Theorizing Conversion: Christianity, Colonization, and Consciousness in the Early Modern Atlantic World

Katharine Gerbner*
University of Minnesota

Abstract
While Christian evangelization and conversion were often the primary justifications for imperial expansion in the early modern Atlantic world, the meaning of the word “conversion” remains contested among scholars, particularly when used to refer to non-European conversion to Christianity. Several historians have argued that the term “conversion” simplifies a complex process and reiterates a missionary mindset. This article surveys a variety of alternatives to the word “conversion,” including syncretism, hybridity, affiliation, appropriation, and practice. While assessing the benefits and drawbacks of each of these terms, it argues that discarding the word “conversion” risks minimizing or overlooking the experiences of non-European converts. Instead, it is more accurate to say that conversion—both Europeans and non-Europeans—was a process of transformation that occurred on multiple planes. The social, cultural, and political implications are easier to identify in the historical record, but historians also need to take seriously the possibility of religious transformation as well.

In order to do so, this essay draws on literature from the fields of anthropology and religious studies to identify two methods that can be particularly useful for describing non-European conversion: first, an emphasis on “lived religion” can help historians move past the misconception that Christianity is a bound system. By focusing on practice rather than doctrine, it de-center missionaries and seeks, instead, to examine religious practice from the “bottom up.” Second, interrogating the process of translation has great potential for historians of conversion, particularly during a period of colonial encounter. By exploring how Christian terms were redefined through their translation into non-European languages, historians will gain better insight into the cosmologies, beliefs, and practices of Native Americans and Africans. By using these methods—and recognizing that the meaning of “conversion” is, and always has been, in flux—historians can move past the “missionary mindset” and acknowledge the significance of the choice that many non-Europeans made to engage in Christian rites.

Sometime in late 1737, an elderly woman named Marotta expressed a desire to be baptized. Marotta, who was given the name Magdalena, was a native of Popo, a region in western Benin. Enslaved in the 1690s and transported to the Danish colony of St. Thomas, she labored on the island until being freed by her master in the 1730s, when she was in her seventies. Widely regarded as a devout and pious woman, Marotta had become increasingly involved with the newly formed Moravian congregation on the island in the years after her manumission. At some point during this time, she chose to convert to Moravian Christianity.1

What did “conversion” mean for Magdalena?2 Was it, as the Moravian missionaries hoped, a moment of transcendent spiritual transformation marking the adoption of a new identity? Was it an attempt to build a new spiritual and social community within the context of Atlantic slavery? Or would it be more accurate to say that Magdalena was appropriating elements of Christianity into a “syncretic” religious practice? Furthermore, did Magdalena believe herself to be giving up a previous set of beliefs or was the Christian God integrated into a pre-existing cosmology? Finally, is the word “conversion” really appropriate for describing Magdalena’s choices?
This article will address these questions by surveying a variety of methods that scholars have developed to describe the conversion of non-Europeans to Christianity in the early modern Atlantic World. Within this field, the topic of conversion has been, and remains, hotly contested. There are two central criticisms of the word “conversion.” First, some have suggested that it falsely implies that “converts” abandoned one belief system for another. As Jean and John Comaroff have written, “the very use of ‘conversion’ as a noun leads, unwittingly, to the reification of religious ‘belief.’” As they explain, “[t]his abstraction makes spiritual commitment into a choice among competing faiths, and ‘belief systems’ into doctrines torn free of all cultural embeddedness.” Second, some historians have argued that using the word “conversion” reflects missionary intentions, rather than the experiences of non-Europeans. Within the context of imperial expansion and Atlantic slavery, these contentions are particularly significant, because many “conversions” took place within highly unequal colonial encounters.

As a result, many historians have studiously avoided the term. As Anthony Grafton and Kenneth Mills have written, scholars prefer to “quietly avoid religious conversion or else append it to a brace of more fathomable (and historiographically fashionable) alternatives.” While that approach is certainly safe, this article contends that historians must wrestle with the problematic connotations of conversion in order to better understand the experiences of both European and non-European Christians. Rather than allowing Christian missionaries to decide who is a “true” convert, historians should recognize the ongoing tension within the word “conversion” and use a variety of methodological techniques to examine how non-Europeans perceived and narrated their engagement in Christian rituals.

In order to do so, this essay will begin with a brief history of conversion in Europe to show that the meaning of “conversion” has always been passionately debated, even among European Christians. It will then move to a historiographical discussion of recent works addressing the conversion of non-Europeans in North America and the Atlantic world. While this survey could be fruitfully expanded to include Asia and the Pacific, this essay will be confined to literature on the Atlantic world in order to focus more explicitly on scholarly debates within this region. The final section considers the terminology employed by historians, anthropologists, and scholars of religion to discuss “conversion” and assesses the benefits and drawbacks of each approach. It will pay particular attention to the theoretical approaches to “conversion” developed by non-historians.

1. The History of Conversion

Etymologically, conversion derives from the Latin word *convertere*, meaning “to turn.” Within a Christian context, this “turning” has been qualified and defined in a number of different ways. While early Christians targeted “pagans,” Christian conversion became associated with the expansion of the Roman Empire after Constantine’s adoption of Christianity. As a result, “conversion” took on two primary meanings: it could refer to the inner transformation of an individual (for example, the conversion of Augustine of Hippo) or the collective conversion of an entire people, usually by military victory. In the latter case, conversion was bound up with the idea of “civilization” – the adoption of Roman customs and Christian rules. Yet even when conversion referred to an inner transformation, it did not always mean a “moment of illumination,” such as Augustine’s. Instead, early Christian writers often spoke of conversion as a process – the possibility of salvation through continuous adherence to a new ‘religious’ vision.

By the early medieval period, Christianity had spread through most of Europe. As a result, as Bruce Hindmarsh has written, “Christendom had become so englobing that conversion could no longer be the proselyte experience of conversion from paganism.” Instead, “the word *conversio* came to denote not principally the transition from pagan to Christian, but the passage
of a Christian into the life of a religious.”

On the Iberian Peninsula, meanwhile, the term *converso* gained new meanings in connection to the Reconquista campaign of the 15th and 16th centuries. Within the Iberian context, *conversos* referred to Jews who had adopted Christianity—in name at least—as their official religion, often as a way to avoid exile.

In the splintered churches of 16th-century and 17th-century Europe, conversion became “a matter of true belief and allegiance to the true institutional church,” whether that church was Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, or the newly formed and internally contentious Church of England. It was during this period that Europeans—particularly radical Protestants—began to formulate new ways to articulate the specifics of a conversion “experience” and to delineate the various stages of conversion. Protestant reformers distinguished not only between Christians and heathens, but also between saved and unsaved Christians. By making such distinctions, these reformers introduced new complexity and acrimony into the meaning of conversion.

As this brief survey illustrates, there was no consensus among early modern Europeans about what constituted “conversion.” While some denominations retained the same ritualized events, such as baptism, even the details of these rites were highly contested. Early modern Europeans disagreed about whether children should be baptized; whether an individual should be “dipped” or “sprinkled” with water; and whether conversion had to be preceded by education or an experience of saving grace. These questions and debates took on new meanings as Christian missionaries crossed the Atlantic to bring the gospel to enslaved and free Africans and Native Americans.

2. Non-European Conversion in the Early Modern Atlantic World

While early modern Europeans debated the meaning of true conversion, what did “conversion” mean to the non-Europeans who were the objects of the Christian missions? Historians have used several strategies to examine non-European conversion in North America and the Atlantic world. I have divided the topic into two historiographical parts. The first, entitled “Native North America,” traces scholarly debates about native conversion, focusing on New France and New England. The second, “Christianity in the African Diaspora,” examines scholarship in a wider geographical area, including West Central Africa, North America, Brazil and the Caribbean. While there are some important similarities between these sub-fields, historians studying the African diaspora have tended to subsume questions about conversion into a larger preoccupation with identifying “African” elements of religious practice in the Americas.

NATIVE NORTH AMERICA

Over the past 30 years, scholarship on Native North America has shifted away from a condemnation of evangelization and conversion as part of the colonial agenda toward a more nuanced exploration of what Christian conversion offered Native Americans. Yet scholars still debate how native engagement with Christianity should be described. Were native Christians politically savvy opportunists who recognized that membership in a Christian community offered material benefits? Were they desperate refugees who sought to rebuild kinship networks within a Christian congregation? And furthermore, was conversion experienced as a single event of transformation or one element of a diverse religious practice?

James Axtell’s classic study, *The Invasion Within*, was a landmark text in moving past the view that natives were passive victims of evangelization. Axtell argued that Indians were historical agents who could convert Europeans to native ways. He compared the varying success of French and English missions, concluding that the French Jesuits succeeded more often because,
among other things, they were less likely to condemn native practices. Since its publication in 1985, scholars have moved even further to examine native experiences of Christian conversion. Daniel Richter has argued that scholars need to shift their perspective away from missionary intentions and focus on native appropriations of Christian practices. Though missionaries often rejected native Christianity, some Indians incorporated Christian baptism and prayer into their own religious practice regardless of missionary judgment.

Recent scholarship has also rejected the notion that evangelization always represented a clash of cultures or an agent of imperialism. In his essay, “The Practice of Native American Christianity,” Michael McNally forcefully argued that historians have reduced the contact between Euro-Americans and natives to a “collision” of belief systems and viewed native Christianity as a form of “acculturation.” Within this context, native conversion has been defined as a loss of traditional religious practice, rather than a “complex process shaped by both missionary and native Christians.” Similarly, Allan Greer’s study of the Mohawk woman Katherine Tekakwitha viewed Catholicism not as part of the colonial agenda, but as an opportunity to strengthen and renew kinship ties within native communities and negotiate alliances with Europeans. Thus conversion “did not imply submission to European rule,” and it should not be treated “as a discrete, unidirectional event, but as a problem to be unraveled in all its ambiguity, instability, and local specificity.”

Some scholars have gone so far as to reject the word “conversion” altogether, arguing that it traps historians “in a missionary paradigm.” In his article “Embracing Ambiguity,” Neal Salisbury argued that historians should “banish the terms [i.e., ‘convert’ and ‘conversion’] once and for all from their vocabularies to avoid further confusion and obfuscation.” According to Salisbury, using the word “conversion” fails to acknowledge that natives “could embrace what the Euro-American tradition could and can comprehend only as ambiguity.”

Recently, scholars of New France have been more willing to reengage the language of “conversion.” Kenneth Morrison has suggested that when conversion is defined as a “process of re-discovery” rather than a “radical ideological change,” it can be used effectively to describe native experiences. Tracy Leavelle has built on the concept of translation to revise the meaning of “conversion.” In *The Catholic Calumet*, he argued that scholars should adopt a “plural, dynamic, and flexible concept of conversion that accounts for the changes in all participants.” In an illuminating chapter on the translation of Christian prayers and concepts, Leavelle showed how “translation allowed the Illinois to make Christianity their own.”

**CHRISTIANITY IN THE AFRICAN DIASPORA**

Studies of Christianity in the African diaspora have mapped a similar shift. While earlier scholarship viewed conversion as a form of acculturation, an agent of colonial expansion, or a method of slave control, more recent scholarship has emphasized the appropriation of Christianity by Africans and African Americans. Yet disagreement remains about whether conversion represented a form of “creolization” or an “Africanization” of Christianity. While proponents of creolization emphasize the creation of new religious traditions in the Americas, advocates of the “Africanization” thesis insist that African religious practices remained largely intact within African American Christianity. While the division between these approaches has become somewhat blurred, scholars have increasingly emphasized the African-ness of black Christianity,
with several studies drawing specific connections between African and African American religious practices.

One of the most influential proponents of the Africanization thesis is John Thornton, who reminded historians that the Kingdom of Kongo in Central Africa embraced Christianity as early as the 15th century and that many enslaved men and women were familiar with Catholicism before they left Africa. For Thornton, African cosmology informed Kongolese and African American Christianity, and Christianity “provided a sort of lingua franca that joined various national religious traditions” together in the New World.\(^2^2\) James Sweet, like Thornton, has emphasized the persistence and “recreation” of African religious traditions through the practice of Catholicism, though he departs from Thornton in his understanding of conversion. While Thornton emphasized the significance of revelation for both African and Christian religious traditions, Sweet stressed the difference between African and Christian cosmologies and argued that even when Africans adopted Christianity, “they continued to see the world through the religious prism of their African pasts.”\(^2^3\)

While Thornton and Sweet have examined African conversion to Catholicism, scholars of Afro-Protestantism face a more difficult task connecting black Christianity to Africa. The Protestant churches that populated most of North America had no uniform or regular missions to enslaved Africans, meaning that Afro-Protestantism did not emerge until the 18th century.\(^2^4\) Furthermore, the Protestant colonies lack the expansive records created by the Catholic Inquisition, which have fueled many of the studies of Afro-Catholicism.\(^2^5\) Still, despite these challenges, scholars have found new and innovative methods using demographic data on the slave trade as well as material culture to examine the distinctly African influence on Afro-Protestantism.\(^2^6\)

Aside from an increased emphasis on the African-ness of black Christianity, recent scholarship on black Christian practice in North America has continued to view conversion to Christianity through the lens of “accommodation” or “resistance” to slavery. While older scholarship tended to view Christianity as an ameliorating force on slave plantations – a method of “slave control” – more recent studies have moved in the opposite direction. John Thornton and Mark Smith have argued that Afro-Catholicism provided an important theological impetus for rebellions on both sides of the Atlantic, while Jason Young has argued that spiritual practices among slaves – including African American Protestantism – were “persistently resistant.”\(^2^7\)

3. Terminology

As this brief survey of literature on conversion in North America and the Atlantic world shows, historians have increasingly sought to understand Christianity from the perspective of non-Europeans. Moving past the presumption that conversion to Christianity represented a capitulation to imperial expansion, a form of “slave control,” or a “loss” of “traditional culture,” they have sought to describe conversion as a multi-layered process that represented a choice on the part of native and African “converts.” Yet the focus on continuity, rather than change, between native and African religions and Christianity, has eroded the possibility that “conversion” could be experienced as a transformative process by non-Europeans. As we have seen, the word “conversion” is often avoided because it is seen as too representative of a missionary mindset and a Christian worldview. Instead, words such as “syncretism,” “engagement,” “affiliation,” “dialogue,” “translation,” and “hybridity” have become popular replacements for the word “conversion.” Historians have borrowed much of this terminology from the fields of anthropology and religious studies, particularly from scholarship published in the late 1980s and early 90s. This final section will survey the benefits and drawbacks of each of these terms by examining the
most influential scholarship on non-European conversion within the fields of history, anthropology, and religious studies.

SYNCRETISM AND HYBRIDITY

Syncretism and hybridity both refer to a process of cultural interaction that results in a “mixed” outcome. While the terms have divergent histories, they both come to be employed by historians to describe non-European conversions to Christianity. Of the two, the term most aligned with the study of religion is “syncretism.” Originally coined in the first century of the Common Era to refer to a “political alliance,” it was redefined in the 17th century to describe the “mixing” of different religious groups. As the cultural historian Peter Burke has written, 17th-century writers used “syncretism” in a pejorative sense to describe “a kind of religious chaos.” By the late 19th century, however, “syncretism” was deployed in a more positive way to explain the integration of multiple religious systems in classical antiquity. The term entered the field of anthropology in the first half of the 20th century through the work of Melville Herskovits, who used it to explain the persistence of African religious traditions in African American practice.

As syncretism migrated into historical descriptions of conversion, it has been used to emphasize the continuing influence of non-Christian traditions after Christian conversion. This objective is evident in John Thornton’s description of Christianity in West Central Africa. For Thornton, Christianity in Africa was syncretic because it “allowed the Africans to retain their old cosmology, their old understanding of the structure of the universe and the place of the gods and other divine beings in it.” Yet while syncretism offers historians the opportunity to demonstrate the continued relevance of non-Christian religions, the term has been criticized for implying that religions are discrete entities that can mix with one another, producing a syncretic form. Similar criticisms have been leveled against “hybridity,” a word emerging from the field of botany that describes the combination of different plant species, resulting in a new strand.

Responding to this criticism, some scholars have suggested updating the meaning of syncretism to represent an ongoing process among continually changing entities. They have argued that the study of syncretism is vitally important for understanding the evolution of religious traditions, none of which can be deemed “pure” or “whole.” Thus Talal Asad has defined syncretism as “a new amalgam” with a “multiplicity of origins.” The field of post-colonial studies, meanwhile, has similarly redefined the term “hybridity” to emphasize the interpenetration of all cultures.

While “syncretism” and “hybridity” have evolved to emphasize the ongoing processes of cultural interaction, they continue to be influenced by their etymological histories that imply “mixing.” In her now classic study of the 16th-century Catholic mission to the Nahuas, the anthropologist Louise Burkhart rejected the term syncretism because it “implies a resolution of contradictions, a half-way meeting between complementary elements.” Furthermore, by focusing on large processes rather than individual experiences, “syncretism” and “hybridity” fail to fully acknowledge the agency and perspective of converts. As a result, some scholars have looked elsewhere for a critical vocabulary of conversion.

AFFILIATION, PRACTICE, AND APPROPRIATION

While terms like “syncretism” and “hybridity” refer to abstract processes, “affiliation,” “appropriation,” and “practice” emphasize the choices of individuals and have thus gained popularity among historians seeking a new way to describe native and African conversion to Christianity. In Linford Fisher’s 2012 study of The Indian Great Awakening, he argued that the term
“affiliation” was more appropriate for describing native religious engagement with Christianity because Indians “had long incorporated new ideas and practical skills alongside old ones, often without intending to drop, remove, or alter the existing ones.” While they did sometimes choose to affiliate with a particular Christian church, they might later find this affiliation unfulfilling and choose alternative ways to incorporate Christian ideas, beliefs, or practices in their lives.36

Fisher’s use of the term “affiliation” is connected to a movement within religious studies to emphasize “lived religion” rather than doctrine. Proponents of lived religion view religion not as a set of beliefs but as a dynamic practice that is inextricable from other elements of daily life, such as family and kinship networks. As David D. Hall has written, emphasizing lived religious practice “encompasses the tensions, the ongoing struggle of definition, that are constituted within every religious tradition.”37 For students of conversion, the “lived religion” approach is helpful because it expands the field of religion for both Europeans and non-Europeans, making it easier to recognize that there was constant tension and ambiguity in the meaning of “conversion” even within European Christian communities. It also makes clear that studies of “conversion” cannot focus just on individuals but must also recognize the influence of communities and families on decisions to convert.

While the term “affiliation” most often refers to native or African engagement with Christian institutions, “appropriation” and “incorporation” usually denote the integration of Christian symbols or practices within an indigenous or African context. Take, for example, Allan Greer’s description of “conversion” in Mohawk Saint. Greer rejected the suggestion that Iroquois people were “about to turn into Europeans” upon their conversion. Instead, “Christian beliefs and practices were incorporated into an indigenous framework...there could be no other form of ‘conversion.’”38 Often, however, Europeans refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of native and African appropriations of Christianity. And in some cases, the appropriation of Christian rituals profoundly disturbed Europeans. In the Danish West Indies, Ray Kea has written about how “the slaves’ appropriation of Pietism destabilized the plantation owners’ notion of Blacks.”39 Similarly, the Kongo woman Doña Beatriz’ appropriated both Catholic baptism and the sacrament of penance in her quest to reunite the kingdom of Kongo, a mission that brought her into direct conflict with Capuchin missionaries and rival kings.40 As these examples show, emphasizing “appropriation” and “incorporation” demonstrates that native and African converts were not passive recipients of Christian doctrine but active participants in the creation of new religious meanings for Christian symbols, practices, and rituals – many of which threatened European notions of Christianity.

While discussions of affiliation, appropriation, and practice demonstrate the agency of non-Europeans as well as the significance of kinship networks and daily life in the conversion process, this language also has shortcomings. For example, a focus on affiliation may lead historians to deemphasize or even overlook the full significance of conversion as a subjective experience of transformation. Though viewing conversion in this way may sometimes reflect missionary expectations, it remains worthwhile to consider the possibility that non-Europeans did, in fact, view their participation in Christian rituals to be part of an intentional subjective transformation. Furthermore, downplaying the theological and experiential elements of conversion risks missing the meaning of conversion for native and African converts.

**TRANSLATION**

One of the most promising methods for examining non-Europeans conversion is to interrogate the translation of Christian theology into non-European languages. Two of the most influential studies on this topic are John and Jean Comaroff’s two volume study of the Protestant mission to
the Tswana in South Africa, *Of Revelation and Revolution* (1991, 1997) and Louise Burkhart’s *The Slippery Earth* (1989), which, as mentioned previously, examined the Catholic mission to the Nahua in 16th-century Mexico. These studies, both of which were conducted by anthropologists, aim to articulate new ways to talk about “conversion” within the context of colonial expansion and cross-cultural contact. While exploring very different subjects, they both introduce language that can be helpful for historians studying non-European conversions.

In *Of Revolution and Revelation*, John and Jean Comaroff criticized the term conversion due to its association with European modernity and Christian history. As they explain, “modern Protestant conversion is itself an ideologically saturated construct. Framed in the imagery of reason and the reflective self, it is a metonym for a moral economy.” In other words, it is impossible to decouple conversion from colonial power and European conceptions of modernity and selfhood. The Comaroffs conclude, in their strongest statement against conversion, “to pretend, therefore, that [conversion] may be an analytic tool, an explanatory principle, is to dress up ideology as sociology – and to ignore the fact that, in the context of European colonialism, ‘conversion’ has always been part of its apparatus of cultural coercion.” If this is true, then what happened when an individual chose to “convert” to Christianity? The Comaroffs argued that there was a fundamental disjunction between what the missionaries called “conversion” and what the Tswana intended by joining the Protestant church. While the missionaries believed that Setswana would “yield to the pains-taking effort to translate literally and precisely the English message they wished to convey,” they failed to recognize both the impossibility of this project as well as its inherently coercive nature. In other words, the process of translation made conversion impossible – at least on the terms sought by missionaries.

Like the Comaroffs, Louise Burkhart investigated the process of translation in order to parse the meaning of “conversion” for the Nahua in 16th-century Mexico. While Catholic friars “attempted to convert the Nahua by converting indigenous rhetoric to the expression of Christian moral concerns,” Burkhart argues that in reality, “Christian rhetoric was made indigenous.” So, for example, the friars chose to translate the word “sin” as *tlatlacolli*, a word with a broad range of meanings revolving around “damage.” Yet while for Europeans, “sin” described solely metaphysical damage, *tlatlacolli* could refer to literal damage (i.e., a broken chain) or unintentional damage (i.e., a singer failing to harmonize) as well as metaphysical damage. Thus, while *tlatlacolli* and sin had common ground, the terms were “not synonyms.” Most significantly, the friars also used *tlatlacolli* as a translation for “guilt,” thereby eliminating the cause–effect relationship between guilt and sin and fundamentally shifting the theological meaning of the words.

Underlying these particular problems of translation was the larger structural difference between Christian and Nahua cosmologies. While Christianity is a semidualist religion that combines an omnipotent, benevolent God with a simultaneous problem of evil, Nahua cosmology is both polytheistic and monist: a single divine principle, *Teotl*, is responsible for both negative and positive aspects of the universe. Consequently, “negative forces were not construed as enemies of goodness,” as they were in Christianity, but “as essential...components of the cosmos.” Thus when friars used the Nahua word *Teotl* to represent both God and holy, they ended up changing Christian theology to map onto the Nahua view that the world was a struggle to maintain balance. Good and evil became order and chaos. As a result of this process of translation, conversion happened largely on Nahua terms, despite the friars’ greater power within the colonial context. Rather than representing a coercive element of a colonizing...
culture, as it did for the Comaroffs, Burkhart argued that Christianity was “Nahuatized” in 16th-century Mexico. In the last chapter of The Slippery Earth, which is tellingly entitled “Christianity Conquered,” Burkhart concluded that while missionaries believed that the Nahua were converting to Christianity, it was in fact Christianity that “crossed the dialogical frontier into Nahua monism.”

So who, in the end, was converted during Christian conversion? For the Comaroffs, conversion represented the colonization of consciousness, whereby the Tswana were introduced to the ideology of western selfhood and economy. For Louise Burkhart, conversion was a colonization of Christianity, as the religion was translated to fit Nahua cosmology. In order to parse this question, let us return to the story of an individual, Magdalena, the African woman living on the Danish island of St. Thomas in the Caribbean. In an illuminating essay on Magdalena’s religious life, Ray Kea, like Burkhart and the Comaroffs, investigated the translation of Christianity into both language and cosmology. Magdalena was first introduced to Christianity in her homeland of Great Popo, Africa, located in the western part of the Bight of Benin. She grew up in a Roman Catholic family, though her worldview was shaped by two other metaphysical systems as well: Vodun and Ifa. Together, these systems “provided a theoretical understanding of and perspective on the making of the societal order.”

Kea argued that the practice of Catholicism in Magdalena’s homeland was not “syncretic,” as John Thornton has proposed. Instead, Ardra Catholics like Magdalena developed “their own hemmeneutic and theological traditions” based on the “historical relationship between different communities of discourse, textuality and praxis – Ifa, Vodun, and Catholicism.” This cosmology is evident in Magdalena’s understanding of the Christian Trinity, which she described to Moravian missionaries in St. Thomas. Magdalena used Aja-Ayizo concepts to represent God (Pao), the Son (Mau), and the Holy Spirit (Ce).

Thus while the Moravian missionaries believed that Magdalena “possessed only ‘vague notions’ concerning the Trinity,” Kea argued that Magdalena used her understanding of Christian theology, as well as the corresponding cosmologies of Vodun and Ifa, to interpret Moravian pietism. She joined the Moravian church in 1736, was baptized the following year, and thenceforth assumed a position as an Elder within the congregation.

As this description suggests, becoming a Moravian was both a theological and a social decision for Magdalena. In Moravian pietism, she saw a form of communal worship that met her high expectations for devotion, ritual, and prayer. Interpreting Moravian pietism through her knowledge of Catholicism, Vodun, and Ifa, she translated the missionary message both for herself and for other black Christians. Moreover, she used her membership in the Moravian church to strengthen bonds within her own family (her son, Mingo, was also a member) and as a platform to protest the culture of Atlantic slavery (she authored and signed multiple petitions to the Danish monarchs). Her conversion was not a break with the past but an act of self-narrative that allowed her to connect her African past with her Caribbean present. As she wrote in her petition to the queen of Denmark, while she was able to “serv[er] ye Son of God” in “Popo,” the “white people” of St. Thomas would “not suffer me to serve him tho now I have more ground to serve him than before I had in my Heart.” By converting to Moravian pietism, Magdalena was able to reassert and redefine her religious and social identity within the context of Atlantic slavery. As such, conversion was an act of both subjective transformation and social affirmation.

As this exploration of Magdalena’s religious life suggests, scholars need to abandon the common conception that conversion was a “turning” from one belief system to another. Instead, it is more accurate to say that conversion – for both Europeans and non-Europeans – was a process of transformation that occurred on multiple planes. The social, cultural, and political implications are easier to identify in the historical record, but historians also need to take seriously the possibility of religious transformation as well. In the case of Magdalena, it is clear that her conversion to Moravian pietism gave her a political platform that she had previously lacked.
and that she translated the Christian trinity through Vodun and Ifa. Yet these facts do not mean that her conversion should be judged as partial or incomplete. While some 18th-century missionaries may have believed this, 21st century historians need to broaden their understanding of “conversion” in order to encompass the ways in which non-Europeans created a narrative of their own spiritual transformation.

In order to do so, two methods are particularly useful for describing non-European conversion: first, emphasizing “lived religion” can help historians move past the misconception that Christianity is a bound system. By focusing on practice rather than doctrine, it de–centers missionaries and seeks, instead, to examine religious practice from the “bottom up.” Second, interrogating the process of translation has great potential for historians of conversion, particularly during a period of colonial encounter. By exploring how Christian terms were redefined through their translation into non–European languages, historians will gain better insight into the cosmologies, beliefs, and practices of Native Americans and Africans. By using these methods – and recognizing that the meaning of “conversion” is, and always has been, in flux – historians can move past the “missionary mindset” and acknowledge the significance of the choice that many non-Europeans made to engage in Christian rites.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank the participants of the Early Modern Atlantic Workshop at the University of Minnesota for their helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this article.

Short Biography

Katharine Gerbner’s research explores the religious dimensions of race, authority, and freedom in the early modern Atlantic world. She is currently working on a book project entitled “Christian Slavery: Protestant Missions and Slave Conversion in the Atlantic World, 1660–1760,” which asks why enslaved and free Africans participated in Christian rituals in the Protestant Caribbean. She argues that their conversion conditioned the emergence of whiteness, transformed the practice of religion, and redefined the idea of freedom in both Europe and the Americas. Gerbner has published essays in Slavery & Abolition, The New England Quarterly, Early American Studies, and Pennsylvania History, and held fellowships at the John Carter Brown Library, Haverford College Quaker & Special Collections, The Library Company, the American Philosophical Society, Harvard University, and the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota. Gerbner is currently an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Minnesota.

Notes

* Correspondence: University of Minnesota, 1239 Heller Hall, 271 19th Ave. S., Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA. E-mail: kgerbner@umn.edu

1 Oldendorp, Historie, 2:228.

2 I have chosen to use the name “Magdalena,” rather than “Marotta” throughout most of this essay because that is the name that Magdalena chose to use for herself at the end of her life.

3 Comaroff and Comaroff, Of Revelation and Revolution, 1:251.

4 Mills and Grafton, Conversion, x.

5 Muldoon, The Spiritual Conversion of the Americas, 2.

7 For more information on Christianization and conversion in late antiquity and the Middle Ages, see Muldoon, Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages; Fletcher, The Barbarian Conversion; Armstrong and Wood, Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals; Brown, The Rise of Western Christendom; Carver, The Cross Goes North; Mills and Grafton, Conversion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages; Petts, Pagan and Christian.

8 Hindmarsh, The Evangelical Conversion Narrative, 23.

9 Scholars have debated whether conversos should be understood as “true” Christians or whether they were crypto-Jews. See Beinart, Conversos on Trial; Netayahu, The Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth Century Spain; Starr-LeBeau, In the Shadow of the Virgin; Abrera, The Tribunal of Zaragoza and Crypto-Judaisms, 1484–1515.

10 Hindmarsh, The Evangelical Conversion Narrative, 31.

11 The debates about baptism and conversion in early modern England were part of a broader conversation about the meaning of true Christianity throughout Europe and the Americas. For more information on this subject, see Morgan, Visible Saints; Holifield, The Covenant Sealed; Hambrecht-Stowe, The Practice of Piety; Brown and Hall, “Family Strategies and Religious Practice”; Lindberg, The Pietist Theologians.

12 James Axtell, The Invasion within.

13 Richter, “Some of Them… Would Always Have a Minister with Them.” See also Richter, Facing East from Indian Country. For other recent studies that emphasize native perspectives on Christianity, see Griffiths and Cervantes, Spiritual Encounters; Anderson, The Betrayal of Faith; Martin and Nicholas, Native Americans, Christianity, and the Reshaping of the American Religious Landscape.


15 Greer, “Conversion and Identity: Iroquois Christianity in Seventeenth-Century New France,” 177; Greer, Mohawk Saint.


18 Morrison, The Solidarity of Kin, 129.

19 Leavelle, The Catholic Calumet, 8, 124. Another promising approach to native conversion in New France has focused on the centrality of marriage. Both Susan Sleeper-Smith and Robert Morrissey have shown that inter-marriage between French men and Indian women was vital to the construction and development of native Christian communities. Sleeper-Smith, Indian Women and French Men; Morrissey, “Kaskaskia Social Network.”

20 While Sylvia Frey and Paul Lovejoy have used the term “revisionist,” I have replaced it with the term “Africanization” because it is more descriptive of the Africa-centered dimension of this approach. Lovejoy, “The African Diaspora: Revisionist Interpretations of Ethnicity, Culture and Religion under Slavery”; Frey, “The Visible Church.”

21 The origins of this debate can be traced to the earlier dispute about African cultural “retentions.” In the 1940s, Melville Herskovits argued that African Americans had not “lost” their culture in their forced migration across the Atlantic. E. Franklin Frazier challenged his position by insisting that Herskovits had not fully accounted for the destructive impact of slavery. In the 1970s, the anthropologists Sidney Mintz and Richard Price introduced the “creolization” thesis, which revised Herskovits’ argument. Mintz and Price critiqued Herskovits’ static conception of “culture” and argued that while African institutions were destroyed, Africans in the Americas drew on their cultural histories to create new institutions. A revised Herskovits thesis, which has come to be known as the “Africanization” approach, see Gomez, Exchanging Our Country Marks.


23 Sweet, Recreating Africa, 100.

24 Frey and Wood, Come Shouting to Zion.

25 Aside from James Sweet’s work, important recent studies of Afro-Catholicism using Inquisition records include Bennett, Africans in Colonial Mexico; Bristol, Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches.

26 For a description of some of these new methodologies, see Frey, “The Visible Church.” The classic text on Afro-Protestantism is Raboteau, Slave Religion. For the most recent synthesis, see Frey and Wood, Come Shouting to Zion.
Other important studies demonstrating African influences on Afro-Protestantism include Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*; Chireau, *Black Magic*; Sensbach, *Rebecca’s Revival.*

27 Smith, *Stone; Young, Rituals of Resistance,* 184.


31 Burke, *Cultural Hybridity,* 49, 54. Michael McNally, for example, has argued that scholars need to develop a more sophisticated vocabulary for defining hybridity that focuses on Native practice rather than belief. McNally, “The Practice of Native American Christianity.” Other scholars have argued that hybridity overlooks uneven power differentials. See, for example, Carrasco, “Borderlands and the ‘Biblical Hurricane’.”

32 See the debate on the term “syncretism” in Leopold and Jensen, Syncretism in Religion.

33 Asad, “Comments on Conversion,” 264.

34 Burke, *Cultural Hybridity,* 51.

35 Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth,* 188.


37 Hall, *Lived Religion in America,* xi.

38 Greer, *Mohawk Saint,* 108.


42 Ibid., 1:244–5.

43 Ibid., 1:217.


45 Ibid., 28–33.

46 Ibid., 37.

47 Ibid., 188.

48 *Vodun* was, as Kea describes, “a metaphysical site of representational practice and of modes of signification about the worlds of the living, the dead, and the cosmos.” *Ija,* or *Fa,* was “a complex of meta-languages associated with divination discourses and practices and was equally widespread.” Kea, “From Catholicism to Moravian Pietism: The World of Marotta/Magdalena, Woman of Popo and St. Thomas,” 117.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., 121–2.

51 Ibid., 123.

52 “A Letter of the Eldress of the Church of the Negroes at St. Thomas to her Majesty ye Queen of D. 1739.” *St. Thomas Letters: 1734–1766.* Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, PA.

Bibliography


