Suggested project
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The apostle Paul's individual conversion as the loss of old and the gain of new resonance

According to J. Rüpke (2007) 'the attractive power of Christianity and its extremely rapid growth-rate, sustained over several centuries, are among the most remarkable phenomena in the religious history of the Roman Empire.' To shed some new light on this phenomenon, it seems important to study individual conversion with some fresh perspectives on the individual change of axes of resonance as offered by the conceptualisation of and the collaboration within the IGDK.

With the notable exception of the conversion and baptism of the whole household of the centurion Cornelius in Caesarea Maritima (Acts 10), the early Jesus movement, including Paul, attest mostly individual conversions. Jesus and Paul invited individuals to reorganise their inherited systems of religious coordinates and join the group of believers in Jesus Christ. Such individual conversion based on a change of one’s personal religious convictions is a rather new phenomenon in the history of ancient religions. Using Rosa’s (2016) concept of ‘resonance’ might shed some new light on conversions in the early Jesus group, on the conversion of Paul, the meaning of baptism and the literary conceptualisation of conversion. In the following, a dissertation project on Paul’s conversion will be described.

One of the rare first-person conversion accounts from antiquity is Paul’s short report about his turn to faith in Jesus as Son of God in Gal 1:12-16 (cf. the even shorter remarks in 1 Cor 9:1 and 15:8-10). To begin with, one must investigate to what degree those accounts are influenced by typical elements of contemporary conversion narratives and by Paul’s own interests. If an specific conversion experience of Paul can be reconstructed and described, then it must be asked in which ways it changed Paul’s ‘moral map’ (see Taylor 1989; Rosa 2016).

This is a central question in Pauline studies: Did Paul receive a divine ‘call’ which he experienced as being in keeping with his Jewish map or did he ‘convert’ to a new religious worldview? In the past Paul’s revelatory experience (Gal 1:16: ‘[God] was pleased to reveal his Son in me’) was interpreted (especially in Lutheran exegesis) as the consequence of an alienation from Judaism. Since the 1980s the ‘new perspective’ on Paul has challenged this view: Paul experienced a strong resonance with Judaism, which was not terminated, but
rather altered, by his Damascus experience. This reorientation took place at the beginning of the 30s of the first century AD and continued until his death at the beginning of the 60s.

Using Rosa’s concept of resonance, it might be possible to reformulate the question and to get closer to some convincing theses. For instance, did the Damascus experience open up new resonance axes to Paul – horizontally to the Christians whom he persecuted and vertically to God who now became the God of Jesus Christ for him? Or did Paul make a new resonance experience along ‘old’ axes (written and oral Torah, the prophets, the spirit, etc.)?

Further, Paul’s ‘conversion’ can be understood as an act of individualisation ‘which includes the notion of de-traditionalisation’ (Rüpke 2013). Indeed, following his vision of Jesus as exalted Lord, Christ and Son of God (on ‘visionary individuality’ see Rüpke 2015), the apostle devalued some traditions which had been very dear to him in his ‘old life’ (Gal 1:13-14; cf. Phil 3:7-8). Not only in Gal 1:12-16 but in the whole letter to the Galatians there is a strong emphasis on the apostle’s individuality: Compare, for instance, the ‘autobiography’ in chapters 1 and 2, references to Paul’s ‘mysticism’ (Gal 2:19-20; 6:14. 17) and the passage on his very personal relation to the Galatians in 4:8-20 (especially v. 12 on mutual imitation and v. 19 on Paul as the Galatians’ mother being in labour). Regarding this aspect, the DFG Research Group ‘Religious Individualisation in Historical Perspective’ at the Max Weber Centre (University of Erfurt) could provide further stimulation and support for the doctoral student working on this topic.

Finally, conversions to the new faith in Christ were implemented and embodied in the ritual of baptism which is also described by Paul (Gal 3:26-28; Rom 6:3-8). In which ways did this ritual support the new resonances experienced by Christ-believers? The attraction of this ritual might be compared with other contemporary initiation rituals, e.g. the social position of their audiences and their ritual semantics.

In addition to a dissertation on Paul, dissertations on conversions in the early Jesus movement and in Luke’s Acts of the Apostles also seem worthwhile projects.

1) A separate dissertation could investigate the reasons why Jesus could attract a group of followers in Galilean villages and why the majority there rejected him. In which ways did Jesus’ preaching and his actions resonate with his addressees? On the other hand, there are also echoes of lacking resonance and refusal in the early Jesus tradition (e.g., Q 10:13-15 [Matt 11:21-24 par. Luke 10:13-15]). The Jesus movement is also aware of conflicts within families caused by individual conversions (Q 12:51.53 [Matt 10:34-36 par. Luke 12:51.53]).

2) Another dissertation could ask how early conversions to the faith in Christ were reflected in literature and which patterns were used for this by Christian authors. For instance, both Lucian (‘Hermotimos’) and Luke (Acts 17:16-34) relate failed attempts to convert Stoics. However, both protreptic stories do not end wholly negatively, but remain somehow ‘open-
ended’. This ‘open end’ technique contrasts with later Christian dialogues, for example the ‘Octavius’ by Minucius Felix (third century). Here a Sceptic philosopher finds the truth in Christianity and converts.

Collaborations: A cooperation on the theme of conversion is envisaged with Stephan Möebius (concept of sacralisation), Wolfgang Spickermann (conversion in Late Antiquity), Hartmut Rosa (resonance) and Katharina Waldner (initiation rituals).

Literature