Special Issue Introduction

Religious Conversion in a Religiously Plural World

Religious Conversion as a Form of Religious Contact

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ABSTRACT   Religious conversion is a phenomenon that has intrigued scholars, theologians, and sociologists for centuries. As the conscious choice of a particular form of religion over another, it is fundamentally a form of religious contact. Religious conversion may be approached psychologically, sociologically, and conceptually. The contributions of this special issue show all three approaches and cover a wide array of geographical, socio-cultural, and religious contexts.

KEYWORDS   Religious conversion, sociology of religion, modernity

Religious conversion, a phenomenon that has intrigued scholars, theologians, and sociologists [1] for centuries, continues to be a complex and evolving field of study. Generally understood as the conscious choice of a particular form of religion over another, it is eminently a kind of religious contact. This is especially the case when conversion is conceptualised as a change of religious affiliation, which entails contact between the faith community that used to govern the convert's life and their new religious home. Other forms of religious conversion—the intensification of religious beliefs or the turn to religion from non-belief—may also involve religious contact and can certainly lead to religious transformation. Most voluntary religious conversions do not include a large-scale contact situation or a macro-level transformation. However, the transition from one religious community to another may significantly impact

both the communities involved and the converts themselves. Moreover, such transitions might have a crucial impact on how the surrounding society perceives these converts and their communities. This last point is especially important in the case of conversion to affiliations that can be perceived as marginal in any given society or when conversion implies punishments, such as in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

This special issue gathers several vastly different approaches to the topic of religious [2] conversion applied to various religions in the modern age from early career scholars. The essays presented here reflect the nuanced nature of religious transformation and its impact on individuals, communities, and societies at large. The points mentioned before form the backbone of the majority of the contributions, which deal predominantly with conversions to non-mainstream orientations and the way these impact social relations and the perception of religious transformation.

The articles included in this special issue cover a broad spectrum, from socio-political moti- [3] vations behind conversions to the practical implications of religious mobility in multicultural settings. They clearly show how religious conversion can be approached from a wide variety of angles and with vastly dissimilar conversion models.

First, this includes psychological approaches to conversion as a transformation in the [4] individual's psyche (James 1902; Rambo 1993). Most contributors touch upon this angle, while they all combine it with one of the others, as the psychological angle is difficult to access for the researcher due to its embeddedness in social, cultural, and theological contexts that shape the way it is being communicated in interview situations. The psychological approach to conversion is often paired with one that focuses on conversion narratives (Rambo and Farhadian 2014; Jindra 2011). It involves analysing the language used by individuals undergoing the conversion process. By collecting and analysing personal stories, the narrative approach offers insights into the emotional, intellectual, and social dynamics of conversion. It highlights the individuals' journey through themes and the transformative impact of new beliefs on identity and practice.

Another approach is the sociological one, which is concerned with motivations for and [5] outcomes of conversions for the individuals involved. This approach, which also has a long history in academic research (Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow and Machalek 1983, 1984; Gooren 2010), is considered by most of the contributors to this issue. It is about the way religious conversion occurs in certain social and political circumstances and impacts the later life of the converts. It is interested in the way converts narrate their conversion trajectory in interview situations and in published material. This approach also involves the influence and reactions of family, friends, and the larger community, as well as how the social environment is transformed through individual or mass conversions (Turner 2013; Pace 2009). While this aspect of the sociological approach is not explicitly addressed in many of the contributions, its underlying influence can be perceived as a common background concern for them all. Especially when the focus is not solely on the individuals who change their religious affiliation but includes a context that encompasses entire movements or publicly active converts, it becomes relevant to examine the implications of religious conversion for contemporary societies.

The sociological approach is also relevant on the meta-level as it raises the question about [6] the significance and meaning of religious conversion in the modern world. According to French sociologist of religion Danièle Hervieu-Léger (1999), the modern world is characterised by a lack of commitment to a particular religious tradition, something that used to be naturally transmitted from generation to generation in the family. Instead, the modern religious

landscape is dominated by individuals who pick and choose from various religious offerings according to their personal taste. Two conceptual models emerge in this landscape: the pilgrim and the convert. The pilgrim remains rooted in a specific tradition but is constantly on the lookout for particularly memorable ways of expressing this tradition, be it a solemn ritual, a festival, or following the footsteps of some saint. The convert, on the other hand, is one that consciously leaves their former religious or secular identity behind, fully embracing a religious identity instead. For Hervieu-Léger (2012), a convert is a paramount example of how religion in modernity is mobile and no longer bound to place and ethnic or family traditions.

François Gauthier (2021), a Canadian-Swiss sociologist of religion, goes even further and argues that religion in the modern world should be understood not primarily in the framework of bounded institutions but rather as expressions of the "grammar of the global market." For Gauthier, the "grammar of the nation-state," which has governed most academic understanding of social relations in the modern world, including those within religious communities, is slowly eroding since the Second World War, especially outside of the so-called "Western World." Instead of religions being conceived as containers with clear boundaries, religion must be regarded as a field, where different actors are vying for relevance and influence in the global market. This includes marketing strategies, management discourse, and mediatisation, aspects that are easily overlooked using the traditional academic focus on institutions and texts. [7]

For the topic of religious conversion, both Hervieu-Léger and Gauthier pose challenges to the traditional macro-level treatment. Hervieu-Léger's idea that the convert is a paramount figure of modern religiosity, for example, indicates that conversion is a way for individuals to come to terms with their place in the modern world by consciously opting for belonging to a religious tradition. Gauthier's focus on religion in a market setting points to the way conversions can be perceived as reactions to market mechanisms and the role played by modern media-techniques. The contributions to this special issue do not specifically refer to these challenges, but they offer a backdrop against which the papers may be understood and compared. [8]

The Contributions

The contributions to this special issue adopt various approaches and touch upon different contexts, from North and Central America via various European regions to Indonesia. All contributions are based on presentations held in the context of the Summer School "Religious Conversion in Plural Societies Past and Present." This summer school was organised by Sebastian Rimestad, Katharina Waldner, and Helena Kupari in July 2022 in Erfurt, Germany. Fifteen young graduate students came together for five days to discuss religious conversion together with six published experts in the field. [9]

The papers that were submitted to this special issue can be grouped under three headings that correspond to the approaches mentioned above: "Narrating the Conversion Experience" (psychological and narrative approach), "The Implications of Conversion for Individual and Social Life" (sociological approach), and "Conversion as a Contested Concept" (meta-level). [10]

In the first group, Tova Makhani-Belkin (2024) explores the role played by dreams in the conversion of first-generation Bahá'ís. This is based on life story interviews conducted with converts from a variety of countries and backgrounds. This paper is the one that is closest to the field, although others also include field research and narrative reconstructions of religious affiliation change. In the second group, this is the case with Ksenia Medvedeva's paper (2024), which analyses how North American converts to the Orthodox Church conceptualise their [11]

new religious home. Benedikt Römer (2024) focuses on the written conversion narrative by a married couple who converted to Neo-Zoroastrianism. On this background, Römer analyses the highly conflictual nature of modern Zoroastrianism, including ethnic, linguistic, social, and theological aspects. The papers by Sebastian Rimestad (2024) and Minoo Mirshahvalad (2024) both turn to the socio-political motivations behind religious conversions and their practical implications for multicultural societies. They examine how actors may use religious conversion as a means of making public statements. Rimestad compares the religious biography of John Henry Newman (1801–1890) with that of Malcolm X (1924–1965), unearthing unexpected structural similarities related to their conversion trajectories. Mirshahvalad takes the reader to post-war Italy, where a modest conversion movement to Shi'a Islam developed among right-wing neo-fascists. These conversions, which initiated a specific Italian version of Shi'a Islam, have produced an impressive body of apologetic literature praising this particular religious tradition as the best way forward for Italians.

The third group contains three papers that all pose inconvenient challenges to the concept of religious conversion. Maria Papenfuss (2024) analyses first-encounter narratives in Mexican Neo-Paganism and remarks that the concept of conversion is seldom in their vocabulary. Instead, she singles out three key narrative elements with which Mexican Neopagans typically frame their attraction to Neo-Pagan ideas: intuition, rebellion against predominant societal circumstances like Catholicism, and the preservation of a tradition passed down by their ancestors. The paper by Ariane Kovac (2024) focuses on Churchome, a US-American megachurch that strives to portray itself as an antithesis to predominant Evangelical North American Christianity. Instead of focusing on "living the right life", Churchome can be conceived of as a "deconverted" church, which focuses more on human imperfection. Using the example of two "converts" to this church, Kovac shows how the concept of "deconversion" fits better in this case, where joining the church plays a therapeutic role. Lastly, Hamzah Fansuri (2024) takes us to Indonesia, where the "hijrah"-movement of Islamic renewal also may be conceptualised in terms of conversion. This movement, which calls for a deepening of Muslim commitment outside of traditional authority structures, also includes genuine conversion from other religious communities to Islam, and is highly contested in the Indonesian public. [12]

As guest editors, we are thrilled to present this collection, which encapsulates the intellectual vigour of the summer school participants and contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding religious conversion. We extend our gratitude to all the scholars, researchers, participants, and anonymous reviewers who have shared their expertise and perspectives, fostering a collaborative and enriching dialogue. We hope this special issue serves as a catalyst for continued exploration and understanding of the intricate and diverse landscape of religious conversion. [13]

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