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Religious conversion in early modern English drama

Stelling, L.J.

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Author: Stelling, Lieke Julia

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CHAPTER 2 'The Whole Summe of Christianitie:' Spiritual Conversion in Protestant Sermons

The present chapter builds on the changing understanding of spiritual conversion that we saw in *The Digby Conversion of Saint Paul* (c. 1480-1520) and *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene* (c. 1550-1566): the translation of spiritual conversion into reformation and Protestant propaganda. I will show how late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Protestant preachers identified spiritual conversion with repentance and described it as the kernel of Christianity, a process that I will call the Protestantization of spiritual conversion. Despite this appropriation, and despite the fact that the same homilists also used conversion to differentiate between what they saw as Protestant truth and Catholic error, much of the Protestant definition of spiritual conversion inevitably and clearly originated from Catholic tradition, was based on Catholic writing, and was therefore not considerably different from Catholic understandings of conversion. In the homiletic writings of many Puritans, however, spiritual conversion is described in strongly anti-theatrical terms, an approach that we do not find in Catholic interpretations. This hostile sentiment was furthermore fuelled by the conviction of preachers that playwrights drew audiences away from church services, a concern that was rooted in the unprecedented success of the commercial theatre in the Elizabethan era. In addition to thus exploring the prominent role of theatre discourse in Protestant definitions of conversion, this chapter provides the context for the next chapter, in which I will investigate how the Protestantization of spiritual conversion affected its representation on the Elizabethan stage.

Protestant preachers felt the need to redefine spiritual conversion as a God-given capability of true repentance¹ and core of Protestant Christianity. This need was shared by preachers of all sorts. The divine John Udall (1560–1592/3), for instance, does this in his exegesis of Peter's exhortation, in Acts 2:38, to "amend your lives."² The original word for this activity, he notes,

¹ Of course, repentance was often mentioned as an important and sometimes even essential aspect of conversion before the Reformation, but the penitential character of conversion is never absent in Protestant descriptions of spiritual transformation.

² John Udall, *Amendment of Life: Three sermons, vpon actes 2. verses 37. 38. conteining the ture effect of the worde of God in the conuersion of the godly: and the manner how it changeth their harts, and reformeth their liues, which is the true worke of regeneration* (London, 1584).

is commonlie translated repent, and the matter called repentance, which is a turning of our lives unto GOD, proceeding from a true feare of hys judgements for sinne, imbracing God his promises in Jesus Christ, & reforming the life according to the prescript rule of gods word.³

Udall also reminds his readers of the importance of spiritual conversion to true faith: Peter's counsel contains "the verie substance of all religion, and the whole summe of Christianitie."⁴ The Church of England clergyman John Preston (1587–1628), too, equated repentance with conversion, writing that "repentance" is "a turning of the heart and casting of a man into a new mould, the setting of the heart in a right way."⁵ The Church of England divine Nehemiah Rogers (1593–1660) did the same in his sermon entitled *The True Convert*, which is an examination of the meaning and workings of repentance – a term he uses more often than conversion – as expounded in the parable of the prodigal son. His motto to the sermon, Acts 3:19, is illustrative of the same point: "repent you therefore and be converted, that your sinnes may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord."⁶ In a sermon on the conversion of Salomon, the divine and "loyal defender of the Church of England"⁷ John Dove (1561–1618) contended that conversion "signifieth repentence of them which have fallen away from the truth of Religion or heresie, or Idolatrie, or from vertue to sinne, and afterward turne back againe unto God."⁸

What makes Dove's sermon particularly interesting in the light of this study is that it explicitly distinguishes between "two sorts" of conversion in a way that resembles the difference between interfaith and spiritual conversion. In the first sense "it signifieth regeneration when a man is effectually called and

³ Udall, *Amendment of Life*, sig B1v.

⁴ Udall, *Amendment of Life*, sig. B1v.

⁵ John Preston, *The Remaines of that Reverend and Learned Divine, John Preston* (London: 1637) 295.

⁶ Nehemiah Rogers, *The true convert, or an exposition vpon the whole parable of the prodigall* (London: Edward Griffin, 1620) title page.

⁷ Will Allen, "Dove, John (1561–1618)" *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn, ed. Lawrence Goldman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 13 Feb. 2013 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7948>>.

⁸ John Dove, *The conuersion of Salomon A direction to holinesse of life; handled by way of commentarie vpon the whole booke of Canticles* (London: W. Stansby, 1613) 3.

converted to the Faith.”⁹ As examples Dove gives the conversions of Paul and Barnabas, and of the Gentiles who “were made Christians.”¹⁰ The second “sort” is conversion not from Judaism or paganism to Christianity, but as repentance and that is also what Dove considers to be the conversion of King Salomon. Due to the growing prominence of interfaith conversion, Dove and his contemporaries were increasingly faced with the distinction between the two types of religious change. This development will be analysed in closer detail in chapter five.

In identifying conversion with repentance, Protestant preachers followed the example of the prominent early Protestant reformers. William Tyndale offered in his 1534 translation of the New Testament a fourfold meaning of the scriptural Greek term *metanoia*: “confession [...] to God in the heart,” “contrition,” “faith” and “amends-making [to] [...] the congregation of God.”¹¹ That he considered *metanoia* synonymous with conversion becomes clear from his concluding remark:

Wherefore now, whether ye call this *metanoia*, repentance, conversion or turning again to God, either amending and etc. or whether ye say repent, be converted, turn to God, amend your living or what ye lust, I am content so ye understand what is meant thereby, as I have now declared.¹²

In his *Sermon of Repentance*, the Reformer and martyr John Bradford (1510–1555) proposed a tripartite meaning of repentance. Its definition first contains “a sorowynge for our synues,” secondly “a truste of pardonne, whyche otheryse maye be called a perswasion of Gods mercy, by the merits of Christe, for the forgevenesse of our synnes,” and thirdly “a purpose to amende, or conversion to a newe lyfe.”¹³ Yet although Bradford largely identified repentance with spiritual conversion, he did recognize a difference between the two, arguing that spiritual

⁹ Dove, *The Conversion of Salomon*, 3.

¹⁰ Dove, *The Conversion of Salomon*, 3.

¹¹ William Tyndale, *Tyndale’s New Testament*, ed. David Daniell (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989) 9–10.

¹² Tyndale, *Tyndale’s New Testament*, 10. Tyndale disagreed with Thomas More over whether the scriptural Greek *metanoia* should be translated as repentance or penitence, the latter also carrying the significance of the Catholic sacrament. See for an analysis of this issue James Simpson, *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and its Reformation Opponents* (Cambridge MA, etc.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) 73–76.

¹³ John Bradford, *A Sermon of Repentaunce* (London: 1553) sig. B4r – B5v.

conversion is an “effect” of the first two parts of repentance.¹⁴ We do not find this distinction in John Calvin’s description of repentance in his *Institutes* (1536) first translated into English in 1561):

The name of repentance in Hebrue is derived of convertinge or returninge, in Greke of changing of the minde or purpose, & the thing it selfe doth not ill agree with either derivations, whereof the summe is, that we departing from our selves should turne unto God & puttinge of our old minde, should put on a new.¹⁵

As these Protestant reformers also reminded their readers, the cause of the semantic affinity between spiritual reformation and contrition can be traced to the books of the Bible in which repentance is presented as a *conditio sine qua non* for a turn towards God.

The reason why repentance is dominant in Christian understandings of conversion is that it is directly linked with Christian soteriology: salvation requires repentance, which in turn presupposes (original) sin. Christ was sent to earth to save mankind from damnation by inciting people to repent. Indeed, many New Testament conversion stories testify to the fact that Christ is not so much interested in those who are already righteous as in the degenerate as potential penitents. This is not only explicitly stated in the Gospels – “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance,” for instance rings through the New Testament – but is also an underlying message in many conversion stories in Scripture. The parable of the lost son, for instance, presents the possibility of repentance and conversion as a better point of departure than the lack of it. It explains that it is wrong of the elder brother to complain about his father’s warm and generous reception of his prodigal brother while he himself has remained faithful all the time. It is the joy over the return of the penitent son, like a dead person who becomes alive again, that makes one merciful. The purport of this and the other well-known parables in Luke 15 is that “joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance” (Luke 15.7). For this reason, Christ surrounded himself with sinners like tax collectors and public women because he could still turn them to repentance.

¹⁴ Bradford, *A Sermon of Repentaunce*, sig. B5v.

¹⁵ John Calvin, *The institution of Christian religion vvritten in Latine by M. Iohn Caluine, and translated into English according to the authors last edition, by Thomas Norton*. (London: Thomas Vautrollier, 1578) fol. 241v.

Given the prominence of remorse in Scripture, it is not surprising that homiletic conversion discourse was imbued with a rich variety of biblical metaphors, aphorisms and parables of conversion. Widespread descriptions of conversion as a turn from blindness to sight, insight or enlightenment echoed Paul's transformation on the road to Damascus. Congregations were also reminded of scriptural healing miracles when conversion was put in terms of a cure, and the biblical idea of a "hardened heart" was evoked, a pre-conversion situation that rendered one unsusceptible to faith and repentance. Among the conversion parables that we typically find in sermons are the call and repentance of Zaccheus (Luke 19:1–10), the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40), the conversion of the Philippian jailer and his household (Acts 16: 25–34) and the conversion of the city of Nineveh (Jonah 3:5–10). The most inspirational, however, proved to be those of the prodigal son and of Mary Magdalene's anointment of Christ. Her appeal and popularity manifested itself in the fact that Protestant preachers adopted her as an icon of conversion despite the lack of scriptural support for this. Still, not all of them let this issue go unnoticed. The dean of York George Meriton (*d.* 1624) claimed that the repenting woman in Luke 7:37–38, to whom his sermon "a Sinner's Conversion" is devoted, was indeed Mary Magdalene, but that her name remained unmentioned probably because she had lost it through her utter sinfulness.¹⁶ But it could also have been to "teach others a lesson, that when wee are about to publish the defects of men, we should conceale their names" for "our hatred must be against the sinnes of men, and not the men themselves."¹⁷

In explaining conversion, clerics seized the chance to emphasize the crucial importance of the Word, the medium of preaching it, and thus their own profession. For instance, the Church of England clergyman William Attersoll (*d.* 1640), who contended that "the conversion of sinner is [...] the *onely* miracle of the Gospell," wrote that "God worketh repentance and the conversion of a sinner by the Preaching of the Word," and "there is no ordinary means under heaven to convert sinners, and to worke faith in us, than the Ministry of the word."¹⁸ According to the Church of England preacher Richard Rogers (1551–1618),

¹⁶ This explanation is also given by Jacobus de Voragine in *The Golden Legend*. See chapter 1.

¹⁷ George Meriton, *The Christian Mans Assvring House and A Sinners Conuersion* (London: Edward Griffin, 1614) 36.

¹⁸ William Attersoll, *Three treatises Viz. The conversion of Nineueh. 2. Gods trumpet sounding the alarum. 3. Physicke against famine* (London, 1632) 63, 62, 29. See also Thomas Cooper, who wrote: the "*matter and meanes* of Conversion" are "the word of GOD, applied and made effectuell, by the operation of the spirit of God." Thomas Cooper, *The Blessing of Japheth* (London: 1615) 12.

many become beleevers in Christ, by companie and acquaintance with Preachers; who being appointed by Christ to be fishers of men doe shew the love to them, that Christ shewed to themselves before [...] they will lay open tot them their treasures, which they have gathered out of the hoard of the Gospell, and impart the same unto them.¹⁹

Likewise, the Church of England clergyman Henry Smith (1560–1591), also known as the Silver-Tongued Preacher, asserted that “faith comes by hearing the worde of God.”²⁰ John Donne explained the fundamental value of the Word of God on the basis of the conversion of the thief on the Cross (Luke 23):

it is not unseasonable now, to contemplate thus far the working of [Christ’s passion] upon this condemned wretch, whose words this text is, as to consider in them, First, the infallibility, and the dispatch of the grace of God upon them, whom his gracious purpose hath ordained to salvation: how powerfully he works; how instantly they obey. This condemned person who had been a thief, execrable amongst men, and a blasphemmer, execrating God, was suddainly a Convertite.²¹

The quotation from Donne above touches on another key assignment for Protestant preachers, which was to mitigate the role of free will in conversion, or even deny human agency in this respect altogether. Attersoll, for example, conceded that the importance of the Word does not downplay God’s divine power in converting people: “God is able to convert us, and to give us to believe without the meanes of his word, because he is not tyed thereunto: but he hath tyed us, and left us no other way.”²² According to John Udall, conversion is purely an act of God because “all the imaginations of the heart of man are altogether evill” and “our faith leaneth upon the sole and only mercy of God for

¹⁹ Richard Rogers, *Certaine Sermons* (London: Felix Kyngston, 1612) 21–22.

²⁰ Henry Smith, “The Sinners Conuersion” in *Two Sermons preached by Maister Henry Smith* (London: 1605) sig. A3r–B3v, A6v.

²¹ John Donne, “A Lent Sermon Preached at Whitehall, February 20, 1617,” *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, vol. 1 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1953) 252–267, 254.

²² Attersoll, *Three treatises Viz. The conversion of Nineueh*, 71.

our salvation.”²³ Indeed, in the words of the temporary convert to Catholicism and Church of England clergyman Theophilus Higgons (1578–1659), “it is *God* that quickeneth us, raiseth us &c. not *Angels*, not *Man*, not his owne *Works*, not his owne *Will*. [...] God is the only Agent in this great, and glorious worke.”²⁴ Still, for some preachers it was difficult to let go of the convert’s agency altogether. Nehemiah Rogers contended that “in the very act of conversion, the will of man is not idle, nor without all motion and sence, but it followeth, the spirit of God, that draweth it far more, and the same moment God mooveth and boweth the will and causeth us to be willing indeed.”²⁵ John Dove, too, argued a case for a contribution of the human will in conversion, albeit an extremely modest one:

God worketh in us the will without our selves, and yet when we are willing, and so willing, that to our will is also joyned the issue and performance, he worketh joyntly with us, and yet we can doe nothing that is good, without he doe both worke in us the will, and worke joyntly with us when we are willing.²⁶

Another important aspect of the Protestant understanding of conversion was the idea that spiritual conversion is a continuous, if not lifelong, process of critical self-examination, rejecting sinfulness and worshipping God. Conversion “must be constant and continued, not flitting or starting backe like a deceitfull bow, or vanishing like the morning dew,” William Attersoll wrote.²⁷ William Perkins observed that “the conversion of a sinner is not wrought all at one instant, but in continuance of time.”²⁸ A more elaborate description of continuity in conversion can be found in Richard Sibbes’s *The Brvised Reede and Smoaking Flax* (1630). Examining Matthew 12:20, the Church of England clergyman Sibbes (1577?–1635) argued that the state of a contrite sinner troubled by his own wickedness and craving God’s mercy is like that of a “bruised reed.” This bruising is inflicted by God or “a duty to be performed by us” and “required before conversion that so the spirit may make way for it selfe into the heart [...] and come home to ourselves with the Prodigall.”²⁹ Yet, the bruising is not simply

²³ Udall, *Amendment of Life*, sig. Dv.

²⁴ Theophilus Higgons, *A Sermon preached at Pauls Crosse the third of March* (London, 1611) 7.

²⁵ Nehemiah Rogers, *The true convert*, p. 225.

²⁶ John Dove, *The Conversion of Salomon*, 22.

²⁷ Attersoll, *Three treatises Viz. The conversion of Nineueh*, 128.

²⁸ William Perkins, *A Graine of Musterd-seed* (London: Thomas Creed, 1597) 11.

²⁹ Richard Sibbes, *The Brvised Reede, and Smoaking Flax* (London: 1630) 33, 13.

a definitive means to conversion: “nay, after Convversion wee neede bruising, that reedes may know themselves to be reedes, & not Oakes.”³⁰ That is, the bruising functions to remind us of our humility and of our dependence on Christ, “who was bruised for us.”³¹ We find a similar idea in Thomas Cooper’s *The Converts First Love*. In this work Cooper (1569/70–1626), a Church of England divine, states that even the “saints of God” have been “subject to infirmities, and that not before their conversion only, but even after also.”³²

Many churchmen devoted special attention to the particular stages of continuous conversion. According to John Dove, conversion consisted of six steps that, like Jacob’s Ladder, would eventually lead the convert to God: “from sinne to repentance, from repentance to works, from works to judgement, from judgement to mercie, from mercie to glorie. And there is God on the toppe of the ladder.”³³ The Church of England preacher John Gaule (1603/4–1687), however, seemed to argue for speedy conversion when he wrote in a sermon on the conversion of Paul that “that the Holy Ghost but shines upon us is enough both to humble, and instruct us. Great is the efficacy of saving Grace; that do no sooner approach, but convert; scarce touch, ere change us.”³⁴ Despite this description, which suggests that Gaule interpreted Paul’s conversion as an instant transformation, Gaule at the same time considered it to be a gradual process that can be broken down into different steps: “from Contrition, to Confession, and so to satisfaction.” That is to say, “[Paul’s] contrition and humiliation is, he falls to the earth: for his Confession, both is it annuated by his silence, and convicted by his speech: And so his Obedience, as the best satisfaction, answering so readily, and so chearefully bestowed.”³⁵

It is telling that Protestant, and notably Puritan preachers took their cue precisely from popular Catholic devotional literature when writing about spiritual conversion. An example of a Catholic author whose works on spiritual conversion were widely read among Protestants, including Puritans, is the Spanish Dominican friar Luis of Granada (1505–1588). Granada was probably best known for his spiritual exercises in his *Of Prayer and Meditation*, but also for his conversional works *A Memorial of a Christian Life*, *A Sinner’s Guide* and *The*

³⁰ Sibbes, *The Brvised Reede*, 16.

³¹ Sibbes, *The Brvised Reede*, 18.

³² Thomas Cooper, *The Converts First Love Discerned, Iustified, Left, and Recouered* (London: F. Kingston, 1610) 2.

³³ John Dove, *The Conversion of Salomon*, 25.

³⁴ John Gaule, *Practique theories: or, Votive speculations vpon Abrahams entertainment of the three angels Sarah, and Hagars contention [...] Pauls conuersion* (London: 1630) 352.

³⁵ Gaule, *Practique theories*, 354.

Conversion of a Sinner (published as part of the *Sinner's Guide* in the original Spanish edition) that went through multiple editions in English translation. According to Maria Hagedorn, the popularity of his meditative work can be explained by the absence of Protestant meditation books until the 1580s, by his lack of outspoken doctrinal and polemical language and his eloquent and accessible style.³⁶

The Protestant conception of conversion in many respects resembled Granada's understanding of it. For him, too, spiritual conversion was synonymous with repentance and he also uses the terms interchangeably.³⁷ As he notes in an appendix with "profitable contemplations," "a Christian man which covetteth to come unto God, must make his enterance through the gate of compunction, generally confessing all his offences."³⁸ In addition, Granada often referred to election doctrine. However, to Granada predestination meant that humanity is first and foremost destined to be saved. As John Moore writes, his description of predestination "does not deny free will," but

he does not try to explain or even acknowledge the problem of reconciling the theological antinomy between predestination and free will. He simply tells his reader that it is God's will for him to be saved and that he should be moved to seek virtue in gratitude to Him.³⁹

Thus, while Granada, in Francis Meres' translation of *The Sinner's Guide*, writes that "true repentance is properly the worke of God," he argues on the same page that "God requireth the liberty of thy will" in conversion.⁴⁰ Although Granada's understanding of predestination has a rather different emphasis than that of Reformed Protestants, who focused on damnation and humanity's lack of free will, the way in which Granada used the terms "predestination" and "election" did not directly contradict Protestant teachings and could even be read as confirming Protestant doctrine. Thus, "the benefit of Predestination," Granada

³⁶ Maria Hagedorn, *Reformation und Spanische Andachtsliteratur: Luis de Granada in England* (Leipzig: Verlag von Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1934) 7, 99–105.

³⁷ See Luis de Granada, *A Memoriall of a Christian Life* (Rouen [i.e. London]: 1599) passim.

³⁸ Luis de Granada, *The Conversion of a Sinner* (London: Thomas Creede, 1598) sig. 15r.

³⁹ John A. Moore, *Fray Luis de Granada* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co, 1977) 46,

⁴⁰ Luis de Granada, *The Sinners Guyde* (London: James Roberts, 1598) 281. "presupongamos primero lo que sant Augustín y todos los doctores generalmente dicen: conviene saber, que así como es obra de Dios la verdadera penitencia, así la puede El inspirer quando quisiere."278.

wrote, “is the first and greatest of all benefits and which is merely given gratis without any precedent merit. The greatnes therefore of this benefit, and all those things which pertaine thereunto, greatly provoke a man to serve God, and to be dutifull unto him [Del sexto título por donde estamos obligados a la virtud, que es el beneficio inestimable de la divina predestinación. A todos estos beneficios se añade el de la elección, que es de solos aquellos que Dios ab eterno escogió para la vida perdurable].”⁴¹ What is more, like Protestant preachers, Granada argued that conversion ought to be considered a sign of election: “for as amongst the signes of justification, amendment of life is not the least, so amongst the signes of election the greatest is perseverance in good life. [Porque *dado caso este secreto esté encubierto a lo ojos de los hombres, todavía come hay señales de la justificación, las hay también de la divina elección. Y así como entre aquéllas la principal es la emienda de la vida, así entre éstas lo es la perseverancia en la Buena vida*].”⁴²

Nevertheless, the Catholic origin of Granada’s work can easily be traced, even in the English translations. *The Sinner’s Guide*, for instance, exhibits the Catholic dogma of particular judgment upon death:⁴³ “After death, followeth the particular and speciall judgement of every man [...] Many matters are to bee considered in this judgement, but one of the cheefest, is, to mark of what things we must give a reckoning.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, Granada’s contempt for the world, as opposed to the spiritual life, is reminiscent of the monastic convert’s motives for entering the monastery: “as soone as a man hath tasted the sweetnes of spiritual things (saith Saint Bernard) he despiseth the flesh, (that is, all the goods and pleasures of this world) and thys is the principall reason of this error, which so much blindeth the men of thys world.” He added “what goods (I pray you) are founde in the whole worlde, which are not false?”⁴⁵ Granada’s sparing references to purgatory, however, were omitted in most English translations.

Another striking example of a Catholic treatise on spiritual conversion that avoids taking up an explicit confessional position is *A Looking Glasse of Mortalitie* (1599) which promises its readers to treat “all such things as appertaine

⁴¹ Luis de Granada, *The Flowers of Lodowicke of Granado. The first part. In which is handled the conuersion of a sinner* (London: 1601) fol. 55r. The corresponding passage in the original Spanish version is the beginning of chapter six, in *Obras Completas: Tomo VI, Guía de Pedadores (Texto definitivo)* ed. Herminio de Paz Castaño (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española Dominicos de Andalucía, 1995) 75.

⁴² De Granada, *The Flowers of Lodowicke of Granado*, fol. 57r. The original Spanish is from *Obras Completas*, 76 (original emphasis).

⁴³ The dogma of particular judgment is implied in the Union Decree of Eugene IV (1439).

⁴⁴ Granada, *Conversion*, sig. B3r.

⁴⁵ Granada, *The Conversion of a Sinner*, ed. 1601, fol. 122v, fol.122r.

unto a Christian to do, from the beginning of his conversion, untill the end of his perfection.”⁴⁶ Some terms and names appear to disclose the anonymous author’s Catholic sympathies: his self-chastisement compared to that of “Katherine of Sienna,” his exhortation to “Redeeme your sinnes with Almes-deedes,” and his grievance over Christian laxity in faith: “O keycold Catholike! ô negligent Christian! [...] Shall Infidels that know not God teach thee to live like a Christian?”⁴⁷ Yet at the same time, the author incites his readers to observe the Lord’s “Saboths,” a term which has a Puritan ring to it.⁴⁸ His specific formulation of the reception of the “representation of the Lords body,” moreover, suggests an attempt at being doctrinally neutral and circumventing confessional polemic.⁴⁹ The author’s possible desire for a universal Christianity is most clearly expressed when he writes about conversion. Unlike the Catholic and Protestant polemicists of his day, he plays down Catholic-Protestant difference by suggesting that there are several right and truthful ways of preaching conversion. Instead, he laments that none of them have been particularly successful: “so many preachers there are, so many books, so many voices, and so many reasons, which doe all call us unto Almighty God. And how is it possible then, that so many callings as these are, so many promises, and threatnings, should not suffice to bring us unto him?”⁵⁰ Elsewhere, he suggests that “infidels that know not God” may prove better teachers of spiritual conversion and learn his readers to “live & die well” than Christians themselves.⁵¹

Works on spiritual conversion that are simultaneously Roman Catholic and universalist, like *A Looking Glasse of Mortalitie* clarify why many Protestant preachers felt the necessity to engage in denominational polemics in their conversion sermons. While glossing over the ideological character of their own understanding of conversion, they warned “true Christians” against “popishness,” the “Roman antichrist” and his “papist” adherers. The Protestantization of spiritual conversion thus also manifested itself in the fact that preachers embedded their denomination-free descriptions of spiritual conversion in sermons permeated with anti-Catholic diatribe. This shows that authors of spiritual conversion sermons were in fact deeply concerned about interfaith conversion between Protestantism and Catholicism. Hugh Dowriche,

⁴⁶ *A Looking Glasse of Mortalitie* (London, 1599) title page.

⁴⁷ *A Looking Glasse*, 36,38,8.

⁴⁸ *A Looking Glasse*, 119.

⁴⁹ *A Looking Glasse*, 155.

⁵⁰ *A Looking Glasse* 148.

⁵¹ *A Looking Glasse*, 8.

who was worried about the “lack of progress in the purification of the Reformed English Church,”⁵² lamented, for instance, that

the Papists [...] are not yet reclaimed; the Atheists, Brownists, Anabaptists, Libertines, and carnall, carelesse, and dissolute professors, that are for their sinne suffered to be led into heresies, are not yet contented to joyne in one godly unitie to worship and serve the Lord in the mount of Jerusalem , the vision of peace.⁵³

John Wilson, writing on the spiritual regeneration of Zacheus, expressed his concern over contemporary conversions to Catholicism as follows: “we being fallen into those times wherein Popery increaseth, new errors are sprowting up, and old heresies are called up out of their graves, and represented under the deceiving shoves of received truths.”⁵⁴ This did not mean that there was no hope for Catholics; although “Papisme saves none [...] some among Papists may bee saved.”⁵⁵ Nevertheless, for preachers like Dowriche and Wilson, appropriating spiritual conversion did not suffice to define, consolidate and stabilize Protestant identity. Realizing that the border between Protestantism and Catholicism was highly permeable, they resorted to violent anti-Catholic language.

Spiritual Conversion and Antitheatricalism

A topic that did mark and even widened the divide between Protestants and Catholics was the theatre. Where Jesuits, for instance, embraced drama as a means of pious instruction,⁵⁶ many Protestant preachers regarded the stage as a

⁵² Aughterson, Kate. “Dowriche , Anne (d. in or after 1613).” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, Oxford: OUP, 2004, Online edn, ed. Lawrence Goldman. Jan. 2011. 15 Sept. 2011 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7987>>.

⁵³ Hugh Dowriche, *The iaylors conuersion Wherein is liuely represented, the true image of a soule rightlye touched, and conuerted by the spirit of God* (London: Iohn Windet, 1596) sig. A4v.

⁵⁴ John Wilson, *Zacheus converted: or The rich publicans repentance. Restitution In which, the mysteries of the doctrine of conversion, are sweetly laid open and applyed for the establishing of the weakest. Also of riches in their getting, keeping, expending; with diuers things about almes and restitution, and many other materiall points and cases insisted upon.* (London: T.Cotes, 1631) sig. A8r.

⁵⁵ Wilson, *Zacheus converted*, 547.

⁵⁶ Spanish missionaries in mid-sixteenth-century Central America even went so far as to blur the line between acting conversion in the theatre and actual conversion. During a performance of *La conquista de Jerusalén* (1543), which was written and directed by Franciscan friars, Indian actors who played Turkish troops “prepared for baptism and, after they were defeated, they were actually baptized onstage” (33). Likewise, the performance of “La

spiritual danger as well as a threat to their business. They deemed they were drawn into a rivalry with playwrights in attracting and captivating audiences. In this competition for popularity, playwrights appeared to have a clear lead over preachers, or so it was felt by various clerics. It was one of the major concerns of the Puritan polemicist William Prynne, for instance. In his infamous thousand page diatribe against the theatre, *Histrion-mastix*, he lamented the perceived exodus from the churches to the playhouses, or, in his words, the “Synagogues of the Devill”:

now alas in stead of calling upon one another to heare Sermons, and of these encouragements to goe up to the house of the Lord to blesse and prayse his Name [...] we heare nought else among many who professe themselves Christians; but *come let us goe and see a Stage-play: let us heare such or such an Actor; or resort to such and such a Play-house:* (and I would I might not say unto such a Whore or Whore-house;) *where we will laugh and be merry, and passe away the afternoone:* As for any resort to such or such a Lecture, Church, or pious Preacher; it's a thing they seldome thinke, much less discourse of. Alas that any who professe themselves Christians should be thus strangely, (that I say not atheistically) infatuated, as to forsake the most sacred Oracles, the soule-saving Word, the most blessed Sacraments, house and presence of their God; to runne to Playes and Play-houses.⁵⁷

natividad de San Juan Bautista (The nativity of St. John the Baptist; 1538) which was preceded by a mass [...] ended with the baptism of an eight-day-old child called John” (26). Adam Versényi, *Theatre in Latin America: Religion, Politics and Culture from Cortés to the 1980s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). See especially the first chapter for a description of the phenomenon of the theatrical performance of real conversions. I thank Rob Carson and Ingrid Keenan for drawing my attention to this material.

⁵⁷ William Prynne, *Histrion-mastix The players scourge, or, actors tragaedie, divided into two parts. Wherein it is largely evidenced, by divers arguments, by the concurring authorities and resolutions of sundry texts of Scripture ... That popular stage-playes ... are sinfull, heathenish, lewde, ungodly spectacles, and most pernicious corruptions; condemned in all ages, as intolerable mischiefes to churches, to republickes, to the manners, mindes, and soules of men. And that the profession of play-poets, of stage-players; together with the penning, acting, and frequenting of stage-playes, are unlawfull, infamous and misbeseeming Christians. All pretences to the contrary are here likewise fully answered; and the unlawfulness of acting, of beholding academicall enterludes, briefly discussed; besides sundry other particulars concerning dancing, dicing, health-drinking, &c. of which the table will informe you.* (London: 1632) fol. 531v. Original emphasis. For Prynne, even plays that were not being performed posed a threat: “many hundred prophane ones in this age of light [...] [read] over three Playbookes at the least, for every Sermon, for every Booke or Chapter in the Bible” (fol. 531r).

The anonymous author of *An Alarme to Awake Church-sleepers*, too, complained about the fact that churchgoers lacked the stamina to “watch one houre in hearing Gods word” but had no difficulty “seeing a Play, or some vaine show.”⁵⁸ Henry Smith wrote in a similar vein that “the common people in our time, are more readie to follow their sport and pastime, then to come to the church to heare of Christ,” this, as opposed to Christ’s contemporaries who “were so desirous to follow Christ, that neither lameness, nor blindness, nor sicknes, could stay them from comming to him.”⁵⁹ The poet and essayist Owen Felltham also observed that playwrights saw their audiences grow at the expense of the pulpit. Yet unlike Prynne, he was keen to emphasize that the problem did not lie in human depravity, but in the simple fact that sermons lacked the aspect of acting, and as such, the key to affecting people and holding their attention:

the waighty *lines* men finde upon the *Stage*, I am perswaded, have beene the *lures*, to draw away the *Pulpits followers*. Wee complaine of drowsinesse at a *Sermon*; when a *Play* of a doubled length, leades us on still with alacrity. But the fault is not all in our selves. If wee saw *Divinitie* acted, the *gesture* and *varietie* would as much invigilate. But it is too high to bee personated by *Humanitie*. The *Stage* feeds both the *eare* and the *eye*: and through this *latter sence*, the *Soule* drinke deeper draughts. Things *acted*, possesse us more.⁶⁰

Preachers were sensitive to Felltham’s argument, as becomes clear from Prynne’s reluctant discovery about their sermonizing habits: “I have heard some stile their texts [...] a Play or Spectacle, dividing their texts into Actors, Spectators, Scenes,&c. as if they were acting of a Play, not preaching of Gods Word.”⁶¹

Protestant anti-theatrical sentiment was not only fed by jealousy and the sense that plays proved better equipped to captivate an audience and hold their attention, but also by a profound conviction that the very idea of theatrical performance subverted true religion, and, more specifically, sincere conversion. Prynne, for instance, largely defines the business of the stage against spiritual conversion. According to him, acting and watching plays are anathema to

⁵⁸ *An Alarme to Awake Church-Sleepers* describing the causes, discovering the dangers, prescribing remedies for this drowsie disease (London: 1640) 96.

⁵⁹ Smith, “The Sinners Conuersion,” sig. A6r.

⁶⁰ Owen Felltham, *Resolves or, Excogitations. A Second Centvrie* (London: 1628) 64–65. Original emphasis.

⁶¹ Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix*, 935 (note).

conversion, and forms of spiritual perversion: “alas, all the time that you have already past in Play-haunting, and such delights of sinne, hath beene *but a time of spirituall death*, wherein you have beene worse then nought in Gods account.”⁶² Elsewhere, he quotes the fifth-century presbyter of Marseilles Salvian, who contended that “in Stage-Playes, [...] there is a certaine Apostasie from the Faith, and a deadly prevarication, both from the Symboles of it, and the heavenly Sacraments.”⁶³ Moreover, plays cause the “Angels” to “lose [...] *their joy, in our conversion, [...] their office, in our protection,*” and “*their happinesse in our Salvation.*”⁶⁴ This is because attending plays “*is contrary to our Christian vow in baptisme, to forsake the Devill and all his workes, the pompes and vanities of this wicked world and all the sinfull lusts of the flesh,*” an idea that Prynne restates over and over again throughout his work.⁶⁵ In addition to having a corrupting effect on the soul, the theatre also renders people impervious to devout regeneration, because “Stage-plays indispose men to the acceptable performance of every religious duty: be it prayer, *hearing, and reading of Gods word*, receiving the Sacraments, and the like.”⁶⁶ It is not surprising then, that Prynne exhorted his readers to repent “*before it be too late*” and “Hell” has “devoured” them.⁶⁷ Prynne went as far as to consider it a sign of true conversion if people abandoned the stage, approving of Prudentius’ claim that “Christians after their conversion, retorne backe no more to Playes and Theaters.”⁶⁸

William Prynne’s objections against the theatre and acting were not new. In *Histrion-mastix*, Prynne refers to the Church of England clergyman Stephen Gosson, a self-proclaimed former actor and playwright, who had written a similarly vigorous though much less extensive attack on the theatre, entitled *Playes Confuted in Five Actions* (1582). His contemporary Anthony Munday recognized, like Prynne, an inversely proportional relationship between conversion and theatrical festivities. He considered buying a theatre ticket, a “purchase” of “damnation,” and noted “repentance is furthest from you when you are nearest such maiegames.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, as Jonas Barish points out,

⁶² Prynne, *Histrion-Mastix*, 990. Original emphasis.

⁶³ Prynne, *Histrion-Mastix*, 51.

⁶⁴ Prynne, *Histrion-Mastix*, 44. Original emphasis.

⁶⁵ Prynne, *Histrion-Mastix*, 911. Original emphasis.

⁶⁶ Prynne, *Histrion-Mastix*, fol. 522v–r.

⁶⁷ Prynne, *Histrion-Mastix*, 990. Original emphasis.

⁶⁸ Prynne, *Histrion-Mastix*, fol. 561r, 562v.

⁶⁹ Anthony Munday, *A second and third blast of retrait from plaies and theaters the one whereof was sounded by a reuerend byshop dead long since; the other by a worshipful and zealous gentleman now aliue: one showing the filthines of plaies in times past; the other the abomination of theaters in the*

Protestant anti-theatrical sentiments, may very well have been anticipated as early as the late fourteenth century.⁷⁰ A case in point is *A tretise of miraclis pleyinge*, an anonymous sermon from this period that was written in the tradition of the proto-Protestant Lollard movement, which argues that miracle plays are blasphemous.⁷¹ According to its author, in this type of drama the miracles of God are abused to satisfy the public's desire to be entertained. Unlike the "worschipe of God, that is bothe in signe and in dede," plays are "onely sygnis of love withoute dedis."⁷² Like Prynne, the author felt that acting, and, more specifically, reenacting the Passion of Christ procures the opposite of conversion, as it "benemeth men their bileve in Crist."⁷³ Indeed, "the develis instrument to perverten men," miracle plays cause the "verré apostasye" from him, and they reverse "penaunce doying."⁷⁴ If the "word of God" nor "his sacramentis" enable people to convert to God "how shulde pleyinge worchen, that is of no vertue but ful of defeaute," the homilist asked rhetorically.⁷⁵ One of the author's key objections against the theatre is that it involves feigning, or "sygnis withoute dede," and is therefore "fals conceite."⁷⁶ This notion of dissimulation extends to those who contend that they have been converted by a miracle play, because this "is but feynynd holynesse."⁷⁷

More than two centuries later, Prynne, as well as some of his contemporaries, showed themselves equally concerned about the idea of dissimulation in faith, which, they believed, was encouraged by the theatre. According to Prynne, "[God] requires that the actions of every creature should be

time present: both expresly prouing that that common-weale is nigh vnto the curse of God, wherein either plaiers be made of, or theaters maintained. Set forth by Anglo-phile Eutheo. (London: Henrie Denham, 1580) 66. See also William Rankins, *A mirrour of monsters wherein is plainly described the manifold vices, &c spotted enormities, that are caused by the infectious sight of playes, with the description of the subtile slights of Sathan, making them his instruments* (London: Iohn Charlewood, 1587). Despite this fierce diatribe against the theatre, Rankins later changed his mind and became a playwright himself.

⁷⁰ Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1982) 67–68.

⁷¹ Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, 67–68.

⁷² "A Sermon Against Miracle-Plays," *Reliquiae Antiquae: Scraps from Ancient Manuscripts*, ed., Thomas Wright and James Orchard Halliwell, vol. 2 (London: John Russell Smith, 1843) 42–57, 46.

⁷³ "A Sermon Against Miracle-Plays," 53.

⁷⁴ "A Sermon Against Miracle-Plays," 52, 53, 43.

⁷⁵ "A Sermon Against Miracle-Plays," 48.

⁷⁶ "A Sermon Against Miracle-Plays," 46, 49.

⁷⁷ "A Sermon Against Miracle-Plays," 49.

honest and sincere,” but “the acting of Playes” causes actors “to seeme that in outward appearance which they are not in truth: therefore it must needs bee odious to the God of truth.”⁷⁸ To bolster his argument, he quoted the original Greek meaning of the word hypocrisy:

for what else is hypocrisie in the proper signification of the word, but the acting of anothers part or person on the Stage, or what else is an hypocrite, in his true etimologie, but a Stage player, or one who acts anothers part [...] we must needs acknowledge, the very acting of Stage-playes to be hypocrisie [...] and so an abominable and unchristian exercise.⁷⁹

In Protestant conversion sermons we find a similar concern over hypocrisy, which becomes evident from warnings against feigning conversion that are put in theatrical terms, and in a fixation on the distinction between outward appearance and inward piety. Like Prynne, the clergyman Thomas Shepard, who later became a minister in America, alluded to the Greek origin of the term hypocrite: “cast by all Hypocrites, that like stage players in the sight of others, act the parts of Kings and honest men; when looke upon them in their tyring house, they are but base varlets.”⁸⁰ Other clergymen were concerned about what they perceived as the ease with which people could pretend to have embraced a life of holiness. As the clergyman William Perkins (1558-1602) understood it, this capability is an inherent aspect of humanity: “the wickedness of mans nature & the depth of hipocrise is such that a man may and can easily transforme himselfe to the counterfeict & resemblance of any grace of God.”⁸¹ For Thomas Cooper, this also works the other way around in the sense that people are easily deceived by outward virtue: “*is not the seeming good which by natures benefit shewes forth in the world, accounted currant holinesse, and thereby excludeth the true power of well-doing?*”⁸² Indeed, preachers were fascinated by the difference between inward and outward faith. Without exception, they contended that

⁷⁸ Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix*, 159.

⁷⁹ Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix*, 159.

⁸⁰ Thomas Shepard, *The Sincere Convert, Discovering the Pavcity of True Beleevers; and the great difficulty of Sauing Conuersion* (London: Thomas Paine, 1640) 127.

⁸¹ Perkins, *A Graine of Musterd-seed*, 42. Thomas Cooper was of a similar mind: “Is not here a glorious maske for sincerity and religion, where outward honestie in a ciuill calling becomes a warrant of uprightnesse, seeing our faith is shewed by workes?” Thomas Cooper, *The Converts First Love*, “To the reader,” sig. A2r.

⁸² Cooper, *The Converts First Love*, sig. Av. Original emphasis.

conversion is essentially an inward change and warned against the danger of empty ostentation in faith:

For what is all our praier but lip-labour and sacrifice abominable in his [the Lord's] eares? or what is all our outward fasting and abstinence, but meere hypocrisie which his soule abhorreth, unlesse they be accompanied with faith in his promises, and with repentance from dead workes?⁸³

Much of this “contemporary obsession with dissimulation,” as Peter Lake puts it, was fuelled by the Elizabethan settlement “which saw outward obedience, conformity, and compliance as the highest political (if not religious) virtues.”⁸⁴ Thomas Cooper cautiously addressed the problem that he saw with the religious administration of his employer: “policy” or “that wisdom which civill government discovereth in managing it [sic] affaires” could violate truthfulness “when it stands more upon the forme then the power of godlinesse” and when it “excludes the substance of religion for the outward complement thereof.”⁸⁵ Of course, the regime’s emphasis on outward conformity was also considered a problem that concerned confessional identity. Protestants became increasingly anxious about what they perceived as coreligionists, converts in particular, who shrouded their true Catholic sympathies. In some cases, these worried Protestants were converts themselves. Knowing that it would not harm his credibility, the former Catholic John Copley, for instance, wrote that

there are in this realme many dissembling Protestants, which outwardly doe all the acts of Religion belonging to this Church of England, either to stay in their places in the common-wealth, or to avoyde their penal lawes; and yet in their hearts are resolved beleivers of the Roman Faith, egregiously dissembling both with God and men, and practising most notorious equivocation, aswell in matters of faith as manners.⁸⁶

⁸³ Attersoll, *Three treatises Viz. The conversion of Nineueh*, “epistle dedicatory,” sig. A4v- A4r.

⁸⁴ Peter Lake, “Religious Identities in Shakespeare’s England,” *A Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. David Scott Kastan (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004) 57–84, 64.

⁸⁵ Cooper, *The Converts First Love*, 17.

⁸⁶ John Copley, *Doctrinall and Morall Observations Concerning Religion* (London: 1612) “Advertisements to the Reader”, sig. Av.

In chapter five, I will discuss in further detail the accusation of dissimulation that was typically leveled at interfaith converts, as well as the strategies converts used to refute them.

It should be noted that the preachers mentioned above belong to one end of the Protestant spectrum. On the other, we find people such as the Archbishop William Laud. In the late 1630s, he formalized and standardized the reintegration of repentant renegades into the Church community by composing a *Form of Penance and Reconciliation of a Renegado or Apostate from the Christian Religion to Turcism* (1637). In a ritual that was “drawn from the practice of the Roman Catholic Church and the Inquisition” and was “a quasi-drama of return, a kind of ritual of reacceptance,” the repentant renegade should wait in the porch of a church for a few weeks, dressed in white and “his head uncovered, his countenance dejected, not taking particular notice of any person that passeth by him; and when the people come in and go out of the church, let him upon his knees humbly crave their prayers, and acknowledge his offence.”⁸⁷ According to Michael Questier, although there was no “specific printed format for such recantations from Rome,” it is “virtually certain that Elizabethan and Jacobean bishops used a Protestant equivalent of the Episcopal liturgical ritual in the roman *Pontifical* [in which] the conformist was made to look as if he was making a thorough religious conversion from a heretical to a true Church.”⁸⁸

Conclusion

From the beginning of the Elizabethan era, there were two distinct developments in the understanding of spiritual conversion. Firstly, it became a favourite subject of Protestant preachers. While religious drama of an overtly moralizing and confessional polemical nature started to fade in popularity in the last decades of the sixteenth century, the pulpit became the chief site for teaching about conversion. Many Protestant preachers perceived a rivalry between the play and the sermon in drawing audiences. In their attempts to claim the pulpit as the major site for reflection on conversion, Puritans increasingly dismissed the theatre altogether. Secondly, like Reformation playwrights such as Lewis Wager, Church of England clergymen began to define spiritual conversion as an inherently Protestant event and the essence of true Christianity. Spiritual conversion, in other words, became Protestantized. In a typical sermon it was thus argued that conversion is not an act stemming from the human will but a

⁸⁷ Quoted in Matar, *Islam in Britain* 69–70.

⁸⁸ Questier, *Conversion, Politics and Religion* 110–111.

gift granted by God. It was also seen as tantamount to sincere repentance, a claim supported by the analysis of conversion parables from Scripture. Preachers, furthermore, explained the different stages of penance at length, showing that it was a life-long process with dangers of relapse and mistake, rather than an instant and single moment of insight. While many of them explicitly contributed to the confessionalization of traditional Christianity by lashing out against Catholics and Roman doctrine, most preachers avoided defining conversion itself in the same ideological terms and carefully concealed the ideological character of Protestantized spiritual conversion. In addition, Protestant spiritual conversion was often defined as fundamentally anti-theatrical, with hypocrisy and the distinction between inward as true and outward as corrupt faith as stock themes of conversion sermons.

The Protestantization of spiritual conversion created new opportunities for playwrights. While the pulpit was consolidating its role of propagating conversion, the commercial theatre started losing interest in spiritual conversion from a didactic perspective, but developed a range of new approaches that were inspired by the emergence of Protestantism. These include the exploration of the knotty relationship between election doctrine and spiritual conversion, which will be the topic of the next chapter, and the response to the loss of medieval forms of spiritual conversion that will be discussed in chapter four.