



Call for Papers

for a conference on

Conversion, Modernity and the Individual with particular reference to Islam in Africa and Asia

to be held at the Centre for Modern Oriental Studies in Berlin, Germany,
on November 25 and 26, 2005.

In recent years, some regions in Africa and Asia have become the scene of conflicting missionary endeavours. Christian as well as Islamic religious movements, often with fundamentalist leanings, vie with each other for influence and new adherents. One such region – East Africa – is currently researched, with particular reference to activists of Islamic mission and to their converts, in a project at the Centre for Modern Oriental Studies in Berlin, Germany. The Centre therefore convenes a conference to be held on November 25 and 26, 2005, at its premises in Berlin on new approaches to the study of Islamic conversion in multireligious contexts.

In his epilogue to an earlier conference on the same topic, Talal Asad has stressed that the concept of ‘conversion’, used for a more or less conscious reorientation towards a new form of faith, is historically and epistemologically the product of Euro-Christian modernity.¹ To what extent or in what way, however, this concept can actually be adopted for studies of conversion to (and in) Islam is still an open question. Some have claimed that „conversion“ should be spoken of only when some equivalent terminology is used by converts themselves. Others tend to define „conversion“ by certain characteristics, such as radical and sudden change in religious outlook, that may be peculiar for Christian experience but have now become hegemonial across the world. Does this help to better understand processes of religious reorientation in Islam, or does it rather obscure incremental processes of learning that individuals may experience as continuity rather than as rupture in their lives? For a more nuanced approach, it may be useful here to think about a universal typology of the convert, such as the one recently proposed by Danièle Hervieu-Léger. She distinguished the convert who changes his religion as such, on the one hand, from the one who discovers a way into religiosity for the first time in his or her life (a case particularly frequent in highly secularized societies), on the other, and finally from the „internal convert“ who reasserts the belonging to his or her religion after having been associated to it or having lived it only in a formal and conformist way.²

Definitions of conversion that reach beyond Christianity may equip us for tackling further questions that should be addressed by the conference. Often, conversions have been described in direct connection with crises that are related to modernity. How exactly this relation works, however, and

¹ “Comments on conversion.” In: Peter van der Veer (ed.), *Conversion to modernities. The Globalization of Christianity*. London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 263-273

² *La religion en mouvement. Le pèlerin et le converti*. Paris: Flammarion, 1999

what conceptual and methodological tools are required to study it, is still open to question. To what extent can religious conversions in fact be seen as conversions to modernity, and how do they interconnect individual and social crises ?

Another interesting question is the one of mutual influence or convergence between Christian and Muslim practices, forms and concepts of conversion. This requires a study of the imaginations, but also of ritual practices of religious transition.

Yet another set of unresolved issues refers to patterns of explanation of conversion, a question which is linked to methodological approaches. Different agendas of research have been pursued here with regard to different regions and religions. For conversion research on East Africa, for instance, approaches referring to collective identities and social belonging have been preferred, particularly with regard to Islam, while studies on individual perceptions of the converts themselves are rare. For Africa in general, pragmatic and „syncretic“ elements of conversion have often been emphasized. Studies on religious, including Islamic, conversion in Europe, in contrast, have tended to stress the individual and spiritual experience and the radical reorientation that conversion entails. Similar tendencies can be observed with earlier studies on religious conversion in Asia. Observations on general trends in the modern Islamic world, however, confirm the need for more attention for the individuality of conversion. Many scholars have observed the emergence of a new emphasis on scripturalism in Islam (Geertz) that is spread through print and electronic media and thereby no longer reserves knowledge on the holy texts to a small group of religious scholars (*ulama*) but enables a strong individualization in the relationship between individual and text (R. Schulze). Thus, a methodological reorientation of conversion research towards the individual experience – having once been discarded by social scientists for equally good reasons – is clearly needed for an appropriate grasp on these developments.

Comparative studies may help to generate broader insights on these questions and to overcome the gaps and biases of established approaches. The conference is therefore intended to present researches on different geographical regions and historical periods, but with a certain emphasis on modern Africa and Asia. Comparisons should also include different disciplinary perspectives and methodologies. Following the outline of problems just given, four specific areas of debate are proposed for contributions to the conference:

- Problems of conceptualizing “conversion” in a crosscultural perspective
- Conversion and the crises of modernity
- Conversion and convergences between Islam and Christianity
- Conversion and the rediscovery of the individual

Contributions towards these topics are hereby invited. Please send your proposal, with provisional title and a short abstract, **as soon as possible** to one of the convenors mentioned below. Please do not hesitate to contact us for further inquiries.

Looking forward to your response, and with our best regards

(Dr. Chanfi Ahmed - ahmed.chanfi@rz.hu-berlin.de)

(PD Dr. Achim von Oppen - oppen@zedat.fu-berlin.de)

(Tabea Scharrer, M.A. - tscharrer@gmx.de)



Conference

Conversion, Modernity and the Individual with particular reference to Islam in Africa and Asia

November 25 and 26, 2005

Centre for Modern Oriental Studies, Berlin

PROGRAMME

(provisional, as per Oct. 10, 2005)

Friday, Nov. 25th

10.00 *Registration*

11.00 ***Welcome by the convenors***

Introduction: Debating conversion in modern East African Islam.
(*Achim von Oppen, Berlin*)

Short discussion

11.45 ***1st Session: Problems of conceptualizing “conversion” in a crosscultural perspective***

On the relevance of the Christian paradigm in conversion research.
(*Ilinca Tanaseanu, Bayreuth*)

[Conversion as a polymorphous social practice – with examples from Kenya.
Tentative title, to be confirmed]
(*Yvan Droz, Genève*)

Discussion (with introductory comment by Andreas Heuser, Limburg)

13.15 *Lunch Break*

14.45 ***2nd Session: Conversion and the crises of modernity***

The dynamics of conversion to Islam in East Africa and Indonesia in historical perspective.
(*Abdin Chande, Garden City*)

Conversion to Christianity and the attractions of modernity in the 19th century Gold Coast.
(*Sonia Abun-Nasr, Basel*)

Discussion (with introductory comment by: To be confirmed)

16.15 *Coffee/Tea Break*

16.30 *2nd Session (continued)*

Power and agency in conversion and reversion: Muslim prayer groups in Nigeria.
(*Amidu Sanni, Lagos*)

A matter of orthopraxy ? Muslim women's conversion narratives and the struggle
over "Sunni" identity in Mali.
(*Dorothea Schulz, Ithaca / Bloomington*)

Discussion (with introductory comment by: To be confirmed)

Gangs, guerrillas, and opportunist conversions to radical Islam: a view from the
underworld, with special reference to Kenya and Nigeria.
(*Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, Paris*)

Discussion

18.15 *End of session*

19.30 *Dinner and social evening in the city*

Saturday, 26th Nov.

9.00 *3rd Session: Conversion and convergences between Islam and Christianity*

Conversion for power – power against retro-conversion. A Muslim convert to
Christianity and his son at the top of the Ethiopian monarchy at the turn of the 20th
century.

(*Eloi Ficquet, Paris*)

Muslim Bible Preachers in East Africa.

(*Chanfi Ahmed, Berlin*)

Discussion (with introductory comment by: To be confirmed)

10.30 *Coffee/Tea Break*

11.00 *3rd Session (continued)*

Religious mobility and religious pluralism in Burkina Faso.

(*Katrin Langewiesche, Marseille*)

Discussion (with introductory comment by: To be confirmed)

12.00 *Lunch Break*

13.30 ***4th Session: Conversion and the rediscovery of the individual***

Muslim Fon: a commentated narrative of the conversion journey of El Hadj Akan Charif Vissoh (Benin, Côte d'Ivoire).
(Marie Miran, London/Seattle)

Mapping selves: Biographic narratives of working women negotiating the Sudanese Islamist moral discourse in Darfur, West-Sudan.
(Karin Willemse, Amsterdam)

Discussion (with introductory comment by: To be confirmed)

15.30 *Coffee/Tea Break*

15.45 ***4th Session (continued)***

Narrating conversion: discourses (and mediators) of religious change in East Africa.
(Tabea Scharrer, Berlin)

Discussion (with introductory comment by: To be confirmed)

Becoming a 'True Muslim': Young People's Conversion to the Tablīgh Jamā'at in The Gambia.
(Marloes Janson, Leiden)

Discussion

17.15 *Refreshments*

18.00 ***Final Session***

Comment I: *Ute Luig (unconfirmed)*

Comment II:

Concluding discussion

19.30 (ca.) ***Farewell, end of the Conference***

ABSTRACTS OF ALL PARTICIPANTS

(provisional, as per Oct. 19, 2005)

Sonia Abun-Nasr (Basler Afrika Bibliographien, Basel)

Conversion to Christianity and the attractions of modernity in the 19th century Gold Coast

My approach to the phenomenon of conversion rests on an analysis of the spread of Christianity in southern Ghana during the 19th century. I focus on the activities of the Basel Mission which during this period expanded from the coast to the inland, thereby reaching the centre of the Ashanti empire after its subjection by the British in 1896. I will show that the establishment of missionary stations often depended on the goodwill and hospitality of Africans who viewed the missionaries as representatives of "modernity" and welcomed them as such. The term "modernity" in this context refers to social and political developments introduced by Europeans to the Gold Coast which were seen to be new and promising by African rulers. But accepting the presence of missionaries did not necessarily imply that Africans underwent a process of religious reorientation. During the 19th century conversion was not very common in the politics of the Gold Coast. Only small numbers of individuals and groups of people were willing to be baptised and live in a Christian village ("salem") as required by the Basel Mission.

Using sources from the archives of the Basel Mission I shall describe the social background of some of these early converts. I will show that in the 19th century conversion to Christianity was attractive to men and women whose position in "traditional" society was ambivalent and precarious. This does not imply that converts were attracted to Christianity for purely materialistic reasons. Instead I suggest that Christianity was a convincing religious alternative to those Africans who were drawn to a new and "modern" way of life in the early colonial period. The interpretation of Christianity as an aspect of modernity was a truly African achievement. The missionaries in their turn adhered to a conservative and antimodernistic philosophy of life and certainly did not intend to lead their converts along a path of social innovation.

Chanfi Ahmed (ZMO, Berlin)

The Muslim Bible Preachers in East Africa

Unlike other Islamic missionary groups which in order to convert people put the emphasis on education, the *Muslim Bible Preachers* specialise in giving sermons and preaching in the streets, on markets or in football stadiums etc. They call these activities 'open air conferences'. Their sermons consist of an 'Islamic' reading of the Bible, intending to convert Christians to Islam, hence their somewhat hybrid name (*Muslim Bible Preachers*, in Kiswahili: *waHubiri wakislamu*).

I first wish to trace the emergence of this new *da'wā* method in East Africa. I would then like to make the point that how negative the *Muslim Bible Preachers* may interpret the Bible, the simple fact that they do this in front of a mixed Muslim-Christian public can be considered as a contribution to a better mutual understanding between the different believers.

The *Muslim Bible Scholars* exclusively use Swahili in their sermons and even render Qur'anic verses in Swahili. In this context, I intend to analyze the role of the vernacular (in relation to Arabic), both in Islam and Christianity. Therefore, I also seek to analyze the concept of the "*translatability of the (religious) message*" developed by Lamine Sanneh in his book "*Translating the Message. The Missionary Impact on Culture.*" I would also like to question the role *Islamic Swahili literature* plays in the transmission of Islamic knowledge in East Africa today and whether it is as prominent as some scholars, e.g. Justo Lacunza-Balda, maintain.

Abdin Chande (Garden City)

The Dynamics of Conversion to Islam in East Africa and Indonesia in historical perspective

It would be interesting to study and compare the process of conversion to Islam in East Africa and Indonesia. To do this we need first to analyze the origins, transformations and expansion of Islam in both regions. This has great significance for revealing the nature of Islamic conversion in terms of the historical forces and cultural influences that have shaped Islam as it is expressed locally. What does conversion mean in each case? Is it a change in institutional affiliation, outlook, world-view, or way of life? Are there changes in personal identity, changes in ideology and socio-political action or a complete reorientation of emotional status? Has this conversion incited strong emotions and competition and led to conflict with neighbouring communities?

This paper hopes to identify and study in an exploratory way the types of conversion that have taken place in East Africa and Indonesia. What are some of the major similarities and differences, if any, that have emerged in the conversion process in the two areas? Would, as in the case of Indonesia, for instance, a change from abangan (nominal) to putihan (what Clifford Geertz called Santri) or normative Islam constitute a conversion of some sort given that these categories are considered to be conflictual? In what sense do categories such as these and others help us to understand on the one hand local manifestations of Islam and on the other the dynamics of the conversion process? What are some of the conversion motifs which reflect different experiences, social contacts, identity formation etc in both Indonesia and East Africa? These are some of the questions that this paper will attempt to address.

Yvan Droz (Genève)

Conversion as a polymorphous social practice – with examples from Kenya

My paper analyses conversion as a polymorphous social practice. I outline the structure of conversion that we define—for want of a better term—as an, often, dramatic change in beliefs and practices which are considered sacred. Such a general description might mingle an ensemble of apparently rather diverse practices. However, and at the risk of colliding with the advocates of a "theological" concept of conversion, this broad definition is necessary, first to identify the basic principles of the conversion process, second to distinguish its internal differences. Therefore, using the Kikuyu people from Kenya as an example, I will identify three tentative types of conversion: cosmogonic conversion, which concerns the passage from one cosmology to another; liturgical conversion, which is conversion within the same religious cosmogony; and additional conversion, the Pentecostal one (to be filled with the Holy Spirit or a reassertion of one's faith). The Kikuyu example underlines the complexity of the conversion process and diversity in its interpretation.

Adopting a new religion does not necessarily imply a "conversion" in the Christian sense of the word, nor a change of faith, but conversion can correspond to its etymological meaning (the Plato epistrophê): to turn towards the radiance of Ideas... while hoping for a better fate. That means "using" conversion to face ill-fated events, specifically a succession of ills that neither therapeutic means nor anti-witchcraft rituals can stop. Conversion thus becomes a Pascalian bet: the reasons of conversion are clearly this-worldly and do not stem from a supposed anxiety about the immortality of the soul. However, this disillusioned analysis does not question the religious fervour, nor the depth of faith, lest the "truth" of conversion, since this is essential to the performative efficiency of conversion. Actually, in order for conversion to meet the believers' hopes, these must "truly" believe "in good faith".

Therefore "religious" conversion not only implies faith or illumination, but it is often induced by therapeutic, sorcery, economic or moral reasons. To consider conversion having in mind adhesion to Christianity is to impose a particular concept of religion and conversion on a complex social reality. One can thus assume that faith is not personalised or individualised in the same way everywhere, which of course does not lessen its value. In other words, it is to

take Christian theology—and its specific concept of faith—with the concept of conversion, without regarding the actual social practices. Thus, religion does not constitute a specific field or is not disembedded from other social practices. This is the reason why it remains surrounded by witchcraft, therapeutic or moral considerations. These may induce a process of conversion without faith being its primary cause."

Eloi Ficquet (EHESS, Paris)

Conversion for power. Power against retro-conversion. A Muslim convert to Christianity and his son at the top of the Ethiopian monarchy at the turn of the 20th century.

Ethiopia is remarkable for the fluidity of conversions between Christianity and Islam. In this context, a case study of the chief of this region in the late 19th century proves to be very elucidating. The imam Mohammad Ali allied himself to the king of kings Yohannes and converted to Christianity, becoming thus ras Mikael and gaining control of the entire region. He continued the alliance with Yohannes' successor Menelik and got married to his daughter. His son Iyasu, being the only descendent to Menelik was made king of Ethiopia in 1913. Iyasu's Muslim origin and the sympathy he showed towards the Muslim population of Ethiopia served as a motive for his dethronement. The figure of the convert whose offspring rose to occupy the highest political functions promises to be a very interesting case study.

Marloes Janson (ISIM, Leiden)

Becoming a 'True Muslim': Young People's Conversion to the *Tablīgh Jamā'at* in The Gambia

The proliferation of the *Tablīgh Jamā'at*, an Islamic missionary movement that strictly observes the fundamentals of the faith, is a manifestation of the recent Islamic resurgence in West Africa. The movement originated in South Asia, but has expanded to Africa. Despite the Jamā'at's great influence on the lives of many West African Muslims, sub-Saharan Africa - which is often seen as the periphery of the Muslim world - is a region that has been ignored almost completely in studies of the movement. This paper, which is based on anthropological field research in The Gambia conducted between 2003 and 2005, will focus on the upsurge of the *Tablīgh Jamā'at* in The Gambia. Despite its small size, this country appears to be a booming centre of *Tablīgh* activities in West Africa. Adherents from other African countries regularly assemble in The Gambia to exchange ideas on the proper *Tablīgh* method, that is missionary work aimed at the moral transformation of Muslims. It is striking that the Jamā'at does not attempt to convert Christians, who form a tiny minority in The Gambia. Sikand (2000: 10-12) and Reetz (2004: 295) rightly remark that in the scant literature on the *Tablīgh Jamā'at* attention is paid primarily to explicating the movement's worldview and its fundamental tenets, while the questions as to how the *Tablīgh* ideology plays itself out in the lives of individual Muslims and how the Jamā'at operates on a daily basis are neglected. In order to gain insight into how doctrine is put into practice, I have recorded the 'conversion' stories of several young *Tablīgh* activists. 'Conversion' does not refer here to a shift from one religion to another, but rather a turning from an earlier form of piety to another. The indicators of *Tablīgh* conversion are, according to Moosa (2000: 214), that the adepts adopt a new discourse steeped in Islamic metaphor; they espouse an ideal and purist lifestyle with its attendant paraphernalia, such as a dress code. Roy (2004) speaks of 'born-again Muslims' in this context.

The central question in the conversion stories is: what does it mean in Gambian daily life to be a *Tablīgh* activist? Attention will be paid to young men and women's motives to convert to *Tablīgh* ideology and its consequences. On the basis of these narratives, the central themes in the Gambian branch of the *Tablīgh Jamā'at*, such as intergenerational competing notions of Islam as expressed through life-course rituals and the prominence of women within the movement, will be explored. These themes result from local factors such as the current socio-

economic crisis and gender relations. Nevertheless, they also bear similarities with recurrent subjects in other 'fundamentalist' movements throughout the Muslim world.

Katrin Langewiesche

Religious mobility and religious pluralism in Burkina Faso

In Burkina Faso, one can often meet people whose religious path is composed of various experiences. For example, men who converted to Islam when they migrated return to the tradition of the ancestors for celebrating the funerals of their fathers. Or women born into a Catholic family who were married to an Islamic man and adopted his religion, could also turn to the evangelical Protestants after a long illness.

This religious mobility is analysed by an approach based on the actors and integrated into the outline of the historical development of the religious pluralism in the region of Yatenga since the 1960s. Far from classical religious monographies concentrated on one religion, I make the opposite choice to study "in parallel" the traditional religion, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism. So a picture of "religion in everyday life" is drawn which is not often described in anthropological literature.

The religious conversions are often presented as a "one way ticket" founded on a radical act of individual religious reconstruction. However in the Yatenga province we see the opposite: frequent reversible conversions. These multiple interchangeable conversions indicate a certain indifference to the religious affiliation which is adapted to everyday life and a social context. There is an increase in the theological and popular debates about the difference between the religious denominations. These debates maintain the limits between the various religious institutions. The people however transgress these limits without challenging the authority of the institutions. Instead of creating conflict these dynamics make the peaceful coexistence of various religious communities possible.

Marie Miran (SOAS, University of London)

Muslim Fon: a commented narrative of the conversion journey of El Hadj Akan Charif Vissoh (Benin, Côte d'Ivoire)

El Hadj Akan Charif Vissoh was born Lucien Vissoh in 1953 in Logohoze, a hundred kilometers away from the historical center of Abomey now in modern Benin. Fon by birth, he was the son of a Christian father and animist mother. Unusual circumstances led him to embrace Islam in Porto Novo in 1974, turning him into the first Muslim Fon of his hometown almost a living oxymoron. Charif Vissoh's spiritual journey then led him to seek Islamic knowledge and social assimilation in various regions of Côte d'Ivoire. Along the way, he was confronted with many difficulties, some particularly painful, as he was challenged by his non-Muslim family and non-Muslim family-in-law (his Fon wife also converted to Islam in Abidjan) and seldom supported by the local Muslim communities whose outlook on Muslim converts was often condescending at best. Now living in Cotonou, Charif Vissoh has become the first Muslim preacher fluent in Fon, Arabic, and English and the first translator of the Quran into Fon. He has also founded an association called the "Benin Islamic League for the Defense and Promotion of Muslim Converts" to raise Muslims' awareness of the specific problems of converts

and help the latter succeed in straddling their old and new ethnic and religious cultures and communities. Based on Vissoh's enlightening autobiographical narrative, collected in a lengthy interview of about 15 hours in Cotonou in 2003, the proposed paper will attempt to broaden the analysis of the complex processes by which Muslim converts have domesticated Islam in the predominantly non-Muslim forest regions of the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa. Muslim converts are meaningful actors located at the crossroads of local/indigenous, national, and global/pan-Islamic identities, discourses, and politics. Yet, if the African encounter with Christianity in the 20th century has been carefully studied, the context and impact of the rapid contemporary Islamization of coastal West Africa remains to be investigated. This paper will

present in a tentative fashion the comparative framework and heuristic questions of my new research project on the social and religious history of Muslim converts in this part of Africa.

Achim von Oppen (Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin)
Debating conversion in modern East African Islam.

The recent rise of Islamic revivalism in East Africa (as in other parts of the world) seems to revive, among its observers, the earlier question as to whether the expansion of Islam in the region should be seen as an Islamization of Africa or as an Africanization of Islam. The paper critically reviews the debate on „African conversion“ of the 1970s and 1980s and confronts it with empirical evidence from 20th century East Africa. It asks for ways out of what has turned out to be a theoretical impasse: Instead of conceptualizing conversion between the poles of „break“ and „continuity“, between external influence and local adaptation, a focus on the views and practices of social actors themselves, both as groups and as individuals, it seems, may open up a more promising agenda for understanding the current dynamic of „world religions“ in Africa. It is such an agenda which has informed the Call for Papers for this conference on „Conversion, Modernity and the Individual“.

Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (Paris)
Gangs, guerrillas, and opportunist conversions to radical Islam: a view from the underworld, with special reference to Nigeria.

Since the September 11, conversions to Islam worry strategic analysts, as neophytes are usually considered to be more extremist than traditional Muslims. From Asia to Africa, the issue is now a burning issue that deserves many commentaries. First, we have to distinguish 1) conversion from one religion to another, 2) "internal" conversion (a "born again" phenomenon for the Christians) and 3) the discovery of God (especially for animists in Africa or atheists and agnostics in the West). When we consider these three types altogether, the expansion of Islam in Africa remains mysterious: not only because its appeal would need further investigation to be fully understood, but also because it raises some doubts on the reality of its growth, all things being equal. Hence this paper will challenge some common assumptions. Indeed we have no scientific measurement of the progression of Islam in Africa. Nigeria, the most populated country on the continent, is an interesting case-study in this regard, because it experienced many religious confrontations between Muslims in the North and Christians in the South. In a first part, we will show that there are no rational proofs about the growth of Islam, only clues and conspiracy theories, especially about Sharia and the so-called "Kaduna Mafia". In a second part, we will question the development of Islam amongst non-Muslim societies. We will compare it to the rapid propagation of Christianity in the Middle Belt and we will deal with what we call "opportunist" political conversion to Islam in the Niger Delta: a pattern which involves rebels in a context where Muslims constitute a minority of the population. By studying el-hadj Asari Dokubo and his Niger Delta Volunteer Force, we will attempt to understand the attractive influence of Islam for gangsters or warlords opposing a Christian elite. Their conversion seems quite paradoxical because it can repulse their non-Muslim followers. And one wonders what is radical in such a process: Islam or the converted?

Amidu Sanni (Lagos State University)
Power and Agency in Conversion and Reversion: Muslim Prayer Groups in Nigeria

According to Ryan (1978), it was not the ritualistic Islam that necessarily attracted the West Africans to Islam, but rather, the efficiency of the prayers of its gifted holy men who could

write and heal and make amulets for those in distress or those wishing to access power in its various forms. Colonialism Christianity challenged the authorities of Islam and the traditional belief systems in Yorubaland (Nigeria) until independence in 1960. The economic boom of the 70s was followed by a depression such that religion came to be seen as anything that the economic political system had failed to offer. So there was a fertile ground for religious revivalism and conversion. Christianity was the first to take advantage of this with the emergence and rapid growth of charismatic and neo-Pentecostalism (Corten & Fratani 2001; Peel 2000; JRA, 28 (1998).

In the Next Christendom, one of the most influential titles on global Christianity, Phillip Jenkins (2002) foresees a “coming crusade” of Christians against Muslims in desperate contestations for converts. The crusade may have in fact begun with the ever-increasing variables in the global dynamics of competition and conflict, the continuum of convergence and divergence between and within “public religions” (Casanova 1994). This is the underlining object of my study as it relates to the reassessment of the agencies and mechanisms for conversion among the Yoruba of Nigeria. The Islamic response to the conversion enterprise by Christ’s spokespersons has traditionally been tilted towards the retention of adherents of the Islamic faith rather than winning new members. But in recent times, however, a new dimension can be discerned in the conversion market in which the Weberian instrument of “intellectualization” has become the norm. How has this reduced the authority of the clerics and ‘ulamā’ hitherto regarded as the sole custodians of knowledge (Zaman 2002) and agents of conversion?

The advent in the last few years of Muslim prayer groups has afforded a new meaning and perception to conversion in Nigeria. Nominal Muslims who suddenly become religious out of conviction or expectation in the “cure-all” ability of Islam characterize their new identity as “reversion” rather than “conversion”, as long as the process of “retraditionalization” and “internalization” of Islam, albeit under a new dispensation, has become overwhelming (Cf Rambo 1999). My paper will investigate the factors responsible for this development, especially in light of inroads of modernity, mass education, new technologies, and the new actors’ appropriation of same. The paper, which is based on a field work on NAFSAT, the fastest growing prayer group in West Africa, will also examine the factors that promoted the emergence of Muslim prayer groups as agents of conversion and accession of power in a new public sphere in which the dynamics of globalization, deterritorialization, and transnationalism are at work. Attempt will be made to see whether we can identify a common trend in the goals, modes of operation, and public perception of these prayer groups in the West African conversion market in which emphasis is more on the rediscovery of individual in the context of received religious and social values.

Tabea Scharrer (ZMO, Berlin)

Narrating conversion: discourses (and mediators) of religious change in East Africa

Despite Talal Asad’s statement that conversion is a European, Christian concept, there can be found many testimonies about conversion to Islam in the internet. These bear much resemblance to likewise testimonies that can be found in small booklets across the region of East Africa and to interviews carried out during our research period on conversion to Islam in East Africa. Where does this similarity come from, given that people do not all feel the same during conversion? I will argue, that despite the fact that only a few people have access to these new sources of ‘Islamic knowledge’, like internet, booklets or audio-tapes, these people act as mediators and are therefore very important for the spread of certain ideas. In the case of conversion narratives in East Africa, this is especially important for ideas and expressions concerning reformist Islam, which are nowadays used by East Africans to describe and shape their own individual experience of their conversion to Islam.

Dorothea E. Schulz (Indiana University/ Cornell University)

A matter of orthopraxy ? Muslim women's conversion narratives and the struggle over "Sunni" identity in Mali

The aim of the paper is to understand whether, and if so, how the notion of conversion, conventionally employed in the study of Christianity, can be fruitfully applied to the contemporary Islamic revival in Mali. Here, a broad array of female actors embark on a quest for spiritual atonement of which they conceive of as a perpetual, never-ending form of moral "rejuvenation". Most of the female supporters of the Islamic moral reform movement organize themselves in women's groups. The paper takes a controversy among representatives of different Muslim women's groups as a point of entry to explore conflicting versions of what it means to be a rightful believer. Definitions of "being a rightful believer" are made dependent on a "genuine" conversion experience (that is usually authenticated through its narrativization) as well as with constructions of religious orthopraxy. The paper examines how competing narrative constructions of these processes and practices feed into the on-going struggle among Muslim women over how to define, and to claim for themselves, a "Sunni" identity.

Ilinca Tanaseanu (Bayreuth)

On the Relevance of the Christian Paradigm in Conversion Research

The conversion of Paul recounted in the Acts of the Apostles has been a powerful paradigm in the history of Christian conversion. It was the prototype behind the conversions which first came to be studied in a scientific manner, as the first steps in conversion research were undertaken by North American psychologists of religion focussing on individual cases in their own culture. Thus it has dominated attempts to conceptualize conversion well into the sixties, when sociology entered the field shifting the focus from individual experience to the social processes underlying religious conversion. Nevertheless, the old conceptualization is still influential and conversion definitions as a dramatic change in a person's religiosity and moral life still can be encountered. In this paper I shall argue that even though such a model of conversion may be helpful to understand certain developments within Christianity, its usefulness is very restricted. On the one hand this canonical idea of conversion wasn't the only one even in the history of Christianity, and concentrating upon it can lead to a distorted one-sided perception. On the other hand its potential for comparative studies is very meagre. As an alternative, an approach based on the concept of identity, integrating the process of individual conversion into its social context as well as into the larger picture of the whole biography, is more suitable.

Karin Willemse (Amsterdam)

Mapping selves: biographic narratives of working women negotiating the Sudanese Islamist moral discourse in Darfur, West-Sudan

To be included soon