

Catholic Converts in the Nineteenth-century Market of Souls

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Let me begin with the story of two pilgrimages to Rome, one of which was never taken.

The first pilgrimage was the fervent wish of Isaac Thomas Hecker. In 1844 Hecker wrote about his plans in a series of letters to his religious fellow-traveler, Orestes Augustus Brownson, with whom he had been corresponding for almost a year about their shared search for the true church and their shared efforts for political and economic reform. For a period of weeks, perhaps months, Hecker had fallen into a spiritual malaise, having already decided to unite with the Catholic Church but waiting because “it is a rule of the Church to defer the baptism of adults for a short time.” In a letter written on August 2, the very morning that he was to be baptized, Hecker described a plan to revive the ardor of a conversion not yet consummated. He planned to take “a penitential [sic] journey to Europe, even as far as Rome. To work my passage over the sea and to work[,] walk and beg whatever distances I may go. A better penance I cannot think of.” Hecker’s plan was perhaps not that exceptional, but he hoped to take along an unusual traveling companion. Hecker wished to go with the “one person who can live on bread and water and sleep upon the earth, who can walk his share; if he should consent to go I might go. It is Henry Thoreau I mean.”¹

Henry David Thoreau might seem like an odd companion for a pilgrimage, but Hecker, himself a former Transcendentalist, was looking for someone to share a simple life.² Quoting the Gospels in his proposal to Thoreau, Hecker wanted to go “without purse or staff, depending upon the all-embracing love of God,” for traveling in Europe and kneeling before shrines would “prove the dollar is not almighty.” In his reply, Thoreau wrote that his soul leaped at the idea, because such wanderings rekindled “fresh faith in a kind of Brahminical, Artesian, Inner Temple life.” But Thoreau could not comprehend Hecker’s conversion to Catholicism: “The other day, for a moment, I think I understood your relation to that body; but the thought was gone again in a twinkling.”³

¹Isaac T. Hecker to Orestes A. Brownson, August 2, 1844, in Joseph F. Gower and Richard M. Leliaert, eds., *The Brownson-Hecker Correspondence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 109.

²Jenny Franchot has demonstrated how Catholic themes appear in the literature of other Concord authors writing at the same time as Thoreau. Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), chap. 10–13, 16.

³Isaac Hecker to Henry David Thoreau, July 31, 1844; Thoreau to Hecker, August 14, 1844; Hecker to Thoreau, August 15, 1844; Thoreau to Hecker, n.d.; in E. Harlow Russell, ed., *A Bit of Unpublished Correspondence Between Henry D.*

Hecker broke off his letter to Brownson to go receive the waters of baptism, but resumed the correspondence a few weeks later: "My project of going to Europe has so far failed. Henry Thoreau is not disposed to go and under the present circumstances I am not inclined to go on such a tour alone. This has thrown me back on the languages which may be of much more permanent good to me than the monk tour." Hecker did not bring up the question of whether Brownson might join the pilgrimage, but of course Brownson could not go: he had a large family and burdensome finances, which kept him from Hecker's kind of piety. Only someone as detached from the economy as Thoreau could contemplate such a pilgrimage. Thus Hecker was forced back to studying Latin and Greek rather than making his "monk tour" with Thoreau. When Hecker did make a trip to Rome in 1857 to plead for the Redemptorists, he was expelled from the order for, among other charges, breaking his vows of obedience and poverty by undertaking the voyage.⁴

The second pilgrimage was taken by Isaac Hecker's younger contemporary, George Bliss. Bliss made his first trip to Rome in 1846, two years after Hecker's conversion. The trip was not a pilgrimage, however, for Bliss was a Massachusetts Yankee descended from the Dwights of "the bluest orthodoxy," who would be censured even at Unitarian Harvard for sitting during prayers. Bliss was presented to Pope Pius IX as a wealthy American traveler taking the European tour before college.⁵

Bliss's pilgrimage to Rome would wait until 1887–88. First he became a capitalist and a lawyer to capitalists, serving as the federal district attorney for New York and a lawyer for Mutual Life Insurance and other large corporations. He married his second cousin, whom he admired in part for "her independence . . . in becoming an Episcopalian when all the influences about her were Unitarian." In their household, Catherine Bliss was the religious leader. Though they had agreed to split time between churches, George went most often to his Catherine's Episcopalian church. In 1884, in the midst of a prolonged illness, she suddenly converted to Catholicism. Bliss was "very angry and threatened separation &c., and even threatened to kill myself, though I never meant that." Catherine converted George with only the greatest difficulty, after leaving books lying around the house. A female client of her husband's, Anaïs Casey, prompted Catherine to invite

Thoreau and Isaac T. Hecker (Worcester, MA: Press of Charles Hamilton, 1902), 5–10.

⁴Hecker to Brownson, September 5, 1844, in Gower and Leliaert, *The Brownson-Hecker Correspondence*, 114. Cf. Patrick Carey, *Orestes A. Brownson: American Religious Weathervane* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004).

⁵George Bliss, autobiography, typescript, 1:34–36, 51–53, in *George Bliss Papers*, The New-York Historical Society, New York, NY (hereafter Bliss autobiography).

Monsignor Thomas Capel, the so-called “Apostle to the Genteel,” to speak with her husband. George was converted in 1884 in a semi-secret conversion in the Bliss’s private chapel. The secret only lasted to the next morning. Bliss traveled that evening to Washington DC, and in the morning at the White House President Chester Arthur congratulated him on his conversion, the news having been published in one of the New York prints.⁶

When Catherine died, George Bliss married Anaïs Casey, and the newlyweds spent their honeymoon on a European tour, including several months in Rome. The new Mrs. Bliss recalled the trip in a memoir of her husband. The Blisses went to mass celebrated by Pope Leo XIII, who blessed them and later made Bliss a Commendatore of the Order of St. Gregory for protecting the American College in Rome and for using his political influence on behalf of American Catholics. Unlike Hecker, the Blisses missed the injunction to travel with neither purse nor staff, and they certainly brought more than two tunics for the journey. Their travelogues were filled with recollection of meals taken, art purchased, and powerful people visited. The extravagant trip, like Hecker’s, encouraged and expressed George Bliss’s emerging piety; unlike Hecker’s, it was underwritten by wealth inherited and earned on the capitalist market rather than begging.⁷

Does it matter that these two different converts, who shared an impulse to travel to Rome as an expression of loyalty to their new mother Church, had such very different relationships to America’s emerging market capitalism? Does it matter that the one was a former Transcendentalist who renounced the world and its goods, who found Henry David Thoreau the perfect companion and who later denounced *Walden*, the foremost nineteenth-century critique of the market, for its sham poverty, while the other was a New York elite who converted as part of a circle of well-heeled New York society Catholics, who paid for a lavish trip to Rome with insurance, railroad, finance, and federal monies?⁸

My point is not to reduce these conversions to a crass materialism. Indeed, converts themselves

⁶David McAdam and others, eds., *History of the Bench and Bar of New York* (New York History Company, 1897), 2:48–51; Bliss autobiography, 1:104–5, 202–7. Bliss’s father was president of several railroads. Cf. T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981); Anne C. Rose, *Beloved Strangers: Interfaith Families in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁷Bliss autobiography, 2:253–482. George Bliss to Sarah Walker, May 2, 1895, Bliss papers.

⁸When Thoreau published *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* a decade later, Hecker wrote to Brownson, “I have not read all his book through, and I don’t think any one will except as a feat.” But what Hecker would find objectionable ten years later was Thoreau’s insufficient poverty behind a pretended self-sufficiency. Hecker to Brownson, October 29, 1854, in Gower and Leliaert, *The Brownson-Hecker Correspondence*, 170.

often puzzled about the causes of their conversion. Hecker wrote, “The life that leads me to the Church is deeper than all thought and expression and if I attempt to give a reason or to explain why I am led to the Church afterwards I always feel that it never reaches the reason and I feel its inadequacy. Let men say as they may it is only by grace that we come to the knowledge of the truth as it [is] in Jesus.”⁹ Bliss likewise wrote, “I was often asked by what process or by what arguments I was induced to become a Catholic. I could hardly answer the question definitely”¹⁰ My point is that people who converted were making decisions about this world, as well as the world to come. For nineteenth-century converts, that increasingly meant settling their relation to the market.

Now, what do we mean by the word *market*? Historians of the nineteenth-century United States have used the word *market* in two ways. The first, most frequent meaning of the word is in a technical economic sense, as in the phrase “the market revolution.” Since Charles Sellers published a book by that title, historians have researched how markets formed and how labor changed from competency to wages. Even if historiographical interest in the market revolution has flagged, the history of American capitalism remains vibrant.¹¹

Historians of religion also use the word *market* in a metaphorical sense to refer to the “free market” of religion that developed in the United States following disestablishment, in which religions and sects competed with one another for adherents, as well as prestige and power. In some works, the market metaphor stands simply for religious competition; for other works, the metaphor is extended to religious firms, entrepreneurship, and other details of a functioning market.¹²

Religious historians may be reluctant to use the term *market*, for two reasons. First, an unfortunate misuse of technical theological terms to express ideas about the market led to severe criticism of Sellers’s work, by some religious historians. Second, the boundaries of the

⁹Hecker to Brownson, 24 June 1844, in Gower and Leliaert, *The Brownson-Hecker Correspondence*, 106.

¹⁰Bliss autobiography, 1:205.

¹¹Charles G. Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), esp. pp. 202–236; Michael Zakim and Gary John Kornblith, eds., *Capitalism Takes Command: The Social Transformation of Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

¹²Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Jonathan D. Sarna, “Christians and Non-Christians in the Marketplace of American Religion,” in *American Christianities: A History of Dominance and Diversity*, ed. Catherine A. Brekus and W. Clark Gilpin (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 119–132.

market metaphor have been pushed by sociologists like Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, and historians who identify as humanists rather than social scientists are reluctant to swallow the rational-choice model of human action. The result is that history of capitalism and religion, with notable exceptions, tends to be a twentieth-century enterprise.¹³

Though I am sympathetic to both of these critiques, I find that the sources left behind by converts frequently include a striking juxtaposition of spiritual and economic concerns, of which Isaac Hecker and George Bliss are but two examples. Converts were not trying to serve both God and Mammon, but they were trying to figure out their relation to the two. How then can we describe converts' relationship to the emerging nineteenth-century marketplace?

First, the history of conversion has to be written by bringing multiple religions into the same work. For too long the history of conversion—like the history of American religion generally—has been written denomination by denomination. Historians of American Catholicism such as Robert Orsi and John McGreevey, historians of American Judaism such as Jonathan Sarna and Lila Corwin Berman, and historians of Mormonism such as Richard Bushman, have called for re-writing American religious history with these religious interactions at the center.¹⁴ The difficulty is finding a narrow enough lens that still allows a broad field of vision on multiple religions, but conversion, like intermarriage or polemic, naturally brings the study of multiple religions together. With multiple religions within the frame, it becomes possible not just to assert that there was a “free market,” but to question how that market functioned and how converts moved from one faith to another.¹⁵

But bringing multiple religions together presents to the problem of how to compare them, especially given that many spiritual experiences are incommensurable. So, second, we can use the various ways that people chose to relate to the market for insight into their conversion. I'm not

¹³For two critiques, see essays by Daniel Walker Howe and Richard Carwardine in Melvin Stokes and Stephen Conway, eds., *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800-1880* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 259–309.

¹⁴Thomas A. Tweed, ed., *Retelling U.S. Religious History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Harry S. Stout and D. G. Hart, *New Directions in American Religious History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Randall J. Stephens, *Recent Themes in American Religious History: Historians in Conversation* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009); Christopher Cantwell, ed., “Roundtable: Beyond the Protestant Nation: Religion and the Narrative of American History,” *Fides et Historia* 44, no. 2 (2012): 56–83; cf. Kevin Michael Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁵Recent work by Steven Green and David Sehat questions to what extent this market was free. Steven K. Green, *The Second Disestablishment: Church and State in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); David Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

suggesting that the market determined people's conversion but in changing their religions people changed how they related to the market. In their experiences of conversions, one's religion made a major difference in how one related to the economy. This is the payoff, if you will, to bringing in the market, so let me try to sketch out some of the patterns that different religions have followed before returning to Hecker.

Jews were able, in large part, to resist conversion to Christianity, in part because they managed to assert that to convert was to succumb to a shady market in conversion. The assertion, made by rabbis, other Jewish leaders, and especially by converts who had returned to Judaism, was that Christians had erected an entire economy directed towards converting Jews: wealthy donors gave money to missionaries (who were usually converts), who in turn paid off poor, unsuccessful Jews to betray their religion. This argument, which had some basis in fact, painted Jewish conversions to Christianity as inauthentic because economic.¹⁶

Mormons, who at least for the first generation or so were all converts, and who continued to bring in massive numbers of converts from the United States and overseas, entered not only a new religion and new families, but also a new economic Zion. The Mormon economy in Nauvoo, then the State of Deseret, then Utah, often under the tight control of Brigham Young, was closer to religious cooperative than the unfettered capitalism of other parts of the United States.¹⁷

African and African-American slaves lived in an economic system that defined them as chattel, where the slave market was the defining experience of slavery. Conversion to Christianity, whether resisted or encouraged by masters, was a radical act that unlocked the soul by giving it to Jesus, the second Moses. Conversions of slaves to Christianity may have been so closely linked to the economy of slavery that most African Americans did not convert to Christianity until after the system had been abolished.¹⁸

Cherokees lived with Christian missionaries in both a market and a gift economy. Moravian, Baptist, Methodist, and ABCFM missionaries brought the infrastructure of a market economy—the

¹⁶Samuel Freuder, *A Missionary's Return to Judaism: the Truth About the Christian Missions to the Jews* (New York: Sinai Publishing Company, 1915); *A Critical Review of the Claims Presented by Christianity for Inducing Apostacy in Israel* (New York: Frere & Bellew, 1852), 25–26; John Oxlee, *Three Letters Humbly Submitted* (Philadelphia: Abraham Collins, 1843), printer's postscript, pp. 95–96.

¹⁷John G. Turner, *Brigham Young, Pioneer Prophet* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

¹⁸Daniel L. Fountain, *Slavery, Civil War, and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870, Conflicting worlds* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, updated ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

same market economy which, yoked to the political power of the state and federal governments, drove the Cherokee west. But missionaries, who were the Cherokees' strongest advocates, also lived with Cherokees in a gift economy where hospitality defined relationships more than the market, and where Christianity was received as a gift.¹⁹

Let me circle back to Isaac Hecker. When in 1855 Hecker wrote his first book, *Questions of the Soul*, a work addressed to potential converts, he took as a given that among Americans there was "a class of souls that cannot satisfy their natures with the common modes of life." These souls doubted that "he who amasses wealth" could be a follower of Jesus. Hecker held up as a positive, if deficient, example the communitarian experiments at Brook Farm, in which he had participated before converting. The book's argument against Protestantism reached its head in his description of the crucifixion, "Christ was not only poor, he had also a great affection for poverty," and, "As he approached death he became more and more enamored of poverty. His garments were stripped from his body and naked he was nailed to the cross." Where Protestants held that imitating Christ in his poverty was "not required of men, . . . [and] that it is absurd and ridiculous to think of it that no one can practise voluntary poverty," Hecker's gospel was that "Voluntary poverty must be most precious in the sight of God if one is able by it to purchase the riches of heaven."²⁰

Hecker saw conversion to Christianity not as a market economy, but a gift economy.²¹ Hecker was only one of perhaps 700,000 Americans who became Catholics in the nineteenth century—what we've been calling a market of souls.²² But in Hecker's understanding, conversion was not motivated by competition between religious "firms," nor was it simply a matter of choice. Instead, it was a gift of God's grace (which he experienced in a mystical way). For Hecker, that gift obligated him to a vow of poverty and a life dedicated to leading the Paulist Fathers in an effort to convert others; for Bliss, it meant using his not inconsiderable economic and political influence in defense of Catholics. Nineteenth-century converts to Catholicism, and converts to other faiths, found their conversions involved in both the market for souls and the market for goods, and for Catholic converts, that usually meant being in the market, but not necessarily of the market.

¹⁹Rowena McClinton, ed., *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007); *Memoir of John Arch, a Cherokee Young Man*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Massachusetts Sabbath School Union, 1836).

²⁰Isaac Thomas Hecker, *Questions of the Soul* (New York: D. Appleton, 1855), 153–55.

²¹For the idea of a religious gift economy, I am indebted to Leigh Eric Schmidt, "Practices of Exchange: From Market Culture to Gift Economy in the Interpretation of American Religion," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 69–91.

²²Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 540.