

The Applicability of the Horton Thesis of African Conversion to the Christian Conversion of Medieval Europe

Lynette Olson

Until very recently the subject of the Christian conversion of Europe itself has been incredibly understudied, considering its staggering implications for the formation of European culture. (It was the context for the introduction of textual literacy in many regions, for one thing.) As Eric Sharpe's former student Carole Cusack wrote at the beginning of her doctoral dissertation, she soon realised that she would have to write the up-to-date overall consideration of European conversion that she initially looked for herself.¹ That the theme of the giant Leeds International Medieval Congress for 1997 was conversion is also indicative of current interest in the subject and awareness of its importance.

Yet the Christian conversion of early Europe not only needs more study, it needs a better conceptual framework of analysis than has appeared in publications on the subject. In advocating the Horton thesis as such I should say that in my experience historians (including myself) are more readily convinced of its value as an analytical tool in understanding religious change than are those in the field of Religious Studies. This is why I'm particularly glad to be contributing to an interdisciplinary dialogue through this *Festschrift*, to try to understand why we seem to see or miss the value or otherwise of different aspects of the Horton thesis.

One older conceptual framework of analysis which has been used in the analysis of early European conversion is Nock's distinction between natural and prophetic religion as employed in *The Christianization of Scandinavia* collection of conference papers² and in Clare Stancliffe's excellent article on the Christianisation of the Touraine in northern France. As Stancliffe explains, 'whereas natural religion seeks to satisfy a number of basic human needs, a prophetic religion has to create in man the

¹ 'An Examination of the Process of Conversion among the Germanic Peoples in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages', University of Sydney, 1995; published as *Conversion among the Germanic Peoples*, London, 1998.

² Ed. B. Sawyer *et al.*, Alingsas, 1987.

This Immense Panorama: Studies in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe

deeper needs it claims to fulfil'.¹ This seems to me to be more of a description of religion than an explanation of religious change, although Stancliffe's discussion of the natural religion of the Touraine peasantry fits in well with Horton's notion of the microcosm as we shall see. Henry Mayr-Harting's non-theoretical explanation of the appeal of Christianity to the first English royal convert is all right as far as it goes: 'Quite apart from spiritual considerations about which we have no evidence, it was worth having the notice of the pope and being drawn closer to the civilized and wealthy axis of Mediterranean life'.² Yet Horton's theory can tie the two together and even suggest what some spiritual considerations might have been. Robert Browning's explanation of why the Bulgar and Slav religions had less appeal than Christianity when Bulgaria was subject to outside pressures in the mid-ninth century is better: 'Unlike the great monotheistic religions they could not provide universally valid sanctions for the conduct of individual or community, or endow their adherents with the conviction that their lives formed part of a process of cosmic importance. Closely linked with family and clan, with particular persons and places, traditional religion was of no help to a man once he was removed from his familiar environment.'³ Browning may have used Horton but does not cite him.

It is time this paper did both. Readers wishing to examine Robin Horton's thesis for themselves should consult the journal *Africa*, volumes 41 (1971), which has his seminal article 'African Conversion', and 45 (1975) for 'On the Rationality of Conversion' of which part 1 is probably the best thing to read, beginning as it does with a summary of his thesis; there is also an early formulation of it in volume 32 (1962) from 'The Kalabari World View: an Outline and Interpretation', which is very valuable for showing what was really important to Horton as he developed his theory.⁴

1 'From Town to Country: the Christianisation of the Touraine 370-600', in *Studies in Church History*, 16, 1979, pp. 43-59, at p. 52.

2 *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, London, 1972, p. 63.

3 *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, London, 1975, p. 143.

4 Respective paginations for the above articles are pp. 85-108, pp. 219-55 (part 1) and 373-99 (part 2), pp. 197-220 (and see below). A sustained and on the whole positive critique of the Horton thesis is found in D. Schreuder and G. Oddie, 'What is "Conversion"? History, Christianity and Religious Change in Colonial Africa and South Asia', in *Journal of Religious History*, 15.4, December, 1989, pp. 496-518; C. Cusack, 'Towards a General Theory of Conversion', and B. Martin, 'African Conversion and the "Irish Question"', both in *Religious Change, Conversion and Culture*, ed. L. Olson, Sydney, 1996, pp. 1-21 and 33-61, respectively, are less enthusiastic.

The Applicability of the Horton Thesis

Horton explains religious change in Africa in the following terms. He draws a distinction between a microcosmic world view and a macrocosmic world view and relates this to the way in which people's religious needs of explanation, prediction and control are met. The microcosm is the small world of isolated subsistence settlements, and religious orientation in a microcosmic cosmology is to the familiar local spirits. Yet African traditional religions, according to Horton and others,¹ generally also have a concept of a supreme being remote from earthly affairs; in the religion of nomadic pastoralists, less tied to a particular microcosm, the supreme deity may receive a little more emphasis. Now, as circumstances change so as to bring people more into contact with the wider world, the macrocosm, whether they go out into it or it comes to them, their cosmology will develop in the direction of greater orientation to the supreme deity who has charge of it. Horton gives several examples where this occurred within the indigenous traditional religion, in one of which he says Christian or Islamic influence was non-existent and in others seems to have been minimal. Yet that is almost beside the point as we shall see. Of course one aspect of the wider world with which Africans have come in contact has frequently been one or both of the macrocosmic 'world' religions Christianity and Islam. At this point Horton's embryonic thesis expressed in his article on the Kalabari world-view is worth quoting at length.

The practice of varying one's level of theory with the range of phenomena one is trying to cope with also, perhaps, makes it understandable why the unitary *tamuno* and *so* [roughly 'the creator god' and 'fate'] were not actively approached in traditional Kalabari religion. For together they provided some sort of interpretation of the creation and life-course of the world as seen as a whole; and though Kalabari were aware of a wide world surrounding their own little enclave, it did not greatly impinge on their activities and they found small cause for coming to terms with it. This view of the matter is supported by subsequent Kalabari readiness to identify their unitary *tamuno* with the Christian God, and to give it active worship in such a guise. For Christian evangelism coincided with a growing irruption of the wider world outside into the narrow enclave of

¹ Cf. Schreuder and Oddie, *op. cit.*, p. 506.

This Immense Panorama: Studies in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe

village life, and hence with a growing need to come to terms with this wider world.¹

In 'African Conversion' Horton's view had developed further: 'the obvious inference is that acceptance of Islam and Christianity is due as much to development of the traditional cosmology in response to *other* factors of the modern situation as it is to the activities of the missionaries'.² Yet Horton's thesis, while taking full account of social factors and so forth still allows people to *be religious*. I like it for doing both, and also because it focuses attention on the convert and the convert's selective and creative reception of an introduced religion.

It is almost time to turn from the modern situation to consider to what extent and how usefully Horton's thesis can be applied to medieval European conversion, but first the general question must be addressed: 'can Horton's thesis be applied outside Africa?' He doesn't claim that it can, and I was relieved when the anthropologist Mary Douglas told me when she was in Sydney that she thought Horton would approve of (careful) attempts to apply it to religious change elsewhere. It has been used successfully by R. M. Eaton to analyse the Christian conversion of the Nagas, a tribal people in far northeast India.³ There's a beautiful case of modification of indigenous religion emphasising the great creator over the lesser spirits when the wider world came with a vengeance to unfortunate Iroquois Indians who had sided with the losers in the American Revolution in the part of New York State I grew up in.⁴ It probably did contribute to my appreciation of the usefulness of Horton's approach when I realised that his thesis could be enlightening about something I had heard and read about in my youth. The case is worth mentioning also to emphasise the importance of change *within* indigenous religion in Horton's thesis, which posits that it would occur with shifts along the macrocosmic/microcosmic continuum altering peoples religious needs whether a world religion was around or not. Of course in the American Indian case Christianity was present, and some would say and have said that the Iroquois Longhouse Religion was the result of Christian influence. But this is another reason why I like Horton's thesis: that it gets

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 214.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 103.

³ 'Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876-1971', in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 21, 1984, pp. 1-44; cf. Schreuder and Oddie, *op. cit.*, pp. 515-16.

⁴ See now A. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*, New York, 1970.

The Applicability of the Horton Thesis

away from consideration of 'mere imitation' of one religion by another. Horton's theory about what is going on in people's heads may be impossible to prove,¹ but if there is any chance that it is correct it should be kept in mind when studying religious change. Now to medieval Europe!

If we stay on the subject of indigenous religion and turn to early European examples, there are problems. When Anne Ross writes in the introduction to her major study of *Pagan Celtic Britain*,² 'It is possible to acquire some knowledge as to the nature of the gods and goddesses they envisaged, but we cannot hope now to know what these deities meant to the early Celts any more than we can expect to understand what the references to the old religion in the Irish tales meant to a twelfth-century Irish audience, for example', she removes from our grasp something that is important to Horton's thesis. Still, did pre-Christian European religions have a two-tiered cosmology of lesser gods and a high god like the African religions of Horton's thesis? The twelfth-century German chronicler Helmold of Bosau, who had been on missions to northern Slavs, says of their religion: 'But they do not deny that there is among the multiform god-heads to whom they attribute plains and woods, sorrows and joys, one god in the heavens ruling over the others. They hold that he, the all powerful one, looks only after heavenly matters; that the others, discharging the duties assigned to them in obedience to him, proceeded from his blood, and that one excels another in the measure that he is nearer to this god of gods',³ which sounds like Horton's African macrocosmic deity. The existence of a remote high god in Germanic religion is debated.⁴ I can see no trace of such in Celtic religion, which was exceedingly local (microcosmic). But I am not going to be unduly deflected from my inquiry into the possible usefulness of Horton's thesis for understanding conversion in my field by problems with his supreme

1 Schreuder and Oddie, *op. cit.*, pp. 505-6 and 517-18.

2 London and New York, 1967, p. 6.

3 *The Chronicle of the Slavs*, 84, trans. F. Tschan, 1935, rpt New York, 1966, p. 219. The Latin reads: 'Inter multiformia vero deorum numina, quibus arva, silvas, tristicias atque voluptates attribuunt, non diffitentur unum deum in celis ceteris imperitantem, illum prepotentem celestia tantum curare, hos vero distributis officiis obsequentes de sanguine eius processisse et unumquemque eo prestantiorem, quo proximiorum illi deo deorum' (ed. B. Schmeidler, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum*, 32, Hannover, 1937, p. 160).

4 G. Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, University of California Press, 1973, pp. 35-8, with U. Strutynski, 'Philippon Contra Dumézil: An Answer to the Attack', *The Journal of Indo-European Studies*, 5, 1977, pp. 213-14.

This Immense Panorama: Studies in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe

being, unlike some colleagues in Religious Studies to whom it seems to be like waving a red flag to a bull, whereas I deem it more of a red herring.

We can do better however in examining cosmological conceptions in the age of European conversion by quoting from the early eighth-century letter of advice of the English bishop Daniel to the English missionary bishop Boniface on the method of converting the heathen.¹ This document is almost the only thing of its kind — the late sixth-century sample sermon of Martin of Braga intended to persuade countryfolk from pagan holdovers is similar,² but the letter of Daniel to Boniface is a real ‘how to’. I am glad to have the opportunity to emphasise the importance of this source, and to express frustration that it is so seldom quoted in contrast to Gregory the Great’s advice to Augustine on how to convert the Anglo-Saxons, about reusing sacred sites, etc. This undoubtedly reflects the fact that Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, in which the latter is quoted,³ is much better known than Boniface’s correspondence, but certainly not the relative worth of the two sources in question.

The advice of Daniel to Boniface on the method of converting the heathen begins as follows:

Do not begin by arguing with them about the genealogies of their false gods. Accept their statement that they were begotten by other gods through the intercourse of male and female and then you will be able to prove that, as these gods and goddesses did not exist before, and were born like men, they must be men and not gods. When they have been forced to admit that their gods had a beginning, since they were begotten by others, they should be asked whether the world had a beginning or was always in existence. There is no doubt that before the universe was created there was no place in which these created gods could have subsisted or dwelt. And by ‘universe’ I mean not merely heaven and earth which we see with our eyes but the whole extent of space which even the heathens can grasp in their imagination. If they maintain that the universe had no beginning, try to refute their arguments and bring forward

¹ Trans. C. Talbot, *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany*, London, 1954, pp. 75-8, passages quoted below at pp. 76 and 77.

² Trans. J. Hillgarth, *The Conversion of Western Europe, 350-750*, Englewood Cliffs, 1969, pp. 55-63.

³ I.30, ed. & trans. B. Colgrave and R. Mynors, Oxford, 1969, pp. 106-9.

The Applicability of the Horton Thesis

convincing proofs; and if they persist in arguing, ask them, Who ruled it?¹

Then follows a whole series of questions along this line; then the letter continues:

This conclusion must also be drawn: If the gods are omnipotent, beneficent and just, they must reward their devotees and punish those who despise them. Why then, if they act thus in temporal affairs, do they spare the Christians who cast down their idols and turn away from their worship the inhabitants of practically the entire globe? And whilst the Christians are allowed to possess the countries that are rich in oil and wine and other commodities, why have they left to the heathens the frozen lands of the north, where the gods, banished from the rest of the world, are falsely supposed to dwell? The heathens are frequently to be reminded of the supremacy of the Christian world and of the fact that they who still cling to outworn beliefs are in a very small minority.²

¹ 'Neque enim contraria eis de ipsorum quamvis falsorum deorum genealogia astruere debes, [sed] secundum eorum opinionem quoslibet ab aliis generatos per complexum mariti ac femine concede eos asserere, ut saltim modo hominum natos deos ac deas homines potius, non deos fuisse et cepisse, qui ante non erant, probes. Cum vero initium habere deos utpote alios ab aliis generatos coacti didicerint, item interrogandi, utrum initium habere hunc mundum an sine initio semper exstitisse arbitrentur. Si initium habuit, quis hunc creavit? Cum procul dubio ante constitutionem saeculi nullatenus genitis diis inveniunt subsistendi vel habitandi locum; mundum enim non hanc visibilem tantum celum et terram, sed cuncta etiam extenta locorum spatia, que ipsi quoque pagani suis imaginare cogitationibus possunt, dico. Quodsi sine initio semper exstitisse mundum contenderint, quod multis refutare ac convincere documentis argumentisque stude: tamen altercantes interroga, quis ante natos deos mundo imperaret, quis regeret?' (ed. M. Tangl, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Epistolae Selectae*, 1, Berlin, 1916, p. 39).

² 'Hoc quoque inferendum: Si omnipotentes sunt dii et benefici et iusti, non solum suos remunerant cultores, verum etiam puniunt contemptores. Et si hec utraque temporaliter faciunt, cur ergo parcunt christianis totum pene orbem ab eorum cultura avertentibus idolaque evertentibus? Et cum ipsi, id est christiani, fertiles terras vinique et olei feraces ceterisque opibus habundantes possident provincias, ipsi autem, id est pagani, frigore semper rigentes terras cum eorum diis reliquerunt, in quibus iam toto orbe pulsi falso regnare putantur. Inferenda quoque sepius eis est orbis auctoritas christiani; in quorum comparatione ipsi paucissimi in vanitate antiqua adhuc perseverant' (*ibid.*, 40-1).

This Immense Panorama: Studies in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe

That Daniel should have chosen to phrase practically the entire line of argument in these terms indicates that what Horton is talking about is what people analysing the conversion of Europe should be thinking about too. First attention is called to macrocosmic cosmology, and later to the macrocosm of the wider, rich, civilised world. The heathen are being encouraged to 'think big', to stretch their religious imagination and are reminded of earthly reality too (except Daniel's statements of the latter are wildly unrealistic for his day). Notice though that unlike European missionaries in Africa who several times have encouraged the identification of an indigenous supreme god with the Christian deity (the Kalabari *tamuno* is an example used to translate the Christian deity), the letter does not expect him to be found in the Germanic heathen cosmology. Our word 'God' was at least found in the Germanic heathen vocabulary however.

Requoting the last part of Horton's analysis of religious change among the Kalabari will lead into the remainder of this paper. 'For Christian evangelism coincided with a growing irruption of the wider world outside into the narrow enclave of village life, and hence with a growing need to come to terms with this wider world.' This insight is endlessly applicable to medieval conversion, except that the extent to which the wider world impinged on village life in the Middle Ages was limited. Sometimes people went into the wider world, like the Goths towards the fifth century and the Vikings later. The Christianisation of the Goths and several other Germanic peoples is interesting, having been largely effected by members of their own group after the migration had begun. We know this because their Christianity followed the heresy of Arius and used scriptures and liturgy in the Gothic language, all of which the Romans despised — after the days when Arianism enjoyed imperial favour which contributed to its original, limited spread among the Goths. This makes the case of the Visigoths a very special one in the history of conversion and one which may in turn have useful implications for Horton's theory.¹ In cases where people seem to be converting themselves, one may suspect that something like the processes which Horton describes are in operation.² Irish raiders into the wider world who brought Patrick back with them as a slave ultimately brought the wider world to Ireland. When diplomatic alliance was confirmed by marriage to a Christian queen or the

¹ See further my 'The Conversion of the Visigoths and Bulgarians Compared', in *Religious Change, Conversion and Culture*, pp. 22-32.

² Cf. Eaton, *op. cit.*, p. 34: missionaries were astonished to find how Christianity had spread among the Sema Nagas when they toured the region.

The Applicability of the Horton Thesis

Franks took in more eastern territory, then the wider world arrived. The missionaries whom Frankish soldiers protected were part of that wider world. Note that although force was a major technique of medieval conversion and rulers made great claims of having made their people Christian, its role and theirs should not be exaggerated. Early medieval communication was not that good, and rule not that effective. There was plenty of room for pastoral episcopal and monastic missionary initiative and informal conversion via the family especially. Of course one has to explain why the rulers were converted in any case; Horton's supported statement that the indigenous religion of African chiefs tended to be more macrocosmic than that of their people is worth mentioning here.¹

In the course of the conversion of Europe, Christianity went from being a religion of city-based communities in touch with each other in the wide world of the Roman Empire to the religion of profoundly rural societies. One insight I have gained from using Horton's analysis is that in the process Christianity changed and became more microcosmic in order to meet the religious needs of a population still largely in the 'narrow enclave of village life' (if not on isolated farmsteads).² Stancliffe in her article on the conversion of the Touraine gives a fine example of country people who persisted in throwing offerings into a certain lake. So a chapel dedicated to a saint was built beside the lake and the people made offerings there.³ Thus via the cult of the saints the local cult site was preserved and local needs met. An interesting study could be done of saints' lives at the beginning of the Middle Ages to point out miracles stressing the relevance of Christianity and its saints to country concerns of crop failure and so forth. And of course pagan survivals lingered on. At the time of the Reformation Protestants conducting visitations in Germany were deeply shocked by the combination of paganism and Catholicism which they found.

¹ 'On the Rationality of Conversion' (part 1), p. 226.

² How controversial an insight is apparent from the following in Rosamond McKitterick's hostile review of J. Russell's *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity. A Sociohistorical Approach to Religious Transformation*, in *Early Medieval Europe*, 6.2, 1997, p. 252: 'Even if it could be established that "Germanization" is a process that can be identified, recognized and ascertained from the surviving evidence, it is surely the case that it was not Christianity itself that was adapted to new cultural milieux but the other way about.' While sharing her criticisms of the book by and large (and adding that despite being theoretical it does not use Horton!), I cannot accept the latter part of this statement.

³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 55-6.

This Immense Panorama: Studies in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe

Peasants from Protestant districts were taking their medicinal herbs and magic wands to Catholic ones for the customary blessing by the priests.¹ I could be bold and suggest that with the Reformation hatched in the widening world of northern European cities Christianity abandoned microcosmic features as it sloughed off medieval Catholicism, but I am out of my period and space.

A fitting conclusion to a paper which grew out of the University of Sydney History Department's teaching is provided by one of our students' evaluation of the use of the Horton thesis in the overall study of Christian conversion in his examination paper: 'Professor Horton's theory of conversion has given a reference point for sorting through the complexity of religious conversion, rather than a tight model into which conversion movements must fit. Thus it has provided freedom, rather than restriction, for investigations of religious change.'²

¹ G. Strauss, *Luther's House of Learning: Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation*, Baltimore and London, 1978, p. 303.

² James Dayhew, for the undergraduate course then called 'Religion and Society: Christian Conversion Movements, Tradition and Change', which examined the subject thematically and comparatively in Medieval Europe and Modern India and Africa. It was taught by Professor Deryck Schreuder, Dr Geoffrey Oddie and myself, the Horton thesis having been introduced by Professor Schreuder.