

2021 VETU/ETS Theological Integration Conference
“Christian Conversion: Multi-disciplinary, International and Ecumenical Perspectives”
July 1–3, 2021

Overview:

The theological integration conference on Christian conversion aims to be a scholarly and reflective inquiry into the Christian practice and experience of conversion from a variety of relevant academic disciplines, national-cultural contexts, and ecclesial traditions, with special care to address the topic within the context of Central and Eastern Europe. The conference will include presentations of academic papers from keynote speakers and accepted submissions from an open call for papers, as well as planned interactive sessions on designated topics. Publication of an anthology of some or all presented papers will be sought with the goal of publication by October, 2022 in celebration of VETU-ETS’s 50th anniversary.

Conference Location and accommodation: ETS-VETU campus, Cvjetkova 32, 31000 Osijek, Croatia, featuring a newly renovated dorm and 180-seat auditorium.

Conference Dates: July 1–3, 2021

Participants: Scholars, teachers, students, clergy and other practitioners from around the region and the world with an interest in the topic.

Format:

- i. Presentations from keynote speakers in plenary sessions.
- ii. Parallel sessions featuring invited and submitted papers
- iii. Interactive topical breakout sessions/discussions

Call for Papers: Dates tbd (autumn, 2020)

Introduction:

What is “conversion”? As a religious phenomenon, conversion would appear to mean a thorough and complete turn or change from one set of religious convictions (or none at all) to another. But “conversion” has also been used as a way of describing a move to a deeper religious commitment, or a move within or between different traditions within one religion. When speaking more narrowly of Christian conversion, the concept has been understood in these three ways: conversion to Christian faith; conversion to deeper commitment in one’s Christian faith, perhaps from nominal, cultural belief to an active committed personal belief, or a move from one Christian tradition to another.

But what did Christian conversion entail from those earliest days onward? How might we speak of “conversion” on the Hebrew scriptures? How did it develop through the history of Christianity from the New Testament through the patristic, medieval, reformation and modern periods? Could conversion be a one-time act or a lengthy process, or was it necessary at all for those born within Christian families and communities? What was the relationship between conversion, discipleship, and new churches? Was it an individual act or experience, or could it indeed be national and collective? Was conversion a revelatory experience, a coming to true knowledge, a surrender to God, or some combination of each of the above? Indeed, history bears out all of these possibilities, but how are we to understand them theologically today in our contemporary context?

All of these historical questions remain current for theological consideration. One may also consider the role of the Bible in conversion, or the work of the Holy Spirit, or the role of

other Christians or the church itself as a mediator of conversions. Are certain experiences normative, or are there numerous variations that fit within a Biblical and orthodox theological framework? What are the various understandings of this concept within different Christian traditions?

Other questions about conversion also arise from non-theological fields of inquiry. What insights on the experiences of Christian conversion can be gained from the social sciences, or even the fast-developing fields of brain science? How do philosophers understand conversion? How have conversion experiences been treated or expressed in art, music, literature and poetry, and how do these experiences contribute to Christians' understanding and/or spiritual development and formation?

Finally, what are the pastoral, missological, spiritual and ecclesial dimensions of conversion today? How might a better understanding of the phenomenon of conversion in the above ways help Christians recognize the work of God in their own lives and in others? What misconceptions, misunderstandings or prejudices could prove harmful? What is the role of tolerance in discourse about conversion? How should conversion narratives be expressed to those with other religious beliefs or in other non-Christian cultures? In what ways does an understanding of "conversion" change across cultures and times, and how can Christian practitioners and churches faithfully and lovingly practice evangelism, discipleship and mission with all of these questions in mind?

In sum, this project is based on the conviction that a sound and well-conceived Christian theology of conversion—though perhaps too often neglected—is an important and necessary ingredient for Christian life and discipleship, for healthy churches and for appropriate Christian engagement with the wider culture and other worldviews. In the words of Gordon T. Smith (2001, 11), "reflection on conversion is vital to the task of theology."

This project thus aims to be an academic inquiry that seeks theological integration from multiple perspectives, incorporating both theoretical and experiential reflection from a critical yet ecumenically confessional faith position in order to pursue and contribute to the development of an integrative Christian theology of conversion for better understanding, teaching, practice and ministry in church, academy and society, and with special consideration for the cultural context of Central and Eastern Europe.