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

Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui
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)  Jan N. Bremmer (1944)

- *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven, 1984)

Birgitte Bøgh

• (ed.) *Conversion and Initiation in Antiquity: Shifting Identities, Creating Change*, Frankfurt 2014

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

Oἱ μὲν γὰρ εἰς τὰς ἄλλας τελετὰς καλοῦντες προκηρύττουσι τάδε· ὅστις χεῖρας καθαρὰς καὶ φωνὴν συνετός, καὶ αὐθικὲς ἕτεροι· ὅστις ἁγνὸς ἀπὸ παντὸς μῦσους, καὶ ὅτω ἡ ψυχὴ οὐδὲν σύνοιδε κακὸν, καὶ ὅτω εὖ καὶ δικαίως βεβίωσε. Καὶ ταῦτα προκηρύττουσιν οἱ καθάρσια ἀμαρτημάτων ὑπισχυόμενοι. Ἐπακούσωμεν δὲ τίνας ποτὲ οὕτως καλοῦσιν· ὅστις, φασίν, ἀμαρτωλός, ὅστις ἀσύνετος, ὅστις νήπιος, καὶ ὃς ἀπλῶς εἰπεῖν ὅστις κακοδαίμων, τούτον ἡ 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 δὲ φαμεν ὅτι οὐ ταῦτὸν ἐστὶ νοσοῦντας τὴν ψυχὴν ἐπὶ θεραπεῖαν καλεῖν καὶ ὑγιαίνοντας ἐπὶ τὴν τῶν θειοτέρων γνώσιν καὶ ἐπιστήμην. Καὶ ἡμεῖς δὲ ἀμφότερα ταῦτα γινώσκοντες, κατ’ ἁρχὰς μὲν προκαλοῦμενοι ἐπὶ τὸ θεραπευθῆναι τοὺς ἀνθρώπους προτρέπομεν τοὺς ἁμαρτωλοὺς ἥκειν ἐπὶ τοὺς διδάσκοντας λόγους μὴ ἁμαρτάνειν καὶ τοὺς ἁσυνέτους ἐπὶ τοὺς ἐμποιοῦντας σύνεσιν καὶ τοὺς νηπίους ἐις τὸ ἀναβαίνειν φρονήματι ἐπὶ τὸν ἄνδρα καὶ τοὺς ἀπλῶς κακοδαίμονας ἐπὶ εὐδαιμονίαν ἢ, ὅπερ κυριώτερον ἐστὶν 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.
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!
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.
Οἴεται δ' ὅτι τοιαύτα εἰς προτροπήν τῶν ἀμαρτανόντων φαμὲν ὡς μηδένα ἄνδρα τῶν ὑπερ τὸν χρηστὸν καὶ δίκαιον προσαγεσθαί δυνάμενοι, καὶ ὅτι διὰ τοῦτο τοῖς ἀνοσιώτατοι καὶ ἐξωλεστάτοις τὰς πύλας ἀνοίγουμεν. Ἡμεῖς δὲ, εἰ τις κατανοήσαι ἧμων εὐγνωμόνως τὸ ἀθροίσμα, πλεῖονας ἔχουμεν παραστῆσαι τοὺς οὐκ ἀπὸ χαλεποῦ πάνυ βίου, ἀλλὰ τοὺς ἀπὸ ἐξωλεστῶν ἀμαρτημάτων ἐπιστρέψαντας. Καὶ γὰρ πεφύκασιν οἱ τὰ κρεῖττονα ἑαυτοίς συνεγνωκότες, εὐχόμενοι ἀληθῆ εἰναι τὰ κηρυσσόμενα περὶ τῆς ὑπὸ θεοῦ τοῖς κρεῖττοισιν ἁμοιβής, 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.
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.
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.