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A Typology of Thai Conversions to Evangelical Christianity

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This article focuses on typologies of Thai conversions to evangelicalism, and part of it appears in Chapter Three of Ed Zehner's recently completed doctoral dissertation. This typology is, I think, an important contribution to our understanding of why people convert to such an apparently alien religion for Thais as evangelical Christianity. I would like to thank Ed for allowing me to publish this article.

Introduction

Once upon a time I thought I knew a lot about religious conversion. I had been raised in devotedly evangelical churches, my parents had met through Youth for Christ activities, my mother had once planned to be a missionary, and my father had once trained for the ministry. Growing up, I was well-versed in the evangelical logic that conversion is a once-for-all born-again experience, the beginning of one's spiritual life. On Christian radio programs I can still hear, as I did growing up, that if I cannot name the exact date and time when I became a Christian, I am not really "saved." I grew up believing this thoroughly, and assumed that this doctrine reflected the actual life experience of most evangelical Christians.

When I actually started asking evangelicals to tell me their conversion stories, I found that the stories often did not match the model. My father, for example, could not name a precise date and time. The closest he could come was to name a particular summer when he felt prompted to read the Bible intensively. At the beginning of the summer he was "not a Christian" (in the evangelical sense). At the end of the summer he knew that he was. My best friend in college, a Bible major attending a leading evangelical school, had a similar story – no specific date and time, but a period of intensive searching that resulted in the conviction that he and his relationship with God had changed. My girlfriend in my senior year of college, an evangelical raised in a non-evangelical family, had an even less mainstream story. She could not remember a time when she had not believed in God. And if she had to pick a time when her religious orientation became more like that of evangelicals, it would be the day she read the book of Ecclesiastes (not exactly the subject matter of evangelical tracts) and found to her pleasant surprise that the Bible had some intellectual and emotional depth. As for me, I "accepted Christ" at the age of five, and though my stay technically conforms to the model (only in Thailand have I ever heard an evangelical question the validity of my conversion), I later learned that in many religious traditions (both Christian and non-Christian) I would have been considered too young to be expected to make such a decision.

There is therefore a great deal of empirical variation around the modal evangelical story of a once-for-all life-changing experience ideally modeled on the Acts Chapter 9 story of Jesus' sudden encounter with Saul/Paul on the road to Damascus. Intriguingly, when I began studying conversion as an academic pursuit, I found that the secular authors made some of the same assumptions about conversion that evangelical preachers did. The scholarly literature did not require converts to name dates and times, and it did not voice the theology of spiritual rebirth that underlies the evangelical model, but it did, for the most part, assume that conversion was about personal and cultural transformation. One of the leading scholars of conversion defines it as "a total transformation of the person" that strikes "to the root of the human predicament" (Rambo

1993:xii). Others have defined it as "a radical reorganization of identity, meaning, life" (Travisano 1970:594), "the process of changing a sense of root reality" (Heirich 1977:674), a "deliberate turning" (Nock 1933:7), and a process "of self-transformation and commitment" (Stromberg 1993:ix). Similar assumptions underlie the claim, couched in terms of different language and issues, that "conversion is emphatically intransitive, a one-way street" that functions as a "general trope for both translation and appropriation, a sign of…epistemological violence" (Dirks 1996:121) and Talal Asad's remark that Christian conversion is something that happens to "subjects" who passively allow themselves to be subjected to Western religion "as a consequence of forces beyond their control" (1996:263, 265). These latter statements would certainly be challenged by most converts, as they are by many other scholars (for example, Jolly 1996, Meyer 1996, Sanneh 2003). But the assumption of conversion as psychologically transformative, as a radical turning point, is an assumption that remains strong, despite the evidence of socially and historically significant conversion movements that were more calculated than they were emotionally or cognitively transformative (for example, Kammerer 1990, Kipp 1995). Yet work with archival materials has shown that even in Christianity the norm of conversion as a personally transformative event to be recounted in personal stories is a relatively recent development (Pollman 1996). And work on new religious movements in North America has brought to scholarly awareness a phenomenon surely familiar to many who work with converts and congregations, the fact that a large proportion of converts eventually fall away (Balch 1985, Richardson 1980).

Clearly, there is a variety of ways that people become Christians, and I do not mean to imply that this variety has been entirely overlooked. Whereas some students of Christianity and other converting movements have focused on personally transformative crises (Allison 1969, James 1985 [1902], Lofland and Stark 1965, Stromberg 1993), others have explained the growth of religious movements in terms of interpersonal networking effects (Lofland 1977, Lofland and Stark 1965) and other factors. Indeed, so diverse has been the array of religious options and movements in North America since the 1960s that some scholars of this diversity have abandoned the very notion of a modal type of conversion around which the other types must revolve. One of the clearest presentations highlighting the diverse styles of religious change is the set of six conversion "motifs" suggested by Lofland and Skonovd (1981). A similar recognition, though somewhat less explicit, can be found in Rambo's (1993) model of interactive webs of conversion processes (which he, unfortunately, refers to as "stages").

Readers interested in additional work on (non-Thai) conversion typologies are urged to look up Lofland and Skonovd's 1981 article on "conversion motifs." Also useful is Richardson's 1980 article on "conversion careers." Though it does not deal directly with typology, it presents, fairly directly, the notion that a person's personal and religious identity is constantly in process, an idea that parallels parts of the following discussion. As for readers who would like to study the broader literature on religious conversion, they would do well to start with the books written or edited by Buckser and Glazier (2003), Rambo (1993), and (though some of the articles get a bit tendentious) van der Veer (1996).

Thai Conversion Stories

Anybody who listens carefully to the stories that people tell about their conversions is sure to find a great variety of patterns and themes in those stories. This is especially the case in Thailand concerning conversions to Christianity from other religious backgrounds such as Buddhism. Whereas North American evangelicals who convert from less devoted commitments to more devoted ones can be expected to conform more or less to the norm (though, as I noted at the outset, even many North Americans conform more in their affirmations than in their personal experience), such is less likely among Thai who converted from Buddhism to Christianity. No matter how hard they may try to make their stories conform to the evangelical ideal (and many of

them try very hard to do so), their actual experience reveals a variety of paths and patterns on the journey into Christian churches.

That is what I found in 1990 when I interviewed several dozen students in and near Bangkok who had been born in Buddhist families, converted to Christianity, and were now training for lay or professional Christian ministry. The process of collecting their conversion stories was a simple one. I obtained the permission of school administrators to interview these students, and in most cases the administrators not only gave permission but also provided the interview space and scheduled the order of interviews. In the interview sessions I explained that I was studying conversion and invited the students to tell their conversion stories however they wanted to tell them, though I also conversed with them when I heard something that I thought especially interesting or needing clarification.

The interpretation of these stories was influenced by my four years of prior experience living and working in Thai evangelical churches. Readers interested in the larger set of discussions arising from this material should consult my Ph.D. thesis (Zehner 2003).[1] The remainder of the present article shares a typology of conversions that I derived from the stories and presented in the second half of the third chapter of the dissertation. Readers are warned that the typology is not meant to be comprehensive. I do not expect that it can be tied explicitly to any broader ideological grid or theory, nor should it be used as a means of classify converts or their conversions, as most converts' stories showed features of more than one type. In generating the types, I simply parsed out the patterns I noticed in the stories. Another writer working with this or a different set of stories would likely notice different patterns. I have no problem with that. The best use of this material is not to pigeonhole people or their experiences but rather to spark greater creativity in thinking about religious contact and personal change.

A Typology of Thai Conversions to Christianity

In the following typology I give special attention to the speed of movement into Christianity, the sequence of communal participation versus inner conviction (that is, which came first), the degree of experimentation or quest in the conversions, and the role of factors interpersonal processes. While the typology is meant to be descriptive rather than explanatory, some of the categories also take overt motivations into account. There are six main categories and a seventh combination category.

1. Gradual Conversions

For some converts, the process of exploration and conviction was so gradual that it was impossible to point to any particular moment when they became a Christian. These people tended to talk about the results of the process rather than identifying a turning point to belief. Several of these informants had attended church over an extended period, asking questions about Christian faith and practice. As one of them put it, she believed because in the end she found answers to many of her questions. Another said that she eventually found that she "could no longer deny God." The tellers of these kinds of stories had trouble providing specifics, and this difficulty suggests that much of their decision-making process was subconscious. For these people, Christian commitment emerged gradually out of the fog. These converts are usually much better at describing the beginning of their exploration of Christianity than they are at articulating how and why they switched from exploration to commitment. This group might be called "seekers," people who attended church, got to know Christians, and asked questions. These people typically used a combination of intellectual and social modes of entry. Their conversions usually focused on ideas and were mediated by relational ties, but, as I said, lacked clearly marked points of commitment. Though most of these informants probably prayed prayers of conversion, those prayers are not central to their stories.

2. "Experimental" Conversions

A second, more experiential kind of conversion might be called "experimental." Through their contacts with Christians, these converts learned of the Christian teachings about the power of God. They then tested the Christians' teachings by seeing if the power of God would apply in their own cases. Some of these experimenters tested by praying for things that they considered unlikely. One individual prayed that two family members who never spoke to each other would become reconciled. Another prayed for help in his studies. Yet others prayed about financial problems. Other experimenters prayed for change in their own personalities, for example praying that they would be able to overcome particular vices or that they would start to care more for other people. Some members of this second group were actively testing, while others were not consciously praying for these changes but were impressed when they noticed the changes occurring over time. One such passive tester noted her addiction to sniffing paint thinner had gone away, while another passive tester came to consider it the grace of God that she had been able to continue pursuing her studies.

Like the seekers, most experimenters were already in contact with Christian communities, and most could say why they began their experiments. While the passive experimenters were able to say what event grabbed their attention, the active ones usually could not. The active testers seemed instead to have experimented continually until convinced, just as the seekers asked questions until convinced. And both active and passive experimenters did their testing while in regular contact with Christian communities. For active experimenters it was important not to convert until they had tested Christianity's claims, and they spoke of this testing as *thot laung*, a phrase often used when talking of scientific experiments done in a lab or when trying out a sample of a new product. I had the impression that this explicit "testing" attitude was more common in Thailand than in the United States. It may be influenced by the Buddha's famous dictum to test all teachings, including his own, instead of taking things on faith. Active experimenters engaged in Christian practices specifically to see if they would work as advertised, and only if the practices worked did the experimenters become committed Christians. The formal ritual of rap chuea (the prayer of "accepting Christ as Savior") could happen at any point in this process, but subjectively it was not felt to be the main event in the conversion, for, subjectively, the testing was itself the conversion process. The results were not necessarily psychologically transformative in themselves, but they did provide the basis for a decision.

3. "Casual" or "Drifting" Conversions

A third conversion type might be called "casual conversions" or "drifting conversions," in that these converts had already been drifting in and out of the Christian community over time, and consequently, though they were fully committed at the time of interview, they might be expected to drift away again in the future. Of course, it is possible that any convert might someday drift away; impermanent conversions are quite common. But in the cases of which I speak the converts had already drifted in and out of churches at least once. In some cases the earlier commitments were so real and their participations in Christian community so intense that the earlier commitment would have been considered a genuine conversion at the time, and converts reporting these histories often struggled to decide which conversion was genuine. Some treated their first conversions as genuine, but others did not. Whatever the case, convert claims that on the earlier occasions they had not "really believed" need not be taken at face value. An experienced missionary once told me he had noticed Thai young people rotating among a series of Christian and non-Christian religious groups. Each time they rejoined the Christian community, these young people seemed to join at a new level of maturity. None of my Thai informants fit this pattern exactly; when leaving the church they seemed to drop out of organized religious practice entirely. But the notion of rejoining at a new level of maturity may have validity, as each reentry into the Christian community draws on earlier life experiences.

Nevertheless, this conversion type deviates from the modal expectation of a once-for-all-time conversion even more than do the first two (despite the informants' attempts to make their experience fit the punctiliar model). Participation in the Christian community may bring psychological satisfactions for a time, and for that period the individual may indeed seem to have been transformed. But then the commitment passes until the cycle is repeated later.

4. "Emotional" Conversions

A fourth type might be called "emotional conversion." The convert has an emotional experience, often unexpected, that gives a special personal importance to the transition to Christianity. One person unexpectedly broke down in tears as she was praying the conversion prayer suggested in a correspondence course. Another said she had "seen Jesus" (actually, she thought she had heard Jesus calling her), and at that moment she felt a flood of emotional experiences that convinced her that Jesus was alive and Christian teaching was true. Several said they had unexpectedly spoken in tongues at Christian revival meetings, events that are usually accompanied by emotional excitement.

Not all emotional experiences lead directly to conversion. For example, several informants said they had spoken in tongues repeatedly (always at Christian meetings) before formally deciding to convert. I suspect this happened not only because the experience was too new for them to commit to Christianity or even be aware of the meanings that Christians read into tongues-speaking, but also because the experiences were open to multiple interpretations and reinterpretations. Consequently, emotional experiences leading directly to conversion almost always happened when the convert was already in a relationship with one or more Christian friends with whom he or she was discussing Christianity. In several cases the emotion seemed to be an expression of the excitement of appropriating Christian teaching at a new level, while at the same time it justified that decision subjectively.

5. Social Conversions

A fifth type might be called "social conversion." These social conversions were consciously sparked by relationships with Christians, and were often motivated by respect for them or for the way they acted. Several of my informants reported converting after moving to live with older siblings who were Christians. Others told me of Christian families who gave them shelter from conflicted home situations. These close relations with Christian social superiors playing a parental role appeared more frequently than I expected. Similar dynamics happened within biological families, however. When a series of family members entered the church successively, it was usually by a process of the younger ones following their elders. This was not exclusively the case, though, as there were reports of parents converting several years after their children had done so. Even so, younger following older was the most common pattern.

5.1. *Krengjai* Conversions

Two subtypes of social conversion merit special attention. One was the *krengjai* conversion. *Krengjai* is a quintessentially Thai term meaning to have consideration for the other person's feelings. In *krengjai* conversions people pray conversion prayers out of respect for the feelings of the people who are trying to convert them. One informant referred to this phenomenon as "acting to encourage the speaker." Most of these *krengjai* conversions are conversions in name only. But occasionally they lead to more serious commitment.

For one of my informants, the *krengjai* conversion was truly an act of respect, but it was also more than lip service. This informant had been performing for several months in a Christian musical troupe. When the missionary who had organized the troupe encouraged him to convert,

the informant did so after just a few minutes' discussion, acting, he said, mostly out of *krengjai* for the missionary who was witnessing to him. However, the informant had also decided to be serious about the conversion. He stopped paying respects to the supernatural powers his family had once respected, and he decided to act in every way as a Christian. The informant felt that God honored his conversion by answering his prayers, and he solidified his commitment in the course of his practice.

5.2. Quasi-adoption Effects

Another type of social conversion was conversion as a counterpart of quasi-adoption arrangements. In Thailand it is common for children to move back and forth among families. Some may live with a nanny while the parents work. Some may stay with a relative when attending school. In still other cases, a child may stay with another family because the biological family can't or won't provide proper care. (These quasi-adoptions are almost never formalized legally.) And sometimes an older sibling will take in a younger sibling in hopes of correcting the sibling's behavior or with the intent of providing a warmer family environment. Sometimes these new living situations provided relationships that were deeply meaningful to the person taken in, especially if the new host (or hostess) was respected and was providing safety. Several informants reported converting only a few weeks or months after starting to live with such people who were Christians. In some cases these older Christians were the informants' brothers or sisters. In another case a student who was suffering at home was invited to live with her Christian schoolteacher. In yet another case, a young woman was given shelter by a Christian woman after an older sister had kicked her out of the house in the middle of the night. This last example helps illustrate the potential effect of these relationships. The informant said the Christian woman was phikan, meaning she was handicapped or physically deformed. At that time, handicaps tended to evoke pity, and they could seriously reduce social respect. Consequently, the informant initially had little regard for her hostess. Yet over time she became impressed that this woman, whom she did not love, continued to show love to her, and that realization opened her heart to considering Christianity.

6. Observation of Christians

A sixth and widely cited type, closely related to social conversion, centered on observation of Christians, usually over time. This type divides into several subtypes.

6.1. General Attraction

Several converts spoke highly of the personality or behavior of Christians they had known. One of them spoke fondly of a Christian evangelist who had been a family friend for many years. Eventually the informant began desiring a life like his, as the evangelist's life seemed to be full of peace and happiness. Another informant was moved by the attention shown her by a couple of young female missionaries. Others said they were impressed when they noticed Christians having fun together, especially since they did so without resorting to alcohol, and without using rough language among themselves. Yet another was impressed by the mother of a Christian roommate he had in college. When visiting her home on school break, he was impressed that she avoided harsh words when speaking with her children. In all these cases, the informants claimed that the attitudes they observed in Christians were different from what they had observed elsewhere.

6.2. Observing the Effects of Conversion

When a close relative converts, the change in behavior sometimes has especially striking effects. One informant said he was stunned when visiting an older brother who had become a Christian; not only had the brother given up his vices, but in general he had also acquired a more settled character. The informant could see that his brother's life was good, and he wanted some of that. Another informant was impressed simply by the stubbornness with which her older sister

remained committed to her new faith despite opposition from her family. The sister spoke of peace, and it showed in her. Yet another informant said his older sister had begun treating other family members better. Whereas the sister used to get angry easily, she was now much easier to get along with. Another person noted that her mother had taken the breakup of her marriage very hard, but she seemed to become more settled after she became a Christian. Observations such as these were most salient for informants who were in their teens or older. Conversions that happened when the informants where younger than this were less likely to have a deep impact. In such cases, the children might follow their parents' lead in converting, but upon reflection did not consider it deeply meaningful. Informants called this form of Christianity chuea tam, that is, following the parents' lead without truly appropriating the faith for themselves. It was not until they were young adults that these informants made conversion decisions that they considered truly their own

6.3. Appreciating Treatment by Christians

Several informants said that they converted because they were simply happy with the way they were treated by Christians. Often these feelings came most to the fore when the informant was making a first visit to a Christian meeting. One informant, who had attended a Christian house meeting, said he was impressed that the other participants went out of their way to look after him, bringing him fruit and drinking water. I had considered this kind of hospitality to be general Thai custom, but the informant said he was surprised that they would do this for a stranger, and he felt warmed in his heart. Another informant was impressed by a Thai pastor who persisted in offering to take the informant to a Christian institution that would help him to overcome his heroin addiction. The informant had essentially been abandoned to his own devices when he was aged thirteen, losing contact even with his brothers and sisters. Though he was not sure he could or even wanted to abandon his heroin addiction, he was impressed simply that this stranger showed interest. Others spoke of the "love and warmth" and the smiles bestowed on them by Christians, especially at Christian meetings. Many spoke of Christians being nice (*di*) toward them. Many also spoke of the "love" of Christians. It was often not clear what they meant by "love," but in general they seemed to be praising Christians for showing personal interest in themselves. Some also praised the approachability of older Christians, along with their availability for counseling and for answering questions. Several individuals mentioned feeling accepted in Christian settings, a consideration that was especially important for young people who had recently arrived from the provinces or who held low-status jobs.

6.4. Christians' Approachability for Counseling

Christians' availability for personal counseling was a major issue in several of the conversion stories I collected. Several people praised the approachability of older Christians, especially pastors, pastors' wives, and elders who made themselves available for advice and emotional comfort. [2] In a way, these individuals were merely acting out the normal expectations entailed for a person in their position, playing a benevolent, nurturing role toward their social inferiors. The informants found these people's behavior impressive and comforting nonetheless, and seemed to find the treatment unexpected. Sometimes informants were impressed at the persistence with which peers injected God into conversations. While many nonconverts might be repelled by such persistence, the people who eventually converted gave these people credit, first, for caring enough to listen and, second, for offering a means of hope.

7. Combinations of Types

The several conversion types I have just outlined rarely appear alone in the conversion stories. For example, an informant's story may show the importance of a relationship with a particular person while claiming that the conversion was motivated entirely by intellectual arguments. Or a person's initial interest in Christianity may have been sparked by observing a change in a family

member, while in the course of conversion the person also attended church and raised cognitive and theological questions. Or a person may have had a sudden, emotional conversion that was preceded by extended discussion with Christian friends. The main purpose of detailing the conversion types at this point has been not to separate my informants into logical pigeonholes, but simply to draw attention to the fact that they experienced a variety of styles of conversion, while also indicating some additional points of attraction.

Final Comments

Asking people how they converted is a lot like asking people how they fell in love or how they developed their political perspective. They can tell stories, sometimes with great detail, conviction, and relish. But as for being able to name the precise moment when they, in their innermost being, went from "out of love" to "in love" (or Republican to Democrat, or Buddhist to Christian), well, that's pretty rare. For evangelicals, this mismatch between experience and the theologically rooted ideal may always create tensions. One way around those tensions is to develop a more ambiguous, less late-twentieth-century model for understanding the relevant scriptures. Instead of understanding conversion in the black-and-white, is-or-is-not, ones-versus-zeros model of a computer program or legal proceeding or citizenship application, evangelicals might draw on earlier Christian (indeed, proto-evangelical) models such as a journey (consider Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress) or of developing a mystic's concern for the "practice of the presence of God" (to pick a metaphor favored among evangelicals) or a concern focused more on where one is going than on where one is or on how or when one got there.

In practice, many evangelicals think in precisely the ways I have just suggested. But they are also concerned with points of initiation into the faith, with stories of spiritual "birth" (or "adoption," to use another biblical term), with the personal assurance of knowing how and when one "truly believed" and truly became part of the family of God. Though I do not have the space to detail my reasons here, I suspect this enduring evangelical concern about precise thresholds of belief is rooted not only in theology but also in psychological needs for tangible assurances of belongingness, a need that we all share to some extent.

As for outreach strategies and research programs, the implication of the highly variegated typology I have outlined is to avoid putting all your conceptual or institutional eggs in the same basket. This article has dealt just with patterns of conversion, and only peripherally with motives. But suffice it to say that the motives are as diverse as the patterns. People enter Christianity (and Islam and Buddhism) via a variety of routes, and many of those routes are difficult to program by direct applications of resources (how, after all, can an "experimental" Christian be induced to speed the experimentation process?). As with any other kind of appeal, people are typically drawn to a particular new religion or church by a variety of contacts. A tract here (perhaps rejected as "ridiculous"), a Bible passage there, a friendship there, an experimental church membership somewhere else, here an argument, there a long-term friendship – the journey is hardly a straightforward path. An inexplicable desire to start searching, perhaps even (as one convert reported) a never-quite-understood fascination with the shape of the cross seen on churches she never bothered to enter – these too have been reported as contributing to the journey. The best an outreach-minded congregation can do is to have the welcome mat out, and, at a minimum, be actively responsive as people express their curiosity about Christianity and their desire for contact with caring people – though, of course, it hardly hurts to advertise as well.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Readers interested in learning more about scholarship on conversion can consult the books and articles listed in the references. Particularly good places to start include Rambo's (1993) review of the sociological and psychological literature (a review focused mostly on North America), Buckser and Glazier's (2003) collection of articles by anthropologists, and van der Veer's (1996)

collection of articles by anthropologists and other scholars oriented to the concerns of postcolonial scholarship. Not only do these three sources provide a range of perspectives, but the literature cited in their bibliographies will lead readers still deeper into the scholarly discussions to date.

End Notes

[1] Copies of the dissertation should be available (for a fee) from University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA, 48106 (800-521-0600, www.umi.com). Copies have also been placed in Thailand at Payap University's archives and at the library of Bangkok Bible College.

[2] Elders are lay people who were part of the church's formal leadership corps. Some of them also acted as de facto pastors.

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