

*Szpiech, Ryan. Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. 311 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4471-7*

Ryan Szpiech's *Conversion and Narrative* deftly analyzes medieval conversion narratives from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, focusing its inquiry on the Western Mediterranean in geographic, linguistic, and religio-cultural terms. The central aim of the work is an investigation of first-person stories and their place in religious apologetic and polemical discourse. Of particular importance is Szpiech's attempt to blur or dissolve the boundaries between historiography and literary studies, between the historical artifact and the literary text. By questioning the notion that the reader must assume that a personal account of conversion "happened" as it is narrated, Szpiech directs the reader towards the texts as representation. That is, conversion narratives are representations, not (necessarily) in the derridean sense, but in the polemical and exegetical tradition of religious dispute. Borrowing from Karl Morrison's study of medieval conversion, Szpiech cautions that "one must distinguish between the experience of conversion, the "thing felt", and the document written about it, "the thing made"—the *récit* not the *histoire* (3, 229). That is, *Conversion and Narrative* discusses the "thing made", and posits a fundamental connection between conversion narratives and medieval polemic.

Against the Neo-Platonic view of conversion which conflates protagonist and convert in conversion tales, Szpiech approaches the conversion narrative like a stained glass window: it is a "thing made", but it is "one that exists essentially not to be seen through but to be looked at ... a stylized rendition meant to depict past events, with the illuminating light of context and the interpretive horizon of the viewer" (17). As such, he aims to look not at the texts of his study, but around them, seeing them as products of discrete cultural contexts rather than fragments of personal biographies. In this way, the reader avoids "pietistic readings" of the narratives without losing sight of the narrative's signifying potential (20).

Szpiech discards the one-dimensional conception of narrative posited by Gerald Prince, as the "representation of events or changes in state of affairs," and instead, borrowing from H. Porter Abbot, defines narrative as "the representation of events, consisting of *story* and *narrative discourse* ... in which story is an *event* or sequence of events (the *action*); and narrative discourse is those events represented" (3, 19,



and in detail, 4). However, even the word “event” in Abbot’s definition is problematic for Szpiech’s understanding of narrative, for the former can theoretically be fixed in both space and time. As such, he resists Morrison and Lewis’s understanding of conversion as a single moment and instead sees it as a process of change. Like Augustine’s painful and arduous transformation in the *Confessions*, Abner of Burgos, for example, becomes Alfonso of Valladolid. As such, conversion narratives describe it as a process of transformation.

However, because this process bears different meanings to different confessional communities, Szpiech cautions the reader that “conversion”, as an instrument of critical analysis, cannot be employed equally in all cultures or religions. Indeed, after a detailed analysis of important and well-known Christian conversions narratives (Abner of Burgos’s *Teacher of Righteousness*, Herman of Cologne’s *Little Work on His Conversion*, the Barcelona Disputation in 1263, and Augustine’s *Confessions*), as well as Jewish and Muslim narratives (Judah Halevi’s *Kuzari* and Samaw’al al-Maghribi’s *Silencing the Jews*), Szpiech concludes that “narratives of conversion play a more prominent role in Christian polemics than they do in Muslim and Jewish treatises because they more fittingly reflect Christian notions of revelation, salvation, and time” (6). Szpiech suggests that while conversion in Christian sources is generally conflated with apology, the concept of conversion and its use as an argumentative narrative strategy are inapplicable to Jewish and Muslim traditions. And as such, Jewish and Muslim texts not associated with conversion to Christianity are included in his study to provide context for reading Christian conversion narratives and isolating their renewed importance in Christian polemic during the twelfth to fifteenth centuries. Scholars interested in contextual comparison with Islam should consult Chapter 6, “The Supersessionist Imperative”.

In order to contextualize changing approaches to religious polemic, in Chapter 2, “Alterity and *Auctoritas*”, Szpiech discusses how Augustine’s *Confessions*, as the dominant paradigm for Western Christian narratives of conversion, not only led to the conflation of the convert with the protagonist, but to a clear break between human author and divine *auctor* (64). That is, truth was expressed on the authority of sources (Scriptural and ecclesiastical), not on the authority of the human author. In this sense, *ratio* played no part in these narratives of conversion; rather, understanding was not a matter of reason, but a question of recognizing and reading authorities and their sources correctly. The introduction of *ratio* into polemical language in the late eleventh century, Szpiech argues, not only destabilized the

meaning of authority in writing, but it allowed other sources to be considered as valid support for one's claims. Studies on this move toward *ratio* are not new. Most recently, for example, Novikoff's *The Medieval Cultural of Disputation*, though narrow in its focus, exhaustively explores the introduction of *ratio* into Christian polemical discourse in the same space and time concerned here. *Conversion and Narrative*, however, suggests that as a response to this process of destabilization, authors began to use narrative as a method to construct an authorial voice. And this was true not just in anti-Jewish rhetoric found in Christian texts, for example, but revelatory of a changing nature of authority in religious polemic and disputation in general (61). It must be noted, however, as Szpiech accurately conveys, the concern here was not of reason supplanting revelation—the truth of Scripture was never absolutely undermined by secular texts—rather, what emerges is a shift in the understanding of proofs, which began to integrate *ratio* and *auctoritas* into a “workable pair”, what Szpiech calls the “polemical *auctor*” (68).

The novelty of Szpiech's approach fully emerges when he places twelfth-century conversion narratives into the framework of this expanding conception of authority. Though in reality the shift was probably not as dramatic as Szpiech describes it—“a once sturdy pillar, authority was becoming a stifling shackle”—the utility of traditional sources of authority for religious dispute was in question. However, as *Conversion and Narrative* proposes, the tension between authenticity and the destabilization of authoritative proof resolved itself, at least in part, by the introduction of the personal testimony (66). Szpiech argues that:

In the face of destabilization, the conversion story can be read as a response to this shift in the foundations of proof, serving to dramatize the larger argument of Christian supersession and also to authorize the author as an authentic expert in both his former and his newly adopted faith. (91)

That is, in this period of destabilized *auctoritas*, personal testimony became a strategy by which the author of conversion narratives (and religious polemic) could reestablish authority. The author of the conversion narrative, not only possessed the authority to recount his personal experience of transformation, but as apology or polemic, the convert postures himself strategically as an interpretive gateway between the faith of his apostasy and the faith of his conversion. Consequently, these narratives suggest, according to Szpiech, that the convert alone has authority over not only an accurate description of his conversion, but hermeneutical and exegetical authority over the interpretation of the process and purpose of that transformation.



One of the peculiar but not wholly unexpected results of this transition was the use of what Szpiech calls a “jargon of authenticity”, the citing of foreign texts in order to lend an air of testimonial authority (See Chapter 5, “The Jargon of Authenticity”). In Szpiech’s words, “there is an intensified concern with the authenticity and original form of those sources as the primary means of evaluating their intrinsic worth” (122). Szpiech notes that the increased attention given to foreign language, in general, served as a sign of authenticity. As such, throughout the thirteenth century, he observes, “words could be converted as easily as selves, and thus translation came to reflect Christian notions of salvation history as much as narrations of conversions did” (120). See, for example, Szpiech’s analysis of the use of kingship (*melukhah*) and kingdom (*malkhut*) in place of power (*mehoqeq*) in the Barcelona Disputation and Ramon Martí’s appeal to the *Qur’an* in *On the Sect of Muhammad* (Chapter 4, “A War of Words”). Readers of Cervantes will recognize the satirical critique of such rhetorical conventions in *Don Quixote*, where the narrator employs the Arabic writings of a Muslim historian as authoritative proof of his “Christian” tale. This example is, of course, purely fictional but Szpiech’s approach allows the reader to examine whether such imaginary tales are any different from “historical” narratives of conversion. That is, how does narrative convey meaning and function as representation?

In Szpiech’s analysis of Abner of Burgos, for example, we find that in comparison with other Christian apologetic texts prior to the twelfth century, Abner/Alfonso addresses his narrative to a Jewish audience. As such, he does not structure his arguments on Christian exegetical traditions of Scripture, but on Jewish understanding of the same texts in the Hebrew language. Moreover, not only does Abner/Alfonso avoid citing non-Jewish sources whenever possible, when he does so, it is generally by way of classical or Arabic philosophical sources translated into Hebrew (148). Though one example of many in *Conversion and Narrative*, the Abner/Alfonso conversion narrative is important for Szpiech’s analysis, as a “convergence and culmination of trends” in Christian polemical texts in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In the *Teacher*, for example, conversion (as a first-person experience) is used to stabilize polemic and religious dispute in the midst of shifting foundations of authority. But perhaps ironically, Szpiech suggests, Abner/Alfonso as emblematic of a process aimed at stabilizing *auctoritas* (through its conflation of conversion and personal testimony with linguistic and textual knowledge) began to blur “the distinction between self-hood and otherness, identity and alterity, upon which his arguments are founded” (173). That is, while personal testimonies of conversion

might be strategic for the polemical purposes of religious debate, they do not resolve questions of epistemology. The ‘real’ experience outside of the text, whatever that may be, is irrelevant to the rhetorical purposes of conversion narrative. In essence, Szpiech argues that conversion is a category of discourse. Consequently, Szpiech’s investigation is less about conversion and narrative, than conversion as narrative.

A note on onomastics: when addressing a particular author and convert, Szpiech uses a hyphen to mark the pre-conversion and post-conversion name, respectively (e.g. Saul/Paul for Saul of Tarsus and the Apostle Paul). Though a useful convention here, more work could be done to explore the rhetorical purposes of conversionary name change. While Szpiech speaks of conversion as a process and not an isolated event, the hyphen falsely (unintentionally) bifurcates the convert’s identity, a before and after. But “Paul”, for example, implies larger theological implications which reveal an outward sign of the inward reality of transformation; it is not simply an outward social code-switching. Moreover, adopting a new name was arguably a rhetorical strategy by which the Jewish author “Saul” could better communicate with gentile readers. That is, names are (can be) a category of discourse, and part of the larger rhetorical strategy of conversion narrative. Further inquiry in this area would benefit conversion studies in general, and be a wonderful supplement to Szpiech’s work in particular.

In sum, Szpiech’s fresh approach to the subject of religious debate and conversion in the context of narrative and representation opens up the source material to a broader critical audience and, consequently, lends itself to important and much welcomed interdisciplinary approaches (Religious/Conversion Studies, Iberian Studies/Hispanomedievalism, and Mediterranean Studies). Like Lisa Tuttle’s theoretical understanding of the value of feminist theory, Szpiech’s methodological approach demonstrates for the reader a way to ask “new questions of old texts” (184). In this manner, while *Conversion and Narrative* offers many insightful conclusions regarding medieval conceptions of conversion, narrative, and authority, perhaps its most valuable contribution lies in the questions it asks, leaving fertile ground for further scholarship.

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*Martínez Gázquez, José and John Tolan, ed. Ritus infidelium: Miradas interconfesionales sobre las prácticas religiosas en la Edad Media. Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2013. 334 pp. ISBN: 9788496820944*

En un trabajo reciente sobre la percepción de la religión en la edad media, Phillip Ackerman-Lieberman destacaba el problema de reconocer las relaciones interconfesionales que existían entre musulmanes, judíos y cristianos. Para José Martínez Gázquez, la idea de interconfesionalidad remite sin duda a la percepción de un sistema de ritualización encaminado no ya a establecer relaciones sincréticas sino a observar y reinterpretar "los ritos del otro" (2). En su libro *Living Letters of the Law*, Jeremy Cohen defiende en este sentido la existencia de un judío hermenéutico que funcionaría no tanto como antagonista sino como depositario de las inquietudes del grupo social dominante. Tomando como principio de estudio tanto el examen de las costumbres como el de la formulación jurídica de las ceremonias medievales, Martínez Gázquez propone una visión de las tres religiones monoteístas que es independiente de la intolerancia que se desarrollaría especialmente a partir del siglo XV.

A lo largo de sus dieciocho capítulos, *Ritus infidelium: Miradas interconfesionales sobre las prácticas religiosas en la Edad Media* nos ofrece cinco aproximaciones a la "mirada interconfesional". La primera sección ("Reinterpretar los ritos") nos ofrece un análisis de la percepción del ritual en las comunidades medievales de Siria y España. Partiendo de la existencia de un posible Pentateuco árabe de Damasco, François Déroche ("Présenter la Parole de Dieu: pratiques et