Along with this, as it was stated above, in the context of discourse there is a peculiar modus of interaction between the believers and “the God as a loving Father” and through this prism almost all aspects of life are considered. The figure of “the Father” existing in the life of group members directs their lives and interiorization of this figure through a canonic language enables consideration of one’s own life as controlled and endued with a purpose (constitutive language function according to Stromberg).

My life is now, I’m trying, and Jesus Christ is always ahead of my life. I wake up, thank the God, when I have some errands I invite Him through my prayer to act in my life because He said “you can do nothing without Me” It means that He, so to say, is my guide in life – in family, at work, in allegiance, in all my deeds, in all ways (M., 51 years old, Word of Life Church).

...my father always taught me: «Live according to your conscience”. I asked him: “What is conscience? What is it? Can I touch it? Can I scale it, can I find out what is it? Because every person has a different conscience”. And he could not give any answer to this question. Now I answered him: “I know what conscience is”. Like a fellow soldier – it is the one you fight together; like a colleague you work together, likewise the conscience – it is something that penetrates our hearts with the Gospel or has a seal inside our spirit. “Con-science” – it is the God’s seal inside of us and it speaks in some way, somehow we understand something inside of ourselves, inside of ourselves we know what is right and what is wrong, what is prohibited and what is the Law of God (M., 54 years old, Word of Life Church)

Consequently, all the actions and events that do not comply with this model and contradict to it are considered as influence of “evil” forces in the context of evangelical discourse.

You know, there is also such a contrary to the God as a devil, a demon who cheats on people and induces them in all possible ways simply to deter us from the God. It means that it gives various addictions for a person. A devil is trying to lead a person astray, gives a particular addiction to each person. It is not obligatory to be a drug addict or an alcoholic, it is enough for a person to depend on money, job, in other words any other activity which may capture his attention and not to bring him to God (M., Evangelical Christian Baptists, 42 years old).

Going back to interpretation of personality changes that occur with the converts, we should refer to consideration of those social effects that are related to using a canonic language in the context of conversion narratives. In the given context, we should try to analyze how a canonic discourse begins to perform a constitutive function. Constitutiveness of communication behavior is considered as an immediate creation of social effects and shaping comprehended communicative situations, which meanings depend on their contexts.

As an example, we can introduce a narrative of one of respondents where he refers to topic of relations with his management at work and with authorities.

... suppose somebody of my management or authorities at my workplace makes some kind of problem for me and I cannot solve it on my own, how can I cope with it? I can either hit him or take him to court or set many people against him and the crowd

would crush him, he would exist no more, do you understand? I can do this, no problem. However, the one who rules on earth is stronger. God never follows imprecations. God always follows blessing and that is why He says to bless. And when I bless a person who insulted me, including authorities and management and God follows the blessing... And when I see that he makes me a problem, I will not imprecate him and I will not resist it, in the first place I will simply... put a blessing and will bless that person. That's what I will do. I sow and God grows. I sow a blessing into his life, God will grow this blessing..., and always to be free from any problems with management or authorities you should bless. Moreover, the God will protect those who bless, He will send angels and you will have no problems. Remember this for your life (M., 55 years old, Full Gospel Church)

In the given narrative a situation of so-called “paradoxical” communication is described when relations with an opponent, in the person of management who “creates” problems for a respondent, resulted in his “blessing” instead of resistance. At the same time, it is this “blessing” that allows the narrator, according to his opinion, to build relations on good terms with management, facilitates his career development, and influences his rate of pension and so on. Thus according to the narrator he pursues his purpose. This occurs by means of symbolic transformation of his communicative behavior due to use of a canonic language of his religious group. In such case, the language performs a constitutive function producing desired social effects. Along with this a respondent use also an abstractive communication through the constant appeal to a field of discourse (here – to the Bible text and the group’s teaching) of his religious community.

As previously emphasized, when analyzing a conversion narrative, it should be taken into account that storytelling is always built in the context of a particular situation of social interaction. In our case, this refers to interaction of a narrator (respondent) and a listener (interviewer). The situation of an interview itself may be considered from a few perspectives. Firstly, an interview is a component of a respondent’s conversion process (his self-transformation), as well as means of maintaining it. For a respondent it is an opportunity to reconsider once again and reconstruct his prior biographical experience, as well as to build strategies, oriented towards future in terms of a canonic language of the religious community. This results in a biographical narrative, which, step by step, connects and adjusts various time perspectives and reflects a new religious identity. Secondly, different respondents considered a situation of an interview as an opportunity for a missionary activity. A respondent tells about his own conversion experience and gives “testimonies” of a divine presence related to a healing experience, release from addiction etc, and in doing so he sees an interviewer as a potential convert, demonstrating to him advantages and attractiveness of both his own lifestyle and a corresponding world view.

Conclusions

When it comes to peculiarities of a conversion in the environment of Evangelical Protestantism in Ukraine, it should be mentioned that the considered conversion narratives in the majority of cases are not unique. Peculiarities of their building, plots and rhetorical techniques, largely, are identical to those at the level of respective religious communities in the USA and the Western Europe. In the given context, we should hardly say anything about any

universal nature of the religious experience and feelings. These feelings are unique and may considerably vary in different religious traditions. Nevertheless, it may be assumed that the nature and structure of the religious experience are closely connected to categorization and interpretation peculiarities of events and experience in a particular religious’ subculture. Religious categories and interpretation means not only express but also define largely what and how a person goes through in his day-to-day life and in religious practice.

Experience of a religious conversion as well as a respective narrative built around this event is one of the key elements of an evangelical religious tradition. At the same time, a researcher’s access to the religious experience is possible only through narrativization of this experience by converts who passed through it. A key criterion for such experience is the degree of penetrating a religiously marked space into the autobiographical narrative that is testified by the process of oratory adaptation to the requirements of this or that religious group. Linguistic changes related to mastering a canonic language of the Evangelical Protestantism are significant tools for shaping a new language picture as well as means of individual and group identification. Learning new speech patterns and forms that exist in the group an individual continues following them in his day-to-day practice. These linguistic transformations reflect internal changes of a personality and included into the narrative they appear to be peculiar indicators of acceptance of the new “universe of discourse” by the individual. Conversion narrative reflects not only details of an individual experience but also peculiarities of the religious tradition.

Thus, conversion appears to be a specific discursive practice or a religious

communication related to producing a narrative, which, on the one hand, reflects changes occurring to a person who passed through a conversion experience, and on the other hand the narrative itself preconditions such changes by means of adaptation of a canonic language of the religious group.

Cases considered in this paper allow for the conclusion about steady communicative conversion models at the level of Evangelical Protestantism, which have a predetermined plotline and discursive practices. By means of a canonic language such discourse defines a respective “plot” or a “canon” in terms of which the convert’s autobiography splits into time before conversion, conversion stage itself and time after conversion (usually with positive connotations). Old reality as well as collective teams and significant “others” which previously were its intermediaries get a new interpretation. Everything proceeding to the religious experience is now seen as a preparation to it and everything following it emerges from its new reality. Individual aspects of the past removed, others are defined in a new way, and those being incompatible are now connected. The process of biographical reconstruction is never-ending, however some events of the autobiography may get “forgotten” and their place will be taken by other ones – related to a passed through experience.

Depending on a communicative situation, converts may use individual elements of his “religious biography” or reproduce it “from the beginning to the end”. This “canon” may also be based on a suggestion that communication participants understand what is appropriate in such narration and may be included into it. Eventually, in the course of time, participants of the considered evangelical communities work out

a long-held text of their religious biography, which may be used at any moment of time. In such a perspective, a self-vision or a narrative identity emerges through adaptation of canonic narrations of its community. Consequently, the group language limits possibilities of an individual narration. Thus, stories become shared not only due to similarity of individual experiences but also due to emerge of narrative patterns for entering the group which are created by virtue of telling and retelling other stories. Each story contributes to creation of this common narrativity. Apart from its didactic function, a conversion narrative performs a function of creation and maintaining a collective identity. From one point of view, this is an act of self-affirmation as a community member for the teller, from the other point of view it is a means of a community integration based on common topics and similar experience. ☞

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Narratywizacja doświadczenia konwersji religijnej w środowisku ewangelikalnych protestantów

Streszczenie:

Narratywizacja doświadczenia konwersji religijnej w środowisku ewangelikalnego protestantyzmu na Ukrainie

Doświadczenie konwersji religijnej, a także odpowiadająca temu doświadczeniu narracja, pozostają zasadniczymi elementami ewangelikalnej tradycji religijnej. W przypadku konwersji na ewangelikalny protestantyzm na Ukrainie daje się zauważyć, że narracje towarzyszące temu procesowi nie mają unikalnego charakteru w tym sensie, że sposoby ich konstruowania, właściwa im fabuła i zabiegi retoryczne, nie różnią się zasadniczo od narracji towarzyszących konwersjom w Stanach Zjednoczonych i Europie Zachodniej. Rozważane w ramach artykułu przypadki pozwalają zatem na sformułowanie konkluzji, zgodnie z którą istnieją ustabilizowane komunikacyjne modele konwersji.

Konwersja w takim przypadku może być postrzegana jako szczególna praktyka dyskursywna, czy też jako rodzaj komunikacji religijnej, wytwarzająca określoną narrację, która – z jednej strony – odzwierciedla zmiany zachodzące w jednostce doświadczającej konwersji, z drugiej zaś – sama ta narracja, poprzez adaptację języka właściwego danej grupie religijnej, stanowi dla tej zmiany punkt wyjścia.

Słowa kluczowe:

konwersja religijna, narracje konwersyjne, ewangelikalny protestantyzm, analiza językowa, dyskurs konwersyjny.