Introduction: Space, Conversion, and Global History

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Our world is becoming more and more conscious of the global scope of processes and events that have traditionally been interpreted within local or regional contexts. Individuals and societies perceive their geographic frame of reference as rapidly widening. This has led many scholars to stress the importance of the notion of ‘space’—a notion which is far from neutral or limited to the strictly physical sphere. Thus, for some years now, words like simultaneity, connection, circularity, and border crossing—to mention a few—have come to pervade a growing literature in the human and social sciences.1 Historians, too, have embraced this new sensibility, which some have termed a ‘spatial turn’.2 In doing so, they have begun to ask questions particular to their craft, that is, questions about time. How, for example, did events, actions and representations relate to the multiplicity of spaces with which they were associated? How did these relationships change over time? And how did people experience such more or less radical transformations? Historians do not tend to see most breaks with the past as clean and irreversible. On the contrary, they will point out that, if the global present reflexively adopts planetary scales to understand today’s economies, societies and demography, as well as politics and culture, this calls for the need to recognize the impact of (partly) similar processes during past centuries.3

Rejecting the idea of drastic historical breaks does not mean to deny any discontinuity. Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the application of new technologies of transportation and mass communication deeply modified the relations between humans and space, though in different ways depending

on place and time. Secularization, for its part, marked a decisive shift in the role of religion in individual lives or entire societies, even though there is no doubt that this has not led to a world without faiths. In fact, recent times have witnessed the powerful rise of so-called ‘world religions’, which are competing, often on a local scale but nourished by global models and discourses, for the emotional and moral embrace of the new adherents they covet. Yet for all its slowness and contradictions, the process of secularization has removed us irremediably from earlier ages, in which religious belonging shaped rigid social identities and created confessional geographies that often reproduced political maps, making the passage from one faith to another complex and traumatic. Due to secularization, in contrast, conversion has not only become much more frequent, but also more diffuse, as the term itself has undergone a notable semantic expansion. The phenomenon has thus lost its once exclusive bond with religion: today it may refer, for example, to a change of heart in the political, cultural or aesthetic sphere. Even here, however, there is a relationship between changed perceptions of space and the sense of uncertain belonging that led to a generalization of the meaning of ‘conversion’.

These considerations were at the heart of an international symposium about space and conversion that took place at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, in December 2011. It gathered leading scholars and young historians from many countries, specialists in the history of a wide variety of religious and social groups: Catholics and Protestants; renegades; Turkish, North-African and Central Asian Muslims; Sephardi, Ashkenazi and Italian Jews; Nahuas, Incas, Guarani, Chiquitos and Moxos; Eastern Christians; castes from Southern India. This volume results from some of the questions and the still tentative and partial answers that emerged during the discussions held at the symposium. Yet, however provisional the findings, they confirm the importance of studying the intersections between space and conversion. The book’s

7 The workshop was a joint initiative of the Faculty of Arts of the Scuola Normale Superiore and the research project ‘Beyond the Holy War’ (RBFR08UX26) – Principal Investigator: Giuseppe Marcocci.
chronology encompasses the early modern period, which saw a redefinition of the geographic frame of reference of a great part of humanity, associated with a simultaneous proliferation of conversion paths. A few contributions push the analysis into the nineteenth century, when some dynamics and trends of the previous four centuries are still in evidence.

The Pisa symposium shed light on many aspects that deserve in-depth analysis. We wish to stress three of them. First, it is important to consider the difference between ‘space’ and ‘place’ in the study of conversion processes, borrowing the terms of a debate especially intense among social scientists and geographers. Second, processes of conversion were often uncertain or unstable, and could even result in failure. Their spatial ramifications were thus equally unpredictable, also considering that the concept of conversion itself could have different meanings in the various religious and cultural contexts. Finally, it remains critical to consider ‘time’ alongside ‘space’. On the one hand, the deep transformation of cultural references resulting from conversion also involved temporal categories. On the other hand, despite the ostensibly basic unity of concepts like ‘religion’ and ‘conversion’, their meaning changed in the course of the early modern period up to the break, however incomplete, represented by secularization.

The recent historiography on conversion has been original and abundant. The impressive amount of research and publications it has produced has stimulated new questions and approaches, which go well beyond the field of religious history. As a result, conversion has come to be accepted as a central theme in history. It helps us to understand and interpret episodes of social transformation and resistance, to study the biographies of individuals who crossed cultural and political borders and changed religious identity, and thus to penetrate the thoughts and emotions of many people of the past. In this way conversion has become a key to reflect on the birth of the modern world.

This volume proposes to rethink important results of this historiography in light of the ‘spatial turn’—a trend whose significance is confirmed by the more and more sophisticated and persuasive studies conceptualized as ‘global


9 Conversion may be understood as a typical example of the shifting identities that are frequently a substantial part of the work in global history. Despite an emphasis on religion, conversion is not taken into consideration by Bayly C.A., The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons (Oxford: 2004).
history’ or ‘connected history’. These approaches invite us to reconsider events and processes often taken for granted by placing them on different scales and varying the analytic focuses with which we study them. As a consequence of so many intriguing and heterogeneous directions, the current historiography on conversion tends to be fragmented in time and space. Generally speaking, the early modern era has received much more attention than other periods, while geographic areas and contexts have generally been studied independently from each other. One of the aims of this volume is to connect the different fields of research by adopting a wider but consistent chronology, while focusing on conversion through the lens of space. Therefore our approach has been multifaceted, and our scale global. We have taken advantage of current research and existing literature on specific aspects: for instance, by bringing the extremely productive work on conversion and confessionalisation in early modern Europe in conversation with the ever-developing scholarship on Catholic missions outside of Europe, and by examining the differences between the Islamization and Christianization of space. Of course, we do not deny that it is important to emphasize chronological discontinuities, religious

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peculiarities, and the irreducibility of some regional or local phenomena to a more general level of explanation. We only mean to suggest that a selection of case studies about the still largely unexplored link between conversion and spatial context offers a different, and potentially very productive, point of view and puts new questions on the table. In pursuing this goal, we wish to take up and extend to other religious contexts the successful experiment of the volume *Conversion: Old Worlds and New*, edited by Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton, and their ambition ‘to spark new thinking about religious conversion across disciplines and various subfields of history’.\(^\text{13}\)

Our starting point is the notion of conversion as ‘metanoia’, a transformation of religious belonging. This was often entangled with a transformation of space, not only physical space—particularly sacred space (the subject of a book by Will Coster and Andrew Spicer that was a point of reference for our work)\(^\text{14}\)—but also the space of interiority, that is the intertwining of religious conversion and the evolution of the self (individual conscience, sentiments, emotions, and autobiography). It is well known that the inner dimension of conversion was often a true battlefield, a point highlighted especially in research on the Jews.\(^\text{15}\) It influenced the gradual definition of the notion of ‘person’, as Adriano Prosperi has shown for the early-modern Catholic world.\(^\text{16}\) Not by chance, conversion was often a passage relating to the birth or the death of individuals.\(^\text{17}\) It also gave rise to a specific literary genre, the conversion narrative.\(^\text{18}\) This said, as the conversion process unfolded in the privacy of the self, it frequently had a spatial representation too, as many writings and paintings show.\(^\text{19}\)

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\(^{15}\) In a very rich literature see, for the Ashkenazi world, Carlebach E., *Divided Souls: Converts from Judaism in Germany, 1500–1750* (New Haven: 2001), and, for the Sephardic world, Graizbord D.L., *Souls in Dispute: Converso Identities in Iberia and the Jewish Diaspora, 1580–1700* (Philadelphia: 2004).


From the point of view of institutional and social history, conversion often implied isolation, as in the houses of catechumens and other similar institutions, or segregation, especially in the case of minority groups or converts subject to discrimination, enclosed in areas of confinement or special neighbourhoods. However, these spaces were permeable and became a stage for the differentiated agency of individuals. Moreover, conversion was a potential factor of change, transformation, and re-appropriation of urban areas (in terms of topography and toponomy, architecture and buildings), as well as rural villages and landscapes (as evidenced, for example, by the foundation or disappearance of localities, the re-purposing of art and the alteration of local lifestyles). Historiography has considered urban areas more open to conversion than rural ones. Big cities, especially, offered the convert anonymity, a space to redefine her or his status, and a new place of social belonging. In addition, cities like Jerusalem or (for Catholics) Rome had a special power of attraction, becoming a kind of universal reference point. Accordingly, historians have correctly recognized and emphasized the role urban areas played as a stage of conversion.20 However, the rural dimension seems to be more complex than they have allowed, not only because roads and paths could turn the countryside into a space of communication and connection (a characteristic shared with the seas), but also because small towns and villages at times permitted cross-cultural encounters in a way that big cities did not, thus encouraging conversion. This distinction is extremely interesting, because it makes us wonder if urban conversions required closed institutions or quarters, while rural ones might be facilitated by less-controlled interconfessional interactions. Considered from this point of view, the country and the forest may unexpectedly appear to be spaces of relative freedom, where it was possible to apostatize, to convert, or to reconvert to one’s former religion.

Moreover, the centuries this book explores, especially during phases of greater power of Eurasian empires, saw episodes of conquest and settlement that caused religious reconfigurations of cities, villages, regions, and even entire societies. Since the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the work of proselytization and the resulting conversions encompassed ever larger distances—from central and South Asia to the African coasts, from Europe to the Americas—sometimes reviving dreams of universal conversion. Inevitably, this process was accompanied by increased movements of missionaries and

religious agents, converts and, not uncommonly, those who tried to avoid conversion, which could be imposed by violent means. Indeed, another element that our approach allows us better to understand is the violation of established religious spaces for the sake of future converts—a violation that was not only physical, but cultural as well. This was particularly true where the conversion and reappropriation of sacred spaces involved negotiation with local elites, no matter how ambivalent they were about adopting the new faith.

Thus our challenge is to consider together a variety of conversion processes relating to space in the early modern world. This requires that we pay special attention to the ways in which global studies have contributed to our understanding of the dynamics of connection, integration, and hybridization characteristic of the intensification in human relations from the fifteenth century onwards. Therefore this volume has a comparative structure, but also deploys a set of analytical tools befitting a global approach: not only a wide-ranging geographic scope encompassing four continents (Africa, America, Asia, and Europe), but above all the study of instances of circularity and exchange across political and cultural borders, the shift in focus from micro- to macro-levels, the inclusion of a plurality of viewpoints, cultures and religions, and a refusal to follow one or another as more representative or characteristic. In adopting these tools, we believe that this book will be a contribution to the field of global history as well.

The thirteen essays collected in this volume have been organized in such a way as to reflect this approach. In fact, the common themes that emerge from them go well beyond the central issue of space. Yet the spatial anchor makes it possible to highlight them all the better in that it frees our reflection from the temporal boundaries and specific contexts that demarcate each specialized contribution. Therefore we have grouped the essays not according to conventional chronological or geographic criteria but in terms of three pairs of concepts which, as argued above, are particularly significant in global studies: city-country, segregation-permeability, and distance-mobility. Thus, for example, the uses of urban space in Granada or Rome (discussed by García-Arenal and Prosperi) may be compared with the role of the Palestinian countryside as a space of conversion (Tramontana). The tension between segregation or seclusion and the possibility of communication and exchange is highlighted in different ways in essays on a penitential neighbourhood in Lisbon, a Roman

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hospital, Paraguayan missions, and a model for a Jesuit church in India (Mateus, Fosi, Wilde and Aranha). Experiences and spaces of travel are fundamental to some forms of conversion, as essays on the Mediterranean and Atlantic suggest (Marcocci, Colombo-Sacconaghi), while the significance of distance is evident in chapters by Maldavsky and Zemtsova.

Yet this structure—and the analytical categories that underlie it—is suggestive rather than absolute. Some essays illuminate several different categories; and the ties that hold the volume together are by no means limited to those conveyed by its chapter organization. Among other common themes we may point to places and institutions specifically dedicated to conversion, such as the college of spiritual re-education studied by Mateus, Jesuit reducciones in Paraguay (Wilde), and convents in the Bethlehem area (Tramontana). Other spaces were less specifically devoted to conversions. Hospitals (discussed by Fosi as well as Colombo-Sacconaghi) or public squares where executions took place (Prosperi) were not primarily set up for conversions, but proved particularly effective for this purpose because of the weak condition in which the sick and the condemned found themselves. The vulnerability of the body, which was especially acute on the scaffold and in a place of cure like a hospital, where life was much more at risk in early modern times than it is today, was also on display on board ships, as Marcocci and Colombo-Sacconaghi suggest in their complementary essays. Corresponding with this weakness, which is similarly present in Mateus's contribution, where the illness of penitents is one reason for the production of sources that allow us to know them, is the question of constraint and domination, which returns throughout the volume.

In fact, constraint and political domination are essential in the conversion of spaces through the Christianization of their inhabitants and the transformation of public buildings. These strategies are pursued with particular vigour in the context of military conquests. The two most significant examples featured in this book are those of Granada and Cuzco, studied by García-Arenal and Ramos, respectively. As Muslim and Andean spaces, both cities symbolize in the eyes of their Castilian conquerors the power of the conquered. Their religious conversion is thus a high-stakes political endeavour on which the exercise of sovereignty depends. The same dynamic of conquest of space and domination of indigenous peoples helps explain why the Peruvian encomenderos studied by Maldavsky wished to sponsor the missionary orders.

Nevertheless, multiple case studies presented in this book indicate that military and political force was insufficient to achieve the religious transformation of a space and its inhabitants without their consent and without good reasons for them to submit and adhere to the new faith. This becomes
evident when one lends an attentive ear to the socio-political motivations of sixteenth-century Inca elites, the Guarani caciques of Paraguay and the apostates of the middle-Volga region in nineteenth-century Russia (Ramos, Wilde and Zemtsova). Such motives might include the recognition and legitimation of local powers, as well as the emergence of new colonial elites. Constraint and submission are only one side of the conversion process, regardless of whether they involve spaces or persons. Missionaries themselves were not misguided in adapting church interiors to the local caste system, as was the case in South India (Aranha); and, in any case, they did so without fundamentally overturning their hierarchical conception of society.

The ability of converts to affect the ways in which they and their living spaces were transformed transpires in numerous instances. This discovery, made possible by current historical approaches, allows us to understand processes of conversion no longer as projects decided, conceived, and executed exclusively by conquerors, governors, missionaries and other agents, but—in a more complex fashion—as socio-cultural processes that were frequently shifting, ambiguous, and marked by advances and reverses. For this reason these processes can in no way be reduced to a linear, easily identifiable trajectory. That is evidently the case for the Guarani populations of Paraguay, whose traditional chiefs negotiated their conversion and administration by the Jesuits in a context of colonial pressure and great insecurity, but without ever renouncing their parentage relations: thus they established an ambiguous pattern of coming and going between the Christianized space of the mission and that, supposedly pagan, of the forest. One encounters a similar ambiguity in the conversion of Mohammed el-Attaz: after having turned Jesuit and assumed the name Baldassare Loyola, he remained eager for contacts with the Muslims on whom he had turned his back in adopting Catholicism. And if the interest in Christian burial sites by traditional elites of Cuzco arose from their quest for political legitimacy, it also reflected their keen sense of the ambiguity of these spaces, which were often ancient, non-Christian temple grounds. In a similar fashion we need to understand the apostasies of nineteenth-century populations in the Volga region as they navigated between Islam and Orthodoxy on the tide of political opportunity. In short, the focus on space allows us to capture not only the stakes of conversion for conquerors and other authorities but also the ways in which the converts deployed their agency and developed strategies of resistance, negotiation, and survival. Here we also reach a limit: even as we consider the subjects of conversion, we do not pretend to make pronouncements about the sincerity with which they changed their faith.
Selective Bibliography


