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► **To cite this version:**

Nadia Marzouki. Conversion as Statelessness: A Study of Contemporary Algerian Conversions to Evangelical Christianity. *Middle East Law and Governance*, 2012, 4 (1), pp.69 - 105. 10.1163/187633712X626053 . hal-03461371

HAL Id: hal-03461371

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-03461371>

Submitted on 1 Dec 2021

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Conversion as Statelessness: A Study of Contemporary Algerian Conversions to Evangelical Christianity

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Abstract

This article analyzes current practices of conversion to Evangelical Christianity from the perspective of a contentious relation between state and society in Algeria. Based on a pragmatist approach to religion as a contextual and practical accomplishment, this study shows how Evangelical Christianity has provided converts with a new understanding of freedom that is based on the cultivation of a pure faith. It examines how this renewed piety contributes to the formation of an alternative ideal of the Algerian nation, one that contradicts the Arabo-Islamist FLN imposed narrative. Drawing upon observations gathered during several research trips in Kabylia, Algiers and Oran, this paper does not seek to develop a general theory of Muslim conversions in the Muslim world. Rather, it presents the ways in which conversion is practiced and explained by Algerian converts within the specific political and cultural context in which they live. It shows how converts' discourse and practice connect global Evangelical themes to claims and contentions that emerge specifically from Algerian political and religious history. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discussions of the complex ways in which global Pentecostalism blends into local cultures.

Keywords

conversion; proselytism; nationalism; religious freedom; piety; public order; statelessness; salvation; religion; millenarism; citizenship

In March 2008, Habiba Kouider, an Algerian convert to Christianity, was arrested on her bus journey from Oran to Tiaret. When she was searched, police found several copies of the Bible in her purse. On May 20, 2008, the attorney of the Tiaret court charged Habiba with “preaching a non-Muslim religion without authorization,” and required a conviction of three years’

imprisonment against her.¹ Since then, images of burnt churches and stories of imprisoned converts and expelled missionaries have become a central element of public debates about religious freedom in North Africa. Most media analysts find such events puzzling,² and contend that in a context of highly restricted religious freedoms, conversion can only be a response to frustration or greed: the hope of receiving a visa to a Western country is, it has been argued, the main motivation for Muslim conversions.³ As simplistic as it is, this explanation echoes a well-established scholarly and political narrative about Islamic conversions in which the sincerity and authenticity of Muslim converts is consistently questioned.

Religious change in North Africa has generally been examined from two points of view—namely, legalist and ethnic—which are both questioned in this article. Scholarly analyses of conversions in a Muslim context have typically approached the issue of religious change from the legalist (and asocio-logical) perspective of Islamic jurisprudence.⁴ These studies focus more on what Islamic norms, defined independently from the social and historical context in which they are shaped, theoretically authorize or prohibit than on the actual practices and motivations of converts. This approach has contributed to confining the study of Muslim conversions to normative debates about apostasy, which assume that the clash between Islam and Christianity is the only relevant paradigm in which to elucidate practices of conversions.

Second, in a specifically Algerian context, Berber exceptionalism is a central factor referenced by scholars and media analysts in order to explain any form of religious, political, or cultural change. From this point of view, Christian

¹ On May 27, 2008, the criminal court of Tيارت decided to report the sentence.

² US Department of State, *Report on International Religious Freedom*, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/index.htm>, (chapter on “Algeria”)

³ As simplistic as it is, this explanation echoes a well-established scholarly and political narrative about Islamic conversions in which the sincerity and authenticity of Muslim converts are consistently questioned.

With regards to missionaries’ tendency to question the sincerity of Muslim converts’ motives, see Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); and Karima Dirèche-Slimani, *Chrétiens de Kabylie: Une action missionnaire dans l’Algérie coloniale* (Paris: Bouchene, 2004). A large part of the scholarship on Islamism in North Africa draws upon a similar suspicion regarding the authenticity of Islamist actors. It suggests that the issues of sincerity and authenticity are not specific to the study of North African Christians, but concern the study of religious change in North Africa more broadly.

⁴ Abdullah Saeed, *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004); and M.E. Subhani, *Apostasy in Islam* (New Delhi: Global Media Publications, 2005).

conversions in Algeria are merely a manifestation of the Kabylisians' attempts to be recognized as a distinct cultural and political minority. Although today's convert communities do indeed include more Kabylisians than Arabs, explaining conversions to Christianity as a mere expression of Berber differentialism is highly problematic for two reasons. First, it gives credit to the "Berber myth," developed by the French government during the colonial era in order to support its policy of divide and rule.⁵ Because of its close ties to the colonial project of alienating Berbers from Arabs, any explanation resorting to the notion of a supposedly Berber particularism is extremely suspicious. Moreover, this argument completely ignores the long history of activism by Protestant missions in Kabylia. Rather than an expression of a supposedly innate affinity between Berbers and Western Christian culture, the success of Evangelical Christianity among Kabyles is more adequately explained as a consequence of the sustained work of numerous Protestant missions in that area of Algeria.⁶

Rejecting a strict legalist or Berberist narrative, this article instead demonstrates that current practices of conversion to Evangelical Christianity are more productively understood from the perspective of a contentious relation between state and society in Algeria. Instead of speculating about the sincerity (or lack thereof) of converts' motivations, this article is interested in showing how Evangelical Christianity has provided converts with a new understanding of freedom that is based on the cultivation of a pure faith. It examines how this renewed piety contributes to the formation of an alternative ideal of the

⁵ This expression refers to a central assumption of French colonial policy in North Africa, according to which the various Berber groups were racially superior to the Arabs, and closer to the Euro-Christian civilization. This myth played a major role in the policy of divide-and-rule that the French government implemented. For example, in May 1930, the French protectorate issued the infamous Berber Dahir (Decree) in order to establish a separate regime of justice for the Berbers. Arab and Berber Moroccans violently resisted this policy, in which they saw an attempt to divide the Moroccan population and strengthen French power. See Dahbia Abrous, *La société des missionnaires d'Afrique à l'épreuve du mythe berbère: Kabylie, Aurès, Mzab* (Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2007); Alain Mahé, *Histoire de la Grande Kabylie, XIXe - XXe siècles. Anthropologie historique du lien social dans les communautés villageoises* (Paris: Editions Bouchène, 2001); Charles-Robert Ageron, "Le 'mythe kabyle' et la politique kabyle," in *Les Algériens musulmans et la France*, vol. 1 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), 267-92; and Charles-Robert Ageron, "La politique kabyle de 1898 à 1918," in *Les Algériens musulmans et la France*, vol. 2 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), 873-90.

⁶ As for the reason why Protestant missions often chose to first settle in Kabylia, examination of the NAM and the Methodist Mission archives suggests that the first Protestant missionaries were attracted to the area by trivial motives, such as Kabylia's weather and environment (rather than by the so-called preposition of Kabylisians souls to Christianity).

Algerian nation, one that contradicts the Arabo-Islamist FLN imposed narrative.

Based on a pragmatist approach to religion as a contextual and practical accomplishment,⁷ this article assumes that there is no predetermined distinction between appropriate and inappropriate meanings or goals for religious action. The following discussion instead seeks to acknowledge and emphasize the blurred distinction between religion and politics that characterizes the experience of Algerian Christians. Rather than trying to arbitrarily define phenomena as religious or political, this article attempts to work from within the ambiguous religio-political space that characterizes Algerian Evangelical expressions. Converts do not relate their religious practice to a broader political state-oriented enterprise, similar to the one that informed the Islamists' project in the 1990s. However, the conception of "religion" that they propound—as salvation rather than as obligation—and their vehement critique of state interference with religious practice entails a *de facto* attempt at separation from state control. As such, Algerian conversions can be explained as a practice oriented toward the detachment from state rule, as an art of statelessness. Importantly, the notion of statelessness within the present discussion should not be interpreted as a functionalist and reductive reading of converts' practice. It is not argued that Algerians convert *in order to* challenge state rule, but rather that in the context of the state's attempt to monopolize religious expression and nationalist meanings, converts' practice inevitably entails a redefinition of their relation to the state and to the nationalist narrative.

This article is based on observations gathered during several research trips in Kabylia, Algiers and Oran. Instead of developing a general theory of Muslim conversions in the Muslim world, it presents the ways in which conversion is practiced and explained by Algerian converts within the specific political and cultural context in which they live. As will be shown, a number of the arguments articulated by Algerian converts—most notably regarding their approach to religion—are common themes of Christian Evangelical discourse worldwide. The intent of this paper is not to make a case for the uniqueness of Algerian Christianity, but rather to show how converts' discourse and practice connect these global Evangelical themes to claims and contentions that emerge specifically from Algerian political and religious history. In doing so, it seeks

⁷ Philippe Gonzalez, "Reclaiming the (Swiss) Nation for God: The Politics of Charismatic Prophecy," *Etnografica* 12, no. 2 (2008): 425-51; and Philippe Gonzalez, "Religion as a Practical Accomplishment" (paper presented at the European University Institute, Florence, Italy, February 15, 2011).

to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discussions of the complex ways in which global Pentecostalism blends into local cultures.⁸

To achieve the above-noted ends of this paper, I first provide evidence that challenges the assumption according to which the success of Christianity in Algeria is a recent phenomenon, caused by external pressure and foreign missionaries' proselytizing activities. I then turn to the analysis of the 2006 law against proselytizing, showing how the law's advocates rationalize it as a defense of public order and state power rather than as an attack against Christianity. Finally, I explain how, through their redefinition of religion, converts come to reject state interference in religious affairs rather than radically dismissing Islam. This religious practice, contrary to other forms of comparable pietism movements such as Salafi groups, is neither purely oriented toward the construction of a moral self nor toward the global "umma" (i.e., beyond the boundaries of the nation). Instead, the practices and narratives of converts are significantly influenced by an attempt to redefine the past and future of the Algerian nation.

An Algerian Protestantism

It is herein argued that contemporary waves of conversions are not primarily caused by external pressure, as many alarmist reports contend, but instead represent the continuation and expansion of the long and overlooked presence of Protestantism in Algeria. Mustapha Krim became the first Algerian President of the *Association de l'Église Protestante d'Algérie* in 2007, an association that had been led only by non-Algerian pastors since its creation in 1972. This event is largely considered to be a major turning point in the history of Christianity in Algeria. It can also be understood not as a break from, but as a consequence of, the long and robust work of Protestant missionaries since the end of the 19th century. The general bewilderment of the Western public regarding Christian conversions in Algeria is surprising when one considers the extensive history of Protestant entrenchment in Algeria and the granting of religious freedom by the Algerian constitution.

⁸ For instance, see Joel Robbins, "The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 117-43; and Simon Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Though they have been comparatively less studied than their Catholic counterparts,⁹ Protestant missions have been active in Algeria since the end of the 19th century. In 1881, the U.K. based “Mission to the Kabyles” —renamed “North Africa Mission” (NAM) in 1883—established its first station in a small village located approximately 20 miles east from Tizi Ouzou, Djemaa Sahridj.¹⁰ In 1908, the U.S. based Episcopal Methodist Church Mission established its first station in Fort National (now Larba Irathen).¹¹ These two missions did not see their role as one of mere witnessing to Christ in Muslim land, nor did they target the European community only. Rather, they firmly intended to work toward the formation of an indigenous Church composed of Arab and Kabyle converts. Insofar as an exhaustive presentation of the history of Protestant missions in the region is beyond the scope of the present discussion, suffice it to point at the significant connection between a large number of Algerian converts today, notably self-proclaimed church pastors, and the Methodist Church. A large majority of converts and church leaders with whom I worked admitted that direct or indirect contact with pastors or members of the Methodist missions had played a major role in their own spiritual journey. Even though these testimonies may not be sufficient to prove a direct influence of a single church on the formation of current convert communities, they clearly show that Protestantism has been part of Algerian religious sociology since well before the last decade. Moreover, an analysis of the relation between French colonial government and Protestant missions until the 1930s reveals the existence of a long tradition of the state monitoring Evangelical proselytizing. Testimonies and field reports of missionaries of the NAM and the Methodist Mission all emphasize the initial distrust of the French colonial government toward Protestant missions,¹² which were seen alternatively as a threat to French Islamic policy in Algeria or as undercover

⁹ Jean-Claude Ceillier, *Histoire des Missionnaires d'Afrique, Pères Blancs: De la fondation par Mgr Lavignerie à la mort du fondateur* (Paris: Karthala, 2008).

¹⁰ For a testimony regarding the North Africa Mission, see Francis Rue Steele, *Not in Vain: The Story of North Africa Mission* (Pasadena: William Carrey Library, 1981).

¹¹ William Heggoy, *Fifty Years of Evangelical Missionary Movement in North Africa, 1881-1931* (PhD diss., Hartford Seminary, 1960), 190.

¹² In 1890, Pastor James Stephens of the North Africa Mission stated in his field report: “There is not in Algeria the facility for open-air work that there is in many mission fields. Of course, in a small cluster of purely native dwellings one might be permitted to speak to the men openly. But wherever one is under the observation of the French authorities the open-air preaching would be disallowed.” Quoted in Steele, *Not in Vain*, 32.

British spies. This distrust suggests that, from the outset, the attempt to constrain the development of Evangelical Christianity has had more to do with state control than with a conflict of civilizations.

Turning to the rights that the Algerian Constitution grants to religious minorities, the law proves to be relatively liberal concerning religious freedom—especially compared to the more restrictive legislation of other Muslim countries.¹³ Despite article 2 of the Constitution, which defines Islam as the state religion, article 29 recognizes the equality of all citizens and bans discrimination based on race and gender. Article 36 establishes freedom of consciousness and opinion as inviolable liberties, and article 43 grants citizens the right to create associations, including religious associations. Conversion and apostasy are not considered a criminal offense.

No assured data exists that documents the exact number of Evangelical Christians currently living in Algeria. Although the number of Catholics is estimated to be 12,000 (including a majority of Catholic students from Sub-Saharan Africa), Christian religious leaders I interviewed suggest that there may be 20,000 to 30,000 Evangelical Christians. The social and demographic background of these converts is extremely diverse. All generations are present at Church services, and most converts explain how they eventually managed to persuade at least one family member to change religion. As a matter of fact, converts' communities are very much audiences of families rather than of individuals. While a minority of converts are unemployed young men, the majority of Evangelical Algerians belong to the lower and upper middle class. They are teachers, doctors, lawyers, engineers, shopkeepers, and small business owners. In other words, the appeal of Evangelical Christianity to Algerians cannot be explained in the same reductive way that the success of Islamism so often has. Algerian Evangelical Christianity is neither a religion of the marginalized nor of the outcasts. Conversions cannot be explained as "conversions de la misère," as they were described in the early 20th century.¹⁴ Given that, historically and constitutionally, conversions to Protestant Christianity do not appear as an eccentric or sacrilegious phenomenon, and no clear social profile seems to define the majority of converts, how, then, can one make sense of this practice and of the controversy that it has caused?

¹³) US Department of State, *Report on International Religious Freedom*.

¹⁴) Dirèche-Slimani, *Chrétiens de Kabylie*, 27.

The 2006 Ordinance, State legibility¹⁵ and public order

Making Evangelical Christianity legible

On February 28, 2006, the government passed Ordinance 06-03, which specifies the exact conditions in which non-Muslim religions can be legally practiced. Importantly, the Ordinance is not rationalized as a theological defense of Islam against Christianity; rather, it asserts the mundane necessity for the state to protect weak and credulous groups within the society against the insidious threat of destabilizing forces. Indeed, the ordinance does create an imbalance in the treatment of Christians and Muslims to the extent that it only criminalizes attempts to “unsettle the faith of Muslims.” This one-sided policy, however, stems from a broader effort by the Algerian state to monitor and monopolize religious practice, instead of from a series of truth claims regarding the theological superiority of Islam. Although this difference doesn’t make the protection of Algerian religious minorities less worrying, it does contradict civilizational and essentialist approaches to Muslim conversions.

The preamble of the Ordinance stresses the Algerian state’s tolerance and acceptance of non-Muslim religions. Article 2 re-establishes that the state, whose religion is Islam, guarantees free exercise of religion, tolerance, and respect among religions. Article 3 contends that religious associations other than Muslim associations are granted protection from the state. Article 4 prohibits resorting to the notion of religious belonging to justify any form of discrimination against individuals or groups.

These important protections, however, are contingent on the requirement that religious practice be made clearly recognizable to the state at all times. Articles 5 through 9 stress the obligation for religious practice to take place in buildings that are officially registered as houses of worship. These places are required to be open to the public—a rule that entails the possibility for the religious community to reach out to a broader public, but also allows for the state to access and monitor the Church sermons and activities. The government’s Executive Decree 07-135, issued in May 2007, clarifies article 8 of the Ordinance and conditions the gathering of non-Muslim religious services upon several criteria. A non-Muslim religious group must request permission from the *wali*, or prefect, to organize a religious event at least five days before the scheduled event. The Ordinance calls for the creation of a National

¹⁵⁾ See James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1998.

Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Services (article 9), dependent on the Minister of Religious Affairs and *Awqaf*. The Commission's mandate is to protect religious freedom and give preliminary advice regarding whether or not a religious association should be granted an "agreement" (i.e., the government authorization necessary for its official registration).¹⁶

An ambiguous protection of Islam as metonymy of public order and national unity

Despite the fact that the Ordinance's first articles concern religious practice in general and avoid creating any specific hierarchy among religions, the subsequent provisions addressing the issue of proselytizing introduce a significant imbalance between Muslims and followers of other religions. Articles 10 through 14 define proselytizing as a criminal offense and explain the criminal sentences for persons who do not abide by the law.¹⁷ For example, anyone using provocative discourse, calling to resist public order, or agitating citizens to rebel will receive a sentence of 250,000 dinars and one year of imprisonment. The faith of Muslims is specifically protected by the ordinance: a sentence of 500,000 dinars and two years' imprisonment is set against anyone who tries to seduce another into changing religion and to "unsettle" the faith of a Muslim. Article 14 states that foreign nationals suspected of proselytizing will be expelled. Foreign missionary groups, however, are permitted to conduct humanitarian work as long as they do not proselytize.

Several other aspects of Algerian law present a similar emphasis on the protection of Islam and Muslims. The anti-proselytizing of the 2006 Ordinance echoes an analogous constraint established by article 144 bis 2 of the Penal Code.¹⁸ Many Algerian Christians have been tried under this article,¹⁹ which

¹⁶ The government issued Decree 07-158 in June 2007, clarifying the nature and role of this Commission, which was composed of senior representatives of the Ministries of National Defense, Interior, Foreign Affairs, National Security, as well as the National Police, the National Gendarmerie, and the governmental National Consultative Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (CNCPPDH).

¹⁷ Ordinance 06-03 of February 28, 2006, establishing conditions and rules for the practice of non Muslim religions : http://www.droit.mjustice.dz/lois_ord_06_08.htm

¹⁸ République Algérienne Démocratique et Populaire Ministère de la Justice, *Code Pénal*, 4ème ed (2005), http://www.droit.mjustice.dz/legisl_fr_de_06_au_juil_08/code_penal_avec_mod_06.pdf.

¹⁹ In most cases, however, charges were dropped following the trial. In 2008, 10 men were charged with "denigrating the dogma or precepts of Islam," and were tried in September 2008

provides for a sentence of three to five years' imprisonment and 50 000 to 100 000 Algerian dinars against anyone "insulting the prophet and any of the messengers of God, or denigrating the creed and precepts of Islam, whether by writing, drawing, declaration, or any other means." For example, Rachid Seghir, Youssef Ourahmane and Hamid Ramdani were convicted in absentia in January 2008, and sentenced to three years' imprisonment and a fine of 50 000 dinars.²⁰ The sentence was subsequently reduced to a two-month suspended prison term on appeal in November 2008. This privileged protection of Islam and Muslims is also expressed in several other parts of Algerian law, such as article 26 of the Information Code of 1990, which censors publications that are deemed "contrary to Islamic morals, national values, human rights."²¹ Article 9 of the Constitution states that "Institutions should refrain from engaging in practices that are contrary to the Islamic morality and to the values of the November revolution." Most provisions of the Algerian Family Code concerning marriage, divorce or inheritance also contradict the principle of citizen's equality provided by article 29 of the Constitution.²² According to the 2005 amended Family Code, testament executors should be Muslim,²³ and persons who have left Islam lose their right to inheritance.²⁴

However significant, the imbalance that these various rules introduce in the state's relation to differing religious traditions is based on a profoundly ambiguous rationale. What is at stake is not the defense of a transcendental or theological conception of Islamic truth, but the safeguarding of the authority of

for breaking the fast during the month of Ramadan. For an exhaustive report of Algerian trials, see Amnesty International, *Annual Report for Algeria, 2009*, <http://www.amnestyusa.org/annualreport.php?id=ar&tyr=2009&cc=DZA>. The dropping of charges in most cases clearly illustrates the vitality of the judicial and public debate around conversions and religious freedom in Algeria.

²⁰ Jo-Anne Prud'homme, "Policing Belief: Algeria," in *Policing Belief: The Impact of Blasphemy Laws on Human Rights*, ed. Courtney C. Radsch (Freedom House, 2010), <http://freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=571>, 13-20.

²¹ Article 26 states: "Periodical and specialized publications, national or foreign, of any nature and audience, shall not include illustration, story, information or insert that are contrary to Islamic morals, national values, human rights, nor advocate for racism, fanaticism or treason" (my translation). Chadli Bendjedid, *Code de l'Information*, April 1990, <http://lexalgeria.free.fr/com.htm>.

²² République Algérienne Démocratique et Populaire Ministère de la Justice, *Code de la Famille*, 4ème ed (2005), http://www.droit.mjustice.dz/code_famille.pdf.

²³ Article 93.

²⁴ Article 138.

the state over society. Islam is defended as the metonymy of public order rather than as a sovereign source of truth. What is criminalized by the 2006 Ordinance is not a form of blasphemy or apostasy, but an attempt to disrupt social order and take advantage of credulous individuals. The Ordinance does not use the religious expression “fatana,” but the more prosaic “shaking the faith” (*za’za’at iman ay Muslim*). What is deemed punishable in these articles is a form of speech that may excite part of the population to sedition. Article 144 of the Penal Code shows a similar ambiguity between the protection of Islam and the protection of the nation state. Interestingly, the provision against blasphemy is included in an article whose title does not explicitly refer to Islam: “Insult and violence against civil servants and state institutions.” The hierarchy of the protections provided by the article also proves quite unexpected. Among the persons protected against offense, the article first cites civil servants and judges (article 144), then the President of the Republic (article 144 bis), and only in the third position the Prophet and God’s messengers (article 144 bis 2). Moreover, article 77 of the Information Code partially qualifies the apparent imbalance among religions introduced by the Penal Code by prohibiting not only insults against Islam but also against all the other “heavenly religions.”²⁵

The limitations on religious freedom that these norms define are therefore better understood in the broader context of the state’s effort to contain society’s pluralism than in terms of a transcendental fight over competing truth claims. Even though the Ordinance prevents any informal religious gathering from taking place, this regulation is not fundamentally different from the one governing the state relation to Islamic activities. Article 87 bis 10 of the Penal Code establishes that the government must officially authorize imams to lead prayers, and that religious services can only take place in mosques recognized by the state. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs strictly monitor the study of Islam in public schools, and a number of private schools have been refused official accreditation because their curriculum does not meet the standards defined by the two ministries. Government-appointed religious officials can legally preview sermons of the Friday prayer, and these sermons can be censored when they are seen as potentially destabilizing.

²⁵ Article 77 states: “Whoever offends through writings, sounds, images, drawings, or any other means, direct or indirect, Islam and other heavenly religions, will be punished by 6 months to 3 years of imprisonment and a fine of 10.000 to 50.000 DA or one of these two sentences” (my translation). Bendjedid, *Code de l’Information*.

Imams are often dismissed, and locations where unauthorized Islamic worship takes place are shut down.²⁶

The virulent debate that took place in 2005 around the official recognition of the national anthem is a further illustration of this broad effort to appropriate Islamic and nationalist symbols. As a response to a French law passed on February 23, 2005,²⁷ which stipulated that scholarly curricula should recognize “the positive role of French presence in North Africa,”²⁸ a group of Algerian MPs launched a virulent campaign calling for the protection of the national anthem, *Qassamem*, by the Algerian Constitution.²⁹ As a result of this lobbying, article 5 of the Constitution (as amended in 2008) defines *Qassamen* as the official national anthem “in its integrity,” that is, including its third aggressively anti-French couplet.³⁰ Interestingly, most Islamist groups have consistently opposed this anthem in their effort to rewrite Algerian national history, arguing that only God, and not the profane symbols of the revolution, should be revered and sacralized. This dispute over the national anthem clearly

²⁶ Mohammed Aissa—an official of the Ministry of Religious affairs—explains this measure as a response to the increasing influence of Islamic practices that are seen as foreign to Algerian Islam, notably under the influence of Saudi Arabia or Iran.

²⁷ République Française, *Loi n°2005-158 du 23 février 2005 portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés (1)*, <http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=LEGITEXT000006051312&dateTexte=20110331>.

²⁸ This highly controversial formulation was modified by a decree issued on February 16, 2006. The law now states that academic research programs “grant the history of the French presence abroad, notably in North Africa, the place it deserves.” République Française, *Loi n°2005-158 du 23 février 2005 portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés (1)*, http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexteArticle.do?jsessionid=C445EDAD85DDB04FAC4DA4186D170E9D.tpdjo12v_3?idArticle=LEGIARTI000006238939&cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000444898&categorieLien=id&dateTexte=20110331.

²⁹ The third paragraph of the hymn states: “O France, the time of reproach has passed./And we have closed like a book;/ O France, the day of reckoning is at hand./ So prepare to receive from us our answer!/ In our revolution is the end of empty talk;/ and we have resolved that Algeria shall live.” The anthem’s complete text is quoted on the Algerian presidency Web site, as part of the “symbols of the state.” See <http://www.el-mouradia.dz/francais/symbole/hymne/symbolefr.htm>. With regards to this debate, see Chérif Benadji, “Révision de la Constitution: Vers une présidence à vie pour Abdelaziz Bouteflika,” in *L’Année du Maghreb V* (Centre national de la recherché scientifique [France] et L’Institut de recherches et d’études sur le monde arabe et musulman, 2009), 225–61.

³⁰ Article 5 states: “The national emblem and national anthem are conquests of the Revolution of November 1, 1954. They are unchangeable.... The National anthem is ‘Qassamen’ in the integrity of its strophes” (my translation). *Constitution de la République Algérienne Démocratique et Populaire*, <http://www.joradp.dz/HFR/Consti.htm>.

illustrates what some scholars have defined as an Islamonationalist attitude of the state, in its effort to sacralize the memory of the revolution and to safeguard the myth of a perfectly united national body. In 2008, when inter-communal violence occurred among Arab Sunnis and Berber Ibadites in the Mزاب, government officials once again resorted to this same argument of a threat to social order and national unity to justify their timid support to the Ibadites. Indeed, public order is broadly conceived as an order aimed at defending the Islamic character of the Algerian nation.

Furthermore, the criminalization of proselytizing in the name of public order and the banishing of apostasy in the name of Islam are, to a certain extent, based on a similar rationale—namely, the condemnation of the *publicity* of the deviant thought (rather than the thought itself).³¹ In other words, the conversion controversy and the state's reference to the notoriously open concept of public order³² show how the religious-secular divide is being contextually produced and contested, rather than existing as a predefined historical structure. In Algeria, the state strategically plays with the blurred distinction between Islam as a metonymy of secular public order and Islam as a religious reference. Yet, in order to safeguard national unity and social stability, it also calls for a clear distinction between the circumscribed space of non-Islamic religions and the public space, as well as demands a clear definition of religion.³³

³¹ See Mouna Mohammed Cherif, "La Conversion ou l'apostasie entre le système juridique musulman et les lois constitutionnelles dans l'Algérie indépendante," *Cahiers d'études du religieux. Recherches interdisciplinaires* (Special Edition, February 2011), <http://cerri.revues.org/809>, 23; and Jean-Noël Ferrière and Baudouin Dupret, "Participer au pouvoir, c'est édicter la norme: Sur l'affaire Abu Zayd," *Revue française de science politique* 48 (1997): 762-775.

³² With regards to the comparable usage of the reference to public order in the context of Egyptian inter-religious conflict, see Maurits S. Berger, "Secularizing inter-religious laws in Egypt," *Islamic Law and Society* 12, no. 3 (2005): 395-418; Johanna Pink, "A Post-Quranic Religion between Apostasy and Public Order: Egyptian Muftis and Courts on the Legal Status of the Baha'i Faith," *Islamic Law and Society* 10, no. 3 (2003): 409-34; and Hussein Ali Agrama, "Secularism, Sovereignty, Indeterminacy: Is Egypt a Secular or a Religious State?" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52, no. 3 (2010): 495-523.

³³ A similar argument was put forward in September 2008, when six men were sentenced in Biskra for breaking the Ramadan fast, as well as in September 2009, when two French citizens from Algerian origin broke the fast in public. In both cases, that which the judges deemed punishable were not the inner beliefs that precipitated the break in fast, but rather the disruptive consequences of such an action on the public order. See, US Department of State, *Report on International Religious Freedom*, 2009 <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148812.htm>

Islamists' nationalist approach to Evangelical Christianity

Significantly, the discourse of Islamist leaders, who were among the most vocal supporters of the 2006 Ordinance, is based on a similar rationale of state-society relation, and makes no reference to a conflict between Islam and Christianity. Colonialism, and not religious war, is the lens through which most Islamists analyzed the threat of Evangelical proselytizing. In an interview (*Quotidien d'Oran*, March 31, 2008), Bouabdellah Ghlamallah, the Minister of Religious Affairs, justified the expelling of Hugh Johnson, an American Methodist Pastor and President of the *Eglise Protestante d'Algérie* until 2007, by referring to national security and unity: "We do not want to prevent people from changing religion. But we are telling converts that Algeria is targeted by Evangelists (*évangélistes*). The interest of the nation must come before everything. The most important thing is to safeguard our homeland."

In another interview with the French Christian Magazine *La Vie*, Ghlamallah went so far as to declare that he would not oppose his own son's decision to convert, granted he was assured that his son had not been coerced into making such a choice: "If my son converted to Christianity, I would not resent him. I don't say it would be easy. But I believe in freedom of consciousness. The path toward God is not single but is multicolored. You accept that Christians convert to Islam. But I cannot accept the fact that Christians buy consciences."³⁴ A member of the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulamas whom I interviewed in December 2009 insisted on the distinction between the notions of plurality (*ta'adoudiya*) and division (*inqisam*). While the former, he explained, is a positive notion that reflects the natural organization of human affairs and is compatible with equality among different groups, the latter gives rise to hierarchies similar to the ones that divided Algerian society in the colonial period. The Association of Algerian Muslim Ulamas (AAMU) does not reject the notion of a pluralist Algeria, but rather insists on how premature such an ideal is. Algerian society, he argues, is still too fragile, too weakened by the consequences of colonialism not to be unsettled by Christian minority groups. Similarly, an Islamist MP, who is a member of Movement of Society for Peace (MSP) that currently holds 9% of seats in Parliament and is a member of the government coalition (with Rassemblement National Démocratique and FLN), contends that the controversy around conversion is primarily a political conspiracy aimed at destabilizing Algeria. Equally determinant in the argument of Islamic officials and government Islamists is the memory of the

³⁴ Jean-Pierre Denis, "Algérie, La Poussée évangélique," *La Vie*, August 18, 2008.

“Black Decade” of civil war sparked by various extremist groups. The notion that the state’s monitoring of religious change is key to the safeguarding of the still fragile social stability after ten years of interpersonal violence appears very clearly in a statement made by the minister Ghlamallah in a conference organized by the Ministry of Religious Affairs on February 11, 2010: “Either we resist, or we ask the state to renounce its responsibilities and to let its people do whatever they want in the name of religion. Algeria already paid a much too high price for this, and we won’t fall into that trap again.”³⁵

Although state and Islamist officials focus on the “foreign” nature of Evangelical Christianity, converts’ arguments emphasize the indigenous dimension of Christianity. In this light, the debate between Christians and their opponents is not one that pits Christianity against Islam, but rather one that reflects conflict between foreign and indigenous Christianity. Indeed, François Burgat has shown that the particularity of Algerian Islamism lies in its close relation to anti-colonialism and nationalism.³⁶ Islamists’ discourse about conversion is an anti-colonial, nationalist discourse of political and cultural resistance, not a theological rejection of Christianity. This argument echoes the long tradition within Algerian Islamic reformism of defending what Jacques Berque called “Jacobin Islam,” a phrase “suggestive of a furiously proselytizing rationalism and of an obsessively centralizing claim to unity.”³⁷

The predicament of state definition of acceptable religious practice: the French-Algerian mirror

To the extent that the 2006 Ordinance is so closely related to the state’s project of containing societal and national dislocation, it is comparable to the 2004 French law banning religious signs from schools. The argumentation of the Stasi Commission,³⁸ whose recommendation led to the passing of the March 2004 law, was equally oriented toward the defense of public order. Akin to the Algerian case, wherein the state presents itself as the protector of credulous and weak individuals, the French state justifies its ban of religious signs as a

³⁵ Ghania Qamraoui, “Ghoulamallah s’indigne des propos de Bader: La réglementation du culte relève des prérogatives de l’état!” *Echorouk Online*, February 12, 2010, <http://www.echoroukonline.com/fra/index.php?news=5799>.

³⁶ François Burgat, *L’Islamisme en face* (Paris: La Découverte, 1996),

³⁷ James McDougall, *History and Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 110.

³⁸ Named after its president, Bernard Stasi.

way to protect young Muslim women from the pressure of militant minorities. In both cases, the states' demand for a clear definition of religion opens up the complex question of how to determine acceptable religious practice. Importantly, the French ban concerns all religious signs, whereas the Algerian Ordinance specifically targets "non Islamic religions." Despite this major difference, however, the similarity of the rationale on which the two legislations are based is striking. This resemblance is partly explained by the strong influence of the French model of the nation state on Algerian post-independence institutions and constitutional history.³⁹ It suggests that the issue of religious freedom in Algeria, as in France, should be apprehended from the perspective of the state-society competition over the meanings of the nation, rather than from an essentialist assumption about the supposed impossibility of religious plurality in Muslim contexts.

According to article 7 of the 2006 law in Algeria, religious practice has to be collective in order to be accepted as legal. Similarly, the French law of 2004 stipulates that a religious sign must be defined as non-ostensible in order to be accepted as legal. But according to what standard can one define a practice as collective or a sign as non-ostensible? According to the 1991 Algerian Code of Association, to which article 7 of the 2006 Ordinance refers, an association requires 15 people to be legal.⁴⁰ Does this consequently imply that for Christians' religious practice to be considered collective, and therefore legal, it must be systematically organized around at least 15 people? What if someone invites nine people to her house to discuss religious texts? Does this constitute an illegal gathering in violation of the state's definition of religious practice as a collective practice?⁴¹ Likewise, article 11.1 of the 2006 Ordinance opens up

³⁹ See K. Mameri, *Les Constitutions algériennes. Histoire. Textes. Réflexions* (Alger: Thala Editions, 2008); and Mohammed Abdelwahab Bekhechi, "Remarques sur l'évolution du droit constitutionnel algérien de l'indépendance à la révision constitutionnelle de 1996" (paper presented at a conference organized by the Center for the Study of Law in the Arab World, Saint Joseph University, Beirut, 1998), <http://www.cedroma.usj.edu.lb/files/constpaysarabes.htm>.

⁴⁰ Law 90-31 (December 4, 1990) regarding associations. <http://www.droit.mjjustice.dz/codes.htm>

⁴¹ Lawyers defending Christian converts have further developed this argument, notably Kheloudja Khalfoun. See for an example of analyses of this type, the detailed analysis made by a group of Algerian lawyers of the 2006 ordinance: Advocacy group for non Muslim believers (Le collectif de défense des croyants autres que musulmans): http://collectifalgerie.free.fr/fr/?page_id=7, April 20, 2006.

the question of how to measure the “means of seduction” capable of unsettling Muslims’ faith. Although the law suggests that authorized religious practice should be limited to the weekly ritual taking place in identifiable buildings, opponents of the law explain that religious practice does not solely consist of the ritual, but includes various educational, charity and welfare activities. Activities taking place beyond the walls of the religious building are not as easily readable and controllable by the state, and therefore can appear as potential instruments of division. In other words, the distinction between legal and illegal religious practice is based on standards that do not fully satisfy the ways in which Algerian Christian believers themselves define religious practice.

The Stasi Commission’s recommendations regarding the banning of ostensible religious signs sparked similar debates about how to define a religious sign as acceptable to the standards of a liberal public sphere. While the Muslim headscarf, the Jewish kippa, and “large” Christian crosses were deemed ostensible, more discreet signs, such as small necklaces representing a Quran, a cross or a Star of David, were deemed acceptable signs. This distinction, however, was widely criticized by believers of all faiths as artificial and arbitrary. The 2004 French law and the 2006 Algerian Ordinance are both based on the assumption that faith is constructed through mundane and material means. Religious creed is thought to be something that can be readily constructed or unsettled by Evangelical or Muslim radicals, and therefore must be protected by the state. Such a view conflicts with both the Algerian Christians’ and French Muslims’ argument that faith is the result of God’s grace, and not of the more mundane means of seduction, coercion, or protection.

Conversion as statelessness

Even though the Algerian state insists on the necessity to make the religious practice of Christian converts legible, or in other words compatible with its monitoring policy, the way in which converts themselves define conversion and religion suggests, by contrast, a non-oppositional practice aimed at avoiding state control while actively committing to a new set of rules. This particular relation to the state may be described as a form of statelessness, one that, far from being merely a negative practice of escape, is oriented towards the formation of a new ideal of Algerian Christian citizenship.

Statelessness is the term political ethnographer James Scott uses to describe the new ways of life that were historically developed by uphill populations of

Southwest China and Northwest India in order to keep state power at bay.⁴² The present discussion therefore borrows this notion of statelessness in order to underline the complex and dynamic state-society relation that informs Christians' practice; however, the term is conceptualized somewhat differently than Scott's perspective.

In *The Art of Not Being Governed*, Scott describes how the “remote hill people” of “Zomia” resorted to various cultural, economical and political strategies in order to escape the state project of bringing non-state space and people to heel—most notably through taxation and the imposition of specific forms of economical growth.⁴³ Two key features characterize the efforts made by the stateless people of Zomia to escape fiscally legible economy: a deliberate choice of autonomy and cultural mobility. Although populations that have placed themselves at the state periphery have often been called barbarian or uncivilized, Scott shows that their effort to resist the state enclosure movement is deliberate and intentional. People of Zomia have chosen their location and way of life to maintain their autonomy vis-à-vis the state. The hill population has developed forms of escape agriculture and escape social structure “*designed* to aid dispersal and autonomy and to ward off political subordination.”⁴⁴ In addition to the purposefulness of state resistance, fluidity is another central distinctive feature of the life of Zomians. Versatility has become a decisive aspect of a strategy of state evasion and of adaptation to changing constellations of power. “Zomians are not as a rule only linguistically and ethnically amphibious; they are ... capable of nearly instantaneous social change, abandoning their fields and house to join or form a new community at the behest of a trusted prophet. Their capacity to ‘turn on a dime’ represents the ultimate in escape social structure.”⁴⁵ Despite the fact that stateless people's primary objective is to escape state taxation and control, they do not show any interest in the formation of alternative national structures. In the case of Zomia, the “justification for designating the area has nothing to do with national boundaries or strategic conceptions but is rather based on certain ecological regularities and structural relationships that do not hesitate to cross national frontiers.”⁴⁶

⁴² *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 23 (emphasis mine).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

In the context of conversion among Algerians, I use the term “statelessness” to describe a practice oriented toward the search for new moral rules and a new national identity *in addition to* evading the state’s attempt to confiscate religious, cultural, and national symbols. Despite the different way in which it is used here, “statelessness” is nevertheless appropriate insofar as it captures a relational practice of state evasion that goes beyond conventional boundaries between politics and culture. As in the case of Zomia, statelessness is not reducible to a partisan form of political opposition or to a social movement. Its distinguishing aspect stems from the fact that it is inseparably a cultural, economical, and political form of action.

The present use of the term “statelessness” differs in three important respects from what it describes in relation to the life of Zomians. While Scott insists on a project of escape and a deliberate choice made by uphill people for political and cultural autonomy, this study focuses on Algerian converts’ preoccupation with new forms of moral and collective rules. In other words, statelessness here is not so much the result of an intentional plan of state evasion as the consequence of a moral project of reconstruction of the self and the nation. Indeed, Scott acknowledges that the anarchy sought for by Zomians does not equate with anomy or absence of political order, as he extensively describes the new forms of order established in the hills. Nonetheless, he does emphasize the versatility of these orders and the reversibility of rules: Zomians resist the state enclosure because of their ability to “turn on a dime.” By contrast, the commitment to rules and the effort to make obedience to these rules a durable part of everyday life are central aspects of Algerian converts’ practice.

Whereas Scott focuses on the rejection of state rules, I am more interested in Christians’ attempt to imagine new moral and collective rules. What is at stake in Algerian conversions is, rather than the effort not to be governed, the question of how not to be governed *like that* (i.e., in the name of the FLN inspired Arabo-Islamic narrative of the Algerian nation, and by means of the state procedures of legibilisation of all religious and cultural practice). Statelessness is herein understood less as a practice of anarchy than as a form of moral critique and reflexive intractability.

Importantly, this definition of Algerian converts’ Christianity as statelessness is not a functionalist reduction of their religious experience. It is not argued that converts decide to believe in Jesus *in order to* challenge state rule. Algerians do not convert to Christianity in order to resist the state; rather, they develop new understandings of their relation to the state and the nation through the new understandings of faith and freedom that they cultivate. This relation is different from the deliberate and ideological type of state

opposition that Islamist social movements such as FIS advocated in the 1990s.⁴⁷ Contrary to Islamist movements of the 1990s, Algerian Christians do not rely on a predefined set of ideological guidelines or theological canon in order to rationalize their relation to the state.⁴⁸ Instead, the definition of this relation emerges from various forms of practices and discussions—ranging from learning the sincere form of prayer, attending Bible schools and Saturday sermons, to everyday interaction with neighbors and family. Primarily directed toward enabling converts to develop new understandings of themselves as sincere believers (free of their former superstitions and fears), these practices also enable them to develop new discourse regarding not only their right to hold and practice different religious beliefs, but also to spread these beliefs in the interest of the broader society and, ultimately, of the “sinful” state.

Contrary to what has been documented in other contexts, no clear pattern emerges from converts’ biographies suggesting that conversion primarily offers a way out of drugs, alcohol, or poverty.⁴⁹ Likewise, when explaining the path that led them from Islam or atheism to Evangelicalism, none of my

⁴⁷ With regards to the strategy of the Islamic Salvation Front and its relation to the state and nationalism, see Hugh Roberts, “Algeria between Eradicators and Conciliators,” *Middle East Report* 189 (July-August 1994): 24-27; Hugh Roberts, *The Battlefield Algeria: Studies in a Broken Polity* (London: Verso, 2003); Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, trans. Carol Volk (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); François Burgat and William Dowell, *The Islamic Movement in North Africa* (Austin: University of Texas at Austin, 1993); Luis Martinez, *The Algerian Civil War, 1990-1998* (London: Hurst and Co., 2000); and Michael Willis, *The Islamist Challenge in Algeria: A Political History* (Reading, Berkshire: Ithaca Press, 1996).

⁴⁸ Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Sebastian J. Walsh, “Killing Post-Almohad Man: Malek Bennabi, Algerian Islamism and the Search for a Liberal Governance,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 12, no. 2 (2007): 235-54; Allan Christelow, “Ritual, Culture and Politics of Islamic Reformism in Algeria,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 23, no. 3 (1987): 255-73; and Andrew March, “The Uses of *Fitra* (Human Nature) in the Legal and Political Theory of ‘Allal al-Fasī: Natural Law or ‘Taking People as They Are?’” (working paper, Faculty of Law, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, November 4, 2009), http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1500009.

⁴⁹ Most of the scholarship pertaining to conversions that focuses on the instrumentality of conversion as a means to escape a material situation of discomfort, or to resist a cultural context adverse to women’s empowerment, also recognizes that the instrumentality of conversion does not exhaust the integrality of belief or preclude the possibility of sincerity. See Elizabeth Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995); and Andrew R. Chesnut, *Born Again in Brazil: The Pentecostal Boom and the Pathogens of Poverty* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

informants explicitly mentioned a specific intent to mobilize against the state. Although converts do not use the term statelessness in order to account for their practice, their description of their spiritual path always includes comments both about their moral needs and their relation to the broader society and the state. To that extent, the term is not a retrospective rationalization of their practice, but rather an attempt to grasp their own understanding of a practice that they relate to the moral reconstruction of their soul and of the nation-state.

Arguing that the act of converting essentially fulfills a religious objective is still a manner of acknowledging an instrumental dimension to converts' practice. However, it is important to refrain from rejecting any reference to intentionality as evidence of a raw functionalist interpretation. The fact that Algerian converts decide to believe in Jesus in order to respond to spiritual (and sometimes material) dissatisfaction does not mean that Evangelical Christianity is understood here as a new form of false consciousness or "opiate of the masses."⁵⁰ The approach to intentionality that informs my understanding of Algerian converts' practice draws upon studies of conversions that seek to move beyond the binary opposition between reason and revelation, or religion and politics. For example, in his study of conversions to Pentecostalism in Venezuela, David Smilde shows that although converts do decide to believe in order to respond to material issues of violence or substance abuse, the instrumental aspect of their practice does not make their practice less sustainable, valuable, nor less religious. The notion of "imaginative rationality" he refers to in order to describe Venezuelan converts' intentionality "should not be taken here as a synonym for false, insincere or ungrounded."⁵¹ Rather, the concept designates the "human's ability to get things done by creating concepts."⁵² Similarly, the term "statelessness," while granting an instrumental aspect to converts' practice, does not refer to a purely reactive or negative escape, but to the process of creating new rulings for the self and new ideals for the nation.

This understanding of instrumentality is closely tied to a pragmatist conception of religion as a contextual and practical accomplishment rather than as a predefined normative order. From this point of view, religious activity, just as any form of activity, is oriented towards the achievement of certain goals.

⁵⁰ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843), 1.

⁵¹ David Smilde, *Reason to Believe: Cultural Agency in Latin American Evangelicalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 13.

⁵² *Ibid.*

Yet these goals, the meanings that are assigned to them, and the manner in which they are achieved are not defined *ex ante*. This approach calls into question the relevance of a normative discussion regarding the opposition between faith and instrumentality, or between religion and politics. In the worldview of Evangelical Pentecostalism as it is taught to Algerians, pursuing mundane objectives such as the salvation of the nation is as much a religious goal as the salvation of the soul and obedience to a constraining ethical code. No action or discourse can be defined as instrumentally or politically independent from the context in which these meanings take shape. As demonstrated by David Smilde, “there is no universal distinction between appropriate and inappropriate goals of religious practice. These distinctions are located in concrete historical, biographical, and even interactive contexts. For believers, the success of religious concepts in foretelling consequences is what validates them.”⁵³ Although Algerian Christians do not convert in order to resist the state, the anti-state intention and nationalist orientation of their practice does not render their religious experience less authentic. Their search for religious rulings and their reflection on Christians’ position in Algerian polity are inseparable and are not lived as mutually exclusive or contradictory. Both the call to self-purification and to national salvation helps them to respond to situations of unease as individuals and as citizens. Their main concern is not whether their activity can be described as religious or political, but locally accomplished relevance.

Salvation versus religion (din)

Converts come from different social and professional backgrounds and their previous engagement with Islam is often extremely varied. Some converts are former Sufi marabouts or imams who, in some cases, may have endorsed radical and violent forms of Islamic practice during the Black Decade. Others describe their pre-conversion experience as one of agnosticism, nominal adherence to Islam, or even atheism.

An important common feature that emerges from converts’ narratives is their insistence on rejecting the very notion of “religion” as *din*. When asked them about their motivations for converting to the Christian “religion,” my interlocutors repeatedly insisted on the fact that what they had converted to could not be adequately defined as a religion. Instead of the term “religion,” Algerian Christians preferred using phrases such as “faith,” “grace,” “freedom,”

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 53.

“love,” or, most of the time, “fellowship of Jesus.” For example, when I asked about her new “religion,” Z.—a schoolteacher in her mid-thirties—interrupted the question and said: “This is not a religion (*laisa din*), but a Christian freedom, a freedom in Jesus (*hourriyya fi yasu al-masih*). I did not choose God, but God freed me. I did not choose a religion, I chose Jesus. He gave me the true life (*a’tani al-hayat al-abaddiyya*). He is the path, the truth and the life (*Ina houa tariq w’al-haq w’al-hayat*).”

Similarly, when asked about which denomination of Protestant Christianity they identified with, converts strongly rejected the need to identify with a particular doctrinal trend. I.—a former Sufi in her late fifties, a cancer survivor, a daughter of a Sufi sheikh and sister of a former radical Imam—thus argued: “We are not evangelical or Pentecostal. We are Christian. We are the body of Christ. This is not a religion, but a path with God, freedom and love, I am a new born.” Mustapha Krim—the leader of the Protestant Church of Algiers—likewise insisted on the irrelevance of denominational divisions to describe Algerian Christianity: “We are free of these divisions, we live our faith in a very down-to-earth way (*au ras des pâquerettes*).”⁵⁴ When questioned as to the reason why religion was seen as such an inadequate term to describe their own practice, the interviewees all insisted on two key aspects of religion as *din*: namely, its legal and constraining aspect and its artificiality. K.—who has converted more than twenty years ago in a Methodist church and is now leader of a small church in Oran—explained what he meant by religion in the following terms:

Religion is clothes, something exterior, it is an obligation. Religion, Islam or Catholicism, it’s all the same: it’s a disguise. True Christianity on the other hand, means that you have your heart in Jesus. Christianity is a path with God. When you live with God, you carry the cross. You accept and you forgive. You do good, you forgive the enemy. I decide when I want to pray. It is not a debt. It is not an obligation. Christianity, it’s not a debt that you pay. It’s a choice. Religion obliges you to wake up at 5 A.M.; you pay your debt. I don’t have any debt to pay. All my debts have been paid. This is my decision, my choice. Christianity is herein defined as a sincere faith and free practice, in opposition to religion as *din*.

Importantly, Islam and Catholicism are rejected for similar reasons. In other words, Algerian Christians convert not so much from Islam in particular as

⁵⁴) Protestant Missions in Algeria have historically been largely inter-denominational, even when they officially identified with a particular denomination. The North Africa Mission was largely interdenominational, and even the Methodist Mission was composed of missionaries from different denominations. See Heggoy, *Fifty Years of Evangelical Missionary Movement*, 201-210.

from religion in general, defined as both constraining law and a disguise. Z. emphasized the insincerity of her religious practice when she was a Muslim: “In Islam, there were prayers, but no feelings. In Christ, I felt that prayer was a spiritual prayer (*salat rouhiyya*) and not simply a physical prayer (*jasadiyya*). In Christianity, I feel that God is in my soul. When we pray, it is a complete demand and not in Islam. Ritual (*‘ibadat*) in Christianity is more true. I pray all the time. Fasting is my freedom. I fast when I want.” Her thoughts about praying and fasting echo a comment made by another convert, who described Ramadan as “the month when everyone hides to eat,” thereby underlining the more significant truthfulness and sincerity of Christianity. S.—the leader of a Church in Kabylia—explained the difference between Christianity and Islam as the difference between a religion of life and love and one of laws and constraints:

Islam is based on law of the Old Testament in order to impose on men a burden (*joug*) that they cannot tolerate. Jesus is the God of life and love, he is the path, the truth and life. I do not want a God that only talks about death and war. Jesus’ death is enough. That is the only sacrifice that god accepts. Redemption and salvation are possible because of the one who gave his life instead of us/for us (*à notre place*).

In this quote, what S. rejects in Islam is its legalist, obligatory, and exclusive dimension (death and war), which he contrasts with the notions of redemption and love. The converts’ rationalization of their own experience is thus consistently oriented toward the rejection of religion as intolerable laws and disguise, rather than toward the rejection of Islam *per se*.

Specifically, it is the legalist and artificial aspects of religion that are repeatedly associated with the state’s intervention in religious affairs. The rejection of state intervention in religious affairs may explain why Sufism, even though somewhat comparable to Evangelical Christianity with its focus on piety and self-empowerment, is often rejected by Algerian Christians (many of whom are former Sufis). Indeed, in recent years, the state has implemented a policy of “retraditionalizing” Islam as a way to constrain the appeal of Salafism. However, the public largely understands the state’s participation in the rebirth of some Sufi *zawiyas* as a political strategy employed by government officials to gain votes, and has contributed to the decline of Sufism’s appeal.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Mohammed Hachemaoui, “Y a-t-il de la Baraka dans l’urne ? L’invention de la Tradition dans le Touat-Gourara” (paper presented at AIMS conference, Oran, June 26, 2010).

In my conversations with them, converts regularly emphasized how the state's use of Islam as the cement of the postcolonial nation-state had led to the ossification and, ultimately, the death of Islam. "[The] State's control on religion," one convert argued, "is the death of religion." This rejection of religion as law, understood as state law, applies to all forms of contemporary Islamic practice in Algeria. Salafism, Sufism and Islamism are all described by converts as being corrupted and delegitimated by the state's attempt to shape religious practice. By contrast, Protestant Christianity provides converts with a new understanding of freedom that is not conditioned by the nation state's definition of acceptable religious practice. Instead, this freedom is based on the cultivation of a sincere form of piety through prayers, attendance at services and Bible schools, everyday interaction with neighbors and work.

An important feature of converts' rejection of *din's* artificiality and legalism is the extent to which they correlate the sincerity of their new faith to a "moral narrative of modernity."⁵⁶ Most of my informants insisted on the "backwardness" of legalistic Islamic practice. When discussing their pre-conversion experience or the religion of the broader society, they put forth various comments, ranging from outward Islamophobic accusations about the Prophet morality to more nuanced analyzes about religious experiences. Despite these differences, all comments converged toward a similar critique of a fetish-like, ritualistic, and almost pagan form of Islamic practice. The ritual of Ramadan, the codified organization of prayer, or the common use of the expression "*Insha'Allah*" were commonly derided as evidence of a superstitious, fearful, passive, and childish relation to God. These features were associated with the immobilization and corruption of state institutions and their grip over Algerian citizens. In this narrative, where the notion of "help yourself" is thus opposed to the supposedly fatalistic "*Insha'Allah*," the free, interiorized and sincere prayer is preferred to the ritualized salat. It is implied that conversion to Evangelical Christianity paves the way to a more modern and active form of agency and citizenship. The contempt of Algerian converts for their former life and the religion of broader society is based on a critique that is very similar to the one formulated by Dutch missionaries in Indonesia, which Webb Keane describes in the following words: "Submitting to fixed discursive forms is not only a theological error or an affront to God; it threatens to undermine the agency proper to humans."⁵⁷ Conversion to Evangelical Christianity in Algeria

⁵⁶ Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns, Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 47 sq.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2

engenders a similar moral narrative of modernity, whereby progress is not just about technology, but also about self-mastery and human emancipation. In the particular context of Algeria, access to modern agency supposes purification from materiality, herein understood as the materiality of a legalistic, ritualistic, and codified practice.

Converts' insistence on constructing a sincere and truly pious self is generally consistent with the discourse of Evangelical born again Christians in contexts very different from that of Algeria.⁵⁸ It also echoes the ways in which *da'wa* Salafi movements describe their own practice. Both groups focus on the transformation of the individual into a pious and sincere self through specific pedagogical and social means and through participation in faith communities that emphasize the search for purity, as opposed to the blind imitation of local folk customs.⁵⁹ The practices of both groups are informed by a critique of the state's attempt to monitor religious activities and by an effort to reach out to the broader public through *da'wa* or proselytizing. Both religious movements resort to indirect means of development—through charities and education—rather than to frontal opposition to the state. Although an extensive comparison of Algerian Evangelical Christianity and these two religious trends exceeds the scope of this paper, it is important to identify a number of key features that specifically characterize the self and collective representations embodied by Algerian Christian lives.

Converts' practice distinguishes itself in three important respects from Salafi projects. First, the performance of statelessness is not based on a simple shift toward the sphere of private morality, or a movement of individualization of religious practice.⁶⁰ Rather, it is closely tied to the emergence of a millenarist form of discourse and a process of collective self-identification as a group that is at once persecuted by, and savior of, the Algerian state. Second, converts' accounts of their conversion experiences are inseparable from an attempt to redefine the identity and the history of the Algerian nation, the “true” origin of which is to be found in Africa and Christianity, rather than in the Middle East and Islam. Despite the essential orientation of the discourse of *da'wa* Salafis toward the notion of a transnational Umma, in which the nation-state

⁵⁸ Sebastien Fath, ed., *Le Protestantisme évangélique, un christianisme de conversion: Entre ruptures et filiations* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2004), entire doc

⁵⁹ With regards to this critique, many Islamic piety movements have developed against the folklorization of religious practice, see Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 49 sq.

⁶⁰ Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

has lost all legitimacy, the reinvention of national tradition is a central aspect of Christian converts' discourse in Algeria. Finally, Christian converts' practice differs from the practices of da'wa Salafis inasmuch as the former account for their endeavors in terms of *autobiography*, while the latter primarily insist on the believer's subscription and obedience to orthodox Islamic tradition.⁶¹ Narratives of conversions are autofictional accounts through which the individual recreates herself as a newborn. In this effort, her sole guide is the example of Jesus, an example to which Algerian Christians refer more as a source of inspiration than as a model whose attitude should be imitated. By contrast, in Salafism, individual piety and social practice are essentially oriented toward the enactment of orthopraxy and what is defined as the authentic and orthodox Islamic tradition, as well as toward the imitation of the pious companions of the prophet (*salaf*).

Algerian Christian millenarism

Although the paradigm of "law versus faith" is central to the narrative of most converts, this opposition cannot in and of itself shed light on the nature of Algerians' post-conversion relation to Islam and to the broader society. Indeed, the critique of the legalist and ossified aspect of religion is a key aspect of the success of Salafi piety movements.

However, taking converts' description of Islam at face value calls for a critique similar to the one developed by E.P. Sanders' historical reconstruction of the Judaism of Paul's time.⁶² Sanders and his followers have convincingly demonstrated that Paul's account of the Judaism of his time is inaccurate, to the extent that it was actually not legalistic. Similarly, the rationalization of conversion as a mere rejection of *din* as law does not correspond to the reality and diversity of Islamic practice. The discrepancy between Christians' description of Algerian Islam and the reality of this religious landscape does not make the

⁶¹ Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Occasional Papers Series*, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University (March 1986), <http://ccas.georgetown.edu/research/papers/>, 9-24.

⁶² *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977); *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); and Steven Westerholm, "The 'New Perspective' at Twenty-Five," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2, *The Paradoxes of Paul*, eds. D.A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 1-38, quoted in Joel Robbins, "Anthropology, Pentecostalism, and the New Paul: Conversion, Event, and Social Transformation," in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 4 (2010): 636-38.

“law versus faith” narrative to which Christians resort less true or effective in their own experience. But it does suggest that, in Christians’ post-conversion relation to their past and to Algerian society, there is something beyond the pure quest of sincere faith and individual salvation. The correlation between the salvation of the self and of the nation is, even more so than the simple opposition to *din* as law, a distinctive feature of Algerian Christians’ religious practice—a feature that also marks its clear distinction from Islamic piety movements.

Converts’ insistence on their belonging to “Corpus Christi” rather than to the Algerian state expresses the extent to which they view conversion as a liberation from state control. S. for example, explained his conversion in these terms: “It is very difficult to free oneself from the burden (*fardeau*) of Algerianity. I am related to Christ, rather than to Algeria. This experience has allowed me to uproot myself from Algerianity. [The] link to Christ is stronger in my life than the link to Algeria.” But even if most Algerian Christians insist, like S., on their desire to free themselves from the pressure of an intrusive state, conversion cannot be reduced to a spiritual form of exile, or *haraga*. Weekly religious services are a key element of a convert’s individual path toward Christianity; yet, they also play a major role in the process through which converts *collectively* define their identity as a group, as well as their relation to the state and to society in general. During religious services in which I participated, the pastors’ sermons defined the relationship between converts (as a group) and the state. This relationship was neither antagonistic nor did it suggest a mere retreat from the public sphere into the realm of private piety or toward a global Christianity. Rather, this relation emerges as an ambiguous one simultaneously based on a process of self-identification and on a shared representation of the community’s moral superiority over the persecuting state. The community’s interest in self-marginalization is reinforced by its certitude that Algerian converts will one day be called to save the Algerian state. This idea is supported by the pastors’ repeated calls for their congregations to acquire specific forms of emotional dispositions such as love, forgiveness, and joy, all of which are considered to be marks of the converts’ moral superiority. If conversion as statelessness entails a separation from the state, it is not through confrontational opposition, but through the converts’ enthusiastic confidence that, one day, they may be called to save Algeria from itself.

Most of these religious services began with the pastor calling the audience to bless their relatives and friends—converted or not—and, surprisingly, to bless the State, the country, or even the police. One may first assume that these statements are merely a rhetorical strategy that allows converts to answer to

the perceived threat of state surveillance. Through these unexpected blessings, converts reassure state informants, potentially present in the audience, about their allegiance to Algerian authorities. However, closer examination of the way in which state authority is referenced during religious services suggests that something more complex than a simple strategy of deception is at work. In December 2009, I attended a religious service in a church of Kabylia that is a particularly instructive example of the complex way in which converts envision their relation to the state. That day, a special guest from the Netherlands, Sir G., took part in the service. After a two hour service led by the Kabyle pastor of the church, Sir G. came to the pulpit and addressed the audience in English while the pastor's wife translating his words into French, Kabyle and Arabic. "They tell you that you are committing blasphemy," he started, "but I am here to tell you that they are the ones who are committing blasphemy." Sir G. then engaged in a detailed comment on Chapters 6 and 7 of the Book of Acts. He strongly emphasized the story of Stephen returning the accusation against the Sanhedrin, blaming them for their lack of love and devotion.

After finishing his comment on Stephen's persecution and Saul's participation in the stoning and persecution of the Church, Sir G. produced his European Union passport from his pocket, and raised his arm to show the passport to the entire audience: "This shows my attachment to my country, but we all hope to have a passport to heaven.... You are a minority, but you are not alone." Sir G. went on to describe the persecution of Christians in North Korea and Colombia to convey to his audience that Algerian Christians' suffering is comparatively benign, and that they are part of a global community, part of the "body of Christ." In the conclusion of his speech, Sir G. shifted toward a more exulting and conquering tone. He referred once again to the story of Paul's conversion and asked: "What if one day, Saul comes to Jesus' door and says: 'I am not Saul any more, but Paul, and *I am here to lead you*'?" (emphasis added).

Sir G.'s sermon aimed at providing his audience with arguments that would enable them to refute two major misperceptions of Christianity in Algeria—namely, the idea that converts are primarily motivated by their hopes of obtaining a visa for a Western country, and the notion that Christianity is blasphemous. Sir G.'s sermon was not simply meant to communicate an edifying story that would move or comfort his audience. Instead, it displayed arguments to the audience that they could use in the debates sparked by their religious choice. Importantly, the sermon was not only aimed at the present audience, but was oriented both by and toward an imaginary audience of

Christianity's detractors ("they tell you.../but I am here to tell you..."). The sermon represents a key element in the definition of converts' identity as a group that is distinct from, and accountable to, the broader society and the state.

In order to counter the argument that converts' attraction to Christianity is solely predicated on the desire to receive a visa to a Western country, Sir G. emphasized Algerian Christians' place within a Global Christianity, and insisted that heaven, and not the West, constitutes their true goal. Interestingly, he compared the condition of Algerian Christians to two examples from the non-Western world (Colombia and North Korea), carefully avoiding any comparison with Western Christians. Regarding the accusation of blasphemy, Sir G. taught his audience how to rebut the charge of which they are accused through the exemplary story of Stephen's martyrdom and Saul's conversion. The insistence on Christians' preference of heaven over the West and the story of Stephen's response to his judges both reinforce the idea of a group that is morally superior to the State.

The relationship between Christians and the state that was constructed throughout this sermon is more complex than one of mere opposition or retreat. The story of Stephen and Saul suggests that, even though converts are now persecuted and accused of blasphemy, they may one day be called to engage in a similar exercise of "fraternal correction" of the state. This shift from an individual to a collective eschatology, and the tight link that is established between the purification of the soul and the salvation of the nation is indeed a common feature of the discourse of Evangelical Christianity worldwide.⁶³ Such tropes are circulated and have become popular among Algerian Christians through various channels such as the Internet, Arab Christian TV channels, and contacts with Evangelical pastors based in Europe.⁶⁴ However, the idea of reverting persecution into election that so often characterizes the discourse of Evangelicalism also strongly resonates with the long Algerian tradition of dream telling and millenarism.⁶⁵

⁶³ For example, it strongly echoes aspects of Peter Wagner's "dominion theology." *Dominion! How Kingdom Action Can Change the World* (Grand Rapids: Chose, 2008). Regarding the link between the circulation of Evangelical themes about national salvation and the purification of the soul in other contexts, see Gonzalez, "Reclaiming the (Swiss) nation for God," 425-451.

⁶⁴ Channels such as Channel North Africa play a major role in the circulation of information and transmission of Evangelical tropes throughout North Africa. For example, see <http://www.cna-sat.org/>. I examine the role and impact of these Christian Media stations and the circulation of Evangelical themes in a forthcoming article.

⁶⁵ On Algerian millenarism, see *Julia Clancy-Smith, Rebel and Saint: Muslim notable, populist protest, colonial encounters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

Africa versus the Middle East

The second specific feature of converts' practices that distinguishes it from other comparable forms of religious practices is their insistence on redefining the true origins of the Algerian nation. Although Salafi movements may criticize government officials' role in the distortion or folklorization of "true" Islam, they refrain from harshly questioning the nationalist narrative that has become hegemonic since Algerian independence—a narrative that underlines the Arabo-Islamic identity of Algeria and the key role that Islamic reformism has played in Algerian independence.⁶⁶ By contrast, reinventing the "true" tradition of Algeria is an integral part of converts' discourse about their religious practice. Citing Augustine, Tertullian, the role of pre-Islamic Christianity, and the African roots of Algeria is a common trope of Christian Algerians' discourse. Anything related to the Middle East, especially to Egypt or Saudi Arabia, is rejected as foreign.

Language is one of the main sites of converts' contestation of the Arabo-Islamic narrative of the nation. Most religious services in which I participated took place in three languages: Arabic, Kabyle and French. In certain churches, trilingualism is almost officially established. When a song is sung in Kabyle, for example, TV screens transmit the translation of the song in Arabic and French. Sermons are frequently translated into at least one of the two other languages, and churchgoers use Bibles in both Kabyle and Arabic. In other churches, trilingualism takes place in a more informal manner, depending on the changing composition of the audience of the day. In conversations about the languages used during the religious services, the converts with whom I spoke repeatedly criticized the type of Arabic that is used in mosques, describing it as a language that is alien to Algeria. It is not that the language is criticized for being Arabic, but that it is a foreign, Middle-Eastern brand of Arabic, which is different from the language that the converts' parents and grandparents used to speak. This critique of Middle-Eastern Arabic, as opposed to the genuinely Algerian Arabic dialect, parallels the converts' critique of Islamism as distinct from an authentic and peaceful "Algerian Islam." After the attack against Tafat Church on January 12, 2010, Mustapha Krim, the leader of the Eglise Protestante d'Algérie (EPA), gave an interview to *El Watan* (January 15, 2010) in which he insisted on the fact that Christians are not critical of Islam, but of the Arabo-Nasserist ideology that led to the distortion

⁶⁶ McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism*.

of Islam (i.e., to Islamism).⁶⁷ Krim, like most of the converts that I interviewed, speaks very respectfully of the “Islam of our parents,” but vehemently rejects Egyptian and Middle-Eastern brands of Islamism. “[The] Islam of our parents is absolutely not comparable to today’s political Islam.... We are fully citizens, as much as all other Algerians.” Just as state officials and Islamists argue that Christian converts are manipulated by Western powers, Christian converts similarly argue that the Algerian state and Algerian Islamists are manipulated by Middle-Eastern powers.

Beyond the specific issue of language, Algeria’s identity itself is reconstructed as either a specifically Maghrebi one, or as an African one. The appropriation of the fierce debate that agitated the Algerian public in December 2009 after the Algerian soccer team was assaulted in Egypt clearly illustrates this practice. During this period, newspapers across the ideological spectrum, from Islamist to secularist, published articles daily to condemn Egypt’s behavior, and to question the privileged relationship between Egypt and Algeria. Although the events were interpreted in different ways, a clear consensus emerged regarding the notion that Egypt’s behavior was unacceptable: how could a brother Islamic country treat Algeria in such a way? On December 4, 2009, during a Friday service in Oran, the pastor began his sermon by inviting his audience to dismiss the insults made by all the “Pharaohs” of the world. He then went on to read Exodus 14: 30-31,⁶⁸ and explained that this was a good metaphor for what had happened to the Algerian soccer players in Egypt, in addition to the manner in which Christians were treated by Muslims in Algeria. God had protected Algerians against the Egyptian “Pharaohs” by giving them victory in Sudan, an “African country,” rather than in Egypt. In the pastor’s interpretation of the conflict between the Egyptian and Algerian soccer teams, Egypt represented at once the Middle-Eastern arrogant country that bullied its North African “brother” country, and, on a more abstract level, Algerian Muslims who oppressed their Christian fellow citizens. In the pastor’s narrative, Algerian Christians are emotionally related to Africa, not to the Middle East. Therefore, it was God’s will that the Algerian team lost in Egypt “so that Algerians can be saved from lynching and so that they were given a chance to win the game in Sudan, a little insignificant African country.”

⁶⁷ In this interview, Krim stated: “Que la constitution algérienne qui garantit la liberté de culte soit appliquée sur le terrain.”

⁶⁸ These two verses conclude the passage describing how God allowed Israelites to cross the sea and escape Egypt, while the Egyptian Pharaoh and army were drawn in the sea.

The pastor's sermon was oriented toward two types of audiences, and carried out two different repertoires of identification for converts. When he addressed an imagined Egyptian audience, the pastor suggested that Algerian Christians side with the wider Algerian society. When he addressed an imagined Muslim audience, however, he referred to a conflicted relationship between Algerian Christians and Algerian Muslims. In either case, this sermon clearly shows how the discursive practice of Algerian Christians is strongly informed by the events of the context in which their religious services take place. That is, the way in which Christians define their individual and collective identity does not take place in isolation from, or in mere opposition to, the debates of the broader society. Christians' questioning of the African or Arab identity of Algeria, as well as their critique of Middle Eastern imperialism and fake solidarity, are concerns that are widely shared by the rest of society. For example, in an article entitled "Let's Ban the Use of the word 'brothers,'" movie director Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina wrote: "To the Egyptian television and to their leaders who call us 'barbarians,' I say that ... I am proud of being Berbère. From now on, let's stop calling each other 'brothers'."⁶⁹

Through its engagement in controversies about the nature of Algerian nationalism, the religious practice of Algerian Christians differs from the global orientation of Evangelicalism and Salafism, and responds to concerns that belong to wider Algerian society. The discursive strategy of drawing a boundary between good, moderate Islam and Islamism is by no means proper to Christian converts. This reasoning is the basis of argumentation of numerous mosque rectors in France, such as Soheib Bencheikh, who has consistently supported Algerian Christians' rights. Ironically, it is even consistent with the Algerian state's policy of neutralizing Islamism while revivifying Sufi Tariqas as archetypes of moderate Islam.⁷⁰ In other words, converts' efforts to redefine the true origin of Algeria as both African and Christian are not considered heretical in contemporary social debates. Rather, they echo the inclination of Algerian society to question the Arabo-Nasserist narrative of nationalism. The convergence of converts' discourse on national identity with comparable critiques of the FLN Arabo-Islamic nationalist narrative further shows that the phenomenon of conversion in Algeria is better understood from the perspective of changing state-society relations than in terms of a clash between Islam and Christianity. It also shows how converts' arguments and beliefs are

⁶⁹ Mohamed Lakhdar Hamina, "Bannissons le mot 'frères,'" *El Watan*, December 6, 2009.

⁷⁰ Rachid Grim, "Le jeu politique des zaouias en Algérie," *El Watan*, July 12, 2004.

primarily informed by the context in which they are formed, and not by a supposedly fixed Christian view of Islam. Despite the description of Pentecostalism's force as a "culture against culture,"⁷¹ Algerian converts' engagement with debates about national identity, linguistic politics, and geopolitical categorization of their country, suggests that their practice involves principles and ideals that go beyond a mere rupture from national culture toward the abstract global community of Christ. More specifically, the imagery on which their practice and discourse is based displays a significant interest in rewriting this national culture.

Conversion as auto-fiction

Christian converts share with Salafi *da'wa* movements a similar revivalist desire to break away from what is perceived as an inauthentic, folkloric or artificial form of religious practice, and to enact a more demanding and sincere form of piety. The two types of religious practices, however, differ in terms of the end toward which this revivalist shift is oriented. Salafi *da'wa* practice is oriented toward enacting what is defined as the true and authentic Islamic tradition. The renewal of faith and piety is based on the voluntary subscription of the believer to a specific discursive tradition.⁷² Narratives of Christian conversions, by contrast, are primarily informed by the believer's effort to reconstruct her life as a unique work of art. Christians describe conversion not so much as a pedagogical process focused on adherence to the Christian tradition, but as a miraculous moment that changed the life of the individual, a rewriting of their autobiography. Moreover, Salafi and Evangelical praxis are oriented towards the formation of different types of subjects. The model of piety proposed by many Salafi movements is governed by the ideal of wholeness and incorporation; hence, the insistence on the notion of embodiment of religious dispositions, a feature that many anthropologists have captured by crafting terms such as Muslim "sensorum."⁷³ In this particular form of piety, the religious subject is defined by the ideal of a complete, spontaneous, and desired adhesion between religious norms and an individual's behavior. By contrast, an Evangelical convert's ideal or religious subject remains essentially ambiguous and divided. This ambiguity is not merely a reflection of the

⁷¹ K. Dombrowski, *Against Culture: Development, Politics and Religion in Indian Alaska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).

⁷² Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*; Charles Hirschkind, *Ethical Soundscape: Cassettes Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

⁷³ Hirschkind, *Ethical Soundscape*, 98 sq.

difficulty for newborn Christians to ignore their past and the broader society. It is to a large extent a necessary condition of maintaining their faith alive and enacting the sincerity of their conversion. Algerian Christians' divided religious identity is apparent in their relation to their pre-conversion experience as well as in the way they answer to other Algerians' perception.

A common theme of these narratives is how conversion helped the convert to radically change her lifestyle. In their stories, these believers consistently describe their life before conversion as doomed by unhappiness, boredom, lying, laziness, or unemployment.⁷⁴ Yet, despite their insistence on describing the moment of revelation that changed their life as a clean and radical break from the past, converts need to preserve the imagination of their past as a form of constant motivation in their effort to cultivate a new and sincere faith. The vivid memory of their "sinful" pasts helps feeding the faith of newborn Christians and distinguishes their practice from the passive adhesion of nominal Christians.

Through their narratives, Algerian Christians relate in an ambiguous manner to what they perceive as the dominant norms of religious behavior. These narratives are at once disruptive and conservative. As a disruptive event, conversion is indeed a way for them to challenge these perceived norms, but their insistence on answering to potential accusations of subversion suggests that conversion narratives serve to simultaneously reinforce those norms. When claiming that they are Algerians *and* Christians, converts at once contest and reinforce the perceived presupposition according to which Christians can only be Westerners.

Rather than foment anti-Islamic sentiment, narratives of conversion aim at persuading an imaginary audience. For example, S., in a small village near Oran, constructed his narrative as an answer to what "they" think of converts: "There is a difference between a Christian and a French. My grandfather had lived in France. They think that all that is Western is Christian. They think that when we become Christian, we become decadent. As if we had become French. But with time, they see change in our life, they respect Christians. But first, they refuse." Likewise, H., in Tizi, defined his identity by denying the validity of the way in which "they" present converts: "They blame us for being Zionists, anti-Arabs, anti-Palestinians. We are not Zionists. They don't let us

⁷⁴ Karima Dirèche-Slimani, "Dolorisme religieux et reconstructions identitaires. Les conversions néo-évangéliques dans l'Algérie contemporaine," *Annales* 5 (September-October 2009): 1137-63.

express ourselves, so we used other medias. But, otherwise, we define ourselves as Christians. We are Catholics, because it's universal, but not Roman Catholics. We are Protestants because we protest, evangelical because it is the call of God." In other words, narratives of conversion are neither socially disengaged accounts, nor mere disruptions of what new Christians perceive as norms of adequate religious behavior.

To the extent that they consistently orient their discourse toward an imagined contradictor, converts also seek to respond to these norms. In their narratives, the converts' own examples serve as an argument aimed at persuading the broader society. Historian Mercedes Garcia-Arenal describes the convert as "the autobiographer answering to this world *in the way in which he is expected to do so*."⁷⁵ The study of Algerian Christians' narratives shows the dialogical dimension of the way in which these accounts are constructed and the relational imagination on which it is based. Even though they distinguish themselves from the rest of the society through the disruptive act of converting, Christians still want to answer to, and persuade, the rest of society. Their conversion is not simply a transgression of norms, but an attempt to account for how and why converts still belong to the normative society. The existence of the broader society is necessary to the cultivation of converts' piety not only as a potential target of missionary efforts, but as an indispensable audience (be it real or imaginary) in front of which the sincerity of religious change can be proclaimed, tested, and, ultimately, made authentic. This compulsion towards public objectification is an endless process. Indeed, as Webb Keane articulates, "the nature of iterability means one can never be sure; the most earnest deeds and protestations of faith are in themselves but acting, mere words."⁷⁶

This simultaneous orientation of Christian narrative, toward both disruption and persuasion, is also apparent in the reluctance of many converts to use the actual word "conversion" to describe their experience. Most Christians I spoke with avoided using this word. When they conceded to do so, they made it clear that they viewed this word as one that inadequately described their experience, one unduly imported from a discussion of foreign religious changes. Most converts resorted to periphrases such as "I was freed by God," "I was called by God," "I saw Jesus in my dream," "when I accepted to give my life to Jesus," or more simply, "when I became Christian," and "when I changed

⁷⁵ Mercedes Garcia-Arenal, "Dreams and Reason: Autobiographies of Converts in Religious Polemics," in *Islamic Conversions. Religious Identities in Mediterranean Islam* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001), 101 (emphasis added).

⁷⁶ Keane, *Christian Moderns*, 288.

religion.” Algerian Christians’ insistence on avoiding the word “conversion,” which strongly resonates with their uneasiness surrounding the word “religion,” suggests that they envision their path to Christianity as a lateral move for which they are not entirely responsible, rather than as a deliberate act of choosing a new faith. Furthermore, it again shows how inadequate the paradigm of Islam versus Christianity is to a meaningful understanding of Algerian conversions.

Reconsidering the Boundaries of Algerian Citizenship

Although Protestant Christianity has been present in Algeria since the end of the 19th century, it was not until the early 21st century that converts have begun to advocate an assertive form of collective representation as Christians *and* Algerians. The affirmation of this collective identity is based not only on the strong legal and public mobilization of converts during Christians’ trials; rather, it is an integral part of the religious discourse and practice that increasingly link together the purification of the individual’s soul and the millenarist theme of the salvation of the nation. It is yet too early to draw any firm conclusion as to whether this millenarist engagement with the nation’s future will lead to the formation of more politicized mobilization, a form of political Christianity that would parallel and counter political Islam. For now, the originality of Algerian Evangelical Christianity, both intellectually and politically, lies in its ability to blur the lines between clear cut categories of religion, politics and secularism. As for state policy towards Christianity, this article has attempted to suggest that, no matter how alarming the number of trials and the close monitoring of which Christians are victims, the rights of Evangelicals cannot be treated separately from the broader question of religious freedom in general. In a context defined by the state’s attempt to monopolize religious practice and national symbols, the issue of Evangelical Christians cannot be singled out. Instead, it raises broader questions of religious and political pluralism. Finally, the essentially ambiguous and divided aspect of state policy and of Algerian converts’ identity, both in how they approach their past and their fellow citizens, indicates that despite the unequal relations of power that define the state-convert relationship, the discourse of Christians, Muslims and the state is capable of meeting at certain points: they are not “co-authors,” who can talk to each other in an ideal speech situation, but they do “step into the same semiotic shoes.”⁷⁷

⁷⁷) *Ibid.*, 287.