

DESIRE FOR CONVERSION—SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Desire for Conversion
Convener: Peter Casarella, University of Notre Dame
Moderator: Peter Casarella, University of Notre Dame
Presenters: Catherine Chalier, Université Paris Ouest Nanterre, Maria Clara Luchetti Bingemer, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro

The session took its point of departure from the recently published book by Catherine Chalier, *Le désir de conversion* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2011). Chalier treated “Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929): To Remain a Jew in a Christian World.” She stated that the question of conversion has usually been avoided by philosophers even though Michel Foucault once claimed that there can be no truth without the conversion of the subject. The philosophy of conversion, she maintained, can shed light on the search for truth and the desire for God. The question of the conversion of self can thus be situated in the context of the question of the conversion to God (and vice versa).

Rosenzweig was a Jewish philosopher who resisted the path to Christianity taken by his close friend Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy. Rosenzweig began his philosophical journey by investigating and ultimately critiquing the Hegelian idea that God by necessity enters into history. History for Rosenzweig is mute. Nature too can be silent, as we see in the book of Job. By October of 1913, Rosenzweig came to an awareness that conversion to Christianity was no longer necessary or possible for him. He rediscovered his roots as a Jew, and as such, he maintained, he was already with God the Father. His desire to remain a Jew left a decisive imprint on his theory of reading the Torah. His conversion (*teshuvah*) made him aware that the words of the Torah must be uttered by a living people. So he began to investigate the question of how to understand our yearning for God through the Torah. In his *Star of Redemption* (1921) the people of God are anchored in the Torah, and nature was thereby rediscovered as revelation. The Jew, according to Rosenzweig, is chosen by God from birth to become a witness to God’s love among his people. This recognition put Rosenzweig at odds with the dominant view of his day, which portrayed Judaism as a blind people, as miserable (Pascal), and, above all, as a religion of the past. In stark contrast, Rosenzweig rediscovered the idea of conversion as *Teshuvah* and thereby a deep awareness of the fact that for the Jew Judaism is the goal of the future. Rosenzweig maintained that for Christians too Judaism, by showing how faith is a risk of embracing a new form of freedom, contributes to the coming into being of the future.

Bingemer’s presentation focused on “The Desire for Conversion in Simone Weil.” She began by recalling the fourfold distinction developed in Chalier’s work: philosophical conversion, conversion within Judaism (*teshuvah*), the conversion of a Gentile to Judaism, and Christian conversion. Weil had a Jewish upbringing but cannot be classified according to any of these categories. Her conversion was from the God of the philosophers to the God of revelation.

Weil began as a Cartesian rationalist under the influence of Alain. Although she admired St. Francis of Assisi and consciously embodied Christian virtues, she at first

strongly resisted all forms of prayer and official Christianity. Her mystical experiences in Povoia do Varzin and later at Assisi and Solesmes gave her “a better understanding of the possibility of loving divine love in the midst of affliction.” In sum, she had a profound experience of being possessed by Christ and his passion (even to the point of reciting the Lord’s prayer with great conviction), and she interpreted these personal encounters through her doctrine of decreation, i.e., a process of allowing the self to die in order to give way to openness to God, to the other, and to truth.

She then redefines the idea of knowing the God of revelation. Knowledge of God is not acquired “by force of system” at the level of intelligence. Weil creates a space for a “negative philosophy” (akin to the negative theology of Dionysius the Areopagite) and for a God who is welcomed, confessed in praise, and desired. In order to arrive at a conception of God that surpasses the “consoling God of religion” and the “conceptual God of metaphysics,” she offers her own version of Pascal’s famous wager. Accordingly, she writes that we must first subordinate everything to the obedience of God, without any restriction. If we suppose that God is real in this way, then we win all. Even if the moment of death brings nothing and if this relationship does not correspond to anything but illusions, we did not lose anything. We even won for being in truth, because we left behind illusionary goods that exist but are not goods for a thing that (in this supposition) does not exist but that if it existed would be the only good.

This fragile stance ultimately leads Weil to make two seemingly contradictory assertions. First, “God is absent from the world” in the sense that humanity’s autonomous existence creates a torn, crucified, and frail God. Second, “beauty is real presence of God.” Weil loved God and dwelled in the holy mystery of this very contradiction believing that truth can only be searched in the attentiveness of solitude and that truth is always tragic because it is hidden.

In the ensuing discussion, participants inquired about the application of these models of conversion to the reality of Jewish-Christian dialogue and about the seemingly derisive remarks of Weil regarding Judaism. The discussion was lively and provocative, but no definitive conclusions were reached.

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