

Speaker 1:

Thank you for calling 1-800-REL-HELP. Your question is very important to us. A scholar will be with you shortly. Every question is an important one and the scholars on call at 1-800-REL-HELP are eager to provide information on your requested topic. Thank you for choosing 1-800-REL-HELP for answers to your most burning questions about religion. Our scholars are more than well equipped to answer any questions you may have.

Eric:

Hello. Thank you for calling 1-800-REL-HELP. This is Eric. How can I help you today?

Speaker 3:

Hi. This might be a weird problem, but I wasn't sure where else to reach out.

Eric:

No problem at all. We're here for any and all queries for your religious studies needs, of course. So what's up today?

Speaker 3:

Well, I'm an instructor teaching an intro to religious studies course. I had a great class discussion about the function of church this morning.

Eric:

Oh, good. We're always happy to hear that.

Speaker 3:

And at the end of it, an engineering student joked with me that I might be converting him to [inaudible 00:01:18] religious studies or humanities major.

Eric:

Uh-huh (affirmative). Well, did you inform that student that they won't be able to tell everyone that they're an engineering major if they do that?

Speaker 3:

That's a good point. I hadn't thought of that, but the student switching their major isn't the issue.

Eric:

Oh, sorry. What is the issue?

Speaker 3:

Well, I explained to the student that I couldn't convert him. That's a process of self-invention and reinvention and has a lot of variables. He responded that as an engineering student, he converts things all the time, vectors or valances or velocities or something. I'm not a science person.

Eric:

Me neither. What is your question then?

Speaker 3:

Well, I told the student I was going to follow up with them about what conversion means and how it functions, but I had to run to my next class all the way across campus, mind you. I wanted to do this in the next lecture. I just wanted you, if you could, to give me a quick breakdown of conversion. What it means to convert?

Eric:

Yes, of course. So convert comes from the Latin *converto* which means to turn about. So to convert means to turn, to go in a different direction. In essence then it doesn't necessarily have to do with conversion in the religious sense. Though starting in the middle ages that did become its primary connotation. After all, your student's comment was about converting from one major to another, to change the direction of their original path so to say. By extension, your reply is correct. One can't be converted. One converts. It's an active, not a passive experience. That said, of course, external voices and circumstances influence that experience. If we continue the metaphor of a path, one may need to change direction because of an unforeseen blockade in the road, for example, or based on the advice of a fellow traveler or an old timer at a checkpoint.

Speaker 3:

Oh, that's super helpful. What about the experience itself? If one must convert on their own, what does that look like?

Eric:

Right. So it should be emphasized of course that no two conversion experiences are the same. That said, two models perhaps best represent the different ends of a kind of spectrum. The first is the Pauline model after Paul the Apostle. After persecuting early Christians in the first century CE of the Roman empire, Paul saw Jesus as a bright light on the end of the road to Damascus. Blinded by this light, Paul gained vision after three days and he was now a devout Christian.

Eric:

The Pauline model then is epiphanic, a sudden realization or change of feeling. It's a true one of a kind experience. On the other end of the spectrum is something closer to a process than a single moment. And it's the Augustinian model after St. Augustine of Hippo. He relates his conversion in his *Confessions*, which he wrote in the middle of his life at the late fourth century CE. Augustine describes growing up without a clear sense of faith and a recurring sense of guilt throughout his young adult life.

Eric:

Eventually after much sinning, as he considered it, meditation and consultation with friends, he converted to the Catholic church in his late twenties. His conversion took decades. Again, there's no singular model for conversion, but these two examples provide two competing tracks. One being sudden realization. The other being a drawn out process of introspection.

Speaker 3:

So it's kind of both an experience and a process? Why do people convert?

Eric:

Exactly. That's a good question. There's a lot of different theories on the function of conversion. From an anthropological perspective, for example, it's often viewed as a means of community identification, a way of belonging to a group, which we know is an extremely important social need of human beings. As a person's need and values change over the course of their life so too will what communities they belong to and want to belong to.

Eric:

As you told your student, it's a process of self-invention and reinvention. The psychologist and philosopher Henry James understood the process of conversion as a kind of self-healing, a psychological process of overcoming a bifurcated self or a self at conflict with itself. Of course, like the conversion process, there is no single reason for a person's conversion. Rather it's a confluence of factors, but it's always rooted in a desire of sense making of the world around the convert. Does that make sense?

Speaker 3:

Absolutely. Yeah. This has all been really helpful. As I prepare the lecture, it is apparent that I will need to emphasize the sheer variety of conversion experiences.

Eric:

Exactly. You can reassure your engineering student that there's plenty of time for whatever they choose to do.

Speaker 3:

And that conversions are rarely final. Rather a series of shifts of identity throughout life. Sometimes tweaks, sometimes overhauls, but usually an ongoing thing.

Eric:

Yeah, exactly. It sounds like you get it. Do you feel better about going to this next class then? Is there anything else I can help you with?

Speaker 3:

Not for today I don't think. But I'll definitely keep the hotline in mind when these kind of cruxes occur in the future. Thank you so much for your help.

Eric:

Happy to do so and so glad I could help. Thank you for calling 1-800-REL-HELP and you have a great rest of your day.

Speaker 3:

Thanks. You too.

Speaker 1:

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Speaker 4:

Cool.