Conversions in Central and Eastern Europe

The Politics of Religion and Nonreligion across the 20th Century

Edited by Gašper Mithans, Heléna Tóth and Matteo Benussi

First published 2026

ISBN: 978-1-041-19919-9 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-041-19920-5 (pdk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-71413-2 (ebk)

Introduction – Crossing Boundaries

Conversions in Central and Eastern Europe in the Long 20th Century

Gašper Mithans, Heléna Tóth, and Matteo Benussi

DOI: 10.4324/9781003714132-1

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

Introduction – Crossing Boundaries

Conversions in Central and Eastern Europe in the Long 20th Century

Gašper Mithans, Heléna Tóth, and Matteo Benussi

This volume applies the theoretical insights of the study of religious conversion to the complex social fabric of Central and Eastern Europe by bringing together a diverse collection of essays, based on original archival research and fieldwork. Characterized by religious heterogeneity and the shared historical experiences of the dissolution of multiethnic empires, ambiguously demarcated nation-states, and the rise and fall of socialist regimes throughout the long 20th century, this region offers a unique matrix for appreciating the political, social, and cultural dimensions of conversion.

The essays share three premises. The first concerns the unintended destabilization of religious institutions and identities. Collectively, our book shows that across Central and Eastern Europe, as changing political systems seized upon and mobilized religious politics to foster political loyalties, they inadvertently unsettled both religious institutions and the very identities they sought to control. The second pertains to the oblique interdependence of collective and individual identities. Although changes in collective and individual religious identities do not always align straightforwardly, they do feed back into each other and this discrepant codependency both generates political capital and introduces vulnerabilities during processes of state formation and power play. The third is a recognition of nonreligion as an integral part of the history and practice of conversions in the region. We integrate atheization, secularism, and religious disaffection into our framing of conversion, thereby challenging narratives focusing solely on shifts in faith to reveal the nexus of politics, power, subjectivity, and collective imagination in a region and time in which nonreligion played an unprecedented role – and continues to occupy a central position to this day.

In Central and Eastern Europe, piety was – and remains – political in historically specific ways throughout the long 20th century. Religious and secular institutions participating in nation- and state-building projects used religion as a defining mechanism to govern through the instrumentalization and management of a variety of ethnic, political, and cultural differences (Fejérdi et al. 2018, 445–71; Weir 2023; Ramšak, Mithans, and Režek 2022). State authorities considered some religious communities strategic assets while holding others responsible for interethnic tensions and wartime atrocities. The state-driven atheization of society and the subsequent restriction (to varying degrees) of religion to the private sphere in the

DOI: 10.4324/9781003714132-1

socialist era was not merely an expression of Marxist ideology but also a continuation of the politicization of the intersection of faith and ethnicity by other means (Waldenberg 1998, 61–69; Mojzes 1992; Enstedt, Larsson, and Mantsinen 2019).

With the fall of communist regimes, the complex relationship between religious communities and state structures once again became both historicized and politicized in new ways, as religious institutions positioned themselves as the bearers of national narratives and identities. Accordingly, their different attitudes toward conversion as a phenomenon have also gained a new layer of political relevance. It is, for example, significant that Orthodox Churches do not usually conceptualize themselves as components of civil society and reject such classifications, instead primarily defining themselves as autocephalous. Furthermore, seeing themselves as the agents of national identity, Orthodox Churches often consider religious pluralism a threat to national integrity and challenge the legitimacy of "proselytization," by both historically well-established religious groups and newer religious movements (Knox 2005). Similar trends in terms of exclusivist perceptions of the "other" and objections to religious pluralism can be found within "ethnicized Catholicism" and Muslim communities (Abdullah 2015). Proselytization – as distinct from conversion – remains a contentious issue, especially in light of increased migration from Asia and Africa, which has in some post-socialist societies fueled xenophobia and Islamophobia (Kéri and Sleiman 2017, 283–94).

These developments call for renewed scholarly attention to the historical dynamics between the state and religion, as well as to transnational religious networks in the region.

At the same time, the practices, symbols, and doctrines of religions or worldviews cannot be reduced to their political dimensions, though these have indubitably shaped the history of Central and Eastern Europe. In fact, their political potential derives from their capacity to serve as a powerful means of forming subjectivity. As is particularly evident in post-socialist societies since the early 1990s, when, just as "traditional" religious institutions began to reinforce national identity over inner "belief" as a determinant of collective confessional belonging (Davie 1994), many religious seekers rejected the essentialist notion that people are born into a religion, adopting a more individualized and questioning approach to spiritual growth instead.

Conversions reveal the often-amorphous boundaries of these shifting relations. Crossings between identities could act as a bridge (e.g., intermarriage), a cultural passage, or a political statement of loyalty or dissent (Austin-Bross 2003, 1–14; Viswanathan 1998). The concept of a "conversion career" (Gooren 2010) expresses that religious transformations may unfold gradually and/or be experienced as more of a continuation of one's former religious (or nonreligious) past (religious habitus) than a break with it, as can often be observed from converts' narratives (Shanneik 2011, 503–17; Rambo 1993; Bremmer, Van Bekkum, and Molendijk 2006). Of course, the depth and characteristics of conversion vary greatly from person to person, especially when external pressures or practical considerations play a role, as in cases of forced conversions and conversions of convenience (Barbour 1994; Davis and Rambo 2005, 159–73). As Lewis R. Rambo put it, conversion is, at heart, "what a group or person says it is" (Rambo 1993, 7).

In this volume, we use the term *conversion* in a deliberately broad and open-ended fashion to denote a process of change in religious or nonreligious identity, affiliation, or conviction. This may involve inner transformation, ritual acts such as initiation, pragmatic or coerced adaptation, shifts toward nonreligion (atheization or secular conversion), as well as the departure from religion without necessarily adopting a new worldview (deconversion). Such changes can be sudden or gradual, voluntary or coerced, individual or collective, and may entail not only rupture but also continuity, adaptation, or reconnection. Rather than a fixed theological or typological category, conversion functions here as a heuristic lens for examining the interplay of individuality and collectivity, conviction and conformity, enthusiasm and coercion. While our empirical focus is Central and Eastern Europe, the framework advanced here extends more broadly, encompassing the full spectrum of transformations between religion, nonreligion, worldview, and identity.

Connecting the Study of Conversions and Area Studies

Our volume conceptualizes an area of indeterminacy at the intersection between two dynamically growing fields of research: the study of conversion as a topic in religious studies and the historical and social-scientific study of religion in Central and Eastern Europe, with area studies providing a conceptual perimeter. In the long 20th century, multiethnic and multiconfessional Central and Eastern Europe experienced the dissolution of multiethnic empires, the contested construction of nation-states, and the establishment and fall of socialist regimes. The selected case studies offer a comprehensive showcase of the diversity of the region, contextualizing and grounding established traditions and institutions, faith minorities, and alternative forms of community and spirituality, as well as various experiments in secularity within a vibrant, competitive religious field. Actors and vectors in this domain cannot be understood solely by positing bounded, homogeneous religious entities or groups nor by appealing to deceptively stable dichotomies juxtaposing religion with the state, institutions with the grassroots, tradition with innovation, or (post-)Enlightenment with (re-)enchantment. For these categories to be helpful, they must accommodate the kind of messiness and changeability that this collection of essays brings into focus.

Recently, religious conversion has been gaining momentum as an interdisciplinary research area within religious studies and neighboring disciplines exploring religion. However, representations of conversions have remained rather conservative, falling mainly into one of two categories. The scholarship has tended to either address conversion on a primarily theoretical level (Droogers and van Harskamp 2013; Jindra 2014; Gooren 2010) or offer broader overviews, representing conversion and change from one religion to another (or to nonreligion) and downplaying the significance of regional and historical contexts (Rambo and Farhadian 2014; Bullivant and Ruse 2013; Enstedt, Larsson, and Mantsinen 2019). Even though such research designs have produced important results, these studies have largely focused on the transformative aspects of conversion without fully considering the conceptual ramifications of the ethnic and religious heterogeneity of Central and Eastern Europe. The historiography of religion in this region has

showcased narratives of oppression, persecution, and victimhood, often using the topic of conversion as a tool to illustrate repressive state policies ranging from religious and ethnic persecution to genocide. While these are issues of wide-ranging scholarly and societal relevance, the insights of recent research on conversion as a multidirectional, dynamic process open up a new range of questions that invite a rethinking of the history of religion in the region and challenge such compartmentalization. Thus, on the one hand, religion emerges not merely as a spiritual or theological phenomenon but as deeply embedded in political power, law, and conflict; on the other hand, it is shown to shape – not just be shaped by – politics, serving as a constitutive force in political culture, legitimacy, and authority. Indeed, it is almost a truism to state that in different parts of Central and Eastern Europe, imperial statecraft, socialism, and nationalism (including pan-nationalist variants) have all been invested in the management of religious diversity and sameness. Differences that may engender strife were to be attenuated, others could be accepted, emphasized, and harnessed. Crucially, in imperial statecraft, socialism, and (pan-)nationalism – partly irrespective of the different instantiations of these forms – governments have committed themselves to managing the interiority of subjects. Hence, "pastoral" forms of religious administration have long stood in tension with "unmanaged" religious formations based on ethical conviction and personal choice but without ever successfully getting rid of them.

This allows us to conceptualize an exploration of conversion in Central and Eastern Europe through a set of interrelated conceptual variables, which can be seen as running through the wealth of cases assembled in this volume.

- Continuity and discontinuity: In terms of religious and cultural change, conversion ambiguously oscillates between these two modes, sometimes combining elements of both. Depending on the viewpoint, a shift in confessional affiliation, including through initiation, can be seen as a breach, a fresh start, a revolutionary event – even a betrayal – but also as a reconnection with tradition, an organic development, a nontraumatic process of growth;
- Individuality and collectivity: In terms of the social scope and connotation of the change, conversion raises ever-challenging questions about personal choice and agency versus persuasion and regimentation (cf. Jakelić 2010). Religion combines affiliation and introspection, exemplarity and emulation, public and private dimensions. While it might be impossible to fully disentangle these pairs, different phenomenologies of conversion may see them combined in varying proportions;
- Conviction and conformity: In terms of initiative in the change, different scenarios may place more emphasis on self-organization based on zeal, missionary ardor, and self-sacrifice, on the one hand, or on persuasion, campaigning, social engineering, even intimidation, and coercion, on the other. The modes of conviction and conformity ought not to be seen as mutually exclusive, but may and frequently do stand in tension with each other;
- Lastly, enthusiasm and adaptation: In terms of how the change is subjectively understood and lived, some conversion stories are characterized by epiphany,

inner tumult, and a struggle with temptation, others by pragmatic acceptance of, and alignment with, a mutating status quo.

Evidently, these conceptual pairs are so tightly interwoven that only by dint of analytical abstraction can they be considered in isolation from each other. What is more, they are not dichotomous. Religious life being complex and ambivalent, and histories of conversion often being contentious, seemingly contradictory principles frequently coexist side by side, with different degrees of salience mirroring the ever-partial positionalities of specific sources and interpretive frames.

For all this complexity, however, we do offer these conceptual pairs to our readers as a heuristic lens through which to orient themselves in this indeterminacy. Applied to the context of Central and Eastern Europe, this heuristic enables the charting of possible comparative paths across and even within (especially federative and multireligious) states, regions, and time periods, without losing the sense of specificity and nuance. Note: we do not take these terms as measuring sticks or as taxonomic parameters to be used to shoehorn case studies into schematic "types" of conversions. Such an approach would inevitably lead to analitically thin conclusions and be detrimental to the richness of the essays collected in this volume. Instead, just as we invited our contributors to attend to these themes to the extent that they apply in the context of their studies, we invite our readers to be mindful of the intertwining of continuity and discontinuity, individuality and collectivity, conviction and conformity, and pragmatism and adaptation as they progress through the chapters – both in connection with the dynamics explored in depth in each contribution and while looking synoptically at the volume as a whole. By doing so, readers may reach a deeper appreciation of both the variability and the resonances that characterize the mosaic of Central and Eastern Europe in the long 20th century.

The volume's comparative and conceptual structure has been devised to de-essentialize and de-reify the complex geography and history of the region, without renouncing a defined geographic and historical focus. It brings the region's internal variety to the fore while also acknowledging the intimacies and commonalities that make comparison heuristically and analytically generative. These legacies include the reverberations of the eras of the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Russian Empires, as well as the German Reich, each of which left a lasting imprint of religious politics and power structures on Central and Eastern Europe – as did the socialist experiments of the 20th century and their aftermath. Both imperial and socialist-federal state structures were intensely invested in managing religious diversity and its related social imaginaries. While in the late 19th century, (post-) imperial nation-building projects emerged in a complex and often uneasy relationship to religious identities, the processes of socialist modernization in the interwar period and after World War II sought to establish an aggressively secularist order. However, as scholars of the recent "nonreligious turn" (Smolkin 2018; Bubík, Remmel, and Václavík 2020; Quack, Schuh, and Kind 2019; Luehrmann 2015; Lee 2015; Guigo-Patzelt 2025) have shown, the processes of atheization amounted to more than the mere negation of religion. Postwar socialist regimes were expanding

their understanding and practice of atheism to combine the repression of religious institutions with a generative practice aimed at constructing nonreligion as a viable, desirable mode of modern personhood (Mojzes 1992; Borowik, Ančić, and Tyrała 2013, 622–37). With the disintegration of supranational and formally atheist political regimes, new possibilities have emerged – both for religious expression and experimentation and for renewed religious strife.

The volume argues that conversion is a valuable heuristic to understand the political and identity formation processes that accompanied and occasionally drove these historical transformations. By adopting a broad framing of conversion, the chapters move beyond the idea of an exclusively individual, spontaneous spiritual phenomenon modeled after the Pauline and Augustinian understanding of conversion as an internal religious epiphany, whether sudden or processual (Wolters 2019, 57–72), and beyond the dichotomy of "active" and "passive" conversions (Zock 2006, 43–44). This book's case studies shed light on the diverse motives, forms, and sociopolitical particularities that condition and sometimes hinder any change(s) in worldview; they illustrate both the pragmatism and/or profound life alterations that may underlie a shift in religious affiliation and provide insight into the specificity and contingency of identity formation in times of political and social transformation. Importantly, the volume establishes atheization as an integral part of the history of conversion in the region. The overlapping dynamics of conversion and atheization, secularization and religious revival, accompanied by demographic and cultural shifts, have redefined and reshaped the boundaries of religion resulting from interreligious interactions, political disagreements, and national religious policies.

Central and Eastern Europe thus provides fertile terrain for revealing individualized perceptions of the right to choose one's religion, coerced conversions, and the controversies surrounding freedom of religion and freedom from religion, in a comparative and transnational perspective. The book has a broad geographic focus, including Yugoslavia and most of its successor states (Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina), the Soviet Union and some of its successor states, in particular Russia and Ukraine, as well as Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, and the German Democratic Republic. The chapters showcase the religious heterogeneity of Central and Eastern Europe by analyzing conversions within and between major and minor confessions and religious denominations across the region. Collectively, the book chapters canvass various branches of Orthodoxy, the history of the Catholic Church, Greek Catholicism, the historiography of Protestant denominations, Jewish studies, Islam, the Bahá'í faith, and the political history of religion in general. The contributions illuminate the significance of the points of contact within and the transnational interconnectedness of conversion processes while also demonstrating their variability across Central and Eastern Europe. Recognizing that (post-)imperial and (post-)socialist religious dynamics unfolded differently at different times and places, this volume offers its readers insights into how this diversity influenced, and continues to influence, experiences of conversion.

Reframing Conversions: Subject Formation and Power Structures

The terminology of conversion echoes with theological reverberations and ethical connotations that, albeit many-faceted, pertain to a shared, broad Abrahamic horizon. The term migrated into English and other western European languages via the Latin *conversio*, a translation of the Greek *epistrépho*, in turn connected with the Hebrew verb *shrub*. The three terms share a semantic link to the idea of turning toward something or someone, shifting/moving from (or to) one station or place to (or from) another, changing ways, or returning. Typically, this has mostly meant turning toward a higher spiritual truth, divine revelation, or – naturally – a deity. Indeed, in the Middle Ages, the term was used to indicate one's entry into monastic life: a specifically "institutional" nuance that coexisted with the purely "private" meaning of an inner change of heart (*metanoia*). In our collection of essays, we explore this tension between conversion as an internal personal transformation and as a public, institutional, political shift. We do so not by positing an opposition but rather by exploring a gamut of conversional phenomenologies that range from personal experimentations in conviction and volition to large-scale experiments in social engineering. The "higher truth" to which converts turn is often confessionally connoted but may have nontheistic or atheistic ideological connotations as well. In this sense, the implementation of atheization campaigns in the context of 20th-century socialist projects can be seen as mass conversion projects toward a specific post-confessional or non-confessional truth.

What the contributions to this edited volume collectively emphasize is the fact that the "turn" or "shift" inherent in conversion – if we are to develop the spatial metaphor upon which this terminology rests – does not occur in a vacuum. To the contrary, these case studies strongly indicate that the "movement" of conversion unfolds in a force field generated by power dynamics, collective currents, top-down pressure, and bottom-up upswells. This argument is not, of course, entirely new. Both historians (Jacoby 2016) and anthropologists working in various parts of the world (Van der Veer 1996; Kravel-Tovi 2023, 19–37), including post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe (Pelkmans 2009), have highlighted the political life of conversion, its historicity, and its embeddedness in webs of social relations and cultural signification. Confessional identity – and changes thereof – has to do with group affiliation, authority (*cuius regio, eius religio*), public ritual, spectacle, and storytelling (Rappaport 1999; Kefeli 2014; Kapaló and Povedák 2022). Even when we focus on faith and spiritual "reform" through the minutiae of individual drama, personal conviction, self-cultivation, and bodily askesis, we are never far from a public, collectively recognized and validated discursive tradition that aims at producing certain kinds of religious subjects and does so through specific matrices of authority, rule-establishing, and rule-following, as well as instituted and institutionalized exemplarity (Asad 1986; Humphrey 1997, 2008, 357–80; Roudometof 2015, 211–27; Rogers 2009; Kormina and Naumescu 2020, 7–11). In short, we are now fully aware that piety is politics (Mahmood 2006, 323–47; Benussi 2026; Hann and Goltz 2010).

We do not intend to impose a single conceptual framework, or theoretical master narrative, upon this book's multidisciplinary richness. Yet the reader will certainly appreciate that its cornucopia of cases unveils conversion as a crucible where the subjective and the collective, the intimate and the institutional, self-fashioning and social engineering, come together with astounding vividness. Central and Eastern Europe provides a remarkably powerful setting to trace this ambivalence of conversion, being a space where, over the past century, multiple truth projects have jostled for ascendancy over the region, its inhabitants, their bodies, and their souls. Each of these projects has sought to "turn" – by nudging or pushing, regimenting or cajoling – Central and Eastern Europeans toward specific higher verities and revelations. From state-driven mass conversion – including to scientific atheism – to the gentler interplay of philosophical paths in the "marketplace of religion," from the violence of religious nationalism and ethnoreligiosity to the righteous ethical pursuits of spiritual innovators and seekers, this book will furnish readers with a greater appreciation and understanding of the politics of *epistrépho* between the Adriatic, the Baltic, and the Black Seas.

This approach advances a dynamic understanding of (non)religious agency and subject formation. Historically, religious communities throughout Central and Eastern Europe often defined themselves on the basis of national and ethnic principles, although with significant geographical differences and divergences between urban and rural settings. This was true for locally dominant religious communities as well as for minority religions. Rather than undermining the significance of established religions, however, our volume offers a nuanced insight into the forces shaping the religious field by challenging the supposed stability of ethnoreligious identifications and treating established religions as one of the constituent parts of a broader contested field.

While regional religious and ethnic particularisms are inextricably intertwined, their concordance was and remains also deeply unstable. The boundaries of religions which present themselves and are in turn commonly perceived as fixed have instead been constantly reshaped, renegotiated, and instrumentalized by political impositions and in convergence with and divergence from broader socioeconomic transformations. By examining the contact and interaction between Muslim, Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Protestant, Jewish, and Bahá'í communities, as well as nonreligion, this volume offers a comparative and relational perspective (Daskalov and Marinov 2013) on the phenomenon of conversion in Central and Eastern Europe. The contributions build on recent scholarship on religions in the region (Leustean 2014; Ramet 2019; Martin and Beliakova 2023; Wanner 2022; Ghodsee 2009, 227–52; Duranović 2021; Bringa 1996; Henig 2020; Kosicki 2018), particularly in the Balkans, and the evolution of confessional minorities under socialist rule while also expanding the field through original empirical case studies and theoretical reflections. The individual chapters explore archival sources from institutional and individual actors, along with ethnographic fieldwork that highlights the personal experiences behind acts of conversion and reveals how individual identities and worldviews were shaped and families and communities transformed.

It is important to add that this volume seeks to expand conventional frameworks of interreligious dialogue by revealing the agency of atheists and the nonreligious (Borowik, Ančić, and Tyrała 2013, 622–37; Streib 2009). Remaining mindful of the asymmetrical power relations that framed this dialogue, the chapters of the volume shed light on a telling incongruence at the heart of the atheist position as a political project and as a worldview. The authors show that atheism as a constitutive element of the ideological bedrock of socialist states was historically contingent and specific. Political atheism was operationalized in the state repression of religious institutions and was integrated into the education system to teach citizens of socialist countries a conceptual framework and vocabulary for thinking and talking about religion (Froese 2004, 35–50; Luehrmann 2011). At the same time, the creators and practitioners of atheist cultural practices operated in relation to their own religious socialization and within the realities of the religious pluralism that continued to exist. In this context, religious and nonreligious actors both coveted and feared conversions (religious and secular), as they exposed the porousness of the borders separating supposedly eternal truths while also criticizing indifference, which was sometimes seen as a by-product of deconversion. By foregrounding these instances of transgression, the volume uses the lens of conversion to reconceptualize the nonreligious position as an integral part of religious pluralism in Central and Eastern Europe (Madeley 2018, 265–94; Köllner 2020, 119–41; Kormina and Naumescu 2020, 7–11; Bernstein 2014, 7–11).

Our approach is boldly interdisciplinary yet coherent and focused on its research agenda. Unlike some earlier excellent collective publications that seek to capture the complexity of conversion at large by juxtaposing multiple case studies, while remaining within (and thus reasserting) the methodological and epistemic boundaries of a given discipline/approach (Buckser and Glazier 2003), this volume advances the discussion in two ways. First, it brings together a variety of scholars of different training and backgrounds, who apply complementary tools (history, ethnography, theological reasoning, etc.) to provide a fuller, richer picture of what conversion means in a specific geography and in a specific time frame. Second, each section integrates diachronic and synchronic perspectives, thereby transgressing disciplinary binaries (Van der Veer 1996), and engages questions of global significance about the transformations of religion in modernity. Particularly in its focus on the interplay between the political and the religious,[1] this volume foregrounds atheism and situates the turn to nonreligion within the broader religious field in Central and Eastern Europe.

Structure and Overview of Chapters

The book is organized into four thematic parts, illuminating what we consider to be core characteristics of religious culture and religious politics in the region. These are the repeated (often unintended) destabilization of religious institutions and identities as a by-product of political projects of identity formation, the interdependence of collective and individual identities, and the intricate nexus of politics, power, subjectivity, and collective imagination. Each of these parts explores

specific patterns of these dynamics. Part I focuses on individual, conviction-driven conversions and the ways in which personal spiritual transformations interact within specific historical and institutional contexts, revealing how internal change is shaped. Part II turns to state-driven and coercive conversions, emphasizing the instrumentalization of religion for political ends and the use of conversion as a survival strategy or means of forced assimilation during moments of acute violence and systemic repression. Part III centers on collective and conformity-oriented conversions, usually incited by political or social pressure rather than personal belief, reflecting efforts to – often strategically – align with national, socioeconomic, or ideological identities during times of political instability or change. Part IV addresses the role of nonreligion and atheization, analyzing the conscious effort by socialist regimes to reshape spiritual life through atheization campaigns, the creation of secular rituals, and ambiguous interactions between religious and political institutions. Ultimately, the volume offers not a typology of conversions but a multi-perspectival framework for understanding how conversion has functioned as a crucial site of negotiation between self, community, and power across different historical moments and regimes.

Part I "Conversion, Conviction, and Faith" showcases personal and spiritual transformations, and while closest to the Augustinian definition of conversion as internal religious change, the contributions demonstrate how profoundly such conversions are shaped by and respond to distinct chronological, political, religious, and cultural contexts, as well as social strata. Jared N. Warren analyzes the dual religious conversions of the French theologian Lev Gillet in the 1920s, tracing his transition from Roman Catholicism to Ukrainian Greek Catholicism, influenced by the metropolitan Andrey Sheptytskyi, and subsequently to Russian Orthodoxy through émigré communities in France, reflecting his evolving perception of the notions of Christian universality. Nadezhda Beliakova and Vera Kliueva show that under Soviet atheism – which promoted and at times enforced deconversion – conscious, personal conversions to and within Evangelical communities persisted as a countertrend. They revealed a distinct pattern of reconversion, particularly from Baptism to Pentecostalism, as an unintended consequence of Soviet religious policy. Milan Tomašević and Zorica Kuburić contrast two different institutional responses to religious nonconformity within the Serbian Orthodox Church, rooted in the ambivalence and ideological instrumentalization of the concept of conversion. While the interwar God Worshippers' Movement was framed as a legitimate spiritual renewal, New Religious Movements and alternative religious groups in the 1990s and 2000s were perceived as delusional and a social threat. Marko Galić and Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović analyze a distinctive case of Bahá'í conversions in post-socialist Bosnia and Herzegovina. Drawing on qualitative interviews, the chapter demonstrates that conversion involves gradual identity integration, informed by intellectual inquiry, spiritual continuity, and social networks. Henri Gooren's conversion career model effectively captures the complexity and evolving nature of these conversion narratives. Together, these chapters demonstrate how conviction-driven conversions unfold across diverse settings, revealing the interplay between individual agency,

institutional responses, and broader ideological forces in shaping religious transformation.

Part II "Conversion, Coercion, and Protection" moves on to state-driven forced conversions, showcasing the instrumentalization of religious identity and how states, aligned with dominant religions, enforced conversions to and within Christianity to generate and solidify national loyalties, while individuals at times used conversion as a means of protection. Stefanos Katsikas demonstrates that religious conversion between "Muslims" and "Christians" in the modern Balkans was a politically and socially charged process shaped by war, shifting power dynamics, and rising nationalism. Involving both internal transformation and external adaptation, conversion often redefined national identity, with "apostasy" carrying serious political and diplomatic consequences. Martyna Grądzka-Rejak shows how Jewish conversions to Christianity in the wartime Kraków District served primarily as a survival tactic. Her analysis of the Metropolitan Curia petitions reveals a surge in baptisms among Jews peaking in 1941. Women's conversion experiences and instances of Jews hiding by passing as Poles highlight the intricate interplay of identity, coercion, and resilience inherent in conversion. Milosav Z. Đoković reveals how the Holy See was promptly informed by Church officials and Vatican diplomats of the forced conversions of Orthodox Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia. Yet the Vatican failed to address the coercive nature of Orthodox conversions, instruct bishops to verify their voluntariness, or advise a postponement of acceptance. Beyond wartime, Anca Șincan shows how the Romanian communist regime, with the support of the Romanian Orthodox Church, forcibly united Greek Catholics with Orthodoxy in 1948. In the 1960s, the state's intervention exposed the Orthodox Church's mismanagement and the survival of the Greek Catholic underground. The full integration beyond nominal conversions occurred only as new generations were raised within Orthodoxy. These cases highlight how states and religious institutions have shaped, and often contested, the very definition and practice of conversion.

Part III "Conversion, Power, and Unrest" demonstrates the significance of collective, social conversions incited by broader political and social movements. These cases reveal sites of sociopolitical contestation shaped by identitarian ambiguities, shifting power relations, and economic factors, where identity, politics, and faith remain deeply intertwined. Klaus Buchenau argues that conversions between Greek Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Communism in Transcarpathia, Czechoslovakia, were often motivated more by frustration and material insecurity than by deep personal conviction. Orthodox missionaries from Serbia and Russia framed this movement as a return to an "authentic" Slavic identity and faith, while Czech officials viewed it as a revolt of the rural poor against the established elites. Gašper Mithans demonstrates how in the Slovenian part of interwar Yugoslavia, conversions from Catholicism to German Evangelicalism and Serbian Orthodoxy were also largely driven by social factors, including aspirations of (supra)national consolidation and/or expressions of anti-Catholic sentiment. The mobilization endeavors of both minority religions and rising nationalism were therefore frequently perceived as threats to religious and national cohesion. Branko Sekulić and Matteo

Benussi analyze forms of conversion in post-Yugoslav and post-Soviet contexts that give rise to a certain type of religious subject prone to identifying their liturgical community with the nation-state. By fostering a dialogue between theology and anthropology, they test the applicability of the concept of ethnoreligiosity, highlighting the implications of political religions for global security. These cases reveal how religious conversions were deeply embedded in broader social and political dynamics throughout the long 20th century.

Lastly, Part IV "Conversion, Communism, and Atheization" showcases the interplay between (religious) conversion, atheization, and political ideologies, revealing how socialist regimes reevaluated spiritual life, which in turn reflected broader ideological shifts and transformations in personal conviction. Johannes Gleixner shows how the Bolsheviks in interwar Russia struggled to conceptualize religious indifference as a precursor to full atheism, which they ultimately imagined as a form of secular conversion. Drawing on autobiographical texts and surveys, he reveals the decision of the anti-religious movement to construct a binary choice of being either a believer or an atheist as the foundation of Soviet atheism. Despite recognizing their circular reasoning, activists nonetheless remained caught in it. Julian Sandhagen reveals how the Vatican's engagement with Yugoslav multiconfessional Partisans as part of the Allied forces in Southern Italy in 1945 exposed deep tensions. While the Partisans requested spiritual care, the Roman Curia struggled to balance pastoral needs with ideological opposition. Internal disputes and fears of losing the faithful to materialism led to a cautious solution of permitting spiritual support without formal recognition. Eva Guigo-Patzelt shows how scientific atheists in East Germany closely followed and theorized the sharp decline in religious affiliation from 94% in 1946 to 28% in 1990. Over time, the aggressive rhetoric softened to promote "positive" aspects of atheism yet remained blind to new forms of religiosity. After 1989, the careers of the scientific atheists ended abruptly; some reconverted to Christianity, while others remained active in freethought circles. In the concluding chapter, Heléna Tóth traces the development of socialist funeral culture in Hungary from the 1960s, focusing on the state's initiative to create a secular funeral culture within the broader framework of the "struggle against the worldview." By highlighting the role of experts who translated the ideology into ritual practice, she interrogates the part played by Catholic (non-) converts in the creation of nonreligious rituals.

Conclusion

In its selection of diverse case studies from different historical periods and geographic regions, this volume takes an ambitious approach to interdisciplinarity, taking into account new research perspectives and providing a platform for scholars from the fields of history, anthropology, theology, sociology, and political science. We advance that the integration of archival research, fieldwork, oral history, sociological surveys, social analysis, and theological reflection offers a promising model for future research on conversion – one that is as attentive to the nuances of personal experience as it is to the broader sociopolitical forces that

shape those experiences. Drawing on these insights, we rearticulate conversion as a phenomenon that emerges as a deeply ambivalent practice, an act that reverberates through the social fabric and even intra-, inter-, and transnational relations. Accordingly, while the volume elucidates how states, religious communities, and individuals – from both the top down and the bottom up – have shaped and often contested the meaning of proselytizing and undergoing conversion, along with related identifications, it also fosters scholarly interaction, encouraging researchers to share, compare, reexamine, and even converge their usually distinct (disciplinary) approaches and conceptions of the subject.

In the contemporary globalized and often fragmented world, the insights from these studies are particularly resonant. The volume shows that conversion remains a site of contestation and creativity, where the contours of identity and community across diverse cultural landscapes are shaped and reshaped, including the dynamics between faith and nonreligion: not only in Central and Eastern Europe but in all societies grappling with the epochal shifts that we call "modernity."

In mapping the diverse trajectories of conversion, this volume contributes to a deeper understanding of religious and nonreligious change, particularly but not exclusively through the perspective of the "nonreligious turn." It reframes conversion not as an isolated instance of transformation but as a complex process that encapsulates the interplay of conviction, coercion, identity, and power, providing a rich analytical framework for understanding one of the most enduring and contested phenomena. By situating conversion within the entangled histories of nationalism, socialism, atheization, and religious pluralism in Central and Eastern Europe, this volume highlights the region's importance as a laboratory for rethinking conversion globally. Here, conversion has long been a matter not only of faith but also of ideology, survival, and cultural negotiation – dynamics that resonate far beyond Europe, where similar patterns of coercion, adaptation, and identity negotiation are visible. Thus, while rooted in the specific histories of Central and Eastern Europe, the chapters assembled in this volume contribute to a global reframing of conversion studies, demonstrating that the category must encompass religious and nonreligious transformations alike.

Note

1 See Pelkman's concept of conversion and "anti-conversion" (2009) as well as Marzouki and Roy (2013) with a focus on a different geographic area.

References

Abdullah, Arif Kemil. 2015. *The Qur'an and Normative Religious Pluralism: A Thematic Study of the Qur'an*. The Islamic Foundation.

Asad, Talal. 1986. *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*. Occasional Papers Series. Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University.

Austin-Bross, Diane. 2003. "The Anthropology of Conversion: Introduction." In *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, edited by Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier, 1–14. Rowman & Littlefield.

Barbour, John D. 1994. *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith*. Studies in Religion and Culture. University Press of Virginia.
Benussi, Matteo. 2026. *Restless Quietists: Halal Living and Muslim Autonomy in Russia*. Cornell University Press.
Bernstein, Anya. 2014. "The Impossible Object: Relics, Property, and the Secular in Post-Soviet Russia." *Anthropology Today* 30 (2): 7–11.
Bremmer, Jan N., Wout J. van Bekkum, and Arie L. Molendijk, eds. 2006. *Cultures of Conversions*. Peeters.
Bringa, Tone. 1996. *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way: Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village*. Princeton University Press.
Borowik, Irena, Branko Ančić, and Radosław Tyrała. 2013. "Central and Eastern Europe." In *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, edited by Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse, 622–37. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199644650.013.020.
Bubík, Tomáš, Atko Remmel, and David Václavík, eds. 2020. *Freethought and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe: The Development of Secularity and Non-Religion*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429276071.
Buckser, Andrew, and Stephen D. Glazier, eds. 2003. *Anthropology of Religious Conversion*. Rowman & Littlefield.
Bullivant, Stephen, and Michael Ruse, eds. 2013. *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199644650.001.0001.
Daskalov, Roumen Dontchev, and Tchavdar Marinov, eds. 2013. *Entangled Histories of the Balkans. Volume One: National Ideologies and Language Policies*. Brill.
Davie, Grace. 1994. *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*. Blackwell.
Davis, Patricia M., and Lewis R. Rambo. 2005. "Converting: Toward a Cognitive Theory of Religious Change." In *Soul, Psyche, Brain: New Directions in the Study of Religion and Brain-Mind Science*, edited by Kelly Bulkeley, 159–73. Palgrave Macmillan US. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403979230_8.
Droogers, André, and Anton van Harskamp, eds. 2013. *Methods for the Study of Religious Change: From Religious Studies to Worldview Studies*. Equinox.
Duranović, Amir. 2021. *Islamska zajednica u jugoslavenskom socijalizmu* [The Islamic Community in Yugoslav Socialism]. Studije za historiju BiH, knjiga 8. Udruženje za modernu historiju.
Enstedt, Daniel, Göran Larsson, and Teemu T. Mantsinen, eds. 2019. *Handbook of Leaving Religion*. Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion 18. Brill.
Fejérdi, András, Tatiana Vagramenko, Áron Kovács, Mateja Režek, and Jure Ramšak. 2018. "Religious Resistance: Forms, Sources and Collections." In *Handbook of COURAGE: Cultural Opposition and Its Heritage in Eastern Europe*, edited by Balázs Apor, Péter Apor, and Sándor Horváth, 445–71. Research Centre for the Humanities of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.
Froese, Paul. 2004. "Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43 (1): 35–50.
Ghodsee, Kristen. 2009. "Symphonic Secularism: Eastern Orthodoxy, Ethnic Identity and Religious Freedoms in Contemporary Bulgaria." *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 27 (2): 227–52.
Gooren, Henri Paul Pierre. 2010. *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices*. 1st ed. Palgrave Macmillan.
Guigo-Patzelt, Eva, ed. 2025. *Communist Perspectives on Atheism in the Twentieth Century*. Routledge.
Hann, Chris, and Hermann Goltz, eds. 2010. *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective*. Vol. 9. The Anthropology of Christianity 9. University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640711001156.
Henig, David. 2020. *Remaking Muslim Lives: Everyday Islam in Postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina*. University of Illinois Press.

Humphrey, Caroline. 1997. "Exemplars and Rules: Aspects of the Discourse of Morality in Mongolia." In *The Ethnography of Moralities*, edited by Signe Howell, 25–48. Routledge.
Humphrey, Caroline. 2008. "Reassembling Individual Subjects: Events and Decisions in Troubled Times." *Anthropological Theory* 8 (4): 357–80.
Jacoby, Susan. 2016. *Strange Gods: A Secular History of Conversion*. Knopf Doubleday.
Jakelić, Slavica. 2010. *Collectivistic Religions: Religion, Choice, and Identity in Late Modernity*. Ashgate.
Jindra, Ines W. 2014. *A New Model of Religious Conversion: Beyond Network Theory and Social Constructivism*. Brill.
Kapaló, James Alexander, and Kinga Povedák, eds. 2022. *The Secret Police and the Religious Underground in Communist and Post-Communist Eastern Europe*. Routledge Religion, Society and Government in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet States 15. Routledge.
Kefeli, Agnès Nilüfer. 2014. *Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia*. Cornell University Press. www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9780801454776/becoming-muslim-in-imperial-russia/.
Kéri, Szabolcs, and Christina Sleiman. 2017. "Religious Conversion to Christianity in Muslim Refugees in Europe." *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 39 (3): 283–94. https://doi.org/10.1163/15736121-12341344.
Knox, Zoe. 2005. *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia after Communism*. RoutledgeCurzon.
Köllner, Tobias. 2020. "Orthodox Religion, Politics, Secularity and the Introduction of New Festive Days in Contemporary Russia: The Case of the Day of Family, Love, and Faithfulness." *Etnografia e ricerca qualitativa* 1: 119–41. https://doi.org/10.3240/96827.
Kormina, Jeanne, and Vlad Naumescu. 2020. "A New 'Great Schism'? Theopolitics of Communion and Canonical Territory in the Orthodox Church." *Anthropology Today* 36 (1): 7–11. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12551.
Kosicki, Piotr H. 2018. *Catholics on the Barricades: Poland, France, and 'Revolution,' 1891–1956*. Yale University Press.
Kravel-Tovi, Michal. 2023. "Making a Difference: The Political Life of Religious Conversion." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 52 (October 1): 19–37. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-052721-101416.
Lee, Lois. 2015. *Recognizing the Non-Religious: Reimagining the Secular*. Oxford University Press.
Leustean, Lucian N., ed. 2014. *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315819037.
Luehrmann, Sonja. 2011. *Secularism Soviet Style: Teaching Atheism and Religion in a Volga Republic*. Indiana University Press.
Luehrmann, Sonja. 2015. *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge*. Oxford Series on History and Archives. Oxford University Press.
Madeley, John. 2018. "Enigmatic Variations: Russia and the Three Secularities." In *A Secular Age beyond the West: Religion, Law and the State in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa*, edited by Mirjam Künkler, John Madeley, and Shylashri Shankar, 265–94. Cambridge University Press.
Mahmood, Saba. 2006. "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation." *Public Culture* 18 (2): 323–47. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2006-006.
Martin, Barbara, and Nadezhda Beliakova, eds. 2023. *Religious Life in the Late Soviet Union: From Survival to Revival (1960s–1980s)*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003311294.
Marzouki, Nadia, and Olivier Roy, eds. 2013. *Religious Conversions in the Mediterranean World*. Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137004895.
Mojzes, Paul. 1992. *Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR: Before and After the Great Transformation*. East European Monographs; Columbia University Press.
Pelkmans, Mathijs, ed. 2009. *Conversion after Socialism: Disruptions, Modernisms and Technologies of Faith in the Former Soviet Union*. 1st ed. Berghahn.

Quack, Johannes, Cora Schuh, and Susanne Kind. 2019. *The Diversity of Nonreligion: Normativities and Contested Relations*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429196799.

Rambo, Lewis R. 1993. *Understanding Religious Conversion*. Yale University Press.

Rambo, Lewis R., and Charles E. Farhadian, eds. 2014. *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195338522.001.0001.

Ramet, Sabrina P., ed. 2019. *Orthodox Churches and Politics in Southeastern Europe: Nationalism, Conservativism, and Intolerance*. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-24139-1.

Ramšak, Jure, Gašper Mithans, and Mateja Režek, eds. 2022. *Christian Modernity and Marxist Secularism in East Central Europe*. Srednja Europa.

Rappaport, Roy A. 1999. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511814686.

Rogers, Douglas. 2009. *The Old Faith and the Russian Land: A Historical Ethnography of Ethics in the Urals*. Cornell University Press.

Roudometof, Victor. 2015. "Orthodox Christianity as a Transnational Religion: Theoretical, Historical and Comparative Considerations." *Religion, State and Society* 43 (3): 211–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2015.1092230.

Shanneik, Yafa. 2011. "Conversion and Religious Habitus: The Experiences of Irish Women Converts to Islam in the Pre-Celtic Tiger Era." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 31 (4): 503–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2011.630859.

Smolkin, Victoria. 2018. *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism*. Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.23943/9781400890101.

Streib, Heinz, ed. 2009. *Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America*. Research in Contemporary Religion 5. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Veer, Peter van der. 1996. *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity*. Psychology Press.

Viswanathan, Gauri. 1998. *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*. Princeton University Press.

Waldenberg, Marek. 1998. "Democrazia e problemi nazionali nell'Europa centro-orientale." In *L'altra Europa. L'Europa centrale e i Balcani verso l'unione europea*, edited by Rade Petrović and Francesco Russo, 61–69. Edizioni scientifiche italiane.

Wanner, Catherine. 2022. *Everyday Religiosity and the Politics of Belonging in Ukraine*. Cornell University Press.

Weir, Todd. 2023. *Red Secularism: Socialism and Secularist Culture in Germany 1890 to 1933*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316443736.

Wolters, Gereon. 2019. "Religious Conversion: Epistemological and Other Considerations." *Bollettino Della Società Filosofica Italiana* 226: 57–72.

Zock, Hetty. 2006. "Paradigms in Psychological Conversion Research – Between Social Science and Literary Analysis: International Conference on Cultures of Conversion." In *Paradigms, Poetics and Politics of Conversion*, edited by Jan N. Bremmer, Wout Jac van Bekkum, and Arie L. Molendijk, 43–44. Groningen Studies in Cultural Change. Peeters.