

Mellon-Sawyer Seminar, Oxford 2009-2010

**Christian conversion in late
antiquity: some issues to consider**

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The purpose of this introductory contribution is to set out – at the invitation of the organizers – the framework within which the term ‘late antiquity’ is currently understood, and certain themes and questions that seem inherent in any attempt to understand the processes of conversion in late antiquity. It falls into three parts – first, observations about ‘late antiquity’, and then comments on some of the issues surrounding the topic of conversion and on the methodology that might be used. Since I am not an Islamicist, I concentrate on Christianity. However, it is one of the central aims of the project to consider the similarities and differences between Christian and Islamic conversion, and we therefore need a parallel setting of the scene dealing with the topic of conversion to Islam in the early period of its existence. It is equally impossible – though there is no space here to attempt it - to separate a full discussion of Christian conversion from the very lively discussions that are currently going on about the continuance or even revival of some forms of polytheism and the equally important recent work on Judaism and Christian-Jewish relations during this period.

I

'Late antiquity' – the state of the debate

This project adopts a long chronology for late antiquity, one that encompasses the Arab conquest and the arrival of Islam. This is a view which has occupied much of the field since the publication of Peter Brown's book, *The World of Late Antiquity. From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad*, in 1971, though it has also attracted detractors, especially recently. This is a matter which is still engaging strong debate, as shown in the fact that the three opening articles in the first issue, in 2008, of the new *Journal of Late Antiquity* were all on the question of periodization.¹ The debate about the end or fall of the Roman empire, exemplified in recent publications by Wolfgang Liebeschuetz, Bryan Ward-Perkins and Peter Heather, is also essentially about periodization. In a sense it's a matter of how you cut the cake. I have indeed myself promoted the concept of

¹ Arnaldo Marcone, 'A long late antiquity? Considerations on a controversial periodization', *JLA* 1.1(2008), 4-19; Edward James, 'The rise and function of the concept 'late antiquity'', *ibid.*, 20-29; Clifford Ando, 'Decline, fall and transformation', *ibid.*, 30 ff; cf e.g. Arnaldo Marcone, 'La caduta di Roma all'inizio del III millennio', in Paolo Desideri, Mauro Moggi, Mario Pani, eds., *Antidoron. Studi in onore di Barbara Scardigli Forster* (Pisa, 2007), 267-80, and many others. Critical of the Brown position: A. Giardina, 'Esplosione di tardoantico', *Studi Storici* 40 (1999), 157-80; *id.*, 'The transition to late antiquity', in J. Scheidel, ed., *Cambridge Economic History of the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge, 2007), 743-68, and see the debate in *Studi Storici* 45 (2004). For the 'long' period, see Averil Cameron, 'The perception of crisis', in *Morfologie sociali e culturali in Europa fra tarda antichità e alto medioevo*, 3-9 aprile 1997, *Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo* 45 (Spoleto, 1998), 9-34; however, some doubts as to its continuing appeal in the 21st century are expressed in Averil Cameron, 'The 'long' late antiquity. A late-twentieth century model?', in T.P. Wiseman, ed., *Classics in Progress*, British Academy Centenary volume (Oxford, 2002), 165-91. In general the objections to the Brown model are that it is excessively cultural in emphasis, that it ignores the fall of the western empire and the role of barbarians, that it is insufficiently aware of evidence of economic decline, and of administrative issues. On the other hand, the idea of a clear 'break' between late antique and Islamic culture has been shown to be completely unfounded (for the archaeological evidence see Alan Walmsley, *Early Islamic Syria. An Archaeological Assessment*, London, 2007).

the long late antiquity – with early Islam as part of it - though I have also expressed some doubts. However the concept has served us very well for 40 years or so (and made a lot of careers). The appearance of a journal and a recently announced Oxford University Press monograph series on ‘late antiquity’ still says a lot; moreover, the transition in the east to an Islamic world is so important, and so central to questions of conversion that it is highly appropriate that this project is formulated on the basis of the ‘long’ late antiquity, and effectively framed by Christianization at one end and Islamicization at the other (though this must not imply a crude chronological shift). The concept of the project is also geographical: we are to study ‘the Late Antique world as it has been constructed by historians, broadly comprising the territories and neighbours of the Roman Empire (essentially Europe, North Africa and the Middle East)’. In the project description (from which I quote) there is a natural reference to Peter Brown’s *World of Late Antiquity*, which has acquired its iconic status, precisely for these two features - its chronological range (its subtitle is ‘from Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad’) and its kaleidoscopic coverage, embracing Sasanian Persia, the Caucasus, Ethiopia and much else. The present project proposes to investigate conversion to Christianity and conversion to Islam – two ‘conversion movements’ which ‘sit at opposite ends chronologically and on different sides of some solidly grounded academic boundaries’. This is indeed premised on the concept of late antiquity – ‘a broad church’, but one which, it is nevertheless suggested, can be framed by religious conversion, and these two conversions in particular.

There is no need here for further exposition of the ‘Brownian model’ of late antiquity, whose main outlines have become very familiar: it is an approach

which is essentially benign, multicultural, long in chronology and encompassing and inclusive in geographical terms. Some of this thinking is embodied in the last two volumes of the Cambridge Ancient History, though by no means every contributor has the same starting point. But it should be emphasized that there was no one moment in this long period when the empire could be said to be 'Christian'; indeed, these ambiguities and fluidities are exactly the factors that make this project interesting.

II

'Conversion' in late antiquity: some issues

The obstacle of Christian triumphalism

Late antiquity is often taken to be a particularly religious period – but we need to guard against being misled by the available source material, our tendency to take contemporary accounts, and especially contemporary narratives of Christianization, at face value, and importantly, the centrality of religion and religious sources to the Brownian model. Some recent publications, especially by archaeologists, have therefore attempted to focus on secularity and material culture. It is a considerable problem for historians however that central to many, even all, the contemporary Christian sources is the desire to find a narrative of conversion. While this may indeed be a heroic narrative, or an anxious narrative, or a contested narrative, it is very hard indeed not to fall into the trap of believing it. This difficulty is stressed by Peter Brown himself in his chapter on 'Christianization and religious conflict' in Cambridge Ancient History

XIII,² and it is well put also by Clifford Ando in an article of 1996, which points out both the complexities and ambiguities of Christian writing, and the impossibility of expecting a neutral (and therefore objectively reliable) account of conversion from these sources: Christian writing could not help but be apologetic writing.³ Almost without exception the Christian sources present Christian history in terms of a genealogy of origins, and a triumphant narrative of Christianization. A very similar process of systematization, narrativity and justification took place in early Muslim literature, as is brilliantly demonstrated in Tarif Khalidi's recent *Images of Muhammad. Narratives of the Prophet in Islam across the Centuries* (London, 2009). There was of course not just a single narrative adopted by Christian writers, who often had opposing perspectives; but all shared the same triumphalist drive, and the same urge to list the heroes and villains of their own particular side. Peter Brown memorably says therefore that the Christian narrative in the period was not about conversion, it was about *triumph*, that is, victory. He calls it 'a firm narrative choice', 'the "roar" of a Christian narrative' which is extremely difficult for us to work with.⁴ Just think of Eusebius, with his highly tendentious 'history' of the church. He established a framework for conceptualizing the rise of Christianity which many others followed and extended later. For Eusebius the ground-breaking Council of Nicaea in AD 325 presented interesting issues of historical methodology, but later Christian writers had no hesitation in weaving the history of councils into the

² Peter Brown, 'Christianization and religious conflict', in Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey, eds., *The Late Empire, AD 337-425*, The Cambridge Ancient History XIII (Cambridge, 1998), 632-64.

³ Clifford Ando, 'Pagan apologetics and Christian intolerance in the ages of Themistius and Augustine', *J ECS* 4.2 (1996), 171-207.

⁴ 'Christianization and religious conflict', 636, 635.

genealogy of early Christianity as well. Or conversely, think of the genealogies of heresy which were the mirror-image of these triumphalist scenarios.⁵ The genre of heresiology, with its lists of 'top heretics',⁶ was in fact just a way of claiming that your own side was best. Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians had different versions, but they all used the same technique. The Christian narrative of late antiquity *was* about conversion, but it was a story told in terms of competition and triumphalism, and dealt with other Christian groups as much as non-Christians.

Defining Christianity

Ando has also argued against the tendency of modern scholars, even critical ones, to draw too sharp a line between Christian and existing Roman religion. On this reading, late antiquity was not in fact somehow more 'religious' than preceding periods of the Roman empire. Nor was there a clear divide when the 'Christian empire' began. Enormous areas of overlap and ambiguity continued in practice, language and concepts between pagans and Christians; this is one reason why Christians were so insistent on drawing lines, asserting difference, establishing discipline and trying to keep their flocks in line.⁷

Apologetic is inherent in Christian writing, and this should make us very suspicious of the fact that a high proportion of Christian writing in late antiquity consists of a concerted attempt to claim difference. Christian writers had a clear

⁵ D. Kimber Buell, *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁶ Volker Menze and Kutlu Akalin, *John of Tella's Profession of Faith. The Legacy of a Sixth-Century Syrian Orthodox Bishop* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009), 23.

⁷ *Ibid.*; also Clifford Ando, *A Matter of the Gods* (Berkeley, 2008); Clifford Ando and Jörg Rüpke, eds., *Religion and Law in Classical and Christian Rome* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2006).

aim; they might have pagans, or Jews, or heterodox Christians as their target, but in all cases their aim was to claim success. The gap between what they claimed and the actuality might be considerable.

Measuring Christianization

Classic statements about the spread of Christianity, following Adolf von Harnack's *Mission and Expansion of Christianity* (1902), focused on the supposed appeal of Christianity in a context in which paganism was conceived as being in decay. This is a subject in itself, as is Harnack's idea of what Christianity was, but we no longer think this way now, and the issues surrounding conversion in late antiquity are not the same as those for the first two or three centuries. In some ways it is difficult to separate the study of conversion in late antiquity from the topic as it relates to the first three centuries of Christianity. But in either case, given the nature of the source material, any attempt to measure actual conversion to Christianity, that is, the actual level of Christianization in numerical terms, is very difficult. For instance, estimates still vary considerably of the percentage of Christians in the empire at the time of Constantine, and in any case can only be based on guesses. To give another example, taking the sources at face value is one of the several problems with Rodney Stark's sociological explanation of the success of Christianity.⁸ Is it really to be believed (as he argues) that people converted to Christianity because they saw Christians being kind to each other, or that mass conversion can be explained

⁸ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity. A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); there are nevertheless many points in Stark's book which are of central relevance to this project: see also the discussion in the special issue of *J ECS* 6.2 (1998).

demographically because Christian families had more children and looked after them better?

It is just as difficult to argue for the number of Christians from the size of Christian buildings – yet this is also still done.⁹ Or indeed, though possibly with slightly more credibility, on the basis of epigraphy, especially tombstones. Measuring Christianization, or deciding when the empire ‘became Christian’ is a real trap. This supposed event is often placed somewhere in the fifth century, but the generation after Constantine has its advocate in T.D. Barnes, for instance. Brown argues for a complicit willingness by many Christians to allow the continuance of pagan practice, for the limits on what imperial legislation could actually achieve, and for the continuation through the fifth century of ‘a patchwork of religious communities, highly localized and socially segmented’.¹⁰ He seems to think things changed in the sixth. I am one who thinks that whatever Christianization means, it took even longer and was a much less clear cut process even than Brown allows for here. The sets of Christian questions and answers, several from the seventh century, but some earlier, also suggest that a high degree of confusion still existed among the supposed faithful. Imperial legislation from the 380s and 390s onwards, apparently meant to enforce Christianity or proscribe pagan or heretical practices, used to be seen as a pretty straightforward indicator that the state was now Christian. But given a closer understanding of how late Roman law actually worked, this ‘evidence’ also now

⁹ See Brown, 651, n. for this methodological difficulty. Also Ramsay McMullen, *the Second Church. Popular Christianity AD 200-400* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), passim. Cf also id., *Christianizing the Roman Empire, AD 100-400* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984) and *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1997).

¹⁰ Ibid., 641.

seems like a minefield; laws were repeated, and were usually in any case rescripts addressed to local enquiries or local petitions. Law was not made just from the top, or straightforwardly enforced.¹¹ The state was rarely in a position to implement such legislation, and rarely did so (this is also true of the supposedly Christian empire of Byzantium). Debate about the major break often assumed to have occurred under Constantine also still rages, with some advocating a 'Constantinian revolution', others making strong efforts to claim him as 'tolerant', and ecumenical, or emphasizing the lack of enforcement of pro-Christian policies. Ray Van Dam indeed has recently attempted to present him in the mould of Augustus and embed him in the context of existing Roman religion.¹²

We will therefore need to confront two obvious questions: how can we *measure* conversion, and what did the late Roman state, or indeed any state, including Islamic ones, really think it was doing?

What counts as conversion?

My next point is about the definition of conversion itself. Is conversion, seen as an empire-wide phenomenon, the same as Christianization, which is how the question is usually presented in the scholarly literature on late antiquity? But the question also presents itself on an individual level. What IS conversion? Is it a personal *volte face*, a matter of belief or revelation, rather in the manner

¹¹ Brown, art. cit., 639. From the many recent revisionist publications on late Roman law see Jill Harries, *Law and Empire in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1999); John Matthews, *Laying Down the Law. A Study of the Theodosian Code* (New Haven, 2000).

¹² R. Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); cf. also his *Becoming Christian: the Conversion of Roman Cappadocia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

proposed by Arthur Darby Nock's classic work, *Conversion. The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (1933), or St Paul on the road to Damascus? Or can it be rather a matter of outward conformity? Using the comparison of Christians and Muslims in Ottoman society and the religious situation in many countries in recent times, even today, it can entail changing names, as well as social practice, for convenience or under some duress. The 'sincerity' of conversion is very hard to detect, and it can be a matter of family, social, economic or political pressure: the phenomenon of 'crypto-Christians' who reveal themselves when times change is frequent, and I would suggest that it is by no means just a modern one. In Byzantine times, for example, the changing fortunes of Byzantine/Islamic power relations in eastern Anatolia led to changing regimes for the local populations, and sometimes even to the movement of populations by the authorities, which ought to lead historians to ask questions about the religious effects similar to those which currently hotly debated about such changes in our own time. Similarly late antique Christian writers were worried about whether conversions were genuine, or whether people were 'false Christians', still pagan at heart. No doubt this was behind the insistence that Manichaeans, and others who converted from Judaism or 'heresy', were required to sign a *libellus* publicly adjuring their former beliefs: many of these formulae survive. This kind of conversion needed public 'proof' in order to be accepted.

Thinking about conversion today

Conversion is a particularly difficult concept at the moment. We live in an age where in many quarters active mission and conversion are not thought of as

politically correct, not quite playing by the rules. The secularism agenda, that is, the idea that there is in the contemporary world an inexorable progress towards secularity, has taken some hard knocks recently,¹³ but there is still unease over the concept of 'conversion'. In the modern context, it is of course also frequently associated with colonialism. At the same time conversion in some cultures poses serious risks for the individual. From the pluralist point of view, since conversion is also premised on the idea that one religion is better than others, or even that all other religions are wrong (there is no salvation except through Christ), it poses clear difficulties in the contemporary western world of multiculturalism and post-colonialism. It seems to me obvious that post-enlightenment liberal and secularizing agendas, the narratives of secularism and modernity, will inevitably affect our approaches to conversion in earlier periods as a historical phenomenon. As for our own day, some contemporary Christian theologians have sufficiently lost confidence in their own right to convert others that they are debating not only the relation of Christianity to other religions but also whether religion itself is in fact pluralistic.¹⁴ Similarly Stark's marketplace model for the process of conversion to Christianity relies on the idea that all religions are more or less of equal value and that people will choose their religion out of self-interest or personal preference.¹⁵ Conversion is also today closely allied to

¹³ See e.g. Bryan Wilson, *Religion in a Secular Society: a Sociological Comment* (London, 1966); with S. Bruce, ed., *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis* (Oxford, 1992). Any study of conversion in the ancient world does now surely need methodological input from the field of history of religions.

¹⁴ Cf. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness. Towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987).

¹⁵ See also Leslie Newbigin, 'Religion for the market-place', in Gavin D'Costa, ed., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered. The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 135-48; on the 'choice'

questions of ethnicity and identity. For nationalist or political reasons, in some countries conversion is not officially allowed, or not allowed to particular groups, yet it continues unofficially, whether by missionaries, or encouraged by investment on a big scale from outside the country. Again, it is not obvious that conversion is an automatic aim of all religions (think indeed of early Islamic Syria), or, conversely, that if a religion is not obviously out to convert, it follows that it has a clear concept of toleration (which is a modern idea).

Christians and Jews

I have wondered why Judaism seemed not to be included in the project's formulation alongside Christianity and Islam. After all, Christians put a vast amount of effort into distancing themselves from Jews from the first century onwards, the very intensity of their efforts revealing how difficult this was. Christian attempts to distance themselves from (and claim superiority to) Jews started very early and went hand in hand with similar efforts to brand some beliefs as heretical and others as orthodox. The question of Jewish and Christian proselytism is also an old and intense matter of disagreement by modern scholars (did Jews proselytize and did Christians learn this from them?), but the many publications of recent years make it clear how strongly the Jewish diaspora established itself across the empire and how attractive it seemed to many. Recently it has been argued that Jews themselves in late antiquity reacted in religious terms to the rising success of Christianity. In this heady atmosphere the

theory see I.R. Iannacone, 'Rational choice: framework for the scientific study of religion', in Lawrence A. Young, ed., *Rational Choice Theory and Religion. Summary and Assessment* (New York, 1997), 25-45.

striking title of Daniel Boyarin's book, *Border-lines*,¹⁶ points to the effort – not at all always successful – invested in drawing lines, setting boundaries, and keeping up the work of asserting difference. And whatever we may think of Islamic origins, the arrival of Islam in the Roman empire in the seventh century was preceded both by a flourishing of Jewish confidence and cultural creativity in Palestine, shown in the extraordinary mosaics from places like Sepphoris,¹⁷ and by violent and perhaps predictable anti-Jewish feeling expressed by Christian writers. In the seventh century as well, the genre of Christian *Adversus Iudaeos* literature reached a new peak – literary dialogues composed by Christians to answer 'Jewish' objections to Christianity. Some of them contain what seems to be quite circumstantial detail about Jewish communities in the Near East. But the dramatic ending in every case was of course discomfiture on the Jewish side, if not actual conversion.¹⁸ They are essentially pieces of Christian apologetic propaganda, and must have played their part in the tense and anxious situation in early seventh-century Palestine where Christians themselves were divided and under attack from Persians as well as Muslims.

¹⁶ Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines. The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). See also Seth Schwarz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹⁷ See now Fergus Millar, 'Narrative and identity in mosaics from the late Roman Near East: pagan, Jewish and Christian', in Yaron Z. Eliav, Elise A. Friedland and Sharon Herbert, eds., *The Sculptural Environment of the Roman Near East. Reflections on Culture, Ideology and Power* (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 225-56.

¹⁸ There is a large bibliography, from which see for instance *Travaux et Mémoires* 11 (1991); Averil Cameron, 'Blaming the Jews: the seventh-century invasions of Palestine in context', *Travaux et Mémoires* 14 (*Mélanges Gilbert Dagron*) (2002), 57-78; B. Flusin, *Saint Anastase le Perse et l'histoire de la Palestine au début du VIIe siècle* (Paris, 1992).

Conversion and violence

Part of the story of Christianization in late antiquity also lay in the use of force, and indeed violence features largely in current writing on late antiquity. Imperial legislation as such perhaps had less effect than appears. But Christians themselves could be violent towards pagans and towards each other. Bishops were exiled with considerable frequency, with the twists of ecclesiastical politics, and bishops and clergy went into exile, wandered from place to place and went into hiding, especially during the Arian controversies and then again with the eastern reaction to the Council of Chalcedon. Secret ordinations of non-Chalcedonian clergy on a mass scale by John of Tella and then by Jacob Bar-adai in the sixth century were also part of the conversion story. Ecclesiastical writers, whether Chalcedonian or non-Chalcedonian, emphasized the sufferings of their own side, as also happened in their various accounts of Christians demolishing temples or converting them into churches; their claims are certainly exaggerated, but some of this certainly did happen. Late antiquity was not always very nice or benign. Quite often there was religious violence, storming of synagogues, street disturbances, and similar manifestations.¹⁹ Bishops and local Christian communities were not above pressurizing individuals.²⁰ But again, Peter Brown argues against any simple linear effect and for a complex but perhaps realistic willingness by most to live with variety.

¹⁹ Michael Gaddis, *There is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ. Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (Berkeley, 2005); Brown, 646-49 (note that the chronological scope of Cambridge Ancient History XIII does not allow him to take in the urban violence of the early sixth century, and in fact he emphasizes the general desire to avoid such scenes); Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity. Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia, 2009).

²⁰ Brown, art. cit., 659.

This prompts the question, not only how can we measure conversion, and what does it mean, but also, what do we mean by 'Christianity'? The term covers doctrine, faith, practice, liturgical practice, ritual, and there was not just one version, or a simple linear story.

Processes and techniques of conversion

Who converted people to Christianity and by what means? Was it top-down, or did it happen at multiple levels? Bishops and holy men and women are often credited with conversions in hagiography and other Christian texts. However the formal processes of conversion are also highly relevant. Ritual and liturgy are sometimes neglected as key factors in Christianization in the period. In fact the Christian baptismal requirement involved training, sometimes over a long period, and mass baptisms at Easter were public affairs, a matter of display for the local church and the bishop, meant to reinforce the momentousness of the act and impress others. Conversion was of enormous ideological importance to the church and self-respecting bishops considered it part of their duty to convert, and to show that conversions had happened. This is revealed in countless examples from hagiographic sources, and we can frequently see it in action, for instance in northern Italy in the ambit of Ambrose, and in Anatolia in the sixth century in the *Life* of Nicholas of Syon, to take only these out of many other examples. Once 'conversion' to Christianity had happened, constant discipline, education and watchfulness were required on the part of clergy and bishops. This shows itself in Christian writing: in the early sixth century the non-Chalcedonian John of Tella, who supposedly ordained thousands of non-Chalcedonian clergy, produced 27 canons, a *Profession of Faith*, questions and

answers and other works. This was not at all unusual: nearly all the leading Fathers of the Church produced a huge amount and a huge range of interpretative and pastoral writing. When we think of the enormous effort that went into this pastoral education, exhortation and discipline, I wonder whether this differentiates Christian conversion from conversion in most other religions. It certainly makes one reflect that it was hard to achieve and hard to maintain.

Networks of communication

Communication networks were important for the spread of Christianity at local and personal levels,²¹ and structures – political, social, religious – and communications – for instance the networks of bishoprics – were important for large-scale conversion in late antiquity. The sixth century also seems to have been a time for state-sponsored mission, raising the important question of conversion and politics.²² A question that might be asked is what it really meant for a people as a whole when its king ‘converted’, like Tzath of Lazica or for the Ghassanids, Christian Arab allies of Rome in the sixth century. Also in the sixth century, Procopius presents Justinian’s building policy in the provinces in terms of the twin aims of mission and security, and every large fortified site also had its basilica, usually more than one. Again, the Gothic war in Italy was naturally presented in terms of right religion. But one of the hardest questions to

²¹ Brown, 654 f., drawing on Edward Shils, *Center and Periphery* (Chicago, 1975), 349-54.

²² I. Engelhardt, *Mission und Politik in Byzanz. Ein Beitrag zur Strukturanalyse byzantinischer Mission zur Zeit Justins und Justinians*, *Miscell. Byzantina Monacensia* 19 (Munich, 1974); for the west: Ian Wood, *The Missionary Life. Saints and the Evangelization of Europe 400-1050* (Harlow, 2001); Richard Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe. From Paganism to Christianity 371-1386 AD* (London, 1997).

disentangle is not that of the interrelation between the state and 'the church', but that of the various shifting formal and informal elements that together went to form 'the church' as an institution. Faced with the struggles and tensions between west and east in the sixth century, and with the divisions between Christians themselves in the east, we can hardly speak of a single 'church'. The story of Christianization has to be multiple.

III

On comparison

A central question for this project is how historians should study a phenomenon like conversion. Our own historical ideologies and sympathies will make a great difference, for example whether we call ourselves social historians (as Peter Brown does), 'cultural historians', historians of religion, or perhaps historical materialists. The role given to religion in history is right at the heart of this question. For instance, conversion and Christianity as such get little if any direct treatment in Christopher Wickham's important book *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (2005) – because they belong to 'cultural history', which he does not include, or because he writes from a broadly materialist viewpoint? There is also a strong element of sociology in much current writing on religion in late antiquity, but is the phenomenon of conversion in late antiquity capable of being understood in terms of sociology; or, to put it another way, is sociological method enough? John Haldon's chapter on Byzantium in *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires*, ed. by Ian Morris and Walter Scheidel, is much indebted to sociology and critical of traditional materialist approaches which leave out the

instrumentality of belief systems; nevertheless, while wanting to bring belief into historical explanation, it is striking that he takes it for granted that that explanation will still be 'epistemologically realist and materialist'.²³ A quite different kind of sociological model could of course be drawn from the work of Michel Foucault or Pierre Bourdieu, in terms of *habitus*, power relations and identity.²⁴

Given that comparison between Christian and Islamic conversion is built into the framing of this project, I hope I may now turn to the comparative method itself. The question that arises is simply this: how do we know what to compare? Brent Shaw in his review of Christopher Wickham's *Framing the Early Middle Ages*,²⁵ invites us to look far beyond not only the 'conventional late antiquity' but also even the much broader geographical and chronological range adopted by Wickham and we now have two volumes from Walter Scheidel and colleagues (reviewed by Christopher Kelly in *TLS*, 5 Nov., 2009), which are also as it happens related to a Mellon-Sawyer seminar (on 'The First Great Divergence: China and Europe, 500-800 CE', 2007).²⁶ A large body of current writing, in which late antiquity increasingly features, advocates a broader

²³ John F. Haldon, 'The Byzantine empire', in Ian Morris and Walter Scheidel, eds., *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires. State Power from Assyria to Byzantium*, Oxford Studies in Early Empires (Oxford, 2009), 205-52, especially 252.

²⁴ For the Bourdieu model see e.g. Isabella Sandwell, *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity. Greeks, Jews and Pagans in Antioch* (Cambridge, 2007).

²⁵ Brent Shaw, 'After Rome. Transformations of the Mediterranean world', *New Left Review* 51 (May/June, 2008), 89-111; cf also 'Challenging Braudel: a new vision of the Mediterranean', *JRA* 14 (2001), 419-53.

²⁶ Morris and Scheidel, eds., *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires*; Walter Scheidel, *Rome and China. Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires* (Oxford, 2009).

‘Eurasian’, rather than a ‘Eurocentric’ viewpoint,²⁷ and indeed even in Peter Brown’s broad vision, the late antique world is constrained chronologically and geographically. So should we too be thinking about China (the favoured comparator) and other non-European states? Those who argue against Eurocentrism are doing so partly in order to oppose just the sort of linear narrative accounts that Christian writers have typically given of Christianization, or the ‘rise’, let alone the ‘triumph’, of Christianity; in Christopher Wickham’s words, they seek to avoid the trap of teleology, the sense of inevitable ‘progress’ towards a Christian or even a capitalist Europe. They therefore lead us to a much more structural approach. The sociologist Michael Mann in 1986 already drew on the comparison between Rome and China ²⁸ (and so indeed did Keith Hopkins, who spent some years as a professor of sociology at Brunel University). But Mann also regarded Christianization in late antiquity as producing ‘pacification’, the necessary condition for the development of European capitalism. He was therefore criticized by Perry Anderson for a sociological method that was historical rather than comparative, and he did not carry his interest in China as far as real comparison.²⁹ Yet it seems to me that conversion cannot easily be reduced to an explanation based on the structural features of a society, or even a religion. The question for this seminar in this case is: what are the elements that can be compared in relation to conversion? Ando opens a further article with the uncompromising statement that Christianization was ‘a

²⁷ E.g. in particular Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); J.M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

²⁸ Michael Mann, *the Sources of Social Power I. A History of Power from the beginning to AD 1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

²⁹ Perry Anderson, rev. of Mann, *TLS*, 12 Dec., 1986, 105-6; also Philip S. Gorski, in *Contemporary Sociology* 24.6 (1995), 772-74.

process ultimately reducible to acts of individual choice whose aggregate effects can be described in purely demographic terms'.³⁰ While this is open to challenge, it does point to the fact that conversion implies not only the importance of the individual but also change over time and therefore a narrative process. Structures versus diachronic change, and macro versus micro are issues to be considered by this seminar.

Although I have not been able to say much about Islam here, I have been struck by a sentence in Michael Mann's book, when having more or less consigned the eastern empire to unimportance, he says, 'the eastern empire itself was later swept aside, except in its heartland around Constantinople, by a religion of greater mobilizing power, Islam'.³¹ He comes back to Islam in an almost concluding chapter entitled (significantly), 'European conclusions'. Mann's overall argument is about the reasons behind European capitalism (in which he gives an important role to late antique Christianity) and there is a lot on which we could disagree with him.³² But however wrong and essentialist his throwaway remarks about Islam, he nevertheless illustrates a fundamental truth, namely that conversion, in the sense of the spread of a religion in specific historical areas and circumstances, is inherently a political matter; it has to do with state structures, and explaining and interpreting it is also an ideological matter for historians. But secondly, Mann also does what is almost standard, which is to concentrate on western Europe and airbrush out of the picture the complicating factor of the continuance of a Christian state in the east, that is the

³⁰ Clifford Ando, 'The Palladium and the Pentateuch: towards a sacred topography of the later Roman empire', *Phoenix* 55 (2001), 369-410.

³¹ Mann I, 334.

³² See Jack Goody, *Capitalism and Modernity. The Great Debate* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 90.

eastern empire. To say more on this would take me into a big area for which there is no time, and it is perhaps a subject that is gaining momentum;³³ suffice it to say that I was glad to see a chapter on Byzantium in Morris and Scheidel, *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires*, and more than intrigued to find that Edward Luttwak, no less, is now publishing on Byzantium (*The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, 2009).

Conclusion

This necessarily very incomplete introductory essay has omitted many topics that would be important to consider: for example (to name a few) the role of preaching and teaching; writing and education; daily life; the part played by liturgy and spectacle; wealth and charity; asceticism and the holy man; the evidence of hagiography; material evidence; the development of the role of bishops. It has left aside the crucial but huge topic of the religious framework within which Islam developed, or the question of whether there was an increasing move towards monotheism in late antiquity. In particular, in considering Christianity and Islam in relation to each other, it will be important to ask what the actual requirements of conversion were in either case, and how exclusive they were in practice. Being a Christian, or a particular type of Christian, or a Muslim, was not always quite the clearcut affair interested contemporaries want us to think. And if Judaism was affected in its late antique development by Christianity, so was Islam; Muslim writers too were very

³³ Averil Cameron, 'The absence of Byzantium', *Nea Hestia*, Jan, 2008, 4-59.

interested in Jesus and in Christianity, Christian writers apparently much less so in Islam.

Finally, what can the modern resonances of this question suggest for our own period? I think here not only of Islamism and the so-called 'anti-terror' campaign, but also in particular of the religious tensions in the Balkans and the new post-communist countries, where nationalism and outside influences are both powerful. The rewriting of history textbooks has become a highly political and debated issue, with the relative roles of Christianity and Islam high on the agenda. Religion and national identity are in some countries very much bound up with migration, and the social mix of population. So is religious history, and the identification of modern states with a particular religious past, especially if there are in fact religious divisions. The examples are many, but Russia is a case in point, with a 'Eurasianist' movement that identifies with the east rather than with Europe and with considerable tensions surrounding the redefinition of the concept of 'Orthodoxy'.³⁴ I believe all this has an impact on what this project is about. It makes the whole topic of conversion a 'hot' one; history is not neutral, neither is it innocent. It also imposes an even greater responsibility on those of us who are tackling this difficult subject.

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³⁴ M. Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism. An Ideology of Empire*, Eng trans. (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2008).