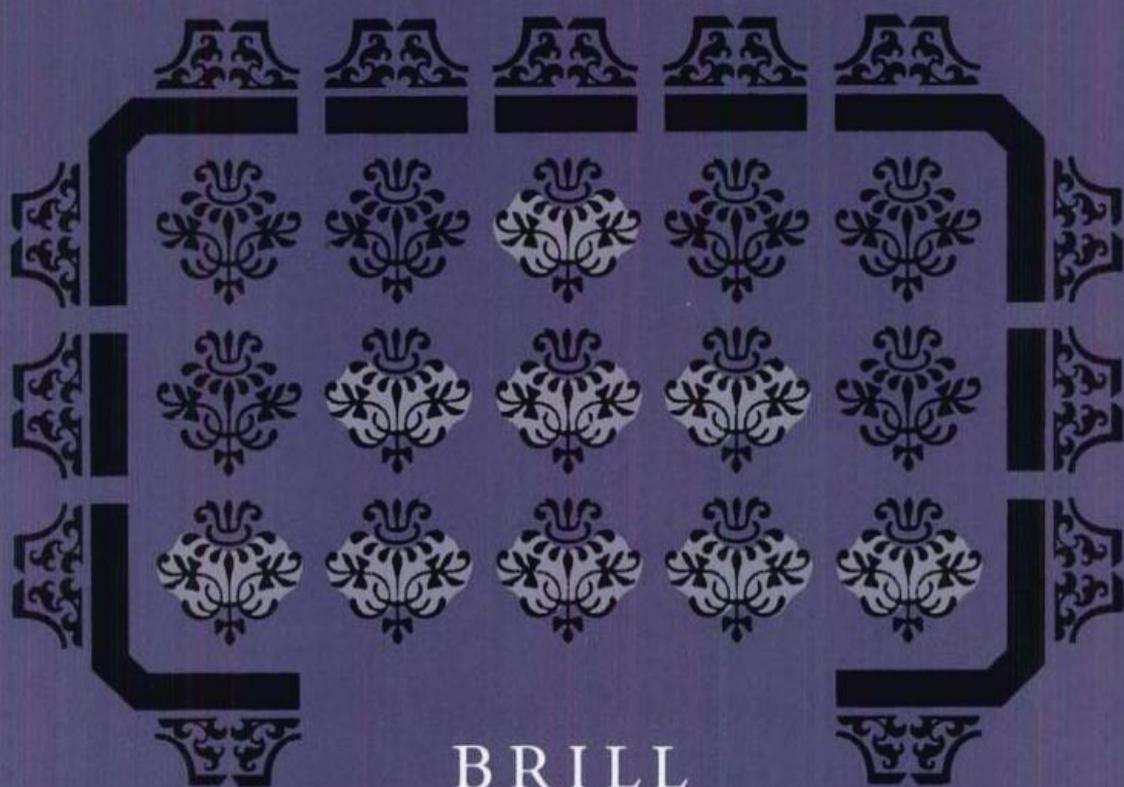


Transformations
of the Inner Self in
Ancient Religions

—
Edited by

Jan Assmann &
Guy G. Stroumsa



TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE INNER SELF
IN ANCIENT RELIGIONS

STUDIES
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(*NUMEN* BOOK SERIES)

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H.G. KIPPENBERG • E.T. LAWSON

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INTRODUCTION

J. ASSMANN AND G.G. STROUMSA

From their earliest forms down to the deep transformations they underwent in late antiquity, the religions of the Near East have usually been studied mainly for their theological ideas. In sharp contrast to this approach and particularly in the last generation, the study of Greek religion, for instance, has greatly benefited from new scholarly perspectives that emphasized both the anthropological dimensions of religion and the implications of theology, myth and cult for the evolution of anthropological conceptions. As is well known, the birth of the western conception of the individual has generally been attributed to ancient Greece.

The various chapters of this volume are the fruit of a project that was essentially concerned with aspects of the anthropological, rather than the theological dimensions of Near Eastern and Mediterranean religions, ranging from the "primary" religions of the archaic period and their complex developments in Egypt and Mesopotamia to the "soteriological" movements and "secondary" religions that emerged in late antiquity. Interpretive and comparative in nature, this project sought to uncover new dimensions of the relationships between religion and culture, and thus to better understand the formation of western anthropological conceptions. It is not only intended to bring new conceptual and factual results, but also to propose a breakthrough in method. We hope to have offered new models for the comparative study of the role of religion in ancient societies.

Recent years have seen the remarkable growth, among social scientists and philosophers alike, of the study of the person or "self". The last major effort in this trend is represented by Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989). This work is an impressive attempt at retracing the genealogy of the modern person, which, in a sense, could be described as an "anti-Foucault" statement of sorts. Michel Foucault's *Les mots et les choses* having been widely perceived as heralding the death of man. Taylor's book, however, is not devoid of religious presuppositions and implications. It is precisely because Taylor sees the sacred as being transformed, but not

quite evacuated, in the modern world, that "man" still remains a concrete presence for him. In his and Foucault's view, there is a direct correlation between theology and anthropology. Divine and human persons depend upon one another. The implications of such reflexions are of immediate and crucial importance. The construction of a new code of ethics is predicated upon a humanism that is religious in essence, if not directly linked to a church.

Although anthropologists (since Marcel Mauss's seminal study, *la personne*, published just sixty years ago) and philosophers alike consider the problem of the relationships between conceptions of the divine and of the human to be a crucial one, their solutions seem to be faulted, because they both lack the historical and comparative perspective which alone could generalize, confirm or infirm the points they are making.

Under these conditions, it seems to us that historians of religion are in a position to make a meaningful contribution to a problem which today stands at the very "front" of scholarly discourse. During the last generation, a new interest in the religious anthropology of ancient Greece has been developed, in particular by the French historians of Greek religion around Jean-Pierre Vernant and his colleagues, and thanks to the accomplishments of Walter Burkert. Important as it may be, however, ancient Greek culture and religion represent a very peculiar case in the world of antiquity. We sought to broaden results achieved by classicists to include the various religions of the ancient Near East, by offering a contribution to the archaeology of western conceptions of the person. By "religious anthropology", we mean here both the explicit and the implicit concepts of man, person and individual, as well as their frames of reference within religious traditions and "cultural texts". We sought to study these concepts in a comparative way throughout the religious cultures of the Near East, Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean. The chronological scope of our investigation begins with archaic religions such as those of Egypt and Mesopotamia and proceeds from there to the deep transformations of monotheism and salvation religions in late antiquity: Rabbinic Judaism, Early christianity, Gnosis, Manichaeism, Sasanian Zoroastrianism.

This period of two millennia witnessed several decisive transformations and revolutionary disruptions. The first religious revolution in the recorded history of mankind is the monotheistic cult of Aten,

instituted in the middle of the 14th c. B.C.E. by the Egyptian king Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten). This innovation, however, did not lead to any lasting tradition, because it was exterminated shortly after the death of its founder. Later revolutions that rejected both the “own” tradition as well as other religions (which now became stigmatized as “paganism”) changed the world in a way that still determines the modern situation; they include Zoroastrianism, the prophetic religion of Ancient Israel from its early stages of “Monoyahwism” to its latest, developed monotheistic stages, furthermore Christianity, Judaism, Manichaeism, Gnosticism, Hermeticism and other movements of Late Antiquity until the rise of Islam, in many respects the most typical secondary religion.

Common to all these new religions is the introduction of a new distinction and the shifting of a boundary. The new distinction concerns truth and untruth in religion. Primary religions are based on distinctions such as sacred and profane, pure and impure, but not on the distinction between truth and falsehood. The idea of “false” or “fictitious” gods is as alien to primary religions as it is constitutive of founded religions from Akhenaten until Mohamed. This new distinction leads to the shifting or redefinition of the boundary between sacred and profane or pure and impure, which is now transformed from an inner into an outer boundary separating “us” from “them”. The distinction between priests and profane people now tends to be applied to the difference between the members of the own group, who come to be defined as “a kingdom of priests,” and outsiders, who are excluded as impure and profane. Even in the context of Christianity, where many “primary” institutions such as priesthood, hierarchy and sacred mysteries survive or were even re-introduced, the outer boundary by far dominates all inner distinctions.

It seems obvious that these changes on the plane of religion and theology imply corresponding changes on the plane of anthropology, that is, new concepts of man, of the person, of community and society and of the human condition in general. Until now, religious anthropology has stressed continuities and similarities. The primary interest in studying topics such as the sacred, sacrifice, myth, prayer, shamanism, etc. was to uncover the common phenomenology of *homo religiosus*. In this volume, we are following a different, if not opposite track. Our interest lies in the search for disruptions, discontinuities, changes, redefinitions and innovations, shifts and mutations,

all of which may be used to support our hypothesis that radically different forms of religion must necessarily entail radically new forms of *homo religiosus*.

Both parts of this volume concentrate on themes that are closely related to the genesis of what Paul and Augustine defined as “inner man”, which is undoubtedly of fundamental importance for the rise of the western subject. But instead of dealing with so broad and abstract a subject in general and theoretical terms, we preferred to concentrate on specific problems and phenomena that would allow us to study the origins and transformations of early conceptions of human interiority on a more concrete level. For this purpose, we chose such concepts that were in themselves already related to forms and aspects of inner transformation, such as initiation, conversion, purification, confession, repentance and penitence. The first part of the volume concentrates on “conversion” as a quintessential form of inner transformation, including forms and concepts of confession and repentance that emphasize the aspect of transformation. The second part follows up, in more detail, on the problem of guilt associated with rites of confession and repentance. We think that this method of focussing on specific questions, rather than constructing “grand narratives”, will eventually lead to a historically more accurate view of the origins of modernity and western individualism. The present volume can only be a beginning.

The “Grand Narrative” that we are attempting to replace with detailed studies in historical analysis was presented in its most accomplished and influential form by Karl Jaspers, whose concept of “Achsenzeit” (Axial Age) continued a long tradition dating back to Anquetil-Duperron in the 18th c. Jaspers’ concept of “Achsenzeit” refers to precisely the same transformations of religion around the middle of the first millenium B.C.E. which we would classify as the emergence of “secondary religions”. Jaspers, however, is more impressed by the temporal than by the structural analogies. The prophets of Israel, the first Greek philosophers, Zarathustra, the Buddha, Confucius would have been, roughly, contemporaries. In the wake of Jaspers, the Israeli sociologist S.N. Eisenstadt advanced the proposal to investigate what he calls “breakthroughs” in religious attitudes of the ancient world and their relationships with transformations of society and culture. Eisenstadt’s model has the great advantage of being both detailed and dynamic. It transforms the concept of “Axial Age” into a process of “axialization” and even allows for contrarious

processes of “deaxialization”. For Jaspers, on the other hand, the world of “pre-axial” cultures was simply a polemical and eurocentric construction: the counter-image of everything that Jaspers hailed as the classical norms and values of “axiality”. In spite of his efforts to extend the concept of axiality to the Asian world at large, his values remained strictly European.

We, for our part, intend to focus even more intensively on the question of “transformation” by approaching it from both sides: from the side of “primary religions” or “pre-axial cultures”, which we investigate not only in their “classical”, but also in their late and latest stages, and from the side of “new” religions or “axial cultures”. And we intend to study the dialectical relationships between transformations of theology and anthropology, rather than the whole spectrum of the relationships between religion, society and culture. We do insist, however, on the comparative frame of the collective research.

In other terms, we seek not so much to enrich the objective knowledge of a limited field, but rather to influence our conceptions of the interrelationships between religious and cultural phenomena.

These chapters represent versions of papers presented at two workshops, jointly organized by the editors within the framework of a research grant from the German-Israeli Foundation for Scientific Research and Development (GIF). This grant permitted an investigation of Religious Anthropology and its Transformations in the Ancient and Late Antique Near East. The papers of a first workshop (on “Soul, Self, and Body”) held at Neve Ilan, Israel, in February 1995 with the cooperation of the Jacob Taubes Minerva Center for Religious Anthropology at Bar Ilan University, have been published in this series by Albert Baumgarten and the editors of this volume. At a workshop held in Heidelberg, Germany, in July 1996, we decided to focus on “Confession and Conversion.” The workshop held in Jerusalem in October 1997 had “Guilt, Sin, and Rituals of Purification” as its theme. Since the scope of the project was so broad from a chronological point of view, and comparative in essence, we sought to have at least a kernel of scholars participate in both workshops, which is the reason why six of the participants contributed two chapters, one in each part of the volume. This fact may actually provide some thread of continuity between the two connected yet different aspects of the “transformations of the self” discussed in parts one and two. Although we sought to cover as many as possible of the different

cultures and religious communities involved, we make no claim of having been exhaustive. What we hope to have gained (and conveyed) is a sense of the dynamics and dialectical relationships between the various Near Eastern and Mediterranean religions from the archaic period to late antiquity, not to forget the highly enriching experience of having studied these religions together.

We wish to express our deep gratitude to the German-Israeli Foundation and its Director, Dr. Amnon Barak, who supported our project in the most generous way during the years 1994–1998. We also wish to thank Albert Baumgarten, who was extremely helpful in co-organizing the first conference on “Self, Soul and Body” at Neve Ilan and in coediting the first volume. The other two conferences were held, respectively, at the *Internationales Wissenschaftsforum Heidelberg* and the *Ratisbonne Pontifical Institute for Jewish Studies*, and we would like to thank Prof. Michael Welker, Dr. Theresa Reiter and Father Elio Paseto for their most kind hospitality and support. Members of the team of investigators were, at Jerusalem, Dr. Brouria Biton-Ashkeloni and Dr. Serge Ruzer, and at Heidelberg Dr. Robert Meyer. Their share in the results of our venture is as big as our gratitude for their never-failing engagement and dedication.

PART ONE

CONFESSION AND CONVERSION

FROM THE PARADIGM OF LAMENT AND HEARING TO THE CONVERSION PARADIGM

FRITZ STOLZ

1. *Preliminary remarks: Speaking of conversion*

1.1 *Conversion as individual experience*

From the very beginnings of the scientific study of religions, conversion has been a prominent theme of research. About one hundred years ago, psychological studies were carried out on conversions in North America; indeed, this marked the beginning of the field of the psychology of religion. The most prominent representatives of the developing discipline made contributions to the topic: Starbuck published an empirical study stressing the juvenile setting of the event,¹ Leuba underlined in a phenomenological study the ethical character of conversion,² and James dedicated two chapters of his epoch-making work on religious life to this specific experience.³ Conversion seemed to be the center of religion in general, the Christian model was attested to be representative for the world of religions as a whole. Arthur Darby Nock in his introduction to a new edition of James' work in 1960 explicitly pointed to this supposition, himself consenting.⁴ The idea of religion, in this regard, is highly individualistic: Religious experience directs human beings towards moral perfection; it reveals the mystic underground of reality to them; and it makes them aware of the hitherto hidden dimension of the person, the "uttermost self". These are typical modern qualities of religion; conversion seems to be a paradigm of religious modernity.

¹ E.D. Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religions* (London: Scott 1899).

² J.H. Leuba, "Studies in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena", *American Journal of Psychology* 7 (1896).

³ W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study in Human Nature* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1977, reimp. of the 1960 edition, originally 1902): 194ff.—James explicitly refers to the previous studies of Starbuck and Leuba.

⁴ "Most of the material is drawn from Christian sources . . . James would probably have liked G. van der Leeuw's dictum that there are only quite few thoughts which it is given to humanity to think about the divine . . ." A.D. Nock in the reedition of James, *Varieties*: 20–21.

Nock, for his part, approached conversion from the historical side. His famous work on religious history from Alexander the Great to Augustine deeply influenced historical research on the Hellenistic and early Christian era in this century.⁵ Thus there are two prototypical epochs of conversion: Late antiquity on the one hand, and the Protestant milieus of Pietism, Revivalism, Puritanism and Evangelicalism on the other.

Both concepts of conversion are shaped by a certain type of individualism. The typical conversion of Antiquity, from one religion to another, requires an individual who is able to choose a personally adequate religion, against the traditional social bonds. The conversions of Protestantism require an analogous individual who is able to turn away from worldly behavior, from the values of the surrounding majority. In both cases, conversion concerns the "inmost self" which is constituted by a religious choice; religion belongs to this "inmost self", choosing its personal "truth". The phenomenological and comparative approach points to an anthropological level which is elementary for religion in general. According to many scholars even today, religion is conceptualized in correspondence to the "inmost self," which came into being (not exclusively, but to a certain extent) in the historical contexts of conversions.⁶

1.2 *Conversion as social pattern*

In the last decades, however, a new approach to the phenomenon has developed. Sociologists of religion have revised the case of conversion, stressing the social aspect of the process. Conversion is now treated as a pattern of communication.⁷ Narrations of conversions

⁵ A.D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933, ²1961).

⁶ The influence of William James for the formative phase of religious studies is hard to overestimate. In the German speaking world, the work of Rudolf Otto had a similar effect.

⁷ The approach developed in English speaking countries, cf. W.E. Conn (Ed.), *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation* (New York: Alba House, 1978); J.A. Beckford, "Accounting for Conversion", *The British Journal of Sociology* 29 (1978): 249-262; J.H. Fichter, *Autobiographies of Conversion* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1987); P.G. Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation. A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Later this type of research was adopted by German-speaking scholars, B. Ulmer, "Konversionserzählungen als rekonstruktive Gattung. Erzählerische Mittel und Strategien bei der Rekonstruktion eines Bekehrungserlebnisses" *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 17 (1988): 19-33; M. Wohlrab-Sahr/H. Knoblauch/V. Krech (Eds.), *Religiöse Konversion: Systematische und fallorientierte*

have been analyzed; they prove to be stereotyped in a very high degree. The styling of narrations depends on the group that forms the social background of the conversion experience. This means that experience is formed by the pattern of communication; it is not possible to describe the experience itself in a form prior to that formed by communication patterns. This does not mean that experience disappears completely in communication; we have to take into account a mutual dependence: Experiences are shaped by patterns of communication, and patterns of communication create new experience. The variability of the conversion pattern depends on the rigidity of the classification system that is applied within a group.

Patterns of conversion are not invariant; they develop in parallel with the development of the group as a whole; e.g., conversions in the context of Jehovah's Witnesses have changed typically according to the structure and the organization of the community.⁸

Christian evangelical narratives about conversion emphasize that conversion is the center of the biography; thus it is the most individual point of one's life. Many evangelical Christians know the exact date and the exact time of conversion. But even if conversion is a very individual experience, it is not original at all; all members of the group tell stories about very similar experiences.

Conversion means a complete reversal of one's life. A life of darkness, of perversion, of sin turns into a redeemed life. Even members who have grown up in the group, i.e. children of evangelical parents, experience such conversions. An observer from outside would not notice a change of behavior. In this case, the formative power of the communication pattern is obvious: Life cannot really be understood without the turning point of conversion—so conversion *has* to happen, even if it seems not to be necessary. The pattern of communication is so strong that it induces the experience.

A last remark is important. The word "conversion", although a traditional term of Protestant theology, has become something like a shibboleth for a certain type of Protestantism; it is characteristic of evangelical or even fundamentalistic groups, at least in Europe. If you ask a non-evangelical Christian if he is converted, he will hesitate

Studien in soziologischer Perspektive (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag, 1996) a.o. Introduction into the present sociological and psychological discussion: L.R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁸ Beckford, Accounting.