Introduction: Space, Conversion, and Global History

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Our world is becoming more and more conscious of the global scope of processes and events that have traditionally been interpreted within local or regional contexts. Individuals and societies perceive their geographic frame of reference as rapidly widening. This has led many scholars to stress the importance of the notion of ‘space’—a notion which is far from neutral or limited to the strictly physical sphere. Thus, for some years now, words like simultaneity, connection, circularity, and border crossing—to mention a few—have come to pervade a growing literature in the human and social sciences.¹ Historians, too, have embraced this new sensibility, which some have termed a ‘spatial turn’.² In doing so, they have begun to ask questions particular to their craft, that is, questions about time. How, for example, did events, actions and representations relate to the multiplicity of spaces with which they were associated? How did these relationships change over time? And how did people experience such more or less radical transformations? Historians do not tend to see most breaks with the past as clean and irreversible. On the contrary, they will point out that, if the global present reflexively adopts planetary scales to understand today’s economies, societies and demography, as well as politics and culture, this calls for the need to recognize the impact of (partly) similar processes during past centuries.³

Rejecting the idea of drastic historical breaks does not mean to deny any discontinuity. Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the application of new technologies of transportation and mass communication deeply modified the relations between humans and space, though in different ways depending

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on place and time. Secularization, for its part, marked a decisive shift in the role of religion in individual lives or entire societies, even though there is no doubt that this has not led to a world without faiths. In fact, recent times have witnessed the powerful rise of so-called ‘world religions’, which are competing, often on a local scale but nourished by global models and discourses, for the emotional and moral embrace of the new adherents they covet. Yet for all its slowness and contradictions, the process of secularization has removed us irremediably from earlier ages, in which religious belonging shaped rigid social identities and created confessional geographies that often reproduced political maps, making the passage from one faith to another complex and traumatic. Due to secularization, in contrast, conversion has not only become much more frequent, but also more diffuse, as the term itself has undergone a notable semantic expansion. The phenomenon has thus lost its once exclusive bond with religion: today it may refer, for example, to a change of heart in the political, cultural or aesthetic sphere. Even here, however, there is a relationship between changed perceptions of space and the sense of uncertain belonging that led to a generalization of the meaning of ‘conversion’.

These considerations were at the heart of an international symposium about space and conversion that took place at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, in December 2011. It gathered leading scholars and young historians from many countries, specialists in the history of a wide variety of religious and social groups: Catholics and Protestants; renegades; Turkish, North-African and Central Asian Muslims; Sephardi, Ashkenazi and Italian Jews; Nahuas, Incas, Guarani, Chiquitos and Moxos; Eastern Christians; castes from Southern India. This volume results from some of the questions and the still tentative and partial answers that emerged during the discussions held at the symposium. Yet, however provisional the findings, they confirm the importance of studying the intersections between space and conversion. The book’s

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7 The workshop was a joint initiative of the Faculty of Arts of the Scuola Normale Superiore and the research project ‘Beyond the Holy War’ (RBFR08UX26) – Principal Investigator: Giuseppe Marcocci.