Modes of Conversion in American Religious History, 1500–1860

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One of the most gifted preachers in American history greatly trimmed theatrical performances from his sermons compared to other revivalists of his time. Charles Finney worked with the rational minds of his hearers rather than tamper with their emotions or enact a wild or dramatic display of spiritual power, though some who attended his meetings would describe their individual experiences differently. Finney methodically and carefully planned his meetings to avoid excessive, supernatural, or miraculous phenomena and insisted on struggling with the congregation in spirit through prayer and exhortation. His profoundly systematic approach to evangelism continues to influence preachers, with evangelists no more prominent than Billy Graham using these same methods into the twenty-first century to attract proselytes. Converts during this period of awakening flocked to Finney and became Christians in droves, which suggests that his system held a causal relationship with such a rise in his churches' membership.[1]

One convert, however, challenges this analysis of Finney's successes. Describing herself as one directly converted by Finney, Elizabeth Cady Stanton reminisced that her young mind became consumed with Finney's message but was ultimately poisoned by it. As a young student, she felt puzzled about salvation, and with her fellow schoolmates, she besought God's forgiveness while feeling irreconcilably damned, a "forsaken worm of the dust in trying to approach [God], even in prayer." Stanton found Finney and asked him how she ought to resolve her despair, to which he replied, "Repent and believe … that is all you have to do to be happy here

1. Grant Wacker, "Awakeners of the Heart," Chap. 9 in Jon Butler, et al., *Religion in American Life: A Short History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 178–79.

and hereafter." Until she vacationed with her brother-in-law, a learned reader of Enlightenment philosophy, she continued as a Christian, relieved that a way out existed for her "depraved soul." However, this brother-in-law presented Stanton with new ideas and books, and provided space for her to disavow her previous conversion. She described this move from religious excitement into reason much like Kantian philosophers had done a century earlier: one of doubt and fear to enlightenment and liberation. Her psychological odyssey through Finney's system proved to agitate her enough that she abandoned religion and embraced a purely rationalistic approach to the cosmos. Ironically, rational belief had been a staple for Finney and his revivals, yet this same approach to religion propelled this convert toward a more radical rationalism that considered religious experience invalid. Though effective for many, Finney's kind of systematic evangelism apparently had its casualties as well.[2]

These cases of Finney and Stanton in early American history illustrate the complexity of interpreting religious conversion during these periods of rapid Christian expansion. On the one hand, the successes of methodical proselytizing suggest that converts resulted from the work and influence of the preacher or missionary. On the other, psychological responses to these ministers of individual proselytes suggest that the moment of conversion or rejection occurred independently of the preacher or that the preacher only occupied a place in the mind to be negotiated by the individual. The result of conversion depended, then, on the individual's predisposition to the preacher's message or performance, or his or her predisposed reactions to perceived spiritual phenomena. These two interpretive frameworks—the psychology of the convert versus the sociology of the ministry—in many cases appear at odds with each other, precisely because both are in motion at the moment of conversion. A third analytical apparatus brings the moment of conversion into focus and clarifies these dynamic relationships as they play out in American religious history.

Borrowing from Aristotle's and Pierre Bourdieu's social theory of *habitus*, I argue that bridging the psychology of the convert with the sociology of the ministry by means of shared desires and social effects better approaches the dynamic of conversion and helps to avoid a chicken-and-egg syllogism when interpreting how conversion occurs.[3] Applying this

2. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences 1815–1897* (New York: Shocken Books, 1975), 41–44.

3. Bourdieu extends the limits of Aristotle's philosophy by applying habitus to more than just one's social environment. He uses habitus to explain the body, the field

bridge, therefore, to historical method improves the resulting picture and helps elucidate the complexities of interreligious interactions. Beginning with the Franciscan missions to Native Americans in the 1500s and ending with the outbreak of civil war in the 1860s, a history of the modes of conversion in America tells of varied yet similar processes through the minds of the individuals and the social effects produced by the ministers involved.

Before conversion occurs, the potential convert and the evangelist share a set of desires however generalized or hitherto cognitively unrecognized. Three moments ensue when the potential convert and the evangelist come into contact. First, they identify each other as sharing that desire or set of desires; second, one or both install or appropriate a social relationship of authority between the two; third, the potential convert actually converts by fastening a new set of expectations to his or her set of desires. In the case of Stanton and Finney, they both desired freedom of spirit: Elizabeth felt convicted of sins and pled to God for release and Finney wished for any struggling soul to be freed from guilt and hell. She identified in Finney a "pulpit orator" who possessed knowledge of how to repent, and thanks to "my gloomy Calvinistic training … and my vivid imagination," Stanton was predisposed to accept Finney's authority. She appropriated authority to Finney as they interacted with each other, and put into action his counsel. She expected new things of her original desire, and for a time, was converted to his message.[4]

The key to Stanton's change of mind, and other modes of conversion, is *iteration*. Due to new experiences and social effects on Stanton's mind, her approach to social phenomena shifted, and in the process of conversion, a completely distinct set of desires, knowledge, identification, and authority moved Stanton to different conclusions. Hence, her break from evangelical Christianity came once she appropriated a new authority *using* her previous experience and set of expectations she had once gained from her time with Finney. In this sense, conversion is not linear nor circular/repeating. On a macro level, conversion iterates within a social sys-

of experience, and more in ways that has prompted his theory toward even postmodern and poststructuralist interpretations of society. In this paper, I will not engage in this mode of critical analysis, though it certainly could be applied in more detail elsewhere. For this reason, I avoid referring to habitus but rather borrow from this concept and fashion what I will simply call shared desires between the convert and the minister. From there, I amplify my method, though I acknowledge Bourdieu's work and influence. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

4. Stanton, 41.

tem, thus producing new effects but following a similar pattern. Finney's revivals also built upon this constant iteration of the conversion process as he adjusted his work in response to the perceived successes and effects of his sermons. His new forms of managing conversion always took into account the totality of previous methods, even if he did not necessarily acknowledge this totality (*habitus*) conscientiously.

In short, as one appropriates desires and expectations with new knowledge and sense perception to a previously under appreciated or unaccepted system, he or she converts socially, intellectually, or emotionally to that system. This mode of analysis takes into account both the role of the social apparatuses that influence the convert as well as the psychological effects which accompany the conversion experience.

Charles Finney's systematic evangelism arrived to America long before the Rochester revivals of 1830 swept across upstate New York. The Spanish conquest of California and New Mexico between the 1500s and 1800s brought Franciscan friars into contact with indigenous Americans and it did not take long for these missionaries to establish churches following a deliberate methodology. To the astonishment of the Indians, these Europeans controlled things like rain and animals, though these missionaries really only brought over improved farming technology. The missionaries took advantage of this misunderstanding and went so far as to script displays of their power in order to persuade the Indians to convert to Catholicism. A mock execution which the missionaries disrupted at the final moment and the reappropriation of space, time, and object into church buildings, feast days, and sacred relics encouraged the natives to cast off their customs, or so the missionaries hoped. Elements of the Franciscan order of spiritual formation (self-purgation, illumination, and mystical union with Christ) resembled forms and content of indigenous religion, a fact on which the friars attempted to capitalize. Their records indicated tremendous growth among the Indians, with missions lining the coast of California and filling the deserts of New Mexico. Numbers of baptisms also climbed in direct correlation with the Franciscans' proselytization efforts.[5]

For all of these new Indian Christians, however, the effect of conversion was relatively low. Many natives were baptized with a weak commitment to Catholicism, usually because of limited choices for Indians throughout colonial California. The Franciscans themselves recognized a growing

5. Steven W. Hackel, *Children of Coyote, Missionaries of St. Francis: Indian–Spanish Relations in Colonial California, 1769–1850* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 141, 171.

disparity between the size of the mission community and the number of those that took communion regularly.[6] When an Indian prophet announced that Christianity ought to be resisted, formerly baptized Native Americans fled the religion in large numbers. An apostate who preached against the friars among his fellow Indians succeeded at dashing their supposed power over the elements before they arrived; the Indians wanted nothing to do with impostors. Native peoples quickly renounced the religion of their colonizers when indigenous religion provided alternatives or resistance, indicating that what the Franciscans considered "conversion" was more a response to colonial violence than to individual changes of mind.[7]

Indeed, true conversions of the Native Americans did not abound so much as baptisms. One such true conversion, however, does show how the friars' efforts could match the expectations of some of the Indians. Gerónimo de Pedraza impersonated the Pueblo medicine men when presented with an ailing man. Using the crucifix, he drew out the arrowhead lodged in this man's chest. The man, Quinía, had expected some supernatural force to bring about his healing, and in his mind had already appropriated divine properties to physical objects. Both Gerónimo and Quinía accepted the possibility for divine powers in the cross and shared in the desire that the man find healing not from a medical procedure (of which Gerónimo had already acquired a certain level of expertise) but from some spiritual or supernatural intervention. The moment of conversion came once Quinía observed the desired outcome after having legitimized the friar's authority within his own mind. The cross, now, held those divine properties, thus adding to the authority of the friar and his companions.[8]

If such an event could elicit conversions, why then did some healings go awry? The healing of a blind boy among the Hopi had the reverse effect than Quinía's conversion had had among other Pueblos. Agitated by one Franciscan's skill at curing minor ailments, a group of medicine men devised the perfect challenge. They brought a boy that they knew could not be manipulated by the friars since the child had been verifiably blind since birth. Their ultimatum demanded that Francisco de Porras use his cross to bring sight to the child, otherwise they would kill the friar or cast

6. Hackel, 171.

7. Hackel, 141, 143, 170–71.

8. Ramón A. Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 56.

him out in shame. Francisco prayed for a miracle, placed the cross over the boy's eyes, applied some mud, and suddenly the boy saw. Far from honoring their promise that if the boy could be healed by the cross they would "believe everything you tell us," the medicine men vowed revenge and later poisoned the friar.[9]

In this case, the medicine men came to the missionary predisposed to reject the miracle. Their desires were altogether distinct from the evangelist's: the evangelist desired the conversion or salvation of the Indians, but the medicine men only desired to debunk the power of the outsider. No mutual relationship between the medicine men and the missionary formed that identified each other as potentially helpful in the acquisition of a shared set of desires. The medicine men also refused to appropriate any authority to the missionary, rather, they sought to undermine his authority and reestablish their own among their community. On the one hand, Quinía and Indians like him had somehow avoided this same level of antagonism prior to the moment of conversion or rejection. On the other, many Indians harbored resentment for the missionaries and resisted any attempts on their minds to change religion. Francisco's miracle only reinforced the antagonism they already possessed, and these social experiences, when iterated within the community, legitimized their retribution. Their expectations never shifted to a new set of desires or changed in content; they remained unconverted to Catholicism.

The friars continued their work of proselytism among the Indians thanks to their predisposition to believe Pueblo dissimulations were true conversions. As Indians feared the incoming priests, the Franciscans mistook their display of fear for piety. They misunderstood in part because they had appropriated authority to themselves as able to save these "uncivilized" communities and reiterated their role within these communities when reacting to the Indians' behavior. Indians were more converted to European technology than to European religion—in this area the two disparate cultures shared a form of *habitus* in their labors to thrive from agriculture, and the set of expectations the Indians shared began to include these new European means for survival.[10]

The slave trade introduced another point of contact not unlike the Native Americans and European Catholics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Like the Catholic missionaries, slaveholders justified their behaviors on the grounds of converting "heathen" peoples to true religion.[11]

9. Gutierrez, 56.
10. Gutierrez, 93–94.
11. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum*

In 1660, the English government instructed slaveholders to "consider how … servants or slaves may be invited to the Christian faith, and be made capable of being baptized thereunto," so overt was their design to convert the Africans.[12] But such efforts met with resistance. Many slaveholders cared more for the profitability of slaves than the Christian commission to preach the gospel to all nations, and some feared becoming Christian would only embolden the slaves with a new confidence.[13] Not all slaveholders opposed conversion, though; William Black once boasted the baptism of two hundred slaves under his instruction.[14] Nevertheless, catechizing the slaves required many more clergy than the southern colonies had, and instructing the slaves sufficiently prior to baptism took too long for most slaves to receive Christianity directly, if at all.[15] Despite these challenges, churches swelled with blacks and revivals fired up slaves as well as whites. Conversion appears steady throughout the slave years even where the slaves had the most animosity for their slaveholders or when clerical involvement waned.[16]

Revivals contributed greatly to the conversion of many slaves to Christianity. The sermons inspired whites and blacks alike to gain personal experience with Jesus Christ and the inward, individual, and personal conversion experience became the emphasis more than catechism. Space for emotional religious expression opened up, and though in some areas blacks were outlawed from preaching in public, slaves still found room to sing, tell Bible stories, and dance.[17] The spirit of the revivals promoted what African religion already espoused—belief in a supreme creator of the world, belief in afterlife where good and evil are rewarded and punished, prayer, and worship. Congregations began to allow blacks to worship in Sunday services and some black congregations grew in number. By 1845, black congregations had been well established: The Baptist Sunbury Association of Georgia had 4,444 black members served by seven black churches and four ordained black ministers.[18]

The shared set of desires between slaves and their masters eventually incorporated a concept of deliverance. Though the masters clearly subverted any attempt at rebellion on the slaves' part, they nonetheless sup-

South (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 96.

12. Raboteau, 97.
13. Raboteau, 98, 103.
14. Raboteau, 104.
15. Raboteau, 126.
16. Raboteau, 129–133.
17. Raboteau, 135.
18. Raboteau, 175.

ported the deliverance from their own masters, especially in the forming of the United States. When the Civil War broke, it broke along lines of rights—whether or not the states maintained a right to determine the validity of slavery. In this sense, master and slave did not undermine the notion of deliverance or freedom, nor did their shared notions mutually counteract each other. As slaves approached Christianity, though some slaveholders were reluctant, the overall scheme of becoming faithful or saved did not become an issue. In many cases, slave and master overtly agreed upon the same outcome—to one day be saved—and many masters used this fact to justify their use of slavery to bring such a possibility to their slaves.

Revivals, as social formations, installed relationships along these shared sets of desires. Preachers gained access to unconverted souls and unconverted souls awakened to their place beneath the power of God. As presented in these revivals, Christianity did not seem utterly alien to the slaves, and in fact, amplified their sense of how the religion could contribute to their deliverance. These slaves appropriated a degree of authority to the Christian religion, its sacred texts, its sacred history, or its sermons, marking the conditions necessary for the moment of conversion to occur.[19] The confusion between slave control and religious freedom gave rise to an overall sense of autonomy which slaves used when taking advantage of Christian fellowship. A degree of authority denied them in other areas of life was found in the slaves' exercise of Christian religion.[20] In their conversion, these slaves found space to exercise a creative religious expression to fit their own peculiar experience of enslavement.[21]

Christian slaveholders carried their religion to the slaves once they recognized in the slaves a field for gaining converts and once obstacles to their proselytism diminished. Missionaries saw the possibility of making slaves more docile through the use of religion and the desire to create a model plantation fueled the formation of plantation missions. By preaching and baptizing, these Christians justified the severity of their slave practices within their own minds, and noticed that the effects of converting slaves did contribute to their goals. These effects reiterated themselves within the social system, providing new incentives for devising ways to convert more slaves and creating new environments in which slaves found themselves, sometimes compelled to adopt new measures in their enslavement that would contribute to a reinforcement of being

19. Raboteau, 127.
20. Raboteau, 208.
21. Raboteau, 209.

Christianized. Catechetical instruction, worship services, and other effects all appeared among plantation missions.[22]

Christian Americans remained largely unexperienced in African religion. Though shared desires existed between Christians and native Africans to some degree, Americans never identified in African shamans or in the slaves a relationship wherein their religious desires might be answered. Slaves remained for them a commodity, hence no authority in the minds of the slaveholders could be appropriated for bringing about any conversion to African religion. The iteration of converts in this social system continued after slaves syncretized their African customs with Christianity. The point of contact remained in the Western hemisphere, excluding prolonged contact with authentically African religion beyond the shackles of servitude. Thus, the set of conditions for conversion favored Christianity time and again rather than African religion. Ultimately, no African religions survived whole in the British colonies, not only because of conversions of slaves to Christianity, but also due to oppressive measures inflicted with violence upon slaves.[23]

Conversion appeared in less colonizing apparatuses of power, as it did in the cases of Native American and African American conversions, particularly with the Great Awakenings of the 1740s and 1830s. These episodes of religious fervor washed over the continent for decades in the same spirit as many of today's Hollywood blockbusters: Preachers fired up audiences with ecstatic and emotional sermons and the popularity of the revivals became a continental and transatlantic headline. The management of the clergy during these times took on new forms and strategies, particularly in the work of George Whitefield in the 1740s and Charles Finney in the 1830s.

Upon arriving at Boston in 1740, Whitefield expressed dissatisfaction with the spiritual state of things. "The love of many is waxed cold," he wrote in his journal, "there is much of the pride of life to be seen in their assemblies." The apparel of fellow Christians appalled him, especially the fine clothing of little infants who were brought to baptism. He wanted to renounce the "pomp and vanities of this wicked world," and sought conversions to a greater mode of piety. Within days, Whitefield entertained audiences numbered in the thousands and gave rousing sermons to call them to repentance.[24] He desired not just any form of salvation,

22. Raboteau, 165–75.

23. John Butler, "African and American Indian Religion," Chap. 5 in *Religion in American Life*.

24. Edwin S. Gaustad and Mark A. Noll, *A Documentary History of Religion in*

in fact, in many ways he repudiated the notion that one could, with free will, affect one's standing before God (he believed in Calvinistic ideas of predestination). The salvation he sought in others was one of piety and a return to a godly walk. Whitefield saw himself as the instructor in the "grammar school of faith and repentance," not the university professor of "election and predestination," and so his sermons embodied the call to repentance.[25]

One eager participant, Nathan Cole, wrote of racing on his horse to arrive in time for one of Whitefield's meetings. He had previously felt convicted by the Spirit of God as he heard of the great multitudes of conversions accompanying Whitefield's preaching and felt a curious fear upon seeing the preacher in person. In that moment, Nathan Cole wrote that Whitefield appeared angelic with a "bold undaunted Countenance… it looked as if he was Cloathed with authority from the Great God … and my hearing him preach, gave me a heart wound." Cole described his transformation as a conviction that "all my righteousness would not save me." He had desired a singular experience in attending a Whitefield sermon, and he had received it. Others, like Cole, identified in the preachers of the Great Awakening a source for achieving their desires. The fame of the Awakening began to enter the expectations of some that if they did not experience some intense revival, they would consider the preacher unworthy.[26] Cole, in particular, gained a new set of expectations after hearing Whitefield preach, in the form of the doctrine of election which answered his desires of relieving his convicted soul from spiritual duress. Had Whitefield preached a more foreign doctrine in Cole's mind, Cole might have been numbered among those that Whitefield identified at times as "mockers" and "Pharisees."[27]

Conversion throughout the Awakening periods iterated within social systems thus producing new factors, social pressures, strategies, and expectations. Like Whitefield, Finney deliberately strategized for how to win converts based on his own perceptions of the desires of others and his role in answering those desires. Both revivalists exemplify the place of the minister in working to achieve conversion in others; both periods of revival exemplify the psychological motions in the minds of their hearers that precede conversion.

Approaching these cases (namely Native American and Catholic inter-

America to 1877, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 162–63.

25. Gaustad and Noll, 163.
26. Gaustad and Noll, 165, 168.
27. Gaustad and Noll, 163.

actions, slave and slaveholder relationships, and periods of Awakening) from either a psychological perspective or a sociological one without regarding the other invites a presupposition of a linear effect where conversion appears. If analyzed only from the psychology of the convert, conversion might suggest that there exist innate responses to social phenomena that account for changes of religion or philosophy. There certainly exist observable responses to social phenomena, but whether these responses are innate is still debated. If analyzed only from the perspective of the social system, conversion might suggest that no psychological effects for converting exist independently of social phenomena. This analysis could potentially reduce itself to a Prime Mover metaphysic where a preacher who can convert others through his or her mastery of social effects would exist without first ever being converted to his or her own belief system. The iteration, however, of a hybrid between the psychological effects on the convert and the sociological implications of the evangelist explains the ever changing circumstances and environments in which converts are found. This iteration and reiteration of conversion effects within a social system is responsible for the motion of circumstances that give rise or decline to conversion and illustrates why some convert and others do not, and why American Christians at large never convert to Native American or African religion.