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**BOOK REVIEWS: GENERAL AND MISCELLANEOUS**

Conversion and Text. The Cases of Augustine of Hippo, Herman-Judah, and Constantine Tsatsos. By Karl F. Morrison. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia. 1992. Pp. xx, 193. 535.00 cloth; 514.95 paperback )

Conversion and Text is a series of essays in which Karl F. Morrison, Lessing Professor of History and Poetics at Rutgers University, explores three very different accounts of three different conversions. He begins by observing that reflection on an experience is different from the experience itself. Reflection is retrospective, self-conscious, and motivated; experience, immediate and, in itself, ineffable. Conversion accounts straddle this gap. Whether the conversion itself is actual (the case with Augustine, and perhaps Herman-Judah) or fictional (the case with Tsatsos, and perhaps Herman-Judah), the account is, in Morrison's idiom, "fictive"--that is, constructed, without any prejudice to its historicity. These fictive strategies of presentation (text) and the religious experiences they articulate (conversion) are the twin subjects of Morrison's book.

The spirit of the essay seems primarily literary, and indeed its final third concentrates on the fiction of a modern Greek author (Tsatsos), concluding with a nod to James Joyce. Morrison presents no single theory of interpretation as he works from account to account, nor does he seem especially concerned to situate each in its own historical context (though there is some of this). Mostly, these individual texts serve Morrison as the occasion for various pronouncements. (E.g.: "Conversion was not an abrupt, dramatic peripety, but rather an enduring predicament," p. 3; "Truth [i.e., in the Confessions] was not in the information conveyed so much as in the piety enkindled," p. 36; "The meager place of eroticism in Herman-Judah's account excluded participatory bonding, whether dialectical or empathetic," p. 72; "The study of conversion [is] a venture in poetics," p. 145.) These statements are made, not argued; thus, they either strike the reader as true or not.

I hope that I am not being untrue to Morrison's goals and interests if I raise some

questions about his handling of the historical material, especially as regards the Confessions and the twelfth-century Short Account of His Own Conversion (for which Morrison provides a translation, pp. 76-113).

Page x: "In conception and in vocabulary, Augustine distinguished supernatural conversion from its formal signs.... For conversion was a turning to God, not to Christianity or the Church." I think this is wrong: God, for Augustine, at least when he writes of and in his own lifetime, can be found only in the true (i.e., Catholic) Church: this is the point of Books 6 and 7 of the Confessions, and the point as well of Augustine's adducing the story of Victorinus in 8.2,3 -4, just before recounting his own decision to convert. ("Do walls make the Christian?" Answer: Yes.)

Page 5: "The singularity of [the Confessions] is indicated by the fact that he never referred to his conversion in any other of his voluminous writings." This puzzled me; either Morrison is wrong, or he is using "referred" or "conversion" in a very specialized sense that he does not explain. For Augustine's other references to his conversion and the issues leading up to or resolved by it, see c. Acad. 2.2,6; cf. *de beata vita* 1.4, *de util. cred.* 1,2; 8,20; *de ii an.* 9.11, and c. *ep. Man.* 3.3--all mini-rehearsals for the Confessions.

Page 6: Morrison suggests that Augustine was free to develop the 'fictive' elements in the story of his conversion because most intimates from the period of his conversion had died. "Few witnesses remained to add, modify, or contradict." He seems to mean that 'fictive' equals 'fictional,' implying if not actually false then at least wide of the truth. Two points. First, Alypius, together with Augustine during the events in Milan, was his fellow bishop back in Africa; surely this would at least impede fictionalizing. Second, the simple observation that many of the players in the events of 386 were dead by 397 does not in itself make the case.

Page 7: The Confessions has "a serenely retrospective character." It never struck me this way. See, for instance, Brown's description in his chapter on the Confessions in Augustine of Hippo; more recently, James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions* (Oxford, 1992), I.xli--li.

Pages 9 - 14 and passim: Morrison states that Augustine had the Donatists in mind as the primary target of his polemic. Since he does not reveal the places in the Confessions that suggested this to him, I cannot argue against it; but this does seem unlikely. Inasmuch as the Confessions has a target, it is the Manichees; and as Pellegrino demonstrated a half-century ago, the chronology of Augustine's controversies weighs against his having the Donatists in view here (*Les Confessions*, pp. 37 - 39; now O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, 111, 236, and n. 27).

Pages 39 ff.: Case Two opens with a consideration of the factual status of Herman-Judah's Account. The question is: does the text represent the actual conversion of a real twelfth-century Jew to Catholicism, or is it a pious fiction? Morrison holds, essentially, that it does not matter, since all conversion accounts, being literary, are fictions (p. 40). But surely it does matter, and in fact Morrison's discussion proceeds as if he assumes authenticity. Thus he speaks of the narrator as "suppressing facts about his past life" (p. 44); if this is fiction, the author had no "past life" (i.e., in Judaism) to suppress. An assumption that this story is Christian fiction (I can't tell) would at least explain some of its author's curious unfamiliarity with Jewish traditions, practices, or texts, which Morrison passes on without comment.

For example, European Jewish communities, both by the laws of the lands they

sojourned in and by their own laws (especially since 70 A.D. with the cessation of the Sanhedrin) could not exercise capital punishment. Morrison believes that some secret community court passed a judgment of death by stoning (p. 42); the text, more plausibly, says only that some Jews wanted to kill Herman-Judah (chap. 14 and 15, pp. 102 - 104). Similarly page 44: "His toying with Christianity and subsequent baptism was apostasy, a crime that carried the sentence of death" (my emphasis). Apostasy was a capital offense in Christianity and in Islam, not in Judaism. Jews mourned the apostate as one dead, but did not execute him; this was true when the Sanhedrin still convened (e.g., the case of the notorious Tiberius Alexander, Philo's nephew) and true thereafter. Cf. Gregory of Tours, HF 5.11 (unpleasant, but not fatal; and Merovingian Jews would have had more freedom of movement than their twelfth-century co-religionists).

Herman-Judah claims that, once he had taught himself Latin, "I came to know how to read scripture" (chap. 2, p. 81). This is curious, since the author later claims to be literate in Hebrew (p. 104), to frequent the synagogue, and to be able creditably to claim contemplating studying in yeshiva: would he not have read Scripture before going to Mainz?

Page 95: Why would this Jewish father have insisted on a marriage if Herman's religious allegiances were so notoriously suspect? Herman does not say, and Morrison does not comment.

Page 43: a question of tone. Crusaders on their way to Jerusalem in 1096 butchered Jewish communities along the Rhine. Many Jews, not waiting to be murdered by the mob, took their own and their children's lives, perhaps (if they had time) by severing the carotid artery, just as priests had once sacrificed animals in the Temple. The memory of these terrible pogroms lives on in Jewish liturgy, and in medieval commentaries on the akedah (the binding of Isaac).

On these events Morrison writes: "These [post-Crusade, Jewish] writings call for vengeance with a burning intensity matched by the motive of revenge that impelled the Crusaders" (my emphasis). Jewish prayers call for God to avenge the (recent and unprovoked) slaughter of these communities. But the Crusaders were human agents, "avenging" a distant and more abstract "wrong"--alleged Jewish deicide--motivated in part by their own anti-infidel ideology, in part by the lure of loot, in part by simple thuggery; not waiting on God, they exact their punishments themselves. There is no moral parity here.

Later, on page 51, this same problem of tone. "[Herman-Judah] coerced his [seven-year-old] brother into baptism, although in 1096 Jews had ritually slaughtered their children to protect them from baptism." The point, I suppose, is to compare Herman-Judah's willingness to do something his earlier coreligionists went to desperate lengths to avoid. But it's a funny comparison, robbing the earlier Jewish action of its pathos. Parents did not calmly engage in some ritual act to spare their children baptism; often both children and parents faced imminent, violent death. The choice often was not between death or baptism, but death and death.

Page 52: "Jews were commanded to love their friends and hate their enemies, but Christians were obliged to love their enemies." Herman-Judah, chap. 5, p. 85: "The Old Law says, 'Love your friend and hold your enemy in hatred.' " Morrison as editor gives in brackets Leviticus 19:18. But Leviticus does not say this; and in fact this teaching exists nowhere in Jewish scripture. (Morrison does not seem to know this, but should not Herman-Judah have known it?) Its locus is the Gospel of Matthew 5:43, its purpose to show the superiority of Jesus' teachings to traditional Jewish ones. It is polemic.

Better that Morrison had noted this rather than uncritically passing the polemic along.

Page 54: "The third-century scholar Gamaliel III . . . completed the redaction of the Mishnah." Gamaliel III did not redact the Mishnah; presumably Morrison intends Judah ha-Nasi. I wonder if the name "Gamaliel" appears in Herman's account simply because, through Acts 5:34, it was the name of a Jewish authority available to him, and he knew no others.

Page 62: "The flesh of the eaten is transformed into the body of the eater, a fact on which rested the whole weight of the Old Testamental laws against dietary pollution" (my emphasis). According to whom? The scriptural text explains that, since God is the author of life, and life is in the blood, blood is forbidden (Gen. 9:4f.); and it asserts that Jews are to observe revealed food laws, as other laws of all sorts, as a way to acknowledge God and his gracious acts toward Israel: "I am the Lord, who took you out of Egypt; I am the Lord" (Lev. 19:37, and frequently). Later Hellenistic Jewish moralists, like Philo, adduced as well that, in avoiding eating certain animals, the Jew likewise eschewed the unsavory moral characteristics attributed to them (avoiding gluttony, unlike pigs; or homosexual intercourse, unlike hares, and so on); Christian authors, like "Barnabas," argued likewise. Much later, social anthropologists ascribed systems of social boundary maintenance to food codes (e.g., Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*). As stated here, however, an "You-are- what-you-eat" explanation is a fundamental "fact" to no group, whether those who first codified these laws, those who observed them, or those who comment on them.

Page 66: The author seems to assert, tout court, that the Book of Daniel was "written after Jerusalem had been laid desolate by Babylon." He cannot possibly mean this, but offers no disclaimer (on the order, for example, of "As medieval people thought," or, "According to tradition . . .").

Ibid.: If Herman-Judah actually existed, he would not have needed his debate with Rupert of Deutz to have his attention drawn to the Book of Esther: presumably Purim, coming annually around the same time as carnival/Lent, celebrating the execution of a man cursed by his own malice and hanging from a tree ("his tree/gibbet/cross")--that is, Haman--and centered liturgically around the reading of Esther, would have sufficed.

Page 68: Morrison opines that Herman's putative audience would have been semi-Christian Jews, whom he would be attempting to persuade by his own story. This is unlikely. First, Herman argues almost exclusively from Christian scriptures. Second, Herman himself says plainly, in the text Morrison himself translated, that he addresses "the pious," in order to "proclaim to believers" (p. 76). The function of this text, then, is to confirm identity within a group, not to persuade across group lines--that, in any case, is what its author states.

Page 73 begins an extended comparison of the Account and the Confessions. Much of what Morrison observes is true: Herman does not pose speculative questions; Augustine did; Herman does not state epistemological principles; Augustine did. Herman and Augustine do both distinguish between outer/ physical and inner/spiritual, but the distinction is not Augustine's, which Herman then borrows: it is an ecclesiastical commonplace, its earliest source Paul's letters. Satan's absence from the Confessions is hardly striking; Augustine is not a medieval author. And so on. Comparing the Confessions directly with the Account, in order to make telling comments on each, strikes me as an unlikely procedure: it's a little like comparing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with a Chopin exercise, and then speculating on the reasons for Chopin's decision not to use a choir.

Historical questions aside, Morrison's responses to these presentations of conversion are often thought-provoking and intriguing. Students of literature, of the psychology of religion, and of the Confessions themselves will doubtless find much to consider in this volume.

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