

BOOK REVIEWS

CONVERSION AND NARRATIVE: READING RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN MEDIEVAL POLEMIC. By Ryan Szpiech. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. 311 p.

In this ambitious and learned book, Ryan Szpiech studies the role that narratives of conversion played in medieval religious polemic. He argues that by examining these largely first-person narratives as stories rather than as records of actual religious transformation it is possible to see how they both reflected and shaped shared understandings of religious history and methods of theological argument. In Szpiech's view, to understand the shifting conventions and sources of religious authority is to grapple with the problem of representation. Attentive to both the social conditions of belief and the formal and philological particularities of his texts, Szpiech looks *at* rather than through the twelfth- to fifteenth-century conversion narratives considered in this book. This literary historical approach is particularly apt for studying the works of Christian apologists, Szpiech contends, because of the fundamentally "narrative structure" (5) of Christian sacred history. Although a sequential eschatology is embedded in the arc of Christian conversion stories, Szpiech demonstrates that such stories were nevertheless supple tools for demarcating both individual and collective identity, particularly in the context of medieval polemic.

As Szpiech acknowledges in his introduction, conversion is a knotty interdisciplinary topic. Studying conversion as a personal experience, economic calculation, social movement, or political weapon not only entails tracing the movement of individuals and groups through the boundaries between religions but also involves proposing a definition of religion itself. A shared paradigm for studying conversion across multiple fields has proved elusive precisely because conversion is often a "placeholder" (16) for these broader epistemological and methodological concerns. In pursuing a "narrative approach" (25) to conversion, Szpiech seeks to historicize this conundrum, which in the medieval period occupied theologians and evangelizers as today it troubles historians, anthropologists, and literary critics. Because the learned have always employed accounts of conversion for both professional and polemical ends, Szpiech suggests, the shifting formal, linguistic, thematic, and other literary features of these accounts can serve as a gauge for doctrinal creep and pastoral technique, not to mention the shifting conventions of authenticity. From this perspective, the opacity of language and narrative is an opportunity rather than a limitation.

Toggleing between ancient paradigms and late medieval adaptations, the first chapter argues that there are two principle ways to tell the story of conversion to Christianity: as a sudden and decisive break, such as Paul's conversion in Acts, or as a long and gradual transformation, such as Augustine's conversion in *Confessions*. By the fifteenth century, the Iberian Christian apologists Juan Andrés and Pablo de Santa María, the former a converted Islamic jurist from Xátiva and the latter a prominent Jew from Burgos, among many others, had combined aspects from both Paul's and Augustine's conversion stories. This intermingling of models, in Szpiech's view, indicated an ongoing tension between exclusive and supersessionist conceptions of Christian history. Andrés's Castilian *Confusion or Confutation of the Muhammadan Sect and of the Qur'ān* and Santa María's Latin *Scrutiny of Scriptures and Additions* to Nicholas of Lyra's exegetical gloss show not only how first-person stories of conversion become tools of religious disputation, but also how such stories transformed extant narrative archetypes. The crucial second chapter moves backward chronologically to the twelfth century in order to examine the well-known Latin treatises of two

Jewish converts to Christianity, Herman of Cologne's *Little Work on His Conversion* and Petrus Alfonsi's *Dialogue against the Jews*. Szpiech contends that the integration of philosophical reason into polemical arguments based on scriptural and patristic authority produced a crisis of interpretive method in the twelfth century. Citing non-Christian source texts and including first-person conversion stories were two ways that Christian scholars sought to resolve this crisis. Interrupting his examination of Christian treatises composed in Latin and Spanish, Szpiech turns in the third chapter to the uses of conversion narratives in the medieval Jewish context. Drawing on a range of texts penned in Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew, including the late Carolingian *Annals of St. Bertin*, Khazar correspondence discovered in the Cairo Geniza, and the *Kuzari* of the Iberian poet and philosopher Judah Halevi, Szpiech concludes that stories of conversion to Judaism served more narrow disputational ends than stories of conversion to Christianity.

Returning to Christian sources, the fourth and fifth chapters examine primarily Iberian texts from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Widening the definition of conversion to include spiritual awakening as well as outright community swapping, the fourth chapter studies the *Autobiography* and other Catalan and Latin works of the peninsular polymath Ramon Llull. Increasingly attentive to the sounds and linguistic forms of non-Christian sources in their original Arabic and Hebrew, Llull and his predecessor, the Catalan Dominican Ramon Martí, reimagined the form and scope of religious authority, or *auctoritas*. While the future of actual Jews hung in the balance during the famous Barcelona Disputation of 1263 between the Jewish convert to Christianity Pau Cristià and the eminent Jewish scholar Nachmanides, Martí and Llull employed a fiction of contact with non-believers in order to refashion Christian authenticity for a largely Christian audience. Focusing on Jewish convert to Christianity Abner of Burgos's *Teacher of Righteousness*, a fourteenth-century Hebrew text now extant only in Castilian translation, the fifth chapter argues that by this late medieval moment Christian apologists had begun to celebrate rather than fear the indeterminacy that was and remains an essential feature of narrative. Szpiech's Abner stages his own authority and marshals the representation to doctrinal and pastoral objectives. In a reprise of the third chapter, the sixth chapter studies stories of conversion to Islam from Judaism and Christianity in order to offer a second counterpoint to the medieval Christian account occupying most of this book. Treating the multifaceted autobiography of the late fourteenth/early fifteenth-century Catalan-born Anselm Turmeda alongside an array of little-known texts by the twelfth-century Baghdadi/Anatolian Samaw'al al-Maghribi, the thirteenth-century Alexandrian Sa'id Hasan, and the fourteenth-century Ceuta-born 'Abd al-Haqq al-Islami, Szpiech addresses the long-standing debate about the relative importance of inner spirituality and ritual practice in the Islamic tradition. He then concludes the book with a reading of the fifteenth-century Hebrew allegory *Book of Ahitub and Salman*, which suggests that story-telling became an important strategy of late medieval Christian polemic because (and not in spite of the fact that) storytellers tend to underscore the unreliability of their own tales.

Szpiech's examination of the rhetoric of testimony in religious polemic is thorough and astute. He leaves no doubt that in mining for historical data historicists of the past missed the rich ore on the linguistic surface. The surprise for non-specialist readers of Szpiech's book is not that this was the case, but that this argument still needs to be made in some corners of medieval studies, decades after the "linguistic turn." Even so, real authors lurked behind the rhetoric of authenticity, seeking to persuade and instruct through their stories, whether or not they invented them out of whole cloth. And, whatever the imagined audiences, the histories of these texts' reception extended beyond the ramparts of learned polemic into the worlds of pastoral action and imperial expansion. While Szpiech's close readings reveal how medieval conversion narratives served to "dramatize" (91) shared conceptions of time or markers of orthodoxy, the most compelling of such readings trace the histories of these texts' production and reception as well as their symbolic function. The danger of the "lens of literary studies" (4) is that in over-correcting for a historicist hypero-

pia it can produce a New Critical myopia. Despite his insistence that he is simply studying how stories work as stories, Szpiech happily protects against such over-correction by engaging a wide range of social and institutional history.

Szpiech's interpretive focus is sharpest when examining Iberian texts, which occupy the bulk of the book. Yet this distribution of sources raises certain questions that Szpiech leaves unanswered: Do peninsular materials take priority because they are uniquely illustrative of conversion narratives' centrality to polemic? Was conversion a particularly hot topic on the peninsula because contact across religious and linguistic lines was especially intense or intimate there? Is this book a delicate attempt to shift the traditional center of medieval studies to the southwest? Unbounded by the peninsula, Szpiech tends toward exhaustiveness—his corpus of conversion texts extends from the finely wrought autobiography to notarial snippets culled from archives throughout Latin Christendom and the Islamic world. Like his loose definition of “narrative,” his flexible principles of inclusion and exclusion end up diluting the book's important conclusion that stories of conversion were tools of Christian religious polemic. Szpiech is not responsible for the disciplinary and publishing pressures that undoubtedly shaped the decision to tell a far-reaching medieval story and to include a wide variety of sources. Nonetheless, he has forgone the opportunity to deepen his book's stakes by more clearly addressing the intersection and friction between medieval generality and Iberian specificity, on the one hand, and the distinctions among different genres of narrative, on the other.

Most impressive about *Conversion and Narrative* is the way it strides the fields of cultural history, religious studies, and literary criticism. Testing the boundaries of each with multilingual dexterity and interpretive acuity, this book will be of particular interest to medievalists from each of these three disciplines, although other scholars interested in conversion, testimony, and rhetoric will find much to consider as well. For, not unlike the texts examined in his study, Szpiech has aimed to transform the conventions of scholarly expertise by telling a new kind of interdisciplinary story, one whose most important lesson is that stories are as much a source of history as a vehicle for conveying it.

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ISLAM AND THE ENGLISH ENLIGHTENMENT. By Humberto Garcia. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. xviii, 346 p.

Humberto Garcia's excellent and very timely book presents itself as a study of how “sympathetic literary and cultural representations of the Islamic republic contributed . . . to Protestant Britain's evolving self-definition between 1670 and 1840” (xi). Garcia positions his work as an intervention in contemporary political and cultural debate, writing against the many versions of the “clash of civilizations” thesis that, more and more aggressively post-9/11, have posited an essential and irreducible antagonism between Islam and the West. His objective is “to discredit the false Eurocentric assumption that English law and democratic thought were exclusively rooted in Judaeo-Christian history” (224), and he pursues this by exploring how “the radical Enlightenment was in constant dialectical engagement with Islam” (3), which was understood as part of a shared Abrahamic heritage and prophetic tradition. In particular, Garcia focuses on how freethinkers in the long eighteenth