

## **The Politics of Conversion**

### **A Workshop**

**July 21-22, 2015**

**University of Warwick**

**Application deadline: January 15, 2015**

Conversion is an ideal entry point for thinking about the political life of early modernity, especially the harrowing struggle between power and freedom. In early modern Europe, conversion was an individual response to divine invitation, but it was also a sublime instrument of state and imperial power, and a potent tactical weapon of various sectional and oppositional groups. The forced conversion of Iberian Jews and Muslims, the European conquest of the Americas, the changes of ecclesiastical polity accompanying waves of Reformation and Counter-Reformation across continental Europe and the British Isles – all these raised profound issues about the relationship between outward conduct and inner conviction, about individual versus collective expressions of identity and culture, and about the (always questionable) theatricality of fidelity.

For contemporaries, as for us, conversion posed challenging questions about the possibility of free realization of the self in relation to a suprapolitical good. Henri IV may or may not have felt that Paris was worth a mass. “Fool and wretch,” says John Donne, “wilt thou let thy soul be tied / To man's laws, by which she shall not be tried/ At the last day?”

Early modernity saw a multiplication and diversification of the language and symbolism of conversion, drawing on the patterns of conversion and the authority and power of conversional experience to create new kinds of personal, social, epistemological, and artistic transformation. In repositioning an individual agent in relation to inherited structures of legitimation, and existing communities of knowledge and interpretation, such conversions were inherently political.

Conversion, in a rainbow of forms bequeathed to us by the repurposing of religious conversion in early modernity, is alive and active in the present age. We find it in the multi-billion-dollar market in procedures, how-to books, videos, websites, and programs—including religious programs—that promise to make us entirely new and also to free us to become most authentically ourselves. As an instrument of power, it continues to play an important part in the religio-political life of modern America, as well as in violent struggles in the Middle East and other parts of the world. The lines between power and freedom in all these conversional arenas are never entirely clear.

The Warwick Workshop is the first of three meetings sponsored by the Early Modern Conversions Project ([earlymodernconversions.com](http://earlymodernconversions.com)). The second will be at McGill University in 2016- 17. The third, a large-scale conference, will take place at the Newberry Library in Chicago in 2017- 18, the final year of the Conversions Project. The overall goal of the Politics of Conversion series is to develop new understandings within the following three large areas of inquiry:

- the interrelationship among transformation, freedom, and power
- the centrality of multiple forms of conversion, sacred and secular, in the political world
- the lines of conversional thinking and practice that connect us with our early modern predecessors

The Politics of Conversion workshop at Warwick will feature sessions around pre-circulated papers and/or short position papers, presentations of longer papers, and working sessions on important ideas, approaches, questions.

The Early Modern Conversions project will cover the travel and accommodation costs of as many co-investigators, collaborators, postdocs, and GSAs as budgeted funds will allow. To apply to participate please submit the application for collaboration fund support available on the EMC website (from the homepage, select ‘for members’ > ‘admin’ > ‘collaboration fund’, or go directly to <http://earlymodernconversions.com/projectadmin/collaboration-fund/>). Those applying for travel funding should include a short account of how they would expect to benefit from participating in the meeting and should indicate how and in what form they would be willing to contribute to the meeting. The application deadline is January 15, 2015.