

## AS.100.383 – *Conversion & Apostasy in the Middle Ages*

This seminar is a comparative study of religious transformation in the Middle Ages. We will mostly be looking at the Mediterranean and the area we now call the Middle East. Our period of focus is long: over a millennium separates our earliest and latest cases, but they will cluster around these periods:

- Late Antiquity, including
  - the 4th-5th centuries, especially accounts of Christianization (in Egypt, Rome, Gaul);
  - the 7th-8th centuries, with the Islamic conquests of what we now call the ‘Middle East’;
- High Middle Ages (Islamization in different regions of the Middle East, from Iran in the 10th-11th centuries to Egypt in the 12th-14th); and the
- Late Middle Ages (14th-16th centuries), to cover select cases of conversion after the ‘Reconquista’ (the Christian conquest of Islamic Iberia), including forced conversions of Iberian Jews (*conversos*) and Muslims (Moriscos).

Most of our cases will revolve around conversion to Islam (and/or Islamization), but to contextualize these, we will make several comparative forays to examine notable cases of Christianization (e.g., St. Augustine’s *Confessions* and Christian missionaries in the New World). In terms of themes, we will explore religious transformation on different registers, including

- (a) **personal conversion**: what we usually think of when we hear the word ‘conversion’, i.e., in most cases, the personal adoption of a new religious identity;
- (b) **mass conversions**: when religious change happens *en masse*, and resembles a social movement; this often elicits different responses from the non-converts (the communities *left* and *joined* by the convert group);
- (c) **converting the landscape**: for example, when holy sites or topographies acquire new names and accrue legends and origin accounts that resituate them within the new religious tradition;
- (d) **institutional conversion**, including the conversion of pagan temples into churches in late antiquity, or some churches into mosques following the Islamic conquests.

Each of these comprises more categories! For example, in studying personal conversion, we will examine famous examples of **conversion narratives**—the highly stylized first-person accounts penned by intellectuals, often quite some time after their personal conversion—and compare some by converts to Christianity (e.g. the axial accounts by Paul and St. Augustine) and others by New Muslims (e.g. the 13th-century Jewish convert to Islam, Sa‘id of Alexandria).

In some cases, we will also address historical processes that were closely associated with conversion, for example, **imperial conquests** (e.g. Islamic conquests of the Middle East in 7th-8th century and the conquest of Iberia, ca. 12th-15th centuries). In some cases, the spread of the scriptural traditions of Christianity and Islam brought about **linguistic conversion**: What factors explain the distinct paths of Islamization and Arabization in different societies? For example, how do we understand the different paths and outcomes in Iran (where Zoroastrian converts became *Persian-speaking* Muslims) versus in Egypt (where Coptic converts became *Arabic-speaking* Muslims)? Here we will also examine cases of

*Arabization* of non-Muslims (i.e. Jews and Christians in the Middle East who did *not* convert to Islam).

In all these cases, our general focus will be the *social and cultural history of religion* (rather than theological or psychological dimensions of conversion). Our basic 'unit' is the weekly module, where we examine a selected theme or regional case study.

The main questions that motivate this course revolve around the ways religious conversion was experienced, negotiated, and represented in medieval society. What did religious identity and affiliation mean in medieval society—and how was *religious difference* maintained, transgressed, and historically changed? How was religious identity experienced in everyday life—how did it structure one's relations with members of other religious communities? What would *motivate* a person to change this crucial form of belonging? What were the consequences of such a *radical act of self-transformation*? Do these same reasons obtain for groups that convert *en masse*? How did individual converts—mostly elite, male, *literati*—narrate and represent their personal conversion? Are there other kinds of evidence that describe religious conversion, especially that of non-elites? Can believers provide *incentives* or *rewards* to induce others to convert? How were these defined—and differentiated from *coercion/force*?

Case studies will lead us to consider the following themes:

- When are new converts socially marked, their religious practices suspected and regulated, as in the case of Spanish *conversos* subject to the Inquisition? What does the absence of an Islamic parallel to such inquisitorial questioning of converts indicate?
- When and how does martyrdom function as the limit of conversion/apostasy?

In so far as our cases all come from far-off lands and times (the pre-modern, non-Western world), this course is also an extended exercise in *radical defamiliarization*—thus, an opportunity to think about the practice and uses of history. You should leave the course having improved your critical reading, research and writing skills (and learned some titillating cocktail anecdotes about the Middle Ages).



'The Birth of Muhammad', a very unusual illustration in the Islamic tradition—here depicted along the classic triptych iconography of the Christian Nativity (14th-c. *manuscript*, produced in Tabriz, Iran)

## Reading and writing

*“Do not read superficially, lest you do me an injury, and derive no benefit for yourself. You must study thoroughly and read continually; for you will then find the solution of those important problems of religion, which are a source of anxiety to all intelligent men.”*

— Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed

*“Context is one of the most important indications of the speaker’s intended meaning. Overlooking context is likely to lead to misunderstanding [of any text] and false argumentation.”*

— ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, 14th-c. Syrian Muslim polymath

*“Generally speaking, when reading a short book, you will complain that it can be easily finished. Yet, when reading a long book, you will complain that it is hard to finish it. Reading a book of resentment, your hair will bristle with anger; while reading a joyful book, you will beat your spittoon until it is broken. [To strike a balance] whenever you read a book, you should have other books at hand as well.”*

— Wu Congxian, 16th-c. Chinese writer

Pay heed to these wise words when reading and writing. This is a *seminar*: you are responsible for completing all assigned reading—carefully, critically, and thoughtfully—before coming to class. In some cases, I will distribute a few points or reading questions to guide you through the readings (e.g. what to look for in a text). But *you* are responsible for asking your own active questions of the texts, rather than languishing in passive reading.

Each week’s readings will include both **primary and secondary sources** on a particular theme. For example, in examining the relationship between conversion and martyrdom, we will look at a case study of the 9th-century Christian martyrs of Córdoba. Readings for that week will include:

- (A) **Secondary studies:** two articles, one on martyrdom and one on 9th-century Córdoba; and,
- (B) **Primary excerpt:** Eulogius’ 9th-c. account of the Córdovan martyrs (in translation).

Each class, one student will present one or two of the secondary readings; this involves summarizing the content and argument and briefly discussing links between the text and other readings. The presenter will close with a few questions to spark a wider class discussion of the reading.

**Writing** Plagiarism will result in an automatic F for the course. Keep all your notes and source material and be prepared to explain any writing you submit. In your essays, I am looking for indications that you have read thoughtfully and engaged the material originally and critically. An essay is an argument; I need not agree with yours, but I expect it to be a coherent, persuasive development of the issues we raised in class—supported by textual evidence from the readings (or your own research). I will hand out a list of tips (suggestions) about writing an essay/paper. **Unless otherwise stated, written assignments (reviews, essays, etc.) are due on SUNDAYS and should all be emailed to me.**

### **Written Work: Formatting and Submission**

Format (for *all* submitted written work): Margins: 1” all around; double-space texts; font size 12 point. Submit *all* work by email to me (no hard copies), your essay/paper attached as *either* an MS Word or PDF file (pick *one* format). Your last name must be the first word of the filename; also number all pages sequentially with your surname. Bcc yourself on the message: the time stamp on that email is your receipt and my confirmation regarding submission time.

## *Grading & Class Requirements*

**Exams** There are no in-class exams.

**Grades** will be assigned as follows:

25% **Attendance and participation**; includes your short presentation(s) of readings at beginning of each meeting. Once again, this is a seminar and we will learn through an engaged discussion.

45% **Three Short Essays—3, 4, and 5 pages respectively (~ 900, 1,200, and 1,500 words)—** answering one of two questions, about themes covered in the readings (see Table overleaf for due dates). The essays carry 10%, 15%, and 20%, of the grade, respectively (but if there is a clear improvement in response to feedback, I drop the lowest).

30% **Final Paper.** A substantial research paper (15-20 pages, or 4,500-6,000 words) is **due Sunday May 8th** in lieu of a final exam. You should meet with me at least once to discuss the topic and have it approved; I will offer suggestions/tips for research, sources, relevant theoretical work, etc. This portion of the grade also includes

- your timely preparation and submission of the Research Question (due w12);
- the 5-page draft (due w13), and
- your thoughtful and engaged critique of fellow students' short drafts (w14).

**Attendance & Participation** You are expected to attend all classes. This is a seminar, not a lecture class, which means that we will learn *only* by *active* discussion among class members (who have covered the readings thoroughly and thoughtfully). Two or more unexcused absences (e.g. anything excepting serious illness documented by an official note) are grounds for *an F*.

*Conversion in the Middle Ages • Weekly Topics Schedule*

<i>Week/date</i>	<i>Topics</i>	<i>Selected Readings</i>
JAN. 24TH	INTRODUCTION	(FREE RIDE)
Week 2: Jan. 31st	<b>Critical Theory: On History and Religion</b>	<i>The History of the Category "Religion"</i> <u>PRI</u> : <i>Accounts of Famous Conversions to Christianity</i>
Week 3: Feb. 7th	<b>Christianization in Late Antiquity</b>	Violence and Religious Change <u>PRI</u> : <i>Late-Antique texts on Christianization &amp; Violence</i>
Week 4: Feb. 14th	<b>Foundational Stories: Islamic Origins</b> Revelation, Persecution, Migration	<u>PRI</u> : <i>Prophet's Biography (excerpts)</i> ; <u>PRI</u> : <i>The Satanic Verses: Medieval History (&amp; modern amnesia)</i>
<b>Week 5:</b> <b>Feb. 21st</b>	<b>CLASS CANCELLED</b>	<b>(I'm at a conference)</b>
<i>Essay #1 due Sunday, February 27th</i>		
Week 6: Feb. 28th	<b>Arab-Muslim Conquests (630s-700s) &amp; Communal Boundaries</b>	Christian Apocalypses in the wake of the Muslim Conquests <u>PRI</u> : <i>Narratives of the Arab-Muslim Conquest of Egypt &amp; Iran</i>
Week 7: Mar. 7th	Religious Difference in Medieval Muslim Societies and Islamic Texts	<i>Dhimmi</i> s and the Pact of 'Umar
Week 8: Mar. 14	<b>Conversion to Islam in Iran and India</b> Islamization and Religious Conversion	Bulliet, <i>Conversion to Islam...</i> Eaton, <i>The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier</i>
Week 9: Mar. 21st	NO CLASS	= Spring Break
<i>Essay #2 due Sunday, March 27th</i>		
Week 10: Mar. 28th	<b>Individual Conversion/Religious Change</b> Nock & Critiques; <i>Influence of Psychology on Modern Theories</i>	Typologies of Religious Change Modes, Agents, and Models of Islamization
Week 11: April 4th	<b>Narrating Personal Conversion I</b> Paul & Augustine as Paradigmatic Conversion Narratives	<u>PRI</u> : Conversion Narrative of Herman Judah
Week 12: April 11th	<b>Narrating Conversion II</b> Reading Islamic Conversion Narratives	<b>Dreams and Polemics in Conversion Narratives</b> <u>PRI</u> : Sa'id of Alexandria (13th c.) Kristic, <i>Ottoman Narratives of Religious Change</i>
<i>Essay #3 due Sunday, April 17th</i>		
Week 13: Apr. 18th	<b>People, Places, Things I:</b> Arabization vs. Islamization in Medieval Egypt & Andalus (Iberia)	<u>PRI</u> : <i>Myths as collective Conversion Narratives (Islam in Indonesia)</i>
Week 14: Apr. 25th	<b>People, Places, Things II:</b> Genealogy, Gender, Family...	<b>Converting to/from Judaism</b> <u>PRI</u> : <i>Trials of two Jews/conversos by the Inquisition</i> <u>PRI</u> : Moses b. Samuel of Damascus: Repentance Poem
<i>Final Papers due Sunday May 8th</i>		

## Conversion & Apostasy in the Middle Ages – Weekly Readings

### **WEEK ONE: Critical Theory on Religion and History<sup>i</sup>**

- Jonathan Z. Smith. “Religion, Religions, Religious” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark Taylor (Chicago, 1998), pp. 269-284.
  - William Arnal, “Definition” in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. William Braun and R. T. McCutcheon (London, 2000), pp. 21-34.
  - Talal Asad. “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category” in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and the Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993), pp. 27-54.
  - Marc Bloch, “The Idol of Origins” (two-page selection).
    - **PRIMARY:**
      - A. Eusebius’ account of the conversion of Constantine, early 4th century (2 pages);
      - B. Gregory of Tours on the conversion of Clovis, late 5th century (6 pages);
      - C. Bede’s account of the conversion of England, late 6th century (3 pages);
      - D. Two versions of Sojourner Truth’s speech (3 pages).
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### **WEEK TWO: Christianization in Late Antiquity<sup>ii</sup>**

- Frankfurter, David. “Christianity and Paganism I: Egypt” *CHX* pp. 173-186.
  - Frankfurter, David. “Syncretism and Holy Man in Late-Antique Egypt” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 (2003): 339-385.
  - Gallagher, Eugene V. “Conversion and Community in Late Antiquity” *Journal of Religion* 73 (1993): 1-15.
  - Frankfurter, David. “‘Things Unbefitting Christians’: Violence and Christianization in the 5th-c Panopolis” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8 (2000): 273-295.
    - **PRIMARY:**
      - Socrates (d. ca. 450), On destruction of the Serapium & Attack on Hypatia (5 pp);
      - Severus of Minorca (early 5th c.), *Letter on the Conversion of the Jews* (English text: 23pp).
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