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Response to Handbook Reviewers

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Book reviewers confront a challenging task. How does one capture the essence and the contours of a book? How does one formulate both affirmations and critiques? The task is even greater when a reviewer is asked to write about a book that is not a monograph but a handbook, encyclopedia, or edited book of chapters by different authors. We want to thank Nathan Carlin, Alvin Dueck, Austin Johnson, and Ines Jindra and praise their courage for writing essay reviews of a handbook with 32 complex and diverse chapters. Each chapter is written from the point of view of a particular discipline and/or religion.

Each reviewer, in his or her own way, engages the *Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* with extensive knowledge, generosity of spirit, and a critical perspective that not only evaluates this book but also enhances and enriches the field of conversion studies. Although some dispute the assertion that there even *is* a "field" of conversion studies, Farhadian and I, along with the authors of the *Handbook*'s chapters, consider the dynamics of conversion to be worthy of attention. Each of the authors has made an important contribution to the study of the dynamics and contours of the nature of religious change that is often labeled "conversion."

As many of the contributors to the *Handbook* note, there is no clear consensus on a definition of conversion. Indeed, we (Farhadian and Rambo) argue that there are two major ways of looking at definitions of conversion: normative and descriptive. Normative definitions are derived from within particular religious groups or movements that provide characteristics of and/or requirements for a "good" or "authentic" conversion. In some groups, this means having orthodox (as specified by a particular group) beliefs, practices, ethical standards, etc. In my (Rambo's) book *Understanding Religious Conversion*, I rather provocatively said: "Conversion is what a group or person *says* it is" (1993, p. 7). It is important to note that various religions (and subgroups within a particular religion) have specific requirements and

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expectations that must be followed in order for a person to be considered a legitimate, genuine convert.

Nathan Carlin's review essay provides a good introduction to some of the major issues raised by the contributors to the *Handbook*. His review explicates valuable information about the *Handbook* and also notes that it is, in some ways, a continuation and expansion of my (Rambo's) 1993 book *Understanding Religious Conversion*. In that book, I sought to make the case for the necessity of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to the study of conversion. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, I interviewed members of New Religious Movements that were flourishing in the San Francisco Bay Area. I also did some participant observation research. In 1985 and 1986 I conducted both formal and informal interviews with converts to Christianity in Japan and Korea and with converts from Judaism to Christianity and from Christianity to Judaism in Israel. It quickly became clear that I had to expand my horizons from exploring only the psychological dimensions of conversion to include the cultural, contextual, and religious dimensions of the processes of people moving from one religious tradition to another. I did not, it should be noted, jettison my interest in the psychological dimensions of conversion, but it became vividly clear that many of the past psychological studies of conversion were rooted in Christianity, especially American Protestant forms of Christianity, and that the theories developed, although interesting and relevant to the cultural and religious context of America in the late 19th century and early 20th century, were severely limited in their application to conversions to New Religious Movements in the United States and conversions to Christianity in Korea, Japan, and Israel.

Carlin endorses the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach of the *Handbook* but makes a strong case for those who prefer to approach conversion through the lens of psychology of religion via Sigmund Freud's vast oeuvre and the rich developments in the psychoanalytic tradition. We certainly applaud those whose work is as complex and nuanced as Carlin's as they pursue this disciplinary tradition, and we eagerly anticipate more psychoanalytic studies of conversion from him. We hope that more scholars like Carlin will plumb the depths of their own disciplines and, at the same time, offer their findings to the wider field of interdisciplinary studies of religious conversion and spiritual transformation.

Alvin Dueck and Austin Johnson's review essay introduces us to the emerging field of cultural psychology of religion. Their work is not only a marvelous introduction to cultural psychology but a focused and insightful approach to religious and spiritual conversion.

Dueck has been a trailblazer in challenging psychologists in general and psychologists of religion in particular to recognize the profound implications of the origin of psychology as a discipline within the matrix of Western Europe and the United States. Many of the studies in the psychology of religion in the first 50 years since the founding of psychology focused on conversion, especially in the context of American Protestant Christianity. As a result, definitions of conversion, case studies of converts, and empirical studies of conversion were shaped by the experiences of American converts. Much of American Christianity has been characterized by revival movements that stressed individual decisions to commit one's life to Jesus Christ, live in faithful adherence to the proscriptions and prescriptions of the church (with some variations according to denominations), share the good news of salvation with one's friends and neighbors, and support the mission of the church to "preach the gospel" to all the world. It should be noted that the missionary enterprise was often the outgrowth of revival movements within the United States and the United Kingdom and parts of Europe.

Dueck and Johnson assert that the discipline of psychology has paid scant attention to the cultural and social matrix of the assumptions, methods, foci of research, and goals of the

discipline. Their contribution to this book forum on the *Handbook* is extremely valuable. One of the major goals of the *Handbook* is to stimulate multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to conversion studies. Dueck and Johnson's essay provides a viable path forward for sustaining a foundational and substantial interdisciplinary approach to the cultural psychology of religion. We would also argue that their essay on the cultural psychology of religion points to the reality that academic disciplines as they have been formed in Europe and the United States have resulted from the influence of Christianity, the Enlightenment, and the rise of sophisticated, rigorous science. This context has shaped our fundamental assumptions about human personhood, especially individualism but also other aspects of our perceptions of reality. The "original sin" of Eurocentric academic traditions of inquiry is the proclivity to project this orientation of reality onto the rest of the world. Without being fully aware of the power of culture to shape the perceptions, attitudes, and life ways of the West, we have universalized our assumptions and ideologies and imposed them on many parts of the world. Indeed, Western value judgments of the rest of the world have, for hundreds of years, almost always denigrated and misinterpreted millions of people (including their religions, worldviews, and cultures).

Dueck and Johnson's review reminds us that we should never approach conversion, or any other topic, by projecting our own views of human beings, the nature of religion and spirituality, etc., on other people and cultures. Dueck and Johnson do recognize the value of etic research, in which outsiders claim universally valid and scientifically derived theories and findings. But, they advocate the profound importance of emic understandings, of the indigenous knowledge and perspectives of "insiders" in our approaches to understanding conversion and other phenomena that require rigorous, empathic, and careful study of people, religions, and cultures, particularly of contexts that are culturally different from the taken-for-granted world of Western scholars

Gaining authentic emic knowledge and understanding demands that we have an approach that is humble, appreciative, and respectful of people, religions, spiritualties, and cultures that are, in many cases, profoundly different from our own. We urge you to read carefully the essay by Dueck and Johnson for an introduction to a very different point of view that is to date uncommon in the psychology of religion. Dueck and Johnson are not requiring us to reject the knowledge gained in Western psychology of religion but are inviting us to recognize that the reigning psychology of religion is, in fact, a form of indigenous psychology that is native to the Western world. This psychology of religion is not invalid for Westerners, but it becomes illegitimate or, at the very least, limited in its usefulness when applied to other people, cultures, and religions outside the sphere of influence of Western psychology.

Dueck and Johnson also make the point that cultures, persons, and religions are not discrete, isolated phenomena but are mutually interactive, emergent, and fluid. Cultures, persons, and religions are not static, universal entities but dynamic processes that are constantly changing from place to place and over time. Scholars of conversion, therefore, must begin with an approach to the processes of religious/spiritual transformation by engaging particular people, religions, and cultures from within the perspective of particular cultures, religions, and people.

In order to understand the phenomena of converting and of transformative experiences and processes, we must seriously consider the nature of the person's psychology, the nature of the particular religion/spirituality under consideration, and the complex and intricate matrix of culture. For example, Dueck and Johnson's overview of the relationship of culture to the role of emotions in religious/spiritual life is fascinating. Research indicates that different cultures encourage and validate certain emotions and suppress or even reject other emotions. These

actions impact the contours of a particular religion/spirituality in important ways. This factor is easily missed, ignored, or even denigrated by psychologists of religion who are not sufficiently attuned to the variability of cultural influences on human emotions.

Ines Jindra's review essay provides a very good overview of the contents and goals of the *Handbook* and engages a number of salient issues relevant to the study of conversion. Although Jindra is interdisciplinary in her approach to conversion, she works primarily in the field of sociology of religion. Like Dueck and Johnson, she challenges the taken-for-granted approach in her discipline of sociology and expands and enriches traditional American sociology with a keen appreciation and appropriation of the *cultural* sociology of religion. In addition, she points to the need for scholars of conversion to examine the ways in which conversion contributes to human flourishing—a topic that is relevant to the goals of *Pastoral Psychology*.[1]

I especially appreciate Jindra's emphasis on the macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis of converting processes. Like Dueck and Johnson, she stresses that these levels can be distinguished analytically but in reality they all interact with each other (in both supportive ways as well as in conflict with one another). All these levels are complex and inextricably connected. For some scholars, network theory tends to be related primarily to the personal world as it is influenced by family and friends, but macro networks (such as political, economic, and religious) have a powerful influence in both facilitating as well as limiting converting processes (see Kane and Park 2009 and Vasquez 2008).

Jindra identifies two important concerns that are not sufficiently addressed in the *Handbook*. She notes that the *Handbook* is divided into two major sections: Disciplines (with 17 chapters) and Religions (with 15 chapters). She would like to have seen more connections made between these two major components of the *Handbook*. Although some of the chapters do make connections between the two parts, the truth is that there is little systematic interaction between disciplines and religions in the *Handbook*.

I should explain that, as the editors of the *Handbook*, we wanted to include separate chapters on various religions of the world. We both think that conversion scholars often neglect the religious content and practices of religions.[2] It is our view that most religions in various ways have guidelines, rituals, and beliefs about how a person or group is to enter a religion. In addition, most religions have theories and practices related to how and why people should act in order to be transformed in particular ways to be better human beings, to be in alignment with deities or spirits that can foster human welfare, and even, in some traditions, to transcend the human predicament of finitude (illness, death, and other obstacles to human well-being and flourishing).

We recognize, of course, that not all religions use the vocabulary of conversion (which is most common in Judaism and Christianity), but all do have systems of teachings, rituals, and ideologies/theologies that instruct and guide people to various forms of religious converting and spiritual transformation. Our hope is that scholars doing research on conversion (and its various forms) in diverse religions will draw upon the resources in the *Handbook* provided by the authors of the chapters on religion.

Jindra also laments the lack of a concluding chapter that provides a lucid and compelling program for doing multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research and theorizing on the nature

[1] Many articles on this topic have been published in *Pastoral Psychology* since its inception in 1950.

[2] For more information about our approach to the study of religion, see Chau (2011), Farhadian (2015), Riesebrodt (2010), and Tweed (2006).

of converting processes. This is an important point, and she is correct in her assessment. We give hints here and there in the introduction, and various authors point to ways in which this can happen, but unfortunately we did not provide a coherent, systematic strategy for fulfilling our goal of offering sophisticated, nuanced interdisciplinary integration of the vast literature we cover in the *Handbook*. We hope to provide such a conclusion—or perhaps a better word would be a proposal for the next phase of our work necessary for an integrated program of interdisciplinary of research and theorizing.[3]

We are profoundly grateful to Nathan Carlin, Alvin Dueck, Austin Johnson, and Ines Jindra for their fine review essays on the *Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*. Our hope is that the *Handbook* is not an end in itself but a launching pad for future research on this profoundly important subject.

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[3] Rambo is currently working on several articles that propose an approach to converting processes that seek to integrate disciplines in a way that is both informative and illuminating for conversion studies (See Rambo et al. (2012), Rambo and Haar Farris (2012), and Rambo and Bauman: Converting and Deconverting in China (submitted for publication).