Leaving the Fold: Apostates and Defectors in Antiquity (review)

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to his political thought and the centrality of Augustine's theology to his account of the acquisition of the virtues. The author deepens our understanding of what is usually thought to be an early instance of a "mirror for princes"—*The City of God* 19.5—by showing the importance of humility and repentance for persons in political authority. *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine* is a most welcome addition to the literature on Augustine's political thought and will be especially valued by graduate students and scholars. One hopes that the extraordinarily high price Cambridge University Press has attached to this book does not deter too many of those who would find it of interest.

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Stephen G. Wilson
Leaving the Fold: Apostates and Defectors in Antiquity
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004
Pp. xvii + 158. $25.

In *Leaving the Fold* Wilson addresses the important issue of what it meant to cross boundaries between religious communities in late antiquity. Through careful examination of the sources, both literary and epigrammatic, and a discerning use of historical and sociological studies, the author provides a very helpful examination of the nature and prevalence of religious apostasy and defection in the ancient Mediterranean world.

The first chapter surveys scholarship on the subject. Particularly helpful is Wilson's discussion of pertinent Greek and Latin terms. He notes that while *apostasis* and *defectio* initially had political connotations in the pagan world, Jewish and especially Christian usages gave the terms religious senses and intensified their negative meanings. Indeed, "it is Christians who turn it [apostasy] into a frequent, almost technical term" (16) that is strongly negative even though its pagan usage is mostly neutral.

Chapter 2, "Jewish Apostates," considers Jews like Tiberius Alexander, nephew of Philo, who as adjutant to Titus during the Jewish War, "did not," according to Josephus, "continue in the customs of his forefathers" (29). Exposed to the attractions of Greek culture and required to take part in Roman rites because of his office, he was, says Wilson, "to all intents and purposes, a defector" (33). While not specifically censoring his nephew, Philo considers those who participate in pagan cults and thinks their participation to be "tantamount to abandoning a . . . defining element of their own tradition" (42). Even the apostle Paul, according to the criteria Wilson adduces from Philo and others, "is a classic example of one group's apostate becoming another group's convert" (52).

In Chapter 3, "Christian Apostates," Wilson concludes that in the New Testament there are "conflicting visions of what Christian belief and practice involved" so that those condemned by Paul or other writers as deserting the faith "presumably had a different definition of what those limits were" (70) and did not consider themselves defectors. Roman persecution complicated this situation. Some individuals confessed their faith "and were summarily executed"; others denied their faith "and were released," and some others "admitted association in the past but not in the present" (81). In this complex situation "convictions were inexorably tied to . . . familial and social context" (86). So, too, some might apostatize out of philosophical or religious disillusionment with the faith. One example, perhaps, was the noted third-century philosopher Ammonias, teacher of Origen and Plotinus although Wilson acknowledges that there may have been "more than one Ammonias and, possibly, more than one Origen" (95). A "mystical and philosophical" attraction to paganism together with a "personal and political . . . rejection of Christianity" seems to have led the emperor Julian to apostasize (99).

In Chapter 4 Wilson considers "Pagan Defectors." This is the shortest chapter primarily because one cannot find the same "principle of exclusive commitment or firm boundaries" (100) that one finds in Jewish or Christian groups. While the pagan world typically had a "relaxed and casual syncretism" (102), exceptions to this can be found among those leaving Pythagoreanism or in defections among imperial families to Judaism or Christianity. Some other philosophical schools, like the Epicureans and the Platonic academy, might also describe those who left as apostates. And, of course, Roman officials might take "a dim view" of other Romans who abjured "their devotion to civic and imperial cults" (109) in favor of the Christian faith.

What conclusions can one derive from all this evidence? Drawing on the approaches of historians like J. G. Barclay and sociologists of modern and ancient religion, Wilson concludes that in these religious communities "the labeling of deviants has an important role in boundary maintenance" (116). Even so, contrary to what some have argued, this is not a merely arbitrary labeling. These communities had "central convictions and norms" that "were sufficiently widespread," so that the labeling had "a certain objective quality" (117). In practice some who left "[drifted] away gradually" while others broke in a way that was "decisive, radical, and often result[ed] in public hostility on both sides" (120). Perhaps, the author suggests, the former are more aptly described as "defectors," and the latter as "apostates," and this variety demonstrates that religious boundaries often are "more like penumbras than hard-and-fast lines" (134). Such qualifications provide a fuller and more carefully shaded picture of what "leaving the fold" meant in the ancient world. And such nuance is the strength of Wilson's book, providing, as it does, a very helpful introduction to the topic for students and for scholars who are beginning to study the phenomenon of religious defection and apostasy in antiquity.

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