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Gil Anidjar

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Muslim Jews

GIL ANIDJAR

It was Islam who saved the Jewish people.

Shlomo Dov Goiten

“Conversion,” argues Gauri Viswanathan,

is arguably one of the most unsettling political events in the life of a society. This is irrespective of whether conversion involves a single individual or an entire community, whether it is forced or voluntary, or whether it is the result of proselytization or inner spiritual illumination. . . . With the departure of members from the fold, the cohesion of a community is under threat just as forcefully as if its beliefs had been turned into heresies.¹

Conversion, in other words, requires that we consider not only the limits of the community, its internal and external dynamics, its cohesion and beliefs, indeed, its political nature and its life; it requires as well that we follow the event of conversion and its subject (who appears provisionally here as individual or community in their fragile identity). For one conversion alone, the parting of one individual might be sufficient to qualify as “one of the most unsettling political events” a subject is said to undergo. But what precisely is this event, and how are we to think it? Calling on us to “avoid the danger of confusing word with concept and con-

cept with practice,” Talal Asad explains that “it would be better to say that in studying conversion, one was dealing with the narratives by which people apprehended and described a radical change in the significance of their lives,” or, indeed, in the lives of others.² Navigating uneasily between word, concept, and practice, I will soon turn to one such narrative, but for now I want to reiterate this benign finding: conversion—word, concept, or practice—takes the form of a narrative turn. Sudden or progressive, it tells of and testifies to a transformative event, or series of events. And as Viswanathan makes clear, this event (or chain of events) is political through and through. As well, conversion raises rhetorical questions upon which I would like briefly to linger toward an explanation of my somehow implausible title, “Muslim Jews.”

As its name indicates, along with the practice in its varied forms, conversion is a turn, a figure, and a trope. It is a turn of event or events that understandably mobilizes, or has mobilized, “figures of conversion,” as Michael Ragussis has it.³ Such events, which often put into play versions of displacements and series of translations, whereby members depart from the fold and beliefs turn into heresies, are indeed marked by a turn and a trope, a figure of turning. These are events that are articulated as or around moments akin to what Judith Butler has described as the “tropological inauguration of the subject, a founding moment whose ontological status remains permanently uncertain.”⁴ Butler underscores this uncertainty, which plagues a figure that otherwise familiarly “operates as part of the explanation of how a subject is produced.” Having recalled, with Viswanathan, that conversion implicates individual or community, one could nonetheless say that, in the event and turn of conversion, “there is no subject, strictly speaking, who makes this turn.” What remains and what is left behind, what is inaugurated or created—there emerges in the space of these questions a figure “that marks the suspension of our ontological commitments,” for with it “we must refer to what does not yet exist” as well as to what no longer exists (*PL*, 4). Between these two vectors—that which is no more, and that which is not yet—conversion relates language to religion and religion to language. It is revealed as a work of translation.

Walter Benjamin says as much in an otherwise isolated and puzzling comment, which he makes in “The Task of the Translator” and whereby the movement of translation—the growth and development of language—is brought into relation with religious growth. Having explained that “all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages,” Benjamin makes a turn of sort, a conversion of his own, and suggests an indirect mediation within (as a substitute for a complete resolution to) this provisional state of affairs. What he asserts is that “the growth of religions [*das Wachstum der Religionen*] ripens the hidden seed into a higher development of language.”⁵ This spiritual and botanical growth (“a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change”) affects a seed that itself figures an elusive and infinitely remote solution to the foreignness of languages. In turn, conversion—the growth of religions—fosters the development of language and thus engages in a similar manner, and even if only implicitly, the foreignness of religions. Like conversion, which appears here as its very *condition*, translation is a growth of sorts. It develops and expands language along the lines of a peculiar kinship that transcends likeness and re-signifies the very notion of relatedness, first as the absence of relation (“It is plausible that no translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards the original”); second, as a proximity paradoxically void of importance (“Yet, by virtue of its translatability the original is closely connected [*im nächsten Zusammenhang*] with the translation; in fact, this connection is all the closer since it is no longer of importance to the original” [“TT,” 71]).

As Benjamin famously puts it, “no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original” (“TT,” 73). Such an *unlikely* figure (whereby kinship and relation, along with both of the “sides” involved, must be rethought as anything but natural ties) functions so as to refigure the relation between original and translation and “the relatedness of two languages” and by extension the relatedness of religions (“TT,” 74). After Benjamin’s “translatability,” one could perhaps speak, therefore, of “convertibility,” something like the condition and afterlife

of an original religion. This lingering history (Benjamin writes of a “potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations”) gains further illumination in a later, complementary or supplementary simile: “Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point, with this touch rather than with the point setting the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity, a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux” (“TT,” 80).

If the tangent line of interpretation I have begun to draw is not incorrect, we learn here that conversion establishes a kinship and a renewed fidelity, both of which extend to infinity, between religions, and this in a fashion altogether different from what is otherwise implied by a rhetoric of source and target languages, first and second religions. Benjamin famously quotes Rudolf Pannwitz, who argues that instead of turning (figures of translation, like figures of conversion, are figures of turning) Hindi, Greek, English into German, translations should rather turn German into Hindi, Greek, English. In this manner, conversion from one religion to another would be that which turns the newly found religion into and within (the language of) the original. It would do so with the lightness of a touch rather than with the harshness of a law-setting point but, as the growth of religions goes, it would function so as to turn, as it were, the later religion into an active repository of the former. More precisely (and to follow another turn of the botanical figures), “while content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds” (“TT,” 75). A royal cover would thus surround and clothe the original religion.

Minimally, as the character of the narrative toward which I shall soon turn puts it, there is inscribed “the indelible mark of one who had crossed borders and donned the garb of others” (O, 124). Such folding and enfolding occurs through a process that is undoubtedly “one of the most unsettling . . . events” in life and afterlife. But once again: whose life? And whose afterlife? This brings us back to the “tropological presumption” and the “tropological quandary” when it comes to the subject of conversion, a quandary with which

we are urgently confronted and of which Judith Butler speaks. For “we cannot presume a subject who performs an internalization if the formation of the subject is in need of explanation. The figure to which we refer has not yet acquired existence and is not part of a verifiable explanation, yet our reference continues to make a certain kind of sense” (*PL*, 4). This sense, “the infinitely small point of the sense” at which a translation lightly touches on the original, will serve as the trope—the small point of sense occurs, after all, as a turning point—of conversion, as its subject.

Beyond the preceding, seemingly abstract, considerations, one could point to a more pedestrian historical (linguistic and rhetorical) link between conversion and translation, a link that extends, although it cannot be reduced to, etymology. Thus, the Greek term that gave Western languages the word “proselyte” and its derivatives translates, in the Septuagint, the Hebrew *ger*. It refers to and translates the foreign and the foreigner, who is also the *prochain*—not quite the neighbor. He is the one who approaches and comes, the one who has come to a place, strange and foreign, and a sojourner. The word came to mean a convert to Judaism and later, by extension, any convert.⁶ And converts have often been, and famously so, good translators.⁷ If this confirms, and hopefully clarifies, how both conversion and translation constitute related political events at the limit of the community, then Ahmad Haroun Soussan’s autobiographical account in Shimon Ballas’s *Ve-hu aher* can easily be shown to illustrate the matter in a paradigmatic manner.⁸ This extraordinary book, which was published originally in Hebrew in 1991 and translated into English as *Outcast* in 2007, was referred to by Ammiel Alcalay shortly after its publication as “Ballas’s most complex work to date.”⁹ I want to pursue the reflections I have begun above on conversion and translation and argue that what is found in this book—which itself orbits uneasily around the event of a conversion—is a kind of translation of “the idea of the Arab Jew.”¹⁰ To put it too briefly, Ballas’s book, deploying language as (perhaps even clothed in) something like the royal robe evoked by Benjamin, points us toward directions that are strikingly similar to what Gershom Scholem described as “one of the strangest and most paradoxical episodes in the history

of the Jewish religion.” In this particular episode, members of the Jewish community “became formally Muslims but remained Jews at heart—though Jews of a most peculiar kind.”¹¹ Appropriately (or inappropriately, I suppose), I want to propose that one unlikely name for the point and subject of conversion toward which I have been turning and gravitating is “Muslim Jews.”

Such an unlikely, indeed, contrived, phrase may seem to force yet another addition in a long line of categories and designations that, in Western (if sometimes also Jewish) eyes, referred to “Semites,” to “Oriental” and “Levantine” Jews, to Jews *and* Arabs, the Jews *of* Islam, and all the way to the idea of the “Arab Jew.” These terms or phrases have provided ample identificatory resources, no doubt, as well as the scholarly ground for shifting and ambiguous objects of study, even if they have rarely gained “internal” political traction (e.g., one has yet to find evidence for a “Semitic Liberation Movement”). To the extent that one can testify to the growth of “Semitic” studies, and to the increased respectability of scholarly studies on “the Jews of Islam,” there is reason to doubt the wisdom of introducing yet another link in this chain.¹² History and the study of religion, ethnography, law, and literature—each partakes of a contest where representation and identity succeed and fail. There is, finally, no gainsaying the currency of yet other terms such as “Sephardim” or “Mizrahim,” which, mapping out onto older and newer cartographies, come to function among technology of rules, and state politics, as markers of identity (distributed along racial or religious, cultural or political, lines). Rather than providing geographical, genealogical, or liturgical information, terms such as these primarily serve, one could broadly say, power/knowledge goals (again, in the modern sense).¹³ In any of these contexts, though, the value of the phrase “Muslim Jews” is easy to determine. It is null—indeed, unnecessary. Neither can it claim to be less anachronistic, more emic (or, for that matter, etic), than its more recognized contenders. Its lack of currency breaks from our accustomed thinking and may therefore illuminate the possibilities and impossibilities of a turn. If “Muslim Jews” is the name of a fiction, if it is no more than an isolated trope (even less of a rallying banner than the term “Semites”), it may be seized as an image never to be seen again. It is the likeness of a turn, a figure of conversion.

Versions and Conversions

The self-described memoirs of *Outcast*, indeed, the book as a whole, articulate in more than one way the rich weave of relations between conversion and translation. Minimally, it brings us to the precise point Gauri Viswanathan describes when she suggests that the conversion of one lone individual constitutes a political event, the measure of which remains to be taken. As to translation, by virtue of its ambivalently fictitious dimension (the narrative is based on a historical figure), the book occupies the tenuous space between history and literature, translating one into the other. The autobiography of a subject who never existed nonetheless constitutes a compelling testimony. It passes, as it were, as a document.¹⁴ But translation operates further and at a wider range of levels here. It may begin—or end—with the fact that we are reading the otherwise unmarked Hebrew version of a text whose implicit source appears to be Arabic.¹⁵ One text stands for both original and translation, with Hebrew serving as original and non-original language. Indeed, the Hebrew of the text runs at countercurrent, foregrounding the fact that linguistic translation follows a direction as if opposite to the religious conversion. Yet in both cases what there is testifies to what is not (or *is* no longer) there. Hebrew, moreover, is shot through with interferences, not the least of which come from outside Hebrew, as the narrator tells of his early education in that language. In many ways, English works in a similar manner (his life in America; his American ex-wife and child; his work on the English translation of his own scholarly study of *The Jews and History*). The book further stages and thematizes translation, another conversion of sorts, from the rabbinical figure of Elisha ben Abuya (otherwise known as *aher*) to Soussan himself (O, 145) from the sword to the word, Jacob (“who is Israel”) to Muhammad, from the Bible to the Qur’an (O, 206–7), from language to language, marked or unmarked, as well as from place to place. Palestine, and Israel, are constant references, recurring coordinates. They even constitute, for a number of important characters, a destination of sorts, but so do the United States, Iran, Lebanon, and, above all, Iraq. The book functions as a dynamic, palimpsestic, and expansive stage

upon which are enacted different, and more recent, displacements, conversions, and translations between Iraq, Israel, and the United States, as well as between Judaism and Islam. Commenting on the structure of such texts, contexts, and events, Jacques Derrida underscores their layered temporality and the uneasy relatedness of their language (not necessarily languages):

This tells us a great deal about the status and function of what one could call the self-referential signs of an idiom in general, of a discourse or a writing in its relationship to the linguistic idiom, for instance, but also in its relationship to all idiomaticity. The (metalinguistic and linguistic) *event* is then doomed to be erased in the translating structure. Now this translating structure does not begin, as you know, with what is commonly called translation. It begins as soon as a certain type of reading of the ‘original’ text is instituted. It erases but also exposes that which it resists and which resists it. It offers up language to be read in its very erasure: the erased traced of a path (*odos*), of a tract, the path of erasure. The *translatio*, the translation . . . is a path that passes over or beyond the path of language, passing its path. (*EU*, 19)

Surely, the book also traces a path toward what Peter van der Veer has called “conversion to modernities.” As its readers today at any rate, we are caught into its translating structure, thrown onto the stage it sets, one that is never simply topocentric. Need I add that we are still in the thick of it?

But Ahmad Haroun Soussan hardly qualifies as the subject of a major historical event. Nor is his conversion, by any means, representative. Historians—who often adjudicate on events and non-events as well as, no less authoritatively, on what cannot be known—have certainly assured us that in modern history, among Iraqi Jews at least, “conversion was rare.”¹⁶ Yet, his conversion (and the translations it performs along with those that surround his character) in his textual, historical, and political aspects does recall and resonate with a long chain of Jewish converts, beginning with “Ibn Ka’ab and Ibn Salam and Ka’ab al-Akhbar and others,” all those “tribal Jewish chieftains to be counted among Muhammad’s first messengers . . . those who were close to the

Prophet and spread his teachings at the beginning of his mission,” as one sheikh who commends Ahmad Soussan on his conversion recalls (O, 97). Other scholars have confirmed that mass conversions recalls, in fact, have occurred, between Judaism and Islam and throughout history. For good or bad reasons. In the thirteenth century, the Jewish philosopher Ibn Kammûna offered a sample of such motives for conversion. “We never see anyone converting to Islam,” he writes, “unless in terror, or in quest of power, or to avoid heavy taxation, or to escape humiliation, or if taken prisoner, or because of infatuation with a Muslim woman, or for some similar reason. Nor do we see a respected, wealthy, and pious non-Muslim well versed in both his faith and that of Islam, going over to the Islamic faith without some of the aforementioned or similar motives.”¹⁷ There are famous examples, of course, who may fail to be representative but seriously raise nonetheless, or at least pose, the unsettling political challenge that occupies us here. Take Samaw’al al-Maghribi, a Jew converted to Islam (and to history, according to one scholar), whose polemical, semi-autobiographical account underwent many a translation (he became known in the West as Samuel Marochitanus, “the blessed Jew of Morocco,” and his own conversion was converted, translated, as he was said to have converted to Christianity [*sic*], “a blackamoor turned white” indeed).¹⁸ Or take Sabbatai Zevi and his followers, the Dönme, who might very well be the truest examples of “Muslim Jews” and about whom I have already quoted Scholem.¹⁹ Take the children, in Israel/Palestine and elsewhere, who come before the law—at once Jewish and Muslim—by virtue of mother and father (they may be the result of modern day *convivencias*, the consequence of the derelict imagination of Israeli Security Services—the original, infamous, and murderous units of “*mista’aravim*”—or the product of the literary imagination of writers who could entitle a novel *Mohammed Cohen*).²⁰ Take Muhammad Asad, whose *Road to Mecca* bears more than a passing likeness to Soussan’s *My Path to Islam*.²¹ Take finally, “Jews for Allah” (at www.jews-for-allah.org) who endeavor to review and extend some of this history, testifying as well to what Ella Shohat aptly describes as “a Muslim investment in maintaining Jewish identity as it had been known within

the Muslim world” (*TM*, 344). Unless we think that their relatedness is even more unlikely than that of original to translation.

Conversion to Islam out of the folds of Judaism—an event of translation if there ever was one—engages, as I have said, more than lonely (or not so lonely) individuals. If it informs “the idea of the Arab Jew,” it is because the very words we use in this context are themselves effects of subtle translations. One historical account of the twists and turns of these translations is offered by Steven Wasserstrom in his examination of the founding texts of scholarship dedicated to an inquiry into Arab-Jewish or, and there begins our predicament, Jewish-Muslim relations, what has been called the “Jewish-Muslim symbiosis.”²² Wasserstrom aptly and approvingly documents the shift in standard texts, whereby scholars turned away from Shlomo Dov Goiten’s *Jews and Arabs*, reading instead Bernard Lewis’s *The Jews of Islam*. Wasserstrom notes the emergence of religion as an analytical category. Still, he laments the fact that between these two texts, “the study of religion has barely begun to integrate the extraordinary phenomenon of Jewish-Muslim symbiosis, much less rethink the paradigm itself” (*BM*, 7). Without lingering on what is left unsaid regarding the translation here at work, whereby something like culture and ethnicity (Goiten’s book takes a broad, culturalist approach) should turn, with apparently no need for explanation, into religion (*The Jews of Islam* and the “Jewish-Muslim symbiosis”), it can no doubt be argued that the turn to religion has now become determining, if not always dominant, in the study of Judaism and Islam, as well as in the study of their relatedness. Certainly, no study of the Arab world today would refrain from referring after a fashion to religion in its different forms.²³ It might be paradoxical therefore to acknowledge that when it comes to the idea of the Arab Jew, the operative terms hark back to an ambivalently non-religious, pre-religious, or otherwise than religious, vocabulary. The risk is that the very words, and perhaps more than that, leave untouched the question of religion; religion “itself” as a problem or object of investigation. Obviously, I do not mean to push this argument too far, not at the moment, since these are complicated matters that many have tried to contend with (I myself have

tried to address them elsewhere).²⁴ I do wish to indicate, however, that the translation—if it is one—from “Arab Jews” to “Muslim Jews” does not quite accompany the quiet, progressive narrative of scholarly shifts described by Wasserstrom. The phrase “Muslim Jews” is rather meant to highlight a peculiar feature of the shift from race (or ethnicity) to religion, namely that whereas racial discourse sought to *forbid* miscegenation, the current discourse of religion appears efficiently to make it *impossible*, to function so as to make certain modes of co-presence unthinkable or nonsensical, and minimally paradoxical. If the phrase “Muslim Jews” does participate in turning our attention (and a few other things) around, and anew, to the matter of religion, it could confirm for us that we have left behind what Charles Taylor has recently—not to mention, strangely—termed “the secular age.”²⁵ But it hardly brings us “back” to any prior mode of existence, to some ideal or authentic “religion.” The phrase alerts us rather to different translations, different conversions, ideally making us look at any “original” in different ways. On the other hand, we are forced to acknowledge that the title “Muslim Jews” has yet to become the catchphrase of the moment (hyphenated or not), the currency of which would lead one to think of gathering conferences, workshops, and symposiums, and even write articles and heavily footnoted books about it. Like a lone conversion, and a strange turn of phrase, “Muslim Jews,” their conversions and translations, may or may not qualify for the category of “most unsettling political events in the life of a society” akin to ours.

Is Ahmad Haroun Soussan a Muslim Jew then? If we consider these terms—Judaism, Islam—at their most basic, along with that which links them (namely here conversion, and translation), it will not be difficult to recognize that the religiousness they seem to evoke is almost entirely absent from the narrative as a whole. Following the descriptions of Sasson Somekh’s nonfictional memoirs, there is hardly “a film of religiosity” that envelops this story and its characters. “The Baghdad that I knew,” Somekh explains, “had become far more secular.”²⁶ Although the fictional Soussan is technically older than our thriving and respected colleague at Tel-Aviv University, one easily surmises that this is true of his Baghdad as

well. In a way, this is why the event of conversion can be described as so unsettling. The “processes of secularization,” as Somekh calls them, make even a thin religious varnish appear like a “problem”: “The problem is that a film of religiosity envelops the story,” writes Somekh about a different but proximate story, which foregrounds a similarly alternative account of Baghdad. And religion is indeed a problem, if a marginal one, in a body of writing that foregrounds cultural or ethnic habits and practices. Yet, if conversion is another name for that problem, it may be because what is otherwise absent (and can only “return” when one assumes this absence) has undergone a translation and a transformation that remain to be read. Recalling Benjamin’s idiom, one would have to consider the possibility that the life of the original (religion or religions) attains in conversion (which would have to include secularization) “its ever-renewed latest and most abundant flowering” (“TT,” 72). Phrased differently, conversion here demands that we still ask about the afterlife of religion, which means, first of all, the afterlife of Judaism in Soussan’s Islam, as well as, second of all, the afterlife of religion in secularization. What I have been referring to as the implausibility (or unlikelihood) of the phrase “Muslim Jews” may testify to the absence of an afterlife (in all the senses of these words). It may lead us to ask whether there was ever religion in the first, and older, place. Then again, the phrase may call attention to the lingering and even retrospective effects of precisely such an afterlife. If the phrase “Muslim Jews” functions like a translation, then we will do well to remember that translation, according to Benjamin, “serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages. It cannot possibly reveal or establish this hidden relationship itself; but it can represent it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form” (“TT,” 72). Conversion—the growth of religions such that it would comprehend the idea of “Muslim Jews”—cannot possibly reveal or establish the hidden relationship that exists (or not) between Judaism and Islam and their mutual conversions, translations, and secularizations. It can only represent their afterlife—it is their afterlife. And it does so “by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form.” Benjamin insists here that “the idea of life and afterlife . . . should be regarded with an entirely

unmetaphorical objectivity.” For him, “the concept of life” can be given its due “only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life” (“TT,” 71). Indeed, an afterlife “could not be called that if it were not a transformation and renewal of something living.” Most crucially here “the original undergoes a change” and “even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process” (“TT,” 73). How much more so *religion*.

I am hardly confident that it would be possible to demonstrate for certain that whatever we might want to call “religion,” in any of its accepted senses, is of less than marginal interest to Ahmad Haroun Soussan. What, after all, would such a demonstration entail? Having undergone a conversion—having made what might otherwise look like a “religious” commitment—Soussan has no hesitation in asserting (if not publicly so) that the biblical and quranic patriarch “Abraham was neither a Muslim nor a Jew, if he even existed” (O, 11). To the extent that he manifests any interest in religion or religions, it is almost entirely scholarly (e.g., O, 28–29). And when he is identified as a Muslim (prior to his conversion, incidentally, and by no less than a Jesuit priest) it appears to be because he speaks heatedly of Europe’s “great debt to Muslim civilization,” of its repudiation of Islam “for generations,” and of its representation of “Muslims as barbarians.” Talking like a Muslim (“You talk like a Muslim!” says the priest) seems to have little to do with religion. Indeed, Soussan promptly clarifies that “even though I was born a Jew, I see the best in each religion and do not adhere to any of them” (O, 31). Whatever this looks like, it is not the image of a person on the verge of being “born again.”

The point bears repeating. What otherwise appears as “religion” here has little to do with anything recognizably religious (accepting for now the current understanding of the term and concept, which continue to revolve around notions like belief and practice, divine and human, and so forth). Islam is refigured as much as Judaism is, the latter repeatedly transformed into that which is neither people, nor homeland, nor culture: “All of a sudden I don’t belong to a people, a homeland, a culture, I’m just a Jew!” Soussan complains when confronted with the paternalizing racism of his American,

Christian father-in-law (O, 21). Rather than a politicized religion (an opaque category if there ever was one), Islam appears as a political program of universal magnitude (often described, to be sure, as metaphorical “religion”). As Soussan explains on occasion, “I said we are in need of an *Islamic Manifesto* similar to the bankrupt *Communist Manifesto*. I talked of a general Muslim unity for a social and cultural revolution that could pull us away from dependence on the west and prepare us to construct a just society, a shining model for the entire world” (O, 76). Islam is a social body, the internal and external dynamics of which presents a genuine alternative to the Christian West.

The tour in Europe reinforced my conviction regarding Islam’s supremacy over Christianity. For while Christianity made do with spiritual preaching, and instructed believers to say “Let Caesar have his due”, Islam was founded on the unity of believers, regardless of race and language, on faith in one god. This unity prevented the growth of a clerical power next to the government, as in the case of the church. (O, 78)

In other words, Islam offers a different vision of politics and not an alternative “spiritual preaching” that leaves the political ruler separate and alone. Christianity may be a religion, then, but Islam hardly appears to be. Indeed, it was the doings of “the Orientalist school” that fostered “animosity toward Islam as a fanatical and tyrannical religion,” that reduced and translated “Muslim civilization” into no more than a “religion” (O, 79). Underscoring its political and social, as well as cultural, dimensions (as opposed to spiritual, theological, or even ritual ones), Soussan writes his conversion account and addresses himself to Jews on sociopolitical grounds, “entreating them to let go of their separatism and join the Muslim nations wherein they live” (O, 97). Even his secularist friends point out that he does not even contemplate going on the mandatory pilgrimage to Mecca (O, 116). One of them is “incessantly pressing me to change my way of life and establish a Muslim family as required by religion” (O, 132). He in turn expresses pain and (implicitly) surprise when his Muslim friends fail to join in the otherwise consensual condemnation of his first marriage on

proper religious grounds: “What hurt me even more was disapproval from my Muslim friends . . . not due to my marrying a Christian, but due to my marrying an American!” (O, 51). Finally, when he recounts and compares the respective struggles of Jacob and Muhammad with the angel, the argument he makes is nothing less than theological.

The story of the angel would serve as a point of departure through which I could explain not only the difference between Judaism and Islam, but also my own views on genuine Islam, that primal and pure Islam that came before power and disputes and division and bloodshed. Faith in the word and not the sword is the message that Muhammad bore at the beginning of his mission and it is this message that Muhammad bore at the beginning of his mission and it is this message that the Muslims of today bear to their people and to the world. (O, 207)

How to translate the word, then? How to do so without converting words into swords? How to translate religion? And conversion?

I have already suggested that one could read the material I have presented so far as a different kind of translation; in this case, the translation of Islam from religion to politics, or alternatively, as the transcript of a dream that could go by the name of pan-Islamism, a transnational Islamic nationalism, or even as “post-nationalism,” all of which would be quite remote from religiously sanctioned practices. These and other clichés could indeed be deployed (and they are, in one instance at least of misunderstanding, in which Soussan is accused of holding the view that “Islam is the foundation for a comprehensive national concept. This sort of reminds me of something. Excuse me but I can just quote your own words about Zionism!” To this he answers that “there isn’t a shred of semblance between Zionism, which sees Judaism as a nationality, and what I am saying” [O, 170]). Yet, the effect would be to ignore that whatever goes under the name of religion (or better yet of “political religion”), whether contended with or ignored, testifies to categorical inadequacies and to what Benjamin calls “the hallmark of bad translations.” Just as “any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything

but information—hence, something inessential,” so the conversion of Islam into religion, indeed, the reduction of Soussan’s conversion to “religion,” does no more than convey something inessential (“TT,” 69). Nor can the problem be avoided by substituting terms like “ethnicity” (“You are . . . the only one who stands above the ethnic dispute,” Soussan is told [O, 111]), “culture,” and whatnot. Religion must be affirmed: “We must realize how hopeless the efforts of Christian radicals in the Arab world to deny religion its central role in shaping the nation are” (O, 101). Yet it must also be refigured; it must be translated again, and again, and with it the ever renewed relatedness of “religions” as it takes place in the *form* of conversion and of translation (“translation is a form,” says Benjamin at the beginning of his essay, as if suggesting that translation be treated as an independent rhetorical or literary genre, or perhaps as a singular mode of thinking).

It is therefore crucial to consider that what Soussan’s account figures among its many turns is precisely such relatedness of Judaism and Islam, of Jews and Muslims. With these terms—as it were, “religious” terms—there begins to operate a language that testifies to yet other conversions and translations of religion. Such are, of course, the very terms that explain my own insistence on “Muslim Jews,” a phrase that, I have indicated, is meant to highlight and intensify the stakes otherwise present in “the idea of the Arab Jew,” and to express what is, in Soussan’s memoirs, the central reciprocal relation between Judaism and Islam, to “represent it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form.” The relatedness of Judaism and Islam is parallel to the “kinship of languages” that Benjamin describes as having less to do with likeness or with the identity of origin. Here too, “while all individual elements of foreign languages—words, sentences, structures” can be seen as “mutually exclusive, these languages *supplement* one another” (“TT,” 74). This relatedness takes many forms in Soussan’s narrative, undergoing many a transformation and translation. We have seen, for example, that it governs his scholarly interpretation of Abraham, if in the mode of negation (“neither a Muslim nor a Jew”) or the perception of his failed marriage (“A Jew who became a Muslim and his wife deserted him” [O, 126]) and of himself (“A Jew who

converts is always suspicious, even more so when he tries to defend Jews" [O, 164]). It emerges as a double failure of recognition in the United States ("he found out I wasn't a Muslim like he thought . . . I'm just a Jew" [O, 21]) or as the accomplishment of conversion before the fact ("For me, you are no less a Muslim than myself" [O, 103]). It testifies to a secularized sociability, or alternatively to the growth of partnerships, rituals, and customs, shared and denied, a *convivencia* of sorts: "In Beirut I was in the company of Christians and was invited, for the first time in my life, to the students' Christmas celebration, in which Muslims and Jews also participated" (O, 28). In Baghdad as well, during water festivities, "Muslims and Jews celebrated together and even though they didn't taste each other's foods, the joy was general and carried everyone along in a major celebration" (O, 57). "In those days it was an accepted custom that business partnerships or friendships between a Jew and a Muslim did not take precedence over the taboo of eating the other's food or drinking from the other's vessels. Each was impure to the other and, on happy occasions, when Jews did sit in the company of Muslims, they didn't touch one another's food; if they wanted a sip of coffee, they'd take out cups brought from home" (O, 58). It gives the measure of political solidarities in the assertion, and evaluation, of facts: "Must I be a Muslim to acknowledge the facts? . . . Even though I was born a Jew, I see the best in each religion" (O, 31). It is also a site of separation, discrimination, and even segregation, another, highly negative but also complex, moment of social life of which Soussan partakes, and which he seems alternatively to observe, affirm, resist, lament, and endorse in quick succession, as he also blames the victims: "Many Jews . . . were annoyed by the respect with which I was treated in the company of Muslims. The café where I was sitting bore a sign up front 'For Muslims Only,' and this in itself was enough to see me as not one of them . . . I tried to reduce my involvement in Muslim society and conceal it, but over time I learned that the more I tried to be considerate of the Jews' sense of frustration, the more they increased their animosity toward me" (O, 35). "Assad and I didn't abide by these prohibitions, secretly we would eat of the Muslims' foods we found palatable, and yet in their eyes

we were unlike them, we didn't belong" (O, 58). Both Judaism and Islam become markers of a foreignness that inscribes temporality at the same time that the narrative as a whole undoes it, figuring the problematic of conversion as the recurring figure of turning: "I again realized that I had to accept my predicament and carry my foreignness *wherever I turned* and accept not being accepted just the way I had been in the past, a Jew from without . . . and now I was a Muslim come from without" (O, 124). Soussan's father too "went to great lengths to maintain a different way of life at home, different not only from Muslim homes, but also from the Jewish families in the neighborhood" (O, 61). One can therefore begin to recognize here the generalization of the Muslim Jew. Minimally, and in the final analysis, Soussan's description of his Jewish friend Nissim Assad reveals that they both share the double foreignness of Muslim Jews. They are kin to Abraham ("neither a Muslim nor a Jew, if he even existed" [O, 11]). One can certainly ask after the existence of both of them. One can also ask about them both the question Soussan asks about his friend "What came first with Assad, the Jew or the Iraqi? It seems to me, were he asked such a question, that he would answer: Both are first" (O, 90). They both partake of "dual loyalties. A soul split in two" (O, 93; and see also 192). They are both "Jews in the Shade of Islam," Muslim Jews. This is Nissim Assad's poem by that title:

If the religion of Moses is my vessel of faith
 The shade of Muhammad's Law is my home

 The tolerance of Islam is what I lean upon
 And the Koranic tongue my verse's treasure chest

 Safe-keeps the love I owe Muhammad's people
 And though it is to Moses my prayers go

 It is the loyalty of Samawal I cannot forego
 As I rejoice in Baghdad or let my misery grow (O, 67)

Is this religion? Clearly it is about Jews and Muslims. This poem, like the material I have mobilized in this essay, articulates the legal and the domestic, the linguistic and the poetic, the social and the

ritual, the geographical and the political dimensions that constitute the relatedness of Judaism and Islam and the figure of the Muslim Jew. On the other hand, the poem is undoubtedly the site of many turns and conversions, hardly the measure of one individual—or of one religion. Rhetorically, it circulates or rather turns upon internal conversions, the way one speaks of internal translations. Like this poem, like the book as a whole, the plausibility and implausibility of Muslim Jews would foreground religion and perhaps a different idea, even a different idea of religion. This idea would be no more than “a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness” of religions, since “an instant and final rather than a temporary and provisional solution of this foreignness remains out of the reach of mankind; at any rate, it eludes any direct attempt. Indirectly, however, the growth of religions ripens the hidden seed into a higher development of language” (“TT,” 75).

Notes

This paper was intended for a UCLA workshop on “the idea of the Arab Jew,” which I was, unfortunately, unable to attend. I thank Shaul Setter and the editors of *Qui Parle* for their invitation and thoughtful suggestions. I dedicate it to Petar Milat, who prompted me to think about conversion.

1. Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), xi.
2. Talal Asad, “Comments on Conversion,” in *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity*, ed. Peter van der Veer (New York: Routledge, 1996), 266, hereafter cited as *CM*; Asad is here engaging with Karl F. Morrison’s important work, *Understanding Conversion* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992) and with the claim that conversion is fundamentally a Christian category. For my own purposes here, I will adhere to Asad’s distinction between word, concept, and practice and suspend the matter of Christianity, which would deserve a separate and distinct treatment here.
3. Michael Ragussis, *Figures of Conversion: “The Jewish Question” and English National Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995)
4. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 3–4. Hereafter cited as *PL*.

5. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 75. Hereafter cited as "TT."
6. Keeping with the distinction proposed by Talal Asad between word, concept, and practice, it should be pointed out that there is no general word for "conversion" in Hebrew (there is one, however, for "apostasy" or, more precisely, for "apostates," *meshumadim*). Conversion is otherwise referred to with a verbal form of the new, "target" religion, unless one converts to Judaism, which brings us back to the "proselyte" or *ger* (with all the attendant paradoxes of becoming thereby a kind of resident alien, a foreign sojourner).
7. Amnon Raz-Krakozkin pertinently describes one important site of converts' textual activities in the emerging discourse of Hebraism during the sixteenth century. Speaking of Jewish converts to Christianity, he explains that they "reflected an ambivalent stance that expressed their continuous attempt to bridge the two aspects of their identity by accommodating Hebrew literature to the Christian world. They blurred the distinction between Jews and Christians, and at the same time redefined the boundaries. By that, they evidently confirmed *Jewish existence within the Christian world*" (A. Raz-Krakotzkin, *The Censor, the Editor, and the Text: The Catholic Church and the Shaping of the Jewish Canon in the Sixteenth Century*, trans. Jackie Feldman [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000], 25–26; emphasis added). Later, Raz-Krakotzkin will argue that the convert articulates the very "perspective from which modern Jewish historiography has been written" (197).
8. Vicente L. Rafael has made the case for this link between converts and translators most persuasively in *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); van der Veer follows Rafael and affirms that "it is precisely the problem of translation that is at the heart of conversion" (Peter van der Veer, "Introduction," in *CM*, 15). Shimon Ballas, *Ve-hu Aher* (Tel-Aviv: Zmora Bitan, 1991), translated as *Outcast* by Ammiel Alcalay and Oz Shelach (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2007). Hereafter cited as *O*. The copyright page of the Hebrew original offers a different translation for the title, namely, "The Other One."
9. Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 241.
10. In his discussion of "the predicament of the Arab Jew in Palestine,"

Salim Tamari (focusing on Ishaq al-Shami, aka Yitzhak Shami) somehow casually describes the characters of a dream sequence as “Muslim Jews,” allowing for this admittedly rare phrase to serve as a translation, however implausible, for “Arab Jews” (S. Tamari, “Ishaq al-Shami and the Predicament of the Arab Jew in Palestine,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 21 [August 2004]: 19).

11. Gershom Scholem, “The Crypto-Jewish Sect of the Dönme (Sabatians) in Turkey,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 142.
12. After Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, the groundbreaking work of Ella Shohat and, differently, that of Ammiel Alcalay have enabled the emergence of a critical reflection on the political and rhetorical configurations sustained by these designations (see Ella Shohat, “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims,” *Social Text* 19/20 (Autumn 1988): 1–35, as well as Shohat’s collected essays *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); hereafter cited as *TM*. And see Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). I have tried to follow suit, and trace some of the same vicissitudes, in my *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008). It should be pointed out that historians—and philologists of old—have always insisted on their sovereignty over the archive. From Shlomo Goiten’s *Jews and Arabs* to Bernard Lewis’s *Jews of Islam*, one can witness the terminological vagaries of ethnicity and religion, culture and geography, and the oscillations of disciplines. As demonstrated by the legal division between “Jew” and “Arab” (as distinct “nationalities”) enforced by the state of Israel, the stakes can become quite high.
13. For the most pertinent analysis, which focuses on the situation in Israel, where terms like “Oriental Jews” or “Sephardim” acquired state institutional force, as well as political momentum, see Sami Shalom Chetrit, *The Mizrahi Struggle in Israel: Between Oppression and Liberation, Identification and Alternative* (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 2004; in Hebrew).
14. The terms “testimony” and “document” are used with some irony here, following the sharp critique of their philological structure by Marc Nichanian in his forthcoming *The Historiographic Perversion*, trans. Gil Anidjar (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming) and in *Le deuil de la philologie* (Geneva: MetisPresse, 2007).
15. Jacques Derrida provides us with an insight into the problem raised

- with this silence of the “original” when he writes that “when an ‘original’ speaks about its language by speaking its language, it prepares a kind of *suicide by translation*, as one says suicide by gas or suicide by fire” (*Eyes of the University. Right to Philosophy* 2, trans. Jan Plug et al. [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004], 19. Hereafter cited as *EU*).
16. Nancy E. Berg, *Exile from Exile: Israeli Writers from Iraq* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 19.
 17. Sa’ad Ibn-Kammûna, *Examination of the Three Faiths*, trans. Moshe Perlmann, in Norman Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), 261. Stillman refers on a number of occasions to “significant” or “large numbers” of Jews converting to Islam over the course of the centuries, e.g. 27, 73.
 18. Cf. my *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) 214n37, hereafter cited as *JA*; and see Adnan A. Husain, “Conversion to History: Negating Exile and Messianism in Samaw’al al-Maghribi’s Polemic Against Judaism,” *Medieval Encounters* 8, no. 1 (2002), 3–34.
 19. For an additional turn on the Dönme (a term that, as Kader Konuk explains, derives from the Turkish verb *dönmek*, “to turn”), see Marc Baer, “The Double Bind of Race and Religion: The Conversion of the Dönme to Turkish Secular Nationalism,” in *Converting Cultures: Religion, Ideology and Transformations of Modernity*, ed. Dennis Washburn and A. Kevin Reinhart (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 291–323; and see K. Konuk, “Eternal Guests, Mimics, and Dönme: The Place of German and Turkish Jews in Modern Turkey,” in *New Perspectives on Turkey* 37 (2007): 5–30; I am grateful to Veli Yashin for this last reference.
 20. Claude Kayat, *Mohammed Cohen* (Paris: Seuil, 1981).
 21. Muhammad Asad, *The Road to Mecca* (Gibraltar: Dar al-andalus Limited, 1980).
 22. Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). Hereafter cited as *BM*.
 23. On the ambivalent making of Islam as a “world religion” see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions; or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). I have commented on the novel and paradigmatic status of Islam as religion as diagnosed by Edward

- Said in *Orientalism* (cf. Gil Anidjar, “Secularism,” in *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008], 39–63).
24. Cf. Anidjar, *Semites*, esp. chapter 4.
 25. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).
 26. Sasson Somekh, *Baghdad, Yesterday: The Making of an Arab Jew* (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2007), 116.