Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond

Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar
Academic Year 2009-10
University of Oxford

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Mahatma Gandhi improvised what was to become an influential approach to conversion when he teased a group of women missionaries in 1925 with his 'humble intelligence', which refused 'to believe that a man becomes good when he renounces one religion and embraces another'. For an Indian nationalist under the British Raj, there were inescapable political implications to any Christian missionary activity among Hindus. And there was a barely concealed contradiction in Gandhi's subsequent declaration that 'there is no such thing as conversion from one faith to another in the accepted sense of the word. It is a highly personal matter for the individual and his God'. However appealing to the liberal conscience, this personalization of conversion finds little purchase in the ferocious debates in contemporary India concerning the legitimacy of Christian proselytism, where Gandhi's words provide slogans both for Hindu Nationalists and for their Congress opponents. However, the terms of the controversy have changed significantly, as the Churches are now claiming to be the 'minority' force fighting for 'social justice' against the 'injustice' of the caste system upheld by Hinduism.

The Indian case is far from unique. Debates rage across the planet today on the 'Islamisation' of Europe, on 'imperialist' Christian missions in Asia, on the 'intrusion' of Oriental religions in the West. The belief that genuine religious conversion must be both personal and apolitical has become embedded in modern liberal discourse, and tends to spark controversies about the 'manipulation' of converts. Real or imagined, the processes such expressions refer to are being constantly studied, measured and analysed by social scientists, but the passions that fuel the debates over conversion not only resist analysis of this sort but even tend to see it as taking sides. Such debates have significance for the present generation that needs no emphasis. The situation presents the West with a formidable challenge, namely that of living up to its own ideals of religious tolerance once its long-standing – if relative – religious homogeneity has broken down.

By studying the process of conversion in a historical setting, this seminar aims to avoid the bitterness, as well as the immediate political relevance, of current debates so as to better focus on some core questions: why do people convert? Why do they say they convert? Can we as historians detect other motivations than the ones they are directly conscious of or prepared to admit? What is the role of the social body, the cultural context or the political establishment in fostering conversions? Are 'sticks' or 'carrots' common or efficient means to obtain conversions? And why should one want to obtain conversions in the first place?

Background and aims of the seminar

The success of Christianity in becoming the dominant religion of the Roman empire and a significant force beyond its borders marks the beginning of the fascinating period named Late Antiquity, a field of study that has expanded impressively since it was brought to the fore almost forty years ago by Peter Brown. With the establishment of an Islamic regime from

Arabia across the eastern provinces of the empire and the whole of Sasanid Iran, this period is usually understood to give way to the Middle Ages. Arguably there have been few historical events of greater significance to the world we live in than these two massive religious reorientations, each of them involving a complex amalgam of patronage, coercion and acculturation.

Yet despite the enormous importance of these two conversion movements on the one hand and of the thriving condition of Late Antique studies on the other, no systematic comparison has been attempted between the reasons which encouraged conversion to Christianity and to Islam during the period. There is good reason why such a project has not been attempted before. Late Antiquity is a broad church, and our two topics sit at opposite ends chronologically, and on different sides of some solidly grounded academic boundaries. Thus specialists in the rise of Christianity, usually Classicists, tend to look to classical Roman historians for their partners in dialogue, those in the rise of Islam to Orientalists. Our aim is to create an interdisciplinary forum where the questions raised by the two conversion movements can be systematically explored within a deliberately transversal and comparative framework.

We shall be building on much exciting work that has been done on conversion in recent years. An exemplary project was that conducted at Princeton University's Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies in 1999-2001, which brought together experts in late antiquity and in early modern history, exploring conversion both in 'old worlds and new' with a strong comparative commitment. However, the focus was exclusively on conversion to Christianity; and many of the most exciting questions raised in the discussion were lost in the decision to publish two separate volumes, one concentrating on late antiquity and the other including the case studies from the modern world. Here is a good example of how traditional disciplinary boundaries can continue to impede dialogue. Many of the same considerations apply to another fine volume, *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals*, a collection of twenty-eight papers from the 1997 International Medieval Congress in Leeds that celebrated the fourteenth centenary of the Gregorian mission to England. By restricting the focus to conversion to Christianity in different contexts, a greater understanding has been gained of the factors at work in this very complex phenomenon, and some sophisticated theoretical tools have been forged. However, it has also had the disadvantage of remaining within a single rhetorical tradition, in the sense that the accounts given by the converters, the converted and the various onlookers all tend to conform in some way to a couple of ideal-types that go back to early Christian times.

Conversion to Islam, on the other hand, has long been an issue in histories of the rise of Islamic societies, but has much more rarely been studied in depth as a cultural and religious phenomenon, having most often been put in relatively mechanical relation with the wish of non-Muslims in Islamic lands to escape the poll tax, as well as with the role played by Arabicisation and state policies intended to curb the importance of Christianity.

The title of the Leeds volume suggests one important reason why scholars have failed to make the connections that we shall outline. Late Antique Christianity has left a rich store of material from which it is possible both to generate large-scale models ('Christianising Peoples') and to explore individual conversion case-histories ('Converting Individuals'). With early Islam, it is much more difficult to gain access to individual converts. As a result, when 'Islamisation' is discussed, it tends to be treated as social rather than an individual process. A recent conference in Paris on the Islamisation of Central Asia (November 2007) illustrates the point nicely: of twenty-four papers focusing on texts and artefacts, not one had an individual as its focus.

The weight of tradition has also inhibited exploration of any parallels between the two cases. The grand narrative still exercises its spell. Conversion to Christianity seems a natural process, a 'logical' step for any fourth- or fifth-century individual living around the Mediterranean. It is difficult to escape the framework in which the 'triumph of Christianity' reflects a natural 'progression' towards monotheism, towards a more rational form of religion than the childish polytheism that preceded it. Conversion to Islam, however, is not (in the western intellectual tradition) seen as a further step along this road towards monotheism. Instead it is consistently analysed in terms of economic and social incentives, of oppression or lack of choice. This is of course partly due to the fact that in most cases, conversion to Islam happened among Christians or Jews, in other words among monotheists who had no 'logical' reason to convert again. But it also reflects presuppositions prevalent among scholars working within the western tradition. However secular the outlook, the dominant image remains that of Christianity as a religion that has brought humanitarian and democratic values to the world, and of Islam as a violent religion based on *jihād* and the subjection of women.

The connotations of terms such as 'idolatry' and 'paganism' are unashamedly negative in common language today, and thus contribute to the idea that conversion to Christianity was 'obvious' as civilisation advanced, while conversion to Islam was at best unnecessary, at worst a regression.

We cannot pretend that we shall enter this project liberated from the prejudices and presuppositions of our predecessors. Despite the multiple fires it has come under, the 19th-century evolutionary paradigm still dominates historical studies and will likely do so for some time to come, so that assessments in terms of 'progress' and 'regression' are still almost instinctive for most of us. However, it is our conviction that by putting the two religions on the same floor and asking similar questions about comparable aspects of the two types of conversion, within a group including experts from both fields, it will be possible to challenge the above assumptions and to gain greater insight both into the process of conversion in general, which can have far-reaching implications in the analysis of the contemporary situations alluded to above, and into two major historical transformations that have made us who we are today.

Method and format

As already mentioned, previous work on conversion has mostly concentrated on a single religion, with the comparisons being essentially temporal and spatial. In this seminar, the opposite is suggested, namely to keep essentially to the same space and time, but to concentrate on two different religions, something that very surprisingly has never been attempted before.

To avoid falling into the trap of asking yet again the questions that have usually been asked of the two processes, we have chosen a series of themes on which we shall couple papers on Christianity and Islam, thus systematically putting the traditional versions in parallel. To further ensure that we do not simply reassert traditional boundaries between the two fields, we have chosen to broaden our outlook by discussing conversion within an entirely different tradition in roughly the same chronological period: Buddhism in early Medieval East Asia. The relations between the core Late Antique world as it has been constructed by historians, broadly comprising the territories and neighbours of the Roman Empire (essentially Europe, North Africa and the Middle East), and the areas lying beyond it to the East have hardly been

explored by scholars of the field. Yet the two worlds were much less distinct and separated than one is led to think. Recent work on the Silk Road, on the trade networks of Central Asia, on the spread of Manichaeism and on models of state formation has shown not only that they were in constant contact, but also that they shared several common features in cultural terms. Buddhism spread in East Asia during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages in similar contexts of state formation or reorientation, and we intend to use it as a contemporary case-study to test our models and assumptions about our core area. It has the advantage of being sufficiently different, and studied within a different scholarly tradition, to allow a fresh and oblique look on the questions we are asking, even while it is not entirely alien. It had at that time some contact with the Roman and Islamic worlds and shares with the two religions we are studying a number of important characteristics, not least its claim to universality. We intend to use it as a spotlight with which to bring out the central questions in each one of our main themes, rather than create a three-way comparison.

In order not to stray from the aims defined at the outset, we have created a very focussed format designed to constantly bring participants back to the core questions. This involves:

- The choice of three main themes within which we shall explore three different thematic strands or sub-themes. Each theme will be explored in in a separate study day. These will all follow a similar structure:

  - one introductory session on the day's theme by a specialist of Buddhism in East Asia.

  - three sessions concerning the couplet of Christianity/Islam on three different sub-themes. Each session will have two speakers, one treating the Christian and the other the Islamic side of the session's theme. They will be followed by a common respondent who will open the discussion by bringing out the important points of the comparison and relating them to the general theme.

  - one final discussion session introduced by two specialists of the general theme, who will bring together tha various strands in a set of concluding remarks, and will also lead the discussion.