

INTRODUCTION

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The religious upheavals of the early modern period and the fierce debate they unleashed about true devotion gave conversion an unprecedented urgency. Whereas artists and authors had always been inspired by it, literary, artistic and technical developments in the Renaissance incited them to capture, represent and communicate the elusive concept of religious transformation in new ways. Never before did the practice of conversion appear in so many guises; indeed, never before were there so many doctrines and forms of piety to embrace or forswear. Prior to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, moreover, religious conversion had not been as intermingled with secular issues, such as politics, nationality and commerce, as it was in Renaissance Europe. There are three developments in particular that fostered the renewed interest in pious renewal or the exchange of religions: the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, Western European colonial enterprises in the Americas, Africa and Asia, and Ottoman colonial expansion.

During the Reformation, new models of devotion to reach conversion were introduced that challenged traditional ideas of spiritual reform. Stressing humanity's complete dependence on God's grace, Luther and Calvin considered conversion first and foremost a divine intervention naturally flowing from God's righteousness and manifesting itself in repentance. Indeed, Calvin, in his *Institutes*, claimed that 'the whole of conversion to God is understood under the term 'repentance', and faith is not the least part of conversion'.¹ At the same time, the Reformation also opened up a range of new possibilities for changing one's denominational identity. 'Conversion' now also implied the shift from one Christian fold to another form of Christianity. As such, conversion came to play a significant role within religious polemics,

¹ Quoted in McKim D.K., "The Mainline Protestant Understanding of Conversion" in Malony H.N. – Southard S. (eds.), *Handbook of Religious Conversion* (Birmingham, AL: 1992), 123–136, 129. See for an extensive discussion of Luther's understanding of conversion, Harran M.J., *Luther on Conversion: The Early Years* (Ithaca – London: 1983).

and was more than ever a political statement. The Christianization of Jews, too, was an issue within these debates. From around the end of the sixteenth century a belief developed that the conversion of the Jews would herald the Apocalypse.² Many Reformers, including Luther, believed that the Jews' adoption of Christianity 'had awaited the preaching of the true Gospel'.³ Thus the conversion of the Jews, foreshadowed by Christianizations of individual Jews, served as a powerful argument in defence of Protestantism. Rome, in turn, responded to these ideas by forcing Jews to attend conversion sermons, hoping they would turn Catholic.

The European colonial expansion into Africa, Asia and the New World created an industry for the training of missionaries, with a central focus on methods of conversion. For Peter Martyr, the chronicler of the Spanish explorations in central and Latin America, proselytizing was the first objective that sprang to mind when he realised that indigenous peoples were, as Stephen Greenblatt puts it, 'a tabula rasa ready to take the imprint of European civilization'.⁴ Martyr notes:

for lyke as rased or vnpaynted tables, are apte to receaue what formes soo euer are fyrst drawen theron by the hande of the paynter, euen soo these naked and simple people, doo soone receaue the customes of owre Religion, and by conuersation with owre men, shake of theyr fierce and natiue barbarousnes.⁵

English colonists were no less zealous in their missionary ambitions. The Virginia settlers deployed various strategies to convince the Indians of the Protestant truth. The Virginia Company went as far as to instruct its Governor to take away or even execute the Indians' 'inio-casockes or Priestes'.⁶ Yet most conversion attempts were directed at children who had to be 'procured and instructed in the English language and manner'.⁷ The asymmetrical power relations between colonizer and colonized, however, often proved an obstacle to successful

² Shapiro J., *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: 1996) 132.

³ Rowan S., "Luther, Bucer and Eck on the Jews", *Sixteenth Century Journal* 16 (1985) 79–90, 10.

⁴ Greenblatt S., *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: 1992) 17.

⁵ Quoted in Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse* 17.

⁶ Bach R.A., *Colonial Transformations: The Cultural Production of the New Atlantic World, 1580–1640* (New York: 2000) 15.

⁷ Robinson W.S., "Indian Education and Missions in Colonial Virginia", *The Journal of Southern History* 18,2 (1952) 152–168, 153–154.

proselytizing. For instance, in 1622 disturbed trade relationships between the native inhabitants and the English residents in Jamestown resulted in the killing of a quarter of the English inhabitants, which temporarily ended conversion efforts.

Scholars have pointed out that while many European seafaring nations were busy exploring and conquering indigenous territories in the New World, they simultaneously felt the threat of being colonized by the expanding Ottoman sultanate.⁸ This was the largest Islamic territory of early modern Europe, which, during its peak in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, stretched from the coast of northern Africa to Iraq and western Iran and from modern Turkey to south-east Europe. The Western European anxieties about Ottoman expansion were not unsubstantiated, if only because Islamic military forces managed to capture Christians in their European homelands. Yet European Christians were vexed more by the perceived vast number of voluntary conversions to Islam than by their enslaved compatriots who defected from their faith. Having turned pirate, many impoverished Christians came in contact with the Ottomans when they called in at Turkish ports or other cosmopolitan cities like Venice. In these places they managed to improve their worldly prospects significantly by striking deals with the Ottomans and ‘turning Turk’. This is not surprising if we realise that the make-up of the Ottoman society allowed for social, political and economic mobility to a much greater extent than European societies at the time.⁹ Moreover, ‘[t]he Ottoman Empire was a lavish provider of booty for daring and resourceful employees. This attractive power was recognized and understood by European contemporaries’.¹⁰ Renegades were able to join the army and even occupy important positions in administration.¹¹ In 1606, a Turkish army officer proudly noted that he had command of 30,000 Christians who ‘are the founders of our artillerie, and other Instruments of warre’ and who are all

⁸ Vitkus D., “Turning Turk in *Othello*: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor”, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48 (1997) 145–176, 146. Matar N., *Turks Moors and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (New York: 1999) 8–11.

⁹ Coles P., *The Ottoman Impact on Europe* (London: 1968) 154.

¹⁰ Coles, *The Ottoman Impact on Europe* 154.

¹¹ Potter L. “Pirates and ‘Turning Turk’ in Renaissance Drama” in Maquerlot J.P. – Willems M. (eds.), *Travel and Drama in Shakespeare’s Time* (Cambridge: 1996) 124–140, 129.

‘Renegados’ battling ‘in defence of our lawe, and with vs to conquer your country’.¹²

It is not without irony that what the Western Christian tradition has deemed the prime examples of religious conversion, those of Paul of Tarsus and Augustine of Hippo, are also the most elusive and complex. This is partly due to the fact that not only is Augustine’s regeneration inconceivable without Paul’s, but the Christian conception of Paul’s conversion is also determined by Augustine’s reading of it. At the same time, both changes of heart as well as their reciprocity allow us to gain insight into the wide array of meanings and forms of divine experience that are indicated by the term ‘conversion’.

Paul only very briefly touches on his spiritual transformation in his *Epistles*. He describes it as a divine call inciting him to turn from his zealous persecution of the followers of Christ and to spread Jesus’ gospel. Paul did not use a phrase that directly translates as ‘religious conversion’ when he referred to his experience, which can partly be explained by the fact that ‘conversion’ is hardly a biblical term. As Frederick Gaiser reminds us, ‘readers of the English version of the Bible will run across terms like “conversion” or “convert(s)” or “to convert” only rarely [...]. Yet definitions abound, and the phenomenon – the unconditional turning of the human toward God – is seen as fundamental to biblical religion’.¹³ Many of these definitions relate to the concept of repentance, a word that does occur regularly in Scripture. Three terms in the Old and New Testament that are often understood as conversion are the Hebrew word *shubh* and the Greek *epistrefein* and *metanoein*. *Shubh* literally means ‘return’, but is often explained as ‘repent’, for example in Jeremiah 3:14

Turn [*shubh*], O backsliding children, saith the LORD; for I am married unto you: and I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion.

Metanoein is most often used to indicate the verb to repent, *epistrefein* to the act of turning oneself to a person or God. Examples of both terms can be found in Acts 26: 20, which describes Paul’s efforts at converting the Gentiles after his own spiritual transformation:

¹² Quoted in Matar N., “The Renegade in English Seventeenth-Century Imagination”, *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 33 (1993) 489–505, 490.

¹³ Gaiser F.J., “A Biblical Theology of Conversion,” in Malony H.N. – Southard S. (eds.), *Handbook of Religious Conversion* 93–107, 93.

But [he] shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent [*metanoein*] and turn to [*epistrefein*] God, and do works meet for repentance [*metanoias*].

Paula Fredriksen alerts us to the fact that Paul's conversion occurred in 34 A.D., so soon after the crucifixion that, instead of taking on a 'Christian' belief, Paul's new faith can be better understood in the context of a 'Jesus movement' consisting of Jewish adherers.¹⁴ Paul's conversion has nevertheless come to be known as the legendary transformation of a violent persecutor of Christians, a man who exchanged Judaism for the Christian religion: the first 'interfaith' conversion to Christianity. The reason for this, Fredriksen argues, must be sought in Acts, written by Luke, as well as in Augustine. Luke's description, as opposed to Paul's, gives the impression that the latter indeed converted from Judaism to Christianity. This is due to the 'theme [...] of constant and terrible Jewish hostility to Christianity' in the Luke text, which is 'crucial to his concept of Paul's conversion and already important in his Gospel'.¹⁵ Augustine played a vital role in disseminating the interpretation of Paul's divine experience as an interfaith conversion. Augustine, who presents his own conversion narrative in the *Confessions*, as well as in the *Cassiciacum* dialogues and the anti-Pelagian writings, heavily relied on Luke's account of Paul. As Fredriksen notes,

through Luke and the Pastorals, Augustine can appropriate Paul, his prototype of the sinner saved despite himself because God so willed [...]. The New Testament canon thus serves as a sort of chamber for this mythic feed-back system, where Augustine the convert interprets Paul's conversion through his own, and his own through what he sees as Paul's. Taking his cue from Luke, Augustine holds Paul's conversion as the hermeneutic key to Pauline theology – identical, for him, with Catholic tradition.¹⁶

Augustine's conversion as he famously describes it in Book 8 of the *Confessions* is possibly open to even more interpretations than Paul's. His change of heart is summed up in an ostensibly simple story of a child chanting the words 'pick up and read', which Augustine interprets as a divine command. Upon reading Paul's Epistle to the Romans 13: 13–14

¹⁴ Fredriksen P., "Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Traditions and the Retrospective Self", *Journal of Theological Studies* 37,1 (1986) 3–34, 9.

¹⁵ Fredriksen, "Paul and Augustine" 9.

¹⁶ Fredriksen, "Paul and Augustine" 27.

all his uncertainties are resolved: 'Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts'. This seemingly sudden conversion has nevertheless also been interpreted as an extended process of lifelong spiritual progress, whose description covers the entire *Confessions*. Moreover, if Augustine's conversion is a highly individual and private experience, it is also an event that conditions and is conditioned by the conversions of others. That is to say, in the *Confessions* Augustine underlines the significance of the conversion narrative as an *exemplum* by embedding his account of his divine experience in the garden in a *mise en abyme* of comparable and related conversion stories. This emphasis on the imitative aspect of conversion eventually directs the reader towards Augustine's ultimate example, Christ. As José Oroz Reta argues, 'Augustinian conversion is not produced through philosophical reflection but rather through the imitation of the humble Christ in whom is fulfilled the most sublime aspiration of ancient man: union with God'.¹⁷ Augustine's turn to God involves a Pauline rejection of worldly pleasure: 'The effect of your converting me to yourself was that I did not now seek a wife and had no ambition for success in this world'.¹⁸ Augustine's spiritual writings became the foundation of the Augustinian order, which additionally points to the dominant medieval meaning of conversion, the adoption of a monastic life. Yet Augustine's spiritual transformation was also his third interfaith conversion. Having lived as a Manichean and having pursued the life of a Neoplatonist, he became a member of the Christian Church on Easter, 387, eight months after his divine experience in the Milanese garden. Perhaps most disturbingly, Augustine's writings predating and postdating his legendary turn do not manifest a radical change of conviction. What has come to be known as 'the Christian paradigm of right-angled change into something radically new',¹⁹ can also be understood as a mere moment within 'a fundamental continuity in Augustine's thought from the very beginning'.²⁰

¹⁷ Oroz Reta J. "Conversion" (trans. A. Esposito, ed. and rev. A. Fitzgerald) in Fitzgerald A. (ed.), *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1999) 239–242, 241.

¹⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, H. Chadwick (trans. and ed.), (Oxford: 1998) 153–154.

¹⁹ Abrams M.H., *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: 1971) 113.

²⁰ Harrison C., *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity* (Oxford: 2006) 7.

In addition to the question of the process and character of the conversion experience, fundamental to the narratives of both Paul and Augustine is the tenuous relationship between seeing and blindness, vision and understanding, sight and insight. According to Scripture, when Paul's eyes were opened (spiritually), he could see nothing (physically), and he remained blind for three days. Augustine's account deals with vision in a similarly paradoxical way:

I entered and with my soul's eye, such as it was, saw above that same eye of my soul the immutable light higher than my mind – not the light of every day, obvious to anyone, nor a larger version of the same kind which would, as it were, have given out a much brighter light and filled everything with its magnitude. It was not that light, but a different thing, utterly different from all our kinds of light. [...] When I first came to know you, you raised me up to make me see that what I saw is Being, and that I who saw am not yet Being. And you gave a shock to the weakness of my sight by the strong radiance of your rays, and I trembled with love and awe.²¹

These types of visual metaphors dominate Augustine's account of his spiritual enlightenment: he sees the immutable light with the eyes of his soul, does not derive this vision from the body, and arrives at 'that which is' with the flash of a 'trembling glance'. Later in book seven, Augustine revisits the topic: '“you shut my eyes that they should not see vanity” (Ps. 118: 37). [...] I woke up in you and saw you to be infinite in another sense, and this way of seeing you did not come from the flesh'.²²

The influence of Paul's conversion experience does not stop with Augustine. Augustine's interpretation and imitation of Paul's account creates a conversion type that is further emulated by Christians for centuries to come, particularly as it relates to the issue of vision. Just one, more popular example is Francis Petrarch. In the first letter of the fourth book of his *Le Familiari*, Petrarch recounts his ascent of the highest peak in Provence, Mont Ventoux.²³ This famous letter indicates the shades of grey between autobiographical and artistic appropriation of Augustine's conversion narrative. When in the 1950s and

²¹ Augustine, *Confessions* 123.

²² Augustine, *Confessions* 126.

²³ See *Petrarca: Le Familiari*, in Rossi V. – Bosco U. (Florence: 1933–1942) 4 vols. For English translations, see Bishop M., *Petrarch and His World* (Bloomington: 1963) 104–109.

60s it was discovered that the letter was actually composed around twenty years later than Petrarch had claimed, the 'conversion' as narrated in his letter came to be the subject of an extensive and ongoing scholarly debate about its existential, artistic and biographical value. Although the veracity of the account may be questionable, the letter nevertheless offers insight into how Petrarch may have retrospectively conceptualised the mental processes of conversion.

The letter is addressed to Petrarch's confessor, the Augustinian friar Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro, and dated at 1336 by the author. Moments of meditation on his moral shortcomings are interspersed throughout his meandering journey to the top. Particularly interesting are his discussion of the physical characteristics of the landscape, including the pathways he chooses to travel, the allegorical function they assume, and the commentary they offer on his spiritual enlightenment.

Petrarch explains that while his brother chose a direct path straight up the ridge, out of weakness he took an easier one, which actually descended. Because of his laziness, when his brother had already ascended a considerable distance, he was still wandering in the valley. Finally, he became disgusted and resolved to climb immediately. However, after he reached his brother and they had walked for a while, he forgot his earlier troubles and decided to once again take a lower road. He wandered the roundabout path through winding valleys, only to find himself soon in his old difficulty. As Petrarch explains, 'I was simply trying to avoid the exertion of the ascent'.²⁴ Despite his best efforts, he made this same mistake three times or more during a few hours.

The frustration that results from Petrarch's struggle between taking the difficult, narrow paths or the broad, easy ones leads him to sit down in a valley and transfer his thoughts from the physical to the spiritual world, addressing himself as follows:

What thou hast repeatedly experienced today in the ascent of this mountain, happens to thee, as to many, in the journey toward the blessed life. But this is not so readily perceived by men, since the motions of the body are obvious and external while those of the soul are invisible and hidden. Yes, the life which we call blessed is to be sought for on a high eminence, and strait is the way that leads to it. What, then, doth hold thee back? Nothing, assuredly, except that thou wouldst take a path which seems, at

²⁴ Francis Petrarch, *Francesco Petrarca: The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters*, ed. and trans. J.H. Robinson (New York: 1898) 312.

first thought, more easy, leading through low and worldly pleasures. But nevertheless in the end, after long wanderings, thou must perforce either climb the steeper path, under the burden of tasks foolishly deferred, to its blessed culmination, or lie down in the valley of thy sins.²⁵

In the next section of his inner monologue, it becomes clear that, for Petrarch, the easy and difficult paths – the former bound to earthly desires, the latter to spiritual enlightenment – are defined by that which is visible versus that which is not.

While I was thus dividing my thoughts [...] to higher planes, it occurred to me to look into my copy of St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Where I first fixed my eyes it was written: 'And men go about to wonder at the heights of the mountains, and the mighty waves of the sea, and the wide sweep of rivers, and the circuit of the ocean, and the revolution of the stars, but themselves they consider not'. I was abashed and [...] I closed the book, angry with myself that I should still be admiring earthly things who might long ago have learned from even the pagan philosophers that nothing is wonderful but the soul, which, when great itself, finds nothing great outside itself. Then, in truth, I was satisfied that I had seen enough of the mountain; I turned my inward eye upon myself, and from that time not a syllable fell from my lips until we reached the bottom again.²⁶

Petrarch is certain that the words of Augustine were intended for him only and goes on to note that Augustine and the hermit Anthony (whom Augustine in the *Confessions* quotes as an example of conversion) had had the same experience when they were confronted with a random Bible passage. Petrarch's experiences on the mountain, both his personal failings in discerning the way up and the physical characteristics of the landscape itself, lead him to renounce outward vision and the external beauty of a vista and turn his inner eye toward that which even the pagans believed to be wonderful – the soul. It is self-inflicted blindness that leads to his abrupt change in direction and spiritual revelation. Similar to Augustine's account in multiple ways, Petrarch's conversion also involves a Pauline rejection of worldly pleasure.

The accounts of Paul, Augustine, and Petrarch are illustrative of the fact that religious conversion is necessarily an imaginative construct with a wide range of forms. This is not to say that there is no such thing

²⁵ Petrarch, *Francesco Petrarca* 312.

²⁶ Petrarch, *Francesco Petrarca* 316–317.

as a genuine experience of a turn of the soul, but that there are simply no objective criteria for establishing a definition of conversion. To put it simply, a conversion is a conversion whenever it is designated as such. Nevertheless, a conversion can at the same time be construed in a wide variety of often opposing ways, as testified by the hermeneutics and appropriations of 'Pauline' and 'Augustinian' conversion.

It is precisely these ideas of constructedness and poly-interpretability that inform the key themes of conversion in the present volume: (i) Agency, (ii) Authenticity and (iii) Imitation. Its investigation centres on the way in which spiritual transformations and exchanges of religions were constructed by their representations. Conversion could be expressed in a range of (metaphoric) binary oppositions, including vision versus blindness, ignorance versus wisdom and sinfulness versus holiness. Without the pressure of having to provide unambiguous, doctrinal answers, which characterize religious treatises or sermons, and with their rich variety of emotive, aesthetic and rhetorical means of expression, literature and the visual arts proved particularly well-adapted means to address, explore and represent the complex nature of conversion. At the same time, many artists and authors experimented with the notion that the expressive character of their work could cultivate a sensory experience for the viewer that enacted conversion. Indeed, focusing on conversion as one of early modern Europe's most pressing religious issues, this volume demonstrates that conversion cannot be separated from the creative and spiritual ways in which it was received.

The constructedness of conversion manifests itself in three questions that immediately arise from the lack of objective criteria: How is conversion authenticated? Where exactly is agency located in conversion? And what role does the genre of the conversion narrative, as represented in the examples of Paul, Augustine, and Petrarch, play in subsequent representations of religious transformation, whether in text or image? In fact, these were three aspects of conversion addressed by early modern authors and artists alike. Regarding the first issue, Protestant reformers questioned the active role of humankind in the process of conversion. Ascribing it fully to God's grace, they urged laity and clergy alike to reconsider drastically the human factors that had traditionally been seen as vehicles of conversion, such as the manner and form in which Scripture ought to be read, charity, mass, sermons as well as images and (morality or mystical) plays. Catholic reformers,

in turn, responded to Protestant successes with unprecedented missionary zeal on a global scale. Indeed, unequalled proselytism on both sides of the confessional divide, as well as an unprecedented range of denominations and religions to convert to and from, significantly increased the numbers of conversions and converts. Yet, as is suggested by the theme of authentication, many conversions were looked upon with suspicion, asking for unequivocal authentications of their genuineness. The motivations of Christians who embraced Islam were assumed to be opportunistic, but non-Christians turning Christian also had trouble integrating into Christian society. For many reasons, Jews who had adopted Christianity had great difficulty in being fully accepted as Christians. Moreover, the fact that many Christians who defected to another confession returned to their old persuasion, sometimes even to convert again, fostered the image of the convert as an opportunistic and unreliable vacillator. Finally, no matter the region or religion, institutions offered up diverse characters, saints and spiritual leaders in both text and image as examples for people to embrace. This was especially the case in the context of religious conversion, as narratives were canonized by religious institutions as models to imitate. What role does imitation play in helping to bring about spiritual revelation? More specifically, imitation inevitably takes place as a result of the practices of reading, viewing or performing; how, then, are these acts described or portrayed as devotional mechanisms that factor into the conversion experience?

These questions and contextual circumstances have informed our approach to thematically organizing the essays that follow. Rather than divide the contributions by religion, medium of representation, or geographical region, we have arranged them within categories that relate to these deeper issues: authenticity, agency and imitation.

Mathilde Bernard's essay analyses the *Confession catholique du sieur de Sancy* by Agrippa d'Aubigné, which addresses the authenticity of Nicolas Harlay de Sancy's conversion to Catholicism under Henry IV. In his book, Aubigné creates a fiction around the confession of Sancy, where the latter provides justification for his conversion. Through the use of biting irony, however, Sancy's conversion and his justification for it are rendered meaningless by turning the genre of the 'confession' into a parody. Bernard goes on to examine how irony functions in the text, and to what extent it participates in constructing representations of the apostate at the turn of the century.

Christian II of Denmark became an early convert to Lutheranism in 1524. In 1530, he converted back to Catholicism, and attempted to reconquer his old kingdom in an unfortunate military expedition. Making use of the rich diplomatic material on the subject, Federico Zuliani introduces Christian, including his life and his religious experience, and analyses the particularities of his conversion as witnessed by the diplomatic sources – and especially the fact that few believed its sincerity.

Lieke Stelling examines the ways in which early modern English playwrights lost interest in the theme of spiritual conversions that were defined by their authenticity and started, instead, to focus on what she calls ‘interfaith conversion’, the exchange of religious identities. Although conversions from Judaism, Islam or Paganism to Christianity were also staged as genuine transformations, the fact that they were associated with death and marriage as symbols of irreversibility must be seen as a strategy to assuage fears over the reliability and steadfastness of converts and the stability of Christian identity that were inspired by these Christianizations.

In the early modern era, Christian and Islamic spheres overlapped, coincided, and were delineated by changing and permeable boundaries, so that the notion of separate ‘East’ and ‘West’ worlds is inaccurate and potentially misleading. With reference to early modern exchanges between Christianity and Islam, the idea of ‘turning Turk’ has become a focal point for scholars interested in Christian-Muslim relationships. Chloë Houston’s essay, however, takes a close look at the prospect of one instance of Muslim to Christian conversion, the rumoured conversion of the Safavid Shah ‘Abbās I (r. 1587–1629 CE). Houston argues that while representations of Islamic to Christian conversion reflected European attitudes to Islam, they were also bound up with contemporary divisions within the Christian church. Although in this case, actual conversion never took place – ‘Abbās remained a Muslim, and his change of religion was nothing more than conjecture – close consideration of actual or rumoured religious conversions may contribute to the scholarly efforts to focus on specific historical moments in the relations between Muslims and Christians.

In the final essay dealing with the issue of authenticity, Natalie Rothman addresses the presumed relationship between confessional identity and juridical subjecthood in early modern Venetian narratives of conversion from Islam to Christianity and from Christianity to

Islam (and to a lesser extent, conversion to Catholicism from Judaism and Protestantism). She examines several sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts, including reports penned by Venetian diplomats in Istanbul about renegades who had ‘turned Turk’, inquisitorial depositions by Muslim and Protestant subjects who sought reconciliation with the Church, and converts’ baptismal records and matrimonial examinations. She suggests how the process of conversion and the converts’ subjectivity itself were differently articulated in various textual genres. To do so, Rothman employs Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope (space-time frame) and identifies two prototypical accounts of the spatiotemporal process of conversion prevalent in narratives of conversion from Ottoman Islam and Protestantism to Catholicism, respectively, and points to the key role of Venetian institutions and intermediaries in articulating both.

Addressing the theme of agency, Philip Major examines two hitherto neglected texts written by the Church of England minister and author Samuel Smith (1584–1665) and published in 1632. While each can stand on its own as an essentially orthodox Church of England exposition of conversion, Major situates *The Admirable Convert* and *The Ethiopian Eunuchs Conversion*, one concerned with a thief and the other a powerful court official, as complementary companion pieces in order to address the modes of thought and argument attendant on both the authorship and reception of such works. Central to his analysis is the issue of agency in conversion, particularly the extent to which an individual can help to effect his own conversion, which in turn informs a discussion of how Smith subtly attends to the possibility of backsliding in readers.

Although the word ‘conversion’, especially in literary studies, almost uniformly signals an internal choice played out largely in the realm of the individual, Jayme Yeo’s contribution examines the work of John Donne in the broader socio-political context of England, particularly the poet’s practice of instilling Catholic symbolism with Protestant meaning as a way of imagining England’s religious conversion on the large scale. A changing world resulting from doctrinal schisms and colonization abroad meant that many of the ideas that had traditionally underwritten Catholic symbolism were destabilized. Yeo offers a close reading of three of Donne’s poems to discover how each capitalizes on these religious and geographical shifts and engages different aspects of redefining symbolic identity.

While James Shirley's (1596–1666) own religious convictions are unclear, in his play *St Patrick for Ireland* (published in 1640) he represents the complex process of Ireland's conversion from paganism to Christianity. Alison Searle argues in her essay that Shirley's reworking of Ireland's key hagiographical narrative is a targeted attempt to engage with issues of political and religious controversy. Shirley deliberately chose to focus on a narrative that was at the core of Irish Catholic self-identity. By adopting an anachronistic form of theatre, drawing on the traditions of medieval drama, Shirley represents conversion in *St Patrick for Ireland* as inherently dramatic. This enabled him to validate the theatre's position as a medium of agency and exchange in the religious and political debates that were preoccupying his Dublin audiences.

To round out the topic of agency, Lise Gosseye examines Constan-tijn Huygens' (1596–1687) poem *Ooghentroost*, completed in January 1647. The poem can be read as a consolatory letter for his friend Lucretia van Trello, who was steadily going blind due to cataracts. However, in a broader context, it also can be understood as a satire, a commonplace book, a literary autobiography and a highly personal meditation on the poet's reading of different philosophers. Gosseye contends that Huygens' *Ooghentroost*, in an effort that is typical of the early-modern humanist as well as the strict Calvinist, combines the Augustinian content of Grace with the Stoics' ethical reading practice in which Reason dominates the other faculties. He does so, she argues, in order for reading to become an epiphanic act that inspires conversion – an acceptance of Grace that involves a change in behaviour. Gosseye goes on to situate the poem in the intellectual framework William Bouwsma has provided for the Renaissance in his famous text, 'The Two Faces of Humanism. Stoicism and Augustinianism in Renaissance Thought', and shows how the confrontation of humanism's two faces in a single text can shed a new and interesting light on the early-modern self.

The *Ars Moriendi*, a well-known, mid-fifteenth-century handbook for preparing Christians for death, is an example of a conversion guideline meant to be contemplated and imitated. It provides an example that, if internalized and followed correctly, promises to increase a soul's chances of attaining heaven or, at the very least, of avoiding hell. However, as John Decker shows in his examination of the woodcut illustrations that accompany the text, conversion and the purification of the soul that led to salvation were not one-time,

static events, but ongoing, dynamic processes. As the author states, the faithful understood that (re)conversion was a life-long prospect that required patience and effort. Contrary to modern scholarly assumptions, the Protestant doctrine of ‘once saved, always saved’ did not hold true for late medieval Christians. Decker argues that the images of Moriens, the main character in the *Ars Moriendi*, are not simple depictions of early modern anxieties surrounding death. As a stand-in for Everyman, Moriens enacts the critical moment in which the *liberum arbitrium* (free will) must discern and choose between full conversion and abandoning the soul to the apostasy of sin. Moriens’s struggle, as offered in the *Ars Moriendi*, drove home to Christians that the state of their souls was never certain and that proper conversion was the only way to address any lingering doubt.

Another example that deals with the theme of imitation is the Catholic homiletic work of the convert Vitale Medici, previously known as Rabbi Jehiel of Pesaro, which forms the subject of Shulamit Furstenberg-Levi’s contribution. Furstenberg examines two of Medici’s sermons as a case-study of the phenomenon of conversion from Judaism to Catholicism during the Counter-Reformation period in Italy. In addition to preaching to a Christian public, Vitale Medici also had the task of converting Florentine Jews who were forced to attend his sermons attesting to his new faith. As the author explains it, in his capacity as a convert, Vitale utilized the possibility of moving between ‘cultural territories’ in a variety of ways: at times, yet not often, he entered into the ‘Jewish territory’ with the intention of meeting his audience on a common ground, benefiting from his knowledge of their world in order to create a more convincing and efficient rhetoric; other times he clearly remained in his new ‘Christian territory’, while emphasizing the *differentiation* and the borders between his old world and his new world, showing why he belongs to the one and not to the other. As such, his sermons reflect the complex phenomenon of conversion, especially regarding the question of continuity versus discontinuity.

Discernment and imitation are also taken up in Walter Melion’s essay, which examines the correspondence between images in Jerónimo Nadal’s *Adnotationes et meditationes in Evangelia* (*Annotations and Meditations on the [Liturgical] Gospels*). Composed by Nadal at the behest of Ignatius of Loyola, and issued in 1595–1596 by the publisher Martinus Nutius of Antwerp, the *Adnotationes et meditationes in Evangelia* consists of 153 chapters, each based on an *imago* portraying one or more scenes from the life of Christ. Through the interaction

of the images, as well as image and text, Melion argues that the viewer experiences the parable as an heuristic instrument of faith, designed by Christ himself to activate the faculty of spiritual discernment. Reading the parable requires that its familiar images be converted into metaphors of Gospel truths. In turn, the ability to construe images as metaphors bears witness to an internal process of conversion that opens the spiritual eyes of the reader, making it possible for these metaphoric truths to be revealed and understood. For Nadal, through close visual analysis, interpretative *conversio* aligns with *conversio* of the spirit, and in this sense, conversion plays out as a process of translation that jointly operates as a process of transformation.

Bart Ramakers' article focuses on a Dutch dramatisation of St. Paul's conversion story, as recounted in Acts 9:1–19, titled *The Conversion of Paul (De Bekeeringe Pauli)*. The play was written by an anonymous rhetorician from Brabant, possibly originating from Vilvoorde, and is dated at roughly the middle of the sixteenth century. By examining the way in which Paul's conversion is given shape, both verbally and visually, Ramakers argues that it serves as a particular type of spiritual model to follow. Rather than taking a purely textual approach, which has led to rhetoricians' plays being understood within the context of Protestant and Catholic theological controversies of the time, the author shows that the play's primary goal was to bring its audience members to an expression of a personal relationship with God that is experienced inwardly, in the heart, and which transcended contemporary religious disputes.

Finally, Xander van Eck's contribution offers a close visual analysis of a monumental sculpted pulpit designed by Michiel Vervoort. The wooden structure was originally installed in the Church of the Leliendael convent of Norbertine nuns, but later moved to St. Rombout Cathedral. Van Eck argues that the pulpit offers up St. Norbert, the founding saint of the Norbertine order, as an example to follow, particularly since the saint's conversion is modeled after that of St. Paul. While the figure of the saint falling off his horse greets the viewer at ground level, the pulpit also serves as a theatrical stage on which the priest processes and performs his sermon. The pulpit's composition functions as a visual theological accompaniment to the ephemeral nature of the preaching of the Word.

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