

One Helpful Theory for Explaining Religious Conversion

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Abstract

The author finds the theory of religion developed by Stark and Bainbridge useful in understanding his own faith journey, findings from four research projects in the Muslim world he has conducted, and findings from other research that contributes to Christian's knowledge of spreading the gospel. This article focuses on how the theory employs three theoretical spheres: the social and cultural context surrounding the presentation of the gospel, the gospel as understood by the recipients, and what is meant by conversion.

Key Words: religious theory, socio-cultural context, gospel presentation, Muslim conversion

Introduction

I am a follower of Jesus, a social scientist, and a missions information worker. How do these three identities fit together, and what might that fit mean for you? I find *A Theory of Religion* by Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987) useful in understanding my personal faith journey, findings from my missions research, and how other missions research studies contribute to spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. Within each of these three areas, I focus in this article on three theoretical spheres: the social and cultural context surrounding the presentation of the gospel, the gospel as understood by the recipient, and what is meant by conversion.

As I retired from a 45-year career in social research and program evaluation that was guided by theoretical models, the Lord opened the opportunity to join the mission agency One Challenge (One Challenge, 2026) as a research associate. My research during the past 17 years has focused on ministries with Muslims. That research has consisted of individual projects to assist various ministries, but I felt there must be commonalities that could help guide current and future ministries. I sensed the need of a general theory to identify and communicate the contributions of these projects to missions.

In my search for such a theory, I read the Silliman (2022) obituary for Rodney Stark in *Christianity Today*. I did not know Stark personally but had used his textbook (Stark, 1989) when I taught introductory sociology. I was also impressed with his book on how Christianity spread from an obscure sect of Judaism to a dominant world religion in three centuries (Stark, 1996). Next, I discovered that he had developed a complete theory of religion with William Bainbridge, who was chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Towson University while I was there as a researcher.

Stark and Bainbridge derived their theory from seven sociological principles of exchange theory and network analysis. Central to exchange theory is that humans seek rewards and will give up something they value less for something they value more. However, some things desired by humans, such as eternal life, do not exist in the natural world. The Stark and Bainbridge theory defines the term "compensators" for desired things which can be obtained only in the supernatural world (e.g., eternal life) and uses the term "rewards" for that which can be obtained in the natural world (e.g., belonging). Since humans have no way of knowing the true value of compensators,

their value is largely based on the value placed on them by the cultural context, religious professionals, and people in their social networks.

When a person hears a new religious message, the person must evaluate whether the compensators offered are worth the cost of changing religious affiliation. A major change in religious affiliations based upon a religious message is often referred to as “conversion.” Stark and Bainbridge define conversion as “affiliation of a person to a new religious group conceptualized as a positive transformation of the nature and value of a person.” This definition makes no assumption or statement about what God did, nor over what period of time conversion occurred. It is limited to the testimony of the person and observable actions. Scientific theory, whether social, physical, or biological, applies only to phenomena in the natural world that can be measured and tested by human senses. Humans cannot predict or measure how God accomplishes his supernatural work.

Understanding My Faith Journey

My faith journey began at age ten, and I have reconstructed how my social environment made me open to the gospel message. My parents divorced two and a half years earlier, and I was devastated when my father left town. My oldest sister soon married and moved to the mountains. My next oldest sister had a small scholarship that let her attend college in another city. There she joined a Baptist student group and came back with them to our hometown for a one-night Billy Graham crusade. These two older sisters made public decisions that night to accept Jesus while I played in the sawdust, oblivious to the gospel message. Sickness struck me a short time later, and an incorrect diagnosis of polio quarantined our house and closed my mother’s in-home daycare business. The financial strain meant my sister had to return home to finish college. I was soon correctly diagnosed but confined to bed for three months. After that, the doctor would not allow me to walk ten blocks to our former church. Besides, no one at that church seemed to know or care that I was sick. My mother thought we should go to church even though God was not a topic of conversation in our home. Since we had no car, my mother accepted a neighbor’s offer to take our family of four with them to their Baptist church. I made friends in this new church, and Jesus became a topic in our home after my sister returned home. The following fall I felt the hand of God reach down and touch me while attending the small mission in the mountains with my married sister. I then heard the message that Jesus loved me and would guide me in my life. I committed my heart to Jesus in the mountains and made my decision public the next Sunday at the church we were attending. I was soon baptized.

Why did I hear the gospel message in the mountains when I ignored Billy Graham’s message the year before? Stark and Banbridge’s theory of religion says that the values we place on rewards are primarily influenced by the people in our social networks. I desired love and guidance not available from an earthly father. The people in my social network—mother, older sisters, neighbor, new church—valued Jesus as the way to obtain these desires. In this social and cultural context, the gospel message became salient to me.

The gospel message offered me love and guidance. I might obtain limited love and guidance in my natural life without any reference to God, which Stark and Bainbridge label as “rewards.” However, perfect love and eternal purpose are impossible to obtain in natural life, and these promised “compensators” can only be obtained in a supernatural life. All religions deal with compensators, the rewards not available in our natural world. The gospel message I heard was that

God is love, he offers guidance for a meaningful life now and eternally, and following Jesus is the way.

I believe God reached down and touched my heart that Sunday morning. Can I prove scientifically what God did? Can any human prove or falsify what God does in what is generally called “conversion?” No, but I believe God saved me and that I committed the rest of my life to following him. Scientific theory predicts what happens in the natural world and can be judged false if that prediction does not occur. Stark and Bainbridge carefully define conversion as what people believe God did that changed their nature, values, and conduct. People can question my conversion, however, if I do not testify about the value of what God did for me and do not change my behavior. Their theory gives no time frame for conversion, whether it happens at a single event in time or is progressive development. I experienced conversion at a single point in time and always wondered if my three children were converted at ages five, eight, and eight when they asked to be baptized. My daughter and one son now describe their following Jesus as a series of commitment steps over the years. Their testimonies and values attest to their conversion, even though they may not point to a specific event. The other son chose to affiliate with the church for a couple of years after he moved into his own apartment but gives no testimony nor change in behavior and values that I can see. I still wonder, but only the Lord knows his heart.

Understanding My Mission Research

In countries without a state religion and where churches are generally in low tension with the surrounding culture, following Jesus might not bring a Muslim into conflict with the surrounding culture like it would in a country where Islam is the state religion and following Jesus is a deviant religious belief that may have a high cultural price (e.g., losing one’s children). Stark and Bainbridge’s theory predicts that fruitful practices of ministries with Muslims would need to differ in different contexts. I found evidence of this need for various ministries in research that compared what workers with Muslims identified as fruitful practices in Europe (Bonham & Hewitt, 2021), in the Muslim-majority world (Allen et al., 2009), and in North America (Kronk, 2018). Some practices, such as having an intimate walk with God and being bold in witness, were fruitful in all three regions (Hoskins, Bonham, & Hewitt, in press). Sharing the gospel in ways that fit learning preferences and encouraging seekers to share what God is doing in their lives were equally fruitful in Muslim-majority and European regions, but less so in North America. Helping seekers and believers find appropriate ways to identify themselves as followers of Jesus was equally fruitful in the Muslim-majority and North America regions, but less so in Europe. Mentoring leaders who in turn mentor others was about the same in the two diaspora studies, but less so in the Muslim-majority world. The context makes a difference.

Another of my studies found that the value placed on fellowship and community was higher among believers with Muslim backgrounds than among believers with Christian backgrounds. This differing value makes it difficult for many with Muslim backgrounds to feel supported by historical Christian churches, and they desire churches with other Muslim background believers (Bonham, Daniels, & Hewitt, 2026).

The issue of conversion has come up in several of my studies. Does conversion occur at a single point in time when people first realize that they are following Jesus, or is it a developmental process as they learn more about Jesus and his teachings? In the most recent study (Bonham, Daniels, & Hewitt, 2026), the question was whether Muslims who express belief in Jesus revert to Islam. Some leaders in fellowships of Muslim Background Believers (MBB) said that it is

impossible for a Muslim who has ever accepted Jesus as Lord to revert to Islam. Others said they know of some who have gone back. However, our recent research has found that many more have simply fallen out of contact, left traditional churches and desire a fellowship with other Muslim background believers, or maintained their faith yet have no relationship with any Christian church or fellowship. There are many other questions. Can a Muslim retain relationships in the Muslim community while still following Jesus? How can one tell if a person has been truly converted? Stark and Bainbridge say that humans cannot directly measure what God has or has not done. Humans can only measure whether people believe God has changed them and that their actions reflect the change.

Understanding Others' Research

A book about Muslim conversion to Christianity in Cambodia starts with two inquiries: how the religious message was communicated, and how the message was both understood and compelling (Seckler, 2020). Most Cambodian Muslims belong to the small Cham ethnic group within the predominately Buddhist Khmer ethnic group culture. The book's only discussion of how this context might affect the communication of the message was noting that the use of the Cham word for the Muslim God, Allah, made the message more relevant than when the Khmer word for the Buddhist divine was used. An effect of being a minority appears when the book reports one believer who valued the Christian message because Jesus does not "discriminate." The report focuses on the importance of the religious message, with no discussion of the importance of social networks. Another example is given of a wife who became a believer several years after her husband. She knew her husband loved her and the value he placed on following Jesus. Seckler attributes the woman's becoming a Christian solely to the religious message. He does not consider that a husband has a prominent place in a woman's social network and that the value the husband placed upon Jesus would influence how his wife understood the message. Stark and Bainbridge's theory, however, explains that people develop their values, particularly of a compensator, through exchanges with other people who are important in their lives. Stark and Bainbridge further note that both the social context and the content of the message are important to a religious movement, and emphasizing one over the other can affect whether a movement grows or dies.

I found that the discussions in Seckler's book fit well in Stark and Bainbridge's theory that people will not leave one religious organization for another unless they see greater value in the new religious organization. The most helpful portion of Seckler's study for me was his identifying what Cambodian Muslims valued most in the Christian message compared with the Muslim message. The prominent themes he found were sin and cleansing; heaven and judgement; what Jesus did, does and will do; and the Bible. Also helpful was a list of the ways the message was presented.

Seckler recognizes that conversion is complex. Sometimes it happens quickly, and sometimes it occurs gradually over time. God also does not seem to work the same way in everyone's lives. Conversion is easier to understand if it is limited to Stark and Bainbridge's definition that people "believe" God has made a change in their lives that is reflected in a change in their values and behaviors.

Conclusion

The theory presented by Stark and Bainbridge applies to all human religions past and present, not just to Christianity. They developed it after studying many historical and contemporary religions and how these religions grew or declined over time. Although their theory is derived from seven axioms of exchange theory and social networks, they provide about 350 propositions that can be tested using about 100 definitions of important terms. Like any scientific theory, this theory of religion cannot be proved correct, but propositions derived from it can be falsified. Until their propositions are found false, I recommend the theory. I have described in this article how the theory has helped me understand my own faith journey, some of the missions research in which I have participated, and how to understand the value and limitations of what other missions researchers have found. I hope you will be helped in similar ways.

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