On 18 April 1709, Elizabeth-Charlotte, duchesse d’Orléans, wrote to the Electress Sophia of the Palatinate and complained about the ‘simple-mindedness’ of her new confessor Bertrand Claude de Lignières. In this letter, she recounted the conversion experience of her aunt, Anne de Gonzague, princesse Palatine, which had occurred more than thirty years earlier:

This new confessor of mine is reasonable in all things, except when it comes to religion; on this point he is just too simple-minded, even though he has a good mind; it must be his upbringing […] I told him quite plainly that I am too old to believe simple-minded things. He would like me to believe a lot of trifling things about miracles. On Maundy Thursday something funny happened, which gave me a good laugh: After I had returned from Church where I had partaken of the Lord’s supper, we talked of miracles and someone said… that Madame la Princesse Palatine had been converted because she had held a piece of wood from Our Lord’s cross in a candle flame and it had not burned. I said “That is not a miracle because there is a type of wood in Mesopotamia that does not burn.” Père Lignières said that I simply do not want to believe in miracles. I answered that I had proof in hand and this was true because Paul Lucas had sold me a large piece of the wood that becomes red hot and does not burn. I rose from my seat, fetched the wood and gave it to Père Lignières to examine it thoroughly to make sure it was wood. He cut off a piece of it and threw the rest into the fire, where it became red hot like a piece of iron but did not burn up. Well that was one embarrassed and flustered confessor, for I could not keep myself from laughing.²

Here, the incredulous duchess challenges the import of Anne de Gonzague’s encounter with an incombustible fragment of the True Cross using a piece of wood she had acquired from Paul Lucas. Born into a family of jewellers in Rouen, Lucas was commissioned by the King to
undertake missions collecting curiosities for the royal cabinet and to observe Christians living under Ottoman and Persian rule. The wood that the duchesse d’Orléans describes in this letter was most likely from one of these journeys, on which he also collected medals, manuscripts, semi-precious stones, sea-shells, spices and rare grains. For the duchess, the object in her aunt’s possession was not a holy relic but simply one of countless curiosities which were being displayed in Wunderkammer in courts and households throughout Europe. In this letter, she described how the properties of this sample of wood flustered the royal Jesuit confessor Lignières, who presumably felt undermined by the experiment and perhaps more generally frustrated by the duchess’ propensity to find hilarity in religious matters.

The epistolary anecdote speaks of two incidents when a female religious sceptic used a sacred object to put faith to the test. The latter of the two occasions requires separate treatment, having been motivated at least in part by the duchesse d’Orléans’ exhaustion with the court’s endless religious observances after the conversion of Louis XIV. This article will instead focus on the conversion of her ‘irreligious’ aunt, Anne de Gonzague, who has attracted little scholarly attention beyond that of her early twentieth-century biographer Léonce Raffin. Offering a reassessment of the circumstances surrounding her pious transformation, this article challenges the narrative presented by Raffin and several historians since, which describes the princess’ conversion as the fruit of a successful struggle against her own “worldliness.” Instead, this article foregrounds the place of ‘unbelief’
in the story of her conversion and thus it engages with the work of several other scholars who have uncovered cases of incroyance in medieval and early modern Europe. Using her own écrit, or conversion narrative, this article situates the princess’ conversion within the broader context of her life in Paris and revisits the nature of her associations with the Condé family - namely her son-in-law Louis II de Bourbon, prince de Condé. Condé’s princely court at the family estate of Chantilly, with its lavish program of feasts and hunts, has been interpreted as one of the many “worldly” influences on the princess that delayed her conversion. In challenging this view, this article finds that Anne de Gonzague’s conversion could be realised only after a lifelong cognitive struggle with doubt: a battle that climaxed in her pivotal experiment with a morceau of the True Cross. It highlights the role played by her doctor in this empirical test, the Cartesian physician and ‘notorious athiest’ Pierre Michon Bourdelot, whose hand was first detected by Anne’s biographer. But unlike Raffin, who read Anne’s immersion in Bourdelot’s scientific academy and her exposure to seventeenth-century French philosophical scepticism as another symptom of her infatuation with ‘the world’, this article contends that it was this very intellectual culture which engendered Anne’s pious transformation. The case of Anne de Gonzague - the turning of this aristocratic female courtier from impious debauchee to committed penitent - therefore presents us with an occasion where exposure to the New Philosophy helped to bring about a conversion to religious orthodoxy.
Unbelief in the Conversion Narrative

After the death of her father Charles de Gonzague, Anne decided not to take religious vows as her parents had intended. Her mother Catherine de Mayenne, who died when Anne was two years old, was a deeply pious woman and part of the generation of dévots who pioneered spiritual rejuvenation in France after the Catholic Reformation. Neither did Anne initially share the piety of her older sibling Marie-Louise de Gonzague, who would later become Queen of Poland, and was intimately connected to the Cistercian convent of Port-Royal.

Without dated sources, it is difficult to pinpoint precisely when during the period between her sister’s death in 1667 and her own in 1684 that Anne de Gonzague’s conversion occurred. Even the death of her husband Édouard de Bavière, prince Palatine in 1663 did not trigger her conversion. Living at the Hôtel de Gonzague on the Parisian rue Sainte-Geneviève she continued to mingle within Parisian society at Louis XIV’s increasingly libertine royal court and at her son-in-law’s estate at Chantilly. In 1935, Raffin suggested that Anne made an attempt to eschew the court in the 1650s, but the affairs of her daughter Anne-Henriette – who had married the son of Louis II, prince de Conde, Henry-Jules de Bourbon, duc d’Enghien in 1663 - gave her new worldly engagements for which she ‘once again, sacrificed her piety.’ More recently, Janine Marie Lanza similarly concluded that Anne was ‘corrupted’ by the court in this period, suggesting that it was only later after she renounced the worldly life ‘with little deviation’ that
she was able to truly convert.\textsuperscript{17} Such interpretations find a textual warrant in the sermon Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet delivered at her funeral at the Carmelite church in the Parisian Faubourg Saint-Jacques on 9 August 1685, which named worldliness as the obstruction to her conversion. Yet the evidence does not really indicate that this culture of ‘divertissement’ was imposed on a reluctantly pious widow by her son-in-law and his father. The princess was also hosting similar gatherings at her own château at Raincy.\textsuperscript{18} In November 1664, for example, Molière’s Tartuffe was performed there, only six months after it had been staged at Versailles. Anne supported the satirical playwright against the criticism of dévots such as Guillaume de Lamoignon when Tartuffe came under fire for mocking the religious hypocrisy of courtiers, and another of his plays Dom Juan was performed at Raincy in 1665.\textsuperscript{19} The presence of scientific sceptics such as the Cartesian doctor Bourdelot also helped give Raincy (and Chantilly) a reputation in contemporary memoirs for being a place of libertinage and irreligion.\textsuperscript{20}

An undated, short ‘écrit’ by Anne de Gonzague provides us with her own explanation for the delay in her conversion.\textsuperscript{21} In Bossuet’s funeral sermon, commissioned by Anne’s daughter, he quoted liberally from this ‘écrit’ and also explained that the abbé de Rancé instructed her to write it, although there are no surviving letters between him and the princess to confirm this.\textsuperscript{22} At the start of Anne’s conversion narrative we learn what she perceived to be impeding her conversion:

\begin{quote}
I had very much lost all the lights of faith which left me only with doubt[...]. I fell into such blindness that when someone spoke seriously of religion in my presence, I wanted to laugh [...].
\end{quote}
same urge that one normally feels when simple people believe ridiculous and impossible things, and I had said often to my friends that the greatest of all miracles in my regard would be to firmly believe in Christianity.\textsuperscript{23}

In this passage, Anne did not acknowledge her social duties, familial obligations or attachment to the worldly life as having encumbered her spiritual reformation, but rather a ‘blindness’ (‘aveuglement’) or incapacity for belief, which left her with ‘doubt’. She made her own desire (‘envie’) to laugh during the discussion of religious matters comparable to the feeling of intellectual superiority she had towards ‘personnes fort simples’ who believed unquestioningly in the ‘ridiculous and impossible.’ Here, Anne was not just mocking the kinds of religious superstition which had already been condemned by the Protestants and which the Catholic Church had set out to reform. The construction of the last sentence in the passage signals the fact that, for her, ‘miracles’ (and thus official Catholic doctrine) were among these ‘ridiculous and impossible’ things which she found so incomprehensible. Faith in such things was consequently laughable to Anne, which must have made her a ready audience for Molière’s plays.\textsuperscript{24}

Conversion narratives, by their very nature, tell of transitions from different states of ‘belief.’ But in the genre of female spiritual writings to which Anne’s text belonged, ‘worldliness’ was usually conceived of as impeding conversion and is something which we can suppose would have been easier to admit to than the impiety Anne confessed to.\textsuperscript{25} Anne’s unbelief was not presented as a product of her ignorance or apathy, but as part of an on-going intellectual battle
against doubt – not her worldly lifestyle. In the narrative she expressly claimed that she ‘would have given anything’ (‘donné toutes choses’) in order to believe.\textsuperscript{26} Her correspondence substantiates this. Letters to both her sister, and her pious cousin, Anne-Genevieve de Bourbon, duchesse de Longueville, show that whilst she did not convert for another two decades, Anne was already contemplating matters of faith as early as 1650.\textsuperscript{27}

The internal, cognitive struggle revealed by Anne de Gonzague’s confession of unbelief cannot be detached from the intellectual milieu in which this text was produced. Anne’s doubt – and, as we shall see, her method of overcoming it – were conditioned by her contact with, and participation in, some of the prevailing philosophical debates of the century. The next part of this article will situate her narrative within this context in order to explore its impact upon her conversion.

\textit{‘We should never believe anything we have not dared to doubt.’}\textsuperscript{28} Anne de Gonzague’s written confession to Rancé tells us that a staunch belief in Christianity seemed ‘miraculous’ to the princess before she converted. But her ‘doubt’ did not extend to a denial of the existence of God. She followed the revelation of her ‘unbelief’ with a qualifying statement:

\begin{quote}
I was nevertheless always convinced that there was a premier being. God had given me the grace not to doubt it.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

In reference to this particular profession of faith, a single footnote in Christopher Betts’ study of early French Deism identifies Anne de
Gonzague, and her son-in-law Condé, as Deist. Betts cites an earlier statement by Historian Henri Busson who observed that whilst Anne had no faith in the ‘mystères,’ she pledged her belief in God.³⁰ Coupled with Anne’s comments on the implausibility of miracles, this passage certainly suggests consistency between her ‘unbelief’ and at least one seventeenth-century definition of the term - that is, a person who rejects all religious beliefs except faith in God.³¹ The term ‘Deist’ was ambiguous in this period, however, and whether Anne would have identified herself as such is questionable. More compelling for our purposes is that Anne’s faith in God alone allows her ‘unbelief’ to be situated within the ‘Deist’ tendencies of the libertins érudits, permitting the identification of religious scepticism as the intellectual basis for the epistemological obstacles she described in her own conversion narrative.³²

The libertins érudits were thinkers who inherited the philosophical and religious scepticism of Michel de Montaigne and Pierre Charron, generated by the sixteenth-century revival of the Greek Pyrrhonian movement. Put simply, these ‘sceptics’ challenged the certainty of knowledge and any kind of dogmatism – religious or scientific.³³ The seventeenth-century libertins included figures such as the librarian Gabriel Naudé, doctor Guy Patin and tutor François de La Mothe Le Vayer. A second movement of ‘constructive’ or ‘mitigated’ sceptics, inclusive of Petrus Gassendi and Marin Mersenne, tried to reconcile scepticism with the possibility of knowledge by claiming that the ‘appearances’ or ‘effects’ of things could not be doubted – for instance, ‘the light at
noon’ could be proven to be ‘greater than that of the stars.’ Yet the metaphysical challenges raised by many of these thinkers did not preclude their belief in God; the sceptics merely worked from the premise that any ‘proofs’ presented to justify religious belief were insufficient. Consequently the growth of deism in seventeenth-century France has been linked both to their religious scepticism and the Cartesian method – which will become significant later.

The way in which Anne de Gonzague was able to sustain her faith in God, whilst doubting the ‘ridiculous and impossible’ tenets of Christianity was almost certainly a consequence of her encounter with the religious scepticism of the libertins érudits in the Parisian scientific academy of her physician, the Cartesian Pierre Michon Bourdelot. Unlike her son-in-law Condé who is listed in Gallois’ minutes or Conversations as being present, Anne would not have attended Bourdelot’s meetings since the academy was for men only; but it seems tenable that the princess was exposed to these ideas through her doctor. The academy was held at the Hôtel de Condé in the 1630s and 1640s, and subsequently at Bourdelot’s own house on the rue de Tournon from 1664, continuing until his death in 1685. Bourdelot, born at Sens to a barber-surgeon Maximilien Michon in 1610, was adopted by his paternal uncles Edmé and Jean Bourdelot in 1629 when he began studying medicine in Paris; Edmé’s position as médecin to Louis XIII helped to acquaint his nephew with the libertins. Bourdelot took his doctorate in 1640 and became médecin du Roi, before transferring to Queen Christina of Sweden’s court during the noble Fronde, where he took up the chair of
her Stockholm Academy in 1652.⁴⁰ The scepticism of Bourdelot and the libertins érudits was essentially characterised by a scientific and philosophical inquisitiveness and disillusionment with the religion of the dévots: two things with which Anne must have sympathized.⁴¹ Perhaps the ‘friends’ that Anne confessed she spoke with about her ‘unbelief’ was a reference to the scholarly circle in Bourdelot’s academy?⁴² The doubt in her conversion narrative should, at the very least, be read as an expression of her immersion in these debates, and perhaps a neglected contribution to them.

The more direct influence of the ‘notorious atheist’ Bourdelot on Anne’s philosophic approach to her conversion was noted by both the princess’ biographer and Bossuet in his funeral sermon.⁴³ What evidence is there to support these suppositions? Bourdelot enjoyed the princess’ patronage and that of her son-in-law, Condé.⁴⁴ Contemporaries also place Bourdelot at the home of the princess during the testing of the True Cross which ‘converted’ her, as we shall see.⁴⁵ But more convincing than any circumstantial evidences are the clues embedded within Anne’s own conversion narrative, which signal the intellectual premises of her experiment with the Croix Palatine. The final part of this article will turn to reconstruct this event – which became the ultimate expression of Anne’s desire for religious truth.

Seeing is Believing? The Miracle of the True Cross
The relic of the True Cross which Anne de Gonzague thrust into the flames had been gifted to her from the King of Poland Jean Casimir Wasa in 1668, but the reports of Cyril of Jerusalem show that a cult of the True Cross had been flourishing since the fourth century.\textsuperscript{46} The history of its discovery was told by Ambrose of Milan and the other doctors of the early Church.\textsuperscript{47} According to such accounts, the dowager Empress Helena-Augusta found the True Cross on Golgotha, or Calvary Hill, along with two other false relics.\textsuperscript{48} The accounts offer different explanations as to how Helena came to establish which of these was the True Cross.\textsuperscript{49} In one version, the authenticity of one of the crosses was proved when it was used by Helena and Macarius, bishop of Jerusalem, to resurrect a local woman.\textsuperscript{50} In Rome, Constantine preserved the True Cross within an elaborate reliquary held inside the Sessorian Palace and throughout the period, the cult continued to grow.\textsuperscript{51} By the twelfth century, the ‘Holy Wood’ or ‘Rood’ had become an object of veneration and Jacobus de Voragine’s \textit{Legenda Aurea} or ‘Golden Legend’ helped to disseminate True Cross stories further.\textsuperscript{52} Both literary and iconographic expressions of the cult reinforced its veneration in the fourteenth century.\textsuperscript{53}

The cult of the True Cross was just part of a broader cult of relics, grounded in a conviction that sacred objects could function as channels as divine intercession. Augustine spoke of extraordinary cures by saintly relics which had inspired Christian conversions in the fifth century.\textsuperscript{54} As Peter Brown has shown, miracles surrounding the shrines of early Christian martyrs were ubiquitous, and to borrow Rowan Greer’s phrase ‘the sacralisation of the Empire […] was accompanied by a
The bodies of saints and their brandia were being venerated from the early Middle Ages and formed part of what Eamon Duffy called the ‘economy of grace.’ The Catholic Church responded to Protestant criticisms of the cult of Saints and their relics by reaffirming its importance at the Council of Trent and the rediscovery of relics in the Roman catacombs in 1578 did much to renew the cult in the sixteenth century.

As the cult of the True Cross continued to spread, ‘vast forest(s) of splinters’ were found across the world. The sources afford us some certainty about how one splinter came to the hands of a seventeenth-century religious sceptic. The probate inventory produced after the death of Anne de Gonzague’s royal sister shows that the relic remained in the Polish treasury until 1667, before being bequeathed to her. The document describes a bejewelled, gold reliquary, decorated with rubies, diamonds and pearls, encasing a piece of the True Cross. After Anne’s death 17 years later, the relic was relocated to the Benedictine abbey at Saint-Germain-des-Prés – the site for Jean Casimir’s retreat after his abdication and where his heart was interred. In 1686 a larger reliquary was made to hold the fragment and it survived destruction in 1794. Since 1828, its final resting place has been the treasury of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, where it remains on display. The fragment itself, which had been carved into the shape of a cross, originally had a silver cover with the inscription:

Jesus Christ attached to the cross, you have lifted up the nature of men. Manuel Kommenos who wears the crown wrote this.
There has been some disagreement among scholars over the date of the inscription, and the events leading to its appearance in the Polish treasury in 1475 have excited similar scholarly debate. Elżbieta Dabrowska has proposed a number of explanations for its transfer to Poland – the most likely among these that the relic was presented to Vladislas Jagello by the legates of the Emperor Manuel Paléologue in 1420 during a meeting with the ambassador at Cracow. Relics were often exchanged among the social elite as gifts in this way and could also be donated to religious institutions.

According to the letter with which this article commenced, Anne’s encounter with the holy object in her possession was the clincher in her conversion. Here, Anne’s conversion narrative presents an interpretative obstacle, since the story of the ‘Croix Palatine’ is starkly absent from it. Bossuet’s sermon was equally silent on this ‘miracle’ – perhaps to avoid any repercussions for the princess’ accomplice, Condé, who would have been present in the congregation that day, but did not convert for some years. Anne’s niece was not the only courtier to reminisce about the event, however, as the memoirs of the duc de Saint Simon show:

Monsieur, the prince [de Condé] had a large piece of the True Cross and they tried to burn it. They carried out this crime at the house of Madame the Princesse Palatine with the famous Bourdelot [...] the blazing fire did not touch the holy wood, which Bourdelot, in anger, told them that the age of the wood had given it durability[...]

This was not just courtly hearsay. Mademoiselle de Themericourt, a female religious at the convent of Port-Royal also gave an epistolary
account of the event. She wrote about the princess having volunteered the splinter for an experiment during a conversation about ‘religion’ with the Grand Condé who wanted to ‘test’ whether the wood of the True Cross was immune from the flames. These witnesses attribute quite a passive role to Anne and suggest that Condé instigated the sacrilegious act, but the princess was clearly also enthusiastic about the test and even remembered the event in her testament, where she vowed to have ‘seen the [holy true cross] held in the flames without burning’. Her description of the fragment corresponds with that documented by other scholars, as that of ‘Jerusalem’, engraved with a ‘Greek inscription.

Anne’s attempt to establish the veracity of the relic was not without precedent. Subjecting a relic to a flame was actually formally adopted by the 2nd Council of Saragossa (529) as a means of testing its authenticity. Bede chronicled the application of a fire ‘test’ to the cloth Veronica used to wipe Jesus’ face in 670 and there are several other early examples where this ‘official iconoclasm’ was used as a tool for verification. The incombustibility of sacred objects regularly astonished their venerators, and not just adorers of the True Cross. Both saints and their objects were thought to be able to withstand fire, as was the Eucharist and the Corporal cloth on which it rested during Mass.

After the Reformation, the cult of relics became even more closely supervised by the Church. Miracles, in particular, were confessionally-charged since they would help to substantiate respective Catholic and Protestant claims to the ‘True Church.’ Protestant theologians stressed
that only publicly visible demonstrations of miracles could be accepted as legitimate. In the Catholic Church, the miracles performed by candidates for canonization were closely examined; witnesses gave accounts at trials for canonization and precisely what counted as a ‘true miracle’ was closely regulated. The Congregation of Rites was established in 1587, and subsequently reformed in the 1630s, to oversee the process of canonization. Relics were also subject to strict authentication criteria including the requirement of documentation. Strictly speaking, the laity (and particularly women) were not at liberty to access the power of sacred objects. The Church decreed that relics were not to be kept in the cloister in female religious houses and tried to regulate their presence in secular homes. Reliquaries were also designed to protect them from inappropriate handling. In practice, however, many lay people experienced the power of relics for themselves. Their faith was inspired by ‘things seen,’ as Cynthia Hahn notes in her work on early medieval shrines. As Dillenberger observes, it was through the ‘modalities of touch and sight’ that most people ‘felt’ the power of relics.

The sight of the incombustible relic proved its worth to Anne, as she began carrying the relic with her on all long journeys. She also accumulated a large collection of other relics between the death of her husband in 1663 and her own in 1684, perhaps in the aftermath of this corroboratory experience. Anne’s conversion narrative is undated and so it is difficult to chart how the miracle fits into the overall chronology of her conversion. It seems likely that the narrative was
composed after her encounter with the relic and she simply chose to omit this information. This decision have been informed at least in part by her desire to conceal what was at best, impious conduct, and at worst, an act of sacrilege, from her spiritual director.

That Anne assumed the (albeit unofficial) role of authenticator in the testing of the Croix Palatine confirms what we have already observed about her religious scepticism and her attitudes towards the Church. But Anne’s experiment with the relic was not only a perversion of Catholic protocol; ‘testing’ the relic also had a scientific basis. Anne’s contact with her physician and his scholarly contacts came at a time when Cartesianism and the mechanical philosophy were favourably received into Bourdelot’s scientific academy.86 Descartes attempted to devise a solution to the epistemological crisis created by philosophical scepticism in his Meditations by establishing one fundamental truth: cogito ergo sum.87 Using the cogito as the foundation, Descartes advocated a series of rational steps from knowledge of God to objective truth.88 Anne’s approach to ‘testing’ the True Cross in a candle flame was perhaps modelled on Descartes’ scientific method, as a crude empirical experiment. Although Descartes’ rationalist metaphysics depended principally on abstract reasoning (a priori knowledge), his experiments remained formative in his pursuit of scientific knowledge.89 In this context, many meetings of Bourdelot’s academy were devoted to the discussion of experimental, as well as theoretical, science.90

Claims that Anne’s experiment was a Cartesian-inspired empirical ‘test’ need not rest only on the (plausible, if tentative) hypothesis
that she was exposed to these ideas through Bourdelot. The language of her conversion narrative allows us to trace these influences on her trial more directly. Although, as we have already noted, there is no explicit reference to the incombustible relic in the text, Anne did make one strong allusion to it in her écrit. In this part of the narrative, Anne explicitly confronted her dependency on seeing something in order to dispel her doubt:

I dreamed one night that walking alone in a forest I met a blind man in a little cave. I asked him if he had been born without his sight[...] He replied that he was born blind. ‘So you do not know,’ I said to him [...] ‘the light of the sun which is so bright and beautiful?’ ‘No’, he replied, ‘I am not able to imagine any of it, because I have never seen it. I have no idea of it.’ Now it seemed to me that all of a sudden this blind man changed his tone of voice and spoke to me with an air of authority saying, ‘you must learn that there are very excellent and extraordinary things which are no less true just because one is unable to see them or understand them’... I felt in that moment a truth so clear and found myself filled with the joy which I had been looking for, for a long time.  

Of course, ‘blindness’ had important spiritual currency in these types of text and was a recurring analogy in many stories of religious conversion. Blindness is frequently evoked in the Bible as a metaphor for unbelief and Augustine condemned various forms of his own spiritual blindness throughout his Confessions. Yet here ‘sight’ is not just being evoked as a spiritual metaphor, but also refers to the literal bodily sense. Anne questions how a person born without sight could ‘know’ (‘vous ne savez donc pas’) the light of the sun, having never witnessed it. In doing so, she made a reference to her own inability to access visual or physical evidence, which had hindered the conversion that she was so eager for: a nod to her motivations for ‘testing’ the Croix.
Palatine. Crucially, the passage also shows that Anne converted because she came to accept that some things exist beyond human perception; as the blind man’s testimony convinced her that one could know of and believe in the reality of ‘excellent’ (‘excellentes) and ‘extraordinary’ (‘admirable’) things without having seen proof.

The indications here are that Anne’s experiment with the True Cross did convert her, but only because it forced her to recognise that we cannot necessarily ‘see’ everything which exists. This realisation was therefore based on a new awareness of limited human ‘sensory capacities:’ another important component of the ‘New Philosophy.’ Scholars such as Mersenne and Gassendi rejected Aristotelian empiricism and, in line with the sceptical tradition, argued against the accuracy of the ‘senses’ as a means for attaining knowledge. Instead, they claimed the senses could only allow us to observe outer appearances. Whilst Descartes conceded that the senses played a role in scientific experiments, he argued that the intellect could comprehend things undetectable to the senses. When viewed within this philosophical context, Anne’s account of her discussion with the blind man must be read as an expression of her internalisation of seventeenth-century debates on the cognitive faculties. Translated into Anne’s dream, this took the form of a conversation about how a blind man could ‘know’ that the light of the sun existed without seeing it – and, by implication, how she might believe without seeing. That this message was transmitted in a dream also has Cartesian undertones. Dreaming presented philosophical sceptics such as Montaigne with a thorny epistemological
quandary: how one can distinguish between reality and the seeming veracity of the visions experienced whilst sleeping. On this basis, in Descartes’s *Meditations* he extended his ‘doubt’ to question whether dreams could constitute ‘illusions’ created by ‘the demon.’ As Stuart Clark puts it, ‘what thinking with dreams meant for both these authors [Descartes and Montaigne], therefore, was a radical calling into question of assumptions about the truth, certainty and objectivity of sensory knowledge.’

As we have already noted, the idea that belief was something that humans could not verify was the basis for the Pyrrhonian sceptics’ belief in God, because they accepted that their faith was beyond proof. Importantly, it also allowed them to deny that the authenticity of visual religious spectacles such as miracles could be known with any certainty. Significantly, for Anne, the effects of extending her philosophical scepticism to question the adequacy of her own senses actually allowed her to reach a different conclusion – one which returned her to orthodoxy:

> At mass I found myself in a very different state than I usually was. I seemed to feel the real presence of Our Lord as much as visible things which cannot be doubted.

Once she awoke from the dream, Anne noted that she was able to trust in the ‘mysteres.’ In this particular extract, she vowed that the doctrine of the real presence in the Eucharist had become a certainty for her. There are some inconsistencies in her logic (such as the appeal here to demonstrable ‘visible’ proof), but it seems that, on the basis of the
dream, Anne deduced that if the light of the sun still existed despite one man’s incapacity to see it, why should the mysteries not be true despite her own human inability to ‘see’ them.

It is clear from her écrit that Anne continued to wrestle with doubts which challenged the durability of her conversion, even after her dream. Her correspondence also betrays signs of her reservations up to one year before her death. In February 1683, for example, she wrote to Madame de Boulainvilliers, superior of the convent of the Annonciades at Meulan, about how she hoped to seek the ‘peace and silence of their solitude’ and to be distanced and protected from the ‘corrupting influences of the world’. But the transformative effects of the dreamed conversation with the blind man are clear in her account. The reappearance of this theme of witnessing the miraculous in the text is testimony to its part in her conversion. Anne’s conversion narrative tells us that the princess was only able to make this transition and truly convert once she had satisfied her own intellectual curiosity by conducting an experiment and even doubting her own senses during this experiential test.

**Conclusion**

The conversion of Anne de Gonzague amounted to far more than simply the moment when a society aristocrat was finally able to relinquish her addiction to worldly pleasures. Using the princess’ own composition - referred to here as her ‘conversion narrative’ - this article has revealed the way that Anne’s transformation in fact hinged upon her
capacity to resolve her own epistemological crisis. In many respects, Anne’s ‘conversion narrative’ conforms to type. Just as historians have discovered in many female spiritual writings produced in this period, her account possessed many formulaic qualities. ‘Blindness’ was made analogous to a lack of faith on several occasions and Anne’s ‘visions’ were stock images of feminine spirituality. She celebrated having ‘wept’ after reading the story of the conversion of two courtiers in Augustine’s *Confessions*; in this period sacred tears were typical of the experiences had by female mystics and part of a repertoire of symbols of feminine, affective piety. But crucially, Anne’s story also problematizes existing approaches to early modern female conversions which make ‘affective’ and ‘intellective’ experiences not only antithetical, but even mutually exclusive.

This article has recovered the admission made by Anne early in her *écrit*, that her faith was confined to belief in God, and located her ‘doubt’ within the deist tendencies of the libertins érudits who attended meetings held at the homes of her son-in-law Condé and her physician Bourdelot between the 1660s and 1680s. It has suggested that the scandalous ‘testing’ of the relic itself may have been inspired by both Anne’s mistrust of Church procedure and a scientific curiosity roused by the ideas circulating in Bourdelot’s academy. Historians have suggested that a climate of uncertainty created by the Reformations raised fundamental questions about the nature of knowledge and belief in this period. Anne de Gonzague’s own life was similarly strained by confessional divisions which we can suppose might explain her
receptiveness to religious scepticism – since her husband had been a Calvinist before converting to Catholicism faith in 1646.¹⁰⁴

Anne’s conversion narrative also presents us with another (disregarded) example of the intellectual contributions which seventeenth-century women made to science and philosophy during the age of the ‘Scientific Revolution.’¹⁰⁵ More significantly, Anne de Gonzague’s ‘test’ of her faith compels us to rethink the relationship between the New Philosophy and faith in the seventeenth century. Historians of science have already begun to contest the notion that this period marked the beginning of a process of separation of science from religion; this is, for some, a historical platitude of traditional literature on the Scientific Revolution.¹⁰⁶ That Anne de Gonzague’s application of philosophical scepticism and the Cartesian method to her own irreligion actually brought about her conversion to orthodoxy further brings into question this association between the New Philosophy and secularisation.

In the end then, it did take a miracle to help Anne de Gonzague believe, just as she predicted it would. Contemporary accounts of the princess’ attempt to put faith to the test delighted her peers and, as we observed at the start of this article, the anecdote continued to amuse her niece several decades later. Ultimately, however, the sensationalization of the experiment of the Croix Palatine does an injustice to the extended period of intellectual toil Anne de Gonzague invested in her conversion; only the very process of doubting could
eventually bring about her extraordinary transition from libertine religious sceptic, to orthodox believer.

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Acknowledgements
Research for this article was made possible by a Max Weber Postdoctoral Fellowship at the European University Institute, 2012 – 2013. The author wishes to thank the editors and anonymous reviewers of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* for their insightful suggestions. I am also grateful to conference participants at ‘Conversion Narratives in the Early Modern World’ (York, 2011) for their comments on an earlier version of this article.

Notes
1 This title is a reference to R. W. Scribner, “Incombustible Luther: The Image of the Reformer in Early Modern Germany,” Past and Present 110 (February, 1986): 38 - 68. In this article Scribner showed how the cult of Luther developed in early modern Germany based on the ‘miracles’ occurring around his portraits which did not burn in fire.


3 Ina Baghdiantz McCabe, Orientalism in Early Modern France: Eurasian Trade, Exoticism and the Ancien Regime (New York: Berg, 2008), 131. Lucas is perhaps most renowned for having introduced a Syrian Maronite from Aleppo, known as Hanna, to France. Hanna, or Jean-Baptiste Dipi as Lucas often called him, is credited with the tales of ‘Ali Baba’ and ‘Alladin.’ Ibid, 131. The curiosities which Lucas brought back from his journeys are well documented by the comprehensive lists that he compiled, as well as the descriptions of his travels; Mémoire des antiques et autres pièces rares et curieuses, du cabinet du feu Sr Paul (Paris: Rebuffé, 1738). The earliest edition of his travel journal is Voyage du sieur Paul Lucas au Levant, ed. Charles-César Baudelot de Daerval (Paris: G. Vandive, 1704).

4 Paula Findlen, Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy (London: University of California Press, 1994). Alexandra Walsham has recently argued,
however, that relics were not necessarily ‘disenchanted’ by their incorporation into such collections; see “Introduction: Relics and Remains,” Past and Present Supplement 5 2010 (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010): 12.


8 Many have responded to Lucien Febvre’s marginalisation of unbelief in his seminal 1942 work, Le problème de l’incroyance au XVIe siècle: la religion de Rabelais (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1942). A recent interesting piece is Federico Barbierato, The Inquisitor in the Hat Shop: Inquisition, Forbidden Books and

9 Béguin, Les Princes de Condé, 330-337.

10 Raffin was the first to suggest this in Anne de Gonzague, 280 – 83.

11 For some, the New Philosophy of the seventeenth century marked the beginning of a separation of science and religion and thus the advent of secularisation. See John Hedley Brooke, Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 53 – 59.


Their marriage contract can be found at Archives Nationales, Paris (hereafter AN), Minutier Central (hereafter MC), ET/LXXIII/379, 1 May 1645.


Raffin, Anne de Gonzague, 278; Anne-Henriette’s marriage contract can be found at AN, Série K, 541, fo. 29, 28 July 1663.


I have consulted two versions of the source at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (hereafter BnF.). The first is an undated printed account: *Écrit de Mme Anne de Gonzagues de Clèves où elle rend compte de ce qui a été l'occasion de sa conversion, avec l'oraison funèbre de cette princesse, prononcée par feu M. Bossuet* (n.p, n.d.). The second version is printed in Raffin’s biography, *Anne de Gonzague*, as “*Écrit de Mme Anne de Gonzague de Clèves, princesse Palatine, ou elle rend compte de ce qui a été l’occasion de sa conversion,*” 292 – 99. Both versions are essentially the same, with some minor orthographical differences. In this article, quotations are taken from Raffin’s version. Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, in his sermon at the princess’ funeral at the Carmelite church in the faubourg Saint-Jacques on 9 August 1685, gave an account of her life, conversion and reason for composing the text: ‘Un saint abbé, dont la doctrine et la vie sont un ornement de notre siècle, ravi d’une conversion aussi admirable et aussi parfait que celle de notre princesse, lui ordonna de l’écrire pour l’édification de l’Église,’ *Oraisons Funèbres de Bossuet, Avec une introduction, des notices et des notes par A. Gazier* (Paris: Armand Colin et Cie, 1894), 191.

Bossuet was working on this according to his own letter to Condé in July 1685, *Correspondance de Bossuet: Nouvelle, éd. augmentée de lettres inédites et publiée avec des notes et des appendices sous le patronage de l'Académie française* (Paris: Hachette, 1909), vol.
Rancé’s correspondence has been published in several editions, I consulted Correspondance: abbé de Rancé; éd. originale par Alban John Krailsheimer (4 volumes, Paris: les Éd. du Cerf, 1993).

23 Raffin, Anne de Gonzague: ‘J’avais tellement perdu toutes les lumières de la Foi qu’à peine me restait-il le doute [...] j’étais tombée dans un tel aveuglement que lorsqu’on parlait sérieusement devant moi des choses de la religion, je me sentais la même envie de rire qu’on sent ordinairement quand des personnes fort simples croient des choses ridicules et impossibles; et je disais souvent à quelques personnes de mes amis que le plus grand de tous les miracles à mon égard serait celui de croire fermement le Christianisme,’ 292 – 93.

24 The treatment of religion and belief by Molière has been examined by many scholars. For a recent biography in English, see Virginia Scott, Molière: A Theatrical Life (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3.

25 The theme of ‘worldliness’ has been identified in many studies of conversion narratives, and not just Catholic. See, for example, D. B. Hindmarsh, “The Olney Autobiographers: English Conversion Narrative in the Mid-Eighteenth Century,” The Journal of Ecclesiastical History 49, no. 1 (January, 1998): 82.

26 Raffin, Anne de Gonzague: ‘J’aurais donné toutes choses pour trouver la Religion véritable et pour en être persuadée,’ 293.
BnF. Clairambault. Ms. 460, fo. 205, Anne de Gonzague to Anne-Geneviève de Bourbon-Condé, undated, but written shortly after the Fronde; BnF. Fonds Françises (hereafter FR.), 3845, ff. 12 – 13, Anne de Gonzague to Marie-Louise de Gonzague, undated, but written during the later 1640s after Marie-Louise became Queen of Poland.

Maxims of a Queen, Christina of Sweden (1626 – 1689), selected and translated by Una Birch (London: John Lane, 1907), 27. This was probably adapted from Descartes, probably under Bourdelot’s influence during his time as chair of her Stockholm Academy, 1652 – 1653; see Susanna Åkerman, “The Answer to Scepticism of Queen Christina’s Academy (1656),” in Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, eds. Richard H. Popkin and Arjo Vanderjagt (New York: Brill, 1993), 97. On Bourdelot, see Béguin’s prosopographical appendix in Les Princes de Condé, 405.

Raffin, Anne de Gonzague: ‘J’ai toujours néanmoins persuadée qu’il y avait un premier être. Dieu m’avait fait la grâce de n’en point douter et de lui demander souvent la connaissance de la vérité,’ 293.


Betts cites Antoine Furetière’s 1690 definition: ‘Déiste: Homme qui n’a point de religion particulière mais qui reconnaît


37 Harth, *Cartesian Women*, 60.


42 See note 35 above.

43 Raffin, Anne de Gonzague, 280; Bossuet lamented this in his funeral sermon: Oraisons Funèbre de Bossuet, 192.

44 Raffin, Anne de Gonzague, 281.


48 Ibid, 14.


50 Michel Quenot, *The Resurrection and the Icon*; translated from the French by Michael Breck (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 174.

51 Ibid, 14.


53 Ibid, 7.


60 Derwich, “Le baiser de paix utilisé lors du couronnement des rois de Pologne,” 337.

61 Ibid, 337.


Raffin, La Croix Palatine, 9.


Oraisons Funèbre de Bossuet: Mademoiselle de Téméricourt: ‘Ils parlaient de religion comme gens qui n’en ont point. Sur cela, M[onsieur] le prince dit qu’il avait oui dire que le bois de la
vraie croix ne brûlait point, et qu’il voudrait bien en faire l’épreuve. “Cela n’est pas difficile, dit M[ada]me la Princesse, on m’a fait présent d’un morceau qui vient d’Allemagne; nous n’avons tout à l’heure qu’à en faire l’expérience” Aussitôt ella alla quérir le morceau de la vraie croix, duquel elle coupa avec ses ciseaux, un très petit morceau, qu’elle prit avec la pointe de ses ciseaux et qu’elle mit à la flame d’une bougie qui était près d’eux. Elle fut d’abord assez surprise de ce que ce morceau de brûlait point[...]’ 169.

70 AN, RS/1261, 6 Juillet 1684: ‘Je leur donne encore ma croix de pierreries avec la s[ain]te vraye croix que j’ateste avoir veu dans les flames sans bruller. cette croix est double comme celle de Jerusalem et il y a une double croix dor avec des gravures des lettres grecques.’

71 AN, RS/1261, 6 Juillet 1684.


73 Snoek, Medieval Piety from Relics to the Eucharist, 329 – 32.

74 Scribner, “The Incombustible Luther,” 43.


79 Ibid, 122.


Relation de ce qui s’est passé dans la translation d’une portion considérable de la vraie croix, d’un clou de Notre Seigneur, du sang miraculeux, et de quelques reliques aportées de l’hostel de madame la princesse palatine à l’abbaye de saint germain des prez (Paris, 1684), 8.

The probate inventory produced after the death of the Prince Palatine reveals no such objects: Musée Condé, Chantilly, 2 - A - 010, 5 November 1663, ‘Biens: Edouard de Bavière rue de Cley, paroisse st Eustache’; whereas the probate inventory produced after her death in 1684 at her Parisian residence on the rue Sainte-Geneviève in the parish of Saint-Sulpice describes a large collection of relics and devotional objects: AN, MC, ET/XCII/0247, 3 August 1684. Obviously, this rests on the assumption that the notary listed all of the items owned.


Ibid, 194 - 95.


Raffin, Anne de Gonzague: ‘...une nuit Je songeai que, marchant seule dans une espèce de forêt, j’avais rencontré un aveugle dans une petite grotte. Je lui demandai s’il était aveugle de naissance, ou s’il l’était devenu? Il me répondit qu’il était né aveugle. “Vous ne savez donc pas, lui dis-je, ce que c’est la lumière qui est si belle et si agréable, et le soleil qui est si éclatant et si beau?” “Non, me répondit-il, je n’en puis imaginer; car n’ayant jamais vu, je ne puis n’en former aucune idée. Je ne laisse pas de croire que c’est quelque chose de très beau et de très agréable à voir.” Alors, il me semble que cet aveugle changea tout d’un coup de ton de voix et me parlant avec une manière d’autorité, me dit: “Cela vous doit bien apprendre qu’il y a des choses excellentes et très admirables qui ne laissent pas d’être vraies et très désirables, quoiqu’on ne les puisse comprendre ni imaginer en aucune façon...je me sentis en un moment si éclairée de la vérité que, me trouvant transportée de joye d’avoir que je cherchais depuis longtemps.’


The relationship between bodily and spiritual sight has been noted by Matthew Milner in his study of the senses; see The Senses and the English Reformation (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 26.

Gary Hatfield, “The Cognitive Faculties,” in The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy, eds. Daniel Garber,

95 Ibid, 963.

96 Ibid, 954.


98 Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 282.

99 Raffin, *Anne de Gonzague*: ‘Je me trouvais à la messe dans un état bien différent de celui où j’avais accoutumé d’être. Il me semblait sentir la présence réelle de Notre Seigneur à peu près comme l’on sent les choses visibles et dont l’on ne peut douter,’ 295.

100 *Lettres de la reine Anne d'Autriche, du président Molé, du P. de La Chaise, de Mme de Montespan, d'Anne de Gonzague, princesse palatine, écrites à l'occasion de la construction du Couvent des Annonciades de Meulan par Louis XIV avec un précis historique sur ces lettres, par J. A. Le Roi* (Versailles: impr. de A. Montalant, 1860), Anne de Gonzague to Madame de Boulainvilliers: ‘Mon Dieu que jaurez de consolation de pouvoir partager avec ces cheres solitaire la paix et le silence de leur solitude et destre insy esloignee des bruits efroyables et danjeureux du monde ou lon nentend plus parler que de desordres et de miserers et ou le plus de gents de bien sont tous le jours exposez aux dangers de se corompre et de ce perdre,’ 70.

As Robert N. Swanson found in medieval Europe, intellective strands of mysticism were often integrated with the affective; Robert N. Swanson, Religion and Devotion in Europe c.1215 – c.1515 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 179. Scholars have been querying the assumptions made about ‘feminine,’ ‘affective’ piety for several decades now; see Clarissa W. Atkinson, Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and World of Margery Kempe (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 158 – 59. Caroline W. Bynum’s Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 170 – 73, shows that women have traditionally been seen to have been more ‘emotional’ than men. Andrea Janelle Dickens has shown that the
intellectual content of female mystical writings is often ignored, Female Mystic: Great Women Thinkers of the Middle Ages (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 3, 5.


105 The contributions of the Cartésiennes such as Christina of Sweden and Elisabeth of Bohemia, in particular are well known, but the merits of Anne de Gonzague’s texts have, to my knowledge, not been explored. See, for example, Harth, Cartesian Women, 64 – 122; Erica Harth, “Cartesian Women,” Yale French Studies 80 (1991): 146 – 164.

106 This idea continues to be contested by some historians of science. See, for example, Margaret J. Osler, “That the Scientific Revolution Liberated Science from Religion,” in Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion, ed. Ronald L. Numbers (London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 90 – 98.