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Modern Pagan Religious Conversion Revisited

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Abstract

When modern Paganism emerged as a new religious movement in Western Europe and America in the 1950s and 1960s, its followers described the experience of conversion that alluded to the conversion narrative models that were already well-spread in the religious mainstream. In their conversion narratives from the 1960s to the 2000s, reflected both in their Pagan writings and scholarly literature, we can see motives recognizable from generic Christian prototypes. A Pagan “crisis” conversion is perceived as an altered state of consciousness, which helps gain access to some sort of ultimate truth concerning reality.

Keywords

modern Paganism, religious conversion, new religious movements

Introduction

Modern Paganism as a new religious movement is mostly a religion into which people convert consciously, accepting its tenets and practices at a rather mature age. No wonder that the problem of religious conversion must inevitably become important for the academic study of Paganism. An important part of the whole conversion complex in any religion is the conversion narrative – a text which may be used both for legitimizing one’s religious choice, and for positioning a religion for outsiders. It is remarkable, though, how modern Pagans and Heathens are reluctant to use the very word “conversion”. It is for them associated too closely with Christian models of religious inculcation and active proselytism. One of the respondents in a sociological study of Paganism said about conversion,

It’s a word that is loaded with Christian baggage, appropriate for Christians, not us. I have always been Pagan, I just hadn’t heard of Paganism. When I did I knew instantly that it was for me, I sought it out. I found Wicca. I knew I had come home. It’s always called to me, and I just confirmed it at initiation when I joined this mystery school, and went deeper into my path. Initiation shows my commitment to the Gods, and has linked me closer to them, but I never converted, I always was Wiccan. (Harrington, 2005: 116)¹

Nevertheless, the research of M. Harrington and E. V. Gallagher shows that one may speak of Pagan “conversion” using it as an analytical category (Harrington,

¹ In Harrington’s research most respondents prefer terms like “came home” or “were called”, not “converted” (Harrington, 2005: 133).

2005: 2; Gallagher, 1994: 858). Although, as the same research shows, generally Pagan conversion from the 1950s to the 2000s is of a “gradual” and a not “crisis” type. We find there texts which testify to the influence of the widely known conversion models adopted from Christianity.

Pagan Conversion Narratives

In the wake of the birth of modern Pagan religion of Wicca/Witchcraft in England in the 1950s, stories of conversion are absent among its adherents, while their functions are taken on by stories of initiation. In initiation narratives, what matters is not some extraordinary experience of a divine presence, a divine intervention, or even an altered state of mind *per se*, but a description of bizarre ritual activity. The very fact that witches’ rituals are performed skyclad and that they use whipping, dance, magic, and ceremonial sex serve the same function as the narratives of contact with divinities or other powerful beings. In early stories it is assumed that the rituals of Witchcraft are effective in providing such contacts. Such dignitaries of early Craft as Doreen Valiente, Alex Sanders or Robert Cochrane (King, 1969; Cochrane, 1964; Heselton, 2016: 130–133) refer to these rituals, sometimes in great detail, but not in the context of a conversion narrative or religious polemics. In other words, it is not through Gods or spirits that a person becomes a self-conscious witch, but through the power of a newly discovered “old” ritual which is perceived as belonging to the “ancient”, “pagan”, and “natural” world – in every respect unlike the world of everyday modernity.

Things were different in America, where modern Paganism was heavily influenced by the movement of Goddess spirituality. Unlike the stories told by the early British Pagans, here one sees repeated reports (contemporary or retrospective) of a private revelation of a deity, who possessed a very distinctive individuality. This deity is gendered and is almost always a Goddess. It is linked, as in British accounts of Witchcraft rituals, with pre-Christian culture and is also associated with a whole complex of countercultural ideas including: 1. sexual liberation, 2. anti-industrialism, 3. a rejection of patriarchy, 4. and a critique of social, cultural and political ways of modernity perceived as pathological. In 1957, a Pagan conversion happened which led to a creation of a Pagan group – it is the experience of goddess Kora by Frederic Adams, the founder of Feraferia. It is notable that Adams’s experience was fostered by intense reading (Adler, 1979: 235–236). Earlier, in the 1930s or late 1920s, a similar experience was recorded by another worshipper of another goddess – Gleb Botkin, the archpriest of the Church of Aphrodite (cf. Botkin, 1933: 184).² The Goddess in these narratives embodies all that a modern world is not. While the modern world is heading towards its own destruction through war, political and social oppression, repression of sex, and the destruction of nature, the Goddess promises an efflorescence of human personality and mutual love and ethical cohabitation of humans and non-humans in an idyllic natural environment.

² Botkin, though, has never called his church Pagan and apparently didn’t approve of the nascent Paganism of the 1960s (Galtsin, 2012: 102; Galtsin, 2015: 41–42).

In a number of Pagan texts of different genres such as “how-to” books (De Grandis, 1998), autobiographies and biographies of notable Pagans, and journalistic research (Farrar, 1971); the “presence”, “revelation” or “intervention” of a divinity, or “awakening” can figure as the crucial moment of the narrative and is described in detail. These moments if looked at in the perspective of the religious career of a Pagan, may well be studied as instances of religious conversion.

In a preface to one of the editions of “Drawing Down the Moon”, Margot Adler states bluntly: “no one converts to Paganism or Wicca”. In the same passage she describes the process of becoming Pagan as she imagined it: “Upon opening its pages, they often experienced a homecoming. Perhaps they said ‘I never knew there was anyone else in the world who felt what I feel or believed what I have always believed. I never knew my religion had a name.’” (Adler, 1979: x). So, this process is presented as a purely intellectual recognizing or acquisition of information, usually through reading. One of the chapters in Adler’s book bears a title “A Religion Without Converts”. According to Adler, people just find out they have always been Pagans, so Pagans are somehow born, not made. But the irony is that in the next passage Adler describes exactly the process of a conversion, as narrated by one of her respondents – a Goddess-worshipper Alison Harlow. This text, republished in Pagan books, may be considered one of the models of Pagan conversion:

It was Christmas Eve and I was singing in the choir of a lovely church at the edge of a lake, and the church was filled with beautiful decorations. It was full moon, and the moon was shining right through the glass windows of the church. I looked out and felt something very special happening, but it didn’t seem to be happening inside the church.

After the Midnight Mass was over and everyone adjourned to the parish house for coffee, I knew I needed to be alone for a minute, so I left my husband and climbed up the hill behind the church. I sat on this hill looking at the full moon, and I could hear the sound of coffee cups clinking and the murmur of conversation from the parish house.

I was looking down on all this, when suddenly I felt a “presence”. It seemed very ancient and wise and definitely female. I can’t describe it any closer than that, but I felt that this presence, this being, was looking down on me, on this church and these people and saying, “The poor little ones! They mean so well and they understand so little”.

I felt that whoever ‘she’ was, she was incredibly old and patient; she was exasperated with the way things were going on the planet, but she hadn’t given up hope that we would start making some sense of the world. So, after that, I knew I had to find out more about her.

Further Adler describes her own way into Wicca and the acceptance of “Pagan” as an identity. From the description of her girlhood fascination with Greek gods and the eco-activism of her youth, she goes to her first experience of hearing the Wiccan Charge of the Goddess on a tape:

A feeling of power and emotion came over me. For, after all, how different was that ritual from the magical rituals of my childhood? The contents of the tape had simply given me *permission* to accept a part of my own psyche that I had denied for years – and then extend it. Like most Neo-Pagans, I never converted in the accepted sense. I simply accepted, reaffirmed, and extended a very old experience. I allowed certain kinds of feelings and ways of being back into my life. (Adler, 1979: 12, 23, 26).

We see that Adler postulates the absence of religious conversion in Paganism, because for her, as rightly noted by E. V. Gallagher, “conversion” implies active proselytism along the lines of world religions, which serve as the epitome of all things “non-Pagan” (Gallagher, 1994: 852–853). Conversion, according to such understanding, means a subjection of an individual to certain moral imperatives which are imposed by an outward authority (divine or mundane), while Paganism is mostly described as an inward journey in search of some primordial, and immanent divine source of love and life. However, one cannot miss that the stories told by Adler, tell of religious conversions that wouldn’t be incomprehensible in a Protestant culture. They are all dominated by a mighty inward emotion, usually perceived as a contact with the divine which may be quite personified as in the Harlow narrative, or impersonal, but mighty still, bringing an individual to some truth about his or her life and the world in general. It is this emotion which legitimates the choice of a Pagan religion and the practice of Pagan religion.

Much more dramatic than the Harlow narrative is a description by an American Pagan author A. J. Drew, of what he himself calls a divine intervention:

I became very ill with a condition that attacked my lungs. It had gotten so bad that I could barely talk without losing my breath. I spent most of my time locked away in a small room with an air filter, a computer, and my rather large collection of guns. The computer was my only connection to the outside world, so I spent hours each day reading and posting to news groups via local computer networks. One day, I spilled a bottle of Pepsi on the keyboard and flew into a rage. At the time, keyboards were very expensive, and I had just destroyed the only method I had to remain sane. I started cursing the keyboard for not having a membrane to protect it, myself for being so clumsy, and even the Pepsi for being wet and sticky. I eventually cursed the Creator for giving me the desire to be active but allowing my lungs to be attacked by the illness. My damaged lungs could not keep up with the yelling. By screaming out loud, I expended what little oxygen my lungs were able to send into my bloodstream. I fell to my knees on the floor and cursed the Creator for giving me all of my dreams and then robbing me of the ability to fulfill them by making me so sick.

Then I saw my shotgun resting in the corner just a few feet away. I considered taking my own life. It would have been so easy. Mission unsuccessful, abort and try again. But just as quickly as the idea came into my head, something happened.

As quickly as the thought of suicide entered my mind, a counterpoint challenged my self-destruction. I like to think that counterpoint was Goddess. In an instant, I understood every portion of the universe, my purpose, and the purpose of every grain of sand. Unfortunately, I forgot most of it. I don’t

know if I passed out or hallucinated due to oxygen and sleep deprivation, but it seemed as though for one absolutely lucid moment, I understood everything there is to understand in the universe. I also experienced an incredible feeling of dread, as if I had just fallen love and my love left for a long business trip. Unfortunately, that lucid moment passed quickly and I returned to my normal self.

I had the very strange understanding that if I wanted to live, I had to support life. I sold most of my extensive gun collection, became a vegetarian, opened a Pagan shop, and started making plans to host a festival that would make a difference in my community. I wanted other Pagans to understand the feeling that I had been given in that instance. My medical condition went into full remission. The bumper sticker that reads “Born-Again Pagan” has a very special meaning for me.

It is remarkable, that right after this description of a “new birth”, A.J. Drew adds,

I cannot recall a point in my life where I was definitively not Wiccan. I grew into this religion and it grew into me. I did not take on the title Wiccan and then transform my life into what someone said a Wiccan life should be. Instead, I became the person that I am over the course of my life, and the word *Wiccan* best fits that which I have become. (Knight, 2002: 72–73)

Pagan Conversion Analyzed

This reservation, as well as Margot Adler’s statement, is generally corroborated by the academic study of Pagan conversion. Tanya Lührman in “The Persuasions of the Witches’ Craft” (1989), claims that on joining a “magic” community

... magicians may identify significant events in retrospect, or be struck by startling instances, ... there does not seem to be any experience comparable to a sudden conversion to a different way of thinking (Lührman, 1989: 315).

According to Lührman, a converted Pagan, while mastering his or her religious practices, learns gradually to replace the old interpretations of his or her life with new ones. Lührman calls this process an “interpretative drift”. Eugene V. Gallagher (1994) who devoted an article to religious conversion among modern Pagans, compares Lührman’s definition with that of a “gradual” conversion in the works of William James. The gradual conversion, unlike the “crisis” conversion exemplified by the Pauline experience of “the road to Damascus”, is “the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits” (James, 1958: 169). Next, Gallagher, who generally agrees with Lührman, notes that she doesn’t take into account the change of social environment as a result of the conversion, although it is this environment which is crucial for confirmation and embedment of the convert’s Pagan practices and intuitions, bringing in a regular spiritual career (Gallagher, 1994: 856–860). Melissa Harrington in her PhD dissertation, “Studying Conversion Among South English Traditional Wiccans”, introduces

a “Schematic Integration Model” in lieu of Luhrman’s “interpretative drift”. The Schematic Integration Model

... proposes that a number of psychological schemas (mental templates) are laid down at stages in a seeker’s life, and when Wicca is encountered the religious model it offers fits converts’ personal schemas better than other belief systems. Initiation into Wicca confirms and fulfils these schemas leading to a sense of ‘coming home’.

Harrington finds that Wicca appeals to people with a predisposition towards a “quest religion” which encourages people to engage in active spiritual seekership. The mental schemes or “pre-dispositional variables” which lead people to Wicca/Paganism, according to Harrington, may form throughout life, but mostly take shape at an early age. People who convert to Wicca may have the “pre-dispositional variables” of a love for nature, an interest in magic and mythology, a need for a powerful female figure, and a need for aesthetical enchantment, etc. On meeting a religion created by people with similar mental schemes, such persons “recognizing” their own templates, feel that they have “come home” (Harrington, 2005: 144–152).

Finally, E. F. Johnston turns to the study of the Pagans’ conversion narratives, contending that their “interpretations of their experiences are shaped by conventional patterns of “telling the story of becoming ... in the wider community and therefore reflect and reinforce prevailing norms of discourse.” The Pagans interviewed by Johnston

... describe their religious adherence as deriving from deep, inner desires and inclinations for spiritual expression. This is an important source of difference from narratives that stress discontinuity ... The initial exposure to Paganism is described as the moment in which they discovered a label and community that represented and legitimated a self “always-already-there” ... This way of describing the experience transforms religious change from an awakening – or discovery of something and previously unknown – into a rediscovery or uncovering of something was already present. (Johnston, 2013: 552; 559–560)

However, the stress put by both Pagans and their researchers on gradual conversion as the dominating type in modern religious movements, perhaps, needs a commentary if not a corollary. The very word “conversion” is so uncomfortable for the Pagans since its connected to traditional schemes of Christian, and, more precisely, Protestant expectations, which may seem a really heavy and irrelevant burden to those who have denounced Christianity altogether. First, it is almost always a “crisis” conversion with altering states of magnitude of the “crisis”. This is brought about by some “contact” with a powerful divine figure which becomes a turning point in life, usually in the direction of religious activism or, at least, toward active religious practice which is assessed as reaching some state of “happiness” or “bliss”. Besides the Pauline story of the road to Damascus (Acts, 9: 3–9), one can recall in this context the “garden scene” of 386 CE described by Aurelius Augustine (2014: 12). The last precedent also shows the great value

of reading in the conversion process, which echoes Margot Adler's accounts of converted Pagans. The history of Protestantism, especially in English-speaking cultures, is full of mass spiritual "awakenings". This made the requirements to the "converted" or "born-again" Christians especially high, demanding of them a genuine and sometimes examined experience of an otherworldly "intervention". This happened in order to claim them as legitimate children of Christ's Church. Some Christian confessions still insist on such grace tests as prerequisites for ultimate "salvation".

Apparently, the Pagans' reluctance to use the term "conversion" is due to its connection to the standards of "salvation" in Christianity. Perhaps, as a reaction to such normative expectations they insist on the "coming home" model as the most attractive which makes this model in its turn the normative one for Pagans and this can only influence the conclusions of academic researchers. At the same time, it cannot be said that the "crisis" conversion is absent from the experience of Pagans with its extraordinary ideas on perception and divine intervention. On the contrary, according to M. Harrington, "mystical experience" is the second most popular conversion experience among the "conversion motifs" of her Wiccan respondents – the most popular being reading (Harrington, 2005: 119). Nevertheless, it is clear that a crisis conversion with its dramatic character is not considered normative in modern Paganism. It may be largely due to the fact that modern Paganism doesn't imply any aim of religious salvation.

The Pagan conversion narratives may speak of a contact with a goddess though there may be variants which call to mind another famous precedent of conversion – the more "pagan" conversion of the Lucius of Apuleus into the cult of Isis (Apuleus, 1915). The notable conversion narratives of this type, (Kelly, 2011: xii–xiii; De Grandis, 1998³) may in the Apuleian manner focus on the unusual psychic experiences, which make the contact seem vivid and "true". However, even here, the Pauline-Augustinian modes of conversion are present, as it is not only an establishment of a personal relationship with an individual deity, but it is also an entrance into a certain religious movement with its values and social practices, and, more often than not, a start of a religious career. The topics of "awakening" or "enlightenment" as well as their countercultural character may link such conversion experiences with the "road to Damascus" and an important role played here by reading – to Augustine's "garden scene" – the crucial moment of conversion described in the "Confessions", where reading St Paul's Epistles, after hearing a mysterious voice singing "*Tolle, lege!*" (Take up, and read!) Augustine makes the final decision to be baptized (2014: 12). More often than not, it is the conversion experience that becomes the retrospective start of a religious career. It is a conscious choice of a religious identity, even if it is claimed, as in Adler and Drew, that this identity "had always been there". Thus it is difficult to speak of Paganism as "a religion without converts".

³ Though not conversion narratives strictly speaking (as the author considers herself to be a Fairy for the first time incarnated in human form), these descriptions are addressed to the student-readers of her course in "Celtic shamanism" and deal with first experiences one may meet on a spiritual path (De Grandis, 1998: 2–4 a recall of the past lives; 104–105 description of psychic phenomena).

In Pagan conversion narratives, we may see one of the antinomies of the whole religious movement. On one hand, Paganism is mostly not perceived by its adherents as “the one true way”. It is assumed that Paganism may “work” for some people who tend to sympathize with certain values, but all too often even Pagan deities or other sacred characters are perceived as constructs or archetypes, rather than “hard”, “real” beings out there. It is not “the Living God” of Paul, Augustine or Pascal, but, to use the latter’s phrase, Gods “of the sages and philosophers”. However, it is the experience of theophany in conversion which is narrated as a point of exit toward a “true” reality, which is absolute in its claims, and which legitimizes a choice. Given the strong bend of the Western Pagans on ecological activism, it is obvious that such a truth is not simply a private matter but is thought of as a way to save the planet from ecological disaster. The claims to the “truth” of Pagan experience may take on rather blunt forms, as, for instance, in Vivianne Crowley:

Wicca is not an evangelical religion and has no need to seek converts, for we do not enter Wicca in response to any human call but in response to the Horn of Herne the Hunter which echoes in the deep caverns of our unconscious minds, and in response to the Goddess whose voice, like a silver harp whisper, calls us to come to her altar (Crowley, 1989: 243).⁴

If a Christian conversion is represented as performed by God, and not human, but always presupposes evangelical preaching, then it is not seen as the cause of conversion, but as an important attendant circumstance – conversion narratives of modern Paganism combine two other antinomies. On one hand, it is the claim that Paganism is “natural” for those who convert, often corroborated by descriptions of childhood experience. On the other hand, Pagan conversion requires an experience, which may be linked to extraordinary sensations or emotions, as in the examples above, or even an experience of reading or in meeting other people. On one hand, Paganism is seen as a “nature religion”, which is natural for all humans as a species, on the other – it requires an “awakening” or a “homecoming”. It is obvious that here Paganism aims at a “re-enchantment of the world”, a goal which is shared by Paganism with a number of other spiritualities or ideologies that look upon modern world as a state of “lapse” from truth.

These antinomies overshadow the meaning and place of Pagan conversion narratives as part of a religious tradition. On one hand, such narratives are to be met rather often in Pagan literature, and some of them are repeatedly republished clearly as a means of legitimization. The “home” of which Pagans speak in Pagan imagination is clearly a common ontological home of all people, who, according to Pagan message, are called to live in Nature by their very bodies and their very being. They are somehow called to “be Pagan”, whatever the meaning of it may

⁴ Cf., “Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead (...) For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ (...) But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by his grace, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood” (Gal. 1:1, 12, 15–16).

be. On the other hand, such experiences are described as subjective insights and are often fenced with dozens of reservations which aim at convincing the reader that they are not here to “convert” him or her. The claims of power, based on such experiences, are mostly absent. The “how-to” books may inspire such experience in the users, and may contain exercises to make it closer, if not attainable. However, there is no visible stratification of practitioners according to the experience he or she had, unlike other kinds of religious movements like Thelema.

The Pagans themselves have noted the fact that extraordinary personal experiences as a rule do not serve as the main source of legitimizing religious views or as the decisive argument in theological polemics. As the 21st century is moving towards its third decade, the Pagan/Heathen complex is apparently splitting into the “Pagans” and the “polytheists” – or, “hard polytheists”. The latter, who seem to be the moving force behind the split, are characterized by Christine Hoff Kraemer as follows:

Hard polytheism is the view that the gods are objectively existing, independent personalities with whom human beings can have relationships. This theological position is somewhat unique in contemporary Paganism because it is the only belief around which groups of Pagans have strongly rallied. Interestingly, although conversations around hard polytheism are often framed in terms of belief, hard polytheists’ objections to soft polytheism are primarily about the way belief informs practice. For hard polytheists, soft polytheist practice – especially practice that approaches the gods as interchangeable archetypes – is both less effective and potentially disrespectful. Pagans will sometimes speak of rituals where the gods do not “show up” – no energy moves, no sense of connection or presence is felt, and the participants return home in much the same mental and emotional state in which they arrived. Hard polytheists believe that this undesirable state of affairs occurs because Pagans do not recognize the nature of the gods. Hard polytheists usually experience the gods as powerful presences with distinctive desires and behaviors, as well as historical ties to particular traditions, cultures, and lands. In order to connect with a goddess or a god and form relationship with them, hard polytheists will look at rituals from the deity’s native culture for guidance. When they ask a goddess or god to be present, they see themselves as calling someone very specific. (Kraemer, 2012)

These polemics are far from being finished. We may note that the debates may be heated revolving around the question of the “true” being of divinities. Although there is almost no trace of referring to the theophanic experience of Pagan gods as “proof” of one’s claims. On the contrary, one of the main opponents of the “hard polytheists” is John Halstead who positions himself as an American Neopagan, an Atheopagan, and a Jungian archetypalist – and who also happens to be an ex-Mormon. He made a statement regarding the role of mystical experience in conversion and about the legitimization of religious tradition:

There is an idea floating around that, if you’re an atheist, you must not have met any gods.

There's a logical appeal to this notion. After all, if you had met a god, why wouldn't you believe in it.

Here's the problem with that idea: A lot of atheists are former theists. Lots are former Christians, for example. Some may be former polytheists. And a fair number of them had religious experiences in their former religious lives, experiences which resembled those of other theists: for example, praying to a god and receiving answer to a prayer ... in the form of an emotional impression, or an auspicious event or dream, or even hearing a voice in one's head or seeing a vision – experiences which are common among both monotheists and polytheists.

I am one of those theists-turned-atheists who had all of those things happen to me. And I have had less subtle experiences as well. I stood on a mountain in Utah and I encountered something that, at the time, I could only identify as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I have felt his presence bearing down on me like a physical weight.

It may be difficult for theist to grasp why someone who would have these experiences would cease to believe in the existence of gods, but suffice it to say that theists-turned-atheists come to interpret their experiences differently.

(...) I'm an atheist. And I once met a god. (Halstead, 2015)

Conclusion

While the examination of Pagan literature shows that the Pagans often eschew the very notion of “conversion” considering it too connected to the Christian religious background, the narratives they make about their formations as Pagans still bear traits of similarity with analogous experiences in Western Christian tradition. Its basis is an epiphany, that is, an unusual personal experience which is regarded as a contact with divinity. The preferred term for subsequent embracing of a Pagan religion is usually “coming home”, since Paganism is considered a “natural” religious path, implicit in human body and soul. Modern scholars of Paganism tend to retain the term “conversion” as a means to describe the process of becoming Pagan. While Pagan conversion may often be perceived as a moment of an altered state of consciousness which helps gain access to “true reality”, modern Pagans don't seem to use it to legitimize their religious stances. What really matters for a Pagan religious career is the employment of certain cultural material and certain ideas, as well as socialization in a certain “cultic milieu” in a modern Pagan community.

List of abbreviations:

- Acts Acts 9. In *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. (2011). London: Hodder & Stoughton. Accessed [27.06.2017] on <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+9&version=NIV>.
- Gal Galatians 1. In *King James Bible, Second Edition*. (2013). Nashville: Thomas Nelson. Accessed [27.06.2017] on <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians+1&version=KJV>.

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