John Henry Newman and Malcolm X

Religious Conversion as Religious Contact—the "statement conversion"

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ABSTRACT   Some famous religious conversions, happening in a great variety of contexts, are carried out by intellectuals who use their conversion to make a statement about the world. Arguably, all conversions to some extent make a statement about the world, but some more publicly than others. My contribution will compare the conversions from Anglicanism to the Roman Catholic Church during the Oxford Movement in the 1840s with those of African Americans to (the Nation of) Islam in the 1960s. This is done on the basis of the aforementioned framework, which enables a view of both instances as asymmetric religious contact with a broad public scope. This allows me to compare the conversion trajectories of such disparate figures as John Henry Newman and Malcolm X using their public statements and appearance.

KEYWORDS   Religious conversion, statement conversion, John Henry Newman, Malcolm X, Oxford Movement, Civil Rights Movement, social criticism, Nation of Islam, Roman Catholic Church, Anglican Church

Introduction

Religious conversion is an ambiguous concept with a very long history. One of the first [1] documented religious conversions is the Biblical account of the Roman functionary Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus some years after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. According to this account (Acts 9: 1-18; Kling 2020, 42–48), he was blinded by divine intervention and regained his eyesight only through a full acceptance of the Christian religion. Henceforth, he called himself Paul and became one of the most famous advocates of Christianity. Paul's conversion experience became a cornerstone for conversion, especially to Christianity, which had to involve a crisis and a sudden eye-opening encounter with the Christian truth claim. In many evangelical conversion narratives, these elements play a significant role even today. Another very influential conversion in early Christianity was the one of Augustine of Hippo, a fourth-century bishop who composed a spiritual autobiography (Ruden 2017; Kling 2020,

88–96), detailing his path to the Christian faith. Unlike Paul, who experienced a sudden and violent divine intervention leading to embracing Christianity, Augustine describes a long intellectual journey crowned with a divine sign nudging him towards Christianity. This Augustinian way of describing the acceptance of the Christian faith has also seen widespread imitation throughout history. It has been the favoured way for intellectual converts who are not comfortable with the idea of a sudden, divinely inspired discovery of religious truth, but prefer to view their life as a rationally guided spiritual journey towards a hidden truth.

But religious conversion is not only a journey towards some religious goal, it is also a [2] religious contact between the previous religious conviction and the new faith. In the case of the Paulinian conversion experience, it is a clash, whereas the Augustinian journey represents more of a protracted encounter. Moreover, the religious contact in the latter case might even have little observable consequences but largely remain part of the subjective experience of the individual convert. This paper compares two historical cases of such a religious conversion: John Henry Newman (1801–1890) and Malcolm X (1924–1965). Both of them underwent what I propose to term a "statement conversion," meaning a conversion that seems not primarily to be about a sudden change in the inner religious constitution, but rather a strategic choice justifying the convert's criticism of power relations in the surrounding society. By introducing the term statement conversion, I hope to shed light on a conversion type that has significant ramifications for the understanding of religious identity in the modern world. In order to ensure a wide circulation of the intended statement, the statement convert typically uses print communications, social gatherings, and other media.

This paper is divided into three parts. It begins with a look at the development of the theory [3] of religious conversion, before describing the contexts in which John Henry Newman and Malcolm X effectuated their conversions. In the third part, the two conversions and their mediatisation are analysed, opening out into an attempt to develop a theory of the statement conversion.

The Theory of Religious Conversion and Religious Contact

As pointed out already, religious conversion, at least in the Western, Christian understanding, [4] is based on the biblical narrative of Paul of Tarsus and the autobiography of Augustine of Hippo. These narratives served as blueprints for numerous later conversions to Christianity, including the genre of being born again as a true Christian, which has been widespread in various strands of the Protestant confessions. According to the classical scholar of religious psychology William James, conversion "denotes the process […] by which a self hitherto divided […] becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities" (James [1902] 1992, 186). Moreover, "to say that a man is 'converted' means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy" (James [1902] 1992, 193). For William James, thus, conversion was an eminently spiritual process happening inside an individual and bringing this individual closer to religious 'truth'. This understanding is clearly influenced by Protestant theology, in that the agency is squarely placed on the individual, who is responsible for internalising the religious habitus involved in being a true Christian. Moreover, to be a true Christian, for James, can be measured in the intensity of publicly attested individual piety and needs no institutional validation.

This conceptualisation of religious conversion has dominated much of conversion research [5]

1. Rational—instrumental	2. Rational—value-oriented
Conversion is the result of more or less refined *calculation*.	Conversion is the outcome of a convinced adhesion to a system of belief and its values.
I convert because it suits my purposes, without allowing myself to become very involved on an emotional plane or in terms of my lifestyle.	I convert because I think the new faith offers a better *set of values* than others.
3. Traditional—conformist	**4. Charismatic—subjective**
The conversion is due to the *conversion policy* that a dominant system of belief adopts in relation to those who originally did not adhere to it.	The conversion derives from an affective and emotional *interaction* between a spiritual leader and a disciple, who allows himself to be guided along the paths of the spirit.
I convert to *conform* to the rules of social interplay that the religion of the majority helps to reinforce, since it is seen as a pillar of the established social order.	I convert because I have found a life that leads to an interior illumination and the discovery of a truth that the *religion of my birth* (or lack of religion) was unable to make me understand.

Figure 1   Ideal-types of conversion (taken from Pace 2009, 193).

in the following century, even if the concept expanded beyond conversions to Christianity. However, the Protestant bias does not work as smoothly in other kinds of conversion, especially when an elaborate initiation ritual is involved. Also, the idea of conversion as only the intensification of religious consciousness disregards the social surroundings and the consequences of conversion in a religious community. This applies both to the community that a convert leaves and also to the one they are joining. A different approach to the subject of conversion developed in sociology of religion and political science, where the focus was not on the changes happening inside the individual, but rather on the consequences engendered by a change of religious affiliation. Bryan S. Turner (2013, 119) argues that a conversion is only interesting to the sociologist when it has social consequences, such as upsetting the balance of power. The social consequences of a conversion are also detectable in the way a religious community regulates its external borders. What is required of the individual to become a member, what are the consequences of wanting to leave, and how does the community define and sanction border transgressions?

[6] A conversion almost always involves the crossing of such a border, exiting one religious community and/or entering another one. That is the premise for the Italian sociologist Enzo Pace (2009, 189), who argues that conversion is not only "a process involving individuals in their relationships with those who succeed in convincing them to 'change sides' in terms of their faith, but also […] an indicator of a conflict going on inside and outside a given system of belief." Pace approaches religion from the systems theory approach of Niklas Luhmann as power of communication (Pace 2011), but the observation also holds true from a discourse analysis approach. A conversion is just as much about strategies and convictions as it is about conflicting discursive elements within and between religious communities. And this is all the more so in the specific case of the "statement conversion," which contains an explicit and public challenge to a religious discourse heretofore taken for granted.

[7] Again following Enzo Pace (2009, 193–94), it is possible to adapt Max Weber's theory of action to account for four ideal types of religious conversion (see fig. 1).

[8] As ideal types in the Weberian sense, these are not to be confused with categories, in which individual cases of conversion can be placed, but as a matrix, along which conversions can be analysed. All four types are present to a certain extent in each conversion. The most prominent type in the statement conversion is the second one, since it is typically the result of a long journey of rational search for the 'correct' faith. However, as will become clear in the case of Malcolm X, for example, type four—the charismatic-subjective conversion—can also play a

significant part. The other two, however, denoting less active avenues of conversion, figure less prominently.

The following treatment of individual cases of conversion is conducted using a framework   [9]
of discourse analysis. This means that it sees the conversion and its public aftermath as an attempt to influence the discourse about religious truth and the role of religious integrity within society. The inner religious mentality of the convert is not as much of interest here as his[1] public framing of the conversion and the way he uses it as a discursive tool to advance an agenda. Discourse analysis is here conceptualised with Michel Foucault in mind (see Hjelm 2011), but also the textually oriented linguistic approach of Dominique Maingueneau (b. 1950). Maingueneau is most interested in "self-constituting discourses," meaning discursive fields where the "experts" do not rely on expertise from other fields. Their key characteristic is that "self-constitutive discourses claim to found others and not to be founded" (Maingueneau 1999, 185). Important self-constitutive discourses are the religious ones, that in general are founded on infallible texts that come from within the particular religious discourse, while being interpreted as of divine origin.

Maingueneau (2021, 65–70) posits a religious discourse as the interaction of three "mod-   [10]
ules": a *thesaurus* (TH), a *regulation module* (RM), and an *indexical module* (IM). The sacred, unchangeable texts of a religion are all collected in TH, while RM includes those texts and practices that regulate the life of the believers, such as rituals, prayer texts, and religious laws. The role of IM, finally, is "to make TH or RM relevant in a particular context" (2021, 67). Thus, IM uses vernacular, comprehensible language to explain and convince believers of the necessity to adhere to RM by more or less openly linking these practices to TH.

Since TH and RM are relatively stable elements of religious discourse, IM is the most relevant   [11]
module for scholarly discourse analysis, including sermons, religious literature and periodicals, as well as websites. A significant part of IM is theology, which traditionally sees itself as a scholarly analysis of the two other modules. It is therefore always important to keep in mind the interaction between all three modules for a successful discourse analysis. The inherent tensions between the modules lead to religious change when elements from IM are accepted as part of TH or certain aspects of RM are challenged. For Maingueneau, it is important to keep in mind that religious experts, unlike ordinary believers, "need to postulate that their religion forms (or can form) a coherent whole" (Maingueneau 2021, 65). One of the avenues that exist for religious experts to reconcile tensions between the modules in their own religious identity is the conversion, specifically a conversion approaching the rational—value-oriented type described above.

It is therefore possible to analyse individual conversions using the toolbox of discourse   [12]
theory, even if the case at hand is not about discourse as a body of texts. Statement conversions represent a fascinating case in which an individual or a group of intellectuals attempt to steer religious discourse in an unexpected direction. Moreover, they display a certain degree of success, since they are able to retain their public presence without their previous religious affiliation, even in a new social and religious setting. Before turning to the two converts themselves, though, the following section first takes a look at the contexts in which their conversion happened. This is, first, the so-called Oxford Movement among theologians of the Anglican Church in the 1840s, and second, the beginning of the Civil Rights movement in the

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1   The two case studies concern men and the statement conversion has traditionally been a male domain, even though one can identify a handful of female statement converts (such as Sigrid Undset (1882–1949) and Frederica Mathewes-Green (*1952)). See also Inge (2017).

US in the decades following World War II. Both contexts represent a moment of identity crisis for adherents of a certain mindset or social group. This is a factor that seems to facilitate the statement conversion, as the last section of this paper argues.

Contexts: A Crisis of Collective Identity

The Anglican Church in the early nineteenth century experienced a crisis of its institutional identity. In 1833, this crisis was aptly summarised by French traveller Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859), observing that "the National Church has become in England a political party; it defends itself and is attacked as such. In this respect it sustains an unequal struggle, having against it the passions and interests of the majority" ([1833] 1958, 64). Moreover, the rise of charismatic but dissenting religious voices in England over the previous decades (Carter 2001) had shown how "pure" Christianity could be lived. In the 1830s, the established Anglican Church seemed to be on the brink of imploding, not least due to financial mismanagement and incompetent clergy (Picton 2015, 85–91).   [13]

Out of this environment sprung the so-called "Oxford Movement." It encompassed a charismatic revival within the established church that was centred at the University of Oxford. At the same time, the movement was "a reaction against some characteristic trends of the 1830s like the rise of liberalism and utilitarian thought, the increasing secularization of British society, as well as the constant questioning of authority—that of a church in crisis in particular" (Picton 2015, 94). The Oxford movement was thus both a move to reinvigorate the church and to show disagreement with modern developments. It grew out of a specific interaction among a handful of theologians at the University of Oxford, among them John Keble (1792–1866), R. Hurrell Froude (1803–1836), and John Henry Newman. They started to publish what they called "Tracts for the times" in 1833, a number of programmatic texts for the renewal of the English Church, giving the movement its contemporary name of Tractarianism.   [14]

The main theme of these texts was ecclesiology (Church [1890] 1970, 68–90), especially the concept of apostolic succession. For the Tractarians, the Church of England was a branch of the universal Christian Church, just as the Roman Catholic Church, and the Anglican bishops could still trace their episcopal mission back to the disciples of Jesus Christ. It was not a renewed or corrected form of Christianity, like the Protestant Churches of the continent claimed to be, but an unalienable branch of the original. The last "Tract for the times," number 90, was published in 1841 by the charismatic and eloquent John Henry Newman (Church [1890] 1970, 182–201), and it sought to prove that the "39 Articles," which were regarded as the foundational document of the Anglican Church, did not contradict Roman Catholic theology. This publication caused a wide outcry in the British public, which caused Newman to retreat from public appearance for some years, while the movement continued with a less charismatic leadership.   [15]

The second context is the USA after World War II. This period saw a new quality in the struggle for civil rights and equality for the black population in North America. After centuries of slavery and open racism and segregation (Dierenfeld 2021), the post-war years saw a rise in black activism beyond mere petitions for legal desegregation. Black activism, be it in schools, public transport, or restaurants, proliferated, especially after the second half of the 1950s, with the chief ideology being non-violence. This non-violence was inspired by the Christian message and the example of Mahatma Gandhi in India.   [16]

While the desegregation drive gained ground in the Southern States, the social and economic   [17]

situation of the black communities in the North ensured a *de facto* racial segregation also here. Urban African Americans predominantly lived in black ghettos and inter-racial permeability was minimal. A specific brand of the political engagement of black Americans was Black Nationalism (M. Newman 2018), a move to establish a separate society or state particularly for African Americans, either in Africa or as part of the United States. The main force of this movement in the post-war years turned out to be the "Lost Found Nation of Islam" (NOI), an organisation that argued for the unsuitability of Christianity to provide relief for suffering African Americans, instead redirecting them to the Islamic faith.

The leader of the NOI was Elijah Muhammad (1897–1975), a self-styled messenger of Allah [18] for the African Americans from 1935 (R. B. Turner 2004, 455–59; M. Newman 2018, 84–89; Evanzz 1999). The NOI preached a peculiar kind of Islam, including the idea that fair-skinned humans were genetically engineered in a laboratory by an evil scientist called Yacub, who had sought to create a "devilish race" to control the "black race," the "original race" (Haley [1965] 1973, 164–1679). In order to appeal to the badly educated black masses, the NOI used stories from the Bible to underpin its message, even though it argued that Christianity was a ploy of the whites to subdue the blacks. At the same time, it sought to attract mainly young black men, often missionising in prisons, by promising them a better life if they renounced drinking, smoking, and eating pork.

This strategy was successful, although the movement only grew significantly after the [19] cunning and charismatic petty hustler Malcolm Little was converted by his siblings. To emphasise the start of a new life as a Muslim, Elijah Muhammad renamed his new adepts, since their last names were not their original names, but remnants of white domination. Until the original last name had been retrieved, the NOI adepts were all given the epithet "X," providing Malcolm Little with the name he became famous for: Malcolm X. Malcolm X was a controversial personality who became the *de facto* public face of NOI over the 1950s, until several political developments caused a rift between him and Elijah Muhammad (M. Newman 2018, 94–99; Haley [1965] 1973, 294–303). The latter forbade Malcolm to speak publicly after an unauthorised comment following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November 1963. Malcolm complied and retreated for several months, which did not significantly hinder the further spread of NOI, however.

These two contexts are radically different, but they both signify a crisis in a long-established [20] collective identity. The Anglican Church in the early nineteenth century was perceived as having lost a sense of Christian moderation, urging some of its key ideologues to question where its authority really came from. The post-war civil rights movement was also seen as a dead end by some of its proponents, causing them to reimagine the role of African Americans in society at large. On the level of activities, actors, and societal impact, the two contexts are hardly comparable, but they represent typologically similar contexts that prompted a group of actors to rethink their religious commitment and experiment with thoughts from a previously alien religious community. Using the terminology of Maingueneau, a growing inability of the religious discourse to catch up with other discourses caused dissatisfaction, which led some actors to rethink their core beliefs (TH) and prompted an innovative production of auxiliary texts (IM).

In some cases, this resulted in conversions to a different faith (a new TH) that was then [21] used rhetorically and discursively (through IM) to attract attention to social injustices and religious errors. The most famous conversions in these two contexts were those of John Henry

Newman and Malcolm X, both of whom were regarded as natural leaders of their respective group, even if this leadership was not formalised in either case.

For both of them, there exist rhetorically captivating autobiographies that detail the story of   [22]
their spiritual development. In the case of Malcolm X, the autobiography (Haley [1965] 1973) was actually written by a journalist who had been commissioned by Malcolm to compose it. Because of the latter's assassination, the autobiography was published posthumously and immediately achieved a bestseller status. Newman's autobiography (J. H. Newman [1864] 1950), published in response to criticism of "his" Catholic Church in 1864, also became a bestseller, and Newman "emerged into a position of favour in English public opinion which he has not since relinquished" (Pegis 1950, xiii). Thus, both personalities achieved what can be considered a "sacred" status: Newman by becoming a Roman Catholic Cardinal and recently even being officially canonised as a saint (2019), and Malcolm, being hailed as "one of the most iconic black radical thinkers and activists of the second half of the twentieth century" (Singh 2021, 497). As such, biographical and analytical treatments of both actors abound, but often border on the hagiographical.

John Henry Newman (1801–1890)

John Henry Newman was born as the eldest of three brothers and three sisters into a London   [23]
family in 1801. The family was part of the upcoming English middle class, with his father a grocer turned successful banker. Newman had his first conversion experience at 15 years of age, after his father's banking business almost went bankrupt. In these troubling times, Newman discovered Evangelicalism (J. H. Newman [1864] 1950, 35–39; Newsome 1993, 31–37)—a Calvinist-inspired movement within the Anglican Church. However, according to the biographer David Newsome, "what happened in 1816 was not so much that he changed as that he found direction" (1993, 37). He was only moderately successful at Oxford University in the beginning, but managed to acquire a *Fellowship* at Oriel College in 1822. Instead of aspiring to become a lawyer, as his father had wished, Newman was ordained a deacon of the Anglican Church in the summer of 1824. A few months later, his father passed away and he became the main breadwinner for his family. His religiosity was still influenced by his conversion experience, but his colleagues at university "had been gently undermining [his] Evangelical views" (1993, 55) since his fellowship at Oriel, the most innovative of Oxford's colleges at the time.

Instead of pursuing Calvinist Evangelical Christianity, thus, Newman embraced the growing   [24]
concern of his peers about placing the authority of the Church of England on new foundations that resulted in the Oxford Movement. The religious development at Oxford University in the 1820s was rather tumultuous, with Evangelical passions running high. In 1831, the charismatic Evangelical frontman in Oxford, Henry Bulteel (1800–1866), set out to purge the Church of England of misconduct, but his venture failed to garner sufficient support and he was even deprived of his preaching post at the University (Carter 2001, 262–71). A fellow Evangelical later remarked that "Newmanism and the Tractarian movement would never have been what it was, had it not been for Bulteel's failure" (quoted in Carter 2001, 310). David Newsome mentions several other drastic experiences that were decisive for Newman's path in the 1830s (Newsome 1993, 57–62). In every way, the timid, indecisive, and self-conscious early John Henry Newman had given way to a charismatic and rhetorically sharp polemicist fighting "an offensive-defensive action in response to specific dangers faced by the Church" (1993, 69).

For Newsome, Newman's involvement in the Oxford Movement falls neatly into three phases: the first one, from the first "Tract of the Times" in 1833 until 1836, was characterised by the aforementioned battle for the church. In the second phase, lasting until 1838, Newman rather sought to portray the Anglican Church as a middle course between the excesses of both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. The last phase, then, was characterised by the search for evidence that the Church of England indeed represented the true, original Christian Church (1993, 135–38). This third phase culminated in the publication of the last "Tract of the Times," Tract 90, in which Newman wanted "to show that, while our Prayer Book is acknowledged on all hands to be of Catholic origin, our Articles also, the offspring of an uncatholic age, are, through GOD's good providence, to say the least, not uncatholic, and may be subscribed by those who aim at being catholic in heart and in doctrine" (1841, 4). As mentioned above, the outcry due to this publication caused Newman to retreat from public life to a monastery-like community he had established in the hamlet of Littlemore some years earlier (Newsome 1993, 139–42, 156).

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In the peaceful quiet of the English countryside, Newman, wo even resigned from his clergy post in Oxford, spent the time pondering over the Catholicity of the Anglican Church, coming to the conclusion that it was lacking. In October 1845, Newman was quietly received into the Roman Catholic Church: "the long agony was over, to be replaced in time by a sense of inner peace" (Newsome 1993, 169). The conversion happened far away from publicity and was, for Newman, the conclusion of a long spiritual journey, not a sudden and life-changing event. As Newman contends in his autobiography: "What I held in 1816, I held in 1833, and I hold in 1864" ([1864] 1950, 75). He conceived of his spiritual life as a journey towards a realisation of the truth that had accompanied him his whole life. It was not as much a "conversion" as it was a "confirmation"—he saw the change not primarily in his inner life, but in the way he was integrated into the primarily institutionalised surroundings.

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With time, Newman wished to return to the limelight as a Roman Catholic, even though he no longer was an authority in the mainstream Church of England. However, the position of converts to Catholicism in England in the mid-nineteenth century was not very favourable (Newsome 1993, 185–95; McClelland 1999), since they were seen as intruders into the domain of the few high-class Catholics. At the same time, the English Catholic church struggled to accommodate a significant influx of poor Catholic Irish workers, which caused the existing layman-led structure of the church to be transformed into proper dioceses in 1852. Newman combined the establishment of a closed monastic order for him and some of his fellow converts with a return to public life. In the 1850s and early 1860s, he was involved in several failed attempts to incentivise Catholic youth to enter higher education (Newsome 1993, 202–4, 215–18, 236–37).

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The turning point came when he and the entire Roman Catholic Church were publicly attacked by the Anglican theologian Charles Kingsley in 1864, and Newman replied within weeks with a powerful autobiography entitled *Apologia pro vita sua* (Newsome 1993, 238–41). This publication was an instantaneous success, as it portrayed him as a sincere and thoughtful Catholic, unlike the image his critics tried to propagate, that of an opportunist whose conversion had only been a ploy in order to oppose the Church of England. The Canadian Catholic theologian Anton C. Pegis characterises Newman with pathos in his introduction to a reprint of the text: "A man who has a cause in his heart and lives as a faithful disciple of that cause cannot but reveal the majesty of his cause when he reveals his heart; for that is the meaning of his dedication" (Pegis 1950, xiv). But even the Anglican Church Historian Newsome concurs:

[28]

"Newman, by the supreme demonstration of his rhetorical arts, had stolen the sympathies of his audience" (Newsome 1993, 240).

In the last two decades of his life, Newman lived a quiet life in his monastic community in Birmingham, occasionally writing highly acclaimed theological treatises that stirred up public interest and still to some extent do. In 1879, Newman was made a cardinal, the highest clerical office available in the Roman Catholic Church (except for the Pope). In the recommendation letter to the Pope suggesting this honour, Newman's fellow English convert and already a cardinal, Henry Edward Manning (1808–1892), wrote: [29]

> The veneration for his powers, his learning, and his life of singular piety is almost as deeply felt by the non-Catholic population of this country as by members of the Catholic Church. In the rise and revival of Catholic Faith in England there is no one whose name will stand out in history with so great a prominence. (Quoted in Newsome 1993, 346–47) [30]

Thus, Newman's conversion was an inspiration for quite a few Anglicans, who followed him into the Roman Catholic Church either directly or indirectly. At the same time, the Roman Catholic Church in England was shaped significantly by his theological contribution, to the extent that some observers claim that his insights were a key component in the lead-up to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) (Newsome 1993, 364), which opened up the Roman Catholic Church to the modern world. [31]

Malcolm X (1924–1965)

Malcolm X was, at first sight, radically different from the erudite and secluded John Henry Newman. Malcolm Little was born as the second son into a family of freed slaves in the US South at a time when racial discrimination had reached a new apogee. Malcolm's father was a Baptist minister and activist who championed Marcus M. Garvey's (1887–1940) *Universal Negro Improvement Association*, which argued for the establishment of a new homeland in Africa for black Americans. He died under mysterious circumstances when Malcolm was just seven years old, officially in a car crash (Haley [1965] 1973, 9–10). The loss eventually caused his mother to become mentally ill and the five children were assigned to different foster homes. Although initially showing promise in school, he was dissuaded from pursuing education by the generally racist environment in the 1930s USA. Instead, he moved to his half-sister in Boston at the age of 16, where he began a life as a hustler, partaking in all kinds of more or less legal schemes to earn some money. This life, in the less obviously racist US-American North, went quite well until a robbery in 1946 went awry and Malcolm was arrested together with three accomplices ([1965] 1973, 134–50). [32]

While he was in prison, his siblings had come into contact with Elijah Muhammad, the self-styled leader of the *Nation of Islam* (NOI), and managed to convince Malcolm of joining this "natural religion for the black man" (Haley [1965] 1973, 155). Encouraged by the new self-confidence of belonging to the 'right' religion, he became a "new man" and began to read all the books he could get his hands on. According to his own recollections: "I knew right there in prison that reading had changed forever the course of my life" ([1965] 1973, 179). Moreover, "Islam and Mr. Elijah Muhammad had changed my whole world" ([1965] 1973, 186). He was released from prison in 1952 and right away joined the NOI, receiving his 'X': "The receipt of my 'X' meant that forever after in the nation of Islam, I would be known as [33]

Malcolm X. Mr. Muhammad taught that we would keep this 'X' until God Himself returned and gave us a Holy Name from His own mouth" ([1965] 1973, 199). His painstaking reading efforts in prison had made him a master rhetorician, so he soon rose in the NOI ranks to become a minister, who established new NOI temples in Boston and Philadelphia and grew the New York temple in Harlem exponentially.

Reading the recollections of his time as a NOI minister, it is interesting to note how Malcolm   [34]
used Christian stories and tropes during his Muslim services, because they were bound to have a psychological impact to the audience, which consisted exclusively of converts to NOI. Although intellectually embracing Islam, it seems as though the NOI preached some kind of Baptist Christianity tainted by Islamic expressions and rituals. Malcolm X married Betty X in 1958, and they had four daughters over the next 6 years.

In late 1961, Malcolm started to become uneasy about the moral integrity of Elijah Muham-   [35]
mad, since rumours of his extramarital escapades were causing some black Muslims to leave the NOI. In Malcolm's own words:

> I looked up, and talked with three of the former secretaries to Mr. Muhammad.   [36]
> From their own mouths, I heard the stories of who fathered their children. And from their own mouths I heard that Elijah Muhammad had told them I was the best, the greatest minister he ever had, but that someday I would leave him, turn against him—so I was 'dangerous.' I learned from these former secretaries to Mr. Muhammad that while he was praising me to my face, he was tearing me apart behind my back. (Haley [1965] 1973, 297)

The rift between the two men became obvious when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated   [37]
in November 1963 and Malcolm X told a reporter it was "a case of the chickens coming home to roost" (Haley [1965] 1973, 301; Evanzz 1999, 270–78; Singh 2021, 506). He implied that Kennedy's anti-racism policies had incited a white man to kill the president, but this argument had not been coordinated with Elijah Muhammad, who immediately silenced him for 90 days. Being thus silenced, Malcolm travelled to Florida to visit the boxing champion Cassius Clay, a friend and fellow NOI convert who later called himself Muhammad Ali (Haley [1965] 1973, 303–8; Evanzz 1999, 284–87). He used the time to reflect on his life choices, which further intensified upon his return, when he faced concrete and open death threats from other NOI ministers. He decided that he was not going to give up on America's black community, but could not return to the NOI, so he announced the establishment of a rival Black Muslim organisation, the Muslim Mosque, Inc. But before that, he made what all Muslims should aspire to do in their life: a pilgrimage to Mecca.

It was during this pilgrimage, which brought Malcolm X outside of the US for the first time,   [38]
that his second and even more profound conversion took place (Haley [1965] 1973, 318–42; R. B. Turner 2004, 460–61). On this journey, Malcolm realised that Islam was much more than what the NOI preached. He was especially impressed by the "*color-blindness* of the Muslim world's religious society and the *color-blindness* of the Muslim world's human society" (Haley [1965] 1973, 338). The intense link between Islam and the black race that was a cornerstone of the NOI suddenly made no sense, and Malcolm's mission acquired a global shape. Leaving Mecca, he continued on a tour of black Africa, where he was received with acclaim everywhere and spoke with the highest dignitaries.

He returned to the USA in May 1964, eager to set to work on spreading what he now   [39]
knew as true Islam and fighting racism with a fresh vision in mind, that "the only true world

solution today is governments guided by true religion—of the spirit" (Haley [1965] 1973, 369). However, US-American realities were catching up with him. He was a nationwide celebrity, but he also received countless death threats to him and his family from various corners. He had a very busy schedule speaking at universities, political rallies, and with journalists over the next months. Not only in the US, but also abroad, in Europe and during another four-month trip to Africa. All the while, he met repeatedly with Alex Haley, who scribbled down everything Malcolm told him. This continued right up until a civil rights rally in his mosque in New York, where he was assassinated with several shotguns at short range (Haley [1965] 1973, 431–37; Evanzz 1999, 320–21).

Malcolm X had taken the name El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz after his pilgrimage to Mecca but was still widely known as Malcolm X when he was assassinated. The assassination caused a public outcry, but the investigation yielded no results. It is still not clear who exactly was responsible for the death of Malcolm X, although both the FBI and the NOI had clear motives. In an internal communication, FBI head J. Edgar Hoover argued that the intelligence community must "prevent the rise of a 'messiah' who could unify, and electrify, the militant black nationalist movement. Malcolm X might have been such a 'messiah'; he is the martyr of the movement today" (quoted in Evanzz 1999, 333). Malcolm's veneration far surpassed that of the remaining NOI, at least (Evanzz 1999, 354; R. B. Turner 2004, 462–63), and it is difficult to say if he could have achieved more fame had he stayed alive. [40]

Conclusion—Religious Conversion as Statement

A comparison between the two individual life courses of John Henry Newman and Malcolm X might sound preposterous, but there are indeed a number of parallels that can be drawn, most of which are related to the conceptualisation of religious conversion as a way to make a statement about the state of the world. First, both Newman and Malcolm described their spiritual life as having undergone two conversions, the first one being a choice made under the influence of charismatic figures of their surroundings and the second coming after a public outcry over their utterances. Moreover, in both cases, the second conversion was a conscious, rational decision, following a period of retreat from public life. For Malcolm, this period only lasted a few months, while Newman retreated for several years. For both, the second conversion was an intensification or 'correction' of the first one, after which they claimed to finally feel fully at home in the world. Both of them returned to the limelight with what can be characterised as a consciously crafted statement regarding the errors of the religious community they had previously belonged to. [41]

Besides all these similarities, there are obviously blatant differences, such as Newman clearly being more theologically articulate, while Malcolm was more of a political activist. Moreover, due to the much less serene environment of Malcolm X, antagonism against him as a person and his ideas ran much higher than in Newman's case, culminating in his assassination. However, these differences appear in a less contrastive light when referring to other fellow converts around Newman and Malcolm. Henry Edward Manning, for example, was an outspoken politically active convert, who had numerous enemies in the English political establishment. A person like Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali in the NOI, on the other hand, was much more peaceful and moderate, in spite of his career as a boxing champion. [42]

The typological similarities between the conversion paths of John Henry Newman and Malcolm X—or more broadly, the contexts they lived their lives in—can be analysed using [43]

Maingueneau's (2021) modules of religious discourse. To recap, Maingueneau identifies the three modules of *thesaurus* (TH—the fundamental beliefs), *regulation module* (RM—the rituals), and *indexical module* (IM—explanatory texts). In the case of Newman and Malcolm, a very important element is the lack of a well-articulated TH and RM in their new religious home. Newman converted to Roman Catholicism in a predominantly Anglican religious setting, whereas Malcolm X embraced Islam in Protestant Christian USA. In both cases, the surrounding society only offered a rudimentary grasp of TH and RM, meaning that articulate converts had relatively free reins, when it came to filling IM with what they thought should fit in there. Disseminating Roman Catholicism in mid-nineteenth century England was carried out by a handful of people, and John Henry Newman could easily put his mark on English language Roman Catholic IM. For some commentators, he was so successful that he even left a distinct trace on the documents of the Second Vatican Council, which arguably belong to TH.

A similar situation surrounded the case of Malcolm X, who was the most charismatic   [44] spokesman of the NOI in the 1950s. He did not write texts, but still filled IM with statements, ideas and explanations through his speeches and activities. When he realised that NOI's TH was not really Islamic after his pilgrimage to Mecca, he set out to correct that with an ever-increasing emphasis on IM, but the assassination put a stop to his activities. Nevertheless, his legacy lived on and the NOI of Elijah Muhammad's successors, in spite of splits and controversies, has eventually acknowledged that and changed its TH to align with mainstream Sunni Islam (Evanzz 1999, 442–44; R. B. Turner 2004, 463–66).

While the two cases discussed here are both extraordinarily famous and very directly related   [45] to larger social upheavals, there are innumerable other cases of statement conversion that had less direct societal impact. These statement conversions have tended to appear in contexts of social crisis that some observers stylised as a crisis in religiosity. Other such contexts include the interwar Weimar Republic, when a handful of disgruntled Germans converted to Ahmadiyya Islam with the understanding of thereby reforming society (Jonker 2016). Another context was post-war Italian neo-fascism, which included conversion to Shia Islam (Mirshahvalad 2024), or conversions to the Orthodox Church in the US in the 1980s (Gillquist 1992) and UK in the 1990s (Harper 1997). All these have in common that the converts seek out a religious faith that is conceptualised as the "original faith," one that enables them to redress a perceived societal imbalance. Moreover, they all convert not to a mainstream religious community, but to a minority religion that they then help establish. In this way, they become "kings in their village," with a significantly higher impact on the religious community than they had previously had.

For all of them, just as for Newman and Malcolm X, the conversion is not primarily the   [46] result of a charismatic or sudden encounter with a new religious system, nor is it the result of any kind of coercion, but it is the result of a long rational and spiritual search that in hindsight always pointed towards the convert's new religion. Speaking with Enzo Pace's (2009) ideal-types of motivations for conversion, these conversions exhibit a strong focus on the rational—value-oriented type. Whether the leadership opportunities that come with such a conversion play a role in the motivation, involving Pace's rational-instrumental type, is debatable. For both Malcolm X and John Henry Newman at least, no such motives are readily discernible in their subsequent public statements. Both of them, however, clearly felt stifled by what they perceived as a restrictive religious environment prior to their second conversion. These conversions came as a sort of liberation cry that freed them from institutional shackles, even if they thereby entered a new, arguably more restrictive institutional setting. The new

setting was in its infancy in their social environment, however, meaning that they were able to shape it both in terms of institutional establishment and in public perception. Malcolm X was not able to do so before his death, but John Henry Newman was instrumental in reshaping the tattered image of Roman Catholicism in English society.

Since the advent of the internet and especially social media, this kind of conversion seems to proliferate, as making a publicly visible statement is no longer linked to status or money. More research is required to ascertain whether this quantitative increase also engenders a qualitative change in the rhetoric of statement converts. While the two cases elaborated above involved rhetorically gifted public speakers and writers, the plethora of online conversion testimonies that can overwhelmingly be classified as statements about the state of the world are often composed by less erudite and educated individuals (see, e.g., Rimestad and Kelaidis 2024). The analysis of the conversion paths of John Henry Newman and Malcolm X at least shows that it is not only the inner change that matters, nor that conversions are primarily the result of external pressures, but that many converts are conscious actors employing their conversion to further a political or social agenda.

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