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**Ryan Szpiech, *Conversion and Narrative: Reading Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Pp. 311. \$59.95. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4471-7**

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Voluntary conversion from one faith to another, perhaps even more than the parallel conversion from secular to religious life, is the embodiment of a process that is generally understood to reflect a range of complex and at times converse motivations. These can often be formulated in terms of binary oppositions: inner self versus outer persona; estrangement versus belonging; individual experience versus communal identity; historical past versus salvational future, and so on. A striking feature of the medieval apologetic tradition is the variety of conversionary accounts that were preserved and memorialized in narrative or disputational form, in turn provoking further reflection by future readers upon the very meaning of conversion as a paradigm of history and exegesis. It is this crucial if somewhat blurry intersection between what Karl Morrison has termed the “thing felt” (conversion itself) and the “thing made” (the act of recording that conversion) that Ryan Szpiech endeavors to examine, for his book is framed not as a study of conversion patterns in general but rather as an exploration of the function of conversionary accounts in the polemical literature of the High and Late Middle Ages. It is an admirably broad-ranging study of this body of writing and includes alongside numerous converts to Christianity a few notable converts to Judaism and Islam.

On an interpretative plane, Szpiech claims to depart from earlier readings of these works in three specific ways. First, he aims to underscore the essentially social and ideological function of conversion narratives as expressions of apologetic intentions rather than of devotional or psychological meaning; in other words, to access “communal portrayal rather than the vestiges of individual experiences” (25). This approach is perhaps not quite as original as the author suggests, as this ground has been traversed before (notably by Karl Morrison, Jean-Claude Schmitt, and Harvey Hames), but the framework is a salutary reminder that conversion in the Middle Ages constitutes a dialectic engagement with the past and with the future more ruminative than the often abrupt moments of personal illumination that typically animate such accounts. Second, he considers the role played by narrative in expressing this connection between conversion and authority. This narratological emphasis on conversion’s duality as both an embracing of the new and a rejecting of the old allows him “to weave together its formal doctrinal and narrative elements” (26), meaning that the polemical and fictive aspects of purported first-hand accounts must not be ignored. Third, and most intriguingly, Szpiech compares Christian conversion paradigms with the depiction of conversion within the apologetic works of Jewish and Muslim writers in order to gain perspective on competing visions of history and salvation. It is in this final area of analysis that

Szpiech is best able to deploy his considerable linguistic and philological skills and arrive at some important and even profound conclusions regarding the nature of conversion narratives in the medieval Christian tradition.

Converts both famous and little known appear and reappear over the course of six substantive chapters and range from North Africa to northern Europe, from Iberia to the Near East. A pivotal figure for Szpiech is the Castilian Jew Abner of Burgos (ca. 1265/70-ca.1347), whose report of his own conversion within the context of a lengthy polemic epitomizes the various narratological operations that this book sets out to examine. Abner converted to Christianity around 1320, took the new name Alfonso of Valladolid, and wrote a series of anti-Jewish works in Hebrew, the most famous being *Moreh Zedek* (*Teacher of Righteousness*), which is framed as a dialogue between the Christian figure of the Teacher and a Jewish disputant known simply as the Rebel. The work unfortunately only survives in a contemporary Castilian translation under the title *Mostrador de Justicia*, but it is one of the longest anti-Jewish polemics of the entire Middle Ages and as such holds particular significance for the broader sphere of interfaith relations. Szpiech has much to say about the structure of this work and its reception, but two aspects of its construction bear heavily on the overarching thesis of the book: Abner's opening account of a dream vision he had while asleep in a synagogue motivated that led him to convert, and the fact that it was originally written in Hebrew rather than Latin. The dream vision was of course a common trope in medieval literature (it features prominently in the twelfth-century *Little Work on His Conversion* by Judah/Herman of Cologne, discussed in chapter 2), and Iberia produced a venerable list of anti-Jewish polemics, some Jewish converts themselves. What sets Abner/Alfonso's account apart is his direct engagement with other Hebrew works in order to present his story and the salvation of conversion directly to a Jewish community that could read little or no Latin or Spanish. According to Szpiech, Abner's rhetorical strategies are responding to a central concern of other thirteenth-century polemicists, namely the diminishing validity of using non-Christian authorities they do not believe in. Far from evincing the categorical rejection of Hebrew works that had characterized many earlier polemicists, the Teacher in the dialogue encourages other Jews who are in states of doubt and confusion to study intensely the sages of their own tradition, just as Abner the author claims he did in response to his dreams. By pushing his reader to study more, he encourages the Jew to admit he has doubts and questions about his faith. The implication of all this, and Szpiech makes this point well, is that Abner and other apologists of the later Middle Ages have escaped the old Augustinian paradigm of personal conversion and entered a new phase characterized by changing notions of textual authority.

Szpiech also makes fruitful comparisons with stories of conversion away from Christianity, although the implications of these analyses are somewhat uneven. Chapter 3 is concerned with converts to Judaism, a natural counterpoint given Christianity's persistent expectations of eventual Jewish conversion. Here the results, I felt, are limited. From a relatively limited source base (a couple of brief Christian accounts of apostasy, a few well-known documents from the Cairo Geniza,

and the justly famous *Kuzari* by Judah Halevi) Szpiech arrives at the unremarkable and somewhat tautological conclusion that “conversion and proselytism...play a less prominent role in Jewish depictions of history considered here than in Christian ones” (119). What stories of conversion to Judaism do set in relief, particularly given the appropriate focus on the twelfth century as a moment of transition, is that 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.

Since Islam, unlike Judaism but akin to Christianity, does impose a “suppersessionist imperative,” Chapter 6 thus targets conversionary accounts to Islam. Here the results are very intriguing. Examining a range of texts between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries, Szpiech detects convergences with and divergences from the Christian apologetic tradition. A good example of this is the *Gift of the Learned One for the Refutation of the People of the Cross* by one Anselm Turmeda, who adopted the name Abd Allah following his conversion from Christianity to Islam around 1420. In constructing this polemical anti-Christian work in Arabic, Anselm/Abd Allah drew heavily in his conversionary narrative from Christian models, most notably the one by Abner/Alfonso. This is best evident in the appeal to both reason and authoritative tradition, the use of personal testimony to support the authority of the arguments, the carefully drawn parallels between personal experience and historical processes, and the appeal to linguistic mastery as a further proof of authenticity in conversion (208). The Christian supersessionist approach toward Judaism is, *mutatis mutandis*, appropriated to become a powerful rhetorical tool for Muslim converts and apologists. And in the twelfth century a Baghdadi Jew named Samuel converted to Islam and composed an anti-Jewish work entitled *Silencing the Jews* (c 1163), which circulated widely in the East. Samuel’s treatise mixes rational and Scriptural appeals and is evidently based on familiar arguments of the equality of prophecy, the condemnation of Christian and Jewish falsification of the true prophetic message in their Scriptures, and the abrogation of these religions as corrupt and invalid. From a close reading of this polemic and other similar works, Szpiech draws the important conclusion that “the twelfth-century Christian conflict between ratio and *auctoritas* is paralleled by a corresponding conflict in Islamic sources between *aql* (reason) and *naql* (received tradition)” (184).

Szpiech has a fine eye for detail within the texts he examines, but an obvious question that arises from this densely packed and well-constructed book is how to situate the narrative of conversion within the wider context of non-narrative conversions (i.e. “the thing felt”). Are these narrative texts merely discursive or do they fundamentally impact our understanding of conversion in the Middle Ages more generally? Szpiech is so focused on the rhetorical element of conversionary accounts that almost all other forms of conversion seem strangely irrelevant to him. He says that his project “interacts little with the work of historians charting the spread of religion as a historical process” (25), but that seems to me to limit the reach of his own findings. I disagree with his dismissal of the staging of public debates in the thirteenth century as “little more than a reified projection of standard

hermeneutic conceptions of difference” (126). They are, I would contend, a byproduct of the very crisis of religious authority he is examining and, since they are dramatic and public, contain important clues about how polemical encounters evolved from one intellectual sphere of activity to another. Some attempt might also have been made to compare interfaith paradigms of conversion with that other Augustinian model, the conversion from secular to the religious life. At times Szpiech tends to wax verbose, such as in the recapitulation of important points, when simplicity might have been preferred (i.e. “the story I have told in this book is partly about the intractability of narration as a tool for axiomatic argumentation,” 225). Scholars and students of Iberian studies and medieval interfaith relations will nevertheless want to think hard about the questions this book poses and the texts it so elegantly exposes.