

Récits de conversion en contextes impériaux et (post)coloniaux:
perspectives comparatives

Conversion Narratives in Imperial and (Post)colonial Contexts:
Comparative Perspectives



12-13 octobre 2023 / October 12-13, 2023
Colloque du CIHSR 2023 / CIHSR Symposium 2023

Organisation: Dr. Philippe Bornet (Faculté des lettres, SLAS), Dr. Nicolas Meylan (FTSR, IHAR),
Prof. Raphaël Rousseleau (FTSR, IHAR)

University of Lausanne, Dorigny Campus, Amphimax 414

Participation en ligne sur demande / Online participation on request



Summary

Conversion to Christianity is still often presented as either the result of an internal individual crisis, or as part of a larger process of disenchantment of the world, involving a “rationalization” of beliefs and practices. While the first perspective is directly inherited from apologetic discourses, the second has been particularly developed in postcolonial studies, which often assumed that conversion was a kind of “collective inevitability”, going hand in hand with the colonial project, and leaving little space for individual appropriations or movements of resistance.

Since the seminal study of Comaroff and Comaroff (1986), a number of works about “religious change” in imperial and (post-)colonial contexts have revealed the complexity of the phenomenon, underlining that it could not be reduced to a purely religious dimension and that it was interacting with other cultural, economic, political and social aspects. More recently, historical and ethnographical studies of Christianity have emphasized the fundamental “hybridity” of colonial and missionary situations, considered as kinds of “terrains of exchange”, “contact zones” (Becker 2015, following the formulation of Mary-Louise Pratt), or analyzed under the lens of cultural and moral values. These models certainly do not ignore power imbalances, but they encourage scholars to delve deeper onto the actual local historical and social contexts, so as to understand the multiple meanings and implications of religious transformations.

The symposium explores various case studies that address the complexity of narratives about religious change in imperial and (post-)colonial contexts. Interrogating the narrative construction of conversion narratives and recasting them within their respective cultural, social and political context, the goal is to get a more complex understanding of processes of religious change: Why are narratives telling about conversion redacted in the way they are ? What dimensions are prominently represented in these texts? Who are they targeting and why? What do they tell us about the motives for “conversion”? What do such narratives tell us about encounters between different religions or cultures? Who are the actors interacting with these narratives?

The contributions examine different cases stemming from various regions and religious contexts – notably Europe, Africa and South Asia, in both Antiquity and modern times, thus allowing broad comparisons at a global level. With this, we hope to highlight dimensions of “conversion” that go beyond Christian and European understandings of the notion, and that are heuristically helpful for making the concept into a fruitful tool for the comparative study of religions.

Jeudi 12 octobre / Thursday, October 12

9h30. Welcome by Ingo Strauch (University of Lausanne), President of the CIHSR
Introduction (Philippe Bornet, Nicolas Meylan & Raphaël Rousseleau)

Morning session, chair Nicolas Meylan (University of Geneva and University of Lausanne)

10h. Francesco Massa (University of Turin), « S'éloigner des autels : récits de conversion au christianisme chez les auteurs polythéistes de l'Empire romain tardif »

10h30. Gaetano Spampinato (University of Bern and University of Fribourg), « Se convertir à l'erreur, devenir hérétique : la stigmatisation des rituels de conversion dans l'hérésiologie antique »

11h-11h30. Discussion

11h30-13h30. Repas (Geopolis)

Afternoon session, chair Nicola Pozza (University of Lausanne)

13h30. Deepra Dandekar (Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin), "Spirit Possession and Baba Padmanji's Conversion to Christianity"

14h. Raphaël Rousseleau (University of Lausanne), "Munda 'Conversions' through the Interstices of Missionary Sources: Pragmatic Reasons and the Economy of 'Spirits'"

14h30-15h. Discussion

15h. Pause / Coffee break

15h30. Philippe Bornet (University of Lausanne), "The Conversion of 'Conversion'? Notes of a German missionary in Kerala, 1924-1926"

16h. Mukesh Kumar (ETHZ), "Crossing and Dwelling: Protestantism and Lower Caste Religious Conversion in South-Western India (1834-1900)"

16h30-17h. Discussion

19h. Dinner

Vendredi 13 octobre / Friday, October 13**Morning session, chair Stefano Rodrigo Torres (University of Lausanne)**

9h. Vibha Joshi (Parkin) (University of Oxford & University of Tübingen), "Conversion and Second-Life: Narratives of Charismatic Christian Healers in Nagaland, North-East India"

9h30. Federico Carducci (University of Geneva), « Entre rêve, mémoire et bureaucratie : les récits de conversion dans une Église chrétienne traditionnelle en Angola »

10h. Maxime Thierry (University of Lausanne), « La conversion comme sortie de crise : co-construction d'un récit polyphonique en Guyane française »

10h30. Pause / Coffee break

11h30. Discussion about the session talks

12h. Final discussions

Abstracts

Francesco Massa, professeur, Université de Turin

S'éloigner des autels : récits de conversion au christianisme chez les auteurs polythéistes de l'Empire romain tardif

La communication vise à interroger comment les auteurs grecs et romains polythéistes du IV^e siècle de notre ère représentent dans les ouvrages la conversion au christianisme. À une époque où le vocabulaire de la conversion est de plus en plus répandu et la notion elle-même fait l'objet de réflexions théoriques de la part des théologiens chrétiens, un dossier « polythéiste » permet de mettre en valeur l'existence d'une autre manière d'exprimer l'idée d'un changement dans le domaine religieux, sans passer par les modèles chrétiens. Afin d'analyser les stratégies discursives mobilisées par les auteurs polythéistes, l'intervention propose de sélectionner quelques auteurs ayant des fonctions sociales et politiques différentes : le maître de rhétorique antiochien Libanios, l'empereur Julien, le sénateur de Constantinople Thémistios et l'historien Ammien Marcellin. Par-delà leurs rôles et leurs fonctions, ces auteurs montrent l'importance de la dimension rituelle dans la définition de l'appartenance religieuse : encore dans la seconde moitié du IV^e siècle, il n'est jamais question d'une transformation intérieure ou d'un changement d'esprit ; il s'agit en revanche de souligner la dimension performative des gestes rituels, l'occupation des espaces rituels et la participation aux banquets sacrificiels.

Gaetano Spampinato, University of Bern and University of Fribourg

Se convertir à l'erreur, devenir hérétique : la stigmatisation des rituels de conversion dans l'hérésiologie antique

L'un des aspects auxquels les hérésiologues antiques accordent une attention particulière est la conversion des hérétiques, c'est-à-dire la manière dont les hérésiarques intègrent dans leurs groupes les victimes de leurs erreurs. En d'autres termes, comment devient-on hérétique ? Cet intérêt a une motivation pratique pour les hérésiologues : parler des modalités de ces conversions sert à comprendre quel comportement adopter envers ces hérétiques – surtout quand ils « reviennent » à l'orthodoxie. En outre, ces textes présentent un objectif polémique. Dans la stigmatisation des hérétiques, les récits de conversion ont en effet une fonction très importante. Ils permettent de ridiculiser les adversaires, en soulignant leurs tentatives d'imiter les orthodoxes. Dans cette présentation, j'analyserai quelques rituels de conversion chez deux hérésiologues, Irénée de Lyon et Épiphane de Salamine. Un accent particulier sera donné aux stratégies discursives par lesquelles ces auteurs polémiquent sur ces rituels, qui servent à leur invective plus générale contre les hérétiques.

Deepra Dandekar, researcher, Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin

Spirit Possession and Baba Padmanji's Conversion to Christianity

This presentation focuses on a spirit possession encounter, recounted by Rev. Baba Padmanji (1831-1906) in his Marathi autobiography Arunodaya, first published in 1888. Having converted to Christianity at the Bombay Scottish Mission in 1854 and having served as Pastor of the Pune Free Church (1861-1865), Padmanji was considered the most important native Christian missionary leader of his time in 19th century Bombay Presidency. Lauded as a litterateur par excellence, Padmanji prominently headed many Christian vernacular publication boards, besides authoring more than a 100 Christian missionary tracts and texts in the vernacular (Marathi), himself. He ran his own printing press, and is celebrated and lauded as author of the first vernacular (Marathi) novel in India, dated to 1857. At the tail end of his writing career, Padmanji recounts a curious encounter with a Muslim spirit, whose possession played a vital role in shaping his journey towards conversion. This presentation dwells on Padmanji's autobiographical and possibly, real-life encounter with the possessing Muslim spirit, contextualized within wider discussions about vernacular Christian autobiographies and biographies that were written by Hindu converts, that

shared from local Hindu discursive traditions to narrativize the authenticity of their own Christian transformation.

Raphaël Rousseleau, professeur, FTSR, Université de Lausanne

Munda 'conversions' through the interstices of missionary sources: pragmatic reasons and the economy of 'spirits'

The Munda are a linguistic and cultural 'tribal' minority (Adivasi) of Eastern India, who have been targeted by three different missions from the mid-nineteenth century. I will first focus on some straightforward letters by the Jesuit Father J.-B. Hoffmann and on his published Encyclopaedia Mundarica (1930-37), in order to highlight the economic and political reasons plainly stated by the missionary for the conversion of the Munda in a colonial context (dispensaries, Land rights, cooperative bank vs moneylenders, schools). In a second time, I will try to show that another aspect often presented as crucial by the missionaries: the abandonment of 'spirit worship' can be reconsidered through the local concept and narratives of 'spirit' (following the works of P. Vitebsky on a similar minority, and more largely of J. Robbins on the moral economy of Christianity).

Philippe Bornet, MER, Université de Lausanne, Faculté des lettres, SLAS

The Conversion of "Conversion"? Notes of a German missionary in Kerala, 1924-1926

The contribution deals with cases of conversion within the activities of the Basel Mission in India, and more specifically, with the case of a German missionary stationed in Nettur, Kerala, Paul Sengle (1870–1932) in the 1920s. After delineating a few elements constitutive of an ideal conversion from a Pietist perspective, we turn to concrete examples in the Indian context. First, a story of a conversion of a young woman which became the topic of one of the first "ethnographic" propaganda movies of the Basel Mission, *Das Licht scheint in der Finsternis* (1928). Second, the narration in internal reports and published documents of the frustrated encounters of the same missionary with a low caste group, that of the Ezhavas. That case is exemplary in that it attracted preachers of other religious traditions (in particular Buddhism, Syrian Christianity, Islam and Hinduism) who competed with Christian missionaries in trying to attract that group to their own religion. Questions that we raise concern the way documents speak of conversion in that context (e.g. is the social advantage gained through conversion the main way texts evoke the topic?); the reactions and long term strategies of missionaries in such a context (e.g. how to reconcile the socially interested dimension of conversion with other understandings of conversion, as involving a deeper transformation or the participation to church life and rituals?); and finally, the role of religious encounters in coining a "modern" notion of "conversion" that is translatable across languages and religious traditions, and that does justice to the complexity of the phenomenon.

Mukesh Kumar, chercheur postdoc, ETHZ Zurich, Departement Geistes-, Sozial- und Staatswissenschaft
Crossing and Dwelling: Protestantism and Lower Caste Religious Conversion in South-Western India (1834-1900)

This paper delves into the complex dynamics surrounding narratives of conversion in the context of the Basel Evangelical Mission's (BM) activities in south-western India during the 19th century. Focusing on the encounter between European missionaries and low-caste communities, this study investigates how this interaction between two culturally distinct worlds brought about significant social and cultural transformations for both groups.

By examining missionary photographs, accounts, annual reports, and mission magazines, this paper problematizes the conventional understanding of religious conversion as solely spiritual change. Instead, it highlights how conversion in non-European settings was intricately intertwined with various forms of self-transformation, particularly centered around the duality of body and mind. Within the Protestant framework of the BM, the mind held paramount importance, as it was associated with

the “Word of God,” while the heart, representing bodily passions, emotions, and desires, needed to be individually subdued according to Protestant norms. Moreover, this study explores the discourses employed by the BM to regulate and administer the individual body and mind, contributing to the creation of social categories that aligned with Protestant ideals.

The analysis emphasises the role of everyday social, economic, and religious exchanges mediated by the forces of British colonialism, which created a fertile ground for conversion related “social situations” to arise. The paper argues that the BM's attitudes toward the lower caste body in South India were shaped by German Pietistic discourses, ultimately seeking to produce a society that conformed to Protestant norms. As a result, this examination of conversion narratives sheds light on the intricate relationship between power, identity, and religious change within the context of inter-religious encounters.

Vibha Joshi (Parkin), research affiliate, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford & Guest Fellow, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Tübingen
Conversion and second-life: Narratives of charismatic Christian healers in Nagaland, North-east India
 The Angami Naga were introduced to the Baptist form of Christianity by American Baptist missionaries from 1880 onwards. The most effective way of gaining attention among Angami villagers was by dispensing rudimentary medication along with reading verses from the Bible. Reflecting the importance of healing among the Angami, one of the main missionaries returned to America to train in medicine and came back as a medical missionary. As a result some of those Angami who recovered from illnesses converted to Christianity. Some contemporary conversion narratives include those who recovered from illness. While the conversion to Christianity among the Angami was gradual, during the waves of revival in the 1960s and 70s among the Naga (which coincided with Naga nationalist movement and the suppression by Indian state) breakaway charismatic revival churches were formed with emphasis on charismatic healing. In this paper I focus on two case-studies, one of a charismatic healer who converted to Christianity during this wave of revival, and eventually became a charismatic Christian healer. The second is a case-study of a woman who found her faith again after a life-changing accident and has since become a healer who prays and performs laying of hands for those who need her help. I will compare their narratives with those of traditional divinatory healers and show that ‘healing’ is the thread that links the indigenous and Christian faiths and the parallel shift from individual to both individual and communal/community healing.

Federico Carducci, Université de Genève, doctorant, département de science politique et relations internationales

Entre rêve, mémoire et bureaucratie : les récits de conversion dans une Église chrétienne traditionnelle en Angola

Cette communication propose une ethnographie des récits de conversion à l'Église tokoïste, une Église chrétienne traditionnelle angolaise, qui est née à l'époque coloniale et s'affirme dans les années 2000 grâce à la figure de son leader, évêque de l'Église et personnification du prophète fondateur. Dans un contexte marqué par une concurrence entre Églises chrétiennes (catholique, protestantes, traditionnelles et pentecôtistes) et par le traumatisme des divisions de la guerre civile (1975-2002), ces récits de conversion reproduisent et se réapproprient trois logiques historiquement coconstruites par lesquelles s'opère la transformation du sujet converti, entre événement et processus, et se définit son rapport à soi et à l'institution :

1. Une logique de scepticisme social à l'égard du prophète fondateur de l'Église, Simão Toko (persécuté par les autorités coloniales et marginalisé dans le champ religieux) et de son successeur, le prophète-évêque, qui alimente un conflit avec soi et entraîne un travail d'acceptation historique, qui marque le processus.
2. Une logique de chevauchement des figures d'autorités (charismatique, spirituelle et institutionnelle) qui se reproduit dans le rêve déclencheur de l'événement spirituel.

3. Une logique de bureaucratisation de la conversion, par laquelle l'événement spirituel ne se concrétise que par l'acte officiel d'inscription à l'Église.

Maxime Thierry, doctorant, FTSR, Université de Lausanne

La conversion comme sortie de crise : co-construction d'un récit polyphonique en Guyane française

Depuis une quinzaine d'années, la presse locale de Guyane relate la survenue, dans différents établissements scolaires de ce département français d'Amérique, de spectaculaires transes collectives pouvant concerner plusieurs dizaines d'élèves. Appelé « crises de baclou » pour être communément associé à une entité non-humaine du folklore local, cet objet ethnographique controversé sur lequel j'effectue ma thèse, cristallise de nombreux discours et représentations, au nombre desquels figurent les récits de conversion. Dans le cadre d'une enquête de terrain menée entre 2021 et 2023, j'ai pu mettre à jour des relations récurrentes entre des récits des crises de baclou et des récits de conversion chrétienne ayant suivi celles-ci. Or, bien au-delà de l'apparent lien de cause à effet qu'il suggère, cet agencement discursif singulier pose question. En effet, ce discours caractéristique de la culture chrétienne qu'est le récit de conversion, entre ici en contradiction avec des sociétés autochtones dont les critères structurant l'ordre du monde sont difficilement compatibles avec les implications éthico-individuelles de la conversion. En outre, la parole possédant au sein de ces logiques autochtones une fonction rituelle corrective et performatrice, la question se pose du statut à accorder au récit de conversion en pareil contexte. Je me propose de questionner ces éléments de contradiction (en l'occurrence l'association établie par les autochtones entre récits de conversion et de crises de baclou) à l'aune des stratégies socio-culturelles mises en oeuvre par ces populations soumises à la double contrainte du discours religieux dominant et du recours à des modalités traditionnelles d'interprétation de l'infortune. Je développerai les deux points suivants : D'abord, j'exposerai les raisons pour lesquelles cette configuration discursive mêlant crises de baclou et conversions, contribue à assoir la légitimité des institutions missionnaires dans ce département français d'Amérique soumis à une forte concurrence ecclésiastique. Je montrerai ensuite le caractère co-construit de ces récits de conversion, témoins d'un modèle discursif à visée universalisante ayant pris racine au sein d'un humus culturel particulier, a priori incompatible avec ce modèle, mais non moins fertile.