

CONVERSION METHODOLOGY AND THE CASE OF CARDINAL NEWMAN

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[Editor's Note: The author offers an interdisciplinary method for studying religious conversion. The method draws upon literary criticism, cultural history, and historical theology. It helps to elucidate contexts in which an individual or a group shifts from one theological position to another. This approach aims to account also for what persists after a religious conversion. The well-documented conversion of John Henry Newman from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism serves as a case study for testing this new methodology.]

RELIGIOUS CONVERSION has been a conspicuously unwieldy matter to study. This is particularly evident in Christianity, where the word "conversion" has occurred often and held many meanings. It continues to do so. Converts have been regarded as among the most colorful figures in the history of Christianity; anyone endeavoring to understand them and the period in which they converted faces a treacherous path. By taking as a case study the 1845 conversion of John Henry Newman (1801–1890) from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism, some of the methodological difficulties of studying religious conversion in general may be clarified.

By conversion one can mean either "a change from lack of faith to religious belief" or "a change from one form of church, religion, doctrine, opinion, currency, etc. to another." Such definitions emphasize the change that occurs in religious conversion, and not the foundation on which it takes place. Conversion also affects a person's preexistent relationships and attitudes. Therefore, the meaning of a religious conversion is determined in part by the worldview from which a person converts.

At times the language of Christianity obfuscates this. The conversion of Paul of Tarsus is recorded in Acts 9:3–9, 22:6–11, and 26:13–16. One version has Paul blinded by a flash of light, suggesting the "darkness" of unbelief in which he traveled earlier. In a well-known verse, Paul himself wrote: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we

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will see face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12). This suggests a current "darkness" which will diminish as the truth increasingly becomes evident. Paul's emphasis on the destination of conversion (beyond the "darkness") has been paralleled throughout Christian history. Writing in 1864 about his gradual road to Roman Catholicism, John Henry Newman echoed Paul's sentiments:

From the time that I became a Catholic, of course, I have no further history of my religious opinions to narrate. In saying this, I do not mean to say that my mind has been idle, or that I have given up thinking on theological subjects; but that I have had no changes to record, and have had no anxiety of heart whatever. . . . I was not conscious, on my conversion, of any inward difference of thought or of temper from what I had before. I was not conscious of firmer faith in the fundamental truths of revelation, or of more self-command; I had not more fervour; but it was like coming into port after a rough sea; and my happiness on that score remains to this day without interruption.¹

Newman's postconversion confidence embodies the notion that conversion concerns arrival in the new faith, not departure from the old.

But more resides in Newman's words. He also noted a lack of change between his new faith and the old. This suggests, though, that the "port" in which Newman docked and the one from which he sailed were not so different after all. Conversion might indeed mean "change," but that implies three focuses for studying religious conversion: the old faith, the new faith, and the actual point of conversion. Perhaps a fourth would be the person who converts. A historical study of religious conversion would be multivalent, focusing on the multiple faiths and historical situations surrounding a particular person. Additionally, such a study would contribute to an understanding of the theological sensibilities, both individual and social, of the period.

In this article I pursue just such a study of Christian conversion. I treat material in three sections: first, an overview of some common methodological approaches to conversions; second, an exploration of an interdisciplinary method that, by combining history, literary criticism, and religious studies, seeks a new interpretation of conversion; and third, a section focusing on John Henry Newman as a case study for this new method. Conversion within the history of Christianity will thus be viewed as a holistic process, the meaning of which is determined by the historical environment surrounding the convert and the autobiographical and biographical accounts of the conversion, as well as the historical setting of beliefs involved in the conversion.

COMMON METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO CONVERSION

Religious conversion, of course, implies more than a shift in academic perspective or a change in one's Sunday morning destination.

¹ John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image-Doubleday, 1956) 317.

After all, it is one's religious view of the world that is converted. This view forms one's experiences. Historian John Owen King has argued that texts help to form experience that culminates in a certain perception of the world. A change in the texts one reads or, conversely, a change in the ways one reads those texts will necessarily impact one's perception of the world. Religious conversion is just such a case. Its effects reverberate throughout the convert's life, not just the place and time of public worship. Yet because these effects express themselves in everyday life and most or all of them do not constitute conventionally intellectual material, they are often considered to fall within the domain of the pastor or religious leader. Just as religious opinions participate in the construction of one's perception of reality, any changes in that aspect of one's worldview often proceed under the aegis of religious leadership.²

Curiously, this presumed ministerial hegemony over conversion extends into scholarly research as well. The reigning mode of conversion studies might be labeled "ministerial-psychological" ones whereby scholars interpret conversion, either that of the living convert or of a historical figure, in terms that address the spiritual state of current believers. This often espouses a common theological worldview and proposes how readers might incorporate such findings in their own lives. This "ministerial" model also seeks to interpret conversions psychologically; it attempts to describe the mental processes by which the individual converts, again for the benefit of those currently converting or the ones charged with assisting them through the process. The unique theological environment of the historical figure thus are often lost for a presumably more productive project.

James Fowler's work on faith and its developments throughout human life stands as the paradigm in this respect. Since the early 1980s, Fowler has written of the stages through which human faith progresses to various expressions of relationships and value formation. He aims "to treat faith as a generic *human* phenomenon—a way of leaning into or meeting life, whether traditionally religious, or Christian, or not."³ All people, accordingly, would experience conversion as they progress at their own pace through the stages. Although the process is multivalent, and therefore inaccessible by one method alone, Fowler

² John Owen King has rooted the American "structures of spiritual conversion" in the Puritan spiritual autobiography. "The presence of writing and the understanding that one is enjoined to employ scripture to make experience is, in Christian culture, clear enough. Writing becomes a usable material in that it allows one to construct meaning out of the chaos of one's life" (*The Iron of Melancholy: Structures of Spiritual Conversion in American from the Puritan Conscience to Victorian Neurosis* [Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University, 1983] 48–49). I return later to the textual influences on experiences for the case study of Newman's conversion.

³ James W. Fowler, "Faith and the Structure of Meaning," in *Toward Moral and Religious Maturity: The First International Conference on Moral and Religious Development*, ed. Christiane Brusselsmans (Morristown, N.J.: Silver Burdett, 1980) 54.

defines faith cumulatively as "an aspect of the total constitutive activity of the *ego*. It functions to provide orientation, hope, and courage. It grounds sustaining strength, purpose, and experiences of shared commitment that bind the self and others in community."⁴ This clearly expresses a disposition toward a psychological, as opposed to a theological definition. In itself, this is not wrong. But, as my explication of Fowler's points will show, the results of his works offer a skewed picture to those interested in a historical study of conversion.

Much of the groundwork for Fowler's definition comes from the cognitive-constructivist school of developmental psychology following Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg. Since faith, for Fowler, is a more holistic way of knowing, it incorporates the more rational strains of knowledge described by Piaget and Kohlberg into a larger way formed by conviction. Fowler translates these structures of knowledge to faith and examines their presence in actual human experience. Through research and interviews he arrives at seven stages of faith: undifferentiated, intuitive-projective, mythic-literal, synthetic-conventional, individuative-reflective, paradoxical-consolidative, and universalizing. Each of these stages, he writes, "is a dynamic unity constituted by internal connection among its differentiated aspects. . . . [S]uccessive stages are thought of as manifesting qualitative transformations issuing in more complex inner differentiations, more elaborate operations (operations upon operations), wider comprehensiveness, and greater overall flexibility of functioning."⁵ As a person moves further through the stages of faith, an increasingly complex web of symbolism, moral judgment, views of authority, and self-perception of the world is woven. In the rare, final stage (universalizing) these are all interconnected in an ideal of human community: "the rare persons who may be described by this stage have a special grace that makes them seem more lucid, more simple, and yet somehow more fully human than the rest of us."⁶

Although these stages are derived from empirical research, their suggestive quality seems to have made a convert of Fowler himself, who writes, "I believe that we are genetically potentiated for growth in faith throughout the life-cycle. I also believe that each stage represents genuine growth toward wider and more accurate response to God, and toward more consistently human care for other human beings. We stand under an imperative toward ongoing growth."⁷ Such a newly discovered constitutive element of human experience requires an innovative approach that maximizes a person's unencumbered development. In this ministerial-psychological model of conversion, current trends in psychological research aid in the solution of dilemmas faced by pastors, ministers, priests, and other religious leaders. Such work

⁴ *Ibid.* 65.

⁶ *Ibid.* 74-75.

⁵ *Ibid.* 74.

⁷ *Ibid.* 82.

contributes to the building of faith communities that recognize people's different needs while contributing to a "humanizing common life."⁸

Although certainly interdisciplinary and admirably utopian, these conclusions might not be the most methodologically preferable for a historical study of conversion. Perhaps the most significant fact is the absence of any consideration of the cultural environment of the convert. However, Fowler's work lurks underneath historical treatments of the subject as well. The result is that, reminiscent of Feuerbach, many historical treatments of conversion often result in modern pastoral or theological concerns being projected back into history upon agents unrelated to these current considerations.

Two such projectionist studies have been those by Walter Conn and Lewis Rambo. In noting that the conversion process has traditionally been described as a metaphor concerning one's conscience, Conn writes that his study proposes to construct "an adequate interpretation of conscience as the necessary context for attempting a fundamental understanding of personal conversion."⁹ He concludes that the most advanced stage of conscience development is equated with "religious conversion," where the subject replaces the sense of absolute autonomy with belief in the centrality of God in one's life.¹⁰ Rambo likewise blurs the lines between the human study and a religious understanding of conversion. "Scientific understanding of conversion is merely a human attempt to comprehend a phenomenon that is an encounter between a mysterious God and an individual of vast potential, perversity, and extraordinary complexity."¹¹

Conn's positing Merton as a paradigm of "the Christian version" seems to imply that analogous versions exist for other religions. What remains to be done is to find suitable examples. This approach to understanding conversion is rooted more in ministerial concerns. From the same perspective, though, the results could be damaging: What if someone's experience does not sufficiently resemble the established version to merit being called "Christian?"¹² Apparently for Rambo the question of how such an approach benefits a historical study have faded into insignificance. "Historians collect and integrate the concrete

⁸ Ibid. 84.

⁹ Walter E. Conn, *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender* (New York: Paulist, 1986) 10.

¹⁰ Ibid. 157.

¹¹ Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University, 1993) 17.

¹² Conn, *Christian Conversion* 25, 57. It is important to note that criticism of universal models also exists within theological circles. William C. Placher has claimed that such theological models are based on an Enlightenment mind-set that erroneously presupposes its own universality (*Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989] 78-81). Significantly, Placher targets Lawrence Kohlberg in this criticism. Placher's claims concerning systematic theology are analogous to the historiographical critique made here against the methodological predominance of universal models.

details of conversions. Attention to historical particulars may complement theoretical models, providing a substantive and detailed data base of information about conversion, and may also help to trace the nature of conversion over time."¹³ The historian's role is not to understand the ways in which conversion, by individual or by group, has occurred, but to bolster a previously established perspective.

A NEW METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO CONVERSION

In the preface to his study of conversion, Karl Morrison draws a clear distinction between his work and that of others: "This book is not an account of conversion experiences but of how people made sense of conversion."¹⁴ With these words Morrison dismisses any treatment of ministerial issues arising from his studies. He also focuses more on what the language of the text discloses and conceals than on how its subject matter might be analyzed. He concludes that because a text's language is historical it has antecedents that are particular, not universal. He writes that "[t]o speak of language as historical evidence is to ask whose language it was. By whom, for whom, with whom did it signify, especially in concealed, metaphorical senses? . . . Hermeneutic circles are made by social circles."¹⁵ These questions are geared toward recreating the worldview within which a conversion took place. For example, Morrison raises the problem that even the use of the word "conversion" is governed by specifically modern usage. His study, however, focuses mainly upon the eleventh and twelfth centuries. By reconstructing the interpretive schema of a particular period, he is able to understand how events were understood then, not how they might be perceived now.

Rambo calls for a "systematic history" of religious conversion. While Morrison's writings indicate that any history would not be systematic, they do suggest that narrative theory may be employed successfully in a historical consideration of conversion. Morrison's work and other

¹³ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* 11–12. In contrast, Peter Burke writes that "if historians are concerned with a greater variety of human activities than their predecessors, they must examine a greater variety of evidence" ("Overture: the New History, its Past and its Future," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke [University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University, 1992] 5). To illustrate Burke's point in the discussion here, neither Fowler nor Conn nor Rambo discusses conversion as a group phenomenon. Instances where this is particularly acute include the Waldensians of medieval France and Italy and the Jewish converts to Catholic Christianity in Spain. The marginal status of both groups challenges assumptions of a single version of Christian conversion, or that conversion is strictly an individual concern. Focusing on "surrender," as Conn suggests, might take on unintentional meaning when studying these groups, since both were the targets of hostilities and persecution.

¹⁴ Karl F. Morrison, *Understanding Conversion* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1992) xi–xii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 188.

methodologically similar works have helped create a history of conversions to which I hope to contribute further.

Some of the difficulty with conversion's historicity stems perhaps from the profoundly personal medium in which many conversions are conveyed, autobiography. Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*, John Henry Newman's *Apologia pro vita sua*, and Dorothy Day's *The Long Loneliness* all enjoyed widespread popularity both at the time of their publication and after the authors' deaths.¹⁶ John Barbour has utilized this popularity to interpret conversion as a deconversion as well. This presents comprehensive understanding of the phenomena where both preconversion and postconversion mentalities indicate the continuities, as well as the changes, in the convert's religious worldview. Barbour writes: "A person's deconversion raises the question of the standard by which a religious faith is judged to be wrong. Thus interpretation of deconversion narratives calls for explication of an author's most deeply held values and ultimate concerns."¹⁷

Barbour recognizes the various interpretations of conversion and suggests that the preventient loss of faith is equally variable. There are, however, four basic characteristics: doubt or denial of the truth of a system of beliefs, moral criticism of the previous worldview, emotional upheaval, and the marked renunciation of the community to which the convert previously belonged. Even the loss of faith entailed by deconversion varies. Newman's autobiographical deconversion entails only the loss of a particular expression of faith, not the faith itself, while for others the loss is more encompassing. In other words, Newman converted from one expression of Christianity to another, while other converts, such as Malcolm X or Louis Farrakhan, joined entirely different religions.¹⁸ In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Celie relates how Shug managed her own path through this process:

Ain't no way to read the bible and not think God white, she say. Then she sigh. When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest. . . . Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for.¹⁹

¹⁶ Several studies have traced this popularity. For the best insights on Newman, see Sheridan Gilley, *Newman and His Age* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990) 321–34. On Day and Merton, see James Terrence Fisher, *The Catholic Counterculture in America, 1933–1962* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989) 1–24, 206, 211. Arnold Sparr also discusses the literary significance of Newman and Day in connection with converts such as Merton (*To Promote, Defend, and Redeem: The Catholic Literary Revival and the Cultural Transformation of American Catholicism, 1920–1960* [New York: Greenwood, 1990] 65–75, 110, 152).

¹⁷ John D. Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1994) 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 2–3.

¹⁹ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Pocket-Simon, 1985, orig. ed. 1982) 202.

Understanding who is relating an account of religious conversion helps reveal what the narrator wishes to convey about the convert. Occasionally these two roles reside within the same person, but Shug herself may have told the story another way. All three versions make up part of Barbour's notion of deconversion.

Like Morrison, Barbour bases his study on literary criticism. This enables him to conclude that the autobiographical expression of the loss of faith often parallels the conversion stories of the faith tradition that the convert leaves. "Accounts of deconversion often use the same old wineskins for the new wine of unbelief . . . both Christian and anti-Christian writers modify autobiographical conventions and devise innovative new forms in order to express distinctive aspects of their own spiritual struggles."²⁰ Often the content of these reinvented structures pertains to ethical and moral questions surrounding the former faith. Accordingly, the autobiographies of deconversion and conversion offer answers. While describing the joys of new-found faith, an autobiography also expressed an attack on previously joyous beliefs. "The reactions against a mistaken belief has tremendous influence on the way in which a person articulates fundamental values, often providing an image of the 'other' against which present identity is contrasted."²¹

The convert's autobiography has broader historical implications as well. It offers a glimpse of how abstract philosophical or theological principles surface in lived reality. "Autobiographical narratives express the interplay of cognitive, volitional, and emotional factors within the individual and the writer's commitments within a particular society and broader cultural context."²² The intersection between conversion and deconversion is thus one between intellectual history and lived history, or the historical perspective that focuses on a period's daily religious realities. Barbour and Morrison suggest a far more satisfactory approach to religious conversion. Instead of utilizing the historical fact of a conversion for apologetics or ministerial purposes, these two writers provide the religious historian with a method by which one can focus on the environment of a conversion.

The deconversionist perspective of Barbour appears to contradict Philip Slater's argument that "an individual who 'converts' from one orientation to its exact opposite appears to himself and others to have made a gross change, but actually it involves only a very small shift in the balance of focal and persistent conflict."²³ After all, while Barbour discusses change, Slater follows similarity. Morrison's notion of the "hermeneutics" of conversion defuses this conflict by focusing on the entire historical period in which the conversion occurred. "Our task is to recover the metaphorical reasoning that prepared the ground for them and that made possible both those descriptions and the idea of

²⁰ Barbour, *Versions of Deconversions* 4.

²¹ *Ibid.* 5.

²² *Ibid.* 7.

²³ Philip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (Boston: Beacon, 1970) 4.

conversion as it was known in a distinct culture and epoch."²⁴ Therefore, while Barbour and Slater's approaches are individualistic, Morrison gathers the historical data to suggest how the converts interacted with general historical and linguistic patterns of the time. The combination of Barbour, Morrison, and Slater comprises a comprehensive picture of religious conversion for the individual and the surrounding culture as well. Barbour admits his method of studying conversion is interdisciplinary, involving literary criticism, ethical theories, and religious studies.²⁵ By incorporating Morrison's and Slater's insights, I hope that I have suggested another interdisciplinary model whose specific focus is the historical reconstruction of the individual and social ramifications of religious conversion in the history of Christianity.²⁶ The model is based on three factors: the deconversion, the faith to which one or a group converted, and the continuities between the two faiths.

NEWMAN'S CONVERSION AS A CASE STUDY

The efficacy of this new method of conversion studies, which focuses on the reconstruction of the religious similarities and, of course, differences surrounding the conversion, can best be demonstrated by means of a case study. John Henry Newman's visibility in conversion studies, as well as his well-known autobiographical account of his "religious opinions," the *Apologia pro vita sua*, present an excellent test for the kind of study described by Barbour and Morrison.

We have already cited a passage from Newman's *Apologia* that revealed his conviction that his religious opinions did not change after his conversion in 1845. Biographical portrayals have varied widely in the 100 years since his death. For Newman, or for any other convert, Maisie Ward's judgment still rings true: "A religious conversion presents a problem for the biographer."²⁷ The problem that Sheridan Gilley has wonderfully described is the projectionist view of conversion: "[n]o one in such matters can escape his own convictions, and every biographer of Newman has seen in Newman a mirror of himself."²⁸ The interpretation of Newman's conversion I offer certainly will not constitute another biography, but it does seek to understand the problem Ward posed by following the historical method just described.

My case study is divided into three parts: first, an overview of some previous treatments of Newman's conversion; second, a glimpse at the circumstances surrounding the publication of his *Apologia*; and third, a reconstruction of his conversion using the method described earlier.

²⁴ Morrison, *Understanding Conversion* 8.

²⁵ Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion* 8.

²⁶ See Patrick Allitt, "American Women Converts and Catholic Intellectual Life," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 13 (Winter 1995) 57-79.

²⁷ Maisie Ward, *Young Mr. Newman* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1948) 25.

²⁸ Gilley, *Newman and His Age* 3.

This last part sketches a spectrum of Newman's religious experiences so that his 1845 conversion to Roman Catholicism receives a more comprehensive meaning by being placed in its appropriate historical context alongside other developments in his life.

Earlier Studies on Newman

There are many studies of Newman's life, and they portray his conversion in a variety of ways. Here I examine only some of the better-known studies. If hagiography is the literary style that retells the saints' imitation of Christ, Muriel Trevor's portrayal of Newman must merit consideration: "What could the world do to one whose standard, in fact as in word, was the Cross? It could make him carry it."²⁹ With such rhetoric Trevor removes Newman from his historical situation to the theologically unassailable position of imitating Christ. More recently, two significant biographies of Newman have likewise grappled with the historical issues surrounding his religious conversion, but they do so from rather different perspectives.

Ian Ker's *John Henry Newman: A Biography* uses letters, diary entries, as well as quotations from the *Apologia* to retell Newman's life. In this retelling, though, Ker replicates the erratic emphases and periodization of the earlier scholarship. He follows Newman's temporal structure in the *Apologia*; comparatively little time is spent on Newman's early years; by page 24 of a 745-page narrative, Ker has already arrived at 1824, Newman's 23rd year. He devotes more pages to the years 1839 to 1845 than to the years leading up to 1839. Thus, like Newman, Ker spends a great deal of time on "the Anglican death-bed" before his conversion at Littlemore in 1845. However, unlike Newman, he appears to highlight whatever might be "Catholic" in Newman's early years, instead of his deep-seated Anglicanism. His narrative contains editorializing like "as he would often do for the rest of his life."³⁰ Ker gives the impression that he is reading Newman's Anglican years through his Catholic ones, thereby hinting that Newman was really Catholic all along. Ker reinforces this rhetoric with occasional mention of Newman's gravestone epitaph, "from unreality into reality." He apparently equates "unreal" with "Anglican" in Newman's life.

Sheridan Gilley's book *Newman and His Age* provides cultural historical background that is lacking in Trevor and Ker. Gilley also devotes more time to Newman's early years, unlike Ker and even Newman himself. This is significant since Gilley's point is that much of Newman's early life never left him, especially his underlying evangelical leanings. Newman himself rejects this thought by 1828 in Chapter 1 of the *Apologia*. Gilley, on the other hand, sees even Newman's con-

²⁹ Meriol Trevor, *Newman 1: The Pillar of the Cloud* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image-Doubleday, 1962) 248.

³⁰ Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1990) 170.

version as a function of the evangelical emphasis of his adolescence.³¹ When first converted at age 15, Newman felt he was called by God away from the world; the same idea is thought to be present in 1845 when Newman became Catholic. Gilley's treatment is more balanced chronologically, with the result that comparatively less time is spent on the years 1841 to 1845. Gilley gives the impression that after 1841 Newman had begun a long, but irrevocable road to Rome. This does not follow the account Newman himself provided in the *Apologia*. Of course, Newman wrote with only 20 years of postconversion hindsight. From a greater temporal distance, Gilley is able to treat equitably both halves of Newman's life.

Whether explicitly respectful of Newman's words, like Trevor and Ker, or attempting a respectful reconstruction of Newman's age, the biographies just surveyed do reveal certain continuities. One is the assuredly incremental nature of Newman's conversion. Another, more delicate regularity is the relation with Newman's own account of his conversion. Given the literary direction of Barbour's and Morrison's studies, an overview of the *Apologia* will provide some basis for the method of conversion studies I am proposing.

The Context of Newman's Apologia

Newman was a hyperprolific writer. His *Apologia* poses the greatest obstacle to arriving at a clear conclusion concerning his conversion. The *Apologia* was published in 1864 in response to Charles Kingsley's affront to Newman's integrity, "What, Then, Does Mr. Newman Mean?" In his *Apologia* Newman offers a "history of his religious opinions" in which he reconstructs the various twists and turns in his life that led to his conversion to Roman Catholicism. Kingsley had accused Newman of lying, in light of his previously anti-Romanist stance during the Oxford Movement that preceded his shocking, if not altogether unexpected conversion. Newman's *Apologia* is, quite literally, "a defense of his life" in the face of such attacks.³²

The complications in the matter now become obvious. When faced with two different interpretations of Newman's life, such as Gilley's and Ker's, many scholars take Newman's own account of his life simply at face value. In terms of historical methodology, however, this reliance on a subject's own written work constitutes an infrequently noticed

³¹ Gilley, *Newman and His Age* 233.

³² Meriol Trevor's words, "The *Apologia* was the record of his thinking, not his feelings, except incidentally" (*Newman: The Pillar of the Cloud* 307), appear therefore to be only partially true. Oliver Buckton has suggested how questions of gender identity and sexual orientation had become prominent between the time of Newman's friendship with Hurrell Froude and the publication of the *Apologia*, forcing Newman to address issues of male friendship in different discursive terms. The *Apologia* thus defended aspects of Newman's life unquestioned at the time of his conversion (" 'An Unnatural State': Gender, 'Perversion', and Newman's *Apologia pro Vita Sua*," *Victorian Studies* 35 [1992] 359–83).

weak link. Just as Gilley and Ker draw upon material to construct a historical argument concerning Newman's life, so too does Newman himself. Thus the *Apologia* has its own rhetorical, persuasive structure. After all, Newman is attempting to convince the reader that he was not guilty of lying during his Anglican years. Instead of offering an "objective" account of his conversion (in that the account is Newman's, and therefore presumably more true), Newman's *Apologia* offers only another persuasive restructuring of historical events, much like those of Gilley and Ker.³³ All three provide different accounts of the worldview which characterized Newman and his Anglican contemporaries.

The *Apologia's* texts, if not its ideas, as I have already noted, supply argumentative material for the studies by Gilley, Ker, and others. At its most basic level, the *Apologia* reconstructs Newman's life and influences as an Anglican. Newman makes use of letters—both those written by and to him—as well as articles and books he produced during that period as textual illustrations of his Anglicanism.

Narrative theory calls attention to the way a narrator constructs "time" within a text. It is also important to note the amount of space an author devotes to each period of time. Newman organizes his materials and personal memories of his Anglican years into four chapters of unequal length devoted to unequal periods of time. Chapter 1 covers his life until 1833 (29 pages devoted to 32 years). Chapter 2 deals with the time from 1833 to 1839 (46 pages devoted to six years). Chapter 3 treats the time from 1839 to 1841 (47 pages given to two years). Chapter 4 describes the period from 1841 until 1845 (76 pages devoted to four years). Frederick Oakeley, a younger Tractarian who, before his conversion to Rome, was rector of London's Margaret Street Chapel (the Tractarian's primary place of worship in the city), also authored an account of the Oxford Movement which exhibits a chronological structure similar to that of the *Apologia*.³⁴

Newman's Conversion Revisited

Much can be drawn from what we have noted already. Here I focus on the aftermath of the publication of *Tract Ninety* which "broke" Newman. He lists three particularly significant events: (1) the editing of his *Arians of the Fourth Century* which, by way of Newman's interest in historical analogy, revealed his stance among the Arians, not Rome; (2)

³³ Mieke Bal begins with the premise that a narrative relates a story made of a certain fabula, or a "series of logically and chronologically ordered events." The narrator of this is not the same as the writer, and is, to some extent, a "fictitious spokesman." This allows Bal to claim not only that the text differs from the story (the content that is related) but that the fabula's dependence on the narrating agent also produces difference (*Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, transl. Christine van Boheemen [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985] 5, 8).

³⁴ Frederick Oakeley, *Historical Notes on the Tractarian Movement (A.D. 1833-1845)* (London, 1865) 4-6. Oakeley was also a friend of Hurrell Froude, and thus offers invaluable information apart from Newman's well-known characterization.

the increasing attacks and denunciations of *Tract Ninety* by the Anglican bishops; and (3) the Jerusalem bishopric. All these events took place in 1841; after that year Newman comments that he was on his "death-bed, as regards [his] membership with the Anglican Church," and remarks further that "[a] death-bed has scarcely a history; it is a tedious decline, with seasons of rallying and seasons of falling back."³⁵

Yet these last four years with "scarcely a history" occupy the largest segment of the Anglican *Apologia*. During these years Newman's retirement to Littlemore was the much-publicized subject of debate as to whether or not he would "go over to Rome." Chapter 4 argues that, in fact, Newman was Anglican until the day of his conversion, 8 October 1845, and that he spent those four years trying to prevent others from converting. In addition, Newman in the preceding chapters reiterates that his "via media" rested on the Anglican bases of the early Church Fathers and the Anglican divines of the 17th century. In Chapter 4 he is still grappling with these sources but the via media of Anglicanism mutates into the Roman development of doctrine.³⁶ Newman's underlying point seems to be that the very sources with which he attacked Rome in turn led him there. Thus he is not dishonest, but rather honest for following a particular strand of Anglicanism to its conclusion.

Three accounts of Newman's conversion, therefore, may reach three different conclusions: Newman depicts himself as thoroughly Anglican until his conversion (albeit with difficulties after 1841), Ker sees him as Catholic even in his most antipapist years, and Gilley views Newman's conversion as partially a result of the latent Evangelicalism which Newman had already rejected. The method proposed here suggests a fourth conclusion, using Gilley's insights to determine the similarities and differences of Newman's conversion in his historical "hermeneutical circle" besides its personal meaning to him.

Morrison suggests that each conversion narrative consists of three tiers: "the phenomenon, the name by which it is called, and the process of naming it."³⁷ Newman's *Apologia* was concerned with the latter two tiers. Kingsley's attacks labeled Newman as representative of the presumably dishonest Roman clergy. The *Apologia* was Newman's attempt to rename his conversion and subsequent Roman Catholic life.

It is not pleasant to reveal to high and low, young and old, what has gone on within me from my early years. It is not pleasant to be giving to every shallow

³⁵ Newman, *Apologia* 247. For an excellent study of how these and other events figured in Newman's estrangement from the Church of England, see Kenneth Parker, "The Role of Estrangement in Conversion: The Case of John Henry Newman," in *Christianity and the Stranger: Historical Essays*, ed. Francis W. Nichols (Atlanta: Scholars, 1995) 169–201.

³⁶ Newman, *Apologia* 238–39, 241–42, 295. Oakeley recalls that Newman's Oxford detractors referred to his retreat as the "Littlemore monastery"; after Newman's conversion, those at Littlemore who had not already gone over to Rome did so (*Historical Notes on the Tractarian Movement* 93–94).

³⁷ Morrison, *Understanding Conversion* 26.

or flippant disputant the advantage over me of knowing my most private thoughts, I might even say the intercourse between myself and my Maker. But I do not like to be called to my face a liar and a knave: nor should I be doing my duty to my faith or to my name, if I were to suffer it.³⁸

The actual conversion phenomenon remains on a tier different from such rhetorical concerns. Barbour suggests that the rhetoric in Newman's case is deconversionist. Its motivation—Newman's defending himself from libel—exemplifies that moral criticism of one's previous worldview that Barbour finds characteristic of deconversions. While thoroughly Christian, the *Apologia's* rhetoric emphasizes his desire to preserve the abiding faith that led to his conversion. "[The *Apologia*] documents primarily the author's conscious adherence to particular Christian doctrines . . . Newman never loses his faith in God and remains fully committed to the Christian Church; his rejection of the Anglican tradition occurs as soon as he becomes convinced that its beliefs make him a heretic."³⁹

The rhetoric of deconversion, however, also pertains to Newman's persistent English sensibilities. His account of his deconversion from Anglicanism is couched precisely in culturally recognizable structures. The best example is the *Apologia's* account of Newman's rational search for theological truth. Linda Peterson traces this pattern to the spiritual autobiographies of English Puritanism, especially Thomas Scott's *The Force of Truth*. "Like other evangelicals, Scott believed that anyone who disinterestedly studied the Scriptures and Anglican theology would adopt, sooner or later, the evangelical position. Newman uses the same sort of argument implicitly throughout the *Apologia* to counter the prejudices of his anti-Catholic readers, on whom the allusions to Scott's autobiography and its principle of truth would not be lost."⁴⁰ In the late 18th century Scott had written of his search for truth from Unitarian Calvinism to Trinitarian Evangelicalism, although his "natural spirit and temper were very unfavourable to such a change."⁴¹ In the *Apologia* Newman described how at age 15 he "received into [his] intellect impressions of dogma, which, through God's mercy, have never been effaced or obscured." By age 21, though, he realized that his expressed Calvinism was "simply denied and abjured . . . by the writer who made a deeper impression on [his] mind than any other, and to whom (humanly speaking) [he] almost [owes his] soul—Thomas Scott of Aston Sandford."⁴² By recalling Scott's influence, Newman was also taking steps to defend himself against Kingsley's anti-Catholic attacks.

³⁸ Newman, *Apologia* 124.

³⁹ Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion* 25.

⁴⁰ Linda Peterson, *Victorian Autobiography: The Tradition of Self-Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1986) 100–1.

⁴¹ Thomas Scott, *The Force of Truth*, 8th ed. (London, 1808) 72.

⁴² Newman, *Apologia* 127–28.

Yet Newman avoided many standard Puritan and evangelical images, particularly biblical ones, in order to introduce Augustinian imagery, such as the deathbed.⁴³ In so doing, he could speak genuinely at some length of his equivocation during the 1841–1845 period. “By adopting the Augustinian figures, Newman passes judgment on his defense of the “via media” and on many of the doctrines he held previously, recognizing them in retrospect as heresy, as a source of spiritual death.”⁴⁴ The deconversion, then, was not so much from English culture and literary sensibilities, as it was from the predominant form of Christianity among the English people. Barbour writes:

[Newman] tries to show that his conversion to Roman Catholicism is not inconsistent with his deepest and original religious convictions but a better expression of them than the Anglican church could provide. There is thus an interesting tension within the *Apologia* between Newman’s suggestion that he does not really undergo a radical transformation but remains true to his original beliefs and his need to show that he *has* changed and was not secretly a Catholic during the Tractarian controversy.⁴⁵

Newman once wrote that “the religion of the multitude is ever vulgar and abnormal; it ever will be tinctured with fanaticism and superstition . . . A people’s religion is ever a corrupt religion, in spite of the provisions of Holy Church.”⁴⁶ Always concerned with the contagion of heresy and the purity of doctrine, these words parallel the *Apologia*’s attempt to maintain a similar sense of separation. Thus Barbour writes that “Newman makes not conversion but deconversion the dramatic climax of the book . . . Newman passes over in silence the moment of his entrance into the Roman Catholic Church. It is his loss of faith in the Anglican tradition, rather than his secure grasping of true belief, that is the turning point.” The *Apologia* recognizes, however, that as a convert its author remains one of the people “tinctured with superstition.”⁴⁷ Because of this, the “tinctured” language helped Newman rename his conversion and reaffirm his English heritage in the face of Kingsley’s challenge.

By following Gilley’s approach to “Newman and his age,” one may gain a fuller understanding of Newman’s conversion. The persistence of religious faith and its transformations inform us about the theological worldview that Newman shared with his former and new coreligionists. This recreates a meaning of religious conversion that in different intensities pervaded the general culture and the individual convert. By defending himself with the literary structures of English

⁴³ Peterson notes that Newman was responsible for the 1838 public “reintroduction” of Augustine’s *Confessions* to the English spiritual autobiographical traditions (*Victorian Autobiography* 111).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 113.

⁴⁶ Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion* 31.

⁴⁷ Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion* 183.

⁴⁷ Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion* 31–32.

Evangelicalism, to which he himself had once adhered, Newman rooted his conversion to Roman Catholicism in Anglican traditions. In writing his account of the matter, Newman offered one answer to the question facing Anglicans in the 19th century: "How did the Church of England stand in relation to 'popular Protestantism' on the one hand and the Church of Rome on the other?"⁴⁸

CONCLUSION

Sheridan Gilley has drawn attention to Newman's early and persistent love of poetry. Another convert, Allen Tate, is known for his poetic writings. His poem "The Maimed Man," published in 1952, evokes some of the imagery I have been discussing in theoretical terms.

What a question! Whence the question came
I am still questing in the poor boy's curse,
Witching for water in a waste of shame.

Thence, flow! conceit and motion to rehearse
Pastoral terrors of youth still in the man,
Torsions of sleep, in emblematic verse

Rattling like dice unless the verse shall scan
All chance away; and let me touch the hem
Of him who spread his triptych like a fan.⁴⁹

Tate wrote these words two years after his own conversion to Roman Catholicism.⁵⁰ Much of "The Maimed Man" may be seen in religious conversion in general and John Henry Newman's conversion in particular. Barbour's discussion of "the versions of deconversion" alerts our attention to concomitant loss of faith involved in changing religious forms, leading the convert to feel as one "witching for water in a waste of shame." Yet the notion of persistent belief that Slater described rises from the convert's "torsions of sleep," "still questing in the poor boy's curse." The "pastoral terrors of youth still in the man" persist in the new faith. As Karl Morrison noted, how these "terrors" helped create meaning depended on this historical circles in which the conversion

⁴⁸ Geoffrey Rowell, *The Vision Glorious: Themes and Personalities of the Catholic Revival in Anglicanism* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1983) 3. See Placid Murray's introduction to *Newman the Oratorian: His Unpublished Oratory Papers* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1969) 3-129.

⁴⁹ Allen Tate, "The Maimed Man," in *Collected Poems 1919-1976* (N.Y.: Giroux, Farrar Strauss, 1978) 129-30.

⁵⁰ For an extensive study of Tate's religiosity, which included more than a few "de-conversions," and an account of his literary career, see Peter A. Huff, *Allen Tate and the Catholic Literary Revival: Trace of the Fugitive Gods* (New York: Paulist, 1996).

took place. A universal model of conversion such as Fowler's model might blunt the pain of deconversion and the joy of new faith experienced by the convert.

A study of Newman's conversion to Roman Catholicism makes a strong case for him to be seen as emblematic of Tate's "Maimed Man." As Newman left Oxford in 1846, he wrote wistfully:

Trinity had never been unkind to me. There used to be much snapdragon growing on the walls opposite my freshman's room there, and I had for years taken it as the emblem of my own perpetual residence even unto death in my University. . . . On the morning of the 23rd (February) I left the Observatory. I have never seen Oxford since, excepting its spires, as they are seen from the railway.⁵¹

Tate's torsions of sleep and Newman's snapdragon represent what continues to hold and provoke meaning for the individual convert. At the same time, Newman's words of loss upon his departure from Oxford embody the loss of faith described by Barbour. After all, Slater suggested that conversion is a "small shift in a focal and persistent conflict," and it was only after a long series of conflicts that Newman became a Roman Catholic. By examining what persists, as well as what changes, in a historical instance of religious conversion, one can gain a much better understanding of that phenomena, as well as of the historical period in which it occurred. The primary goal of such a study is historical and theological, not ministerial or psychological. For Newman, conversion left him estranged from the sources in English culture that continued to support his newfound faith in Roman Catholicism. Charles Kingsley's belligerence offered Newman an opportunity to defend this religious change which that culture could not comprehend. In the *Apologia* Newman expressed his conviction that his conversion was rooted in the English traditions that had ostracized him.

⁵¹ Newman, *Apologia* 315.