



Franciscan Conversion: Turning Toward the Truly Good

1. Religious Conversion

The year 2019 marked 900 years ago since Francis of Assisi's visit to Egypt to visit Sultan Al-Kamil and speak to him about Christ. All around the world, people celebrated this important event as a groundbreaking Christian-Muslim encounter, often seen as the first example or one of the earliest forms of interreligious dialogue.¹ Nothing is known about what the saint and the sultan talked about, and we are not sure about the true motives of Francis on this mission and about the sultan's true reasons for receiving Francis. Francis probably intended to do what he describes in chapter 16 of his own rule as good behavior in those who go among the Saracenes: "As for the brothers who go, they can live spiritually among the Saracens and nonbelievers in two ways. One way is not to engage in arguments or disputes but to be subject to every human creature for God's sake and to acknowledge that they are Christians. The other way is to announce the Word of God, when they see it pleases the Lord, in order that [unbelievers] may believe in almighty God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Creator of all, the Son, the Redeemer and Savior, and be baptized and become Christians [...]"² This, naturally, was to be done in a peaceful way, in a way that contrasted with the violence of the crusaders. I also tend to agree with Thomas of Celano and other biographers: "Francis traveled to the region of Syria, hurrying to the Sultan. Assaulted and beaten he preached Christ."³ His primary aim was, in other words, conversion to Christianity.⁴

¹ See for example the invitation to the seminar "Franziskus und der Sultan – Dialog statt Hetze" ("Francis and the Sultan – Dialogue, not Harassment") organized by the Interfranziskanischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft (Infag) in March 2019 in Oberzell-Würzburg: "Entgegen der vor 800 Jahren vorherrschenden christlichen Meinung, Kreuzzüge als adäquates Mittel der Missionierung und der Befreiung des Hl. Landes zu sehen, setzte der heilige Franziskus 1219 bewusst ein Zeichen des Dialogs. Er traf sich inmitten der Kampfhandlungen mit dem Sultan Al-Kamil Muhammad al-Malik. Wie hat Franziskus diese Begegnung geprägt und verändert? Wie begegnen wir „dem Fremden“?"

² *ER* 16,5-7 (*FAED* 1, 74).

³ *LCh* 3 (*FAED* 1, 322).

⁴ For some good historical interpretations see Katharina Heyden, "Die legendäre Begegnung zwischen Franz von Assisi und Sultan Melek al-Kamil oder: Von der



The subject of interreligious and missionary conversion in the Middle Ages as well as in our own “age of pluralism” is well-researched and well-documented.⁵ Conversion as a general phenomenon remains a controversial and contaminated subject. Inherently connected to core issues of freedom, power, and ideology, it is also often associated with compulsion, subjugation, and extremism. For missionaries as for mystics, however, it represents the gateway to a better life and the key to salvation. Regardless of their repugnant or promising aspects, the different uses and guises of conversion point to a profound process with life-changing potential. Conversion as a religious phenomenon has occupied many social scientists with different backgrounds at least since Stanley Hall’s lectures (1881) on the psychology of religious conversion and Freud’s theory of conversion disorder, which defines hysteria as “the transformation of psychical excitation into chronic somatic symptoms.”⁶ The larger part of these scholars are primarily interested in *innerreligious* conversion – an area much discussed by scholars of religion.⁷

geschichtsprägenden Absicht in Geschichten,” *Mediaevistik* 31 (2018): 203-229; Adam L. Hoose, “Francis of Assisi’s Way of Peace? His Conversion and Mission to Egypt,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 96 (2010): 449-469; Volker Leppin, *Franziskus von Assisi* (Darmstadt: wbg Theiss, 2018), 187-198; Steven J. McMichael, “Francis and the Encounter with the Sultan,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Francis of Assisi*, ed. Michael J.P. Robson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 127-142; John V. Tolan, *Saint Francis and the Sultan: The Curious History of a Christian–Muslim Encounter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵ See for example Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier, eds., *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003); Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1998); Giuseppe Giordian, ed., *Conversion in the Age of Pluralism* (Leiden, etc.: Brill, 2009); Ira Katznelson and Miri Rubin, eds., *Religious Conversion: History, Experience and Meaning* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2014); Calvin B. Kendall et al., eds., *Conversion to Christianity from Late Antiquity to the Modern Age: Considering the Process in Europe, Asia, and the Americas* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009); Ali Köse, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts* (London, etc.: Kegan Paul, 1996); Lincoln A. Mullen, *The Chance of Salvation: A History of Conversion in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

⁶ See Geoffrey E.W. Scobie, “Types of Religious Conversion,” *Journal of Behavioral Science* 1 (1973): 265-271; Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studien über Hysterie* (Leipzig and Wien: Franz Deuticke, 1895), 73; Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, *Studies in Hysteria*, trans. Nicola Luckhurst (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 79.

⁷ See for example Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Conversions in the Spiritual Life* (Charlotte: TAN Books and Publishers, 1977); Bailey V. Gillespie, *The Dynamics of Religious Conversion: Identity and Transformation* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1991); Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010); Christopher Lamb and Darrol M. Bryant, *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies* (London etc.: Cassell, 1999); Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Ha-

The current article will deal not so much with the fundamental spiritual and moral reorientation of another person, i.e. conversion as a process brought about primarily by the normative agency of another (active conversion), as with the transformation process that revolves around the personal experience of a decisive new beginning, a profound change of self and identity (passive conversion). The fact that the two are usually interrelated becomes especially evident in the Franciscan tradition: within a decade after Francis's death, many thousands of Franciscan "converts" spread the Gospel message in word and deed to thousands of others. Within two decades, the Franciscan order had become a leading religious institution in Western Christianity. Conversion remained a key moment and a key instrument in the lives of these many brothers and sisters (as well as in Franciscan-Muslim relationships). Many scholars have studied the societal effects of the revolutionary program based on the Franciscan call to the virtues of poverty, penance, and peace. More work remains to be done on the Franciscan order as one of the largest conversional efforts in medieval and modern society. Here, the focus will lie on the spiritual dynamics and moral dimensions of Franciscan conversion in the lives of Franciscan converts, including some of their implications for *modern-day moral conversion*.⁸

2. Franciscan Conversion

Of his own conversion, Francis tells us in his Testament: "For when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world."⁹ The sources and stories of his life indicate that he actually remained in the world, but with a radically altered view on society and the things of this world. They

ven: Yale University Press, 1993); Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Chana Ullman, *The Transformed Self: The Psychology of Religious Conversion* (New York: Plenum Press, 1989).

⁸ On spiritual and moral conversion in practice, see also Jennifer Vetter, ed., *Franciscan Virtues through the Year: 52 Steps to Conversion from Saint Francis of Assisi* (Fort Wayne: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016). This formation book on Franciscan virtues and conversion is written by members of the Confraternity of Penitents and intended for Franciscan friars, nuns, sisters, and laity: "If the reflections and practice are done weekly as suggested, the reader will be spiritually more in tune with God's ways at the end of reading the book than at the beginning" (blurb).

⁹ *Test* 1-3 (*FAED* 1, 124).

also show that this “significant shift in behavior and worldview”¹⁰ was in reality a sequence of events that turned his world upside down but that gave direction to his search and constituted different stages in his discernment process.¹¹ The Canadian Franciscan Pierre Brunette studied the life of Francis from the perspective of his *conversions* toward the “sweetness of soul and body” of the Gospel and God, who is “the fullness of good, all good, every good, the true and supreme good.”¹² According to Brunette, Francis “had to explore many avenues and test out several choices before settling on the direction of his life.”¹³ Brunette counts seven conversions: sickness and convalescence (a process in which Francis turned from the experience of frailty and the human body to the body of Christ); dreams of glory (in which he turned from *miles* and military glory to *humiles* and God’s glory); periods of seclusion (in which he turned from refuge in a grotto to a spirituality of the heart); service to lepers (in which he turned from visiting lepers to seeing them as brothers); hearing God’s call (in which he turned from building a chapel in ruins to being a spiritual penitent-mason); a public judgment (in which he turned from a dispute with his father to a new birth and a Father in heaven); and a revelation in front of the Gospel (in which he turned from the Gospel in a book to the Gospel lived out on the road).

Apart from Francis’s “total transformation” and the many hagiographical accounts of his conversion process, there are many more early Franciscan conversion stories like Francis’s. One famous example is brother Bernard, who turns to God by turning to Francis and thus by joining “a man truly from God” in his quest for salvation:

[...] Brother Bernard, embracing the delegation of peace, eagerly ran after the holy man of God to gain the kingdom of heaven.

¹⁰ Gillespie, *The Dynamics*, 8. Gillespie refers to Duane W.H. Arnold and C. Geoffrey Fry, *Francis: A Call to Conversion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988). On Francis’s conversion as evangelical penance, see Chrysostomus Dukker, *Umkehr des Herzens: Der Bußgedanke des heiligen Franziskus von Assisi*. Bücher franziskanischer Geistigkeit 1 (Werl: Dietrich Coelde Verlag, 1956).

¹¹ See for example André Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi: The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint*, trans. Michael F. Cusato (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 22: “Rather than the word ‘conversion,’ which in our vocabulary evokes a brutal rupture with previous beliefs and practices, the term ‘turnaround’ is probably more appropriate to describe this period of searching, marked by the progressive passage from knightly values to a program of life founded on the Gospel.”

¹² *ER* 23,9 (*FAED* 1, 85).

¹³ Pierre Brunette, *Francis of Assisi and His Conversions*, trans. Paul Lachance and Kathryn Krug (Quincy: Franciscan press, 1997), blurb. See also François de Beer, *La Conversion de Saint François* (Paris: Editions Franciscaines, 1963).

He had often received the blessed father as a guest, had observed and tested his life and conduct. Refreshed by the fragrance of his holiness, he conceived fear and gave birth to the spirit of salvation. He used to see him praying all night long, sleeping rarely, praising God and the glorious Virgin, His mother. He was amazed and said, “This man truly is from God.” So he hurried to sell all he had and distributed it to the poor, not to his relatives. Grasping the title of a more perfect way, he fulfilled the counsel of the holy gospel: “If you wish to be perfect, go and sell all you own, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he had done this, he joined the holy man, Francis, in the same life and habit [...].¹⁴

The elements of his conversion (his successive conversions?) are clearly outlined: an encounter and a series of meetings, an “active” observation and a test, a “passive” refreshment and inspiration, an impression and conviction (“this man truly is from God”), an insight put into action (leaving everything behind), and a new start (joining in Francis’s life and habit). Celano comments:

His [Francis’s] conversion to God stood out as a model
for those being converted
in the way he sold his possessions
and distributed them to the poor.
The holy man Francis rejoiced with very great joy
over the arrival and conversion of such a man,
because the Lord seemed to be caring for him,
giving him a needed companion
and a faithful friend.¹⁵

Francis is a spiritual and conversional exemplar from the very beginning, his spiritual conversion a most powerful invitation to imitate him and likewise “grasp the title of a more perfect life” and “fulfil the counsel of the holy gospel.” There are, therefore, many more Franciscan conversion stories. I will mention two other examples, out of literally thousands. In her most recent book, *Enduring Presence: Diversity and Authenticity Among the First Generations of Franciscan Laity*, Franciscan theologian Darleen Pryds offers “stories of the faith journeys of lay men and lay women who helped create the Franciscan charism in the first

¹⁴ IC 10,24 (FAED 1, 203). Cf. Lk 23:47; Mt 13:46; Mt 19:21.

¹⁵ IC 10,24 (FAED 1, 203).

generations of the Franciscan movement.”¹⁶ These people were “somatic theologians” who “contributed to the Franciscan intellectual tradition by how they lived out the theology and spirituality” in their work, marriage, hospitality, and service as spiritual practice. Pryds recounts a number of real conversion experiences, a striking one being that of Luchasio Modestini, who was born into a merchant family in Tuscany in the late twelfth century. The story goes like this.¹⁷ First, like Francis, Luchasio found fighting thrilling. But then he got married, settled down, and started working in the money exchange business in Poggibonsi. Pryds comments: “Their business ended up being quite successful, but it was its very success that nudged Luchasio into a conversion that would take several years and evolve through several steps.”¹⁸ Luchasio started feeling uneasy about earning money so easily and he became a grain merchant. But easy profit and the inequality of wealth weighed on his conscience. Then, he encountered some friars and possibly, Francis himself. Soon after, he sold his business and took to taking care of the ill in the swamps near Poggibonsi. In order to serve (and imitate) Christ, he bought a donkey and tended to the sick. Then his children died. The story ends in 1260 with the death of Luchasio and his wife Buonadonna within a short time of one another – “shared grief seems to have brought them closer together.”

A second story recounted by Pryds is that of Pietro Tecelano, Peter the Combmaker, who lived in thirteenth-century Siena.¹⁹ This lay Franciscan, born into a peasant family near Florence around 1189, became well-respected and well-known to his contemporaries and even to Dante, who included him in his *Divine Comedy*. Peter was a studious and devout young man. He went to Siena to learn the art of combmaking – a labor which requires mental focus, skill, care, and patience. After his apprenticeship (training with a master combmaker who took him into his home), he opened his own shop and became successful largely because of the unusual way in which he ran his business. Pryds writes: “Unlike other shopkeepers, he refrained from the kind of false flattery that could lead to his own financial gain [...]. So, someone entering his shop experienced a placid transaction without the habitual arguing and posturing [...]. This effort to refrain from idle chatting, especially conversations that hurt others, points to Peter’s dedication to cultivating a

¹⁶ Darleen Pryds, *Enduring Presence: Diversity and Authenticity Among the First Generations of Franciscan Laity*, Franciscan Heritage Series, 10 (St. Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2018), blurb.

¹⁷ Pryds, *Enduring Presence*, 34-38 (paraphrased here).

¹⁸ Pryds, *Enduring Presence*, 35.

¹⁹ Pryds, *Enduring Presence*, 38-44 (paraphrased here).

disciplined life for spiritual benefit.”²⁰ People came into his shop to enjoy the peaceful environment and to seek his wise counsel. While deepening his own tranquility and that of his workplace, he listened and cultivated compassion. His shop became a “place for spiritual companionship and direction,” a “spiritual refuge from the political animosities and aggressive business tactics of the day.” Peter got married (“there were sufficient opportunities to reflect and experience penance in his daily domestic life!”), but his wife suddenly died. Then, Peter met Franciscan friars and saw in them simple men of prayer and humility. His discernment process continued but he was content “as a widower, a combmaker, and a simple lay man devoted to God.” He then took up a volunteer position at the hospital, serving the sick and giving them spiritual advice. He even went to live in a cell in the friary, there and in his shop living an unspectacular life and simply trusting in God’s providence. Having cultivated a spiritual life while running a business, Peter died in 1289.

The main driver of the phased conversion process in both stories seems to be a combination of external and internal factors, of (outer) meetings and actions with (inner) miseries and propensities. Spiritual service to others goes hand in hand with a strong preference for private penance, care and compassion with deep discernment, and simple luck with radical choices. Whereas the Franciscan friars remain a likely but distant inspiration in the first story, they offer hospitality to a man who “advanced in holiness by the most ordinary means”²¹ in the second story. The spiritual transformation stories of Francis, his Franciscan brothers and sisters, and members of the Franciscan laity are filled to the brim with spiritual virtues like humility, poverty, penance, and peace. Conversion seems to be a matter of God, conscience, awakening, setback, determination, and so forth. These are exemplary conversion stories, fitting into the classical scheme of Christian conversion²² and adding to the understanding of the phenomenon of religious conversion, as studied by many conversion specialists. According to philosopher and psychologist

²⁰ Pryds, *Enduring Presence*, 40.

²¹ Pryds, *Enduring Presence*, 44. This is a quotation taken from Cecily Hallack and Peter Anson, *These Made Peace: Studies in the Lives of the Beatified and Canonized Members of the Third Order of St. Francis of Assisi* (Paterson: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1957), 25-26.

²² See especially Walter E. Conn, *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986). On famous Christian conversion stories, see Hugh T. Kerr and John M. Mulder, eds., *Famous Conversions: The Christian Experience* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1983). The most famous conversion models are Paul and Augustine: Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *The Road from Damascus: The Impact of Paul’s Conversion on His Life, Thought, and Ministry* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997); Robin Lane Fox, *Augustine: Conversions to Confessions* (London: Basic Books, 2015).

William James, conversion brings a unification of self.²³ According to social psychologist Daniel Batson, it implies a cognitive restructuring.²⁴ According to theologian Bailey Gillespie, it affects the core of a person, produces behavioral changes, and forms a new identity.²⁵ According to spiritual author Emilie Griffin, it is the experience of desire, dialectic, struggle, and surrender.²⁶ The various approaches (philosophical, psychological, theological, spiritual) already suggest that conversion should be studied in an interdisciplinary way. I introduce a model for such an interdisciplinary approach below.

3. Moral Conversion

Francis's spiritual conversion was also a moral conversion, his turn toward the Highest Good (God) also a turn toward the moral good (goodness). When he turned to the One "who is good, all good, supreme good, full of goodness, totally good, true good, and the only One who is good,"²⁷ he also turned toward being and doing good in an ethical sense. The historical events and spiritual experiences of his conversion are therefore equally relevant for its moral implications.²⁸ First, a lover of the world became a servant of the poor, a promoter of charity, and a herald of peace. A single example will suffice to illustrate how Francis, whose

²³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London and Bombay: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1917), 166-253.

²⁴ C. Daniel Batson et al., *Religion and the Individual: A Social-Psychological Perspective* (New York etc.: Oxford University Press, 1993), 181.

²⁵ Gillespie, *The Dynamics*, 65.

²⁶ Emilie Griffin, *Turning: Reflections on the Experience of Conversion* (Garden City: DoubleDay, 1980).

²⁷ ER 23,9. [...] *solus verus Deus, qui est plenum bonum, omne bonum, totum bonum, verum et summum bonum, qui solus est bonus* (cfr. Lc 18,19) [...]. Cf. Krijn Pansters, *Franciscan Virtue: Spiritual Growth and the Virtues in Franciscan Literature and Instruction of the Thirteenth Century*. Studies in the History of Christian Traditions 161 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 83. Other references to God as the Good are: *Adm* 7,4. [...] *sed verbo et exemplo reddunt ea altissimo Domino Deo, cuius est omne bonum*; *Ctc* 1. *Altissimu onnipotente bon signore* [...]; *PrsG* 3. [...] *tu es bonum, omne bonum, summum bonum, Dominus Deus vivus et verus* (cfr. 1 Thess 1,9); *2Ltf* 62. [...] *qui est solus bonus, solus altissimus, solus omnipotens, admirabilis, gloriosus et solus sanctus, laudabilis et benedictus per infinita saecula saeculorum*; *ExhP* 10. *Laudate Dominum, quoniam bonus est* (Ps 146,1) [...]; *PrOF* 2. [...] *quia tu, Domine, summum bonum es, aeternum, a quo omne bonum, sine quo nullum bonum*.

²⁸ I have explored the relationship between history, spirituality, and morality (virtue ethics) in my books *Spirituele ethiek: Franciscaanse perspectieven* (Eindhoven: Damon, 2017) and *Spiritual Morality: The Religious Orders and the Virtues, 1050-1300* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation: KU Leuven, 2019).

moral call can be heard in many places in his writings, inculcates in his listeners a basic, Christian attitude of love and goodness: “And let us love our neighbors as ourselves [Mt 22,39]. And if anyone does not want to love them as himself, let him at least not do them any harm, but let him do good.”²⁹ Then, generations of men and women following in his footsteps became important players in the development of systems of pastoral care and spiritual welfare.³⁰ The other-oriented spiritual legacy of these founders of schools and hospitals became a blueprint for social justice and peace. Franciscan morality, a domain of religion deeply rooted in a transformative way of life, was adopted by many as a tactic or strategy to improve the world, the neighbor, and the self.

Francis remains a moral exemplar to this day, but does his turn toward goodness also fit into the classical scheme of moral conversion? The answer is no, as there is no such classical scheme. Or rather, the phenomenon of moral conversion is so understudied that such a scheme has not been delineated or described. Compared to religious conversion, the interest in moral conversion is strikingly minimal. A number of authors discuss to a greater or lesser extent the ethical dimensions or moral aspects of religious conversion,³¹ some of them by applying Bernard Lonergan’s typology of intellectual, moral, and religious conversion.³² There are also

²⁹ 2LtF 26-27. *Et diligamus proximos sicut nos ipsos* (cfr. Mt 22,39). *Et si quis non vult eos amare sicut se ipsum, saltim non inferat eis mala, sed faciat bona.*

³⁰ See for example C. Colt Anderson, “Franciscan Reform of the Church,” in *Go Rebuild My House: Franciscans and the Church Today* (St. Bonaventure: The Franciscan Institute, 2004), 39-64; Timothy J. Johnson, ed., *Franciscans and Preaching: Every Miracle from the Beginning of the World Came about through Words*, The Medieval Franciscans 7 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012); Michael Robson, “A Ministry of Preachers and Confessors: The Pastoral Impact of the Friars,” in *A History of Pastoral Care*, ed. Gillian R. Evans (London and New York: Cassell, 2000), 126-146. On the meaning of Franciscan “care,” see Jay M. Hammond, “The Economy of Salvation According to Francis of Assisi,” in *Ordo et Sanctitas: The Franciscan Spiritual Journey in Theology and Hagiography. Essays in Honor of J.A. Wayne Hellmann, O.F.M. Conv.*, ed. Michael F. Cusato et al., The Medieval Franciscans 15 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 111-136.

³¹ See for example Gooren, *Religious Conversion*; Rambo, *Understanding*; Rambo and Farhadian, *The Oxford Handbook*. See also, from a different perspective, James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

³² Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971). See for example Conn, *Christian Conversion*; James L. Marsh, “Praxis and Ultimate Reality: Intellectual, Moral and Religious Conversion as Radical Political Conversion,” *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 13 (1990): 222-240; Neil Ormerod and Christiaan Jacobs-Vandegeer, *Foundational Theology: A New Approach to Catholic Fundamental Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015). On Lonergan, see for example Mary Kay Kinberger, *Lonergan on Conversion: Applications for Religious Formation* (New York, etc.: Peter Lang, 1992).



a couple of philosophical treatments of moral conversion, such as a discussion of the moral justification of conversion,³³ an examination of three exemplary cases,³⁴ and a reflection on the “aha” moment in morality.³⁵ Most important for our discussion may be a study of moral conversion in an unpublished doctoral dissertation.³⁶ A full focus across disciplines on moral conversion, however, is conspicuously absent from current academic discourse. Some of the existing studies make moral conversion stories and testimonies available for ethical debate. With the notable exception of MacLaughlin’s unpublished *Narratives of Hope*, however, none of them discuss “classical” unfoldings of moral conversion. None of them put conversion at the center of moral philosophical debate. None develop a multidisciplinary phenomenology of moral conversion. None investigate building blocks, sequences, and variations in multiple instances of radical moral reorientation, past or present. None map (in a systematic way) subjections of moral self and identity to profound change or turns away from the “truly bad” toward the “truly good.”³⁷ None study real moral conversions, laid down in a broad range of sources. None, to conclude, offer a broad consideration of the *genealogy* of goodness in individuals.

4. A Radical Change of Perspective

Moral conversion is a neglected area both in Franciscan studies and in current ethical discourse. A focus on the transformation processes that

³³ Richard H. Dees, “Moral Conversions,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 56 (1996): 531-550.

³⁴ David B. Wong, “Are Moral Conversions Possible?,” in *In Search of Goodness*, ed. Ruth W. Grant (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 41-70.

³⁵ William B. Irvine, *Aha! The Moments of Insight that Shape Our World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³⁶ Alfredo J. Mac Laughlin, *Narratives of Hope: A Philosophical Study of Moral Conversion* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation: Loyola University Chicago, 2008). Chapters: 1. Conversion: The Etymological Context; 2. Early Studies on Conversion; 3. Conversion in Bernard Lonergan: An Overview; 4. A Phenomenology of Conversion; 5. The Notion of Moral Conversion and the Three Classes of Moral Conversion; 6. The Distinction Between Moral and Religious Conversion; 7. The Distinction Between Moral Conversion and the Goals of Psychological Therapy; 8. The Distinction Between Moral Conversion and Normal Moral Development: Moral Conversion as an Existential Event; 9. Conversion and the Debate on Free Choice and Determinism; 10. Feelings and Cognitive Operations in Moral Conversion: An Internalist View; Appendix: A Collection of Narratives of Moral Conversion.

³⁷ Compare Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 240: “moral conversion consists in opting for the truly good.”



revolve around the personal experience of a decisive new moral beginning is necessary, however, if we want to understand how Franciscan people and others “change the criterion of one’s decisions and choices from satisfactions to values”³⁸ and turn from self-centeredness to concern for the common good. By suggesting four analytical turns in the study of Franciscan moral conversion below, I not only intend to create ways to better understand the spiritual dynamics and moral dimensions of Franciscan conversion in the lives of Franciscan converts (descriptive approach), but also consider the implications of a “Franciscan conversional ethics” for modern-day moral conversion (normative approach). The Franciscan tradition is rooted in the spiritual, conversional experience of a turn from bitterness into sweetness of soul and body,³⁹ bringing forth a radical personal reorientation and total inner transformation with striking moral consequences. This tradition may be incomparably appropriate for such a combination of descriptive and normative ethical approaches. In order to address the moral – economic, ecological, social – crises of our times and move present discussions forward, we need a radical reorientation, a change of perspective from ethical behavior and concern for the common good *to the possibilities of a total transformation of the morally disconcerted person* as well as from political solutions and ethical strategies that to a greater or lesser extent deal with a lack of morality and justice to *the lack of radical reorientation toward the good and the right that is the root of the basic problem.*

First Analytical Turn: From Theory to Testimony

The first turn implies that we trace experiences and events of internal transformation in various fields of human existence in a broad range of testimonies. Religious scholars have developed multiple theories on conversion and suggested different analytical approaches to it.⁴⁰ Several of these theories and approaches may also be applicable to existential changes and existential events of a moral nature. In order to be able to explain processes of moral transformation, however, we need a description of the forms and configurations of the phenomenon before us (form-descriptive research), an interpretation of the texts dealing with it (hermeneutic

³⁸ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 240.

³⁹ *Test 3 (FAED 1,124)*.

⁴⁰ A good example is Rambo’s systemic stage model of context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences (Rambo, *Understanding*, 16-17) and his methodology of observation, description, empathy, understanding, interpretation, and explanation (Rambo, *Understanding*, 18-19).



research), and a systematic reflection on the topics dealt with (systematic research).⁴¹ The literature shows that there is no comprehensive inventory of moral conversion stories that may provide the basic materials for further interpretation. The interpretations that we have almost exclusively concern religious conversions, especially of famous people like St. Paul, St. Augustine, John Wesley or Thomas Merton. The moral implications of these religious conversions have not been integrated into a larger ethical framework, nor have the testimonies of moral conversions of many others been systematically brought together. This is why we should first turn to a descriptive, narrative, semiotic approach⁴² of the phenomenon of moral conversion; one that highlights (1) the process of replacement (2) of bads (3) by goods. This new perspective underlines the necessity of the retrieval and reconstruction of moral stories. It follows recent scholarly suggestions in the field of religious conversion narrative.⁴³

Second Analytical Turn: From Type to Aspect

The second analytical turn implies that we identify the main components of a complex process and apply a descriptive model that transcends existing, partial typologies. Religious scholars have developed various typologies and paradigms of conversion. There are, for example, purgative, illuminative, and unitive religious conversions.⁴⁴ Religious conversion can take the form of apostasy, intensification, affiliation, institutional transition, and traditional transition.⁴⁵ Distinctions are made with regard to the character of conversions (incremental vs. sharp-turn⁴⁶) and their

⁴¹ A triad developed by Kees Waaijman in his study of the phenomenon of spirituality: Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Leuven etc.: Peeters, 2002).

⁴² See especially Algirdas J. Greimas, *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*, trans. Paul J. Perron and Frank H. Collins (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1987) and Joseph Courtés, *Analyse sémiotique du discours: De l'énoncé à l'énonciation* (Paris: Hachette Supérieur, 1991). See also Brian Treanor, *Emplotting Virtue: A Narrative Approach to Environmental Virtue Ethics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), blurb: "character and ethical formation are intimately tied to our relationship with the narratives through which we view the human place in the natural world."

⁴³ Bruce Hindmarsh, "Religious Conversion as Narrative and Autobiography," in *The Oxford Handbook*, eds. Rambo and Farhadian, 1-30; Massimo Leone, *Religious Conversion and Identity: The Semiotic Analysis of Texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Massimo Leone, "Religious Conversion and Semiotic Analysis," in *The Oxford Handbook*, eds. Rambo and Farhadian, 1-40; Patrick Michel, "Elements for a Semiotics of 'Conversion,'" in *Conversion*, ed. Giordian, 73-89.

⁴⁴ Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Conversions*.

⁴⁵ Rambo, *Understanding*, 12-14.

⁴⁶ Mac Laughlin, *Narratives*, 229.



central effect (personal vs. social transformation⁴⁷). Moral conversion, furthermore, can happen by evolution, by discovery, and by revelation.⁴⁸ These and other approaches all have severe limitations in terms of applicability to the multifaceted phenomenon of moral conversion. One downside of most existing approaches is that they do not have moral conversion as their main subject. Another downside is that moral conversion is almost entirely seen as an aspect of religious conversion. We should therefore make the theoretical debate on conversion (“an aspect of religion”) truly ethical by offering a rich phenomenological understanding of moral conversion as radical reorientation toward the truly good. This can be done by using a descriptive model that (1) identifies core components or aspects in manifold types of moral conversion either with or without religious constituents, and (2) reveals patterns of interdisciplinarity.⁴⁹ I conceptualize aspects of moral conversion as interactive nodes in a network (see figure below).⁵⁰ Moral conversion is a process brought about by the normative agency of another (“encounter”) or the self. All eight components or aspects and their interplay are valid for all perspectives on the moral convert: passive-passive (external unintentional conversion), passive-active (external intentional conversion), active-passive (internal unintentional conversion), and active-active (internal intentional conversion).

Third Analytical Turn: From Passage to Progress

The third analytical turn implies that we turn the phenomenon of moral conversion into a lens through which to view the dynamics of existential and ethical belief systems. Researchers have used conversion as a lens on the culture in which it takes place,⁵¹ on the course of the life

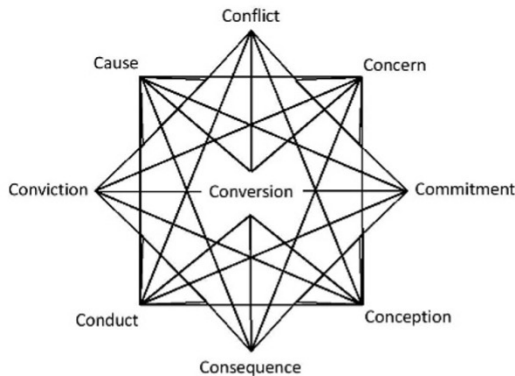
⁴⁷ Joshua Iyadurai, “Religious Conversion and Personal Transformation,” in *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, ed. David A. Leeming (Boston: Springer, 2014), 1510-1513; Joshua Iyadurai, “Religious Conversion and Social Transformation,” in *Encyclopedia*, ed. Leeming, 1513-1514.

⁴⁸ Dees, “Moral Conversions.”

⁴⁹ The model presents conversion as a multifaceted phenomenon the essence or structure of which is revealed 1) in the meaning-making of experiencers, and 2) in the theoretical insights of researchers from different disciplines (philosophical, psychological, theological, spiritual, etc.).

⁵⁰ Inspired by Rambo’s systemic stage model of context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences of conversion (Rambo, *Understanding*, 16-17) and social psychologist Mark J. Brandt’s “Belief System Networks” (“The Belief Systems Laboratory”: <https://tblslaboratory.com/>; 30 June 2020).

⁵¹ Jan N. Bremmer et al., eds., *Paradigms, Poetics, and Politics of Conversion* (Leuven



of the convert,⁵² or on philosophical thought.⁵³ Whether diffuse or contained in a particular event, conversion is a form of passage: “a ‘turning from and to’ that is neither syncretism nor absolute breach.”⁵⁴ Until now, however, nobody has systematically examined conversion as a turning from “bad/wrong” to “good/right” in the process of becoming a better person. Neither has there been a systematic reflection on personal transformation as moral conversion in relation to the main ethical categories of goods, codes, principles, rights, rules, morals, choices, virtues, actions, outcomes, and so forth. In his typology of conversion, Lonergan only briefly discusses the development of moral knowledge.⁵⁵ In his article on the justification of moral conversions, Dees briefly describes his discovery of new truths about morality and the new-found moral sensitivity of others.⁵⁶ Some authors relate conversion to Kohlberg’s stages of moral development,⁵⁷ although Kohlberg himself did not deal with conversion.⁵⁸ We should therefore study the full dynamics of what Wong describes as a significant change for the better in an adult’s moral commitments and actions⁵⁹ and what Dees describes as a change that leads the convert to

etc.: Peeters, 2006).

⁵² Mark K. Olson, *Wesley and Aldersgate: Interpreting Conversion Narratives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

⁵³ Roger A. Ward, *Conversion in American Philosophy: Exploring the Practice of Transformation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

⁵⁴ Diane Austin-Broos, “The Anthropology of Conversion: An Introduction,” in *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, eds. Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 1-14 (1).

⁵⁵ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 240.

⁵⁶ Dees, “Moral Conversions,” 531-532.

⁵⁷ Mac Laughlin, *Narratives*, 195-205.

⁵⁸ Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Psychology of Moral Development: The Nature and Validity of Moral Stages* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).

⁵⁹ Wong, “Are Moral Conversions Possible?” 41.



accept a new view of how he *should* live.⁶⁰ We need to incorporate experiences and views of conversional changes, both practical and perspectival, into a broad range of existential and ethical contexts. By analyzing (1) how people make sense (2) of a moral change of sense of reality (3) in themselves and others, moral conversions have to be investigated as exceptional sequences in personal trajectories of struggle and growth.

Fourth Analytical Turn: From Form to Norm

The fourth analytical turn implies that we answer current challenges in ethical engagement and moral exemplarity by situating conversion within the progress of the moral life itself. We should deal with both the formative and the normative aspects of moral conversion, a distinction that I have introduced before with regard to medieval religious life.⁶¹ Unlike the usual, one-dimensional perspective in studies of a historical or philosophical nature (which may or may not place radically new outlooks in the totality of progress in life), this turn moves from a description and explanation of historical forms and foundations of moral conversion, to a prescription and application of norms for fundamental moral change. It thus combines a phenomenological avenue to moral about-face with a normative appeal to moral agents today, a method that I have introduced before in my attempt to make medieval morality fruitful for a present-day virtue ethical practice.⁶² This combination pays due attention to a major philosophical problem in global and social ethics: the motivation of individuals, in particular the limits to the motivating power of their self-interest.⁶³ Ethicists normally respond to the lack of commitment to collective action for the common good by reminding people of their greater responsibilities and by reverting to rational or emotional engagement strategies. We should, however, avoid the central weakness of many of these reminders and strategies: their “must change” character. By simply explaining the “does change” character of a historical phenomenon that audiences may not yet know of, one provides “reasons that can be source of new beliefs, beliefs that in turn can be the motivators

⁶⁰ Dees, “Moral Conversions,” 533.

⁶¹ Krijn Pansters, “Normation in Formation: The Regulation of Religious Life and the Shape of Stability,” in *Shaping Stability: The Normation and Formation of Religious Life in the Middle Ages*, eds. Krijn Pansters and Abraham Plunkett-Latimer, *Disciplina Monastica* 11 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 13-47.

⁶² Pansters, *Spiritual Morality*.

⁶³ Patrick Riordan, *Global Ethics and Global Common Goods* (London etc.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 140.

of action.”⁶⁴ An argumentation that provokes by historical illustration will thus provide moral facts and stories as source of motivation – not moralization. An additional strategy relates Linda Zagzebski’s exemplarist moral theory to historical moral converts, giving them their rightful place in a new and original theory that is “based on direct reference to exemplars of goodness.”⁶⁵ The study of women and men who flourish after progressing from one set of values and virtues to another as main features in exemplarist moral thought will illustrate how “judgments about the identity of paradigmatically good persons”⁶⁶ feature in our moral quest, and furthermore how narratives and descriptions of these good persons, in whom all theoretical concepts are rooted and whom we observe carefully, are “morally revealing.”⁶⁷

5. A Turn to Franciscan Conversion

With this, I return to the “exemplar of goodness” and “paradigmatically good person” Francis of Assisi. Franciscan scholars have developed multiple theories on his conversion and suggested different analytical approaches to it.⁶⁸ As these are all rooted in the “morally revealing” narratives and descriptions of his spiritual path, we must, first, “observe him carefully.” An explanation of the process of his moral transformation – a process with many religious constituents – needs a description of the forms and configurations of the phenomenon before us, an interpretation of the texts dealing with it, and a systematic reflection on the topics dealt with. We need, in short, a turn from theory to testimony. Let me offer, by way of example, one of many such testimonies:

When he started thinking of holy and useful matters with the grace and strength of the Most High, while still in the clothes of the world, he met a leper one day. Made stronger than himself, he came up and kissed him. He then began to consider himself

⁶⁴ Riordan, *Global Ethics*, 40.

⁶⁵ Linda T. Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), blurb.

⁶⁶ Linda T. Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 41.

⁶⁷ Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 18.

⁶⁸ Good examples are Brunette’s model of Francis’s seven conversions (Brunette, *Francis of Assisi*) and Arnold and Fry’s model of symbols of change in Francis from “God’s builder” to “God’s fool” to “Light of God” (Arnold and Fry, *Francis*). Another approach is Francis’s spiritual development as seen through the lens of his dreams: Krijn Pansters, “Dreams in Medieval Saints’ Lives: Saint Francis of Assisi,” *Dreaming* 19 (2009): 55-63.

less and less, until by the mercy of the Redeemer, he came to complete victory over himself. While staying in the world and following its ways, he was also a helper of the poor. He extended a hand of mercy to those who had nothing and he poured out compassion for the afflicted. One day, contrary to his custom (since he was very polite), he rebuked a poor person seeking alms from him, and he was immediately led to penance. He began to say to himself that to refuse what was asked by someone begging in the name of such a great King would be both a shame and a disgrace. And so he fixed this in his heart: to the best of his ability, never to deny anything to anyone begging from him for God's sake. This he did and with such care that he offered himself completely, in every way, first practicing before teaching the gospel counsel: "Give to the one who begs from you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."⁶⁹

And here is another example from the same author, Thomas of Celano:

One day the gospel was being read in that church about how the Lord sent out his disciples to preach. The holy man of God, who was attending there, in order to understand better the words of the gospel, humbly begged the priest after celebrating the solemnities of the Mass to explain the gospel to him. The priest explained it all to him thoroughly line by line. When he heard that Christ's disciples should not possess gold or silver or money, or carry on their journey a wallet or a sack, nor bread nor a staff, nor to have shoes nor two tunics, but that they should preach the kingdom of God and penance, the holy man, Francis, immediately exulted in the spirit of God. "This is what I want," he said, "this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart." The holy father, overflowing with joy, hastened to implement the words of salvation, and did not delay before he devoutly began to put into effect what he heard. Immediately, he took off the shoes from his feet, put down the staff from his hands, and, satisfied with one tunic, exchanged his leather belt for a cord. After this, he made for himself a tunic showing the image of the cross, so that in it he would drive off every fantasy of the demons. He made it very rough, so that in it he might crucify the flesh with its vices and sins. He made it very poor and plain,

⁶⁹ *IC 1,7 (FAED 1, 195-196).*



a thing that the world would never covet. As for the other things he heard, he set about doing them with great care and reverence. For he was no deaf hearer of the gospel; rather he committed everything he heard to his excellent memory and was careful to carry it out to the letter.⁷⁰

A comprehensive inventory of moral conversion stories like these may provide the basic materials for further interpretation, which in turn may lead to an integration of their moral implications into a larger ethical framework.

Second, we have to identify the main components of the complex process in these testimonies. Let me apply, by way of illustration, my descriptive model of core components to the first testimony. Here is a short overview:

Cause: when he started thinking of holy and useful matters with the grace and strength of the Most High; he met a leper one day; by the mercy of the Redeemer.

Conflict: while still in the clothes of the world; while staying in the world and following its ways; contrary to his custom (since he was very polite), he rebuked a poor person seeking alms from him.

Concern: he was also a helper of the poor; he extended a hand of mercy to those who had nothing and he poured out compassion for the afflicted.

Commitment: and so he fixed this in his heart: to the best of his ability, never to deny anything to anyone begging from him for God's sake; this he did and with such care that he offered himself completely, in every way.

Conviction: to refuse what was asked by someone begging in the name of such a great King would be both a shame and a disgrace; give to the one who begs from you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Conduct: he came up and kissed him; first practicing before teaching the gospel counsel.

⁷⁰ *IC 1,9 (FAED 1, 201-202).*



Consequence: made stronger than himself; he came to complete victory over himself; he was immediately led to penance; he began to say to himself.

Conception: he then began to consider himself less and less.⁷¹

These are, in this story, the interactive nodes in the conversational network of Francis of Assisi.⁷² In an interdisciplinary way (with insights from philosophy, psychology, theology, spirituality, etc.), they can now be analyzed in the context of and compared to the same conversion experience in other stories and to other conversion experiences in like testimonies.

Third, we have to turn Francis's moral conversion into a lens through which to view the dynamics of his existential and ethical belief system. How does Francis turn from "bad/wrong" to "good/right" in the process of becoming a better person? How does his personal transformation relate to the main ethical categories of goods, codes, principles, rights, rules, morals, choices, virtues, actions, outcomes, and so forth? How does his making sense of a moral change in his sense of reality become an exceptional sequence in his personal trajectory of struggle and growth? For the sake of brevity, let us have a look at the moral qualifications and implications of Francis's meeting and embracing the leper(s) – one of several elements of his conversion, or several "conversions" in his life – as described in the writings, sources, and literature. In the writings of Francis: "Nevertheless, the brothers can beg alms for a manifest need of the lepers"⁷³; "They must rejoice when they live among people considered of little value and looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside"⁷⁴; "And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them."⁷⁵ In the

⁷¹ See also *Test 1-3 (FAED 1, 124)*: "For when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world."

⁷² One can apply the same procedure to multiple other conversion testimonies, like that of Luchiesio Modestini, the merchant from Poggibonsi who started to feel uneasy about quick profit and decided to go spend time in ministry and service to others. Cause of his conversion: his conscience, his encounter with friars. Conflict: easy money vs. inequality of wealth. Concern: equality and equity. Commitment: to take care of the ill. Conviction: ["I serve Christ by tending to the sick"]. Conduct: travel on a donkey, receive the habit of the lay order. Consequence: live out the spiritual vocation, have peace of mind. Conception: ["I reframed my life around my faith"].

⁷³ *ER 8,10 (FAED 1, 70)*.

⁷⁴ *ER 9,2 (FAED 1, 70)*.

⁷⁵ *Test 2 (FAED 1, 124)*.

sources on Francis: “Then the holy lover of profound humility moved to the lepers and stayed with them. For God’s sake he served all of them with great love”⁷⁶; “He wanted to return to serving lepers and to be held in contempt, just as he used to be”⁷⁷; “In the meantime, he began to humble himself more and more and finally took himself to the lepers and lovingly cared for those whom he had previously heartily despised.”⁷⁸ In the literature (just one of many examples):

His visits take place, however, within the larger context of the poor in general. One day, he refuses to give alms to a poor man, reconsiders his action, and then decides never again to close the door to such requests. He is very generous in his care for them, even lavish in his giving. What we must not forget is that he still has his hand in his father’s till to support his prodigality. Little by little, his social identity and relationships change and provide surprising new awarenesses of himself. What is already becoming visible on the horizon is the social status of a penitent.⁷⁹

Notice here the existential dynamics of this episode as well as its blend of ethical (give alms, care, prodigality), psychological (reconsiders his action, decides never again, surprising new awarenesses) and social (his father’s till, social identity and relationships, social status) processes.⁸⁰ With this small sample, we can now lay a fraction of the foundation for a study of the full dynamics of “the significant change for the better in Francis’s moral commitments and actions” and of “the change that leads Francis to accept a new view of how he *should* live.”⁸¹

Fourth, we have to address current challenges in ethical engagement and moral exemplarity by situating conversion within the progress of the moral life itself. This means that once we have an in-depth phenomenological study of the materials of moral conversion formally seen as a progressive moral process, it can be practically applied to – and used in interaction with – modern-day morality.⁸² Once we have retrieved and

⁷⁶ *1C* 1,7 (*FAED* 1, 195). See *FAED* 1, 377: “Both Thomas of Celano (*se transtulit ad leprosos*) and Julian (*ad leprosos se transtulit*) accent Francis’s going to lepers as a movement in humility.”

⁷⁷ *1C* 2,6 (*FAED* 1, 273).

⁷⁸ *LCh* 2,1 (*FAED* 1, 320).

⁷⁹ Brunette, *Francis of Assisi*, 41.

⁸⁰ For a theological interpretation, see especially Hammond, “The Economy,” 131-132. For a historical interpretation, see especially Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi*, 22-25.

⁸¹ Compare Wong, “Are Moral Conversions Possible?” 41; Dees, “Moral Conversions,” 533.

⁸² See also the theological and psychological approach of David B. Couturier in *The*



reconstructed conversion experiences as documented in primary sources and testimonies, giving a description of external events, internal movements, and structural mutations next to bads, turns, and goods in the context of the moral life of women and men in different layers of society, they can be put in the service of knowledge utilization. Once we have renewed, from a Franciscan vantage point, the ethical understanding of this central human mechanism with high psychological and social impact, its role in today's society can be renewed. A *new Franciscan conversational ethics* should therefore be developed and discussed in a range of contemporary contexts, including politics, society, ethics, church, spirituality, economy, ecology, leadership, and care.⁸³ From an authentic Franciscan perspective, in which “what seemed bitter is turned into sweetness of soul and body,” this new ethics will be able to contribute in a scholarly, non-devotional way to the understanding of the multiform phenomenon of moral metanoia and at the same time offer solutions for moral conversion deficiency, or lack of radical moral change, in society here and now.

Conclusion

In order to move present discussions on ethical behavior and concern for the common good forward, we should not only look toward the future but also into the past. Since the beginning of the Franciscan Order in 1223,⁸⁴ Franciscan (lay) preachers have been successful specialists and promoters of fundamental spiritual and moral reorientation. An exemplary event for thousands throughout history is the dramatic but dynamic conversion of the founding father of the Order, Francis of Assisi, who recounts an iconic conversion moment in his Testament. His conversion story and many other testimonies in the Franciscan spiritual tradition present an exemplary case for conversion investigation. By ap-

Four Conversions: A Spirituality of Transformation (St. Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2016). Couturier claims that conversion is not only a matter of personal change but also of relationships and institutions. He therefore proposes metanoia as four mutually enriching phases of conversion: personal, interpersonal, ecclesial, and organizational.

⁸³ For these topics, see the new Franciscan blog “Franciscan Connections” (<https://www.franciscanconnections.com>; 30 June 2020), a partnership between the Franciscan Study Center at Tilburg University, NL and the Franciscan Institute at Saint Bonaventure University, NY.

⁸⁴ According to his *Testament*, in 1209 the pope confirmed a form of life according to the holy Gospel presented to him by Francis. This can be considered the “official recognition” of the Franciscan movement. The friars minor (lesser brothers) were canonically established as an order in 1223 (*Solet annuere*, November 29).



plying a descriptive model and providing interdisciplinary avenues, these testimonies can be made fruitful for current moral discourse in academia and beyond. By charting the multiform phenomenon of moral conversion throughout the ages, a Franciscan conversional phenomenology can be developed, expanded, and compared to other (charismatic) traditions. What is needed is a comprehensive study based on a rich description of real Franciscan moral conversion events and experiences; a structural analysis of the causes, components, and consequences of Franciscan moral conversion processes; a profound discussion of desired and desirable Franciscan goods; and a systematic reflection on Franciscan ways to remove transformation-thwarting obstacles and to set moral commitments in motion, today.

Although often studied as a dimension of religious conversion, the phenomenon of moral conversion has received scant attention from scholars in interdisciplinary contexts. It is also nearly absent from public discourse. A Franciscan research perspective that turns its full attention to processes of moral awakening – affiliating with a better ethical belief system – is likely to have high scientific and social rewards. Scientific rewards: I anticipate that a phenomenology of Franciscan moral conversion that is the product of a vast interdisciplinary research will put profound moral improvement back on the map of descriptive ethics. The same phenomenology will also enrich normative ethics by explaining which newly acquired moral outlooks are indeed better, more desirable, and more appropriate. Social rewards: I expect descriptions of real moral conversions taken from the treasure trove of the Franciscan tradition to have direct exemplary effects on people. At the same time, our descriptive model and conversional method are both suited to include and interpret actual moral experiences. The main risks are twofold: material and moral. Material risks: we have not proven yet that there are truly as many stories of moral conversion as suggested above. Only a profound historical exploration of the landscape of Franciscan morality can give such proof. Moral risks: scholars and other moral agents may be offended by the project's normative appeal, which entails a certain *risk of conversion*. It will therefore be crucial to work as historians, moral philosophers, and theologians together in a common effort to address issues of moral freedom and coercion. It will also be crucial to clarify why moral conversion should be at the top of scholarly and social, if not personal, priority lists.

Krijn Pansters
Franciscan Study Center
Tilburg University
The Netherlands