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Conversion as a Communal System of the Protestant Atlantic World

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Katharine Gerbner's wide-ranging and provocative book connects a broad range of scholarship on religion and race in the Protestant Atlantic world prior to the Great Awakening. It is organized around her concept of an emerging ideology of "Protestant Supremacy," which she argues was the first step toward White Supremacy. This ideology came out of evangelizing failures in the seventeenth-century colonial Americas as Protestant slaveholders reframed their own values on religious and secular freedom in the context of colonial settlement and the growth of African slavery. This argument is entirely convincing and innovative in its comparisons of sometimes separate denominational scholarship. In my comments, I hope to reflect on Gerbner's use of the word *conversion*, a keyword in her book's title and one that many religious historians employ in their own work. Gerbner outlined her views in the introduction to her book (pages 6–12), but a fuller version of her arguments can also be found in her 2015 article published in *History Compass*, "Theorizing Conversion: Christianity, Colonization, and Consciousness in the Early Modern Atlantic World." Her engagement with scholarly definitions rightly focuses on the malleability of what defined conversion in this eighteenth century Protestant Atlantic world—both when comparing different denominations and as a process that changed over time in conversation with things like slavery. She retains the word since the baptism and conversion of enslaved Africans prompted European Protestants to rethink their definition of Christianity, and particularly prompted them to find new ways to exclude non-whites. She also argues that using the term conversion helps to validate the actions and self-articulated changed identity of African-descendant converts as they engaged with majority white cultures hostile to their inclusion in the Christian community.[9]

Yet using the term conversion carries various serious problems, as Gerbner certainly recognizes. I embarked on the same struggle over terminology when writing my first book, *Ordinary Lives in the Early Caribbean: Religion, Colonial Competition, and the Politics of Profit*. I remember working through my proposal and subsequent research with one of my committee members, Herman Bennett. I wanted to get at religious identity, to

[9]Katharine Gerbner, "Theorizing Conversion: Christianity, Colonization, and Consciousness in the Early Modern Atlantic World," *History Compass* 13 (2015): 134–147.

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understand why subaltern subjects identified as Protestant or Catholic, and what it meant when the identity seemed unstable or was subject to a change in belief or purported conversion. Bennett kept trying to steer me away from words like "belief" and "identity." He reminded me that historians can never quite get into the heads of our subjects. Moreover, relying on self-reported belief or identity is notoriously unreliable given the mediated nature of our colonial sources, especially those that represent subaltern subjectivity. He kept urging me to read Clifford Geertz's classic anthropological study "Religion as a Cultural System." As I sat at a café one day, reading and rereading Geertz's dense prose and complex argument, I had one of those "aha" moments that I remember clearly as key to my intellectual journey, something that feels so commonsensical, yet so often mischaracterized. Geertz pushed scholars to see that religion is not just about shared belief—it is about defining values and social relationships in this world, including the powers beyond human understanding. Many of us would agree that religious institutions legitimate earthly social hierarchies, yet he persisted that religion is not quite *that* instrumental. Geertz urged his readers "to put aside at once the tone of the village atheist and that of the village preacher, as well as their more sophisticated equivalents," allowing "questions about whether religion is 'good' or 'bad' . . . to disappear like the chimeras they are." Religion operates as a complex negotiation over communal values, one mediated but not foreclosed by power.[10]

To make religion work, Geertz argued, everyone has to be willing to *participate* in rituals that fuse together "the world as lived and the world as imagined."[11] Emphasizing the participatory or performative aspects of religion in ritual might lead some to see religion as hypocrisy, an easy way to resolve this uneasy tension between lofty ideals and earthly realities. Yet I came to be convinced that I needed to focus not on statements of affiliation or belief but to examine how my subjects came together to affirm shared values in religious ritual—even if not everyone "believed" all the tenets of their presumably shared creed. To participate in these ceremonies was not only to make belief manifest but also to affirm the community that defined the contours and limits of that creed. I used that insight to help me imagine how a simple prayer offered by the English commanders of Cromwell's fleet before they attacked the Spaniards in Hispaniola had the profound ability to confirm puritan power by virtue of the soldiers' simple acquiescence to the ritual. That participation later allowed soldiers to critique "their betters" when reports surfaced about elite greed in organizing the expedition. It also

[10]Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 123.

[11]Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 112.

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allowed me to discuss belief as a form of action, such as when the Inquisition in Cartagena de Indias prosecuted an English spice merchant who had been residing in Venezuela for neglecting to attend Sunday Mass and refusing to contribute alms to prayers. The merchant's further refusal to participate in the Inquisition's ceremonies of reconciliation (offered to all who repented their heresies) led to his execution in a 1622 auto-de-fé. The merchant's refusal to take part in Catholic rituals is the mirror image of the large-scale participation of residents from the city in the Tribunal's elaborate ceremony confirming the justice of the Catholic Church's rules and dictates.[12]

At its heart, the word conversion is about transformation. In a religious context, it is often used to depict the adoption of new, more moral ways of being in the world. And as Gerbner shows us, conversion to Protestant Christianity for African descendants was a very messy process, full of ambiguity and unresolved conflicts within the larger community. Should they completely abandon all old notions about the divine and the rules of moral behavior, even those that (as among the Kongo) syncretically supported Christianity's universality? She acknowledges that European Christians moving toward membership in a new denomination experienced similarly extended periods of conflict, uncertainty, and struggle with the new group's dogmas. Quaker "convincement" looked quite different from the German Pietist progress toward baptism and inclusion in the sacraments. These processes reflect Geertz's definitions, whereby religion both serves to solidify social hierarchies by policing the boundaries of "right behavior" and remains open to challenge by those outside the power structure, whose participation is nonetheless necessary to affirm those power relations as part of "divine order."

In this sense, I would make the case that "accommodation" and "resistance" (the two terms Gerbner identifies as most often employed by scholars of Christianity in the African diaspora) remain perhaps the most powerful words to describe how colonized and enslaved people engaged with Protestantism. In fact, in Gerbner's *Christian Slavery*, Moravian missionaries wielded the term "conversion" as a rhetorical weapon to chastise African-descended Christians who desired to be included in that church. Instead, they excluded black potential converts from full inclusion (worrying they were just seeking access to literacy or to the potential for freedom papers) or criticized their inherited cultural forms, from dancing to polygamy.[13] Should conversion be the most salient term? I urge scholars working in this realm to consider whether religious "practice" and "lived religion" are actually more

[12]Kristen Block, *Ordinary Lives in the Early Caribbean: : Religion, Colonial Competition, and the Politics of Profit* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 74–75, 84–85, 120.

[13]Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 155.

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useful categories given the frequent questioning of "conversion" and allegations of "backsliding" prevalent in these communities.

For those reasons, in *Christian Slavery*, I would have loved to see even more expansiveness and unconventionality in Gerbner's use of conversion as a category of analysis. What about the messy ambiguities involved in "converting" slaveholders to more "moral" Christian behaviors? Or in "converting" Protestant missionaries who were not always comfortable accepting the racial dogmas of Europeans in the Americas? Certainly we see that happening in the case of wealthy Quaker slaveholders who helped guide leaders like George Fox and William Penn on the realities of their faith in the Americas, in the process silencing persuasive arguments against "man-stealing," like the protest articulated by Germantown Pietists.[14] A stimulus to conversion of another sort came from Catholic colonists who urged Christopher Codrington and Elias Le Jau to promote the idea that an enslaved Christian was not an oxymoron but in fact the norm.[15] In many senses, discussions of religious "practice" and "lived religion" allow us to better think through the communal transformations of Christianity into a form of Protestant Supremacy, and the conversion of the world into a White Supremacist one.

[14]Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 68–71.
[15]Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 112–125.

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