Conversion and Modernity

The notion of “conversion” is commonly taken to denote a specifically religious phenomenon. In its broad definition, however, conversion refers to a “turning” with respect to position, direction, or destination which results in a recasting of basic orientation. “Conversion” can signify a fundamental alteration of character, a change of nature, form, or function, that is to say, a process of turning or being turned towards or even into something else, as in metamorphosis. Conversion can enable an elemental transformation of perspective in both real and metaphorical space. The origins of secular modernity can be traced back to an occurrence of shared cultural conversion, a turning or radical shift in orientation with respect to the widely assumed “horizon” of knowledge and meaning—in Greek metanoia or, as some have recently termed it, a conversion of “cognitive ecology”. The cognitive and cultural shift which gives rise to modernity is customarily associated with intellectual, religious, and aesthetic movements designated by historians as “Renaissance”, “Reformation”, and “the Baroque”. With an emerging modernity manifold forms of conversion have translated the horizon lines of knowledge and redrawn the world-pictures of individuals and whole communities. In short, our theme takes as its premise that modernity itself can be viewed as the manifestation of a broadly based “conversion” of world-view. In tracing the birth of modernity the phenomenon of religious conversion provides an effectual point of departure for a wider discussion of diverse “forms of conversion”—geographical, socio-cultural, material, linguistic, literary and artistic, human-animal, sexual, cognitive and affective, as well as religious. By treating these forms of conversion across disciplinary boundaries as a nexus of movements, translations, and transformations, we hope that these lectures will contribute to developing an understanding of religious, cultural, and cognitive change that will in turn provide insight into the emergence of the modern world.

In a lecture series sponsored by the McGill Centre for Research on Religion and scheduled for autumn 2012, we propose to address the theme Conversion and Modernity. Seven one-hour lectures followed by half-hour periods of open discussion will be delivered at the Faculty of Religious Studies, 3520 University Street, on Wednesdays in October and November 2012, at 5:30 pm. Contact: Torrance Kirby, Director of CREOR, torrance.kirby@mcgill.ca

3 October
Paul Yachnin
Tomlinson Professor of Shakespeare Studies
McGill University
Animal Dreams: Conversion and Metamorphosis

10 October
Mark Vessey
Professor of English and Principal of Green College
University of British Columbia
Erasmus and the Conversion of Latin Letters

17 October
Iain Fenlon
Professor of Historical Musicology
King’s College, Cambridge University
First Encounters: Music and Ritual in Early Spanish America

24 October
Douglas Hedley
Reader in Hermeneutics and Metaphysics
Clare College, Cambridge University
Reflection and Conversion: Neoplatonism and early-modern Philosophy of Mind

31 October
Bronwen Wilson
Professor of Art History
University of East Anglia
Moving Pictures: Sketchbook of a journey from Vienna to Istanbul

7 November
Sarah Beckwith
Professor of English and Theatre Studies
Duke University
Shakespeare, Sacraments and Conversion

14 November
Emidio Campi
Professor of Church History Emeritus
University of Zurich
The Italian convert: Marquis Galeazzo Caracciolo and the English Puritans

21 November
Allan Greer
Professor of History and Canada Research Chair in Colonial North America
McGill University
Kateri Tekakwitha: the Mohawk who Converted the Jesuits