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TOO OLD TO BE BORN AGAIN? GREG CLARKE

Conversion to Christianity has long fascinated me. What is it that causes such a profound change in a person's thinking and way of life that we say they have been 'converted' from one kind of person into another? The Gospel language for such a change is 'born again', a term now so politicised as to obscure its powerful evocation of a fresh start.

It is well established that the majority of people who have such an experience have it while they are adolescents. Recent research by the California-based Barna Group has shown that 43% of a group described as 'born again' were converted before the age of 13, 64% before age 18, and 77% before age 21. Less than a quarter of people who convert to Christianity (23%) do so in the maturity of adulthood.¹

George Barna explains: "It is during those years that people develop their frames of reference for the remainder of their life—especially theologically and morally. Consistently explaining and modeling truth principles for young people is the most critical factor in their spiritual development."

But increasingly, I hear of high-profile adults who have made extraordinary changes in their thinking and their lives as a result of Christianity. They may be small in number, but often their impact on those around them is enormous. The apostle Paul is perhaps the exemplar: converted when around 30 years old after his vision of Christ on the road to Damascus, and changed from a vicious opponent of Christians to the key missionary and theologian of the early church.

One of the most celebrated of recent times is C. S. Lewis, the Oxford Professor who came to believe in God, and then in Christ, the 'myth made fact'.² Lewis described his conversion in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*:

In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed; perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now

the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms...The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation.³

In contrast with the often exuberant conversions of youth, adult conversions often seem more painful and drawn out—almost by compulsion. Perhaps this is inevitable when turning around a ship that has been travelling in one direction for a long time. There seems to be a good deal of groaning, stumbling and agonising involved in an adult conversion.

There is often also a very involved thought process—a slow dawning, rather than the flicking of a switch. For Lewis, this involved a four-year intellectual journey from atheism to theism and finally to belief in Jesus Christ as Lord of the universe and Saviour of humanity.

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In my field of literature, there have been a number of intriguing conversions. T. S. Eliot, the modernist poet, became a Christian believer mid-way through his life, and thoroughly reformed his attitude not only to God and to Christ, but to society and the arts as well. Likewise, W. H. Auden had a later-life conversion and began revising his earlier poems in light of his newfound Christian belief.

In today's sciences, one thinks of Francis Collins, the director of the Human Genome Project, who became a believer in Christ in his late twenties after a period of what he called "obnoxious atheism".⁴ He is now a prominent defender of the coherence of science and the Christian faith.

But the stimulus for this editorial came from the news that an octogenarian philosopher had gone through some kind of conversion. Professor Antony Flew, the long-time champion of atheism, has recently revealed that he now believes in God. Sort of. Having argued for over fifty years that

the onus of proof rests on those who believe God exists, Flew now feels that the evidence is in. "It has become inordinately difficult even to begin to think about constructing a naturalistic theory of the evolution of that first reproducing organism," Flew recently wrote. He says that biological study of DNA "has shown, by the almost unbelievable complexity of the arrangements which are needed to produce (life), that intelligence must have been involved".⁵

In other words, Professor Flew, at age 81, has concluded that there is evidence for God's existence. He is careful to point out that the God he believes in might be personal (an intelligent being), but is not like the God of Christians or Muslims, whom Flew views as "omnipotent Oriental despots". Flew seems to have come to a deist position.

A similar path was taken by C. S. Lewis,

who was a leader of the Socratic Club at Oxford back in 1950 when Flew presented his seminal paper, "Theology and Falsification". Lewis's thinking moved from theism/deism to Christian belief as he seriously considered the evidence and the options regarding the identity of Jesus Christ. Might Flew walk the same path and be surprised by joy? The position of oldest adult philosopher convert is open. ©

ENDNOTES

1 "Evangelism is most effective among kids", The Barna Group, Oct 11, 2004. <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=172>.

2 See C.S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact" in *God in the Dock*, Eerdmans, 1994. Here Lewis outlines his view that God provided in the religious and mythological stories of the world "good dreams" by which we are enabled to comprehend the work of salvation in Christ.

3 C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1955), pp.228-9.

4 For an interview discussing Collins's Christian faith in relation to his work, see <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/transcripts/collins.html>.

5 Richard N. Ostling, "Leading atheist now believes in God, more or less", *Science and Theology News*, January 2005. Online at http://www.stnews.org/news_leading_0105.html. Download Christian philosopher Gary Habermas's interview with Antony Flew at www.biola.edu/antonyflew.