Dear Workshop participants,

Given that the structure of this paper might seem alarming, I feel it necessary to clarify what I intend this paper to be. As I began my empirical research on the subject of conversion to Catholicism in Goa, I realized that the general theoretical problem that I was tackling was one that had been largely neglected by political science because it did not seem to think of it as a problem at all. This paper is my first crack at conceptually working through the terms that are taken for granted by the literature to illuminate the specific nature of the problem. I hope to build upon this to become the first chapter of my dissertation and I would appreciate all the feedback I can get in that direction.

Thank you for reading!
FAITH IN CONQUEST: THE POLITICS OF FORCED CONVERSION

In 1635, a Brahmin-born Christian convert by the name of Mateus de Castro was ordained Bishop in Rome. Castro’s remarkable journey from Goa, on the southwest coast of India, to the Holy See began when he was kidnapped as a child and inducted into a Franciscan seminary, one among several children from prominent Hindu families to be introduced to Christianity through this common practice during the most militant phase of Portuguese colonial rule in Goa. Castro embraced the Christian faith, excelling in every dimension of his religious education—both in terms of an authoritative command of the beliefs and prayers of the Roman Catholic tradition as taught to him, and in correctly performing the practices, from confession and mortification to the duties and obligations of mass and feast day. Yet in keeping with the Padroado policy of the time (the Portuguese Assistancy, an institution formed to unify Church and State, as per the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1514), his request for ordination to priesthood was rejected. Undaunted, Castro made his way to Rome in 1625, where he pursued a doctorate in theology and was appointed Protonotary Apostolic in 1933. Upon his return to his native Goa, however, the newly ordained Bishop became the target of Portuguese missionaries and was accused of treason and conspiring against the Portuguese Crown. Castro left Goa for the neighboring territories of the Sultan of Bijapur, never to preach in Goa.

I begin with this story because it is exemplary of a number of features that characterized the experience of religious conversion under Portuguese colonial rule in Goa. First, it illustrates the radical embrace of a religion that was, simply put, politically enforced upon the colonized. In colonial Goa, indigenous people could either convert or leave Portuguese controlled territories. While the use of force for colonial conversion in Goa thus produced a range of reactions—from flight to syncretic accommodation to open revolt—a significant number of colonized people

1 Draft prepared for the Comparative Politics Workshop on 26 April, 2017. Please do not circulate.
professed intense devotion to their new religion, often endangering themselves in the process, as the story of Castro lays bare.

Second, Castro was only the first in a long line of native converts who sought to claim moral authority for themselves, based upon their new identity as Christians. By the middle of the eighteenth-century, nearly all of Portuguese Goa was Catholic, and the number of converts attempting to gain accession to the clergy continued to grow even as discrimination against them became more acute. Their histories highlight a space of political action that was opened up uniquely through the act of conversion. It was in surrendering themselves completely to authority that converts found and expressed their religious agency.

Third, the suspicion with which the colonial administration viewed converts and the persecution inflicted upon them betrays the fragilities and ambiguities of a mode of rule that sought to reconcile the dominating rationality of colonialism with a political ideology rooted in a theology of the liberation of individual consciousness. Throughout the history of its evangelization efforts, the Portuguese empire was dogged by anxieties about whether or not converts were sincerely adopting the faith or merely assenting to it through fear or avarice.

My dissertation therefore asks: How were some Goans moved to convert to Catholicism with manifest ardor, even when it was disadvantageous to be so demonstrably passionate? Why were the Portuguese colonial rulers so concerned with sincerity in the act of conversion? Why was the total obedience of the colonized not sufficient? And what do processes of Catholic conversion under Portuguese colonial rule tell us about how conversion and religious fervor relate to practices of political domination more generally?

Portugal regarded itself as a truly Christian nation, especially relative to other European countries, with the mandate to augment and protect Christianity, plant the faith, and make Christians in its overseas territories. With vigorous financial, legislative and institutional support from the state
and Rome, Portuguese (and Spanish) missionary efforts were considerably more energetic and better organized than the later English and Dutch missions. The Portuguese kings regarded conversion to be their most important duty even when the empire struggled fiscally – this emphasis on proselytization granted substantial administrative and legislative power to the religious authorities in the colony, enabling their coercive relationship with the colonized. Comparative political scientists have puzzled over why the empires of the second wave of colonialism\(^2\), which exercised direct rule by the Crown rather than the indirect colonial rule, should have been less vigilant about the loss of revenue than the later company initiated empires\(^3\). We need to therefore formulate theories that account for the non-material motivations and aspirations of empires and their subjects. Religious conversion, in particular, has crucial implications for long-term trends in the development of nationalisms, identity politics, electoral appeals, violent communal relations, and even revolution.

In this paper, I seek to lay the foundation for building a theory of religious conversion under a repressive political regime by first elucidating the concepts that animate the problem of colonial conversion. Reducing conversion to a merely repressive disciplinary mechanism belies the transformative potential of religious belief. It also conflates colonial political interventions with expansionist Catholic goals that were not simply the domain of European kings\(^4\). I argue that the act of conversion, regardless of whether it is adopted voluntarily or through coercive mechanisms of political governance, is principally generative; it constitutes new subjects and

\(^2\) Here I am utilizing Anthony Pagden’s schematization of colonial empires, where the Roman Empire was the first imperial formation. From the 16th through the 18th century, Spain (and Portugal) established their empires based upon the dual motives of evangelization and military glory. These were eventually superseded by the British and French models of empire, which justified their expansionist projects through profit in trade and agriculture. See Pagden 1995.

\(^3\) See Hechter 2000. I am grateful to Anjali Anand for discussions on this subject.

\(^4\) Given the Padroado arrangement between the Roman Catholic Church and the Iberian empires, we might think of these empires as the first Church-State ventures.
carves out radically new possibilities for meaningful action.

Before I can show how the surrender to a supposedly foreign ideology was in essence politically enabling rather than constraining, however, I must first cut through the accretion of assumptions and implicitly evaluative judgments that comprise modern taken-for-granted uses of the term *conversion*. In order to understand the particular problem for *forced conversion*, we need to clarify what we mean by conversion and what we imagine of a person who converts. Thus, I will propose an alternative model for understanding conversion when it is *something that happens to people*, rather than *something they do*. I demonstrate how particular conceptions of conversion feed into notions of subjectivity and personhood and vice versa, thus prompting anxieties of insincerity. Ultimately, I will argue that in surrendering to the demands of the missionary efforts, and by enacting the ritualistic procedures of Christianity as foisted upon them, native Goans (re)formed themselves as Christian subjects in a Christian empire. Christianity not only propelled them toward an ethical life but it provided them with the spiritual and intellectual vocabulary to question the political rubrics by which they were governed. The emergence of a native religious consciousness provoked anxieties about sincerity as converts destabilized colonial expectations of conversion and threatened the colonial self-imagining of their purpose as deliverers of salvation.

Passionate religious commitments tend not to stay bounded within the domain of the religious, restricted to Churches or one’s private meditative moments. Because religion pertains to the relationship between people and the transcendent, it tends to suffuse life in various dimensions – in how we interpret our existence, what we take to be our purpose, how we order ourselves for its fulfillment, and the extent to which we deem integral to our religious experience the effort to persuade others to partake of the virtues of the same spiritual path. These aspects of private life have an irrepressible tendency to spill over into the public. In some cases they were
public to begin with. Political scientists need to engage with religious life as experience—something not entirely cognitive, nor entirely affective. By this I do not mean to suggest that we arbitrate the meanings of people’s religious experiences. On the contrary, I want to emphasize the challenge of studying an aspect of human experience that is largely incommunicable and only accessible in slivers of historical and narrative accounts. We must exercise an epistemic modesty and empathy when dealing with the subject of conversion. It is not enough to treat religious interests the same as any other pre-existing material interest. Forces beyond our control whether familial, social or political impact how and what we come to understand as the religious experience which in turn transforms our desires and actions. Religious conversion is by definition transformative and it demands special attention because it can be more disruptive to public life than other religious experiences, altering as it does understandings of self, community, and nation. It is the change in individual and community life that my dissertation seeks to delve into in order to reveal innovative assertions of life.

Scholarship on responses to conversion under colonialism

What can people do when they are faced with the prospect of being forced, in whatever measure, to abandon their traditional religious or spiritual ways of life in exchange for distinctly foreign forms? Prevailing accounts of religious conversion under colonialism traverse a gamut of responses. On the one hand, individuals who wish to resist colonial religion exercised through

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5 By this I do not mean that we should adopt an interioristic position, as if often the case when scholars emphasize studying religion as experience. Rather I employ it as an orienting guideline to acknowledge the unboundedness of religion as it is actually lived rather as it is textually constructed.

6 Thinkers of religion from the theologian Jonathan Edwards to the sociologist William James have emphasized the manner in which it is the affective dimensions of religious experience, rather than doctrinal matters, that are deeply entrenched in people’s lives. We should absolutely pay attention to the particularities of doctrine when studying systems of social and political order but to make claims about subjective commitments or decisions based upon doctrine is not appropriate.
violence may flee the territory of persecution, as was the case with the widespread exodus of Hindus from Portuguese Goa under colonial edicts that mandated conversion to Catholicism (Alexrod and Fuerch, 1996). On the other hand, some suggest that those who choose not to leave and end up converting to the colonizer’s religion could do so largely through a mode of adaptation or accommodation to the new regime that effectively thwarts missionary efforts at colonizing their consciousness. Scholars in this vein demonstrate how native subjects may continue to regard the colonizer’s religious with a sense of foreignness even as they utter the words that profess belief (Rafael 1993) or they may formally convert with the expedient motive of improving their current lot (Engelke 2004; Prakash 2003; Viswanathan 1998). The literary theorist Homi Bhabha (1985) famously argues that mimicry, hybridity, and “sly civility” allow the colonized to feign adherence⁷, while the anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff see the emergence of new syncretic systems of native life as a necessary consequence of the colonial encounter. Anthropologist Webb Keane (2007) recognizes the colonial encounter less as a clash between people or cultures than one between “semiotic ideologies,” wherein indigenous people differ vastly from their European preachers in their estimation of the moral and political value of words and practices so that native converts viewed their transformation less as a break from the past than a juxtaposition of past and present. All of these scholars illuminate different ways in which we can perceive the agency of those who converted, and recover voices that remained mute in anti-colonial historical agendas preoccupied with violent resistance.

Variants of all these reactions to colonial religion have been proffered for the case of those in Goa who chose not to flee Portuguese territory. Although there were sporadic violent insurrections against forced conversions (Azevedo 1996), scholarly analyses have largely focused on how the colonized accommodated the drastic changes demanded of them by their rulers.

⁷ See also Austin-Broos 1997; Meyer 1999
Much of the contemporary work on Goa celebrates its distinctive Indo-Portuguese religious pluralism but in doing so, ends up sidelining the singularity of Goan Christianity. The strongest proponent of the syncretism model, anthropologist Alexander Henn (2014) argues that the hybridity in contemporary Goa can be traced back to the colonial era where the ambivalence of the conversion policy, shifting between persuasion and punishment, allowed native Goans to convert to Catholicism while preserving the valences of Hindu symbols and their attachments to them. His approach is emblematic of the notion that, in a significant sense, Goan Christians never stopped being Hindu. By insisting that Christian norms and rituals were simply a veneer upon an authentic non-Christian Goan self, his interpretation devalues Goan claims to Christianity\(^a\). Similarly, Robinson (1998) maintains that Goans converted under the pressure of colonial violence but while they appropriated the symbols of their new order, they perceived Christian meanings and attributes through their web of existing culture and religion, producing a new syncretic socio-religious order. On the other hand, Ipek (1989) and Xavier (2007) view the dynamics of conversion to Christianity in Goa as driven by the extant caste hierarchy. For the downtrodden lower castes, conversion promised social mobility while for the upper castes, conversion permitted the maintenance of social stratification (Zupanov 2001).

Nevertheless, as Xavier acknowledges, the pragmatic aspects of conversion in Goa, were at odds with its theological underpinnings. The deliberations of the Council of Trent determined *liberum arbitrium*, the freedom of choice (which included freedom from all kinds of force including positive enticements) to be essential for Catholic conversion. She posits that the tensions between the theological and political goals were “solved by dissociating the moment of conversion...from

\(^a\) This kind of scholarly position also reinforces present-day political tensions surrounding the issue of conversion to Christianity in India. From the early days of India’s independence movement, nationalism has been bolstered by the idea of conversion as a threat and a foreign imposition. Hindu nationalist groups mobilize significant anti-Christian sentiment and conflict by stressing the notion of Christians as deceptive, foreign elements threatening the foundations of Indian communities.
the process of Christianisation itself”⁹ and that Christianisation itself was a long-term historical process that was crucial for the durability of the Portuguese imperium. The problem here is that Christianization is essentially deemed a cultural process. It is precisely the process of substantive religious change, as opposed to the formal titular change, that must be tackled for an understanding of empire with staunchly religious foundations. The moment of conversion was valued less than the moment of baptism by both Portuguese and Goans, an end point that was hard won by the natives.

As mentioned above, both Crown and missionaries took individual consciousness to be the terrain upon which Catholic Portuguese dominion would be affirmed. While some natives may have adopted the trappings of Catholicism to the minimum, others actively partook in the violent assertion of their Christianity, destroying signs of Hinduism and punishing those who continued to indicate any “pagan” affiliations. Moreover, all the scholars of caste in colonial Goa make clear that upper class Hindus were favored by the Portuguese in the granting of economic and political office in their local spheres, even without conversion. In the case of clerical offices, only Brahmins were admitted to the secular clergy (though not even they were part of the regular clergy). Thus, although instrumental accounts of the incentives for conversion can explain broader patterns of socio-historical change, they are inadequate when it comes to examining those who expressed ardent devotion to the religion of their oppressors, even as it posed them against their fellow oppressed. The same is true of a singular emphasis on the syncretism that is so apparent in the present (and past) experience of Goan religious life – it excludes those who seemed to take up the task of Christianisation with vigor. Underlying these theories then are underspecified conceptions of conversion, which need to be brought into sharper relief.

⁹ Xavier 2007: 292
The Concept of Conversion

In its most obviously stated form, conversion is a change of religion but when we consider the problems that studies of conversion tackle, the term no longer remains so simple. Whether one wants to understand forms of identity, study the anatomy of religiously motivated social and political movements, criticize the means by which conversion occurred – voluntarily or involuntarily, or determine whether an instance of conversion was sincere and agentive rather than forced, the term conversion is largely descriptive of an experience that we have already interpreted. The interpretation of that experience, however, is distinct across studies and disciplines, and frequently, in terms that converts themselves would not recognize. While political science has had limited engagements with conversion, anthropology and religious studies have rich literatures dealing with the subject and it becomes quickly evident that conversion histories are complex and vary vastly in different contexts. Before we can understand why we might be apprehensive about studying forced conversion, we need to examine the myriad extant approaches to the meaning of conversion itself.

Political scientists have tended to conceptualize religious conversion in terms of an event: something sudden, definite, complete, and immediate. Conversion is explicitly explained as a strategic response to changing external circumstances, whereby individuals and groups rationally but dramatically alter their religious lives, whether by changing their creedal affiliation or by adopting one for the first time. This often comes as a resolution to some kind of external crisis. The questions extant studies ask are usually in connection with the rise of “religious fundamentalism” or adherence to “strict religions” where the strictness refers to exclusivity,

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10 At least since Samuel Huntington’s thoughts on the clash of civilizations, there has been a bustling cottage industry devoted to explaining the dangers of religion, based on ham-fisted ideological readings. It is not these studies that I address but rather the more recent burgeoning literature that considers religion
higher participation and institutional commitments, as well as rigid behavioral codes. This type of religious association is seen to often translate to higher level of political involvement\textsuperscript{11}.

There are two general approaches that characterize this literature. The first approach is Durkheimian in spirit and suggests that social displacements and anomie pave the path for particularly vibrant forms of religion. These studies argue that modernization, globalization, and secularization produce economic uncertainty and alienation and threaten existing forms of security in social and political arrangements, thus destabilizing moral norms, and creating the need for new stabilizing influences.\textsuperscript{12} Religious adherence is then a coping mechanism that produces new knowable patterns and attachments. Some scholars have taken this argument further by predicting that such forms of religious belonging produce conservative politics\textsuperscript{13} that pose irreconcilable challenges to democracy while others have posited that the otherworldliness of these commitments in fact detract from active political engagement\textsuperscript{14}.

The second approach comes from what is called “the religious economy school” and further builds upon the materialist treatment of religion. Proponents of this approach employ a market analogy wherein religion is a “product” offered to utility-maximizing “religious consumers” by religious institutions acting as “firms” or “producers.” Within this literature, there are those that focus on the “supply” side of the equation while other engage with “demand.” Laurence Iannacone (1992, 1994) assumes a constant demand for religion and argues that individuals with low levels of religious capital (financial status, skills, network connections) are the

\textsuperscript{11} There is a particularly vibrant literature on religiously motivated participation in the subfield of American Politics. See Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995; Ted Jelen 1991

\textsuperscript{12} See, for example, Martin 1990; Marty and Appleby 1991

\textsuperscript{13} See Juergensmeyer 2001, Kellstedt 1990, Campbell 2004

\textsuperscript{14} See Bastian 1993
most likely to convert to strict religions while Anna Gryzmala-Busse (2012) suggests that such religions offer a tantalizing network of support which increases their “costs of exit.” In a similar vein, Anthony Gill (2003) explains the rise of Pentecostalism by suggesting that the Catholic Church in Latin America is analogous to a “lazy monopoly” thus incentivizing other religious producers to provide spiritual fulfillment. Andrew Chestnut (2007), on the other hand, uses what he terms “heterodox market analysis” to study how higher demand for religious good encourages a proliferation of diverse religious offerings, replete with innovative marketing strategies. Many of these studies also incorporate the assumptions of the anomie approach in terms of how changing external stimuli produce different religious affiliations.

The economistic approach to religion has been amply criticized on theoretical as well as empirical grounds by sociologists, anthropologists and religious studies scholars alike for its fundamental misattributions of sacred matters and for an inherent reductionism, and I do not intend to re-tread these objections. It is of course clear that models of cost benefit analysis cannot capture the religious rapture of the Goa case, nor can they fathom a form of political rule that gives preeminence to the religious motive at the expense of revenue loss; in fact such models would struggle with any case where conversion is accompanied by coercive forces. Nevertheless, what matters for the purpose at hand is the underlying interpretation of conversion beyond its appearance as the market metaphor or analogy. What exactly is it that is being converted and how?

All of these studies seem to suggest that what is changing is formal or institutional affiliation. Of course they make no claims about the emotional or affective content of religious

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15 See also Chaves and Cann 1992; Clark 2010; Finke and Stark 1992
experience but it has to be noted that treating all religions and institutions as essentially fungible is only possible when conversion is thus reduced to a matter of balancing resources and gains, according to your tastes and preferences, and with amply available information. Within their own construction of the problem, conversion to strict religions is seen to be a deliberative choice by an unchanging, autonomous agent, without the element of coercion – essentially a liberal self, producing an illiberal politics. It seems odd then not to problematize that paradoxical relationship. If we treat people as basically rational and utility-maximizing where their personal autonomy and liberty is conceptualized by the capacity to make autonomous decisions, and we find them submitting to rigorous forms of authority, even if we grant that it is ultimately a rational decision, how can we treat that decision just as any other choice? Should our efforts not be trained on attempting to understand that specific and somewhat peculiar relationship between self and authority?

Furthermore, the matter of what different religious institutions believe conversion to be remains largely underspecified. In what forms do churches conceptualize their authority? What changes do they envision being produced, in peoples’ behavior, their social representations, or even their internal states? Here again, the problem with treating all faiths and missions as if their specific content is irrelevant is that we miss glaring differences in how different creeds produce different forms of rule and subjection and we fail to comprehend a political ideology to which religion was integral rather than incidental.

Anthropologists, on the other hand, have been keenly invested in demonstrating how religious conversion is a complex of changing facets of life, and not, in fact, a temporally restricted and discrete act that simply transforms formal religious participation and produces new stable identities. Particularly, when it comes to evangelization as part of colonial projects, we
have come to appreciate how conversion was often the domain of extended active negotiations and struggles over the meaning of words and actions. Missionaries, their patron crowns, and the indigenous people all have their own languages and ideologies of spiritual change and conceptions of how conversion is to be effected by anchoring it in other parts of quotidian living.

John and Jean Comaroff (1991, 1997) were pivotal in advancing this analytic move to the more intimate aspects of colonial life, by revealing the “highly variable, usually gradual, often implicit, and demonstrably syncretic manner in which social identities, cultural styles, and ritual practices of African peoples were transformed by the evangelical encounter.”17 The Comaroffs illustrated the ways in which British missionaries in South Africa attempted to convert the interior beliefs and proclivities of the Tswana people by effecting change at the most mundane levels of everyday practices from getting dressed and sitting attentively in school to marrying, building a home and tending the sick. This is the domain of the hegemonic, the “historically situated cultural field” of signs, practices, and relations that come to be “taken-for-granted as the natural and received shape of the world.”18 It is precisely in paying attention to these accompanying all-encompassing processes that they assert, “the act of conversion was not a reliable index of the values or spiritual commitment of those concerned.”19 They alert us to the risks of conflating cultural conformity with spiritual subjectivity. Hence their efforts remain trained on the “protracted exchange” between the British missionaries and the Tswana people and how it reshaped the cultural landscape in South Africa.20

17 Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 250
18 ibid: 23
19 ibid: 250
20 Other anthropologists have observed that the Comaroffs’ study of conversion in South Africa is decidedly not about the particularities of Christianity as a religious ideology. See for instance Cannell 2006; Robbins 2007
The breathtaking scope of the Comaroffs’ seminal study is critical to seeing how the African response to Europeans missions did not conform to the missionary expectations of conversion and, more importantly, alert us to the dangers of simply reading history from the point of view of the colonizer, rather than against the grain. That is, the concept of conversion, as a sincere inner transformation with new loyalties and devotions, is itself profoundly ideological. To that end, they declare that the concept of conversion is not “a significant analytic category in its own right.” The Comaroffs are not alone in their apprehensions about the portability of the term conversion. Historian of medieval Christianity, Karl Morrison, explains:

Perhaps too self-evident is that the word conversion is not a reliable tool of analysis. Far from being (so to speak) clinically sterile, it comes laden with connotations rooted in Christian history that transmit their coloration on contact to materials under investigation. There is reason to assume that the word has no equivalent in major languages outside Europe. The question is certainly worth considering whether applying the word conversion can impose Western conceptions on non-Western experiences and ideas.

Hesitant as they are to impose upon African subjects a European perspective and normative framework, the Comaroffs tend to focus on syncretism rather than conversion, continuity rather than rupture. I want to suggest, however, that instead of discarding the concept of conversion, their critique should invite us to probe further into the ideological valences of the term. Religious conversion, however construed, is a term that continues to have political currency and it is crucial to understand the various meanings with which it is imbued in scholarship as well as in societies at large. In India, for example, where religious conversion has been and continues to be a politically contentious issue, conversion refers exclusively to the

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21 Given that the only evidence available to us about certain periods in history come from the vantage point of the ruler or dominant force, we have to be methodologically sensitive to the voices of the ruled in between the lines.
22 Ibid: 251
23 Morrison 1992: 185
adoption of Christianity. Taking up Hindu practices is variously referred to as “purification,” “enlightenment,” “devotion” and so on.

An additional point worth noting with regard to the Comaroffs’ hesitation with the concept of conversion is how ambivalent they are about the “ideological” battles that are fought between colonizer and colonized. They argue that in order to enter into a conversation with the British, the Southern Tswana “had no alternative but to be inducted, unwittingly and often unwillingly, into the forms of European discourse.”24 That is, the terms of the conversation were set by European symbolic systems and as such, the indigenous people had already surrendered to their colonization of their consciousness. It was only when the Tswana clashed with the symbolic order itself that the Comaroffs recognize glimmers of resistance, or of acting autonomously. When Tswana people expressed new modes of thinking and acting in Church, for instance, they were deemed to be abetting the missionary “commandeering of everyday terms.”25 According to this viewpoint, in some sense, the possibilities of conversion as the adoption and expression of new religious beliefs are precluded within the colonial situation. Conversion then becomes primarily a cultural object of hybridity.

The Comaroffs’ interpretation of enthusiastic conversion as non-agentive or less agentive action is representative of a wider normative association of agency with resistance.26 I find this position troubling as it gives to the scholar the authority to evaluate certain kinds of actions as belonging to the colonized themselves and others as being the product of an unconscious and unwilling submission, and therefore not of their own making. To a certain extent, this mode of analysis reproduces the differences (though bereft of the associated differential in valorization)

24 Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 213
25 ibid: 218
26 Studies of political domination have tended to pay attention to the “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1990) at the risk of “romanticizing resistance” (Abu-Lughod 1990).
that Europeans saw and articulated between themselves and indigenous social and symbolic systems by implicitly referencing a pre-colonial, un tarnished African self that is lost in the act of conversion. What is instead needed is an analytical approach that does not reject indigenous participation in zealous worship of the “foreign gods” as being non-agentive or normatively disappointing.

Anthropologists have since been focusing on conversion less as a matter of subjective or inner belief and instead as a field of collective social and cultural transformations produced because of or in reaction against the foreign religious ideology. Language emerges as another locus of negotiation between colonizer and colonized and a particularly productive area for understanding conversion beyond syncretism. Vicente Rafael (1988) argues that conversion was coextensive with translation, both in terms of how Spanish missionaries attempt to convey their ideas of God and moral practice and the Tagalogs’ understandings of Christianity in terms of their own social conceptions, whether of hierarchy or the relationship to the supernatural. This is an interpretation of conversion as substitution – the replacement of erstwhile propositions with new, foreign ones. The very principles of colonial rule here lies in how Christian ideas of self and authority were translated in the colonial field. Rafael is emphatic about how the Tagalog subjects were neither clearly opposed to Spanish authorities nor unequivocally collaborative but their handling of colonial Christian discourse was such that they tended to change its meaning as given to them and instead retain a sense of foreignness even as they uttered the words. William Hanks (2010), on the other hand, maintains that the ambiguities of translation in language and practice are integral to the colonial experience and instead of producing new hybrid forms as an effective evasion of colonial power, he argues that the negotiation between colonizer and colonized produced truly autochthonous concepts. According to him, the Yucatec Maya encounter with
Christianity is the very opposite of the syncretism model – its form appears to be indigenous but its meaning is Christian.

More recently, Joel Robbins (2007) has offered a nuanced critique of the literature that is concerned with continuity in conversion, often through various accounts of syncretism. Robbins suggests that when confronted with conversion from local to universal religions, anthropologists have tended to dwell on the extent to which old traditions and systems of belief make way for the new religion. They do this because of what they take belief to mean. Robbins draws our attention to the distinction between believing in and believing that. Whereas the former is an implicit trust and commitment to act in a certain way toward a person, thing, or God, believing that carries with it a propositional logic of assent. That is, there is some element of uncertainty in believing that a God exists and people are make claims about their beliefs in specific ways. The latter is a particularly Protestant modern notion that has carried over into scholarly treatments of conversion. When they inevitably find that those who claim to be Christian retain old rituals or traditions, they suggest that maybe the best way to study them is not as Christians. It is this kind of evaluative scholarly tendency that was prominent in the Comaroffs’ work, whereby the domain of each religion or tradition is believed to consist of certain unchanging propositions and scholars can then keep a tally of how much of each domain is part of converts’ lives.

What Robbins points to, however, is the discontinuity that converts themselves stress in their avowals as Christians. In his case of Papua New Guinea, converts often thought of time and their lives in terms of the Christian revival, when everything changed for them. The continuities of their traditional life are not a buffer against the foreignness of Christianity. Treating it as such is a disciplinary preference, not necessarily an accurate description of

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27 See Robbins 2004
conversion. Thus, what is important is not counting the number of traditional or new ideas in a convert society but rather by looking at “which values are organizing the relation between ideas.” 28 In Robbins’ case, he finds the Christian value of salvation to be the primary motivating value such that other rituals are deemed subservient. To be Christian then is not simply to assent to every proposition of one specific version of Christianity but rather to order your life according to an overall Christian ethos.

This local ordering of Christianity that nonetheless purports to be universal thus requires an alternative analytic framework. What the theoretical lens of syncretism misses are the profoundly generative aspects of conversion, the ways in which people are enabled and emboldened by their faith. By simply speaking of syncretistic Christianities, we undermine the particular amities as well as conflicts that are part of subscribing to a universalistic ideology. It positions people alongside other people on an even keel, from a purely objective point of view. Particularly within the context of India, where the indigenous people were converting from Hinduism with its distinctive social hierarchies, being Christian was radically different. Of course, as I stated earlier, this was not the social reality of converts, who often carried their caste status with them. Nevertheless, that position of belonging to the same ethical worldview drives the politics of subjects claiming the same or greater moral authority as their rulers. What people call themselves is, at least in part, based upon their conviction that that label means something important and powerful, and it propels them to act in accordance with that faith. Converts in Goa were not attempting to evade the reaches of colonial power by retaining elements of Hinduism. In fact, they do not make claims about wanting to overthrow Portuguese colonial and a number of scholars of Goa have dwelt upon local attachments to Portuguese culture and

28 Robbins 2007: 16
ideologies in explaining the durability of the Portuguese Empire in India. On the contrary, then, it is precisely the avowed embrace of Christianity by Goans that troubles their governors.

This then is the minimalist theoretical framework of conversion that I employ in thinking about conversion in general: a change in religious norms and rituals, the enactment of which produce significant transformations in how religious agents think about themselves in relation to other members of their own faith as well as those outside it. This is not to say simply that action produces belief but rather that the two are inextricably linked. If we conceptualize belief as something that is not wholly interioristic, we begin to see why the element of force should not be deemed incompatible with the production of belief. It is conceivably difficult to forcibly alter internal desires or convictions and if that is all we regard belief to be, it is clear why we might not consider forced conversion a subject worth investigating – we dismiss its very possibility. The peripety model of sudden conversion, which emphasizes dramatic events such as revelations and an autonomous path to God, further reinforces this position. I suggest, however, that while conversion must necessarily involve a change of some kind, often radical, what that change is, whether interior or exterior, varies from context to context. Therefore, I propose a more specific model of conversion that pertains to the case of Portuguese Goa.

Conversion in Portuguese Goa was ritualized and decidedly coercive in nature. This form of political conversion was largely beholden to the thinking of Saint Paul and Saint Augustine on belief and questions of how the believer is formed in relation to God and temporal authority. Conversion was not sudden and dramatic in this understanding. It was gradualist, continuous, and an often lifelong process of living according to sacred precepts. Bernard of Clairvaux distinguished between two levels of conversion: the first one was that of affiliation, the one most commonly recognized by social scientists. A person first submitted to religious institutions such as
the seminaries and Churches in order to receive the appropriate education that would mold them for the second level of conversion. This was the process of redemption, which was wholly initiated and sustained by the grace of God. People could not choose to believe, nor could they will God’s grace. They could, however, demonstrate their willingness to be saved.

We should note that earlier Christian thinkers were reluctant to even use the term conversion in talking about the process of finding faith. It was a realm of experience so utterly intimate, between man and God, that it was beyond generalizable human knowledge. Luther, for example, rarely preached on the cataclysmic conversion of Paul and was reluctant to extrapolate from his experience to that of all converts. When he did, he dwelt on the external aspects of Paul’s faith, his vocation rather than his conversion.29 These were mortally accessible aspects of the religious life. Proselytization was not to be construed as the attempt to either enforce or convince through speech. It was a slow persuasion, often propelling non-believers to a long process of imitation, an acting out of belief before one truly believed.30 By pretending to believe, one could truthfully be touched by God. It was apparently not an uncommon phenomenon for theatre actors performing conversion scenes to find themselves actually converting. Through acting out the Christian rites and professing the doctrinal beliefs on stage, performers would come to truthfully espouse the beliefs they had simply been simulating.31

The constructive or formative sense of conversion comes in part from the fact that it carried over as a metaphor from the arts, during the 11th and 12th centuries. At that time, it was

29 Morrison 1992: 20
30 Despite the generally employed idea of the “Pauline paradigm” as one of sudden dramatic conversion, in the Bible, it is only a few chapters into the Book of Acts that Saul is called Paul, as if the conversion took some time to stick. See Taylor 2009.
31 Genesius, the patron saint of acting is the most famous example of a “heathen” who performed a conversion on stage as part of Roman anti-Christian propaganda, designed to mock the irrationality and contemptibility of Christianity. See Dolar 2017. I am indebted to Lisa Wedeen for this wonderful insight.
an understanding of how a work of art was formed in the image of God and how after a period of deterioration, it would be restored to glory. It is obvious how this translates in religious discourse to ideas of original sin and redemption through the maker. In this vision of conversion as the recovering and remaking of something beautiful:

“pain was necessary to break down the old, to efface the deformed likeness, so that the new one could be formed in its place. Such healing, renewing pain could by voluntarily embraced, as it was by penitents and ascetics, or, because it was thought to be the due of brotherly love, it could be imposed by force on unbelievers or wrong-believers. Penance and persecution were twins, often likened to medical or surgical procedures that inflicted terrible pain in order to cure. It is not clear what social behaviour many ancient religions demanded. However, like Judaism, Christianity enjoined social effects of belief on every level of existence.”

Being rebuilt in the image of God thus was not simply a moment of ecstasy; it often entailed a long painful journey. Earlier still in Christian history, Augustine and Paul talked explicitly about the use of force and violence as a temporal impetus that drives individuals toward sincere belief. According to this view, “the final, spontaneous act of [conversion] could be preceded by a long process—of eruditio and admonitio—in which elements of fear, of constraint, of external inconvenience are never, at any time, excluded.” Saint Xavier, the co-founder of the Society of Jesus and the leading proponent of forceful conversions in India, relied upon precisely this logic. The emphasis here is on creating a specific kind of physical moral ethos that must precede moral action. It is important to clarify that I am not propounding the argument that coercion produces belief or indeed, ardent manifestations of belief. Instead, recognizing that the concept of conversion as voluntarily sought and arrived at is of more recent origins will go some way toward shedding light on the concerns about sincerity.

32 Morrison 1992: xvi
33 Chadwick 1993
34 Brown 1964, 112
Sincerity & Autonomy, Ritual & Heteronomy

The question this paper asks at the beginning is why the colonial regime including the Crown in Portugal and the missionaries working locally would lay such stock in the sincerity of their subjects, why their compliance with colonial expectations isn’t enough. While the colonial concern is of a particular kind, a worry about sincerity is more commonly pervasive, clearly occupying scholars studying colonial conversion. They approach with trepidation conversions under the threat of violence or other forms of coercion because they cannot know if the conversions were sincere. Although these anxieties are produced by different motivating factors, they both hinge upon the fact that we cannot know the internal thoughts, feelings, reasons, convictions or desires of subjects converting under duress. Before I can answer the former concern, then, I shall address the latter worry, in order to explicate the ethical orientation as well as the methodological approach I adopt.

The specific scholarly disquiet in confronting forced conversion and its sincerity betray a more generally pervasive apprehension. As Adam Seligman states, “our own categories for the world we inhabit (that of liberal academia in the United States) are very sincere.” That is to say, one of the defining characteristics of modernity is how the categories we use to understand the world are shaped by the tropes of sincerity, inasmuch as they seek to fix meaning and eliminate ambiguity. There are two problems with this approach when dealing with human subjects. The first is a moral one wherein this position privileges the interiority of subjects rather than their actions. And the second one is more pragmatic, even in cases where there is no coercion, we cannot, in fact, know what subjects feel sincerely or rather, the access we have is one of degree. The closest we can get to that supposed inner sanctum is through the medium of language, which

35 Seligman 2009: 1086
can approximate subjective truth at best. The search for authenticity whether in thought or action, therefore, is a fraught enterprise at best and a dangerous one at worst as it creates dichotomies between truth and dissimulation that are simply not borne out in everyday social and political life and moreover, create attachments to certain fixed ideas and identities as being pure and defined while ignoring the permutations and combinations that make up people’s adaptations, reactions and creations, that more amorphous realm of lived experience. The worlds we live in are messy, fractured, fluid, contradictory and ambiguous, ever more so in circumstances of repressive political power, where our options are structured and limited. As social scientists, it is important to respond to that messiness and integrate it into our intellectual quests rather than seeking to eliminate it from our models.

Almost thirty years ago, moral philosopher Bernard Williams, challenged the Kantian primacy given to autonomy by stressing the fact that there are always forces beyond our control that nevertheless incite actions that should not be excluded from the domain of moral action. This was a response to what can be generally referred to as the Control Principle or the idea that we are moral creatures only to the extent that the factors that influence our judgments and decisions are within our control. The Control Principle privileges intent over action – the will that wills a morally praiseworthy action, even if it fails to accomplish its purpose, is nevertheless a good will. The corollary is that the will that wills a bad action but fails to accomplish said action is punished less severely, even if the failure is reducible to luck. Focusing on action in this fashion, through the filter of intent, of course, discounts all those actions that are prompted, even on an everyday basis, by factors completely outside of our control, unforeseen and often, undesired. Consequently, “the area of genuine agency, and therefore of legitimate moral judgment, seems to
shrink under this scrutiny to an extensionless point.” While my purpose is not to delve into the problem of moral judgments which is what these thinkers are grappling with, I find that the philosophical insight that we are moral creatures, regardless of whether we are acting autonomously, is eminently useful for the discipline of political science where we are often engaged in the attempt to understand human actions in situations that are uncertain and shifting and often subject to heteronomy, that is being subject to the will and control of external entities, whether in the form of violence, coercion or a gentler form of persuasion.

Williams coined the term “moral luck” to refer to all those situations where we differentially judge actions that may have occurred despite a lack of control on all factors producing said action even where the intention was the same. Rather than attempting to strip away that element of luck or, in some cases, force, which is present in people’s lives, in some shape or form at all times, we need to find a way to grasp outcomes produced under conditions totally beyond their choosing. One might object: but the reason they are acting in this fashion is because they are compelled to. If we consider the viewpoint outlined above, however, this is not a satisfactory resolution. As Bernard of Clairvaux has stated, “Neither fear nor self-interest can convert the soul.”

Williams argues that no external reason can, by itself, offer an explanation of an action and taking it as such is a normative rather than explanatory position. An internal reason is one where an agent’s actual set of motivations moves him to commit some act whereas an external reason is one that under certain conditions moves him to that act independent of the agent’s actual pre-existing motivations. As Williams elucidates, however, the external reason statement is not an explanation of an agent’s desires but rather of the considerations that dispose him to act in

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36 Nagel 1979, 66
37 See Williams 1981
some way. Moreover, judging an agent’s failure to act in accordance with considerations we
deem to be reasons implies precisely that they are not reasons for him. The failure, for lack of a
better word, of certain native Goans to evade the religion imposed upon them should not
indicate a failure of agency but rather point us toward an alternative set of motivations and
dispositions, a different kind of agency visible specifically in this other domain of power. In other
words, external configurations of power can cultivate or activate dispositions that can explain
how people might be motivated to act against their desires and interests but they are not in
themselves sufficiently explanatory. There is also the empirical puzzle that actions produced
through compulsion are a source of anxiety precisely for those doing the compelling, so in this
specific case as well as generally, it cannot provide a reason for the display of ardent religiosity.

Such situations therefore present a less explored area of inquiry for political scientists and
they call for a move toward ethical reflection. This means allowing the subjects of our study to
speak in their own voices, distrustful though we may be of what they have to say. By taking this
course, we can begin to do away with singular notions of agency as sincere or simply autonomous
and instead ask the question: in what way were the converts agents? Under what conditions were
they formed and what challenges did they pose to the regime that sought to control them? While
their actions may not accord with our own political predilections, I want to point to how they can
illuminate ways in which humans reconfigure and inaugurate new “signs of life”\(^{38}\) within
restrictive frames. Following Judith Butler, I acknowledge a certain opacity when it comes to our
subjects, so as to avoid doing them violence – we cannot know what they feel but we can trace
their own efforts to express and enact. By surrendering the demand for absolute coherence, we
suspend judgment in favour of empathetic understanding:

\(^{38}\) This is Foucault’s term that Butler channels.
“[W]e must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human. To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance—to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient ‘I’ as a kind of possession. If we speak and try to give an account from this place, we will not be irresponsible, or, if we are, we will surely be forgiven.”

In practice, this entails two analytic moves in my dissertation: first, I will detail the various behavioral demands and administrative strictures imposed upon those living within Portuguese held territories, paying attention to the kinds of violence inflicted upon the land and their persons while also focusing on the more quotidian mandates. I will also be sensitive to the pre-existing sociological order that had its own schema of subjection and would have provided rationale for converting as well as not converting. My attempt here is not to reduce religious transformation to sociological change, although that is an accompanying process, but rather to draw out that web of “external reasons” that would have played a role in conditioning new affective attachments. The second move is to study how those specifically affective attachments produce a politics that hinges upon claims about faith and virtue. Converts channel the new language of religion in defining themselves and their position in the colonial order. Rather than attempting to decipher motivations, here we see the productive work done by converts as political agents. Their new dispositions in the personal realm have significant implications for what they regard to be important and vocal in the public sphere.

The cultivation of dispositions through action and with coercion has a particular history in Catholic thought, whether within the theological writings of St Augustine and St Thomas or in

39 Butler 2005: 136
the more actively political vexations of Vitoria and Bartoleme de las Casas. These deliberations clearly impacted the means by which Catholic colonial powers sought to govern in the colonies and this history will be explored in detail in the next chapter. However, at least since Talal Asad’s intervention, anthropologists in particular, have been attuned to the manner in which the assumption of religious belief itself being a distinctive mental characteristic is a modern one that is tied up with the Protestant ideals of self-cultivation. In fact, Asad (1993) sheds light upon how the very concept of religion as a set of propositions to which a believer first gives assent is descriptive of one mode within a wider range of modalities through which human beings become aware of and relate to the transcendent. It is important to ask the question of how different forms of power produce different regimes of truth, or as Asad puts it, how different kinds of practice and discourse are intrinsic to the fields in which religious representations acquire their identity and truthfulness. Earlier forms of religious belief such as those associated with Medieval Christianity tied moral action to austere bodily comportment—ethical dispositions were intimately linked with physical disciplinary techniques. A number of more contemporary religions also encourage new converts to partake first in the participatory, bodily aspects of religious practice before turning their devotions to doctrine.

The Nichiren Shoshu is a Japanese Buddhist sect that believes that salvation is attained through faith in the Lotus Sutra. What is important, however, is not the content of the sutra but rather the repeated chanting of its title. The chanting is completely standardized and largely free of cognitive content as converts are encouraged to immerse themselves in the participatory ritual that is meant to move them on an affective level40. What matters is that you are saying the words, not that you understand the words. Other activities such as yogic exercises, singing hymns, shrine

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40 Proudfoot 1985: 112
worship, processions, pilgrimages, even serving others, aid the purpose of engaging an agent and rendering him more receptive to the internal aspects of the faith. Essentially, bodily engagements are seen to condition religious convictions. The ritual mode is thus opposed to the sincere mode – it seeks to cope with the ambiguity of not knowing and instead ingrain patterns of thought and action that can render the unknown comprehensible.

Anthropologist Charles Hirschkind (2006) argues that political and moral judgments are not produced by purely cognitive acts but rather by “evaluative dispositions outside the purview of consciousness, to orientations grounded in affective and visceral registers of human existence”\textsuperscript{41}. Studying the popularity of the cassette-tape sermon in the Piety movement in Egypt, Hirschkind demonstrates how the sermon is a “technique for animating and organizing a stratigraphy of bodily experience”\textsuperscript{42} through specific forms of oratorical persuasion. In other words, the sermon trains the body’s gestures, affects, and other forms of expression to emulate and embody the ethical habitual demands of that form of religious belief. Thus, what is significant is not simply the content of the sermon but rather, its specific form, which “imparts not simply moral lessons but affective energies of ethical potential”. Expressing shared dispositions through a shared religious style is also central to the formation of religious communities\textsuperscript{43}. Whether through the medium of collective prayer or a corpus of stories and songs, this kind of religious inculcation thrives upon regimentation and repetition through rituals linking body to mind.

Significantly, these modes of subjectivation rely upon the subordination of the individual to a collective will. By focusing on women’s adherence to apparently repressive gender norms in

\textsuperscript{41} Hirschkind 2006: 31
\textsuperscript{42} ibid: 98
\textsuperscript{43} See also Meyer 2006
the Piety movement, Saba Mahmood aims to show how “the very processes and conditions that secure a subject’s subordination are also the means by which she becomes a conscious identity and agent”\textsuperscript{44}. Mahmood suggests that if we recognize that the desire for freedom from norms is not a universal or transhistorical one, then we need to analyze differently the operations of power on those bodies in those regimes that do not aspire to this mode of emancipatory politics. She argues, therefore, that “what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency—but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment”\textsuperscript{45}. Turning to the Aristotelian conception of habitus, as the self-conscious work done by the ethical self, Mahmood demonstrates the rituals and practices through which even emotions such as fear and shame, desired as virtues by the pious Muslim self, can be cultivated actively through repetitive action performed by women. Thus, it is possible to devote oneself to religion completely sincerely without prior internal convictions.

Not only can the embodiment of ritual play some part in conditioning belief, the total surrender of one’s autonomy to a transcendent authority can propel subjects to agency not previously accessed by them. Scholar of Catholicism Robert Orsi provides a stirring account of women’s devotion to St. Jude, the patron saint of hopeless causes, which aims at showing how belief functions in the lives of the devout. From women confronting a life of hardship with alcoholic fathers and husbands to the daughters of immigrants moving from ethnic enclaves to the suburbs, St Jude consoles and gives confidence and courage to people for whom life is difficult, unstable, and with few avenues for exit. Orsi offers a rich description of the space people occupy between institutionally prescribed religion and the personal experiences of religious

\textsuperscript{44} Mahmood 2005: 17
\textsuperscript{45} ibid: 14-15
people. St Jude is not a “stable agent of the culture” either – he does not simply subject or emancipate his worshipers. He is an idiom for “an oscillating dialectic between fantasy and reality…between objective and subjective.”

There is a bit in the book’s preface that captures Orsi’s approach best: he tells the story of a time when, despite not being devout himself, he prayed to St Jude in a desperate situation and saw a change in luck. He confesses he does not believe in the saint but “what’s belief got to do with it?” Whatever the interiority of an agent, the external deeds they present to observers are incredibly fertile.

It is my contention that the religious ardour that converts in colonial Goa display should be considered as situated within this kind of ritual mode. The repressive colonial regime demanded that they make certain sacrifices, severe old ties, denounce former practices; but it did not and could not have produced a passionate display of faith. By submitting to Christianity, which may not have been a part of their original motivational set, converts open up an agentive space between surrender and freedom that is somehow more confounding than resistance. By acting as Christians, objectively they become Christians, regardless of whether their doctrinal values are the same as those of the Portuguese or not. That native Christian identity is not to be construed as a merely empty label; it denotes particular lived characteristics.

Contrary to the notion of belief being somehow internal and unknowable, not open to verification, the philosopher Slavoj Zizek argues that belief is in fact “radically exterior” and thus has an objective status. Belief is embodied in the practical and effective procedures adopted by people. By giving oneself to ritual and custom, one produces the conditions for belief, a kind of “belief before belief” wherein the “external custom is always a material support for the subject’s

46 Orsi 1996: 210
unconscious”\textsuperscript{47}. He gives the example of the Tibetan prayer wheel where you write the prayer on a piece of paper, insert it in the wheel, turn the wheel and the wheel prays for you. It does not matter what you are thinking, objectively you are praying. Put simply, our beliefs and even emotions are not what we think or feel but rather what we do.\textsuperscript{48} Beliefs can thus be manifested in the exterior domain, transferred or delegated to other things, without losing their sincerity. The doing of the procedure is sincere enough. For Zizek, this exteriorization of belief is not characteristic of a primitive stage of development or sacrilegious (as the Protestants worried) but is rather analogous to “canned laughter” – at the end of a long day, when we sit in front of the television and are too tired to even laugh, the show’s laughter track laughs for us. We are relieved of the pressure to laugh “sincerely” and in that moment, we are not disingenuous, even if the laughter did not emit spontaneously from within us.

Of course, Zizek also draws upon the Pascalian wager when speaking about the objective status of belief. The wager as we are well aware is a rational defense of belief but it is so only as a last ditch effort. Pascal is not literally suggesting that we weigh the costs and benefits of belief in order to make ourselves believe – he is merely nudging skeptics along their own line of argumentation, to say that by their own logic, faith is rational. One must, however, remember that submission is different from superstition. Pascal is not prescribing an absolute acceptance of religious propositions; that is not how one attains faith. Instead he proposes the paradoxical idea of the automatism of belief because “proofs only convince the mind; habit provides the strongest proofs and those that are believed.” What Pascal offers is radical inasmuch as the sincerity of belief is not in the believing but rather in the enacting of belief. This is why reducing religious

\textsuperscript{47} Zizek 1989: 39
\textsuperscript{48} The exercise of writing is an all-too-familiar example of how the thinking is in the doing. I do not truly know what I mean or feel until it is materialized on this digital screen through the typing of mechanical keys and then it is all too real. In that sense, writing is not too far removed from the act of praying.
transformation to sociological change is problematic because it elides the ethical work done by converts. Another way of comprehending that distinction is in terms of what William James has called the “willing nature” that is essential to belief. Yes, the choice may be forced upon them but as James explains in relation to any form of belief, it is nevertheless a real choice.\textsuperscript{49} James is especially instructive for seeing the inadequacies of the marketplace approach to religion and politics. Treating religious dispositions as essentially fungible means missing the distinctive features not just of religious life but also political movements motivated by and crafted in the language of religious attachments.\textsuperscript{30} It means misjudging the passional excesses of bodily commitments that are more than rational.

**Portuguese rule and the problem of sincerity in conversion**

The previous section briefly outlined the lurking assumptions and idealizations of the sincere self in order to accomplish two preliminary tasks: one was to point toward the somewhat anachronistic reading, by social scientists, of the act of conversion under coercion – the idea that true conversion is voluntary, or that force was not an integral part of the ideologies of conversion. The second was to situate this project within a growing body of scholarship that is committed to illuminating alternative conceptions of ethical life that reveal ever more creative means by which power is inscribed upon and circumscribed by bodies. How do these reflections help tackle the empirical puzzle on hand? They clear the necessary ground for situating us in an ideological

\textsuperscript{49} In The Will to Believe, James argues that the choice of whether or not to believe in God is always forced inasmuch as there is no third option. He also explains that it is live which means that it is not outside of the realms of possibility and it is momentous, meaning that the choice must be made immediately and with immeasurably high stakes.

\textsuperscript{30} This is a problem that comes up in contemporary political commentary as well. Certain segments of the public or policy makers decide that the way to discredit violent religious political movements, for example, is to deny their religion, to denounce them as “purely political” and refuse to acknowledge the religious commitments they profess.
world where the desire to produce sincere religious subjects arose, the social and political materializations of that desire, as well as the anxieties provoked by their expectations being exceeded by new consciousnesses.

As stated earlier in the paper, the Portuguese presence in Goa was driven by an almost fanatical commitment to harvesting souls even as it proved fiscally unsound. With ever increasing frequency, missives from the King and Queen in Portugal would bestow upon missionaries the sacred task of converting “the gentiles” while reiterating to civil administrators their duty to facilitate the work of the missions. The colonial imaginaire or raison d’être – the domain of political, cultural, and ideological self-definition – was intensely focused on the ambition and imperative to envelope all attainable spaces under the umbrella of universal Christendom. Part of this motive was that Portuguese (and Spanish) expansionism staked its legitimacy upon the donation of the Papal Bulls. Even when later in the seventeenth century, the methods of achieving their goals were vigorously contested by theologians and jurist, the sanctity of the Bulls remained unquestioned. The other crucial aspect of the Portuguese imaginary was that it envisioned itself as perpetuating or revivifying the ancient and medieval legacy of universalism, especially as that tradition related to the Roman Empire. As the particulars of Portuguese universalism took the shape of a monotheistic faith, they were driven to forge a colonial beast that would somehow control and recast the hearts and souls of their subjects in their own image. Simply preaching the gospel, however, could not achieve this purpose – after all, missionaries could not know if the converts believed or even understood. In the Christian theorization, belief came to be associated with specific kinds of social behaviour and significations. Not only that, as previously mentioned, religious belief was not simply a matter of the internal contents of a

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believer’s self—external practice was intrinsic to faith. Thus, the specific Portuguese version of Catholicism had to be translated into practical rules of embodiment in social and individual life that would condition natives to the truths of that one true faith.

A complex web of institutions was spun to promote the cause of conversion. These included seminaries and houses for catechumens for instructions in doctrinal as well as behavioral matters of the faith, the Pai dos Cristaos who was engaged for the express purpose of protecting the neophytes from influences outside the faith that might cause them to deviate from their newly acquired faith. The Rigor of Mercy and the Tribunal of the Inquisition were established to punish those who were alleged to apostatize or defile the faith. Converts were even required to serve in the homes of Portuguese settlers as they gained the marks of civility. Of course there were a number of more positive incentives that were also of an institutional nature—such as the granting of land rights to widows and their children should they accept the new religion. Aside from fulfilling the educational needs of evangelization, the rigors of the disciplinary apparatus that the Portuguese put in place in Goa also served an evidentiary purpose. It became not only the means by which “heathens” could convert to Christianity, its exacting demands also became the test of their faith. In the earlier phases of colonization, the conversion program in Goa was far more accommodating, as the new norms, customs and rituals were introduced.\textsuperscript{52} As the number of people converting grew, however, the strictures imposed upon them to prove themselves to be Christian were augmented.

To indigenous converts, fulfilling Portuguese demands was equivalent to performing their duties as good Christians. The prominent discourse of sincere conversion and the practices

\textsuperscript{52} Accommodation of local traditions and habits was actually theologically consistent. If the process of conversion was conceived as a gradual one, allowing erstwhile practices was simply an extension of empathy.
instituted to ensure sincerity, thus paved the path for a particularly “visible” form of Christianity in colonial Goa wherein it was not sufficient to claim to be Christian – you had to be seen to be Christian. It is my contention that indigenous converts understood their Christianity in terms of zealous and elaborate displays of piety, whether through participating in grand and elaborate liturgical ceremonies as well as other rituals such as processions, church decorations, feasts, musical gatherings and group baptism, or through submitting to the more arduous demands of service and penance. The almost flamboyant displays of ardor by converts only heightened colonial anxieties further. Even during the auto-da-fe, which was the public ritual for eliciting confessions under extreme forms of punishment and torture, the inquisitors demanded that the accused convince them their repentance was sincere, and not merely forced by the pain they were subjected to. This kind of suspicion about the causes of compliance suggests a political impulse that exceeds the merely dominating dimension.

The question of why the Portuguese colonial regime was not satisfied with obedience is in the first instance rooted in Christian theology. To the Portuguese, conquest was not achieved through military might but rather through fulfilling the dictates of Christian expansion. Coercive political measures were acceptable insofar as they were necessary to introduce Christianity and induce voluntary conversion. This period in European history is marked by the “transfer of the definition of humanity from the moral sphere to the political” – Christianity would supersede temporal law in the creation and maintenance of order and would moreover, aspire to create an ethical political community where subjects were ruled not merely by the coercion of their wills

53 Charles Dellon, a 17th century French physicist, narrates his trial, torture, and incarceration by the Portuguese Inquisition over a period of eighteen months.
54 St Augustine, St Thomas, Bernard of Clairvaux all seem to agree on this subject.
55 Pagden 1995:28
but rather by their willing submission to moral principles. The Catholic Church granted the monarchs of Spain and Portugal the right to govern other lands and of course profit from them based upon the promise of bringing their inhabitants into the Catholic Church. This moral right to rule emerged from the perceived difference between the civilized virtuous Europeans and the idolatrous heathens. In Portuguese systems of self-representation, colonial domination was the medium of access to religious truth for the ruled populace.

Within the specific contours of the imperial arena, however, the concern with sincerity is also provoked by the fragility of a colonial regime that attempts to reconcile a religious ideology emphasizing the sovereignty of the individual conscience with the repressive logic of colonialism. In a political regime that counts upon obedience as a strategy of domination, there is awareness on the part of both ruler and ruled that the ruled do not believe what they are doing, they are simply acting as if they do. Political scientist Lisa Wedeen argues that external comportment with the behavioral demands of the cult of Asad in Syria, regardless of how outlandish their claims might be, functioned as a reinforcement of the coercive power of the regime. External obedience might give way to, and in fact, permit limited transgressions but it is in those limits that we see both the extent of control that is exercised as well as the confines of subjective freedom and by so doing, the compulsion to obey simply reinforces the asymmetry of power in the relationship. Compliance with the cult does not produce belief in the legitimacy of the regime. It works to isolate those subjected by prescribing the limits of permissible language.

Submission to Christianity, however, alters converts’ subjective understanding of themselves precisely because the practices, which are meant to be disciplinary, are also productive of religious consciousness. They have a life of their own that exceeds the imagination.

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56 Whether or not it had the authority to confer the right to sovereign lands was of course hotly debated from the 17th century onwards.
and intentions of the imposers. As I suggest earlier, it is these new signs of life that accounts of syncretism miss, this excess of devotion and passion. The disciplinary mechanisms manifest faith and consequently they bring the threat of political instability. One of the defining characteristics of colonialism is how the colonized come to see themselves as “natives,” solidifying hierarchies of rule; but converts in colonial Goa recognized and asserted themselves as “Christians”, not as “natives” or “native Christians.”

I argue, therefore, that the act of religious conversion did not simply fail to constrain colonial subjects – it provided them with spiritual and intellectual resources for cultivating themselves as virtuous individuals. Being inducted into the ideological space of the Christian rulers was a gateway to new life forms, both conscious and subconscious. It provided converts with an analytical and expressive vocabulary that, paradoxically, through modes of devoted submission, ended up empowering subjects politically, offering novel challenges to colonial rule.

If the claim to legitimate colonial rule was premised upon the tenets of Christianity, being Christian allowed natives to scrutinize the very terms of that governing promise. Conversion to Christianity inaugurated new aspirations and desires in the colonized as equal religious subjects in an avowedly universal kingdom. While all converts were known to recite the main prayers, sing the hymns and psalms, confess to their sins and perform penance, some were moved to seek further immersion in the religion. I argue that their enjoyment of the religious experience is what prompted indigenous converts to beckon others to what they now regarded as the only means to a good life and what encouraged their continuous efforts despite increased persecution.

It is this excess or ardor in submission that provokes the anxiety of sincerity by defying European expectations and seemingly usurping their position as spiritual mediators and moral

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57 Comaroff and Comaroff 1997:19
arbitrators. The new demonstrations of faith are not what the colonizers recognize in their capacity as the dispensers of knowledge. I want to suggest that the colonial fear of insincerity was in fact linked to a fear of the materialization or actualization of sincerity. Sincere conversion was a slow process to be attained with a longue durée of labor – somewhere in the distance, to be gleaned but not yet attained – it was the attachment to that ideal that acted as a justification of Portuguese rule. Without that goal, the imperial project would have to be radically restructured and this is ultimately what the Marquis de Pombal accomplishes with the expulsion of the Jesuits and a de-prioritization of the religious mission.

**Conclusion**

In this historical moment, as in all others, we are borne by currents of mistrust and fear when confronted by representations and life forms that are other than fundamentally cognizable. As political scientists, it is incumbent upon us to interrogate the terms of that unease. Our present scholarly frames reify and simplify concepts such as belief and conversion that should instead be complicated to better grasp their significance in practice. Although we may never be able to appreciate the pleasure that is derived from modes of submission, for example, recognizing how they are alternative (to our own), rather than deviant, would be a step toward developing better methods for tackling affective and ideological politics. What I hope to demonstrate with the case of Catholic conversion in colonial Goa is that power, even in its most apparently repressive form, cannot and may not even seek to subvert meaningful action. We just have to look for the meaning.
Bibliography


