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Rethinking Conversion:
Beyond the Religious and the Secular

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RELIGIOWEST

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Abstract

This article seeks to pinpoint some of the consequences of the secularization process – conceived as the dissociation of religion from both state politics and culture – with the aim of broadening the conceptualization of conversion. Conversion is therefore considered to be a social fact beyond the religious and the secular, for which the concept of 'trans-formation' is employed in order to grasp this phenomenon. The concept of trans-formation posits processes of conversion as shifts from intimate convictions to public values. From this perspective, based on a pragmatic sociology of values, religious conversions are put forth as one possible way to qualify trajectories that the concept of trans-formation aims to comprehend. The article ends by considering the status of religious convictions in comparison with convictions otherwise qualified.

Keywords

"I mean by this that great proximity of alternatives has led to a society in which more people change their positions, that is, "convert" in their lifetimes, and/or adopt a different position than their parents"

(Taylor, 2007: 556 [note 19]).

I would like to pinpoint the phenomenon that Taylor identifies with the word "convert" without having to resort to using quotation marks to describe them. I recognize that talking about 'conversion' when one is not referring to a change of religious identity seems odd at first. However, I argue that this uneasiness need not remain if social scientists fully acknowledge, as Taylor rightly states, that the variety of personal convictions people hold may change over the course of their lives. Based on an analysis of the public performance of various conversion trajectories, I intend to problematize the dichotomy between the religious and the secular. How is conversion now to be understood in the broader context of the individualization of personal convictions?

To make sense of conversion as a social fact requires considering two movements that come with secularization.[1] The first movement involves the dissociation of temporal and spiritual universes of meaning. This dissociation creates the conditions in which it is possible to give meaning to the world through personal experiences, which results in the individualization of beliefs and values (Taylor, 2007). Individual changes of religious identity tend to be the norm in the contemporary world of research as well as in the social imaginary.[2] However, historically, this was not always thought to be the case: "Conversions have always existed, but mass conversions have generally been collective and in specific political circumstances (conquests, assimilation strategy, expression of local identities). What is new today is the high number of conversions undertaken as a result of individual choice and in very different contexts" (Roy, 2010 [2008]: 12-13). The second movement involves the 'delinking' of the 'religious' and the 'cultural,' which had led to the massive contemporary phenomenon of individual conversions. As a result, secularization produces what Roy calls 'pure religion':

> secularization has not eradicated religion. As a result of our separating religion from our cultural environment, it appears on the other hand as pure religion. In fact, secularization has worked: what we are witnessing today is the militant reformulation of religion in a secularized space that has given religion its autonomy and therefore the conditions for its expansion. Secularization and globalization have forced religions to break away from culture, to think of themselves as autonomous and to reconstruct themselves in a space that is no longer territorial and is therefore no longer subject to politics (2010: 2).

This disconnection paved the way to what was once called a "religious market" (Berger, 1990 [1967]).[3] In this new regime, religions can now recruit new members from other "cultures." Considering these two movements that accompany secularization – the dissociation of religion from state politics, and the disconnection of religion from culture– I propose that, before the major secularization of the twentieth century, purely individual change of religious identity was virtually unthinkable. Before secularization, as Roy suggests, conversion would only make sense in reference to a larger context. Therefore, I posit that "religion without conversions" (understood as purely individual change) gave way to "conversions without religion," which implies that religion has been downplayed to the status of one of many possible kinds of convictions. This proposition should be understood less as a descriptive statement than a working hypothesis that could bring about fruitful ways of rethinking the phenomenon of conversion. I argue that there is no sociological reason *a priori* to study conversions involving religious, sexual, political and philosophical convictions as separate phenomena. Focusing on religious identity change fails to acknowledge the variety of conversions that take place in the contemporary world.

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[1] For a summary on the main approaches to secularization, see for example Tschannen (1992) and Dobbelaere (1981; 2002).

[2] According to Meintel (2007), most social research on conversion revolves around the idea of a change of religious identity.

[3] For another influential thesis on the relationship between globalization and religion, see Peter Beyer (1994).

How should we think about conversion in sociology? Flanagan asks, "How is the sociological imagination to be employed to understand the social facts of conversion?" (2009: 39). I understand conversion as a phenomenon of "normal sociology,"[4] as a social fact, through an approach similar to Durkheim's premise of crime in society (1982 [1894]: 66). Asserting that conversion is a social fact does not mean that everybody converts in one's lifetime, as Durkheim neither intended to say that crime and suicide affect everyone in a given society. Considering conversion as a social fact implies that it is "general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations" (Durkheim, 1982: 59). This assertion does not aim to explain conversion but rather to situate the methodological stance maintained in this paper. I will not be looking at individual experiences for their own sake. Instead, I wish to define a concept and methodological tool that posits those experiences as manifestations of a broader phenomenon common in society, which is not to say that individual experiences are not unique or that they can be reduced to these commonalities.

If conversion is understood as a social fact, Mills would add (2000 [1959]), how are sociologists to study it both as a personal trouble and a public issue? According to Mills' classical definition, sociological imagination is the capacity "to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society" (p. 6). This is sociology's task and promise. Another use of sociological imagination involves overcoming the European frame of a sociology that has taken on "modernity" as an object of study (Bhambra, 2007). For instance, a *de facto* definition of conversion as a religious phenomenon reproduces the classical idea in sociology that modern society is divided in differentiated spheres (political, economic, religious, social, judicial, etc.) (Boatcă, Costa, 2010). A third use of sociological imagination consists of attending to phenomena of 'haunting': "Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition" (Gordon, 2008 [1997]: 8). Gordon challenges sociologists to consider the complexity of power relations and individual fantasies invisible to both society and individuals. In an attempt to respond to Mills', Bhambra's and Gordon's proposals, I suggest an approach to conversion that offers sociologists a conceptual tool to exercise their sociological imagination in order to move beyond sharp-cut distinctions of analytical scales (individual/collective), *a priori* separations of society into differentiated spheres and the refusal to consider what is invisible to society and individuals. Through theoretical and empirical argumentation, I will explore how religious conversion can be analysed together with other trajectories of what I will call 'trans-formations.'[5] In doing so, I seek to enlarge the theoretical scope of conceptualizations of conversion to make them more complex and dynamic than the notion of 'religious identity change.'[6]

Religious Conversion as an Analytical Concept: Three Epistemological Limitations

Before exploring some specific examples, I propose to examine three questions that will help to broaden the scope of inquiry. What is conversion? Is conversion exclusively a religious phenomenon? Lastly, is conversion an "ordinary" phenomenon?

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[4] Stating that a phenomenon pertains to "normal sociology" does not preclude it from being singled out or dramatized by the public conscience.

[5] I use the term 'trans-formation' with a hyphen to underline the fact that this concept does not mainly designate an interior transformation but a change of position in configurations of values.

[6] In this article, I will use the term 'conversion' to talk about the social fact of concrete trajectories of changes in values that can qualify as 'trans-formations,' which constitute a conceptual tool to analyse those trajectories.

What is conversion?

If I were to follow the majority of studies on conversion, I would define it as a change of religious identity, as previously mentioned. When one looks closer at social research on conversion, however, a greater variety emerges, but only in appearance. The variety of definitions proposed by researchers coalesces around the broadest of common denominators: the dimension of change (Mossière, 2007: 9). Such a statement should not stand as a satisfactory definition. Psychologists and sociologists[7] are certainly those who contributed the most to the conceptualization of conversion (Lofland, Stark, 1965; Snow, Philips, 1980; Greil, Rudy, 1984; Rambo, 1993). Roy summarizes how the social sciences represent conversions:

> So for sociologists, a convert is somebody who shifts from a religion A to join another religion B, while considering A and B as two symmetric entities belonging to the same register (a religion and a culture), as if the move would let A and B remain unchanged, and leaving the convert now in B the same way he was formerly in A. Intermediary stages are understood in terms of hybridity or syncretism (2013: 182).

This way of conceptualizing how and why an individual changes religion amounts to relegating the rest of this person's life to causal or contextual variables. The description drawn by Roy is what I will call the 'preferred reading' of religious conversion. 'Preferred readings' have the "institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalised" (Hall, 1980: 134). "Ordinary" people and researchers alike use the 'preferred reading' of conversion, which conceives linear religious identity change as a norm by which conversions are evaluated. As Roy points out, the concept of 'syncretism' often acts to differentiate conversions that do not correspond to the modern 'preferred reading' (Van der Veer, 1994: 196; Viswanathan, 1996).[8] For example, conversion by "others", meaning non-Europeans, is sometimes depicted as "ambiguous" (Sharkey, 2013). Considering this double standard, the question that needs to be asked is: Who is being studied through the modern, neo-colonial 'preferred reading' of 'religious identity change' and whose trajectory is being evaluated by this norm as more or less 'ambiguous'? The 'preferred reading,' omnipresent in the social imaginary, fails to acknowledge the fact that "converts are not necessarily easily recognizable" (Marzouki, 2013: 5).

Is conversion a religious phenomenon?

Conversion studies seldom questions the adjective 'religious' always appended to the word 'conversion.' However, theoretical debates on the definition of religion have flourished in the social sciences, without conversion studies having followed suit. According to how one defines religion, the spectrum of the phenomena studied could be broadened or narrowed. Moreover, what is 'religious' is subject to concurring definitions by both the social sciences and social actors. Consequently, I argue that researchers should not avoid problematizing the religious dimension of conversion. Only few recent works of which I am aware approach more or less directly this concern (Marzouki & Roy, 2013; Meintel, 2007; Dericquebourg, 2010; Roy, 2010 [2008]). As a matter of fact, conversion is a notion almost exclusively used by religious studies, regardless of the discipline.[9] The underlying

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[7] Conversion has also been studied by historians, who have examined collective or mass conversions in relation to specific political events (Bennassar, Bennassar, 2006 [1989]; Krstic, Le Gall, 2012; Dakhlia, Vincent, 2011).

[8] Droogers gives the following definition of syncretism: "religious interpenetration, either taken for granted or subject to debate" (1989: 20-21).

[9] Some works (Petrunik, 1972; Greil, Rudy, 1983; Alexander, Rollins, 1984) use the concept of conversion to describe how participants in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) come to share what these researchers call AA's ideology. These studies carry the religious analogy to the point of considering AA groups as cults or quasi-religious groups. Another example of a non-religious use of the notion of conversion is Kestel's book (2012) on the political conversion of Jacques Doriot and ex-communists within the Parti populaire français (PPF), which is considered fascist. Aside from these studies, Kristen Schilt has conducted a comparative research on different kinds of major changes people experience over the course of

question seems to be: Does the definition of the 'religious' require religious phenomena to be studied separately? The religious/secular binary has been criticized and deconstructed by critical religious studies scholars, which have refused to consider religion as incommensurable and attempted to reveal how this binary is sustained (Asad, 1993; Fitzgerald, 2008). They invite researchers to consider religion not as an analytical category, but as a social category that needs to be contextualized and historicized. Using the religious analogy to understand phenomena that are not religious *per se* entails the risk of imposing meanings alien to a particular context (Fitzgerald, 2003 [2000]). Laborde (2014) takes a different stance, as she suggests not abandoning the religious analogy but instead multiplying their number so that researchers can consider a variety of experiences and not only the normative individualistic one. Comparison may well be the solution to this dilemma between forgoing or enriching the religious analogy: "The epistemological and methodological preconditions for a better knowledge of [religion's] political and social meanings still need improving, in particular a more systematic comparative perspective" (Amiraux, 2012: 345). In terms of conversion, looking at how different moral convictions change over the course of one's life could be a first step to avoid falling into the trap of the religious/secular binary. In doing so, the theoretical conditions for the comparison of a variety of conversions must be established. How can we acknowledge diverse moral convictions in their own right, instead of always examining them through the lens of religion?[10] If those studying conversion problematize the relationships between religion and politics (Marzouki, 2013), maybe it is time, as I proposed in the introduction, to include a wider array of convictions in the discussion.

Is conversion an "ordinary" phenomenon?

In research on conversion, conversion is often associated with controversies, which allows for affirmations like Viswanathan's suggesting that "*conversion is arguably one of the most unsettling political events in the life of a society*" (1998: xi). Studies that present conversion as both a threat to nation states and religious groups lend credence to Viswanathan's claim. Focusing on nation states, public declarations by politicians or laws play a role in maintaining a relationship between conversion and controversy. Most famously, contemporary conversions to Islam are linked to radicalization (Özyürek, 2009), or islamization (Liogier, 2012). "Fraudulent" religious conversion in immigration processes has also been in the spotlight in the U.S. with regard to cases involving people seeking refuge and claiming religious persecution in their home country (Samahon, 2000). Some states even passed laws to regulate or ban so-called "forced conversions," such as Sri Lanka (Owens, 2006) and India (Coleman, 2008; Jenkins, 2008; Kolluri, 2002). Moreover, conversion takes on a controversial character when it is supposed to involve a "dual loyalty" (or citizenship) in the context of interstate conflicts (Yen-Fen, Wu, 2011). From religious groups' perspective, conversion can be perceived as a threat when it takes the form of apostasy (Bromley, 1998). However, to only look at those extraordinary cases of conversion paints a misleading picture. What about conversions that are not heard of, that appear to be in line with the dominant social order? (Marzouki, 2013)

In sum, I argue that the tendency to dramatize conversion (3rd limitation) stems from the same bias as religious exclusivism (2nd limitation), resulting in modernist and neo-colonial conceptualizations of conversion conceived as individual religious identity change (1st limitation). Considering these three limitations, what should social scientists be looking for, what cases should they study and what should they say about them?

(Contd.) ————————————

their lives: "She examines how commonsense ideas about the biological origins of social differences ease or heighten inequalities for marginalized groups through an analysis of four case studies of individuals making major life transformations in identities commonly understood to be both stable and shaped by biology: weight, gender, sexual orientation, and Jewish identity" (Schilt, s.d.).

[10] See, for example, Lee (2014) who criticizes unproblematized uses of terms such as 'nonreligious' that fail to acknowledge diverse substantive positions and public identities.

Religious Conversion: from Concept to Representation

When social scientists study conversion, they often encounter 'life narratives,' even if they do not themselves make use of the life history method. Narratives may be products of or underpinnings for conversion, even though a life narrative is not always readily available to researchers, as I will demonstrate below. Consequently, in most cases, those studying conversion must balance tensions between minimizing the 'life narrative effect' and hiding behind converts' stories (Le Pape, 2009: 212-222). Also, social scientists need to be aware that "ordinary" representations of conversion have entered the field of social sciences and influenced conceptualizations of conversion in a way that may no longer be suitable, if it has ever even been so. Conceptualizations of conversion are deeply embedded in the modern social imaginary, which is characterized by the valorization of an autonomous individual who seeks, via narratives, to achieve a level of authenticity that marks his/her individuality (Taylor, 1992 [1991]).[11]

I posit that the 'preferred readings' of conversion have been established in reference to cases of "great men" like Paul Claudel or Saint Augustine, all whom gained public recognition through their publicized conversion narratives. Therefore, I suggest that these men's written narratives have had a lasting influence on theorizations of conversion.[12] As such, Claudel's conversion trajectory – often cited in social science research as a paradigmatic example of modern conversion – can serve as a starting point to disentangle the intrinsic links between conceptualizations of conversion and the modern social imaginary. With his conversion narrative, the French writer, poet, dramatist and diplomat, who was born in 1868 and died in 1955, initiated a new literary genre that marked and still marks many converts and studies on conversion. Claudel's short conversion narrative "My Conversion" [Ma conversion],[13] first published in 1913, initiated the first wave of 'intellectual converts' to Catholicism in France at the beginning of the twentieth century and inspired an array of conversions among French intellectuals throughout the following decades.[14] Claudel dates his own conversion to 1886, which is in fact more a return to, than a discovery of, Catholicism. Claudel was from a Catholic background, but his family departed from religion when they moved to Paris. As he studied in a secular provincial school, like other "great men" of his time, he subscribed to the idea that science could explain everything through 'laws' and causal effects. He felt as if he were living in a 'materialist prison' and experienced the 'supernatural' for the first time while reading Rimbaud's *Illuminations* and *Une Saison en Enfer*. However, this "vivid and almost physical sense of the supernatural" did not last and his "habitual state of apathy and despair did not change" (p. 454).

As advanced by major "models" of conversion in contemporary social research, Claudel underwent a "moment of conversion." On December 25, 1896 at Notre-Dame de Paris, "[an] event took place which revolutionized [his] whole life. Suddenly [his] heart was touched and [*he*] *believed*" (p. 454). This 'inexpressible revelation' was followed by four years of resistance from Claudel who had to deal with this "great crisis of [his] life" (p. 455). In the end, Claudel resolved to go to confession where the priest commanded him to declare his conversion to his family before he could be absolved. Humiliated and infuriated by this injunction to publicize his conversion, it took him a year before he felt compelled to return. Exactly four years after his revelation, Claudel finally received his First

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[11] According to Taylor (1992 [1991]), "Western modernity," which emerged from Latin Christianity and was prolonged by the Protestant Reformation, encompasses three tendencies: individualism, secularization, and instrumental reason.

[12] "Writing has been viewed as the mark of a superior civilization and other societies have been judged, by this view, to be incapable of thinking critically and objectively, or having distance from ideas and emotions. Writing is part of theorising and writing is part of history" (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012 [1999]: 30).

[13] Paul Claudel (1999 [1913]), "My conversion" (translation from French), in *Pilgrim Souls: A Collection of Spiritual Autobiographies*, Amy Mandelker & Elizabeth Powers (eds), New York, Touchstone, p. 452-457.

[14] The first wave, which includes Charles de Foucauld, Joris-Karl Huysmans and Léon Bloy, is characterized by trajectories of conversion hinged upon a personal revelation, a unique experience the convert was to face individually, defenselessly (Lescourret, 2003: 87). Two waves followed the first, the second from 1895 to 1904 and the third from 1930 to 1935.

Communion at Notre-Dame. Claudel's conversion narrative shows close similarities with the representations of conversion put forth as examples by many social scientists (including numerous psychologists). For example, Rambo's psychological model of conversion includes seven steps that correspond mostly to Claudel's narrative: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences (Rambo, 1993). Even though Rambo presents this "model" as an analytical tool whose only purpose is to organize complex data, I cannot simply ignore the similarities between this theoretical representation and Claudel's own definition of conversion: "A conversion is a violent change that brings the convert to a new world in which he can feel astonished and, at first, disoriented" (quoted by Gugelot, 2002a: 59 [my translation from French]).[15] The dramatic character of Claudel's conversion is presented as emblematic of modern conversions in social research (Décobert, 2001: 76; Gugelot, 2002b: 9; Flanagan, 2009: 44). The most influential "models" of conversion in social research thus appear to be situated as modern and Christian (Mossière, 2012).

If Claudel's conversion narrative were all that was known about it, I could conclude that he underwent a dramatic, total and linear religious identity change. However, Claudel's narrative belongs more to the *confession* genre than that of biography. Claudel wrote "My Conversion" 25 years after his "moment of conversion" when he was asked to confess his conversion by a Dominican priest. First published in the Dominican *La revue de la jeunesse*, his sister-in-law later wished to include it in a new edition of Claudel's work. It is then that Claudel told her that he never had the intention to write such a text and that it even made him "wince." The apparent matching of his narrative with conversion studies models does not reflect his more complex lived experience. The idea itself of going public about his intimacy was repulsive to him. Claudel never even intended to keep notebooks. Again, he was responding to a command from his "superiors" (Guers, 1987: 134).[16] Notwithstanding, the publicizing of his intimacy was not planned by Claudel to be a product of his conversion. This publicity must be approached as a component of his conversion, even as constitutive of the process, but his conversion cannot be reduced to his narrative.

To add a layer of understanding to the Claudel case, his conversion needs to be read in relation to its context of emergence. Claudel's conversion took place in a context of religious anxiety in the lead up to the Law on the Separation of Churches and State (*Loi de séparation des Églises et de l'État)* passed in 1905. The conversion of several intellectuals allowed the Church to take on proponents of the republican positivist ideology by pinning some prominent figures in science and culture against others (Gugelot, 2002a: 55). Consequently, the figure of the intellectual convert contributed to the dichotomization of the religious and the secular in France at the turn of the twentieth century. Moreover, by making religion a private matter, the sudden *laicization* of France ironically resulted in the publicization of individual convictions in the public sphere. Talking about one's religious convictions in the public sphere thus became a moral duty, as in the case of Claudel (Gugelot, 2002a: 51). In this context, the emerging modern secular state produced exclusive and open religious subjectivities that appeared publicly through 'coming-outs.' From his prominent social position as an influential European man, Claudel could publically state his personal convictions by linking them to so-called "Catholic values" without having to expose his private practices.[17] As Claudel's change in values was publicly demeaned under the term '*Catho*,' his identification to "Catholic values" may have had a subjectifying effect. The public circulation of his conversion narrative and the social context coalesced to construct him as "convert." Even though Claudel never wished to make his

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[15] Paul Claudel's letter on Septembre 22, 1909, Paul Claudel, Francis Jammes and Gabriel Frizeau (1952), *Correspondance 1897-1938,* Paris, Gallimard, p. 166.

[16] Guers (1987) does not specify who those "superiors" were but the reader can guess that they were probably the superiors of the Ligugé Monastery where Claudel was first refused as a monk.

[17] By contrast, Claudel neglected his family, especially his sister Camille Claudel who was incarcerated in a psychiatric institution, although doctors were ready to authorize her release. She died there and her brother never claimed her body (Deveaux, 2013). Claudel was truly able to have a public existence claiming values without having to prove how he practiced them, with the exception of notebooks and stories that did not reflect his intimacy as he portrayed it.

'religious sentiments' known to the public – a recurrent idea in his writings – his social position changed as a consequence of the publicization of his values. His new stature as a public Catholic intellectual gave him the authority to publically intervene on the question of values while giving him the possibility to resist the subjectifying effects and injunctions to conform completely to the '*Catho*' model. Therefore, a conceptualization of conversion needs to rely on visibility and recognition.

Analytically, Claudel's conversion is a representation, which does not mean that it has no meaning in his own experience of it. However, for the researcher, it certainly means that attention should be paid to the conditions of possibility that sustain such representation. If visibility, which comes with Claudel's majority position in this case,[18] is one of those conditions, a racializing configuration also seems to play a role in constructing the exclusive religious subjectivity of the 'imaginary' convert Claudel.[19] From his majority position, Claudel uses the liberty it confers him to publicly evaluate the "others." For example, he affirms that religions other than Catholicism leave people with unused human capacities, such as love and desire (Claudel cited in Lescourret, 2003: 488).[20] Moreover, Claudel maintains that there is no such thing as a Russian, English or German Christ, but only the Catholic Christ, which unites a church that is not exclusive because it is universal (Claudel cited in Lescourret, 2003: 66).[21] This conforms to Roy's thesis according to which religion and culture have been unlocked, and religion has acquired its 'purity,' its 'religious exclusivity.'[22] Claudel goes further by associating Catholicism with a civilizing mission and colonialism. Charles Péguy, a contemporary convert of Claudel, situates the waves of conversion to Catholicism among French intellectuals in a long tradition of fathers and grandfathers who constitute the "race" (Péguy cited in Gugelot, 2002a: 62).[23] I argue that this racialized and gendered configuration, of which these converts are part, conditions the publicization of their convictions and thus their possibility to exist publicly as converts.

What can the Claudel case – a prime example that offers both the advantage of being well known and frequently used in studies on conversion – tell us about the *conceptualization* of conversion? First, conversion seems to entail a shifting point that projects intimate convictions into the public sphere. However, in the case of Claudel, the genesis of his values remained a private matter, a privilege he held dear. His conversion narrative constituted a synthesis of public representations of conversion that also served as a "model" for other converts – without necessarily reflecting their own experience – and influenced the social sciences' conceptualization of conversion. Secondly, this "individual private experience [is] as much constitutive of publics as are collectives" (Amiraux, 2014: 33 [my translation]). The concept of conversion designates changes in values in the course of one's life that are constitutive of publics built upon "public values." This type of conversion takes place at the

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[18] Majority and minority positions are not declared *a priori* by the researcher, but induced from particular configurations in which the given case takes place at a given time. They are neither variables nor factors, but contextual constituents that need to be taken into consideration to understand conversion and its reception in the public sphere.

[19] Here I use the term 'imaginary' to reinforce the idea that Claudel's public existence as an exclusively religious convert is a representation embedded in the social imaginary that has no necessary correspondence with his concrete experience.

[20] Original quote in French: "Une seule religion parce qu'une seule catholique : les autres laissent les facultés de l'homme inemployées et de toutes la plus importante, l'amour, le désir" (Paul Claudel (1968), *Journal I, 1904-1932,* Paris, Gallimard, Pléiade, p. 222, cited in Lescourret, 2003: 488).

[21] Original quote in French: "il n'y a pas de Christ russe ou anglais ou allemand, mais un Christ catholique, dans une église n'est exclusive que parce qu'elle est universelle et dans une vérité qui n'est intransigeante que parce qu'elle est totale" (Paul Claudel, André Gide (1949), *Correspondance, 1899-1926,* préface et notes par Robert Mallet, Paris, Gallimard, p. 85 (« 30 juillet 1908 ») cited in Lescourret, 2003: 488).

[22] According to Beaucage and Meintel, "the definition of religious belonging as monolithic and exclusive [...] is similar to the classic model of national affiliation. It is possible that such conceptions correspond to the top-down bias of ecclesiastical authority that appears to be shared by researchers, rather than to the way different religious forms are actually experienced 'on the ground'" (2007: 12).

[23] Charles Peguy (1992), *L'Argent, œuvres en prose complètes, t. III,* Paris, Gallimard, p. 900.

intersection of personal convictions and public values where they are constantly entangled and disentangled.

Digging deeper: Three Cases Beyond Religion

With the three aforementioned questions and the Paul Claudel case in mind, I will demonstrate how three other trajectories, insofar as they are performed publicly, may be approached as conversions. Nonetheless, differences remain that will have to be engaged with in order to refine the concept of trans-formation. In the Claudel case, I distinguished three dimensions that I also found in trajectories beyond religion.[24] In each one, the individuals experience what they consider as something (1) 'that falls upon oneself' and (2) is a practical 'change in values' influenced by (3) conditions of publicization.[25]

It falls upon oneself

The idea that 'it falls upon oneself' is a major common denominator between all four cases, including Claudel's. 'It' can be many different things and is perceived as almost unspeakable, as impossible to qualify. Michelle Blanc[26], born Michel Leblanc, is a Quebecois who has experienced a transsexual trajectory marked by sexual reassignment surgery to 'become' a woman. Following a conversation with her female partner while she was still a man, Blanc started to feel more intensely what she had already known: she is a woman and she now wants to live according to what she believes is her real self, in a similar fashion to Claudel who reconnected with his "true nature," to his "race." Doubts aroused in private, by herself and others, on her "true nature" initiated a chain of events that led to the publicization of her intimate practices (dressing as a woman at home for example). What were

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[24] Here I present only a short synthesis of the four case studies. I refer the interested reader to my master's thesis for an extended analysis of each case.

[25] My methodology consisted mainly of a comparison of four case studies built upon trajectories of what I call conversions. To subvert the 'preferred reading' of conversion phenomena, I set out to establish a 'shocking parallel' between trajectories that are not normally juxtaposed. First, I identified cases that could help me to address my theoretical questions about conversion, that is, how people 'convert' throughout their lifetime (see the epigraphic quotation by Taylor). The juxtaposition of these trajectories, which appeared quite different at first sight, seemed however to present some similarities that I could not yet name or explicate, even though I had the feeling that they corresponded to what Taylor calls "conversion" in quotation marks. However, a trajectory is not a case and a case is never given. To build the cases at hand, I used a variety of materials and sources, including biographies, autobiographies, private letters (now published), op-eds, blogs and videos. A case stems from the work of a researcher who takes a situation (or trajectory, in this case) from which he reconstructs the contexts and configurations in which it took place. In so doing, I brought together most of the material available about each individual's trajectory. Upon analysing these documents, I noticed recurrences in the way all four individuals referred to 'values' and 'convictions.' I then started to shift my attention to what those terms meant in relation to the situations and contexts in which they were used. What Becker calls "combinations of elements," here points of intersection between intimacy and publicity, were systematically compared to progressively get a sense of the most significant axes of analysis: the presence of an audience and the shift toward minority or majority values. Despite all that, this research is limited due to the material used to build each case. In fact, most of it consists of public or published documents, which was a condition that allowed me to have access to it. Consequently, I only had a partial view of these individuals' experience (is that not always the case?). Aware of these constraints and potential biases, I included in the analysis the conditions of publicization of these documents and the absence of publicization of others. For more details on the methodology, see my master's thesis (Blouin, 2015).

[26] My research on this case stems mostly from the biography written by Jacques Lanctôt (2012), *Michelle Blanc, un genre à part*. (Montréal: Libre Expression). At first, I was reluctant to rely on this book since it is not a first-hand account. Nonetheless, I chose to use the book, as it is highly inspired by her three blogs: micheleblanc.com (her first professional blog), michelleblanc.com (her new professional blog after her coming-out) and http://femme-2-0.blogspot.ca/ (a blog she created to tell her transsexual journey). Before her coming-out, she had an anonymous profile on the social media web site *MySpace* on which she would discuss with people sharing similar experiences. She published its content on her blog *Femme 2.0*. I also considered many of her public statements even though I did not cite that material in this article.

intimate convictions and practices went public. Joe Loya,[27] a Mexican American imprisoned for multiple bank robberies, spent two years in solitary confinement, secluded from the public. During his time in the 'hole,' he felt what he described as an incredible "pressure" to which he tried not to succumb. When the authorities took him back to the prison's general population, he initiated a correspondence with a writer outside the prison. While writing about his 'rage,' he had what he called a revelation: "All of a sudden I realized that my reaction to things, and not the things themselves, was really the cause of my rage. You have to understand that this was a large and fundamental shift in my perspective, a remarkable change" (Loya, 2004: 313). Loya's conceptions of good and evil then changed, and he now considers himself a 'pacifist.' From then on, he has struggled in an attempt to live accordingly. The last case is built upon the trajectory of Nathalie Eyraud, a French vegan, also known as Mlle Pigut (Miss Pigut),[28] well known for her blog and cookbooks. She too describes her experience of 'becoming vegan' as "something that happened in her head" for no reason that she could possibly explain. Nonetheless, she associates this moment of conversion to people and events, in her case to her intimate partner and travels.

Practical changes in values

Focusing mainly on the discourses about the "moment of conversion" – the ineffable feeling of a sudden change – is certainly crucial to acknowledge these people's experiences and to provide a common ground for comparison. However, this moment seems more like an initial feeling, the starting point of more complex and nuanced practical changes in values linked to concrete situations. In her youth, Michelle Blanc identified with 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 2005) norms through her participation in sports and the military. After her revelation, she set out to become "100% woman" and took every possible action to live according to her conviction that she is and has always been a woman. Even if she shows (in a performative sense) many signs of a complete change from "masculinity" to "femininity," she continues to claim a strong attachment to the value of cisgenderism[29] and her friends and colleagues continually attribute what she does to what they consider to be "masculine" and "feminine" traits. As for Claudel, her conversion from "masculinity" to "femininity" appear more like a 'preferred reading' of transsexual trajectories than an accurate description of her life. Moreover, this example illustrates the tenuousness of the theoretical distinction between norms and values,[30] being that Blanc values norms of "femininity" in her everyday life due to her deep conviction to be a woman. Values are thus not conceived as mere abstract ideas, but as ordinary judgements through which qualities are attributed to phenomena. Values emerge from those processes of valuation (Bidet et al., 2011[31]). Conversions imply those practical changes in values, as the Loya and Mlle Pigut cases show. After what he calls his revelation on how to be a "good" person, Loya discovered through writing the arbitrary character of his 'rage' via an examination of various situations he has experienced in his daily life. As a result, he can now envisage modifying his behaviours to actually be what he was convinced was "good," according to his new representation of

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[27] This case study relies on Joe Loya's autobiography (2004) *The Man Who Outgrew His Prison Cell*, New York: Harper Collins, his one-man show (http://vimeo.com/37566834 [2012]) and some of the op-eds he wrote for several newspapers.

[28] This case study is based mainly on her website and blog (pigut.com). A comparison with blogs by Black vegans in my master's thesis, which exceeds the purview of this article, complements the case study.

[29] According to Schilt and Westbrook, "'Cisgender' replaces the terms "nontransgender" or "bio man/bio woman" to refer to individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity" (2009: 461 [note 1]).

[30] Ogien (2012), a philosopher, insists on the political significance of distinguishing between norms and values, especially in a context in which public debates tend to be framed more and more in terms of values instead of principles, rules and rights. Although I agree with Ogien, the fact remains that norms and values are often indiscriminately mixed together in everyday life.

[31] Bidet et al. (2011) have synthesized John Dewey's fragmented work on values to which I cannot do justice here. See also Aubin-Boltanski, Lamine & Luca (2014) who have a similar approach.

himself (a 'pacifist'). Similarly, Mlle Pigut's new conviction, from vegetarianism to veganism, broadened through everyday observations on what her relatives ate and what she could find on the Internet. Based on her conviction that veganism was the way to live, she extrapolated this original feeling to values that make sense publicly.

Conditions for existing publicly

All four cases do not stage mere shifts between religions, sexes, conceptions of what is good and diets. These cases show how a conversion works as a turning point that leads to a shift from intimate convictions to public values. To manifest her conversion, Michelle Blanc felt the need to adopt all the signs publicly associated with "femininity" (clothing, physical appearance, ways of walking). Contrary to Claudel, who did not have to change his behaviour after his conversion, Blanc experienced a subjectification effect following her turning toward minority values. The position Claudel gained through his conversion granted him the privilege to distinguish his private convictions and practices from his public actions and work, which does not mean that one did not inform the other. Even if Loya turned toward majority values, equating that which is "good" with being "white," his status as a racial minority in the U.S. made it complicated for him to publicly live as what he considered to be a "good" person. Consequently, Loya could not publicize his convictions without being constantly brought back to his skin color. In everyday interactions, Loya thus felt compelled to prove to others that he was an ex-convict, even though nobody had expressed reservations. Mlle Pigut also encountered practical constraints in her efforts to live according to her vegan convictions. When she was still living with her parents and going at school, she could not make her own food choices. Moreover, when she grew into adulthood and began to talk about it, her private eating habits became public, which brought her face to face with harsh, gendered reactions from others who qualified her as "radical," unlike with her vegan boyfriend who talked about anarcho-veganism. Publicly, she was seen as an annoying radical, while he was seen as political. If conversion is characterized by a shift from intimate convictions to public values, through the intermediary of practical valuations, it does not necessarily imply that every 'convert' has a public existence, or the same existence, as a 'convert.' Nonetheless, beyond social positions exist what I call 'publics of values,' constituted by a shared attachment to certain public values, that command neither co-presence nor voluntary actions (Dewey, 1954 [1927]), even though the way individuals can connect with it publicly is conditioned by social positionality.

From Religious Conversion to Trans-formation: Toward Escaping the Religious-Secular Binary

Claudel, Blanc, Loya and Mlle Pigut can share the same stage, but it remains to be seen how the plot would unfold. The deconstruction of the notion of religious conversion allowed me to bring these four heterogeneous characters together. In comparing these cases, I paid particular attention to two axes of analysis: the relation of the individual to an audience (to public attention) and the relation between minority and majority values in given figurations. This led me to propose the concept of *trans-formation*, which is a process through which one or many individuals change their positions, within configurations of values, as a result of new or renewed relations of intimate convictions with one or many public values. This definition acknowledges that trans-formations can be compared only if individuals' trajectories are not conceived as equal in the eyes of the public, since their experience differs according to the way they are recognized and qualified. Equally as important is the fact that trans-formations necessarily maintain connections with 'publics of values;' losing sight of those often invisible publics likely leads to approaches to conversions that focus only on the individual.[32] A trans-

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[32] My goal is certainly not to overthrow what has already been done well in studies on conversion, but rather to *add* a representation of conversion that may help refine the portraits of converts drawn by the social sciences, considering that concepts are *representations*, albeit professional ones (Becker, 1998: 17)

formation does not always have an audience, but it is always constitutive of a public, in the sense that trans-formations happen on the condition that intimate convictions can be connected to public values. The concept of trans-formation reveals how convictions can be shared across social positions while being publicized, and thus qualified, differently. This concept is first and foremost a conceptual tool that must be distinguished from concrete conversion trajectories as experienced by people. As a result of this distinction, the (always temporary) product of a trans-formation is not a 'convert' but the 'figure of a convert,' a methodological tool that reveals configurations of values. As such, the concept of trans-formation allows social scientists to think about conversions at the interface between intimacy and publicity, personal convictions and public issues, and, I would add, between the religious and the secular.

What Remains of Religion?

Since I refused to use the religious analogy as the *a priori* standard for comparison, I now need to clarify on what basis those four trajectories can be compared and what remains of religion in relation to conversion. Two options should be set aside. First, it cannot be argued that these trajectories are completely similar if the researcher really wants to acknowledge these individuals' convictions. For example, considering that Michelle Blanc fights to distance herself from religion, it would be inappropriate for the researcher to impose a religious analogy on her. However, the researcher should neither prevent his or herself from employing categories not used by social actors themselves. Accordingly, the researcher should resist the temptation to approach these four trajectories as incommensurable, as completely original trajectories having nothing in common. The question is, then, what type of condition would allow me to inscribe religious conversion in a broader analytical category? My response would be trans-formation. My argument is not to say that these experiences of conversion can be compared because they would share a same essence or a same function. Indeed, I did not seek to explain the source of the convictions involved or the individual needs that these conversions could be said to satisfy. Instead, sociologists are able to study these experiences of conversion in the same analytical movement because they socially work in a similar fashion. The concept of trans-formation aims at capturing how these trajectories are socially constructed to work similarly in societies organized around the imperative of publicity (Foucault, 1976).

As an example, on CBC's *The Current,* a Canadian public affairs radio show, hosted on March 4, 2015, Sally Kohn declared the following: "I have this inherent wish for my kid to be gay... like wanting my kid to be a Democrat, like wanting my kid to be Jewish."[33] The debate casted two other people who argued that Sally Kohn should rather wish that her daughter "be herself" and that the conviction to be gay, Democrat or Jewish cannot possibly be compared. Even if Kohn's view did not bring about a consensus, it nonetheless illustrates how a variety of individual convictions can be debated on a similar ground. This similar ground is nonetheless weakened by two questions.

First, are these trajectories a matter of nature, choice or constraint? By profession, I tend to discard the first option. The two other options however command closer attention, especially considering that they frame public and sociological debates on religion and values in general. Theoretically, considering my four cases, I argue that a third way exists. It is neither a choice nor an imposition; it is rather a conviction. By conviction, I mean an initial affective feeling that leads to consequences that can be understood as practical values, or valuations, which may or may not produce a change of identity.[34] For example, all four characters talk about something beyond them that they have to face,

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[33]   "Gay mom Sally Kohn says 'I wish for my daughter to be gay, too'." *The Current*, CBC Radio, March 4, 2015,

<http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-march-4-2015-1.2981015/gay-mom-sally-kohn-says-i-wish-for-my-daughter-to-be-gay-too-1.2981040>.

[34]   Moreover, it could well be argued that people who convert do not see their trajectories as a change of identity since they often say that deep down they were always this way.

whether they call it a revelation, condition or "something in their head." They do not think about their trajectory in terms of choice or constraints; instead, they often use those words to distance themselves from this dichotomy. The vocabulary of choice and constraint does not encompass their reality.

Secondly, do some convictions have a special or different ontological status that should refrain researchers from comparing them? Taylor (1989) argues that individuals orient their lives according to 'strong evaluations' that consequently have a particular ontological status if compared to more minor evaluations. The question is therefore: Does being convinced to be Catholic, a woman, a "good" person or vegan imply 'strong evaluations' in the same way? Is there a specificity of religion, as faith or belief, compared to other moral convictions? I have argued here that they can all be looked at and approached in the same analytical movement, which does not mean that there is no specificity for the people that have those convictions. Convictions that are deemed "secular" should not be reduced to mere "lifestyles" or products of power relationships – although that may also be the case – but should rather be considered as serious as religious convictions. Religion is not reducible to a conviction in the same way that vegetarianism or transsexualism are not reducible to lifestyles, which should not prevent one from examining the consequences engendered by an initial conviction. And in doing so, I see no convincing reason to perpetuate an incommensurable divide between what we are used to calling religious conversions and other conversions.[35] If trajectories present all aspects of a trans-formation, researchers can justify comparing them, which does not mean all conversion trajectories can qualify as trans-formations, or that all convictions imply a trans-formation.

From the outset, I put forth the working hypothesis that religious convictions have been downplayed to the status of one of many possible kinds of conviction. This hypothesis does not completely hold true when looking at the facts, as the outcome of the debate on CBC illustrates, but is useful as it allowed me to observe how, when and under what conditions various convictions appear to be so different in the public sphere despite the similarities of the trajectories involved. The concept of trans-formation does not only consider convictions, but also their conditions of publicization. Conditions of publicization may provide an explanation for the reproduction of the dichotomy between religious and secular convictions. To be coherent with the pragmatic approach herein adopted, I posit that the 'religious' and the 'secular' should be considered as qualifications applied to convictions that are reproduced as antithetical through a process of publicization. By exposing the commensurability of four trajectories, especially in light of controversies surrounding the religious, I wished to play down this assumed and publicly reproduced incommensurability – an incommensurability that may also be felt and performed by individuals in search of religious, gender, moral or alimentary purity, being that trans-formations are constitutive of publics. The political consequences of such a proposition, however, remain to be explored, notably regarding the way in which state law can relate to various personal convictions. If convictions have more in common than is sometimes publicly acknowledged, should this grant them broader protection in some cases? To what extent can the right to freedom of conscience and religion, which relies on this dichotomy, concretely protect a broad variety of convictions and the means to live, publicly or not, according to said convictions?[36]

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[35] That does not mean that convictions cannot have a special ontological status. However, since I cannot demonstrate it empirically, the comparison cannot therefore be based on this premise.

[36] Laborde (2014) worries about the potential negative consequences for freedom of religion of a critic of religion as a scholarly category. As a response to critiques on the incapacity of state laws to capture the fullness of religious experiences, she proposes to "disaggregate religion" by "identifying a *plurality of normative analogies* for religion." Although I share Laborde's concerns about the political consequences of the dissolution of the concept of religion, I am sceptical about the idea that religion should remain the only frame of reference from which to build analogies when it comes to moral matters. In this article, although I started with a case that is qualified as religious, Paul Claudel's, to challenge the concept of conversion, my objective was not to extend the religious analogy to other moral phenomenon, for reasons I have explained, but to build another common ground for comparison through the concept of trans-formation.

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