Early Modern Conversions
Report on the Team Meeting July 2015

The third team meeting of the Early Modern Conversions project convened at CRASSH at the University of Cambridge the evening of July 23 2015. What followed the opening reception were more than three and a half days of presentations, discussions, and informal conversations as well as special sessions at the Fitzwilliam Museum and the Perne Library. The meeting wrapped up in the early afternoon of Monday, July 27.

The overall planning of the meeting was undertaken by research co-leaders (2014-15) Patricia Badir and Ben Schmidt as well as by Project Manager Stephen Wittek and Project Director Paul Yachnin. As the attached program (appendix 1) shows, the meeting called on the moderating and organizational skills of most of the members of the team.

As they worked over the course of the the year leading up to the Cambridge meeting, the planners had five principal goals in mind. Here they are in order of importance:

1. to build connections among disciplines and researchers and to strengthen the focus of the research by addressing the foundational, definitional questions—(1) what is conversion? (2) and when does conversion as we understand it emerge as a central feature of European life?

2. (less centrally but still substantially) to advance our understanding of the geography of conversion (the "where" question) as well as to develop our grasp of the global context of conversion in early modern Europe

3. to introduce a greater variety of activities and session formats

4. to provide space for individual research presentations and to work to integrate that range of research into the work of the whole project

5. to think more substantially about how our historical research can speak to modern concerns and engage with others outside the academy

The what and when questions

The lead-up to the team meeting featured group work on the two central questions. The members of the team were organized into six groups, each group led by a member of the Management Committee (Sarah Beckwith, Julie Cumming, Mark Vessey, Valerie Traub, Ben Schmidt, Bronwen Wilson). The group leaders took on the task of soliciting answers to the following clusters of questions and to forging the answers they each received into two one-page summaries (a total of 12 one-page reports; see appendix 2):

WHAT: Events and processes of conversion in the early modern period occurred across several domains, ranging from religion to chemistry, from medicine to morals. What kinds of relations are we describing between such events and processes across distinct

domains? What are the (epi)phenomena that indicate a case of early modern "conversion"? What is lost or gained by imposing firm conceptual boundaries around the concept of "conversion," in order to differentiate it from "metamorphosis," "transformation," and "adaptation," for instance?

 WHEN: What is the balance between continuity and rupture in the process of conversion? What can we say about the temporalities of conversion, its historical arc(s)? What are the historical contingencies of early modern conversion? Does conversion have a history—in which case, how can early modern moments offer theoretical insights for other periods and instances of conversion?

The team meeting began the morning of July 24. Sarah Beckwith led off with a presentation on the "what" question. Her ideas emerged, she said, from her own work, especially on Shakespeare's tragedies, religion, and ordinary language philosophy. She counselled us to give ample space to theology and to an understanding of narrative (as well as to historicism) and also to pay close attention to three figures of great importance to the history of conversion—Paul, Augustine, and Luther. Luther's view is exemplary: conversion is not conceivable if it does not involve the whole person and the entire life and if it is not bound up with inner change and transformation. Conversion in this Reformation idiom is nothing like the conversion of things— apartments into condos, even water into wine.

In answer to the question, "what is lost or gained by imposing firm conceptual boundaries around the concepts of conversion," she reminded us to attend to the natural distinctions among words. That attentive openness to words is a historical as well as an ethical practice. Her critical attention to words (like conversion, metamorphosis, transformation, etc.) was of a piece with her reading of *King Lear*, a play that teaches us that "acknowledgment *is* conversion": acknowledgment's instrument is language (utterance really—speaking what we feel, hearing the other), its energy is love, and its enabling condition grace.

At the end of the talk, she offered us the idea of "just response." Her reading of *Lear* is not merely her opinion, she said, but a sharing of what she cares about and a demand made of her interlocutors that they respond justly to the reading. She said she wondered if the topic of conversion—what will move us to see ourselves and the world differently—entails the consideration of exactly this category of just response.

Group discussion followed immediately after Sarah's talk. The six groups worked for an hour, responding to the talk in itself and also in light of the group work done in the months leading up to the meeting. The responses highlighted several questions: must conversion always be bound up with language? What other practices (ritual, entrainment, metal-working) and what other forms of expression (music, painting, acting) have a claim to be conversional alongside language? Are material forms of conversion (apartments into condos, water into wine) inauthentic by definition? Theatrical conversion *is* inauthentic by definition; how might that bear on the conversions in *King Lear*? What is the relationship between conversions of people and conversions of things? What is the relationship between conversion as acknowledgment of the other on one side and the conversional capacities of bodies, things, art forms, and the social and political surround on the other?

Three other sessions bear on the discussions that developed around "the what question." The last session of the day on Friday took place at the Fitzwilliam Museum in connection with the Museum's "Treasured Possessions" exhibition. In addition to a presentation by the curators of the exhibition, thirty members of the research team (in two groups) were invited to handle, examine, and ask questions about a small collection of rare objects, some of them associated with reading and writing, some with religious practice, some *objets d'art*.

On the morning of the second day, Saturday, five members of the project took part in a "materiality roundtable," where things (precious metals, amber, porcelain, loadstones, costumes) rather than people were the converts. We were told about how early modern things converted (like Catholic icons into Protestant coinage—this from Allie Stielau) not in the absence of human productive and interpretive agency, but in complex networked relationships.

On Sunday morning, the eleven members of the Summer Seminar put on a collective presentation about their individual research projects. The members of the seminar came from a number of disciplines—Architecture, Art History, English, History, and History of Dance. The work brought conversion into conversation with cross-cultural relations, material culture, spatiality, and sexuality. Several presentations focused on conversion and things—paintings, maps, decorative stones. The session was notable not only for its contributions to our understanding the relationship between people and things in a range of conversional events, but also for the exceptionally well-executed choreography of an hour-long session in which each individual research project had a hearing, where all of them were able in some measure to speak to each other, and where all the projects were able to address the Conversions project itself, not in a linear fashion (that is, by trying to bind their various projects into a single argument), but rather by writing a collective poem, so to speak, where their work was able to suggest numerous insights and entry points into the questions around conversions.

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On Saturday afternoon, Peter Marshall addressed "the when question." He suggested that each word in the phrase "early modern conversions" was difficult to pin down and that the words were even more more challenging in combination. He put aside the question of the temporalities of conversion within a putative conversion process in order to focus on the more straightforward but hardly less difficult historical questions—when is early modernity? and why are conversions linked in our project with early modernity? He recalled that at one time "The Age of Conversion" was the working title of the project. He suggested we could think of that title as "the fundamental research question rather than a prescribed working agenda. In other words, conversion is the means whereby we begin to interrogate the very concept of early modernity itself."

He reviewed the problems of periodization in general and of "early modernity" in particular, including its teleology, Eurocentrism, and strongly academic cast (which makes it unappealing to people outside the university). Periodization, he said, ought to be a form of hypothesizing rather than a means of framing. The hypothesis of the project is "that there is something particularly interesting, distinctive and important about conversion in the three or four centuries anchored on c. 1600, something which may or may not be connected to a state of emergent modernity." The Reformation is something like a anchor for this hypothesis, an immensely complex network of

events that nevertheless can serve to assure us that there is something substantial about our central research claim.

It is unlikely that a universal theory of conversion is going to fall into our laps; instead, a sense of historical rootedness, a shared space in time, might be able to begin to show us the connections among different forms of conversion. Why this particular space in time? And especially bearing in mind that other centuries could make their claim to being "the age of conversion." Because of the Reformation, of course, but also on account of the globalizing expansion of cross-cultural exchanges, because of print and the growth of public discourse and public life, and because the period sees an enhanced historical consciousness that is itself conversional. Peter here quoted from one of the responses coming from the working groups: our epoch might be an age of conversion "in the sense that it is a period in which people began to think of themselves in relationship to a past (from which they had turned, and to which they might, or might not, return) and to a future (toward which they were moving and from which they might, or might not, return."

Six discussion groups broke away into separate spaces for an hour to reflect on what Peter had said. They returned to the main meeting room with a wide range of ideas and questions. The multiple responses to Peter focused on a number of issues. There was agreement that the Reformation, cross-cultural exchange, print and the expansion of public discourse were important features for our work. The idea of thinking of periodization as a hypothesis was appealing. One group suggested that perhaps "early modernity" was no longer a useful term (especially since it is usually treated as a frame rather than a hypothesis), and that it might be time to think of our period as indeed an age of conversion. A number of other groups also thought it would be valuable to use "age of conversion" as a research prompt and challenge. It is important also to remember the "economics of conversion" since forced conversion was often about the seizure of goods and property and since economics in part drove the early stages of European imperialism.

Among much else, Simon Goldhill's summary remarks on Monday addressed "the when question" and advanced Peter's presentation and the discussion that followed it. For one thing, Reformation, Renaissance, empire, and technology provide indeed the conditions of possibility for the phenomena we are undertaking to describe. This is not a matter of simple cause and effect; these elements form something like interlocking force-fields that enable an age of conversion. Simon provided a brief survey of the almost total absence of conversion narratives from Antiquity. It might be that later writers redescribe ancient narratives as models of conversion, but the narratives are not that in themselves. There are other early models—in the Jewish literature and in medieval Christian writings, a number of which focus on women and conversion. Turning to our period, Simon asked us,

> Can we locate and analyse the potent and prevalent stories of conversion in the age of conversion in and against the counter models of antiquity and the immediately following centuries? If there is a new form of historic self-consciousness in this particular era, how does this change the stories by which change is narrated?

The geography of conversion

The recognition of the importance of understanding the geography of conversion, which was forcefully expressed in the discussion of "the when question," connected centrally with one session. Guest presenters Gabriela Ramos (Cambridge) and Tara Alberts (York) generously shared their research with us, Gabriela speaking about Conversion in the Andes, and Tara on Conversion in Southeast Asia. The presentations and the discussion that followed strengthened our awareness of the importance of how Christians interacted increasingly with cultures and religions in other regions of the world and how those exchanges changed European confessional conversion and contributed to broader dimensions of a conversional early modernity.

A number of presentations (by Ben Schmidt, Juan Luis Burke, VK Preston, Robert Clines, and Gul Kale) focused on works and events outside Europe and on exchanges between European and others cultures.

Variety of activities and session formats

The program included a range of activities and formats. The Fitzwilliam workshop was one of the high points. Team members braved heavy rain to think about the material dimensions of early modern life with their hands as well as their heads. The sessions that included all the team members were interspersed with breakout work and six smaller paper presentation sessions. One other high point was the visit to the Perne Library at the end of the team meeting. A splendid change of pace and another way of thinking about literature, music, and conversion was provided by a group of Music students from McGill, who led the members of the team in a literary and musicological engagement with William Lawes's setting of Andrew Marvell's poem, "When death shall snatch us from these kids ."

Individual research presentations / integration of those presentations with the whole project

Already discussed is the presentation by the Summer Seminarians. With one or two exceptions where presenters were addressing general questions of the whole project, all the research presentations emerged from team members' particular projects. A quick scan of the program shows the considerable range of research areas and questions, but it also suggests the effects of the gravitational pull of the project, at least on the evidence of the titles.

Speaking to modern concerns and engaging with others outside the academy

Owing to a medical emergency, Iain Fenlon was unable to take part in the team meeting or in the Roundtable on Public Exchange: Taking our work outside the academy. The presenters, Valerie Traub and Mark Vessey, spoke about the challenges that we face in trying to move our work to other audiences or readerships. It is important to bear in mind that radio producers, for example, have other ways of doing things than we have and goals often substantially different from ours. Important is the careful cultivation of real reciprocity and actual exchanges among the members of the project, faculty, postdocs, students, and artists and between the members of the project and the various communities of people who will be intrigued by our work.

Summary

While there remains a very great deal of work ahead for the Conversions team, it is reasonable to say that we made significant progress at the Cambridge team meeting, especially for goals 1, 3, and 4. The focus on key questions encouraged thoughtful, lively, and collegial discussion and debate. The organization and the focus of the work around the what question and the when question succeeded in creating a valuable disputational arena, a space where we could disagree and debate and where we did not simply speak past each other. Less successful was our work for goals 3 and 5. Clearly, we grasp the importance of cross-cultural exchange and emerging globalism. Given the project's focus on multiple modes of conversion in early modern Europe, we will not develop anything like a comparative study of conversion across the early modern world, but we will develop a greater understanding of the multiple lines of connection between European conversion and models of conversion elsewhere in the world.

We have most to do perhaps on the side of public exchange. There we share our slow start with most of the rest of the academy. Since we do believe that our historical work has something of value to say about modern forms of conversion, we will have to work hard to learn how to share our ideas and questions with others not in the project and not in the academy.

Early Modern Conversions team members at the Cambridge meeting

1. Abdulhamit Arvas, PhD student, English, Michigan State
2. Patricia Badir, Professor of English, UBC
3. Catherine Bahn, PhD student, Music, McGill
4. Sarah Beckwith, Katherine Everitt Gilbert Professor of English and Theatre Studies, Duke
5. Juan Luis Burke, PhD student, Architecture, McGill
6. Simon J.G. Burton, Postdoctoral Fellow and Assistant Professor, University of Warsaw
7. Miriana Carbonara, PhD student, Art History, East Anglia
8. Robert Clines, Assistant Professor, History, Western Carolina University
9. Zoey Cochran, PhD student, Musicology, McGill
10. Julie Cumming, Professor and Associate Dean, Music, McGill
11. Tony Dawson, Professor Emeritus of English, UBC
12. Chris Gaudet, PhD student, English, UBC
13. Tomasz Grusiecki, PhD student, McGill
14. Anuradha Gobin, Postdoctoral Fellow, Art History, U of East Anglia
15. Simon Goldhill, Professor of Greek and Director of CRASSH, Cambridge
16. Douglas Hedley, Reader in Hermeneutics and Metaphysics, Fellow, Clare College, Cambridge
17. George Hoffman, Professor of French, Michigan
18. Ivana Horacek, Visiting assistant professor, Art History, University of Minnesota,
19. José Jouve-Martin, Associate Professor, Hispanic Studies and Dept Chair, McGill
20. Gül Kale, PhD in Architectural History and Theory, McGill
21. Torrance Kirby, Professor of Ecclesiastical History, Director of the Centre for Research on Religion, McGill
22. Anna Lewton-Brain, PhD student, English, McGill
23. Kathleen Long, Professor of French, Cornell

24. José-Juan Lopez-Portillo, Visiting Professor, Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, Mexico City; EMC Postdoc, 2013-2015
25. Peter Marshall, Professor of History, University of Warwick
26. Isabelle Masse, PhD student, History, McGill
27. Catherine Motuz, PhD student, Music, McGill
28. Steven Mullaney, Professor of English, Michigan
29. VK Preston, Visiting Assistant Professor of Theatre Arts and Performance Studies, Brown U
30. Eve Preus, PhD student, English, UBC
31. Alexis Risler, PhD student in Musicology, McGill
32. Ben Schmidt, Joff Hanauer Faculty Fellow and Professor of History, Univ of Washington
33. Helen Smith, Reader in Renaissance Literature, Director of the Centre for Renaissance and Early Modern Studies, Univ of York
34. Justin Smith, University Professor of the history and philosophy of science, Univ of Paris VII-Denis Diderot
35. Allie Stielau, PhD in Art History, Yale; EMC Postdoc, 2015-2016
36. John Sutton, Professor of Cognitive Science at Macquarie University
37. Valerie Traub, Huetwell Professor of English and Women's Studies, Michigan
38. Lyn Tribble, Professor and Donald Collie Chair of English, University of Otago
39. Angela Vanhaelen, Professor of Art History, McGill
40. Mark Vessey, Professor of English and Principal of Green College, UBC
41. Bronwen Wilson, Professor of Art History, UCLA
42. Stephen Wittek, English, McGill; Project Manager
43. Paul Yachnin, Tomlinson Professor of Shakespeare Studies, McGill; Project Leader