Religious Conversions in the Mediterranean World

Edited by
Nadia Marzouki and Olivier Roy
One of the main objectives of this series is to explore the relationship between Islam, nationalism and citizenship in its diverse expressions. The series intends to provide a space for approaches that recognize the potential of Islam to permeate and inspire national forms of identification, and systems of government as well as its capacity to inspire oppositional politics, alternative modes of belonging and the formation of counterpublics in a variety of local, national or transnational contexts.

By recognizing Islam as a transnational phenomenon and situating it within transdisciplinary and innovative theoretical contexts, the series will showcase approaches that examine aspects of the formation and activation of Muslim experience, identity and social action. In order to do justice to, and make better sense of contemporary Islam, the series also seeks to combine the best of current comparative, genuinely interdisciplinary research that takes on board
cutting-edge work in sociology, anthropology, nationalism studies, social movement research and cultural studies as well as history and politics. As research on Islam as a form of identity is rapidly expanding and as interest both within the academia and the policy community is intensifying, we believe that there is an urgent need for coherent and innovative interventions, identifying the questions that will shape ongoing and future research and policy, and exploring and formulating conceptual and methodological responses to current challenges.

The proposed series is intended to play a part in such an effort. It will do so by addressing a number of key questions that we and a large number of specialist interlocutors within the academia, the policy community, but also within Muslim organizations and networks have been grappling with. Our approach is premised on our understanding of Islam and the concept of the nation as resources for social identification and collective action in the broadest sense of these terms, and the need to explore the ways in which these interact with each other, inform public debate, giving rise to a diversity of experiences and practices.

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The political transformations that have taken place in the Arab world since December 2010 have triggered numerous debates concerning religious freedom. Similarly, polemics around the right of Muslims to wear headscarves or to eat Halal food have been prominent in countries like France and Italy for more than a decade. These controversies about religious freedom on the northern and southern sides of the Mediterranean have been the object of many valuable studies. Most of the existing scholarship, however, emphasises the controversial aspects of the transformation of national religious landscapes. Moreover, it tends to examine controversies about headscarves and minarets in Europe, and breaking the fast of Ramadan in North Africa, as separate and unrelated phenomena. As such it reproduces the well-established assumption according to which there is a complete disconnection between what happens on each side of the Mediterranean. By contrast, this book was born out of a curiosity about the non-controversial aspect of religious change, and for the interconnectedness of processes and debates that take place in the countries of the Mediterranean region. While the study of public debates about religious changes is crucial, it is important not to lose sight of the concrete human experiences and everyday practice which these changes entail. Converts and members of religious minorities are often aware of the fears and anxieties their affiliations cause in the broader national context. But the way in which they envisage and live out their own religious practice is often strikingly uncontroversial. They do not define their practice as a means to upset the dominant national culture or political order. Given the gap between the public’s perception of religious change and believers’ own understanding of their lives, this volume seeks to go beyond the common assimilation of the practice of conversion within a controversial or revolutionary act
of protest or secession. The book also insists on the numerous resemblances between the everyday practice of converts and members of religious minorities in places as different as France, Algeria, Lebanon and Israel. No matter how different these contexts may be, individuals face similar challenges, resort to analogous arguments and modes of reasoning, and attempt to cultivate comparable forms of emotions.

This project originates in a conference we organised at the European University Institute, in March 2011. The conference – entitled ‘Converts as Commuters’ –, aimed at analysing the difference between present and past conversions. This book has been completed within the framework of the Religiowest programme funded by the European Research Council. Historically, religious conversions have been essentially of two forms: individual and collective. Social sciences have primarily focused on collective conversions, to the extent that they have had massive, visible and long-term consequences for national and international politics. Scholars have amply examined collective conversions from the perspective of power, domination and identity. They have shown how, during a specific period of time, a hegemonic power might coerce populations into converting to its own religion (as in the Muslim conquest of the seventh and eighth centuries, the Spanish Reconquista and colonialism in Latin America). In this narrative, the paradigm of *cujus regio, ejus religio* requires a common religious belonging for people of a shared polity, and entails a strong push for converting subjects to the rulers’ religion. As for individual conversions, they represent a minor place in the social scientific study of conversion: scholars have essentially approached individual conversions as idiosyncratic instances which illustrate or challenge widely accepted theories about collective conversion.

Contemporary movements of conversion challenge previous understandings of religious change. Although conversions now seem to take place at once at the individual and mass levels, they do not necessarily form collective movements. Conversions occur in all directions, and people do not always convert to the religion that has been dominant in a particular context or tradition (as shown by cases such as young Europeans now converting to Islam, Algerian and Moroccan Muslims converting to Evangelicalism, the breakthrough of Pentecostalism and Mormonism in Africa, and self-conversion to Judaism).

The sociology of religion has thoroughly studied many of the forms of contemporary religious change that conversions manifest. Notably, scholars of religion have extensively examined the individualisation of faith, the crisis of established Churches and denominations, and the emergence of a global religious market (Beyer 1994; Casanova 1994; Stark 2011). The
complexity of trends, whereby withdrawal towards fundamentalist practices and makeshift syncretism coexist, has also been widely discussed.

However, contemporary conversions pose a key challenge to the sociology of religion, to the extent that they cannot be reduced to a form of acculturation to the dominant power aimed at integration into the majority culture. Nor do they stem from the quest for an alternative collective identity. Rather, contemporary conversions reveal a search for ‘the religious’ in its purest form.

The present volume draws upon the same conceptual framework as the conference, but focuses solely on cases from countries from the Mediterranean area. Our approach, however, is neither exhaustive nor strictly comparative. Our purpose here is not to define anything like a Mediterranean type of conversion, or model of religious change. Just like the categories of ‘Muslim world’ or ‘Western world’, the notion of a homogeneous Mediterranean world must necessarily be questioned. We use the notion of the Mediterranean as a heuristic tool to reflect upon the processes of religious change in a non-essentialist and non-culturalist perspective. The methodological paradigm that informs this research is not that of area-studies – based on the assimilation of geographical areas with cultural and political patterns – but that of globalisation and interconnectedness. The Mediterranean area provides a unique site to critically engage with an assumption that is still prominent in the scholarship on religious change, according to which the region can easily be divided between its Judeo-Christian northern side and its Islamic southern side. The proliferation of communities of converts to Christianity in North Africa, and the growing rate of conversions to Islam in Italy, Spain or France reveals the inadequacy of this model and the urgent need for scholars to think beyond the narrow framework imposed by Area Studies. Processes of migration and mobility have made the systematic relations among religion, territory and culture far less obvious. The geostrategic approach in terms of clash of cultures between the northern and southern sides of the Mediterranean, and the more civil approach based on notions of integration, tolerance, engagement and dialogue, both fail at accounting for the increasingly interconnected aspect of religious changes in this region. Notably, in Muslim majority countries such as Algeria or Turkey, the presupposition that Islamic norms determine all forms of individual and collective actions has become a major obstacle to the evaluation of new religious and cultural trends which significantly challenge traditional definitions of the nation. As Olivier Roy has noted, ‘[w]e should not try too much to define what the Mediterranean is’, but should rather perceive it as an “open sea”, not simply a lake that
stands in the middle, in between Europe and North Africa. ‘If it is open, then we have to be careful with the notion of “Middle”, because it supposes a circumference, a closed circle, Let’s open the circle’ (Roy 2009, p. 9). This is what this book seeks to do.

Based on a series of historical and ethnographical studies, this book shows how religious conversions to and from Islam, Christianity or Judaism in Mediterranean countries dramatically unsettle dominant understandings of nationalism, citizenship and secularism. Rather than provide an exhaustive and systematic comparison between northern and southern countries, we propose a few case studies that uniquely illustrate the process of globalisation and formatting of religious practice in Muslim and Western contexts. The relevant binary here is not between Muslim and non-Muslim, but rather between globalisation and the nation-state. While globalisation and the European construction increasingly undermine the model of the nation-state in the Mediterranean world, conversions reveal the capacity of religion to disrupt and unsettle previous understandings of political and social relations. Converts’ claims and practice are often met with the hostility of the state and the public in general (bans on the burqa, on minarets, on proselytism etc.) Converts are perceived either as traitors or as unconscious and weak tools of foreign manipulation. Through studies of controversies taking place over conversions in Algeria, Turkey, Egypt, Morocco or Israel, the book examines the challenges which conversions represent for how states traditionally deal with religious minorities. Not only do converts’ practices entail a questioning of common national understandings of what constitutes the proper meaning and place of religion. They also challenge the notion of a fixed boundary between religion and politics, or between religion and secularity. Indeed, most converts situate their practice beyond these common binaries, and propose a genuine vocabulary to describe their activity, their commitments and the new forms of covenants with which they identify.

The understanding of globalisation which informs this study of religious conversions, particularly in cases regarding conversions to Evangelical Christianity, draws upon sociological and anthropological studies which consider globalisation as a process simultaneously entailing ‘Westernizing homogenization’ and ‘indigenizing differentiation’ (Robbins 2004). All the studies proposed herein move away from the US-centred view that explains conversions as the result or expression of the stronger capacity of the US to export its culture and ensure its hegemony in different parts of the world (for a critique of the US-centred model of Evangelical globalisation, see Robert Wuthnow 2009). The book instead
demonstrates how Evangelical globalisation occurs through conversions yet simultaneously preserves some distinct features of, and merges into, local cultures. For example, contrary to a widespread misrepresentation of the success of Evangelical Christianity in Algeria, most Evangelical pastors and leaders of Christian communities are Algerians. While they may refer to references broadly inspired by some American media or Churches, their primary objective is to establish an Algerian Christianity. In Lebanon, there are deeper connections between Evangelical Churches and American missionaries; but the success of these Churches is due to their capacity to address members’ concerns and to adapt their teachings to the specificity of the Lebanese context. The depth of exchange and the level of reciprocity vary from one religion to another. As we shall see in this study, Evangelical Christianity shows a stronger capacity to merge with local cultures than Mormonism or Orthodox Judaism.

This volume draws upon an understanding of conversion that moves away from its stereotypical definition as a clean break, a whole rejection of a tradition and the wholehearted adoption of a new set of norms. The various cases studied herein demonstrate that, on the contrary, conversion can be partial, ambivalent and does not necessarily imply a full rejection of the convert’s past or former community. In Turkey, Muslims attend Christian churches without converting to Christianity. African migrants in Egypt assemble multiple layers of religious identification, rather than selecting a single one. The history of Protestant missionaries in Egypt reveals that most conversions were ambiguous, secret, and invisible. The chapters presented in this volume offer a description that breaks from the traditional Paulinian understanding of conversion as a clear rupture and as an integral adhesion to new rules and emotions. The cases studied also suggest how inadequate a classical social scientific approach is to the study of conversions. Converts are not necessarily easily recognizable. They do not fall into existing categories of social movements, political strategies or new religious movements. The widespread conception of conversion as an instrumental strategy appears as largely insufficient and inadequate. The approach to intentionality that informs most studies presented here seeks to move beyond the binary opposition between reason and revelation, or religion and politics. For example, in his study of conversions to Pentecostalism in Venezuela, David Smilde shows that although converts indeed decide to believe in order to respond to material issues of violence or substance abuse, the instrumental aspect of their practice does not make their practice less sustainable, valuable, or less religious. The notion of ‘imaginative rationality’ he refers to in order to describe Venezuelan converts’
intentionality ‘should not be taken here as a synonym for false, insincere or ungrounded’. Rather, the concept designates the ‘human’s ability to get things done by creating concepts’ (Smilde 2007, p. 13).

While converts in some cases describe their experience as an act of religious conversion, many others use this term with significantly more caution. They usually resort to other expressions, such as religious change, personal transformation, path to God, fellowship of Jesus, and personal liberation. Given the gap between the vocabulary utilized by believers and scholarly modelisation, many contributors to this volume propose new designations and original definitions of conversion. Heather Sharkey proposes a new definition of conversion that accounts for the very blurriness of the phenomenon under examination. Rather than seeing conversion as a clean break or a conscious change, she sees conversion as ‘turning in position, a change of condition, and […] a structural adaptation for a new purpose in life’ (Chapter 5). To describe the practice and discourse of African migrants in Cairo, Julie Picard prefers the expression ‘religious mobility’ to religious conversion (Chapter 3). In his examination of the processes by which individuals go public and reveal their new religion to their relatives and friends, Loic le Pape suggests that conversion is a codified linguistic form, a ‘grammar’, much more than a purely subversive or creative act (Chapter 6). Don Seeman shows how the case of Pentecostal Judaism and Ethiopian Israelis challenges fixed sociological categories like religion and ethnicity. He envisages the practice of Beta Israel Pentecostals from the perspective of mediation. Pentecostal Jews do not see themselves as having left Judaism, but they define their Jewishness as ‘mediated by Christ’ (Chapter 4). He proposes the notion of ‘a transaction of kinship’. The word kinship, Seeman argues, ‘is broad and flexible enough to encompass multiple phenomenologies of belonging that include but may not be limited to genealogical continuity, shared ritual commitment and the sense of shared history or destiny that modern Jews frequently invoke’. In this sense, kinship does not designate ‘a fixed status like citizenship but a negotiated quality of interactions over time’. The need to be recognised by others, to see one’s choice validated by others, is a central aspect of the activity of converts. From this perspective, conversion, Le Pape argues, is essentially a relational activity, oriented towards recognition, and one that can be captured only through the study of interactions. Benoit Fliche’s study of Muslims’ attendance of services at Saint Anthony’s Church in Istanbul shows the variety of forms that religious commitments can take. Individuals may regularly attend a church service, or even write notes to a Christian saint, without describing their activity as
a conversion (Chapter 9). As shown by Aurélien Gampiot in his study of Black Jews in France, the presence of different normative references (secularism, Orthodox Judaism, racial prejudices) against which they need to struggle to define their own identity does not allow us to think of conversion as a simple trajectory from a clear identity to a clearer one. Even though they deal with different practice, locations and periods, all the chapters of this volume contribute to a rethinking of the category of conversion and propose alternative descriptions that better capture the complexity and nuances of the phenomenon.

This hybrid and difficult to categorize dimension of conversion makes it all the more threatening for the state that is at a loss about how to control, contain, or legislate for it. In places as different as Israel and Algeria, conversions pose a similar challenge to dominant nationalist narratives and to existing regulations. The dilemma of Israeli policymakers and jurists in the face of Feres Mura (i.e. descendants of Ethiopian Jewish converts to Christianity) shows the limits of the efficiency of the traditional divide between religious and secular, or between Judaism and Christianity, on which modern Israel is based. Ethiopian Jews and Beta Israel Pentecostals do not seek recognition as an established community:

They hold to a narrative in which faith defines every public and private decision and should also define public institutions [...] Moreover, they insist that they do so as Jews, though the contours of the cultural imaginary render them structurally invisible to ordinary Israelis, for whom Judaism and Christianity represent a binary that is still nearly absolute. (Chapter 9)

Fatiha Kaoues interprets conversions to Evangelical Protestantism in Lebanon as an attempt at going beyond the sectarian organisation of society and politics:

Converts opposed to inherited religious identity as supposedly inauthentic affirm their determination to stay masters of their own fates and in control of their own destiny. In this respect, Protestantism asserts the autonomy of the subject whose direct relationship with God, alone and with the Bible introduces a new way of believing that no longer admits a social order determined by a clerical hierarchy. (Chapter 1)

Similarly, Chrystal Vanel shows how the strong response triggered by the project of constructing a Mormon Temple in Le Chesnay in France has exposed the ambiguity of French secularism (Chapter 8).
Although the challenge that converts represent for dominant narratives of the nation-state (based on secularism, Public Judaism or sectarianism) has clear political implications, the practices that are examined in this volume do not correspond to social or political movements. The critique of dominant narrative that informs converts’ identities does not necessarily lead to an endorsement of political groups or ideas that aim at unsettling law and policy. Moreover, the deep concern converts have with how they are perceived by the broader society – either for fear of alienation or out of need for recognition – often prevents them from openly organising as political parties or resistance movements. The way in which converts engage with the political realm is therefore more oblique and ambivalent. Their religious activity and discourse often entails a millenarian type of belief in an upcoming redemption of the nation and a dramatic transformation of politics. This millenarian project, however, remains intimately ingrained in a religious endeavour of purification of the soul and cultivation of new emotions.

Independently from the differences of contexts, motives, policy, and history that are examined in this work, the practice of conversion reveals an ambivalent process that simultaneously aims at rejecting and finding religion. A recurrent theme of the discourse of converts is the critique of a certain state of religion as too focused on rules and prohibitions, on dogma, or on tradition. Opposing this ossified form of religion, converts seek something that they describe as truer, more sincere, and more authentic. Algerian and Lebanese Christians reject the notion of religion as *din* (an Arabic term for religion suggesting adherence to a set of doctrines), and speak instead of freedom and fellowship of Jesus. Pentecostal Jews describe themselves as believers, rather than as adherents to a religion. But despite this attempt at downplaying religion as a constraining framework of practice and ideas, the development of a new orthodoxy and a new orthopraxy (in other words a new religion) is inherent to the achievement of a successful conversion. Such is the paradox that converts must struggle with: their choice to convert is born out of a rejection of religion in favour of religiosity, but the cultivation of a new, purer religiosity always bears the risk of leading back to the creation of a new religion. To a large extent, the dilemma of revelation versus institution that converts face epitomises the very dilemma that is at the heart of any religious practice.

This book is divided into two parts. Part I (Chapters 1–4) examines the legal and policy challenges that conversions represent for the nation-state. Chapter 1 (by Fatiha Kaoues) studies the ambiguous relation of Evangelical Lebanese converts to national understandings of the
relationship between religion and politics. To a large extent, conversion to Evangelicalism expresses Lebanese converts’ attempt to distance themselves from the nation’s religious traditions and sectarian politics. In a society where interpersonal relations are marked by a high level of conflict, and where the middle class is getting poorer, the insistence of the Evangelical ritual of building a ‘community of love’ is increasingly appealing. Rejecting Shiite theology’s focus on suffering, Maronite piety’s concern with fault and guilt, and, most of all, the politicisation and radicalisation of Islam, Lebanese Evangelicals praise themes such as compassion, forgiveness, and love. However, conversions are not a purely reactive phenomenon, based on the rejection of local religiosity. They are also oriented towards the recasting of a new relationship between religion and citizenship. In a country where citizenship is defined by religious identity, conversion is, if not an instrument, at least a catalyst of a process of re-imagining these sectarian politics.

In Chapter 2 (by Nadia Marzouki), practices of conversions to Evangelicalism are explained from the perspective of a competition between state and society over the meaning of the nation and of citizenship. Analysis of the ordinance passed by the Algerian government in 2006 in order to criminalise proselytising shows that state officials have essentially perceived conversion as a threat to the authority of the state and to the unity of the nation. On the contrary, converts’ narratives and practices suggest that, through conversion, newborn Christians seek to escape the state’s attempts to render all religious practice legible. Through a tight correlation between the purification of the individual’s soul and the purification of the nation, Algerian Evangelical Christianity expresses a significant interest in, and commitment to, the future of the nation.

Chapter 3 (Julie Picard) examines the case of the many African Christian migrants who currently live in Cairo. Whether they are political refugees, asylum seekers or economic migrants, they change their religious practices during this migration experience. Due to the long and ancient presence of Christianity in Egypt, they are able to continue practicing their religion. While migrants’ attachment to Global Christian identity gains in intensity due to this context of exile, African Evangelical migrants are also able to build strong relations with the broader Egyptian society, in particular through the Evangelical Coptic community. This chapter studies the African-Egyptian networks through which African migrants attempt to make their religious practice possible, and how this encounter affects Egyptians’ perception of Christianity.

Chapter 4 (Don Seeman) explores the complex situation of Ethiopian Jews and Pentecostal Israelis in Israel. ‘While nominally secular, Israeli
law and practice also acknowledge the complex, possibly inextricable relationship between ethnic, religious and national or genealogical forms of imagining what it means to be a Jew in the modern world’, Seeman explains. ‘The demography of Israel has been changing through mass immigration (especially from the USSR and Ethiopia) as well as strong foreign missionary efforts. In the Ethiopian case, tens of thousands of individuals who immigrated into Israel over the last two decades were considered by the state to be descendants of converts to Orthodox (or Protestant) Christianity. Therefore the state sought to normalise their case, as officials saw it, by encouraging these Ethiopians to undergo a state-sponsored “return to Judaism” program that reunited ethnic and religious grounds of identification. Yet this has remained contested and conflictual at both the policy level and the level of everyday, vernacular experience of Ethiopians. Moreover, a smaller but even more challenging group of Ethiopians, from the state’s point of view, have begun, with other Jewish Israelis, to embrace various forms of Messianic Judaism and charismatic Christianity in Israel – making a frontal collision with the state’s basic imaginary almost inevitable’.

Part II of this volume addresses the ambivalent relations of converts with the broader society.

Chapter 5 (Heather Sharkey) addresses the question of what it meant to convert in North Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. British and American Evangelical Protestant missionaries arrived in the Islamic societies of North Africa imagining conversions in which public professions of faith would gain confirmation through ceremonies of baptism and the growth of official Church membership. But in fact, formal, large-scale, or family conversions seldom occurred, except, arguably, in parts of Egypt among Coptic Orthodox communities who were already Christian. By the late nineteenth century, circumstances were compelling Evangelical Protestant missionaries to change their ideas and expectations about what conversion and Christian identity could mean. In this process, missionaries began to acknowledge that conversions could be partial, private, and unknowable to others in addition to being incremental in nature. Using examples from Egypt and, to a lesser extent, from Sudan and the Maghreb, this chapter considers the nature of ‘ambiguous conversions’ and argues that they were a significant consequence of missionary encounters as well as an important aspect of religious and cultural landscapes. Sharkey argues also that such ‘ambiguous conversions’ depended on factors of mobility – or the lack thereof – including the ability of individuals to change home or job, to reconfigure circles
of families, neighbours, and friends, or to transcend communal and national boundaries.

Chapter 6 (Loïc Le Pape) demonstrates how, in the French secular context, religious conversions are often perceived by the broader French public as threatening, abnormal events. It examines the numerous challenges converts must face when they publicly confess their conversion, and how, in turn, this public confession unsettles established norms regarding the separation between public and private spaces. Based upon the examination of a sample of converts' narratives, this study shows how converts strive to inscribe their story in a secular (or, more accurately, to use the French term, a laïque) context. In order to do so, they often insist on their commitment to confining their new religious practice to the private sphere and on the fact that their conversion results from a free, autonomous decision and not from coercion. Ironically, in the French laïque context, a successful conversion is a conversion where the individual seems to have changed almost nothing.

As shown in Chapter 7 (Aurélien Gampiot), the physiognomy of Judaism in France has recently changed, owing to the presence of African and West Indian converts. Their motivations and life experiences are diverse and can be analysed as betraying the need for a new construction of ‘Blackness’ through the Jewish religion. This field of study proves especially rich when it comes to investigating the identity reconstruction of these ‘new Jews’ and their coexistence with their fellow Jews, mainly Ashkenazis and Sefardis. How are Black Jews perceived in France, both within the Jewish communities and in the wider French society? How is the issue of visibility addressed in their efforts towards integration in both spheres?

Chapter 8 (Chrystal Vanel) examines the presence of two forms of Mormonism in France. In this country, to reconcile belonging to France and to the Church of Latter-day Saints (as the Mormon Church is officially known) is not an easy task. The strong American identity inherent in Mormonism often seems incongruent with French culture. French Catholics have proven reluctant to welcome the soon-to-be-erected first French Mormon temple. The Latter-day Saints Church nevertheless has a relatively strong presence in France (with more than 50,000 members), whereas another ‘Mormon’ offshoot, the Community of Christ, only has around 70 members, most of whom are Tahitians, for whom religious identity often constitutes a tenet of their Tahitian culture.

Based on an ethnographical study of Saint Anthony’s Church in Istanbul, Chapter 9 (Benoît Fliche) analyzes Muslim attendance at Christian places of worship in Turkey. Visiting a church to pray is not easy
or natural for Muslims, especially because of the state policies concerning religion and the widespread representation of Christians as ‘missionaries’. In spite of this context, somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000 people visit Saint Anthony’s Church each day, and most of them are Muslims. They do not come to visit as tourists, but in order to pray, or to light candles. Importantly, these Muslims neither intend to convert, nor define themselves as Christians. They offer an intriguing case of participation without conversion.

Note

1. The term laïque here describes a context defined by a strong conception of the separation between politics and religion. This strongly separatist conception of secularism calls for pushing all visible religious symbols out of the public space. While it is often argued that this is the prevailing understanding of secularism in France, this conception does not account for the reality of legal arrangements of secularism in France. For a detailed analysis of the difference between common representations of French laïcité and legal and judicial implementation of laïcité, see Koussens (2010). For a historical analysis of the development of French laïcité, see also Jean Bauberot (2004).

Bibliography

1 Evangelicals in the Arab World: The Example of Lebanon

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This chapter analyzes Evangelical missionary activity in the Muslim-Arab world, focusing on the case of Lebanon. All over the world, Pentecostal Churches aim to spread the Gospel, i.e. the ‘Good News’, among people; these organizations may have experienced great success in Africa and South America, but their missionary activity in the Muslim world faces many obstacles. Admittedly, the phenomenon of conversions to Christianity under the influence of the Evangelical Christian missionaries does not constitute a mass phenomenon in the Arab world. However, it receives a great deal of media attention and is treated in a sensationalist manner. Moreover, the stakes involved go beyond its breadth of conversions. Researchers have noticed that the emergence of fundamentalist movements is a product of the standardization and erosion of traditional values, linked to the process of decline of religion and the destruction of cultural areas, and caused by the phenomenon of globalization (Anderson, 2004). In any case, it is no coincidence that the problem of apostasy in the Islamic world raises such unbridled passions. As a matter of fact, an apostate calls into question the definition of the borders of social cohesion when it becomes apparent that common citizenship of a nation is insufficient to delimit its contours.

For humanist universalism to exist, human beings need to overcome their particular loyalties. The minimization of all divisions in favour of the religious identity leads to the exclusion of all other particularities. Thus we can state that some of the main challenges that Muslim countries are confronted with are the definition of citizenship and the nature of the creation of social cohesion. François Burgat said that Islamism was the ‘third stage’ of the ‘rocket of decolonisation’ (Burgat, 1999).

We can also suggest, regarding the conversion of Muslims to Christianity, that the rejection of Islam could constitute the final step in
the individualization of people who originally belonged to the Muslim cultural group. In these revolutionary times in the Arab world, these issues acquire great importance. In the Muslim, and particularly the Arab, world, these Evangelical Christians face many obstacles in their quest for evangelisation. However, Lebanon is significantly more welcoming. In this country, religious communities represent the foundation of public order at the expense of the state, and each denomination has its own charitable network. In this regard, Lebanon is distinguished by the freedom it offers to Evangelical Protestants. This chapter considers a few developmental limits and challenges regarding the activities undertaken by these Evangelicals in Lebanon.

**Protestantism in the Middle East: A long history**

Evangelical Protestantism in Lebanon is closely linked to the rise of Reformed missionary activity in North America and England. The Church of Beirut is the oldest Arabic-speaking Protestant congregation in the Middle East. It was founded in Beirut in 1848 following American Presbyterian missionary activity. In the Middle East, the word ‘Evangelical’ (*Injili* in Arabic) designates the numerous Christian denominations commonly known in the West as ‘Protestants’ (Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist, etc.). Therefore, the words ‘Protestants’ and ‘Evangelicals’ are used interchangeably. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) was the first missionary agency to undertake mission work in the Arab world. The first American missions began their evangelizing work in Syria and Lebanon in the mid-nineteenth century (Kidd, 2008). The missionaries had been fuelled by a feeling of triumphalism ever since the Protestant Great Awakening, which had shaped the personality of the American nation and its institutions. The primary aim of the missionary was to evangelise Jews and to accomplish the Great Commission by proclaiming the good news of salvation in order to hasten the Second Coming of Christ, so they decided at first to reside in Palestine, and to launch their work from Jerusalem in the rest of the region. But most of the region’s inhabitants were Muslim Arabs, who remained resilient to the missionary activity. Therefore, Ottoman law at that time banned expatriates both from permanent residence and from owning property in Palestine. Thus, in 1823, American missionaries moved to Beirut, on the ancient Syrian coastline. However, soon after their initial settlement there, they were informed that they could not evangelise Muslims. This is why they directed their work towards Eastern Christians, but once more, they had to deal with stiff resistance
led by the Maronite patriarch. At that time, however, the Maronite Church was faced with an uncomfortable dual loyalty to the Ottoman Empire and the papal authority; the Ottoman Empire was itself weakened by the repeated efforts of European powers to dismantle it. This heavy uncertainty increased the sense of existential precariousness of the Maronite Church, which is particularly attached to a rigid orthodoxy touted as a means of survival. One must understand that for the Eastern Christians this ‘missionary moment’ is essential: it has deeply influenced the Maronites’ and Copts’ cultures over centuries, and each group has developed a habitus of spiritual life characterized by a deep withdrawal into their own community. Thus, when the first missionaries’ activity began, these two groups had opposed each other and each had remained ignorant of their counterpart’s specific culture, needs and history. Ussama Makdisi’s book, entitled *Artillery of Heaven* (Dib, 2006; Makdisi, 2009; Traboulsi, 2012), proved this in an enlightening way: it tells the story of the tragic fate of one of the first Maronite converts, Asad Chidiaq, who was held prisoner and tortured to death by the Maronite authorities in retaliation for his conversion to Protestantism. In a similarly Manichaean manner, Chidiaq became a martyr for the American missionaries, someone who had paid the ultimate price for his freedom of faith and conscience. Conversely, for the Maronites, Chidiaq was living proof of betrayal, a man who had worked from the inside towards the destruction of the ‘Maronite personality’ and who therefore had to be punished in an exemplary manner.

According to Ussama Makdisi, Asad Chidiaq’s plight is a typical example of the long history of misunderstanding and mutual exclusion between Arabs, Christians, Muslims and Americans which continues to this day. While the first attempt to establish Protestantism in the Arab world can be seen to have failed, this was mainly because of the missionaries’ arrogance and their commitment to the inherent superiority of their culture. Thus, although the first Evangelicals arrived in Beirut at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was not until 1850 that the Ottoman Empire recognized Protestantism as an official religion.

**A diversified world**

A distinction must be made between the mainstream Evangelical Churches – that is to say the traditional Churches, which belong to the historical trend – and other Evangelical denominations. However, this terminology is misleading because all Protestant churches in the Middle East are referred to as Evangelical. In the Lebanese capital, the mainstream
Churches are chiefly located in Hamra and Ras Beirut and close to the American University of Beirut, which in its early days was called the Syrian Protestant College. As a matter of fact, it should be noted that over the past decade, the mainstream Churches have been supplanted by the global spread of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity, which has multiplied ‘church planting’ in Beirut, especially in the popular areas of Sinn el Fil, Nabaa, Burj Hammoud, etc.

In the 2000s, the National Protestant Church has considerably strengthened its links to the world, both in the directions of the Lebanese diaspora established abroad and to other Evangelical Churches, particularly in the Anglophone world. The aim of such networking is to generate more income and more extensive resources. The Near East School of Theology (NEST) was founded in Beirut in 1932. Today, this seminary is one of the best Protestant theological training colleges in the Middle East and North Africa. Located in the middle-class neighbourhood of Hamra, north of the capital, not far from the American University of Beirut, NEST teaches students from all over the Middle East and North Africa. It should be noted that, in accordance with the principles of the Reformation, the language of the cult of the Evangelical community in Lebanon has been, since its inception, the vernacular Arabic. Greek Orthodox or Maronite Arab Christians did not use Arabic as an official liturgical language when Protestantism started. Each of these Churches worshiped using their own ancient language which was not understood by the public, and it is only in the late nineteenth century, in response to Protestantism and to resist its progress, that the Arabic language was substituted for Greek, Syriac, Coptic or Latin.

Lebanon has two important Protestant seminaries: the Near East School of Theology NEST (in Arabic: Kuleyat Lahout fi el Sharq el Adna) and the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, ABTS (in Arabic: Kuleyat Lahout el Arabiyya Ma‘madaniya). These are the country’s main theological faculties. Their uniqueness in the Middle East lies in the fact that they train pastors and lay Protestants not only in Lebanon but throughout the Muslim world, especially in Arab countries.

While NEST is involved in high-level intellectual activities, publishing academic journals and organising regular academic conferences, and while it prohibits proselytising, ABTS lays claim to the same academic excellence but is more open to evangelizing. The difference lies in their respective historical traditions: NEST belongs to the historical or mainstream tradition, in line with the first nineteenth-century Protestant movement, while ABTS was born in line with Baptist missionary activity that appeared much later, in the twentieth century.
The beginning of Baptism in Lebanon

The development of Evangelical Churches is much more recent. In 1948, Reverend Graham Finlay and his wife Julia were the first Baptist missionaries to establish themselves in Lebanon, followed by a few others. Graham came from Oban, Scotland. This Scottish Presbyterian received his formation at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Texas. As a member of the Royal Air Force during the Second World War, his missionary vocation appeared to him after he was shot down over North Africa and captured by the Germans. Having survived this adventure, Graham had returned from the war convinced that he had been saved by the miraculous intervention of God, and that he should now serve Christ. Graham gave an important impetus to Baptism in Lebanon by developing a network of new churches, taking the form of concentric circles from Beirut to the entire region. The second stage was to ‘nationalize’ Baptism in Lebanon. As such, the Lebanese Baptist Convention was officially founded on October 27, 1955, by representatives of four churches (Beirut, Tripoli, Kefr Mishky and Mieh Mieh) gathered around the missionary Graham Finlay. The Lebanese Baptist Convention intended to connect to the mainstream Protestant universe at regional and international levels: to do so, it became a member of the Supreme Council of Evangelical Churches in Syria and Lebanon, and joined the Baptist World Alliance in 1956. In 1959, the Union of Baptist women was created in Lebanon. In accordance with Protestant tradition, the first Baptist missionaries established a school in 1955 in Beirut with six classes. They also founded a publishing house to deal with the growing need for books, bibles and guides in Arabic to carry out their various ministries and programs. The main Baptist publishing house is currently known as Dar Manhal Al Hayat. In 1960, a crucial step was taken with the foundation of the theological seminary known as the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary. ABTS is located in Mansourieh, Lebanon, and aims to promote and spread Protestantism in the Arab world, so the administration is composed of an advisory committee with representatives of the major countries in the region, including Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan. The Baptist movement in Lebanon is now composed of 22 Baptist churches comprising at least 3,000 registered people and many others unofficial members.

Pentecostals: A dynamic movement

The adventure of the Assemblies of God in Lebanon began in 1969 when two missionary pastors, Bob Hoskins and Bill Elinski, founded a mission
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station in Beirut. In 1987, all American missionaries in Lebanon with many other foreigners had to leave the country for political reasons. Bob Hoskins and his wife Hazel left Lebanon for Salvador (in Brazil). Bill Elinski placed an advertisement in a newspaper to find people who could take over the mission station.

Among these people was Camille Nawar, who finally became the leader of the Lebanese Assemblies of God in 1993, and who founded his church in Hazmieh. Rev. Camille Nawar is the head of the Evangelical Assemblies of God that bring together all Pentecostal churches. He is also the pastor of the Church named Jesus the Savior (Yassour el Khallas). The Church defines itself as non-denominational, but its worship is Pentecostal and it is affiliated to the International Assemblies of God, whose main church is located in Springfield, Missouri, USA. The Assemblies of God were born in Chicago in 1914. In the American organisation, Lebanon and Egypt are integrated into the Eurasia region (particularly in MENA, Middle East and North Africa, classified as ‘sensitive area’); the Assemblies of God have 285 missionaries and 77 associated partners throughout the world. Within the American Church, there are different kinds of missionaries. In the Middle East, several positions were proposed in 2012, including assistantships for a missionary team in Cairo in charge of various courses (English, sports, music, etc.). Another position was advertised for a missionary female in Amman, Jordan, in Hakema Cafe, which offers various fitness and beauty facilities for women. All these positions will begin in January 2013.

The Pentecostal movement has experienced rapid development. The Hazmieh church had 80 members in 1996. Today, it has moved to Louaizeh and has a congregation of 250 people. Camille Nawar is currently the President of the Union of Evangelical Pentecostal Churches in Lebanon, under the leadership of the Supreme Council of Churches in Lebanon and Syria led by Salim Sahyouni. Pentecostal churches are under its jurisdiction, and two others are under construction. Camille Nawar received his formation at the Derek Prince Ministry (DPM), a charismatic missionary organisation named after its founder, Derek Prince, who died in 2003, whose aim was to complete the formation of the newly converted. According to Nawar, official members of Pentecostal churches totalled 2,000 people, gathering former Maronites, Catholics, Muslims and Druze. There are also 4,000 registered Baptists, 5,000 Presbyterians and 3,000 members of Churches of God (Knisset Allah, in plural, Kaneyes Allah). To these should be added the unaffiliated members, whose number is estimated at around 40,000–70,000. According to the pastor, 20 per cent of them are from Muslim and Druze
backgrounds. The senior pastors of these Pentecostal churches are Chadi El Aouad, Michel Matar, Magdy Basta, Fouad Kahwajé, Walid Khoury, Kevork Salbajian, Gaby El Awad (Chadi’s brother), and George Saad. Two other pastors are being formalised. In Lebanon, the missionaries hail from many countries, including Sweden, France and Korea, but most are from the US. When a pastor wishes to start a church, he must ultimately obtain the approval of the Supreme Council and the validation of its president, Salim Sahyouni. A police investigation is conducted to ensure that the building is intended to house a church.

Legacies and heritage of Protestant missions in Lebanon

Considering the impact of Protestant missions in Lebanon, Habib Badr, head of the National Evangelical Church of Beirut, observes an Evangelical heritage and several cultural legacies. He makes an intentional distinction between an Evangelical, ecclesiastical, and religious heritage, with generally positive consequences on the one hand, and a Protestant civilisational, cultural, ideological and political legacy with a mixture of bad and good elements, on the other. According to him, a consensus exists among scholars to appreciate the precious educational, scientific and general cultural influences of Protestantism in the Middle East. Schools, colleges, printing presses and publishing houses and other such institutions bear witness to this phenomenon. To illustrate the significant impact which the American University of Beirut (AUB) has had on the Middle East and North Africa and the rest of Asia, one should note that AUB had the highest number of university graduates among the official representatives of the young nations of Asia and the Middle East who participated in the founding act of the United Nations in 1945.

However, Reverend Badr has noted several aspects of Protestant presence in the Middle East which have had a negative impact. The first of these is the issue of cultural, social and political alienation which the Protestants experience or are perceived to have provoked among their religious communities. Badr makes the point that a ‘legacy of alienation’ appears when some Protestants, at the present time, disconnected themselves from their Arab roots, by their thoughts and words, for the benefit of Western cultural forms of expression. This alienation from many of their Eastern fellow Christians and non-Christians alike is evident, according to Badr, in their lack of effort to build contextualising theology, worship and liturgy, music and other forms of an Arab-specific expression of Protestantism. As a result, according to the
reverend, one cannot properly speak of a Middle Eastern Reformed Lutheran, Episcopal or Baptist theological and church tradition.

The second legacy Badr notices is that of emigration. Protestants facilitate the resettlement of Middle East Christians in America in a variety of ways. However, in doing so, they create a continuing current of migration which helps to concomitantly reduce the Christian presence in Middle East.

Another legacy which can be noted is proselytism, a subject that is very sensitive vis-à-vis ecumenical relations. As a matter of fact, born-again Protestants aim to evangelise not only Muslims but to help reviving the ‘nominal Christians’. In 2007, a big clash occurred when Maronites attacked a newly built, independent Baptist church in a Lebanese village called Ajaltoun. For Badr, the fact that there are Protestants who evangelise Eastern Christians is very disturbing, to the point that their ‘mere existence as an “Eastern Protestant” church community is sometimes felt to be an embarrassment, if not altogether a burden’. Another legacy that Badr regrets is the issue of Zionism. This ideology, both political and theological (also known as ‘dispensationalism’) is based on biblical interpretations related to the promised land (in the Old Testament) and the return and conversion of the Jews (in the New Testament). In this regard, Lebanese people know that for many American Evangelicals (‘Christian Zionists’) who are dispensationalists, Israel fulfils its divine purpose in colonising Palestinian lands and threatening Lebanon. Lebanon is quite concerned insofar as Israel’s ‘natural’ biblical borders are supposed to contain the lower Litani River, above Jebel el-Sheikh. Therefore, the American dispensationalists provide unqualified support to Israel, although the country’s motivations are very much more prosaic. As a matter of fact, the water resources of southern Lebanon and its surroundings also explain its policy. Even if this state is imbued with ethno-religious ideology, namely Zionism, its policy is based more on nationalist, economic and strategic goals than on religious motivations (Rouyer, 1999). Consequently, in the last 20 years:

Eastern Protestants have been subjected to an increasing number of attacks by their compatriots through books and the media accusing them, directly or indirectly, of being responsible for the establishment of the State of Israel with all the evil ensuing thereafter. This indeed is a very sensitive issue, substantially complicated by the fact that major conservative Evangelical denominations in the West openly and blindly support Zionism and the State of Israel at all costs. This is done without any consideration of the tremendous
amount of injustice which this blind support has created among the non-Jewish communities of the Middle East. (Badr, 2009).

A few pastors accept the help of American dispensationalists. However, most do not.

Saïd Dib, head of Life Center (Church of God, Knisset Allah) explained why it is impossible for him to do so. Dib was born into a Catholic family. He suffered a lot during the civil war, so that during the war of 2006, it was very important for him to welcome and help Lebanese Shiites, who were more specifically targeted by the bombings. He told us:

I was a refugee during the civil war, trying with my family to escape bombs […] so I have an idea of what it is like to be a refugee. I was a refugee in my own country. During the last war, I saw a TV program on an American satellite Evangelical TV channel. There was an American pastor calling for people to help Israel. He was calling for the death of Arabs, my death, my beloved ones’ death and the death of innocent people […] and he expressed himself as an Evangelical […] I was so disgusted, so disgusted!

After that, Dib decided to stop his subscription to the channel. Dib is not a nationalist, nor is he involved in politics. During the worship, one of the songs says Yassou’ aghla jensiyyé (Jesus is the highest ‘nationality’). For him, it is simply impossible to associate with dispensationalists. ‘It would give me the impression of trampling underfoot my people’s lives, including my own’.

Conversions: A continuing growth

According to Reverend Habib Badr, in recent years, at least 6,000 people who became born-again Christians have required an administrative change. However, Habib Badr knows that most converts do not change their administrative situation. According to him, the Church leaders advise converts not to change their religious registration, particularly if they are married. Badr asserts that if the change of religion is officially authorised, converts can be ostracised within their family, as well as in their social and professional environment. The changes are only required in case of a marriage of a Christian man with a Muslim woman, for example, because a Christian man is not allowed to do so. Within the National Evangelical Church, a dozen people each year demand a change of registration in favour of the Protestant religion.
One-third are Muslims. As far as he’s concerned, Dr Georges Sabra, head of the NEST, considers that there are certainly more than 40,000–60,000 Protestants in Lebanon, amongst whom only 10,000 registered to vote in the 2009 parliamentary elections.

Portraits of converted people

Maïssam, 37, is a Lebanese teacher of Arabic. This young woman works with an Evangelical ministry called Stonecroft, an American organisation based in Kansas, USA, led by Helen Duff Baugh. This minister supports women in the Arab world in building or changing their careers. They can realise projects such as micro-enterprises, or benefit from practical teachings in English, in computers and in various other fields. Called Sitt El Habayeb (The Beloved Lady), the social integration program for women in the Arab world is inseparable from the desire to convert them. The project works on the assumption that women’s economic dependence upon a father or a husband constitutes an obstacle to their conversion to Evangelical Protestantism. Maïssam complains of social pressure on women in their traditional families, but at the same time she adopts a religion that is, in Lebanon, not really liberal regarding a woman’s condition and role. This apparent paradox is due to the fact that what is important for Maïssam is to follow her unique path to a self-identification process, away from a hetero-identity imposed by the community.

Another part of the explanation lies in the ambiguous role of Islam. The figure of Jesus, Issa in the Qur’an, is a very honourable religious one, characterised by his capacity for goodness, and his miraculous gifts. Somehow, the dual status of the Qur’an is deeply ambivalent: it is rejected for its ‘falsity’ and at the same time it reinforces the convert’s new faith because of the elements it shares with the Bible. The Virgin (Meriem) is another figure who appears a lot in people’s dreams and visions, especially among women who see her as a model figure.

There appears to be an effective affinity between the Arab culture, which gives pride of place to warmth and sentimentality, and the deep emotional expressions of the Pentecostal worship.

Bilal has served as a computer teacher in an Evangelical non-governmental organization (NGO), Lifecenter, in Beirut. This former Sunni instructs, with his colleagues in the classes of the Evangelical institution, 40 children each morning and 50 more in the afternoon. These children are divided into four levels, A to D, while adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 meet with the youth minister. The convert is
proud to participate in this both social and educational endeavour, giving support to the most deprived.

Such activities translate the values and standards that he embodies as an Evangelical Christian into reality. The NGO is not supported by the major political institutions which dominate the socio-political community in Lebanon. Ethics lie at the heart of the Evangelical project. The pursuit of personal coherence and harmonisation between beliefs and norms is inseparable from the process of conversion. This research cannot be taken for granted. It requires putting his faith in a plausibility structure to justify his conversional process in its views. Sincerity of intent and authenticity must be demonstrated in regard to the community. Samir, another convert is very frustrated by the fact that he lives in a country which is very marked by religiosity and, at the same time, deals with a high degree of conflict. In the Christian camp in which he participates, he enjoyed, on the contrary, the warm, supportive and positive atmosphere which emanates from the collective life. Having taken note of the khabar sarr (the Good News), the young man found in the Bible the 'added soul', sensitivity and ethics that were sorely lacking in his life.

Wassim is a former Muslim who has converted to Evangelical Protestantism. The journey of this young man dramatically illustrates the possibilities of social mobility offered by conversion to Evangelical Protestantism. Wassim was born in a Shiite family, but he never received real education or socialisation in Islam. At the age of eight, he was supported by a Christian organisation, Dar el Uled (Children's House). For both financial and health reasons, his parents were unable to support him, which is why he lived in a residence belonging to an Evangelical organisation called Wheat Grain. He achieved a diploma at the Arab Baptist theological seminary. Now 26, Wassim found a job thanks to the Church of God in Burj Hammoud. Wassim's case is an exemplary illustration of the Evangelical world's ability to take care of people from childhood to adulthood.

Selma has acquired skills in English and Computer Science thanks to Mutual Faith, another Evangelical body. After her conversion, she joined the Discipleship Training School (DTS) to improve her knowledge of the Bible, to deepen her faith and to perform missionary activities. She had the opportunity to travel to India to carry out this project. An employee living in Tripoli, Nadim also had the chance of travelling to Switzerland and Arab countries thanks to Life Agape (former Campus Crusade for Christ) in order to evangelise Arab people living there.

Melkon, 22, is a psychology student of Palestinian origin. He witnessed the collapse of Palestinian society under the yoke of colonisation and
the endless ‘peace process’. He also experienced the decline of traditional solidarity because of the impoverishment and the hardening of political and social conditions of life within a Palestinian society that is now divided and fragmented. In addition, we should mention personal characteristics. Ambitious and determined, he had to deal with a culture that discredits individualism and enrichment, which are associated with materialism and amorality. Besides this, the uncertainty of salvation in Islam is a key element that explains his conversion. The need for certainty about their future is an essential aspect of motivation for converts who suffer from high existential feelings of insecurity. However, a certain ambiguity sometimes remains regarding the status of Jesus, recognizable in his personification. Jesus is the Father, the one who comforts, encourages and leads by example. One might also wonder if that father is not one that everyone dreams of. Jesus appears very reassuring for Lebanese people, who note with concern the slow disappearance of the ‘real’ father, and who are shaken by the rapidity with which the familial and generational patterns of traditional Arab families are being pushed around.

Prayer time is divided into a multiplicity of meetings suited to various groups of devotees (there are ministries for youth, for women, teens, alcoholics, etc.), where each believer has the opportunity to speak, to find meaningful purpose in life, and to bear witness. In this regard, the place of testimony is central, inseparable from the desire to transmit the Good News, since this is the exact definition of the Gospel.

The singularity of the conversion is that saying and doing are all one movement. The testimony of faith is part of the self-invention process. This creativity also lessens the severity of the break with the time ‘before’ the conversion: the convert is not joining a new religion, he does not suddenly ‘find’ faith, but is back to his old self by finding the heart and essence of a message which was altered by the old tradition, to which he was bound simply by superficial ties, as a genetic heritage.

The Tent of Praise Church (Kheymé el Tesbih) is in the form of a theatre stage. It does not look like a church, which is entirely intentional; the fact remains that even if he wears jeans, Pastor Michel Matar, head of the Tent of Praise Church, reveals his preacher’s charisma. The goal pursued is to restore social links: while claiming to be unrelated to any ritual, Pentecostals observe rituals, special gestures and celebrations which aim to build social relationships in a dynamic of group identification and to ensure their safeguarding. The establishment of prayer times coupled with the invention of traditions and rituals seems to favour an approach based on standardization.
Marwan considers his former religion as family heritage he acquired at birth, but not as true faith. Thus, Protestantism has, in this example, been his first and only experience of religious socialization: ‘I did not practice my religion before, for me it was just a tradition, family celebrations, that sort of stuff’.

Among the conversion attitudes which D. Hervieu-Léger analyzes is the ‘reaffiliated’ figure, also called ‘converted from within’ (Hervieu-Léger, 1999). This model refers to the convert who redefines an existing latent belief. This theory seems particularly telling in relation to the cases studied. Indeed, on numerous occasions during the interviews, converts explained that through the powerful experience of their first meeting with the pastor or the missionary, a revelation occurred. Revelations caused by dreams or apparitions are very common amongst Pentecostals: in this regard, there appears to be an elective affinity between Pentecostalism and a certain popular religion in Lebanon that gives much weight to dreams, the supernatural and even superstition.

It should be added that the Pentecostal churches in Beirut welcome a motley audience, including foreigners who are welcomed without discrimination. As a matter of fact, the use of English as a common language is even more appreciated because it seems, unlike Arabic, to be well suited to language games marked by inventiveness and fluidity. In this regard, the English language is more than merely a language; it is an idiom that attests to the universal character of the Evangelical family.

With the pluralism of its expressions and its extreme fluidity and adaptability, Pentecostalism is clearly in line with the modern world, and even, in some sociologists’ words, with ultramodernity. Besides, it is assisting in an increasing number of countries to develop individualism and the free expression of people's philosophical convictions. Such an evolution installs a favourable climate for conversion. This is particularly so in Lebanon, a country which is not fully secularized, but where individualism is gaining momentum. A recurrent argument raised in the interviews is related to free choice presented as being authentic. In a society where no more salient model exists to serve as a global ethical framework that might be acceptable to all, conversion expresses freedom of thought and individual consciousness in a paroxysmal way.

**Conclusion**

Among the fundamental cultural traits, religion is an essential constituent of the cultural group.
In the Arab world, where religion is still influential, conversion is at the heart of major socio-political and cultural issues. It participates fully in the confrontation of ideas and the (re-)formulation of collective identities. The missionary experience offers a remarkable illustration of this phenomenon. Thus, Christian missionaries – be they Catholics or Protestants – who have succeeded each other since the late nineteenth century, whether or not through taking advantage of colonial enterprise, made a strong impression on the region. Besides, conversion is a biographical disruption experience that requires what Bourdieu calls a process of adjustment. This dynamic building and self-construction requires the renewal of one's reference criteria, which are by definition unstable and uncertain (Schafer, 2012). According to two researchers, Boltanski and Thevenot, when an actor wants to justify his choices to the dominant community he must mobilise higher principles beyond personal interest to comply with the dominant conception of what is ‘right’ and ‘just’ (Boltanski and Thevenot, 1991).

We identified in our study three key principles: compassion, ethics and authenticity. Compassion is the loving example of Christ; ethics determines one’s social and spiritual commitments in the Church. The authenticity process aims at making the conversion appear as a free and informed choice. D. Hervieu-Léger recalled that as religious affiliation is less obvious and can no longer simply be the result of transmission from parents to children, it takes the form of an ‘elective ethnicity’ (Hervieu-Léger, 2000). This is a clear indication of the ongoing change in this era of ‘revolutions’ in the Arab world.

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Religious conversions in the North African Muslim context have mostly been understood from two points of view, legalist and ethnic. Scholars have extensively glossed over the rejection of conversion as apostasy in Islamic legal theory. This trend in scholarship tends to pay very little attention to the historical and sociological context in which these legal restrictions were formed, or to how they were implemented, contested and lived. Another set of analyses considers historical and social practices, but with specific focus on the cultural and ethnic question. In scholarship on the Maghreb, more specifically, the question of religious change has often been lumped together with the broader problem of Arab–Berber relations. From this perspective, religious change is essentially seen as a strictly Berber phenomenon, through which Berbers seek to establish their singularity and contest Arab hegemony in Maghreb culture. Although it captures an important aspect of the activity of some Berber groups, this explanation is overly simplistic, and does not adequately account for the complex and nuanced relationships between ethnic groups in the Maghreb. Moreover, it draws heavily upon the colonial paradigm of a supposedly natural antagonism between Arabs and Berbers, without seeking to question or complicate this narrative.

Rejecting these strictly legalistic or Berberist biases, this chapter – which is based on observations gathered during several research trips in Kabylia, Algiers and Oran – seeks to demonstrate two points. Firstly, the state regulations concerning Evangelical Christianity will be shown to have much more to do with the state's attachment to the postcolonial Algerian myth of national unity than with its adhesion to a theologically inspired notion of antagonism between Islam and Christianity. Secondly, focus will then move to how Evangelical Christianity has provided Algerian converts with a new understanding of freedom based
on the cultivation of pure faith, and how this project has in turn come
to be increasingly connected with another mission: the purification or
‘healing’ of the nation.

An Algerian Protestantism

Contrary to the contentions of many commentators, Protestantism has
been a part of Algeria’s religious landscape for a very long time. Although
they have been studied less than their Catholic counterparts, Protestant
missions have been active in Algeria since the end of the 19th century. In
1881, the UK-based ‘Mission to the Kabyles’3 – renamed the ‘North Africa
Mission’ (NAM) in 1883 – established its first station in a small village
located approximately 20 miles east of Tizi Ouzou, Djemaa Sahridj. In
1908, the US-based Episcopal Methodist Church Mission established its
first station at Fort National (now Larba Irathen). From this point of view,
the appointment in 2007 of an Algerian citizen as the President of the
Association de l’Eglise Protestante d’Algérie – which had been led only
by non-Algerian pastors since its creation in 1972 – is not as surprising as
it may have seemed. The choice of Mustapha Krim reflects the commit-
ment of both government officials and self-appointed leaders of the nas-
cent Christian communities to ‘Algerianise’ Evangelical Protestantism.

No confirmed data exist documenting the exact number of Evangelical
Christians currently living in Algeria. Although the number of Catholics
is estimated to be around 12,000 (including a majority of Catholic
students from Sub-Saharan Africa), Christian religious leaders whom
I interviewed suggested that there could be 20,000–30,000 Evangelical
Christians. This number is still contested, however: some prefer to
speak of 3,000 Evangelicals, and some of only 300. The social and
demographic backgrounds of these converts are extremely diverse.
During church services, one can see individuals from all generations
and various social backgrounds. Contrary to what is often assumed,
Algerian converts are not unemployed outcasts in search of a visa to
the West. The majority of them belong to the lower and upper-middle
classes. They are teachers, doctors, lawyers, engineers, shopkeepers, and
small business owners. Importantly, converts’ communities are groups
of families rather than marginalised individuals.

Islam as a metonymy of public order and national unity

Conversion and apostasy are not considered as crimes under Algerian
law. Despite Article 2 of the Constitution, which defines Islam as the
state religion, Article 29 recognises the equality of all citizens and bans discrimination based on race or gender. Article 36 establishes freedom of conscience and opinion as inviolable liberties, and Article 43 grants citizens the right to create associations, including religious associations. From this perspective, Algerian law proves to be relatively more tolerant than the laws of other Muslim countries.

The condition of Algerian Christians has been greatly affected, however, by the ordinance passed by the government on 28 February 2006 in order to criminalise proselytisation. Ordinance 06-03 specifies the exact conditions under which non-Muslim religions can legally be practiced. While the preamble to the Ordinance recalls the Algerian state’s tolerance and acceptance of non-Muslim religions, subsequent articles establish important restrictions on religious freedom. They demand that religious practices be made clearly distinct to the state at all times. Articles 5–9 stress the obligation that religious practices must take place in buildings officially registered as houses of worship. These places must be open to the public – a rule that entails the possibility of religious communities reaching out to a broader public, but also allows the state to access and monitor Churches’ sermons and activities. The government’s Executive Decree 07-135, issued in May 2007, clarifies Article 8 of the Ordinance and conditions the gathering of non-Muslim religious services upon several criteria. Christians’ capacity to organise events is therefore entirely dependent on the – often arbitrary – decisions of local walis, who must be informed of any anticipated event at least five days in advance.

The provisions addressing the issue of proselytising introduce a significant imbalance between Muslims and followers of other religions. Articles 10–14 define proselytising as a criminal offence and detail the criminal sentences for those who do not abide by the law. Muslim faith is specifically protected by the ordinance: a fine of 500,000 dinars and a sentence of two years’ imprisonment is set against anyone who tries to seduce another into changing religion or to ‘unsettle’ the faith of a Muslim.

Several other aspects of Algerian law present similar emphasis on the protection of Islam and Muslims. The anti-proselytising sentiment of the 2006 Ordinance echoes an analogous constraint established by Article 144 bis 2 of the Penal Code. Many Algerian Christians have been tried under this article, which provides for sentences of three to five years’ imprisonment and fines of 50,000–100,000 Algerian dinars for anyone ‘insulting the prophet and any of the messengers of God, or denigrating the creed and precepts of Islam, whether by writing, drawing, declaration, or any other means’. This privileged protection
of Islam and Muslims is also expressed in several other parts of Algerian law, such as Article 26 of the Information Code of 1990, which censors publications that are deemed ‘contrary to Islamic morals, national values, human rights’. Most of the provisions of the Algerian Family Code concerning marriage, divorce or inheritance also contradict the principle of citizens’ equality provided by Article 29 of the Constitution.

Importantly, the Ordinance and the rules mentioned above are not rationalised as theological defences of Islam against Christianity; rather, they assert the mundane necessity that the state protect the weak and credulous groups within society against the insidious threat of destabilising forces. What is at stake is not the defence of a transcendental or theological conception of Islamic truth, but the safeguarding of the state’s authority over society, and of the unity of the nation. Islam is defended as a metonymy of public order and as the symbol of national unity, rather than as a sovereign source of truth. The acts criminalised by the 2006 Ordinance are not forms of blasphemy or apostasy, but attempts to disrupt social order and take advantage of credulous individuals. The Ordinance does not use the religious expression *fatana*, but the more prosaic ‘shaking the faith’ (*za’za’at iman ay Muslim*). These articles deem punishable any form of speech that may excite parts of the population to sedition. Article 14 of the Ordinance also betrays the fear of foreign threats to national unity. According to this article, foreign nationals suspected of proselytising will be expelled. Foreign missionary groups are permitted to conduct humanitarian work, as long as they do not proselytise.

The limitations of religious freedom defined by these norms express the state’s efforts to safeguard the post-independence myth of national unity, and to deny the reality of an increasingly plural and diverse society which no longer identifies with this narrative. To a large extent, the limitation of Christian activities is no different to the monitoring of Islamic activities. For example, Article 87 bis 10 of the Penal Code establishes that the government must officially authorise imams to lead prayers, and that religious services can only take place in mosques recognised by the state. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs monitor the study of Islam in public schools strictly, and Government-appointed religious officials can legally preview sermons of the Friday prayer. These sermons can be censored and imams can be dismissed if they are seen as a threat to the unity of the nation.

Significantly, the discourse of Islamist leaders – who were among the most vocal supporters of the 2006 Ordinance – is based on a similar nationalist rationale and makes no reference to conflict between Islam
Religious Conversions in the Mediterranean World

and Christianity. Colonialism, not religious war, is the lens through which most Islamists have analysed the threat of Evangelical proselytising. In an interview (Quotidien d’Oran, 31 March 2008), Bouabdellah Ghlamallah, Minister of Religious Affairs, justified the expelling of Hugh Johnson – an American Methodist pastor and President of the Eglise Protestante d’Algérie (EPA) until 2007 – by referring to national security and unity: ‘We do not want to prevent people from changing religion. But we are telling converts that Algeria is targeted by Evangelists [évangelisateurs]. The interest of the nation must come before everything. The most important thing is to safeguard our homeland’.

A member of the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulamas (AAMU), interviewed in December 2009, insisted on the distinction between the notions of plurality (tāadoudiya) and division (inqisam). He explained that while the former is a positive notion that reflects the natural organisation of human affairs and is compatible with equality among different groups, the latter gives rise to hierarchies similar to those that divided Algerian society in the colonial period. AAMU does not reject the notion of a pluralist Algeria, but rather insists on how premature such an ideal is. Algerian society, he argues, is still too fragile, too weakened by the consequences of colonialism, not to be unsettled by Christian minority groups. Similarly, an Islamist MP who is a member of the Movement of Society for Peace (MSP), which currently holds 9 per cent of seats in Parliament and is a member of the Government coalition (with Rassemblement National Démocratique and FLN), contends that the controversy around conversion is primarily a political conspiracy aimed at destabilising Algeria. Equally determinant in the arguments of Islamic officials and government Islamists is the memory of the ‘Black Decade’ of civil war sparked by various extremist groups. The notion that the state’s monitoring of religious change is key to safeguarding its – still fragile – social stability after 10 years of interpersonal violence is particularly apparent in a statement made by Minister Ghlamallah at a conference organised by the Ministry of Religious Affairs on 11 February 2010: ‘Either we resist, or we ask the state to renounce its responsibilities and to let its people do whatever they want in the name of religion. Algeria already paid much too high a price for this, and we won’t fall into that trap again’.

Whereas state and Islamist officials focus on the ‘foreign’ nature of Evangelical Christianity, converts’ arguments emphasise the indigenous dimension of Christianity. In this light, the debate between Christians and their opponents is not one that pits Christianity against Islam, but rather one that reflects conflict between foreign and indigenous Christianity. Indeed, François Burgat has shown that the particularity
of Algerian Islamism lies in its close relation to anti-colonialism and nationalism. Islamist discourse about conversion is an anti-colonial, nationalist discourse of political and cultural resistance, not a theological rejection of Christianity. This argument echoes the long tradition within Algerian Islamic reformism of defending what Jacques Berque called ‘Jacobin Islam’, a phrase ‘suggestive of a furiously proselytising rationalism and of an obsessively centralising claim to unity’.8

The ambivalent effect of the Arab Spring

Strangely enough, the dramatic political transformations that have taken place in Tunisia and Egypt in the wake of the 2010 revolutions have not triggered any major change in the Algerian debate on religious pluralism. The victories of Islamist parties in the Egyptian and Tunisian elections were widely perceived to be potential sources for destabilisation of Algeria, and reawakened painful memories and fears of the infamous Black Decade. Nonetheless, this grudging response to the Arab Spring did not lead to a violent backlash against Christian converts. However, nor did the relative failure of the Islamist party in the Algerian legislative elections of May 2012 entail any significant improvement for Christians. Since 2010 the attitude of the state towards Christians has shifted from strict monitoring to a form of benign neglect, whereby signs of accommodation alternate with episodic warnings and repressive actions. As for the Ordinance and the executive decrees, they are unchanged thus far, despite numerous calls from Christian Algerian leaders for their annulment. Government officials continue to publicly claim that Christians are free to practice their religion. In the summer of 2011, the EPA was officially recognised by the government, and the 27 churches that comprise the Eglise received a certificate indicating their conformity with Algerian law. On 14 June 2011, former Archbishop Henri Teissier was invited to participate in a meeting organised by a consultative body on political reforms, led by Abdelkader Bensalah, President of the Council of the Nation. Mgr Teissier explained this invitation as ‘a sign that Algeria wants to welcome all her children, no matter what their beliefs and culture are, in as much as they work for the collective good of the country and the region’.9 In theory, such official recognition and symbolic gestures should allow for better protection of Christians’ religious freedom. Arbitrary decisions, such as the Wali of Bejaïa’s decision in May 2011 to close seven churches in his area, are now more difficult to justify. In practice, however, attacks against individual believers or churches have not ceased. Conflicts concerning the
ownership of a number of churches remain unresolved. Notably, in June 2011, Mustapha Krim pressed charges against officials from the wilaya of Mostaganem who refused to recognise the EPA's rights regarding a church it had leased to a health centre since 1976.

Moreover, controversies concerning people who allegedly broke their fast in public during the month of Ramadan have now gained new importance. In the summer of 2012, Slimane Rebaïne, a worker who was caught drinking water during the day, was violently beaten by police in the village of Beni Douala in the Wilaya of Tizi Ouzou. Three other youths were arrested by police in Boumerdes because they were smoking cigarettes in an abandoned house in the village of Issers. In other words, the attitude of official authorities towards Christians since the Arab Spring has been very ambivalent. Charges made against people who have allegedly disturbed public order by publicly breaking the fast seem to have taken precedence over accusations of proselytising. But a lot of arbitrariness remains in the implementation and interpretation of rules by local judges and walis. As such, the attempts made by the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Religious Affairs to send more positive signs to Algerian Christians express a desire to closely monitor and co-opt Algerian Christianity, rather than a true commitment to religious liberty and freedom of conscience.

Salvation versus religion (din)

Converts come from different social and professional backgrounds and their previous engagement with Islam has often been extremely varied. Some converts are former Sufi marabouts or imams who, in some cases, might have endorsed radical or violent forms of Islamic practice during the Black Decade. Others have described their pre-conversion experience as one of agnosticism, nominal adherence to Islam, or even atheism.

A significant common feature which emerges from converts’ narratives is their insistence on rejecting the very notion of ‘religion’ as din. When asked about their motivations in converting to the Christian ‘religion’, my interlocutors repeatedly insisted on the fact that ‘religion’ was an inadequate term. Instead of ‘religion’, Algerian Christians preferred to use terms such as ‘faith’, ‘grace’, ‘freedom’, ‘love’, or, most of the time, ‘fellowship of Jesus’.

Similarly, when asked about which denomination of Protestant Christianity they most identified with, converts strongly rejected the need to identify with a particular doctrinal trend. Mustapha Krim – the leader of the EPA – likewise insisted on the irrelevance of denominational
divisions to describe Algerian Christianity: ‘We are free of these divisions, we live our faith in a very down-to-earth way’. When questioned why religion was seen as such an inadequate word to describe their own practice, the interviewees all insisted on two key aspects of religion as din: namely, its legal and constraining aspect and its artificiality. They associate the concept of religion with hypocrisy, disguise, gratuitous constraint, oppression or ignorant superstition. Importantly, Islam and Catholicism are rejected for similar reasons. In other words, Algerian Christians convert not so much to turn away from Islam in particular, as from religion in general.

In my conversations with converts, they regularly emphasised how the state’s use of Islam as the cement of the postcolonial nation-state had led to the ossification of and ultimately the death of Islam. ‘[The] State’s control on religion’, one convert argued, ‘is the death of religion’. This rejection of religion as law, understood as state law, applies to all forms of contemporary Islamic practice in Algeria. Salafism, Sufism and Islamism are all described by converts as being corrupted and delegitimised by the state’s attempt to shape religious practice. By contrast, Protestant Christianity provides converts with a new understanding of freedom that is not conditioned by the nation-state’s definition of acceptable religious practice. Instead, this freedom is based on the cultivation of a sincere form of piety through prayers, attendance at services and Bible schools, everyday interaction with neighbours and work.

The converts’ rejection of din’s artificiality and legalism is also intimately related to their tendency to equate religion as din with backwardness and underdevelopment. Most of my informants insisted on the ‘backwardness’ of legalistic Islamic practice. When discussing their pre-conversion experiences or religion in the broader society, various perspectives were put forward, ranging from outwardly Islamophobic accusations about the morality of the Prophet to more nuanced analyses about religious experiences. Despite these differences, all comments converged towards a similar critique of the fetish-like, ritualistic, and almost pagan elements of Islamic practice. The ritual of Ramadan, the codified organisation of prayer, or the common use of the expression Insha’Allah (‘Allah willing’) were commonly derided as evidence of a superstitious, fearful, passive, and childish relation to God. These features were associated with the immobilisation and corruption of state institutions and their grip over Algerian citizens. In this narrative, where the notion of ‘help yourself’ is thus opposed to the supposedly fatalistic Insha’Allah, the free, interiorised and sincere prayer is preferred to the ritualised salat (Islamic prayer). It is implied that conversion to
Evangelical Christianity paves the way to a more modern and active form of agency and citizenship. The contempt of Algerian converts for their former life and for the religion of the broader society is based on a very similar critique to that formulated by Dutch missionaries in Indonesia, which anthropologist Webb Keane describes in the following words: ‘Submitting to fixed discursive forms is not only a theological error or an affront to God; it threatens to undermine the agency proper to humans’. Conversion to Evangelical Christianity in Algeria engenders a similar moral narrative of modernity, whereby progress is not just about technology, but also about self-mastery and human emancipation. In the particular context of Algeria, access to modern agency supposes purification from materiality, herein understood as the materiality of a legalistic, ritualistic and codified practice.

Algerian Christian millenarianism

The critical description that converts give of the state of Islamic practice in their country does not account for the variety of practices. The opposition of ‘faith versus law’ which is mentioned does not adequately describe the difference between Evangelical Christianity and the changing and diverse forms of Islamic religiosity. However, the insistence on rationalising their rejection of din and Islam in such a manner betrays converts’ deep concerns about justifying their choices in relation to the state of wider society, hence the choices are explained within this broader context. In many Christians’ post-conversion relation to their past and to Algerian society, there is something beyond a pure quest for sincere faith and individual salvation. Most of the converts whom I met insisted on their emancipation from the pressure of an intrusive state through their belief in Jesus Christ. But conversion cannot be reduced to a spiritual form of exile, or haraga. Weekly religious services are a key element of a convert’s individual path towards Christianity, yet they also play a major role in the process through which converts collectively define their identity as a group, as well as their relation to the state and to society in general. During religious services, in which I participated, the pastors spent a lot of time defining the relationship between converts (as a group) and the nation. This relationship was seen neither as antagonistic nor as merely suggestive of a retreat from the public sphere into the realm of private piety or towards global Christianity. Rather, this relation emerges as an ambiguous one, simultaneously based on a process of self-identification with Christians worldwide and on a shared representation of the community’s moral
superiority over the persecuting state. The community's interest in self-marginalisation is reinforced by its certitude that Algerian converts will one day be called upon to save the Algerian state. This idea is supported by pastors' repeated calls for their congregations to acquire specific forms of emotional dispositions such as love, forgiveness and joy, all of which are considered to be marks of converts' moral superiority. If conversion entails a separation from the rest of society, then this is not a separation through confrontational opposition, but through the converts' enthusiastic confidence that one day they might be called upon to save Algeria from itself. The narratives of most Evangelical converts and the exchanges that take place during weekly sermons or Bible lessons reveal an inclination towards painful, personal tales. Converts enjoy telling stories of how they used to live in sin or ignorance and how their conversion brought about a whole new set of challenges and pains. Although this dolorous tendency is stereotypical of a large part of Evangelical discourse worldwide, in the Algerian case it is closely associated with tacit and enthusiastic faith in the ability of Christianity to save Algeria and to heal it from its traumatic past. In their sermons, pastors use passages from the Bible from which they can offer advice that is specifically adapted to the condition of converts in Algeria. The Book of Acts, for example, is the subject of much comment and discussion. Pastors seek to provide believers with arguments that they can use to respond to people who criticise their choices, or to persuade themselves if their own faith declines. They insist on reminding their audience that they have done nothing wrong; that their choice was the only one; that they are not apostates. But these speeches are not meant to be simply reassuring or consoling. They aim to give profound meaning to the suffering that Algerian Christians go through. Through all sorts of theological detours and edificatory stories, pastors seek to demonstrate that Algerian Christians are an elected, exceptional community who will one day be called upon to save the nation. These prophecies remain notoriously vague, and they have nothing to do with a precise political programme. But they are convincing enough to inculcate in most believers the notion that they were chosen, and given an exceptional mission. The idea of transforming persecution into choice and of replacing the FLN-imposed narrative of an Arabo-nationalist unity with a more discreet Christian covenant does have political implications, even if it is not presented as the basis for political mobilisation.

Some media outlets have played central roles in the formation of a common set of norms and arguments on which new converts can reflect in their everyday lives. Just like the weekly sermons, they seek to link a
number of common global Evangelical themes with the specific North African context, and to connect the North African Christian community to the wider Christian community worldwide. Channel North Africa, for example, was created by a group of Christians from the region in order to spread the Gospel and to provide believers with teachings and advice particular to their own context. Long broadcast by the channel El Hayet, it is now accessible as a web-television channel. The channel’s self-description includes an attempt to present a particular interpretation of the history of ‘the Church’ in North Africa. The channel offers a genealogy which strongly emphasises the intimate link uniting Christianity and Africa. It also asserts that when Islam was brought to North Africa at the end of the seventh century, Christianity was already well established in the area, despite the fact that it had been weakened by internal struggles. This attempt to disconnect Algeria from its Arab identity and to link it more closely with Africa and the recurrent reference to key historical figures such as Tertullian and Augustine are central to the nascent identity of Algerian Christians. In contrast with some shows, broadcast through Arabic channels, which are extremely polemical and Islamophobic, the programmes of the North Africa Channel aim to persuade viewers of the merits of Christianity, but also to provide converts with reasons and methods. Heated debates conducted mainly in Kabylian with both Muslim and Christian participants or shows featuring guests who express their doubts and difficulties help to create a sense of shared experience and identity. Other programmes have more of a pedagogical objective: they teach the audience the ‘correct’ readings of the Bible, as well as suggesting adequate ways by which to cultivate a sincere and pious faith. Importantly, a lot of this pedagogy is intended to answer specific questions and doubts that develop in the Muslim North African context. Discussions of piety and ritual emphasise how Christian practices value sincerity and truth; as opposed to Islamic rituals, which are seen as superstitious behaviour. Programmes focusing on doctrine often select issues that tend to be particularly problematic for an audience with a Muslim background. The notion of the son of god, for example, has been lengthily discussed. In addition to this attempt to make Christianity more sensible and appealing to Algerians, the channel also seeks to communicate to its audience a sense of belonging to a global community of Christians. In order to do so, the theme of persecution is stressed. Programmes not only remind viewers that persecution has been an integral part of the history of the Church in North Africa, but also seek to trigger a sense of identification between Algerian Christians and Christians in other parts of the world. The prominence of the theme
of persecution is not random: as cultural historian Melani McAlister has shown, this theme has become central to the global project of some American Evangelical organisations in the last three decades.

American evangelical Christians are afraid: They believe that Christians around the world are persecuted, that Islam is a global threat and that their fundamental values are under assault by a secular culture. American evangelicals are fearless: They are assertive and self-confident, energised and powerful enough to enact legislation that promotes their particular vision of international human rights. These concomitant realities do not form a contradiction so much as a mutually enabling construction. In the last three decades, evangelical fears of persecution have become the impetus for a remarkable surge of activism. The moral geographies of the new evangelical internationalism are in flux. These contain both the seeds of global solidarity and the threat of increasing hostility.12

For Algerian pastors and North African Christian media, highlighting the theme of persecution is thus a way of connecting converts’ present situation to the particular history of the area and of giving them a sense of belonging to a wider community which exceeds the stifling boundaries of the nation.

This double orientation of the discourse of Algerian Christians – both towards and beyond the nation – is constrained by one normative principle and value: the idea of freedom. Central to the weekly sermons, Bible school teachings, converts’ random discussions and Christian media shows is the theme of freedom, which is developed in two interrelated ways. ‘Accepting the love of Jesus’ is one element of a long process of moral improvement. But this liberation of the self through love, based on the development of sincere faith, is closely related to the redemption of the country. Algerian Christians do not outwardly seek to create a political or social movement at all, but the link between the idea of Islam and the notion of backwardness that significantly underlies their worldview has obvious political implications. From their perspective, Islam maintains a reverse, opposite relation to Christianity, modernity and progress. Songs, movies, websites, television shows, and sermons all seek to convey a similar narrative, whereby adhesion to the Christian faith is associated with the redemption of the Algerian nation. A song by Djams, a Kabylian gospel singer, entitled ‘Heal my country’ (Guéris mon pays) is often sung during church services. The lyrics explicitly call Jesus to heal Algeria from her wounds of the past: ‘Heal
my country / heal my nation / turn the mourning into resurrection’.

Numerous articles and shows warn Christians against belief in false prophets, witchcraft and paganism. In other words, although they reject the notion of religion as *din* in favour of ideas of salvation and freedom, Algerian Christians are engaging in a process of establishing a new form of religious orthodoxy, by drawing a clear distinction between acceptable beliefs and practices and attitudes that are rejected as barbarian, pagan, Islamic or backward. The website Maarifa, for example, presents a short movie that establishes a causal relation between the economic and social predicament of the Muslim world and the spread of superstition and witchcraft. Significantly, the teachings of the Islamic *shuyukh* (Arabic terms for scholarly figures of authority) are seen to be equivalent as those of self-appointed witches. Common devotional objects of everyday Muslim life are derided as mere idols.

**Conclusion**

The study of Algerian conversions raises important questions regarding the ways in which the categories of religion and politics in the social sciences are viewed. Converts’ practices and discourses contribute both to unsettling and reinforcing the category of religion. The ideals of freedom, love and salvation that are proposed in lieu of the legalistic notion of *din* could lead to the implementation of a new type of regulatory practice that may very well also turn, eventually, into a new form of legalistic *din*. Christians’ everyday practices involve numerous pedagogical procedures that are intended to teach the right actions, beliefs and ideas; in other words, to create a new form of orthopraxy and orthodoxy, and possibly a new *din*. The case of Algerian Christians also invites us to reflect upon the relation between the categories of religion and politics. Converts see their beliefs and activities as being beyond the common boundary of religion and politics. They insist on the distinction between their project and that of Islamist movements, and present themselves as apolitical. However, a number of Algerian pastors and — often self-appointed — representatives of the Protestant communities have an ambiguous relation with state authorities. On the one hand, they stress themes of persecution, in order to inculcate in their followers a sense of identification with a global community of persecuted Christians that transcends the boundaries of nations. On the other hand, they try to cajole state authorities by proposing a strong dichotomy between good, national Christianity and the bad, foreign equivalent. Ironically enough, this rationale mirrors the distinction
between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims that has become so prominent in Western politics in the last decade. The case of new Evangelical Algerian Protestants thus suggests how conversion can be at once a revolutionary phenomenon that unsettles hegemonic norms, and a conservative force that consolidates existing power relations between state and society, or between the nation and the world.

Notes


5. Ibid.


Bibliography


African migration has been a phenomenon in Egypt since the early 1990s, just as it has been in the Maghreb. Refugees, economic migrants or ‘refugees of poverty’ arrive into a ‘space-between’ or ‘migratory air-lock’. Some of them hope to continue their route out of Egypt with the help of the United Nations or their social networks, whereas others who moved to Egypt for security reasons are waiting to go back to their own countries. However, due to different strict migration policies or because the refugees are unable to return home, many have to settle in Cairo in spite of the difficult environment in this host country (e.g. racism, lack of rights). Most of these migrants are Christians and their presence symbolises an original case of religious diversification in the Arab world. What characterises this religious diversification and how is it perceived by Egyptian citizens, Coptic or Muslim, or even the government? How does religion become a real resource for ‘transit migrants’ and how does their religious re-territorialisation affect urban organisation?

In reality, religious diversity in Egypt considerably predates the arrival of refugees and migrants. Furthermore, we will convey that Evangelical Protestantism is more concerned with religious mobilities in Cairo and that this process generally takes place discreetly and ‘from the bottom-up’, independently of local institutions. Lastly, cultural transformations in migration are not a one-way process. Even though, on the one hand sub-Saharan migrants affect local society, on the other hand the religious history, sacred spaces and the organisation of urban territories in Egypt will also influence African practices and beliefs and therefore, their identity process.
Diversity of the religious landscape in Egypt, before and after African migration

Egypt was composed of Greeks, Romans, Jews, Christians and pagans until the Arab conquests of the seventh century, and with its position as a crossroads for exchanges, it was a cosmopolitan country. Most of the population slowly converted to Islam around 800 or 900 (Courbage and Fargues, 1992). Far from being homogeneous, Egyptian people are characterised by cultural and religious diversity, despite several periods of expulsion of foreign nationals. Within the local Christian community, orthodox Copts predominate, but other Christians – such as Catholic Copts, Protestant Copts (or ‘Coptic Evangelicals’), Latin missionaries and Levantine communities (Armenians, Syrians, Greeks) – complete this landscape. At the time of the 1996 census, 3.3 million Christians lived in this country of about 60 million inhabitants (5.7 per cent). Coptic Evangelicals are linked to the arrival of British and American missionaries prior to the British colonisation (Coyault, 2003). They represented between 20,000 (Heyberger, 2003, p. 27) and 250,000 people in the early 2000s. These figures exclude Christian western foreigners whose numbers decreased after the Suez Crisis of 1956 and also after the Arab Revolution of 2011 (whether temporarily or not). In 2006, there were 185,000 foreigners in Egypt, mostly Arabs but also westerners working in international organisations, diplomacy or private groups. With regard to the religious and legal context, Sharia law influences the foundations of legislation in Egypt, and Copts are excluded from the highest political and professional circles. Religious freedom is controlled and Christian proselytism is forbidden. It is also very difficult to obtain approval to build or to renovate a church in Egypt.

This religious landscape has developed with the arrival of African refugees and migrants whose numbers have been increasing steadily since the 1990s, despite some of them resettling in western countries or going back to their country of origin. Cairo became an attractive place, notably due to the significant number of diplomatic and consular representatives and because of the presence of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). For Sudanese people and refugees from the Horn of Africa, Egypt has been a clear migratory destination for the last 20 years (Le Houérou, 2004; Zohry and Harrell-Bond, 2003). Refugees used to consist mainly of men, political opponents, intellectuals from upper and middle socio-economic classes, but there has been an increase in the number of other family members and single women with children. Egypt also became one of the destinations targeted by trans-Saharan migrants from central and western Africa, young men or ‘adventurers’, because
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of the difficult living conditions or road closures in Libya, Mauritania, Morocco (Bredeloup and Pliez, 2005) and even in Yemen. These are Somalis, Sudanese, Ethiopians, Eritreans and more recently, from farther afield, Congolese, Nigerians and Cameroonians. Because of the undefined nature of many statutes, it has nowadays become difficult to distinguish between asylum seekers, refugees, ‘economic migrants’ (who have generally arrived legally in the country with a tourist visa but overstayed after their residence permit expired), students, economic refugees or victims of smuggling. Legal statutes are inadequate to fully cover the social reality and these statutes can evolve during the transit period. For example, an African can enter Egypt with a student visa and become a refugee later, or else enter with a tourist visa and become ‘illegal’. Moreover, since The Four Freedom Agreement9 was signed (2004) and since the peace making between North and South Sudan (2005), Sudanese people are no longer eligible for the UNHCR refugee status.10 They are encouraged to go back to their country, which is not yet stable and where everything needs to be rebuilt. Generally speaking, the files of many asylum seekers have been closed (Grabska, 2005) and fewer refugees can benefit from resettlement abroad. The common point for all of these sub-Saharan migrants is their precarious situations, despite some of them having been settled in Egypt for more than 15 or 20 years. There is still no national integration policy for immigrants or even refugees,11 and discrimination is usually practised against ‘black people’. Egyptian people often consider migrants as poor refugees from Sudan. The common history between the two countries is deeply marked by slavery. Racist insults are frequent in the public space and the colour of the skin is still more stigmatised than the religious affiliation.12 Not all migrants are Christian but the majority are. Christian South-Sudanese or Evangelical Eritreans (Pentecostal, Jehovah’s Witnesses) have often left their own countries for religious reasons. Today, there are more than 30,000 sub-Saharan individuals assisted by the UNHCR in Egypt (70 per cent of these are Sudanese), but actually there could be between 2 and 5 million in the country.

The UNHCR’s partners, such as NGOs, confessional NGOs (Caritas, Catholic Relief Services) and, above all, religious orders and missionary churches13 (Sharkey, 2008) have developed an important system for providing aid to migrants. These Churches are officially established in Egypt but members are mostly foreigners. These churches have become very popular places for Africans. In peripheral migrant areas, Protestant or Catholic churches have opened schools, health-care centres and provide professional training for adults, whether they be Christian or Muslim. They try to work together in an ecumenical environment, based on values
of charity and hospitality, trying to bridge the remaining governmental gaps and the absence of support being provided by Muslim organisations. Muslim associations exist in Egypt and are the first category of registered organisations. However, they still hold little social weight, are still organised on a community and religious basis and are characterised by a complex embedding of political and administrative structures (Ben Nefissa, 2002). The subject of refugees seems to be ‘incompatible’ with the main concerns of the Egyptian leaders of these organisations, who are often members of the political elite. As in many different parts of the world, Christian religious leaders or faith-based organisations have ‘invested’ in the migratory space and the social question of migrants as philanthropic or humanitarian actors rather than evangelisers just as they used to (Etienne and Picard, 2012). This is particularly noticeable in the Arab world where proselytising, which they are constantly suspected of carrying out, is forbidden. Emergency aid is preferred rather than human rights and a long-term approach, and those carrying out those actions are struggling to provide political solutions, all the more so in a non-democratised country. The presence of foreign Christians is tolerated because they are responsible for providing aid to a forgotten and invisible segment of the population. However, the political integration and the role of the missionary churches remain limited and this is a taboo subject.

We are secular, we don’t practise religious discrimination. Half of the teachers are Muslims here, it is not a question that we generally ask. We’re not asking to change religion, it is the same God for everybody. It is a hard situation here … The Sudanese need this message of tolerance towards different religions. We don’t have problems with the government but it monitors us. They are nervous because we host Shiite Iranians and they are afraid of conversions. With other churches, there is no competition. We cooperate.

Missionary churches also provide daily religious services for Christian migrants, according to their liturgy and their language of origin. Some of them are referred to as ‘international and interdenominational’ churches, where many nationalities and religious affiliations mix together. Among sub-Saharan countries (particularly the Sudan, with Combonians) and Egypt, there is a religious continuity ensured by missionary churches, whilst in Cairo, a kind of spatial inertia exists in Christian places of worship. Indeed, it is easy for Catholics and traditional African Protestants to find ‘their own Church’ in Cairo. These individuals do not see a difference between their Church of origin and their Church in Cairo, even though they have often affirmed that their beliefs become stronger
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in exile. Religion offers hope for people in difficult and precarious situations. But other migrants, depending on their profile, their projects or their social networks, may adopt different religious strategies and experiment with broader religious and urban mobility.

Religious mobilities of migrants in Cairo: The dynamism of Evangelical Protestantism

Collectively and individually, churches and religion take on important meanings during exile. Visited daily, churches become central places, real refuges and service hubs for migrants. There are only a few public places in the city where they can feel safe. However, religion also becomes a symbolic resource and faith usually grows during the ‘transit’ period. Some sociologists and anthropologists have already described contemporary processes of religious fluidity, religious transnationalisation or the adaptation of religious practices in migration (Bava and Capone, 2010; Fourchard, Mary and Otayek; 2005 Levitt, 2007). The particular success of Evangelical Protestantism is the product of a more individualised and less institutionalised religious modernity and relates to the operation of globalisation (Bastian, Champion and Rousselet, 2001). Based on transnational networks, Evangelical Protestantism allows mobile individuals to travel with their ‘sacred umbrellas’ (Smith, 1998, p. 106). In our case, religious creation and belief mobilities appear when people are still static and within a particular urban context. Identity affiliations are transnationalised but the religious identity process takes on meaning in Cairo and is more localised. Religion provides spiritual, psychological and community support when a migrant is uprooted, confronted with a difficult host context (e.g. racism, lack of rights, unemployment, no desire for social integration) and finds himself in need of cultural and identity markers, especially when he becomes part of the religious minority. It is usual for the reassertion of people’s identities to be determined by religion, and Egypt seems to be a particularly conducive place for this process to occur. Churches are where they are united with their community, where they feel safe and ‘at home’. Likewise, churches are where they find work (e.g. cleaning, cooking, playing music).\(^\text{18}\) Thus, everyday life is structured around these places and ‘urban mobilities’ between churches are common: the same person may pray, receive training and work in three different churches. Moreover, some newly arrived African migrants might need time before settling on a church, as their choice will depend on their native tongue, their affinities and any potential conflicts that might arise from their relationship with the priest or pastor (Soares, 2009).
Conversions from Islam to Christianity are very rare. We met only one young man from Mali, a former Talibé who had been sent to Egypt as an Al Azhar\(^\text{19}\) student, who after a few years had become an Evangelical Protestant. Other religious mobilities take place, particularly within the Christian sphere.\(^\text{20}\) Often, Catholic African migrants discover or re-experience Evangelical Protestantism in Cairo. The Maadi Community Church (MCC), which is located in the wealthy suburb of Maadi\(^\text{21}\) and peopled by expatriates, is a famous starting point for religious routes. MCC, as Al Azhar is for Muslim migrants, is quickly discovered by a Christian newcomer. It was founded by the American community just after the Second World War. Because of the growing congregation, a special African service, ‘Africa Live’ (in English) was established in 1996 while in 2000, a special Sudanese service (in Arabic) was instated. Under a big tent, in front of a lively orchestra, a giant screen and a charismatic African or American pastor, Africans gather each week in this atmosphere of fervour. Some Americans, Europeans or a few Egyptians occasionally join them. The adjacent area, Hadayek el Maadi, is much less prosperous and has been inhabited since the 1990s by many sub-Saharan migrants. The gap between the economic and social features of Hadayek and Maadi – the living conditions, urban morphology and rents – is considerable. However, their places of work and worship are only a metro-stop or a 20-minute walk apart. This urban border creates movement. Moreover, this place of religious practice can also become a place of religious vocation. Indeed at MCC, migrants can do a month-long course or even a two-year course to obtain the status of leader or pastor. The idea is that African leaders or pastors administrate their own ‘cell group’ in their residential area\(^\text{22}\) or set up their own church in Cairo. Thus, it is common for Africans to go to two different Evangelical services each week: one at the MCC which is the established church, and another smaller, emotional service which is attended only by Africans, albeit of different nationalities, in more ‘invisible’ places and closer to their living areas. In their ‘black church’, they address daily issues such as health, family, work, visas or police arrests.

I attend Africa Live at the MCC but I have a second church. I like the MCC but … I don’t know. I need both. I know the Cameroonian Pastor well and it is our church, our black church.\(^\text{23}\)

Those who do become leaders or pastors generally had not planned to undertake a religious career before their arrival in Cairo. The religious effervescence and the local range of religious offerings facilitate the fulfilment of these vocations. These ‘neo-pastors’ or ‘migrant-pastors’ have
various backgrounds. Some have experience in religious leadership; others have attended the MCC or another evangelical seminar in Egypt. There are people who have never had any religious training and have proclaimed themselves pastors following a vision, a dream or a miracle. Discovering a religious vocation in Egypt marks a decisive milestone of change in their lives. Some of these migrants are even teaching new African students how to become leaders.

I was a Protestant in Cameroon. But I didn’t accept Jesus. Today, He has saved my life. I’ve found a new way; I learned new things at the MCC. I experienced different kinds of leadership training with teachers from South Korea, Germany, America … I now evolve with my own church […]. Not all of us are meant to be pastors. Most students sit down and wait. They just want to open their church. But they are here to serve! I try to tell them. You have to be a servant. You start by serving and after God decides for you […]. My home is still my home but I love Egypt because there are new things in my life. If I go back to Cameroon, things would never be the same. I have changed.

I became a Protestant at the age of 19 in Congo [RDC]. I followed Bible courses and different training courses to become a leader. Because I worked for Mobutu’s Government, I had to leave. In Cairo, I found a Congolese prayer group, La Révélation, and I joined the established francophone Église Évangélique du Caire [EEC] because many Congolese go there too. I replaced the Swiss Pastor of the EEC during the summer when he was on holidays but as a layman. La Révélation became independent, I left the EEC and I decided in 2005 to follow Bible courses at a Nigerian school. God caught up with me there! Today I am the full-time pastor of La Révélation.

I joined the Evangelical church Christ de la Nouvelle Alliance [CNA] in 2001. I had to go to Lithuania for a professional football competition. We stayed in through Cairo for few days and in the end, Lithuania was cancelled. We were all Christians so, we gathered each week to pray in houses. The group got bigger, we had less and less space and we decided to find a bigger place. I am now the pastor of the CNA branch in Cairo. I didn’t follow any Biblical courses. I think it is perseverance that counts.

Becoming a religious leader or creating one’s own church is also a way to have a particular status, to receive gratitude from one’s community,
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and can be a way to obtain a part, even a small one, of worshippers’ wages. Many discovered a role to play within the migrant community and developed social activities and charities. This new role also takes on a meaning in terms of imagined or real migration. Indeed, through their status of leader, these new preachers are able to announce the Good News in any place, in any country, and this religious duty or mission is sometimes connected to the desire to emigrate abroad. Despite strict migratory policies, Egypt has become a place from which people can escape in spirit. All of them express the desire to continue their religious activity and their ministry after their departure from Egypt.

When I was in Nigeria, I accepted God. God wanted a ministry but football came first ... As a child of God, I had to obey. In my dreams, I heard ‘Salam Alaikoum’. I knew my mission was here even if I didn’t know anybody in Cairo [...]. I went to MCC but I felt that it was not exactly where I had to be. I sat down and waited. I wanted to do more [...]. It’s difficult here, especially for Africans and the ministry helps them to find solutions. We listen to their story and help them to find administrative information, food, housing ... .

I will go back to Congo, it is my country and I think there is a mission over there. But our goal is to be everywhere. The best thing would be to emigrate abroad ... especially for the children. But we need money. I have to communicate the knowledge I now have of the word of God. We have to set up branches somewhere else. But we are locked here. Moving is difficult.

The Evangelical sphere is therefore a key resource for African migrants. They can find, rethink and choose their ‘African’ community, a community of new converts, and can adapt their practices according to their current needs. It also allows them to find a meaning or a new way in their lives and their journeys, by becoming religious leaders or pastors. These new Evangelical churches are numerous in Cairo but our approach must be put into perspective. These churches sometimes actually host only 10 or 20 people, and may divide or quickly disappear. They remain outside the institutional system in Egypt and remain discreet in the urban landscape.

**African churches and Coptic Evangelicals: Recognition ‘from the bottom up’ and discretion in the urban landscape**

The African Evangelical churches in Cairo are mostly ‘migrants’ churches’ (Fancello, 2006). They are becoming more and more independent from
MCC or from established Churches. With the exception of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, a transnational Church (the mother-church of which is in Nigeria), all were created from scratch by refugees and migrants. All of them have been created since the year 2000 and belong to the Pentecostal movement. Theoretically, all Evangelical churches have to be registered with the Evangelical Fellowship of Egypt, a member of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA). However, migrants do not control the local institutional system and for the Egyptian president of the fellowship, this phenomenon is seen as temporary and is minimised.

Seventeen groups cover all the evangelical ideas in Egypt [Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist etc.]. We are not a big community. Why create a new Church? There are already enough groups. Each new foreign Church has to come to me and ask to join one of the groups. We won’t create a new Church only for the Sudanese, given they don’t stay! They can join us until they leave. As for the buildings, they can rent our churches. Sometimes local churches don’t want to but there are only very few problems […]. Through the fellowship, pastors have to get an agreement to obtain a visa to stay in Egypt, buy a car, etc. All new pastors ordained in Egypt also have to come to me! But we don’t have figures about foreigners ordained in Egypt … They are very few …

In fact, contacts with this institution are rare. Religious pluralisation takes place ‘from the bottom up’ and the process of recognition is more important at a transnational level than on a local scale. Indeed, leaders engage in recognition processes, not with the Egyptian Church but, in time, with their established Churches of origin. For example, the self-proclaimed Cameroonian pastor of the Christ de la Nouvelle Alliance (CNA) in Egypt spontaneously gave this name to his Church and only afterwards decided to contact the CNA in Cameroon to negotiate its official status. He also employs an Egyptian Evangelical lawyer so as to be covered in case of problems.

Because of the longer transit periods and the decline of hope and opportunity, the position of the pastors has changed regarding the conversion of new believers. Due to the diversification of African migrants in Cairo and due to the increased religious competition, small ethnonational prayer groups have been opened to other African groups. Compared with other African Evangelical churches in Europe for example, Pentecostal churches in Cairo are not so unyielding. In the early years of La Révélation, only lingala-speaking Congolese from RDC gathered. Today, in many African churches in Cairo, the spirit is more
pan-African and ceremonies are directly translated into French, English or Sudanese Arabic. For national or special celebrations, African pastors often invite pastors from different countries. Both African and Christian identities, which characterise the Church in Cairo, have been reactivated. Although caution is considered necessary and mistrust is present, the pastors’ discourse sometimes includes the Egyptian population. Relationships with Muslims are sometimes seen as easier than with Orthodox Copts and casual contact with the Muslim neighbourhood is not a source of conflict. If their church is close, people walk to it, Bible in hand, on days of worship.

We have a good relation with other African pastors. We are not in a business situation. We are all Christians. Worship is more flexible and moderate because people come from different backgrounds [...]. Egypt is a land of transit but is becoming more and more a place of residence. There are few jobs ... I don’t speak Arabic very well, but in the name of integration I had to learn. Even as a pastor, it’s important, it’s a bridge with Egyptians. Pastoral work is done with indigenous support. We know that the conversion of Muslims will be difficult ... But Egypt will soon be recovered by Christianity. It’s gradually opening to the outside world. Conservative Egypt is losing its influence on the younger generations [...]. More relationships have been established with Egyptian believers that ‘have changed’.

Above all, Africans establish relationships with Coptic Evangelicals while they are searching for places of worship in the city. Indeed, it is forbidden to gather in houses to pray collectively and, because of high demand, finding a place to assemble has become a central problem for these new churches. There are a few large and visibly traditional Coptic Evangelical churches in the city centre, dating from the beginning of the twentieth century. On the other hand, the churches in peripheral areas are more recent and blend into the urban landscape. Initially, the Sudanese pastors directly contacted the Coptic Evangelical pastors in their area of residence or beyond, and individually negotiated a price, a day and a time. Later on, other new African groups, thanks to word of mouth, decided to temporarily occupy these same spaces. Old places and spaces of Evangelical Protestantism are reactivated by migrants. In a quiet area between Hadayek and Maadi, close to a hospital, neighbours complained about the volume of the music and songs during the different African worship services on Saturday, a day of rest in Egypt. The Egyptians responsible for these places – and who sometimes host African
groups for free – have quieter ways of praying and are still under religious pressure. So they try to negotiate with these newcomers who, in spite of this, occasionally attract a few curious Copts when they worship.

We have been hosting a Sudanese group for seven years and a Congolese and another Sudanese group for two years. Our church is in the city centre, it’s easy for everyone to come. The faithful are friendly to each other. We don’t rent, we don’t ask for money. It’s a gift, they can give what they want. I know African groups have problems finding a place ... I love them very much. We don’t offer any other activities to them but if they want celebrate a wedding or anything else, they can ask. We ask the Lord not to make problems ... We don’t ask consent to the President of the Evangelical Fellowship to lend the church. Even if we asked, he would agree.37

They are good people here, they are lovely to us. We love this place and we haven’t had any problems for the past two years. It’s not like in other churches, they don’t say: you pay and after you can pray.38

African pastors have also learned religious life codes and have adapted to the constraint of being discreet. It is a two-way adaptation process where the stronger religion prevails. Some groups gather several times a week and sometimes find solace in the small premises of Sudanese associations in migrant areas, where they can pray informally and quietly. The exercise of faith may also take place more individually, at home or in the street with headphones, thanks to religious sermons or songs downloaded off the internet, while crosses worn around the neck are concealed in public areas. Therefore, African Churches in Cairo testify the ability of the migrants to adapt, to carry out the fluid practices and dynamism of Evangelical Protestantism in the Arab world. However, although relationships are being built with Coptic Evangelicals, this process must be qualified because it is still both institutionally and visibly very discreet. A way of doing this is to observe how Egyptian space is also influencing migrants’ identity process.

Space, places and the sacred: Building a religious identity in Egypt

Religious pluralism has discreetly been created by the arrival of African migrants who have learned to adapt their practices to an Arab and Muslim country. In fact, beyond simple adaptation, Egyptian religious
history and sites have been actively appropriated by migrants and have become – temporarily or permanently – parts of their identity references.39 Through religion, their migratory journey and expectations in Cairo are re-symbolised. First, during worship, frequent references are made to their areas of residence in Cairo (e.g. Hadayek el Maadi, Ain Shams, Arba’a wa nus) or to everyday places where they go. Thus Egypt, which is considered by the Bible to be both a sacred land and a place of persecution, is not seen as the result of an accident or as a synonym for failure anymore. Trans-Saharan migration has a sacred meaning in this Biblical land. Africans proceed to select Biblical verses that give sense to their territorial inscription (Maskens, 2008, p. 59). In addition to expressions like ‘God sent us here’ or ‘It is God’s plan’, references to the refuge found by the Holy Family in Egypt, to the exodus, to Moses or to the Book of Isaiah40 are recurrent. This supports the idea that a prophecy is coming to pass in Egypt and that the country should be considered as a ‘spiritual nation’, a migratory and religious opportunity. Africans are sometimes likened to the people of Israel, held in slavery but soon released. And even though Egypt is initially seen as a place from which they can escape – in reality or spiritually – thanks to their beliefs, it also becomes an important place in their lives, one they would like to come back to.

We don’t consider Egypt on a physical level. It’s necessary to see Egypt on the spiritual level. Egypt is extensive and everything is possible.41

Egypt has a history. Africans abound here and it is no coincidence. There is effervescence now. A force is attracting here, it’s Biblical.42

I always will come back here. I will come back because I started here.43

Moreover, some important places of pilgrimage, in particular Orthodox ones, have been re-appropriated by migrants: places where the Virgin appeared in Cairo (Zeitoun), churches in Old Cairo where the Holy Family came to seek refuge, Mount Sinai (or Mount Moses) in the desert, which is near the Monastery of Saint Catherine that shelters the shrub symbolising the Burning Bush in the Bible. They have not necessarily visited these places but know of them and hope to go there one day. The Orthodox Church of the Holy Virgin is located close to Maadi and on the edge of the Nile. In 1976, an open Bible was discovered floating in the river in front of this church, open at the chapter of Isaiah (19: 25): ‘Blessed be Egypt, my people’. The CNA Church chose this place to baptise new converts: not inside the church but close to the Nile, thanks
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to private access. The discreet ‘re-territorialisation’ process of Christian African communities in Egypt is active, and specific religious places in Cairo and in Egypt are being appropriated.

Religious mobility as a way to negotiate a place in the world and in Egyptian society

Despite strict migratory policies and the continued existence of the borders of nation-states, migrants circulate and participate in cultural globalisation. Egypt has hosted an unprecedented population influx for under 20 years, and these new inhabitants have been discreetly transforming the local religious and cultural landscapes, which in fact have always been on the move. These ‘flexible’ actors have learned how to find resources in Christianity and how to practise their faith in a closed Arab and Muslim country. Transnational, individualised and non-institutionalised Evangelical Protestantism and Pentecostal movements appear to have adapted to contemporary migration. They deal with the majority of Africans’ religious mobilities in Egypt. Religion allows migrants to create new vocations, new destinies, and to integrate – concretely or mentally – into social networks at global, national and local levels while still awaiting opportunities. The identities of migrants become multi-faceted, hybrid and fluid. Even though Africa is still an identity reference for many, and even though pan-African groups are gathering more and more often, Egypt’s territories and history are actively being re-appropriated by migrants. In this case, it is difficult to designate Evangelical Protestantism as a deterritorialised religion. In the city, territorialisation is occurring in places of residence, work or social activity and especially in places of different religious practices. Evangelical migrants seem to be better at mastering the urban dimension and negotiating places of worship thanks to Coptic Evangelicals. Sharing of religious buildings is now a frequent phenomenon and migrants play an important role in the revitalisation of Egyptian churches, even though concepts of diversity and social mix relate more to space than to people. African religious references are being superimposed onto older Christian places and a Christian ‘memory topography’ is being structured in Egypt (Halbwachs, 2008). In spite of this, African Evangelical churches may involve a few hundred people and are divided between the desire to be recognised and the necessity of discretion. Former missionary churches often have difficulty in defining themselves as Evangelisers and thus have to adapt their message in Egypt. Concerning their human rights and their religious identity, recognition comes from the bottom up and
Egyptian institutions still consider their presence as temporary. Despite the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 and the overthrow of the government, access to citizenship, the acceptance of foreigners and religious tolerance do not seem to be priorities in future political plans, and religious pluralism is still a taboo subject. By being a minority within the minority, African migrants are discreetly changing the geography of the Christian world but, in contrast to those in European countries, they do not question the organisation of the Church. Their latitude, in social, economic or political terms, is and will probably continue to be extremely limited in Egypt. Thus, mobilising religious resources in their material or spiritual forms can be a local answer for excluded migrants who are confronted with the lack of any national or international measures being taken to face increasing globalised damage.

Notes

1. In our case, we prefer to use terms such as ‘religious mobilities’ or ‘religious strategies’ rather than ‘conversions’. Indeed, conversions between Islam and Christianity are occasional. Religious mobilities within the Christian sphere predominate and superimpositions and fluidity of religious identities are regular.

2. This work is based on 10 months’ observation in Cairo (migrants’ areas, places of worship) between October 2009 and June 2011, and interviews with African migrants, religious leaders, NGO and UNHCR officials, within the context of my PhD (Anthropology and Geography) and the research programme MIGRELI (ANR-09-JCJC-0126-01): ‘Instances religieuses et d’origines confessionnelles sur les routes de la migration africaine’ coordinated by Sophie BAVA (IRD/LPED) (2009–12).

3. Coptics represent the biggest Christian community in the Arab world. They were the occupants of Egypt before the Muslim conquest of the seventh century.

4. Each Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox Coptic Church has famous seminaries in Egypt.

5. The decennial census of 2006 carried out by the Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics (CAPMAS), which mentions more than 72 million inhabitants, no longer includes religious criteria. Only estimates (ranging from 5 to 10 million) have been available since.


7. In the United Nations’ language, ‘resettlement’ means the transfer of refugees who have been given temporary protection in a first country of asylum to another safe country where they can start a new life and find permanent protection. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the sole interlocutor of forced migrants in Egypt.

9. This agreement was signed between Hosni Mubarak and Omar El-Beshir. It allows citizens of Egypt and Sudan to freely move across the border separating both states, and the right to reside, work and own property in either country without a permit. In reality, it has not been fully applied.

10. This is especially true since South Sudan became independent (9 July 2011).

11. The UNHCR alone legislates about asylum seekers. Although Egypt is a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees, to the 1967 Protocol and to the 1969 Addis-Abeba Convention on African refugees, the government does not apply its duty to protect refugees in practice. It made reservations that limited access to rationing, primary education, public relief and assistance and labour rights and social security. The Egyptian government considers their presence as temporary.

12. From migrants’ point of view, if they do not feel comfortable with Egyptian people and if relations are tense between the two groups, they have noted and they respect the strong faith of Egyptian Muslims.

13. Anglican (All Saints), Lutheran (St Andrew’s) or Combonian Church (Sacred Heart) for example. Most of them date from the nineteenth century.

14. The mobilisation of Islamic associations in Egypt is also considered as an answer to the Coptic associative mobilisation.


16. Refugee Ministry Director, St Andrew’s Church, Cairo.

17. Some African priests or pastors arrived as refugees, but others may have been sent specially to serve African communities exiled in Egypt (Bava and Picard, 2010).

18. African women get jobs more easily, quite often as domestic workers in rich Egyptian or expatriate families.

19. This is the biggest Islamic university in Egypt. Many sub-Saharan migrants (e.g. from Senegal, Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso) receive scholarships to study at this renowned university.

20. In poor peripheral areas, like Arba’a wa Nus, some Catholic South Sudanese may be tempted to convert because the local Orthodox Church offers more aid and more food to Orthodox people (Le Houérou, 2007). But these are not voluntary conversions.

21. Located in the southern suburb of Cairo.

22. African migrants do not all live in Hadayek el Maadi. Many others areas, more or less peripheral, host both Egyptian popular categories (some from rural exodus) and African migrants: e.g. Sakakini, Ain Shams, Ard el Liwa, Arba’a wa Nus, Hay el Asher, New Maadi.


24. The Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo (ETSC) hosts Egyptians, Arabs from foreign countries and a few Sudanese nationals, but other, less established seminaries belonging both to Egyptian and Western networks provide religious training for African migrants.

25. Pastor S. from Cameroon arrived in 1996.


27. Pastor H. from Cameroon arrived in 2006.

28. We met a Sudanese pastor from MCC who recently left Cairo to complete his training in Romania through the Assemblies of God. He is now married.
to a Romanian woman. Also, many African migrants in Cairo have tried to
reach Israel in recent years, another Biblical land where social discrimination
and religious and inter-community tensions are less important. See Anteby-
Yemini (2008).

31. Interview with Safwat Al-Bayadi, President of the Evangelical Fellowship of
Egypt.
32. Although African Churches are open to an international crowd, various
branches of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (Nigeria) in Cairo host only
Nigerians, and Sudanese churches also tend to host only Sudanese people.
Smaller African groups are strategically more open.
33. Many African pastors refer to a Canadian pastor of MCC who died in 2006 in
mysterious circumstances (according to them) and to a Nigerian pastor, mar-
rried to a German woman, who temporarily left Egypt and was not allowed
by Egyptian institutions to come back. Fear is part of the religious vocation
in Egypt but migrants learn to live with it.
34. We met only one Eritrean and one Sudanese pastor who apparently travelled
around Alexandria and in Upper Egyptian villages to celebrate and worship
with Egyptian people. Outside Cairo, there seems to be a more favourable
environment in which to develop small evangelisation activities, but not
all migrants can move easily around the country, especially people without
legal documents.
35. Pastor J. from RDC arrived in 2002.
36. In the same church and on the same day, a Nigerian, a Cameroonian, a
Congolese and a Korean service may occur successively. Each assembly has
its own musical instruments, Bibles, accessories and decorative elements.
People meet and greet one another but in-depth exchanges are still limited
among the faithful.
37. Evangelical pastor responsible for a city-centre Baptist church.
38. A faithful Sudanese woman about the Coptic Evangelical responsible and the
Baptist church where she prays.
39. Egyptian influences are even sometimes engraved on the body, as some
Orthodox Ethiopians get a cross tattooed on their wrist in Egypt, as the
Copts do from a young age.
40. The Book of Isaiah (Old Testament) focuses partly on the release of the
people of Israel from Egypt and on the future conversion of the country.
41. C. arrived from RDC in 2005.
42. Pastor H. arrived from Cameroon in 2006.
44. Several refugees and migrants try to establish small social centres, open to all
Africans, Muslims and Christians. But displaying its Christian identity is also
a way to obtain financial support from international institutions or Western
NGOs.

Bibliography

Anteby-Yemini, L. (2008), 'Migrations africaines et nouveaux enjeux de la fron-
tière israëlo-égyptienne', Cultures et Conflits, Vol. 72, pp. 76–99.
A few years ago I attended a circumcision ceremony for the eight-day-old son of a man I had first met when he himself was only a boy of seven, languishing at a transit camp in Addis Ababa. Tadesse’s family had been designated ‘Feres Mura’, or descendants of Ethiopian Jewish converts to Christianity. As such, they were excluded from the dramatic airlift that brought more than 14,000 people to Israel in the course of just two days during the chaos that accompanied the collapse of Ethiopia’s Dergue Regime in 1991 (cf. Bard 2002; Seeman 2009). When permission for Tadesse’s immediate family finally came to immigrate in 1995, it was on humanitarian grounds of ‘family reunification’, though that was later coupled with a (formally) optional government-sponsored ‘Return to Judaism’ program for descendants of converts who sought recognition as Jews in Israel.

Feres Mura immigration provoked a considerable and still ongoing controversy in Israel concerning the nature of modern Jewishness and the potential limits of costly social, political and economic forms of solidarity with those whose Jewishness had been called into question. Were the descendants of apostates still Jews and how should the state of Israel relate to them? Was their professed ‘penitence’ necessary or efficacious and how could it be measured in terms meaningful to the state bureaucracy? The Return to Judaism program, which I have described at length elsewhere (Seeman 2003; 2009), was an imperfect and frequently contested bureaucratic mechanism for the exorcism of this complex religious past. While most of its graduates went on to forge lives somewhere along the familiar Israeli Jewish spectrum (from secular to traditional to Orthodox), a few, like Tadesse, were different. That is because more than a decade after his family completed the Return to Judaism program, Tadesse came to identify with a unique amalgam of
Ethiopian Pentecostalism and Messianic Judaism that challenges every one of Israel’s foundational narratives, secular as well as religious.

The dilemmas for Israel raised by the existence of people like Tadesse can certainly be compared with those faced by other Mediterranean states whose established religious traditions face increased competition today from global Christianity or Islam, but it is also important to highlight some of the distinctive features of the Israeli case. The state of Israel was formally established as a homeland for the Jewish people on a part of Mandatory Palestine in 1948. Its founding ethos and laws included the right to free exercise of religion for individuals along with a privileged place for official Judaism in public culture and state institutions. Many of Israel’s most bitter and protracted internal struggles involve conflict precisely over the limits of religion in public life and the question of who gets to define public Judaism. While similar conflicts occur elsewhere, they resonate particularly strongly here because of unsettled anxiety among modern Jews about the differently weighted (and almost always contested) constituents of Jewishness that are only sharpened by different histories of acculturation, persecution and genocide. Jews’ perceptions of themselves as members of a corporate group may be older and more continuous than those of many communities whose claims to ‘peoplehood’ have been sanctified (and armed) by the ideology of modern nation-states, yet the content and meaning of that corporativity have also been fraught with rifts and schisms whose footprints are visible in the Feres Mura controversy.

Modern sociological categories like religion and ethnicity have never applied seamlessly to Jewish historical experience even when particular Jewish communities did try to elevate them into organising principles. In the nineteenth century, for example, many Western European Jews seeking emancipation adopted a vision of Judaism as a community of religious ideas lacking the complications of peoplehood or ethnicity that were thought to be incompatible with German or French nationalism. An idealist of the early Reform Movement, Abraham Geiger argued that Jews had once borne the qualities of a distinctive people in ancient times (land, language and race) but were now best understood as adherents of ‘ethical monotheism’, a religious idea shorn of any separatist implications (Geiger 1996). Some early Zionists, by contrast, offered a vision of Jewish nationalism or peoplehood unencumbered by religion. Yet 150 years later it is hard to escape the conclusion that today’s Reform Jews are more highly motivated by a diffuse sense of peoplehood than they are by Geiger’s idealist abstractions, just as no honest observer would suggest that religion has grown inconsequential to the Jewish
state. This should be measured not just by the numbers of Israelis who identify today as ‘religious’ but even more by the way in which traditional concepts and understandings continue to inflect even avowedly secular discourses like those surrounding the nature and prerequisites of citizenship.

I am not simply arguing that religion and ethnicity endlessly condition one another the way they do in other settings but that they are so deeply enmeshed here that they require different analytic models altogether.

The recalcitrance of Jewish historical experience to post-reformation sociological categories (cf. Seeman 2004) is one of the reasons that I prefer ‘kinship’ for analytic purposes over more experience-distant concepts like ethnicity. This is not only because kinship resonates with the traditional and still vibrant Jewish language of tribe or extended family – as well as the more religiously inflected ‘covenant’ or brit – but also because it is broad and flexible enough to encompass multiple phenomenologies of belonging that include but may not be limited to genealogical continuity, shared ritual commitment and the sense of shared history or destiny that modern Jews frequently invoke. There is, moreover, no simple calculus that determines which of these points of connection will prove sufficient to ground a claim of shared kinship in any given context: kinship in the sense I am using it here is not a fixed status like citizenship but a negotiated quality of interactions over time. It links the local moral world (Kleinman and Kleinman 1991) of micro-relations within a family or neighbourhood to the macro-world of state politics and national identities that are inevitably built upon them.

A circumcision like the one I attended in Jerusalem can provide an important window onto these kinds of relationships. Like many Ethiopian Israelis of his generation, Tadesse was culturally fluent, newly affluent and (despite frustrations) deeply self-confident, even brash in claiming his place as an Israeli. He hired a trendy catering hall for the event as well as an Ultra-Orthodox mohel (circumcision expert) who performed his task with the effortless good humour of someone who probably performs dozens of circumcisions each week for families he thinks of as secular or only moderately pious. Most Ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups have never recognised the Jewish legitimacy of any of the Ethiopian immigrants to Israel, but that did not seem to bother the jovial mohel who recited the blessings and conducted the minor surgery as he would have done at any other circumcision. It is possible that he checked with the family to ascertain they had been through the Return to Judaism program or some other conversionary ritual but more likely that he hedged his bets, performing the circumcision in his own
mind *I'shem gerut*, for the purpose of converting a minor whose parents already considered him Jewish. Circumcision is framed in Jewish contexts as the entrance of a child into the ‘covenant of Abraham’, which implies a moral burden but is also fundamentally a transaction of kinship: not the conferral of Jewishness exactly (except in cases of conversion), but certainly the articulation of kinship already implicit through the fact of birth to a Jewish mother. Tadesse, believer in the Holy Spirit though he might be, chose to have his son inducted the same way other Israeli Jews are inducted into that fellowship, and only the choice of a name with some ambiguous New Testament resonances may have given that fact away to a few of the guests.

Circumcising one’s son is a paradigmatic performance of Jewish social connectivity, but it was striking to me how much of Tadesse’s own immediate family – siblings and cousins – were conspicuous by their absence. I knew he had been estranged from many of them by his religious choices, though it might be more accurate to say that his estrangement and his religious choices were intimately connected in ways that even he could not fully articulate. One group of friends sitting at a table together were clearly his ‘family in Christ’, close friends who are self-consciously referred to as brother and sister and sometimes even mother or father because of their spiritual relationships. For me, as an old family friend, and for Tadesse too, I think, the juxtaposition of an intense but easy intimacy with these ‘brothers’ and the absence of many of his birth kin made this circumcision terribly poignant. Though most other Jews would disagree, Tadesse does not think he has left Judaism so much as realised that his Judaism is now mediated by Christ.

**Living in the spirit**

In historical terms, the Beta Israel (often previously known as ‘Falasha’) were an Agau-speaking group concentrated in the highland Ethiopian provinces of Gondar and Tigray. While their origins are still debated by scholars, it is generally agreed that the form of Judaism they practice took definitive form around the fourteenth century (Kaplan 1992; Quirin 1992), and that many of its key symbols can be thought of as structural oppositions to those of the Orthodox Church (Abbink 1990; Salamon 1993). Beta Israel in some regions resisted integration by Ethiopia’s growing ‘Solomonic’ Christian state until their independence was finally broken by force of arms in the fifteenth century. That is when the Emperor Yeshaq is said to have declared, ‘May he who is baptized in the Christian religion inherit the land of his fathers, otherwise
let him be uprooted from his land and be a stranger (falasi)’ (Kaplan 1992, p. 58). While local conditions varied, the Beta Israel population as a whole was ultimately transformed into a landless occupational caste (Quirin 1992) whose survival depended primarily on weaving, sharecropping and metalwork – the latter profession so strongly associated in Ethiopia with buda or evil eye accusations that the term buda often came to be synonymous with Beta Israel. Beta Israel social and economic dependence on Christian landholders deepened during an extended period of social unrest in the nineteenth century, punctuated by the rise to power of the emperor Tewodoros at around the same time Western Protestant missionaries began to take a sustained interest in both Orthodox Christian and Beta Israel life. Many of these missionaries were interested at first in the ‘regeneration’ of the Eastern Churches and in missions to the Jews throughout Europe and the Levant (Seeman 2000). Perhaps paradoxically however, one of their most lasting influences was to promote stronger contacts and ties of dependence between Beta Israel and Western Jews.

One of the reasons that the Protestant mission to the Beta Israel was so fateful was that unlike earlier Catholic or indeed Orthodox evangelisation efforts, members of groups like the ‘London Society for the Promotion of Christianity amongst the Jews’ sought, for the first time, to drive a hard wedge between religious and ethnic (they would have said ‘racial’) Jewish identities. They were the first of the Christian missionary groups on the ground in Ethiopia to argue for the theological significance of continuing Jewish identification among ‘Hebrew Christians’, who were expected to evangelise their unconverted brethren from a position of kinship solidarity (Seeman 2000; 2009). Jewish communities in Ethiopia and elsewhere resisted this bifurcation, which they tended (and still tend today) to understand as an aggressive rather than generous stance on the part of a hostile dominant group.

Missionaries never enjoyed more than modest success in numerical terms but some people who came under their influence ultimately converted under the auspices of the Orthodox Church. Others became ‘native agents’ who continued to destabilise the traditional Beta Israel communal structure (which had been based on the leadership of priests and monks) even long after foreign missionaries left the scene. Michael Quirin has argued that missionary activity contributed to a ‘splintering’ of the Beta Israel by the end of the nineteenth century that divided Beta Israel traditionalists from those who had either baptised or sought allies among non-Ethiopian Jews. Yet by the middle of the twentieth century, I think it is fair to say that all of those who had not become Christians
had allied themselves with Western Jews to one degree or another. Anthropologists who visited Ethiopia during the 1960s and 1970s reported that Beta Israel they met had begun to adopt liturgical Hebrew and other symbols of contemporary Rabbinic Judaism, and that their traditional messianic hopes for a return to Jerusalem were increasingly focused on the modern state of Israel. While there is no way to know how many Beta Israel ultimately assimilated into Christian communities, witnesses have described ‘Beta Israel conversos’ (Messing 1982) who lived outwardly as Christians while maintaining significant Beta Israel practice and identity. Missionary groups from the 1950s wrote frankly about their concern that some Beta Israel converts might well revert to their ancestral religion (Trevisan-Semi 2002).

It should not therefore have been surprising that some descendants of Beta Israel converts sought to emigrate during the 1980s and 1990s along with their unconverted kin. In some cases, these were families that had maintained contact with their Beta Israel kin and never stopped identifying as Beta Israel to at least some degree, which might even have included considerable endogamy. In other cases, the emigration of kin awakened dormant kinship sentiments, increased the hostility of neighbouring peasants who coveted their land, or simply suggested a new mode of escape from Ethiopia’s chronic poverty and desperation. Families like Tadesse’s were in the first category, and were also among the first of the Feres Mura to assert their claim to Jewishness before 1991. From their point of view, the refusal of Israeli agents to allow them to board planes for Tel-Aviv in the chaotic hours before Tigrayan rebels captured Addis Ababa was a devastating surprise; from their point of view, they had already taken the radical step of leaving behind everything they knew in order to throw in their lots with emigrating Jews. They almost without exception joined the Return to Judaism program that was first started in Ethiopia and was later completed in Israel. Given what they felt they had suffered to gain recognition as Jews, Tadesse’s later Pentecostalism shook some of his relatives to the core.

Pentecostalism was actively suppressed in Ethiopia under the Dergue, but has since emerged as an important competitor of the Orthodox Church. Like Pentecostalism elsewhere in Africa, it is associated broadly with modernising trends, growing literacy and individual upward mobility. Ethiopian and Eritrean Pentecostals routinely eschew alcohol consumption and all of the social enmeshments with which such drinking is associated: in Jimma, Orthodox Christians and Muslims assume the social obligation to attend one another’s weddings and funerals, yet Pentecostals tend to stand apart (Mains 2004). Converts to
Pentecostalism are often, but not exclusively, drawn from the ranks of individuals portrayed as ‘nominally Christian’ because they were evangelised previously by other Protestant groups; conversion narratives typically focus on sources of anomie like chronic illness, sexual depravity or substance addiction, all of which are healed by ‘giving oneself over into the hand of God’ (cf. Seeman 2009). This entails thoroughgoing reevaluation of deeply rooted local practice. Possession by the zar, which is typically treated as a chronic malady subject to ritual management, is elevated by Pentecostals into a form of acute demonic agency that requires excision through charismatic healing. Beta Israel Pentecostals I have encountered also practice what may be a distinctive form of coffee (buna) avoidance that is related to the attenuation of kinship and other ties that are often mediated through coffee but that Pentecostals experience as openings to the demonic (Seeman forthcoming).

Despite their recognizably Pentecostal practice and theology, Beta Israel Pentecostals I have spoken with in Israel heatedly reject the characterisation of themselves as Christians. ‘Christianity is idolatry and the worship of Mary and the saints’, one believer told me, in what was clearly his view of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The kind of rabbinic Judaism practiced in Israel may be depraved and immoral from his point of view (it tolerates alcohol consumption and, he believes, sexual promiscuity), but it is not idolatrous. Beta Israel Pentecostals tend to represent themselves simply as ‘believers’ or even ‘believing Jews’. An Ethiopian Pentecostal preacher from North America (not Beta Israel) who visited Israel during my fieldwork in the middle 1990s told me that he had never before encountered Pentecostals who identified themselves as Jews, and that this experience predisposed him to more active collaboration with North American Jews for Jesus activists. It might make strategic sense for a small religious minority like Beta Israel Pentecostals to identify with the majority religious community, but it would be a mistake to ignore the powerful emotive and theological significance of Jewishness to Beta Israel Pentecostals.

One of the things that has changed over the past decade-and-a-half since my first ethnographic meetings with Pentecostals in Israel has been the growing integration of Ethiopian believers into religious networks that include or may even be dominated by non-Ethiopian Pentecostal and messianic Jewish believers. Tadesse still listens to Amharic gospel music (much of it recorded in the United States), and some of his closest friends are fellow Ethiopian believers. But he prays with a mostly white, Hebrew-speaking group that includes some of his middle-class Israeli neighbours, most of whom are Jews by birth, though a few Arabs
have also joined the group: ‘Not Muslims who read the Koran’, he hastens to add by way of explanation, ‘but believers, who read the Bible’. Bible study, both solitary and communal, is an important dimension of Pentecostal life, and also a touchstone of authenticity. It may be our joint predilection to dwell over religious texts that allows us to continue to find common ground for conversation, despite the fact that I do not share his religious convictions. Tadesse frequently brings our conversations around to discussion of a Biblical text: he likes to cite verses from books like Job, Daniel and the Gospels rather than the Pentateuch or early prophets emphasised by most contemporary Jews. When I press him to explain how a person committed as he is to Biblical authority deals with those verses that enjoin Sabbath observance or Jewish dietary laws, he first responds by citing the New Testament dictum that ‘the Sabbath is given to man, not man to the Sabbath’. He avoids alcohol and coffee, but when I ask him whether these are prohibited to him as a believer he pushes back against the unintended rabbinic inflection of my language. ‘Look’, he says, ‘nothing is “prohibited”, but it is always a question of what it means. Like, I won’t drive on Shabbat to go shopping or to work or something, but I drive to meet my friends to pray to God and be with them. Do you think God wants me to sit alone in my house? We are just like those Jews you have in America, what are they called? The ones who drive to synagogue on Shabbat – you know, reformim’ (Reform Jews).

This is an important clue both to Tadesse’s self-understanding and to why people like him pose such a significant challenge to practically all Jewish communal narratives. His scriptural touchstones are heavily New Testament-oriented and focused, like those of charismatic and Evangelical Christians elsewhere, on the life of Christ. He shares the common Pentecostal emphasis on gifts of the spirit and the accessibility of the Holy Spirit (for which he uses the Hebrew term ruah ha-kodesh). Yet when he seeks an analogy for his community’s relationship to Jewish law and traditional practice, it is American Reform Judaism (or his distant understanding of Reform Judaism) to which he turns. At every turn, Tadesse and other Beta Israel Pentecostals emphasise that they are Jewish believers rather than Christians, by which they mean not just ‘ethnic’ Jews but people who are striving to embody the authentic faith of the Hebrew Bible. Yet this is a claim that is structurally impossible for any existing Jewish community to credit as anything but weirdly paradoxical, misinformed or even predatory when it includes sharing Gospel with other Jews.

Reform Jews suffer important disadvantages in Israel, where the Orthodox rabbinate enjoys official standing and Orthodox Judaism is
still the Judaism to which many non-Orthodox Israelis turn when they seek religion. Yet all of this notwithstanding, there is broad consensus in Israel today, reflected even in many laws such as the one recognising non-Orthodox conversions performed in the diaspora, that Reform Jews are undoubtedly members of the Jewish people, while Pentecostals and messianic believers are simply Christians or – worse in local terms – ‘missionaries’. No North American Jewish communal institution today officially recognises or services messianic churches or synagogues as part of its pluralistic understanding of contemporary Judaism, no matter how broadly the tent may otherwise be spread; a recent population survey of New York area Jews explicitly excluded ‘Jews for Jesus’ and other messianic groups from consideration, on the grounds that they do not possess a ‘compelling claim’ to be treated as Jews. This sets the stage for a contentious and potentially violent collision of self-perceptions where Pentecostal or messianic Jews in Israel are concerned.

**Contesting the nation**

The importance of global, and especially North American, networks to contemporary Ethiopian Jewish religious life cannot be overestimated. North American Jewish organisations have championed Ethiopian immigration to Israel since at least the 1970s and have continued to push the government of Israel hard on matters of immigration and immigrant absorption. A relatively small organisation, the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jews (NACOEJ) played a disproportionate role in the immigration of Feres Mura for example, by providing emergency subsistence in Addis Ababa (later Gondar) and by helping to fund the Return to Judaism program that began in Ethiopia and later moved to Israel. North American groups also continue to provide funds for educational assistance and Ethiopian Jewish cultural projects. This is not, however, limited just to Jewish organisations. From my home in Atlanta, I was able to watch an hour-long infomercial on cable television for the mission to Ethiopia by an evangelical group called Jewish Voice International (JVI), which provides medical care and proselytises people waiting for Israeli immigrant visas at the transit camp in Gondar. JVI adopted many of the rhetorical techniques and promotional strategies previously developed by American Jewish groups like NACOEJ to raise support for Beta Israel immigration efforts, including the sale of nearly identical Ethiopian Jewish handicrafts. Like the missionaries of the London Jewish Society before them, Jewish Voice International finds theological purpose in evangelising Jews,
including those whose connection with other Jews is often considered tenuous at best.

Tadesse was not among those proselytised while still in Addis Ababa: his maternal great grandfather had converted to Orthodox Christianity – something I was able to corroborate through non-convert relatives in Israel – and his mother's father had been the one to acknowledge the 'mistake' (as his mother calls it) and embark upon the Return to Judaism program promoted by Israel. Among his own religious inspirations, Tadesse cites the American Pentecostal evangelist Morris Cerullo, who was born to a Jewish mother and runs a significant ministry today in Israel. Cerullo was raised till the age of 13 in a Jewish orphanage in New York, where he tells followers he 'learned the traditions of my people' and celebrated a Bar-Mitzvah (Cerullo 2010). The orphanage hired a Christian nurse, however, who introduced him to Christian Bible study. The power of the text itself, suffused with sacred energy, was definitive: 'I was reading about Abraham, but it was a different Abraham, reading about Moses, but it was a different Moses'. At the age of 15, Cerullo was transported into heaven where he saw 'millions of multi-national people', and began his mission to the Gentiles. Then, in 1967 (just six months before the Middle East War) Cerullo says he had another vision while travelling in Argentina that revealed he must undertake a new mission to the Jews. A promotional podcast published by his ministry claims that he mailed the Gospel to 400,000 Israeli homes in 1968 (when '150 Jews received Jesus as the Messiah') and increased his outreach exponentially after that. In 1990, while Beta Israel like Tadesse were gathering for emigration in Addis Ababa, he inaugurated the International School of Ministry in Israel, and in 1994 (around the time Tadesse immigrated) he opened his 'Messianic headquarters' in Jerusalem. Tadesse attended Cerullo's 2000 Jerusalem conference which was boasted of as the largest gathering ever of 'Jewish and Arab believers', followed by a similar mass meeting in Amman, Jordan.

Morris Cerullo’s ministry and Jewish Voice International are only two of many groups devoted to evangelising Jews including Ethiopians, but I mention them here because of their specific intersection with the story of Beta Israel Pentecostals. There is no reliable census of Jewish Pentecostal or Messianic believers in Israel today, but both sympathetic and unsympathetic observers have claimed that their number is growing. Cerullo takes credit for opposing a 1996 Israeli law against evangelism that was later struck down by the Israeli courts, but other forms of opposition to missionary activity have been strengthened. In 2006, an unprecedented gathering of Ethiopian Israeli leaders from all
sectors – traditional priests as well as Israeli-trained Ethiopian rabbis and secular communal leaders – came together to decry the perceived threat posed by missionaries to their community. They called upon government to take various measures such as denying burial to apostates in Jewish cemeteries, and some participants predicted violence if no action were taken (Seeman 2009, p. 203). In 2010, similarly, I attended a Jerusalem conference devoted to ‘The Missionary Enemy’, in which rabbis who were mostly identified with right-wing nationalist organisations described continuous and substantive efforts by individuals with conversionary agendas to infiltrate their communities and even religious institutions by posing as Jewish religious teachers or by offering funding to which strings were implicitly attached. The anti-missionary group Yad La-banim claims that there are more than 150 messianic centres spread across Israel today. While most opposition to their activity has been rhetorical and bureaucratic (threats of deportation against immigrants who may have misled authorities in their immigration documents, for example) there have also been a few violent attacks against Messianic Jews who live or work near Ultra-Orthodox neighbourhoods. None of these has so far targeted Ethiopian Israeli believers, but the potential for violence frequently hovers around discussions of this topic.

Targeted conversion touches an exceedingly deep nerve among many modern Jews, and is particularly sensitive for historical reasons among Beta Israel. My friend Yossi immigrated in 1985 from a village near Gondar via the Sudanese refugee camp at Gedaref. On the wall of his Galilee home is an aged black-and-white photograph of six stern and poorly shaven men clutching ancient rifles in front of a traditional mud and straw hut. Yossi identifies the six men as his father and five elder brothers, the eldest of whom already had a white beard when the picture was taken, sometime during the late 1950s. It was this eldest brother, according to Yossi, who first established the village as a Beta Israel settlement. Local Christians who wanted the land tried to evict them, but they defended their claim by force. Western missionaries also later came to the village, but the brothers shot at them so they left and it is still a matter of some family pride that no one from that village was ever converted.

The northern Israeli town where I met Yossi has experienced something of a religious revival since the late 1980s when I first visited. Back then, the whole Ethiopian community was absorbed in a bitter cultural and political struggle against the Israeli chief rabbinate, which had been demanding that immigrants from Ethiopia undergo an expedited conversion process to erase any doubts about their Jewishness. Under
these circumstances, immigrants mostly refused any involvement with the religious establishment, to the extent of conducting their own marriages outside of recognised channels and sometimes forbidding their children to go on school fieldtrips lest they be secretly proselytised or immersed for conversion outside their parents’ control. Local state-run religious schools, for their part, balked at absorbing such a high percentage of children from illiterate backgrounds, while some of the local synagogues (most of which were dominated by earlier immigrants from North Africa) treated Ethiopians with what I would characterise as polite disdain (Seeman 1989). So it is more than a little striking that today there are not one but two synagogues in the neighbourhood that cater to the Ethiopian community as well as an active Sabbath club for observant Ethiopian youth, some of whom carry books by the East European mystic Nachman of Breslov or the contemporary Sefardic icon R. Ovadia Yosef.

When I asked local teenagers whether they have any friends who have come under the influence of the Christian mission that their elders seem to worry about they just smiled and said, ‘No, we chase them if they come around here!’ Their opposition is not framed in theological terms but as simple communal self-defence. In the Ethiopian highlands of the nineteenth century, missionaries and their native agents were sometimes cursed by unconverted Beta Israel as witches (Seeman 2009, pp. 67–8). These accounts seem to offer a stark binary between Beta Israel Jews and Christians but there are also at least two factors complicating any such assessment. The first, which I treated in my ethnography, is the relative tolerance I have found for individual converts who are known to their kin or neighbours, as opposed to the anonymous category of ‘missionaries’ framed as dangerous outsiders. Possibly more subtle, however, is the way in which the complexity of Israel’s dynamic religious field also frustrates simple binaries. When I met Yossi for lunch to talk about some of these matters, he told me how much he tries to dispute with Beta Israel converts whom he meets from time to time in the course of his work. His depictions of these encounters were mostly humorous rather than deadly serious. But on leaving the restaurant, Yossi immediately confronted not a Pentecostal but a Lubavitcher Hasid who had set up a table just a few hundred yards away on a public street, encouraging passersby to stop and don phylacteries (tefillin) or give charity. Lubavitch, an Ultra-Orthodox group that focuses on outreach to unaffiliated Jews, is notorious among Ethiopian Israelis for its refusal to recognise Beta Israel Jewishness without benefit of conversion, and also (especially in Israel) for their frequent reference to their late Rebbe
as the promised Messiah. Yossi and some other Ethiopians I have known (Seeman 1999; 2009, p. 168) took special umbrage that a group whose messianism they find redolent with Christianity should dare to question their own lineage. Yossi challenged the young emissary to justify Lubavitch positions and pressed him on his answers. While mainstream Jewish groups in Israel reject the idea that Messianic Judaism or Pentecostalism can in any way be considered part of the Jewish mosaic, in other words, this does not mean that they all recognise or cooperate easily with one another. Nor does it mean that this Jewish/Christian binary dominates everyday consciousness and social life. Israel's Jewish population is fantastically diverse and often fractious on ethnic, religious and ideological grounds, and while the rejection of Christian belief unites nearly everyone, the texture of social practice cannot be reduced to any simple binary.

Believers and the state

In 1992, when Israel was still wrestling with the dilemma of Feres Mura immigration, the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption sponsored a series of hearings to debate the issue, calling for testimony from academic and legal experts, noted rabbis and members of the Ethiopian Israeli community. That testimony, though inconclusive, revealed some of the major tropes through which religious change and conversion have been framed in this context. One approach that seems to have held a certain appeal for policymakers was to divorce this issue from any specifically Jewish or Israeli context by portraying the descendants of Beta Israel converts simply as economic refugees or exemplars of the 'starving south' seeking sanctuary in more prosperous countries (Seeman 2009, pp. 89–93). Though economically reductive, there is no question that this account tells part of a complicated story in which poverty played an important role. Other tropes, built on themes of heroic resistance or apostasy and assimilation, also encompass valid aspects of this story, though they may equally elide the experience of immigrants for whom kinship bonds, shifting religious commitments and confrontation with brutal material necessity have been much more difficult to disentangle. Facile attempts by political actors or scholarly observers to neatly distinguish between religious practice, ties of kinship and material want fail not just because they produce an analytic that is ill suited to Jewish historical experience, as I have argued, but also because they do so little justice to the irreducible contingencies of life in the here and now for people like Tadesse or Yossi. Neither of these men can think about
religion, ethnicity or national identity in a wholly compartmentalised way because each is highly contingent upon the others in ways that render such distinctions artificial.

Israel’s ultimate Feres Mura immigration policy has been characterised by fits and starts. Immigrants who were admitted to the country under family reunification statutes were then encouraged to undergo a Return to Judaism program that would allow them to apply for their own relatives to come to Israel in turn. Yet this compromise itself was repeatedly contested both by purists among the rabbis as well as many secularists who resented rabbinic control over the conferral of new civil statuses tied to ritual practice. This tension between ‘Jewish solidarity’ and secular humanitarian framing of Feres Mura immigration maps, moreover, onto struggles between differently positioned stakeholders in Israel’s messy parliamentary system, in which no single policy on a complex matter such as this can be easily maintained for long. Yet by laying bare some of the deep cultural anxieties aroused by the return to Judaism of people considered to be the descendants of apostates, this immigration dilemma also casts light on the mirror image case of Israeli Jews (including Ethiopians) who embrace Christianity.

Like Feres Mura, Beta Israel Pentecostals and other Jewish Christians tend to be tolerated but mistrusted in fundamental ways that may engender bureaucratic and social exclusion. Rather than seeking public recognition as a separate religious community like the established Christian Churches, or trying to make common cause with secularist groups promoting the separation of synagogue and state, believers have held to a frame of Biblical promise in which the designation ‘Israel’ holds significant theological content. Yet they do not seem troubled by the fact that, in this frame, most Israeli Jews cannot help but see them as freakish boundary crossers, apostates or traitors. Their insistence that they are Jews adhering to the true Biblical faith (what an earlier generation of missionaries called ‘Hebrew Christians’) has made it harder rather than easier for them to make an explicit claim for their place in Israeli society, despite the fact that, as individuals, many participate naturally in Israeli Jewish social life and interact with their neighbours on that basis.

A more complete account of this phenomenon, which will necessarily transcend the scope of this short chapter, will almost certainly require a shift in scholarly focus from questions of identity and religious belief that mimic state bureaucratic taxonomies to more grounded explorations of the ways in which religious life helps to shape moral and political agency in concrete settings. It is telling, for example, that Pentecostals in the Horn of Africa have been noteworthy for their
relative aloofness not just from alcohol and spirit possession but also from civil religion (which is still strongly associated with Orthodox Christianity) as well as military service and patriotic performances of other kinds: they are sometimes criticised by their neighbours precisely for the attenuation of perceived Ethiopian-ness (Kileysus 2006; Mains 2004) that their religious ethos seems to demand. But is this true in the same way of Ethiopian Jewish Pentecostals living in Israel? Coffee and alcohol avoidance and association with Christianity certainly set believers at odds with popular Ethiopian Israeli culture, yet their position as immigrants to a state with positive Biblical resonances may also have mediated the rejection of Israeliness. Believers I knew served in the army, circumcised their sons and participated in other dimensions of Israeli Jewish civil society in ways that they seemed to find meaningful. They also participated in the ubiquitous national conversation about peace and security in distinctive ways.

One believer told me during a walk through Jerusalem’s Damascus Gate that the state of Israel was clearly suffering from its failure to obey the Biblical injunction to wipe out ‘the inhabitants of the land’, which in this context meant Palestinians. Yet he added without any apparent sense of contradiction, ‘Of course once you decide not to do that, then you have to give people their rights. You can’t just suppress them!’ On the occasion of an attack in which several Jewish pedestrians were killed by a Palestinian workman, this same believer insisted to me that the attack must have been a demonic intervention like the one which held some of his own people in thrall to the spirits of the zar and led some Israeli youth to take drugs or practice Satan worship. While another observer might balk at the inference of a common spiritual basis for such widely disparate phenomena, this characteristic Pentecostal hermeneutic suggests not just an interpretation of political events but also a way of grounding political experience in sets of everyday practices like Bible reading and charismatic healing that engender an overarching moral praxis. Only ‘giving yourself over into the hand of God’ leads to free moral agency for individuals and peace for the nation as a whole.

Beta Israel Pentecostals are demographically insignificant but the challenge they pose to Israel lies in the realm of ideas and cultural taxonomies rather than voting blocks. Together with a variety of other disparate groups including both messianic Jews and those Russian immigrants who deny any necessary contradiction between Jewishness and Russian Orthodoxy (Kornblatt 2004), these believers, though small in overall number and undeniably marginal to Israeli public consciousness, nevertheless threaten to reopen ancient conversations about the social
and theological limits of Jewishness. Whether or not such conversations gain traction over time, despite their absolute incompatibility with mainstream secular and religious discourses of contemporary Jewishness and Israeli identity, remains to be seen. Yet the existence of the state may paradoxically render such questions more significant than they would otherwise have been. That is because the state of Israel, which serves as the most palpable vehicle for Jewish peoplehood in the world today, will have no real choice but to wrestle with the place of these religious minorities in ways that diaspora Jewish communities can avoid if they choose. It is likely that the state will continue to attempt to honour the individual freedoms of citizens like Tadesse but will also work simultaneously to marginalise them in cultural and institutional terms. The stability of such a strategy over time and its consequences in the lives of the people to whom it is applied cannot be clearly predicted.

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Ambiguous Conversions: The Selective Adaptation of Religious Cultures in Colonial North Africa

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Introduction

What does it mean to convert? In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, British and American evangelical Protestant missionaries arrived in the Islamic societies of North Africa with some clear thoughts on this matter. They imagined conversions entailing public professions of faith that would gain confirmation through ceremonies of baptism and the growth of official Church membership. They imagined converts who would establish families and spread Christianity at the grass roots. To their supporters at home, they emphasised that their missions were universal, appealing to Muslims, Christians and Jews; men, women and children; rich and poor; sick and healthy. However, formal, large-scale or family conversions seldom occurred in Islamic North Africa, except, arguably, in parts of Egypt among Coptic Orthodox communities that were already Christian. By the late nineteenth century, circumstances on the ground were compelling Evangelical Protestant missionaries to change their ideas and expectations about what conversion and Christian identity could mean. In the process, missionaries began to acknowledge that conversions could be partial, private and unknowable to others in addition to being incremental in nature. In short, conversions could be highly ambiguous.

Using examples from the southern shores of the Mediterranean, and above all from Egypt and the Maghreb, this chapter considers the nature of ‘ambiguous conversions’ and argues that they have been a significant consequence of missionary encounters as well as an important part of cultural landscapes. The essay also considers different kinds of ambiguous converts that British and American missionaries in North Africa encountered, including ‘Hebrew Christians’, ‘secret
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believers’, Christian-to-Christian converts, transient Christians and those whom some missionaries described as people who became Christian without knowing it. The historical examples of ambiguous conversions presented here are relevant for understanding conversions today. Notably, they remind us that conversions may not entail a total reversal of faith and identity, but may instead generate cultural hybridity as religions move into new contexts and in the process ‘reshape ... their borders and meanings’.2

This study, like others in this volume, explores the dual political and cultural dimensions of conversion, and examines how changes of religious identity among individuals can threaten or unsettle states, societies, or communities that perceive themselves to have unitary, dominant or normative cultures of belonging. Changes of religious identity can pose particular challenges to nation-states in cases where their leaders presume or promote unitary religious (or ethno-religious) allegiances. This chapter differs, however, from the other contributions to this volume insofar as it involves the colonial states and societies of the late nineteenth- and early-to-mid-twentieth-century period, when North African nationalist movements were still in formation. In the colonial North African setting, officials representing the British and French Empires – most of whom came from Christian cultural backgrounds themselves – exerted power over Islamic North African societies, and implemented policies towards Christian missions that reflected attitudes ranging from ambivalence to solid support. In such contexts, where colonial powers hobbled the abilities of Islamic state and religious authorities to regulate policies and practices regarding public conversion, opposition to Christian missions tended to emanate not from local religious or political authorities but from ordinary Muslims, Jews, and sometimes in the case of Egypt, indigenous Coptic Christians, who objected to missionary overtures amongst their co-religionists. In colonial North Africa, in other words, the collective sentiment of the ‘amma, meaning the ordinary people, proved critical to sustaining the power of the dominant culture and to shaping incipient nationalist movements that all drew upon the heritage of Islam and the history of Islamic states.3 Covert, private, partial, or otherwise ambiguous conversions occurred against this context where public sentiment – and public opposition – could be strong and formidable.

Black and white, or shades of gray? Seeing and counting conversions

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Uganda, Zambia and southern Nigeria), formal,
wide-scale conversion to Christianity was a dramatic phenomenon, and thus historians have studied the subject extensively. By contrast, in the Islamic societies of North Africa and the Middle East during the same period, Christian conversion was so rare and isolated that historians have generally either ignored the subject or have dismissed Catholic and Protestant missionary activity as a failure. However, attitudes among scholars are changing as historians of the Middle East bring new attention to bear on the complex social, political and economic influences that both Catholic and Protestant missionaries exerted on the region.

In my own book, entitled *American Evangelicals in Egypt* (2008), I argued that Christian missionaries transformed cultures of schooling in Egypt, offered new models for public healthcare initiatives, and established grass-roots programs for promoting literacy among adults and poor people. These very activities elicited considerable resistance from Muslim and Coptic community leaders, and prompted Egyptian nationalists to take oppositional action. In time, some of the fiercest critics of Christian missionaries – including founders of the Muslim Brotherhood – selectively adapted Christian missionary techniques, for example, by establishing social and athletic clubs as a way of channeling collective sentiment, engaging in coffeehouse preaching, and founding orphanages for socially vulnerable children. At the same time, in response to the sense of threat that Christian missionary activities provoked, the Egyptian government passed a series of laws to ban or restrict Christian evangelisation. As all these things were occurring, American Presbyterian missionaries – who operated the largest Protestant mission in Egypt – continued to maintain a church for those who formally converted or underwent baptism. In 1957, this mission-sponsored Egyptian church, then called the Coptic Evangelical Church, counted 26,663 ‘communicant members’.

The precision of a figure like this – 26,663 members – raises a question: Was conversion really an all-or-nothing, black-or-white affair, something that could be reduced to a number? Close reading of missionary archives, memoirs, and other publications suggests that American and British Protestant missionaries in the Nile Valley increasingly detected shades of gray in what they regarded as conversions. As the twentieth century opened, missionaries were more readily acknowledging that conversions could be murky, temporary or partial, while some missionaries even suggested that conversion could be unconscious or passive, insofar as individuals might undergo conversion without knowing it. (Certainly in Egypt, this last possibility terrified Muslim critics, who feared that children, in particular, might undergo unwitting conversions in mission schools.) This tendency to accept conversion as something...
gradual and possibly unconscious appears to have gained credence among a wider range of evangelical Protestants during the course of the nineteenth century.7

In the pages that follow, I will discuss different types of ambiguous conversion by drawing upon details from the published and unpublished records of three Protestant missions that were active in North Africa in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These are the missions of the American Presbyterians and the British Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS), both active in Egypt and Sudan; and the Protestant but non-denominational British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), which worked not only in Egypt and Sudan but also in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. A few points about this last organisation, the BFBS, are worth noting: it was a publishing mission that published only one book, the Bible, in portions or as a whole; it was an umbrella mission that collaborated closely with dozens of other Protestant missions all over the world to translate the Bible into vernacular languages; and, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was especially active in the Suez Canal and in port cities like Alexandria, which enabled it to make a considerable impact on people sailing into and out of the Mediterranean world that is the focus of this volume.

Ambiguous conversions fit certain patterns. They typically occurred among individuals whose adherence to prior religious cultures (notably Judaism, Islam and other forms of Christianity) made the nature and extent of their religious change hard to determine. Ambiguous conversions appear to have been more likely to ‘stick’ or persist when they occurred among highly mobile individuals who had the power to migrate. Ambiguous conversions were elusive: difficult to count, difficult to trace, and difficult to weigh in their impact. Finally, ambiguous conversions went in many directions. The focus here is on ambiguous conversions to Christianity, although one could apply this notion equally to conversions from Christianity.

Before examining ambiguous conversions more closely, it is worth considering three features of Anglo-American Evangelical Protestantism. These features made the religion especially transportable during a period of flux.

First, Evangelical Protestantism was highly individualistic. Evangelicals assumed that faith was personal; that individual devotion was more important than collective profession and ritual; and that participation was voluntary within a marketplace of religious ideas that included an abundance of choices.8 In other words, to borrow from the organising theme of the conference from which this volume has originated,
Evangelicals assumed that converts should be free to ‘commute’ in the
sense of moving around in religious cultures.

Second, Evangelical Protestant missionaries adhered to what the
literary historian Isabel Hofmeyr has called an ‘evangelical theory of
language’; they believed in the translatability of all texts, and especially
Bible texts, which had a particular power to ‘seize and convert’. It was no
accident that American and British missionaries in North Africa poured
so much effort into translating and distributing Bibles – including Bibles
in colloquial forms of Arabic – and into teaching people how to read.
Missionaries claimed to know many cases of people who had read or
heard parts of the Bible only to be ‘converted’ directly by the text. In
fact, the work of the BFBS depended on the assumption that the Bible
could be its own missionary and that the text could function, according
to the society’s slogan, ‘without note or comment’.

Third, Evangelical Protestantism was transportable in this context
because of colonialism. Protected by imperial power, Protestants as well
as Catholics in North Africa felt bold enough to pursue missions in
Islamic domains, and to insist on the rights of individual converts (even
if colonial states were sometimes reluctant to alienate Muslim public
opinion by backing up such people). The colonial context was also
critical for religious conversions because it provided frameworks for the
dramatic movement of people – soldiers, sailors, merchants, labourers,
and even pilgrims – between various colonies and between colonies and
metropolitan imperial centres.

The following discussion seeks to accomplish three things. It tries to
explain why and how ambiguous conversions happened, in light of
cultures of reading, increasing mobility, and colonialism. It draws atten-
tion to the problems of counting converts and questions the firmness
(or ‘knowability’) of conversions. And it tries to elucidate what I call a
typology of ambiguous conversions. In sections that follow I provide
examples of different kinds of ambiguous conversions and their pos-
sible social significance, while discussing some of the organisations
that played a role in effecting them. The fragmentary evidence for the
existence of each group offers glimpses into social worlds that deserve
closer study.

**Hebrew Christians**

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, British and especially
Scottish Evangelicals poured effort and resources into missions to
Jews in Britain, in Europe more broadly, and in the Middle East and
North Africa. These British efforts eventually inspired the formation of missions to Jews in the United States as well. One historian has called the Scottish missions to Jews in nineteenth-century Palestine a ‘dismal failure’, and yet their efforts did lead to the emergence of a small Episcopalian community of ‘Hebrew Christians’ that persisted through the mandate period (1920–48). There also appear to have been some Hebrew Christians in Morocco and Tunisia. Certainly, in both Morocco and Tunisia the BFBS hired Jewish converts to Christianity who helped to prepare Arabic Bible translations for Jews; the BFBS called these versions ‘Moorish Colloquial, Hebrew Characters’ and ‘Judaeo-Arabic of North Africa, or Judaeo-Tunisian’ respectively.

In the immediate years before the First World War, annual reports of the BFBS occasionally mentioned Hebrew Christian men who worked for the Society in the Suez Canal as colporteurs, or Bible sellers. Some of these Hebrew Christians possessed linguistic talents that suggested highly mobile and cosmopolitan backgrounds. For example, the society’s report for 1908 praised a Hebrew Christian colporteur named Samuel Segal, who sold Bibles to sailors and tourists as they passed through the Suez Canal. This man reportedly spoke Arabic, Bulgarian, Croatian, Dutch, English, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, Rumanian and Russian.

Offering insights that may be applicable to the Hebrew Christians of North Africa, Michael Darby (the author of a recent study of the Hebrew Christian communities of nineteenth-century Britain) suggests that Hebrew Christians were often caught between worlds or communities. Persecuted or ostracised by Jews, they often felt awkward or shunned vis-à-vis larger Christian communities. Perhaps compounding this sense of marginalisation was the way Church of England authorities consistently urged Hebrew Christians to put ‘their Anglicanism before their Jewishness’. In time, Hebrew Christians in Britain found ways of coping with their status, notably by either assimilating into mainstream British Protestantism, or by affirming their Jewishness, for example, by maintaining customs of male circumcision and the sabbath.

There is a remarkable lack of scholarship on Hebrew Christians in Britain, Darby notes, and the lack appears even greater with regard to North Africa. But why have Hebrew Christians received so little attention in the wider scholarship on Christian missions? There are a number of possible reasons. The first relates to latent anti-Semitism among leaders or participants in mainstream Christian organisations. Consider, again, Samuel Segal, the aforementioned Bible-seller who spoke 12 languages. The same British report that praised this ‘Hebrew Christian’
man’s language skills invoked certain British stereotypes about Jews, for example, by ascribing Segal’s success as a Bible seller to ‘the natural aptitude for selling which characterizes his race’. Another reason is that Jewish believers in Christ (called, in different times and places, Hebrew Christians, Jewish Christians, Jews for Jesus, or Messianic Jews) have often elicited scorn or ridicule from other, ostensibly mainstream Jews. In a study on the history of missions to Jews in the United States, Yaakov Ariel has acknowledged this scorn factor as one impediment to serious historical scholarship. In terms of the lack of scholarship, yet another inhibiting factor may be embarrassment; that is, the sense of guilt or shame that the history of proselytising among Jews has come to elicit among some mainstream or liberal Protestants in the aftermath of the Holocaust (even while missions to Jews have remained popular among some more conservative Evangelical groups). I suggest one more factor behind the lack of scholarship on Hebrew Christians: namely, their extreme mobility during a century of Jewish displacement, together with an apparent ability or potential to assimilate into host societies, which has made them elusive to scholars.

The Hebrew Christians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries may now be hard to trace. One can only speculate that the Hebrew Christians of North Africa dispersed amidst the decolonisations of the mid-twentieth century, perhaps joining Jewish, Christian, or Messianic Jewish communities in Britain, France, Italy, or Israel. Ultimately, Hebrew Christians not only offer a perfect illustration of ambiguous conversion, they also suggest how lonely conversion may be, as individual converts struggle to find new footings and build new communities in social worlds adrift.

Secret believers as immobile non-martyrs

Unlike Hebrew Christians, who seem to have declared their modified allegiance and found ways of living with it, secret believers were people who embraced some Christian beliefs but who lacked the mobility to escape from family pressures and social conventions. As the term suggests, secret believers kept their beliefs private and never proclaimed public Christian identities. Their very secrecy has made it impossible either to count them or to attempt a qualitative assessment of their Christianness.

The possibility of there being ‘secret believers’ appealed to Christian missionaries in North Africa, who, again, attracted few formal converts from Islam. Missionaries attributed this dearth of converts to Islamic
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doctrines of apostasy and to the steep social barriers that made out- 
conversion so daunting to Muslims: loss of inheritance and child cu 
stody, possible divorce by the courts and the fear of death. Islamic law 
in theory provided for the execution of apostates, though in practice 
exections for apostasy were exceedingly rare during the nineteenth 
century. Nevertheless, among missionaries in the Islamic Middle East 
and North Africa, many stories circulated about Muslim converts to 
Christianity who experienced assault, imprisonment or torture from re 
latives and from like-minded police. Others described converts who were 
treated as insane and locked up; or who died under mysterious circum 
stances (for example, by apparent poisoning or in tramway accidents). 
Such social deterrents and fears of harm appear to have succeeded in 
dissuading many people from openly embracing Christianity.

Missionaries appeared to regard Muslim women, in particular, as likely 
candidates for secret believers. Missionaries noted that when Muslim 
girls embraced or expressed interest in Evangelical Christian beliefs, 
families often responded by cutting off contact with missionaries and 
getting the girls married. American Presbyterian missionaries suggested 
that this situation applied, for example, to one of the daughters of the 
Egyptian revolutionary Ahmed Urabi, whom historians have associ 
ated with the anti-colonial nationalism of the Urabi Revolt (1879–81). 
Married in 1890, Urabi’s daughter read her Bible daily though ‘her new 
husband soon put a stop to that’.

Secret belief was not as critical for those who were mobile, and par 
ticularly for men, who could more easily move and reinvent themselves. 
Missionaries often helped male converts from Islam to move away from 
extended families that could dissuade or harass them, sometimes by find 
ing them jobs with distant Protestant missions. For example, in the early 
twentieth century, missionaries helped male converts from Islam to relo 
 cate from Syria to Egypt, from Egypt to Aden, and from northern Sudan 
to the Nuba Mountains of western Sudan. In one striking case from 
the late 1870s, missionaries helped a man named Ahmed Fahmy, from 
a prominent Egyptian Muslim family, to escape onto a boat bound for 
Scotland. Ahmed Fahmy never returned to Egypt, but instead pursued his 
own missionary career in China. In some ways, however, the mission 
ary practice of relocating male converts backfired, insofar as word spread 
that missionaries would find lucrative jobs for all converts, thereby 
attracting what missions regarded as insincere elements. During the early 
1930s, for example, American missionaries in Cairo reported that some 
of the Muslim male ‘inquirers’ who approached them were responding 
to the rumour that missionaries were ‘paying large sums of money to
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converts and giving them good positions and sending them abroad...’. Missionaries lamented that such Egyptian men were prepared to fake a Christian conversion for the sake of emigrating to North America.

Missionaries implicitly accepted that secret believers were, first, unable or unwilling to move and, second, unwilling to deal with the reprisals that Christian profession might generate. It is worth emphasising here that British and American Evangelicals neither advocated nor supported martyrdom, despite the importance of this phenomenon in early Christian history. They believed that people should be able to proclaim their Christianity but not suffer for it. As reformers and modernists, they also believed that people could and should agitate to change laws in response to new conditions. (Indeed, after the First World War, Anglo-American Evangelical Protestants proved eager and ready to promote the cause of religious liberty at the League of Nations, in the United Nations, and through the channels of national governments.) In sum, Evangelical missionaries were at once sympathetic to secret believers (whose existence they assumed), and hopeful that these believers might somehow plant Christian ideas in Islamic societies.

Reports of secret believers have continued to circulate among Evangelical Protestants up to the present day. For example, a demographic survey called World Christian Trends, published in 2001, identified a sub-set of Christians called ‘Crypto-Christians’ and explained, ‘This grouping is also called secret believers, or non-professing Christians, or Christians not publicly baptized, or clandestine or underground believers. They are those who for reasons of family, personal safety, status, employment or other factors do not declare or reveal their commitment to Christ or expose their faith to public or state scrutiny or enquiry but prefer to keep it private’. The study identified a particular sub-category of Crypto-Christians or secret believers called ‘Hidden Muslim believers in Christ’, and estimated in 1995 there were some 450,000 of them spread over 15 Islamic countries. The idea of, and possibility for, secret believers remains very compelling within Evangelical circles, although again, the deep uncertainty of their conversions calls the counting into question.

**Converting from Christianity to Christianity: Did it count?**

Did conversion to Christianity ‘count’ if the person in question was already a Christian? For American Presbyterian missionaries in Egypt, the answer depended on who was asking this question. And it was an important question, since the vast majority of Egyptians who embraced
Evangelical Protestantism came from Coptic Orthodox Christian backgrounds. When communicating with the US churches that paid for their mission, American missionaries in late nineteenth-century Egypt tended to glide over their numbers, for example, by citing figures for baptisms or church attendance rates that did not distinguish between Orthodox Copts and Muslims, thereby leaving American donors with the impression that conversions from Islam were far more common than they actually were. Among themselves, however, missionaries were divided on whether the shift of allegiance for Copts entailed ‘conversion’; that point depended on whether they viewed the shift of allegiance as dramatic or mild and on how they perceived sectarian differences. In Egypt, some American Presbyterians insisted on calling people who shifted from Coptic Orthodoxy to Protestantism ‘acessions’ rather than ‘converts’, because they appeared to see the change as a minor one. This said, leaders of the mother church in the United States appear to have taken a narrower view of sectarian differences. As late as 1870, for example, in response to a question about whether American Roman Catholics needed to be re-baptised if they wished to join their Protestant church, church leaders at a general assembly meeting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania rejected the Christian credentials of Roman Catholicism. Combining anti-Semitism with Christian parochialism, these Presbyterian leaders called the Roman Catholic Church a ‘synagogue of Satan’ and denied the validity of ‘Papal Baptism’. 

On the ground in Egypt, the perception of sectarian difference and competition remained strong among some Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox Christian leaders, who occasionally complained about mutual poaching. Yet Protestants appear not to have insisted on Catholic and Orthodox re-baptism, if only because they were so eager to attract new members without causing a fuss. Matters changed in the post-World War II period, a postcolonial era when the Arab-Israeli conflict loomed large in Egypt. Responding, arguably, to a mutual sense of beleaguerment, many Egyptian Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox church leaders began to welcome opportunities for ecumenical cooperation, anticipating rather than following the changes that the Second Vatican Council set rolling. By 1979, an American missionary in Egypt described ecumenical village Bible classes that were ‘non-sectarian’, explaining, ‘we do not lure people from one church to another, but try to help them become better Christians in their own churches’. 

Christian-to-Christian conversion also highlights the complication of counting members and converts. In Egypt during the late nineteenth century, and continuing through the twentieth, Orthodox, Catholic
and Protestant Christians evinced a tendency to ‘commute’ between places of worship, and this complicated the efforts of religious leaders to count their Church communities. As the twenty-first century opened, Egyptian Evangelical (Presbyterian) pastors and scholars were still noting the tendency of Egyptian Christians to shift between Churches, to marry across sectarian lines, or to revert to Coptic Orthodoxy for major life events such as weddings and baptisms. The best that Church leaders could do, therefore, was to guess broadly at the size of congregations or wider communities.

**Transient Christians and the persuasive power of books**

Transient Christians were people on the move: travellers, migrants, commuters. The historian should more accurately call them transient potential Christians, since their conversions are unverifiable.

The archives of the BFBS, which are stored in Cambridge University Library, provide a window into the history of this kind of transient conversion, suggesting how both books and people travelled and changed in the process. The BFBS supported an extensive network of ‘colporteurs’ and ‘Bible women’ who sold Bibles throughout cities, towns and trading posts across the sweep of North Africa, deep into the interior. But the society had a special fondness for seafarers, and especially military and merchant seamen, as they passed through Mediterranean and other port cities. After the Suez Canal opened to traffic in 1869, sea travellers – and potential Bible customers – included many tourists, emigrants, refugees, and colonial functionaries, too. Such travellers could choose from scores, even hundreds, of Bible texts, since by 1939 the BFBS had sponsored 734 different translations, while in some languages they published editions on the spectrum from plain (and cheap) to fancy (and more expensive).

Bible sellers probably wanted to trumpet their own success as salespeople pitching a message; it was good for their careers. So we must approach their stories with caution. Again and again, though, the BFBS published reports or anecdotes from their Bible sellers about customers whose initially sceptical attitudes towards the Bible shifted dramatically once they had read portions of the ‘good book’. Note that, unlike most conventional Christian missions, the BFBS made no effort to baptise people or to organise them into Churches. Indeed, the only things the Society counted were books: books published, books distributed, books sold. Of course, buying a book does not mean reading a book, just as reading a book does not mean accepting or agreeing with its messages.
To what if anything, then, did Bible buyers and Bible readers convert? How many of them came out changed by their reading experience?

This much, at least, is clear: the BFBS distributed Bibles on a vast scale. Consider that in the year 1913, in the Suez Canal zone, the Society’s Port Said depot held stocks of scriptures in more than 80 languages, while its harbour colporteurs reported sales of texts in 51 languages after boarding more than 3,000 ships. Aside from selling Bibles in western European languages like English, German, French and Dutch, they also sold Bibles in various Asian and African languages: not only Arabic, but also Chinese, Bengali, ‘Hindustani’, Malay, Amharic and more. In 1914, more customers in Port Said bought Bible portions in Chinese than in any other language; it appears that many or most of these Chinese readers worked with the support crews on ships; for example, in engine rooms and kitchens. Note, too, that the BFBS in the Suez Canal was not only selling books, but was distributing them globally to other ‘Bible Houses’ or depots around the world. In 1914, its depot received and stored 160,315 volumes, and sent out 118,572.

When accounting for the spread of ‘world Christianities’ – that is, the modern global diffusion of Christian ideas – historians usually credit the work of Church-sponsored missions on the ground, in places like Kenya and Korea. Yet the work of non-denominational or independent (that is, non-Church-sponsored) Christian publishing missions and tract societies deserves scrutiny, too. For even without adhering to ‘evangelical theories of language’ (the idea, again, that a book like the Bible has the power to ‘seize and convert’), historians of the book readily acknowledge the power of books – and indeed of all texts – to travel and to persuade. This power has been particularly evident in conditions of high or rapidly growing literacy where books are cheap and accessible and where reading can occur as an individual, private, leisurely pursuit.

The phenomenon of Bible-buying among sea travellers in Port Said and other Mediterranean port cities also raises questions about the locus of conversions. That is, in addition to asking how conversions occur, we can ask when and where. Can conversion occur on a boat as it passes through a canal? Or, for that matter, can conversion today occur in an airport? The answer to these last two questions may be yes. Sociologists recognise that even fleeting contact can be decisive, if contact occurs at critical junctures or nodes within mobile networks.

In a recent history of reading, entitled *Books without Borders*, Robert Fraser and Mary Hammond suggest a way of conceptualising the flow
of ideas and information in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century British Empire. They say: do not simply look at where the world map was coloured red (indicating British territories); instead, look at the charts of international telegraph cables or shipping routes. ‘Cable charts of the 1890s look like cobwebs radiating from London to every corner of the globe, with many intersections. [Such charts offer] a more sufficient, a more kinetic and less static – therefore a far more faithful – image for the traffic of information and of books’.46 Arguably, too, such charts may offer maps for the traffic of Christian ideas.

Converted without knowing it

The idea that people can become Christian without realising their own conversion conflicts sharply with the Biblical New Testament conversion narrative associated with Saul of Tarsus, or Saint Paul, who purportedly experienced a blinding light on the road to Damascus (Acts 9: 1–31). In his 1911 study entitled The Varieties of Religious Experience, the philosopher William James suggested that this Saint Paul-type of conversion consisted of ‘a tremendous emotional excitement or perturbation of the senses, [in which] a complete division is established in the twinkling of an eye between the old life and the new’.47 This classic or ideal model of conversion proved to be very rare in Islamic North African contexts where so few Muslims publicly converted to Evangelical Protestantism. In the nineteenth century, Protestant missionaries found it to be much more effective to attract Muslim and other children to their schools where they taught ‘modern’ subjects while overtly or obliquely trying to convey to them Christian ideas. Missionaries expressed hope that schoolchildren would become subtly, slowly, and perhaps imperceptibly persuaded, or that they might selectively adapt parts of missionary Christianity – for example, customs of individual, meditative prayer – while remaining officially Muslim, Coptic Orthodox or otherwise.

Egyptian Arabic newspapers from the early twentieth century show that many Muslims were indeed concerned about Christian mission schools. Many expressed fear that in such schools their children, young and naïve, might be deceived (or might even be ‘magnetically hypnotized’) into becoming Christian inadvertently. Thus, starting around 1930, Muslim activists (including leaders of the newly formed Muslim Brotherhood) clamoured for restrictions on Christian missionary activity in the country, articulating a kind of ‘Egyptian Islamic nationalism’ that had both populist and Muslim dimensions. While supporters of
this brand of nationalism acknowledged the legitimacy of ‘multiple identifications and loyalties’ within the territory of the nation, they worked from the premise that all allegiances were and should be subordinate to Islamic or Muslim identity.48

In Egypt, Muslim nationalist agitation against Christian missionaries prompted the Egyptian government to enact a series of incremental restrictions on mission schools, in an effort to limit the exposure of Muslim children to Christian instruction and prayers.49 In this context, in 1932 a leading American missionary in Egypt observed that:

Very few Muslims [in Egypt today] object to Christian teaching but the day may come when they shall and when the government will prevent us from teaching Christianity to non-Christians. This will mean that our Christianity will have to be caught rather than taught from our schools.50

In other words, this missionary appeared to use a metaphor of contagion to suggest how Christianity might spread. Students would be able to ‘catch’ Christianity unaware, just as they might catch influenza – through an airborne, invisible, but nonetheless potent transmission.

Many missionaries in colonial North Africa and elsewhere described their educational work as something that could ‘sow seeds’ for future conversions. But perhaps because the idea and the discourse of dramatic, total, public conversion in the mode of Saint Paul remained so appealing or influential, few ever consciously articulated a model for incremental, selective and subtle conversion of the kinds I have just described. This was the case even if many missionaries thought that formal profession was not the only possible manifestation of Christian conversion.51

In Egypt during the early 1930s, two American Presbyterian men living in Cairo – Charles R. Watson and James Quay – did clearly articulate, albeit in their private correspondence and diaries, the notion that people could become Christian without knowing it. Watson, who was the founder and president of the American University in Cairo and an active figure in the Protestant ecumenical movement, argued that the label of being ‘Christian’ was irrelevant since Christianity was at its core a system for social ethics and honourable living. Quay, an obscure but fascinating figure who was a leader in the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in Egypt, went so far as to speculate that Muslims could be Christians, and that Christians could be Muslims, simultaneously, by holding onto a cluster of beliefs and ethical ideas.
(An essential part of being Christian, in his view, appears to have been simply embracing an ideal of Jesus Christ and a message of his role in human salvation.) Both Watson and Quay had considered themselves, at the start of their careers, to be missionaries to Muslims. Their emphasis on the irrelevance of formal Christian identity at this moment in the 1930s was in some measure a response to the resounding lack of formal conversions from Islam to Christianity that they had witnessed in Egypt, as well as a response to increasing opposition from Muslim activists and the Egyptian government. They were writing at a time, in other words, when it was becoming apparent to American and British Evangelicals that Islamic states and societies were not going to permit the kind of ‘free market’ of religious ideas that would allow for the widespread public evangelisation and conversion of Muslims. Their ideas also reflected an important strain of mainstream American Protestant thought during this early twentieth-century period, which prioritised ‘good works, conceived in either individual or more collective terms, over professions and confessions’; that is, deeds over doctrines.

This line of thought about the potentially subtle manifestations of conversion, which reflected a growing uncertainty about what Christianity meant or should mean within the context of missionary movements, gained expression, too, in a famous report that was funded by John D. Rockefeller II. This report, often called the ‘Hocking Report’ after the Harvard philosophy professor (William Ernest Hocking) who chaired and edited it, suggested that Christian missions should dedicate themselves to faith-blind social service. Historians of American religion argue that this report triggered a conservative evangelical backlash and confirmed a conservative-liberal rift in American Protestantism that has persisted up to the present. On a more international scale, this report signalled another kind of ambiguous conversion that was occurring in the twentieth century on an institutional level, as international, philanthropic, humanitarian enterprises, such as those supported by the Rockefeller family, shifted away from formal Christian missions and towards ‘secular’ or vaguely ‘faith-based’ non-government organisations.

Conclusion: The meanings of conversion

In his introduction to a volume entitled Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation (1993), the anthropologist Robert W. Hefner suggested that, ‘at the very least – an analytic minimum – conversion implies the acceptance of a new locus of self-definition, a new, though not necessarily exclusive reference point
for one's identity'. If the self-definition that Hefner identifies as a *sine qua non* for conversion requires a conscious recognition of changed religious allegiance, then the examples presented here would not always fit his model. Drawing from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, I suggest, instead, applying a broader definition of ‘conversion’ while acknowledging its blurriness. We could thus define conversion as a ‘turning in position’, a ‘change of condition’, and (as in the architectural sense) ‘a structural adaptation ... for a new purpose’ in life.

Addressing the blurriness of conversion is not easy. Indeed, Nadia Marzouki and Olivier Roy have suggested the reason for the lack of scholarship on individual or idiosyncratic conversions: quite simply, they are difficult and inconvenient to study. It is far easier to lump people together than to acknowledge the quirkiness and infinite variety among them. The fact that conversions occur in the realm of ideas only complicates the picture. As the sociologist Michael Mann has observed, ‘Societies’ – and to that we could add individuals – ‘are much messier than our theories of them’.

Two factors drove the ambiguous, individual conversions discussed in this chapter. The first factor was the growing access to literacy and its associated technologies. All of the ambiguous conversions presented in this study were book-mediated, and especially Bible-mediated. (Today, satellite television, the internet and associated social media technologies are additional textual vehicles for persuasion.) The second factor was movement – mobility or the lack of it – including the ability to change home or job and to reconfigure circles of families, neighbours and friends. In many cases, the degree of outspokenness or privacy regarding religious identification and expression was linked to this ability of individuals to migrate or ‘commute’. An *inability* to move appeared more likely to yield ambiguous conversions in the form of secret belief, while an *ability* to move apparently enabled converts to recast their public personas and to find new social niches.

Scholars may be reluctant to study ambiguous conversions because they are hard to track or assess. Religious leaders may be reluctant to acknowledge them because they threaten authority and break from convention. And nationalist leaders may choose to ignore them because they challenge political agendas of cultural coherence among subjects or ideal ‘citizens’. But ambiguous conversions are worth studying and deserve closer attention. They probably offer a more realistic picture of how religious ideas spread or jump – in piecemeal, uneven and inconsistent ways, among individuals who stumble upon them. At the same time, ambiguous conversions signal larger shifts taking place in various
eras of globalisation. These shifts include the spread of new ideas and practices; the opening of new routes for migration; and the concomitant blurring, erasure or redrawing of borders. Finally, ambiguous conversions attest both to the porousness of communities, including religious and national communities, and to the cultural heterogeneity that coarsens their texture.

Notes

1. On the idea of conversion as a process and not an event, see Rambo (1993).
4. For a survey of this literature on African missions, and for a sense of recent directions in the field, see Morier-Genoud and Urban-Mead (2011) as well as the other articles in this special issue by J. Comaroff and E. Morier-Genoud, N. Etherington, D.R. Peterson, and T. Ballantyne.
14. The following book mentions Hebrew Christians in passing: Robson (2011). Robson notes that as Episcopalians in Palestine, Hebrew Christians did not worship in the same churches as their Arab counterparts (most of whom had converted from Greek Orthodoxy).
15. The British and Foreign Bible Society (1939) pp. 5–6; and Bible Society Archives, Cambridge University Library (henceforth BSA), BSA/E3/3/21/1: Translations Dept. Correspondence, Arabic: Tunisian, April 1910–August 1912.
16. Henceforth these reports will be cited as BFBS Annual Report with year.
20. Strikingly, for example, in the annual reports of the BFBS, coverage of book sales among Jews had featured prominently before the Second World War II but shrank to one paragraph in the 1946–47 report and disappeared entirely by the late 1950s. The 1946–47 report offered the following, rather puzzling, remark: “It is believed that during the war of 1939–45 more than 1,500,000 Jews were massacred by the Nazis, but their total numbers in the world have not diminished.” BFBS Annual Report (1946–1947) p. 46.
21. A notable exception occurred in Fez, Morocco, in 1834, when Muslim authorities publicly decapitated a Jewish girl named Sol Hatchuel whom neighbours


27. Tyrrell (2010); Hutchison (1976).


30. PHS UPCNA RG 209-1-19: C.C. Adams Papers, Adams to Anderson, dated Cairo, 1 November 1932. This is the same C.C Adams who authored the now classic work *Islam and Modernism in Egypt: A Study of the Modern Reform Movement Inaugurated by Muhammad Abduh* (Oxford University Press, 1933). This usage of “accession” recurs in Jamison, *The United Presbyterian Story*.

31. PHS, Minutes of the Twelfth General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church of North America at its meeting in Pittsburgh, 25 May 1870, folio 551.

32. See, for example, this Catholic source, which described the shift of Catholic Copts to Protestantism in terms of heresy: Attwater (1937) p. 138.


34. Dye (1979) p. 36.

35. Conversation with Rev. Emile Zaki, Cairo, 2 June 2005; Conversation with the Rev. Menes Abdel Noor, Cairo, 23 May 2005.

36. I draw here upon Hofmeyr (pp. 2–3) for inspiration: “Put another way: when books travel, they change shape. They are excised, summarized, abridged, and bowdlerized by the new intellectual formations into which they migrate.”


38. BFBS, *The Gospel in Many Tongues*. On what counted as a language or version, see, for example, Sharkey (2011).


41. BFBS Annual Report (1914) p. 142.

42. BFBS Annual Report (1914) p. 141.


45. For a broadly theoretical study along these lines, see Elliott and Urry (2010).


49. See Chapter 4 in Sharkey, American Evangelicals in Egypt.
51. See, for example, Laing (2012).
52. See Chapter 5 of Sharkey, American Evangelicals in Egypt.
57. Mann (1986) p. 4.
58. On some contemporary trends, see, for example, Miller (2010).

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6
Converts at Work: Confessing a Conversion
Loïc Le Pape

Introduction

In an international context brimming with religious tension (post-09/11, and with the rude health of both Muslim and Christian fundamentalism), the study of religion seems to have a new explanatory virtue in the humanities. Similarly, religious conversions are studied by all scientific disciplines because they reveal both the crucial importance of religious identities and the means of changing beliefs in a period when religions are spreading outside their original cultures (Roy, 2008).

The French religious landscape is characterised by a historical link to Catholicism, which was for centuries the state religion. The main religions are Catholicism (30 million believers), Islam (5 million), Protestantism (3 million) and Judaism (approximately 1 million). The French state is laïque, religiously neutral and does not accord official recognition to any religion (Art. 1 of the Law of 1905). The French laïcité is both a historical construction (with strong juridical, political and ideological heritages) and an original way to envisage the place of religion in the public and political spaces. Laïcité in this context is a vague concept that frames the means of conversion in France. The aforementioned statement will represent one of the strongest hypotheses in this text.

For this chapter, I have in a way been revisiting my previous research. In 2008, I completed a PhD in Sociology, titled ‘What is Religion for the French? Studying conversion’. I started from a naïve observation: ‘Religions are still important in France, as some people choose to convert’. I assumed that through the study of conversion I would be able to say something about the importance of religion today. One idea was to try to understand the tension between the importance of religion for converts and a social atmosphere that Charles Taylor called, in
2007, the secular Age (Taylor, 2007). In using this expression, Taylor characterises contemporary times as times since unbelieving became the rule and believing became a personal option. So I tried to investigate the attitudes of converts in their personal, familial and social environments in order to know if conversion – and beyond, commitment to a new faith – is really a personal choice. I've done free-interviews with converts. I simply asked them to tell me about their conversions, while being attentive to their feelings, to the steps in their commitments, and to the reception to their conversions of their families and friends. I enclosed my field research in an urban micro comparison between two French cities (Marseilles and Strasbourg). The interest in choosing these two towns lies in the fact that they have different legal statutes about cults: the 1905 law in Marseilles and the Concordat in Strasbourg. Indeed, the Department of Lorraine and the two departments of Alsace are still governed by an agreement between the Vatican and the French state, called the Concordat, which dates from 1801. In this context, four religions are officially recognized: Judaism, Catholicism and two Protestant Churches. Religions are included in the school curricula; priests, rabbis and clerics of recognised religions are appointed and paid by the state and there are theological faculties. In contrast, in Marseille, cults are governed by the 1905 law on the separation of state and religion, without official recognition.

I also decided to focus on the ‘converters’. I approached the institutions through their various groups or through religious clerics in charge of conversion (various authorities judge conversions: rabbis, imams and priests, bishops, elder councils among Protestants Churches). Thus I combine an overall perspective, from the converts (and their stories about the institutions) to the institutions themselves with their ‘official discourses’ on conversion (and their reports on converts).

One of the major results of this work was to demonstrate that conversion is not necessarily an individual trip. Of course, the overwhelming majority of converts decided by themselves to choose a new religion. But the process of change, the different steps of the conversion, and ultimately the avowal are all strongly linked to social relationships (family and friends). The converts have to make real efforts to avow their conversions, to present them and have them accepted. I will try to reflect on this chapter in the different parts of this work, in trying to present the complexities of such a demarche.

First of all, I will try to characterise the efforts of converts theoretically, using the concept of a ‘grammar’. The second part of the chapter will show the work and strategies of converts in relation to the host
institution, their new religion. The third part will deal with the converts’ efforts with friends and relatives, categories that became apparent as the most important over the course of my research. Fourthly, I will try to show that converts have to frame their personal journeys in order to present themselves in this secular age.

Towards a ‘grammar’ of conversion?

I would like to advance here a first set of hypotheses concerning the conversion process. The idea is to replace the converts at the centre of the action: (1) conversion is an individual choice but it is validated by people around the convert; (2) the convert must publicise his engagement, making public the reasons and motivation for their personal choice; (3) there are some rules which are generally followed by converts so as to make the conversion acceptable; (4) not following the rules could expose the convert to reprobation and, according to my hypothesis, to the non-validation of the conversion. The theoretical option I chose in my research was to focus on the interaction between converts and their entourages using the approach of G. H. Mead (Mead, 1934): that it is through interactions and transactions with others that men and women internalise the rules of behaviour in society. I added the contributions of the interactionism (an attention focused on social interactions) on the construction of a social world by the interactions between individuals, and, most important, the fact that actions (collective and individual) are at the right level of investigation) and the micro sociology of E. Goffman (1959; 1971).

A ‘grammar’ is the translation of a concept of pragmatic sociology, which compares social actions to grammar rules. Words, verbs, subjects, and complements can be used in combination, but a few rules must be respected in order for language to have a socially constructed form which can be understood. In my mind, the same applies with social behaviour: anyone can convert, but respect must be shown for some socially accepted rules, otherwise criticism, or even punishment, would follow. Which grammar is used for a successful conversion? A first example of a conversation with converts to Catholicism deals with sincerity and honesty:

– Sociologist: It seems not really easy to talk about your conversion?
– Convert 1: No, not at all. One needs to know with whom we are talking, and the sincerity makes the difference. If you are honest and sincere, others can’t say anything.
Cyril Lemieux systematised the concept of a grammar in an ambitious book (Lemieux, 2009), and gave an operational definition in an earlier work: ‘the rules to follow in order to act in a sufficiently correct way for the partners of the action’ (our translation, Lemieux, 2000: 110). In Boltanski and Thévenot’s vision (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006), a grammar is articulated as a ‘superior common principle’. In our attempt to characterise a grammar for conversion, this principle could be transparency. Transparency means that converts have to explain their spiritual evolution and explain their feelings as justification. They must be transparent in their stories, detailing all the stages of their conversions and the evolution of their faiths and personal situations. Transparency also means introducing oneself in front of several institutions: the religious one (in other words, the clerics of the new religion), their social relationships (family and friends) and all the interactions that converts could have with police, administration, school etc. Lastly, transparency also has a binding side that involves some form of injunction: an injunction to be transparent, of course, but also an injunction to detail all feelings and all the adventures and misadventures of the conversion process. This injunction stems in part from the process of individualisation of beliefs, which is an implicit, necessary achievement through the conversion. It also refers to the work of Richard Sennett regarding the historical evolution between public and private spheres, ‘Tyrannies of Intimacy’. In this book, Sennett underlined the maladjustment from private life to public life since the 18th century. Converts’ work consists of publicising entire parts of their private life in order to be ‘transparent’ and credible, which appears sincere and true (Sennett, 1977). Studying conversion allows us to outline the limits of the distinction between public and private. Indeed, through their processes of justification, converts have to publicise parts of their intimate lives. This process challenges the original distinction because religious ‘coming-out’ occurs somewhere between public and private: in group conversations, family meetings, interactions at dinners or parties, etc. Djamel, a convert to Protestantism said:

Clearly, I don’t say the same things to my brothers, my sister or my parents. My parents don’t know explicitly that I converted myself to Protestantism; they would not understand. They have doubts
I think, but we don’t talk about it. With my sister, I share lots of things and thoughts. She was the first person to whom I confided my wish to convert, the stages of conversion, etc. She understood; she was great. My brothers know that I converted but they didn’t react. We do not talk about religion. We are very chaste and discreet in my family.

Through this superior principle of transparency, the operational action that converts have to follow is to sustain bonds with friends and relatives. Conversion is seen as a great individual transformation, but at the same time, converts must account for their personal continuity towards others just as if nothing had happened, as if they were unchanged. The ontological tension of conversion is in the personal and social changes (Le Pape, 2010).

The conversion story follows a linear form, a form that follows stages, adventures and tests. It also allows a communicable and shareable story. Converts’ speeches are a succession of highly affective engagements (emotions and inner feelings) and detachments (permitting interlocutors both to understand emotional importance and to relativise it, suspending their involvement in the story). The others are active witnesses, by which I refer to their exterior position in the interaction: they couldn’t be considered as participants, aloof yet able to dissociate emotions, and so on, to receive conversion.

In conclusion, conversion falls under three constraints. Firstly, the convert must ‘justify’ his decision in front of an institution in order to be accepted. Secondly, he must explain himself to his entourage, his friends and relatives, so as to be recognised as a convert. Thirdly, he must present his conversion as a banal action in a secular age.

**The converts and the institution**

Talking about institutions necessitates some preliminary remarks. First of all, in the course of my research I identified differences in the conversion process in each monotheistic religion: it’s easiest to convert to Islam, and hardest to convert to Judaism. Converting to Catholicism seems to present a kind of mix between the other two religions. My second remark in this regard is that Churches create converts: a religious institution shapes its candidates and they have the obligation to bow to the decisions of the institution. The final decision is the ultimate validation of the conversion. My third remark is that we can find, in each monotheistic
religion, an institution, composed by specialised clerics (even laymen), and by a special ‘road map’ which candidates must follow: requiring a ritual, following courses, passing diverse evaluations, etc.

Institution in this chapter in understood in the sense of Emile Durkheim (1986: xxii): ‘one can call “institution” all beliefs and all rules of self-conduct instituted by the collectivity’. To be more precise, the conception of Jaques Lagroye is totally relevant:

The usage of the term ‘institution’ signifies [...] the greatest attention to what is instituted or objectivised in various ways, to all that is therefore likely to ensure a minimum coherence in the behaviour of members, to partially unify their behavioural patterns, even shape their conceptions of justice and injustice, of licit and lawful, of good and bad, of right and wrong. [Lagroye, 2006: 12–13]

These preliminary definitions allow us to clarify the relation between would-be converts and religious institutions. This is an unequal relationship because the institution ultimately gives permission for conversion. Clerics are in the position and have the power to evaluate and decide about the convert’s reality. But we must realise that this is not a unilateral relation and candidates have strategies and ways to bypass the rules and decisions of the institution. Thus, we have to focus on the interactions between the institutions and those they recognise.

The work of the convert is necessarily the construction of their justification: the convert must indeed develop a narrative for the institution, i.e. learn how to speak like a religious person. I have identified three stages for a convert: The first of these is to speak about his or her faith inside the church. The convert has to produce a discourse about himself, about his or her journey, about his or her faith in order to achieve a narrative of his or her conversion: a sort of ‘pilgrim’s progress’. The institution delivers suggestions and examples of such a construction. For example, in the Roman Catholic Church, the conversions of Paul or Augustine are given as successful examples. Neo-pilgrims find elements with which to compose their narratives in books or in talk groups.

Secondly, converts must find legitimate motivations. The candidate has to mould his spiritual quest according to questions which the institution can answer. At this stage, the convert has two elements to consider. First of all, she or he has to differentiate between his feelings and emotions (generally over-invested in contemporary conversions) and
the position of the institution, where expressions of emotion are kept under strict control. For example, a convert cannot seriously request a conversion by merely evoking his or her daily personal dialogue with God, because the institution cannot evaluate the degree of sincerity. Therefore, such a relationship presents risks that may not be shared by the institution. In addition, the pretender must present an acceptable reason for conversion. For example, he or she has to refrain from offering instrumental reasons: an institution will not receive a project of marriage, because conversion is only judged on the sincere adherence of individuals and not on their personal arrangements. In this second stage, the work required is carried out in order to distance himself or herself from fervour, in order to achieve the best way to present in front of the authority. Candidates may hide personal motivations behind their avowed spiritual development. For example, converts must hide any motivations unacceptable for the clerics:

I didn’t care for religion, and I still don’t care today. Converting was only a way to prove my love and my will to live with her. But I have not said this to the imam, nor to her parents ... I’m not even sure I told her! I just told to the imam that I was interested in learning Arabic and discovering his religion. [Rashed]

Thirdly, the convert is required to show his or her will to integrate into a new community. As mentioned previously, in each monotheistic religion a conversion processes was identifiable. The first step is generally an interview with the cleric, a rabbi, a priest or an imam. This step is important because the candidate is judged on his or her performance and answers questions about his or her motivations, personal history and spiritual quest. Showing a will to integrate implies the acceptance of new rules and training. In Islam, the formation process could be reduced to the interview itself, but in Roman Catholicism or in Judaism the training period could last anything from one-and-a-half years to five years. During that time, candidates have to follow courses, attend training sessions and discussion groups, take exams etc. It is a real apprenticeship. But showing a will to integrate also implies the possibility of hiding certain personal hesitations. For example, if you want to convert to Catholicism, you cannot overtly criticise the Pope (too much), even if you keep a critical distance. Institutions can stand some heterodoxy, within limits. Once more, candidates have to sustain pretence during their entire novitiates.

According to these rules, we can say that institutions have to routinise conversions; that is, to mould the process into a set of mutually
accepted requirements (an institutionality). So the role of institutions is to receive converts’ emotions and fervour, and to distance them from the daily routine: welcoming the exceptional and enforcing the banal.

On the other hand, however, we must ask: What are the role and the contribution of the institution? Two were identified:

1. The role of ‘converting instructor’. Sébastien Tank says that the institution ‘makes converts’ (Tank-Storper, 2007). The instructor’s duty is to conduct tests and ensure that the required testimonies are received from those who wish to convert. For the institutions, a conversion could be seen as an evaluation of liabilities that engage their reputations. It is one of the reasons why candidates must do courses, exercises, tests etc. in the comprehensive training.

2. The second role, strongly linked to the first one, is the role of witness. While authorising a conversion, the institution ‘officially stamps’ the conversion, proclaims it to be socially acceptable because it is sincere and it obeys the rules of the procedure. The Church acts like a guarantor. It creates converts and authenticates their progress as ‘in conformity with the religious orthodoxy’.

**Endless work with friends and relatives**

In this case, converts are judged through their interactions with other individuals. These individuals are generally relatives, next of kin, and next-door neighbours. It may also concern friends and family that a convert may have, such as fellow believers in faith, work colleagues etc. In such a situation, where his or her faith is questioned, the convert feels compelled to tell his story, his evolutions and its greatest stages. She or he has to speak about intimacy in front of a wide range of individuals. Some are close but some are distant, and the convert has to take into account this diversity.

Through my interviews, I have identified rules that converts have to respect. These can be summarised into three competences.

The first consists of knowing how to speak about intimate life. Conversions are generally individual choices, personal decisions, but these choices must be publicised and explained. Speaking about themselves is often an aptitude learned and modelled during their relationships with the Church. But it is less easy to speak about oneself outside the Church. I noticed that in converts’ narratives, the place and role of self-experienced ‘trial’ and error is given special consideration. Thus the convert shows the human dimension of his conversion, with its doubts,
hesitations and questions. Conversion is not a steady, linear process, so the expression of hesitations can echo the ups and downs of the process. Underlining the moments of weakness is a way to present oneself as an individual with positive and negative sides. One convert to Judaism told me of her doubts:

- Sociologist: Have you met phases of doubt during your journey?
- Convert [3]: Oh yes, lots of! I was almost constantly in doubt. First, the Consistory put doubt on me as regard to the continuation of the conversion. They often said that it wasn’t won. So I had hard times and phases of doubts. And yet, after one more step, it is up again. I was happy for a while, comforted in my choices. And so on, one hesitation following the other. But that’s converting isn’t it?

In this extract, we note that doubts are part of the process of conversion. Recalling these hesitations is a way of proving oneself to be sincere and transparent. It reinforces the choice of the religion and makes the engagement definitive. In fact, across all the narratives, the phases of doubts alternated with more secure stages, but they were shortened and transformed: doubts are assessed, but are no proof of weakness; they are presented as creative energy. This logic of exposure also obeys the pattern followed by Augustine in his confessions, being touched by doubts, distrust and uncertainty: a pattern that has become the classical narrative for conversion nowadays.

The second skill consists of knowing how to modulate these stories according to the audience. Obviously, the converts’ narratives will change, depending on the audience and the situation. For example, the conversion-narrative will be different if a convert speaks with his life-companion, with his family, with his friends, his colleagues or with a sociologist. Converts have the competence to modulate their narratives, to be long-winded or brief, merely telling or testifying, etc. They are capable of identifying the differences between situations, the quality of their audience or the place, and can adapt their ways of telling accordingly. In such situations the major difference is about the public or private configuration, linked to the difference between avowal and testimony of confession (potentially with a missionary side).

It is not in the closest circle (family and friends) that it is easiest to tell of one’s conversion. The proximity of the audience and the degrees of intimacy could prevent free speech. Parents’ reactions are especially feared by converts. In the course of my research, I noticed that almost all conversions are the cause of distance between the converts and their
parents, distance that could be restored quickly, but could also last years. Another type of situation, both public and private, is the conversion stories posted on the Internet. This configuration was outside the frame of my first field research. One might notice, however, that anonymity allows freer expression and generally leads to a more detailed narrative.

The third competence consists of knowing how to accept controversy, criticism or/and reprobation. In certain social interactions, the convert has to face hostility. The capacity to face criticism, to face opposition, is at stake and is seen as a real asset. The operational way to do this is not to take it on a personal level, not to feel involved either personally or religiously. It implies being detached both from oneself and one's religious progress. It is not easy to be criticised for one's intimate and personal engagement. Most of the time, converts use strategies to defuse arguments: having a sense of humour, being polite, expressing no anger, changing the topic etc. One of my interlocutors confided a similar situation during an interview:

– Convert 4: I was at a friend's party, and a man came up and spoke to me about religion, probably because my friend had already told him I was a believer, or convert. So, he asked me, so directly, if I was a sort of mystic, if I knew Bernadette Soubirou, what was my opinion on miracles, and stuff like that. I felt it a bit too rich, and he thought he was funny. I felt hurt.
– Sociologist: How did you react on the moment?
– Convert 4: I was bas, I felt rotten, I dropped the discussion.

In narrating one's conversion, these competences or aptitudes are also rules to follow. If any of these three rules were not to be respected, it could endanger the achievement of recognition for the conversion. With these three competences (which are also injunctions to be honest) the convert must be able to sustain a bond with old and new friends, with family and relatives. This continuity is important, because the convert has to keep in touch with his family and his immediate surroundings (friends, colleagues at work, etc.). Continuity is also important because, in our theoretical scheme, the conversion is validated by recognition stemming from these interactions without major conflict, from which we can assume that the individual is regarded as a convert, and tacitly accepted.

The following and last part of the chapter will present an attempt to sociologically 'problematise' the religious conversions in a broader perspective. I shall try to show how the religious conversions today are
shaped by what C. Taylor calls the Secular Age and its socio-political contexts.

**Becoming a believer in the secular age**

Outlining the stakes around conversion and the social context in which it occurs implies taking into account some of the results from the sociology of religion. First of all, religious modernity has given rise to two processes. The first is a process of individualisation of beliefs and of ways to achieve in life. For centuries, religion has been a family heirloom. The fall of religious transmission has provoked an individualisation of religious choices and a consumerist approach to committing oneself. A tendency to rationalise one’s quest is linked to this process (Berger, 1990: 120–34). This second process is related to the need to self-publicise one’s spiritual quest. In cases of conversion, converts are urged to express and publicise their rationality in this regard. The second point deals with the concept of secularisation. Peter Berger, one of the theoreticians of the concept, outlined the central idea:

> ... although the term ‘secularization theory’ refers to works from the 1950s and the 1960s, the key idea of the theory can indeed be traced to the Enlightenment. That idea is simple: Modernization necessarily leads to a decline of religion both in society and in the minds of the individuals. [Berger, 1999: 2]

Another definition from the Davie and Hervieu-Léger (1996: 13):

> ... religion has ceased to provide individuals and groups with the references, norms, values and symbols that allow them to make sense of the various situations and experiences in which they live: religion is no longer the all-ensconcing moral code that applies to all.\(^4\)

Religious conversion is an heuristic point for discussion because it is the adhesion to an institution that is supposedly weaker than before.

The general idea guiding this last section is to view conversion as a result of changes, of resistance and restitution between politics and religion in the contemporary world, and especially in the particularly French relationship between religion and laïcité. In these configurations, beliefs and conversion must be presented in a specific way that
allows people to take personal action harmlessly, conscientiously and in a carefully thought out manner.

**What about converts and the French laïcité?**

As mentioned, in order to make his conversion a success, the convert must set the process in a secular configuration, with two specific features: The first feature is that the choice of a new religion has to be personal. From this perspective, conversion is a model of personal choice and individual autonomy. Therefore, conversion should never be imposed. The choice has to be explained and endorsed, following the steps and rules mentioned previously. If a conversion is not to be imposed, it could possibly be influenced. Debates and controversies could come up and are welcomed. For example, in recent years in France, there have been huge public debates on the definition of a religion ‘what is a religious practice?’ and the ways for groups to adhere. This debate raises questions on sects and modes of commitments, especially when a ‘conversion’ is ‘forced’ (by mistreatment or blackmail). In those situations, conversions cannot be seen as personal or voluntary choices. The grammar based on free will cannot operate and the ‘conversion’ cannot be validated.

The second feature is that all religions are supposed to be confined to the private sphere. This feature only really concerns the French system (and maybe the Turkish one, because French and Turkish legislation share the same principle of separation – of public and private – albeit with different religious majorities: Christian Turks tend to keep low profiles). There is a real difference in comparison with the USA, Canada and other European countries: in France, individuals can have their own religion, but they cannot exhibit it collectively. The state today recognises faith, but not any public manifestation thereof. Therefore, we can understand the headscarf crisis as a result of the manifestation of a new religiosity, in a particularly sensitive space – the school system – which has historically been a place of conflict between the state and Churches. However, there are no juridical restrictions on the public expression of religious choices; it is only the result of a historical opposition between politics and religion.

Now, let us try to enter the black box of the French laïcité. I have envisaged French laïcité in three aspects. It is firstly a historical evolution – which I call a ‘secularisation phase’ – which lasted approximately a century (1789–1905, from the French Revolution until the Law of Separation; Baubérot, 1994). Secondly, it is a law and jurisprudence,
embodied in the 1905 Law of Separation between state and religions (Weil, 2007). Thirdly, and mainly, it is a strong idea and ideal which carries representations and political mobilisations.

We could envisage these three irreducible dimensions as a device. Laïcité is a historical construction, a representation of the world which was carried through by individuals (free-thinkers, political groups that fought mainly against the Catholic Church). These ideas were fought for and against, and a juridical compromise was finally found through law in 1905. So laïcité is an ideal which aims at neutralising the public space. But today it is also a framework, a common frame of reference that could determine individual actions. From our sociological perspective, this device illuminates many interacting factors: institutions (Churches, political parties, associations and special-interest groups, police and justice system), individuals (believers or unbelievers), objects (churches, temples, mosques, schools, headscarves, bibles, crucifixes, improvised praying spaces), ideas, beliefs and ideologies (religious beliefs, faith, Republicanism, national identity and unity), and a divinity occupying the central place.

My assumption is that laïcité has become more and more of a framework for French political life than a simple succession of articles in law. It is a referent with a very strong symbolic range that is interfering with collective and individual behaviour.

So, in our French context, where institutions and individuals are interacting, the law is to be respected, but at the same time strategies and counter-strategies are being elaborated in order to meet specific goals. Laïcité, as a superior common principle (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006) is being updated through arguments, quarrels and crises.5

And what about religions in the secular age?

From the particular above-mentioned situation, what place can be found for religion in this secular age? I suggest the following assumption: the three monotheistic religions are caught between two competing – but not exclusive – representations: they are simultaneously tolerated and suspected. They are tolerated because we recognise the role and the strong social importance of religions, while relegating beliefs to the private sphere. They are suspected because they are perceived as coercive structures which alienate individuals and are thought to be opposed to social change. If we delve further, we may say that these two conceptions are inherited from French nineteenth-century anti-Catholic policies. If I dared, these conceptions could be traced back to the philosophies of
the Enlightenment: Rousseau perhaps, with his deist principle at the base of any society (which will lead to civil religion), and Voltaire with his atheist criticism of religion.

Concerning religious conversions, the publicisation must be done in this frame. The public presentation needs to show a safe and stable adherence to the tolerated side of religion. The convert must present some way in which the new religion has made a positive contribution to his life. If not, he might not be recognized as a convert by his relatives, and thus might be segregated. I have noticed two types of conversion that are socially devalued. I call the first form ‘fanatic conversion’. In this form of conversion, the religious engagement is associated with being intransigent, doctrinaire, exclusionary and potentially violent. The second form could be called ‘illuminated conversion’. This form implies mysticism and irrational arguments, and ways of living with religion that can isolate and be potentially dangerous for the convert. These two ideal-types of devaluated conversions make apparent the differences between a classical conversion and a sectarian engagement. One convert testified about his return to Islam in a very strong and fundamentalist practice:

Once I came back to Islam, I had a very fundamentalist period: I criticised my parents because they didn’t pray every day; I annoyed my sister for years about her clothes … Even my friends, I castigated them for smoking and drinking, while six months before, we had traded drugs … My conversion was so radical! But I calmed down afterwards because nobody in my family and friends were talking to me … I was a little ayatollah! [Adel]

We arrive thus at a more general remark: the study of religious conversions allows us to identify the construction of individual relationships with religion, which must be personally justified by the convert. So, in order to successfully convert, a convert has to publicly present a personal road (path) that balances any real or noticeable change in the person. A ‘good’ conversion is a conversion where the individual doesn’t seem to have changed in any way. A ‘bad’ conversion is one which changes the individual beyond recognition.

Converts must ‘live out’ their conversion to different persons, in various places at different moments. One difficulty was often noted: talking in public about one’s new religion carries a risk of being mocked, criticised and contradicted. ‘French society is not a religious one, people can’t understand the truth of faith’ a young Catholic convert told me.
The strictest representations of laïcité shrink the expression of beliefs and tend to neutralize the publication of religious belonging.

**Conclusion**

It is my assumption that tolerance and suspicion are two social attitudes applied to religions. Between these representations, individuals hesitate, choose, refute, argue, refuse and adhere. They act and give their opinions according to their beliefs and to their relations to religious institutions. By my reckoning, to convert is to enact a belief in a social space, and manifesting faith is to claim an identity in the public sphere; an identity which could be read both by the Church and by society at large.

A second assumption considers conversions as interactive processes. It is only by the validation of others that a conversion occurs. Danièle Hervieu-Léger (1998) called this process the ‘mutual validation of faith’, but she limited it to the sphere of co-religionists (fellow believers). In my opinion, seeking a social recognition of the new faith constitutes the major work of converts. This task requires techniques, measures and adjustments during social interactions.

Finally, to believe in the Secular Age, one must examine the presentation of beliefs in a historical context where the representations of religion are determined. Thus, in France, the laïcité inherited from the Enlightenment maintained an aggressive attitude towards religion: ‘France has, since 1789, been in a political culture of undeclared civil war where [...] seculars and clerics [...] haven’t ceased to declare each other “enemies of the Nation”’ (Roy, 2008: 241). Therefore, France’s long Catholic tradition contributed to the creation of a religion ‘by default’ calqued on the Catholic political evolution. Three main elements compose the French vision of religion: beliefs are supposed to be private (in the intimate sphere), religion can no longer appear in the public space (except the historical traces like churches), and no religious reference is allowed in politics. Any new religion whose lifestyle does not match these criteria is suspected of intransigence, with a will to break the secular consensus. It is not easy in this context to talk about adhesion to a new religion, above all when this religion is stigmatized.

In the secular regime, converts possess resources and strategies to publicise their new religion. They know how to speak or keep quiet, and where to talk or be silent; they can modulate their stories. Converts benefit from the liberal religious attitude of French laïcité. These opportunities are, however, constrained by the historical context, which seeks to bury religious observance deep in the intimate sphere. Reporting a
conversion according to the Secular Age’s rules of civility contributes to strengthening these rules of civility and thus perpetuating the Secular Age. In addition, the invention of secularism is one of the strongest issues of political debate in France, and crystallised two irreconcilable camps. French secular intransigence still has a bright future!

Notes

1. The concept of ‘justification’ was introduced in the pragmatic sociology by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006). Justification is the moment where individuals, viewed through their actions, are acting through a grammar. The action of justification concerns the positions, argumentations, criticisms or explanations delivered in trials. These trials are moments of uncertainty where the ‘états de grandeur’ will be established.

2. My translation of: ‘on peut appeler institution toutes les croyances et tous les modes de conduite institués par la collectivité’.

3. My translation of: ‘L’usage du terme “institution” signifie (…) la plus grande attention à ce qui est institué ou objectivé de diverses manières, à tout ce qui est par conséquent susceptible d’assurer un minimum de cohérence dans les conduites des membres, d’unifier partiellement leurs façons de se comporter, voire de modeler leurs conceptions du juste et de l’inique, du licite et de l’inacceptable, du bien et du mal, du vrai et du faux’.


5. A typical example is the law on the hijab, the Muslim headscarf, which we can consider as a moment when groups clashed over trying to negotiate a change in the interpretation of this superior principle: arguments for respecting women, counter-arguments for respecting personal faiths and political issues are testing the superior common principle of the law.

Bibliography


Being a Black Convert to Judaism in France

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‘Converting to Judaism is possible, but not easy’.¹ What might be perceived as being particularly uncommon is the experience of a Black person going through the process of conversion to Judaism in France. Yet Black converts to Judaism are becoming increasingly visible, even though they have not been integrated as such in the self-perception of the Jewish community of France, let alone in the wider French society. One organisation established within the Jewish community of France is currently playing an important part in bringing French Black Jews out of obscurity – the Fraternité Judéo-Noire (Black-Jewish Brotherhood, hereafter FJN). Joining forces to form an organisation seems to have been the best option for these proselytes, whose ethnic profile is not in keeping with the traditional mapping of the French Jewish community as made up of Ashkenazim and Sephardim. This chapter will focus on French Black Jewish identity as experienced and related by African, West Indian, American or biracial converts. What factors have driven them to embrace Judaism at a time when the French media exhibit a marked tendency to expose the Black French as the new anti-Semites?

In order to gain accurate insight into the actual lived experience of French Black Jews, I have chosen two sociological approaches. The first consists of observing and getting updates on the activities of the FJN, which aims to liaise between Black Jews scattered all over the French territory. The other approach is a qualitative analysis of interviews I have conducted with converts, not necessarily members of the FJN, which has allowed me to delineate a number of individual spiritual itineraries. Two essential questions have guided me throughout this study. First, how is French Judaism appropriated by Black Jews, and how do they negotiate their integration into the French Jewish community and into wider French society? Second, how is their quest for visibility
expressed vis-à-vis both the Jewish world and French society, which is largely secular?

Converting to Judaism in France

Judaism has been part of French culture and religious life from the earliest beginnings of the nation. A Jewish presence was recorded at the time of the colonization of Gaul by the Romans. Migratory waves, both from Eastern Europe and from the Mediterranean, contributed in shaping its diversity, although Jewish communities remained politically on the margins of the Catholic kingdom of France. The specificity of French Judaism lies in its emancipation, and official recognition, in the wake of the French Revolution of 1789, which planted the seeds of the idea of the separation between Churches and the state. As a result, Judaism in France was redefined as a private form of worship, which was not supposed to have any impact on the way citizens interacted with their fellow Frenchmen and women in the public sphere. At the same time, the organization of the communities’ religious life became centralized after 1808, when Napoleon initiated the creation of a Consistory based in Paris, controlling local branches in every region of France. The role of this central religious body was to associate private religious beliefs even more closely with the moral ideals of human rights, thereby elaborating a form of ‘Franco-Judaism’, so that rabbis and Jewish intellectuals preached an actual ‘regeneration’ of Jewish personhood in their writings and schools, particularly after 1860 and the creation of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (Cohen, 1993, pp. 101–2).

In France, there are two ways to become Jewish. On the one hand, the Consistoire central israélite de France, a national institution, was created by Napoleon I with the specific aim of administrating the Jewish denomination in France. Its role consists of watching over and defending the interests of the French Jewish community and maintaining Jewish quality of life in all communities, synagogues, schools and charities, notably through close control of kosher foods. Gilles Bernheim is the Chief Rabbi of France and Joël Mergui is the President of the Consistoire central. As the latter institution is officially representative of Judaism in France, all requests for conversion are centralised through it. Obtaining the status of convert is difficult because all aspiring converts are systematically deterred. Monique Ebstein, writing for the website of the liberal Jewish community in Belgium, explains this polity in the following terms:

As regards the Consistoire central de France, in the very early 21st century … a maximum degree of stringency was the rule in enforcing
the regulation. Since then, it appears to have softened to a certain extent. It is an extremely bureaucratic system. Out of the 1,500 requests sent annually to the Bureau of Conversions, only about 50% are granted. First, the applicant must send a letter of interest which is answered only several months later, and sometimes as late as a year. Next is a very formal exchange, by mail only. During this stage of the process, the applicant is alone, without any contact with any member of the hierarchy; then a first appointment is set. Then the learning process may begin: ‘being in the conversion phase’ means accepting the role of the disciple, faced with an authority that possesses the knowledge, prescription, and judgment, and tells him or her to act before they understand. Most of the time, the applicant is deprived of any support on the part of the hierarchy and is left on his or her own to integrate in the community.²

Coexisting with the Consistoire is the modernist movement, which consists of the liberals on one side and the Massorti on the other. The modernist movement, which is not controlled by the Consistoire central israëlite de France, offers alternative conversion paths to the Jewish religion, setting its own rules for the process. Conversions validated by this movement are not recognised by the Consistoire. Yet, in either case, converting to Judaism remains a lengthy process which is difficult to complete. In spite of its dissuasiveness, the conversion process in France gives rise to new ethnic profiles in a community which remains traditionally identified by its two main ethnic markers – Ashkenazim and Sephardim. Among these new ethnic profiles, African and West Indian Jews appear in two categories: the natives and the converts. In this chapter, I am specifically discussing the converts, although I have also interviewed Black native Jews who identified as Ethiopian, or even Ashkenazic or Sephardic. I have focused on the reasons which led this group to embrace Judaism.

Reasons for converting or asking for recognition

The socio-professional profile of the interviewees is rather diverse. Their educational level is quite high, ranging between a Bachelor’s degree and a Master’s degree or a doctorate. However, their occupations often are below par, as a result of discrimination that many feel and highlight. Nonetheless, several are skilled professionals such as lawyers, physicians, psychologists, or hold political offices such as deputy mayors or members of city councils. The interviewees display two sorts of profiles: some were born Jewish as a result of having Black and White Jewish
parents, and these tend to ask for recognition as Jews; while others have converted to Judaism. The first category is made up of Ethiopian Jews, also known as Beta Israel, the descendants of the Biblical union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. In 1985 and 1991, two repatriation missions of Ethiopian Jews to Israel were organised, called Operations Moses and Solomon. But any Ethiopian Jews born or living in France at that point were left out of these operations; hence, the legitimacy of their Jewishness still remains to be proven by means of a return to Ethiopia, which would in turn grant them a sort of ‘Jewish ID card’. I have met several such interviewees who have been living in France for a very long time but who refuse to be compelled to convert to prove their Jewish legitimacy:

My grandmother is a Yemeni Jew. She lived in Israel, and then they returned to Ethiopia. I’ve been in France since I was four, my mother worked for the United Nations and my father had an administrative job. Here in France, I met an uncle of mine from Ethiopia. He’s the one with whom and from whom I’ve learnt our family history. I did a lot of talking with my parents, and now I’m waiting for an opportunity to return to Ethiopia, to see where my house is, and once I’ve done that, then I’ll go to Israel. You see, if you want to go there you need legitimacy. [D, French and Ethiopian origins, temp. job, 38].

Living as a faithful Jew, bearing a Jewish first name, this interviewee remains a native Jew waiting for legitimisation in two stages – returning first to Ethiopia to subsequently obtain the certificate of Jewishness requested by the Israeli Ministry of Interior for anyone requesting to benefit from the Law of Return, or Aliyah.

The second category is made up of Jews born into marriages between Ashkenazim or Sephardim and Blacks from the West Indies or from African countries. One of my respondents, for instance, is a 17-year-old woman born to an Ashkenazic father and a Catholic mother from Martinique. Her paternal family (her grandparents especially) being orthodox Jews, she was educated in Jewish culture and in a religious atmosphere, which she describes as such: ‘From my birth, I was raised in Judaism on my father’s side. I respect the Shabbat and the great feast days, I did my bat-mitzvah, so I don’t need to convert to feel Jewish, really’ (R, high school student, 17).

While Jewishness is inherited from one’s mother, this young respondent nevertheless feels Jewish in her own right, and refuses to go through the process of conversion because she feels it would violate her
conscience. As a result, although all of her paternal relatives belong to the orthodox community, she goes to a liberal synagogue where she obtained full recognition.

Another female interviewee, in her 30s and born to a Sephardic mother and a West Indian father from Guadeloupe, finds herself compelled to convert because she cannot show her parents’ marriage certificate (their Ketuba). She asserts that her father unsuccessfully attempted to convert at the Consistoire israélite de Paris:

In 1980, my father tried to convert at the Consistoire, but they rejected his request. He obtained his conversion in Morocco – my mother’s home country – but he was told they did not recognise this conversion. ... When my turn came, the rabbis at the Consistoire asked me to convert, although they are perfectly aware of the fact my mother is Jewish. Just to give me a hard time, they told me to bring back the Ketubas of 1730, although they know that Morocco’s situation has changed since then. In spite of the fact I am a Jew, I still had to convert, that’s a sad thing to say, it’s sad for my family ... Since I didn’t have the Ketuba they demanded, I did DNA tests to prove that I am a Jew, thinking they would take that into account. But they replied, ‘you know, converts from Spain were denied, so why should we accept you?’

The law which stipulates that a person is Jewish by maternal filiation becomes painful in its interpretation in the case of this interviewee, who has forced herself to accept the conversion process demanded by the Consistoire and worships at a Lubavitch synagogue, her self-described priority being to preserve her future offspring:

I have accepted to become a convert, because I need this document [the certificate of Jewishness] for my children. I can't picture myself marrying a non-Jew, because I don't want my parents’ story to repeat itself.

Aside from these cases of native Jews seeking recognition, the Consistoire and the so-called modernist movement both deal with converts of African or West Indian descent who converted to the Jewish religion and live in France. I have so far met with 30 people who agreed to answer my questions. This has allowed me to collect their life stories and conversion narratives, to detect motifs within these narratives, and to bring to light their thought processes, choices, subjective representations and
ways of coping with their difficulties, as well as the individual or collective strategies they implemented to overcome the latter. These elements often remain unseen in the context of direct observation. Listed below are some of the reasons put forward to explain conversions. Firstly, the motif of the spiritual quest:

I have been interested in Judaism from age 16. I am 45 today, but to this day I just can’t explain how I stumbled into it. I fell into it like a fly into water, there’s nothing you can do about it. [M, male, telecom worker, from Guadeloupe, 45]

I have always felt like a Jew, although I belonged to a very devout Roman Catholic family. [A, applying for conversion, female, lawyer, Togolese origins, 30]

You don’t become a Jew by chance. My soul awakened and I turned towards the Jewish religion. [S, female, realtor, from the Ivory Coast, 42]

A number of other converts discovered their ‘calling’ to embrace Judaism while living in Israel as students and living with Jews on a daily basis:

I was in Israel, living like a Jew, but I didn’t want to mix with the orthodox crowd. In Israel, people are free to pray or not pray, wear the kippa and not go to the synagogue. They have freedom in the democratic sense of the term. That’s how I was living my faith. I used to hang out with Christians, Protestant Evangelicals, but I felt like a Jew at heart. I wore the kippa, respected the Shabbat, fasted on Yom Kippur and respected every one of the great feast days. I was lucky: I got adopted into a Jewish host family, just like another child, so I really was immersed in Judaism. So it was up to me to decide whether or not to actually convert. In fact, I had decided to not convert, because that wasn’t my priority. But when coming to France, I felt more than empty inside, and I said to myself, ‘I don’t feel at home here’. I cried and cried and called my host family, saying I needed to go back home. But they said, ‘you spent your money to go and study there, so you should stay there’. That’s when I decided to convert, and I wanted it to go fast. [A, from Congo Brazzaville, Philosophy major, working as a cook, 34]

This testimony is interesting insofar as the interviewee, in spite of his Congolese roots, has really embraced Israel as his home country. His
decision to convert might be explained by homesickness, yet the home he missed when going to France to study was not Congo Brazzaville but Israel, the nation that introduced him to Judaism and gave him the strongest sense of belonging in national as well as religious terms, through the nurturing offered by his host family. Thus, this young man, who perceived himself literally as a ‘child of Israel’ and religiously speaking as a Jew, whose presence made sense in the ‘democratic’ atmosphere of Israeli society, without having to obtain legitimacy through the conversion process, suddenly found himself out of place in France. There, his way of expressing Jewishness along with ‘Blackness’ clashed with the norm to such a point that conversion appeared to him to be the only way to recover his identity. What is most striking is that this category of conversions – those linked to a life experience in Israel – typically occurs in a later period in the interviewees’ lives, after they have settled in France. For instance, a lady in her 50s from the Ivory Coast, who had lived in Israel for nearly 10 years as the Ambassador’s daughter, did not feel the need to convert until 30 years later, after she had left the country to return to the Ivory Coast and had eventually settled in France. Israel thus appears in such narratives as an adopted homeland, and Judaism as an Israel out of Israel, while conversion is an attempt to return to the only possible home – Israel, where Black Jewish identity would no longer be seen as a problem.

A third recurrent motif is the quest for answers to existential issues. One French respondent from the island of Martinique, coming from a Catholic background and aged 65, told me that she had converted in 2004 as a result of an existential crisis triggered by her husband’s passing away just after she had gone into retirement. The feeling of imbalance caused by this double loss prompted her to look for meaning, and she said she found answers to her questioning in Judaism.

Also noticeable among the converts’ motivations is their belief in belonging to a historically Jewish ethnic group (whether or not such genetic claims are historically validated). For instance, a 45-year-old convert of Cameroonian origin justified his joining the Lubavitch orthodox community by the fact that his ethnic group claims to belong to the Hebrew people, even though his family worships at a Baptist church. Another convert, a woman from Martinique, researched her genealogy and was proud to discover that her French ancestors were Jews, rather than Bretons. This belief in belonging to an ethnic group or a family tree with Jewish roots seems to have made it easier for these converts to weather the dissuasive process of conversion; in this respect, conversion appears to legitimise, or at least validate, an ethnic identification
with the Children of Israel, albeit an imaginary one. Genetic legitimacy thus reveals the depth of their aspiration to be recognised as full-fledged Jews, for it ideally erases the phenotypical differences they have with a majority of their fellow Jews.

Besides, conversion may be considered as a characteristic of modern societies, as the French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger has shown: as a result of the growing recognition of individual choice, and the corresponding decline of community control over personal options, religious identity can no longer be taken for granted as an ascribed feature, determined by a person’s birth into any given religious community and unchallenged throughout this person’s lifetime (Hervieu-Léger, 2003). Racial and ethnic mixing has simultaneously become a phenomenon which transforms all modern societies, and in this context, I have been able to detect, between the lines of the conversion narratives, the existence of another category of persons who point to the intercultural nature of their couple as a catalyst for their conversion. These interviewees have accepted and eventually embraced the religion of their Jewish spouses; they participate in the existing construction practice of the Jewishness of their couples and families. As French sociologist Séverine Mathieu has shown, they were brought to conversion (Mathieu, 2009).

Of the couples I interviewed, one described conversion as a deliberate choice made by the non-Jewish wife for the sake of the balance and harmony of the couple, while the other couple said it was not an option, but a necessity for the wife to be able to transmit Jewishness to their offspring. In the first couple, the wife is from Guadeloupe, the husband is Ashkenazic; they have two children and belong to the liberal movement. This is how she accounts for her choice to convert:

We’ve known each other since 1998. Without even considering religion at first, his mindset and way of life were just fine with me and I told myself, ‘Why not convert?’ After all, it will help us lay a common foundation, and start with a healthy family structure, knowing where we’re headed with the education we’ll give our kids. That kind of thing, I believe, is more difficult to achieve when you’re in between two religions. [F, from Guadeloupe, bank executive, 37]

In another couple, the husband – of Ethiopian origin – demanded that his wife from Martinique convert before they had any children together. His priority was to secure the Jewishness of his descendants. They eventually had a son together. However, in such cases, the unwillingness of the Consistoire to consider such motivations as valid reasons for
converting may jeopardise the couples’ life choices since, as explained earlier, only conversions validated by the Consistoire give the right to the Law of Return in case of religious or ethnic persecution.

Parent–child love was also occasionally found to work as a catalyst for conversion. The most exemplary case I encountered is that of a female interviewee in her 50s whose neighbours were Jewish. Her five-year-old son discovered the Jewish faith by becoming friends with their son, who was the same age. It was by accompanying her son and the neighbours’ son to Talmud-Torah classes that the lady converted. She became a Jew before her son, now aged 17, so that he did not have to go through the same process, as it automatically made him a Jew as well.

Every single one of the interviewees lives in a context which is socially delineated by the assertion of individual conscience, and this is perceptible in the way their reasons for converting are narrated as highly individual and intellectual processes. For many of those with a high level of education, the epiphany came when reading books such as Maimonides’s Guide for the Perplexed, rabbi and philosopher Marc-Alain Ouaknin’s Mysteries of the Kabbalah, viewing films or documentaries such as The Jewish Americans by David Grubin, Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List or Roberto Benigni’s Life is Beautiful, or meeting certain iconic figures such as Rav Léon Ashkenazi, better known in France by the nickname Manitou. Their quest for Jewish spirituality is indeed personal, insofar as it runs counter to family traditions that are generally Catholic, and is pursued in spite of the negative reactions of friends and relatives which can lead to misunderstandings, the loss of friends, or escalating tensions sometimes culminating in divorce for a number of couples. But as was shown earlier, the conversion process cannot be restricted to the private and individual sphere, since it is about joining a community and hence building an identification process. It then becomes important to understand what identity markers are borne by these Black converts to Judaism in the specific context of the representations and perceptions of Jewishness in France.

Parameters of Jewish identity

Any analysis of the construction of a sense of identity among Black converts to Judaism in France requires a preliminary investigation into the global parameters of Jewish identity. Jewishness remains hard to define, for there are myriad ways of being Jewish. Still, specialists all seem to agree on the parameters defining a Jewish presentation of the self: i.e. embracing the Torah, the Holocaust, Israel, abiding by religious rules
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and practices, particularly those pertaining to kosher food (Kashruth) and circumcision.

The Jewish population in France, while displaying multiple identities and legacies, is still usually represented as a binary community, made up of Ashkenazim from Eastern Europe and Sephardim from Spain and North Africa. As a result, being a Black Jew in France means finding one’s place somewhere between these two well-established, socially dominant embodiments of Jewishness. Hence the necessity to question the construction of Jewish identity for Black converts, as their status entails a complex negotiation of origins and paths to conversion, ethnic and religious dimensions, and migratory patterns.

Being Black and Jewish, a process of reinterpretation

How can someone be both Jewish and Black? What are Black converts’ representations of themselves and their Jewishness in the eyes of the (White) Jewish Other? Elements of identity reconstruction may be observed along four main axes.

The first is a historical identification with the Jewish people on the basis of a reading of the Torah, or even an appropriation or a reinterpretation of the Biblical past. According to several studies by the historian Cheikh Anta Diop (Anta Diop, 1967), the Biblical ancestors – Ancient Hebrews – were Black. This understanding of the history of Judaism has shaped the collective psyche of a number of ethnic African groups and their representations of their collective historical identity. Thus, all over Africa there are ethnic groups who are commonly recognised as Jewish or who identify with Jews – such as the Jews of Rusape in Zimbabwe, the Lemba of Mozambique or South Africa, the Jews of the Cape Verde islands, the Tutsi of Rwanda and Burundi, the Bayuda of Congo, or the house of Israel in Ghana. The list could go on, but there is still a lack of scholarly works as complete as the book written by Edith Bruder (Bruder, 2002), The Black Jews of Africa: History, Religion, Identity, which lifts the veil on the reality of African Judaism. At any rate, many of these ethnic groups build on this mythical element to assert their historical, or even genetic, membership of the Jewish people. This argument is reinforced by the fact that Moses married a Black woman, Tsippora – which is claimed to reveal Black people’s identification with the historical past of the Jewish people. Let us mention in passing that the interracial union between Solomon and an African woman, the Queen of Sheba, is what allows the Beta Israel, or Falashas, to be recognised as full-fledged Jews.
Two points in particular delineate the ways in which people identify culturally with the Jewish people. The first is expressed in an element which is essential to Jewishness in terms of ritual, i.e. circumcision. African and West Indian men are often, if not always, circumcised. Circumcision is thus not an issue in their conversion experience, though there is a ritual of this kind in the process. Some interviewees have pointed to this African tradition to assert and buttress their identification with the Jewish people.

The second element that was repeatedly put forward is linked with African culinary traditions, which are very close to Kashruth and kosher food processing. A male interviewee from the Lubavitch community insisted on this point in the following words:

I often ask myself if our folks were not going by the same rules as the kosher ritual. They slaughtered the animals by bleeding them to death, and then they made it a point to clean the meat thoroughly and have it well done, for eating your meat rare is not really an African custom. (M, Cameroonian origins, deputy mayor, 45)

Several narratives have emphasised such cultural elements so as to demonstrate and justify identification with the Jewish people. But a paradoxical case is also being made for culinary distinction. The sociologist Séverine Mathieu pointed out in her study that ‘the kitchen, as a preferred medium for the transmission of memories, holds centre stage in the transmission of Judaism’ so that, she writes:

I have considered as ‘Jewish dishes’ those which my interviewees designated as such ... most of the time, ‘Jewish dishes’, or dishes identified as such, appear on the tables (in families of Ashkenazic or Sephardic descent) .... [T]o construct spaces allowing them to keep a link with secularised Judaism, the people I surveyed resort to individual strategies of ‘bricolage’, and cooking also is a stage for implementing such strategies. [Mathieu, id, 77]

African converts come from societies where manioc roots and leaves, yams or mfumbua (shredded leaves) are staple foods, rather than foodstuffs from the Middle East or Russia. Many of these interviewees have expressed the need to implement similar strategies of culinary ‘bricolage’. But they are confronted with many difficulties, as the kosher food stores operating under the licence of the Beth Din carry no sub-Saharan
African foodstuffs. Guershon Nduwa, the president of the FJN, raised this point by mentioning a striking example:

Nothing is more kosher than grasshoppers. Locusts are described in the Torah as a very kosher food source, yet it is mostly Africans from the Great Lakes region who eat them. When I returned from holidays in Congo, I brought back some grasshoppers and offered them to the rabbi from my synagogue. They all refused to accept my gift, because they won’t trust what they’re not familiar with.

The FJN’s claim regarding African kosher food stores is echoed by another claim, rooted more in identity matters. Due to the compartmentalised nature of the Jewish community in France, many Jews of African and West Indian descent have the feeling that they belong neither to the Ashkenazic nor to the Sephardic branch. As a result, they regularly express their discomfort with the present mapping of Jewish identity and its representations in France, typically by joining forces into an association.

The third parameter encountered in individual narratives is the identification with Israel and Africa, both of which hold very important places in the expression of their faith. Some speak Hebrew and go to Israel at least once a year. This mode of expression of their Jewish identity also contains a political dimension. Some have become Zionist activists, while others have started political careers in their African home countries, with platforms explicitly prioritising better cooperation with Israel.

The fourth parameter encompasses the dual transmission of the legacies of the Holocaust and slavery, which are emphasised jointly in the actions of the FJN. This is how the psychologist Yoram Mouchenik describes the legacy of the Shoah:

The Shoah can be seen as the paradigm of the place of collective-type trauma in the construction of identity, particularly as regards the trans-generational transmission of traumatism. In his or her development, the Jewish teenager is confronted ... with the massive, overwhelming perception of the historical event known as Shoah or Holocaust which aimed at the total extermination of the Jews of Europe during the Second World War. We therefore consider that it is partly by being confronted with the myriad representations of a horrifying collective event which many have called ‘unthinkable’ – the deportation, torture, and murder of a great part of the Jewish population of Europe, that a Jewish teenager has to build certain aspects of his or her identity. This identity is thus made increasingly complex, as the usual
transgenerational process of transmitting any identity is overwritten by this historical and unfathomable parameter of the genocide, which, in some circumstances, obliterates all other aspects. In such cases, his or her access to identity is associated with the building or the transmission of a trauma. [Mouchenik, 2002: 119–128]

It might have been assumed that people of African and West Indian descent did not feel concerned by the transmission of the traumatism of the Holocaust from one generation to the next, but among the persons interviewed – some of them biracial – the trauma was evident. A young woman aged 17, born to an Ashkenazic father and a mother from Martinique, expressed herself in these words:

I actually feel closer to the legacy of the Shoah than to that of slavery. Our memory of slavery is further removed, while our memory of the Shoah is more recent, with my grandfather often telling me about it. My grandfather was deported to Auschwitz. My mother never tells me about slavery. [R, high school student, 17]

This particular respondent displayed an actual passion for the Holocaust – she collected articles from newspapers of the period, and her list of preferred movies was all related to it, with Schindler's List by Steven Spielberg and Life is Beautiful by Roberto Benigni quoted as favourites. Other interviewees of West Indian descent have echoed what she said about her mother’s silence about slavery, pointing out that this attitude is quite frequent among families from the French Antilles:

There's a lot of buzz around the legacy of slavery in continental France, but in the Antilles it's a taboo. I'm from Guadeloupe, but we never speak about it there. [M, telecom worker, from Guadeloupe, 45]

Still, other interviewees have stressed similarities between the two forms of persecution, with comments such as the following: ‘slavery and the Shoah are about the same thing, they’re based on man’s hostility to his fellow man’ (Y, from the Ivory Coast, 54). What’s more, the Shoah was also perceived by some respondents as an experience of suffering endured by both Jews and Black people. As has been documented by the journalist Serge Bilé, there were African, West Indian and African American prisoners in Nazi extermination and concentration camps (Bilé, 2005).

The fifth and last element which surfaced with increasing frequency over the course of the interviews addresses the Biblical episode of the
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curse of Ham³ (Genesis 9:24). Both on the website of the FJN and in the radio shows he participated in, FJN president Guershon Nduwa has regularly insisted on its mythical dimension.⁴ As a result, I decided to include a question on this passage in my questionnaire. The responses I received fall into three categories: the first is made up of respondents who deny this myth and put forward objections to it. The second category comprises people who believe they have been cleared of this curse by converting to Judaism. Finally, the third category is composed of respondents who have never heard about it (they are mostly younger people of West Indian origin.) This may be perceived as revealing a colonial issue – albeit based on myth – which has never been addressed, let alone solved. It must not be forgotten that the curse of Ham was used as ideological justification by the Christians who enslaved Africans – even if the latter were supposed to have been cleared of the curse by being christened before boarding the slave ships for the Middle Passage – and also as justification for the colonisation of African countries by European empires.

The elements of identity reconstruction that have been analysed above demonstrate that any identification also entails a dissociation process. The core of this identification process is made up of ethnicity markers which establish and secure the ‘border’ between the identity ascribed to individuals by the Jewish world and the identity they claim for themselves. The best illustration of this was given on 9 January 2011 at a dinner followed by a debate organised by the FJN. There, an academic insisted on identifying African and West Indian Jews as Sephardim, even though an hour earlier both Guershon Nduwa and Shlomo Mula (the latter a representative of the Ethiopian Jewish community at the Israeli Parliament who was visiting France), had made the point that they were neither Ashkenazim nor Sephardim. This shows the extent to which, beyond the religious dimension, an ethnic problem is raised, in the sense of the term which was best defined by the sociologist Pierre-Jean Simon:

... a web of relatively objective ... traits, shared with a number of individuals and shaping them, in their own eyes and others’, into a specific community, and at the same time, a common consciousness of belonging to this community. Ethnicity is what makes you a member of an ethnic community, both for yourself and the other members of your group (self-identity) and for the non-members (hetero-identity,) in a feeling of acceptance, pride or even vanity (positive identity, which may be assertive or aggressive) or, on the contrary, a
feeling of shame and self-hatred (negative identity.) Ethnicity is what makes you share with others membership in one of these extremely numerous and diverse, always highly specific, ethnic groups such as Quebecker-ness, Jewishness, Breton-ness, Vietnamese-ness, Japanese-ness, etc. [Simon, 1994: 18]

Thus, as put by Denys Cuche, another French sociologist, the point is not so much to study:

... the cultural content of identity, but rather the mechanisms of interaction which, relying on culture in a strategic and selective way, maintain or challenge ‘collective’ borders. Contrary to a largely held belief, continuous relations sustained in the long run between ethnic groups are not necessarily conducive to the progressive erasure of cultural differences. On the contrary, quite often, these relations are organised in such a way as to maintain cultural distinctiveness. Sometimes, they even lead to emphasising this distinctiveness, through the (symbolic) patrolling of identity borders. [Cuche, 2010: 113]

Besides, although Black converts consider themselves to be full-fledged Jews, this does not account for their mode of integration into the Jewish community. What are the reactions to their presence in the Jewish milieu, and how do they relate as Blacks Jews to their White fellow Jews?

**Being Black and Jewish in the Jewish communities of France**

Once the conversion process has been completed, the Black proselytes are inscribed in a Jewish world that is already diverse as a result of the migratory waves which have profoundly transformed the landscape of French Judaism, as highlighted by the French sociologist Martine Cohen (Cohen, 1993: 103).

‘Who and what are ‘the Jews’? What does it mean to be a Jew?’ asks the ethnologist Ida Simon-Barouh, before pointing out:

They are routinely perceived as a homogeneous community, but in reality they display an astounding degree of diversity – in terms of ethnic origins, and hence, family and national histories; in terms of individual and collective self-definitions; in terms of how they are ascribed an identity and perform their Jewishness. ‘The’ Jew does not
exist. Many kinds of Jews exist, in the different forms taken by their daily lives in the wider society. [Simon-Barouh, 2009: 9]

Once the conversions have been validated, a question remains as to whether this implies a relation of mutual identification and acceptance. Do Black proselytes consider themselves to be full-fledged Jews? Are they perceived as such by their fellow Jews who are White? How is the relation of Black Jews to White Jews (known either as Ashkenazim or Sephardim) expressed in France?

Conversion to Judaism implies wholehearted identification, and even actual fusion with the Jewish community:

Conversion must indeed be understood as the encounter of specific individuals with a specific belief system, but it seems more to the point to comprehend the relation as one of reciprocal identification. Conversion is based on the assumption that an exclusive identity has been built in the first place. It does not simply boil down to embracing values or salvation goods. It involves a process whereby the convert espouses the beliefs and, hence, the institution conveying them ... it is a process of assimilation in the fullest meaning of the term, a process of mutual incorporation ... . The process at work in conversion is a dynamic process of symbolic appropriation which allows a better understanding of oneself through self-transformation. It is a process of identification of the Other with the self and of the self with the Other. [Tank-Storper, 2007: 17–18]

This observation, by the sociologist Sébastien Tank-Storper, is only partly validated in the present case. For, in spite of the actual and profound transformation of the person, the process of mutual identification seems problematic, particularly in the context of the French Jewish community when the convert is Black and the ‘Other’ is White.

Undeniably, Black converts’ relations with their fellow Jews are marked by their relative distinctiveness in terms of skin colour. Several respondents have emphasised dual reactions: on the one hand, extremely hospitable attitudes (such as giving tips on books or better rabbis for those seeking specific guidance); and on the other hand, reactions of rejection, betraying astonishment at, and doubt about, their Jewish identity.

Within synagogues, two types of reaction have been recorded by the interviewees. On the one hand, again, hospitality is expressed, with converts being adopted by members of the community or finding new friends there, and with some even getting involved in movements such
as the Jewish Students’ Movement of France (Mouvement des étudiants juifs de France) or embracing Zionism. The following case – that of a female lawyer from an orthodox community in La Garenne-Colombes (greater Paris area) – perfectly illustrates the attitude of adoption: ‘I think I’ve been lucky, they have really adopted me in my community and I’m really being pampered there. Maybe that’s because I’m articulate and I’ve got a good job’ (A, Togolese origins, lawyer, 30).

On the other hand, several respondents mentioned screenings and searching at the entrances to synagogues which they claimed targeted Black worshippers more insistently than White, as well as hostile stares. Significantly though, younger respondents who grew up in the communities mentioned no hostile stares, but rather described a form of colour-blindness, as the following interviewee explains:

I’ve worshipped at my synagogue since I was little, and I never had any mean stares or any other form of discrimination. I grew up in my community, so I think from their standpoint, I’m not seen as a Black person. [L, Falasha and Martiniquais origins, Master’s student, 24]

But almost all adult respondents have ascribed the hostile stares and expressions of suspicion and rejection to their skin colour, explaining that members of the communities were not used to seeing Black people among them:

The first time I went to a bookstore down the street ... not only was I badly received, but the bookseller told me these books were not for people like me. [D, Ethiopian origins, realtor, 38]

When I went to a kosher store, the salesman was with his son and the kid said out loud, ‘Hey look, Dad! A Black man with a kippa!’ [M, from Guadeloupe, telecom worker, 45]

‘Mean stares in the synagogues’ were repeatedly mentioned as evidence of an attitude of suspicion towards them, and came up spontaneously in almost all of the interviews, except, as mentioned, among younger respondents who mostly belonged to liberal communities. When respondents from the liberal movement had to deal with this, they typically blamed Jews from other communities than their own. The following excerpts are quite representative:

The first times at my synagogue of the Lubavitch movement, I received many mean stares. They often came up to me to check whether I was
at the right page in my book of prayers. After they did that several times and saw I was always at the right page, or that I was even helping other men who had gotten lost, they eventually left me alone. [M, male, Cameroonian origins, deputy mayor, 48]

Even if there are mean stares, I don’t pay any attention. I am in my element. Some people even consider me as a reference, because I know more things than they do. [S, female, from the Ivory Coast, realtor, 43]

People who belong to my [liberal] community (Paris Beaugrenelle) aren’t surprised anymore, but I have observed that people who come to worship occasionally, for instance when there’s a Bat Mitzvah or a Bar Mitzvah – well, these people are surprised to see Blacks in the synagogue, but I’m at home there. [F, from Guadeloupe, bank executive, 37].

When confronted with attitudes of rejection, the respondents concerned resort to various individual strategies, aiming both to protect themselves and to get their communities to evolve towards greater inclusiveness. Their responses show the variety of their strategies: ‘I pretend I haven’t noticed’; ‘They need some time to get used to us again’; ‘It makes me laugh’; ‘I even started protesting that this was racism’; ‘What can I do? They’re human just like everyone else. You can’t change people’s mindsets overnight’; etc.

On the collective level, it is precisely the need to implement new strategies to eventually change other people’s mindsets which led to the creation of the FJN, as the organisation claims to speak on behalf of these unrepresented Jewish believers and lead the fight against racism and discrimination.

**The impact of the FJN**

Although they are still invisible in France, Black Jews are beginning to gain some recognition through the FJN, a secular organisation set up under the principles of the 1901 Law of Separation between the Church and the French state. The history of this organisation is inseparable from that of its founder Guershon Nduwa, a Congolese man who converted to Judaism in 1995 after a study-abroad trip at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. While waiting to become a rabbi – a process he started in Israel – he settled in France, where he is a social worker for Médecins Sans Frontières (‘Doctors Without Borders’). He first founded an organisation called Amitié Judéo-Noire (Judeo-Black friendship), and
in 2007 founded the Fraternité Judéo-Noire (Judeo-Black brotherhood.) This is how he publicly explained the reasons for creating the FJN:

The creation of the Amitié Judéo-Noire essentially revolved around cross-cultural dialogue. But in a context of rising anti-Semitism in Black milieus, we needed a structure that could bring people closer to one another on both sides. Later, the organisation began to morph into a political movement which did not correspond to my ideals anymore. But this is not the reason why I founded the Fraternité Judéo-Noire – this organisation comes from within the community. When you compare with the United States or Great Britain, you see that in those countries, the representation of Black Jews is almost banal. But in France, this is considered a problem. Yet we do have a place and we want to hold it exactly on the same footing as the Jews from Northern Africa and Eastern Europe. We refuse to be forever considered as a minority.5

What the founder did not say in the interview above, but explained in private, is that he decided to set up the FJN after an incident that happened to a 65-year-old female convert from Martinique – a person I myself interviewed later on. She had been cast out of her synagogue by the rabbi, Nduwa said:

... because the rabbi, whose name I purposely won’t mention, said she had a strong body odour. In fact the women from the synagogue had come up to the rabbi to tell him the woman was a nuisance due to her body odour. So the rabbi summoned her and expelled her from the synagogue for this reason. As she stepped out of his office, she was in tears and called me. [interview with Gershon Nduwa, July 2009]

Thus, the FJN was born from a deeply rooted need for change within the Jewish community in France, on the part of Black members expressing the urge to stop living their religion in secret for fear of being considered anomalous. In the greater Paris area, the organisation boasts an estimated 250 families hailing from the French Antilles, America, and mostly from sub-Saharan Africa. A majority of these converted in France. A nationwide estimation remains difficult to obtain due to lack of any reliable statistics, but Guershon Nduwa asserted that he received testimonies from many regions in France. This quest for visibility takes place in the form of cultural activities as well as claims addressed to their fellow French Jews from within the community.
For instance, the FJN recently called out the chief rabbi of France, Gilles Bernheim, regarding the continued existence of a Siddur which was still included in the 2003 edition of the book of prayers (*Tractate Berakhot*, Chapter 6, Tosefta 6). This prayer, called meshane habriyot, had to be recited ‘when seeing a Black person, a person whose appearance is abnormal by birth, or when seeing an elephant or an ape’. In response to the FJN’s protest, this prayer was removed from the latest edition of the *Siddur Kol Haneshamah* published by the Livres de l’Alliance, as the Chief Rabbi of France himself informed the members of the FJN on 28 December 2011.

These recent developments seem to suggest that the process of reciprocal identification may now be underway on a collective, rather than just individual, basis. Yet, while embracing Jewish identity is inseparable from embracing – and being embraced by – a local and national Jewish community, being a Black Jew also implies gaining acceptance as part of both communities within French society.

**Black Jews and French society**

Although their existence and specific identity are not yet clearly perceived in France by either public opinion or media, French Black Jews are beginning to act in ways that make them increasingly visible in wider society. Their relation to French society is expressed in two distinct ways.

At the individual level, their relation to their circles of friends, neighbours, colleagues or classmates betrays an identity crisis stemming from the lack of information on the existence of Black Jews in France. Several strategies are commonly resorted to: some respondents have chosen to remain invisible as Jews within the wider society by not displaying their religious identity among neighbours and friends, in the workplace, or at school or university. They conceal their Magen Davids, kippot, or mezuzot.

A 54-year-old female respondent told me that, because she lives her Jewish faith in a non-ostentatious manner, her North African neighbours had inferred that she was a Muslim, as they often saw her with a scarf on her head and refusing to eat pork. She often received the couple for dinner and was invited over by them as well, until one day they discovered the mezuzah she had nailed to the wall by the door – and ever since their relations have been tense. A male respondent told me that he is so scared of losing his best friend, an Algerian with clearly anti-Jewish sentiments, that he does not dare tell him that he is a Jew.
But others are beginning to act in ways that aim towards rendering their Jewishness visible, both in the public and private spheres – in the workplace, by asking for days off for Jewish feasts, and amongst friends and relatives, by requesting that meals be prepared in keeping with the kosher diet. Such individual initiatives are indicative of their will to frame their problem in terms that correspond with religious norms which are socially recognised in France.

Yet the choice to ‘out’ their religious identity is also fraught with peril, for the Jewish question then becomes a central social issue, which is superimposed onto the ‘Black question’. It may trigger a conflict with employers when negotiating for days-off on account of Jewish holidays. One respondent thus told me that he had lost his job because he had asked for recognition of his Jewishness in the company. It may also – and respondents say, often does – entail the loss of friends, or exposure to anti-Semitic assaults by other Africans or West Indians, as well as North African or White individuals. A 22-year-old male interviewee said he had been attacked on the train by three young North Africans when they realised he was wearing a Magen David around his neck. He escaped unharmed only because he practises martial arts.

The prevailing ignorance surrounding Black Jewish identity in France is the cause of the general identity crisis evident in the respondents’ strategies. Some express it by making their Jewish identity a secret to all; others, by withdrawing into Black Jewish circles to find comfort from the pain of being the target of their fellow (White) Jews’ suspicion; and a third category confronts society’s blindness to their presence by openly displaying their Jewish identity, to the point of seeming in-your-face about it.

At the collective level, the relation of Black Jews to the wider French society is mostly defined by the actions of the FJN, although not all Black Jews, whether native or converted, are members of the organisation. In its fight for visibility, which many members also consider to be a priority, the FJN encourages its adherents to display in their actions an identity that is both Jewish and Black, putting both aspects on the same footing. In this sense, being a Black Jew entails breaking away from what has long been the model of Black Jewish faith in France, i.e., living one’s faith in anonymity, in the shadow, and even in pain. This organisation has allowed some people, especially converts, to feel less lonely and to muster the courage necessary to assert and assume their Black Jewish identity. The FJN’s network offers real potential for mobilisation and publicity around activities that both significantly strengthen the bonds
between its members and give a positive image of their contribution to Jewish life in France, such as the sharing of testimonies, the organisation of religious feasts, concerts and public conferences, the making of films and media broadcasts, and two significant projects – namely, the creation of a community centre or a Black Jewish synagogue, and even the opening of a kosher grocery store carrying goods imported from Africa. Most of all, the feeling of unity is maintained thanks to the organisation’s website, where articles are posted almost daily by, or via, Guershon Nduwa.

The specificity of the FJN’s approach is to challenge the Ashkenazic-Sephardic binary in the mapping of the French Jewish community, by deliberately inviting academics of international renown who specialise in Judaic or Africana Studies – such as Professors Shmuel Trigano, Elikia M’Bokolo, Edward Kaplan or Ephraim Isaac – as guest speakers to debates and feasts organised by the FJN. I have also seen political or religious figures attending the debates organised by the FJN, such as Joël Mergui, the president of the Consistoire central israélite de France, Shlomo Molla, the only Black representative (from Ethiopia) at the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament) or André Azoulay, who acted as counsellor to the Moroccan Kings Hassan II and Mohammed VI. Other organisations, from France or abroad, have also involved in their meetings, such as UPI SAR EL, a civil service volunteer organisation, which once came to give information to the FJN members about the importance of maintaining support bases in Israel.

Finally, the FJN’s outreach also points to a will to establish an interfaith dialogue with a focus on solidarity between minorities. Thus, in January 2011, *Le monde des religions*, a popular magazine, published an article under the following title, ‘Black Covenant Between an Imam and a Rabbi’ to show not only the importance of interfaith dialogue between Black Jews and Muslims, but also the place of Black people in both religions:

> Ever since they met, a year ago, Abdelaziz Gnabaly and Guershon Nduwa have worked hand in hand to legitimise the place of Black people in their respective religions and develop a Pan-African form of solidarity. [Ba, 2011: 16–17]

All of these elements are part of the strategies of outreach and of publicising their cause, which may eventually help to reveal the presence of Black Jews in France, and also be a significant factor in their individual as well as collective integration in France.
Conclusion

Being a Black convert to Judaism in France thus means being confronted with a dual fight for visibility and integration, both within the Jewish community of France and in wider French society. For these converts, the assertion of their Black Jewish identity implies a dual process of identity reconstruction: on the individual level, being Black and Jewish means finding one’s place as such in the Torah, but also living one’s faith either in anonymity and secrecy or even pain, or in a more overt manner, with all the social implications of such a strategy in both the Jewish community and in French society. On the collective level, the FJN has already earned some recognition in its fight to boost the visibility of Black Jews, be they natives or converts. It has become the liberated space of their identity construction.

Notes

3. The Book of Genesis relates that Noah had three sons called Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham and his descendants, through his son Canaan, were cursed by Noah in the following terms, ‘Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant.’ (Genesis 9: 25–27) This biblical myth was used as a justification for the enslavement or colonization of Africans as the purported descendants of Ham and Canaan.
4. See Guershon Nduwa, ‘Are Blacks the descendants of Ham the accursed?’: ‘It is monotheist religions, and above all Christianity, which have introduced a dichotomy that eventually contributed in “racism” after a progressive shift. Then Islam, in its turn, popularised the thesis of the curse of Ham, the putative ancestor of blacks, and this eventually was used by the slaveholders to justify slavery. Yet nowhere does the Bible say that Ham was black’. http://www.fjn-123.fr/spip.php?article160, accessed on 12 October 2010.
Bibliography


In 1830, the Church of Christ was organised in New York under the leadership of Joseph Smith (1805–44) as a reaction to American religious pluralism (Hill, 1989) and as a return to primitive Christianity: Smith claimed to have restored the ‘only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth’ in response to a religious awakening which provoked ‘stir’ and ‘confusion’ due to denominational competition in a very pluralistic religious market. Because of its belief in the Book of Mormon, the Church was referred to as the ‘Mormon Church’ and its members as ‘Mormons’, even though its official name became the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in 1838.

With Mormonism, Joseph Smith ‘Americanised’ Christianity, the Book of Mormon – which Smith claimed to have translated from ancient plates found on a hill near Palmyra, New York – being about the colonisation of Ancient America by Hebrews, and the American continent being considered the Promised Land, ‘a land of promise […] a land which is choice above all other lands’. According to Smith theology, the New Jerusalem was to be founded in Independence, in Jackson County (Missouri), where the Garden of Eden once was and where Jesus would make his return.

Under Smith’s leadership, Mormonism organised utopian communities in the American Midwest. In Nauvoo (Illinois), the Mormon prophet established secret temple rituals known as the ‘endowments’, borrowing from his Masonic initiation. These rituals enable the recipients, who are married for time and eternity in the temple, to become gods in the afterlife and thus, according to American sociologist Thomas O’Dea, ‘Mormonism has elaborated an American theology of self-deification through effort, an active transcendentalism of achievement’ (O’Dea, 1968: 154). In June 1844, due to internal dissensions, political moves
and popular anger and fear, Smith was killed in jail while waiting to be judged. As Smith had not clearly designated his successor to the Mormon Church presidency, Mormonism became Mormonisms.6 The terms ‘Mormonisms’ and ‘Mormons’ being linked to the use of the Book of Mormon by the new-found Church in 1830, I argue that ‘Mormonism’ is in every Church that believes in or uses the Book of Mormon, even if that Church and its members refuse to be called as such,7 mostly in order to distance themselves from the ‘Majority Mormonism’8 of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints which is headquartered in Salt Lake City (Utah).

Among these many Mormonisms, two are currently present in France: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) and the Community of Christ (known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints before 2001), actually nowadays a progressive Protestantism with Mormonism as an option.

Those two USA-headquartered movements, while sharing the same founding American mythology and 14 years of common history, reacted differently to their respective and very unequal international growth: whereas the LDS Church spread the same American religious identity everywhere it established itself, the Community of Christ tended to indigenise. Thus, whereas converting to the LDS Church in France means converting to a conservative American subculture, this is not so in the Community of Christ.

1-LDS converts in France: Mormons and yet French?

In 1846, the majority of the Mormons left Illinois to go to the Rocky Mountains under Brigham Young’s leadership. In the territory of ‘Deseret’, Mormons had their own way of life, of which polygamy, which began with Smith, was an essential element. Due to government pressure, polygamy was given up in 1890, and Utah became a State of the Union. Mormons today are very much integrated into US political, economic and cultural American Life – Harry Reid (Senate Democrat minority leader), Stephanie Mayer (best-selling author of Twilight) and J. W. Marriott (Marriott International chairman and CEO) are all Mormons.

The LDS Church is still very much American in its beliefs and practices, and ‘one could argue that (it) is the most American of all American religions’ (Trepanier and Newsxander, 2012: 111): it emphasises strong belief in the Book of Mormon, almost all of its top leadership (‘General Authorities’ in Mormon nomenclature) are American (its president ‘prophet, seer and revelator’ Thomas Spencer Monson is a native of Salt
Lake City), its headquarters are in Salt Lake City (Utah), its canonised articles of faith, inherited from Joseph Smith, read ‘that Zion (the New Jerusalem) will be built upon the American continent’ and it views the US constitution as a divinely inspired and established document. The LDS Church has an official presence in [eight] Mediterranean countries: Albania, Croatia, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Spain, Slovenia. As of December 30 2010, the highest LDS membership in the Mediterranean world is to be found in Spain, with more than 47,000 members, while the lowest is found in Malta, with fewer than 150 members. The LDS Church also has an academic presence in Israel through the Brigham Young University Jerusalem Center, based on Mount Scopus.

The first Mormon missionaries arrived in France in 1849: British Mormon missionaries landed and preached the Mormon Gospel in Normandy and later on in northern France (Euvrard, 2009: 76–409). The first French translation of the Book of Mormon was published in 1852, thanks in part to the efforts of Louis Auguste Bertrand (1808–75), a French socialist journalist who was among the first French converts to Mormonism baptised in Paris in 1850 (Bertrand, 1862; Euvrard, 2005). The Mormons were then gathering in the Rocky Mountains, where Brigham Young and the Saints were actively building Zion. French Mormons, as other Europeans Mormons, benefited from the Perpetual Emigration Fund of the LDS Church and were able to migrate to the Mormon Promised Land. Mormon missionary work went on again in France from 1912, and new cities were evangelised, such as Amiens and Troyes. The Mormon faith seemed then to have been considered as American by the few French people who knew about it. French esotericist René Guénon (1886–1951) sums up his 1926 exposé of Mormon doctrines and their arrival in the Old World: ‘... the Americans have given Europe some truly deplorable gifts’ (Guénon 2004: 145). In 1921, French author Raymond Duguet doubted Mormonism’s success in France:

Newspapers have, in recent times, noted the presence of Mormon missionaries in Europe, especially in England: it is easy to foresee that those missionaries may bring some new adherents from England, Germany and Scandinavian States for example but that, as in the past, they won’t have success in Latin countries, especially ours.

Between the two world wars, Mormonism spread across Marseille, Montpellier, Nîmes, Lyon, Grenoble, Saint Etienne, Paris, Orléans, Tours and Nantes. In 1939, as the Second World War started, American
Mormon missionaries had to leave the country. After the War, Mormon proselytising was once again active in France. The LDS Church also sent foodstuffs to France between October 1945 and December 1949. Membership was growing fast in the 1960s and Church buildings appeared in French cities such as Bordeaux and Versailles. Whereas the LDS Church had 1,500 members in France in 1955, membership had risen to 10,000 by 1975, to 16,500 by 1985 and to nearly 36,000 by 2011. The prophecy of Raymond Duguet seems to have been wrong.

This growth of LDS Church membership in France is mainly due to its strong, proactive missionary programme, all young Mormon men being expected to serve a two-year proselytising mission between the ages of 18 and 26. Thanks to these missionaries, the LDS Church experienced phenomenal membership growth over the years and across the world, to the point of being labelled a ‘new world faith’ by sociologist Rodney Stark (Stark, 1984).

The strong LDS Church presence in the Mediterranean world can be shown through its temples and its chapels/meetinghouses. Chapels are meetinghouses open to all Mormons and non-Mormons. The LDS Church has two chapels in the city of Paris, one near the Centre George Pompidou (in the Jewish and gay district of the French capital) and the other in the much more popular 19th district. Temples are buildings into which only ‘active’ (practising) Latter-day Saints can enter, in order to go through some sacred rituals, like ‘marriage for time and eternity’ and ‘endowments’ enabling them to reach ‘exaltation’ (deification in the after-earth-life). There is currently one LDS temple in the Mediterranean world, based in Madrid (Spain) since 1999. An LDS temple is currently under construction in Rome (Italy) as of October 2010.

As for France, in 2006 the LDS Church planned to buy land owned by the Clérico family (owners of the Moulin-Rouge and the Lido) in Villepreux in order to build a temple. However, the project was eventually abandoned, as the Clérico family found another buyer who was ready to purchase the land quickly, while the LDS Church had to first make sure that a temple could be built on it. Some local reactions to the temple were interesting, as evidenced by the president of the local political organisation ‘Villepreux Autrement’, Stéphane Mirambeau, who feared that the Mormons would ‘take possession of the city’. In late 2011, the LDS Church finally bought some land in Le Chesnay, near Versailles. They obtained a building permit from the mayor and are now planning to build the first Mormon temple in continental France on the site, the first French LDS temple having been built in French Polynesia in 1983. Most French people showed only indifference to the
building of a Mormon temple in a Paris suburb. No national newspaper headlines were devoted to the project, and French television did not report much on it. Nevertheless, some expressed their right to show disapproval through an organisation named ‘Avenir 46’.

One of its representatives, Martial Pradaud, argued on a French national radio station that in Salt Lake City, ‘where the American temple is, 90% of the inhabitants are Mormons’, even though the Salt Lake City Mormon temple is not the only American Mormon temple, and the majority of Salt Lake City inhabitants nowadays are not LDS. Pradaud concludes that ‘there is thus a danger that the Chesnay population could become … Mormon’.¹⁶

Pradaud commented further, on a French national TV station as a representative of Avenir 46:

We are secularist (laïcs), so we think everyone shall be able to practise their religion, but a Mormon temple is neither a synagogue nor a church, it is a building that is not harmless on a religious level.¹⁷

By claiming that he is ‘laïc’, Pradaud implies that he subscribes to the French principle of laïcité, under which no religion is either recognised or supported financially by the French Republic, making no religion more respectable than another in France, as the second article of the 1905 French Law on the Separation of Churches and State prescribes: ‘The Republic neither recognises nor salaries, nor subsidises any religion’. The comment on a Mormon temple having less of a place in the French religious landscape than a synagogue and a [Catholic] church does not actually reflect the principle of laïcité’, but seems to reveal a certain uneasiness toward a changing religious landscape.

Avenir 46 organised an online petition for ‘a public consultation of the Chesnay inhabitants on the future of 46 Boulevard Saint-Antoine’, the site where the LDS Temple is planned.¹⁸ As of February 2012, the Avenir 46 website’s home page claimed that more than 6,000 individuals had signed their online petition.¹⁹ On the petition’s web page, one can read interesting comments from Internet users demonstrating uneasiness towards a changing French religious landscape:

When it is about Mosques, nobody opens their mouth or does a petition. I live in a country of cowards!!!²⁰

Local politicians and Internet users were not the only people to react against the building of the Mormon temple. Even though the Roman
Catholic Church in France did not take any official stance on the Mormon temple, local Catholic curate Mathieu de Raimond wrote:

For it is in fact the religious purpose of this place, with no real connection to any local population, that poses a problem. We are not watching any ordinary business try to set up shop, but a [Mormon] Temple with all that it signifies culturally and symbolically in this particular context ... The political question becomes: What type of city are we building for our children, what identity do we claim faced with an economic logic now in the foreground? As Christians, we are called to move from indignation to commitment. Commitment to serve the city from day to day, commitment to proclaim Christ as the only way, truth and life.21

All these reactions, from politicians, religious officials and ordinary citizens, although expressed by only a few individuals, show how much difficulty religious pluralism can encounter in becoming part of the – traditionally Roman Catholic – French religious landscape. Regarding the ‘sudden and massive rejection of minarets in France’, sociologist Jean-Paul Willaime says:

French society is secularised. This is not to say, however, that it has become a society with no religion. National imagery continues to be steeped in Christianity. François Mitterrand posed in front of a church bell tower during his 1981 presidential campaign called ‘calm strength’. Minarets run counter to that cultural landscape, imposing religious pluralism, and this is not well received.22

Those comments on minarets in France apply equally to the Mormon temple. Much like the online petition organised in 2011 against the building of an LDS temple in Le Chesnay, a petition was organised in 1978 against the building of a mosque in a Mantes-la-Joly, a city in the same county (département) (Liogier, 2010). As with Islam, Mormonism often seems to be considered to be an external religion in France, not as part of French culture or society but as something attempting to invade its cultural and religious landscape. Hence the comments from the Internet users, local politicians and Catholic officials. What John Bowen (Washington University in Saint Louis) writes about Muslims in France could have been written about Mormons:

Muslim's demands to live their religion publicly also made explicit the contradictions already in place between French ideas about religion’s
private character and the still-public role of France’s Catholic heritage. [Bowen, 2007: 20]

Even though the debate around the Mormon temple in France shows the difficulty some citizens have in accepting a new kind of religious pluralism, the historian and sociologist of the LDS Church must also admit to the deeply American identity of the Mormon Church and its relative novelty in most French minds. French sociologist Sophie-Hélène Trigeaud writes:

France indeed is a country where the LDS Church is neither a traditional nor an indigenous Church. Although it is true that the first LDS missionary arrived in France in 1849 – which is to say only nineteen years after the establishment of the LDS Church by Joseph Smith at Fayette, New York – implanting the Church in France was difficult. Very few converts were baptised. There were less than 100 French Mormons in the 1940s … It was only after World War II, and especially in the 1970s, that the LDS Church experienced significant growth in France. [Trigeaud, 2009: 267]

Of the nearly 35,000 French Mormons (2008), Trigeaud points out that most of them are converts:

In France today, most of the French LDS members are converts, children or grandchildren of converts … The area has been and still is a place of intense missionary activities. [Trigeaud, 2009: 267]

As nearly 70 per cent of the 300 full-time Mormon missionaries in France are still Americans,23 we can conclude that many converts in France converted through American missionaries.

Bernadette Rigal-Cellard (University Bordeaux 3, Michel de Montaigne) analysed how French Mormons consider their LDS membership, regarding its American-ness. Among the 31 French Mormons who answered Rigal-Cellard’s survey, 22 were converts, of whom 16 came from Catholicism, one used to be Protestant and five had no religion prior to their conversion to the LDS Church. Among the 31 respondents, 11 claimed to have converted to Mormonism through a family member, three found their new faith through friends and 12 became Mormons through missionaries. Sixteen of those missionaries were American, three were Canadians, two were English and only one was French (Rigal-Cellard, 2000: 287). Rigal-Cellard notices that French Mormons
seem to have better communication with French Mormon missionaries, whereas French non-Mormons seem to have better communication with US Mormon missionaries, as American Mormon missionaries have told her: ‘We get their attention easily because we are Americans’; ‘with French non-members, I felt it was an asset to be American. People, who were not members, were not typically used to having Americans in their lives. They felt it was something special to talk to an American on the street, or have an American in their home’ (ibid: 288).

To the question ‘Did the fact that the Church is of American origin and that most of its missionaries in France used to be or still are American seduce you in any way?’, 24 respondents answered ‘no’, while four admitted to being seduced by the American behaviour of the missionaries, their kindness, positive attitude and strength of conviction. Rigal-Cellard also notes that, amongst her students who had met American Mormon missionaries, five of them said that they did not convert as they felt the Mormon missionaries were too American.

To the question ‘What is the part of the American dream (attraction towards material success, wealth accessible to all …) in the seductiveness the Church has among youth and adults?’, 10 respondents said that the American dream played no part in their conversion, four did not know or did not answer, and, according to one respondent, the Church is not tied to particular national ideals. Other respondents admitted the attraction that the American dream can have on converts, especially youth, while adding that in such cases the young converts tend to leave the Church after a while.

To the question ‘In your profession, in your daily activities, in your perception of foreign policies, do you feel more attracted towards what is American than if you were not Mormon?’, 21 respondents answered ‘no’ to Rigal-Cellard, while 12 reported feeling no attraction whatsoever to America and feeling good about France. Another interesting question asked by Rigal-Cellard was: ‘Is your attraction to America old or does it simply go back to your conversion to Mormonism?’ Most respondents reported having a lack of attraction towards the USA and 10 respondents denied having any attraction at all to America. Four respondents said they had been attracted to the USA since their conversion to Mormonism and one respondent admitted that, while he had disliked the USA before becoming a Mormon, his faith had since helped him to like the country more. Regarding the special place America has in Mormon theology, 19 respondents were not uncomfortable with the 10th article of faith, even though three had been so at the beginning of their membership. The respondents acknowledged the
American characteristics of their religion, such as family home evening (Mormon families spent all Monday evenings together, having some family time), American missionaries, American missionaries’ cookies, and even some holidays occasionally celebrated by French Mormons, such as Halloween.31

Rigal-Cellard thus concludes her study – of which the answers to only a few questions have been summarised:

The Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-day Saints offers them the possibility of going from a humdrum religion that does not ask anything of them, therefore offering them nothing, to a religion that asks a lot from them, not only in terms of their spiritual convictions, but also in their daily lives, and thus brings to them a perfect inner balance. Their religious and dietary practices isolate them from the secular or passively religious society and, as some of them told me, cause them to create for themselves a particular culture, neither American nor completely French, a Mormon culture that gives them a very strong and international identity. As a result, they consider themselves first to be Christians, reassured by the strong conviction that they are living in the true, original restored Church. So, if we ask them the question, they consider themselves French, and as such, most of them claim the same cultural and historical autonomy from the transatlantic giant as their fellow countrymen.32

Rigal-Cellard’s comments about ‘Mormon culture’ demonstrate that, more than a mere religion, Mormonism indeed appears like a culture, a way of life encompassing all aspects of daily life. American Mormons have their own music (the Church-sponsored traditional Mormon Tabernacle Choir or non-Church sponsored Mormon boy band ‘Evercleen’), are encouraged to dress ‘modestly’, and there is even a Mormon cinema (‘Mollywood’).

The LDS Church is the same in Paris as it is in its Salt Lake City headquarters. All the LDS manuals and procedures originate from the Utah headquarters and Mormon missionaries in America and in France teach from the same manual.33 The same – mostly American – hymns, from mostly the same LDS hymnbooks, are sung in Sandy (Utah) and Marseille (France).34

Thus, French Mormons sing traditional Anglo-Saxon Mormon hymns during their Sunday worship services, among which some celebrate the pioneer past of early American Mormons; for example, ‘Come, Come,
Ye Saints’, written in 1846 in order to give courage to the ‘saints’ as they migrated to the Rocky Mountains, under Brigham Young's leadership:

We’ll find the place which God for us prepared
Far away, in the West,
Where none shall come to hurt or make afraid;
The saints, will be blessed.
We’ll make the air, with music ring,
Shout praises to our God and King;
Above the rest these words we’ll tell –
All is well ! All is well!35

As for the Sunday school manuals, they are translated from English and are produced at the American headquarters. The Book of Mormon may be the most read of all the LDS scriptural books (including the Bible, with French Mormons using the ‘Louis Segond’ Protestant translation).

True, a shared meal may occasionally follow the worship service and Sunday school. And if American missionaries may bring cookies, French members/converts will tend to share French dishes: no jelly (a Utah favourite) on the table but instead French tартes aux pommes (apple-pies); no hamburgers (an American best) but instead quiches lorraines or salade de pâtes. And during the Chandeleur (a traditional French holiday), French Mormons tend not to eat pancakes with maple syrup, but French crêpes with chocolate spread or jam, like their fellow-countrymen, but without cider, of course.

However, French and American Mormons share the same Mormon culture, which could be defined as a conservative American subculture.36 For example, Mormons in France do not drink wine, following the LDS principle of the 1833 ‘Word of Wisdom’ (which reflects the American medical convention of the time; Bush, 1981), and are forbidden from alcohol (as well as coffee, tea and tobacco).

During Sunday church services, most French Mormon men wear dark suits, white shirts and ties like their Utah brothers in the faith, while French Mormon women would tend to wear long dresses covering at least down to the knee, like their Utah Mormon sisters.

Young French Mormons may wear favourite American Mormon jewellery, such as the CTR (Choose the Right) ring that many American LDS missionaries wear. A select few young French Mormons still attend the LDS Brigham Young University in Provo (Utah).

French Mormons tend to imitate their American counterparts in a number of ways. They share the same Mormon culture, which is an
American conservative subculture, while, as Rigal-Cellard showed, still claiming their own particular French culture. They are French and Mormons. They share many particular identities, which sometimes may seem contradictory, as we all do (Lahire, 2005).

Even though the LDS Church has been established in France for more than a century-and-a-half and now has many well-established congregations, there is still no French indigenised Mormonism. Everything (beliefs, practices, rituals, policies) is planned at the Salt Lake City headquarters and the LDS Church is heavily centralised, due to its ‘correlation committee’ established in 1960 partly in answer to international growth and in order to ensure that ‘Mormonism is the same wherever in the World’ (Shipps, 2006: 272). Thus, despite worldwide growth, the LDS Church is not yet at the point of becoming a ‘world religion’, but – according to British anthropologist Douglas Davies in contrast to sociologist Rodney Stark’s analysis – is a ‘global religion’:

It is far more likely that, Davies argues, with its strong central control from Utah, which will continue for some considerable time albeit with the incorporation of a few South Americans and Asians into the General Authorities, Mormonism will become a ‘global’ religion. By ‘global’ I refer to the process of globalisation by which an institution makes its presence felt within hundreds of societies and yet retains its distinctive identity. Indeed, it is the maintenance of that identity that is its reason for existence and the very basis for its theology and mission. It will appeal and attract people in need of a distinctive identity and who are prepared to be different from their neighbours. [Davies, 2003: 248]

That typology of ‘world religion’ and ‘global religion’ is also applied to Mormonism by scholar Matthew Bowman, who recognises the important American cultural aspect of Joseph Smith’s religion:

In part, this investment in American culture may be due to the makeup of the church’s highest leadership: that the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve serve for life means that nearly all the men currently in those positions were born in the western United States into the Church of Heber J. Grant [LDS Church President from 1918–45]. The church has not yet had a president born after World War II and likely will not for some years to come. The current president, Thomas S. Monson, was born in 1929, and as of 2011 only two members of the Quorum of Twelve were born after 1950. Only one,
Dieter Uchtdorf of Germany, was born outside of the United States. Because the church leadership functions according to the principle of seniority, it will take time for members of the international church to climb the ranks. While Mormonism may be a global religion – it is present on every continent, the *Book of Mormon* is available in 51 languages, and the church’s semi-annual General Conference can be seen via satellite, translated into 43 languages – it is not yet a world religion, one that, like Islam or Catholicism, has found a way to adapt its forms to share its meaning in a panoply of cultures. [Bowman, 2012: 221–22]

Indeed, Mormonism is ‘almost a religious franchise’ and it ‘remains a constant in a multicultural world’ (Shipps, 272). It offers exactly the same religious product, designed in Utah, wherever it is. It presents the same conservative American subculture in all nations in which it is established. But still, as Douglas Davies notices, ‘it is the maintenance of that [global Mormon] identity that is its reason for existence and the very basis for its theology and mission … [Mormonism] appeal[s] and attract[s] people in need of a distinctive identity and who are prepared to be different from their neighbours’. Many people are attracted by the distinctive Mormon identity/culture, even in traditionally Catholic/secular continental France. Although established in France since 1849, Mormonism, with its American gospel, remains a religious ultra-minority in continental France with fewer than 40,000 members. But still, the LDS Church draws far more members in continental France than the Community of Christ, with which it shares a common founder and a common 14-year history.

**Converting to the Community of Christ in France: Finding faith through Tahiti, finding Tahiti through faith**

Following Joseph Smith’s death, some Mormons were dissatisfied with Brigham Young’s Mormonism, especially with the practice of polygamy, which some argued was neither taught nor practised by Smith. Those Mormons finally organised in 1860 under the leadership of Joseph Smith III (1832–1914), son of Joseph Smith, becoming the ‘Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints’ (RLDS) in 1872. The Reorganized Church did not create a separate, remote community, but was very much integrated with US society from its inception. It was in fact a ‘moderate Mormonism’ (Blair, 1973) which never accepted the more heterodox and esoteric practices introduced by Joseph Smith.
Refusing to define itself as either Mormon (for fear of confusion with the Utah Mormons) or Protestant (ibid: 221), the RLDS Church could also be considered as an ‘Apophatic Mormonism’.38

As the American RLDS Church established itself in foreign countries in the 1960s, a decision was made to change its very American theological particularities. Some in the top leadership of the RLDS had been trained through Protestant seminaries and thus the Moderate RLDS Mormonism experienced a ‘protestantisation’ (Vanel, 2009) of its beliefs and practices. In 2001, the RLDS Church changed its name to ‘Community of Christ’ (CofC). With almost 200,000 members worldwide and unbound by a common creed (although recent attempts have been made to define its beliefs and practices more systematically), the CofC nowadays is a very pluralistic Church, the identity of which tends to change from one country to another: it looks like a fundamentalist Protestant Church in Haiti, while it often looks like a liberal Protestant Church in some parts of the Western World. In light of such pluralism, Communities of Christ might be a much more appropriate name.

The CofC today actually represents a progressive Protestantism with Mormonism as an option. It is a Protestantism in the sense that its theology is mainly based on the Bible and emphasises Protestant fundamental principles such as grace.39 It is a progressive Protestantism in the sense that it intends to promote social justice, such as gender equality and ecology.40 Mormonism is an option in the CofC, as belief in the Book of Mormon is not a requirement for Church membership and is rarely mentioned in official Church publications.

The progressive Protestantism with Mormonism as an option of the CofC is currently present in two Mediterranean countries: France and Spain.

The RLDS presence in France began in 1960 in the southern part of the country, among people ‘disaffiliated with the Mormon Church’. Religious services were held in 1961 in houses of RLDS American soldiers in Fontainebleau in France.41 In 1966 an RLDS congregation was established in the city of Verdun, known in France and Western Europe as the scene of a crucial and bloody First World War battle. Most of the Verdun RLDS congregation members were ‘from the United States or Canada’ and were ‘attached to the armed forces of those countries’.42

In 1976, Jean-Christophe Bouissou was assigned by the RLDS Church to be a full-time minister in France. Bouissou had converted to the RLDS Church in 1959 following his marriage to a Tahitian Sanito woman.43 Bouissou became a full-time RLDS minister in 1967 and thereafter established a school for children with mental disabilities in Tahiti.44
The Community of Christ is part of the Tahitian cultural and religious landscape, having been established in French Polynesia in the early 1870s (Saura, 1977), and currently has more than 7,000 Tahitian members, traditionally referred to as ‘Sanito’. During Bouissou’s ministry, the RLDS Church held its first religious services in Paris, in the library of the American Church.

Nevertheless, proselytism was difficult in France. At times, Jean Bouissou tried to distribute leaflets about the Church to people walking through the subway station near Sorbonne University, but recalls experiencing only mockery and insults in response. Things got even harder after the 1978 collective suicide-massacre of the People’s Temple community at Jamestown, Guyana. This religious group was founded and led by an American pastor named Jim Jones. Following the suicide-massacre, the French media and politicians became concerned about the dangers of cults (sectes; Luca, 2011: 9) and French people who came in contact with the RLDS Church tended to view it more as a dangerous American cult. Since the 1990s, the RLDS Church/CofC in France has been led by another French minister, Thierry Schmidt, who converted, once again, through a Tahitian wife.

As of 2009, the CofC had around 75 members in continental France, most of whom were from Tahiti. The CofC in France has always tried to set itself apart from the LDS Church, in order to distinguish itself from the Utah-based Mormonism. RLDS French minister Jean-Christophe Bouissou said to scholar Jean-François Mayer:

I feel as if we are victims of a false image. One reason for this sad situation is that we are unjustly identified with the Utah Mormon Church, with its theology and with its history. Nevertheless, an objective observer would find nothing in our theology, and much less in our practices, that would justify such a prejudice. I hope that as time goes on and with an open, positive and patient attitude from us, the doors of understanding will open and that we will finally be accepted as who we truly are: true Christians not living in the margin [of Christianity] ... In sum, we are a Christian Church just as the others are.

The small presence of the CofC in the Mediterranean world compared to the more important LDS Church presence is due to its lack of a proactive missionary programme. Whereas the LDS Church has around 300 full-time missionaries in France alone, the CofC has only around 100 full-time missionaries worldwide.
Whereas the LDS Church identity is the same in the Mediterranean world as it is in the USA, this is not the case with the CofC. Even though some CofC members use the *Book of Mormon* in America, it is almost never used in France and is not yet in use in Spain. France’s CofC President Thierry Schmidt wrote:

I do not refer to the *Book of Mormon* in my ministry. Some use it, especially Americans, and I respect their point of view. But I do not see the use of the *Book of Mormon* in my ministry.\(^52\)

In not using the *Book of Mormon*, the French Community of Christ is different from its US counterpart, even though not all American CofC members believe in the *Book of Mormon*, and the book is rarely quoted in Church publications. However, the continental French CofC has similarities with its Tahitian counterpart. While the American CofC uses bread and grape juice during Communion services, the continental French CofC uses gingerbread instead of bread, just as the Tahitian CofC does. Songs are sung in Tahitian and French, using a bilingual hymnal,\(^53\) with the help of Tahitian instruments. Prayers are sometimes said in Tahitian. For CofC members living in continental France, their CofC membership seems to be part of their Tahitian culture and heritage. Hereata (woman, 24) came to continental France in 2010 for her studies. To the question ‘What is the link between your faith and your Tahitian culture?’, she answered:

I was born among a very practising people, with a deep faith for our Tahitian gods, before the arrival of the Gospel, and since then for Christ. The Church is part of my culture as I sing in Tahitian and I listen to sermons in my mother tongue. The Tahitian culture is very artistic: singing, dances, ‘orero’ (sermons) ... and we naturally find those elements in our community.\(^54\)

Even though we may then think that for Hereata, the Tahitian culture and the CofC faith tradition are deeply embedded, her answer to the question ‘Is the Community of Christ a Tahitian Church?’ is very interesting: ‘The Community of Christ is an American Church established in Tahiti since 1860. I don’t really understand the essence of the question’.\(^55\) For this young Tahitian woman, then, her Church is an ‘American Church’, but more importantly, the question does not seem to be relevant. And although she says her Church is ‘American’, she attends the Community of Christ in France in order to be reconnected
with her Tahitian culture, as we can understand from her answer to the question ‘Is attending the Community of Christ a way for you to regain your Tahitian culture?’ \(^{56}\). ‘Now that I am in France, yes, the Church is what links me to my home country’. \(^{57}\) Not all Tahitian members feel the same way though. Purotu (woman, 24) does not think the CofC is a Tahitian Church, but argues it belongs to ‘everybody’. When asked, ‘Is attending the Community of Christ a way for you to regain your Tahitian culture?’ Purotu’s answer may seem ambiguous: ‘Of course NO’, she answered initially, but then continued, ‘I find again what I left in Tahiti at the Sunday mass: sharing, praying, worshipping, glorifying our God through our readings, sermons, testimonies, questions, songs, etc’. \(^{58}\) Purotu attends other Churches, as does Riva (woman, 42), for whom the CofC is ‘not only’ a ‘Tahitian Church’ but a Church for the ‘whole world’. \(^{59}\)

Apart from Thierry Schmidt and Jean Bouissou, the only other continental French convert we met is Johanna, a 23-year-old French woman who came to know the CofC through her boyfriend Maui, a Tahitian deacon in the CofC. Johanna seems to be very much attracted by the Tahitian culture: she sometimes attends CofC worship services in Paris dressed like a Tahitian, she has a few traditional Tahitian tattoos and she even knows some Tahitian words and is able to sing hymns in Tahitian. More than a religious conversion, Johanna’s conversion to the Community of Christ also seems to have been a conversion to Tahitian culture. Concerning the link between Tahitian culture and the Community of Christ, Johanna says:

I first studied the Tahitian culture in general before knowing about the Church. I was a believer but I did not practise. When I met Maui, he initiated me slowly to his culture, and then I met his parents and then I mixed more and more with Tahitians and so I adapted to their culture and particularly the Church culture (the songs, the way to practise ...). The Tahitian culture was my starting point in my disciple’s path and today I cannot conceive of them being separated. \(^{60}\)

Johanna emphasises that the Tahitian culture is part of her new-found religious faith when answering the question ‘What place had the Tahitian culture in your conversion to the Community of Christ?’: ‘It is the Tahitian culture that brought me to Christ. I learnt, thanks to it, and by the way most of the songs I know are Tahitian songs, for example. I practise Church the way they do. In reality I have always known the Community of Christ as a “Tahitian”’. \(^{61}\) Even though Johanna very
consciously converted to the CofC faith and the Tahitian culture, she says she understands the Community of Christ denomination as not being exclusively Tahitian: ‘I am conscious that our Church is a world Church and that it is established in quite some countries’.62

It is interesting that Johanna is referring to the CofC as being a ‘world Church’ (a more literal translation would read ‘a Church that is worldwide’). The CofC – headquartered in Independence (Missouri) – indeed indigenised in the non-American nations where it is established, and the institution is promoting multiculturalism, as shown through its hymns and its top leadership, among whom some are not Americans: apostles Andrew Bolton (England), Bunda Chibwe (born in Zambia and raised in the Democratic Republic of Congo), Richard James (Wales) and Carlos Enrique Mejia (Honduras).

Communities of Christ share different perspectives on ethical issues, depending on their cultural perspectives, as current debates on homosexuality show. Whereas some Western world members claim that the Church should marry and ordains ‘gays’ (often in the name of social justice, thus in line with progressive Christianity), most members from the southern Hemisphere are opposed to such changes, and, according to William Russell (Graceland University) at least one Haitian congregation left the CofC because of this debate.63

Nevertheless, indigenisation has its limits in the CofC: whereas in French Polynesia, Tahitian theology is present through the Maohi Protestant Church and its theologians,64 no such trend exists in the Tahitian CofC, whose theology depends on what is developed in Independence (Missouri) by US theologians. That theology is still mainly built from an American perspective: the emphasis on peace and justice often seems to reflect a progressive Christianity that is in vogue nowadays in the USA.

Conclusion

Among all Mormonisms, only one has successfully implanted itself in the Mediterranean world: the majority Mormonism of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, headquartered in Salt Lake City (Utah, USA), and currently lead by Utahan prophet Thomas Spencer Monson. Not only is the LDS Church the only Mormonism that successfully implemented itself in the Mediterranean world, it is also the only Mormonism that has successfully implemented itself outside the USA. The LDS Church has a very effective missionary programme and emphasises its particular history and theology, promoting Joseph Smith’s Americanised
Christianity even in secular and historically Catholic France. But despite their American Gospel, French LDS Church members view themselves as French and their Mormon identity/Mormon American subculture does not seem to diminish their French identity.

The CofC has no proactive and well-managed missionary programme like that of the LDS Church. The identity of the CofC in France is very different from its identity in the USA, where its headquarters are. But as most of its members in continental France are originally from French Polynesia, it very much draws from the CofC Tahitian identity. Thus, converting to the CofC in France may also mean, in a way, converting to the Tahitian culture through Tahitian relationships. The CofC in France could even be defined as a Tahitian diasporic Church.

Converting to the LDS Church in France means converting to an Americanised Christianity, a conservative American subculture. Converting to the CofC means converting to the Tahitian culture. Far more people convert to the American Church than to the Tahitian faith. In the Old World, the most American of all Mormonisms, the LDS Church, has also been the most successful.

Notes

1. Thus French sociologist Jean Séguy qualified the Church founded by Joseph Smith as a ‘counter-Church’ (contre-église): Séguy (1965).
2. ‘Section 1:30’, Doctrine and Covenants, Salt Lake City, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
7. Thus specialist Steven Shields (2012) proposes the name ‘Smith-Rigdon Movement’ instead of Mormonism and Mormonisms, in reference to Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon, whom he argues are the two founders of

8. The term ‘Majority Mormonism’ (‘Mormonisme majoritaire’) to designate the Utah based LDS Church comes from scholar Massimo Introvigne, who refers to the LDS Church as the ‘Majority Mormon Church’: Introvigne (1991).


10. Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Containing the Revelations Given to Joseph Smith, the Prophet, with some Additions by his Successors in the Presidency of the Church, Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001, pp. 199–200.


14. ‘Les journaux ont, ces temps derniers, signalé la présence de missionnaires mormons en Europe, en Angleterre notamment: il est facile de prévoir que ces missionnaires pourront peut-être ramener de nouveaux adeptes d’Angleterre, d’Allemagne, des États Scandinaves, par exemple, mais que, comme jadis, ils ne réussiront guère dans les pays latins, surtout chez nous’, Raymond (1921), p. 98.

Many thanks to Joey Williams, Lecturer in French at the University of Missouri in Kansas City, who helped us with all the translations in this chapter.


16. ‘Il y a un risque que la population du Chesnay devienne mormone’, France Inter, 27 December 2011.

17. ‘On est laïc, donc il faut permettre à chacun de pratiquer sa religion, mais un temple mormon c’est pas une synagogue ni une église, c’est un bâtiment qui n’est pas anodin au niveau de la religion’, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2Wa28oLNae, France 3, 2012, 3 January, date accessed 26 February 2012.


21. ‘Car c’est bien la destination culturelle de ce lieu, sans lien avec une population locale réelle, qui pose un problème. Nous ne sommes pas en train de voir s’implanter un commerce quelconque mais un Temple [mormon] avec tout ce que cela signifie culturellement et symboliquement dans le paysage […] La question politique devient la suivante: quelle ville construisons-nous pour nos enfants, quelle identité revendiquons-nous face à une logique


23. E-mail from Dominique Calmels, Head of Communication for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in France, 6 October 2012.


32. ‘L’Église de Jésus-Christ des saints des derniers jours leur offre la possibilité de passer d’une religion routinisée qui ne leur demande rien, et donc ne leur offre rien, à une religion qui exige énormément d’eux, non seulement dans leurs convictions spirituelles, mais aussi dans leur vie quotidienne, et qui de ce fait leur apporte un parfait équilibre intérieur. Les pratiques religieuses et leur régime alimentaire les isolent de la société laïque ou passivement religieuse, et, comme certains me l’ont déjà dit, ils se sont créé une culture à part, ni américaine, ni totalement française, une culture mormone que leurs concitoyens’, Rigal-Cellard (2000): 301.


42. ‘Around the Church: Church Group Meets at Verdun’, *Saints’ Herald* (January 1966), p. 4.
45. E-mail correspondence with Membership Records (Community of Christ), 22 January 2013.
46. ‘New Meeting Place in Paris’, *Saints’ Herald* (January 1979), p. 44.
47. Personal interview with Jean-Christophe Bouissou, 28 April 2009.
48. E-mail correspondence with Kees Compier (then CofC Europe Financial Officer), 2 September 2009.
49. Je pense que nous sommes victimes d’une fausse image. Une des raisons de ce malheureux état de choses est que nous sommes injustement identifiés à l’Église mormone d’Utah, à sa théologie et à son histoire. De plus, l’origine américaine de notre mouvement le rend suspect aux yeux de certains. Pourtant, un observateur impartial ne trouverait rien dans notre théologie, et encore moins dans notre pratique, justifiant un tel préjugé. J’espère que le temps et une attitude positive, patiente et ouverte de notre part ouvriront les portes de la compréhension et que nous serons finalement acceptés pour ce que nous sommes: des chrétiens authentiques ne vivant pas en marge […]. En somme, une Église chrétienne parmi d’autres’. *Mouvements Religieux*, n 23 (March 1982), pp. 5–6.
51. E-mail correspondence with John Wight, Community of Christ missionary work coordinator, 10 December 2010.
52. ‘Le Livre de Mormon n’est pas dans mes références, il l’est pour certains et notamment pour des Américains et je respecte ce point de vue. Je n’en vois pas l’utilité dans mon ministère’, E-mail correspondence with Thierry Schmidt, 10 March 2008.
54. ‘Je suis née dans un peuple très croyant, une foi immense pour nos dieux tahitiens (avant l’arrivée de l’évangile) et depuis pour le Christ. L’église fait partie de ma culture parce que je chante en tahitiens, j’écoute le sermon dans
ma langue. La culture tahitienne est très artistique: chants, danses, “orero” (prêcher) … que l’on retrouve naturellement dans notre communauté’, E-mail from Hereata, 25 October 2011.

55. ‘La communauté du Christ est une église américaine qui s’est implantée à Tahiti en 1860. Je ne comprends pas vraiment le “fond” de la question’, E-mail from Hereata, 25 October 2011.

56. ‘Aller dans la Communauté du Christ, c’est une façon pour toi de retrouver ta culture tahitienne?’

57. ‘Maintenant que je suis en france oui, l’église est mon lien avec mon pays’, E-mail from Hereata, 25 October 2011.

58. ‘Bien sûr que NON … je retrouve [sic] ce que j’ai laissé à Tahiti à la messe du Dimanche, partager, prier, louer, glorifier notre Dieu à travers nos lectures, nos sermons, nos témoignages, nos questions, nos chants, etc …’, E-mail from Purotu, 12 November 2011.

59. ‘… la communauté du Christ est une église faite pour toi, moi, nous en Christ dans le monde entier’, E-mail from Riva, 25 October 2011.

60. ‘J’ai d’abord étudié la culture tahitienne en général avant de connaître l’Eglise, j’étais croyante avant mais je ne pratiquais pas, quand j’ai connu Maui il m’a initié tout doucement à sa culture, puis j’ai connu ses parents et ensuite j’ai de plus en plus souvent côtoyé des tahitiens donc je me suis adapté à eux et j’ai aimé leur culture, en particulier dans l’Eglise (les chants, la manière de pratiquer …). La culture tahitienne a été mon point de départ dans mon cheminement de disciple et aujourd’hui je ne conçois pas l’un sans l’autre’, E-mail from Johanna, 29 October 2011.

61. ‘C’est la culture tahitienne qui m’a conduit au Christ, j’ai appris grâce à elle, d’ailleurs la majorité des chants que je connais sont des chants tahitiens par exemple. Je pratique l’Eglise de leur manière, en réalité j’ai toujours connu la Communauté du Christ en tant que “tahitienne”’, E-mail from Johanna, 29 October 2011.

62. ‘Je suis aussi consciente que notre Eglise est mondiale et qu’elle est implantée dans pas mal de pays’, E-mail from Johanna, 29 October 2011.


Bibliography


Every day, 2,000–3,000 visitors come to St Anthony’s church, located on
Istiklal Caddesi in Istanbul’s European historical centre.¹ Most of them
are Muslims (Dionigi and Fliche, 2012). They come in order to partici-
pate without any intention of converting. This Muslim frequentation of
a Christian place of worship can be considered surprising. As a matter of
fact, despite being officially ‘secular’, the Turkish state is not religiously
neutral and has strong ties with Islam. Therefore for a Muslim in Turkey,
visiting a Christian place means challenging social and religious con-
ventions. The widespread fear of conversion makes visiting Christian
places seem even more suspicious.

Firstly, I shall deal with the widespread representations of the
Christian presence in Turkey and the strong social pressure against con-
version. Secondly, I will analyse Muslim attendance at Christian places
of worship in Istanbul. In order to do so, this paper focuses on the case
of St Anthony’s church – a case among many others. It is important to
highlight the fact that the purpose of this chapter is not to analyse why
Muslims go to a church to pray, but what the attendants do. I argue that
despite transgressing the boundaries, these Muslims don’t go to church
in order to convert, but in order to pray and to partake in other religious
practices. In fact, churches provide the opportunity to engage in prac-
tices such as expressing wishes, lighting candles, etc. – practices which
would be more difficult to take part in within the mosque because of
the tight control of religious authorities. Based on my analysis of the
book of wishes, I argue that the Muslim visitors don’t consider churches
as dangerous places or as places where they might lose their religious
faith.
Unlike the Ottoman Empire, the Republic of Turkey is officially ‘secular’ (*laik*). However, the republican state has for a long time controlled its people’s religion and their orthodoxy. Mustafa Kemal established the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, hereafter Diyanet) in 1924. This institution is responsible for the regulation and administration of all issues dealing with belief and ritual. In this context, a number of religious practices have been outlawed on the grounds that they are considered heterodox. These include *ziyaret* (visits) to saints for therapeutic purposes. Such practices are deemed illegitimate because they do not conform to the Sunna, and are depicted as ‘superstitions’. The point is about the question of intercession with God: looking for intercession is interpreted as a sign of idolatry so it is forbidden by religious authorities (Altan, 1996; Zarcone, 2002). For example, in the big religious complex of Eyyüp, there are some posters where forbidden practices are written, such as lighting a candle, walking around the mausoleum, hoping for health from visiting the *türbe* (tomb). From this perspective, going to a church, praying to a saint for intercession or lighting a candle are not sufficiently ‘orthodox’ for the Diyanet which fights these practices.

In this context, nationalist tendencies on both the right and the left of the political spectrum still lead to Christian or Jewish Turkish citizens being viewed as foreigners and as ‘enemies of the country’. Turkish citizenship has long been closely associated with religious affiliation, and apostasy was often equated with national betrayal (Bozarslan, 2004). In this context, there is a widespread fear of conversion. From a Muslim perspective, conversion is widely perceived as apostasy. However, the Diyanet doesn’t advocate punishing apostasy by death – let’s also remember that, in hanafism, apostasy doesn’t result in capital punishment. But apostasy is strongly disapproved of socially. In his recent research, the political scientist Hakan Yılmaz shows that, despite secularism, the right to conversion is not perceived as a fundamental right in Turkey.

Another factor which hints at this fear of conversion is that every Christian tends to be considered a potential missionary. In fact, ‘the missionary’ is an imaginary construct, the roots of which lie in the nineteenth century (Kieser, 1999). However, the fear of Christian proselytism has endured even since the introduction of secularism. This fear of Christian proselytism is a recurrent theme in the nationalist press – both in its leftist and Islamist forms – which sees missionaries as a threat to the integrity of the national community (Pérouse, 2004). This fear of conversion has practical consequences. For example, during the famous
pilgrimage of St George to the orthodox monastery of Büyükada Island,⁴ many Evangelist and Protestant groups have shown proselytising activity. Against these actions, in 2006 and 2007 the Diyanet distributed Korans to everyone for free. The target of this distribution was not to ‘reconvert’ Muslim pilgrims, but to ensure a presence around the Evangelist missionaries. Underlying this generosity was the idea that any Muslim who visits a Christian place of worship might potentially be converted, not necessarily by the priest of the church visited, but possibly by the missionaries who benefit from the pilgrimage. But going to a church can also be considered as the first step to a conversion.

Among the elements that discourage the frequentation of Christian places by Muslims, one should also mention widespread anti-Christian sentiment. My research took place in the context of growing tensions concerning the issue of non-Muslims: the virulent polemic over the controversial conference entitled ‘Ottoman Armenians during the Decline of the Empire: Issues of Scientific Responsibility and Democracy’, organised in 2005 by Bilgi University with many great Turkish intellectuals; the assassination of the Italian priest Andrea Santoro in Trabzon in 2006 and the attack on his Slovene colleague Martin Kmetec in Izmir a few days later; the attack on Father Brunissen in Samsun in July 2006; the demonstrations against the Pope’s visit in the autumn of 2006; the murder of the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in January 2007, which is considered a trauma for many mostly liberal people most of them liberal; the murder of three Protestants⁵ in Malatya in April 2007; the murder of Bishop Luigi Padovese in Iskenderun in June 2009. Recent juridical investigations have shown that the murders in Malatya can be related with Ergenekon, an allegedly clandestine, Kemalist and ultranationalist network. So, it is very difficult to know who ordered these murders – if indeed they were ordered – but these events remind us that the issue of non-Muslims is a very sensitive social issue. In this context, attending a church as a Muslim really is a transgression of boundaries.

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The St Anthony of Padua complex opens onto an avenue that is at the heart of life in Istanbul. Built in a neo-Gothic style at the beginning of the twentieth century, St Anthony’s is one of the largest Catholic churches in Turkey. Mass is celebrated in Italian, Turkish, Polish and English. St Anthony’s geographical position and visibility make it a tourist attraction. But St Anthony’s also attracts daily crowds of worshippers who come to perform various acts of devotion. Catholics are joined by Orthodox
Christians (both Greek and Armenian) and, above all, by Muslims – both Sunni and Alevi. I found that the number of visitors fell by about one-third between 2005 and 2007, which might be related to the strongly anti-Christian social climate. Despite this context and this social and official pressure, people do go to churches like St Anthony’s to pray.

I call this attendance exopraxy (Fliche, 2010), that is religious practice at the place of ‘the other’. It is important to remember that this ‘exopraxy’ is not new to Turkey. It is not a consequence of the diffusion of New Age ideas. As early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, Frederik Hasluck described Muslims attending Christian places of worship during the Ottoman Empire (Hasluck, 1929/2000). Carnoy and Nicolaïdes, two folklorists at the end of the nineteenth century, also described the links between Christians and Muslims. The ‘Church of the Fish’ in Istanbul provides convincing evidence. Famous for an apparition of the Virgin Mary and the healing powers of its ayazma (spring) where fish swim, the church was the focus of a major pilgrimage that attracted over 40,000 people at the end of the nineteenth century. It was attended not only by Greeks, but also by ‘Armenians, Turkish women and sometimes even Turkish men’ (Carnoy and Nicolaïdes, 1893). Its attendance is still very important today. Nowadays, several Christian places of worship in Istanbul are strongly attended by Muslims. The Christian shrine that attracts the largest numbers of Muslims today is probably the Orthodox monastery of St George on Büyükada Island (Couroucli, 2012).

Who are the people who attend St Anthony’s church in Istanbul? Many people visit the church every day. According to my estimates based on observations gathered in the year 2005, the church had about 3,000 visitors per day, and many more on Tuesdays (St Anthony’s Day). However, the numbers grew in 2009. Most visitors are women, but women are not overwhelming in their majority, they constitute about 60 per cent of the visitors (Orsi, 1999). Of course, it is difficult to determine how many visitors are Christian and how many are Muslim, simply because the indicators of their religious identities are sometimes discreet. Given that it would be impossible to interview all of the worshippers about their faith, we have to rely on hints such as ‘Islamic’ headscarves in the case of women, the absence or presence of the sign of the cross, visitors’ behaviour at the stoup, their posture during prayers, and so on. On the basis of these indicators – which are sometimes equivocal – I estimate that at least half the people who enter the church are Muslim.

We could compare this attendance with that at the Büyük Ada pilgrimage: according to my own observations, for St George’s Day (23 April) in 2012, about 1,680 persons per hour visited the chapel. Of these,
90 per cent were women. Most of them were Muslim, but only about 5 per cent of the women wore the Muslim headscarf. We can relate these observations to another statistic: about 67 per cent of women are veiled in Turkey (Konda, 2007).

In St Anthony’s church, certain practices clearly identify Muslim people, like the use of the stoup. Muslim visitors often use stoups to perform their ablutions: they wash their hands or splash water onto their neck, hair and face. I have seen some women anointing themselves from head to foot with holy water. Some even go so far as to fill mineral-water bottles after performing their ablutions. The use that is made of the stoup also marks a departure from its primary function.

Some practices appear to be interpreted as a step towards conversion, for an ‘outside’ observer, like confession. Requests for help sometimes require the mediation of the clergy. In order to channel them, the priest in charge has organised a sort of ‘reception centre’ in a small space in the church. He does not consider this reception to be like a ‘real’ confession. Both in the morning and in the afternoon, he receives anyone who wishes to meet him, without any distinction as to their religion: both Muslims and Christians are free to come and talk to him. The conversations take place face to face in a small private space. The space is full throughout the day: four or five people can always be seen waiting. According to the priest in charge, most people who come to speak to him are Muslims. They have different reasons for coming. According to him, the most humble people, who are usually illiterate, ask him for help against attacks from the evil eye or, in more serious cases, cin (Jinns). On the other hand, people from higher and more educated backgrounds such as teachers, doctors, artists and journalists ask him for spiritual guidance in times of distress or existential crisis. Whatever the nature of the interaction, the meeting ends with a prayer being said by the priest, who also makes the sign of the cross.

These practices are more about Muslim reinterpretation of a Christian place than about conversion. If somebody began to pray like a Muslim in the church, this would be interpreted as an attempt at conversion to Islam and he would risk being banished. So Muslim people act as Christians act, or as they think Christians act. There is mimesis and reinterpretation. But in fact, the issue of conversion is not central to them, as we can observe in the St Anthony Book.

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Every Tuesday, a book is left in the central pews for visitors to write down their prayer intentions. Some years ago, the priest in charge
decided to provide a book in which anyone who wanted to do so could write whatever they wished. His initial idea was to integrate these prayer intentions into the prayers said during Mass. The idea was that everyone would say prayers on behalf of the supplicants. He told me that he had to put an end to the experiment after two months because everyone had been rushing to write things down as Mass was being said. A queue would form, and he almost had to wrest the Book away from the crowd. The Book is now always available close to the statue of St Anthony. Although its use is now marginal in terms of liturgical space and time, it has been a complete success.

I took pictures of the collections of votive writings for 1996, 1999, 2003 and 2009 and analysed them, both statistically (with software like Lexico 3 or nooj7) and qualitatively. For reasons of space, I cannot go into further detail here; suffice to say that the Book is an excellent source that permits an understanding of the motivation of the people who pray in the church.

What requests are written down and for whom? My initial analysis looked at a sample for the year 1996 (1,083 messages). First observation: visitors write directly to Allah, without religious consideration. ‘Allah’ is the most common form of address (1,112 occurrences), followed by ‘Tanrı’ (279 occurrences) – a more neutral term used to address God that is also used by Catholics – and ‘Rabbi or Yarabbi’ (273 occurrences), a more mystical term. Only 31 requests are addressed to Jesus (Isa), and 34 to Mary (Meryem). Jesus and Mary are always associated with St Anthony: rarely is writing addressed only to them. Some 56 requests are addressed to St Anthony, who is often associated with Allah, as we can read in the following message:

Sevgili Allahum, Sevgili SENTANTUAN. Sana binlerce teşekkürler, bana ve aileme yardımcı olduğun için kimseye muhtaç olmadan yaşamak nasip et bize doğru yolu göster ve iş yerine iş açılığı ver ödemelemimizi kolay yapmak nasip et bana sağlık ve huzur ver kötülüklerden koru. Yeni yıl hayırlı uğurlu gelsin sağlık huzur kimseye muhtaç olmadan yaşamak nasip et. AMİN.

Dear God, Dear SENTANTUAN. Thousands of thanks to you, for helping me and my family. Grant us to live without being dependent on anyone else. Show us the right way. Grant prosperity to our workplace. Grant us to easily pay our debts. Grant me health and peace and protect me from evil. I hope the New Year bodes well for us, brings health and peace, and grants us to live without depending on anyone else. Amen.
The frequent use of ‘Allah’ and the relatively low number of specifically Christian forms of address is an indication that most of those who write in the Book are Muslim. It also shows that they prefer to address themselves directly to God, rather than to a saint. Although the saint, in this case St Anthony, is the subject of veneration (people pray at the feet of his statue), he is rarely mentioned in the messages recorded in the book that is left at his feet. Most of the writers are Muslim, but they very rarely declare their faith. For example, there are only seven messages out of a thousand in which it is mentioned that the writer is Muslim. Here is an example:

Ey ulu Allahım ben hamdolsun müslümanım ama burasında senin ibadet evin ve ben burada sana yalvariyorum. Ne olursun ben evlenmek istiyorum. Şansımı, bahtımı, kader ve kısmetimi açık et ve ben seneye bu günlerde çoktan evlenmiş, yüzük takmış olayım. Bana yardım et. Allahım amin. B.

Dear great God, thank God I am Muslim, but here belongs to you as a prayer place as well and it is here that I beg you. Please, I want to get married. Make my luck, destiny, fate and fortune be plenty and I’ll be already married, wearing a ring this time next year. Please help me my God, Amen. B.

When people write that they are Muslim, they explain their approach, as we can see in the following messages:


My Almighty God, first of all I declare that I am here only to look around, I know that our prayer place is our gracious mosques. Thank God I am Muslim. Forgive me, my God, if I have made a mistake. Actually, I know that I shouldn’t make a wish here in this place. My God, make me pass my class without difficulty, and have lots of fortune. In addition, I pray for N., Ş., Ö., B., and A. to achieve the same things. I beg you to accept our wishes. Amen.

These writers recall their Muslim identities by use of the expressions ‘Elhamdülillah’ or ‘hamdolsun’ (‘Thank God’) and justify the
circumstances of their writing acts with an ‘opportunistic’ and ‘friendly’ ecumenism.


My God, I am a Muslim. But, even though in a church, I beg you in the name of Prophet Mohammed, and Prophet Jesus and the saints, I beg for my good wishes for my children and for my home. Let them first of all be healthy and happy, and then be hard working and successful. I write these lines out of respect for the great and noble, and also for the ones who work in the name of God. Forgive me and I plead for happiness, peace, and health in the following years that I can continue to live in the rest of my life. Amen. 31.12.1996. Signature.

Ben Elhamdülillah Müslüman bir kadımdım fakat sizin dininize ve Hz. Isaya saygılarım var Devamlı gelip dua ediyor ve Rahatlıyorum. Yeni yılın herkese Sağlık ve Mutluluklar getir mesini diliyorum. N.

Thank God I am a Muslim woman, but I respect your religious faith and Prophet Jesus. I come here frequently to pray and I feel relieved. I hope that the New Year brings health and happiness to all. N.

In this corpus, messages which criticise the fact that Muslims pray in this church are very rare: I found only three. These three writers indicate their Muslim identity. The first of them does not really criticise: an educated and cultivated woman wished that the Koran were sold in the Church, because ‘we are on Muslim land’:


I asked God for a wish, and I expect that it will get accepted. In your sacred and respectful environment, apart from Torah and Psalms, remembering that we are on Muslim land, I would have liked to see Koran in your bookshelves. I am sure that you will deal with this. Respectfully, S.
The second message, written by a man, is more direct, and the writing seems uneasy. The message clearly aims to convert the church to a mosque.

Müslüman olsun artık. (D.)
Let it (the Church) become Muslim after all.

The third message shows the fear of conversion and reminds the reader of the Islamic faith.

I think this is ridiculous. God, don’t make me renounce your religion. I am Muslim and I will continue to be a Muslim. God is one. The Prophet Mohammed is the servant and the messenger of God. And it will remain so.

After these three messages, there is no response from other writers: they are ignored. The book is not used as a space for confrontation between Christians and Muslims. So, to declare one’s faith to others is not the goal of votive writings. The question of religious belonging isn’t relevant for the writers, either Muslim or Christian. From this perspective, it is interesting to observe that the messages beginning with the ritual ‘Bismillah’ – 24 occurrences – aren’t associated with any other declaration of faith like ‘I’m a Muslim’. They are very ‘classical’ in their hopes and expectations.

Bismillahirrahmanirrahim. I came here for your sake. I beg you to make my wishes come true. Almighty God, please make this man feel regretful because he treats me in an unjust way. Let him only exist with me, live with me. Let his thoughts and sentiments exist in relation to me, live with me. I beg you that he only marries me. My God, I love you so much, please help me. Give A. to me as a spouse. Let my son think straight. Let him learn to read as soon as possible. Grant us abundance and strength. I beg you, please help us. Don’t make us dependent on anyone else. Your holiness and strength protects us, grants us health and happiness. Make all our work be favourable. My God, out of respect for all the holy people, for all the prophets, let A. be devoted to me, let him only think about me. Let him love me and not bring anyone else to that house as a bride, spouse and wife. Amen. I beg that you hear my voice my God. Amen.

The messages which begin with ‘Bismillah’ are very similar to the others. To be honest, they are, for the analyst, a little monotonous. According to my survey, the main goal and concern of petitioners appears to be health (719 occurrences of the term sağlık, health). Most ask for an illness to be cured or for protection by performing an apotropaic action. The second most frequent requests concern work (175 occurrences) and money or financial survival (120 occurrences). There is no mention of lost property, even though helping people to find lost things is usually seen as one of St Anthony’s ‘specialities’. The requests do not only concern the ‘petitioners’ themselves, and may be made on behalf of members of their immediate families (children, spouses, parents). So they write their hopes without consideration for religious boundaries. Those are not their problem. Their problem is to construct the religious efficiency of their ‘exopraxy’. And St Anthony’s church, more so than a mosque controlled by the Diyanet, can be a space that allows this freedom.

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In general terms, St Anthony’s Church is a space in which individuals of different persuasions mingle; their behaviour is inventive and has little to do with any Catholic routine. Everything is very flexible. Very different devotional manifestations coexist under the roof of the church. These ‘exopraxists’ are fully absorbed in what they are doing and concentrate on the supernatural and the objects that mediate their relationship with it. They quietly wait their turn to touch the glass protecting the saint.
They come to write their wishes directly to God in the Book, without intercession, and to pray without any desire to convert. Practices of hope do not care about denominational boundaries.

The final point concerns writing to God. This practice is not limited to the Catholic Church and is increasingly popular. It is very common during the (Christian Orthodox) pilgrimage of Büyük Ada but it may also be observed within the Muslim religious space. An example is the case of some Alevi mausoleums in the Hatay region, where the practice of writing to God is not as visible as in St Anthony’s Church, since the messages are hidden in the mausoleums. Even more telling is the case of the religious complex of Eyüp (Istanbul) where I observed between 2005 and 2009 the foot of an ancient column that was used for 'heterodox' rituals. To prevent such rituals, the Diyanet sent an attendant responsible for giving moral lessons to the visitors who prayed around this column's foot. Since this measure was not enough to deter visitors from coming and making wishes, religious authorities have simply sealed the column foot with a padlock. Ironically enough, in the meantime the walls of the mausoleum of the sixteenth-century Ottoman statesman located next to the column got covered with votive graffiti for health, children, cars, love, etc., even though they were not previously the object of any special devotion. This practice has now persisted for two years. Authorities reacted by cleaning the walls and putting notes reminding visitors that it is forbidden to write on the walls, but the graffiti appear again and again. Writings of hope are not deterred by a simple ban.

Notes

1. İstiklâl Caddesi runs through the old neighbourhood of Pera (now Beyoğlu). It became one of the busiest and most frequented thoroughfares in Istanbul after its rehabilitation in the 1990s.

2. Hanafism is one of the four schools of law in Sunni Islam and is the principal school of Islamic law in Turkey.

3. Only 27 per cent of people think that the individual’s right to change religion should not be abolished in all circumstances. Hakan Yılmaz, ‘We, Others and Othering in Turkey: Empirical Findings Based on an Opinion Poll’, intervention In the IFEA, 14 March 2011. See also http://hakanyilmaz.info/research_projects_ara%C5%9Ft%C4%B1rma_projeleri.

4. In fact, there are two pilgrimages: one is on 23 April, St George’s Day, the other is on 24 September, St Thecla’s Day.

5. One of them was a convert to Christianity.

6. The legend has it that a monk was going to grill fish near the source when he was informed that the Ottomans had just entered the city. He said that he
would believe this if the fish—which were already roasted on one side—were to return to the water and swim. The fish jumped out and returned to live in the fountain, where they remain, or at least their descendants do.


8. St Anthony is spelled in several ways: Sent Antuan, San Antuan, Aziz Antoine.

9. This is the great difference between the devotion to St Anthony in Istanbul and in Europe, where people prefer to write to the saint than directly to God. See Marlène Albert-Llorca, ‘Le courrier du ciel’, in Daniel Fabre, Ecritures ordinaires, Paris, POL, 1993, p. 205.

10. Clara Lamiraux notes, for example, in the ecumenical space of Orly’s airport, the confrontation between Muslims and Christians in the votive book. The Catholics who organise this space have to neutralise the confrontation. They write responses to messages which are not ecumenical and sometimes erase some of the messages (Lamiraux, art.cit. p. 222). This is not the case in St Anthony’s in Istanbul.

11. Votive writings present the same methodological problems as the condolence register. Messages are repetitive, usually with a fair amount of flatness. As Marlène Albert-Llorca (art.cit. p 187) has said, they are the expression of ‘ordinary unhappiness’. The corpus is difficult to read linearly, and more to comprehend exhaustively. Cf. Truc, art.cit. p. 30.


Bibliography


Conclusion: What Matters with Conversions?

Olivier Roy

Conversions today: Massive, individual and multi-directional

There is nothing new about religious conversions, but the way they have occurred during the last 40 years is rather different from in the past. As far as the history of Christianity is concerned, mass conversions were largely linked to political domination, from the barbarians of the late Roman Empire to the Amerindians and Africans of the colonial period. Conversions to Islam used to occur inside the Muslim kingdoms and empires mostly as a way to align with the dominant power; at the periphery of the Muslim world, where there was no political incentive, conversions, made mainly through merchants and travellers, were perceived in terms of upward social mobility, a factor often associated with conversions in general. In a word, conversions worked vertically from dominated to dominants, as if the top were some sort of magnet attracting subjects. Exceptions, such as the spread of Christianity in the early and middle Roman Empire, remind us more of the present time; in any case, Christianity in the Roman Empire was always perceived by the state as a political issue, with the aim of bringing state and religion together, either by suppressing Christianity or making it the state religion. In a given territory, mass conversions used to concern only one religion, one that was already (or was trying to become) dominant. Conversions thus appeared as a way to make the dominant religion coincide with the dominant power; exceptions, as with the Reformation in Europe, were followed by a string of civil and foreign wars, in the perspective of restoring such a convergence (according to *cujus regio, ejus religio*, the famous founding principle of the Peace of Westphalia). This territorialisation of religious belongings entailed the setting up of majority/minority
systems, which combine the association of a given religion with a given political entity and the toleration of other religious groups.

Through conquest, colonisation or slavery, conversions have also traditionally been linked with vertical acculturation, which means the integration of a given group into the dominant culture. Endeavours by dominated groups to preserve or restore a certain degree of autonomy during this process of acculturation have traditionally been studied by anthropologists under the category of ‘hybridity’, syncretism or creolisation, which means that the main approach to analysing this kind of new religions has been culture, not religion as such, that is the faith of the believer (who will not buy the concept of ‘hybridity’). In this sense, such an approach towards the ‘protest’ religions is also a way to understand conversion in the framework of cultural domination.

But if we look at the recent wave of religious conversions, associated with the ‘return of the sacred’ from the 1960s onwards, we are confronted by different patterns. An important characteristic of these contemporary conversions is that they cannot be reduced to acculturation in favour of the dominant power, or to a quest for a new collective identity, or to integration into the dominant culture. Contemporary conversions look for the ‘purely religious’ and entail the constitution of ‘faith communities’ that, even when they do not sever their ties with the surrounding society, insist on being purely religious. Faith communities are not ‘new societies’; they claim to position themselves as mere religious communities and, instead of merging in a new polity, ask to be recognised as such (faith communities) in the public sphere. Conversions are ‘horizontal’, they are disconnected from ‘political domination’ or at least political competition for domination, even if they all carry important political consequences: conversions from Catholicism to Protestantism, from Islam to Christianity, or from any religion to the ‘new religious movements’ (e.g. Jehovah Witnesses), do not follow a trend towards homogenisation of the public space, on the contrary. The phenomenon of the ‘born-again’ which shares many common patterns with conversions (a sudden individual break with the past and a re-assertion of religion as an absolute faith with little or no concession to the profane culture) contributes to construct faith communities as minorities, even in the midst of a society that shares the same nominal denomination (Evangelicals in the USA, Salafis in Egypt, Haredim in Israel). Conversions are thus multi-directional. The same space can see conversions in two opposite directions; the city of Trappes in France has, in the same rather destitute neighbourhood, two new worshipping places: a Salafi mosque, with many converts from Christianity, and an
Evangelical church, headed by the pastor Saïd Oujibou, which recruits exclusively among former North African Muslims. Moreover if there are dominant trends in conversions, it is not in favour of one of the ‘great’ monotheist religions, but of specific subsets of these great religions: the fundamentalist, charismatic and strongly normative denominations (Pentecostalism, Salafism).

Another issue is the relevance of such conversions in the fields of politics, law and geo-strategy. Why does it matter? First, because of course the mass conversion of millions of people is a social and political phenomenon in itself. But even isolated conversions may carry strong political consequences, even in countries where freedom of religion is supposedly a given: why did Tony Blair wait to leave office as prime minister before publicly announcing his conversion from Anglicanism to Catholicism?

Contemporary conversions are statistically significant in many cases: they concern millions of people who shift from Catholicism to Protestantism (in Latin America and Africa, in the USA among the Latinos), tens of thousands from Christianity or atheism to Islam in Europe (youth from the French ‘underclass’) or from Islam to Christianity (among Iranian refugees in Turkey, Muslims in Central Asia or even in Algeria). But even conversions that are not important in terms of numbers could raise important symbolic issues by breaking a close association between culture, identity, citizenship and religion. For instance, a conversion from Islam to Protestantism introduces a discrepancy in accepted (and sometimes legally enforced) identities: the Malaysian Supreme Court refused to grant the right to convert to an ethnic Malay woman (Lina Joyce), arguing that the law equates Malay ethnic belonging with Muslim faith (the reverse is not true as an ethnic Chinese could be a Muslim); in Algeria the government eventually accepted in 2007 the appointment as head of the Algerian Protestant association a former Muslim convert (the position having been held previously by an Algerian of European descent), thus accepting the fact that there should be no automatic connection between being an Algerian, and Arab and a Muslim (see Marzouki’s chapter). Conversely, in Morocco, the government preferred to ignore the existence of an indigenous Protestant faith community comprising converts from Islam, although there is no provision in the Law banning conversion and apostasy. In Israel the presence of a small community of hundreds of ‘Messianic Jews’, who claim both to be Jewish and to accept Jesus as their saviour, has triggered uproar and a denial of their right to make alya: their very existence exacerbated the ongoing debate about ‘Who is a Jew?’ (with the consequential issue ‘Who could become an Israeli
citizen?’) and challenges the shaky compromises built since the foundation of the state of Israel (see Seeman’s chapter).

Another important pattern of contemporary conversions is that they are individual, even if they achieve some mass dimension. Individual conversions always existed, but did not alter any balance between religions. In brief, we see nowadays massive individual conversions, instead of massive group conversions. It is very rarely a whole local community that converts, although converts are sometimes overrepresented in a given ethnic group (Kabyles in Algeria). The individual dimension is a key to understand modern conversions; it does not mean that converts are isolated, because in fact conversions occur through a small local network of kinsfolk or neighbours. But these local communities may remain split between the converts and the other faithful: conversions break the social fabric more that they translate into a new denomination that re-enforces the specificity of the group. For instance, when French Roms convert en masse to Evangelicalism, this contributes to accentuating and recasting the group identity by using ‘additional’ markers (Evangelicalism being added to nomadism, use of rom dialects and specific occupational activities), but when some dozens of families in an Algerian Kabyle village convert to Protestantism, while the majority of the village remains Muslim, or conversely when the same number of families in an Indian village of Chiapas in Mexico converts to Islam, such conversions do not entail a shift in the village/clan/group identity: they just undermine any kind of previous collective identity without providing a collective alternative. Conversions contribute to the destructuration/modernisation process of traditional societies.

In any case, converts always stress that they made a personal choice (Kaoues) and that they want to break with an inauthentic religion and culture (Marzouki). They stress freedom and individualism and are opposed to the traditional sectarian system that defines a dominant religion as opposed to religious minorities. In the Middle East, converts from Islam to Christianity criticise the sectarian classification (millet, tayfa) that is supported by the traditional Christian clergies and by the authorities, because, according to the converts, it made religious affiliation not a personal choice, not even a faith, but an inherited cultural belonging. Converts are reluctant to use indiscriminately the term ‘religion’ (Kaoues, Marzouki) because it would equate all religions and discard what is for them at the core of conversion: the direct relationship with Christ. In France, by the same token, young converts to Salafism preferred to use, in French, the term din instead of ‘religion’, in order to stress that Islam is not a religion among others, not even the
best religion among the others, but something totally different from the other religions.

This individualism might explain a striking phenomenon: self-conversions. Of course to speak about conversions means to look at missionaries and proselytism. Evangelicals and Salafis do proselytise. But Haredim don’t, or restrict themselves to bringing nominal Jews back into the way of the Torah. Nevertheless, there are self-converts who knock on the door of the synagogues willing to be recognised as good observant Jews, and not as converts for opportunist reasons (such as a marriage) (see Gampiot). Self-conversions are also to be found in Islam and Christianity: for instance, a French star-singer, Diam’s, born into a Catholic family, explained how she became a Muslim without any contact with an imam or a mosque.²

The disconnection with culture

Conversions have traditionally been linked with acculturation, that is the entry into another culture, usually the dominant one, in terms of dress, language, educational system, values and norms, although this merging may also give way to syncretic counter-cultures, like voodoo or different kind of cults. Catholic, Protestant and Muslim missionaries used to build schools, teach the language of the dominant Church, and offer scholarships or any other way to go to the ‘centre’ (Rome, the USA, Medina or Al-Azhar). In brief, conversions were linked with a civilisational project. We can speak (see Sharkey’s chapter) of a cultural Christianity transmitted through Christian schools, which was not necessarily followed by conversions. In this sense, conversions were just a sub-set of a more general process of ‘Westernization’. And clearly the nineteenth century Protestant missionaries were the bearers of a culture that they used to consider ‘superior’ (it would be interesting to look at the way they promoted English, Western dress, and possibly food); predication had to do with a civilisational mission more than with saving souls. They indulged in building schools and universities, whose curriculum was modern and secular. They provided scholarships with no religious obligations and promoted a ‘secular’ knowledge of the Middle East. The American Universities in Beirut and Cairo, and the Jesuit University of Beirut were open to everybody, while the strong networks of primary schools managed by French or Irish Catholic nuns from Tunisia to Pakistan recruited a lot more among Muslims than among Christians. The Catholic White Fathers produced a remarkable corps of experts in Arab language and literature as well as Islamic studies.
But when we look at the contemporary religious movements that succeed in converting, prominently Protestant Evangelicals, we see a very different pattern: they just skip the issue of culture. They don’t care about higher studies and profane knowledge, they do not build universities, or even primary schools, they care only for Sunday schools. They do not care about the local culture or Islamic studies; they preach using vernacular languages, not literary Arabic. Culture is reduced to a set of almost purely technical tools. They do not make great efforts to adapt to local cultures, but also no great efforts to export a ‘Western’ culture, in terms of contents, even if they bring elements of a Western way of life (body-language, like praying while standing up). The same is true for the Salafis: they reject all cultures, including the traditional Islamic ones, even if they exhibit pseudo ‘Islamic’ garb. The teaching agenda of these religious movements concentrates exclusively on religious matters (the same is true for the ultra-orthodox Jews). They try to use a non-culturally embedded language, whose ad absurdum perfect expression is the glossolalia of the Pentecostalists. The Salafis promote some sort of a pidgin Arabic among converts: Arabic terms are plugged into the vernacular language, in order to avoid being ‘contaminated’ by Christian ideas, but there is no transmission of an Arab culture. The same is true for the neo-fundamentalist movement Tabligh which was created around 1927 to ‘reconvert’ nominal Muslims to the true tenets of Islam, shedding any kind of syncretism with Christianity or Hinduism: A typical course in Tabligh mosques is to teach children to learn the Koran by heart in Arabic, but there is no course of Arabic grammar. Their first impact on local culture is deculturation, not acculturation. Of course most of the missionaries have to take into consideration elements of local cultures, contrary to Mormons who export a kit of American culture, from BBQ to suit and ties. They may use local instruments of music and refer to local customs: but they are not interested in ‘embedding’ faith into a different culture, they don’t buy the ‘enculturation’ perspective of some Catholic missionaries of the twentieth century. Culture is not a big concern for the new missionaries.

In this sense, there is no continuity between the traditional Protestant missionary movements among Muslims, which began in the early nineteenth century and produced the American Universities in Beirut and Cairo, on one hand, and the present Pentecostalism offensive, on the other hand, as illustrated by F. Kaoues’s study of Protestantism in Lebanon.

A confirmation by default of the deculturation effect of the new conversions is the fact that the Catholic Church, which basically, after
a period of fascination for ‘enculturation’ in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, has maintained the same centennial standards for converting, and has almost consequently very little success in attracting converts from other religions, while it is experiencing a spread of charismatic forms of piety among born-again Catholics, combined with a stress on traditional and conservative modes of piety and management of the Church. There is a clear connection between the insistence of the Catholic Church on connecting Christianity with Western culture and its lack of appeal among potential converts to Christianity who instead join Protestant denominations that are not concerned with the issue of culture. Religious and cultural markers are thus both disconnected and ‘floating’. Incidentally, this might explain the strange phenomenon of worshipping without converting, studied by Benoît Fliche: devout Muslims see no problem in performing some rites in a Christian Church, while they, rightly, do not consider such an action as ‘syncretism’, because they clearly differentiate both religions; they just catch a religious marker that could ‘work’ (in healing for instance).

This disconnection between religion and culture makes it difficult to study these conversions through the lenses of identity, acculturation and empowerment. This poses a challenge to the social sciences, which experience some difficulty in understanding religious attitudes except by reducing them to more familiar paradigms (culture, social movements, ethnicity, nationalism, etc.). But the other challenge is for political authorities: conversions challenge the traditional consensus on the link between state, church, nation and the national legislation which is a result of past conflicts and compromises. Converts may bring ‘alien’ religions (American Evangelicalism), go against dominant accepted paradigm (the ban on ‘apostasy’ in Islam), and antagonise a part of public opinion. Converts insist on exhibiting a faith which is not ‘domesticated’ by local culture and traditional practices. In a word, at a time when the model of the nation-state is challenged by globalisation and by the European construction, conversions turn religion into a disruptive factor for the political and social bond. State and public opinions often react negatively (e.g. the ban on burqa and minarets, restrictions on proselytism ...), treating converts either as traitors or as unconscious and weak tools of foreign manipulation, thus contributing to a toughening of the clash of cultures paradigm, without understanding the logic behind conversions.

Most of the sociological studies of conversions approach the issue through two concepts: social mobility and identity, or more exactly change of identity, a passage from one culture to another. As often in
social sciences, religions are equated with cultures. So for sociologists, a convert is somebody who shifts from a religion A to join another religion B, while considering A and B as two symmetric entities belonging to the same register (a religion and a culture), as if the move would let A and B remain unchanged, and leaving the convert now in B the same way he was formerly in A. Intermediary stages are understood in terms of hybridity or syncretism.

The problem is that this view does not fit with the way converts explain their trajectory: they leave a ‘wrong’ religion that for them is precisely a transmitted tradition, a culture, to join a ‘true’ religion that is something which is first of all a religion and not a culture or only incidentally a culture. So there is no symmetry between the point of departure and the point of arrival. Even concerning religions that are culturally embedded, which means strongly identified with a given culture (e.g. Mormonism with US culture), the convert does not speak in terms of joining another culture (see for instance the case of French converts to Mormonism as studied by Chrystal Vannel). That is clearly expressed by Muslims turned Christian in Algeria as studied by Nadia Marzouki. The same is true with the North African Muslims in France who became Protestants: their leader, Said Oujibou, claims to keep the traditional North African culture (in videos he shows himself playing oud and eating couscous), but speaks of Christianity as the universal and sole true religion, which means for him as for all his fellow converts a direct and personal contact with Christ, not necessarily a bridge towards Western culture. But of course the North African culture he refers to is quite poor in anthropological terms: he stresses first of all the daily material culture (food, body language, music) but not an alternative normative system of values and norms, because all values and norms are to be found in the ‘true religion’. New converts, when speaking of culture, see it more as a toolbox that could help to communicate faith than as a global symbolic system of values and meanings. This means that even when missionaries claim to take culture into consideration, they have a deculturation impact.

Because converts leave what they see as a dead religion, a religion turned culture, and join what they see as a true religion, as a living personal religious experience, they don’t buy the change of identity, because they don’t see the new faith as an identity; they don’t put an equality sign between the previous and the last religion. They may not join the national or local consensus that frame the role of religions in the public space. For instance, in Italy and France, many women who ostensibly wear a niqab to challenge the local (Italy) or national (France)
ban on the burqa are converts. Converts have little or no administrative or political incentives from the states to convert even to the dominant religion (in Israel one can even speak of a distrust of the state towards converts to Judaism), with few exceptions: among the Muslim countries, Malaysia encourages conversions to Islam, which is also clearly a way to weaken the Chinese minority; but, by contrast, the Egyptian Supreme Court sent back to a Coptic monastery two Copt women said to have converted to Islam. Hence conversions seem to be little determined by external factors, both in terms of pressure and incentives. Of course this does not mean that there could be no sociology of conversions: conversions may be linked with sociological changes (individualisation, a shift from less patriarchal societies to more open ones; globalisation offering direct access to information and to a global ‘religious market’; a way for some women to empower themselves). The Prosperity Gospel that developed from Brazil to West Africa is a good example of a ‘spiritualising’ reading of a deregulated global free market: communal ties are softened; success stories are personal stories. But how to explain that Latinos in the USA could convert both to Protestantism (a move that could be seen as a will to join the mainstream) or to Islam, along with many African Americans, which is not really a sign of political integration?

Of course, deculturation is strengthened in the case of uprooting, migrations, travels and deterritorialisation. The African migrants who joined Evangelical churches in Cairo (Picard) were already Christian and often Protestants, but they did not find in these new churches a continuation of their former parishes; these churches have turned to ‘global’ languages (French, English) and provide rites and prayers not connected with a local religious tradition. They may often require a new baptism; it is typical for new converts and the born-again to experience the same path. Deterritorialisation is nevertheless always a moment: migrants and refugees settle, even if they consider their settlement to be temporary. Thus do they re-invest a local space, but through a different spiritual mapping (as Picard describes for African converts or the born-again obliged to stay in Egypt).

The convert’s attitude: Religion first

The convert puts forward something that could not be understood in sociological terms: faith as a primary mover, not as an element among others constituting a religious identity. The convert brings a disruptiveness which might be temporary, but which shakes traditional connections between
Religious Conversions in the Mediterranean World

religion and culture; conversions question the given identities that constitute a society or even a state’s legitimacy. A sociological approach cannot exhaust the experiences and agency of the converts. There is autonomy of the religious sphere that social sciences have a problem grasping. Building a faith community is not just building a new kind of community: members’ agenda (including politics and economics, the impact on social bonds, the increased social mobility) is largely determined by a religious perspective and attitude.

Converts would contest the term ‘ambiguous conversions’ that Sharkey uses in her article. It does not mean that there is no ‘shade of grey’ or ambivalence in conversions, but their denial by converts introduces precisely a ‘convert attitude’ that in itself has an impact on the role of religion in our societies. It accentuates the autonomisation and the objectification of the religious sphere and contributes to dissociating it from ordinary social bonds. In this sense, conversions contribute paradoxically to the secularisation of societies, by sorting out religion and culture, a fact which does not mean of course the fading away of religious beliefs; but the consequence of this paradoxical dissociation (secularisation of society and exacerbation of the religious feelings inside the faith community) is to exacerbate the tensions between religious groups and the more secular society.

Converts speak not only out of conviction, but because they have to explain what appears to their friends, colleagues and relatives as a weird decision (Le Pape). They have also (and are often requested) to explain to their new faith community why they converted: it may be because there are some suspicions about sincerity, but more often (in Islam for instance) the decision to convert is used as a proof of the attractiveness and of the truth of the new religion; Muslim websites eagerly list ‘famous’ converts and expose in length the story of their conversion.

Converts thus have to rationalise their decision. Conversion may or may not be followed by a change of environment (moving elsewhere, breaking with family and friends in order to join a new family and new friends). Converts may, as Le Pape suggests, keep the same job, try to maintain family relations, and thus do not necessarily adopt the culture of their new congregation. In any case, their attitude towards the cultural dimension of their new religion is rarely one of full immersion and integration, precisely because they join a faith community that does not valorise culture. Less sensible to the traditional compromises between religion and culture, converts tend to abide by stricter religious standards. When they wish to exhibit their new faith they carry ostensible religious signs (a cross, a kipa) or they adopt a limited set off
cultural markers, like a piece of dress that makes them look like their new brothers (a white skull cap for a Salafi for instance, the orange robe for the Hare Krishna). In a word, they adopt cultural markers only when they identify them as religiously meaningful, either as a way to break with their former religion, or because these express new explicit norms; whereas adopting a whole culture would mean entering into a more complex set of attitudes, habits and body language. A convert to Judaism or Salafism will train himself and his body to follow explicit written norms, not to enter into such a complex set of cultural patterns; anyway, nobody will teach them the implicit culture, but only the explicit norms, a fact which explains why a convert might always remain a convert.

The reception of conversions

Converts are often held in suspicion by their former community. Mainstream societies distrust converts. They are frequently referred to as lunatic, fanatical, or as manipulated by a pseudo-religious groups in search of power, money or cheap labour. Many states restrict the right of conversion. We can distinguish between three cases: countries where there is no right to convert, at least from the dominant religion (the criminalisation of ‘apostasy’ from Islam is enforced in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia etc.), countries where conversions are tolerated but where restrictions apply to proselytism (Morocco, India, Russia, etc.), and countries without any official restriction. But even in countries where there is no legal restriction (France, Turkey), there is a widespread suspicion towards conversion and proselytism, associated with troubles à l’ordre public (threats against public order), or with a strategic threat (converts as fifth column).

For instance, in France, Morocco, India or Russia, converts to Protestant Evangelicalism are often accused of being a fifth column of US influence. Money, whether from the USA for Protestants or from Saudi Arabia for Salafis, is mentioned by media, politicians, but also by traditional Churches as the main factor behind conversions. Converts are also accused of undermining the national identity and the legitimacy of the state (in Israel, as we saw, ethnic Jews who voluntarily converted to another religion are not granted citizenship according to the law of return). In France, where officially the separation of state and religion is absolute, and in Morocco, where no law bans conversion from Islam, missionaries are watched by police for the sake of public order, not to speak of terrorism (the relatively high percentage of converts in
Al Qaeda in Western Europe has accentuated this suspicion. France has even created a parliamentary commission (MIVILUDES) to check the activities of the ‘cults’, a term which refers mainly to the proselytising new religious movements.

**What after conversion?**

A conversion is a very personal move, and, even if he or she converts young, a convert will always be referred to as a convert. There are famous cases like the French archbishop Mgr Jean-Marie (Aaron) Lustiger, whose Jewishness was always stressed by himself, and by friends and foes, but not by orthodox Jews for whom he was no more a Jew. But children of converts are not converts; they did not experience the ‘break’ with culture, friends and mainstream society. Even when the group they belong to has been seen, or is still seen, with suspicion by the mainstream religious groups (Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, Ahmediyyas, Baha’is), the ‘convert attitude’ has disappeared, often replaced by a minority attitude. They long for recognition and fight suspicion and misgivings even when they keep their distance from a dominant culture perceived as too secular (avoidance of too profane activities is still a stake for Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Salafis).

Institutionalisation in the Weberian sense of the term absorbs the momentum of conversions. But when institutionalisation comes, the landscape has already changed; the monopoly of the dominant religions has been broken, the automatic association between a culture and a religion has been put into question, even the definition of citizenship may have been altered or challenged. And it does not need a mass movement of conversions to produce big changes. For instance in Turkey, the automatic association between an ethnic Turk and a Muslim has been challenged by a bunch of some dozen ethnic Turks turned Protestant who obtained a change in their identity card (the term ‘Christian’ replacing ‘Muslim’), and the status of legal trust or foundation (vakf) for their churches (around the years 1999–2007). Through the institutionalisation of the small faith community created by conversions, they have contributed to challenging the state in redefining the relations between citizenship, ethnicity and religion. Previously, according to the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), all religious minorities in Turkey comprised non-Turkish ethnic groups (Jews, Armenians, Greeks or Syriacs), while now the link between ethnicity and religion has lost its legal basis. Of course this shift was congruent with pressure from the European Union to suppress the mention of religion in the IDs. In any case, the phenomenon
of conversions entails a more ‘modern’ definition of what freedom of religion means: it is not only the collective right for a religious minority to practise its traditional religion, but it becomes an individual right to choose one’s religion (or not to choose any religion). In countries where religious freedom is defined as a collective right in the framework of ‘minorities’ rights’, and not as an individual right, it is a huge achievement.

This is particularly relevant in the Middle East, where religion means belonging to a group by birth, and not believing in a specific faith (although there is of course no incompatibility between the two). The traditional Christian Oriental Churches are supporting freedom of religion as a collective right to belong and practise, not as an individual right to choose (in this sense they agree with Muslim Ulamas). Conversely, the new Protestant Churches’ proselytism challenged this perception. Whatever the number of converts, the simple fact of converting to another faith entails a radical shift in legal paradigms. And it is not by chance that the shift from collective rights to individual freedom is congruent with the quest for a new citizenship as expressed by the ‘Arab Spring’. Even if the convert does not care about politics and is concerned only by the religious dimension of his or her decision, conversions are part of the complex array of trends and changes that characterise our global world. This is why we should concentrate on the scope and impact of the conversion momentum.

Notes

1. The case of Shabbataï Zevi (1626–76) is interesting. After gathering a huge crowd of followers by claiming to be the Messiah, he converted to Islam, under pressure from the Ottoman Sultan, and a large part of his followers converted too. But his conversion was political and the decision of his followers was a group decision, not the addition of thousands of individual conversions to Islam. The collective identity of the group still survives after four centuries (they are called the dönme).
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