

Does the Soul Have a History?

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Let us begin with one moment in the life of one man:

I went to the synagogue, it being Friday evening, where I was soon observed as a stranger, and was invited to supper by the most honorable Jew in the place, who knowing my father and connexions, was extremely kind to me, and desired that I would dine with him the next day. I stayed at the same inn with my Christian friend. My soul was disquieted within me all the night. Early in the morning my friend went into the city on his business. Soon after he was gone, all that he had said to me [about Christianity] came suddenly into my mind with great force, and his kind and affectionate behavior, contrasted with the shameful conduct of my brother the Jew [who had cheated him], had such an influence on my mind, that I immediately sat down and wrote a letter to him, intimating I would travel in his company to Berlin, in order to inquire into the truth of Christianity. Having written this letter and sealed it, I left it for him in the inn, and went into the synagogue, without thinking, for a moment on the great sin, which I had committed (according to the Jewish traditions) in writing and sealing a letter on the Sabbath day.

On my return from the synagogue, . . . [m]y conscience was now awakened, and it loudly told me that I was no longer a Jew, for that I had broken the Sabbath. . . .

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From this time I must date the commencement of a new period
in my life.¹

What can a historian make of this source? The text is an autobiography, and thus presents the difficulties of self-representation and narrative. Some features—the cheating Jew, the word ‘Pharisee’—are stock, stereotyped characters with a polemical purpose. This is a conversion narrative, and therefore follows some genre conventions. Identifying the source only confirms the apparent difficulties, for the author is the most (in)famous of nineteenth-century Jewish converts to Christianity and Christian missionaries to the Jews, Joseph Samuel Christian Frederick Frey.²

Frey’s conversion has an apparently simple explanation. Born a Jew in pre-emancipation Germany, Frey left the Jewish community of his birth to make his fortune. Finding no work and in danger of being expelled from Rostock for being a Jew, Frey feigned interest in converting to Christianity to secure an apprenticeship and lodging, and in 1798 he was baptized into a Lutheran church. After moving to England, and being again in need of employment, he took a position as an Anglican missionary to the Jews. After an alleged scandal with a married woman, Frey departed for the United States, bounced between various groups as a missionary, and finally bent his convictions one last time by being immersed in order to take the pastorate of a Baptist church.³

This explanation, by virtue of going behind the text of Frey’s autobiography and exposing the material motives for his conversion, has the authority of scholarly due diligence and skepticism. There is some truth to that explanation. In the vicious interfaith battles of nineteenth-century America, Frey’s motives were as mixed as anyone else’s.⁴

¹Joseph Samuel Christian Frederick Frey, *The Converted Jew; or, Memoirs of the Life of Joseph Samuel C. F. Frey* (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1815), 31–33. See also Frey, *Narrative of the Rev. Joseph Samuel C. F. Frey* (New York, 1834) and various other editions.

²On the difficulties of autobiography, see D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). On conversion narratives as a genre, Stuart A. Federow, ‘Convert Autobiographies as a Genre of Literature’ (rabbinic thesis, Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, 1982).

³This is essentially the explanation given by David Max Eichhorn, *Evangelizing the American Jew* (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, 1978). Lee M. Friedman, *The American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews, and Joseph S. C. F. Frey Its Missionary: A Study in American Jewish History* (Boston, 1925).

⁴Jonathan D. Sarna, ‘The American Jewish Response to Nineteenth-Century Christian Missions’, *The Journal of American History* 68, no. 1 (June 1, 1981): 35–51; Eichhorn, *Evangelizing the American Jew*.

I'm not persuaded that this skeptical explanation captures the most interesting feature of Frey's experience, namely, his description of what was happening in his soul.⁵ In the passage I've quoted, Joseph Frey is describing his experiences as Joseph Samuel Levy, for he had not yet abandoned his priestly surname and assumed his three baptismal names. The passage does not explain how Frey came to be persuaded of the truth of Christianity, nor does it describe the rituals of catechesis and baptism by which he was accepted into the German Lutheran church, both of which the autobiography discusses later. Rather, this passage deals with Frey's sense of self, even his soul. Frey writes: 'my *soul* was disquieted within me'; 'all that he had said . . . came suddenly into my *mind*'; 'my *conscience* was now awakened'; 'a wounded *spirit* who can bear?'⁶

To understand the religious experiences of Frey and other like him who crossed religious boundaries and did not dwell in the religions of their birth, I think we need a way of talking about the experiences of the soul. Briefly stated, my question is this: Does the soul have a history?⁷

What is a soul?

In response to that question, one may first ask, what is a *soul*? The word is the property of philosophers, theologians, and maybe psychologists. Suffice it to say that I am not taking up the history of the idea of the soul,⁸ nor do I mean the term in the Christian theological sense,⁹ and I certainly do not mean the *psyche* in the sense of psychological history. When I ask, What is a soul?, I mean, how can scholars of religion talk about people like J.

⁵If this is a helpful distinction, I am choosing to pass over the historical arguments—which I find strong—to address more general theoretical issues.

⁶Frey, *Converted Jew*, 31–33, emphasis added.

⁷I allude here to Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁸Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁹The reason I do not mean *soul* in the Christian or in any theological sense is that the soul in Christian theology is a peculiar idea that is not generalizable to other religions. A Christian notion of the soul, or *ψυχή* in the language of the New Testament, is not like the Jewish conception of the soul, or *nephesh* in the Hebrew Bible, and it is certainly not like the Hindu, or Buddhist, Islamic or any other number of conceptions of the self. Charles Taylor argues against the universality of identity: 'Underlying our modern talk of identity is the notion that questions of moral orientation cannot all be solved in simply universal terms.' *Sources of the Self*, 28. Since I am dealing with converts, I must leave open the question how people experienced the soul.

S. C. F. Frey, who talk about their souls? And when I ask, Does the soul have a history?, I mean, how can these texts be read as reliable sources about the inner-workings of the soul *not* only about the genre of conversion narratives?¹⁰

I am persuaded that such a reading is possible for several reasons. First, the *Confessions* of Augustine of Hippo stand at the head of a long Christian tradition of valuing—even trusting—written introspections about God’s working in the soul. I think Augustine’s advice, ‘Return to your heart’ is good for the historian as well as for the pious. (It is because I have been surprised to find out and out deception in these conversion narratives that I value that I am at such pains to find a method of reading them.)¹¹ Second, William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* but also elsewhere in his philosophical writings, provides a pragmatic, empirical model for examining people’s inner experience in ‘solitude’. The soul for my purposes is related to the types of religious, interior experiences that people experience and find central to their identities, especially when they stop dwelling within a religious tradition and begin crossing religious boundaries. And I will also emulate James by beginning with religion in solitude, though as I hope will become apparent, solitude must give way to the social in both the origins and consequences of interior religious experiences.¹² And third, Robert Orsi’s history of ‘abundant’ experience, a term for experiences where ‘the transcendent breaks into time and comes face to face with humans in the circumstances of their everyday lives’ provides me with a model for dealing with experiences for which disenchanting categories (in the Weberian sense) are inadequate.¹³

¹⁰For example, Bruce Hindmarsh has done admirable work on early modern conversion narratives, but in the main he treats them as a genre.

¹¹Augustine, *Confessions*, 4.12.18–19.

¹²Thomas Tweed points out in *Crossing and Dwelling* that James’s definition of religion as what happens in ‘solitude’ is as pragmatic as his philosophy, for James provisionally, or arbitrarily, defined religion as something that occurs in solitude in order to investigate the phenomena in which he was interested, rather than assert that his definition was universally applicable. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902). Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 42–53. Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). In opposition, see David Hollinger, ‘Damned for God’s Glory: William James and the Scientific Vindication of Protestant Culture’, in Wayne Proudfoot, ed., *Re-Experiencing Varieties: William James and a Science of Religion* (New York, 2004), 9–30.

¹³Not every case in which we have the opportunity to look at the soul requires a resort to abundant history, but enough of them cite the miraculous, the supernatural, and the spiritual that abundant history can be a way of talking about what we find in the sources. Robert Orsi, ‘Abundant History: Marian Apparitions as Alternative

After circling around this definition of the soul, let me ask the question again: Does the soul have a history? Even with my narrower, pragmatic definition, the answer I most often hear is no. I beg to differ, and I want to offer a method for getting at the soul, as I have defined it. These theoretical musings are indebted not only to William James, but also to Erving Goffman, Randall Collins, and Charles Taylor. It is no accident that I have enlisted William James's pragmatic approach to religion, for all of these theorists draw heavily from him. My approach will be two-fold, dealing first with the private, inner experience, then moving to public, social consequences.

The soul's interactions

Taking up Frey's autobiography again, I must emphasize that we are not at the passage or moment in his life that has typically been regarded as the turning point, when (take your pick) he apostatized or converted. It is also not the point when Frey comes to believe 'the truth of Christianity' in his own conversion, where the work's apologetic character is most apparent and where we can trust Frey's narrative the least.¹⁴ But this moment of solitude framed by social interactions in the synagogue is the most crucial moment in Frey's conversion.

First, some background. Frey left his home and traveled to Schwerin, and among his fellow passengers were a Jew and a Christian merchant. The Christian noticed that Frey was strict in keeping *kashrut*, but that the other Jew ate whatever he pleased. The Christian accused the non-observant Jew of being neither a Jew nor a Christian. He was less harsh to Frey, but he told him that the law was a burden he need not bear.¹⁵

Frey had bought a letter of introduction for a position as a tutor to

Modernity', *Historically Speaking* 9, no. 2 (September/October 2008), 12-16. Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton University Press, 2004); Anne Taves, *Fits, Traces, Visions*; Anne Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*; Michael Altman, 'Hannah Adams' Intellectual Grandchildren; Or, Maybe It Was All Liberal Protestantism, After All?', *Religion in American History*, July 7, 2011, <http://usreligion.blogspot.com/2011/07/hannah-adams-intellectual-grandchildren.html>. 'Finding the Presence in Mormon History: An Interview with Susanna Morrill, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Robert Orsi', *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 2011, <https://dialoguejournal.com/2011/finding-the-presence-in-mormon-history-an-interview-with-susanna-morrill-richard-lyman-bushman-and-robert-orsi/>.

¹⁴Frey wrote several polemical or apologetic works aimed at converting Jews, the themes of which can also be detected in his autobiography.

¹⁵Frey, 29.

children. In Hamburg it became apparent that there was no position, and that he had been deceived. Frey thus moved on to Gistrow (Güstrow) in search of work, traveling again with the Christian who encouraged him to 'put your trust in the God of Israel'.¹⁶

The passage quoted earlier begins when Frey arrived in Gistrow. Frey went to the synagogue on Friday evening and was warmly welcomed. On Saturday morning, after a night in which his 'soul was disquieted within me', Frey wrote a letter to his Christian merchant. He then went to the synagogue on Saturday morning with the intention of later going to the home of 'the most honorable Jew in the place' for supper.

Frey interacted with both Jews and Christians, by attending synagogue and by hearing out the evangelization of the anonymous Christian. One need not be much of a skeptic to see that Frey was using these religious connections to find work. The desperate young man used his connection in the synagogue but also feigned interest in Christianity to follow another lead from the Christian tobacco merchant.

We see here a complex set of frames, to borrow the term from sociologist Erving Goffman. Goffman defines a *frame* in this way: 'Definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events.' Goffman's *Frame Analysis* is a powerful tool for interpreting conversions, because it is able to unpack multiple levels of meaning in interaction and because it is equipped to deal with problems of ritual, deception, and sincerity, and especially with the different meanings that different people may impart to the same event.¹⁷

We can see a number of frames apparent in Frey's interactions. Take the synagogue to start. Within the set of interactions in the synagogue, there was a frame of religiosity: people were there as a community to worship. Yet Frey could also interact with the prominent Jew in another set of frames. Frey could view the interaction within the religious community as an opportunity for advancement in his status as a job seeker, while the prominent Jew could regard his interaction with Frey as a kind of benevolence or obligation both to a fellow Jew and to the son of a distant

¹⁶Frey, 27-28, 31.

¹⁷Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 10-11. A theme that pervades my analysis below is how we can work out a methodology for reading sources that involve deceit. Cf. Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), who writes about reading sources produced by slaveholder's 'as if they contained only lies'. This is a practical necessity of reading problematic conversion narratives. Goffman's concern for duplicity and mixed meanings make his method particularly apt.

acquaintance. Both Frey and his benefactor, and for that matter the entire synagogue, were likely aware and approving of interactions occurring within these overlapping frames.

Interactions between Frey and the Christian merchant likewise had multiple frames. To the Christian, the frame was religious, an opportunity to convert a Jew to Christianity. For Frey, the frame was economic, an opportunity to look for a job. But to interact with the Christian, Frey had to appear to interact within the religious frame that the Christian imposed. That is why Frey framed his letter to the merchant in terms of inquiring after Christianity, rather than inquiring after a job. Frey of course was aware of operating within both frames, but had an interest in keeping the Christian's frame foremost.¹⁸

We can also see in Frey's description of his experiences two larger, macro-frames. Let me call the first 'being Jewish'. Frey had been acculturated into a Jewish way of looking at the world and himself since birth. Frey was not a rabbi, as others later claimed, but he had a Jewish education, having studied Torah, Talmud, Rashi, and the *Toldoth Yeshu*,¹⁹ and having served as *chazan* (reader or cantor), *shochet* (ritual slaughterer), and a teacher of the Torah and Mishnah to children. Frey was also strict in his observance of the law. It seems reasonable, then, to conclude that Frey interacted with the world within a macro-frame of being a Jew. Given that German Jews had not yet been emancipated, this frame was reinforced continually by law and society.

But there was another frame which Frey knew was a possibility, namely 'being Christian'. It is probably safe to presume that Frey had a basic idea of what a Christian frame was like from an early age. Societies of unequal power are usually societies of 'asymmetrical ignorance'—in other words, the powerful know their own culture, but the weak must know their own culture and the culture of the powerful. Then too, the Christian merchant's judgments of the two Jews, based on his Christian theology, were an explicitly Christian way of framing Frey's identity. By interacting with the businessman on the Christian's terms and within the Christian's frame, Frey was indicating a knowledge of and ability to interact within this frame of being Christian, even if he consciously rejected the frame.²⁰

¹⁸We can see the same kind of dual frames of religion (inquiring after Christianity) and need (inquiring after lodging and a job) in Frey's interactions with Christians in a later city.

¹⁹An anti-Christian story about Jesus typically read by Jews on Christmas Eve. See *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. 'Toldoth Jesu'.

²⁰The term 'asymmetrical ignorance' comes from Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University

As Frey tells his story, the crucial moment of his conversion occurred in solitude. Before going to the synagogue, he wrote a letter, and the act of writing on the Sabbath violated the law. (Never mind that the letter was inquiring ‘into the truth of Christianity’!) After returning from the synagogue, ‘[m]y conscience was now awakened, and it loudly told me that I was no longer a Jew, for that I had broken the Sabbath.’²¹

These interior events occurred in solitude, but Randall Collins’s ‘radical microsociology’ helps us understand how even private, interior actions occur in society. Collins asserts that ‘we conceptualize thought as a social process’, most obviously through thinking through conversation with imaginary others, as well as through ‘the metaphor of dialogue among parts of the self’. This social process of thinking leads to a socially constructed notion of the self: ‘Having an internalized standpoint of other people makes it possible to formulate a self-conception.’²²

Though these events occurred in solitude, they still occurred *in society*. Frey himself depicts his crisis as occurring in a social context. The event happened around the same time that he was coming and going to the synagogue. The presence of the Christian merchant ‘at the same inn’ was felt in Frey’s solitude. The crucial act by which Frey broke the law was writing a letter—an interior conversation made manifest in writing. And finally, Frey depicted his crisis as a ‘dialogue among parts of the self’: ‘[m]y conscience . . . loudly told me that I was no longer a Jew.’²³

The argument that Frey’s conscience mustered against him is what Goffman calls a frame-breaking event. Goffman describes how a person’s fundamental way of approaching the world can be shaken: ‘An event occurs . . . that leads observers to doubt their overall approach to events.’ This type of break occurs because the frame has failed its purpose: ‘Given that the frame applied to an activity is expected to enable us to come to terms with

Press, 2000).

²¹Frey, *Converted Jew*, 33.

²²Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 203–5. Collins borrows some of his concepts from Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*, 1st ed. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967). Collins is also borrowing some of his ideas from Charles Sanders Peirce, a pragmatist and intellectual companion of William James.

Charles Taylor describes how the social self is formed through interlocation: ‘This is the sense in which one cannot be a self on one’s own. I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding—and, of course, these classes may overlap. A self exists only within what I call “webs of interlocation.”’ *Sources of the Self*, 36.

²³Frey, 31–33.

all events in that activity . . . , it is understandable that the unmanageable might occur, an occurrence which cannot be effectively ignored and to which the frame cannot be applied, with resulting bewilderment and chagrin on the part of the participants.’ But a catastrophic breaking of frame need not be based on a proportionately significant event. According to Goffman, even small events or details that do not fit the frame can explode it.²⁴

The small event of breaking the Sabbath by writing had such power for Frey because it could not be explained by his macro-frame of being Jewish, but it could be explained by the macro-frame of being Christian. His violation of the law broke his sense of self as a ‘self-righteous Pharisee’. He could no longer conceive of himself as a perfectly observant Jew. But the Christian frame of the merchant *did* explain his actions. The Christian merchant had told the non-observant Jew that he was ‘neither a Jew nor a Christian’—this fit Frey’s self-diagnosis.

Charles Taylor’s ideas about the formation of the self help us further understand Frey’s change of frame. Taylor posits an ethical, rather than sociological, idea of what the self is. He conceives of a set of ‘inescapable frameworks’: ‘the horizons within which we live our lives and which make sense of them have to include these strong qualitative discriminations.’ He uses a spatial metaphor for the self: the self is comprised of what one values as the Good and how one considers oneself as oriented to the Good. One also can only conceive of the self in relation to a community: ‘The full definition of someone’s identity thus usually involves not only his stand on moral and spiritual matters but also some reference to a defining community.’²⁵

But if the self is defined by orientation to the Good and in relation to a community, then it is possible for a self to be disoriented: ‘[People] are saying that were they to lose this commitment [to the Good] or identification [with a group], they would be at sea, as it were. . . . It’s what we call an “identity crisis,” an acute form of disorientation. . . . What this brings to light is the essential link between identity and a kind of orientation. To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space.’²⁶

Taylor’s description of the self in moral and communal space maps onto Frey’s experience. By violating the Sabbath, he not only broke his frame but also changed his orientation to the Good. Frey had conceived of himself

²⁴Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 28, 347.

²⁵Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 27, 36; cf. 41–43.

²⁶Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 27–28.

as obedient to the law, but his sin left him disoriented, and left open the possibility of orienting himself to a new Good. Furthermore, disorientation to the Good left Frey disoriented to the community. Rather than continue his relationship to the synagogue or even attend the supper to which he had been invited, Frey left Gistrow and traveled to another city, where he was converted.²⁷

The social soul

I have undertaken this exposition of a particular episode in the life of Frey in an attempt to answer the question, does the soul have a history? My answer is that the soul has a history if the soul can be understood in a social sense. Sources such as Frey's narrative can be understood best through the conceptions of sociologists and philosophers: Goffman's frames, Collins's interior rituals, and Taylor's spatial, ethical self.

This history of a soul is also tied to how individuals affiliate with and are changed by social groups such as congregations. Against simplistic notions that the self is shaped in the youth, or worse, a kind of religious essentialism that finds religiosity to be innate, we can advance the idea that socialization can change an individual at any age. Thus Collins asserts that 'the individual is socialized from the outside, by social experience carried within. . . . [W]e are constantly being socialized by our interactional experiences throughout our lives. . . . [Pace Freud,] socialization once laid down [in childhood] does not endure forever.'²⁸

The soul has a history insofar as it has a social component—or more properly, the social aspect of the soul has a history. Perhaps this is a narrowing of the question. But this narrowing of the question is profitable, because the history of a soul is likely to prove of interest to scholars, as opposed to those engaged in spiritual disciplines, to the extent that the soul is seen in the context of society and social change.

This idea is scarcely new to me. Sociologists have considered the self in relation to society since the beginnings of their discipline. And we must all give pride of place to Plato, whose Socrates, when asked about justice in the soul of man, expounded his idea of justice in the *polis*. Indeed, what I am attempting here is a similar move in argumentation: to move from the highly particular (the soul) to the general (society). Examining the

²⁷Frey, *Converted Jew*, 31–33, ff.

²⁸Collins, *Interaction Rituals*, 44–45.

conversion of individuals is useful to our histories because of what it tells us about the structures and possibilities of society.²⁹

In asking the question, Does the soul have a history? my answer is an optimistic, if tentative, yes.

²⁹Plato, *The Republic*, bk 2.