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Edited by
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Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity

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Pacific Manuscripts Bureau, consulted on microfilm at Mitchell Library Sydney.
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COMMENTS ON CONVERSION

Talal Asad

So What Is Conversion?

Why do people convert? This seems an innocent question. Anthropologists have not only raised it but responded to it with interesting answers. In his edited volume Conversion to Christianity, R. W. Hefner provides a useful overview of many of these answers. Populations become Christian or Muslim for different personal reasons and under a variety of social conditions. Hefner has outlined the debates about the proper explanation of such conversions.

But the question is not entirely innocent. At any rate, it is based on assumptions that are at least as interesting as the answers. John and Jean Comaroff have pointed to some of them in their admirable study Of Revelation and Revolution, and I will discuss their contribution in a moment. There's another point worth thinking about: religious conversion appears to need explaining in a way that secular conversion into modern ways of being does not.

There was a time when conversion didn't need explaining. People converted because God had helped them to see the truth. (This is still good enough for the religious.) Nonreligious persons today often think of the shift into modern life in a similar way. They want to know what is involved in living a modern life, not why people are motivated to become modern. Like the truth, modernity seems to justify itself. Religious conversion is usually thought of as "irrational," because it happens to people rather than being something that they choose to become after careful thought. And yet most individuals enter modernity rather as converts enter a new religion—as a consequence of forces beyond their control. Modernity, like the convert's religion, defines new choices; it is rarely the result of an entirely "free choice." And like the convert's religion, it annihilates old possibilities and puts others in their place.
Resisting Conversion

Writing about nineteenth-century missionary activity in southern Africa, the Comaroffs note that the term "conversion" carries a commonsense European connotation, and they ask whether its use doesn't oversimplify the real process it purports to describe:

How well does it grasp the highly variable, usually gradual, often implicit, and demonstrably "syncretic" manner in which social identities, cultural styles, and ritual practices of African peoples were transformed by the evangelical encounter? How well does it capture the complex dialectic of invasion and riposte, of challenge and resistance, set in motion among the likes of the Southern Tswana? Here, after all, was a politics of consciousness in which the very nature of consciousness was itself the object of struggle. (p. 250)

These concerns are to be found in the writings of many anthropologists and historians. They are genuine enough, and the Comaroffs are right to alert us to them. But there is another question that also needs asking: The transformations may be slow, erratic, incomplete, but what kind of epistemic structures emerged from the evangelical encounter? When we read of "syncretism," we are alerted to a multiplicity of origins of a new amalgam. And we are consequently led to inquire whether its syncretic character means that it is related in the same way as an amalgam to the European and African origins of its constituent elements.

On an earlier page, which deals with customs and beliefs relating to Tswana rainmaking, the Comaroffs tell us something of the asymmetry of origins: "In being drawn into that conversation, the Southern Tswana had no alternative but to be inducted, unwittingly and often unwillingly, into forms of European discourse. To argue over who was the legitimate rainmaker or where the water came from, for instance, was to be seduced into the modes of rational debate, positivist knowledge, and empirical reason at the core of bourgeois culture." (p. 213, emphasis in original) They are right, of course, to go on to insist that this did not mean that Tswana life was now patterned on European Christianity. But it is important to recognize the profound displacements produced by the "conversion process," both in the specific Christian sense and in the associated sense of induction into modern life. That displacement cannot be grasped by tracing the origins of an amalgam.

To begin with, what is now identified as the object of struggle in the Tswana setting—consciousness—has a specific Western genealogy, partly rooted in the Christian concept of "conscience." As self-awareness, or internal reflection (Hamlets "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all"), consciousness becomes politically contestable only when it is represented publicly as the sign of an authentic identity. We cannot know how African converts really thought and felt, but we know something of what they said and did. To the extent that "consciousness" is a discursive object, talk about it belongs to bourgeois culture. To the extent that that object becomes politicized, we have a bourgeois activity. Therefore, the existence of "a politics of consciousness" in southern Africa rests on an epistemic structure that makes it thinkable and doable, a space that is continuous with modern European history and is thus something that represents a major conversion of African possibilities.

Put another way, the question is not merely whether, and if so to what extent, African subjects were converted. It is certainly not whether they were completely subjected to an external molding force. The prior question is what new possibilities for constituting themselves these subjects now encountered. Given that there was now a possibility of recognizing themselves as authentic, what part did this new fact play in their constitution? The possibility that one may be falsely conscious of oneself—and that such a possibility can itself become the object of public dispute—is not the same as the possibility of resisting the missionary's attempt to coerce one into becoming another kind of person: His idea of a good Christian. The changed epistemic structure brought about by the conversion to modernity articulates a range of new possibilities not adequately captured by the simple alternatives of passive reception by subjects or active resistance by agents, of unoriginal reproduction or synthetic originality. The politics of consciousness, like the politics of personal identity of which it is part, is an entirely modern Western possibility. The self-conscious selection and integration of new elements into that identity (which many anthropologists refer to as syncretism or hybridity) is central to that possibility. That is to say, the centrality of self-constructive action is due to a specific epistemic structure.

Conversion to the Better Life

Whereas the Comaroffs regard the concept of conversion as having a commonsense European connotation, some historians say that it is essentially Christian. "It is a confusion of categories," writes Morrison, "to use the word conversion as though it were an instrument of critical analysis, equally appropriate to any culture or religion. The word has a profound mystical sense in the West for which some great religions and languages of the world..."
have no equivalent. Even in the history of the West, it has displayed different connotations at different moments. Thus, the word is more properly a subject, rather than a tool of analysis. However, if one wishes to avoid the danger of confusing word with concept and concept with practice, it would be better to say that in studying conversion, one was dealing with the narratives by which people apprehended and described a radical change in the significance of their lives. Sometimes these narratives employ the notion of divine intervention: at other times the notion of a secular teleology.

The concept of conversion within the Christian tradition as a whole includes an intransitive and a transitive aspect at the same time, with the latter represented as an act of divine mercy. Long before Foucault, Augustine knew that power could be both productive and repressive. “Power”—potens—is at once torment and ability. For Augustine, therefore, belief in the Truth follows only through the operations of divine power. The master narrative of the Old Testament is the story of divine chastisement and divine direction of his chosen but erring people, a story that implies and is completed by the Truth of the New Testament.

In the transitive sense, conversion is a process of divine enablement through which the intransitive work of becoming a Christian, of attaining true consciousness, can be completed. But that divine function has also been aided by human institutions that impose the conditions necessary for liberation from false consciousness. The Church in this world has an essential task to secure the Truth through human power.

In the modern era, European theologians have taken the close connection between imperial expansion and the spread of Christianity to be an embarrassment and a scandal because the aims and conditions of empire appear to be essentially secular. They claim that theology must continually address the nature of human power, “which reaches its widest range of potential good and evil under the form of imperialism.”

Max Warren, for example, argues that despite its negative effects, imperialism has functioned “as a preparatio for God’s good will for the world.” In secular terms this means that “the legacy of permanent good things such as legislation, political improvement, the development of European-style cities, cohesion of states, and the breakdown of isolation” are among the providential consequences of imperialism. This makes modernity the common destination for the world willed by God. Missionary conversions to (West European) Christianity become a part of that destiny, as well as a means of fulfilling it. In Warren’s theological formulation, the significance of conversion as a secular movement, at once transitive and intransitive, emerges in all its historical complexity.

What we distinguish today as secular history and religious history are closely connected in a single genealogy. For medieval Europeans, saeculum was the period of time within a Christian history between the Fall and the Last Day; in early modern Europe, “the secular” becomes a space beside “the religious.” In the Enlightenment, saeculum is transformed into the domain of “purely natural” human action, now opposed to a domain of “supernatural” belief. Eventually, the concept of the social becomes rooted in “the secular” as the space of human action pure and simple, and “the religious” becomes subsumed by it as a social phenomenon to be characterized in terms of that ontological space. To act in that space is now the condition of being human, regardless of whether one’s beliefs and motives are “religious” or not.

The question of imposed conversion, and of the limits to securing belief through coercion, is thus intertwined with the great theme of global progress on the one hand and that of religious toleration on the other. Both are connected with the political theories and practices that were initiated in Western Europe in the seventeenth century and that were fed into the nineteenth- and twentieth-century movements by which the world has been modernized.

Practical and Moral Limits to Conversion

I want to make some points about the doctrine of religious toleration in the early modern state in order to think about the connection between external (“secular”) force and internal (“religious”) belief.

It is not always recognized that this doctrine was associated with two epistemological changes: claims relating to religious Truth acquired the new status of private belief, and the concept of practices was partly subordinated to the concept of propositions. In a fascinating article on the Lockeian theory of toleration, the political scientist Kirstie McClure reminds readers that in his early writings, Locke defended politically imposed rites by making a sharp distinction between the mind as the locus of faith and the body’s activity as mere externality. The prince’s insistence that his subjects practice the same ritual ceremony should not therefore—so Locke maintained—be intolerable to them. In this early position, Locke represented conscience as “nothing but an opinion of the truth of any practical proposition, which may concern any actions as well moral as religious, civil as well as ecclesiastical.” As such, he argued that if the principle of conscience were to be conceded as a basis for rejecting civil jurisdiction, all political authority would be undermined.
But in his later work, Locke concluded that the attempt to resolve the problem of religious conflict and coercion by means of theological formulas must fail, because every practical judgment by one person employing such a formula was bound to be regarded as scandalous by someone else. Locke therefore abandoned his reliance on a theological vocabulary and set up a new, "non-religious" principle for distinguishing between acts in which the magistrate might legitimately intervene and those in which he had no authority to do so. This was the now-famous principle of harm to life, limb, or property. All acts that resulted in such harm could be identified unanimously and therefore with certainty. Since no agreement could be reached on whether particular ritual practices resulted in harm to the soul, such acts could not be allowed to become objects of political judgment and control. Thus, politics dealt with the domain of "objective fact," religion with that of "subjective consciousness."

Locke's emphasis on human uncertainty regarding religious belief essentially refers to the simultaneous existence of several irreconcilable assertions (each based on conviction) about harm. Jurists of Roman and canon law in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries dealt with conflicting assertions by assigning fractional measures (called "probabilities") to each type of evidence. Judicial "conviction" was reached in such situations by the calculation of "probabilities." However, for Locke, the political mode of resolving uncertainty was inadmissible wherever the harm in question was itself subject to uncertain claims—as in claims that one's soul would be harmed by being forcibly subjected to "scandalous" rituals and doctrines. The result was the liberal theory of religious toleration, which—as McClure rightly points out—renders (religious) difference into (cultural) diversity, and prohibits private and public agents from attempting to coerce others into or out of existing religions.

McClure wants to reinstate the importance of irreconcilable difference via the notion of personal "identity" within a modern concept of society. By insisting that harms to personal identity belong in the domain of social tact (a new kind of knowledge) and not in the domain of subjective belief (the old notion of opinion), she hopes to restore difference to the political domain in which compulsion can now be practiced on a principled basis. But her reasoning at this point appears to me faulty on several counts: (1) The representation of seventeenth-century religious convictions "as what we today might understand as identity" is a misleading secular anachronism; (2) the knowledge produced by contemporary social science does not constitute a new kind of facticity but a new space of argument; and (3) that there are now conflicts over what constitutes "subjective" harm certainly makes for a new kind of politics (identity politics), but this politics provides no criteria for judging between conflicting claims to difference. For seventeenth-century sectarians, it was neither politics nor self-authenticating claims about harm to identity but divine authority that provided those criteria.

Of course, Locke's theory is a normative one. But every normative theory carries certain social, psychological, and theological assumptions about the world to which it is meant to apply. To that extent, the theory is also descriptive. The liberal theory of religious toleration that traces its origin to Locke is therefore an account of the limits of historical possibility in which empirical and moral elements are combined.

According to Susan Mendus, Locke propounded his theory of toleration on the basis of the psychological principle that belief can never be determined by the will. However, this principle belongs to a modern psychology that was beginning to emerge in seventeenth-century Europe. In the Middle Ages, a contrary doctrine prevailed. Thus, for Thomas Aquinas, drawing on Aristotelian psychology, belief could indeed be willed.

"To 'will,' in Greek thought," writes G. Vesey, "is not to exercise an independent mental faculty called 'the will'; it is to adopt a favorable attitude to some specific object . . . . For Descartes, on the other hand, there are 'operations of the will' on a par with those of the intellect, the imagination, and the senses. Descartes may even have introduced this concept of the will, and willing, [into general currency]. . . . Descartes evidently thinks of thoughts as having a perceptible or phenomenal character. An 'idea' is a thought qua perceptible. In this he was followed by John Locke, who called a person's perception of the operations of his mind 'reflection.' . . . This new psychology inaugurated the modern discourse of "mental or psychological phenomena," and, hence, a way of identifying "religion" as a phenomenon of "consciousness" together with other internal phenomena.

It was this psychology that allowed Locke to insist that the Prince's attempt to coerce religious belief—including belief in the salvational implications of religious practices—was irrational. All that imposition could secure was an insincere profession of faith and therefore an incomplete conversion. Of course, the Prince might have reasons for imposing conformity on his subjects other than concern for their salvation—such as upholding law and order—that would not render his coercive efforts necessarily irrational. Nevertheless, Mendus maintains that "rationality" had a strong moral value for the Puritan tradition to which Locke belonged, and that he therefore regarded religious intolerance not only as impractical but as morally wrong.

The presumption that political attempts to coerce belief are irrational because impossible has been the focus of modern debate, summarized in part
by Mendus. Her own view is that Locke was right to make that presumption, and she defends him against his critics on this point by making what she regards as a crucial distinction within the convert's consciousness—a difference between sincere and authentic belief. This allows her to argue that an externally imposed attempt at conversion may, at most, obtain sincere belief, not an authentic one.

But the conditions cited by Mendus—beginning with the so-called "acceptance" condition—are, I think questionable. Thus, her claim that the alternatives of deliberate reticence (not saying what one really believes) and insincerity (affirming what one doesn't believe) must always exist as possibilities in order to determine whether a belief is really sincere, seems to me not clear enough. The possibility must surely be more than simply an abstract logical option; it must relate to an act that could, within a specific religious context, be properly performed. But if that is so, then the Christian act of "bearing witness in public" would have to be identified as "sincere but authentic," because for the Christian it excludes the possibility of deliberate reticence or insincerity. Mendus would have to describe Luther's act of "bearing witness in public" would have to be identified as "sincere but authentic," because for the Christian it excludes the possibility of deliberate reticence or insincerity. Mendus would have to describe Luther's act of "bearing witness in public" as sincere but inauthentic. This doesn't seem right. God help me. Amen.

Conversion and Agency

That leads me to a question with which I want to conclude my comments: Why does it seem so important to us to insist that the converted are "agents"? Why do we discount the convert's claim that he or she has been "made into" a Christian?

One aspect of "agency," of course, is the old Protestant doctrine of individual responsibility. Individuals are agents because they are responsible for their own souls. That was a central doctrine for Puritans like Locke. The secular concept of agency is also connected to the spirit of capitalism. It invokes the mutually dependent figures of the entrepreneur and the consumer, or, more abstractly, the functions of initiating and choosing. Liberalism has worked these figures into its individualist theories of politics and morality.

Modern definitions of agency typically operate to render a world of "accidents" into a world of moral and legal responsibility (i.e., "necessities"). We tend to think of responsibility as being intrinsic to the way an action binds cause and effect. To abbreviate that structure, to define that certain responsibilities necessarily apply to the performance of an act, is to define a particular kind of agency.

The paradigmatic agent is the human individual. Modern law also constitutes collections of humans as agents, making it possible thereby to hold the collectivity—as distinct from its individual members—liable for certain "accidents." But although legal fictions such as corporations are said to be agents, animals that we can see and touch are never agents—at any rate, not in our modern, disenchanted world. "Consciousness" is not an essential property of agents, certainly not of corporations. Even activity is not such a property. If a mother's failure to act has consequences, she is liable as an agent regardless of "consciousness"; a "child," on the other hand, may act, and do so consciously, but is not therefore an agent in the sense of someone who can be held legally or morally responsible. Similarly, we describe chemicals, bacteria, or machine parts as agents or active elements when we wish to attribute causal force to them. The point is that agency is not a universal property, nor is it a transcendental quality. "Agency" operates through a particular network of concepts within which the historical possibilities and limits of responsibility are defined.
In brief, what is not always made clear in narratives of conversion employing the concept of agency is what theoretical work that concept is doing. What are the culturally specific properties that define agency? How much agency do particular categories of person possess? When and where can attributions of agency be successfully disowned? Can non-humans be agents?

Too often, the assumptions we bring with us when talking about the conversion of people in another epoch or society are the ideological assumptions in and about our modern condition. Conversion is regarded by moderns as an "irrational" event or process, but resort to the idea of agency renders it "rational" and "freely chosen." Everyone has agency; everyone is responsible for the life he or she leads. The doctrine of action has become essential to our recognition of other people’s humanity. Suffering, we think, does not serve to mark humans off from other animals. And that distinction is crucial for those who want to justify conversions to modernity.

Notes
2. Earlier, the Medieval historian Karl Morrison maintained that the concept of conversion was unique to Western culture, and especially to the Christian tradition that helped shape that culture from the twelfth century on.
3. There is some lack of clarity on this point, however. When they write that "increasingly, then, the argument over such issues as ramming became a confrontation between two cultures, two social orders, in which each had a palpable impact upon the other." (op. cit., 213) the Comaroffs are confusing the local adaptations made by the missionaries in order to seduce more Tswana into their fold with the abstractions called "cultures" and "social orders." They cannot mean to say that the legal, moral, and religious principles of life in Europe were altered by an infusion of Tswana discourses.
5. See Augustine of Hippo, Confessions, Eighth Book, XII: 30.
7. See Chapters 1 and 6 of T. Asad, Genealogies of Religion (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993).
12. Cited in O. Chadwick, The Reformation (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 56. As Chadwick remarks, the famous words, "Here I stand: I can do no other" were probably never uttered, although they express very well the sentiment of his actual statement at the Diet of Worms.
13. op. cit., 33
14. Mendus’s book as a whole is important for stating a powerful case against the liberal theory of toleration and for recommending a socialist theory in its place. She puts forward the interesting (but by now not unfamiliar) argument that socialism has greater ideological resources for developing a modern politics devoted to constructing a complex solidarity out of disparate loyalties.
15. English literature taught in missionary schools in British India included many Victorian poems in the style of Muscle Christianity. I remember one verse that might be taken as the motto of certain kinds of "agency" theories:

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

(From Invictus by W. H. Henley, 1849-1903)