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Introduction: Conversion Narratives in the Early Modern World

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Abstract
In the early modern world the process of describing a conversion experience was often as important, and problematic, as the conversion itself, and the resulting texts illustrate the extent to which conversion and its effects permeated cultural forms. Charting the discursive nature of conversion narratives, which were frequently translated into foreign languages and crossed international boundaries, this introduction discusses the problems inherent in narrating religious change, considers the current historiography, and outlines the premise for this collection.

Keywords
Conversion, propaganda, missions, Reformation, Counter-Reformation

Introduction: Narrating Conversion

In 1614, the apostolic nuncio Antonio Albergati left Cologne and headed towards Dusseldorf on a mission of special importance: the Duke of Neuberg-Pfalz and his wife had just made the decision to abjure their Calvinist faith and become Catholics, and for Albergati, who had spent months patiently encouraging the duke, the conversion was both a gratifying personal success and a major political and diplomatic victory that was capable of changing the balance in the struggle between Catholic and Protestant princes in the Empire. In his conversations with the duke he suggested a number of ways to strengthen the church, ranging from the protection of ecclesiastical properties, the introduction of schools of Christian doctrine, and the application of the reforms of Trent, but the nuncio's most pressing request, relayed in a dispatch to Rome, was of a different nature: "I begged him make it known to all the world that his conversion was not done for reason of state, but only for having known the truth, and out of a desire to

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save his soul. And for this reason, I asked him to print the reasons that had led him to make his conversion, and he promised to do so."[1]

Similar conversations must have taken place many times during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially in the numerous places across the globe, such as the Rhineland, that stood on the edge of sensitive linguistic and political boundaries. Conversion, whether perceived as an abandoning of one faith in favor of another, or an ascetic intensification of one's existing beliefs—a "turning away" from sin and from the world—was an act that cried out for justification. The unambiguous taking of a new religious position and identity was bound to provoke as many admirers as enemies, and often took on implications or symbolism that stretched far beyond the person involved and their immediate circle. The proliferation of accounts like the one published for the Duke of Neuberg (and his chancellor, Johann Zeschlin, who converted a few years later) was symptomatic of a period when bitter conflict had weakened, if not eliminated, the possibility of a common theological language. This granted individual religious experience a particular importance, and the retelling of the conversion experience was in many ways as important as the religious change itself. In Germany, where the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* formed the basis for a tenuous religious truce between the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 and the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War in 1618, the conversion of a ruler was freighted with a political and diplomatic significance that made the need for explanation all the more urgent.

These were by no means isolated examples. Converts and their biographers crafted a vast array of narratives with a cast of characters and situations that seemingly included every type of individual and every corner of the globe. From a janissary born as an Orthodox Christian in the Balkans who converted to Islam and wrote a Turkish memoir of his transformation in Istanbul, to the spurious account of a Polish nobleman who converted to Judaism in Paris after a chance encounter with a rabbi, there

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[1] Wolfgang Reinhard, ed., *Nuntiaturberichte aus Deutschland. Die Kolner Nuntiatur. Nuntius Antonio Albergati (1610 Mai-1614 Mai)* (Munich, 1972), 1/1: doc. 1105: "Quanto al spiritual, lo pregai far cognoscere in fatti publicamente a tutto il mondo, che la sua conversione non e' stata fatta per ragion di stato, ma solo per verita cognosciuta, et per desiderio di salvar l'anima sua. E percio li feci instanza che si mandassero in stampa le cause che l'havevano mosso a far la sua conversione, e lui mi promise di farlo, e mi disse, che le mandarebbe a me in compendio, et io mi sono preso cura di farle poi estendere da due o tre principali theologhi, accio' si possono mandar alla stampa, il che giovara' grandemente alle cose nostre."

was seemingly no end to the possible variations on a genre that could never be exhausted, let alone summarized, notwithstanding the attempt of the Italian priest Girolamo Bascapè to do so in 1684 with a four-volume compendium of conversions to Catholicism entitled *The Sacred Metamorphoses, or well-known conversions of Turks, Jews, and other Idolators.*[2] With the aid of paraphrase and translation, the lives of converts were often read in languages that they never would have spoken themselves, and the printing press helped to spread them far beyond the locations where they were written, to new audiences and new interpretations.

The result was a complex network of narratives which habitually crossed borders, whether they were produced by exiled presses and smuggled into unsympathetic territories or circulated in letters and bureaucratic documents. Correspondingly, the experiences of converts were disseminated in a multiplicity of different formats, translated into sacramental performance and re-enacted on the public stage, repeated in sermons, and incorporated into ballads.[3] The discursive nature of these narratives of religious metamorphosis—whether designed to persuade, to offer proof, or to incite further change in others—as well as their considerable geographical reach, demonstrates the extent to which conversion and its effects permeated early modern culture.

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Because of the way in which it blends elements of individual experience with larger problems of historical change, conversion has become a focus for a range of scholars working in different geographical areas and using a range of different kinds of sources. For historians of the Reformation and the Early Modern Mediterranean unsatisfied with the premises of overarching categories such as confessionalization, the biographies of converts, frequently gleaned from manuscript diaries and trial records, have proven extremely effective at illustrating the ways in which religious difference was

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[2] *Sacre Metamorfosi, ossia segnalate conversioni di Turchi, Ebrei, e altri Idolatri* (Naples, 1684). The two examples come from Tijana Krstic, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change and Communal Politics in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, 2011) and Magda Teter, "The Legend of Ger Zdenek (Righteous Convert) of Wilno as Polemic and Reassurance" *AJS Review* 29, no. 2 (2005): 237-263, respectively.

[3] The story of John Ward, an English pirate who "turned Turk," inspired both the play *A Christian Turned Turk* (London: William Barrenger, 1612) by Robert Daborne and the ballad *The Sea-mans Song of Captain Ward* (London: F. Coles, T. Vere, and W. Gilbertson, between 1658 and 1664).

experienced in practice, and the obstacles and opportunities that stood in the path of those who abandoned one faith for another.[4] Literary scholars have investigated the reciprocal influences between the proliferation of conversion tales and the new genres of literature which developed over the course of the sixteenth century—from autobiographies that grew out of the practices of Protestant congregations in Stuart England to drama that attracted audiences with edifying stories of immorality and redemption that drew heavily on the archetypes of Paul and Augustine.[5]

The six articles in this issue, all of which are based on papers originally presented at a conference held at the University of York (UK) in June 2011, reflect on these problems related to the representation of religious change, in a series of case studies that range geographically from Elizabethan London to Portuguese Brazil, by way of Istanbul, Rome, Japan, and Fez. Their authors share an interest in the way that converts, their patrons and allies, and on occasion, their opponents crafted stories of conversion: the narrative limits that they selected or that were imposed upon them, their silences and omissions, and the rhetorical styles and arguments that they employed to create narratives capable of persuading their

[4] Though the historical study of conversion in the Reformation goes back to some of the earliest confessional histories of the period, including a multivolume series of biographies by the nineteenth century Archbishop of Strasbourg Andreas Räss, *Die Convertiten seit der Reformation nach ihrem Leben und aus ihren Schriften* (Freiburg, 1866-1880), it has recently been the object of renewed attention. See among others, Benjamin Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2007); Kaspar von Greyerz, Manfred Jakusbowski-Tiessen, Thomas Kaufmann, and Hartmut Lehman, eds., *Interkonfessionalität—Transkonfessionalität—binnenkonfessionelle Pluralität: Neue Forschungen zur Konfessionalisierungsthese. Schriften des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte* (Heidelberg, 2003); and Craig Harline, *Conversions: Two Family Stories from the Reformation and Modern America* (New Haven, CT, 2011). On the Mediterranean, see Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empire: Imperial Subjects Between Venice and Istanbul* (Ithaca, 2012) and Eric Dursteler, *Renegade Women: Gender, Identity, and Boundaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore, 2011), both centering on the Venetian *Stato da Mar* in the Adriatic and Eastern Mediterranean. On conversion in the Ottoman Empire, in addition to the book by Tijana Krstic cited above, Marc D. Baer, *Honored by the Glory of Islam: Conversion and Conquest in Ottoman Europe* (Oxford, 2008).

[5] See in particular Kathleen Lynch, *Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth Century Anglophone World* (Oxford, 2012); Molly Murray, *The Poetics of Conversion in Early Modern English Literature: Verse and Change from Donne to Dryden* (Cambridge, 2009); and Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theatre and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570-1630* (New York, 2003).

intended audiences. Their source material ranges from the type of mass-produced published narrative described above to manuscript records that were never intended for broad consumption—letters, baptismal records, and the records of the inquisitorial courts that have proven to be among the most revealing and evocative kinds of documents for reconstructing numerous aspects of the religious history of the early modern period. Several also make forays into the imagery that accompanied these stories and the iconography that was used to symbolize religious transformation.

Exploring these questions makes it necessary to confront the interpretive and methodological questions that these sources pose—to what extent do representations of conversions follow the true experience and intentions of the convert, and how were they distorted in the retelling? In one way or another, all of the sources investigated here belong to the category of "fictions in the archives," documents that purport to be objective accounts of real events but which were nevertheless crafted by protagonists who had a heavy investment in their outcome. And like the subjects of Natalie Zemon Davis' pardon tales, converts need to be studied with a careful attention not only to the content of their biographies, but to their lapses, censorship and silences, and the rhetorical frame in which the experience was cast. Each one of these stories was contested, retold, and reworked before being written down in the version or versions available to scholars today, and much of the most compelling and significant detail comes from these imperfections and manipulations—the chinks and inconsistencies in the convert's well-crafted armor, rather than the smooth and burnished surface that is most immediately visible.

There were many forces at work in early modern societies that make the historian's task a difficult one. Irene Fosi's article makes it clear that in the circumstances of seventeenth-century Rome, a city where ecclesiastical authorities regarded the mass influx of Northern, often Protestant travelers with a certain ambivalence, there were heavy controls on what converts were allowed to say about themselves. Even as they allowed large numbers of Protestants to abjure without penalty, the city's inquisitors "strictly filtered and coded" the confessions that they made as part of the ceremony, including salient facts about their backgrounds and their reasons for coming to Rome and converting, while repressing any details that might cast their motivations into doubt, and stating in clear terms that the convert had recognized the error of his former views and chosen to embrace the Holy Mother Church. By the second half of the seventeenth century, the tribunal produced a simple printed form for these cases, a fact which

testifies both to how common they had become and the bureaucratic procedure which had been developed to deal with them. But it was not the only strategy adopted: the rectors of the English College, an institution meant to support English Catholics living in the city, was more focused on the re-conversion of the British Isles, and it collected the biographies of men and women who had secretly abjured in the institute with the purpose of making them into *exempla vitae*, stories of redemption and conversion that could provide edification for other Catholics or persuade Protestants to convert.

Yet, despite the intense ecclesiastical and state control over literary production in Europe, there remain instances in which the competing versions and discrepancies of these often highly polished accounts can be discerned and recovered. The case of Baldassare Loyola, a Muslim prince who converted to Catholicism in 1651 and later became a Jesuit, is a good example. Emanuele Colombo's careful examination of an unusually abundant and complete documentary record reveals several distinct ways in which Loyola's retelling of his conversion differed from those of his Jesuit handlers. Despite the fact that he considered his baptism a distinct and definitive breach with his former life as a Muslim, Loyola nevertheless employed a number of continuities in his biography, including visions of a virgin Mary who spoke to him in Arabic, and comparisons between the pilgrimages he took to the holy sites and sanctuaries of Italy to the *hajj* he had made to Mecca, that were omitted or downplayed by his later Jesuit biographer. For the religious order which was among the most assiduous promoters of anti-Islamic propaganda in the Catholic world, it was more important to employ Loyola's story as an unambiguous narrative of the defeat of one faith by another, the decision of a powerful and respected member of Muslim society to abandon Islam in favor of Christianity, than to recognize the compelling and realistic aspects of the convert's inner life. When Loyola's story was adapted for the Madrid stage by Calderón de la Barca in 1669, it contained elements of both the pseudo-hagiographic myth and the complex and introspective self-description by the convert.

In sixteenth-century England, a rising maritime and colonial power that was heavily divided along theological lines, clergy agreed with their Roman Jesuit counterparts about the importance of baptizing Muslims and Jews, but were less sure about why and how to do so. In his examination of the records of adult baptisms in London, Matthew Dimmock finds the clergy of the Church of England improvising from one rite to the next, divided about the most fundamental aspects of the rite by concerns

that were primarily, but not exclusively, theological. Despite the frequent necessity of baptizing Jews, Tatars, and Muslims, the English clergy was unable to agree on a liturgy for baptism until the release of the fourth edition of the Book of Common Prayer in 1662, a situation which in Dimmock's view arose out of "a chaotic interplay of contested religious positions, national and intranational communities, new mercantile horizons, and unstable notions of difference" in the capital. Unable to agree upon the status of converts, or to arrive at a consensus on the content of a ceremony that was sufficiently distant from both Rome and Geneva, English clergy improvised from one ceremony to the next in the 1580s and 90s, creating ad hoc rituals that varied according to the religion of the convert and the circumstances of his or her conversion.

With this in mind, Dimmock turns to the one extended published relation of a baptism, that of the Turkish slave Chinano, who was liberated from Cartagena de las Indias by Francis Drake in 1586. The impresario of this ceremony, the London minister Meredith Hamner, recognized the symbolic potential of the conversion, and described the baptism as an attack on the Spanish crown and the Catholic Church, giving ample opportunity for the convert to make his contempt for his former masters known, and distinguishing papal "idolatry" from "true religion" whenever possible.

Both of the examples given by Dimmock and Colombo show how competing European confessions made use of converts to advance their churches and religious ideology at the expense of their competitors, and demonstrate some of the subtle, even insidious ways in which theological and political concerns extraneous to the conversion in question permeated official accounts. But both authors also make a strong case that there was a place for the voice of the convert even in highly controlled works of religious propaganda, and both offer possible ways of separating the theological concerns of the clergymen who welcomed and protected the new members of their respective churches from the way that the converts themselves understood their own lives. Even pieces of propaganda can contain revealing inconsistencies and unresolved tensions that historians can exploit.

This view is shared by Ananya Chakravarti, who offers a re-reading of a classic series of sources for the history of the overseas missions in the Portuguese colonies of Southern India and Brazil, the Jesuit *litterae annuae*. In contrast to many of her predecessors who consider these letters, many of which were published and translated at the time they were written, to

be religious propaganda which reflects only the lopsided view of the missionaries and their colonial sponsors, Chakravarti argues that many of the accounts of conversion in fact contain clues that can be used to recover the perspective of the indigenous converts and the way they understood their religious experience. The reported conversations between the converts and the Jesuits often contain vestiges of religious concepts and problems that were extraneous to the Christian tradition, and which suggest a range of possible continuities between the social and religious experience of converts before and after conversion, and the profound and sustained syncretisms which remained in place despite the missionaries' insistence on a total and complete transformation.

The articles by Opher Mansour and Jose Alberto Tavim take this theme in a different direction, by exploring the way narratives of individual and collective conversion were crafted in the context of what Serge Grusinski has described as the first century of globalization.[6] The processes of European expansion and colonization, as well as the re-negotiation of existing relationships between polities across the globe forced both the representatives of the European states and their interlocutors to comprehend the intersections of the religious and the political in new ways. When it occurred in the context of diplomatic exchange or espionage, a change of faith could be both something more and something less than it appeared, an act whose political significance often superseded its religious content, and created ambiguities and triggered intertwined plots which even the most shrewd and well-informed observers had difficulty unraveling.

For Mansour, the rituals and imagery created by the pontiffs to represent the visits of ambassadors from Japan, Persia, and Kongo during the papacy of Paul V (1605-1621) reveal the complex underpinnings of papal diplomacy during a moment when many of the leading members of the church viewed its most important political goals as linked to the expansion of Catholicism into other parts of the globe. (Among other developments, the congregation of Propaganda Fide began to challenge the domination of the Spanish and Portuguese monarchies over the colonial missions just after the end of Paul's pontificate, in 1622.) The participation of ambassadors from beyond the borders of the Christian world in representations of themselves as converts or as representatives of a convert people paying homage to their pastor could often prove the crucial link in securing political

[6] *Les Quatre Parties du Monde: Histoire d'une Mondialisation* (Paris, 2004); and Idem., *L'Aigle et le Dragon. Démesure Européene et Mondalisation au XVI^e siécle* (Paris, 2012).

accords that otherwise might have never been accomplished, and bargains of real importance were sealed through the complicity of these ambassadors in the highly symbolic religious theatre of Baroque Rome. In this setting, it was precisely the interplay between the "reciprocal, negotiable, and limited commitments" of diplomacy and the universal and unbreakable commitment represented by an eventual conversion that drove diplomatic ceremony, negotiations, and their later representations. The conversions—real, implied, and promised—of these diplomats amounted to moves in a game with tremendous potential benefits and drawbacks for both sides.

The gap between the dissimulation of diplomats who "performed" sincerity and spies who justified the most contorted personal histories by professing an unshakable commitment to a single law and single monarch, was relatively small. Tome Pegado da Paz, a Portuguese spy in Istanbul who was accused of apostasy and forced to defend himself before the Holy Office upon his return to Lisbon in 1578, was among the latter group. Born into a family of conversos, Pegado da Paz was a natural suspect for inquisitors who viewed him as a likely apostate, but he was able to defend himself from the charge through a carefully constructed narrative that he used in court. During his years in the Ottoman capital, Pegado da Paz had assumed many guises—from "Rabi David" to a Greek and later Muslim subject of the Ottoman Empire—and he argued to the inquisitors that these changes in outward identity never reflected his unshaken devotion to the Catholic Church, which he preserved inside even as he adopted new religious habits. It was a line of defense impervious to any material evidence that might exonerate or convict the suspect, and one that forced the inquisitors, whose aim was to find evidence of true deviation from the faith and obtain repentance, to allow the spy to go free after several lengthy interrogations. Essential to the story of Pegado da Paz was the presence of a robust series of communities of the Sephardic diaspora across the Mediterranean, who were closely linked both with their Muslim and Christian overlords and with one another, providing an essential network of political and social support for him as he moved back and forth across a religious and political frontier of dizzying complexity: from Edirne to Split to Livorno, it was Pegado da Paz's connections to other Sephardic Jews and conversos which allowed him to cross borders and change identities with relative ease.

The range of material covered by the articles here testifies to the sheer variety of different conversion texts in circulation in the early modern world, as well as to the complex pressures applied to the composition of

religious narratives in fractured and frequently dangerous environments. The journey from interiorized experience to public testimony, whether in the form of propaganda or proof, necessitated a careful negotiation of competing political and religious demands as well as the skillful use of persuasive rhetorical tools and typologies. At times this produced powerful acts of ventriloquism, from the use of direct speech in the Jesuit *litterae annuae* to the theatrical representation of the life of Baldassare Loyola, which effectively mask or mimic the voice of the convert. The difficulty of excavating an originating voice in conversion narratives is a central preoccupation for the articles in this collection, all of which offer compelling evidence as to the myriad ways in which conversion was represented and manipulated by individuals, institutions, and communities. The result is a partial view of the overwhelming meshwork of influences—perhaps best represented as a discordant cacophony of voices—which went into constructing and disseminating representations of religious metamorphosis in the early modern world.

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