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Szpiech, Ryan. *Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic. Middle Ages Series*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. Pp. 328. \$59.95. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4471-7. . .

Reviewed by:

Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak
New York University
bbr2@nyu.edu

Their mutual acceptance of many prophets and texts immensely complicated the need late medieval Judaism, Christianity and Islam had to distinguish their rival conceptions of revelation, history, and salvation, and to advance the authoritative truth of their beliefs. In *Conversion and Narrative*, Ryan Szpiech identifies a particular strategy deployed within the Abrahamic religions, especially in Christianity, to articulate and prove the validity of their postures. This consisted in publicizing stories of conversions that narrated a personal rejection of a competing group as a vindication of the chosen one. For the purpose of Szpiech's analysis, conversion is first and foremost an account, referencing a narrative logic from which socio- religious trajectories derived the manner and matter of their existence. Thus, in *Conversion and Narrative*, conversion is not to be read in relation to an individual experience but as a particular discursive device at work within a situated act of writing, enabling the articulation of polemic and the actualization of eschatological models of prophetic history, from error to true religion.

Szpiech's approach to conversion stems from his observation that, from the twelfth century onward, stories of male conversion to Christianity were on the increase and were mostly written in the first-person, initiating polemical treatises, as ordinary prologues would at the beginning of school texts. From his focus upon conversion stories as polemical writing in the high Middle Ages, Szpiech moves, somewhat abruptly, to extend the connection between narratives of conversion and apologetic writing to all Christian conversion stories beginning in late antiquity. Szpiech is not unaware that accounts of conversion appear in monastic chronicles, in memoirs, in hagiographic texts, and in royal registers and other archival documents. He is, however, eager to underscore the similarities that, since late antique and early medieval times, underlay various genres and traditions for the representation of religious change, by way of challenging modern epistemological boundaries that have prevented a more comprehensive approach to conversion. He is also aware that conversion is not unidirectional. In fact, in order to highlight the specificity of Christian writings, Szpiech has created a comparative framework by considering a sampling of Jewish and Muslims texts relating conversions into their ranks. From this cross-cultural perspective he acknowledges that written documentation of religious change involves diverse formats and alludes to markedly different events that too often lose their specificity by being subsumed within the conceptual category of conversion. Szpiech's denunciation of this category's divisive or inclusive hermeneutical impact is part of his painstaking attempt to construct an interpretive framework that bypasses issues of facticity, devotion, identity, subjectivity, and psychology that have traditionally characterized the historiography of conversion. Acknowledging epistemological roots in literary criticism, and following in the footsteps of Karl Morrison and Jean-Claude Schmitt, Szpiech examines the fashioning of texts narrating conversion in order to reach cultural paradigms rather than self-fashioning converts.

Through a close and learned reading of conversions from Judaism to Christianity, such as those by Moses/Petrus Alfonsi (early twelfth- century), Judah/Herman of Cologne (mid-twelfth century), Abner of Burgos/Alfonso de Valladolid (d. ca. 1347), Solomon Halevi/Pablo de Santa María (d. 1435), and from Islam, by Abd Allah/Juan Andrés (d. sixteenth century), Szpiech stresses three important points. Firstly, he illuminates the ways that medieval conversion narratives were patterned on New Testament (Saul/Paul) and patristic (Augustine) models. Of these two models, the representation of conversion in the *Confessions* became the predominant paradigm. Szpiech shows that Augustine's conception of a single temporal scheme to resolve the historical significance of the Jewish past inherent in the Pauline paradigm demanded narration as the representational mode that could best situate exegesis, history, and the self, both old and new, within a diachronic view of time in which the past was not rejected but rather was incorporated into a mutually constitutive relationship with the future.

Second, Szpiech demonstrates that, in addition to late antique paradigms, the discursive fabric of late medieval conversion narratives interwove in philosophical and extra-scriptural material. He concludes his long survey of twelfth-century Christian thought derived from a rather limited corpus of extant scholarship with a general diagnosis of crisis within Christian notions of authoritative proofs. Situating conversion narratives within such a context enables Szpiech to account for the insufficiency of the Augustinian paradigm from the twelfth century onward. For by that time, conversion stories were expected to address a new Christian need for rational proof as the basis for textual authority and authenticity. The Jewish or Muslim convert to Christianity, as acknowledged experts in the texts of both native and adopted faiths, verified their overall authenticity but also

indexed authoritative worth through their personal enactment of Christian supersession.

In his third main point, Szpiech follows the twelfth-century association of conversion to Christianity and knowledge of non-Christian books into the next two centuries. He argues that continuing Christian unease surrounding textual authority intensified recourse to non-Christian writings and attention to their original languages and forms as markers of authenticity. Dominicans in particular, such as Ramón Martí (d. after 1284), appealed to the Talmud, aggadic sources, the Qur'an, and the Hadith, to refute Judaism and Islam, translating, transliterating, and transcribing excerpts from these works to defeat counterarguments by non-Christian opponents. Though heavily criticized by Ramón Llull (d. 1315), Martí's recognition of non-Christian authorities as the foundation of Christian polemics became the standard of Western Christian apology. Szpiech concludes that, during the thirteenth century, the critical element of proof shifted from personal testimony to linguistic authenticity, substituting foreign script for the individual convert as the most potent witness to the triumph of Christianity. By the next century, however, a synthesis had occurred, locating authentic and authoritative proof in the combination of text and personal testimony. Abner of Burgos/Alfonso de Valladolid is presented as a critical case in point. Abner wrote his conversion narrative (and anti-Jewish works) in Hebrew, sharing personal perspectives and anecdotes of his own experience, as well as quoting liberally from Hebrew sources and rabbinical authorities in an attempt to show that his argument against Judaism was derived from both its main authorities and from an informed Jewish understanding of them. In a fine analysis of Abner/Alfonso's hybrid testimony, Szpiech disentangles the contradictory implications, and the limits, of a rhetorical strategy which appropriates Jewish books and Jewish identity for Christological purposes.

Szpiech skillfully uses the multiple frameworks he has set up for comparative perspectives. In examining the few and brief Latin accounts of Christian conversions to Judaism, those of Bodo/Eleazar (ninth century) and Wecelinus (early eleventh century), Szpiech notes that they exist within a Christian conceptual framework and play no recorded role in Judaism, thereby underscoring the extent to which conversion was primarily a Christian theological category. Polemical statements are generally absent from eleventh-century Hebrew accounts of conversion to Judaism preserved in the Cairo Geniza, including the conversion of the Khazars (in ca. 800) and of Giuàn\Obadiah (in 1102), even when these accounts are framed as debates between the three Abrahamic religions. There are, however, some exceptions to this trend. Polemic elements animate Judah Halevy's (d. 1141) version of the Khazar conversion and the *Book of Nestor the Priest* (twelfth century). Nevertheless, narratives of conversion to Judaism tend to deal with a renewing of individual faith, with a personal return to the continuing truth of Torah.

When looking at Arabic accounts of conversion to Islam, selecting three from Judaism (Samaw'al al-Maghribi, Said Hasan, and Abd al-Haqq as-Islami, twelfth-fourteenth century) and one from Christianity (Anselm/Abd Allah, fifteenth century), Szpiech is particularly sensitive to the ways these narratives of conversion to Islam are situated within time, making Islam the final and true prophecy that abrogates all previous religions, considered to be the erroneous manifestations of God's unchanging revelation.

Indeed, time emerges as a central theme of Szpiech's thorough and comparative examination of conversion as a literary trope. Christian time, in which the past foreshadows the future and the present remembers the past, is dialectic; in this view, the past is not rejected but superseded, and history is a sacred dialogic movement of anticipation and fulfillment. In the Jewish concept of time, the present does not fulfill the past but repeats and commemorates it. In the Islamic notion of time, the present is the final correction of the past. Thus, for Szpiech, the particular use of conversion and of personal narrative in Christian polemic is effective, for, as he also posits, there is affinity between narrative and supersessionist history, as well as between the unfolding of conversion and the trajectory of sacred history. From this viewpoint, different conceptions of time result in different stories of conversion with distinct utilities.

Szpiech's insightful reading of a variety of conversion narratives produced within the Abrahamic religions between the ninth and the sixteenth century has produced this densely textured and important book which launches the study of conversion into new territory, inviting still further charting.