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Loïc Le Pape

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# Converts at work: Living out its conversion

Loïc Le Pape

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## Summary:

This chapter deals with the way that religious conversions have to be professed and presented in the secular age. The first section tries to examine the concept of 'grammar' and its possible application to conversions. The second part presents the relationship between converts and their new churches, seen as institutions. The third part deals with the work of converts with regards to their relatives and the conditions of reception of their conversion. Conversion is seen as an interaction process between an avowal and the recognition of this avowal by others. The last part envisages the secular age (and its specific French form, the concept of laïcité) as a frame for becoming a believer in an unbelieving world. The conclusion tries to shed some light on two under-rated forms of conversion: fanaticism and mysticism.

## Introduction:

In an international context religiously tensed (post 09/11, vitality of Muslim and Christian fundamentalisms) the studies of religion seems to have a new explanation virtue in the humanities. Similarly, religious conversions are studied by all scientific disciplines because it reveals both the crucial importance of religious identities and the ways of changing beliefs in a moment where religions are spreading outside their original cultures (Roy, 2008).

The French religious landscape is characterized by a historical link to Catholicism, which was for centuries the state's religion. The main religions are Catholicism (30 millions of believers), Islam (5 millions), Protestantism (3 millions) and Judaism (approx. 1 million). The French state is "laïque", religiously neutral and doesn't recognize any religion (art. 1 of the 1905's law). The French laïcité is both an historical construction (with juridical, political and ideological strong heritages) and an original way to envisage the place of religions in the public and politic spaces. Such a laïcité is a vague concept that frames the ways of conversion in France. It will be one of the strongest hypotheses in this text.

For this chapter, I have been kind of revisiting my previous research. In 2008, I completed a Ph. D. in sociology, titled "What is Religion for the French? Studying conversion". I started from a naive observation: "religions are still important in France, as some people choose to

convert". I assumed that through the study of conversion I would be able to say something about the importance of religion today. One idea was to try to understand the tension between the importance of religion for converts and a social atmosphere that Charles Taylor called, in 2007, the secular Age (Taylor, 2007). In using this expression, Taylor characterises contemporary times as times since unbelieving became the rule and believing became a personal option. So I tried to investigate the attitudes of converts in their personal, familial and social environments in order to know if conversion -and beyond, commitment to a new faith- is really a personal choice. I've done free-interviews with converts. I simply asked them to tell me about their conversions, while being attentive to their feelings, to the steps in their commitments, and to the reception to their conversions of their families and friends. I enclosed my field research in an urban micro comparison between two French cities (Marseilles and Strasbourg). The interest in choosing these two towns lies in the fact that they have different legal statutes about cults: the 1905 law in Marseilles and the Concordat in Strasbourg. Indeed, department of Lorraine and the two departments of Alsace are still governed by an agreement between the Vatican and the French State, called Concordat, which dates from 1801. In this context, four religions are officially recognized: Judaism, Catholicism and two Protestant churches. Religions are included in the school curricula; priests, rabbis and clerics of recognized religions are appointed and paid by the State and there are theological faculties. In contrast, in Marseille, cults are governed by the 1905 law on the separation of state and religion, without official recognition.

I have also delimited my field work in time: it deals with recent conversions. The first conversions studied date from the beginning of the Eighties (thus 25 years maximum). I also decided to delimit the scope of religions: I chose only monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), because these three religions have a common background, and even have common adventures in French history, particularly since the nineteenth century.

I also decided to focus on the "converters". I approached the institutions through their various groups or through religious clerics in charge of conversion (various authorities judge conversions: rabbis, Imams and priests, bishops, older councils among Protestants churches). Thus I combine an overall perspective, from the converts (and their stories about the institutions) to the institutions themselves with their "official discourses" on conversion (and their reports on converts).

One of the major results of this work was to demonstrate that conversion is not necessarily an individual trip. Of course, the overwhelming majority of converts decided by themselves to choose a new religion. But the process of change, the different steps of the conversion, and ultimately the avowal are all strongly linked to social relationships (family and friends). The converts have to make real efforts to avow their conversions, to present them and have them accepted. I will try to reflect on this chapter in the different parts of this work, in trying to present the complexities of such a demarche.

First of all, I will try to characterise the efforts of converts theoretically, using the concept of

a "grammar". The second part of the chapter will show the work and strategies of converts in relation to the host institution, their new religion. The third part will deal with the converts' efforts with friends and relatives, categories that became apparent as the most important over the course of my research. Fourthly, I will try to show that converts have to frame their personal journeys in order to present themselves in this secular age.

## **Towards a 'grammar' of conversion?**

I would like to advance here a first set of hypotheses concerning the conversion process. The idea is to replace the converts at the centre of the action: 1. conversion is an individual choice but it is validated by people around the convert; 2. the convert must publicise his engagement, making public the reasons and motivation for their personal choice; 3. there are some rules which are generally followed by converts so as to make the conversion acceptable; 4. not following the rules could expose the convert to reprobation, and according to my hypothesis, to the non-validation of the conversion. The theoretical option I chose in my research was to focus on the interaction between converts and their entourage using the approach of G. H. Mead (1934): it's through interactions and transactions with others, that men and women interiorize the rules of behavior in society. I added the contributions of the interactionism (an attention focused on social interactions, on the construction of a social world by the interactions between individuals, and, most important, the fact that action (collective and individual) are the right level of investigation) and the micro sociology of E. Goffman (1959; 1971).

A 'grammar' is the translation of a concept of pragmatic sociology, which compares social actions to grammar rules. Words, verbs, subjects, and complements can be used in combination, but a few rules must be respected in order for language to have a socially constructed form which can be understood. In my mind, it's the same thing with social behaviour: anyone can convert, but respect must be shown for some socially accepted rules, otherwise criticism, or even punishment, would follow. Which grammar is used for a successful conversion? A first example of a conversation with converts to Catholicism deals with sincerity and honesty:

- sociologist: it seems not really easy to tell your conversion?
- convert 1 : no, not at all. It needs to know whom we are talking with, and the sincerity makes the difference. If you are honest and sincere, others can't say anything.
- convert 2: He's right, it's honesty. For me it is also the most important. If you are clear with yourself, the individual in face of you will understand that the religion represents for you.

Cyril Lemieux systematised the concept of a grammar in an ambitious book (Lemieux, 2009), and gave in a precedent, an operational definition: "the rules to follow in order to act in a

sufficiently correct way for the partners of the action" (our translation, Lemieux, 2000: 110). In Boltanski and Thévenot's vision (2006), a grammar is articulated as a "superior common principle". In our attempt to characterise a grammar for conversion, this principle could be transparency. Transparency means that converts have to explain their spiritual evolution and explain their feelings as justification. They must be transparent in their stories, detailing all the stages of their conversions and the evolution of their faiths and personal situations. Transparency also means introducing oneself in front of several institutions: the religious one (in other words, the clerics of the new religion), their social relationships (family and friends) and all the interactions that converts could have with police, administration, school etc. Lastly, transparency also has a binding side that involves some form of "injunction: an injunction to be transparent, of course, but also an injunction to detail all feelings and all the adventures and misadventures of the conversion process. This injunction stems in part from the process of individualisation of beliefs, which is an implicit, necessary achievement through the conversion. It also refers to the work of Richard Sennett about the historical evolution between public and private spheres, tyrannies of intimacy. In this book, Sennett underlined the maladjustment from private life to public life, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Converts' work consists to publicise entire parts of their private life in order to be "transparent" and credible, which sounds sincere and true (Sennett, 1977).

Studying conversion allows us to outline the limits of the distinction between public and private. Indeed, through their processes of justification, converts have to publicise parts of their intimate lives. This process challenges the original distinction because religious 'coming-out' occurs somewhere between public and private: in group conversations, family meetings, interactions at dinners or parties, etc. Djamel, converted to Protestantism said:

Clearly, I don't say the same things to my brothers, my sister or my parents. My parents don't know explicitly that I converted myself to Protestantism, they would not understand. They have doubts I think, but we don't talk about. With my sister, I share lots of things and thoughts. She was the first whom I told my will to convert, the stages of conversion, etc. She understood, she was great. My brothers know that I converted myself but they didn't react. We do not talk about religion. We are very chaste and discreet in my family.

Through this superior principle of transparency, the operational action that converts have to follow is to sustain bonds with friends and relatives. Conversion is seen as a great individual transformation, but at the same time, converts must account for their personal continuity towards others just as if nothing had happened, as if they were unchanged. The ontological tension of conversion is in the personal and social changes (Le Pape, 2010).

The conversion story follows a linear form, a form that follows stages, adventures and tests. It also allows a communicable and shareable story. Converts' speeches are a succession of highly affective engagements (emotions and inner feelings) and detachments (permitting interlocutors both to understand emotional importance and to relativise it, suspending their

involvement in the story). The others are active witnesses, by which I refer to their exterior position in the interaction: they couldn't be considered as participants, aloof yet able to dissociate emotions, and so on, to receive conversion.

In conclusion, conversion falls under three constraints: firstly, the convert must "justify" his decision in front of an institution in order to be accepted. Secondly, he must explain himself to his entourage, his friends and relatives, so as to be recognised as a convert. Thirdly, he must present his conversion as a banal action in a secular age.

## **The converts and the institution**

Talking about institutions necessitates some preliminary remarks. First of all, in the course of my research I identified differences in the conversion process in each monotheistic religion: it's easiest to convert to Islam, and hardest to convert to Judaism. Converting to Catholicism seems to present a kind of mix between the other two religions. My second remark considers that churches create converts : a religious institution shapes its candidates and they have the obligation to bow to the decisions of the institution. The final decision is the ultimate validation of the conversion. My third remark is that we can find, in each monotheistic religion, an institution, specialised clerics (even laymen), or on special 'road map' which candidates must follow: requiring a ritual, following courses, passing diverse evaluations, etc.

Institution in this chapter is understood in the sense of Emile Durkheim: "one can call 'institution' all beliefs and all rules of self-conduct instituted by the collectivity" (my translation of : "on peut appeler institution toutes les croyances et tous les modes de conduite institués par la collectivité") (Durkheim, 1986, p.XXII). To be more precise, the conception of Jacques Lagroye is totally relevant: "The use of "institution" means (...) a great attention to what is instituted or objectified from various ways, to what is therefore likely to ensure a minimum coherence in the behaviour of members, to unify partially their ways of being, even shape their conceptions of the just and the unjust, the licit and the lawful, the good and the bad, the right and the wrong" (my hesitate translation of "L'usage du terme "institution" signifie (...) la plus grande attention à ce qui est institué ou objectivé de diverses manières, à tout ce qui est par conséquent susceptible d'assurer un minimum de cohérence dans les conduites des membres, d'unifier partiellement leurs façons de se comporter, voire de modeler leurs conceptions du juste et de l'inique, du licite et de l'inacceptable, du bien et du mal, du vrai et du faux" (Lagroye, 2006, p.12-13).

These preliminary definitions allow us to clarify the relation between would-be converts and religious institutions. This is an unequal relationship because the institution ultimately gives permission for conversion. Clerics are in the position and have the power to evaluate and decide about the convert's reality. But we must realise that this is not a unilateral relation and candidates have strategies and ways to bypass the rules and decisions of the institution. Thus, we have to focus on the interactions between the institutions and those they recognise.

The work of the convert is necessarily the construction of their justification: the convert must indeed develop a narrative for the institution, i.e. learn how to speak like a religious person. I have identified three stages for a convert:

The first of these is to speak about his or her faith inside the church. The convert has to produce a discourse about himself, about his or her journey, about his or her faith in order to achieve a narrative of his or her conversion: a sort of “pilgrim’s progress”. The institution delivers suggestions and examples of such a construction. For example, in the Roman Catholic Church, the conversions of Paul or Augustine are given as successful examples. Neo-pilgrims find elements with which to compose their narratives in books or in talk groups.

Secondly, converts must find legitimate motivations. The candidate has to mould his spiritual quest according to questions which the institution can answer. At this stage, the convert has two elements to consider. First of all, she or he has to differentiate between his feelings and emotions (generally over-invested in contemporary conversions) and the position of the institution, where expressions of emotions are kept under strict control. For example, a convert can’t seriously ask a conversion evoking his or her daily personal dialogue with God, because the institution cannot evaluate the degree of sincerity. Therefore, such a relation presents risks to be unshareable for the institution. In a second time, the pretender has to present an acceptable reason for conversion. For example, he or she has to refrain from offering instrumental reasons: an institution will not receive a project of marriage, because conversion is only judged on the sincere adherence of individuals, and not on their personal arrangements. In this second stage, the work required is to distance himself or herself from fervour, in order to achieve the best way to present in front of the authority. Candidates may hide personal motivations behind their avowed spiritual development. For example, converts has to hide their motivations unacceptable for the clerics:

I didn’t care for religion, and I still don’t care today. Converting was only a way to prove my love and my will to live with her. But I have not said to the imam, nor her parents... I’m not even sure I told her! I just told to the imam that I was interested in learning Arabic and discovering his religion... (Rashed)

Thirdly, the convert is required to show his or her will to integrate into a new community. As mentioned previously, in each monotheistic religion a conversion processes was identifiable. The first step is generally an interview with the cleric, a rabbi, a priest or an imam. This step is important because the candidate is judged on his or her performance and answers questions about his or her motivations, personal history and spiritual quest. Showing a will to integrate implies the acceptance of new rules and training. In Islam, the formation process could be reduced to the interview itself, but in Roman Catholicism or in Judaism, the training period could last anything from one and a half years to five years. During that time, candidates have to follow courses, attend training sessions and discussion groups, take exams etc. It is a real apprenticeship. But showing a will to integrate also implies the possibility of hiding certain personal hesitations. For example, if you want to convert to Catholicism, you

can't overtly criticise the Pope (too much), even if you keep a critical distance. Institutions can stand some heterodoxy, within limits. Once more, candidates have to sustain the role of pretenders during their entire novitiates.

According to these rules, we can say that institutions have to routinise conversions, that is, to mould the process into a set of mutually accepted requirements (an institutionality). So the role of institutions is to receive converts' emotions and fervour, and to distance them from the daily routine: welcoming the exceptional and enforcing the banal.

But in return, what is the role and the contribution of the institution? Two were identified:

1. The role of "converting instructor". Sébastien Tank says that the institution "makes converts" (Tank-Storper, 2007). The instructor's duty is to conduct tests and ensure that the required testimonies are received from those who wish to convert. For the institutions, a conversion could be seen as an evaluation of liabilities that engage their reputations. It's one of the reasons why candidates must do courses, exercises, tests etc., in the comprehensive training.
2. The second role, strongly linked to the first one, is the role of witness. While authorising a conversion, the institution "officially stamps" the conversion, proclaims it to be socially acceptable because it is sincere and it obeys the rules of the procedure. The church acts like a guarantee. It creates converts and authenticates their progress as " religiously conform".

## **Endless work with friends and relatives**

In this case, the convert is judged through their interactions with other individuals. These individuals are generally relatives, next of kin, and next-door neighbours. It may also concern friends and family that a convert may have such as fellow believers in faith, work colleagues etc. In such situation where his faith is questioned, the convert feels compelled to tell his story, his evolutions and its greatest stages. He has to speak about intimacy in front of a wide range of individuals. Some are close but some are distant and the convert has to take into account this diversity.

Through my interviews, I have identified rules that converts have to respect. These can be summarised into three competences.

The first consists of knowing how to speak about intimate life. Conversions are generally individual choices, personal decisions, but these choices must be publicised and explained. Speaking about themselves is often an aptitude learned and modelled during their relationships with the church. But it is less easy to speak about oneself outside the church. I noticed that in converts' narratives, the place and role of self-experienced "trial" and error is given special consideration. Thus the convert shows the human dimension of his conversion, with its doubts, hesitations and questions. Conversion is not a steady, linear process, so the

expression of hesitations can echo the ups and downs of the process. Underlining the moments of weakness is a way to present oneself as an individual with positive and negative sides. One convert to Judaism told me of her doubts:

- Have you met phases of doubt during your journey?
- Oh yes, lots of! I was almost constantly in doubt. First, the Consistory put doubt on me as regard to the continuation of the conversion. They often said that it wasn't won. So I had hard times and phases of doubts. And yet, after one more step, it is up again. I was happy for a while, comforted in my choices. And so on, one hesitation following the other. But that's converting isn't it?

In this extract, we note that doubts are part of the process of conversion. Recalling these hesitations is a way of proving oneself to be sincere and transparent. It reinforces the choice of the religion and makes the engagement definitive. In fact, across all the narratives, the phases of doubts alternated with more secure stages, but they were shortened and transformed: doubts are assessed, but are no proof of weakness; they are presented as creative energy. This logic of exposure also obeys the pattern followed by Augustine in his confessions, touched by doubts, distrust and uncertainty, a pattern that has become the classical narrative for conversion nowadays.

The second skill consists of knowing how to modulate these stories according to the audience. Obviously, the converts' narratives will change, depending on the audience and the situation. For example, the conversion-narrative will be different if a convert speaks with his life-companion, with his family, with his friends, his colleagues or with a sociologist. Converts have the competence to modulate their narratives, to be longwinded or brief, merely telling or testifying, etc. They are capable of identifying the differences between situations, the quality of their audience or the place, and can adapt their ways of telling accordingly. In such situations the major difference is about the public or private configuration, linked to the difference between avowal and testimony of confession (potentially with a missionary side).

It is not in the closest circle (family and friends) that it is easiest to tell of one's conversion. The proximity of the audience and the degrees of intimacy could prevent free speech. Parents' reactions are especially feared by converts. In the course of my research, I noticed that almost all conversions are the cause of distance between the converts and their parents, distance that could be restored quickly, but could also last years. Another type of situation, both public and private, is the conversion stories posted on internet. This configuration was outside of the frame of my first field research. One might notice however that anonymity allows freer expression and generally leads to a more detailed narrative

The third competence consists of knowing how to accept controversy, criticism or/and reprobation. In certain social interactions, the convert has to face hostility. The capacity to face criticism, to face opposition is at stake and is seen as a real asset. The operational way to do this is not to take it on a personal level, not to feel involved either personally or religiously. It implies being detached both from oneself and one's religious progress. It is not easy to be criticised on one's intimate and personal engagement. Most of the time, converts use strategies to defuse arguments: having a sense of humour, being polite, expressing no anger, changing the topic etc. One of my interlocutors confided a similar situation during an interview:

- I was at a friend's party, and a man came up and spoke to me about religion, probably because my friend had already told him I was a believer, or convert. So, he asked me, so directly, if I was a sort of mystic, if I knew Bernadette Soubirou, what was my opinion on miracles, and stuffs like that. I felt it a bit too rich, and he thought he was funny. I felt hurt.
- How did you react on the moment?
- I was bas, I felt rotten, I dropped the discussion.

In narrating one's conversion, these competences or aptitudes are also rules to follow. If any of these three rules were not to be respected, it could endanger the achievement of recognition for the conversion. With these three competences (which are also injunctions to be honest) the convert must be able to sustain a bond with old and new friends, with family and relatives. This continuity is important, because the convert has to keep in touch with his family and his immediate surroundings (friends, colleagues at work, etc.). Continuity is also important because, in our theoretical scheme, the conversion is validated by recognition stemming from these interactions without major conflict, from which we can assume that the individual is regarded as a convert, and tacitly accepted

The following and last part of the chapter will present an attempt to sociologically 'problematise' the religious conversions in a broader perspective. I'll try to show how the religious conversions today are shaped by what C. Taylor calls the secular Age and its socio-political contexts.

## **Becoming a believer in the secular Age**

Outlining the stakes around conversion and the social context in which it occurs implies taking into account some of the results from the sociology of religion. First of all, religious modernity has given rise to two processes. The first one is a process of individualisation of beliefs and of ways to achieve in life. For centuries, religion has been a family heirloom. The fall of religious transmission has provoked an individualisation of religious choices and a consumerist approach to committing oneself. A tendency to rationalise one's quest is linked to this process (Berger, 1990: 120-134). This second process is related to the need to self-

publicise one's spiritual quest. In cases of conversion, converts are urged to express and publicise their rationality in this regard. The second point deals with the concept of secularisation. Peter Berger, one of the theoreticians of the concept, outlined the central idea: "although the term 'secularization theory' refers to works from the 1950s and the 1960s, the key idea of the theory can indeed be traced to the Enlightenment. That idea is simple: Modernization necessarily leads to a decline of religion both in society and in the minds of the individuals" (Berger, 1999, p.2). Another definition from the two different authors: "religion stops to provide individuals and groups all references, norms, values and symbols that allow them to make sense in situations and experiences they live: religion is no longer the overall sense which applies to all" (my translation of la religion cesse de fournir aux individus et aux groupes l'ensemble des références, des normes, des valeurs et des symboles qui leur permettent de donner sens aux situations qu'ils vivent et aux expériences qu'ils font : la religion ne constitue plus le code de sens global qui s'impose à tous" (Davie and Hervieu-Léger, 1996 : 13). Religious conversion is a heuristic point for discussion because it is the adhesion in an institution which is supposedly weaker than before.

The general idea guiding this last section is to view conversion as a result of changes, of resistance and restitution between politics and religion in the contemporary world, and especially in the particularly French relationship between religion and laïcité. In these configurations, beliefs and conversion must be presented in a specific way that allows people to take personal action harmlessly, conscientiously and in a carefully thought out manner.

### **What about converts and the French laïcité?**

As mentioned, in order to make his conversion a success, the convert must set the process in a secular configuration, with two specific features:

The first feature is that the choice of a new religion has to be personal. From this perspective, conversion is a model of personal choice and individual autonomy. Therefore, conversion should never be imposed. The choice has to be explained and endorsed, following the steps and rules mentioned previously. If a conversion is not to be imposed, it could possibly be influenced. Debates and controversies could come up and are welcomed. For example, in recent years in France, there have been huge public debates on the definition of a religion ("what is a religious practice?") and the ways for groups to adhere. This debate raises questions on sects and modes of commitments, especially when a "conversion" is "forced" (by mistreatment or blackmail). In those situations, conversions cannot be seen as personal or voluntary choices. The grammar based on free will cannot operate and the "conversion" cannot be validated.

The second feature is that all religions are supposed to be confined to the private sphere. This feature only really concerns the French system (and maybe the Turkish one, because French and Turkish legislation share the same principle of separation -of public and private-

albeit with different religious majorities. Christian Turks tend to keep low profiles). There is a real difference in comparison with the US, Canada and other European countries: in France, individuals can have their own religion, but they can't exhibit it collectively. The state today recognises faith, but not any public manifestation thereof. Therefore, we can understand the headscarf crisis as a result of the manifestation of a new religiosity, in a particularly sensitive space - the school system - which has historically been a place of conflict between the state and churches. However, there are no juridical restrictions on the public expression of religious choices; it is only the result of a historical opposition between politics and religion.

Now, let's try to enter the black box of the French laïcité. I have envisaged French laïcité in three aspects. It is firstly a historical evolution -which I call a "secularisation phase"- which lasted approximately a century (1789-1905, from the French Revolution until the Law of Separation)(Baubérot, 1994). Secondly, it is a law and jurisprudence, embodied in the 1905 law of separation between state and cults (Weil, 2007). Thirdly, and mainly, it is a strong idea and ideal which carries representations and political mobilisations.

We could envisage these three irreducible dimensions as a device. Laïcité is a historical construction, a representation of the world which was carried through by individuals (free-thinkers, political groups that fought mainly against the Catholic Church). These ideas were fought for and against, and a juridical compromise was finally found through law in 1905. So Laïcité is an ideal which aims at neutralising the public space. But today it is also a framework, a common frame of reference that could determine individual actions. From our sociological perspective, this device illuminates many interacting factors: institutions (churches, political parties, associations and special interest groups, police and justice system), individuals (believers or unbelievers), objects (churches, temples, mosques, schools, headscarves, bibles, crucifixes, improvised praying spaces), ideas, beliefs and ideologies (religious beliefs, faith, Republicanism, National identity and unity), and a divinity occupying the central place...

My assumption is that laïcité has become more and more of a framework for French political life than a simple succession of articles in law. It is a referent with a very strong symbolic range that is interfering with collective and individual behavior.

So, in our French context, where institutions and individuals are interacting, the law is to be respected but at the same time, strategies and counter-strategies are being elaborated in order to meet specific goals. Laïcité, as a superior common principle (Boltanski and Thévenot) is being updated through arguments, quarrels and crises.<sup>2</sup>

### **And what about religions in the Secular Age?**

From the particular abovementioned situation, what place can be found for religion in this secular age? I suggest the following assumption: the three monotheistic religions are caught

between two competing -but not exclusive- representations: they are simultaneously tolerated and suspected. They are tolerated because we recognise the role and the strong social importance of religions, while relegating beliefs to the private sphere. They are suspected because they are perceived as coercive structures which alienate individuals and are thought to be opposed to social change. If we delve further, we may say that these two conceptions are inherited from French nineteenth century anti-Catholic policies. If I dared, these conceptions could be traced back to the philosophies of the Enlightenment: Rousseau perhaps, with his deist principle at the base of any society (which will lead to civil religion), and Voltaire with his atheist criticism of religion.

Concerning religious conversions, the publicisation must be done in this frame. The public presentation needs to show a safe adhesion in the tolerated side of religion. The convert must present some way in which the new religion has made a positive contribution to his life. If not, he might not be recognised as a convert by his relatives, and thus would be segregated. I have noticed two types of conversion which are socially devalued. I call the first form 'fanatic conversion'. In this form of conversion, the religious engagement is pushed towards an intransigent attitude, doctrinaire, exclusionary and potentially violent. The second form could be called 'illuminated conversion'. This form implies mysticism and irrational arguments, and ways of living with religion that can isolate and be potentially dangerous for the convert. These two ideal-types of devaluated conversions make apparent the differences between a classical conversion and a sectarian engagement. One convert testified about his come back to Islam in a very strong and fundamentalist practice:

Once I came-back to Islam, I had a period very fundamentalist: I bawled out my parents because they didn't pray everyday; I annoyed my sister for years about her clothes... Even my friends, I blamed them smoking and drinking, while six months before we traded about drugs... My conversion was so radical! But I calmed after because nobody in my family and friends were talking with me... I was a little ayatollah! (Adel)

We arrive thus at a more general remark: the study of religious conversions allows us to identify the construction of individual relationships with religion, which must be personally justified by the convert. So, in order to successfully convert, a convert has to publicly present a personal road (path) that balances any real or noticeable change in the person. A "good" conversion is a conversion where the individual doesn't seem to have changed in any way. A "bad" one is which changes the individual beyond recognition.

Converts has to living-out their conversion to different persons, in various places at different moments. One difficulty was often said : talking in public about his or her new religion carries a risk of being mocked, criticized, contradicted. To be in conflict. "French society is not a religious one, people can't understand the truth of faith" told me a young catholic convert. The strictest representations of laïcité shrinks the expression of beliefs and tends to neutralize the publicisation of religious belonging.

## Conclusion

It is my assumption that tolerance and suspicion are two social attitudes applied to religions. Between these representations, individuals hesitate, choose, refute, argue, refuse, and adhere, in short. They act and give their opinions according to their beliefs and to their relations to religious institutions. By my reckoning, to convert is to enact a belief in a social space and manifesting faith is to claim an identity in the public sphere; an identity which could be read both by the Church and by society at large.

One second assumption considers conversions as interactive processes. It's only by the validation of the others that a conversion occurs. Danièle Hervieu-Léger (1998) called this process the "mutual validation of faith", but she limited it on the co-religionists' sphere (fellows believers). According to me, seeking a social recognition of the new faith is the major work of converts. This task requires techniques, measures, and adjustments during social interactions.

Finally, to believe in the Secular Age, is the presentation of beliefs in a historical context where the representations of religion are determined. Thus, in France, the laïcité inherited from the Enlightenment maintained an aggressive attitude towards religions: "France is, since 1789, in a political culture of undeclared civil war where (...) seculars and clerics (...) haven't ceased to declare each others 'enemies of the Nation'" (Roy, 2008: 241). Therefore the French long tradition catholic contributed to create a religious "by default" calqued on the catholic political evolution. Three main elements compose the French vision of Religion: beliefs are supposed to be private (in the intimate sphere), Religion can no longer appear in the public space (except the historical traces like churches are tolerated) and no religious reference is allowed in politics. Any new religion whose lifestyle does not match these criteria is suspected of intransigence with a will to break the secular consensus. It is not easy in this context to talk about the adhesion of a new religion, much more when this religion is stigmatized.

In the secular regime, converts have resources and strategies to publicise their new religion. They know how to speak or keep mum, where to talk or be silent, they can modulate their stories. Converts benefit from the liberal religious report of French laïcité. These opportunities and ways are however constrained by the historical context which seeks to bury deep the religious claims in the intimate sphere. And telling a conversion according to the rules of civility Secular Age contributes to strengthening these rules of civility and thus perpetuating the Secular Age. In addition, the invention of secularism is one of the strongest issues of political debate in France and crystallised two irreconcilable camps. The French secular intransigence still has a bright future!

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of “justification” was introduced in the pragmatic sociology by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006). Justification is the moment where individuals, seen by their actions, are acting through a grammar. The action of justification concerns the positions, argumentations, criticisms or explanations delivered in trials. These trials are moments of uncertainty where the ‘états de grandeur’ will be established.

<sup>2</sup> A typical example is the law on the hijab, the Muslim headscarf, which we can consider as a moment when groups clashed over trying to negotiate a change in the interpretation of this superior principle: arguments for respecting women, counter-arguments for respecting personal faiths and political issues are testing the superior common principle of the law.