

Einleitung

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, the Western European colonial enterprises in the Americas, Africa and Asia, and the 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'. 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, 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. Many Reformers, including Luther, believed that the Jews' adoption of Christianity 'had awaited the preaching of the true Gospel'. 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'. Martyr notes:

for lyke as rased or vnpaynted tables, are apte to receaue what formes soo euer are fyrst drawn 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.

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' 'iniocasockes or Priestes'. Yet most conversion attempts were directed at children who had to be 'procured and instructed in the English language and manner'. The asymmetrical power relations between colonizer and colonized, however, often proved an obstacle to successful proselytizing. For instance, in 1622 disturbed trade relationships between the native inhabitants