

Back to a Classic Debate: Conversion and Salvation in Ancient Mystery Cults?

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Arthur Darby Nock (1902-1963)



Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo. Oxford, 1933

Ramsay Mc Mullen (1928)



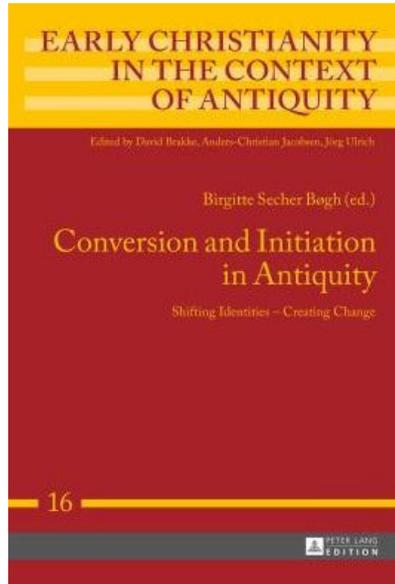
- *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven, 1984)
- “Conversion: A Historian’s View,” *Second Century: A Journal of Early Christian Studies* 5, no. 2 (1985–86): 67–81

Jan N. Bremmer (1944)



'Arthur Darby Nock's *Conversion* (1933): a balance', in J. Weitbrecht et al. *Zwischen Ereignis und Erzählung. Konversion als Medium der Selbstbeschreibung in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, Berlin, 2016, pp. 9-29

Birgitte Bøgh



- (ed.) *Conversion and Initiation in Antiquity: Shifting Identities, Creating Change*, Frankfurt 2014
- "Beyond Nock: From Adhesion to Conversion in the Mystery Cults," *History of Religions* 54, no. 3 (2015): 260-287

Methodological criteria

- Paradigmatic rhetoric
- Individual experiences
- Conceptual vs. literary metaphors
- Salvation vs. saving acts
- Avoiding superiority complexes
- Diachronic perspectives

Conversion (*metanoia*) vs. initiation (*telete*)

- Renunciation vs. purification
- Exclusiveness vs. elitism
- Models: Paul vs. Eleusis
- Genre: protreptic / paraenesis vs. ritual prescriptions
- Frequent telestic imagery in Christian contexts
- Occasional conversion imagery in mystery cults

Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.59-69

Οἱ μὲν γὰρ εἰς τὰς ἄλλας τελετὰς καλοῦντες προκηρύττουσι τάδε· ὅστις χεῖρας καθαρὸς καὶ φωνὴν συνετός, καὶ αὐθις ἕτεροι· ὅστις ἀγνὸς ἀπὸ παντὸς μύσους, καὶ ὅτῳ ἢ ψυχὴ οὐδὲν σύνοιδε κακόν, καὶ ὅτῳ εὖ καὶ δικαίως βεβίωται. Καὶ ταῦτα προκηρύττουσιν οἱ καθάρσια ἀμαρτημάτων ὑπισχνούμενοι. Ἐπακούσωμεν δὲ τίνας ποτὲ οὗτοι καλοῦσιν· ὅστις, φασίν, ἀμαρτωλός, ὅστις ἀσύνητος, ὅστις νήπιος, καὶ ὡς ἀπλῶς εἰπεῖν ὅστις κακοδαίμων, τοῦτον ἢ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ δέξεται.

Celsus says: ... Those who invite to the other mysteries proclaim this: ‘Every one who has clean hands, and an intelligent tongue; others again thus: ‘He who is pure from all pollution, and whose soul is conscious of no evil, and who has lived well and justly.’ Such is the proclamation made by those who promise purification from sins. But let us hear what kind of persons these Christians invite. Every one, they say, who is a sinner, who does not understand, who is a child, and, to put it simply, whoever is unfortunate, him will the kingdom of God receive...”.

Καὶ πρὸς ταῦτα δέ φαμεν ὅτι οὐ ταυτόν ἐστι νοσοῦντας τὴν ψυχὴν ἐπὶ θεραπείαν καλεῖν καὶ ὑγιαίνοντας ἐπὶ τὴν τῶν θειοτέρων γνῶσιν καὶ ἐπιστήμην. Καὶ ἡμεῖς δὲ ἀμφοτέρωτα ταῦτα γινώσκοντες, κατ' ἀρχὰς μὲν προκαλούμενοι ἐπὶ τὸ θεραπευθῆναι τοὺς ἀνθρώπους προτρέπομεν τοὺς ἀμαρτωλοὺς ἥκειν ἐπὶ τοὺς διδάσκοντας λόγους μὴ ἀμαρτάνειν καὶ τοὺς ἀσυνέτους ἐπὶ τοὺς ἐμποιοῦντας σύνεσιν καὶ τοὺς νηπίους εἰς τὸ ἀναβαίνειν φρονήματι ἐπὶ τὸν ἄνδρα καὶ τοὺς ἀπλῶς κακοδαίμονας ἐπὶ εὐδαιμονίαν ἢ, ὅπερ κυριώτερόν ἐστιν εἰπεῖν, ἐπὶ μακαριότητα. Ἐπὰν δ' οἱ προκόπτοντες τῶν προτραπέντων παραστήσωσι τὸ κεκαθάρθαι ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου καὶ ὅση δύναμις βέλτιον βεβιωκέναι, τὸ τηνικάδε καλοῦμεν αὐτοὺς ἐπὶ τὰς παρ' ἡμῖν τελετάς.

Now, in answer to such statements, we say that it is not the same thing to invite those who are sick in soul to be cured, and those who are in health to the knowledge and study of divine things. We, however, keeping both these things in view, at first invite all men to be healed, and exhort those who are sinners to come to the consideration of the doctrines which teach men not to sin, and those who do not understand to those which beget understanding, and those who are children to rise in their thoughts to manhood, and those who are simply unfortunate to good fortune, or—which is the more appropriate term to use—to blessedness. And when those who have been turned towards virtue have made progress, and have shown that they have been purified by the Word, and have led as far as they can a better life, only then do we invite them to participation in our mysteries.

ὅστις ἀγνός οὐ μόνον ἀπὸ παντός μύσους ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν ἐλαττόνων εἶναι νομιζομένων ἀμαρτημάτων, θαρρῶν μυείσθω τὰ μόνοις ἀγίοις καὶ καθαροῖς εὐλόγως παραδιδόμενα μυστήρια τῆς κατὰ Ἰησοῦν θεοσεβείας. Ὁ μὲν οὖν Κέλσου μύστης φησὶν· ὅτῳ οὐδὲν ἡ ψυχὴ σύνοιδε κακόν, ἡκέτω· ὁ δὲ κατὰ τὸν Ἰησοῦν μυσταγωγῶν τῷ θεῷ τοῖς κεκαθαρμένοις τὴν ψυχὴν ἐρεῖ· ὅτῳ πολλῷ χρόνῳ ἡ ψυχὴ οὐδὲν σύνοιδε κακόν, καὶ μάλιστα ἀφ' οὗ προσελήλυθε τῇ τοῦ λόγου θεραπείᾳ, οὗτος καὶ τῶν κατ' ἰδίαν λελαλημένων ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ τοῖς γνησίοις μαθηταῖς ἀκουέτω. Οὐκοῦν καὶ ἐν οἷς ἀντιπαρατίθησι τὰ τῶν μούντων ἐν Ἑλλησι τοῖς διδάσκουσι τὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ οὐκ οἶδε διαφορὰν καλουμένων ἐπὶ μὲν θεραπείαν φαύλων ἐπὶ δὲ τὰ μυστικώτερα τῶν ἤδη καθαρωτάτων.

whoever is pure not only from all defilement, but from what are regarded as lesser transgressions, let him be boldly initiated in the mysteries of Jesus, which properly are made known only to the holy and the pure. The initiated of Celsus accordingly says, Let him whose soul is conscious of no evil come. But he who acts as initiator, according to the precepts of Jesus, will say to those who have been purified in heart, He whose soul has, for a long time, been conscious of no evil, and especially since he yielded himself to the healing of the word, let such an one hear the doctrines which were spoken in private by Jesus to His genuine disciples. Therefore in the comparison which he institutes between the procedure of the initiators into the Grecian mysteries, and the teachers of the doctrine of Jesus, he does not know the difference between inviting the wicked to be healed, and initiating those already purified into the sacred mysteries!

Εἶτα συκοφαντῶν τὰ προτροπῆς ἔνεκα εἰρημένα καὶ γεγραμμένα τῆς πρὸς τοὺς κακῶς βεβιωκότας καὶ καλοῦντα αὐτοὺς ἐπὶ μετάνοιαν καὶ διόρθωσιν τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτῶν, φησὶν ἡμᾶς λέγειν τοῖς ἁμαρτωλοῖς πεπέμφθαι τὸν θεόν. Ὅμοιον δὲ καὶ τοῦτο ποιεῖ, ὡς εἰ ἐνεκάλει τισὶ λέγουσι διὰ τοὺς κακῶς διάγοντας ἐν τῇ πόλει πεπέμφθαι ὑπὸ φιλανθρωποτάτου βασιλέως τὸν ἰατρόν. Ἐπέμφθη οὖν θεὸς λόγος καθὸ μὲν ἰατρός τοῖς ἁμαρτωλοῖς, καθὸ δὲ διδάσκαλος θείων μυστηρίων τοῖς ἤδη καθαροῖς καὶ μηκέτι ἁμαρτάνουσιν.

In the next place, throwing a slur upon the exhortations spoken and written to those who have led wicked lives, and which invite them to repentance and reformation of heart, he asserts that we say that it was to sinners that God has been sent. Now this statement of his is much the same as if he were to find fault with certain persons for saying that on account of the sick who were living in a city, a physician had been sent them by a very benevolent monarch. God the Word was sent, indeed, as a physician to sinners, but as a teacher of divine mysteries to those who are already pure and who sin no more.

Οἶεται δ' ὅτι τοιαῦτα εἰς προτροπὴν τῶν ἀμαρτανόντων φαμέν ὡς μηδένα ἄνδρα τῷ ὄντι χρηστόν καὶ δίκαιον προσάγεσθαι δυνάμενοι, καὶ ὅτι διὰ τοῦτο τοῖς ἀνοσιωτάτοις καὶ ἐξωλεστάτοις τὰς πύλας ἀνοίγομεν. Ἡμεῖς δέ, εἴ τις κατανοήσαι ἡμῶν εὐγνωμόνως τὸ ἄθροισμα, πλείονας ἔχομεν παραστήσαι τοὺς οὐκ ἀπὸ χαλεποῦ πάνυ βίου, ἢ περ τοὺς ἀπὸ ἐξωλεστάτων ἀμαρτημάτων ἐπιστρέψαντας. Καί, γὰρ πεφύκασιν οἱ τὰ κρείττονα ἑαυτοῖς συνεγνωκότες, εὐχόμενοι ἀληθῆ εἶναι τὰ κηρυσσόμενα περὶ τῆς ὑπὸ θεοῦ τοῖς κρείττοσιν ἀμοιβῆς, ἐτοιμότερον συγκατατίθεσθαι τοῖς λεγομένοις παρὰ τοὺς πάνυ μοχθηρῶς βεβιωκότας.

He imagines, however, that we utter these exhortations for the conversion of sinners, because we are able to gain over no one who is really good and righteous, and therefore open our gates to the most unholy and abandoned of men. But if any one will fairly observe our assemblies we can present a greater number of those who have been converted from not a very wicked life, than of those who have committed the most abominable sins. For naturally those who are conscious to themselves of better things, desire that those promises may be true which are declared by God regarding the reward of the righteous, and thus assent more readily to the statements (of Scripture) than those do who have led very wicked lives.

Καὶ ἐν τούτοις δ' ὁ Κέλσος πάνυ μοι ἐσφάλθαι δοκεῖ, μὴ διδοὺς τοῖς ἁμαρτάνειν πεφυκόσι καὶ τοῦτο πράττειν εἰθισμένοις τὴν παντελῆ μεταβολήν, ὅστις οὐδ' ἀπὸ κολάσεων αὐτοὺς οἶεται θεραπεύεσθαι. Σαφῶς γὰρ φαίνεται ὅτι πάντες μὲν ἄνθρωποι πρὸς τὸ ἁμαρτάνειν πεφύκαμεν, ἐνιοὶ δὲ οὐ μόνον πεφύκασιν ἀλλὰ καὶ εἰθισμένοι εἰσὶν ἁμαρτάνειν· ἀλλ' οὐ πάντες ἄνθρωποι ἀπαράδεκτοί εἰσι τῆς παντελοῦς μεταβολῆς. Εἰσὶ γὰρ καὶ κατὰ πᾶσαν φιλοσοφίας αἵρεσιν καὶ κατὰ τὸν θεῖον λόγον οἱ τοσοῦτον μεταβεβληκέναι ἱστορούμενοι, ὥστε αὐτοὺς ἐκκεῖσθαι παράδειγμα τοῦ ἀρίστου βίου. Καὶ φέρουσί τινες ἡρώων μὲν τὸν Ἡρακλέα καὶ τὸν Ὀδυσσεά, τῶν δ' ὕστερον τὸν Σωκράτην, τῶν δὲ χθὲς καὶ πρῶην γεγονότων τὸν Μουσώνιον.

Now here Celsus appears to me to have committed a great error, in refusing to those who are sinners by nature, and also by habit, the possibility of a complete transformation, alleging that they cannot be cured even by punishment. For it clearly appears that all men are inclined to sin by nature, and some not only by nature but by practice, while not all men are incapable of an entire transformation. For there are found in every philosophical sect, and in the word of God, persons who are related to have undergone so great a change that they may be proposed as a model of excellence of life. Among the names of the heroic age some mention Hercules and Ulysses, among those of later times, Socrates, and of those who have lived very recently, Musonius.

Ἐξῆς δέ φησιν ὅτι οἱ ἀναμάρτητοι βελτίους κοινωνοὶ βίου, μὴ σαφηνίσας, τίνας φησὶ τοὺς ἀναμαρτήτους, πότερον τοὺς ἀρχῆθεν ἢ τοὺς ἐκ μεταβολῆς. Οἱ μὲν οὖν ἀρχῆθεν ἀδύνατοι, οἱ δ' ἐκ μεταβολῆς σπανίως εἰσὶν εὕρισκόμενοι, οἵτινες ἐκ τοῦ προσεληλυθέναι λόγῳ σώζονται τοιοῦτοι γίνονται. Οὐχὶ δὲ τοιοῦτοι ὄντες τῷ λόγῳ προσέρχονται· χωρὶς γὰρ λόγου καὶ ταῦτα τελείου ἀμήχανον ἀναμάρτητον γενέσθαι ἄνθρωπον.

He alleges, in the next place, that they who are without sin are partakers of a better life; not making it clear what he means by those who are without sin, whether those who are so from the beginning (of their lives), or those who become so by a transformation. Of those who were so from the beginning of their lives, there cannot possibly be any; while those who are so after a transformation (of heart) are found to be few in number, being those who have become so after giving in their allegiance to the saving word. And they were not such when they gave in their allegiance. For, apart from the aid of the word, and that too the word of perfection, it is impossible for a man to become free from sin.