

# Annual Review of Anthropology Making a Difference: The Political Life of Religious Conversion

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# **Keywords**

religious conversion, change, religious difference, political difference, politics of religion

#### **Abstract**

This article reviews the anthropological scholarship that engages with religious conversion as a political phenomenon, broadly defined. It develops the idea of making a difference as an overarching framework with a double meaning. First, this idiom captures how, by framing religious conversion in political terms, anthropologists have claimed to have substantially intervened—have made a difference, so to speak—in the discussion of conversion. Second, the article sets aside the prevalent problematization of conversion as a category of change, showing instead how anthropologists have sought to establish how religious change makes a difference—in the interweaved realities of individuals, collectives, and polities. I scrutinize and contextualize the belated consolidation of this area of inquiry, map its major strands, and identify the interrelated theoretical developments within anthropology. Seeing these strands as a generative domain of inquiry, I conclude with a number of suggestions for future research, such as paying closer attention to political conversions and to the links between religious conversion and political crises.





### INTRODUCTION: DIFFERENCE, FOR A CHANGE

Ostensibly, religious conversion is about making change in one's life. Across the range of disciplinary engagements with the topic of religious conversion (anthropology included), the notion of change has set both the terms and the clusters of questions around which scholarly discussion on the subject has evolved. The nature of change indexed by this concept varies greatly. Conversion is sometimes described in dramatic terms, such as "transformation," "departure," "break," and "ruptures" (Meyer 1998, Thangaraj 2015), and sometimes in more benign terms such as "reorganization" or "passages" (Austin-Broos 2003, Frigerio 2007). It is framed as either a radical turning point—a complete break with the previous self (Beckford 1978); a gradual, partial, and fluid change (Lacar 2001, van Nieuwkerk 2006, Reidhead & Reidhead 2003); an exploratory engagement (e.g., Kraft 2017)—or an ongoing labor and aspiration, a steady quality of religious experience (Coleman 2003). Conversion can be forced, can be an outcome of capitulation, can be sought out voluntarily, or can be situated in a complex structure-agency configuration (Kravel-Tovi 2012, 2019; Smilde 2007; van der Veer 2006). It can be perceived by converts as a nonissue (Meintel 2007), conducted offhandedly, or solemnized by way of formal ritual (Kravel-Tovi 2017, pp. 192-202; Wimberley et al. 1975). The change entailed can be described as a "paradigmatic change" (Jones 1978), "a change in the universe of discourse" (Travisano 1970), a "change of heart" (Heirich 1977), or a "change of identity" (Sachs-Norris 2003), to mention only a few of the terms of choice. These multiple and important varieties notwithstanding, the common point of departure is that conversion occasions a significant change, often with a definite direction and destination.

Ultimately, the interdisciplinary field of conversion studies has been highly engaged with and, at times, haunted by—the attempt to define itself by assessing the quality, pace, and scope of changes that warrant the rubric of conversion (e.g., Meintel 2007, Rambo 1993, Travisano 1970). When anthropologists entered the field, they questioned the coherence and strength of religious conversion as an analytic category (Asad 1993, p. 47; Chua 2012; Comaroff & Comaroff 1991, pp. 249-58; Roberts 2016). Specifically, scholars have critically observed that the notion of a significant personal change provides a thin and simplified umbrella, imposing the existence of a false conceptual unity on what is, undoubtedly, a highly variable phenomenon within and beyond the Western world. After all, in both indigenous and scholarly discourses, religious conversion denotes an extensive array of changes. It denotes not only the adoption of another religion, but also mass spiritual effervescence, religious awakenings, rebirth, boundary crossings between religious affiliations within the same religion, and trajectories of repentance. Equally important, the concept of religious conversion has been criticized for generating a reified, supposedly universal and stable understanding of religion and religious faith (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991, p. 251), while also masking the Western, modern, and Christian ideological biases of these analytic constructions (Asad 1996, pp. 265–66).

I build on these critical understandings in the sense that I do not presume conversion to be a cohesive, consistent, and ahistorical construct and in the fact that I treat religious conversion as a family name, made up of multiple and culturally bound instantiations, ideas, and ideals of personal and collective change. While accepting these important critiques, I do not dwell on them. In particular, setting aside the problematization of conversion as a category of change, I seek to show that, more than enriching and complicating the understanding of this category, anthropologists have pointed at how conversion makes a difference.

This review article is an attempt to move away from the preoccupation with change. In its place, I describe a related yet different anthropological contribution around the notion of making a difference. This contribution is significant, albeit generally implicit and unacknowledged. I examine

what the literature tells us about the reasons why, and the ways in which, the move across religious positionings, loyalties, and formations of religiosity carries a weight that is not just religious.

When read closely, the literature on conversion demonstrates the difference that religious change makes in the lives and realities of individuals, collectives, institutions, and polities. The merits of this literature lie in its ability to explicate how, why, and to whom religious conversion matters—in terms of both the importance vested in the act and in how conversion engenders its own effects. No matter how religious conversion tends to be construed with regard to specific contours of change, the re/calibration of selves and collectives vis-à-vis religious vectors implicates transformations in other social vectors. Thus, despite the explicit interpretive framework of change, the studies on conversion still productively take us elsewhere, illuminating how religious changes of all sorts signify, establish, and negotiate positions in the social world.

Most notably, anthropologists have shown how religious conversion is tied to politics, broadly conceived. They have interrogated how religious conversion makes and remakes a political difference, embedded as it is in a political world that affirms significance in religious difference; they have shown, in various ways, how conversion takes place at both the centers and the margins of political orders and the role it plays in reshuffling the relations between the two; and they have described how conversion functions as a key node in social and subjective processes. The act of conversion itself can metamorphize into new and often contested claims, fissures, and trajectories of belonging.

In tracing the political entanglements of religious conversion, anthropologists have both mirrored and driven a dominant (and renewed) thread within anthropological scholarship on religion and religious subject making. This thread links theological doctrines, spiritual experiences, and the ethical cultivation of pious selves, on the one hand, with political projects and configurations of power on the other (e.g., Bubandt & Van Beek 2012; Lambek 2012; Mahmood 2005; Meyer 2004, p. 467).

The idiom of making a difference captures how, by framing religious conversion in political terms, anthropologists have claimed to have substantially intervened—have made a difference, so to speak—in the discussion of conversion. In addition, this idiom helps me foreground the argument that anthropology's principal intervention in the study of conversion lies in its exploration of the political and politicized differences embedded in religious change. This argument is intentionally expansive, crafted as a heuristic device for thinking through the manifold faces of conversion as a politically implicated religious phenomenon. Across varied sociohistorical contexts, religious conversion emerges from this body of literature as a fraught formation, the source of anything but indifference for a wide array of political actors, including state agencies, compatriots, and transnational actors. The extent and the multiple ways in which myriad actors invest and intervene in conversion can tell us a great deal about the perceived import and impact of religious passages.

The discussion that follows is organized into four main sections. The first section outlines the belated entry of anthropology into the study of religious conversion, describing its premises and promises and arguing that the clear political bent of this entry has advanced the relevant interdisciplinary literature significantly. The second section unpacks the political bent, identifying five interrelated clusters of research. The third section contextualizes the emergence and contours of this political bent by pointing to the sociopolitical realities that catalyzed its appearance and by identifying three areas of inquiry or turns within anthropology, whose coinciding consolidation has helped raise particular questions and sensibilities in the new area of inquiry around religious conversion. The fourth section proposes further strands for thinking in political terms about and through the notion of religious conversion.

# ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION: PREMISES AND PROMISES

The field that is now called the anthropology of religious conversion began to gain currency during the 1990s and 2000s, following scant, indirect, and cursory engagements during the preceding two or three decades. These engagements included theoretically diffuse writings on religious systems, cosmologies, and transformations (Horton 1971, Reina & Schwartz 1974, Tippett 1977, Thompson 1968). While some of these works were ambitious in their arguments and even garnered significant attention, on the whole they did not coalesce into a shared intellectual conversation. It was only in the 1990s that we started to witness a more concerted effort to put religious conversion on the anthropological research agenda, following the publication of new volumes, special issues, monographs, and review essays dedicated to the issue (Buckser & Glazier 2003, Comaroff & Comaroff 1991, Hefner 1993, Meyer 1998, Robbins 2004a, van Der Veer 1996).

A distinct anthropology of religious conversion is surprisingly overdue. It is overdue given that anthropologists have paid salient and persistent attention to religion since the foundation of the discipline in the mid-nineteenth century. It is also overdue because religious conversion is closely tied to how people understand their human condition and to how groups form and transform their social realities—questions at the heart of anthropology.

The belated arrival of anthropology to the study of religious conversion meant that other disciplines, mainly theology, psychology, social psychology, history, and sociology, took the lead in researching the phenomenon. Specifically, the study of proselytization, the spread of world religions, new religious movements, religious experience, and devotion—all integral aspects of conversion—was informed by these disciplinary perspectives (e.g., Balch & Taylor 1977, Greil 1977, Heirich 1977, Lofland & Stark 1965, Long & Hadden 1983, Snow & Machalek 1984, Toch 1965).

The emergence of the anthropology of religious conversion bore a great promise: to shed light on the blind spots of other disciplinary standpoints. Sociocultural anthropology was offered as a viable alternative, or at least a crucial addition, to the existing, somewhat circumscribed, interdisciplinary conversation (Buckser & Glazier 2003, Gooren 2014). The guiding premise was that anthropology could help trace native interpretations and conceptualizations of conversion; think locally and comparatively; tease out the limits of the cultural translatability of various religious changes in different religious traditions; and help in theorizing the relationships between individual lives and experiences on the one hand and historically informed, macrolevel processes, such as legal, political, economic, and cultural transformations, on the other. While these claims were innovative at the time, today we can find these research orientations in other disciplines, such as human geography, literature, and theology, all of which display an interest in religious conversion (e.g., Barua 2015, Stelling 2017, Woods 2012).

Overall, anthropologists have sought to depart from, complicate, and supplement the schematic models of conversion that dominated the literature of the period. Specifically, anthropologists distanced themselves from William James's [2009 (1902)] canonical work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, which emphasized the inner experience of the convert and underlined the epiphanic, solitary, and spiritual quality of conversion. They took distance from the prevailing understanding of conversion, as primarily a moment in which individuals recognize the ontological alterity of the Almighty. Similarly, they veered away from psychological explanations for why people (in the main, adolescents and young adults) were pushed to exploring conversion out of emotional needs such as family pathologies, mental vulnerabilities, and identity crises (Levine 1984, Ullman 1989).

Sociologists and social psychologists, who have sought to go beyond these individual-centered and pathology-oriented perspectives, situated the psychology of conversion within meso-level

models depicting the social and interactive mechanisms of proselytization and conversion (e.g., Lamb & Bryant 1999, Rambo 1993). Anthropologists built on these understandings of conversion as an interactive and socially embedded process. Like their fellow social scientists, they focused on the incorporation of converts into a community of fellow believers and practitioners and on the relationships that newcomers forged with gatekeepers. But while sociological and social psychological accounts attended primarily to conversion in the context of sects and new religious movements in the West (e.g., Lofland & Stark 1965), and were generally informed by rationalist overtones and secularist anxieties about religious indoctrination, anthropologists offered more nuanced explanations of volition, persuasion, and agency.

Equally important, anthropologists further expanded the empirical and analytical lenses of the discourse on conversion, locating the convert within a broader matrix of the conditions and alignments, near and remote, that shape conversion as a process of new self-definition and orientation in the world. Anthropologists identified the role of myriad forces—ideological, linguistic, moral, and material, among others—in mediating the spiritual encounters with supernatural entities and truths and in calibrating new ideas of selfhood (Bailey 2008, Harding 2000, Marshall 2009, McDougall 2009, Roberts 2016, Robbins et al. 2014, Schieffelin 2014, Stromberg 1993). Similarly, they showed how ethical conceptions of personhood and prescriptions of sociability can propel a change in religious convictions or affiliation. Ultimately, anthropologists have situated religious conversion within a rich texture composed of social actions, interactions, and transactions. In so doing, they have rendered the decontextualized concept that religious conversion had been thought of until then into an entangled object of study: an object that intersects pious devotion with contested belonging, divine certainties with political contingencies, religious subjectivity with civil mobilization.

I suggest that a significant strand of this anthropological departure from existing theoretical models solidified through a turn to the politics of religious conversion, in the broadest sense of the word. This turn fashioned critically attuned approaches to overlooked issues of power, culture, and history. Anthropologists have pushed the idea that conversion is imbricated in specific, and possibly highly disruptive, political realities and, in itself, impacts these realities (Pelkmans 2009); they have shown how conversion marks and plays into extant political differences (Özgül 2014); and they have introduced a new theoretical vocabulary for discussing religious conversion in political terms. Concepts such as race, ethnonationalism, citizenship, the politics of belonging, biopolitics, and diaspora have all become central in the anthropology of conversion (Johnson 2007, Kravel-Tovi 2017, Özyürek 2015, Seeman 2010, Viswanathan 1998).

To be sure, what I identify as a political bent is neither a homogenized nor a singular direction. Scholars have debated what it means for a religious conversion to also be political; they differ, for example, in interpreting the motives for conversion, specifically either as pragmatic and utilitarian or as existential, intellectual, and spiritual (Horton 1971)—or, indeed, as any combination of these positions (Kipp 1995, Robbins 2004a). Scholars of conversion differ in the scale of their analysis, which ranges from individuals and families, via the local (communal and intercommunal), to national and transnational political dynamics, debating the interplay between these scaled forces and significations (Ardhianto 2017, Connolly 2009). They have also debated the power structure of conversion and whether conversion is intrinsically a form of conquest or colonialization (Roberts 2012). Debates on all these issues are not close to reaching a consensus. But debates aside, by being attuned to political dimensions of religious conversion, anthropologists have, on the whole, managed to layer their accounts without reducing conversion to merely being an empty or overtly strategic move; they have generally avoided privileging the material over the phenomenological and ethical (Engelke 2007, pp. 140–41; Robbins 2004a) without falling into the trap of rigid, binary thinking on religious sincerity (Seeman 2010); and they have not overlooked

the ontological commitments that conversion entails (Chua 2022). Altogether, this political bent has made a difference in how religious conversion is studied, historicized, and theorized.

# THE POLITICAL TURN: WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES RELIGIOUS CHANGE MAKE?

I identify five interconnected empirical and conceptual spaces in and in relation to which anthropologists have gleaned insights into the political import of religious conversion. Neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, these clusters can nevertheless provide a cartographic description of how religious change can make a political difference.

## Converting Like a State: State Regulation of Religious Conversion

Converts emerge from anthropological scholarship as political subjects, usually citizens or immigrants, whose religious allegiances inevitably position them vis-à-vis the state—its constitutional discourses, governing administration, and underlying ideologies. This scholarly thread helps us to identify how religious change is embedded in political exchanges, effected by state aspiration and affecting the state project in return (Kravel-Tovi 2014, Miyazaki 2000). States have a variety of tools for defining the course, scope, and validity of the religious passages of both individuals and groups. States differ in the state-religion arrangements that form a part of their political regime and in their legal deployment of the notion of religious freedom (Sullivan et al. 2015)—differences that bear on the nature and intensity of their involvement in regulating conversion. But indisputably, the modern state, in all its iterations, plays a key role in shaping religious conversion and fusing it with political implications. Across contexts, religious conversion is tied in political discourses and public spheres with civil rights and injunctions of citizenship. States can use religious conversion to govern populations, enact moral imperatives, and address national anxieties (Keane 2007, Kravel-Tovi 2017).

In many cases, the bureaucratic, taxonomic, and legal logics of the state all give the act of conversion specific form and meaning. In this vein, the motivation for conversion must be formulated into official petitions; statements and narratives of religiosity get translated into administrative rubrics, codified and performed via formalized procedures and regulative mechanisms; and conversion petitions are subjected to governmental jurisdiction and discretion and ultimately endorsed or rejected, illustrating the omnipresence of the state in the lives of its subjects (Özgül 2014, Spyer 1996). And because states seek to see like a state, they often convert like a state, as it were: documenting, classifying, and systematizing the personal religious affinities and trajectories under its synoptic gaze.

The state sometimes reifies changes in religious affiliation by inscribing its sacred formality on them. For example, Keane (2007, p. 215) observes that a national identity card of Indonesian citizens draws on the name assumed in baptism—a name-form that is intelligible and thus recognized as valid and permanent by the state. Anti- or proconversion sentiments turn into legal and bureaucratic measures to endorse and authorize the change at hand—or, alternatively, to criminalize and exclude converts (Özyürek 2009, 2015).

Furthermore, conversion is entwined in different ways with state mechanisms of knowledge/power, the most notable of these being statistics and enumeration. Conversion can augment or disturb demographic visions of the nation-state and is thus spoken of in political discourses in the language of numbers (Kravel-Tovi 2017). As Spyer (1996) demonstrates, in Indonesia an obsession with the number of missionaries and an obsession with numbers of the state merge into statistical spectacles, in the highly politicized and bureaucratized context of religious conversion. And, as Peterson (2002) shows in postwar southern Mali, converts are counted, and their numbers count,

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in both the state governance of citizenship and the actualization of religious scripts such as those of global Christianity—the mission of saving countless souls.

## Inside/Out: Majoritarian National and Cultural Politics

Conversion is studied as a formative dimension in the relationships between the national self, as is often embodied by the state, and the religious Other (Özyürek 2009, Rogozen-Soltar 2020). These relationships are often established along the contours of minority-majority schemes and sensibilities and further destabilize these already fraught dynamics, often around questions of recognition, freedom, and the character of the public space. To the extent that religious difference in the nationstate often implicates a political difference, it is no wonder that conversion to and from minority religions is studied as a process that poses, confronts, and negotiates understandings of political differences. Put differently, it is not a surprise that conversion is construed as a move into or outside the nation and that states are consequently involved in sanctioning or thwarting particular paths to conversion. For instance, several states in India place legal restrictions on mass conversions from Hinduism while promoting mass conversions to Hinduism; the first is construed as "going away" while the latter is deemed as "coming home" (Rajeshwar & Amore 2019). The Egyptian state imposes significant bureaucratic and civic obstacles to conversion from Islam to Christianity but facilitates the conversion of citizens to Islam (Mahmood 2012). Another example of the state's hand in conversion can be seen in Russification, the massive process of acculturation led by the Soviet authorities. Russification has had a long-term effect in post-Soviet Central Asia, with increasing numbers of Muslims finding their way to Christianity (Hoskins 2015).

Religious conversion plays into ethnoreligious and sectarian conflicts between groups with stratified claims of belonging to the national project of the state. It is both a semiotic and practical mechanism to enunciate and galvanize these schemes of conflict. Such is the case, for example, with the vicious civil violence around conversion to Islam or Christianity in the constitutionally secular but majority Hindu India (Gellner 2005, Jenkins 2019, Menon 2003, Perveez 2022, Viswanathan 1998). In this and other cases, conversion either exposes or unsettles majoritarian efforts to homogenize the nation and ingrain the taken-for-granted link between primordial cultural imageries of the collective, marriage arrangements, and religious commitments of individuals and subgroups (Fernandes 2011, Pelkmans 2007). In the religiously defined nation of Sri Lanka, linkages among religious attachment, political-economic sensibilities, and partisan political arrangements have contributed to the historical entrenchment of Buddhist–Christian enmity (Mahadev 2018). More recently, hegemonic groups who have taken upon themselves the right to speak in the name of the Sri Lanka nation are further reproducing Buddhism by employing discourses that frame conversion from Buddhism as an insidious and unethical move, hostile in its essence to the national project (Woods 2018).

In other contexts, these politics of difference set the stage for racial distinctions, most notably between whiteness and blackness—a dynamic clearly evident in the racialization of white converts to Islam in Western settings (Özyürek 2015). This dynamic is intensified when converts adopt a Muslim outlook (Rogozen-Soltar 2020), since the wearing of religious markers in public spaces stakes out a difference and is often interpreted by both state and compatriots as a daring, subversive statement about the entitlement to assert a difference. Racialized conversion is the becoming of a walking difference. These politics of religious difference can also manifest as sexual difference, highlighting the particular burden placed on female converts in producing and reproducing the nation (Kravel-Tovi 2017, Mahmood 2012).

The majoritarian politics of the nation-state sometimes establish religious conversion as a venue to combat difference. As an instrument in the politics of inclusion, conversion can be used Downloaded from www.annualreviews.ord.

as a vehicle of sameness; it helps states to integrate those who fall outside, or not quite within, the categorical order of the national order. Such is the case in Thailand, where state-sponsored programs catered to indigenous groups seek to convert them to Central Thai Buddhism and from this to instill national loyalty in them (Hayami 1999). Such is also the case in Israel, where "non-Jewish Jews"—citizens with a Jewish background but not officially recognized as Jews by Jewish law—are a target of an official proconversion policy intended to sanction their belonging to the majoritarian Jewish public (Kravel-Tovi 2015). Converts, in this case, become a useful resource for the Zionist state and its endless biopolitical efforts to maintain its majoritarian Jewish character (Kravel-Tovi 2014).

Both empirically and theoretically, conversion is linked with immigration (Hsing-Kuang 2006, Rogozen-Soltar 2017). Immigrants may seek to convert to the national religion or to express through conversion a sense of kinship and relatedness with their new compatriots (Egorova 2015). Forced immigrants, such as Afghan refugees in India and Iranian refugees in Turkey, find their way toward conversion (in these cases, from Islam to Christianity) thanks to institutional and contextual factors permitting free encounters between the displaced and proselytizers (Akcapar 2019). The drama of sincerity, a recurring theme in the study of conversion (Keane 1997, Shipley 2009, van der Veer 2006), receives a specific political twist in the immigration context because immigrants-cum-converts sometimes face intensified statist trials of sincerity and are required to perform their allegiances to the national fold and to the polity itself (see also van der Veer 1996). Relatedly, gatekeepers of the state have been found to suspect immigrants of abusing religious conversion, of using it as an instrumental and cynical vehicle toward naturalization and the securing of civil rights—in short, as a ruse (Seeman 2010).

## **Convergences and Conversions of Contested Fault Lines**

Converts do not come from nowhere. Their particular socioeconomic positions and dispositions often shape the paths available to them and determine the social spaces of privilege and belonging allocated to them at the end of the journey to conversion. From their distinct positions, they take, and sometimes carve, specific spiritual passages; as they adopt new religious truths and affiliations, they remorph their relations with families, compatriots, civil society organizations, employers, interest groups, and national cultures and thus engender, reshape, and erase textures of social difference. In terms that resonate with this article's overarching framework, Chua (2022) observes, in a recent article on indigenous villages in Malaysian Borneo, that "Christianity was not just a means for these Bidayuhs to reinforce some pre-existing difference but was itself the generative basis of an extraordinary project of difference making" (p. 714). By implication, the embrace of new gods and religious identities is taken as an active force in the never-ending charting of differences.

Religious conversion often intersects with and effects other conversions in one's life—in social capital, wealth, civil status, modes of sociability, marriage arrangements, morality, political views, kinship ties, and gendered ideologies (Marshall 2009, p. 71; Rouse 2004). Being a convert often entails becoming a new kind of worker, family member, and gendered person. A substantial thread of studies tackles these convergences or interrelated conversions, demonstrating how religious conversion can conflate and activate economic, racial, and gendered fault lines and hierarchies (Doja 2000, Rogozen-Soltar 2019).

Conversion can be a tool of social distinction, as is the case with the Forest Tobelo foragers of northeastern Indonesia, who converted to Christianity in an attempt to maintain their distinctiveness from coastal communities with whom they had had a long history of poor relations (Duncan 2003). Conversion can also be a tool of mobility. For subaltern subjects, conversion offers a means of stacking economic claims and climbing up the social ladder. Lee shows, for instance,

how the dispossessed, lower-caste converts to Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism in colonial India sought, through conversion, access to educational and occupational resources. However, their aspirations encountered resistance from landlords; their marginalization persisted in their new religious communities, who classified them as a subordinate category (Lee 2021, pp. 46–48). In rural and predominantly Catholic communities in southern Mexico, conversion to Protestantism offers economic refuge for the disinherited; it is a costly move, however, with a detrimental impact on social ties and status (Gross 2012).

The gendered politics of conversion intersect with all the contours of power outlined above. Anthropological research shows that women use conversion as a unique platform for exploring and exercising new forms of agency. Research from Latin America, for example, shows that religious conversion can be a strategic decision, making it possible for women to raise their standard of living (Mariz 1992) or claim moral superiority (Griffith 1997). Converting to Islam allows European white women to critically examine the gendered structures and ideals that underpinned their upbringing and to adopt new understandings of desire, complementarity, and femininity (Sultan 1999, McGinty 2006). For women from Côte d'Ivoire, the Islamic revival has strengthened their negotiating hand in the marriage market (LeBlanc 2007). Taiwanese women who convert from Confucianism to Buddhism and Christianity benefit from freeing from the gendered impositions of their families (Chen 2005). Contrary to the experiences of Taiwanese women, South Asian domestic workers in Kuwait develop Islamic piety in relation to their family relationships, which allows them to develop a broader sense of connectivity and belonging (Ahmad 2017). Other scholars argue that while such effective consequences can transform women's experiences in the wider world, these consequences are not necessarily crafted and calculated strategically (Marquardt 2005).

#### Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters

The fourth locus of research is how religious conversion is embroiled within broader colonialist and postcolonialist encounters, between indigenous groups on the one hand and Western missionary forces—disseminating Christianity, modernity, progress, health, hygiene, technology, and later on capitalism and development—on the other (Brightman 2012, Comaroff & Comaroff 1991). Comaroff & Comaroff (1997) argue that the colonial, missionary encounter objectified the order of differences between ruler and ruled—between black and white, pagans and Christians (pp. 25–26). The missionary encounter emerges as a multivalent (rather than simply dyadic) field of relations, translations, and misunderstandings.

Conversion in the context of colonialism had aroused early interest among anthropologists even before the anthropology of religious conversion had consolidated as an area of inquiry. Over the years, the study of conversion in these settings has shifted its emphasis from a seemingly linear process, whereby primitive cosmologies are abandoned in favor of an alluring, civilized world religion, to a conflux of religious, cultural, and economic transmissions unfolding under the rubric of a grand political power. Instead of being an instantiation of structural determinism, research indicates that these encounters are characterized by more convoluted, and sometimes even contradictory, fluctuations between resistance, cultural criticism, submission, emancipation, and mutual constitution (Washburn & Reinhart 2007, p. xiii; Viswanathan 1998). Religious conversion emerges out of a deeply imbalanced yet multidirectional encounter between the colonizer and the colonized. Unequal and asymmetric as the colonial and missionary encounter may be, it also proved to be highly generative, innovative, and creative, bringing together into dialogue and sometimes syncretism different imageries of religion, agency, personhood, morality, and community (van Der Veer 1996).

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The study of conversion in colonial settings includes, by now, interest in the making and remaking of religious and racial grids in the colonial census (e.g., Lee 2021, pp. 42–50) and in the everyday governmental management of relations between indigenous groups and the globalized forces of modern capitalist economy (Cooper & Stoler 1997, Pels 1997). This scholarly strand illuminates the seminal role of Christian missionary forces in exporting and disseminating tenets of modernity and traces the ambivalent appeal of these tenets in African settings (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991, Dirks 1996).

Tensions, ambivalences, and contradictions persist in missionary encounters and religious passages in the context of postcolonial political economies. These encounters take new forms and meanings as they foreground semiotic battles about internal "authenticities" versus external, invasive influences (e.g., Keane 2007) or as they engender anxieties over religiomoral differences. As Mahadev (2018) shows in her study of the economies of conversion in Sri Lanka, the first mass wave of conversion from Buddhism to Christianity coincided with colonial-era missionary sway; a second wave of "return conversions" resulted from desires to decolonize Sri Lanka. In contemporary postcolonial Sri Lanka, hostility to the growth of Christian charitable capital has given rise to anticonversion sentiments (Mahadev 2018). In postcolonial Nigeria, where the failed legacy of colonialism has yielded radical insecurity and a crisis of governmentality impacting on the everyday realities of citizens, born-again revivalism offers supernatural terms of redemption; spirituality, Marshall (2009) shows, provides politically laden redemption from the economic, political, and moral ordeals of postcolonial corruption.

## **Transnational Configurations and Exchanges**

The fifth line of inquiry deals with transnational contours of religious passages and intensifications. These contours often consolidate in an overlap with globalizing postcolonial and neocolonial spiritual economies (Rudnyckyj 2010), in line with global religiopolitical coalitions and in a globalized age in which multiple modernities have taken hold (Hefner 1998). Scholars examine religious conversion as a conduit for, or outcome of, transnational connections and networks of various sorts. These connections transpire within and among ever-expanding world religions (e.g., Meyer 2004), international and local publics (e.g., Schedneck 2021), global faith-based humanitarianism and local populations in need (Kraft 2017), and branches of religiopolitical far-right radicalism (Coleman 2000) as well as between homeland and diasporic groups sharing spiritual citizenship (Castor 2017) or ethnoreligious subjectivities (Johnson 2007).

Religious doctrines and cultural images circulate on media technology, flowing rapidly and widely across space and time; material resources and stakeholders travel across national and political borders, delivering and translating religious redemptions to new publics (O'Neill 2010). It is no wonder, then, that individuals and groups search for their place within a transnational religious order (Leichtman 2015). A transnationally configured conversion can, for example, offer a salvific home abroad, an escapist route to redemption for those disenchanted with their national politics (Riccardi-Swartz 2022). Alternatively, it can subject vulnerable individuals to transnational governmentality, placing them beyond the confines of local precarity (Oosterbaan 2017).

Global Christianity is a paradigmatic case in point for thinking about religious conversion in transnational terms and for interrogating how cultural and economic globalization has amplified basic religious tenets (i.e., proselytization and spreading the Word). The transnational form of Christianity manifests primarily in the massive and exponential gains of evangelical Christianity (an umbrella term for the Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal, and Charismatic branches of Christianity) among indigenous populations in postcolonial Africa (Meyer 2004), Latin America (e.g., Smilde 2007, Stoll 1990), and postsocialist areas (Pelkmans 2009, Wanner 2007), as well as in an

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intertwined duty of care on the part of Global North evangelicals for the faith and fate of new and potential believers in the Global South. Care and conversion play a part in the moral and material exchanges that feed this global arrangement (e.g., O'Neill 2013).

Global Christianity has raised questions about whether religious conversion is a form of cultural replication and imperialism or, alternatively, a set of multidirectional processes of spread and local adaptation, which ultimately diversify the forms of evangelical Christianity (Robbins 2004b). Either way, owing to the sweeping spread of evangelical Christianity, populations that were only tenuously linked with the Global North have become exposed to globalized cultural forms and potentials originating in the West. Such is, for example, the promoted neoliberal call for and promise of health and wealth prosperity that accompanies spiritual promises of deliverance (Coleman 2000). Jean and John Comaroff (2000) famously argue that millennial capitalism, by which they mean "both capitalism at the millennium and capitalism in its messianic, salvific, even magical manifestations" (p. 293), works inextricably with globalized doctrines and moralities of prosperity. As scholars have shown, the surge in evangelical conversions in the Global South is tied to the inclusive yet hierarchized order of global financialization and the proliferation of logics of capital (e.g., Bartel 2021).

# ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION IN CONTEXT AND IN CONVERSATION

Why did these five clusters of research figure so prominently in the literature? Why did they solidify in the 1990s and continue to grow and take shape ever since? I suggest that both external sociopolitical realities and internal developments within anthropology account for this set of trajectories.

The anthropology of religious conversion came of age, and then crystalized in the ways that it did, in response to the historical and contemporary political realities of the final decades of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first century. These dynamics, which have begged for attention, include postsecular realities with the heightened presence of religion in both the private and public spheres, intensified involvement of state apparatus and legal systems in regulating religion, the acute racialization of religious minorities in the context of the War on Terror in the West and elsewhere, significant waves of migration around the globe, the increasing public salience of American evangelicalism as a political force, and the surge in the evangelization of the Global South.

As much as this topic of inquiry was shaped in response to sociohistorical political dynamics, it has also resonated with, and has been informed by, the influence of interrelated theoretical and epistemological trajectories within the discipline. The primary three of these are the historical turn, the rise of an anthropology of the state, and an anthropology of Christianity.

From the outset, historians were instrumental in the emergence of an anthropology of religious conversion. Key publications heralding this development in the 1990s and 2000s—and giving the field its political bent—came about as collaborative endeavors (e.g., conferences, volumes, special issues) of anthropologists and social historians (e.g., Hefner 1993, van der Veer 1996). Additionally, some of the monographs that soon became most associated with this field were historical ethnographies addressing large, long-term, and historical issues related to conversion as a cultural transformation, examining these issues with ethnographic specificity and nuance (e.g., Comaroff & Comaroff 1991, 1997; Engelke 2007; Keane 2007; Robbins 2004a). This historical turn in the study of religious conversion reflects a broader historical turn in anthropology, specifically increased recognition since the 1970s of the intersected workings of history, historicity, power, social structure, culture, and narrative, and the diachronic trajectories and transformations of culture

(among many, Cohn 1980, Stewart 2016, Willford & Tagliacozzo 2009). This turn also meant a greater incorporation of archival work into the anthropological methodological toolbox, which has catalyzed increased archival work on the cultural politics of religious conversion (e.g., Keane 2007, Lee 2021, Peel 1995).

Equally important, the anthropology of religious conversion has benefited greatly from the coeval rise in the anthropology of the state. In itself a belated arrival to the rich interdisciplinary scholarship on the topic, the anthropology of the state has provided conceptual tools for studying the state as an ethnographic object—omnipresent yet mundane, a taken-for-granted yet elusive generator of political imagination, meaning, order, and power (among many, Sharma & Gupta 2006, Steinmetz 1999). Anthropologists have increasingly incorporated or relied on these tools when turning their attention to the daily labor of the state in regulating and fashioning religious conversion, as described above. Likewise, the seminal notion of an inherently blurred line between civil society and the state has found its way to the study of the majoritarian politics of conversion and to the study of hegemonic civil groups who take upon themselves the prerogative to embody the state and speak in the name of its national interests.

Finally, the anthropology of religious conversion has been married, somewhat inescapably, to the anthropology of Christianity. While the rise of the anthropology of religious conversion was informed by the wish to recover—and go beyond—Christian biases in the study of conversion (Buckser & Glazier 2003, Washburn & Reinhart 2007), the emergence in the early twenty-first century of an anthropology of Christianity has left its mark on the study of religious conversion. First, the emergence of an anthropology of Christianity has meant that, alongside comparative interest in religious conversion across world religions (e.g., Hefner 1998), cross-cultural analyses were also pursued within Christianity (e.g., Robbins et al. 2014). Second, and more importantly, this rise led to the persistent influence of Christian (mostly evangelical) scripts on the scholarship on religious conversion. Specifically, while scholars noted critically that the very term conversion reflects emic Christian themes, unparalleled in other contexts of religious change (e.g., Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish: respectively, Schedneck 2021, pp. 103-4; Peumans & Stallaert 2012, p. 111; Kravel-Tovi 2017, pp. 22, 173–76), the traces of these themes are manifest in the anthropological literature on religious conversion. Such traces are evident, for example, in the preoccupation with questions of continuity/discontinuity (Chua 2012, Engelke 2004, Robbins 2007, Schieffelin 2014) or in the salient attention to global dynamics of conversion, in which Christianity plays a key role, as discussed above. As Robbins (2004b) writes, these two issues are interlinked: "[Pentecostal and Charismatic discourse is littered with images of rupture and discontinuity. This emphasis on discontinuity is an important part of how [Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity] globalizes" (p. 127).

Ultimately, the study of conversion has remained intertwined with and prompted by the study of Christianity in new and possibly unintended ways (Bialecki et al. 2008). To the extent that a conversionist, born-again model of personhood is the hallmark of evangelism, it is only natural that studies of evangelical Christianity would provide detailed accounts of conversion and, in so doing, shape significant segments of this area of study (e.g., Harding 2000, Luhrmann 2012).

# THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION, LOOKING FORWARD

The attention to the political entanglements of religious conversion brings me to suggest prospective directions for future research, which will both build on the strands described here and respond further to emerging realities.

Scholars of religious conversion have demonstrated repeatedly that political turmoil—including wars, mass migration, and regime change—leads to religious transformations and

conversions. The twenty-first century is already marked with accelerated and dramatic crises. These include climate change, mounting tides of populism and nationalism, increasing threats to democracies, significant waves of migration including forced migration, the rise of temporary or permanent communities of refugees, and, most recently, a political long COVID—an ongoing period of sociopolitical unsettlements following the global pandemic, which from its very onset had a profound effect on the organization of religious life.

In addition, the formats, speed, and availability of new media can have an accelerated impact on how individuals and groups reposition themselves vis-à-vis religious anchors or identity and sociality. What Oosterbaan (2017) defined as "hypermediated conversions" when referring to conversion dynamics shaped by media may evolve further with the invention of new communicative platforms. Equally important, it seems productive to consider how the post-truth era, relying heavily as it is on new media, hypermediates conversion in its own ways, by governing (or at least manipulating) how religious (post-)truths are established and circulated widely. A deeper understanding of how and why religious conversion takes place in light of all these dynamics can help us trace the repercussions of political crises and the cultural transformations that typify the contemporary era. This understanding can also help us recognize the kind of work that the assertion and communication of belief systems, orientations, and affiliations do for individuals and groups in the early twenty-first century. As Cardoza & Victor (2024) suggest in their unpacking of "religious suasion," these assertions and communications help imagine—and also establish—new publics, counterpublics, and political engagements.

A reliance on the analytic potential of religious conversion can benefit scholarship in a variety of contexts. This reliance—concrete but also metaphorical and intersectional—is already manifested in studies within and beyond anthropology. To give a few examples, some literature on sexual conversion, or queer conversion, treats the entwined embrace of Jesus and the conversion to heterosexuality as a convoluted process facilitated by religious organizations (Ezren 2006, Peumans & Stallaert 2012). Tellingly, the notion of change is key to this undertaking: As Ezren (2006) writes, "The idea of change is the financial, political, religious, and personal basis of the ex-gay movement, and it continues to be the fulcrum on which the debate over the fixity or fluidity of sexual identity turns" (p. 13). Religious humanitarian endeavors are analyzed as conversionary sites, in the sense that their underpinning of moral, spiritual, and economic values is reworked—undergoing a conversion of sorts—and in the sense that they refashion the communities and agents who operate them (Halvorson 2018, pp. 4, 11).

The turn to secular modernity is similarly likened to religious conversion (Asad 1996, pp. 263–66; Scherer 2011). Some scholars have argued that the figure of the canonical (Christian) convert and the kind of narrative attached to it resemble the transformation of individuals within the politics of modern secularism. For Washburn & Reinhart (2007), this equation provides a point of departure for thinking even more broadly about "converting cultures." They write, "The transformation to modernity is a species of conversion akin to, if not precisely identical with, religious conversion. Although the concept of conversion has strong religious connotations, it is useful to help understand the experience of political or ideological change" (p. xiv).

Such invocation of religious conversion in a variety of contexts brings us to a closer scrutiny of political conversions—by which I mean changes, revivals, and intensifications in political belief, belonging, and mobilization. These span naturalization, the move across political ideologies such as the turn to or away from liberalism and human rights, and the embrace of conspiracy theories. Tools from the study of religious conversion can help us go beyond a brief, in passing, invocation of the term conversion (e.g., Junge 2019, p. 922) to better understand, for example, the narratives, models, and temporal schemes used to attract new recruits; the role of the mediators and missionaries of ideological and intentional communities; the drama of political sincerity; and, ultimately,

the multifaceted nature of political conversions. One good example is how Ozyürek (2023) likens entry of Middle Eastern/Muslim-background immigrants into the German Holocaust memory culture to that of conversion into German national identity. Similar to conversion to Christianity, this conversionist model of nationalism opens up space to newcomers but at the same time approaches the idea of full transformation of hearts with suspicion. Another example is Parmigiani's (2021) exploration of the links among spiritualties, conspiracy-believing, and political subjectivity. She shows that, in times of crisis, religious epistemologies can catalyze disjunctive moments and communities of dissensus (i.e., sensing differently) for those who feel unacknowledged by the majority and excluded from the common political structure of affect and feeling (Parmigiani 2021).

With regard to all these instantiations of political conversion, and to all these aspects of conversion, it is worth asking, what difference do these conversions make—in the life of converts, communities of converts, and communities and in the lives of polities and global politics?

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