

## *Introduction*

It is well known what confusions and misunderstandings have arisen in the history of Christianity by translations from one language into another.

EVANS PRITCHARD,  
“The Perils of Translation,” 1969

Their misunderstanding of me was not the same as my misunderstanding of them, and thus the difference between our respective interpretations could not be dismissed on the basis of linguistic dissimilarity or communicational difficulty.

Wagner on his Fieldwork Among the Daribi,  
*The Invention of Culture*

TWO THOUSAND YEARS AGO, a small sect, just one among the many seeking to redefine Judaism in opposition to the assimilation of Hellenic culture that had characterized the followers of the Law of Moses since the Roman Empire’s expansion into their lands, obtained a relative degree of success. Among other factors this was due to its missionary emphasis and inclusivity, which broke with the patriarchal and hierarchical structure of the Jewish tradition (Kee 1993: 47, 52–55). Here inclusivity should be taken to mean not only an openness to the poor and the marginal but also this new religion’s capacity to constantly redefine itself through the incorporation of the social, cosmological, and ritual peculiarities of the peoples caught up in its missionary expansion.

It was a historical accident, though, that transformed this minority religion, worshipped by a mere 5 to 10 percent of the population (Veyne 2007: 10), into the official religion of the Roman Empire: the conversion of

Emperor Constantine in A.D. 312, following a dream foretelling his victory in a battle fought under the Christian symbol, formed by the first two letters of Christ's name (X and P). Ceasing the harsh treatment inflicted on the church between A.D. 303 and A.D. 311, and using persuasion more than persecution (21, my translation), Constantine gave Christianity a global dimension within the space of ten years. Veyne writes, "Without Constantine, Christianity would have remained simply an *avant-garde* sect" (13; see also Kee 1993: 63).

But Christianity survived the fall of the Roman Empire, became associated with other empires, survived the new configurations of power, and today remains a dominant religion across a large swath of the planet. As Hefner reminds us in his introduction to a pioneering collection on conversion to Christianity among contemporary native peoples, the world religions are "the longest lasting of civilization's primary institutions" (1993: 3, 34; see also Wood 1993: 306).

A missionary religion, Christianity was carried to the world's most distant corners and isolated peoples, very often accompanying the expansion of the empires associated with it, initially the Roman Empire, later the Spanish and Portuguese Empires, whose religious orders in the sixteenth century took it to places as far away as China and America. In these lands the church's envoys came face-to-face with cultures that were radically different from each other but that posed equally challenging problems. Certain that they were faced with a "civilization" in the fullest sense of the term, the missionaries in China strove to learn the language and traditions of the sages, behaving like them—that is, as emissaries of Western knowledge and science, an approach that meant they were initially well received (Gernet 1982: 27, 29, my translation). Comparing the work of the Christian missionaries in China and the Americas, Gernet writes, "The conditions were very different on the two sides of the Pacific. . . . Among the Indians of America, the question of adaptation to local cultures never arose and conversion relied on the miraculous effects of baptism" (60). As the author reminds us (59), this was combined with authoritarian imposition, made possible in situations where the "Portuguese and Spanish had imposed themselves through the Conquest," but unthinkable in the context of the "scholarly traditions" like those of China and India.

However, there was an even more important reason for not attempting to adapt to local cultures in a similar way, particularly in the lowland Americas: the Portuguese and Spanish did not recognize the illiterate Indians as possessing what today are understood as full-blown cultures, much less civilizations. Although indigenous peoples had been declared descendants of Adam

and Eve at the start of the sixteenth century by papal edict, they were labeled barbarians, which, among other things, hindered the work of translation. As Father Manuel da Nóbrega wrote in 1549 concerning the Tupinambá (S. Leite 1954: 112, my translation): “I cannot find a *língua* [‘tongue’: interpreter] who can tell me, since they are so brutish, they don’t have the words.”

The difficulty in converting them was, however, very different from that posed by the Chinese. The latter, especially the sages with whom the missionaries tried to dialogue, were interested in what seemed to them to be their Western peers, but they guarded their own knowledge jealously and rejected the exclusivism characteristic of Christianity (Gernet 1982: 51, 92; Jordan 1993: 286), which led to the deterioration of relations when a new wave of Jesuits decided to act in a more arrogant manner.

“Myrtle statues” rather than “marble statues,” to cite the expression used by Father Antônio Vieira in 1657 (quoted in Viveiros de Castro 2002: 183–184; 2011: 1–2) to refer to the same Tupinambá of the Brazilian coast, the “Brasis” were easily moldable, since they appeared keen from the outset to adopt the new religion: they learned how to pray, for example, asked to be baptized, and simulated prayer at mass. In the words of Father Manuel da Nóbrega: “They are a people who have no knowledge of God, nor idols, they do everything they are being told to” (S. Leite 1954: 111, my translation). However, just as rapidly as they converted, they abandoned the new faith and returned to their old customs, like cannibalism and warfare, forcing the missionaries to conclude that “the conversions were superficial, at best” (Pollock 1993: 167).

For over five hundred years this type of encounter has been reproduced in the Amazonian rain forest, where many indigenous groups once lived in a relative degree of isolation. On this temporal scale, the events that I wish to examine here happened just recently. In 1956, after years of attempts, a group of Evangelical missionaries from the U.S.-based New Tribes Mission (NTM), accompanied by agents from the Brazilian government, achieved the first peaceful contact with a group of warlike Indians who had become infamous in the region: the Wari’, at the time known as the Pacaás Novos owing to their habitation of the river of the same name, located in the present-day Brazilian state of Rondônia.

Until then the Wari’ had been totally averse to any kind of contact, and even with other indigenous groups of the region their only relation was one of warfare. Hostilities with the whites were then at their most intense, provoked by the invasion of their lands by armed rubber-tappers, who machine-gunned entire villages in surprise attacks, usually at dawn (Vilaça 2010: 83–88, 197).

Unlike other indigenous groups who had been in contact with Christianity via neighboring groups with whom they exchanged, the Wari' had never heard of this religion; and while the first words heard by them from the mouths of the whites probably included the word *God*, they certainly would have been unable to differentiate it amid the meaningless babble emitted by these strange enemies.

Just like the sixteenth-century Catholic missionaries, the American Evangelicals offered presents, communicated through gestures and founded village settlements, where they began to live on a daily basis for years on end. Immediately after arriving, they began to study the language. As in the sixteenth century too, devastating epidemics, an outcome of contact, decimated two-thirds of the Wari' population. In contrast to diverse cases from the past, though, these epidemics were not associated by the Wari' with the sorcery of the whites (or with the baptismal water, as in the case of some Tupinambá groups), who, on the contrary, were able to act as curers with the aid of medicines, which they associated with the name of God.

With or without medicines, however, the impact of the presence of the missionaries and their goods was little different in spite of the four centuries separating the arrival of the Jesuits on the Brazilian coast from the first contacts with the Wari'. Neither was the reaction to this show of power different: the Wari' set themselves to imitating the missionaries, although this did not include—given the different religious practices involved—the simulation of masses and baptisms as occurred in the past.

Around ten years later, in 1969, when some of the missionaries were already fairly fluent in the Wari' language and able to preach God's word, by then in the process of being translated, something occurred that both the missionaries and the Wari' describe as a wave of conversion, spreading through different villages. The Wari' presented themselves to the missionaries, saying that they "believed" (*howa*, "to trust") in God. They abandoned their rituals in favor of collective meals, attended church services, and no longer saw any sense in eating their dead. The shamans ceased to cure, in part because their actions had proven ineffective against the epidemics. People confessed publicly to killings in the past and to adultery and also abandoned their food taboos, assuming the right given to them by God to subjugate all of creation.

Albeit not as quickly as appears to have happened with some Tupinambá groups, about ten years later the Wari', too, reverted to their "bad customs," except for warfare and cannibalism, leading the missionaries to complain of the superficiality of their conversion in similar fashion.

They had not resumed their old practices out of choice, the Wari' told me, but because the fights—usually between husbands and wives—proved inevitable, provoking anger, the name given to sin, which escalated into collective club fights involving entire communities. The shamans resumed their activities, reapproaching their animal partners, previously shunned in order to “accompany Jesus.” Present again, the animals started causing diseases among the Wari' once more, attracting the latter to join them. The chicha festivals were revived, bringing together different Wari' subgroups to become drunk together.

#### FACING CHRISTIANITY

In 1986, when I arrived for the first time, the Negro River village, in the Brazilian state of Rondônia, situated between six and twenty hours by boat from the city of Guajará-Mirim (depending on outboard motor size and river level), was inhabited by 350 agriculturists, hunters and gatherers with little access to manufactured goods. Although a health worker, a teacher, an agent of the National Indian Foundation, and a missionary couple from the New Tribes Mission were also living among them, they seemed to be living, we could say, a fairly traditional life. They told me that they had been Christians throughout the 1970s, but had “abandoned God” at the start of the 1980s. At the time four shamans were active there, curing people attacked by animal spirits and traveling to the subaquatic world where the dead lived.

Christianity remained a minor theme in our conversations and, in my view, in the everyday lives of the Wari', despite the continued presence of missionaries in the villages. Aside from the missionaries' work as teachers and nurses, any explicit catechism during the periods I was there, between 1986 and 1990, and between 1992 and 1996, was limited to discreet meetings, first in a small village house used as a church and then in the missionaries' house with a small group of people who had stayed Christian. In these meetings they read translated fragments of the Bible and prayed.

Understandably the Wari' seemed to have had difficulties comprehending the universe of biblical events. On a visit to the Lage village, in 1993, where a missionary couple also lived, I was able to witness an open-air lesson about figures from the Old Testament in which the missionary Royal Taylor, equipped with a poster, tried to explain to a small group of people what a king, a pharaoh, and a sheep were. On this occasion he complained of the inconstancy of the Wari's faith and their problems in understanding