

Prospectus: Fall 2024

HIST 3203 / JWST 3207

Conversion in Historical Perspective: Religion, Society, and Self

Tuesday 3:30–6:30 pm

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### Course Description

Changes of faith are complex shifts that involve social, spiritual, intellectual, and even physical alterations. In the premodern West, when legal status was often determined by religious affiliation and the state of one's soul was a deathly serious matter, such changes were even more fraught. What led a person to undertake an essential transformation of identity that could affect everything from food to family to spiritual fulfillment? Whether we are speaking of individual conversions of conscience or the coerced conversions of whole peoples en masse, religious change has been central to the global development and spread of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, and reveals much about the people and contexts in which it took place.

This seminar will explore the dynamics of conversion across a range of medieval and early modern contexts. We will investigate the motivations for conversions, the obstacles faced by converts, and the issues raised by conversion from the perspective of those who remained within a single tradition. How did conversion efforts serve globalization and empire, and what other power relations were involved? How did peoplehood, nationality, or race play out in conversion and its aftermath? How did premodern people understand conversion differently from each other, and differently than their coreligionists or scholars do today? The course will treat a number of specific examples, including autobiographical conversion narratives and conversion manuals, the role ascribed to conversion in visions of messianic redemption, forced conversions under Spanish and Ottoman rule, missionizing in the age of European expansion, and more.

Everyone is welcome! The course aims to hone students' skills in thinking about—and with—premodern religiosity. We will open new perspectives on the past and present by reading primary texts and analytical research, whatever your initial comfort level with this kind of inquiry may be.

### Class Time

The course will meet once a week in person for up to three hours. The format is a seminar, so class time will focus on in-depth discussion of readings and other activities completed outside of class, along with new material presented during class. There will be no extended, formal lectures, and students are responsible for coming prepared with questions, reactions, and their own ideas to form the basis of a shared semester-long investigation. Students will occasionally take leadership roles in facilitating

discussion. We will read and discuss primary texts, work toward deeper understanding of existing scholarship, and support each other in the development of individual research projects.

### Out-of-Class Activities

Each week, students will be expected to spend about three to four hours on reading or other preparation for class, and up to three hours working on short- or long-term research/writing assignments. Class preparation might include reading various genres of text, watching a video/listening to a podcast, creating or answering brief discussion questions/prompts, and/or outlining a discussion.

### Assignments and Assessments

The main assignment for the semester is a 15-page paper or equivalent project reflecting independent research. The project will be assigned in steps with feedback along the way, including exploring theme interests and setting a topic, locating and understanding books and other appropriate research materials, and producing partial and complete drafts. The aim is for students to complete the course with a sense of ownership of the project and to develop or improve research and analytical skills in the process.

The research project will be supplemented with smaller assignments including class discussion preparation, short responses, feedback on peer project drafts, library activities, and the like, totaling 5 to 7 assignments.

Course assessment will be approximately as follows: 55% research project (broken down into component assignments), 25% attendance/preparation/participation, 20% total for smaller assignments.

### Essential Course Policies

Readings have not yet been determined. Most are likely to be available from the library, whether in print or online. A few books may be required for purchase but they will not be high-cost commercial textbooks.

Attendance is key. Since the course meets once a week, each meeting is a large part of the syllabus. One free absence is allowed, no questions asked; use it wisely. After that, discussion with me and potential documentation are required to avoid loss of points to the attendance grade. However, it is important to stay home when ill, so we will do our best to accommodate remote or make-up participation as needed. The precise modality for this will depend on class size.