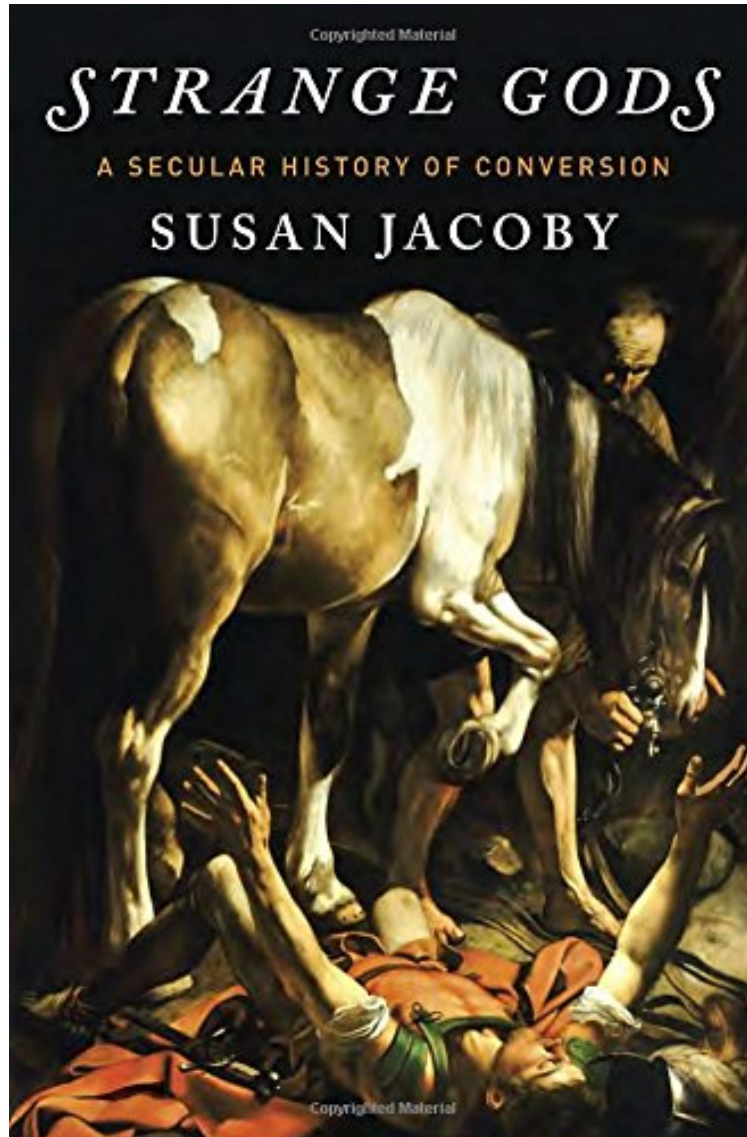


## Strange Gods: A Secular History of Conversion

*Susan Jacoby*

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**Susan Jacoby : Strange Gods: A Secular History of Conversion** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Strange Gods: A Secular History of Conversion:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A Necessary Examination of Religious Conversions from a Secular Perspective. By Daniel G. Helton Strange Gods is the fourth book of Susan Jacoby's I have read. This fact alone attests both to my belief that she is an excellent writer and that I am drawn to the kinds of subject matter that she expertly

studies and adeptly analyzes. At first I thought *Strange Gods* was a bit of a departure from the subjects she explored in *The Age of American Unreason*, *Freethinkers* and *The Great Agnostic*. After all, why should a self-avowed atheist concern herself with religious conversions? By the second chapter, in which she explores the bizarre marriage between pagan empire and the particularly intolerant brand of Christianity that became Roman Catholicism, the reasons she was drawn to this subject became clear. And while most histories of large scale societal or accounts of individual conversions are written from the perspective of the religious convert or proselytizer, a secular history of these phenomena is more than useful, it is necessary for anyone who wants to understand the influence over individuals and societies alike magical and phantasmagorical thinking continues to possess. Having studied fourth century Christianity for my recent novel, *The Secular Gospel of Sophia*, I found in *Strange Gods* confirmation of some of the themes I explored there. Well done. Highly recommended

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Rich Rewarding History of Religious Conversion By David P Susan Jacoby is a master writer. The book is rich with insight, appropriate respect, and even a few touches of well placed humor. Jacoby makes history come alive. Her research and knowledge base are impressive. Using a study of conversion experiences, both voluntary and forced, Jacoby reveals the social psychology of religious faith. If you are interested in the history of Europe, the history of the Christian Church, the social psychology of religion, or the history of the conflicts between Christianity, Judaism and Islam, this is the book to read. I could not put it down.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Incredible Scholarship By Karen Garst As always Susan Jacoby's thorough knowledge of her subject comes through on the first page. While the book is very well researched and footnoted as an academic work, it reads easily and captivates. It constantly amazes me how people can be so cruel to one another in the name of a "loving god."

In a groundbreaking historical work that addresses religious conversion in the West from an uncompromisingly secular perspective, Susan Jacoby challenges the conventional narrative of conversion as a purely spiritual journey. From the transformation on the road to Damascus of the Jew Saul into the Christian evangelist Paul to a twenty-first-century religious marketplace in which half of Americans have changed faiths at least once, nothing has been more important in the struggle for reason than the right to believe in the God of ones choice or to reject belief in God altogether. Focusing on the long, tense convergence of Judaism, Christianity, and Islameach claiming possession of absolute truth Jacoby examines conversions within a social and economic framework that includes theocratic coercion (unto torture and death) and the more friendly persuasion of political advantage, economic opportunism, and interreligious marriage. Moving through time, continents, and cultures the triumph of Christianity over paganism in late antiquity, the Spanish Inquisition, John Calvins dour theocracy, Southern plantations where African slaves had to accept their masters religion the narrative is punctuated by portraits of individual converts embodying the sacred and profane. The cast includes Augustine of Hippo; John Donne; the German Jew Edith Stein, whose conversion to Catholicism did not save her from Auschwitz; boxing champion Muhammad Ali; and former President George W. Bush. The story also encompasses conversions to rigid secular ideologies, notably Stalinist Communism, with their own truth claims. Finally, Jacoby offers a powerful case for religious choice as a product of the secular Enlightenment. In a forthright and unsettling conclusion linking the present with the most violent parts of the Wests religious past, she reminds us that in the absence of Enlightenment values, radical Islamists are persecuting Christians, many other Muslims, and atheists in ways that recall the worst of the Middle Ages. (With 8 pages of black-and-white illustrations.)

In book after book [Jacoby] has been a paradoxically effective [religion] teacher, and this new book, her most ambitious yet, is no exception. Atheists as self-conscious and purposeful about their irreligion as she are a small minority in America and a tiny minority in the world at large, but her improbable strength is that she makes the subject of religion, a subject she can never be done talking about, contagiously interesting. True to her calling as a heroine of free thought, she fights the good fight for irreligion as she goes, treating her reader to many a saucy aside, many a laugh-line for the baptismally decertified. Jacobys book is a page-turner, not so much because it tells a single, forward-rushing story but because, in the manner of a good teacher each of whose classes leaves you eager for the next, any two of her chapters will leave you ready for a third. Jack Miles, Los Angeles of Books Susan Jacoby turns her feisty brilliance on the history of religious conversions, famous and infamous, simultaneously giving us a history of religious intolerance. Her combination of intellectual rigor, vigor, erudition, and integrity makes *Strange Gods* wonderfully lively and enlightening. Rebecca Goldstein, author of *Plato at the Googleplex* The modern wave of secularist books has seen no author more historically erudite than Susan Jacoby. Immensely learned, yet with a lightly witty style, she smoothly surveys the whole phenomenon of religious conversion, from ancient times to our own. The section on slavery in America is especially moving, giving the lie to the myth that abolitionism was primarily motivated by religion. And a blessed bonus she has no truck with that pretentious gimmick favoured by so many historians, the historic present tense. Richard Dawkins, author of *Brief Candle in the Dark* Susan Jacobys *Strange Gods* is an astonishing work: an audacious attack on ides reues about conversion, an exposure of a legion of hypocrisies, a spirited guidebook to religions and heresies one remembers at best dimly, and a passionate defense of the right to reason and choose. Jacoby is a supremely intelligent and brave writer. It is impossible to praise her book too highly. Louis Begley, author of *The*

Dreyfus Affair Rare is the person who can combine deep scholarship with powerful narrative abilities and a capacity for autobiographical detail. Susan Jacoby's *Strange Gods* does all of these things, and in the service of a fascinating subject. Those who change their religion, those who do not, and those who could care less will all find much of value in her book. Alan Wolfe, *At Home in Exile* One of America's most astute cultural critics, Susan Jacoby writes more intelligently and insightfully than any author I have read on the vexed issues of religious identity, freedom, ideology, and the collision of secular and theological forces. James Shapiro, author of *The Year of Lear* In a work blending culture, religion, history, biography, and a bit of memoir (with more than a soupçon of attitude), the author of *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought* returns with a revealing historical analysis of religious conversions. The author impressively combines thorough research and passionate writing. Jacoby draws the first detailed maps of a terrain that has been very much in need of intelligent, careful cartography. Kirkus's \*starred review\* This militantly secular history of religious conversion reconsiders famous converts, from Augustine to Muhammad Ali, to reveal the complex web of political, economic, and social forces that can lead to individual conversions. Its conclusion that religious coercion inevitably produces a false uniformity that collapses as swiftly or slowly as social conditions permit is powerful. The New Yorker A vivid picture of the ways in which conversions happen and the myriad reasons behind their happening. Booklist Neither a scathing New Atheist tract nor a dry academic history, Jacoby's sweeping account of religious conversion, from Augustine to Muhammad Ali to the horrors of medieval Spain and modern-day Raqqa, finds an essential new angle of approach. An ardent secularist but a child of multiple American converts, Jacoby chooses to focus not on spiritual or psychological motives but on the social forces that drive religious change. *Strange Gods* may be off-putting to believers, but it's a likely story and, in her hands, a lively one. Vulture.com [Jacoby's] book engagingly looks at the phenomenon of conversion throughout Western history, pausing for terrific specific examinations of famous cases, from Saint Augustine to John Donne to Muhammad Ali, and although her treatment throughout sparkles with the rich, lively thinking readers have come to associate with this author, her sharp points are sharper here than they've been in any of her previous books (including even her brilliant 2008 *The Age of American Unreason*, which certainly pulled no punches). Her main concentration in these pages might be on the changeability of religious creeds, but she never loses sight of how toxic those creeds can be, and how important it is to be honest about that. Open Letters Monthly *Strange Gods*, with its scope (Augustine of Hippo to Muhammad Ali), insight, and carefully assessed judgments, emerges as an engaging rumination on if not quite a history of this tricky and multifarious subject. Christian Science Monitor Illuminating. [This book] arrives at a crucial moment, when belief systems that demand blind adherence are once again on the rise, jeopardizing rationalist gains that have broadened human possibilities. Miami Herald Jacoby is an atheist and secular humanist; her goal isn't to push an atheist agenda nor discredit believers. She does, however, feel that secularists have been ignored and mistreated as exemplified by the fact that political candidates do not recognize, and therefore ignore secular voters. Unlike the new atheism that takes an incendiary stance toward religion, attributing many of life's ills to denominations, Jacoby's book is refreshingly tolerant while retaining her defense of secularism. A plea for mutual respect between believers and secularists. Convincing. *Mormons into Media* In *Strange Gods*, Jacoby turns a respectful yet skeptical eye on a series of conversion dramas. For much of human history, she argues, converts switched religion under social or political pressure; more recently, it's nearly always a result of intermarriage. Among the most fascinating stories are those that don't fit either narrative: that of Edith Stein, a German Jewish philosophy student who became a Catholic nun in 1933, which didn't save her from being killed at Auschwitz; or Muhammad Ali, whose 1964 decision to join the Nation of Islam confused and even enraged white sportswriters and boxing fans. Half a century later, Jacoby points out, Ali is beloved in part, she argues, because of a choice that represented our most cherished traditions exalting freedom of conscience. Boston Globe About the Author SUSAN JACOBY is the author of eleven previous books, most recently *Never Say Die*, *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought*, *The Age of American Unreason*, *Alger Hiss and the Battle for History*, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, and *Half-Jew: A Daughter's Search for Her Family's Buried Past*. Her articles have appeared frequently in the op-ed pages of *The New York Times* and in forums that include *The American Prospect*, *Dissent*, and *The Daily Beast*. She lives in New York City. For more information, visit [www.susanjacoby.com](http://www.susanjacoby.com). Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. 1 AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO (354/430) Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. Paul, Colossians 2:8 AUGUSTINE, a teenager studying in Carthage in the 370s, begins to ponder what he will one day consider the inevitable shortcomings of human philosophy ungrounded in the word of God. This process begins, as Augustine will later recount in his *Confessions*, when he reads Cicero's *Hortensius*, written around 45 b.c.e. The young scholar, unacquainted with either Jewish or Christian Scripture, takes away the (surely unintended) lesson from the pagan Cicero that only faith—a faith that places the supernatural above the natural—can satisfy the longing for wisdom. But, O Light of my heart, Augustine wrote to his god in *Confessions* (c. 397), you know that at that time, although Paul's words were not known to me, the only thing that pleased me in Cicero's book was his advice not simply to admire one or another of the schools of philosophy, but to love wisdom itself, whatever it might be. . . . These were the words which excited me and set me burning with fire, and the only check to this blaze of enthusiasm was that they made no mention of the name of Christ. The only check?

To me, this passage from *Confessions* has always sounded like the many rewritings of personal history intended to conform the past to the authors current beliefs and status in lifewhich in Augustines case meant being an influential bishop of an ascendant church that would tolerate no dissent grounded in other religious or secular philosophies. By the time he writes *Confessions*, Augustine seems a trifle embarrassed about having been so impressed, as a young man, by a pagan writer. So he finds a way to absolve himself of the sin of attraction to small-c catholic, often secular intellectual interests by limiting Cicero to his assigned role as one step in a fourth-century boys journey toward capital-C Catholicism. It is the adult Augustine who must reconcile his enthusiasm for Cicero with the absence of the name of Christ; there is no reason why this should have bothered the pagan adolescent Augustine at all. Nevertheless, no passage in the writings of the fathers of the church, or in any personal accounts of the intellectual and emotional process of conversion, explains more lucidly (albeit indirectly) why the triumph of Christianity inevitably begins with that other seeker on the road to Damascus. It is Paul, after all, not Jesus or the authors of the Gospels, who merits a mention in Augustines explanation of how his journey toward the one true faith was set in motion by a pagan. It is impossible to consider Augustine, the second most important convert in the theological firmament of the early Christian era, without giving Paul his due. But let us leave Saul he was still Saul thenas he awakes from a blow on his head to hear a voice from the heavens calling him to rebirth in Christ. Saul did not have any established new religion to convert to, but Augustine was converting to a faith with financial and political influence, as well as a spiritual message for the inhabitants of a decaying empire. Augustines journey from paganism to Christianity was a philosophical and spiritual struggle lasting many years, but it also exemplified the many worldly, secular influences on conversion in his and every subsequent era. These include mixed marriages; political instability that creates the perception and the reality of personal insecurity; and economic conditions that provide a space for new kinds of fortunes and the possibility of financial support for new religious institutions. Augustine told us all about his struggle, within its social context, in *Confessions* which turned out to be a best-seller for the ages. This was a new sort of book, even if it was a highly selective recounting of experience (like all memoirs) rather than a tell-all autobiography in the modern sense. Its enduring appeal, after a long break during the Middle Ages, lies not in its literary polish, intellectuality, or prayerfulness though the memoir is infused with these qualities but in its preoccupation with the individuals relationship to and responsibility for sin and evil. As much as Augustines explorations constitute an individual journey and have been received as such by generations of readers the journey unfolds in an upwardly mobile, religiously divided family that was representative of many other people finding and shaping new ways to make a living; new forms of secular education; and new institutions of worship in a crumbling Roman civilization. After a lengthy quest venturing into regions as wild as those of any modern religious cults, Augustine told the story of his spiritual odyssey when he was in his forties. His subsequent works, including *The City of God*, are among the theological pillars of Christianity, but *Confessions* is the only one of his books read widely by anyone but theologically minded intellectuals (or intellectual theologians). In the fourth and early fifth centuries, Christian intellectuals with both a pagan and a religious education, like the friends and mentors Augustine discusses in the book, provided the first audience for *Confessions*. That audience would probably not have existed a century earlier, because literacy a secular prerequisite for a serious education in both paganism and Christianity had expanded among members of the empires bourgeois class by the time Augustine was born. The Christian intellectuals who became Augustines first audience may have been more interested than modern readers in the theological framework of the autobiography (though they, too, must have been curious about the distinguished bishops sex life). But *Confessions* has also been read avidly, since the Renaissance, by successive generations of humanist scholars (religious and secular); Enlightenment skeptics; nineteenth-century Romantics; psychotherapists; and legions of the prurient, whether religious believers or nonbelievers. Everyone, it seems, loves the tale of a great sinner turned into a great saint. In my view, Augustine was neither a world-class sinner nor a saint, but his drama of sin and repentance remains a real page-turner.