Contemporary Models of Conversion and Identity Transformation

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| le savoir vivant |

Preliminary *methodological* consideration

- **No access to conversion (our own or that of others) apart from self-reports**

- These reports often take the form of narratives

- Object of study: the conditions under which these narratives are produced

Definition

Hadot, P. (1996). Conversion. In *Encyclopaedia Universalis. Corpus* 6 (pp. 497-499). Paris: Encyclopaedia Universalis

- The same Latin word *conversio* served to translate two Greek terms that have different meanings :

  - *epistrophè* which means "change of orientation" implying a return (return to the origin, return to oneself, see the root *shûv* in Hebrew)
  - *metanoia* which means "change of thought" implying the idea of a mutation, a rebirth.

- There is a tension between conversion understood as fidelity and conversion understood as rupture/break

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Definition

However, contemporary models of conversion built by social scientists favour mainly the second meaning.

The first meaning, closer to the idea of repentance, is not modelled as a process of conversion by the social science (e.g. but considered as guilt management).

We will focus today on conversion in the sense of rupture, adherence to another system of norms, or even to another worldview.

In this presentation, we will focus on conversion as a form of identity transformation.

Definition

Lewis R. Rambo suggests to call « religious conversion » a set of five types of identity changes (1993, pp. 12-14 et 38-40) :

- *tradition transition* (from one major religious tradition to another; e.g. from Christian to Muslim),
- *institutional transition* (from one faith community to another *within* a major religious tradition; e.g. from Lutheran to Orthodox within Christianity),
- *affiliation* (from no religious involvement to full involvement with a particular religious group or movement),
- *intensification* (or revitalization of interest and participation in a person's existing religious tradition: , religious involvement takes a central place in the person's life),
- *apostasy* or *defection* (from a person's existing religious tradition to no religious involvement).

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Objective of this talk

From a psycho-sociological point of view, we will…

- … consider conversion as a kind of identity transformation…resulting from *inner* vs *outer* factors

- …try to understand the factors that determine the production of conversion narratives

- …refer to different contemporary models of conversion

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Identity transformations

Identity transformations can be described through a variety of processes, among which:

- maturation (stages ritualized by "rites of passage")

- education and exams (initiation and rites of initiation)

- election vs degradation [ceremonies] (qualification vs disqualification)

- "coming out", conversion, labelling…

Identity transformations

- So, identity transformation does not take place only on the mode of conversion …

- … including when it makes use of resources provided by religious or spiritual traditions:
    - attachment to a spiritual figure
    - community
    - worldview
    - roles
    - ethical rules

    (Brandt, in press)

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Subjective Identity / Objective Identity

- Individual identity:
  - Results from a construction
  - Is attributed before the subject is able to express any desire about it
- Objective identity: attributed by the social environment
- Subjective identity: attributed by the subject to oneself from his/her proper point of view

- An identity transformation can be:
  - prescribed from outside
  - claimed by the subject

- Coincidence between subjective and objective identity results often from a **negotiation**

Transactional Model of Conversion

- Conversion, as any important identity transformation, requires a negotiation between the convert (an individual) or (the group of) converts and the social context.

  - Azzopardi-Ljubibratic (2018): Religious conversions of Jews in Malta (16th-18th centuries): a comparative approach to Marranism.

- As a result, both partners redefine the identity of the convert in a *convergent* vs *divergent* manner

Who has the initiative?

- Who is initiating the process of redefining the identity of somebody?

- Who has the right to open de process of renegotiating the identity definition of somebody?

- Must the convert be passive or can he/she be active?

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Model of Passivity vs Activity in Conversion

- The convert is passive vs active
- Outer vs inner motion
- Hetero- vs autonomous
- External vs internal Locus of control

- Richardson 1985; Zock 2006

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Three paradigms in conversion research

The passive (Pauline) paradigm (Richardson 1985)	The active paradigm (Richardson 1985)	The biographical-narrative paradigm (Zock 2006)
passive, deterministic	active, volitional	active, volitional
individual	social	socio-cultural
emotional	rational	emotional and rational
static	dynamic	dynamic
radical, once-and-for-all	dynamic	dynamic
belief precedes behaviour	behaviour precedes belief	Interaction between belief and behaviour

Model of Passivity vs Activity in Conversion

- These paradigms are described by Zock as paradigms in psychological conversion research

- Richardson distinguishes passive vs active to contrast Pauline vs NRM conversion

- There is a *theological shift* from Paul to contemporary NRM

- Therefore, Richardson's model builds a distinction between *theological* (and not *psychological*) paradigms of conversion

Model of Passivity vs Activity in Paul Conversion

- Transactional model : the goal is, at the end of the renegotiation, that the objective identity fits with the subjective identity

- If Paul wants to make plausible that his conversion is real (for the people he was prosecuting *and* for himself!), he cannot just say: « I have decided to become a disciple of Jesus »

- For theological reasons, he has to present himself as completely passive: « God has done everything »

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Passivity vs Activity in Conversion from the Perspective of Time and Temporality

- Passivity vs activity are also connected to the question of time: what is the duration of conversion

- Conversion as a sudden event vs a process

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Activity vs Passivity in Conversion from the Perspective of Time and Temporality

- In the context of North-American revivalism, W. James and the Clark School (Hall, Leuba, Starbuck) were opposing sudden vs progressive conversion

- Progressive conversion was understood as the result of maturation (endogenous process / Hall)

- Influence of cultural context has been obscured, occulted

Model of Activity vs Passivity in Conversion from the Perspective of a Theory of Creativity

- The opposition between sudden event vs process was also thematised by the psychology of creativity

- Conversion as a creative process?

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CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES

Common description of religious conversion (Pauline conversion paradigm)
Break / departure from the past
instantaneous event
unique, exceptional event
unexpected, unpredictable event
passive role of the convert

Passivity vs Activity in Paul's Conversion

- From a theological perspective, Paul is passive and his conversion looks like a sudden event

- However, from a psychological perspective, texts document an *active involvement* of Paul….
  - He is actively persecuting Jesus disciples
  - The predication of Jesus does not leave him indifferent or quiet

- … and the *process* of his conversion
  - Young, he was already concerned by Jesus movement (he was present at the stoning of Stephen)
  - Many years before having a public activity among the disciples

CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES

Common description of religious conversion	« aha/eurêka experiences » by Gestaltpsychologie (Gruber 1981)	Act of creation (Koestler 1964)	Creative process (Gruber 1981)	Religious conversion considered as a creative process
Break / departure from the past	Break / departure from the past	Break / departure from the past	process organized in many distinct enterprises	Creative synthesis
instantaneous event	Very short phenomenon, flash (duration: a few milliseconds)	flash	Temporal sequence (duration: between some months and many years)	Long process (during many years)
unique, exceptional event	Rare phenomenon « Big and unique insight »	Unique flash, when the subject is ready for the solution	Many insights during a long period	?
unexpected, unpredictable event				Unexpected for the convert / unpredictable for the observer
passive role of the convert		The subject is active at the critical moment	intense activity of the subject	Active role of the convert

The process of conversion (Rambo)

- Context
- Crisis
- Quest
- Encounter
- Interaction
- Commitment

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Psychosocial and Motivational Model of conversion

- Why following the path of conversion?

Revivalism (context of first psychological studies on conversion) : What are the motivations for conversion ?

- To convert…to avoid social exclusion…
- And to reduce an emotional discomfort

- It is not a choice…
- … but the result of the pressure of the social/cultural context
- conversion has the function of social integration

- It is a transformative process (rite of confirmation)…
- …and non-reversible

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Conversion to Islam : cases in the UK

- Study on native British who convert to Islam (Köse)
- progressive defection from Christian institutions in the second part of childhood
- Period of moratorium (Erickson)
- Islam understood as an exclusive (-istic) religion requires conversion
- Conversion happens when the convert decides to integrate the Muslim community

British converts to Islam : Why to convert ?

- To gain social integration
- To solve emotional discomfort

- It is not a choice…
- … but the result of the pressure of the cultural context
- conversion has the function of identity transformation and social integration

- It is a transformative process (rite of initiation/integration)

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The no requirement to convert in contemporary Western societies

- Religious pluralism
- The two faces of religiosity : traditional or « à la carte » (Campiche, 2004)
- Individualization and privatization of religion
- Religious affiliations become more porous, fluid, liquid…
- In institutional religions, access to salvation goods (rites, spiritual care, retreats, places and buildings) is often no more linked to the obligation to convert

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Intercultural comparison : the case of India

- The socio-cosmic order (dharma) express itself in the cast system

- A variety of doctrinal systems have emerged in India without provoking a contestation of this system

- Are not considered as conversion :
  - becoming Sikh, Buddhist or Jaïn
  - becoming a saddhu (one who leaves the worldly life) for joining the teachings of a guru

- Indian society is fundamentally **inclusive**

- Problems appears face to the **exclusivist** pretentions of Christianism and Islam
  - Who require not to follow anymore the rules of the cast system …
  - … with the consequences of exclusion from it

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Summing up: Why convert?

- For escaping exclusion…

… as an answer to the pressure of the social environment (including forced conversions)

- For building oneself by identification to collective models…

… as an answer to the need of psychic coherence

- So that subjective identity (asked for recognition) and objective identity fit together

… which do not make impossible the coexistence of a hidden subjective, not declared, identity

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Conversion: a cultural construct

- Cultural aspect:
  - The paradigm of (sudden) conversion is not universal

- Conversion is a mode of identity transformation which is required when :

=> The construction of religious identity is mediated by an **exclusiv belonging**

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Production of self-narratives of conversion and identification processes

- Role of conversion narratives culturally transmitted
- Conversion is collectively recorded in **standard narratives**

- To get recognition for conversion:

  The convert is required to produce a self-narrative according (conform) to the standard narrative
- Re-negotiation of identity is linked to the ability to use standard narratives in the shaping of self-narratives

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Remember

- Conversion, even experienced as instantaneous, is supported by a long psychological process (worldview cannot be changed overnight, without preparation and integration processes)

- for theological and philosophical reasons, the active role of the convert is more or less obscured, left in the shadows

- Access to the intimate experience of conversion is mediated by the production of a narrative

- the production of a self-narrative (of conversion) is conditioned by the standard narratives available in the cultural environment

- This self-narrative is shaped in order to obtain the recognition of others

- the need to reorganize one's own identity on the mode of conversion depends on the conception of exclusive (religious, philosophical) affiliation

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Thank you for your attention !

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