The Introduction of Christianity into the Early Medieval Insular World

CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS IN LATE ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

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The Introduction of Christianity into the Early Medieval Insular World

Converting the Isles I

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The Comparative Method and Early Medieval Religious Conversion

Chris Wickham

This paper is intended to be an outsider's view of the processes of, and problems faced by, early medieval religious conversion. I have some experience as a comparative historian, but not especially in the religious sphere; much of what I say may therefore seem obvious to religious historians, because it is obvious once said, at least. But that is not always a bad thing; much of what we do as historians consists of making explicit the inexplicit, so that we can interrogate it, or use it in a more aware manner. That is my aim, at any rate.[1]

The title does, however, need a comment before we go on. 'Conversion' is not a straightforward word to use. As a process, it is simply a subtype of religious change seen more widely, although an important one of course. Above all, however, the word 'conversion' is itself a highly transactional and value-loaded term. Does it only include shifts from one religion or sect to another — as in the Africanist John Peel's influential brief definition, 'the process by which the primary religious identification of a people changes' (to which one

[1] This paper was given at the Cambridge conference on 'The Isles and the Wider World' in September 2013. In preparing it for publication, I have kept fairly closely to the oral style I used there, and I have not aimed at bibliographical completeness. I am grateful to Roy Flechner and Máire Ní Mhaonaigh for comments and critiques and to Lesley Abrams. The argument of this article in many respects runs parallel to the stimulating discussions in Dunn, *The Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons*, although I do not follow some of her more detailed interpretations.

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would have of course to add the primary religious identification of individuals)? Or instead, or also, the shift to a more committed, full-on, attachment to a religion one already holds, as with Jerome or Augustine, or so many Christian and Muslim ascetics later, or, more collectively, with Pentecostalists and others today? I am very happy to use it in both senses, and indeed in non-religious senses too, but of course not everyone does. It has, furthermore, been argued by John and Jean Comaroff, also Africanists, that the concept of 'conversion' is itself a colonial construct, which reifies the religious belief of the target group into a system which may well not reflect lived reality, and that, as an analytical tool, 'it is to dress up ideology as sociology'.[2] They say that only as a warning, though; the word is fundamental to their own, highly sophisticated, analytical tool-kit. That in itself is enough for my purposes; I shall employ it too, while highlighting problems involved with its use in the course of this paper.

The 'comparative method' also needs a gloss. I do not intend here to describe a set of societies and cultures and then to compare them. I want, rather, to talk about differences and categories and problems, with a set of societies, past and present, in the back of my mind, which I will try to bring into focus as becomes relevant and useful. But here the point of putting this phrase into the title is not to nuance it, but rather to stress it. As I have argued before, if you only understand the one society you are studying, you risk not understanding any society.[3] All understanding comes from getting a sense of difference, from testing one's explanatory assertions against parallel situations with different results, or different situations with the same result. There are, for example, triumphalist historical accounts of the victory of Christianity over a strategically weaker (because polytheistic) Graeco-Roman or Germanic paganism — strategically weaker because a polytheistic system can accept Christ as an extra, but he then undermines the other gods, as a sort of cuckoo in the nest; this kind of argument, however, founders if the counterexample of Indian Hinduism is invoked, against which Christianity made almost no inroads at all in the century and a half of Christian British rule. That comparison (one seldom in fact used) ought to require a more complex analysis of the first cases. Similarly, Robin Horton's famous and bold Total Explanation for religious change in Africa (he linked it to a version of 'modernization', which brought in Christianity and Islam as

[2] Peel, 'Conversion and Tradition in Two African Societies, p. 108; but Peel's major analysis of conversion (of the Yoruba in Nigeria) is *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, especially pp. 123–277; Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, I, 251.

[3] Wickham, *Problems in Doing Comparative History*.

incidental by-products), which still fascinates Africanists even though they do not really accept it, does not remotely work in either the Roman Empire or India; Horton would have said that that was not his aim, but in fact the force of his explanation, at least in the form he gave it, is weakened substantially as a result.[4] And that is without even starting on the Middle Ages.

Having said that, on the other hand, one does have to take care to compare like with like. I will only discuss conversion to Christianity here, and to a lesser extent to Islam, to help that (although of course, together with Buddhism, these are the main proselytizing religions in world history). For medievalists, however, the best data-set of comparative examples (far richer, 'thicker', in their description than anything medievalists have) are those provided by anthropology, which I shall therefore draw on substantially here. This chapter is, nonetheless, intended as a contribution to a medieval historical debate, not an anthropological one — anthropology has a much more developed theoretical problematic at times, and also a greater divergence of approaches, precisely because of the density of the material available in the field, to which medieval evidence can usually add little. Anthropological parallels do, nonetheless, present problems of their own when one is trying to compare like with like. I will mention two here briefly.

As to the first: one problem about importing accounts of conversion in (say) colonial or post-colonial Africa into medieval-focused analyses is that these empirical examples derive from societies in which impulses to Christianity (and sometimes Islam) are potentially associated with ruling or external powers which are far richer and have better weapons, and which can represent to indigenous peoples what we call 'modernity', in a way that Patrick, or Anskar, or Adalbert of Prague, perhaps did not. That is a contrast medievalists have already in part taken into account, because we often assume that the desire of rulers to emulate, by conversion to Christianity, the far more powerful political systems of the Franks or Byzantines in the later first millennium and after has some parallels. And so it does, on the level of rulers; as we know, they could and did gain new infrastructures (sometimes with the help of new patterns of

[4] Horton, 'African Conversion'; Horton, 'On the Rationality of Conversion'. Fenella Cannell made some useful criticisms of the Christianization-modernization equivalence in her paper to the 'The Isles and the Wider World' conference (19–21 September 2013). Note that I use the word 'paganism' throughout this paper to denote both Graeco-Roman and Germanic pre-Christian religion; this term homogenizes very disparate religious systems too much and should be understood throughout as having invisible inverted commas around it, but it is convenient.

property-owning brought in by churches), and new possibilities for royal control of now-Christianized space, as well as transnational cultural capital. All the same, how conversion reaches other people is a far less comparable process. Our primary sources focus on elites, and indeed quite largely assume that, once kings convert, so (at any rate in theory) does the population at large; missionaries come then to be seen as engaged in a sort of mopping-up operation which can be figured in terms of the standard medieval narrative of the purist religious specialist preaching to his more or less ignorant flock. We have to guess about how the preaching worked, too, as our evidence is almost entirely one-sided here — it reflects the intentions of preachers, not any form of reception. The primary data anthropologists have, however, is above all about how religious change works on the ground, and about the complex ways in which the population at large deals with it. Here we are not, for the most part, comparing like with like, and when we use anthropological parallels we must remember that.

A second issue is the problem of translation, which looms large in anthropological discussions, but which does not appear so much in the medieval historiography. Birgit Meyer on the Ewe of Ghana, Vicente Rafael on the Tagalog of the Philippines, or Tomas Sundnes Drønen on the Dii of Cameroon — among many others — put great stress on the problem of translation for any missionary who is not entirely bilingual.[5] We can translate the words of Christianity (or Islam) into another language, but the network of concepts around each word can often be quite misleading, and can lead to native interpretations of a religious message which are far from what missionaries intend — as with one of Rafael's main examples, the word 'loob', which early modern Spanish missionaries used to translate the 'soul', but which actually in Tagalog meant 'interior' in all senses, most of them simply physical, and was most closely linked to words and conceptual practices associated with gift-giving and debt: so the Spanish saw 'loob' as linked to the self and individual salvation, but the Tagalog viewed it as linked to reciprocity. The issue of conversion-as-translation will, in fact, always be fundamental when one goes far outside one's own speech-community. I will come back to it. But medievalists have to face the issue less because, often enough, it does not arise for us (and our sources, with some important exceptions like Bede or Bruno of Querfurt, barely mention it);[6] medieval mis-

[5] Meyer, *Translating the Devil*, pp. 80–82 and passim; Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism*, pp. 20–22, 112–26, and passim; Drønen, *Communication and Conversion in Northern Cameroon*, pp. 15–16.

[6] Wood, *The Missionary Life*, p. 257; Bede, *HE*, I, 25, III, 3, ed. by Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 72–77, 218–21; Bruno of Querfurt, *Vita quinque fratrum*, chaps 5, 10, ed. by Kade, pp. 722, 727.

sionaries were very often — not always, of course — preaching to people who spoke something at least close to their own language. So, much anthropology of conversion faces an issue we do not have to face — although it is significant when we do, as with Augustine in Canterbury or Aidan in Northumbria — and parallelisms are sometimes less close as a result. When we compare, we have to keep issues such as these in the front of our minds.

* * *

I will structure the main part of this paper around, first, some potentially useful oppositions, and then some of the problems with conversion. Four oppositions, four problems, with the latter discussed at the greatest length.

First, 'conversion' versus 'adhesion'. This is A. D. Nock's distinction from the 1930s between conversion as a spiritual turning-point in life (Paul on the road to Damascus, Augustine in the garden) and the more casual, often ad hoc or inconsistent, adoption of another religion, sometimes en masse as a result of a top-down decision: probably even Edwin of Northumbria, and certainly all his elite followers whom (Bede says) Paulinus baptized across a month in, probably, 627.[7] Many religious historians have been more interested in turning-point conversion; Karl Morrison's interesting book on what one might call the aesthetics of twelfth-century conversions to more rigorous forms of Christianity discusses nothing else, for example.[8] Most large-scale Christianization in history has been 'adhesion', however, and this ought to be at the front of our minds when we analyse the conversion phenomenon, taken as a whole. I will not make much of this distinction, all the same, for one simple reason: it assumes that someone else has made the rules about what 'real' conversion consists of. If all those Northumbrians had gone away from Yeavering in 627 (as they might well have done; Paulinus supposedly catechized them too) saying 'we're Christians now', by what criteria would we disbelieve them — or have disbelieved them then? Christianity is, for historians, whatever each believer thinks it is. Purists — sometimes religious professionals, sometimes fanatics — may say 'you think you're a Christian, but you're not', but it is not our job as historians to do so. The same is true for Islam. I would start from the axiom that all conversion is genuine, except in the case of deliberate deceit, which is close to impossible to police in this period; but that the content of the new belief could remain highly varied. That is to say, we are dealing with conversion to *Christianities*,

[7] Nock, *Conversion*, pp. 5–7; Bede, *HE*, II, 14, ed. by Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 186–89.

[8] Morrison, *Understanding Conversion*.

to *Islams*. Once the marker set by the missionary, or the community, has been passed, at least: usually baptism for Christians, the spoken phrase about Allah and Muhammad his prophet for Muslims. Then the question becomes how such Christianities and Islams work, and differ.[9]

Second: I would counterpose this form of conversion (which Nock would have called 'adhesion') to what one could call 'ecclesiasticization', a horrible and rare word (even if Hans Küng uses it according to Google),[10] but I have not thought of a better one. I mean by this: you convert, you may think it is over, but in Christianity this brings the clergy with it, if not at once then eventually, and their job is to change your practices, and if possible also your beliefs, into something closer to what they think Christianity is like. And then this dialectic between you and them will continue ever after, although how it turns out is by no means inevitable — especially if the clergy come to be recruited from inside the society to which they minister, which is sociologically normal. The solidity of this dialectic is strongest in Catholicism, as its church structure is most complete. It is rather less consistent in Islam, as Islam has little sense of a clergy, and certainly no clerical hierarchy. (Protestantism is in between, because, although it has often vocal clergy with a church behind them, it is so divided between sects that societies can often choose between them, or invent their own churches with, sometimes, more indigenous values, as often happens in Africa;[11] but this is less of a parallel for medievalists.) I would add, however, that even if a church structure is weak, any society converted to a book-based religion is also exposed to revivalisms, the rediscoveries (or actual discoveries) of a more purist faith; as we all know, these are common in religious history, as with eleventh-century Catholic reform, Protestantism itself, the various United States 'Awakenings', in Christianity; Sufism or Wahhabism or Salafism, in Islam. Conversion is thus never a closed process.

The third opposition is belief versus ritual. This one goes, I think, to the heart of the practical counterposition of conversion processes. It is often said, for example, that Graeco-Roman paganism was more about ritual (particularly sacrifices) than belief, and that this is one of the things that allowed Christianity, with its highly developed belief system, to offer an alternative type

[9] So also, for example, Bialecki and others, 'The Anthropology of Christianity', a survey of recent anthropological work on 'Christian heterogeneity', although its underpinning assumptions are not those set out here. A guide-line analysis along the lines I am arguing for here is Abrams, 'Germanic Christianities'.

[10] As with a Google search for 'ecclesiasticization kung'.

[11] A classic here is Peel, *Aladura*.

of religious system. That is an over-simplification, as we shall see later, not least because public and collective Christian activity — that is, ritual — stabilized very fast after it was legalized; and also because this sort of opposition has been used very often in history simply to justify revivalisms, such as Protestantism, rhetorically: *we* have belief, *they* only have rituals. But, if we take away this rhetorical underpinning, the opposition is still a useful one, for a different reason. We need to have in the front of our minds, when we look at conversion, that missionaries may aim to change beliefs, but actually they are going to have to start with rituals. They may try to abolish them (and be resisted); they may simply try to Christianize them, as with Gregory the Great writing to Abbot Mellitus in Kent, on the subject of temples being turned into churches — the danger in this sort of case, of course, being that the converts simply carry on with all the key elements of their older religion, which are just retitled. I will come back to that. But changing the network of beliefs is anyway a far slower process, so we need to avoid confusing the one with the other.[12]

The fourth opposition is our versus their agency. As a society changes its religion, perhaps at the encouragement of missionaries, who is doing the choosing? Sometimes there is little doubt, as with the violently enforced Christianization of much of Central and South America by Spanish missionaries in the century after 1550; or else, at the other extreme, by the apparently entirely un-missionary-led religious revivalism which brought root-and-branch Christianization to some remote and only partially Christian New Guinea communities in the 1970s, as discussed by Joel Robbins among others[13] — or the steady adoption of Islam by the merchants of West Africa, in some cases centuries before the more militant movements of the early nineteenth century.[14] Usually, however, there is much more negotiation, whether conscious or not. Indigenous communities — or their individual members, particularly their rulers — make choices as to what to believe or how to act religiously, informed by missionary charisma, or intelligent missionary divide-and-rule tactics, or potential external threats or models, but not determined by them: as (the classic example for medievalists) the Icelanders are said to have done in 1000 (or 999).[15] Even now,

[12] For Gregory, Bede, *HE*, I, 30, ed. by Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 106–09. Belief versus ritual to an extent parallels Whitehouse's opposition between 'doctrinal' and 'imagistic' religiosity, especially in his *Arguments and Icons*, but he puts much ritual into the 'doctrinal' category, essentially because its repetition is so routinized and boring.

[13] Robbins, *Becoming Sinners*, pp. 122–54; Lohrmann, 'Turning the Belly'.

[14] For a traditional introduction, see Trimingham, *Islam in West Africa*, pp. 28, 31–42.

[15] See, for example, Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak*, who also collects the sources.

historians often assign agency for non-scientific reasons; we need to recognize that process so as to avoid it. But it is still necessary to look for whose agency we are dealing with, or how to divide it up if it is shared: as long as we have the data necessary to determine it (which medievalists seldom do); but we need to have the question in our minds even when we do not.

* * *

From here onwards we need to confront problems. The first is that we cannot believe any conversion narrative, any convert's voice, even if that is all we have (as is very frequently the case even today, let alone in 800). Every single one justifies — has to justify — a choice which is obvious afterwards, and of course highly virtuous to the narrator, but was not earlier, before the moment of the conversion itself. Very occasionally we have enough data to second-guess a conversion narrative (as with Augustine's *Confessions*, since he kept some of his immediately post-conversion early writings); usually, however, all we can do is disbelieve. And we do, too — at least these days, at least most of us. Karl Morrison puts it crisply: 'the experience of conversion is quite different from what is called conversion in texts'; 'we cannot penetrate to experience'; 'we only have a text before us'. Even what are perhaps the most immediate conversion texts we have for our period, Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld's 'Conversion Verses' from (probably) *c*. 1000, although fascinating for their use of words like 'reluctant' and 'forced', are highly crafted musings on the different ways conversion happens (largely, in these texts, occasioned by royal pressure), again with hindsight.[16] This is still more the case when we have later narratives of the conversion of others. An acute article by Ruth Karras about the conversion of Scandinavia (she, too, uses Hallfreðr among others) remarks that medieval conversion narratives there are often very matter-of-fact. As with Gauka-Þórir in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, joining Óláfr Haraldsson before the battle of Stiklarstaðir in 1030, saying 'what is it to me if I believe in the White Christ or some other god?' — he is a brigand, which weakens the force of his words, but Snorri juxtaposes him with the (slightly) more virtuous Arnljótr Gellini, who says much the same. The Icelandic conversion narratives are very similar, too. Paganism is here not evil, and actually not that different to Christianity; just less good, less effective.[17] These cannot be taken as useful guides to the conver-

[16] Morrison, *Understanding Conversion*, pp. xii, 23; for Hallfreðr, see Goeres, 'The Many Conversions of Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld'; cf. Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual*, who makes similar points about textualization and the experience of the ritual process.

[17] Karras, 'God and Man in Medieval Scandinavia'; Snorri Sturluson, *Ólafs saga helga*,

sion process — as even some of the traditional positivist historians have done for Iceland in 1000 — because their source is Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók*, which is supposed to be Iceland's one 'reliable' source. They are constructions, in at least two senses: first, of Scandinavian common-sense pragmatism, even if a brave and honourable pragmatism (both of the 1030 converts are claimed by Snorri to have died at the start of the battle) — it is a construction that is all-pervasive in our Norse sources — and, second, of a (by now lost) paganism which is made to be like Christianity so that Scandinavian men can make rational and pragmatic choices. We can set that beside Bede's Coifi story, from the Edwin conversion.[18] Coifi is constructed to be a pagan priest who is *like* a Christian priest, so that he can have the religious legitimacy to state that Christianity is better because it provides more personalized help to the devout (and also, another notable says, an afterlife), neither of which Anglo-Saxon paganism supposedly possesses. Bede is a bit more obvious, but the artifice is much the same.

We do not have to doubt that both Snorri and Bede sincerely believed that their stories of two hundred years and one hundred years earlier conveyed the (at least underlying) truth of the matter. But they were nonetheless both engaged in the same process: of inventing paganism, so that it becomes, although Othered, recognizable and (of course) capable of being defeated. That process was widespread in the early Middle Ages, as James Palmer among others has shown. We cannot conclude that paganism really was like that, and, still less, that people converted like that. This is our equivalent to the Comaroffs' sharp-edged pages on the invention of Tswana religion by late nineteenth-century missionaries in South Africa: Bede and Snorri can be seen as engaging in, as it were, a colonialist operation.[19] And this leads us to a regrettably negative conclusion: we cannot ever tell from our narrative sources why conversions, whether individual or mass, happen. We can and will try to guess, of course, but our sources will hardly help. Although one of the attractions of studying the conversion process is very often to try to understand *why* a people with a long-standing (and, presumably, at least partially functional and satisfying) religious

chaps 204, 215, 226, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, pp. 353–54, 369–70, 378–81; for Iceland, see note 15, above.

[18] Bede, *HE*, II, 13, ed. by Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 182–87.

[19] Palmer, 'Defining Paganism in the Carolingian World'; Palmer, *Anglo-Saxons in a Frankish World*, pp. 113–44; Petts, *Pagan and Christian*, pp. 73–87; cf. Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, I, at, for example, pp. 248–51.

system would ever change it for a new one, we are just going to end up guessing, from the outside. We are going to get a lot further with 'and then what?' than 'why?': that is to say, with what resulted from conversion.

A second problem is variety, which I shall discuss in more detail. It is well known, for example, that so-called Germanic paganism has often been too homogenized, both in the Middle Ages, by the construction process I have just characterized, and also in the present day, with the cosmology in Snorri Sturluson's other book, the *Edda*, plastered onto the different Germanic realities as a parallel to the Graeco-Roman pantheon of gods and their origin myths. Graeco-Roman paganism itself, the best-documented 'pre-world-religion' in our period, was far more complicated than that; and there is no reason to think that Germanic paganism could not have been. I will return to the point below. This, however, presents issues for anyone who tries to convert a society, for religions are not just diverse; they also can have practices, and even epistemologies, which are not commensurate with those in Christianity and Islam (which are, by contrast, relatively similar, so converting between them — or of course inside them — is conceptually easier). The concept of belief in God itself does not translate well from culture to culture, as Rodney Needham famously argued inside anthropology.[20] To many Christians, belief in God is quite distinct, in an epistemological sense, from a belief that it will rain this afternoon, or a belief in the morality of the programmes of the Labour Party. This is not the case in very many other cultures: sometimes beliefs in gods are simply part of general truth-statements about the world, perhaps less easily falsifiable than predictions of rain, but not that distinct; sometimes beliefs in gods are more part of the domain of trust in others that political affiliation implies; sometimes all these concepts are totally different, and we cannot use the same words at all.

A missionary might not be too worried by this, for each offers a different ground for conversion. But she or he would certainly need to know which was the case; and maybe she or he would not know, if she or he had engaged in the homogenizing construction process which I have outlined, a process which is quite common. The 'then-what' issue, what the Christianity is like which results from conversion, becomes relevant here; because if belief in a Christian God is not conceptually distinct from a belief that it will rain this afternoon, then it may turn out to be a contingent belief in a way that missionaries do not usually intend. A substantial amount of backsliding can result. Indeed, many societies

[20] Needham, *Belief, Language, and Experience*.

and cultures do expect religious belief to work, in particular to benefit believers in this world, and, if it does not, then its truth-content is at risk. If Coifi had really thought, as Bede claims, that paganism was less good because he himself had not been rewarded by the king as much as had less religious men, then his new Christianity might not have survived a later career failure. Although, of course, if Bede himself believed this, and if missionaries did too (we have plenty of evidence, for example from Gregory of Tours, that many people did think like this in our period, after all),[21] then the Christianity that people were converting to was itself epistemologically different from the varieties we are more familiar with, so the issues were potentially different again. We know that early medieval Christianity was much more instrumental than are mainstream modern Christianities, with divine intervention seen more often as very direct, and bargains with God often made; but that, in terms of comparative religious philosophy, is much more of a contrast than we tend to admit.

The source of evil is another example of this sort of variety. Christians tend to believe (it is, after all, what the New Testament says) that evil is mostly internal to humans and needs to be countered by repentance; but plenty of non-Christians see it as an external force or set of forces, which are best countered by purification rituals. They do not necessarily change their minds about that at conversion; indeed, since the external forces which they believed in before were often ambiguous and easily placated, perhaps minor gods themselves or spirits of the air, when they convert to Christianity these ambiguous beings can all too easily become simply demonic, more dangerous, more necessary to counter ritually. Birgit Meyer's Ewe reacted this way, for example, and got little help from their Pietist German missionaries, who thought that all such rituals were pointless, as well as 'superstitious', although they certainly thought — and taught — that the spirits of the air were emissaries of Satan, which contributed strongly to an Ewe Christianity focused on the Devil and on demons (with, one can add, an increasing fear of witchcraft).[22] We can find all of this, although assembled differently, in medieval Christianity too, starting with the ambiguous *daimones* of some Greek paganism who were the ancestors of the demons who possessed numerous people in the Christian East Roman Empire, and, although apparently less often, in the early medieval Christian West too. Here, in the fifth and sixth century, the clergy (not external figures in this case) not only themselves

[21] Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum X*, III, Preface, ed. by Krusch and Levison, pp. 96–97, is the programmatic statement, but the assumption permeates the work.

[22] Meyer, *Translating the Devil*, pp. 83–111.

regarded demons as normal but also, like their neighbours, did believe in rituals which could remove them; Peter Brown forty years ago showed how attractive a micro-field of history the study of this process was.[23] In studying it, among other things, we have come to realize that the pre-Christian ancestry of demons is not an adequate explanation for their structural role in a historically characterized and fully Christian society (in particular, the concept of 'superstition' is too value-laden for us to use, although it is important to analyse it as part of the imagery of the writers of our sources). But, conversely, we need also to realize that, if demons (or their equivalents) are seen by any social group, however Christian, as the *only* source of evil, then one of the major underpinnings of the traditional Christian doctrine of salvation is going to have to work differently in that society, and that this is going to be largely (although not totally) related to how evil was configured before the Christians got there.

The ubiquity of unseen spirits of this kind is quite common in indigenous religions, but they were far from all the same in their religious roles, past and present. In the pre-Christian Roman Empire they operated alongside a more structured, even if locally variable, pantheon of gods, plus the more focused communities of adepts in the mystery religions, to which one could convert in ways that are still recognizable to us, plus the highly intellectualized philosophical tradition, plus, of course, the sacrifice-based but not so transcendental imperial cult.[24] That was a complex network for Christians to counter; small wonder they let *daimones* stay. On other parts of the globe, spirits can also have hierarchies, but can be set against a supreme being or High God, who is often very weakly characterized indeed. In yet others, these spirits are simply the ancestors of the living and have no real hierarchy at all.[25] Missionaries tend to focus on the High God, and to explain to the society that they are dealing with that the latter has misunderstood who that god is. They have often been convincing, too. But when the indigenous High God is actually almost irrelevant to the daily religious practice of non-Christians, then it is much harder for missionaries to locate the Father and the Son in the foreground of the religious system of converts. Different results ensue. Jean Comaroff found this, in her

[23] Brown, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity', especially pp. 88–89; Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine*, pp. 131–38.

[24] See for example Beard and others, *The Religions of Rome*, I, 167–363.

[25] See for example Horton, 'On the Rationality of Conversion', pp. 223–30, for a set of African ethnographic instances. For the Fang of Cameroon, see Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas*, pp. 43–44; for the Kpelle of Liberia, see Stakeman, *The Cultural Politics of Religious Change*, pp. 44–65, 201–20; for the Tswana, see note 26, below.

ethnographic work on the Tswana which pre-dated her and her husband's more historical books. The Tswana had a remote High God and very active invisible ancestors, *badimo*. The missionaries here for the most part entirely failed to reconfigure the *badimo* as demons; they remained as intercessors with a still-remote Christian God. As one of Jean Comaroff's Christian informants said in 1970, when she prayed, she addressed God through those she saw in her 'inner eyes', that is, her ancestors.[26] Here, I am not trying to imply that all intercession in Christianity has pre-Christian roots; if that were true (and I doubt very much that it is), it would explain nothing; I am arguing only that the type of intercession which many versions of Christianity need is going to be related to the pre-Christian map and how the conversion process dealt with it. Christian Tswana, or (more ambivalently) Fenella Cannell's Christian Bicolanos in the Philippines,[27] are much more relaxed about spirit intercession than Christian Ewe are. We can look for the reasons in the type of spirits each had and have, and in the negotiations involved in each conversion (insofar as they can be reconstructed), but we certainly have differences here.[28]

The final aspect of variety that I would like to stress here is the nature of religious expertise. Broadly, Christian missionaries get on fairly well with societies with an organized pagan priesthood: they then have enemies, obviously — more than in many more vaguely characterized religious systems; they may lose, but they know where they are, and know when they have won, for it is when they have replaced their predecessors. That is not the only type of expertise there is, however. Classic Islam does not have it, for a start, for the '*ulama*' are more theologians and jurists than clerics. (Islam thus also does not usually have professional missionaries; it expands more through steady contact and example, which clearly works quite as well in many cases, although one should add that the Sufi and marabout versions of Islam have more clerical characteristics.)

[26] Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, II, 110–16 (quotation at p. 115); see also Landau, *The Realm of the Word*, pp. 4–5, 93, a reference I owe to Tom McCaskie.

[27] Cannell, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines*, pp. 118–28; cf. also, for the ambiguous (but far from wholly negative) incorporation of the formerly divine Túatha Dé Danann into early medieval Irish Christianity, Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun*, pp. 12–38 (with thanks to Máire Ní Mhaonaigh for the reference).

[28] It is also, I would add, always different in pre-Christian societies which already held that some spirits were bad and that their human associates, witches, were highly dangerous; in some cases (there are Zambian examples, for instance: see e.g. Morris, *Religion and Anthropology*, pp. 171–73) missionaries have made great progress simply by acting as witch-finders during moments of witch hysteria.

In traditional religions, too, expertise is variously constructed, as with both the witches and the witch-finders of parts of Africa, and their rival knowledge and manipulation of spirits.[29] Religions where the main religious experts are those people who can become ecstatically linked to supernatural powers — we tend to call them by the pseudo-technical term 'shamans' and associate them with very un-hierarchical societies in northern Eurasia and North America, but they come in all types, and Greek oracles are another example — do not really have a 'priesthood' either. This is perhaps the hardest group for missionaries to deal with: shamans may get refigured as witches, but they may also be unnoticed by proselytizers and survive unchanged.

It is hardly necessary to say that religions are not homogeneous; and it is far from my task to offer a typology here. But I do want to stress this variety, for most of the types of religious belief and practice that I have mentioned also existed in late Roman and early medieval Europe, and missionaries thus had to deal differently in every case. We can say that most clearly for the Roman Empire, of course, for they were practised there by partly literate people whose works partly survive. It is sometimes tacitly assumed that the bewildering variety of Graeco-Roman paganism is simply a consequence of the great complexity of Mediterranean society, and that this could not be assumed for the technologically simpler, smaller-scale, less hierarchical, societies of the North. No one who has any familiarity with works on African or Pacific-rim traditional religion could believe that for a moment. We have to consider that behind the bland and homogenizing constructions of pre-Christian northern and eastern European religion there could well have been quite as much variety, between societies but also inside them, and there are indications that this was in fact the case.

In our period, then: Irish druids, whom Christian clerics opposed and replaced, and in part also the *filid* whom they recognized and accommodated, represent the priesthood model; so may some of the temple-focused Slavic religions such as that of the Liutizi, if we believe Thietmar of Merseburg.[30] Conversely, Scandinavia seems in part to have granted religious leadership (*goðorð*) to local big men, for *goðar* are attested in both Iceland and Denmark; and they perhaps also coexisted with shamans, for I am happy to see the prophetic and magical practices described in many twelfth- and thirteenth-century

[29] The classic here remains Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*.

[30] For *filid*, see most recently Johnston, *Literacy and Identity in Early Medieval Ireland*, pp. 134–56, a reference I owe to Roy Flechner; for the Liutizi, see Thietmar of Merseburg, *Chronicon in Gesta Saxonum*, VI, 23–25, ed. by Holtzmann, pp. 302–05.

Scandinavian (usually Icelandic) texts as shamanistic in part, however fictional the stories in which they are located by their authors (although I have more doubts about similar theories put forward for early medieval England).[31] These differences will have resulted in different strategies for missionaries, or for kings who accepted and furthered versions of Christianity. So will the greater and lesser importance of pantheons of gods (which existed everywhere but were not necessarily the locations of all cult, or even the most important cult) in the complex sacred landscapes of Hessia, or Denmark, or Sweden, in temples where they existed, in shamanistic practices which hardly need gods at all, or wherever else. (We should also draw distinctions between gods, as with the somewhat edgy recalling of Freyr in thirteenth-century Iceland set against the enthusiastic — and often confusing — adoption of Thór into half the personal names on the island.)[32] So will the cult of ancestors, if and when it existed; the odd story of the Frisian ruler Radbod who walked out of the font when he discovered that his ancestors would go to hell, saying that 'he could not abandon the company of his predecessor princes of the Frisians and reside in the celestial kingdom with a small number of *pauperes*' ('poor' or 'weak' people) — it is a story in a partially forged life a century later, but Ian Wood is reluctant to dismiss it out of hand — not only depicts Radbod as a snob, but may also indicate a sacred quality for at least aristocratic ancestors, which represents another option for us.[33] Each one of these situations imposed different tasks on missionaries across the world in the last century or two and produced different results; to repeat, so will they have done in medieval Europe, that is to say, in the Christianities of the next centuries. (Precisely because shamans can be described in thirteenth-century Icelandic fiction, for example, it is not at all inconceivable that they survived and became part of Icelandic Christianity too.) We will have to com-

[31] Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak*, pp. 109–23, gives some data; for *goðar*, see most recently Sonne, 'Kings, Chieftains and Public Cult in Pre-Christian Scandinavia', pp. 64–68 (highly minimalist, but not contradicting the argument as set out here); for England, Pluskowski, 'The Archaeology of Paganism', pp. 770–72.

[32] For sacred landscapes, see e.g. Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*, pp. 132–37, 279–331; the more hypothetical Hedeager, '*Asgard* Reconstructed?'; Semple, 'Sacred Spaces and Places in Pre-Christian and Conversion Period Anglo-Saxon England'; Petts, *Pagan and Christian*, pp. 90–95. See Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak*, pp. 37–43, for data about Thór and Freyr.

[33] *Vita Vulframni Episcopi Senonici*, chap. 9, ed. by Levison, p. 668; Wood, *The Missionary Life*, pp. 92–94; cf. Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe*, pp. 239–40, 406.

pare to find that out, of course, and keep on comparing across successive waves of ecclesiasticization.

The existence of sacred spaces brings with it another challenge to conversion, namely, geography: that is my next problem, though I will discuss it more briefly. Very many religions attribute sacrality to springs, mountains, forests, or complex networks of all of them. That is certainly the case with many of the northern and eastern European pre-Christian religions; it comes up as an image over and over, sometimes in contemporary accounts, and also in place names, perhaps a less constructed type of source.[34] Our narrative sources universally stress Christian hostility to such sacralized landscapes, and missionaries are routinely recorded as destroying them if they could (Boniface and the Oak of Geismar in 723 for example), but of course they could not always do so, as with mountains, or the tides in Frisia, focus of a sacrificial cult.[35] A missionary, then, has three choices: either the sacralized landscape has to become evil (and thus highly threatening and upsetting to people, who will then need to invent new rituals to ward it off); or it has to become entirely desacralized and neutral; or it has to be Christianized. All three hold dangers for a missionary committed to a purist Christianity: the first has uncontrollable implications (imagine if the tides ever became evil in Frisia); the second is very hard to implement effectively; the third, the Christianization of the sacred elements of the landscape, risks the perpetuation of the older cult without change. All three seem to have been tried in our period. Choice one is perhaps represented by the demonic nature of the Fens in the *Vita Sancti Guthlaci*, which I find hard to imagine was so total before conversion to Christianity.[36] Choice two may be visible in, for example, Patrick's lifting of the stone at the Well of Findmag in the *Vita Tripartita*, and perhaps also in the saints' wells of eleventh- and twelfth-century England, some of them certainly old, discussed by John Blair — although the fact that such sites continued to have some numinous power shows that they had not become entirely neutral. They survived to create their own problems for the more committed desacralizers of landscapes in the sixteenth and seven-

[34] See Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*, pp. 132–37, 279–331.

[35] *Vita Bonifatii auctore Willibaldo*, chap. 6, ed. by Levison, pp. 31–32; for Frisia, *Vita Vulframni Episcopi Senonici*, chap. 8, ed. by Levison, p. 667. Cf. Wood, *The Missionary Life*, p. 92, and, in general, Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*, pp. 208–10, 254–57, 262–68.

[36] Felix, *Vita Sancti Guthlaci*, chaps 25, 31, 36, ed. by Colgrave, pp. 88–89, 100–07, 114–17.

teenth centuries, as Alex Walsham has shown, and that may be the real point at which choice two came, slowly, into effect there.[37]

The third choice, the Christianization of a sacred landscape, was most commonly performed by setting a church (or, less ambitiously, a cross) upon or beside the old cult site, sometimes, though by no means always, on top of a former temple. There are dozens of examples of this in our narratives. The church was probably the best solution, for in that case local ritual could be controlled more directly. The creation of a network of churches in this way also allowed for a degree of Christian proactivity with regard to the landscape which could, in the end, really Christianize it, because it was structured around new sacred sites as well as old ones, such as monasteries and their precincts, which could well become foci for pilgrimage and so on. By Gregory of Tours's time, at the end of the sixth century, there might well have been no significant difference in central Gaul between the pilgrimage centre at Brioude, where St Julian was supposedly martyred (but which had certainly previously had a major shrine and festival devoted to Mars and Mercury), and that of the tomb of St Martin at Tours, which had no pagan connotations at all. When such differences disappeared, Christianity had definitely won. But it can never have been easy. The Brioude church had had to be rebuilt on a larger scale; bishops had had to intervene; the emperor Avitus had had to be buried there: quite an operation.[38] And even when a festival had become fully Christian, its participants did not always have the right idea. Augustine of Hippo complains in a letter that, on a feast day at the start of Lent, his flock simply went out and got drunk, as they had done in pagan times — he knew it was pagan, but they doubtless did not — rather than follow his own preferred celebration, psalm-singing in church, which he says he persuaded them to do in future.[39]

Here we are already inside the dialectics of ecclesiasticization, and to go on here would take us through the rest of Christian history. But I would like at least to stress that success in Christianization, of any kind, always depended on intelligent dealing. If you got it wrong, people might get the wrong idea, or else not follow you at all. Terry Ranger in an important article relates how carefully some Anglican missionaries to the Shona in what is now Zimbabwe at the turn of the last century negotiated the burial of converts in churchyards rather than

[37] *Vita Tripartita*, ed. and trans. by Stokes, 1, 122–23; Blair, *CASS*, pp. 225–28, 471–89; Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape*.

[38] Van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul*, pp. 41–48.

[39] Augustine of Hippo, *Letters*, letter 29, ed. by Goldbacher, pp. 114–22.

in crevices of the sacred granite hills above them, but also how they failed for a long time to get chiefs to be baptized, precisely because they might not be able to be buried in the hills: the landscape here stayed sacred, in ways Christians did not wish for.[40] Conversely, although I doubt whether anyone followed Gregory the Great's advice about turning temples into churches in Kent (not least because Anglo-Saxon temples are rather hard to find archaeologically; his was a very Italian mindset), I have always thought the advice very shrewd. Use the temple; let people bring animals for sacrifice; but then, 'since some *sollemnitas* [Colgrave translates "solemnity", Blair translates "ritual"] ought to be given them in exchange', have them eat the animals.[41] The shock of having to eat a sacralized animal would have had quite an effect; it is saying 'your practices may partially continue, but this is a new religious world'. Gregory was a remarkably humane man for a saint, but also subtle. He might indeed, had the occasion arisen, have made an unusually effective missionary: for, at least as represented in our narratives, most early medieval missionaries seem to have been the opposite of subtle.

Burial, as in Shonaland, is my final problem for conversion. Something rarely at the front of the minds of Christian missionaries is the need to supply satisfactory alternatives to non-Christian *rites de passage*, particularly the most total of all of them, death. The ethnographic literature is full of the alarming results of their getting it wrong. The dead are powerful in most societies; they are potentially dangerous in many societies if they are not carefully separated from the living by the right rituals (even in societies protected by the ancestor-spirits themselves, like the Tswana); Christians often have much simpler and in any event different death rituals, which may not be perceived to work properly. Catholic missionaries in conquered Spanish America in the early seventeenth century forced societies in the Andes, which had previously mummified the dead and left them in the open, to bury them, thus leaving the dead 'in great torment'; *Indios* responded by digging the bodies up; the Spanish responded by burning them and throwing the ashes in the river. Again, quite a shock; but not one with good consequences. The dead became objects of fear and repugnance, but they did not lose their power at all. The Laymi of Andean Bolivia, studied by Olivia Harris, spend a lot of time propitiating the dangerous dead, with death rituals which have remained elaborate, probably still more than before, to

[40] Ranger, 'Taking Hold of the Land'.

[41] Bede, *HE*, I, 30, ed. by Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 106–09; Blair, *CASS*, p. 185. For temples, see Semple, 'Defining the OE *hearg*', pp. 367–68.

counteract the 'torment' of burial. Interestingly, one result is that the ritual year is structured by two major events, All Saints and All Souls, and Carnival — so certainly Christian moments of the year, but not the two principal moments of any established church — in the first of which all the dead are systematically fed and celebrated and in the second devils (i.e. the spirits of the dead) are again celebrated, and then cast out.[42] All Souls is famously the celebratory Day of the Dead in former Spanish colonies, and this may have been in part the result of the negative side effects of forced conversion, and above all the forced abolition of rituals, elsewhere too. The Anglicans in Shonaland, who had no coercive authority behind them, were more careful, at least at the start: the first burial in the churchyard of St Faith's, under the great hill of Chevuti, in 1906, was left open, with the body carefully arrayed so that no earth would fall on it.[43]

It is interesting that, here at least, some medieval conversion processes were more successful. Perhaps this is because we follow them across a much longer time-scale than most anthropologists, or modern historians of the non-European world, do. This does, however, allow us to see that, in particular, burial changes, although they certainly took place in the end, were very slow. The pagan Roman world had heavily stressed pollution fears of the dead, and urban cemeteries were all outside city walls; Christianity brought cemeteries inside the walls, if not in the fourth century at least in the seventh, and domesticated the danger of death: in part through the medium of saints, Peter Brown's 'very special dead', who in some sense were not really dead at all (and so did not pollute) and beside whom first bishops and aristocrats, then non-elites, sought to be buried. This was not the only way the process occurred, but it was successful: Christian cemeteries in the Mediterranean remain liminal places to this day, but not threatening.[44] Similarly, pagan cemeteries were often in liminal spatial locations in Anglo-Saxon England, and so were early Christian ones; but by *c*. 700 kings were beginning to be buried in churches and by the mid-ninth so were non-elites, although we do not know how far the tradition of *ad sanctos* burial was important here, nor indeed how burial rituals themselves changed

[42] Harris, 'The Dead and the Devils among the Bolivian Laymi'; cf. Harris, 'The Eternal Return of Conversion'; see further, for the decades around 1600, Gose, 'Converting the Ancestors', pp. 152–66.

[43] Ranger, 'Taking Hold of the Land', pp. 168–69.

[44] Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*; Paxton, *Christianizing Death*, especially pp. 19–91, the basic analysis of early medieval death rituals, which shows, inter alia, that documented ones could be so elaborate that, if regularly practised (a big if), they might well have been effective as *rites de passage*. See also Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*, pp. 213–16.

to match, and perhaps to counteract, this considerable shift.[45] What I do wonder, however, is whether the considerable prominence of revenants in twelfth-century English and thirteenth-century French and Icelandic narratives might be the residual result of the new rituals not working well enough. When in *Laxdæla saga* Víga-Hrappr, a classic saga Nasty Man, persuades his wife to have him buried in the most dangerously liminal place of all, the doorway to his own house, one can almost hear the neighbours crying out at the stupidity of it, and sure enough he haunts his family out, until he is dug up; but other hauntings do not have such easy explanations in sagas, and there are many of them. To repeat, if one is going to analyse phenomena like this, one needs to do it comparatively; but in the comparative history of revenants, we do have quite a lot of data, at least for the central Middle Ages.[46]

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There are so many obstacles to conversion that the most obvious conclusion would be that no one would convert at all, particularly not from one religion to another. But, evidently, this has not been the case in history, including in the period 600–1100 in Europe, when the land area of Christian polities more than doubled in size. But when we are comparing the actual processes of conversion, it seems to me useful to keep in mind — among others, doubtless — the problems raised here. And the underlying issue must, I think, be this: an indigenous religious system fits the rest of the local social structures pretty well, for it has developed inside them. Of course societies are not static, and religions change; nor are societies or cultures coherent, so there are internal contradictions and conflicts in religious practice (they are often contradictions missionaries can exploit); but these are at least indigenous to the system. Every conversion to a

[45] Blair, *CASS*, pp. 58–65, 228–45; for the care needed if we wish to separate out religious from social change in this context, see Halsall, *Cemeteries and Society in Merovingian Gaul*, pp. 203–84; Hadley, 'Equality, Humility and Non-Materialism?', neither of them very concerned with *rites de passage*, however. For *rites de passage* and their dangers, see further Dunn, *The Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons*, with some differences of interpretation. For what can be said about death rituals in late Anglo-Saxon England (well after the conversion, of course), see Thompson, *Dying and Death in Later Anglo-Saxon England*, especially pp. 33–49.

[46] *Laxdæla saga*, chap. 17, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson; cf. for other examples *Eyrbyggja saga*, chaps 34, 51–55, and 63, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Magnús Þórðarson, pp. 93–95, 139–52, 169–76; for north-west Europe as a whole, see Caciola, 'Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture'; Watkins, *History and the Supernatural in Medieval England*, pp. 182–90.

new religion represents contact between two separate cultures, and the introduction of exogenous values. A dialectic ensues, for each will react on the other. But there is also, inevitably, conflict; for the conversion experts, the missionaries in most cases, wish very much to change not only the indigenous religious system, but other aspects of the society's structure and culture too. Which side will win, by how much, and why? Where missionaries have a coercive apparatus behind them, they will win more, of course, whether this is the Spanish colonial state or a keen early medieval king. But even then such victories are seldom fully complete, or not fully complete until (as in Ireland) centuries of ecclesiasticization have passed. I would suppose, and propose, that public rituals are most at risk, for these are the easiest to police; and that the traditional values that are most crucial to the reproduction of the society (including its hierarchy) undergoing conversion will resist best, except in situations of extreme social breakdown, or in instances (not so common, but not unknown) where conversion was precisely an oppositional act.[47] We could explore what resists, comparatively, to see how far that proposition works, and how far it helps to illuminate what the core traditional values actually are in each society — if we have enough evidence, of course. But it is at least worth saying that some of the most obvious features of early medieval societies, like the force of kinship, or the violent defence of honour, or the assumption by aristocratic elites that they were wholly morally superior to the poor and unfree, survived the conversion process without difficulty, for all that they are values directly contradicted by Christian texts: they may be too obvious to be recognized as *superstitiones*, survivals from a pagan past, but they were survivals for all that, even more than demons were. Here, indeed, very few purists argued against them then, or ever would — as they also would not argue much against oppression or patriarchy, although these are less in contradiction with Christian texts. If we look at the level of survival of local social structures and values, however, a comparative study of conversion can lead us to a wider understanding of all aspects of societies, whether religious or not.

[47] As with the rebellious conversions to Protestantism in late modern southern Italy: Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, pp. 57–73; or the dissenting revivalism of twentieth-century East Africa: Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival*, pp. 3–13 and passim.

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