

## Religious Conversion in the Face of the Past

The conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity and the Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century showed how religion, far from being confined to a matter of faith, was capable of triggering devastating conflict. I will analyze the work of three major figures of these social transformations to ask how these religious shifts relate to the beliefs and customs that preceded them: do they predominantly demonstrate aggression towards the past or do they try to acknowledge the importance of the previous customs in order to build on them? For the Roman conversion to Christianity, I will consider the two major works of Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God* and the *Confessions*. Similarly, for the Protestant Reformation I will contrast Martin Luther's *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation* with Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*.

Augustine of Hippo was a Christian theologian and bishop who wrote about the relatively novel Christian doctrine and its relation to the older Roman pagan religion in his books, *The City of God* and the *Confessions*. *The City of God*, written between 412 and 426 CE, aggressively attacks the Roman religion, calling their gods "false", "unclean spirits", and the "most malign, deceitful demons" who "find amusement in crimes."<sup>1</sup> His criticism extends to the Roman citizen themselves, as he "refrain(s) from asking what sort of men Romulus gathered together."<sup>2</sup> Augustine also adopts a disdainful tone to mock the polytheism of the Roman religion, ridiculing the origin of the gods'

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, Book 4, Chapters 1-11, in *Augustine: City of God, Volume II: Books 4-7*, Translated by William M. Green (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 136.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 147.

names and their narrow responsibilities: “they did not reach the conclusion that they should put some god in charge of all their land, but assigned fields to the goddess Rusina, mountain peaks to the god Jugatinus, hills to the goddess Collatina, and valleys to Vallonia.”<sup>3</sup> So, he argues, this means Romans cannot entrust any god enough with their protection – “how could Segetia care for the empire, when she was not allowed to take care of the grain crop and of trees at the same time?”<sup>4</sup> Augustine also condemns the immoral actions of their gods and the Roman’s enjoyment of their pagan theatre and mythology, wondering why “they are delighted to see in the theatres these crimes of their gods enacted.”<sup>5</sup> Augustine’s disdainful tone here attempts no reconciliation between Christianity and the traditions of the Roman empire.

But Augustine’s tone is very different in his earlier book, the *Confessions* (396-400), an autobiography in which he narrates the sequence of events that led to his conversion to Christianity beginning with his infancy and adolescence. In this book, Augustine acknowledges the influence of the Greek and Latin on his thinking. In his description of his early education, he explains how he fell “completely in love with Latin” and its literature, mentioning how he wept for Dido’s death in the Aeneid but did not “shed not a single tear” for God.”<sup>6</sup> In his account of his rhetorical skills, he recognizes the profound influence of Cicero’s *Hortensius*, even on his “prayers to the Lord.”<sup>7</sup> After reading Cicero, he says, “all of a sudden every one of my vain hopes became worthless to me, and with an extraordinary passion of the heart I began to long for immortal wisdom, and I started to arise so as to return to You.”<sup>8</sup> In later chapters, Augustine only rejects

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 144.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 145.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 148.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, Books 1-8, Chapters 1-11, in *Augustine: Confessions, Volume II: Books 4-7*, Edited by Carolyn J.-B. Hammond (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 24.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 38.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 38.

Manicheism and Neoplatonism when Ambrose, who “took away the mystical veil and opened the spiritual sense of things,”<sup>9</sup> reveals to him the true meaning of the Bible. The very nature and style of the book is reconciliatory with the past. The fact that the *Confessions* examines all of Augustine’s previous religious and intellectual influences, narrated in the first person, shows an intention of bridging Christianity with its preceding traditions. In contrast, *The City of God*, which was written in response to perceived pagan forces that had symbolically and literally sacked Rome, was written in “reply to the enemies” who “make an outcry against the Christian religion.”<sup>10</sup>

About ten centuries after Augustine’s writings, the German theologian Martin Luther sparked another religious transformation with his criticisms of the supremacy of the Pope in the Roman Catholic Church and of the sale of indulgences, among others, which led to the Protestant Reformation. In 1520, Martin Luther published the tract *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, in which he lays out the “three walls” of the “Romanist” Christians: that the temporal power has no jurisdiction over the spiritual, that no one may interpret the scriptures but the Pope, and that no one may call a council but the Pope.<sup>11</sup> Like Augustine in *The City of God*, Luther’s language towards the Church is harsh: he accuses Romanists of employing “the devil’s help” and of acting with “malice” and “wickedness,” and calls priests “hypocrites” and “anointed puppets” and the pope a “madman.”<sup>12</sup> Luther positions himself as a true Christian with a “duty” to “expose the craft and deceit of the devil” and to “again obtain God’s favor.”<sup>13</sup> Luther emphasizes his inheritance of the true Christian creed by resting all of his arguments on the Bible. His tone is not reconciliatory, as the intention of the text is to demonstrate the need to

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<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 70.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 136.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation*, 1520, course website, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Luther, *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation*, 3, 4, 5, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Luther, *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation*, 4.

suppress papal power and to decentralize spiritual authority. In his own metaphor, Luther wants to “blown down these walls.”<sup>14</sup> His conception of Protestantism is born in direct opposition to Catholicism.

The Lutheran opposition to Catholicism is much less present in the allegories of Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queene*, an English epic poem of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Spenser praises Protestantism and Queen Elizabeth I, who instituted it in England, through various allegories, including the names of his characters. The main character is the Redcross Knight, a Christian figure who is identified with Saint George – “on his brest a bloudie Crosse he bore”<sup>15</sup> – and thus with the nation of England and the virtue of holiness. Redcross is accompanied by Una, whose name means “truth”, and in Book I several misfortunes occur that attempt to separate the Redcross Knight from “truth” by bringing him close to Catholicism. First, the knight has to defeat the dragon Error whose “vomit full of bookes and papers was,”<sup>16</sup> representing Papal scriptures and Catholic propaganda against Queen Elizabeth. Later, the evil wizard Archimago, whose name “arche-imago” (first image) alludes to the iconoclasm of the Catholics, deceives Redcross. Spenser leaves no doubt that Archimago is a Catholic: the wizard “told of Saintes and Popes” and “strowd an Ave-Mary after and before.”<sup>17</sup>

But, *The Faerie Queene* is not in complete opposition to the previous Catholic tradition to the same extent as Martin Luther’s tract. Spenser is often quite respectful towards Catholic practices and traditions. The main character of the story is Saint George, a major Catholic figure, and the first book of *The Faerie Queene* is in fact very close to the legend of Saint George. Spenser also describes the knight as very young and

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<sup>14</sup> Luther, *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Book 1, cantos 1-2, course website, l. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, l. 177.

<sup>17</sup> Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, l. 315.

inexperienced, but bearing old armor in reference to England's Catholic past: "the youthfull knight"<sup>18</sup> wore "mightie armes and silver shielde, wherein old dints of deepe wounds did remaine."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the red cross on his shield, a "deare remembrance of his dying Lord"<sup>20</sup> in a specifically Catholic tradition, is meant to protect the knight. Other Catholicisms include the appearance of hermits, Archimago and Contemplation, and the symbolic baptism of the knight when he falls in the holy and healing water of the Well of Life at the end of the first book. All of this indicates a willingness to build the Protestant movement in England as a continuation of the Catholic past of the country.

Nonetheless, it would be simplistic to categorize any given text as wholly embracing its past or forsaking it. As we have seen, the same author can adopt seemingly conflicting attitudes. The main issue here is the definition of "past," which can mean any number of things. For example, what Augustine primarily attacks in *The City of God* is the religion and gods of the Roman empire, but not its literature, which he had praised in the *Confessions*. Augustine appears more than willing to let go of the religious past of the Romans, while hanging onto much of their literary and intellectual past. Second, the past need not be a block, but can be an accumulation of moments. While Martin Luther is critical of Romanist traditions, he is committed to a concept of a preceding "original" Christianity: his tract is designed to present him, and not the Pope, as the true inheritor of Christianity. Moreover, there is the distinction between historical and personal past: Augustine is often sympathetic towards his own spiritual journey towards conversion, even as he rejects the intellectual history of his society and the

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<sup>18</sup> Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, l. 119.

<sup>19</sup> Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, l. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, l. 11.

teachings emerging from it. Martin Luther, on the other hand, skirts introspective understanding by alluding only to a historical past.

Even among historical pasts, writers differ as to whether their perceived past is national, intellectual, spiritual, or, most usually, some mix of these. Spenser focuses on a society defined by the nation: his epic poem is about England as represented by his main character. So, Spenser considers all of England's rich history, including the Catholic past. Luther, while his broader object is Christian spirituality, still specifically addresses "the nobility of the German nation." And Augustine, while rooted in the intellectual environment of the late Roman Empire, focuses mainly on theological history. In each of these works, the author, by embracing a different attitude in the face of religious conversion, is also shaping a unique conception of the past.

## Works Cited

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