Religion and the State in Pre-Modern Europe
Conversion

Old Combination Room, St Catharine’s College, Cambridge
24-25 July 2006

REPORT

The Centre for History and Economics convened a two-day colloquium on the theme of conversion. The colloquium brought together a group of scholars – predominantly historians – whose expertise collectively covered an extensive chronological and geographical range (Anna Abulafia, Ronnie Ellenblum, Simha Goldin, Michael Heyd, Elliott Horowitz, Oded Irshai, Ben Kaplan, Steve Kaplan, Ira Katznelson, Maurice Kriegel, Joshua Levinson, Ora Limor, James Montgomery, Miri Rubin, Adam Sutcliffe). A number of Cambridge PhD students were also present (Alex Bamji, Gil Klein, Sarah Lamm). In each session, largely informal presentations provided a starting point for substantive and comparative discussions.

The seven sessions of the colloquium examined the conversion of individuals, groups, intellectuals, space and time, considered conversion as a process which involves the individual, as well as institutional religion, and discerned variation in the meanings of conversion across space, time and religion. The principal topics included:
- the impact of conversion upon the body as well as the mind
- attitudes to converts by those of both the old and new religious standing, and the possibility and consequences of double conversions
- how age, gender and morals affect experiences of conversion
- the authenticity or sincerity of conversion; motivations and tests
- whether conversion can be completed and how religions treat conversion as an ongoing process/deal with lapses
- the links between conversion and violence; it can be forced and/or unsettling
- toleration and coexistence: how relationships between religious groups are negotiated

Conversion: State of Body, State of Mind

In the first session Joshua Levinson’s presentation drew on the rabbinic literature of late antiquity to discuss how the theme of conversion involved issues about the state of mind and the state of the body. Conversion was described as a transgressive act, a crossing of boundaries in which changing minds involved changing bodies. In late antique Judaism, conversion referred to both states of mind and body; therefore, conversion involved the dual requirement of circumcision and the acceptance of the commandments. This had not always been the case: in the Bible there is the possibility of assimilation into the body of Israel through marriage, but not conversion. This changed with Hellenism, and in the first century AC we have the first text of the act of conversion (Judith 14:10), which describes a change of mind which leaves its mark upon the body. A new type of subject emerges in this period who can choose his identity; Judaism becomes a type of citizenship and a way of life. Thus in late antiquity we find two paradigms: firstly, the genealogical (biological descent), and secondly, the ideological (beliefs and practices). Jewish identity involved mimicking the mind and body of Abraham. The convergence of these two models at this time problematised conversion, giving the convert liminal status, as changing minds and bodies raised issues of where boundaries lay.
Levinson showed how the body was central to identity in late antiquity; thus a new identity needed a new body. Drawing on Judith Butler’s ideas of how gender identity is performative, it was discussed how the crossing of borders was often represented as a blurring of gender boundaries. The story of Pelagia (who concealed her biological identity) was compared to a rabbinic tale about a prostitute to posit conversion as counter-seduction. Both narratives involve sematic changes as well as changes in states of mind. Caroline Bynum has argued that the bad woman’s body was conceptualised as open and breachable; women were therefore identified with opening. Both stories relate ideas of the body to the issue of how to contain female sexuality.

A passage from Genesis Rabbah 53:9, about Sarah’s nursing of Isaac, was cited to demonstrate an unusual type of conversion. The mocking laughter of noblewomen was followed by their recognition of miraculous effect: they changed their minds when they saw a miraculous change in Sarah’s body. They recognised the power of the God of Israel, but did not convert. Levinson linked this example to the numerous pagans who adopted some customs of the Jewish community in late antiquity. These God-fearers admired the God of the Jews without converting or becoming part of the community. Yet whereas converts strengthened the border between paganism and Judaism, the refusal of the God-fearers to settle on either side of these boundaries created problems and challenges to the hybrid genealogical and ideological identity. As the two paradigms could not accommodate God-fearers, there was a need for a new model. Thus the story of Sarah was used as a new narrative of affiliation. Sarah’s body could be seen to combine and confuse in and out, Jew and Gentile. Sarah’s breached body could justify a breached social structure; outsiders could be allowed in. Thus the story of Sarah can be read as an attempt to put the God-fearers in their place: the rabbis asserted control over the problematic hybridity of the God-fearers, and a new transgressive body was created to enable the creation of new identity. The implications of the uncanny similarity between nursing mother and the goddess Isis were explored. Images of the nurse Isis, goddess of conversion and initiator into the mysteries of the faith, were extremely prevalent at the time. One possibility is that rabbis were presenting Sarah in the image of Isis; alternatively, perhaps God-fearers were using pagan imagery to translate what they were seeing.

In the discussion which followed, Ben Kaplan evoked a parallel between rabbinical attitudes to the God-fearers and the situation in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, where people were not required by law to be members of the Reformed Church. It seems that the dominant group in the Netherlands had an inclusive strategy towards non-members, and that sympathisers had many advantages of membership. James Montgomery pointed to the existence of Muslim God-fearers, whose identity has not been fully established. They were referred to as ‘people of the book’, recognising divine revelation in written form, and therefore of equal status to Jews and Christians. Joshua Levinson drew attention to rabbinical motives, emphasising how texts show their recognition that conversion exists, and desire to regulate it. Rabbis, in a sense, were presenting themselves as gatekeepers to the community. Michael Heyd referred to the ‘guiding stars’ in one of Levinson’s texts (bShabbat 145b) to suggest that an astrological solution may have been sought to the problem of identity; a metaphysical alternative to genealogy.

In responding to questions of gender in the presentation, Ora Limor spoke of the fear of the female body in stories of women ascetics. James Montgomery related how wine was described as virginal in classical Arabic poetry, and that amphora were also imaged as women, and said to bleed around the waist when opened, as if menstruating. Similarly, in Hippocratic medical works, rabbinic and Biblical literature, the uterus is commonly described as a jug or flask.

Thinking more generally about conversion, Ronnie Ellenblum pointed out how conversion involves multiple changes: 1) a person converts; 2) the community accepts him; 3) the
community changes. Thus conversion is not simply personal, but involves the community, and should be thought of in terms of reciprocities. Steve Kaplan called attention to the use of the word ‘convert’ for two different things: the person in the process of converting, and someone long converted and in the community. Joshua Levinson added a further degree of complexity by indicating that at times, a person could still be a convert when in the community. Ira Katznelson raised the issues of authenticity, sincerity and tests in the context of conversion; that is, the questions of when is a convert an authentic convert, how do you judge sincerity, and what would be an appropriate test? Texts suggest the need for assurance, but differing degrees of sincerity are possible; thus groups accepting converts have different conditions and request different assurances.

Katznelson asked whether different situations required different tests. One variable might be whether conversion involved an individual, group, whole community, man or woman; another whether the religion was in a phase of monopoly or post-monopoly – i.e. whether it was a question of converting to a particular confession. Variation might also result from age, or be affected by whether conversion was taking place in an urban or rural context. How important was it that the motivation of the individual was fully sincere, or were there situations which allowed for the relaxation of sincerity?

Katznelson also raised the issue of exits, and whether these were demanded from existing cultural standings. When the symmetry of exit was not present, conversion could be suspect, as it frequently was for the Inquisition. Joshua Levinson cited Mary Douglas to point out that if one talks of conversion, one should consider apostasy, and examine how rituals of entry and exit match up. On the subject of heresy, Anna Abulafia referred to the Cathars, and how the Orthodox Catholic Church wished to save cedenti. Miri Rubin brought the discussion to a close with the thought that converts pollute and dilute, and thus every act of welcoming has to be a cautious one.

Intellectuals and Conversion

The second session considered the attitude of intellectuals to conversion in the period of the Enlightenment. Michael Heyd began by emphasising the importance of self-reflection of the persons concerned when talking about the conversion of intellectuals. Accounts of conversion by this group are almost always retrospective testimonies, often written late in life. This raises a serious methodological problem, which must be kept in mind, since they are testifying to an experience decades after it occurred. Retrospective accounts can put the focus on religious and intellectual changes. Heyd also highlighted the importance of distinguishing between types of conversion and different periods. Paul and Augustine, for instance, are paradigmatic cases, but not necessarily helpful for assessing conversion in the early modern period. As Judith Pollman, writing on Protestant conversion in the sixteenth century, has pointed out, conversion at this time often was not so much about a change of personality as with Paul and Augustine, but was a – sometimes gradual – process of learning. Thirdly, Heyd suggested that the role of circumstances should be kept in mind.

The focus of Heyd’s presentation was on double conversions (that is, the conversion to another religion, before a further conversion back to one’s initial religion), taking Pierre Bayle and Jean-Jacques Rousseau as case-studies, for which he drew on three texts: Pierre Bayle on the nature of conversion in his article on Paul Weidner in the Dictionnaire historique et critique (1740), and two passages from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Confessions, which described the author’s conversions of 1749 and 1754. Paul Weidner was a sixteenth-century Jewish physician from Udine in Italy, who studied medicine at the University of Padua and later settled in Carinthia, Austria, where he practised medicine. In 1558, he moved to Vienna, openly converted to
Christianity, and became a Professor of Hebrew at the University of Vienna. He became the topic of one of Pierre Bayle’s short articles in the *Dictionnaire*, but it is apparent that Bayle was writing about himself, and his own double conversion.

Bayle was born in France to a Huguenot family, and joined the Jesuit school in Toulouse for intellectual reasons in 1668/9, as did a number of Protestant Huguenots in the late sixteenth-century. There, he decided to convert to Roman Catholicism in February 1669. In the years before the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes when conflict in France was reaching its height, there was considerable pressure on Huguenots to convert. Bayle’s conversion was followed by a very serious break with his family, and within eighteen months – in May/June 1670 – he had returned to the confession of his parents. This indicates a sense of belonging to a family, and a genealogical element to religious adherence. Heyd highlighted three elements of significance in Bayle’s conversion: his age of 21-22, perhaps suggestive of an adolescent crisis related to the authority of his father and elder brother; his teachers in Toulouse; and the politics of the time. Heyd compared the case of Bayle to the anthropological findings of Daniel Levine in which youngsters who leave the religion of their parents return – on average – in eighteen months. Heyd then considered the effect of double conversions, especially on intellectuals. The impact on Bayle can be assessed as the text was written towards the end of his life. For Bayle, his double conversion created distance from religious controversies, and gave him sociological and psychological insight, which led him to total religious scepticism (though not, Heyd stressed, to atheism).

Moving to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who retained theistic faith throughout his life, Heyd explained that circumstantial considerations motivated both of his conversions. With the first, when Rousseau escaped from Geneva as a youth, he had found the city gates locked and decided to leave. It was only many years later that he returned to the religion of his forefathers, when he returned to Geneva. Political and social motives can be discerned in this second conversion, as Rousseau wanted to get back to the city-state of Geneva, to the Republican ideals which he saw as optimal for political constitutions. Thus, in order to resume his citizenship, he decided to return to the faith of his forefathers. In the text relating Rousseau’s conversion in 1749, the model is clearly that of Paul or Augustine: a sudden conversion, which took place on his reading an announcement of a competition. Heyd concluded by asking whether a comparison of the conversions of Bayle and Rousseau provides us with evidence of secularisation. Bayle remained engaged in religious controversies throughout his life, and a committed Christian; conversion was part and parcel of the conflicts of the period. For Rousseau, religion was not as central to his life and intellectual endeavours.

Adam Sutcliffe’s presentation covered three topics: 1) Jewish-Christian intellectual relations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; 2) the Sephardic Jewish community of seventeenth-century Amsterdam; 3) the Enlightenment itself as a conversion experience. Sutcliffe began by explaining that conversion was used as a justification for Christian engagement with Jewish texts in the early modern period. Christian scholars were initially attempting to discredit rabbinical literature, but became fascinated by the texts and increasingly discerned value in them. Scholars immersed in rabbinical literature were frequently accused of Judaizing. Referring to John Locke’s *Letters on Toleration*, Sutcliffe elicited the tensions between Enlightenment aspirations to objectivity and the continuing and sincere aspiration to convert Jews. Locke’s third letter suggests that the underlying reason to tolerate Jews was so that Christians could convert them; this can be seen as an insincere modification of Locke’s earlier arguments about toleration. Yet conversion discourse came to be seen as intellectually shallow, as the Republic of Letters was about transcending confessional division. Voltaire’s account of the Jean Calas affair was a polemic against the importance of conversion and the charge attached to it by both Protestants
and Catholics. Rudeness and vulgarity were attributes which became ascribed to those who continued to be preoccupied with conversion. Sutcliffe stressed, nonetheless, that conversionism did not end in the eighteenth century, as the work of Chris Clark makes clear.

Returning to the phenomena of double conversion, Sutcliffe referred to Graizbord’s recent book, *Souls in Dispute*, to raise the idea of converso ‘renegades’: people who inhabited both Jewish and Christian worlds. Traditionally renegades were viewed harshly as hypocrites, but Graizbord speaks instead of a ‘pragmatic acculturation’ which made sense within the contexts of their own lives. Proceeding to the Jewish community in Amsterdam, Sutcliffe presented the life story of a seventeenth-century Sephardic Man of Letters, Daniel Levi (or Miguel) de Barrios, who was born near Córdoba, circumcised in Livorno, and travelled to the Caribbean around 1660. De Barrios was a captain in the Spanish army, and subsequently moved to Brussels at some point prior to 1663, returning there frequently in the years until 1670. His name first appears in the Amsterdam community records in 1663, and he was the author of the first history of the Amsterdam Sephardic Community (1683-4). With two names and two identities, de Barrios can be seen as what Graizbord termed a ‘cultural commuter’. He continued to use his Spanish name and military title in some contexts even when permanently settled in Amsterdam. In his history, de Barrios used the literary forms of the Spanish Counter Reformation to celebrate the associational life of Sephardic Amsterdam. Constantly switching between spheres, it is evident that de Barrios’ sense of self was profoundly hybrid.

The two presentations provided a basis for discussing how conversion was about individual experience as well as institutional religion. Anna Abulafia pointed out the importance of morals for the individuals discussed above. Miri Rubin intimated that, in these highly personalised narratives, the anchoring of experience in the body appears to have disappeared. Adam Sutcliffe responded by saying that anxieties about the body remained in the eighteenth-century, giving the example of the Jew Bill of 1753 in England, which fell apart due to fears that the Jews would be circumcising true-born Englishmen. Michael Heyd noted that Rousseau did refer to bodily symptoms, and that he talks about attending his first communion after he converted to Catholicism. For Rousseau, bodily symptoms were a verification of inner transformation. Joshua Levinson reflected on the conflict in Rousseau’s account of his 1749 conversion between the rhetoric presenting his conversion in the mode of Paul or Augustine, and the secular language of his later statement that ‘I was in an agitation that bordered on delirium’. His use of medical discourse to explain change makes it possible that there was no change. Heyd suggested that Rousseau’s use of ‘delirium’ relates to medical accounts of religious phenomena in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Michael Heyd referred to the double tradition upon which Rousseau was drawing: the classical (from Cicero to Machiavelli and early modern Republicanism), and the evangelical. Rousseau grappled with this dual inheritance throughout his life and came to a dual solution, in which he was ‘republican’ in the classical sense of the world at the public level, and evangelical at the personal level. This privatisation of religion, Heyd noted, was very characteristic of the northern world. Ira Katznelson advocated the necessity for boundaries around the word ‘intellectuals’. This could mean: 1) people who possess a certain distance from social reality and have a capacity for reflection and self-reflection somehow outside existing social networks; and/or 2) people who simply use systematic reason irrespective of whether they are inside or outside these networks. This raises complex issues of public and private. With the modern sense of ‘intellectuals’, can people still be wholly inside the religious system and still be intellectuals? Steve Kaplan suggested that there are a number of conversion genres: intellectual, revivalist, ecstatic, and so on. Referring back to earlier remarks on authenticity, he indicated the importance of distinguishing between considering why people join a religious organisation, and why people believe particular
things. Sutcliffe suggested that the sincerity of belief became much less policed in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The emergence of scepticism – even towards conversion itself – occurs in many cases of conversion experiences, especially double conversions.

**Conversions of Space**

The third session examined the physical and conceptual dynamics of conversions of space. Ronnie Ellenblum launched the session by discussing the geography of conversions of religion. Given that much material for the study of conversion consists of highly biased individual accounts, Ellenblum asked whether it is at all possible to trace demographic reality. He stressed the difference between personal conversion and processes of Christianisation or Islamicisation. He presented the moment of personal conversion as a part, and not necessarily the most important part (as with the personal conversion of Constantine), in the process of Christianisation or Islamicisation. It can be the start or end of the process. Christianisation can be defined as the means by which a geographical unit, which was largely non-Christian, became Christian, or at least came to identify itself as such. As Jacques Le Goff once pointed out, this process is never actually completed, and could be partial, reversed or repeated.

Ellenblum set out three paradigms of conversion: 1) the personal/psychological; 2) mass conversion; 3) conversion of the geographical context. Focusing on the third model, Ellenblum drew attention to how it is commonly used absent-mindedly, such as with references to the Christianisation of Ireland, or the Islamicisation of Egypt. It is important to remember that the process is always diachronic, and to note regional diversity on a large and small scale: for example, Christian provinces still exist in Lebanon. It is, nonetheless, difficult to measure deep changes in a society when they are not measured geographically. Ellenblum then demonstrated that it is possible to talk of the conversion of an area without speaking of the conversion of any individual convert. In Palestine in the last century, for instance, villages were Islamicised without any individual converting, due to immigration and differential birth rates. Thus demographic movements in and out can be used to study the conversion of an area.

Ora Limor’s presentation focused on sacred space to investigate whether conversion can be applied to space at all. She began with a story about Belmonte, a small city in Portugal in which a community of Marranos have lived since the end of the fifteenth century. A recent documentary told the story of one of the converts, who had had holy water sprinkled on him when he converted. At a later date he was seen eating chicken on a Friday, and when questioned about this, responded that he had bought it at the market, and sprinkled holy water upon it, so that it was no longer a chicken, but a fish. This tale, Limor suggested, should lead us to ask: can space can converted, or does its meaning only lie in the eye of the beholder?

To investigate this question, Limor drew upon three texts. In the first [Jerome, Epistula 108], it is clear that for Jerome, geography is a text. He reads it, and it has no importance in and of itself, only as a tool for understanding the Bible. The geography which Jerome describes is Jewish geography, and he tries to make it Christian by reading Christian ideas into it. The second text, from Sozomenus’ *Historia Ecclesiastica*, shows how ritual can be used as a means of appropriating a space. The third text, written in the eighth century by Theophanis, a Byzantine Greek Orthodox Christian historian, describes how in 640, two years after the Muslim conquest: ‘Umar began to build a temple in Jerusalem. The building would not stand, but fell down. When he asked why, the Jews told him the reason: ‘If you do not tear down the cross on top of the church on the Mount of Olives, your building will not stay up’. Therefore the cross there was torn down, and thus their building arose. For this reason the Christ-haters tore down many
crosses’. From this early anti-iconoclasm text, the question arises: whose country was it anyway? Political power was not enough to make a country an Islamic country, and crosses have to be removed to make Jerusalem an Islamic space. It is interesting that there were no Jews in Jerusalem at this time, but that even after 500 years, Jews still had knowledge and authority relating to the city.

Steve Kaplan’s presentation concerned Ethiopia, primarily in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, the great period for the dominance of the Ethiopian Christian state. He argued that Christianity can be seen as an organising principle for civilisation, a system which society uses to manage itself, a means by which people organise their daily lives. Kaplan pointed out that Christianity is a vernacularising religion: everywhere it goes it becomes a local religion. Ethiopian Christianity was remarkably theologically un-self aware until late sixteenth-century encounters with the Jesuits, and the phenomenon to be traced is the spread of Christians, rather than Christianity. The demographic spread of people into new areas was certainly supported by the state, but not an organised process. Evidence exists of Christian settlement expanding beyond the borders of the Church; that is, Christians were in places without the clergy to service them. Another significant phenomenon was the spread of monasticism beyond the spread of the political kingdom, when monastic clergy were sent into exile. Renegade monks became missionaries for Ethiopian Christianity.

Kaplan provided a number of examples of how the process of Christianisation was tightly linked with nature, as with cave churches, and ‘mount’ and ‘wilderness’ in the names of monasteries. Sycamore trees – a pre-Christian Ethiopian symbol of kingship were incorporated into Ethiopian Christianity. Power is the key issue: the establishment of churches was seen to defeat powers which resided in natural phenomena. ‘Truth’ is less central; the term is only used to refer to correct theology. For much of its history, Ethiopia had a very low level of urbanisation; for extensive periods there was not even a capital and the royal court was a tent city which moved from place to place. As a consequence, churches were even more significant in terms of the landscape, with considerable visual impact, and often they were the only buildings which stood for several generations. Ethiopian Christians were not traders or craftsmen: these roles fell to Jews or pagans. The land therefore became Christian as Christians were the agriculturalists in the areas which they controlled. Kaplan stressed the importance of the cycle of the year of the church. Dozens of fast days were observed, enforcing Christianity on the body. Ethiopians tattooed crosses on hands and foreheads, crosses were worn on clothes, and placed on ploughs. Thus if you were a Christian people would see; Christianity very much became a way of life.

In the ensuing discussion, Elliott Horowitz remarked on the degree to which animosity propels knowledge. With regard to the Theophanis passage, the Jews know where the cross is, because they hate it. Joshua Levinson wanted to rephrase Limor’s idea that, for Jerome, space was a text, to say that space was a narrative, being told over time, in which there was movement from letter to spirit, from the red heifer to the founding of the Church, and from the twelve stones to the twelve apostles. This was a dynamic process in which the conversion of space involved the negotiation of meaning. Gil Klein made the point that buildings can be changed: architecture can be converted. A church in one sense is a reappropriation and reinterpretation of the house as a unit. Anna Abulafia emphasised that religious life and faith are dynamic concepts, rather than givens; and questioned Steve Kaplan’s separation of power and truth, which seemed premised on an intellectualisation of truth.

Miri Rubin said that conversion arising out of trauma or following violence is something which has received a great deal of historiographical attention, since it is accessible through personal accounts. Conversion is also a long-term process although it is sometimes never achieved or
completed. Are these the same phenomena and should we use the same terms to describe them? Rubin argued that the work of conversion is never completed because of the way in which the body operates. The act of conversion has to convince the host or host community, and tattooing is one thing which could be helpful; but an individual can retain a taste for chicken rather than fish. Following the idea that the work of conversion is never done, the Catholic church went out of its way to mark out Christian dominance with practices such as processions. Rubin asked whether conversion can ever be completed given that an individual cannot be reborn. Steve Kaplan stated that there are groups for whom the formal conversion ceremony is the beginning of the process; and groups for whom it is the end of the process. Some religions – such as Catholics and Ethiopian Christians – have a mechanism for dealing with lapses. In the early modern period, Michael Heyd explained, Christianisation was an ongoing process for both Catholics and Protestants.

Ira Katznelson suggested that when considering conversion and space, religion should be compared to other markers. For instance, how should we assess the conversion of capitalist to socialist space with the Russian revolution? What is special when religion is the basis of transformation? Katznelson referred to a survey which demonstrated the significance of institutional presence. Participants were asked whether a number of streets in New York City were Jewish or Irish, when they were split 50/50 demographically. Responses were positively correlated to the proximity of a parish church or synagogue.

**Reading Session: Rashi’s responsa and conversion**

The fourth session took the form of a Reading session, in which texts came to the fore. A number of texts were presented by Simha Goldin and Maurice Kriegel, to which Elliott Horowitz responded before opening the general discussion. Goldin began with Rashi’s *Responsa*, which raises the important issue of the attitude of those who remain Jews to converts. In all genres of medieval sources, Goldin explained, we find conversion described and analysed by the Jews themselves. Converts did not disappear, but continued to be involved in the lives of those who remained Jews, sometimes living near them and generally continuing to take part in the life of the locality. In his *Responsa*, discussing the ceremony of Halizah, Rashi wrote that ‘the Jew who converts remains a Jew’, even though this convert has sinned. The logic of this position was that the way should not be blocked for the convert to remain to Judaism. The Jewish essence of the convert had not changed.

Goldin introduced a further text, a chronicle of the Crusades, which at the surface appears to be dealing with the reaction of Jews to Christians. Yet it can be read as a Jewish attempt to talk to the Jewish convert in Christian society. From the twelfth century, in the aftermath of the First Crusade, the Jewish group turned its efforts inwards, attempting to enhance the image of those who remain Jews. Thus it treated those who converted to Christianity severely, although the door remained open for their return. From this time, the relationship between Jew and Christian was seen as between life and death: Christianity was perceived as a threat whose purpose was to destroy Judaism, and converts were seen as a danger to the preservation of Judaism. Goldin’s comparison of these texts, therefore, suggested a change in Jewish attitudes towards converts.

Maurice Kriegel continued with the theme of attitudes towards converts, stating that being Jewish was not considered something of the will, and elaborating a naturalisation or biologisation of the Jewish identity. The history of early modern Spain provides food for thought because of the issue of forced conversion. In Spain, converts were victims of the Inquisition and Jews were not. Kriegel referred to the work of Benzion Netanyahu on the Jews in Spain, who argued that responsa show that the converted felt estranged from the Jewish community. Kriegel argued that
it is simplistic to say that the converted Jews were either very close to their Jewish identity, or far from it. He outlined a number of possibilities for conversos. Firstly, they could be converted if forcibly taken to baptism during a riot; they might see continue to see themselves as Jews, but were forbidden to return officially to Judaism. Secondly, they could not have wanted to become Christian in the first place, but having been freed from the negative associations of Jewish identity, became eager to become part of Christian society, encouraged by circumstances in Spain where society was unusually open to converts. In the face of violence, nonetheless, many Jews fled to North Africa, perhaps inspired by Maimonides, who had argued that people should leave a place of persecution and go into exile. Kriegel analysed the writings of the fifteenth-century rabbi Isaac bar Sheshet Perfet (Ribash), who had been converted during a riot in Valencia and subsequently fled. Ribash considered the question of whether the Jews who remained in Spain were still faithful Jews. Kriegel also referred to how Simon ben Tsemach (Rashbatz) and Salomon ben Simon Duran (Rashbash) drew on Maimonides to consider the position of forced converts.

In his response, Elliott Horowitz commented on how translating these texts raised questions. In Ribash’s Responsa, for instance, convert could be translated as ‘apostate’, not least because in the early modern period some converts were apostates in the early Talmudic sense; that is to say, they were not converts but imperfect adherents. Horowitz brought in the notion of ‘inner conversion’, and suggested that more than one type of transgression was possible: it could be an ideological statement or a matter of taste. One could give into external pressure when with others, or when alone. Horowitz suggested that, for Maimonides, Judaism was a philosophy, and introduced a final text: Maimonides’ Letter to Obadiah the Proselyte.

In the discussion, Miri Rubin raised the issue of gender. Christians perceived female converts from Judaism to Christianity as safer than male converts for a number of reasons, including the circumcised male body, and the male tendency to reason. Following this line of thinking, Steve Kaplan mentioned cases of levirate marriage in twentieth-century Kenya. Questions arose of whether a converted woman could go to a non-converted husband, and the key was whether the woman was circumcised. Continuing with the theme of the body, Maurice Kriegel brought up the practice of ‘dechristiana’ which is mentioned in Inquisitorial sources (although it is unclear whether it definitely occurred as it is not confirmed by Hebrew sources): when someone converted back to Judaism they would rub where they had been touched by holy oil with sand in order to get the sacrament out.

Anna Abulafia noted that Christianity and Judaism are similar in that there is no means by which someone can leave. Just as Rashi stated that ‘the Jew who converts remains a Jew’, once baptised, one remains Christian. The impact of this lack of exit on one’s sense of self is an intriguing issue. Adam Sutcliffe suggested that if there was no exit from religious standing, there was also no exit from families.

Many Inquisitorial documents, Elliott Horowitz noted, refer to how crypto-Jews spent Friday afternoons scourging the cross. This can be read as their way of circumscribing Jewish time: having spent six days of the week living as Christians, they undid their Christianity in this way. Conversion of time, it was agreed, is important as well as conversion of space.

Ira Katznelson set out three relationships: 1) between Jews and converted Jews; 2) between Christians and new-Christians/suspect Christians; 3) between Jews and Christians. In each case the question arises of: how much is the other like us? The behavioural element of these relationships (how should I treat the other?) is a separate issue. Thus the session concluded with
a question: under what circumstances and conditions do different relationships project to different behaviours to others?

**Toleration, coexistence and conversion**

This was the second part of the session held jointly with ‘Religion and the Political Imagination’ and it continued with the themes of coexistence and toleration. Ingrid Creppell began her presentation about the sociology of toleration by highlighting the need to be careful when conceptualising ‘modernisation’ and ‘secularisation’. Religious resurgence can be positive, and negative, and reclaiming. In addition, it should be remembered that the pre-modern period was not as religiously infused as is sometimes thought: as Mary Douglas contended, there is no good evidence that there was a high level of spirituality. Equally, the modern period has not always been about reasonability and rationality. Creppell argued that the capacity to sustain religious diversity was a modern development, and defined toleration as the ‘recognised or self-aware acceptance of religious difference’.

According to Creppell, toleration developed in two forms: as a volcanic post-Reformation eruption; and as a long term process. She traced the beginnings of toleration in the period from the beginning of the Wars of Religion to 1689, arguing that indigenous religious change was essential for toleration. This period was also characterised by raison d’état and political expediency. Rulers had to build up security and grounds for allegiance to the state, and people came to see aspects of their identity as national as well as religious. Power was therefore involved, with the state as a normative and ideological authority, and the public and political spheres were invented, partly through battles about religion. A discourse, language, and set of arguments about toleration developed.

Ben Kaplan echoed Creppell by stressing the importance of definitions when speaking about the highly charged subject of toleration, although he intimated that they might disagree about the definitions themselves. He highlighted intersections between issues of toleration and issues of conversion. He argued that conversion is a profoundly unsettling phenomenon which, moreover, cannot be separated from the art of proselytising. In the early modern period, all major churches were intent on the acquisition of converts, but their results are questionable. In the early sixteenth century, the Moors of Spain, who numbered over 300,000 at the time, were coerced into accepting baptism. But in the early seventeenth century, the Moriscos were expelled from Spain. A rival incident of mass religious persecution occurred with the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. A million people were at least nominally converted, and many fled France. Kaplan showed how people could face incentives, threats and pressures to convert, as in Ireland, where laws were not focused on Catholic worship, but aimed to strip Catholics of power and social status. A number of converts played roles in their new religion which were very antagonistic to their former co-religionists, for example, as polemists or persecutors. The Papacy, it should be observed, was one institution which expressed doubt about some of the more forcible means of conversion.

Kaplan’s central argument was that conversion shows that the boundary dividing religious groups is permeable and negotiable; a flexibility which is also demonstrated by mixed marriages. Etienne François has argued that the seductiveness of other faiths and the possibility of movement between them was one of the driving forces behind polemics. Polemics played a role in reassuring people that the boundary between faiths was clear and solid, and that there was no real choice to be made between the two. Although many polemics seem to address another group, the intended audience consists of members of the same faith as the author, in order to shore up their commitment and loyalty. Church leaders appear to have concluded from religious
diversity that mix was inherently dangerous, which should be combated in social, if not geographical ways. Mixed marriages, as a consequence, were opposed. An increasing separation of religious groups can be discerned, especially between Catholics and Protestants.

In his response to the presentations, Ira Katznelson underlined the complexity of the concept of toleration, asking: 1) what of ‘the other’ is being tolerated; 2) which zones of life or forms of behaviour are tolerated and which policed; 3) what is the spatial scope of toleration; 4) which groups are eligible for toleration and what is demanded of them to be eligible? Toleration should be seen as a negotiated relationship. He argued that there are choices to make about the nature of enquiry into toleration, although one should perhaps refuse to choose. One approach might portray the complexity of a variation of outcomes, finding a few key variables. A second approach would focus on one place and look for a complex causal structure, accepting trans-local elements of toleration and tracing how they are combined in a very particular way. A final issue which Katznelson broached was that of regime forms and their friendliness or lack of friendliness to religious mix. The expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290, for instance, was tied to the growth of parliamentary representation.

A number of points were made in the general discussion. Miri Rubin suggested that it is possible to tolerate a group out of existence by fully accepting it. Michael Heyd drew attention to the etymology of toleration: the Latin ‘tolere’ means ‘to suffer’; thus toleration implies that one suffers the ideas and behaviour of someone one deeply resents. An alternative term with more positive connotations is ‘concordance’. Crepell replied that language evolves, and that despite its negative origins, ‘toleration’ is now a positive term. Ruth Harris proposed that the negativity in the concept should not be condemned, because it acknowledges difficulty and the value of suffering.

Heyd argued that toleration is practised out of necessity. Explicit arguments were made for toleration in the early modern period, and it could be argued that some type of Christian value is given to toleration in the 1680s, as a dialectical response to the policy of persecution by Louis XIV and the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Geoffrey Hosking wondered whether intolerance should be studied as the historically deviant form, as the session had focused on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – a time which followed a period of intolerance. Harris queried the relationship of the emotions to toleration, and made the point that often problems occur when people are closest together. Elliott Horowitz advocated a dialectical relationship between tolerance and intolerance in which groups who have suffered intolerance, extend tolerance to others; and those who live in tolerant settings are intolerant.

**Final discussion and future planning**

The final session fell into two parts: thoughts and reflections on the colloquium, and a discussion about the possibility of a volume arising from it. It was agreed that ‘conversion’ had turned out to be many different things.

Questions which arose included:
- can we associate aesthetic things with conversion?
- is it possible to trace the afterlife of the act, to follow interiority and subjectivity?
- what is it like to live as a convert on a daily basis?
- what is the nature of conversion at moments of relative peace and turmoil?
- is it possible to draw upon the visual arts in the study of conversion?
- how does the openness of religious organisations to the active participation of converts vary over time?
Elliott Horowitz thought that it would be interesting to reflect on the phenomena of the born-again, of which George Bush is but one of many modern-world examples. Pre-modern parallels were forthcoming: becoming a Franciscan, for example, was also associated with radical changes in lifestyle, bodily comportment, and so on. Steve Kaplan referred to Lewis Rambo’s concept of ‘intensification’, for which people are already in a system, but it assumes a different place in their lives. The phenomena can also be found with double conversions, when an individual firstly becomes part of a faith, and faith later becomes central.

Michael Heyd stressed the importance of conversion of time, referring to the importance of time in the Jewish tradition; and to the Protestant response to the Catholic calendar, with the abolition of saints days, and the division of the year and week in clearer fashion. In this context, Ora Limor referred to how blood-libels and desecrations of the host often took place at particular times, such as Easter.

Expulsion was discussed, as representing a degree of insecurity different from local insecurity. It can also be read as the failure of conversion. The majority society might be uncertain about whether it wants collective conversion or expulsion, and oscillate between the two. This led to further reflections on the relationship between conversion and violence. There are many examples, for instance, of conversions in the Middle Ages after failure in battle. James Montgomery outlined the rules when a city was under siege: if the city capitulated, the religious standing of its inhabitants remained unchanged, but if the city fell, everyone would be either killed or converted. Thus the onus was very much on those within the city. The Normans adopted the same practice when they invaded Sicily.

Several points were made regarding the role of minority religions for the majority group. As Augustine points out, a Christian society needs Jews. Equally, in the medieval world, Muslims did not want to convert Christians and Jews as they were a resource: their payment of the poll tax financed the city and army. Anna Abulafia explained that the ideas of the Church about how the Jew could serve Christian society could differ from those of a prince, and that difficulties arose when the bishop was the prince.

Suggestions of possible themes for a future colloquium, if funding is available, were: Poverty and Charity, Polemics and Apologetics; Violence; The Family.

Rapporteur: Alexandra Bamji
July 2006