

Epilogue: Conversion and the Force of History

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Across Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and the multiple modernities born of them, coming to terms with forced conversion means coming to terms with the force of history. The point sounds both portentous and cryptic. In order to make it intelligible I will need, like vulture or gull, both to circle high above the subject and to squabble over earth-bound scraps of the particular. But as a starting point, consider the view that emerges from a cluster of chapters in this book, about the powerful afterlife of a couple of brief and obscure paragraphs dictated by a handful of seventh-century bishops. Did any of the Visigothic worthies gathered in synod imagine that their deliberation—on what might have seemed to them relatively minor questions concerning converts that royal edict had compelled into Christianity from Judaism—would help shape ideas about conversion, intentionality, and sacramental power for more than a millennium?

In their chapters of *Forced Conversion in Christianity, Judaism and Islam: Coercion and Faith in Premodern Iberia and Beyond*, Elsa Marmursztejn, Rosa Vidal Doval, and Isabelle Poutrin have shown us some of the many futures of these few and fateful episcopal words. Any number of lines of historical force could be drawn from the “mysterious” council of Seville of circa 620 and the (better known) fourth council of Toledo (633), to those myriad futures. The statutes of those councils would come to impinge on the possibilities of existence for fourteenth- and fifteenth-century *conversos* and sixteenth-century *moriscos* in Iberia, for the cruelly evangelized in Africa and the Americas, for the kidnapped and baptized Edgardo Mortara in the nineteenth century, and for so many other converts to Christianity.

We can draw a similar impression of the gravitational power of particular episodes of conversion from the trio of essays—by David Wasserstein, Maribel Fierro and Alan Verskin—debating the origins and futures of Almohad policies of forced conversion to Islam. To read those pages is to enter into a world in which accounts from the Prophet Muḥammad’s Arabia (coincidentally roughly contemporaneous with the aforementioned Visigothic affairs) later acquire new and powerful meanings in Ibn Ḥazm’s Cordoba or early Almohad Fez, meanings that would in turn affect the possibilities for Jewish conversion to Islam in the future, even perhaps to the present day.

Each of the authors of *Forced Conversion in Christianity, Judaism and Islam*, in her or his own way, is simultaneously engaged both with a particular historical “moment”—with periods and places, texts and persons—and with some of the many pasts and futures that seem to them most relevantly related to that moment. They also ask (albeit sometimes only implicitly) what type of relation this might be. Ryan Szpiech, for example, wonders whether there is a causal relation between Abner of Burgos’ polemics in the first half of the fourteenth century and the violent conversions that took place a couple of generations later. Or should we speak more loosely of influence, or even of merely arbitrary analogy constructed through hindsight? How we answer these questions depends upon how we think of the force of history. What I’d like to suggest here is that how we think about the force of history—at least within the traditions of thought that have arisen within the reaches of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and their attendant modernities—is itself intimately connected to how we think about the force necessary for conversion, and vice-versa.

1 A Force of History: The Psycho-Social

By “force of history” I mean two analytically distinguishable but empirically inseparable things. One of these is quite familiar to historians today: the inheritance of habits of thought and forms of life within a given context, time and place. No human makes their world from scratch (except in philosophical thought experiments such as the famous one of Ibn Tufayl). Natality is not only into flesh, but also into languages, cultures, economic, social, and family structures. All of these have histories that shape the possibilities of thought and existence for those born into them. We do not need to agree on the extent of the shaping—historical determinism and radical contingency are only two extremes of the many options currently on offer—in order to concede that this inheritance, this history, has force. For purposes of this essay, I will call this the *psycho-social force* of history.

In every place and period visited in this volume, from seventh-century Toledo to Almohad Fez to post-Tridentine Italy (see the chapter by Tamar Herzog), contemporaries were well aware that converts had been born into a family, a culture, and a past; that this history exerted great force upon them; and that even greater force might be needed to escape its grip. That awareness is evident at the very beginnings of our subject (at least from a Christian point of view), in the paradigmatic story told about the apostle Paul’s conversion to Jesus in the *Acts of the Apostles*. “Saul” the Jew is traveling to Damascus when a flash of light blinds him and knocks him to the ground. He cannot see, but he

can hear: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Saul asked. ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. ‘Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.’” (Acts 9:4–6, and compare chapters 22 and 26).

In his own seven extraordinary epistles, written between 50 and 60 CE, Paul never called himself Saul. He did not place himself on any particular road, nor outside any city. He reported no flashes of light, no violent force. Of his vision, which would have taken place circa 36 CE, he tells us only that he saw the risen Christ. (1 Cor 9:1, 15:3–8; Gal. 1:11–16) Acts is generally dated to the first quarter of the second century, generations later than Paul’s own writings. Perhaps in its addition of explosive spiritual devices and of a representation of Paul’s previous persona we should see the development over those generations of an anxiety about the forces of habit and of history, expressed as a need for miraculous force capable of casting off the weight of the (in this case Jewish) past.

Similar anxieties have deeply marked many efforts to think about history and about conversion, in part precisely because scripture has served them as paradigm. Such anxieties permeate, for example, some modern definitions of conversion, such as the one by Arthur D. Nock already cited twice in *Forced Conversion in Christianity, Judaism and Islam*: “the reorienting 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 a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.”¹ The “Pauline” tone of Nock’s definition (he is virtually citing Ephesians) should not be surprising: he was himself a product of this Christian tradition, and his definition of conversion was not independent of his own habits of thought. I invoke his definition of conversion here not qua definition, but as an example of the co-dependence I am attempting to describe: our ways of thinking about the tension between conversion and the psycho-social force of history are themselves not independent of the religious traditions whose history we are trying to understand.²

We might want to divide this force into the internal or psychological, and the social or external, or to place more emphasis on one of these or other. As an example of the former, recall William James’ definition of conversion cited by García-Arenal and Glazer-Eytan in “Forced Conversion and the Reshaping of Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Tradition, Interpretation, History,” their introduction to the book: “the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto

1 Nock, *Conversion*, 7.

2 Readers interested in Nock’s writing about St. Paul’s conversion specifically may turn to chapter 3 of his *St. Paul*. See more generally Price, “The Road to *Conversion*: The Life and Work of A.D. Nock.”

divided, and consciously wrong, inferior, and unhappy becomes unified and consciously right, superior, and happy in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.”³ The definition might almost seem penned by a Christian thinker like St. Augustine, except that the bishop of Hippo was much more skeptical than the Harvard professor about the self’s ability to achieve unity by overcoming its own divisions and contradictions.

At an extreme, and across all the periods and religious communities studied in this book, there have been those who believed that individuals could achieve an inner conviction sufficient for true conversion. (I will set aside for now the important question of God’s necessary role in this achievement: a question treated most explicitly in this volume by Davide Scotto’s essay on Hernando de Talavera.) Conviction could produce conversion even without any public profession or social manifestation. Maribel Fierro mentions the late Almohad prince Abū Zayd, who concealed—for political motives, she surmises—his conversion from Islam to Christianity for many years. On a grander scale Vicent Ferrer, one of the great impresarios of the Iberian forced conversion studied here, preached that if non-Christians truly willed their conversion and desired baptism, they would be saved as Christians whether or not they received the sacrament before death.⁴ And indeed both the Christian and the Islamic traditions preserve accounts of converts whose internal conversions were revealed—often through miracles—only after their death.⁵

Others might insist more on social aspects, and seek symptoms of conversion in changes of habit, ritual performance, kinship structures, neighborhoods, and networks. “Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires.” (Ephesians 4:22–24) Setting aside the important question of what the historical Paul might have intended by these lines, we can translate them into what in the future would become frequently asked questions about the proper relationship of converts to their past. How radical a transformation does this putting off of an old self and putting on of a new require? What aspects of manner of life might be involved?

Changes of diet and dress, of kin and friends, of languages and loyalties, of spouses and sexual practices, of profession and economic practices, these and many more could be demanded of a convert, or (conversely) very little might

3 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 189, a book that had also greatly influenced A.D. Nock’s work on conversion.

4 Within Catholicism this view, as Isabelle Poutrin points out in her essay for this volume, did not survive the Counter Reformation.

5 A lovely example is the account of a Christian nun’s conversion to Islam recounted by the Mamluk-era theologian-littérateur Ibn Abī Ḥajala (d. 1375) in his *Collection on Passionate Love* (*Dīwān al-ṣabāba*), discussed by Gründler in “That You Be Brought Near,” 94–95.

be required at all. At any given time and place (even in Paul's own context: witness the debate between Peter and Paul in the second chapter of Galatians) different individuals offered different answers to these questions. And insofar as we might speak of a prevalent opinion at any given moment, that opinion was by no means fixed. In this book, for example, we have seen the requirements for Iberian *conversos* from Judaism shift over the course of the fifteenth century from minimal to maximal, as they did across the early sixteenth century for forced converts in Portugal (as Giuseppe Marcocci's sad and learned pages makes so clear), and in the second half of that century for *morisco* converts from Islam in Granada, Valencia, Aragon, and Castile (on which see the chapter by Mercedes García-Arenal).

My use of the term psycho-social is meant to contain this tension without resolving it. Although we may choose to distinguish the psychological from the social for certain purposes or questions, and to emphasize one or the other, we should not make our distinctions too categorical or too emphatic, as if the two were independent of each other. Indeed for many of the figures and texts studied in this volume, a pressing question was the nature of the relation between them. To what degree can history constrain intention, intention break with history? And is the one legible in terms of the other? Can, for example, the "inner" intention of a convert be discerned from an "outer" manner of life and its history? In Glazer-Eytan's "Incriminating the Judaizer" we accompany the inquisitors in their struggle with this last urgent question, as they develop methodologies of questioning, of genealogy, and of torture in order to string powerful transmission lines between behavior and belief.

When it came to storming the gates between "outer" and "inner," pre-modern Muslim thinkers about conversion seem to have been more cautious than Christian inquisitors. "Only God knows what is in the heart" was a common refrain among the learned. In the meantime, even an Almohad caliph could be willing to put up with a good deal of doubt, albeit with precautions. Abū Yūsuf al-Manṣūr (r. 1184–98), for example, imposed any number of distinctions and discriminations upon forced converts and their descendants, motivated (as a chronicle from 1224 has it) by the doubt he entertained as to the sincerity of their belief. "Were I sure that they were true Muslims, he would say, I would allow them to merge with the Muslims through marriage or in their other affairs. If, however, I were sure that they were Infidels, I would have their men slain, their children enslaved and their property confiscated and distributed among the Believers. But I have doubts about their case."⁶

6 Al-Marrākushī, *Kitāb al-mu'jib fī talkhīṣ akhbār ahl al-Maghrib*, 223–24; English translation in Fenton, *Exile in the Maghreb*, 55. See also Fierro, "Conversion, Ancestry, and Universal Religion," García-Arenal, "Rapports entre les groupes dans la péninsule Ibérique."

The heightened awareness of the gap between what we have inadequately come to distinguish as “inner” and “outer” is one product of forced conversions. (I say inadequate, because the distinction and much of what has been based upon it is itself entangled in the long history of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic thought about hypocrisy and sincerity.) For some influential historians not alluded to in this volume, our own modernity emerged from this heightened awareness. Yirmiyahu Yovel, for example, attributed to the *conversos*’ cultivation of a crypto-spiritual life—an inner life concealed from and in conflict with public life—the creation of psycho-social forms of being out of which modern subjectivity was born. According to this view, the late medieval and early modern forced conversions of Jews to Christianity in Iberia were the event that shattered the unity of the pre-modern persona, giving rise to the split subjectivity, self-reflexivity, irony, and skepticism of “modern” figures such as Michel de Montaigne. There is much to be skeptical about in this account. I offer it here as simply one more example of one more representation—in some sense the mirror image of the “Pauline” one—of a violent conversion producing a defining break in history and subjectivity.⁷

2 A Force of History: The Kerygmatic

Thus far I’ve focused on what I called, without strong commitment to the term, the psycho-social force of history. But this force alone does not suffice to explain why conversion became a site of such importance for reflection upon the capacity (or lack thereof) of the human to break free of the chains of history. I wrote earlier of two forces, analytically distinguishable but empirically inseparable. I turn now to the second of those forces, which I will call the *kerygmatic* force of history.

Derived from the Greek verb κηρύσσω *kērússō*, “to cry, announce, proclaim as a herald,” this term too is awkward, not least because of its roots in scripture, and in the vocabulary of the apostle Paul. (Is it not disconcerting, how often we encounter him at our cross-roads?)⁸ In modern circles of Christian theology, the term rose to prominence in the writings of Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, and others until it came to be used (as one theologian put it a bit reductively in

7 See, for example, Yirmiyahu Yovel, *The Other Within*. For my own skepticism about the thesis, see Nirenberg, “Unrenounceable Core.”

8 A rare word in the Septuagint (Gen. 41:43; 2 Chr. 30:5; Jon. 3:2; Prov. 9:3; Dan. 3:4), it is used extensively by Paul (Rom. 2:21, 10:8, 10:10, 10:14–15, 16:25; 1 Cor. 1:21, 2:4, 9:27, 15:4, 15:11–12; 2 Cor. 1:19, 4:5, 11:4; Gal. 2:2, 5:11; Phil. 1:15; Col. 1:23; 1 Thess. 2:9; 1 Tim. 2:7, 3:16; 2 Tim. 1:11, 4:2, 4:17; Titus 1:3) and in the Gospels.

1962) to describe situations in which “the past is contemporized.”⁹ It was the Islamic and world-historian Marshall Hodgson (in an unpublished talk he gave in 1967) who lifted the term beyond its Christian roots.¹⁰ He spoke of “the ‘kerygmatic’ life-orientational traditions—those that call for ultimate commitment on the plane of the historical,” (2) and sketched briefly the history of these “historical” faiths. They began (according to him) with Israel, took world-religious form in Christianity and Islam, and eventually came to include (in secularized form) modern ideologies such as Marxism. “These kerygmatic life-orientational traditions... have become steadily more dominant in the world in the last 3,000 years, till now they help mould the ultimate awareness of most people.” (26-7)

Hodgson provided further explanation in the first volume of *The Venture of Islam*. There he wrote specifically of “Islamic piety” that it “reflected a strong historical consciousness that was becoming rare then in non-Muslim traditions.” (362) Even more helpfully, he described what he meant by this component of piety focused on history:

We may refer to the *kerygmatic* component,¹¹ when ultimacy is sought in irrevocable datable events, in *history* with its positive moral commitments. In response to a revelatory moment, the environment, particularly historical society as it is and is about to be, may be seen as radically other than what it appears, and the individual is challenged to find fresh ways to respond to its reality. For instance, as the worshipper recites the Qur’an he may realize that the great of this world are about to die and be judged and are not deserving of all the reverence they receive; and that he himself must find a way to change his cringing ways to them and be

9 In English the term was virtually unused before the Second World War, expanding rapidly in English theological literature shortly thereafter, peaking in 1967 before declining sharply once again (I draw here on Google N-gram). “The past is contemporized”: Thompson, *Theology of the Kerygma*, 2.

10 Hodgson, Marshall G. S. Papers, Box 1, Folder 18, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library. The page numbers in parenthesis refer to this manuscript. The talk, entitled “The Historian as Theologian,” was brought to my attention a few years ago by Kyle Bellows in a seminar paper entitled “Kerygmatic History, the Axial Age, and ‘The Historian as Theologian’: Marshall Hodgson’s Last Word.” The text had been previously noted and discussed in 2010 by Lydia Kiesling in her University of Chicago MA Thesis entitled “The Professional Life and Educational Vision of Marshall Hodgson.” Michael Geyer is preparing an article on this piece of Hodgson’s among others.

11 As opposed to what he called the personal/mystical component. See Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 363–64.

bounden to God alone. This kerygmatic component has been crucial to the prophetic monotheistic traditions.¹²

Hodgson's inclusion of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and their secularized heirs within the term kerygmatic is useful and illuminating, even if his own definition and use of the term remains a bit obscure. For my part, I intend the term to embrace a complex of closely related ideas: that at particular points in historical time God offered teachings to humanity in the form of revelation; that those revelations themselves offer a vision of history (ranging from the beginning to the end of the world) that is understood by believers as in some sense eternally true; and that the subjective historical experience of every believer at any moment in time acquires meaning in relation to that eternal historical truth.

My use of the term in this sense builds on an essential attribute of the faith traditions studied in this volume. "The basis of the paradox of Christianity is that it continually uses time and the historical in relation to the eternal," Kierkegaard wrote in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.¹³ Had he been interested, he could have said the same of Islam and of Judaism.¹⁴ In all of these traditions (and in some of their secularized heirs) the historical revelations of an eternal God and the human experience of history in a given time and place exert powerful influence upon one another, and gain meaning in relation to each other.¹⁵ In all of them, as Franz Rosenzweig put it in his own difficult but powerful diction, the historian "finds man under the curse of historicity, divided within himself between first receiver and last fulfiller of the Word, between the people that stands at Sinai and the Messianic humanity."¹⁶

Even without following Kierkegaard or Rosenzweig much further, I hope we can agree that within this split historical subjectivity, the question of

¹² Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 362–64.

¹³ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, vol. 1, 95. For a formulation of the problem in terms of modern Christian systematic theology see Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 5.

¹⁴ For a modern attempt to understand Judaism in terms of the 'scandal' of God's irruption into history see Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* (1922) and (much more briefly) his 1914 essay "Atheistic Theology," in his *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 17.

¹⁵ This relational constitution of meaning is one of the reasons that we cannot empirically separate these two kinds of historical force, even if we might want to make analytical distinctions between them.

¹⁶ "Atheistic Theology," in Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 24. Rosenzweig continued: "He [the thinker, the student of the past or the present] will therefore be unable to eliminate the God to whom the historicity of history is subjugated by His historical deed." We need not grant the second point in order to concede the first.

conversion can take the shape of a struggle over the meaning and valence of any given historical moment. In that moment, are the psycho-social forces of history—the powers of piety and politics, of biological and spiritual life—aligned with the kerygmatic, that is, with the eternal truths contained in and proclaimed through God's historical teaching? Are the choices taken in the here and now of any historical present pointed in the direction of salvation history? Or have they been corrupted by compromising habits acquired in the course of the many choices messianic humanity must make within the confusions of this uncertain world?

The question is so important precisely because conversion is so meaningful a historical indicator within these faith traditions. It is well known, for example, that the scriptures and teachings of all of these historical faiths represent conversion as a tell-tale sign within the apocalyptic teleology of divine history. Think here of Isaiah's descriptions of Egypt and Assyria's future forceful conversion to God's worship; of Paul's (and Augustine's) description of the Jews as cut off from the vine, "vessels of wrath" whose suffering makes visible God's plan in the present, but whose re-grafting will signal the apocalyptic fulfillment of that plan; or of the Islamic tradition's soteriological characterization of the believers' final battle against the Jews at end-time.¹⁷

In other words, within these faiths, God has taught believers that conversions are signs at which of the state of relation between divine and human history can become legible. In this sense, conversions can be counted among those signs that Moses told the Israelites they should demand of any prophet. Recall Deuteronomy 18:21–22: "You may say to yourselves, 'How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord?' If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken." The truth of prophecy emerges from its relationship to events unfolding within history as signs confirming divine teaching: one more reason to call these traditions "historical faiths."

17 See among many examples: Isaiah 19; Romans 9:22 ("vessels of wrath") Romans 9:22, Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 59:17–19; Romans 11 (cut off and re-grafted). In the Islamic tradition the apocalyptic hadith collected in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (41:6981–5) and *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (4:52:177; 4:56:791) is among the more notable: "The Day of Judgement will not come about until Muslims fight the Jews, when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say O Muslims, O Abdullah, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him..." See Vajda, "Juifs et Musulmans selon le Ḥadīth," 112; Laquer, *The Changing Face of Antisemitism*, 192. (This hadith is still cited in the context of the contemporary conflict in the Middle East: most famously in the Hamas Charter of 1986, and more recently by Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, in 2002: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=oTFAnCPUpjU>).

Legible does not mean certain. On the contrary, the meaning of conversions as kerygmatic historical signs always remains disputable. We might, with all the authority of scripture, say the same of every sign, even the most miraculous. True, we have just seen Moses (in Deut. 18) teach the Israelites to demand a sign or wonder, often in the form, as Spinoza would put it, of a prediction of “the outcome of some future event.”¹⁸ But Moses also taught that, however real the signs and wonders, the prophetic claims that they are sent by God to guarantee are sometimes false. In such cases, those who prophesied them are to be stoned rather than followed. Why does God work signs and wonders in support of false prophecy? “God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul.” (Deut. 13:1–4)

Conversion, like miracle and other divine signs, is not exempt from ambiguity. Every conversion is in this sense at least potentially a sign sent by God to indicate the state of relation between human and divine history, one whose meaning is ambiguous but whose correct interpretation is (for believers) a matter of soteriological life or death. Hence (among other reasons) conversions can become a staging ground for sometimes violent disagreement about the state of relation they were meant to reveal.

3 Miracle or Politics? The Forced Conversions of 1391

An example of such disagreement arose in the immediate wake of one of the most violent episodes of forced conversions mentioned in this book: the massacres and baptisms of Jews that took place in 1391. Those events began in Seville, where on the 6th of June the city’s Jewish quarter was successfully assaulted, its inhabitants killed or forcibly converted. By the end of August Jews had been attacked or converted in more than seventy other towns and cities of the Peninsula. Of these, the assault on the Jewish quarter of Valencia on Sunday, the 9th of July, is among the best documented.¹⁹

18 Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, preface, 27; chapter 2; and elsewhere. I mention Spinoza both because his own subjectivity has sometimes been presented (by Yovel and others) as the product of the history of forced conversion, and because his reading of these passages proved especially fruitful for how philosophical movements of modernity would think about the relationship between historicism and miracle. Few pages are as illuminating on the subject of Spinoza’s miracles as those recently penned by Schechter: “Spinoza’s Miracles: Skepticism, Dogmatism, and Critical Hermeneutics.”

19 For bibliography, as well as for a more extended analysis of these events and fuller citations from the sources, see my “Massacre or Miracle? Valencia, 1391,” in *Neighboring Faiths*, 75–88.

We have multiple accounts: from Jewish witnesses; from Prince Martin, the king's own brother, charged with the defense of the Jews of the city; and from the town council of Valencia. The riots began with a throng of youths chanting that the Jews should convert or die. The gates to the quarter were closed, but the Christian attackers penetrated into the Jewish quarter and began killing, raping, and looting its inhabitants. Hoping that conversions might calm the crowd, the Prince summoned a host of chaplains. By the time the Prince wrote his first report at sunset he did not yet know the death-toll, but he did know that the pillaging was near total, that "very few" Jews remain un-baptized, and that the looting was still going on. (The prince would later put the death toll at close to 300 Jews, with only 200 remaining unconverted. The town council claimed a lower number of 100 Jewish dead.) "Therefore, lord," the Prince concluded this first report, "you should correctly understand that this could only be the judgment of God, and nothing else."²⁰

"Solament juhi de Deu": the Prince is making a "kerygmatic" argument here, asserting that in the killings and conversions, his brother King John should see the clear sign of a divine decision against a historical status quo of protected Jewish presence in the city. We could, in keeping with current fashion, call the implicit argument politico-theological. God, according to Prince Martin, is overturning a long tradition of royal law and politics designed to protect the Jews. That decision over-rules any possible objection by the king, who was indeed the self-designated protector of the Jews, but who, as King Peter (John and Martin's father) had been wont to say, is only "sovereign lord after God."²¹

But "God's judgment" implies a historical theology as well as a political one. It could be understood as articulating divine criticism of an "Augustinian" interpretation (as it is known among specialists) of the Jews' place in sacred history. In that tradition, Christians are not to kill or eliminate the Jews ("slay them not"), who are rather to be preserved in a servile status that makes evident their punishment by God ("vessels of wrath") for their rejection of His Son. According to the "Augustinian" point of view, the Jews are spiritual fossils, blind adherents of a superseded faith whose continued presence on earth

20 I am drawing on ACA:C 2093:112 r-v here. See also the Prince's further account at ACA:C 2093:119 r-120r. On the 12th the Prince writes to the Queen that only 200 Jews remain unconverted: ACA:C 2093:117 r. The town council's letters—such as AMV, LM 5, ff. 19r-20r (July 9) [=Hinojosa #6]—are more detailed, but also more precociously aware of the need for self-justification. For Jewish testimony see the report of Joan Pérez de Sant Jordi, formerly Juseff Abarim, who witnessed to his brother's knifing, the rape of his niece and her wet-nurse, and his own robbery and beating: Danvila y Collado, "El robo de la judería de Valencia en 1391," 390, doc. 25.

21 "Senyor sobirà après Déu en Catalunya": Arxiu Històric de la Ciutat de Girona, I.1.2.1, lliçal 5, llibre 2, fol 39r (1342).

provides historical testimony to Christian accounts of the more ancient reaches of sacred history. Now, on July 9, 1391, it seems that, to the contrary, God is explicitly authorizing their removal from Valencia and its environs. Perhaps—Martin does not go this far but others will—with this mass conversion of the Jews, God is revealing the apocalyptic potential of the present, pointing toward the promised end of history, at which the Jews will either be saved or disappear from the earth.²²

In any event, King John refuses to concede his jurisdiction, or to recognize an inflection point in sacred history. His response to his brother stresses that this insult to his sovereignty must be met with a “punishment so cruel” that it will serve as “sovereign example, for we and you and other princes and officials must... punish such incitements and riots..., in such a way that your punishment be divulged and renown, ... passing beyond all justice.” The attack on the Jews and on his royal power should be punished with the immediate execution of three or four hundred of the guilty, without trial or any regard to legal process or privileges.²³ John is here insisting that the king—like God—can decide to suspend the normal processes of law in the exercise of his justice. Against the prince’s claim of God’s mysterious judgment, the king pits earthly politics and the sovereign’s legal claim to decide the exception.

It is the municipal council that makes the kerygmatic discourse most explicit, in its (successful) efforts to save its citizens from royal punishment and to ensure that the city remains Jew-free. The council’s letters present the assaults as a moment of divine antinomianism, a miraculous suspension of the laws of both nature and kingdom for the elimination of the Jews: an assertion, in other words, of God’s supreme sovereignty interrupting human habit and history. These begin by stressing the “many and good” preventative measures they had taken. “But,” the councilors add in an early letter, using an apt biblical citation to point toward the gap between politics human and divine, “unless

22 Circa 1393, for example, Antoni Rieri of Lerida drew such conclusions, seeing in the events of 1391 the promised signs of the conversion of that part of the Jews that would be saved, and the massacre of the rest as followers of the anti-Christ. He was accused, among other things, of preaching that the prophesied time had arrived ‘in quo omnes iudei debant interfici, ut nullus iudeus in mundo deinceps remaneret’ (‘in which they all should kill the Jews, so that no Jew remain in the world henceforth’). See De Puig i Oliver, “La Incantatio studii ilerdensis de Nicolau Eimeric, O.P.,” 47.

23 ACA:C 1878:66 v (1391/07/13): “aquelles corregir e castigar, en tal manera que vostra punicio e castich sia divulgada e anomenada, no tan solament per nostres regnes e terres mes encara per los altres, passant hi ultra tota justicia.” See also ACA:C 1961:41 v-42v (July 16) [=Hinojosa #14; Baer I, 409]. See also ACA:C 1961:43r (July 17) [=Hinojosa, #20]. Only 5 or 6 people had been imprisoned for the attacks.

God guards a city, he guards in vain who watches it.” (Psalm 126.1)²⁴ Henceforth the council’s efforts would be devoted to the demonstration that this rupture was itself an act of God, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit everywhere evident in prophecy and miracle, a “divine mystery” beyond the judgment of man.²⁵

The council gathered evidence of numerous wonders. Before the riots one Jew had dreamt three times of Jesus being crucified. And during the riots themselves another Jew saw a towering figure standing on the roof of the main synagogue, carrying a child on his shoulders “in the fashion that one paints St. Christopher.” Within days of the riot the synagogue was cleaned and a portrait of St. Christopher placed within it, producing a constant pilgrimage and so large a kindling of candles that “you would not believe.”²⁶ So many Jews had sought baptism the day of the riot that the clergy feared a shortage of chrism. Instead there was surplus, achieved by a number of miracles. In the parish of Sant Andreu a vessel left empty before supper was displayed overflowing after the meal. A foreign cleric said mockingly that he knew well how this had been achieved, at which point the vessel was found again to be empty. The doubting chaplain threw himself to the floor in contrition, and the vessel filled once more. The councilors sent four notaries to collect evidence of these miracles, all “seen with the eyes, proven, and experienced.” As for the final miracle, it was the scale of the conversions themselves, not only in the city but throughout the land. (As the Jewish leader Ḥasdai Crescas put it, no Jew remained in the entire kingdom of Valencia except in the town of Morvedre.) No Christian, the councilors reminded the king, could be unhappy about the conversions themselves, regardless of the crimes that might have accompanied them. Even the converts “understand and say that the robbery was the cause of the cleansing of their sins.” “Consider for yourself whether these things can have a natural cause. We believe that they cannot, but can only be the work of the Almighty.”²⁷

24 AMV, MC A-19, fol. 241r-245v, [=Hinojosa, doc. #7]

25 The Valencians’ first letter speaks (like the Prince) of a “disposicio divinal” and uses the curious phrase “fortunal pertilencia” to describe the riots: AMV, LM, g3-5, fol. 19r-20r (July 9). Less than a week later (fol. 20v-22v, July 14) they speak of a “misteri divinal,” evidenced “per los miracles e maravelles qui deus veurets.” The admission of adult leadership is at fols. 23r-24r.

26 On the 16th of July the king protested fruitlessly against the conversion of the synagogue into a church: “do not suffer the said synagogue to be unmade, for we wish and intend to rebuild the said Jewish community.” ACA:C 1961:41v-42v (July 16): “alguns volen fer esgleya de la sinagoga de la dita aljama... no soffrats que la dita sinagoga sie deffeta, car nos volem e entenem reparar la dita aljama.”

27 AMV, LM, g3-5, fol. 20v-22v (July 14). The city writes a similar letter to the king on the 17th (AMV, LM g3-5, fol. 23r-24r), reminding him that no Christian can be displeased by the conversion of the Jews: “a tots feels christians deu plaure, empero, senyor, la inquisicio e

According to the municipality, miracle marked these murders and conversions as events shaken free from the weight of human custom, law, and politics, events produced by God's visible eruption into history. The king's advisors remained dubious. According to them, the council invented the miracle of the chrism in order to "excuse the event or even approve it in order to alleviate the punishment of the guilty."²⁸ The council in turn compared its critics to those who spread discord over the meaning of scripture. Concerning the miracle of the chrism, "we believe that if we had been quiet about it the stones would have cried it out." Besides, there were now infinitely more miracles to report, among them the lighting, without the aid of human hands, of the new lamps in the church of St. Christopher (formerly the main synagogue); the miraculous multiplication of the lamp-oil; and that oil's healing power, which was every day curing the sick and infirm who came from all parts of the kingdom to be anointed with it. "Now let every slanderer see if the divine virtues should be silenced!"²⁹

At this level of resolution, and abiding within this particular historical moment, we might want to present (as some contemporaries did) these forced conversions as a triumph of miracle and the forces of kerygma over those of habit and the psycho-social: an antinomian moment in which spiritual potential breaks free from the dead deterministic weight of the past. But history did not end in 1391, nor did our forces cease their interplay, and the relation between those forces could seem otherwise from a different time, place, or subjectivity. To Martín Sánchez, looking back from the sixteenth century, the forced conversions of Jews in the late-fourteenth and early fifteenth seemed less a miracle than a grave human error.

The prior of the Augustinians of Valencia, Sánchez was himself charged with the task of investigating the forced conversions of Muslims in Valencia in 1521, at much the same time that he came to be investigated by the Inquisition. According to witnesses, he had said that "Saint Vicent Ferrer is very guilty of this, to have made the Jews Christians by force and mixed them with the natural Christians, and now they suffer disgrace and punishments." According to Mercedes García-Arenal, who discusses the case in her "Theologies of

punició dels principals malfeytors no romandra." Similarly they write to the council of Barcelona on July 20 (AMV, LM g3-5, fol. 27r-28r) that they will inquire and punish, "com no deia cessar per tot lo be seguit dels dits babtismes e sguardada la intencio e qualitat del dit primer mal." Ḥasdai Crescas' "Letter to the community of Avignon" is included in Ibn Verga, *Das Buch Schevet Jehuda*, 128.

28 AMV, LM g3-5, fol. 34v: "escusar la culpa del esvaiment o approvar aquell per alleviar la punició dels culpables" (July 21?, 29?). Cf. 30r.

29 AMV:LM, 30v-31r (for the miracles), 34v; 37r-v.

Baptism,” Martín Sánchez was “not only looking at the social realities created by these events but also taking into account the persecution inflicted on the converts by the Inquisition.” He was, we might say, giving the psycho-social force of history its due, at the expense of miracle.³⁰

4 Can We Convert from History?

All the chapters in this volume explore some form of a debate between, on the one hand, the power of intention, conversion, and baptism to break with the past and, on the other, that of history and habit to overwhelm even the power of God’s sacramental and miraculous power. This is true, albeit in reverse, even of Ram Ben-Shalom’s essay, that examines the converts from their un-converted co-religionists’ point of view. Out of this debate over the force (or lack thereof) of conversion there emerged many discourses, including those that provide the title for this volume: discourses of genealogy and race, and also discourses of grace, sovereignty, will, and interiority, among many others. Conversion was, in all of the faiths touched on in this volume, a stage upon which the persistence of the old confronted the possibility of the new, a wrestling ring in which to grapple with the force of history.

Can we break with history? And if so, what force is required? The question is an ancient one, immured at the foundations of our discipline, and I hope that it is becoming clearer why, in the Abrahamic faiths and the cultures influenced by them, that question has often taken the form of conversion. I have already mentioned a few among the moderns who paused to pose it: most notably Kierkegaard and Rosenzweig, both of whom wrestled with the wretched angel of Hegel’s historicism. Let me conclude with a last example, one whose teachings still animate the more post-modern wings of our profession: that of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Second Untimely Meditation*.

“On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” is an inquiry into the appropriate relationship of the human to the weight of history. The answer is subjective, not absolute:

To determine this degree, and therewith the boundary at which the past has to be forgotten if it is not to become the gravedigger of the present, one would have to know exactly how the great *plastic power* of a man, a people, a culture is: I mean by plastic power the capacity to develop out

³⁰ On Martín Sánchez, see pp. 367–69 of this volume. The quotes are from pages 368 and 367.

of oneself in one's own way, to transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken moulds.

But Nietzsche believed that in his own age the borderline had been badly misplaced, thanks to the false apostles of a Hegelian "science of universal becoming, history." "Excess of history has attacked life's plastic powers."³¹

And yet for a great spirit the achievement of a salvific relation between past and present remains possible, if only as a violent act of conversion.

The best we can do is to confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge of it, and through a new, stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away. It is an attempt to give oneself, as it were *a posteriori*, a past in which one would like to originate in opposition to that in which one did originate:—always a dangerous attempt because it is so hard to know the limit to denial of the past and because second natures are usually weaker than the first.

The phrase resonates with the definitions of conversion we have previously encountered. We might even say that, in his description of the modern subject's appropriate revolt against history, Nietzsche provides, as eloquently as William James but less dogmatically, a definition of conversion and the force it requires. Nietzsche's has the added virtue that, unlike James, he is aware how much the terms of his own psychological diagnosis owe to the past. He presents the deadly force of the "science of history—causal and psycho-social (not Nietzsche's word) as it may appear to be—as itself inextricable related to the kerygmatic (not Nietzsche's word) force of Christian apocalyptic temporality. "In this sense, we are still living in the Middle Ages, and history is still disguised theology."³²

This is not the place to explore Nietzsche's meditations on the relationship between history and theology, or his claims, in the latter parts of "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," that Jesus himself, in his true greatness, would not himself have aspired to become historical in the way that the Christian faith became. But even without lingering further, Nietzsche's example can prod us toward a self-conscious conclusion. It was in order to come to terms with the force of history that he developed "a new strict discipline" capable of

31 Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, "gravedigger," 62; "science," 77–78; "excess," 120.

32 Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*: "the best," 76; "disguised theology," 102.

achieving—or so he presumably believed—conversion to a different relation with the past. We call that historical discipline “genealogy,” and it has come to inform the practice of many in our own generation of historians.³³ It is one of the many virtues of this illuminating volume that it reminds us of the degree to which many of the aspirations of our discipline have been born from the tense union of the historical with the conversionary. May its readers be inspired to come to terms, each in their own way, with the force of the past.

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33 Michel Foucault played a notable role in informing that practice. See for example his “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, 139–64.

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