ARTICLE

Interpreting conversion in antiquity (and beyond)

Andrew S. Jacobs

Center for the Study of World Religions,
Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge,
Massachusetts, USA

Correspondence
Andrew S. Jacobs, Center for the Study of
World Religions, Harvard Divinity School,
Cambridge, MA, USA.
Email: andrew@andrewjacobs.org

Abstract

This essay explores the persistent scholarly desires and
motivations that structure the historical study of conversion in religious studies. Most "conversion studies" take a
phenomenological approach, which acknowledges the
diverse processes, contexts, and meanings of conversion
but nonetheless sees the phenomenon as a way to access
the contours of global religion. Phenomenology of conversion reveals a desire for bounded religions arranged in a
comparable system, "religion." A hermeneutical approach
to conversion does not seek to access a stable phenomenon
but asks why conversion as a discourse is deployed. This
form of narrative interpretation can open up new possibilities in what we think the study of religion can, and
should, do. The specific examples of Jewish conversion to
Christianity in late antiquity act as case studies.

1 | APPROACHING CONVERSION

What do students of religion see when we look at accounts of religious conversion?
What disciplinary structures, desires, and imperatives direct our scholarly gaze?
What other options are available to us?
Let me begin my exploration of these questions with a story from the fifth century C.E.:

The Church historian Socrates recounted this miraculous story about Paul, the Novatian (heterodox) bishop in
the Roman capital city, Constantinople. According to Socrates (*Historia ecclesiastica* 7.17.7-15), some "Jewish cheat"
was swindling the different Christian sects of the capital city by being "frequently baptized" and somehow in this
way amassing wealth. When he made his way to Paul and insisted on being baptized without benefit of the required
fasting or instruction the water in the baptismal font miraculous disappeared. Refilled, the pool emptied itself again
when the Jewish cheat approached. Paul figured out the problem: "My good man, you're either a crook or a fool as

you have already been baptized." Paul's miraculous insight was affirmed by members of the crowd who remembered this ex-Jew being previously baptized by the orthodox bishop of Constantinople, Atticus.

What do we, as scholars of religion, do with this curious conversion story? One approach would be to focus our attention on the insincere motives of the "Jewish cheat" and understand it as a story about authentic versus inauthentic converts. This reading would constitute what I call a phenomenological approach to conversion: an approach which focuses primarily on the motives, processes, and experiences of a person changing from one religious status to another. A phenomenological approach concedes that such motives, processes, and experiences may vary from place to place, from time to time, and from tradition to tradition, but nonetheless these distinct examples of a broader phenomenon ("conversion") allow us to better understand how religion works.

A different approach focuses not on the phenomenon but on the narrative in which it is produced. This approach, what I call a hermeneutics of conversion, asks how and why a narrative of conversion operates in its particular contexts. What are the different ways a story makes meaning: about religious identity, difference, conflict, or contact (or even about issues we might not at first blush categorize as "religious")? What does Socrates want us, as readers, to think not just about conversion but about the world in which this conversion takes place? As I note below, conversion is always first and foremost a narrative and as such might be said to give historians insight into the world-shaping power of stories more than the particular psychology of religious subjects.

In this essay I assess both of these approaches and then apply their respective insights to my own work (on Jewish conversion to Christianity in late antiquity). I begin by sketching out what I mean by "phenomenology of conversion." Conversion studies takes as a given the process that we call *conversion* and devises various means—philological, psychosocial, anthropological, and so on—to figure out how conversion operates in a variety of religious, social, and cultural contexts. One significant impulse behind this approach, I argue, is the reproduction of a discrete and recognizable category of *religion* as well as a discrete and recognizable system of comparable *religions*.

I then describe a hermeneutics of conversion, which treats as the historical event not the putative change in religious status itself (buried, as it were, beneath layers of rhetoric) but rather that narrative of conversion: how and why are these narratives deployed and what kind of work are they doing to normalize or subvert forms of identity, difference, and boundary? This approach to conversion has found its most recent elaborations in pre-modern historical studies but has also borne fruit in some literary and anthropological studies.

I then give a few examples of ancient narratives of what we might identify as Jewish conversion to Christianity, like the Socrates story with which I began. What do such stories look like from a phenomenological perspective and what possibilities open up when we focus instead on their ability as stories to generate a variety of meanings? I conclude, very briefly, with a reconsideration of the value of conversion as a category in the study of religion.

2 | PHENOMENOLOGY OF CONVERSION

In 2012, the "Center for the Study of Conversion" was established at Ben Gurion University in Israel. The Center hosts lectures, has an annual seminar series, and is constructing a database of "every known record of conversion from one religion to another." On their "About" page (Center for the Study of Conversion, 2016) they explain why conversion merits close scrutiny:

> Conversion from one religion to another is a significant moment, not only for the person converting, but also for the religious community abandoned and the one adopted. Historical materials contain records of thousands of inter-religious conversions (individual as well as mass conversions), which can shed light on religious, social, political and legal phenomena relevant for understanding how religious communities function, how they deal with questions of identity and how and why they erect boundaries.

This approach to conversions as "phenomena" that help us understand "how religious communities function" is, I suggest, the predominant approach to conversion in religious studies. It is what I call the phenomenological approach.

Phenomenology is an umbrella term for comparative approaches to religion focusing on patterns of practice and belief that reveal the workings of the generic category of religion as well as the particularities of specific religions (Gschwandtner, 2019). Professor A's study of sacrifice in ancient Greece can fruitfully be brought into conversation with Professor X's study of sacrifice in ancient Israel and from both we can learn something about sacrifice in general and the contours of religious life. The researchers at the Center for the Study of Conversion view "conversion" as one such phenomenon: particular in its specific instances (even as they number in the "thousands" that can be cataloged in a database) but illustrative of larger questions of religious studies. It is reasonable to assume that the larger question of "how religious communities function" is the final goal of such research.

The recent *Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* likewise takes this phenomenological approach more or less for granted, even though it claims to reject an earlier stream of phenomenology that "sought to find universal structures or themes related to various phenomena" (Rambo & Farhadian, 2014, p. 14). Edited by Lewis Rambo, a specialist in psychology of religion who has been publishing on conversion for decades (see Rambo, 1993, 1999), and Charles Farhadian, who has published works on Christianity and world religions, the *Handbook* frames itself as a "a model of conversion studies that is global, interdisciplinary, multireligious, and inclusive of the personal, social, cultural, and political dimensions of the human predicament" (Rambo & Farhadian, 2014, p. 16). The goal of the chapters, which are organized according to methods and traditions, is "that the reader will have a better understanding of how and why people change religions or why they depart from their religious beliefs and practices" (p. 17). Conversion as a discrete and locatable (if variously defined) phenomenon provides a comparative lens on the diversity of global human experience. (Even in the case in which the objects of study, Dutch Muslim women, specifically reject the language of conversion [van Nieuwkerk, 2014].)

This approach may claim to eschew "universal structures or themes" but it is still fundamentally phenomenological. The existence of a phenomenon called conversion, the diversity and multiplicity of which can be studied and analyzed, connects the *Handbook* to the earlier generations of conversion scholarship from which they attempt to distinguish their work. Specifically they acknowledge William James and Arthur Darby Nock. James, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (James, 1902), viewed conversion as "the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided and consciously wrong, inferior, and unhappy becomes unified and consciously right, superior, and happy" (p. 189). Nock (1933) brought James' universal view down to the historical ground of the first centuries C.E. True conversion—"the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another" (p. 7, a page on which he refers to James)—emerges only with the rise of gentile Christianity, the premier "prophetic religion," in contradistinction to earlier, weaker forms of religious change Nock calls "adhesion."

Rambo and Farhadian reject James' and Nock's "subjectivist orientation deeply influenced by Protestant Pietistic understandings of religious conversion that privileges interior states and subjectivities" (Rambo & Farhadian, 2014, p. 5). Their conversion studies extends beyond these "subjectivist" and "Protestant" orientations through new psychological theories, as well as approaches outside of psychology (especially the landmark sociological intervention of Lofland and Stark [1965]), serious attention to non-Christian religions, and engagement with the material circumstances of conversion (such as embodiment). Nonetheless the expansion beyond James's and Nock's "subjectivist" and "Pietistic" dispositions does not move conversion studies significantly beyond their particular interests and frameworks.

Conversion remains a distinctive phenomenon that allows its students both to say something meaningful about a particular sociohistorical event and to theorize more broadly about a widespread (if not "universal") human phenomenon (see recently Kling, 2020). Nock's interest in conversion was precisely in its historical specificity, engendered in and responding to the psychological needs and desires of humans in the Mediterranean world in a

way that earlier religious changes ("adhesions") did not (Rives, 2011). While James' high-altitude approach does arguably assume a universalizing view of conversion and religious self-hood, Nock's more influential essay is rigorously historical and lays out a taxonomy of different religious forms made possible by attention to the diverse phenomena of conversion and adhesion.

Historical critiques of Nock focus on his narrow distinction between "conversion" and "adhesion" (Bøgh, 2014, 2015; Fredriksen, 1986, 2006); nonetheless the framework he laid out 80 years ago remains basic to the phenomenological approach to conversion, even as particular methods and objects of study expand. Conversion is a specific kind of religious experience; its permutations allow scholars to distinguish what's different about different religious traditions ("conversion in Islam," "conversion in Buddhism," etc.) while uniting all of these varied traditions in a coherent system of comparable phenomena ("religions"). Students of ancient religion have not been immune to these phenomenological desires even in studies that aim to crack open and expand our ideas about religion in antiquity (see Papaconstantinou et al., 2015). How we define discrete religions and their relation in a larger taxonomy can shift and change over time; the function of *conversion* to produce discrete *religions* within the system *religion* remains the same. Indeed, this dual function of differentiating *religions* while producing a taxonomic category of *religion* continues to direct and discipline our scholarly approach to narratives of religious change.

3 | HERMENEUTICS OF CONVERSION

Medievalist Karl Morrison (1992) used the term "hermeneutics of conversion" as a way to shift the historian's focus: from "something felt" ("a phenomenon called 'conversion'") to "something made," that is, the naming of something *as* conversion (p. xiii). For Morrison, the historian can only focus on the narrative: "What is called conversion is a thing felt, evaporating with its duration. What we have as historical evidence is a text, a thing made" (p. 5; see also p. 22). Morrison felt this evaporation as a loss and the focus on narrative a concession. Other more recent studies of conversion see this distinction between "thing felt" and "thing made" as a historical and theoretical opportunity.

Several studies since the 1990s have taken a similarly hermeneutical approach, viewing narratives of conversion not as evidence of a religious transformation but as a species of rhetoric doing all manner of cultural, social, intellectual, and political work. In *Figures of Conversion* (Ragussis, 1995), Michael Ragussis studied the proliferation of Jewish conversion narratives in Victorian England to trace new forms of English national identity. Gauri Viswanathan's *Outside the Fold* (Viswanathan, 1998) similarly traced British imperial control both in Britain and in the regulation of religious life in colonial India. More recently Audra Simpson (2009) reread the famous tale of Eunice Williams, captivated by Mohawk raiders in 1707 and ultimately refusing to return home to her White, Protestant family in Massachusetts, as a "discursive formation," "a story of colonial alchemy, of recognition of political subject-formation" (p. 106–7). Shane Gannon (2011) looked at academic representations of the conversion of Bhimrao Ambedkar, whose move from Hinduism to Buddhism inspired mass conversion of *dalit* Indians in the 1950s, and disclosed the persistent colonial attachments of academic knowledge production. Gannon deployed his own "hermeneutics of conversion" to argue that "conversions have a meaning beyond the personal, political, and social reasons of the converter" (p. 24). It is significant, perhaps, that Ragussis, Viswanathan, Simpson, and Gannon operate outside of the discipline of religious studies and are less enmeshed in the scholarly desires of our discipline (cf. also Ahmad, 2017).

Several medievalists have followed their colleague Morrison's lead in seeing conversion primarily as a narrative that is subject to cultural criticism. In an edited collection of essays on late antique and medieval conversion, Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton (2003) observe that "complete conversion... is a chimera, something to be imagined, constituted, preached, and pleaded for" (p. ix). "Whatever the motivations that lead to it," write Ira Katznelson and Miri Rubin in the introduction to their edited volume (Katznelson & Rubin, 2014), "conversion is always a public act, regulated by law and custom, witnessed and interpreted by contemporaries" (p. 7).

Ryan Szpiech's study of medieval conversions and disputational literature (Szpiech, 2012) explicitly takes up Morrison's distinction between "thing felt" and "thing made," but without Morrison's historical tristesse for the "lost" act of conversion. "Stories about conversion," Szpiech insists, "make most sense when viewed *as stories* rather than as embellished but factual descriptions of historical events, actions, or experiences" (p. 217, emphasis original). The insistence that we have only narrative to work with also leads Szpiech to disavow conversion as a discrete phenomenon liable to comparison across times and spaces: "conversion itself is a placeholder for other protean concepts and paradigms that explain and qualify change of religion in different ways without ever exhaustively defining it…. *Conversion* is a collective representation that can be used for convenience but whose full range of significance is perpetually deferred and never definitely grasped" (pp. 16–17). To take a hermeneutics of conversion seriously means acknowledging that our use of the term and even our identification of such narratives as "conversion" is a strategic convenience that allows fuller historical analysis. It is a disavowal of phenomenological conversion.

A focus on narrative indicates a shift, then, not just in methods and approaches but in goals and scholarly desires. Szpiech and others are not merely applying a light "hermeneutics of suspicion" to their narratives to more accurately arrive at the truth of the phenomenon of conversion. They are asking entirely new and different questions using narratives of religious change as a springboard. Because conversion is not taken as a given, a discrete phenomenon varying in time and place, these questions also interrogate assumptions about religious identity as a whole. How does conversion not just reflect but produce notions of "religion" and "religions"? What modes of identity—religious, perhaps, but also ethnic, political, and cultural—do narratives of conversion seek to induce in their readers, and what do these attempts at producing identity and difference tell us about their contexts? The tools of narrative analysis, as B. Diane Lipsett (2010) has argued, are particularly suited to such carefully structured stories of change (see also Clark, 2004).

Some particularly rich studies in this vein have focused, like Ragussis's *Figures of Conversion*, on Jewish conversion to Christianity (Shoulson, 2013; Tartakoff, 2012, 2020). A great deal of Christian intellectual energy, since antiquity, has been focused on the problem of Jews and Judaism, a problem by turns theological, social, political, and even eschatological (Fredriksen, 2008). The desire for many mainstream forms of Christianity to utterly distinguish themselves from Judaism creates a discord and a friction, a desire to distinguish between and delineate the boundaries that separate the two. Narratives of conversion, as these recent studies carefully detail, are a persistent mechanism for producing a Christianity and Judaism that are distinct yet still held in tensile relationship to each other. We might even see in these Christian narratives of Jews and ex-Jews the seeds of the modern phenomenological use of conversion to create distinct religions linked together in a taxonomic system "religion." I turn now to some late ancient narratives of Jewish conversion to Christianity to suggest how a shift from a phenomenological approach to a hermeneutical one might help us excavate this foundational Christian narrative.

4 | EX-JEWS IN ANTIQUITY: A CASE STUDY

Let me return to my story from Socrates. What would a phenomenological approach to this story ask and what would a hermeneutical approach do differently?

Phenomenological analyses of conversion are not naïve or unsophisticated, and so such a reading of the Socrates story would certainly acknowledge that the historicity of this event cannot be taken for granted: we cannot assume there was such a Jew, such an attempt at fraud, and such a miraculous denouement. Nonetheless, we would press to ask what we might learn contextually about conversion: what scenarios do Socrates and his readers assume are operative when a Jew converts to Christianity? The involvement of a bishop, the requirement of instruction and ritual fasting, the bestowal of gifts (a crucial element of the tale), and a crowd of public witnesses: these all seem plausible elements that Socrates assumes his readers would expect. We might furthermore infer (at least in Socrates' mind) the social desirability of conversion to Christianity, since Paul never questions the Jew's desire to convert; we might furthermore suspect some level of antipathy between the Jews and Christians of Constantinople, since the Jewish cheat feels comfortable swindling multiple Christian communities.

Almost all of our examples of ancient Jews becoming Christian (including several other stories from Socrates himself) come from Christian sources; scholars wishing to recover some sense of the experience of conversion must exercise a high degree of care and analytic finesse (Kraemer, 2020). The hyper-partisan heresiologist Epiphanius (c. 377) tells the story of Joseph, from Tiberias in Galilee, who became Christian after years in the employ of the aristocratic Jewish patriarch (*Panarion* 30). We cannot hope for Epiphanius to relate his story in the disinterested manner of a modern ethnographer so we must distill his rhetoric to arrive at the social and cultural contexts in which a conversion such as Joseph's might have taken place. A series of Jewish-Christian dialogs, from the second through seventh centuries, were designed rhetorically to prove the superiority of Christianity over Judaism and almost all end in the conversion of the Jewish interlocutor (Lahey, 2007; Rigolio, 2019). Few scholars would claim these are transcripts of real dialogs, but might they not give a sense of the rhetorical techniques deployed by Christians seeking to convert Jews?

A scholar seeking to elucidate the phenomenon of conversion might simply abandon such narratives as too embedded in the heated rhetoric of Christian anti-Judaism to give us any insight whatsoever into the historical phenomenon of Jews converting to Christianity. Yet conversion studies has repeatedly signaled the necessity to read beyond and through the highly stylized rhetoric of conversion narratives, even that of first-hand accounts, in order to arrive at something close to the phenomenon of conversion (Hindmarsh, 2014). These ancient narratives, then, might simply require more diligence to break through the barriers of interested rhetoric. For the student of conversion the rewards might be less fulsome than if we had direct access to our subject, but might nonetheless add to the database of knowledge about converts and conversion.

A hermeneutics of conversion, however, does not seek to work around the interested rhetoric of narrators but rather leans into it. To return to Socrates: why does a Church historian embedded in the ecclesiastical and imperial politics of the capital city of Constantinople tell this story, and others like it? We might posit that he is using the figure of the trickster (ex-)Jew to highlight the sanctity of the Novatianist bishop Paul over against other Christian sectarian leaders in the city. Or we might argue that he is encouraging his readers to attend more closely to religious boundaries in general—between Christian sects, between Jews and Christians—in a city rife with over-lapping communities of religious difference. He is certainly using conversion as a way to think about, and perhaps even reinforce, religious communal boundaries by describing a convert who has, perhaps even against his will, been divinely moved from the category *Jew* to *Christian*.

A hermeneutical approach to conversion narratives is also useful in cases where our sources might seem more documentary than narrative. We find several laws on Jewish conversion in the fifth-century Theodosian Code, an imperially sponsored compendium of more than a century of legal rulings (Kraemer, 2020). Among them, Emperor Constantine (d. 337) issued a law protecting Jewish converts to Christianity against violent reproach from their former coreligionists (*Codex Theodosianus* 16.8.1). Rather than assessing this law as a historical point in the phenomenon of conversion ("Jewish converts faced violent reprisal"), we can view this law as evoking a narrative just like Socrates the historian and ask: Why tell the story of Jewish conversion in a legal framework of Jews facing violent reprisal? Why issue such a law and why incorporate such a law into a later compilation (and why do it again, republishing it in the sixth-century Justinianic Code [1.9.93])? The prima facie factual legal ruling asks those who encounter it to conjure up a scenario, a narrative: a Jew becoming Christian, anger, retaliation, communal disorder, violence. Legal storytelling produces a world of religious violence, social disruption, and personal danger ameliorated (or not?) by the guiding hand of imperial jurisprudence.

Even the merest mention of a Jewish convert implies an interpretable narrative. In the sketchy accounts of urban violence during the episcopal elections of the city Rome in the year 366 partisans of Damasus (the eventual bishop) clashed in the streets with partisans of his rival Ursinus. One of Ursinus's supporters was a Christian called "Isaac the Jew." Isaac, according to a later report, brought criminal charges against Damasus years later: "So Ursinus's faction undertook, by inciting Isaac the Jew (who profaned the heavenly mysteries when he went running back to the synagogue), to seek a capital charge against our holy brother Damasus" (*Relatio hoc gloriae vestrae* 8). This is not an account of conversion (unless we consider the parenthetical reference to Isaac's presumed reversion

to Judaism) yet a conversion narrative is invoked by the curious label "Isaac the Jew," even invisibly: a moment when Isaac, a Jew, became a Christian known as "Isaac the Jew." What work does that invisible narrative do as Isaac moves through the political spaces of fourth-century episcopal politics in Rome? Does it diminish his status among his fellow Christians, or perhaps boost it (why, after all, should he be chosen to bring suit against Damasus)? What circuits of difference and power are being activated by the bare invocation of a conversion narrative left open to the reader's imagination?

It may seem odd to spend so much time spinning out the hermeneutical possibilities of "Isaac the Jew." I want to underscore the point that conversion is *always* a narrative, and so always available for and liable to narrative interpretation. To call someone a convert (as opposed to merely a member of a religious community: "Isaac the Christian," as it were) is to evoke a past where that person was otherwise and conjure up a narrative of change and transformation. In all of these accounts of late ancient ex-Jews, from the most narratively fulsome to the barest epithet, we can assess the work being done through a narrative of religious change. In most, if not all, of these cases one result is the simultaneous affirmation and disruption of the boundary between religious groups. To talk about conversion is to assert the distinction and commensurability between two groups—"religions"—and to construct a world in which movement between such groups raises larger questions of power, difference, and identity.

Does a hermeneutical approach to conversion deny that conversions took place? Of course not. That these narratives can use the story of religious change from *Jew* to *Christian* in service of larger questions means that such religious change must have been legible to their audiences. Would ex-Jews recognize themselves in such stories, laws, dialogs, and diatribes? How could we possibly know? These narratives do not give us access to the contours of conversion as a phenomenon, access to the lives of ancient Jews and Christians, but rather to the interests and desires of those deploying conversion. These narratives have an interest in partitioning the world into bounded groups and they use movement from one group to another to naturalize such a bounded religious landscape.

5 | LEAVING CONVERSION, LEAVING RELIGION?

As a historian of late ancient religions, I find more grist for historical analysis from the hermeneutical approach than the phenomenological. In this last section, I would like to zoom back out from my own narrow field of study, however, and ask two interrelated questions: Why does the phenomenological approach continue to predominate in contemporary conversion studies? What would it mean for students of religion to give up conversion as a phenomenon and treat it as a discourse, amenable to interpretation and analysis beyond the phenomenological?

"Conversion," I suggest, is the right hand of "religion." By this, I mean that a phenomenon of conversion affirms and reproduces the modern concept of "religions" as species of the generic category "religion." That our definition of conversion has expanded methodologically and conceptually over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries should not surprise us, since "religion" has likewise expanded and grown. Whatever the content of "religion," its modern study requires that there be religions which are recognizable and comparable. In the same way that the material and conceptual bounds of nations and of "nationhood" can be mapped by attention to migration—its causes, its controversies, its controls—similarly, religions and religion come into focus by attention to conversion. Narratives of conversion, and studies of conversion, replicate and naturalize the idea of discrete religions embedded in a generic category "religion." *Religious studies* requires *conversion*.

The category of "religion," however, is historically and ethically problematic. As Nongbri (2013) writes in an ancient context: "Religion is a modern category; it may be able to shed light on some aspects of the ancient world when applied in certain strategic ways, but we have to be honest about the category's origins and not pretend that it somehow organically and magically arises from our sources" (p. 153). Those "origins" are distinctly colonialist; *religion* as a modern category arose at the intersections of colonialism, capitalism, and conquest that shaped the structures of global inequity that persist today (see Chidester, 2014; Masuzawa, 2005). To apply this category uncritically to objects of our study risks reinscribing them into these inequitable structures (Reed, 2018, pp. 422–35). Some

scholars of religion go so far as to insist on a "critical religion" approach that eschews religions as phenomenological objects of study and focuses instead on when, how, and why the category is deployed (Fitzgerald, 2015). If we continue treating narratives of conversion as sources for a phenomenon rather than rhetorical tools in the production of *religion* and *religions*, we risk making ourselves complicit in the work of religious impresarios, past and present. We risk reinforcing their boundaries, accepting their presuppositions, buying into their narratives because we, too, desire the certainty of bounded, comparable, and systematized *religions*.

What would it mean for students of religion to abandon this project of reproducing "religion" through "conversion"? A hermeneutical approach takes us closer to what "critical religion" scholars have been doing for some decades, what we might call by analogy a "critical conversion studies." This approach takes seriously the narratives of conversion as attempts to secure forms of religious identity, distinction, and difference but does not then take them as data points in a global phenomenon recognizable as *conversion*. In addition to providing a more secure historical foothold, it also provides us with a more ethical one: once we step back to evaluate narratives of conversion as attempts to do certain kinds of cultural work, we can also assess the nature and implications of that cultural work. If narratives of conversion make visible circuits of power and difference, they also have the potential to reveal networks of resistance and solidarity.

Let's return where we began: with the curious tale of the "Jewish cheat" from Socrates the historian. We can make out the contours of the world Socrates wants to depict: one of religious boundaries and hierarchies enforced by the miraculous witness of the natural elements in the imperial capital. But we can also imagine the different ways this story would be received and interpreted in its own day, not only by the imperially sanctioned Christians for whom this tale of Jewish chicanery and religious boundary would already ring true but for others—so-called heretics, pagans, Jews, and even self-professed "converts"—who might instead feel friction and disjuncture and find in Socrates' tale not a straightforward story of religious transformation but an opportunity for reflection, reaction, and reconsideration. We, as students of religion, conversion, and history, can follow their lead.

ORCID

Andrew S. Jacobs https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4886-6287

REFERENCES

Ahmad, A. (2017) *Everyday conversions: Islam, domestic work, and South Asian migrant women in Kuwait*. Duke University Press.

Bøgh, B. (2015) Beyond Nock: from adhesion to conversion in the mystery cults. *History of Religions*, 54(3), 260–287. https://doi.org/10.1086/678994

Bøgh, B.S. (Ed.) (2014) *Conversion and initiation in antiquity: shifting identities, creating change*. Peter Lang.

Center for the Study of Conversion. (2016) About. Available from https://in.bgu.ac.il/en/csoc/Pages/About.aspx

Chidester, D. (2014) *Empire of religion: imperialism and comparative religion*. University of Chicago Press.

Clark, E.A. (2004) *History, theory, text: historians and the linguistic turn*. Harvard University Press.

Fitzgerald, T. (2015) Critical religion and critical research on religion: religion and politics as modern fictions. *Critical Research on Religion*, 3(3), 303–319. https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303215613123

Fredriksen, P. (1986) Paul and Augustine: conversion narratives, orthodox traditions, and the retrospective self. *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 37(1), 3–34.

Fredriksen, P. (2006) Mandatory retirement: ideas in the study of Christian origins whose time has come to go. *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, 35(2), 231–264. https://doi.org/10.1177/000842980603500203

Fredriksen, P. (2008) *Augustine and the Jews: a Christian defense of Jews and Judaism*. Doubleday.

Gannon, S.P. (2011) Conversion as a thematic site: academic representations of ambedkar's Buddhist turn. *Method Theory Study Religion*, 23(1), 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1163/157006811X549670

Gschwandtner, C.M. (2019) What is phenomenology of religion? (Part I): the study of religious phenomena. *Philosophy Compass*, 14(4), e12566. https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12566

Hindmarsh, B. (2014) Religious conversion as narrative and autobiography. In: Rambo, L.R., & Farhadian, C.E., (Eds.) *The Oxford handbook of religious conversion*. Oxford University Press, pp. 343–368. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195338522.013.015

James, W. (1902) *The varieties of religious experience: a study in human nature*. Longmans, Green.

Katznelson, I., & Rubin, M. (Eds.) (2014) *Religious conversion: history, experience, and meaning*. Ashgate.

Kling, D.W. (2020) *A history of Christian conversion*. Oxford University Press.

Kraemer, R.S. (2020) *The Mediterranean diaspora in late antiquity: what Christianity cost the Jews*. Oxford University Press.

Lahey, L. (2007) Evidence for Jewish Believers in Christian-Jewish dialogues through the sixth century (excluding Justin). In: Skarsaune, O., & Hvalvik, R. (Eds.) *Jewish believers in Jesus: the early centuries*. Hendrickson Publishers, pp. 581–639.

Lipsett, B.D. (2010) *Desiring conversion: hermas, Thecla, Aseneth*. Oxford University Press.

Lofland, J., & Stark, R. (1965) Becoming a world-saver: a theory of conversion to a deviant perspective. *American Sociological Review*, 30(6), 862–875. https://doi.org/10.2307/2090965

Masuzawa, T. (2005) *The invention of world religions, or, how European universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism*. University of Chicago Press.

Mills, K., & Grafton, A. (Eds.) (2003) *Conversion in late antiquity and the early middle ages: seeing and believing*. University of Rochester Press.

Morrison, K.F. (1992) *Understanding conversion*. University of Virginia Press.

Nock, A.D. (1933) *Conversion: the old and the new in religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*. Clarendon Press.

Nongbri, B. (2013) *Before religion: a history of a modern concept*. Yale University Press.

Papaconstantinou, A., McLynn, N., & Scwhartz, D.L. (Eds.) (2015) *Conversion in late antiquity: christianity, Islam, and beyond*. Ashgate.

Ragussis, M. (1995) *Figures of conversion: "the Jewish question" & English national identity*. Duke University Press.

Rambo, L.R. (1993) *Understanding religious conversion*. Yale University Press.

Rambo, L.R. (1999) Theories of conversion: understanding and interpreting religious change. *Social Compass*, 46(3), 259–271. https://doi.org/10.1177/003776899046003003

Rambo, L.R., Farhadian, C.E., Rambo, L.R., & Farhadian, C.E. (2014) Introduction. In: Rambo, L.R., & Farhadian, C.E. (Eds) *The Oxford handbook of religious conversion*. Oxford University Press, pp. 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195338522.013.033

Reed, A.Y. (2018) *Jewish-Christianity and the history of Judaism*. Mohr Siebeck.

Rigolio, A. (2019) *Christians in conversation: a guide to late antique dialogues in Greek and Syriac*. Oxford University Press.

Rives, J. (2011) Religious choice and religious change in classical and late antiquity: models and questions. *Arys*, 9, 265–280.

Shoulson, J. (2013) *Fictions of conversion: jews, Christians, and cultures of change in early modern England*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Simpson, A. (2009) Captivating Eunice: membership, colonialism, and gendered citizenships of grief. *Wicazo Sa Review*, 24, 105–129.

Szpiech, R. (2012) *Conversion and narrative: reading and religious authority in medieval polemic*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Tartakoff, P. (2012) *Between Christian and Jew: conversion and inquisition in the Crown of Aragon, 1250–1931*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Tartakoff, P. (2020) *Conversion, circumcision, and ritual murder in medieval Europe*. University Pennsylvania Press.

van Nieuwkerk, K. (2014) "Conversion" to Islam and the construction of a pious self. In: Rambo, L.R., & Farhadian, C.E., (Eds.) *The Oxford handbook of religious conversion*. Oxford University Press, pp. 667–687. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195338522.013.028

Viswanathan, G. (1998) *Outside the fold: conversion, modernity, and belief*. Princeton University Press.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Andrew S. Jacobs is a Senior Fellow at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He has taught at the University of California, Riverside, and Scripps College. He is the author of *Remains of the Jews: The Holy Land and Christian Empire in Late Antiquity*, *Christ Circumcised: A Study in Christian History and Difference*, and *Epiphanius of Cyprus: A Cultural Biography of Late Antiquity*, which won the 2016 Philip Schaff Prize from the American Society of Church History. He is co-editor of *Christianity in Late Antiquity, 300–450 C.E.: A Reader* (with Bart D. Ehrman) and *The Garb of Being: Embodiment and the Pursuit of Holiness in Late Ancient Christianity* (with Susan Holman and Georgia Frank). He is editor of *Elements in Religion in Late Antiquity* with Cambridge University Press.