

The Conversion of Public Intellectuals

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Abstract. Is Christianity becoming fashionable? In recent years, we have witnessed a growing number of celebrities converting to Christianity or expressing an intense interest in it. The writer and activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Jordan Peterson, and the former New Atheist Richard Dawkins, who now describes himself as a “cultural Christian,” are just a few among many examples. According to the English theologian Luke Bretherton, one of the great temptations of the contemporary wave of conversions is that, instead of following Christ, Christianity becomes a form of civilizational self-defence. Amid the crises of our age, we may long to restore an imagined Christian era; conversion, however, is not restoration but rebirth. Those who convert in order to preserve an earlier cultural form or to “make it great again” are, in effect, seeking conversion without repentance.

Keywords: megtérés; kereszténység; nyugati civilizáció; keresztény nacionalizmus; politikai teológia; Jacques Maritain

Two pathways.

I was formed under the shadow of New Atheism. In Britain, where I trained as a theologian, New Atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens were not bold prophets burning down temples with the cold heat of scientific rationalism. Rather, they were spokesmen for a pervasive cultural disdain for religion that existed long before the New Atheists started their polemics. New Atheism, in the British context, was a reaction to the return of religion as a political force elsewhere in

the world, particularly in North America and Muslim-majority countries. The New Atheists were horrified by the persistence of benighted souls who refused to read the memo that God was dead. The steady drumbeat of their derision—and the adulation they received—formed the backbeat of my intellectual life.

To grow up a Christian and then become a theologian working in British universities against this background noise was to live with a sense of being on the defensive. This is why I found so enthralling—and, if I am being honest, somewhat liberating—the recent podcast and now book titled *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God* by the British journalist and Christian apologist Justin Brierley. Listening to the podcast was a kind of intellectual exorcism.

Brierley chronicles the rise and fall of New Atheism as a social and intellectual movement. Along the way he interviews many who previously identified as atheists but who are not only no longer hostile to Christianity but actively open to and interested in its claims. Among those interviewed or discussed are public intellectuals including Jordan Peterson, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Paul Kingsnorth, Douglas Murray, and Louise Perry. Some of those interviewed have gone further and converted to Christianity. To this list can be added the comedian and rabble-rouser Russell Brand. Brand recently posted a picture of himself being baptized by fellow celebrity Bear Grylls in the river Thames. In the United States, two prominent examples are the commentator Sohrab Ahmari and Harvard law professor Adrian Vermeule. Both are recent converts to Roman Catholicism. The most surprising turnaround of all is Richard Dawkins, who earlier this year declared himself a “cultural Christian.” It seems God is not dead, at least not among a growing band of Western thought leaders.

There is a striking feature of the stories these figures tell about their journeys toward faith. Their conversion narratives are bound up with a critique of contemporary culture and, in particular, what they see as the baleful influence of “woke” ideologies and the decline of Western civilization. For these intellectuals, Christianity seems to function as a bulwark against the imminent collapse of the West into barbarism of one kind or another.

A powerful example of this stance is articulated by former atheist Ayaan Hirsi Ali in a piece titled “Why I Am Now a Christian.” In the essay, Hirsi Ali narrates her move from Muslim to atheist to Christian. But at the heart of the piece is an account of how the basis of “Western civilization” is “Christianity” and why, if the threats to Western civilization are to be warded off, Christianity needs recovering.

As she puts it, “The lesson I learned from my years with the Muslim Brotherhood was the power of a unifying story, embedded in the foundational texts of Islam, to attract, engage and mobilise the Muslim masses. Unless we offer something as meaningful, I fear the erosion of our civilisation will continue. And fortunately, there is no need to look for some new-age concoction of medication and mindfulness. Christianity has it all.”

An Intellectual Heritage

The way Hirsi Ali and other recent converts' combine an embrace of Christianity (whether culturally or confessionally) with a brooding sense of the collapse of the moral and social basis of Western civilization has many predecessors.

One forebear they echo is a common critique of the West made from the nineteenth century onward. This framework poses Christianity as the last redoubt against a future of domination and depravity brought on by the degradations of modern life.

This framework narrates the emergence of modern Western life not as a story of progress whereby we become rational, autonomous, and enlightened beings able to enter into emancipated ways of life. Rather, it tells a story whereby becoming modern involves the tragic loss of the ties that bind us, whether to each other, to the land, or to our ancestors. In this story modernity does not make us free. Instead, individualism and moral relativism are its characteristic fruit. The modern, supposedly liberated self is left without direction or purpose and utterly naked and alone. To change this situation and thereby renew the West entails recovering our connection to those like "us," to "our" land, and to European traditions, the most important of which is Christianity.

In this story modern Western culture is not a problem because it produces this or that instance of injustice or immorality; it is a problem because it inverts the moral order and makes what Augustine calls the *libido dominandi* a point of virtue. This simultaneously apocalyptic and conservative framework divides history between modernity and all prior ages, a division that sacralizes the past (often an idealized medieval era) and demonizes the present. On this kind of account, Christianity is converted into something it is not. It becomes either an endangered species to be protected on special reservations or weaponized to defend Western culture from internal collapse and external attack. Contemporary expressions of the former are Rod Dreher's Benedict Option, while "Christian nationalism" exemplifies the latter.

The Benedict Option and Christian nationalism illustrate a way of being critical of modern Western life (and in particular liberalism) that too easily gives rise to a nostalgic, reactionary politics. Reactionary politics are often fuelled by a resistance to change and the desire to recover an imagined past that is envisioned as lost or stolen. Such movements seek to reconnect with an illusory point of origin before things went bad.

A turn to Christianity, however, need not entail making it either a defensive civilizational project anchored in a sanitized version of history or a sectarian faction fuelled by an aggrieved sense of entitled victimhood. Following Christ and discerning the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit should be about discovering just and generous forms of life here and now that bear witness to and prefigure the new creation.

Approaches that predetermine what Christianity can and should be by overidentifying it with a prior culture or historical moment refuse to discover what Christ and the Spirit are doing here and now among these people in this place. Such a refusal

also denies how loss, vulnerability, and lack of control are central to the experience of acting faithfully, hopefully, and lovingly with and for others. Indeed, the desire to reassert control over a culture or nation is itself an expression of the lust for domination and a vainglorious pride that Augustine identifies as a defining expression of sin, one that leads to great evil.

The life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, rather than Western culture or a particular intellectual tradition, are the condition for the possibility of movement into new kinds of relationship with God and neighbour. Any such journey of conversion demands that we orient ourselves to living in time and the experience of flux and transition that is part of what it means to be a finite and fallen creature rather than a god. Becoming Christian is properly about discovering—with these people, in this place, at this time—communion with Christ amid and through our differences, a communion we receive only as a gift of the Spirit (and that can never be a work of frail flesh). Seeking to encounter Christ where the Spirit is blowing here and now rules out a nostalgic division that poses the past as good and the present as intrinsically bad. All forms of life are entangled with idolatry and structural sin. The spiritual, moral, and political struggle is to find ways to identify with Christ and participate in the work of the Holy Spirit and thereby dis-identify with the past and present idols and cultural systems of domination that shape us.

True Conversion

To convert for the sake of holding on to a prior cultural form—or as a way to make it great again—is to undergo conversion without repentance. It is to want resurrection without crucifixion. No cultural form is free from sin, idolatry, and oppression. The revival and renewal of a culture cannot bypass dying to itself if it is to be transformed into Christlike ways of being alive.

Conversion properly understood not only entails recovering what was lost and is now found. It also entails being born again. To rediscover or recollect one's true, created self, one must undergo a fundamental reorientation of one's self. This reorientation involves a turn toward God and neighbour in order to begin anew. To convert for the sake of holding on to a prior cultural form—or as a way to make it great again—is to undergo conversion without repentance.

Baptism embodies the paradoxical movement of conversion. It points to how conversion simultaneously looks backward and forward. In baptism I become what I was and what I will be, both at the same time. I recover my original created self, and I am born again.

Baptism also makes explicit a dynamic central to the theology of conversion, one that St. Augustine articulates forcefully in his own conversion narrative: conversion represents a movement from dispersion, alienation, and disassociation—both individually and collectively—to communion.

Drawing on baptism and the theology of conversion it enacts provides an alternative frame of reference to the frameworks many recent converts adopt, a frame-

work that rejects modernity as a metaphysical mistake. Against both reactionary and progressive ideologies shaping the contemporary culture wars, this alternative framework recognizes there is always a dynamic interplay between past and present, conservation and innovation, tradition and revolution. In other words, it demands being salt, working with others to preserve what is good and upholding peace and justice where possible, and light, pointing the way in the darkness to the judgment and redemption of all things in Christ.

As an aside, within this theology of conversion there is no “authentic” form of Christianity. Authenticity is a deeply modern sentiment alien to Christianity. Christianity is about being faithful, not authentic. All forms of Christianity—if they are being faithful—are subject to ongoing dynamics of continuity and change as they embody the paradoxical movement of restoration and new birth. A theology of conversion thereby raises a question mark against those converts who seek in Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, or some other stream of Christian belief and practice an original or authentic form of the faith, one unsullied by processes of modernization. Paul Kingsnorth, who moved from being a Wiccan to becoming Romanian Orthodox, expressed exactly this sentiment in an interview about his conversion for Justin Brierley’s podcast. However, contemporary forms of Orthodoxy are no less shaped by modernity than, say, Pentecostalism. But, like Pentecostalism, Orthodox Christianity can also provide means of metabolizing modern forms of life in faithful, hopeful, and loving ways even as the ways Orthodoxy is identified with sinful and idolatrous forms of life need repenting and renouncing.

A Model of True Conversion

The two pathways open before recent intellectual converts are embodied in the life of the modern French philosopher Jacques Maritain.

Maritain grew up a nominal Protestant. But like Hirsi Ali, after examining atheism and other modern philosophies, he became disillusioned by the meaninglessness each of them seemed to offer. Such was his despair that along with his wife, Raissa (who was born Jewish), he considered suicide. After encountering the work of philosopher Henri Bergson, but more influentially through reading Thomas Aquinas, he and Raissa converted to Catholicism and were baptized in 1906. Their conversion was part of a wave of Protestant and Jewish converts to Catholicism among leading French intellectuals of that time.

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The first pathway for today’s converts is represented by what Maritain did immediately after his initial conversion, which was to become involved with Action Française. Action Française was a royalist, reactionary, anti-democratic group, many of whose members went on to become fascists and leading figures in the Vichy government that collaborated with the Nazis. Action Française looked to Christianity

but not to Christ. Its leaders saw in Christianity a means of securing French civilization against the rot within and the threat without. (It was a Make France Great Again project.) In turn, it offered a political movement dedicated to defending family, faith, and flag against the threat posed by the “woke” ideologies of the day—namely, communism, anarchism, and liberalism.

When Action Française was condemned by Pope Pius XI in 1926, Maritain disidentified with it and underwent a second conversion, this time to love of neighbour manifested in a commitment to democracy, human rights, and anti-racist politics. His friendships with Russian theologian and philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev and the French Christian democratic thinker Emmanuel Mounier seem to have been key in this move.

Maritain’s second conversion represents the other pathway open to contemporary intellectual converts. It embodies a switch from a defensive posture marked by a narrative of decline centred on the fate of the West to a Christ-centred story in which the eternal destiny of humanity and what it means to be human is at stake.

An early expression of Maritain’s new position is articulated in his 1936 book *Integral Humanism*. As historian James Chappel notes, “Often sanitized as a paean to liberal democracy, [*Integral Humanism*] should instead be read as a furiously antifascist, antiracist, and anticapitalist tract.” *Integral Humanism* is a direct challenge to and rebuke of the ideologue and propagandist Charles Maurras, who was a main player in Action Française. Maurras advocated what he called “integral nationalism,” which was anti-pluralist, anti-Semitic, and anti-democratic. In rejection of all that Maurras stood for, Maritain developed a philosophical and theological defence of a pluralistic, democratic form of politics.

As well as providing a response to the racism and authoritarianism of the reactionary and fascist ideologies of his day, Maritain envisaged his Christian humanism and conception of Christian democracy as an alternative to the alienation and atomization of liberal, bourgeois, capitalist individualism and the totalitarian and atheistic revolutionary politics of communism.

Maritain saw democracy as a vital means through which humans can realize their true natures as those created in the image of God. For Maritain, democracy is the form of politics that best honours the dignity of each person while ensuring that everyone can participate in forming a common life and so fulfill their personhood. Rather than be acted on and have their world determined and controlled by either the one, the few, or the many (i.e., majoritarianism), a participatory and pluralistic form of democracy enables each person to have agency in cultivating and contributing to shared worlds of meaning and action. Democracy provides the means through which human personhood is actualized because it provides the means through which everyone can form free and mutually responsible relationships with and for others. It does so by making provision for each person to have a hand in shaping and benefiting from the material and social conditions under which they live and work. For Maritain, this democratic vision is enacted best not through political parties or legal

procedures but through highly participatory and relational forms of political and economic association, such as trade unions, cooperatives, and community-organizing coalitions.

Maritain was not alone in developing a constructive rather than defensive posture. Many of his fellow converts followed a similar path. In doing so, they did not seek to defend something vague and Eurocentric called “Western civilization.” Rather, they became ardent anti-fascists, worked tirelessly to renew democracy, and sought to develop new forms of life marked by justice and generosity for all. In doing so, they sought to bear faithful witness to Jesus Christ’s love for all humankind. While I welcome the news of those who are turning to Christianity as a response to the crises of our day, I hope and pray that they—that we all—undergo a second conversion to a furious and passionate love of neighbour, a love that must include, if it is to be Christian, love of enemies. As narrated in the parable of the good Samaritan, neighbour love marks how in discovering we are loved by Christ we rediscover our shared humanity with others, even with those we consider a threat to our way of life or to what we hold most dear. Whether newly converted or cradle raised, it is in the capacity of Christians to inhabit this love that the plausibility of the gospel as good news rests.