Paola Tartakoff, Between Christian and Jew: Conversion and Inquisition in the Crown of Aragon, 1250–1391
Between Christian and Jew: Conversion and Inquisition in the Crown of Aragon, 1250–1391 by Tartakoff, Paola
Review by: Ryan Szpiech
Published by: The University of Chicago Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/680534
Accessed: 22/01/2015 10:09

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philosophy, Christian history, biblical studies, ritual studies, and sacrificial studies, and the book is accessible enough to be read with graduate students in all of these fields. The work is particularly refreshing as a project grounded in Christian studies that reflects an affinity for Christian texts, theology, and history while still speaking thoughtfully to comparative scholars of sacrifice.

Ullucci’s argument has implications not only for Christian studies but for sacrificial studies as well. For historical reasons, sacrificial studies, much like religious studies more broadly, have been greatly shaped by mainstream Protestant Christian theology. Ullucci’s work demonstrates that Christian theology about sacrifice did not present itself as monolithic and fully formed in the early days of the church. Rather, the interpretation of sacrifice was contested by various Christian groups, in debates with each other as well as with non-Christian neighbors. Ullucci’s work also adds to textual, theological, and historical studies focused on sacrifice, by noting the political dimensions of sacrifice. The struggle to own sacrifice, to determine how sacrifice is interpreted and how much weight it will carry socially and politically, is an age-old struggle, still being waged today. Ullucci’s book not only speaks to the specific historical debate he explores but also highlights how much is at stake in controlling dominant interpretive approaches to sacrifice.

KATHRYN MCCLYMOND, Georgia State University.


The anti-Jewish pogroms and mass forced conversions that swept the Iberian Peninsula in 1391 are commonly taken as a watershed in the history of Jewish-Christian relations in Spain. As these gave rise to a new underclass of conversos, converted Jews who did not fit into either Christian or Jewish society, 1391 is seen by many as a critical moment in the rise of the anti-Jewish and anti-converso sentiment that led eventually to the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition in 1478. Officially in existence until the nineteenth century, it investigated the faith of many Spaniards, especially “new Christians,” and infamously tortured and burned many people at the stake for heresy, apostasy, “Judaizing,” and other crimes of faith.

This story, although often distorted, is familiar in its broad strokes. What is less known is that, contrary to tradition in the Catholic Church, unconverted Jews (and not only reverting apostates) were sometimes investigated and condemned by the Medieval Inquisition of the church itself, which had been created to investigate Christian heresy among its members. This fine book by Paola Tartakoff focuses on the ecclesiastical Inquisition’s investigation of Jewish converts to Christianity (as well as apostates who returned to Judaism) in the Crown of Aragon in the half century preceding the riots of 1391. It is an accessible and valuable account of this little-known aspect of Inquisitorial dealings with Jews, as well as a coherent overview of the issues surrounding Jewish conversion in a period that is often overshadowed by the study of 1391 and its aftermath.

The book is very well written and easy to read, in part because it is cleverly structured around the fascinating case of one particular Jewish convert named Alatzar (Eleazar), called Pere (Peter) after his baptism in 1340. Only weeks after his conversion, Pere was investigated for rejecting his baptism, finally confessing under threat of torture that a group of Jews had encouraged him to reject Christianity and seek martyrdom at the stake on behalf of the Jewish faith. Tartakoff’s study of Pere’s story, which is recorded in an inquisitorial file held in the Archive of the Cathedral of

134
Barcelona, is more than just the history of a single apostate, because it chronicles how Pere’s confession also led inquisitors to unconverted Jews, who were likewise investigated and condemned.

Tartakoff uses Pere as a touchstone to open discussions of a range of related topics, including the inquisitorial prosecution of Jews, the lives of Jewish converts in Aragon in the second half of the fourteenth century, the harsh realities that they faced after adopting Christianity (including great financial hardship, cultural isolation, and separation from family and friends), and the extreme antagonism Jews often harbored toward converts, coupled with persistent attempts to return them to the Jewish fold in dangerous defiance of Christian prohibitions. She also uses her careful reading of this inquisitorial record as a window onto Jewish-Christian relations more generally, onto minority-majority relations in Aragon, and onto the parallel practices of the Roman Catholic and Spanish Inquisitions.

In surveying these issues, Tartakoff gathers many cases of converts attested in different archival documents from across Aragon. While some of her sources—including those relating to Pere’s story—have been written about or mentioned by earlier scholars, Tartakoff offers a fresh perspective on them and is the first to bring so many documents relating to conversion together in this particular way. Apart from her clear summaries, her book is useful for the sheer number of interesting cases it references and categorizes. Tartakoff here joins a long line of scholars (including David Nirenberg, Yom-Tov Assis, Mark Meyerson, Robin Vose, and Jaume Riera i Sans) who have used the rich Aragonese archives (far more extensive than those in Castile) to explore the religious and cultural landscape of the crown between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries. To her archival sources, she adds related Latin texts such as the inquisitorial manual of Bernard Gui and treatises of churchmen such as Nicolao Eimeric, Francesc Eiximenis, and Ramon Martí, as well as Hebrew sources of Aragonese Jews such as the legal responsa of Solomon ibn Adret and the polemical writing of Shem Tov ibn Shaprut.

Between Christian and Jew is an exemplary study of high intellectual caliber and erudition that makes an important contribution to the study of religious interaction in fourteenth-century Iberia. Even so, the subject Tartakoff pursues is a slippery one, not only because it involves a complex mix of social ritual, institutionalized procedures, and polemical rhetoric but because it also touches on intangible, often inaccessible questions of belief and on theoretically complex issues of individual agency and motive. Moreover, as Karl Morrison and Jean-Claude Schmitt (as well as I) have argued, conversion is not simply a historical subject (such as the bureaucratic workings of the Inquisition or the events of 1391) but is in part a culturally specific construction of metaphor and of narrative. Tartakoff does recognize the limitations of all documents about conversion, but she is more sanguine than me about the possibility of identifying “the broad features of Jewish conversion” and of successfully understanding “converts’ motivations for converting” (62). I find some of her reflections on “converts’ experiences” (62) problematic, such as her remark that “we cannot always know what moved Jews to seek baptism. It is likely that some sincere conversion transpired” (72). Such an assessment may seem merely to state the obvious, but in its pondering of motive and sincerity, I believe it reaches beyond the scope of her—or indeed of any—written sources about conversion.

Such moments, however, are very rare, and on the whole, Tartakoff laudably avoids attempting to re-create the experience of conversion (or worse, to appraise the inner state of converts) and concentrates instead on documenting conversion’s social circumstances and consequences, effectively outlining the “broad characteristics of the world of Jews, converts, and inquisitors” (136). In this, her book is a masterful, thorough, and innovative study of conversion and inquisition in fourteenth-
Evagrius Ponticus (ca. 345–99 CE) has been the recipient of dramatically increased scholarly attention in the past few decades. However, because many of his works were purged from the Greek manuscript tradition and preserved either pseudonymously or across an array of translations, even the twentieth-century scholarship has suffered from a lingering reputation of incoherence between the different strains of Evagrian thought. The so-called practical and speculative writings have been transmitted by different linguistic currents, and the question of their interrelation has been compromised to this day by long-standing biases according to which Evagrius is regarded as cold and cerebral, an “Origenist” through and through, whose esoteric excess functions as a foil to the more balanced thought of such authors as Pseudo-Macarius and Maximus the Confessor. To cross beyond this unsympathetic image and knotted reception history and to reach Evagrius’s own formidable and immensely influential theology requires not only multilingual dexterity but also the patience and creativity to derive new categories of interpretation from Evagrius himself, rather than accepting at face value the reasons for his sixth-century condemnation.

With his new book, Augustine Casiday has demonstrated precisely such dexterity, patience, and creativity. The work constitutes a major achievement in dissolving “the several assumptions that underlie the received account” (3) of Evagrius’s contribution to the Origenistic controversies and argues that the dominant perspective on Evagrius resulting from these assumptions is not justified by his own writings. Despite Casiday’s subtitle of Beyond Heresy, the purpose of the project is not to determine the extent of Evagrius’s orthodoxy but rather to redress the interpretive errors brought about by the long-standing but insufficiently justifiable assumption of heterodoxy. If there is an ideological bent to the book, it is that controversial thinkers such as Evagrius should be given the dignity of defining the scope, content, and primary categories of their own thought.

Casiday’s argument proceeds in two asymmetrical sections: first, a recontextualization not only of Evagrius’s life and writings but also of their transmission and the process by which they fell under suspicion (chaps. 1–3); second, a new synoptic account of Evagrius’s theology and pedagogy that examines how Evagrius taught as a hermeneutical key to interpreting what he taught (chaps. 4–8). The first part of the book provides a useful and pleasurable expansion on Casiday’s introduction to his earlier collection of annotated translations, Evagrius Ponticus (New York: Routledge, 2006), rehearsing Evagrius’s colorful maturation from the “charismatic, hot-blooded and sexy” (18) ecclesiastic-about-town in Constantinople to the warm-hearted monastic master in the desert enclave of Kellia. It then situates each of the many genres of Evagrius’s corpus in relation to his various settings of life and conversation partners. For Casiday, this exercise is essential, not ornamental. Modern readers may not need to live as Evagrius did in order to understand his work, but we must become intimately familiar with the ascetic patterning of life that Evagrius insisted would precede any comprehension of his theological discourse.

The end of part 1 provides an account of Evagrius’s developing (and darkening) reputation, carefully locating the accusations against Evagrius in their own time