Introduction

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'Convert or Die': such was the bleak choice imposed, according to any number of western newspaper headlines in the late summer of 2014, by the militant sectarians who claimed to have re-established the 'Caliphate' in Iraq and Syria. The commentaries from journalists and politicians which accompanied these headlines, most as impassioned as they were ill-informed, indicated the continued vitality of the ancient stereotype of Islamic conversion as a fundamentally and intrinsically violent process, implemented 'by the sword', as reflected in all the images of turbaned caliphs and sultans on horseback pillaging Christian cities that European art has been producing since the Middle Ages.[1]

Although this traditional vision of conversion to Islam has been thoroughly discredited by recent research, it retains a tenacious hold on the public imagination. It is also in stark contrast to the general perception of conversion to Christianity, which finds its heroes not in Saladdin and Mehmet the Conqueror but in Augustine, Martin Luther or Teresa of Avila: an interiorized, voluntary, individual decision based on faith and dogmatic conviction. Historians too tend to treat the first conversions to Christianity as a form of progress, following an implicit consensus that an intellectualized religion is more fitting to an evolved, rational society than the obviously wrong and rather silly conception of 'one god – one function' that is the common (mis)understanding of polytheism. Islam, on the

[1] See John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York, 2002).

other hand, at least as seen by a scholarly tradition that is overwhelmingly Christian in culture, had little to add theologically to what was already offered by the existing monotheistic traditions, and thus conversion to it has largely been explained in terms of social or economic benefits, of fear or conformism.

This disjunction, and the very different assumptions underlying it, was at the origin of the seminar project we submitted in 2008 to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for a Sawyer Seminar to be held at the University of Oxford. By setting the two conversion processes in parallel, and inviting pairs of specialists to analyse specific themes in each, we hoped to bring out similarities and differences and to bring to the surface the presuppositions and biases in the respective approaches of early Cristian and early Islamic history. We also chose to examine alongside them the spread of Buddhism in Asia, using it as an external foil that was not caught in the all-too-familiar net of the Abrahamic religions.

As often, in practice things did not happen quite as symmetrically as we had planned. The Seminar sessions reoriented our questions and raised new ones, and led to the widening of our geographical scope and range of religions. Thus, on the path from project to publication, several questions were reformulated and our main focus was reframed from a one-on-one comparison with a sidelight to a fully comparative volume centred around a number of themes.

It soon became obvious, even as we were putting together the programme, that although Christianity and Islam, and to a large extent Buddhism, have produced large amounts of source material that falls broadly into similar categories across religions, late antique and early medieval Christianity was incomparably prolific in the production of long, complex, and often personal conversion narratives. Ranging from autobiographical reflections like that of Augustine of Hippo, to short narratives inserted in larger historical

works, they constitute an evidential base which is almost entirely absent in most other traditions. The existence of sources that describe an internal journey have naturally allowed scholars of Christianity to see the psychological – or, as some prefer to call it, the spiritual – aspect of conversion much more clearly than specialists of early Islam. It is much more difficult, for the early Muslim centuries, to gain access to individual converts.[2] Combined with the weight of traditional European perceptions of Islam, this lack of intimacy of the early sources has contributed significantly to the prevailing treatment of the beginnings of 'Islamization' as a social transaction rather than a personal transformation.

Once established, such a hermeneutical model becomes difficult to escape. This is especially true as within a single religious tradition the relevant sources will describe its adoption by outsiders in terms that are inscribed in the same rhetorical tropes.[3] Converts who are articulate enough to narrate their own experience also conform to some extent to previous models. It is thus easy for historians to fall into the trap of reproducing the model *ad infinitum*, partly misled by the nature of the sources and partly reasoning on the basis of received or established wisdom. Any acceptance, however, of the continued validity of processes and perceptions that can be identified in fourth-century conversions to Christianity in Rome for (let us say) ninth-century conversion to Christianity in Bulgaria, or sixteenth-century Christianity in Central America, rests on the intrinsically problematic assumption that religions have an essential nature that will remain unchanged in different cultural contexts. This becomes particularly problematic, moreover, in the case of religions with a claim to universality that has taken them far, both geographically and culturally, from the specific historical context of their origin. Indeed, some of the most spectacular

[2] This becomes less true with time, of course, as learned Islamic religious literature develops.
[3] Many examples can be found in Anthony Grafton and Kenneth Mills (eds.), *Conversion: Old Worlds and New* (Rochester, NY, 2003).

advances in recent scholarship on religious change have been in the understanding of the interplay between religion and cultural identity, and of the dialectical nature of the process of adopting a religious system from a different cultural universe.[4]

It is perhaps this variety that makes any attempt at synthesis difficult. It is striking, on reviewing the range of recent publications which reflect the increased interest in the topic, to note how many of the key volumes are collections of papers—a reflection, no doubt, of the strong comparative element which has underpinned the most fruitful research on conversion. The titles, however, betray the enduring centrality of the Christian paradigm: most of these collections compare conversion to Christianity, whether to different forms of the religion, or in different historical and cultural contexts, or using different disciplinary approaches.[5]

Islam has not been approached in the same way. To some extent, this is an effect of the sources that have come down to us. Not only are early Muslim sources rather laconic on anything to do with conversion, they are also quite garrulous on administration, and have thus inflected research in that direction. The longest texts we have discussing Islamization, moreover, are of Christian origin and written with an apologetic and polemical agenda.[6] This creates an important initial bias that we have to dismantle very carefully before we

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[4] See the volume by Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier (eds.) *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion* (Lanham, MD, 2003), esp. the introduction by Diane Austin-Broos, pp. 1–12.

[5] A series of very fine recent volumes illustrate this: Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (eds.), *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Toronto, 1990); Robert W. Hefner (ed.), *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley, 1993); James Muldoon (ed.), *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages* (Gainesville, FL, 1997); Calvin Kendall, Oliver Nicholson, William D. Philips and Marguerite Ragnow (eds.), *Conversion to Christianity from Late Antiquity to the Modern Age: Considering the Process in Europe, Asia, and the Americas*, Minnesota Studies in Early Modern History (Minneapolis, 2009); and the twin volumes produced by the Princeton University Shelby Cullom Davis Seminar on conversion in 1999–2001, unfortunately separated by period: Anthony Grafton and Kenneth Mills (eds), *Conversion in Late Antiquity and The Early Middle Ages: Seeing and Believing* (Rochester, NY, 2003); Anthony Grafton and Kenneth Mills (eds), *Conversion: Old Worlds and New* (Rochester, NY, 2003); Anna Foa and Lucetta Scaraffia (eds), *Conversioni nel Mediterraneo*, Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica 2 (Rome, 1999).

[6] For instance, Christian Décobert's article on the Islamization and Arabicization of medieval Egypt relies very heavily on the Christian sources of the period: Christian Décobert, 'Sur l'arabisation et l'islamisation de l'Égypte médiévale', in Christian Décobert (ed.), *Itinéraires d'Égypte. Mélanges offerts au père Maurice Martin, s.j.* (Cairo, 1992), pp. 273–300.

can begin to see clearly into this issue. The earliest studies of the subject largely mirrored the source material. The title of Daniel Dennett's *Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam*, published in 1950,[7] reflects this approach, and although the author brought many caveats to that hypothesis, many subsequent inroads into the subject have continued along those lines. Economic factors,[8] as well as enhanced prospects for upward social mobility, have consistently been understood as the main motors of conversion by most historians of the early period.[9] The emphasis, in other words, has been placed on forms of worldly self-interest rather than 'spirituality'.

To be sure, this is in many ways a more objective socio-historical approach than much of the early work on the 'triumph' of Christianity – itself a very revealing expression, the ramifications of which are discussed by Averil Cameron in the opening chapter of this volume. This is probably because for most scholars, Islamic history is not self-history, neither religiously nor culturally. It is therefore much easier to write about it in a detached and analytical way, and this inevitably translates into a much more straightforwardly cultural or socio-economic approach.

An attempt to counterbalance this is the collection published by Mercedes García Arenal on *Islamic Conversions*, which among other things examines the evidence for internal experience among converts to Islam.[10] The volume covers the area from Iraq to Spain from the early centuries of Islam to the mid-twentieth century. Although it stems from the wish

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[7] Daniel C. Dennett, *Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam* (Cambridge, MA, 1950).
[8] Gladys Frantz-Murphy, 'Conversion in early Islamic Egypt: the economic factor', in *Documents de l'islam médiéval: nouvelles perspectives de recherche*, ed. Yusuf Ragib, Textes arabes et études islamiques 29 (Cairo, 1991), pp. 11–17.
[9] See Décobert, 'Sur l'arabisation'; Ira M. Lapidus, 'The conversion of Egypt to Islam', *Israel Oriental Studies*, 2 (1972): pp. 248–62; Michael Brett, 'The spread of Islam in Egypt and North Africa', in *Northern Africa: Islam and Modernisation*, ed. Michael Brett (London, 1973), pp. 1–12; Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, MA, 1978), with the review by Christian Décobert in *Studia Islamica*, 58 (1983): pp. 182–7; overview in Sam I. Gellens, 'Egypt, Islamization of', *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (New York, 1991), pp. 937–42. It was the view taken by Petra Sijpesteijn in her paper at the Seminar, which is not part of this volume; see Petra M. Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State: The World of a Mid-Eighth-Century Egyptian Official* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 190–93.
[10] Mercedes Garcia-Arenal (ed.), *Conversions islamiques. Identités religieuses en Islam méditerranéen / Islamic Conversions. Religious Identities in Mediterranean Islam* (Paris, 2001).

to study Islam without making Christianity 'the implicit frame of reference',[11] by making this choice it falls into precisely the same trap as cross-cultural and trans-historical studies of conversion to Christianity: it reifies Islam across space and time, as though the religion had an unchangeable core that applies in the same way to every person or group adopting it. Inevitably in those circumstances, García Arenal makes some claims in her introduction about the religion and its 'spirituality' that are so general they lose their meaning. Worse still, as Isabelle Poutrin has pointed out,[12] a Christian frame of reference underpins the very way she frames her questions. Using terms such as 'salvation and 'redemption', so strongly Christian in their conception and outlook, has precisely the effect the author wanted to avoid, namely expressing other religions through Christian language – converting, so to speak, their religious concepts into Christian ones.

More than anywhere perhaps, this issue arises with the use of the very term 'conversion', as has been pointed out more than once. From the outset, Max Deeg in this volume questions the applicability of the term to Buddhism, and indeed to any religion other than Christianity, for which and within which the term was created. Even for Judaism, the relevance not only of the term, but of the very concept were put into question twenty years ago by Martin Goodman in his book *Mission and Conversion*. Goodman questions the assumption that 'a positive desire to affect outsiders [was] an integral part of every religion', which, he suggests, may well 'reflect an unconscious Christianization of the study of ancient religions'.[13]

In most recent research, defining conversion has been a vexed issue indeed. Nothing exemplifies this better than the continued prominence, in modern discussions, of

[11] Ibid., p. 9.
[12] Isabelle Poutrin, 'Conversions islamiques: un modèle spécifique?', *Conversion/Pouvoir et religion. Hypotheses.org*, 27 avril 2014; http://pocram.hypotheses.org/185.
[13] Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1994), p. 3.

A.D. Nock's view of conversion as a complete change of heart and practice;[14] we routinely hear how inadequate this is to describe a process of religious change where social environment and cultural habits play an important role. Yet Nock did not ignore gradual and culturally rooted religious change, he simply gives it a different name, 'adhesion', which involves individuals having 'one foot on each side of a fence which was cultural and not creedal'.[15] Nock's examples for conversion are largely drawn from the Old Testament, where religious exclusivism made its first powerful appearance. He is very conscious that it is rare, and that it is only 'seen at its fullest in the positive response of a man to the choice set before him by the prophetic religions'.[16] Thus in many ways, what Nock considered only one specific – and rare – aspect of religious change has come to represent his approach as a whole, very often only in the interest of having a foil against which to argue.

Nock's book dates back to 1933, and research on conversion has advanced enormously, both conceptually and in its fields of application.[17] So why do scholars still return to a paradigm that is outdated, and partly misrepresent it in order to continue repeating that it is outdated? The answer is not straightforward, but at some level, this repetition seems to stem from a lack of conviction that we have gone beyond Nock's conception of 'conversion' as opposed to 'adhesion'. This is apparent in many recent publications. Turning once again to García Arenal's introduction to her collection of essays, we find such statements as this: 'For individual conversions, there are two categories: properly religious conversion, which has to do with conviction, and the conversion of adventurers, mercenaries, and fortune-seekers who live on the frontiers (both geographical and political), one leg each side of the border, drawing their strength from life at the

[14] A.D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford, 1933), p. 7: 'The reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that the old was wrong and the news is right'.
[15] Nock, *Conversion*, p. 7.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Fausto Parente, 'L'idea di conversione da Nock ad oggi', *Augustinianum*, 27 (1987): pp. 7–25.

edge'.[18] Despite the difference in context and tone this is precisely the distinction made by Nock.[19]

Such a distinction inevitably leads to assessments of the 'sincerity' of conversions, implicitly or often even explicitly. Nock discounted adhesion as a 'useful supplement',[20] and thus by implication as less sincere and less profound than conversion. García Arenal does the same when she expresses surprise at the *laissez-faire* attitude of the Ottoman authorities, 'who seem never to have been concerned about the sincerity of conversion'.[21] For her, what distinguishes conversion to Islam is its progressive character and its insistence on ritual and bodily practices. This is implicitly predicated on the assumption that Christian (or at least non-Muslim) conversion does not follow that model, but is more immediate, more dramatized, and less external.[22] Combined with the strongly-rooted perception of religious practice based on ritual rather than introspection as somehow less authentic, the step to considering conversion to Islam as less sincere is small. Such a view, however, is very reductive, not only for Islam but also for Christianity: it refers to its post-Tridentine, intellectual, and largely interiorized forms, obliterating the strongly social and ritual nature of Christian practice not only in non-Western Christianities, but even in European Christianity of earlier centuries – and often still today. In the words of Antonello Palumbo, 'the experiential paradigm that identifies conversion with *metanoia* tends to confuse states and statements, while granting rather cavalier treatment to the social making of meaning for both individuals and groups' (p. 000).

[18] García Arenal, 'Introduction', p. 11: 'Dans les conversions individuelles, il y a deux categories: la conversion proprement religieuse qui a trait aux convictions et la conversion d'aventuriers, mercenaires et hommes de fortune qui vivent sur la frontière (géographique et politique), chevauchant aux confins, tirant leur pouvoir de la vie sur les limites.'
[19] Earlier in the introduction the author has already made that distinction: 'Il y a, bien entendu, différent niveaux de conversion dont l'affilitation est seulement le premier' (ibid., p. 9).
[20] Nock, *Conversion*, p. 7.
[21] García Arenal, 'Introduction', p. 10.
[22] See the analysis by Poutrin, 'Conversions islamiques'.

García Arenal's introduction is given here only as an example of a very common practice. Religious change is surprisingly often framed in terms of genuine *vs* fake, sincere *vs* opportunistic, complete *vs* incomplete, or profound *vs* superficial. These, as we shall see below (Lavee, Simonsohn, Sizgorich), are questions that the religious elites of the late antique communities we are studying were constantly asking themselves. This is because they are ultimately emic-type questions, asked from within by those who claimed control over a group's beliefs, with the aim of categorizing their social and religious environment. Yet as the complete absence of such issues in the thousands of everyday documents preserved on papyrus indicates, they do not even adequately reflect the concerns and conceptions of the average inhabitant of the area.

It is precisely the emic status of this approach that has made it so influential. At one level there is the evident, if passive, cultural bias of historians overwhelmingly raised in Christian countries. Even those with an explicitly secular outlook tend to equate religion semantically with a series of familiar terms and concepts, which when seen from the more distanced point of view of world religions proclaim 'Christianity'. There is a much more active level, however, namely the weight in modern scholarship of a long line of thinkers on conversion from the missionary ranks, who have tried to conceptualize and understand conversion with the aim of making their practice more efficient. From the early Jesuit missionaries to the New World and Asia, to their present-day colleagues in India, Africa, and elsewhere, missionaries have written some of the most robust and systematic analyses of the conversion process and the challenges it poses to its promoters.[23] The most commonly cited work today, largely because it is the only recent theoretical treatment, is Lewis Rambo's book on *Understanding Religious Conversion*.[24] A pastor and professor at the

[23] See for instance the texts cited by Allan Greer, 'Conversion and Identity: Iroquois Christianity in Seventeenth-Century New France', in Grafton and Mills (eds.), *Conversion: Old Worlds and New*, pp. 175–98.
[24] Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, 1993).

San Francisco Theological Seminary, Rambo analyses conversion as an individual psychological process in several stages involving 'context', 'crisis', 'quest', 'encounter' with an 'advocate', 'interaction', 'commitment' and 'consequences'. Although this is a very flexible framework that leaves room for different types of experience, it is also rooted within the Christian missionary tradition and ultimately aims to make the practice of the 'advocate' efficient. As Isabelle Poutrin puts it, Rambo's book could be used as 'the contemporary missionary's handbook', because its analysis sets up the necessary framework to 'position oneself on the market (of religious alternatives)', and gives the means to identify the contexts of potential missionary success.[25]

To be fair, the bias is made more acute by the overwhelming focus of scholarship on the so-called 'Abrahamic' religions, and thus on what is, seen from a distance, a single religious tradition.[26] When other religions are studied, it is also religions with claims to universality – predictably, as conversion generally happens in favour of such more wide-ranging religious systems, as opposed to those that are more closely bound with a specific culture and its ecosystem. Having spread outside their initial social cradle, such religions are routinely confronted with the religious 'other' and have to adapt constantly in order to accommodate new cultural systems, languages, and environments. This variety and fluidity prompted the production of works of self-definition and clarification of religious frontiers, something that univocal and mono-social religious systems do not need. To a large extent, that production, which constitutes the standard discourse on conversion produced by late antique societies, is also our principal source for the study of that process. Averil Cameron discusses this issue at some length in the context of Christian triumphalism, and shows how distorting a mirror of their own times late-Roman sources can be.

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[25] Isabelle Poutrin, 'Qu'est-ce que la conversion ? Du côté de la psychologie religieuse', *Conversion/Pouvoir et religion* (Hypotheses.org), 31 mars 2014; http://pocram.hypotheses.org/118.
[26] Thomas Sizgorich, 'Narrative and Community in Islamic Late Antiquity', *Past & Present*, 185 (2004): pp. 9–42.

We adopted the term 'conversion' despite its difficulties, largely because of the lack of any single term that does not raise its own difficulties. It was important to tackle and deconstruct the long legacy of connotations it carries with it, and one of the initial aims of this project was precisely to find a way to de-exceptionalize Christianity as the exemplar and the yardstick against which every religious conversion is measured, and which even defines the term in its very essence. Cameron notes that scholars of Roman religion are insisting more and more on the continuity of religious practice and rejecting the sharp distinction between two opposed types of religiosity that has for so long dominated academic historical narrative, and raises questions about the very definition of Christianity in the early centuries. Others have insisted on the lack of sharp borders between Judaism and Christianity,[27] or between Christianity (or Judaism) and Islam.

Seen from a distance, it is true that there is a cultural and even religious continuum where the sources signal a break. This internal discursive development of markers of differentiation that would otherwise not be obvious to an outsider is precisely where the heart of the construction of religious identities lies. If we want to observe and understand the phenomenon we call 'conversion', or any form of religious change, we need to pay attention to where contemporaries situated that break and how they construed it – but we also need to see that construction for what it is. Traditional definitions of conversion are inadequate largely because they take the discursive break for a real one. Even in 1999, in an article in *Annales*, one could find conversion described as 'le passage d'une religion dans une autre',[28] a definition which as Allan Greer has pointed out 'implicitly situates the discussion in a European universe of mutually exclusive creeds'.[29]

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[27] For example, Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (eds), *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Tübingen, 2003).
[28] Pierre-Antoine Fabre, 'Conversions religieuses: présentation', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 54.4 (1999): pp. 805–12, at p. 807.
[29] Greer, 'Conversion and Identity', p. 177.

More consistent with the contention that, to a large extent, what the actors understood as conversion was about crossing a community's perceived boundaries, is the definition adopted by Mercedes García Arenal in her introduction to the collection discussed above. Understood as 'the range of processes through which individuals or groups come to engage with beliefs, rituals, but also social and material practices different from those of their birth',[30] conversion becomes a useful tool for the exploration of cultural, social and political identities, and their definition and construction. Taking her cue from Fredrik Barth's work on ethnic groups,[31] which not only challenged established essentialist definitions of ethnicity, but also, crucially, showed to what extent boundaries between groups were fluid, negotiable, and above all permeable, García Arenal sees conversion as a 'means of crossing boundaries' and thus 'inseparable from the very complex processes that achieve integration and, at the same time, include phenomena of exclusion and stigmatization by the dominant group'.[32] This is an angle that, without explicitly relating it to Barth, several papers in this collection have adopted, and it appears as a very fruitful analytical tool.

The focus in this volume on the period of late antiquity, and upon the broad area of the eastern and southern Mediterranean, serves to avoid any reification of Christianity or Islam into timeless, changeless religious systems. Although, as Averil Cameron points out, the period, a victim of its own historiographical success, has tended to become longer and longer in recent scholarship, it allows us to focus on a temporal continuum with fuzzy borders during which the evolutions we set out to observe were taking place. Several papers occasionally go beyond even the 'long' late antiquity, but remain in continuity with it and in a continuous space. By making this choice, we can discuss the phenomenon of

[30] García Arenal, 'Introduction', p. 7.
[31] Fredrik Barth, 'Introduction', in Fredrik Barth (ed.) *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Oslo, 1969), pp. 9–38.
[32] García Arenal, 'Introduction', p. 8.

conversion among social and religious groups that were to a large extent culturally homogeneous and shared the same historical context of state-building, thus reducing the number of variables that are being compared. At the same time, we felt it important also to avoid being confined entirely within this sphere—hence the decision to include some examples, from broadly the same period, relating to Buddhism, as another universalizing religion spreading in neighbouring regions in a state-building context but which belongs to a different cultural area and so enables fresh bearings to be taken upon the Mediterranean paradigm. The papers by Max Deeg and Antonello Palumbo generated eager discussion during the seminar sessions, and prompted an enthusiastic response from the Mediterraneanist majority; we hope that their presence here will inspire further development of this comparativist approach. Samuel Lieu's chapter on the spread of Manichaeism across Central Asia meanwhile raises important questions about religious connections between the worlds of the Abrahamic Mediterranean and Buddhist Asia in the period.

Two chapters which do not follow this overall scheme are included in the opening section to help frame the inquiry. Polymnia Athanassiadi's chapter thus explores the discourses and practices of conversion in a non-Christian milieu contemporary with the Christianizing processes discussed by other contributors; Vesna Wallace meanwhile takes us to the heart of a modern case study where an encounter between a traditional religion and two universal ones, one perceived as much more alien than the other, leads to an instructive interplay between politics, economics, and cultural identity.

The themes around which this volume is organized are derived from the original seminar sessions, but also take into account the new directions which emerged during the discussions. They reflect, above all, the context in which our questions were framed from the outset, namely the state on the one hand and forms of practice and institutionalization

on the other. Conversion is a process about which principles are repeatedly expressed, both by those involved in it and by those commenting on it as observers. Debates and discussions about conversion and the issues it raises are not rare in societies experiencing religious change, and the first section of the book will examine some of the main issues brought up by our sources. This will be followed by three sections examining different aspects of how those principles were – or were not – put into practice: how conversion was handled by the state, how it was continuously redefined by individual ambivalence and cultural fluidity, and how it was enshrined through different forms of institutionalization. Finally, a topographical coda examines the effects of religious change on the iconic holy city of Jerusalem.

Principles

Late antique sources were produced largely by literate elites which were either linked to ecclesiastical circles, or were part of the governing class at the local or supra-local level. Most of them would have had responsibility over a community or social group, or would have been in close contact with people who did. They are therefore not simply the product of participants in the processes of religious change, but normative works aiming to define the framework within which that change should take place. These principles were not, of course, entirely divorced from reality: rather, they were an attempt to organize and rationalize it, and to define and police the boundaries that the converts were crossing – irrespective of whether they were coming in or going out. When cultural or religious boundaries became fuzzier, the need for discursive strategies that would re-clarify them became stronger.

In the traditions we are concerned with here, and most eloquently perhaps in the Christian and Islamic traditions, that discourse generally presents conversion in the form

of a triumphal narrative made up of selective memories, aggrandizing the positive, obliterating the negative, vilifying the predecessor, and advancing in a sweeping movement of progress with few obstacles and no looking back. That triumphal narrative will use military metaphors, and require the crushing defeat of the adversary. It will speak of free will rather than coercion, because it is what makes it legitimate as a religious act: from Augustine to the Qur'ān, compulsion is seen as antithetical to religion.[33] Conversion as an irrevocable act, often secured by rites of abjuration of the previous creed, is an assertion that is found repeatedly in the writings of those who controlled it. Moshe Lavee's and Polymnia Athanassiadi's discussions of irrevocability as seen respectively by rabbinic courts and by Neoplatonist philosophers show the importance of the issue, but also how the idea was best developed mainly in an abstract and intellectualized context. Emperor Wu's rejection of Taoism was, as Palumbo argues, also largely a rhetorical device intended to dramatize his new religious policy.

The irrevocable nature of conversion is partly the effect of the completely new identity that religious change confers upon an individual. The discourse of transformation and renewal through conversion is especially powerful: rabbinic Judaism talks of death and rebirth, and of the severing of previous kinship links (Lavee); abjuration, practised even by philosophers like Marinus (Athanassiadi), was another way of symbolically cutting bridges with one's religious past. In Allan Greer's felicitous wording, this was the 'perennial missionary fantasy, a sudden and fundamental transformation of individuals and societies'.[34] This fantasy is an ideal that the internal discourse on conversion needs to keep alive, presenting it as the norm towards which practice should be tending. It is, in fact, an

[33] Augustine, *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 26.2 (CCSL 36, p. 260): *Intrare quisquam ecclesiam potest nolens, accedere ad altare potest nolens, accipere sacramentum potest nolens; credere non potest nisi volens* ('Someone can come to church unwillingly, can approach the altar unwillingly, can receive the sacrament unwillingly, but cannot believe except willingly'); Qur'ān 2:256: 'There is no compulsion in religion'; see the comments of Ira Katznelson and Miri Rubin (eds.), *Religious Conversion: History, Experience and Meaning* (Farnham, 2014), 'Introduction', p. 8.

[34] Greer, 'Conversion and Identity', p. 176.

idealization of practice in a way that allows better control of it. Abjuration, for example, seems to have been particularly important in cases of re-conversion to one's old creed, as with the cases cited by Uriel Simonsohn of Jews and Christians who had converted to Islam and wanted to return to their previous denomination – thus completely flouting the principle of the irrevocability of conversion.[35]

The importance of boundary policing appears even more strongly in attitudes towards conversion 'away from' a religion, well reflected in the stigmatizing term 'apostasy'. This is a term that is much more marked by a point of view than conversion, which describes the process whatever its direction. The discourse aimed at preventing members of a religious group from converting away from it is merely another aspect of the assertion that conversion is an irrevocable decision. Its main objective is to instil fear of the consequences, which range from shame and social disgrace to divine or institutional punishment that can go as far as death. At the same time, the consolidation of religious identity was achieved through persuasive rhetoric that sought to obtain intellectual and emotional adhesion. This both created a sense of common identity and controlled its contours, so that converts *into* the group would have a canvas for their new practice, and those already there would find it difficult or alienating to move out.

Practice I: Raison d'État

Despite the constantly reasserted principle of free will, the popular imagination sees conversion in imperial contexts much more in terms of coercion and enforcement. That does not necessarily correspond to reality: rather, it reflects late-Roman imperial and ecclesiastical discourse, which seeks to promote an image of conformity and purity – a

[35] See also Uriel Simonsohn, '"Halting Between Two Opinions": conversion and apostasy in early Islam', *Medieval Encounters*, 19 (2013): pp. 342–70; id., 'Conversion to Islam: A Case Study for the Use of Legal Sources', *History Compass*, 11 (2013): pp. 647–62.

form of 'religious cleansing', so to speak. The use of the military metaphors of triumph and defeat are part of this rhetorical construction.

Another point to bear in mind is that although the discourse of triumph was not a purely Christian phenomenon, the same military rhetoric being shared by the Muslim conquerors, that of conformity and religious purification, was much less prominent in the Caliphate. The notion of sibling 'people of the Book' (*ahl al-kitāb*) is at the basis of a very different way of constructing identity for Islamic society. Where early Christianity defined itself *against* Judaism, early Islam incorporated its predecessors with a common religious heritage into a social model which, although it did mark hierarchy, was in no way exclusive.

Observing how the official discourse played out in practice is a challenge, as it requires one to see through the propaganda and detect the real impact of imperial policy and institutional intervention. Coercion in the form of violence was certainly the exception, and only happened spasmodically, as Christopher Kelly's discussion shows. Such episodes often clustered around moments of wider social or political crisis. As Polymnia Athanassiadi has argued in a recent volume, what is known as the 'persecutions' were the first manifestation of mass religious coercion on the part of the Roman state.[36] Exceptional measures of this sort were understood – or at least presented – as motivated by something akin to national security, and generally involved the designation of a group as dangerous because of its religious practice or beliefs, and its forced conversion to the mainstream religious system under penalty of death or exile. This fits Diocletian's persecutions as it fits Heraclius' conversion of the Jews, the fate of the Manichaeans, or al-Ḥākim's crackdown on the Christians in the early eleventh century.

[36] Polymnia Athanassiadi, *Vers la pensée unique: la montée de l'intolérance dans l'antiquité tardive* (Paris, 2010), ch. 2; see also her chapter in this volume, p. 000.

Rather than direct force, legislation intended to create incentives of varying intensity was one of the most common tactics of the authorities. Advantages in such areas as taxation, property, and public careers were systematically reserved to members of the dominant religious group. Simon Corcoran's chapter shows the extent to which this was true in the Roman Empire, where it was couched in rhetoric of exclusion and outright hostility towards those who were given to 'folly'. Although the Caliphate also unambiguously favoured Muslims in those areas, there was less stark contrast between them and members of the other religions, in particular as concerns property and careers in the administration. The extra tax burden represented by the *jizya*, the special poll tax paid by the *ahl al-kitāb* or *ahl al-dhimma* (the 'protected people'), no doubt created a difference between them and the Muslims, but the latter also had the obligation to pay specifically Islamic taxes such as the *zakāt* (alms tax), and although this is often ignored,[37] it could very well have led to a certain perception of balance, since each of these levies was a 'religious tax'.

The development of a public discourse that linked religion to the membership of a political entity was also a strong factor in creating attitudes of conformity. As Vesna Wallace shows, contemporary Mongolia is a fascinating observation ground for the constant adaptation and reorientation of a public discourse attempting to strike a balance between the traditional, the official, and the external, that will serve the state's purpose without alienating its population. On the face of it, Roman imperial power was less subtle, and Simon Corcoran's chapter goes into the details of its attempts to obtain religious conformity through legislation, but also through the wholesale promotion of an ideology presented as the sole legitimate one. Legislation could be used to incapacitate members of non-dominant religious groups in such a way that converting to their religion would

[37] See the detailed discussion of early taxation in Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State*, pp. 172–99.

diminish the convert's legal status – a tactic used by the Romans both before and after Christianity came to power (Corcoran, Lieu), and it was quite naturally taken over in the Caliphate. Courts implementing those laws were essential instruments for the propagation of official discourse, not only at the level of the central authorities, but also at that of smaller communities, as the chapters by Simonsohn and Lavee show very clearly.

Monotheism offered a political theology that made it much easier than a polytheistic and polycentric pantheon to legitimize centralization through religion. It also facilitated imperial interference in the religious realm, especially when combined with the Roman imperial tradition of the emperor also being *pontifex maximus*. From the start, the officialization of Christianity in the empire was accompanied by Constantine's efforts to define it, control it and direct it. This top-down, centralized, controlling, and exemplum-based model of dealing with a new religion in a context of political renewal was sufficiently attractive to be adopted, argues Antonello Palumbo, by emperor Wu in sixth-century China. After the Arab conquests, the caliph, as successor to Muḥammad and 'commander of the faithful', was also a figure uniting religious and political legitimacy, and he was essential in the definition of the new religion and the orientation it took.

Practice II: Human Ambiguities

The attempts of rulers to define the boundaries of religions that they deemed central to the construction of their states, and the hurdles they encountered in such attempts, point to the inherent difficulty of drawing such boundaries. As already mentioned above, Mercedes García Arenal's comparison of religious and ethnic groups, and her suggestion of analysing conversion along the lines of Fredrik Barth's work on ethnic groups, is very close to the

approach taken by several papers in this collection. This section brings together those that are closest to Barth's model, albeit without explicitly using his concepts.[38]

There are several features of Barth's work that make it interesting for the study of conversion. Rather than focus on what cultural content defined an ethnic group, Barth – and the contributors to the volume to which his famous essay was an introduction – focused on the boundaries and their maintenance, and on processes of recruitment, thus studying the cases of individuals who *changed* their ethnic identity. They demonstrated how ascription and self-ascription were essential for ethnicity to have a meaning as an element of social organization, and that the features ascribed were the product of specific circumstances and contexts, rather than an essential or primordial set of defining features. Finally, Barth also pointed out the important role of political actors in mobilizing ethnic groups into forms of action, and, by implication, in stimulating their constant re-definition.

Although ethnicity was the aspect Barth and his colleagues studied, their ultimate objective was to understand the processes through which social groups reproduce and maintain themselves, and how boundaries are maintained despite their permeability. Such an analysis is evidently also relevant to the study of religious groups, and allows a much finer understanding of the process of conversion.

The ambiguity and fluidity of religious identities is highlighted by most papers in the volume. Taking up a term used by Peter Brown in his 1998 reconsideration of the famous 'holy man' article,[39] Thomas Sizgorich explores the 'untidiness' of religious change – a theme also that is also central for Elizabeth Key Fowden, who calls it 'messiness'. In the late antique Near East different groups were located along a continuum that blurred their

[38] Thomas Sizgorich died before he could complete or annotate his chapter, so the footnotes refer mainly to the sources we could identify. His work as a whole, however, was to a large extent informed by Barth's analyses, as his *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia, 2009) shows, and he would no doubt have made direct reference to Barth here.

[39] Peter Brown, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity, 1971–97', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 6.3 (1998): pp. 353–76 at p. 364; the initial article was id., 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity', *Journal of Roman Studies,* 61 (1971), pp. 80–101.

distinctions and where a slight shift was enough to find oneself on the other side of the border. The examples given by Simonsohn and Lavee show that such shifts could be consciously tactical and motivated by social and economic advantages. In other cases, such as those described by Kelly, Sizgorich and Fowden, they were cultural and linked to various forms of social contact and networking, such as kinship, trade, marriage, travel, or simply sharing the same urban space. It has become fashionable to describe such situations of religious promiscuity a 'religious marketplace', an expression that conjures up an image of competition between religious systems each offering a set of 'goods' for consumption.[40] Wallace observes this on the ground in Mongolia, and if only one could do fieldwork in eighth-century Damascus or Fusṭāṭ, one would most probably find a very similar situation.

This fluidity and constant external solicitation prompted religious leaders to be wary and promote by every means they had not only the validity of their own version of religious truth, but also the dangers inherent in abandoning it. If, according to the metaphor above, a religion was a market commodity, it was in a market without free trade agreements, where protectionism reigned. Simonsohn shows how the fear of 'apostasy' was a constant concern in all communities, and also that communities dealt with such cases in a very matter of fact way – even while they produced heroic narratives of martyrs and virgins to declare vociferously that such cases were very rare and severely punished. Sizgorich discusses several such texts, highlighting a number of themes recurring across religious borders.

The worry of losing one's own went hand in hand with a certain suspicion towards newcomers, expressed in the form of doubts about the sincerity of their conversion,

[40] See for instance J.A. North, 'Pagans, Polytheists and the Pendulum', and Seth Schwartz, 'Roman Historians and the Rise of Christianity: the School of Edward Gibbon' in William V. Harris (ed.), *The Spread of Christianity in the First Four Centuries: Essays in Explanation*, Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition 27 (Leiden, 2005), respectively pp. 125–43 and 145–60.

especially when it provided obvious advantages, or had been obtained by force.[41] Evidently this worry was stronger among those who were attempting to patrol group boundaries than among most members of the group. Legislation and codification were used with the aim of regulating behaviour so as to avoid boundary crossings. Essentially, this was much more centred around pointing to the forms of behaviour that were out-of-bounds than prescribing the ones that were expected, which was left to texts with a persuasive rather than coercive agenda, such as exhortation and narrative. All this textual production was addressed to group members either from the pulpit or through story-telling. Its function was normative, of course, in that it framed religious experience and practice in terms that were meant to be recognisably distinct for each group concerned.

At the same time, they were facilitators of religious change, as they strove to attract outsiders by dramatizing conversions and putting these in the most positive light through a rhetoric of achievement and victory. The dynamics of this use of texts are analysed by Sizgorich, and his broader approach is complemented by Klein's and Kelly's contributions, which each focus on a single episode while treating essentially the same theme. All three papers show, from different angles, to what extent the criteria used to recognize the divine, and the practices adopted to submit to it, were the same across boundaries, with a long-standing cultural habitus standing in the way of clear differentiation. Only a substantial body of law and literature proclaiming the differences and demarcation lines could achieve the reification of religious identities in a way that would give conversion the aura of a very consequential move. This is to a large extent the same phenomenon that Cameron discusses for an earlier period, when Christianity was striving to part ways with Judaism,[42] and by Deeg for the adoption of Buddhism by the Chinese. Palumbo's extended discussion

[41] Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State*, p. 193; Katznelson and Rubin, 'Introduction', p. 8.
[42] Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia, 2004); id., 'The Christian Invention of Judaism: The Theodosian Empire and the Rabbinic Refusal of Religion', *Representations*, 85 (2004): pp. 21–57; Becker and Reed (eds), *The Ways that Never Parted*.

of the 'polemical making of corporate religious identities' (p. 000), the gradual development of a dichotomous view through the construction of a unified, reified, different, and generally evil Other, follows Daniel Boyarin's *Border Lines*, and finds an excellent parallel in this volume in Kelly's discussion of the invention of the pagans, 'a knowing imposition of a dichotomy on a broad and blurred spectrum of possibilities', which allowed each group to mark itself off from outsiders and to 'lend those outsiders both unity and purpose' (p. 000).

Practice III: Symbols and Institutions

The passage from the spontaneous discourse intended to control fluidity by group leaders to the formation of all the trappings of an institutionalized definition of religious identities is not easy to capture. It occurs partly through the manipulation of elementary symbols of one's superiority vis-à-vis the other, and the development of a discourse of polarity within the cultural value system, where rationality is compared with ignorance (Klein) and right-mindedness with folly (Corcoran), where civilization is opposed to wilderness and settlement to nomadism. Used by Galerius for the Christians, and by Cyril of Scythopolis for the pagans, this is a timeless rhetorical device used to undermine the legitimacy of a rival and to assert one's cultural superiority. It has also attracted much comment, from Jonathan Swift's famous ironical passage on the violent '*modern Colony*, sent to convert and civilize an idolatrous and barbarous People',[43] to Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Le cru et le cuit*, significantly the first part of a series entitled *Mythologiques*.[44] The rhetoric is of course reversed according to context, creating in each case a customized hierarchy between two religions, the rational

[43] Jonathan Swift, *Travels Into Several Remote Nations of the World, by Lemuel Gulliver*, part IV (Dublin, 1727), p. 86, chapter 12.

[44] *Mythologiques*, I: *Le Cru et le Cuit* (Paris, 1964). As Edmund Leach noted in his long review of *Le cru et le cuit* in *American Anthropologist*, 67 (1965): p. 778, 'If you want to express your difference from your neighbor for any reason whatsoever you will act in a manner exactly opposite to that in which you expect him to behave. And our attitude to our predecessors and to our neighbors always has this kind of ambiguity'. This is also valid for the fictionalization of behaviour

and the irrational. This comes in a reverse manner in the Chinese reaction to Buddhism, where the foreignness of the new was opposed to traditional practice (Palumbo).

Beyond rhetoric, it was essential for those who converted to signify this to the relevant communities – the one they joined and the one they had left. This could take the form of physical movement from one locality to another, especially in cases of conversion by seduction such as those recounted in the stories analysed by Sizgorich, which are romanced versions of mixed marriages (a common occurrence as Simonsohn's discussion of the legal literature shows). Whatever the circumstances, conversion was only really ratified and validated when it was socialized: it had to be, as Cameron puts it, a public act.[45] The close analysis given by Kelly of Augustine's rhetoric of religious separation shows the bishop of Hippo's very down-to-earth approach to group membership, where ultimately everything comes down to declaring adhesion to a group and its beliefs – even when (or because) cultural practice between the different groups did not differ all that much. That choice, however, involved adherence to a new set of social norms, and affected one's social status.[46] As we have seen, these were sometimes directed by the authorities in such a way as to promote conversion – or prevent it, depending on the point of view adopted. One of the areas where a new religious identity had an important impact was civil and socio-economic status, as it affected property and inheritance rights, kinship ties and family authority (Corcoran, Simonsohn, Lavee).

Yet even though the official line was that kinship links were completely severed, it is difficult to imagine that this was entirely true in practice. In many cases, things seem to

[45] This was of course also true of its flip side, 'apostasy', which required a form of public renunciation, not a simple lack of adherence. See the overview of early Jesuit definitions of 'apostasy' by Isabelle Poutrin, 'L'apostasie, désertion de la foi', *Conversion/Pouvoir et religion* (Hypotheses.org), 10 juin 2014; http://pocram.hypotheses.org/276.

[46] See Katznelson and Rubin, 'Introduction', p. 14; Peter Brown, *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (London, 1981), pp. 103–5; Carlo Ginzburg, 'The conversion of the Jews of Minorca (417–18): An experiment in history and historiography', in Scott L. Waugh and Peter Diehl (eds), *Christendom and its discontents: exclusion, persecution, and rebellion, 1000–1500* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 207–17.

have been reversed, with the new ties created through marriage becoming a powerful vector of conversion. Although it is clear that this happened in the late antique Near East, we have no evidence that it was practiced as an assimilation policy – as we do, for instance, for Umayyad al-Andalus.[47] In such cases of individual conversion, family ties within the new social/religious group would have been mainly through affinity, while blood ties inevitably maintained the link with the old group. This could eventually lead to more conversions, or to a return to the old group in the case of dissolution of the union – or, as hagiographical accounts would have it, by converting the spouse to one's old creed. Whatever the case, the closely interwoven religious communities of the region were a fertile ground for back-and-forth boundary-crossing, which prompted a powerful rhetoric of separation.

This rhetoric was backed by the development of rituals and institutions aimed at formalizing and consolidating the separation. Most of those rituals took place within the framework of religious institutions or courts, and ratified the transformation through a public acceptance of the new religious and social status and rejection of the old one. They were essentially rites of passage such as baptism, which often included symbolic speech acts such as statements of faith or, on the contrary, abjuration. Despite the strongly social nature of such rituals, their symbolic value was such that they were performed even in the abstract and intellectualized context of philosophical conversion (Athanassiadi).

The Rabbinic development of a symbolism of conversion as a new birth and the corresponding severing and renewal of kinship ties was also embedded in a radical legal framework that cut off converts from all their previous claims to property or inheritance, but also freed them of any obligations or condemnations they may have suffered under their previous identity. Lavee shows how this was systematically institutionalized, and

[47] See for example Eduardo Manzano Moreno, 'Convertirse en un árabe: la etnicidad como discurso político en al-Andalus durante la época de los Omeyas', in *Grenzräume und Grenzüberschreitungen im Vergleich. Der Osten und der Westen des mittelalterlichen Lateineuropa*, Europa im Mittelalter 7, eds. Klaus Herbers and Nikolas Jaspert (Berlin, 2007), pp. 219–38, esp. 000.

although this institutionalization functioned as a protection of the group's identity, it also transformed not only the conversion process, but the contours and definition of the religious group itself.

It has been long recognized that institutions and rituals allow the deconstruction and reconstruction of social identities. In the specific case of the spread of religions with claims to universality in culturally diverse regions they also mediate ideas and norms in a way that is sometimes easier to integrate than through language. Indeed, language is perhaps one of the most powerful vectors for the acculturation of the new religion within its new context. The example of Mongolian given by Wallace, where the term for the Christian God is the same as that for different Buddhist entities has many parallels, not least in Greek, Latin, Egyptian or Arabic, where the same term is used for the many and the 'one' – a difficulty modern languages have solved through the use of capitalization. Wallace describes the efforts of the missionaries to circumvent even that linguistic ambiguity, which may seem one of the least problematic ones. In his essay on the conversion of the Iroquois cited earlier, Allan Greer gives a very striking example from the New World of the conundrum posed by the exercise of linguistic-cultural translation, citing the Jesuit Jean de Brébœuf in 1636:

> A relative noun for them always includes the meaning of one of the three persons of the possessive pronoun, so that they cannot say simply, father, son, master, servant, but are obliged to say one of these three: my father, your father, his or her father. To facilitate the task of translating prayers, I have designated one of their nouns to stand for the word 'Father', but we nevertheless find it impossible to get them to say

properly in their language 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost'.[48]

This perfectly illustrates Wallace's point that the linguistic conventions and structures of the adoptive group are a powerful force in the assimilation, but also the interpretation of new ideas, creating 'a realm of conceptual possibilities and emotional responses that do not necessarily correspond to those envisioned by external agents of conversion, and that bring familiarity to alterity' (p. 000). The differences among religions regarding the language of their sacred texts are very interesting in this context, not least the contrast between Christianity and Islam in their respective imperial frameworks: where the expansion of the former involved translation into local languages, that of the latter was closely linked to the Arabicization of the converted population – with the notable exception of the Iranian provinces.[49]

Conversion, even when it is an individual act, is largely about joining a new social group. It is no surprise, therefore, that one of the most efficient means of obtaining conversion has been the establishment of new communities. Monasteries located near the religious border, or even beyond it, seem to have been instrumental in attracting new members, and this was true of Christianity as it was of Buddhism and Manichaeism (Fowden, Deeg, Lieu). The symbolic power of the social group bound by common aims and ideals was not lost on hagiographers, whose descriptions of such events are countless. Several of them are analysed by Klein, who highlights the way their authors frame them within the binary rhetoric of civilization *vs* wilderness. When Cyril of Scythopolis describes how the monk Euthymios converted an entire tribe of Arab nomads not only to

[48] Jean de Brébeuf, 'Relation of 1636', in *The Jesuit Relations: Nations and Missionaries in Seventeenth-Century North America*, ed. Allan Greer (Boston, 2000), p. 39; see Greer, 'Conversion and Identity', p. 182.
[49] For a discussion of the distinction between 'Islamization' and 'Arabization', see Décobert, 'Sur l'arabisation'; on Iran, see now Sarah Savant, *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: : Tradition, Memory, and Conversion* (Cambridge, 2013).

Christianity, but also to the sedentary life, he is developing an archetypal narrative defending the superiority not only of a religion, but of a culture and a way of life. Generally, such narratives are as etiological as they are historical, giving a holy figure an important role in the establishment of the community as a way to give lustre to its origins. At the same time, they express the often competitive urge of ecclesiastical and monastic institutions to establish their control over a territory, and having converted it will legitimize their aims.[50]

Building Jerusalem

Territory is very important when it comes to establishing group boundaries, and conversion is no exception. It was impossible to focus on everything in a single volume, so space had largely been left out of our central concerns. The mark left on the landscape by religions new and old has been the subject of countless works, and we refer the reader to that enormous body of literature.[51] Here we have chosen to take a spatial symbol, Jerusalem, which came to carry meanings that go well beyond its material existence as a city to express the idea of the city of god, the heavenly city towards which everyone is heading – a notion that could be seen as a Mediterranean version of Nirvana.

As a physical city, Jerusalem was a focal point during both religious reorientations in the Mediterranean. In addition to its Jewish history, it developed from the fourth century onwards a mythological topography linked to the events of the Gospels, and this

[50] This process is admirably analysed by Hassan Elboudrari, 'Quand les saints font les villes: lecture anthropologique de la pratique sociale d'un saint marocain du XVII[e] siècle', *AnnalesESC*, 40 (1985): pp. 489–508.
[51] Among the most relevant for our purpose here are Béatrice Caseau, 'Sacred landscapes', in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, ed. G.W. Bowersock, Peter Brown and Oleg Grabar (Cambridge, MA, 1999), pp. 21–59; Ora Limor, 'Conversion of Space', in *Religious Conversion: History, Experience and Meaning*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Miri Rubin (Farnham, 2014), pp. 31–59 (see also pp. 19–23 of the introduction to the volume); Julia Shaw, 'Archaeologies of Buddhist propagation in ancient India: "ritual" and "practical" models of religious change', *World Archaeology*, 45 (2013): pp. 83–108; David Frankfurter (ed.), *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt* (Leiden, 1998); Johannes Hahn, Stephen Emmel and Ulrich Gotter (eds), *From Temple to Church: Destruction and Renewal of Local Cultic Topography in Late Antiquity* (Leiden, 2008).

was followed by a Muslim stratum of sacralized spaces. None of these traditions rejected the previous ones wholesale, since they were the topographical expression of a common textual heritage. This was also the reason why it was so important to mark one's presence there. Under the Umayyads, there was thus a triple religious focus on Jerusalem as a holy city, which created a contested urban space that was constantly transformed, but without losing its original nature. This insistence on a small set of focal points is very important for universalizing religions. For the distant convert, Jerusalem, like Rome or Mecca, played the essential role of 'the centre out there', to use Victor Turner's famous phrase:[52] a supra-local centre that gave a sense of a common, if distant, holy place across geographically scattered groups and thus maintained a symbolic unity despite the distance.

Of course, in that role, Jerusalem functioned as an ideal-type. In practice, as Elizabeth Fowden's chapter vividly shows, there was a strong focus on local nodes of sacrality, and conversion brought the transformation of familiar landscapes. In the immediate environment, holy sites were places of convergence, at given moments throughout the year, and were often seen as the spots where iconic events had taken place. They were highly ambivalent sites, associated with extraordinary and wondrous stories, and whose very materiality could be used as a seductive force.

This was – to saturation – the case of Jerusalem. Every new religious identity was inscribed into the landscape through the spatialization of their respective formative narratives,[53] which were then integrated into the religious life of the city through ritual. John Baldovin has shown how the development of Jerusalem's stational liturgy was both

[52] Victor Turner, 'The Center Out There: Pilgrim's Goal', *History of Religions*, 12.3 (1973): pp. 191–230.
[53] In his classic study on this process, Maurice Halbwachs related it to the formation of collective memory, one of the most potent factors of common identity: Maurice Halbwachs, *La topographie légendaire des évangiles en Terre Sainte. Étude de mémoire collective* (Paris, 1941); see Gérôme Truc, 'Memory of places and places of memory: for a Halbwachsian socio-ethnography of collective memory', *International Social Science Journal*, 203–4 (2011): pp. 147–159.

the driver and the result of Christian domination of urban public space.[54] Egeria's description of her time in the city at the end of the fourth century reflects this territorial control very eloquently.[55] When Mu'āwiya became caliph after the first civil war, he performed a series of ceremonial visits to the city's holy places, presumably to mark his ecumenical stance as new ruler.[56]

More prosaically, of course, the inhabitants of the city contributed in giving it its religious character. The two articles by Jan Willem Drijvers and Robert Schick in the final section both show how the converts, or the members of the new religion come from elsewhere, created their own spaces within the existing urban framework. The Muslims initially settled in a new, previously uninhabited quarter, in a way that did not disturb the existing balance by taking over occupied spaces. This agglutinative model can be found in other existing cities, like Damascus.[57] Fusṭāṭ also was founded right next to Babylon, eventually creating one large, united settlement despite its dual nature.

The way religious domination was asserted was through cult buildings. It was possible for a demographic minority with political support to impose its own aesthetics and to make a strong statement about its position of power through architecture. Constantine's building programme in what was still a non-Christian Jerusalem did just that, and he was emulated three and a half centuries later by 'Abd al-Malik and al-Walīd.

Symbolic space and important spatial points of reference could be transformed rather than destroyed, and religious life recentred around a topography consistent with the new religion's dominant narratives. This process, which consists in the creation of a rival network of holy places rather than in the substitution of the existing one has been

[54] John Baldovin, *The Urban Character of Christian Worship: The Origins, Development and Meaning of Stational Liturgy* (Rome, 1987).
[55] Egeria, *Itinerary*, *passim*. An overview of Egeria's description of Christian ritual in Jerusalem
[56] R. Stephen Humpreys, *Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan: From Arabia to Empire* (Oxford, 2006).
[57] Nancy Khalek, *Damascus after the Muslim Conquest: Text and Image in Early Islam* (Oxford, 2011).

described in some detail for Rome by Augusto Fraschetti,[58] and was clearly at play in the eastern Mediterranean despite the emphatic stories of boisterous monks destroying whatever they found impious. The transformation also involved a change in the use of urban space. The dominant group could prohibit other groups' public rituals, as they implied control over parts of its territory. So the Christians banned 'pagan' festivals, and the Muslims banned Christian processions and *semantra* (calls to prayer), substituting their own as the only ones to be practised publicly. Oleg Grabar also noted that minarets first appeared in the mosques of Syrian cities, where there was competition with a similar tradition, and where a tall building could serve as a powerful way of marking the Muslim presence in a predominantly Christian landscape.[59]

* * *

In many ways, monumental building programmes functioned like normative discourse on the part of religious group leaders: they construed difference, asserted domination, and imposed categories and order in a material world that was too fluid to be comfortable for them. Buildings, especially religious or otherwise symbolic ones, translate Barth's conceptual group boundaries into concrete topographical ones, by giving the different urban communities their specific territories and exclusive focal points, and presenting those of the other communities as out of bounds. In that sense, it is as difficult to use them to quantify conversion as it is to use written sources: they are the official expression of a communal self-definition, rather than a reflection of the much more fluid social situation on the ground. When the borders are fuzzy, it is by definition impossible to count the

[58] Augusto Fraschetti, *La conversione da Roma pagana a Roma cristiana* (Rome, 1999).
[59] Oleg Grabar, 'Islamic Art and Byzantium', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 18 (1964): pp. 67–88 at p. 74.

people on either side.[60] This does not mean, of course, that once we have demonstrated the fluidity, any categories fall apart. What Barth noted from the very beginning was the permanence and solidity of those permeable and fluid boundaries, and the strength of the conviction among a group's members that they belong precisely on 'their' side of the boundary. Since 1969, Barth's work has often been revisited, and on that foundation, questions have largely evolved towards understanding the gradual *creation* of the boundaries, and the role, in that process, of power (an aspect highlighted by Antonello Palumbo's reference to Carl Schmitt to analyse emperor Wu's 'conversion'), of institutions and their classificatory activity, and of forms of cultural negotiation.[61] Such an approach can find much ammunition in the material contained in this volume. The discourse attempting to control fluidity comes from group leaders with vested interests, and its gradual institutionalization enshrines the constructed boundary in social reality. Once created, such structures proved very useful to the state apparatus, which used the tools at its disposal to reinforce them, obtaining, through the normalization of a multitude of locally well-defined groups, a high degree of political and religious allegiance. The way this was obtained is strikingly similar in China, Rome, and the Caliphate, and the argument made by Palumbo for circulating models for the implementation of power offers an exciting avenue for further investigation of the subject.

[60] David Frankfurter recently intervened in the long-standing papyrologists' debate over the value of onomastics in papyri for quantifying conversion, moving the ground from whether papyri are a statistically reliable source to whether conversion can be defined – and consequently quantified – that easily in the first place: David Frankfurter, 'Onomastic Statistics and the Christianisation of Egypt: A Response to Depauw and Clarysse', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 68.3 (2014): pp. 284–89.

[61] An approach most clearly set out by Andreas Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks* (Oxford, 2013), who builds on the work of Barth, but also Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu.