

The Politics of Conversion Workshop, Part II

McGill University June 6-7 2016

Following on the first “politics” workshop at the University of Warwick, July 21-22 2015, the Early Modern Conversions Project takes great pleasure in convening a second workshop (the second of four) on the Politics of Conversion.

Religious conversion is a highly personal phenomenon—Augustine alone under the fig tree has only the company of the voices of children and a found biblical verse, Luther in the privy is in solitary conversation with Paul’s Letter to the Romans—but conversion, as personal as it often is, can also ramify outward into the world with great force, galvanizing new communities, breaking old ones, and changing the political world utterly.

Early modernity sees conversion come into full flower as a sublime instrument of imperial power—a way for sovereigns to exercise control over their subjects’ souls as well as their bodies, whether those subjects are Iberian Jews or Muslims, French Protestants, English Catholics, or the First Nations peoples of the Americas. Conversion also becomes in the period a surprisingly potent instrument of resistance to the power of the State or the Church, a way for subjects such as Bartolomé de las Casas, Anne Askew, or Luther himself to stand out against the powerful and even to begin to create new conversational publics.

Other kinds of conversion—social transformations that make individuals both new and also most authentically what they are (like Shakespeare’s transformation from yeoman to gentleman or Veronica Franco’s shift from courtesan to poet and scholar)—can also bring together the personal and the political, especially by fashioning highly visible models of mobility in rank, profession, and identity and by creating new forms of social power. Very often, of course, it is not possible to see where the social starts and the religious ends, as in the case of converts such John Donne or the serial convert Antonio de Dominis.

We are particularly pleased to announce that we will be joined at this workshop by special guests Peter Lake (University Distinguished Professor of History, and Martha Rivers Ingram Chair of History, Vanderbilt University) and Daniel Weinstock (James McGill Professor in the Faculty of Law, and Director, McGill Institute for Health and Social Policy).

We invite members of the Early Modern Conversions team to submit proposals for short individual presentations, group presentations, and ideas for special sessions including sessions that focus on particular events, historical figures, or texts. Our goal is twofold: to pay generous, critical attention to the research and ideas of workshop participants and to work together toward a philosophically and historically grounded understanding of the political dimensions of the multiple forms of conversion that emerged in early modernity.

Please send your proposals to conversion.iplai@mcgill.ca by 15 April, 2016. Proposals should be approximately 250 words in length and should provide a brief explanation of how the proposed paper or session relates to the political dimension of conversion in early modernity. An adjudication committee will review all submissions and arrive at a decision by May 2016.

Conversions project members may apply to the Collaboration Fund for travel support. See here for details: <http://earlymodernconversions.com/projectadmin/collaboration-fund/>

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