



Politics of Conversion II June 6-7 2016
A report on the meeting

The second (of four) Politics of Conversion meetings took place at McGill University, June 6-7 2016. The participants included members of the Conversions project as well as guests from Vanderbilt University, the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (a partner institution), the University of Toronto, and the University of Massachusetts. The participants represented a number of disciplines, including Literary Studies in English, Italian, and Spanish; Theatre History; History; History of Religion; Art History; and Historical Musicology.

The goal of the meeting was twofold—to pay constructive, critical attention to the research of workshop participants and to work together toward a philosophically and historically grounded understanding of the political dimensions of the multiple forms of early modern conversion. We began with the idea (as we said in the CFP) that 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 conversional publics.

The meeting was designed to build on the work of the first Politics of Conversion workshop (University of Warwick), July 21-22 2015 (<http://earlymodernconversions.com/activity/politics-of-conversion-workshop/>). That workshop covered a lot of ground, starting out with coupled presentations on the 1534 Henrician Act of Supremacy and Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* (a play about power and conversion in the home rather than the State), and moving to presentations on the family and conversion; conversion in 15th-century Italy and the Eastern Mediterranean; the conversional politics of agriculture and food in New Spain; *The Merchant of Venice* (three presentations on the morning after we went to the RSC production of the play); the poets George Herbert and Richard Crashaw; flooding and the conversion of the land; the practices of baptism; preaching and conversional politics in England; and the wonderful French text, *L'Isle des Hermaphrodites*. The wrap-up discussion highlighted five interconnected features that had issued from the various conversional ideas and practices we had discussed:

1. conversion is an instrument of power, both state power and individual and popular power against the State and Church;
2. conversion is a shuttle between the private and the public, able to bring the two domains into generative interactivity;
3. conversion is also able to shuttle among art, nature, and the divine, able to weave innovative patterns of connection among these realms;

4. conversion is not a single thing, but needs to be understood in fine-grained terms as a large and changing ensemble of ideas and practices;
5. conversion is an instrument of persuasion and a force creative of the public sphere.

The second Politics of Conversion meeting, which was to build on these broad ideas about conversion, started at the Archive of the Jesuits in Canada in the northeast section of Montreal, where participants were welcomed by Theresa Rowat, the Director of the Archives. The Jesuit Archive was a propitious venue for the opening presentation—Ben Schmidt’s account of the Meissen porcelain statue of the Death of St. Francis Xavier, which served as an entry point for his discussion of the European struggle to figure out how the Chinese made the “white gold” and how the European manufacture of porcelain changed politics within Europe (Saxon princes who used porcelain to legitimate their own politically-motivated conversions) and contributed to a transformation of global politics (Meissen porcelain, a technological conversion of clay into matter of a higher order, helped shift global trade toward European mastery and contributed to the European denigration of China).

The afternoon of the first day and the whole of the second unfolded at McGill. The presentations and discussions covered an even wider territory than at the Warwick meeting—Saxony, England, Italy, Spain, New Spain, and also Quebec, China, and the Ottoman Empire. Robin Macdonald took us into the close quarters of a ship as it traveled across the Atlantic to its arrival in Nouveau France in 1639. Ships like these could be vessels of conversion, not only because of Catholic rituals performed on board but also on account of the conscience-catching danger of sea travel. Other presentations (this account is not exhaustive) took us to Paul’s Cross in London and invited us to think about conversion as a trope of public, political discourse; brought us to the archive of pre-Reformation Italian thinking about alchemy and prophecy; landed us in the homoerotic, conversional world of early modern Istanbul with boys who turned and were turned from Christian to Muslim, (many of the “palace boys” went on to become important State administrators); put us in step with European travelers as they tried to make sense of the Islamic call to prayer; or took us into Hamlet’s world to try with him to make providentialist sense out of what seems like sheer contingency. Peter Lake’s extraordinary account of the “happy life and holy death” of John Bruen showed how, in considerable detail, conversion could transform the way an individual spoke and acted on a day-to-day basis and how the household itself could become an instrument of conversion, for individuals but also for groups of people, including members of the nobility.

In sum, we did pay generous, critical attention to the work of all the members of the meeting; but it cannot be said that we moved decisively toward a “philosophically and historically grounded understanding of the political dimensions of the multiple forms of early modern conversion.” The McGill workshop did, however, achieve significant progress in two principal, interrelated areas.

One, we addressed the question of conversion as a shuttle between the private and public and also developed a fine-grained account of conversional practices and ideas. It is useful here to remember what Helen Smith has called “the twinned kinetics of conversion and conversation” as well as the fact that “conversation” and “conversion” were often synonyms in early modern English. “Conversation” itself was a richer word for the early moderns: it meant more than just talk; it also meant “the action of living or having one’s being *in* a place or *among* persons” (*OED*). Being in a place (aboard a ship, in a holy household, at Paul’s Cross, in Shakespeare’s Venice, or in a Turkish palace) or being among certain people (Protestants, Catholics, Moriscos, Ottoman Turks, pirates (as Hamlet is)—these forms of conversation can also be forms of conversion.

Two, we extended the geographical and cultural boundaries of our work. The movement of goods and people across borders and between cultures, and this happening on an increasingly global scale, emerged in our discussions as a major, new feature of early modern conversions. The politics of conversion, on this account, needs to be understood as of a piece with a politics of global conversation.

There are two future meetings planned. In March 2017, the third Politics of Conversion workshop will convene at the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas in Mexico City. The fourth meeting, at the Newberry Library in Chicago, will take place in September 2017. Both future meetings will continue the work we began at Warwick and developed in Montreal. The meeting at the Newberry will be a larger event—a conference with a major public outreach and exchange dimension. We feel that by the time we get to Chicago we will be ready to share our ideas about how early modern conversions changed the politics of their own time and how the globalization of conversion in the same period helped bring about about the political worlds of modernity.

The members of the Politics of Conversion II workshop (non-team participants are indicated with an asterisk)

- Abdulhamit Arvas, Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow, Drama Department, Vassar College
- Clara García Ayuardo*, History, Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (Mexico City)
- JF Bernard, English, Champlain College (Montreal)
- Julie Cumming, Music, McGill
- Jane Degenhardt*, English, University of Massachusetts, Amherst
- Abdullah Farooqi*, PhD student, History, University of Toronto
- Madiha Hanachi, PhD student, English, Université de Montréal
- José Jouve-Martin, Spanish, McGill
- Torrance Kirby, Religious Studies, McGill
- Peter Lake*, History, Vanderbilt University
- Anna Lewton-Brain, PhD student, English, McGill
- José-Juan Lopez-Portillo, History, Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (Mexico City)
- Robin MacDonald, PhD student, History, University of York (UK)
- Steven Mullaney, English, University of Michigan
- Yelda Nasifoglu, PhD student, Architecture, McGill
- VK Preston, Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama, University of Toronto
- Benjamin Schmidt, History, University of Washington
- Matteo Soranzo, Italian, McGill
- Angela Vanhaelen, Art History and Communication Studies, McGill
- Daniel Weinstock*, Law and Philosophy, McGill
- Stephen Wittek, Conversions Project Manager
- Paul Yachnin, English, McGill; Conversions Project Director
- Carla Zecher, Executive Director, Renaissance Society of America