Forthcoming in Arietta Papaconstantinou, Neil McLynn and Daniel Schwartz, eds., *Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond* (Farnham: Ashgate, in press)

Chapter 1

Christian Conversion in Late Antiquity: Some Issues

Averil Cameron

Introduction

Any consideration of the processes and progress of conversion in late antiquity needs to start by considering the framework within which the term 'late antiquity' is currently understood. The following contribution (which concentrates on Christianity) thus falls into three parts – first, observations about 'late antiquity', next, comments on various issues surrounding the topic of conversion, and finally some thoughts on methodology. Since I am not an Islamicist, I cannot offer here the comparativist approach that is surely now needed more than ever before, except to urge the desirability of a parallel assessment dealing with the topic of conversion to Islam in the early period of its existence in the light of the many recent additions to the scholarship on both Christians and Islam in the early period. To return to the theme of Christian conversion, or what is often termed the 'Christianization' of the Roman empire, here too the parameters have dramatically shifted since the classic studies of earlier scholars such as Adolf Harnack.[1] Not only has there been an explosion in the very field of 'late antiquity', with an emphasis on religion and the various forms of religious expression; there has also been a corresponding increase in the attention paid to both Judaism and paganism (or

[1] See below, n. 23, with Jan. N. Bremmer, *The Rise of Christianity through the Eyes of Gibbon, Harnack and Stark*, Valedictory Lecture (Groningen, 2010).

polytheism) in late antiquity, with profoundly differing views being expressed. Within the sphere of the study of Christianity itself in late antiquity, a very marked 'turn to the east', to embrace both west and east Syrian Christianities, has been accompanied by greatly increased interest in the proceedings, management and reception of major and minor church councils and the theological splits and rivalries of the fifth to seventh centuries,[2] as well as a revisionist understanding of the working of law, including religious legislation, in late antiquity. The east in the period that saw the first appearance of Islam now emerges as a region in a state of religious ferment,[3] with all forms of religion acquiring heightened salience; Islam did not emerge in a religious vacuum but in a world which was already seeing profound religious change. When it did become established in the regions that had belonged to the Roman Near East and the Sasanian empire, it came as a new formation introducing a new religious dynamic into what was already a complex set of circumstances. This story cannot be told here, where the objective is more limited, but it means that over–simple differentials between supposedly clear–cut religious entities must now be abandoned.

I

'Late Antiquity' Again

---

[2] Greatly stimulated by the appearance of the first annotated English translations of the conciliar *Acts* of 451 and 553: *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, trans. with an introduction by Richard Price and Michael Gaddis (3 vols, Liverpool, 2005); *The Acts of Constantinople 553*, *with related texts from the Three Chapters Controversy*, trans. with an introduction and notes by Richard Price (2 vols, Liverpool, 2009); cf. Richard Price and Mary Whitby (eds), *Chalcedon in Context. Church Councils 400–700* (Oxford, 2008).

[3] See Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity, AD 395 to 700* (second edition, London, 2011), Chapter 8.

For the Mellon–Sawyer project from which this volume has emerged, a long chronology was adopted for late antiquity, one that encompasses at least the Arab conquest and the arrival of Islam in the early seventh century. This is a view which has prevailed in much of the field since the publication of Peter Brown's seminal book, *The World of Late Antiquity. From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad*, in 1971, though it has also attracted some detractors. This periodization is currently engaging strong debate, as shown in the fact that the three opening articles in the first issue of the new *Journal of Late Antiquity* in 2008 were all concerned with the question.[4] The renewed debate about the fall of the Roman empire, exemplified in recent publications by Wolfgang Liebeschuetz, Bryan Ward–Perkins and Peter Heather, is itself as much about

[4] Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London, 1971). See Arnaldo Marcone, 'A Long Late Antiquity? Considerations on a Controversial Periodization', *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 1/1 (2008): pp. 4–19; Edward James, 'The Rise and Function of the Concept "Late Antiquity"', ibid.: pp. 20–29; Clifford Ando, 'Decline, Fall and Transformation', ibid.: pp. 31–60; cf e.g. Arnaldo Marcone, 'La caduta di Roma all'inizio del III millenio', in Paolo Desideri, Mauro Moggi and Mario Pani (eds), *Antidoron. Studi in onore di Barbara Scardigli Forster* (Pisa, 2007), pp. 267–80, and many others. Critical of the Brown position: A. Giardina, 'Esplosione di tardoantico', *Studi Storici*, 40 (1999): pp. 157–80; A. Giardina, 'The Transition to Late Antiquity', in J. Scheidel (ed.), *Cambridge Economic History of the Graeco–Roman World* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 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* (Spoleto, 1998), pp. 9–34; some doubts 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), pp. 165–91.

periodization as it is about conceptualization.[5] There is of course no 'right way' to delineate 'periods' in history, and some indeed would make late antiquity continue much later, to AD 800, or even to AD 1000, seeing the early Islamic period as lying firmly within it. I have myself promoted the concept of the long late antiquity – to include the beginnings of Islam – but I have also expressed doubts; nevertheless, the concept has served us very well now for more than forty years, and the appearance of a new journal and a new Oxford University Press monograph series on 'late antiquity' still says a great deal about its durability and usefulness. It has for instance been a problem in the past that for disciplinary and institutional reasons too clear a break was frequently made between the late Roman and the Islamic periods; in contrast, the transition to an Islamic world is nowadays so vital a topic, and so central to our questions of conversion that late Roman and late antique historians cannot but attempt to bring it within their scope.

The main chronological period considered in this volume is therefore effectively framed on the one hand by the progressive Christianization of the Roman empire and on the other by that of Islamicization. This late antique world, as it has been constructed by historians, broadly comprises the territories and neighbours of the Roman Empire, thus essentially Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Indeed, *The World of Late Antiquity* already had as its subtitle in 1971 'From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad', and its coverage was kaleidoscopic, embracing Sasanian Persia, the Caucasus, Ethiopia and much else. Within this vast geographical area and chronological period, which Peter

[5] J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman City* (Oxford, 2001); Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians* (London, 2009); Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 2005); Bryan Ward–Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford, 2005).

Brown has indeed extended in a later book, albeit with a somewhat different focus,[6] conversion to Christianity and conversion to Islam constituted movements which, in the words of Neil McLynn and Arietta Papaconstantinou, 'sit at opposite ends chronologically and on different sides of some solidly grounded academic boundaries'. At the same time, the story of Christian conversion, seen in the long perspective, also needs to take in the marked spread of Christianity in the east, both before and during the lifetime of Muhammad. On the eve of Islam, not only were there Christianized Arabs within the territory of the Roman empire; there were also strongly established non–Chalcedonian west and east Syrian churches, and Christians were a significant force within the Sasanian empire.[7] They were also to be found in Arabia, in particular in Himyar in the south–west, and on the shores of the Arabian Gulf. Lively recent scholarship in all these fields now provides a much deeper contextualization for the emergence of Islam and needs to be fully part of the story of Christianization in late antiquity.

---

[6] Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom. Triumph and Diversity, AD 200–1000* (second edn, Oxford, 2003).

[7] Among recent contributions see Philip Wood, *'We have no King but Christ'. Syrian Christian Political Thought on the Eve of the Arab Conquests* (Oxford, 2010) and cf. Elizabeth Key Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain. Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran* (Berkeley, 1999); Joel Thomas Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh. Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley, 2006); David Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity* II (Oxford, 1990), pp. 221, 227, 241ff.; I. Gajda, *Le royaume de Himyar à l'époque monothéiste* (Paris, 2009); J. Beaucamp, F. Briquel–Chatonnet and C. Robin (eds), *Juifs et chrétiens en Arabie aux Ve et VIe siècles: regards croisés sur les sources. Collège de France–CNRS, Centre de recherche d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance, monographies 32, Le massacre de Najran* II (Paris, 2010).

There is no need here for further exposition of what I have called elsewhere the 'Brownian model' of late antiquity, whose main outlines have become very familiar: this way of looking at the period (in contrast to the older model of the 'decline and fall of the Roman empire') is commonly identified as being 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 there had the same starting point, and it is still perhaps best encapsulated in the edited volume, *Late Antiquity. A Guide to the Postclassical World*, of 1999.[8] At the same time a very large secondary literature has grown up which addresses itself to a sophisticated analysis of the huge body of surviving Christian literature from late antiquity, often under the guise of cultural studies rather than the traditional viewpoint of patristics.[9] The general model

---

[8] G.W. Bowersock, Peter Brown and Oleg Grabar (eds), *Late Antiquity. A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, Mass, 1999); cf. Averil Cameron and P.D.A. Garnsey (eds), *Cambridge Ancient History XIII: The Late Empire* (Cambridge, 1997); Averil Cameron, Bryan Ward–Perkins and Michael Whitby (eds), *Cambridge Ancient History XIV: AD 42 – c. 600* (Cambridge, 2001).

[9] The *Journal of Early Christian Studies* has been particularly important here. Founded in 1993 under the auspices of the North American Patristics Society, the editors' expressed hope in their preface was that the new journal would 'publish traditional articles of the highest caliber', but would also 'become a showcase for work in newer fields, such as women's studies and literary theory, that were not incorporated into the older "patristics."' They continue, 'We also hope to include articles using some of the newer methodologies, as well as those that employ traditional historical and philological scholarship.' For cultural studies contrasted with the older patristics, see Elizabeth A. Clark, 'From Patristics to Early Christian Studies', in Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David Hunter (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 7–41, esp. 25ff., with Dale Martin, 'Introduction', in Dale Martin

has indeed come under intense scrutiny, with an emphasis on actual religious violence emerging as one of the newer themes, and a considerable body of revisionist scholarship addressing the difficult question of interpreting the effects of religious legislation (see below for both). Another challenge has come from scholars wishing to argue for the continuing vitality of polytheism, especially, but not only, in philosophical and intellectual circles, or for actual indifference to the religious rivalries whose importance is painted in such lurid colours in many of the contemporary sources. Finally, along with the great increase in the secondary literature has come an awareness of actual complexity, in contrast to the over–simple answers and positions of the past. The reign of Constantine (306–37), for instance, still assumed by some without question to represent the definitive step in making the Roman empire 'officially' Christian, now seems far more problematic, to the extent indeed that one scholar can write of a turn towards a 'minimalist view' of the capacity of Roman government to bring about religious change.[10] Constantine, the most famous convert of all, with the exception of Augustine, also remains one of the most elusive.[11] Finally, there was no one moment at which the empire became 'Christian'. Rather, we must imagine a complex process or

---

and Patricia Cox Miller (eds), *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography* (Durham, NC, and London, 2005), pp. 1–21.

[10] See Kate Cooper, 'Christianity, Private Power and the Law from Decius to Constantine: The Minimalist View', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 19/3 (2011): pp. 327–43. Also important is Peter Brown and Rita Lizzi Testa (eds), *Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire: The Breaking of a Dialogue (IVth–VIth Century A.D.), Proceedings of the International Conference at the Monastery of Bose (October 2008)* (Münster, 2011), based on papers given at a conference revisiting a classic volume of the early 1960s in the light of current scholarship: Arnaldo Momigliano (ed.), *The Conflict between Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 1963).

[11] See below, n. 30.

processes, unevenly spread and taking far longer than many have supposed in the past. The next section will single out some of what I believe are key issues likely to be faced by anyone approaching this vast subject.

II

'Conversion' in Late Antiquity: Some Issues

The obstacle of Christian triumphalism

Late antiquity is often taken to be a particularly religious period; however, there is a real danger of being misled by the claims made in the contemporary sources, as well as by the centrality of religion and religious sources to the 'Brownian' model. Some recent publications have therefore attempted to focus on secularity and dissent or indifference (instanced for example by the 'semi' Christians who were the targets of harangues by John Chrysostom, and who were accused of frequenting synagogues or participating in pagan cult),[12] and to look for evidence of the actual difficulty and the slow pace of Christianization, especially in relation to the conversion of pagan temples into churches.[13] In their eagerness to vilify, or conversely to claim superiority, contemporary

[12] Still a theme in the highly tendentious late–sixth century *Life of St. Symeon the Stylite the Younger*, whose column was near Antioch: see V. Déroche, 'Quelques interrogations à propos de la *Vie de Syméon Stylite le Jeune'*, *Eranos* 94 (1996): pp. 65–83, at 77–80.

[13] See e.g. David M. Gwynn and S. Bangert (eds), *Religious Diversity in Late Antiquity*, (Leiden, 2010), with extensive bibliography; E. Rebillard and C. Sotinel (eds), *Les frontières du profane dans l'Antiquité tardive* (Rome, 2010); B. Caseau, 'Le crypto–paganisme et les frontières du licite: un jeu de masques?', in Brown and Lizzi Testa (eds), *Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire,* pp. 541–71; Jan N. Bremmer, 'Atheism in antiquity', in M. Martin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 11–26; Phil Booth, Matthew dal Santo, Peter Sarris (eds), *An Age of Saints. Conflict and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity* (Leiden, 2011), and see M.–Y. Perrin, '*Crevit hypocrisis.* Limites d'adhésion au christianisme dans l'antiquité tardive: entre histoire et historiographie', in H. Inglebert, S.

Christian sources frequently applied the very word 'Hellene', for 'pagan' or polytheist, in what can only be described as emotional or ideological ways, certainly not with objectivity. It is therefore a considerable problem for historians that the desire to find a narrative of conversion is central to many, even all, the contemporary Christian sources; this may be a heroic narrative, or an anxious narrative, or a contested narrative, but it is more often intended to be a victorious one, and it is hard indeed not to fall into the trap of believing it. This difficulty is stressed by Peter Brown in his contribution to Cambridge Ancient History XIII,[14] and it is also well put by Clifford Ando, who points out the complexities and ambiguities of Christian writing, and the impossibility of expecting a neutral (and therefore a reliable) account of conversion from these sources: Christian writing could not help but be apologetic writing.[15] Almost without exception

---

Destephen and B. Dumézil (eds), *Le problème de la christianisation du monde antique* (Paris, 2010), pp. 47–62, with rich bibliography. For the conversion of temples see B. Caseau, 'Late antique paganism: adaptation under duress', in L. Lavan and M. Muleyan (eds), *The Archaeology of Late Antique 'Paganism'* (Leiden, 2011), pp. 111–34, with J. Hahn, S. Emmel, U. Gotter (eds), *From Temple to Church*: *Destruction and Renewal of Local Cultic Topography in Late Antiquity* (Leiden, 2008); Frank R. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization, c. 370–529* (2 vols, Leiden, 1993, 1994).

[14] Peter Brown, 'Christianization and Religious Conflict', in Cameron and Garnsey (eds), *Cambridge Ancient History* XIII, pp. 632–64.

[15] Clifford Ando, 'Pagan Apologetics and Christian Intolerance in the Ages of Themistius and Augustine', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4/2 (1996): pp. 171–207; for doctrinal debate and the writing that supported it (an intellectual project that deserves to be analysed as such) see Averil Cameron and Robert Hoyland (eds), *Doctrine and Debate in the East Christian World, 300–1500* (Farnham, 2011), in the series *The Worlds of Eastern Christianity 300–1500*, ed. Robert Hoyland and Arietta Papaconstantinou.

the Christian sources present us with a Christian history in terms of a geneaology of origins and a triumphant narrative of Christianization.

A very similar process of systematization, narrativity and justification took place in early Muslim literature,[16] and there was of course no single narrative adopted by Christian writers. All however shared in the same triumphalist drive, and the same urge to list the heroes and villains of their own particular group. Brown memorably says that the Christian narrative in the period 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.[17] A fundamental precedent was set by Eusebius of Caesarea, the founding father of the Christian church history. With his apologetic works, the *Preparation for the Gospel* and the *Demonstration of the Gospel*, and his highly tendentious *Ecclesiastical History*, he established an ideological framework for the interpretation of the rise of Christianity which many others were to follow later, while his *Life of Constantine* presented the Christian Emperor Constantine in a near–hagiographic mode.[18] Later Christian writers had no hesitation in weaving the history of church councils from the first ecumenical council of Nicaea, called in AD 325 by Constantine, into the genealogy of early Christianity, thus producing a canonical account of an inexorable progress towards Christian orthodoxy. The genealogies of heresy which also appear in contemporary sources are simply the mirror–image of these

---

[16] See T. Khalidi, *Images of Muhammad. Narratives of the Prophet in Islam across the Centuries* (London, 2009).

[17] Brown, 'Christianization and Religious Conflict', pp. 636, 635.

[18] See the interesting approach of Doron Mendels, *The Media Revolution of Early Christianity: An Essay on Eusebius's Ecclesiastical History* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1999).

triumphalist scenarios;[19] they too have the idea of conversion – to orthodoxy – at their core. The genre of heresiology, with its lists of 'top heretics' and its classifications of 'heretical' groups (a mode of writing that continued in Greek, with varying targets, until the late Byzantine period),[20] was not only an assertion of identity through the manipulation of religious memory, but also a way of claiming that one's own side is best. After the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451, while pro–Chalcedonians and anti–Chalcedonians saw things differently, all used the same techniques. The Christian narrative of late antiquity was indeed still about conversion, but it was told in terms of competition and triumphalism. [21]

Defining Christianity

Clifford 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 more 'religious' than preceding periods of the Roman empire; scholars such as John Scheid, John North and Jorg Rupke have helped us to realize the importance and the pervasiveness of religion in the Roman empire, and thus to see the inherent complexities of the relation of Christianity to its religious

---

[19] D. Kimber Buell, *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy* (Princeton, 1999); J. Rebecca Lyman, 'The Invention of "Heresy" and "Schism"', in A. Casiday and F.W. Norris (eds), *Cambridge History of Christianity 2, Constantine to c. 600* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 296–316.

[20] See Averil Cameron, 'How to Read Heresiology', in Martin and Cox Miller (eds), *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies*, pp. 193–212; S. Elm, E. Rebillard and A. Romano (eds), *Orthodoxie, christianisme, histoire* (Rome, 2000).

[21] For a negative view of these processes, raising the related issue of Christian intolerance, see Polymnia Athanassiadi, *Vers la pensée unique: la montée de l'intolérance dans l'Antiquité tardive* (Paris, 2010).

context.[22] It is precisely because there were still enormous areas of overlap and ambiguity in practice, language and concepts between pagans and Christians that Christians were so insistent on drawing lines, asserting difference, establishing discipline and trying to keep their flocks in line. Apologetic is so inherent in Christian writing that 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 aim: they might have pagans, or Jews, or heterodox Christians as their targets, but in all cases their aim was to claim success.

Measuring Christianization

Classic statements about the spread of Christianity, following Harnack's *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, [23] focused on the

[22] For instance, J. Rüpke (ed.), *A Companion to Roman Religion* (Oxford, 20007); Mary Beard, John A. North and S.R.F. Price (eds), *Religions of Rome* (2 vols, Cambridge, 1998); Clifford Ando, *A Matter of the Gods* (Berkeley, 2008); Clifford Ando and Jörg Rüpke (eds), *Religion and Law in Classical and Christian Rome* (Stuttgart, 2006).

[23] See A. Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (trans., second, revised edn, 2 vols, London, 1908) [from the second German edition of 1906, original German edition, Leipzig, 1902]. Recent works include Charles Pietri and Luce Pietri (eds), *Naissance d'une chrétienté (250–430), Histoire du christianisme des origines à nos jours* II (Paris, 1995); Charles Pietri et al. (eds), *Histoire du christianisme II–III* (Paris, 2000); Casiday and Norris (eds), *Cambridge History of Christianity 2*; Jean Robert Armogathe, Pascal Montaubin and Michel–Yves Perrin (eds), *Histoire générale du christianisme des origines au XVe siècle* I (Paris, 2010); see also M.–Y. Perrin, 'La "grande chiesa" dall'impero pagano all'impero cristiano', in G. Traina (ed.), *Storia d'Europa e del Mediterraneo, Il Mondo Antico III. L'Ecumene Romana, VII L'Impero tardoantico* (Rome, 2010), pp. 697–749, with bibliography.

supposed appeal of Christianity in a context in which paganism was conceived as being in decay. We no longer think this way now, and the issues surrounding conversion in late antiquity are not the same as those in the first two or three centuries. 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. Estimates still vary as to the percentage of Christians in the empire at the time of Constantine, and in any case can only be based on guesses. Nevertheless, quantitative methods have proved attractive as a way of tracking Christianization.[24] Taking the sources at face value is another of the several problems with Rodney Stark's explanation of the success of Christianity.[25] 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 demographically because Christian families had more children and looked after them better?

[24] See also William V. Harris (ed.), *The Spread of Christianity in the First Four Centuries: Essays in Explanation* (Leiden, 2005).

[25] Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity. A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, 1996); see the special issue of *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6/2 (1998), and see also Rodney Stark, *Cities of God. The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (San Francisco, 2006), with a chapter entitled 'Why Historians Ought to Count'; less cited by late antique historians is another book by Stark, tellingly entitled *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity led to Freedom, Capitalism and Western Success* (New York, 2005). Bremmer, *The Rise of Christianity,* discusses Stark's views in the light of the earlier history of the subject.

It is just as perilous to argue for the number of Christians from the size of Christian buildings.[26] Or indeed – though with more credibility – on the basis of epigraphy, especially inscriptions on 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, although the generation after Constantine has its advocate in T.D. Barnes, for instance, writing of the Roman aristocracy.[27] In contrast, but in relation to the empire more widely, Peter 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'.[28] He seems to imply that matters changed in the sixth. But in fact the process of Christianization took much longer and was a much less clear cut process even than Brown allows for. Imperial legislation from Theodosius onwards, apparently intended to enforce Christianity or proscribe pagan or heretical practices, used to be seen as a straightforward indicator. But given a closer understanding of how late Roman law worked – or did not work – in practice, this 'evidence' now seems like another minefield; laws were frequently repeated, and were usually in any case rescripts addressed to local enquiries or local petitions. Nor was law only made from the top, or

[26] For which see Ramsay Macmullen, *The Second Church. Popular Christianity AD 200–400* (Atlanta, 2009), passim. See also Ramsay Macmullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire, AD 100–400* (New Haven, 1984) and *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven, 1997).

[27] See T.D. Barnes, 'Statistics and the Conversion of the Roman Aristocracy', *Journal of Roman Studies* 85 (1995): pp. 135–47.

[28] Brown, 'Christianization and Religious Conflict', p. 641.

straightforwardly enforced.[29] The state was rarely in a position to implement such legislation, and rarely did so (this was also true of the supposedly Christian empire of Byzantium). Debate about Constantine's religious aims and religious legislation also still rages, with some advocating a 'Constantinian revolution', or making strong efforts to claim him as 'tolerant', and ecumenical, and to emphasize the lack of enforcement of pro–Christian policies, with one recent scholar presenting him in the mould of Augustus and embedding him in the context of existing Roman religion.[30]

Two obvious questions have so far presented themselves, therefore: how can we measure conversion, and what did the late Roman state believe it was doing in relation to the religion of its subjects?

What counts as conversion?

In tracking conversion to Christianity, we need to know what such conversion actually meant. Is conversion, seen as an empire–wide phenomenon, the same as Christianization, as is often assumed in the scholarly literature on late antiquity? The

---

[29] Brown, 'Christianization and Religious Conflict', p. 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); Caroline Humfress, 'Bishops and law courts in late antiquity: how (not) to make sense of the legal evidence', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 19/3 (2011): pp. 375–400; Jill Harries, 'Superfluous verbiage: rhetoric and law in the age of Constantine and Julian', ibid.: pp. 345–74; Rita Lizzi Testa, 'Legislazione imperiale e reazione pagana: I limiti del conflitto', in Brown and Lizzi Testa (eds), *Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, pp. 467–91.

[30] R. Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine* (Cambridge, 2007), with the review by T.D. Barnes, 'Was there a Constantinian Revolution?', *Journal of Late Antiquity* 2/2 (2009): pp. 374–84, especially p. 383; for Constantine and toleration, H.A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops. The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore, MD, 2000).

question also presents itself on an individual level. What is conversion? Is it a personal *volte face*, a matter of belief or revelation? Or a domestic affair?[31] Or a matter of outward conformity, that is, practice? As in the case of later Christians in Ottoman society, as well as that of the religious situation in many countries in recent times, it can entail changing names, as well as social practice, often for convenience or under some duress. The 'sincerity' of conversion is hard to detect in circumstances where there may be family, social, economic or political pressure. Furthermore, 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 to the enforced movement of populations by the authorities;[32] this must have led to specific new patterns of conversion. Similarly, in the Crusader states, Orthodox and western Christian interaction led to a situation of some religious fluidity. Not surprisingly, late antique Christian writers were themselves 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 those who converted from Judaism or 'heresy' to catholic or mainstream Christianity were required to sign a *libellus* publicly adjuring

---

[31] See Kimberley D. Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values and Religious Change in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2008); for another recent approach see Raymond Van Dam, *Becoming Christian: the Conversion of Roman Cappadocia* (Philadelphia, 2003).

[32] For this see G. Dagron, 'Minorités ethniques et religieuses dans l'Orient byzantin à la fin du Xe et au XIIe siècle: l'immigration syrienne', *Travaux et Mémoires* 6 (1976): pp. 177–216; M. Balard and A. Ducellier (eds), *Migrations et diasporas méditerranéennes: Xe – XVIe siècles. Actes du collque de Conques, 1999* (Paris, 2002).

their former beliefs: many of these formulae survive.[33] The fact that this kind of conversion needed public 'proof' in order to be accepted is an indicator of the anxieties and importance attached to such issues. But it also hints at the far larger numbers for whom a clear religious commitment may well have remained unaddressed.

Thinking about conversion today

Conversion is a particularly difficult concept at the present time. In many quarters active mission and conversion it is not thought of as politically correct, not quite playing by the rules. It may be true that the secularism agenda which has held the field for some time in the study of religions may now be under some pressure,[34] but there is still unease over the concept of 'conversion' and its uneasy association 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 are clear difficulties in the contemporary world of multiculturalism and post–colonialism. Yet at the same time active, or even aggressive, levels of mission activity

[33] See Samuel N.C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China* (second edn, Tübingen, 1992). The model was followed long into the Byzantine period for repentant heretics and converted Jews and Muslims: see P. Eleuteri and A. Rigo, *Eretici, dissidenti, musulmnai ed ebrei a Bisanzio: una raccolta eresiologica del XII secolo* (Venice, 1993); on repentant heretics in Late Antiquity see also Fergus Millar, 'Repentant Heretics in fifth–century Lycia: Identity and Literacy', *Scripta Classica Israelica* 23 (2004): pp. 11–30.

[34] 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 now surely needs methodological input from the field of history of religions.

are taking place in certain regions, above all the new post–communist countries in the Balkans and eastern Europe, where religious competition financed from outside the country in question is evident to any visitor, not only through the construction of ostentatious Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches and Islamic mosques but also in the activities of many different proselytising groups and sects.

It seems to me obvious that post–enlightenment liberal and secularizing narratives of secularism and modernity will also have an influence on any reformulation of conversion in earlier periods as a historical phenomenon. In the last generation some contemporary Christian theologians so lost confidence in their own right to convert others that they have debated not only the relation of Christianity to other religions but also whether religion itself is in fact fundamentally pluralistic.[35] 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.[36] Conversion is also today closely allied to questions of ethnicity and identity. In some countries both conversion and missionary activity are forbidden, or not allowed to particular groups for nationalist or political reasons, yet both continue unofficially and sometimes underground.

Christians and Jews

[35] Cf. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (eds), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness. Towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY, 1987).

[36] 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, NY, 1990), pp. 135–48; on the 'choice' 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), pp. 25–45.

From the first century onwards, Christians also put a vast amount of effort into distancing themselves from Jews, the very intensity of their efforts revealing how difficult this was. Christian attempts to distinguish 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 an old and intense matter of disagreement among modern scholars, but many publications of recent years have now made it abundantly 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 striking title of Daniel Boyarin's book, *Border Lines*,[37] points to the effort – not at all always successful – to draw lines, to set boundaries, to keep up the work of asserting difference. Equally, *The Ways that Never Parted*, the title of a volume edited by Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, indicates the current emphasis in the face of complex evidence on a late date for the 'parting'.[38] The arrival of Islam in the seventh century was preceded both by a flourishing of Jewish confidence and cultural creativity

---

[37] Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines. The Partition of Judaeo–Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA, 2004), with Andrew S. Jacobs, *The Remains of the Jews. The Holy Land and Christian Empire in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, 2004). See also Seth Schwarz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton Press, 2001), with the reaction in Alexei M. Sivertsev, *Judaism and Imperial Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2011), who takes issue with Schwartz's argument about Jewish introversion under the impact of imperial Christianity.

[38] 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).

in Palestine, shown in extraordinary synagogue mosaics,[39] and by violent and perhaps predictable anti–Jewish feeling expressed by local Christian writers. Some of this was provoked by the invasion of the Roman Near East and conquest of Jerusalem by the Persians in the early seventh century, when Christian rule was for a time overcome and Jewish hopes correspondingly raised. Partly in response, the longstanding genre of Christian *Adversus Iudaeos* literature now reached a new peak – literary dialogues composed by Christians to answer 'Jewish' objections to Christianity. Though there is little secure evidence about actual debates between Christians and Jews, some of these texts contain what seems to be quite circumstantial detail about Jewish communities in the Near East. But the dramatic ending in every case was the discomfiture, and ideally the actual conversion, of the Jewish interlocutors.[40] These texts, in Syriac as well as Greek, are essentially pieces of Christian apologetic; as such they must have played their part in the tense and anxious situation in seventh–century Palestine where Christians themselves were divided and under attack from Persians as well as Muslims.

---

[39] See David Milson, *Art and Architecture of the Synagogue in Late Antique Palestine: In the Shadow of the Church* (Leiden, 2007); 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* (, 2008), pp. 225–56.

[40] There is a large bibliography, from which see for instance the important contributions in the journal *Travaux et Mémoires* 11 (1991); see also Averil Cameron, 'Blaming the Jews: the seventh–century invasions of Palestine in context', *Travaux et Mémoires* 14 (*Mélanges Gilbert Dagron*) (2002): pp. 57–78; for the seventh–century context cf. also B. Flusin, *Saint Anastase le Perse et l'histoire de la Palestine au début du VIIe siècle* (Paris, 1992). For a valuable discussion of the Jewish eschatology stimulated by these events and by the Arab conquest which followed so soon afterwards, see Sivertsev, *Judaism and Imperial Ideology*, especially Chapters 4 and 5.

Conversion and violence

Part of the story of Christianization in late antiquity includes violence, a topic which has come to feature largely in current writing on the period.[41] Imperial legislation as such perhaps had less effect than appears, but Christians themselves could often be violent towards pagans and towards each other. There were clashes between different religious groups in late antique urban contexts, which were already the scene of violent confrontations;[42] 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 of the fourth century and then again with the eastern opposition to the Council of Chalcedon in the late fifth and sixth. 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.[43] Ecclesiastical writers, whether Chalcedonian or non–Chalcedonian, emphasized – and exaggerated – the sufferings of their own side.[44] Quite often there

[41] Philip Jenkins, *Jesus Wars. How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1500 Years* (New York, 2010), is luridly expressed, but points to a real phenomenon. See also H.A. Drake (ed.), *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices* (Aldershot, 2006), and the important book by the late Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia, 2009).

[42] See Cameron, *Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity*, Chapter 7; Michael Whitby, 'Factions, bishops, violence and urban decline', in J.–U. Krause and C. Witschel (eds), *Die Stadt in der Spatantike – Niedergang oder Wandel?* (Stuttgart, 2006), pp. 441–61.

[43] See recently Volker L. Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church* (Oxford, 2008).

[44] See Susan Ashbrook Harvey, 'Remembering Pain: Syriac Historiography and the Separation of the Churches', *Byzantion* 58 (1988): pp. 295–308.

was religious violence, storming of synagogues, street disturbances, and similar manifestations;[45] nor were bishops and local Christian communities above pressurizing individuals.[46] Late antiquity was certainly not always benign.

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 and in different ways? Bishops and holy men and women are typically 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 impressive 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 and its public recognition were 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 the phenomenon in action, for instance in northern Italy in the ambit of Ambrose, and in Lycia in the sixth century in the *Life* of

[45] Michael Gaddis, *There is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ. Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (Berkeley, 2005); Brown, 'Christianization and religious conflict', pp. 646–49 (though note that the chronological scope of the 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).

[46] Brown, 'Christianization and Religious Conflict', p. 659.

St Nicholas of Sion, to take only these out of many other examples.[47] 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.[48] This was by no means unusual: the leading Fathers of the Church all produced a huge range and amount of interpretative and pastoral writing. An enormous effort went into this pastoral education, exhortation and discipline, and this surely differentiates Christian conversion from conversion in most other religions. The canons of the Council in Trullo, held in the imperial palace in Constantinople at the end of the seventh century, were still preoccupied with forbidding Christians from engaging in pagan practices, and while some of the content may be purely formal or in a sense rhetorical, there is no reason to doubt the concern that was still felt.

Networks of communication

Communication networks were important for the spread of Christianity at local and personal levels,[49] and structures – political, social, religious – and communications – for instance the networks of bishoprics – were important for large–scale conversion in late

[47] Rita Lizzi, 'Ambrose's Contemporaries and the Christianization of Northern Italy', *Journal of Roman Studies* 80 (1990): pp. 156–73; I. Ševčenko and N. Ševčenko, *The Life of Saint Nicholas of Sion* (Brookline, Mass., 1984).

[48] See Volker L. Menze and Kutlu Akalin, *John of Tella's Profession of Faith. The Legacy of a Sixth–Century Syrian Orthodox Bishop* (Piscataway, NJ, 2009).

[49] Brown, 'Christianization and Religious Conflict', pp. 654 ff., drawing on Edward Shils, *Center and Periphery* (Chicago, 1975), pp. 349–54.

antiquity. The sixth century also seems to have been a time for state–sponsored mission, raising the important question of conversion and politics.[50] A question that needs to be asked is what it really meant for a people as a whole when its king 'converted', like Tzath of Lazica or like 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 of Justinian was naturally presented officially in terms of right religion, the elimination of Arianism, as is reflected in Procopius's account in his *History of the Wars*, even if the official version is undercut in his *Secret History.* One of the hardest questions to 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 did go 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

As is now clear, a central question raised in the Mellon–Sawyer seminar on which this volume is based concerned methodology. Our own historical ideologies and sympathies will make a great difference, for example whether we call ourselves social historians 'cultural historians', historians of religion, or perhaps historical materialists. The role

[50] I. Engelhardt, *Mission und Politik in Byzanz. Ein Beitrag zur Strukturanalyse byzantinischer Mission zur Zeit Justins und Justinians* (Munich, 1974); Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth. Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993); for the west: Ian Wood, *The Missionary Life. Saints and the Evangelization of Europe 400–1050* (Harlow, 2001).

assigned to religion in history in each individual case is at the heart of this question. For instance, conversion and Christianity as such receive little if any direct treatment in Christopher Wickham's important *Framing the Early Middle Ages* – because they belong to 'cultural history', which he does not include. There is 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, he takes it for granted that that explanation will still be 'epistemologically realist and materialist'.[51] A quite different kind of sociological model, in terms of power relations and identity, could of course be drawn from the work of Michel Foucault or Pierre Bourdieu.[52]

Given that comparison between Christian and Islamic conversion is built into the framing of this project, I will turn briefly to the comparative method itself. The fundamental question is surely 'how do we know what to compare?' Brent Shaw invites historians of late antiquity to look beyond not only the 'conventional late antiquity' but also even the much broader geographical and chronological range adopted by

[51] 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, 2009), pp. 205–52, especially p. 252.

[52] For the influence of Bourdieu see e.g. Isabella Sandwell, *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity. Greeks, Jews and Pagans in Antioch* (Cambridge, 2007).

Wickham.[53] Two edited volumes also related to a Mellon–Sawyer seminar (on 'The First Great Divergence: China and Europe, 500–800 CE')[54] raise the question of comparison in an acute form, while a large body of current writing, in which late antiquity increasingly features, also advocates a broader 'Eurasian', rather than a 'Eurocentric' viewpoint.[55] Even in Peter Brown's broad vision, the late antique world is constrained chronologically and geographically. So should we too be comparing it with China (the favoured comparator) and other non–European states, and if so, how? Those who argue against Eurocentrism, the privileging of Europe, do so partly in order to oppose just the sort of linear narrative accounts that both contemporary Christians and moderns writing from a Christian or theological viewpoint have typically given of Christianization, or the 'rise', or 'triumph', of Christianity. In the formulation of Wickham, 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. In 1986 the sociologist Michael Mann already drew on the comparison between Rome and China.[56] But Mann also regarded Christianization in late antiquity as producing 'pacification', the necessary condition for the development of

---

[53] Brent Shaw, 'After Rome. Transformations of the Mediterranean World', *New Left Review* 51 (May/June, 2008): pp. 89–11; cf also 'Challenging Braudel: A New Vision of the Mediterranean', *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 14 (2001): pp. 419–53, on the Mediterranean perspective offered by P. Horden and N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea. A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford, 2000).

[54] I. Morris and W. Scheidel (eds), *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires*; W. Scheidel (ed.), *Rome and China. Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires* (Oxford, 2009).

[55] See e.g. the series of books by Jack Goody, including *The Theft of History* (Cambridge, 2006); J.M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge, 2004).

[56] Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power* I. *A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760* (Cambridge, 1986).

European capitalism. He has therefore been criticized for a sociological method that was historical rather than comparative, and he did not carry his interest in China as far as real comparison; Mann too was essentially Eurocentric in his emphases.[57] Yet leaving this debate aside, the phenomenon of conversion cannot easily be reduced to an explanation based on the structural features of a society, or even a specific religion. The question 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 process ultimately reducible to acts of individual choice whose aggregate effects can be described in purely demographic terms'.[58] While this statement is undoubtedly open to challenge, it does point to the fact that conversion implies change over time and therefore a narrative process. The assessment of structural factors versus diachronic change, and the consideration of macro versus micro issues have to be central.

I have also 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'. [59] He returns to the example of Islam in an almost concluding chapter entitled (significantly), 'European conclusions'. Mann's overall argument is revealed as being about the reasons for the development of European

---

[57] Perry Anderson, review of Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, *Times Literary Supplement* (12 December, 1986): pp. 105–6; also Philip S. Gorski, in *Contemporary Sociology* 24/6 (1995): pp. 772–74.

[58] Clifford Ando, 'The Palladium and the Pentateuch: towards a sacred topography of the later Roman empire', *Phoenix* 55 (2001): pp. 369–410.

[59] Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, p. 334.

capitalism, among which he gives an important role to late antique Christianity.[60] He concentrates on western Europe and airbrushes out of the picture the complicating factor of the continuance of a Christian state in the east, namely the eastern empire of Byzantium.[61] But however essentialist or problematic, his work 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.

Conclusion

This necessarily incomplete essay has omitted many important topics: for example the role of preaching and teaching; writing and education;[62] daily life; the part played by liturgy and spectacle; wealth and charity; asceticism and the holy man; the interpretation of the usually highly tendentious genre of saints' lives; material evidence; the development of the role of bishops. It has perforce left aside the crucial topic of the religious framework within which Islam developed, which includes the question of

---

[60] See Jack Goody, *Capitalism and Modernity. The Great Debate* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 90.

[61] Averil Cameron, 'The Absence of Byzantium', *Nea Hestia* (January 2008): pp. 4–59; Averil Cameron 'Thinking with Byzantium', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 21 (2011): pp. 39–57.

[62] Including the enormous output and reception of Christian literature aimed at the inculcation of Christian doctrine and ecclesiastically sanctioned behaviour, which was also fundamentally about conversion. For Christian book production, see W.E. Klingshirn and L. Safran (eds), *The Early Christian Book* (Washingon, DC, 2007); for the Christian pedagogic project see M.H. Williams, *The Monk and the Book. Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship* (Chicago, 2006); Catherine Chin, *Grammar and Christianity in the Late Roman World* (Philadelphia, 2008).

whether there was an increasing move towards monotheism in late antiquity.[63] 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 the clear cut 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 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 times? I think here not only of 'Islamism' and the western reactions to it, but also the religious tensions in the new post–communist countries, including Russia, [64] where nationalism and outside influences are both powerful. In several such countries the rewriting of history textbooks has become a highly political and debated issue, with the relative roles of Catholic or Orthodox Christianity and Islam high on the agenda. Migration, and the social mix of population is also in some countries very much bound up with religion and national identity. So is religious history, and the identification of

---

[63] See Cameron, *Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity*, Chapters 8 and 9; monotheism: P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede (eds), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 1999); Stephen Mitchell and Peter van Nuffelen (eds), *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 2010); Stephen Mitchell and Peter van Nuffelen (eds), *Monotheism between Pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity* (Leuven, 2010), with the works on Himyar cited in n. 7 above.

[64] For the 'Eurasianist' movement in Russia that identifies with the east rather than with Europe see M. Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism. An Ideology of Empire* (English trans., Washington, DC, and Baltimore, 2008). A large literature has also developed which debates the extent to which Orthodoxy can or should be open to 'western' critiques.

modern states with a particular religious past, especially if they are in fact the setting for sharp religious divisions. I believe this has an impact on what our present subject 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.