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The converting sea: Religious change and cross-cultural interaction in the early modern Mediterranean

Robert John Clines

Western Carolina University

Correspondence
Robert John Clines, Department of History, Western Carolina University.
Email: rjclines@email.wcu.edu

Abstract

This review article explores conversion, construed as any change that fundamentally recalibrated the religious, political, and cultural landscape of the early modern Mediterranean. By expanding the concept of conversion to include shifts in collective identity construction, institutional anxieties, literary culture, intellectual traditions, and the visual arts, we can approach a more lucid understanding of the processes of religious change, acculturation, and cross-cultural interaction in the early modern Mediterranean. We can then speak of the early modern Mediterranean as a converting sea: one that shaped the lives of its inhabitants who in turn shaped the cultural landscape of the Middle Sea itself.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The early modern Mediterranean was a fraught contact zone in which imperial powers and religious confessions competed for subjects and souls. Part and parcel of the movements of peoples across borders and the renegotiations of cultural frontiers was conversion. Typically, conversion has hitherto been studied as the process of individuals and communities changing faiths. This limits our scope by obscuring the links between changes of faith and larger processes of religious change, acculturation, and cross-cultural interaction. The failure to connect these polyvalent deeply entangled strands results in a truncated and incomplete view of the place of conversion in early modern Mediterranean society.

This essay aims to broaden our understanding of conversion by exploring it on multiple cultural fronts to show that it meant more than switching faiths. This essay instead sees conversion in terms of the uniquely human ability to change oneself, to stimulate change in society, or to react to the changes that individuals and societies faced. Such a broad definition allows us to approach a fuller synthesis of the religious changes and cross-cultural interactions that took place in areas previously seen as unrelated, such as literary culture, intellectual traditions, and the visual arts. By exploring conversion in the early modern Mediterranean as any sociocultural change that fundamentally recalibrated

the religious, political, and cultural landscape of the Middle Sea, a converting Mediterranean—one that shapes the lives of its inhabitants who in turn shape the cultural landscape of the Sea itself—comes more fully into view (Braudel, 1972; Horden & Purcell, 2000; O'Connell & Dursteler, 2016; Catlos and Kinoshita, 2017).

2 | TRADITIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHY: CONVERSION, EMPIRE, AND EVANGELIZATION IN THE EARLY MODERN MEDITERRANEAN

Understanding the larger implications of conversion begins with the recognition that all forms of conversion took place within the larger nexus of imperial expansion and constructions of rival religious, cultural, and political identities that pervaded the early modern Mediterranean. In regard to conversion as it is traditionally understood, individual and collective changes in religious identity were always in dialogue with institutional efforts to enmesh devotion and political loyalty. Perhaps most famously in Venice, houses for catechumens were established to integrate converts into society through patronage networks and surrogate kinship (Rothman, 2012). This was not only a Venetian phenomenon, as conversionary preaching and other mechanisms of fostering and safeguarding conversions took place throughout Italy (Lazar, 2005, pp. 116–117; Mazur, 2016; Michelson, 2017). Such entanglements of religious orthodoxy and political loyalty in the edification of converts were also widespread in the Iberian empires, which aimed to create ethno-religiously homogenous states (Paiva, 2011; Rodrigues da Silva Tavim, Lopes de Barros, & Liba Mucznik, 2015; Roth, 2002; Soyer, 2007). Unsurprisingly, the Spanish in particular attempted to implement these tactics in their holdings in Italy, above all Naples (Huerga Criado, 2012; Huerga Criado, 2017; Varriale, 2013; Varriale, 2015) and Palermo (Oldrati, 2016), two important administrative centers in the Habsburgs' Mediterranean empire that were on the front lines of Ottoman encroachment.

While much of this was state driven, parts of empire-building via conversion hinged on the evangelization efforts of the Catholic Church. There was much overlap of course, as evangelization was often state driven, and missionaries tended to originate from the nations backing specific missions. That said, Mediterranean conversion and evangelization have not always been treated as interrelated phenomena because early modern missionary Catholicism has traditionally been studied as an arm of European expansion in the Americas and Asia. However, we should think of evangelization and cross-confessional dialogue as Mediterranean conversionary processes in the same vein as we would the Inquisition or houses for catechumens. Consequently, Catholic efforts to combat Protestantism and heresy across the Northern Mediterranean littoral and into the European heartland (Armstrong, 2004; Luria, 2005, pp. 47–102; Michelson, 2013) and Catholic missionary work among Eastern Rite Christians (Clines, 2017; Forrestal & Smith, 2016; Piccirillo, 1983; Ruiu, 2014) should be considered pan-Mediterranean processes of confessional and political consolidation through evangelization, the very processes that were also applied in missions further afield. In other words, early modern Catholicism became a global faith partly because of the conversionary tactics sharpened in the Mediterranean both before and after the opening up of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean Worlds (Selwyn, 2004).

Another consequence of studying overseas missions without attending to their Mediterranean roots has been a general failure to see similarities between Catholic missions and efforts to Islamize and Ottomanize the Balkans (Minkov, 2004) or even conversionary tactics in Shiite Safavid Persia (Abisaab, 2004). But if we are to understand the roles of political and religious institutions in the fabrication of the loyal subject as zealous believer, we must think beyond the traditional scope of evangelization as a Catholic process tied to European global empires. The result is a more lucid picture of the ways in which confessions and empires—which depicted one another as wholly different—acted similarly as they constructed confessions and religiously inspired empires across the Middle Sea.

This is not to suggest that all conversions were the result of empire and evangelization. In fact, many conversions did not happen in the Mediterranean's religio-imperial urban centers and were not necessarily procured by religious and political institutions. First and foremost, the very nature of imperial borders—permeable and fluid with very little bearing on the everyday lives of individuals—meant that conversion often caused a certain level of anxiety for those charged with safeguarding confessional purity. The Veneto-Ottoman border in Dalmatia and the Balkans,

for example, is a treasure trove for exploring the varied ways in which individuals "converted," for example, Muslims on Venetian Corfù baptizing their children to fight off disease while still remaining Muslims (Dursteler, 2011, pp. 34–40, 80).

If we see borrowing ostensibly foreign religious practices without formally changing faiths as a type of acculturative conversion distinct from wholesale changes of faith, we can understand conversion as the product of the various Mediterranean microecologies that served as contact zones in which cross-cultural interactions and religious syncretism could take place (Horden & Purcell, 2000, pp. 401–460). The Mediterranean's porous borderlands thus functioned as theaters in which conversion could be performed as an acculturative organic process that happened locally and often with little regard for doctrinal orthodoxies or the wishes of political authorities. As the next two sections will show, this reality rendered conversion a problem for the rhetorics of empire and evangelization that aimed to position conversion as a mechanism for consolidating authority. This will also allow us to extend the scope of early modern conversion into the realm of cultural production.

3 | CONVERTS, RENEGADES, AND CRYPTO-JEWS/MUSLIMS: RETHINKING CONVERSION AS THE EVOLUTION OF CONFESSIONAL IDENTITIES

Despite institutional efforts to monitor conversions, individuals could forge their own conversionary experiences and religious identities. Many of these converts were driven by true piety and spiritual transformation in line with mainstream expectations (Leone, 2004; Sluhovsky, 2017). Others, however, converted because they saw it as a mechanism for moving freely within the larger geopolitical landscape of the Mediterranean and beyond (Mazur & Shinn, 2013), which, as we will see in the next section, would become quite problematic.

This perspective has allowed scholars to interrogate the life histories of cultural chameleons such as the polymath Leo Africanus, the Moroccan Jew Samuel Pallache, and the Venetian convert to Islam Beatrice Michiel, who traversed the fluid borders of the Mediterranean for all sorts of reasons (Davis, 2006; García-Arenal & Wiegers, 2007; Dursteler, 2011, pp. 1–33). Eric Dursteler's *Renegade Women* presents the story of several women, including Michiel, who used the political and religious permeability of Veneto-Ottoman borderlands to their advantage, thereby illustrating that women often converted to gain some semblance of personal autonomy (Dursteler, 2011). *Renegade Women* is part of a larger historiographical trend that underscores that confrontations with new religious, cultural, and political identities offered increased mobility across the Mediterranean to women and children just as it did for men (Baer, 2004a; Ditchfield & Smith, 2017; Melammed, 2002). These stories are reminders that zeal was not the only factor at play in how individuals articulated and shaped their religious identities.

Fluid borders and frequent contacts with religious difference facilitated a large number of conversions. Such converts, often called renegades regardless of the motivation of their conversion, underscore the ways in which shifting mechanisms and definitions of conversion were the product of the religious fluidity and plurality of the early modern Mediterranean. Generally speaking, the term renegade has been applied to Christians who converted to Islam; perhaps the greatest source of renegades was the *devşirme*, the Ottoman policy of forced conscription of Christian boys, usually from the Balkans, to serve in the military and civil administration (Graf, 2017). Ottoman galley slavery also led to renegadism, as conversion to Islam was a means of securing one's freedom (Fiume, 2009). Scholars have thus shown that we should broaden our definition of renegade to include anyone who transgressed or challenged the political, confessional, and cultural borders that Mediterranean societies constructed (Dursteler, 2011, p. ix). Such an approach allows us to see that changing faiths was one among an array of practices by which "converts," making use of fluid borders, redefined themselves in relation to society as a whole.

Figures such as Sidi Yahya-u-Ta'fuft, who tells us that "The Moors say I am a Christian, and the Christians say I am a Moor, and so I hang in balance without knowing what I should do with myself," illustrate how difficult it could sometimes be to identify not only another's faith, but even one's own, because of the ease with which individuals could

convert (Subrahmanyam, 2011, p. 22; Aubin, 2006, p. 211). Renegades were also mediators through whom identities were constructed against one another. Bartolomé and Lucile Bennassar's important study of the "Christians of Allah" points to this very fact, as these individuals' Christianness remained central to how we understand them as Muslims (Bennassar & Bennassar, 2008). Renegades played a significant role as go-betweens, facilitating diplomatic relations between the various empires of the Middle Sea (García Martín, Solá Castaño, & Vázquez, 2000; Gürkan, 2015a; Gürkan, 2015b; Gürkan, 2016; Oldrati, 2018; Solá Castaño, 2004). This creates a paradox wherein the empires that stressed confessional rigidity and aimed to control conversions came to rely on these trans-confessional and trans-imperial figures in their quests for power and influence across the Mediterranean. Conversion was, as we will see in the next section, therefore both a catalyst for and product of cross-confessional exchange as well as a font of anxiety regarding the challenges that religious orthodoxy faced from religious and cultural nomadism (Benzoni, 1985; Scaraffia, 2002).

On the other end of the spectrum of renegadism, but also a great source of anxiety, were converts who maintained their old faiths in secret. Most, but not all, of these converts were Jews and Muslims who chose to convert to Catholicism (Mazur, 2013; Roth, 2002; Soyer, 2007). Known as *conversos* and *moriscos*, respectively, and as New Christians collectively, these converts and their descendants were often, but not always, publicly Christians but Jews and Muslims in private (Ingram, 2009). It is impossible to know how many of these converts retained their previous faiths, as many fully embraced Catholicism while others were never exposed. In either case, it is clear that many New Christians preserved some of their prior religious and cultural traditions. Former Muslim women, known as *moriscas*, were central to preserving Muslim customs in the domestic sphere through ritual bathing, song, and culinary practices (Perry, 2005). This has led L. P. Harvey to suggest that it is incorrect to label these people as *moriscos*, given that "the 'converted' Muslims did not think of themselves as in any way different doctrinally from their fellow Muslims in other parts of the world" (Harvey, 2005, p. 4). Such a claim could also be extended to the Jewish converts, who preserved their identities in the face of the pressures of Catholicization (Melammed, 2004).

Harvey's dichotomous view assumes that religious conversion entails the abandonment of cultural mores. But just as renegades could remain internally dedicated to the cultures, faiths, and homelands of their births, *moriscos* and *conversos* could be sincere Catholics while retaining remnants of their pre-conversion cultures. Religious conversion entailed not only individuals changing confessions but also confessions themselves changing over time, as new members had new understandings of belonging because of their cultural legacies. In essence, newly constructed religious identities, such as *converso*, *morisco*, New Christian, and Old Christian, rendered old dichotomies—such as Christian versus non-Christian—inadequate for grappling with shifting religious and cultural identities and the ways in which individuals viewed themselves and one another (Rodrigues da Silva Tavim, 2009; Lopes de Barros & Rodrigues da Silva Tavim, 2013). As such, conversion can serve as a paradigm for understanding the evolutionary nature of religious confessions and how they defined themselves against one another.

This is not to suggest that old dichotomies were easily relinquished. Once New Christians left Iberia, they often found that skeptical locals perceived them as too Christianized or as renegades. *Moriscos* who returned to Islam once they arrived in the Maghreb were seen as "Hispano-Muslims," a religio-cultural identity that was the product of both Iberian religious policies and the ways that their Muslim cultural identity had shifted through their efforts to preserve it post-conversion. Thus, much post-expulsion writing grappled with the interstitial nature of the identities that these individuals constructed through the mediation of two faiths; their conversion was not so much a movement between faiths as it was the construction of a collective sense of self that stemmed from their outsider status in both Christian and Muslim societies (Perry, 2005, pp. 158–163).

Such negotiations of identity also took place among *conversos* and exiled Jews, who often found themselves unwelcome because they were perceived as apostates or as foreign Jews (Graizbord, 2013). Like *moriscos*, *conversos* had to mediate and reconceptualize their ambiguous identities against two polarities: their Jewish origins on one hand and their Catholic present on the other (Ruderman, 2010, pp. 159–191). Oftentimes, *conversos* and exiled Jews carved out a controversial existence in places like North Africa or the Netherlands, where they migrated for economic reasons as well as to avoid the queries of the Inquisition (Bodian, 1994; García-Arenal & Wiegers, 2007). For exiled Jews, such migrations allowed for the formation of new collective identities rooted in their shared experience of

forced expulsion. By thinking of the diasporic experience as a conversionary one, the Hispano-Jewish identity known as Sephardim, for example, which developed among disparate exiled Iberian Jewish communities, takes on new meaning. Rather than being solely the collective destiny of Iberia's Jews, the diaspora becomes a conversionary experience wherein Iberian Jewish communities with unique histories created a new collective identity and historical memory as a means of grappling with their status as religious and cultural outsiders (García-Arenal & Wiegers, 2014; Ray, 2013). Conversion was both a religious experience as well as a process by which new religio-cultural identities were constructed through migrant groups' efforts to negotiate their place in foreign lands and reconcile their sense of the past with contemporary realities.

These conversions that went against the grain in terms of confessional expectations were facilitated by the very structures of the Mediterranean that Braudel claimed allowed for the flourishing of the imperial rivalries that were the hallmark of the early modern period (Braudel, 1972). Nevertheless, conversions outside of the scope of confessional control, religious hybridity in borderlands, renegadism, and false conversions, all underscore the polyvalent nature of religious change and cross-cultural interaction. More than simply movements across confessions, early modern Mediterranean conversion constituted both a fundamental reconfiguration of the perception of religious identity and a concomitant pan-Mediterranean crisis. The remainder of this essay explores the various ways in which conversion engendered a cultural crisis of religious identity and cross-cultural interaction that played itself out in official religious and political institutions, literary culture, intellectual exchange, and the visual arts.

4 | AN ANXIOUS SEA: MEDITERRANEAN CONVERSIONS AS IDENTITY CRISES

As suggested at the end of the previous section, conversions outside of institutional control, and the difficulty of confirming sincerity, created anxiety about the impact that renegadism, false conversions, and the forging of new religious diasporic identities would have on traditional understandings of religious identity. Institutions such as the Spanish Inquisition, which sought to weed out suspected heresy and crypto-religion among Jewish and Muslim converts, underscore the inherent contradiction of attempting to create a homogenous society via institutions whose existence proves the incompleteness of such homogeneity (Alpert, 2001; Lea, 2010; Rawlings, 2006; Roth, 2002). In other words, Spanish Catholic society itself converted, taking on a new form due to the unsettling nature of crypto-religion. The perceived proliferation of hidden confessional enemies stimulated efforts to address exactly what Spanish Catholicism had become and what it meant to be a Spanish Catholic, as evidenced by policies promoting "blood purity" (Sicroff, 1960) and attempts to police theological purity in intellectual life (Homza, 2000).

Anxieties about fictive conversions, recidivism, and cross-confessional contamination extended beyond Iberia. In Venice, with the establishment of multiple ghettos and the influx of foreign—mainly Sephardic and Levantine—Jews, the Inquisition functioned to ensure the maintenance of borders between Old Catholics, Jews, and *conversos*. Of particular concern for Venice was the fear that Iberian *conversos* and exiled Jews would promote recidivism among converts as well as Judaizing among Venice's Christians (Pullan, 1983). The Roman Inquisition also investigated heresy and crypto-religion, particularly Judaizing and crypto-Judaism (Stow, 1992; Wendehorst, 2004). Similar anxieties about apostasy and crypto-religion among *conversos* led to calls to expel or suppress *converso* clergy throughout Catholic religious orders. This was most notable in the Society of Jesus, which began suppressing Jewish-lineage members in 1573, a *de facto* policy that became official in 1593 (Maryks, 2010). These examples demonstrate that Catholic society itself transformed, as new institutions were created and the makeup of the clergy changed. Similar anxieties also pervaded Ottoman society, compelling converts and their new co-religionists to come to terms with the implications of religious change (Krstić, 2011).

Such pan-Mediterranean anxieties, spawned by the realization that conversions could take place beyond the scope of "official" institutions, led to a shift in the nature of those institutions and attempts to mitigate the unsettling nature of religious change. But such efforts—ranging from establishing ghettos to investigating the family histories of

seminarians—only confirm that traditional understandings of religious identity were in a state of flux, which we might call a conversionary crisis. The identity crisis stemming from conversion as both the forging and undoing of confessional homogenization highlights the impossibility of disentangling religious conversion as an official process of confession- and state-building from renegadism, crypto-religion, apostasy, and recidivism. They are reminders that religious conversion was not only a matter of individuals changing faiths for the sake of zeal, political conformity, or even pragmatic reasons. Rather, conversion involved shifts in the larger political and cultural structures and concomitant anxieties concerning the religious fluidity and ambiguity that allowed for conversion to be a mechanism of social and political control across the early modern Mediterranean world. The next section addresses how such anxieties found vibrant expression in early modern Mediterranean literary culture.

5 | A CONVERSIONARY RENAISSANCE: THE RENEGADE, CRYPTO-JEW, AND TURK IN "MEDITERRANEAN" LITERARY CULTURE

The identity crises engendered by the instability of conversion became tropes in Renaissance literature. A wide variety of genres and media—epic poems, short stories, histories, and theater—dwelled on the cultural threats of religious opportunism and crypto-religion, as well as Ottoman encroachment. Rather than treat these works separately, it is important to note the common strands: representations of the renegade, the Jew or crypto-Jew, and the Turk—often depicted as interchangeable—exposed Europe's fascination with and latent fear of the disintegration of Christian society. As Renaissance Italians felt that they were on the front lines of Europe's confrontation with Islam, much of their intellectual culture was grounded in anxiety about Ottoman expansion and the potential of turning Turk (D'Elia, 2003; Hankins, 1995; Ricci, 2002; Rostagno, 1983; Soykut, 2001). Italian humanists attempted to reconstruct Ottoman history (Bisaha, 2004) often in the name of discovering whether the Ottomans were "good" or "bad" Muslims (Meserve, 2008). There was even an effort to rewrite literary traditions as conditions and relations with perceived rivals changed over time, such as the shift toward negative literary representations of Muslims from Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* (1495) to Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516/1532; Cavallo, 2013).

This development was not limited to Italy. French literature also Orientalized Ottoman expansion, despite the fact that the French and the Ottomans were political allies throughout much of the early modern period (Isom-Verhaaren, 2011; Longino, 2002; McCabe, 2008). Spain's attempts to grapple with its Muslim past led to a literary and historiographical anxiety that problematized its designs for imperial grandeur, which was in mimetic dialogue with its Ottoman rival (Fuchs, 2001; Fuchs, 2011). Perhaps most famously, Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and *Exemplary Tales* lay bare Spain's contradictory construction of new Iberian identities through conversion and religio-imperial authority, the very same processes that oftentimes led to the creation of renegades and made the fear of "the Turk" all the more acute (Galarreta-Aima, 2017; Hegyi, 1992; Quinn, 2013; Solá Castaño & de la Peña, 1996). Lastly, pan-European literary and artistic celebrations of the victory over the Ottomans at Lepanto underscore the ways in which literary culture intersected with the Mediterranean as an imperial, martial, conversionary, and cross-confessional space (Cacheda Barreiro & Novoa, 2018; Grootveld, 2018; Wright, 2016; Wright, Spence, & Lemons, 2014).

If we think of the Mediterranean not as a geopolitical space, but as a culturally constructed theater of conversion—hence the quotation marks in this section's title—we can approach an even fuller understanding of Renaissance literature as a nexus of conversion. One need only think of the fearful fascination with converts, renegades, Jews, and Turks, as well as Catholics (an additional Mediterranean Other for Protestants) that pervaded English plays: Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Merchant of Venice*; Daborne's *A Christian Turn'd Turk*; Greene's *Selimus*; Massinger's *The Renegado*; Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (Adelman, 2008; Dimmock, 2017; Henke & Nicholson, 2016; McJannet, 2006; Smith, 2009; Vitkus, 1997; Vitkus, 2000; Vitkus, 2003). Beyond theater, the English produced a wide array of writings that exposed a deep-seated anxiety about religious change and the reformulation of English society

stemming from interactions with religious others (Bassi, 2016; Dimmock, 2013; Grogan, 2014; Holmberg, 2016; MacLean, 2007; Robinson, 2007; Stanivukovic, 2007; Stanivukovic, 2016).

While this is by no means an exhaustive list, it amply demonstrates that Renaissance literary culture operated in a world in which individuals wrestled with the idea of the Mediterranean as a conversionary space. As a result, the everyday anxieties stemming from conversion, renegadism, crypto-religion, and turning Turk became literary tropes, topoi for reflexive performances of identity, and mechanisms for coming to grips with individual and collective preoccupations with the realities and potentialities of conversion.

6 | A CONVERSION OF THE MIND: CROSS-CONFESSIONAL INTELLECTUAL EXCHANGE

Much like how anxieties about religious change and cross-confessional interaction caused a conversion of sorts in literary culture, scholarly and scientific pursuits were also recalibrated as a result of movements across faiths. Cross-confessional exchanges were often perceived as catalysts for apostasy and should therefore be seen as a conversionary paradox on par with theatrical and literary obsessions with renegades, Jews, and Turks.

Perhaps, the most famous tradition that we could call a conversionary intellectual exchange was Christian interest in the Jewish mystical tradition known as the Kabbalah. Along with the rise of Renaissance humanism and the philological study of classical Greek and Latin, Hebrew had its own Renaissance as a classical language, mostly in the effort of interpreting scripture (Rosenthal, 1954). Italian humanists such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola investigated Jewish intellectual and mystical traditions in the name of finding links between the ancient Hebrews and Christianity (Blau, 1944; Reichert, 2012; Swietlicki, 1986; Wirszubski, 1989). This resulted in the triangulation of Renaissance humanism, Christian truth, and Jewish mysticism, often under the guise of Catholic reform (Aranoff, 2009; Idel, 2011; Veltri & Miletto, 2012; Weinstein, 2009; Wilkinson, 2007).

Intellectual exchanges among Catholics, Greek Orthodox, and even Muslims also illuminate that religious difference need not be an obstacle to scholarly collaboration. The emigration of numerous Byzantine scholars such as Manuel Chrysoloras and Basilios Bessarion enriched intra-Christian intellectual life and aided Italian humanists in their revival of ancient Greek learning (Ciccolella, 2008; Geanakoplos, 1973; Monfasani, 1976; Monfasani, 2002; Monfasani, 2016; Wilson, 1992). In the sphere of knowledge exchange between Christians and Muslims, acceptance of heliocentrism has increasingly been recognized as a cross-confessional collaboration rather than a purely European discovery (Ben-Zaken, 2010); even pedagogy itself should be seen in part as the product of the interactions between the faiths and cultures that comprised the Mediterranean (Ben-Zaken, 2011). Lastly, there was also a marked interest in what one could call proto-Orientalist studies, particularly of Egypt and its place in Mediterranean history (Curran, 2007; Stolzenberg, 2013).

As fruitful as these exchanges were, they often fell under scrutiny due to their potential for causing heresy, apostasy, and schism. For example, the Catholic Church permitted Kabbalistic studies only so long as they served to prove the authority of the church or could lead to the conversion of the Jews (Van Boxel, 2016). This often led to a crackdown on intellectual exchange and increased censorship of books in the name of preventing Judaizing and crypto-religion (Rummel, 2000; Stow, 1972); even the Egyptological work of the Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher fell under scrutiny (Stolzenberg, 2013, pp. 180–197). When such intellectual collaborations were deemed detrimental to their respective faiths, they were banned (Weil, 1963, pp. 20–26; Dweck, 2013; Copenhaver & Kokin, 2014, p. 38).

That humanists' obsession with Greek learning was often couched in the language of convincing the Greeks to submit to papal authority, partly for the sake of Christian unity against the Ottomans (Geanakoplos, 1955; Gill, 1961; Schmidt, 1961), elucidates the paradoxical nature of knowledge exchange in the fraught religious landscape of the early modern Mediterranean. We should also remember that Greek luminaries arrived in Italy as religio-political refugees in the wake of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453. By thinking of intellectual life as a theater

of conversion, it more clearly becomes part of the collaborative yet conflictual nature of early modern Mediterranean religious culture: It permitted the Mediterranean's philosophers, antiquarians, and scientists to formulate new forms of knowledge, but it also potentially facilitated their corruption by religious outsiders.

7 | THE ART OF CONVERSION: RELIGIOUS CHANGE AND MEDITERRANEAN VISUAL CULTURE

A final conversion that lays bare the contradictory nature of religious change and cross-cultural interaction is the transformation of Mediterranean visual arts: painting, sculpture, architecture, and the conversion of the Mediterranean cityscape. On one level, these artistic and architectural developments illustrate that cross-cultural exchange and the experience of travel from the Middle Ages through the early modern period converted cities into cosmopolitan emporia and centers of artistic innovation (Howard, 2000). And even in cases of radical breaks, such as the Ottoman conquest of Christian and Mamluk cities, transformations of cityscapes tended to stress cultural and imperial continuity, even as they gave rise to new architectural and urban ideologies (Necipoğlu, 1991; Watenpaugh, 2004; Boyar & Fleet, 2010, pp. 15–17).

Acculturative processes of exchange and artistic borrowings pervaded Renaissance art as well, as European artists borrowed Islamic motifs and the Ottomans patronized Italian Renaissance artists, as in the famous relationship between Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II and Gentile Bellini (Necipoğlu, 1989; Jardine & Brotton, 2000; Campbell & Chong, 2005). These acculturative elements are also prevalent in Spain after the conquest of Granada, in the form of Mudéjar (i.e., Moorish-influenced Christian) art and architecture (Lacarra Ducay, 2006).

Nevertheless, as we saw in previous sections, for every bit that Mediterranean conversions hinged on cultural fluidity and the acculturative nature of religious change, they also highlighted difference. Visual culture was no different, as evidenced by the creation of monuments that promoted conversion as a means of undercutting religio-political rivals. For example, after the Spanish conquest of Granada, the last Muslim stronghold in Iberia, the cityscape slowly evolved from obviously Muslim to unequivocally Spanish Catholic through the construction of new churches and palaces (García-Arenal, 2015). In Rome, structures such as Bramante's marvel of Renaissance architecture, *il Tempietto*, stressed the integration of political loyalty and piety (Freiberg, 2014), and Bernini's *Fountain of the Four Rivers*, an allegorical representation of early modern missionary Catholicism, are monuments of Rome's rebirth as the imperial capital of a global faith (Habel, 2013; San Juan, 2012). The creation of ghettos, first in Venice and then elsewhere, also signified religiously demarcated conversions of architectural space (Davis & Ravid, 2001; Hsia & Lehmann, 1995; Stow, 2001). The Ottomans also converted architectural space as a mechanism for promoting religious conformity: In the wake of the Great Fire of Constantinople in 1660, formerly Christian and Jewish neighborhoods destroyed in the conflagration were thoroughly Islamized when rebuilt (Baer, 2004b).

These pan-Mediterranean examples of the conversion of visual culture and urban space illustrate that art and architecture were not produced in a vacuum. Rather, they were commissioned, completed, and consumed by patrons, artists, and others whose ways of viewing were shaped by the prevalence of religious change and cross-cultural interaction in the early modern Mediterranean as well as by the anxiety stemming from the increased interlinking of religious conformity with political loyalty.

8 | CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have explored conversion in the early modern Mediterranean as a process that goes beyond individual and collective decisions to change religions. By interconnecting several historiographical strands under the larger umbrella of conversion as a process of confronting religious change and cross-cultural interaction, we can better see the early modern Mediterranean as a dynamic space of cultural production through the creation and reshaping of religious, political, and cultural identities. Throughout the Mediterranean, religious conversion created a pervasive

anxiety about when to collaborate with others and when to confront their otherness. Viewing conversion in this manner helps to make sense of contradictory phenomena such as Christian Kabbalah existing alongside fears of Crypto-Judaism or Mudéjar architecture as the physical backdrop to Spanish anti-*Morisco* policies.

Construed not merely as switching faiths, but as a uniquely human process of changing and grappling with change, conversion emerges as a cultural problem with an endless number of strands: Conversion occurred when individuals switched faiths, interacted with others, attempted to make sense of new collective identities, negotiated change through literature and theater, engaged in intellectual exchange, or confronted difference in the visual arts. In sum, future studies of even the most quotidian aspects of the early modern Mediterranean would do well to define conversion broadly and see the Mediterranean as a converting sea, a crucible of religious change and cross-cultural interaction, which allowed individuals and societies to change themselves by wrestling with difference and negotiating its meaning.

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ORCID

Robert John Clines http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1335-5930

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Robert John Clines is Assistant Professor of History and International Studies at Western Carolina University. He is completing a book that uses the entangled identities of the only Jewish-born member of the Society of Jesus, Giovanni Battista Eliano (1530–1589), to unpack the myriad ways in which religious conversion manifested itself in early modern Mediterranean religious culture. He has been awarded a Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome, as well as fellowships from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Early Modern Conversions Project, the Fondazione Lemmermann, and the U.S.-Italy Fulbright Program. He has published in a variety of scholarly journals such as *Mediterranean Historical Review*, *Renaissance Studies*, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, and *The Journal of Early Modern History*.

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