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Chad M Bauman



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Appreciation, Analysis, and Critique: *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* and the Future of Conversion Studies

Chad M. Bauman¹

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Abstract This article provides an introduction to the essays in this issue on the *Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, edited by Lewis Rambo and Charles Farhadian. After briefly discussing the origins of these essays in a session sponsored by the Religious Conversions Group at the 2015 American Academy of Religion annual meeting, as well as some of the broad historical trends and problems in the study of conversion(s), the essay provides a summary of each author's contributions and suggests that one particular topic—healing—deserves more attention in the study of conversion than it has heretofore enjoyed.

Keywords Conversion · Conversion studies · American Academy of Religion · Lewis Rambo · Charles Farhadian · Oxford handbook

The articles in this issue were first presented at the 2015 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in a session organized and sponsored by the [Religious Conversions Group](#), one of the AAR's many program units. The Religious Conversions Group was established at the AAR in 2009 after several of its founding and most active leaders (e.g., Alexander Hwang, Linda Mercadante, and Charles Scalise) had participated together on an AAR panel entitled Religious Conversions in 2008.

My own interest in religious conversion(s) derives from my research on conversion to Christianity in India and Sri Lanka (and *debates* about the same). These debates expose deep disagreements about the motives and appropriateness both of religious conversion itself and of the desire to bring it about in others (through evangelism, etc.) They also highlight the fact that religious conversion is never merely an act of individual will or choice but always takes place within—and *alters*—a specific historical, social, and cultural context. It is for this reason that religious conversions are often fraught, contested, and politically controversial, particularly in

✉ Chad M. Bauman
cbauman@butler.edu

¹ Department of Philosophy, Religion, and Classics, Butler University, 4600 Sunset Ave, Indianapolis, IN 46208, USA

parts of the world where the ideals of family and community harmony and solidarity outweigh ideals of individual freedom.

The work of the Religious Conversions Group has been intentionally interdisciplinary from the very beginning, bringing together and encouraging the work of scholars working from psychological, historical, ethnographic, textual, and theological perspectives. The group has also, by design, invited scholars focused on a variety of religious traditions and has tried to attend to both emic and etic perspectives on the phenomenon of religious conversion. As readers of *Pastoral Psychology* know, studying conversion from the perspective of a single discipline or religious tradition can lead to distortions of various kinds.

For example, examinations that are overly reliant on mentalist perspectives are blind to the interplay of mind and body and to the interaction of an individual's mind-body with other mind-bodies, as well as with the individual's particular social, cultural, and natural environment, as Vasquez (2011) has convincingly argued. Similarly, focusing only on emic perspectives—evangelical Christian testimonials, for example—can be misleading in other ways. Because emic perspectives are informed and shaped by expectations internal to the religion in question about what conversion is and should be, testimonials about conversion often go through a process of homogenization over time, coming more and more to resemble ideal models supplied by the tradition (Snow and Machalek 1983; Taylor 1978). Finally, studies that focus only on one cultural or religious context can distort our understanding of conversion in other ways. Those that study conversion only in North America, for example, may not recognize how politicized and socially disruptive conversion can be and how contested what most North Americans unhesitatingly consider the individual's "right" to convert truly is, particularly in South and Southeast Asia, but also elsewhere.

As implied in the previous paragraph, and as noted by Rambo and Farhadian in their introduction to the Handbook, many studies of conversion in the Western academy tended, until the 1990s, to unconsciously and uncritically take it for granted that conversions everywhere followed the patterns implicit in the testimonials of contemporary evangelical Protestant Christians: sudden, sweeping, spiritual (i.e., not material), irreversible, and complete. But as scholars looked more closely at the phenomenon of conversion and began to carefully distinguish rhetoric from reality, they discovered something far more complicated. One of the most important things they came to recognize was that "conversion" in reality varied significantly from one cultural, religious, and historical context to another. The experience of an American Muslim converting to Christianity is far different, for example, from that of a Chinese Taoist "converting" to Buddhism (if the term "conversion" even makes sense in such a context), a fact recognized and investigated at length in the Handbook itself.

Escaping the straightjacket of this implicit Christian model of conversion as sudden, sweeping, spiritual, irreversible, and complete, scholars began to speak of conversion as a *process* rather than something that happens suddenly, and to reject linear, teleological models of conversion in favor of those that recognize the possibility of pauses, reversals, deconversions, and disaffiliations.¹ Scholars also began to notice the clear signs of syncretism and hybridity in many conversions as well as the multiple forms of *internal* conversion within a single religious tradition or—in the now very common American pattern—from institution-oriented forms of faith to "spiritual but not religious." And scholars also slowly began to highlight the many "material" motivations for conversion—reasons considered illegitimate in

¹ Pioneering publications on this topic came from Rambo (1993) and Rambo and Farhadian (1999). One of the most succinct and persuasive of the more recent publications in this vein is by Gooren (2007).

some religious traditions—while interrogating and calling into question the very differentiation of “material” from “spiritual” in light of the fact that many religious traditions recognize “material” concerns as legitimately “spiritual” and would not in fact recognize their dichotomization. Many of these same religious traditions do not clearly recognize the Cartesian mind-body/spiritual-material distinctions so prevalent in Western Christianity.²

The Religious Conversions Group has tried to promote and host conversations about these matters as a way both of expanding our understanding of religious conversion in multiple contexts and of refining our research methodologies. To that end, it was only natural that the Group should host a session on *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, a simply monumental volume that includes contributions from some of the most sophisticated scholars working on the topic and that in many ways reflects the (increasingly sophisticated) state of the field.

We invited Lewis Rambo and Charles Farhadian, as editors, to talk about the genesis of the volume and to respond to the invited speakers, who were instructed to provide “appreciative critiques.” One of the speakers, Eliza Kent, of Skidmore College, had contributed to the volume but agreed to analyze it more fully from the perspective of her ethnohistorical work on conversion to Christianity in India, as well as through a feminist lens. At the conference, and in her essay for this issue, Kent points out that feminist interest in conversion has paralleled and grown apace with feminist interest in religion more generally, and she implies—in my reading at least—that contemporary feminists’ focus on agency and intersectionality may be particularly useful to the field of conversion studies because of the fact that this focus enables feminists (and encourages all scholars) to avoid, address, and correct many of the conceptual distortions in our understanding of conversion outlined above. Kent also proposes further exploration of the ways that the concept of karma justifies both conversion *and* nonconversion in South and East Asian religions as well as of the role of dreams and visions in conversion processes.

Reid Locklin of the University of Toronto also works on Hindu-Christian encounters, but from a more theological perspective. In his conference presentation and essay in these pages, Locklin wonders out loud whether an “integrated theory” of “conversion” (in the singular) is a “worthy or achievable goal,” as the editors of the *Handbook*, and the structure of the *Handbook* in and of itself, imply. Locklin also calls attention once again, with data from the pages of the *Handbook* itself, to the enduring and still concerning normativity and prevalence of Christianity within scholarly conversations about conversion as well as to the related neglect of traditions like Hinduism. Locklin also notes, however, that some of the tradition-specific chapters in Part II of the *Handbook* do nevertheless open up space and potential for the project of comparative theology (as well—I might add—for the project of *comparative* conversion studies).

Esra Ozyurek of the London School of Economics had to decline our invitation to join the conference discussion but has nevertheless provided her response in these pages. In her contribution, Ozyurek draws our attention to the politics of religious conversion and to the “transformative power” that converts have (often without knowing it) to break “established social, cultural, and political boundaries,” and she does so from the perspective of her work on German converts to Islam and Turkish converts to Christianity.

Finally, Anne Spencer, a sociologist (and former healthcare worker/researcher) who works at the College of Idaho and currently conducts research on American Buddhism, provides her own unique perspective on the *Handbook*. Her experiences as a mental health counselor dealing with families whose crises often led to personal and familial religious tumult and change prompt her to encourage

² For the argument in *abstract*, see Bauman (2013, pp. 319–321). For an illuminating case study, see Roberts (2013).

and embrace the already described shift in conversion studies from notions of conversion as something sudden, complete, and linear to a process that takes place in stages and often circles back around upon itself. From the perspective of her scholarship on American Buddhism, Spencer raises important questions about what conversion looks in “non-exclusivist” religions” and whether it is even possible to conceive of “conversion” if we reject—as we possibly should—the notion that religions are discrete, bounded things, the borders of which are clearly and obviously, at identifiable moments, crossed over.

What follows, then, is a continuation and expansion of the conversation that started at the AAR, hopefully just one of many conversations that this rich collection surely deserves. If I could add one agenda item to these future conversations, it would be the issue of spiritual healing. As most readers surely know, one of the most dynamic, fast-growing, and conversion-inducing religious traditions today is Pentecostalism, and one of the most important reasons for the growth of contemporary Pentecostalism is its engagement in practices of physical and spiritual healing. In India, such healings are very often (probably *most* often) the primary reason that non-Christians first begin affiliating with Christianity. The “recuperative conversions,” as I have previously called them (Bauman 2015, pp. 94–130), are interesting, *inter alia*, because they trouble the usual material-spiritual motivations debate. If one converts because one has been physically healed, or healed of addiction, and is thereby able to work more productively and earn a better living, was that conversion a “material” or “spiritual” one? Moreover, recuperative conversions are interesting because they often don’t stick; the religious search for healing is notoriously itinerant. (Such itinerancy is itself worth studying within the field of conversion studies.) For these reasons, as well as because of the growing prominence of healing in scholarship on religion (e.g., in the sophisticated work of Csordas [2011, 2013] and Robbins [1998]), more attention needs to be given to this topic than was given in the *Handbook*. That said, it is worth acknowledging that no single handbook could possibly cover an entire field, even one in its relative infancy. And so, with Anne Spencer, who in these pages calls for volume two of the *Handbook*, I look forward to the future conversation.

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