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Converting the Story: Toward a Theory of Narrative Conversion in the
Muslim *Tale of Ġirġīs* (St. George)

Convirtiendo el relato: Hacia una teoría sobre la conversión narrativa en la
versión islamizada del *Relato de Ġirġīs* (San Jorge)

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Abstract

When analyzing literary works that cross religious and cultural boundaries, scholars often reach for the language of *appropriation*. This framework takes stories as raw materials, to be mined, reshaped, and redeployed as the redactor sees fit. But is a story a wholly passive body? And if not, is there an analytical frame more helpful in drawing out its activity? With these queries in mind, I propose the following study: What would happen if we approached the boundary-crossing editorial process as a type of *conversion*, and the story itself as a *convert*? For this experiment, I take up the Islamized *Tale of Ġirġīs* (St. George) as a case study, using it to support some preliminary remarks on a theory of narrative conversion. Reading this homiletic story against the stages of conversion proposed by Lewis R. Rambo, I argue for the heuristic utility of *conversion* as a framework for revealing the subtle ways that stories are active in their own transformation. Ultimately, I advocate for the adoption of this new frame as a basis for further theorizing about why and how stories transmigrate from one religious or cultural world to another.

Keywords: Christian-Muslim relations; conversion; hagiography; Lewis R. Rambo; narrative; preaching; story; St. George; tales of the prophets; theory and method.

Resumen

Al analizar obras literarias que trascienden fronteras religiosas y culturales, los académicos suelen recurrir al lenguaje de la apropiación. Este marco conceptual considera los relatos como materia prima, para ser extraídas, remodeladas y redistribuidas como el redactor lo crea conveniente. Pero, ¿es un relato como un cuerpo completamente pasivo? Y si no, ¿existe un marco analítico más útil para entender su actividad? Con estas interrogantes en mente, propongo el siguiente estudio: ¿Qué pasaría si abordáramos el proceso editorial como un tipo de conversión, y el relato mismo como un converso? Para llevar a cabo este experimento, tomo el Cuento islamizado de *Ġirġīs* (San Jorge) como caso de estudio, y lo utilizo para respaldar algunos comentarios preliminares para elaborar una teoría sobre la conversión narrativa. Al interpretar este relato homilético siguiendo las etapas de conversión propuestas por Lewis R. Rambo, defiendo la utilidad heurística de la conversión como marco analítico para revelar las formas sutiles en que los relatos son agentes activos en su propia conversión. En la última instancia, abogo por la adopción de este nuevo marco analítico como base para seguir teorizando sobre por qué y cómo los relatos transmigran de un mundo religioso o cultural a otro.

Palabras clave: relaciones cristiano-musulmanas; conversión; hagiografía; Lewis R. Rambo; narración; predicación; relato; san Jorge; historias de los profetas; teoría y metodología.

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1. Introduction: From Christian *Passio* to Muslim *Qiṣṣa*

In the fourth century CE, stories began to spread throughout the Christian world about a soldier martyred for refusing to renounce his faith in Jesus Christ. This holy man—George by name—publicly decried the idolatry of his pagan ruler and, before being executed, was grievously tortured for his audacity.¹ The story is not one of tragedy, however. While the *passio* literary genre, to which the standardized *Acts of St. George* conforms, is known for lingering over the details of a martyr's suffering and death, this is not a mournful practice. Rather, it serves to celebrate the saint's piety and power, promote the values of the community, and edify the faithful to likewise stand firm in the face of trials and persecutions.² George is ultimately victorious, his *passio* proclaims, crowned in martyrological triumph. Moreover, on account of his victory, the hero now stands ready to assist those who seek his aid and intercession, a role that God expressly sanctions.³

Stories about St. George continued to evolve as his fame spread, to Ethiopia and England, Spain and Persia. He became known not only for his martyrdom but also for the miracles attributed to him after his death.⁴ The *Acts of St. George*, in particular, found its way into the church's official martyrologies and synaxarions and was recounted on the saint's feast day, April 23. The Greek original is now lost, but the core story survives (with varying degrees of elabora-

tion) in several non-Western languages, such as Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, and Arabic.⁵ Thanks in large part to the thirteenth-century CE *Golden Legend*, St. George was reimagined in Europe as a dragon-slaying, princess-saving model of Christian chivalry.⁶ Though this legend has little to do with the original Roman-era martyr or his late antique *passio*, it stands as testimony to both his widespread popularity and the flexibility of Christian hagiographical writings. In short, George emerges as the Christian saint *par excellence*. So, how does he become a Muslim hero?

By the ninth century CE, St. George was already being venerated as the pious Muslim “Ğirğīs”. Textual evidence of his Islamization can be found in several early historiographical works, including the *Kitāb al-ma'ārif* (The Book of Knowledge) of Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh b. Qutayba al-Dīnawarī (d. 276/889),⁷ the *Tārīḥ al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* (Annals of the Prophets and Kings) of Abū Ğa'far Muḥammad b. Ğarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923),⁸ and the *Murūğ al-dahab wa-ma'ādin al-ğawhar* (The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems) of Abū al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī al-Mas'ūdī (d. 345/956).⁹ Of the above works, Ṭabarī's universal history is the most important, as it contains the oldest complete version of the Islamic story.¹⁰ What is more, this account is clearly based on the Christian *Acts of St. George*. Though there are key differences in content and chronology, when one compares Ṭabarī's account to the oldest extant Christian versions of the *Acts* (in Syriac and Coptic) the shared narrative structure is unmistakable.¹¹ Ğirğīs and St. George are substantially the same *literary figure*.

The Ğirğīs story was recapitulated nearly a century later in the *Arā'is al-mağālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (The Brides of the Sessions in the Tales of the Prophets) of Abū Ishāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad

¹ This study treats St. George as literary figure. Although this should not be taken to deny his historicity outright, the record is obscure, to say the least. Some hagiographical texts gloss George's prosecutor “Dadian(us)” as Diocletian (r. 284-305 CE), an identification which would place his martyrdom in the early fourth century CE. However, E. A. Wallis Budge argues that it was earlier, possibly during the reign of Decius (r. 249-251 CE), an assessment he bases largely on a legend that Diocletian sought to destroy the already existing Georgic shrine at Lydda. See Budge (ed.), *George of Lydda*, pp. x, xii, 20-21, 46-47. Though the earliest textual reference is not until the end of the fifth century, when Pope Gelasius issues a decree condemning the reading of the saint's fantastical life, it does suggest that a written narrative had likely been circulating for some time. For a discussion of Gelasius's decree, see Smith & Wace, *Christian Biography*, vol. 2, p. 646. For an extensive bibliography on St. George, see Hollander, “Multimediation of Holiness”.

² For more on the *passio* genre, see Elliott, *Roads to Paradise*, pp. 16-41.

³ See Brooks (ed.), *Acts of Saint George*, pp. 94-95 (trans., pp. 113-114).

⁴ See Budge (ed.), *The Martyrdom and Miracles*.

⁵ See Brooks (ed.), *Acts of Saint George*; Budge (ed.), *George of Lydda*; Kiraz (ed.), *The Acts of Saint George*.

⁶ See Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, pp. 238-242.

⁷ Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-ma'ārif*, p. 27.

⁸ Ṭabarī, *Annals*, vol. 2, pp. 795-812. For an English translation, see Perlmann (trans.), *Ancient Kingdoms*, vol. 4, pp. 173-186.

⁹ Mas'ūdī, *Murūğ al-dahab*, vol. 1, p. 127.

¹⁰ Ṭabarī inserts Ğirğīs just before his treatment of the Sassanid and Byzantine emperors and concluding his recounting of key figures and events of pre-Muhammadan salvation history. While both Ibn Qutayba and Mas'ūdī give a précis of the Ğirğīs story, they do not recount it in full.

¹¹ For a content-oriented comparison of Ṭabarī's version with the Syriac *Acts*, see Durmaz, “Stories between Christianity and Islam”, pp. 109-112.

al-Ta'labī (d. 427/1035).¹² Although this account is largely the same as Ṭabarī's (with minor variations), its inclusion in Ta'labī's work is significant. *The Arā'is* fundamentally reshaped the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (tales of the prophets) literature—a corpus of narrative traditions about pre-Muhammadan figures and events—into a wholly didactic genre characterized by three formal features: Qur'ānic commentary (*tafsīr*), group biography (*tā'ifa*), and homiletic storytelling (*qaṣaṣ*).¹³ Thus, as a result of the *Arā'is*'s distinctive framing, we find Ġirġīs fully transformed. His narrative is reconceived as a commentary on the Qur'an;¹⁴ he is placed firmly in the company of the prophets;¹⁵ and his story is

to be publicly recited in the hortatory preaching assembly (*maġlis al-qaṣaṣ*) as “an instruction and guidance for [the] people.”¹⁶ No longer a neophyte to Islamic salvation history, Ġirġīs is made a secure and effectual Muslim exemplar.

Thus far I have only given a general outline of the *literary* transformation of the Christian St. George into the Muslim Ġirġīs. In so doing, I have emphasized the end of this process more than its beginning. This is largely pragmatic. While we have the narratives of Ṭabarī and Ta'labī, we do not have their source(s). Still, I believe we are in a position to offer a reasonable hypothesis. It is possible, even probable, that both Ṭabarī and Ta'labī drew upon the same source: a now lost work of Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 110/728 or 114/732). This conclusion is based not only the *isnāds* given by our two collectors but also on other textual witnesses.¹⁷ In many ways, Wahb makes for the perfect link: an *alleged* convert, who, in the assessment of Raif Georges Khoury, should be recognized not only as the initiator of the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* literature but also a major source of Jewish and Christian (and South Arabian) traditions for later Muslim historians.¹⁸ And again, given the unmistakable resemblance, it is almost certain that Wahb (or his source) took the *passio* as his base text.¹⁹

From the standard perspective, what I have just described is a case of literary borrowing or *appropriation*. A narrative, written *by* and *for* one community, has been removed, revised, and redeployed by another to serve the latter's purposes.²⁰ In such a framework, the story has no power of

¹² Ta'labī, *Arā'is al-maġālis*, pp. 376–382. For an English translation, see Brinner (trans.), *Lives of the Prophets*, pp. 715–725.

¹³ See Siebeking, “The Creation of an Islamic Literary Genre”. For more on the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* as a literary genre generally, see Nagel, “Die Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'”; Pauliny, “Einige Bemerkungen zu den Werken ‘Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’”; Tottoli, “Le storie dei profeti”; Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, 138–164; and Pregill, Klar, & Tottoli, “*Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'* as Genre and Discourse”. It is important to note here the difference between standalone *qīṣaṣ* compendia (like Ta'labī's) and universal histories that contain *qīṣaṣ* traditions (such as those of Ṭabarī, Ibn Kaṭīr, and Ibn al-Aṭīr). In terms of the former, we have two partially extant *qīṣaṣ* works that precede Ta'labī's, those ascribed to Ishāq b. Bishr (d. ca. 206/821) and Umāra b. Waṭīma (d. 289/902). However, both lack the above tripartite framing, which served as a model for later works. And while Ta'labī's Andalusian contemporary Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarāfi (d. 454/1062) did emphasize the exegetical and didactic elements of the *qīṣaṣ*, his composition did not achieve the same fame. See Tottoli, “*The Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'* of Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarāfi”.

¹⁴ Although Ta'labī does not introduce the story with a specific Qur'ānic passage, he does have Ġirġīs allude the Qur'an in his rebuke of the ruler's idolatry: “He [God] is the one who created and sustained you; who gives you life and causes you to die [cf. Q2:258, 3:156, 7:158, 9:116, 10:56, 22:6, 23:80, 40:68, 44:8, 53:44, 57:2]; who can harm you and benefit you [cf. Q10:106, 22:12, 25:55]. If he says to something, ‘Be!’ it is” [cf. Q2:117, 3:47, 59, 6:73, 16:40, 19:35, 36:82, 40:68]. But you have taken up something shaped from his creation, [which is] deaf, unable to hear, see, or speak, and no use for you against God [cf. Q5:76, 6:71, 10:18, 13:16, 20:89, 21:66, 22:12, 25:55].” Ta'labī, *Arā'is al-maġālis*, p. 376 (my translation). Still more importantly, Ta'labī's introduction describes the entire *Arā'is* as a comprising “tales of the prophets mentioned in the Qur'an, along with commentary (*bi-l-ṣarḥ*).” Ta'labī, *Arā'is al-maġālis*, p. 5; Brinner (trans.), *Lives of the Prophets*, p. 3.

¹⁵ This does not mean that Ta'labī necessarily considered Ġirġīs a prophet. *Qīṣaṣ* literature often contains stories of figures who are either not prophets or whose prophethood is contested. While neither Ta'labī nor Ṭabarī grant Ġirġīs unambiguous prophetic status, Ibn Qutayba and Mas'ūdī both expressly state that Ġirġīs “was sent” (*bu ṭā*) to the ruler(s) of Mosul, suggesting a prophetic mission. See Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-ma'ārif*, p. 27; Mas'ūdī, *Murūġ al-dahab*, vol. 1, p. 127. That said, Ṭabarī and Ta'labī do describe Ġirġīs as a “pious servant of God” (*abd Allāh ṣāliḥan*), a description used in the Quran

for the prophets Noah and Lot (Q66:10), while Ibn Qutayba and Mas'ūdī use the epithet “servant of Christ” (*abd al-Masīḥ*). Finally, the tenth-century Muṭahhar b. Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī writes that unnamed historians (*ahl al-aḥbār*) claimed Ġirġīs as a prophet. See Maqdisī, *Kitāb al-bad'*, vol. 3, p. 5. For a French translation, see Huart, *Livre de la création*, vol.3, pp. 5–6.

¹⁶ Ta'labī, *Arā'is al-maġālis*, p. 6; Brinner (trans.), *Lives of the Prophets*, p. 5.

¹⁷ For example, see Mas'ūdī, *Murūġ al-dahab*, vol. 1, p. 127.

¹⁸ Khoury, *Les légendes prophétiques*, p. 84. See also Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, vol. 1, pp. 201–221; Khoury, “Wahb b. Munabbih”. On Wahb as one of the principal sources of pre-Muhammadan Islamic history, see Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, pp. 138–141. Cf. Dūrī, *The Rise of Historical Writing*, pp. 122–135. For more on his alleged conversion to Islam, see below.

¹⁹ Roberto Tottoli convincingly argues that Wahb very likely knew Syriac, a linguistic skill that further supports his identification as our redactor. See Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, p. 141. Cf. Dūrī, *The Rise of Historical Writing*, p. 125.

²⁰ For examples of this approach to the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* traditions, see Schwarzbaum, *Biblical and Extra-Biblical Legends*; Adang, *Muslim Writers*.

its own; the redactor and transmitter are in total control. To adapt a popular Sufi metaphor about the master-disciple relationship, the tale is like a corpse in the hands of the corpse washer.²¹ But is such passivity accurate? Is a story, especially one inscribed in a text and part of a formal literary genre, a wholly submissive body? And if not, is there an analytical frame more helpful in drawing out its activity in crossing from one religious or cultural world to another? With these queries in mind, I propose the following investigative study: What would happen if we approached the boundary-crossing editorial process as a type of *conversion*, and the story itself as a *convert*? How would this atypical framing productively challenge our understanding, not only of the processes of narrative transmission across confessional and literary boundaries but perhaps even of stories themselves?

For this experiment, I take up Ṭa'labī's aforementioned *Tale of Ġirġīs* as a case study, using it to support some preliminary remarks on a theory of narrative conversion. I have chosen this account (as opposed to Ṭabarī's) because it represents the culmination of the conversion process, from Christian *passio* to Muslim *qiṣṣa*—from one literary genre (or community) to another. I frame my subsequent theoretical analysis around the “stages” of conversion proposed by Lewis R. Rambo, a pioneer in the interdisciplinary field of Conversion Studies. While his stages are intended to scaffold the complex social and psychological processes by which a person converts from one religion to another, I find thinking with Rambo's schema curiously generative for texts as well. Reading Ṭa'labī's homiletic story against these stages, I argue for the heuristic utility of *conversion* as framework for revealing the subtle ways that stories are “active” in their own transformation. Ultimately, I advocate for the adoption of this new frame as a basis for further theorizing about why and how stories transmigrate from one religious or cultural world to another. But first, a (very) brief primer on Conversion Studies.

2. Conversion Studies: A Brief Primer to an Evolving Field

Modern studies on religious conversion, such as those of William James and A. D. Nock, first emerged from the discipline of psychology.²² Or, perhaps more accurately, psychology has its begin-

nings in the study of conversion. Either way, for much of the 20th century, the relevant scholarship has been dominated by a psychological approach to understanding what is assumed to be an inner experience. According to a recent summation of the field, this personal orientation, initiated by James and Nock, “was deeply influenced by Protestant Pietistic understandings of religious conversion that privileges interior states and subjectivities,”²³ While not discounting the importance of psychological analysis for interpreting why and how certain individuals chose to convert, contemporary Conversion Studies has increasingly drawn attention to the external along with the internal, the public along with the private. In the latter part of the 20th century, historical, sociological, and anthropological approaches entered the conversation with vigor, transforming the field into a multidisciplinary “thematic site” to study the full complexity of religious change.²⁴

Somewhat surprisingly, this social turn coincided with a move to center the agency of the convert. For example, this can be seen in Lofland & Stark's influential “Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective”, which highlights the activity of converts to the Unification Church in constructing their new identities.²⁵ That converts are active (not passive) and that conversion is a complex, evolving social process (not simply a sudden psychological change) are two important examples of how the field has evolved in ways that make it amenable to the sort of analytical stretching my study propose.²⁶ Relatedly, there is rising trend to consider the phenomenon of conversion in relation to deconversion.²⁷ The fact is that not all conversions

²³ Rambo & Farhadian, “Introduction”, p. 5.

²⁴ See Gannon, “Conversion as a Thematic Site”. One way of categorizing this complexity is the use of conversion motifs. See Lofland & Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs”.

²⁵ Lofland & Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver”.

²⁶ On conversion as a process, see Tippet, “Conversion as a Dynamic Process”. On the active v. passive debate, see Richardson, “The Active vs. Passive Convert”.

²⁷ See, for example, Csöff *et al.*, *Deconversion*; the authors argue, no better word than deconversion to describe processes of disengagement from religious orientations because these have much in common with conversion. Termination of membership may eventually be the final step of deconversion, but it involves biographical and psychological dynamics which can and need to be reconstructed by qualitative approaches and analyzed by quantitative instruments. In the B”, “collection-title”: “Research in Contemporary Religion (RCR Streib, *Deconversion Revisited*; and slowly changing causes and consequences. Based on quantitative and qualitative data, *Deconversion Revisited* presents ten longitudinal case studies representing the lifespan from early

²¹ See Ernst, *Sufism*, p. 124.

²² See James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*; Nock, *Conversion*.

are permanent. People—as well as stories—are constantly in motion. While some are embracing a new religious identity, others are forsaking it. Indeed, a single person may adopt and abandon the same identity at different times. (As I will discuss in my conclusion, such is the fate of the Islamic Ġirġis story, at least in the Arabic Sunnī tradition).

In adopting and adapting the insights of Conversion Studies to theorize about the “conversion” of stories, especially through Rambo’s work, it is important to recognize the inherent limitations. I am not so radical as to propose that stories have psyches or feelings or anything approaching human agency. And yet, I do aver that they have lives, relationships, and activity. These latter affirmations are literary, not personal; socio-historical, not psychological. In discussing the role of language in the conversion process, Peter G. Stromberg begins by making a critical distinction between conversation as an experience of “personal transformation” and “a change in religious affiliation.”²⁸ Though the two processes often overlap, they are not the same thing. One is possible without the other.²⁹ So it is with this study. Here, I take conversion solely as “a change in religious affiliation,” namely, from a *Christian* story to a *Muslim* one.³⁰ Such a straightforward

understanding, I believe, sanctions my capacious and experimental analysis. With this declaration, I now turn to interrogate our textual convert guided by Rambo’s stage-model of conversion.³¹

3. A Literary Convert: The Stages of Narrative Conversion

3.1. Context: Relational Congruence

Rambo begins his pioneering work, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, by making three claims:

- (a) conversion is a process over time, not a single event; (b) conversion is contextual and thereby influences and is influenced by a matrix of relationships, expectations, and situations; and (c) factors in conversion are multiple, interactive, and cumulative.³²

Given how dynamic and multifaceted this process of religious change appears to be, one can understand why Rambo names *context* as his first stage.³³ And yet, context is not so much a stage as it is the ground upon which the other stages are built. Elsewhere, Rambo seems to admit this, calling it “the ecology of the conversation process.”³⁴ Accordingly, context draws our attention to the unique pattern of symbols, circumstances, and relationships that enable the conversion to take place in the way that it does. At the macrolevel—which I will address more in the next stage—time and place, as well as the social, cultural, and religious milieu, all factor into the context of conversion. At the microlevel, relationships are paramount.³⁵ But do stories have “relationships”? Yes.

story’s former affiliation—i.e., the Christian *passio* remains in effect—but rather adds to it, one could argue that this type of conversion is closer to what Nock calls “adhesion”. See Nock, *Conversion*, p. 7. Of course, Nock’s distinction is based on human psychology, which is inapplicable in this context.

³¹ It is important to note that the sequence of these stages is not as fixed as it appears. Rambo asks us to take them as a heuristic model of the conversion process, recognizing that individual converts may move back and forth or even skip whole stages. See Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp. 16–17. I take this flexibility as an invitation, skipping two stages in my own analysis (*quest* and *consequences*) for reasons I note below.

³² Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 5.

³³ See Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp. 22–43.

³⁴ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 165.

³⁵ According to Rambo, “Virtually every social scientific study of conversion stresses the importance of relationships”. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 195, n. 9. For example, see Lofland & Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver”; Lofland, “‘Becoming a World-Saver’ Revisited”.

adulthood to old age. These case studies are based on reinterviews with the Faith Development Interview and questionnaire data ten years later. The data yield insight in stability and change of biographies, faith development, psychological well-being and coping with disengagement from a variety of religious backgrounds.” --Provided by publisher,”collection-title”:”Research in contemporary religion”,”event-place”:”Göttingen”,”ISBN”:”978-3-525-56868-2”,”language”:”eng”,”note”:”OCLC: 1265347512”,”number-of-pages”:”306”,”publisher”:”Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht”,”publisher-place”:”Göttingen”,”source”:”Open World-Cat”,”title”:”Deconversion Revisited: Biographical Studies and Psycho-metric Analyses Ten Years Later”,”title-short”:”Deconversion Revisited”,”author”:[{“family”:”Streib”,”given”:”Heinz”}],”issued”:[{“date-parts”:[[“2022”]]}],”schema”:”https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json”} Zuckerman, *Faith No More*. President Obama described the United States as a nation of “Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus—and nonbelievers.” It was the first time an American president had acknowledged the existence of this rapidly growing segment of the population in such a public forum. And yet the reasons why more and more people are turning away from religion are still poorly understood. In *Faith No More*, Phil Zuckerman draws on in-depth interviews with people who have left religion to find out what’s really behind the process of losing one’s faith. According to a 2008 study, so many Americans claim no religion (15%, up from 8% in 1990

²⁸ Stromberg, “The Role of Language in Religious Conversion”, p. 118.

²⁹ Consider, for instance, the Christian man who formally converts to Islam to marry his Muslim partner, not out of conviction but to satisfy the demands of his in-laws.

³⁰ Since this change does not completely replace the

As I mentioned earlier, in its original Christian context, the martyrdom account of St. George is a specialized hagiographical work known as a *passio*. In her influential work, *Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of the Early Saints*, classicist Alison Goddard Elliot highlights the principal characteristics of the *passio* genre (especially as distinguished from the *vita*). These features include (1) a diametrical opposition of values—“between the two sides [martyr and tyrant] there can be no middle ground, no mediation”—(2) the sociality of the literary event—“the values depicted are those of an entire society”—(3) the preeminence of speech—“the climatic center of the *passio* was not the moment of death but the interrogation scene”—and (4) the role of contemporary readers/hearers—“the words are directed beyond the seemingly intended receiver in the text... to the audience at large.”³⁶ Sharing in these patterns, the *Acts of St. George* exists in hermeneutical relationship with other *passiones*, in a literary community. These relational elements are critically important, not only to understand the George story in its Christian setting but also to help explain why its conversion was so efficacious.

At the heart of the matter is the principle of *congruence*. According to Rambo, congruence between the old and the new, especially in terms of symbols, values and expectations, is a major factor in a conversion's success. Drawing on Charles H. Kraft's study of the Kwame people in Northeast Nigeria and Northwest Cameroon, he shows how certain cultural, sectarian, and theological ideas helped facilitate their conversion to Christianity.³⁷ In our case, as a member of the *passiones* literary community (genre), the Christian *Acts of St. George* already shared much in common with the Islamic “tales of the prophets” (*qışaş al-anbiyā'*) literary community (genre) to which it converted. We can see this similarity in terms of narrative themes. For example, George was sent to publicly confront a tyrant (*à la* Moses),³⁸ he broached no compromise with idolatry (*à la* Abraham),³⁹ he suffered patiently (*à la* Noah),⁴⁰ his faithfulness was ultimately rewarded (*à la*

Joseph)⁴¹ and his foes suffered divine retribution, (*à la* Hūd and Šālīh).⁴² While Rambo is theorizing about congruence in terms of a person's “cognitive framework,”⁴³ this insight works for literary frameworks as well.

In addition to these common narrative themes and plot expectations, the Christian and Islamic George stories share a hortatory and performative function. This is especially evident in *Ta'labī's* telling. Though he was best known as a Qur'ān commentator (*mufasssīr*), *Ta'labī's* biographers were keen to stress his role as a *wā'iz* (admonitory preacher), something evidenced by the popularity of his *Arā'is*.⁴⁴ Accordingly, each of the *mağālis* (teaching sessions) that comprise his *qışaş al-anbiyā'* compendium (including the *Tale of Ġirğīs*) is meant to be recounted as a public exhortation.⁴⁵ It is not merely an entertaining

⁴¹ See *Ta'labī, Arā'is al-mağālis*, pp. 97-129.

⁴² See *Ta'labī, Arā'is al-mağālis*, pp. 57-68.

⁴³ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 61.

⁴⁴ For a thorough investigation of *Ta'labī's* biography, see Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafssir Tradition*, pp. 25-52. Although he is described by his chief biographer, 'Abd al-Ġāfir b. Ismā'īl al-Fārisī (d. 529/1135), as a *wā'iz* (admonitory preacher) rather than *qāṣṣ* (storyteller), this may be due to several factors: (1) his scholarly stature, (2) the fact that his audiences would have included students and other scholars as well as members of the general public, and (3) as a defense against Ibn al-Ġawzī's critiques of the *quṣṣās* (sing. *qāṣṣ*). That said, it is important to note here that in the early period *qāṣṣ*, *wā'iz*, and *mudakkir* (warner) designated someone engaged in a broadly similar activity and were often used synonymously. See Armstrong, *The Quṣṣās of Early Islam*, pp. 6-8, 133-135. See also Radtke, “Wā'iz”; Pellat, “Kāṣṣ”; Pedersen, “The Islamic Preacher”, p. 231; Pedersen, “The Criticism of the Islamic Preacher”, pp. 215-216, 218-219; 'Athamina, “Al-Qasas”, pp. 53, 64; Berkey, *Popular Preaching*, p. 14. In is only in later works, such as those of Ibn al-Ġawzī and al-Subkī, that we find firm distinctions being drawn. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-quṣṣās*, pp. 9-11 (trans., pp. 96-98); “language”: “eng”, “note”: “O-CLC: 81826217”, “number-of-pages”: “170”, “publisher”: “Dar el-Machreq Éditeurs”, “publisher-place”: “Beyrouth”, “source”: “Open WorldCat”, “title”: “Ibn al-Jawzī's Kitāb al-Quṣṣās wa-al-mudhakkirīn”, “title-short”: “Kitāb al-Quṣṣās wa-al-mudhakkirīn”, “author”: “[“family”: “Ibn al-Jawzī”, “given”: “Abū al-Faraj 'Abd al-Rahmān b. 'Alī”]”, “editor”: “[“family”: “Swartz”, “given”: “Merlin L.”]”, “issued”: [“date-parts”: [[“1971”]]] } }”, “schema”: “https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json”] Subkī, *Kitāb mu'īd al-ni'am*, pp. 160-163. Cf. Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges*, pp. 217-218; Jones, *The Power of Oratory*, pp. 17-18, 162. Of Subkī distinctions specifically, Berkey notes, “[they] have a formulaic, even artificial, air about them. With the exception of the political aspects of the *khaṭīb's* sermons, to which he alludes, and perhaps their formal and precisely delineated venue, there is little to distinguish the [various preachers].” Berkey, *Popular Preaching*, p. 13.

⁴⁵ See Siebeking, “The Creation of an Islamic Literary Genre”, pp. 65-70. See also, Saleh, *The Formation of the*

³⁶ Elliott, *Roads to Paradise*, pp. 17, 18, 24, 25.

³⁷ See Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 37. See also his related discussion of intellectual and religious “availability”. Rambo, pp. 61-62.

³⁸ See *Ta'labī, Arā'is al-mağālis*, pp. 159-167.

³⁹ See *Ta'labī, Arā'is al-mağālis*, pp. 68-73.

⁴⁰ See *Ta'labī, Arā'is al-mağālis*, pp. 50-56.

tale but a form of *qashaş* (homiletic storytelling).⁴⁶ Like a *passio*, which is preached on the saint's feast day, *qashaş* is fundamentally performative, involving a preacher and an audience. Moreover, as *qashaş*, the story seeks to elicit an active, inquiring, response.⁴⁷ Much more could be said about the performative aspect of these respective genres, but there is no need to belabor the major point: Attending to the literary context of Ta'labī's proselyte story shows how thematic and hortatory congruences between its new community (*qishaş al-anbiyā*) and its old community (*passiones*) helped facilitate its conversion.

3.2. Crisis: A Changing World

Context alone is insufficient to explain conversion—of people or stories. Something must serve as the proximate cause. In Rambo's model, this is the stage of *crisis*.⁴⁸ While he admits that a crisis or tension may come later (after the stages of *quest* and *encounter*), it is typically a key part of the conversion process in that it acts the catalyst for change. Given the long-standing dominance of psychology in the field of Conversion Studies, such a crisis is often posited as an internal one. Yet, as Rambo suggests, external factors are just as important.⁴⁹ A story, of course, does not have a psyche to analyze—no mystical experience or existential angst trigger its conversion. Stories do, however, have socio-historical contexts that we can interrogate. Specifically, if we follow Ta'labī, Ṭabarī, and others in identifying the late seventh/early eighth century CE Wahb b. Munabbih as the “missionary” who converted George into Ġirġis and introduced him into the

Islamic *qishaş al-anbiyā* literary corpus, we are able to identify just such a crisis.

Wahb—who is sometimes (mis)represented as a convert himself⁵⁰—lived in a time when the Islamic conquests of the Middle East were relatively recent events and Muslim authorities were still working out Islam's relationship to other religions, especially Judaism and Christianity. This project was multigenerational and at its vanguard were the *quṣṣās*, preachers who narrated (among other topics), *qishaş*—stories about prophets and other figures shared by Jews and Christians—from traditions collected by Wahb and others.⁵¹ Preaching in public assemblies (*maġālis al-qashaş*),⁵² they proclaimed an Islam that was both consonant with and distinct from the other monotheistic traditions. Not only did converts and potential converts comprise the audiences, but many of the earliest *quṣṣās* were converts themselves.⁵³ In such an environment, it takes little imagination to see the appeal of converting the George story. Indeed, its value goes both ways. To the potential convert from Christianity, the venerated George-Ġirġis serves as a bridge to a new identity; to the already converted, he endorses the antiquity, continuity, and veracity of Islam.⁵⁴ (I will say more about his bridge-building role below).

⁵⁰ See below for more on his alleged conversion.

⁵¹ On the role of the *quṣṣās* in transmitting *qishaş* and (so-called) *isrā'īlīyāt* material, see Armstrong, *The Quṣṣās of Early Islam*, pp. 38, 90-92, 109-111. Cf. Pauliny, “Zur Rolle der Quṣṣās”. Lyall R. Armstrong lays the blame for the troublesomely persistent view in modern, Western scholarship of the *quṣṣās* as fabricators and charlatans squarely on Ignaz Goldziher, who relied heavily on a certain reading of Ibn al-Ġawzī. Armstrong, *The Quṣṣās of Early Islam*, pp. 3-4. For Goldziher's remarks, see Goldziher, *Schools of Koranic Commentators*, pp. 36-38. On the thorny question of whether Wahb should himself be considered a *qāṣṣ*, see Armstrong, *The Quṣṣās of Early Islam*, p. 94.

⁵² For a description of *qashaş* sessions, see Armstrong, *The Quṣṣās of Early Islam*, pp. 151-189. Cf. Jones, *The Power of Oratory*, pp. 18, 161-163, who remarks that, following Ibn al-Ġawzī, Andalusian and Maghrebi authorities also distinguished between the *qashṣ* and *wā'iz* as well as the *maġlis al-qashaş* and *maġlis al-wa'iz*.

⁵³ Armstrong provides biographical sketches of 109 early *quṣṣās*. See Armstrong, *The Quṣṣās of Early Islam*, pp. 285-314.

⁵⁴ On the validating function of the *qishaş* traditions generally, see Berkey, *Popular Preaching*, pp. 40-41. This dynamic mirrors the observation by Rambo & Farhadian that “converts and their new community of faith sometimes proclaim that a new convert is another confirmation of the truth of their religion.” Rambo & Farhadian, “Introduction”, p. 4. Interestingly, the validation that conversion brings can work both ways. For a fascinating study on how popular Muslim veneration of St. George in contemporary Cyprus is seen by Orthodox Christians as confirming their own faith, see Hollander, “Even They Love Him”.

Classical Tafsīr Tradition, pp. 36-37.

⁴⁶ I take my rendering of *qashaş* as “homiletic storytelling” from Jones, *The Power of Oratory*, p. 18. More generically, Armstrong glosses the term as “preaching”. Armstrong, *The Quṣṣās of Early Islam*, p. 3, passim. Khalil 'Athamina likewise translates the same term as “religious preaching”. 'Athamina, “Al-Qasas”, p. 53. Johannes Pedersen, focusing on narrativity, renders it as “edifying tales”. Pedersen, “The Criticism of the Islamic Preacher”, p. 218. See also Pellat, “Kāṣṣ”, who defines the *qāṣṣ* (the one who engages in *qashaş*) as a “popular story-teller or preacher, deliverer of sermons”. For more on the connection between preaching and storytelling, including the role of the *qishaş al-anbiyā*, see Armstrong, *The Quṣṣās of Early Islam*; and Berkey, *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority*, pp. 13-14, passim.

⁴⁷ See Armstrong, *The Quṣṣās of Early Islam*, pp. 153, 169. More on this below.

⁴⁸ See Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp. 44-55.

⁴⁹ See Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp. 46-47, 54-55.

In the monumental task of defining and refining Muslim identity, the retelling of Jewish and Christian stories was a powerful tool not only because it established common ground but also because it drew contrasts. This is especially vivid in the *Tale of Ġirġīs*, which, despite its boundary-crossing origins, is fundamentally about erecting walls, between insiders and outsiders, truth and lies, good and evil. Yes, it tells of the protagonist's martyrdom, but not only his death. As a converted *passio*, the story comprises Ġirġīs's entire *martyrium* (testimony), in which the *public* interrogation scene is the narrative climax.⁵⁵ Ġirġīs's speech acts, though differing in theological content, share St. George's defiant tone.⁵⁶ The hero confronts his enemy with a boldness that often stupefies his hearers and leaves no one in doubt as to where the lines are drawn, who is on God's side and who is not. Again, when viewed in the service of elaborating Muslim identity vis-à-vis others, this story certainly made for a helpful convert. This, I submit, is the *crisis* that precipitated George's narrative conversion: the need to manage the social and religious change of an emerging Islamic society.

3.3. Encounter: The Advocate's Role

At this point in my analysis, the limits of applying the stage-model of conversion to stories that traverse religious boundaries becomes more apparent. Drawing on the sociological analyses of James Richardson and Roger Straus to emphasize the convert as an active agent,⁵⁷ Rambo's third stage is not *encounter* but *quest*. This stage is wholly person-focused, as it "begins with the assumption that people seek to maximize meaning and purpose in life, to erase ignorance, and to resolve inconsistency."⁵⁸ Though one can certainly debate whether or not this assumption is warranted, there is no escaping that stories are immaterial to

the discussion. Tales do not quest. Texts do not seek out their own meaning. Fortunately, this stage is also optional to the model. As Rambo readily admits, many converts, like our George story, do not begin as active seekers. Yet, all eventually find themselves in an *encounter* with a missionary or "advocate". This, Rambo's fourth stage (our third), is where we pick up his framework.

The encounter between an advocate and a potential convert is complex and bidirectional. The parties enter this initial meeting from their own contexts and with their own objectives, and these must be actively negotiated if they are to move on to the next stage. I speak more about the story's activity in the next stage. Here, I want to focus on the advocate's work in the initial encounter. After all, it is the advocate that steps forward to initiate contact, often taking some risk in doing so. What drives a person toward this action? What entails success? What about failure—at what point do the costs outweigh the benefits? Given the audacity of the act, Rambo is right to emphasize the importance of understanding the background, beliefs, and motivations of this missionary-advocate.⁵⁹ Taking Wahb as our redactor-advocate, it thus makes sense to ask what his personal story and literary career suggest about his reasons for converting the George tale as well as what he hoped to achieve. In undertaking this analysis, we begin to see how much more is at stake than a single story.

Wahb b. Munabbih was born in Yemen in 34/654-55. His life ended when he was flogged to death in either 110/728 or 114/732, perhaps on account of his (alleged) Qadarite sensibilities. His father, Munabbih, was a Persian (possibly Jewish) convert to Islam, a fact that, according to Khoury, was confused by later scholars who thought that Wahb himself had converted.⁶⁰ Though he is known to have written works on a variety of subjects (including a history of Yemen and a *mağāzī*), his chief legacy is as a collector of *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*.⁶¹ His magnum opus is cited under a variety of names, though the original seems to have been either *Kitāb al-mubtada' wa-qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (The Book of the Beginning and the Tales of the Prophets) or *Kitāb al-mubtada' wa-al-siyār* (The Book of the Beginning and

⁵⁵ See Elliott, *Roads to Paradise*, p. 24.

⁵⁶ For example, in the Syriac *passio*, St. George begins his verbal contest not only by declaring himself a Christian who "worships the one true God, with his Son and his Holy Spirit" but also rejecting the tyrant's threats as idle and, a little later, calling him "Satan". Brooks (ed.), *Acts of Saint George*, pp. 75-76 (trans., pp. 89-90). In Ṭa labī's *qīṣaṣ*, Ġirġīs commences his trial in a similarly confrontational fashion: "Know, [O King] that you are a slave owned by a Master, and that you yourself do not own anything or anyone, and that there is a Lord who owns you and others" (my translation). Ṭa labī, *Arā'is al-mağālīs*, p. 376. Cf. Ṭabarī, *Annals*, vol. 2, p. 797.

⁵⁷ See Richardson, "The Active vs. Passive Convert"; Straus, "Religious Conversion".

⁵⁸ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 56.

⁵⁹ See Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp. 66-75.

⁶⁰ See Khoury, "Wahb b. Munabbih".

⁶¹ See Khoury. See also, Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, pp. 138-141; Dūrī, *The Rise of Historical Writing*, pp. 122-135.

Lives [of the Prophets]),⁶² often shortened to *al-Mubtada*.⁶³ Unfortunately, we no longer possess a direct textual witness of *al-Mubtada*, save a single papyrus on the *Hadīṭ Dāwūd* (Story of David).⁶⁴ (That being said, some of it can be reconstructed from the *Kitāb bad' al-ḥalq wa-qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* of 'Umāra b. Waṭīma al-Fārisī (d. 298/902) who used Wahb as his primary source⁶⁵).

The meagerness of Wahb's extant works contrasts with the copiousness of their quotation by later scholars. Subsequent *qīṣaṣ* writings leaned on Wahb's expertise heavily.⁶⁶ And it is not hard to see why. His was an early literary career dedicated to bridging the Islamic with the Judeo-Christian, the Qur'ānic with the Biblical.⁶⁷ In this role, his influence was paradigmatic. Hear Roberto Tottoli's assessment:

Wahb was in many ways one of the first Muslim historians and his vast interests covered many subjects, ranging from Jewish antiquity to the history of the life of Muḥammad, thus demonstrating that even earlier than the work of Ibn Ishāq Muslim history and stories of the prophets were closely related. If Ibn Ishāq was the first to place the topics together in one book, the work of Wahb, as a whole, had a decisive influence to such a degree that [it] was probably the principle [*sic*] source of Ibn Ishāq

especially for the [now lost] sections of his work dealing with the prophets.⁶⁸

To bring this appraisal back to Rambo's concerns. Wahb's background as the son of a convert, his career as a collector and transmitter of traditions, and his belief in the continuity of Islam with the salvation histories of Judaism and Christianity indicates two related objectives: (1) to provide an Islamic identity to converts and their stories, and (2) to affirm a "Biblical" basis for Islamic history. Ġirġīs does both.⁶⁹

A final point to emphasize with respect to the encounter stage is that most potential converts resist. While missionaries and scholars of conversion alike tend to focus on successful conversions, the fact is that, in the vast majority of cases, the advocate's advances fail to generate the desired change (at least initially).⁷⁰ The reasons for such resistance are myriad. Sometimes the blame is weighted on an advocate's strategy. But more often, it can be found in broader socio-political factors. In short, most communities offer powerful incentives for maintaining the religious status quo. In bringing this sociological insight to bear on our narrative conversion, we are confronted with a critical question: Why this story? After all, Christian hagiographical literature is vast, and by the seventh century CE, there were already numerous *passiones* (martyrdoms), *vitae* (lives), and *acta* (acts) from which to choose. What is more, the fantastical story of St. George (with his multiple deaths and resurrections) had already come under sanction by Pope Gelasius (d. 496) as having been corrupted.⁷¹ Why then would Wahb—and those following in his wake—take up such a controversial tale?

The answer, I believe, is suggested by the story's conclusion. Before Ġirġīs is martyred—for the fourth and final time—he publicly supplicates God for the right to intercede on behalf of anyone who asks for help in his name.⁷² Though the words of the prayer are different, this request to be an intercessor for the faithful is carried over from the Christian account. But why keep it, especially when other Christian-specific material

⁶² See respectively Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-ma'ārif*, p. 27, and Mas'udī, *Murūğ al-dahab*, vol. 1, p. 127. For other title variations, see Dūrī, *The Rise of Historical Writing*, pp. 126-127; Lidzbarski, *De Prophetis*, pp. 2-3.

⁶³ There is also a *Kitāb al-isrā'īliyyāt* (The Book of Israelite Stories) attributed to Wahb, though Khoury and others believe it likely recapitulated the same or similar material. See Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, vol. 1, pp. 224-227. See also Lidzbarski, *De Prophetis*, p. 4; Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, p. 335, n. 2; Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, p. 139. On the history of the complicated (and often pejorative) term *isrā'īliyyāt* (Israelite stories) and its frequent confusion with *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (the Islamic tales of the prophets), see Tottoli, "Origin and Use of the Term *Isrā'īliyyāt*".

⁶⁴ See Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, vols. 1 and 2.

⁶⁵ For Ibn Waṭīma's indebtedness to Wahb, see Khoury, *Les légendes prophétiques*, pp. 158-185. The extant section of *Kitāb al-bad'* extends from Khidr to the advent of Muḥammad but, alas, does not include Ġirġīs. For the Arabic text, see Khoury, pp. 1-389. This omission suggests one of three possibilities: (1) Ibn Waṭīma intentionally excised it; (2) he was working with a different recension of Wahb's compendium, one which did not have the story; or (3) it was never included in *al-Mubtada* but rather existed as a standalone work.

⁶⁶ For example, Ṭa'labī cites Wahb as an authority in his *Arā* is well over 100 times.

⁶⁷ According to Ibn Ḥaḡar al-Asqalānī, Wahb had read 72 books of the Jews and Christians. Ibn Ḥaḡar al-Asqalānī, *Tahdīb al-tahdīb*, vol. 4, p. 332. On the varying numbers of books Wahb was claimed to have consulted, see Dūrī, "The Rise of Historical Writing", p. 124-125.

⁶⁸ Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, p. 139.

⁶⁹ The latter point is especially important. For what is often missed in discussions of conversion is how the convert's transformation impacts the receiving community. The change goes both ways.

⁷⁰ See Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp. 35-36, 90-91.

⁷¹ See Smith & Wace, *Christian Biography*, vol. 2, p. 646.

⁷² See Ṭa'labī, *Arā is al-maḡālīs*, p. 381; Ṭabarī, *Annals*, vol. 2, p. 812.

is excised? I suspect that the supplication was maintained because by the time Wahb converted the story, George-Ġirġīs was already recognized as an efficacious intercessor by recent Muslims converts from Christianity. This was especially the case in Mosul, where the Islamic story is set and which has long claimed Ġirġīs's tomb.⁷³ As I discussed above, the Yemenite Wahb b. Munabbih had ties to Persia on his father's side and was likely well-acquainted with Mosul's tradition of George-Ġirġīs veneration (which is perhaps why he set the story there to begin with). Again, these latter comments are only a hypothesis. We lack the textual or material evidence to go beyond this. Yet, my larger point remains: Focusing on the encounter stage in Rambo's conversion framework draws our attention to questions of why and how a story converts in the first place.

3.4. Interaction: The Redaction Process

If the advocate's initial encounter is successful, they bring the potential convert into a fuller *interaction* with the new community. Rambo describes this stage (his fifth, our fourth) in pedagogical terms. The interested party now learns about the new group's beliefs and practices, and what will be expected of them if they choose to take the leap.⁷⁴ In Christian terms, we are talking about the catechumenate. But how does one catechize a story and incorporate it into a new communal life? While a narrative cannot be trained into a new religious identity, a text can be edited. Accordingly, I will frame our story's interaction with its receiving community through the process of redaction. Yet, to address this process is to raise again the issue of activity. Though a story has no choice but to convert in the face of a determined redactor-advocate, *how* the conversion happens, and *what* is changed, shows that there is much more give and take than is often assumed. Here, we must return to the question of genre.

As I elaborated above, the Christian *Acts of St. George* is a *passio*, which means that it narrates the saint's entire *martyrium*—that is, his “testimony”.

In such an account, words are no less important than deeds. As expressed by Elliot, “The drama calls for intense physical suffering, but the necessary prelude to physical *agon* is verbal *agon*: the ritual contest prefigures the literal. The hero must triumph in word and deed.”⁷⁵ A close comparison of the extant Islamic redactions (of Ṭarabī and Ṭa'labī) with the earliest Christian versions (in Syriac and Coptic), substantiate Elliot's emphasis on the centrality of the spoken martyrdom, as it is the character's speech acts that stand out as the most substantially altered material. To be sure, some events are also ordered differently and other details are changed. Yet, the most theologically significant changes are to what the characters say.⁷⁶ In short, the *passio* genre (with its emphasis on speech acts) shaped the contours of the conversion, suggesting that stories, especially those inscribed in texts, display a subtle agency of their own.

But the question of literary genre does not end here. For as much as the story's original genre acted on the conversion process, so too did its new one. As noted above, Wahb's redaction introduced Ġirġīs into a growing literary corpus, which came to be known as the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*. As a *category* of narrative traditions about the pre-Muhammadan prophets, this material can be found in a variety of historiographical works.⁷⁷ Ġirġīs's inclusion transformed him. Not only did he become a Muslim martyr (and sometimes prophet) but, more importantly, he was made a link in Islamic salvation history between Jesus and Muḥammad.⁷⁸ This was a major step in the story's conversion. Nevertheless, the process was not complete until Ṭa'labī's intervention (the *Arā'is*), where we can start to identify a distinct *genre* of *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, one characterized by the formal features of Qur'ānic commentary (*tafsīr*), group biography (*tā'īfah*), and homiletic storytelling (*qāṣaṣ*).⁷⁹ Ṭa'labī's decision to incorporate Ġirġīs into what would become the standard work of

⁷⁵ Elliott, *Roads to Paradise*, p. 24.

⁷⁶ In addition to replacing christic and trinitarian language with more appropriate Islamic phrasing, a major editorial concern was minimizing Christian notions of reciprocity in the saint's relationship with God. For more on this, see my forthcoming article, “The Problem of Patronage: Genre and Theology in the Reception of an Islamic *Passio* of Ġirġīs (St. George)”.

⁷⁷ See n. 13 above.

⁷⁸ In fact, Ṭa'labī states that Ġirġīs was part of the people of Palestine, “who knew the last of the disciples of Jesus.” See Ṭa'labī, *Arā'is al-maġālīs*, p. 376; Cf. Ṭabarī, *Annals*, vol. 2, p. 796.

⁷⁹ Again, see Siebeking, “The Creation of an Islamic Literary Genre”.

⁷³ Concerning Ġirġīs's tomb, the Andalusian travel writer Ibn Ḡubayr remarked on his visit to Mosul in 1184 CE, “God favored this city with a holy cemetery (*turba muqddasa*) in which lies the shrine (*mashhad*) of Ġirġīs” (my translation). Ibn Ḡubayr al-Kinānī, *The Travels*, p. 236. Cf. Broadhurst (trans.), *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, pp. 264–265. On the likelihood of a previous church on the site, see Fiey, *Mossoul chrétienne*, 118–120.

⁷⁴ See Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp. 102–123.

this new genre, endorsed his story, not only as historical, but as exegetical, prophetic, and pedagogical as well. With these new rhetorics, relationships, and roles,⁸⁰ the *Tale of ĠirĠĠs* was further entrenched in its Muslim identity.

3.5. Commitment: Ritual Performance

Sustained interaction with the new community, though essential, is not the culmination of the process. A conversion is not effectuated until a formal *commitment* is made. Rambo calls this stage “the fulcrum of the change process,” where a free human agent makes the choice to leave her former religious community and join another.⁸¹ Yet, Rambo’s normative assumption of conversion as a free choice bespeaks of his own bias toward Evangelical Protestantism, something which he admits in his preface, and can be seen the examples he uses throughout his work.⁸² In truth, history provides us with many examples wherein embracing a new religion—especially as an identity-marker—was less an act of human freedom than of survival, an acceptance (sometimes grudgingly) of a new social order.⁸³ I raise this point not to suggest we take the *Tale of ĠirĠĠs* as a case of “forced conversion”. No, such a label would flatten the very complexity my study aims to surface. Rather, I mean to suggest that what is most important about the commitment stage is not choice but ritual.

Commitment rituals, like baptism or *šahāda*, enact conversion as a public event. Even if there are only two witnesses, they represent the group and facilitate the convert’s initiation into their new communal life.⁸⁴ Thus, the commitment stage is fundamentally social. It should be stressed here that I diverge from Rambo, who discusses such rituals primarily as a public demonstration of a personal choice.⁸⁵ Rather, to borrow the words

of Roy A. Rappaport, “I take ritual to be *the* basic social act”.⁸⁶ Initiation rituals, in particular, demonstrate the community’s assent. After all, converts do not invent their own initiation process, they are given it by the new community. Such a view is critical because it authorizes us not only to consider what the public ritualization of conversion can tell us about the role of communal reception but also to consider the reception process as potentially on-going. But first, what does the commitment ritual look like for our convert story? What are the performative protocols? In short, the story must be told, or, in the case of *Ta’labī’s* narration, preached.⁸⁷

As discussed above, *Ta’labī* was a *wā’iz* (admonitory preacher) renowned for his homiletic storytelling (*qaṣaṣ*). On the one hand, the *‘Arā’is* thus represents the most important literary artifact of his sermonizing career; on the other, it is a manual for use by other preachers and storytellers.⁸⁸ Once again, what is most significant about *Ta’labī’s* *‘Arā’is* (for our study) is not simply that his work became the archetypal *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* compendium but that it shaped this homonymous genre as an essentially hortatory one. Accordingly, the *‘Arā’is*’s stories are intended to be publicly narrated in the *maġlis al-qaṣaṣ* or *maġlis al-wa’z* (preaching assembly), a performance which included responding to questions (*masā’il*) posed by the audience.⁸⁹ It is unfortunate that we do

⁸⁶ Rappaport, *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion*, p. 174. Emphasis in the original.

⁸⁷ According to Rambo & Farhadian, conversion scholars are increasingly seeing narration as “the constitutive process of how converts are ‘made’.” Rambo & Farhadian, “Introduction”, p. 8. In the same volume, see Stromberg, “The Role of Language in Religious Conversion”; Hindmarsh, “Religious Conversion as Narrative”.

⁸⁸ In his introduction to Kisā’ī’s famous *qīṣaṣ* collection, Wheeler M. Thackston suggests *Ta’labī’s* *‘Arā’is* functioned as “a sort of reference manual for preachers.” Kisā’ī, *Tales of the Prophets*, p. xvi. Berkey makes a similar observation, but goes on to caution that, “in themselves [works like *Ta’labī’s*] are several degrees removed from spontaneous interaction with the audience.” Berkey, *Popular Preaching*, p. 18.

⁸⁹ Athamina explains that the *masā’il* was “a procedure which became an integral part of the *qaṣaṣ* ceremonies.” Athamina, “Al-Qasas”, p. 63. See also the remarks in Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ*, p. 223. “language”: “eng”, “note”: “OCLC: 81826217”, “number-of-pages”: “170”, “publisher”: “-Dar el-Machreq Éditeurs”, “publisher-place”: “Beyrouth”, “-source”: “Open WorldCat”, “title”: “Ibn al-Jawzī’s Kitāb al-Qusṣāṣ wa-al-mudhakkirīn”, “title-short”: “Kitāb al-Qusṣāṣ wa-al-mudhakkirīn”, “author”: “[{“family”: “Ibn al-Jawzī”, “-given”: “Abū al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. ‘Alī”}], “editor”: “[{“family”: “Swartz”, “-given”: “Merlin L.”}], “issued”: “[{“date-parts”: “[“1971”]”}], “schema”: “https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json”]

⁸⁰ For more on the importance of these dimensions (plus ritual) for the interaction stage, see Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp. 107-123.

⁸¹ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 124.

⁸² See Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp. xi-xv; passim.

⁸³ For example, consider Charlemagne’s militarily achieved conversion of the Saxons in the late eight/early ninth centuries CE. See Flierman, *Saxon Identities*.

⁸⁴ For a brief description of the *šahāda* as a conversion ritual and its comparison to baptism, see DeLong-Bas, *Islam*, pp. 16-17.

⁸⁵ For example, Rambo claims, “At the heart of ritual conversion is the difficult combination of saying no [to one’s former affiliation] and saying yes [to the new].” Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 127.

not possess a record of the exchanges between *Ta'labī* and his audience. Nevertheless, with the mention of this interactive expectation, we are in a position to make three important observations about the commitment stage.

The first observation, as noted above, is that this stage is marked not by personal choice but by ritual performance. In the case of *Ta'labī's Tale of Ġirġīs*, the commitment to its new Islamic genre is established when it is *recounted* by a preacher and *received* by an audience in a ritualized and admonitory way. Second, this stage is continuous. As Rambo's suggests, commitment can be life-long process.⁹⁰ For the *Tale of Ġirġīs*, this happens each time the narrative is ritually recounted and received as constituent of the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* genre. And third, if this stage is ongoing, it may also be progressive, by which I mean that commitments can build on one another. Thus, Wahb first introduced the story into the emerging literary corpus of narrative traditions about pre-Muhammadan figures and events. *Ṭabarī* then built on that Islamic salvation history, of which *Ġirġīs* was now a part, and linked it to world history, especially in the Persian tradition. Finally, *Ta'labī* reshaped the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* into a multi-faceted didactic genre, in which the *Tale of Ġirġīs* now served exegetical, theological, and moral functions.⁹¹ Thus, one could argue, it is not until *Ta'labī's Arā'is* that we arrive at *Ġirġīs's* full conversion.

4. Conclusion: Toward a Theory of Narrative Conversion

With the above analysis on the transformation of the Christian *Acts of St. George* into the Muslim *Tale of Ġirġīs*, using a modified version of Lewis R. Rambo's stage-model,⁹² I am now in a position to offer some general remarks on the heuristic utility of *conversion* as a framework for exploring why and how stories cross religious and cultural boundaries. As expressed at the outset,

I believe that moving from the language of *appropriation* to *conversion* helps scholars better appreciate what is happening and what is at stake in narrative transmigration. A conversion frame focuses on processes over products and thereby draws attention to questions of continuity and discontinuity, purpose and performance, and, perhaps most importantly, the activity of the literary genre in shaping the work's redaction and reception. Moreover, it encourages us to think intentionally about stories as things in flux, able to move from one matrix of meaning to another. Even inscribing them in texts does not necessarily fix their identities. In short, stories, like people, have lives, lives marked by change.

With these points in mind, I offer five general observations that have emerged from my study, and which, I believe, can serve as the foundation for the theory of narrative conversion. Each observation is articulated as a "call to attention" emphasized by applying a conversion framework: (1) importance of socio-historical factors, (2) activity of literary genre, (3) role of narrative relationships, (4) function of ritual performance, and (5) reception as an ongoing process.

4.1. Socio-historical factors

Applying a conversion framework calls attention to the importance of socio-historical factors that may have contributed to a story originating in one literary tradition being redacted into another. Specifically, it helps us think about why *this story*, why *this period*, why *this redactor*? Accordingly, the initial conversion of the George story from Christian to Muslim can only be understood within the context of the massive religious and cultural changes that were sweeping the newly created Islamic world in the early eighth century CE. Neither Jews nor Zoroastrians nor any other religious community composed their own George story, an observation which suggests there was a unique crisis for Muslim authorities in articulating a distinct religious identity in an environment in which Christians and Christian-background converts to Islam affirmed devotion to St. George. Moreover, attending to socio-historical factors in this way highlights the critical role of advocates (like Wahb and the *quṣṣāṣ*) not only in disseminating stories like that of *Ġirġīs* but also in negotiating the boundaries between Islam, on the one hand, and Christianity and Judaism, on the other.

Cf. Armstrong, *The Quṣṣās of Early Islam*, pp. 168-169.

⁹⁰ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 5.

⁹¹ As for the last feature, in particular, Tilman Nagel affirms, "The edifying character of the legends became even more stressed when they were separated from historiography; this was, so far as we know, first done by *Ta'labī*." Nagel, "Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'".

⁹² I skipped one other stage: *consequences*. This is because I have dealt with some of the consequences of George's conversion in my above analysis, while I have saved further discussion for my concluding remarks. On the *consequences* stage, see Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp. 142-164.

4.2. Activity of Literary Genre

Applying a conversion framework calls attention to the subtle activity of literary genre in shaping a narrative's own cross-cultural reception. Perhaps more than anything else, this observation challenges notions of passivity latent in the language of appropriation and attempts to rectify a domineering view of the redactor. Stories, especially those inscribed and transmitted in written texts, function as they do because they participate in shared patterns and common grammars. Change a narrative too much, diverge from the plot expectations or introduce an entirely different symbolic matrix, and you risk destroying it. If a story is unintelligible to the original community, it is simply not a convert. It is something new. Conversion as *process* and *framework* exists in the tension between continuity and discontinuity. Change is only recognized in relation to both poles. Moreover, we see that a genre's activity is not confined to the original work but can exercise a hold on the convert text. Thus, with the George story, the *passio*'s focus on the primacy of speech acts is retained in the *qiṣṣa* and, in fact, determines where our Muslim redactor makes his most substantive edits. In short, genre has agency.

4.3. Narrative Relationships

Applying a conversion framework calls attention to the role of narrative relationships in facilitating a story's transformation (or its resistance). As discussed above, stories find their meaning through participation in the forms and features of particular literary genres. Like a community, genres set up common patterns, values, and expectations for their members, and thereby distinguish themselves from others. Stories may not have the psychological aspect of relationality, but they are relational things. And because relationships are hermeneutical—i.e., they help interpret a person or story—they play a fundamental role in any conversion. Thus, to convert from one community or genre to another entails the cultivation of new relationships. This complex process requires two things: (1) some *congruence* between the old and new; and (2) a greater *benefit* than cost. In terms of congruence, we saw how the *passiones* and *qiṣṣa al-anbiyā* literatures shared some basic themes, expectations, and notions of performativity. And, in terms of benefit, the *Tale of Ġirġis* not only helped articulate a continuity between Islam and Christianity but also gave the saint himself new life by sanctioning a growing tradition of bicommunal veneration.

4.4. Ritual Performance

Applying a conversion framework calls attention to the function of ritual performance as the new community's assent and welcome of the proselyte. Though Rambo's discussion focuses more on the idea of ritual as a sealing of the convert's commitment (decision)—and thus emphasizes the psychological—as I previously argued, ritual is more about communal reception. This social emphasis links, once again, back to questions of genre. Like the Christian *passiones* literature, the *qiṣṣa al-anbiyā* (especially after Ṭa'labī's intervention) is a fundamentally performative and hortatory genre. While the stories can be read privately, they are ideally intended to be preached in a public assembly with active participation by the audience. It is this ritual performance of the *Tale of Ġirġis* as *qaṣaṣ* (homiletic storytelling), recounted alongside other Qur'ānic and extra-Qur'ānic stories of pre-Muhammadan prophets and other personages, that ultimately formalizes its conversion. Now, I must admit, not every narrative conversion need entail such a public and interactive performance. Again, it depends on the genre to which the story converts. Yet, all require some form of active communal reception. After all, one is only a convert when one is received as such.

4.5. Reception as Ongoing

Finally, applying a conversion framework calls attention to the dynamic, ongoing, and often cumulative nature of literary transformation. Far from being passive, stories, like people, play an active role in their own conversion. While stories may not choose to be converted, their unique socio-historical context and literary genre impact the process and demand that the redactor-advocate grapple with them. Moreover, this complex process of reception continues beyond the initial the conversion. To commit to a new community's way of life is never a once-and-done deal. Change must be continually enacted, else one becomes a backslider, non-practitioner, or worse, apostate. Likewise, a converted story must continually be received and recounted by the community if it is to be retained. Lastly, if conversions are ongoing, they can also be cumulative, by which I mean that the same person or story can recapitulate their transformation in new and deeper ways. A lay Christian may be ordained as a priest; a Muslim may rededicate their life after making the Hāġġ. In Ġirġis's case, conversion from Wahb to Ṭabarī

and eventually to *Ta'labī* ensconces the story ever more deeply into the Islamic tradition.

* * *

Pulling these five observations together, I will now to take this experiment to the next level by offering some *preliminary remarks* toward a theory of narrative conversion.⁹³ A story “converts” from one literary tradition to another when (a) there is a contest for influence between opposing religious, cultural, or political options and (b) the conversion helps the receiving tradition gain an upper hand in that contest. The convert story is not completely passive in this process, however, and through its distinct socio-historical milieu and embedded literary features—form and function, topics and tropes—it actively shapes the redactor’s editorial choices. Finally, the conversion is not complete until the proselyte story is ritually received within the new tradition and recognized among its canon, a process that is both singular and ongoing. When the reception process ends, either through active rejection of the story or passive neglect, deconversion begins. The narrative may recommit to its former community (in an exclusive way), it may convert to another, or it may die. This is, in fact, the tension in which we find the Muslim *Tale of Ġirġīs* today: caught between conversion and deconversion.

* * *

By way of conclusion, allow me some brief remarks on the fate of the George story in the Arabic Sunnī tradition.⁹⁴ Unlike Imāmī (Twelver) Shiism, which largely accepts the *Tale of Ġirġīs* as proof not only of Ġirġīs’s Muslim identity but also his prophethood,⁹⁵ contemporary Sunnism has a more ambivalent view. True, many Sunnīs, especially in Iraq and the Levant, where Christian devotion to St. George remains strong, continue to revere the martyr on a popular level, and, until it was destroyed by ISIS in 2014, visited his shrine

in Mosul to seek his intercession.⁹⁶ However, the formal *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā* tradition would seem to have moved on. The last major Arabic Sunnī historiographical work in which we find Ġirġīs is *al-Kāmil fī l-ta’rīḥ* (The Complete History) of Ibn al-Aṭīr (d. 630/1233).⁹⁷ By the time we reach Ibn Kaṭīr (d. 774/1373), whose *al-Bidāyah wa-l-nihāyah* (The Beginning and the End) includes a popular *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā* section, Ġirġīs is nowhere to be found.⁹⁸ Part of the reason is no doubt due to Ibn Kaṭīr’s critical approach to the so-called *isrā’īlīyāt* traditions, many of which he believed were introduced by unscrupulous sources, like Wahb.⁹⁹ But Ibn Kaṭīr’s idiosyncratic editorial decisions do not explain why Ġirġīs vanishes from later *qīṣaṣ* compendia.

We once more find ourselves in the realm of speculation, a dangerous terrain indeed. But I would argue that a conversion framework can provide some bearings here as well. Specifically, if we consider the changed socio-historical context, we discover a plausible explanation for George’s deconversion. From the end of the eleventh century to well into fourteenth century CE, Muslim rulers across the Eastern Mediterranean had to contend with Crusaders encroaching upon their lands and people. During this period of intercultural contact, many Crusaders acquired a deep devotion to St. George, who they adopted as their protector.¹⁰⁰ Their intense identification with St. George must have had an impact on Muslim views of Ġirġīs. Although Ibn al-Aṭīr’s career extended well into the thirteenth century CE, he lived and died in Mosul, the center of Ġirġīs’s cult. Ibn Kaṭīr, on the other hand, lived and worked in Mamluk Syria. And though he was born after the fall of Acre (1291), Frankish Cyprus remained such a threat that the governor of Damascus enlisted him to compose *al-Ġtīhād fī ṭalab al-ġihād*, a work on detailing duty and merits of *ġihād*.¹⁰¹

Reading this new context into the theory of narrative conversion outlined above gives us insight into Ġirġīs’s deconversion. Again, a story “con-

⁹³ “Preliminary remarks” is indeed the key phrase here, for I am acutely aware that elaborating a complete theory would require many more studies with texts from different social, historical, cultural, literary, and linguistic contexts. Indeed, it requires far more effort than one scholar—let alone one article(!)—can muster. I make this admission as an appeal for others to pick up this line of investigation, to test it, modify it, or reject it as the evidence demands. It is a call for scholarly collaboration in the spirit of collegiality.

⁹⁴ I am specifying the Arabic Sunnī tradition because these are the *qīṣaṣ* collections I am most familiar with.

⁹⁵ See Maġlisī, *Bihār al-anwār*, vol. 13, pp. 445–448.

⁹⁶ Associated Press, “Islamic State Destroys Ancient Mosul Mosque”.

⁹⁷ See Ibn al-Aṭīr, *al-Kāmil fī l-ta’rīḥ*, vol. 1, pp. 264–270.

⁹⁸ For Ibn Kaṭīr’s *qīṣaṣ* traditions (*sans* Ġirġīs), see Ibn Kaṭīr, *al-Bidāyah wa-l-nihāyah*, vols. 1–2.

⁹⁹ For more on the impact of Ibn Kaṭīr’s critical approach toward the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā*, see Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, pp. 170–175.

¹⁰⁰ See Budge (trans.), *George of Lydda*, pp. 24–31. It was during this time that he began to be considered the patron saint of England, in particular.

¹⁰¹ See Laoust, “Ibn Kaṭīr”.

verts” from one tradition to another when (a) there is a contest for influence and (b) the conversion helps the receiving tradition gain an upper hand. In the contest between the Crusaders and their Muslim opponents (Seljuks, Zengids, Ayyubids, Mamluks), the former derived powerful social and psychological benefit by invoking the saint’s patronage. Accordingly, they converted him, not into a Christian—he was already a celebrated Christian martyr¹⁰²—no, they transformed him into a Crusader, complete with new legends and symbols. With this conversion, it is reasonable to assume that ĠirĠĠs’s benefit to Islam, at least in the minds of Ibn Katīr and the scions of the Sunnī *qīṣaṣ* tradition, was greatly diminished. Thus, we observe that ĠirĠĠs’s *deconversion* seems to be directly linked with George’s Crusader *conversion*. The legend of St. George, the noble European cavalier, rises as the tale of ĠirĠĠs, the heroic Muslim martyr, wanes. While more research needs to be done on this inverse connection, its discovery once again highlights the heuristic value of a theory of narrative conversion.

In closing, the George story’s saga—from Christian *passio* to Muslim *qīṣṣa*—is a uniquely generative case to experiment with a theory of narrative conversion. Its sudden appearance within (and disappearance from) the *qīṣaṣ* canon raises important questions that conventional frameworks, like that of borrowing and appropriation, are ill-suited to answer. Reimagining the story as a convert calls us to attend to the subtle activity that context and genre play in ushering its migration across religious and literary worlds. Redactor-advocates are obviously central to the task, but (like missionary-advocates) their power is not unbounded. The convert gets a say. In the end, this case study demonstrates that stories too have lives—births, deaths, and changes in between. Perhaps ĠirĠĠs’s conversion remains unfinished. And God knows best!

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¹⁰² Indeed, it is important to underscore that Christians did not cease venerating St. George just because Muslims joined them. This fact reminds us that “not all conversions require dramatic and total life shifts.” Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 117. Some conversions simply add a new identity, outlook, and practice without rejecting the old completely.

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