

# Conversion Careers, Conversions-*For*, and Conversion in the Study of Religion<sup>1</sup>

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I am indebted to Professor Locklin for the provocative nature of this paper, and I say this not only to be polite. Some months ago, I read and then integrated elements of an earlier draft of the paper into my own work on conversion and Hindu-Christian conflict. My response to Locklin's paper is therefore an appreciative one, which I will organize around three primary themes.

First, I wish to begin by drawing out and moving forward a point Locklin makes only obliquely. Locklin argues that Hindu-Christian debates about conversion involve the two sides "talking past one another" due to their different understandings of "conversion." He also quotes Sebastian Kim, who maintains that the controversy involves a "clash of two radically different religious frameworks."<sup>2</sup> It is this point I wish to highlight.

Hindu-Christian debates about conversion are not just about the nature of *conversion*. They are also, and more fundamentally, about the nature of *religion* itself (what it is and *should* be). Are religious truths universal or particular? Are they embodied by a single religion or diffused across all religious traditions? Is the primary goal of religion eternal salvation or moral and spiritual development in the here and now? Is it distinctive dogmas or particular spiritual practices that are more consequential in the pursuit of this goal? Is truth settled once and for all, or is it discovered experientially and individually? Given such choices, Gandhi would tend towards the latter options; a figure like Billy Graham towards the former. And since western notions of "secularism" and "freedom of religion" derive in important ways from post-

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<sup>2</sup> Sebastian C. H. Kim, *In Search of Identity: Debates on Religious Conversion in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 179.

Enlightenment Christian conceptions of religion<sup>3</sup> (e.g., conceptions more like Graham's than Gandhi's), contemporary debates about conversion in officially secular India reticulate intricately with and inform debates about the nature, usefulness, and appropriateness of political constructs like secularism and freedom of religion outside of the western cultural milieu which engendered them.<sup>4</sup>

Second, I would like to suggest that the conversation about conversion outlined by Locklin's paper could profit from engagement with the work of descriptive scholars of conversion, many of whom now speak of conversion "careers" rather than conversion as an "event." For Henri Gooren, for example, conversion careers involve a religious person's passage "within his or her social and cultural context, through levels, types, and phases of...participation."<sup>5</sup> Gooren's model, which itself could be expanded and improved by considering and attempting to account for common Hindu notions of conversion, employs a five-level typology of religious participation involving "pre-affiliation," "affiliation" (what most people think of when they hear the word "conversion"), "conversion" (used in a more limited sense

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<sup>3</sup> On the western origins and foundations of modern "secularism," see Charles Taylor, "Modes of Secularism," in *Secularism and Its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 31-53; Jakob De Roover and S. N. Balagangadhara, "John Locke, Christian Liberty, and the Predicament of Liberal Toleration," *Political Theory* 36, no. 4 (2008): 523-49; Jakob De Roover, "A Kingdom of Another World: Christianity, Toleration and the History of Western Political Thought" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Ghent University, 2005), 40; John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the 'Two Treatises of Government'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke's Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Sarah Claerhout, "'Losing My Religion': Conversion, Secularism and Religious Freedom in India" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Ghent University, 2010); and William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> On the (in)appropriateness of secularism in India (and, more generally, outside of the West), see Ashis Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Toleration," in *Secularism and Its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 321-44; Triloki Nath Madan, "Secularism in Its Place," *ibid.*, 297-320; and Sarah Claerhout and Jakob de Roover, "Conversion of the World: Proselytization in India and the Universalization of Christianity," in *Proselytization Revisited: Rights Talk, Free Markets and Culture Wars*, ed. Rosalind I. J. Hackett (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2008), 53-76.

<sup>5</sup> Henri Gooren, "Conversion Narratives," in *Studying Global Pentecostalism: Theories and Methods*, ed. Allan Anderson, et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 94. See also, Henri Gooren, "Conversion Careers in Latin America: Entering and Leaving Church among Pentecostals, Catholics, and Mormons," in *Conversion of a Continent: Contemporary Religious Change in Latin America*, ed. Timothy J. Steigenga and Edward L. Cleary (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 52-71; and Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

of radical change of worldview), “confession” (a level involving active participation and profession), and “disaffiliation.”<sup>6</sup>

Conceiving of conversion as a “career” rather than as an event makes more room, descriptively, to accommodate conversions that are “up,” or “up-and-up” (as opposed to “over”), to use Locklin’s terms. It also acknowledges that conversions happen over time, in stages, and involve processes that often stall, reverse, or come completely undone. Conceiving of conversion as a career also helps avoid the progress-oriented, almost teleological assumptions that I would argue are implied in conceiving of conversion either primarily as “up” or “over.” Many people advance only a step or two in their conversion careers, some move quickly and others more slowly, and “disaffiliation” is also always a distinct possibility. Embedded in the conversion career model, therefore, is the helpful acknowledgement that conversions are not just “over” or “up,” but also, quite frequently, up-down-and-all-around.

Finally, I wish to say a few words in defense of what we might call *Conversion-For*, that is, conversion motivated at least in part by the pursuit of some “material” benefit. Those who think of conversion *exclusively* in terms of “over” or “up” (which Locklin, notably, does *not* do) betray a bias in favor of the intellectual, rational, “spiritual” conversion, and against conversions involving more complex mixtures of motivations, including so-called “material” interests like dignity, respect, social mobility, physical or spiritual healing, and economic improvement. This is a very modern (and fundamentally Christian) bias, one which scholars of religion often share, in an unconscious and unacknowledged fashion, with both Christians *and* Hindu nationalist critics of Christian conversion. But why?

The bias makes no sense from a scholarly point of view. As a result of my Protestant upbringing, I myself long held an unacknowledged scholarly bias for “spiritual” conversions, and still do at some instinctual personal level today. But for a scholar to prefer that people convert for “spiritual” reasons not only reflects an unthinking acceptance of Protestant Christian prejudices, but also implies the assertion

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

that religion is a cultural system<sup>7</sup> somehow different substantively from politics, where people constantly align and re-align themselves in order to pursue individual and collective material interests. The unconscious scholarly bias for “spiritual” conversions therefore implies an ideological argument about religion, to wit, that it is somehow different than other cultural systems, *sui generis*—even *sacred*—an assertion that it seems to me should be reserved for the religious themselves.<sup>8</sup>

For Hindu nationalist critics of Dalit and mass conversions to Christianity, which they frequently portray as the result of “inducement,” or “allurement,” the bias is also a curious one. For at least the last five hundred years of Indian history, communities (especially caste and sub-caste communities), have frequently aligned and re-aligned themselves with different religious sects, traditions, patrons, and benefactors (including Hindu ones) in order to signal their improving social status or press for social advance, as other groups elsewhere have done throughout recorded history.<sup>9</sup> Conversion-*For* therefore has a long history as an *Indian* model of conversion.

Moreover, the conception of religion as an individual, intellectual, and rational thing unrelated to mundane material concerns arguably emerges first (or at least most clearly) in the context of post-Enlightenment, western religious thought, and was expressed most regularly and forcefully by western missionaries worried about producing “rice Christians” in places like Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The Hindu nationalist rejection of Dalit and mass conversions to Christianity as something other than “genuine”<sup>10</sup> therefore paradoxically assimilates concerns that first gained real force not in India, but rather

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<sup>7</sup> Here I am intentionally borrowing language from Clifford Geertz’s seminal essay, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> For a fuller exposition of my thoughts on this matter, see Chad M. Bauman, “Does the Divine Physician Have an Unfair Advantage?” in *Asia in the Making of Christianity*, ed. Jonathan Seitz and Richard Fox Young (Leiden: Brill, Forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> On this, see Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society 1700-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> Attempts to distinguish between “genuine” conversions and those that are inauthentic appear relatively regularly in contemporary debates about Christian evangelism in India. For example, echoing elements of Dayananda Saraswati’s argument (discussed by Locklin), Suhag Shukla, Co-Founder and Managing Director of the Hindu American Foundation, writes, “Conversion, when born from *genuine* faith, belief, study, or religious experience, can be beautiful. But, conversion begot by aggressive or predatory proselytization is a form of violence.” See Suhag Shukla, “The Question of Evangelism in India,” *Huffington Post*, 5 February 2011, available at <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/suhag-a-shukla->

among modern, western, particularly Protestant Christians, who then exported them through projects of imperialism, modernization, and evangelization.<sup>11</sup> There's no reason to be dismissive of those who utilize this distinction in order to criticize conversions to Christianity, of course; but given the fact that these critics frequently frame their critique as a kind of resistance against western neo-colonialism, a "decolonization" or "de-westernization" of the Indian mind, the paradoxical nature of their deployment of this distinction at the very least bears mentioning.

My three themes come together at this juncture, and in order to respect the length limits I've been given, I will conclude briefly by indicating how they relate. Those who conceive of conversion as Conversion-*For*, like those who conceive of it primarily in terms of "up" or "over," are making an argument not only about the nature of conversion, but also about the nature of religion itself, what it is, what it should be, and what it is *for*—e.g., among other things, *for* the securing or acquisition of "material" benefit. This conception of religion is one which, from a scholarly point of view, should receive treatment and consideration equal to that given to other models.

Moreover, the continued, observable presence of conversions *for* all over the modern world indicates, once again, the importance of adopting a life-cycle or conversion career approach. My own fieldwork throughout India over the last few years suggests that the most regular reason people become affiliated with Christianity is because Christians prayed for them and they received physical or spiritual healing (e.g., liberation from demon possession). Such considerations are prominent elsewhere in the world as well, including (perhaps even *increasingly*) in the modern West. Those who convert because they have received physical healing or some other "material" benefit often don't make it past Gooren's "affiliation" stage, rarely become "confessing" Christians, and frequently "disaffiliate". They remain, nevertheless (and maybe even *because* of this), an important object of scholarly study.

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[esq/harvesting-souls-yields-c\\_b\\_817793.html](http://esq.harvesting-souls-yields-c_b_817793.html), accessed 14 May 2012. The distinction between authentic and inauthentic conversions is one which religious people can and regularly do make from the perspective of their own religious traditions. My point is merely to caution scholars against introducing such distinctions (and the biases they imply) into their research on the topic.

<sup>11</sup> For a similar argument, more fully articulated, see Nathaniel Roberts, "Anti-conversion Law in a Secular State: Religious Difference and the Threat to 'Public Order,'" workshop paper given at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen, 22 February 2011.