

Towards a General Theory of Conversion

Carole M. Cusack *

One finds broad disagreements about the factors behind conversion ... This range of opinion can be explained ... by the fact that the term conversion has led researchers to believe that everything under that name in different contexts refers to the same phenomenon.

Nils G. Holm¹

The phenomenon of conversion to Christianity may be approached from many differing viewpoints: as history of missions, as a sociological process, as a personal journey from unbelief to faith, and as an aspect of political and territorial expansion which advanced the power of certain hegemonic cultures throughout the last two thousand years. This list is not exhaustive. Each of these perspectives may be illuminating, but the scholar may have some difficulties discerning the fundamental nature of 'conversion' amidst the methodological confusion.

Until the edifice of Christianity was challenged thoroughly in the mid-nineteenth century, histories of conversion tended to speak of the triumph of the Holy Spirit, and the progress of salvation. Throughout the twentieth century missiological writings have become increasingly secularised.

Psychological/Interior Approaches to Conversion

The earliest 'academic' theories of conversion were from scholars who developed their methods under the influence of the 'psychology of religion' school, originating with William James' groundbreaking study *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Arthur Darby Nock, whose great work *Conversion* remains an impressive effort sixty years on, concentrated on a

* Carole Cusack is a Lecturer in the School of Studies in Religion, and her recently completed doctoral dissertation is a study of the conversion of the early medieval Germanic-speaking peoples.

¹ Nils G. Holm, 'Pentecostalism, Conversion and Charismata', *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, vol. 1, no. 3, p. 139.

Religious Change, Conversion and Culture, ed. Lynette Olson, Sydney Studies in Society and Culture, 12, Sydney, 1996.

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definition of 'conversion' as an essentially individual, experiential phenomenon. He distinguished between 'adhesion', which was acceptance of a religious position to a degree, but which required no absolute allegiance, and 'conversion', of which his famous definition is as follows:

by conversion we mean the reorienting of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.²

Immediately Nock has done two things: made 'conversion' a phenomenon which involves moral judgements, and located that phenomenon within the psyche of the individual. The mass focus of the sociologists is totally absent; only an individual can be converted. Nock was concerned to demonstrate the appropriateness of his definitions, and to justify the progress of Christianity within them. Therefore he considered religious experience outside of Christianity, and the appeal of certain philosophical schools. He asserted that

we cannot understand the success of Christianity outside Judaea without making an effort to determine the elements in the mind of the time to which it appealed.³

Nock gives some time to the 'mystery cults' which were popular in the late Roman period, and with which Christianity is sometimes classified. That these cults were popular and had a profound spiritual effect on the lives of the devotees is evidenced by spiritual autobiographies such as Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* (which describes his devotion to Isis, and the change that this experience wrought in his life). These cults were closer than other forms of pre-Christian religion to the terms of 'conversion' as Nock defines it, in that the devotees of Isis, Serapis, Cybele or any other eastern deity were expected to make certain changes to their lives (Propertius' poems about his mistress Cynthia's devotions to Isis are an example of this).

² A. D. Nock, *Conversion*, Oxford, 1933, p. 7.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

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Nock notes that the term used for conversion to philosophy was *epistrophe*, which Plato used in the sense of a turning round of the soul,⁴ and that it was later used by Christians in speaking of conversion. *Conversio* has the same meaning in Latin, of turning from carelessness to true piety. However, Nock concludes that Christianity differs from the philosophical schools and the mystery cults in that it demands absolute allegiance, God is a 'jealous God'. Isis and Cybele did not 'own' their devotees as Christ did.⁵

The conversion experience of Paul, who turned from persecution of Christians to evangelism and eventual martyrdom, would appear to be Nock's paradigm. Thus far, Nock's analysis of the phenomenon of conversion is confined to the inner state of the individual, who chooses to belong to a new faith because of a personal spiritual conviction. However, Nock does not adequately account for the mass conversions which took place in the Late Antique and Early Medieval periods, perhaps because he cannot: such mass movements, in terms of his definitions, could not be instances of 'conversion'.

The same problems are encountered in the work of a near-contemporary scholar, A. C. Underwood. His study *Conversion: Christian and Non-Christian* is subtitled *A Comparative and Psychological Study*, and commences with an admission that most such research up to this point (1925) has been Protestant and Evangelical in orientation, and that his study will correct this. However, Underwood has an agenda of his own: his book is an avowed exploration of the fundamental identity of religious experience, and the scholars he cites to establish a definition of conversion (for example, Starbuck and James) all stress suddenness and moral-personal integration as features of the conversion experience,⁶ and Underwood's own definition of conversion is

⁴ Plato, *The Republic*, ed. and trans. Desmond Lee, Harmondsworth, 1974, Part XI, 'The Immortality of the Soul', pp. 440-55.

⁵ This raises the question of the status of ceremonies of initiation: many people were baptised, which is an external sign of conversion, but the corresponding internal transformation cannot easily be observed or measured.

⁶ For example, F. Peter Cotterell, 'The Conversion Crux', *Missiology*, vol. II, no. 2, April, 1974, who states that 'the conversion experience in mission, then, is a painful, decisive decision between two alternative ways of life, and the crux is whatever experience is critical in establishing a lasting, permanent break between the two ways' (p. 185).

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the unification of the unhappy soul by its obtaining a stronger grip on religious realities.⁷

Underwood's book traces this form of individual conversion through the Old Testament and Antique Christianity, then Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and finally the philosophical schools of Greece and Rome. In dealing with Islam, Underwood reveals the same distaste for the mass movement as Nock: he comments,

how superficial the conversion of the Arab tribes was is seen by the widespread apostasy that followed the Prophet's death; while the subsequent conversion of millions of non-Arabs was the work, not of apostles, but of generals.⁸

Underwood's discussion of the mystery cults follows similar lines, stressing the power of ritual to create profound emotional and spiritual agitation (and having no small problem dealing with Christian baptism, as the act is supposed to follow the experience, not to engender it). The final sections of *Conversion: Christian and Non-Christian* deal with pure psychological theory of conversion, and the comparative aspects of the phenomenon. Here Underwood makes an important point:

while conversion is a human fact, and found in all religions, its incidence is largely affected by the traditions and expectations of the group and of the period.⁹

This observation contains the kernel of the problem with the inward-looking definition of conversion. All studies of religious experience which are conducted from a comparative viewpoint have the problem that it is not really possible to separate the 'experience' which is being described from its social, religious and cultural context. To posit that there is an essential conversion experience, and that all authentic conversions involve that interior change, narrows the scope of the term severely. All those societies which 'converted' for other reasons (political, social, the desire to have the

⁷ A. C. Underwood, *Conversion: Christian and Non-Christian*, London, 1925, p. 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

protection of a more powerful deity, with limited or no understanding of the doctrines of the new faith, and so on) and later grew into piety throughout the generations, osmotically, were never converted, never received the true faith.

That even the champions of individual, personal, psychological conversion were aware of the problems here is revealed by Underwood's caution that

it is ... important to point out that the significance of what has been said is not exhausted by saying that the convert imposes on his experience the doctrinal themes of the faith in which he finds unification. The doctrinal system also controls to a large extent his expectations, and for this reason he tends to discover in his conversion what he has been led to expect to find.¹⁰

In other words, the conversion experience is not really the authenticated constant that Underwood has argued for. It is culturally conditioned, easily manipulated, and therefore may turn out to be a blind alley in the search for a model of conversion. Perhaps mass conversions may be 'authentic' in some sense too.

Twentieth-Century Christian Approaches to Mission and Conversion

In missionary writing from the 1950s it has been possible to discern the emergence of a variety of trends in missionary activity. In general, these trends may be divided into the ecumenical and the evangelical. The evangelical pattern has continued to conform strongly to the traditional eschatological understanding of mission and individual salvation; the ecumenical view has changed in response to social and political issues.

For ecumenical Christians, the instability of the twentieth century resulted in

the West [becoming] ever more conscious of its faults, mistakes and shortcomings. Where the West did not realize this of its own accord, the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

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Third World was only too ready to point it out ... Western colonialism, civilisation and attitudes of superiority came under fire, as did 'Western Religion'. This resulted in the West, and Western Christian churches, adopting an apologetic attitude.¹¹

Concepts in mission such as 'witness' began to be replaced by the notion of 'dialogue', in which the non-Christian religions were accorded status and the encounter between Christianity and such faiths was perceived as a meeting of equals. The emphasis also shifted from active to passive modes of mission, where Christian 'presence' was stressed.

The assemblies of the World Council of Churches since that of Uppsala in 1968 have favoured a positive evaluation of the world and of the process of secularisation, in that the church is part of the world and must respond to it. One major breakthrough is the recognition by Christian writers that any preaching of a new faith involves cross-cultural communication:¹² obvious as this seems, it was not generally acknowledged in earlier missionary efforts.¹³ It also ties in neatly with the attempts of the West to abandon its more stridently colonial habits:

the fact that Christianity has become an integral part of probably all Western cultures does not mean that those have become Christian cultures ... No particular set of cultural patterns and social structures is in itself specifically Christian.¹⁴

¹¹ David J. Bosch, 'Crosscurrents in Modern Mission', *Missionalia*, vol. 4, no. 2, August, 1976, p. 56.

¹² For example, 'A religious mission can be understood as being a special form of cultural transmission', Arild Hvitfeldt, 'History of Religion, Sociology and Sociology of Religion', *Temenos*, 7, 1971, p. 86; 'I personally know of missionaries who themselves traced their failure to their inability to communicate, with all the attendant frustrations', Donald S. Deer, 'The Missionary Language-Learning Problem', *Missiology*, vol. III, no.1, January, 1975, p. 89; and Trevor D. Verry, 'What is Communication? Searching for a Missiological Model', *Missionalia*, vol. 11, no. 1, April, 1983, pp. 17-25.

¹³ John Reed, a fellow-student of mine in 1984, wrote a thesis on the work of his grandfather(?) who was a missionary in the Pacific, and who spent most of his time attempting to make the Pacific people wear Western clothes.

¹⁴ Eugene Hillman, 'Pluriformity in Ethics: A Modern Missionary Problem', *Missiology*, vol. I, no. 1, January, 1973, p. 61.

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The result of this rehabilitation of mission-field cultures has been many interesting insights into the ways in which the Christian message has become overlaid with cultural accretions which are mistakenly perceived as essential to the faith. One particularly fascinating example of this is Friedrich Dierks' encounter with an African theologian, Gabriel Setiloane, author of *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*. Dierks presents this meeting in the context of an article about the interference of 'world-view' in cross-cultural communication. He says,

I asked him whether the concept of God as he had described it was a personal one, so that one could speak of God and apply to God the personal pronoun 'you', as one usually does with human beings, or whether his concept of God was that of an impersonal power. Setiloane replied that the question of whether God was personal or impersonal originated in a typically Western world-view which was foreign to the Sotho-Tswana. He then defended the opinion that the image of God should not be bound to a dualistic Western thought-pattern where God must be either personal or impersonal. God's personhood is a concept which could also be conceived of in non-dualistic African thought-forms where a personal God and an impersonal divine power are not mutually exclusive concepts.¹⁵

Setiloane's challenge is a profound one. Western Christianity has absorbed Western thought-forms, many of which substantially distort the essence of Christianity.

Several others in the field of mission have emphasised the similarity between the function of the missionary and that of the anthropologist,¹⁶ and have suggested 'ethno-theological sensitivity'¹⁷ and the adoption of anthropologically-developed 'roles' in order to relate effectively to alien societies. The latter suggestion is remarkably useful. A missionary cannot immediately expect to be acknowledged by a society and allocated a place within it. The employment of 'insider' and 'outsider' roles (where an

¹⁵ Friedrich Dierks, 'Communication and World View', *Missionalia*, vol. 11, no. 2, August, 1983, p. 49.

¹⁶ For example, Donald R. Jacobs and Jacob A. Loewen, 'Anthropologists and Missionaries Face to Face', *Missiology*, vol. II, no. 2, April, 1974, pp. 161-74.

¹⁷ Louis J. Luzbetak, 'Unity in Diversity: Ethnotheological Sensitivity in Cross-Cultural Evangelism', *Missiology*, vol. IV, no. 2, April, 1976, pp. 207-15.

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insider role is one where the missionary gains acceptance as a true member of the society and an outsider role, one where the missionary accepts their alienness and attempts to provide services by means of this alienness) makes the development of a relationship possible.

The general view is that insider roles are more difficult to sustain, because

the person who wants to become a true insider needs to recognise that unless he turns away more or less completely from his own culture and people, he is bound to create serious if not insurmountable conflict.¹⁸

This cultural conflict may result in the community losing faith in the missionary as a trustworthy person. Outsider roles do not require that the missionary/anthropologist abandon their own culture and it is therefore easier to maintain credibility.

All of these studies are immensely useful in helping the scholar come to grips with missions throughout history. Most of the people who have developed these broadly 'anthropological' approaches are themselves Christians. These approaches give a positive view of human cultures and their role in providing foundations for people's lives, and acknowledge that a person's culture is an essential part of them. What follows from this is an understanding that to those cultures which do not accord great status to the individual, but have a more collective emphasis, it is inappropriate to apply versions of Christianity which focus strongly on individual, interior religious sentiment, because such a version of Christianity is foreign to such cultures.

The next recognition is that there are a plurality of 'Christianities', throughout history and across varying cultures, and that this is both inevitable and not to be regretted. It is inevitable because

just as socialization seems to be a necessary condition for religiosity — religion is learned — so the situational factors seem to be intervening variables which modify learned beliefs and practices.¹⁹

¹⁸ Jacob A. Loewen, 'Roles: Relating to an Alien Social Structure', *Missiology*, vol. IV, no. 2, April, 1976, p. 225.

¹⁹ Paavo Seppanen, 'Religious Solidarity as a Function of Social Structure and Socialization', *Temenos*, 2, 1966, p. 128.

Recent Anthropological Theories of Conversion

The most influential recent theory of conversion is that proposed by Robin Horton, working on African material in the 1970s. Horton's article, 'African Conversion', reviewed John Peel's book *Aladura*, in which Peel advanced an essentially sociological understanding of the conversion process among the Yoruba. Horton expressed doubts about Peel's lack of distinction between 'this worldly' and 'otherworldly' religions, his untested assumption that certain peoples or groups have a greater tendency to be rational than others; and concluded:

one final criticism of *Aladura* concerns the phenomenon of conversion ... he makes a serious slip when he talks of Christianity as if it were one cult coming in alongside the existing cults ... For one salient feature of Christian proselytization in Yorubaland has surely been the identification of the Christian God with the indigenous supreme being Olorun, and the presentation of Christianity as the 'true' way of contacting this being.²⁰

Horton identifies several vital principles in the effective transmission of a religion, in order to bring about conversion. First, there is the intellectual background: those factors in a given society which may be harmonised with, or said to anticipate, Christian concepts. Here he tends to focus on concepts of the Supreme Being, which may be equated with the Christian God. The issue of the role of the Supreme Being in conversion to Christianity in Africa is more problematical than it might seem.

The Supreme Being has been a contentious concept in comparative religious studies, because of its links with the possible validation of religious positions. Theories of the origin of religion have been as varied as totemism, animism and Freud's psychoanalytic theory:²¹ they all are classifiable as 'evolutionary' or 'Edenic', where the evolutionary model posits that religious concepts were originally simple and became complex,

²⁰ Robin Horton, 'African Conversion', *Africa*, vol. 41, no. 2, 1971, p. 100.

²¹ Garry Trompf, *In Search of Origins*, London, 1990, offers a survey of theories of the origin of religion.

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and the Edenic model posits that truth and complexity were originally present, and religious ideas have become corrupted since that time.²²

In the tangled political context of colonialism, the search for 'authentic' aboriginal concepts is fraught with difficulties. Horton's unquestioning acceptance that Olorun is a native Supreme Being, not an imported or hybrid deity, the result of centuries of casual and deliberate contact between Africans and Europeans or Arabs engaged in trading and missionary activities, seems uncritical in the light of other studies,²³ and deserving of the criticisms of 'ahistoricity' which have been levelled at him.²⁴

Horton's second principle, and linked to his ideas about the Supreme Being, but able to be separated from them, is his understanding of the differing religious requirements of the local microcosm and the wider macrocosm. He argues that

If thousands of people find themselves outside the microcosms, and if even those left inside see the boundaries weakening if not actually dissolving, they can only interpret these changes by assuming that the lesser spirits (underpinners of the microcosm) are in retreat, and that the supreme being (underpinner of the macrocosm) is taking over direct control of the everyday world ...²⁵

This then results in a lack of attention to the lesser spirits and an increased interest in the activities of the hitherto-distant supreme being, which

²² Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, London, 1975, ch. 5, 'Culture and History', pp. 172-94, discusses the work of Fr. Wilhelm Schmidt on 'high gods', which resulted in *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee*, 1912, and *The Origin and Growth of Religion: Facts and Theories*, 1931, among other works, in which Schmidt, a Roman Catholic priest, attempted to prove the primacy of belief in a high god, and what I have termed the 'Edenic model'.

²³ Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers*, Cambridge, 1993, rejects utterly the high god in Australian Aboriginal religion, and argues cogently and conclusively for the importation of the All-Mother (from Indonesia) and the All-Father (from Christian missionaries), two possible candidates for that role. His work presents a challenge to scholars who believe it is possible to isolate authentic 'native' or 'aboriginal' ideas and concepts, so vast is the labyrinth of contact, colonial or otherwise.

²⁴ Deryck Schreuder and Geoffrey Oddie, 'What is "Conversion"?' History, Christianity and Religious Change in Colonial Africa and South Asia', *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1989, p. 505, citing the criticisms of Robert Elphick.

²⁵ Horton, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

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encourages conversion (to monotheistic religions). This focus on the Supreme Being is a parallel process to the impact of colonial powers on society generally.

Thirdly, Horton gives attention to the specialised roles of monarchs and religious leaders. His speculations here are especially interesting: his argument is that the more involved a person is in the 'old' cosmology, the more likely will be their involvement in the transition to the new:

although the philosophers fill a thoroughly traditional role, the very nature of their involvement with the old cosmology makes it likely that they will be more acutely aware of the interpretative challenge of ... change than anyone else ... they may become deeply involved with the new developments in cosmology and ritual, and may even take the lead in formulating such developments.²⁶

Rulers, Horton argues, also have a role to play in the religious transition, in that they have the greatest exposure to the macrocosm, and thus must intellectually adjust in order to maintain their status among their people.

Again, Horton limits the effectiveness of this point by concentrating on the attitude of rulers to the Supreme Being, and also on the idea that the intellectual basis for the acceptance of Christianity was already present in African communities. Hence, he argues that

They lived in the light of a single world view, which, in its essentials, was that of their rural subjects. However, since their involvement with the wider world was significantly greater than that of their subjects, they laid correspondingly greater emphasis on the cult of the supreme being.²⁷

The really valuable point here concerns Christian conversion as part of contact with a wider world, the further expansion of the world which often occurs when a culture becomes exposed to Christianity, and the close relationship between the developing understanding of Christianity and the developing understanding of the outside world.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²⁷ Robin Horton, 'On the Rationality of Conversion', Part II, *Africa*, vol. 45, no. 4, 1975, p. 375.

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Scholars focussing on cultures in transition and the modern colonial experience have favoured Horton's approach. Yet more profound insights may be found elsewhere. Garry Trompf, without reference to Horton, argues that the encounter of the 'mythic' *mentalité* with the historical consciousness results in new theologies/myths which attempt to resolve the shocking discontinuities. Melanesian cargo cult myths illustrate his thesis, and his conclusions are politically more incisive than Horton's:

of prime importance is understanding that these attempts are usually responses by primal people to finding their culture infiltrated by imperialists who are immeasurably more militarily and technologically powerful. Their efforts are also an index to the still more sobering reality that almost every corner of the earth has at last been opened up to the behemoth of internationalism and that time has been standardised through newspaper culture and history-oriented propaganda (whether sacred or secular, papal or Marxist).²⁸

Trompf's article fascinates because he attempts to identify such a transition in the development of Gnostic theologies in the Early Christian period, demonstrating that the colonial paradigm may be useful in illuminating the more distant past. Yet he too becomes embroiled in the debate concerning the theological presuppositions of the mission-field cultures which facilitate their acceptance of Christianity. His conclusions differ radically from Horton's, however.

In an article attempting to isolate the characteristics of the 'perennial religion' (which analyses the strengths and weaknesses of 'this-worldly' and 'other-worldly' religious foci), Trompf triumphantly charts the victory of this-worldly primal concepts over other-worldly Christian ideas. Perennial religion is characterised by a concern for the physical well-being of the individual and the tribe, the ideal of warriorhood, and the continued relation with the departed ancestors. 'Salvation' in this context is this-worldly, and Trompf argues that the introduction of more 'developed' concepts 'seems like calling for emergency measures after complicating

²⁸ Garry W. Trompf, 'Macrohistory and Acculturation: Between Myth and History in Modern Melanesian Adjustments and Ancient Gnosticism', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1989, p. 633.

matters in the first place'.²⁹ The mission-field culture has to develop its own theology in order to 'domesticate' Christianity, which results in the kind of dislocations already discussed. The issue of whether the reaction to the world's expansion is positive or negative could be debated at length.

Trompf argues that it is negative. Schreuder and Oddie, discussing the Indian case, note that social mobility as a result of Christianity and the expanding horizon is often viewed positively.³⁰ What is agreed is the potential for the colonial encounter of cultures to result in radical change.

Mass Conversions

Most anthropological and sociological theory concerns itself with the external, observable movements of a society, rather than the interior workings of individuals. Therefore the difficulties experienced by Underwood, Nock and James in analysing mass movements are irrelevant. This opens up the debate on conversion sufficiently to permit the question 'is "conversion" a useful term?' Its origins in the notion of the turning-around of a soul have been discussed, and it seems firmly anchored in the personal and individual sphere of activity.

'Christianisation' has been the preferred term among some scholars who focus on the process of the spreading of Christianity. The mass conversion, where large numbers become Christians, and where evidence of their inner state is limited, invites the use of this term. Pickett's influential work on India suggests a threefold analysis of mass acceptance of Christianity, focussing on human social units acting as units, the programme of education subsequent to the group's religious change, and the role of indigenous leaders in maintaining and propagating the group. His case studies indicated that

the group deciding for Christ ordinarily is composed of one caste, and often includes all members of that caste in one, or more than one, village.³¹

²⁹ Garry W. Trompf, 'Salvation and Primal Religion', *Prudentia*, supplementary number, 1988, p. 223.

³⁰ Schreuder and Oddie, *op. cit.*, p. 513.

³¹ J. W. Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India*, The Abingdon Press, 1933, p. 23.

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He argues that missionaries in India generally sought converts from the higher castes, and that the mass movements were lower caste, and generally sought the missionaries. The issue of social mobility is canvassed, with the observation that Christianity overtly offered a better life spiritually, so the analogical seeking of a better life materially was comprehensible. Ensuring that the group baptised remained Christian was largely achieved through education, and must be done quickly, and if it is effective, the native-born clergy and leaders will emerge. Pickett comments,

where converts have received little instruction prior to baptism, but have been successfully incorporated into churches providing regular and frequent opportunities for worship and oversight by faithful ministers, they have become established as Christians ... where they have been well instructed prior to baptism, but for any reason have not been organised into churches ... they have not become established in Christian faith.³²

This may seem obvious, but is illuminating for the spread of Christianity in the Late Antique and Early Medieval periods. Pickett stresses that the group must be protected from 'social dislocation', and suggests that mass movements preserve 'the integration of the individual in his group',³³ which guards against this. The mass movement also reduces the likelihood of Westernisation, by preserving the social group identity. He identifies weak links in the process, such as the neglect of personal piety, but concludes that the mass movement is an authentic means of becoming Christian.

Susan Bayly's *Saints, Goddesses and Kings* continues the debate on mass movements, and she makes valuable observations on the co-existence of Christian and non-Christian people in communities, and of 'Christian' and 'non-Christian' beliefs in the minds of individual persons:

It has sometimes been implied that the coming of the major 'conversion' religions must obliterate all pre-existing beliefs and social ties amongst its new affiliates ... alternatively, some authors have seen 'convert' groups as people struggling to be free of 'pagan' superstition and the supposed disabilities of caste, but irredeemably mired in them. This

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 240-1.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

study seeks to challenge both of these assumptions by asking what religious conversion really meant in South India over the last three centuries. What kinds of meetings and interactions occurred when practitioners of the so-called world religions encountered the values and cultural norms which already prevailed in South India?³⁴

This brings to the terminological debate the use of phrases such as 'religious transition', rather than 'conversion' or 'Christianisation'. In this paper the three terms will be used interchangeably, as it seems that to attempt to define any one exclusively from the other two is excessively pedantic and generally unhelpful.

The Top-Down and Bottom-Up Models of Conversion

Thus far the models and theories of conversion discussed have been anchored in the modern colonial context. The figure of the missionary has been neglected, and case studies from the remote past have not been considered. Attempts to assess conversion in early medieval society and the role of the medieval missionary have concentrated on the structure of medieval society, aiming to identify factors which facilitated the change from one religion to another. In general, the more interior and doctrinally-defined versions of Christianity, and the theories of religious experience, are demonstrably inappropriate to the study of Christianisation in the early medieval period, principally because the people who comprised the various early medieval societies were not accustomed to regarding themselves as discrete individuals, capable of personal decisions in the area of beliefs and practices.

Allied to this communal view of society is the issue of the role of 'religion' in that type of society, and the extent to which that role is a cognitive one for the group. To posit this may require a re-definition of 'religion', for if

religion is treated as cultural — that is, as a cognitive and evaluative model — then there is a conceptual relationship between religion and reality. This follows by definition. When a certain religious belief is

³⁴ Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 1.

adopted, a new reality is inherent in it. It seems obvious that it is not productive to carry this line of reasoning too far. Conversion to a religion, even by an entire community, does not necessarily mean a change in the structure of the community. The interpretation of the meaning of structure, e.g., prevailing power structure, may change, but the power structure itself need not change.³⁵

This is a timely observation, because in the case of early medieval conversions of entire peoples and political units frequently there was little or no change to the power structures, or the change was so gradual as to be negligible.³⁶

J. T. Addison, in *The Medieval Missionary*, argues for the pivotal role of the king/ruler in the transition to Christianity in these group-oriented societies (what has come to be known as the 'top-down' model of conversion). He analysed cases of conversion and the role played by rulers, and concluded that there were three possible scenarios:

- 1) independent rulers, recently converted and free from external pressure, exerting influence over their own countrymen; 2) monarchs of Christian lands extending their protection to missionaries among weaker or dependent neighbouring peoples; and 3) Christian conquerors exercising force against alien non-Christian races.³⁷

Actually, the monarch is of crucial importance even before conversion, in that he symbolises the society, and very often represents the society's connection with the supernatural world and therefore is the natural focus for missionaries.

For the late antique and early medieval Germans society was close-knit, with the people in order of their social rank bound by ties of loyalty to the ruler. Tacitus, in the *Germania* (98 C.E.), and other Classical authors comment on the high value given to loyalty to the lord by the warrior aristocracy. These works are ideological in intent,³⁸ but it is demonstrable

³⁵ Erik Allardt, 'Approaches to the Sociology of Religion', *Temenos*, 6, 1970, p. 18.

³⁶ E. J. Sharpe has likened this phenomenon to a takeover of a supermarket by a new company: the structure of society remains unaltered, but the boss is different.

³⁷ James Thayer Addison, *The Medieval Missionary*, London, 1936, p. 22.

³⁸ Rosemary Woolf, 'The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord in the *Germania* and in *The Battle of Maldon*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 5, 1976, p. 64.

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from later sources that such an ethic existed. The Germanic kings traced their descent from the gods which legitimised their political position and cemented their religious importance for the people:

Belief in descent from a god was an important ideological principle in the ordering of society among the early Germans. It gave ethnic coherence to peoples, and royal authority to the dynasty which ruled them.³⁹

This supernatural element in the constitution of the authority of the Germanic kings has been commented on extensively.⁴⁰

The techniques of the missionaries are often difficult to establish, as the vast majority of writings from the period say little or nothing about them. However, the missionaries in general approached the ruler, who often had a Christian presence at court. The missionaries were protected by either or both the Church and a Christian ruler. From there on preaching is mentioned, as is mass baptism, the establishment of churches and monasteries, the ransoming of Christian hostages and the freeing of Christian slaves.⁴¹

For the Germanic groups in the Early Middle Ages Christianity was never perceived as a thing in itself: always it came with cultural connections, the power of the Continental Christian rulers and the legacy of the Roman Empire.⁴² The Germanic rulers had strict codes which governed their responses to the missionaries: Richter argues that the success of 'conversion' among the Anglo-Saxons is as much due to the rulers as agents, as to the missionaries:

Barbarian kings cherished ideals of hospitality to strangers, including strangers of a different religious persuasion. It can be argued that for an ultimately successful mission the attitude of the Kentish royalty towards

³⁹ Hermann Moisl, 'Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies and Germanic Oral Tradition', *Journal of Medieval History*, vol. 7, no. 3, p. 217.

⁴⁰ David Dumville, 'Kingship, Genealogies and Regnal Lists', in P. H. Sawyer and I. Wood (eds.), *Early Medieval Kingship*, Leeds, 1977; also Anthony Faulkes, 'Descent from the Gods', *Medieval Scandinavia*, 11, 1978-9, pp. 92-125.

⁴¹ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, Harmondsworth, 1964, chs 3-4, *passim*.

⁴² Christopher Dawson, *Medieval Essays*, London, 1953, p. 55.

the missionaries from Italy was just as crucial for their success as the determination of the missionaries to evangelise.⁴³

Richter also proposes that the focus on missionaries in some cases be supplemented by attention to 'agents of conversion'⁴⁴ who are laity who contribute to the spread of Christianity.

Horton's 'intellectual factors' which facilitate religious transformations have not been neglected by medievalists, and the multifarious nature of the encounter has been noted. Of the Northern Europeans Sharpe has written:

religiously, however, the Germanic mind was very far indeed from being a tabula rasa on which the first words of salvation were to be written by the Christian Church. The presentation of Christ as the cosmic victor and the symbolism in which that act of salvation was depicted fell into prepared soil ... They understood the drama, the mythos of salvation; and they understood the power of the risen and ascended Christ ... To this end they took and re-shaped their ancient symbols and their ancient concepts, conscious that they were now part of a greater Empire, but conscious equally of their own distinctive heritage.⁴⁵

Sharpe's reference to an 'Empire' highlights another factor in top-down conversions: the element of political force. Monarchs frequently accepted Christianity due to pressure from outside powers, such as in the case of the conversion of Pomerania in the twelfth century.⁴⁶ The identification of the new faith with political power and wider horizons made the choice easier.

Alongside the 'top-down' model is the 'bottom-up' model, which works in reverse. Pagan groups conquered Christian territories and the subjugated populations became servants/slaves, bringing Christian influence into the conquerors' households. In frontier societies traders brought Christian

⁴³ Michael Richter, 'Practical Aspects of the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons', in Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (eds), *Irlund und die Christenheit*, Stuttgart, 1987, p. 364.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

⁴⁵ E. J. Sharpe, 'Salvation: Germanic and Christian' in E. J. Sharpe and J. R. Hinnells (eds), *Man and His Salvation*, Manchester University Press, 1973, p. 261.

⁴⁶ Robert Bartlett, 'The Conversion of a Pagan Society in the Middle Ages', *History*, vol. 70, no. 229, 1985, p. 191.

items and Christian beliefs casually into pagan communities, Christian princesses married pagan kings to cement alliances, and in the army Christian and pagan served side by side, influencing each other's beliefs.⁴⁷ It could not be claimed that bottom-up conversion would ever in itself prove sufficient to win over a hostile society, but it has been demonstrated that the creation of a receptive environment for Christian ideas has aided top-down conversions notably.⁴⁸

A final observation on medievalists' contributions to the study of conversion concerns syncretism, the intermingling of different beliefs due to long coexistence, and the futility of attempts to stamp out the old beliefs. Bayly and Sharpe have already been quoted on the danger of assuming (as did the old psychological model of conversion) that when a religious change occurs, all that was formerly believed ceased to be. The Germanic peoples reinterpreted Christianity in the light of their culture, as indeed all converts do.⁴⁹

Towards a New Theory of Conversion

In examining case studies of 'conversion' in medieval Europe and many other cultures and historical periods, the traditional Christian interpretation generally proves inadequate to explain the phenomena under observation. Factors which have not been considered may include the relationship of the individual and the society (including family and kin-group ties), mass conversions and individual conversions (and their degree of completeness

⁴⁷ Aspects of bottom-up conversion are discussed in A. P. Vlasto, *The Entry of the Slavs Into Christendom*, Cambridge, 1970, *passim*; William Toth, 'The Christianization of the Magyars', *Church History*, vol. XI, 1942, p. 36 (role of Christian slaves), p. 53 (marriage of Christian Princess Gizella of Bavaria to pagan Vajk, later baptised Stephen); and M. N. Tikhomirov, 'The Origins of Christianity in Russia', *History*, vol. 44, 1959, *passim*, among a multitude of works.

⁴⁸ A recent Ph.D thesis by Jonathan Barlow in the History Department of the University of Sydney argues for strong Christian presence in Frankia in the late fifth century, influencing Clovis' adoption of Catholic Christianity.

⁴⁹ Christopher Dawson in *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, London, 1950, comments on syncretism that 'In this twilight world it was inevitable that the Christian ascetic and saint should acquire some of the features of the pagan shaman and demi-god: that his prestige should depend upon his power as a wonder-worker and that men should seek his decisions in the same way as they had formerly resorted to the shrine of a pagan oracle', p. 32.

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or incompleteness), theology (how is the message being presented theologically and what adaptations are being made by the receiving culture), terminology (which is particularly relevant to teaching), mythology and iconography, worship and organisation.

Many valuable insights have been gained from the work of earlier scholars. The debate over the term 'conversion' has been mentioned. It is unfeasible to abandon 'conversion' entirely, and wiser to loosen its definition, with no special interior or spiritual meaning attached to the term. The debate over the legitimacy of the mass movement is considered a non-issue: mass movements are viewed as authentic instances of conversion, with Addison's conclusion accepted:

Group conversions are not likely to occur except where social and religious traditions make them normal and natural; and if they are normal and natural they are to be welcomed as such and not condemned by reference to alien standards.⁵⁰

This leads to the principles derived from previous theories of conversion. Horton stresses the need to assess the intellectual structures already present in a society, which make the acceptance of Christianity more likely. His narrow focus on similarities between concepts of the Supreme Being may be ignored here, and the broader principle accepted. The second Horton principle established is the shifts in belief which are likely to occur when the microcosmic local community and the macrocosmic world meet, when Christianity (or by implication any international or universalist belief system) is introduced to a localised culture group. Again, he links this point to the Supreme Being, but this can be discounted, and the general principle accepted. The third area of focus for Horton is the role played by both secular and religious leaders in the transition from one religion to another. He argues that despite these individuals having a greater stake in the 'old' situation, they are likely to be in the forefront of the development of new concepts for the community.

The rulers, then, were no desperate 'men of two worlds', dodging back and forth between incompatible cosmologies.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Addison, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁵¹ Horton, 'On the Rationality of Conversion', p. 375.

Towards a General Theory

This accords well with the top-down conversion models used in the analysis of medieval conversion, and incorporates Richter's insights into the significant role played by secular 'agents of conversion' as well as missionaries. In appraising the role of missionaries in conversion, it is important to assess their cross-cultural communication skills and the insider and outsider roles they adopt in order to gain acceptance into the mission-field culture.

Building on these concepts is Trompf's assertion that the mission-field culture will domesticate Christianity to make it harmonious with their traditional perspective, and Pickett's emphasis on the importance of social cohesion and structural support in the process of Christianisation. These points lead to an analysis of the development of vernacular religious literature and the training of native clergy, and the immense potential for syncretistic beliefs in that context, which is the capstone for an approach to conversion which has the opportunity to take into account all the available evidence and to derive from it an understanding of the phenomenon which is both subtle and rich.