
The Culture Shock of St Patrick

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Abstract. This article will shed new light on the Confession of St Patrick by examining it through the prism of the culture shock model. It will argue that the stages of the saint's conversion broadly follow the stages of culture shock and that some modern examples of culture shock are very similar to religious conversion experience. It will contextualise these observations into the thesis that 'religion' and 'culture' are only clearly distinguished in Western or post-Enlightenment societies, that 'culture' has come to replace God in many modern societies and that a strong divide between the two concepts is not philosophically sustainable. Accordingly, it will apply the modern model of 'culture shock' to Patrick's experience, arguing that it exemplifies this model.

Key Words. Culture Shock, Conversion Experience, St Patrick, Kalervo Oberg, Religion.

Resumen. El artículo arroja luz sobre la Confesión de San Patricio al examinarla a partir del modelo del choque cultural. Se sostendrá que las fases en la conversión del santo siguen en líneas generales las etapas del choque cultural y que algunos ejemplos modernos de choque cultural se asemejan mucho a la experiencia de la conversión religiosa. Estas observaciones se contextualizarán en la tesis de que 'religión' y 'cultura' sólo se distinguen claramente en las sociedades occidentales o posteriores a la Ilustración, que la 'cultura' ha pasado a reemplazar a Dios en muchas sociedades modernas y que la rígida distinción entre ambos conceptos no es filosóficamente sostenible. En consecuencia, se aplicará el modelo moderno del 'choque cultural' a la experiencia de Patricio, sugiriendo que ejemplifica dicho modelo.

Palabras clave. Choque cultural, experiencia de la conversión, San Patricio, Kalervo Oberg, religión.

Introduction

St Patrick is an ancient saint while Culture Shock is a relatively modern phrase. 'Cultural Shock' was first recorded in 1929 (Gamio 1929) with 'Culture Shock' following in 1931 (Carpenter 1931). So it is unsurprising that in all of the numerous scholarly works on St Patrick (e.g. Thompson 1999, Hayes-Healy 2005, Freeman 2005, Kinane 2008, Newell 2008, O'Loughlin 2010, Rogers 2010), this phrase – most commonly associated with

international students and expatriate businessmen – has not been deployed as a means of better understanding St Patrick's life. But modern phrase as it is, it does help us to understand St Patrick's life. The saint's conversion to Christianity, in many respects (even if broadly), follows the model of culture shock which has become so well-known on management consultancy courses and amongst anthropologists conducting fieldwork with foreign cultures and intercultural communication scholars.

What is Culture Shock?

Though the phrase is first recorded in a notable source in 1931, it was not until 1954 that the classic ‘U-curve’ model of culture shock was developed by Canadian anthropologist Kalervo Oberg (1901 – 1973). In his presentation to the wives of American expatriate businessmen stationed in Brazil, Oberg (1954, 1960) argued that culture was divided into distinct phases. Stage One was xenophilia where one found the new culture endlessly fascinating, Stage Two was characterised by xenophobia and even a kind of emotional breakdown where one became angry about the culture and withdrawn, hopelessly romanticising ‘home.’ By Stage Three, the sojourner displayed a grudging resignation to their situation and, finally, by Stage Four they had learnt much of the language, understood the culture and understood that it was ‘just another way of living’, no better or worse than their own culture. There are, however, ‘moments of strain,’ specific ‘culture shocks’ based around new things happening. In the 1960s, this was developed into a ‘w-curve’ to take into account ‘reverse culture shock’: when expatriates return home they experience a similar pattern of symptoms in relation to their home culture (Gullahorn and Gullahorn 1963). Also, Stage One has been disputed with some scholars arguing that it is effectively bypassed in particularly subjectively difficult environments (Brown and Holloway 2008). Accordingly, they argue, Culture Shock should be reduced to three stages, at least in certain cases.

Religion, Conversion and Culture

On the surface, at least, the pattern is very similar to that of Christian conversion experience. According to experts in the field such as Lewis Rambo (1993) or Boyer (2001), religious conversion tends to occur at a time of dramatic change in a person’s life such as adolescence but also, in general, at times of stress. In its textbook form, there is a dramatic meeting with God which results in great joy. This is followed, often, by ‘backsliding’ in which the convert recoils in horror from the change (e.g. Austin 1977, Strauss 1979 or Coleman 2003). Gradually, a more mature and measured form of religiosity takes root and finally the convert intellectually accepts, for example, the Church’s dogmas as well as emotionally accepting their new identity.

Culture Shock operates in a very similar way but the ‘culture’ rather than God is the central object. The philosopher Roger Scruton (2000) has observed the way that, after the Enlightenment, ‘culture’ effectively replaces God as the object of worship in Romantic thought, itself a kind of neo-religion which functions in a way similar to the Christianity which it begins to replace. ‘Culture’ as an awe-inspiring replacement-God is central to Romanticism, Romantic nationalism and what has been termed the ‘cultural cult’ of Cultural Relativism and Multiculturalism (Sandall 2001). Culture Shock even culminates in accepting an anthropological dogma – that all cultures are equal and equally valuable. This is the ‘cultural relativism’ that was almost unquestioned in anthropology until the 1980s (see Freeman 1983). Many scholars would argue that it is an illogical, philosophically unsustainable dogma which even prevents us from making comparisons because cultures must only be understood through their own terms (e.g. Wilson 1998, Kuznar 1997, Sandall 2001, Dawkins 2003). Nevertheless, culture shock and religious conversion appear to follow the same human reaction of being excited by the novel, horrified by the novel when it does not make sense, getting used to the novel and, finally, being so used to it that it is ‘normal’ and anything else is unsettling. The same pattern has been noted in relation to bereavement, retirement and even surviving serious earthquakes (see Kubler-Ross 1969, Minkler 1981 and Kowalski and Kalayjian 2001). Of course, this is an archetypal pattern and there are humps and bumps in actual descriptions of it, even if they broadly conform (see Irwin 2007).

Fieldwork and Emotional Breakdown

But Patrick’s conversion has far more in common with the experiences of anthropologists like Kalervo Oberg. Like St Patrick, the anthropologists – usually at a relatively young age (see Westbrook 2008) – goes abroad, to a very different culture and is cut off from all, or most, contact with his own world. Many anthropologists, while engaged in fieldwork assignments around the world, have observed that – with various nuances – their experiences follow the pattern suggested by Oberg (see Irwin 2007, Pelto and Pelto 1978). Indeed, some have had dramatic emotional experiences uncannily similar to the kinds

described by Early Church converts like St Patrick. One anonymous anthropologist (in Davies 2010: 81), during his fieldwork in Nepal, reported the following:

I had been living in a village for some time; over my weeks there I had integrated well into the community, so much so that on occasion my concept of home felt shadowy, oddly inaccessible. This sense that I was moving within myself, almost unimpeded, from a known cultural space (home) into unfamiliar terrain was at times strong, almost ominous . . .

It was on the night of a day spent visiting a local Hindu burial ground that I awoke to a sudden and startling feeling of disorientation. Describing this feeling now I would say it was as if I stood in a no-mans-land between two locations – the one I had left behind and the one I was slowly entering. From the position of that threshold I felt a terrible doubt concerning not merely the intellectual but the experiential status of my own socio-cultural world – a doubt which threw me into a disturbing panic. The more I gazed at home from this new position, the more fabricated and accidental it appeared. I felt as if I were looking at my own world through the wrong end of a telescope – how little, insignificant, arbitrary it looked, how vain in all its claims of certainty and correctness. In proportion to the growing sense of estrangement, my panic grew and I soon found myself slightly trembling. I think it was at the peak of my distress that I realised I must do something decisive. I remember almost instinctively grasping my rucksack and emptying its contents onto the floor, groping for objects of familiarity, no matter how mundane that might bring back associations of familiarity with them . . . these activities started to have a soothing effect . . . (They pulled me back from) that threshold from where everything was doubted.

Because this quotation is divorced from its full context it is difficult to be quite sure whether this reflects the early stages of culture shock or the ‘moments of strain’ that occur later, though it seems to be the latter. The anthropologist awakes to a deeply disturbing emotional experience. He is racked with doubts about the world, about himself, about how to make sense of the world . . . for a startling moment nothing makes sense whatsoever and he realises the vanity of Western life. He can either accept this uncertain world and, implicitly, reject the ‘vain’ ‘certainty’ of Western life and embrace the void (see Scruton 2000) or he can retreat from the abyss. He retreats by groping for familiar objects in an

almost idolatrous manner because everything from his culture is, after all, ‘vain’ and arrogant. And this soothes his panic and calms him down. However, he has made sense of his world by backsliding into the old one rather than fully embracing the new one with a new – cultural relativist – means of making sense of everything. This is just as Oberg’s model would suggest he should behave.

The anthropologist – though this is acutely intense in this case – has the chance to embrace cultural relativism and post-modernism; to embrace the view that there is no truth and that cultures are equal. Accordingly, following our comparison to culture shock, we might argue that this realisation of the truth of ‘cultural relativism’ is highly comparable to the most intense religious experiences in Christianity. The language he employs about Western culture is tantalising similar to that used by Christian converts or Jewish prophets in their rejection of idolatrous polytheism (see Benoit 2004). The world he is invited to reject is vain, conceited and superficial. He can reject this in favour of embracing the mystery and ceasing to grope for vain ‘certainties.’ But he does not do so. This account involves much that is comparable to archetypal experiences of Satan. In the Christian tradition, these tend to be portrayed as occurring at night, in the wilderness (and presumably rural Nepal can be understood as ‘the wilderness’) but, crucially, they involve being sucked into a superficial and vain world (see Hayes-Healey 2005). As noted, this scholar is far from the only anthropologist to report dramatic, seemingly religious experiences of this kind during fieldwork.

St Patrick and Culture Shock

St Patrick’s conversion to Christianity parallels each of the Stages of Oberg’s Culture Shock Model and there is a good case for arguing that culture shock is central to his conversion, though he mediates everything through the prism of God rather than the modern ‘culture.’ It might be argued that this is problematic for this comparison but we cannot divorce ‘religion’ from ‘culture.’ Many scholars argue that it is central to ‘culture’ (e.g. Wilson 1975) while others have even argued that the two are so operationally similar that ‘religion’ should be abandoned as a separate category (see Fitzgerald 2000). As Scruton (2000) argues, in religious societies there is no

distinction between ‘religion’ and ‘culture.’ The two are fused into one ‘culture’ or way of life.¹

St Patrick (387 – 461) was the grandson of a native British patrician priest and son of a civil servant who was also a Christian. Patrick lived during a period in which Christianity was gradually triumphing over paganism in mainland Britain. In understanding Early Church conversion St Patrick’s Confession is a useful example upon which to draw because experts on the text widely agree that his testimony very precisely parallels the testimonies of many other contemporary converts (e.g. Conneely 1993, Hayes-Healy 2005). It follows a set pattern. At the beginning of the narrative, St Patrick is not a Christian. He has lost his faith in God and has become decadent.

I, Patrick, a sinner, a most simple countryman, the least of all the faithful and most contemptible to many . . . was taken captive. I was at that time about sixteen years of age. I did not, indeed, know the true God; and I was taken into captivity in Ireland with many thousands of people, according to our desserts, for quite drawn away from God, we did not keep his precepts, nor were we obedient to our priests who used to remind us of our salvation’ (Dunne 1945: par 1).

There are many fascinating aspects to this narrative for the interested church historian or theologian but what is relevant here – in light of our previous summary of conversion research by Rambo – is Patrick’s relative youth and the fact that he experiences, during this emotionally susceptible period, the obvious crisis of being taken to a foreign country as a slave. It is here, in Ireland while working as a slave, that he first experiences God, something which is reflected in irrational and fervent behaviour, perhaps comparable to xenophilia, where the anthropologist accepts the new culture at face value.

But after I reached Ireland I used to pasture the flock each day and I used to pray many times a day. More and more did the love of God, and my fear of him and faith increase, and my spirit was moved so that in a day [I said] from one up to a hundred prayers, and in the night a like number; besides I used to stay out in the forests

and on the mountain and I would wake up before daylight to pray in the snow, in icy coldness, in rain, and I used to feel neither ill nor any slothfulness, because, as I now see, the Spirit was burning in me at that time (par 16).

However, this does not last. Patrick soon rejects God. He escapes and manages to cross over to Britain with some Pagan sailors. Camping out in the forest with them, Patrick ends up fighting with Satan, seemingly symbolic of his backsliding, and attempting not to backslide, into his decadent ways.

The very same night while I was sleeping Satan attacked me violently, as I will remember as long as I shall be in this body; and there fell on top of me as it were, a huge rock, and not one of my members had any force.

However, Patrick renews his fervour for God, in that moment, and manages to defeat the Devil. He returns to the bosom of his family, in Britain, and continuously ignores God’s pleas for him to return to Ireland to convert the heathen Irish.

On the other hand, I did not proceed to Ireland of my own accord until I was almost giving up, but through this I was corrected by the Lord, and he prepared me so that today I should be what was once far from me, in order that I should have the care of – or rather, I should be concerned for – the salvation of others, when at that time, still, I was only concerned for myself (par 28).

But, having rejected God, he eventually returns to Him. And this time, there is no ostentatious religious fervour. There is simply acceptance that he must now live by following God’s will. ‘So that whatever befalls me, be it good or bad, I should accept it equally . . .’ Patrick has now finally converted and it is at this stage that he makes it his life’s mission to extinguish his previous decadence in others, a phenomenon noted in converts (e.g. Bloch 1992). He is thus, presumably, at something like Stage Four in which there is always the possibility – the tension – of backsliding to Stage Two but hopefully it does not occur. In this regard, he writes:

And I know in part why I did not lead a perfect life like other believers, but I confess to my Lord and do not blush in his sight, because I am not lying; from the time when I came to know him in my youth, the love of God and fear of him increased in me, and right up until now, by God’s favour, I have kept the faith (par 44).

1. For a detailed defence of the operational form of the definition of religion see Dutton (2009: Ch. 2).

This final line about keeping ‘the faith’ is very important. St Patrick’s ultimate conversion involves an utter submission to God and, accordingly, an intellectual submission to a doctrine which by its very nature is incoherent. This is the Trinity and the various other doctrines of Christianity which are so seemingly incoherent that even Patrick concedes that they are ‘indescribable.’

For there is no other God, nor ever was before, nor shall be hereafter, but God the Father, unbegotten and without beginning, in whom all things began, whose are all things, as we have been taught; and his son Jesus Christ, who manifestly always existed with the Father, before the beginning of time in the spirit with the Father, indescribably begotten before all things, and all things visible and invisible were made by him (par 4).

If we look at Patrick’s narrative in terms of culture shock, we can see that there is no evidence of Stage One (xenophilia). But this is not problematic with regard to our comparison because there is evidence that this stage does not occur – or is vanishingly brief – in environments experienced as highly unpleasant, such as prison (see Brown and Holloway 2008). We might argue that his initial religious experience (mindful of the relationship between religion and culture) is the break-down – the irrational behaviour – of Stage Two in which, through his fervent religiosity, he searches for structure in the world by returning to the Christian traditions of his childhood which he has rejected as part of a youthful rebellion. However, in his intense circumstances, he creates a very strong sense of identity; something comparable to the process of fundamentalism and something often noted amongst immigrants (e.g. Bruce 2002: Ch. 2). It is probably significant to this that, for the first time in his life, he is surrounded exclusively by pagans and identifies more strongly as a Christian and this includes, of course, missing his Christian family. Accordingly, he idealises life at ‘home’ and wishes to return there. When he does, he finds that he has changed, his family has changed and there are many tensions. His reverse culture shock is again mediated through religious experience and is congruous with research indicating that people can become used to and secure in even very

difficult environments and become unhappy and nostalgic when removed from them to those which make less sense (see Wilson 1975 or Galanter 1999). The pagan Irish appear to Patrick in a dream and beg him to return to Ireland to convert them to Christianity. He duly does this but, this time, there is less irrational behaviour or dramatic religious experiences. He has, perhaps, reached a psychological accommodation.

This is speculative because Patrick is only introspective in terms of his religiosity but, again, I emphasise that it is difficult to draw a clear line between ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ is a religious society because there is no alternative, secular means of thinking. Patrick’s experience this would appear to be congruous with Oberg’s model of culture shock. Nevertheless, what I think is fascinating is the degree to which this model imbricates the commonly understood model of ‘conversion’ whereby we replace the experience of God with the experience of a culture. In this regard, it appears to follow the same pattern quite precisely and it can only do so because the final stage of Oberg’s model involves, implicitly, the calm, gradual acceptance of a dogma, as in Christian religiosity.

Conclusion

Culture Shock remains a fashionable concept, especially as the world becomes more mobile and people are more likely than in previous generations to work, study or just go on holiday abroad (see Stier 2006). Culture Shock is a modern phrase and the preoccupation with ‘culture’ a relatively modern concern. But part of the proof that culture shock is a useful model is that it explains something about human nature. It can be applied across cultures and across time periods. Patrick’s *Confessio*, with some nuances, follows Oberg’s culture shock model. The essential difference is that, in Patrick’s case, everything is mediated through the religious beliefs of the period. But it follows the model and, as we have seen, ‘culture’ occupies a similar place in modern religiosity as the gods did at that time. The Confession of St Patrick is also Culture Shock of St Patrick.

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