

**CONVERSION AS TESTIMONY:  
RELIABILITY, OBJECTIVITY AND OTHER  
METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES**

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**Abstract.** *What is a conversion testimony? Why is a statement about conversion conceived as testimony? How do we know that persons who report conversion experiences are telling the truth? What are converts trying to achieve with their testimonies? These are the leading questions of this article. The first section discusses the hermeneutics of testimony and deals with the philosophical and theological understanding of the term. It summarizes Paul Ricoeur's contributions to the philosophy of testimony. Building on my earlier research exploring the testimonial analysis of recovering drug addicts' conversions, this article examines the validity, reliability, objectivity and other methodological challenges in the empirical study of religious conversion.*

**Key words:** *testimony, conversion, reliability, objectivity, epistemology of testimony, hermeneutics.*

*"There is no 'true' testimony without 'false' testimony".*

Paul Ricoeur (1992, 22)

*"As long as there's one person to believe it,  
there's no story that can't be true".*

Paul Auster (2009, 40)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this article I explore the speech act of testimony, one of the most common acts converts perform. Testimony is understood here as the expression of one's own narrative identity. In a testimony a convert exposes, discloses, and inspects oneself; it uncovers, reveals, professes

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and confesses. Testimony is a desire to attract a different formation of the self, a means of seduction, through a statement of the need for empathy, exoneration from the secret that hurts, and a desire to transform. It tranquilizes the convert's soul. This perspective of testimony provides a rich resource for understanding the nature of conversion, the prototypical form of spiritual change. Conversion is in part the adoption of a new rhetoric or language system. Lewis Rambo (1993, 136) defines testimony as "the narrative witness of a person's conversion and it entails two interacting processes: language transformation and biographical reconstruction". However, Rambo does not problematize the question of testimony from a methodological point of view, as we shall do when we discuss the hermeneutics of testimony. For him, personal testimony is a common method for publicly displaying commitment. It is an important element where individuals have the public opportunity to give a personal account of their experience with God. Testimony is a central "technique of the self" (Marshall 2009), and the principal mode of creating a new identity and collective belonging. Moreover, as practice of the self it "involves acts and experience of faith whose focus is on interiority, enacting in various forms processes of self examination and giving an account of oneself" (Marshall 2009, 129). That is to say, conversion testimonies are stories converts tell and re-tell through speech acts and behaviors that express a religious role they are performing. Understanding testimony as a performative discursive practice allows insight into the strategies converts employ to negotiate identity and meaning through storytelling practices. Conversion testimonies function as dynamic, discursive devices in which converts stress the presence and active involvement of God in everyday life (Klaver 2011, 282). Thus the testimonial discourse serves as a transformative practice of self, and it is always linked to the transformation of faith communities. In this collaborative storytelling, the opportunity to testify *before* an audience can be a deeply liberating experience. Therefore, the testimony serves to reconstruct biographical information, integrating the convert's story with that of a religious community. It also constitutes the performance of a new social identity which is the result of a successful conversion. As Maruna and others (2006, 163) argue: "This narrative redefinition and reflexivity are exaggerated for religious converts because they are constantly being asked and expected to 'give witness' to their experience of how they have changed." –

## 2. THE HERMENEUTICS OF TESTIMONY<sup>1</sup>

For Beverley (2005, 547), "*testimonio* intertwines the 'desire for objectivity' and 'the desire for solidarity' in its very situation of production, circulation, and reception". *Testimonio* is a narrative, a spoken or written text in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts (Beverley 2005, 547). According to Beverley (2005, 547), "its unit of narration is usually a 'life' or significant life experience." Likewise, in contemporary philosophy the term *testimony* is used as a label for the spoken or written word, when this purports to pass on the speaker's or writer's knowledge or experience. Despite the wide variety of views on testimony, a single proposition is widely accepted: testimony is the assertion of a declarative sentence by a speaker to a hearer or to an audience (cf. Coady 1992; Fricker 2004; Graham 2000). In this sense, *testimonio* might be seen as a kind of speech act that sets up special ethical

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<sup>1</sup> Some fragments of this part of the article are previously published in Sremac & Ganzevoort 2013a.

and epistemological demands. Therefore, testifying, or giving testimony, is a linguistic action, and testimony is its result, an intelligible speech act of telling and retelling.

Conversion testimonies can then be understood as the discursive practice of self-performance in which converts give evidence of their spiritual transformation through public confessions (testimony) of their past life and their present situation. Through testimonies the converts describe how their thinking and behavior worked before conversion, and judge their own past self by the standards of their present religious consciousness. These conversion testimonies as they are retold orally and composed as autobiographies become the paradigms by which converts interpret their lives (Rambo 1993, 158). In my own research among recovering drug addict converts, these testimonies help individuals construe a new religious identity that enables them to cope with the past as something that can be both overcome and redeemed (cf. Sremac & Ganzevoort 2013a, b; Sremac 2013). In particular, testimonies enable new forms of conduct that offer recovering drug addicts a way of extricating themselves from a spoiled or stigmatized identity. In this sense, conversion testimony functions as mechanism of reinforcement and commitment (Cartledge 2010, 17).

The epistemological analysis of testimony shows that the setting of a testimony, in ancient times, as well as at the present, is in a court of law, which means that there are different accounts of what did or did not take place. In the trial setting, some actual events or experiences are under dispute (Brueggemann 1997, 120). The court, however, “has no access to the ‘actual events’ besides the testimony, but must take the testimony as the ‘real portrayal’” (Brueggemann 1997, 120). Usually in the epistemological research of testimony, the term testimony is used within narrow limits, suggesting a formal or legal setting. It should be noted that testimony is not always evidence and is certainly not always given in courtrooms. It is important, therefore, not to focus on the connotations of testimony only from legal contexts when analyzing conversion testimonies. As Ricoeur (1979, 119) notes: “Testimony should be a philosophical problem and not limited to legal or historical contexts where it refers to the account of a witness who reports what he has seen”. My use of testimony will be intermediate. I will refer to acts that do not take place in formal settings, although I will use some analogies from a judicial perspective.<sup>2</sup>

The study of testimony is growing in the field of theology and philosophy. Despite this increase, Ricoeur’s (1979) seminal essay, “The hermeneutics of testimony”, which was among the first to explore testimony as the distinctive Christian hermeneutic still remains a touchstone text. In this article, Ricoeur tries to analyze testimony from a semantic perspective, providing language and terms to describe the philosophical and theological aspects of testimony. By asking the question what sort of philosophy makes a problem of testimony, Ricoeur seeks to determine whether a philosophy of testimony is even possible.

Ricoeur begins his analysis of testimony by stating that testimony has a quasi-empirical meaning; it designates the act of relating what one has seen or heard. It is not the perception of the event itself, but the story or narration of an event. The basic form of the testimony is therefore narrative. The witness (eyewitness or firsthand witness) is the author of this action; it is he or she who reports personal experience and shifts the discourse from the level of things seen to the level of things said (Ricoeur 1979, 123). This shift has

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this discussion some valuable insights might be derived from John Adams’ historical work on the Puritan concept of judicial analogies and conversion narratives. He argues that in the Puritan concept of conversion and church polity, it was expected that candidates would be able to testify to their experience of conversion in a way that would provide the congregation with appropriate grounds for judging whether they had an ‘authentic’ conversion experience or not (cf. Adams 1991).

implications at the level of communication. Testimony implies a dual relationship: the testifier (one who has seen) and the hearer (one who has not seen and must rely on what is heard). As Ricoeur (1979, 123) notes: “Testimony as story is thus found in an intermediary position between a statement made by a person and a belief assumed by another on the faith of the testimony of the first”. Consequently, judgment is an implicit aspect of testimony. We rely on the statement or story to form an opinion of the meaning of what has happened. The statement and the story constitute information on the basis that one forms opinions about a sequence of events, sees connections between actions, discerns motives behind the act, gauges the character and authority of the testifier; in short, the statement or story informs our understanding of what has happened (Ricoeur, 1979, 123). Therefore, testimony is not just a statement about something witnessed, but an account used in support of a judgment, giving rise to the judiciary sense of testimony. In a similar vein, the Scottish empiricist philosopher David Hume described the judiciary sense of testimony from an epistemological point of view. In his book *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume (1977, 74) notes “there is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men, and the reports of eyewitnesses and spectators.” In the chapter “Miracles”, Hume discusses the reliability of human testimony and the role testimony plays as a part of epistemology. He offers some reasons why we have to believe in someone’s testimony based on experience: firstly, human memory can be relatively tenacious and, secondly, because people are inclined to tell the truth, and ashamed of telling falsities. This suggests that people usually tell the truth and therefore they are probably accurate in reporting their experience. Hume (1977, 390) also enlists a number of reasons to be skeptical of human testimony, also based on experience: namely if 1) testimonies conflict with one another; 2) there are a small number of witnesses; 3) the speaker has no integrity; 4) the speaker is overly hesitant or bold; and 5) the speaker is known to have motives for lying. In these cases the epistemologist has reason for skepticism. Put compactly, if there are sound reasons to suspect the witnesses’ honesty, or if the testimony was self-contradictory in some way, we may suppose it to be unreliable (cf. Griffith Dickson 2007). Likewise Davis (1989, 71–77) provides four criteria for the genuine testimony of religious experience, these include; 1) internal and external consistency; 2) evidence of the moral and spiritual “fruits” or consequences of the testimony; 3) consistency with orthodox doctrine of the religious tradition; and 4) the evaluation of the subject’s general psychological and mental condition.

Let us now return to Ricoeur. The French philosopher notes that not every account is a testimony; the action of testifying has an intimate relation to a place or institution. The testimony makes reference to a trial, which calls for a judicial decision that settles a dispute between two parties. This is why a testimony always arises as proof *for* or *against* something. Both legal discourse and the notion of the trial exhibit certain traits of testimony and engender the quasi-judicial aspect of testimony (Ricoeur 1979, 125). Therefore, we cannot have certainty but only probability, and the probable is only pursued through a struggle of opinion. Furthermore, in a quasi-judicial sense, testimony is a kind of proof, part of the rhetorical level of discourse aimed at getting a certain judgment. Building his argument on Aristotle’s work in the *Rhetoric*, Ricoeur (1979, 127) argues that testimony is non-technical proof; it is “external to arguments that the orator himself invents”. Therefore, the judgment of the testimony becomes dependent on something exterior, to things seen or heard. That is to say, the credibility of the testimony and the quality of the witness take on the utmost importance.

Ricoeur tries to show that a philosophy of testimony can only be hermeneutic, that is, a philosophy of interpretation. He argues that the interpretation of testimony is a twofold act, an act in which consciousness becomes aware of itself and an act of historical understanding which is based on signs that the absolute gives of itself. According to Ricoeur (1979, 143), “the signs of the absolute’s self-disclosure are at the same time signs in which consciousness recognizes itself”. Therefore, the hermeneutics of testimony arises in the confluence of two exegeses – the exegesis of the historic testimony of the absolute and the exegesis of the self in the criteria of the divine. From the perspective of the philosophy of religion, Stoker (2006, 102) describes the Christian faith itself as a testimony to Transcendence. According to him, such a testimony has two poles: on the one hand, a manifestation and proclamation of Transcendence and on the other, the individual witness of what he or she has seen or heard. For Stoker (2006, 118), testimony and Transcendence in essence involves a witness “giving an answer to the manifestation and proclamation of religious Transcendence”. Furthermore, Ricoeur (1979, 144) argues that testimony itself interprets and also gives to interpretation the contents of experience. In testimony there is an immediacy of the absolute without which there would be nothing to interpret. Ricoeur holds that interpreting this experience must be done across three dimensions.

First, testimony demands to be interpreted dialectically between meaning and event (Ricoeur, 144). The relation between the confessional pole and the narrative pole of testimony has a considerable hermeneutical significance. This relationship implies that interpretation cannot be applied to testimony externally but must proceed immanently.

Secondly, testimony demands further interpretation by the critical activity it evokes (Ricoeur 1979, 146). Here again, the relationship between testimony and trial is instructive. It is always necessary to choose between the false witness and the true witness. Stoker points out that testimony is both a manifestation and a crisis of appearance. The attitude of trust is ultimate but not blind. In this regard, testimony is not only absolute but also relative. Stoker claims: “It requires critical narrative investigation of testimonial reliability” (Stoker 2006, 113). According to Ricoeur (1979, 146), “the hermeneutic structure of testimony consists in that testimony concerning things seen only reaches judgment through a story, that is, by means of things said.” In his 1989 essay ‘Emmanuel Levinas: Thinker of Testimony’, Ricoeur (1995, 118) holds that the epistemological status of testimony is inseparable from trust:

“Here to believe is to trust. With testimony, it seems to me, the problematic of truth coincides with that of veracity. It is in this sense that testimony is related to and dependent upon a hermeneutics: the believing confidence of a second-order testimony in the first, absolute testimony does not coincide with deductive knowledge or with empirical proof. It stems from the categories of understanding and interpretation.”

Thirdly, the dialectic between witness and testimony requires interpretation (Ricoeur 1979, 146). The witness testifies about something which or someone which transcends him. Ricoeur argues that in this sense testimony concerns the *Other*. Finally, Ricoeur notes what we recognize in testimony, not in the sense of the story of a witness who tells what he or she has seen but it is the expression of the freedom that we desire. As Ricoeur (1979, 152) puts it, “What I recognize outside myself is, in its effectiveness, the movement of liberation that I posit only as an ideal.” In the next section I will try to demonstrate how the ideas Ricoeur develops are applicable to conversion research and how his hermeneutics of testimony can help our understanding of the act of testifying.

### 3. CONVERSION AS TESTIMONY: SHOULD WE BELIEVE CONVERTS BECAUSE OF THEIR TESTIMONIES?

Is conversion testimony a reliable source for investigating spiritual transformation? I suggest that conversion testimonial sources are reliable but not necessarily in a factual way. The importance of conversion testimony “may lie not in its adherence to fact but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge” (Portelli 1991, 51). Thus, there are no ‘false’ testimonial sources. As Portelli (1991, 51) suggests, diversity in storytelling “consists in the fact that ‘wrong’ statements are still psychologically ‘true,’ and that this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts.” It should be borne in mind, however, that when analyzing conversion testimonies we do not need to consider converts as witnesses in a trial, although I will discuss the ‘empirical trial’ where conversion researchers often have suspicions regarding the accuracy of the conversion accounts. Nonetheless, some of Ricoeur’s insights can lead to a better understanding of what is happening when one testifies.

In his semantic exploration of the word “testimony”, Ricoeur (1979, 123) states that a testimony is primarily a story or narration of things one has both heard and seen. The witness of the testimony is the author of this narration. As I have already mentioned, testimony implies a dual relationship: the testifier (the one who has seen) and the hearer (the one who has not seen and must rely on what is heard). Moreover, the testimony is the principle conveyor of truth (or the lack thereof) in legal trials. Correspondingly, conversion testimonies are exposed to the same issues concerning the transmission of truth, as are court room testimonies. Needless to say, conversion researchers have often worried about false testimonies in their empirical data. This skeptical attitude to the narrative and testimonial activity of converts was adopted by scholars in their studies of the social reality of conversion storytelling. Some theorists have gone on to suggest that conversion testimony is not credible because it is inevitably subjective. With Staples and Mauss (1987, 138), I hold that conversion is fundamentally a subjective phenomenon, and thus only the subject is qualified to tell us who he or she really is. Others have doubted the veracity of retrospective conversion testimonies as the present may affect (or infect) the accounts viability. This is a suggestion worth considering. Steve Bruce (2006), for example, criticizes the naïve notions of conversion testimonies as either true or false. Referring to the followers of Harold Garfinkel, he claims that we have to be suspicious of what converts communicate about their actions and using it as data for understanding their motives. Bruce, among others, holds that courtroom testimony is an obvious example of the methodological problems in conversion investigation. The actor (the convert) has an interest in making a favorable impression, e.g. conveying that they are trustworthy, and this choreography is often aided by the lawyer who coaches his or her client. Similarly, religious communities can teach their converts how to testify. Converts often present their testimonies within a well-established frame and “canonical language” (Stromberg 1993) that they themselves have learnt from others (Bruce 2006). Day (2002, 71), discussing Streib’s research on the narrative accounts of people who join and leave fundamentalist groups, claims that religious subjects employ narratives and language “thoughtfully, carefully, deliberately, so as to create a coherent picture of self, to justify their conduct, and to persuade their listeners that what they are saying is both sensible and wise”. As a result of this, Bruce holds that giving an account of a convert’s actions is not merely an objective reporting of the past; it is itself a social act in which the speaker wishes to achieve a certain outcome. Converts often try to

attain a certain result: to impress others or to achieve a new social status. An important question in this connection is what does a testimony accomplish, both with respect to the convert's interaction with his or her audience and to his or her construction of social reality? Telling one's testimony to others may serve highly strategic purposes of making a certain impression on an audience. As Bruce (2006, 7) claims, "like the person on a criminal charge, converts want to be let off; in this case they want to be freed of responsibility for their previous actions." He goes further, arguing that converts' accounts are exposed to the contingency of a subjective explanation and so we cannot use what people say about themselves as empirical data for social explanations. Yet, for Bruce, this does not mean that we simply give up seeking to understand religious conversion. He writes: "To say that accounts cannot be taken naively as evidence about the reality behind them is not itself a sufficient justification for supposing that we can never test accounts or that in every case underlying realities are unknowable" (Bruce 2006, 8). In the context of my previous research among recovering drug addicts converts, the testimony provides a medium whereby converts can articulate and transform the disruptions of previous shamed life events into meaningful events and above all it helps them to cope with the past (Sremac 2013). In other words, conversion testimony can be seen as an addict's *apologia pro vita sua*. I would argue, therefore, that testimonies could be used as a strategic device, for example, in order to excuse or explain past actions or behavior. This does not, however, mean that their testimonies are not a reliable source for understanding their life changes and that we cannot use them for our empirical analysis. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that situational factors also play a decisive role in the construction of conversion testimonies. In this regard, I propose that we develop more sophisticated annotation tools for analyzing contextual factors, particularly on the interaction between conversion-teller and the audience. In this way, conversion testimonies can be understood as interpretations or retrospective accounts which seek to render experiences meaningful and which therefore change over time in accordance with the convert's life circumstances, or with the social context of the conversion testimony-telling.

Other theorists argue that biographical data in testimonies cannot be used as documentation for what happens to a person in a conversion, but rather forms part of a convert's experience viewed through the theology of the faith community. A theological framework that reflects an implicit or "ordinary theology" (cf. Astley 2002; Astley & Francis 2013) of the convert informs testimonies. Testimonies, therefore, form and shape the basis of the convert's new worldview, spirituality and theology. Rambo (2010) forcefully claims that: "Creating objective retrospective biographies is difficult for converts. It is not that they are lying. They simply have a new vocabulary and they believe a new divine power is in their lives. Consequently, that strong post-conversion understanding influences their interpretation". We should be aware, however, that conversion experiences by their very nature elude rigorous testing and checks for reliability.

Because of these methodological problems mentioned above, social constructionist conversion researchers contend that we should study the performance of account-giving instead of trying to understand what actually contributed to conversion (Popp Baier 2002; Sremac 2010; Zock 2006). This point once again underscores the importance of a narrative approach in conversion research. It should be noted, however, that my primary interest does not lie in the truth and epistemology of the testimonies of the converts, although I think this is a very important and relevant issue. Instead, the focus is more pragmatic: I do not ask whether testimonies are true or not, but whether the testimonies enable the individual to

live their life without drugs, and how the testimony supports the individual through the changing circumstances of their life. I am also interested in how the identity of the recovering drug addict is negotiated and established through testimonial talks. In other words, I want to understand how testimonial storytelling provides strategies that ultimately help an individual redress imbalances and correct perceived traumatic experiences in their lives. Asking this kind of question I do not want to limit conversion testimony to a mere coping crutch but rather I am interested in their narrative therapeutic outcomes. In other words, I want to grasp how they re-conceptualize their conversion and addictive experience to produce convincing explanations for their recovery. In short, conversion testimonies are neither true nor false in the sense that they are more or less exact representations of past events, but they are 'true' or 'false' in terms of being functional or dysfunctional in leading to a life without drugs in the present and anticipated future.<sup>3</sup> Or as Holloway and Wheeler (2002, 208) argue, the narration may be true in its meaning even though it is not always based on fact or objective reality but is a social construction and reception of what has happened to the testifier.

However, here is the main critical question: Why is a statement about conversion conceived as testimony? I argue that it is necessarily framed in these terms because the convert refers to a personal experience. The convert tells a story that no one else can tell – just like an eyewitness in court. In a way, however, the question is not so much about what really happened as it is about who has the authority to narrate. Coady (1992, 42), for instance, gives a definition of testimony which includes the requirement that the speaker “has the relevant competence, authority, or credentials to state truly what she or he is telling”. Moreover, like a legal witness, the convert vouches personally for the veracity of what he or she says. In Ricoeur’s terms, the testifier gives a personal *attestation*. For example, the witness says, “believe me”, and like a legal jury his or her audience has to determine whether they accept this testimony or not. Ultimately, they should judge whether a certain testimony comes from God or not. Indeed a complex issue in a conversion testimony is the unveiling of the experience that the witness refers to; is it to the outer, visible, material world? Or does the witness refer to something revealed in their inner life, or to both? This issue is important for the credibility of a testimony. If the witness only refers to an inner experience some in the audience might say: “That is true I have had the same experience”. Others might say: “Fine for you, but we do not have this experience”. If the witness only refers to verifiable facts, the audience might say: “Yes, a miracle has happened!” But equally, others might also say: “Well, there is nothing extraordinary about your testimony.” Therefore, to be accepted, testimonies have to refer to personal experience but in such a way that others can imagine to have the same experience. But perhaps the best evidence is not the conversion itself but the effect of the conversion: has the convert has changed? As the pragmatic maxim teaches us, “through their fruits you shall know them!” In this sense, “*testimonio* is therapeutic and trust is based on the authenticity of belief rather than on the promise of confidentiality” (Hansen 2005, 450).

At this point we can benefit from Ricoeur (1979, 130) when he concludes his semantic analysis by stressing that the fundamental sign of a true witness is devotion to a cause: actions and life-styles can be testimonies to the extent that they point to a certain conviction. Long ago, Strickland (1924, 123) has argued: “And if action from new ideals and changed habits of life do *not* follow, there has been no conversion”. Likewise

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<sup>3</sup> For the functional approach to autobiographical memory see Bluck 2009.



William James (2004 [1902], 237) said: “If the *fruits for life* of the state of conversion are good, we ought to idealize and venerate it, even if it be a piece of natural psychology”. James (1995, 20) articulated his rationale for attending to the practical bearings of not only religion but all human endeavors in his pragmatic beliefs: “There can be no difference anywhere that doesn’t make a difference elsewhere – no difference in abstract truth that doesn’t express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact”. Similarly Alston (1991) points to the religious practice of looking for the “fruits” of an experience in a subject’s life or behavior, testing the “output” of a religious experience as a way of probing its validity.

Furthermore, the comparison between Ricoeur’s analysis of the religious connotation of the word testimony and the testimonies of recovering drug addicts reveals even closer parallels. First, the witness is sent to testify to something. The witness is the author of his or her testimony. In the context of my study, the converts testify about the spiritual transformation that he or she has experienced. However, Ricoeur also highlights the separation between the religious and the profane meaning of the word testimony. In the religious sense, the testimony does not belong to the witness. As we already mentioned, God is both the source of testimony and the subject of its content. Furthermore, one of the characteristics of the religious meaning of the word testimony is the unification of words and acts. For recovering drug addicts, their changed lives render their testimony potent and sincere. In this sense, the witness (the convert) is similar to the true witness that Ricoeur elaborates in his semantic analysis.

Also, it is important to note for our purposes the two elements Ricoeur describes: *testimony–confession* and *testimony–narration*, which are present in conversion testimonies. Recovering drug addict converts are engaged in testimony–confession when they declare that the power of God helped them to be free from drugs. Testimony–narration consists of the associated narrative of how they gained that testimony and what the significance of that testimony is. Stating that God delivered them from drugs will always be tied into a narrative of salvation in Jesus Christ, or in the words of Ricoeur, a narration of “the acts of deliverance” (Ricoeur 1979, 134). If we examine the ways in which the experience of conversion is described in testimony, we see that the individual invariably presents this:

“Spiritual moment as an intensely powerful and private dialogue of the self with the self, yet one in which the individual recognize him- or herself as being in the grip of a power that goes beyond the individual, a power that reveals itself in an imperious fashion, demanding that one cede or capitulate (Marshall 2009, 147).”

Here it is also important to mention the communal aspects of testimony. The (re)construction of testimony does not occur in a social, psychological or religious vacuum, so the strong social influences on the person must be taken into account. In this process, testimony becomes more than a story of individual change; it also reflects the ongoing process of communal change (Rambo 1993, 139). In the narrative, a community’s identity transformation takes place through re–telling of testimonies and the identification of personal meanings of metaphors. As Rambo (1993, 137) correctly recognized, testimony can also be a potent reminder of the community’s basic values and goals.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The aim of this article has been to present Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of testimony and to apply some of Ricoeur's insights to conversion research. In summary, testimony in the broad sense includes the central case of one person telling something to another in face-to-face communication. It is a story where a convert is an active, interpretive human agent, with himself or herself and with the audience. In conversion testimonies, we have no access to the actual events, but we can analyze the speech act of testimony in which converts construe their stories. I argue that we should study conversion testimonies from a linguistic standpoint instead of trying to understand what actually contributed to the conversion (Sremac 2010). This does not mean that I neglect the spiritual dimension in that process or divine agency in converts' lives, but I want to see how they understand the work of God in creating and construing the credible stories of their lives. Testimonies are not for the entertainment of an audience, or even to inform it: the purpose is neither to enthrall nor convince. Rather, it is a platform for a speaker to stand up and be counted as a part of community. The ritual of speaking candidly in front of those who have seen and heard it all before is essential to the process of identity transformation and to the group dynamic. Therefore *testimonio* is both an art and a strategy of narrative identity reconfiguration. Drawing on Derrida's injunction "No one bears witness to the witness", Ohmoto Frederick (2012) captures this idea neatly when he writes:

"Bearing witness is not necessarily truth itself, but is a performative act [...] Although belief may be a belief in the act of thinking, the necessity for belief is not logic, it is not knowledge, it is an appeal by the witness to the other for recognition. This recognition entails remembrance, a reflection of one's self in the Other, not as mirrored re-creation, but as discovery."

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**OBRAĆENJE KAO SVEDOČANSTVO:  
EMPIRIJSKA POUZDANOST, OBJEKTIVNOST  
I DRUGI METODOLOŠKI IZAZOVI**

*Rad se bavi činom i analizom svedočanstva religijskog obraćenja na temelju Ricæurove hermeneutike svedočanstva. U prvom delu rada, autor kritičkom analizom sagledava hermeneutiku svedočanstva, kao i epistemološko značenje termina. Drugi deo rada se bavi Ricæuovim doprinosom filozofiji svedočanstva; kao i njegovoj primeni pri empirijskoj analizi religijskog obraćenja. Autor kritički sagledava metodološke probleme kao što su validnost, objektivnost i pouzdanost pri analizi svedočanstva obraćenje. Sve ovo, autor promišlja kroz prizmu njegovog prethodnog istraživanja o empirijskoj analizi svedočanstva obraćenja rekonvalescenata.*

*Ključne reči: svedočanstvo obraćenja, empirijska pouzdanost, objektivnost, validnost, hermeneutika, epistemologija svedočanstva.*