

Exploring Mass Conversion to Christianity Among the Chinese: An Introduction

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The intention of putting together this collection of articles is two-fold: We would like to stimulate renewed attention to the phenomenon of religious conversion, especially conversion among certain sociocultural groups. In addition, we hope it will help to raise interest in studying religious change among the Chinese in North America and Chinese societies.

Religious conversion was once at the center of the sociology of religion. The effervescence of sociological studies of conversion from the 1960s through the 1980s was driven largely by concerns about conversion to cults in North America and Europe. These studies successfully debunked the misperceptions that religious conversion was deviant, caused by deprivation, or resulting from brainwashing. The process model first sketched by Lofland and Stark (1965) emerged as "the most influential guide to research on the sociology of conversion" (Bainbridge 1992:184). Yet within the last decade or so, other than applying this model in explaining particular cases, sociologists of religion seem to have lost interest in further theoretical reflection on conversion.

However, religious conversion has not become less frequent or less significant in today's world. Some historians, anthropologists and sociologists have pointed to the rapid expansion of Christianity in societies beyond the West (Hefner 1993; Jenkins 2002; Martin 1990, 2002). Meanwhile, here and now in North America, many Latinos and Asians have been converting to evangelical Protestantism. Having seen many Christian congregations of Asian and Latino immigrant and ethnic groups in the United States, R. Stephen Warner (2004)

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calls attention to what he calls the “de-Europeanization of American Christianity.”

Conversion amongst certain sociocultural groups may be called mass conversion, by which we mean the phenomenon of religious conversion happening to many individuals in a society within a relatively short period of time. These individuals converted voluntarily rather than being forced to do so by the king or the clan patriarch, as happened sometimes in medieval Europe and other premodern societies. This type of mass conversion seems to be on the rise in modern society.

However, this kind of conversion, whether in the United States or elsewhere, has received little attention from North American sociologists of religion. Therefore, this special issue represents an effort to refocus attention on the phenomenon and thus fill the gap. In this collection, four of the five papers concentrate on Christian conversion among different segments of the Chinese population in the United States, from the most recent foreign students from the People’s Republic of China to second generation Chinese-American college students. We also include an article about conversion to Christianity in urban Taiwan. A recent article (Yang 2005) on conversion in urban China may be read as a supplement to the current collection as well. Given the intensive transnational networks in the accelerating globalization process (Yang 2002a), what happens in Chinese diasporic communities is likely to have significant impact in Chinese societies, and vice versa. Meanwhile, whereas the immediate social, political, and cultural contexts in these societies are different, significant numbers of Chinese people are converting to Christianity rather than retaining or returning to traditional Chinese religions. This phenomenon is intriguing, and challenges scholars to refine existing theories or develop new explanations.

Since Lofland and Stark (1965) most of the sociological studies of religious conversion have focused on what Lofland and Stark called “situational contingencies,” especially the path of conversion through personal bonds in small networks. Meanwhile, what they called “predisposing conditions” have been often neglected, or even repudiated. This problem is due to the individualistic nature of the existing sociological approach to the phenomenon of conversion. Religious conversion is regarded as an individual act that happens to exceptionally few individuals in a society. Certainly, religious conversion in itself is usually an individual change. However, the individualistic approach cannot adequately explain mass conversion, or conversions occurring within certain social and cultural groups on a large scale in a short period of time. The path of individual conversion through personal bonds in small networks is the micro process. But the macro-level social and cultural context and the meso-level organizational factors have to be taken into account as well in order to gain a fuller understanding of such large-scale change (Yang 1998, 2005). This collection of articles tries to advance theoretical development by articulating and linking the micro-, macro- and meso-level factors.

The paper by Brian Hall, focusing on Chinese-American college students, refurbishes the often-neglected predisposing factors in the Lofland and Stark model. He relates religious conversion to the presence of both "openness factors" and "receptivity factors." The former lead to the decline of barriers to joining a religion; the latter are factors that make a religion attractive. Regarding the Chinese, openness to Christianity has increased because of the collapse of traditional culture. Moreover Buddhism has been a weak opponent both because it has not emphasized proselytizing and because currently many Chinese view Buddhism as out of touch with modernity. Christianity has grown more attractive because it is perceived to be modern and because Christian groups mount effective outreach programs that offer many specific forms of help in coping with the problems of daily life. Because Hall studied Chinese Americans, not immigrants, he also found that converts were interested in joining specifically Chinese groups as a way of discovering and affirming what it means to be Chinese.

Yuting Wang and Fenggang Yang also discuss openness and receptivity factors. The "coerced modernization" of China created feelings of alienation that have left the Chinese looking for new meaning systems. Moreover the relatively recent economic policies have been perceived as increasing materialism and selfishness, which have further disillusioned many Chinese.

All of the papers note the importance of the many concrete forms of help given to potential converts by members of Christian congregations. These include picking up arriving students at the airport, inviting them to dinners, helping them pass driving tests, and so on. Wang and Yang suggest that any Christian group, and not just conservative churches, would attract Chinese converts if they developed such helping programs. Andrew Abel argues that what is important is not the help itself, but the symbolic meaning of the way helping behavior occurs in Chinese congregations. In a traditional Chinese setting, one helps a stranger because it is expected that subsequently a gift will be received from the stranger. However, in these Chinese churches, people practice "altruistic helping," that is, the individuals doing the helping do not expect any personal reward. However they do hope the recipient of the help will participate in the congregation. According to Abel, altruistic helping symbolizes a community of love and kindness, which is appealing to people coming from Chinese societies that they perceive as drenched in selfishness.

Hsing-Kuang Chao shows that helping behavior is important in explaining the conversion to Christianity of rural-to-urban migrants in Taiwan. He, also, stresses that the help often takes the form of emotional support. Thus it may be that the social bonds formed in outreach programs are more important for their psychological benefits rather than material assistance. Xuefeng Zhang documents the impressive amount of resources that are being used by Chinese and American Christians to evangelize among the Chinese in the United States. Indeed the rationalization of proselytization must be considered a major factor in explaining conversion to Christianity.

Chao, more than the other authors, emphasizes that receptivity is enhanced if converts perceive some cultural continuity between the old and new religions. Negatively many Chinese avoid Christianity because it is perceived as preventing the performance of traditional duties related to filial piety and ancestor worship. Positively, Hall, as well as Wang and Yang, argue that conversion is made easier due to the overlap between Confucian values and the values of conservative Christians. Chao places great importance on the similarity between charismatic Christianity and traditional Chinese practices, especially the practicing of exorcisms and spiritual healing. Whereas in mainland China, Singapore, and Taiwan, the fast growing Chinese churches tend to be charismatic or Pentecostal congregations, this is apparently not the case in the United States. In order to understand this difference additional research is necessary. In the meantime, questions related to the American experience remain.

Why have most Chinese converts in the United States joined evangelical, nondenominational, and ethnic Chinese churches? Without an existing Chinese church in a community, do Chinese newcomers still convert? Wang and Yang find that the conversion rate in the local Chinese population in a small city without a Chinese church is about the same as that in a large city with three Chinese Protestant organizations. However, the Chinese converts in the small city have joined a variety of denominational churches, even different Christianity-inspired sects. They argue that the Chinese are open to religious groups beyond evangelical and ethnic boundaries, and that the local organizational ecology is a significant factor for the diversity of religious groups which Chinese converts have joined.

Some journalists and Christian scholars (e.g., Aikman 2003; Lambert 1999) have boldly predicted that within the next thirty years, one-third of the people in China could become Christian. This in turn would reshape the world political landscape in "the clash of civilizations" (Huntington 1993, 1998). Bays, a historian, asserts, "Today, on any given Sunday there are almost certainly more Protestants in church in China than in all of Europe" (Bays 2003:488). As a matter of fact, about one third of the Chinese in America have already identified themselves with Christianity (Yang 2002b). The rapid religious changes among the Chinese, including the rapid increase of Christians in diasporic Chinese communities and Chinese societies, call for additional empirical research, theorizing, and understanding.

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