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# Conversion to Christianity as cultural exchange? Medieval examples and comparative perspectives<sup>1</sup>

Alban GAUTIER

The process of conversion of a whole society to a new religion may be studied – and so it is, more and more, in historical literature – as an aspect of the history of culture, in the broadest sense of the term, as used by anthropologists: the conversion of a people or a country can be studied as the introduction into a given society of an exogenous “package” of cultural features, among which specific spiritual beliefs and/or rituals connecting humans to the supernatural are prominent<sup>2</sup>. It is in this broad sense of the word “culture” that I would like to offer some tentative and preliminary reflections for the study of religious conversion as a kind of “cultural exchange”: I would like to examine not only the question of influences and reception in the field of artistic works and high-flown conceptions to which we often confine “culture”, but the to-and-fro movement of all sorts of “beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviour”<sup>3</sup>, as well as artefacts and discourse – mostly religious in this case, but also belonging to other aspects of human life which we would not immediately define as such.<sup>4</sup>

1. I would like to thank NARIKAWA Takahiro 成川岳大 for translating this paper into Japanese, but also for his useful comments on the text.

2. Chris WICKHAM, “The comparative method and early medieval religious conversion”, in Roy FLECHNER, Máire Ní MHAONAIGH (eds), *The Introduction of Christianity into the Early Medieval Insular World: Converting the Isles I*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2016, p. 13–37.

3. This set of terms is used by James C. RUSSELL, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity: A Sociohistorical Approach to Religious Transformation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 211, where the author coins the acronym “BAVB”. On this book and its reception, see below.

4. See the warning by Paul LANDAU, “‘Religion’ and Christian Conversion in African History: A New Model”, *Journal of Religious History*, 23/1, 1999, p. 8–30: the very concept of “religion” is not a valid category for the study of many societies, especially “traditional” ones.

## Conversion as a cultural transfer

In the case of Christianity, the Early and High Middle Ages – during which most of Northern and Eastern Europe adopted a religion which was originally born in the Middle East, but which had been considerably modified through its adoption as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the course of the fourth century – constitute an important field of research. Between the fifth and the thirteenth century, regions such as Ireland, England, Scandinavia, Hungary, and the Slavic and Baltic lands of Central and Eastern Europe (with the exception of Lithuania), adopted Christianity, and along with it a remarkably stable selection of cultural features – some of which we would regard as “religious”, others being seen as “political”, “social” or even “economic” – which included of course a very original brand of monotheism, the cult of saints and relics, a clerical hierarchy, and monasticism, but also new naming patterns for both places and individuals, Latin or Greek literacy, coinage, administrative monarchy, and new educational standards and practices.<sup>5</sup>

Early medieval Europe is a very interesting field, and I will concentrate on it, but other areas and moments in the long history of Christianity may be of equal interest: for example, Mexico and Peru in the wake of the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century, Japan during what has been sometimes called the “Christian century”<sup>6</sup> (c. 1550–1650), Africa south of the Sahara in the past 200 years, or Korea in the same period, have been submitted to similar research by both historians and anthropologists, and provide useful comparisons for the early medievalist.

For a long time, the traditional way of studying the conversion of any society – especially by historians of the Church – has been to adopt the point of view of missionaries and other clerics who conveyed the new beliefs and practices, and to see Christianization as the top-down imposition of new, foreign,

5. Among many sweeping studies of this process in early medieval Europe, we may mention Robert BARTLETT, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change, 950–1350*, London, Allen Lane, 1993, esp. ch. 11; Peter BROWN, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, AD 200–1000*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996; Richard FLETCHER, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity*, New York, Henry Holt, 1997; Julia M. H. SMITH, *Europe after Rome: A New Cultural History, 500–1000*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005. A standard and recent textbook is Thomas F. X. NOBLE, Julia M. H. SMITH (eds), *Early Medieval Christianities, c. 600–c. 1100*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge History of Christianity, 3), 2008.

6. On this phrase and its use in historical literature, see Nathalie KOUAMÉ, “Japon. Le ‘siècle chrétien’. Son historiographie et ses lieux de mémoire”, *Histoire et missions chrétiennes*, 4/4, 2007, p. 170–82.

customs on a purely receptive local population<sup>7</sup>. Most of the written sources for the early medieval period, written in monasteries and other ecclesiastical contexts, actually espouse this point of view, and it is just natural that the first historians who tried to reconstruct the process of conversion adopted the bias of the texts they relied upon. But the history of early medieval Europe was not the only one which suffered such a one-sided approach: even for the study of societies like sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Japan, which can boast abundant local sources, it took some time before an *histoire à parts égales* really began to be considered in Western academia as far as conversion was concerned.<sup>8</sup>

A more recent trend has been anticipating, and then consciously echoing, the theory of “cultural transfers”, as defined by historians of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European culture: for Michel ESPAGNE, one of its most prominent advocates, *transférer, ce n'est pas transporter, mais plutôt métamorphoser*.<sup>9</sup> In this perspective, Christianization has been studied from the point of view of the societies that were the recipients of conversion: there has been for some decades now a growing interest in the way converted groups and societies, and particularly their elites (for whom sources are far more abundant), received, incorporated, and often transformed for their own use the doctrines and practices of specific religions. Thanks to the notion of a “cultural package” which accompanied the process, conversion to Christianity may be seen as a particularly relevant example of a fully blown “cultural transfer”. In studies of conversion as a kind of cultural transfer, societies are depicted in the act of “negotiating” and “accommodating” – important and recurrent words in this particular brand of historical study – their adhesion to the new foreign beliefs and practices.

For example, the cult of saints in Anglo-Saxon England was adapted and put to use in order to accommodate pre-existing conceptions of sacral kingship and the political agenda of ruling elites, through the development of the veneration of “martyred” kings and princes, often rulers who had been killed in battle. Edwin, king of the Northumbrians (r. 616–133), was in fact a victim of his competitor the (Christian) king Cadwallon of Gwynedd (r. 625–34), in

7. Carole M. CUSACK, *Conversion among the Germanic Peoples*, London/New York, Cassell, 1998, p. 19–20.

8. KOUAMÉ, “Japon. Le ‘siècle chrétien’”, art. cit.; the phrase “*histoire à parts égales*” (“equally proportioned”) quotes Romain BERTRAND, *L'Histoire à parts égales. Récits d'une rencontre Orient-Occident (XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Paris, Seuil, 2011.

9. “A transfer is not a mere transportation: rather, it is a metamorphosis”: Michel ESPAGNE, “La notion de transfert culturel”, *Sciences/Lettres*, 1, 2013, p. 1–8, esp. p. 1; see also the defining volume: Michel ESPAGNE, Michaël WERNER, *Transferts. Les relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand (XVIII<sup>e</sup>-XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Paris, Recherche sur les civilisations, 1988.

North Wales; nevertheless, from about 680, his body was venerated at the monastery of Whitby, a religious house in which his daughter and granddaughter were dominant. An individual who had not been killed by non-Christians because of his faith, but in the context of a purely political confrontation, had thus become a saint and a martyr. This way of defining a saintly martyr was not entirely new: already in Roman Late Antiquity, the quality of “martyr” had been given to individuals who had been unjustly killed, and who were hence entitled to call on God for vengeance; moreover, the case of King Sigismund of the Burgundians, killed in 523, provided at least one possible model.<sup>10</sup> Yet, it is in England that the phenomenon really took root and flourished, with many other examples of such cults in early medieval Britain, and after that in medieval Scandinavia (with, for example, the well-known cases of St Olaf Haraldsson (d. 1030) and his predecessor and namesake Olaf Tryggvason (d. 1000) and Central and Eastern Europe (with St Wenceslas [907–35] in Bohemia, or the brothers Sts Boris and Gleb [d. 1015] in Russia)<sup>11</sup>. It means that the very ideas of “martyr” and “martyrdom” as a religious category had been redefined in this new Anglo-Saxon context, and had become rather different from what they had been in the ancient Mediterranean context in which they had first emerged.<sup>12</sup>

This is indeed at the very core of the notion of “cultural transfer”: through its adoption in a given society, any cultural feature is necessarily transformed, adapted, accommodated to new conditions, to the point that it “becomes something else” (Michel ESPAGNE, as we have seen, writes of a “metamorphosis”), and a new social and cultural reality emerges. We may reflect briefly on another practice, that of praying for dead ancestors and friends, which was

10. Anne-Marie HELVÉTIUS, “De l’assassinat au martyre. La mort de Sigismund, roi des Burgondes (523)”, in Joël CORNETTE, Anne-Marie HELVÉTIUS (eds), *La mort des rois, de Sigismund (523) à Louis XIV (1715)*, Saint-Denis, Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 2017, p. 35–63.

11. František GRAUS, « La sanctification du souverain dans l’Europe centrale des x<sup>e</sup> et xi<sup>e</sup> siècles », in *Hagiographie, cultures et sociétés (iv<sup>e</sup>-xii<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Paris, Études augustiniennes, 1981, p. 559–72; Robert FOLZ, *Les saints rois du Moyen Âge en Occident (vi<sup>e</sup>-xiii<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Brussels, Société des Bollandistes, 1984; Susan J. RIDYARD, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England: A Study of West Saxon and East Anglian Cults*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988; Haki ANTONSSON, “The Early Cult of Saints in Scandinavia and the Conversion. A Comparative Perspective”, and Åslaug OMUNDSEN, “The Cults of Saints in Norway Before 1200”, in Haki ANTONSSON, Ildar H. GARIPZANOV (eds), *Saints and their Lives on the Periphery: Veneration of Saints in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe (c. 1000-c. 1200)*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2010, p. 17–37 and p. 67–93.

12. On the place of martyrdom in Christian thought and practice, see now Philippe BUC, *Holy War, Martyrdom, and Terror: Christianity, Violence, and the West*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.

arguably one of the central features of medieval Christian practice. The fact that, after the Reformation, it was retained by modern Catholicism, but rejected by most brands of Protestantism, has had important effects on the religious practices of converted groups all around the world, but not in a mechanical and uniform way, with Catholics adopting it in the same way everywhere, and Protestants constantly rejecting it. In several regions of the world, this very old Christian idea was conflated with other, indigenous ones, for example the cult of ancestors. Local conditions, and not the elusive “nature” of Protestantism, explain why some Protestant denominations in Korea do not hesitate to practice a ritual in memory of the deceased, called *ch’udo yebae*: it is partly derived from earlier, non-Christian rituals, in apparent contradiction with what is defined elsewhere and originally as orthodox doctrine.<sup>13</sup>

So the study of conversion to Christianity as a kind of “cultural transfer” has become well-established in modern historiography.<sup>14</sup> Returning to Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, we can see that historians of those periods are less and less inclined to speak of “Christianity” in the singular: the pattern which dominates now is that of juxtaposed “Christianities”, of numerous “micro-Christendoms” – to use a phrase coined by Peter BROWN – which were of course in contact with each other, but which had sometimes very different ways of understanding “what a Christian is”. This is why Christian or post-Christian societies have remained to this day both very similar and very different.<sup>15</sup> Depending on the historian and on the topic, aspects of either uniformity or diversity may be stressed, but it is now understood that Christianization never meant the adoption of Christianity (or its variants Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Protestantism) *en bloc*, as a monolithic and unchanging reality. In fact, if it were not the case, there would be no history of Christianity!

### Can conversion have a rebounding impact?

The notion of “cultural exchange” is, at first glance, much fuzzier and less well defined than that of “cultural transfer”; it is also, in some ways, a much more traditional way to look at interactions between cultures: questions of

13. James Huntley GRAYSON, “Christianity and Korean Religions. Accommodation as an Aspect of the Emplantation of a World Religion”, in Keith HOWARD (ed.), *Korean Shamanism: Revivals, Survivals and Change*, Seoul, Royal Asiatic Society (Korea Branch), 1998, p. 133–51.

14. For instance, it is prominent in many contributions of two recent volumes: Ildar H. GARIPZANOV (ed.), *Conversion and Identity in the Viking Age*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2014; FLECHNER, MHAONAIGH (eds), *The Introduction of Christianity*, *op. cit.*

15. Joel ROBBINS, “What is a Christian? Notes toward an Anthropology of Christianity”, *Religion*, 33, 2003, p. 191–9.

influences and of who began what are as old as the history of art and literature.<sup>16</sup> Is there a way that would allow us to give new relevance to that somewhat old-fashioned notion? Insisting on the existence of an actual *exchange*, and not only influence on one side and reception on the other, is clearly a first step in that direction. We know that the shifting of ideas and practices, just as that of people and commodities, is very often accompanied by movements in the opposite direction.<sup>17</sup> Does it mean that conversion to Christianity may be studied as a genuine “cultural exchange”, and not only as a “cultural transfer”? Actually, I believe that the results of processes of conversion on aspects of religion in emitting societies have been rather neglected.

In all missionary enterprises, there is indeed an emitter and a target: given the fact that the agency of the target must be taken into account (and this is what the “cultural transfer” model applied to conversion studies aims to do), is it conceivable to postulate a real exchange between emitting and receiving societies? This is in no way self-evident. In fact, conversion to any religion could even be seen as a typical example of a cultural shift which is intrinsically one-way: an individual or a society will adopt (and, of course, adapt and accommodate to their own use) a religion, a series (or even a selection) of beliefs and practices, and part and parcel of the cultural package that goes with them, but it need not have consequences on the people and societies from which the new religion originally came. Christian missionaries may have journeyed to other lands to bring the good word, but it does not seem that advocates of the cult of Lug, Odin or Perun (three divinities attested in “pagan” Europe in the Early Middle Ages) travelled back along the same routes to preach devotion to their gods for the sake of Christians who lived in Byzantium, Italy or Frankia.

In other words, can we say that the Christianization of Northern and Eastern European regions in the Early Middle Ages eventually affected the way Latin Christians lived and perceived their own religion, even in the core regions where that religion and its advocates had come from? This is exactly the position which was defended by James RUSSELL in *The Germanization of Christianity*, published in 1994. According to RUSSELL, the conversion of essentially rural Germanic peoples to Christianity between the fourth and the eighth century transformed that religion, which had been born in the urban world of the

16. See the stern remarks of ESPAGNE, “La notion de transfert culturel”, art. cit., p. 1–2.

17. See the observations made by Stéphane LEBECQ, “Échanges ou communications culturelles dans l’Europe médiévale? Conclusions”, in *Les échanges culturels au Moyen Âge*, XXXII<sup>e</sup> congrès de la SHMESP, université du Littoral Côte-d’Opale, Paris, Éd. de la Sorbonne, 2002, p. 313–121, esp. p. 313: in the study of “cultural exchange”, reciprocity is seldom envisaged.

Ancient Mediterranean, into something very different: instead of an individualistic and personal set of beliefs and practices, a “world-rejecting” religion which aimed at answering the anxieties of “status-inconsistent” persons confronted with social stress in the large metropolises of the Roman Empire, it became a holistic, hierarchical, patriarchal, strongly normed religious system, a “world-accepting” religion which was instrumental in preserving and even consolidating the social structures of converted societies. Most importantly, this transformation of Christianity was supposedly effective both in Germania and in the core regions: the development of private churches, new conceptions of sainthood and martyrdom, the success of prayers for the dead, the appearance of new notions of sacral kingship and holy war, the development of a powerfully dramatic liturgy were all, according to RUSSELL, aspects of this “Germanization”.<sup>18</sup>

The problem with RUSSELL’s approach is twofold. Firstly, his portrayal of “original”, late antique, Christianity is fundamentally flawed: even in their earliest period of existence, Christians may be described as both “world-rejecting” and “world-accepting”, and there was already some degree of involvement with social hierarchies, power and violence; in other words, “untainted” original Christianity is a myth.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, many developments which he identifies as consequences of the conversion of Germanic peoples were more specifically established in fourth- and fifth-century Christianity, that is in the “post-Constantinian” religious system of the later Roman Empire. It is probably true that the religious worlds, and even the whole vision of life and the universe, of Germanic barbarians and Romanized Christians were very different,<sup>20</sup> but as far as socio-political notions are concerned, the metamorphosis was already very advanced when the first missionaries crossed the Danube in order to preach the Gospel to the Goths in the mid-fourth century; and its subversive dimension had lost most of its edge when Charlemagne (d. 814) took his armies into Saxony in order to Christianize (and submit) the Saxons. Probably more than its adoption and adaptation by Germanic (or Celtic) barbarians, it was the alliance of Church and State in the context of the Constantinian compromise, and after that in the Romano-Germanic kingdoms, that really tipped the scales of Christianity in favour of a “world-accepting” religion, which indeed was a bulwark for established elites more often

18. RUSSELL, *The Germanization*, *op. cit.*, esp. p. 91–6, 102–3, and 209.

19. BUC, *Holy War, Martyrdom, and Terror*, *op. cit.*, ch. 2, emphasizes this point through a *longue durée* study of Christianity and violence.

20. This is rightly stressed by Marilyn DUNN, *The Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons, c. 597–c. 700: Discourses of Life, Death, and Afterlife*, London/New York, Continuum, 2009.

than a stimulus for social and cultural transformation. If that is true, then the lasting establishment of Christianity as a “world-accepting” religion was not primarily due to an exchange of cultural features, but to an internal transformation of the balance and nature of power within the Empire.

So, must we conclude that religious “beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviour” never travelled the other way round, from areas of conversion in the North and East of Europe to the Mediterranean core and its two main centres, Constantinople and Rome? Of course not, and even if the notion of a wholesale “Germanization” of Christianity in the Early Middle Ages must be rejected, in other cases isolated aspects do allow us to speak of a real “cultural exchange”.

A good example can be studied in the context of the Christianization of the Spanish “New World” in the sixteenth century. The first contacts with the native populations of America, and even more the decision, taken very rapidly by the Castilian authorities, to convert them, confronted Christian Europeans with unsuspected realities, and brought them to qualify or even reject well-established patterns of thought and strategies of conversion. Most theologians and exegetes had believed until then that the Apostles or their immediate successors had actually preached the Gospel everywhere on Earth, even “to the end of the World”.<sup>21</sup> The sudden revelation of the existence of new peoples, who were not only “pagans”, but had never heard of Christianity, was the proof that a significant proportion of humankind could not possibly have been in a position to be touched by the Christian message, accepting or rejecting it. I have said earlier that prayer for the dead within communities was a defining feature of medieval Christianity: so we should not be surprised to observe that, within the newly converted societies of America, as also in Japan, the question of the fate and treatment of dead, “pagan” ancestors, became a central problem for both missionaries and converts.<sup>22</sup>

But, most interestingly, that very problem rebounded on Christian European societies. Indeed, the debate had never been really abandoned or

21. There are several passages in the Bible which convey this idea: e.g. MATTHEW 28:19, MARK 16:15, Acts 1:8.

22. For Mexico, see Éric ROULET, *L'évangélisation des Indiens du Mexique. Impact et réalité de la conquête spirituelle (xvi<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008, p. 255–7; for Peru, see Peter GOSE, “Converting the Ancestors. Indirect Rule, Settlement Consolidation, and the Struggle over Burial in Colonial Peru, 1532–1614”, in Kenneth MILLS, Anthony GRAFTON (eds), *Conversion: Old Worlds and New*, Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2003, p. 140–74; for Japan, see Nathalie KOUAMÉ, *Le christianisme à l'épreuve du Japon médiéval, ou Les vicissitudes de la première mondialisation (1549–69)*, Paris, Karthala, 2016, p. 90–3 (I would like to thank Benoît GRÉVIN for this last reference).

settled during the Middle Ages: within years of COLUMBUS's (1451–1506) discovery of America, and probably without any knowledge of it, the German scholastic theologian Lambertus de Monte (d. 1499) published a *quaestio* on the possibility (or impossibility) of salvation for pagans.<sup>23</sup> But the discovery and the ensuing imposition of Christianity on Mexico and Peru created a brand new situation, in which the whole argument had to be redefined: a large, irretrievable breach had been open in the late antique and medieval doctrine of the damnation, through their own fault, of most (if not all) “pagans”, who had consciously rejected Christianity.<sup>24</sup> Many reassessments and *bricolages* had to be brought into that doctrine, and that happened not only on the missionary field but, eventually, in Christian Europe itself. In a context marked by the growing breach within Christendom opened up by the Reformation, Catholic churchmen had to reconsider their understanding of the centuries-old debate on the “virtue and salvation of pagans”.<sup>25</sup> Men such as Bartolomé de las CASAS (1484–1566), Michel de MONTAIGNE (1533–92) and many other less well-known writers did take part in this great effort of redefinition of Catholic doctrine: let us mention only Francisco SUÁREZ (1548–1617), arguably the greatest Molinist commentator of Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), who was answered by the *Messieurs* of Port-Royal, that Parisian stronghold of the strictest Augustinian doctrine.<sup>26</sup>

These debates, which today are almost forgotten, had indeed a long and significant aftereffect: they are probably one of the direct antecedents of the eighteenth-century notion of the “noble savage”. Catholic doctrine was forced to adopt a position that allowed more and more possibilities for the salvation of “pagans”,<sup>27</sup> until finally the whole doctrine was silently (but efficiently) put

23. Peter VON MOOS, *Heiden im Himmel? Geschichte einer Aporie zwischen Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit. Mit kritischer Edition der Quaestio de salvatione Aristotelis des Lambertus de Monte (um 1500)*, Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag Winter, 2014.

24. As shown by KOUAMÉ, *Le christianisme à l'épreuve du Japon medieval*, *op. cit.*, p. 64, Jesuit missionaries to Japan in the 1550s and 1560s were absolutely convinced that all “ancestors” were indeed damned, and that was the doctrine they preached, even if they saw it as a great obstacle to the conversion of the Japanese.

25. Louis CAPÉLAN, *Le problème du salut des infidèles. Essai historique*, Toulouse, Grand Séminaire, 1934, p. 220–5; John MARENBOON, *Pagans and Philosophers: The Problem of Paganism from Augustine to Leibniz*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015, ch. 12 to 14.

26. CAPÉLAN, *Le problème du salut des infidèles*, *op. cit.*, p. 267–85.

27. Stéphane HARENT, s.v. « Infidèles (salut des) », in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, Paris, Letouzey, vol. 7, 1922, col. 1726–1930. Some internal Western aspects of that “theological revolution” are presented by Guillaume CUCHET, “Une révolution théologique oubliée. Le triomphe de la thèse du grand nombre des élus dans le discours catholique du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle”, *Revue d'histoire du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 41/2, 2010, p. 131–48.

away at the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s.<sup>28</sup> Even if this example cannot be analysed as a transfer of originally non-Christian “beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviours” into mainstream Western Christianity, it shows how religious controversies within Christian Europe – in this case, debates over notions of “natural law”, “free will”, and the “natural goodness” of humans – were partly kindled by questions originally raised by missionaries who were striving to accommodate the spiritual interrogations of converted Amerindians about their non-Christian ancestors.

### **The missionary terrain: a hotbed of new challenges**

Can we find similar examples of realignment and redefinition of core Christian doctrines and practices in the wake of the early medieval conversion of Northern and Eastern Europe? Several cases could indeed be put forward, but because of the fragmentary nature of the sources, our understanding of them remains necessarily sketchy and tentative.

One of the most prominent cases, and arguably the clearest one, is the transformation of the practice of penance. When Christianity and monasticism were adopted by British (Welsh) and Irish societies of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, it gave birth to a very original conception of penance, which considered penitential acts as stepping stones on the path of perfection for monks, and eventually of lay people. Hence the development of a penitential practice that was both private and reiterative, as opposed to older forms of public, once-in-a-lifetime penance.<sup>29</sup> The development of “Irish” penance – let us call it Irish, for want of a better term – can be seen as a kind of cultural transfer: within Irish society, the Christian notion of penance was adopted and transformed at the same time.

What is really interesting here is that, beginning in the seventh century, this practice which had appeared on the edge of the Christian world was itself received (and, again, modified) in Frankia and in Italy, and brought about a profound transformation of the very definition of penance in the core regions

28. Bernard SESBOÛÉ, “Hors de l’Église, pas de salut”. *Histoire d’une formule et problèmes d’interprétation*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 2004.

29. Cyrille VOGEL, *Le pécheur et la pénitence au Moyen Âge*, Paris, Cerf, 1969. But it should be stressed that public penance was not the only kind in the Late Empire: see Rob MEENS, “The Irish contribution to the penitential tradition”, in Roy FLECHNER, Sven MEEDER (eds), *The Irish in Early Medieval Europe: Identity, Culture and Religion*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 131–45, esp. p. 132.

of Western Christianity.<sup>30</sup> Still, no more than a “Germanization” of Christian doctrine and practice, that “metamorphosis” cannot be defined as a kind of “Celticization”. Of course, aspects of Celtic and Germanic culture which RUSSELL would have called “world-accepting” and “holistic” – for example, juridical conceptions of retribution and negotiation between parties in conflict such as the Germanic *wergild* – were part of the reception of penance among converted barbarians, who understood and transformed it in their own way; but other ideas, which could more easily be described as both “world-rejecting” and “individualistic” – for example, monastic ideals and rules aiming for personal perfection – were also very important in the process. Indeed, only the to-and-fro movement of ideas and practices between Egypt, Italy, Gaul, Britain and Ireland can explain the complex birth of medieval conceptions of penance: no one-way movement of “influence”, not even the notions of “reception” and “transfer” of religious features into a given society, can give a rounded account of what happened between the fourth and the ninth century in penitential matters within both old and new Christendoms.

Another example, less conspicuous but very telling, may be briefly developed here. We saw how the discovery and Christianization of America opened a wide breach in the medieval doctrine which stated that “pagans” were all condemned to hell and eternal damnation. In fact, there existed an earlier, but much smaller breach, which concerned only one individual. Beginning in the twelfth century, both Latin and Greek Christian writers were fascinated and at the same time puzzled by a strange story: according to several *Lives* of Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604), the saintly pope had efficiently interceded for the soul of the Roman emperor Trajan (d. 117). Trajan had been a pagan, known to have persecuted Christians and brought about the execution of several martyrs, but the power of the pope and the infinite goodness of God had allowed him to escape eternal punishment, so that he was admitted into heaven.

This bizarre story was first told in a *Life* of St Gregory, written around 710 at Whitby in England, the already mentioned monastery where the body of King Edwin was venerated.<sup>31</sup> In a recent book, I tried to show that the idea was not only told there for the first time, but that it originated there and served the purposes of the abbesses of Whitby: Ælle (d. c. 588), Edwin’s father, is

30. Rob MEENS, *Penance in Medieval Europe (600–1200)*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, showed that some forms of private penance already existed in Late Antiquity, whereas public penance never really disappeared; but I think it is safe to maintain that the early medieval evolution reversed the relative importance of each (at least in discourse), and that the period saw a considerable development of private penance.

31. *Vita Gregorii prima*, ch. 29, ed. by Bertram COLGRAVE, *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great by an Anonymous Monk of Whitby*, Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 1968.

mentioned several times in the *Life* and was remembered as a positive character in Christian Whitby. The story of Trajan addressed the anxieties and the political agenda of the abbesses, who descended from both Ælle and Edwin: it was part of a local, Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Irish reception and accommodation of the Christian doctrine of salvation.<sup>32</sup> But what is most interesting here is that, briefly in the ninth century,<sup>33</sup> and more consistently between the twelfth and the fifteenth century, this isolated but well-established “case” of Trajan’s salvation became a recurrent argument in all debates concerning the virtue and salvation of pagans. It was retold, used and discussed by all kinds of medieval authors and artists:<sup>34</sup> scholastic theologians like Peter Abelard (1079–1142) and Thomas Aquinas, writers of history like the anonymous author of the German *Kaiserchronik*, political thinkers like John of Salisbury (d. 1180), popular hagiographers like Jacobus de Voragine (d. 1298), major poets like Dante (d. 1321), and even painters like Roger VAN DER WEYDEN (d. 1464).<sup>35</sup>

So this curious and seemingly illogical narrative – that of a pagan ruler who persecuted Christians, but finally went to heaven through the intercession of a major saint – seems to have been first conceived by an Anglo-Saxon nun or monk with a purely local agenda; but it had become part of the “legend” of St Gregory, a holy pope and a Doctor of the Church, which gave much authority to the story. Most of all, it provided the “proof” that such a salvation was indeed possible, even if very rare. Medieval theologians were forced to interrogate, and even rethink (in the case, for example, of Abelard<sup>36</sup>) the

32. Alban GAUTIER, *Beowulf au paradis. Figures de bons païens dans l'Europe du Nord au haut Moyen Âge*, ch. 5, Paris, Éd. de la Sorbonne, 2017; on the Irish dimension of that first attestation of the legend, see Colin IRELAND, “Some Irish characteristics of the Whitby *Life of Gregory the Great*”, in Pádraic MORAN, Immo WARNTJES (eds), *Early Medieval Ireland and Europe: Chronology, Contacts, Scholarship. A Festschrift for Dáibhí Ó Cróinín*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2015, p. 139–78.

33. Especially in the *Life of Gregory the Great* written in Rome by John the DEACON in the 870s.

34. See the classic study by Gaston PARIS, “La légende de Trajan”, *Bibliothèque des Hautes études. Sciences philologiques et historiques*, 35, 1878, p. 261–98; more recently, see Nancy J. VICKERS, “Seeing is Believing: Gregory, Trajan and Dante’s Art”, *Dante Studies*, 101, 1983, p. 67–85; E. Gordon WHATLEY, “The Uses of Hagiography. The Legend of Pope Gregory and the Emperor Trajan in the Middle Ages”, *Viator*, 15, 1984, p. 25–63; Marcia L. COLISH, “The Virtuous Pagan. Dante and the Christian Tradition”, in id., *The Fathers and Beyond: Church Fathers between Ancient and Modern Thoughts*, Aldershot, Ashgate (Variorum Reprints), 2009, p. xvii.

35. Roger VAN DER WEYDEN drew the original cartoons used for the weaving of the “Trajan and Herkinbald tapestry”, today at the Historical Museum of Bern in Switzerland: see Anna Maria CETTO, *Der Berner Traian- und Herkinbald-Teppich*, Bern, Bernisches Historisches Museum, 1966.

36. MARENBNON, *Pagans and Philosophers*, op. cit., ch. 5.

whole doctrine of salvation inherited from their late antique predecessors like Augustine. And in the 1490s, just when the first Spanish ships were reaching America, the strange “case” of Trajan was still invoked by Lambertus de Monte in his scholastic discussion over the salvation of Aristotle and other ancient pagan philosophers.<sup>37</sup> Over the centuries, a kind of “cultural transfer”, that is the reception of Christian ideas of salvation within an Anglo-Saxon converted society, had bounced several times between the eighth and the twelfth century, finally returning to the core of Western Christianity, where it challenged some of its most stable tenets. The breach was not wide, but it was there...

## Conclusion

So can conversion to Christianity be studied as a genuine example of cultural exchange, and not only as the assumption of one religious system into a receiving society? Sweeping theories like that of James RUSSELL, which claim to demonstrate that Christianity was completely “transformed into something else” through the conversion of other peoples, will always be open to criticism. But smaller, more specific examples, show that the conversion of “pagan” and “exotic” peoples did have effects on emitting Christian societies, and even sometimes on the very definition of Christian doctrine. Religious ideas and practices did not travel only one way: once they had been incorporated, accommodated, and sometimes deeply modified through a process of cultural transfer, some of them could rebound and have unanticipated effects once they had travelled back to where they had originally come from. Bede (d. 735), that most famous Anglo-Saxon Christian and monastic writer, was an inspiration for many missionaries to Spanish America in the sixteenth century: Church councils and letters written by clerics show that in newly-converted Mexico, the Christianization of traditional buildings, poetry and even ritual utensils was sometimes consciously conducted in conformity with what Bede (and before him Gregory the Great himself) had advocated eight centuries before.<sup>38</sup> Of course, the examples I have developed here should in no way be construed as proofs that religious ideas and practices travelled back and forth along missionary routes, and that we should safely describe conversion to Christianity as a perfectly reciprocal “cultural exchange”: I am convinced that it remained essentially a one-way transfer. Yet, reciprocity was part of the picture. In the

37. VON MOOS, *Heiden im Himmel*, op. cit.

38. Lesley ABRAMS, *Bede, Gregory, and Strategies of Conversion in Anglo-Saxon England the Spanish New World*, Jarrow, The Parish Church Council of St. Paul’s Church (The Jarrow Lecture for 2013), 2015.

case of the debate on the salvation of pagans, ideas about conversion had been travelling from Rome to England, back to Rome, then to Spain and into the New World: but at each step of the process, they had been profoundly transformed by the way each of their recipients had understood them.