Giuseppe Marcocci, Wietse de Boer, Aliocha Maldavsky and Ilaria Pavan, eds.


This collection of essays joins the burgeoning field of what might legitimately be called ‘conversion studies.’ The degree to which early modern Europeans crossed (and even re-crossed) confessional boundaries was inevitably increased by the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, while the so-called ‘voyages of discovery’ precipitated a scale of Christian missionary activity and cultural encounter the like of which had not been seen for almost a millennium. The editors’ intelligent decision to engage with the topic from the perspective of space—or rather place—brings this book securely within the ambit of studies that are fully alive to the fact that conversion could refer to an intensification of faith, on the one hand, as well as to “a change of heart in the political, cultural or aesthetic sphere” (2), on the other; but also to the need to view conversion, of whatever type, both contextually and comparatively. Only thus is it possible to see it in all its contingency and frequently shifting ambiguity.

To this end, the book has been organized thematically, rather than chronologically or geographically. The first part, “City and Country,” draws on the strengths of ‘connected history’ to compare the processes of conversion in newly conquered Granada, Tridentine Rome, colonial Cuzco, seventeenth-century Palestine, and Poland in the first half of the nineteenth century. In a well-argued and well-structured essay on Granada as a ‘New Jerusalem,’ Mercedes García-Arenal highlights several telling points often underplayed—or simply ignored—in the frequent retellings of this story. First, she reminds us that well before the fall of Granada, the frontier had not been impermeable, and that in the fifteenth century nobles were converting to and from Christianity according to the state of play of the power politics between the Castilian crown and the last Islamic kingdom in the peninsula. García-Arenal also makes the important point that Ferdinand and Isabella’s initial aim was the incorporation, rather than the conversion, of their new Muslim subjects. This was reflected in the generous terms of the first treaty, so that by 1495 there were still fewer than 500 Christians in a population of over 60,000. Even by the mid-sixteenth century, the city had only been Christianized—or, rather, Castilianized—to a certain extent. For example, although a chapel for royal burials was built as early as 1504–21, by 1550 there was still no *plaza mayor*—an urban feature the settlers of New Spain had carefully replicated throughout the Americas. However, already in 1499 the Mudejar revolt had accelerated changes
to the urban fabric (a papal bull of 1501 allowed for the construction of twenty-three parish churches). This revolt had been provoked by the requirement imposed by Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros, primate of Spain, that the Muslim descendants of Christians (elches) be baptized. Such an uncompromising policy has traditionally been contrasted with that of Granada’s bishop, the ‘Arabized Christian’ Hernando de Talavera. However, García-Arenal demonstrates the importance of considering both prelates as sharing essentially a common ideology, messianic and focused on the creation of the city as a New Jerusalem. Central to her contention is a little-known document: the liturgical office celebrating the taking of the city, introduced by Talavera and celebrated annually on the anniversary of the conquest.

In his chapter, Adriano Prosperi offers a characteristically subtle and nuanced reading of Italian methods of capital punishment, very far from that influentially described by Michel Foucault. There was no carnival atmosphere, in which rules were inverted; no last dying speech that exonerated the authorities. On the contrary, eyewitnesses such as Michel de Montaigne described scenes of “devout cruelty,” in which the audience expressed feelings of pity and moans of entreaty and sympathy as the executioner butchered the dead bodies of those who had been judicially murdered.

Gabriella Ramos shows us that the message of Gregory the Great’s letter to Mellitus—in which the pope exhorted the prelate not to destroy pagan temples but to repurpose them—was still of the utmost relevance to colonial Cuzco, where leading Inca families had themselves interred in churches on or near areas with which they had historical links. This was in the mutual interest of the indigenous families and of the colonial church. Furthermore, it was much easier for the latter to secure attendance at religious instruction and liturgical ceremonies if churches were sited according this topographical logic.

It is refreshing to find coverage of the early modern Palestine in this wide-ranging volume; Felicita Tramontana reminds us of the continuing importance of ‘medieval’ religious orders, such as the Franciscans, who played a crucial, even monopolistic role in the area not only as guardians of the holy places, but also in their work various cities and settlements besides Jerusalem. Tramontana shows that “the diffusion of Catholicism is best understood in terms of the model of diffusion by contagion [...] with the Franciscans acting as carriers” (87). She also adds the significant detail that the friars hired Eastern Christians as translators/interpreters (dragoman), most of whom subsequently became Catholic and that most villages where Catholicism spread were inhabited by Eastern Christians.

The second, strongest section of the book is devoted to the theme of “Segregation and Permeability.” It opens with a fascinating piece by Susana