Introduction: Social and Political Dimensions of Religious Conversion

Pierre Beaucage   *Université de Montréal*
Deirdre Meintel   *Université de Montréal*
With the collaboration of Géraldine Mossière   *Université de Montréal*

Conversion[1] is the subject of an extensive literature and has attracted the interest of researchers working in a number of academic disciplines, including history (e.g., Deslandres 2005), theology (e.g., Marty 1988), sociology (e.g., Stark 1965), psychology (Rambo 1993) and anthropology (e.g., Buckser et Glazier 2003). Historical studies, especially as regards the spread of Islam and Christianity via conquest and colonization, have predominated in the study of conversion. As André Mary has noted in his work on Africa, historical works on conversion have generally been framed "in a missionary perspective whose object was to find a local matrix for the evangelical message, or else in a "native" perspective that often borrows the categories of the missionary other" (1998:13).[2]

There is little consensus on how to define conversion, except for the notion of change. The sociologist Heirich, for example, writes of "a change of the heart" inscribed in "a process of changing a sense of root reality" as well as "a conscious shift in one's sense of grounding" (1977:674). Yet how much change is involved, and from whose point of view it is assessed remain at issue; Rambo (1993), for example, adopts a subjectivist perspective whereby "conversion is seen as what a group or individual believes it to be." Moreover, the author sees conversion as a "multiple, interactive and cumulative" process, rather than a single, dramatic act of rupture (Rambo 1993:7), echoing the approach of the anthropologist Robin Horton (1971, 1975) who argues that indigenous cosmological development precedes and is integrated into the conversion process.

Most social scientific studies of conversion before the 1970s were framed in a modernization perspective whereby religious phenomena appeared as pre-modern, "irrational" and ultimately, doomed to disappear. In this light, "psychopathological" (Stark 1965) causes were invoked to explain conversion. During the same period, anthropologists approached conversion, usually considered a part of "religious change" (see De Waal-Malefijt 1968), primarily in terms of the transformation of tradi-

tional belief and ritual systems among exotic peoples after contact with the West. Given religion's functional links with social structure, along with the radical changes to the latter caused by colonialism, it was expected that primitive cosmologies would be replaced by a modern, rational world view. This was expected to happen after an intermediary phase where natives, though formally converted to the forms of Christianity brought by the colonizers, would retain and reinterpret important segments of their previous religious systems.[3] On occasion, the brutal cultural shock brought by colonization could lead much further, that is, to temporary processes of "counter-acculturation" (Herskovits 1952:234 ff.). These could take the form of prophetic, messianic movements headed by charismatic leaders and aimed at social revolution (Worsley 1957). In the long run, however, full conversion was expected as the expression of inexorable social and cultural change involving radical change of identity and social belonging (Gruzinski 1988).

Since the 1970s, religious renewal in industrialized societies, as well as in former colonies in Africa, Asia and Latin America has resulted in many cases of conversion to new religions or reconversion. The latter typically involves much-intensified religious belonging and practice for individuals whose belonging was previously a nominal affiliation. As a result, a new body of literature on conversion is emerging. The new literature shows the influence of postmodernist perspectives; for example, in the focus on individual trajectories and the subjective transformation the act of conversion may entail.

The articles presented here are focussed on two major issues. The first is the relation between religion and politics. Benedict Anderson writes of the relations between religious belongings and the modern nation-state that grew out of the great religious communities of Europe and the Mediterranean region; i.e., Christianity, Judaism and Islam (Anderson 1983). Yet now there seems to be a movement in the other direction, where sociopolitical representations (symbols, vocabulary, imagery) are being displaced in favour of new religious forms and imaginaries (Corten 1995).

The other major issue addressed in this collection involves the definition of religious belonging as monolithic and exclusive, which is similar to the classic model of national affiliation. It is possible that such conceptions correspond to the top-down bias of ecclesiastical authority that appears to be shared by researchers, rather than to the way different religious forms are actually experienced "on the ground." Amselle (1990) argues that monolithic ethnic identities, corresponding to religious, political and linguistic divisions, in Africa were largely the work

of colonial administrations, imposed on a much more fluid social reality informed by what he calls a "logique métisse." Similarly, the label of "religion à la carte" (Bibby 1988) was applied to a new trend among believers who do not feel constrained any more by Catholic or Protestant dogma, but rather borrow religious beliefs and practices from several different frames of reference, such as combining Buddhist morals with shamanistic practices or the acceptance of reincarnation. In other words, there is postulated a kind of "syncretism" like that mentioned above, but one that goes in the opposite direction. It is no longer freshly converted natives who retain "pagan" elements but rather members of the dominant faiths who seem to find their inspiration in exotic cults.

Conversion in Colonial and Postcolonial Contexts

The historical processes surrounding conversion in the imperial context were far more varied and complex than linear models of modernization would suggest. The re-examination of historical sources, for example, shows that there were many contradictions and reversals even in the initial phase of conversion. Emma Anderson's article in this issue reveals these contradictions in her presentation of the case of Pierre-Antoine Pastedechouan, a young Innu (Montagnais) who was converted with great fanfare by French missionaries in the 17th century, only to be castigated as a "renegade" after his difficult and painful return to the religion and way of life of his ancestors.

If we look at the present era, we see that Catholic and Protestant religions have lost ground in North America and Europe. Advancing secularization has affected culture and social organization, though at a variable pace and in different ways, according to national and temporal context. The same currents have affected colonial and postcolonial societies but do not seem to have affected them so deeply. In any case it is clear that laicization is by no means the universal phenomenon predicted by the proponents of linear evolutionism, be it of Marxist or liberal inspiration.

The major monotheistic religions have not only survived but have gone through periodic renewals of fervour that are portrayed as returns to the "true faith," seen as lost for years, if not centuries. These renewals have been labelled "revivals," a term that does not carry the negative charge of the French "intégrisme."

The political radicalism associated with certain Christian, Islamic and Jewish movements has received a lot of attention, but relatively little is known about the complex sociocultural factors behind, for example, conversion to Pentecostalism in the Americas and the Islamic mobiliza-

tion elsewhere. Marie-Nathalie LeBlanc's article treats the expansion of an "Arabized" version of Islam among women in Ivory Coast. LeBlanc shows that in the debates about "Ivoirité" in the 1990s, following the collapse of the agricultural export (coffee and cacao) economy in the 1980s and the end of the single-party regime, Muslims felt ever more removed from the centres of power. This in turn gave rise to Islamic renewal where Muslims found a new focus of identity in fundamentalist Sunni Islam, in opposition both to the West and to traditional Ivorian Islam, which was Sufi and syncretic in character. Focussing on middle-class, educated Westernized women, the author shows how joining new religious associations holds the advantage of allowing them to surmount the "handicaps" posed by their education and success in respect to finding a husband. These women can compensate by adhering to a strict interpretation of Islamic rules, as publicly manifested by wearing the jeleba and the head covering.

In a very different political and geographic context, Chiara Letizia examines the expansion of Theraveda Buddhism among the Newar, an ethnic minority in Nepal. The author shows that in the "only Hinduist State in the world," conversion, defined as individual adhesion to a new religion and its rituals, is not admissible. Given that religion derives from the public sphere in Nepal, proselytising is forbidden, an unusually intolerant stance for Hinduism. Traditional Newar Budhhism has incorporated many Hindu elements; for example, castes, religious feasts and so on. The Theraveda Budddhist movement, originating in Sri Lanka, seeks to "purify" local Buddhism of its Hindu elements and transform it into a universalist, "modern" religion. Letizia shows that the teachings of the Theraveda monks lead, in fact, to conversion, insofar as they give rise to new religious belongings, in this case, to an international pan-Buddhist community instead of caste.

In still other world contexts, one notes the intense proselytization that characterizes Pentecostal churches, as discussed in several articles in this issue. Originating in Methodism, small Pentecostalist congregations provide their members with direct, often ecstatic forms of religious experience, along with moral renewal and a grid of meaning with which to approach life. First observed among Blacks in the United States (Corten 1995), contemporary Pentecostalism has become a transnational movement and recruits new members from traditional Protestant denominations as well as from among Catholics and those with no affiliation. In Latin America, which was strongly Catholic since the Spanish and Portuguese conquest, the expansion of Pentecostalism over the last 25 years has assumed the proportions of a veritable tidal wave (Stoll 1990).

Using examples from South Africa, Haiti and Brazil, André Corten and Vanessa Molina try to show that this "new religious form marked by emotion" cannot be considered simply as the result of social and economic crisis. Rather, Pentecostalism is oriented to the "transformation of a whole set of experiences and practices by re-investing them with meaning." This last is particularly evident in the representation of conversion as reconstruction of the self, of money as a new form of the sacred, of daily life as unity, and finally, in the spiritual-political warfare to be waged on a global scale.

The spread of *evangelismo* has provoked considerable upheaval in communities where the cults of Catholic saints (where indigenous beliefs and rituals were also mixed in) have held a central place in sociopolitical organization and local identity. The crises generated by the arrival of evangelical groups have in some cases led to the outright expulsion of new converts (Rangel 2001). In his article, Martin Hébert presents a different model of co-existence of converts with the majority among the Tlapanéques of Guerrero, Mexico. Protestants make up for their non-participation in Catholic community rituals with involvement in the social and political organization of the celebrations.

Nearby Guatemala shows the highest proportion of Protestants of any Latin American country. Furthermore, it has had two heads of State who were Pentecostal, the dictator Rios Montt (1982-83), and later President Serrano Elías (1990-93). In his analysis of research results from fieldwork in two indigenous communities, one of them mainly evangelical, Pierre Beaucage observes a marked difference in the religious experience of men and women: while men emphasize the moral transformation that follows conversion, women describe their happiness upon receiving Christ. Yet overall, the interviews reveal a certain disenchantment as to the capacity of faith to transform society, especially politicians. From the point of view of Beaucage's informants, it is mainly politics that has corrupted the Children of God; they give as examples, a certain local mayor and President Serrano. Even the division between believers and "the world" has become less clear than before.

Conversion and Urban Minorities

Conversion in the context of migration has attracted the attention of a number of scholars. For example, in Canada, Winland (1994) has described the group conversions of Hmong refugees in Ontario as a result of the help they received in resettlement from Mennonite groups. She sees these conversions as a mode of integration to the host society. On the other hand, Ng (2002) has shown how Chi-

nese immigrants who have converted to an American Reformed Church create new syncretisms between their traditional symbols and practices and the religion they have adopted in the United States.

Two of the studies presented in this issue consider the religious transformations experienced by migrants in different national contexts. Mossière analyses how their Pentecostal faith allows immigrants in Montreal (mostly African, particularly Congolese, and Haitian), to give meaning to their experiences in the host society. Rather than constitute an obstacle to integration (as religious groups are often seen as doing) the congregation studied by Mossière offers immigrants moral and practical support for dealing with the problems encountered in the process of getting established in Canada and Quebec. Based on interviews and long-term participant observation, Mossière's research shows how the weekly religious ritual affects participants' "somatic modes of attention" (Csordas 1993). Music and religious rhetoric lead them to experience a new perception of the world via bodily experience as well as a sense of belonging to a new community: raised arms, swaying bodies, cries and exclamations all express emotions that sometimes peak in trance and glossolalia. The faithful leave strengthened and renewed to deal with the many uncertainties of living in a new society.

Liliana Tamagno's article concerns Toba (indigenous) migrants to Buenos Aires. Subjugated by national military power and evicted from their land early in the 20th century, the Toba were first converted by Anglican missionaries and later by Mennonites. In the Buenos Aires area, the Toba participate in an evangelical church that is indigenous in direction and membership. In the absence of other associative structures, this religious group makes it possible for the Toba to embrace modernity while retaining cultural distinctiveness. Interpretation of the Scriptures helps them decode the multiple messages of metropolitan society while finding a place in the urban milieu.

Canton describes how a long-established minority, the Gypsies of Andalusia, have been able to renegotiate social relations within the group and re-establish community solidarity through conversion to Pentecostalism. Whereas sedentarization and the fragmentation of lineages have weakened group ties, Pentecostalism has led to new cultural definitions. Flamenco music and lyrics are rejected as profane, and blood revenge for affronts to clan honour is condemned. Most converts abandon their traditional trade as scrap merchants and become travelling vendors in regional fairs. Yet at the same time, certain old rituals are maintained, notably, the ostentatious display of "proof" of the new bride's virginity.

New Religious Identifications in Secular Societies

In societies normally seen as modern and secular, researchers are discovering the enduring significance of religion, even as traditional political forms (parties, movements, demonstrations) seem to be weakening. Schnapper (1993) suggests that ethnic and religious revivals serve to compensate for the impersonal, meritocratic quality of modern society, giving new possibilities for social recognition and identifications. At the same time, she suggests, they offer the possibility of creating meaning via transcendent referents and inscription in a wider community. Nevertheless, Laplantine (2003) shows that the communal aspect of modern religious movements is highly variable. While some communities offer clear boundaries and internal structures, others offer less in the way of structural support, in favour of personalized, even idiosyncratic, religious networks, groupings and religious expression.

The spiritualists studied by Meintel correspond to the second type. In this case, a number of Montreal Francophones, most of them of Catholic background, participate regularly in the rituals of a Spiritualist group. These include trance, channelling, meditation, clairvoyance and healing. Some of them choose to develop their own "spiritual gifts" in a religious context under the supervision of ministers who are also mediums. The members of this congregation find religious experience and meaning that offer support for the uncertainties of modern life such as unemployment, divorce and so on. Unlike evangelicals, these spiritualists do not see their religious belonging as necessarily a break from previous affiliations, nor does it exclude other, new involvements (e.g. Native Spirituality[4]).

Issues of Method and Theory

Several interesting tensions typical of studies of conversion can be noted among the contributions to this issue. On the one hand, conversion is a social issue and often a political one. Several of the contributions to this issue (Beaucage, Tamagno) present cases where whole communities have converted (see also works on Native peoples in Canada by Laugrand (1999) and by the historian Deslandres (2005)). On the other hand, viewed on the individual level, conversion is highly variable and even reversible, as several of the studies show (Mossière, Anderson). Many recent writings on conversion, especially in officially secular societies, favour qualitative approaches using narrative methods in order to capture the "bricolage" and religious mobility of individuals (e.g.,

Sherkat 1993; Kose 1999), including not only converts but apostates (e.g., Carter 1998).

A second tension concerns how the researcher is situated in relation to their object of study. As we noted at the beginning, early writings on conversion tended to reflect the situation of the authors as missionaries or "native converts." The more recent literature counts the occasional convert (Jules-Rosette 1976) as well as members of religious groups who study more recent arrivals (Kose 1999; Setta 1999). Many authors have noted the difficulties of studying prosyletizing groups (Mary 2000; Mossière n.d.); paradoxically, it seems to be in studying the more fluid approaches to the supernatural where researchers feel most keenly the impossibility of comprehending the phenomena under study without entering into them as an active participant (Favret-Saada 1977; Goulet 1998; Meintel in press). In general, it seems fair to say that the researcher's personal situation in relation to the religious object (agnostic, atheist, participant, convert, member) tends to orient the focus of their work.

Finally, let us note that the very concept of conversion, understood in the narrow sense of complete rupture with past affiliations, followed by unequivocal adhesion to new ones, is open to question, going by recent work in the field, of which this issue is an example.

While examples of exclusive and intolerant religiosity are not hard to find, they seem to be more the exception than the rule. As illustrated by the contributions to this issue, recent studies of conversion involve highly diverse methods, from statistical analysis to clinical interviews, not to mention participant observation, thus promoting, it is to be hoped, a more nuanced view of the nature of religious conversion.

Without pretending to resolve all the issues we have raised, by examining conversion in its political and social dimensions, our issue seeks to contribute in a more general way to the study of religious phenomena. Finally, by our choice of contributors, we hope to build bridges among anthropological researchers working in various national contexts including Latin America, Africa and Asia as well as North America and Europe.

Pierre Beaucage, Département d'anthropologie, Université de Montréal, C.P. 6128, Succ. Centre-ville, Montréal, Québec, H3C 3J7, Canada. E-mail: pierre.beaucage@UMontreal.ca
Deirdre Meintel, Département d'anthropologie, Université de Montréal, C.P. 6128, Succ. Centre-ville, Montréal, Québec, H3C 3J7, Canada. E-mail: deirdre.meintel@umontreal.ca
Géraldine Mossière, Département d'anthropologie, Université de Montréal, C.P. 6128, Succ. Centre-ville, Montréal, Québec, H3C 3J7, Canada. E-mail:geraldine.mossiere@umontreal.ca

Notes

1 Parts of this introduction are based on Mossière (in press).
2 "Les sources historiques sur les phénomènes de conversion sont pour la plupart issues soit d'un regard missionnaire cherchant dans la culture locale une matrice d'accueil pour le message évangélique soit d'un regard «indigene» qui emprunte souvent pour se formuler les formes et les catégories de discours de l'autre missionnaire" (Mary 1998:13).
3 For a description of this approach to "syncretism," see Rivière 1991.
4 A form of Neo-shamanism (Atkinson 1992) that gives central place to Nature, and where rituals such as the sweat lodge and the vision quest are carried out under the supervision of a Native shaman.

References

Amselle, Jean-Loup
    1990   Logiques métisses: anthropologie de l'identité en Afrique et ailleurs. Paris: Payot.
Anderson, Benedict
    1983   Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. London: Verso.
Atkinson, Jane Monig
    1992   Shamanisms Today. Annual Review of Anthropology 21:307-330.
Bibby, Reginald W.
    1988   Religion à la carte. Montréal: Fides.
Buckser, Andrew, and Stephen D. Glazier, eds.
    2003   The Anthropology of Religious Conversion. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
Carter, Lewis F.
    1998   Carriers of Tales: On Assessing Credibility of Apostate and Other Outsider Accounts of Religious Practices. *In* The Politics of Religious Apostasy: The Role of Apostates in the Transformation of Religious Movements. David G. Bromley, ed. Pp. 221-238. Westport: Praeger.
Corten, André
    1995   Le Pentecôtisme au Brésil. Émotion du pauvre et romantisme théologique. Paris: Karthala.
Csordas, Thomas
    1993   Somatic Modes of Attention. Cultural Anthropology 8(2):135-156.
Deslandres, Dominique
    2005   Entre persuasion et adhésion. La mission française au XVIIe siècle. Théologiques 13:95-117.
De Waal-Malefijt, Anne
    1968   Religion and Culture. An Introduction to Anthropology of Religion. London: MacMillan.
Favret-Saada, Jeanne
    1977   Les mots, la mort, les sorts: la sorcellerie dans le Bocage. Paris: Gallimard.
Goulet, Jean-Guy A.
    1998   Ways of Knowing: Experience, Knowledge, and Power among the Dene Tha. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
Gruzinski, Serge
    1988   La colonisation de l'imaginaire. Sociétés indigènes et occidentalisation dans le Mexique espagnol (XVIe-XVIIIe siècles). Paris: Gallimard.

Heirich, Max
  1977   Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theo-
          ries about Religious Conversion. American Journal of
          Sociology 83(3):653-680.
Herskovits, Melville
  1952   Les bases de l'anthropologie culturelle. Paris: Payot.
Horton, Robin
  1971   African Conversion. Africa 41(2):85-108.
  1975   On the Rationality of Conversion. Africa 45(4):219-
          235.
Jules-Rosette, Benneta
  1976   The Conversion Experience: The Apostles of John
          Maranke. Journal of Religion in Africa 7(2):132-164.
Kose, Ali
  1999   The Journey from the Secular to the Sacred: Expe-
          riences of Native British Converts to Islam. Social
          Compass 46(3):301-313.
Laplantine, François
  2003   Penser anthropologiquement la religion. Anthro-
          pologie et sociétés 27(1):11-32.
Laugrand, Frédéric
  1999   Mourir et renaître: La conversion au christianisme
          des Inuit de l'Arctique de l'Est Canadien. L'Homme
          152:115-141.
Marty, Martin E., with Frederick E. Greenspahn
  1988   Pushing the Faith: Proselytism and Civility in a Plu-
          ralistic World. New York: Crossroad.
Mary, André
  1998   Retour sur "La conversion africaine": Horton, Peel,
          et les autres: parcours de conversion. Journal des
          Africanistes 68(1-2):11-20.
  2000   L'anthropologie au risque des religions mondiales.
          Anthropologie et sociétés 24(1):117-135.
Meintel, Deirdre
  In press When the Extraordinary Hits Home. In Extraordi-
          nary Anthropology: Transformative Moments in the
          Field. Jean-Guy Goulet and Bruce Miller, eds. Lin-
          coln: University of Nebraska Press.
Mossière, Géraldine
  In press Revue de littérature: La conversion religieuse. Docu-
          ment de travail/Working Papier, Groupe de recherche
          Ethnicité et Société.
  N.d.   Sharing in Ritual Effervescence: Emotions and
          Empathy in Fieldwork, Anthropology Matters.

Ng, Kwai Hang
  2002   Seeking the Christian Tutelage: Agency and Culture
          in Chinese Immigrants' Conversion to Christianity.
          Sociology of Religion 63(2):195-214.
Rambo, Lewis
  1993   Understanding Religious Conversion. New Haven:
          Hall University Press.
Rangel, Claudia
  2001   Iglesias y denominaciones religiosas: La disputa por
          los espacios en la Montaña de Guerrero. In El Sur en
          movimiento: La reinvención de Guerrero del Siglo
          XXI. Tomás Bustamante and Sergio Sarmiento, eds.
          Pp. 401-415. Mexico: UAG-CIESAS Unidad Istmo,
          Consejo de Ciencia y Tecnología del Estado de Guer-
          rero.
Rivière, Claude
  1991   Syncrétisme. Dictionnaire de l'ethnologie et de l'an-
          thropologie. Pierre Bonte and Michel Izard, eds.
          Pp. 692-693. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
Schnapper, Dominique
  1993   Le sens de l'ethnico-religieux. Archives des sciences
          sociales des religions 81:149-163.
Setta, El-Houari
  1999   Le Suisse converti à l'Islam: Émergence d'un nou-
          vel acteur social. Social Compass 46(3):337-349.
Sherkat, Darren
  1993   Theory and Method in Religious Mobility Research.
          Social Science Research 22:208-227.
Stark, Rodney
  1965   Psychopathology and Religious Commitment. Review
          of Religious Research 12:165-176.
Stoll, David
  1990   Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics
          of Evangelical Growth. Berkeley: University of Cal-
          ifornia Press.
Winland, Daphne N.
  1994   Christianity and Community: Conversion and Adap-
          tation among Hmong Refugee Women. Canadian
          Journal of Sociology 19(1):21-45.
Worsley, Peter
  1957   The Trumpet Shall Sound. London: MacGibbon and
          Kee.