

Conversions: Gender and Religious Change in Early Modern Europe.

Simon Ditchfield and Helen Smith, eds.

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017. xvi + 336 pp. £75.

Conversions is the expanded conference volume of the 2012 symposium on “Gender and Conversion in Early Modern Europe” held in York. The meeting was part of a larger project on post-Reformation Europe (ca. 1550–1700) titled “Conversion Narratives” curated by the Centre for Renaissance and Early Modern Studies in York. Simon Ditchfield and Helen Smith introduce the contributions articulating how the interdisciplinary symposium and book project explore the intersections of the notions of conversions, gender, and religious change in early modern Europe. An afterword by Matthew Dimmock explains the project again: the authors reconsider faith and gender and “the ambivalence generated by conversion” (from non-religious perspectives) (287). The beginning and end provide some continuity and weld the diverse times and spaces covered in this volume together.

The contributions in part 1, “Gendering Conversion,” are attempted interpretations of early modern texts and court records. Eric Dursteler’s “To Piety or Conversion More Prone? Gender and Conversion in the Early Modern Mediterranean” is a comparison of interreligious conversion narratives examining the implication of whether more seventeenth-century men or women were renegade converts. “The Quiet Conversion of a ‘Jewish’ Women in Eighteenth-Century Spain” by David Graizbord impresses the ambivalence of religious conversion and gender during the inquisitorial tribunals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Hannah Crawford’s “‘A father to the soul and a son to the body’: Gender and Generation in Robert Southwell’s *Epistle to his Father*” and Abigail Shinn’s “Gender and Reproduction in the *Spiritual Experiences*” both offer a linguistic analysis of early modern texts, taking a deconstructionist approach to the question of conversion.

Part 2, “Material Conversions,” is the heart of the volume with outstanding historically compiled objective studies which mitigate the concept of conversion in early modern Europe. The contributions include: “‘The needle may convert more than the pen’: Women and the Work of Conversion in Early Modern England,” the coordinated effort of Claire Canavan and Helen Smith; “Uneven Conversions: How Did Laywomen Become Nuns in the Early Modern World?” by Elizabeth A. Lehfeltdt; “*Domus humilis*: The Conversion of Venetian Convent Architecture and Identity,” by Sandra Weddle; and “Converting the Soundscape of Women’s Rituals, 1470–1560: Purification, Candles and the *Inviolata* as Music for Churching,” by Jane D. Hatter. Praise is due for the careful gender- and religion-sensitive historical contributions on needlework, women of the cloth, and the significance of space and female rituals in the church in these accounts.

Part 3, “Travel, Race, and Conversion,” returns to the overall experimental approach of the project and the tone of part 1. Starting with Keith P. Luria’s “Narrating Women’s Catholic Conversions in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam,” the reader is confronted with a critical reflection on women’s enculturation from Eastern thought to Christian faith. “‘I wish to be no other but as he’: Persia, Masculinity, and Conversion in Early Seventeenth-Century Travel Writing and Drama” by Chloë Houston addresses early modern women’s conversion between Islam and Christianity. Daniel Vitkus’s chapter, “Turning Tricks: Erotic Commodification, Cross-Cultural Conversion, and the Bed-Trick on the English Stage, 1580–1630,” argues a secular literary perspective on religious conversion. Kathleen Lynch’s contribution, “Whatever Happened to Dinah the Black? And Other Questions About Gender, Race, and the Visibility of Protestant Saints,” is the final essay, a wistful linguistic perspective on conversion in gender history. Lynch’s thoughtful contribution examines the notion of gender and black skin color in seventeenth-century London; her conclusion, however, transports the reader from the early modern period back into the framework of contemporary Anglo-American racial controversies.

The present collection on conversion is a conference volume with a difficult task: to envision early modern gender and religious change through literary and historical research on the word, act, and world of conversion in early modern Europe from an interdisciplinary perspective. The chapters in *Confessions* are the product of Anglo-American early modern scholarship, which seems to homogenize the conclusions. A more comprehensive international view on the topic might be the next step. Indeed, at least one theological contribution on conversion, gender, and religious change in the early modern period may have challenged and enriched the noteworthy achievement of *Confessions*.

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Erasmus and Calvin on the Foolishness of God: Reason and Emotion in the Christian Philosophy. Kirk Essary.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017. xx + 278 pp. \$80.

This is a close reading of Erasmus and Calvin bringing significant results. Essary studies the two scholars on Paul’s comment in 1 Corinthians 1:20, rendered as “Has God not made foolish the wisdom of this world?” The “foolishness of God” turns out to be a highly important insight leading to the denouncing of worldly wisdom as folly, and recognizing the misplaced appropriation of human reason in doing the work of theology—which these two humanist scholars brought to the fore. The cross of Christ, insists Paul, is a stumbling block and an offense to the philosophers of this world who try to understand it only with the tools of worldly reason. This stark contrast led “prominent sixteenth-century interpreters to suggest that an alternative religious epistemology, as