

# BEGINNING TO SEE THE LIGHT

Religious conversion across the ages

By Gary Greenberg

Discussed in this essay:

*Strange Gods: A Secular History of Conversion*, by Susan Jacoby. Pantheon.

512 pages. \$29.95. pantheon.knopfdoubleday.com.

*Radical: My Journey out of Islamist Extremism*, by Maajid Nawaz. Lyons.

296 pages. \$26.95. lyonspress.com.

*Islam and the Future of Tolerance: A Dialogue*, by Sam Harris and Maajid Nawaz.

Harvard University Press. 144 pages. \$17.95. hup.harvard.edu.

When I attended Swarthmore College, in the mid-Seventies, it had an active religious life. The school was founded by Quakers, and its on-campus Friends meetinghouse was filled most Sundays. Religion classes were taught by ordained ministers. Orange-clad denizens of the local Ananda Marga ashram sat in the student center chatting up would-be recruits, and Jesus Freaks sat outside the dining hall clutching denim-bound Good News Bibles and handing out GET SMART GET SAVED buttons, ready to tell anyone who would listen that Jesus was the first hippie.

Like the outside world, the campus was a burbling, bustling bazaar of belief, and we—with our duck-and-cover childhoods, our Vietnam adolescences, our nuclear families gone critical, our mendacious politicians, and our ravenous, pillaging beast of an economy—were the perfect market, set up for the one-two punch William James noted in the course of describing the “uniform deliverance in which religions all appear to meet”:

1. An uneasiness; and
2. Its solution.

1. The uneasiness, reduced to its simplest terms, is a sense that there is

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*something wrong about us as we naturally stand.*

2. The solution is a sense that *we are saved from the wrongness* by making proper connection with the higher powers.

A few of my cohort wandered back to religion, temporarily or permanently; one friend even ran off with the Get Smart people. But despite our shared uneasiness, most of us were content with solutions that required less of us—silent hand-holding around the dinner table, vague nature worship, psychedelic drugs. All were sincerely pursued, and all seemed to offer salvation from whatever was wrong about us.

It took a woman to show me that my wrongness demanded a more concentrated form of connection with the higher powers. Mostly she did this by withholding sex, on the grounds that her guru advised chastity. He also frowned on smoking pot, eating eggs, and thinking unkind thoughts, demanding instead early mornings, quiet evenings, and meditation twice a day. In return, he promised access to the Divine Light and Sound of God, which did not seem as attractive as weed, omelets, and calumny, but then again nothing seemed as attractive as my chaste friend, especially not when she lay in bed next to me resisting my entreaties.

Occasionally, the guru would journey from India to the United States, and his followers would pile into cars

to meet him. Which is how I found myself in a suburban D.C. living room, seated on the floor with twenty or so others in front of a bearded, turbaned man with dark, deep-set eyes who was explaining in a sibilant Hindi accent how the Science of the Soul could be grasped not theoretically but only through a Living Master like him.

The room was darkened for meditation. I assumed the position I'd learned from my friend during our bedroom training sessions—blankets over heads, fingers (or earplugs, for those who had come prepared) in ears. I don't know if it was the presence of so many meditators all knocking on the same heavenly door, or that of the Master himself, seated in front of us, serene and even radiant, urging us to our deepest inner reaches, but within moments I was overtaken by exactly what I had been told to expect but had never yet seen or heard: light, stars that stippled the darkness, whirled into a galaxy, and then exploded in supernovas behind my eyelids; and sound, vague and chaotic at first, like an orchestra tuning, that slowly congealed into harmony and finally became a single blaring note, a blast from Gabriel's horn that threatened to never end. Tears streamed down my face. I was ready to throw myself prostrate at the Master's feet. I was ready to be chaste and kind and vegetarian and even drug free. I had made the proper connection. I had been saved from my wrongness.

St. Augustine's conversion, in fourth-century Milan, also had to do with sex. He'd already spent much of his youth chasing women, even as he was trying to tame his worldly appetites, when a child's overheard remark—“Take it and read”—led him to open the book of Paul's letters that lay in front of him:

In silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: “Not in revelling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites.” I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as



I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.

In his *Confessions*, Augustine recalls thanking the Lord the moment he emerged from this experience. “You converted me to yourself,” he exulted, “so that I no longer desired a wife or placed any hope in this world but stood firmly upon the rule of faith.” It wasn’t free will that had finally delivered him from his wrongness, that allowed him to want what he wished to want, but sudden and unbidden surrender. Salvation may have spoken in a still, small voice, but it ran over Augustine like a train.

Augustine, like Saul of Damascus before him, was suddenly transformed, but Susan Jacoby argues that both men, and all the converts who followed, got their own experiences wrong. In *Strange Gods*, she suggests that converts who thought God was speaking directly to them, inhabiting their souls and rearranging their minds, saw through a glass darkly. Obscured from their view was history, politics, and, above all, the beliefs that accrue silently, the background assumptions that shape our understanding of raw experience into the stories we tell ourselves about who we are—in short, ideology.

That something strange and even wonderful happened to Augustine of Hippo cannot be denied. That it was

the Holy Spirit moving through him in the way God always has and always will move, or that there is a God at all: these ideas, Jacoby insists, must be questioned. Augustine’s conversion took place at a time when the Roman Empire was vying for political power with the Church, and as Christianity and Manichaeism and a thousand brands of paganism were competing for the souls of men. His father was a pagan, his mother a Christian whose interest in his sex life may or may not have led to his troubles with women. Ambitious and curious and eloquent, with a scientist’s interest in the workings of the mind, and especially of memory, Augustine serves as an exemplar of Jacoby’s argument that personal and social history provide the content of the conversion experience.

That’s not how it looked to Augustine, of course. He didn’t understand that the Church, having “managed to take full advantage of the anxieties of the era,” had already colonized his mind so thoroughly that when he felt whatever stirrings he felt, he could not but attribute them to the Christian God. To the contrary, Jacoby argues, he believed that the nature of his conversion was self-evident, that, as she puts it, “anyone who is exposed to the Gospels and refuses to accept them is committing the most grievous form of sin and perpetuating the evil error . . . of choosing a life and philosophy without Jesus at its center.” Only a sinner could fail to see the truth of Christianity, and his failure to see something so obvious was the proof of his sinfulness.

In reaching this conclusion, Jacoby argues, Augustine provided the rationale for trying to save Jews and other sinners from their own wrongness, unleashing the epidemics of coerced conversion that have swept societies for the past 1,500 years. In Jacoby’s telling, this disastrous history is especially tragic in light of how close Martin Luther once came to immunizing the Western world from religious compulsion—and how quickly this promise was lost. The Reformation, Jacoby says, started off as a liberation of individual conscience from the hegemony of the Catholic

Church, but within twenty-five years of Luther's apostasy at Wittenberg, John Calvin had returned to Geneva and joined with civil authorities to enforce his doctrine. It wasn't the bloodbath of the Inquisition, but by 1546, ten insufficiently pious Genevans had lost their heads and thirty-five had been burned at the stake. More important, Calvin's "reforms" had instituted a reign of spiritual terror. "By day and by night," Stefan Zweig wrote in an account quoted by Jacoby, "there might come a knocking at the entry and a number of 'spiritual police' announce a 'visitation' without the concerned citizen's being able to offer resistance." In such a climate, how could even a genuine conversion be said to be freely arrived at? How could reformation mean anything other than what Jacoby calls "the substitution of one absolute truth for another"?

To Zweig, this reversal was part and parcel of the revolutionary impulse. The "reign of force which originates out of a movement towards liberty," he wrote, "is always more strenuously opposed to the idea of liberty than is a hereditary power." Revolutionaries know better than anyone how fragile the hold on power can be. But Jacoby thinks this "paradox of protestantisms" goes beyond politics. She situates it in "the incompatibility of a core belief in the right of individuals to directly engage with God's truth through reading the Bible and a quickly emerging intolerance of divergent conclusions about that truth." On her reading, Luther and his successors failed to follow their own liberationist impulse to its logical end: a world in which the only conversion worth undergoing is from faith-based ignorance to reason-based enlightenment, and the only possible apostasy is intolerance.

As Jacoby's history of conversions from Paul's to Muhammad Ali's moves into the present, her target becomes less the gods and the religions they inspire, and more the intolerance built into the "absolute-truth claims" that are the sine qua non of religion—not just of organized religion but of all ideologies. "There is little difference between a

revolutionary and a traditionalist faith," Arthur Koestler wrote in a passage that she uses as an epigraph. "All true faith is uncompromising, radical, purist." This is why, at least according to Jacoby, Stalinism was as much a religion as Catholicism, and why conversions as disparate as Whittaker Chambers's to Communism, G. K. Chesterton's to Catholicism, and C. S. Lewis's to Anglicanism must be seen as responses to the same yearning, sharpened by the displacements of modernity, for absolute certainty, moral and otherwise. Quoting Koestler again—"There is now an answer to every question, doubts and conflicts are a matter of the tortured past. . . . Nothing henceforth can disturb the convert's inner peace and serenity"—Jacoby makes clear who deserves scorn for intolerance: not the gods but the converts, who are too pusillanimous to resist the temptations of absolute truth, too weak to see that God, mercifully, died as soon as we got enlightened enough to say he might be dead, too terrified to recognize that when it comes to figuring out how to live and what to believe, we are on our own.

Reading Jacoby—who tells us that she has been an atheist since age fourteen—on the subject of religious conversion is a little like reading a sex manual written by a nun. She acknowledges that the phenomenon exists, she has studied what other people have to say about it, but she doesn't seem much moved by those accounts. Nor does she seem to understand that to rely on reason to negotiate our moral and political lives is to have faith that the faculty by which we uncover the secrets of the natural world can also tell us how we should live. Neither does she recognize that it is ideology—her secularism, not common sense or logic—that is offended by religious fervor. To say, with Thomas Paine, that "my own mind is my own church," as Jacoby does, is to make what may be the mother of all absolute-truth claims. Science will never prove that God does not exist, nor will the MRI debunk sudden conversion as a neurochemical thunderstorm amplified by whatever religious ideology happens to be at hand.

It may be a cheap shot to point out that an apostle of enlightenment is still an apostle, or to suggest that the recent spate of militantly atheist books, of which Jacoby's is only the most recent example, can be read as gospels of faith in human progress. But it's nowhere near as cheap as the shot that Sam Harris takes at Maajid Nawaz at the beginning of *Islam and the Future of Tolerance*, an account of a dialogue between Harris, a prominent atheist, and Nawaz, a former radical Islamist. "You want to convince the world . . . that Islam is a religion of peace that has been hijacked by extremists," he tells Nawaz. "But the problem is that Islam isn't a religion of peace, and the so-called 'extremists' are seeking to implement what is arguably the most honest reading of the faith's actual doctrine."

"Islam is not a religion of war or of peace—it's a religion," Nawaz replies. "Religion doesn't inherently speak for itself; no scripture, no book, no piece of writing has its own voice." It is the practitioners of religion who give the sacred texts their meaning, he says. Most Muslims are not extremists, so if "Islam is only what its adherents interpret it to be, then it is currently a religion of peace."

Given the bad faith of Harris's question, the mildness of Nawaz's response is surprising, even admirable. It's certainly different from the response that he would have given twenty years earlier, when he was a firebrand student leader of Hizb ut-Tahrir, a group that sought to unite all Muslim countries under a caliphate long before anyone had heard of the Islamic State. Nawaz was only sixteen when he joined H.T., but his conversion to Islamism wasn't his first—at least not by Jacoby's definition, which encompasses "any shift of belief that significantly alters the course of a life." As an eleven-year-old British-Pakistani boy living in racially polarized southeastern England, Nawaz heard N.W.A.'s "Fuck tha Police." "I was never the same again," he writes in *Radical*, his memoir. "This was the sound of a community finding its voice. . . . They were saying *you treat us like that, and we're going to take the fight straight back to you.*"

Nawaz spent his early adolescence bringing the fight back to the white kids who had tormented him, but the hip-hop solution to his uneasiness didn't last. Professor Griff's invocations of Malcolm X and Brand Nubian's sampling of the Muslim call to prayer had made Islam "feel vibrant and interesting," and in his teens, when he learned of the genocide of Muslims in Bosnia, he began to think that there was an oppression more fundamental than racism. His second conversion was consummated when one of his posse faced down a gang of white boys who were armed with baseball bats by telling them, "We're Muslims and we don't fear death. . . . We're suicide bombers. We've been taught how to make bombs, and I've got one in my backpack." Nawaz explains:

In one conversation, Islamism did what hip-hop couldn't do. It was alive, beating in the hearts of men, and it was prepared to sacrifice everything to regain lost dignity. It wasn't interested in singing "Fuck tha Police." Islamism was shouting from the tops of mountains "Fuck all y'all!"

Nawaz's account of his conversions is at once a confirmation of and a rebuke to Jacoby's analysis. He presents them as powerful experiences that changed the trajectory of his life. But he is not—and, if we are to believe him, was not at the time—so thunderstruck, so convinced that God was speaking directly to him in a timeless language, that he failed to recognize biographical forces at work even as they remade him. The subject of his conversion may have been religion, but it was apparent to him from the beginning that his new cause wasn't "a religious movement with political consequences"—it was "a political movement with religious consequences." Historical awareness did not prevent Nawaz from experiencing his conversion in religious terms.

In this sense, his turn to Islamism was fully modern, or even post-modern, understood, while it was happening, as a change in the narrative that was shaping him. Indeed, he says, "the message of Islamism

was almost tailor-made for someone like me: intellectually curious and brought up in a Western environment." Joining H.T. was not primarily about faith, nor was his reading of scripture the "vacuous literalism" of groups such as Al Qaeda. H.T.'s hermeneutics were more sophisticated than that. They focused on "ideas and narratives," and in particular on the way sweeping historical forces had subjected Muslims everywhere to mistreatment.

The caliphate sought by H.T. would curtail free speech, amputate the hands of thieves, and execute apostates, adulterers, and homosexuals, but only as part of a larger identity politics. Islamism was the ideology of an oppressed people reclaiming their dignity. The "Muslim superstate [was] the answer to all the injustice meted out to the Muslim populations of the world." It was a political solution to the uneasiness that resulted from a thousand years of oppression, one that would create a nation where it was safe to be a Muslim.

Nawaz was twenty-four when he was arrested in Egypt for attempting to recruit for H.T. Imprisoned for five years, he began to question Muslim extremism, especially the brand practiced by the jihadists among his fellow inmates. His doubts were catalyzed into apostasy when Amnesty International "adopted" him as a prisoner of conscience. "The unconditional nature of Amnesty's support . . . humbled me," he writes. It conveyed a message strikingly different from H.T.'s: "You're a human being, so you deserve our support." He realized that "Islamism derives part of its power from its dehumanization of 'the other'"—exactly what Amnesty was refusing to do in adopting the cause of someone who preached intolerance. He also saw that the attempt to build a nation-state on the foundation of sharia was not drawn from the Koran, which, he points out, never mentions the words "law," "state," or "constitution." Those were European concepts that had been grafted onto Islam over the centuries. "Rather than justice—legal consistency—being derived from Islamism, Islamism relied on *Western*

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concepts of justice to get off the ground," he writes. "I buried my head in my hands as I slowly realized: we Islamists were the bastard children of colonialism." They had created an ideological chimera: a "political system inspired by modern European constructs, justified by seventeenth-century norms." The result, he realized, was monstrous.

And so Nawaz's third conversion:

Slowly and alone, I began to unpick the last thirteen years of my indoctrination, concept by concept. Ideas that I had once held sacrosanct were unraveling in my mind, revealed as crude political deceptions. My whole character would have to change.

This most recent remaking, he tells Harris, was a "long journey," but ultimately successful. Saved not only from one dogma or another but from absolutism itself, he joined with two other former members of H.T. to create a think tank focused on "counter-extremism." He recites the group's catechism to Harris after he tires of responding to the atheist's attempts to tar all of Islam with the most extreme passages from its scriptures:

Any given subject has multiple interpretations, which demonstrates that there's no *correct* one. If we can understand that, then we arrive at a respect for difference, which leads to tolerance and then pluralism, which in turn leads to democracy, secularism, and human rights.

His final (at least so far) conversion complete, possessed of sight where once he was blind, Nawaz has joined the apostles of modernity.

**M**y conversion did not take. I wish I could say that I grasped the connection between faith and tyranny, and demurred on principle. But I think it is more likely that the charms of religion paled along with the charms of my girlfriend, or that I loved sex and drugs and intellectual freedom more than I loved her Master. In the meantime, I've been run over by a few more trains, but if they were dispatched from heaven, I was too hardheaded to notice, let alone to pick myself up and

climb on board. I've taken shelter from modern grotesqueries like scientism and patriotism in the Church of I Don't Know, where it is taught that we all have ideologies, but some stink less than others. I'm all for its central article of faith, sometimes maintained against all evidence, that our fate is in our own hands, even as this belief cuts us loose from any moorings in the transcendent.

But even the briefest and most callow turn to religion will show you what Nawaz's life story exemplifies, which Jacoby and Harris overlook, though it seems obvious: that every ideology, no matter how irreligious, entails faith. Some atheists are converts, Jacoby acknowledges, such as those who become fervent Communists, but the people who manage to resist absolutism are, she claims, simply being reasonable. They have adopted the ontology that any rational person who thinks things through would arrive at. "I do not consider the holders of [religious] beliefs stupid," she declares. "I think they are wrong." It's a peculiar inversion of Augustine's logic to insist that the religious are the ones who have failed to see the obvious—that God does not exist, and that "secularism, which is a way of acting ... on the atheist's conviction that human reason, not divine grace, is our best hope of improving life on earth."

But while we must at this point hope that human reason will see us through, and believe that without it we are unlikely to improve, only the most Whiggish reading of history can persuade us that the epiphanies of modernity are without deep and possibly fatal flaws; only faith can justify that hope. But "Whiggish" exactly describes Jacoby when she asserts that modern theocracies tell us "what the western world would have been like without the Enlightenment"—as if the Islamic State (or Saudi Arabia) evolved in a parallel universe and landed, fully formed, atop the unsuspecting modern world—or Harris when he tells Nawaz that "groups like the Islamic State and Al Qaeda are the common enemies of all humanity." Harris and Jacoby are both true believers, proselytes of atheism, no matter that they think their faith

is only common sense. They even have an eschatology.

But Al Qaeda and the Islamic State are not even reliably the enemies of Saudi Arabia, let alone of all humanity. They may well be enemies of the civilization out of which they arise, which we have arrived at through the haphazard, irrational, and ultimately uncountable course of history. Harris and Jacoby decry the tendency, especially among liberals, to denounce critics who insist, as they both do, that Muslim extremism springs directly from religion, and Nawaz notes that the politically correct have been foolish in their "desperat[ion] not to offend" by refusing to denounce Islamism. But it is neither naïve nor tendentious to point out that secularism is not the culmination of human history, that its pathologies breed extremism at least as prolifically as the Koran does, and that the ravages of capitalism, nuclear war, and climate change—all products of reason—seem much more like common enemies of humanity than any religious person, even the most fanatical, could dream of becoming.

Civilizations fall. When Jacoby reminds us that "freedom of conscience ... is one of the greatest achievements of secular democracy," she means to remind us that this achievement is under assault by zealots who do not recognize its glory, who would convert us to a cause in which conscience would willingly surrender its freedom. And so it appears. But freedom of conscience, along with all the other convictions of secularism, is vulnerable for another, more disturbing reason: it is a human invention, one that is grounded in our incomplete understanding of ourselves and our world, which means that no matter how sublime it is, or how self-evident it seems, it is imperfect and sure to prove evanescent. When the civilization that invented it falls, it may happen not because Islamic barbarians storm its gates but because no matter how beautiful the edifice of our freedoms, its foundations are as shaky as anything else that we, as humans, can build. ■