



Submission to authority and reflexivity in the narrative of evangelical religious conversion

Jérémy Ianni

► To cite this version:

Jérémy Ianni. Submission to authority and reflexivity in the narrative of evangelical religious conversion. 2023. hal-03940863

HAL Id: hal-03940863

<https://univ-paris8.hal.science/hal-03940863>

Submitted on 16 Jan 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EVANGELICAL CONVERSION NARRATIVES TO THE SELF AND TO THE COMMUNITY: AN ANALYSIS BASED ON THE PARTICULAR CASE OF AN EVANGELICAL GROUP IN THE PHILIPPINES

TRANSLATION OF THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE : DU RAPPORT DU RÉCIT DE CONVERSION ÉVANGÉLIQUE AU MOI ET À LA COMMUNAUTÉ : ANALYSE À PARTIR DU CAS PARTICULIER D'UN GROUPE ÉVANGÉLIQUE AUX PHILIPPINES

Jérémy IANNI

Contractual doctorant

University of Paris 8 -EXPERICE (EA3971) - France

jeremy.ianni.philippines@gmail.com

Abstract: *Religious conversion from Christianity to Evangelicalism is an increasingly common phenomenon in the Philippines. Such a conversion can be used to develop personal narratives to relate the life change associated with it. Whether in the form of testimony or song, new converts use autobiographical elements to narrate both an individual and universal story. The probative and transmissive dimension of testimony is also affected by power figures, as these narrative forms are produced before the pastors representing the new convert's new cult. What then of the reflexivity of the author of the testimony? Even if the narrative production linked to the conversion contributes to the plausibility of the new social structure joined by the conversion, the latter can also be a source of reflexivity since it contains a dialogue from self to self.*

Keywords: *evangelism, significant other, testimony, religious feeling, autobiography.*

Religion can be seen as a large-scale social phenomenon in constant motion. Religious followers produce narratives and testimonies to share their experiences. New technologies and the emergence of new types of worship such as evangelicalism and neo-Pentecostalism have changed the way these religious experiences are expressed in the 20th century.

In the Philippines, evangelical groups are increasingly visible. National statistics indicate that the population converted to these new evangelical denominations is 10% today, up from 4% 15 years ago (Philippines Statistics Authority, 2018). New Christians are participating in these discursive changes, producing testimonies both in places of worship, but also in the public space to evangelize and share the Good News.

Jayeel Cornelio, a Filipino sociologist of religion, somehow identifies religious narrative production as an activist expression. According to the author, evangelical Protestants develop an intellectual, spiritual, political and institutional activism. These activists share a vision of society based on the interpretation of texts, advocate the idea that their church is the only way to truly live the faith, declare that Jesus is the only Lord and follow what their leader tells them to do (Cornelio, 2017: 23). This is a totalizing activism, of which discursive production is only one facet, if not a political expression. In line with what Filipino philosopher Tracy Llanera points out, theological-political discourses in state instances in the Philippines are increasingly ordinary and constitute an important mainspring of the discourses accompanying government measures and the need to entrench ever more coercive forms of social control (Llanera, 2019: 47).

Little is said from the Philippines about new Christian conservatism, especially from a narrative perspective. In a book published in 2016 by two French anthropologists working at the Institute for Research on Contemporary Southeast Asia (IRASEC)¹, *Chrétien·nes évangéliques d'Asie du Sud-Est. Expérience locale d'une ferveur* [*Evangelical Christians in Southeast Asia. A local experience of a conquering fervor*], the Philippine archipelago is quickly mentioned from a historical anthropologist perspective. The authors also point out that efforts must still be made to consider the conversion narratives of new converts.

As part of a field survey conducted since 2019 on new Christian conservatisms, I have been meeting with members of two Philippine *Born Again* evangelical churches. These are small community churches, rooted in local areas, with a doctrine based on the idea of conversion: access to salvation no longer depends on good deeds or predestination, but on accepting Christ as one's personal Saviour and confessing one's sins directly to Him (Perrin (ed.), 2015: 29). Confession, as an individual performance, reconfigures faith in very individual ways and can also foster the emergence of personal narratives. In the context of this research, these narratives are part of the data collected, and I propose to rely on two of these testimonies, which are therefore to be considered within a more substantial corpus.

These narratives allow people to share both an experience based on autobiographical features, while simultaneously showing a transcended Self, who has taken control of his or her life by moving from darkness to light: this is conversion to evangelicalism. This immediately brings a tension to the analysis of these narratives since liberation or the passage from darkness to light is likely to be phrased according to the demands of people exercising power.

¹ Find IRASEC or *Institut de recherche sur l'Asie du Sud-Est contemporaine* presentation: <https://www.irasec.com/Qu-est-ce-que-l-IRASEC?lang=fr>

The analysis of conversion narratives may tend to neglect the consideration of social relations, insisting on an individualizing dimension. As biographical transformations have been little studied (Angey, Fer & Vildard, 2021: 3), this paper focuses on the social dimension of conversion, using both a sociological and philosophical perspective. Firstly, based on a testimony and a song, I will show how these narratives convey an autobiographical, transmissive, and probationary dimension. In a second step, I will detail more precisely the autobiographical dimension, its social framework (Berger & Luckmann, 2018: 250) but also how the new identity of the newly converted is likely to be narrated according to the demands of power (Moreau, 2018: 11). Finally, I will conclude by mobilizing the concept of crisis and the shift from a *communitarian* to a *societal* identity (Dubar, 2000: 213) to show how the new conversion can also allow the emergence of a Narrative-Self, by questioning the conditions of its reflexive dimension.

1. Narratives with autobiographical, transmissive, and evidential dimensions

In this first part, I propose to work on two narratives: a testimony collected in the form of research interviews, and a musical form of testimony collected during a religious celebration. These narratives involve autobiographical, transmissive, and evidential dimensions, as well as being tied to a form of individual performance.

1.1. The testimony

The first story presented is a life story, collected from July to September 2020, during research interviews with the respondent, whose alias is Mark. These interviews were conducted in two languages: Tagalog and English.

Mark talks a lot about his faith on social medias, makes numerous posts in which he writes about what he has learned from studying the Bible. At the time of the data collection, he was working as a teacher in a private pre-school in the Philippines. He agreed to share his conversion experience, rooted in a life story perspective, with the understanding that his story would be used for research purposes. Hence, even though it is not a public testimony, it is part of a possible publicity and Mark asked several times if his experience would be published, which he hoped it would be to “share his experience” (Mark, Personal Communication, 8 July 2020).

In the first interview, the respondent explains that before his conversion to *Born Again* his faith was not genuine. He questioned the existence of God because of the difficulties he had in his life. He also regularly states that it is important for him to investigate and verify what he is told about the existence of God. He recounts that in 2010, during a drinking session, he was very drunk and at that moment he felt the presence of God in his body: this is where his faith became real. From then on, his whole narrative is structured around his pre-conversion and post-conversion conditions. Prior to the conversion he did not understand the characteristics of God, now he does. He began to study the Bible in a school and a Bible study group. According to him, he realized that even though God can punish, He can also forgive, provided Mark surrenders to Him completely, and this requires a certain form of humility. Religion did not transform him, but his belief in God. For him, this transformation is a rebirth, he is *Born Again* because he has accepted Christ, and this implies an awareness of his mistakes and a need to be forgiven both by God and the people he has hurt.

The main obstacle to the analysis of this interview is the fact that Mark details his life, his profession, the place where he lived, his family, but also his beliefs, especially about the conditions that ensure salvation for all people. To support the idea of surrendering totally to God for salvation, he relies both on his own experience and on an extract from the New Testament, which states that “for the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Bible, New International Version [NIV], 1978, Romans 6:23). From the point of view of the researcher who seeks to collect empirical data, a methodological difficulty arises, since the testimony is also a description used to establish the truth. It is difficult for the researcher to collect evidence from empirical experience without it being reviewed through the lens of religious morality or dogma.

Throughout the following interviews, we focused on his experience by targeting certain moments, to collect data that refer to the actual experience, and not the one prescribed by the evangelical religious discourse. Mark describes a pivotal moment or turning point, that of his transformation into *Born Again* or rebirth. He explains that he was 21 years old at the time, living sometimes at his girlfriend's house and sometimes in a dormitory, and that he had stopped his studies in the University. He was unemployed and had an aimless life, liked to go out at night with his friends and taking drugs. Because of the drugs, he was not getting enough rest, and he started to hallucinate. He thought he was being followed in the street, and that this person wanted to kill him. One night, he says, he was feeling particularly nervous and went to a shop to buy alcohol with his two cousins and took a high dose of methamphetamines [*shabu*]. He then took a taxi and went home because he could not take public transport and risk being arrested by the police. When he arrived home, he thinks he immediately fell asleep, and does not remember how the evening had ended. The next day, he said he felt bad, both physically and mentally, and added that it took him two weeks to recover, as he was paranoid that something would happen to him. Gradually his anxiety subsided, and he started praying for a return to normal life and for God to put him back on the right track. His mind became more peaceful, and Mark explains that the anguish and phobia of going out was taken away by God. Thanks to divine intervention, Mark felt safer, but more importantly he realized that God exists, a God he could talk to. He decided to convert and become a *Born Again* Christian.

It is difficult to reconstruct a chronology, because as the interviews went on, Mark added new elements that made it possible to reread the data collected in a different way. For instance, about his conversion, he explains that he knew the *Born Again* group because he wanted to study the Bible, but when exploring this moment in more detail with him, Mark explains that he first knew this group because he wanted to resume his university studies. The missionaries of this religious group offered him a scholarship and gradually he joined the group, as he was given a stipend. According to Mark, he could benefit from the scholarship without converting, but he explained that he had to go to the *Born Again* church once a week to perform a free service. The identification of these disjunctions is important to support the respondent in the elaboration of his life story (Bouregois & Piret, 2007: 184).

This testimony contains three distinct and at the same time related dimensions: autobiographical, transmissive, and evidential. The autobiographical dimension is strong: Mark gives details about his life, speaks using the “I” pronoun, and situates the social and family environment of this experience. However, many issues are conveyed by the collection of biographical data linked to transformative moments: the interviewee must

say what he did, not what he thinks he did. The speech must be embodied. Access to recollection must be encouraged so that the respondent can talk about a specific moment, with vividness of perception, and not about a certain sort of general moment. This also allows the interviewee to obtain a sufficient level of detail and to explain the micro actions carried out around the moment of turning point (Bézille (ed.), 2006: 143-146). I therefore repeatedly asked Mark questions to facilitate the work of recovering memories, by helping him to focus on the moment of his conversion and not on a general moment of conversion. This autobiographical dimension was spontaneously present in Mark speech elaboration, who did not hesitate to describe details, to pause for reflection, to reformulate what he was saying or to correct. He described places, attitudes, sounds, sensations, amounts of money spent, etc.

This autobiographical dimension can also be linked to a transmissive dimension, particularly during stages of life marked by ruptures (Cuynet & Guinet, 2020: 179), in this case the conversion to evangelicalism. By verbalising his experience, Mark also offers a space in which his experience has greater collective significance. For example, he explains that he participates in community services in poor neighbourhoods. He plays basketball with young people, which is a way for him to offer them an activity they like and to share his experience with them. He tries to transmit positive values so that these young people find a purpose in their lives and become good citizens. According to him, the aim of community services is to make people aware that Christ is part of their lives, and that he preaches the love of God based on his experience, thus stressing the transmissive dimension.

It is important to emphasise that the transmissive dimension of his experience is amplified using an extract from a religious text, be it the Bible or the Koran. Belonging to a religious group is therefore not the starting point for evangelisation, for what matters above all is the way in which Mark was, according to him, personally saved by Christ, and the relationship he established with his Saviour. He insists on the existence of God without demonstration, to deliver the Good News, like a messenger. His main communication tool is his experience and his testimony, thus giving it a transmissive dimension and an educational purpose.

This educational purpose is primarily aimed at conversion, which is different from affiliation or membership in a religious group. Conversion is also a stage in which a person can publicly declare that he or she adheres to a new value system (Orfali, 2011: 65). Thus, Mark's testimony also contains an evidential dimension. First, he proves his conversion by declaring it publicly. Second, this testimony also aims to prove that rescue and salvation in the temporal existence are possible and this through divine intervention and personal relationship with Jesus.

The practice of faith here has a deeply individual characteristic, which finds its roots in Arminianism and the Great Awakenings of the 19th century. Arminianism challenges the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and asserts that every believer can be freely saved by God. However, this access to salvation is conditioned by the believers' personal adherence to salvation (Perrin (ed.): 29), which Mark verbalizes by insisting that one must accept Jesus as one's personal Saviour. The evangelical cult, founded by Arminianism and reaffirmed during the Great Awakening, is clothed with an individualistic tendency, declaring that Christianity is not a doctrine but a life (Marin-Lamellet, 2014: 107). Through his testimony, Mark provides proof that this doctrine is true, and provides public evidence

of his conversion. However, as Yannick Fer, a French sociologist points out, the discourse that inscribes evangelicals “in a grand narrative about the modern individual, emancipated from obligatory membership and free to make his or her own choices” [« *dans un grand récit sur l'individu moderne, émancipé des appartenances obligées et libre de ses choix*] (Fer, 2021: 34) may tend to limit the interpretation of religious facts, to the detriment of taking their social dimensions into account.

We observe that Mark's testimony intertwines three dimensions which are at the same time decoupled but interdependent: the proof of the truth, transmitted during the evangelization activities in which he participates, is based on autobiographical elements which he does not hesitate to share to support his message. Before looking at how the narration of the autobiographical dimension is influenced by a new social framework, I suggest examining a second form of testimony, this time involving music.

1.2. Testimony set to music

Members of evangelical groups may also use other media, such as music. The song I present here was sung in June 2022, in a *Born Again* community church located in the suburbs of Manila, in Quezon City. This church organizes activities in the nearby city jail, offering free Bible study classes. Paulo, an alias given to the singer, met members of this church when he was imprisoned.

Every Wednesday there is a small event where members can meet and receive a free medical consultation. During the first half of the service, male and female preachers play guitar and sing, and during the second half, a preacher talks about a specific topic. Finally, it is possible for people who attend this event to consult a doctor and receive a donation of medicines.

After the first songs, Paulo was called by the preacher, and stood in front of the audience of about 30 people. The preacher introduced Paulo then explained that he had written this song while he was in prison, because the church had held a song contest there, and that Paulo had won the contest. Paulo started playing the guitar and singing, and the text of the song was shown on a screen. The original text of the song is in Tagalog. I witness this musical performance because I was conducting a participant observation on that day.

While Paulo was singing, the pastor did a shooting him with his mobile phone and posted a *Facebook Live* video indicating that he was with Paulo, who had just been released from prison, singing his own composition entitled *Tulungan mo ako Panginoon* [Help me God]. Paulo's musical expression is therefore destined to be public, and without even starting to listen to it, it was already biographically situated by the pastor.

This biographical dimension can also be found in the song text. Even though the number of words in the lyrics is very limited compared to a testimony, Paulo invokes elements of his personal experience. He sings that “*Dito raw ay wala raw Diyos ay sarili lamang kaya ang hirap harapin*” [Here it says there's no God, only yourself; So it's hard to face [that]]; “*Itong aking pankukulungan*” [It was my prison]. He compares the loneliness in a life without God to the loneliness in prison, referring to his experience of incarceration. He gives another autobiographical element to his discomfort when he sings: “*Tulungan mo ako Panginoon na maintindihan kung ba't ako naririto sa aking kinalalagyan*” [Help me Lord; To understand; Why I am here; In this situation] or that “*Puso ko' y biglang naakit na matiwala at dasal at unting unting natabing*” [My heart suddenly came closer to you; In

trust and prayer; And little by little You touched me]. We can understand from listening to Paulo that before he accepted God, he felt lost.

The change of regime from darkness to light is also reflected in the lyrics, when he sings “*Dahil ang buhay ko o Diyos sa' yo ko na pinatitiwala*” [My life oh God; Is entrusted to you] or “*Gamitin mo ang buhay ko, buhay ko na hiram lamang*” [Use my life; Which is just borrowed]. Paulo also produces a discourse in which his life is intertwined with a transmissive dimension, by appealing to the participants present that day at the religious service: the song is intended to be listened to, it is not in itself an introspective work, even if it could also, under certain conditions, serve as a reflective basis. The singer mentions the importance for him of spreading the Good News, saying: “*Ngunit ako' y magpapatuloy na ikalat and iyon ngalan hangga't aming maipabatid*” [But I'll go on; Spreading Your name; As far as I can speak it].

As Paulo publicly declares his adherence to a new value system, this song conveys an evidential dimension. In contrast to the testimony, this song proposes a sensory and bodily experience of devotion. In the church I am investigating, devotional times are always linked to moments in which music is present. One participant, who converted to evangelicalism in 2015 and whose alias is Gloria, described how she felt during these times of worship in an interview conducted in February 2021, conducted in Tagalog:

Pero ngayon na naranasan ko yun na, isa na rin ako sa kanila, naintindihan ko na kung bakit bakit sila umiiyak, bakit sila na kumakanta. Naranasan ko na habang kumakanta kami. Nagwo-worship kami, yung kanta, paran parang umano sa puso ko na. Basta nagwo-worship kami no'n Sunday service no'n, bigla na lang may kanta, biglang tumulo yung luha ko, tapos yung pastor naming, nakatalikod siya kasi eto 'ko, nando'n yung pastor ko, do'n siya nakaharap. Pero bigla siyang, nung umiiyak ako, siyang nagsalita na: 'Ate Gloria pinatawad ka na ni Lord'. Iniyakan ko yung kanta, kasi nagwoworship kami no'n. Parang, nadala ko do'n sa kanta.

But now that I'm experiencing the singing, the dancing, the crying, I understand why they [the Born Again] are crying, why they are singing. I feel it, when I sing, during the times of worship, the song sort of enters my heart, it's like it's talking to my heart. I don't know why, when I'm in worship, like for example last Sunday, we started to sing and all of a sudden, my tears started to flow. And our Pastor stood in front of me, just after I started crying and he said: “Gloria, you have been called by God” and some people started talking to Him in whispers. We then continued the worship time and maybe it was the song that brought us to this state (Gloria, personal communication, 2021).

A particular importance is given to music in evangelical and neo-Pentecostal movements: it allows both the praise of Jesus Christ and the formation of a community identity, highlighting a group culture (Slavkova, 2015: 107). Music can also allow for the integration of ethno-national elements in a perspective of indigenization of worship (Fancello, 2006: 86). On the other hand, music could also provoke a bodily experience, as Gloria describes.

It appears, then, that the evidential dimension of religious narrative can engage a bodily experience of devotion, facilitated by music, providing the ultimate proof of the presence of Jesus Christ through bodily feeling and sensation.

In both examples, the autobiographical, transmissive, and evidential dimensions are present in different ways and developed to different degrees. Whether this narrative

engages the work of the mind through listening and understanding, or the body through an openness to the devotional experience, it remains as personal as it is transcendent. This experience is no longer merely singular, nor even particular to a given religious group: it is likely to reverberate in a wider community than that of a well-defined and restricted religious group. The narrator is also a universal figure. It seems important to ask to what extent these narratives reflect a singular or institutional power-driven experience.

2. What [auto]biographical singularities are to be found in these experiences?

Throughout the data collection, I was able to observe that the narrative expressions, public testimonies, and social medias testimonies were different, as the biographical elements were not the same depending on the person who was expressing themselves. On the other hand, the entirety of these narratives includes a temporal sequence that contains a rupture. A first situation characterized by vice ends because of a radical change, the encounter with God, to make way for a second situation characterized by light. Thus, the concept of *alternation*, or total social world change (Berger & Luckmann, 2018: 250) is relevant to convene to analyse them. As these narratives contain similar story elements, at least in their weave, it is also appropriate to ask how much the autobiographical elements put forward matter, and how the process of narrativity can meet or even legitimize the demands of agents who wield power, or *significant others* (*Ibid.* 264).

While focusing on the temporalities of these narratives, we can distinguish three moments that recur: a before (the shadow), a change (the conversion) and an after (the light). These moments are articulated in a linear way, but this does not mean that the believers' history keeps a progressive character, as I argue.

In Mark's story, the first period characterized by vice corresponds to a life socially situated by autobiographical elements: he was unemployed, lived in a dormitory and used drugs. Financially, it was his girlfriend who supported him. The lexicon for talking about drugs remains evasive, with many changes of language from English to Tagalog during the interviews. For example, Mark refers to it in the following terms: "I was not a good person I did a lot of mistakes [...] cupid moments [...] you lost your track [...] different life, night life [...] vices is the way to complement my life [...] drinking session [...] that kind of track" (Mark, personal communication, July 2020). Mark also uses the metaphor of the night to show his despair and inability to find meaning in his life. He does not talk about the drug experience during the first interview, but in subsequent interviews and using these words, "I took drugs [...] you are very high [...] the effect of drug [...] I have some drugs [...] methamphetamine" (*Ibid.*). One can easily imagine the distress he was in.

This situation could have stopped, as Mark mentions a transformative moment, which allowed him to leave this dark world. He explains that

"It was in January 2010 when I said Lord if you are real, you may give comfort, I want to change my life but I cannot change, I want to surrender it to you. And then there were something I felt, I feel [sic.] relieved I was relieved at that time, there were a peace and then faith grows [sic.] until the time I accepted Christ as my Lord. [...] My faith transformed my life" (*Ibid.*)

using the word *transformation* 11 times during an interview. To talk about the transformative moment, Mark explains that he first felt "paranoid", "it came to the point that someone is trying to kill you or someone is following you", "it was an illusion it was

the effect of the drug”, “grave danger” and then fairly quickly, within half a day, he was “relieved and safe” (*Ibid.*).

After this transformation, Mark explains that he now possesses greater self-knowledge, greater confidence and has recreated a path that keeps him out of danger. He now knows that he will go to heaven because he has accepted Christ as his personal Saviour. Here Mark shows that he re-socializes in a different way, it is a rebirth, the life of before is no longer there, and can be left behind. The characteristics of this transformative moment are therefore those of *alternation*, which also constitutes a conversion to another life (Vulbeau, 2006: 63).

The concept of *alternation*, which corresponds to a change of social reality or a conversion to a new life, raises the question of the maintenance of reality, since the latter can radically change. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman have described several elements that enable the new reality to be maintained and, above all, to be made plausible: the first is the *conversational apparatus*, which can be defined as what is said, what can be said, including the ways of saying it, in each reality. The set of people who use the same *conversational apparatus* thus confirms to each other, according to sociologists, the existence of the reality in which they live, there is a form of collaboration in maintaining it. Alternation thus implies a change in this *conversational apparatus*. (Berger & Luckmann, 2018: 253). For sociologists, the second element that enables the maintenance of reality is the *plausibility structures* (*Ibid.* 255). Reality must be shared by enough people in order to exist. The authors show that these structures are built on beliefs, and that if a significant number of people adhere to it, it becomes plausible and can therefore be integrated into reality. This does not mean that the belief is true or false, but that it is plausible, regardless of its veracity. Sometimes, as in the case of religion, this belief can be institutionalized by places, writings, practices, rituals, which give meaning to certain positions, and allow others to be rejected. For example, Mark does not hesitate to invalidate beliefs that do not correspond to his own.

The *conversational apparatus* and *plausibility structures* also need to be accompanied by *significant others* (*Ibid.* 264). These *others* are central, primary agents that help maintain reality. In the process of new socialization, especially during institutionalization, certain people will take on a more important role, and will become significant, such as the pastor of the new church, or the religious leaders.

In evangelical conversion narratives, it is easy to identify *alternation* (moving from darkness to light), which underlies a change in the *conversational apparatus* (communicating with people who take drugs, and then people converted to evangelicalism), in the *plausibility structures* (it is necessary to know a sufficient number of converted people who use the same *conversational apparatus* and patronize the same institutionalized venues), or even in the *significant others* (the pastor and religious leaders become a new significant figure of legitimization of the new reality).

For these sociologists, conversion thus refers to a change of reality and of the structures that maintain it. In the case of evangelical conversion, we may wonder whether the new reality contains a progressive dimension, and it is again the study of a corpus of testimonies or conversion stories that may orient this reflection. For Mark and Paul, what characterizes the new reality is the fact of having surrendered their lives to God to obtain salvation. This light that characterizes the aftermath of conversion corresponds well to

Salvation, made possible by the death of Jesus on the Cross who sacrificed himself to allow them access to eternal life. Mark says that he has become aware of his mistakes and the need to be forgiven, and that to do this he must accept Christ. Only belief in God can transform him, he can only get out of the vice by focusing on God and accepting Him. Paulo sings that he has placed his life in God's hands by trusting Him. From a historical point of view, then, it seems that there is no significant event after Jesus' death on the Cross. Evangelical conversion removes the significance of history: in the new social world, history is not progressive, truth is revealed once and for all, and there can be no new nor novelty after the birth and death of Jesus: religious discourse is focused on redemption.

As Filipina philosopher Tracy Llanera points out, religious language, which she describes as authoritarian, is based on transcendence and redemption. The transcendental dimension takes precedence over the other dimensions, and religion conveys a language that carries with it a notion of redemptive truth: truth is at the centre of the system and completes the reflective process. The existence of God becomes a redemptive truth. Language takes over the Self and authority is defended to the death (Llanera, 2019: 49). The author notes that in liberal Filipino society, this type of language tends to develop alongside the development of a form of Christian activism, thus supporting the architecture of an authoritarian or even disciplinary society. This is due to the redemptive dimension of religious language, which is above all authoritarian language (*Ibid*, 51).

We can therefore see that even if the stories contain autobiographical elements, the change in the structures legitimizing the new world can prevent these elements from being embedded in a uniqueness. The new identity of the saved person is constructed from a revealed and redemptive truth, history no longer makes sense after the death of Jesus, because nothing can be significant or new. I therefore emphasize that the new identity has characteristics that are given, once and for all, irreducible, because it depends on a historical fact, the death of Jesus on the Cross.

From a narrative point of view, *alternation* implies a fictional character of the reconstruction of history, or narrative reconstruction, as Francis Lesourd, researcher in Education Sciences at the University of Paris 8, points out in *L'Homme en transition* [*The Man in Transition*]:

Comme il est, disent-ils, relativement plus facile d'inventer des choses qui n'ont jamais existé que d'oublier celles qui se sont réellement produites, l'individu peut fabriquer et insérer des événements partout où le besoin s'en fait sentir de façon à harmoniser la mémoire et le passé réinterprété. Comme c'est la nouvelle réalité plutôt que l'ancienne qui lui paraît maintenant plausible, il peut être parfaitement sincère dans une telle procédure. (Ibid. 218)

Since it is, they say, relatively easier to invent things that never existed than to forget things that happened, the individual can fabricate and insert events wherever the need arises so as to harmonize memory and the reinterpreted past. Since it is the new reality rather than the old one that now seems plausible to him or her, he/she can be perfectly sincere in such a procedure. (*Ibid*, 218).

Reinterpretation thus constitutes a rupture in the biography of the newly converted person (*Ibid*. 256). In other words, memory has a social framework that can influence self-narration, especially in narratives that induce a disruption. This does not mean that the production of this type of narrative precludes all reflexivity, but it does show that power

relations related to the new *significant others* are considered in the narrative reconstruction process, voluntarily or not.

I argue that this consideration impacts a facet of truth: that held by the power or the institution, to which the self must submit, under the gaze of the pastor's benevolent master who can post a Facebook Live video during the performance. It is a truth *of* the self, to which the latter must conform, with a model of educational conversion: interiority adapts to a well-defined exteriority, and the self cannot deploy itself. The other facet of truth, a truth *about* the self, is accessible through the exercise of subjectivity and the recognition of the value of singular experience (Moreau, 2018: 11). I will discuss this later because it could allow for reflexivity. Does the new convert can express him/herself on his journey and verbalize his/her experience other than through the expectations of these new *significant others*, agents of power? The value of the singular experience is precisely held by these *others*, agents of a plausible structure in which contact with the divinity is made from the point of view of Evil. The singular experience, besides being reinterpreted with the new social framework of memory, also has a utilitarian character, since it will contribute to the plausibility of the new reality.

Since the narrative process is thus influenced by the need to respond to the demands of power and *significant others*, I will now analyse these narratives through the lens of identification for the self and for others (Dubar, 2000: 4), by capturing the reflexive and identity-building dimensions.

3. The identity in crisis, towards a project of oneself by the narration

As we have just observed, the choice of autobiographical singularities summoned in evangelical religious narratives is oriented by the figures of power, and the narrative production may also aim at legitimizing a dominant structure and discourse. What then of the narrator's identity dimension?

The French sociologist Claude Dubar describes identity as both that which is unique and that which is shared, which induces two linguistic operations: differentiation, i.e. seeking singularity, and generalization, i.e. seeking commonalities with a class of elements (*Ibid.* 3). This paradox is linked to the fact that identity is linked to otherness, and thus to identifications for oneself and for others. While we have seen that identifications for others can emerge through the analysis of evangelical conversion stories, what about identifications claimed by oneself? The sociologist shows that there are forms of communitarian identity [*formes identitaires communautaires*], which correspond to systems in place and to what can be reproduced from one generation to another, in the case of the context of this investigation, membership in a Catholic monotheistic cult. Furthermore, Claude Dubar identifies and names forms of societal identifications [*formes d'identifications sociétales*], which can be related to collective, multiple and variable forms, and “in this perspective, each person possesses multiple belongings that can change over the course of a lifetime” [*« dans cette perspective, chacun possède de multiples appartenances qui peuvent changer au cours d'une vie »*] (*Ibid.* 5). According to the author, the *societal* forms are insufficiently seized by the modern sociology, or too often reduced to a consequence of capitalism, liberalism, and individualism.

It is true that this reduction is enticing. By examining the evangelical religious narratives, it is obvious that the practice of faith is narrated in an individual way, and that even if the narrative can also contribute to supporting an architecture and a discourse, there is also a

subjectivity, that of the personal relationship to God. This religious feeling, described and publicly claimed as a vector of personal transformation to pass from darkness to light, or from Good to Evil, is indeed in line with the principles of liberalism and its individualistic side. The conversion narrative also becomes the vehicle for a personal performance, in which the figure of the role model is visible, as Mark points out when he explains that it is by sharing his personal experience that he seeks to touch the people he addresses.

The often-decried return of the role-model figure [at least in France] can also be seen as part of the spirit of capitalism, and thus as a transaction. Max Weber pointed out at the dawn of the 20th century that there is a continuity between the spirit of capitalism and Protestant ethics. The demonstration reaches its paroxysm if we focus on the concept of *Beruf*, which Weber shows to be its cornerstone (Weber, 1904: 28). The *Beruf* or vocation to accomplish one's work as formulated by Luther allows for the legitimization of work within the capitalist organization and at the same time for the believer to accomplish his work in the name of God. Religion, and the exercise of vocation or *Beruf* is thus clothed with the idea of individual performance, which links the religious narrative of conversion to the exercise of a vocation in the name of God. In this sense, it is possible to reduce the religious narrative or testimony to an economic task, to act in God's name and to be used by Him by giving Him one's life, as Mark points out when he explains that God uses him by having given him a talent for playing basketball. This vocation to act for God, anchored in material work, thus shows a correspondence between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism for Max Weber. Does this mean, then, that all the identifications produced by the testimony are made for others? The answer is yes if we accept this reduction, and evangelical witness would thus become a simple means of promoting oneself and converting others. It would thus be a tool of transaction, cantered on the narrator, under the gaze of *significant others*.

However, it is important to understand conversion as a passage from a *communitarian identity*, in this case Christianity, which is in the majority in the Philippines, to a *societal identity*, in this case evangelicalism, which is part of a much more local, new, and moving dynamic. For Claude Dubar, the passage from a *communitarian identity* to a *societal identity* does not always mean submission to the development of liberalism, but is also the marker of an existential crisis, of a change in value system. This crisis obliges the individual to rewrite and re-narrate his/her affiliations: he/she is no longer a member of a so-called natural community that would be self-evident, such as an inherited religion, but he/she must redefine him/herself to find a representation of him/herself, which contains both identifications for others and for him/herself. Indeed, people who experience a crisis linked to the passage from a *communitarian* to a *societal* form of identity cannot be satisfied with an identity for others. They must also be able to justify this change of regime by themselves and for themselves (Dubar, 2000: 161).

When Mark or Paulo declare their belonging to a religious cult different from the one they inherited, they must also be able to justify it by themselves, for themselves. In this crisis of personal identity there is also a dimension of self-construction, a projecting of the self through narrativity, what the sociologist calls the Narrative Self [*Soi Narratif*] (*Ibid.* 197), which is also based on subjectively assumed biographical processes. Thus, Mark details his previous social life, admittedly reinterpreted by a new social framework. These descriptions include his family, professional, emotional, and social situation. He can describe even the neighbourhood in which he used to live, the people he used to associate

with, and the biographical details thus support a new life project. By allowing his interlocutor to access a level of detail, and thus by putting himself into a narrative, Mark can justify his new belonging in a way that is not only based on the demands of power and thus resolve an identity crisis. The narrative identity thus highlighted during the transition from *communitarian* to *societal* identity-based affiliations also corresponds to a new identification: to narrate the Self and become a project oneself.

This narrative identity implies a new identity of the Self as history (Ibid. 207), and religious discursive production, whether in the form of testimony or song, reinforces the emergence of this *Narrative Self*. It also implies reflexivity, for “subjectivity is expressed, already through temporalities, because history does not only recount the chronogenesis, nor is it the ordering of a time of memory, it is the trace of the inner dialogue between Self and ‘I’ ” [« la subjectivité s’exprime, déjà à travers les temporalités, car l’histoire ne raconte pas seulement la chronogénèse, ni est la mise en ordre d’un temps de la mémoire, elle est la trace du dialogue intérieur entre soi et soi-même »] (Ibid. 211). Naming a new personal identity thus obliges us to distinguish the “I” from the Self, and to consider the trace of this inner dialogue in the stories.

To leave the Catholic Church is to take a huge risk of being outcast by family, friends, and being stigmatized. The *Reflexive-Self* [*Soi Réflexif*] can act as a mediator: one needs someone to talk to, oneself in the first place. We have emphasized that identity is linked to intersubjectivity, and so the *Narrative-Self*, which consists in telling oneself in terms of otherness, complements the *Reflexive-Self* to bring out this new personal identity. Paul Ricoeur, a French philosopher, provides a condition to this definition of personal identity, he states that the *Reflective-Self* and the *Narrative-Self* must cohabit within fair institutions [*institutions justes*] (Ibid. 213). In other words, these narratives of religious experience can allow, provided they belong to a fair institution, for the emergence of a *Narrative-Self* and thus be a place of reflexivity, self-construction, and resolution of an existential crisis, brought about by a total change in social framework and value system.

Conclusion

There are several dimensions to the religious narratives of conversion. Their autobiographical dimensions can be grasped by finding elements from the personal life of the narrator. As these stories are intended to be listened to, they also have a transmissive dimension, whether through the narrator’s message or a bodily experience linked to a musical stimulus. Finally, they contain an evidential dimension, as the narrator declares his or her new religious affiliation, his/her new identity, while contributing to a structure of greater plausibility, which maintains a new truth.

As we have seen, this structure is built around the *conversational apparatus* (narrative and discursive dimension), a sufficient number of adherents (group or even institutional dimension) but also *significant others* (organizational dimension). These *significant others*, who are figures of power in the case of evangelical religious conversion, can influence the arrangement of the elements making up the testimony, so that the latter can serve as proof and legitimize a new social framework. This change in social framework, particularly the new conversational apparatus, is also one of the elements that can alter the veracity of the religious narrative and discourse produced by the testimony. As academic work in the Philippines points out, this discourse of experience can find translation into the political field with the emergence of a form of Christian activism (Cornelio, 2017: 23), an

activism supported by the use of redemption-based authoritative language (Llanera, 2019: 51).

However, the narration of the self through testimony can allow, if the institution is fair, the emergence of a Reflexive-Self. The new convert must be able to justify by him/herself, by telling him/herself to others, his/her choice, and the response he/she finds to a deep identity crisis, characterised by the passage from a *communitarian identity* to a *societal identity*. The narrative is thus not only a performance of personal self-aggrandisement, or the emergence of a role-model rooted in liberalism, but also a site of inner dialogue between an “I” and a Self. In other words, liberation is also linked to access to a form of subjectivity that can, and must, be constructed through narrative, the condition being that the new institution is fair. This therefore requires the researcher to take into account and be more vigilant about the relationships of power that are exercised in the new religious institution in cases of conversion, and therefore to take into account a greater multi-referentiality in its analysis: the sciences of language, the sciences of education and the social sciences are thus relevant to be called upon in the case of the analysis of religious narratives and the narration of the self.

Bibliographical references

- ANGER G, FER Y & VILDARD M. 2021. « (Se) Convertir : les ressorts de la transformation biographique » in *Genèses*. (Se) Convertir. 124. p.3-8.
- BERGER P. & LUCKMANN T. (1986). *La construction sociale de la réalité*. Armand Colin. Malakoff.
- BIBLE. NIV. 1978. *Romans 6 :23*. [online]. URL : <https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/romans/6/23>. 29/12/2022.
- BOURDEAUX P. & JAMMES J. 2016. *Chrétiens évangéliques d'Asie du Sud-Est, Expériences locales d'une ferveur conquérante*. Presses universitaires de Rennes.
- BOURGEOIS E. & PIRET A. 2007. « L'analyse structural de contenu, une démarche pour l'analyse des représentations » in PAQUAY et al. *L'analyse qualitative en éducation*. De Boeck Supérieur. Louvain-la-Neuve. p.179-191.
- CORNELIO J. 2017. « Religion and Civic Engagement: the Case of Iglesia ni Cristo in the Philippines » in *Religion, State & Society*. 45:1. Routledge. p.23-38.
- COTTRET B. 2015. « Puritains, papistes et arminiens » in COTTRET B. *La révolution anglaise*. Perrin. Paris. p.29-39.
- CUYNET P. & CUINET C. 2020. « L'écrit biographique, objet de transmission. Témoignage d'un biographe hospitalier » in *Dialogue*. 230, Devenir et être grands-parents aujourd'hui. Éres. p.179-199.
- DUBAR C. 2000. *La crise des identités, l'interprétation d'une mutation*. Presses Universitaires de France. Paris.
- FANCELLO S. 2006. « Akanité et pentecôtisme : identité ethno-nationale et religion globale » in *Autrepart*. 38, La globalisation de l'ethnicité ? Presses de Sciences Po. p.81-98.
- FER Y. 2021. « Le travail 'invisible' de l'institution pentecôtiste, relation personnelle avec Dieu et mécanismes de la transformation biographique » in *Genèses*. (Se) Convertir. 124. p.31-53.
- LLANERA T. 2019. « The Law of the Land has God's Anointing - Rorty on Religion, Language, and Politics » in *Pragmatism Today*. Scopus. p.44-61.
- LESOURD F. 2006. « L'explicitation biographique des moments transformateurs » in BÉZILLE H. (dir.) & COURTOIS B. *Penser la relation expérience formation*. Courtois, Chroniques sociales. Paris. p.142-155.
- LESOURD F. 2009. *L'homme en transition : éducation et tournants de vie*. Anthropos. Paris.
- MARTIN-LAMELLET J. 2014. « Du grand réveil spirituel à une nouvelle réforme » in *Revue française d'études américaines*. 141, Transferts du religieux. Belin. p.107-119.
- MOREAU D. 2018. « Confiance en soi et métamorphose éducative » in *Recherches en éducation*. 31, Aux sources de la confiance dans la relation éducative. Université de Nantes. p.9-21.
- ORFALI B. 2011. « La conversion » dans ORFALI B. *L'adhésion : militer, s'engager, rêver*. De Boeck Supérieur. Louvain-la-Neuve. p.65-70.
- PHILIPPINE STATISTICS AUTHORITY. *Philippines in Figures*. Quezon City. [online]. URL : <https://psa.gov.ph/sites/default/files/PIF%202018.pdf>. 5/04/2022.
- SLAVKOVA M. 2015. « Tu sinjan, Isuse, amaro thagar... La musique évangélique tzigane en Bulgarie » in *Études Tsiganes*. 54-55, Musiques. FNASAT. p.104-117.
- VILBEAU A. 2006. « Alternation, altération et métissage : les jeux de l'altérité et de l'identité » in *Télémaque*. 29, Éducation et altérité. Presses universitaires de Caen. p.57-68.

WEBER M. 1904. *L'éthique protestante et l'esprit du capitalisme*. Université du Québec. *Collection Les classiques des sciences sociales*. Version numérique. Chicoutimi.