



**SHOPPING FOR GOD:
Dwelling in a Land of
Converts**
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Shopping for God - Dwelling in a Land of Converts

Every conversion is a betrayal, even as we depict it as an act of higher loyalty. When we turn toward God, taking what we believe is the right path, we rationalize the switch as turning toward truth and submitting to the unassailable claims that eternal principles must, of necessity, make on our conscience. "Here I stand; I can do no other," as Martin Luther put it to Johann von Eck and the Diet of Worms. And that was before he realized what he was getting himself, and Christendom, into.

Yet even as we embrace what we see as the greater good, we are, by definition, turning away from something we held dear – from the tradition we were raised in, from ideas we once believed in, from friends, from family, from the tribe. And that rejection often brings conflict and pain, and ought to bring a desire to redeem, if not explain, the unsettling tensions that can accompany one of the most profound decisions in a person's life. "Well, I won't see you in paradise," a lifelong friend said when I announced that I had converted to Catholicism. My friend is a faithful evangelical whose judgments are not to be dismissed lightly, even though a natural reflex against my disloyalty to what was once our shared tradition surely weighed heavily in her verdict. She has since come to an uneasy peace with my choice, and I suspect the evolution of her beloved Billy Graham on issues of denominational competition – he was one of the great eulogizers of Pope John Paul II – no doubt eased the way.

Still, more than fifteen years later, that naked confrontation of creeds and emotions continues to disturb my conscience, and to prompt considerations not only of my own religious choice

but of our growing national penchant for conversion – for continual religious reinvention that seems to mirror our national fascination with makeovers and our almost manic need for constant movement. A pilgrimage is one thing, having the goal of deepening faith through a long and rigorous journey of sanctification. But we are rapidly becoming a society of religious boulevardiers, always on the move, not as itinerant monks who bring our faith with us, but as God-shoppers on the lookout for the best deal. The reality is that conversion does not seem to trouble our nights nearly as much as it should, and to my mind this calls into question the depth of our newfound commitments; it also points to the common societal tendency to gloss over real differences, or, at the other extreme, to exalt combat as the only means to ideological clarity.

In the first scenario, religious conversion amounts to little more than psychotherapy – chicken soup that could be served up any number of ways depending on one’s mood. In the second scenario, conversion is just another weapon wielded on the battlefield that is America’s public square today – a way to prove that I am right and you are wrong, and wrong about everything, not just religion. Our conversion is affirmed only by demonstrating that our personal choice of what to believe is superior to all other beliefs, including those we ourselves once espoused. Neither rationale – the therapeutic or the self-justifying – addresses the claims of the religious community we leave or the one we join. The real disloyalty in these cases is to faith itself.

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Historically, the ardor for conversion in America is understandable, though its contemporary expression is nothing short of revolutionary. We are a God-loving nation, defined spiritually by our revivalism, as we are politically by our republicanism. We do not want inherited truth any more than we want a hereditary monarchy. Yet sometime in the last few decades the quest for authenticity – we were founded, after all, by Puritan pilgrims seeking the true faith – got mixed up with our market-based love of reinvention, and thus the conversion industry was born.

In his classic work from 1955, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*, Will Herberg argued that some 96 percent of Americans continued to identify with the religious traditions they were raised in – by and large one of the three religions examined in the book. If there was any significant shifting, it was within these groupings. Stasis characterized the American religious character. Three decades later, one of Herberg’s leading successors in the field, sociologist Robert Wuthnow, showed how much the landscape had changed: By 1985, Wuthnow reported, one-third of Americans had converted to another religion, and most likely the numbers have continued to rise since then. Not only that, but many Americans, in what sociologist Wade Clark Roof has called this “generation of seekers,” have converted several times.

So determined are Americans to choose their religious destiny that any opinion to the contrary is seen as, well, heresy. I once attended a seminar on Native American religion in which one of the panelists – an American Indian – was complaining about the appropriation of his traditions by “white shamans,” a lament that received nods of assent from the largely white crowd. But he elicited an audible gasp when he pointed out that people simply couldn’t choose to become a practitioner of Indian religion. The religion is so bound up with the tribe you are born into and the geographical area where that tribe lives, he explained, that plucked from this context the religion makes no sense. And conversely, it makes no sense for someone to pretend to be part of a world they cannot enter. Needless to say, his listeners were aghast.

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What accounts for the shift? There are a number of factors, prominent among them the decline of institutions, the fraying of communal and ethnic bonds, and the rise in religious intermarriage. Once you marry someone from outside your faith or denomination, it becomes increasingly untenable to consign them to even the comfier upper rings of hell. (Mel Gibson, a traditionalist Catholic who has suggested that his Episcopalian wife is destined for perdition,

may be exceptional in this regard.)

The increase in immigration has not diluted the predominantly Christian makeup of the nation as much as some contend, but it did significantly expand the menu of choices. Loosed from their bonds of familial and denominational loyalty, Americans have happily availed themselves of these choices – the “heretical imperative,” as Peter Berger has called it. We remain a deeply spiritual, if not especially religious nation; most people feel they have to “be” something. (“A man’s got to believe in something,” W.C. Fields said. His punch line was, “I believe I’ll have another drink,” but the original sentiment still holds true.) In the abstract, this sort of religious freelancing should be a good thing. Sociologists like to differentiate between “achieved” and “ascribed” identities, the latter being the religious loyalty that one takes in with mother’s milk, together with the rites and traditions of old-world faiths. Achieved identities are those we discover for ourselves, often as we grow into adulthood.

In his book *Paul the Convert*, author Alan F. Segal reports that two-thirds of religious conversions are gradual, the result of intellectual and emotional quests, and only one-third are sudden. That kind of slow fermentation should – I would think – produce a deeper and richer religious faith. Yet the opposite seems typically to be the case, as religious conversion so often looks like spiritual faddism, with questing Americans snapping up all manner of spiritual snake oil and trading it in as soon as they realize they’ve bought just another placebo.

For many who discover a new spiritual home within a long-standing tradition, on the other hand, there seems to be a tendency to proclaim their newfound allegiance, but without acquiring a corresponding grounding in the history and beliefs of their faith. That results in what both liberals and conservatives decry as an endemic religious illiteracy in America, or, perhaps worse, a simple lack of religious seriousness.

The opposite tendency, of course, is the more widely noted phenomenon of converts becoming the greatest zealots. Diving into the deep end of the religious pool can be as problematic as skimming the surface, however. William James famously described conversion as “the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided or consciously wrong, inferior, and unhappy becomes unified and consciously right, superior, and happy.” It is a short step from there to triumphalism, and too many converts seem ready to take that step, perhaps in part out of a desire to compensate for their delayed enlightenment by trying to prove that they are purer in their beliefs, more Catholic, one might say, than the pope. This can produce all manner of tragic results, as each day’s news bears witness to.

The more common problem with the zealotry of the converted, I think, is that it is often rooted in a narcissistic desire to be right, which is then camouflaged as a proprietary monopoly on universal truth. One can believe in something that is true without being correct about everything else in one’s life. The humility required by the great religious traditions would never sanction the egotism of identifying one’s personal wishes with the universal truths of the faith. Separating the two is perhaps the greatest spiritual challenge for the deepest religious believers. It is a quest for what Richard Gaillardetz, a Catholic studies professor at the University of Toledo, has called “eschatological humility.” “Eschatological humility,” he wrote in *Commonweal* magazine, “treasures divine truth as it is mediated through the received faith of the church but also recognizes that we do not so much possess divine truth as it possesses us.”

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Along with the penchant for zealotry, the newly converted are often strongly attracted by the idea of a historically grounded religious authenticity. One could argue that this has always been an incentive to, and a justification for, religious conversion. Go to the source for the real thing, we are told, so it’s no surprise that we follow this advice in our thinking about religion.

Several years ago I was invited by a rabbi friend to give a talk at Sabbath services. Naturally, I was a bit daunted by the prospect, especially when the rabbi encouraged me to talk about my experience of “swimming the Tiber” – a story that I figured might be of interest to the

audience, but not one pointing to common ground between us. When I had finished my tale of conversion and opened the floor for questions, an elderly woman in the front row shot up her hand and asked, "So, you went from being a Protestant to a Catholic. Why didn't you go all the way and become a Jew?"

The line induced laughs, and my somewhat embarrassed rabbi quickly shifted the discussion to other areas. I actually thought it was a good question, perhaps because I recognize in my own psyche the lure of historical verisimilitude, which was certainly one of the factors in my own leap backward, beyond 1517. The motivation to make a clean break is understandable, and an integral part of the appeal of conversion. Islam, in fact, teaches that its newcomers do not convert per se but actually undergo a "reversion," that is, a return to the place where we all started, Islam being the default set point of the soul in the Muslim view. By discovering one's "true self" somewhere in the distant past, we needn't contend with the hurt feelings of those living with us in the present, or with the idea that we ourselves have "changed" or betrayed anything. We were always right. We just didn't know it.

Unfortunately, in America today this approach too often becomes an exercise in chronological, rather than theological, justification. It becomes what I call "vintage religion," like shopping for retro furnishings that can recreate a world we were never part of and that we can then idealize through some soft-focus lens of nostalgia. The resuscitation of Celtic and Norse religions, along with resurgent neopagan faiths like Wicca and Heathenism, are manifestations of this trend. These modern versions of ancient traditions are often created out of whole cloth, but they offer the pleasure of enjoying an old-time religion without engaging one's own past. It is the luxury of wearing a beautiful fur coat that was bought by someone else's grandmother long before it was a sin to kill animals for fashion.

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Underlying the entire conversion question is the loss of the fear of eternal damnation. In the old days, if you made the wrong choice you were doomed. Not anymore. Today, religious belief is pretty much, "I'm OK, You're OK. See you in heaven." In his 2003 book *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Practice Our Faith*, Alan Wolfe aptly calls this phenomenon "salvation inflation," and the numbers bear him out. One Gallup poll has shown that 75 percent of Americans say that there is a religion "other than their own that offers a true path to God," and of that number a substantial majority believe that this other path to God is equally as good as their own. Additionally, although the vast majority of Americans say that there will come a day when God judges people and decides whether they will go to heaven or hell, the poll finds that 44 percent believe that a good person will go to heaven whether or not he or she believes in God.

This is seven centuries – and an even longer distance theologically – from Pope Boniface VIII declaring that there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church – *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.

The progress from a conversion of fear to one of mature choice would not seem to be such a bad thing. Converting out of the fear that we are dangling over a fiery pit with one foot on a banana peel, as Jonathan Edwards had it, is not exactly the most profound motivation for worshipping God. The problem, of course, is that if one religion – or no religion – is as good as another, why switch? In fact, why be anything at all? Many Americans seem to be asking the same thing, and the lack of any need to formally affiliate with a brand-name faith has contributed to the steep decline in membership in many denominations. It has also prompted the expenditure of millions of dollars in advertising by those denominations, in an effort to better market themselves.

Improving public relations, however, does not strike me as the best way to attract believers. In the end, meaningful beliefs attract the best believers, and the enduring appeal of conversion can be seen as evidence that many Americans do take their religious quests seriously. This can be salutary not only for them, but also for the faiths they embrace. I once heard the church historian Martin Marty recount his experience of acquiring three daughters-in-law, and his surprise at their fascination with the various Marty family rituals whose roots

and significance the Martyrs themselves had begun to take for granted through decades of habit. It was thanks to these newcomers to the family, he said, that he began to rediscover the meaning and memories of the family traditions. In the same way, converts can hold up a mirror to the communities they join, perhaps reminding us of things we don't like about ourselves, but also about the good things that attracted us in the first place, and above all about the "why" of who we are.

In American Catholicism adult converts – 150,000 every year – have been called the new immigrants, an apt label given the impact they are having on the church. Purdue University sociologist James Davidson has shown that the 10 percent or so of American Catholics who are converts are often more faithful in their observances than so-called cradle Catholics. Converts are more likely to believe there is "something special" about being Catholic; they are more likely to be registered in a parish (87 versus 67 percent); to read about the church (47 versus 34 percent); to share their faith (41 versus 29 percent); and to believe that their faith helps them with daily decisions (35 versus 21 percent).

Certainly much of this can be chalked up to the often short-lived zeal of the convert. It is the process of deepening the faith after conversion – what the church calls "mystagogy" – that is the true test of a conversion. The pilgrimage of sanctification after the moment of justification is an avenue by which bonds frayed by rejection of one tradition in favor of another can be healed.

In reflecting on his own faith journey on the eve of his retirement in 2004, Bill Moyers cited T.S. Eliot's claim that "no man has ever climbed to the higher stages of the spiritual life who has not been a believer in a particular religion, or at least a particular philosophy." Moyers then inverted the image of mountaintop enlightenment to one that is perhaps better suited to the nitty-gritty of real faith at work: "As we dig deeper into our own religion, if we are lucky we break through to someone else digging deeper toward us from the core of their tradition, and on some transcendent level we converge...."

This does not avoid the differences, or gloss over the difficulties, inherent in our religious choices. Rather, it is a call to plumb the depths of our faith – to be truer to ourselves, and in doing so to discover connections with eternal truths and with other believers that may not have been visible under the aspect of a privatized or superficial life of faith. Conversion is popularly depicted as a sudden burst of inspiration enjoyed by a blessed individual. But the most firmly grounded conversion is one that transports an individual deeply into a community. In the end, true conversion is an ongoing process, and above all a challenge to ourselves as much as it is to those around us.

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