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Peculiar Christians,
Circumstantial Courtiers, and
the Making of Conversation
in Seventeenth-Century England

OUR CONVERSATION GIVES US AWAY. What it gives away most freely is where we are coming from. Our accents, our diction, even the rhythms of our speech reveal the parts of the world we grew up in, the kinds of schools we attended, and the class backgrounds of our families. There is something vaguely unsettling about coming to terms with conversation’s capacity for self-betrayal. Perhaps this is why, since the advent of the twentieth century, we have become so linguistically insistent on our control over conversation, not only do we “make” it, but we also “put a stop to,” “change the subject of,” and even “kill” it at will. These common idioms diminish conversation by denying it continuity; they uncouple it from history; they constrain it from telling either our life stories or its own. And yet the fierceness with which we insist on our capacity to make or break conversation only reveals the extent to which we still remain adherents to the proverbial wisdom that “conversation makes one what he is.”

One of the liabilities of denying continuity to conversation is that we lose track of just how much the subject of conversation has changed over time. “Conversation” entered the English language in the fourteenth century as “the action of living or having one’s being in a place or among persons.” Only in the late sixteenth century did “conversation” specifically begin to refer to verbal intercourse, and not until the nineteenth century was its marriage to talk finalized. This essay explores a particularly significant turning point in “conversation’s” life story by showing how two newly energized but ostensibly antithetical uses of “conversation” converged upon and refined each other during the Restoration era. In the wake of what Christopher Hill

ABSTRACT This essay looks at both spiritual and secular “conversation guides” published during the Restoration era in order to argue that a primarily discursive and contingent tradition of courtly conversation converged with a primarily immanent and embodied Christian usage of the word in late seventeenth-century England. It was this process of convergence and the refined version of conversation that emerged from it that made possible the polite, progressive Whig social agenda of the eighteenth century.
referred to as “a period of glorious flux,” when it was becoming clear that neither temporal nor divine power would achieve perfect cultural uniformity, and religious and political diversity were in the process of being institutionalized, conversation provided a practical strategy for accommodation and advancement attractive to individuals operating within both theological and secular frames of reference. In what follows, I read a variety of texts (including sermons, devotional works, translated courtesy books, and conduct literature) published between 1660 and 1700 that can be grouped under the broad category of “conversation guides”—texts that offered their readers strategies for “living together” with others in a stubbornly complex world. By focusing on the significance of “conversation” in these often otherwise apparently adversarial texts, I am able to describe that process whereby a primarily discursive and contingent courtly conversation converged with a primarily immanent and embodied Christian one to create new possibilities for the word and the world.

It was this process of convergence and refinement that made possible the elaboration of the polite practice of conversation that has been recognized by scholars such as Brian Cowan and Lawrence Klein as crucial to the Whig project of fostering disciplined discursive liberty in the reign of Queen Anne. Klein has characterized polite conversation as part of a “postcourtly” and “post-Godly” cultural “regime,” one that aimed to create “order and direction” within discourse beyond the “authoritative cultural institutions” that had previously sought to do so. In the writings of men like the Earl of Shaftesbury, Joseph Addison, and Richard Steele, conversation clearly serves as an antidote to the restricted discourse of the church and the court. My contribution to this scholarship is to emphasize that this culturally progressive strategy of polite conversation did not simply leave the church and court behind. Instead, it was premised on a newly transfigured construction of “conversation” that carried its mixed parentage within it. Conversation’s heterogeneous heritage, its refined but imperfectly purged construction, enabled it to be adopted as both a palatable and a practical instrument for the civil and secular cultural agendas of the next century.

Identifying the complex composition of early eighteenth-century conversation provides the occasion for making claims about its future as well as its past. Specifically, I suggest that what happened to conversation in the Restoration shaped the way the British nation was imagined in the century to come. The “conversation” that coalesced at the beginning of the eighteenth century coupled specific discursive practices associated with the courtly tradition to what had historically been a Christian project of envisioning and (imperfectly) revealing a more perfect world. This refined conversation thereby endowed secular practices of sociability with the power to manifest (not invent) “real” communities that had not yet been fully revealed in this
world. It was thus that conversation became one of the primary tools available, not just for fashioning a more polite society, but for imagining as yet unrepresented communities. If, as Benedict Anderson suggests, “communities are to be distinguished . . . by the style in which they are imagined,” then it was during the Restoration that conversation was made into a common stylistic trope for such imaginings.7 By describing the making of English “conversation” in one century, then, my ultimate goal is to call attention to the variety of conversations—social, material, textual—that may have participated in making the British nation in the next.

**Restoration Conversation**

Energized by the thorny and inchoate religious, social, and political terrains of Restoration-era England, “conversation” became an increasingly central term within both the religious discourse and the courtesy-inspired conduct literature of the late seventeenth century. In other words, the question of how best to live together successfully as a society was a question many different kinds of people turned to many different kinds of texts to find potential strategies for answering. This does not mean that individuals necessarily acted upon the recommendations proposed in their readings. We cannot simply mine these texts as “evidence” of actual behavior or even, simplistically, as indicators of belief. Not only do such assumptions about prescriptive literature generally fail to appreciate the broader context of the reading act and the “autonomy of the individual reader”; they also seem particularly ill fitting in this specific instance.8 While it is tempting to read seventeenth-century conversation guides as articulating what Anna Bryson calls the “ideals and norms,” if not the actual “practice,” of men and women, the competing nature and overlapping readership of the courtly and Christian conversational traditions suggest that—for the majority of their readership neither one nor the other could be ascribed the pride of place necessary to represent a broad cultural “ideal” or epitome.9 Instead, for our purposes it is probably most accurate to consider these as experimentally elucidatory works rather than as regulators of behavior. Indeed, the fact that two discreet and largely incompatible conversational traditions converged at this time suggests that the “conversation guides” examined in this essay can perhaps best be understood as a form of interpretive literature that helped readers living in a certain place and among a certain people to construe that experience in a more coherent fashion.

The return of the court to England in 1660 created an occasion for a new round in the republication of old courtesy literature. Such publications as *The accomplish’d courtier* (1660), *The courtier’s calling* (1675), and *The refin’d courtier* (1663, 1679) recycled the works of continental writers such as Giovanni
della Casa and Eustache de Refuge on perfecting the art of conversation as a means of “advancing a man’s Fortune” by “insinuating himself into the pleasures of the Prince”—this being the “common end” of all courtiers. The courtier must first, however, according to these texts, negotiate the complex arena of intercourse that stood between himself and his “patron.” This arena encompassed the “divers persons [of the Court] who aspire to the same Fortune: Whose principle study is, to take advantage from one anothers Misfortunes” and who hedge the prince in by “a thicket of obstacles.” Such an intricate playing field, explained these guides, demanded a diversity of conversations each fashioned to fit new situations as they occurred. It is for this reason that the table of contents of the 1673 “The art of complaisance, or, the means to oblige in conversation” (derivative of Refuge’s A Treatise of the Court) includes the following chapter headings: “Of the Conversation of the Court,” “Of the Conversation of the Inns of Court,” “Of Conversation with Ladies,” “Of Conversation with great men.” Clearly, the courtier’s state of grace depended on his constant striving for conversational suppleness and renewal.

The restoration of the monarchy explains, in part, England’s interest in the goings-on at courts. But the growth of London, in both size and importance, during the later seventeenth century was probably the more significant factor in expanding the appeal of tweaked and translated continental books on manners to a population that was experiencing urban culture with a new intensity. In an era characterized as much by change as by return, therefore, English language purveyors of the continental art of conversation promoted their products to a growing urban market beyond the immediate influence of the court. In principal, courtesy literature had always provided the template for a deliberate model of social intercourse by means of which any person might control his future—or “designs for advancement”—by strategically responding to whatever his present sphere of conversation happened to be. Thus, the author of the same 1763 manual quoted earlier explains at the beginning of his work that the courtly setting is appropriate to his purposes, not because it represents a unique conversational arena, but rather because it embodies a particularly highly refined version of a universal one:

Though the practice of this Art be exreamly [sic] advantageous to all persons, and in all places, yet since it is especially of use to those who place themselves in the Court where conversation is most difficult, and appears with the greatest variety, I shall take occasion in some part of my discourse, to address my self particularly to such, to assist them in their designs for advancement in the pursuit of which, they will find so many oppositions.

Although the conversation of the court is the “most difficult,” and although it is in the court where one must be capable of responding to the “greatest
variety” of conversation, the underlying assumption of this statement is that “all places” (especially densely and heterogeneously populated urban ones) confront individuals with some degree of variety and difficulty of intercourse, a reality that was increasingly characteristic of the English experience. Obadiah Walker, who had spent substantial time on the continent, explicitly equated the courtly and urban situations when he explained to the readership of his 1673 treatise on the education “of young gentlemen” that in cities, “as in Courts,” “there is also great variety of humours and dispositions; and a greater care of wary conversation.” The doubtful social environment of the continental court served Restoration-era authors and educators such as Walker as the original source or example of the kind of complex conversational field of play that they encouraged their readers to recognize all around them.

Because the courtesy tradition made a virtue of social complexity by viewing it as something that could be turned to account, no particular rank in society held the exclusive right to take advantage of such benefits. English translators and imitators of continental originals may have produced manuals that propounded what Bryson terms “gentlemanly civility,” but in reality this gentlemanly practice constituted a conversational strategy that could be used by anyone who wished to elevate himself above the rank below him. Thus, while the title of The courtiers manual oracle (1685) advertises its aristocratic credentials, the work’s preface argues for its utility not only to him “who has the honour to be actually in that station [of a courtier]; but of others also, who by knowing, and reflecting upon the transactions of the world, may be capable, if not to serve the Publick, yet to live like men in their generation.” Men who serve their “generation” in a private capacity (a capacity that could encompass merchants and professionals as well as independent gentlemen) are here invited to participate in the same kind of “transactions” (a suggestively commercial word choice) that are associated with the court. The marketing of a courtly tradition of conversation as a means of personal advancement to a less than gentlemanly readership, specifically one engaged in trade, can also be recognized in the frequent assurances within these guides that conversation was a good investment, one that distributed continual returns “with no other stock then a few pleasant looks, good words, and not-evil actions.” Indeed, the very fact that speech (the verbal component of conversation) was considered “the most crucial factor in shaping a gentleman’s courteous image” must have helped translate courtly conversational aspirations into the middling classes of society insofar as talk has always been relatively cheap and plentiful.

If the readers of late seventeenth-century courtesy-inspired texts were encouraged to emulate courtiers by learning to “compose” their conversation to “those among whom it is their Lot to live,” the new reality of religious
diversity to which Christian believers were allotted by history produced religiously inspired texts that urged their (likely overlapping) readership to do much the same thing at much the same time. The urgency of responding to a variegated and uncertain religious state via the careful management of one’s conversation was perhaps most vividly expressed in the writings Non-conformist ministers directed to their outlawed congregations. Addressing his “deeply beloved and longed for flock” in the dedicatory letter to A saint indeed (1668), the ejected Presbyterian minister John Flavel hoped that “this small remembrance” (the text itself) might strengthen and preserve “the cord of friendship” between them that his “necessitated absence” threatened to “untwist.” In his absence, he encourages his congregation to eschew “frivolous and sapless controversies” and to attend instead to their conversation as a means of maintaining their spiritual progress, or advancement, in a complex, unfriendly, and intensely attentive world:

you will carefully look to your Conversations, and be accurate in all your waies, hold forth the Word of life: be sure by the strictness and holiness of your lives, to settle your selves in the very consciences of your enemies. Remember that your lives must be produced in the great day, to judge the world. 1 Cor. 6. 2. Oh then what manner of persons ought you to be! You have many eyes over you, the Omniscient eye of God, that searches the heart and reins, Rev. 2. 23. The vigilant eye of Satan, Job 1. 7, 8. The envious eyes of enemies, that curiously observe you, Psal. 5. 8. The quick and observant eye of Conscience, which none of your actions escape, Rom. 9. 1. Oh then be precise, and accurate in all manner of conversation.

The terrain that Flavel admonishes the Christian believer to negotiate via the precise management of his conversation is here internal (conscience) and eternal (God and Satan) as well as social (envious enemies). Nevertheless, both the intricate and hyperobservant world sketched out in this passage, and the weight Flavel’s exhortation places on conversation as the means by which a Christian can maneuver to his advantage within that world, evoke the situations and strategies depicted by contemporary courtesy-inspired conduct literature.

In the aftermath of the 1662 Act of Uniformity, few Christians felt that they belonged in the place or among the people where they found themselves. And while this sense of spiritual estrangement was made most manifest in the lives of Nonconformists, effective sectarianism had changed the Church of England as well. There would be no universal rule of saints; but neither, it became clear, would there be a uniform Protestantism. Within this context, the question of how to conduct one’s spiritual life within a complex theological topography (rather than the impetus to purify that topography) became the central concern of individuals on both sides of the conformist rift. And if the struggle over doctrines was to remain unresolved, then a renewed insistence from spiritual leaders on Christian conversation provided
a practical alternative for making the best of things. Even as polemical and doctrinally invested a writer as John Owen, writing in support of justification by faith (1677), found himself suggesting that, in a world in which other means of seeking the truth had failed, the conversations of men ought to be repaired to as an acceptable secondary trial of doctrines:

We being fallen into those times wherein under great and fierce contests about notions, opinions, and practices in Religion, there is a horrible decay in true Gospel Purity and Holiness of life amongst the generality of men, I shall readily grant, that keeping a true regard unto the only standard of Truth, a secondary Trial of Doctrines proposed and contended for, may and ought to be made by the ways, lives, walkings, and conversations of them by whom they are received and professed.25

As Christopher Hill explains, in the “everyday world” of the Restoration, when millenarian intensity had waned, even dissenting sects turned increasingly toward imposing “social attitudes” and morality as a kind of ersatz standard of truth.26 Thus, Christian conversation, which signified an embodied (versus discursive) and heavenly oriented manner of “walking” in the world (while avoiding the problematic terminology of works) came to serve as a key term in what Blair Worden has characterized as the central religious change of the later seventeenth century—Christianity’s “shift of emphasis from faith to conduct.” In what Worden describes as their effort to “save” religion by relaxing “the tension between this world and the next,” a variety of Christian thinkers deployed conversation as a means of advancing “moral reformation . . . [in] the place of doctrinal conflict.”27

Religious texts as well as the ways in which they were read played a crucial role in the advancement of civil conversation as a Christian principal. As Flavel’s “small remembrance” to his longed-for flock demonstrates, the complex social and rhetorical “event” of a Nonconformist sermon was often necessarily replaced by a text. In this case, by a text that, via its rejection of “frivolous controversies” and its exhortations to its readers to maintain vigilance over their personal conduct in a watchful world, deliberately asks to be read as a conversation guide rather than as a theological treatise.28 Separation, as James Rigney has argued, not only increased the market for printed sermons and devotional literature but also encouraged a new “style of readership that placed emphasis on the use to which the reader put the work.”29 We can recognize Flavel responding to both these occurrences when he justifies his own contribution to the “multitudes of books” already published by emphasizing his authorial avoidance of “impractical notions” in favor of a focus on “practical godliness.” That emphasis on practical conduct indicates a degree of mistrust on Flavel’s part as to what kinds of texts his congregation could be trusted with reading on their own.30 The promotion of Christian conversation seems to have developed as a practical
textual strategy as well as a practical religious strategy for dissenting ministers forced to contend with the translation of their spiritual discourse into printed texts.

The reading of religious texts (versus attending spoken sermons) played a significant role in the religious history of England beyond the boundary of dissent. Indeed, as John Sommerville contends in *Popular Religion in Restoration England*, devotional texts became crucial during the late seventeenth century, not only for the “survival of dissent” but also for constructing “new foundations in popular opinion” for the Anglican Church.31 The best-sellers of the age, according to his detailed analysis, can be characterized as works of “religious direction” or “manuals of devotion,” which, while differing in the date of their initial publication, the ostensible social rank of their target audience, and the religious affiliations of their authors, unified a wide readership due to their relative lack of investment in theological issues.32 Because sermons were “the most familiar cultural forms of the age,” Tony Clayton characterizes them as being easy to collect and consume by a British public that had a long “tradition of using printed spiritual literature as a guide to personal piety.”33 Serving to intensify this tradition was the contemporary promotion (by both dissenting and church affiliates) of a program of “family religion” in which the communal reading of evangelical texts within the home served as the central spiritual practice.34 The religiously oriented “public discussions” engaged in by the large and diverse readership of popular devotional texts promoted Christian conversation as a viable method of achieving “practical godliness” in British society as a whole.35

Considering the popular dominance of religious literature during the Restoration, as well as the increasingly broad audience to which courtesy-inspired conduct literature was marketed, it was inevitable that the distinctive courtly and Christian uses of “conversation” would begin to brush up against each other—not only in different works consumed by the same readers but also within the covers of single texts. Walker’s treatise on the education of “young gentlemen” provides a fascinating example of an author purposefully drawing upon the authority of both conversational traditions in order to buoy up the legitimacy of his own work. In so doing, Walker provides a tidy expression of how Christian and courtly “doctrines” of conversational accommodation supply parallel, equally weighted, and authoritative models for the instruction of “civil” converse:

As a good Christian, for the glory of God, mortifies all his own passions and humors, and puts on those, which are for his purpose, and according to his intention: Such I mean, as Religion and reason suggest: And as a good Courtier, for his interest complies with everyone; always gay, cheerful and complaisant, without any humour of his own, only borrowing that of the company. So in like manner, every civil person doth the same, so far at least to avoid all offending those with whom he converseth.36
Despite the easy logic of this passage, however, the convergence of courtly and heavenly conversations into the “civil” converse of the eighteenth century was neither a quick nor necessarily a very graceful event. The work of the rest of this essay will be to slow down and complicate the process of amalgamation between these two distinct uses that Walker is here so eager to elide.

This process can best be understood as one of refinement in which both Christian conversation’s tendency toward separatism (associated with enthusiasm) as well as courtly conversation’s radically circumstantial nature (linked to hypocrisy) were gradually purged. The following two sections examine the increasingly problematic status of each of these distinctive attributes during the last years of the seventeenth century as well as the methods by which contemporary writers of both spiritual and secular conversation guides attenuated their influence and thereby paved the way for the condensation of a culturally purified (and thus common) conversation of the eighteenth. What got left behind, or married, by this process, however, is ultimately of greatest interest to history: conversation’s identification (via courtly discourse) as a primarily discursive act was strengthened, while increased importance was concomitantly placed on conversation’s capacity (via Christian discourse) to manifest imagined communities within the material world.

Refining Heavenly Conversation

Seventeenth-century Christian conversation’s most unpromising feature (as far as its assimilation into polite society is concerned) was its peculiarity; it was scrupulous, distinct, and separatist in orientation. Walker’s formulation of the convergences between Christian, courtly, and civil conversations suggests that both the “good Courtier” and the “good Christian” present positive conversational models for “every civil person” because each sacrifices his own personal desires to a greater good. These greater goods, however, did not yet fully correspond; traditionally, the courtier “complied” his “humours” to those of whatever “company” he kept, but the Christian “mortified” his only “for the Glory of God.” Indeed, Walker’s parallel (intentionally) obfuscates the fact that, in a post-Restoration world, Christians were habitually exhorted, by churchmen and Nonconformists alike, to employ their conversation to set themselves apart from the “humours” of general society. As the evangelically oriented Calvinist Thomas Manton preached to the elect, “there must be something more than ordinary in your Conversation. . . . A peculiar People must live in a peculiar manner.”

But perhaps the most popular scriptural support for this belief during the seventeenth century was Philippians 3:20, “For our conversation is in
heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ," a verse popular across doctrinal divides for admonishing Christians to live and act on earth as if they had already been received into the community of saints in heaven.38

The promise of Philippians 3:20 resonated for the Latitudinarian John Tillotson, who preached on this text in a sermon addressed to Whitehall in 1686: "Our conversation is in Heaven, so we render the words; but they properly signify, that Christians are Members of that City and Society which is above . . . Heaven is the Country to which they do belong, and whither they are continually tending."39 It also appealed to the evangelically oriented Nonconformist Thomas Watson, who took up the same emphasis in his own manner in his treatise on “practical divinity”: “Like the Birds of Paradise, who soar above in the Air, and seldom or never touch with their Feet upon Earth . . . The Saints of old, tho they did live in the World, they did trade in Heaven. Phil. 3.20.”40 Commentary of this nature encouraged believers to employ their conversation as evidence of the fact that they already belonged to a separate community, that they continually bore the duties and privileges incumbent upon holding citizenship and doing business somewhere else. As such, the heavenly conversation of believers embodied not just a way of being in this world; it also manifested their immanent possession of something essential, intrinsic, and “real” that was waiting for them in the next. Seventeenth-century Christian conversation privileged not communication, but identity; it served not to facilitate intercourse, but to constitute belief. The majority of printed sermons and devotional works from this period can therefore be seen as resisting the assimilation of a Christian’s conversation into the model of “civil converse” that Walker’s text assigned it insofar as they refused to assimilate “converse” (intercourse) with “conversation” (belonging).

Immanent conversation resisted conflation with either mere words or mere works.41 Some Restoration-era religious thinkers accepted that men might practice “virtuous behaviour” without accepting the word of Christian doctrine—conversation without profession—but argued that this version of moral conduct should not be confused with “holy conversation.”42 Far more pressing and prevalent for these commentators, however, was the problem of profession without conversation. Sermons and devotional literature of the era insist, unremittingly, that word (scripture, doctrine, profession) and conversation must be brought into conformity with each other in a Christian’s life, but this goal of correspondence was premised upon the fundamental distinctness of the two.43 A deep strain within contemporary Christian discourse, therefore, cautioned against the conflation of conversation with verbal intercourse, which was characteristic of the more verbally oriented courtesy tradition. John Bunyan makes this distinction explicit in The Pilgrim’s Progress when he emphasizes that the straight path does not deviate toward the town where
Civility dwells, in part, because a Christian’s conversation does not deviate toward talk. On first encountering Talkative, Faithful finds his new acquaintance to be “a very pretty man” and is much impressed by Talkative’s fine discourse and eagerness to accommodate his speech (just as courtesy literature urged) to a variety of subjects: “I will talk of things heavenly, or things earthly; things Moral, or things Evangelical; things Sacred, or things Prophane; things past, or things to come . . . provided that all be done to our profit.” It is Talkative’s very facility in talking anything into “profit,” however, that gives him away. Although Faithful is at first beguiled, Christian explains why he should not be deceived: “Religion has no place in [Talkative’s] heart, or house, or conversation; all he hath, lieth in his tongue, and his Religion is to make a noise therewith.”44 Apparently those who enact on earth their conversation in heaven must be wary of the seductive facility of words.

Naturally enough, those who struggled most immediately against civil powers were most eager to assert their eternal citizenship in heaven by means of their “holy conversation.” Thus, though they had no exclusive claim, “heavenly” or “holy” conversation had a special resonance for dissenters like Bunyan. For all who were deprived of the regular meeting times and places of worship, the conceptual power that conversation held to unify and separate without dependence on the legislatively vulnerable use of words (in texts or conventicles) must have rung true; nevertheless, what was deemed the aggressive assertion of a rigorous conversation by separatist sects gave “holy conversation” something of a bad name in society at large. In the final decades of the seventeenth century, the Quakers—with their “sullen, proud, and dogged Conversation”—became the most visible of such sects. Much of the language thrown in their direction attacked the peculiarity of their conversation as an expression of their unjustified pride and antagonistic censoriousness: “Their Holiness lyes in a separation from all others as polluted”; “the austereness and severity of their Manners, as being so opposite to the Conversation of Men . . . upbraid[ed] the Folly of all of them”; “[their] Justishness, clownishness, closeness, strangeness, and severity or reservedness in behaviour, and Christian civil conversation, is a sin.”45 “Christian civil conversation,” contends J. C. in One sheet against the Quakers, involves the “true use of our Tongues and Members,” it describes a socially and verbally circumscribed realm of Christian intercourse that the fully embodied state of the Quakers’ separatist conversation does not recognize as worthy of its accommodation.46 Statements such as these reveal the extent to which the deployment of conversation “to appear different from all others” and to snub familiar intercourse with general society could be viewed as distasteful and antagonistic.47 In the case of the Quakers, this conversational “preciseness of their own making” was not only evidence of hubris (via its association with the doctrine of perfection); it was also condemned as the fruit of superstition.
(via its association with the doctrine of immediate inspiration or “the light within”).

The later association is interesting because it meant that an uncivil conversation like that of the Quakers could be attributed to enthusiasm: “fancied inspiration” or “a vain confidence of divine favour or communication.” The mistaken notion that one enjoyed a separate (and thus unverifiable) communication with God was condemned by the vast majority of Restoration-era Christians for encouraging individuals to supersede, supplement, and thus subvert the revealed word of scripture. As William Allen, an advocate for unifying the church, explained to such misguided believers as might be reading his *Danger of Enthusiasm*: “that narrowness and Strictness consisting in outward Austerities and Incivilities, wherein you differed from other Sober Christians, was no Narrowness or strictness of God’s appointing, but a piece of Superstition of your own devising, when you placed Religion in it.” He directly contrasts this false practice with “God’s way and method of bringing men to Salvation . . . by making known this Gospel to them, by word or writing.”

Because their conversation was premised on the direct inspiration (unmediated inbreathing) from God that bypassed his revealed word, it naturally enough expressed itself in an inflexible isolated conceit, as “whimseys and crotchets of their own brain” that resisted integration into society. Thus, both the practice and the origin of separatist Christian conversations were vulnerable to attack for being excessively nonverbal in nature.

Enthusiasts were not the only ones who risked isolating themselves via the peculiarity of their conversation; Christian conversation continually risked snubbing common civilities when it bypassed the world of words. The prolific devotional writer and Church of England divine John Kettlewell addressed this problem when he asked in his popular *The measures of Christian obedience* (1681), “What is more common than for men to be over-censorious and troublesome rigid in conversation, who aim at nothing but to be severely virtuous, and piously austere?” A stream of publications, from both the established and Nonconforming churches acknowledged this problem—publications that favored sweetening and socializing Christian conversation, in part by emphasizing its affinities with familiar discourse. Characteristic of this thread of commentary is the ejected Presbyterian William Bates’s reworking of and response to Kettlewell’s query in *Spiritual perfection unfolded* (1699): “A person innocent and pure, but of a severe and harsh Temper, condemns by his Holy Conversation the Profane and Scandalous: but a Good Man charms and captivates the Hearts of others.” The idea that heavenly conversation might captivate rather than condemn was hardly an invention of the seventeenth century; nevertheless, Bates’s substitution of “good” (a moral term) for “holy” (a doctrinal one) signals his participation in a particular historic movement that sought to reconcile “the good Christian” to “the good companion.” Indeed,
for evangelically minded writers, Christ becomes the ideal model for both. “[Christ] was a Person of the Greatest, Freedom, Affability, and Courtesie,” we are informed by Edward Fowler in 1671; “There was nothing in his Conversation that was at all Austere, Crabbed, or Unpleasant. Though he was always serious, yet he was never sour, sullenly Grave, Morose or Cynical; but of a marvelously conversable, sociable and benign temper.” The template of a “courteous” and “conversable” Christ had consequences for the history of Christianity in England, and it had an impact on the history of English conversation as well. As Christian conversation was nudged toward an appealing, familiar, and easy (both amiable and accessible) social practice, “conversation” crept closer to the world of words.

The gradual weakening of Christian conversation’s antipathy toward ordinary verbal converse can be appreciated by revisiting Philippians 3:20 under the aegis of the moderate Nonconformist John Corbet’s The kingdom of God among men (1679). In a chapter dedicated to encouraging Nonconformists to temper their “zeal, and strictness about things of indifferent or doubtful interpretation” such that “they are [not] by Scornfull men numbered among Fanaticks,” Corbet confirms that “a necessity of being singular lies upon those that imbrace the power of Godliness,” but he also asserts that “the humour of needless Singularity hath a snatch of Pharisaical leaven in it.” Implicitly condemning more radical readings of this scripture, Corbet argues that, while his “true” conversation (like his eternal life and ultimate citizenship) belongs in heaven, a Christian need not estrange himself from civil converse with “natural men”:

> It is most true, that the Faithful in Christ have their conversation in Heaven. . . . Nevertheless as yet they dwell upon earth, and converse with natural men, and therefore may not speak and act in such a strain, as if they were taken out of the world. Provided they deny no principle of Faith, it behoves them to shew themselves in nothing estranged from the principles of human reason, and moral prudence according to men upon earth, and in that regard to act as Citizens of this world; though in regard of their heavenly Spirit and conversation, which is their life indeed, they must walk as fellow Citizens with the Saints now in Glory.

Explicitly this passage establishes a two-tiered system whereby Christians converse in the world of men but maintain their conversation (walk in their hearts) with God. But while Corbet thus maintains the traditional distinction between conversation (life indeed) and converse (speaking and acting), he suggests—since the two are clearly connected in his own thought processes—that each is a version of the other; conversing as citizens of this world and walking as fellow citizens with the saints now in glory blend together as compatible practices of Christian conversation. By subtly releasing “conversation” from its exclusive signification as an immanent way of being, Corbet begins
to relax the enmity that existed within Christian discourse between conversation and words.

An excellent example of how writers invested in socializing religion during the Restoration era promoted the slippage of Christian conversation toward discourse occurs in *The measures of Christian obedience* where Kettlewell offers an extended discussion of the “groundless scruples” inspired by Matthew 12.36: “I say unto you, That as concerning every idle word which men shall speak, they shall give an account thereof at the Day of Judgment.” This “severe” stricture, he suggests, has led Christians to set themselves apart from society: “to contribute nothing to the harmless mirth and cheerfulness of conversation themselves, and to frown upon it in others.” But this “reserve” was neither the intention nor the example of Christ. Indeed, it is impossible for those men who share in “a conversation” like Christ’s to “avoid a multitude of words.” Kettlewell concludes that, to avoid familiar verbal intercourse not only is “ill-manner[ed]” but also flouts the laws of nature and morality, as well as the example of a conversable Christ. Although Kettlewell (for the most part) maintains the traditional Christian usage of “conversation” throughout this text—as a way of walking versus talking in the world—the free flow of words takes its place as the natural expression of Gospel conversation as well as polite social practice. Here the “ordinary entertainment of . . . talking and discourse” (what we would now call conversation) surfaces as the worldly manifestation of “true” Christian conversation.57

In contradistinction to the intense unidirectional model of communication suggested by “inspiration,” a number of contemporary devotional texts promoted what we would today recognize as a conversational model of communion with God/Christ as well as with men. “Our love to the Lord Jesus, just as our love to other things, is very apt both to be bred, and to be very much nourish’t by conversation,” wrote the polemical Arminian Thomas Pierce in 1670. And although this conversation was to take place via frequent reading of the Bible, the figure or model for this kind of scriptural familiarity was that of familiar intercourse, or talk. It is not pardonable, Pierce exhorted his readers in a passage that confounds “converse” with “conversation,” that we “excuse our gross neglects of conversing with Jesus Christ, by alledging our Inability of taking delight in his converse. For conversation must be made easie, ere it can possibly be delightful. And the easiness of anything must come by use.”58 Richard Allestree, probably the best-selling author of the era, takes this idea even further in *The gentlemans calling* (1660), a book of spiritual direction that Sommerville has characterized as “meant to break down the barrier between an aristocratic mentality and the Protestant ethos.”59 Here, he calls on men to give (a conversable model of) God the “honour of being good Company” by addressing him with greater frequency and familiarity:
In Humane Conversations we use not to finde the gust and relish of them, till we arrive to some degree of freedom; they that converse as strangers, are under constraints and uneasiness; and certainly that main cause of that disgust men have to this Spiritual entercourse, is their unaccustomedness to it: They address to God perfectly as strangers, now and then pay him a slight Visit, as it were by way of formality and Complement; and then no wonder if it be neither satisfactory to God nor themselves.60

Although this passage explicitly condemns the formality of courtly conversation, for writers who were invested in making good Christians into good company—for God as well as each other—it was necessary that Christian conversation approach more closely the courtier’s rubric, explicitly endorsed by Kettlewell, that “all converse and society is managed by the tongue.”61

Refining Courtly Conversation

If the most distinctive feature of Christian conversation was its peculiarity, courtly conversation was markedly circumstantial in nature. Returning again to Walker’s 1673 formulation, we find that the “good Courtier” provides a conversational model to “every civil person” because he is “without any humour of his own, only borrowing that of the company.” In contradistinction to the strict integrity of the Christian, the courtier’s conversation is marked by mutability. By virtue of his circumstantially sensitive conversation (a sensitivity most fully realized by that most flexible of organs, the tongue), the courtier succeeds in becoming a creature of his surroundings. Indeed, failing to comply with the company one keeps, implies The refin’d courtier (a 1663 translation of Giovanni della Casa’s Il Galateo), smacks of religious enthusiasm: “In our civil conversation, we are by no means to run counter to the major part, unless we are compell’d by an unavoidable necessity... And therefore there is no reason why in these and such like things, you should prefer your own phantastick conceit, but instead of that, soberly comply with other men.”62 “Civil conversation” apparently shares no kinship with spiritual conviction. Such claims are, however, belied by the process of refinement through which English-language treatments of courtly conversation passed before the turn of the eighteenth century—a process that drew upon the habits of Christian usage to nudge conversation away from circumstance and toward truth.

Courtly conversation helped an individual achieve what he wanted; it did not identify who he was (two things the Christian usage conflates). And, because it failed to insist upon a connatural link between conversation and identity, courtly conversation was naturally vulnerable to accusations of hypocrisy. Such charges were nothing new; however, as more texts began to commend strategic conversation as a means by which anyone might make
his way in the world, conversation’s association with hypocrisy began to chafe. Even Walker, who promoted the courtier as a model of civil conversation in one part of his text, attacks the “simulation and duplicity” of “court Flatterers” in another. Before conversational achievement in the secular world could be discharged from its association with false representation, its circumstantial construction (inherited from the courtly tradition) had to be modified. In place of a mutable performance, the strategic management of conversation was re-imagined in secularly oriented conduct literature as a revelation of truth—as the embodied proof rather than the circumstantial evidence of something “real.”

Humphrey Brooke’s 1681 epistle to his children, The durable legacy, offers an example of how English individuals writing conduct literature in the lineage of the courtly tradition (in that they promoted the worldly advantages of actively deploying a verbally weighted conversation) posit conversation as a conduit for truth. “Let thy conversation be plain and courteous,” he advises, unlike that of “Statesmen and Courtiers”:

who though they are great explorators of other mens hearts, keep their own skreened with the outside of Ceremony, and art of obliging: Good men are of another mould, they do not hide their hearts in the formality of their carriage and expressions, but intend to be known by them. . . . I would not have thee therefore, my Son, to study and affect any particular carriage, but to let it naturally flow from the integrity of an honest heart.

In an interesting parallel to Bates’s distinction between the alienating affect of “holy conversation” and the captivating quality of the “good man,” Brooke supplants the obfuscations of courtiers with the conversational transparency of “good men.” Efforts by religious writers to increase the civility of Christian conversation relaxed the word’s association with rigid sincerity. But here, in a contrary move, Brooke invokes the “natural flow” of “integrity” in order to dislodge conversation from the stiff screen-work of courtly complaisance. Brooke assumes that conversation embodies a means of access to, as well as a natural emanation of, truth; it allows his son to “be known” because it issues forth from his “honest heart.” In order for the strategic secular potential of conversation to be disidentified from “apes, parasites, [and] falsehearted Courtiers,” the object of its representation needed to be displaced outside of society such that conversation became the authentic manifestation of (what was imagined as) a preexisting (and therefore less circumstantial) state or identity.

John Flavel’s exposition to his estranged congregation of the classic dichotomy between profession and conversation exemplifies the spiritual origin of Brooke’s emanating construction of conversation.
O that I might live to see that day! When professors shall not walk in a vain shew, when they shall please themselves no more with a name to live, being spiritually dead . . . but the majestick beams of holiness shining from their heavenly, and serious conversations shall awe the world, and command reverence from all that are about them: when they shall warm the hearts of those that come nigh them, so that men shall say, God is in these men of a truth.67

The “truth” of God cannot be known via representation (profession); rather, it is manifest (“shines forth”) through conversation. Heavenly conversation embodies the truth of a Christian’s identity because its origin exists really and unconditionally outside of society—just as does the integrity of Brooke’s son’s “honest heart.” While Brooke does not acknowledge his debt to a Christian model, some contemporary versions of courtesy books borrowed more self-consciously from that tradition when attempting to establish a stable link between conversation and identity. The author’s dedicatory letter to The art of complaisance (1763) offers a striking example of this pattern.

I have been guilty of many more irregularities, of which, like a man who intends to be a Convert, I make this confession to you. . . . Oh! how I am covered with shame, when I reflect, how infected I came from [the university], with pedantry, and a humour of contention. . . . All this time, Sir, you were pleased to pardon my faults, and to love me for the sincerity of my soul. . . . It was then that I resolved to make you the Model of my Reformation, and from that time I endeavoured to cashier my presumption, and sought to temper the violence and impetuosity of my humour, with mildness and modesty.68

By aligning his conversational reformation to the experience of religious conversion (the addressee here markedly resembles Christ), the author demands that his readers recognize his change of conversation—here a turning from pedantry to civility rather than from sin to sanctity—as, nevertheless, a true conversion experience. The author’s change of conversation indicates his adoption of a “new course” and a “new heart”; he has become, in the words of the evangelical Nonconformist Joseph Alleine, a “new man.”69 Thus, regardless of the rehashed courtesy material that follows, the dedication evokes a religious paradigm to suggest that by remaking his conversation an individual could catalyze a revolution in his intrinsic identity. Personal integrity and conversational complaisance are aligned.

This emphasis on personal integrity, however, is somewhat complicated by the fact that, within Christian discourse, a new conversation indicated not simply a new state of being, but a new state of belonging as well. When secular conduct literature of the late seventeenth century adopted the “truth value” of Christian conversation over the performance of the courtly
tradition, it imported a communal aspiration as well. Thus, rather than the tool used by the individual courtier for maneuvering through a thicket of social obstacles, the anonymous author of *The Polite gentleman* (1700) posits conversation as a consolidating force within society: “Conversation creates those agreeable Ties which bind us one to the other.” Even more significantly, this text posits conversation as a joint endeavor toward a common goal. In a section dedicated to examining “as near as we can, after what manner [conversation] is perform’d,” the author explains: “Men joining from all parts, do that together which they could not asunder, produce a thousand Things which wholly owe their being but to the Dispositions we reciprocally communicate to each other, and which would never have appear’d, had we not rous’d them up from that Depth in which they lay as it were buried.”

This text’s realm of concern is professedly secular (its main theme is the proper use of wit) and the men described in this passage “produce” things of their own “dispositions”—not for or via God’s; nevertheless, the idea that conversation is that which makes manifest a commonly owned truth—which brings to light an as yet unclaimed but achievable joint property—produces a spiritual logic. That which is promised by God can only be revealed via heavenly conversation; that which men hold in common, can only be revealed via polite conversation. Thus, the kind of polite conversation that evolved via the spiritual refinement of courtly conversation not only made conversation into a stable platform for authenticating individual identity but also envisioned conversation as a means for “rousing up” or making manifest an immanent communal identity as well.

With this in mind, we can return to a statement that epitomizes the shift from an ideological to a conduct-based Christian practice in England and see it afresh. In 1673 Josiah Dare wrote in the preface to his “loose adaptation” of *Il Galateo*: “The design of all Theologues in the Pulpit is, to teach men Grace; and it is mine out of it, to teach them Manners, and truly a moral life is a fair step to a holy one, and a good behaviour to a sanctified conversation.” Dare concisely describes a world in which manners inhabit the primary field of signification, a fact that strives to soothe societal tensions by privileging individual “good behaviour” over identification with any particular holy community. Yet a “sanctified conversation” remains his ultimate aspiration, and that conversation is both eternal in origin and communal in essence. Even when stripped of “grace” the conversation of this world tends toward citizenship in an imagined community that, while it may (and indeed must) continually be manifest, will never be fully realized (known, visible) on earth, for it has no beginning or end. Thus, while Dare still clings to a religiously imagined telos, by the end of the seventeenth century the pathway he sketched was easily diverted toward more secularly imagined communities.
Perfecting Conversation

In 1710 Jonathan Swift predicted the possibility of conversation’s perfection:

Most things, pursued by men for the happiness of publick or private life, our wit or folly have so refined, that they seldom subsist but in idea; a true friend; a good marriage; a perfect form of government, with some others, require so many ingredients, so good in their several kinds, and so much niceness in mixing them, that for some thousands of years men have despaired of reducing their schemes to perfection: But in conversation, it is, or might be otherwise.72

Anticipating the argument of this essay, Swift describes human ideas as the products of refinement, as subtle mixtures of several ingredients. Apparently, however, people typically over-refine their designs. Their desire for a polished, purified “good” attenuates its actual potential to effect happiness in either “publick or private life.” Swift exhibits the pragmatic approach to the pursuit of happiness characteristic of the eighteenth century when he disparages this tendency towards over-refinement as an antiquated (“for some thousands of years”) quest for perfection that relegates designs for human advancement to notional schemes. But in conversation the situation was perceived to be otherwise, and not just by Swift. A multitude of voices crowded into the press during the early decades of the eighteenth century to promulgate the common goal of perfecting conversation as a method for making society more orderly, pleasurable, and predictable.73

What I have tried to suggest in this essay is that conversation was adapted to this progressive social agenda precisely because its state of refinement was not so “nice.” Lumpy rather than elegant, discursive, and visionary; both a vehicle for personal ambition and a state of communal identification: the heterogeneous character of eighteenth-century conversation may have purged its traditional cultural affiliations, but it maintained the irreducible features of its mixed parentage. Thus, while it was perfect (singular, whole) enough to furnish a common rather than divisive human ideal (unlike “a perfect form of government”), conversation remained imperfect enough that it apparently embodied a realizable goal—one ready to be newly appropriated for political ends. Writers like Swift—and more famously Shaftesbury, Addison, and Steele—promoted conversation as a means to construct a clean, well-lighted place of discourse that would serve the interests of the Whig political order. Purified of its associations with both Machiavellian maneuverings and the “inner light” of enthusiasm, these writers billed conversation as a stable mode of “commerce”—that (like the financial commerce of the era) brought profit and pleasure to individuals while consolidating the interests of what Bernard Mandeville dubbed the “fruitful hive.”74

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But while Addison and Steele’s definition of “a gentleman” as the polite (not courtly) and moral (not sanctified) “man of conversation” endures as one of the most celebrated end-products of this project, to stop there fails to capture the full tenor and scope of eighteenth-century conversation. The perfection of conversation that Swift contemplated in 1710 had previously designated a spiritual aspiration—the Christian desire to accommodate human conversation to the perfect model set forth by Christ. And aspiration to a perfect conversation continued to express a desire for transcendence even after that goal had been harnessed to a secularized agenda. In his 1743 “Essay on Conversation,” Henry Fielding calls attention to the fact that he will intentionally discount men’s conversation with God in order to focus instead on “conversation [as] a branch of society,” since it is society, he clearly indicates, that has supplanted religion as the “grand business of our lives.” And yet the essay itself is dense with the echoes of heavenly conversation. (Social) conversation, Fielding tells us, is the “foundation of every Thing either useful or pleasant”; it is what separates men from the rest of “creation”; it lessens the “imperfection” of an unequal society; with due effort, we can make our conversation (and thus society itself) tend toward a “more perfect . . . purer, and more unsullied” state. While Fielding promotes conversation as a practical tool for making what Joyce Appleby refers to as the “human product” of society out of the materials of everyday life, the lineage of his language reveals the extent to which conversation retained its spiritual impulse and, with it, its capacity to serve as a medium for imagining communities. Essayists of conversation offered rules to polish polite intercourse, but they also continued to posit conversation as a means to transfigure, not merely reshuffle, society. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, conversation came to be positioned as the “foundation of every thing” else—government, religion, society—that individuals continued to aspire to despite their realization that such projects would never be brought into a state of perfection.

For these reasons, I suggest, it is worth our while to contemplate eighteenth-century conversation not merely as a style of discourse but rather as a mode of imagination. During that century, periodicals, assemblies, clubs, novels, epistolary friendships, and the polite reading public in various ways served as analogous conversations that married—as did conversation itself—an impulse toward immanence (instantiation versus representation) and a longing for transcendence (aspiration versus realization) to the discursive practices of sociability. Thus, despite their diverse manifestations, we can identify all of these conversations as practical experiments in manifesting imagined communities that were not—and did not need to be—fully represented in the world. Additionally, as I have already suggested, it is worth considering this construct of eighteenth-century conversation in relation to Benedict Anderson’s characterization of the nation as an imagined
community. Anderson argues that the nation fills the void left by religious (and dynastic) communities and differs from them in its mode of apprehending time—a new concept of horizontal simultaneity made possible by print capitalism.\(^7\) It was during the eighteenth century that conversation gradually lost its identity as a means of imagining a religious community “vertically linked to Divine Providence” and was absorbed into a world dependent on the “meanwhile” of homogenous time—on “commerce, intercourse, society” and, increasingly, print.\(^8\) The history of conversation and the history of British nationalism follow similar patterns, are suggestively intertwined, and are possibly interdependent. One way to assess the degree to which this is the case will be more closely to examine eighteenth-century conversations in order to determine the extent to which they may have served as formal conditions of possibility for imagining the British nation.\(^9\)

Notes

3. *The Oxford English Dictionary* notes that this earliest English use of “conversation” was also employed figuratively to indicate the place of one’s “spiritual being.” “Conversation’s” association with the idea of belonging in a place or to a community is crucial to seventeenth-century Christian discourse. I do not mean to imply that this earliest use of “conversation” was the only one active prior to the Restoration era. “Conversation” was employed to indicate verbal as well as sexual intercourse from the sixteenth century onwards. However, throughout its early history in the English language, conversation was more strongly associated with continuous modes of being, occupations, and behaviors than it was with particular moments of intercourse or exchange. These uses dropped off during the nineteenth century leaving “talk” as its primary meaning from that period on. It was during the eighteenth century that “conversation” enjoyed its most various usage. This essay does not concern itself with conversation in relation to the history of rhetoric. In fact, it is part of my project to suggest that it is anachronistic to collapse “conversation” with dialogue at this time period. Nevertheless, Timothy Dykstal’s argument that early eighteenth-century literary dialogues defined a speculative realm demands attention as an intriguing parallel to this essay’s suggestion that conversation functioned as a mode of imagination; *The Luxury of Skepticism: Politics, Philosophy, and Dialogue in the English Public Sphere, 1660–1740* (Charlottesville, VA, 2001).
4. Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (New York, 1975). 14. The parliamentary factionalism that developed around the exclusion crisis revealed the entrenched and soon to be institutionalized nature of political diversity in this period. This diversity was attested by what Tim Harris refers to as the period’s “demystification of majesty and . . . the rise of a more articulate and
assertive popular political culture,” an articulateness Steve Pincus tells us was
evined within the popular institution of the coffeehouse as well as by its broad-
based support; Tim Harris, “Understanding Popular Politics in Restoration
Britain,” in A Nation Transformed, ed. Alan Houston and Steve Pincus (Cambridge,
2001), 152; Steve Pincus, “Coffee Politicians Does Create: Coffeehouses and
807–34. See John Spurr, The Restoration Church or England, 1646–1689 (New
Haven, 1991), and Richard Greaves, Enemies Under His Feet: Radicals and Non-
conformists in Britain, 1664–1677 (Stanford, 1990), for discussion of the reli-
gious diversity that characterized the Restoration era. As Spurr emphasizes, the
Toleration Act of 1689 was considered a “license for . . . Sectarianism” that
reduced “the Church of England from the national to merely the established
Church,” thus institutionalizing for the first time a religious diversity that had
existed, in fact, since the 1640s (104).
5. The most common eighteenth-century use of conversation was “the action of
consorting or having dealings with others; living together; commerce, inter-
course, society, intimacy”; Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “Conversation.”
6. Brian Cowan, “Mr. Spectator and the Coffeehouse Public Sphere,” Eighteenth-
Century Studies 37, no. 3 (2004): 345–66; Lawrence E. Klein, “Coffeehouse Civility,
1660–1714: An Aspect of Post-Courtly Culture in England,” Huntington
Library Quarterly 59, no. 1 (1997): 90–51. Klein describes “the polite and gentle-
manly cultural regime” as an “escape from” the constraining authority of both
the courts and the church. It was primarily via the “protocols of good conversa-
tion” that “the paradigm of politeness offered an alternative to the reliance on
traditional authoritative institutions” as a means to “organize culture” (47, 51).
My argument largely agrees with and indeed depends upon these insights.
Where I differ most significantly from Klein (and less directly, Cowan) is that
while he focuses on conversation as a means of countering the formality of
high-church discourse, I am interested in reclaiming certain peculiarities of
conversation’s Christian heritage that are inherently nondiscursive and that
allowed it to serve not just as a tool for organizing civil society but for imagin-
ing more visionary communities as well. See also, Klein’s Shaftesbury and the Cul-
ture of Politeness (Cambridge, 1994).
8. Ian Jackson, “Approaches to the History of Readers and Reading in Eighteenth-
Century Britain,” Historical Journal 47, no. 4 (2004): 1053. In this review article
Jackson emphasizes that “any synthesis [of reading practices] needs to balance
the autonomy of the individual reader with the power of the discourses seeking
to guide readers’ responses.” This general caution is particularly applicable to
the reading of prescriptive literature.
9. Anna Bryson, From Courtesy to Civility: Changing Codes of Conduct in Early Modern
didactic literature in the courtesy tradition. Because she is interested in a single
tradition, in contrast to this essay’s examination of the convergence and refine-
ment of two distinct didactic traditions, the language of “ideals” and “norms” is
more applicable to her purposes than to mine.
10. The courtier’s calling . . . (London, 1675), n.p.; Eustache de Refuge, The accom-
plish’d courtier . . . (London, 1660), 2. For a publication, translation, and recep-
tion history of continental courtesy literature see Peter Burke’s The Fortunes of

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11. The courtier’s calling, 41; Refuge, Accomplish’d courtier, 5. As Burke explains, this emphasis on accommodation within the “hostile environment” of the court is more typical of the writings of Refuge and Baltazar Gracián (which were the more popular English translations available during the later seventeenth century) than were those of the more outspoken Castiglione, who wrote prior to the development of absolute monarchies; Fortunes of the Courtier, 119–24.

12. S. C., The art of complaisance, or, the means to oblige in conversation (London, 1673). On links to Refuge see Bryson, Courtesy to Civility, 37.

13. See Bryson, Courtesy to Civility, 132–37, on the significance of the growth of both the English court and London to the applicability of works such as Castiglione’s The Courtier, which itself originated from the context of an urban culture. Bryson claims that while the “English elite never became an urban aristocracy” as such, “they gradually evolved a new and quasi-urban way of life in which the code of ‘civility’ was an important means of definition and orientation” (281).


15. The era’s growing realization of the staying power of religious and political diversity (see note 4) meant that individuals encountered a wider variety of “conversations” in their daily lives than had previously been the case. The creation of a variegated cultural terrain that both necessitated and rewarded conversational flexibility was also aided by the growth of urban populations and the increased mobility of individuals within the country. See Harris, “Popular Politics,” 144. Another factor in the growth of such opportunities can be recognized in the expansion of “cultural communities” outside the “narrow confines of the court” as discussed by John Brewer in The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century (Chicago, 1997), 3. Although his focal point is somewhat later, see also Miles Ogborn, Spaces of Modernity: London’s Geographies, 1680–1780 (New York, 1998), for his examination of the “variegated” or “uneven” cultural spaces of London. The expansion of print culture after the lifting of the Licensing Act in 1695 can similarly be understood as providing a new range of conversational opportunities for individuals to advance within. See Roy Porter’s The Creation of the Modern World (New York, 2000), 72–95.


17. Bryson, Courtesy to Civility, 37. See also Jennifer Richards’s introduction to her edited volume Early Modern Civil Discourses (New York, 2003) for a discussion of research that has complicated the assumption that literature on civil conduct was necessarily read by elites and functioned to protect their privileges.


20. Markku Peltonen, “‘Civilized with Death’: Civility, Dueling, and Honour in Elizabethan England,” in Richards, Early Modern Civil Discourses, 55. The emphasis placed on the verbal component of a courtier’s conversation is discussed more fully later in this essay.

21. Wits cabinet or, A companion for young men and ladies. . . . (London, 1698), 151. Although actual data on readership of the various “conversation guides” examined here is mostly lacking, the supreme popularity of sermons and devotional religious
works during this period in and of itself suggests that the audience for these texts would inevitably have overlapped to some degree with most other segments of the reading population.

23. Ibid.
25. John Owen, *The doctrine of justification by faith. . . .* (London, 1677), n.p. In 1662 the Quaker preacher William Caton described how the recent emphasis on doctrinal conflict had made the world “no better nor holier then it was, but rather worse. . . . For now in these Dayes men do little regard Life or Conversation, but presently fall upon judging of the Doctrine, Persecuting and shamefully Intreating those that differ from them in Doctrine, though their Life be never so good”; *The testimony of a cloud of witnesses. . . .* ([London?], 1662), 35.
28. What was at stake in the translation of performed sermons into printed texts is a complicated matter. In her review article “Interdisciplinarity and the Study of Early Modern Sermons,” *Historical Journal* 42, no. 4 (1999), Mary Morrissey reminds historians and literary critics alike that “before the impact of a particular preaching event and its transmission to print can be analyzed almost every aspect of the context of the event—the physical, ceremonial, liturgical circumstances in which it took place—needed to be described” (1123). Although devotional works like Flavel’s *A saint indeed* did not begin their lives as sermons, they were often explicitly presented to their readers as textual substitutes for “live” preaching events. Their authors were clearly sensitive to (and savvy about) the different manners in which their performed and printed discourse to their congregations would be experienced.
32. Ibid., 12, 135.
35. As Tony Clayton argues, once we acknowledge printed sermons (as well, I would argue, as other kinds of “practical” spiritual texts) as significant forums of public debate, then it becomes possible to recognize that “instead of a public sphere dominated by ‘civic humanists,’ by Lockean rationalists, or by apologists
for a polite and commercial society . . . we should perhaps see one still dominated by actively preaching clerics”; “The Sermon,” 225. Christian conversation, it is this essay’s argument, was an influential component to the development of less explicitly spiritual constructions of public discourse.

36. Walker, *Of education*, 212–13. It is possible that Walker’s attraction to and ultimate conversion to the Catholic Church may have influenced his comfort level with comparing “good courtiers” to “good Christians.”


38. Phil. 3:20 (King James Version).


41. As John Brown admonished, men should not delude themselves “to think that, that which will passe for pure Religion and undefiled before God, consists either in an outward blameless conversation, or in putting on and wearing an external garbe of profession”; *Christ the way and the truth and the life*. . . . (London, 1677), n.p.

42. In Gilbert Burnet’s *A modest and free conference betwixt a conformist and a non-conformist* ([Edinburgh?], 1669), the Nonconformist baits his opponent with the following jibe: “You look after morality, as the great matter: but we look after true Christianity.” The conformist’s reply (Burnet’s opinion) reads as follows: “If by morality, you mean the affecting a vertuous behaviour, without a dependence on God and Christ, I have as low an account of it as any can have; but if by morality, you mean a pure and holy Conversation, I doubt it is the greatest and best part of Religion: Without which, the other parts are but hypocrisy and formaliy” (16).

43. This is such a prevalent theme that I will limit myself to two references appearing in a single text, Edmund Calamy’s *An exact collection of the farewell sermons preached by the late London-ministers* (London, 1662). Mr. Watson preached, “Be not like Rovers in a Barge, that look one way and row another: Do not look heaven-ward by your profession, and row hell-ward by your conversation” (41); Mr. Lye preached, “You must be steadfast in conversation. . . . Never give those be[a]sts of Babylon occasion to say, that a man may be a child of God in the morning, and a child of the devil at night; that we contradict that Doctrine by our conversation, that we assert by our profession” (343).

44. John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* and *The Pilgrim’s Progress from this World to that which is to come* (London, 1966), 201, 202.


48. Ibid. See Edward Fowler, *A friendly conference between a minister and a parishioner of his, inclining to Quakerism* (London, 1676), as a text in which the Doctrine of Perfection is debunked in part via an examination of 1 John 3:3: “To walk as he walked, and to be holy in all manner of conversation because he was so,” the point being that we are admonished to imitate Christ’s perfect conversation but can never hope to attain its full measure (34). The struggle between various religious writers and thinkers over the nature of Christian conversation at the end of the seventeenth century can be understood as a particular point of conflict between
the linguistic style of “latitudinarianism” and that of the proponents of “a religion of grace” discussed by Rivers in *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment*.


59. Somervill[e], *Popular Religion*, 49.

60. Richard Allestree, *The gentleman’s calling* (London, 1660), 112. Compare to this Bunyan’s model for how God communicates with him in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*: “Lord, thought I, if both these scriptures would meet in my heart at once, I wonder which of them would get the better of me. . . . Well about two days after, so they did indeed; they bouted upon me at a time, and did work and struggle strangely within me” (68–69). Although in both cases God’s message is made known via the verbal medium of scripture, the model of communication is quite different from Pierce and Allestree’s familiar converse.


63. The 1665 translation of della Casa, *The arts of grandeur*, states “There is no action of man which is without design; and it is vain to imagine there is any so good natured, as that their visits and friendships are without particular ends” (4). Many texts within the courtesy tradition do express moral scruples, but, as Peter Burke points out in a quotation from Refuge, such scruples are often flexible: “There is no help for it, it is sometimes necessary to use flattery to gain advantage over these people—but not any kind of flattery”; *Fortunes of the Courtier*, 122. Also see Burke for the long-standing critique of courtesy under the “culture of sincerity” associated with Protestantism (106–15).


66. Ibid., 175.


70. *The polite gentleman, or, reflections upon the several kinds of wit* (London, 1700), 8, 5–7.

71. Josiah Dare, *Counsellor Manners, his last legacy to his son*. . . . (London, 1673), n.p. See Bryson, *Courtesy to Civility*, 32, for her identification of Dare’s text as a “loose translation” of della Casa’s influential original.


73. Several famous names are associated with “essays on conversation” including Swift, Steele, Addison, Fielding, Johnson, and Hume. A better indication of the contemporary interest in the improvement of conversation is probably the large number of anonymous essays and letters (many penned by amateurs) on the subject that were published in such periodicals as the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, the *Weekly Register*, and the *London Magazine*. Also see Peter Burke’s *The Art of Conversation* (Ithaca, 1993) for a discussion of the English adoption of conversational improvement as a social project in the eighteenth century.


76. For an example of how Christians were admonished to aspire to Christ’s perfect conversation, see John Tillotson, *Sermons concerning the divinity and incarnation of our blessed Saviour* (London, 1695), 127. The concept of a “perfect conversation” still appears primarily in religious contexts throughout the eighteenth century (i.e., in devotional literature and sermons).


79. Anderson is careful to avoid making causal arguments: “I am not claiming that the appearance of nationalism towards the end of the eighteenth century was ‘produced’ by the erosion of religious certainties . . . Nor am I suggesting that somehow nationalism historically ‘supersedes’ religion”; *Imagined Communities*, 12.

80. Ibid., 24. Anderson quotes from Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* on the religious mode of consciousness’ version of simultaneity and from Walter Benjamin on the idea of “homogenous empty time.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Conversation.” This was the most common eighteenth-century use of the word.

81. Jonathan Culler reminds us that “the power of Anderson’s thesis about the novel is that it makes it a formal condition of imagining the nation—a structural condition of possibility” that is independent of its particular content. Along these lines, I am suggesting that perhaps the conversational “genres” of the eighteenth century—including but not limited to the novel—functioned as “analogues” of, though not necessarily “representations” of, the nation; Jonathan Culler, “Anderson and the Novel,” in *Grounds for Comparison: Around the Work of Benedict Anderson*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Jonathan Culler (New York, 2003), 48, 33.