Conversion Models

Juliette Galonnier

RADICALIZATION IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN WESTERN EUROPE

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EDITORS

Radicalization in Theory and Practice

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in Western Europe

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Conversion Models

Juliette Galonnier

The past two decades have witnessed a swift propagation of the notion of "radicalization." Its meaning, however, remains contested. Scholars have referred to radicalization as "a source of confusion" (Sedgwick 2010), a "buzzword" that is used by "political elites and so-called specialists" (Marchal and Salem 2018) but proves "a total nightmare to operationalize as a topic for research" (Githens-Mazer 2012). It is often said to lack scientific rigor (Neumann and Kleinmann 2013) and to be "plagued by assumption, intuition and conventional wisdom" (Githens-Mazer and Lambert 2010). Critiques of the radicalization concept as it is used in commonsense discourse contend that it overtly focuses on individual and psychological processes and places too much emphasis on ideological and theological interpretations, at the expense of social and political considerations. They argue that radicalization is often portrayed as a "virus" of extremist beliefs spreading across individuals, which precludes any explanation of the actual passage from beliefs to violence (Malthaner 2017; Kundnani 2012). The recent *critical turn* in radicalization studies also highlights the negative effects of radicalization discourses in terms of securitization, depoliticization, and the construction of suspect communities through the racialization of a stereotypical "Muslim figure" (Fadil, Ragazzi, and de Koning 2019; Baker-Beall, Heath-Kelly, and Jarvis 2015). In sum, radicalization as a concept has proven unsatisfactory and needs reframing. This chapter argues that the conversion literature can be of some help in that endeavor.

Like radicalization, *conversion* is also a very contentious word: scholarship on conversion is enormous and characterized by numerous debates (for a complete overview, see Gooren 2007; Richardson and Kilbourne 1989). For instance, scholars disagree as to how much change is necessary to identify a religious shift as conversion (Le Pape 2009). In addition, people whom we call "converts" do not necessarily use this term to self-identify. Alternative terms have been suggested, such as "transition" (Wadud 2007, 5), "reversion" (Van Nieuwkerk 2006), "alternation" (Travisano 1970), or "adhesion" (Nock 1933) (for an overview, see Barylo 2018). There are also distinctions between what some authors call "external" and "internal" conversions (Hervieu-Léger 1999, 120–25), the former referring to religious change across traditions and denominations (shifting from one religion, or none, to another) and the latter to reconnection and intensification of practice within a religious tradition (the so-called "born-again" phenomenon). Finally, narrow understandings of conversion have also been criticized for placing too much emphasis on individual and theological factors. For the sake of clarity, we can start by defining conversion with Mercedes García-Arenal (2001, 7) as "the range of processes through which individuals or groups engage in beliefs, rituals and social practices that are different from those into which they were born." This simple definition has the merit of encompassing a broad range of religious and social transformations, from gradual to sudden, from dramatic to subtle.

This chapter investigates the relationship between radicalization and conversion. There are two main ways of envisioning the conceptual links between these notions. The first one, informed by some recent statistical evidence, argues that conversion provides fertile ground for radicalization and that converts are more likely than other believers to engage in the path of politico-religious violence. The second one, motivated by theoretical concerns, suggests that radicalization is best defined as *a subtype of conversion* (one that involves violent ideology and action), and that scholars working on radicalization have much to learn from the conversion and new religious movements (NRMs) literature. This chapter alternately explores these two options: It concludes that the first option tends to reproduce the shortcomings underlined by critiques of the radicalization concept and that the second one is most promising in terms of theoretical and empirical prospects.

Conversion as Fertile Ground for Radicalization?

A growing number of studies in the scholarly and gray literature investigate the elective affinities between conversion to Islam and contemporary radi-

calization (Rushchenko 2017; Mullins 2015; Van San 2015; Bartoszewicz 2013; Flower 2013; Simcox and Dyer 2013; Karagiannis 2012; Kleinmann 2012; Uhlmann 2008; for an overview, see Schuurman, Grol, and Flower 2016). They argue that Muslim converts are more likely than non-converts (so-called "born Muslims") to partake in violent forms of politico-religious militancy, although we still need to understand why. Scott Flower and Scott Kleinmann (2013) underline that "how the mechanisms of conversion correlate and intersect with the mechanisms of radicalization is not well understood." In this strand of scholarship, the word "convert" usually refers to "external converts," or people who did not grow up in a religious or cultural Muslim environment. A "convert" is therefore mostly identified by the fact that they do not belong to any of the ethnic and racial categories commonly associated with Islam in Western collective representations (e.g., Middle Eastern, North African, South Asian, to name only a few).

Counting Converts in Violent Politico-Religious Movements

Security concerns over converts first emerged with the advent of Al-Qaeda in the 1990s, which featured significant numbers of so-called "converts" in its midst (Roy 2011). These concerns have heightened with the rise from 2014 onward of Daesh, which displayed an even larger percentage of converts. Studies have found that the share of converts involved in radical movements is disproportionately high compared to their actual share in the Muslim population. A number of figures have been circulating, although caution must be exerted as to their methodologies and reliability. For instance, Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes (2005) have established that out of 71 people charged with various Daesh-related activities in the United States in 2015, 40% could be defined as converts, or people who were not raised in Muslim families. Given that the share of converts in the American Muslim population at large is around 21% (Pew Research Center 2017, 119), this indicates a clear overrepresentation. Such disproportion is even more striking in Western Europe, where the percentage of converts among Muslims generally does not exceed 5% (Schuurman, Grol, and Flower 2016). In 2015, the French Home Ministry established that out of the 1,923 French citizens enrolled in Daesh, 23% (roughly 440 people) could be characterized as "converts" (Mathiot 2015). In the UK, Sam Mullins (2015) has argued that among the 427 individuals who supported Al-Qaeda–related activities between 1980 and 2013, 47 (11%) were converts. In Belgium, Marion Van San (2015) has estimated that among the 329 young people who joined Daesh in Syria, 10% were converts. Such

figures suggesting that converts are overrepresented in violent movements have produced bewilderment and concern.

The "Radical Convert" as Contemporary Boogeyman

The spectacular and shocking trajectories of a small number of violent converts have made the headlines in North America and Western Europe, producing both fascination and moral panic among the public. Indicative of such fascination is the fact that, in comparison to their non-convert counterparts, radical converts are more frequently given nicknames, such as the "White Widow" (Samantha Lewthwaite, UK), "Jihad Jane" (Colleen LaRose, United States), "Lady Jihad" (Maria Giulia Sergio, Italy), the "Blue-Eyed Emir" (Richard Robert, France), the "Shoe Bomber" (Richard Reid, UK), the "Dirty Bomber" (Jose Padilla, United States), or the "American Taliban" (John Walker Lindh, United States). The "radical convert" has in fact become a highly telegenic character in popular culture. Suffice it to look at recent TV shows to appreciate this centrality. To take only one example, *Homeland* (2011) features a white American Marine, Nick Brody, who was held hostage by Al-Qaeda for eight years and was eventually turned by the organization. While coming back to the United States as a war hero, he is actually planning a suicide attack against the vice president. The tropes of treason, duplicity, and brainwashing have considerably skewed the representations of Muslim converts in the contemporary period. While they had historically been portrayed as pirates, adventurers, Orientalists, or Sufi mystics, the figure of the "fanatic religious warrior" has now outshined all others. The highly visual and Hollywood-style mise-en-scènes of Daesh have also contributed to durably ingrain the archetypal image of "the convert": a light-skinned, blue-eyed, bearded man wearing camouflage clothing and sporting an AK-47 in its male version; and a determined woman dressed in a *niqab* covering her entire body, except for the eyes (also blue), in its female incarnation. As a result, conversions to Islam are increasingly apprehended through the univocal lens of threat and securitization, with converts being presented as more radical than non-converts. "Converts are often the most dangerous," once declared French anti-terrorist judge Jean-Louis Bruguière (Leclerc 2012). Scholar Esra Özyürek (2009) has referred to such a complex set of fears about violence, proselytism, and Islamic invasion as "convert alert": converts have deepened moral panics over the pervasive threat of Islam because they are seen as a more insidious menace.

Liminality and "Convertitis"

In contrast, scholars have sought to provide a dispassionate analysis of why converts seem more likely than non-converts to join the ranks of radical movements. Several explanations have been put forward. Radical Islam being one of the most dramatic causes currently available in the political landscape, a first explanation suggests that young people holding apocalyptic ideals can embrace it without necessarily entertaining a close connection to the religion of Islam itself. This is what Olivier Roy (2016) calls "the Islamization of radicalism," whereby extreme interpretations of Islam simply provide the ideological coating for violent aspirations, without constituting the cause of radicalization itself. Thus, non-Muslims can readily appropriate distorted Islamic references to satisfy their destructive leanings and legitimate their actions. In that case, the conversion to violent modes of action precedes the conversion to specific Islamic beliefs, which is purely instrumental and contingent.

A second explanation reverses the direction of causality and indicates that people who convert to Islam—for a variety of reasons: spiritual or moral quest, marriage, friendly relations, travels, political commitment, identity search, etc.—are subsequently more "vulnerable" to radicalization. British convert and Islamic scholar Timothy Winter (Abdal Hakim Murad) has for instance argued that some converts can be afflicted by what he sarcastically calls "*convertitis.*" As he puts it, "The initial and quite understandable response of many newcomers is to become an absolutist. This mindset is sometimes called 'convertitis.' It is a common *illness*, which can make those who have caught it rather difficult to deal with. Fortunately, it almost always wears off" (Murad 2014 [1997], emphasis mine). In a nutshell, the amusing neologism of convertitis has been coined to designate the oftentimes absolutist behavior adopted by some overzealous converts at the beginning of their entry into Islam, as they strive to incorporate all new religious norms at once and become "perfect Muslims" overnight (see also Jensen 2006). The literature on conversion to Islam proffers a substantial body of research that can account for converts' greater propensity to embracing stringent and univocal interpretations of the religion. A central finding of this literature is that conversion to Islam is an experience of "liminality." In his study of rites of passage in Central Africa, anthropologist Victor Turner (1969, 95) defined liminality as the intermediary state between the phase of separation and the phase of reincorporation that characterize those rituals (*limen* is a Latin word meaning "boundary" or "threshold"). He wrote that "the attributes of liminality or liminal personae are neces-

sarily ambiguous. . . . Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, convention and ceremonial" (95). Liminality, therefore, is to be understood as "an area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo." Likewise, conversion can sometimes alienate individuals from their milieu of origin and put them into a liminal phase: Not only are they shunned by their family and eschewed by their friends, they can also encounter obstacles in their efforts to thrive in Muslim community spaces (Galonnier 2017; Moosavi 2012; Woodlock 2010): issues of cultural, generational, class, or ethnic/racial difference frequently come in the way of successful religious integration. Converts often report having trouble asserting their Islamic legitimacy. Imperfectly belonging to neither world, they are often depicted as "edge men," "transitional beings," or "threshold people" (Finn 1990).

In her study of female converts in Australia, anthropologist Karen Turner (2019, 73, 79) has aptly argued that convertitis "is not just a fanaticism or fervor in the early stages," but "an embodied resistance to the experience of liminality and ambiguity that new converts experience when becoming Muslim." She convincingly shows how some converts enshrine their religious transformation into rigid and conspicuous practice to prove their Muslimness to others and adopt literalist black-and-white interpretations of their religion in order to mitigate the uncertainties inherent to their liminal position. Thus, some converts undergo radical life changes overnight, which often implies brutally getting rid of former habits and hobbies or severing ties with friends and family. Others incorporate all at once a series of demanding religious practices at the risk of severe "religious burn out." By overperforming their religiosity, they intend to shrink the liminal phase and accelerate the completion of their rite of passage. "Fortunately, [this disease] almost always wears off," says Timothy Winter. Indeed, the majority of converts who suffer from convertitis early on in their journey progressively soften their practice over time. Yet, it has been argued that convertitis provides fertile ground for radicalization in the case of converts who do not find a stable community network to fall on their feet. This resonates with the uncertainty–identity theory outlined by John F. Morrison (see chapter 5, this volume) to account for an individual's move toward extremism.

Echoing these analyses, research conducted in Europe has shown that radical Islamic movements tend to attract second-generation immigrants of Muslim descent characterized by disenfranchisement, social anomie, and family dissolution, that is, not immersed in a solid Muslim culture (Khosrokhavar 2014). Such lack of grounding opens avenues for their entry into groups that offer a strong social identity and promote a world-

view drastically different from mainstream society. The same applies to converts. Scholars have demonstrated that converts are for instance particularly interested in the rationalist, deculturalized, and univocal textual approach promoted by Islamic currents such as Salafism, because they posit that religious authority derives exclusively from the mastery of scripture rather than cultural competency or the practice of Islam for generations. By Salafi standards, a "good" Muslim is not necessarily someone immersed in majority-Muslim culture, but someone who lives their life by the book. Salafism is conceived by its supporters as independent from tradition: universal, democratic, and meritocratic. As such, Salafism exerts great attractiveness upon new Muslims in search of religious authenticity. Mohamed-Ali Adraoui (2013), who conducted long-term qualitative studies on Salafism in France, highlights that between a fourth and a third of his Salafi respondents are converts. Adraoui (2019) further notes that although various Islamic movements, such as Sufis or Tablighis, feature large numbers of converts in their midst, Salafism is the only one having elevated the convert to such a central position. Salafi-oriented rhetoric is refreshing for converts who often struggle to assert their religious legitimacy in Muslim spaces. Within Salafism, their "lack" of Muslim culture is precisely considered an asset and a source of symbolic capital, for it allegedly enables them to decipher with greater ease what is cultural *bid'ah* (harmful innovation) from what is "truly" Islam. While Salafism alone does not lead to violence (Crettiez et al. 2017; Githens-Mazer 2012), and while studies have demonstrated that many Salafis strictly oppose jihadism (Inge 2017), its rhetorical tropes can be successfully enlisted by violent movements to specifically attract converts.

Limits

Overall, in spite of interesting findings related to liminality and the quest for religious legitimacy, the idea that conversion provides fertile ground for radicalization remains limited in its prospects. First, an inverted look at available statistics shows that radicalization "remains an ultra-minority attitude" among converts (Roy 2004, 318). If we consider that the general French convert population oscillates around 100,000 people, the actual number of those who joined fighting groups (roughly 440 in 2015) represents less than 1%. Hence, the spectacular trajectories of a few converts should not obscure the daily reality of the remaining 99%. Conversions to Islam in their overwhelming majority are mundane and banal and do

not fit into dominant framings of threat and menace. Most converts posi-
tively embrace their state of "liminality": They enjoy their roles as cultural
"passers," "bridges," or "ambassadors" (Bartoszewicz 2013) and promote
a rhetoric of "syncretism" between their culture of origin and their newly
embraced religion, rather than an attitude of symbolic battle, radical dif-
ferentiation, or conflict (Wohlrab-Sahr 1999). The focus on converts as
"more dangerous" is therefore misleading, for conversion alone is not a
determining factor of radicalization.

Second, this strand of scholarship tends to reify the boundaries between
converts and non-converts in a way that is artificial and unwarranted.
The internal convert/external convert divide often turns out to be a false
dichotomy, which is actually based on racialized assumptions about who
is Muslim and who is not. Research has demonstrated that many second-
generation Muslims closely resemble converts, for they understand reli-
gion very differently from their parents (Arslan 2010; Duderija 2007; Roy
2004): In fact, born-again Muslims typically insist on reciting the *shahada*
at the mosque to mark their renewed interest in the religion and inter-
pret their reconnection with diligent practice as a form of conversion. The
boundaries between so-called converts and so-called born Muslims are
therefore particularly blurry and can hardly be considered as a relevant
explanation. More important, people who join radical movements, even
when they were born in Muslim families, profess an understanding of reli-
gion that is so drastically different from the one in which they were raised
that it is safe to characterize their trajectory as a form of conversion.

Third, this perspective tends to reproduce the tropes of "contagion" and
"vulnerability," which have proven detrimental to radicalization research.
The idea that converts are more "malleable" and vulnerable to the viruses of
brainwashing and indoctrination, in part because of the so-called illness of
"convertitis," leads to pathologizing accounts of radicalization. The use of
medical metaphors has been criticized by many scholars because it entails a
framing of Muslim communities in terms of "risk" (converts being at once
more "risky" and "at risk"). Such conceptions obscure social and politi-
cal considerations in the development of radical trajectories (Heath-Kelly
2013). According to Anthony Richards (2011), they "deflect us from what
has generally been agreed in terrorism studies—that terrorism involves the
perpetration of rational and calculated acts of violence."

In sum, such approaches to conversion and radicalization reproduce
some of the flaws identified by critiques of the radicalization concept (e.g.,
pathologization, racialization of Muslim identities, lack of conceptual rigor
in distinguishing so-called converts from non-converts, heavy reliance

on mainstream media representations, etc.). Therefore, rather than considering conversion as a factor of radicalization, a more sustainable and integrated approach is to conceptualize radicalization as a subtype of conversion and to enlist conversion models as a means to understanding radicalization processes. Indeed, as put by Roland Marchal and Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem (2018, 5), radicalization can be understood as "the *conversion* or recruitment of groups or individuals to violent ideologies and actions" (emphasis mine). In what follows, I suggest going back to conversion scholarship to explore what radicalization means.

Radicalization as a Form of Conversion

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, conversion, like radicalization, is a contested concept. Interestingly, part of the debates in the conversion literature closely mirror those surrounding radicalization. Controversies around conversion models can therefore help illuminate the radicalization concept and provide solid ground for its theoretical refoundation. The literature on conversion emerged at the end of the 1960s in the United States when the rapid development of "new religious movements" (NRMs) such as the Unification Church, The Family, Aum Shinrikyo, or the People's Temple prompted questions about religious change and re-affiliation (Barker 1989). Hundreds of studies on conversion have been published since then. While NRMs do not necessarily promote violence, they share with contemporary radical groups a number of characteristics: small group size, atypical demographics (predominance of young people), first-generation membership, charismatic leaders, unequivocal belief systems, emphasis on us/them divides, and antagonistic relations with society (Barker 1995). While we lack solid empirical (and especially ethnographic) studies on radical groups and movements (partly because of access and safety issues), we do have a long tradition of immersive and interview-based qualitative research on conversion, whose insights can be productively enlisted to shed light on some aspects of radicalization. As a result, an increasing number of studies, initiated by Marc Sageman (2004), have envisioned parallels between radicalization and NRMs/conversion research (see also Ferguson and Binks 2015; Borum 2011; Shterin and Yarlykapov 2011; Dawson 2009; Sedgwick 2007; Langone 2006). This is a much welcome trend since the literature on conversion is rich with findings that can illuminate the process of radicalization itself. In the remainder of this chapter, I highlight four main debates of conversion scholarship

that can be relevant to students of radicalization: the issue of agency; the question of time and processual change; the centrality of collective life; and the matter of embodied practice.

Agency

Two paradigms have historically characterized conversion research. The "old" paradigm saw conversion in passive terms, as something irrational that suddenly "happened" to the individual. Studies of religious conversion have long been dominated by such a deterministic understanding, which influenced most of the models until the 1970s. In the passivist paradigm, the individual is at the mercy of external forces that make them convert: for instance, a set of social predispositions that renders them "vulnerable" and a brainwashing cult that takes advantage of this vulnerability. They have no agency over their own religious decisions and passively receive a new belief and ideology. According to James Richardson (1985), "this view of forced conversion implies that if enough information is available about a person's psychological and social background; then one can predict whether or not that person will be converted." The old paradigm has been criticized on the ground that it neglects the agency of individuals and strives to identify high-risk "profiles," an endeavor which has turned out to be vain, as emphasized by Daniela Pisoiu (chapter 2) and John F. Morrison (chapter 5) in this volume. The overwhelming majority of researchers have progressively moved away from such pathologizing interpretations of conversion and have distanced themselves from brainwashing models. It is considered that "coercive conversions" (Lofland and Skonovd 1981) are extremely rare, and so are cases of coercive radicalization. In fact, according to specialist of terror networks Marc Sageman (2004, 125), "five decades of research have failed to provide any empirical support for the brainwashing thesis."

Instead, a new understanding of conversion emerged at the end of the 1970s, focusing on converts as autonomous actors engaged in activities of meaning-seeking. As put by Bryan Taylor (1976), the focus shifted from "someone who is converted" to "someone who converts." The "new" paradigm portrays conversion as the result of an active quest for truth by a subject. Roger Straus's research (1976) on how individuals "change themselves" was one of the first explicitly active treatments of religious conversion. This is not to suggest that individuals are purely autonomous agents strategically trying out different options and exercising their absolute free will, as some rational choice theories would have it. To be sure, these

choices remain constrained by social conditions of existence and interpersonal relations (see the following sections). Yet, the new paradigm helps us depart from pathologizing accounts of conversion and radicalization by considering how certain sets of beliefs and practices might actually make sense for some individuals at certain points in their lives. This approach can be productively enlisted to understand how and why individuals deliberately adopt radical beliefs and behaviors.

Time and Change

Another dividing line in conversion research has to do with the relationship to time and change. Early works on conversion conceptualized it as a marked rupture between a before and an after. In line with the genealogy of conversion as a predominantly Christian term (Asad 1993), these accounts were heavily influenced by Paul's conversion story as related in the Bible (Mossière 2007): On the road to Damascus, Paul, a young and ambitious Jewish man who acquired fame by persecuting the first Christians, is blinded by the light and saved by God. Sudden and dramatic, his conversion is also a single terminal event, inaugurating a dichotomous relationship to time: Paul was Jewish; he is now Christian.

Contrasting with this narrative of discontinuity, sociological and anthropological literature on conversion has tended to emphasize the continuous nature of religious change. Several scholars have proposed to conceptualize conversion as a *process* with various stages (Rambo 1993; Greil and Rudy 1983; Straus 1979; Lofland and Stark 1965) or even as a *career* (Richardson 1978; Gooren 2005). In a seminal article, Straus (1979) wrote that "the act of conversion is not a terminal act." In his study of conversion across the Mediterranean world during antiquity, Thomas Finn (1997, 30) added that conversion "meant a transforming change of religion, but *not something over and done with*" (emphasis mine). These considerations have been applied to the study of conversion to Islam specifically. Tina Gudrun Jensen (2006) explores how converts learn to become Muslim, emphasizing that conversion to Islam is "a *gradual process* of change and transformation" (emphasis mine). As for Anna Mansson McGinty (2006, 188), she writes that "the process of becoming Muslim is *neither final nor predictable*; there are no sudden breaks or absolute changes; it is gradual" (emphasis mine). Juliette Galonnier (2018) has also argued that becoming Muslim is not about "moving into" Islam but rather a process of "moving toward" it.

This gradual approach to conversion is actually in line with findings

from the sociology of deviance (Parrucci 1968), especially Howard Becker's work on marijuana users. In *Outsiders* (1991 [1963], 30), Becker writes: "We are not so much interested in the person who commits a deviant act once as in the person who sustains a pattern of deviance over a long period of time, who makes of deviance a way of life, who organizes his identity around a pattern of deviant behavior." Likewise, sociological scholarship on conversion is not so much interested in the person who simply converts as in the convert who maintains a pattern of religiosity in the long run. Thus, Straus (1979, 161) has argued that the "reasons why a person might seek conversion become of secondary interest to the question of *how does a person manage to maintain across time* any form of strict social, behavioral and/or phenomenological organization" (emphasis mine). Straus suggests that instead of focusing on the *why* of conversion and endlessly looking for static conversion causes or motives, it is more fruitful to study *how* religious commitment is built and maintained over time. In the case of new religious movements or radical groups, such commitment can be secured by the development of a plausibility structure (Berger 1967), the emphasis on discipline—strict churches are strong (Iannaccone 1994), the enforcement of a sense of religious exclusivism (being the only saved sect), the threat of exclusion from the group, and the ability to offer a straightforward economy of salvation.[1]

In short, what matters for these scholars is not so much the decision to convert but rather how conversion is secured and stabilized and how converts progressively solidify religious dispositions and learn to persevere in their beliefs and actions in spite of challenges and contradictions. Contrary to the Pauline assumption, complete religious change is not acquired through the mere act of conversion. It must be *achieved* a posteriori. Hence, while it is often presented as a single event pinpointed in time, conversion is rather made of a multiplicity of events that stretch over time: It is a drawn-out process of accomplishment, rather than a fait accompli. It seems more appropriate, therefore, to talk of "converting persons" rather than "converts," and we might as well start talking about "radicalizing individuals" instead of "radicals," for radicalization is, like conversion, a protracted process (Crettiez 2016). An attention to time also implies taking into account what individuals convert *from*, in addition to what they convert *to*. What is it that converts and radicals leave behind? What type of self and life do they withdraw from? What social role do they exit (Ebaugh 1988)? Answers to these questions must be a central part of our investigations.

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1. The centrality of the economy of salvation in the radicalization process is particularly evident in the German case study provided by Robert Pelzer and Mika Moeller in chapter 8 of this volume.

Micro, Macro, and Meso Approaches: The Centrality of Collective Life

One additional cleavage separates scholars who see conversion as a purely individual act from those who view it as the result of macro-sociological changes. In the first approach, characteristic of early academic models, religious change is described as a personal and intimate gesture. Here again, the influence of the Pauline metaphor seems preponderant. In the Bible, Paul, alone, suddenly embraces a new worldview and rejects his former social identity. His experience is ineffable, incommunicable to other human beings: Conversion is portrayed as individual and individuating, a subversive gesture that asserts the importance of private faith over group identity.

Such understanding of conversion as an eminently individual act has been severely criticized. Danièle Hervieu-Léger notices that "conversion, which is presented by those concerned with it as the most intimate and private experience they ever went through, is in fact a social and socially determined act" (1999, 120, my translation). The individualistic approach to conversion, it is argued, misses the larger processes at play (Yang 1998). It is unable to understand for instance why whole societies or communities massively convert to a religion at a particular point in time. According to Orlando Woods (2012), "changes in the structure of society, perhaps unknown to converts themselves, play a key role in determining religious choice." Hence, scholars have advocated for a more macro understanding of religious conversion by linking it to larger social processes and by taking into account the structures of societies, specifically in terms of socioeconomic equality and political regimes as well as precipitating historical events.

Yet, the cleavage between the individualist and macro perspectives leaves unaddressed the intermediary role of collective life. On the one hand, the individualist conception misses the fact that in order to corroborate personal convictions, individuals cannot rely on their own subjectivity. They need to share their experience with others to obtain an external proof that their beliefs are relevant (Hervieu-Léger 1999, 180; Richardson and Kilbourne 1989). Thus, even in the realm of religious individualism, believing implies belonging, if not to an institutionalized religion, at least to a small group with whom one can share one's beliefs. This is as true about conversion as it is about radicalization, since recent research shows that lone-wolf radicalization is mostly a myth (Crettiez et al. 2017). On the other hand, the macro sociological perspective explains conversion by a series of societal changes (e.g., invasions, commercial exchanges, economic incentives), but never gets to explain how, practically, individuals get to learn about the new beliefs, practices, rules of sociability, speech manners, food habits, and clothing requirements of their new religion. While phenomena of massive

conversions certainly stem from large historical changes, they need to be operationalized at the micro-sociological level.

Certainly, small groups have a role to play in this endeavor. Accordingly, a number of studies now focus on the meso role of religious groups in structuring conversion and radicalization paths. Indeed, research on small groups has demonstrated that it is through them that "individuals find arenas to enact their autonomous selves and to demonstrate allegiance to communities and institutions" (Fine and Harrington 2004, 344). Small groups help converts operationalize religious dogmas that would otherwise remain very abstract. Conversion, therefore, is not only an individual or macro-sociological event, but also a meso sociological process involving interaction between converts and group members. Writing about the learning process of smoking marijuana, Howard Becker (1953, 242) explained that: "an individual will be able to use marijuana for pleasure only . . . [after] a *series of communicative acts in which others point out new aspects of his experience to him*, present him with new interpretations of events, and help him achieve a new conceptual organization of his world, without which the new behavior is not possible" (emphasis mine). Hence, interaction with others appears crucial in the formation of a new self. This analysis applies word for word to the experience of converts, who stabilize their religious practice and progressively build loyalty toward the group through exchanges with their peers.

Accordingly, several sociological studies on conversion have devoted substantial attention to the role of small groups and collective life (Balch 1980; Snow and Phillips 1980). Straus (1979) was the first to conceptualize conversion as a "*collective accomplishment*." Theodore Long and Jeffrey Hadden (1983), in their study of the Unification Church, propose to understand conversion as a *process of socialization*. They suggest that we pay closer attention to the ways religious groups *create* and *incorporate* new members. According to them, recruitment precedes belief and commitment. In her study of conversion to Mormonism, Sophie-Hélène Trigeaud (2013) also convincingly describes how Mormons "manufacture" (*fabriquer*) members through an all-encompassing education that durably shapes their subjectivity. Yannick Fer (2010), in his ethnography of conversion to Pentecostalism, highlights the central role of Pentecostal institutions in shaping conversion trajectories while maintaining the illusion that converts reconnect with their "true selves." In an interview study with American converts to Russian Orthodoxy, H. B. Cavalcanti and H. Paul Chalfant (1944, 452) argue that collective life should be given a central place in scholarship on conversion: It "should be seen as more than the wallpaper that forms the background of your beliefs," but rather as "the creative energy which forms individuals' norms and values."

A significant part of the conversion literature also insists on "role playing," "trying out," and "experimenting" as central to religious change. Thus, David Bromley and Anson Shupe (1979) reverse the conventional sequence of conversion explanations (pre-dispositioning needs → new beliefs → practice and inclusion into a group) and consider on the contrary that novices first meet a group, then start experimenting with their new role as potential believers, and subsequently embrace the corresponding set of beliefs (if the situation suits them). For David Snow and Richard Machalek (1983), conversion is characterized by an ability to "embrace the convert role." In his study of a UFO cult, Robert Balch (1980) has aptly shown that participants convert by adopting the roles of converts, even though they do not necessarily believe in all the precepts of the cult. In his interpretation, conversion results first and foremost from participation: It is by actively engaging in a conversion role that seekers develop dispositions that might eventually convince them to adhere to a new set of beliefs. This is in line with the comments made by John F. Morrison in chapter 5 of this volume, according to which social involvement with a group tends to precede ideological commitment.

In sum, individuals cannot convert alone: They need the support of religious groups to give them guidelines, set the modalities of their worship, accompany them throughout their transformation and grant them recognition as authentic members of the group. Carolyn Chen (2008, 61), in her study of Taiwanese immigrants converting to Christianity, therefore explains that converts *belong before believing*. Conversion processes are therefore eminently *relational*. This is also in line with past research on terrorism showing that social networks tend to matter more than ideological convictions in the commitment to action (Sageman 2004, 113). In this perspective, radicalization "stems from complex and contingent sets of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutional actors" (della Porta 2018, 463).

Beliefs and Practices: The Role of Embodiment

A last debate focuses on whether conversion happens at the cognitive or behavioral level. In a seminal yet contested article, John Lofland and Rodney Stark (1965) had defined conversion as a "change in worldview or perspective." In this view, conversion was said to happen at the level of consciousness. It was akin to a "change of heart" (Heirich 1977), a "reorientation of the soul" (Nock 1933). It occurred when new beliefs were adopted and professed. Even if most sociological works also recognize the impor-

tance of a change in behavior and practices for conversion to be complete, these new behaviors and practices are generally described as *resulting from* the adoption of new beliefs (Snow and Machalek 1984).

Yet, recent anthropological research on religion has demonstrated that religious practices are much more than a mere reflection of beliefs. Rather, they can also be the *means* through which beliefs are cultivated. The idea that bodily practices are meant to create moral dispositions has first been put forward by Marcel Mauss (1973, 87), who wrote that "at the bottom of all our mystical states, there are body techniques." This idea has been further explored by Talal Asad (1993) and Saba Mahmood (2012), who each talk about the role of prayer as a means to cultivate pious selves and reinforce the desire for worship.

These considerations have recently been applied to the study of conversion (Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Yang and Abel 2014). In a valuable ethnographic study on Muslim converts in Missouri, Daniel Winchester (2008, 1754–55) has written extensively about the primary role of embodied religious practices in converts' attempts to develop their moral Muslim selves and embrace a new Muslim habitus. He found that "converts did not see their practices as derivative of an already fully-formed moral reason, but rather understood practices such as prayer and fasting as central to the ongoing development of their new moral selves." Karin Van Nieuwkerk (2014) also writes that "conversion is not solely a mental activity of accepting a new belief. It requires the embodiment of new social and religious practices." In her study of female converts to Islam in France and Quebec, Géraldine Mossière (2011) also suggests that her interviewees become Muslim by "disciplining their bodies" to "transform their spirit." This scholarship invites us to acknowledge the central role of the *body* in processes of conversion, an "absolutely crucial" factor, which according to Manni Crone (2016) has been largely ignored in radicalization research. The incorporation of a new set of religious beliefs and practices involves a number of body techniques that must be studied. This is particularly necessary when examining the development of violent dispositions. As put by Crone (2016, 601), "Young aspiring extremists do not become radicalized by taking part in highbrow discussions about the concept of jihad. Rather, they pick up specific ways of behaving, fighting, shooting and dressing." There is therefore no clear-cut separation between "cognitive" (mind) or "behavioral" (body) transformation, and if anything, it seems that the latter predates the former. This must be taken into account in current research, which often tends to differentiate between cognitive and behavioral radicalization—or radicalization of opinion and radicalization of action (McCauley and Mos-

kalenko 2014)—while the two are in fact inextricably linked: It is not about "either or," as Peter Neumann (2013) reminds us.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that conversion models can play their part in solving the puzzle of radicalization. Indeed, conversion scholarship has been exposed to the same debates and controversies that now engulf the concept of radicalization: It has been criticized for pathologizing religious transformations, for overemphasizing individual factors, for prioritizing ideology and beliefs over practice, and for neglecting the processual nature of change. Scholars have taken into account such criticisms to craft more rigorous conversion research. This literature can therefore be productively enrolled to overcome the shortcomings of current radicalization research. Several takeaway points can be drawn from this chapter.

First, the concept of "liminality" is useful in thinking about the tipping conditions that can foster radicalization. A central characteristic of conversion trajectories, liminality constitutes a state of indeterminacy and uncertainty. While it is generally happily embraced, it can also push some individuals to adopt rigid, intransigent, and possibly violent behavior.

Second, recent conversion studies encourage us to break away from pathologizing explanations of radicalization, in which individuals are portrayed as passive, contaminated, or brainwashed. Such approaches have now been rejected in conversion scholarship, which rather advocates taking seriously individuals' agency, worldviews, and repertoires of justification.

Third, in understanding radicalization and conversion, it appears more productive to focus on the *how* rather than the *why*, that is, to trace *routes* rather than *roots* (Horgan 2008). The literature on conversion has demonstrated that we should move away from an analysis of static causes and motives to an analysis of dynamic processes and trajectories. Interpretations in terms of predispositions, "profiles," or sociological determinisms have proven limited, and it is more fruitful to focus on the contingent assemblages of conditions and circumstances that potentially lead to radicalization.

Fourth, in describing how people reorder and reorient their lives, we must break away from a dichotomous approach to time and change, characterized by a marked rupture between a before and an after. Conversion is rather a continuous, gradual, and protracted process. Furthermore, such a process is not linear, but made of forward and backward moves, doubts and

hesitations that unfold in a chronologically irregular manner. This indeterminacy must be further considered in radicalization research.

Fifth, it is necessary to pay acute attention to the role of social networks, affective ties, and interaction. Radicalization must be framed as a collective accomplishment rather than an isolated individual gesture. Greater attention must be paid to how movements attract, incorporate, and manufacture new members by durably shaping their sense of self through interaction.

Sixth, the literature on conversion teaches us that beliefs are not the only locus of religious transformation and that it is through embodied practice, participation in collective life, and role learning that genuine conviction is ultimately produced. Thus, it becomes necessary to move from an exclusive focus on "ideas" to a more pragmatic approach about how radical commitment is secured: In particular, it is important to understand how new radical beliefs and modes of action become incorporated into one's body.

In sum, paying attention to the debates in the conversion literature helps us break away with conventional wisdom about radicalization and enables us to refound the concept on a more rigorous basis. Yet, conversion models are not a panacea, and several caveats must be borne in mind when applying them to the study of radicalization.

One limit of the conversion literature is its strong religious connotation. Even though conversion models have been used to study enrollment in different types of groups and careers, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (Greil and Rudy 1983) or anorexia (Darmon 2008), they remain firmly associated with studies on religion and religious phenomena. Although religion and ideology do play a role in radicalization processes, this should not deflect us from the fact that these processes are not *only* religious and ideological but also social and political.

Another limit of conversion models is that they do not sufficiently cover the organizational dynamics and relational positionalities of various converting groups. An encompassing view of the larger ecosystem of these groups is missing, which prevents us from explaining why some of them start viewing violence as a legitimate mode of action and others do not. Stefan Malthaner (2017, 375) has highlighted the need to embed the analysis of "radical movements and militant groups within a broader relational field of actors involved in political conflict." Conversion models are not necessarily equipped to do that: As such, they are only one entry point into the study of radicalization and must be complemented with other approaches, such as social movement theories (see Pisoiu, chapter 2 of this volume).

Finally, one of the remaining questions of the conversion literature

is the issue of deconversion, disaffiliation, and disengagement (Fillieule 2015), whereby converts "move out" after having "moved in" (Van Nieuwkerk 2018). Given the high turnover rates of NRMs—research suggests that the overwhelming majority of joiners end up leaving (Dawson 2009, 7)—one can wonder about the sustainability of conversion. Solving this puzzle requires extensive longitudinal research. In addition, we must also explore what has been called the "challenge of the second-generation" (Barker 1995). In other words, what happens to converts' children? Can commitment be secured across generations? Do the "born-intos" behave like the "born-agains"? Likewise, in the coming years students of radicalization will have to face the challenge of determining whether radical beliefs and behaviors are transmitted across generations or fade away.

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