

Ryan Szpiech

Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. 311 pp.
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Ryan Szpiech begins his compelling study of medieval conversion narratives and interreligious polemic with a narrative. Abner of Burgos (d. ca. 1347), a Castilian Jew who in many ways seems to stand at the center of the study, tells the story of a Jew (himself? a construct?) who dreams a challenge to his Jewish identity and converts to Christianity. Under his new name, Alfonso of Valladolid, Abner/Alfonso¹ subsequently writes a work of anti-Jewish polemic in Hebrew, opening with the story of his conversion. Beginning as he does with this conversion narrative allows Szpiech to simultaneously introduce us to the genre at hand and also to make the case for a literary study of Christian-Jewish-Muslim encounter. He points out early and often that he is interested in conversion narratives as literature (“things made” rather than “things felt,” using Karl Morrison’s terminology), and he demonstrates convincingly that by reading them as literature, we stand to learn a great deal about how medieval Christians, Jews, and Muslims understood themselves in relation to religious others.

Szpiech lays out three goals for himself in the book. First, he seeks to understand how personal narratives of conversion functioned in medieval Christian apology and polemic. He asks why authors of polemical treatises included such stories in their writing, and what connection they found between their own stories and their polemic. Second, he intends to explain why these conversion narratives proliferate in the twelfth century specifically. Here he focuses on the transformation of intellectual culture and attending challenges to traditional notions of *auctoritas* that arose at that time. Finally, he plans to explore the distinctive nature of Christian narratives by comparing them with parallel Jewish and Muslim stories of conversion. While conversion narratives do make their way into polemical treatises in each of these traditions over the course of the Middle Ages, Szpiech finds that they play a far more central role in Christian writing than in Muslim or Jewish texts because the individual convert’s journey toward Christianity (real or stylized) follows a Christian arc of salvation history. The analysis that follows has important ramifications not only for how we think about medieval conversion, but also for the way we read

1 I follow throughout Szpiech’s convention of including both pre- and post-conversion names for his authors.

and understand religious rhetoric much more broadly, especially around problems of “historicity” in narrated accounts of interreligious engagement.

As one would hope, Szpiech includes a substantive discussion of theoretical and methodological issues in his introduction. Szpiech handles complicated questions of definition very well, differentiating between meanings of conversion for medieval people and for scholars in a variety of contexts today. The discussion is well crafted and will be tremendously useful to anyone interested in the theoretical issues at stake in writing about religious “conversion” in any time or place. Szpiech is less interested in conversion itself than in the formal narration of conversion. He takes issue with Karl Morrison and others who assume that behind conversion stories lies some lost interior experience. Szpiech instead views conversion narratives as “primarily intellectual, not affective, constructs” (25). By embracing a textual approach to his subject, we avoid the need to know what “really happened” in the lives of converts. Instead, what matters is the way they utilized their stories of conversion. Bringing a literary perspective to the study of conversion texts, Szpiech gives us fresh insight into medieval conversions.

In Chapter 1, Solomon Halevi/Pablo de Santa Maria (Archbishop Paul of Burgos), a Jewish convert to Christianity, and Juan Andrés, a purported Muslim convert to Christianity, form a late medieval endpoint for Szpiech’s exploration of conversion narratives. The two fifteenth-century texts he explores here work well together, in spite of the fact that one narrative comes from the pen of a well-known historical figure (Solomon Halevi/Pablo de Santa Maria) and the historicity of the other has not been established. Szpiech raises but chooses to ignore the problem of “Juan’s” identity because he believes “that the function of a conversion story in a polemical treatise is not biographical but rhetorical, serving as a device to establish the authority of the voice of the author as an authentic witness to the tradition it aims to reject.” Szpiech attempts a great deal in this chapter, surveying the historical development of Christian conversion narratives in antiquity, establishing Pauline and Augustinian modes of understanding conversion, and then analyzing the fifteenth-century texts in view of those two models. It sometimes feels like too much to hold together, but by the end, Szpiech successfully demonstrates a distinction between Pauline and Augustinian models of conversion, the durability of those models through the Middle Ages, the utility of the Augustinian model particularly to address the problem of Jewish continuity, and the presence of newer elements introduced over the course of the Middle Ages, traceable to the twelfth century.

Chapter 2 focuses on the twelfth-century changes introduced in the preceding chapter. Once again pairing two substantially different texts, Szpiech presents the narratives of Judah/Herman of Cologne and Moses/Petrus Alfonsi

to illustrate the development of new forms and functions for conversion narrative in the twelfth century. In different ways, both Judah/Herman and Moses/Petrus develop conversion narratives that are “expressions of apologetic discourse aimed at recuperating a radically destabilized notion of Christian authority” (61). The turn toward reason “not only expanded the foundation of traditional proofs beyond the evocation of biblical testimonies and trusted *auctores*. It also destabilized the very meaning of authority in this writing, creating a gap through which other sources could be brought in to substantiate one’s claims” (62). Scholars have long noted that the development of new standards of authority and proof in the twelfth century contributed to the expansion of textual sources employed in Christian anti-Jewish polemic, but here Szpiech links these changes with a new phenomenon in which conversion narratives enter into polemic as “a new discourse of personal testimony” (68). The quality of Szpiech’s reading here is exceptional. With a nuance and subtlety rarely seen in historical studies of interreligious polemic, he attends to the language in Petrus’s dialogue with his former self Moses, suggesting that staged intimacy and the fracturing thereof opens the door to new conversation about authority. Szpiech turns to voices from modern literary studies, like Naomi Seidman on the politics of translation and Jonathan Boyarin on conversion and identity, using both to good effect, once again adding new depth to old conversations.

In chapter 3, Szpiech moves to consider the record on conversion to Judaism, such as it exists. The record is spotty, and often the cases that appear in the record cannot be verified historically, but here again, the historicity of the documents is not important, since Szpiech is interested in presentation/representation of conversion in any case. He opens the chapter with a brief discussion of two early medieval reports of conversion—that of Bodo/Eleazar in the ninth century and of Wecelinus in the early eleventh. In both cases, the experience of the convert is known to us through a (hostile) Christian lens, and Szpiech spends the bulk of the chapter considering the much richer territory of medieval Jewish writing on conversion and converts. He provides an overview of competing essential and universal conceptions of Jewish identity. The first category, associated with neoplatonic thought, was embraced by figures like Judah Halevi and Nahmanides and saw conversion to Judaism as something that could be achieved in outer performance but not fully interiorly. The second was embraced by philosophers like Maimonides, who believed that it was indeed possible for the stranger to become fully Jewish through conversion. Szpiech notes that Jewish discussion of conversion rarely turned to detailed narrative or the sort of polemic that we see in the Christian world. The rest of the chapter focuses on three exceptional, well known narratives of conversion

to Judaism—Judah Halevi’s retelling of the story of the Khazar king’s conversion in the *Book of the Kuzari*, the fictional *Book of Nestor the Priest*, and finally documents describing the conversion of Obadaiah the Proselyte. These narratives form the basis for sustained comparison with Christian narratives of conversion, and he finds that only Obadaiah’s echoes themes of the convert as mirror of salvation history so evident in Christian conversion narratives. When polemic or apology is engaged in these narratives, as is certainly the case in both the *Kuzari* and *Nestor the Priest*, conversion tends not to be used as an authorizing feature. Szpiech demonstrates convincingly that narratives of conversion to Judaism focus much more “on the defense of faith after conversion than on the portentous infidelity that precedes it” (118), a fact he attributes to differences between Christian and Jewish concepts of salvation history. Szpiech writes, “the narrational form of conversion as a dialectic of error and truth plotted across a movement from past to present does not inherently support either a prophetic concept of returning to the original law of Moses or a rabbinical notion of fulfilling the mythic paradigm of belief that follows the biblical patriarchs in the same way it does support a Christian notion of the supplanting of the old law by the new . . . medieval Christian arguments had to rely far more on narration than Jewish arguments did because the former expressed a figural vision of salvation while the latter did not” (118).

Chapter 4 turns back to Christian context, this time to the late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century incorporation of Jewish and Muslim texts as *auctoritates* in polemic. The convert has an important role to play here as one who possesses special knowledge. Szpiech studies Nicholas Donin’s attack on the Talmud, Ramon Marti’s attack on the Qur’an just a couple of decades later, and then brings in Fra Pau’s disputation with Nahmanides as the fulfillment of what he sees as their new construct of Christian authority. Szpiech references the ongoing scholarly debate about the extent of Christian commitment to Jewish and Muslim mission (think particularly of Robin Vose’s recent *Dominicans, Muslims, and Jews in the Medieval Crown of Aragon* and push-back by John Tolan and others), and notes that a close examination of the literature demonstrates a continuing orientation toward Christian apologetics for Christian ears (establishing new forms of authority for traditional arguments) rather than a new direction of argument for explicitly missionizing purposes. Szpiech makes the very important point that “Just as it is a mistake to read conversion narratives affixed to disputational treatises as faithful accounts of real events, likewise it is a mistake to conflate the tropes and language of these treatises, expressed according to the exigencies of traditional polemical and apologetic formulas, with the real history of Dominican engagement with non-Christian groups” (127). The discussion of authority and truth that

follows uses a close reading of text to make the convincing case that changes in thirteenth-century polemical strategies were primarily the result of the same efforts to correct for the destabilization of traditional Christian authority that gave rise to the conversion narrative. The chapter covers ground well travelled, looking especially at the Nahmanides-Fra Pau debate and the work of Ramon Martí, but the interpretation is fresh with its focus on the issue of constructing authority. Szpiech would have found even more support for his approach here had the timing allowed him access to the collection of essays edited by Gian Luca Potestà in *Autorität und Wahrheit. Kirchliche Vorstellungen, Normen und Verfahren (13.–15. Jahrhundert)*, published by the Historische Kolleg in Munich in 2012, as many of the essays approach the question of changing Christian notions of authority from a sympathetic perspective. Szpiech ends the chapter with an excellent discussion of the complicated figure of Ramon Llull, whom he finds to be the “polar opposite” of Ramon Martí in his approach to authority. Llull stands here as an exception who proves the rule about thirteenth-century mendicant polemic, but also as someone whose emphasis on the power of reason in argumentation was bolstered by a sort of conversion narrative of his own, thus making the connection with conversion narrative and authority described in earlier chapters.

Chapter 5 considers the development of these movements in the fourteenth century, principally through the writing of Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid. In Abner/Alfonso's work, Szpiech writes, “the thirteenth-century cultivation of what we might term, adapting Theodor Adorno's phrase, a ‘jargon of authenticity,’ reached its zenith, both through citation of foreign texts and the invocation of the narrated testimony of converts” (144). Abner/Alfonso's body of work stands out as different from the thirteenth-century works already discussed in that it was written primarily in Hebrew (although frequently translated into the vernacular and, in some cases, surviving only in that vernacular) and very clearly aimed at a Hebrew-literate audience of Jews. Szpiech contrasts Abner/Alfonso's midrashic style of writing with the clearly scholastic form of authors like Ramon Martí, taking this as further evidence for a Jewish readership. Szpiech does not think this accidental; he sees it as further evidence of an attempt to claim authority by aligning himself with his target readers' sensibilities. The earliest surviving work, *Teacher of Righteousness*, contains substantive autobiographical material, and Szpiech calls that work “an *epitome* of the use of the conversion narrative as a polemical device and a rhetorical tool” (145). Abner/Alfonso represents for Szpiech “a convergence and culmination of trends running through the Christian texts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries: both the use of conversion to stabilize argumentation in the face of shifting notions of authority and the focus on language as a

marker of identity and a touchstone of faith" (145). Abner/Alfonso's conversion story as presented in *Teacher* is distinctively Jewish, with reverberations of biblical calls to prophecy and divine communication through a dream. Szpiech presents this as part of a rhetorical maneuver to get his readers to identify with him so that they might follow him on his journey. Certainly there is plenty of discussion of textual authorities and how to read them, but Abner/Alfonso also claims a personal authority on the basis of this conversion experience. The discussion of Abner/Alfonso that follows is one of the highlights of the book, rich, insightful, complex. Szpiech brings Abner/Alfonso dramatically to life, both furthering his argument concerning authority and polemic but also helping to recover for this figure some of the human experience and uncertainty that must have existed around his decision to convert and especially around the consequences of that conversion.

Chapter 6 turns again to comparative study, asking whether stories of conversion to Islam function in contemporary Muslim treatises the way they do in Christian ones. Szpiech examines four texts dealing with Jewish or Christian conversion to Islam, dating from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries and covering a range of territory within the greater Mediterranean. Szpiech justifies this breadth by noting that disparate though they may have been in origin, they came to circulate together in manuscript form in the Islamic world. Finding that conversion narratives function quite differently in Islamic texts, Szpiech writes, "Whereas the Christian examples we have examined mostly reflect a dialectical concept of history, one that evokes the Jewish past even as it rejects it, these Muslim texts seem to be more ordered and chronological and more focused on action and concrete events than on exegetical typology" (176). We hear first about the story of Samaw'al, a Jew living in Baghdad who converted to Islam in the mid-twelfth century. Following his embrace of Islam, Samaw'al wrote a polemical work called *Silencing the Jews*, and four years after its initial circulation, he wrote another longer version in which he responded to a number of objections to the text raised by Jews. What makes this polemical work so useful for Szpiech is the fact that Samaw'al also included in this later edition a narrative of his conversion to Islam. Szpiech compares the rhetorical function of Samaw'al's conversion narrative with the Christian examples explored earlier in the book. The relationship between reason and authority is central here, too, but there are aspects of that tension that are quite different from what we find in Christian texts. One particularly interesting feature of this narrative is the role of dream prophecy as a primary means by which Samaw'al's appeal to reason as authority is validated after the fact (184–185). Szpiech follows this with a discussion of two slightly later narratives by Jews

converted to Islam, both from roughly the same time as Abner/Alfonso's treatise. Like Samaw'al's, these narratives highlight an understanding of Islam as "the culmination of a historical process of the clarification of truth . . . a progressive sloughing off of perversion and falsification, an increasing purification of a single, unchanging message" (199). The idea of historical abrogation is central, and these Jewish to Muslim conversion narratives "reflect a distinctly Islamic notion of supersessionism, one more historical than exegetical" (200). The final section of this long chapter looks at the fifteenth-century *Gift of the Learned One for the Refutation of the People of the Cross*, written (at least in part) by Anselm Turmeda/'Abd Allāh al-Turjumān, a Franciscan friar from Mallorca. Szpiech finds that while there are many affinities with Christian conversion narratives like that of Abner/Alfonso, it shares in common the central feature of Islamic conversion narratives in its emphasis on a chronological rather than figural understanding of salvation history.

The conclusion reminds us that Jewish, Christian, and Muslim conversion narratives were bound to reflect each tradition's soteriology in some way. But only for Christians did the act of conversion itself mimic an understanding of salvation and history. The fact of conversion itself—and particularly the narration of that change—functioned as a distinct sort of proof for Christianity from the twelfth century on, when traditional biblical proofs were deemed insufficient and new sorts of evidence were engaged to fill that gap. The exploration of Jewish and Muslim conversion narratives here provides an invaluable point of contrast with the Christian cases at the heart of the study, but Szpiech acknowledges that there is much more that could and should be done with those traditions.

Szpiech writes beautifully and the book is a delight to read. He employs sophisticated, complex language and concepts, yet manages to make the book a model of clarity and accessibility. His command of sources in Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic as well as European vernaculars allows him to do what few scholars can. What is most original and exciting about this book is the association of long noted trends in polemic and exegesis with another neglected trend—the rise of conversion narrative and its implications for changing Christian-Jewish-Muslim engagement and communal self-understanding. The study provides a wonderful complement to the recent archive-oriented research on conversion by Paola Tartakoff, *Between Christian and Jew: Conversion and Inquisition in the Crown of Aragon, 1250–1391*. The book also expands a recent trend toward literary studies of Jewish-Christian or Jewish-Christian-Muslim encounter, represented by works like Susan Einbinder's *No Place of Rest: Jewish Literature, Exclusion, and the Memory of Medieval France* or Jonathan Decter's *Iberian*

Jewish Literature: Between al Andalus and Christian Europe. Religious and intellectual historians have a great deal to learn from these literary studies with their often inspired approaches to shared texts.

If there is one question mark that remains at the end of the book, it would be about geographical scope. There is no getting around the fact that most of Szpiech's sources come from an Iberian or Mediterranean orbit. But Szpiech clearly does not want to limit his findings geographically, and the broad intellectual and religious currents into which he places his analysis are Parisian and broadly western European as much or more than they are Mediterranean specifically. Perhaps part of the point is to use this Mediterranean construct to break down old divisions of Europe and Africa/Asia or Christendom and Islam. Szpiech does show how fruitful it can be to extend range beyond the usual, longstanding divisions, but it would have been helpful if he had addressed this question directly at some point in the book. While this is not a small complaint, Szpiech's study should nonetheless be read and eagerly received by scholars across disciplines, including medieval studies, literature, religious studies, and history. It is a very rewarding read.

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