

# Metanoia interrupted: the case of Bobby Kennedy

Alexis Artaud de la Ferrière

University of London

## Abstract

This paper investigates metanoia as a phenomenon that is real yet inherently incomplete. While classical rhetoric and Christian thought have long framed metanoia as a decisive change of heart or rebirth, these traditions often imply that such transformation can be perfectly accomplished. Against this view, the paper argues that metanoia is better understood as a lifelong, never-finished process that is always shaped and ultimately interrupted by mortality. Drawing on Augustine's evolving reflections on his own conversion, the argument shows that recognising the incompleteness of metanoia is itself part of its deepening. To illustrate this dynamic, the paper examines the late-life trajectory of Bobby Kennedy. His personal transformation, intertwined with Catholic sensibilities yet expressed in secular political language, became a catalyst for broader public imagination. Kennedy's ethos appeared in visible motion, resonating with a historical moment marked by volatility and collective longing for change. His assassination exemplifies metanoia interrupted: a transformation initiated, unfolding, and abruptly cut short. The paper concludes that metanoia should not be conceived as a perfected act or a guaranteed achievement. Its significance lies in the orientation it provides within the constraints of temporal finitude, where transformation is always underway and always vulnerable to interruption.

## Keywords

metanoia; conversion; personal transformation

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### \* Correspondence:

[Alexis.ArtauddelaFerriere@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:Alexis.ArtauddelaFerriere@rhul.ac.uk)

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The notion of metanoia gives rise to many conceptual questions. Does it properly describe an act a person performs, or an experience they receive? Does it constitute a return to an authentic original state or a rebirth into a new identity? Does it occur in a single moment or gradually over time? Alone or in company? But the question I'd like to start with is this: does metanoia happen at all? And the answer I will present here, very briefly, is 'yes' – but not necessarily in the way we expect or wish it to.

Pierre Hadot (1968) held that “the idea of conversion represents one of the constitutive notions of Western consciousness and conscience. In effect, one can represent the whole history of the West as a ceaseless effort at renewal by perfecting the techniques of conversion, which is to say the techniques intended to transform human reality.” The evolving meaning of metanoia tracks the gradual development of this central notion over the centuries. Literally meaning “after-thought”, classical Greek rhetoricians spoke of metanoia to describe a persuasive figure of speech in which the speaker takes back an earlier statement and replaces it with a new one to reinforce their point. In doing so, the speaker performs a change of heart, but the change occurs in their words rather than in their forum internum – but if effective, it may effect a change within the listener. The advent of Christianity brought a new emphasis on individual interiority, the ethical imperative for personal conversion, and the central idea of rebirth through a change of ethos. Under the Christian influence, metanoia came to signify an act of substitution of “the old sinful being with a new personal identity—an ethos that is defined by a penitent relation to the self”. How is such a thing possible? That is of course Nicodemus's question in John's Gospel when Jesus tells him that a person must be “born again”. And it is a question which continues to animate us today, whether or not we phrase it in overtly Christian terms.

Hadot's account rather sounds like an argument in favour of metanoia as something real. But we should be attentive to a tension in Hadot's account. In the first instance, we hear that the pursuit of personal transformation is

constitutive of who we are as Western people. But on the other hand, we also hear that the history of the West is driven by a search to perfect the techniques of conversion – and further, that those techniques are intended to transform humanity.

But what are we to conclude about the efforts of our predecessors if each of their successive techniques required further perfection? And how should we judge the fruits of their conversions if we have sought, generation after generation, to find better means of transforming the human reality which we inherit? Did their conversions not effect any such transformation?

On the one hand, one might be tempted to take a whiggish view and think of conversion as a technology like powered flight. On this view, the history of innovation in the realm of metanoia attests to our objective progress over time: our predecessors had rudimentary means of conversion like they had rudimentary means of flight, and just as you would rather cross the Atlantic in an Airbus than in a Sopwith Camel, you would rather entrust your ethos to modern techniques than to ancient ones. Personally, I don't find this notion convincing.

On the other hand, one might suppose that, although the idea of conversion is constitutive of Western consciousness, the fact of conversion was almost entirely absent from the course of Western history. Metanoia on this view is something like alchemy. It offers an enticing prize – but one that is probably unattainable, regardless of the technique employed. Admittedly, this would be a rather pessimistic note on which to start our symposium!

So here is a third solution to this puzzle of our reiterative struggle of conversion. Maybe there is a disjunction between a certain ideal of metanoia accomplished which we idealise, and the experience of metanoia interrupted which we can actually obtain. And by elevating the ideal, we diminish the real experience – perhaps even to the extent that we doubt its reality and fail to obtain its promises.

Consider for example, the following passage from Adam Ellwanger in which he

discusses the dynamics of conversion, repentance, authenticity, and renewal. He writes:

*there seems to be some indeterminacy as to the movement of metanoia. Metanoia marks a "change" or a "turning," but is it a changing or turning away "from" something, or a changing or turning "to" something? Is it a 360-degree turn, where one returns to a prior state of being that was lost? [...] Or is it a 180-degree turn, where the subject, in an act of self-negation, turns away from one mode of being and is "born again" as a person with an entirely new ethos?*

My concern with this sort of account is that, regardless of whether one opts for the 360-degree turn or the 180-degree turn, these neatly-rounded geometric shapes convey the idea that metanoia constitutes an act that one can perfectly accomplish, such that at some point in the person's life (whether suddenly or gradually; whether by will or by grace) the turn is complete. The person is converted like a mountain is ascended and then marked with a cheerful banner. From that point, any additional events in the person's life are supplemental materials which serve only to confirm the validity of the metanoia accomplished. This idea was long sustained in the popular imagination by an unfortunate type of hagiographic literature that represents the saints as people whose beings were so completely transformed by their metanoic experiences that, once converted, they appear ethereal as angels and static as totems.

However, if we actually interrogate the lives of the saints, we find of course that they continued to struggle and falter until the very end. Does this mean that their conversion was illusory or fabricated? No. Simply that it was not perfect in the sense of being fully accomplished.

A seminal example of this is Augustine's gradual realisation that his conversion to

Christianity did not equate to his achieving the life proposed in the sermon on the Mount<sup>1</sup>. And it is noteworthy that he also understood this realisation of the incompleteness of his conversation as a deepening of his conversion. I think this points to something essential about the phenomenon of metanoia, which is that its course is co-extensive with a person's natural life; and as such it is never something accomplished but is always interrupted at the caesura of death. Yet by the same token, it is also motivated and oriented by our awareness of this impending interruption.

This incomplete quality of metanoia is not always obvious when we focus on towering figures of virtue who seem so outwardly accomplished in their lives. But we see it more clearly in stories of people whose ethos is visibly in gestation or whose lives were cut short at a relatively early stage of conversion, such as in the case of Bobby Kennedy.

In his book *Coming Apart*, written in the wake of Bobby's death, William L. O'Neill supposed that in retrospect Bobby Kennedy's "*foremost quality will seem to have been his capacity for growth. [...] After his older brother's assassination in 1963, Bobby's character mellowed and deepened. His sympathy for distressed minorities became stronger. He struggled with the great questions of life and death, read Aeschylus and Camus, and exchanged instrumental optimism for a more stoic philosophy.*" Half a century later, I would build on O'Neill's assessment to say that the last years of Bobby Kennedy's life express four qualities which can help us interrogate the concept of metanoia.

First, Bobby was someone in the process of a personal transformation which was not outwardly religious in its expression; but which was informed by his Catholicism, and which was expressed in ways which only make sense if understood (consciously or not) within a Christian matrix. In our modern approach to metanoia, we can observe an epistemic dichotomisation that mirrors the disassociation

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Augustine's Conversion; Augustine, *De Sermonibus Domini in Monte*, I, 19, 1-3.

between the religious and secular spheres in Western societies. Transformative phenomena categorised within the secular sphere are described exclusively with naturalist or political language – or described through religious analogies in which the ontological status of the claims are left ambiguous. Conversely, a subset of transformative phenomena are categorised within the religious sphere, described in explicitly confessional terms, and treated as though their manifestations should be restricted to the arena of private belief and practice. However, the last years of Bobby Kennedy offers the example of a transformational experience in which these compartmentalising categories are not apparent: the notions of the religious and the political, the private and the public are so intertwined that they seem to be obstacles to understanding rather than heuristics.

Second, Bobby Kennedy's individual trajectory of conversion was mirrored in his campaign platform for the Democratic Primary, which emphasised a vision for radical change in American society. This is not an assessment of the contents of his policies, but of the idea which his campaign inspired in the public imagination—a sense of rupture and possibility that became indissociable from his own person. In this sense, Bobby's metanoia was not confined to his interior life; it radiated outward, becoming a catalyst for collective aspiration. His speeches increasingly drew on themes of healing, reconciliation, moral renewal, and solidarity with the marginalised—concepts that resonated with the logic of conversion even when articulated in overtly political terms.

This raises a deeper question about the permeability of the boundary between personal transformation and political imagination. When an individual undergoes a change of moral orientation, to what extent does that transformation alter the range of futures that others can envision? Political projects often present themselves as rational programmes, yet their effectiveness depends on affective and symbolic resources that are inherently tied to the moral credibility of the people who embody them – hence the importance placed

on the lives of the saint, often above their teachings. Kennedy's later campaign illustrates how a metanoic transformation in one person can become a point of gravitational pull for a broader political movement. What is the relationship between individual journeys of conversion and transformational political projects? If personal metanoia alters the moral horizon of a single life, it may also unsettle the collective horizon of a community, enabling new forms of political possibility that would otherwise remain unarticulated.

Third, Bobby's person and his campaign resonated with the historical moment in which they were inscribed. There are times in which it feels for those alive as though history is chomping at the bit – that the possibility for major transformation is palpable, although its direction and drivers remain uncertain. The late 1960s in America were such a moment, marked simultaneously by deep fractures and unprecedented mobilisations. Bobby Kennedy personified this feeling and his campaign channelled it into the apparatus of electoral politics. In this environment, Bobby Kennedy became a vessel for the diffuse sense that profound change was both necessary and imminent. His own metanoic development seemed to harmonise with the national atmosphere: a growing awareness of injustice, a recognition of shared vulnerability, and a longing for reconciliation that transcended conventional political language.

Kennedy's political appeal derived not only (perhaps not even primarily) from his policy positions but from the sense that his personal transformation made him uniquely attuned to a historical conjuncture characterised by volatility and possibility. His vulnerability—publicly mourning, publicly evolving, publicly rethinking—matched the vulnerability of a nation questioning its moral trajectory against the backdrop of failure in Cuba, quagmire in Vietnam, and rioting in US cities. His campaign thus operated as a conduit through which this collective disposition towards change could be channelled into the formal structures of electoral politics. To what extent are individual experiences of personal transformation, and our receptivity to the notion of change,

conditioned by our social environment? Metanoia rarely occurs in isolation; it emerges in dialogue with the historical moment, shaped by the pressures, tragedies, and hopes that define a particular epoch.

Finally, these three converging paths (the sense of transformation in the man, in the idea, and in the nation) were abruptly cut short in the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles on June 6th 1968. Bobby Kennedy's story is one of metanoia interrupted. His assassination did not merely end a political campaign; it fractured a narrative of personal and collective becoming. The question is not only what he might have accomplished, but what kind of cultural or political metanoia might have unfolded had his trajectory continued. But this is a question that would only have ever been pushed further back in time had Bobby Kennedy lived longer - or been answered with disappointment had he acceded to the Presidency and thereby exposed the hopes invested in his person to the limits imposed by political power. The abruptness of the interruption encapsulated in his assassination invites reflection on the fragility of transformational processes. Metanoia, whether individual or societal, is not only not guaranteed to achieve completion, it necessarily falls short of expectations because at every stage of development it either risks being cut short or, if it continues, in doing so it also pushes further back the horizon of what seems possible.

Bobby's example is particularly instructive because his story is one of metanoia initiated by death (his brother's) and then interrupted by death (his own). And we see this in his place in the public imaginary, which is not defined by any of his early achievements, but by the ellipses left behind at the moment of his assassination, when he appeared to be in the process of a personal transformation, which was mirrored in his campaign platform for the Democratic primary, and which corresponded to a historical moment in which the public imagination was captivated by the idea of change.

This may seem like an unexpected point of departure for our day devoted to metanoia. Death is precisely the termination of change and the point at which the person's ethos is fixed in amber. In Dante's *Inferno*, the torments are tailored to the sinners' earthly lives, and they repeat themselves for all eternity. But, as Bobby Kennedy's example illustrates, death also establishes the Kairos of metanoia and inspires its associated sense of urgency. Any metanoic movement is set against this horizon of temporal finitude, which motivates, orients, and ultimately interrupts all trajectories of personal transformation. So, in summary I think this is worth keeping in mind throughout today, not out of morbidity but out of realism, that metanoia is not a technology we perfect or a magical incantation, but it is an appropriate response to our mortal condition.

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