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14 The Context of Conversions in Early Modern Europe

Personal Agency and Choice in the Construction of Religious Identities

The models of conversion constructed by the Protestant and Catholic churches of early modern Europe may have varied in details, but they shared an insistence on the absolute, irrevocable, and transformative nature of the change that occurs when a person abandons one faith in favor of another. Converts were represented as undergoing a profound alteration of the inner self – an enlightenment of the mind, a turning of the heart, a liberation of the conscience. They were portrayed as totally repudiating their old faith and church (or synagogue or mosque) and unreservedly embracing a new one. According to the models, converts crossed a line or boundary between faiths that was sharp, clear, and constant. They made a choice between the orthodoxy of one religion, including the entire system of beliefs and practices associated with it, and that of another. The very essence of this model of conversion long predated the Reformations, having roots in the New Testament and the writings of Augustine, and it remains the dominant model in our culture today.[1] Until recently, this was also how most historians understood the phenomenon of religious conversion.

In the last decade or two, a growing group of scholars has proposed an alternative model. Aptly summarized in an article by Kim Siebenhüner, this new understanding suggests that the rupture effected by converts with their old religion is inevitably incomplete and that their religious allegiance often remains fluid and unstable. Conversion is not an all-or-nothing choice between restricted alternatives but a dynamic process in which individuals construct their identity out of elements that are not passively accepted but actively appropriated. The Christian identities that result from this process are complex. They combine elements

1 On the modern definition and use of the concept of conversion, see Hubert Knoblauch, Volkhard Krech, and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, "Religiöse Bekehrung in soziologischer Perspektive: Themen, Schwerpunkte und Fragestellungen der gegenwärtigen religionssoziologischen Konversionsforschung," in *Religiöse Konversion: Systematische und fallorientierte Studien in soziologischer Perspektive* (ed. Hubert Knoblauch, Volkhard Krech, and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr; Constance, 1998), 7–43; on the origins of this definition and use, see Paula Fredriksen, "Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Traditions and the Retrospective Self, " *JTS* 37 (1986): 3–34.

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that are heterogeneous and sometimes completely contradictory; they can be multi-layered, hybrid, syncretistic, or ambiguous and at their core lurks an unresolvable ambivalence that makes them potentially unstable. In refashioning the self, converts cannot wipe the slate of their past lives entirely clean; try as they might to renounce their upbringing and previous culture, they remain stamped by the latter in some unavoidable ways.[2] Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton have even gone so far as to make the hyperbolic claim that "complete religious conversion…was and is impossible to achieve."[3] This new understanding of conversion accords with postmodernist cultural theory and has, in some cases, been directly influenced by it.[4] Hyperbole aside, it has been very fruitful, yielding a host of new insights.

Significantly, it is historians studying conversions to Christianity who have developed and applied the new understanding most fully. Historiography on the Conversos of Iberia (converts from Judaism to Christianity) has shown that "between old and new faiths all shades of religious identity were possible" and that some Conversos moved easily between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim worlds, their religious identities shifting with the context of their lives.[5] Recent historiography on the Christian missions to Asia and America has revealed that many converts to Christianity fused their old and new faiths, practicing elements

2 Kim Siebenhüner, "Glaubenswechsel in der frühen Neuzeit: Chancen und Tendenzen einer historischen Konversionsforschung," *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 34 (2007): 243–72. For another historiographic overview, see Jörg Deventer, "Konversion und Konvertiten im Zeitalter der Reformation und Konfessionalisierung: Stand und Perspektiven der Forschung," *Aschkenas* 15 (2005): 257–70.

3 Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton, "Introduction," in *Conversion: Old Worlds and New* (ed. Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton; Rochester, 2003)(Rochester, 2003), x.

4 Siebenhüner herself cited the cultural theories of Susan Stanford Friedman in "Glaubenswechsel," 250–51, 272.

5 Ibid., 261 (quotation). See Stephen Haliczer, *Inquisition and Society in the Kingdom of Valencia, 1478–1834* (Berkeley, 1990), 209–43; Brian Pullan, *The Jews of Europe and the Inquisition of Venice, 1550–1670* (London, 1997), 201–42; Jose Faur, "Four Classes of *Conversos*: A Typological Study," *Revue des Études Juives* 149 (1990): 113–24; Nathan Wachtel, "Marrano Religiosity in Hispanic America in the Seventeenth Century," in *The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West, 1450–1800* (ed. Paolo Bernardini and Norman Fiering; Oxford, 2001), 149–71; Yosef Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism: The Story of Isaac Orobio de Castro*, (trans. Raphael Loewe (; Oxford, 1989); Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton, 1989), 3–84; Mercedes Garcia-Arenal and Gerard Wiegers, *A Man of Three Worlds: Samuel Pallache, a Moroccan Jew in Catholic and Protestant Europe* (Baltimore, 2003); David M. Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of the Crypto-Jews* (Philadelphia, 1996), esp. 84–90, 563–86; David L. Graizbord, *Souls in Dispute: Converso Identities in Iberia and the Jewish Diaspora, 1580–1700* (Philadelphia, 2004).

of each alongside the other.[6] On the other hand, historians studying conversions between the rival Protestant and Catholic confessions of early modern Europe have proved more conservative. Their publications have certainly manifested an increasing awareness of phenomena that accord more with the new understanding, such as the frequency of relapse and reconversion, the geographic mobility of converts, the fictive quality of conversion narratives, and the role played by some converts as mediators between religious communities.[7] Nevertheless, as a group, they have been slow to abandon the traditional view of conversion as a radical rupture.[8] One of the reasons for this discrepancy is, I believe, that the traditional view of conversion accords more readily with the dominant paradigm

6 See Sabine MacCormack, *Religion in the Andes: Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Peru* (Princeton, 1991); Nancy M. Farriss, *Maya Society under Colonial Rule: The Collective Enterprise of Survival* (Princeton, 1984), 286–351; Kenneth Mills, *Idolatry and Its Enemies: Colonial Andean Religion and Extirpation, 1640–1750* (Princeton, 1997); Nicholas Griffiths and Fernando Cervantes, eds., *Spiritual Encounters: Interactions between Christianity and Native Religions in Colonial America* (Birmingham, 1999); Allan Greer, "Conversion and Identity: Iroquois Christianity in Seventeenth-Century New France", in *Conversion: Old Worlds and New*, (ed. Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton; Rochester, 2003), 175–98; Peter Gose, "Converting the Ancestors: Indirect Rule, Settlement Consolidation, and the Struggle over Burial in Colonial Peru, 1532–1614", in *ibid*., 140–74. Greer declined even to use conversion as an analytic concept on the grounds that doing so objectifies religious traditions and turns them into firmly bounded, mutually exclusive, dichotomous entities.

7 See especially Keith P. Luria, *Sacred Boundaries: Religious Coexistence and Conflict in Early-Modern France* (Washington, DC, 2005), 246–307; Beat Hodler, "Konversionen und der Handlungsspielraum der Untertanen in der Eidgenossenschaft im Zeitalter der reformierten Orthodoxie," in *Gemeinde, Reformation und Widerstand: Festschrift für Peter Blickle zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Heinrich R. Schmidt, André Holenstein, and Andreas Würgler (Tübingen, 1998), 281–91; Kim Siebenhüner, "Conversion, Mobility and the Roman Inquisition in Italy Around 1600," *Past & Present* 200 (2008): 5–35; Odile Martin, *La Conversion Protestante à Lyon (1659–1687)* (Geneva, 1986), 155–72; Judith Pollmann, "A Different Road to God: The Protestant Experience of Conversion in the Sixteenth Century," in *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity* (ed. Peter van der Veer; New York, 1996), 47–64; D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2005); Ute Lotz-Heumann, Jan-Friedrich Missfelder, and Matthias Pohlig, eds., *Konversion und Konfession in der frühen Neuzeit*, part 3, (Gütersloh, 2007), part III; Thomas P. Power, "Converts," in *Endurance and Emergence: Catholics in Ireland in the Eighteenth Century* (ed. Thomas P. Power and Kevin Whelan; Dublin, 1990), 101–27; Duane J. Corpis, *Crossing the Boundaries of Belief: Geographies of Religious Conversion in Southern Germany, 1648–1800* (Charlottesville, 2014), who noted 'the hold that the confessionalization thesis has had on the analysis of religious conversion," 11.

8 For a direct challenge to this view, however, see Nicholas Griffiths, "The Best of Both Faiths: The Boundaries of Religious Allegiance and Opportunism in Early Eighteenth-Century Cuenca," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 77 (2000): 13–39.

that we use for understanding post-Reformation Christianity, namely, the concept of confessionalization.[9]

Whichever precise variant is deployed, the confessionalization paradigm represents Europe in the post-Reformation era as increasingly polarized into clearly defined and sharply contrasting confessional blocks. Between the late sixteenth and early eighteenth centuries, orthodoxies grew narrower and more defined. The boundaries of each block – both culturally, in terms of belief and practice, and socially, in terms of membership – were policed with increasing effectiveness, and the amount of variety tolerated within each block declined as each of the major confessions undertook in its own way a quest for "holy uniformity."[10] Confessionalization was thus antithetical to the highly individualized and surprisingly creative constructions of religious identity which, it has recently been suggested, characterize converts. The author of a 1579 pamphlet articulated a typically confessional viewpoint when he wrote: "either the Reformed religion is good or it is bad; there is no middle, since the affairs of heaven permit no averages...truth and falsehood are as much at odds as Belial and Christ, and hence there is as little in common between the Reformed teaching and Roman fantasies as there is between white and black."[11] People whose religious identities show traits such as fluidity, hybridity, and ambiguity seem, on the face of it, incapable of sharing such a viewpoint. They can only be understood within the confessionalization paradigm as unconfessionalized, that is, as predating confessionalization, if their dates allow it, or as abnormal, marginal figures who were exceptions to the rule.

The problem is, therefore, to reconcile our picture of the early modern religious scene as increasingly rigid and constricting with our new appreciation for the degree of personal agency and creative freedom exercised by converts. As a partial solution to this puzzle, I argue that even in a highly confessionalized Europe, converts were not the only people who exercised individual religious agency, and conversion from one confession to another was not the only form of religious choice available to people. While this may seem obvious, we need to avoid exaggerating the degree to which confessions, even in their most mature form, were monolithic entities. We also need to examine our tendency to

9 For an overview of the concept and the historiography that uses or critiques it as a paradigm, see Ute Lotz-Heumann, "Confessionalization," in *Reformation and Early Modern Europe: A Guide to Research* (ed. David M. Whitford; Kirksville, 2008), 136–57.

10 Benjamin J. Kaplan, "Dutch Particularism and the Calvinist Quest for 'Holy Uniformity,'" *ARG* 82 (1991): 239–56.

11 Paul Fredericq, ed., *Het Nederlandsch proza in de zestiendeeuwsche pamfletten uit den tijd der beroerten* (Brussels, 1907), 107–8.

regard confessional allegiance as absolute, involving an unconditional, unlimited acceptance of a predefined body of beliefs and rites. Like those of converts, the religious identities of non-converts too were in some ways flexible, multidimensional, and individually constructed. This was true even of people who lived in communities where a single confession commanded the support of secular authorities and the allegiance of all inhabitants. It was all the more true of people in religiously mixed communities, from where most of the converts derived. In short, converts were perhaps not as exceptional as recent historiography has made them seem.

A proverb circulated among Catholics in early modern France: "vivre chez les Jesuites, être malade chez les Capucins, mourir chez les Dominicains."[12] Jesuits, renowned for their skill as teachers and confessors, were thus touted as best able to instruct people on how to lead a pious – and perhaps not too ascetic – life. When an epidemic struck a community, it was the bold and self-sacrificing Capuchins whom Catholics could count on to minister to them in their suffering. And in death, one might be spared the fires of purgatory with the help of the Dominicans; no one's masses and prayers for the dead were reckoned more abundant or powerful than those of the Blackfriars. The French saying reminds us of the wide range of specialisms and resources that not only survived early modern Catholic reform efforts but were, in some cases, created by those efforts. To be sure, Catholic reformers sought to bring lay piety under closer clerical supervision, to direct it away from the profusion of sacramentals and paraliturgical rites that had developed in the late Middle Ages, and to focus it on the sacraments and official liturgy of the church. Still, even the most confessionalized, hierarchic, clerically controlled brands of early modern Catholicism continued to include a multiplicity of religious orders and other types of clergy, saints, and fraternal organizations and a wide variety of rituals and objects which Catholics believed gave them access to the supernatural.

As Jens Ivo Engels and Hillard von Thiessen have noted, the French saying also suggests how ordinary Catholics selected in a rational and even calculating way from among these resources, based on their needs and circumstances and in pursuit of their spiritual and material well-being.[13] They understood that in order to secure the benefit of these resources, they had to make carefully calibrated investments of their own money and efforts. After all, neither the clergy nor saints provided their mediating services to those who offered nothing, not

12 Quoted in Jens Ivo Engels and Hillard Von Thiessen, "Glauben: Begriffliche Annäherungen anhand von Beispielen aus der frühen Neuzeit," *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 28 (2001): 343.

13 Ibid., 343–44.

even their prayers, in exchange. Some Catholics went so far as to play the system, turning rivalries and contested jurisdictions to their advantage. This was most notorious in the case of laypeople who evaded the demands of their parish priest by turning to regular clergy as their confessors and for the administration of sacraments; such competition between Catholic regular and secular clergy for penitents is known to have occurred in German lands and the Dutch Republic, among other places.[14] But such calculations were not usually cynical. Catholic theology itself prescribed a form of account keeping, requiring Christians, in the economy of salvation, to balance a commensurate tally of good works against their sins. Part of being a good Catholic, moreover, involved knowing which resources to mobilize – for example, which saint to implore to intercede for you – in different situations. Most importantly, different people simply felt enthusiasm for different devotions, were attracted to different styles of piety, and identified with different saintly and clerical models. Some chose anything but the easy route: for example, the Jansenists, who opted for an austere piety that dwelt upon human depravity and the difficulty of proper penance.

Protestantism, of course, with its repudiation of the saints, hostility to idolatry, and reduced rituals, offered less variety for individuals and groups to choose from than Catholicism. Its doctrine of justification by faith alone denied Christians a say in how, or indeed whether, they would be saved. Yet, in ways long acknowledged, it did empower individuals, first and foremost, to read, if not to interpret, Scripture for themselves, so that Bible reading became an intense and highly personal form of religious engagement, as people sought instruction, explanation, guidance, and consolation, charting their own pathways through its rich and varied text. Naturally, Protestants had many other edifying texts as well at their disposal, including catechisms, martyrologies, manuals of piety, psalm books, and collections of sermons, as well as ephemeral materials such as ballads and pamphlets. By reading and utilizing these texts, individuals engaged in an active process of selection, reception, and appropriation. Nor were printed works the only kind of "text," to speak figuratively, that Protestants read; Puritans scoured both external events and their own inner workings for signs of election or damnation. Some Anglicans and Lutherans, in examining their own consciences, took the initiative to unburden themselves by making voluntary, private confes-

14 W. David Myers, "*Poor, Sinning Folk*"*: Confession and Conscience in Counter-Reformation Germany* (Ithaca, 1996), 31, 188; F. J. M. Hoppenbrouwers, *Oefening in Volmaaktheid: De Zeventiende-Eeuwse Rooms-Katholieke Spiritualiteit in de Republiek* (Den Haag, 1996), 67.

sions to clergy. Numerous studies have found Protestants of various confessions evaluating their own fitness to receive communion.[15]

Each of the Protestant confessions, to differing degrees, encompassed different forms of piety. These forms were embodied first of all in different strains of preaching. There was, of course, the exegetic strain with its careful attention to the words of Scripture by which faith was believed to be imparted and from which a number of doctrines and practical applications would be derived. There was the prophetic strain, heard especially (but not only) on days of prayer and fasting, when latter-day jeremiahs called on individuals to repent and communities to reform in order to escape God's wrath. There was also the polemical strain, when ministers blasted their confessional opponents as enemies of God. Individual lay Protestants did not determine which of these strains was heard in their parish church on a particular occasion, or indeed ever, and sermons often combined elements of all three. But, at least in cities with multiple churches and ministers, people almost invariably had their favorite ministers whose manner of preaching they found more edifying than others. In Lutheran Augsburg, churchgoers had no fewer than 38 different sermons a week from which to choose, excluding sermons for special occasions such as weddings, funerals, and days of fasting. As Hans-Christoph Rublack has shown, these sermons were far from the uniformly dry lessons in doctrinal orthodoxy that sermons in the confessional age are often assumed to be.[16] In England "sermon-gadding," namely, travelling around the performances of charismatic preachers, was common practice among the "hotter" sort of Protestants, while in France personality cults developed around famous Calvinist preachers whose sermons would be published, read, and imitated.[17]

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15 David Warren Sabean, *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge, 1984), 37–60; F.C. Mather, "Georgian Churchmanship Reconsidered: Some Variations in Anglican Public Worship 1714–1830," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985): 255–83, 272–73, 281–82; Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Calvinists and Libertines: Confession and Community in Utrecht, 1578–1620* (Oxford, 1995), 36–37.

16 Hans-Christoph Rublack, "Augsburger Predigt im Zeitalter der Lutherischen Orthodoxie," in *Die augsburger Kirchenordnung von 1537 und ihr Umfeld* (ed. Reinhard Schwarz; Gütersloh, 1988), 123–58. On the other hand, in a place like early seventeenth-century Basel the numbers of sermons did not translate into much variety from which to choose, and the reality came close to matching our caricature. Amy Nelson Burnett, *Teaching the Reformation: Ministers and Their Message in Basel, 1529–1629* (Oxford, 2006), ch. 8.

17 Patrick Collinson, "Elizabethan and Jacobean Puritanism as Forms of Popular Religious Culture," in *The Culture of English Puritanism 1560–1700* (eds. Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales; New York, 1996), 32–57; Peter Bayley, *French Pulpit Oratory, 1598–1650: A Study in Themes and Styles, with a Descriptive Catalogue of Printed Texts* (Cambridge, 1980), 15. See also Françoise Chevalier, *Prêcher sous L'édit de Nantes: La Prédication Réformée au XVIIe Siècle en France* (Geneva, 1994); Larissa Taylor, ed., *Preachers and People in the Reformations and Early Modern Pe-*

Lay Protestants were also very attentive to differences in ritual and in church decor. Research by Bodo Nischan revealed the scale of popular resistance to changes made to both during the so-called "second Reformation" in Saxony, Brandenburg, and other territories of northern Germany in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. This resistance could be violent, verbal, or passive. It could involve the enactment of parodic rituals or consist of people voting with their feet; for example, in the 1590s a minister in Naumburg began to omit the exorcism rite in baptism, and "people refused to take communion from him," flocking instead to other parishes. When liturgical reforms were introduced in Saxony, large numbers of people stopped attending church, some for many years.[18] Sensitivities were at least as acute in England where questions such as whether people should kneel when receiving communion led to a rupture in the national church.

And as in England, so on the continent some divisions within Protestant confessions grew in the seventeenth century into bitterly opposing camps. In the Netherlands, the Reformed Church came to be divided between Voetians and Cocceians. Different doctrines of the covenant produced diverging schools of Reformed theology. Most significantly for ordinary laity, both the Reformed and Lutheran traditions developed pietistic wings, which offered a more mystical, emotive, self-searching style of piety than the dogmatic orthodox wings. In fact, these pietistic movements had antecedents going back at least as far as the early seventeenth century, with the preaching and teaching of figures such as Johann Arndt in Germany and Willem Teelinck in the Netherlands. While these movements spawned seers like Jean de Labadie and Count von Zinzendorf who founded new sects, they arose initially from within the mainstream Protestant confessions and continued to be fairly well accommodated within the latter, just as Methodism was in the Church of England until the 1790s. The conventicles and prophesying that characterized these movements reveal the limited but not negligible scope that existed within the Protestant confessions for the "enthusiasms" of ordinary lay people.

Lutheran Pietism and its pietistic counterparts in other Protestant confessions appealed especially to those who craved a heightened religious fervor. Just as Christians of all confessions had preferences and wherever available exercised choice among the various forms of piety, they could also be more or less pious.

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riod (Leiden, 2001), esp. 35–88, 193–219; Arie Th. van Deursen, *Bavianen en slijkgeuzen: Kerk en kerkvolk ten Tijde van Maurits en Oldebarnevelt* (Assen, 1974), 32–68. On English jeremiads, see Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999), 281–325.

18 Bodo Nischan, *Lutherans and Calvinists in the Age of Confessionalism* (Aldershot, 1999), esp. II/151–58.

While life in a small town or nuclear village offered people little choice but to participate in communal religious rites and limited even these opportunities except during occasional missions or revivals, in sizeable cities and scattered rural settlements social control was looser and scope for self-expression therefore greater. Here we see that even when confessionalism was at its peak, some people were more frequently or intensely engaged in religious thought and activity than others. Thus, in Cologne and Lille, bastions of Tridentine Catholicism in the seventeenth century, only a minority of adult males – around 2000 of a total population of roughly 45,000 – joined one of the Marian congregations that inculcated frequent confession and communion.[19] Even as their overall standards rose, Catholic officials continued to distinguish between "devout," "good," and "lax" Catholics. Therefore, confessions not only had insiders and outsiders, that is, adherents and opponents, but they also had cores and peripheries among their adherents. Such categories corresponded somewhat with social groups: within any congregation, different sorts of people – men and women, young and old, elites and non-elites – had different roles available to them. For example, while it has been noted that a significant majority of the members of Dutch Reformed congregations tended to be women, only men could serve as elders or, in most places, deacons. However, membership in a group can never wholly explain why a particular person is more or less pious; on a certain level, religious sentiments are irreducibly individual and can also change. As Keith Luria reminded us, the word "conversion" had another meaning in early modern Europe besides a change of confession, namely, a resolution to live in full accordance with the teachings of the confession one already adhered to.[20] Moved by an inner conviction, individuals who converted in this latter sense chose – or, as many of them would have said, were inspired by God – to join the ranks of the devout.

Devout Protestants might have been more inclined than their less devout counterparts to see the hand of providence in daily affairs. When misfortune struck, they possibly saw God punishing them for their sins or tempting them into despair. Catholics had additional explanations available to them, for example, that they had incurred the wrath of a saint by not sufficiently venerating him or her. But not even the most devout Christian, Protestant or Catholic, explained

19 Louis Chatellier, *The Europe of the Devout: The Catholic Reformation and the Formation of a New Society* (trans. Jean Birrell; Cambridge, 1989), 51.

20 Keith P. Luria, "Rituals of Conversion: Catholics and Protestants in Seventeenth-Century Poitou," in *Culture and Identity in Early Modern Europe (1500–1800)* (ed. Barbara B. Diefendorf and Carla Hesse; Ann Arbor, 1993), 69. See also Elisabeth Labrousse, "Conversion dans les deux sens," in *La conversion au XVIIe siecle: Actes du XIIe colloque de Marseille (Janvier 1982)* (ed. Roger Duchene; Marseilles,1983), 161–77.

every misfortune or event in terms of the deity or His delegates. So many uncertainties surrounded human health that illness, in particular, was susceptible to a wide range of diagnoses.[21] Depending on the symptoms and circumstances, a malady might have been interpreted as a divine affliction, saintly retribution, imbalance of the humors, pernicious influence of a planet, or the result of poisoning, corrupt vapors, contagion, witchcraft, or even demonic possession.[22] Most of these diagnoses were anything but mutually exclusive; on the contrary, in a single case, more than one was commonly seen at work. In short, even the most orthodox and confessionalized Christians constantly chose from among a variety of natural, supernatural, and occult models of causality; in explaining and responding to occurrences in their own lives and those of others, they were both eclectic and syncretistic.[23] Early modern historians might do well to consider how and to what extent the observation made by Richard Buxton regarding the ancient Greeks applies also to early modern Europeans:

> Few Greeks will have felt the need to work out for themselves, in the manner of a Plato, an explicit reconciliation or hierarchisation of the alternative modes of access to the sacred. They will simply have accepted as normal the fact that different ways of imagining the gods were appropriate to different contexts. To ask which constituted their real belief is to miss the point.[24]

One well-studied example of eclecticism and syncretism is the English clergyman and physician Richard Napier (1559–1634), who saw nothing incompatible about his use of astral talismans, exorcisms, and folk remedies, on the one hand, and Protestant orthodoxy, on the other.[25] When, in the latter half of the seventeenth century, English elites began to condemn this traditional fusion of magic, science, and religion, what they embraced in its place was not some narrower orthodoxy but a "rational religion" that had little time for Puritan providentialism.

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21 This made illness a crucial area of negotiation and dialogue between the rival religions, as is pointed out by several authors (David Murray, Nicholas Griffiths, Osvaldo Pardo, Alejandra Osorio) in Griffiths and Cervantes, *Spiritual Encounters*.

22 Case studies have graphically revealed the dilemmas of diagnosis: see, for example, Benjamin J. Kaplan, "Possessed by the Devil? A Very Public Dispute in Utrecht," *Renaissance Quarterly* 49 (1996): 738–59; Hans Christian Erik Midelfort, *Exorcism and Enlightenment: Johann Joseph Gassner and the Demons of Eighteenth-Century Germany* (New Haven, 2005).

23 Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*, esp. 3, 332.

24 Richard G.A. Buxton, *Imaginary Greece: The Contexts of Mythology* (Cambridge, 1994), 162–63.

25 See, for example, Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1981).

No confession, therefore, was monolithic, and none ever entirely robbed its adherents of the choice between different brands of piety, degrees of devotion, or ways of making sense of the world. Such choice was exercised by even the most confessionalized Christians living in communities where theirs was the only faith. In mixed communities, where people of different faiths coexisted, the scope for individual choice was much greater. Even if they never converted, Christians who lived in mixed communities were empowered in additional ways by the mere fact of religious diversity.

First, the presence of ecclesiastic rivals meant that no church could take the allegiance of its adherents for granted. Whether it had legal recognition or was merely tolerated de facto, religious diversity made the submission of an individual to the discipline of a particular church a voluntary matter. In the process, it could put people in a stronger position to negotiate the terms of their relationship with whichever church they gave their allegiance. Attendance at services, for example, could become difficult, even impossible, for churches to police. This was clearly the case in the Dutch Republic, where the religious pluralism of people and rulers, combined with political factors, led to a uniquely permissive religious settlement. Inhabitants of the Republic were under no legal obligation to belong to the official state church or, for that matter, any other. As a result, the Dutch population ended up divided between Calvinists, Catholics, Mennonites, Lutherans, and other groups, with each group exhibiting a certain diffuseness. The official Reformed Church, for example, acquired two categories of adherents: members who submitted to ecclesiastic discipline and took communion, and "sympathizers" (*liefhebbers*) who chose to only attend sermons. Other Netherlanders, denigrated by their contemporaries as "libertines," kept their distance from all the rival churches.[26] In England, the passage of the famous Toleration Act of 1689 had a similar effect. While, in theory, it only allowed people to choose between attending services at either an Anglican parish church or a dissenting chapel, in practice it gave many English men and women the opportunity to skip Sabbath worship altogether, when it pleased them to do so.[27] The case of Oppenheim, a small Rhineland town studied by Peter Zschunke, offers an example of an officially multi-confessional community where, despite laws to the contrary, church attendance was in effect optional, and people exercised this choice in different ways. Lutheran couples, for example, tended to fall into one of two patterns: either they attended services together on a regular basis, or just one

26 Kaplan, *Calvinists and Libertines*.

27 John Bossy, "English Catholics after 1688," in *From Persecution to Toleration: The Glorious Revolution and Religion in England* (ed. Ole Peter Grell, Jonathan I. Israel, and Nicholas Tyacke; Oxford, 1991), 369–87.

member of the couple attended and less frequently. More than half of all couples sent just one member to services on one of the three dates for which Zschunke has attendance records: Easter, Pentecost, and the eighth Sunday after Pentecost (usually it was Easter).[28]

Christians loyal to one church could also benefit from religious diversity by tapping the resources and facilities offered by other churches and their members, for example, schools. In Poland and France, some Catholic families sent their children to Protestant schools and vice versa. Such crossing of confessional lines was, of course, the exception and not the rule, but, given the extent to which religious texts and lessons pervaded education, it is perhaps surprising that it happened at all. Yet some parents, then just as today, were prepared to send their child to a school of a different faith if it offered the best available education. They made a calculation according to which the orthodoxy of teachers was one factor to be weighed alongside their morals and competence and the prestige of the school. When hauled before the consistory of Nîmes for sending her son to a Jesuit college, one Huguenot mother complained to the assembled ministers and elders that the local Reformed academy was "not as well regulated as is required" and insisted defiantly that she had an obligation to "advance" her sons.[29] Such pragmatism on the part of parents was matched by a comparable calculation made by some schoolmasters who, in order to gain pupils from another confession, were prepared not to force religious instruction on them. Some made this concession for financial reasons; in some villages, no schoolmaster could support himself unless he catered to pupils of both confessions. The Jesuit colleges in Poland adopted a similar approach for strategic reasons, believing that these pupils might eventually be convinced to convert.[30]

Historians have questioned whether Protestant devotion to the text of Scripture gave them an inherent edge over Catholics in the field of elementary education. However, according to Bernard Dompnier, while Protestant elementary schools might have enjoyed a reputation in France for superior quality and therefore attracted many Catholic students, at the higher academic level the flow of students tended to be in the opposite direction with Protestant students attend-

28 Peter Zschunke, *Konfession und Alltag in Oppenheim: Beiträge zur Geschichte von Bevölkerung und Gesellschaft einer gemischtkonfessionellen Kleinstadt in der frühen Neuzeit* (Wiesbaden, 1984), 90–91.

29 Robert Sauzet, *Contre-reforme et reforme catholique en Bas-Languedoc: Le diocese de Nîmes au XVIIe siecle* (Paris, 1979), 186.

30 Janusz Tazbir, *A State Without Stakes: Polish Religious Toleration in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (New York, 1973), 124.

ing Jesuit colleges.[31] However one judges this issue, other examples can certainly be found in early modern Europe of one religious group turning to another for the sake of some specialist services that the latter was particularly suited to provide by virtue of its religious beliefs and practices. Take, for instance, the field of medicine. In the seventeenth century some Catholic families in France apparently preferred to use Protestant rather than Catholic midwives. When Louis XIV barred Protestant women in 1680 from working as midwives, he encountered vocal opposition from Catholics as well as Protestants. According to Élie Benoist, the Huguenot chronicler, this was because many Catholics believed that Protestant midwives were "plus sages, plus fideles, plus experimentées que les autres."[32] It is possible to imagine how this reputation might have been won, as Protestant midwives, unlike their Catholic counterparts, did not perform emergency baptisms for infants who were in danger of dying; similarly, in cases of difficult births, they did not prioritize baptism over saving the life of the child or its mother. Much was at stake here. Protestant infants baptized by Catholic midwives would ipso facto be claimed by Catholics to have been made members of the Catholic Church, while Catholic infants who had not been baptized by Protestant midwives would be feared unable to go to heaven and condemned forever to limbo if they died before receiving baptism at the hands of a priest. Likewise, Catholics who preferred to maximize the chances that they and their progeny would emerge from the ordeal of childbirth alive might well have preferred Protestant midwives over Catholic midwives who were instructed to prioritize baptizing the child over saving its or its mother's life.[33]

Similarly, Christian elites sometimes preferred treatment by Jewish physicians. Prohibitions against consultation with Jewish doctors had been issued by a string of medieval popes and were repeated in the sixteenth century by Gregory XIII; the Lutheran theological faculties of Strasbourg, Wittenberg, and Rostock universities also issued them. Nonetheless, Jewish physicians continued to enjoy a high reputation, perhaps partly, as Robert Jütte has suggested, because of the association between Judaism and magic. In an age when Christian physicians were increasingly abandoning the sorts of treatments used by Richard

31 Bernard Dompnier, *Le Venin de l'hérésie: Image du Protestantisme et combat Catholique au XVIIe siecle* (Paris, 1985), 159.

32 According to Élie Benoist, *Histoire de lèdit de Nantes, contenant les choses les plus remarquables qui se sont passéés en France avant & après sa publication, à l'occasion de la diversité des religions… à lédit de revocation, en Octobre 1685*, vol. III, part ii (Delft, 1693), 401.

33 Elisabeth Labrousse, "Calvinism in France, 1598–1685," in *International Calvinism 1541–1715* (ed. Menna Prestwich; Oxford, 1985), 307. Benoist, *Histoire de l'edit de Nantes*, vol. III, part ii, 401.

Napier, Jewish doctors continued to carry an aura of occult potency.[34] By turning to them, Christians demonstrated once again that they were prepared to take advantage of the presence of "heretics" and "infidels" in order to obtain services or a quality of services that their co-religionists did not provide. They had, of course, done the same for centuries regarding Jewish moneylenders, who plied a trade that for Christians had long been taboo. Such patterns demonstrate that Frederik Barth's observation regarding ethnic groups applies also to religious ones: they may "provide important goods and services for each other" and thus be interdependent, and they can even develop symbiotic adaptations to each other.[35] What gives the phenomenon of Jewish doctors added significance is that their patients, just like recipients of Jewish loans, included countless Christian clergy. Thus, by the example of their leaders, churches sent out mixed signals, condemning but condoning the use of Jewish physicians. This gap between principle and practice conveyed the message that, at least when it came to sickness and health, a calculating instrumentalism with regard to religious differences was not beyond the bounds of propriety. Such inconsistency opened up a space for ordinary Christians to exercise their own judgement.

Discretion and judgement were in fact required constantly, for, as church leaders themselves acknowledged, confessional norms did not apply equally and in the same way to all situations and spheres. This is perhaps the principal lesson that emerges from the colorful story uncovered by Engels and von Thiessen about a group of Lutherans in the German region of Hildesheim who in 1718 banded together with Catholics in a quest for hidden treasure. The group was recruited and led by a pair of fraudsters who claimed to know where a great treasure, guarded by a ghost, lay concealed behind a locked gate. This scheming duo went around soliciting funds which they said were necessary to secure the treasure. In exchange for an eventual share in the booty, participants in the enterprise contributed funds that were to be used, among other purposes, to appease the ghost who desired money "um den Armen zu geben, behten und Messe lesen zu lassen."[36] The Lutherans did not object to providing funds for alms and the masses. When questioned on this point later by magistrates, one man noted in his defense that he had been encouraged to participate in the scheme by a Lutheran

34 Robert Jütte, "Contacts at the Bedside: Jewish Physicians and their Christian Patients," in *In and Out of the Ghetto: Jewish-Gentile Relations in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany* (ed. Ronnie Po-chia Hsia and Hartmut Lehmann; Washington, DC, 1995), 125–57.

35 Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (London, 1969), 19–20.

36 Engels and Von Thiessen, "Glauben: Begriffliche Annäherungen anhand von Beispielen aus der frühen Neuzeit," story 339–47, quotation 340.

minister who had told him that there was nothing wrong with it. The minister, who indeed promoted the scheme, was Franz Theodor Bockelmann, a preacher in the city of Hildesheim renowned for his fierce anti-Catholic polemics. Engels and Von Thiessen argued that Bockelmann's behaviour should not be understood as hypocritical but rather that his stance toward Catholicism was context- and goal-specific. In the pulpit, his goal was to do battle with the Jesuits, refute Catholic doctrines, and hopefully win souls; in his quest for treasure, "it wasn't a matter of some fundamental question of doctrine, but rather of a means to help himself and others."[37]

Sometimes the official positions of the confessional churches were themselves ambiguous or inconsistent. Such was the case, for example, with regard to intermarriage between Christians of different confessions.[38] With a single, minor exception (the Waterlander Mennonites), there was no religious group in early modern Europe that approved of what were called "mixed" or "unequal" marriages. By the end of the sixteenth century, all of Europe's major confessions condemned these marriages and began to employ disciplinary mechanisms to punish those who entered into such unions. Over the following century, churches grew only more hostile to mixed marriages, fearing them as one of the principal ways in which they lost members; indeed such marriages were probably the most common trigger for individual conversions in post-Reformation Europe. If a spouse converted to the other's faith, not only were they lost to the church in which they were raised but so too were their children and grandchildren. If each spouse remained true to their faith, then, regardless of whether the spouses reached a private accommodation, their household became a locus of continuing contestation between the confessions. Mixed marriages thus created households whose religious allegiance would always be somewhat ambiguous and unstable, and they thus undermined the efforts of churches to consolidate the allegiance of their adherents and to render the boundaries between confessions sharp and impermeable.

At the same time, not a single European church denied the validity and binding character of mixed marriages; none refuted that marriage to a "heretic" constituted an "honorable state of matrimony." The reason why they took this stance is a complex question. One obvious reason was the deep respect of all the churches for the sanctity of marriage; another was their fear of undermining patriarchal authority. A third factor was the authority of the New Testament,

37 Ibid., 342.

38 What follows on intermarriage is based on Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2007), 276–93.

which declared the validity of marriages between Christians and pagans. On the basis of 1 Corinthians 7:12–16, the churches held that such marriages could be dissolved only if the heretic or infidel refused to live with the Christian spouse. Thus, while disciplining members who entered into mixed marriages, the churches provided paths of repentance through which those members could be reconciled with God and the church. While condemning such marriages, many were nonetheless willing, either overtly or by connivance, to solemnize marriages between members of different churches. Theology opened up room for ordinary Christians to exercise their own judgement, as they grappled with the many desires and interests that impinged on the choice of life partner, and granted them a wider range of possible partners than their churches wished them to consider.

Thus, even without converting from one faith to another, Christians in early modern Europe exercised agency and choice in religious matters. As we have seen, Catholics were able to choose from among what was still quite a varied assortment of brands of piety, while even Protestants might have had favorite texts and preachers, insisted on certain ritual forms, or been swept up in pietistic enthusiasms. Whatever the pressures to internalize the norms of their church, early modern Christians might have been more or less pious. They had at their disposal a range of religious and non-religious explanations for the human and natural events they witnessed. If they lived in a religiously mixed community, they might have had significant leverage to negotiate the terms of their relationship to their church. They could also seize the opportunities offered by the presence of other religious groups. Whichever confession they adhered to, they confronted questions about how confessional norms applied to different situations and how to reconcile teachings that were not always consistent with one another. Of course, the Catholic Church developed the whole discipline of casuistry so that its agents could guide the faithful through the waters of life, where confessional precepts, material interests, and values such as honor and duty might coincide, oppose, or cut across one another. Such was the context in which both converts and non-converts lived.

As Anton Schindling observed about two decades ago, the concept of confessionalization has clear deficiencies when applied to the history of theology, piety, and spirituality.[39] Confessional norms do not by themselves enable us to adequately describe the religious identities and experiences of early modern Europeans. Especially aware that, even at the height of confessionalism, for most people

39 Anton Schindling, "Konfessionalisierung und Grenzen von Konfessionalisierbarkeit," in *Die Territorien des Reichs im Zeitalter der Reformation und Konfessionalisierung: Land und Konfession 1500–1650,* vol.7 (ed. Anton Schindling and Walter Ziegler; Münster, 1989), 12.

religion was not the be-all and end-all of life, Frauke Volkland has gone so far as to argue that the very concept of "confessional identity" should be scrapped in favor of what she has called "confession and self-definition."[40] Replacing one slogan or tagline with another does not, in my view, greatly advance the cause of historical understanding. Nonetheless, Volkland's point is valid, and I would amplify it significantly by pointing out that religion itself provided scope and resources for individual self-definition.[41] I am not arguing, any more than Volkland was, for the existence in the early modern era of some modern form of individualism that placed a positive value on individual choice as a form of expression and self-realization. Nor am I suggesting that individuals made completely autonomous choices, as if they were not embedded in a social and cultural nexus that quite comprehensively defined who they were. I am merely claiming that non-converts, like converts, also played an active role in constructing their own religious identity.

What then was the relation between the forms of agency exercised by non-converts and the forms involved in conversion, and how did these forms resemble or differ from one another? By placing the phenomenon of conversion in its proper context, we thus recast our questions about it. And while those questions must for now remain open, I nonetheless conclude with two pertinent observations. First, in religiously mixed communities the possibility that individuals might convert always lurked, posing a perpetual threat to churches and their leaders. This threat, amplified in some places by laws (such as the 1648 Peace of Westphalia in the Holy Roman Empire) that guaranteed the right to convert, had the potential to empower individual Christians, whether or not they did in

40 Frauke Volkland, *Konfession und Selbstverständnis: Reformierte Rituale in der Gemischtkonfessionellen Kleinstadt Bischofszell im 17. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 2005); Volkland, "Konfession, Konversion und Soziales Dramas: Ein Plädoyer für die Ablösung des Paradigmas der 'konfessionellen Identität,'" in *Interkonfessionalität – Transkonfessionalität – binnenkonfessionelle Pluralität: Neue Forschungen zur Konfessionalisierungsthese* (ed. Kaspar von Greyerz et al.,Gütersloh, 2003), 91–104. There is a growing body of studies emphasizing the limits, ruptures, ambiguities, and resistance to confessionalism in practice. See, for example, the recent essays in Andreas Pietsch and Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, eds., *Konfessionelle Ambiguität: Uneindeutigkeit und Verstellung als religiöse Praxis in der frühen Neuzeit* (Gütersloh, 2014).

41 Notions of self-definition, such as Volkland's, rely on concepts of the self that are not uncontested and need to be problematized; see Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980); Natalie Zemon Davis, "Boundaries and the Sense of Self in Sixteenth-Century France," in *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought* (ed. Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellbery; Stanford, 1986), 53–63; David Sabean, "Production of the Self During the Age of Confessionalism," *Central European History* 29 (1996): 1–18; John J. Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism* (Basingstoke, 2004).

fact convert. Second, although the majority of European communities were not religiously mixed, Europe as a whole was. Wherever they lived, Europeans shared the consciousness of living in a world where religious alternatives existed and were available to anyone who was mobile.

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