

Szpiech, Ryan. *Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2013. 308 pp.

Szpiech's richly-textured, erudite, and ambitious book, *Conversion and Narrative*, challenges readers with a series of complex, intriguing, and bold arguments. And his interpretative approach is built around engaging case studies and vignettes. They propel and illuminate Szpiech's own narrative strategies and interpretative thrust in a wonderful fashion. Although there is a visible chronological continuity—as his focus moves from the earliest and most influential conversions in Christendom to the central and late Middle Ages—the book's themes are presented in diachronic fashion, as we see his different arguments develop through the book's chapters. Written from a multidisciplinary perspective—the book is as much about cultural history or religion as is about literature and critical theory—there are several main topics that resonate forcefully throughout *Conversion and Narrative*.

First, Szpiech wishes, in his own word, to study “the thing made,” that is, those personal narratives of conversion that are at the center of his inquiry. Second, beyond his close reading or “thick description” of these accounts, his emphasis is on the links between autobiographical accounts of conversion from one faith to another (mostly from Judaism or Islam to Christianity, though the reverse is also examined in depth and with care) and polemical writings against one former coreligionist. Here we follow the journey of some of these converts, most notably Abner of Burgos, a learned Jew of the eponymous city, who as Alfonso de Valladolid (his newly acquired Christian name) described his (late-thirteenth-early-fourteenth-century) conversion in dramatic fashion. Abner/Alfonso's narrative of transformation is imbedded into a sophisticated polemical work against Judaism. Uniquely, as Szpiech points out in a later and quite remarkable chapter on this convert, Abner/Alfonso's main work, *The Teacher of Righteousness*, was composed in Hebrew and sought to buttress its authority by appealing almost exclusively to Hebrew sources to prove the truth of Christianity. Abner is, however, only one of the many conversos, albeit among the most prominent and documented figures, that grace the pages of this excellent book.

A third significant topic in Szpiech's work is the shift that occurs in the relationship between authority, authenticity, reason, and language in the construction of narratives of conversion and polemical works. It is a complicated argument. It traces the development of polemical literature and the manner in which converso authors and polemicists, from the eleventh century onwards, sought new sources of legitimation for their works. In explaining these cultural shifts, Szpiech offers an impressive tour de force, displaying remarkable erudition, a mastery of vast primary and secondary sources, and the ability to research and interpret different religious and linguistic traditions.

After an introduction that sets the methodological parameters of his inquiry, chapter 1 examines the literary and religious archetypes for conversion narratives: those found in the writings of Paul of Tarsus, the Acts of the Apostles,

and St Augustine's *Confessions*. Critical readings of later conversion stories, as for example that of the late-fourteenth-century learned rabbi Selomah ha Levi (Pablo de Santa Maria as a Christian), provide the reader with a sense of how conversion stories and polemical writings move from Patristic models to more complex philosophical arguments and to the deployment of non-Christian sources to buttress polemical stances. Chapter 2 develops these points further by examining several western European case studies of conversion from Judaism to Christianity, polemical writings related to these conversions, and, as was the case in the work of Petrus Alfonsus, the changes in the meaning of authority as the "Augustinian paradigm came up against new criteria of authenticity invoked on the basis of non-Christian sources" (77).

Chapter 3 turns to conversions from Christianity to Judaism. Though we get to see in detail only four case studies—mostly from the eastern Mediterranean—the chapter displays Szpiech's familiarity with the relevant Jewish scholarly literature. A brilliant chapter 4 opens with the debate between a recent convert, Paul Christian, and the great rabbi of Girona, Nahmanides, in 1263. As Szpiech shows, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the nature of these debates and other polemical works comes to depend on the ability to read non-Christian sources in their original languages, but also on the validity or authoritative character of these sources. A stunning chapter 5 returns to Abner/Alfonso for a close reading of his work. Here, Szpiech reminds us of the uniqueness of Abner/Alfonso's work not only in his use of Hebrew and Jewish sources, but in the critical shift from "authentic text to authentic voice" (165). This shift, he argues, signals something novel in conversion and polemical writings. A final chapter also explores four conversions to Islam from Judaism and Christianity, as well as providing a historiographical corrective as to the place of Islam in the hierarchy of religions in the Mediterranean. It is a brief glance at a barely studied area of religious history—Jewish and Christian conversion to Islam—leaving us with an appetite for more.

This is an intelligent, well argued, and extremely ambitious book. It could have been simply a study of Abner of Burgos, but Szpiech's exploration of conversions and polemics in general (and not just in conversions to Christianity) provides a large canvas in which to explore the nature of the porous boundaries of religious filiation. This is clear in the parallels of conversion narration. Together with a recent books on the subject by Tartakoff, a translation of Watchel's book on Marranos (by the University of Pennsylvania Press as well), and Nirenberg's forthcoming collection of essays, Szpiech's book sets a very high standard for our understanding of what conversion meant, of how polemics were constructed, and of the unease and often painful transition from one belief to another. I always learn something from books I read or review. From this, I have learned a lot. This is a memorable and most impressive book. Its rewards are many to the careful reader in what it has to teach and how it does so.