Father of My Soul: Reason and Affect in a Shipboard Conversion Narrative

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Abstract

In 1768, a young Swedish Lutheran, inspired by Voltaire, took up life as a merchant to learn more about the world and to find “true religion” based upon reason. When he boarded a ship to Corsica, his travelling companions were two hundred Mexican Jesuits recently expelled from the Americas. In close confines with these members of the Society of Jesus for the duration of his five-week journey, Thjülen chose to convert to Catholicism and, shortly after arriving in Italy, he became a Jesuit. This essay explores the nature of his conversion, utilizing affect theory to argue that he converted less to Catholicism than to the Society of Jesus, or—more precisely—Thjülen converted to remain in proximity to a particular Mexican Jesuit named Manuel Mariano (Emmanuele) de Iturriaga.

Keywords


In 1768, a young Lutheran Swedish merchant named Lars Birger Thjülen (1746–1833) left the Spanish port of Cádiz on a boat destined for the French island of Corsica. He found himself among two hundred Jesuits who, recently expelled from Mexico, were en route to their exile in Bologna, Italy. The possibilities for Jesuit spiritual and intellectual engagement with the world had changed dramatically at the end of the eighteenth century. The Jesuits Thjülen encountered on the ship from Cádiz to Corsica were among two thousand members
of the Society of Jesus who had been expelled from Spain’s holdings in the Americas. No longer far-flung global missionaries, the Jesuit world-stage had shrunk to the size of the Italian papal states. And even this would not last long: the Society itself was suppressed by papal breve five years later. From 1773 until the Society was restored in 1814, Bologna and Ferrara formed something of a holding place, chock-full of exiled ex-Jesuits from the Iberian empires.1

In close confines with these recently expelled and soon-to-be ex-Jesuits for the duration of his five-week journey, Thjülen chose to convert to Catholicism and, shortly after arriving in Italy, he became a Jesuit. These decisions removed him permanently from family and friends in Sweden; he described this as profoundly painful. We might think him an odd bird, this Swedish Lutheran convert to Catholicism, yet he found birds of a feather in Italy, an exile among exiles. There, Thjülen led a long and productive intellectual life.2 This essay, however, seeks to understand the nature of his conversion. If we follow the contours of his narrative, I argue, we see that he converted less to Catholicism than to the Society of Jesus, or—more precisely—Thjülen

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2 He wrote on a wide range of political-philosophical topics, including commentary on the French Revolution, as well as a novel: Un viaggio nel centro della terra contenente molti singolari avvenimenti, e curiose relazioni dei regni, e degli abitatori interni del nostro globo (Venice: Andreola, 1800).
converted to remain in proximity to a particular Mexican Jesuit named Manuel Mariano (Emmanuele) de Iturriaga (1728–1819).

Scholars of religious studies have begun to look anew at relationships as key factors of religiosity.3 Notably, Brenna Moore has shown how an emphasis on spiritual friendship “shifts the attention to how the subject comes to feel and think religiously not only through anonymous background discourses, but through the more personal domain of mutual bonds.”4 The parallel between friendship and spiritual life is that both must be cultivated. Thjülen’s conversion to Catholicism is best understood as an effort to maintain a spiritual relationship, a religious friendship.

We know these details because, six months after beginning his novitiate at the Jesuit college in Bologna, Italy, Thjülen—tellingly now “Lorenzo Ignazio,” Italianizing his own name and adopting that of the founder of the Society of Jesus—wrote an account of his conversion.5 At twenty-four years of age, he was a self-proclaimed seeker. As Thjülen tells it, his quest for true religion—a religion in accord with reason—had begun with his love of French philosophy and literature, particularly the writings of Voltaire. This and his mother’s death left him with a brooding sense that he ought to seek answers in the world. Through his stepfather’s commercial connections, he took up life as a merchant, and in September of 1767, he set sail for the Iberian peninsula, never to return to Sweden.

Written six months after taking vows as a Jesuit and in obedience to his spiritual director, the account under discussion falls under the genre of “conversion narrative.” Thjülen’s account culminates in his decision to join the

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5 Thjülen remains, largely, understudied but there is one monograph written by Alessandro Guerra, Il vile satellite del trono. Lorenzo Ignazio Thjulen: un gesuita svedese per la controrivoluzione (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2004). As noted in Guerra’s study of Thjülen’s anti-revolutionary politics, Thjülen wrote five versions of the conversion narrative. He “finessed” the account eight years later, embarrassed that his poor Italian had required that he work with an editor to write the first account. Thus far I have seen the first, dated 1770, and the second, dated 1778, which, on the particulars discussed in this essay, remain the same. I have examined the others, whose dates are 1831 and 1833 (two were published in 1833). These texts truncate the conversion narrative and instead narrate what had transpired since he became a Jesuit and after the Society was suppressed in 1773.
Society of Jesus. Following an Augustinian paradigm, his first conversion was to philosophy, although in Thjülen’s case, Voltaire substitutes for Cicero. As we shall see, Voltaire gave him Reason (with a capital R) and Thjülen’s commitment to Reason led him to a sustained conversation with members of the Society of Jesus in order to discuss and evaluate the rationality of Catholicism. This exchange brought him to the Catholic faith—his second conversion.

Despite his stated claim to Reason, we must nonetheless ask: how reasonable was this conversion? Indeed, Thjülen’s account is charged with an affective current. Despite language that privileged the quest for Truth to be found via reasoned disputation, what comes through most clearly is his intense affective bond with Manuel de Iturriaga, the Latin American Jesuit theologian. The conversion narrative traces the shift in Thjülen’s affective ties from mother and homeland to Iturriaga and the Jesuit order. As we shall see, Thjülen’s fascination with the Jesuits—and primarily his intense bond with Iturriaga—served as an inspiration to embrace a creed whose institutional and ritual contours Thjülen actually found rather distasteful. Spiritual friendship was the key transformative force that propelled the Swedish Lutheran toward his new life as a Jesuit in Italy.

Before delving into Thjülen’s conversion narrative, I pause here to clarify two of the terms I am using, namely, “affect” and “affective.” This is not simply shorthand for emotion but rather, a concept that signals a pre-personal and intersubjective intensity. My use of the term seeks to keep my analysis attuned to what that shared intensity produces. And what is the potential gain from giving some attention to affect? I contend that working to discern affective experience enables a mode of historical practice that is mindful of textuality even as one works with and through religious language. Thereby, one can avoid remaining trapped in the discourse (or even the single body) of the speaker, as they struggle to name and contain the felt experience that comes to be named “religious” or “spiritual,” or labeled as “a conversion.” In the humanities, affect theory has sailed under the flag of Gilles Deleuze, captained by Lauren Berlant and Brian Massumi. Yet one of the founding (and most original) theorists of affectivity was Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677). He devoted two books of his Ethics to explaining the transmission of affect as an embodied experience and he did

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6 In the Confessions, Book 3, iv, Augustine describes reading Cicero’s Hortensius as a pivotal moment in the quest for wisdom.
so by theorizing bodies not as substance, but as motion. He used the term *conatus* to describe the endeavor to persist that is an essential quality of all bodies, human and non-human. Importantly, this motion persists with and against other bodies as forces. Accordingly, bodies—as motion and activity—can affect as well as be affected. As Lauren Berlant says so well, “Its [affect theory’s] strength as a site of potential elucidation comes from the ways it registers the conditions of life that move across persons and worlds, play out in lived time, and energize attachments.”

To put these ideas about affect to work in historical scholarship is to conceive of bodies as strengthened or impeded through other bodies. “When a body ‘encounters’ another body or an idea another idea, it happens that the two relations sometimes combine to form a more powerful whole, and sometimes one decomposes the other, destroying the cohesion of its parts.”

This Deleuzean restatement of Spinoza enables my effort to understand the affective connection between Thjülen and Iturriaga. Instead of simply observing that theirs was an emotionally sustaining relationship, I will use affect theory to understand “emotional sustenance” as itself an embodied mode of persistence, that is, it is the very endeavor of two bodies to remain in sync, to move as one.

More broadly, with Spinoza we can situate religious history as a story about bodies in motion, and employ a vocabulary that might better describe the affective nature of religious intersubjectivity, or better, to not just describe their relationship as “interpersonal” but to understand the realm of the interpersonal itself as a conative encounter, that is, bodies strengthened or impeded by one another. Specifically, affect theory helps us to better understand missionary encounters because it helps historians keep two basic facts in mind: missionary encounters are relationships and the humans involved have bodies and emotions. We should add the following commonplace: all relationships are difficult. Put simply, this is an essay about the ups and downs of missionary encounter as embodied relationship.

**From Mother to Voltaire**

Relationships are key to Thjülen’s narrative, from start to finish, but the first move was from his mother to Voltaire. The account begins at the story’s end with the declaration that he wrote for the greater glory of God and, importantly,

8 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 16.
in obedience to his superior. In other words, he wrote from his new situation as a good Jesuit novice. But he had an interested audience in the general of the Society of Jesus, Lorenzo Ricci (1703–1775). Word of Thjülen’s conversion had already reached Ricci and he had written to the Swede, congratulating him on his courage, an indication that this story would be quite welcome at a time of crisis for “the sons of Ignatius.”

Thjülen begins the narrative by introducing his father, Lars Birger, whom he sketched with some brief but intriguing lines about a mercantile life involving two trips to China. His father’s last voyage, fraught with difficulty, cost Lars Birger his health and he died within a few years of his return from Asia. Thjülen’s mother, Petronilla Pattemborg, takes up more space on the page. Her family’s wealth, he wrote, imbued her with “a grandeur made all the more glorious in the eyes of man by her piety.” He positioned his mother as a spiritual model akin to Augustine of Hippo’s mother, Monica. Petronilla offered a far more problematic model as, unlike Augustine, Thjülen had converted away from his own mother’s religion. Yet he was keen to present her as the woman who made his conversion possible, explaining that the seeds of his quest for truth were to be found in his mother’s modification of “a little Lutheran prayer.” The words of the original prayer, he explained, asked God to grant a firm faith while, in contrast, his mother prayed for “the True faith.” Given that he wrote from the other side of his conversion, he was concerned about the salvation of his Lutheran loved ones still in Sweden, and these worries condense around the figure of his mother. He cannot say for certain whether true faith animated his mother’s heart—indeed, he now questions whether “true piety can take shelter in the heart of a Lutheran”—but he gave her the final word on this matter: “Son,” she was noted to have announced on her deathbed, “I am going to heaven.” She admonished him to never take leave of praying to God, “of this do not let up, never drive him from your heart.”

And yet he did just that, in large part through reading Enlightenment philosophers. The year of his mother’s death was 1765, and he described himself as having both great freedom and equally great inquietude during this period. He loved French literature but in hindsight blamed “the grand reputation” of

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10 Guerra emphasizes the narrative as politically and ideologically important in this turbulent era for the Jesuits as a triumphal narrative offered evidence of Jesuit perseverance and continued relevance in the years leading up to the suppression of the order. Guerra, *Il vile satellite del trono*, 23.
11 All translations are the author’s.
12 Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu [hereafter ARSI], *Hist. Soc.* 8, 86.
13 Ibid., 87.
Voltaire for his uneasiness, as the *philosophe’s* impiety had entered Thjülen’s own soul. “Little by little almost every idea of God was worn away and Religion became a fable, which was fine for vulgar persons, but not [sufficient] to sustain the beliefs of a Gentleman. [...] A true religion had to be in the world, and I had to find it.”

Through his stepfather’s commercial connections, he took up life as a merchant, and set sail for the Iberian peninsula in September of 1767.

**From Voltaire to the Jesuits**

After contrary winds, storms, and the continuous danger of shipwreck, Thjülen arrived in Lisbon in late January 1768, where he remained for approximately four months. Both Lisbon and Catholic religious life fascinated the Swede. He occupied himself with making observations about the city, taking notes on the architecture, the churches, and the ruins of the 1755 earthquake. “Quite often I attended *funzioni sacre*, principally the Mass, whose ceremonies seemed the strangest to me; of every detail I took note in my diary with no other intention than to be able to recount them when I returned to my Country.”

Thjülen lived at a time when the notion that religions could be compared dispassionately and rationally was fast gaining widespread acceptance, perhaps best signaled by Picart and Bernard’s evaluation of religious rituals in the multi-volume *Religious Ceremonies of the World*. From the safety of The Netherlands, these Huguenot exiles undertook to survey the religious ceremonies of the world with the express interest of furthering religious tolerance. Inspired in part by ethnography, in part by the burgeoning field of journalism, but primarily by “the new philosophy,” they presented information about ritual life, largely those that marked important moments common to the human condition, such as birth, marriage, and death. “Readers were expected to draw their own conclusions from this material [...] [the book was] an invitation to readers to make up their own minds.”

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studied Picart and Bernard’s volumes, he was clearly interested in comparative cultural practice, as indicated by keen interest to document the strange Catholic ritual called the mass.

Thjülen declared his love of Voltaire in the context of a statement about French literature. Until nearly the date of Thjülen’s conversion, Voltaire would have been best known as a literary star: he published his famous *Candide* in 1759 and became a *philosophe* known for his defense of tolerance only in the years after 1760. Would it be safe to wager that Thjülen had read *Candide*? And if so, was he aware that his own expedition mirrored (and distorted) the one taken by the fictional figure after departing Westphalia? Like Candide, Thjülen braved “near shipwreck” (Candide and Pangloss actually suffer a wreck off the coast of Portugal) and arrived in Lisbon to note the damage of the earthquake (does he take special note of the ruins of the earthquake because Voltaire had written so passionately about this in his *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*) before journeying to Cádiz (as does Candide). There, the fictional character boards a ship that traverses the Atlantic to encounter Paraguayan Jesuits. Thjülen’s encounter with the American Jesuits put him upon a different path, but by his own description Thjülen was faithful to the spirit of the age as expressed by Voltaire’s Candide: “To know the world one must travel.”

In June of 1768, Thjülen embarked for Corsica and described the ten ships in the convoy as “weighted down” with Jesuits. The *London Magazine* (a magazine subtitled “Gentleman’s Monthly Intelligencer”) reported the actual number to be twelve hundred. Thjülen observed on his ship alone “at least 190 Fathers, and it is possible that it was up to 210 because after a number of days the vessel from Ragusa broke down and we had to distribute these Jesuits.” It is worth pausing to imagine this scene: in outward bound trans-Atlantic or trans-Pacific journeys, the Jesuit missionaries would have travelled in small groups, of two, four, maybe ten Jesuits. Here we must envision a very unique situation in which black robes dominated the ship’s decks. Additionally, we ought not

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18 “Cadiz, June 17. The day before yesterday sailed from this bay for Corsica 1200 American Jesuits, who had been collected at Port S. Mary’s. This fleet is composed of eight transports, escorted by the ship of war the Elizabeth. No others of this order now remain there, excepting a few sick persons, who will soon be sent off for the same island along with 151 more, lately brought here by the Vengeance and Good Success vessels.” *The London Magazine, Or, Gentleman’s Monthly Intelligencer* 37 (1768), 445.
think of these missionaries as men “returning” to a homeland. For example, approximately 500 among the 678 from the Mexican province had been born and raised in New Spain. The majority of these men were exiles. Furthermore, their departure had been quite abrupt. The expulsion orders, decreed on February 27, 1767, had been kept secret until delivered to the doors of Jesuit colleges, novitiates, and missions the following June. The soon-to-be exiles were given two days to collect themselves; under military escort, they walked the road to Veracruz.¹⁹

In giving the account of his conversion, Thjülen only mentioned the fact of the expulsion, offering no details about the epic journey that his new Jesuit friends had made. He said nothing of the long stay in the disease-stricken port town of Veracruz, nor the period of limbo in the port of Cádiz, Spain, where they had been housed in a hospital. Thjülen reported little of this backstory. Rather, as his note-taking in Lisbon made clear, he was primed to study religion and his encounter with the Jesuits provided ample opportunity to gather information about the curiosities of Catholicism. They engaged in polite conversation, touching upon religion, but in Thjülen’s description, they spoke about this delicate topic “superficially, without imposition.”

This changed during one very vexing conversation and, notably, this moment of extreme irritation marked the beginning of his turn to Catholicism.

One evening one of these [Jesuits] asked me, “What is your impression of the Jesuits?”
“To me, quite good, I responded. They are good people, and peaceful, and I love them.”
The Father replied, “And of the Catholic Religion, of which we profess, what do you think?”
“Oh, this is another matter,” I said.

The unnamed Jesuit insisted that Thjülen’s position was illogical, in that it was not possible to have good people who were guided by a bad religion. “[S]o if you love the Jesuits, why do you not love their Religion?” To this Thjülen replied that it is quite possible to love people and abhor their defects. The unnamed interlocutor took the opportunity to press him to reveal his own affiliation. Thjülen was boldly evasive: “I am Christian.” Urged to name his sect, he replied:

None, I was not born in this world to be either Lutheran or Calvinist, but I had to search for the Truth, and the Religion to follow is that which seems to best conform with the Sacred Scripture and with Reason; this seems to me to have been found in the Church that is called Lutheran.

Honing in on Thjülen’s sentiments about reason, the unnamed Jesuit issued a challenge. If Thjülen could be persuaded that Catholicism is the “one and true” religion, the “source of truth and health,” would he be content to embrace the Catholic religion? Thjülen replied that he would not only be content, but that this would be the correct choice and for this he would be eternally grateful. But, he added, “I believe that your work will be received in vain. Your Religion seems to me far too Mahometan and irrational.” The conversation became much more heated, as they debated the Catholic position on reading Scripture in vernacular languages. Thjülen contended that this point of Catholic doctrine rested upon “insufferable arrogance” that deprived “vulgar persons of the power to examine the fundamentals of their faith.”

To this the unnamed Jesuit basically shrugged his shoulders. “Ma ché?” [So what?] And then more angrily: “We are the church that is founded by Jesus Christ and we are meant to believe the follies of the malevolent Luther, who is worshiping the Devil in Hell?” Emotions were already running high and, as Thjülen put it (in an idiom that marks his historical context), these last words “fell like many sparks of fire near the powder of a Harquebus.”

At this explosive moment, a different figure appears on the scene:

Stepping forward with some uncertainty was Father Emmanuele Iturriaga, native of Puebla de Los Angeles, or as others say, the City of Angels. This dignified Father, who had to be by Divine Intention (as I express myself) my own Ananias, he had conceived an ardent desire for and a living faith in my conversion.

Father Iturriaga saw how distressed the Swede was and sought to dissipate the tension, assuring Thjülen that the other Jesuit’s words had been far too “spirited” and inappropriate. Thjülen described Iturriaga as having “a manner and words so sweet [that this] was enough to placate me.”

The theologian Father Manuel de Iturriaga was born in 1728 in the city of Puebla, in the viceroyalty of New Spain. But perhaps more important than

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20 Iturriaga took vows as a Jesuit in 1744 and made his final vows in 1763. In Italy, he wrote a work of moral theology that he published in Venice and Assisi so as to escape Dominican censors. He gave “moral conferences” as the behest of the bishop of Fano, which he later published. Iturriaga died in Fano, Italy, in 1819.
any biographical detail was Thjülen’s characterization of Iturriaga as “il mio Anania” [my Ananias]. Appropriate to the genre of conversion narrative, this is a reference to the paradigmatic story of Saul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. Ananias had been commanded by God to attend to Saul who, having heard the words of Jesus, had been blinded (Acts 9:17–19).

Thjülen found himself strengthened by this budding friendship with Iturriaga, who invited him to share in drinking some Mexican chocolate:

> From this moment forward, [Iturriaga] continued to cultivate me, treating me with an extreme affability; he often invited me to join in their chocolate break and gave me, from time to time, little gifts. For these tokens of affection, I bore him great affection. Nor did I have difficulty with him in discussions about Religion. I always disagreed and defended myself as best I knew without ever ceding, unless obliged to do so by reasonable evidence.

Iturriaga set a certain mood, and brought with him a spirit of conviviality that kept the two men together and communicating, even when they disagreed on particulars. Thus we have the beginnings of a spiritual and intellectual friendship, the hinge upon which Thjülen pivoted toward Catholicism. And if I insist upon the affective contours of the spiritual friendship between Iturriaga and Thjülen, I do so in large part due to the details Thjülen subsequently reveals. Two things, he wrote, made their “conferences” difficult.

> The first was the defect in language with which to express ourselves and to understand each other well because Father Iturriaga did not speak any language other than Spanish and Latin, and I only had begun to stammer some Spanish words, and the Latin that I had was in great part forgotten; also, as spoken in the mouth of a Mexican, the pronunciation [of the Latin] made it seem an altogether new language; [yet] where science fails, one supplies industry, and we came to be able to communicate with each other some concepts.

Thjülen and Iturriaga demonstrate this kind of affective intensity, in which two or more bodies strive together and are at work in common. Bear in mind, reason remained the name of the game, thus their “industry” to communicate rationally despite the lack of shared spoken language. Yet perhaps equally important in this case was the manner in which Iturriaga’s stronger presence dissipates, softens, reshapes the tone and mood of Thjülen’s various moments of vexation, aggravation, distress and it is this that serves as his transition, with and through Iturriaga, to Catholicism and the Jesuits. Thjülen moves toward
and with the stronger body, his transition toward Catholicism, understood in a Spinozist frame, results from the effort to remain in sync with the empowering *conatus* of Iturriaga.

But this took some time, for Thjülen continued to be confounded and impeded by the moods, motions, and activities of others. For next we learn that the captain of the ship was his other source of difficulty. The captain, a Lutheran, attempted to dissuade Thjülen from fraternizing with these Catholic men, cautioning him that “the Jesuits would have me hooked and fastened with their sophism.” To Thjülen, this was all “solemn nonsense” and he continued to do as he pleased, until “the sad man continued to pursue me, emphatically goading [me] at every hour with his bitterness, and making me disgusted as never before, such that I was exhausted by the end, determined to avoid (at least in his presence) the conversation with the Fathers.”

Yet the passions of the captain ultimately delivered Thjülen to the Jesuits, or as Thjülen described it: “The Lord desired my great liberty, demonstrating on this occasion, that He knows how to use the passions of Man to promote His own designs.” The captain had a large store of delectable items in his control—wine, aquavite, pastries—and these he wished to sell to the Jesuits. Despite his prohibition about conversing with the Jesuits, he occasionally used Thjülen as a middle-man in this exchange. Thjülen’s language here is interesting: “There were some Swedes on the ship, but I remained only with the Padres, and *took on the color of their language* and since I had recourse, he asked me to give a hand to his illicit trade. I willingly accepted the job.” What took place during those conversations with the Jesuits? Thjülen never discussed this in any detail.

What he reported was a sense of agitation. This was a spiritual awakening that, in the devotional literature of the time, must always be tested. Cue the Devil.

As such, I proceeded to question one or another article [of faith], and saw ever more clearly the light of truth. Then suddenly the Devil presumed to foment war with me. One day in the small room of Padre Iturriaga, I observed on his little desk a book with the title *Modus disputandi cum Protestantibus*. One glance staggered me and, accordingly, altered the course; I said to him that never once had I purposefully studied religion, that to him it was too easy to vanquish, given that he was armed with his book against one unarmed, one who had no other defense but his own reason, that in this business of such importance, I did not have anyone in whom to put my trust, no one on my side, but for my own ability to examine the reason supporting one part or another. It was an enraged
passenger that Padre Iturriaga had to endure with great hardship before he could return me to the original tranquility; but I did not go easy, that wild beast Enemy drove a machine that was something very formidable.

What irony that the Devil arrived in the shape of the Jesuit way of proceeding, that is, in their studied adaptation to other cultural modes. The book packed a punch and he was staggered, but what precisely was the nature of Thjülen’s utter dismay? We can only guess: he was not “special,” just another Protestant? The playing field was less even than he had understood? Clearly this latter point was important, as indicated by his discourse about unfair battle; the armed Jesuit vs. the unarmed man of Reason is pitched in terms of David versus Goliath terms. Or perhaps this was about authenticity: authentic Reason stood the lone player against the heavy artillery of inauthentic “Book Learning.” But the most important point to take away is that his rage was absorbed by Padre Iturriaga’s uncanny ability to shift the mood—this time with greater effort—but nonetheless back to “the original tranquility.” What we learn, ultimately, is that Thjülen is vulnerable and Iturriaga is consoling. Thjülen needs his Jesuit.

From the Jesuits to Catholicism

What I have found so surprising is that Thjülen took no pains to explain his transition to Catholicism after the incident with the book. He simply claimed that he “was already convinced that Lutheranism seemed a truth amassed with error, contradictions, and impiety.” He offered no discussion of the errors. He did mention his worries about the Catholic faith—the adoration of the saints was troublesome, so too the sacramental nature of confession and communion—yet the journey was drawing to an end and he did not want to part ways with Father Iturriaga, who “had spurred me to remain with him.”

That Thjülen deemed this change of life a real possibility, that he had begun to feel a sense of security about his chosen direction, was merely another invitation for the Devil to put him to the test.

Here is where the Devil began to fight me. In vivid colors, he made clear to me the consequences that would follow should I change Religion, the contempt of my relatives, the exile from the homeland, that I would be reduced to a state of begging, still it seemed to me that to flee, escape and, to unite myself with the Jesuits would make me odious to the World, I would be reproached for all eternity as having been sold the fable, and
I would be the curse of all of Sweden. What confidence (I said to myself) what confidence could I have in these foreign persons, who perhaps did not nurture in the soul those affections they had demonstrated with words? What if after a number of years I found that the Catholic Faith was insufficient or uncertain? I would have lost the time with which to secure Eternity for myself. Overall, my heart was cruelly torn by the tender love that I felt for my sister who remained in Stockholm, and the perpetual neglect to which I would abandon her; to me this seemed an ingratitude, an impiety, an unheard of barbarism, but I had no words sufficient to express my extreme anguish. How for many days I was tormented!

It should come as no surprise that instead of struggle or explosive frustration, he now simply turned to Iturriaga. “I revealed this wound so profound, and so painful to the Father of my soul, who used every means to cure it.” The spiritual doctor prescribed frequent yet careful consideration of “the Maxims of the Gospels, now the sweetest, next the strongest, or the most appalling.” He also made it clear to Thjülen that the Jesuits live well and that he would never be reduced to the feared state of begging. More poignantly, he offered his own family to Thjülen, suggesting that after converting, the younger man could “journey to Mexico to his own relatives where I would be well-off and well-treated.” Most interesting was Father Iturriaga’s “money-back” guarantee. “If nothing else (said the Father) were our Religion not to satisfy you, you would always be at liberty to leave, and I myself promise to return you once again to Sweden.”

Now the only thing left was for God to concur. Thjülen may have indicated that his quest was about Reason, and the historian may be hot on the trail of affect, but the conversion narrative proper requires an injection of grace. Father Iturriaga’s words “had made some inroads into my Spirit, but to be submitted entirely it was necessary to find relief in a more powerful grace. This Grace I recognized as coming through the powerful intercession of the Virgin Mary” for whom Father Iturriaga had “managed to light in my heart some small flame of devotion toward the Divine Mother.” How had he done this? At this point, we learn a very interesting detail: from Thjülen’s earliest engagements with the Jesuits, he now tells his reader:

I was induced to recite their Rosary each day publicly with the other Fathers. I confess that I did it with many scruples and disgust; but I did it nonetheless, and the holy Rosary I wore always around the neck under my clothing.”

Iturriaga had continuously prayed to the Virgin on his behalf, and now, as Thjülen described it, he had confirmation.

By intercession of the most pious Great Virgin Mother, everything fell together [improvisare] in a flash, with a ray of light, I recognized [conosceva] that the Catholic Religion was the only true Religion, and that I would not err in embracing it. At the same point, I felt infused in my Heart, with such a force, a generosity, waves of crying out to God that I abandoned everything to his hands, that every thing I sacrificed to him, that I took whatever country for my new homeland, wherever I would find the health of my soul, and that my family, my friends would now be found in the Fathers of the Society of Jesus, with whom I allied myself with so much love.

**Conclusion**

Thjülen was a merchant, a gentleman with worldly aims who feared the dishonor of abandoning sister and homeland. These were masculine concerns that he made manifest as he struggled to find the resolve to turn to Catholicism. That his place as a man in the world was constituted in relationship to feminine figures is clear in the way that he portrayed his mother as the one who made his quest for ‘True Religion’ possible. Yet, through his mother he also voiced an uncertainty about Catholic triumphalism, for Lutheran woman stated unequivocally: “I will be in heaven.” From there, the rhythm of the narrative follows the ebb and flow of vexation and consolation. Thjülen’s inquietude after his mother’s death was answered by his “resolve to be in the world,” in the style of Voltaire. The unnamed Jesuit acted as an irritant to Thjülen, his “fighting words” offering a reminder that surly Jesuits missionaries were capable of driving potential converts away—although in this case, he pushed Thjülen toward Iturriaga (or, more accurately, the unsettling scene drew the soothing Inturriaga out of the shadows). The Virgin Mary figures as his ultimate resolve, mediating Thjülen's transfer of affection from his Swedish sister and countrymen to his new family and friends, the fathers of the Society of Jesus.

Conversion experiences are elusive occasions. Accordingly, the labor of writing the conversion narrative itself serves to channel moments strange and
incommunicable into the genre’s recognizable pattern of a life split neatly into a before and an after. But as Christopher Wild reminds us, to convert is to turn, rotate, to revolve, to turn around, or upside down. These spatial semantics indicate a change of position, a relationality through which new situations emerge. Wild draws upon Plato’s description of the turn away from the shadowy back wall of the cave toward the light to demonstrate how philosophy established “turning” as key to the quest toward wisdom, bequeathing to Christian conversion this “art of turning around.” Yet, given the standard conversion narrative’s emphasis on finality, what is often overlooked, Wild contends, is the problem of continence—that is, maintaining oneself as turned, which, in fact means that to convert is to continue to rotate, revolve, turn, to, in sum, remain in tension to maintain the momentum of conversion.22

If we take conversion to entail a “turning” we must ask, toward what in particular did Thjülen turn? To Catholicism? Yes and no. Thjülen certainly described himself as curious about Catholic ritual life, as attested by his tourism in Lisbon, where he took notes about this strange religion to share with friends upon his return. He remained discomfited by Catholic ritual, as depicted in his account of praying the rosary, about which he clearly had mixed feelings (also, later in the account, he admits that he was positively squeamish about declaring his Catholic faith before the Dominican-run Inquisition, against whom he had imbibed a hatred “along with his mother’s milk”). Finally, the narrative ends with his decision to take vows as a Jesuit. The request that Thjülen compose the text clearly had political and ideological motivations, namely, to highlight the continued role of the Society of Jesus in defending and promoting Catholicism.23 But we have to wonder whether Thjülen’s telling unwittingly undercuts any hard-and-fast defense of Catholicism for, in fact, Thjülen’s narrative never completely departs from the theme laid bare in the first conversation with the shipboard Jesuits: though he loved the members of the Society of Jesus, he was less sure about Catholic ritual life.

Can we say that this is an account of his conversion to the Jesuits? “There were some Swedes on the ship, but I remained only with the Padres,” he wrote, adding, “I took on the color of their language.” “I love them,” he had declared early on. Why was he drawn to the Jesuits? Despite his allegiance to Reason, he


23 Guerra, Il vile satellite, 24.
never offers any reasons why he arrived at the conclusion that Lutheranism is “a truth amassed with error, contradictions, and impiety.” Perhaps he considered this unnecessary. Even if he never offered an explanation for his reader, we can see that he did in fact arrive at some kind of reasoned conclusion, because he fears that he may lose hold of it. “What if after a number of years I found that the Catholic Faith was insufficient or uncertain?” This indicates that he had landed upon some “sufficient” reason, some measure of certainty.

Reason may pave the way toward religious conversion (here the Augustinian case is paradigmatic), but, in the end, conversion narratives describe the relinquishing of human reason. We could say that the nature of Thjülen’s conversion was prefigured in the reference to Ananias, in that Saul did not follow reason but rather adhered to God’s command. Ananias was simply the conduit of the Holy Spirit, who shook the scales from Paul’s eyes. What does it mean that Iturriaga was Thjülen’s conduit? He shaped the affections of this young man and, as I believe the text makes quite clear, moments of inquietude or instability dissolved into the soothing presence of Father Iturriaga who figures not only as a resting place, but also as a conduit. Toward the end of the voyage, Iturriaga turned him toward another relationship, this one with the book, the Word, that is, to Scripture. Yet even here it is clear that the conversion was made firm through affective spiritual exercise: he instructed Thjülen to choose the “Maxims of the Gospels” that made him feel. No matter whether sweet, strong, or appalling—affect anchored the pivot point of his turning.

Thjülen’s text, as I have read it, not only brings into view the intimate religious friendship that sustained a relationship between two men, but also demonstrates how such a friendship mediated a new relationship with God. Although Thjülen wrote the conversion narrative with the appropriate nod of obedience toward his unnamed spiritual director (and it seems clear that this would not have been Iturriaga, but rather the master of novices at the Jesuit college in Bologna), the account describes his growing intimacy with Iturriaga as it unfolded in time. Notably, on the ship they were not bound by the hierarchical relationship of spiritual father to spiritual son. And yet he called Iturriaga the “Father of my soul.” This indicates that with or without vows, he had turned himself over to be mastered.24 His path moved from self direction (he wished for reasoned disputation with intelligent priests) to necessity (he needed to

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remain with Iturriaga). Spiritual friendship here is, as Brenna Moore argues, “the constituting force in the formation of religious sensibilities,” but it is more than an essential aspect of the transformation of Thjülen’s religious sensibilities.²⁵ The affective intensity of friendship was the religious experience in which he endeavored to persist.

Acknowledgements

Gratitude to Christopher Wild and Hall Bjørnstad for inviting me to participate in the extremely fruitful Early Modern Conversion Workshop held in Bloomington, Indiana in December 2014. Conversation with Brenna Moore and Robert Orsi on prayer and religious friendship was key to the shape this essay has taken. I am indebted to the careful readings given this essay by Florence Hsia, Andrew Jankowski, and Ulrike Strasser, and for Katharine Gerbner and Karin Velez’s invitation to give a keynote lecture on this topic at the Missionary Encounters Workshop held at the University of Minnesota in May 2015.