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Contemporary conversions:

Compensatory needs or self-growth motives?

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### Abstract

Do people convert to mainstream religions to compensate for deficiency needs or to satisfy self-growth motives? This question is particularly important in the context of secularized societies. In the present study, 180 converts to a variety of mainstream religions completed questionnaires measuring attachment with parents in childhood, adult romantic attachment, need for closure, need for cognition, generativity, appreciation on beauty and excellence, and existential achievement. Compared to scores from the general population on the same measures, our results suggested a general existence among converts of affective (insecure attachment to parents, avoidance in adult attachment) and cognitive (need for closure) needs. Except generativity, which was shared by all converts, the presence of other self-growth motives was delimited to specific religions in a way that could be interpreted in terms of correspondence between supply (people's motives) and offer (group's characteristics).

## Contemporary conversions:

## Compensatory needs or self-growth motives?

There is substantial evidence to support the idea that religious conversion occurs in the presence of pre-existing psychological vulnerabilities. Certainly, an important shift has been made in the study of the psychology of religion, moving from an older model suggesting sudden, passive, and rather emotional conversion to a newer model highlighting gradual, active, and quite rational conversion (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003). However, there is still evidence showing that many people who convert to a variety of religious groups have experienced personal crises and are motivated by the search for solutions to problems and weaknesses relative to their meaning system, self-esteem, self-control (Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999; Spilka et al., 2003), and emotional and relational security (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, in press; Oksanen, 1994).

Conversely, it has also been proposed that religious conversion may be understood in terms of self-realization within, for instance, the humanistic tradition (Richardson, 1985). In this context, conversion is perceived as a spiritual transformation process that includes a positive change in one's meaning system, values, goals, self-definition, and overall purpose in life (Paloutzian, 2005). In this case, conversion is taken to reflect a healthy form of personal development (Conn, 1986) which may stimulate transition to a higher stage of religious development (Fowler, 1981). More generally, in accord with the perspective of the hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1970), it has been proposed that religion and spirituality correspond to, and satisfy, not only deficiency needs (i.e. safety, esteem, love) but also self-actualization needs (Batson & Stocks, 2004; see also Pargament & Park, 1995).

It must be noted that considerations relative to the self-realization paradigm are often based on theoretical assumptions rather than empirical research. Importantly, the empirical evidence that does exist in favor of the self-growth model is primarily based on what converts

themselves say in interviews (e.g., Köse, 1996) or is a reflection of the scoring motives provided by the researchers (e.g., Lakhdar, Vinsonneau, Apter, & Mullet, 2007). Thus, findings may have been heavily influenced by implicit theories regarding conversion, and the desire to conform to the religious group's discourse. An alternative method to investigate this question is to measure psychological constructs among converts without making an explicit link to conversion, and to compare the results from this group to data from the general population. This method has the potential to attenuate the above-mentioned biases. Furthermore, many studies on which recent reviews of the empirical literature on conversion are based (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; Paloutzian, 2005; Paloutzian et al., 1999; Spilka et al., 2003) examine converts to new religious movements or new forms of spirituality outside the main religious traditions. Conversion to the latter seems to be somewhat neglected in recent decades. Finally, there is also a need to integrate – in the same study – measures relative to the compensatory needs hypothesis and measures relative to the self-growth motives hypothesis.

The present study addresses these issues by focusing on converts to mainstream religions (Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Judaism, Orthodoxy, Protestantism). Measures of psychological constructs that reflect both compensatory (affective and cognitive) needs and self-growth (cognitive, aesthetic, existential, and moral) motives were administered to converts and results were compared with data from the general population. The study was carried out in a Western European country (Belgium) that can be considered typical with respect to the new religious landscape (secularization, new religious movements, emergence of new forms of spirituality, and reaffirmation of mainstream religious traditions; Voyé & Dobbelaere, 2001). The specific constructs used and the corresponding questions and hypotheses are detailed below.

*Compensation needs*

Two self-deficiency needs seem to frequently motivate religious conversion and elicit an interest in religion and spirituality. These are affective-relational insecurity and the need for cognitive closure. With regard to the first, there is now substantial evidence that insecure *attachment to parents in childhood* underlies conversion to a variety of religious groups, including new religious movements. Insecure attachment also seems to correspond to a heightened interest in new forms of spirituality, and a desire to become disaffiliated from the religion of one's parents (Buxant, Saroglou, & Tesser, 2008; Buxant, Saroglou, Casalfiore, & Christians, 2007; Farias & Granqvist, 2007; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, in press). Among individuals with a history of emotional-relational insecurity, God is often considered a surrogate attachment figure, with religion and spirituality serving as a safe heaven (Kirkpatrick, 2005). We thus expected converts to mainstream religions to be characterized by high levels of insecurity in their attachment to their parents. The role of insecure *attachment with one's adult romantic partner* is less evident. Overall, high levels of anxiety in adult attachments seem to be characteristic of people undergoing some forms of conversion (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, in press). The same insecurity is thought to characterize spiritual seeking among participants in spirituality and self-development related conferences (Buxant et al., 2008) as well as people interested in spirituality and esotericism related books (Saroglou, Kempeneers, & Seynhaeve, 2003). However, people who are now members of new religious movements tend to report low insecurity in attachment (Buxant et al., 2007) which may be a reflection of the positive, compensatory effect of belonging to a religious group. Thus, we expected to find insecurity in adult attachment among converts to mainstream religions.

With regard to the second self-deficiency need, there is evidence that religious individuals (Duriez, 2003; Saroglou, 2002), as well as those interested in spirituality

conferences and books (Buxant et al., 2008; Saroglou et al., 2003) are characterized by a high *need for cognitive closure*. Need for closure is defined as the desire for definite knowledge-answers on some issues and the eschewal of confusion and ambiguity (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). Important components of the need for closure include the need for order and predictability, i.e. “desiring definite order and structure in one’s own life and abhorring unconstrained chaos and disorder” (preference for order) and “desiring a secure or stable knowledge, indicating a knowledge that can be relied on across circumstances and which is unchallenged by exceptions or disagreement” (preference for predictability) (Webster & Kruglanski, p. 1050). The need for closure increases after situational conditions of stress, implying uncertainty and difficulty of information processing (Kruglanski, 2004). According to the crisis paradigm of conversion, we should expect that the transformation of meaning within conversion does not reflect a free cognitive creativity about existential issues but rather a re-direction towards a structured, ordered, and coherent set of worldviews. In other words, converts to religious groups should be motivated by a high need for closure. Interestingly, there is some previous evidence for this among people who join new religious movements which shows that these individuals do have a high in need for closure, even more so than highly religious people belonging to mainstream religions (Buxant et al., 2007).

#### *Alternative, self-growth motives*

In addition to compensation needs in the affective and cognitive sphere, it could be expected that modern converts are characterized by motivations that denote self-realization and optimal development. These motivations may include such things as aesthetic interests and an openness to an alternative, higher, view of reality (appreciation of beauty and excellence), prosocial moral concerns implying responsibility for future generations (generativity), the desire to optimally improve oneself in various domains of life (existential achievement), or the cognitive desire to be curious and open to new and complex cognitive

issues (need for cognition). Although this is not an exhaustive list of the components that constitute self-realization and optimal development, the constructs selected for the present study are highly representative and clearly distinct from affective and cognitive deficiency needs.

The first of these motivations, *appreciation of beauty and excellence*, refers to “the ability to find, recognize, and take pleasure in the existence of goodness in the physical and social worlds” (Haidt & Keltner, 2004, p. 537). It is strongly related to positive self-transcendent emotions such as awe, wonder, and elevation and can be integrated into the humanistic psychology tradition of higher non-deficiency needs. In addition, it includes openness to aesthetics, an important component of the fifth personality factor, i.e. openness to experience (see Haidt & Keltner, 2004). Given the overall link between art and religion and taking into account the fact that religious experience, ritual, and mysticism involve aesthetic interests and motivations and imply the appreciation of beauty, we expected modern converts to mainstream religious traditions to be high in appreciation of beauty.

Second, we expected converts to also be high in *generativity*, i.e. openness to others in a broad sense, concern for future generations, and the future of the world in general. According to Erikson (1963), generativity is the main task of mature development in adulthood and is opposite to stagnation. It may be expressed through a variety of ways including education, social responsibility and civil engagement, community service, environmental concerns, or more private activities. Religiosity and spirituality are related to generativity (Dillon, Wink, & Fay, 2003). Although it is commonly assumed that a causal link extends from religious affiliation to social and civic engagement (see, e.g., Donnelly, Matsuba, Hart, & Atkins, 2006), we could also expect that people who have generativity-related concerns and motives join religious groups that affirm the importance of generativity and provide means for taking concrete actions.

Third, realization of one's full potential (moving towards new ways of thinking, feeling, and acting; creating new challenges and goals and attempted to accomplish them; being motivated to progress in everyday life) is a key component of self-realization and optimal development (see Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener, et Benson, 2006). *Existential achievement* may thus also be a motive characteristic of people who convert to religion. Indeed, if we trust what converts self-reports, the conversion process seems to be an important event in their life that allows them to realize an existential accomplishment (Paloutzian, 2005).

Fourth, we expect people who convert to religion to be high in a *need for cognition*. This construct reflects a person's propensity to engage in, and enjoy, effortful cognitive activities (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Need for cognition is positively associated with the tendency to generate complex attributions for human behavior, and an openness to experience (Sadowski & Cogburn, 1997). Converted people, especially in the context of contemporary secularization, may be motivated to turn to religion by curiosity and intellectual questions concerning existential and moral issues (see Batson & Stocks, 2004). This may correspond to a positive, self-growth-related acceptance of the *intellectual* type of motives in the now classic model of Lofland and Skonovd (1981). Note that previous literature suggests some conflict between the need for cognition and the need for closure (Petty & Jarvis, 1996; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). Indeed, the two constructs are inversely related to dogmatism and intolerance of ambiguity (positive associations for the need for closure, and negative associations for the need for cognition; Cacioppo, Petty, Finstein, & Jarvis, 1996; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994).

Finally, two additional questions will be addressed in the present study. First, it will be of interest to see whether differences emerge between converts who were raised in (another) religious faith and converts who did not grow up in a religious family context. The latter case,

who converted not only to a specific religion but to faith in general, should be frequent in the context of highly secularized societies. One could, for instance, suspect that the more conversion is realized in a personal context free from previous education and socialization to another religion (a context not implying disaffiliation and thus emotional-relational insecurity: Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997), the more converts should be motivated by self-growth motives and less by compensatory needs. Second, as our study included converts to a variety of mainstream religions, comparisons among them were possible. Given the fact that recent studies focused heavily on conversion to one specific religion (e.g., Islam: Köse, 1996; Lakhdar et al., 2007; Buddhism: Saroglou & Dupuis, 2006) it is impossible to advance specific hypotheses for each religion or group of religions. With regard to this issue, the present study is exploratory, and posthoc interpretations are provided in the Discussion. On one hand, as Rambo (1992) suggested, there may not be fundamental differences among the processes of conversion to various religions. On the other hand, it seems reasonable to expect some correspondence between supply and demand: people may join the specific religious group that best fits their aspirations.

## Method

### *Participants*

We included participants converted to Catholicism, Islam, Judaism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. Each of these religions is officially recognized by the Belgian State. Because Buddhism is soon to be officially recognized by the Belgian State, people who converted to Buddhism were also included in the study. Participants were recruited with the help of the head of the religious communities or through advertisements which we posted on specific religious web sites. In the announcement, the word “converted” was explicitly stated in order to guarantee that all participants would share the fact that they self-identify as converted. The converted people recruited through religious communities’ leaders completed the

questionnaire anonymously and sent it directly to the researchers at the expense of the latter.

Converts recruited through web sites completed the questionnaire online.

Participants ( $N = 180$ ) belonged to the following religions: Buddhism ( $n = 36$ ), Catholicism ( $n = 46$ ), Islam ( $n = 32$ ), Judaism ( $n = 14$ ), Orthodoxy ( $n = 17$ ), Protestantism ( $n = 21$ ) (14 defined themselves as converted but without more specification). Most participants came from Belgium ( $n = 110$ ), the others came from France ( $n = 49$ ) or Switzerland ( $n = 8$ ) (thirteen did not specify their nationality). Mean, minimum, and maximum age were 41 ( $SD = 15.24$ ), 16, and 82 respectively. Gender was distributed as follows: 65 men and 88 women (27 did not specify their gender). Most participants were married (46%), 26% were single, 8% were cohabiting, 6% were divorced, 1% was widowed, and 13% omitted their marital status. If we do not consider participants who reported conversion before age 18 ( $n = 20$ ), the mean age of conversion for the final sample was 33 years (range = 18-75,  $SD = 11.36$ ). It is noteworthy that conversions to Judaism and Islam occurred earlier (respectively at 24 and 26 years) than conversions to Catholicism (31), Protestantism (32), Buddhism (38) or Orthodoxy (44).

### *Measures*

*Attachment to parents in childhood.* We used the retrospective descriptions of attachment to parents (separately for father and mother) established by Hazan and Shaver (1987) to measure attachment styles, i.e. secure, anxious/ambivalent, and avoidant attachment. As typically done in other studies, participants provided an evaluation on each of the six (two parents  $\times$  three styles) paragraphs in a Likert-type format (5-point scales), a method that provides finer assessment of attachment than the categorical measure. In order to simplify the presentation of results (two rather than six variables), following Granqvist (2002), we created two indexes of global insecurity, one for the mother ( $\alpha = .74$ ) and one for

the father ( $\alpha = .81$ ), by adding the scores on the two insecurity items and the inverted scores of the security item. The two final indexes showed a slight correlation,  $r = .18, p < .05$ .

*Experiences in Close Relationships Scale-Revised* (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000; our French translation). This is a 7-point Likert-format scale of 36 items measuring the two orthogonal dimensions of adult attachment, i.e. anxiety (e.g., “I am often worry that my partner will not want to stay with me”) and avoidance (e.g., “I am nervous when partners get too close to me”). The scale is based on analyses of previous attachment scales and taps the underlying structure of these measures corresponding to two orthogonal axes: anxiety about abandonment by one’s romantic partner and discomfort with physical and psychological closeness with others. It has higher psychometric qualities in comparison to previous multi-item attachment scales (Fraley et al., 2000). The two-factor structure in our French translation was replicated in a previous study (Saroglou et al., 2003). Reliabilities were satisfactory (both  $\alpha s = .86$ ).

*Need for Cognitive Closure Scale* (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994; French translation by Caroff, Berjot, Fievet, & Drozda, 2003). In order to reduce the length and time of the administration of the entire scale (42 items), we used only the subscales of Preference for order (10 items) and Preference for predictability (8 items). These two subscales explain a substantial part of the total variance of the cognitive closure scale and constitute its most representative dimensions (De Dreu, Koole, & Oldersma, 1999). The subscales are in a 7-point Likert-type format. The reliability of our data was satisfactory between the two subscales (both  $\alpha s = .76$ ). Examples of representative items include, “I think that having clear rules and order at work is essential for success” (order); “I hate to change my plans at the last minute” (predictability).

*Need for Cognition Scale* (Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984). This scale refers to an individual’s tendency to engage in, and enjoy, effortful cognitive endeavors and consists of 18

statements (5-point Likert format scale) such as, “I prefer complex to simple problems”, and “I try to anticipate and avoid situations where there is a likely chance I will have to think in depth about something” (reverse-scored),  $\alpha = .89$ .

*Appreciation of beauty and excellence* is one of the 24 subscales of a 240-item questionnaire (Values in Action-Inventory of Strengths; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) which measures character strengths considered to contribute to happiness. Appreciation of beauty and excellence refers to the ability to find, recognize, and take pleasure in the existence of goodness in the physical and social worlds. People who score high on this scale frequently feel awe and related emotions (including admiration, wonder, and elevation). This subscale is a 5-point Likert scale consisting of 8 items. Sample items include, “I feel it’s important to live in a world of beauty” and “I am in awe of simple things in life that others might take for granted”. Reliability was satisfactory ( $\alpha = .77$ ).

*Generativity*. We created seven items to measure prosocial moral concerns implying responsibility for future generations. Items refer to the importance of caring about the future of the world and about future generations through personal and/or social involvement. These items were inspired by the Loyola Generativity Scale (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992) but were adapted in order to evaluate more concrete and focused personal actions which clearly denote pro-social concerns (see Appendix 1). Participants responded to these items on a 5-point Likert scale. Reliability was acceptable ( $\alpha = .67$ ).

*Existential achievement*. Eight items were created to measure the inclination to pursue new and various goals in everyday life that contribute to self-realization ( $\alpha = .55$ ). People scoring high on this scale are not satisfied with routines and a “simple” life but try to achieve self-actualization by being pro-active and considering self-achievement as a priority in how they manage their life (see Appendix 1).

*Religiousness.* Three religious indexes (7-point scales) measured the importance of God, the importance of religion, and the importance of spirituality in life, respectively. These questions were asked twice, once for the present and once, retrospectively, for the period before conversion. Participants were also asked about the religious affiliation of their parents and whether their parents were believers or not (yes vs. no measure).

#### *Comparison samples*

There was unfortunately no unique sample of adults from the general population in Belgium for which data on all of the measures we used in the present study could be found. This of course would have been an ideal solution. Taking into account the exploratory nature of the study, in order to make comparisons between converts and the general population, we used data collected in a variety of previous studies cited below. In each of these studies, participants were Belgian adults from the same linguistic (French-speaking) community who volunteered to participate in the study without compensation. For *religiousness*, we used a sample of 216 adults from Saroglou (2003) (mean age: 38; range: 30-50; men 41%). For the *attachment to parents in childhood*, we combined the two samples coming from Buxant's (2002) and Saroglou, Delpierre, and Kempeneers's (2002) studies, with 320 adults and 120 adults, respectively (mean, minimum, and maximum ages: 28, 18-65 and 37, 25-57; men 40% and 36%). To compare *the romantic attachment with one's partner*, we used the 181 adults from their study by Saroglou et al. (2003) (mean age and range: 27, 18-58; men 35%) and the 196 married adults recruited by Lacour (2002) (mean age: 45, range: 26-62; men 50%). The same sample of adults from the study of Saroglou et al. (2003) was also used for the comparison of *need for closure*. For the *need for cognition scale*, the *appreciation of beauty and excellence*, the *existential achievement*, and the *generativity* scales, we referred to Buxant et al. (2008).

## Results

*Comparisons with adult data*

Means and standard deviations for all measures and all groups, including comparison groups, are presented in Table 1.

*Religiousness.* Participants were highly religious. Mean importance of God, religion, and spirituality in their life was higher than in adults from the general population in Belgium (note that means for the importance of God and religion are 6.62 and 6.18 when Buddhists are excluded). In comparison to the present moment, participants were less religious before they converted ( $M_s = 4.37, 3.46, 4.79$ , respectively for importance of God, religion, and spirituality; all  $F_s$  were significant,  $p_s < .001$ ) but, even before conversion, they placed more importance on spirituality than the general population,  $t(352) = 2.09, p < .05$ .

*Attachment in childhood.* Converts scored higher than people from the comparison sample on insecurity in attachment to their parents, significantly so to the father,  $t(575) = 2.22, p < .05$ , and marginally so to the mother,  $t(570) = 1.76, p < .10$ . Comparisons carried out between each religion and the general population showed that converts to Catholicism scored higher on the insecure attachment to father subscale,  $t(485) = 2.46, p < .05$ .

*Romantic adult attachment.* In general, converts scored higher than the comparison group on the avoidance subscale,  $t(734) = 10.23, p < .001$ , but only marginally lower on the anxiety subscale,  $t(733) = -1.54, p < .10$ . Distinct religion-by-religion comparisons revealed that avoidance was higher among all groups of converts, whereas, for anxiety, two patterns emerged. On one hand, lower scores were found on the anxiety subscale for converts to Buddhism,  $t(609) = -4.77, p < .001$ , to Catholicism,  $t(619) = -2.26, p < .05$ , and, to Protestantism,  $t(591) = -1.45, p < .10$ , in comparison with normative data. On the other hand, higher scores on this same subscale for Islam,  $t(601) = 2.51, p < .05$ , Judaism,  $t(583) = 1.99, p < .05$ , and Orthodoxy,  $t(588) = 2.12, p < .05$ , were observed in comparison with the normative population.

*Need for cognitive closure.* Taken together, converts scored higher than people from the general population on the need for order subscale,  $t(484) = 8.37, p < .001$ , and on the need for predictability subscale,  $t(484) = 3.57, p < .001$ . Concerning this latter subscale, when religions are compared separately to the non-converts, only converts to Islam and converts to Orthodoxy scored higher,  $t(349) = 4.07, p < .001$ , and  $t(335) = 2.51, p < .05$ , respectively.

*Need for cognition.* There was no difference between converts (taken together) and the comparison group. However, when considered separately, converts to Judaism scored higher than people from the general population on this scale,  $t(134) = 1.92, p < .10$ .

*Existential achievement.* Taken together, converts did not differ from normative data. However, participants converted to Buddhism and to Orthodoxy were characterized by lower scores on this measure in comparison with people from the general population,  $t(142) = 2.99, t(122) = 2.61; ps < .001$ .

*Generativity.* In comparison with non-converts, converts scored higher on this scale,  $t(339) = 4.11, p < .001$ . This high generativity was significantly present in four out of the six religious groups: converts to Buddhism,  $t(142) = 5.03, p < .001$ , Catholicism,  $t(152) = 2.53, p < .01$ , Judaism,  $t(120) = 2.14, p < .05$ , and Protestantism,  $t(127) = 3.09, p < .01$ , scored higher than people from the general population.

*Appreciation of beauty.* Converts reported higher scores than the normative population on the appreciation of beauty scale,  $t(271) = 2.17, p < .05$ . In particular, Buddhist,  $t(142) = 2.17, p < .05$ , Catholic,  $t(152) = 2.10, p < .05$ , and Orthodox,  $t(123) = 3.09, p < .01$ , converts evidence higher scores than people from the normative population.

#### *Participants having vs. not having religious background*

Most participants had parents affiliated with a religion (58%), 18% of participants had no religious parents, and 24% omitted the answer to the question. Parents' religious affiliation was Catholic (78%), Buddhist (6%), Protestant (9%), Jew (4%), or Muslim (3%). Participants

with both parents as believers ( $n = 82$ ) were compared to participants whose parents were non-believers ( $n = 46$ ). Results showed that the latter were characterized by a higher score on the need for cognition scale,  $t(125) = 2.49, p < .05$ , and a lower score of security in their attachment to their mother,  $t(95) = -2.22, p < .05$ .

When converts whose parents were believers and converts whose parents were non-believers were each compared to the data from the general population, similarities were observed between these two sub-groups of converts. Indeed, both differed from norms on the following constructs: avoidance ( $M_s = 3.17, 3.37, SD_s = 0.94, 1.03$ ),  $t(652) = 5.69, t(617) = 5.33, ps < .001$ , respectively for converts with religious parents and converts with non-religious parents) and anxiety in romantic attachment ( $M_s = 3.47, 3.35, SD_s = 1.01, 1.11$ ,  $t(603) = -2.53, t(652) = -2.13, ps < .05$ ), need for order ( $M_s = 3.53, 3.48, SD_s = 0.61, 0.64$ ,  $t(400) = 7.65, t(363) = 5.32, ps < .001$ ), need for predictability ( $M_s = 2.89, 2.88, SD_s = 0.73, 0.69, t(400) = 2.52, t(363) = 1.96, ps < .05$ ), and generativity ( $M = 4.01, 3.93, SD = 0.57, 0.65$ ,  $t(188) = 5.13, t(153) = 3.30, ps < .001$ ). In addition, participants with religious parents reported higher scores than norms on the measure of insecurity in their attachment to their mother,  $M = 2.30, SD = 1.28, t(504) = 2.30, p < .05$ , and appreciation of beauty,  $M = 3.86, SD = 0.65, t(188) = 2.41, p < .05$ . Participants with non-religious parents were characterized by a higher score on the need for cognition measure in comparison with the data from the general population,  $M = 67.62, SD = 12.62, t(163) = 1.97, p < .05$ .

### Discussion

Are converted people motivated by compensatory needs or by self-growth motives? The results of the present study seem to be, systematically across different religious groups, in favor of the *compensatory needs hypothesis*. Some evidence was, however, also provided for the *self-growth motives hypothesis*, but in a less systematic way across the different religious groups. Different aspects of the results are discussed in detail below.

First, the present study reveals that modern converts to established religions may be fully converted to a specific faith from non-religion (this is obviously a new phenomenon due to the context of secularization). Other converts, who had religious parents and had received religious socialization in childhood, can be viewed as distancing themselves from their family's religion. However, these two kinds of converts evidenced similar patterns of individual differences, in comparison with a normative sample from the Belgian society (a notable exception being the high need for cognition only among converts from non-religious families). Moreover, even before conversion, our participants were slightly more spiritual than the general population, and the conversion also reflected intensification of faith.

Second, rather consistently across the different religious groups, in comparison to the general population, those who converted to mainstream religions were characterized by high levels of insecurity in attachment to their parents (especially to the father), high levels of avoidance in adult attachment, and a high need for cognitive order. This is consistent with previous research showing the role of affective and cognitive vulnerabilities favoring conversion, including conversion to new religious movements (Buxant et al., 2007; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, in press; Murken & Namini, 2007). These results suggest the retention of classic psychological theories emphasizing the role of compensatory needs in partially explaining religious conversion. Moreover, given the fact that the converted participants in the present study were often disaffiliated from their previous religious tradition, high insecurity in attachment in childhood can be interpreted as explaining not only why people join religious groups (that provide emotional support) but also why they leave their parents' religious traditions.

Third, the compensatory needs hypothesis also received support from our results, but in a more subtle and complex way, with regard to two other constructs, i.e. anxiety in adult attachment and need for predictability. More precisely, with regard to these constructs, results

differed between religious groups. In comparison to norms from the general population, people who converted to Buddhism and to the two Western Christian traditions (Catholicism and Protestantism) were less anxious in attachment with the adult partner, whereas the opposite was the case, i.e. higher anxiety, for converts to Islam, Judaism, and Orthodoxy. Somewhat similarly, among all our participants, only the converts to Islam and Orthodoxy were higher than the norms in their need for predictability, a second component of the need for closure. More than one possible interpretation for this can be advanced. Firstly, it could be that the more relational insecurity (e.g., in adulthood) is experienced, the further, in terms of cultural distance, conversion candidates they will go in joining religious traditions that have grown in non-typically Western cultural environments (e.g., Mediterranean ones). In favor of this interpretation is the finding that the age of conversion was younger for converts to Judaism and Islam than for converts to other religions. Within this interpretation, Buddhism, as experienced in the West, has many cultural affinities with the Western contemporary mentality (Scheuer, 2002). Additionally, contemporary forms of Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestantism imply beliefs, rituals, and communities that may be particularly helpful in dealing with emotional/relational anxiety. This may differ from Islam, Judaism, and Orthodoxy, all three of which are known to place a strong emphasis on rules, ritualism, and observance of tradition rather than on the creation of emotional communities.

Fourth, there was no strong and systematic evidence to favor the role of self-growth motives as being related to conversion across the religious groups. The only construct where converts in general, and four out of six religious groups in particular, were higher than the general population was generativity. However, some evidence in favor of the self-growth motives hypothesis was found for converts to specific religious groups. First, converts to Buddhism, Orthodoxy, and Catholicism seemed to be highly motivated by appreciation of beauty, in comparison with norms. Indeed, Buddhism (Batchelor, 1994; Hiebert, 1992;

Lenoir, 1999) and probably Orthodoxy are believed to attract Western people in part because they propose alternative aesthetic experiences that seem less present or lost in Christian rituals, especially aesthetic experiences that are characterized by mystery qualified by high simplicity (Buddhism) or majesty (Orthodoxy). Similarly, a high appreciation of beauty may characterize younger Catholics who discover modern forms of Catholic rituals. Second, need for cognition, which implies curiosity and fondness for complexity seemed to be high among converts to Judaism. This finding may correspond to the intellectual and discursive approach of religious texts within Judaism and to the long process of studying Judaism before conversion, at least longer in comparison with the other religions.

A surprising finding was that, not only were converts not characterized by high existential achievement, but converts to two religions, i.e. Buddhism and Orthodoxy, seemed to be lower in this self-growth motive. Re-inspection of the individual items leads us to advance a post-hoc interpretation. Contrary to Western Christianity (both Catholicism and Protestantism; see Guiso, Sapienza, & Zingales, 2003), and possibly contrary to Judaism and Islam - at least as they are seen in Western countries -, other religions (e.g., Buddhism and Orthodoxy) emphasize interiority and humility in their conception of spirituality. These two religions reject, directly or indirectly, activism and success in the social domain as a function of the faith.

In sum, the present study suggests a general pattern of affective (insecure attachment in childhood and, to some extent, in adulthood) and cognitive (need for closure) compensatory needs among people converted to various religions, but also reports a specific (according to religion) presence of certain self-growth motives. Although premature (further studies are needed to replicate the present study with larger samples, in other countries, with other kinds of self-growth constructs), there is some suggestive evidence in favor of a supply-demand correspondence model. For instance, people with intellectual needs seem to be

attracted to Judaism (see the “intellectual” motive of conversion in Lofland & Skonovd’s [1981] model). People, at least Westerners, with mystical aspirations (specific aesthetic preferences and spirituality of interiority) seem to be attracted by Buddhism and Orthodoxy (see Lofland & Skonovd’s “mystical” motive). People with both high insecurity in adult attachment and high need for closure (higher than for the other converts) are ready to espouse “foreign” mainstream religious traditions with clear-cut rules and traditions (Islam, Orthodoxy, and Judaism) (see Lofland & Skonovd’s “experimental” and “coercive” motives). Moving within the dominant religion and culture (conversions to Catholicism and Protestantism) reflects, as other conversions, insecure attachment with the father and high need for closure, but also seems to be oriented towards modern forms of faith and groups that may contribute to decreasing emotional-relational insecurity in adulthood (see Lofland & Skonovd’s “affectional” and “revivalist” motives).

Finally, the present study suggests that rather than a general quest for meaning as is often assumed, the specific need for cognitive closure (order, and in some cases predictability) and not curiosity and intellectual creativity (need for cognition) characterizes religious, and especially converted, person’s cognitive needs. This is related to the need for coherence, structure, and answers instead of the tendency to keep questions open, which seems, rather, to be typical of the construction of meaning within religion (Ladd et al., 2007; Saroglou, 2002). Moreover, the co-existence of compensatory needs and self-growth motives suggests that seeing these two kinds of motives (see Maslow’s distinction between “deficiency” and “self-actualization” needs) as conflicting or opposite may not correspond to the reality of the conversion process. Although distinct in nature and in consequences, these two kinds of motives may be complementary, functioning simultaneously, and leading to convergent goals, i.e. a decision to change one’s own life in order to make it better and more

fulfilling than before. Going even further, one can assume that it is the acknowledgement of a deficiency that may stimulate change towards optimal development (see Paloutzian, 2005).

An important limitation of the present study is the lack of a unique large comparison sample from the general population (we were restricted to basing our comparison group on a variety of adult samples from previous studies) as well as the possible heterogeneity between the different converted groups (we were constrained by the self-selection process). In addition, the assumption that mean differences in psychological motivational constructs between converts and non-converts reflect motivations specific to the conversion process is a legitimate assumption but lacks an absolute guarantee. Future use of multi-method approaches may be helpful. Thus, caution should be taken with the results of the present study as they are suggestive and exploratory, and do not offer a definite answer to the question at the heart of the present work.

More complex questions should be addressed in future studies. There is a need, for example, to distinguish not only between religions to which people convert but also religions from which they originate. However, investigating both of these dimensions necessitates a large sample size as well as a very large research context. Moreover, longitudinal rather than cross-sectional studies will allow researchers to test causal links, distinguish motives and needs from the impact of previous religious education, personal pro-religious dispositions, and identify variables which are specific to the context of conversion. In addition, the present study focused only on personal, psychological dimensions. In order to fully understand contemporary conversions, one needs to integrate models from a variety of disciplines (Gooren, 2007).

## Short Biography

Coralie Buxant received her Ph.D. in psychology from the Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium (2007), where she is currently a visiting lecturer of psychology of religion. She has conducted research on the area of cognitive and emotional determinants of various expressions of religion and spirituality (new religious movements, mainstream conversions, contemporary spiritual seekers) and has co-authored several papers published in international journals, as well as a book (*Contested Religious Movements: Psychology, Law, and the Politics of Precaution*, Gent, Academia).

Vassilis Saroglou holds a master's in theology and a Ph.D. in psychology, and is a professor of psychology at the Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium, where he chairs the Center for psychology of religion. For his research in personality and social psychology of religion he received the Early Career Award of APA Division 36 and the Godin Quinquennial Prize of the International Association for the Psychology of Religion. He is an associate editor of the *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* and a member of the editorial board of key journals of the field (*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion; Mental Health, Religion, and Culture; Archive for the Psychology of Religion; Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*).

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## Appendix 1

### *Generativity*

1. At my level of society, I try to do things to improve the neighborhood/city that I live in.
2. I do the best I can, given my resources, to ensure that the world that I will leave to future generations will be different from the world in which I grew up.
3. I sometimes volunteer my time for charity groups that I support.
4. In general, I do not think about how I could be useful to future generations (reversed).
5. I try to pass on to others the knowledge I have acquired so far, based on my previous experience.
6. Deep down inside, I am not preoccupied with whether or not my actions have a positive effect on other people (reversed).
7. I pay attention to what I can do at my level in society (for example by recycling, buying certain products, etc.) in order to leave a healthy planet to following generations.

### *Existential achievement*

1. At the end of the week, I do not like having the feeling that the past week was meaningless for me.
2. One might describe me as someone who is passionate when I am involved in something that I like.
3. I think it is good to have specific plans in life, but I am not willing to make big sacrifices to realize them (reversed).
4. I try to make each day that I live different than the one that came before it.
5. If I were offered a job that is much more rewarding than the one I currently have, but would require that I move, I would take the job anyway.
6. I would like to have, at the end of my life, the feeling of having accomplished things of which I am proud.

7. It hardly worries me that no one will remember me and the things that I have done, once I am dead (reversed).

8. Each week I try to learn as much as I can about the cultural events that take place near where I live (conferences, expositions, marches, festivities, etc.).

Table 1. Means and standards deviations for all measures.

	<i>Buddhism</i> <i>n</i> = 36 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>Catholicism</i> <i>n</i> = 46 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>Protestantism</i> <i>n</i> = 21 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>Islam</i> <i>n</i> = 32 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>Judaism</i> <i>n</i> = 14 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>Orthodoxy</i> <i>n</i> = 17 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>Converts total</i> <i>n</i> = 166 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>Comparison group</i> <i>ns</i> = 120-320 <sup>a</sup> <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
Importance of								
God	2.28 (2.19)	6.53 (0.76)	6.60 (0.75)	6.74 (0.68)	6.36 (1.15)	6.88 (0.33)	5.76 (2.10)	4.11 (2.34)
Religion	4.18 (2.53)	5.91 (1.10)	6.06 (1.16)	6.52 (1.09)	6.43 (0.85)	6.24 (1.35)	5.77 (1.72)	3.55 (2.08)
Spirituality	6.74 (0.66)	6.34 (0.83)	6.44 (0.92)	6.45 (1.23)	6.36 (0.63)	6.69 (0.79)	5.50 (0.89)	4.32 (2.13)
Insecurity in parental attachment								
Mother	2.40 (1.30)	1.98 (1.11)	2.33 (1.34)	1.74 (1.10)	2.06 (1.20)	2.38 (1.15)	2.12 (1.19)	1.91 (1.23)
Father	2.60 (1.19)	2.85 (1.13)	2.29 (0.97)	2.52 (1.25)	2.61 (1.39)	2.79 (1.37)	2.64 (1.19)	2.37 (1.38)
Adult attachment								
Anxiety	3.02 (0.91)	3.39 (1.12)	3.46 (0.96)	4.15 (0.76)	4.32 (0.93)	4.28 (0.95)	3.63 (1.07)	3.78 (1.18)
Avoidance	3.19 (0.93)	2.98 (0.84)	3.01 (0.94)	4.21 (0.86)	4.21 (0.81)	3.88 (1.07)	3.46 (1.03)	2.53 (1.00)
Need for closure								
Order	3.36 (0.60)	3.52 (0.66)	3.45 (0.76)	3.47 (0.60)	3.45 (0.57)	3.36 (0.50)	3.46 (0.63)	2.92 (0.75)
Predictability	2.88 (0.76)	2.68 (0.70)	2.93 (0.82)	3.11 (0.56)	2.99 (0.72)	3.13 (0.73)	2.91 (0.72)	2.66 (0.75)
Need for cognition	3.31 (0.68)	3.63 (0.65)	3.50 (0.73)	3.51 (0.64)	3.81 (0.50)	3.42 (0.65)	3.51 (0.66)	3.53 (0.47)
Achievement	2.97 (0.59)	3.35 (0.51)	3.39 (0.54)	3.15 (0.61)	3.46 (0.35)	2.91 (0.49)	3.21 (0.59)	3.30 (0.56)
Generativity	4.07 (0.49)	3.84 (0.64)	4.04 (0.73)	3.75 (0.63)	3.94 (0.52)	3.79 (0.65)	3.88 (0.65)	3.55 (0.66)
Appreciation of beauty	3.90 (0.65)	3.87 (0.64)	3.92 (0.84)	3.47 (0.65)	3.51 (0.88)	4.17 (0.50)	3.81 (0.70)	3.62 (0.71)

<sup>a</sup> Depending on the measure (see details on the *comparison samples* section).

