Religious conversion: epistemological and other considerations**

di *Gereon Wolters**

Abstract

I distinguish between *active conversion by free choice* and *pragmatic* conversion. Furthermore, I would like to distinguish between sudden conversions ("Pauline conversions") and conversions that occur at the end of a more or less long process of alienation from one's former religious affiliation ("Augustin conversions"). In historical reality, hybrid forms of these two extremes seem to be the rule. Conversion is a "faith change" that includes both so-called propositional attitudes (e.g. beliefs, religious beliefs, hopes, fears) and social preferences; I take Niels Stensen's (1638-1686) conversion as an example.

Keywords: conversion, belief change, rational choice, Thomas Kuhn, Niels Stensen.

1. Introductory Chat

So far, philosophers do not seem to have cared very much about the topic of conversion. Most of you have probably encountered the word only once in your philosophical life, that is with Thomas Kuhn, who compared in his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962, 1970) scientific paradigm change with religious conversion. I will come back to Kuhn soon. I myself wondered about conversion the first time about 20 years ago. At that time,

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I was a fellow in the *Center for Philosophy of Science* at the University of Pittsburgh[1]. There, I regularly went to a fitness club. Exactly next-door was a neo-gothic ecclesiastical building from the early 20th century that displayed an advertising poster: «The end of your search for a friendly church». When I recently checked on the internet, I could not locate this poster any more, but found on "yelp" interesting reviews and rankings of churches in Pittsburgh[2]. For example, this review by Christina W. for the "Encounter Church" (709 N Aiken Ave, Pittsburgh, PA 15206):

5.0 star rating 4/24/2016 - Encounter has been our church home for two years now and we can't recommend it enough. It is a great environment for our young family with people who come together to create a community that isn't based on judgment or dogma and allows us to engage with God where we are. - Also, they have dunkin doughnuts.

Or Amanda R.'s 5.0 Star rating of 4/28/2016:

A place for anyone looking for somewhere to belong, or just needing a cup of coffee and a smile. Great atmosphere, friendly people, and lots of community oriented events. An awesome place to be a part of![3]

Raised as a Catholic, it had never come to my mind that the "friendliness" of a Church or good coffee or dunkin donuts after service could be a reason for joining that Church and converting to the religion it represented. For some reason I entertained the idea that accepting a religion or converting to another had to do with *truth*. This is confirmed in many ecclesiastical texts of the Catholic Church, for example in Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (Faith and Reason) of October 1998. It opens like this: «Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth»[4].

I never completely forgot my Pittsburgh conversion surprise in the years that followed. Nonetheless, I seriously started thinking about doing research on the topic of conversion only ten years later, when, in 2006, I was a visiting professor at the "Sapienza" University in Rome. I had the good fortune to live in the Vatican. Among other formidable institutions,

[1] I am very grateful to its then director, my friend Gerald J. Massey, for his invaluable help in converting the original German English manuscript into what he calls real English.

[2] «The end of your search…», however, seems to be a widely used by Churches as an advertising slogan.

[3] https://www.yelp.com/biz/encounter-church-pittsburgh (seen November 2018).

[4] For the English text see: http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html. There one finds also translations into other languages like Italian.

there is the Archive of the so-called "Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith", which in greater days of the Roman Church was called "The Office of the Holy Inquisition". The opening of the archives of the Inquisition in 1998 by its then head, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, was – apart from his resignation in 2013 – in my view the greatest deed of the later Bavarian Pope. I spent numerous mornings in the archive, studying the reaction of the Inquisition and the Congregation of the Index with respect to evolutionary theory. I could not resist, of course, the temptation to look around a bit. There was so much fascinating material, because many great philosophers of the modern era had ended up on the *Index librorum prohibitorum* (*List of Prohibited Books*): single books or *opera omnia* of people like Descartes, Locke, Hume, Rousseau, Kant, Nietzsche, Sartre and many, many others were forbidden for Catholic readers. One of those, who finished on the Index, was also Spinoza (1632-1677). Happily, in his case there existed still the letter that denounced Spinoza to the Roman authorities. I immediately ordered it and found to my great surprise a well-known author, the Danish anatomist and geologist Niels Stensen (1638-1686), Niccolò Stenone in Italy. Stensen had initially been a fervent Lutheran. After witnessing the Corpus Christi Procession in Livorno on June 24, 1666, he had been seriously considering conversion to Catholicism. A few months later, finally, on November 7, 1667, he solemnly renounced the supposed Lutheran heresy before the General Inquisitor of Florence and delivered the Catholic confession of faith. Stensen knew Spinoza personally very well, because as a student of medicine at Leiden he had attended Spinoza's anatomic demonstrations in nearby Rijnsburg. Stensen was decent enough, however, to hold off sending his denunciation letter until a few months after Spinoza's death. We will come back to Stensen later.

2. Conceptual Considerations

We encounter religious conversion in a great variety of forms. There are conversions from one religion or religious denomination to another, e.g. from Catholicism to Islam or from Judaism to Lutheranism, or from Southern Baptism to Russian Orthodox belief. Then there are conversions in the framework of one's own religion. Such conversions consist in taking that religion seriously in a completely new strong and spiritual way. Here one speaks of "revivalism" (or "rebirth", as in "born again Baptists"). Several "Great Awakenings" in the United States, which encompassed Methodism and Baptism, and "Erweckungsbewegungen" as German Pietism, are examples. Revivalist conversions usually mean a complete change of life. The examples quoted by William James in his classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), are mostly of the revivalist sort. Very often,

such revivals consist mainly in overcoming alcoholism or other addictive behaviors and replacing them with religious fervor. In the following, I will only talk about conversions from one religion or denomination to another. Nevertheless, in this context, too, we have to make several basic distinctions: first, *active conversion* by free choice, second, what I would like to call *pragmatic conversion*. Pragmatic conversions are conversions that render your life more convenient, be it that they result in economic advantages or facilitate your social life. Marital conversion seems to be the most frequent example in our days. Forced conversion, i.e. conversion in order to save your life or freedom, is also a form of pragmatic conversion. Pragmatic conversions are without any doubt fascinating from a sociological, psychological, or political point of view. Philosophically, however they are rather uninteresting. Thus, we are left with conversion from one religion or religious denomination to another that occurs by free choice. Among such conversions, I would like to distinguish between sudden conversions and conversions that occur at the end of a more or less long process of alienation from the former religious affiliation. The sudden type I would like to call "Pauline conversions". Here is why from the *Acts of the Apostles*:

> And as he [i.e. the later St. Paul] journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do[5].

The conversion of St. Paul has been a great subject for painters. This is no wonder, because an instantaneous conversion under dramatic circumstances can be represented in painting much more easily than a conversion process that may take years without any spectacular events. Such process-related conversions I would like to call "Augustinian conversions". In the eighth book of St. Augustin's *Confessiones*, we learn that it took him twelve years of serious searching to, finally, find "the truth" in the year 386[6]. In historical reality, hybrid forms of these two extremes seem to be the rule.

[5] *Acts of the Apostles*, 9, 3-6: https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Acts-9-3.

[6] «Multi mei anni mecum effluxerant (forte duodecim anni)», when he read a certain passage of the letter to the Romans (7.15 ff.) and recalls: «statim quippe cum fine huiusque sententiae quasi luce securitatis infusa cordi meo omnes dubitationes tenebrae diffugerent» (Aurelius Augustinus, 2004, 342 and 362).

3. Kuhn's Comparison

It occurs to me that Thomas Kuhn in his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962, 1970) had Pauline conversions in mind. He compares with religious conversion those radical changes of a scientific belief system that define «scientific revolutions». He calls such radical changes «paradigm changes». Here are three quotes:

1. Though each may hope to convert the other to his way of seeing his science and its problems, neither may hope to prove his case. The competition between paradigms is not the sort of battle that can be resolved by proofs (148).

2. Just because it is a transition between incommensurables, the transition between competing paradigms cannot be made a step at a time, forced by logic and neutral experience. Like the gestalt switch, it must occur all at once (though not necessarily in an instant) or not at all (150).

3. The conversion experience that I have likened to a gestalt switch remains, therefore, at the heart of the revolutionary process. Good reasons for choice provide motives for conversion and a climate in which it is more likely to occur. Translation may, in addition, provide points of entry for the neural reprogramming [...] that must underlie conversion (*Postscript*, 204).

From these quotes, it seems clear that Kuhn draws on «conversion» in order to characterize the meaning of «paradigm change». What are the supposed characteristics of conversion to which Kuhn alludes?

1. Conversion is not a matter of rational proof (Quote 1).
2. Conversion is a case of gestalt switch, i.e. it comes "all at once" as a complete package (Quote 2).
3. Conversion is a form of neural reprogramming (Quote 3).
4. Good reasons may provide a favorable climate for conversion, but cannot enforce it (Quote 3, see 1).

From these characteristics, we may conclude that for Kuhn religious conversion like paradigm change is among other things also a cognitive phenomenon. It is the more surprising that conversion has not been a topic in epistemology. I do not know of any recent work on the epistemology of conversion, while there is no lack of literature about paradigm change. Furthermore, I have checked in vain three voluminous encyclopedic books about epistemology: "conversion" does not even appear in the index (Bernecker, Pritchard, 2011; Dancy, Sosa, 1991; Huemer, 2002).

4. Conversion is more than Belief Change

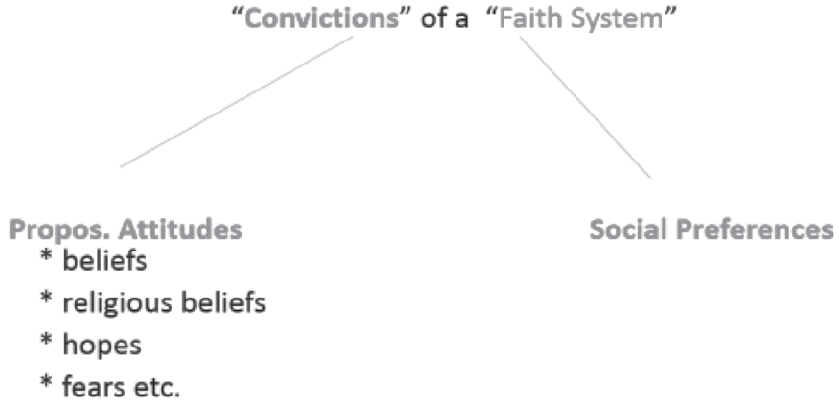
From an epistemological point of view, one is tempted to regard in a first approximation religious conversion of the sort we consider here as a ma-

jor change of one's belief system, occurring mostly in the subsystem of religious beliefs that one usually calls "faith". A little linguistic aside: the German noun "Glaube" translates both the English nouns "faith" and "belief".

If we regard conversion as belief change, we have some epistemological theory at our disposition that might help us to better understand it. Such epistemological theories rest on the assumption that a belief change occurs only if the belief-changing agent has *epistemological reasons* for changing some beliefs in his belief system. In other words, a change of beliefs requires *epistemic justification*. The term "epistemic justification", in turn, opens a wide field of possibilities. Epistemic justifications of *scientific* beliefs, normally, differ from epistemic justifications of *everyday* beliefs, and these again from justifications of *religious* beliefs.

Just a word about "beliefs"(Schwitzgebel, 2011 gives a short overview). Beliefs are usually regarded as "propositional attitudes". A proposition, in turn, is the meaning of a declarative sentence. Sentences that have the same meaning express the same proposition, e.g. «The Vienna philosophy department is great» and «Wienin filosofian laitos on suurenmoinen» express the same proposition. The standard formal expression of propositional attitudes is that person T has attitude A with respect to proposition P. For example, Donald Trump (T) believes (A) that he is the greatest politician in the world (P). In short, T *A that P*. In addition to beliefs there are other possible attitudes towards a proposition *P*. For example, a person S might *hope* that *P*, or might *fear* that *P*, or might *abhor* that *P*, *value* that P and so on. Indeed, for religious believers propositional attitudes like hope or fear are of utmost importance. In other words, the faithful might not only *believe* in the existence of God or paradise or hell, they might well *fear* God or hell, and *hope* to get into heaven. They might not only *believe* in miracles, they might also *hope* that one will occur in an emergency. In fact, propositional attitudes like hope and fear seem to be at least as important for religious faith as beliefs. That makes conversion a rather complex and not simply only a cognitive phenomenon and suggests that Kuhn's comparison of conversion with paradigm change is misleading. Sure, even in scientific paradigm changes there are extra-scientific factors at work that might be analyzed by social epistemology. However, in Kuhnian paradigm changes we do not find anything like, for example, those faith-based *individual* hopes and fears about reward or punishment for a paradigm change comparable to conversion in the religious context. Therefore, I would like to call conversion "*faith change*" and not "belief change". Individual and collective faith systems, accordingly, include, on the one hand, propositional attitudes like ordinary beliefs, religious beliefs, hopes or fears, and social preferences, on the other. The elements of

a faith system I will call "convictions". Conversion would then result as a major change of convictions within a faith system that is connected with a change of affiliation to a particular religious community.



Since only parts of the elements of a faith system of a convert are beliefs, several theories of belief revision that have been developed recently in formal epistemology are not of much help. I think here of approaches like the so called *AGM paradigm*, the ranking theory or Bayesian approaches[7].

Conversion as affiliation-relevant changes within a faith system results from friction, tensions or contradictions in such a system. In psychology, since Leon Festinger's seminal book *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957), one speaks of cognitive dissonance in a system. I would like to adapt the term "cognitive dissonance"[8] for describing the mental discomfort in a convert's faith system prior to conversion. To the cognitive dissonance in the faith system one would have to add some sort of "social dissonance". The act of conversion itself consists then in 1. changing basic convictions with the result of removing cognitive dissonance and 2. choosing a new religious affiliation by removing social dissonance. In other words, religious conversion appears to be a complex theoretical, emotional and social process.

[7] "AGM" after its main proponents Alchourrón, Gärdenfors and Makinson. Cf. e.g. Rott (2001), Spohn (2016), and part I of Arló-Costa, Hendricks, van Benthem (2016).

[8] The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines Cognitive dissonance as «the mental conflict that occurs when beliefs or assumptions are contradicted by new information. The unease or tension that the conflict arouses in people is relieved by one of several defensive maneuvers: they reject, explain away, or avoid the new information; persuade themselves that no conflict really exists; reconcile the differences; or resort to any other defensive means of preserving stability or order in their conceptions of the world and of themselves» (https://www.britannica.com/science/cognitive-dissonance, accessed November 2018).

From a philosophical point of view, conversions of natural scientists, and perhaps philosophers, seem particularly promising, because scientists in their professional life are used to giving justifications both for their scientific beliefs and for the changes of such beliefs. In short, scientists in general seem to be more justification-sensitive than other people are, because it is part of their job to convince their fellow scientists of their views, theories, hypotheses and so on.

With that, we are back at Niels Stensen, our Danish model convert from the first section of my talk[9].

5. Niels Stensen's Justification of His Conversion to Catholicism

Stensen was a remarkable scientist. In the mere 15 years of his scientific career, he achieved an incredible amount of important results in very different fields. He discovered among other things a previously undescribed anatomical structure, which in his honor has been named "ductus stenonianus". The parotid duct or Stensen duct is the route that saliva takes from the major salivary gland, the parotid gland, into the mouth. Furthermore, he showed that the heart was nothing else than an ordinary muscle and not the center of warmth as Galenus and later Descartes believed. He also was the first to correctly describe the production of tears, and delivered interesting work in embryology and about the pathology of hydrocephalus and on the structure of the brain. At the same time, he is credited with being one of the founders of geology and paleontology, who in addition arrived at important results in crystallography. In short, there can be no doubt that Stensen was one of the leading scientists of his age. In addition, he was fluent in no less than six living languages, wrote most of his work in Latin, while being able to read Greek and Hebrew.

As far as methodology is concerned, Stensen was strictly empirically oriented. At the same time, he was strongly influenced by the Cartesian methodical-doubt principle to strive for certainty of cognition by first doubting everything. In 1659, his last year as a student of medicine in Copenhagen, the 21-year-old Stensen kept a Latin notebook with excerpts and notes. Besides there praising Descartes, he wrote among other things: «With respect to the physical world it is good not to bind oneself to a readymade science. One should rather order everything that one can observe under certain categories and then find something on one's own. That might be at least a partially certain knowledge, if more is not available». Or, «those, who do not want to observe the works of nature itself, but – satisfied with reading others – form and invent various imaginations,

[9] The standard biography of Stensen is Scherz (1987-88).

sin against the grandeur of God» (German translation of the quotes in Bierbaum, Faller, 1979, p. 10).

Thus, at the beginning of his scientific career, Stensen was a strictly empirically-minded researcher, striving for certainty in his results. At the same time, he grew up as a rigorously orthodox Lutheran in a country where Lutheranism was the state religion and Catholic priests and monks were not tolerated on pain of death.

If we would like to understand life and interconfessional relations in Denmark and some other European lands in the 17th century, the comparison with political Islam in our days may help. Just think of the belligerent interferences of Saudi Arabia, Iran and other countries in Middle East. They remind me very much of the devastating Thirty Years' War that had ended in 1648 when Stensen was ten years old. Wars and terror attacks between Islamic denominations today are in full swing. Just think of Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan and several other countries, or of the attack on a Sufi mosque on the Sinai Peninsula on November 24, 2017 with more than 300 alleged "infidels" killed. In 17th century Europe, the relations between the Christian confessions were *mutatis mutandis* similarly tensed and polemical. Only a few people, Leibniz among them, thought of interreligious dialogue. Back to Stensen.

Still in 1659, the year of his "Chaos"-notes, Stensen went to Amsterdam and Leiden to continue his medical studies. Holland was a comparatively safe haven for dissenters of all sorts, e.g. Descartes himself. Stensen encountered Calvinism and many sects originating from this variety of Protestantism. He focused so exclusively, however, on his studies that he did not think very much about theoretical religious questions, although he remained a deeply religious person. His first major contact with Catholicism occurred in Paris, where he arrived from Leiden in 1664. In Paris, he met the brilliant theological controversialist Jacques Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704), who tried to convert him to Catholicism. In retrospect Stensen writes in his *De propria conversione epistola* of 1672 that he «held on to the paternal religion, even if not with the earlier firm conviction of its truth, because the study of the sciences and frequent travels diverted my mind to other occupations»[10].

«Divine mercifulness», as he himself called it, reached him for the first time when in early 1666 after travelling in France, he had arrived in Tuscany at the court of grand duke Ferdinando II di Medici. On the occasion

[10] Stensen (1952, p. 257): «patris tamen institutis semper inhaesi, non tam quod pristinam de illis fidei persuasionem in me deprehenderem, quam quod studia naturalia et peregrinatio semper inde me ad alias occupationes averterent» (German translation in Stensen, 1967, p. 34).

of the Corpus Christi Procession that he witnessed in Livorno on June 24, 1666 «the following argument came to my mind: either this Host is a simple piece of bread and those, who venerate it so much are fools; or it is the true body of Christ, and why do I not venerate it?»[11]. It did not come, however, to a Pauline conversion right on the spot. It took Stensen a few more months to finally recognize the supposed truth of Catholicism. In those months, above all two women heavily worked on converting him. Their positions, however, excluded a direct romantic relationship[12]. One was the Florentine nun Maria Flavia del Nero, who ran the apothecary's shop in the Annalena Convent in Florence; the other was Lavinia Arnolfini, wife of the ambassador of the then independent State of Lucca at the Tuscan court. 35-year-old Lavinia often invited Stensen to her home, and exerted remarkable pressure on the 28-year-old Lutheran. Stensen was particularly moved by her confession: «Oh, God is my witness, that if my own blood would suffice to demonstrate for you the necessity of your conversion, I would give my life in this moment for your salvation»[13]. Impressed by this offer of self-sacrifice, Stensen started to study theological literature, however without arriving at the result desired by Lavinia and others. Finally, on All Souls Day 1677, during a meal, Lady Lavinia lost her temper and burst out: «Sir, all these visits and conversations that I grant you contrary to my habit do not have any other motive than my zeal for your eternal salvation […]. Since you are not prepared to surrender to the truth you have perceived, I must not waste my time any longer. Do not come to me any more if you are not determined to become a Catholic!» (Scherz, 1987, p. 206). Stensen was greatly moved and decided the same day to convert. Two days later, he presented himself to the Inquisitor of Florence, and on November 7, 1677, he solemnly abjured the presumed Lutheran heresy and confessed his Catholic faith.

Analyzing this conversion, I arrived at results that I had not expected when I started my work. Let us first have a look at the Lavinia story. As I said in the beginning of the paper, I would have expected that a person filled with methodological strength in science, would exhibit comparable rigor in questions of faith. This means that with Stensen I would have

[11] Letter to Lavinia Arnolfini (late 1667): «sentii svegliarmisi nella mente quest'argomento: O quell'ostia è un semplice petto di pane, e pazzi sono costoro, che gli fanno tanti ossequi; o quivi si contiene il vero corpo di Cristo, e perché non l'onoro ancor'io?» (Stensen, 1951, p. 9).

[12] Gerald Massey (see fn. 1) convinced me, however, that it was most probably of great importance that the two were women.

[13] Stensen (1952, p. 258): «O, si sanguis meus sufficeret ad necessitatem illam tibi demonstrandam, testor Deum me vel hoc momento vitam pro tua salute daturam» (German translation in Stensen, 1967, p. 35).

expected careful theological arguments to justify a step as important for him as conversion. Therefore, it comes as a surprise that at least the occasion ("Anlass") for Stensen's conversion is a *social* one: the fear to not be admitted any more at the house of Lavinia Arnolfini.

Before I come back to his justification, a few biographical remarks. After his conversion, Stensen continued his important geological and paleontological work and travelled a lot. In 1672, he returned to Copenhagen as Royal Anatomist, but left this position to return to Italy in late 1674. In 1675, he was ordained a priest in Florence and two years later there followed in Rome his episcopal consecration and appointment by the Pope as "Apostolic Administrator" *in partibus infidelium*, i.e. in the lands of the infidels with his see in Hannover. In 1680, Stensen became auxiliary bishop in Münster where he got into political trouble because of his severity in all matters. In 1683, he went as a simple Vicar to Hamburg and in 1686 from there to Schwerin in Mecklenburg where he died that year at age 48, not least because he had ruined his health with excessive fasting. In 1988, Pope John Paul II solemnly beatified him. So far, he seems to be the only scientist who has achieved this distinction (Kermit, 2007, p. IX). His sanctification, however, is still open. Thus, today we can speak only of Blessed Niels and not yet of Saint Niels.

Back to his conversion justification. There are several letters and writings in which Stensen tries to present his conversion as a reasonable, not to say necessary, step. Furthermore, he is always ready to convince former fellow heretics of the presumed Catholic "truth". This missionary activity starts immediately after his conversion, and hardly any "heretic" he met could hope to escape becoming an object of Stensen's conversion attempts. In those attempts, which were often felt as annoying, he gives always *social* reasons for his own, exemplary conversion. However, unlike the *occasion* of his own conversion at Lady Lavinia's such social reasons now serve as argumentative justifications. He does this, for example, in his 1672 letter *De propia conversione* to the Dutch Calvinist preacher Johannes Sylvius that I have mentioned already. Here he gives the following reasons for his own conversion and partly for conversion to Catholicism in general. He distinguishes reasons that helped to gradually detach him from Lutheranism from reasons that caused him to become a Catholic. Among the reasons that encouraged his disengagement from Protestantism were 1. the great number (*multiplicitas*) of protestant sects in Holland, and 2. the moral conduct of many Protestants whose lives were not according to the principles of their religion (*modus multorum vivendi politicus*). Corresponding to this disengagement from Protestantism was for Stensen the social attraction of Catholicism: 3. «The moral conduct of several of my Catholic friends left a strong impression on me. Such conduct philoso-

phers do not promise nor have I observed it with my friends of other confessions»[14]. 4. The zeal of Lady Lavinia, who was prepared to offer her life for Stensen's conversion.

These social reasons for Stensen's conversion reminded me, in fact, of Christina W.'s 5.0 star ratings of the "Encounter Church" in Pittsburgh that I quoted in the first section: it is a group of nice people who just make you want to become one of them – in Stensen's case even without donuts, or good Italian pasta.

However, different from Christina W. and Amanda R. who are happy to be part of a community that at least for Christina «isn't based on judgment or dogma», for Stensen dogma plays an important role. The dogmatic reason – it is exactly only one – he gives in his letter to Sylvius recurs also in other letters and writings. Interestingly, his Cartesian striving for certainty that directed his methodology in scientific matters fuels also his approach to dogmatic questions. The central dogmatic question is about «the true Church of Christ» (*vera Christi ecclesia*). Of course, he is convinced that this is the Catholic Church, and he gives the following arguments to justify his conviction: *First*, a historical argument. He claims: «for some time it was uncontroversial that the Roman Church was the true Church of Christ»[15]. This included obedience to the Pope and «until the times of Luther (*ad Lutheri usque tempora*)» to die «with having the hope of an eternal life (*cum spe vitae eternae mortuos*)» – as a reward as it were. In a rather simplistic dealing with ecclesiastical history, he asserts furthermore that the controversy about the status of the Roman Church began with the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. This view on history blots out the Great Schism of 1054 between Rome and Constantinople, as well heretical reform movements like the Waldensians, who have been in existence since the late 12th century. He then «asks whether one should look for the true Church in one of the Churches of the reformers»[16]. The latter is to be excluded, «because the spirit of truth cannot be the author of opposed churches»[17], and at the same time none of those churches is able to show why it should be preferred to the others. In addition to this historical argument, Stenson gives a *doctrinal* one: there is a chaos of interpretations of the bible. This chaos results from the

[14] «Multum apud me valuit vita quorundam amicorum catholicorum, cui similem nec philosophi promittunt nec apud amicos aliarum religionum observaveram» (Stensen, 1952, p. 257; German translation in Stensen, 1967, p. 34).

[15] «Existisse aliquando in ecclesia Romana veram Christi ecclesiam extra controversiam est» (Stensen, 1952, p. 258; German translation in Stensen, 1967, p. 36).

[16] «Quaeritur, an in ecclesia Romana, an vero, in quadam reformatorum ecclesia vera Christi ecclesia reperienda» (ivi, p. 259 and p. 36).

[17] «Spiritus veritatis contrariarum ecclesiarum auctor non esse possit» (*ibid.*).

absence of an ecclesiastical authority that has the final say on these matters. *Third*, Protestants do not have the apostolic authority to administer the sacraments, like baptism, Eucharist or penitence. Jesus has given this authority to the apostles and the apostles have conferred it on the bishops they have ordained, from which in the Catholic Church a supposedly uninterrupted ordination chain has resulted. The reformers severed this so-called apostolic succession. Therefore, Protestant ministers are no longer in a position to administer a sacrament. They are, for example, no longer able to transubstantiate bread and wine into the body and the blood of Christ. *Fourth* and finally, Stensen is convinced that he has encountered in the Catholic Church «those characteristics of sanctity that in none of the other churches are promised, let alone found». These are Stensen's four *dogmatic* reasons for justifying his conversion. They are nothing else than applying the teaching of the *characteres*, i.e. the characteristics of the true church of Christ. The *characteres* of the true church doctrine originate with the second century Church Father Irenaeus (ca. 130-200). In 325, they became part of the so-called Nicene Creed.

This is all Stensen adduces as justification of his conversion from Lutheranism to Catholicism: *first* the social argument that it feels better to be with Catholics and belong to the Catholic Church than to stay with Protestants in their respective communities; *second* the *dogmatic* argument of the characteristics of the true church of Christ: unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity. They, in turn, bequeath certainty to first-order religious beliefs.

6. A Philosophical Evaluation

Let us start with Stensen's dogmatic argument for justifying his conversion. It strikes me, *first*, that Stenson does not mention any change in what I would like to call first-order beliefs of his faith system in order to justify conversion. Such a belief could have been belief in existence of the purgatory that reformers denied. Stensen even wrote a little tract about the topic[18]. Nowhere, however, does he adduce his new belief in purgatory as justification for conversion. Purgatory is a sort of waiting position for heaven, where after death those souls for some time must suffer, who did not live 100% up to the commandments of God. The saintly, in contrast, and the bad people go immediately after death to heaven or hell, respectively. Rather than first-order beliefs of the faith system, it is second-order beliefs that serve Stensen as justification for his conversion. These beliefs

[18] «Catholische Glaubens-Lehr vom Fegfeuer, mit klaren Zeugnüssen aus dem H. Augustino bewehret […]» (in Stensen, 1952, pp. 199-253).

roughly correspond to methodological convictions in scientific belief systems. Although one might also regard the unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity of the Roman Catholic Church as first order religious beliefs, they serve primarily as a justification of the infallible magisterium of the Church. To this magisterium is assigned the last word about the *genuine* first-order religious beliefs which relate to such topics as the works of God, the redemption by Jesus Christ, his resurrection from death, the important role of the virgin mother Mary, the Holy Trinity, the efficacy of the sacraments, and so on. In a sense, one might say that Stensen's dogmatic reason for his conversion corresponds to his Cartesian doubt-driven, empirically-certain methodology in science. As this methodology secures the certainty of scientific results, the magisterium of the Church, certified by her unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity, delivers certainty of faith. It is exactly this methodology or the certainty-assuring magisterium of the Catholic Church, respectively, that Stensen presents as the basis and the theoretical justification for his conversion. All other first-order belief changes ensue from this second-order change. The faithful just believe what the infallible Magisterium orders them.

Cartesian certainty-seeking methodical doubt stops at the supposedly certain reality of the *res cogitans*, Stensen's doubts stop at the infallible magisterium of the Roman Church. In other words, for Stensen the existence of an institution that guarantees infallible truth and therefore serves as the natural endpoint of all justifications of first-order beliefs is the main dogmatic reason for his conversion. Such an epistemological approach is called "foundationalist", as opposed to "coherentist" or sceptical approaches (cf. Kvanvig, 2011, p. 26) Stensen's choice of the Roman magisterium as theological *fundamentum inconcussum* is rather arbitrary. He does not give us any reason why the justificatory process of religious beliefs must end here. One has to add, however, that Stensen mentions an interesting restriction of his dogmatic argument: it suffices to show that the heretics are wrong, but it can give only a probability proof of the Catholic truth (*ut probabilia tantum sit ratione veritatis catholicae*; ivi, p. 260 and p. 38).

In our days, i.e. in the post-Enlightenment west, Stensen's dogmatic justification for his conversion – probability aside – might not sound very plausible, let alone convincing. He, for example, does not say a word about the reliability of those sacred texts on which supposedly rest both the infallible Catholic magisterium and the equally infallible faith system it has developed and guards through the centuries. This remarkable way of squelching doubt reminds me again very much of contemporary mainstream Islam which understands the Qur'an as the direct and non-disputable revelation of Allah that has to be taken literally. Rare attempts in

Islamic scholarship at introducing basic hermeneutic principles have been in most cases answered not with arguments but with death threats.

If we look back at Stensen's theoretical justification for his conversion together with the social argument, it seems to me that *his* conversion and possibly conversion *in general* might be understood via a special version of rational choice theory which has its disciplinary home in economics and the social sciences. From the perspective of rational-choice theory, conversion appears as a «function of the convert's evaluations of the social and cognitive outcomes of converting relative to not converting» (Gartrell, Shannon, 1985, p. 32).

Let us, in concluding, take a quick glance at the connection between conversion and relativism. The act of conversion, at least as long it is motivated by dogmatic, emotional and social change of mind, is on the surface an expression of a certain relativism. Converts regard the previous faith system as no longer absolute, since in the act of conversion important convictions change. However, at least for our model convert Stensen, conversion meant leaving behind one faith system that he had regarded for most of his life as absolute for another that seemed to him to be absolute forever. Relativism in the context of conversion cases like Stensen's, therefore, is a temporary domain of uncertainty between two absolutisms. The act of conversion occurs as nothing else than an attempt at gaining absolute certainty in a situation of cognitive dissonance. One might regard it as a consequence of such absolutism of faith systems that converts, in the eyes of their former brothers and sisters in the faith, become a special sort of traitors called "apostates". In the pre-Enlightenment systems of political religion in Europe, apostates were often threatened with death, as they still in large parts of the Islamic world.

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