Religious Change, Conversion and Culture

In memory of Bill Jobling

Religious Change, Conversion and Culture

edited by Lynette Olson

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Contents

Editor's Preface

This book publishes the papers from a conference which grew out of an undergraduate course. The Department of History of the University of Sydney is proud of its Thematic Courses, which are deliberately designed to stretch students by studying chosen historical subjects in terms of themes which can be applied to other historical subjects. One of the original courses of this type examines Christian conversion in Medieval Europe, Modern India and Aboriginal Australia. Very few, if any, courses combine these three areas! Yet the themes in common are legion. For example, the link of Christian conversion with 'civilisation' is of great importance in all of these societies, and is only significantly modified by the Industrial Revolution. For another example, the indigenisation of Christianity is seen in all of the societies studied, and the creative role of the convert in the conversion process has emerged as perhaps the most important theme of all.

After teaching this course for a number of years, we had the idea of holding a short conference (9-10 April, 1994) in which scholars with some past or present connection with the University of Sydney in a variety of disciplines would examine conversion in a wider context. Thus, although we started with Christian conversion in the three areas of Medieval Europe, Modern India and Aboriginal Australia, the scope expanded religiously, culturally and geographically to take in Medieval Islam, Judaism, the Middle East and New Guinea as well. Following the conference, Dr Bill Jobling spoke to me at length about its value in bringing people together and promoting communication about its subject. Not long afterwards, he died suddenly, and the book of the conference is dedicated to his memory.

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. Holm[1]

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.

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).

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

3 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

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

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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).

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

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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.

> 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]

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[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. Verryn, '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.

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

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[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.

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]

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[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,

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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.

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

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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.

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.

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[26] *Ibid.*, p. 103.

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

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

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[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]

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[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.

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

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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

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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.

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

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[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

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[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

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[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.

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]

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50 Addison, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

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

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.

The Conversion of the Visigoths and Bulgarians Compared

Lynette Olson *

This paper is written to bring out various themes relevant to the subject of this book. It is not the first time such a comparison has been made, for in the ninth century A.D. Pope John VIII warned the Bulgar ruler not to get his Christianity from the Greeks, who 500 years earlier had consecrated a heretical bishop for the Visigoths.[1] This was all a very long time ago and in a part of Europe unfamiliar to most readers.

There are significant differences in the conversion of the Visigoths and Bulgarians which it is hoped will prove illuminating, but the similarities which suggested this comparison in the first place are as follows. First, the same geographical region is involved. Most of the area of early Visigothic settlement, prior to the Visigothic migration into western Europe, lay within the later Bulgar khanate. The region in question is around the lower Danube, west of the Black Sea, where Romania and Bulgaria are today. Almost certainly the residual Christian minority ruled by the Bulgars included some descendants of Visigoths who hadn't gone west, but they may no longer have been ethnically distinct.[2] Second, there is also a geopolitical congruence. The fourth-century Visigoths and ninth-century Bulgarians had the same southern neighbour: the Roman Empire, with

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1 '... ne forte vobis, quae genti contigit Gothorum, contingat, quae, cum a paganorum errore cuperet liberari Christique fidei sociari, episcopum incidit formam pietatis habentem virtutem autem eius abnegantem, qui eos, dum a paganismo liberat, Arii blasphemiis implicat' (ed. E. Caspar, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Epistolae*, vol. VII, Weidmann, 1974, p. 60).

2 The ninth-century Western writer Walahfrid Strabo was told that a German liturgy was in use on the west coast of the Black Sea (*De exordiis et incrementis quarundam in observationibus ecclesiasticis rerum*, 7, ed. A. Boretius and V. Krause, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Capitularia regum Francorum*, vol. II.3, Hannover, 1897, p. 481); but cf. E. A. Thompson, *The Visigoths in the Time of Ulfila*, Oxford, 1966, p. 23, and H. Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, trans. T. Dunlap, University of California Press, 1988, p. 411, n. 300.

Religious Change, Conversion and Culture, ed. Lynette Olson, Sydney, 1996.

which they fought, treated and traded.[3] Although by the ninth century the Empire was much smaller, mainly Greek-speaking and ruled from Byzantium, it was confident in its Roman identity and radiated an aura of awesome cultural superiority, especially to its barbarian north.[4]

The eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire, unlike the Latin West, had a polyglot ecclesiastical tradition, and this brings me to the third, most important similarity between the conversion of the Visigoths and the Bulgarians. Presumably for the reason just mentioned, both were allowed to develop a native church with a vernacular Bible, liturgy and literature, respectively in Gothic and what became known as Old Church Slavonic. This similarity in the relation of religious change and culture is otherwise unparalleled in the conversion of Europe.[5] The presence of rival Christian interpretations in the mission-field is a fourth and final common factor otherwise negligible in much medieval conversion,[6] but it operated differently in each case.

One major difference between our two cases is that most Visigoths went out into the wider world and got their Christianity there, whereas the wider world and Christianity came to most Bulgarians. While the circumstances are debated, historians agree that most Visigoths converted after raiding Huns forced them from their homeland into the Roman

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3 For example, Roman restrictions of trade with the Visigoths in 369 and Bulgarians in 894 were regarded as critical at the time (E. A. Thompson, 'The Visigoths in the Time of Ulfila', *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies*, 5, 1961, p. 17, and R. Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, London, 1975, pp. 58-9, respectively).

4 My allusion in the Editor's Preface to the Industrial Revolution as having made a difference in the relation of conversion to civilisation in the modern world (i.e. by increasing the cultural distance between missionary and convert from what it had been in earlier societies) is perhaps a twentieth-century viewpoint which privileges technology above all else. The elite Roman view privileged educated culture. Christianity was readily combined with either.

5 Anglo-Saxon England, where textual literacy accompanying Christianity was applied to vernacular as well as Latin writing, is an intermediate case. Yet, aside from the Psalms, the Bible remained untranslated and the liturgy also in Latin.

6 Making full allowance for the propensity of nervous missionaries to build up differences in practice where none in belief existed (the erroneous notion of 'the Celtic Church' is ultimately their creation), the Bulgarian case of medieval conversion is atypically akin to the modern situation described by one of my students in reference to New Guinea, where rival missionaries say of each other to potential converts: 'Don't listen to them or you'll go to Hell'. Pope John VIII in the ninth century was more urbane, but his message amounted to the same thing.

Empire (after 375 A.D.).[7] Moreover, their kind of Christianity spread widely among other migrating peoples destabilised by the Huns. The Bulgarians, on the other hand, had a reasonably stable albeit primitive polity which was capable of transformation into a Christian state, as their ruler or khan was quick to realise. Most of them converted as the result of outside pressures creatively managed by their ruler, Khan Boris (after 862 A.D.).[8]

Thus a second major difference between the conversion of the Visigoths and the Bulgarians is that the latter was mainly a 'top-down' conversion, where the ruler converts and the people willingly or unwillingly follow, while the former was mainly a 'bottom-up' conversion in which Christianity spread by a variety of informal contacts. Initially the two cases are actually very similar with a Christian minority including Roman captives and their descendants,[9] a classic scenario for bottom-up conversion. Eventually the Visigoths also were to experience a classic top-down conversion when their king Reccared opted for Catholic Christianity in 589 A.D., but that was in the established kingdom of Visigothic Spain. The intervening Migration Period for the Visigoths and their neighbours was even more fragmented, unstable and insecure than indicated by typical arrows on maps of 'The Fall of the Roman Empire' indicating 'where the barbarians went'. Peoples splintered and ethnogenesis occurred, rulers' authority was militarily-based and even in that area open to challenge.[10] If one group of Visigoths led by Fritigern was required to convert to the emperor's variety of Christianity as a condition of their entry into the Empire in 376,[11] then an element of top-down conversion was present;

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7 See n. 11 below.

8 R. E. Sullivan, 'Khan Boris and the Conversion of Bulgaria: A Case Study of the Impact of Christianity on a Barbarian Society', *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, 3, 1966, pp. 55-139; Browning, *op. cit.*, chs 3 and 8.

9 In both cases there were instances of persecution by the authorities: Athanaric's from 369-72 produced the Catholic Visigothic martyr St Sabas; Bulgar Khan Malamir's in 833 resulted in the martyrdom of his own brother (Thompson, *The Visigoths*, ch. 3; Browning, *op. cit.*, p. 144).

10 See in general L. Musset, *The Germanic Invasions*, trans. E. and C. James, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975, and H.-J. Diesner, *The Great Migration*, trans. C. S. V. Salt, Leipzig, 1978; and for a specific case of the limitations of Visigothic royal control in chaotic circumstances of migration see Paulinus of Pella, *Eucharisticus*, lines 343-405, in the Loeb edition of the works of Ausonius, vol. II, 1967, pp. 330-7.

11 For: P. J. Heather, 'The Crossing of the Danube and the Gothic Conversion', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, 27, 1986, pp. 289-318; against: E. A. Thompson, 'The

however, Visigothic conversion was clearly far more complex.[12] My overall impression is of a broadly-based conversion effected by spiritual leaders, not secular ones.

A third major difference between the conversion of the Visigoths and the Bulgarians is the association of the former with Arian Christianity. While Khan Boris of Bulgaria exploited the mutual suspicion of Greek and Latin Christians in the ninth century, this was a choice between views identified with external powers.[13] Arian Christianity, on the other hand, despite its fourth-century Roman origins, was to become identified exclusively with Visigoths and other barbarians.[14] This makes the case of the Visigoths a very special one in the history of conversion, and one deserving particular attention here. In order to appreciate the significance of this point, even before it is explained, an excursus into anthropological theory is necessary.

Robin Horton's theory of African conversion is a useful analytical tool for examining conversion outside of Africa and even in the distant past, if care is exercised. Basically the theory relates people's cosmology and religious needs to their environment.[15] It distinguishes between the microcosm, the small world of village and familiar fields, and the macrocosm, the wider world. This analysis is not very controversial, and widely applicable. What R. Browning has written about Bulgarian conversion runs along similar lines:

> The traditional religions of Slavs and Bulgars were a disadvantage to them in a world in which the only powerful and durable states were

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Date of the Conversion of the Visigoths', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 7, 1956, pp. 1-11 (also in a later version as Thompson, *The Visigoths*, ch. 4), placing their main conversion between 382 and 395.

12 Wolfram, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-85. It will be considered further in conjunction with the next point.

13 Boris in his quest for a Bulgarian patriarchate turned from Constantinople to Rome in 866, but finding the Pope unhelpful he returned to the Byzantine fold in 870.

14 The Arian-barbarian connection is discussed by Musset, *op. cit.*, 184-9, and J. C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*, Oxford, 1994, pp. 140-5, a new book not seen before this paper was drafted. When Attalus, the Visigoths' puppet Roman emperor, converted from paganism to Arian Christianity it was a sign of how completely he had thrown in his lot with them (Musset, *op. cit.* p. 39).

15 See the previous and following papers in this book. His article 'On the Rationality of Conversion', Part I, *Africa*, 45, 1975, pp. 219-55, is probably the best thing to read, beginning as it does with a summary of his thesis.

> either Christian or Moslem, in that they isolated their adherents. Both at individual and at state level they presented all kinds of problems. How was an oath to be administered? How could a marriage be celebrated between a pagan and a Christian? How were treaties to be guaranteed? And so on. 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.[16]

In terms of the African situation Horton is addressing, the macrocosm can come to people in the form of a British administrator or a missionary, or they can go into it as workers to a city. As already intimated, this paper relates the former type of contact to the Bulgarians and the latter to the Visigoths.

Horton argues that people's cosmology and religious needs adjust to suit their circumstances. In an early article, he wrote about the Kalabari people of Nigeria, whose religion had been concerned mainly with the local spirits of the microcosm, with only a vague awareness of greater forces.

> 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

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16 Browning, *op. cit.*, pp. 142-3. He does not cite Horton. The only medieval historian I know who has used Horton is Michael Richter (in conversation). Russell should have in his reasonably theoretical work cited in n. 14 above.

> 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.[17]

This is seen as essentially a case of change to indigenous religion into which Christianity fits dynamically. Horton's theory about what is going on in people's heads may be impossible to prove,[18] but if there is any chance that it is correct it should be kept in mind when studying religious change. For one thing, it gets away from consideration of 'mere imitation' of one religion by another. More importantly, it focusses attention on the convert. In cases where people seem to be converting themselves, one may suspect that something like the processes which Horton describes are in operation.[19]

Here the Arian Visigoths and their fellow barbarian trekkers through the macrocosm on both sides of the disintegrating northern frontier of the Roman Empire become relevant, because basically they converted themselves. We know this from the state of Roman-barbarian relations, from their religious use of the Gothic language, and above all from their Arian Christianity, which after a point in the late fourth century hermetically sealed their conversion from Roman agency. These factors will now be explained.

In what is arguably the best thing he ever wrote, the historian E. A. Thompson points out that Roman antipathy to barbarians meant that Romans were not motivated to spread Christianity outside the Empire.[20] Where this occurred, there was some ad hoc circumstance like captivity, exile, even shipwreck to account for it. The relevant example here is Ulfila, who was descended from Christian Romans taken prisoner by Visigothic raiders in the third century. He took considerable steps to convert his fellow-Goths to Christianity. When Ulfila attended the Arian council of Antioch in 341, Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia consecrated him

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17 'The Kalabari World View: An Outline and Interpretation', *Africa*, 32, 1962, p. 214.

18 D. Schreuder and G. Oddie, 'What is "Conversion"? Christianity and Religious Change in Colonial Africa and South Asia', *Journal of Religious History*, 15, 1988-9, pp. 505-6 and 517-18.

19 Cf. R. M. Eaton, 'Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876-1971', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 21, 1984, pp. 1-44. Missionaries were astonished to find how Christianity had spread among the Sema Nagas when they toured the region.

20 'Christianity and the Northern Barbarians', *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies*, 1, 1957, pp. 3-21; reprinted in A. Momigliano (ed.), *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, Oxford, 1963, pp. 56-78.

bishop and thus supported his 'mission'.[21] Thompson however cites three instances where antipathy to barbarians seems to have found its way into a Roman Arian commentary on Matthew.[22]

Romans were remarkably slow to convert groups of barbarians even once these were within the Empire.[23] Driven out by Visigothic persecutors in 348, Ulfila subsequently ministered to Christian Visigoths living in the Roman province of Moesia Secunda. This established Christian community within the Roman Empire played a significant role in the conversion of the Visigoths who entered the Empire after 375.[24] Ulfila was by no means the only person to spread Christianity among the Visigoths, but it was he who translated the Bible (or most of it[25]) into Gothic, and he is the heretical bishop referred to by the pope cited at the beginning of this paper. The diffusion of these apparently inseparable elements of the Gothic scriptures and Arian Christianity is what shows that barbarians essentially converted other barbarians.

Of course Christianity originated in the Roman Empire, and so did the Arian heresy, which persisted in a modified form for much of the fourth century, enjoying intermittent imperial favour until the death of the last Arian emperor Valens at the Battle of Adrianople in 378 and succession of the very orthodox Theodosius I saw its permanent eclipse in Roman

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21 Wolfram, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-8. He was of course made bishop of an existing Christian community. Thompson's argument draws a contrast with Pope Gregory the Great's mission to the pagan Anglo-Saxons ('Christianity', p. 61, specifically as different from the case of Frumentius in Axum).

22 *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum*, Homilies 1, 35 and 41, ed. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Graeca*, vol. LVI, Paris, 1859, cols 626, 824 and 864, respectively. In the second of these, the image of evil priests delivering the word of God to 'unlearned, undisciplined and barbarian peoples who neither seek nor hear it with judgement and who have the name of Christians but the manners of pagans' is striking, but it is used to make a moral point, not to criticise the Gothic mission as easily could be inferred from its quotation in Thompson's article, p. 69. On prejudice cf. P. J. Heather, *Goths and Romans, 332-489*, Oxford, 1991, pp. 181-2.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 64-8; cf. Musset, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-9, and pp. 82-3 for the Alamans settled north of the sub-Roman enclave of Chur whose conversion was late and mainly by intrusive Irish monks. The Britons whom Bede reproached for not proselytising the Anglo-Saxons (*Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. Mynors, Oxford, 1969, I.22, pp. 68-9) were just carrying on the Roman tradition.

24 Wolfram, *op. cit.*, pp. 81, 84-5.

25 Philostorgius says that Ulfila left out the Books of Kings, because the Visigoths were warlike enough (trans. P. Heather and J. Matthews, *The Goths in the Fourth Century*, Liverpool University Press, 1991, p. 144).

circles.[26] Yet from this point on in barbarian circles Arian Christianity spread and spread: beyond the Roman Empire, along what one of my students called the 'barbarian thoroughfare' of the Danube basin, among all of the barbarian peoples in the West except the most northern ones.[27] Writing too close to the Visigoths for comfort in southern Gaul in the early 440s, the priest Salvian knew Arianism as the barbarians' Christianity.[28]

What Salvian says about barbarian Arian Christianity is very interesting and worth quoting at length. For one thing, he states the doctrinal difference nicely:

> We are certain that they do injury to the divine begetting because they say the Son is less than the Father. They think we injure the Father because we believe the Father and Son are equal.

Salvian maintains that the barbarians are religiously well-meaning but ignorant, and he explains why:

> You say they read the same writings which are read by us. How are those writings the same which are badly interpolated and badly translated by authors formerly evil? Therefore they are not the same, because those things cannot be said to be whole which are corrupted in any part. ...
>
> ... To be sure, the other nations either do not have the Law of God, or they have it in a weakened and maimed way, and, therefore, as I have said, they have it in such a manner that they do not have it at all. For, if there are any barbarian nations who in their books seem to have the Holy Scriptures less interpolated or torn into shreds than others, nevertheless they have them as they were corrupted by the tradition of their old teachers. Therefore, they have tradition rather than Scripture. They do not keep what the truth of the Law teaches, but what the wickedness of a bad tradition has inserted.

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[26] Diesner, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-3 and 95; Musset, *op. cit.*, p. 184; Wolfram, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-5. The Arian heresy concerns the nature of Christ, *q.v.* Salvian below.

[27] Thompson in 'The Conversion of the Visigoths to Catholicism', *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies*, 4, 1960, p. 35, writes: 'For forty years, from 476-516, a great belt of Arianism stretched half-way across Europe', to which should be added Vandal North Africa.

[28] The quotations which follow are from *On the Governance of God*, V.2, trans. J. F. O'Sullivan, The Catholic University of America Press, 1947, p. 129-31.

> Indeed, the barbarians, being deficient especially of Roman more than educational tradition, know nothing unless they hear it from their teachers. Thus, they follow what they hear, and they who are ignorant of all literature and knowledge and know the mystery of the divine Law by teaching rather than by reading must necessarily retain the teaching rather than the Law. Thus, to them, the tradition of their teachers and their long-standing teaching are, so to say, law for them because they know only what they are taught.

Their books, *their* teachers: small wonder that Arian Christianity became a sort of cultural badge.[29]

Of course Ulfila's translation efforts contributed to the development of Visigothic, northern barbarian Christianity. The Gothic language was undoubtedly thereby enhanced as a vehicle of cultural expression in the face of Roman civilisation and the enormous population inbalance in favour of indigenous ex-Romans over barbarian newcomers, even if the latter were in charge. Indeed it is thought that Arian Christianity kept the Gothic language alive.[30] The Visigoths possessed books to be burnt upon their conversion from Arianism to Catholicism in late sixth-century Spain.[31]

When all is said and done about Roman antipathy to barbarians and their language,[32] it is their Arianism that ensures that, as time went on and the scene shifted further West, no self-respecting Roman would have touched their conversion with a ten-foot-pole. So why did the Visigoths and other northern barbarians convert so readily through their own efforts and on their own terms? Horton's theory can be applied usefully in this case

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29 So complete was the identification that objection was raised by Arian clergy in Vandal Africa to people dressed in barbarian clothes attending Catholic churches; this was resisted 'because a huge number of our Catholics who served in the royal household used to go in dressed like Vandals' (trans. J. Moorhead, *Victor of Vita: History of the Vandal Persecution*, Liverpool University Press, 1992, II.8, p. 27).

30 E.g. Musset, *op. cit.*, p. 45, on Visigothic Spain.

31 So a seventh-century Frankish source (*The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar*, 8, trans. J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, Nelson's Medieval Classics, 1960, p. 7); however, Roger Collins is sceptical about the Arian use of Gothic in Spain (*Early Medieval Spain. Unity in Diversity, 400-1000*, Macmillan, 1983, pp. 40-1).

32 Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *Poems and Letters*, letter V.5, in the Loeb edition, vol. II, 1965, pp. 180-3, having some fun with an acquaintance who had actually learned the Burgundian language in fifth-century Gaul, with the result that 'te praesente formidet linguae suae facere barbarus barbarismum'.

(which in turn may have useful implications for the theory) to suggest that in the disrupted and expanded world they were trying to cope with, the migrating barbarians' cosmology and religious needs were altered so that the universal religion of Christianity with its omnipotent God seemed very attractive.[33] They coped pretty well: Salvian wrote *On the Governance of God* in order to convince Roman Christians that God was still in charge when the barbarians were winning.[34]

The case of Bulgarian conversion can also be analysed usefully with reference to the Horton theory; however, the focus here is on Khan Boris himself. It is important to realise that Boris' initial approach to the Franks (the more distant of his potential allies/opponents) in 862 was said to have included an offer of conversion. The nearer Byzantines forestalled this by sending an army, with the result that Boris agreed to accept Christianity from them; but conversion was his idea.[35] While the religious sincerity of rulers is not of much historical usefulness, real belief by Boris in the Christian God can be inferred from Pope Nicholas I's replies to his questions and by his eventual retirement to a monastery.[36] Horton's argument that the existing leadership especially is apt to be affected by contact with the macrocosm and thus to become leaders in religious change[37] is applicable to Khan Boris and all others responsible for top-down conversions in medieval Europe.

This comparison of the conversion of the Visigoths and Bulgarians has not covered all of the similarities and differences between them. By the

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33 One early medieval source which offers some insight into how people were thinking is the letter of Bishop Daniel of Winchester advising Bishop Boniface on how to convert pagan Germans upon whom Frankish imperialism was impinging in the early eighth century (trans. C. H. Talbot, *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany*, London, 1954, pp. 75-8). 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'.

34 His argument is that the Romans, who know better but still do wrong, are getting their just deserts. The barbarians, being either pagans or heretics for the reasons given above, cannot know any better. Of the latter he also writes: 'In what manner, for this erroneous and false belief, they are to be punished on the day of judgement, nobody can know but the Judge. I think God bears patiently with them in the meantime because He sees that, although their belief is incorrect, they err through the acceptance of a seemingly correct opinion. He knows that they act in this manner because they are ignorant.'

35 Boris was baptised in 864 or 865 (Sullivan, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70; Browning, *op. cit.*, pp. 146-7).

36 The papal correspondence is discussed very fully in Sullivan, *op. cit.*

37 See the previous paper.

ninth century when the Bulgarians converted, the great innovation of Pope Gregory I's mission to a purely pagan people in 597 had borne fruit in an aggressive conversion policy in the Latin West. Even in the East, although Byzantium continued the essentially defensive late Roman foreign policy, the role of conversion in establishing a Christian northern buffer zone of on-side barbarian kingdoms was better appreciated than in the fourth century.[38] An important similarity which there is not space to explore lies in the relationship of Christian conversion to the generation of ethnic identity: as already stated, Arian Christianity limited the cultural cringe of barbarians to Romans; later Visigothic kings used Catholicism to unite their ethnically diverse subjects into one Spain, and Khan Boris did the same with his ruling Bulgar and subject Slav populations.

A final similarity is of great importance for understanding medieval Christianity. As the religion primarily of linked urban communities in the ancient world, early Christianity was a religion of the macrocosm. While its universality was never lost, Christianity as it spread to the countryside and all over Europe became the religion of profoundly rural societies. Meeting the religious needs of peasants made Christianity more microcosmic. As the Visigoths settled and their and Bulgarian Christianity was consolidated, it took on the local colouring typical of the many small worlds of medieval Christianity.

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[38] This zone is the subject of D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, London, 1971; see esp. chs 2-3, and ch. 5 for the Moravian mission which is of great significance, for when it was expelled by the Franks, followers of Sts Cyril and Methodius brought the Slavic Bible and liturgy to the Bulgarians. With the subsequent conversion of Serbia and Russia, the area in which Slavic was elevated to a sacred language was very large. The impact on Slavic culture was enormous, especially as it was buttressed in the regions most to be affected by later Mongol and Turkish invasions.

African Conversion and the 'Irish Question'

Bernard Martin *

About a hundred years ago, the 'Irish question' in politics centred mostly on Home Rule; it occupied a good deal of Mr Gladstone's attention, and was much discussed. That Irish question wasn't answered then, and isn't fully answered now. There was a 'Balkan question' in those days, too; it isn't answered, either. But the Irish question I have in mind is this: what happened when Celtic paganism encountered Christianity? Or, to put it another way, what was the cause of the conversion, and how did it take place? If one agrees with Robert Bellah (he'll be mentioned again later) that religions attempt 'to relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence', then the questions are large ones. And in the case of the conversion of the Irish to Christianity which traditionally began in the fifth century, the factors involved — religious beliefs, practices, symbolic systems, personalities, economic and social concomitants — all these are indistinct in the night of time, though perhaps not quite indistinguishable. I don't find myself answering my Irish question here, though I hope to say something about sub-issues in it. To get anywhere near an answer, I think some general questions about religious conversion need to be considered; and since it has been suggested that the theories of Robin Horton about conversion to Christianity and to Islam in West Africa might function as a kind of reference-point in this collection of papers, I'll refer later on to Horton and to discussions that his work has stimulated.

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The conversion of the Irish to Christianity will have been a long and complex process: an encounter between two religious systems, each of which expressed and implied ramifying patterns of culture and social order. The older system was a form of Celtic paganism (to use a slightly old-fashioned term), which had replaced whatever religion the pre-Celtic inhabitants of Ireland had. The newer system was the Christianity that was

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brought to Ireland, or at least consolidated there, in the fifth century. Not enough is known about the forms of either religion to allow a good description of their encounter.

Liam de Paor puts the matter like this: 'When we try to deal with the fifth century in Ireland the difficulties are very great. No actual manuscript of any kind written in Ireland in that century survives. There is virtually not a single Irish artefact in a museum or a single monument in the field of which an archaeologist could say with full confidence that it was made in the fifth century.'[1] We do nevertheless have later copies of St Patrick's fifth-century *Confessio* and *Epistola* which are accepted as authentic. They represent 'a lone voice from the silence of the fifth century in Britain and Ireland',[2] and give a few fitful glimpses of early moments in the establishment and definition of Christianity in Ireland. St Patrick tells us, for example, how he had baptised 'many thousands of people' and had ordained many clergy for a population coming newly to the faith.[3] His preaching had been especially effective with the more marginal members of pagan Irish society: young people defying parental authority, women of both aristocratic and servile rank, widows, and the *continentes* or naturally austere.[4] The saint was fortified in his work by a strong sense of communion with God, which was manifested in visions seen and voices heard; and we may surmise that Patrick's presence was memorably charismatic. He speaks also of hostility and real danger in the bringing of Christianity to unvisited places at 'the ends of the earth'.[5]

According to the chronicle of Prosper of Aquitaine, however, there were 'believers in Christ' in Ireland, presumably before St Patrick began his mission there, and Pope Celestine had sent Palladius to them to be their first bishop.[6] These believers had presumably learned of the new faith in or from Roman Britain, and being perhaps scattered or ill-organised, they stood in need of a bishop's authority to regulate their religious lives and to

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1 Liam de Paor, *Saint Patrick's World: The Christian Culture of Ireland's Apostolic Age*, Dublin, 1993, p. 5. De Paor conveniently translates many of the documents relating to St Patrick, and also two of the later *Lives* of the saint. The Latin texts of St Patrick's letters are given in Ludwig Bieler (ed.), *Libri Epistolarum Sancti Patricii Episcopi*, Dublin, 1993. There is a whole sub-literature on the 'Patrician question'; for a modern biography which takes account of controversies, see R. P. C. Hanson, *Saint Patrick: His Origins and Career*, Oxford, 1968.

2 de Paor, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

3 *Confessio*, chs 14 and 38, trans. de Paor, *op. cit.*, pp. 98 and 103.

4 *Ibid.*, chs 41-2, p. 104.

5 *Ibid.*, chs 28-30 and 37-8, pp. 101-2 and 103.

6 *Epitoma Chronicon*, in *Chronica Minora*, ed. T. Mommsen, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Auctores Antiquissimi*, IX, Berlin, 1892, p. 472; trans. de Paor, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

maintain their orthodoxy: for in the person of Pelagius the British Isles had already produced one heresiarch, and the dangers of backsliding into paganism would always be present — certainly St Patrick shows abhorrence of pagan practices in his *Confessio*.[7] In any case, about a century and a half after Patrick's time, St Columbanus could claim that the Irish church had preserved evangelic and apostolic doctrine intact.[8]

Yet even orthodoxy has inflections and nuances; and in the matter of practice, the Irish ways of calculating Easter and of consecrating bishops came to look slightly strange to churchmen more directly in touch with Rome; debate about them took place at the Council of Whitby in 663.[9] As for church organisation as it developed within Irish Christianity, Chadwick marks a certain contrast. To judge by Saint Patrick's two extant letters, the Christianity which he brought to Ireland in the fifth century was that of the westerly provinces of the Roman empire, with their towns and roads and episcopal sees; yet when documents begin to become more numerous in the sixth and seventh centuries, they show us a Christian Church in Ireland which was organised less around bishoprics than around monasteries. In a sense this is not surprising, since there were no real towns in Ireland until Scandinavian invaders began to found them in the ninth century; yet apart from that demographic circumstance, Chadwick saw the Irish monastic movement as showing strong influences from the austere monasticism of Syria and Egypt.[10] If she was right, one is almost tempted to speak of 'modalities' of Christianity having existed in Ireland during what I think will have been a longish conversion period, or at least Christianity there will not have been 'monolithic' in every respect. Under correction, I don't think there is much evidence about how the monastic life and the pastoral care of fresh converts were combined together and managed in the first century or so of the conversion period, or about what overall direction of them there was. However that may be, the documentation of fifth-century

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7 Chs 18-19, pp. 99-100. The sucking of nipples was not a pagan rite of 'initiation', as de Paor says at his p. 99, n. 10. Rather, it was a formal gesture of friendship or allegiance, which the unbending saint refused to make to pagans even at some risk to himself. See M. A. O'Brien, 'Miscellanea Hibernica, 13', *Études Celtiques*, 3, 1938, pp. 372-3. One may surmise that Irish Christianity in the fifth century was in what Humphrey Fisher calls a 'quarantine' phase, 'quarantines' being imposed by both Christians and pagans on each other. See below, n. 63 and discussion.

8 *Sancti Columbani Opera*, ed. and trans. G. S. M. Walker, Dublin, 1957, pp. 38-9. See also N. K. Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, London, 1961, pp. 14-15.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 65-9.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 61-118.

affairs is defective and unlikely to be enlarged, though experts in church history may make more coherent and illuminating patterns from it.

I say little more just now about the Christian side of the encounter between the two religious systems, but turn towards the 'traditional' religion with which it had to interact. A difficulty in trying to describe Celtic paganism as it was in Ireland, or elsewhere, is that we don't really know enough about it, either. There are three main bodies of materials from which we can get some idea of it, each of them having its defects: from archaeological remains, from Greek and Roman written sources, and from indigenous Celtic literature written down in the Middle Ages. Even when we put all three together, it's still hard to make a very coherent whole.[11]

To begin at archaeology. In Ireland and in the British Isles, and also in Continental Europe, images of deities are not wanting, though the pre-Roman ones are virtually never accompanied by inscriptions. The standard accounts of them seem to agree that the images afford only a glimpse of the Celtic religion of which they were part — its beliefs, its cosmologies, its rituals, its ethical theories and practices, its formal organisation.[12] To illustrate the point, I take just two objects, one Irish and the other Continental. The Irish object is an anthropomorphic stone figure, formerly at Tanderagee, Co. Armagh, and now kept at Armagh Cathedral. Armagh and its environs are an ancient religious centre.[13] The stone figure appears to be horned, and to wear a cap or helmet; similar headgear is attested in Gaulish archaeological remains. The representation of the mouth suggests a snarl or scream; the figure is neither eirenic nor aesthetically pleasing. It may have been first discovered in a bog, but the exact context is not

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11 I do not attempt to discuss here either the recently discovered inscriptions in Continental Celtic dialects, or folk tradition. For a classic study of an aspect of folk tradition, see Máire Macneill, *The Festival of Lughnasa: A Study of the Survival of the Celtic Festival of the Beginning of the Harvest*, London, 1962.

12 Paul-Marie Duval, *Les Dieux de la Gaule*, 2nd ed., Paris, 1976, p. 2; also Duval, *Travaux sur la Gaule, 1946-86*, Rome, 1989, vol. I, p. 287. Anne Ross has written: 'The evidence for native cults [in Britain] is ... very much of an archaeological nature, but its interpretation is another matter. The material evidence is suggestive of certain patterns of belief, but an understanding of these apparent patterns cannot be based on archaeology alone ...' (*Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition*, London and New York, 1967, p. 2).

13 See *ibid.*, p. 146 and pl. 46; J. V. S. Megaw, *Art of the European Iron Age: A Study of the Elusive Image*, Bath, 1970, illus. 285, and notes; Ruth and Vincent Megaw, *Celtic Art: From its Beginnings to the Book of Kells*, London, 1990, pp. 226-7. For the Iron Age round building near Armagh, see Christopher J. Lynn, 'Navan Fort', in Sabatino Moscati *et al.* (eds), *The Celts*, New York, 1991, pp. 610-11, and Barry Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland: The Enigma of the Irish Iron Age*, London, 1994, pp. 74-9 and 232.

scientifically known. Its absolute date 'is a matter of conjecture'.[14] And so we have the figure itself, the archaeologists' expert comparisons and estimates, and our own impressions of what this enigmatic object may have meant.

The second well-known object which I mention is the Gundestrup Cauldron, which was found in a peat bog in Denmark.[15] A number of deities are represented on it, including a god with a wheel who may be Taranis; similar images have been found in Gaul.[16] On one of the cauldron's inner panels a large human figure holds a small human figure upside-down over a vat, but whether the scene represents ritual drowning, ritual resuscitation, or something else again can't be determined; drownings and resuscitations both occur in medieval Irish stories. Much of the iconography of the Gundestrup Cauldron is Celtic; yet lions, elephants and a boy on a dolphin can also be seen on it, and the craftsmanship recalls certain metal objects found in Dacia and Thrace. Over the last two or three decades, many new archaeological discoveries have been made in territories associated with the Celts, and one never knows what may turn up next; but at present how 'Celtic' the Gundestrup cauldron is, and what its religious significance may have been, are both uncertain.

The second body of information about Celtic religion lies in ancient written sources. A number of Greco-Roman historians and geographers have left ethnographic accounts of the Continental Gauls as they saw them about two thousand years ago, with rather less said in them about the Britons and practically nothing about the Irish. The writers include Julius Caesar, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, and others.[17] Much of what these men wrote seems to derive from Posidonius, a polymath who had travelled in southern Gaul a generation or so before Caesar's campaigns; his work survives only in other writers' citations. All these Greco-Roman writers,

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14 Megaw and Megaw, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

15 See Ross, *op. cit.*, Index, *s.v.* Gundestrup; Megaw, *op. cit.*, Index, *s.v.* Gundestrup; Megaw and Megaw, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-7. Two incidents in medieval Celtic fiction involving cauldrons are conveniently translated in T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover (eds), *Ancient Irish Tales*, rev. C. W. Dunn, Dublin, 1969, p. 42, and in Jeffrey Gantz (trans.), *The Mabinogion*, Harmondsworth, 1976, p. 79.

16 Duval, *Les Dieux*, pp. 72-3; see also Lucan, *The Civil War* (Pharsalia), ed. and trans. J. D. Duff, London and Cambridge, Mass., 1928, I.444-6.

17 Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, ed. and trans. H. J. Edwards, London and Cambridge, Mass., 1963; Diodorus of Sicily, ed. and trans. C. H. Oldfather *et al.*, 10 vols, London and Cambridge, Mass., 1950-67; *The Geography of Strabo*, ed. and trans. H. L. Jones, 8 vols, London and Cambridge, Mass., 1917-89. The most relevant texts are printed and translated with a valuable introduction in J. J. Tierney, 'The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 60C, 1960, pp. 189-275.

including Posidonius, perceived the Gauls as barbarians and remembered that they were old enemies; besides that, the writers were naturally influenced by the philosophical, political and literary circles that they lived in and wrote for. They probably misunderstood some things the Gauls did, and misrepresented others. According to Tierney, much in Posidonius was written from an explicitly Stoic point of view, while Pliny's remarks about the druids and their plant-lore are philosophically sceptical and dismissive. After Gaul and Britain were safely pacified, Roman authors had no pressing reason to write about them, though in the second century Ptolemy had some information about Ireland and gives names and locations for some of its peoples.[18] One or two things do, however, seem to emerge from the Greco-Roman sources fairly clearly. On the one hand, the Celts seem to have believed the cosmos to be a kind of regular process that could in part be understood. For example, Divitiacus, a Gaulish druid and political leader, told Cicero that he knew how to foretell some future events by interpreting signs. On the other hand, the accounts of the sacrifices conducted by the druids suggest that they thought of the cosmos as also being ruled by beings something like people to be propitiated. If the Gaulish sacrifice of human beings for purposes of divination is to be believed, the druids sometimes operated with both these ideas.[19]

The remaining chief source of information about Celtic paganism is the indigenous Celtic literature of the British Isles; it is quite abundant, especially in Ireland. A difficulty in using this literature as evidence for Celtic paganism is this: as we now have it, it is late in date. The oldest extant Irish books containing secular literary material come from the twelfth century — some six hundred years after the time of St Patrick's mission. Now it's true that the most ambitious Irish heroic saga, the *Táin Bó Cúalnge* (let it be the example here), may have existed in irrecoverable oral forms for a long time before it was written down, and that the written forms of it that we actually have barely mention Christianity at all. It's also true that the *Táin* narrative accepts sign-reading druids and poets as normal persons of social consequence, and it even brings in certain figures who belong to old Pan-Celtic religion, the chief of them being the deity Lug.[20]

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[18] For Ptolemy's map of the British Isles, see *De Vita Agricolae*, ed. R. M. Ogilvie and Sir Ian Richmond, Oxford, 1967, pp. 38-9. For Pliny on the druids, see his *Natural History*, ed. and trans H. Rackham *et al.*, 10 vols, London and Cambridge, Mass., 1938-62, XVI.24, XXIV.103-4, XXIX.52 and XXX.13.

[19] Cicero, *De Divinatione*, ed. and trans. W. A. Falconer, London and Cambridge, Mass., 1923, I.xli.90; Caesar, *Gallic War*, VI.16.

[20] Lug makes an appearance in the Book of Leinster version of the *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, ed. and trans. Cecile O'Rahilly, Dublin, 1970, ll. 2134-55, trans. p. 198; for another version

Lug and one or two others play only minor parts in the *Táin*, but their presence there at all is a trait which contrasts with the narrative mode of *Beowulf*, even though the Old English poem has its own element of the marvellous and is actually older, as a text, than any version of the *Táin*. The *Chanson de Roland* is about as old as the earliest *Táin* version, and is militantly Christian. In any case, the twelfth-century *Táin* versions, with their druids, Lug and Morrígan, were written out on valuable vellum at ecclesiastical centres. Much the same is true of other medieval Irish texts which I must pass over. One of the complex interactions between the pre-Christian 'traditional' order and the new Christian order, then, seems to have resulted in the preservation of certain 'traditional' elements by the Church itself; otherwise, no written record of them would have survived. Yet I doubt that those fragments of old pagan mythology that got into Irish monastic manuscripts amount to reliable, detailed data about Celtic paganism in Ireland. In reading old texts, it's often hard to tell where serious belief ended and where literary convention began; and it's certainly hard to think that texts in which pagan scraps appear were composed by old believers for old believers. Much attenuation of the pagan must have taken place. I prefer to think of the 'pagan survivals' in medieval Irish and Welsh literature as parts of a cultural heritage which the Church, functioning as a cultural institution, neither endorsed nor suppressed, but tolerated. Irish litterati may have been like their contemporaries elsewhere who copied out Ovid or the *Edda*, or like Christian poets who, a thousand years after Constantine converted, went on referring to the Greco-Roman pantheon as if it still functioned. An Irish endnote to the Book of Leinster *Táin Bó Cúalnge* in fact calls for a conventional blessing on those who copied it out correctly, while the writer of the accompanying Latin endnote (probably the same man) announces that for his part he gives 'no credence to the various incidents related in [the story]. For some things in it are the deceptions of demons, others poetic figments; ... while still others are

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of the incident, see Thomas Kinsella (trans.), *The Táin*, Oxford, 1970, pp. 142-4. The appearance of Morrígan is associated with the same *Táin* episode: O'Rahilly, ll. 1986-2010; Kinsella, pp. 132-7. Lug, romanised as Mercurius, is well attested in Roman Gaul: see Duval, *Les Dieux*, pp. 67-70; and further Jan de Vries, *Keltische Religion*, Stuttgart, 1961, pp. 40-5 and 50-5. The recently discovered Tablet of Chamalières invokes the Gaulish Lugus in Roman writing: see *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland and Wales*, ed. John T. Koch and John Carey, Malden, Mass., 1995, pp. 1-3. De Vries treats Morrígan as one of the Irish 'war-goddesses', pp. 235-8. The case for the antiquity of the Irish heroic tradition made by Kenneth Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age*, Cambridge, 1964, now looks exaggerated.

intended for the delectation of foolish men.' Nevertheless, the endnotes were added after the copying of the old story had been completed.[21]

My general conclusion is that even when you put archaeology together with the relevant ancient and medieval literature, any detailed notion of belief, rite, religious organisation and praxis in pre-Christian Ireland remains elusive. All the more difficult, therefore, to estimate what happened in the fifth or sixth centuries when Celtic pagans listened to unfamiliar Christian preaching, or to estimate in what ways the change from the old religion to the new affected how people felt, thought and lived.

Even though it will be quite inadequate, I don't see how I can avoid saying something about the theories of Georges Dumézil, for they bear on the understanding of pre-Christian religion in the Celtic realms, and hence on its encounter with Christianity. Dumézil proposed and offered to document what he called a tripartite Indo-European 'ideology', or religious philosophy. The ideology was prehistoric — elaborated and fixed before the Indo-European peoples dispersed from their original homelands and migrated to the places where we find them in historical times.[22] This 'ideology', according to Dumézil, combined a set of three 'functions'. They were these: sacred sovereignty; force (especially military force), and a less well-defined 'third function' of fertility, numerousness, nourishment, wealth and the like. Or perhaps, to label the functions more crudely: order, the application of power, productivity. These abstract Indo-European 'functions' were embodied in and performed by three hierarchised social groups: priests, warriors and free farmers. There seems to have been no formal place in the system for the alien or the unfree. Even though the Indo-Europeans migrated long distances to their historical homelands in India, Italy, Ireland and so on, and even though they encountered many other peoples in their wanderings, they preserved their tripartite ideology as a kind of 'deep structure' to their thought ('deep structure' is not one of Dumézil's own terms). Celts and Scandinavians preserved the ideology until well into the present era, and it is also said to be one of the

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[21] O'Rahilly, *op. cit.*, p. 272. By 'deception of demons' the copyist may have meant passages in the *Táin* such as those mentioning the pagan deities (above, n. 20). By 'poetic figments' he may have meant florid passages such as those describing CúChulainn's warrior frenzy, as in O'Rahilly, ll. 2230-2300, trans. pp.199-202 — a passage which is also connected to the Lug episode mentioned in n. 20, above.

[22] A convenient introduction to Dumézil is C. Scott Littleton, *The New Comparative Mythology: An Anthropological Assessment of the Theories of Georges Dumézil*, 3rd edn, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1983. Dumézil summarised his basic ideas in *L'Idéologie tripartie des Indo-Européens*, Bruxelles, 1958. I have not yet seen the last, posthumous version of his *Mythe et Épopée*, Paris, 1995.

foundations of the Indian caste system. It was true, Dumézil indicated, that 'surface structures' were often modified in the course of time; but the deep structure persisted. Sometimes it would manifest itself in explicitly religious documents, sometimes in historicised myths, sometimes in epic narrative.

I give one example of this persistence. Apparently the Indo-Europeans did not clearly recognise any single Supreme Being who, having created the cosmos, continued to govern it. Their two chief 'sovereign' deities were Mitra and Varuna (to use the Indic names). These two complemented each other by exercising separate modes of sacred and sovereign power, and were further complemented by minor sovereign deities. One of these was Aryaman. Aryaman is mentioned in Vedic texts as being associated with restoration to health (*assainissement*) and with marriages. Now in medieval Irish pseudo-historical texts, the figure of one Eremon occasionally appears. In one story told about him, he heals warriors of mortal wounds by means of milk, and so helps defeat an evil enemy. In another story, Eremon arranges significant marriages. These Irish stories, as we have them, are no older than the twelfth-century Book of Leinster; yet Dumézil compares them with texts composed in India up to two thousand years earlier; he points to analogies between the Celtic and the Indic which, he argues, derive from a distant common origin.[23] From long perspectives and extensive comparative materials of this general kind, Dumézil obtained many striking results. His results and methods may help us detect and explain traces of ancient Indo-European ideology and mythology in medieval Irish literature and solve many puzzles in it; they may seem to offer better insights into old Celtic religion than mute stone figures can do, or biased Roman ethnography, or a medieval literature that had to pass through clerical filters in order to reach us. Small wonder, then, that Dumézil's theories have won wide acceptance and have been adopted by others. As Lindow remarked, Dumézil's Scandinavianist critics were in a minority and seemed likely to 'fall increasingly silent'.[24]

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[23] For the 'sovereign' gods, see Georges Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna*, 2nd edn, Paris, 1948, English trans. by Derek Coltman, New York, 1988; also Dumézil, *Le troisième souverain: essai sur le dieu indo-iranien Aryaman et sur la formation de l'histoire mythique de l'Irlande*, Paris, 1949, and *L'Idéologie*, pp. 108-18. Dumézil's general approach to his disparate texts is 'structuralist' rather than 'historicist': see John Lindow, 'Mythology and Mythography', in Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (eds), *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, Ithaca and London, 1985, pp. 22-67. For sketches of Dumézil's intellectual career, see the interview in *Le Nouvel Observateur* for 14 Jan., 1983, pp. 50-4, and Arnaldo Momigliano, *On Pagans, Jews and Christians*, Middletown, Conn., 1987, pp. 289-314.

[24] *Op. cit.*, pp. 42-8, esp. p. 47.

No one questions Dumézil's great achievements as a comparatist; yet an attempt somehow to apply his work to the what and why of how religious conversions took place leads to questions rather than to answers. Dumézil's main concerns were not with radical change, but with deep-lying continuities in his Indo-European system of thought. His preferred materials were mythological and/or literary texts in the many Indo-European languages; and as one would expect from a man of his philological training, he ranged backwards and forwards in time noting patterned similarities, rather as one moves between the reconstructed linguistic forms of *Ur*-Indo-European and the speech-forms actually attested in historical times. In short, Dumézil explored internal continuities and modifications rather than external contacts.

With a mention now of other aspects of Dumézil's thinking, other ideas enter the present discussion. For although Dumézil made it clear that his Indo-European ideology included religion, it also took in division of labour, law, literary culture, and a philosophy of the cosmos. The threefold partition of the abstract 'functions' among priests, warriors and free farmers implies an ideology of social structure; for it's hard to suppose that the Indo-Europeans of (say) 3,000 years ago first excogitated an ideology and then created a society in order to embody it. Rather, the ideology would be an intellectual superstructure built upon an existing economic and social base. That proposition obviously calls to mind Émile Durkheim's ideas about how 'collective representations' form and tend to perpetuate themselves, and about how rites and beliefs in general (Durkheim thought) are symbolic representations of society itself, and of its modes of differentiation.[25] And indeed Dumézil was perfectly familiar with French sociological thought about societies and their symbolic structures; he had studied under Marcel Mauss and much admired him. Nevertheless, Dumézil's attitudes towards the sociological school of Durkheim and Mauss seem to have fluctuated, perhaps because of political differences among them. And in a way uncongenial to the French sociologists, Dumézil seems also to have been attracted by Frazer's way of arguing by analogy in *The Golden Bough*, and by Frazer's way of showing the long persistence of certain patterns of thought. In the decades between the wars, Dumézil also found impressive the explorations of Germanic folklore carried out by Lily Weiser and Otto Höfler; and they, too, were interested in long continuities of thought, though not in the same ones as Frazer. In making connections at a distance of two thousand years, then, between Aryaman in India and

[25] See the discussion in Robert Murphy, *The Dialectics of Social Life: Alarms and Excursions in Anthropological Theory*, London, 1972, pp. 163-70.

Eremon in Ireland (to revert to the little example mentioned above), Dumézil was perhaps consciously, but not very explicitly, working with an apprehension of thought-patterns for which literary evidence provided analogies and indices rather than philologically provable connections; or with an idea of old thought-patterns which did not depend on complete fixity in their symbolic systems: so that the structures of the old ideology endured whether they found expression in religious texts, or in epic poetry, or in historicised myth.

But as for symbolic structures in general, there has more recently been some division of opinion between anthropological theorists who privilege what verbal informants *say* (or have written), and those who privilege the observation of actual social behaviour. Belief and social action, it is said, are often actually discrepant, though societies often tolerate the discrepancies well enough.[26] For his part, Dumézil did not speculate much on the realities of social behaviour among the ancient Indo-Europeans. He preferred their texts, and in any case the details of ancient social realities are generally inaccessible. He did once say, however, that Indo-European society might not have been totally compartmentalised into the three 'castes' of priests, warriors and farmers. The actual carriers of the three functions were perhaps a limited number of families or clans, to whom the mass of the population entrusted themselves according to circumstance and need.[27] In that case, the hegemonic families or clans would have exercised social and economic power to a degree that may not seem attractive to us now. Mythology, furthermore, is not the same thing as religion, as Lindow points out.[28] For my present limited purpose, Dumézil's work seems to cast no great light on the Celtic paganism from which the Irish converted to Christianity, but it amply confirms what archaeological evidence and the Roman writers both point to: that the prehistoric Indo-European religion and its particular realisation in Ireland can be classed among 'archaic' religions.

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I return for a moment to my starting point: if we want to get an idea of how the Irish conversion from Celtic paganism to Christianity took place, we need to understand something of both those complex systems of belief,

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[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 157-63.
[27] Dumézil, *L'Idéologie*, pp. 17-18.
[28] *Op. cit.*, pp. 22-3.

and of how they interacted; but our information is less detailed and coherent than we would wish on both sides of the interaction. It seems necessary, then, to turn to wider and more general theories about religious systems and religious change; and these theories are usually based on things observed in other places in the world, and much more recently than the fifth century. I am thinking especially of a general typology proposed by Robert Bellah; one need not accept all the details and implications of the typology to find it interesting and potentially helpful towards a resolution of the 'Irish question'. Here I take up only two of Bellah's five typological categories.[29] In the terminology that Bellah uses, Celtic paganism would be a 'traditional' or 'archaic' religion; and in Christianity it encountered a 'world', or 'historic', or (Germanically) a 'world-historical' religion. At least that label helps us escape some of the problems involved in Dumézil's methodology, for Bellah's typology would assimilate Indo-European religion to the general group of 'archaic' religions of the world. Its Celtic branch would inherit its characteristics, perhaps retaining some traits of 'primitive' religion as well. (I leave aside the question of what the religion of the historical Celts may have owed to the pre-Celtic inhabitants of the territories they seized.)

Archaic religions, according to Bellah, typically display a complex of gods, priests, sacrifice and worship. Gods control the human and natural worlds, and human beings must deal with them in a purposive and regulated way. Such dealings are the particular business of priesthoods who devise, operate and control a system of communication between the gods and human beings. Priesthoods may also elaborate large cosmologies in which all things divine and natural have their place. The organisation of archaic religions, however, tends to be merged with the general organisation and structure of the society; and when population increases enough, a two-class social system may appear. This will consist (and here is another Weberian idea) of a lower status-group comprising farmers and artisans, and an upper status-group of land-owning aristocrats who monopolise military and political power and have the priestly class as their allies. Noble families sometimes claim descent from divine ancestors, and sometimes divine powers are attributed to kings in addition to their political, legal, military and other functions.

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[29] Robert Bellah, 'Religious Evolution', *American Sociological Review*, 29, 1964, pp. 358-74, esp. pp. 361-6. As Bellah's title suggests, he elaborated on Max Weber's theories about 'primitive' and 'world' religions, which were in turn strongly influenced by evolutionary and rationalistic ideas current in the late nineteenth century. See Robert W. Hefner (ed.), *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford, 1993, pp. 7-10.

These are of course very general propositions and make best sense when read in the context that Bellah provides. But they seem to fit what written sources tell us about the Celts quite well. I give a few examples of the fit. We can at least trust Caesar when he says that Gaulish religion looked to him like a variation on other contemporary 'archaic' religions that he knew, including his own Roman religion which was Indo-European in origin; and Caesar laconically adds that the Gauls had much the same idea of the gods as everyone else.[30] The Romans also recognised the Celtic druids of Gaul and Britain as a priesthood, though they probably had little direct acquaintance with druids in Ireland. To Diodorus Siculus, the Gaulish druids were 'philosophers' who, as it were, could speak the language of the gods and so communicate effectively with them about human affairs. The gods required sacrifices, and part of the druids' great authority lay in their power to exclude from sacrifice anyone who displeased them, exclusion from sacrifice amounting to exclusion from society. In Gaul, the druids and the military aristocrats (*equites*) were in political alliance to exercise hegemony over an immiserated class of economic producers.[31]

A thousand years or so later, druids at least had a place in Irish cultural memory. According to Patrick's seventh-century hagiographer Muirchú, druids counselled the pagan king Loegaire not to listen to the saint, and by magic they tried to oppose him; but the saint defeated and destroyed them through the power of God.[32] In medieval Irish fiction, druids also act as privileged advisers to kings.[33] Druids, however, may best be regarded as a sub-group within a more extensive native Celtic intellectual and learned class, to the whole of which the word 'priesthood' is not appropriate. This class included 'bards', and those whom Strabo, IV.iv.4, calls *vates* and whom the Irish later called *filid*, the words coming from separate linguistic roots which imply visionary powers. In medieval Irish fiction, the *filid* possess magical arts, especially that of 'satire' — versified obloquy directed against those who failed to live up to social norms or who gave other cause for displeasure. So great were the powers of the *filid* that it was said that they raised not only blushes of shame on the faces of their victims, but

30 *Gallic War*, VI.17.1-2.

31 Diodorus Siculus, V.31; Strabo, IV.iv.4; Caesar, VI.13. For general accounts of the druids, see Nora K. Chadwick, *The Druids*, Cardiff, 1966, and Stuart Piggott, *The Druids*, London, 1968.

32 *Four Latin Lives of St. Patrick*, ed. Ludwig Bieler, Dublin, 1971, pp. 87-97. A version of the story is translated in de Paor, *op. cit.*, pp. 183-5; compare also I Kings 18:17-40.

33 As in Kinsella's *Táin*, pp. 84-5, 218-9, etc.

actual weals and blisters; and sometimes satire even caused death.[34] Sometimes again in literary texts, self-interested *filid* abuse their powers and are punished for it, as in the story of Aithirne and Luaine;[35] and sometimes poets work directly for rulers.[36] In this respect, the *filid* sound like opportunist Weberian 'magicians', and might fit Bellah's category of 'compact' and 'primitive' religion rather than his 'archaic' stage.[37] Finally in this little list of probable 'archaic' features in Celtic religion, I mention certain medieval Irish texts where kings are described as if they had cosmic powers: so that when a king reigned well and judged justly seasons were good and crops abundant, but the reigns of unjust and ungenerous kings were marked by dearth and calamity.[38]

I've been able to give here only a superficial idea of how Celtic paganism might approximate to Bellah's category of 'archaic' religions; but I think it's reasonably concordant with the Greco-Roman and Irish written sources, and perhaps with Dumézil. Now in or about the fifth century, this 'archaic' Celtic religion in Ireland encounters Christianity. In Bellah's terms, Christianity is an 'historic' religion, others being Buddhism and Islam.[39] Following Weber, Bellah has the historic religions originating well after Indo-European times and mainly in the first millennium before the Common Era, Islam being the latest of them. According to Bellah, historic religions share a number of common features. They are 'dualistic' in the sense that they propose the existence of a realm which quite transcends the present world. This transcendental realm is a higher reality, a reality

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34 See Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art*, Princeton, 1960, esp. ch. 1.

35 Summarised in *ibid.*, p. 27.

36 As in Kinsella's *Táin*, pp. 168-9.

37 Bellah, *op. cit.*, p.363, and Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*, London, 1966, p. 88.

38 See Maartje Draak, 'Some Aspects of Kingship in Pagan Ireland', in *The Sacral Kingship: La Regalità Sacra*, Leiden, 1959, pp. 651-63. Draak gives a temperate account of this matter, and cites several of the important medieval texts, including the twelfth-century account by Giraldus Cambrensis of a royal inauguration in Ulster accompanied by horse-sacrifice. The Celtic learned class was an enduring institution. Elizabethan Englishmen glimpsed court poets attending Irish kings and nobles: ragged men with an air of filthy and barbaric magnificence. I met one man in Australia who claimed to and probably did belong to an ancient Celtic school of esoteric knowledge. Though our relations were friendly, I didn't greatly like him. He had, I thought, the dissociated abstractedness that you find in some creative artists and some religious cranks — as if their eyes gaze not the ordinary world, but on another world that is more interesting to them, and more real. Look at such people, and you may see a self-absorbed egotist, or a shabby fraud. Look again, and you may see something out of the common.

39 *Op. cit.*, pp. 366-8.

infinitely superior to that visible in the present world, which in consequence is implicitly devalued. Historic religions thus claim to offer deeper insights into the ultimate conditions of human existence, to reveal a clearer conception of the flawed human self and to open up a way to salvation which often entails renunciation of this present world. In archaic religions, the priesthoods were usually too deeply merged in the general social structure to exert any leverage on its existing conditions: druids, for example, controlled the traditional knowledge and wisdom of the Gauls, but they were content to maintain their alliance with the military aristocrats and enjoy their privileges. Historic religions, on the other hand, are typically founded by 'charismatic' figures (the Weberian term) and have potential to bring on great social changes. They demand more than assent and conformity, they demand adherence and commitment; by their universalism, they transcend local conditions. Historic religions may retain the practices of ritual and sacrifice which the archaic religions had already developed, but they also organise their adherents into close-knit communities. By their reliance on writings associated with charismatic founders, they entrench and promote literacy. Secular rulers find in the end that historic religions cannot be fully controlled, since part of their essence is that they originate and maintain transcendental standards against which the rulers themselves may be criticised and judged.

Bellah's typological distinction between archaic and historic religions seems to offer some insight into what was involved when Irish pagans began to convert to Christianity. To put it portentously, the deepest change would be a shift from a monistic to a dualistic and transcendental conception of the ultimate grounds of human existence, though the change in faith would not, of course, have affected all converts equally or simultaneously. Even allowing for self-interest in Patrick's writings and sectional interests in the seventh-century Patrician legends, we can perhaps see that saint as a charismatic figure entering an 'archaic' society and appealing first to those whom it had marginalised. According to Patrick, the Irish were already receptive to asceticism, and when Irish Christianity took a monastic turn in the 'age of saints', the monks' renunciation of the world, the severe austerities that they took upon themselves and the high value they set on *peregrinatio* all seem well-documented in Irish and non-Irish historical and literary sources. Both developments would contrast with the archaic, pre-Christian Celtic religion.[40]

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[40] For a sympathetic view of monastic renunciations of the world, see Chadwick, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-111.

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Supposing that one accepts Bellah's general typology of religions as useful orientation in trying to think about the Irish conversion, one would still like to understand the process in more detail. And it is here that the work of the Africanist Robin Horton may become relevant, or at least some of the issues that Horton raised. I had better say immediately that with respect to my Irish question, I feel that Horton's own ideas are less helpful than the discussions which they provoked. I'd better say, too, that I've not noticed Horton mentioning Bellah; yet since both scholars were working within the same general framework at about the same time, I mention their names together.

Horton (I understand) has taught anthropology in Nigerian universities for the last thirty years or so. To those who lived through them, they must have been crowded years: the end of the colonial regime and political independence; state-building and the Biafran war; the winds of change in Africa; modernisation, incorporation into the world economy, the growth of huge cities — all this happened within less than a lifetime. Comparable changes had taken place in western Europe centuries beforehand, but there they came more slowly: a millennium separated conversion to Christianity from the Industrial Revolution. Much of Horton's work, so far as I know and understand it, has naturally been concerned with the intensive culture-contact between 'traditional' African society and nineteenth- and twentieth-century western Europe with its version of Christianity. I choose and attempt to outline three major issues which Horton's work raises; for the detailed argumentation, one reads Horton *in extenso*. I think I can see these ideas of Horton's as being applications, developments or revaluations of sociological and anthropological themes and problems, current in one way or another over the last hundred years, and still evolving. They have had their vicissitudes in sociological theorising and debate; and it's as artificial to separate them from that complex of theory, and from one another, as it is to disengage them from the Nigerian context and the preoccupations of Africanists. For the present limited purpose, however, it's convenient to take one by one the following: Horton's views on rationality; and on social microcosms and macrocosms; and his 'thought-experiment' suggesting how the historic or world religions of Christianity and Islam may have amounted to little more than catalysts in religious changes which Africans themselves had already begun. I further have the impression that one of Horton's underlying purposes was to correct an older European perception that African thinking was somehow significantly different from what had

developed in Europe, especially from the seventeenth century onwards. Horton probably aimed at a vindication of Africanity in Nigeria and in its religion; and such vindications, or revaluations, have been a major concern of Africanists since the end of the colonial era.[41]

First, the matter of 'rationality'. It has been an important topic in religious and sociological debate for more than a century, both in respect of European self-questioning and in respect of the European encounter with other cultural traditions.[42] Without trying to be philosophically or sociologically precise about it, I should like to distinguish two aspects of 'rationality', both of which I believe Horton invokes: one is the nature and distribution of rationality among human beings generally, and the other is the conditions under which what we call rationality seems to have developed.

Now when Europeans reached Africa and other parts of the world, it sometimes seemed to them that they had arrived where their familiar writ of European rationality did not run. Indigenous peoples were capably transacting the ordinary business of human existence, but in some respects their modes of thinking seemed non-rational or even irrational. In the earlier part of the present century, these apparently different modes of thinking greatly interested theorists who had already absorbed the idea of evolution; and in a book now notorious for political incorrectness, Lévy-Bruhl sought to define what he called 'primitive mentality'. In 1964 Robert Bellah still referred to Lévy-Bruhl, suggesting that there had been a stage in religious evolution when thinking was more 'fluid' or 'compact' than Europeans usually suppose their own to be; and that while this non-'rational' thinking was a dominant mode, the self, including the religious self, remained merged in the totality of its society. That mode of thinking was distinct from and older than what Bellah typically finds in 'historic' religions.[43] Robin Horton on the other hand sought to show that African rationality is little different from its European counterpart.

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41 See, for example, T. O. Ranger and I. N. Kimambo (eds), *The Historical Study of African Religion*, London, 1972; Terence Ranger, 'The Local and the Global in Southern African Religious History', in Hefner, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-98.

42 You can of course trace reflections on rationality and rationalism back to the Enlightenment, or to the Ionian Greeks; but I don't seek to do that here. For an account of Weber's views, see Bendix, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-79. For collections of essays, see Robin Horton and Ruth Finnegan (eds), *Modes of Thought: Essays on Thinking in Western and Non-Western Societies*, London, 1973; Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West*, Cambridge, 1993.

43 See Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, trans. Lilian A. Clare, with new Introduction by C. Scott Littleton, Princeton, 1985; also Hefner, *op. cit.*, p. 8 and n. 6.

In a wider field, Horton turned to ways in which Europeans and Africans have evolved theories of causality. Much that happens in the world is caused by entities or forces that are both invisible and universal; and both Europeans and Africans, in different idioms, clearly recognise the difference between personal and 'common sense' perceptions of causality as opposed to impersonal and 'theoretical' systems of explanation. In these respects, Africans and Europeans have thought along similar lines; the main difference in the idioms deployed lay in the Europeans' earlier development of literacy, and in their earlier discovery through commerce and exploration of the macrocosm beyond their own shores.[44] To put it another way: centuries earlier in Europe, Christianity had been 'rationalised' (in Weber's sense of the word) by the establishment of centralised priesthoods, by literacy, by the closure of the canon of sacred texts, and the like. The active centres of Christianity, Weber thought, had been towns and cities, and its most important adherents had been urban middle-class people working as artisans and traders. Those were occupations that did not completely depend on the processes of nature and were to some extent insulated from its unpredictability, as agriculture is not; and they were occupations that demanded calculation and planning, especially when commerce expanded to include long-distance maritime trade.[45] Rationality in the conduct of economic life would cumulatively encourage theorising about the explanation, prediction and control of what Horton calls 'space-time events'. Now 'traditional' West Africa had not lacked urban centres; but the rationality of West African religious thought and the rationality of its European counterpart, though in principle equal, had had different bodies of experience to work upon, and were hence related in different degrees to the transformation of the 'traditional' life-world.

For Bellah, see esp. his pp. 361-4 in *op. cit.* Bellah defines what he means by 'evolution' carefully; he is not uncritical of Lévy-Bruhl.

[44] Robin Horton, 'Destiny and the Unconscious in West Africa', *Africa*, 31, 1961, pp. 110-16; 'African Traditional Thought and Western Science', *Africa*, 37, 1967, Part I, pp. 50-71, and Part II, pp. 155-187. At the beginning of this dense, two-part article, Horton mentions his early training in biology, chemistry and the philosophy of science. On p. 52, he observes that some of the puzzles raised by Lévy-Bruhl 'have never been solved by anthropologists'. He also alludes to Godfrey Lienhardt's *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka*, London, 1961, as does Bellah. Students of religious change were reading the same books at about the same time.

[45] For some account of Weber's thinking on these matters, see Bendix, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-10 and 83-97; Hefner, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-18; Robin Horton, 'African Conversion', *Africa*, 41, 1971, pp. 85-108, esp. pp. 98-100.

The matter of 'rationality' in religion is, however, even more complicated than this, as Horton shows. Religions, he suggests, can have two broadly separable aspects. One of them might be called 'theoretical' or 'cognitive', though Horton prefers to speak of theoretical systems 'intended for the explanation, prediction, and control of space-time events': these 'events' include most human fortune and misfortune, individual or collective. The other aspect of religions is sometimes called 'emotional' or 'personal'; though here Horton prefers 'communion', meaning (roughly) a human being's sense of a close relationship with a god or spirit conceived as a person. 'Communion' of this kind is not 'rational', in the ordinary sense of the word, but perhaps takes the form of deep emotional involvement with an *alter*, or Other. Among the Yoruba a sense of identification with an *orisa* or 'god' may result in the *orisa*'s taking intermittent trance-possession of the worshipper; one might also think of Bernini's Saint Teresa. In archaic religions, and in some historic religions such as Christianity (to use here Bellah's terms), gods are thus theoretical entities controlling the cosmos, and at the same time they are enough like people for relationships with them to seem or feel like an extension of social relationships among human beings.[46]

In historic religions, the balance between these two aspects of religion (i.e. explanatory theory and communion) does not necessarily remain the same. Take cosmology. Medieval Christianity, while offering a communion with God, also elaborated models of cosmology in which every aspect of the created universe had its proper place. One model was that of the Great Chain of Being, a chain which extended from God the Creator down through the angels and humanity to the non-rational beasts, plants and stones. This was the 'old' philosophy. The 'new' philosophy of the seventeenth century called it all in doubt. ''Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone', wrote John Donne in 1611. From about then onwards, the Church gradually ceded most theorising about the explanation, prediction and control of space-time events in the world to the natural sciences, as Horton's term 'space-time' suggests. In Christianity (one simplifies grossly) religious emphasis shifted away from cosmology towards a complex of ideas and feelings centred on 'communion'. It was this later form of Christianity that reached Nigeria in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But in itself 'communion' can take more than one form; and Horton distinguishes between 'this-worldly' and 'other-worldly' orientations in it, perhaps somewhat like the medieval distinction between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. In the first kind of communion, one may have the sense of

[46] *Ibid.*, pp. 95-7.

walking through the world with God: an integration of the self may be one consequence of it, the enhancement of relationships with fellow human beings another; for the relationship with God is the model for all relationships. In the second kind of communion — insulated, contemplative, ascetic — the self is integrated in a different way, a way which may result in the attenuation of ordinary 'this-world' human relationships. 'Other-worldly' communion of this kind is not confined to Christianity, of course; and certain remarkable persons are able to maintain a balance between both kinds of 'communion'.[47]

Discussion of differences between European and African rationality and of their separate idioms leads to a second complex of ideas associated with Horton's work: microcosm and macrocosm. It sometimes seemed to European discoverers and colonisers that much of the non-European world was timeless and unchanging, especially if they compared it with their own urbanised nation-states and reflected on their written history. The non-European world seemed a world of 'microcosms', to use Horton's word: simple, rural micro-worlds, rather insulated from one another and from the macrocosm of the wider world; places where daily occupations and face-to-face human relationships had always been closely interwoven. That older view of the non-European world has proved too simple. Pre-colonial Africa had in fact known violent large-scale political movements, and it is now clear that religious and other kinds of trans-regional association extended over wide areas of the continent. The microcosms were not as insulated as they may have seemed.[48] All the same, industrialisation and modernisation had the same impacts in Nigeria as they did everywhere else. The life of microcosms was disrupted. Nigeria began to be incorporated

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[47] See *ibid.*, pp. 95-8. In hagiographical tradition, there is perhaps a recognisable difference between (say) Tirechán's account of St Patrick's practical activity in founding churches on the one hand (as in de Paor, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-9), and Bede's story about the extreme asceticism of Drycthelm on the other. See Chadwick, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-5, together with her account of the tensions between the 'Celtic Order' and the 'Roman Order', pp. 118 ff.

[48] For a sympathetic presentation of the older view, see Robert Redfield, *The Primitive World and its Transformations*, Ithaca, 1953, esp. pp. 11-63. Contemporaneously with colonisation, Europeans could see the destruction of their own microcosms, as Ferdinand Tönnies' observations on 'Gesellschaft und Gemeinschaft' showed as early as 1878, and the poetry of Jammes and Verhaeren a little later. For more recent studies of African complexities, see Robin Horton, 'A Definition of Religion, and its Uses', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 90, 1960, pp. 220-6; Horton, 'African Conversion', p. 86; Deryck Schreuder and Geoffrey Oddie, 'What is "Conversion"? History, Christianity and Religious Change in Colonial Africa and South Asia', *Journal of Religious History*, 15, 1989, pp. 496-518, and Terence Ranger, 'The Local and the Global in Southern African Religious History', in Hefner, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-98.

into the world economy, first by the export of cash-crops, then of oil. Growing towns and cities drew in migrants from the countryside as young men left the fields to become clerks, teachers and traders in the years between the world wars.

Now comes Horton's 'thought-experiment'. It goes something like this. You begin with the 'typical traditional cosmology'.[49] What is this cosmology, and what is its rationale? It is a theoretical system for the explanation, prediction and control of space-time events. How does it function? It functions through two 'tiers' of beings who are unobservable, universal and personal; their activities underpin events in the visible world of human experience. What are the two tiers? The lower tier consists of 'lesser spirits'; among the Yoruba, they include well-known figures like Ogun and Shango, together with some hundreds of others. These lesser spirits are responsible for many space-time events, and are closely involved in human affairs. If they are displeased by immoral human behaviour, they may inflict misfortune on the culprits. Human beings may learn the will of the lesser spirits by divination; they may seek their favour by sacrifice; with beneficial results they may cultivate communion with them. In the upper tier, a supreme being stands alone; among the Yoruba, he is Olorun. Olorun caused the creation of the world, and in a rather remote fashion he still presides over its functioning. By contrast with Shango and the rest, Olorun has no elaborated cult, and morally he is neutral. So far, all this sounds pretty much like one of Robert Bellah's 'archaic' religions. Then, about the beginning of the twentieth century, comes intensive European contact with all its apparatus. Great social changes in Nigeria follow. In particular, modernisation weakens the boundaries that had insulated the microcosms, and brings the world macrocosm plainly into view. How would Nigerian thought respond to the changes? What, in the thought-experiment, would one then expect to happen to the two-tier system?

For the purposes of the thought-experiment, we need to remember two things (though Horton does not quite spell it out like this[50]). First, Africans are rational. Then, their two-tiered religion was a theoretical system for explanation, prediction and control. Confronted by great social changes, and being rational, Africans adapt their system to the new circumstances: so that since the lesser spirits tended to be associated with the old microcosms, the boundaries of which were dissolving, and since rapid change was obliterating many fields of experience with which their cults had been associated, then you would expect the lesser spirits to lose their

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49 'African Conversion', p. 101.

50 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 102-3.

importance in human affairs. Conversely the supreme being, who had previously seemed remote and to whom no strong cult was attached, would now appear as a fit ruler of the newly-discovered larger macrocosm: he had, after all, created the world. He would assume that concern with moral behaviour which one could no longer plausibly attribute to the retreating lesser spirits; and as the lesser spirits lost importance, the cult of the supreme being would be elaborated. And so, according to the thought-experiment, the two-tiered African traditional cosmology would adapt itself to new socio-economic conditions by means of rational internal adjustment. As the economic base changed, the ideological superstructure would change, too. But what about the proponents of the 'world' religions who were active in Nigeria as modernisation made its impact? Neither the preachers of Christianity nor of Islam were necessary to effect the shift of the traditional religious economy from a polytheism towards a monolatry. Islam and Christianity, Horton concludes, need have been no more than catalysts in a process which was already 'in the air'.

Horton's paper on 'African Conversion' actually begins circuitously with a detailed review of John Peel's *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba* (London, 1968), and this strategy suggests that Horton wanted to show that the actual history of conversion to Christianity in Nigeria tended to confirm the thought-experiment which he then went on to make. In the nineteenth century, he says, Christian missionaries at first made little progress. Later, when the supreme being of Christianity became associated with the newly-revealed macrocosm and its modernisations, Africans listened to the missionaries more readily. They joined African branches of European churches. Later still, having become dissatisfied, some Christian converts seceded from these churches in order to found their own 'African' churches. About 1920, the 'African' church movement was superseded by the Aladura movement, apparently a more radically Africanised form of Christianity.[51] Or, to put it another way, the original cosmology — that theoretical system for the explanation, prediction and control of space-time events — reasserted Africanity and reshaped the importation which had influenced it. (One remembers also how Dumézil suggested that the *structure* of the Indo-European 'ideology' persisted, though its forms of expression might change.)

I've already been presumptuous in dealing so summarily with Horton's ideas. I may have misrepresented them, though not wilfully. African specialists have also commented on them, one of whom will be mentioned presently. I add now just a few remarks. First, Horton observed in 1971

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[51] For the details, see *ibid.*, pp. 85-93.

that it was already too late to study traditional Yoruba religion in action. Much of it was probably destroyed during the plague years of 1919-21 and 1924-26, which were also years of growth for the Aladura movement.[52] Then, I don't quite understand how the Yoruba concept of Olorun as supreme being interacted with the new supreme being of Christianity or of Islam. Did an elaboration of the cult of Olorun actually take place? Or did a partly Christian concept of the supreme being come to fill Olorun's 'slot' in Yoruba cosmology, leaving their system, *as* a system, not much altered? Someone will know the answers to such questions, but I don't. A trouble with 'thought-experiments' may be that if you include too many variables in them, they don't work; and Horton, having discussed at some length the concept of 'communion', says practically nothing about it with reference to Olorun. It's not too hard to see the argument about how Yoruba 'rational' ideas about the cosmos may have changed, but by what mechanism did they transfer their feelings of 'communion' from the old lesser spirits to their altered concept of the supreme being? In any case, Horton's thought-experiment looks like a sort of inverted form of a methodological problem that Max Weber had raised: would the European capitalist system have taken the form which historically it did take if, in the religious sphere, there had been no development of the Protestant Ethic? Horton's thought-experiment seems to ask, would Nigerian religion have moved from polytheism towards monolatry under the impact of world capitalism if, in the religious sphere, no monolatric model had been provided by Christianity and Islam? Horton's thought-experiment suggests that the answer to the latter question would be yes; but as Bendix remarks, the answers to such questions about causal analysis of religious change remain 'proximate'.[53]

In Horton's work on conversion as I've been outlining it, I don't on the face of it see immediate solutions to my problems about what happened when Celtic paganism encountered Christianity. First and most obviously, if it was fifty years too late in 1971 to observe the daily realities of Yoruba religion, it's too late by twenty or thirty times that much to know the daily realities of religious life in Ireland in the fifth or sixth centuries. As for 'rationality', if we take Irish paganism as a branch of 'archaic' Indo-European religious philosophy, and if we also accept Dumézil's view of its underlying theoretical system, then that paganism can be called 'rational'. Philosophically, the elaborated three functions of sovereignty, force and productivity were perhaps adequate to Bronze Age human experience. In

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52 *Ibid.*, pp. 87 and 99.

53 *Op. cit.*, pp. 83-4 and n. 2.

practical matters, the Celtic learned class offered to explain and predict space-time events by divination and mantic utterance; and by means of sacrifices to gods they attempted to control or influence those events.[54] To Irish Celts, however, encyclopaedic works such as the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville, fixed as they were in writing, must have seemed revelations of a world of knowledge not only wider in scope, but also (after their fashion) more rigorously intellectualised than anything they had themselves; at least they synchronised their own historical traditions with Christian world chronology. More importantly, the Christian cosmology, accessible in Genesis and in hexaemeral commentaries, must have looked quite different from the archaically Indo-European. Once it had been absorbed, the sacred history of the Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation would mark the great difference between what Bellah calls 'archaic' and 'historic' kinds of religious vision.

Like pre-colonial Africa 'archaic' Ireland was no doubt a world of microcosms, being divided first into its 'five fifths' and then into *túatha* or tribal units; yet also like pre-colonial Africa, Ireland was not entirely sundered from the greater European macrocosm. The British Isles had long had a place in international maritime trade, and for two or three centuries before St Patrick's time the Irish were in indirect contact with the Roman world empire through its British province, where Christianity was of course known.[55] All the same, any Roman impact on Ireland cannot have been anything like the impact of industrial Europe on Nigeria; and if that Roman impact were a 'cause' of the Irish conversion in anything like the sense of modernisation being a 'cause' of the revision of the two-tiered Nigerian cosmology, then the dynamism inherent in that cause was strikingly less powerful. I can't see, either, how socio-political causation of any kind can account for the *quality* of some of the Irish responses to Christianity — especially that passionate commitment to ascetic monasticism which they seem to have made their own. And lastly, thinking of the Yoruba lesser spirits and high creator-god and of their relativity to one another, I can only say that as far as I know the western Indo-Europeans did not clearly recognise a supreme being who had created the

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[54] Dumézil said in the 1983 *Nouvel Observateur* interview that he would have found the Indo-European ideology a prison; he would not have wished for a society that had *Männerbünde* and druids. Three or four thousand years earlier, and in the absence of alternatives, *Männerbünde* and druids may have served their purposes well enough.

[55] See, for example, E. G. Bowen, *Britain and the Western Seaways*, London, 1972; Tacitus, *Agricola*, ed. Ogilvie and Richmond, ch. 24, and pp. 38-9 and 235-8; Harold Mytum, *The Origins of Early Christian Ireland*, London and New York, 1992, esp. ch. 3, 'The belief system'. For excursions of the Irish abroad, see *ibid.*, pp. 21-43.

cosmos and continued to rule it. In the Roman, Scandinavian and Celtic mythologies (so far as I understand them), the sovereign gods of Dumézil's first function come into being a generation or two after a creation which they had not effected.[56] And although, according to Dumézil, the Indo-Europeans had a concept of cosmic sovereignty, sovereignty was but one component in a tripartite ideology; the sovereignty needed the other functions of force and fecundity to complement it, just as they needed the sovereignty, and each other. In short, Yoruba and Indo-European cosmologies (so far as I understand them) do not seem comparable, and it's difficult to see how Horton's thought-experiment could successfully be replicated with the Celtic materials.

I must say, though, that some of Horton's passing remarks may be pertinent in the Irish context. He observes how 'philosophers' of the old religion may become leaders in the new;[57] and if the analogy held, it might explain how some of the old Celtic learned class successfully accommodated themselves to Christianity. Muirchú's imaginative story about Patrick's first celebration of Easter in Ireland, for example, tells how the benighted pagan druids tried to destroy the saint; but two 'poets', one old and the other young, were among the first Irish to accept him and the faith he preached. The younger of them, Fiacc, later became a venerated bishop.[58] Horton also reminds us of how change in religion does not necessarily entail the radical alteration of social structures.[59] In the age of saints, for example, Irish monasteries were sometimes founded and ruled by members of the aristocratic and hegemonic families; after the founder's death, members of the same kin would continue to rule them: St Columba and his monstery of Iona provide a well-known example.[60] Some Irish monasteries were furthermore established on lands given by a king to an individual and his successors, so that in a legal sense the monasteries were in private hands; and this institution of 'co-arbship' was consonant with Celtic custom.[61]

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56 See Bruce Lincoln, *Myth, Cosmos, and Society: Indo-European Themes of Creation*, Cambridge, Mass., 1986.

57 'African Conversion', p. 103.

58 Muirchú's Latin *Life* of St Patrick, chs 18-20, trans. de Paor, *op. cit.*, pp. 185-6.

59 'African Conversion', p. 92.

60 See A. O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson (eds), *Adomnan's Life of Columba*, London and Edinburgh, 1961, esp. pp. xxiv, 66-7, and 90-2. Columba was of the Uí Néill; his biographer Adomnan, ninth abbot of Iona, descended from Columba's grandfather.

61 Chadwick, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-4.

Horton described his general approach to religious change as 'intellectualist', implying that the important task with regard to religious change or conversion is to seek causal explanations for it. He did not assert that the spiritual world had no reality, but he did want to find 'this-worldly' causal explanations for changes in belief concerning it; he believed he had identified the causation at work in West African conversion. He was impatient with those whom he called the 'Devout Opposition', or the 'Comparative Religionists'. They were mystifiers and tautologists.[62] I find one among the 'Devout Opposition', however, who in a graceful response to Horton seems to suggest a more plausible model for an answer to my question about the conversion of the Irish than Horton himself. This is Humphrey Fisher, an Africanist with Islamic interests.[63] I take only one aspect of Fisher's article, which sketches the way Islam has won converts in West Africa through a gradual and cumulative process; some aspects of the process seem to be quite well documented from centuries before the industrial age. Horton had labelled Fisher's arguments for cumulative conversion as a 'juggernaut' theory, deriding the idea that anything was 'inexorable' about the advance of monolatric beliefs in West Africa. Fisher, I understand, implied that religious belief might be not a dependent variable in cultural change — that is, a variable dependent on socio-economic conditions — but an independent variable, a factor *sui generis*. In that respect, there may be a compatibility between Fisher and Bellah to be explored.

I now paraphrase some of Fisher's argument; and because I think that it might have an analogical application to the 'Irish question', I try (with all respect to Fisher) to substitute a few early medieval European illustrations for more modern West African ones, and Christianity for Islam: the justification for that being that both Islam and Christianity are 'historic' religions encountering 'archaic' ones. This is of course argument by analogy, but if there is insufficient coherent documentation from the fifth

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62 'African Conversion', pp. 93-4. See also Horton, 'On the Rationality of Conversion', Part II, *Africa*, 45, 1975, pp. 373-99, esp. pp. 394-7. Robert Bellah, with his evolutionary concept of 'historic' religions as religions of dualistic and transcendental vision, would be a 'Comparative Religionist'. For some professional critiques of Horton, see Hefner, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-5.

63 Humphrey J. Fisher, 'The Juggernaut's Apology: Conversion to Islam in Black Africa', *Africa*, 55, 1985, pp. 153-73. Fisher is replying in particular to Part II of Horton's 'Rationality of Conversion'. I find it hard to disagree with Fisher's conclusion, pp. 169-70. The discussion to follow focusses on his pp. 155-9.

century, either for Irish paganism or for Christianity, I don't see how one can approach the Irish conversion at all except by analogies.

To follow Fisher, then, religious change in older times begins in the microcosm. Before the Palladian and Patrician missions, there will be a few Christians in an Irish pagan community, perhaps only two or three of them. Who might they be? A slave or two captured, like the youthful Patrick, in Roman Britain; an adventurer returned from Britain, having seen Christianity there, perhaps a man with important kinship connections. People like that, perhaps not even officially baptised. This phase will correspond to Fisher's period of 'quarantine': Christians exist inside the microcosm of the community, but are separate from it. Now suppose this small group of Christians increases a little in numbers, and someone ordained appears among them. If his presence is tolerated, he will be conspicuous by his dress, his tonsure, his prayers, diet, and perhaps by austerities or other customs. To the hostile druids in Muirchú's legend, Patrick was 'adze-head with his curve-headed stick' because of his distinctive tonsure and crosier; tradition also preserved some of the saint's characteristic dicta, such as *Deo gratias* ('Thanks be to God').[64] The bearing of such a man is perhaps an outward sign of his transcendental vision. At any rate, this man in orders has a few Christians to whom he ministers; they develop a little 'reference group'.[65] They are still isolated among the pagans, each 'quarantined' from the other.

Then Fisher's phase of 'mixing' may begin. The pagan microcosm will have its troubles. Children fall sick, adults have bad dreams. Traditional wise men and wise women can be consulted, but some individuals may come to the Christian cleric for help. Perhaps he can do nothing for them, but sometimes he will have a success. The success will be remembered, and perhaps recorded. Such a turning of a pagan to Christianity for the relief of ills can be found as early as Luke 7:2-10. In ch. XVII of the *Life* of St Martin of Tours by Sulpicius Severus, perhaps a contemporary of St Patrick, we hear how the pagan Tetradius successfully applied to the saint for the healing of a demoniac. The demoniac was duly healed, and Tetradius was baptised.[66] In the *Dialogues* of Sulpicius (II.iv), a pagan woman whose child has died cries to St Martin, '"We know that you are a friend of God; give me back my son, my only son!"' The saint restores the child to life. 'Then indeed a shout went up to heaven from the whole

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64 de Paor, *op. cit.*, pp. 180 and 202.

65 Hefner, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-8.

66 Ed. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina*, vol. XX, Paris, 1845, cols 169-70; trans. F. R. Hoare, *The Western Fathers*, New York, 1965, pp. 30-31.

multitude as they acknowledged Christ to be God.'[67] Or an armed conflict threatens the microcosm. The local military will take any spiritual help they can get: if this God of the Christians has power, let him be invoked. A victory will be remembered. Constantius of Lyons (perhaps St Patrick's contemporary) wrote a *Life* of St Germanus; in it he relates how Germanus was sent to Britain to combat the Pelagian heresy, which he successfully did. Then, when Saxons and Picts made joint war on the Britons, Germanus was appointed to command the defending army. Drawing up his men, he ordered them to shout 'Alleluia!' in unison when the signal was given. They did so. The savage enemy fled. Later, St Germanus single-handedly saved Armorica from the ravages of the Alans under their idolatrous king, Goar.[68] Again, in the seventh-century *Life* of St Brigid by Cogitosus, a number of rather disconnected and seemingly trivial miracles are recorded. Brigit miraculously provides honey, salt and milk when they are needed; she saves a harvest from rain; she recovers lost or stolen animals. These miracles may not be as trivial as they look; they may record the low-intensity conspicuousness in a rural community of a remarkable woman.[69]

Such things might happen by chance. What would tend to make them cohere and accumulate would be not only the focussing and perhaps charismatic personality of the cleric or missionary and his way of life, but also the regular religious services of his adherents, and the unchanging reference-point of written scriptures. Given time and favourable circumstances, those who felt attraction to the new faith would formally attach themselves to it, though still retaining many of the old pagan practices: they would be of what Fisher calls 'mixed' faith. Others would move to total commitment. General conversion would not proceed with automatic inevitability. Backslidings would occur. As Weber pointed out, some status-groups are stubbornly reluctant to abandon their old view of themselves: military aristocrats, for example, have little natural affinity with an otherworldly God who makes systematic ethical demands,[70] and that may have something to do with heroic archaisms in the *Táin Bó*

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67 Ed. Migne, vol. XX, col. 204; trans. Hoare, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

68 Trans. *ibid.*, pp. 295-302 and 308-9. The Latin text of the *Life* of St Germanus is edited by Wilhelm Levison, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum*, vol. VII, Hannover and Leipzig, 1920, pp. 247-83. For general comment on this *Life*, see Nora K. Chadwick, *Poetry and Letters in Early Christian Gaul*, Cambridge, 1955, pp. 250-66.

69 Trans. de Paor, *op. cit.*, pp. 209-11, 213, 219, etc. It has been remarked that St Brigid and other Irish Christian women may have 'played a vital part in evangelising Ireland, for a woman may penetrate where a man cannot': Daphne D. C. Pochin Mould, *The Irish Saints*, Dublin and London, 1964, p. 43; see also de Paor, pp. 46-50.

70 Bendix, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-7.

Cúalnge. Eventually, perhaps after centuries according to Fisher's West African model, reforms are made and the beliefs and practices of the faith are all rendered completely orthodox. In West Africa, this phase of reform evidently followed a long, tortuous and violent path,[71] and I don't see any close parallel to it in Ireland. One might mention, though, how in the seventh century the Irish monks had to accept Roman custom with respect to the tonsure and the calculation of Easter; other reforms were made in the twelfth century. And as elsewhere in Europe, ecclesiastical authorities repeatedly tried to eliminate all pagan practices, prescribing penalties for those who took part in them.[72]

It may seem grotesque even to suggest a parallel between events in the not-too-distant past in West Africa and events in Ireland fifteen hundred years ago. Yet Fisher's scenario of conversion is based on kinds of observations which can still be made, and it seems to me, *mutatis mutandis*, inherently plausible. Where datá are insufficient or incoherent, then try analogy or give up wondering how conversion went in Ireland. In a wider perspective, we may agree with Horton that conversion of a community or nation is not only a matter of faith, but also a matter of readjusting ideas of the cosmos. On the other hand, we may think that his Nigerian example cannot well be back-projected to the Europe of fifteen hundred years ago, and his particular example may have distorted his general 'intellectualist' theory. With Bellah, we may think that monolatrous, 'historic' or 'world' religions (of which Christianity is one) really do mark a recognisable stage in the religious evolution of humanity, and that they open to their adherents insights into a world not consisting entirely of space-time events to be explained, predicted and controlled. We may agree with Fisher that religion has 'a *sui generis* initiative and activity of its own',[73] and that its development cannot be reductively ascribed to social and political events. To take the matter any further, you'd need to revise the present argument, include more proven historical facts in it, perhaps invent another metalanguage. If there is an answer to the 'Irish question' with which I began, the beginnings of it may lie in the writings of those whom I've mentioned here, together with their predecessors, followers, rivals, critics, opponents.

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71 Horton, 'On the Rationality', pp. 381-7.

72 For example, in the 'First Synod of St Patrick', para. 14, a Christian who has sworn before a druid 'as pagans do' must perform a year's penance. In the Old-Irish 'Table of Commutations', para. 5, 'druidism' and 'satirizing' were among the serious crimes for which no remission of penance was allowed. See Ludwig Bieler (ed. and trans.), *The Irish Penitentials*, Dublin, 1963, pp. 56-7 and 278-9, etc.

73 Fisher, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

New Evidence for the History of Indigenous Aramaic Christianity in Southern Jordan

W. J. Jobling *

Pre-Islamic Southern Jordan has for some time been a much neglected Aramaic-speaking domain in the history of the spread of the early Christian movement as it emerged from its Judaic origins. This is in spite of the large Byzantine site of Khirbet Humayma at the northern end of the Hisma and the sites in and around the Wadi Ramm, Petra and the copper-rich Wadi Araba. Now recent excavations of a large tripartite basilica which was discovered at Petra in 1990 and the discovery in its environs of ancient scrolls in December, 1993, have revived interest in the episcopal sees of *Palestina Tertia,* or Third Palestine, and the history of their origins and development.[1]

Prior to this new evidence it was widely held that after the Roman annexation of Petra in 106 A.D. there was a gradual decline in the area generally and a move of socio-economic interests to Bosra which is situated to just south of the Hauran in southern Syria. A Greek inscription dated to 446 A.D. in the Urn Tomb at Petra indicated that this Nabataean structure had been converted into a church, and crosses engraved on the walls of the Deir which looks west across the Wadi Araba from just below Aaron's Tomb were thought to denote the consecration of the lofty Deir for Christian worship. Backtracking through the early Patristic sources it can be seen that Petra became the seat of a bishopric in the fourth century and was later elevated to that of a metropolitan see. Thus just twenty years ago Iain Browning reflected the view that the period of the Christian occupation of Petra was coincident with the demise of the Rose Red City half as old as time:

> One gets the feeling that the authorities had at last given up the unequal struggle to pretend that their city mattered at all in the councils and history of the world. The vitality of the people was being sapped by squalor and the continual bickering between the Christian churches did not help matters. Without even vain hope, a sort of torpor settled across

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1 *La Jordanie Byzantine*, Supplement to *Le Monde de la Bible*, [collected articles by] Michele Piccirillo, J.-B. Humbert, A. Desmeuraux, Leonardo Ratti, Eugenio Alliate, Pierre Medebielle, Paris, 1984.

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

> Petra; life became an existence valued for its own precarious self and not for any prospect of achievement. Control by the central authority became looser and looser, to such an extent that Petra virtually turned to being independent again.[2]

Browning further concluded that

> It is worth considering the possibility that the whole of the true Nabataean population moved out long before the final desertion leaving behind only the polyglot, alien population which is an inevitable parasite of any wealthy trading nation with international ramifications and connections. The Nabataeans to a man were traders of one sort or another so it would be natural for them to move to where business could be found. Jerash and Palmyra have already been mentioned as possible destinations and there can be little doubt that expatriate Nabataean merchants were seen there.[3]

Twenty years later the accumulation of the results of surveys and excavations in southern Jordan, the study of new mosaics, numismatics, inscriptions, architecture and most importantly the refinement of the study of Nabataean ceramics have begun to draw a new picture of the developments in the indigenous semitic culture which took place in the Roman and Byzantine periods.[4]

Of particular interest with regard to native cultural traditions is the newly developed typology and chronology of the Byzantine churches of the Negev by Professor Avraham Negev. In my view this also applies to the new basilica at Petra and the church buildings at Humayma, and traces in a preliminary way an architectural history which links these sites east and west of the Wadi Araba and illustrates important links with the Nabataeans and a continuing indigenous semitic tradition.[5] Basic to my study is the conviction that from the marginal and desert areas of the Hisma, through Petra and the Wadi Araba and across the Negev to the southern Mediterranean ports stretch the remains of an Aramaic and North Arabian

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2 Iain Browning, *Petra*, London, 1974, p. 58.

3 *Loc. cit.*

4 Robert Wilken, 'Byzantine Palestine: A Christian Holy Land', *Biblical Archaeologist*, 51 (4), 1988, pp. 214-217; Yoram Tsafrir, 'Ancient Churches in the Holy Land', *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 19(5), 1993, pp. 26-39; Yoram Tsafrir, *Ancient Churches Revealed*, Jerusalem, 1993, pp. 260-302.

5 A. Negev, 'The Cathedral of Elusa and the New Typology and Chronology of the Byzantine Churches in the Negev', *Liber Annuus*, 39, 1989, pp. 129-142, plates 15-20, and works by Tsafrir cited in the previous note.

culture which can also be linked with the Sinai. It is contended that neither Rome nor Constantinople eclipsed the native inhabitants of these regions. The new archaeological and papyrological data from Petra are beginning to shed new light on this culture and its accommodation of the intrusions from Rome and Constantinople.

During this century particularly academic controversies have raged over whether Jesus and his earliest disciples spoke Hebrew or Aramaic or both! Thus a major preoccupation of twentieth-century scholars has been the attempt to recreate an Aramaic or Hebrew *Vorlage* by following up the apparent semitisms preserved in the Greek New Testament.[6] To this can also be added the record of Saint Paul's retreat in Arabia after his conversion and before his return to Jerusalem (Galatians 1:17-18).[7] This was at a time when the Nabataean realm was at its zenith, towards the end of the long reign of Aretas IV (9 B.C.–39A.D.), and when these regions east of the Jordan from almost Damascus to the Red Sea were generally designated *Arabia Nabataea* and the Decapolis in current cartographic terminology.[8] Less attention has been given to the Apostle's attestation that it was for about three years that his sojourn continued in these frontier regions of the Roman Empire which interfaced with the east semitic world and Parthia, regions which had their own regional socio-economic importance and cultural character. Recent important developments in Palmyrene- and Nabataean-Aramaic speaking cultures east of the Jordan in the Herodian and Late Roman periods provide a range of new archaeological and epigraphic evidence. This provides a picture of what I would term an apron of Aramaic culture which embraced the world of Syria, Palestine and the Decapolis in which it may now be perceived that Christianity originated, developed and spread. It must be stated immediately that this is not to overlook the depth of the intrusive

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6 Mathew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*, Oxford, 1967; Michael Sokoloff, *Aramaeans, Aramaic and the Aramaic Literary Tradition*, Ramat-Gan, Israel, 1983; *The New Covenant Commonly Called The New Testament: Peshitta Aramaic Text With a Hebrew Translation*, ed. The Aramaic Scriptures Research Society in Israel, The Bible Society, Jerusalem, 1986; Robert Lindsey, *The Jesus Sources: Understanding the Gospels*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1990; cf. D. Bivin, 'Jerusalem Synoptic Commentary Preview', *Jerusalem Perspective*, 38 and 39, 1993, pp. 3-28; R. W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, New York, 1993, pp. 8-9; Alan D. Crown, 'The Parting of the Ways', *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies*, 7(2), 1993, pp. 62-81.

7 Cf. Justin Taylor, 'The Ethnarch of King Aretas at Damascus. A Note on 2 Corinthians 11:32-33', *Revue Biblique*, 99.4, 1991.

8 Cf. G. W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, Harvard, 1983; A. H. M. Jones, *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*, 1971.

Hellenistic culture but rather to see it as in a finely and regionally differentiated symbiotic relationship with the indigenous Aramaic culture. The geography of the Aramaic cultural apron regardless of geopolitical boundaries provided a social medium through which Christianity spread. As this study will emphasise, preliminary analysis of some of the new archaeological and epigraphic material from southern Jordan illustrates an important aspect of this process and has important implications for the Byzantine period and the rise of Islam. After all it was from Nabataean-Aramaic script that later classical Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, was developed.

The discovery by the American anthropologist and archaeologist, the late Dr Ken Russell, of a Byzantine Church in Petra in 1990 has led to a significant breakthrough in our understanding of the Byzantine period in Petra, and in my view has added exciting new evidence with implications for the cultural continuity of the Nabataeans with this later period. (I should note that Professor John Bartlett of Trinity College, Dublin, has already argued cogently for a continuity between the Iron Age Edomites and the later Nabataeans.)

Excavations of Dr Russell's site by the American Schools of Oriental Research and the Jordanian Ministry of Tourism and the Department of Antiquities, who have been funded by the United States Agency for International Development, have revealed a large tripartite basilica, which measures ca 26 m. (east-west) by 15 m. (north-south), with three apses to the east and three entrances to the west.[9] As has been so far reported,

> the preserved decorations of the church attest to its original magnificence. Both of the side aisles have mosaic floors of patterns stylistically dated to the early sixth century A.D. In the northern aisle, three parallel rows of roundels depict native and exotic animals and a variety of vessels and containers. The eastern part of the southern aisle is similar, while the remaining area of that aisle presents a variety of different motifs. The central panels contain anthropomorphic personifications of the Seasons, Ocean, Earth and Wisdom. These are flanked by birds, animals and fish.[10]

Much of this mosaic art is typical of the decorations preserved at Mount Nebo and at Madaba and Umm er-Rasses where the semitic names of the mosaicists would suggest a well developed local school. In this regard it is

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9 Zbigniew T. Fiema, 'The Petra Project', *ACOR Newsletter*, 5(1), 1993, p. 1.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

important to note the smaller but no less significant site of Deir 'Ain 'Abata which is situated close to the Lisan which juts out into the Dead Sea. This site has been identified as the Church of Saint Lot which is mentioned on the sixth-century Madaba map mosaic. The excavator of this site, Dr Konstantinos Politis, has reported an example of the Nabataean horned capital together with fifth-century A.D. Nabataean pottery.[11] He also notes that the extensive mosaic, which is dated by an inscription to May, 691 A.D., has branches with red leaves depicted and that these are reminiscent of the painted decorations found on the earlier Nabataean pottery in Petra.

Further to the south of Petra, providing something like the cathedral town and CBD of the 'top end' of the Hisma, the site of Khirbet Humayma furnishes similar evidence. Identified with Roman Avara, this site provides important evidence for the history of the occupation of this marginal desert area from the Nabataean through to the Byzantine and early Abbasid periods.[12] The large tri-apsidal church, the aqueduct and the hydrotechnology of this site in the Byzantine period attest a high demography and suggest a relationship (which is also confirmed by the surface pottery sherds of the subsequent ten years of the 'Aqaba-Ma'an survey) with a network of smaller sites throughout the area.[13] G. W. Bowersock has noted that the modern toponym of Humayma situated about 60 km. north of Aqaba (Roman Aila) preserves a corrupted form of the Roman name Avara.[14] David Graf has noted that recent investigation has only enhanced the importance of Humayma for the study of Nabataean and Roman settlements in the region and added the important summary comment that

> It appears as *Aura* in the geography of Ptolemy (V.16.4) and as *Hauarra* on the Tabula Peutingeriana. Since the latter lists it as 20 Roman miles south of Zadagatta (modern Sadaqa) and 24 miles north of Praesidio (modern Khirbet al-Khalda), the precise distances to Humayma, its equation with *Auara* seems assured. According to the Notitia Dignitatum, the *equites sagittarii indiginae* served at Hauanae/Hauare under the Dux Palaestina (Or. XXXIV.25). Its importance in the sixth

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11 Konstantinos Politis, 'Deir 'Ain 'Abata Basilica', *Minerva*, 3(4), 1992, pp. 6-9; K. D. Politis, "Excavations at the Monastery of Agios Lot at Deir 'Ain 'Abata", in 'Ricerca Storico-Archeologica in Giordania', *Liber Annuus*, 40, 1990, pp. 475-476.

12 D. Homes-Fredericq and J. B. Hennessy (eds), *Archaeology of Jordan*, II1. Field Reports Surveys & Sites A-K, Leuven, 1989, pp. 270-274.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 16-24.

14 Bowersock, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

century is indicated by the Beersheba Edict's assessment of Auron with the second highest amount in annual taxes of any of the Transjordanian towns.[15]

This supports the view that 'the appearance of Avara in these late documents, along with the presence of Byzantine ceramics on the site, indicates that the town remained an important and prosperous military post into the Byzantine period, although its precise role in the overall defence of the region remains to be determined'.[16] However like many other Roman and Byzantine sites in southern Jordan, Humayma has archaeological evidence of extensive Nabataean occupation. Nabataean shaft graves to the west and north-west of the site, pottery sherds, niches and inscriptions in both Nabataean and North Arabian-Thamudic attest a Nabataean occupation prior to (and in my view during) the Roman and Byzantine period. This may concur with the legend about the foundation of Avara which is preserved in the fourth-century A.D. fragment of Uranius' *Arabica*:

> Auara, a city of Arabia, named after a prophecy given to Obodas, by his son Aretas. Aretas set out to seek the fulfilment of the prophecy, the prophecy being to look for a place named Auara, this meaning 'white' in the Arabian and Syrian languages. And to Aretas, as he was lying in wait in advance, there appeared the image of a man dressed in white proceeding on a white dromedary. When the image of the man disappeared, a round hill appeared, holding firm above the ground, and on this spot he built the city.[17]

According to the reconstructed Nabataean King List the Obodas and his son Aretas mentioned in the *Arabica* should be Obodas III (30-9 B.C.) and Aretas IV (9-40 A.D.).[18] The former is thought to have been deified on his death and buried in Eboda in the Negev west of the Wadi Araba while the latter who was called 'Philopatris' (which was a rendering of his Nabataean numismatic superscription 'the King of the Nabatu, who loves his people') went on to bring the Nabataean kingdom to its zenith. From his survey in 1980 David Graf has now provided evidence of a Nabataean inscription

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15 David F. Graf, 'The God of Humayma', in *Intertestamental Essays in Honour of Josef Tadeusz Milik*, ed. Zdzislaw Jan Kapera, Krakow, 1992, p. 67.

16 Homes-Fredericq and Hennessy (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 272.

17 No. 675 in F. Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker*, 3C1, Leiden, 1958, p. 340; cf. Graf, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

18 Nelson Glueck, *Deities and Dolphins*, London, 1966, pp. 541-542.

which he cogently argues supports the tradition in Uranius' *Arabica*.[19] This newly published Nabataean inscription reads:

slm. br. tlm. 'bd. 'l.hwr
Peace, BR-TLM, servant of 'Al-HWR.

Graf suggests that the name 'Al-HWR like the Greek name *Auara* or *Hauarra* is derived from the Arabic term *hawar* 'white', 'to whiten, make white',[20] and that this is descriptive of the cretaceous white rock of the area. Thus he argues that 'the ancient toponym is probably preserved in the modern name Humayma, a corruption of the original name Auara'.[21] I would suggest that this too brings into focus the strength of the semitic cultural stratum and in this particular case highlights the sociolinguistic mechanics of cultural continuity in the face of intrusive and socially superior Byzantine culture.

However to return to the newly excavated basilica at Petra, it is now reported that early in December, 1993, ancient scrolls have been found in the ruins of the basilica. Forty scrolls have been found and it is anticipated that the number may be increased to 50.[22] Preliminary study of these scrolls has revealed that they are written in two scripts. The first of these scripts has been identified as a cursive Greek of the documentary style typical of the fifth-sixth century A.D., while the second script is thought to be some form of Aramaic.[23] It is so far reported that 'The arrangement of the texts on the scrolls indicates that they are more likely personal writings such as sermons, letters or contracts, rather than literary book rolls, e.g. a "standardised" or "published" text like a Bible or a Greek tragedy'.[24] Fragments of the Greek scrolls so far studied refer to the Patriarch of Antioch, Flavianus, who was banished by the Emperor Anastasius to Petra after the Synod of Sidon in 512 A.D. The Council, or Synod, of Sidon was concerned in 512 A.D. with the Theopaschite Controversy which was a christological problem about the theology of the suffering of Christ and, by definition, the theology of the suffering of God. Following the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451 many of the eastern, or Levantine, bishops were declared Monophysites because they had adopted the formula 'God has been crucified', and incorporated this into the liturgy as an addition to the

19 Graf, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
20 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
21 *Ibid.*, p. 74.
22 P. V. Vivekand, *Jordan Times*, 12 January, 1994, p. 10.
23 *ACOR, Friends of Archaeology Newsletter*, February, 1994, p. 5.
24 *Loc. cit.*

Trisagion with the words, 'Holy God! Holy Almighty! Holy Immortal! *who has been crucified for us!*'[25] The Emperor Anastasius favoured the Monophysite doctrine and directed the Patriarch Flavianus (II), who presided over the Council of Sidon and had made concessions to Monophysite doctrines, to anathematise the Chalcedonians. However, favouring a moderate Chalcedonian orthodoxy Flavianus was sent into exile at Petra in 512 A.D. Study of the Synod of Sidon and the Theopaschite controversy suggests that Flavianus was sent into exile amongst pro-Monophysites. It looks as though he may not have been amongst friends. It is to be hoped that swift publication of the Petra Scrolls will shed more light on these theologically troubled times.

However it is not to be overlooked that when Justin I became emperor in 518 A.D. many Monophysite bishops were deposed and fled to Alexandria where Monophysitism was too strong to be deposed.[26] Thus a variety of Monophysite sects developed, their divisions turning chiefly on the degree in which the humanity of Christ differed from ordinary human nature. Many of these sects which expressed their piety through ascetic practices were to be found along the trade routes which passed through southern Jordan into Arabia and the Sinai and of course penetrated the Eastern Frontier. In my view in all probability they did not replace the officially appointed ecclesiastical hierarchy which administered the main sites and cities of the Holy Land. Rather I would suggest that once again a symbiosis developed in which the heterodox found themselves able to operate in less populated areas. From the point of view of Constantinopolitan orthodoxy they were driven onto the boundaries of the *OIKUMENE* and were politically defused.

While we await further elucidation of the Aramaic scrolls from Petra it is pertinent to remember that Petra already has an important link with the Dead Sea Scroll corpus through 4Q235 and 4Q343.[27] Of these fragments from Cave Four which are written in the Nabataean-Aramaic script, Professor J. T. Milik has made a preliminary identification of the two fragments of 4Q235 as from the Biblical Book of Kings.[28] 4Q343 on the other hand is reported by Magen Broshi and Ada Yardeni to be a fragment

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25 Philip Smith, *The History of the Christian Church*, Part I, London, 1895, p. 362; cf. John Maiendorf, *Imperial Unity and the Christian Divisions*, 1989; Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*, Oxford, 1993, pp. 262-273.

26 Smith, *op. cit.* p. 368.

27 R. Eisenman and James M. Robinson, *Facsimile Edition of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Washington, 1991, vol. II, plate 1396: PM 43.402; plate 639: PM 42.078.

28 E. Tov, 'The Unpublished Qumran Texts from Caves 4 and 11', *Biblical Archaeologist*, 55(2), 1992, p. 97; cf. 4Q235.

of a Nabataean letter. There are also other Nabataean texts from the nearby Nahal Se'elim which are soon to be published by Professor Jonas Greenfield. More substantial Nabataean-Aramaic documents from the Nahal Hever, and dated to the period of Jewish messianism and national insurgence against Rome under Bar Kokhba, attest substantial land holdings of the widow Babatha in areas on the old Moabite Plateau near the head of the Lisan. Written in Aramaic, Nabataean and Greek and witnessed in Reqem (which is the Nabataean and Mishnaic name for Petra), these legal documents attest the currency of Nabataean-Aramaic as a legal language, the penetration of the intrusive Greek language and the legal status of Petra as a place where such documents could be processed.[29] It is arguable that they attest the currency of the Aramaic culture in both the Dead Sea Basin and east of the Jordan in spite of the local political borders and intrusive administration of the Roman Empire. Recent analysis of the Babatha archive suggests that there was a close currency amongst the indigenous population in spite of the imposed Roman administrative patterns; as Martin Goodman now puts it,

> far from feeling oppressed by an internal security force, people in the local group of which Babatha was a member enjoyed extracting all possible benefits from the density of the Roman presence in their country. In theory, in eastern as in northern provinces the wealth of soldiers paid regularly by the state could be a blessing for the natives as well as a curse, and provide a boost to the local economy.[30]

Goodman further concludes that

> The Archives leave a strong impression that the same families had owned and traded in the lucrative estates around the Dead Sea for generations, and that they intended to go on doing so indefinitely, with the help rather than the hindrance of Rome; support for the property rights of rich provincials was of course not a novel aspect of Roman administration. The date-palm grove bought by Babatha's father in A.D. 99 under Nabataean jurisdiction was still owned by her in

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[29] Y. Yadin, 'The Nabataean Kingdom, Provincia Arabia, Petra and En-Geddi in the Documents from Nahal Hever', *Ex Oriente Lux*, Leiden, 1963, pp. 227-241; N. Lewis, Y. Yadin and Jonas C. Greenfield, *Documents from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of the Letters*, Jerusalem, 1989. Cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Daniel J. Harrington, *A Manual of Palestinian Aramaic Texts*, Rome, 1979, pp. 162-168.

[30] Martin Goodman, 'Babatha's Story', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 81, 1991, p. 171.

A.D. 127. Most of the transactions recorded in the documents involved transfers of land around the extended family rather than to outsiders.[31]

The later Mishnaic references to Reqem would seem to support this view and indeed provide sound evidence for the maintenance of Jewish halachic provisions for this area.

In assessing the grounds on which the indigenous semitic population maintained and developed its cultural identity it is suggested that the regional economic potential of the vast copper resources of the Wadi Araba and the other agricultural and mineral resources of the Dead Sea Basin also need to be added to the strategic trade which passed through these areas from the Arabian Peninsula and the Red Sea. Both Humayma and Petra continued to benefit from them long after the Roman annexation of Petra. Thus in the Wadi Feinan, which is situated close to Petra and drains into the Wadi Araba, recent surveys and excavations by international teams of archaeologists and archaeometallurgists have traced extensive mining of the copper from the late Neolithic through to the Mameluke periods.[32] Known as Phaino to the church historian Eusebius who was writing in the fourth century A.D., these copper mines were renowned as places where prisoners served hard labour sentences and where Christian priests from Gaza and Egypt were martyred by being beheaded or burnt alive during the earlier persecutions.[33] However by the fifth century a Bishop Saidas of Phaino was a signatory to the Synod of Ephesus in 431 A.D. This Synod was concerned with settling the Nestorian controversy. It rejected Nestorianism and gave formal approval to the doctrine of the Theotokos.[34] Later a Bishop Kaioumas of Phaino was a signatory to the Synod of Ephesus in 449. This Synod, known also as the *Latrocinium*, or Robber Council, supported the Monophysite doctrine. Its decisions were reversed by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. The local significance of Phaino was also signalled by its bishops at the Jerusalem synods of 518 and 536 A.D. Two large Byzantine churches and a monastery and two Christian Byzantine cemeteries also attest the significance of the Wadi Feinan which was situated just to the west of Petra whence the patriarch Flavianus was banished. Thus for the moment it would seem possible to argue that his exile placed him amongst his theological opponents who by definition held the view that the Person of the Incarnate Christ was but a single, and that a

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31 *Ibid.*, p. 173.

32 Rami G. Khouri, *The Antiquities of the Jordan Rift Valley*, Amman, 1988, pp. 121-127.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 122.

34 Ehrman, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-61.

Divine, Nature. This doctrine is usually traced through the heresiarch Eutyches to Cyril of Alexandria. It is pertinent that both in trade and architecture Alexandria cast a long socio-economic and cultural shadow over the Nabataean Realm.[35] For a long time it had been one of the main Mediterranean ports to which the Nabataean trade routes made their way.[36]

In a variety of ways Constantinople produced a control of religion and culture. As Claudine Dauphin has shown with regard to the Mediterranean Basin and the Levant the spread of basilicas and mosaics are coefficients of wealth and social status concomitant with the zenith of the Christian occupation of the areas east and west of the Jordan.[37] East of the Wadi Araba the basilicas at Humayma and Petra as well as the mosaics of other sites such as Umm er-Rasses now provide additional new data for the statistics compiled by Dauphin.[38] Together with the other mosaic sites and basilicas located south of Philadelphia (which is roughly modern Amman) the basilica and scrolls of Petra make a welcome addition to the study of the religious change and conversion of this strategic area at the 'top end' of the Arabian Peninsula.

The new archaeological, epigraphic and papyrological evidence from east of the Wadi Araba has important implications for the reassessment of the religious change and conversion associated with the spread of Christianity through the early generations of missionary outreach and then through the imposed political structures which follow the conversion of Constantine. It is suggested that there was always a basic semitic cultural substratum into which entered the intrusive Hellenistic culture of the Mediterranean Basin. As other scholars have shown, this intrusive culture has a long history of penetration and symbiosis with the indigenous semitic cultures and reaches back to the period before Alexander the Great.[39] With the conversion of the Emperor a new phase of this imperial cultural intrusion began. However as the material surveyed in this study suggests the indigenous semitic element remained a strong element in the cultural mix. In my view important dimensions of this can be identified in the Nabataean architecture, art motifs and Aramaic dialects which have been identified in the local Byzantine remains of southern Jordan and the Negev.

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35 Judith Mckenzie, *The Architecture of Petra* , Oxford, 1990, pp. 62-63, *et passim.*

36 P. M. Frazer, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, Oxford, 1972, pp. 176-181, 296-303.

37 Claudine Dauphin, 'Mosaic Pavements as an Index of Prosperity and Fashion', *Levant*, 12, 1980, pp. 112-134, fig. 7.

38 Boghas Darakjian, *Mosaics of Jordan*, Amman, n. d.; Wilken, *op. cit.*, pp. 236-7.

39 D. S. Barrett, 'Ancient Hellenism and The Jews: A Study in Attitudes and Acculturation', and W. J. Jobling, 'Hellenism in North Arabia: A New Epigraphic Focus', in *Greek Colonists and Native Populations*, ed. J.-P. Descoeudres, Oxford, 1990, pp. 543-550 and 551-557, respectively.

With regard to the types of Christianity which developed east of the Jordan it is tempting to argue that a pattern is emerging which suggests that not only were the deserts to the east of the ancient King's highway the domains of pastoralists and caravaneers of geopolitical significance, they were also theological frontiers where Monophysite (and Nestorian) Christians were to be found. In this latter respect it may be possible to argue that these regions became the eastern edge of imperial penetration of Constantinopolitan and Chalcedonian unity. Indigenous Monophysitism in its struggles with intrusive Chalcedonian orthodoxy probably reflects a theological loyalty to the deep theistic motifs of semitic religious culture.[40] In all probability these were the circles in which the local legends of Syrian or Arabian Christians were generated and sustained, some of which are preserved in the so-called Apocryphal Gospels.[41] They were never extinguished and are in all probability the sources of the Christian religion with which the prophet Muhammed came into contact.[42] In my view the recovery of the Byzantine sites of southern Jordan provides a stimulus for a new look at the theological geography of these regions east and west of the Wadi Araba.

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[40] William Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites*, London, 1927, pp. 74-75, 526-531.

[41] M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford, 1924 (corrected edition, 1953); cf. Erhman, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-96, 274-283.

[42] W. J. Jobling and R. G. Tanner, 'New Evidence for Early Christianity in the North-West Hejaz', *Studia Patristica*, 25, 1991, pp. 313-317; Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, *Lectures on the History of the Eastern Church*, London, 1869, pp. 262-264.

Christians and Muslims in Syria and Upper Mesopotamia in the Early Arab Islamic Period: Cultural Change and Continuity

Ahmad Shboul *

Introductory

This is a preliminary report of research in progress on social and cultural change in early Islamic Syria. Syria is defined here as the historical region covered by modern Syria, south-west Turkey (Antioch province), Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine-Israel. Upper Mesopotamia denotes the area between the upper middle Euphrates and Tigris. The early Arab Islamic period is here understood to extend from the early seventh to the late eleventh century A.D. The present essay takes a broad perspective beyond the limited question of religious conversion. It is more concerned with processes of cultural change, continuity and acculturation. This study is mainly based on literary evidence and special attention is given to works of Syrian provenance.[1]

It is perhaps necessary to remind ourselves that, in most studies in Western languages, the history of the rise of Islam and of the Arab conquest of the eastern and southern Mediterranean has often been viewed from a eurocentric perspective.[2] This paper starts from the regional perspective of West Asia and the eastern Mediterranean, particularly that of geographical Syria itself. This is not simply due to a desire to shift the focus, but rather because historically this region of the eastern Mediterranean has played a particularly significant, in a sense even central,

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1 Most available sources for this period are in Arabic, including some written by Arabic-speaking Christians from Syria. It is planned to take due account of non-Arabic material, particularly Syriac and Greek, as well as archaeological evidence in this ongoing research.

2 For example, the Pirenne Thesis (and most of the lively debate generated by it) is only concerned with the impact of the rise of Islam on western Europe.

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

role in both the Roman-Byzantine world of Late Antiquity and in the early Islamic period. [3]

In discussing social and cultural change and continuity in Syria after the coming of Islam, a number of important factors need, therefore, to be remembered. Some of these factors are connected with the position of the Arabs in pre-Islamic Syria, the importance of Christianity among the pre-Islamic Arabs of Syria and upper Mesopotamia, and the close links between Syria and the Hijaz, the birth place of Islam. Other factors have to do with Islamic teachings and Islamic Arab attitudes as well as actual policies, in early Islamic Syria, towards Christians and Jews as 'People of the Book'.

There is no doubt that the Arab Islamic expansion in both the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean regions constitutes a significant turning-point in world history. It is important to remember that it is not only, or even mainly, through religious conversion that Islam has transformed the old world of the eastern Mediterranean. A particularly remarkable outcome of the early Arab Islamic enterprise was perhaps the readjustment of the geopolitical and cultural orientation of the Near East. Moreover, a significant, but often ignored, historical fact in this context is that in such countries as Syria, including Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine — as well as Iraq and Egypt — religious conversion to Islam has never been complete. Indeed, it was perhaps never meant to be complete. Moreover, Islam as a religious, political and cultural force in the eastern Mediterranean has, in a sense, contributed to the historical self-definition of Eastern, particularly Arabic, Syriac and Coptic, Christianity.[4]

Unlike the conversion of the peoples of western Europe to Christianity, for example, the peoples of Islamic Syria, including Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon, as well as those of Iraq and Egypt, despite undeniable social and other pressures, were not subjected to any systematic process of religious conversion to Islam whether by political authorities or religious missionaries. In fact, during the early Islamic period, before the drastic

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[3] For the former period, see in particular the insights of Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: from Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad*, London, 1971, particularly chs 15 and 16; F. E. Peters, *The Harvest of Hellenism: a History of the Near East from Alexander the Great to the Triumph of Christianity*, London, 1972.

[4] See the insights of some modern Eastern bishops in Maximos IV Sayigh (ed.), *The Eastern Churches and Catholic Unity*, Edinburgh-London, 1963, the editor was Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, of Alexandria and of Jerusalem, for the Greek Melkite Catholic Church.

episode of the European crusades, the majority of the population of these countries under Arab Islamic rule remained Christian. This becomes particularly significant when one realises the geographical proximity of Syria, as well as of Iraq and Egypt, to the Hijaz, the cradle of Islam and the centre of the first Islamic religious and political community. Moreover, Syria, Iraq and Egypt have in turn played the role of political and cultural centres of an Arab Islamic Caliphate: that of the Umayyads in Damascus, the 'Abbasids in Baghdad and the Fatimids in Cairo.

Thus while these three regions became, and continue to be, central parts of an Arab-Islamic world politically and culturally, they still maintained considerable indigenous (Eastern) Christian communities. Furthermore, these Eastern Christian communities have been, and are today, largely Arabic speaking. In the case of historical Syria, as defined above, and also upper Mesopotamia and southern Iraq, Eastern Christians were not simply arabised with time after the Islamic conquest as might be assumed. Rather, most of them have had lived as Arabs, some of them hellenised or aramised, long before the coming of Islam, in certain cases before the triumph of Christianity.

It is instructive to contrast this with two other geographical areas to the east and west of these central Islamic lands. Thus while Iran has been almost entirely converted to Islam in religious terms, it has not been linguistically or culturally arabised. On the other hand, North Africa has been largely arabised in language and culture and virtually completely converted to Islam. It is obvious that Syria has been more linguistically and culturally arabised than it has been religiously islamised.

A corollary of this must be the need to question old assumptions about the historical process of the 'spread' of Islam, or 'islamisation' as it is sometimes imprecisely described. It seems plainly inaccurate on historical evidence to assume that the Arab Islamic conquest of Syria, Iraq and Egypt, for example, and the establishment therein of the political authority of Arab Muslim caliphs led necessarily to the immediate, or even eventual, mass conversion to Islam of the populations of these regions. Thus the terms 'spread' of Islam, or 'islamisation', when applied to these countries, need to be understood more correctly, as essentially referring to historical processes of political rule, social transformation, acculturation, arabisation, rather than religious conversion. The concept of 'islamisation' need not conjure up a graphic simile of some flood submerging the lands that came

in its way, with the assumption that regions close to the centre would have received more 'inundation' than outlying areas.

Compared to other regions, Syria as defined above (and to a lesser extent southern Iraq and upper Mespotamia) would appear as unusual due to the long and considerable connections with Arabia and the Arabs in pre-Islamic times. The modern political map of the Arabian peninsula and the Middle East in general can obscure important aspects of historical and human geography. One of these aspects is the significant links between Syria, the wider Fertile Crescent, and the Arabian Peninsula as geographical-cultural area and also between the Arabs and their neighbours as people long before the Islamic period. In some sense, it could be argued that parts of Syria had been already relatively 'arabised', in terms of demography, language and culture, prior to the Islamic conquest. Thus with due recognition of the processes of hellenisation and romanisation, it can scarcely be assumed that in terms of society and culture, conditions in Syria under Roman and Byzantine rule were necessarily the same as in Asia Minor, for example.[5]

First, it is necessary to be mindful of the early and continued presence of Arab tribes and clans in Syria in pre-Islamic times, particularly in the eastern parts — between the western Lebanon range and the Euphrates, and also the east of the Jordan and southern Palestine, including the area near Gaza. In some cases, this Arab presence goes back to several centuries not only before Islam, but also before the Christian era. It is significant that the so-called 'earliest written reference to Arabs', i.e. the 9th-century B.C. Assyrian inscription, already speaks of the Arabs' presence as far north as the modern Syrian-Turkish border. Indeed a number of Arab tribes since ancient times had their areas of pasture and agricultural settlement in the Syrian and Mesopotamian steppes. Tribal Arab presence was also already established long before Islam in such parts of this region as Galilee, Mount Lebanon, Hawran, Golan, Damascus, Hims (Emesa), and the Euphrates basin. Some Arab clans were absorbed in the agricultural and urban life or were involved in regional and dynastic politics throughout the Hellenistic period.[6]

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[5] For parallels concerning Iraq, as distinct from Iran, under the Sasanians, see M. G. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, Princeton, 1984.

[6] See, in particular, Peters, *op. cit.*, and Shahîd, *Rome and the Arabs*, Washington, DC, 1984, pp. 5-15.

The earliest recorded military encounter between Arabs and Greeks in this region (4th century B.C.) refers to the Nabataean Arabs in modern-day Jordan. By the time Pompey arrived in Syria on behalf of Rome (64 B.C.), he had to deal with several influential, partly hellenised and aramised, Arab dynasties as far north as Edessa, Antioch and Emesa, as well as the Nabataean Arab kingdom between Damascus and Petra and further south.[7]

These facts would indicate that ancient Arab groups have for long considered Syria as part of their native sphere, not only in pastoral transhumance, but also in agricultural settlement, urban life, commerce and politics. Long before the Roman conquest of the Orient and down to the Arab Islamic conquest of the early seventh century A.D., Arab demographic, cultural and political presence in the Syrian region seems to have persisted. This is exemplified notably during the heyday of the Nabataeans of Petra and their extensive trade empire between the third century B.C. and the early second century A.D. It is seen again during Palmyra's brief rise to supremacy (3rd century A.D.) and in a different way afterwards in the role played by such Arab tribal powers as Tanukh, Salih, Kinda, Lakhm and Ghassan (from the 3rd to the early 7th century A.D.). The Roman authorities in the Orient, while obviously seeking to limit the impact of nomadic Arab tribes on Syrian lands, never succeeded, perhaps never attempted, to exclude them completely. The Roman *Provincia Arabia,* roughly corresponding to modern Jordan and the southern regions of the Syrian Arab Republic, was not only based on former Nabataean Arab domains, but continued to have a majority of Arab population. Other parts of Syria, as defined in this essay, also continued to have significant Arab populations under Roman rule, notably the area of Hims (Emesa).

Thus under Roman and Byzantine rule, Arab groups were an integral part of the native population of Syria and upper Mesopotamia. In addition to the role of such Arab states as Palmyra, and of Arab *foederati* such as Ghassan in the political, economic and cultural life of the Roman and Byzantine Orient, it is necessary to remember other hellenised, romanised Arab elements in several Syrian cities and in the countryside. The role of Arab groups in the history of pre-Islamic Syria thus both predates and survives the Roman conquest of the Orient. It cannot therefore be reduced

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7 See Peters, *op. cit.*, p. 320ff.

to a pattern of sporadic raids or penetration by nomadic tribes from beyond the Roman *limes*.[8]

On the other hand, the Arabs of the Hijaz, Najd, the Yemen and the Gulf region, have had trade and kinship links with Syrians long before the Muslim conquest. The people of Mecca itself, including many of Muhammad's ancestors and contemporaries, traded with Syrian centres. Pre-Islamic Meccan-Syrian trade routes seems to have been more significant than Mecca's other trade routes. Muhammad's great grandfather, Hashim, is said to have been buried in Gaza where he died during his last trading journey from Mecca to the Palestinian coast. Muhammad himself reached Damascus as a merchant more than once before his prophetic mission, and the Hijaz-Syria routes seem to have been a significant factor in his subsequent diplomacy as a political leader.[9] rtyuytyui

A second important point, regarding Syria and the Arabs, has to do with the spread of Christianity as the religion of practically all the Arab tribes, clans and urbanised families in Syria during the three centuries before Islam. To put it another way, it is worth remembering that the majority of the Christian population of Syria on the eve of the Muslim conquest were not ethnic Greeks or Romans. Rather they were largely indigenous Aramaeans and Arabs, albeit hellenised in the major cities, who were Eastern Christians, following either the Patriarchate of Antioch or that of Jerusalem.[10] There were also Jewish and Sabian minorities. The native Syrian and Palestinian Christian Churches were represented, in the pre-Islamic period, by two main groups. The native hellenised Orthodox (Melkite) bishops of Syria and Palestine may have been in agreement most

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[8] For the role of the Arabs in the Roman and Byzantine Orient, see the detailed studies of Irfan Shahîd, *op. cit.*, and his continuing series *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century*, 1984, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*; *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, 2 pts, 1995; G. W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, Cambridge, Mass.,1983; F. E. Peters, 'The Nabateans in the Hawran', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 97, 1977, pp. 263-77; also R. Dussaud, *La Penetration des Arabes en Syrie avant l'Islam*, Paris, 1955, first published in part in 1906.

[9] See for example, F. E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*, Albany, 1994, ch. 3; V. Sahhab, *Ilaf Quraysh: Rihlat al-Shita' al-Sayf* (The Pacts of Quraysh: the Winter and Summer Caravans), Beirut, 1992; see also A. Shboul, cited below.

[10] On this process, see in particular J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, London & Beirut, 1979; I. Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs*, cited above, volumes on the 4th, 5th and 6th centuries, particularly pt 2 of the last volume.

of the time with the bishops of Constantinople and Rome. Indeed several of them had worked hard for ecclesiastical unity. Among their congregations, mostly Aramaic- and Arabic-speaking, there was perhaps a feeling of alienation towards Byzantium. This was certainly more so in the case of the other major group of native Christians, the Monophysites (Syrian Orthodox). The additional factor of ecclesiastical estrangement vis-à-vis Constantinople had been at work from the fifth Christian century, and had begun to lead to more hardened communal feelings, particularly from the time of Justinian I (mid-sixth century) onwards. It is important that both Muslim and Eastern Christian historians such as the 10th-century Melkite Bishop Mahbub (Agapius) of Manbij (Hieropolis) and the 12th-century Monophysite Syriac Bishop Abul Faraj Ibn al-`Ibri (Bar Hebraeus) speak of the Christian Arab tribes of Syria as a significant element numerically and politically on the eve, and after, the Arab Islamic conquest.

Thirdly, it is important to keep in mind the close historical and linguistic connections between the Aramaic (or Syriac) and Arabic groups in pre-Islamic Syria and upper Mesopotamia (and also Iraq). Their common Christianity, after the fourth century, was both a manifestation and a strengthening factor of historical links between the two peoples. In certain parts of Syria and Mesopotamia there was some degree of Arab assimilation, or perhaps 'mutual assimilation' with the Aramaean population in villages and towns to the extent that some scholars refer to a 'common spoken Arabic-Syriac idiom used by both peoples'.[11] This fact, together with the strong hellenising features of educated Syriac-speaking elites, including Monophysites, during the Byzantine period, had significant implications for processes of acculturation during the early Islamic period.

Fourth, we need also to appreciate the historical experience of the population of the Syrian cities and countryside during the Byzantine-Persian wars of 613- 29, 'the last Great War of Antiquity' in the words of Peter Brown. One of the serious consequences of this war, particularly the prolonged Persian occupation of Syria and upper Mesopotamia, apart from devastation, was a certain weakening of the old Syrian Arab alliances with Byzantine authorities. It was in fact towards the end of the Persian occupation and about the beginning of the Byzantine restoration, that the

[11] N. V. Pigulevskia, *Araby u Granits Vizantii i Irana V IV-VI vv*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1964, pp. 10-11, 14-15; Arabic trans. by S. O. Hashim, Kuwait, 1986, pp. 22-23, 28; cf. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, p. 222 .

rising Islamic community under the skilful leadership of Muhammad succeeded in establishing pacts of mutual security with a number of strategic centres of Arab Christian, and in one or two cases Jewish, population in southern Syria. These included Ayla, Adhruh, Jarba and Miqna. At the same time Muhammad began to explore channels of contact with more powerful Christian Arab tribes in Syria, such as Judham, Kalb, Tayy, Bali and Kinda.[12]

On the other hand, a significant point to keep in mind is the official Muslim attitude towards Christians and Jews, as 'People of the Book' or the 'People of the Covenant' as reflected in the Qur'an, in traditions and policies of the Prophet Muhammad and in the practice of early Arab Muslim leaders during the conquest and for sometime afterwards. In practical terms, this attitude was exemplified by a series of written covenants, or peaceful security pacts (*aman* in Arabic), between Arab Muslim leaders of the conquest and the leadership of indigenous Christian populations (including local Arabs in certain cases) of Syrian towns and their hinterland.

An understanding of the above points is necessary in order to appreciate the situation after the Muslim conquest. In other words, to the Syrian Arabs and Aramaeans, the Muslim Arabs in their conquest of Syria did not simply erupt out of the unknown into a completely foreign land. Moreover, the Arabic- and Aramaic-speaking Christians of Syria, Mesopotamia and southern Iraq , with both of whom the Muslims were soon to establish close cooperation, were to become the significant mediators of cultural interchange. For the first century or so of the Islamic period, this applies particularly to those urban families who were experienced in the traditions of Byzantine administration and/or influenced by hellenistic traditions of thought and scholarship. There were among the vital factors of both continuity and change in the evolution of early Islamic society and civilisation.

Aspects of Change and Continuity

[12] See A. Shboul, 'Relations of the early Islamic Community with Byzantine Syria at the time of the Prophet Muhammad' (in Arabic), *Studies on the History of Arabia*, III, ed. A. T. Alansary, Riyadh, 1989.

It is possible to raise a series of questions while keeping in view the concept of tension, or dialectical relationship, between continuity and change in Syrian society during this crucial period. A detailed investigation of a wide range of literary sources as well as numismatic, epigraphic, artistic, and archaeological evidence, would illicit some answers at least to some of these questions.

At this stage it is only possible to indicate the range of questions and some broad implications of such an inquiry. These include: the consequences and repercussions of the Islamic conquests; impact of Arab wars coming after an interregnum of Persian occupation and on the wake of a recent, very short-lived, Byzantine reconquest; the impact of the inauguration of the new Islamic Arab rule, first with its centre in the Hijaz, then the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty with Syria itself as a new imperial centre; the effect of dynastic change and the reverting of Syria to the status of a province, as a result of the fall of the Umayyads; the implications of policies of the `Abbasid regime with its Iraqi-Iranian-Indian Ocean orientation away from Syria and the Mediterranean. Linked with this is the impact of later political changes affecting Syria, including the establishment of regional dynasties, such as the Tulunids, Ikhshidids, Fatimids, all centred on Egypt with varying degrees of control over Syria, and the rise of such provincial dynasties as the Hamdanids, Mirdasids and `Uqaylids in northern Syria and upper Mesopotamia. Other questions include the effect of Islamic taxation on the economy and society of Syria; developments or decline in agriculture and in land and water management; the conditions of trade routes and regional and international commerce; the relationship and mutual impact of urban, agricultural and pastoral economic activities. Of some significance is the role of the evolution of early Islamic jurisprudence and its actual workings in Syria and upper Mesopotamia during this formative period .

The question of the role, successful or otherwise, of the central and regional political players in the processes of political and social integration is significant, particularly as Islamic Arab rule in Syria during this period has been described as an 'empire on trial'.[13] Connected with this point is the issue of inter-community relations across tribal, local, and also

[13] See K. S. Salibi, *Syria under Islam: Empire on Trial, 634-1097*, Delmar, N. Y., 1977. Although Salibi's subtitle may be justifiable, some of his assumptions and conclusions as well as the tenor of his interpretation remain unconvincing to me.

confessional, lines. At a more elevated conceptual plane, perhaps, it is necessary to take into consideration, and if possible to analyse, aspects of continuity and change in social and religious values. In this context the question of actual or perceived convergence and conflict between Christian and Islamic religious values deserves special attention. Perhaps even more crucial, in terms of social and political change, is to consider the tensions between Islamic religious values and old Arab tribal ones.[14]

Finally, from the point of view of the Christian communities, it is important to keep in mind the position of these communities and their relations with Islamic political authorities and the evolving Islamic milieu, at the ideological as well as the practical levels, including tribal relations and life in the countryside and the steppe. Moreover, the extent of the Byzantine factor needs to be investigated, both in the context of official Arab-Byzantine relations and in the history of changing ecclesiastical links between the Churches of the Orient, including the Melkite (Greek Orthodox) Church and the see of Constantinople. These are the kind of issues explored in the ongoing research on early Islamic Syria of which the present essay is but a provisional introduction.

In terms of any connection between the wars of the conquest and conversion, the Islamic historical literature on this period in Syria is generally more preoccupied with the details of the conquest and establishment of Arab Islamic rule, for both historical and juristic interests, than with the question of religious conversion. The contents of the peace covenants at the time of the conquest, as well as the broader, often quite detailed, historical narratives, seem to imply that there was relatively very little conversion as an immediate result of the conquest of Syria and upper Mesopotamia. As a general rule, the peace covenants guaranteed safety of the people, as well as their property, places of worship and freedom of religion in return for payment of a regular annual tax (*jizya*) either as a lump sum or as dues on individuals and produce.[15]

The question of the physical impact of the military operations of the Islamic conquest and subsequent new Arab settlement upon the Syrian population and landscape is in need of fresh and more thorough

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[14] For a comparative regional perspective, see A. Shboul, 'Aspects of Socio-cultural Continuity and Change in the Hijaz during the First Islamic Century' (forthcoming).

[15] On these, see in particular M. Hamidullah (ed.), *Majmu'at al-Wathai'q al-Siyasiyya* (Collected Political Documents), Cairo, 1956; D. R. Hill, *Termination of Hostilities in the Early Arab Conquests AD 634-656*, London, 1971, pp. 59-98.

consideration. Much has been reiterated, often with little substantiation, about the destructive effect of the conquest on urban life in Syria.[16] A survey of the operations of the conquest would reveal a pattern that was far more characterised by negotiated surrender rather than prolonged war. There were three significant battles, Ajnadayn, Pella and Yarmuk; only the latter was a major one and all three were fought outside, or even relatively far from urban areas. Most large cities were besieged, often for short periods. With the exception of Caesarea, extended siege or extensive killings on both sides do not seem to have been the norm. Many towns seem to have been taken with little or no actual fighting. At the end practically all cities were given covenants of security more or less according to the pattern alluded to above. That is, they were guaranteed the safety of persons, places of worship, and property, as well as freedom of religion. In certain cities, such as Jerusalem which surrendered to the caliph `Umar in person, and Damascus, for example, special mention was made of crosses under the terms of safety guarantees. There does not seem to be any evidence of wanton destruction of cities or neighbourhoods.[17] In certain cases, there was mention of encouraging and safeguarding trade and other economic activities among the native populations.

In demographic terms, the conquest clearly led to considerable consequences. In the coastal cities and other major urban centres with large Byzantine garrisons, bureaucracy or large non-native population, the non-native population would have been considerably reduced as a direct result of the conquest. This was partly due to the heavy causalities reported for such major military engagements as the Yarmuk and Caesarea, partly due to the withdrawal of the troops and officials and their dependants. This also partly explains the extent of Arab settlement in vacated centres, particularly along the coast.

At another level, the dividing ethnic and religious lines during the wars of the Arab conquest of Syria were not always very clear from the perspective of the native Syrian Arabs, and to a certain extent Aramaeans. For a while at least, it is possible to speak of a crisis of identity among Christian Arab clans in Syria and upper Mesopotamia. More specifically, there were several Christian Arab tribes whose men fought alongside the Byzantines. But there were other Christian Arab tribes, particularly after

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16 See for example Salibi, *op. cit.*, pp. 19ff., 161ff.

17 Hill, *op. cit.*, p. 59ff.; F. M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, Princeton, 1981.

the initial Muslim victories, who joined the forces of the conquest and fought alongside the Muslim Arabs against the Christian Byzantines without themselves converting to Islam. The second caliph, `Umar, is reported to have instructed his generals to seek the active support of the Arabs of Syria, without making it a condition that the latter should convert to Islam.[18]

Several Christian Arab tribes did eventually convert to Islam, of course. The question of the conversion of each tribe or clan is not easy to document in our present state of knowledge. Further research would probably clarify some of the uncertainties. With few exceptions, conversion of clans seems to have occurred not so much as a direct result of the conquest, but rather considerably later and in totally different circumstances. An early exception which seems to prove the rule is that of a branch of Ghassan who are reported to have converted to Islam at the time of the conquest and then quickly reverted to Christianity. This was apparently in protest at the less than differential treatment accorded their proud leader, the legendary Jabala, by the caliph `Umar.

Conversion by clans of certain Christian Arab tribes to Islam took place under the Umayyads, and more often under the `Abbasids and other later Muslim dynasties. More often than not this was connected with political and economic factors. Many clans however, including branches of Quda`a, Taghlib, Tanukh, Ghassan and other Yamani tribes remained Christian for a long time, some to our own days. For example, the large tribe of Tanukh which had been prominent in the area between the middle Euphrates and the Aleppo hinterland since pre-Islamic times, is known to have remained mostly Christian at least until the reign of the `Abbasid caliph, al-Mahdi (A.D. 775-785). This caliph is reported, by the 9th-century historian and geographer al-Ya`qubi, as having invited Tanukhi leaders to embrace Islam during a visit to their region.[19] We are not told of the extent of their response to the caliph's call, but it is evident that increasing numbers of Tanukhis are later mentioned as Muslims in the sources. Most of this tribe probably converted by the mid-9th century and became thoroughly assimilated in the urban culture of the time producing many prominent scholars and judges. In certain cases, the same tribe would eventually have Muslim as well as Christian branches; examples of this can still be seen in

[18] Tabari, *History*, ed. Ibrahim, vol. III, Cairo, 1969, p. 601.

[19] Ya`qubi, *History*, Najaf, 1955, vol. II, pp. 398-9

the region in our times. Indeed many present-day Christian Arab clans and families in Syria, Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon still trace their origins to such tribes, particularly Ghassan.

An outstanding example of a large tribe that remained proudly Christian for a considerable time is the Banu Taghlib, originally active in the middle Euphrates region. What is particularly unusual about Banu Taghlib is that having remained Christian they refused the condition of paying the *jizya* from the outset. Instead, they negotiated with the caliph `Umar, who was far more flexible than many later Muslim rulers and jurists, to pay the *sadaqa*, which is a Muslim tax, although they had to accept to pay double the usual rate. Taghlib remained Christian well into the `Abbasid period while playing a significant role in Arab Islamic politics and culture. During the Umayyad period, they had produced several influential poets, including the famous al-Akhtal, the court poet of several caliphs and for a while a friend of John of Damascus (before the latter gave up his administrative position in the Umayyad court and became a monk). The Taghlib seem to have largely converted by the mid-9th century AD. This probably remained a nominal or superficial conversion, at least in the case of one clan of the large Taghlib tribe. For in the mid-10th century thousands of the Banu Habib clan of Taghlib chose to take the drastic step of going over to the Byzantine side, and at the same time reverting to Christianity. This appears to have resulted partly from tribal tensions, partly, perhaps more especially, from displeasure with the oppressive policies and heavy taxes imposed by Sayf al-Dawla, the otherwise-celebrated Arab Emir who was himself from the tribe of Taghlib.[20]

The story of Taghlib illustrates the complexity of the situation of politically active Christian Arab tribes within the Islamic polity, particularly from the early `Abbasid period onwards. The problem for such groups does not seem to have been mainly one of religious repression. More often than not it was, rather, a combination of long term tribal conflict and political and economic pressures. There were already examples of disruptive tribal strife during the Umayyad period. However, this was not necessarily between Muslim and Christian tribes as such. Rather, it represented the age old rivalry between the so-called 'Qays' and 'Yaman'

[20] The episode is reported by the contemporary Arab geographer Ibn Hawqal, *Surat al-Ard*, ed. J. Kramers, Leiden, 1938, pp. 153-4, who explains this by Sayf al-Dawla's tyrannical policies.

divisions of the Arab tribes in Syria and upper Mesopotamia. This was often fuelled by economic factors and the divide-and-rule manipulation of caliphs, sultans or emirs.

At the individual level conversion did occur frequently. But the process of conversion, whether for individuals or clans, was not always in one direction only. For there are cases of conversion from Islam to Christianity and there are some documented cases of re-conversion by Arab individuals, families or clans to Christianity or to Islam throughout the period from the 7th to the 11th century A.D. (and indeed later).

Examples of individual and limited group conversion from Christianity to Islam can be found scattered in the biographical literature. But it is significant that, with some exceptions, this seems often to refer more to later generations than those contemporary with the conquest. A significant category in this context is that of war captives during the early Islamic conquests. Two points may be made here. First, apart from direct general references in such main sources as Tabari, for example, it is necessary to undertake more detailed research into the extensive biographical compilations to gain a clear picture. It is often only because a number of the descendants of former captives became famous, mostly in the areas of Arabic scholarship, literature or music, that we come across references to their family background, including such statements describing someone's father, mother, or grandfather as having been among the captives from the times of the conquest. Secondly, there were far fewer captives from Syria, upper Mesopotamia, Iraq and Egypt — countries with populations belonging to 'People of the Book' — in comparison with those from Iran or North Africa, for example.

In terms of demography, the process of increased Muslim population in certain parts of Syria after the conquest seems to be connected more directly with increased Arab migration and settlement of Muslim families and clans, rather than with any large-scale conversion of indigenous inhabitants. The obvious early increase in the proportion of Muslim inhabitants in the coastal towns of Syria-Lebanon-Palestine, and in the northern Syrian, Cilician, and Mesopotamian frontier towns (the *thughur*) facing Byzantium need to be explained essentially in the context of strategic considerations. This is not to say that Christian inhabitants of these regions, both Arab and Aramaean, were excluded from living in the ports and frontier centres. Indeed, some Christians are known to have sometimes participated in the war effort against Byzantium in different capacities.

Syria under early Arab Islamic rule seems to have experienced more social integration of tribal Arab populations in existing cities, towns and villages. In any case, most towns and eventually many of the large villages had mixed populations both in ethnic and religious terms, a fact documented by Arab geographers and travellers and in other genres of Arabic writing. It seems significant that, unlike Iraq, Egypt and North Africa, early Islamic Syria did not need new Arab 'garrison towns', such as Basra, Kufa, Fustat, or Qayrawan. The early camp of Jabiya, on the site of an old Arab Ghassanid position, was not, or rather was not planned to, evolve into a garrison town. From the beginning, Damascus became the main administrative centre and remained the most important city in Islamic Syria. Similarly Hims, Antioch, a number of coastal towns, such as Beirut, Tripoli, Jabla, and Ascalon, and also the Cilician centres of Tarsus and Adana became flourishing Islamic Arab cities.

Moreover, it seems from a careful reading of the sources, including the works of geographers, travellers and men of letters, that cities and towns in Syria and upper Mesopotamia throughout this period were generally characterised not only by religious diversity, but also by interaction across confessional barriers. It was not unusual to find Muslims and Christians, and in certain cases also Jews, sharing the same neighbourhood. There are references to both Christian and Muslim children sharing a class in the same school in Umayyad Damascus for example. Visits to each other's places of worship by Muslims and Christians are also documented.

A particularly interesting aspect of religious pluralism also occurred within individual Arab clans. This was perhaps more visible in certain groups with a high political or military profile in the early Arab Islamic polity. Apart from different branches of the same tribe being divided between the Christian and Islamic faiths, it is possible to find cases of mixed religious allegiance within the same small family. For example, a tribal Arab official, or even a governor, could be a first generation Muslim but his parents, or at least one of them, could remain Christian. In one instance at least, the Muslim official in question built a special church, or chapel, in the name of his Christian Arab mother. Although this evidently was not so common, its very occurrence is indicative of the type of environment prevailing in this early period. Among other considerations, this is obviously quite significant in the context of acculturation and cross-influences, as well as shared living across the two religious communities. Related to this, but quite distinct from it is the role played by the numerous

ex-slave girls of Greek and other Christian background who became mothers of Muslim children while they themselves could remain Christian.

Up to the end of the Umayyad period, the official policy of the state did not seem to include the encouragement of religious conversion. Indeed, there are well-known examples of blatant discouragement of such conversion. Although the examples usually come from Umayyad Iraq under the governor al-Hajjaj, rather than Syria, the point seems to illustrate the significant link between socio-economic factors and pressure for conversion, or in this case against it. For al-Hajjaj is credited with forcing back to their villages and their old religion those converts who fled to Islam as a religious identity to escape official taxation imposed by the government in the name of Islam.

The Umayyads were however very much aware of the need to implement distinct political and administrative measures to ensure arabisation and islamisation of their state, particularly after solving the dangerous crisis of civil war by the able `Abd al-Malik (A.D. 685-705). `Abd al-Malik and his immediate successors executed a series of far-reaching policies that in a real sense amounted to 'converting' the Umayyad regime from its previous, quasi-Byzantine, image to a more recognisable Arab and Islamic polity. It seems however that the first Arab dynasty was more interested in cultural and political conversion rather than religious conversion. `Abd al-Malik inaugurated the systematic arabisation and islamisation of such crucial institutions as the official registers of revenues in Syria (followed eventually by those of Egypt and Iraq), the coinage, the official papyri stationery, the official robes (*tiraz*) and the milestones along the old Roman roads. All these had been a legacy from the Byzantine period and the lettering inscribed on papyri, textile, coins had been Greek (Latin in the case of the early Roman milestones). The coins and papyri also had specific Christian symbols and formulae. All this was now converted into the Arabic script with appropriate unmistakable Islamic expressions. It may seem remarkable that it took the Islamic authorities about sixty years to achieve this. This however could be seen as further evidence for cultural continuity in the life of Syria during this period of transition. The changes finally implemented by `Abd al-Malik clearly pronounced a new cultural epoch in the life of Syria and the eastern Mediterranean.

`Abd al-Malik and his son and successor, al-Walid, also undertook an extensive building programme, particularly in Syria and Palestine, which

can be said to have partly converted the urban landscape of the region. In doing so, they ensured the implementation of a substantial Islamic dimension to be added to, or according to some scholars to distract from, the Byzantine legacy of Christian monuments in the Umayyad central province. The new buildings included such brilliant Islamic monuments as the Dome of the Rock and the Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and the Great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.

One important aspect that needs further study is the transformation of the church organisation and the ecclesiastical landscape of Syria during this period. At one level, the native Christian communities had to come to terms with the new political situation resulting from the establishment of Islamic rule in Syria and Palestine. This applies to the Melkite (Greek Orthodox) as well as the Monophysite (Syrian Orthodox) communities. Even the former, officially in close communion with Byzantium, showed enough realism and concern for positive relations with the new regime. Their bishops, native Syrians but thoroughly hellenised, played leading roles in negotiating the terms of the peace pacts with the Arab conquerors. A distinguished example of these is the contribution of the Palestinian Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, in the terms given personally to the holy city by the caliph `Umar. Before long the Eastern Churches of Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria seem to have practically faded away from the Byzantine ecclesiastical orbit, though not necessarily its intellectual thought-world. However, the Melkite church consolidated its position as the leading church in the region, while the Monophysites who were particularly relieved of Byzantine attempts at controlling them, continued to flourish.

This period, as early as the 680s, witnessed a particularly significant new development among the Christian communities of Syria that was to have far-reaching implications at the ecclesiastical, cultural and, as it turned out, political levels. This was the birth of the Maronite community as a new Eastern Christian Church before the end of the seventh century A.D. The formation of the Maronite Church was essentially connected with internal ecclesiastical differences and was partly the product of the social conditions of the area, particularly the native culture of parts of the Syrian-Lebanese countryside. There is no doubt that the new political environment provided by the early Arab Islamic state indirectly facilitated this development.

On the whole, the impact of the establishment of Islamic Arab rule in Syria has had very considerable impact on the native Christian communities. This has been manifested through two interrelated ways. The first is the consolidation of Islam as a majority religion in the country. This has not happened as a result of any systematic programme of religious conversion, but rather as the end-product of a long historical process that made possible the evolution of an Islamic political and cultural environment. The second has to do with the almost total arabisation of the Christian communities. This is particularly true of the Maronites, as well as of the original Greek Orthodox communities out of whom a Greek Catholic church later emerged. (This is now also exclusively called Melkite, although the latter term used to apply to all Eastern Greek Orthodox Christians of the Syrian regions). This long process of arabisation, which for some groups goes back to pre-Islamic times, was for the others brought about by the broader arabisation associated with Islam.

For Islam as a civilisation, particularly for Arab Islam, the contribution of the native Arab and Aramaean Christians of geographical Syria, upper Mesopotamia, and Iraq has been tremendous. This is connected with the efforts of their bilingual, occasionally trilingual, scholars, including monks and bishops, who fulfilled the vital role of intellectual and cultural mediators. This was not only between Christianity and Islam as religions, but more so between the Hellenistic tradition of Antiquity and the Arab Islamic tradition of learning that flourished during the first five centuries or so of Islamic history. The Arab and Syriac Christians were so instrumental in the crucial movement of translation into Arabic of Greek works of philosophy, medicine and other sciences. They laid the foundation for that fruitful reception, assimilation and study of the 'Sciences of the Ancients' into the world of Arabic Islamic learning.

In this and their joint contribution with their Muslim colleagues, Syriac- and Arabic-speaking Christian scholars were full partners in a significant enterprise. In a sense they were also teachers who enriched the Arabic language and helped make it a language of science. They have helped to 'convert' the Arabs and Islam of this period to much of Hellenism. It is true that most of this work was done under the patronage of the `Abbasids in Baghdad and that the Nestorian Christians of Iraq and Iran played a significant role in it. But the initiative had begun mostly in Syria and upper Mesopotamia under the Umayyads, and Syrian Christian scholars whether

Monophysite, Melkite, Greek Orthodox or Maronite continued to contribute to this effort throughout this important period.

Prescribing Messiah: A Case Study concerning Internal Conversion

Ruth V. Lewin-Broit *

'From the midst of Edom and Epher I cry bitterly unto Thee.'
Yudah Halevi

Introduction and Structure

This paper aims to analyse certain issues in the social and religious history of medieval Jewish communities under the rule of Islam. Its focus is an epistle which was sent by Maimonides in 1172 in response to an appeal from a Yemenite rabbi, Jacob al-Fayumi. The letter, commonly known as *Iggeret Teman*, deals with no less than six inter-related topics ranging from family traditions to binding rabbinical instructions. Written at the time of the crusades, the *Iggeret* reveals the anxious responses of marginal communities to the changes in the quality and structure of power in the Middle Eastern region.[1]

Maimonides' writings, in particular his epistles, go beyond mere historical circumstances. His lasting authority in speculative theology in contemporary Orthodox Judaism and the incorporation into the daily ritual of his formulated thirteen principles of faith, the 'Jewish dogma' as it is called, point to the continuance of medieval traditions to the present day. In the Yemenite Jewish tradition, Maimonides' name has been added to the daily prayer as a token of gratitude and a pointer towards a social and religious debt.[2]

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1 On the necessity to consider marginal communities the better to assess the impact of the crusades and address the striking differences between Christian and Muslim historiographies in matters such as names and dates of important battles, see B. Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, London, 1982, pp. 22-8.

2 On the role of Messianic ideas (including Maimonides') in contemporary Judaism, see C. Waxman, 'Messianism, Zionism, and the State of Israel', *Modern Judaism*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1987, pp. 175-92. However, the modern concern for 'rationalised' religion does not always agree with its medieval antecedents. For controversies surrounding Maimonides' writings, see M. Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought: from Maimonides to Abarvanel*, Oxford, 1986, and E. Shmueli, *Seven Jewish Cultures: a reinterpretation of Jewish history and thought*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 289.

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

The status of both Christians and Jews in medieval Muslim societies is best described by employing two Qur'anic terms: *ahl-al-kitab* (People of the Book), which denoted the shared religious concerns of the three monotheistic religions, and *ahl-al-dhimma* (Protected People), that reflects the Muslim response towards the Christian and Jewish rejection of Muhammad's revelation and subsequent missions. This inherent tension between common theological disposition and separate religious adherence was mitigated by a variety of legal and economic regulations such as poll tax, marked clothing and restrictions concerning the public display of Christianity and Judaism. In exchange, Christians and Jews were offered protection granted by the central Muslim ruler in charge of their residential areas.[3]

However, it is mistaken to view the historical condition of the Jew in medieval Islam merely through 'legal eyes'. In addition to the constant financial burden and public humiliation, the Jews of Islam suffered periods of direct and violent persecution. The peculiarity of Yemen's political instability and its geographical proximity to Muslim holy places rendered Yemenite Jewry more susceptible to either local or regional tensions. In the 12th century when a rebellious leader became the chief Yemenite ruler, he issued an order for the conversion of all Yemenite Jewry to Islam. In direct contradiction to the Qur'an which prohibits forced conversion of the *ahl-al-kitab*, the Jews of Yemen were given the option of conversion, death or further exile. Those difficulties prompted the strengthening of inherent eschatological and messianic speculations already reflecting the aftermath of the crusaders' impact. It was the outside as well as inside pressures that promoted the Yemenite scholar to enter into the correspondence with Maimonides, the spiritual and political leader of Mediterranean Judaism.

The structure of this paper generally follows Clifford Geertz's landmark essay, '"Internal Conversion" in Contemporary Bali'.[4] In this essay, Geertz argues against the common misconception which views religion either as immovable fossil or as a precious souvenir continuously threatened by change and progress.[5] Instead, Geertz offers a model, based on Max Weber's works, of internal conversion. While maintaining Weber's polar opposition between 'traditional' and 'rationalised' religions, Geertz

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3 For the different predicament of Jews and Christians under Islam, see M. Gervers and R. Bikhazi (eds), *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, Toronto, 1990, and B. Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*, Princeton, 1987, in particular chs 1 and 2.

4 In C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York, 1973, pp. 170-92.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 170.

notes the common ground between the two modes of religious expression, namely the seeking of a bridge between the believing person and the almost inaccessible divine. Furthermore, both 'traditional' and 'rationalised' religions offer coherent and self-conscious approaches. Each of them, however, uses different vocabulary and practices, and the 'rationalised' type gives more visible signs of doctrinal generalisation.

According to Geertz, 'internal conversion' is the process by which 'traditional' religion undergoes systematic construction of its legal and moral codes, which assists in its turning into 'rationalised' religion. In this paper Geertz's model is used to reexamine a particular set of historical and literary phenomena in medieval Judaism. The paper offers new insights into Maimonides' contribution to medieval Jewish thought and aims to address questions concerning conversion from inside one tradition rather than between two or more religious traditions.[6]

The paper is divided into three parts. The first outlines the 'traditional' form of Yemenite Jewish religion by observing its main features and their possible origins. The second considers Maimonides' epistle as a facilitating agent for 'rationalised' religion, and the third will examine the extent of internal conversion in Yemenite Judaism insofar as it might have occurred.

'Traditional' Yemenite Judaism: Methodology and Features

There is no historical documentation regarding Yemenite Jewry prior to the tenth century. It was only then, with the rise of the Fatimid empire whose centre was in Tunisia, and with the European awakening during the Carolingian renaissance, that Yemen reestablished itself as an essential link between the West and India. Most of this documentation comes from the Fostat *geniza*, the 'book store-house', and serves as a witness to the prosperity of the Yemenite Jewry. The general success of their commercial enterprises could be seen from extant letters from Jewish merchants, artisans, women; they were almost always the givers of charity and not the recipients.[7]

The commercial links with India were primarily within the domain of import, although some marginal export activity also took place, including the 'export' of Jewish brides to Indian agents. The nature of the imported

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6 *Ibid.*, p. 174.

7 S. Goitein, 'Yemenite Jewry and the India Trade', in S. Goitein, *The Yemenites: History, Communal Organisation, Spiritual Life: Selected Studies* (in Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1983, pp. 33-52.

goods, mainly spices and tin kitchen utensils, fell within the sphere of Jewish dietary laws and required authoritative religious advice. This was sought from the Yemenites' closest and most influential neighbours, the Jews of Egypt. These queries of theirs provided the background for al-Fayumi's appeal to Maimonides, who was then serving as head of the Egyptian Jewry.[8]

The *geniza* provides inexhaustible information concerning the written interactions between medieval Jewish communities. It assists in locating shifts in the political and economic spheres by affording the social historian a window through which members of the Jewish communities become almost real and present through our insights into their daily concerns.[9]

Furthermore, the *geniza* records point to transformation in the religious organisation of medieval Mediterranean Judaism. When the Abbasid empire of Iraq fell, and the centre of Islam passed from there to Fatimid Tunisia, the rabbinical colleges of the Jewish Babylonian tradition, which had been long established in southern Iraq, were affected and faced difficulties. The leaders of dispersed Jewish communities were forced to adopt a regional rather than a central model of authority. Regional authorities were in a position to decide on most religious matters, but their rulings were effective only within local boundaries not in the universal domain. This change created a need for a set of symbols and metaphors which at first foreshadowed and then legitimised religious transformation.[10]

Even if one leaves aside the different oral traditions which link the Yemenite Jews to the political and religious upheavals during the time of the first and second temples, it seems likely that Yemen experienced five major waves of Jewish migration prior to the tenth century. These may be summarised as follows.[11]

1. The first evidence of Jewish life in Yemen comes from a burial cave in the Be'it Shearim necropolis east of Haifa. This burial cave dates to the

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8 For discussion concerning medieval Jewish communal organisation, see I. Baer,'The Origins of the Organisation of the Jewish Community of the Middle Ages' (in Hebrew), *Zion*, 15, 1950-1, pp. 1-41, and M. Cohen, *Jewish Self-government in Medieval Egypt: the origins of the office of head of the Jews ca. 1065-1126*, Princeton, 1980.

9 For comprehensive discussion concerning the *geniza*, see S. Goitein, *Mediterranean Society: the Jewish communities of the Arab world as portrayed in the documents of the Cairo Geniza* (6 vols), Berkeley, 1967-93.

10 Jonathan Z. Smith, 'The Influence of Religious Symbols on Social Change; A Place on Which to Stand', in his *Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*, Chicago, 1993, pp. 129-46.

11 The model for five waves of migration is taken from Goitein, 'Yemenite Jewry', in particular pp. 37-8.

third century and contains the graves of Jewish merchants from Himyar in Yemen. According to early Muslim writers, this layer of Jewish life had all but disappeared by the time of the Muslim conquest of Yemen in 628 C.E. Yet the influence of the Himyarite Jews on pre-Islamic Yemen and the role of Judaism (or rather of Jewish-like traditions) on the formulation of Islam in the Arabian peninsula can be seen from epigraphic evidence dating to the Himyarite kingship.[12]

2. Refugees from Byzantine persecutions and economic restrictions imposed during the reign of Justinian. The evidence for the second wave of migration lies in the traditional crafts of Yemenite Jews and styles in silversmithing, goldsmithing and embroidery.

3. Jews from Iran and Iraq migrated by land through Yemama together with the Zaidi Imams, who became the rulers of Yemen and whose origin was in North Iran around the Caspian Sea. The historical proof for this wave is found in the constant reference to Jews in the Zaidii religious treatises.

4. Migration from Iraq from about the eighth century to the tenth by sea. The historical evidence is provided by the examination of Talmudic reading techniques and the preservation of modes of studying with the daily division between the communal and the private, synagogue and father's house, respectively. These techniques were brought directly from the Talmudic institutions in Iraq which had been disrupted by the collapse of Abbasid hegemony.

5. Jewish migration from Fatimid Egypt and elsewhere in the Mediterranean region in order to take part in trade with India.

'Rationalised' Medieval Judaism: *Iggeret Teman*

Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, in Hebrew Rambam and elsewhere Maimonides (1135-1204) is the most noted of Jewish medieval thinkers. A follower of Aristotelian philosophy, Maimonides aimed at merging Jewish theological concerns with Hellenistic metaphysical speculations. Like other medieval thinkers, Maimonides combined communal commitment with a detached and somewhat esoteric writing career throughout his life. His theology

[12] For more details concerning Himyar, see H. Hirschberg, 'The Jewish Kingdom of Himyar' (in Hebrew), in Y. Yesha'yahu and Y. Tobi (eds), *The Jews of Yemen: Studies and Researches*, Jerusalem, 1975, pp. 19-27.

represents medieval rationalism and *Iggeret Teman* is example of erudite yet sensitive Jewish polemical literature.[13]

The *Iggeret* is complex in structure and laden with rhetorical devices. Although the epistle is composed as an answer to urgent matters, Maimonides adopts the device of deferring authoritative solution while first seeking to address more general issues. These are: the phenomenology of Jewish history, speculations based on biblical verses, Jewish doctrinal assertions, relations between Judaism and both Christianity and Islam, a refutation of Muslim biblical hermeneutics, and Jewish messianic calculations. The question of whether Maimonides is consciously engaged in a process of 'internal conversion' must remain open. Nevertheless, by using domestic idioms and referring to members of families, he is seeking transformation from the inside.

> You write that the hearts of some people have *turned away*, uncertainty befalls them and their beliefs are weakened ... And now, my coreligionists, it is essential for you all to give attention and consideration to that which I am going to point out to you. You should *impress it upon* the minds of your women and children, so that their faith which may be feeble and impaired may be strengthened ... (pp. 438-9, italics mine)

Following this request, Maimonides proceeds to supply Yemenite Jewry with tools in order to deal with the urgent situation and, moreover, to help them reinterpret their tradition in a more 'rationalised' and 'worldly' form. His authoritative advice could be summarised as follows.

1. Phenomenology of Jewish history

Instead of focusing his attention on Yemen, Maimonides directs his readers' attention to the 'lachrymatory' nature of Jewish history. Converting local concerns to a universal truth-claim, Maimonides presents the macrocosm rather than the microcosm, allowing Yemenite Jewry to belong to the wider world both contemporaneously ('For these are evil tidings ...') and historically ('Therefore all the nations instigated by envy and impiety rose up against us ...'). In other words, by attempting to place the local danger

[13] All quotations from *Iggeret Teman* in this paper are taken from B. Cohen (trans.), 'Epistle to Yemen', in I. Twersky (ed.), *A Maimonides Reader*, New York, 1972, pp. 437-63.

faced by Yemenite Jewry within the universal Jewish tradition, Maimonides translates the idioms of Yemenite local and domestic concerns into medieval historical theory.

2. Speculative exegesis

He next addresses himself to the matter of the study of the Hebrew Bible. Utilising a variety of sophisticated exegetical methods, Maimonides presents an intertextual approach by which each verse is made dependent on others for the correct and complete meaning. His main concern is with the book of Daniel, the most eschatological of all in the Hebrew Bible, but his method is applied throughout the whole epistle to the Yemenites. In articulating intertextuality, Maimonides advocates a dialectical approach which enables the transition from oral tradition, which relies on memory, to literate scholarship, which is bound by constant textual reference. In other words, he aims at moving from the traditional structure of Jewish scholarship to medieval Jewish scholasticism.

3. Jewish doctrinal assertions

In contrast to the traditional halachic reading of biblical law, Maimonides urges his readers to engage in a more symbolic interpretation.

> If he [the biblical reader] could only fathom the inner intent of the law, then he would realise that the essence of the divine true religion lies in the deeper meaning of its positive and negative precepts, every one of which will aid man in his striving after perfection, and remove the impediment to the attainment of perfection ... (pp. 442-3)

Maimonides' articulation of perfection, which was to be achieved through esoteric or occult reading of the law, allows for a redefinition of Jewish principles and then for a modification of community self-definition.

> These commands will enable the strong and elite to acquire moral and intellectual qualities, each according to his ability. Thus the godly community becomes pre-eminent, reaching a twofold perfection. By first perfection I mean, man's spending his life in this world under the most agreeable and congenial conditions. The second perfection would

> constitute the achievement of intellectual objectives, each in accordance with his native powers. (pp. 442-3)

Maimonides' twofold perfection is the basis for his entire theological discourse. In order to combat medieval polemics against Judaism, Maimonides puts a seal on hermeneutics concerning the biblical interdictions: first by noting the difference between inner and outer, and then through the process of reintegration. He thus achieves the concept of double perfection for the whole community while maintaining balance between the elite and the common folk.

4. Judaism as opposed to Christianity and Islam

Perhaps one of the striking features of medieval society is the anomalous relations between Judaism on the one hand and Christianity and Islam on the other. While Christianity and Islam accepted biblical revelation and acknowledged the temporal priority of Judaism, medieval political structures marginalised the Jews by selective overrepresentation: in taxation, in specialised clothing and in spatial enclosures. Maimonides' epistle seeks to redress the political situation through employing theological underrepresentation of the two later faiths. Pointing to the history of both Christianity and Islam, Maimonides reclaims Jewish theological incomparability as the only true original religion.

> The tenets of other religions which resemble those of Scriptures have no deeper meaning, but are superficial imitations, copied from and patterned after it. They modelled their religions upon ours to glorify themselves, and indulge the fancy that they are similar to so and so. However, their counterfeiting is an open secret to the learned. Consequently they became objects of derision and ridicule just as one laughs and smiles at an ape when it imitates the actions of men. (p. 443)

In contradiction to the political situation where the Jew was the ridiculed, grotesque relic of an irrelevant past, Maimonides created a theological utopia in which Jews hold power over both Christianity and Islam, so building an inverted universe where Judaism through religious antecedence reigns supreme.

5. Refutation of Muslim biblical hermeneutics

The cluster of metaphors in the preceding quotation from *Iggeret Teman*, counterfeit, forgery and so forth, alludes to the Muslim critique of the Hebrew Bible. By viewing the Mosaic codex as a corrupt message, the Qur'an (Sura VII.150-70) aims at undercutting the basis of Torah and the Gospels while creating the ground for the perfected message of the last prophet, Muhammad. Maimonides retaliates by refuting Muslim claims concerning veiled allusions to Muhammad in the Hebrew Bible. After citing the alleged references, Maimonides moves to overturn the critique.

> These arguments have been rehearsed so often that they have become nauseating. It is not enough to declare that they are altogether feeble; nay to cite as proofs these verses is ridiculous and absurd in the extreme ... The motive for their accusation lies, therefore, in the absence of any allusion to Muhammad in the Torah ... (pp. 449-50)

While there is not much medieval Jewish polemic against Islam, there is enough anti-Christian literature composed by Jews living in Muslim countries to allow for genre analysis. In a recently published article, Daniel Lasker divides medieval Jewish polemics into three types: exegetical, historical and rational.[14] In the *Iggeret*, Maimonides employs all three throughout his argument. Historically he proves that the Bible had been translated into a variety of languages before Muhammad. Rationally he states that all biblical traditions are uniform and thirdly, exegetically he demonstrates that there is no allusion to Muhammad in the Hebrew Bible.

6. Messianic calculations

It is in fact possible to claim that throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries the three monotheistic traditions experienced what might be called 'messianic fervour'. Jewish calculations, which aimed at determining the year of the Messiah, fixed it at (according to tradition from the Creation) 4854-5/1096 C.E. Pope Urban II, outside the gates of Clermont, spoke of the need to salvage Christian brethren in 1095. The Almohads' rise around the Mediterranean forced conversion on Jews and Christians since 500 years had passed since Muhammad preached in Yethrib-Medina. It lies beyond this paper's scope to detail the reasons which led to this

[14] 'The Jewish Critique of Christianity under Islam in the Middle Ages', *American Academy for Jewish Research Proceedings*, vol. 57, 1990-1, pp. 121-53.

seemingly historical coincidence. Suffice it to note that during these two centuries, there were at least eight Jewish messianic movements: the first was in France in 1087 and the last in Yemen in 1172.

Maimonides' *Iggeret Teman* was written in response to the Yemenite messianic movement. He constructs sophisticated rhetorical devices and continuously juxtaposes biblical and rabbinical arguments with scientific observations. These latter are contrasted with astrological claims which predicted an imminent messianic arrival.

> For while the Gentiles believe that our nation will never constitute an independent state, nor will they even rise above their present condition, and all the astrologers, diviners and augurs concur in this opinion, God will prove false their views and beliefs, and will order the advent of the Messiah. Again, it is Isaiah who makes reference to this event in this verse: 'That frustrates the tokens of the imposters, and makes the diviners mad; that turns wise men backward, and makes their knowledge foolish ... That says of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited (Is. 44:25-6) ... This is the correct view that every Israelite should hold, without paying attention to the conjunctions of the stars, of greater or smaller magnitude. (p. 453)

According to Maimonides the reason for the Yemenite messianic movement was a reaction to the decree of forced conversion. Maimonides' sympathetic concern with Yemenite distress sees him compose a list of preconditions, so that the true Messiah could be distinguished from imposters. The list or prescription is the first of its kind in Judaism. Since then, it has become the crucial element in Jewish teaching concerning the awaited Messiah.

> It is, my coreligionists, one of the fundamental articles of the faith of Israel, that the future redeemer of our people will spring only from the stock of Solomon, son of David. He will gather our nation, assemble our exiles, redeem us from degradation, propagate the true religion, and exterminate his opponents ... (pp. 456-7)

Maimonides' innovative approach towards Judaism was quite revolutionary. Using a variety of techniques he managed to shift the Jewish theology from Talmudic discourse into theological and rational religion. By prescribing the messianic qualities, he gave the future Jewish authorities

analytical tools to examine rather emotional and sensitive aspects of the religion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is need to answer three questions. First, whether Maimonides' attempt at 'rationalising' Yemenite Judaism was successful; second, whether the 'internal conversion' was accomplished, and third, what can be learned about conversion through the example of this case study.

Maimonides' attempts were successful insofar as they contributed to averting some dangers associated with messianic movements. As far as historical evidence shows, it seems that Yemenite Jewry retained its communal cohesion without major friction. However, one year after the composition of the *Iggeret*, Egypt conquered Yemen and under Egyptian orders forced conversion of Jews was brought to an immediate halt. It should be noted that Muslim forced conversions during the Middle Ages were rare and the Yemenite example was, according to Goitein, 'an act of a crazed ruler and in contradiction to Muslim law'.[15]

Regarding the second question, the answer is rather complicated. Throughout history each ethnic community within Judaism developed certain customs which distinguish it from the rest. Although most communities differed in minor domestic aspects such as unique food, major rituals and regulations are shared by almost all communities. However, Yemenite Judaism differed from others in one crucial matter. While all Jewish communities banned polygamy around the tenth century, Yemenite Jewry held fast to its practice until the arrival of most Yemenite Jews in Israel in 1948. Although polygamy is but one aspect of late antique Judaism, Yemenite Jews kept most of their traditional customs intact. It is, therefore, correct to assert that, insofar as Maimonides' teachings were incorporated into Yemenite Judaism, 'internal conversion' was accomplished. However, his teachings did not stop certain aspects of the tradition and due to its geographical isolation, Yemenite religion continued to exist by combining the 'traditional' and the 'rational' side by side.[16]

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[15] Goitein's remark is quoted in Y. Tobi, 'Conversion to Islam among Yemenite Jews under Zaidi Rule - the Position of Zaida Law, the Imam and Muslim Society' (in Hebrew), *Pe'Amim*, 42, 1990, pp. 105-26.

[16] On the continuation of traditional messianic calculations in Yemenite Jewry after Maimonides' letter see Y. Ratzahbi, 'Apocalypses and Reckoning of the End of Days

The contribution of the 'internal conversion' model to studies concerning conversion is multifarious. First, it shows that religious traditions are subjected to constant transformation and are able to reinvent themselves to address internal and external political pressure. Second, it exemplifies that the functions fulfilled by religion are maintained although their expressions might vary. Third, the model of 'internal conversion' allows 'traditional' to coexist with 'rational' religion rather than placing the two modes of religion in opposition. Fourth, the model allows the phenomenon of conversion to shift from a matter of limits (between religious traditions) into an issue at the heart of the central authority. By subtle and careful mobilisation, Maimonides was able to transcend local issues and reach towards universal truth claims. This was achieved not by reaching outwards but by shaking the religious foundations and turning inward.

among Yemenite Jewry' (in Hebrew), in *Folklore Resarch Center Studies*, vol. I, ed. D. Noy and I. Ben-Ami, Jerusalem, 1970, pp. 295-323.

Buallawn Israel: The Emergence of a Judaising Movement in Mizoram, Northeast India

Myer Samra *

Through the efforts of a small number of western missionaries, Christianity has taken a firm hold among the tribal peoples of Northeast India.[1] Frederick Downs attributes this success less to the activity of the missionaries themselves than to the fact that the introduction of Christianity coincided with a 'felt need among the people involved'. In many cases, that need had been brought about by social or cultural crisis, which can be traced back to the subjugation of the tribes to British political control and the changes in their lives ushered in by this event.[2] Downs goes on to elaborate many of these changes.

Formerly the tribal communities had been self-governing, village societies which had not known domination from external powers. These communities had been non-literate societies, with limited contact with the outside world. They were economically self-sufficient and lived according to their traditional customs and values. British conquest ended this autonomy and imposed British administrative and judicial institutions in place of traditional ones. New rules prevented certain traditional practices which may have been central to their religious life, culture or social structure.[3]

Having minimal contact with outsiders, tribals could previously look upon all strangers with equal disdain. Now, subjected to external rule, they saw the superiority of the foreigners' weaponry and military organisation, while the material goods which these strangers possessed, along with their other accomplishments, mandated respect — simultaneously serving to

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1 The total population of the region at the 1981 census was 26,608,000, of whom 11,095,000 were recorded as being tribals. The total number of Christians in the region was 2,581,000, of whom 2,225,000 were of tribal origin (K. Thanzauva, 'Introduction', in K. Thanzauva [ed.], *Towards a Tribal Theology: the Mizo perspective*, Mizoram, 1989, p. 2).

2 Frederick Downs, 'Christian Conversion Movements among the Hills Tribes of North-East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in G. A. Oddie (ed.), *Religion in South Asia: religious conversion and revival movements in medieval and modern times*, 2nd ed., Columbia, Mo., p. 155.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 159.

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

undermine the pride that the tribals had for their own society and faith in their particular traditions. The appearance of consumer goods undermined economic self-sufficiency. Literacy, coupled with new forms of communication which facilitated contact with the world beyond the local society, and role models provided by westerners — as officials, traders, missionaries and soldiers — all shook the old certainties, exposing the tribals to new ways of looking at the world.[4]

Important as was the British military conquest, Downs suggests that 'It was not the force of arms that finally destroyed the old culture; it was the force of modernisation'. To survive, 'primal' or tribal cultures require isolation. Exposure to the wider world 'undermines and eventually destroys' their mythological foundations.[5] In these circumstances — and indeed echoing Robin Horton's thesis on the link between cosmology and the social environment[6] — people will inevitably adopt a new perspective to make sense of their changed world.[7]

Downs suggests that Christianity rather than Hinduism came to fill this role, in part because adopting Hinduism would have resulted in the complete absorption of the tribal communities, at the lower levels of the caste system, while Christianity allowed groups to preserve their distinct identity.[8] Even though their self-esteem had been bruised by the westerners' superiority, the gospel message of a God who yet loved each one of them gave the converts scope to develop a fresh source of pride.[9] Furthermore, the identification of the rulers with Christianity added to the power and prestige of this religion, while the educational systems established by the missionaries created a class of individuals equipped to participate in the new social order. The missionaries' invention of written forms of the tribal vernaculars, using the Roman script, also served to distance the emerging educated class from neighbouring civilisations, inclining them instead towards the West.[10]

With the end of warfare and raiding between villages, people came to discern a common identity extending beyond the face-to-face, village

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4 *Loc. cit.*

5 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

6 G. A. Oddie, 'Introduction', in Oddie, *op. cit.*, p. 7; Lal Dena, *Christian Mission and Colonialism: a study of missionary movement in Northeast India with particular reference to Manipur and Lushai Hills 1894-1947*, Shillong, 1988, pp. 87-88.

7 Downs, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 164-65.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 171.

10 Ferdaus A. Quarishi, *Christianity in the North Eastern Hills of South Asia: social impact and political implications*, Dhaka, 1987, p. 41.

community, embracing all members of the tribe or people who spoke the same language. The development of standardised, literary forms of these languages by the missionaries, and participation in church councils encompassing all members of the tribal/ethnic group connected to the same church, have helped to create new, broader social identities. In turn these have in recent times inspired separatist political movements.[11]

Conversion movements, for Downs, represent the attempt of tribal peoples to accommodate so many dramatic changes in their lives, and to maintain a distinctive identity once their isolation and old institutions had been destroyed. To understand such movements, we need to recognise 'the role of Christianity as the central agent of acculturation in a situation where traditional societies were giving way to the process of modernisation'.[12]

Of the numerous tribal groups in Northeast India, the Chin-Kuki-Mizo people (henceforth collectively called the 'Chikim'[13]), in Mizoram, Manipur and across the border in Burma, are now among the most thoroughly Christianised. As one would expect, the social conditions which Downs suggests encouraged the growth of conversion movements were to be found among the Chikim at the time of their conquest and the inception of missionary activity.

In both Mizoram — formerly the Lushai Hills — and Manipur, Christian missionaries arrived in 1894, three years after the territories had been subjugated by the British: Manipur as a princely state where the Chikim were a hill-dwelling minority, and the Lushai Hills under direct rule, a territory in which the tribals predominated. Historically, the Chikim were shifting cultivators. Before making use of a plot, they would first fell the vegetation and burn it, creating a relatively fertile piece of land to grow their crops. As the soil's fertility declined, the villagers would move on to a new location, erecting their homes on the ridges of the

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11 Dena, *op. cit.*, p. 105; B. B. Goswami, *The Mizo Unrest: a study of politicisation of culture*, Jaipur, 1979, pp. 168-69; Downs, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 173.

13 The term 'Chikim' is a neologism, invented by H. Thangjom ('Towards constructive destruction', in L. Haokip [ed.], *Kut Festival Souvenir*, Imphal, Manipur, 1990, pp. 19-21), formed as an abbreviation from the three words Chin, Kuki and Mizo, applied to the same people in different territories (B. Lalthangliana, *History of Mizo in Burma*, Aizawl, Mizoram, 1977, p. 69). The term is particularly attractive because it translates as 'all the clans' in various Chikim dialects. The term Mizo, meaning 'Hill people' was adopted to serve the same function in the early 1950s (Goswami, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23, 90-91). However, after the Lushai Hills had been renamed Mizoram, it has come to refer primarily to people living in this state.

hills and clearing the slopes for cultivation.[14] The Chikim tribes now located in Mizoram and Manipur are relatively recent settlers, having reached their current location during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[15]

Ironically, although the colonial authorities restricted access to the areas occupied by the Chikim to protect what they saw as primitive peoples from exploitation by more worldly-wise plainsmen, the population did undergo dramatic social upheavals. The colonial administration was partially responsible, imposing taxes which forced people to participate in the money economy, and prohibiting intervillage raiding. However, the missionaries, who were their main contact with the outside world, played an even bigger role.

The missionaries helped create a common language in Mizoram by taking 'Dulien', the main dialect spoken in the area, and using it as the medium of instruction. The extant literature in the language was what the missionaries had themselves translated and made available, namely tracts from the Bible. The influence of the missionaries in education was further extended when in 1912 the civil administration withdrew entirely from the field, paying a small subsidy to the missions to undertake this task.[16] Consequently, anyone who entered the education system would be likely to emerge from it as a baptised Christian. And education was popular for those who wished to utilise the new opportunities created by the Europeans. As a legacy of this historical situation, today Mizoram has the second highest level of literacy among all the states in India.

The traditional world view of the Chikim was essentially supernatural, with a belief in spirits who were present all around. Illnesses were usually attributed to their power. Cures were effected by healers or priests, who would seek to appease harmful spirits with sacrifices. The missionaries, westerners who operated from a natural interpretation of disease, treated ailments with modern medicines. Medicine, like education, was left by the

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[14] F. K. Lehman, *The Structure of Chin Society: a tribal people of Burma adapted to a non-western civilization*, 2nd ed., Aizawl, Mizoram, 1980, pp. 47-52; H. N. C. Stevenson, *The Economics of the Central Chin Tribes*, 2nd ed., Aizawl, Mizoram, 1986; Suhas Chatterjee, *Mizoram Encyclopaedia (in Three Volumes)*, Bombay, 1990, p. 50.

[15] Gangmumei Kabui, *History of Manipur, Vol. 1: Pre-colonial Period*, New Delhi, 1991, p. 274; Lehman, *op. cit.*, p. 25; B. B. Goswami, 'The Mizos in the Context of State Formation', in S. C. Sinha (ed.), *Tribal Polities and State Systems in Pre-Colonial Eastern and North Eastern India*, New Delhi, 1987, p. 313. In 1993, the other main tribal aggregation in Manipur, the Nagas, began a campaign of threats and violence to oust the Chikim from the state, asserting that they had usurped Naga lands.

[16] Quarishi, *op. cit.*, p. 26; Dena, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

authorities in the hands of the missionaries, who could show themselves to be more powerful healers than were the traditional practitioners. The use of these healing powers encouraged conversion to Christianity, partly because the cured were more receptive to the message from their healers, but also because the missionaries urged the sick to say a short prayer when taking the medication, suggesting that it was Christ who was working through the medicine to effect recovery.[17]

As puritanical Protestants, the missionaries consciously sought to alter behaviour which they considered unacceptable. They forbad the drinking of *zu* (rice beer); insisted on 'modest' (western) dress for their followers; discouraged the *zawlbuk* (the communal dormitory where the young men of the village had been expected to reside until marriage) as an invitation to 'immorality'; disapproved of divorce and remarriage; and agitated for the abolition of the 'bawi' system of servitude, which they considered tantamount to slavery.[18]

Notwithstanding the cultural biases of the western missionaries, who instilled in their early followers an abhorrence of their ancestors' customs[19] and suppressed many aspects of the old culture — even where these were not inimical to fundamental Christian teachings[20] — after an initial period of hostility from the natives, they gradually won the respect and hearts of the majority. The behaviour of Christian villagers during the famine of 1912 in Mizoram, who willingly shared what they had with everyone, Christian and non-Christian alike, led to many new converts. In previous famines prosperous villagers had fended off the hungry to preserve what they had for themselves.[21]

The 1901 census recorded 26 native Christians in Mizoram; in 1911 there were 1,329. By 1921, the figure had risen to 27,791, close to a third of the population — notwithstanding the fact that enumerators were apparently stringent in whom they registered as a Christian. In one village, all the members of a particular family were counted as Christians except for a five-year-old boy, who was entered as an animist because 'he was so hungry at meal times that he would begin eating without first saying grace'.[22]

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17 *Ibid.*, pp. 105-07.

18 Anthony Gilchrist McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis*, Aizawl, Mizoram, 1977, pp. 125-31; Dena, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-75.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

20 Quarishi, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-37.

21 Downs, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

22 Dena, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

Christianity has continued to grow in both Manipur and Mizoram, after India gained independence in 1947, and after foreign missionaries were forced to leave the region in 1970. While the total number of Christians has been increasing, the 1981 census showed a significant decline in the proportion of Christians to the total population in Mizoram, from 86.1% in 1971 (286,141 individuals) down to 83.7% (413,340 individuals). In Manipur in 1981, 420,000 Christians constituted 29.7%, while tribals totalled 460,000, 32% of the state's population.[23] As we have previously noted, most of the Christians in the area are of tribal origin.

If Christianity met 'a felt need' for the tribals when the missionaries arrived, then clearly its continued growth suggests that the need is still present. And yet the rising proportion of non-Christians suggests that some former Christians have been leaving the faith. For these people, it would seem, Christianity no longer adequately fulfils their perceived needs. Given the many positive effects which Christianity has had on the population, why people should choose to leave the religion calls out for explanation.

One new phenomenon recorded in the region has been the appearance of 'Jews': 1,000 in Mizoram, and 2,900 in Manipur, according to recent Indian government sources.[24] Judaism is not a missionising religion and there has not been an influx of Jews from elsewhere in India, or from other parts of the world. The Jewish populations in these two states are indigenous Chikim tribals who have come to attach themselves to the Jewish faith.

During the past forty years, a Judaising movement has taken root among the Chikim in Mizoram, Manipur, and the Chin State of North Burma.[25] This movement has propelled a small segment of the Chikim to full conversion to Judaism, settlement in Israel, and adoption of a radically different lifestyle. As of August, 1994, there were around 150 such people living in Israel, mostly young adults between 18 and 30 years of age, and more are expected to arrive in the near future. These people are not the founders of the Judaising movement but represent its second generation, having themselves been raised in families which had already embraced

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23 Thanzauva, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

24 Yosef Goell,'Forget the Lost Tribes, Aid Lost Souls', *The Jerusalem Post*, Friday, August 26, 1994, p. A6.

25 Myer Samra, 'Judaism in Manipur and Mizoram: By-product of Christian Mission', *The Australian Journal of Jewish Studies*, 6 (1), 1992, pp. 7-22.

some form of 'Judaism' before they were born, or when they were still young children.[26]

Certainly in this process there has been a 'stepping over the threshold' from one religious community, Christianity, to another, Judaism. Such a 'change of religious fellowship' would generally 'suggest dissatisfaction, restlessness, seeking something better' and 'a palpable declaration that association with the old community was somehow negative compared to identification with the new community'.[27] While this is true for those who have now completed the process of conversion, in this paper we shall examine the beliefs and practices of the early followers of the Judaising cult, to show that many of them saw the path they were treading as one mandated by their faith in Jesus: somewhat ironically, in their endeavour to become better Christians, they have drifted in the direction of Judaism.

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When Protestant missionaries began operating in Manipur and the Lushai Hills (present day Mizoram) in 1894, there was some initial rivalry between the various missionary societies, but the missionaries came to agree upon the division of the territory among themselves. The American Baptist Foreign Mission Society operated in Manipur, the Welsh Calvinistic Foreign Mission Society (a Presbyterian group) in North Lushai Hills,[28] and the British Baptist Missionary Society in the South Lushai Hills. Each mission jealously guarded its 'spiritual hegemony', blocking the attempts of other denominations, such as the Salvation Army and the Catholic Church, to enter its domain. The colonial administration recognised these exclusive jurisdictions and helped the established denominations against encroachment by newcomers.[29]

While the early missionaries were puritanical in their approach, in 1906 Revivalism was introduced into the area, with its emphasis on charismatic leadership, ecstatic worship, biblical interpretation and prophecy, and possession by the Holy Spirit. Although this movement led to a dramatic

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26 Myer Samra, 'True Converts of Honor', *The Jerusalem Post*, Sunday, October 16, 1994, p. 6; Yossi Klein Halevi, 'The Unwanted Immigrants', *The Jerusalem Report*, November 17, 1994, pp. 26-27.

27 Oddie, *op. cit.*. p. 6.

28 In December, 1994, one hundred years after the first missions took hold in Mizoram, out of concern for the decline of Christianity in the West, the Presbyterian synod in the State considered a proposal to send missionaries to work among the Welsh. This proposal lapsed owing to a less than enthusiastic response from the Church which had initially missionised the Mizos.

29 Dena, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-70.

surge in conversions, eventually both the churches and the civil administration sought to curb it, since the unrestrained interpretation of the Bible which it fostered and the demands made by self-proclaimed prophets challenged the authority of both the missionaries and the government.[30] But attempts to control the movement proved unsuccessful. Significantly the revivalist United Pentecostal Church is today the third largest denomination in Mizoram, after the Presbyterian and Baptist Churches. Many splinter churches have also come into existence, most of them being off-shoots of the revival movement.[31]

From their earliest encounter with the Bible, Mizos found parallels with their pre-Christian traditions, leading some to speculate whether they might not have an Israelite origin.[32] By 1936, the revivalist Saichhunga was asserting that the Mizos were 'the lost tribals of Israel'.[33] In 1951 this idea was taken up by Mela Chala, the barely literate Head Deacon of the United Pentecostal Church in Buallawn village, which lies 140 km. north of Aizawl, the state capital of Mizoram. Mela Chala had a vision which persuaded him that the Mizos were descendants of one of the Lost Tribes of Israel. Consequently, to escape annihilation in the impending war of Armageddon, they had to follow biblical precepts directed to the Israelites, and to return to their historical homeland, Israel.

While others before him had also proclaimed their community's Israelite origins, Chala was the first to draw programmatic implications from this revelation, initiating a movement which, notwithstanding circumstances running counter to his prophecies, has continued to influence behaviour to this day: in Mizoram itself, and among Chikim communities in neighbouring states. Chala's revelation has led ultimately to the settlement of the Chikim young adults in Israel, and to a speech in Parliament by the Chief Minister of Mizoram in January, 1991, alluding to the ancient heritage of his people, who crossed the Red Sea with Moses. It has featured in material published by the Manipur Government in celebration of Kuki culture, and has been the central thesis of numerous pamphlets by proponents in Manipur and Mizoram, and of the popular book *Israel-Mizo Identity*, which has already undergone two English editions and one in Mizo.[34]

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30 B. B. Goswami, 'By-Product of Christianity on the Hill Tribesmen of North-east India', *Review of Ethnology*, 7/1-9, 1980, p. 43; McCall, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

31 B. Thangchina, 'Christian Unity in Mizoram', in Thanzauva, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

32 Samra, 'Judaism', pp. 11-12.

33 Rev. Lalbiaktluanga, 'Theological Trends in Mizoram', in Thanzauva, *ed. cit.*, p. 66.

34 Zaithanchhungi, *Israel-Mizo Identity*, Aizawl, Mizoram, 1990; *Israel-Mizo Identity* (Mizo Edition), Aizawl, Mizoram, 1992.

It seems difficult to imagine a community of cultivators, whom one would expect to be deeply attached to their land, who could feel that their real home lay elsewhere, yet the fact that they had come from somewhere else so relatively recently and that they had a long memory of frequent movement, makes it plausible for the Chikim to identify with the wandering Israelites and to contemplate their true home as being in another place. I was touched by the pathetic plea of Sêna, a 93-year-old man who had worked as a cultivator in Mizoram all his life, expressing an anxiety that he might die in the only place he had ever known, without reaching Israel. 'Could you kindly organise to take me to Jerusalem?' he begged, 'Will there be any hope for me? If I go to Jerusalem, our ancestral city, no matter if I die, no matter at all ... Mizoram is not our land, though we are living here till this day. Our ancestral land, our actual homeland, is Israel.'

Sêna was anxious that he might die in Mizoram. He did not want to be buried there, in this 'strange' land — the only land he had ever known. 'So long as I am in Mizoram, I am a stranger. So instead of burying my head in Mizoram, I would prefer to come as a bullet in Israel.' I understood this last expression to mean that he would prefer to go to Israel rather than dying in Mizoram; even if in Israel he were to serve as cannon fodder in the country's battles, he would feel fulfilled.

Nowadays, belief in the Chikims' Israelite origin is not confined to any one single church group. It is an article of faith among a number of small Revivalist groups whose beliefs and practices may be incompatible with one another. In addition, many members of conventional churches are also convinced of their Israelite origins, although their churches do not preach this as a doctrine. These ideas are also expounded by certain political groups seeking support among the scattered Chikim.

Mela Chala's early followers are today associated with various denominations, some of them retaining their adherence to Chala's teachings, while others have distanced themselves from them. The members of Mela Chala's family are equally divided among different denominations. While his widow kept faith with her husband's teachings, their son Challiankhuma has rejoined the United Pentecostal Church, which observes Sunday as its sabbath. Chala's daughter Challianmuani belongs to G. J. Hnamte's Church of God (Seventh Day), which rejects the notion of the Chikims' Israelite origin. Its members celebrate the Sabbath on Saturday and observe other Old Testament practices, while retaining their faith in Jesus.

Chala's youngest son, Para, who lives in Kolasib, northern Mizoram, was a follower of 'Messianic Judaism' until 1991, a group essentially following his father's teachings. After one Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail visited

Mizoram that year, he shifted to a congregation which observes conventional Judaism. Para claims to know little of his father's teachings and practices, since he was quite young when his father passed away in 1959, at age 40.

I was in Aizawl in April, 1992, to learn what I could about Mela Chala, his early followers, their beliefs and practices. I met and interviewed several individuals who had been associated with Chala's group during the 1950s. My principal informants were Chala's daughter Challianmuani, now a widow in her mid-40s, the 93-year-old Sêna, whom we have already met, and Manliana, who has taken the name Ben-Zion. Aged 57, he is a member of a group attempting to observe conventional Judaism.

Manliana was born in Buallawn, and his family accepted the teachings of Chala around 1953. In his adult life, he remained a cultivator in the Buallawn district until 1981, when he moved to Aizawl, where he now works as a peon in the public service. Sêna did not live in Buallawn but was attracted to Chala's teachings in the mid 1950s, and sought to practise them in Lungdai, his home village. He is now a member of Dr H. Thangruma's International Church of God (Zionist), which separated from Rev G. J. Hnamte's group in the 1960s. This sect also worships Jesus while claiming, as Chala himself asserted, that the Mizos are descendants of the lost tribe of Manasseh.

Challianmuani's congregation, the Church of God (Seventh Day), is linked in fellowship to similarly named groups in other countries. Although this church observes Saturday rather than Sunday as the Sabbath and celebrates the biblical festivals, G. J. Hnamte, the church's leader in Mizoram, rejects the claim that the Mizos have an Israelite background. As Challianmuani made clear when I tried to ascertain if she had kept up her father's tenets, she does expect to go to Jerusalem when the Messiah comes, though not because of any Israelite ancestry, as her father had taught, but 'as a believer, as a Christian. Not as a descendant of Manasseh, but because Jerusalem is the meeting place, the gathering place of all nations of believers.'

When I probed whether she accepted the proposition that she was a descendant of the ancient Israelites, her response was doctrinally correct Christianity:

> So far as we claim to be Christians and to be children of God, we are Israelites. This is not on account of my father's teaching or his concerns, but it is the teaching of Scripture. Believers are children of

God, and Children of God are Israelites. We are grafted onto the tree of Israel, not descendants.

Today, I understand, most of the former members of Mela Chala's group are members of this church. As Rev. Hnamte put it, 'In 1975, they merged with me, with the Church of God (Seventh Day). They're honest people, but those who commit adultery, they join this Judaism because there is no place for them in our church.'[35]

From my interviews with Challianmuani, Sêna and Ben-Zion I shall attempt to convey something of the teachings of Mela Chala, along with the history, activities and beliefs of the Buallawn group, and how their experiences have influenced political and religious developments in the region. I shall attempt to weave together, from the accounts of these informants, a brief historical sketch of the group.

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The village of Buallawn no longer exists. There was an uprising in Mizoram in 1966, with the Mizos seeking to break away from India.[36] To control the people better, the Government clustered neighbouring villages together so that they could be more easily watched.[37] The Buallawn people were shifted into a new village called Ratu, only a couple of kilometres away. This remained the focus of the Israelite cult until the mid-70s, when new groups arose to proclaim the 'truth' initially in Bualzang village near Churachandpur in Manipur, then spreading back to Mizoram and into Burma's Chin State.

As one approaches Buallawn, there is an imposing *pura* or memorial stone just outside the village. Carved at the top of the stone, in English, are the words 'MEMORY OF ISRAEL'. Etched in the bottom right hand corner is a six cornered star, perhaps more like a six petalled flower than the star of David, which presumably it is meant to represent. Framed in between is a text in Mizo which, translated into English, reads: 'For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation. [Blessed be

35 In light of this statement, it is significant that Dr H. Thangruma who founded the Church of God (Zionist) had been expelled from Mr Hnamte's group after having divorced his first wife and remarried. Similarly, two of Thangruma's early followers who came to lead the move to Judaism, Joseph Rei and Levy Benjamin, had both also divorced and married again.

36 Chatterjee, *op. cit.*, p. 542.

37 See Goswami, *The Mizo Unrest*, pp. 172-177.

the God of Israel who] has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.'

This *pura* indicates the way the Buallawn Israel group saw themselves, thanking the Lord God of Israel that they, as one of the lost tribes, had now discovered their identity. With God's help, they had been redeemed and had found salvation. The *pura* affirms their conviction that they are Israelites, recently returned to the fold. Yet the passage tells us more, for in fact it is Luke, chapter 1, verses 49, 50, 68 and 69, and Jesus is the 'horn of salvation' referred to. Strikingly, to express their conviction that they are the redeemed children of Israel, they have turned to the New Testament for their validation. What we have here is a people who have come to regard themselves as Israelites, and have deemed it imperative to observe the laws in the Bible applicable to Israelites — *because* they believe in Jesus. Although they see themselves as Israelites, they are still operating from a Christian world-view, with assumptions about Israelites, which they apply to themselves, taken from Christianity and the New Testament as well as the Old.

Ben-Zion recalls the start of the movement, around 1952, although, because the members of the group did not write what they were doing, they 'didn't know dates exactly'. Nonetheless, the movement began when 'Chala had a vision. He was sleeping and in his vision God had told him "You are the people of Israel. You must go back to your country, back to Israel."' As Sêna recalls the revelation,

> Chala was the first among Mizo people who came to know, to see, that Mizos are sons of Israel, of Manasia.[38] God revealed to Chala, through his Spirit, saying that the Mizos are all descendants of 10 lost tribes of Israel. That is God's revelation to Chala, who was first to realise that Mizos are Israel. Therefore his followers all realised, from around 1953, that they were Israelites, of the tribe of Manasseh. All the villagers of Buallawn embraced Chala's vision, and asserted they were Israelites. All people of Mizoram heard and knew that they were all Israel, but unfortunately, they were all uneducated people.

This revelation had both pleasing and disturbing implications. Ben-Zion tells us, 'They were dancing with joy when he told his vision. They didn't

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38 The suffix '-a' denotes a masculine noun in Mizo, in which language all names end either with '-a' for males, or '-i' for females. Thus the biblical name David is rendered 'Davida' and Jesus becomes 'Jesua'. The word 'Manasia' consequently suggests the male Manasi, here being equated to the biblical Manasseh.

know where Israel is, and so they went searching where Israel is to be found. So they tried their very best to learn about it.' While it was a source of joy to be told that they were the people of Israel, it was disturbing because they did not know how they were expected to behave as Israelites, nor where the land of Israel was located. Furthermore if they did not return to their proper homeland, they might be destroyed. As one Levy Benjamin records in a submission to Israel's Chief Rabbinate, Chala, along with a number of other Mizo men, had received 'the word of the spirit of the Lord, ... telling them that we are Israel ... Henceforth from every part of Mizoram we cried longing for our homeland Israel and searched every possible way for contacting' it.[39]

Ben-Zion reminds us, 'Judaism was not yet born at the time of Chala', the group retaining their faith in Jesus, although they now rejected the term Christian as a designation for themselves, and saw themselves as Israelites. A wedge had developed between them and the conventional Christians, Presbyterians, etc., who 'didn't regard us as Christians, because we read the Bible and did as we saw [we should do]'. Conventional Christians considered that they had crossed beyond the bounds of Christianity and referred to them as the 'Israel Pawl', the Israel Group.

Sêna, today a member of the Church of God (Zionist), a church which recognises the messiahship of Jesus, is loathe to call himself a Christian. Although he was born a few short years after the arrival of the first missionaries in Mizoram, into a family which adopted Christianity when he was still a child, he nonetheless declares, 'We are not satisfied with that Christianity. I hate that missionary who sowed the seed of Christianity. They did not teach us the very origin of the Mizo tribes, [our] history.' Had they done so, he suggests, all the Mizos would have realised that they were from the tribes of Israel.

How as Israelites they should conduct their lives Chala and his followers deduced from reading the Bible. A central tenet was the observance of the Sabbath on Saturday rather than the Sunday observed by conventional Christians. But even this change created difficulties with neighbours. 'From the beginning, because we were among the Christian people, it was very difficult, because people looked down on us.' They were not, however, aware of how the Jews kept the Sabbath. As Sêna recalls, 'I began to observe Sabbath day around 1957. First we believed God urged us to observe Sabbath because we had no energy to work, we became like a sick

[39] Letter dated 3 February, 1984, from Levy Benjamin, General Secretary of Manasseh People Shinlung-Israel Northeast India, Mizoram, to the Chief Rabbinet (sic) Council, Israel.

person on that day.'[40] His wife, in particular, appears to have become immobilised on the Sabbath. 'Her body, all parts of her body and mind, were forcibly controlled by Spirit, by God', so that she 'could not work, she had no energy, had no appetite for food, and was very exhausted. With no mind, and no energy to work, she was forced to observe Sabbath day. ... We were always weary or weeping, ... with tears on our cheeks, because of our yearning for Zion, for Jerusalem.

'We observed Sabbath day as a holiday. We did not work, we observed, as far as I can, strictly, as our Christian friends observed Sunday. But from the beginning, as we remember that we are descendants of Israel, we observe Sabbath as an important sign between God and his people Israel.' And, in accordance with the reckoning of the days of creation in the Bible, 'Sabbath began sunset Friday, and ended the next sunset'.

As well as observing the Sabbath, the followers of Chala also abstained from pork. Sêna avers, 'From the beginning when we observed sabbath day, we abstained from unclean meat as mentioned in the Bible, Leviticus, chapter 11, concerning pork et cetera'. However, circumcision was not practised. In later years, the question of circumcision was to become a central point of conflict on which daughter congregations would part company, between those who took the view that they were obliged to follow the commandment which appears in Genesis 17:11-12 to circumcise their male children, and those who held that one only needed a 'circumcised heart' (cf. Jeremiah 9:26). Indeed, as some of these people have interpreted St Paul's pronouncement (Romans 3:4) on the subject, the actual performance of a physical circumcision indicates a lack of faith in Jesus as saviour.

The three pilgrim festivals recorded in the Old Testament, Passover, Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles, were observed in a fashion, but apparently none of the other Jewish holidays. Challianmuani recalls that Passover was celebrated some time in April. A *puithiam* (priest) would kill a lamb, 'and [he] impaled the lamb with two sticks, in the form of a cross'.

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[40] This recalls Downs (*op. cit.*, p. 170) concerning 'The Christian no-work day, Sunday', which many new Christians understood 'in much the same way as they did the old taboo days when it was considered inauspicious to leave the village or carry on normal work'. In Mizo, the word *hrilh* is used for this kind of taboo. Writing about customs at the time of British contact, Parry notes that 'an individual or a whole village may be *hrilh* according to circumstances. A person who is *hrilh* must do no work except the ordinary household tasks and there are certain other prohibitions which vary with the nature of the *hrilh* ... *Hrilh* may be divided into *hrilh* due to the occurrence of a misfortune and *hrilh* on account of a festival or a sacrifice' (N. E. Parry, *Lushai Custom: a monograph on Lushai customs and ceremonies*, Aizawl, Mizoram, 1988, pp. 88-89).

After they had butchered it, the members of the family ate the lamb (cf. Exodus 12:6). Sêna states that

> on the day of Passover, we did a sacrifice of sheep and goat, and laid up some stones, piled them up as an altar, spilling blood of the animals on the altar [cf. Exodus 29:16], smearing the blood and making *beraw*, incense. ... The sacred parts of the animal were sacrificed on the altar, and the rest of the flesh we ate. Sometimes we prepared some Mizo *chhung*, bread from rice. It doesn't rise like European bread.[41] Passover was observed sometimes two or three days, sometimes seven, according to convenience.[42]

Sêna, who is illiterate, cannot recall that any particular foods were avoided on the Passover. He emphasises, however, that they never worked during the festival, and after dinner, prayers were recited. These were Christian prayers as 'we did not know any Jewish prayers'. Ben Zion also recollects that at Passover they smeared 'blood of animal on the doorpost' (cf. Exodus 12:22). The date for the festival of Pentecost was established according to Sêna 'by counting 50 days just after the day of Passover' (cf. Leviticus 23:15-16). This festival was observed 'simply as a holiday. Sometimes we prepared a feast. Always there was group singing, making merry, that's all. Sometimes they prepared Mizo *chhung*.'

The Feast of Tabernacles, says Sêna, was celebrated in October. 'We usually observed for seven days, with no work [cf. Leviticus 23:41]. We would keep it very carefully and seriously, all as we can, to signify we are tribes of the descendants of Israel. Sometimes we would kill sheep and a cow ... but we don't know, don't have the [correct] rate of animals to kill. Sometimes one, or perhaps three.' And according to Challianmuani during Tabernacles 'they went to the outskirts of the village and built a hut from leaves and from branches and made a congregation there' (cf. Leviticus 23:42). Ben Zion adds that they 'stayed there all day and night, but went back to sleep at home'. As Challianmuani reminds us about such observances, 'They did it *because* they believed in Jesus, and they also believed they were Israel'.

In addition to performing these rites, the Buallawn community also believed they were obliged to return to Israel. Now the search for Israel took on an exciting and dramatic cast. Although, Ben-Zion tells us, they

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[41] The eating of leavened bread during the Passover is expressly forbidden (Exodus 12:15-20).

[42] The Bible calls for the observance of seven days (Exodus 12:15-19).

were aware of Israel's existence from the Bible, they did not know for sure whether this land existed 'in the [i.e. this] world or in heaven'; and 'so they opened the Bible and read' to find out where Israel might be. They also sought information from other written sources. Since there were no newspapers in Buallawn, they trekked to Aizawl, a difficult task at the time before proper roads had been built, looking for information. Three times they set out, by foot, 'Silchar, Manipur side, to find a magazine with information about Israel, and they found it on the third time'.

Once again, the Holy Spirit helped, for Chala had a vision that guided them on to the right path. According to Ben Zion:

> After the second time, Chala was told to go to Burma, and there he would 'meet one *Kawl* [i.e. Burmese] *Puithiam* [priest], and ask him, and he will tell you everything. That *Kawl Puithiam* will be able to tell you many things about Israel, and how you are descendants of Israel people. That *Puithiam* may tell you that you are one of the Ten Tribes of Israel, and you will find a newspaper, and on the right page you will find an address, on the right side. That will be Israel's address.' This is what he was told in his vision.

In due course, this vision was fulfilled. As instructed, Chala went off to Burma accompanied by a friend, Darnghaka the village headman, a man who was literate in Mizo but not in English. As prophesied, they met up with a priest in Burma who, Ben-Zion explained,

> told him, 'You are one of the Ten Tribes of Israel, and your ancestor is Manasseh'. Then after the meeting with the Kawl Puithiam they went to Imphal, and found a newspaper in a hotel. In the newspaper they found an address on the right side. They inquired about the address, but people thought Chala and his friend were [Police] C.I.D. officers. Therefore they were afraid to talk with them. As they could not get information from the people, they took that paper, and brought it back to Buallawn. They were very happy they found this thing, and knew it was God's oracle. So happy were they, they killed an ox and had a feast. From that paper, they knew it well. They were sure that there was a land of Israel, but had not known if it was in the world or in heaven. Now they realised, it was in this world.

The processes and the faith he had initiated survived Chala's death in 1959. At last his followers had an address for Israel. According to Ben

Zion, 'So they sent a letter to that address and sealed it with their tears', adding the practical comment, 'and they put more paste'. Sêna's account of what happened next is moving:

> It was learned, the Prime Minister of Israel carefully opened that letter before 120 honourable members of the Knesset [Israel's Parliament]. As soon as he opened that letter of memorandum, they said the Parliament building was shaking, as if there had been an earthquake. So members ran out of the Knesset, but outside, there was no shaking. It just occurred inside the Knesset, so that it was some sort of miracle by God. The opening day of that letter by the Prime Minister was 15 October, 1960, but just after that they had to go to Calcutta and members of Buallawn Israel headed off and out: east, west, south and north in Mizoram. And all the minds of the Mizo people were convinced [of their Israelite status] and see, and wake up to remember of which tribe we belong.

Ben Zion continues,

> The letter was sent to the Parliament of Israel, and they got a reply: 'We received your letter. We are very happy to receive your letter, and the Parliament was shaking like anything to receive your letter. Your country is very far from ours. There is one Consul — or ambassador — Mr Taskhere' — I do not know exactly what he was, but he was someone important — 'in Calcutta. From now, correspond with him, and he will do everything in our behalf, he will do everything on our behalf with you.'

The shaking of Parliament on the opening of the letter from Buallawn is apparently understood as a miracle which underscores the importance of the information that it contains, announcing to the people of the Jewish State that they had these long lost brothers, who were now ready to join them and return to Israel, their ancestral land.[43] Ben Zion is not exactly sure when this incident occurred, adding with regret that the letter from the Knesset was lost during the Troubles, that is the Mizo Uprising of 1966.

[43] Another informant - now living in Israel - who is aware of this tradition, has offered a less miraculous interpretation of the incident. She suggests that the Mizos have interpreted a metaphorical expression literally. The letter received from Israel indicated how stunning the members of the Knesset found the message it contained. They, rather than the Knesset building, were 'shaken' by the news.

Receipt of this letter in Mizoram had a great impact on the people there. To quote from Ben Zion, 'When this news arrived, it spread like wildfire. We had a public meeting in a theatre, where now the Vanapa Hall is standing [i.e. in the heart of Aizawl], and the whole people were shaking like anything. Many people sold their houses, some brought their bedding to go to Israel — even though they did not know where it was.' Challianmuani recalls that before her father had died his younger brother Chhunga had prophesied that there would be turmoil and disaster by 1966. Salvation was possible only by taking refuge in Israel. 'People thought he was a sluggard. He was weeping all the time, day and night.'

The cumulative effect of all these things, the fear of disaster in Mizoram, the contact established with Israel — tenuous though it actually was — the hope of leaving and resettling there, and the turmoil they had created in the state, convinced the authorities that the people of Buallawn were potentially dangerous. Consequently Darnghaka who had followed Chala as leader of the movement and of the people of Buallawn was asked by the Government to go to the District Court. According to Sêna, the Government 'forcibly asked him to put his signature before the judge of the District Council Court, not to continue their movement again', not to preach the doctrine that the Mizos were descended from the Israelites, on pain of imprisonment. Darnghaka signed the bond, and to this day I am told he is afraid to say anything publicly about the Buallawn beliefs, even though people are no longer prosecuted for voicing them. Nowadays Darnghaka is an elder of the Church of God (Seventh Day) in Ratu village.

The focus on Israel and salvation had an adverse effect on the practical requirements of daily living. People forsook their property to ready themselves for the move to Israel. Even the agricultural labour on which life depended was affected. Challianmuani is apologetic about her lack of education. She did not receive an education in Mizoram because her father saw no point in putting her into school and then having to pull her out once the family was ready to leave. She was to obtain her education in Jerusalem. As G. J. Hnamte explains, 'People thought if they go to Israel, they would have immortality. They imagined it was a holy place, and the uncircumcised, strangers and gentiles would not be able to enter the city. In this dream-land, they hoped to find perfection, and so they collected money for this purpose.' Even Laldenga, the man who was to lead the revolt in 1966, helped these millenarian visionaries at one stage, an event which was celebrated in song, though some have suggested that he was looking for popularity and political supporters.

The dramatic impact — and the confusion — which Chala's preaching had on the Chikim is evident from Hminga, a leading Baptist pastor, who wrote in 1963:

> A few years ago a Zionist movement sprang up from the extreme revivalist group which might have been inspired by a fanciful interpretation of the Bible ... The people who adhered to the movement claimed that the Lushai [i.e. Mizo] people were the lost tribe of Israel. They soon caused a stir throughout the country. They taught that Christ's second coming was drawing near and that the return of the people of Israel in dispersion to their home land was a sure sign. They said, 'Christ is going to establish His Kingdom on earth, in Israel, and we, being the lost tribe of Israel must also return to our home land'. There were several people going round the villages collecting names of those who would like to join the migration party. There was a time when 'Migration into Israel' was in the lips of almost everybody in Lushai.[44]

Hminga tells us that 'people argued about it [the Israelite prophecy] everywhere. More than once I had a long argument with people who said, "Suppose what the Zionists are saying is right, what will become of us, shall we not be found disobedient to the will of God".'[45] But the prospect of settling in Israel never materialised for the Buallawn community. In accordance with the instructions from Israel, contact with the Jewish community in Calcutta was initiated. Although the Jews and Israeli representatives were fascinated by the story the Mizos told as to how they had discovered their Israelite roots, this was not sufficient basis for acceptance in Israel under the Law of Return. Even if the claims could be substantiated, they were informed, they could not migrate to Israel since they were not recognised as Jews.

According to Hminga, the delegation who had gone to Calcutta 'came back disappointed', their hopes apparently scotched. 'As a result the movement soon declined although a very small remnant still cling to the movement.'[46] Whereas Hminga thought this setback on emigration had all but extinguished the Zionist movement, commitment to such prophecies

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[44] Quoted by Shalva Weil, 'Conversion among the "Children of Menasseh"', unpublished paper, NCJW School of Education, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1991, p. 17.
[45] *Ibid.*, p. 18.
[46] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

may survive and even become more fervent after disconfirmation.[47] While the faith of Buallawn faded from view, among themselves villagers in Buallawn (and Ratu from 1966) were still professing their Israelite status. Little was being done to propagate such beliefs farther afield. Still, the memory of Chala's claims lingered and occasional pilgrims made their way to Ratu where they were graciously received.

The movement received a new lease of life when the Mizo Revolt erupted in 1966. The Buallawn group were initially sympathetic to the rebels since they believed the rebels 'were fighting for the religious cause', although they were apparently disillusioned in due course.[48] At the same time, Goswami notes that with 'the outbreak of the Mizo unrest, the Biblical story of the lost tribe of Israel got prominence, along with the belief of the return of Christ. These themes were, however, short lived. Yet these themes created a lot of frenzy and frustration among the religious minded Mizos.'[49] How the hope for independence merged with the tribals' concept of themselves as Israelites was highlighted for me by the story of one informant, Hlupuii (now known as Elizabeth) who related that she had dreamt that the rebels had wrested their autonomy and appointed her to take charge of a hospital in Ratu village. As a result of this dream, she visited Ratu and eventually joined the Israelite Pawl.

Another sideline of the Uprising was the visit to Mizoram of General Jack Jacob, a Baghdadi Jew from Calcutta, the second ranking officer in India's eastern command. As Ben Zion tells of the encounter:

> One Indian Army Major General came here. He was very popular, and asked to meet the Israel people. One woman was carrying a baby in a *puan*[50] and the General asked her to stop. He said, 'O, that looks like a *talith/sisidh* of Israel'. So that General Jacob went to Ratu, near Buallawn, and sent a messenger to ask the people to come to Ratu, to talk to him. Only four people came. This was after the disturbance in Mizoram, so people were afraid of the military. Four of them went to

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47 Leon Festinger, H. W. Riecken and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails*, Minneapolis, 1956, pp. 4-5.

48 Goswami, 'By-Product', p. 46.

49 Goswami, *The Mizo Unrest*, p. 193.

50 The *naupuak-puan* is a special cloth which Mizos use for carrying children on their backs (Zaithanchhungi, *Israel-Mizo Identity*, 1990, p. 81). This *puan* (shawl, cloth) is white with black stripes across it, and knotted tassels hanging from the sides. It does resemble the *tallith* (or *sisidh*), the prayer shawl worn by Jews, although it differs in important details: most particularly in that it does not have fringes at the four corners of the garment, the crucial ritual feature of the prayer shawl.

meet the General. When they reached the place where he stayed, he asked them, 'Would you like to drink rum or fruit juice?' They said, 'No. We are celebrating our festival at present.' He was very pleased but they did not know whether he was an Israelite or not, so they were afraid. He asked them about their religion, and how they celebrated. After he went back they learnt he was an Israelite, so they were so sorry. If they had known, they would have had so much to say to him, and everyone would have come. They hadn't come because they'd thought they'd be arrested, because they'd been called by this Eastern Commander.

Around 1969, Pastor H. Thangruma who was familiar with Chala's claims visited Ratu to receive instruction in this faith. Thangruma began to preach Chala's ideas in Churachandpur, the principal Chikim town in Manipur. His followers included people who belonged to various clans and tribes, people from diverse walks of life, with widely different levels of education. Members of this congregation did not share the Ratu people's inhibition about proclaiming their good news. Consequently evangelists went out in all directions with their message, throughout Mizoram, across Manipur and the Chin State of Burma, indeed wherever the Chikim peoples were to be found.

Like his predecessors, Thangruma attempted to make contact with Israeli authorities and members of the Jewish community in India, proclaiming the Israelite origins of his people. Again like his predecessors, he was perturbed by the news that this background would not entitle him to settle in Israel. To this day, Thangruma, who now resides in Aizawl, retains both his belief in his people's Israelite background and his faith in Jesus, and continues to assert that he and his followers should be entitled to settle in Israel.[51]

In 1974-75, a split occurred among Thangruma's followers in Churachandpur and spread to Mizoram in 1976. The breakaway group had come to reject Jesus as the Messiah and sought to follow the teachings of Judaism. They too have had a struggle to achieve acceptance from the Jewish world, although their efforts have slowly paid off. In 1976, ORT India, a Jewish-run technical college in Bombay, began to accept students from this community, initially as day students, and subsequently also as boarders in the college's dormitories, where in addition to learning a trade,

[51] In 1994 one of Thangruma's daughters joined the followers of Judaism, resulting in her estrangement from her father.

they had the opportunity to see and to learn conventional Jewish practices, sending information about them to their kinfolk in Manipur and Mizoram.

The connections of this community with the Jewish people were immeasurably strengthened in 1979, when contact was made with Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail from Jerusalem, who heads an organisation called Amishav, which is searching for descendants of the Lost Tribes, to bring them back to Judaism and to the land of Israel. As were the leaders of Buallawn Israel, Amishav is motivated by a belief that the coming of the messianic era requires the redemption of the Ten Tribes. That they may be living as gentiles when discovered is not a problem, for they can undergo conversion to Judaism; and sincere conversion is held to be proof of one's Israelite origin.[52]

With this theological base, Rabbi Avichail has been willing to accept the Israelite claims of the Chikim and has helped members of the community to understand and to follow normative Judaism. Much of this assistance has been from a distance, through correspondence, the Rabbi sending books on Jewish religion to these remote congregations. In 1981 Rabbi Avichail encouraged three young members of the community, two men and one woman, to go to Israel to study Judaism. After spending a couple of years in Israel, the men went back to India to teach their communities.

Since November, 1989, Rabbi Avichail has assisted the 150 members of these communities now in Israel to reach the country, where they have studied Judaism, undergone formal conversion, and settled as orthodox Jews. Most of these new settlers have been young adults, who have in effect gone as proxies for their elders' long-cherished dreams. After completing their religious studies, the men have been conscripted into the Israeli army, where several have served in elite combat units — recalling the fortitude of Sêna, who dreamt of serving Israel 'as a bullet'.

The Israelite movement has waxed and waned as circumstances have changed. Rabbi Avichail's intervention has fulfilled the aspirations of some of the dreamers of Zion and has created a powerful stimulus for further growth of the Israelite movement. His two visits to Mizoram and Manipur, in 1991 and 1994 aroused considerable local publicity and attracted many people to the Jewish group. If the people of Buallawn may have looked foolish forty years ago when they sought to reach the Promised Land without any means of actually getting there, the Rabbi's role in helping a small portion of the Chikim to settle in Israel may serve as a vindication of Chala's vision.

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52 Eliyahu Avichail, *The Tribes of Israel: the lost and the dispersed*, Jerusalem, 1991, pp. 57-62.

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In this paper our concern has been to examine the nature of the Buallawn Israel movement established by Mela Chala in the 1950s. In doing so, we have ventured back into the history of contact with western missionaries, and forward to the more recent developments of the Israelite idea among the Chikim. As interesting as it may be to ascertain the factors which have eventually led people with belief in their Israelite origins to abandon their faith in Jesus as saviour and to convert to Judaism, our central concern is to understand what motivated the Buallawn movement itself, that is before conversion to Judaism was even considered.

As Downs has shown, conversion to Christianity was in many respects a movement by the tribal population in Northeast India to adjust to the social, cultural and political crises, the rapid changes of modernisation, which followed in the wake of subjugation to British rule. While Downs wrote of conditions generally throughout the region, our examination of the situation in Mizoram and Manipur from the 1890s confirms the validity of this approach to a study of the Chikim.

When Mela Chala began to preach in the early 1950s, this was also a time of dramatic change, linked with a social and political crisis. British rule ceased in 1947 and Mizoram became a part of the Union of India, as a district of the state of Assam, while Manipur, ostensibly an independent princely state, merged reluctantly with India in October, 1949.[53] As the British were preparing to relinquish their imperial rule in India and Burma, members of the administration expressed concern over the possible exploitation of the hill people in Mizoram and neighbouring districts, and toyed with a proposal to retain a hill-tribe protectorate.[54] A number of Mizo leaders advocated the incorporation of their territory into Burma, but the majority accepted the proposal to enter the Union of India.[55] Some individuals insist they believed this would be for an initial 'trial period' of ten years, after which they would have the opportunity to settle their final status.[56]

The Chikim had come to respect and even to feel affection for the missionaries and the British administrators. As Christianity became entrenched among the Chikim, it was now a source of pride to highlight

53 V. Venkata Rao, T. S. Gangte and Ksh Bimola Devi, *A Century of Government and Politics in North East India, Volume IV: Manipur*, New Delhi, 1991, p. 39.
54 McCall, *op. cit.*, p. 242.
55 Goswami, *The Mizo Unrest*, pp. 132-33.
56 *Ibid.*, p. 144.

the fact that although Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims lived in nearby areas, 'none of these great religious and philosophical systems exerted any appreciable influence on the religious and cultural life of the Mizos'.[57] Only Christianity had been able to make headway among them, as if their ancestors had been waiting all along for the right religion to make its appearance.[58]

The affection felt for the British did not extend to the Chikim's relations with the plain-dwellers of India, whom they designate by the pejorative term *vai* and regard with a combination of suspicion and contempt.[59] Furthermore, through the influence of the missionaries, and the use of the Latin script, the Chikim had come to identify with Western civilisation and to fear the prospect of being overwhelmed by the 'heathen', Hindu culture. Indeed, Downs suggests that when people had become dissatisfied with their old ways, the spread of Christianity was assisted by a fear that to adopt Hinduism would compel them to abandon their tribal identities and accept an inferior position within the society they would be entering.[60]

This fear of Hinduism and aversion to Indian civilisation was aggravated in the post-independence period, when in the interests of nation-building the government embarked upon 'a policy of complete integration of the tribal areas, together with total assimilation of the tribals into the mainstream Indian population'.[61] Attempts to promote the use of Assamese were resisted by the Mizos, while the failure of the Assamese government to cope with the famine of 1960 eventually led to the revolt of 1966 and Mizoram's abortive bid for independence.[62]

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57 Rev. Dr Zairema, 'The Mizos and their Religions', in Thanzauva, *op. cit.*, 1989, p. 31.

58 Myer Samra, 'The Tribe of Manasseh: "Judaism" in the Hills of Manipur and Mizoram', *Man in India*, 71 (1), 1991, p. 184.

59 B. B. Goswami, 'Outgroup from the point of view of Ingroup', *Man in India*, 55 (4), 1975, pp. 326-330. This attitude is still strong. On 26 September, 1994, a Mizo was murdered in Silchar, a predominantly Bengali town in Assam just outside Mizoram through which most of the State's imports including foods, fuel and manufactured goods must pass. The following day, apparently worked up by opposition politicians, Mizo mobs burnt and wrecked all the heavy vehicles on the road from Silchar, and smashed, torched and looted all Bengali businesses in Aizawl. This reaction caused hardship for the Mizos in the light of their dependence upon Silchar, and conditions took several months to restabilise.

60 Downs, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

61 Quarishi, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

62 Chatterjee, *op. cit.*, pp. 541-42.

The Buallawn group had adopted their Israelite beliefs prior to the outbreak of the Mizo Uprising, while this political and cultural ferment was brewing. Although eventually their ideas have led a small section of the Chikim population to 'step over the threshold' from the fellowship of Christians into Judaism, a separate religious community, this was neither the intention nor the expectation of the people concerned, neither of Chala nor his followers.

The Bible teaches that all people are descendants of the same ancestors, from Adam and Eve, and from the children of Noah after the great flood (Genesis 10:32). Since the Bible narrative focuses on the Middle East, Chikim Christians have presumed that ultimately their origins are from that region. The Buallawn community took this further by seeing themselves not only as descendants of Noah, but also of the Israelites, the people whose history is followed in the Bible, a people with whom the Christianised Chikim had become very familiar through their attachment to the Bible.

Mela Chala was an evangelist for the United Pentecostal Church, a revivalist sect, when he experienced his visions. Such sects are particularly concerned about biblical prophecy and the exact meaning of the words of the Bible from which they seek signs on how they should conduct their lives.[63] For these groups, inspired by messianic hopes, the people whose history is recounted in the Bible, the Jews — and the state of Israel — have a unique prestige. The re-establishment of the Jews' national existence after a break of almost 2,000 years is taken to be the fulfilment of prophecy and a portent to the realisation of many others. Such prophecies may come directly from the Bible, or may have been revealed to the sects' own leaders, under the inspiration of 'Spirit', as Sêna calls the third entity in the Christian Trinity.

For the Baptist Hminga, Chala's group were 'extreme Revivalist(s) ... inspired by a fanciful interpretation of the Bible', though nonetheless basing themselves upon the Christian holy book. The elements of Israelite practice which they sought to follow — Sabbath observance, the Pilgrim Festivals and dietary restrictions — are all to be found in the pages of the Bible. While the followers of Chala were 'fundamentalists' in a Christian sense, Goswami[64] identifies in them and other cults which have arisen in the region a sentimental attachment to their pre-Christian society and to 'some of the values of the traditional culture'. Interestingly, they have looked backwards, both into their own pre-Christian traditions and into the

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63 Samra, 'The Tribe'.

64 'By-Product'.

pre-Christian elements of the Bible which the missionaries had taught them, and believed they had found the same thing, leading them to identify themselves with the pre-Christian Israelites.

This belief has a psychological value, for the discovery of their ancient Israelite origins redeems the Chikim's ancestors from the status of 'headhunting savages' which the missionaries assigned to them. Instead, Chala's revelation suggests that they were the people at the centre of the Bible narrative — and indeed, even distant kinsmen of the revered Jesus.[65] Furthermore, from being a small, insignificant community in the vastness of the Indian population, by writing themselves into the Bible the Chikim achieve the ability to see themselves at the centre of revelation and of world history. Thus, the notion that they are Israelites and that they are destined to return to the land of Israel provides an avenue of escape from *vai*-dominated India.

In this context, it is possible to appreciate how at the same time as the Israelite belief took hold, Christianity was also continuing to spread among the Chikim, after India's independence and the exodus of foreign missionaries. Mela Chala's ideas were not anti-Christian. He remained a firm believer in the role of Jesus as redeemer and was convinced that the messianic kingdom was soon to be established. In Chala's vision, the Chikim play a more illustrious role in the redemption than other Christians, because of their purported Israelite origins. This idea appealed to the majority of Chikim, leading to widespread enthusiasm for migration to Israel, as recorded by Goswami and Hminga, and described by our informants Sêna and Ben-Zion.

But Chala's prophecy was not fulfilled — certainly not in his lifetime. The Messiah did not reappear; the Chikim were not transported to Israel; and consequently Challianmuani did not receive her education. With the failure of the prophecy, it lost most of its mass support, although it continued to persist among the people of Buallawn and other small pockets of the population, bursting onto the wider stage each time the Chikim faced a common crisis. Yet with each revival, it took a different hue: clearly the Messiah did not come in 1959, perhaps he would in 1966, or in 1987 (when Mizoram achieved statehood within the Indian union); leading to a multiplication of the specific ideas followed by the various communities which have been nourished by Mela Chala's original vision.

Chala himself had not 'stepped over the threshold' from the Christian fellowship to Judaism, but his ideas helped to uncover the seeds of this

65 Samra, 'Judaism'.

religion embedded in that matchless legacy of Christian missionary penetration, the Holy Bible.

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Old Wine in New Bottles? Kartabhaja (Vaishnava) Converts to Evangelical Christianity in Bengal, 1835-1845

G. A. Oddie *

This paper owes a great deal to the anthropologist, Robin Horton. In the 1970s, he produced several important articles on the role of indigenous or pre-conversion ideas in the spreading of Islam and Christianity in Africa.[1] While his specific arguments about the African situation are still a matter of debate, there can be no doubt that his work has had a considerable impact on studies of conversion and religious change, not only in Africa, but in other countries as well.[2]

Of special relevance in what follows are three of Horton's more general and interrelated points — ideas and assumptions which have influenced much of our discussion of Kartabhaja conversion. Firstly, Horton joins with many other scholars in calling for a return to 'the intellectualist approach', an approach 'which takes systems of belief at their face value — i.e. as theoretical systems intended for the explanation, prediction and control of space-time events'. Secondly, and in line with this, he underlines the role of reason and endorses Weber's concept of 'rationalization'. To 'rationalize', in Weber's view, is 'to reorder one's religious belief in a new and more coherent way to be more in line with what one knows and experiences'. Thirdly, when discussing ways in which 'rationalization' or change takes place, Horton stresses the importance of continuities and links between old and new systems of belief. As he writes in the second of his articles on African conversion, 'One does not treat any human group as a *tabula rasa* automatically registering the imprint of external cultural

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1 'African Conversion', *Africa*, vol. 41, no. 1, April, 1971, pp. 85-106; 'On the Rationality of Conversion', Part I, *Africa*, vol. 45, no. 3, 1975, pp. 219-235, and Part II, *ibid.*, pp. 373-99.

2 For further discussion of Horton's work see D. M. Schreuder and G. A. Oddie, 'What is "Conversion"? History, Christianity and Religious Change in Colonial Africa and South Asia', *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 15, no. 4, December, 1989, pp. 496-518.

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

tabula rasa automatically registering the imprint of external cultural influence. Rather one treats it as the locus of thought-patterns and values that determine rather closely which of these influences will be accepted and which rejected.'[3]

In 1972, one year after Horton published the first of his articles on African conversion, Dennis Hudson published an analysis of Hindu and Christian theological parallels in the conversion of H. A. Krsna Pillai — a nineteenth century Tamil convert.[4] This might be rated as another example of 'the intellectualist approach'. Furthermore, although it is a study of the intellectual development and process of adaptation involved in the conversion of *an individual*, it does provide some clues as to how the dynamics might work in a Hindu and more general 'mass movement' context — the term 'mass movement' being used in this and in the following discussion to indicate both 'quantity and connectedness' in low caste and tribal conversion. In 1984 Richard M. Eaton published a study of pre-Christian cosmology and the role of indigenous ideas in the conversion of large numbers of tribals in northeastern India (1876-1971),[5] and there has also been some attempt to explore the relationship between south Indian religious ideas about famine and subsequent mass conversions to Christianity in Travancore in the nineteenth century.[6]

However, apart from the latter somewhat restricted investigation, there has been no serious study of the role of pre-conversion ideas in the rise and growth of Christian group or mass movements which originated within the framework of Hindu caste society. How important were religious ideas or assumptions in these movements? How far did pre-existing beliefs and attitudes either inhibit or facilitate the conversion process? What parallels were there in Hindu and Christian thought and how important were these parallels in conversion? This paper is an attempt to explore these issues with reference to Kartabhaja conversion in the first half of the nineteenth century.

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3 Horton, 'On the Rationality', p. 221.

4 D. D. Hudson, 'Hindu and Christian Theological Parallels in the Conversion of H. A. Krsna Pillai, 1857-1859', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. X1, no. 2, June, 1972.

5 R. M. Eaton, 'Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876-1971', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. XX1, no.1, January-March, 1984, pp. 1-44.

6 Dick Kooiman, *Conversion and Social Equality in India*, Delhi, 1989, pp. 81-82, 188-189.

The Social Context and Rise of the Kartabhaja Movement

The Kartabhaja sect is commonly regarded as an offshoot of the Bengali Vaishnava movement.[7] The sect, together with many other movements, arose in the flux and turmoil of rapid political, social and economic change in Bengal in the mid-eighteenth century. The first in a succession of hereditary leaders of the sect, Ram Saran Pal, who died in about 1783, was a Sadgop (milkman) by caste, but cultivator by profession.[8] In the early nineteenth century the community also included Brahmans and some well placed Western-educated members of the burgeoning middle class.[9] For the most part, however, members of the sect were low caste, poor and illiterate people engaged in a variety of agricultural operations.

In districts like Krishnagar, where they remained integrated within the existing caste system, they appeared to be much the same as their Hindu and Muslim neighbours among whom they continued to live. But while generally speaking they continued to conform to the customs and practice of their low caste neighbours, they were strongly influenced by a spirit of restlessness and spiritual discontent. As we shall see, they attended their own secret or semi-secret religious meetings and were already showing signs of wanting change and revolution.

'Change', to echo one of Horton's remarks, was 'in the air'. In this case, it was not so much because of alterations in the basic structure of Hindu society, as because of chronic rural indebtedness, landlord oppression, floods and famine.[10] These events meant that tens of thousands of the poor low caste people were driven from their homes, unsettled in mind and spirit, and were in the process of seeking for something better. Some, including Kartabhajas who had only recently settled on the banks of the

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7 Ramakanta Chakrabarty, *Vaisnavism in Bengal 1486-1900*, Calcutta, 1985, pp. 354-356, 359; Aparna Bhattacharya, *Religious Movements in Bengal and their Socio-Economic Ideas (1800-1850)*, Patna, 1981, pp. 45-46.

8 J. H. E. Garrett, *Nadia*, Calcutta, 1910, p. 47.

9 CMS archives, Birmingham, CI1/0 306/71, J. Weitbrecht, Journal, 3 May, 1839, and CI1/0 306/71, Dealtry's Journal of a Visit to Krishnaghur, July, 1840 (Deerr's answer no.1).

10 For social and economic conditions in Bengal during this period see especially Dharma Kumar (ed.), *Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. 2, pp. 86-176, 270-331; and for conditions in Krishnagar, Garrett, *op.cit.*

Jellinghy river,[11] were searching for a new messiah who would deliver them from all their woes. Many more, perhaps most, were open to new teachings including the competing claims of gurus, faqirs and other religious leaders.[12] It was in this atmosphere of economic hardship, social disruption and crisis that the Kartabhaja movement grew and flourished in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Early Contacts with Evangelical Christianity and the Christian Movement among Them

Before discussing Kartabhaja teachings in detail it is important to say something about the origin of Kartabhaja contact with Evangelical Christianity and the spread of the Christian movement among the Kartabhajas in the Krishnagar district in the 1830s and 40s. The Christian movement among Kartabhajas was centred in villages near the town of Krishnagar (the district headquarters) which is about 100 miles north of Calcutta. This was and still is in the heart of the picturesque rice-growing region well watered by the Jellinghy River and its tributaries.

Like many other Christian movements in India it was preceded by a fairly long period of exposure to Christian teaching and preaching. The Serampore Baptists, Carey, Marshman and others, were actively preaching in the area in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries[13] and the Church Missionary Society (CMS) began missionary operations in the district in the early 1830s.

In 1832 the CMS opened schools in the district headquarters and in Nadia (Nabadwip), an ancient cultural and religious centre (the birthplace of Chaitanya), on the opposite side of the Jellinghy. Christian scriptures were introduced and read. In 1835 the Rev. William Deerr, a man fluent in Bengali[14] who had spent thirteen years in neighbouring districts, returned from Europe. Leading a team comprising himself, a Bengali school teacher and two Bengali catechists ('native' co-workers), he commenced preaching

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11 *Church Missionary Register*, June, 1839, p. 305.

12 Chakrabarty, *op. cit.*, pp. 346-348; Steven Fuchs, *Rebellious Prophets*, Bombay, 1965, pp. 108-124.

13 *Church Missionary Register*, October, 1839, p. 461; *Periodical Accounts Relative to the BMS*, no. XI, pp. 262-266.

14 CMS CI1/M18, 1839-43, Bishop of Calcutta to Earl of Chichester, 14 April, 1841.

in the town of Krishnagar and surrounding villages.[15] In 1835, in the course of their preaching, the two catechists, Paul and Ramathon, visited the village of Dipchandrapore about six miles west of Krishnagar. The people most interested in what the catechists had to say were Kartabhajas led by an educated village blacksmith called Chandy. In this case, the Kartabhajas had already publicly renounced idol worship and were suffering some degree of annoyance and persecution from Hindu neighbours. The catechists presented them with a portion of Christian scripture and left. This visit was followed up by the Rev. Deerr who had further discussions with Chandy and others on several occasions.[16]

The Christian movement among the Kartabhajas began at Dipchandrapore, or as one missionary put it, Dipchandrapore was the '1st and moving point' of conversion to Christianity in the Krishnagar district.[17] Many of the Christian 'mass' movements elsewhere in India began with local initiative, indigenous leaders seeking out the Christian missionaries.[18] In this case, however, it was Bengali Christian preachers who stumbled across a village where the people were especially willing and anxious to listen, and it was Chandy, the Kartabhaja leader, who played a key role in discussion with the missionaries.

In 1836 about 30 persons, including Chandy, were baptised.[19] This event created a great deal of interest especially among the converts' relatives. Persecution increased, but so too did interest in the Christian movement. Visitors came to the village and news spread among relatives in other villages nearby.[20] In 1838 leading men in 10 villages belonging to the Kartabhaja sect, along with their families (400-500 people), embraced Christianity.[21] By this time the movement had spread extensively among

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15 *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, p. 548.

16 For an account of the origins of the movement see especially Deerr's account in CMS CI1/088/8, Deerr to Jowett, 15 October, 1835, and Deerr's answers to Dealtry's questions in CMS CI1/087/7 'Account of an Extraordinary Work which it is hoped is a work of Grace amongst the Heathen in some Villages North of Kishnaghur', 15 February, 1839. See also CMS Kruckeberg's Journal, 20 May, 1843, which includes important details on Chandy's life.

17 CMS CI1/0167/19, Kruckeberg to Sec., 4 March, 1850.

18 John C. B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians. A History*, Delhi, 1992, pp. 55-57.

19 *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, p. 549.

20 *Church Missionary Register*, June, 1839, p. 304.

21 CMS CI1/087/7, Deerr's reply in Dealtry, 15 February, 1839.

Kartabhajas — at least 50 miles north-east of Dipchandrapore and in and around centres such as Solo, Joginda and Ranaband.[22]

It was at this point that the whole character and tone of the movement was suddenly transformed and came to include not only Kartabhajas, but many other Hindus as well. Towards the end of 1838, as a result of unusually heavy rain, all the flats alongside the Jellinghy river were seriously flooded. Everyone, Hindus, Muslims and Christians alike, lost almost all their crops and faced starvation. Deerr and other missionaries who had limited resources concentrated almost all their efforts on providing relief for Christians. The message was crystal clear. If you are starving and need food and other assistance join the Christians. The next few months saw an unprecedented upsurge of interest in joining the CMS mission. By October, 1839, when the Bishop of Calcutta visited the area, there were more than 4,000 enquirers and baptised Christians.[23]

The Christian movement in the Krishnagar district therefore began with the Kartabhajas and continued to include a high proportion of Kartabhajas right up to the end of 1838. A few more were swept into the fold along with thousands of other Hindu converts after the floods and subsequent relief measures. Among the latter-day Kartabhaja enquirers were at least seven gurus who commanded the allegiance of numerous disciples scattered in villages throughout the district.[24] The great majority of those who embraced Christianity in this the second phase of the movement were, however, ordinary Hindus and not Kartabhajas.[25]

As we have seen, it was the Kartabhajas who first responded to missionary preaching and it was these people who persevered in spite of the suffering and persecution which occurred in the early stages of the

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22 *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, pp. 545-547; *Church Missionary Register*, March, 1840, pp. 166-167, and November, 1841, pp. 501.

23 For these dramatic events see especially CMS CI1/08/4/26, Bishop Wilson to Earl of Chichester, 30 October, 1839, and CI1/M8, 1839-43, 14 April, 1839; J. Long, *Handbook of Bengal Missions*, London, 1848, pp. 183-184, and *Friend of India*, 11 April, 1839.

24 CMS CI1/087/6, Archdeacon Dealtry's Journal of a Visit to Krishnagar, July, 1840, with answers of missionaries to Queries by the Archdeacon in 1840 (Deerr's reply); *Bishop Wilson's Journal Letters addressed to his family*, London, 1863, pp. 309, 314 and 317.

25 G. T. Spencer (Bishop of Madras), *A Brief Account of the Church Missionary Society's Mission in the District of Krishnagur in the Diocese of Calcutta*, London, 1846, p. 16.

Christian movement.[26] Furthermore, as the missionaries most closely associated with the movement declared, it was the Kartabhajas who were 'the most consistent Christians', the 'best and steadiest', or those who gave them 'the greatest satisfaction'.[27] When asked to give an account of why they were involved in the new religion it was they who constantly pointed to the nature of their religious journey and the way in which Christianity seemed to satisfy long felt religious needs and make sense *in the light of their own Kartabhaja system of beliefs.* Indeed, it is through the Kartabhaja movement that we can see more clearly than in many other cases of Christian conversion in India the way in which pre-conversion ideas predisposed indigenous groups in favour of Christianity.

Kartabhaja and Evangelical Christian Belief

The Kartabhaja movement was from the beginning a fairly open, fluid and eclectic movement — absorbing and reflecting a wide variety of influences as it developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Its somewhat amorphous and heterogeneous character, reflected in a variety of sub-divisions, was partly a consequence of the fact that for much of the nineteenth century the Kartabhajas had no written scripture which they could call their own. There was an oral tradition that began to develop under Dulalcand (1775-1832). This comprised songs, including theological comment, noted down by four of his disciples, but not finally sanctioned and published by one of his successors as the *Bhaver Gita* until the 1880s.[28] The Baptist missionaries met members of the sect in the early nineteenth

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[26] For references to the persecution of Kartabhaja Christians see especially CMS CI1/087/7, Deerr's reply in Dealtry, 15 February, 1839; CI1/087/6, Deerr's reply to question no. 9 in Dealtry's Journal, 1840; CMS CI1/0167/19, Kruckeberg to Sec., 4 March, 1850; CMS CI1/0306/72, J. Weitbrecht, Journal, 7 December, 1840, and CI1/0306/73, Journal, 9 February, 1845; CMS CI1/019/3, Journal of a Native Catechist (Paul Chakrabarty), 11 April, 1839; *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, p. 91, and September, 1844, pp. 370-371.

[27] CMS CI1/M10, J. Pratt, 'Minute on the Necessity of Strengthening the Missionary Establishment ...', 20 October, 1845 (Section 19); Kruckeberg, Journal, 2 January, 1843; J. Weitbrecht, *Protestant Missions in Bengal*, 2nd ed., London, 1844, p. 324.

[28] CMS CI1/M10, J. Pratt, 'Minute on the Necessity of Strengthening the Missionary Establishment ...', 20 October, 1845 (Section 19); Kruckeberg, Journal, 2 January, 1843; J. Weitbrecht, *Protestant Missions in Bengal*, 2nd ed., London, 1844, p. 324.

century, and the editor of the Baptist journal *Friend of India*, who was in a position to know, wrote in January 1836 that

> the sect have not yet produced any account of their doctrines. Indeed they hold pens, ink and paper in contempt. They are too material for them. Their doctrine is therefore wholly traditional, and is propagated by initiated disciples, in correspondence with the chief at Ghospara.[29]

In spite of this lack of a written tradition the teachings and sayings of the Kartabhaja leaders (further illuminated by the publication of the *Bhaver Gita*) are now fairly well known. What are less well known are the teachings of the lesser Kartabhaja gurus and the beliefs and attitudes of ordinary disciples who operated at the grass-roots level. Here, however, scholars are fortunate in having access to an abundance of missionary comment which reveals a great deal about the variations in belief and practice among ordinary followers of the Kartabhaja way.

Kartabhaja Links with the Vaishnava Tradition

The Kartabhajas have always claimed that they are part of the Vaishnava tradition and that the roots of the sect lie in Chaitanya's *bhakti* or devotional movement of the 16th century.[30]

(a) *Avatara*. Like Vaishnavas or followers of Vishnu in other parts of India they therefore have a theology which has some important parallels with Christianity, perhaps the most obvious point of similarity being a belief that God has become incarnate in human form. According to the Vaishnava and Kartabhaja tradition Vishnu or God, the Creator and Maker of all things, was and is generally seen as a beneficent deity who, whenever the world is out of joint, takes the form of a creature, usually an animal or human, to visit the world and save human kind. As the *Bhagavadgita* has Krishna (an incarnation of Vishnu) say, 'In every age I come back to

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[29] *Friend of India*, 14 January, 1836 (vol. 2, p. 11). According to the Rev. Weitbrecht, who met members of the sect in Burdwan, 'they read different works, and quote largely from any shasters which favour their views' (CMS CI1/0306/71, Journal, 3 May, 1839); and, according to Deerr, they had no special 'written account' of their faith, 'but they teach their tenets, by verbal communication' (CMS CI1/087/6, reply to Dealtry, 1840).

[30] Chakrabarty, *op. cit.*, pp. 354-356, 359; Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.

deliver the holy, to destroy the sin of the sinner, to establish righteousness' (chapter 4, stanza 8).

(b) *Bhakti.* Chaitanya (1485-1533) who was born at Nawabdip only a few miles from Krishnagar where the Christian movement took place, was a devotee of Lord Krishna, one of Vishnu's most popular incarnations. He not only propounded Krishna as the one God and object of worship, but through his highly emotional movement of song and dance conveyed the simple message that *moksha* or salvation could be obtained through devotion or love of God. Priestly rituals, learning or logic were all unnecessary. As in Evangelical Christianity his stress appears to have been on the *accessibility of salvation* which was open to all irrespective of religion, social status or background. And as was the case in all forms of Christianity he, or at least some of his followers, appear to have adopted some form of *congregational worship.*

Specific Kartabhaja Teachings

The Kartabhajas not only shared with other branches of the Bengali Vaishnava movement some basic theological ideas and teachings which, at least to some extent, paralleled ideas in Evangelical Christianity; there were also parallels between some of their more distinctive doctrines and Christian views.

As already mentioned, one of the most striking features of the Kartabhaja movement was the openness of Kartabhajas to the possibility of further truth. They were, therefore, more open and less certain or settled in their views than the followers of many other religious groups. Their very background speaks of a long-term quest. While some of them were Hindus who became Kartabhajas and then Christians, others had an even longer history of changing religious affiliation. Their forebears had been Hindus converted to Islam.[31] They were therefore born as Muslims with a Hindu background, they joined the Kartabhaja movement and were finally baptised as Christians.

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[31] On Kartabhaja converts of Muslim background see CMS CI1/087/6, Deerr's reply to question no. 2. in Dealtry's Journal, 1840; *Bishop Wilson's Journal Letters*, pp. 293, 311, 317; *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, p. 546; G. T. Spencer, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

For some of the Kartabhajas the long search was a search for truth. The leaders of the movement seem to have placed some emphasis not only on being truthful,[32] but also on seeking truth through discussion. In the *Bhaver Gita* there are, for example, passages which encourage a questioning approach towards scripture and religious propositions.[33] The idea of seeking truth was also prominent among the converts to Christianity. When asked why he had become a Christian one old man at Solo replied that 'the habit of Kurta Bhojas was to enquire after truth, and search and examine different religions'.[34] The quest was not, however, always put in terms of seeking some kind of intellectual truth or understanding. For Gokool, the Baptist convert, the search was for a way of happiness through the performance of Hindu rituals;[35] for Kangali, another Baptist convert who had spent many years as a wandering ascetic with begging bowl and matted hair, the search was a desperate attempt to find 'the true guru',[36] and, for those who became Christians at Dipchandrapore, their greatest longing was to have a vision of God — to see God with their own eyes.

The Kartabhajas' familiarity with Vaishnavite notions of *bhakti* and incarnation and their somewhat tentative views and lack of a rigid commitment to any one particular religious position were all factors which made it easier for them to understand and respond in a favourable way to Christian teaching. But perhaps of even greater significance were specific Kartabhaja ideas which provided further parallels and linkages with Christian doctrine. Like Christians, they placed emphasis on the worship of one God. They also rejected idol worship, questioned concepts of hierarchy implicit in the caste system and practised congregational and inter-caste forms of worship. As the Baptist missionary, the Rev. J. Marshman,

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32 One of the main teachings of Aulcand, the founder, was 'Speak the truth and follow one God', and, because of its emphasis on truth, the movement was sometimes known as *Satyadharma* or *Sahajdharma* (Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, p. 44).

33 According to Chakrabarty (*op. cit.*, p. 374) the *Bhaver Gita* stated that 'an unquestioning attitude is deplorable. One must determine the truth and untruth of propositions before they are accepted or rejected. The supporters of the scriptures very wrongly deplore the questioning attitude'.

34 *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, p. 546 (J. H. Pratt).

35 *Periodical Accounts Relative to the BMS*, vol. 2, no. viii, p. 124 (22 December, 1800).

36 BMS archives, Oxford, folder IN/7 ('Kangali Mahant' c. 1795-1864).

pointed out, for Kartabhajas, caste was nothing, idols were nothing and Brahmans were nothing.[37]

Followers drawn from different caste backgrounds met perhaps weekly or once a month but in the strictist secrecy. The Rev. Weitbrecht who had several discussions with the leader and other members of the sect in Burdwan, wrote that

> they meet every Thursday in certain villages, after sunset, two or three hundred together, sitting cross-legged in a circle, on the ground, They sing hymns in praise of their Creator. Every distinction of caste ceases at these nightly meetings, the Brahmin is sitting in brotherly fellowship by the side of a Sudra and the Mahomedan. They break bread together and a cup passed round the circle, from which all are drinking.[38]

The Rev. Deerr, who had considerable knowledge of Kartabhaja ideas and practice in the Krishnagar district, explained that there, after the hymn, they 'admonish each other to be virtuous, and inculcate the doctrine that God is pure, Merciful & Holy'.[39] Referring to the love feast which, he argued, 'seems to form the principal part of their Worship', he described the ignoring of caste distinctions, the atmosphere of mutual love and support and the fact that during the feast they not only took food from each other's hands, but frequently put rice in each other's mouth.

Any refusal to perform image worship or observe the usual caste distinctions and taboos in public was extremely dangerous as it invited ostracism and outright persecution. In practice, therefore, most Kartabhajas (like the Bahais converted from Hinduism at a later date) lived a double life. Once the meeting was over they reverted to the practices which operated in ordinary everyday life. As Deerr pointed out, the Brahman once more became the Brahman and the Muslim resumed his life as a Muslim.[40] Except for the few occasions when they joined in secret with other members of the sect, Kartabhajas therefore continued to observe the rules of social behaviour, rituals and forms of worship which they had always practised prior to their involvement in the movement — the women of Hindu background, for example, continuing to play a prominent role in

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37 See extract from his Journal (15 April, 1802) in *Periodical Accounts*, no. xi, p. 263.

38 J. J. Weitbrecht, *Protestant Missions in Bengal*, pp. 323-324.

39 CMS CI1/087/6, Deerr's reply to question no. 3 in Dealtry's Journal, 1840.

40 *Ibid.*, Deerr's reply to question nos 3-6.

keeping up Hindu rituals within the home.[41] The Protestant missionaries tended to regard this type of behaviour as hypocrisy, and Kartabhaja converts who had not already been made outcastes were expected to publicly and openly renounce caste and all forms of idolatrous worship.[42]

Notwithstanding disappointment that the Kartabhajas had not come further in their rejection of the caste system, many of the missionaries underlined the extent to which Kartabhaja teachings and lifestyle were already in accordance with Protestant Christianity. As the *Friend of India* remarked, the Kartabhajas recognised two of the main principles of true religion: 'the spirituality of divine worship and the obligation of mutual good will and love'.[43]

As already implied, parallels in Kartabhaja and Christian thought were not confined to ideas about the spiritual nature and oneness of God, social equality and congregational forms of worship. The notion of God becoming incarnate (of his being present in the life of a person on earth) was a part of Vaishnava tradition. This idea, further refined and re-expressed in Kartabhaja theology, provided yet another fundamental link and parallel with Christian belief — in this instance with Christian teachings about the nature of Jesus.

God's Revelation and Activity through the *Karta* or Guru

After his death, Chaitanya was regarded by his followers as an incarnation of Krishna and therefore God.[44] During the early years of the Kartabhaja movement Ram Saran, who was viewed by many as the first *Karta* or guru

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41 *Ibid.*, Deerr's reply to question no. 5.

42 The early Baptist Kartabhaja converts, Krishna Pal and Gookool, publicly 'threw away' their caste by eating with the missionaries. The Dipchandrapore enquirers, who were 'more respectable' than the converts who came later, were outcasted prior to their baptism on the grounds that they had prayed with the missionaries and were therefore already Christians (the implication being that all Christians were polluted). Converts at an Anglican service in Ananda Bas (NNW of Krishnagar) some years later were asked immediately prior to baptism if they would 'give up caste' and they replied, 'yes we have already' (*Periodical Accounts*, vol. 2, no. xi, pp. 123); CMS CI1/087/7, Dealtry, 'Account of an Extraordinary Work ...', 15 February, 1839; *Church Missionary Register*, February, 1840, p. 107).

43 *Friend of India*, 11 April, 1839.

44 Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

of the sect, was believed to be an incarnation of Chaitanya, and hence he too was regarded as Krishna or God on earth.

Referring to the attitude of devotees of the Ghospara *Karta* or guru after conversations with members of the sect at Burdwan in 1839, the Rev. Weitbrecht wrote that

> The Kurta bhojas have peculiar ideas about the divine presence. While they acknowledge it to pervade over the universe, they believe at the same time, that there is a divine incarnation continued in the world, one particular person being the representative of God. The leader of the sect is considered as bearing that exalted character. He resides in a village near Hooghly river, called Khasbara.[45]

When disciples were initiated into the sect they were given a special mantra or incantation. There are references in a variety of sources to at least three different mantras which were used by Kartabhaja gurus on various occasions. In at least some cases, the conversation which took place immediately prior to the disciple's initiation placed some emphasis on the notion of the guru himself being 'the truth'. The claims attributed to Jesus in St.John's Gospel that 'I am the Truth' are echoed in the words of the Kartabhaja guru who asked the disciple to say to him that 'You are truth. Whatever you say is true.'[46] The mantras themselves convey an idea of what was expected of the relationship between guru and disciple — a view which was also similar to Christian notions of the appropriate relationship between Jesus and his followers. They emphasise the power of the guru who can bestow salvation and blessings on the disciple, the unworthiness and insignificance of the disciple and thirdly the need for the disciple to serve and obey.[47] Indeed, for those devotees who swapped the *Karta* for Jesus there must have been a certain *déjà vu* about the 'new' discipleship.

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45 CMS CI1/0 306/71, J. J. Weitbrecht, Journal, 3 May, 1839.

46 Chakrabarty, *op. cit.*, pp. 365-366.

47 See, for example, Ward's translation of the Ghospara guru's mantra, which is as follows: 'O Sinless Lord, O great Lord; at thy pleasure I go and return: not a moment am I without thee. I am ever with thee; save, O great Lord' (William Ward, *View of the History, Literature and Mythology of the Hindoos*, vol. 3, London, 1822, p. 176). Variations of this mantra given by Krishna Pal (himself a disciple) and also by Deerr omit the reference to the 'sinlessness' of the *Karta*, but otherwise they are much the same (William Ward, *Brief Memoir of Krishna-Pal*, 2nd ed., London, 1823, pp. 10-11, and CMS CI1/087/6,

Like Jesus, and as an incarnation of God, the *Karta* was also believed to possess supernatural powers. It was said of Iswar Chandra, who met Marshman in 1802, that he could, for example, heal incurable diseases and give speech to the dumb.[48] Ram Saran's wife, Sati Ma, who succeeded him for a short period, was buried under a pomegranate tree at Ghospara. Pilgrims who resorted there in great numbers, including some of those who subsequently became Christian, considered the dust of the place especially sacred, so much so that a touch or taste of it would help them in attaining their objective.[49]

Contrasts with Christian Teaching

One of the key factors in Kartabhaja conversion was not just parallels in thought and teaching, but also differences. The parallels facilitated understanding, but it was the perception of difference which seemed to make the transfer of faith worthwhile. The Kartabhaja debates with the Bengali and European Evangelicals took place within a framework of thinking which both parties appear to have had little difficulty in understanding. For Kartabhajas the most persuasive arguments appear to have related to Christian claims about Jesus — his moral qualities, advent and second coming — all of them ideas which had an appeal in the early nineteenth century climate of disillusionment and dissatisfaction.

Jesus as the True Guru

The familiar concept of the guru could be linked with the image of Jesus. But what sort of guru was Jesus? Was he like the *Karta* or subordinate gurus in the Kartabhaja sect, or was he different? Notwithstanding their possession of a mantra and formal allegiance to the *Karta*, some of those involved in the movement had doubts about whether they really had found

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Deerr's reply in Dealtry, 1840). According to Kruckeberg, Chandy was often told by 'a mantra in his ears' to join himself to 'the righteous one' (CMS, Journal, 20 May, 1843).

48 *Periodical Accounts*, no. xi, Extracts from Marshman's Journal, p. 262; Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, pp. 47, 50-51.

49 CMS CI1/086/6, Deerr's reply to question no. 1 in Dealtry's Journal, 1840.

the true guru, without whom no one could hope 'to cross the river of life'.[50]

According to much in Kartabhaja teaching, gurus were not supposed to be caught up in worldliness or immoral behaviour. The *Bhaver Gita* declared, for example, that 'one must practise both modesty and poverty if one really wishes to realise God'.[51] There can be little doubt, however, that Dulalchand, the third leader of the sect, lived in considerable luxury. Describing a visit to his residence in 1802, J. C. Marshman wrote that 'Dulal's handsome and stately house, exceeding that of many Rajahs, and his garners around filled with grain, all the gifts of his deluded followers, convinced us of the profitability of his trade'.[52]

Dulalchand's sons (Iswarchandra and Indra Narayan) were singled out and especially condemned by Bengali writers as not living up to the highest of moral standards. And this was precisely at the time the largest number of Kartabhajas were converted to Christianity.[53] Even if allegations of greed, corruption and sexual immorality levelled against them were largely untrue, these allegations must have created further unease among more ordinary members of the Kartabhaja sect.

What is very clear is that some of those Kartabhajas who began to think about adopting Christianity already had doubts about the integrity or moral standing of the Kartabhaja gurus. For them there was a contrast between what they knew of contemporary gurus and the Jesus of the Gospels. Two of these converts were Krishna Pal, the Baptist convert, and Peter Chandy, the first, best known and most highly respected convert of the Krishnagar district.

Krishna Pal was especially struck by Jesus' humility and by his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. According to the writer of his memoir, when Krishna preached,

> he would contrast, with wonderful effect, Christ washing the feet of his disciples, with the Hindoo spiritual guide, having his foot on the disciple prostrate at his feet. He would dwell with delight on the divine properties of the Redeemer, proving from thence that he only was the

50 Chakrabarty, *op. cit.*, p. 374.
51 *Ibid.* p. 375.
52 *Periodical Accounts*, no. xi, Extracts from Marshman's Journal, p. 266.
53 Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

true Gooroo, and would confirm these descriptions by reading to his heathen auditors the Redeemer's sermon on the mount.[54]

Peter Chandy was also convinced that the true guru would be a man of great love and humility. When in the 1830s a certain faqir proclaimed himself as the true heir of the Rajah of Burdwan and deliverer of the people, many Kartabhajas rallied in support of the rising ruler. However, after giving him his initial support, Chandy decided that the faqir could not be the expected messiah, as he was quite clearly 'subject to hatred and pride'.[55] Having developed some idea of what the true guru should be Chandy found these ideas and expectations fulfilled in teachings about the person of Christ.

Messianic Expectation

Messianic expectation, such as that reflected in Chandy's comment, was widespread in Bengal in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century[56] As we have noted, it was a period of great instability, turbulence and change, not to mention the economic hardship and suffering of ordinary people who naturally longed for some kind of leader who would deliver them from all their trouble.

Messianic ideas were quite explicit in the Vaishnava tradition. They are reflected in the imagery of Kalkin who like Krishna was recognised as an *avatar* of Vishnu. God Himself would one day reappear as Kalkin riding on a white horse and carrying a blazing sword in his hands, to punish the wicked, comfort the virtuous and re-establish a golden age. Nor were messianic ideas unknown in Islam especially in Shiah and Sufi circles, including among Sufi preachers in the Krishnagar district in the early nineteenth century.[57]

Among Kartabhajas messianic expectation reflected disillusionment with contemporary gurus and a recognition that they were not able to satisfy long-felt needs. A commonly held view was that God would appear in

54 Ward, *Brief Memoir*, p. 28.
55 CMS Kruckeberg's Journal, 20 May, 1843.
56 Fuchs, *op.cit.*
57 *Church Missionary Register*, November, 1840, p. 505; *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, p. 91.

human flesh — perhaps through some extraordinary public intervention, or perhaps in a more personal way whereby the individual would 'see' God through the inner eye and through that encounter achieve salvation.

When Deerr first visited the Kartabhajas of Dipchandrapore they said, at least twice, that 'unless you can show us God as plain as we can see your body we cannot believe'.[58] Chandy was however in the habit of opposing the missionaries in order to elicit information,[59] and in a subsequent conversation with Kruckeberg, he revealed that he and his party were somewhat less concerned with God's physical or bodily manifestation. 'On their first visit to Kishnaghur they found me walking under a tree', wrote Kruckeberg:

> Chandy asked me to show them God. I replied, 'Do you want to see him with your outward eyes?' It had been one of their rules, before they came in contact with Christ, that an inward eye was necessary to see God. My reply led to a confirmation of that rule, and gratified them.[60]

This latter interpretation of Dipchandrapore Kartabhaja belief was subsequently confirmed by Deerr when in 1839 he declared that the Dipchandrapore Kartabhajas' 'chief principle' was that 'by devotion God will give them eyes, and they will obtain a sight of Him, and through that sight salvation'.[61]

The Kartabhajas of Dipchandrapore were of Hindu origin.[62] Those of Muslim origin scattered in villages elsewhere in the region were possibly influenced less by the idea described above (that the individual would see God through an inner eye) than by the local Islamic preaching that God himself would take the initiative and intervene. While on a preaching tour in 1838, Deerr met with a 'learned Mahomedan', a 'Terpish', who was preaching the message that 'God was to appear in the form of a human body',[63] and this appears to have been the view of a Muslim Kartabhaja convert interviewed in Ranaband who declared that his people had been

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58 *Christian Intelligencer*, 1835, p. 577.
59 CMS Kruckeberg's Journal, 20 May, 1843.
60 *Loc. cit.*
61 *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, p. 549.
62 CMS CI1/0167/19, Kruckeberg to Sec., 4 March, 1850.
63 *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, p. 92.

looking for 'a visible appearance of the Deity', by a sight of whom they hoped for salvation.[64]

The Bengali and European Christian Response

No matter what the questions were about God's activity, the Bengali catechists and European missionaries were faced with the task of convincing persistent enquirers and also critics that Christian scripture and Christianity were relevant to their situation and provided at least some of the answers. It certainly does not appear that either Deerr or Kruckeberg believed in an immediate Second Coming or that God would act in the near future in some unusual way.[65] But what is clear is that the missionaries and their assistants were able to point to three of the basic claims in Christian scripture in order to attempt to satisfy messianic hopes and expectation. In the Old Testament there was the prediction that God would appear as a messiah in human form, in the New Testament there was the claim that this had already happened through the advent, life and death of Jesus Christ and in the latter part of the Bible there was the promise that He (the risen Christ) would come again. All of these themes were exploited in missionary preaching among the Kartabhajas. For example, when preaching to Christians and non-Christians alike at Dipchandrapore in August, 1837, Kruckeberg read and explained Isaiah, chapter 9, 'by which they seemed to be much edified'.[66] This includes the well-known verses where God is described as being on the side of the oppressed and where the prophet predicts God's coming as the Messiah who will rule in justice for evermore. The message one can safely assume was that this promised Messiah had already come, that Kartabhaja longing could be satisfied through worship of Him and that His rule was (as verses 4 and 5 so clearly state) associated with justice for oppressed and exploited people. In developing the Christian idea of the incarnation, Deerr honed in on the Kartabhaja quest for a sight of God by referring to the passage in St.John's Gospel, chapter 14, verse 9, where Jesus says, 'he that hath seen me hath seen the Father'. According to Deerr, Jesus was God 'manifest in the flesh'

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64 *Ibid.*, p. 547.

65 In this sense their views reflect main-line Evangelical teaching. See S. Piggin, *Making Evangelical Missionaries*, Appleford, Abingdon, Oxford, 1984, pp. 70, 146.

66 CMS CI1/M7, Kruckeberg's Journal, 6 August, 1837.

and all that the Kartabhajas were seeking was 'in the Gospel'.[67] Nor did the missionaries ignore the doctrine of the Second Coming. The Rev. Weitbrecht, referring to his conversation with a Kartabhaja leader, noted that the latter 'was exceedingly pleased to hear that Christ was to appear a second time, and that all true believers in him, wait for his advent'.[68] There is clear evidence then that missionaries who played a key part in the Kartabhaja Christian movement made a deliberate attempt to link pre-existing beliefs with the presentation of the Christian Gospel.

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It is the argument of this paper that Kartabhaja interest in Christianity was somewhat different from that of most other groups who joined the Protestant churches in large numbers in Bengal in the first half of the nineteenth century. Unlike the other mass movement converts who joined the churches later (1839-1840) after the floods and handouts, the Kartabhajas were especially interested in the theological and other ideas associated with Christian teaching and the Christian way of life.

In common with many other oppressed and low caste peoples the Krishnagar Kartabhajas had been uprooted and forced to move. They had been searching for a new and better place in which to live and, like many of their fellow-travellers, their physical journey was not unrelated to an open-mindedness and spiritual quest. As the Christian missionaries might well have said, their search was for 'a new heaven and a new earth'. Amongst other things they were seeking for 'the true guru', a messiah, or a saving vision of God, a more accepting, less hierarchical fellowship, and rituals and forms of worship more expressive of their changing views of God and the world around. Though many of them found what they wanted in the Kartabhaja religion, others were less strongly committed, and, for them, participation in the movement was only one stage in an ongoing journey somewhere else. For those who found in Christianity greater religious and ideational satisfaction, the Kartabhaja experience was, nevertheless, an important stage in their religious and conceptual journey. It was at least one of the factors which predisposed them more in favour of Christian teaching. As we have seen, Kartabhaja belief and doctrine

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67 *Bishop Wilson's Journal Letters*, p. 317.

68 CMS CI1/0306/71, Weitbrecht's Journal, June, 1840.

provided striking parallels with Christian belief. And because they already shared many of the same basic assumptions, values and beliefs, the Kartabhajas were in a better position than most of their Hindu and Muslim neighbours to be able to understand and respond to Evangelical claims about God and the Christian message of salvation.

In conclusion there are three points one might keep in mind.

First, it is not our contention that belief or intellectual conviction was the only factor in Kartabhaja conversion. But what we are saying is that, at least in this case, pre-Christian ideas played an important part in the conversion process. Furthermore, there is some evidence that pre-conversion ideas also played a part in the conversion of other groups, if not in Bengal, then elsewhere. The best known case is that of the Madiga (untouchable) followers of the Rajayoga sect who joined the American mission in Andra Pradesh, South India, in the 1860s and 70s.[69] According to missionary and other accounts the Rajayoga gurus taught many ideas which were similar to those in Christianity. Like Chandy and other Kartabhajas they and their followers were influenced by ideas of incarnation and were looking for a messiah which they eventually discovered in Jesus Christ.

Second, while Horton in his theory of African conversion stresses the overriding importance of one particular teaching, namely monotheism, we cannot point to the overriding importance of any one idea in Kartabhaja conversion. Different Christian ideas appealed strongly to different individuals — though, as we have noted, some teachings had a greater impact and were more influential than others.

And third, as Horton himself points out with reference to the situation in Africa, it is not always possible to clearly distinguish between ideas of Christian and non-Christian origin. Some Christian commentators argued that similarities in Kartabhaja and Christian belief were not accidental; that Kartabhaja practices, such as the communal meal, were the result of earlier contact with Christian teaching. However, there is no way of establishing whether this was the case. What one can say is that Bengal had a long history of indirect and direct contact with the Christian movement. As is well known, Jesus is mentioned and respected in the Koran — a text which had been important in the life of some Kartabhaja converts. Dominican,

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69 See especially Emma Rauchenbush-Clough, *While Sewing Sandals. Tales of a Telugu Pariah Tribe*, New York, etc., 1899, pp. 113-201.

Augustinian and Jesuit missionaries were active in Bengal in the 17th and 18th centuries,[70] and lastly, there is specific evidence that some of the Krishnagar converts had been influenced by earlier Protestant preaching.[71] There can be no doubt, therefore, that missionaries were building on earlier Christian foundations. Nevertheless, the point remains that some of the basic concepts and practices which were important in Kartabhaja conversion, such as the institution of the guru, concepts of incarnation and the practice of *bhakti*, were a part of Bengali culture well before the rise of the Christian movement. Kartabhaja conversion, like the conversion of the Madigas in the American mission, may have been encouraged by long-term and very gradualistic Christian influence, but older pre-Christian systems of belief also played a part in creating conditions which fostered and facilitated the adoption of Evangelical Christianity.

[70] K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 3, New York, 1971, pp. 258-259, 263, 273.
[71] *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, p. 546.

Sex, Gender and Christian Conversion in Nineteenth-century South India

Helen McCulloch *

This paper is the result of research conducted for an undergraduate thesis. I had access to source material from two separate missions in South India. These two missions, located in the British administrative region known as the Madras Presidency, were the Telugu mission of the London Missionary Society (LMS) established in 1805 and the mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in the Madura district of the Tamil region, which was established in 1834.[1] I also made use of general missionary literature. My research covered the nineteenth century, 'the great century of missions'. The bulk of converts in both missions came from Hinduism. The majority came from the low castes, many in the mass movements in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

In this paper I am going to discuss firstly the impact of sex and gender on the representation of Protestant Christianity in India and upon the Indian experience of Christian missions. In the second part of the paper I want to examine the material and social processes of conversion to Christianity in India, and to suggest a number of ways in which sex, gender, and patriarchy in Indian and western cultures had an important impact on conversion.

A discussion of conversion needs to be located within the framework of the family. The significance of caste, in terms of both advancing or obstructing the spread of Christianity in India, has long been recognised. There were also, it seems, certain significant patterns of communication and conflict within the family that shaped the process of conversion.

Like caste the family was perceived by missionaries to be a major force of resistance to Christianity. India was not one of the great successes of the

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* Helen McCulloch wrote her B.A. Hons thesis under the supervision of Dr Geoff Oddie and graduated with the Medal in History in 1991.

1 Annual Reports and some letters from the LMS mission were available in manuscript form. Only selections from the letters and reports from the Madura mission that were published in the *Missionary Herald* (*MH*), the journal of the ABCFM, were available.

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

Protestant missionary enterprise. Frustrated missionaries explained to the missionary societies that there were many individuals who were

> probably ready ... to profess themselves outwardly Christian and would do so did not that mighty power, the Hindu family system, octopus like hold them in its tentacles.[2]

Relations between converts and their Hindu relatives were difficult, in some cases impossible to maintain. It is not surprising then to find that many 'believers' preferred to maintain their relations with their families where economic, emotional and social support networks were located and refrained from formal conversion. Neither is it surprising to find that other family members attempted to prevent them from being baptised.

At the same time it was recognised that family networks facilitated the spread of Christianity. As individuals were generally unwilling to be baptised on their own they attempted to influence the rest of their families, and delayed their own conversions until others were prepared to join them. Analyses of mass movements in particular have drawn our attention to the way in which group identity and group mobility is the norm rather than the aberration in India. Because low castes had less to lose and hoped instead that they had much to gain by conversion it was easier for individuals not wishing to be baptised alone to convince others to convert as well.

As could be expected a considerable amount of family politics surrounded conversion. Missionary reports are full of accounts of the baptism of whole family groups together, but this does not necessarily indicate an absence of conflict. It seems more likely that missionaries were not always aware of or did not think it necessary to record the family politics that may have preceded such conversions. These could well have been the families of individuals who, after introducing Christianity into the family, were prepared to wait until other family members were willing to be baptised at the same time.

The main point I wish to establish in this paper is that women and men faced conflict within the family from quite different positions. Men had both greater power and autonomy. Whereas women's choices were circumscribed by social conditions which limited female autonomy, men exercised relatively greater social and economic independence. Indian

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2 Dr Washburn, Letter, 8th November, 1893, in *MH*, February, 1894, p. 71.

women relied upon relations with their male kin for material survival and social status. The sexual division of labour and inequitous wage structures in India, as elsewhere, operated to ensure female economic dependence. This meant that an individual's experience of conversion was largely determined by sex.

I am aware of the limitations of this paper. A major problem with a text-based analysis is that a knowledge of the operation of local agenda is missing. With this in mind it is important to state that I aim to do little more than demonstrate that certain questions about conversion need to be raised. There are also limitations on the resources available to an undergraduate. As a consequence this paper is necessarily general. Due to the invisibility of women in the source material it was just not possible to concentrate upon one mission, or locality, or to pay detailed attention to the sexual politics of conversion in relation to other important factors such as region, local politics, caste, or social and economic change.

On the other hand what struck me most when I did my research were the consistencies in the sexual politics of the process of conversion that were evident in the material from the two missions studied and indeed in material from all over India. Similar patterns of conversion seem to have persisted throughout the nineteenth century and transcended geography and caste.

Before I go on to discuss the sexual politics of conversion in greater detail I want to provide a brief description of the sexual politics of the missionary enterprise in India, both in order to sketch something of a background for my later argument and also to demonstrate that as a result of sexual segregation and the subordination of women in both western and Indian cultures, the male and female experiences of Protestant missions in India were quite different.

The Female Mission

Both the structure and agenda of the missionary enterprise were organised on the basis of sex and gender. There was a high degree of sexual segregation in the representation of Christianity by missions in India. Missionary societies adhered to a strict sexual division of labour. Women

involved in the enterprise performed what was labelled 'Woman's Work for Woman' or the 'Female Mission'.

It is a commonplace in the history of Christian missions in India that sexual segregation and the seclusion of women in zenanas, women's quarters, meant that it was necessary to send missionary women to reach their 'heathen sisters' in India. The significance and the extent of the seclusion of women were exaggerated in the missionary texts. Only wealthier families could afford to keep women secluded, and the practice was less common in the south of India. Still, all Indian women were bound by similar restrictions on their mobility and social and familial intercourse, in what was a purdah of behaviour if not physical confinement. Hindu constructions of femininity meant that these restrictions were required to maintain family honour by ensuring women's sexual purity.[3] When women moved around outside their homes they did so along circumscribed feminine routes in space, time and occupation, working or performing familial functions such as purchasing food or collecting water and fuel. Women did not associate freely with men in public or with men outside their families.

Yet the idea of a female mission had more to do with the needs of middle-class western culture. Within the framework of nineteenth-century western notions of separate spheres and the complementarity of the sexes, masculinity was associated with the public world and femininity with the private, domestic sphere, the home, a world populated by women and children. When women engaged in activities outside the physical boundaries of their homes they did so in occupations that could be understood as an extension of their domestic roles. Women worked almost exclusively among their own sex and children in evangelical and philanthropic endeavours in the west, and missionary women were sent specifically to work among women and children in the 'foreign field', whether or not the women in the country of destination were secluded, and

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3 Michael Allen and S. N. Mukherjee (eds), *Women in India and Nepal*, Canberra, 1982; E. Harper, 'Fear and the Status of Women', *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 25, 1, 1969, pp. 81-95; Leela Dube, 'On the Construction of Gender; Hindu Girls in Patrilineal India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 'Review of Women's Studies', 30th April, 1988, pp. WS11-19; Nur Yalman, 'On the Purity of Women in the Castes Of Ceylon and Malabar', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, no. 93, 1963, pp. 25-58, are just some of the many studies that deal with these issues.

even in places like Hawaii where missionaries considered a little more sexual segregation would have gone a long way.[4]

The female mission was understood to be 'a distinct branch'[5] of the enterprise; it was also a subordinate one, commanding a smaller share of mission resources.[6] The limitations on the female mission were many. For most of the nineteenth century western women could only leave for the field as wives. The marriage rule was enforced on an almost equal basis for both sexes but it had completely different implications for men and women. Women, for whom marriage had been the only means to fulfill their missionary ambitions, found the scope of their work severely limited once in the field. While men could not do without their wives' assistance in taking 'domestic charge' of the stations so they remained free to carry out 'the more important duties of the mission',[7] a woman's first duty was to her own family. The degree of mission work wives could undertake in the towns where they were stationed was dependent upon their familial circumstances and large families were the norm. Male missionaries 'toured' extensively but for most of the nineteenth century women's movement outside the boundaries of the mission premises was not encouraged.

Many saw a need for the employment of more single women who could devote all their time to 'the work' and this was discussed from the earliest years of the missionary enterprise in India. But although it was felt that Indian women were not being reached by male evangelistic efforts it was only after more than half a century of rejection of single women candidates by missionary societies on both sides of the Atlantic that women established their own organisations or committees of existing missionary societies,

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4 Patricia Grimshaw, *Paths of Duty, American Missionary Wives in Nineteenth Century Hawaii*, Honolulu, 1989.

5 LMS Annual Report, cited in R. Lovett, *The History of the London Missionary Society 1795-1895*, vol. II, London, 1899, p. 175.

6 There seems to have been little written on British missionary women but there are a number of excellent studies of American missionary women that deal with issues of the status of women in the missionary enterprise: Robert Pierce Beaver, *All Love Excelling: American Protestant Women in World Mission*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1968; Jane Hunter, *The Gospel of Gentility: American Women Missionaries in Turn of the Century China*, New Haven, 1984; Patricia Hill, *The World Their Household: The American Women's Foreign Mission Movement and Cultural Transformation 1870-1920*, Michigan, 1985; P. Grimshaw, *op. cit.*

7 LMS Archives in the School of Oriental and African Studies Archives, London, William Howell, Letter, Cuddapah, 3rd October, 1829.

which sponsored single western and 'native' women workers, and a variety of institutions for women.[8]

In comparison to the LMS the American Board occupied a relatively advanced position in regard to the employment of women. There was a small presence of single American women teachers from the earliest years. The Woman's Board of Missions was formed in the United States after the retirement of Rufus Anderson in 1868, who as secretary of the ABCFM had so long opposed women's employment in foreign missions.[9] The Ladies Committee of the LMS was formed in 1875. Single 'ladies' were sent out by the LMS during the 1870s and 1880s. The bulk of these women worked in the north of India, a marked rise in the number of single women sent to South India occurred in the 1890s.[10] With the influx of single women a feminisation of the enterprise occurred. As the vast majority of mission men were married, women soon outnumbered men.

The lower status accorded to the female mission was also reflected in the lack of attention paid to the provision and training of a 'Native Female Agency'. From the missions' inception men were trained to take leadership roles in the churches and to fulfill a variety of evangelical functions. The wives of 'native' mission staff were expected to serve the mission in a voluntary capacity but make their domestic duties their first priority and other women worked for missions in earlier years, mainly as teachers and matrons of girls' boarding schools; yet it was only from the 1870s that systematic efforts were made to recruit and train Indian women as mission agents. This was part of the growing professionalisation of women's mission work.

The employment of Indian women in the missionary enterprise was circumscribed by a combination of the social prescriptions of both cultures. Female participation in the work force was not highly valued in India, quite the reverse. Women's withdrawal from the work place was a sign of wealth and prestige. Western missionaries complained that high caste women converts, especially, could not be induced to take up mission service.[11] For converts from the low caste groups female seclusion had

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8 R. Pierce Beaver, *op. cit.*, p. 63; E. Stock, *One Hundred Years. Being the Short History of the Church Missionary Society*, London, 1899, p. 97.

9 W. E. Strong, *The Story of the American Board*, Boston, 1910, p. 311.

10 Lovett, *op. cit.*, pp. 738-41, List of Missionaries.

11 Miss Thornburn, *Report of the Second Decennial Missionary Conference 1882-3*, Calcutta, 1883, p. 193.

never been an option and the entry into mission work that was non-manual and more importantly non-polluting was an avenue of upward social mobility.

The other major constraint upon the employment of Indian women was the fact that marriage was almost universal in India. Marriage was considered essential for the respectability of both Indian women and their families. Single western women who had 'sacrificed' marriage and maternity themselves lamented the constant loss of educated Christian girls to marriage.[12] Prior to marriage young Christian women were employed in the protected occupations of teaching and, by the turn of the century, nursing where they could be kept under careful surveillance in schools and hospitals.

The kind of work undertaken by women in missions in India expanded after the strengthening of the female mission by single western women. Prior to this women's mission work was largely restricted to educating children and gathering Christian and non-Christian women together for various meetings, similar to church women's meetings in the west. From the 1870s women undertook 'zenana visiting', providing secular education and religious instruction to women in their own homes.[13] These activities conformed to contemporary western concepts of femininity. The care and socialisation of children, receiving or visiting and teaching other women was an extension of western women's domestic and social roles. It did not take them far from their homes, and indeed was more often than not conducted within their own homes or those of Indian women.

From the mid-1870s women took up 'direct evangelical work'. Groups of women began to tour, targetting women wherever they went. Wives and unmarried daughters also began accompanying their husbands and fathers.[14] To a lesser extent some women began to preach in public.[15] The

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12 Miss Keay, *Report of the Second Decennial Missionary Conference 1882-3*, p. 218.

13 The word 'zenana' was not used in the south of India; 'zenana visiting' was a generic term used by missionaries all over India.

14 Miss Taylor, Letter, September, 1869, in *MH*, March, 1870, p. 93; Miss Pollock, Letter, September, 1869, in *MH*, February, 1870 p. 61; Review Madura Mission, in *MH*, January, 1874, p. 24; Miss Rendall, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, May, 1876, p. 166; LMS, Mrs Stephenson, Annual Report of Woman's Work, Gooty, 1886 and 1896; LMS, M. Christlieb, Annual Report, Anantapur, 1904.

15 Miss Swift, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, February, 1895, p. 63; M. Christlieb, *An Uphill Road in India*, London, 1929, p. 59.

employment of Indian women in evangelical work was largely restricted to older women, who were allowed more mobility in Indian society. Miss Thornburn, translating from an Indian saying, pointed out that older women

> having 'brought up children' and 'entertained strangers, and washed saints feet' they earned the right to go where they will.[16]

Western women also preferred to engage 'elderly widows or matrons free from family cares'[17] as Bible women and zenana teachers. This work required considerable mobility and commitment and was not thought to be compatible with the duties of wives and mothers.

When they encroached upon this formerly all-male domain western women encountered resistance from western male missionaries. Indian women withstood a certain amount of antagonism and abuse from the Indian community but they also earned a great deal of respect for their commitment to their faith.[18] Bible women were acknowledged as religious leaders and some developed a strong personal following.[19]

The expansion of women's work in the last decades of the century is reflected in the larger numbers of Indian women employed and the wider scope of their employment. Even though the number of Indian women working for missions grew quickly there were always far fewer Indian women employed by Christian missions than men.[20] Ironically the

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16 Miss Thornburn, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

17 Mrs C. Longhurst, *Zenana Mission Work in Madras*, Madras, n. d., pp. 6-7.

18 Christlieb, *op. cit.*, pp. 93, 163, 244; E. Rauschenbusch-Clough, *While Sewing Sandals; Tales of a Telugu Pariah Tribe*, New York, 1899, pp. 124-5; LMS, Miss Haskard, Annual Report, Bellary, 1902; LMS, Mrs Thomas, Annual Report, Vizianagram, 1886 and 1892.

19 LMS, Mr Leighton, Annual Report, Anantapur, 1903; LMS, Mrs Stephenson, Annual Report, Gooty, 1899 and 1903.

20 In Madras in 1881 there were 731 Christian, and 14 non-Christian women teachers employed, double the number employed in 1871. In the same year there were 235 ordained Indian preachers, 1,444 unordained preachers, 2,502 Christian male teachers, and 850 non-Christian male teachers (J. Dennis, *Centennial Survey of Foreign Missions*, New York, 1902, pp. 62-4). By 1890 the number of female agents in Madras was still comparatively small at 1,061 (*Statistical Tables of Protestant Missions in India Burma and Ceylon 1890*, Calcutta, 1891, p. 60).

feminisation of the western mission coincided with the growth of a male-dominated Native Church.

Due to the degree of sexual segregation in the Indian encounter with Christian missions and also perhaps partly because of these limitations of the female mission, it could be argued that the Indian female and male experiences of Christian missions differed greatly, both in extent and nature. Men and women came into initial contact with Christian missions in quite different and sex-specific activities. The degree and nature of women's exposure to Christian proselytisation was further determined by caste, age and residence.

In the nineteenth century missionary societies employed two main strategies, preaching and teaching. Male missionaries carried out their preaching in streets and bazaars. They commonly met with audiences that were eighty to ninety percent male.[21] Male 'inquirers' followed up their interest by seeking out missionaries, often travelling long distances to do so. Male missionaries made themselves available to these inquirers and their reports abound with accounts of the long discussions and religious debates they had with these men. Indian women's mobility and freedom of association was much more restricted.

Women were not, of course, totally untouched by male missionaries' activities, but their experience of preaching was of a different nature.[22] The Rev. Hawker from the LMS wrote that he preferred village preaching because he felt he was able to reach more women:

> While I am preaching to the men in the street I see women skipping into neighbouring homes and sometimes they make remarks or ask questions from their hidden places of hearing.[23]

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[21] S. Immanuel David, 'A Mission of Gentility: The Role of Women Missionaries in the American Arcot Mission, 1839-1938', *Indian Church History Review*, vol. XX, no.2, December, 1986, p. 148.

[22] There were several reports of women approaching and conversing with male missionaries, western and Indian: LMS, Bacon, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1880 and 1881; LMS, Johnston, Annual Report, Nundial, 1874; LMS, Stephenson, Annual Report, Gooty, 1886.

[23] LMS, Annual Report, Belgaum, 1881.

Even though women were also involved in preaching by the end of the century this does not seem to have changed the nature of the audiences. In the Madura mission Ruby, a Bible woman, reported that

> when ... we gave up evening meetings and met by daylight. Some Hindu women complained ... that thereby they lost the privilege of hearing the preaching; for in the evening they could stand in the shadows as they returned from the water fountains and listen without being driven off by the men.[24]

When women were contacted by missions in any direct and sustained way it was usually by other women within the female mission. Education may have been the most important form of contact with Indian women for most of the century, but rates of female participation in education in India were low. The prohibitions against female education in India are well known.[25] In simple terms of numbers missionaries came into contact with far fewer girls than boys for the course of the nineteenth century.[26]

Expressions of outrage at the prohibitions against female education formed part of a rhetoric of denunciation of Indian society and the assumption that women were entirely uneducated is questionable but there is no doubt that there were much higher rates of illiteracy among women. This in itself would have limited women's exposure to Protestant Christianity. Huge amounts of time and effort were expended by men on the translation, production and dissemination of evangelical literature. In a

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[24] Sixty-Fourth Annual Report of the Madura Missions, June, 1899, in *MH*, August, 1899, p. 332. Mr Elwood (Letter, 8th October, 1897, in *MH*, January, 1898, p. 23) expressed disappointment that village women and children would not even come near for the lantern pictures.

[25] J. Dawson (LMS, Letter, Vizagapatam, 30th August, 1825) reported that women were kept uneducated because it was thought that 'for a woman to be able to read, the speedy death of herself or others in the family will be secured, in addition to which it is thought for a wife to be able to read or converse it would make her of too much importance in her own eyes and detract from that sense of servility which all females ... are taught is their proper feeling'.

[26] In 1881 the 'grand total' of girls under instruction in mission institutions and their own homes was 56,408. The total number of boys was more than double at 131,244 (*Statistical Tables*, pp. 65-70).

number of accounts men describe first being stimulated into inquiry after coming across and reading scripture or tracts.[27]

There were greater restrictions on the mobility of high caste women and girls who also needed to maintain caste purity by avoiding contact with lower polluting castes. In response missions established separate 'caste schools'. Although there were some successful attempts earlier it was not until the end of the 1870s in the Madura and LMS mission that sufficient numbers of high caste families were willing to have their daughters educated in mission schools in order to maintain these schools.[28]

At the other end of the spectrum girls of the lowest castes were perhaps less likely to come into contact with missions through education. Children of the untouchable castes only began attending mission schools in large numbers after the mass movements in the two missions studied, and then in schools specifically established for them. The LMS for example set up a number of schools for Malas and Madigas in the early 1890s. It was only after a decade of operation that girls began to attend these schools.[29]

Zenana visiting became an increasingly important feature of women's work in the towns. Part of the purpose of this type of work was to follow up ex-school pupils, the other was to reach older women, especially high caste women who were not being reached by other means. Systematic visiting did not begin in earnest in the Madura mission until the early 1870s and later in the 1880s in the LMS mission, with the increase in the numbers of single western women and Indian women mission agents.[30] Although there was some growth in zenana work numbers of zenana pupils remained small.[31]

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[27] LMS, Howell, Letter, Cuddapah, 8th October, 1836; W. Dawson, 'A Short History of the LMS Chicacole Station', written in 1846 as part of the Annual Report, this incident occurred in 1844; LMS, G. Cran and A. Des Granges, joint letter, Vizagapatam, cited in Lovett, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-5.

[28] LMS, Mrs Thomas, Letter, Vizagapatam, n. d., in *News of Female Missions* (Journal of the Ladies Committee of the LMS), April, 1884, p. 25; Mr Chester, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, April, 1869, p. 272. Mr. Chandler, Letter, 20th May, in *MH*, December, 1871, p. 391.

[29] LMS, Christlieb, Annual Report, Anantapur, 1899; LMS, Mrs Stephenson, Annual Report, Gooty, 1902 and 1903.

[30] 1870 Review, in *MH*, April, 1872, p. 113; LMS, Mrs Jagannadhan, Annual Report Girls School, Vizagapatam, 1884; LMS, Mrs Campbell, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1886.

[31] In 1871 there were 1,997 zenana pupils of Protestant Missions in all India, 121 of them in the Madras Presidency. The figures for 1881 are 9,132 for all India and 1,920 in

Visiting was confined initially to women of the higher castes, Brahmans and Sudras.[32] While low caste women were simply not 'at home' to visitors as they were out working, the gentility of western mission women was more responsible for keeping them away. Initially Indian Bible women too were protected from

> the poor, the rough, and coarse; they enter more generally the houses of the better classes.[33]

Much was made of the inaccessability of high caste women but it was poor low caste working women who, despite being the most mobile group of women, were the least likely to come into contact with missionaries. One woman missionary recognised this when she said,

> we have often overlooked the largest class of women in India, the working women. They are free from restraint, but they have the shadow of deep poverty over them, and the necessity of constant hard labour is the obstacle in the way of their regular instruction. They cannot be gathered into schools, they can spare no time in their busy day for teachers and lessons.[34]

In the last decades of the century low caste women or women employed specifically for the purpose were engaged to contact low caste women.[35]

Caste prejudice had to be catered to, for women who had been in contact with the lower castes were not admitted into high caste homes for fear of the pollution they would transmit. It is possible that this missionary was correct in saying that these women had little time for missionaries. Poor working women may have presented missionaries with the most

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Madras. In 1890 the numbers had risen to 32,659 for all India, 7,090 in Madras (*Statistical Tables*, p. 60-1).

32 A generic term westerners applied to non-Brahman but non-polluting castes.

33 Miss Sisson, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, June, 1876, p. 194. Geraldine Forbes also discusses this issue, 'In Search of the "Pure Heathen"; Missionary Women in Nineteenth Century India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 'Review of Women's Studies', 26 April, 1986, p. WS7.

34 Miss Thorburn, *op. cit.*, p. 190; LMS, Stringfellow, Report of Women's Work, Vizagapatam, 1903.

35 LMS, Mrs Stephenson, Annual Report of Woman's Work, Gooty, 1893 and 1889; LMS, Christlieb, Annual Report, Anantapur, 1899.

resistance. One of the women employed by the LMS reported that she was often challenged by the women she worked amongst, asking her if teaching would bring them food.[36]

Generally, women in villages at any distance from the stations too were rarely contacted by mission women until mission women began to tour. Missionary parties on tour generally camped in some open spot with access to one or more villages, and local women felt free to approach missionary women, coming to the camp in groups, often simply out of curiosity. Men came to see mission women too but it was novel for village women to approach missionaries in this way.[37] Ruby reported to Emma Stephenson that when she was itinerating in the surrounding villages

> In several places the women said 'Oh see here! *Women* have now come to teach us. For some time past men have been coming to preach to our men but now *we* can learn.'[38]

Some of the implications of the sexual segregation in the representation of Christianity in India will emerge in the following discussion. The full implications of sexual segregation and of the possibility that women may have experienced comparatively less direct contact with mission agents are issues that remain to be examined in further studies.

Family Politics — Home Despots

Opposition to Christianity in the family came from all directions but the family politics surrounding conversion were represented by missionaries as sex-specific. According to missionaries' accounts much of the conflict over conversion in the family was between men and women, and most often in the form of female resistance to male baptism. Just as the family was represented as a force of religious conservatism women were identified as

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[36] LMS, Mrs Stephenson, Annual Report of Woman's Work, Gooty, 1889, 1903 and 1904; I. Barnes, *Between Life and Death*, London, 1901, p. 23.

[37] LMS, Christlieb, Annual Report, Anantapur, 1904; Christlieb, *An Uphill Road*, p. 60.

[38] LMS, Mrs Stephenson, Annual Report of Woman's Work, Gooty, 1893 (her emphasis).

the most conservative element within the family. Mrs Lewis, a British missionary wife, perceived women to be

> the greatest hindrances in the way of their husbands and sons following what they believe to be the right way.[39]

According to the evangelical rhetoric Indian women were at once the greatest upholders of heathenism and its most pitiable victims. While on the one hand women were represented as the most oppressed, on the other they were most powerful members of society, as a publication of the Ladies Committee of the LMS pointed out:

> The women of India have been held for generations past in tyranny and degradation ... the idea of woman has for ages past been steadily sinking lower and lower, their rights have been more and more assailed ... More cruel and demoralising customs than exist in India in regard to women can hardly be found among the lowest barbarians, and yet we are told she rules in India; as everywhere in the home, that the family life is the stronghold of Hinduism and that woman superstitious and conservative keeps the key.[40]

This is typical of the commentary about what was described as 'the degradation of Indian Womanhood'. As scholars such as Mrinalini Sinha and Lati Mani have pointed out, discourses on 'the condition of women' in India were an important feature of the British moralisation of colonialism.[41] Confident that British women were 'the most honoured in the world',[42] an argument that the position of women in any culture was a test of civilisation was maintained. It followed that the spiritual, social and moral decay of heathenism was mapped out most clearly in the condition of

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39 LMS, Mrs Lewis, *Report on Zenana Work*, Bellary, 1883.

40 *News of Female Missions*, April, 1884, p. 24.

41 M. Sinha, 'Gender and Imperialism: Colonial Policy and the Ideology of Moral Imperialism in Late 19th Century Bengal', in M. Kimmel (ed.), *Changing Men*, Sage Publications, 1987, pp. 217-31; Lati Mani, 'The Production of an Official Discourse on Sati in Early 19th Century Bengal' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 'Review of Women's Studies', 26 April, 1986, pp. WS32-40.

42 Anon., *Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, Journal of the LMS, February, 1837, p. 98.

heathen womanhood. The litany of 'abuses' against women in India was frequently recited. Heading the list was sati, closely followed by child marriage and prohibitions against widow remarriage and the austerities imposed upon widows. Other 'abuses' included female infanticide, polygamy, the seclusion of women and prohibitions against female education.

The 'elevation' of womanhood was a prominent theme in the debates about the social reform and moral regeneration of India which, the colonisers insisted, were necessary before political independence could be considered. For evangelicals conversion to Christianity was integral to this reform. Spiritual salvation and social liberation were perceived to be complementary and inseparable projects that required complete cultural transformation modelled, of course, upon western cultural forms. Missionaries aspired to transform both gender and relations between the sexes. They attempted to instill the values and attributes of 'True Christian Womanhood' and self-reliant masculinity into converts and Indian culture. Western missionaries also hoped to re-form the Indian family, focusing on marriage in particular.

But while evangelicals expressed much pity for 'degraded and oppressed' Indian womanhood, she was feared as religiously conservative not simply because she was kept in seclusion and ignorance but also, and conversely, because she was believed to possess almost too much power. This power attributed to the women of India was not unique but belonged to them by virtue of their sex. According to essentialist notions about femininity all women were thought to be empowered with an innate feminine influence, which was exercised within the home. The women of India were also believed to share two other essential attributes of femininity: a natural religiosity and a tendency towards conservatism. Thus Indian women were perceived to be a formidable force of resistance to Christianity:

> In India, as all over the world, it is the women who have the strongest instinct for religion and cling to the old worship.[43]

Women, wives, mothers and grandmothers were labelled the 'home despots' of India. They were accused of being the main props of idolatry

[43] M. Butler, *Hindu Women at Home*, Bangalore, 1921, p. 23.

and caste, 'checking all reforms and scrupulously preserving all absurd and ridiculously stupid superstitions.'[44]

This fear of the power wielded by the women of India in their own households was compounded in the missionary imagination by the seclusion of women. Missionaries may have exaggerated its significance but the zenana came to signify the fact that Indian women were out of reach, beyond control. Protected from the colonial gaze women could continue to carry out their 'immoral and idolatrous' practices and pass them on to their children in 'the most inaccessible stronghold of heathenism, the home.'[45]

But at the same time as Indian women were feared as the greatest hindrance they were also viewed as the greatest hope for Christianity. The power of feminine influence could retard but it could also accelerate the spread of Christianity, as Miss Greenfield of the Society for Promoting Female Education in the East so passionately reminded her audience at one of the major Decennial Missionary Conferences:

> I believe that the heart of Hinduism is not in the mystic teaching of the Vedas or Shasters, ... not even in the bigoted devotion of its religious leaders; but enshrined in the homes, in the family life and hereditary customs of the people; fed preserved and perpetuated by the wives and mothers of India ... Let us in our Master's name lay our hand on the hand that rocks the cradle, and tune the lips that sing the lullabies. Let us win the mothers of India for Christ and the day will not long be deferred when India's sons also shall be brought to the Redeemer's feet.[46]

It would be facile to dismiss this concept of female religious conservatism merely as a theme of colonial discourses intent on demonstrating the relatively advanced position of women in Christian society. The notion of female religious conservatism in India needs to be addressed as it has found its way directly into scholarship.

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[44] J. Murdoch, *The Women of India and What Can Be Done For Them*, Madras, 1888, p. 17.

[45] Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

[46] Miss Greenfield, *Report of the Second Decennial Missionary Conference 1882-3*, p. 210.

That women have been excluded from supposedly general histories of religious change in India is demonstrated by the few references to women that can be found. To give some examples: Julius Richter, in his comprehensive history of Christian missions, refers to Indian zenana women as 'the most zealous adherents of traditional heathenism'.[47] Richard Eaton, in his research on tribal conversion in the North of India, records the missionaries' observation that 'it was the women who were most resistant to Christian teachings, remaining devoted to local crop deities'.[48] In their joint study into the church in Andhra Pradesh conducted in the 1950s, Luke and Carman found that women were 'the most entrenched traditionalists' and formed 'the basis of ... resistance to change'.[49] Yet these studies make surprisingly little comment about what appears to be a recurring theme in missionary and scholarly accounts of conversion in India.

Family Politics — A Trial to Him

As already mentioned, because conversion presented a threat to family unity, the family was the site of a considerable amount of conflict over conversion to Christianity. The material from the LMS and Madura missions actually contains many accounts of female resistance to conversion, usually following the introduction of Christianity into the family by males, that appear to validate the notion of female conservatism. There are reports of female opposition causing men to delay baptism.[50] Some men were never baptised for this reason.[51] Some waited till their wives, who may also have brought their children, were persuaded to join them.[52]

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47 Julius Richter, *A History of Missions in India*, London, 1908, p. 329.

48 Richard Eaton, 'Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876-1871,' *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. XXI, no. 1, January-March, 1984, p. 21.

49 P. Luke and J. Carman, *Village Christians and Hindu Culture*, London, 1968, pp. 7, 111.

50 LMS, Howell, Letter, Cuddapah, 10th April, 1835; LMS, W. Dawson, Annual Report, Chicacole, 1844; LMS, J. Gordon, Letter, Vizagapatam, 13th August, 1845; LMS, W. Dawson, Annual Report, Vizianagaram, 1869 (refers to the opposition of a 'fond though heathen mother'); LMS, Goffin, Letter, Kadiri, 5th October, 1893.

51 Jones, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, October, 1893, p. 413.

52 LMS, J. Gordon, Letter, Vizagapatam, 13th August, 1845.

It would be dangerous, however, to rely upon accounts that were written largely by and about men. The problem with missionary records is not only the general invisibility of women but that when women were mentioned it was usually only in their relations with men. Women emerge as incidental, usually nameless, figures in narratives about the conversions of their male relatives. It is clear that many women did attempt to prevent the baptism of their male relatives. But the evidence also indicates that families were perhaps more successful at obstructing the formal conversion of women.

When their male relatives had decided to convert to Christianity women had to chose between maintaining their existing religious beliefs or their closest family relations, and these choices had to be made in the context of social and economic circumstances that made it difficult for women to live outside of marriage and the family. This meant that women often converted for reasons in addition to or other than religious conviction and that women who had initially chosen to remain Hindu often later decided to join their husbands or other male relatives in the Christian community. Wives were often reunited with their baptised husbands after separations of varying lengths, up to many years.[53]

Women were also torn between conflicting family loyalties. In following their relatives women, like male converts, risked forfeiting other familial relationships. The difference was that in such situations women often may not have had a commitment to or even much understanding of Christianity, and may never have actually 'converted' themselves. I am not suggesting that men did not also convert to Christianity in order to maintain family relationships or for social reasons but I would argue that the pressures on women from family and society were greater and that women's choices were more closely tied to those of their male relatives.

While women's interests lay in the maintenance of the family unit, women as well as men were prepared to sacrifice family unity for faith. Just as converts had to pay a price, those who refused to consider conversion also maintained steadfast adherence to their original faith at

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[53] LMS, Howell, Letter, Cuddapah, 10th April, 1835; LMS, Porter, Letter, Cuddapah, March, 1846; LMS, Gordon, Annual Report, Vizagapatam, 1846; W. Dawson, 'A Short History of the LMS Chicacole Station', 1846, records a number of such cases; LMS, M. Ure, Annual Report, Kadiri, 1902.

great personal cost. Many families were permanently separated after men were baptised.[54]

High caste women may have been more likely to attempt to prevent their husbands' and sons' conversion because they had more to lose. Missionaries made a point of insisting that converts demonstrate their sincerity by transgressing or ignoring caste practices. Among the higher castes this meant that contact with Hindu family members was severed or they would also lose caste. High caste women and men endeavoured to prevent the conversion of family members of either sex for the same reasons, but in addition to this there were a number of circumstances that provided women with particular motivations for obstructing the conversion of male relatives.

A high caste Christian convert was considered to have died. For a mother the 'death' of a son would have been a great loss both emotionally and in terms of expected support in old age. Missionary women recognised this and expressed some sympathy.[55] Children of a convert could be outcaste and husbands might never be found for unmarried daughters.[56] High caste wives were faced with a choice of conversion or 'widowhood', with all the consequent deprivations and no option of remarriage. While the lot of a high caste widow is far from a happy one, the alternative was relinquishing their own religious faith, loss of caste and other family relations and an uncertain future. Women's resistance to conversion and men's reluctance to leave their families is understandable.

While high caste women may have had more to lose low caste women also opposed male baptisms. Low caste women are less economically dependent and have the options of divorce and remarriage. However, divorce is not unaccompanied by shame and dishonour for low caste women.[57] Neither does the fact that low caste women work make it possible

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[54] W. Dawson, 'A Short History of the LMS Chicacole Station', 1846, records a number of such cases. Others were recorded in LMS, Porter, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1845; LMS, W. Dawson, Annual Report, Chicacole, 1845; LMS, Bacon, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1882; LMS, Johnston, Annual Report, Nundial, 1869.

[55] Weitbrecht, *The Women of India and Christian Work in the Zenana*, London, 1875, p. 49.

[56] LMS, Johnston, Annual Report, Nundial, 1869; Mr Cane, Letter, 10th April, 1840, in *MH*, March, 1841, p. 138.

[57] This is evident in the recent biographical literature of untouchables, e.g. Leela Gulati, *Profiles in Female Poverty; A Study of Five Poor Working Women*, Oxford, 1982; J. Freeman, *Untouchable*, London, 1979.

to achieve economic independence. Women commonly earned only a third to a half of male wages.[58]

On the other hand continued intercourse between Christian and non-Christian family members was not uncommon among lower caste groups. It was in fact a constant worry for missionaries who would have preferred that converts be protected from 'heathen home influence'. Still there are many accounts of low caste women opposing their husbands and sons when they had decided to convert to Christianity.[59] If families stayed together when men of the lower castes were baptised relationships were strained and some baptised men later returned to Hinduism due to pressure from their families.[60]

One of the earlier conversions of the LMS in South India is a classic example of this pattern of initial female resistance to male introduction of Christianity into the family followed by separation then reunion. It is also a good example of the way in which greater male mobility and literacy meant that men often came into contact with Christianity in quite different ways to women in their families. The man concerned was employed as a hospital peon where he was given some Christian literature by an Indian Christian colleague. This man convinced him to change his faith. His wife eventually joined her husband at the mission. However she resisted at first, because, the missionary believed, she was reluctant to break caste. She was described as 'a trial to him' in her opposition.[61]

Wifely opposition could be vehement indeed. The wife of one man, a goldsmith, who was planning to convert had declared that she would not leave her husband if he became a Christian, but when the ceremony was about to commence she did her best to prevent it. As the missionary described it she displayed 'the most uncontrolled grief and passion. She had beaten her head till the blood was streaming down her face. She repeatedly expressed her purpose of jumping into a well.' The ceremony was

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58 J. W. Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India*, New York, 1933, p. 94.

59 Mr Jones, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, October, 1893, p. 413. One man told him: 'I know the Christian religion is true, but my wife renders my life simply unbearable, and unless she comes I cannot'. Cf. Rauschenbusch-Clough, *op. cit.*, *passim.*

60 Mr Jones, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, October, 1893, p. 413; LMS, W. Dawson, Annual Report, Chicacole, 1845; Journal of Mr Chester, 6th September, 1843, in *MH*, April, 1844, p. 122.

61 W. Dawson, 'A Short History of the LMS Chicacole Station', 1846. This incident occurred in 1844.

postponed indefinitely and she barred the door at the missionaries' approach in future.[62]

Missionaries expressed much sympathy for men whose affections for their families and domestic comforts hindered their baptism[63] and they were not happy to expose male converts to the temptations of bachelorhood.[64] Missionaries attempted to persuade wives to join their husbands and pressured husbands to do so as well. If wives would not be persuaded, however, missionaries encouraged men to leave their families,[65] and male converts sometimes took Christian wives.[66]

Accounts of wives being baptised some time after their husbands are common and not only because they might have resisted initially. Protestant missionaries would not readily baptise candidates until they could demonstrate a certain level of what they called 'Christian knowledge'. Perhaps due to women's lower levels of education and exposure to missions, wives of baptised men who were keen to be baptised as well were sometimes kept 'under instruction' for longer periods than their husbands.[67]

The rules could be bent, however, when expedient. In one instance the wife and child of a man, who had been working as a 'native assistant' for the LMS, joined him after many years separation just when he was about to be sent to another station. The woman and child were baptised immediately even though they were described as being 'totally ignorant' of Christianity.

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62 LMS, Hawker, Annual Report, Belgaum, 1881. A similar incident was reported in LMS, Goffin, Annual Report, Kadiri, 1891.

63 LMS, Porter, Annual Report, Vizagapatam, 1844; LMS, Bacon, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1882: 'Home ties are as binding to the Hindu as to the English man and we could give him our full sympathy'. This report carried two cases of Bacon attempting to influence wives.

64 LMS, W. Howell, Letters, Cuddapah, 8th January and 10th April, 1835; LMS, Bacon, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1882.

65 W. Dawson, 'A Short History of the LMS Chicacole Station', 1846.

66 LMS, Howell, Letter, Cuddapah, 15th July, 1825.

67 LMS, Porter, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1846; W. Dawson, 'A Short History of the LMS Chicacole Station', 1846, this incident occurred in 1840; LMS, J. Gordon, Letter, Vizagapatam, 18th January, 1836; LMS, Howell, Letter, Cuddapah, 10th April, 1835; LMS, Porter, Letter, Cuddapah, March, 1846; LMS, J. Gordon, Letter, Vizagapatam, 6th December, 1851.

The husband, as spiritual guardian, was 'to furnish them with the means of Christian instruction' at their new home.[68]

Missionaries were gratified by such family reunions.[69] But it is important to distinguish between these kinds of reunions and conversion. Women returned to their marriages for a variety of reasons and not all women who joined their Christian relatives were baptised.

Many forces in addition to pressure from husbands and missionaries would have influenced women, both to be baptised with their male relatives or to join them later. Wives may have followed their husbands out of affection or proper Hindu wifely devotion, like the Telugu women who was reported to have, Sita-like, declared to her husband, 'Where you go, I shall go too. Why should I stay where you are not?'[70]

The question of economic support or rather material survival may have been of most significance. Older women were especially dependent and were sometimes baptised along with younger couples upon whom they depended.[71] Mission agents also suggested that men leave their mothers who were opposed to their baptism. Some men certainly did but others refused.[72]

In one family there were three brothers who all eventually converted to Christianity. When the eldest brother, who was baptised first, returned to his village his mother cursed him:

> I brought you forth and cared for you, in the hope that in my old age I should be cared for by you. You have gone on a road on which we shall not follow you. Henceforth I shall not eat food that comes from your hands. Go away! You are to me as though who are dead!

This woman remained steadfast in her adherence to Hinduism but when her other sons were baptised too 'she dared not repeat her curse'. The two oldest went to the mission station for education and employment, 'the youngest stayed at home to support his mother' until her death.[73]

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68 LMS, J. Gordon, Letter, Vizagapatam, 18th January, 1836.
69 LMS, Porter, Letter, Cuddapah, March, 1846.
70 Rauschenbusch-Clough, *op. cit.*, pp. 193, 191.
71 LMS, Howell, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1825.
72 Letter from Ceylon mission, in *MH*, October, 1828, p. 323.
73 Rauschenbusch-Clough, *op. cit.*, pp. 193-8.

The politics of the extended family are an important consideration. Wives were pressured by the rest of the family to use their influence over their husbands in order to prevent them converting.[74] Women who failed to do so were sometimes blamed for the loss to the family of a son, just as widows were held responsible for their husbands' deaths. Families fears of, and anger at, the loss of their sons and brothers to Christianity were taken out on wives of all castes. Some 'baptismal widows' decided to join their husbands because of the persecution they received from their husbands' relatives.[75]

Within the extended family high caste women, especially, were subject to strict controls and greater surveillance. The story of Anandarayer, the first Brahman converted by the LMS, and his wife illustrates the influence of the family on women's choices. Anandarayer met a Roman Catholic convert when returning home after a long but, according to the LMS missionary, unsatisfactory religious pilgrimage. This man gave him some literature which we are told he 'admired'. He was able to follow up his initial interest by travelling in order to seek out several priests and ultimately the LMS missionaries. To test him one of the priests sent him home to his family. He returned, declaring

> that he preferred the salvation of his soul to all worldly considerations; and even left his wife behind him, who was neither inclined nor permitted to accompany him.

He did not see her again until she joined him some months later, explaining that she had decided to find him because she had 'suffered much among her relations'.[76]

Pressures from the extended family varied. One woman had to face opposition, not only from her natal family but from the whole village when she decided to join her husband after many years separation. The residents of her village, where she had been staying, came out in force in an attempt to physically prevent her leaving with her husband when he came to collect

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74 *Ibid.*, pp. 91-3, 228.

75 *Ibid.*, pp. 191-6, 228; LMS, G. Cran and A. Des Granges, joint letter, Vizagapatam, cited in Lovett, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-6.

76 *Loc. cit.*

her. Her mother even took her child hostage, but when this did not weaken her resolve the child was returned.[77]

The question of the sexual politics of mass movement conversions deserves some special attention because the nature of the movements and the representation of them in missionary and scholarly discourses tend to obscure diversity and conflict. Both missionaries and scholars have concentrated on the recording and analysis of male missionaries' contacts with caste and village leaders and male heads of households. The same is also true for a number of earlier, low caste, group conversions. For instance the first Mala conversions in connection with the LMS in Cuddapah occurred in 1840, after the release of a Mala prisoner whom the missionary had visited in jail. When released this man was baptised and proceeded to bring in several families, including his own.[78]

Both mass movements and smaller low caste group conversion emerge from missionary and scholarly accounts as a series of contracts between local male power-brokers and male representatives of the mission.[79] At one level, this is probably just what they were. Decisions regarding conversion during mass movements were often made at the village or community level, by processes that excluded women, either by what missionaries called elders or the all-male caste councils. Stephenson, one of the LMS missionaries, noted that Malas

> move altogether or not at all ... If the elders take the decision the whole community comes and even, if the elders take the decision the whole community goes back to idol worship.[80]

Most importantly, a greater desire among males to be baptised in general was recognised. In his report of the massive India-wide study of mass movements Pickett wrote:

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[77] LMS, J. Gordon, Letter, Vizagapatam, 18th January, 1836; Rauschenbusch-Clough, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

[78] LMS, W. Mawbey, 'Short Chronology of the Cuddapah Station', in Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1874.

[79] Mr Cherry, Extract from Journal, 6th September, 1843, in *MH*, April, 1844, p. 123; Mr Capron, Letter, 25th April, 1868, in *MH*, September, 1868, p. 279; LMS, MacFarlane, Letter, Cuddapah, 26th March, 1894; Rauschenbusch-Clough, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

[80] LMS, Stephenson, Annual Report, Nundial, 1879; another headman was described as 'the means of his people coming over' (LMS, Ure, Annual Report, Kadiri, 1904).

> We do not find resolutions stating that men will not be baptised unless their wives join them in professing Christianity, but we find this condition quite commonly enforced.[81]

No mention was made of wives wishing to be baptised without their husbands. There was clearly some concern about female resistance to baptism in missions and churches dealing with mass movements all over India.

Missionaries have left little record of the female experience of mass movements. One exception is a book written by Emma Rauschenbusch-Clough who was an American Baptist missionary wife involved in the mass movement among Telugu Madigas after the famine of the late 1870s. Throughout her book she too represents the conversion movement in a series of anecdotes where women react to the male introduction of Christianity into the family. But Clough writes with rare understanding of Madiga women's resistance to their male relatives' decision to convert. For instance Thatiah was one of the first Telugu Madigas to introduce Christianity to his village. He first came into contact with Christianity when he met John Clough while travelling in his business of trading in hides. When Thatiah was baptised the whole village isolated him.

> But the grief that was deepest in all his sore trials came through the desertion of his wife Satyamah. She did not stand by him. Perhaps she was not greatly to blame; for she had not been with Thatiah when he opened his heart to the religion of Jesus Christ ... [and] she felt she was losing her husband. Her former care for his comforts was turned to neglect. His food was late or unsavoury, and sometimes he had to go hungry. When he wanted a drink there was no water.

Apparently Satyamah withheld her domestic services until Thatiah threatened to leave her and 'eat with the Christians'. She relented and was baptised and later travelled with him on preaching tours teaching women.[82]

The extent of Christianisation of mass movement converts was always a matter of concern and women were identified as the least Christianised of

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81 Pickett, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

82 Rauschenbusch-Clough, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-8.

all. Pickett's survey found that all over India there were lower rates of credal knowledge and church attendance among women.[83] The same social conditions that limited women's initial exposure to Christianity also shaped women's religious lives after conversion. Women were less exposed to missionaries and teachers after, as well as before, baptism. Working women were not able to read and did not have any spare time. Women involved in mass movements resisted mission agents, they told them things like, 'We are like cattle and cannot learn - baptise us as we are, why make us learn so many things'.[84]

This feature of lower levels of Christianisation among women was not confined to the low castes. Missionaries in Andhra Pradesh also noted that among higher castes 'the women were sometimes more ignorant of Christianity and less well educated than their husbands'.[85]

In addition it seems that women of all castes were often actively excluded from full participation in Christian public life. The proportion of women who attended church services was commonly cited as evidence of 'improvements in community attitudes'.[86] Missionaries felt that it was necessary to encourage male converts to educate women in their families and allow them to come to church.[87] One American in Madura went so far as to threaten to dismiss employees if they did not bring their families to church services. He wrote:

> When the proposition was made it met with much opposition. All declared they would sooner lose their places than comply; that it was against all custom for women to come into the presence of men in public; that they should lose caste etc ...

Only after one man lost his position did the others comply with the missionary's demand.[88]

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83 *Ibid.*, pp. 170-4.

84 LMS, Mrs Stephenson, Annual Report, Gooty, 1904.

85 G. A. Oddie, 'Christian Conversion Among Non-Brahmans in Andrah Pradesh', in Oddie (ed.), *Religion in South Asia*, London, 1977, pp. 82-3.

86 General Letter, ABCFM Ceylon Mission, in *MH*, October, 1828, p. 298;
Mr Noyes, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, October, 1860, p. 306; Mr Chester, Letter, 14th August, 1897, in *MH*, November, 1897, p. 467.

87 Annual Report, Madura Mission, 1860, in *MH*, June, 1861, p. 186.

88 Muzzy, Letter, 6th April, 1843, in *MH*, November, 1843, p. 370.

Female Revival

Given the degree of segregation common in Indian culture it is no wonder that rates of women's church attendance remained low but it may well have been women who most resisted pressures to attend mixed services. Continuity in the form of religious expression has been recognised as an important facilitator of religious change. Christian women attended their own meetings for worship and prayer, just as Hindu women did.[89] In these meetings women could pray out loud and speak without embarrassment. Women's meetings were not initiated to accommodate Indian but western social forms, yet they provided Indian women with venues for religious activity with which they had been familiar.

Other aspects of Indian women's religious lives were preserved. Existing methods of supporting religious institutions were appropriated by the missions and churches. Fund raising was a feature of Christian women's culture as it was in the west. What was known as the 'Women's Contribution' was collected at the weekly women's meetings in the Madura mission. As many converts were poor and as women especially had little access to cash, Christian women maintained their old practice of laying aside a handful of grain each time they cooked for religious offerings and brought this along to their meetings.[90]

Singing was another important feature of religious expression for women in both cultures. Missions developed a strategy of using songs and lyrics to attract women in particular.[91] Traditional songs were adapted and special efforts were made to replace obscene songs traditionally sung by women. Pickett commented upon the popularity of song among women mass movement converts in the Telugu area. Apparently action songs based on parables and miracles were very popular.

> Many have been composed by Bible women and taught to the Christian women of their villages, who sing them at gatherings ... especially at

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89 Christlieb, *An Uphill Road*, p. 246.

90 Noyes, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, February, 1874, p. 50; Miss Taylor, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, March, 1872, p. 94.

91 Christlieb, *An Uphill Road*, p. 92-3; LMS, Bacon, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1882.

> weekly gatherings of women. Some of these action songs have been expanded into dramas in which a dozen or more women participate.[92]

Women also devised their own public celebrations like those planned by 'coolie' women in Madura:

> Their plan was to have a procession ... they were to go from street to street singing and each woman ... was to join the procession as it came past her house ... then singing together they went up and down some of the streets and so came to the church and there they held their simple exercises of various kinds and made their offerings.[93]

If in general, then, women converts were, or were perceived to be, less Christianised it seems that some were actually creating their own forms of worship, even a separate female religious culture that was quite independent from male-dominated churches. Maybe Pickett did not ask the right questions about levels of Christianisation among women.

As the mass movements demonstrate Christianity travelled along indigenous paths of communication, irrespective of missionary activity. The family was one of these paths and it would seem that women's culture was another. Perhaps because women and men did not mix freely in public and perhaps because women and men were usually exposed to Christianity in predominantly male or female environments, it was possible for religious enthusiasm to thrive especially amongst one sex of a community. Cases of women displaying interest in Christianity or religious enthusiasm as a group were certainly noted.[94]

In the mission girls' schools there were often what the Americans labelled revivals amongst the students.[95] It could be argued that female

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92 Pickett, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

93 Anon., Letter, in *MH*, December, 1907, pp. 602-3. Another such women's festival was described by a retired missionary who had worked in Tamil Nadu: G. Burkhardt, 'Tamil Women and the Danish Mission Society: Danish Women Missionaries' Accounts', in *Indian Church History Review*, vol. XXI, no. 2, December, 1987, p. 128.

94 Annual Report, Madura, 1849, in *MH*, June, 1850, p. 193; LMS, Johnston, Annual Report, Nundial, 1874; LMS, Bacon, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1881; LMS, Miss Haskard, Annual Report, Bellary, 1902.

95 General Letter from Ceylon mission, n. d., in *MH*, May, 1838, p. 157; Miss Swift, Letter, 20th September, 1886, in *MH*, December, 1886, pp. 502-3; Miss Noyes, Letter, in *MH*, July, 1899, p. 294.

education is the clearest manifestation of the impact of segregation in the encounter with the missionary enterprise. In mission schools and zenanas women and girls could become interested in Christianity while the men of their households may have had no contact with missionaries.

In some circumstances the fact that women occupied the same social and physical space as a sex meant that caste boundaries could be crossed. In Cuddapah for instance low caste women converts had been singing hymns in the place of traditional work songs as they worked in the fields. Bacon, the LMS missionary, was pleased to report that hearing the songs the Sudra women too had 'learned to sing them and to understand Christianity'.[96]

Mr Noyes of the ABCFM was taken aback by a 'female revival' in one of the small villages he regularly visited. 'Having been accustomed to expect nothing of these ignorant persons' he was most surprised when they exhibited a new-found enthusiasm for Christianity by 'singing harmoniously in a very earnest manner'. This group of women followed Noyes to another village five miles distant, where he organised a prayer meeting with the catechist's wife for their benefit. Not having changed his opinion of these women, Noyes was again surprised to find this revival still prospering when he next visited the area some months later.[97]

Indian women's agency was undoubtedly underrepresented in missionary records but even isolated instances of women's leadership such as this one present an important challenge to ideas of female conservatism. Just as women used their influence to prevent conversions women and girls were active and effective agents of conversion to Christianity. Women were successful agents of religious change in a variety of environments: the immediate and extended family, and the local community.[98] Women converts and in some cases unbaptised ex-pupils disseminated Christian

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96 LMS, Bacon, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1882.

97 Noyes, Letter, June 30th, 1861, in *MH*, December, 1861, p. 398. Other cases of women displaying enthusiasm as a group: Mr Taylor, Letter, 8th February, 1870, in *MH*, August, 1870, p. 257; Miss Taylor, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, March, 1872, p. 94; Mr Herrick, Letter, 23rd September, 1873, in *MH*, January, 1874, p. 25.

98 Gordon, Letter, Vizagapatam, 6th December, 1851, in *Missionary Magazine and Chronicle*, September, 1852, p. 556; Extract Annual Report, Bellary, in *Missionary Magazine and Chronicle*, July, 1841, p. 366; LMS, Johnston, Annual Report, Nundial, 1874.

teachings often without the knowledge let alone support of mission agents.[99]

Women displayed leadership in their communities. During the mass movement among the Madigas one low caste widow was described as the bravest member of her village. In the midst of debates she took a decisive step and went into the heathen temple, removed the idols and gave them to the missionary.[100] One other woman who had been taught in the mission school exercised no little 'influence' over her husband and her neighbours. She instituted and led regular 'family worship'.[101] Not all women were as successful as this, however, and many faced some very effective opposition to their own formal conversions.

Family Politics — Secret Believers

The family shaped the form of both men's and women's reception of Christianity, but it did not do so equally. Women and men were reluctant to be baptised alone for the same reasons of family, caste, support and protection, but the situation was quite different for women who wished to convert to Christianity independently of their families. Due to the social and economic conditions that tied women more intimately to the family, women found it more difficult to be baptised independently. As an Indian woman's status and material well-being so largely depended upon her marital and maternal state, it would not be surprising to find that women postponed baptism when it meant risking marriages and children. There are few instances of wives being baptised before their husbands.

The same structures of sexual inequality disadvantaged women from all castes in regard to joining Christianity independently, but caste, age and marital status further determined levels of female autonomy. High caste women with wealth and status were the most dependent and had more to lose. Zenana women, who had become 'secret believers', presented missionaries with a major problem.

Opposition from within families clearly had a different meaning for women and men. While women may have attempted to manipulate others

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[99] Christlieb, *An Uphill Road*, p. 92.
[100] LMS, Ure, Annual Report, Kadiri, 1904.
[101] LMS, J. Dawson, Letter, Vizagapatam, 22nd September, 1839.

by withdrawing their domestic services,[102] or through self-mutilation and threats of suicide,[103] men had the ability to withhold the very means of survival and women could be placed under serious threat of violence from men. In old age women were most vulnerable. One of the American missionaries wrote of

> One aged heathen woman, a widow, [who] became interested in what she had heard of Christianity. Though ready to cast in her lot with the Christians, she said she must ask her son, with whom she lived. He became very angry at her, and threatened not only to deprive her of food, but to kill her if she persisted in her purpose.[104]

Instances of physical threats and violence to prevent women being baptised are hardly likely to be rare. A most striking example was related by Thatiah, when a preacher. The husband of one woman

> began to ill treat her ... He insisted that she must forsake the new religion; he tied her to a tree and beat her; he dragged her about the ground by her hair, so that bunches of her hair remained in his hand.

This conflict was never resolved, the husband remarried and the woman went to live in the mission boarding school.[105]

Young wives and girls in their natal homes were at the bottom of the family hierarchy. Missionaries were both pleased and saddened to relate many accounts of current and ex-school pupils who read the Bible and prayed in secret because their husbands and families would not allow it.[106]

Not all young women interested in Christianity resorted to secrecy and deception. One high caste girl, for example, who had been a school pupil in the Madura mission was hastily married during the school holidays to her elder sister's husband, because she was considering conversion. However the missionary was delighted to report that when installed in her new home

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[102]General Letter, ABCFM Ceylon Mission, August, 1827, in *MH*, October, 1828, p. 323; Mr Jones, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, October, 1893, p. 413; Oddie, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
[103]LMS, H. Goffin, Letter, Kadiri, 5th October, 1893; LMS, Smith, Annual Report, Belgaum, 1881.
[104]Mr Rendall, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, March, 1874, p. 86.
[105]Rauschenbusch-Clough, *op. cit.*, p. 299.
[106]Christlieb, *An Uphill Road*, p. 128.

she made 'no little disturbance in the family by her opposition to idolatry'. She was 'permitted to have her way for fear that she will take a young wife's revenge of running home to her mother'.[107]

This case may be the exception. The relatively weak position of young brides in family politics was also evident in the mixed marriages that were common among the castes involved in mass movements. Missions and churches tried to enforce a rule against these mixed marriages, though they were prepared to let the rule pass if Hindu girls were brought under the influence of a Christian family.[108] Stephenson, an LMS missionary, met with one young Christian woman who had recently married into a non-Christian family. He wrote, 'she told us she could not help worshipping idols as her husband and his relatives forced her to do so. This case is not a solitary exception', he lamented.[109]

In direct contrast to their relations with men, missionaries had little more to offer women in such situations than moral support. Missionaries rarely intervened in family politics on behalf of women or encouraged women to leave their homes. Mission texts may be full of condemnation of the Indian family and Indian religions as institutions of female oppression, and missionaries may have represented conversion to Christianity as a form of both social and spiritual liberation, but women who viewed entry into the Christian community as a means of escape from miserable family circumstances were given no encouragement.[110] The evangelical agenda was to reform Indian marriage not to emancipate women from it.

But more importantly even when they were convinced of the religious legitimacy of their motives missionaries were reluctant to baptise women independently of their families, for ideological and practical reasons. Missionaries' willingness to baptise women 'believers' depended upon their marital and maternal status. Missionaries were most reluctant to draw wives and mothers away from what they understood to be their rightful place in their homes. They felt less compunction about baptising widows and other women with few domestic obligations.

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[107]Mr Tracy, Letter, 15th May, 1886, in *MH*, September, 1886, p. 344.
[108]LMS, Johnston, Annual Report, Nundial, 1875.
[109]LMS, Stephenson, Annual Report, Gooty, 1889.
[110]Christlieb, *An Uphill Road*, pp. 89, 191, 193-4.

> Women with sad histories and widows with no ties to keep them back have come out boldly for Christ ... But ... women with husbands and children cannot come out and desert them to confess Christ outwardly. If they believe they must do so secretly ...[111]

> We all agree that in no case should wives and mothers be urged to break family ties in order to publicly confess Christ by baptism ... We think such converts should be advised to confess their faith first in their own homes by deed and word, fulfilling in a Christian spirit all their conjugal and motherly duties, and to seek to win their husbands and children for Christ.[112]

Anecdotal evidence indicates that a large number of women who were baptised independently were widows.[113] Webster, too, has noted that zenana missions in North India found that only women in a marginal place in families or with strained relationships left their homes.[114] The propensity of detached individuals or groups to seek new alliances through religious change has been noted in other studies.[115] Women such as widows may have had little to lose by leaving their families. They also might have been offered more encouragement from missionaries.

For some women widowhood may even have provided them with the opportunity to convert. William Moses wrote about a high caste woman connected with his church who had given up 'idol worship' some time ago, but 'like many in her position she had delayed baptism for many years'.

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[111]Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

[112]*Report of the Fourth Decennial Missionary Conference; Held at Madras, 1902*, London, 1902, pp. 99-100.

[113]Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 172; LMS, Gordon and J. Dawson Reports, Vizagapatam, January, 1825 and January, 1824; Sketch of Female Mission Work, paper of the 10th Annual Meeting of the Ladies Committee of the LMS, 1885, p. 20; LMS, Mrs Thomas, Report of Woman's Work, Vizagapatam, 1892; LMS, Miss Haskard, Letter, Bellary, 22nd February, 1894; LMS, Ure, Annual Report, Kadiri, 1904.

[114]J. C. Webster, *The Christian Community and Change in Nineteenth Century North India*, Meerut, 1976, p. 144.

[115]G. B. Forrester, 'Depressed Classes and Conversion to Christianity, 1860-1860', in Oddie (ed.), *Religion*, p. 36; G. A. Oddie, 'Christian Conversion in the Telugu Country, 1860-1900: A Case Study of One Protestant Movement in the Godavery-Krishna Delta', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. XII, no. 1, January-March, 1975, p. 70.

Since her husband's death she had been baptised and commenced giving her children 'Christian instruction'.[116]

Yet missionaries were often reluctant to baptise widows, because these women were unlikely to be able to support themselves. Economic disadvantage was the most commonly recognised obstacle to the baptism of women. Mrs Phoebe Thomas, who took a very active role in the female mission at Vizagapatam in the 1880s and 1890s, wrote that one widow whom she visited would never be baptised. She explained,

> she is now supported by some relatives who would at once cease to do so were she to become Christian ... We have several others who tell us they would join us if they could find means of livelihood.[117]

Men occupying marginal places in the family were in a similar situation. For instance one of the LMS missionaries was in contact with a crippled Muslim man and a blind Brahman man who were both interested in conversion. However, these men 'held back' because they were totally dependent upon their families who would withdraw support if they were baptised.[118]

Missions were reluctant to take on dependents. A Miss Joseph who worked among high caste women spoke at the 1882-3 Missionary Conference:

> Many of my widow pupils have said 'We believe in the Lord Jesus Christ we are Christians we wish to be baptised, but what after that? We have no independent means where shall we live and how shall we be supported?' ... Indeed [she continued] we are quite at a loss to know what to do with them, so that instead of advising and encouraging them to come out and openly confess Christ ... we discourage them if we do not actually hinder them.[119]

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[116]LMS, William Moses, Native Pastor, Annual Report, Gooty, 1881.
[117]LMS, Thomas, Annual Report, Vizagapatam, 1892.
[118]LMS, W. Dawson, Report for 1871, 1872 and 1873, Vizianagaram.
[119]Miss Joseph, BMS, *Report of the Second Decennial Missionary Conference; Held at Calcutta 1882-3*, Calcutta, 1883, p. 216.

Miss Joseph went on to appeal for the establishment of widows' homes. Such institutions offering women alternate support networks, providing accommodation, training and employment for female converts and their children were established from 1880 onwards. At the turn of the century there were forty-eight of these institutions in India, some of them specifically for widows.[120] The American Board built a Widows Home in Ahmednagar, in the Marathi mission in 1897. The LMS established a home for widows in Bellary in 1896.[121]

Contrary, then, to ideas of female conservatism standing in the way of male conversions, family opposition to female baptism could be more effective. Unlike men who frequently left their families to join the church, many women who wished to convert formally to Christianity were unable to do so, and women who were baptised on their own were more likely to be those for whom ties to the family were already weak.

The family both obstructed and facilitated conversion to Christianity but within the family women were less likely to be able to act upon their own beliefs if they conflicted with those of more powerful members of the family. Clearly the issues of sex, gender, structures of sexual oppression and religious change are many and varied. In this paper I have only attempted to raise them in a preliminary manner. The main point I want to make is that constructions of gender, sexual politics, economic and social inequalities should be considered in any analysis of conversion.

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[120]*Report of the Fourth Decennial Missionary Conference; Held at Madras, 1902*, p. 101.

[121]J. Dennis, *op. cit.*, pp. 227-8. The twentieth century may have provided different conditions and a different generation of missionary women such as the terribly forthright Marie Christlieb, who following the First World War, after many years in South India established a home for women and girls in her own compound to provide protection for women. In some situations she advised 'frank revolt' (*An Uphill Road*, p. 242).

Not by Word Alone: Cross-cultural Communication between Highlanders and Missionaries (SVD) in the Jimi Valley, Western Highlands, Papua New Guinea

Wojciech Dabrowski *

'You are Peter, the Rock. And on this rock, I will build my church.'
Matthew 16:18

Is communication (especially of complex religious ideas!) between peoples of different cultures possible and if it is, then under what conditions? This is a vexing question in these post-colonial, post-totalitarian times when peoples in various parts of the world express their ethnic, religious and cultural identities in an atmosphere freed from the politics bent on fabrication of the fiction of consensus and unity extending over social borders.[1] The issue of cross-cultural communication has of course been around for a long time.

Looking at it, however, as a two-directional process is a new phenomenon. Speaking generally, until recently Western civilisation and its specialised economic-political and religious institutions wished to 'be understood' by indigenous cultures so that they could join the 'global village'-like division of labour. Anthropologists, on the other hand, following in Malinowski's footsteps, strove to 'understand' the 'other' with little concern for the possibility of reciprocity, i.e. that the local people would 'understand' the nature of the anthropologist's project.

There has been no clear agenda for the process of bi-partisan 'communication', not least for want of ideas for devising such a project. While the colonial governments occasionally sought the advice of anthropologists (e.g. in New Guinea), confusion reigned on both sides, the administration and the colonial subjects, about each other's identities and

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1 A. Strathern, 'Let the Bow Go Down', in *War in the Tribal Zone*, ed. R. B. Ferguson and N. L. Whitehead, Santa Fe, 1992, pp. 229-50.

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

expectations.[2] The institution of 'kiaps', the government officers in New Guinea with their knowledge of grass-root issues gained from regular visits to the villages, was one of the more outstanding attempts to facilitate two-directional communication.

The diffusion of Western culture among indigenous peoples has been one of the salient features of colonial projects the world over. The indigenous peoples were the ones expected to make the effort to meet the Western culture on its own terms through 'assimilating' themselves, 'syncretising it' with their own culture or by appropriating it in either form. The cultural transformation of the indigenous peoples was to take place via the introduction of the Western educational system, the moral teaching of Christianity and the basics of the democratic political system.

Those who traditionally stood apart from these one-directional communication projects, whether of a governmental or an anthropological kind, were the missionaries in the field. The missionaries, while living among the people they attempted to convert, tried to communicate their message (to be understood and to 'understand' the people in order to reach them).[3] These processes of communication often set in on the level of 'semblances' of communication taken for the 'real thing'. Whether these attempts were the 'real thing' or 'semblances' of communication, in the context of this paper they will be seen as ingredients of communication.

Communication between any individuals and different groups is fraught with political agendas and tactics of coercion, deception and seduction which favour the strong and resourceful. However, notwithstanding the above, the possibility of understanding, i.e. the collective, culturally-specific effort to give meaning to the foreign institutions, practices, values and objects (i.e. cultural artefacts[4]) in the given culture's own terms, hence producing an 'understanding' of a foreign formation, has to be considered.[5]

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2 The colonial administration occasionally sought anthropologists' advice while draughting its policies, with the noted examples of Malinowski advising on Melanesia and Evans-Pritchard on Africa.

3 J. Bartoszek, *Z Kraju Kammiennej Sikiery*, ed. T. Dworecki, Warsaw, 1975.

4 All objects, events and institutions in a given cultural system are to be regarded as 'cultural artefacts' with the meaning prescribed to them by the consciousness structures of a given cultural system, which have also been shaped by those cultural artefacts (G. Simmel, *Sociology of Georg Simmel*, Glencoe, 1950).

5 N. Thomas, *Entangled Objects*, Harvard University Press, 1991.

In fact, such a partisan, partial and limited, though ever expanding 'understanding' of the other, evolved through verbal and non-verbal interactions, seems to be a precondition for any successful manouvering and interaction. These partisan understandings of each other, expressed initially by each side in its own, culture-specific idioms, show a tendency to converge which promotes the emergence of an informed, cross-cultural dialogue conducted from the differing perspectives and political orientations.

The Temporal and Structural Elements of Communication: a Tri-partite model

The logic of any response is not only an outcome of the indigenous internal cultural dynamics which informs the nature of the cross-cultural appeal of given artefacts. It is also the subject of the historically accumulated experience of contact, the strategy of colonisation (i.e. the degree of direct interaction at grass-root level), the identity and culture of the colonisers, the artefact's capacity for surplus meaning, the period of colonisation, and the forms of coercion adopted by the administration.[6] Having this presupposition in mind, that communication is qualified by pre-ordained elements on both sides, I intend to propose a basic model which includes essential, necessary (if insufficient) conditions for cross-cultural communication. This model is based on mission contact with the Hageners in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea.

Conditions for cross-cultural communication can be reduced for the purpose of the model-based analysis to a triadic form constituted by

1. surplus of meaning and displaced meaning inherent in all cultural artefacts,
2. elements of direct physical encounters and
3. 'play' as the condition of transformation from one form of understanding into another.

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6 Cf. R. M. Keesing, 'Colonial and Counter-Colonial Discourse in Melanesia', *Critique of Anthropology*, vol. 14 (1), 1994, pp. 41-58.

This model is inspired by the Peircean linguistic model of communication based on three elements (signifier, signified and signification)[7] and anthropological works from various parts of the world which treat cultural communication as a process based on triadic elements[8] rather than on polar opposition on which the dialectical approach is predicated.

1. The idea of 'surplus of meaning' and 'displaced meaning' of cultural artefacts

Two concepts, utilising the symbolic propensity of cultural artefacts, the 'surplus of meaning'[9] and 'displaced meaning',[10] provide a theoretical construct which helps to identify the mechanisms which facilitate cross-cultural communication. Both 'surplus of meaning' and 'displaced meaning' relate to the communicative propensity of cultural artefacts. They point to the fact that the number of applications and possible interpretations of the role of cultural artefacts in any given culture is inexhaustible. This act of interpretation gives rise to new forms of artefacts and at the same time transforms the meaning of old ones.

The process is possible because although 'objects take their expressive character from their functions in the perceptual whole their meaning is not limited to their function'.[11] Free from the limitation of their function the cultural artefacts could be viewed in their symbolic propensity; hence

> ... symbols give rise to an endless exegesis. If no concept can exhaust the requirements of further thinking borne by symbols, this idea signifies

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7 C. S. Peirce, *Processus interpretatif*, ed. N. Everaert-Desmedt, Liège, 1990; C. S. Peirce, *Essential Peirce: selected philosophical writings*, ed. N. Houser and C. Kloesel, Indiana University Press, 1992.

8 Vivienne Kondos, 'The Triple Goddess and the Processual Approach to the World: the Paratya Case', in *Women in India and Nepal*, ed. M. Allen, Canberra, 1982, pp. 242-286; R. M. Keesing, 'Killers, Big Men and Priests on Malaita: Reflections on a Melanesian Troika System', *Ethnology*, 24, 1985, pp. 237-52.

9 P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Fort Worth, 1976; P. Ricoeur, *Main Trends in Philosophy*, New York, 1979.

10 G. D. McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: new approaches to the symbolic character of consumer goods and activities*, Indiana University Press, 1988.

11 S. Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, Baltimore, 1967, p. 84. This is true of all objects, not only 'objects of art'.

> only that no given categorization can embrace all the semantic possibilities of a symbol. But it is the work of the concept alone that can testify to this surplus of meaning.[12]

This 'surplus of meaning', inherent in all cultural artefacts, albeit not in equal amounts, is the condition for all social interaction. The artefacts' surplus of meaning, though never ultimately fixed in its interpretation, provides for the possibility of inter-human relations.

Since no two individuals are identical, similarly no two interpretations will be identical. The surplus of meaning of the artefact provides for the perception of shared understanding of the meaning of the object, since it (the surplus of meaning) is capable of absorbing the multi-denotation of any object. Thus individuals whose reading of artefacts falls within the interpretation absorbable (within the society's defined criteria) by the artefacts' surplus of meaning share the sense of affinity, of sociability, of understanding and communication.

The cultural artefacts transcend and go beyond the perception delineated by a given cultural epoch. This in turn implies the possibility of an evolution of this perception through the process of interaction with cultural artefacts. This interaction 'reveals' hidden properties of the cultural artefacts, hence stimulating and enhancing perception. The same phenomenon appears in cross-cultural contact when the new artefact, after crossing cultural borders, challenges the perception and enforces its evolution.

It is by means of the perception they attract to themselves that the artefacts from another culture could be absorbed in an alien environment and the meaning they have had in the original context be renegotiated (i.e. the tribal artefacts in metropolitan museums[13]). In the same manner, it is via the mechanism of 'partisan/partial/impressionistic understanding' that the people of non-Occidental cultures perceive the artefacts of the Occidental world.[14] This is the mode in which the New Guinea Highlanders initially viewed the missions.

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12 Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, p. 57.

13 J. Clifford, *Predicament of Culture: twentieth-century ethnography*, Harvard University Press, 1988.

14 R. Connolly and R. Anderson, *First Contact. New Guinea Highlanders Encounter the Outside World*, Viking, 1987.

The concept of 'displaced meaning' illuminates the mechanism whereby cultural artefacts pertaining to social rituals are particularly richly endowed with surplus meaning. Displaced meaning sees the cultural artefacts as bridges between the humdrum reality of everyday communal life and the shared sentiments, moral values and collective fantasies. Seeing the failure of the dreams of social wholeness (the social scope of such wholeness varies from society to society) to live up to the reality they knew around them, the people removed these dreams from ordinary life and relocated them in the context of ritual and ceremony. There they are sheltered from the confrontation with reality which would prove time and again their futility and incompatibility with the requirements of everyday life.[15] They are kept there within reach but away from the danger of exposure to the ridicule and devaluation which would be meted out to them by everyday mundanity. Within the ceremonial or ritualistic context they acquire a sort of empirical demonstration and practical dimension[16] or at least the status of 'probability'.[17]

> What is otherwise unsubstantiated and potentially improbable in the present world [sentiments, collective fantasies and moral values without a practical reference] is now validated, somehow proven by its existence in another [ceremonial], distant one.[18]

Displaced meaning is culturally specific. Nevertheless the artefacts, like the 'mission', which deal with ceremonial activity are likely candidates for the practice of 'displacement' on either side of the cultural border. This accounts for the richness of meaning accumulated in the mission-as-artefact and its propensity to stimulate and enhance the perception of those who interact with it. The vast scope of the surplus of meaning inherent in this artefact gives ample space for the sense of shared sociality in which multi-denoted meaning remains absorbed within an illusory oneness of a singular artefact, the mission. Hence, membership of a given parish, following the

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15 M. Douglas and B. Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*, New York, 1978.

16 M. Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Naming of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

17 C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, 1973.

18 McCracken, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

'mission law' (*bihainim pasin bilong misin*), constitutes the identity which is often stressed above the identity with Christianity at large.[19]

The mission, by participating in the development of infrastructure (roads, schools, clinics), by organising and participating in communal works during weekdays and by assuming a ceremonial role on Sundays, lent itself to the process of double-denoting. Its utilitarian function enhanced the status of the tribal neighbourhood associated with the mission presence, and its ceremonial role was loaded with 'displaced meaning'. In this way the mission served as a bridge between everyday life and religious, ceremonial life. 'Goods [cultural artefacts] are one of the devices that can be used to help in the recovery of this "displaced meaning".'[20] Because of its capacity the mission could also serve as a bridge between the cultures in their quests for mutual understanding.

The ability of the artefacts not only to transform their meaning from the utilitarian to the ceremonial context but from one culture to another testifies to the richness of the 'surplus of meaning' contained in them. In the process of appropriation of the artefacts from one cultural context to another, some of the meaning the artefacts have had in their original context remains as well.[21] However, the likelihood that the original meaning will be retained over the cultural border is greatest when the communicating parties become directly involved in a common action/experience with each other through the shared medium of a given artefact.

In order that physical, direct interaction should produce for both sides some insight into the meaning of the mediating artefact the existence of parity (respect) on the part of both partners is required. In other words neither partner should feel coerced into economic, emotional or any other form of direct dependency, for such dependency could impede the process of communication. This brings us to the next part of the model.

2. Physical engagement: the Hageners' encounter with the missionaries

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19 As if realising the partiality of their exposure to Christianity, the Highlanders refer to it as 'mission law', whatever the relationship such a law may have to Christianity at large. By contrast, the missionaries view themselves in a broader, Christian, though denominationally-divided, manner.

20 McCracken, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

21 Cf. Clifford, *op. cit.*, 1988.

In the Western Highlands, the moral standards normally operative only within the close-knit patrilineal clan[22] are extended to all participants in shared work. The meaning of shared work goes beyond the work's practical ramification. Common experience within the project delineates the scope of moral-relatedness for the duration of the project. The individualities of the co-workers are subsumed into the identity of the project. The leading and following which takes place within the project does not constitute a hierarchy and this is reflected in the behaviour of the participants towards each other. The special moral attitude of all involved creates for a limited time a bond of 'respect' in which a hierarchy is seen rather as 'differentiation'.

The physical presence of the mission within a foreign culture and the personal characteristics of the missionaries provide the parishioners with the mediating experience which they need in order to guess at the missionaries' motives for their involvement in mission work. This gives further space for insight into the content of Occidental ontology and spirituality which has given rise to the mission as an institution. Understanding, as constructed on perception and memory, is always mediated by experience:

> The facts of perception and memory maintain themselves only in so far as they are mediated, and thus given significance beyond their mere isolated existence. ... What falls in any way within experience partakes of the rational form of the mind. As mental content, any part of experience is something more than a particular impression having only the attributes of existence. As already baptized into the life of the mind, it partakes of its logical nature and moves on the plane of universality ...[23]

The Hageners and the Whites used limited coercion and enticement in order to ensure the success of their respective projects. The Whites wanted the Hageners' labour while the Hageners wanted shells and steel tools as well as to engage the newcomers in the relationshions of exchange. In other

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22 W. Dabrowski, 'A Line to Heaven: Gamagai Religious Imagination', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Australian National University, 1991, pp. 43-74.

23 J. E. Creighton, 'Reason and Feeling', *Philosophical Review*, 30, 1921, p. 469.

words they both constructed the condition of 'respect' which was abstracting from the intrinsic inequality which stood tacitly behind them. Levinas analyses the situation thus:

> To show respect cannot mean to subject oneself; yet the other does command me. I am commanded, that is recognised as someone capable of realizing a work. To show respect is to bow down not before the laws, but before a being who commands a work from me. But for this command to not involve humiliation - which would take from me the very possibility of showing respect - the command I receive must also be a command to command him who commands me. It consists in commanding a being to command me. This reference from a command to a command is the fact of saying 'we', of constituting a party. By reason of this reference of one command to another, 'we' is not the plural of 'I'.[24]

As far as this process of the elimination of hierarchy, hence coercion and discipline, was concerned, the Hageners and missionaries were equal, subsumed under the morality of the communal project (building up the parish), and remained in a relationship of 'respect'.

Through the direct proximity of the interaction with the missionaries the Hageners were bestowing on the mission the moral conditions of communal work. This allowed both parties to behave in a spontaneous manner, unhampered by the etiquette conventionally followed which preserves social hierarchies. Such unfettered freedom of reaction was in tune with the Hageners' spontaneous, often playful way of living yielding a glimmer of meaning to the respective parties as to the involvement of the other.[25]

Direct action, because it has an emotional dimension, is able to expand the interaction. The 'mood-signs'[26] give meaning to the artefact (e.g. in this case the mission) by deconstructing it to comprehensible, experiential components, and then reconstructing it in the form of a prevailing

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[24] E. Levinas, *Collected Philosopical Papers*, ed. A. Lingis, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1987, p. 43.

[25] Cf. A. Vetlesen, 'Why Does Proximity Make a Moral Difference?', *Praxis International*, 12, January, 1993, pp. 371-86.

[26] G. Bateson, 'A Theory of Play and Fantasy', in *Semiotics, An Introductory Anthology*, ed. Robert E. Innis, Indiana University Press, 1985, pp.129-144.

interpretation of the meaning of the artefact. In the case under discussion, the direct interaction allowed the mission to be perceived through a myriad of particular moments of common action, which because of their binding effects presented the historical process as a constellation of mood-charged events. The cultural artefact (mission) was largely identified with the missionaries and their personal styles and beliefs, not always endorsed by the official institution which they served (e.g. dissenting attitudes on birth control, baptising of polygamists, etc.).

To bestow a partisan meaning on the cultural artefact and to subject this meaning to the ongoing process of transformation, in relation to the evolving perception and insights gleaned through interpersonal interaction, requires that the subjects operate within changing conceptual conditions. In other words he/she retains the agency of interpretation and the ability to give this interpretation some form of phenomenal manifestation. The domain of play as a social activity provides a good paradigm for such conditions.

3. Play, fantasies and symbolic communication

Play and fantasies are the context in which consciousness becomes reorganised, hence providing for the possibility of seeing the cultural artefacts in a slightly modified, de-centred perspective.[27] Play and fantasies, like ritual activity and various forms of art, belong to the realm of symbolic activity through which people explore and modify their relationship with the living environment delineated by the set of cultural artefacts in which they live and act.

> Play involves a process of 'double denotation' in which the play-action, understood as a virtual utterance, is equivocal to the statement, these actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand would denote.[28]

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[27] G. Bateson,*Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, New York, 1972; M. Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. D. F. Bouchard and S. Simon, Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 208.

[28] Bateson, 'A Theory' p. 125.

This 'virtual utterence' and its psychosomatic implication have the power to influence the consciousness of perception and assimilation of the alien cultural artefact into its own cultural milieu. This is a crucial condition which provides for the interpretation of the phenomenon of conversion.[29]

I will illustrate the dynamics of communication and the role of 'triadic' structures in this communication on the basis of Hageners' experiences with the Whites. Particular instances of the missionary-Hagener encounter will be presented later in this paper.

Introducing the Hageners

The inhabitants of the Wahgi River Valley of the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea, speakers of the Melpa language, and the white, English-speaking Australians, the Leahy brothers, met for the first time in 1933. The former had not been in contact with the societies dwelling over the surrounding mountain ranges and indeed had no knowledge of the existence of populations other than their own. This isolation of the Melpa speakers, known subsequently as the Hageners after the name of main town, Mt Hagen, founded by the newcomers on their territory, was the reason why the expedition did not have interpreters with them since among the populations contacted on the way nobody knew Melpa. Communication between the members of the Leahys' expedition and the Hageners was conducted by means of gestures and images. Shotguns, steel tools, phonograph music, and aeroplanes became forms through which the Hageners viewed and evaluated the newcomers. They themselves were more available for the newcomers' scrutiny with their houses, gardens, weapons and decoration as well as some aspects of social life, e.g. warfare, being visible. Since 'seeing is looking through tradition' (Boas), each side evaluated the other by means of images generated by the objects, the physical appearance and the gestures they observed in each other.

To explain the attraction goods have to a given people one should learn about the value of respective items in the given population, their functional

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[29] Peter G. Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation. A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

appeal, in utilitarian and Langerian terms,[30] and their place in the overall social and moral organisation. For Hageners, a cultural theme or 'cultural artefact'[31] providing the perspective for 'seeing' foreign items and converting them to 'presentational symbols' is the *moka* exchange with its inherent criteria which determine whether or not the presentation is successful. Rich decoration in the form of plumage, shells and body painting displayed by a wealth-giving party is designed to impress the viewers with its opulence, power of imagination and resourcefulness. The presenters hide their bodies but at the same time display the hidden powers of mental agility, political will and moral rectitude within the clan they belong to. Pigs, shells and money, the basic stock of exchanges, are always enhanced by some rare, unexpected gift included in a timely manner for maximum effect. A pig of enormous size obtained from some government-run farm, a python, an albino marsupial given in a 'surprise *moka*' occupy a similar categorical position to phonographs, shotguns and now, increasingly, cars, trucks, and videos. They are testimony to group strength, resourcefulness and viability as potential political and military allies. 'Objects of power' (*samting i gat pawa*), the Hageners call them, since having hold of them gives power, good feeling and political clout in the area.

The Hageners derive a similar sense of well-being and success from attracting to their territory an infrastructure (roads, airstrips), services (medical clinic, shops, workshops) as well as missions themselves. Though both goods and services and religious institutions could be seen as belonging to the same category of 'cultural power objects' there is a marked difference among the elements of the category since the Hageners do 'different things' with each item of the category. In the process of acting the people transform the meaning that the cultural artefacts originally held for them. At the same time they gain a new awareness, derived from the perceived difference between the initial meaning and the one they eventually arrive at through their actions. Different objects have a different capacity for generating the transformation in awareness and this capacity depends upon the depth of moral issues involved.

Soon after 1933 both the administration and the missionaries reported great successes in their work among the Highlanders. Within 30 years, even

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30 Cf. n. 11 above.

31 Simmel, *op. cit.*.

with the interruption caused by World War II, most of the Highlands came under administration control and adopted Christianity, predominantly Lutheran and Catholic. The population refrained from warfare, adopted a limited form of cash economy, and developed chains of *moka* exchanges on an unprecedented scale.

While government success at pacification has been presented in the literature as being due to the Hageners' fear of repression at the hands of the police and court officials, the missionaries' success was explained in terms of the 'prestige' their presence bestowed on the hosting group. It has been argued that the competitive and volatile character of the Hageners' polity led each of the political units (tribes, clans) to get a competitive edge over their neighbours by obtaining items of power which included both European material means as well as mission stations. It was a matter of 'keeping up with the Joneses' or risking marginalisation and defeat.[32] The missionaries themselves, surprised at the rate of conversion in the Western Highlands (more than 70 percent of population claimed to be Christians by 1980), explained the phenomenon by citing the timely intervention of the Holy Spirit on their behalf.[33]

Although the way Christianity was viewed in the Western Highlands could not be separated from its image already embedded in the Occidental powers, the opening of relationships with the missions and a positive response to them did not necessarily imply capitulation to these powers. The Hageners' interest in the mission was not just their attempt to 'romance those powers'. It was also a response to the mission as cultural artefact. For the Highlanders, any interaction with such a cultural artefact would yield a gradual understanding of the political, economic and moral aspects of the colonial project as a whole, and might possibly reveal 'something in it for me'. They viewed the mission as a chain in a 'line of power' which would unfold for them the source of Occidental powers. The mission's readiness

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[32] J. Watson, 'Pigs, Fodder and the Jones Effect in Postipomean New Guinea', *Ethnology*, vol. 16, no. 1, Jan., 1977, pp. 57-70.

[33] W. A. Ross, 'Ethnological Notes on Mt. Hagen Tribes (Mandated Territory of New Guinea)', *Anthropos*, 31, 1936, pp. 341-63; W. A. Ross, 'The Catholic Mission in the Western Highlands', in *The History of Melanesia*, Second Waigani Seminar, University of Papua and New Guinea with the Australian National University, Port Moresby and Canberra, 1969, pp. 319-27.

to set up dwellings in the countryside was seen as an actual opportunity to gain an understanding of the newcomers.[34]

The Hageners' eagerness to gain a competitive edge over their neighbours on the one hand and to retain parity on the other is a constant feature present in the logic of warfare, *moka* exchanges and compensation policy. While the goods attracted by the tribesmen are valued as the objects of presentations given away in *moka*, the infrastructure like roads and institutions such as mission, schools and clinics remain on the hosts' territories. The symbolic value which underlies both goods and infrastructure is that they embody the ingenuity of those who manage to get hold of them. It is the process of acquisition and deployment of the objects and infrastructure that engages the self and transforms it into an ever higher level of awareness. The transformative power it entails is not known a priori, hence the persistent openness to experimentation provoking the ubiquitous quests for some advantage and insight with the 'I am only trying now' (*traim tasol*) heard so often in the Highlands. The Hageners consider themselves the 'owners of the mission' and the mission presence on their territory is a trophy for their collective moral strength and insightfulness. The self, transformed through the relationship with the objects and institutions and with the other people with whom it interacts by means of these objects and institutions, expands its own awareness.

Encountering the Gamagai of the Jimi Valley

I will elaborate on the issue of conversion as a continuous process of gaining individual and social awareness by citing the case of the interaction of a Melpa-speaking tribe in the Jimi Valley, north of the Wahgi Valley,[35] with the mission and its teaching among the Gamagai. First, however, I

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[34] The different responses by the New Guinea Highlanders to the early patrol visits to their territories indicate that the response in favour or against such interaction is culturally specific. While the Western Highlanders eagerly opened communications (M. Leahy and M. Crain, *The Land that Time Forgot; adventures and discoveries in New Guinea*, Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1937; Connolly and Anderson, *op. cit.*), the Southern Highlanders rejected outright such contact (E. L. Schieffelin and R. Crittenden, *Like People You See in a Dream: first contact in six Papuan societies*, Stanford University Press, 1991) and almost starved the explorers to death.

[35] Dabrowski, *op. cit.*

will briefly introduce the socio-cultural set-up of the Gamagai tribe and the main cultural issues which were explored by them in relation to their engagement with the mission.

The Gamagai as a tribe comprises 6 clans. There are 4 tribes in the area. The Gamagai and Mabuge accepted a Catholic mission while the Tipuka and Palke accepted a Lutheran mission. Clans, comprising about 30-40 adults, are patrilineal with the most senior males usually having moral authority over the clan members. It means they are likely to be consulted on political and moral issues but they do not wield any formally institutionalised power over the lives of younger members. Clans are exogamous. The members of the clan are bound together by strong feelings of empathy which guide them towards unconditional mutual assistance in times of need. Theft, killing or malfeelings are claimed not to have a place among the male clan members. They objectify this experience of interconnectedness by means of the spiritual power of *mughlamp* which resides in each clan member and is a constitutive part of their feeling of oneness. At the death of any clan member the *mughlamp* residing in him is transferred to other clan members, so the clan's overall potency is not diminished by an individual's death. Each individual is endowed with the animating force called *min* which leaves the body at the time of death and is transformed into a clan-spirit, *tipokai*. The clan-spirits play an active role in the clan's life, supporting the clan's projects and punishing any intra-clan misdemeanours. Such misdemeanours, which mainly consist of illicit sex with one's brother's wife, have been accommodated within the clan's all-embracing affinity by the introduction of the notion of wicked bush-spirits, *tipokit*, which occasionally enter the heads of clansmen to confuse their sense of non-negotiable commitment to each other. The knowledge of the moral conduct within the clan is acquired spontaneously by virtue of being born and raised by the clan. There is no initiation.

This contrasts sharply with all other forms of social organisation, to which belonging has to be negotiated. The Gamagai tribe is an association of clans based on the will to coordinate political actions publicly expressed in the form of 'promises'. The 'promise' taken by each individual clan extends some aspects of moral conduct from the clan to the tribe. Though killing within the tribe is inadmissible, stealing and seduction are seen not as misdemeanours but rather as risky actions needing great skill and ingenuity to avoid detection by the wronged party which would then claim compensation in return.

All clans constituting the Gamagai tribe entertain a mythical notion of originating from common ancestors without this having any moral significance. The clan-spirits have power only over their own clan people and this power is not extended to members of other clans within the tribe. The relationship with the members of other tribes is not given a priori and is the space of moral wilderness unless organised otherwise. The chain of *moka* exchange linking different tribes together is a form of moral organisation of the social space. Marriage contracts are another similar form of integrating uncharted social relationships with the moral standards of intra-clan relationships.

The mission in Rulna addressed itself primarily to the whole Gamagai tribe. The Gamagai as a whole congratulated themselves with the feat of having attracted the mission to their combined territory and soon after they started to be seen as the collective 'owners' of the mission, a notion that they eventually assumed, using it in their exploration of their own awareness of the moral nature of their social formations.

Because of its rugged terrain and remote location, the Gamagai territory was not contacted by the Europeans until the late 50s. The Catholic mission was established in Rulna in 1965 by a Polish missionary, Fr Bartoszek. In this time the area was missionised by both Lutherans and Catholics but Bartoszek assured the Catholic influence among the Gamagai for succeeding generations by arriving in Rulna on horseback rather than on foot, as did the Lutheran pastor. The Gamagai preferred the image of a horseman since in their opinion it had 'more power' and therefore an association with him seemed more promising. Soon after extensive works were conducted under the auspices of the mission. Roads, bridges, an airstrip, a clinic, a school, mission households, and carpentry workshops were established with the mass and spontaneous participation of the Gamagai men and women. The Catholics conducted their infrastructural works on a much bigger scale than the Lutherans, and so this situation in the early days placed the Gamagai, as Catholics, in an advantageous position vis à vis their neighbours (Palke) who opted for the Lutherans.

The Willi Conversion

The Catholic Gamagai had little trouble in convincing the Mabuge, a tribe dwelling deeper in the forest to join them in their new faith. Then the eyes

of the ambitious young missionary and the Gamagai turned towards the Willi as a yet unmissionised tribe dwelling in the rugged area of the Jimi Valley. A delegation of ten Gamagai church leaders, headed by Fr Bartoszek visited the Willi by foot and convinced them to throw in their lot with the Catholic mission. The Willi soon after built an airstrip and some suitable dwellings so that the missionary and his Gamagai assistants could arrive by plane and teach the Willi the catechism. In 1968 the first plane arrived at the Willi's airstrip welcomed by the enthusiastic and festively decorated Willi population. The occasion however was marred by the sudden appearance of loose pigs running on the landing strip which almost caused an accident. Fr Bartoszek instructed the Willi to take precautions against the pigs straying onto the airstrip. However the Willi seemed either unable or unwilling to restrict the roaming pigs from entering the landing field and this irritated the missionary so much that when on one of his scheduled arrivals he encountered nine pigs grazing on the airfield he shot them. When the plane attempted to land after the pig slaughter it was shot at by the Willi so Fr Bartoszek aborted the visit altogether.[36]

The Willi demanded compensation for the pigs but Fr Bartoszek refused. He sent a report about the incident to the Bishop in Mt Hagen and awaited his decision on the matter. Not being prepared to wait for the official response, they turned their demands on the Gamagai whom they saw as the 'owners' of the mission. Tense negotiations lasting almost a year managed to avert a war between the Willi and the Gamagai who in the end succumbed to pressure and gave pigs and money. The incident resulted in the Willi severing all contacts with the Catholic mission while the Gamagai were reaffirmed in their position as proprietors of the mission with all its benefits but also its liabilities. This had a significant repercussion on the Gamagai's perception of themselves, an issue I will arrive at shortly.

The Willi's action should be seen as an example of the assertiveness with which the Highlanders related to the Catholic mission. Fr Bartoszek's action, far from being seen as an impassioned deed committed under provocation, invited an instantaneous forthright reaction conducted subsequently through the dealings with the Gamagai until parity was

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36 There are conflicting accounts of how many pigs and where the shooting took place. Fr Bartoszek claims he killed one roaming pig and not at the Willi's place but in Rulna (personal communication,1994).

regained and compensation paid. The Highlanders responded forcefully if challenged either by neighbours, the mission or spirits.[37]

Failure to engage or respond when challenged would show a lack of 'respect' to the assailants, treating them as if they were a 'spent' force not even worthy of engagement. Such an insult would generate further destructive action from the assailants which would be in neither the Gamagai's nor the Willi's interest. The involvement of a prescribed mode of reaction within the concept of 'respect' was naturalised to the point of spontaneous reaction preceding any verbal justification.

The Dutch Figurines Incident and Exploration of Identity

The engagement with other people as well as with objects and events has a moral component to it, hence the power to transform the relationship of the self with its social milieu.

In the middle 70s the Dutch Catholics who played the role of occasional sponsors and benefactors to the Rulna mission decided to donate to the mission a load full of mass-produced plaster statues of their own Dutch saints. The erstwhile missionary in Rulna, Fr Joseph, a Pole like his predecessor, did not have any emotional association with these particular saints and what was more, he felt bitterly disappointed that the gift did not represent something more pragmatic and useful for his mission. In a fit of passion he rejected the gift refusing to take delivery of it. He was, he claimed, also motivated by his reluctance to confuse his Gamagai parishioners with a host of human figures not essential to the Christian issues which he tried to convey.

The Gamagai, however, having no traditional notion of any Supreme Being, did know the value of clan-spirit support and therefore had a keen interest in the notion of saints and the ways in which they could be induced to intercede on behalf of humans with God. The rejection of the statues was interpreted by the Gamagai as the mission's attempt to deprive them of the

[37] If the Spirit of the Sky *Tei* killed pigs or people in a storm the Gamagai would stage a ritual of defiance, shooting arrows into the sky and threatening further action if the incident ever recurred. They say emphatically that had they failed to respond to Tei's aggression they would be regarded as 'rubbish people' by the spirit, and likely singled out for further aggression. Their counteraction shows 'respect' to the spirit and sets the relationship on a parity basis.

power they felt they would have had access to, had the statues been placed in their local church. They thought that Fr Joseph's decision was motivated by his concern that they would misuse the sudden influx of power which would come to them once the line to heaven was established through the saints.

Deprived of the support of the Dutch saints, they went on to develop their own line of communication with heaven. They drew from memory the list of their own deceased who, chosen by what seemed to be the Christian criteria of selection, that is their congenial personalities while alive, were elevated by them to the ranks of saints. As a result an indigenous cult developed of home-grown 'saints'. Their memorabilia were housed in a specially constructed chapel and they were appealed to in times of need. This indigenous initiative ran parallel and amicably with the mainstream church activity, with the same people participating in both church and 'chapel' activities.

The Gamagai 'saints' soon came to represent a generalisation on the quality of the individual clan-spirits. Unlike the clan-spirits they were believed to have power over the whole Gamagai tribe which became unified around its affiliation with the Catholic mission in Rulna. Instances of sickness became interpreted in a manner which gave an experiential dimension to the innovation. The instances of sickness were interpreted by the ritual specialists as the results of the saints' punishment for misbehaviour.

These relationships within the Gamagai tribe were declared to be identical in their moral condition to the relationships once reserved for the clan. In this way they not only got the tribe aligned, by means of installing the overarching figures of the tribal saints, in an analogous manner to what was for the clan a group of clan-spirits, they also aligned the clan morality with the Christian morality over the social body of the tribe. This was a cultural and political innovation with huge ramifications, since if it were solidified and turned into a lasting entity, it would render the tribe indissoluble in similar manner to the solidity and indissolubility of the clan. This innovation was not imposed from above by any political or religious authority but developed as a result of an active approach to the mission and its teaching as a cultural artefact open to manipulation and scrutiny in order to render some new self-understanding about their socio-moral conditions. In the course of their actions they developed an awareness which allowed them to 'see' things previously hidden to them. What they

saw, in terms of moral development extensive both on a social scale and in the depth of its concern, would be likely to correspond with the directions of moral considerations with which the Christian mission would like to be associated.

Conclusions

Far from mechanical syncretism or the religious bricolage in which elements of cultures were arranged in a tentative manner, the Hageners engaged the objects, institutions and events in a face-to-face reciprocal manner. This involvement expanded the awareness towards universalism through the expansion of the moral category of clan with the relationship of blood affiliation to the religio-political category of tribe-parish. It produced the effect of limited universalism, one which, though encouraged by Christian teaching, evolved from within the local cultural discourse rather than being imposed by the colonial and nation-building projects.

In conclusion, conversion for the Gamagai entailed the acceptance of the mission as the cultural artefact with which they became actively engaged in an on-going process of self-reformulation in terms of their own evolving socio-moral identities and sensibilities. By comparing the Christian liturgy and practices to their own, by being confronted by external hostility directed towards the mission, the hostility which helped them see their own basic identity as a tribe-parish rather than a clan, by questioning the mission's goodwill towards them in relation to the Dutch saints' figurines, the Gamagai remained constantly engaged with the mission and continued to be transformed by this engagement. It is to the credit of both their moral imagination and the mission's capacity to be a cultural artefact for 'surplus meaning' that this engagement has continued to yield transformative inspiration. In the same way, through the practice of 'displaced meaning' within their own culture, the indigenous cultural artefacts (e.g. pigs, dance and decoration) displace meaning from the mundane and functional to the ceremonial and back again.

It was the Hageners' propensity to act, as if tentatively without depending on any prior conceptual elaboration, that provided for them the ambiance of play through which their conceptual categories could be rearranged. Similarly it was due to the physical proximity between the Hageners and the missionaries, and the ability to take assertive action in

mutual dealings (challenging of missionary pig-killing by Willi) that the relationship of 'respect' was forged.

It was in such conditions that the full moral, political and utilitarian capacity of the mission and their own capacity to engage it was gradually revealed to the Highlanders. They began to extrapolate and adjust such knowledge to the relationship with the wider context of the mission, the national and the global socio-cultural-political context. What started as an involvement, initiated by the attraction of the images which the mission represented to them, was with each transformation gaining a moral and cognitive component, thus making each consecutive stage richer in revelation about their own social and individual identity and the ways and strategies to deal with the powers of the Occident.

Gang Leaders and Conversion in Contemporary Papua New Guinea

Garry Trompf *

In such a collection as this, there is a natural tendency to interpret conversion socially, looking at whole groups that shift from one world-view to another. Details about individual conversions, or a sufficient number of them, are hard to come by, and in any case stories of individual 'changes of religious allegiance or life-orientation' often take the form of in-house testimonies, with historians or social scientists being highly cautious of them for that reason. One might as well be honest in saying, actually, that the two main approaches to conversion, the one more social and the other more individual, reflect back on two very committed positions: the religious orientation that accepts conversion to be the result of a divine or superhuman initiative, and the scientific standpoint from which phenomena of change are putatively explained 'objectively' (and through a kind of 'methodological atheism', as Peter Berger calls it). Even those individuo-psychological slants on conversion presented within the scientific paradigm almost always entail an appeal to some factor that humans share in common. And such a referral to a covert social element — which can bring on a personal transference of commitments but involves only 'non-vitalist'-looking principles — is not likely to satisfy those who see 'the hand of God' behind their own or fellow-believers' 'decisions', or who sense an irreducible and overwhelming Depth in their personal transformations. I suggest, in offering this piece, that the history of ideas or the critical study of shifts of consciousness can mediate between social and subjective explanations, or between 'distancing' and 'real opinion'; and this paper is rather different from the others in concentrating on individuals' states of mind and feeling.

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

There is, however, a specific method in my would-be flexibility; and here I remind readers of my previous attempts to plot shifts of consciousness in terms of altered 'logics of retribution'. Phenomena of conversion, I maintain, are made more intelligible when approached through the analytical rubric that relates retaliatory and concessive impetuses with explanations of the world. Retributive logic, apparently a culturo-religious universal, derives from the simple datum that when people try to act out something *against* others (through revenge, acts of recrimination, rebuttal, refusal, etc.), or *for* them (by making peace, allying, exchanging, befriending, etc.), they can give ostensible *reasons* for doing so (and in the vast majority of cultures what amount to cultural-specific *consensus* reasons). These 'negative' and 'positive' complexes of action and thought are integrally related to explanations people give to happenings around them or in their own lives — in terms of assessing actions and outcomes as 'bad' or 'good', of blaming and praising, and of recognising fitting punishments and rewards. The relevant process of intellection, or the thought-patterns and so-called *mentalités* that both integrate these behavioural and explanatory elements and work to constitute whole culturo-religious outlooks, I have denoted 'the logic of retribution'.[1]

In the micro-historical study of conversion one can often discover very quickly the importance of these mentalities. The transference of 'religious identity', or of *Weltanschauungen,* often involves individuals', leaders' or a collective's recognition that a thought-mould applied to explain outcomes and legitimate behaviour according to long-inured, received retributive/reciprocal dicta no longer satisfies as a way of explaining events, and demands to be altered, if not replaced. Religious conversion is one known consequence of such recognition. There are simple-looking cases. When events are so interpreted that a group's own god(s) are not as powerful as another (or others), and are indeed too weak to forestall what is taken to be a conquest, then the defenders would be under pressure to change religions. This eventually happened with the Roman senate, the last official bastion of Roman Paganism, when in A.D. 380 the Christian emperor Theodosius I achieved an acclaimedly bloodless victory against the senators' champion for the West, Eugenius. The betogaed patricians

1 Or 'of payback'. For background, esp. G. Trompf, *Payback: the logic of retribution in Melanesian religions*, Cambridge, 1994, 'Preliminaries'; G. Trompf, *To Forgive and Forget? The logic of retribution in early Christian historiography*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage Series, Berkeley and London (forthcoming), 'Introduction'.

bestirred themselves and publicly acknowledged at last the superiority of a more powerful deity, after many years through which their finest protagonists had been arguing that neglect of the old gods by the Christians spelt the downfall of the empire.[2] Such a basic case makes us suspect that the motivation for change has been facile; more complex scenarios, though, challenge us to think more deeply about what is sufficient motivation for change in cultures other than our own.

In many Christian missionary initiatives the places of formerly worshipped spirit powers become the locations for church buildings. If the 'baptising' of old locales like this often represents an honouring of pre-Christian religious life, the decisions to make such a re-placement are typically born out of a contest between custodians of the old religions and evangelists for the new. The missionary is told that, should anyone go into a tabued, sacred place, the deities or spirits guarding that area will surely kill him/her. The missionary takes up the dare and nothing — usually! — happens, as illustrated in many mission stories — from Antiquity, when 'uncertain' converts destroyed Egyptian cult statues and survived to tell the tale, through to the time St Boniface cut down the oak at Geismar and went unscathed, and on to the more recent era of missionary expansion, when the Anglicans sat upon and preached from the highly feared Rock of Gwatgage in Daga country, eastern Papua, and later had a church erected there.[3] Local time-honoured expectations of retribution were sorely tested in such situations, and the undermining of such a crucial component of peoples' 'assumptive worlds' predisposed them towards religious change. Perhaps early contests are drawn out and for that reason made tenser. 'If these strangers stay longer, the gods will send a typhoon to destroy them!' promised priests of Fiji's old cult. The typhoon did indeed come, but it

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2 For the issues and sources (esp. Prudentius, *Contra Symmachum*, I.410ff.), see N. Q. King, *The Emperor Theodosius and the Establishment of Christianity*, Library of History and Doctrine, London, 1961, pp. 90-1. In much more ancient contexts, conquered peoples would often be expected to change their gods for those of the successful imperialists, see e.g. M. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Judah and Israel in the eighth and seventh centuries BC*, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Ser. 19, Missoula, 1974, ch. I.

3 See the gossipy *Vitae Patrum* (ed. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Paris, 18, vol. 73, col. 955) (Egypt); Willibald, *De vita vel passio Beati Martyri Bonifatii*, xi (ed. W. Levison, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores rerum Germanicarum*, vol. 15, pt 1, 1905) (Boniface); N. E. G. Cruttwell, 'A Bishop in "Shangri-La"', in *New Guinea Mission* (pamphlet), London, 1952, pp. 3-6 (Papua). Comparable scenarios are important in Islamic tradition, cf. e.g. Ibn Ishaq, *Surat*, sect. 125.

wiped out a traditional village (!) and led to some re-thinking. In the continuing 'competition for a more secure future', admittedy, it was noticed by Fijians that the newcomers, missionary families included, could also fall ill, even despite their purportedly superior medicine; and mission sermons thus required preaching to explain to 'the wavering and confused' that such sickness did not arise from the superiority of Fijian sorcery (most diseases and deaths in Melanesia being ascribed to enemy sorcerers). Enough 'failures' of the old retributive logic, in any case, were telling.[4] And over time in situations like this there arise more pretexts for serious questioning and thus further reasons to shift conceptually. In still more complex situations, or perhaps, rather, in cases where decisions are affected by an increasingly complicated range of new occurrences, we will find people converting from tribal tradition to Christianity because of the more satisfying consequences of adopting and applying a new socio-religious logic. 'Pacified' conditions come to be preferred by many to the continuation of 'revenge warfare'; the court system for gaining redress attracts people as more consistent in the exaction of punishment; the 'mission peace' facilitates heightened opportunities for reciprocity (some say eastern Papua's famed *Kula* Ring trade cycle, for instance, never operated more effectively than in 'Mr. Bromilow's days', because it was previously vulnerable to the disruptions of war[5]); and besides, 'mission talk' widens the possibilities of explanation.

There are still more complex matters involved in transferences between logics of retribution — whole 'paradigm shifts', in fact. It is perhaps easier to see these when, autobiographically, individuals allow one to plot and contemplate the modifications of their previous commitments. Some ancient Christian examples are famous. The cosmic blinding of Saul or Paul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus is supposed to provide us with *locus classicus* of conversion (Acts 9:1-26), yet far more crucial, actually,

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4 On Fiji I rely especially but not only on D. Cowen, 'Religion, Health and Sickness: Fiji 1835-1860', unpublished mimeographed lecture, LaTrobe University Conference on Magic, Sorcery and Healing, Melbourne, May, 1982. Cf. for other examples T. Swain and G. Trompf, *Religions of Oceania*, Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices, Routledge, 1995, pp. 209-10.

5 William Bromilow was a pioneer Methodist missionary to Papua; the *Kula* Ring has been made famous through the fieldwork of Bronislaw Malinowski. For background, esp. M. McIntyre, 'Warfare and the Changing Context of "Kune" on Tubetube', *Journal of Pacific History*, 18/1, 1983, pp. 11ff.

are those arguments in his epistles by which he seeks to diagnose and subvert the retributive logic of Judaism. The assumption that one can please God by keeping the precepts of the Torah is deemed misguided, even factually unfeasible; and Paul turns out to proclaim a righteousness or justification that is only possible through faith in Christ, whose 'propitiating' work satisfies what the law demands from (but cannot provide to) sinful humanity (esp. Romans 3-6; Galatians 3). Faith emerges in Paul's writing as the liberating key, a gift of freedom from bondage to the shackles of an old retributive logic, under which mortals can never escape culpability (and thus death).[6] Another remarkable and well-documented conversion in Christian Antiquity, that of Augustine of Hippo, can be interpreted along comparable lines: but not from legalism to faith so much as from a deterministic Manichaean cosmology to a world in which bondages created by sin can be transcended by divine grace, and human free will and 'the right direction of love' be accommodated to God's predestined salvation *(Confessio*, III, cf. *De Gen. contr. Manich.* I-II).[7]

Examining such individual conversions takes one to the threshold of the most delicate area of all — the 'inner sanctum' of spiritual change, if you like, or the world of inner transformation. Reflection on conceptual shifts, we sense from a patient examination of Paul's and Augustine's writings, cannot exhaust the accounts of their conversions. Yet wanting to be 'objective', social-scientifically oriented scholars will stop short here, as if approaching a *mysterium* academics cannot settle, or else radically divide among themselves — between rationalistic reductionism (that emphasises social-psychological predispositions or psychopathology, or perhaps even questions the reality of individuals) and theologically proactive responses defending the worrying view that God, after all, can burst quite

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6 This message, incidentally, is not so facile as to leave 'Mosaic Judaism' unplaced in the scheme of salvation. It remains the 'schoolmaster to Christ' (Galatians 3:24-5). But Paul gets to the Torah behind the Torah, in rediscovering Abraham as the just man living by faith (Romans 4:13-25; Galatians 3-4). He also eschews denying Israel or the Jews their sacred uniqueness, and attempts to show instead that the true fulfilment of their role in the coming of the messiah entailed the grafting on of the Gentiles to the 'olive tree' of salvation with deep Biblical roots (Romans 11:17-24).

7 This is a much more difficult case to analyse. Augustine has been 'accused' of taking his Manichaean determinism with him, into a Christian theology that demanded some people were to be eternally saved and others eternally damned; yet these conclusions are too simplistic, and the degree to which Augustine overturns his own Manichaeism is decisive. See esp. J. Burnaby, *Amor Dei: a study of the religion of Augustine*, Norwich, 1991.

dramatically into the human *theatron*.[8] We will always be needing some medial terms to cope with the tensions here: sociologist Max Weber's recognition of the 'interiorization' of religious insights and values is helpful, as are newer appreciations of the reality of spirituality, even of 'spiritistic phenomena' to cover the awareness of in-filling and en-thusiasm shared by human groups.[9] Academics, also, indeed all those agile thinkers with a rich repertory of critical tools, need to be cautious about presumptory judgement concerning the more and the less complex motivations for change I have just sketched. The cases can surely only act as exempla, not as the basis for prejudgement; for, if some people's conversions appear initially simple, even 'shallow', they may move on to remarkable depths (and still be thankful and providentialist in their thinking in the end about the apparently absurd triggering or the curious rudiments of their new faith). Human affairs are always on the move. Intellectuals, in any case, unrealistically expect too much self-criticism and introspection in others, when most people are moved by rather basic (yet nonetheless existentially arresting) 'challenges' — by unexpected acts of love, for instance — and one needs to learn how to 'place' such *simplicitas* in a phenomenology, or a putatively unprejudiced understanding, of religion.

With this theoretical preface in mind, I turn now to the major subject of the paper: the conversion of gang leaders in Papua New Guinea (PNG). The so-called rascals (pidgin: *raskol*) in such urban centres of modern Melanesia as Port Moresby, Lae and Goroka have achieved notoreity in recent years for marring PNG's 'law and order' image, and for consequently discouraging investment and foreigners' residency in the country. Originating from spray-can vandalism of the late 1960s, rascal gangs have emerged as a socially destabilising element in the new nation, pitching regional groups ('Goilalas', 'Keremas', 'Sepiks', 'Chimbus', etc.)

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8 The literature is simply enormous here. On the psychological side the names W. Sargant, W. La Barre come to mind; important writers on the theological side are A. C. Underwood, A. D. Nock, M. Green and R. F. Paloutzian. Robin Horton is famous for standing somewhere in between. Charles Taylor, among others, has recently questioned whether social scientists can talk any more about 'individuals'.

9 For Weber, H. H. Gerth and G. W. Mills (eds), *From Max Weber: essays in sociology*, New York, 1958, pp. 323ff.; on the anthropology of 'spiritistic phenomena', e.g. J. Barr, 'A Survey of Ecstatic Phenomena and "Holy Spirit Movements" in Melanesia', *Oceania*, 54/2, 1983, pp. 109ff., and the extensive cross-culturally oriented bibliography there (pp. 122ff.).

against each other, accentuating differences between squatter poor and elite rich, tending to re-tribalise suburban life, and sometimes operating as 'hit-men' in the pay and service of politicians.[10] Churches have joined other agencies for social order in sponsoring youth work and undertaking evangelism among school 'drop- or push-outs' and disaffected adolescents. Since the 1980s there has been wide publicity of so-called *tanim bel* (literally 'turning of the gut [towards God]') in PNG, after significant rascal leaders, and their cohorts following them, publicly announced their conversions and 'a change of ways'.[11] Easily the best-known figure exemplifying the *tanim bel* phenomenon is former gang leader Tapei Martin, whose biography I am currently writing (under the title *Urban Warrior*), although more recently the conversion of Eric Mangen has received a good deal of publicity, and I have done enough preliminary research into his story to present it as a second and supplementary case study for this occasion. At this juncture I am interested in the details of these two individuals' shifts of consciousness within the context of rapid social change. The reader should be aware that *tanim bel* as whole complexes of events certainly could be approached more sociologically than I choose to do here. Groups of 'reformed rascals' are currently involved in social service and agricultural projects, and they participate in evangelistic campaigns (sometimes lining up at markets behind street evangelists whose basic, often rather crudely put, message is that everyone needs to repent).

Tapei Martin (born 1961)[12] was brought up in Port Moresby by parents who had left their village of Leklu in the Mumeng area of what is now the Morobe Province, PNG, to make a new life in the city. Tapei remembers

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10 For historical background, *Pacific Islands Monthly*, March, 1969, p. 32; B. M. Harris, *The Rise of Rascalism*, IASER Discussion Paper 54, Port Moresby, 1988; G. Trompf, 'Gangs and Politics', *Current Affairs Bulletin*, 71/2, 1994, pp. 36-37. For some foreground, e.g. L. Morauta (ed.), *Law and Order in a Changing Society*, Political and Social Change Monograph 6, Canberra, 1986.

11 Important instances of *tanim bel* were publicised by the PNG government for the national interest, e.g. by the Office of Information, 'Raskol Senism Laip long Yut Bung Wantaim', *Nius bilong Yumi* (Port Moresby), 23/14, 1981, pp. 11-12. Demonstrations of remorse (or *sori*) have been known, e.g. L. Giddings, 'Report Given to the National Court sitting in the Presence of Deputy Chief Justice Kapi', mimeograph, Eastern Highlands Provincial Rehabilitation Centre, Goroka, 1982.

12 Readers should be aware that many Papua New Guineans cannot tell their birth dates precisely.

how, as a child, his parents took him to Sunday School at the suburban Lutheran Church of Koki, where the hearing of Bible stories (especially from Genesis and about Jesus) made up his first, vivid 'educational experience'. His father, however, dissatisfied with life as a 'house boy' in the backyard quarters of a white expatriate's home in the suburb of Boroko, came to move his little family well away from the vicinity of this church, out to the newly available settlement zone of Morata on Moresby's outskirts; and there he set about to build his own small dwelling on a cheaply purchased plot. His tiny, shed-like domicile, in fact, was the first house erected within what has since become the largest 'squatter settlement' of the city, and perhaps of the South Pacific as a whole.

It was at the point of the move (in 1970) that his father decided upon sending Tapei back to his traditional culture-area to be initiated. Afraid of his own tendency to lapse into dissolute ways, especially drunkenness, his father recalled the discipline of Mumeng (more specifically Bongnu[13]) ancestral ways, and wished Tapei, now approaching ten years of age, to strengthen his membership within Leklu village. At this stage the old meaning of initiation ceremony was preserved, sitting side by side with but as yet unintegrated into the ethos of the Lutheran Mission. Flown back to the New Guinea side,[14] Tapei found himself secluded with fellow initiates in a men's 'club-house', all of them focused on the acquisition of power from the tribal war god Memo Walo, and on a transaction described under the mysterious name *wawe*. The climax of the initiatory ceremony (which I now have permission from the Leklu elders to explain) involved the painting of red paint, made from red pandanus and pig fat, on prescribed parts of the initiates' bodies. This *wawe*, as it was called, signified the invulnerability given to Bongnu warriors — as it had been taught to the novices — and when the time came for them to withdraw from the men's house and appear decorated before the villagers, including women and children, the newly initiated youths formed the configuration of a giant swaying serpent, at that special moment, so traditionalists held, manifesting and being empowered by Memo Walo. This dance was a tense moment for the onlookers; should even a child begin coughing, its mother would

[13] The southern and more upland region of the Mumeng culturo-linguistic complex falls into a distinct-enough grouping of villages, designated Bongnu (sometimes Karin).

[14] Before independence, Australia's territories to the north were called Papua and New Guinea.

quickly conduct it away lest the god's power kill it.[15] For the initiates themselves, however, and thus for Tapei, the 'moment of possession' passed on the confidence of *indefeatability*.

When Tapei returned to Port Moresby, then, and to the strategically placed first house of a squatter settlement, his psychological preparedness for physical struggle and durability was translated into an 'urban warriorhood'. His parents' efforts to get him a 'whiteman's education' (at a new primary school built two kilometres outside Morata) did not produce the expected results. The learning of lessons, even the rules of sport, let alone parental appeals to 'right behaviour' that recalled his Sunday School days, seemed tame beside the excitement of a 'tough physicality'. By mid-1971 Tapei had joined with other restless squatter youths to form a gang. Made up almost exclusively of 'Goilalas' (boys from the Papuan Highlands areas of Tauade, Fuyughe and Kunimaipa), though under his leadership as a 'Mumeng' or 'Morobe', G0I-PEX 105, as the gang was named, engaged in a bid for nocturnal territorial control over the 'Waigani' area of the city, fighting other gangs, and acting out break-and-enter crimes, household and car theft, rape and murder (of other gangs' members).[16] By the end of 1971 G0I-PEX 105 membership had risen from 6 to 25, its growth being commensurate with the expansion of the squatter settlement.

I am conscious that readers will need help visualising squatter conditions (which in this case resulted from a Housing Commission scheme to allow a no-covenant, 'site-and-service scheme for low-cost housing' on the city's margins).[17] Tapei's prestige soared among the poorest of would-be householders, who typically eked out their families' existence from casual labour opportunities, and slowly put their houses together, sometimes from banana leaves to boards, and sometimes with gaps between the floorboards

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15 For documented parallels to this ceremony among the nearby Watut, H. Fischer, *Watut: Notizen zur Kultur eines Melanesierstammes in Nordost-Neuguinea*, Kultursgeschichtlichen Forschungen, 1, Braunschweig, 1963, pp. 85-6.

16 Tapei Martin, 'The Story of My Life [the activities of the gang]', unpublished handwritten MS, Port Moresby, 1983, p. 1 (with thanks to the author). Sociological observations about gang activity must await another occasion. For some listings of background literature, J. H. Sprott, *Human Groups*, Harmondsworth, 1958, pp. 70-2, 204 (earlier); Trompf, 'Gangs and Politics', p. 37 (recent).

17 N. R. Oram, *Colonial Town to Melanesian City: Port Moresby 1884-1974*, Canberra, 1976, p. 100, cf. pp. 151, 174, 196. On squatter settlements worldwide there are a few monographs, e.g. J. E. Harday and D. Satterthwaite, *Squatter Citizen: life in the urban Third World*, London, 1989.

until cash was available to fill them up. The goods and money stolen by the gang filtered into the families of the GOI-PEX members and into the 'Melanesian urban reciprocity system' that took shape in the settlement. To give generously in almost all Melanesian traditional societies means to acquire personal prestige and clout, and it put those who received items and money into one's debt.[18] In times of trouble adults benefitting from the gang's activities were thus bound to hide and protect its members from the police. Free adventure films, often shown at the local Waigani Catholic church, were interpreted to justify their role; as viewers the gang sided with the criminals against the police, and often picked up ideas from the dramas as to their next mode of operation.

Tapei's invulnerability, self-proclaimed and shared to encourage group support, was daily enhanced by each success, each triumphant escape from the police, and especially by the most daring raids. K6,000 was stolen from Waigani's Chinese-owned Cathay Club, and in one extraordinary episode soon after Papua New Guinea's national independence in September, 1975, Tapei took his gang unhindered, at night, into the new house of Prime Minister Michael Somare; although in the latter's absence they simply sat around and enjoyed the conveniences — and took nothing! Tapei, indeed, seemed invincible. He was, as he himself told his fellows, rewarded by Memo Walo and through being engaged in active 'warriorship'; he himself rewarded his admiring fellows, and in turn the gang became more enmeshed in complicated reciprocal relations with those in the Morata settlement who received material benefits from its strikes and who were thankful for its protective role.[19] Tapei's own parents, struggling as they had been, were cornered into admiring his influence and resources, and in assisting him with some dramatic escapes — by air — to Lae.

The exploits of he who was by now Port Moresby's longest-lasting rascal leader, however, could not last for ever. In June, 1977, aged sixteen, Tapei

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[18] Trompf, *Payback*, chs 2, 4, 6. I am reminded here of my interview with a young Bena Bena man in Goroka gaol (Eastern Highlands, PNG), who had been imprisoned for stealing an open bag of money from a post office van. He said he had 'liked the colour of [the money]', and then, when arriving home at Liarofa, he proceeded to walk up the main village piazza throwing money to the right and left — like a sower! — believing he would acquire unsurpassable prestige from such generosity (cf. *ibid.*, p. 391).

[19] By 1975, however, as Morata grew, another gang — largely central Highlander or 'Chimbu' — emerged on the north and farther side of the settlement, and it took on a more active role when GOI-PEX 105 declined.

was arrested as a prize catch and placed in solitary confinement at Bomana prison. It was in two weeks of darkness that the terrible reality dawned on him: he was now utterly vulnerable, and his confidence in a war god had been misguided. 'The emptiness of it all', as he put it of his gang exploits, quickly dislodged the old sense of excitement,

> and memories from my childhood days flooded my mind. I recalled the things my Lutheran Sunday School teacher explained to me about God.

An image of Jesus, indelible in the void devoid of sunlight, convinced him God was alive, and impelled him into prayer.[20] At this point, lest I leave my readers a little burdened by having to contemplate so subjective a testimony, one should be reminded of that extraordinary and neglected body of literature — a small genre — concerning conversion in prisons.[21] Here I offer no defence of prisons, only the phenomenological reckoning that they sometimes create conditions for religious experiences and a newly perceived need for spiritual change.

With this sudden realisation Tapei interpreted his options in characteristically Melanesian terms of reciprocity — through 'payback logic'. He prayed to the new God, or the God he had forgotten, through a bargain.

> God, if you are real, I want to ask if you can give me a chance. I promise you, if you do that ... I will serve you.[22]

In the making of this prayer he felt *guria* (pidgin for 'spirit trembling'), that he later identified as the crucial turning-point of his life. In the morning he was taken into a packed courtroom for youth offenders — filled with Morata settlers, officiated by a judge and a selected jury of public servants involved in prison, police and general social work. When

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20 Tapei Martin,'My Testimony', unpublished TS (updated), Port Moresby, 1988, [p. 3].

21 Starr Daily's *Love Can Open Prison Doors*, Evesham, 1947, is perhaps the most famous in the cluster, and then Elton Trueblood's *The Company of the Committed*, New York, 1961. Other better-known examples are M. Carothers, *Prison to Praise*, London, 1970, and K. Bradford, *Miracle on Death Row*, London, 1978. Such works, of course, almost always possess an evangelistic thrust; but they cannot be neglected here as relevant phenomena.

22 Tapei Martin, 'My Testimony', [p. 2].

asked to defend himself, Tapei's impassioned plea for another chance and his honest recognition of self-reform turned the court, totally unexpectedly, in his favour, and he walked from it a free man![23] What appeared to him as a miracle, moreover, sustained itself. Soon back in Morata during the day of the trial, a loud-hailer from a passing bus announced a film at the Waigani Christian Life Centre, a film that turned out to be the Billy Graham-sponsored 'A Time to Run' — on the conversion of New York gangs! — and one that brought irrepressible tears streaking down Tapei's face.[24] GOI-PEX 105 soon dissolved, most of its members willingly disbanding because of Tapei's new messages, and most joining church youth organisations.

This is a conversion experience Tapei is famous for publicising in prison circles and the media. The story of his subsequent life is too long and complex to cover here. Tapei, however, acted on his bargain; and since mid-1975, to summarise briefly, he has been severally prison visitor and evangelist (mainly but not exclusively in Port Moresby); Research Assistant to the author with a brief to assess the conditions and problems of squatter settlements; student at a Bible College in Tauranga, New Zealand; coordinator of unemployed youth to take up contract work at the University of Papua New Guinea; 'informal' Ambassador of his country to Israel (both in 1987 and 1988);[25] candidate for national parliament in 1992 (under the banner of 'the only man who raised PNG's flag at Jerusalem', and to such effect that, though he himself was defeated, he received more votes than the [former] Minister for Education, Utula Samana), and of late Chairman of the Wafi Landowners Council, protecting the land interests of villagers on the margins of a new mining company's operations.[26] How and

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23 Because of literacy and language factors, Papua New Guinea court procedures do not involve a call-up system for jury duty, cf. D. Weisbrot, A. Paliwala and A. Sawyerr, *Law and Social Change in Papua New Guinea*, Sydney, 1982, sect. 844. This was the case of a juvenile offender, anyway, though one for that reason involving government-paid counsellors. Other young offenders have been documented as making similar appeals, but with less success (e.g. *PNG Post-Courier*, 9 May, 1985, on the case of Andrew Bawai), I suspect because the involvement of youth offence advisors has dwindled over recent years.

24 Tapei Martin, 'The Story of My Life [the Change as Christian]', p. 1.

25 This was at the behest of the PNG Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, PNG not possessing a consulate in Israel.

26 For key press reports of these events, *Niugini Nius* (Port Moresby), 6 Dec., 1983; *Taranaki Herald* (New Plymouth, N. Z.), 11 Jan., 1985; *PNG Post-Courier* (Port Moresby), 9 Dec., 1987, and 24 April, 1992.

in what circumstances Tapei addressed the moral implications of his conversion; questioned the simplistic evangelistic pressure of his early spiritual mentors in the Christian Life Centre; began to reflect on the sociology of poverty and structural violence; cultivated the media, played politics and played to 'gang elements' in Lae as an electoral base are all matters for detailing in *Urban Warrior.*

By 1991, though, perhaps the most dramatic, vivid story of *tanim bel* was circulating in the country. Allegedly the most hardened and daring of all rascals, Eric Mangen, was found preaching in the parks of Lae city, mainly under the auspices of the Bethany (subsequently Vineyard) Evangelistic Ministries. Mangen received wide publicity in May, 1985, when he shot dead Robert Chappell on the Lae-Wau (or Morobe) Highway. Chappell, a house-parent in one of the Summer Institute of Linguistics children's homes, was driving his family and other missionaries to Bulolo to celebrate the publication of Raymond and Marjorie Dubert's translations from the Bible into a local language. Refusing to stop the car as Mangen and his gang emerged from the jungle shadows at the end of a long stretch of straight road, Chappell was shot at point-blank range. A 'co-driver' kept the vehicle going for some 7 km. The episode sent shockwaves through the expatriate population along the highway. Feelings about the incident worsened in time when it was learnt that the murdered man's daughter returned to the United States and apparently lost all 'moral direction', locked as she had become into such resentment towards life. Dismay turned to astonishment at the Summer Institute headquarters when Mangen was released and given newspaper coverage as a man whose 'heart had changed'.[27]

The details of Eric Mangen's rascal life are complex and extraordinary, and too difficult to present with chronological accuracy without longer interviewing than I have hitherto been able to secure. Suffice it to say that, during the 1980s, the decade after Tapei Martin's activites, Mangen's gang dodged many an arrest by walking the 'Bulldog Track', the old wartime marching route between Port Moresby and Lae. Mangen was arrested and gaoled as many as twelve times, however, and his fame in rascal circles came from his Houdini-like abilities to escape. Placed under the highest security in Bulolo gaol after killing a local shopkeeper, his series of escapes

[27] G. Trompf, Fieldnotes, Feb., 1994. Thanks especially to Heidi Bergmann (Lutheran Mission, Mumeng) and Robin Termon (Summer Institute).

— that had reinforced his sense of invincibility — brought on a personal crisis. Or, as Jack Bukwa, now specialist in evangelistic work among disaffected Morobe youth has put it, persistent prison visitations — by Bukwa and the local Anglican priest in Buimo prison, Lae — 'took Mangen to his knees' (in 1990).[28] His release soon after resulted in one of the more remarkable episodes in regional social change, encouraged as he soon was to preach about his unexpected conversion.

Mangen's revelations about the ethos of his gang show that gang ideologies are quite capable of being affected by external influences pushing against both tradition and mission. Mangen, a Bano, and thus from a culture-area closer to Lae than Mumeng, admitted to being a Satanist, but not in the sense of identifying with the old 'satans' (as Lutheran missionaries called the old deities) but with the Biblical Devil opposed to God. Acquainted with 'modern' Satanism through its absorption into Moresby 'rascal talk' from expatriate sources opposed to missionisation in Melanesia, Mangen's cohorts expressed their cohesion by making the Satanic horn signal — the little and pointer fingers of the left hand being raised while the other fingers were down. On Mangen's first arrest, his bargain was not with God, but with the Devil. Faced for the first time with hated locked bars, and after just receiving a plate of distasteful-looking rice from a warden, he quietly uttered: 'Devil, if you exist, prove it to me. Eat this rice.' And before his very eyes, so Mangen's most paradigmatic and preached story goes, the rice began to disappear bit by bit! This was the uncanny occurrence that made him whisper his second demand: 'Unlock the door'; and this, on Mangen's asseverations, is how he escaped prison eleven times and continued to pursue his life of crime.[29]

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28 Trompf, Fieldnotes, Feb., 1994. Thanks to Eric Mangen and Jack Bukwa.

29 For the most widely publicised of his escapes, see *PNG Post-Courier*, 25 Feb., 1985. I am grateful for information from Patrick Glass, Anthropology, University of Sydney, about the new phenomenon of Papuan 'rascal meetings' to worship the Devil in recent years (pers. comm., April, 1994). There are traditions in the Markham Valley and lower Morobe Highlands area, however, in which the Devil is supposed to be contacted for securing cargo, including rifles (cf. [Commonwealth of Australia], 'Native Affairs and District Administration', *Report to the Council of the League of Nations*, 27, 1934-5, pp. 19-21; A. M. Maahs, 'A Sociological Interpretation of the Cargo Cult of New Guinea and Selected Comparable Phenomena in Other Areas of the World', Ph.D. thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 1956, p. 20. This is interesting in itself, considering that encounters with the Devil are more stressed throughout the southwest Pacific within Catholic rather than Protestant circles. Cf. e.g. A. Pineau, *Marie-Thérèse Noblet: servant de Notre Seigneur en*

Whatever one is to make of this story (and for those who would quickly renounce its credibility, its power in the telling to bring about change can still be easily recognised), the powerlessness of the Devil to save him a twelfth time undercut his reciprocal expectations. His retributive logic, his anticipated continuation of rewards for being on the 'right' side, was sabotaged (albeit only by tighter security in gaol!). Fascinatingly, the core of his preached message encapsulates the shift of consciousness that is of prime interest in this paper. 'If the Devil could use me to bring so much destruction to my people, how much more strongly can God use me to bring new life to the nation of Papua New Guinea?' Not only were most of Mangen's own gang members affected by this 'turning of the gut', but his preaching against 'rascal criminality' led to young people's relinquishment of firearms to the police. Before one large pile of weapons stacked in a park, the Morobe (now Highlands) Police Commissioner Ludwig Kembu actually wept, observing that for years his men had worked as law-and-order officials to produce such a result, when in one afternoon 'a single sermon by a convert had done what his force had not achieved in three years'. In a pact Mangen was then encouraged to take up work running a local security organisation.[30]

Gang leader conversions, in fact the *tanim bel* phenomenon in the history of rascal groups in Papua New Guinea, provide a window onto an individual's shift of consciousness crucial for the study of conversion as a whole — if one is prepared to take the necessary risks involved with the fieldwork.[31] We have not been dealing here with the conversions of whole groups of peoples (as in most other papers in this book); and, viewed within a 'stage-theory' of social change in the history of Papua New Guinea, gang conversions seem a far cry from earlier, near-contact situations in which whole clans moved their allegiance over to the mission because of the decisions of leaders (as was encouraged in the Morobe region, for instance, by the well-known Lutheran missionary Christian

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Papouasie (1889-1930), Issoudin, 1938; K. Scully, 'The Devil Takes a Back Seat', *Annals Australia: journal of Catholic culture*, 105/1, Jan.-Feb., 1994, p. 17.

30 The above paragraph derives mainly from notes taken of Mangen's talks (including Kembu's responses) by Jack Bukwa, 1992-94. Of Mangen's three closest fellow-operators, Jupui Kapera, James Koima and Anton Peto, only Koima converted, Kapera being shot by the police, and Peto still being on the run as an escapee at the time of writing.

31 At this point, though without illustration, I should emphasise the dangers of doing gang research.

Keysser).[32] These gang leader conversions, rather, are paradigmatic for actually being individualistic in the radically transforming processes of urbanisation, monetarisation and detribalisation. Those indigenous individuals imbued with long-inured group consciousness, for instance, like the Gamaga Hageners of the western New Guinea Highlands, notice and are consequently forced to discuss, if they have been gaoled, the demands for the inward change of the individual as evoked by those preaching to prisoners. In such contexts Melanesian Catholics find themselves for the first time shocked by the 'inner demands' of Protestant evangelism.[33] Perhaps we should take into account some differences between Catholicism and Protestantism here, for Protestant reactions against Catholicism have been precisely on the grounds that individuals should make free, heartfelt responses or decisions, and in that sense Max Weber may have been on the right track in writing about the greater stress on the 'interiorization' of the Christian faith within the Protestant trajectory.[34] But it is very difficult to generalise about Melanesian Christianity. Suffice it to say that oral materials concerning, and the images projected from, gang leaders or gang conversions highlight the challenge to individuals to reconsider their 'deepest personal priorities' as to which 'side of the spiritual fence' or 'cosmic conflict' they are on, etc. Thus we can see very arrestingly in the study of these materials and images the transferences of retributive logic. This helps us to place better what it may mean to turn from a war god or the Devil to one whom the converts proclaim as 'the true God'. The existential paradigmata entailed in such turning-points are intensely vivid for the converts. I have come across persons who have been converted through dreams in which the threatening Devil (or suchlike) has been overcome by a Christ-figure (or perhaps the holding up of the Bible), and these converts have then 'spread the word' on this experiential basis.[35] Thus choices between Death and Life, Hell and the Kingdom of God, (total) Captivity or Freedom, Destructiveness or the life of Love or Righteousness, will be seen as individualised necessities of great moment, these becoming not only an index to general shifts from a more group to a

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32 See e.g. W. Fugmann (ed.), *Christian Keysser: Bürger zweier Welten*, Stuttgart, 1985.

33 Fieldnotes, Wojciech Dabrowski, Mount Hagen, 1990s (with thanks).

34 Weber in Gerth and Mills, *op. cit.*, pp. 267ff., 350ff.

35 See e.g. G. Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, Cambridge, 1991, p. 196.

more individualised (self?)-consciousness in social change,[36] not only signals of modifying retributive logic and transferences within symbolic and imaginal life, but also indications of the potency these conversions can have in the struggle to create a new nation. In fact, a useful national strategy in response to gang surrenders and conversions can, and I believe should, involve reinforcement of these modifications and transferences by deliberately providing new, appropriate, constructive and rewarding work that substitutes for the old 'work' of resentment and social disturbance.[37]

[36] For background, G. Trompf, *In Search of Origins*, London and New Delhi, 1990, ch. 5.

[37] For helpful suggestions for Government, S. Dinnan [National Research Institute, PNG], '"Praise the Lord and Pass Round the Ammunition": criminal group surrenders', unpublished seminar paper, Australian National University, Aug., 1994. Dinnan even suggests the establishment of a microcredit facility for such surrenderers.

'Right Way' 'Til I Die': Christianity and Kin on Country at Hermannsburg

*Diane J. Austin-Broos**

Introduction

One family story and three sacred sites reflect the drama of Lutheran missionisation at Hermannsburg/*Ntaria* in Central Australia. The story and sites also reveal ambiguities in Western Aranda experience; aporias that the Aranda remark in a milieu where very different worlds were first brought together at a mission site in the late 1870s. The longevity of missionisation, and the 'frontier' circumstance in which it began, mean that this Aranda experience is an especially striking one. Western Aranda have seen Christian 'law' working as the pre-eminent law in a European social order. And even though *Ntaria* today is a secular bureaucratic regime, the influence of the former mission is still pervasive for the Aranda.[1] The following story and the context of its telling introduces this social milieu and the moral order it sustains today.

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1 Cf. Aram A. Yengoyan, 'Religion, Morality and Prophetic Traditions: Conversion among the Ptjantjatjara of Central Australia', in *Conversion to Christianity*, ed. Robert W. Hefner, Berkeley, 1992, pp. 233-58. The name *Ntaria* for Hermannsburg is taken from the sacred site and waterhole that first attracted missionaries (very likely guided by some of the Aranda; see Diane J. Austin-Broos, 'Narratives of the Encounter at Ntaria', *Oceania*, 1994 [in press]) to make their camp at that particular point on the Finke River. L. H. Leske ('The Modern Chapter', in *Hermannsburg: A Vision and a Mission*, ed. Everard Leske, Adelaide, 1977, p. 13) cites June 8, 1877, as the day on which the missionaries, W. F. Schwartz and A. H. Kempe, found the *Ntaria* site. With the departure of Kempe in 1891, the mission was in effect abandoned with only a few baptisms accomplished among the Aranda people. Carl Strehlow arrived at the Hermannsburg mission on October 8, 1894. By the end of first decade of the twentieth century the mission under Carl Strehlow was an established enterprise. Many Aranda came into the mission forced off their own land by the expansion of cattle stations and the aggressive behaviour of the cattlemen (see Mervyn Hartwig, 'The Progress of White Settlement in the Alice Springs District and its Effects upon the Aboriginal Inhabitants, 1860-1894', Ph.D. thesis, University of Adelaide, 1965; T. G. H. Strehlow, *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*, Adelaide, 1978). Always struggling for financial security and for Federal government approval, the mission nevertheless became a fixture in Central Australian life (Leske, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-31).

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

An old woman, now deceased, who was married into the Malbunka family told of her father's father just before his death standing before her 'painted up' and bearing on his head his *tnatanja* pole, the symbol of a massive phallic potency and also the means by which the paths of heroes were sometimes traced.[2] In other conditions, this was a sight that the woman might have seen in her later years, but even then at a certain distance. Now, however, she was the last surviving member of her patriline and her grandfather felt compelled to show her his designs though he would not give her his stories. She was too young, she told me, and a woman anyway. She said, '*Era nuka ntelalhaka. Kurunga, era iluka. Well, kala.* (He showed himself to me [with his *churinga* designs]. Then, he died. Well, finish.)' This characteristic way of closing a conversation or any social exchange with the announcement of a finish — *kala* — is also one way in which Aranda people talk about dreaming heroes. Heroes 'come out' of a place and travel across a particular space constituting landscape as they go in order to 'finish' in another place where they return, as being, to the land. This notion of 'kala' — or of finish to a course — also applies to human death. On a relative's death a person might say, 'Well *kala*, my cousin pass away' or '*Era tjia korna laka. Well, kala.* (He went the wrong way. Well, finish.)' The European euphemism, 'passed away' with its open-ended message of continuing being, becomes, here, ambiguous beside the Aranda quite definitive *kala*. The latter offers no turning away from death-as-final for the embodied personality. The dreaming aspect of a person's being might return to his conception site, but the moral personality (in European terms) is quite definitively finished. 'Passed away', on the other hand, offers the indeterminacy of 'heaven': the Christians' transcendental destination for the interior soul that goes 'to another place' clearly beyond the reach of the living. Christian moral ontology suggests not a definitive finish, but rather that the moral personality can have enduring life after death.[3] 'Passed away' and also 'finished', different modes of breach *and*

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2 Strehlow, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-2; John Morton, 'Singing Subjects and Sacred Objects: more on Munn's "Tranformation of Subjects into Objects" in Central Australian Myth', *Oceania*, 58, 1988, pp. 100-18.

3 There are at least four different Western Aranda words that have been translated as 'spirit' or 'soul'. These are *kuruna*, the word now used for Christian soul, *enka* which now in the usage *Enka Alkngaltara* stands for Holy Spirit, *ltana* now not commonly used, and *ratapa* or the conception spirit that enters a woman at the place where her foetus has turned. Carl Strehlow proposed that *kuruna* referred to the 'soul' of a living person, *enka* to the 'soul' passing from an ailing person, and *ltana* to the travelling and ultimately obliterated 'soul' of a person who had died (C. Strehlow, 'The Aranda and Loritja Tribes of Central Australia. Part I: Myths, Legends and Fables of the Aranda Tribe', ed. M. F.

continuity: these are the notions and emotions that have vied for salience here. This woman's account is all the more stunning because of the breach that it relates; not only the living personality finished but also the being of a dreaming hero.

Aranda people, including this woman, hardly dwell on these types of story, told to the anthropologist perhaps as a way of impressing the fact of change. People more often address the events that constitute their daily lives and these latter are the types of account that I have collected more frequently. Among the Western Aranda, the Malbunkas are a famous evangelising family. The woman who related this story married a Malbunka orphaned young and raised mainly in the mission 'block'.[4] They travelled around Central Australia evangelising for many years. Her

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von Leonhardi, trans. Hans Oberscheidt, MS, 1907, pp. 17-18, and von Leonhardi's 1910 Preface, p. vii). These ideas should not be confused with the reincarnations of embodied ancestral being in persons, and being in *churinga*, that are permanently constitutive of the world (but see Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, *The Arunta: a study of a stone age people*, London, 1927, pp. 74-8; cf. T. G. H. Strehlow, *Central Australian Religion*, Bedford Park, Adelaide, 1978, pp. 20-6). The enduring nature of this being is in sharp constrast to the ephemeral nature of personality. Ted Strehlow comments, '... the native has no hope of a future life in which he himself will rejoin his friends, his kindred, his family or any of those who were once dear to him. The body is placed in the grave and covered with soil; for a few months the survivors walk about in nightly dread of the ghost [*ltana*] of the deadman, and his name must not be mentioned. Then things return into their normal channels once more: the soul of the dead man has met with complete annihilation' (T. G. H. Strehlow, *Aranda Traditions*, Melbourne, 1947, p. 43). At *Ntaria* today, women among themselves will not utter the name of a deceased. In conversation with visiting past missionaries, however, the same names will be uttered. This movement between worlds is typical of contemporary Aranda being. *Ltana* was clearly not a matrix of moral worth, whereas Adam was made a 'soul' by virtue of God's 'breath' or 'Spirit'. That soul became the locus of the moral through Adam's fall, and the conferral of death as God's judgment on Adam for his loss of divinity. Apostasy meant the inevitability of human death, just as redemption or atonement allowed 'eternal life' (J. E. Colwell, 'Anthropology', in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright, Inter-Varsity Press, 1988, pp. 28-30). In Lutheran theology, God's redemption rests on Christ's 'substitutionary atonement' or 'obedience'. It is through the word and Holy Spirit that faith in Christ leads to the sinner's own atonement, rather than through good acts performed (R. D. Preuss, 'Lutheranism and Lutheran Theology', in Ferguson and Wright, *op. cit.*, pp. 404-6). This theology with its focus on faith and the sacraments seems to allow a space for variant cultural practices in everyday life, and yet proposes a form of moral interiority based on faith in the Christ that is quite foreign to an Arandic world.

4 'Block' is the English word the Western Aranda people use as an equivalent to country or, more precisely, boundary to country. The 'mission block' is sometimes referred to as the missionaries' own country, and sometimes as country lent to them by the senior custodian who claims *Ntaria*. More recently, the term 'mission block' has been used to refer to the Alice Springs headquarters of the mission.

husband became a Lutheran pastor and, though old and almost blind, he lives on in *Ntaria* today. During her last few years, the couple were almost inseparable and used to camp with a related group with whom I lived. Together the couple and others in the group gave me accounts of the mission regime. They could describe themselves both as 'Aranda' and 'Christian'; as people who have lived between worlds and re-rendered a moral order in response to their experience.[5]

The Tensions in an Arandic Moral Order

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[5] This discussion proceeds in terms of an account of 'moral order' against a background of 'ontology'. I have coined this pair of terms to address the analytical demands of the situation. Bruce Kapferer's idea of 'ideologies' within an 'ontology' is the one that is closest to my own. Kapferer observes, 'Through ideology the terms and relations of an ontological scheme receive valuation, a valuation laden with import in a historically lived reality' (*Legends of People, Myths of State*, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988, p. 80). Nevertheless, 'ideology' carries a Marxist burden of active group negotiation of power that seems inappropriate for the Hermannsburg milieu where the politics was more often than not a politics of personal being played out on a confined stage and between disparate individuals. I therefore use the term 'moral order' and the 'politics of moral order' in order to connote this politics of the personal that inevitably involves the normative orders of which people have been a part and which they continue to negotiate (also see Diane J. Austin-Broos, 'The Politics of Moral Order in Jamaica', *Anthropological Forum*, 6, 1991-2, pp. 287-319, and *idem*, 'Redefining the Moral Order: Interpretations of Christianity in Post-Emancipation Jamaica', in *The Meaning of Freedom*, ed. Frank McGlynn and S. Drescher, Pittsburgh, 1992, pp. 221-45). These terms are also especially appropriate for Aboriginal societies in which political power was not reified in states but rather was integral to the power to constitute both self and a social-natural environment through knowledge and the attribution of value. Fred Myers also adopts this terminology though it is *Pintupi* emotion, rather than the orders of colonial engagement, that concerned him as an anthropologist (*Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines*, Smithsonian Institution Press and Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1986, p. 109).

This rendering of a negotiated mission world is different both from the Comaroffs' rendering of missionisation in terms of 'hegemony' and 'ideology' and also from Heidegger's phenomenology that aligns 'ontology' with 'Being' (see Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, vol. I, University of Chicago Press, 1991; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford, 1962, p. 49 esp.). The Comaroffs' account leaves no room for parts of a world not encompassed by domination, while Heidegger's phenomenology fails to acknowledge that history as a process of events can revalue and undermine ontologies. I comment on other aspects of this issue in my conclusion.

The ambiguities in an Aranda Christian being have struck me most forcefully in two related spheres. One continuing site of tensions concerns the construal of the social domain and the divergent constitutions of person that kin and Christian congregation demand. The other area of ambiguity concerns the issue of place, and an Aranda way of being in the world that missionaries have sought to engage. Despite this mission response, there is, still, a significant gap between the locatedness of Aranda life and Christian transcendentalism. Sociality and a sense of place are intimately connected for the Aranda, for moral being is realised in social relations articulated through a logic of place.[6] Place in a Christian ontology has no such connection with moral being. The interior moral space of Christians engages with a transcendent God and this is a relation in which place is largely incidental to being.[7] In the milieu of Hermannsburg/*Ntaria*, the Lutherans' notion of a 'kingdom within' of Christian concern, and a 'kingdom without' belonging to the world, even accentuates this difference. The emphasis on faith rather than good works is stressed in Lutheran teaching, and with a focus on the sacraments as well repositions Christian being and practice away from the domain of kin and living with kin as a moral order. In his account of the emergence of the modern European individual, Herbert Marcuse underlined this dimension of Lutheran practice:

> ... the man who is enclosed in his inner freedom has so much freedom over all outer things that he becomes free *from* them — ... because in self-sufficient inner freedom he doesn't need them at all. 'If such works are no longer a prerequisite, then assuredly all commandments and laws are like broken chains; and if his chains are broken he is assuredly free'.[8]

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6 The three most useful references on this ontology are Nancy Munn, 'The Transformation of Subjects into Objects in Walbiri and Pitjantjatjara Myth', in *Australian Aboriginal Anthropology*, ed. Ronald M. Berndt, Perth, 1970, pp. 141-63; John Morton, 'Singing Subjects and Sacred Objects: a psychological interpretation of the "Transformation of Subjects into Objects" in Central Australian Myth', *Oceania*, 57, 1987, pp. 280-98; and Myers, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-158.

7 Clearly, this statement is more true of the New Testament God than it is of the Hebraic God. But without doubt Lutherans at Hermannsburg today teach that God is 'everywhere' and for all peoples. Predictably, for the Aranda, the Old Testament is accessible and easier to translate than the New Testament.

8 Herbert Marcuse, *From Luther to Popper*, trans Joris De Bres, London and New York, 1983, p. 57, quoting Martin Luther.

This view of interior Christian life, constituted through a relation with God, is strikingly different from an Arandic being embedded in kin relations and ritual demands, themselves embedded in ideas of place.[9]

Yet the Aranda are now a 'Christian people' and sustain a moral order that aspires to negotiate these worlds. They live a life of their own construction that seeks to assimilate ontologies.[10] The confrontation of ontologies has produced an ambiguous world in which the very construction of experience can be pervaded by disparate emotions and countervailing responses to the world. This is reflected in the prominence that Aranda give to issues of family, irrespective of Christian demands. And though country is less a mythical landscape than it was fifty years ago, the realisation of these kin relations is still, importantly, embedded in place. With the demise of a mission regime located at Hermannsburg itself, this tension in moral order has pulled the Aranda away from Hermannsburg and its Christian congregational life.[11] And Lutherans, through their own use of sites, have responded to the Arandic order even as their presence at *Ntaria* initially transgressed it in the past and, ironically, again in the present, when they left their block at *Ntaria* to move back into Alice Springs.[12] The outcome for the Aranda is an identity both as Aranda and Christian, but one in which the experience of country and being Christian have both seen significant change. The following account addresses aspects of both these modes of transformation. It suggests

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9 Cf. Deborah Bird Rose, 'The Saga of Captain Cook; Morality in Aboriginal and European Law', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2, 1984, pp. 24-39, and *idem*, 'Christian Identity versus Aboriginal Identity in the Victoria River District', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2, 1985, pp. 58-61. See Diane J. Austin-Broos, 'Submission Prepared for the Palm Valley Land Claim with Reference to the Robinja Family and some members of the Malbunka family. Prepared on behalf of the claimants, February 1994', TS in Central Land Council Library, Alice Springs, for an account of the relation between marriage, kinship and 'blocks' amongst one group of Aranda. Aranda women give genealogies by simultaneously speaking names of descendants (*ramarama*) and drawing lines of descent in the ground to represent the location of those groups of descendants across the expanse of West Aranda land. The very giving of genealogical knowledge is through establishing location.

10 Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers: towards a history of Australian Aboriginal being*, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

11 This congregational life has slowly attenuated, first with the homelands movement (see below), then with the reconstitution of Hermannsburg as a settlement with a secular village council in 1983, and finally with the withdrawal of the Lutheran school in 1989.

12 Residences for senior mission staff and a new administrative block were acquired in Alice Springs between 1973 and 1975.

that the Aranda today live in an ambiguous world constituted through ontologies that are only partially assimilated.

Kin on Country and the Christian Block

The order of Western Aranda life has been articulated through kin relations, the marriage system with its obligations, sentiments regarding own country, and notions of sustaining place as an independent but interconnected site of sociality. The kinship system is mediated by the occupation and management of land that divides people into moieties of own group, and those one marries. Managers for a set of owners are drawn from those whom the owners marry, but harbour also a smaller set of those who actually care for knowledge. A moiety of owners breaks up into smaller two-generation sets located on particular countries, the 'skin' or *nyinanga* section associated with a particular block.[13]

The contours of this famous system are still discernable today. Yet white settlement, over time, has also changed the Aranda. As a consequence, manager relations are emphasised almost as much as owners. This gives the Aranda figuring of country a distinctively cognatic bent. In addition, when women speak genealogies they adopt abbreviations for regions that once harboured many blocks when country was more densely populated. Talking marriages with these women shows how, in succeeding generations, countries with skins from different moieties were brought into relation with each other.[14] At least recently, this process has allowed stories to be re-learnt from men associated through marriage but whose residence is at some distance. In the context of attentuated knowledge their secondary knowledge has been relevant. These adjustments over time are mirrored in two very different types of Aranda re-embedding in country.

One of these forms of re-embedding has involved a process in which a few members of a now senior generation took over stories from other

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[13] See T. Strehlow, *Aranda Traditions*; John Morton, 'Country, People, Art: The Western Aranda 1870-1990', in *The Heritage of Namatjira: the Watercolourists of Central Australia*, ed. Jane Hardy, J. V. S. Megaw and M. Ruth Megaw, Heinemann, 1992, pp. 23-62.

[14] Morton, *ibid.*, gives a summary of the Western Aranda kinship system. Where marriage is concerned, Aranda women today say that women are passed around the different skins (*nyinanga* sections) 'like a clock to keep people properly separate'. The discussion of kin in terms of country that women sustain today is also reflected in Spencer and Gillen's earlier, and far more detailed, account of the relations between named localities and *nyinanga* sections (*op. cit.*, pp. 63-4).

patrilineal groups or re-learned stories for country that perhaps fathers had not passed on due to early deaths or close association with the mission. These were circumstances in which men re-located on country or assumed residence again in order to look after a place. 'Looking after' might now involve mustering cattle and wild horses, or constructing an out-station house, rather than extensive ritual practice. This process of re-embedding, explicitly through knowledge acquired, has occurred intermittently ever since the missionaries arrived; for example, along the Ellery Creek close to *Ntaria*, further south at *Irbmankara*, and at *Kulpitara* in the western reaches of Aranda land. This process almost certainly occurred as well prior to European settlement,[15] though it now has a different environment. Apart from the new uses for land, the presence of written mission records and the deterioration of the mythical landscape with the arrival of Europeans have meant that these re-embeddings are now remembered, remarked upon, and sometimes contested. In an earlier time, they would have been rapidly normalised simply as part of the dreaming.

A second re-embedding began in 1968 when a number of Aranda families shifted back onto land from the centralised mission community in a 'homelands' or 'outstation' movement. This development followed the Commonwealth Electoral Act of 1962 and the Constitutional Referendum of 1967 that in effect gave Aborigines full legal citizenship. In 1973 the Commonwealth Labor Government began to consider land rights legislation.[16] It was in this context that the Lutheran Mission Board in Adelaide began to move to transfer assets from the Hermannsburg mission back to Aranda people.[17] In addition, local mission staff at Hermannsburg had become convinced that a centralised form of decision-making through an elected council would not override family forms of decision-making for the Aranda.[18] By the end of 1974, 8 groups had moved out of Hermannsburg.[19] By 1995, there were 39 Aranda outstations and, in

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15 Cf. Erich Kolig, 'Noah's Ark Revisited: On the Myth/Land Connection in Traditional Aboriginal Thought', *Oceania*, 51, 1980, pp. 118-32; Peter Sutton, 'Myth as History and History as Myth', in I. Keen (ed.), *Being Black: Aboriginal Cultures in Settled Australia*, Canberra, 1988, pp. 251-68.

16 Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black Response to White Dominance, 1788-1980*, George Allen and Unwin, 1982, pp. 177-8, 184ff.

17 Leske, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-7.

18 Cf. Elizabeth Sommerlad, *Community Development at Hermannsburg: a record of changes in the social structure*, Canberra, 1973, esp. its forward by Paul Albrecht, 'Background to Finke River Mission Policy at Hermannsburg', pp. 1-4.

19 Leske, *op. cit.*, p. 115. Personal communication, Kumantji Ungwanaka and Joyleen Abbott who were early leaders in the homelands movement.

addition, one outstation which had become a fully incorporated town under Northern Territory legislation.[20] The process of missionisation and movement, as Christians, away from the mission has transformed and also reconstituted the experience of living with kin on country. It is this living with kin on country as the focus of moral being that jars with a Christian order where precedence is given to a Christian congregation peopled by moral individuals, and to a person's interior soul in its relation with God. Yet the Aranda's assimilation of laws, of practices from both these worlds, constitutes a moral order that is distinctively their own.

Even though a redeeming Son of God may be recommended to the Aranda, He can only take up the redeemed to heaven as individuated moral beings. A European Lutheran pastor once preached to the Aranda that 'the door to God's place', described as *pmaratjwa* or 'big country', is nevertheless 'very small'. By this observation he intended to convey the individuated nature of salvation. God lets one person in at a time, and all can be responsible only for themselves. Seeking to strike a note of relevance, the pastor added, 'You can't drive a Toyota truck through God's door with your whole family on the back'. Aranda understand the issue clearly, but find it a difficult one with which to grapple. God's country is certainly a space, but does it have place in Aranda terms? It is not connected with other countries and is therefore sometimes thought of as Palestine. People sometimes talk of a particular locale a long way over the Western MacDonnells. This place is both where Noah's Ark rested, and also the place to which Jesus was walking when he passed through Palm Valley (on Aranda land).[21] In dreams, people often see relatives that are 'gone' to heaven and, by rendering them as ghosts, seek to situate them in their own extended space. I have asked a number of Aranda friends who they think is 'sitting' in heaven. The question is invariably taken to mean who among own kin are there, and kin whose deaths are still remembered are listed in one way or another. Heaven is sometimes presented as a 'no-place' and sometimes as a specific place for a set of kin. These responses are in fact quite consistent if indeed heaven is 'thought' through aspects of Aranda sociality mediated by a notion of place. For the young and the 'real

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[20] Personal communication, Ken Porter who was 'manager' of the town in question. The number of outstations serviced by the *Tjuwanpa* Resource Centre across the Finke River from Hermannsburg varies with residence patterns. After a death, or a temporary migration to Alice Springs, outstations may be vacant for months or even a couple of years.

[21] Kolig's account of a Noah's Ark myth in the Kimberleys is strikingly similar to some Aranda stories (*op. cit.*).

Christian people' heaven is a place beyond — as it is for many Europeans — but heaven's social significance for earth remains indeterminate.

The social articulation of heaven is problematic for the Aranda. A number of senior Christian people have expressed great exasperation to me about trying to set children on the right path before they themselves die. They cannot hold or care for their families as they go to heaven and this seems to challenge the idea of what it is to be an old person. Such a person does not 'finish' and yet will not teach the young. To have knowledge and age in God's country and not be 'holding' a younger generation is almost a contradiction in terms.[22] One woman mentioned to me that she would be 'proper lonely' in heaven, and observed that the best thing that she could do was to 'straighten' (*arratja*) her grandchildren prior to her death. Some of her children were drinking at the time, and when she could not speak to them, she sat turned away and singing hymns incessantly, throwing out the words to make matters right prior to her death.[23] To contemplate the young 'going to heaven' and living estranged from their families is also a difficult affair. This concern is similar to the one that Aranda have when youth leave the region for training in Darwin or Adelaide. A person estranged from the homelands area is assumed to be and often is 'proper lonely', and if the length of stay is more than a 'trip' people often return with their business unfinished. The sense of unease that 'heaven' elicits as both a desirable and lonely place was reflected in a comment to me regarding a person who had died in my absence: 'That poor fella, he's only in heaven now'. Notwithstanding a sense of the powerful protection of God, this issue of heaven's sociality remains an enigma to the Aranda. A sense of indeterminacy that they may well share with Europeans is heightened by their own sense of kin-relatedness properly expressed through place.

Funerals for the old are muted affairs while funerals for the young denied fulfilling life are elaborate and emotionally torrid. Old people have played their role in giving knowledge to the young. Young people, in death denied the possibility of this process, are understood as victims so mourning is pronounced. This difference in deaths for the young and the old applies to non-Christian and Christian alike. Within a Christian domain, however, it gives to funerals a special tone. Aranda grief and keening for a

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22 Cf. Myers, *op. cit.*, pp. 145-54.

23 In some respects this woman's actions seem rather similar to Morton's account of the action of ancestor heroes in shaping the land through 'throwing' out songs, actually creating the landscape through naming it (see Morton, 'Singing Subjects', 1987, pp. 107-9).

young deceased can reach an exceptional pitch. People are aware that within the church they are not supposed to make a noise. They nevertheless express their grief by moving bodily around the coffin; sitting and lying on the steps to the altar creating an embodied extension of the family that actually encompasses the coffin and seems to pull it away from the cross. This emotion is both a felt condition and also a specific response constructed through the practised obligations that Aranda accept at a funeral rite. Women can be both 'proper sorry' and also break off in the course of keening to negotiate a practical issue quite unconnected with the funeral. A man can stand and cut himself at the side of the church, apparently entirely self-absorbed, and yet at the sign of a kinsman, straighten up and shepherd the women into church.[24] These complexities of Aranda grief point as much to the social relations of the living as they do to interior sentiment. Yet European pastors, by and large, interpret this Aranda grief simply as enormous sorrow and are generally inhibited by it. Despite the fact that mourning relatives in the church transgress space exclusive to the 'priest', pastors step over and around them during a service, rather than disturb the group.[25] Pastors generally offer a very short address emphasising, simply, the sadness of relatives rather than the Christian cosmological path. Affirmation of the Christian cosmos is here defeated by a different ritual logic interpreted as inconsolable grief. Conflicting demands also occur when women who are choir members prefer to join their families in their collective mourning. Creating a good Christian performance through a strong choir rendition is not in fact an appropriate mourning for an Aranda relative. Funerals often find choir ranks diminished and Christian rite struggling for salience. It is hard not to read this extraordinary ritual, neither simply Christian nor Arandic, as the expression of estrangement from a now only tenuously real dreaming world. The Christian cosmology, on the other hand, still seems equally remote as a construal of continuing being.[26]

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24 Cf. Peter Metcalfe and Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of Death: the Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, 1991, pp. 48-59.

25 'Priest' is intended here in the Weberian sense as a 'functionary' of an 'organized enterprise' (Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Talcott Parsons, Boston, 1964, p. 28). Lutherans do not use this term, which they associate with the intermediary role of the Roman Catholic 'priest'. They do, however, use an Aranda term *ingkarta* or 'ritual boss [of a site]' to refer to a pastor.

26 In this short account of funerals which is preliminary to more detailed accounts I try to deal with the fact that the world for the Aranda has really changed without there being a neat leap from an Aranda world to a European one. The weakness of both Munn (*op. cit.*) and Myers (*op. cit.*) and also Tony Swain ('The Ghost of Space: Reflections on Warlpiri

This ambiguity is acted out in switches in the projection of emotion that sometimes occur at funerals. An old woman, keening with hair awry and a blanket covering her head, grabbed me and looked up for a moment. 'I'm happy, my son gone to heaven', she said, as her body bent over wailing again. This atmosphere is also augmented by other relatives of the deceased engaging in a strident mourning to repel from themselves the suspicion of sorcery. With deaths almost every week at Hermannsburg, sorcery accusations are rife and these can also bring marked divisions into the Christian community. Once again, the mourning underlines the present and living implications of death that are different from Christian concerns. The Aranda mark a real breach notwithstanding a Christian ritual message of continuing life after death for the moral personality. In the case of the young, they expect to find a logic for death among the living and not in the will of God. The outcome is a Christian funeral rite, but with an emotional register that seems distinctly Arandic. A link between an interior moral space of the deceased and the transcendental God is salient but ritually subdued. Attempts to figure place and social relations in death are very prominent. Aranda reflect these ambiguities through their musings on the nature of heaven.

The second way in which a sense of moral order based in kin on country sits uneasily with a Christian being concerns the Aranda concept of law as learning through doing in environment; learning law as a 'path' or 'way' with kin rather than as a general moral precept tied to an interior soul. Moral law is learnt by children growing up as they move between their father's homeland and the homelands of their mother and their father's sisters' children; as they move from the domain of classificatory brothers and sisters into the domain of cousins. These children now and in the past are nurtured often by a grandparental generation that teaches by deploying the experience of countries to define the issues of the social domain. Aranda camp sites or inhabited homelands are generally fairly near a waterhole or in an area that provides good shade, or on a rise close to a natural feature that also may be a sacred site. Even with the depletion of knowledge these sites and their significance are known. Visiting one set of relatives or another recommends itself as much for a terrain as it does for the personalities of the group and in fact the activities of different terrains — the water, topography and tucker available — become

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Christian Iconography and Ritual', in *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*, ed. Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose, Bedford Park, Adelaide, 1988, pp. 452-469) is the disinclination to entertain a world of fragmented ontologies.

associated with the personalities. Travelling to this particular relative in summer also means plenty of bush bananas. Visiting other relatives south means good fishing and a swimming hole. Visiting mother's brother's place, for instance, allows collection of *pitjari* (bush tobacco), or looking at that interesting seepage through rock of trickles of water depositing mineral salts. Aboriginal groups in Alice Springs who are now permanent residents there retain strong commitments to kin and to regions of origin. For Western Aranda, however, moving between an outstation and *Ntaria*, packing up and going to country, is a specific and valued practice. It allows further avenues of movement and an autonomous base that town-dwellers no longer command. Living with kin on country is seen as separate from Europeans and celebrated because of it. It is also seen as a separation from other families with whom there are tensions. Living in close proximity to groups long regarded as socially distant has been a product of European settlement on which the Aranda constantly remark. The homelands movement of the 1970s allowed the Aranda to recapture forms of distance that are part of their sociality.

This sense of moral order for kin on country makes the rites of a generalised Lutheran community difficult ones with which to engage. A woman who strictly sustained daily devotionals on her children's country would not join a Bible group in Hermannsburg. She had been a committed choir member for many years but now no longer came to practice. A son, recently released from jail, wanted to become a pastor. She sat with him on his father's country. 'I can't come to choir anymore', she said, 'I got to teach my son.' In returning to country, her actions and those of her son involved a process of recuperation for the shocked and demoralised son. Importantly, this process involved Christian practice on his father's land. The practice of law on own land is seen as a buffer to white society. It strengthens emotionally in a way that congregational life cannot. An outcome of these dispositions in a larger Lutheran domain is the disinclination of Aranda pastors to minister to a community rather than a specific set of families. When they address a community group, either of children or adults, Aranda pastors often appeal to people's kin as a mediating factor in Christian law. One follows Christianity as a way decreed by 'old people' in a family group as much as for a righteous God. In conjunction with a white fear of ritual syncretisms, this has meant that the Lutheran church at Hermannsburg has never had a presiding Aranda pastor with autonomy over the congregation.

The moral system of the Aranda assumes them to be felicitous, if transitory, beings in a felicitous environment. Apostasy as internal state, beyond breach of practised law, has no place in this system. One learns

'how to go on' in a culture in which, morally, one can break the rules but in which, to augment Gilbert Ryle a little, there is no '[moral] ghost in the machine' requiring that one be redeemed from oneself or disciplined against oneself.[27] Moral order for the Aranda is not referenced to an external force seen as a source of good or bad; and neither is it designed to address a Christian kingdom within that exists beyond the acting self. The system is not readily extendible beyond the bounds of specific kin, and the kin domains of the Aranda are inevitably linked with specific locales. Moral order is a 'law' or a 'way (*tjia*)' for a connected set of countries. One can neither be redeemed alone nor tread a moral way in just any place or set of social relations. Law is learnt by particular people and in particular environments.

This embodied sense of moral law is also revealed in the way that Aranda speak about the Christian order. Breaking the law in Christian terms is commonly described as *tjia korna* or 'wrong way', though as one is driving down a dry rocky creek *tjia korna* can just as readily mean 'bad road'. An ancestor's track or line is called *tjia*. Wilfully going the wrong way involves the transgression of rule or law: abusing self, perhaps through alcohol, and disregarding family obligations is definitely a 'wrong way'. A young man having more than one wife in the sense of more than one woman bearing him children is also 'wrong way'. So is a girl who goes to Alice Springs, drinks, and fails to look after a baby. Playing cards all day is 'wrong way' and so is attacking one's mother-in-law! 'Wrong way' is generally reserved for youths and adults among the Aranda. It is hardly ever applied to children and seldom voiced as a judgment directly, even to an adult. It is invoked generally to explain misfortune and the failure of God's protection. On the road from Alice Springs to Hermannsburg there is a section of country that holds a death totem. Accidents on this section of road are explained in terms of the totem. A person who obeys God's law can be protected from this dangerous area. Someone who is *tjia korna*, however, is vulnerable to this aspect of Aranda law. Still, wrong way behaviour is always reversible and does not touch the intrinsic value of kin. Even relatives practising sorcery, for instance, are generally described as 'cruel' rather than 'bad' or 'sinful'. 'Cruel' refers to maliciousness which can be born of jealousy, but jealousy also is a product of life, not part of the moral ontology of the person. Moreover, overt moral judgments on a person are properly only made by kin who are likely to abuse an outsider

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27 Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, New York, 1963.

making adverse comments on a relative. Even in arguments over killings adverse comment can elicit abuse.

The transcendental God is a causal power for the Western Aranda. He is invoked to intervene in the course of events and is most likely to do this when a person has followed His law. God's power can intervene in the practice of Aranda law and sometimes overrule 'Aboriginal way'. The practice of male initiation is a popular example among Aranda of God's law's accommodation to Aboriginal way.[28] The issue of feuding, on the other hand, is a more problematic area in which it is thought God should intervene to show which law is the proper way. If praying brings no intervention, possibly through a dream, the feud will continue Aranda way. God is a law and a power that can intervene in, and also accommodate to, the Aranda's moral order. Yet God seems remote as a forgiving Being and even more remote as the Redeemer. God has given law to a people rather than moral being to a person. The Aranda sense of moral order still retains a logic of its own that tends to transform Christian law into a law of social order embedded in place and person, in located sociality.

Some of these comments might be gathered in by the common observation that a European notion of community, including a Christian community, is anomalous in a situation of moral order for kin on country. Yet the matter is not as simple as that, for amongst the Aranda today a notion of Christian community is pursued, but also as a located notion.

The Aranda talk about 'the Christian people' as a group of Hermannsburg people. As secular government gains ascendancy, some talk about 'pushing out' its representatives both white and Aboriginal. The latter are consistently represented as coming from other Aboriginal countries. These representations echo a time in which the hegemony of the mission led Aranda people residing around it to regard themselves as superior to others in their degree of assimilation. For these Aranda, the decline of the mission at Hermannsburg, and the expansion of government services, have brought people who are strangers to the area. Whether they are black or white and notwithstanding their cultural background, people from elsewhere in government service remain as strangers at *Ntaria*. In a quick crossfire between an Aranda man and myself, broaching the issue of

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28 The explanation frequently given at Hermannsburg by European and Aranda Lutherans alike is that young men 'going through' the law is a process of socialisation. It makes them 'strong' and teaches 'respect for old people'. Paul Albrecht ('Hermansburg a Meeting Place of Cultures: Personal Reflections', TS, n.d.) also offers this explanation of how people can accept God's law and still retain Aranda law. The latter becomes variable 'culture' accommodated under the single 'truth' of a Christian cosmology.

God's law and Aranda law, he observed that the two were really the same. I asked if God talked about country. He pointed out that the story of Lot was intimately involved with country. I then asked, 'But what about Aranda country?' He changed his tack and inquired whether or not I was a Lutheran. I mentioned another denomination and with some satisfaction he appealed to a group of men standing by and said, 'Well, she's outside, not Lutheran'. When people at Hermannsburg talk country or blocks the English terms 'inside' and 'outside' are frequently used to discuss where people are properly located. For Aranda Christians at Hermannsburg, Lutherans are properly located there which provides a ritual centre from which evangelism both now and in the past has reached out to other parts of Central Australia. Western Aranda or *Tjorritja* has become the senior ritual idiom of this Christianity notwithstanding the current activities to translate the Lutheran liturgy and the Bible into a range of other languages. The Aranda women's choir travels to other language centres but sings mainly in *Tjorritja* and its presence with singing in *Tjorritja* adds importance to a ritual occasion. Various owned stories in Hermannsburg propose a Jesus dreaming in Palm Valley and propose this locale for significant parts of the Old Testament creation. There is disagreement amongst some men about where the Jesus dreaming is located and this is an extension of other disputes about Aranda sites and boundaries of country. Finally, and now foreshadowing the future, there is extreme bitterness at Hermannsburg among the Christian people because with the coming of secular governance the mission withdrew to Alice Springs leaving only one white pastor at Hermannsburg. Conservative Christians among the Aranda say that missionaries left because young people did not follow God's law. A perceived withdrawal from place and relatedness is linked to failure in practice of the law. Less conservative Aranda Christians say that the Lutherans did not teach the young properly. They became more interested in other country and did not look after their own block. These people censure the missionaries for failing to care for their people and place, for failing to teach or quite literally 'give knowledge' at *Ntaria*.

Different ontologies and experienced ambiguity lead to the anomaly in which a ritual life to a great extent based on a kingdom within, to be redeemed through transcending forgiveness, is rendered as located law realised through social relations. Christianity's interiority is challenged by notions of kin on country, by a practice of located sociality. When Aranda people talk about the Christian social order, also understood as a Lutheran order, they also give sense to that order by seeking to locate it on country and in a particular language group. The paradox of the Lutherans at Hermannsburg is that while the triumph of transcendentalism is proclaimed

and ostensibly seems quite secure, the continuing practice of Aranda Christians, and even of the missionaries, suggests a far more ambiguous order. Not the product of tradition alone, this order has been constituted through transformations in Aranda and Christian experience. I now address this ambiguity in terms of European Lutherans and sites.

The Lutheran Reinterpretation of Sites

The really major watershed in Christian proselytisation at Hermannsburg is often seen to be the late 1920s when, as one Lutheran pastor put it, 'Our God proved greater than theirs'. People resident in and around the mission were experiencing a six-year drought and the 3,000 cattle run on the mission, along with an earlier influx of rabbits, had rapidly denuded a fragile environment. This experience of the 1920s came in the wake of the cattle station expansion of the 1870s and 1880s that surrounded the mission lease in three directions and left only the west, inhabited by Loritja and Pintupi, unoccupied by Europeans.[29] The land west was known to be poor and harsh while even the land of the mission lease was poorer than that of the cattle stations. In these circumstances, numerous species were to die out including the *tjilpa* — the spotted possum or 'native cat' — who, under the name of *Malbunka*, had brought to the West Aranda area knowledge of *churinga*, how to make them and perform their ceremonies, as well as the rite of subincision.[30] Stories of two *tjilpa* figures, *Malbunka* and *Nuarperaka*, traverse large parts of West Aranda country and have provided central ritual concerns for two major family groups.[31] It was in these circumstances that the drought occurred and many died, especially small babies. Adults and then children were weakened and killed by scurvy and other conditions created through malnutrition.

Concurrent with these radical changes in environment and structures of power, mission initiatives had engendered a sustained conflict over ritual practice. The object of the missionaries became to wean people away from

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[29] Aranda people make it clear today that there was never really any prospect of them dropping back onto *Pintupi* land. The *Pintupi* are still characterised as fairly wild people who eat meat inadequately cooked. Examples of how a person might incur death by infringing boundaries without permission are generally told with reference to the *Pintupi*.

[30] C. Strehlow, *op. cit.*, pp. 10, 64ff; T. G. H. Strehlow, 'Geography and the Totemic Landscape: A Functional Study', in *Australian Aboriginal Anthropology*, ed. Ronald M. Berndt, Perth, 1970, p. 103.

[31] Personal communication, Kumantji Pareroultja.

'the cult of *tjurunga*' which they identified as a major competitor with their own creationist ideas.[32] It was rapidly concluded by the missionaries that older people, especially men, were difficult to persuade in this respect, but that children trained from their early years were more likely to adopt the mission teachings. It is evident from the Mission Station chronicle that senior men sent their children to school and baptism assuming an inclusive view of rite. Children would learn Aranda law, but also the new law of the Christians. They did not anticipate that the views of the mission would be exclusivist. These views created inevitable conflict for children returning home to country from the mission school. One such conflict is related in a mission report which I quote below. It concerns a prominent Christian, Mose, and his traditionalist father, *Tjita* (*Chita* in the mission report), who sought to negotiate this plurality of rite in the course of the 1890s.

> While at school [Mose] felt very mixed, the missionaries telling him about Jesus and God, and his parents and all grownups declaring this as wrong and forcing him to obey tribal rites and customs and live accordingly. They always said, 'Jesus is in heaven you say, but you cannot show him to us. Missionary "*ortjerama*" (tell lie) and everything they say is so confusing and against our sacred *tjurunga*. We are *tjurunga* men old and wise and know everything. Don't listen to what those white men tell you. They tell you not to paint your bodies, but you and we must do what our forefathers told us.' ...
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> They were told that they were as bad as whites to thus abuse the sacred rites of the *tjurunga* [by not participating in ceremony]. ... they were told that in argument they as uniniated [sic] men, could take no part, but would always be classed as women or children. ...
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> ... even during the Rev. Strehlow's time, the enmity of the *tjurunga* bosses towards the christians did not altogether cease, and the christians were more or less persecuted and in fear of the outside abos [sic]. This explains why our Hermannsburg abos did always prefer to stay in the vicinity of the Station where they were under the protection and care of the Mission. The heathens always scolded and hated the christians for disobeying all the sacred cults and ceremonies ... they were always told:

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[32] See below for Paul Albrecht's statement of this view. It is not clear that notions of the dreaming and 'creation' in a Judeo-Christian sense are assimilable. People sometimes say of the land that it was 'always there' and that God then created the ancestors on the land.

'You christians do not mourn properly when sorry because you do not cut yourselves and do other prescribed ceremonies'.[33]

From the vantage point of 1925, the writer went on to observe that 'the cult of *tjurunga*' was now 'broken' and that although 'corroborrees' were still sustained, 'they are not held with such fanatical faith as yore, but only as a custom that is fast dying out'. Notwithstanding the penchant for representations of suffering for the faith on the part of Christian missionaries, this account is significant for the struggle it suggests between these different forms of ritual practice. This impression is strengthened by a more recent comment from Ted Strehlow:

> Ever since Central Australia's first major drought of 1927-29 the Aboriginal population has attributed the ensuing lengthy successions of poor and dry years to the disappearance of the older generations of ritually wise and traditionally educated elders who alone knew fully how to create rain and how to promote the increase of plants and animals. ... During the grim eight-year drought which ended in 1966, many ... Aboriginal agnostics and some Christianized younger leaders privately joined together in the same chorus of abuse: 'The old men always said that the rains would fail to come, that the animals and trees would die, and that men and women would fall ill, if the sacred songs were no longer sung and if the sacred acts were no longer performed. And what they said has come true. We younger folk who know nothing about the old traditions are helpless to save the country; and the white people are just as useless.'[34]

On the last point, however, the missionaries did not concur and believed, rather, that in promoting a loving God who provides for those who believe, they were extracting the Aranda from a blasphemous and also a fearful world. Carl Strehlow, especially in his early years at the mission, regarded the presentation of *churinga* as a sign of ritual capitulation among Aranda people and in conjunction with the collectors of the various scientific expeditions that passed through Aranda territory took huge

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[33] In my discussions of Aranda life I employ the orthography that is currently in use in *Ntaria*. Unfortunately, this is a different orthography from that of both Carl Strehlow and Ted Strehlow. These differences are registered at various points in this article. It nevertheless seems important to use as much as possible the orthography that is familiar to younger Aranda people today.

[34] T. Strehlow, 'Geography', p. 111.

numbers of *churinga* from the area to be deposited in museums both in Europe and Australia.[35] Frederick Albrecht in his correspondence of the early 1930s refers to *churinga* among other 'curios' which he was sending to various people in Melbourne and Adelaide assisting him with technical advice for works at the mission.[36]

It was in this environment of ritual conflict, new structures of power, depletion of the environment, and sickness and death, that missioner Albrecht at the height of the drought in 1928 could preside over the desacralising of *churinga* at *Mananganganga* cave. Albrecht led the Aranda Christian people to a service and picnic at a *churinga* cave in which were lodged the *churinga* for *Ntaria*, a sacred site and waterhole close to the mission settlement. The *churinga* were carried from the cave and displayed publicly not only to men other than their owners, but also to women and children. Albrecht described the event thus:

> When we had been at Hermannsburg for some time, people told me of a sacred cave, about 2 miles away from the station, in the hills. I was told that at no time had a woman seen the place, neither a child. Thinking about it for some time, I spoke about it to some elderly christians suggesting that we as a christian congregation should do away with it, and as a witness should one Sunday afternoon invite the whole community to come and spend with us a time in song and prayer. For the time being they had no reply but then several arrived saying they were prepared to go out there but were afraid of the pagans in the district who could raid their camp at night and kill them. The next step was to contact as many as we could from outside, inviting them to come out with us. From them we gained the impression that there was little resistance. One Sunday afternoon several hundred men, women and children went out to Mananganganga. It was a treat to listen to the speeches of old Moses, August, Abel and others — in praise of God.[37]

The drama of *Mananganganga* is interesting in two different ways today. In the discussion that accompanied a recent West Aranda land claim for a

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35 Philip Jones, 'Namatjira: Traveller between two worlds', in *The Heritage of Namatjira: the Watercolourists of Central Australia*, ed. Jane Hardy, J. V. S. Megaw and M. Ruth Megaw, Heinemann, 1992, pp. 120-1.

36 Correspondence relating to the *Kaporilya* pipeline was once held at the Finke River Mission and is now lodged in the Lutheran Church Archive in Adelaide. This correspondence at the time I viewed it remained uncatalogued.

37 Cited in Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

portion of the Palm Valley area, *Mananganana* cave was identified consistently by a relevant family group as the site of traditional resistance to the mission order on the part of the senior ritual boss of the family. It is true that the sense of danger surrounding the cave has returned and this has been taken to indicate a continuity between that initial resistance and traditional sentiment today. This is so notwithstanding the fact that another major antecedent of the family was among those men who spoke 'in praise of God' at *Mananganana*. The second significance is in conversations outside the land claim context. The story of *Mananganana* is still told today but with a modern variation. Two recent accounts I have heard both relate that the *churinga* were burned in front of the people, assuming that all the *churinga* were boards and none of stone. The stories are told as accounts of a breach with the past in which the picnic fire becomes the equivalent of a bonfire of vanities. The point is lost that the mere public display of *churinga* was desacralisation.

Another account recalls that Albrecht preached that day of *churinga* as 'the golden calf'.[38] And the transition that missioner Albrecht sought for the Aranda has been succinctly described by his son, Paul Albrecht:

> ... Aboriginals believed they continued the creative activity of their totemic ancestors, and that their food supply among other things, was dependent on this continuing activity. The Christian faith on the other hand holds that the God who revealed himself in the Christian Scriptures, created the world and all that exists, and that it is through his past and present creative activity that the needs of his children are met. It will be appreciated that the Aboriginal and Christian beliefs at this point are diametrically opposed to each other and mutually exclusive.
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> The missionaries pointed this out to those who wished to embrace the Christian faith. They had to make a choice. Those who became Christian did give up their traditional belief and practice; of this there is clear evidence.[39]

From the missionaries' point of view, the sacred site called *Kaporilya* embodies the form of this transition. The 1920s drought threw doubt on

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[38] Barbara Henson, *A Straight-out Man: F. W. Albrecht and Central Australian Aborigines*, Melbourne, 1992, p. 54.
[39] Albrecht, 'Hermansburg', p. 14.

the efficacy of increase rites to replenish the species. It also challenged, Lutherans suggest, an ontology in which ancestor heroes discretely and conjointly sustained the land. This was certainly the case for the rainmaking site at *Kaporilya* that appeared under the custodianship of the Aranda to have failed the people comprehensively. *Kaporilya* is a site of extensive underground springs and also of a large rainmaking stone that marks a place where the rainmaking men entered the earth to be embodied in stone. Rubbing of the stone, Aranda believed, released these ancestral heroes to empty 'rain-bags' on the land. Carl Strehlow recorded a *Kaporilja* story telling of the actions of the rainmen:

> ... Long ago many rain-men (*atua kwatja*) used to live at this place, led by the two chiefs, *Tnamina* [hailstone] and *Kantjira* [white cloud]. These rain-men had big bags (*taua*) into which they stowed clouds (*kwatja ankala*), lightning (*urkulta*), hail (*imbotna*), *takula* [white shells], etc. With these bags they climbed up to the sky and emptied them while roaring frightfully [=thunder], causing rain to cascade to the earth. ... From time to time the *atua kwatja* would throw a burning kangaroo tail (*ara-parra*) from on high and cause the earth to burst into flames [lightening struck].[40]

In the late 1920s, however, the rainmen did not arise. When the source of many deaths at Hermannsburg was identified as scurvy, the mission determined to build a pipeline from *Kaporilya* to bring fresh underground water to the mission. The Aranda would be able to cultivate vegetable gardens as a source of the vitamin C lacking in their diets, due to the collapse of a foraging economy. The pipeline took six years to build and engaged a number of the Aranda families. Missioner Albrecht smoothed his negotiations with gifts of *churinga* to southern supporters and technical advisors. The pipeline was opened on Wednesday, October 2, 1935. Subsequently there was a picnic celebration each year to mark the anniversay of '*Kaporilya* Day'.

Today, that picnic is preceded by a church service held in a natural amphitheatre marked out with rings of stones. The amphitheatre, designed in concentric circles, is intended to represent a *churinga* design etched into the very sand between the *Kaporilya* wells.[41] At the centre of this amphitheatre-cum-design is a dais made of sandstone with a white cross

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[40] C. Strehlow, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-1.

[41] Personal communication, Pastor Philip Scherer, Adelaide.

rising from it. This representation of a cross transcending a *churinga* design, and of a Christian power to provide where ostensibly Aranda rite had failed, is the subliminal message of *Kaporilya* Day. It is encapsulated in the lesson for that day always drawn from John's Gospel (4:1-14) and referring to the Samaritan woman at the well. The passage, read every year at *Kaporilya* from the Aranda Bible, says in part, beginning with a question from the woman of Samaria:

> ... How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? for the Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus answered and said unto her, If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water. The woman saith unto him, Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; from whence then hast thou that living water? Art thou greater than our father Jacob, which gave us the well, and drank thereof himself, and his children and his cattle? Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.

The passage not only feminises and moralises the Aranda but declares an interior law superior to the locative law of their 'fathers' and offers a new ontology in the transcending experience of everlasting life. The message is an extraordinary one, for Aranda accounts of the initial encounter between themselves and the missionaries often emphasise the exchange of knowledge concerning water for knowledge of the missionaries' law.[42] They offered the missionaries a knowledge of named waterholes which they themselves had sustained in significant part through the dreaming stories.[43] The sermon that is preached by an Aranda pastor at *Kaporilya* builds on this passage by enjoining those present to keep Christian law especially by sustaining it within their families. This pastor in particular ascribes the current trials of the Aranda, including slow but relentless urbanisation and loss of place, to failures in the practice of Christian law.

Has, then, *Kaporilya* become the site for the triumph of Lutheran transcendentalism over the Aranda's 'locative' sense of the world? *Kaporilya*, like the demise of the *tjilpa*, story knowledge, and *churinga*

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[42] Cf. Austin-Broos, 'Narratives'.
[43] Cf. T. Strehlow,'Geography'.

designs embodies real change in an Aranda ontology. The world of Aranda daily experience cannot be lived as it was before. Yet, the re-embedding of the Aranda in some of their original countries also means that a European world *simpliciter* is not the world of the Aranda. Experience is ambiguous and sustains a distinctive moral order. And, at least in some small part, this is a moral order to which the missionaries have had to respond.

Between *Mananganganga* cave, the sacred site of *Ntaria*, and the *Kaporilya* site, the Lutherans, albeit unintentionally, have sought to communicate their own significance through reinterpreting the meaning of sites. Talking to Aranda of the missionaries' arrival is a discussion which tends to focus on who were the owners of the country where the missionaries came, and just why they came to that country and sites. Different Aranda tell different stories but always interpreting the missionaries' arrival through issues of the nature and politics of place.[44] The senior custodian among the Aranda today whose family looks after *Mananganganga* cave and *Ntaria* has his outstation close to *Kaporilya* and has taken that name as the name of his camp. Many believe that in Arandic ritual terms *Kaporilya* is not his site, though the site is on country now recognised as his. This allows him with equanimity to have hundreds of people, male and female, adults and children, in and about the site on *Kaporilya* Day. He does, however, slaughter bullock for the picnic, which one pastor said is always sold at a nominal price so that the provision of meat to the picnickers cannot be confused with former Aranda ritual distributions, especially of kangaroo. When an Aranda representative of the new government order began to pursue recognition as a traditional custodian, he was opposed by many Aranda loyal to the mission who saw his regime supplanting that order. The site he initially claimed as his own was the *Kaporilya* site, a 'sacred' site for the Aranda, and perhaps for the Lutherans too.

This very event, however, reveals the process of transformation that has occurred in relation to sites. Both *Kaporilya* and *Ntaria* have been diminished as locales for significant dreaming knowledge. Ownership of *Kaporilya* is contested, and the story associated with *Ntaria* is a 'children's' story that, though owned, is common knowledge in Hermannsburg. At the same time, *Ntaria* became the conception site for the vast majority of a senior generation who were born in and around the mission. In itself, this fact undermined conception as a significant arbiter of responsibility for sites that Ted Strehlow proposed it to be in his discussion of Aranda

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44 Austin-Broos, 'Submission'.

religion.[45] European Lutherans born at Hermannsburg commonly claim *Ntaria* as their conception site. Notwithstanding his own strong comments on the deterioration of Aranda knowledge, Ted Strehlow has also prominently claimed the *Ntaria* designs as his own.[46] Like some other European Lutherans, he embraces as real a ritual attachment which the Lutheran order acted to subvert. What has been sustained, both for *Kaporilya* and *Ntaria*, is a sense of place in relation to a specific sociality embodied in a Lutheran story. The Arandic ritual significance of these places has, however, been diminished.

The Aranda view that 'the Christian people' are Lutherans located at Hermannsburg is, then, a transformation of Christian ontology at least partly into an Arandic ontology even as that Arandic ontology has been subverted by the mission order. As the locus of mission activity has fallen back to Alice Springs, some Aranda have watched with dismay as the social-moral order of God's law has been withdrawn for reasons that are still debated. This has encouraged some Aranda families in their transformation of Christian law into a law for kin on country. If they have been permanently discouraged from baptising and confirming their own children they nevertheless teach or give (*kaltjinthama*) God's law on country in their own family groups. For others, however, the rise of a secular government regime makes God's law a law that cannot command country or the organisation of kin relations and these are perhaps the people Ted Strehlow describes as 'agnostic'. Though both types of family would acknowledge God as the one who frames the universe, and both would have their children baptised and their dead commended to God and buried in the cemetery, their experience of the world still does not easily sustain either an interior moral space or a sense of Christian transcendence. The practice of place and kin on country remain the moral order of their world.

Conclusion

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45 *Central Australian Religion*, p. 42.

46 See the frontispiece to Ted Strehlow's *Songs of Central Australia*, Sydney, 1971. The caption states in part, '*Design of the Ground-Painting of Mananganangа*: Painted by Quinton F. Davis from a colour photograph taken by the author of the Mananganangа ground-painting which had been handed over to him during the *Wolatjatara* Festival of 1955 by Ntamintana, the last surviving *kutungula* [manager] of the *Ntarea* totemic clan. The ground-painting thus became the private property of the author, who had been born into the totem of the Twins of *Ntarea*.'

My concluding remarks are a very brief statement of some analytical concerns. Anthropologists in Africa have produced two prominent models for the process that is called 'conversion': Horton's naturalising 'rational' model of an intellectual transition from local to non-local worlds;[47] and the Comaroffs' view of a mission hegemony that normalises a mission-wrought culture in an emerging nation state.[48] Trigger, on the Australian scene, has taken up the hegemony view,[49] while Kolig,[50] Turner[51] and Swain[52] seem to render the process mainly in intellectual terms. Both styles tend to treat European missionisation as an incursion into Aboriginal worlds. The accounts of Tonkinson,[53] Rose[54] and Yengoyan[55] move in another direction to proclaim the intractable resistance of Aborigines to Christian missions. The sites about which these authors write are very different of course, and all different from Hermannsburg. Nevertheless, I derive two observations from these literatures. First, in the Aranda case, it seems impossible to consider ontology abstracted from the world of event, especially in the case of conquest. And second, in a case of conquest this power is such that elements of a world can be obliterated so that an ontology is placed at risk or fragmented in such a way that experience itself becomes hard to interpret. The very being of life becomes ambiguous. 'Difference' between contesting worlds cannot, then, be the sole explanation of why some experiences prevail or do not prevail in a particular case. One needs to

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47 'African Conversion', *Africa*, 41, 1971, pp. 85-108; 'On the Rationality of Conversion', Parts 1 and 2, *Africa*, 45, 1975, pp. 219-35, 372-99.

48 *Op. cit.*

49 David Trigger, *'Whitefella Comin': Aboriginal Responses to Colonialism in Northern Australia*, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

50 'Noah's Ark'; 'Mission not Accomplished: Christianity in the Kimberleys', in *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*, ed. Tony Swain and Deborah Byrd Rose, Bedford Park, Adelaide, 1988, pp. 376-90.

51 David Turner, 'The Incarnation of Nambirrirrma', in *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*, ed. Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose, Bedford Park, Adelaide, 1988, pp. 470-84.

52 *A Place.*

53 *The Jigalong Mob: Victors of the Desert Crusade*, Menlo Park, 1974; 'One Community, Two Laws: Aspects of Conflict and Convergence in a Western Australian Settlement', in B. W. Morse and G. R. Woodman (eds), *Indigenous Law and the State*, Foris Publications, 1988, pp. 395-411.

54 'Christian Identity'; 'Jesus and the Dingo', in *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*, ed. Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose, Bedford Park, Adelaide, 1988, pp. 361-75.

55 *Op. cit.*

consider the local logic of a colonial engagement as it moves to reconstitute worlds.

This logic involves both how a world has changed or become fragmented, and how people hold themselves together as coherent beings in the face of this fragmentation. These issues in the Aranda situation have led me to frame my account in terms of ontology and a form of moral order — Christianity as kin on country — that registers the ambiguities of a world of fragmented experience, a world now constituted through ontologies only partially assimilated. I have hesitated to replace 'culture' with 'ontology' and 'moral order'. Yet, there are some aspects of life at *Ntaria* that make 'culture' and 'discourse' inadequate terms. At *Ntaria* one cannot but remark on how the world has actually changed. Species have died, new ones been introduced, land de-mythologised, heroes lost, and some families forgotten as land was depopulated through the century. Alice Springs, a burgeoning service and tourist centre, now dominates a once mythical landscape. This is change beyond representation. The theoretical message of the 'culture' concept has been a message of representation and of constructionism in the face of a stable environment. 'Culture' in the Marxist sense, as meaningful practice that really can change environment, comes closer to the sense required, though with the constraining burden of productive relations as its analytical core. I have therefore shifted this analysis into the realm of 'experienced world' and the forms of normative value that are generated, often unconsciously, to sustain a sense of sociality and of valued personal being in the world as experienced. This shift of terminology underlines that the moral order of the Aranda today has a definite logic to it even in a world they do not command. (It might also have had a different logic if different events had occurred. Ontologies and fragmented worlds can harbour many moral orders.) Use of the term 'ontology' does capture more convincingly the idea that for the Aranda both their landscape and embodied being have been changed, leaving emotions sometimes awry. The term also underlines the human achievement of the Aranda in their capacity to adapt a sense of moral order to this changing world — even in the midst of ongoing strife that marks the experience of fragmentation.

From these remarks it should be clear that in my view 'conversion' is inadequate as a term for anthropological analysis. 'Changed practice making real new worlds' would be one way to render the term in an anthropological parlance. Conversion would become one case of a shift from one discourse to another. But conversion has about it the ring of a definite change subsequent to the discovery of 'truth'. (This is consistent with the 'discourse' rendering.) At *Ntaria*, however, the 'Christian people'

are still negotiating a world first introduced to them more than one hundred years ago, and one which itself has changed dramatically in that period. The Aranda experience is now distinctive, neither traditional nor European, but rather a creole or hybrid world with fragmented ontologies and a distinctive moral order. 'Conversion' seems too glib a word for this form of human process in which a woman who is Aranda and Christian can describe an image of her totemic being as it appeared just before its finish.

Conversion, Gender Order and the Wellington Valley Mission, 1832-43

Hilary M. Carey *

From 1832 until its formal collapse amid acrimony and failure in 1843, the London-based Church Missionary Society (CMS) conducted a mission at Wellington Valley, a pretty spot formed by the Macquarie River as it descends the western slopes of the Great Divide. The objective of the mission was the conversion and civilisation (there was rarely much distinction made between the two) of natives away from the corrupting centres of white settlement. The mission was thus established at the northern end of the country of the Wiradjuri people, whose land extended between the three rivers: the Wambool (Macquarie), the Kalar (Lachlan) and the Murrumbidgerie (Murrumbidgee).[1]

Although it is of little importance now, Wellington was a key site in the 'opening up' of the interior of New South Wales. Oxley and Sturt passed through there in their expeditions of 1817 and 1828-9 respectively. Wellington was established as a place of punishment for 'special' convicts from the Sydney settlement in 1823 and a Government store was maintained there. Indeed the existence of a substantial house built for the penal commandant was a key factor in the decision to locate the first inland Aboriginal mission there in 1832. We will return to this house later.

Sources

The CMS demanded that its missionaries maintain copious diaries and journals of their experiences as well as publishing an annual report. They wrote to both the Sydney and the London Corresponding Committees of the CMS. The CMS records relating to the Wellington Valley mission are

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1 *Australians. A Historical Atlas*, ed. by J. C. R. Camm and John McQuilton, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon, 1987, p. 44.

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

held by the Birmingham University Library, but are available on microfilm through the Australian Joint Copying Project (AJCP). They run to some 1000 pages in manuscript but will soon be available in an electronic edition.[2] The Wellington missionaries also produced annual reports for the colonial authorities, which have been published, and in later life published a number of language studies and other accounts of the mission.[3] Four men sent reports back to the CMS in London after being posted to Wellington. In chronological order these are:

1. John C. S. Handt:
   Letters, 1830-43
   Journals, 1832-41
   Report, 1835
2. William Watson:
   Letters, 1832-42
   Journals, 1832-37
   Reports, 1832-40
3. James Günther:
   Letters, 1837-42
   Journals, 1837-40
4. William Porter:
   Letters, 1838-41
   Journals, 1838.

Mission journals are highly complex documents, and these are no exceptions. They were written for a judgemental and distant audience which had financial control over mission operations. They had to be interesting and were expected to list successes. A failing mission put a great strain on the many parties with an investment in its success. On 7 Dec., 1833, John Handt wrote: 'No journal of any Missionary labouring in another field can scarcely be more uninteresting than mine'. Letters conveyed more personal details than journals but they were also essentially

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2 The journals are being edited by Hilary Carey and David A. Roberts and are available at URL:http:WWW.newcastle.edu.au/.

3 The public records relating to the closure of the mission are most conveniently available in the Irish University Press Series reprint of *British Parliamentary Papers. Colonies Australia 8*, Shannon, 1944 (*BPP*). These and other papers are also published in *Historical Records of Australia*, Series I, 1914-25 (*HRA*).

public documents. When Watson wished to end the oversight of his work by the CMS he simply ended their correspondence. The journals now held in Birmingham are written in the hand of the missionaries, but they are copies of the original which the missionary kept in his possession. Although there are occasional howlers, the secure English of Handt and Günther's journals would lead us to suspect that they were at least checked by their English-speaking wives. As junior missionaries, Handt and Günther's journals were read and countersigned by William Watson. The journal entries were then re-shaped several times to appear as Annual Reports for the CMS and the Annual Report for the Governor and other publications. The journals must not therefore be read as personal diaries but as highly political representations of the mission. Much is omitted including Watson's very considerable activities as manager of the Government Store or Günther's work to maintain the mission station and its associated animals. The journals present in a heightened form the evangelical values of the mission sponsor, including gender values. The basis of this paper will be the journal entries of Watson and Günther's journals and letters, with occasional references to Handt and Porter.

At least partly because it was known that missionaries could not be trusted to give a fair account of their operations, the Wellington mission was visited by a stream of interested observers, all of whom made their own reports. Samuel Marsden made a surprise visit in November, 1832, accompanied by his son-in-law Thomas Marsden and a member of the Sydney committee of the CMS.[4] James Backhouse and George Washington Walker of the Society of Friends came in September, 1835, and Governor Gipps himself felt sufficiently concerned about the mission to make a personal visit of inspection, accompanied by his wife, in 1841, before taking the final decision to withdraw its funding.[5]

Marriage and mission

4 Watson Journal, 17 Nov., 1832.

5 Gipps to Russell, 5 April, 1841, *HRA*, vol. XXI, p. 308; Stanley to Gipps, 20 Dec., 1842, *HRA*, vol. XXII, p. 436: Stanley regretted that 'the efforts which have hitherto been made for the civilisation of the the Aborigines have been unavailing' and there were 'no reasonable grounds for expecting success from either Protection or the missions'. Gipps' very full report to the Colonial Secretary is printed in *BPP*, pp. 66-70.

Handt, Watson and Günther were all accompanied to Wellington by their wives under the edict in favour of married missionaries proclaimed, among others, by Samuel Marsden for the London Missionary Society (LMS) missions in the South Seas: 'A Young man will have daily to contend in these Islands with a Hot climate, the Vigour of Youth and the Most Alluring temptation. I admit that the Grace of God is sufficient to overcome all these difficulties — yet none should be appointed to or engage in this difficult task, until the cost is counted.'[6] Despite an excellent education and training, Handt was appointed on the condition he marry. Fixing this up after his arrival in Sydney, his marriage was performed by Samuel Marsden himself, described by Watson as 'Father, Friend and Principal Advocate of Missions in this part of the world'.[7] His wife, Mary, an experienced missionary in her own right having taught in Tahiti and Parramatta, was the eldest daughter of W. P. Crook, the LMS missionary to Tahiti. When William Porter, the sole unmarried lay missionary sent to Wellington was discharged following some unspecified sexual impropriety involving native women, it confirmed Marsden's fears about single men in a hot climate. Porter's story is rather pathetic. He made every attempt to persuade the CMS to allow him to marry and to pay the passage of his sweetheart, a Miss Beeston of Derbyshire, to Wellington.[8] This did not happen and he was removed from his position, with some reluctance, by the Bishop of Australia.[9]

Unfortunately I have located only one surviving letter[10] by the Wellington wives which has made it difficult to achieve the kind of analysis provided by Grimshaw, Knapman, Langmore and others for Pacific missions. Of the male missionaries' journals, diaries and letters only that of Günther has been used by scholars to any great extent. Peter Read has written a fine history of the Wiradjuri, there is a competent local history of the town of Wellington and an extensive history of the mission in Barry

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6 LMS Records, AJCP, Mitchell Library, reel no. FM4/401, Letter from Marsden, Parramatta, 30 Jan., 1801. Marsden also established a branch of the CMS in Sydney in 1825.

7 Watson Journal, 5 July, 1832.

8 Porter Letters, 6 April, 1839.

9 Günther Letters: Bishop Broughton to Günther, 26 June, 1842.

10 Günther Letters: Mrs Lydia Günther to Jowett, 27 January, 1839.

Bridges' doctoral thesis.[11] The Wellington Mission has attracted most attention from religious historians with an interest in the strange reluctance of the missionaries to baptise Aboriginal adults.[12]

The Wellington Valley Mission

I wish to focus on what has struck me as one of the more remarkable features of the various journals written at Wellington, namely the way in which they give priority to issues of gender. For William Watson, Johann Handt and James Günther, every stage of the mission, from the voyage out, the arrival in Sydney and enjoyment of the hospitality of other evangelical families, the long trip to the mission-field and first contacts with Aborigines, provided opportunities for the display of key gender values. Encounters with convict and native women as well as the 'respectable' wives of other evangelical families generated judgements about appropriate female behaviour and the most correct form of family life. Overall, conversion of Aboriginal women was imagined in terms of their adoption of the evangelical domestic order which included seclusion within the house with all its domestic duties, acceptance of a male breadwinner and strict moral regulation.

In order to see the remarkable prominence given to gender issues by the Wellington missionaries, it is useful to compare their mission records with those created under a different denominational culture. The CMS was founded in 1799 by Anglican Evangelicals and it was Evangelicals, with more or less adherence to Anglicanism, who staffed their missions including that at Wellington. If, by way of contrast, we look at the journals written by the German Lutherans employed by John Dunmore Lang for his

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11 Peter Read, *A Hundred Years War. The Wiradjuri People and the State*, Sydney, 1988; D. I. McDonald, *They Came to a Valley, Wellington 1817-1967*, Wellington, 1968, pp. 15-24; Barry John Bridges, 'The Church of England and the Aborigines of New South Wales, 1788-1855', Ph.D. thesis, University of New South Wales, 1978.

12 This is the main theme of Jean Woolmington, 'Missionary Attitudes to the Baptism of Australian Aborigines Before 1850', *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 13, 1984-5, pp. 283-93; Jo Woolmington, 'Wellington Valley in 1838. A House Divided Against Itself', *The Push from the Bush*, no. 16, 1983, pp. 24-32. The account of Wellington by John Harris, *One Blood*, Sutherland, N. S. W., 1990, pp. 56-70, is also concerned with this issue.

mission to Moreton Bay,[13] gender issues are notable by their absence. There are few references to the wives and children of the mission or to contacts with native women. When a child was born, it was common for the diary reference to note, for example, that 'Mr Eipper's daughter was baptised and received the name Maria Louisa Harriet'.[14] References to the missionary wives in letters or journals tend to be restricted to mentions of their illnesses. In brief, both missionaries and the Moreton Bay Aborigines remain ungendered people. This is emphatically not the case at Wellington or at some other missions run by English evangelicals. In order to demonstrate this, let us look more closely at the Watson and Günther papers, starting with their accounts of the journey to the mission, the mission itself and the attempt to morally reform the Aborigines who visited the mission.

It might be helpful at this point if I make clear my understanding of the models of conversion maintained by Watson and Günther at Wellington and how gender values impacted on these models. 'Gender', I should also make clear, is used here in the extended sense advocated by Joan Scott as a 'useful tool for historical analysis'.[15] At Wellington, it is possible to distinguish three models of conversion:

1. English Evangelical conversion
2. German (Lutheran, Moravian) Evangelical conversion
3. Imperial conversion.

In the model of **English Evangelical conversion**, favoured by Watson, the Savage Heathen would become the Civilised Christian in a unified process which can be represented by this diagram.

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13 Lang Papers, vol. 20, Mitchell Library, ZA2240. This volume includes eight short journals, most of which cover mission journeys by two or more male missionaries into the interior. The extracts from the General Diary for the period 27 Sept., 1842, to the end of 1843 contain occasional references to the wives.

14 *Ibid.*, Extracts from the Diary of the German Mission from 25 Dec., 1841, to 13 May, 1842, at 3 April, 1842.

15 Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*

Savage	**Civilised**	**Heathen**	**Christian**
Naked	Clothed	Ignorance of Supreme Deity	Acknowledge Christ as Saviour
Dirty (hair, body paint)	Clean	Pagan rites: male initiation	Attend church, hymns, pray
Beasts	'Rational beings'	Women: No part in spiritual life	Witnessing
Women: slaves and prostitutes	Women: modest wives & mothers	'Careless'	Tears/sense of sin[16]
Vile practices: cannibalism, infanticide, polygamy, child marriage	Women: no restraint on child-bearing Men: monogamy	Rule of old men	Personal salvation
Unsettled	Women: keeping house Men: breadwinners	Heathen songs	Read English Bible

The model of **German (i.e. Lutheran and Moravian) Evangelical conversion** differed from this largely in its strategy of implementation. Watson believed conversion could only be achieved by educating children. Influenced by the Moravians, Günther gave primacy to learning the language, translating the Bible and investigating heathen

[16] A frequent theme with Watson: e.g. Letter dated 21 May, 1834, 'We have no conversions to the faith of our Immanuel to record, but I rejoice to say that we have many instances of moral feeling among them when we are speaking of the great things of God. Our children frequently shed tears while receiving religious instruction and more elderly natives have voluntarily acknowledged that they were very wicked.'

culture.[17] This is nevertheless highly significant because English in Australia was the language of imperialism and by conducting the mission work in native language German missionaries at least dissociated to some extent the processes of conversion and conquest.

The third model of conversion I have called **Imperial conversion.** In order to represent the imperial position, I take the account of the Aborigines in *The Aldine Centennial History of New South Wales Illustrated* although it dates from the period after the Wellington mission. Morrison states that at the time of discovery by Cook the condition of the Aborigines 'was as low as beasts of the field'. This is proven

1. by their absence of houses and lack of industry
2. by their nakedness
3. by the slave-like status of the women.[18]

The expenditure of Government money and the attempt by the churches to convert them was largely a waste of time, but 'Christian civilisation' was the major gift made to the Aborigines in exchange for the wealth of their land. Imperial conversion aimed to instil habits of industry, modesty (i.e. clothing) and family life. It differed from the program of the English Evangelicals only in its less severe emphasis on personal conversion, prayer and church-going.

The point I wish to stress here is that all these models of conversion have imbedded in them a radical transformation of gender roles toward a mythical European norm. How did they operate in practice? I would like to break up the journal accounts into four sections focussing on the different locales of mission work:

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17 Günther Journal, 4 Jan., 1839: 'In endeavouring to elicit a number of words out of the native youths, I was led to make various inquiries about their fictitious deities. All I could learn of Baiamai, the principal god is, that he lives in the East, subsists on bread, he had birds feet resembling those of an emu, he has two wives. Natives who live far off towards the East sometimes hear him. He lives for ever. Darrawirgal, another deity, lives in the West, subsists on fish, he sent the small pox by which so many Natives were snatched away a few years ago. A tree in the form of a rainbow is growing out of his thighs.'

18 W. Frederick Morrison, *The Aldine Centennial History of New South Wales*, Sydney, 1888, vol. I, p. 30: 'The women, who are called "gins" in black parlance, and the children have the hardest lot. They do nearly all the work, while the men in lordly fashion take their comfort, smoke their pipes, and literally "take no thought for the morrow".'

1. the journey
2. the mission house
3. the Aboriginal camp
4. the colonial presence: store, court and police house.

The Journey to Wellington Valley

William Watson (1793-1866) and his wife Ann Oliver (d.1873), whom he married in 1819, were totally committed Evangelicals who embraced the full ideal of a mission marriage as a partnership with complementary roles for wife and husband. Watson regarded every day as an invitation to preach the word of God, and every chance meeting or journey as an opportunity to bring souls to Christ, the more degraded the better. On this biblically defensible scale, convicts, Aborigines, women and children were prime candidates for conversion.[19]

In 1832, it took 46 days for the Watsons to complete their journey from Sydney to Wellington and throughout the trip they were approached by many small groups of curious Aborigines who had heard about the purpose of their trip. By the time Lydia and James Günther joined the Watsons in 1837, they could travel by Royal Mail and saw scarcely any blacks. Of the one group who made contact, Günther wrote, 'we never before saw human beings in so bad a condition, more like beasts than rational beings'.[20] The missionaries arrived in Wellington when the frontier was recently established; in less than ten years it had overwhelmed the Aboriginal people of the western plains.

Watson could be a trying travel companion. The hardened bullockies who carted the Watsons' goods along the rough road from the mountains to the mission declined to join the Watsons in family worship, cursing both the missionaries and their prayers. Watson, observing that 'it is well known to my friends that my voice is never very low in devotional exercises', bellowed into the evening air and forced them to hear.[21] In contrast to the

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19 Luke 7: 'There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine men who have no need of repentance'.

20 Günther Letters, 1 Sept., 1837.

21 Watson Journal, 10 Sept., 1832.

Watsons' enthusiastic participation in their chosen work, the Günthers endured their journey to the mission in 1837 with little comfort. Günther felt a constant strain in maintaining his status as an ordained clergyman of the Church of England with a lady wife to sustain. When forced to spend a night in a bark hut, the house of the overseer of Marroga Station, Lydia Günther was far from happy: 'It was certainly not a place adapted for a lady and Mrs G. was the first that spent a night there. I am sure she could not have believed before hand that it was possible for her to spend a night at a place like this but necessity [sic].'[22] The representation of the mission wives by Watson and Günther reveals an important discontinuity between the models of womanly conduct demanded by the emerging domestic ideology of the middle class lady and that of the active evangelical partner spouse.

The Watsons had a harsh and narrow view of conversion, which led to their denial of baptism to any of the Aboriginal people who attended the Wellington mission school.[23] For Watson, conversion was a process which began with an acknowledgment of individual sinfulness, the best evidence of which was provided by copious tears. Women, because of their more emotional natures, were considered to be better candidates for Evangelical conversion. This can be illustrated from an incident during the Watsons' long trip to Wellington in September, 1832. Throughout their journey, Watson was unhappy about the constant exposure of Mrs Watson to the casual profanity of working men. On the trip over the mountains, 'the Ladies', that is the wives of the missionaries, were joined in the dray by two women assigned to service near Bathurst. Watson observed that 'their look and abusive conversation more than overbalanced the advantage which Mrs W and Mrs H derived from not having to walk'.[24]

Nevertheless Watson engaged the two women in a long conversation on the subject of religion, undeterred or even spurred on by discovering that they were 'professedly Roman Catholics'. Remarkably, one of the women turns out to have lived as a child 'in the house and under the pious instructions' of Mrs Fry. Her current fall he attributes to her removal from

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22 Günther Letters, 1 Sept., 1837.

23 See Watson's testimony before the Executive Council, 28 May, 1839: 'We were not anxious to baptize them until they should be sufficiently prepared. I never have baptized any adult' (*BPP*, p. 47).

24 Watson Journal, 23 Aug., 1832.

Mrs Fry's care by her Roman Catholic friends in order that she could be instructed in that faith. Mrs Fry visited her in prison and could have intervened to mitigate her sentence, but decided that it would do her good to leave the country so that 'she might be reclaimed to the paths of virtue'. Her tears of remorse cheered Watson considerably: 'Though much degraded I hope she is not lost to moral feeling for she wept exceedingly while I was speaking on the subject of religion'.[25]

Ann Watson had a large part in providing the basic training which would allow the subject to move on to Bible reading, attendance at school, morning and evening prayers and hymn singing. Their team approach to conversion can be seen in Watson's account of Billy Black. Billy Black was an Aboriginal boy of about nine or ten years old who had the dubious fortune of being taken in by a 'Major and Mrs Pheerson of the 39th'. When the Pheersons left the colony they left young Billy to the Watsons, the newly arrived missionaries who were on their way to Wellington. By this stage he was in a grossly neglected state. Watson relates:

> When he came to us he was exceedingly filthy though well clothed. Mrs Watson cut his hair, made him wash himself well all over and as the best means of getting him clean she burnt his linen. His habits in the room where he slept were of too dirty a kind to allow relation.[26]

He was also very sick, too sick to walk, and was forced to ride on the dray with Mrs Watson and Mrs Handt. Having already been assigned the task of cleaning him up, it was Mrs Watson who read the Bible to him and explained it. When he died on the journey, Watson was very upset. He recorded all the evidence of his turning toward God, which included his recollections of Mrs Watson's Bible classes: 'I could not forbear weeping and sorrowing exceedingly for I loved him as a Brother or as a son and it was with the greatest difficulty that I got through the funeral service over him'.[27] He was their first failure.

The Watsons are often remembered by historians for the accusations made against them by fellow-missionary James Günther of kidnapping Aboriginal children. These charges can be well substantiated from

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25 *Ibid.*, 23 Sept., 1832.
26 *Ibid.*, 3 Oct., 1832.
27 *Loc. cit.*

Watson's journal, but I would suggest that a key factor justifying these actions to Watson himself was the involvement of Mrs Watson in the mission. The Watsons saw their mission as a new family for the converted heathen which supported the transformation of barbaric gender relations, the evils of promiscuity, prostitution, child-marriage and the slave-like status of Aboriginal wives. Because of the recalcitrance of the men, women and children were the primary targets of their mission activities.

The Watsons never wasted an opportunity to acquire more children to add to Billy Black. Watson could be astonishingly crass about this. Approached by a man with a breastplate engraved with his name and the title 'King of Zion' (or Lapstom Hill) with his wife and a child at the breast, he asked them to give him the child. Although on most other occasions Watson noted that Aboriginal women would not approach, let alone speak with, the male missionaries, this was different: 'the woman seemd to feel all the mother Kindling up in her bosom at the question, and clasping the infant to her breast "Bayal Bayal (no no) why me give you Pickininy?"'.[28] When Watson turned his back on the CMS, his theft and/or purchase of children, sometimes with police help, became quite flagrant.[29]

Despite such open transactions Watson was very put-out on discovering that the 'Agents of Satan' had been telling the natives that the missionaries 'would make the Black fellows work very hard and put all the "Pickinnies" in jail'.[30] On other occasions, Mrs Watson tried to encourage Aboriginal women to approach the party with offers of blankets, biscuits and tea. When some men finally consented to bring up their wives to get the food, the women were astonished by the elaborate clothing endured by Mrs Watson and Mrs Günther. Watson noted:

> I can scarcely ever forget the astonishment they manifested at the dress of the Ladies. They pointed at them and laughed and chattered away surprisingly ... Mrs Watson gave her the lining of an old bonnet and she was as proud of it as ever a monarch was of his royal diadem.[31]

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28 *Ibid.*, 29 Sept., 1832.

29 Read, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.

30 Watson Journal, 30 Sept., 1832.

31 *Ibid.*, 2 Oct., 1832. This response to European women is very restrained compared with that received by missionary wives to the Maori. See Frances Porter, '"All That the Heart Does Bear". A Reflection on the Domestic Life of Missionary Wives', in R. Glen (ed.), *Mission and* Moko. *The CMS in New Zealand 1814-1882.*

So much for the journey itself. What of the mission? The mission was conducted about three fixed points: the mission house and school, the nearby Government store and police station, and the Aboriginal camp which was out of sight on the river.

The Mission House[32]

The Watsons were delighted by the house which they found ready for them on their arrival, described by Watson as 'finely situated upon a hill', commanding a beautiful view of the surrounding mountains covered by deep bush. The Handts took one wing and the Watsons another and they set aside the largest room for use as a church. 'I never anticipated having such a house as this in the Bush.'[33] The house provided a place for the ladies to construct a domestic regime which soon incorporated the Aboriginal school children secured by Watson in his travels in the bush. The school was attached to the house and Mrs Watson heard their prayers and hymns morning and evening, nor, writes Watson, would they say them to anyone else or when anyone else was present: 'My heart has often been melted while from another room I have heard them repeat their prayer and hymns as with one voice'.[34] Meanwhile the male missionaries made daily forays down to the camp. Watson travelled in the bush to collect more children and to attempt evangelisation of the nearby tribes.

Male space at the mission included the surrounding bush, the Aboriginal camp some kilometres away on the Bell River and the government store and court house, which was re-established in 1837. This space was clearly delineated from the mission house and school yard where domesticity and a female presence reigned. On their arrival the Watsons were shocked by the extent of venereal disease among the Aborigines and the rampant sexual abuse of Aboriginal women by European men and what they saw as their casual prostitution by their husbands. In order to counteract this, the mission was gradually turned into a secure compound with a high fence

32 See McDonald, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13 for the buildings constructed under the command of Lt Simpson including the Commandant's house, constructed by August, 1825.

33 Watson Journal, 3 Oct., 1832.

34 *Ibid.*, 6 Dec., 1832.

with fierce punishments for any mission girls found trying to escape. As more and more settlers took up land around Wellington, sexual violence, disease and disorder overtook the mission. The Watsons became increasingly fanatical in their determination to secure the moral purity of at least some of the young girls within the mission. They were also keen to supplant the authority of the old men over marriage and replace it with their own. The story of two of the girls who stayed at the mission, Jane and Nancy, can illustrate this growing obsession with moral and gender order which the Watsons came increasingly to equate with Christian conversion.

Jane is probably the girl who had come to the mission in March, 1833, when she was about eight or nine years old. According to Watson, she had been taken by a native to be his 'yeener' after the death of her parents. An Irish man succeeded in taking her and 'keeping her in a very improper manner'. She came to the mission house when this man's master insisted he give her up by which time she was pregnant. One Sunday evening Jane appeared 'agitated by some religious impressions' and told the missionaries that she was distressed about her soul, her sin and her wicked heart. The Watsons and the Günthers descended on her calling her to kneel down with them in prayer. Günther was elated at this evidence of contrition, noting in his journal: 'What a pleasure and matter of gratitude and encouragement it would be to the missionaries if at last one of the Aborigines should be converted may easily be imagined'. Two days later Jane told Mrs Watson that the 'heavy load' which was on her 'was taken away'.[35] She absconded on 22 April, 1838, to be brought back from the camp after a series of searches. By this time Günther considered that it was probably impractical to try and keep marriageable girls. As they approached the age of initiation, he also lost tight control of the young lads who worked at the mission. Watson never agreed to the loss of the marriageable girls back to the camp. His final letter to the CMS had as its main claim that Günther had allowed the Aboriginal girls to become 'corrupted' within months of their staying with him.[36]

In the frontier world of the Wellington mission, the Evangelicals display a dominant concern with sexual sin. However, in the urban environment which gave birth to the Wesleyan revival, the sins of sloth and

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35 Günther Journal, 11-13 Sept., 1837.

36 Watson Letters, 12 Sept., 1842. When Governor Gipps visited the mission, 'Jane' is said to be the wife of Jemmy Buckley (*BPP*, pp. 68-9).

covetousness were viewed with equal disfavour. There seems little doubt that the Aborigines who visited the Wellington mission did not distinguish it from the other European stations which had forced their way upon their country and from which they could sometimes get handouts of food in return for casual labour. The European attitude to food was utterly inexplicable. After the theft of a cheese from the kitchen, Günther recorded the punishment meted out to the suspects. Two girls were shut up, handcuffed and kept without food for the day in order to invite a confession. When more food disappeared Nancy's sentence was extended to three days of solitary confinement. Her refusal to confess was regarded as particularly culpable and Watson 'began to give her a good flogging'. When she cried out for Günther to help he intervened to the extent of holding her fast while Watson continued the beating, 'at the same time speaking kindly and feelingly to her. "Your conduct is too bad, I said that we can not bear with it any longer."'[37]

When Nancy absconded through the playground fence Watson and Günther organised a search of the camp and then resorted to fetching the Military Detachment. Even the mission wives, in a rare excursion, were drawn from the house to go down to the camp to look for her.[38] Both Nancy and Jane were unlucky in that they had little opportunity to escape from the mission house where they could be under constant observation and the standard of behaviour was draconically maintained. Mrs Günther was even successful in insisting that the young men not sing 'heathen songs' around the house.[39] But the resort to military intervention to ensure the control of mission girls contravened the ideal of evangelical marriage required of missionary couples. This model required wives to provide an exemplum for native women to emulate whose excellencies would be self-evident leading to a cluster of native Christian families under the guidance of the European family. At Wellington however the Aboriginal camp never left the river.

The house allowed the wives to be protected from the harsh frontier violence and nakedness outside its windows. But the position of the wives was always problematic. Only the husbands regarded them as part of the mission or acknowledged their special role in ministering to the native

37 Günther Journal, 7 Sept., 1837.
38 *Ibid.*, 22 April, 1838.
39 *Ibid.*, 16 July, 1838.

women and children. Their status as 'ladies' in a rough male environment was constantly challenged, as Lydia Günther found on the road. When Watson protested about the public flogging of prisoners where the scene could be observed by Mrs Watson from the mission house windows, he was given very little sympathy.[40] In 1839 the Police Magistrate at Wellington Valley claimed before the Executive Council that prisoners had never been flogged in front of the mission house and, 'There was not the slightest necessity for any persons seeing the punishments who did not choose to look at them'.[41] As I have argued elsewhere, wives were seen less as 'companions in the wilderness' by colonial authorities than as an impediment to the necessary maintenance of public order.

The house was also a problem for the mission families who had to share it with the Watsons. The Handts only stayed four years before they moved on to another mission appointment at Moreton Bay. Forewarned perhaps, Günther objected to their dilapidated and bug-ridden accommodation in his first letter back to the London CMS Corresponding Committee. His objections were justified by reference to the needs of his wife, claiming: 'It becomes my duty to have thought for my wife who has left a comfortable and respectable home'.[42] Even more pressing was the problem of finding female domestic servants without which no middle class household could be deemed to exist. At Wellington, there was a choice between convict women and Aboriginal women, none of whom were deemed to be satisfactory. Günther repeatedly complained of the interruptions to his own work caused by the need to assist his wife in domestic tasks. In November, 1837, he noted:

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40 For full account see H. Carey, 'Companions in the Wilderness? Missionary Wives in Colonial Australia', *Journal of Religious History*, forthcoming Dec., 1995; cf. McDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 21: A witness to the incident which had caused Mrs Watson such distress was the author of 'Settlers and Convicts', who reported that the flogging took place immediately under the windows of Mr Watson's house. The report continued: 'It was the talk of the whole country side for months afterwards; with this additional particular, that the female part of Mr Watson's family had been thrown into such a state of agonised excitement at the protracted yells that he knew not what to do to compose them; flying in vain from one room to another to avoid the frightful and intolerable offence; and furthermore that it was done to drive that gentleman away from the settlement, he and the police authorities being at variance'.

41 *HRA*, vol. XX, p. 618.

42 Günther Letters, 1 Sept., 1837.

> Mrs G very poorly today and has repeatedly felt so for some time partly owing to the circumstances that she has to tire herself frequently with work, for which she was not accustomed and overexerts herself as she has nobody to assist her. The apparent assistance now and then rendered by some of the black girls frequently only increases the troubles of our Ladies.[43]

From the house, the Ladies made other gestures toward the Aboriginal camp. They sewed blankets into capes and gave them first to the Aboriginal women, 'to make them look a little more decent',[44] and then to the men. Günther noted resentfully that she spent too much time on this 'to the neglect of her own work'.[45] This begs the question, what was Mrs Günther's work — looking after Mr Günther perhaps? However extended their role might have been beyond that of other middle class women of their day, all their activities were essentially developments of their household tasks. Like Mrs Watson, Mrs Günther did some teaching, cut hair and washed the children who came up to the mission school and provided similar services to the young men who worked in the yards. In a crisis, the wives might come to the camp to police some particular problem which was perceived to fall within their orbit, such as the day they spent watching a woman who was expected to give birth to a half-cast child and kill it.[46] Mrs Watson became a skilled nurse, standing in for her husband in the mission clinic when he was away from the house. Occasionally the wives would accompany their husbands on rides into the bush but they were essentially house-bound.

The Aboriginal Camp

The Aboriginal camp was about a kilometre away from the main mission house which was on a hill overlooking the river. Up to a hundred people stayed there at times of major ceremonies or fights but, as Günther lamented, by 1839 so few were left that they could not bury the dead with appropriate ceremony. The missionaries regarded Aboriginal family life as

43 Günther Journal, 2 Nov., 1837.
44 *Ibid.*, 11 Oct., 1837.
45 *Ibid.*, 18 Nov., 1837.
46 *Ibid.*, 26 August, 1837.

inherently immoral and their wives were not encouraged to visit the camp. The mission girls were not allowed to leave the house; the boys had more freedom of movement.[47] Nor did they like the freedom of movement enjoyed by Aboriginal women during foraging expeditions. Fixated as they were about what they perceived as the constant moral danger of native women, they begged them to leave the camp, leave the bush and join the other domesticated females in the mission house. A classic meshing of cultural patterns occurred when an old man called Fred asked to be baptised. When he went into the bush to get himself a wife, this was taken as evidence of his wickedness. Fred compromised with the missionaries by saying, 'I put her to the Playground to the girls and you make her good'.[48] In this case it would seem that Fred perceived that domestic restraint of his wife was the essential prelude for his own baptism.

The disjunction between the missionary and Aboriginal gender order could reach heights of absurdity, as it did during an incident described by Günther. One morning, Günther accompanied his wife and Ann Watson on a ride and met four Aboriginal women, 'strolling about in the bush in search of prey'. Mrs Watson pointed one of the women out to Günther as 'a very wicked character'. With this invitation, the missionaries began berating the woman but received little by way of reply. Placed in this absurd situation the woman 'blushed very much but encouraged evidently to suppress her feeling and impressions by laughing'. That the woman's fault was sexual in nature is clear from Günther's subsequent comment:

> In my reflection on the way home my heart was deeply moved at the wretched and awful condition of these poor Blacks particularly the females. Vile and degraded as they are by themselves, they are rendered still more by being the victims of the filthy lusts of abandoned Europeans.[49]

Ultimately the missionaries did not consider the Aborigines to be worthy of conversion and a key factor in this was their improper gender and sexual relations. They were innately 'vile and degraded' and this was

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[47] *Ibid.*, 9 Nov., 1837: 'Had a little conversation with Jemmy, chiefly reproving him for not attending Family Prayers, and going to camp every night'.
[48] *Ibid.*, 13 August, 1838.
[49] *Ibid.*, 12 Oct., 1837.

demonstrated above all by the immodest behaviour of the women and what they regarded as the disregard of the husbands for their wives. Günther could note with surprise when a man acted with considered kindness toward his dying wife.[50]

The colonial presence: store, court and police house

Relations between the mission and the other civic authorities were just as problematic as those between the missionaries themselves and the mission and Aboriginal camp. I do not have time to develop this theme, but note the flogging incident which Watson considered to be designed to drive him out of the town.

By the middle of 1838, Günther was depressed and discouraged. He had nothing to note in his diary except his continuing language studies and his brooding fight with Watson. Drought, a famine among the natives and a total absence of converts all contributed to a well-earned sense of failure. By early in 1839 the missionaries were no longer on speaking terms and Watson had built a new house near the Government store. By 1842, the Wellington Mission had ceased to exist and Watson could write to the CMS Corresponding Committee from his private mission at Apsley Station that 'Neither Mr nor Mrs Gunther were fit for the missionary work'.[51] At last he had his children under the rigid enclosure he deemed essential for their Christianisation on the terms dictated by his model of conversion.

I have not attempted to consider here the direct impact of the interventions of the missionaries on the Aborigines who made use of the mission. That would be another paper. I suspect that their presence was ultimately irrelevant to the process of colonisation. I wish to suggest that gender analysis provides us with a fuller explanation for the startling tensions which characterise the Wellington mission itself. The frontier environment with its characteristic sexual abuses, which the missionaries had no power to mitigate, provided a direct challenge to Evangelical values, particularly those which related to family life. In their confrontations with individual native women, the missionaries only succeeded in provoking laughter or revealed their lack of moral authority

50 *Ibid.*, 17-18 Sept., 1837.

51 Watson Letters, 12 Sept., 1842.

by resorting to force. Desperate for conversions, the missionaries nevertheless succeeded in driving away all but children who had no other economic choice but to stay. Scorning the family relationships of the people they had come to convert, the missionaries' constant bickering made a mockery of their assumption of the necessary superiority of European domestic life. The effort of the wives to maintain their status as 'ladies' amidst the disorder and misrule of Wellington also took its toll. While the Watsons and the Handts remained close and loyal couples committed to their original ideals, Günther seems to have felt his own Lydia failed in her domestic duties.

Given the scale of the tragedy which unfolded around them, the private tensions of the mission families seem petty and insignificant. But they do allow us to observe the interaction of class and gender with conversion in a unique colonial environment. The mission was conducted in a gendered mine field in which the key issue of the most appropriate relationship between men and women could not be resolved. Here there was an irreconcilable conflict between the traditional culture of the Wiradjuri, the Evangelical partnership of the Watsons and the domestic ideology of the Günthers.

The final fate of the mission I can perhaps summarise by reference to Günther's journal entry for Christmas Day, 1840. He preached before a congregation of only eight people made up of his two white menservants, and six blacks. When Günther attacked one of the latter, Bungary, for his association with 'a certain worthless treacherous Aborigine', Bungary replied, 'We are not like Missionaries, we love one another'. Surely few advocates of Christian conversion have been given such an unanswerable assessment of the moral status of their activities.

Endnote

At the 'Religious Change, Conversion and Culture' conference in 1994, Noel Pearson spoke movingly about the conversion of his own people. His original B.A. Hons thesis, '*Ngamu-Ngaadyarr, Muuri-Bunggaga* and *Midha Mini* [translated as 'Dingoes, Sheep and Mr. Muni'] in *Guugu Yimidhirr* History. Hope Vale Lutheran Mission 1900-1950', will be published along with three others on Aboriginal subjects by the Department of History of the University of Sydney in 1996.