

RELIGIOUS CHOICE AND RELIGIOUS CHANGE IN CLASSICAL
AND LATE ANTIQUITY: MODELS AND QUESTIONS

OPCIÓN RELIGIOSA Y CAMBIO RELIGIOSO EN LA
ANTIGÜEDAD CLÁSICA Y TARDÍA: MODELOS E INTERROGANTES

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RESUMEN

Este artículo intenta reflexionar en profundidad sobre las transformaciones de la identidad religiosa desde la Antigüedad Clásica hasta la Antigüedad Tardía, y sobre el papel jugado por la conversión en esa transformación. A partir de un modelo simple de tres puntos de cambio religioso, reconsidero la distinción clásica de A. D. Nock entre conversión y adhesión. Sostengo que lo que en realidad distingue la Antigüedad Clásica de la Antigüedad Tardía no era la apariencia de opciones religiosas que ofrecían la posibilidad de una reorientación radical en la comprensión del cosmos de una persona, como implica Nock, sino más bien el desarrollo de estructuras sociales que transformaron esa posibilidad en una necesidad, que efectivamente no permitieron la adhesión e hicieron de la conversión el único tipo de opción religiosa posible.

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to think broadly about the transformation of religious identity from classical to late antiquity, and the part played in that transformation by conversion. Beginning with a simple three-point model of religious change, I reconsider A. D. Nock's classic distinction between conversion and adhesion. I argue that what really distinguishes classical from late antiquity was not the appearance of religious choices that offered the possibility of a radical reorientation in a person's understanding of the cosmos, as Nock implies, but rather the development of social structures that transformed that possibility into a necessity, that effectively disallowed adhesion and made conversion the only possible type of religious choice.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Cambio religioso; identidad religiosa; conversión; cultos de misterios; Cristianismo

KEYWORDS

Religious change; religious identity; conversion; mystery cults; Christianity

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This paper is an attempt to think on a large scale about two issues, one very broad and the other somewhat more specific, in the religious history of the ancient Mediterranean world: the transformation of religious identity from classical to late antiquity, and the part played in that transformation by conversion.¹ Because the transformation of ‘religious identity’ depends on the transformation of ‘religion’, I want to begin with a brief discussion of the latter. Some people, and I am among them, would argue that the key development in the period under consideration, although one that begins earlier, is the development of ‘religion’ as a discrete part of the larger cultural system. In classical antiquity, we would say that ‘religion’ was ‘embedded’ within other aspects of the culture or perhaps, given recent criticisms of the term ‘embedded’, that ‘religion’ had no discrete existence at all.² In late antiquity, by contrast, certainly by the year 600 CE, religion had come to exist as a separate and distinct part of the larger cultural system.

The development of religion as a discrete part of culture was of course a very complex process that resists summary description. For heuristic purposes, however, I will make an attempt to do just that, and offer a three-point summary of what changed, or rather of what exactly I mean when I say that religion emerged as a discrete part of the larger cultural system. First, local and ethnic traditions about the nature of the divine and effective means of interacting with the divine gradually gave way to discursively elaborated systems that were based not simply or even primarily on ancestral tradition but rather on exclusive claims to truth. A particular corollary of this general shift is that an emphasis on the correct performance of ritual gave way

1 I wrote this as the opening lecture for a workshop organized in October 2010 by the Velux group at Aarhus University as part of their ongoing research project on “The transformation of religious identity in the Hellenistic-Roman world from AD 100-600: The significance of conversion and initiation to the formation of religious identity”; I owe thanks to the group (Anders-Christian Jakobsen, Rubina Raja, Birgitte Bøgh, Carmen Cvetkovic, and Jakob Engberg) for their invitation, and to all the participants for their contributions and discussions. It was also the subject of a work-in-progress workshop at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, and I likewise owe thanks to Tina Shepardson for her invitation and to all who took part for their very helpful feedback. Lastly, I must thank Jaime Alvar for his invitation to submit it to *ARYS*. In view of the paper’s broad scale, I have made no attempt to provide full references to the vast secondary literature; I have included a few references, chosen more or less at random, simply for the sake of illustration.

2 For criticisms of the term ‘embedded’, see NONGBRI, Brent: ‘Dislodging “Embedded” Religion: A Brief Note on a Scholarly Trope’, *Numen* 55, 2008, 440-60.

to an emphasis on the articulation of correct belief.³ Second, a multiplicity of overlapping but largely incommensurate discourses about the divine, a situation that some ancient thinkers analyzed in terms of the so-called ‘three theologies’, were gradually replaced by exclusive and ideally coherent systems that aimed at subordinating all these previously separate discourses within a single totalizing discourse; an important corollary here is the emergence of a comprehensive form of religious authority.⁴ Lastly, individual choice came to play a much greater role; that is, a more-or-less automatic adherence to the ethnic and cultural traditions of one’s people gradually gave way to a deliberate choice to adhere to a particular system or group.⁵ As a comprehensive model of religious change from classical to late antiquity, this three-point summary is undoubtedly insufficient; I offer it here merely as a heuristic device to help bring out some particular aspects of the issues under consideration.

What are the implications of this model for the transformation of religious identity? In classical antiquity, just as it is difficult to identify any discrete segment of culture that we can label ‘religion’, so too it is difficult to identify any ‘religious’ identity that is clearly distinct from other forms of identity, whether civic, cultural, ethnic, or political. Obviously, if those cultural elements that we would distinguish as ‘religion’ remain dissolved within a largely undifferentiated matrix, then there can be no separate ‘religious identity’. Perhaps slightly less obviously, in the absence of any totalizing discourse there can be no obvious criterion for determining which aspects of a person’s ideas about and interactions with the divine are the

3 Compare STROUMSA, Guy: *La fin du sacrifice: Les mutations religieuses de l’Antiquité tardive*, Paris, 2005, 179, on ‘la nouvelle définition de la religion promue par les chrétiens: la religion était maintenant identique à la vérité, en opposition avec toute la tradition, depuis au moins Varron, qui distinguait clairement entre religion et vérité’. Contrast ANDO, Clifford: *The Matter of the Gods: Religion and the Roman Empire*, Berkeley, 2008, 13, on the earlier situation: ‘Roman religion was thus founded upon an empiricist epistemology: cult addressed problems in the real world, and the effectiveness of rituals—their tangible results—determined whether they were repeated, modified or abandoned’.

4 On this development see my more detailed discussion in RIVES, J. B.: ‘Christian Expansion and Christian Ideology’, in HARRIS, William V. (ed.), *The Spread of Christianity in the First Four Centuries: Essays in Explanation*, Leiden, 2005, 15–41, at 32–8. On the ‘three theologies’, see, e.g., LIEBERG, Godo: ‘Die *theologia tripertita* als Formprinzip antiken Denkens’, *RhM* 125 1982, 25–53, and RÜPKE, Jörg: ‘Varro’s *tria genera theologiae*’, *Ordia Prima* 4, 2005, 107–29.

5 See NORTH, John: ‘The Development of Religious Pluralism’, in LIEU, Judith, NORTH, John, and RAJAK, Tessa (eds.), *The Jews among Pagans and Christians*, London, 1992, 174–93, especially 178: ‘the basic story proposed by this chapter is one of development from religion as embedded in the city-state to religion as choice of differentiated groups’. Cf. NORTH, John: ‘Réflexions autour des communautés religieuses du monde gréco-romain’, in BELAYCHE, Nicole, and MIMOUNI, Simon Claude (eds.), *Les communautés religieuses dans le monde gréco-romain*, Turnhout, 2003, 337–47, and STROUMSA, *La fin du sacrifice*, ch. IV: ‘De la religion civique à la religion communautaire’.

ones that actually define his or her 'religious identity'. As an illustration, we may consider an emblematic figure from the beginning of the period under discussion. Plutarch was a follower of Plato, a lover of Homer, a priest of Apollo at Delphi, possibly an initiate in the mysteries of Isis, undoubtedly a participant in imperial cult, and much more. Which of these determined his 'religious identity'? Plutarch himself, if we could have asked him about his religious identity in such a way that he would have been able to understand the question, might well have responded by saying that he demonstrated his love and respect for the gods in the proper way, primarily through a correct understanding of their nature but also by maintaining the traditions of his ancestors.⁶ That is, I suspect that he would not have been able to answer our question in the terms that we would want to pose it, by pointing to a discrete part in his larger cultural identity to which a distinctive label could be attached.

If we consider an emblematic figure from a later period, we find something very different. The emperor Julian would probably have understood himself to be doing much the same thing as Plutarch: maintaining, with a correct understanding, the traditions of his ancestors with respect to the gods. But he, I think, would have had much less difficulty than Plutarch in answering our question in the terms in which we posed it: he would simply have responded that he was a Hellenist. The very fact that he could have provided a succinct label for the beliefs and practices that he upheld would mean that he viewed them in very different terms: as something that cohered as a system, and a system separable in analysis, if not necessarily in practice, from his broader cultural or ethnic or political identity: to be a Hellenist was not necessarily the same thing as being a Hellene.⁷ The availability of a separate label for one's religious identity has further implications as well. Julian's self-identification as a Hellenist would have as its necessary correlative the implication that he was not a Christian (or a Galilean, to use Julian's own preferred term), which, of course, is what he originally identified himself as. Indeed, by Julian's time there was a rich set of mutually exclusive labels for religious identity that derived much of their meaning through their opposition to one another: Hellenist, Christian, and Jew, and beyond that, the intricate and ever-changing battery of names that Christians used to brand each other as heretics and schismatics. The existence of this set of labels, and the set of discrete religious identities to which they were attached, is what

6 On Plutarch and religion, see, e.g., BRENK, Frederick E.: 'An Imperial Heritage: The Religious Spirit of Plutarch of Chaironeia', *ANRW* II.36.1, 1987, 248-349, and GALLO, Italo (ed.): *Plutarco e la religione*, Naples, 1996.

7 On Julian and religion, see, e.g., SMITH, Rowland: *Julian's Gods: Religion and Philosophy in the Thought and Action of Julian the Apostate*, London, 1995; on this use of 'Hellenist' and related terms, see BOWERSOCK, Glen W.: *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, Ann Arbor, 1990, 10-11.

made it possible for Julian to convert, that is, to change from being a 'Christian' to a 'Hellenist'.

It is the development of religion as a discrete element of culture to which a distinctive label could be attached, and as a totalizing system that required the rejection of any beliefs and practices that it had not incorporated, that separates the experience of Plutarch from that of Julian, and it is that development that I have, for heuristic purposes, tried to summarize in my three-point model. The specific issue with which this paper is concerned falls under the third of my three points. That is to say, conversion and initiation result primarily from personal choice. In saying this I do not mean that larger social and cultural factors play no part in the process and that the autonomous will of the individual is the only thing that matters; I simply mean that conversion necessarily involves some degree of active assent on the part of the person involved. It is accordingly important that I be very clear about the precise role of religious choice in my model of religious change. It is not that the possibility of religious choice came to exist where it had not existed before; on the contrary, religious choice of a certain sort is an inherent feature of Graeco-Roman culture more or less as far back as our evidence goes. Rather, what changed was the kinds of religious choices that could be made. It is in this regard that I think Nock's classic distinction between conversion and adhesion can fruitfully be reexamined.

Nock defines conversion as 'the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new was right'. Adhesion, in contrast, is merely 'an acceptance of new worships as useful supplements and not as substitutes', and thus a choice that 'did not involve the taking of a new way of life in place of the old'.⁸ It is clear even from these brief quotations that Nock takes the inner experience of the individual as the measure for distinguishing conversion from adhesion: conversion is a religious choice that results in profound implications for a person's understanding of the cosmos and his/her role within it; adhesion is a religious choice that does not result in profound implications. Yet Nock was also aware of the importance of the larger external structures that shape individual experience, and in fact developed his distinction between conversion and adhesion within the framework of a more general dichotomy between two ideal types of religion, which he labels 'religions of tradition' and 'prophetic religions'. 'Exclusiveness of religion', he observes, 'is confined to the prophetic type, and it is natural that there should be give and take outside it';⁹ that is, when people in one cultural

8 NOCK, A. D.: *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*, Oxford, 1933, 7.

9 NOCK, *Conversion*, 3 and 6.

tradition encounter the religious practices and beliefs of another tradition as the result of political or economic developments, they are free to adopt whatever seems useful or appealing without that choice entailing further consequences for their world-view or way of life.

I would like to develop this structural aspect of Nock's conversion/adhesion model further by reconsidering it within the framework of my own three-point model of religious change. In terms of my model, the kind of religious choice that Nock labels 'conversion' requires the existence of systems that make exclusive claims to truth and at least aim at functioning as totalizing discourses; in such a context, any choice requires both the acceptance of an entire set of beliefs and practices and simultaneously the rejection of all other options not included therein. On the other hand, in the absence of totalizing systems with exclusive truth-claims, people can much more easily adopt any particular practice or belief that seems useful or attractive in a sort of mix-and-match process, and they can do so because virtually nothing that they adopt requires as a necessary corollary that they adopt or abandon any other particular practice or belief; this is Nock's 'adhesion'. In terms of the model that I've sketched, then, conversion and adhesion represent the types of religious choices that are possible within two very different contexts: one characterized by a variety of ethnic and cultural traditions and a multiplicity of overlapping discourses with limited truth claims, and one characterized by mutually exclusive totalizing systems with absolute claims to the truth. The former, as I have already suggested, is by and large the type of religious choice that existed in classical antiquity, and the latter that which existed in late antiquity.

With this analysis in mind, I want now to consider adhesion in more detail, and to evaluate the implications that religious choice might have had for religious identity in classical antiquity. As I have already observed, religious choice of a certain sort is an inherent feature of Graeco-Roman culture pretty much from its beginnings. That is, people were generally free to choose which deity to worship in which context and by which means, and free likewise to consult and adopt the recommendations of various figures who claimed expertise in some aspect of religious lore. There were of course certain constraints on this freedom of choice, both formal and informal. Informally, there was the weight of tradition: certain practices had become customary in certain circumstances, and most people in most contexts would not lightly abandon them in favor of something new and untried. Formally, there were the constraints of social and economic power: people were not simply individuals, but were also members of one or more hierarchically structured communities, above all the family and the political community. The latter was of particular importance.

Some scholars have suggested that the religious institutions of the political community themselves functioned almost as a totalizing system, which

marginalized or subordinated all other elements of religious life; this is often described as the ‘polis religion’ or ‘civic religion’ model of classical Greek and Roman religion.¹⁰ In the past fifteen years this model, sometimes labeled the ‘new orthodoxy’, has been subject to substantial criticism, with some scholars rejecting its validity altogether.¹¹ I am myself not convinced that the model of ‘polis religion’ has ever constituted an orthodoxy, and I continue to regard it as a highly useful tool for bringing out some of the key differences between the place of religion in the ancient Mediterranean and in modern western culture. At the same time, the critiques have rightly emphasized that, like all models, it tends to reduce complex realities to simplified ideal forms which, unless due caution is exercised, run the risk of becoming simplistic. In the present case, it is important to remember that although the religious structures of political communities constituted an important and even predominant element in people’s religious lives, they nevertheless left plenty of room for personal choice. Two interrelated points are worth emphasizing. One, often noted, is that there was no structure of authority that had a monopoly on interactions with and conceptions of the divine; the other, less often noted but no less important, is that the multiplicity of different discursive systems meant that there simply could not be a comprehensive form of religious authority. The only authority in religious matters backed by something other than its own claims to expertise was in fact precisely that of the political community, and it tended to be strictly limited: as long as public rites were maintained and respected, people were free to avail themselves of other resources as they saw fit, and to think as they pleased about the nature of the divine and the meaning of religious rituals, including even that of the public rites themselves.

10 See especially on the Greek side SOURVINOU-INWOOD, Christiane: ‘What is *Polis* Religion?’ and ‘Further Aspects of *Polis* Religion’, in BUXTON, Richard (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion*, Oxford, 2000, 13–37 and 38–55, first published in 1990 and 1988 respectively. On the Roman side, see the concise statements in BEARD, Mary, and CRAWFORD, Michael: *Rome in the Late Republic*, Ithaca, NY, 1985, 25–39 and SCHEID, John: *Religion et piété à Rome*², Paris, 2001, 29–34, first published in 1985; for more detailed studies, see BEARD, Mary, NORTH, John, and PRICE, Simon: *Religions of Rome, Vol. 1: A History*, Cambridge, 1998, and RIVES, J. B.: *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage from Augustus to Constantine*, Oxford, 1995.

11 See, e.g., BENDLIN, Andreas: ‘Peripheral Centres—Central Peripheries: Religious Communication in the Roman Empire’ and WOOLF, Greg: ‘*Polis*-Religion and its Alternatives in the Roman Provinces’, both in CANCIK, Hubert, and RÜPKE, Jörg (eds.), *Römische Reichsreligion und Provinzialreligion*, Tübingen, 1997, 35–68 and 71–84, and BENDLIN, Andreas: ‘Looking Beyond the Civic Compromise: Religious Pluralism in Late Republican Rome’, in BISPHAM, Edward, and SMITH, Christopher (eds.), *Religion in Archaic and Republican Rome and Italy*, Edinburgh, 2000, 115–35; note also the response of SCHEID, John: *Quand faire, c’est croire: Les rites sacrificiels des Romains*, Paris, 2005, 125–9. On the Greek side, see the balanced assessment of KINDT, Julia: ‘Polis Religion: A Critical Appreciation’, *Kernos* 22, 2009, 9–34.

The absence of any monopoly on religious authority, and even of any framework that would allow for a single comprehensive form of religious authority, meant that there was ample room for competition among the various individuals and groups that claimed some privileged knowledge about or access to the world of superhuman powers. It is in order to highlight this aspect of religion in classical antiquity that some people employ the metaphor of the 'religious market-place', a metaphor that to me seems very useful.¹² Whether the choices that people made in this 'religious market-place' could fairly be described even in terms of Nock's 'adhesion', however, is a real question. Consistent and marked devotion to a particular deity or to a particular technique of accessing divine power would no doubt have had implications for a person's self-conception. But if we want to take seriously the implications of the 'religious market-place' metaphor, we ought to conclude, I think, that most of these choices would have contributed no more to a person's identity in antiquity than preferences for certain brands of consumer goods do today: that is, a little bit, but not a lot. My father, for example, had a preference for Chrysler automobiles, but if asked to identify himself I very much doubt that 'Chryslerian' would have been the first thing to occur to him. This may seem like a *reductio ad absurdum*, and of course in some ways it is, but it is not in fact meant as a criticism of the 'religious market-place' metaphor. On the contrary, I think that one of the valuable things about that metaphor is that it reminds us that not all religious choices need have any significant impact on a person's identity.

Were there any religious choices in classical antiquity that had a potentially greater impact on religious identity? Turning again to Nock, we may consider the three sorts of choices that he singled out as significant in this respect. The first of these was the choice to become initiated into one of the so-called 'mystery religions' that developed out of the fusion of Greek and Near Eastern traditions. Nock in fact devoted about half his book to these cults, tracing their development and analyzing their success in the Graeco-Roman world; he nevertheless concluded that, at least in the vast majority of cases, participation in these cults was simply another form of adhesion, without 'any marked spiritual reorientation, any recoil from [one's] moral and religious past, any idea of starting a new life'. At the same time, he allowed that under 'special personal circumstances' such adhesion could 'acquire the emotional values of conversion', and cited as the prime example

¹² See for example BENDLIN, 'Beyond the Civic Compromise', 134-5 and BECK, Roger: 'The Religious Market of the Roman Empire: Rodney Stark and Christianity's Pagan Competition', in VAAGE, Leif E. (ed.), *Religious Rivalries in the Early Roman Empire*, Waterloo, ON, 2006, 233-52. Note that NORTH, 'Religious Pluralism', 178-9, uses the metaphor in a very different sense, to describe the competition between discrete and mutually exclusive systems that characterized the religious landscape of late antiquity.

Apuleius' account of Lucius' turn to Isis in his *Metamorphoses*.¹³ Although Nock notes that Lucius' newfound devotion does not preclude his participation in other cults, he affirms that it must make any other worship seem 'tame and inferior', and compares Lucius' story to that of 'a man received into the Catholic Church' who ends by 'becoming a member of the Third Order of St. Francis'.¹⁴ Nock, as always, focuses here on intensity of emotional experience and personal commitment, but I would like to direct our attention instead to the conceptual organization of these cults.

The extent to which the mystery cults of the Hellenistic and imperial periods constituted a fundamental departure from Graeco-Roman tradition remains a subject of much debate. Although Nock was writing at a time when the study of ancient mysteries was dominated by Cumont and Reitzenstein, both of whom in their different ways believed that 'oriental mystery religions' constituted a radical innovation in ancient religion, he seems largely to have rejected their views, as suggested by his reluctance to regard participation in these cults as anything more than a form of adhesion.¹⁵ In this respect he anticipated what in recent decades has become the *communis opinio*, namely, that, as Jan Bremmer recently put it, 'these so-called religions were just cults with a little exotic tinge'.¹⁶ The whole practice of mystery initiations has long been known to have been Greek in origin, and not 'oriental', and there is very little evidence that initiation into the major Greek mysteries, for example that of Demeter and Kore at Eleusis, had much more impact on a person's identity than any other choice made in the 'religious market-place'.

At the same time, it is probably a mistake to regard the orientaling mystery cults of Hellenistic and imperial times as no different from the old mysteries of Demeter and Kore. Jaime Alvar has recently made a vigorous case, against the *communis opinio*, that the cults of Cybele, Isis, and Mithras do deserve to be called 'religions'; in his view, they all supplied full versions of the essential sub-systems that comprise a religion: a system of beliefs about the cosmic, human, and eschatological orders; a system of values and eth-

13 NOCK, *Conversion*, 138.

14 NOCK, *Conversion*, 155.

15 For Cumont, see especially CUMONT, Franz: *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*⁴, Paris, 1929, first published in 1906; for assessments of Cumont's intellectual context and influence, see the introduction by Corinne BONNET and Françoise VAN HAEPERIN to the recent reissue of *Les religions orientales* (Turin, 2006) and the papers in BONNET, Corinne, PIRENNE-DELFORGE, Vinciane, and PRAET, Danny (eds.): *Les religions orientales dans le monde grec et romain: Cent ans après Cumont (1906-2006). Bilan historique et historiographique*, Brussels, 2009. For Reitzenstein, see REITZENSTEIN, Richard: *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen nach ihren Grundgedanken und Wirkungen*³, Leipzig, 1927, first published in 1910.

16 BREMMER, Jan: *The Rise of Christianity through the Eyes of Gibbon, Harnack, and Rodney Stark*, Groningen, 2010, 56.

ics; and a system of ritual practice.¹⁷ If Alvar's analysis is correct, then the choice to participate fully in these cults would have had significantly more implications for the way that a person viewed the cosmos and conducted his or her life than the choice to make a vow to Minerva Medica or seek the aid of a particular ritual specialist. Note that I specify the choice to participate *fully*; people could of course invoke the power of these deities for particular purposes just as they could exploit any of the other options available within the religious market-place. But for those who wished, these cults apparently offered an entire way of life. In that respect, they approached the sort of totalizing discursive system that I sketched at the start of my talk, and made strong if not strictly exclusive claims to truth; the choice to adhere to them would thus at least have approximated conversion, in the terms that I outlined above.

The second kind of religious choice that Nock singles out was the choice to devote oneself to philosophy. Nock puts great stress on the fact that the philosophical schools of classical antiquity were not merely intellectual systems but more importantly 'offered a life with a scheme'; whereas the mystery cults merely 'evoked a strong emotional response and touched the soul deeply for a time', 'philosophy was able both to turn men from evil and to hold before them a good, perhaps never to be attained, but presenting a permanent object of desire to which one seemed to draw gradually nearer'.¹⁸ Here again, more clearly and less controversially, we can observe a choice that at least potentially had much greater implications for a person's understanding of the cosmos and way of life. The idea that ancient philosophy was above all a way of life is I think widely accepted, and has in recent decades been developed most systematically by Pierre Hadot, who locates what he describes as 'spiritual exercises' at the heart of ancient philosophy.¹⁹ Applying my model, we might observe that philosophers also made exclusive truth-claims and treated philosophy as a totalizing discourse. That is, they claimed to hold the key to a correct understanding of other types of religious discourse such as myth and ritual, and thus to be the only ones able to unlock their true value; they likewise claimed to rise above particular ethnic and cultural traditions and provide access to universal truth, even if from our vantage point these claims seem instead a form of cultural hegemony.²⁰ We

17 ALVAR, Jaime: *Romanising Oriental Gods: Myth, Salvation and Ethics in the Cults of Cybele, Isis and Mithras*, trans. and ed. Richard GORDON, Leiden, 2008; first published as *Los misterios: Religiones "orientales" en el Imperio Romano*, Barcelona, 2001.

18 NOCK, *Conversion*, 167 and 185.

19 See especially HADOT, Pierre: *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, Paris, 1995, and *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*², Paris, 2002, first published 1981.

20 See, e.g., RICHTER, Daniel S.: 'Plutarch on Isis and Osiris: Text, Cult, and Cultural Appreciation', *TAPhA* 131, 2001, 191-216, on Plutarch, and SCHOTT, Jeremy M.: *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, Philadelphia, 2008, 52-78, on Porphyry.

may add that a succinct label was available for this identity, one used both by philosophers themselves and by non-philosophers, and that a typical look or style was associated with it. In all these respects, philosophy provided the closest approximation in classical antiquity to the idea of religion as a discrete element within a culture. Yet as with mystery cults, people were free to use philosophy for particular purposes without necessarily accepting all its implications; that is, they could treat it as simply another of the goods on offer in the religious market-place rather than exploiting its potential for the reorientation of their souls.

The third kind of religious choice on which Nock focused was conversion to Christianity, which to some extent was the implicit paradigm for the model of conversion with which he was working. For Nock, Christianity, along with Judaism, really did provide something fundamentally different from the other religious options available in classical antiquity.²¹ His focus on conversion to Christianity as a 'reorientation of the soul' is of course justifiable on many grounds, not least the fact that this is how most early Christian sources present it. Yet as a range of scholars have argued more recently, that is only part of the story; in many cases an individual's choice to worship the Christian god could well have been, or at least started as, something much more like Nock's adhesion. On the one hand, in some cases it might simply have been a decision to worship a god who seemed to deliver more than his competitors; on the other, factors such as participation in a pre-existing social network may have been more important than individual commitment to a set of beliefs.²² In some cases, apparent 'converts' to Christianity may have gradually come to realize that their choice involved implications that they did not in fact want to accept; this may be one explanation for the 'former Christians' that we start to hear about as early as the letters of Pliny (*Ep.* 10. 96.6). In other words, we may reasonably guess that some people, perhaps many, were surprised to discover that the choice to worship the god of the Christians was not the same as other choices in the religious marketplace,

21 He thus, for example, resisted the long-standing scholarly trend to interpret Christian sacraments in terms of the ritual practices of the mystery cults; see NOCK, A. D.: 'Hellenistic Mysteries and Christian Sacraments', in his *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, ed. Zeph STEWART, Oxford, 1972, 791-820, first published in 1952.

22 See, for example, MacMULLEN, Ramsay: *Christianizing the Roman Empire, A.D. 100-400*, New Haven, 1984, 25-42, who emphasizes the power of the Christian god, and STARK, Rodney: *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*, Princeton, 1996, who emphasizes a variety of social factors, particularly the importance of pre-existing social networks; for a balanced assessment of Stark's contribution, see BREMMER, *The Rise of Christianity*, 45-58, and especially 61 for the importance now widely conceded to social networks. On social networks, see also WHITE, L. Michael (ed.): *Social Networks in the Early Christian Environment: Issues and Methods for Social History (Semeia 56)*, Atlanta, GA, 1992, and the stimulating analysis of McCARTHY, J. C.: 'Modalities of Belief in Ancient Christian Debate', *J ECS* 17, 2009, 605-34.

that it required the acceptance of a comprehensive set of beliefs and practices and the rejection of all other options. As far as we can determine, most early Christians apparently insisted that a person either commit fully or not be a Christian at all; there was no middle ground. As Paul put it, 'you cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of the demons' (1 Cor. 10: 21).

This brief reconsideration of mystery cults, philosophy, and Christianity allows us to identify an important aspect of religious choice that Nock's emphasis on individual experience obscures. All three made possible the kind of religious choice that he characterizes as conversion, since all three offered totalizing systems based on exclusive truth-claims that included a distinctive world-view and way of life. But only in the case of Christianity was conversion not just a possibility but a necessity; only Christianity required all-or-nothing, not mix-and-match. What was different about Christianity? In an earlier paper I tried to answer this question by analyzing Christian ideology in terms of its unique interweaving of exclusivity, homogeneity, and totalization.²³ An ideology, however, does not exist in the abstract, but instead consists in specific social practices. In order to explore this aspect of the question, I want to return briefly to a consideration of our overall topic, the transformation of religious identity.

As attentive readers will have noticed, although I began with a model for the transformation of religion, I did not discuss what I mean by 'identity'. I have instead simply been assuming an implicit equation of identity with a person's world-view and way of life. Now embedded in the noun 'identity' is the idea of 'sameness': the quality of identity lies in being the same, *idem*, as some other thing. But what other thing? Two main possibilities seem to exist. On the one hand, a thing can be the same as itself at another time: although context and attributes may change, the thing remains fundamentally the same over time. When referring to people, we may distinguish this type of identity as personal identity. It is this meaning of identity that is implicit in Nock's characterization of conversion as 'a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved': what distinguishes conversion from adhesion is precisely the fact that the person does not remain the same over time, but changes. Nock, then, defines conversion as in essence a change in personal identity, and it is that definition that ultimately limits his analysis. The other way of understanding identity is to relate a thing to something else entirely: in this case, identity consists in one thing being the same as another. When referring to people, we may distinguish this type of identity as social or communal identity; it requires the existence of people other than oneself to be the same as (as well as people who are not the same but different). I would propose that we can answer the question of why, in the context of Christianity, conversion became the only possible type of re-

23 RIVES, 'Christian Expansion'.

religious choice only if we think about the implications of religious choice for communal identity as well as personal identity.

In order to do this, we need a way to model different types of communities. Again, merely for heuristic purposes, I will offer a very simple framework consisting of three polarities: a group can be either loosely or strictly structured; it can be seamlessly integrated into the wider society or sharply opposed to it; it can either be limited to one locality or have a wider, trans-local dimension. If we apply this framework to the three types of religious choice on which Nock focused, we can immediately identify some significant differences. In terms of their internal structure, mystery cults evidently varied; the norm in the cult of Mithras seems to have been the small, strictly regimented, and hierarchical group; the cults of Isis and Cybele, on the other hand, seem to have allowed for larger and more fluid groups of worshippers in addition to smaller and more strictly organized bodies. The relationship between mystery cults and the wider society also seems to have varied. We can easily point to various markers of difference, such as the shaved head that Lucius proudly sports at the end of the *Metamorphoses* (11.30). Yet Lucius also claims to be making a good income as an advocate in the law-courts, suggesting that his shaved head did not hinder his effective integration into wider society. As Richard Gordon argued in a classic paper, there are good reasons to think that the cult of Mithras, which might seem radically distinct from wider society, in fact reinforced rather than subverted some of its core values.²⁴ Lastly, all these cults seem to have been strictly local in organization. Although we may reasonably postulate some degree of fellow-feeling among devotees of Isis or Mithras or Cybele, there was apparently no attempt to expand on that fellow-feeling through any kind of translocal organization or communicative practices.²⁵

Turning to philosophy, we may reasonably ask whether philosophers can be said to have formed communities at all. To be sure, certain sects at certain points of their history did form closely knit communities, most notably Pythagoreans in the archaic period and Epicureans in the Hellenistic and early imperial periods; in the later imperial period we can point to such groups as the disciples of Plotinus or those of Iamblichus. But as these later examples clearly indicate, philosophical groups tended to cohere around a particular teacher and to depend upon him for their community identity; the death of the teacher usually signaled the dissolution of the community.²⁶ An identity as a philosopher seems accordingly to have been primarily a matter of self-

24 GORDON, Richard: 'Mithraism and Roman Society: Social Factors in the Explanation of Religious Change in the Roman Empire', *Religion* 2, 1972, 92-121.

25 See in general BURKERT, Walter: *Ancient Mystery Cults*, Cambridge, MA, 1987, chapter 2: 'Organizations and Identities'.

26 STROUMSA, *La fin du sacrifice*, 205-6, citing FOWDEN, Garth: 'The Platonist Philosopher and His Circle in Late Antiquity', *Philosophia* 7, 1977, 359-83.

identification, a personal devotion to an ideal, tied at most to a relationship with a teacher and fellow students.

The choice to be initiated into a mystery cult or to devote oneself to philosophy thus did not necessarily involve a person in a distinct community, and even when it did those communities were not always organized in such a way as to promote a strong sense of communal identity. Early Christian communities, by contrast, generally promoted a very powerful and sharply distinct communal identity. They tended for one thing to be very highly structured; although the development of formal structures clearly varied in kind and degree from one place to another, the letters of Ignatius and the Pastoral Epistles show that in some places they were already well developed by the early second century CE. A century later, the structure of a local hierarchy headed by a bishop seems to have been more or less universal. The leaders of Christian communities in turn acted to promote particular models of identity among the members of those communities. For example, they tended to insist on a radical distinction between Christians and non-Christians. Again, the stress that people laid on this idea no doubt varied from group to group, especially early on, and even the most separatist groups retained some associations with the wider society.²⁷ I would nevertheless argue that the prevalent model was one of being in the world rather than of it (see, for example, *Epistle to Diognetus* 5-6). They also seem from the start to have encouraged a strong translocal communal identity. We see this already in the letters of Paul, and it becomes more important over time, apparent not only in such practices as the exchange of letters between communities and regional meetings of bishops but also in such ideological moves as the identification and denigration of heresy. The notion of Christians as a separate race was one way of expressing both this strong translocal communal identity and the radical distinction made between Christians and non-Christians; the language of race and ethnicity, before the emergence of religion as a discrete element of culture, was just about the only language available to describe the sharply distinct and translocal nature of Christian communal identity.²⁸ It was also, of course, language that would have come naturally to the early followers of Jesus, who as Judaeans were part of what we might want to distinguish as a real rather than a metaphorical ethnos.²⁹

It was because of these distinctive structures of Christian communities,

27 See for example HARLAND, Philip A.: *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society*, Minneapolis, 2003, 177-237.

28 BUELL, Denise Kimber: *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity*, New York, 2005.

29 It is worth noting that the distinction made by Judaeans between themselves and 'the nations' was in many way similar to that made by Greeks between themselves and 'barbarians'; it was the exclusive truth-claims and totalizing tendencies of Judaeian tradition in the late Second Temple period that gave it a force that the Greek-barbarian distinction lacked.

and the powerful and radically distinct communal identity that their leaders tended to promote, that the choice to worship the Christian god had in most cases either to end in conversion or be abandoned; they did not allow for the sort of participation that Nock characterized as adhesion. With respect to religious identity, then, what really distinguished classical antiquity from late antiquity, the world of Plutarch from that of Julian, was thus not a change in the inner experience of the individual or even the availability of religious choices that entailed profound implications for a person's world-view and way of life; it was rather the existence of social structures that forced individuals to accept those implications, publicly if not always personally. This of course raises a further question: why did what we might call the Christian model of religious choice become the dominant one in late antiquity? At this point I must call attention to the fact that the subtitle of my paper is 'models and questions'. I have presented a number of models, and will now conclude with a question.