

CONVERSION IN FOCUS: ANTHROPOLOGICAL VIEWS AND MISSIOLOGICAL PROJECTIONS

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Introduction

Conversion deserves a place of honour in the contemporary missiological discussion. Whether it is fashionable and/or opportune to pay attention to conversion today may be disputed. Certainly we should avoid pitfalls and be aware of potentially dangerous aspects of this theme, but this is true of every theological topic.

My own interest in a new approach to the theme of conversion was inspired by a challenge from outside missiology.¹ I discovered that conversion has increasingly become a field of research for social and cultural anthropology and for general history, whereas missiologists are generally busy with other urgent matters. I take a short look at both situations.

Where we find conversion studies

In the field of missiology, the first priority is given to the discussion of inculturation or contextualization. One can see here a real mobilization of missiologists of all persuasions, whether evangelicals, mainline Protestants or Catholics. The World Council of Churches has convened the recent World Missionary Conference in Salvador, Brazil, 24 November – 3 December 1996, on the topic ›The Gospel in Diverse Cultures‹. We see that inculturation and contextualization, which became missiological topics in the beginning of the 1970s, are still on the agenda, next to other vexed questions like partnership between unequal church bodies, or participation in development and social protest, or again salvation in or through or despite living world religions. The result was that conversion disappeared from the missiological agenda, save on rare occasions. But even in these rare occasions the atmosphere was not favorable to a fair and fruitful discussion.

¹ I can indeed say that the challenge from outside roused in my mind a missiological issue once touched upon by Jacques Rossel (1969: 47) after the publication of my book *La mission, combat pour le salut du monde* (Neuchâtel-Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1967). In his review he made the incisive remark: »Es gelingt ihm [Spindler] nicht, das Thema der Bekehrung in sein Schema einzugliedern.« Actually the conversion topic was not explicit enough in my theology of mission; I am glad of the opportunity to clarify the matter.

I suspect that another aspect of our global context is playing an unavowed role. Globally, the religious partition of the world is stable and according to statistical projections will remain stable for the years to come. Since David B. Barrett has reintroduced statistics as an acceptable missionary tool, and since his projections of the future of Christianity have not significantly changed in the past 20 years, we get the impression that conversion has no future at all. The proportion of Christians will remain stable at an average of 34 percent of the world population, the same percentage as in 1900 (Barrett 1997: 25). Of course, certain shifts have taken place and may still occur, for instance the rather massive Christianization of Africa and the equally massive de-Christianization of Europe (I do not say of the West). But basically, the prospect of conversion as a historic, socially important shift of religious allegiance amounts to nothing. Why, then, bother about nothing?

I suspect that this is also the background of the discussion on universalism, i.e. universal salvation with or without religions. If we take for granted that the majority of humans, roughly two thirds, will remain outside the Christian flock forever, and if we also consider that these non-Christians are nearby, sometimes flesh of our flesh, we would be very sorry indeed if all of them would be eternally lost.

One will note the contrast between the statistical impression of religious stability in the world and the actual perception of religious volatility and change expressed by scholars who are less preoccupied with the long term than with the daily life of people. Anthropologists and historians are increasingly confronted in their own studies of cultures and contemporary developments with significant religious changes at the grass roots and among populations that were usually considered to be preserved from external influences, i.e. adherents of so-called traditional religions or intangible world religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, or even Roman Catholicism. To take the last example, historians and sociologists are very intrigued by the so-called Protestant explosion in Latin America which was considered to be an intractable Catholic bastion until recently. It is very significant that a famous sociologist, David Martin, devoted a book to this subject (1990). Again, anthropologists are worried that small traditional populations or ethnic reserves which were their particular fields of study and actually their means of living, may lose their originality and maybe their ethnicity. The competition between anthropologists is so fierce that I am not surprised about their angry reaction against Christian influence and penetration into their territories. In spite of their considerable successes and achievements, anthropologists apparently feel threatened and decide to study the threat, i.e. conversion and the agents of conversion.²

I was invited, to my own surprise, to attend and present a paper at an international symposium of anthropologists organized in June 1994 by the University of Amsterdam together with the universities of Nijmegen and Leiden, the International Institute of Asian Studies in Leiden, and with the support of the Royal Academy of Sciences in the

² According to a survey of conversion studies prepared for a special issue of *The Ecumenical Review* in 1967 sociological and anthropological interest in the subject appears to be just emerging at that time (Douglas & Scroggs 1967).

Netherlands. To my still greater surprise I heard on that occasion not one, but 27 excellent, provocative papers witnessing to very serious field research and theoretical speculation. So I am puzzled: anthropologically or humanly speaking, conversion has a present, while it has no future according to some missiological views.

Anthropological hermeneutics

Evidently, the anthropological framework of interpretation differs from missiological or theological concepts and motives. It is not surprising that anthropologists are not at home with theological constructions. They tend to perceive or rather to construct facts from a functionalist perspective. For them conversion is never without strings attached, and hardly ever a free, purely religious, and personal decision. There must be some pressure somewhere, and conversion must have a social, economic and political function.

In the last instance conversion is seen as far less dramatic than missionary literature or even the personal stories of the converts would have one believe. Anthropologists and historians insist upon the continuity of purpose in the life of individuals and groups. They argue that conversion is a means to an end, and the end is self-determination and self-fulfillment governed by self-interest.

Addressing missiologists with a theological concern, I cannot help pointing to the very deep theological significance of this anthropological approach: we are brutally reminded of original sin and of its universality. Sacrifice, self-denial, disinterested love etc. do not exist. All nations go their own way, observed Paul in Acts 14:16 – until God decides to do something about it. Studying conversion, anthropologists and historians come to the conclusion, or rather, take their point of departure in the belief that conversion – in the missionary sense of the term – is impossible.

Overwhelmed by anthropology

Missiologists cannot help being impressed by the depth and quality of modern anthropological and historical research. They also feel a genuine affinity to the implicit theological judgment passed on humankind. So social sciences have a direct influence on the way in which many missiologists engage in the study of conversion. I take as a random example the field study carried out in Rwanda some years ago under the supervision of G. Jan van Butselaar, a missionary from the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands who was then a lecturer at the Theological College of Butare, Rwanda. A short report of the study was published under the title »Christian Conversion in Rwanda: The Motivations« some years ago (Van Butselaar 1981). All kinds of motives for conversion to Christianity were found. Religious motives, when noted, are described in a very vague fashion, – the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the love of God – whereas social, material and personal

motives definitely turn the balance. In my opinion this is a typical example of the way in which anthropology is allowed to overwhelm missiology.

I am not sure that the same exaggeration of anthropological factors is not influencing the theory of conversion offered by Charles H. Kraft in his otherwise extremely helpful book entitled *Christianity in Culture* (1979). He makes a useful distinction between Christian conversion and cultural conversion, regretting that missionaries sometimes urge people towards a conversion to their (North American) culture and way of life and do not realize that this is not Christian conversion. But then he formulates a new instruction to missionaries which says: »The human beings' part of the conversion process is to be in keeping with the culture in which they are immersed« (Kraft 1979: 338).³ My problem with this rule is whether it is meant only for missionaries or also for prospective converts. I cannot endorse it as an instruction to converts. What about cultures breaking down or changing rapidly? What about cultures where the decision patterns make conversion impossible? What about individuals and families searching for liberation from oppressive contexts? It may happen that cultural conversion is the appropriate way of realizing Christian conversion. At this point I am afraid that Kraft's anthropological insights have overwhelmed his missiological purpose.

In fact, the discovery of the great variety of conversion motives is not new in mission studies or, rather, in missionary experience. I just mention in passing the reluctance of Protestant missionaries to admit new Christians to the sacraments. Admission to baptism and the eucharist was delayed, requiring a long period of preparation. Missionaries were happy to see inquirers and catechumens, but then often remained undecided about the next steps for fear that conversion was not absolutely sincere or might be invalidated by deeds. This led to a policy of admission by degrees which is still widely implemented, to the disappointment of many.⁴

From case study to general theory

I now leave the field of case studies, where cultural and social anthropologists are doing excellent work, in order to turn my attention to another aspect of their scholarship, which may be closer to theology and missiology. Every scholarly discipline is bound to make the leap from observation to speculation, from individual case studies to general theories.⁵ In

³ KRAFT has a slightly different formulation on p. 344: »Christian conversion should be in accord with the decision-making patterns of the converts' culture.« This is far too absolute. Anthropologists (see my exposition below) are increasingly aware of the inherent momentum of cultural change. In other words, they establish the fact of »cultural conversion« independently of missionary interference, sometimes leading to adherence to a world religion.

⁴ The problem of easy or delayed access to baptism is a vexing question in church history and missionary practice. A good survey is offered by GEOFFREY WAINWRIGHT (1969), updated from the mission field in 1972. Church constitutions and by-laws are very explicit on the matter.

⁵ Of course the other way round is possible also: to a certain extent, DAVID MARTIN was challenged to make the leap from his general theory of secularization to the case of religious conversion in Latin America, which seemed to contradict his theory.

the following I want to discuss some anthropological theories of conversion offered recently.

The first was originally developed at a conference on conversion held at Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts, 14–18 April 1988. The proceedings of the conference are edited by Dr. Robert W. Hefner under the title *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation*.⁶

In this collection of essays, the preoccupation of secular historians and anthropologists with religious conversion is impressive, and it is not my intention to take them to task for not speaking the language of missiologists.

However, I take note of the fact that they are not impressed by missiological studies of conversion.⁷ Missiologists like Raoul Allier,⁸ Maurice Leenhardt, Walter Freytag, Johannes Triebel, Michel Dujarier, Hans Kasdorf, Mary Motte etc. are not quoted and not discussed in the superb general introduction written by Hefner in the book under review. Missiologists are apparently not deemed capable of any valid interpretation of conversion to Christianity. Anthropologists discuss the theories of the members of their group, from Max Weber and Robin Horton to Marshall Sahlins and David Martin.⁹

I cannot enter into the fine points of the anthropological discussion here. I am fascinated by the general assessment of ›conversion to Christianity‹ (actually to any of the world religions, according to Hefner), which is largely positive. Conversion to a world religion is a step in a positive direction, namely, to what Hefner, borrowing an expression from Peter Berger (1967: 4) calls »world-building« (Hefner 1993: 27). Conversion means access to a new or larger macrocosm, to a new global awareness, to a transregional community which is above local custom or community. World-building amounts to what has been called »civilization« in an active sense, namely getting actively involved in a network of supraethnic, state-based societies, sometimes put together in »empires« (Hefner 1993: 28). In other words, world religions, including Christianity, greatly contribute to the education of humankind,¹⁰ making humans members of a single moral commonwealth instead of members of local groups ignoring one another.

We recognize behind this theory the influence of Robin Horton's interpretation of conversion in Africa, namely as a cosmological shift from microcosm to macrocosm (Horton 1971). The provocative element of Horton's theory was the elimination of the

⁶ The title of Professor Hefner's introduction to the book is revealing: ›World Building and the Rationality of Conversion‹ (1993: 3–44). His bibliography is superbly compiled (1993: 38–44).

⁷ Although conversion is not the focus of current missiological research, as I already mentioned, it has a modest place in classic German textbooks (GENSICHEN 1971: 112–129, BÜCKLE 1979: 96–107). A fair literature survey was recently given by FRITZ KOLLBRUNNER (1993).

⁸ In spite of its title Allier's study offers more than psychology strictly speaking; it has many sociological and ecclesiological aspects. The concept of *non-civilisés* is dated and has become offensive, but Allier is not bound to that concept. He believes in the emergence of universal human brotherhood, realized through Christian conversion.

⁹ The reverse is not true: missiologists generally profit from anthropological research. I point to this asymmetry of relationships between anthropology and missiology – and wonder whether it could be corrected.

¹⁰ Education of humankind, or in German *Erziehung der Menschheit*, was a famous concept of the Enlightenment enhanced by Immanuel Kant and Johann Gottlieb Fichte.

religious ingredients of conversion. In his view, African conversion (either to Christianity or to Islam) was not really a change in religious allegiance, but in effect a shift of cosmological perspective from the village microcosm to a wider, urban and international macrocosm. He went so far as to support the view that this cosmological shift would have happened and may still happen independently of world religions. Christianity and Islam in Africa were chosen at random as means to an end, but could have been missed.

Hefner rejects this entirely speculative hypothesis and accepts the historical role of world religions: these religions cannot be understood outside their global scope. They tend to open universal horizons by themselves on account of their religious message. Because of their global and ecumenical structure, and not least, against the historical background of their political alliances with imperial powers, they are by nature »world-building« religions.¹¹

I now turn to a second anthropological theory of conversion. After Hefner, Peter van der Veer (1996) goes a step further in his brilliant introduction to the proceedings of the international symposium held in 1994 in Amsterdam (already mentioned above). He accepts Hefner's conclusion, namely the concept of »the rationality of conversion« (Hefner 1993: 3–44). Conversion is a progress towards the realization of an open, human world. However Van der Veer is even more interested in the breakthrough of the individual self in the conversion process. The world as one place for humankind to live together and the self as the place where every subject faces this one world in self-chosen ways are two sides of the same historical development, which is called modernization. Again, Van der Veer rightly draws our attention to the diversity of the modernization process, just because this process includes the awakening or discovery or construction of the self. In his view there is no longer one way to modernity; there are many modernities indeed. Building one world cannot mean destroying personal, historical, or social identities. The contrary is true. »The globalization of modernity is played out in very different ways in different locales, and ... the colonized attach their own meanings to this process« (Van der Veer 1993: 7).

Van der Veer comes to the conclusion that Christian conversion is a »technology of the self, ... which, under modern conditions, produces a new subjecthood that is deeply enmeshed in economic globalization and the emergence of a system of nations-states. Not only does conversion to Modern Christianity (both Protestant and Catholic) seek to transform the Self by changing its relations to Others, it enables a new organization of society.« (1996: 19–20)

Missiological perspectives

Missiologists can be tempted to see here a wonderful meeting-point with cultural anthropology. Will missiology seize the helping hand?

¹¹ Horton's views are exposed and discussed by HEFNER in *Conversion to Christianity* (1993: 20–25).

Let me explain the convergence from a missiological perspective. In the first place, classical missiology (in the wake of biblical scholarship) insisted on the shift from particularism to universalism in the development of God's revelation, already prefigured in the Old Testament at certain decisive points, and fully realized in the New Testament, and articulated mainly by the apostle Paul. The concept of universalism here means the missionary concern for all nations, for humankind as a whole, beyond God's covenant with Israel; it is not the same meaning as implied in the theological discussion about universal salvation or »apocatastasis«.

In the second place, missiology affirms the universal scope of Christology and eschatology. A single biblical reference may suffice; in the Fourth Gospel we read these words of Jesus: »And I shall draw all men to myself, when I am lifted up from the earth« (John 12: 32). Christ has been made the Lord of all human beings and all creation, the Lord of history, and at the end of time, »he shall come to judge both the quick and the dead« (The Nicene Creed). Again, this is an elaboration of the *kerygma* proclaimed by the apostle Paul to the Athenians on Mars Hill according to Acts 17.30–31: »Now [God] commands mankind, all men everywhere, to repent, because he has fixed the day on which he will have the world judged, and justly judged, by a man of his choosing; of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.«

I want to emphasize the eschatological setting of this universal scope of the *kerygma*: biblical universalism is future oriented, carried by the hope that God acted and still will act in history. History has been given a direction and a movement, and this means a tremendous dynamics applied to the world. I am aware of the vexed questions whether the direction of history is linear or circular or in a spiral and how much time the movement will take until it is completed. However, these questions are not my topic in the present article. The heart of the matter is the fact, or rather the hope, that humankind has a future. Humankind is not yet what it will be and should be, but a process has begun which by the grace of God and God's glorious energy will come to its implementation.

If I am not mistaken, this historical perspective is lacking in the anthropological theory of Hefner. Instead of history, he speaks of transcendence (1993: 34), which may be understood in a metaphysical way as the world of Platonic ideas and values. This metaphysical approach is well known among secular humanists and even among theologians throughout Church history, and it has its benefits and its partial truth, but I prefer the historical emphasis, provided history is not given the status of a divine hypostasis or the character of a »juggernaut« that advances under its own momentum.¹² God remains the Lord of history.

Anyway I take note of a certain affinity between Hefner's anthropological theory of conversion and an eschatological view of conversion on the point of universalization, i.e.

¹² I borrow this expression from HUMPHREY J. FISHER (1985: 153–173), quoted by HEFNER (1993: 23). Originally it is applied to a world religion, not to history as such. When a religion develops into a historical »juggernaut«, the problem of conversion must be appraised in another perspective. Under these circumstances, those who resist »conversion« are more authentically human, it seems to me, than those who conform to fashion.

the self-education to a global awareness of and a global commitment to »world-building« (from a secular perspective) or (from a Christian perspective) the joyful acceptance of and admission into an (already!) world-wide community of brothers and sisters in Christ beyond every wall of separation. Christian conversion, then, is sharing in a great divine purpose that must be implemented in history (I take the word *must* in the sense of the eschatological *dei* of the New Testament), namely the making of a new humanity under one head, namely the new Adam, the man Jesus Christ.

Personal conversion

We address the balance of our research at this stage. Conversion to Christianity is interpreted as a »world-building« process, as a step in the formation process of global human civilization, or in theological terms, as an eschatological disclosure of God's redemptive action for humankind as a whole, or rather, a (re)making of the whole of humankind that was broken by sin. These perspectives, however, lead us very far away from individual conversion and may be used to bypass the vexed question of personal conversion. As an example of this trend, I just quote from a paper written by the noted Roman Catholic theologian Felix Wilfred, from India, where changing religious allegiance is a big problem: »Conversion is nothing but turning to the action of God in history which works through human realities and participating in the revolution that God is effecting in favour of the poor« (1983: 66). For obvious reasons, in the Indian context,¹³ Felix Wilfred is evading the question of personal conversion. We are not, however, bound to follow this example in our general reflection here.

Let us finally attend to this aspect of conversion. Is the concern for personal conversion a modern, pietistic approach that is ultimately irrelevant in the face of global developments and structural adjustments? I see in present mainline missiology a great reluctance to deal with personal conversion in real theological depth. We are so persuaded of the wrong of individualism and pietistic reduction, and so well instructed that non-Western cultures are not individualistic but community-oriented, by nature apt to solidarity and mutual love, that we can no longer believe that human beings are indeed individuals and should be approached as individuals. As individuals-in-society, maybe, as individuals-in-context, of course, but at any rate as individuals, shaped and created individually, separated from their mother at birth, and dying alone, each for him or herself is called to a living dialogue with God in Christ. »Follow me! Here am I!« We remember the refreshing discovery of dialogue as a form of existence by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1923) in his famous book *I and Thou*. I insist upon the distinction between individual and person, namely between the concept of a human being as an isolated monad, and the concept of a human being as a loved and loving person. Here I am drawing from the legacy of continental personalism; I am not making a case for individualism in the old style.

¹³ See the assessment of the situation by JULIAN SALDANHA (1980).

Classical approach to the conversion of the Gentiles

Again, I must concede that personal conversion as such is less classical than we may think. It is truly a modern emphasis, probably originating in the Enlightenment. This is aptly pinpointed by Peter van der Veer (1996) and even more by Talal Asad (1996) in the proceedings of the Amsterdam symposium. This is not really a discovery: the famous mission historian K.S. Latourette (1937) had already made it clear.

The first specialized missiological expositions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries do not speak of individual conversion but of *conversio gentium*,¹⁴ the conversion of the Gentiles, of the nations not yet included in the Christian commonwealth, called Christendom (*christianitas*). The Gentiles are a collective concept, and in the Christian policy of those days, nations were approached as collective entities, moving as communities, deciding as communities under the leadership of their kings, lords or magistrates. Individual deviation from the nation or the group was almost unthinkable and altogether impossible. The Reformation of the sixteenth century produced or signaled the decisive shift from collective awareness to individual standing.

In seventeenth century Protestant theology, the conversion of the Gentiles (as collective entities, called »nations« in the pre-modern sense of the word) is placed in a calendar of eschatological events that will prepare and announce the *parousia*, Christ's return in glory. In this calendar, the conversion of the Gentiles will precede and condition the conversion of the Jews. Besides, it is very important to realize that this sequence of events is left to the discretion of God and does not imply any voluntary initiative from the Church or any other Christian agency.

I am not entering into details; my contention is simply that the problem of individual conversion is a modern development. This does not mean, however, that because it is modern, it is worthless and should be discarded. On the contrary!

Theological meaning of personal conversion

Christian conversion has to do with the person of Jesus Christ. I already pointed out that Jesus Christ is the new Adam, the prototype of the new humanity intended by God and already on course in history.

I emphasized the universal scope of the appointment of a new Adam. Humankind as a whole, in time and space, past, present, and future, and from Jerusalem to the end of the *oikoumene*, and maybe even elsewhere, if another *oikoumene* is ever discovered, is the range of redemption. We already considered the universalizing process implied by Christian conversion.

¹⁴ See for instance NICOLAS HERBORN'S instructions to Franciscan missionaries, entitled *Epitome convertendi Gentes Indiarum ad Fidem Christi adeoque ad Ecclesiam Sacrosanctam catholicam et apostolicam*, 1532. It deals with the conversion of the Gentiles of the West Indies to the faith of Christ and to the church.

The new Adam, however, is not only a so-called corporate personality that covers a community as one abstract body. The emergence of humanity at large is reproduced in the emergence of human persons as individual concrete beings evolving in their limited portion of time and space. The new Adam is personalized in Jesus and offered as a paradigm of personal existence to every human being. Personal conversion, in this line of theological understanding, amounts to the birth of the new Adam in the human individual. Jesus was a real person: in the same way, real persons enter into communion with Jesus, become one with Christ through the Holy Spirit, put on Christ as a garment (Galatians 3: 27).¹⁵

Ecclesial dimension of personal conversion

There are intermediate levels of corporate existence under the paradigm of the new Adam. Humanity as the totality of human history is probably unthinkable in our limited mind and also far too abstract. Christians used to consider the Church Universal as a plausible prototype of the new humanity, the *tertium genus* of the Church Fathers. The Church Universal is in its turn made concrete and operational in visible local churches. Conversion has an inescapable ecclesiological dimension which is sometimes neglected by contemporary missiologists, for fear of the ugly ecclesiocentrism condemned by J.C. Hoekendijk,¹⁶ L. Rütli (1972) and many others. The churchification of conversion may be wrong, but the affirmation of the ecclesial implication of conversion is completely right. In the current discussion about conversion this is a point of divergence of opinions.

Understanding personal conversion in its ecclesial connotations, I come across two main positions that I call the maximalist and the minimalist position. The minimum of ecclesial content is the affirmation of the category of the neighbor. Conversion to the Lord is in actual fact »conversion to the neighbor«.¹⁷ This position is affirmed by Gustavo Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians. The maximum of ecclesial content is probably affirmed by the mission encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* of Pope John Paul II in para.47: Conversion cannot be disconnected from baptism in a local church fully in communion with the church of Rome and its bishop, namely the Pope (1990). Needless to say, not all Roman Catholic missiologists would be prepared to adopt this position.

The ecclesial dimension of conversion can be taken in still another way, which is a derivative of the central meaning of the term. Several recent publications put the

¹⁵ The theme of the new Adam is aptly illuminated by THEODOR ARENS (1993: 5) in his fascinating book on religious conversion in the Pacific. At the same time he shows the inescapable ambiguity of the theme as far as the new humanity given and promised in Christ is closely intertwined with social and cultural innovations.

¹⁶ See J.C. HOEKENDIJK (1952). I discussed Hoekendijk's theology of mission and the general problem of ecclesiocentrism in my book *La mission, combat pour le salut du monde* (1967: 42–73). A critical assessment of Hoekendijk's ecclesiology and of its influence in the ecumenical movement is given by PIETER VAN GURP (1989).

¹⁷ G. GUTIÉRREZ (1981: 194). *A Theology of Liberation* was first published in 1973. See also pages 194–205. Gutiérrez is drawing on the concept of the »sacrament of the neighbor« suggested by Yves Congar, Romano Guardini and Hans Urs von Balthasar. See my short discussion of these theological developments in SPINDLER (1967: 216).

expression »conversion of the Churches« in their title (Blancy 1992). The intention is to enhance ecumenism, i.e., Christian unity and to overcome division and rivalry between denominations. I cannot dwell on this fascinating topic here.

Ethical dimension of conversion

In the current literature on conversion, there is at least one point of general agreement, namely the emphasis on obedience or discipleship. Conversion, whether it includes a peak experience or is experienced as a long process, is never reduced to this peak experience or to a private turning point. Conversion is a (first) step on the way of sanctification or holiness. Again, we find here two opposite interpretations, a maximalist one and a minimalist one. The maximalists put all the emphasis on social and political sanctification, and want to realize, as it were, the Kingdom of God upon the earth. The minimalists insist on individual sanctification expressed in a sequence of private ethical decisions.

Conclusion

I am afraid opinions will remain divided in understanding conversion and in assessing the scope and dimension of conversion. Here again, the great divide between conciliar and evangelical theologies and missiologies can be perceived. Officially, all Christians and all churches affirm, in line with biblical tradition, the call to conversion which is so central in the original message of Jesus Christ. Again and again, the World Council of Churches maintained that the concept of conversion should not be hijacked by evangelicals, pentecostals, and charismatics, and that it is a common property of all Christians.¹⁸ But in order to make the concept of conversion palatable in some quarters of its constituency, the World Council of Churches is forced to enlarge and extend its meaning. Finally, conversion encompasses so many meanings that everybody can be confused and deceived – Christians or humanists or non-Christians. I am afraid I cannot propose any way out of the deadlock, at least in the public discussion which is very much influenced by political and diplomatic considerations.

What I hope to have achieved is at least a clarification of the theological and missiological debate on conversion in the inner circle of mission scholars.

I would like to conclude with a quotation taken from the German missiologist Paul Löffler, in his well-known study on »The Biblical Concept of Conversion« insisting on the centrality of conversion in the *missio Dei*: »Fellowship« minus the passion for conversion

¹⁸ See the impressive Report of the General Secretary to the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1992, entitled »A Call to Conversion« (Castro 1992). This whole issue of *Ecumenical Review* is devoted to the conversion theme. Among other contributions, I note the survey offered by the former librarian of the Ecumenical Center in Geneva, ANS VAN DER BENT, »The Concept of Conversion in the Ecumenical Movement« (1992: 380–390).

leads to ghettoism; ›service‹ minus the call to conversion is a gesture without hope; Christian education minus conversion is religiosity without decision; and ›dialogue‹ without challenge to conversion remains sterile talk.« (1975: 42)

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Abstract

Conversion to Christianity has become a topic for historians and cultural anthropologists, who emphasize the social dimensions of conversion, basically interpreted as a progress towards modernity. The present article goes beyond this interpretation and makes a case for a genuinely missiological approach to Christian conversion in its personal and ecclesial reality, taking seriously the Christian eschatological frame of reference.

Note: This article goes back to a paper delivered at the fall meeting of the Midwest Fellowship of Professors of Missions, Wheaton, Illinois, 5th November 1994. Its main themes were also addressed in a Dutch lecture in 1995 (published for private circulation only). The present text is a slightly revised version of the paper published in *Missiology* (1997).