

Article

New Approaches to ‘Converts’ and ‘Conversion’ in Africa: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract: It is our goal in this special issue on “Religious Conversion in Africa” to examine the limitations of a long-standing bias toward Christianity with respect to the study of “conversion.” Furthermore, we want to use this issue to prime other scholarly approaches to cultural change on the continent, beginning as early as the medieval period, including the colonial and early postcolonial eras, and extending to the contemporary. There are several reasons for making these interventions. One is the emergence of the anthropology of Christianity as a scholarly literature and sub-discipline. This literature has often focused on issues of religious change in relation to its own predilection for charismatic and Pentecostal expressions of Christianity and the distinct characteristics of cultural discontinuity within those communities. Another reason for this special issue on religious “conversion” in Africa is the relative lack of studies that engage with religious change beyond Pentecostal, charismatic, and evangelical Protestant contexts. As such, studies on the “conversion” of Ahmadi in West Africa, medieval Ethiopian women, Mormons in twentieth-century southeastern Nigeria, and Orthodox Christians in Uganda are included, as is a fascinating case of what it means to “trode the path” of Rastafari in Ghana. Taken together, these contributions suggest new and important paths forward with respect to “conversion,” including critiquing and perhaps even discarding the term in certain contexts. Ultimately, we want these articles to illuminate the many ways that Africans across the continent have engaged (and continue to engage) with beliefs, practices, ideas, and communities—including the changes they make in their own lives and in the lives of those communities.

Keywords: conversion; Africa; anthropology of Christianity; history; Africana religions; historiography

1. Introduction

Scholarly examinations of religious “conversion” have long held a bias toward Christianity. The historian A.D. Nock even posited that it was early Christians who invented the concept, which he defined as “the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right” (Nock 1933, p. 7). Likewise, William James (1985, p. 157) was fascinated by the ways in which evangelical “conversions” allowed “a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, [to become] unified and consciously right, superior and happy.” With these approaches to the subject setting the terms, “conversion” entered scholarly discourse while also carrying with it Christian—and especially evangelical Protestant—assumptions about what mattered most: the transformation of the soul brought on by a changed set of interior dispositions and beliefs.

It is our goal in this special issue on “Religious Conversion in Africa” to examine the limitations of this long-standing assumption with respect to “conversion.” Furthermore, we want to use this issue

to prime other scholarly approaches to cultural change on the continent, beginning as early as the medieval period, including the colonial and early postcolonial eras, and extending to the contemporary. There are several reasons for making these interventions. One is the emergence of the anthropology of Christianity as a scholarly literature and sub-discipline. This literature has often focused on issues of religious change in relation to its own predilection for charismatic and Pentecostal expressions of Christianity and the distinct characteristics of cultural discontinuity within those communities. Kimberly Marshall, Andreana Prichard, and Devaka Premawardhana even suggest in this special issue that the theme of cultural rupture in studies of “conversion” has become the heart of that literature. Another reason for this special issue on religious “conversion” in Africa is the relative lack of studies that engage with religious change beyond Pentecostal, charismatic, and evangelical Protestant contexts. As such, studies on the “conversion” of Ahmadi in West Africa, medieval Ethiopian women, Mormons in twentieth-century southeastern Nigeria, and Orthodox Christians in Uganda are included, as is a fascinating case of what it means to “trode the path” of Rastafari in Ghana.

Taken together, we think these contributions suggest new and important paths forward with respect to “conversion,” including critiquing and perhaps even discarding the term in certain contexts. Since many of the articles in this special issue raise questions about the concept of conversion and its use in history, we have chosen in this introduction to put the term in quotation marks. In doing so, we want to draw attention to the ways that the term is contextually relevant and useful, including how it has been employed by scholars as well as the communities examined in this special issue’s articles. Ultimately, we want these articles to illuminate the many ways that Africans across the continent have engaged (and continue to engage) with beliefs, practices, ideas, and communities—including the changes they make in their own lives and in the lives of those communities. The directions of their engagements cannot be summarized simply. While there are African Christians who would testify to the fact that they have “made a break with the past,” there are many other Africans whose lives do not fit that analytic. What they have made of their lives, communities, and religious traditions is likewise fully worthy of scholarly attention. In short, the contributions to this special issue underscore that “religious change” cannot frequently be defined as a shift from one frame of mind to another. Depending on where and when historians and anthropologists are looking, the process of religious change could involve the adoption of a new religious moniker, the embrace of new rituals, the abandonment of certain social customs, or the formation of new relationships and interpersonal bonds, or some combination of visible cultural and/or social transformations. By thinking critically about the definition of “religious change” in future research, we can loosen the stranglehold that Protestant missionaries and their ideas have had on the literature on religious conversion in Africa.

2. Continuity and Discontinuity in Religious “Conversion”

The question of “conversion,” and especially of “conversion” to Christianity, has been dominated in recent years by a preoccupation with the problem of continuity and discontinuity. This problem is often defined in relationship to individuals: What elements of an adherent’s life and identity are taken to be evidence of a “break with the past,” or of continuity with it?

With respect to Christianity and the African continent, the issue of continuity first emerged from questions among colonial-era missionaries about the sincerity of Africans’ intentions to become Christians. Missionaries from all denominational backgrounds shared concerns about “mixing” indigenous cultural practices with Christianity. However, Protestant missionaries in particular needed to determine that “converts” had made a sufficient break with “paganism” or “heathenism” so that they truly had become “new creatures in Christ Jesus” (Keane 2007). Additionally, missionaries could be suspicious of adherents’ use of the new tools and technologies that missionaries supplied—medicine, literacy, trans-regional economics—in order to make what they felt like were illegitimate hybrid forms of the faith, thereby becoming “nominal” Christians. Some missionaries also embraced these “new” elements as beneficial to their ultimate goal of drawing Africans in the Christian fold, an inclination

especially seen in missionary support of the development of industrial education in the 1920s and 1930s across Sub-Saharan Africa (Barnes 2017; Peterson 2011).

Even from the early twentieth century, many missionaries had to come to terms with the fact that “conversion” often looked less than ideal. Africans did things with their new faith, the Bible, and religious practices that went beyond what missionaries had intended. Bengt Sundkler, for instance, observed that “in these [African indigenous] churches, one could be able to see what the African Christian, *when left to himself*, regarded as important and relevant in Christian faith and in the Christian church” (Sundkler 1948, p. 17). Colonialists often combined their concerns regarding the supposed purity of adherents’ faith with an interest in the maintenance of colonial order. The potential violence to European settlers posed by indigenous movements, such as Maji Maji in German East Africa or Mau Mau in Kenya, illuminate the perennial threat posed by what was perceived as a primitivist spiritually inflected paganism (Anderson 2005; Lemarchand 2013; Mahone 2006). Colonial officials across the continent policed Christian movements for worrisome signs that they might foment rebellion. The suppression of the Harrist movement in Congo is one example, and the British suspicion of the East African Revival and the Spirit Movement in southeastern Nigeria are others. Colonial officials and missionaries thereby sought out methods to determine whether popular movements were sufficiently “Christian”—that is, that such movements severed “paganism” from “modernity” and “politics” from “religion” (Bruner 2019; Ranger 1986). If one were concerned about discontinuity in these instances, the “past” could be as capacious or selective as the one doing the defining of what needed to be left behind.

Historians and anthropologists explored these issues by focusing upon the unique contextualization or indigenization of the faith that grew out of missionary encounters in the colonial era (Barrett 1968; Walls 1996). While most scholars of these “new” expressions or forms of Christianity understood them to be in continuity with Christianity’s (European) forms and institutions, they also frequently highlighted the agency of Africans and their propensity to translate things anew, creating new debates and insights in their novel configurations of ancient teachings and institutions. The attention given to prophetic healing movements and African Indigenous Churches in the mid-late twentieth century is clear evidence of this approach. Many of these scholars, such as Bengt Sundkler or Harold Turner whose scholarship was informed by their faith commitments, as Adrian Hastings has pointed out, approached their research with the desire to “make amends for the past failings in mission relationships with independent churches” (Hastings 2000, p. 33). For this reason, they located a great degree of continuity not only with historical Christianity but also with African cultures and beliefs, or what became glossed as “African Traditional Religion” (Peterson and Walhof 2002). In this sense, Christianity was often described as a vehicle of survivals, enabling some practices, structures, and beliefs to endure amidst the disintegrative onslaught of Euro-Western colonialism and postcolonialism (Daneel 1970; Dube 1999; Kibira 1974, chp. 1).

Sociological models for religious change were similarly premised upon some kind of continuity in “conversion,” while likewise reifying the religious as the site of personal transformation or change of identity, affiliation, or adherence. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, Robin Horton maintained that “conversion” to monotheistic “world religions” such as Islam and Christianity would result from Africans’ recognition of the insufficiency of their localized practices and spirits in accounting for larger geo-political realities produced by trade, travel, technological innovation, and literacy. In seeking to account for the broader realities of this larger world, he argued, they would rationally move their religious conceptions from a local microcosm to a transnational macrocosm, with a supreme, monotheistic deity overseeing a more expansive world. “Conversion,” in Horton’s radically functional analysis, is rational, explanatory, and, in a sense, inevitable, with any distinction between Islam and Christianity ultimately mattering little (Horton 1975a, 1975b).

Stage models of “conversion” implied a kind of continuity, seeing changes occur in typical steps, allowing for a comparative accounting of religious change across and within cultures. By their nature, these models applied etic categories to the lives of those changing their religious adherence, belief,

and practice. Even if adherents understood these changes as sudden, mysteriously providential, or even as a radical break with their previous life, this scholarship emphasized progression, gradual movement, and predictability (Rambo and Farhadian 1999, pp. 23–34). In doing so, it borrows from the deeply seated assumptions about culture and time that are imbedded within the disciplines of sociology and anthropology themselves—the sense that, in Joel Robbins’ words, “culture comes from yesterday, is reproduced today, and shapes tomorrow” (Robbins 2007, p. 10). Yet many of these same converts might describe their Christian faith as having “made a complete break with the past” (Meyer 1998). In short, where anthropologists, social scientists, and historians might see continuity, converts themselves describe an undeniable discontinuity.

The matter has taken on new importance in light of the attention given to charismatic and Pentecostal expressions of Christianity within the interrelated sub-disciplines of World Christianity, the anthropology of Christianity, and of religion in Africa more generally. Led by scholars such as Joel Robbins (2007), Matthew Engelke (2007), and Birgit Meyer (1998), many have argued that earlier social scientific preoccupations with tracing elements of continuity blinded scholars to the fundamentally important ways in which adherents understand themselves and positioned themselves with a different understanding of time. The matter, of course, is not simply about self-understanding, but also in the ways that converts go about organizing their lives, homes, and communities in light of that shift in their beliefs, practices, and self-understanding (Haynes 2015; Marshall 2009). In these areas, historians and anthropologists would do well to consider Robbins’ observation that “Christianity represents time as a dimension in which radical change is possible,” looking both back towards its “break” with Judaism in the early centuries, as well as its anticipated eschatological break present in the anticipated millennium (Robbins 2007, p. 10). Such attention to contrasts in time, discourse, and beliefs of Christians has allowed these scholars to distinguish themselves within their own disciplinary traditions—to make their own break with their discipline’s past, emphasizing rupture as a characteristic of this Christian conception of time and culture.

These foundational concerns within the anthropology of Christianity have shaped studies of religious change in an outsized way. Scholars have focused upon a certain style of Pentecostalism, particularly the kind that is transnationally connected, with huge congregations that continue to grow (e.g., Van de Kamp 2016). These churches likewise seem to support the earlier predictions from scholars writing within the discipline of World Christianity, that Christianity is young, dynamic, charismatic, and expanding. Here Pentecostalism becomes a synecdoche for all of Christianity’s supposedly global, almost inevitable, growth that scholars of world Christianity have been projecting (Robert 2000). Largely excluded from this narrative are non-Pentecostals and even, as Devaka Premawardhana’s article shows in this special issue, Pentecostalism in those places where it has not thrived in the ways it has in Seoul, Lagos, or Rio de Janeiro (Cabrita and Maxwell 2017). Additionally, not every Christian tradition or denomination is predicated upon the radicality of the break with one’s past. Furthermore, instances of cultural continuity inevitably exist side by side with instances of cultural rupture, a phenomenon observed by David Dmitri Hurlbut in his article here, as well as by Charlotte Walker-Said (2018, p. 24) in her study of Catholicism in colonial French Cameroon. The continuity/discontinuity paradigm is a false choice that oversimplifies a complex cultural reality.

More to the point, the emphasis upon discontinuity in matters of “conversion” can also mean that non-Christian people, communities, and traditions have a difficult time fitting into the Christianized discourse. Novelty, innovation, and a search for a sense of authenticity—or even an alternate path of continuity—can all occasion change that results in conversion or changing one’s religious identity or adherence. Still, Pentecostalism has become so predominant in some parts of Africa that other Christian denominations (such as Methodists, Presbyterians, and Catholics) are becoming “Pentecostalized” in response, incorporating healing and all-night prayer services; but so too have other religious communities and traditions used Pentecostalism’s methods for their own ends (Adogame 2011). Muslim and Hindu proselytization in West Africa, for example, often takes on characteristics borrowed from the earlier, successful outreach of Pentecostals (Peel 2016, chp. 10). They do not, however,

seem to have taken the idea that “conversion” necessitates a stark break with one’s past. For some Hindu communities in Ghana outreach looks Pentecostal, but the message is one of deep continuity, as preachers argue that India is the prehistoric cradle of African civilization. In this sense, the style is one response to a Pentecostal demonization of the African past (Wuaku 2013). As Shamara Wyllie-Alhassan’s article in this issue demonstrates, the term “conversion” does not necessarily capture the dynamics of change in religious communities that are not Christian. In these examples, one could say that religious change that results in not simply a turn or break towards the new, but a return to a sense of the old remains relevant to the lives of many people outside of the Pentecostal and evangelical context. The article from Dmitri M. Bondarkeno and Andrey V. Tutorskiy in this special issue indicates that this is the case for “converts” to Orthodoxy in Uganda, suggesting that ancient tradition, ritual, and orthopraxy can be compelling reasons for people to change their religious adherence.

While our analytical framework is influenced by our shared engagement with Christianity in Africa, the literature on Islam in Africa also problematizes the Protestant idea that conversion constitutes a shift from frame of mind to another, or of one strictly bound “religion” to another. As Adeline Masquelier summarizes in her perceptive study of Muslim women in Niger:

[By] embracing Islam, people did not abandon previous beliefs so much as they adopted new practices that visibly marked them as Muslim. Conversion to Islam is too often assumed to be a total and uncompromising process, a sweeping rejection of the “old.” The equation of “belief” with homogenous, systemized, and neatly bounded cosmology led scholars to neglect the conversation between Islam and what is conventionally categorized as “traditional” religion. (Masquelier 2009, p. 61)

As Barbara Cooper’s study of Hausa Muslims and evangelical Christians in Maradi, Niger demonstrates, the process of religious change primarily involved changes to daily behaviors, such as the choice to cease “praying with other Muslims,” to stop brewing “beer in order to call a *gayya* (a party called to work together in the host’s fields in exchange for beer), or even “to reject the offer of a titled office that would have entailed making sacrifices” (Cooper 2006, pp. 289–390). In addition, evangelical Christians made Christianity “legible to Muslims” by embracing “Allah” as the moniker for God in their scriptural translations and by baptizing polygynous men into the church (Cooper 2006, pp. 125, 391). Similarly, Janet McIntosh’s study of Giriama and Swahili culture in Kenya show that linguistic choices, which can be made to reify religious and ethnic identity, can also indicate a spiritually and religiously pluralistic context, suggesting that essentialisms that have to come shape life since the colonial era are “hardly secure, given the constant flow of languages and religions between peoples” (McIntosh 2005, p. 168). In these studies of Islam in Niger and Kenya, the colonial era is seen to be contextually paramount in creating the conditions in which essentialized discourses of religion and ethnicity took hold (McIntosh 2004). In short, the literature on Islam in Africa further highlights the need to rethink how historians and anthropologists engage with religious conversion.

3. Problematizing “Conversion” in African History

The spread of Christianity on the African continent—in antiquity for northern and eastern Africa, and in the colonial era for much of Sub-Saharan Africa—meant not only the expansion of Christian texts, practices, beliefs, and communities, but also of Christianized understandings of change. It was the introduction of Christianity in many parts of the African continent that spread the notion of conversion—that is, as an individual’s consent to change or adopt their affiliation with a community based upon its doctrines, rituals, and moral teachings. These assumptions, however, could also (even unintentionally) foster the expansion of more rigid understandings and expressions of Islam (Masquelier 2009). However, it also provided assumptions about the possibility and desirability of progress and the need for individual transformation. The notion of “conversion”—particularly in the modern period—most often implied the movement of an individual from one bounded religion with a set of doctrines and practices, to another, as seen in Nock’s formulation. In the case of much of Sub-Saharan

Africa, however, this precondition can be very difficult to establish. In short, one is often hard-pressed to say that there was a “religion” from which new African Christians “converted.” Many Sub-Saharan African languages did not seem to have a vernacular term that readily correlated to “religion” in the sense it had developed over the late nineteenth century in Europe and North America. In East Africa, for example, the Swahili term *dini* predated the arrival of Christian missionaries, and came closest to how European missionaries used “religion.” In Buganda (now south-central Uganda), *dini* was used to translate what the new European missionaries brought, but even this was not a vernacular Luganda term. As Paul Landau has convincingly argued, the concept of indigenous “religion” is “an artefact of the Christian encounter with non-Christians” (Landau 1999, p. 11). One might even go so far as to say that the very concept of “African Traditional Religion” was developed in part to facilitate this conceptual distinction between what needed to be converted “from” and what needed to be converted “to” (Peterson 2002).

English-speaking evangelical missionaries often brought literature that they used to help them determine whether they were witnessing “genuine conversions”. In this sense, texts like the American evangelist Charles Finney’s *Revivals of Religion* have had global histories and legacies. This dynamic illuminates the challenge that the concept of “conversion,” including especially that form of “conversion” prized among evangelical Christians, was not simply an invention. Rather, the concept had historical consequences, as new Christian adherents needed to learn how to be seen as “converts”—often on missionaries’ terms—if they were to endure in the new world of the colonial mission station. This distinction is relevant beyond colonial Christian missions. As Katrin Langewiesche shows so clearly with respect to Ahmadi in West Africa and France in this special issue, conversion is “a matter of social issues not personal belief.”

Missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, recognized that there were other contextual factors at play in facilitating religious change. Schools and clinics, along with new foods and agricultural techniques carried different kinds of appeal to potential converts, and missions frequently drew initially from marginal and disaffected populations, those in search of protection, and those on the political fringes and looking for new sources of authority. However, the social patterns of adherence to Christianity in the colonial period in Sub-Saharan Africa defy simplistic narratives. In some places, the movement might be said to be from the “bottom” up, if one is examining social class. In others, such as Benin, Buganda, Warri, and Kongo, Christian missionaries first attracted (or tried to attract) elites in the royal court (Thornton 1984; Ryder 1960, 1961; Hansen 1984).

What is undeniably clear, particularly after Jean and John Comaroff’s monumental work (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991) on Nonconformist Christianity’s encounter with the Tswana, is that “Christianity”—as a reified category—could not exist outside of the orbit of social, political, and material change in colonial sub-Saharan Africa. Such assemblages had been observed earlier by both scholars and missionaries. Robin Horton (1975a, 1975b), for example, explained conversion to so-called “world religions” like Islam and Christianity by developing a model whereby Africans would seek new explanations for the expanding socio-economic world in which they found themselves living as a result of colonial encounters with Europeans. If Horton’s model seems inclined toward the elite, one must be careful to not too quickly assume that common folk had no interest in accounting for the changes—sometimes violent and profoundly disruptive changes—that were occurring in their lives (Feierman 1990; White 2000). This is equally true for the colonial and postcolonial periods, for, as Uchenna Okeja observes, “the subalterns, who are mostly at the center of postcolonial discourses, indeed can and do speak!” (Okeja 2013, p. 109). Horton’s analysis has gained a kind of traction in the way scholars have often described the appeal of Pentecostalism. It is true that, generally speaking, Sub-Saharan Africa has seen the rapid growth of charismatic and Pentecostal churches since the 1970s. The apparent appeal of Pentecostal, or neo-Pentecostal churches and their narratives of conversionary discontinuity has often been read against the backdrop not of “African culture” or “African tradition” *tout court*, but rather against the more immediate backdrop of violent, destructive, and dysfunctional postcolonial histories.

For many Africans, Christianity (or, at least Christian communities, beliefs, and practices) was a means to move forward, and the forward-looking modernity that accompanied the expansion of millennial capitalism seemed to fit with the broader ethos of change that was inculcated within these Christian communities. As Dmitri M. Bondarenko and Andrey V. Tutorskiy's article on Ugandan Orthodoxy shows, however, the Christian past can also be viewed as a repository of ritual resources that need not be understood as antithetical to a modern present. Similarly, as Shamara Wyllie Alhassan explains in this issue, Christianity can also be understood to be part of the social, metaphysical, and structural problems from which Africans want respite. In these senses, there could be said to be multiple modernities with which Africans are engaging. This multiplicity is itself a critique of Horton's model, which seemed to not care to differentiate between Christianity and Islam, let alone contrasting expressions of those traditions. Yet, the diverse communities within these traditions help constitute, produce, and reproduce African modernities in a plurality of ways.

This multiplicity matters to the analyses included in this special issue. The challenges here are both conceptual and historiographical. Scholars should not assume that those who did undergo catechesis or baptism did so only out of material or political calculation since, in many cases, one either has insufficient or non-existent sources to investigate these issues. Additionally, even when one has access to these sources, they are frequently later historical sources that were composed after "conversion," as David Dmitri Hurlbut's article in this special issue demonstrates. These sources frame the adherents' "conversion" experience through the lens of their new religious identity, thereby compromising the reliability of the narrative from a historical perspective. Furthermore, "conversion" was frequently a matter of interpersonal relationships. As Anna Wells' contribution shows, familial bonds, especially the bond between mother and daughter, were a defining factor in the "conversion" of women in *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church*. While Well's article focuses its conclusions on the premodern period, Andreana Prichard (2017) has confirmed the continuing importance of affect in religious "conversion" in the colonial and postcolonial periods. In her article with Kimberly Marshall in this issue, Prichard also highlights the transnational ties among Pentecostal Christians between the United States of America and West and East Africa as a way of illuminating the exchanges that have helped to constitute global Pentecostal belonging and beliefs. We also should pay closer attention to the ways that people narrate their lives with respect to religious and observable processes of cultural change. Shamara Wyllie Alhassan, for instance, demonstrates in her special issue contribution that the Rastafari themselves do not speak of "conversion." Alhassan joins many of the contributors in this issue in challenging the idea that religious change is about belief, or about leaving and joining communities that are clearly bounded by doctrine.

Ultimately, it may never be possible to abandon the terms "conversion" and "convert" entirely since adherents themselves embrace the terms, which are then unavoidable when studying religious change from an emic perspective. Nevertheless, historians and anthropologists need to think more critically about how we are deploying these terms. The importance of the subjective, interior dimensions of religious experience and conversion will endure for religious adherents and missionaries, but the notion of replacing an old set of "pagan" beliefs with a new set of Christian or Islamic beliefs is often tendentious from a scholarly perspective, especially when complicated by scant or incomplete historical records. As the contributors to this special collectively show, religious "conversion" is a process that frequently has more to do with interpersonal and familial bonds, ritual, elective affinities, and socio-economic factors than it does with belief. The term conversion without any scare quotes does not reflect this complex reality.

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