The phenomenon of religious conversion offers an attractive avenue for historical research, since religious change touches upon collective identity, communal boundaries, relationships between “secular” and “religious” concerns, and religious politics. This edited volume, which grew out of panels on the topic of conversion at an annual meeting of the German Studies Association, offers perspectives on the nature, meaning, and effects of conversion in the German-speaking lands in the wake of the Reformation. Contributors examine crucial topics such as the territorialization of confession, conversion and diplomacy, irenicist (tolerant) approaches to religious difference, conversion and notions of the self, and the changing meanings of “conversion” during a period of significant social, political, and legal transformation.

This volume shows how political authorities and subjects imbued religious confession with novel meanings during the early modern era. Generally, the contributors suggest ways that religious concerns overlapped with political and social matters. Religious transformation can be attributed to a variety of factors: coercive pressure, social change, political considerations, and the acceptance of new belief. And resistance to religious innovations could also have political, social, or theological roots.

The volume also offers insights into the historicity of the very concept of “conversion.” One widely accepted modern notion of the phenomenon simply expresses denominational change, yet this concept had no bearing at the outset of the Reformation. Instead, a variety of processes, such as the consolidation of territories along confessional lines, attempts to ensure tolerance, and diplomatic quarrels helped to usher in new ideas about the nature of religious boundaries and, therefore, conversion. However conceptualized, religious change—conversion—had deep social and political implications for early modern German states and societies.

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