

CONVERTED PLURALISTS
An essay in the missiology of religion
by Laurent Ramambason, August 14, 2015

We have been witnessing a massive adhesion and conversion to religious pluralism. New vocal and anonymous adherents of religious pluralism are joining the flock of born pluralists. This live phenomenon is helpful to understand conversion: whom or what do people convert to? How and why?

The traditional focus of conversion studies, on how religious frontiers are crossed, is highlighted by Arthur Darby Nock, a Harvard professor. He published his *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* in 1933. Students of conversion have worked under Nock's shadow. In 2015, Brigitte Bøgh wrote "*Beyond Nock: From Adhesion to Conversion in the Mystery Cults*" *History of Religions* Volume: 54 Issue: 3 (2015-02-01) p. 260-287. Despite the brave attempt to go beyond Nock, it can be said that the studies from Nock to Bøgh are part of a "normal science" - in Kuhnian understanding, of conversion.

The assertiveness of religious pluralism is not only a tough challenge for those who aim at conversion in mission practice. It can cause a "paradigm shift" in conversion studies. In fact, conversion in the New Testament is easy to understand. It refers to the work of the living Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the fruit of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. However, its study, at present, needs the complex combination of problem-solving and good-news affirming epistemologies, characteristic of missiology.

In this paper I wish to present the study of conversion as an integral part of the *Missiology of Religion*. One of the question asked would be. "Why does someone like John Hick become a pluralist?" When I listened to him at the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham, UK, on 15th March 1993, I was rather struck by the fact that the category of western, classical, missionaries was mutating before my own eyes. From spot it was becoming stripe, from what Hick called exclusivist it was becoming pluralist.

Formerly in Madagascar, a significant London Missionary Society (LMS) territory under the supervision of a relative of Hick's wife, most if not all the LMS Presbyterian and the Congregationalist missionaries were exclusivist. They absorbed the Quakers, who, with flexibility then, shelved their pluralist conviction. Nowadays, it is the reverse: the Quaker identity and attitude toward religions have caught the reformed people facing a context of pluralism and secularism at home. It is a very important phenomenon for mission students.

Are the people like Hick the new Western missionaries? Conversion to pluralism is happening among mission-doers of all kinds, maybe at a scale unknown in mission history. Anonymous pluralists are growing. After Hick's lecture, in one of the seminars, a student from Korea helped relaxed the atmosphere when he contended that the problem was not religious but political. In South Korea, he said, people in power frowned on the move by people from different faiths to meet and think together. Hick added that he himself was surprised when he gave a lecture of the same kind to a gathering of people from the United Reformed Church. Those who had attended did not so much asked questions about the content of what he was saying as to the way, how it could be applied.

The paper presents, within the setting of the missiology of religion:

- a typology of pluralists and their missions,
- an enhanced picture of the conversion landscape,
- the task of missiology as serving the mission of Jesus Christ without betraying Him and those, who need Him in the larger community.