

EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN THE CONTEXT OF ANTIQUITY

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Ontological Conversion: a Description and Analysis of Two Case Studies from Tertullian's *De Baptismo* and Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis*

Abstract: Marshall proposes a new way to conceive conversion even in the cases where we have no first-hand attests. He suggests that the concept of “ontological conversion” provides a fruitful entry into the issue of agency in conversion because it defines the religious group and its ideology as central agents in the conversion process.

This essay¹ considers the possibility of conversion in Iamblichus' *De mysteriis* and compares posited features of conversion to those drawn from Tertullian's *De baptismo*.²

Many previous models of conversion have addressed the issue of passivity or activity in the individual's conversion. From an earlier dominant scholarly point of view, a group acted upon the passive converts by brainwashing them, taking their individuality away and making them unable to choose any other option than to join the cult. Today, however, most scholars have abandoned the view on the converts as passive objects and regard them instead as active seekers.³

Still the question of why people undergo conversion, why they change their minds in such, often, radical ways, remains pressing. While issues of agency are impossible to determine from only written evidence, one may in fact point to certain strategies of at least coercion in texts aimed at converts to a religion or philosophical group.

1 I would like to thank Dylan Burns for reading previous drafts of this essay and providing valuable support and criticism. All errors of transcription, translation, and interpretation remain my own.

2 All references to *De mysteriis* follow E.C. Clarke / J.M. Dillon / J.P. Hershbell (eds. and trans.), *Iamblichus. De Mysteriis*, Atlanta 2003; text based on E. Des Places (ed.), *Jamblique. Les mystères d'Egypte*, Paris 1966. I have chosen to rely on this translation as it is the most readable. All citations from Tertullian's *De baptismo* follow R.P. Refoulé (ed. and trans.), *Tertullian. Traité du Baptême*, Paris 2002. I have made use of this edition in my own translation.

3 Cf., e.g., J.T. Richardson, *The Active vs. Passive Convert. Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research*, in: *JSSR* 24/2 (1985), 119–136; H. Gooren, *Reassessing Conventional Approaches to the Study of Conversion*, in: *JSSR* 46/3 (2007), 337–353; L. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, New Haven

In this paper, I will argue that the concept of “ontological conversion” offers an interesting way to address the issue of agency in conversion. In an ontological conversion, the worldview created by the community seems to leave the convert no choice but to convert, because the convert is asked to become who he or she really is, i.e., a divine being. This defines the religious group as a central agent in the conversion process.

Previous research in the field of ancient conversion has concentrated on the individual stories of converters, whether autographic or written by third parties. Although the texts examined in this study are non-narrative, they can still offer us compelling data about the phenomenon of conversion in late antiquity. Tertullian’s *De baptismo* is, I wager, more familiar to the readers of this volume and so the analysis will revolve around Iamblichus’ text. *De mysteriis* is a pivotal fourth-century work that offers us a glimpse into the ritual culture of theurgy which we can preliminarily define as the deployment of rites to attain Platonic goals of union with the divine. Previous research on theurgy has made the strong claim that theurgy is a religious system complete with a ritual of initiation meant to mark one’s admittance into the group by means of a central, “magical” rite, built upon the model of an archaic Greek funeral.⁴ Yet, the evidence for this rite is piecemeal and leaves open the fundamental question of whether or not the theurgists actually constituted a social group and whether they had a ritual of conversion. This essay argues that a particular ideological strategy of conversion, which I define as “ontological conversion”, is present in the proteritic form of the *De mysteriis*. To test this claim, I will interpret features of ontological conversion in the two abovementioned texts. This paper is divided into four subsections. Part 1 offers a brief recap of existing theories and methods of analysing conversion and explains the gap that ontological conversion is meant to fill. Part 2 introduces and defines ontological conversion with brief references to features of ontological conversion in several examples. Part 3 fleshes out the theory by examining the texts of Tertullian and Iamblichus and highlighting within them references to ontological conversion. Part 4 offers some conclusions.

It will be noted that my approach differs somewhat from that of other researchers who have set out to contradict the Jamesian and Nockian model of sudden conversion by drawing on contemporary anthropological studies and new models of conversion which suggest a more processual and gradual shift in worldview.⁵ I do not dispute such models, and I agree on the basis

of evidence and intuition that conversion happens slowly and is re-imagined and written down as sudden, teleological and final. My approach, however, is to investigate the agency of the figures and texts offering the conversion (i.e., the missionaries) and inquire into their strategies.

1. The Study of religious and philosophical conversion from psychology to sociology

The topic of conversion has enjoyed a stimulating intellectual history, inextricably from the definitional and methodological trends of the study of religion. The early forages of William James (1902) focused almost exclusively on narratives of Christian conversion, influenced especially by prevailing theological attitudes and biblical stories such as the famous description of Saul of Tarsus’ conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3–9). Conversion, according to James, was a single, intense, revelatory experience which caused a complete transformation of the moral and psychological being of the individual, healing a perceived existential lack. These early studies had a profound influence on the historical researches of Arthur Darby Nock who similarly focused on the individual and employed the “Pauline” model of a sudden, powerful, conversion. Nock theorised that only the “prophetic religions”, Judaism and Christianity (curiously Islam is absent), impose sufficient psychological pressure on their followers to abandon the old way of life and pursue a new one, thereby coercing a real conversion out of the converted.

Nock also noted that the terminology of conversion had already been used in classical philosophy to denote a shift in allegiance from an ordinary to a philosophical way of life. However, after noting that the schools of Epicurus and Plato also had their prophets who looked at the world around them and demanded change, he refused to make a strong connection between philosophical conversion and Christian conversion, stating that the former was only “something like” a conversion.⁶

Since James and Nock, scholars have examined conversion with a number of different approaches. Some have attempted to argue that James’ original theories of sudden and intense psychological transformation are based on more or less fictive constructions of post-converts meant to exaggerate the difference between the negatively-valued pre-conversion state and the hyper-valued post-conversion state.⁷ Such scholars tend to favour methods that

⁴ H. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy. Mysticism, Magic, and Platonism in the Later Roman Empire*, Paris 1978, 184f.

⁵ Bremmer, Engberg, and Cvjetković in this volume discuss processual conversions. Cf. also Boag’s contribution which proposes new ways to understand conversion

⁶ Nock uses this phrase explicitly in the case of the Cynics (A.D. Nock, *Conversion*, London 1933, 169) and then again, more generally, in the case of second-century philosophies *in toto* (173).

⁷ Eshleman notes that “conversion narratives” are “ideologically constructed [...]”

focus on deconstructing binaries in the converter's narrative of conversion, as well as comparative insights drawn from modern sociological theories of conversion. Others have focused on philosophical conversion, noting that from a purely sociological perspective, joining a philosophical group is the same as a joining a religious group.⁸

This shift of emphasis towards the social factors has produced many valuable insights and theories, such as the notion that conversion is not reducible to a one-time intense moment in one's adolescence, but is rather the outcome of many different contributing elements, all of which play an important role in the conversion narrative. The concentration on social factors of conversion has also resulted in an overall de-emphasis on the value of strict theological (i.e., Christian) notions of conversion. Expanded definitions of conversion applicable to extra-Christian religious traditions and systems are employable. However, while conversion is perhaps primarily a matter of social networking,⁹ it remains a complex phenomenon whose reduction to one factor is simply not feasible. Moreover, the practicality of applying modern social conversion theories to ancient texts is questionable in light of the vast cultural differences between converters ancient and modern. So then, how can we study social conversion in ancient texts?

There may be a solution in a different approach. Many previous studies of conversion have concentrated on data from first-person accounts of converters, whether those narratives are from ancient sources or modern surveys. Certainly, these are interesting sources of data, but they cannot tell the whole story. In the task of understanding why people convert to a particular paradigm of thinking, there is great value to looking at conversion from the perspective of the recruiter, exploring how the recruiting group frames their particular ideology in the manner it does. Such a point of view not only provides us with insight into the persuasive structural frames that the recruiting group's ideology uses to convince an audience of the rightfulness or truthfulness of their dogma/philosophy, but also helps us determine the underlying frameworks of conversion as a general phenomenon.

2. Ontological conversion: Definition and minor examples

There is no religion that is not a cosmology as well as a speculation on the divine.

– Émile Durkheim¹⁰

In his book *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Lewis Rambo identifies five attractive draws of conversion: “(1) a system of meaning (cognitive); (2) emotional gratification; (3) techniques for living; (4) charisma; and (5) power.”¹¹ Rambo’s notion of power provides a useful starting point for thinking about ontological conversion. As Rambo notes, “a theme that emerges in many [scil. conversion narratives] is that the convert feels filled with power, has access to power, or is somehow connected with either an external source of power (God) or an internal sense of power that may be perceived as spiritual or divine.”¹² Belonging to a group is in some way seen as providing people with a feeling of connection to divine powers or an awareness of their own status as a supernatural being.

But how is such a status acquired? There may be several avenues to a metaphysical upgrade, but what I choose to concentrate on here is the substantial transformation – so substantial, one could call it “ontological”, taking place at a deep, essential stratum – that is promised to converts in didactic writings of the recruiting group. These writings also seem to offer a symbolic discourse of the change in identity or status at the social level. Such promises offer the possibility of an individual transforming into something superior to mere humanity; alternatively, in the case of more pessimistic cults, the re-aprehension of an original powerful state from which one has fallen as part of a cosmological fall myth.¹³ This ontological transformation is variously represented discursively through binary metaphors or language of completion/perfection. The value of the term “ontological conversion” lies especially in the fact that it captures not only some features of conversion once labeled “theological” or “religious” (rather unprecise and problematic terms), but it also incorporates features of other religious discourses (for example, certain branches of philosophy) that have circumvented in other respects various definitions of religion.

¹⁰ *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (C. Cosman, trans.), Oxford 2001, 10 (originally published in French in 1915).

¹¹ Rambo, 1993, 81–86.

¹² Ibid., 64, 85f.

¹³ Two examples of this latter conversion are the Christian attainment of a pre-fall state through baptism, as well as the Christian Gnostic understanding of a reception of divine *gnosis* which allows human beings to recall their divine origins.

current understanding, the ideology and self-conception of the group as a whole or the interests of the third party [...] who tells the convert's story” (K. Eshleman, *Affection and Affiliation. Social Networks and Conversion to Philosophy*, in: CJ 103/2 (2007–2008), 129–140 (130)).

⁸ Ibid., 130.

The term “ontology” requires some clarification as it is a term used in different ways in different contexts. For the purposes of this essay, ontology is probably best captured by the vague notion of “the science of what exists.” In Platonic thought the entirety of the universe was hierarchically organised into levels of increasingly real “things”. This hierarchy was accompanied by a cognate hierarchy of modes of epistemological understanding. Thus, certain forms of higher reality were thought to be inaccessible to ordinary modes of data-acquisition, e.g., sensory perception. The systems that describe ontological levels range from the very simple (those that posit only one or two levels to reality), to the relatively complex (systems that describe five levels of reality, subdivide the highest into three, etc.). The existence of these alternative levels of reality, closed to ordinary human understanding but open to sage minds, intuitive perceptions, or noetic understandings was variously defended on the basis of dialectical argument, quasi-religious authority, or some other form of a priori judgment. In familiar religious discourses, the higher levels of reality were peopled with various powerful spirits, such as gods, angels, or daemons, who had the responsibility for the maintenance of the lower levels which were occupied by human beings of ordinary consciousness and animals.

Such ontological divisions are common to many religious and philosophical traditions. In fact, it may be that the posited existence of supernatural realms is one of the most important defining characteristics of religion, though I recognise that this is still a problematic and debatable issue.¹⁴ In any case, we may say religion is constituted by binary oppositions such as the distinction between human and divine, profane and sacred, multiplicity and unity, living and dead, current terrible existence and idealised state of harmony, and various other normative distinctions, which rituals and discourses create and reinforce.

Ontological transformation, the textual description of transformation of human beings into higher states, especially those of angels or gods, has been explored by Fletcher-Louis (though only in the domain of second temple Judaism). He concludes that ontological divisions (human vs. divine/angel) reflect locative (e.g., profane space vs. temple) and institutional (laity vs. priesthood) distinctions. In other words, the narratives of ontological transformation heighten the prominence and the perceived value of the religious leaders as well as the value of the sacred space where those leaders work.¹⁵

My point of departure is to add that this heightening of status – when it is applied not only to the elite leaders of a community, but also to the general membership – may serve as a point of attraction for outsiders. I call the use of ontological transformation as a recruitment and conversion strategy “ontological conversion”.

Ontological conversion is related to conversion at the levels of the ethical and social. It was a common belief in early Judeo-Christian thought that various holy men were capable of becoming angels.¹⁶ This view later found its way into ascetic practice. Perpetuated by urban intellectual writers, it was a commonplace that Christian monks lived an angelic way of life, transforming themselves into angelic beings who, according to Christian doctrines, were superior ontologically to mere mortals.¹⁷ Humans thus desired to become supra-human through their practice of the monastic way of life which is tied to their belonging to the monastic community and their acceptance of monastic doctrines. The interrelated domains of behaviour and belonging are expressed metaphorically through the image of monks becoming angels.¹⁸ Another example which readily comes to mind is the ontological concerns surrounding the practice of circumcision in the Zohar, the 13th century Jewish mystical text *par excellence*. According to the Zohar, circumcision is, apart from being merely a signifier, also an effective, ontologically-transformative rite which transforms the circumcised Jew’s essence from “closed” to “open” thereby permitting the circumcised to “see God.” Cohen, in his comments on this feature of mystical Judaism, draws on Boyarin and Wolfson and compares this kind of spiritual circumcision

(description of layout of temple with “concentric rings of increasing purity”). Priestly Status: 5. 41 (Noah’s angelic form is tied to his legitimate priestly status), 59 (priests and angels wear the same clothing), 194f. (priests are angelic food).

¹⁶ J.H. Charlesworth, *The Portrayal of the Righteous as an Angel*, in: G.W.E. Nickelsburg / J.J. Collins (eds.), *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism. Profiles and Paradoxes*, Chicago 1980, 135–151; C.A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology. Antecedents and Early Evidence*, Leiden 1998.

¹⁷ This “angelic way of life” has been thought to be merely a metaphoric expression for celibacy under the presumption that angels were sexless beings. However, other features of the monastic way of life suggest that this metaphor was also (later?) tied to the ability to exercise superhuman abilities, including the ability to go for long periods of time without eating and transforming oneself into fire (cf. [anon.], *Apophth. Parr.* (alphabetical version), in J.P. Migne (ed.), *Fatrologia Graecae* 65,72–440 (229)).

¹⁸ E. Muchlberger, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity*, Oxford 2013, 148–175, repeats the evidence for “angelic way of life” as sexless, but also makes mention of a few of the more miraculous abilities reserved for those adept in asceticism. She also makes mention on p. 17 of the blurred lines between moral and ontological

¹⁴ See the thesis of Spiro, cited in J.Z. Smith, *Religion, Religions, Religious*, in: M. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Chicago 1998, 269–284 (281).

¹⁵ C.H.T. Fletcher-Louis, *All the Glory of Adam*, Leiden 2002. Ontological transformation: 6–9 (terminology introduced, but left undefined), 214 (human un-

to Christian sacramental theology, concluding that “circumcision in Zoroastrian mysticism is entirely analogous to Christian baptism: a physical operation with metaphysical results, performed once only, an imprinting of a special character on the soul.”¹⁹ We will address further examples of ontological conversion in the main comparaanda of this paper, Tertullian’s *De baptismo* and Iamblichus’ *De mysteriis*, but for now the pattern should be clear enough; ontological conversion is the promise of transformation into a higher being, such as an angelic figure or a god, through admittance into the group, typically through a rite of initiation.

Ontological conversion, it should be noted, is not a *sine qua non* of “true” conversion. An observable transformation of behaviour and a subsequent rebranding of the self as belonging to this or that community, having this or that new goal in mind, and undergoing a complete reordering of an internal hierarchy of values may constitute perfectly legitimate conversion according to standing psychological or social definitions. However, ontological conversion as a theoretical tool may progress us a bit further in research by providing a way to approach conversion by using sources which emanate from the group offering conversion. A major problem for researchers studying conversion in ancient sources is that the only available objects of study are the texts which lack detailed or reliable accounts of conversion. Since James, there has been an intense focus on autobiographical statements about conversion. Classical sources commonly used to understand conversion in the ancient world, most notably Augustine’s *Confessions* and Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, are both valued as starting places for understanding conversion from a first-person perspective, but eventually the criticism is usually made that these texts are in one way or another unreliable. Augustine’s account of his conversion is coloured by his post-conversion Christian perspective which overshadows the whole of his account, and the usefulness of Lucius’ conversion to the Isis cult is predicated by a risky association of author (Apuleius) and character (Lucius).²⁰ Ontological conversion as a theoretical tool can potentially provide an alternative avenue into understanding conversion by isolating predisposing conditions of conversion (especially ancient conversion only accessible through texts). Therefore, while it may not be a totally necessary feature, it can nonetheless be a potentially important one, allowing us to identify as conversion various forms of behaviour (like theurgy) that have not yet been analysed in this light.

Ontological conversion, or some variant of it, has already been used as a tool of analysis for exploring a particular example of conversion in a religious organisation about which we know very little. Anne McGuire has pointed to features of conversion in the *Gospel of Truth*. This text, written supposedly by the second-century Gnostic Christian Valentinus, is an exegesis of the meaning of the gospels for Valentinian Gnostics. The *Gospel* describes two, simultaneously-active levels of reality. One, a mythic level, tells the story of the divine Aeon’s fall into ignorance and the subsequent generation of a being called Error. This being is rectified and cosmological balance restored when the saviour, Jesus Christ, delivers to humanity the truth about their divine nature. The status of returning to the father is represented as “perfection”, a quality retained by the father (and therefore accessible only through him) and encompassed by Jesus (along with salvation bringing *gnosis*). McGuire notes that the “individual’s reception of *Gnosis*” is linked “to a radical reorientation of emotional attitude toward existence, of theological conception, and of life in the world.” The radical reorientation of the Entirety in the *Gospel of Truth*’s mythic dimension is directly linked to the individual’s conversion. This becomes all the more clear because the Father withdraws the outpouring of *gnosis* both of the cosmic order of things and of himself, allowing one only to reach it through conversion (*apokatastasis*). This, the text tells us, is not an act of jealousy or envy, but is for the sake of the Entirety. By withholding absolute *Gnosis*, the Father “permits” in some way the Entirety to come to a greater awareness (perhaps even appreciation?) of the Father’s majesty.

The logic of the text is clear enough. By establishing a binary dichotomy between the actions of the current convert and the state of perfective knowing attained only through the Father’s knowledge (which presumably is mediated through the group who communicates this story in the first place), the group emphasises the necessity of the individual conversion by applying pressure from the ontological system. McGuire uses these insights to build a case for reevaluating Nock’s impoverished and overly specific definition of conversion. As she puts it, the reorientation posited in the *Gospel of Truth* may not be Nockian conversion, but it nonetheless constitutes “a reorientation of a different sort, [...] from ignorance to *Gnosis*, and from anxiety and rootlessness to repose. Moreover, it brings profound reorientation of thought, as it conceptualises the return of the Entirety to its source, and brings about a new form of practice [scil. by calling] its readers to act in conformity with the pattern established by the Son.”²¹ For present purposes, McGuire offers a useful example of a purely textual analysis of an expanded (post-Nockian) understanding of conversion. Moreover, some of the

¹⁹ S. Cohn, *Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised?*, Berkeley 2005, 43–45.

²⁰ See a summary of the arguments for, against, and for a more complex notion of the relationship between author and narrative figure in K. Bradley, *Contending with Conversion. Reflections on the Reformation of Lucius the Ass*, in: Phoe. 52

features of the conversion she notes, the change “from ignorance to Gnosis” and from “anxiety [...] to repose” are, I would argue, ontological states of being. The possession of knowledge confers equality with the aeons and the state of rest is commonly stated to be the natural state of God.

How does ontological conversion relate to other models of conversion? It may properly be classified under the larger category of intellectual conversion, because it seeks to convince the would-be convert by language and rational argument to make a personal and conscious decision to convert. It establishes a religious worldview by superimposing a filter on the preexistent worldview of the converter, making the religious reality of the group paramount. However, ontological conversion isolates a more specific kind of rationality. Whereas some figures may be convinced by rational argument that they should change their lifestyle in order to live a more sane or healthy way of life, ontological conversion demands that people change their lifestyle for the purposes of eschatological or even present gains at the ontological level. From the above considerations, I conclude that ontological conversion is a strategy of discursive conversion (conversion through reason and argument as opposed to emotional or affective strategies). In order for an example to properly be called an ontological conversion, it must possess three features: 1) It must posit an ontological worldview including a hierarchy of levels of reality; 2) the level of reality associated with the state desired by the recruiting group must be highly valued; and 3) admittance into the group in question must be accompanied by a transformation of the ontology of the converter.

3.a. Tertullian's *De baptismo*

Tertullian's *De baptismo* was written in response to the “most poisonous teaching” (*venenissima doctrina*) of a “woman of the Cainanite heresy” who had been teaching that baptism was not necessary. The treatise seems to have been presented in a catechetical setting, shoring up some weak points which had been exploited by this unnamed woman. Tertullian addresses his audience saying that “this particular treatise will not be useless, if it instructs those who are at this very moment being formed, and likewise those who, satisfied with faith, do not question the reasons of tradition.”²² The main goal of the treatise, therefore, is to enhance through emotionally-charged language and philosophical argument the importance of the upcoming baptismal ritual. Tertullian's argument focuses on the necessity and

righteousness of baptism, claiming that although the rite may seem simplistic in comparison with gaudy pagan processions, it nonetheless has its own miraculous features. In fact, it is especially wonderful because it is simple – in the same way the true God is simple.²³ Nonetheless, the specific foci of his argument elevate to prominence the individual, allegedly simple, foolish, and powerless features of the baptismal rite, such as water, which he extolls using scriptural citations: water has existed since the beginning of time; it was the resting place of divinity (Gen 1:2); the division of the waters was one of the principle acts of creation (Gen 1:6–7); water is the first source of living beings (Gen 1:20); human beings were formed from water since the mud from which Adam was formed is a mixture of earth and water (Gen 2:7).²⁴ All of these references presuppose that the water of ritual baptism is similar to and therefore shares characteristics with mythical waters that have existed *in illo tempore*²⁵ or by their common relation under the category of water; the idea being all waters are capable of performing this transformation (when properly activated by ritual attention).²⁶

Tertullian's treatise consistently alludes to the notion of a strong division between an everyday world (earthly life) and a spiritual realm (heavenly realm). He notes (again in connection with the preceding discussion about the dignity of water) that “the material substance [scil. water], which governs earthly life, administers in the heavenly [scil. realm].”²⁷ Likewise, post-baptismal anointing of oil “runs in a material sense, but it helps spiritually.” Furthermore, the baptismal act, although it is a “material act,”

23 *Nihil adeo est quod obdure mentes quam simplicitas diuinorum operum quae in actu videtur et magnificentia quae in effectu reppromittur* (2.1); *Menior si non idolorum sollemnia vel arcana de suggest et apparatus deque sumptu fidem et auctoritatem sibi extrunt. O misera incredulitas, quae denelegis deo proprietates suas, simplicitatem et potestatem!* (2.2). The argument is repeated at 3.2.

24 Waters has existed since the beginning of time; bapt. 3.2, was the resting place of the spirit of God (*divini spiritus sedes*); 3.2; division of waters was principle act of creation: 3.2; water was first source of living beings: 3.2; God formed Adam from mud (i.e., water and earth); 3.5.

25 With this phrase, borrowed from Eliade, I mean to signal how the scriptural waters to which Tertullian refers are thought to be original and transcendent, yet always accessible through ritual practice. See M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, San Diego 1987, 94.

26 Ritual attention: bapt. 4.4: *Igitur omnes aquae de pristina originis praerogativa sacramentum antifictionis consecutueri invocato deo.*

27 3.6: *Licet eo plenus docerem non esse dubitandum si materiam quam in omnibus rebus et operibus suis deus dispositus, etiam in sacramentis propriis parere fecit, si quam et illos qui simillier, credisse contenti,* non exploratis rationibus traditio-

22 Non erit otiosum digestum istud instruens tam eos qui cum maxime formantur quam et illos qui simillier, credisse contenti, non exploratis rationibus traditio-

“becomes spiritual, in that we are freed from our sins.”²⁸ This is made all the more clear when we consider an earlier passage where Tertullian relates that the physical act of baptism does nothing physically while nonetheless an “incredible consequence in Eternity” has apparently occurred.²⁹ We therefore have the clear identification of two separate worlds in which earthly activity has radically different ramifications.

It is likely that Tertullian’s impetus for making this distinction between the spiritual and the physical has something to do with the original criticism made by the “Cainite” woman against whose views he writes *De baptismō*. According to Tertullian, this “temptress” had led many people astray by offering persuasive arguments for the inefficacy of baptism (1.2). His response is to counterattack on several points by noting both the prominent role of water both as a physical substance and as a powerful symbol in scripture, as well as by pushing the efficacy of baptism into a spiritual domain. The rite of baptism has consequences on the spiritual, invisible nature of man, and consequences of that nature cannot be questioned.

Tertullian further writes that baptism confers on the baptised a restoration to a prelapsarian state when one was made in the likeness of God. Thus, Man, who had in the past been made “in the image of God,” will be restored to his likeness with God: “The image” is considered to be in physical appearance, “the likeness” in eternity. For he receives again the spirit of God, which he had at that time received when breathed upon by Him, but had afterwards lost through sin.³⁰

This statement makes clear the ontological factors of the conversion. Baptism, the central and necessary rite for admission to the Christian community, confers divinity. Moreover, this divinity is thought in some way to be the proper state of humanity. Baptism is a restoration to what human beings are meant to be.

In light of the *Forschungsgeschichte* provided at the beginning of this essay, it is interesting that Tertullian makes no mention in this work for the social factors thought to be so important nowadays to conversion. Admittedly, the text is polemical in its scope as it seeks to defend the reality of the effect created by a theologically motivated rite; however, when we consider

its context, and the audience to whom it was probably addressed (catechumens), it seems reasonable to speculate that these metaphysical explanatory notes, especially those that speak of the elevation of the human soul to a higher state of being, probably fostered the importance of conversion by providing a vocabulary of ontological division. We can further speculate that an individual having received these teachings would have felt an intense pressure to stay a member of the group and not betray the awesome status which they obtain through their membership.

3b. Iamblichus’ *De mysteriis*

Iamblichus’ understanding of ritual and its relationship to conversion strongly resembles the understanding of conversion as an ontological transformation in Tertullian’s text. The excerpts interpreted here are in the first and last books of *De mysteriis*. It is in these sections that we see the clearest presentation of theurgic doctrine to outsiders, and it is here that we find the most protractive tone.

As we saw before, one of the obvious prerequisites for an ontological conversion model is the existence of a universe of multiple ontological levels. Tertullian’s understanding of this relationship was somewhat implicit and had to be drawn from hints in the text of an underlying cosmology. Iamblichus much more explicitly describes such a universe in the opening chapter of *De mysteriis* where he discusses precisely how gods, demons, heroes, and human souls are ordered, concatenated, and how we as beings at the lowest level of this hierarchy can possibly be aware of and come to know superhuman beings (Myst. 1.3–21). We do not have to go into too much detail about this argument. It suffices to say that Iamblichus builds upon the standard Platonist theory that there are two levels of reality, a higher level of abstract concepts and a lower, material level. The higher level of concepts is, in Plato, only accessible through reason.³¹ Nearly 700 years of development in Platonic philosophy did not modify this doctrine much, and so the first proposition Iamblichus addresses in *De mysteriis*, the knowledge of the existence of the gods, is explained as being a kind of “immaculate knowledge” ($\bar{\epsilon}\mu\varphi\mu\tau\sigma\gamma\varsigma$, “coexistent with our nature”) ($\sigma\psi\upsilon\tau\acute{\alpha}Q\chi\epsilon\iota\gamma\acute{\alpha}Q\bar{\eta}\mu\bar{\omega}\nu\bar{\alpha}\bar{\delta}\bar{\tau}\bar{\eta}\bar{\tau}\bar{\eta}\bar{\bar{\delta}}\bar{\bar{\bar{\delta}}}$), not subject to lower epistemological levels (Myst. 1.3). One cannot argue about the existence of the gods; this is simply not up for discussion, because such knowledge is indubitable.

Having concluded that such knowledge is innate, Iamblichus has to explain how there is disagreement over the nature of the gods. The argument follows lines familiar to those of Plotinus who claims that there is something in our

²⁸ Bapt. 7.2: *Sic et in nobis carnaliter currit antio sed spiritualiter proficit, quonodo et ipsius baptismi carnalis actus quod in aqua mergimus, spirituus effectus quod delictis liberamur.*

²⁹ Bapt. 2.1: *Homo in aqua demissus et inter paucā verba tinctus non multo vel nihilo mundior resurgit, eo incredibilis existimat̄or consecutio aeternitatis.*

³⁰ Bapt. 5.7: *Ita restituatur homo deo ad similitudinem eius qui retro ad imaginem dei fuerat: imago in effigie, similitudo in aeternitate censetur: recipit enim illum*

nature that tends to draw us away from this realisation, perverting our understanding of the truth of reality. In both Plotinus and Iamblichus these perverting factors correspond to epistemological modes and essential characteristics of humanity. The human condition is subject to “instability and indeterminacy” (1.3) which, according to Iamblichus, are related to the dialectical mode of thinking. Later, Iamblichus will imply that the embodied human, experiencing generative aspects of presumably sexual pleasure, will be drawn to “a return to the natural state” (*τῆς ἐν αὐτῇ εἰς φύοντι ἀτοκαταστάσεως*, 1.10). By contrast, the pre-embodyed soul, untouched by sexuality, experiences a way of life that is in complete conformity with the higher realities, and since the conjoint human (soul plus material body) retains a feature of this soul, there is nonetheless an “essential” strive of the soul to the Good (1.3). This argument, linking ontology with epistemology, is concluded on a protreptic note:

So [...] let the human soul join itself to them [scil. the gods and other divine beings] in knowledge on the same terms, not employing conjecture or opinion or some form of syllogistic reasoning, all of which take their start from the plane of temporal reality, to pursue that essence which is beyond all things, but rather connecting itself to the gods with pure and blameless reasonings which it has received from all eternity from those same gods.³²

In one sentence, Iamblichus conveniently summarises the ontological distinction and its epistemological component. Iamblichus’ setting out of the ontological levels contains sufficiently ebullient language to indicate his appreciation of these high levels of reality. But what about the other requirement for ontological conversion – evidence of ontological transformation simultaneous to the change of identity experienced by the convert undergoing social change in identity? Does becoming a theurgist equal becoming a god, and vice versa? It is easy enough to point to evidence of ontological transformation in *De mysteriis*. One example in particular stands out:

It is plain, indeed, from the rites themselves that what we are speaking of just now is a method of salvation for the soul; for in the contemplation of the “blessed visions” the soul exchanges one life for another and exerts a different activity, and considers itself then to be no longer human – and quite rightly so: for often, having abandoned its own life, it has gained in exchange the most blessed activity of the gods (emphasis mine).³³

The theurgist who experiences the mystical experience described here, “the contemplation of the ‘blessed visions’” undergoes a complete change of ontology as signified by the phrases “exchanges one life for another,” “considers itself to be no longer human,” and “exerts a different activity.” The term “activity” in the last phrase is a *technicus terminus* and refers to the Aristotelian concept of activity which indicates the proper function of an organism.³⁴ In this sense then, the exchange of activity indicates the complete transformation of the entity. The soul takes up a new activity, one wholly inappropriate its status as a soul; adoption of a divine activity necessitates the transformation of the essence to divinity.³⁵

Here, we see that the soul is indeed transformed. It regards itself, correctly we are told, to have shed its human state. It takes up a new activity, the activity of the gods (i.e., theurgy). Elsewhere, Iamblichus confirms this view adding that this transformation of the human can be likened to the attainment of an original divinised state that has been lost, a godlike state that has been replaced with a human soul:

I say, then, that the man who is conceived of as “divinised” (*Θεωρός*) who once was united to the contemplation of the gods, afterwards came into possession of another soul adopted to the human form, and through this was born into the bond of necessity and fate.³⁶

Later Neoplatonists attest to this view as well, noting that the whole goal of theurgy is divinisation:

If, as you maintain, Hegias,³⁷ Isidore was telling him, ‘the practice of theurgy is divine, I too admit it. But those who are destined to be gods must first become human [...] but it has come to pass that nowadays philosophy stands not on a razor’s edge, but truly on the brink of extreme old age.’³⁸

³² Myst. 1.3: Οὕτω καὶ ἡ ἀνθρωπίνη ψυχὴ κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ τῇ γνώσει πόδες αὐτοὺς συναπτέσθω, εἰκαστῇ μὲν ἦ δέξῃ ἢ οὐλογισμῷ τινὶ ἀρχομένοις ποτὲ ἀπὸ χρόνου, μηδαμῶς τὴν ὑπὲρ ταῦτα πάντα οὐσίαν μεταδιδούσουσα ταῖς δὲ καθαραῖς καὶ ἀμεμπτοῖς νοήσεσιν αἱς εἴληφεν ἔξ αἰδίου παρὰ τῶν Θεῶν, ταύταις αὐτοῖς συνηργημένῃ.

³³ Myst. 1.12: Δῆλον δὲ καὶ ἀπ’ αὐτῶν τῶν ἔργων δι νυνὶ φαμεν εἰναι τῆς πόδες αρχομένοις ἀνθρωπίνην ψυχὴν ἀνθρωπότος, γνωμένος τό πρόσθετη τῇ Θεῶν, ἐπεισ-ήλθεν ἐπέρχομενος, καὶ διὰ τούτο ἐν τῷ τῆς ἀνθρώπου μορφῆς εἶδος συνηρμοσμένη, καὶ διὰ τούτο ἐν τῷ τῆς ἀνθρώπου εἰμαρμένης ἐγένετο δεσμῷ.

³⁴ Cf. Arist., EN 1098b.

³⁵ This is seemingly accomplished despite the standard Platonic trope that essences generate activities (Myst. 1.4). Iamblichus offers no clear way to reconcile this problem.

³⁶ Myst. 10.5: Λέγω τούτων ὡς ὁ Θεωρός νοούμενος ἀνθρωπότος, γνωμένος τό πρόσθετη τῇ Θεῶν, ἐπεισ-ήλθεν ἐπέρχομενος, καὶ διὰ τούτο ἐν τῷ τῆς ἀνθρώπου μορφῆς εἶδος συνηρμοσμένη, καὶ διὰ τούτο ἐν τῷ τῆς ἀνθρώπου εἰμαρμένης ἐγένετο δεσμῷ.

³⁷ Dam. Isid., fr. 150 (trans. P. Athanassiadi, *The Philosophical History. Life of Isidore*, Apamea 1999). This brief fragment seems critical of the divinisation doc-

Apart from believing the main purpose of their rituals to be divinisation, the theurgists recognised that theurgic rituals set themselves off from others. This notion seems to be first attested in the *Chaldean oracles* where it is said, enigmatically, “the theurgists do not fall into the herd which is subject to Destiny.”³⁸ The importance of this passage is that the theurgists, as a class,

(much like the class of Christians who return to their prelapsarian state) are understood to all possess the same ontological status, superior to the vulgar throng, which must experience the negative consequences of fate. Only the individual who has become a theurgist, i.e., joined the theurgic school and obtained access to the information of theurgy which only the theurgists know (*πόνοι δὲ οἱ θεογοι ταῦτα [...] γρυνώροκοντι*), is given the opportunity to become a god.³⁹

4. Conclusion

For to explain is to connect things to one another, to re-establish relations between them that make them appear to us as functions of one another, as vibrating sympathetically in accord with an internal law grounded in their nature. [...] I begin to understand only if it is possible to conceive of B from a perspective that links it in some way to A, joined to A by some relation of kinship.

– Emile Durkheim⁴⁰

Previous models of conversion have addressed the issue of passivity or activity in the individual's conversion. Whether through accident or intentional selection, it seems that many modern studies of conversion have focused on groups that occasionally are labeled under the derogatory name of cult, including the Divine Light Mission, the Moonies, Scientologists, etc. As such it seems that one of the reasons typically proposed for why people convert is that they are brainwashed, their individuality is taken away from them, and they are volitionally unable to choose any other option than to join the cult. Such sensationalistic theories, while prominent in journalistic media, have never been empirically proven.⁴¹

Barring the possibility of malevolent hypnotism, why do people even begin to change their minds and identities, and, having done so, what keeps them from changing their minds again? The method I have proposed in this essay has tried to answer this question in a situation where research lacks

first hand accounts of conversion. I have tried to show that metaphysics itself can serve as a form of coercion, especially when it is presented in a rationalistic or hyper-rationalistic manner, substituting for proofs unquestionable reasonings which transfer the “logic” of argument into discursively constructed realities.

Ontological conversion offers an interesting way to address the issue of agency in conversion. In an ontological conversion, or at least the examples explored in this essay, the worldview created by the community seems to leave the convert no choice but to convert, by making the consequences of conversion the growth of the individual into a truer form of the individual. In other words, to paraphrase Nietzsche, the convert is asked to become who he or she really is,⁴² i.e., a divine being. There is an inherent tension in this understanding, because on the one hand, the group needs to explain how they offer something that is unavailable in other groups and/or practices, and must therefore exaggerate the difference between the converter and the divine status promised to him or her. On the other hand, in order to make the conversion attractive, the group must offer to the converter some kind of permeable barrier between these two poles of absolute alterity. One way to do this is to claim that the convert is not really making a change, but is in fact, simply becoming who they already are, discovering their true nature, removing the masks that their previous life has forced them to wear. The rituals of theurgy realign the convert to a proper appreciation of the divine, an appreciation that has been “denied” to the individual human soul as a “result of their birth.”

³⁸ [Anon.], *Oracula Chaldaica* 153: Οὐ γὰρ ὅφελαστην ἀγέλην πύρρου Θεογοῖ (trans. R. Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles*, Leiden 1989, 107).

³⁹ Myst. 5.20.

⁴⁰ 2001 (1915), 180f.

⁴² Was sagt dein Gewissen? – “Du sollst werden, der du hier” /F Nietzsche, D: