

# Spiritual and Ecclesiastical Biographies

Research, Results, and Reading

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# Conversion as a Biographical Problem

## The Infamous Case of Queen Christina of Sweden

*Marie-Louise Rodén*

When the news of Queen Christina's public conversion to Catholicism reached him, the Swedish courtier Johan Ekeblad wrote to his father from London:

What I never would have believed in all my days . . . that Queen Christina might defect to the Catholic Religion; but God knows! I am deceived . . . I must confess that I would sooner have believed that the sky could fall . . .<sup>1</sup>

Christina, born in 1626, was the only legitimate child of King Gustavus Adolphus II, whose death in the course of the Thirty Years' War earned him the status of a martyr to the Protestant cause. A month short of her sixth birthday in 1632, Christina succeeded her father as ruler of that nation which Heinz Schilling has described as Europe's most homogeneously Lutheran – the Evangelical counterpart to Counter-Reformation Spain.<sup>2</sup> Her personal reign lasted a mere decade, from 1644 to 1654 when she abdicated and the Swedish throne passed to her cousin, Karl Gustav of Pfalz-Zweibrücken, according to her wishes. She had firmly and openly declared that she did not wish to marry and, unable to provide the nation with an heir, prepared her abdication by having her cousin appointed hereditary prince of the realm. She thereafter converted to Catholicism and Rome became her permanent residence. She died in 1689 and is buried in the crypt of St Peter's Basilica.

Christina's contemporaries found her change of faith, or defection to Catholicism if you will, dramatic if not downright scandalous. Most Swedish scholars who have treated her life either in biographical works or in more specialized studies have gener-

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1 Johan Ekeblad to Christopher Ekeblad, London 16.1.1655. *Handlingar rörande Skandinaviens historia* 22 (Stockholm 1837), pp. 309–310.

2 Heinz Schilling, 'Confession and Political Identity in Europe at the Beginning of Modern Times (Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries)', *Concilium* 6, 1995.

ally reacted just the way Johan Ekeblad did when the news was fresh. Christina's conversion is something mysterious that has to be explained, or indeed explained away, for it remains easier to believe that the sky would fall than that a Queen of Sweden in the 17th century would convert to Catholicism.

In this contribution, I will discuss three aspects of this problematic conversion. First, I will describe the relevant source material that might help us to construct a narrative of Christina's conversion. I will thereafter discuss the major 20th-century contributions to the subject and finally say something about my own approach to the problem.

Though Christina was a prolific writer who left unfinished albeit lengthy memoirs, two collections of maxims and extensive and varied correspondence from different periods of her life, she never really gave an account of her conversion. The memoirs let us follow her until approximately the age of ten, and though she does touch upon childhood doubts about Evangelical Christianity as communicated by the Swedish clergy of her youth, they are an unreliable source. The memoirs were begun during the last decade of Christina's life and were thus composed at a time when she had already lived as a Catholic for more than a quarter of a century.<sup>3</sup>

As a matter of fact, there is an interesting source from the period directly following the conversion which indicates that she considered it a private matter that she preferred not to discuss at all. Christina's reception in Rome occurred during the first year of Alexander VII's (Fabio Chigi, pope Alexander VII, 1655–1667) pontificate. Hoping to obtain information that he might include in his planned biography of the pope, the noted Jesuit historian Sforza Pallavicino asked Christina to answer some questions about her change of faith and its motives, but she simply avoided the issue. In a letter probably written in 1658 she replied that she had been unable to fulfill her promise due to "domestic preoccupations" – probably the first and last time that she used such a phrase. She had then tried to write something down for Pallavicino, but found that her Italian was so deficient that she had consigned everything she wrote to the flames. This last remark was closer to the truth – Christina's command of written Italian was not particularly good even towards the end of her life and French remained her language of preference.<sup>4</sup>

3 There are numerous editions of Christina's memoirs, beginning with that of Johan Arckenholtz in an ambitious compilation from the mid-18th century: *Mémoires concernant Christine Reine de Suède*, Amsterdam & Leipzig 1751–1760. The most recent Swedish translation of the original French text is found in Marie-Louise Rodén, ed., *Kristina. Brev och skrifter*, Stockholm 2006. For an analysis of the memoirs, see Eva Haettner Aurelius, *Inför lagen. Kvinnliga svenska självbiografier från Agneta Horn till Fredrika Bremer*, Lund 1996.

4 Christina's letter to Pallavicino in the Swedish National Archives, The Azzolino Collection K. 401, 'Miscellanea 1658'. See also Sforza Pallavicino, *Vita di Alessandro VII*, Milano 1843.

What we know about Queen Christina's conversion process could best be described as "circumstantial evidence". The available sources indicate that her interest in approaching the Catholic Church began around 1646 and had progressed from interest to certainty by 1651, when she contacted the General of the Jesuit Order directly. In a letter that is still preserved in the archives of the order in Rome and couched in respectful but fairly vague terms, Christina expressed her admiration for the Jesuits and asked for further contacts with members of the order.<sup>5</sup> In the late summer of 1651, she brought up her intention to abdicate with the Council of the Realm but was temporarily dissuaded.

In the early months of 1652, two Italian Jesuits dispatched from Rome, Paolo Casati and Francesco Malines, reached the Swedish court, as did the Belgian Jesuit Philippe Nutius. The influx of Catholic missionaries to the Swedish capital did raise some eyebrows, even if Casati and Malines were thinly disguised as travelling musicians. Protocols from the municipal consistory of Stockholm made note of the "hordes of Jesuits" that were overrunning the capital.<sup>6</sup> Christina's suspicious consorting with foreigners and Papists was also a matter of concern for the court preacher Erik Emporagrius, who in January of 1653 requested an audience with Christina, hoping to steer her towards a more appropriate lifestyle. He even went so far as to complain to Christina's mother, the dowager queen Maria Eleonora, who supported his views but had no influence on her "unruly" daughter.<sup>7</sup>

By the early 1650's, there was a considerable foreign presence at the Swedish court, since the culturally interested young monarch had invited distinguished artists, librarians, philologists and not least the philosopher René Descartes to Stockholm. At the same time, Sweden had attained the apogee of her position in international politics with the favorable conclusion of the Westphalian Peace in 1648. Ambassadors from Europe's Catholic nations were a constant feature at the court, and Christina was especially close to the French ambassador Pierre Hector Chanut.<sup>8</sup> It was the chaplain of the Portuguese legation, the Jesuit Antonio Macedo, who became the courier for Christina's first letter to the superior of his order. Christina's acquaintance with educated

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5 Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Opp. NN 174–175, fasc. B. On the subject of Christina's correspondence with the Jesuit order prior to her abdication, see Sven Ingemar Olofsson, *Drottning Christinas tronavsägelse och trosförändring*, Uppsala 1953.

6 Nils Ahnlund, 'Drottning Kristinas tronavsägelse. Några randanteckningar', *Personhistorisk tidskrift*, 1931.

7 The most reliable account of this period in Queen Christina's life is found in Olofsson 1953, cited above, as well as his unfinished manuscript of a biography of the dowager queen Maria Eleonora (in the author's possession).

8 Chanut's reports from his years at the Swedish court are published in translation and with commentaries in Curt Weibull, *Drottning Christina och Sverige 1646–1651. En fransk diplomat berättar*, Stockholm 1970.

and – in several cases – devout Catholics is one explanation for how she was exposed to the Catholic faith even though strictures against it in Sweden were so harsh at the time.

Books and manuscripts were another path: even though the instructions drawn up for Christina's education in 1635 prohibited her from contact with any Catholic or Calvinist writings – which were considered equally heretical from a Lutheran standpoint – she as a young adult had access to an impressive royal library which was further enriched by booty from the sack of Prague at the end of the war. A catalogue of the manuscripts in this library drawn up by the philologist Isaac Vossius around 1650 shows that Christina could consult Catholic literature from the patristic age, the Middle Ages and her own time. We can never know which works she might have read and which were simply part of the collection, but it can at least be documented that she had the opportunity of reading works of Catholic theology.<sup>9</sup>

The Italian Jesuits who met Christina in 1652 found that she was already convinced of the central tenets of the Catholic faith and that the major issues to be resolved were of a practical nature. Paolo Casati's account of his mission to "convert the Swedish queen" was written a month after her official reception into the Church and addressed to his superiors. One does not really get a personal picture of Christina at this turning point in her life, but it was here that she took a decisive step towards her conversion, which took place privately on Christmas Eve of 1654 in Brussels and publicly in November of 1655 in Innsbruck.<sup>10</sup>

Given Christina's own reticence on the subject and the relative scarcity of other sources that might illuminate her conversion process, modern studies have been characterized by a high level of speculation and inconclusive attempts to unravel the causal relationships between her abdication, her refusal of marriage and her conversion. A monograph by Curt Weibull, who belonged to a family of distinguished Swedish historians, was published in 1931 and served as an inspiration for a renewed interest in Christina.<sup>11</sup> His contemporary Nils Ahnlund soon entered into debate on the issue of Christina's abdication.<sup>12</sup> Weibull also inspired Ernst Cassirer, who briefly resided in Sweden during the 1930s, to tackle the problem of Descartes' relationship to Christina and his possible role for her conversion.<sup>13</sup> As an historian, Weibull was primarily interested in

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9 Christian Callmer, ed., *Catalogus Codicum Manuscriptorum Bibliothecae Regiae Holmiensis C. Annum MDCL Ductu et Auspicio Isaac Vossii Conscriptus*, Stockholm 1971.

10 Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Opp. NN 174–175, fasc. B.

11 Curt Weibull, *Drottning Christina. Studier och forskningar*, Stockholm 1931; an abridged English translation was published with the title *Christina of Sweden*, Stockholm 1966.

12 Nils Ahnlund, 'Drottning Kristinas tronavsägelse. Några randanteckningar', *Personhistorisk tidskrift*, 1931.

13 Ernst Cassirer, *Drottning Christina och Descartes. Ett bidrag till 1600-talets idéhistoria*, Stockholm 1940.

Christina as a political animal and he accepted her Catholicism at face value. So did the historian and political scientist Sven Ingemar Olofsson, who published an excellently researched thesis on Christina's abdication and conversion in 1953, and another one on Swedish international politics after the Westphalian Peace in 1957.<sup>14</sup> Though Olofsson maintained that the queen's refusal of marriage was the primary motive for her abdication, he too was interested in Christina the politician and did not question the sincerity of her conversion.

However, this was not the case for the most influential Christina-scholar of the 20th century, Sven Stolpe, who was not an historian but rather an author and publicist who wrote a thesis on Christina in 1959. Stolpe's thesis was followed by a biography published the following year as well as an excellent edition of one of Christina's collections of maxims.<sup>15</sup> Stolpe did not accept Christina's conversion as genuine and it is of some interest that he himself was a convert to Catholicism. Born in 1905, he converted when he was over 40 and he was 54 years old when he obtained his doctorate in 1959.

Unlike the historians, Stolpe was interested in Christina the Catholic and his thesis was a close reading of one of her collections of maxims with the aim of tracing her spiritual development. He skillfully described the influence of St Catherine of Genoa's *Treatise on Purgatory* and Christina's interest in the Quietist heresy, which flourished in Rome in the 1680's and also attracted many members of the curial elite. His biography, though admirably written and engaging to read, is a much less sound work than his academic thesis. Stolpe placed an inordinate emphasis on Christina's relationship to her femininity and argued that her unwillingness to marry – a consequence of sexual neuroses – was the real background to her abdication. Unwilling and perhaps unable to provide her kingdom with a successor, she chose to abdicate in order to ensure that the hereditary monarchy established by her great-grandfather should be preserved. In order to support this interpretation, Stolpe had to challenge the veracity of Christina's conversion.

To begin with, he accused Christina of a lack of Christocentricity – a quality she undoubtedly shared with many other Catholics of the Baroque era. Commenting on Cassati's report of his discussions with the Queen in 1652, Stolpe maintained that "all of these are issues which would find their proper place in a discussion forum for libertines, they hardly arise from a soul in need, a human being horrified by her own sins and longing for salvation . . . the bold – and perhaps unsuitable – thought of asking the queen about her sins or finding out whether she really was looking for salvation

<sup>14</sup> Olofsson 1953; *idem*, *Efter westfaliska freden. Sveriges yttre politik 1650–1654*, Uppsala 1957.

<sup>15</sup> Sven Stolpe, *Från stoicism till mystik. Studier i drottning Kristinas maximer*, Stockholm 1959; *idem*, *Drottning Kristina. Maximer – Les sentiments héroïques*, Stockholm 1959; *idem*, *Drottning Kristina*, Stockholm 1960–1961.



in Christ apparently did not occur to anyone”.<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that Stolpe came to Catholicism by way of the Oxford Movement, which certainly influenced his view of Christina and the intellectually oriented spirituality typical of the aristocratic converts of her age.<sup>17</sup>

Stolpe also made the mistake of confusing Christina’s impatience with outward signs of devotion with a lack of faith, and relates a number of anecdotes demonstrating the haughty and often inappropriate behavior of this woman who, after all, had been subjected to the extraordinary upbringing of a ruler in the age of absolutism. In his interpretation, which has been enormously influential among Swedish intellectual historians and scholars of art and literature, Christina’s true conversion occurred only towards the end of her life, when she encountered the Quietist teachings of Miguel Molinos.

A scholar who stands out for having treated Christina’s conversion as part of a European confessional pattern is, tellingly enough, not Swedish but the American Susan Rosa. In a study of 17th-century Catholic polemic, she explains that post-Reformation religious polemic was less concerned with the substance of dogma than with the reasons to believe in a certain faith. Catholic controversial theologians based their arguments on the so-called *notae*, the signs of the true Church. These arguments were also aimed at a particular group, that is well-educated aristocrats, who were not necessarily schooled in theology but attracted to rational arguments. Rosa’s interpretation of Paolo Cassati’s report is thus much different than Stolpe’s: Christina adopts the classic Thomistic position concerning the relationship between faith and reason, and moreover emphasizes the demand that truth can only be found where there is unity. Thus, Christina’s conversion to Catholicism is typical for the pattern of aristocratic conversions to the Roman faith during the 17th century.<sup>18</sup> It is the context, her nationality, and her position that made it exceptional at the time and problematic even in modern scholarship.

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16 Sven Stolpe, *Från stoicism till mystik. Studier i drottning Kristinas maximer*, Stockholm 1959, p. 185. “Allt detta är frågeställningar som hör hemma i en libertinistisk diskussionscirkel, de härrör knappast från en själ i nöd, en människa som fasar för sin egen synd och längtar efter frälsning . . . Ingen kom på den djärva – och kanske opassande – tanken att utfråga drottningen om hennes egna synder eller att undersöka, om det verkligen var frälsningen i Kristus hon var ute efter.”

17 I would like to thank Prof. Anders Jarlert for pointing out the significance of Stolpe’s relationship to the Oxford Movement. This aspect of Stolpe’s religious development has been treated in the recent biography by Svante Nordin, *Sven Stolpe. Blåsten av ett temperament*, Stockholm 2014, pp. 151–169.

18 Susan Rosa, ‘Seventeenth-century Catholic Polemic and the Rise of Cultural Rationalism: An Example from the Empire’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57, 1996, 87–107.

I will now say something about my own approach to Christina's conversion. To begin with, I am a Catholic convert like Stolpe but an historian like Weibull and Olofsson, and therefore it is Christina the politician who has been the focus of my research. When I initiated my doctoral thesis at Princeton University in the mid-1980s, my ambition was to focus on a subject that had been introduced by Friherre Carl Bildt in two studies from 1899 and 1906, but neglected since then: Christina's role in curial politics in relation to her close collaborator, friend and heir, Cardinal Decio Azzolino and the faction he led, the *Squadrone Volante*.<sup>19</sup> I wanted to avoid the debate on the relationship between the abdication and the conversion, which must remain inconclusive since the source material is so limited. Moreover, I was at that time a fairly recent convert and thought it unwise to consider a topic that touched upon my personal experiences.

I soon discovered that there was a wealth of material highlighting the career of Cardinal Decio Azzolino, both in the Vatican Archives and Library and, through a donation of 1985, in the Biblioteca Planettiana in Jesi. Azzolino (1623–1689) was the fourth official Cardinal Secretary of State of the Vatican and the author of a number of influential treatises in ecclesiastical politics, history and theology. My thesis was a study of Christina's collaboration with his faction during her Roman period, and I followed this with a full biography of Azzolino which was published in the year 2000.<sup>20</sup>

In my biography of Christina published in 2008, I treated her conversion more directly.<sup>21</sup> By this point in my life I hardly reflect on the circumstance that I myself am a convert to Catholicism. However, my own experience has obviously informed my view of Christina's conversion, even though I have tried to be a cautious interpreter of her path to Catholicism. As for the general skepticism towards Christina's conversion prevalent among Swedish scholars, I have often wondered whether they considered how difficult it must have been to live as a Catholic, closely tied to the elite at the papal court in Rome for over 33 years, while secretly keeping an internal distance (which would be the interpretation of Stolpe and his numerous followers).

I also reasoned that looking at Christina's life journey as a whole would tell us more of her relationship to Catholicism than focusing on the crucial six to eight years when she was in the process of conversion. It is indeed true that conventional piety was never her strong suit – there is a marvellous anecdote in Pallavicino which speaks of the frustration of Pope Alexander VII on this subject. Paraphrasing Matthew 6:6, “When you want to pray, go into your room and shut your door and pray to your father in the

19 Carl Bildt, *Christine de Suède et le Cardinal Azzolino*, Paris 1899; *idem*, *Christine de Suède et le Conclave de Clément X*, Paris 1906.

20 Marie-Louise Rodén, *Cardinal Decio Azzolino, Queen Christina of Sweden and the Squadrone Volante. Political and Administrative Developments at the Roman Curia 1644–1692*, Princeton & Ann Arbor 1992; *eadem*, *Church Politics in Seventeenth-Century Rome*, Stockholm 2000.

21 Marie-Louise Rodén, *Drottning Christina. En biografi*, Stockholm 2008.

dark”, he shall have said the following to Christina: “In your case, one single Ave Maria said in public would be worth more than an entire Rosary read in private.”<sup>22</sup>

If one reads the source material from Christina’s Roman period carefully – and it is plentiful – one finds her behaving in the same way that many Catholic converts do at the beginning of their journey. She was externally demonstrative in regard to any rite or ordinance that was specifically Catholic. But in letters from her second northern journey of 1666 to 1668, she expressed genuine concern that she had been forbidden to have a Catholic priest in her entourage when entering Sweden. She was experiencing a period of poor health and was afraid that she might die without a confessor by her side, unable to receive the last rites. These were private reflections intended only for her closest friend in Rome.<sup>23</sup>

I have sought to find a unified understanding of Christina the politician and Christina the Catholic. She was raised in an age where European monarchies developed in the direction of absolutism and firmly believed that the hereditary monarchy was the ideal form of government. She saw the structures exhibited in such a government as the earthly reflection of an order instituted by God. Consequently, the strictly hierarchical Catholic Church conformed to her political ideals. Finally, I believe that an historical personage such as Christina deserves the respect of posterity – if she claimed to be a Catholic and lived as one for the major part of her adult life, we must depart from the assumption that her conversion was sincere. Christina herself had a far more balanced view of her spiritual constitution than many of her biographers: “You know very well,” she remarked in a letter to Cardinal Azzolino from 1666, “that I will never be virtuous enough to become holy, nor infamous enough to pretend to it.”<sup>24</sup>

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22 Pallavicino 1843, pp. 25–28; Rodén 2008, p. 196.

23 Bildt 1899, p. 342f.

24 Queen Christina to Cardinal Decio Azzolino, Hamburg 15 September 1666. Swedish National Archives, The Azzolino Collection K. 394, published in Bildt 1899, p. 226. “Je vous prie de dire au père Fozio, de ma part, qu’il perd son temps à prier Dieu que je devienne sainte, car je n’aurai jamais assez de vertu pour l’être, ni assez d’infamie pour le feindre.”