



Conversions

David Aers and Sarah Beckwith
Duke University
Durham, North Carolina

This collection of essays emerged from the international “Early Modern Conversions Project,” funded by Canada’s Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and administered by McGill University’s Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas.¹ Duke is one of eighteen participating institutions from Canada, the U.S., Australia, and England working together toward a rethinking of early modern Europe as an “age of conversion.” The Conversions project has aimed to develop historical understandings that will enlighten modern debates about spiritual, psychological, political, corporeal, and sexual kinds of transformation. For our part, we invited a group of distinguished scholars to explore together issues around the topic of “conversion” in medieval and early modern culture. Each scholar came to Duke, beginning in the fall of 2014, to give a keynote lecture in our “Conversions Lecture Series,” which ran through the spring of 2016. Making use of the vigorous response and discussion afforded by engaged audiences, the contributors submitted revised essays to *JMEMS*.

In its most basic sense, the term conversion (Latin *conversio*) signifies a reversal, a change of direction. Yet the change or turnaround that is conversion has meant many different things in different cultures and across a wide range of discourses from logic to lyric poetry, theology to politics. While no one, for example, is born a Christian in the European early Middle Ages, conversion indicated the entry into a specific form of Christian life: monastic orders. It was also a decisive term in the cultivation and defense of that powerful medieval tradition of the Eucharist known as transubstantiation. The call to conversion was central both to medieval movements of reform within Christendom and to the rhetoric and politics of the crusades that ventured outside it. In the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European reformations, reformers’ zeal often sprang from a decisive event or set of events in their own lives, a conversion that, they insisted, revealed divine

Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies 48:3, September 2018
DOI 10.1215/10829636-7048535 © 2018 by Duke University Press

initiative, not human power. Yet conversions also took place across new confessional lines, under the auspices of competing sovereign powers. Confessional conversion involved political realignment, and here perhaps are the beginnings of a modern political topography. Even within the long traditions of Christianity, understanding of conversion has included significantly different inflections. A study of conversion thus has great potential to illuminate many aspects of these traditions and of medieval and early modern culture in terms of revolutionary change or of striking continuities across what seems a cultural revolution.

We hoped for responses to this special issue on conversion that would address foundational questions that continue to engage reflection. What is the nature of the self over time—continuous across a single life-narrative or cleaved in two by a momentous event? Does conversion entail reconciliation with or a break from different social, religious, and political communities and relationships? What roles do introspection and exemplarity, the inner life and the lives of others, play in conversion? What are the rhetorical forms and linguistic grammars of conversion, and how do their differences matter? What are the links between persuasion and conversion? Does moral transformation precede or follow from philosophical or religious vision? Do we act what we see, or see only once we've acted? What are the links between conversion and authority? Or between conversion and violence?

We were very pleased with the rich diversity and range of the final submissions. The issue includes an extraordinary range of genres, disciplines, microhistories, and concerns, from William Langland to René Descartes, from Margaret Clitherow to seventeenth-century revolutionary London, bridging medieval and early modern cultures. Each of the essays represents very different methodologies and pathways, and as editors we did not seek to impose any sort of uniformity. Hence our title, appropriately in the plural, is “Conversions: Medieval and Early Modern.”



Notes

- 1 See the Early Modern Conversions Project website at <http://earlymodernconversions.com/>. The website brings together valuable resources for the study of conversion, including bibliographies of EMC project member publications, lectures, workshops, and conference presentations. We thank the project director, Dr. Paul Yachnin, Department of English, McGill University, for his support and infectious collegiality.