

interest to all with a concern for crusader studies and/or cultural encounters, it is likely that all will find much of interest.

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### **Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic**

RYAN SZPIECH, 2013

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

313 pp.

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Following in the footsteps of A.D. Nock's classic account of "conversion" in Antiquity, Ryan Szpiech collects a series of conversion accounts from the High Middle Ages to demonstrate the relationship between conversion accounts and polemical argumentation. Rather than tackling the general topic of medieval conversion in the sense of a pietistic turn (which Szpiech admits would quickly become an impossibly vast project on the hagiographical literature of the entire period), the author offers a study of the theologically oriented conversion accounts that are embedded in polemical works. The question is thus: what is the place of first person narratives of conversion and post-conversion in the attack on the religious other, who was once the religious self? He argues that there is a fundamental connection between conversion narratives and the creation of polemics against the abandoned religious tradition. He traces this connection back to a shared root: the relationship between the conversion narratives and the polemics of the medieval period in the West. The more fallen the convert was and the more corrupt their former religion, the greater the conversion's polemical force as a theological argument against the former religion.

Szpiech presents the specific theologizing tendencies of this period's conversion narratives (roughly the sixth/twelfth to the eighth/fourteenth centuries) as a novelty in both plentitude and style. He argues that there was a new need for a "personal touch" to the polemical model. As opposed to mere argumentation of theological points, a conversion narrative establishes the author as an *auctor* with true authority (*auctoritas*), who can therefore be quoted and called as a witness to speak about the (now former) "other" religion. As these human authority claims reflect ultimate divine authority, the conversion accounts likewise tend towards the hagiographic. Indeed, "the convert himself [...] possesses many characteristics of the archetypal hero of myth." (216) He is called away from his community on a spiritual quest, throws down his past-self, who is at once his own foil, and returns to his people as a warner and a redeemer. These apparently biographical qualities were often coupled with other great novelties of sixth/twelfth-century Latin knowledge – the presentation of source languages/translations and rational approaches to argumentation – to beget this particular coincidence of conversion narrative and polemical tract.

Szpiech claims that these stories “make more sense” as narratives than they do as history because they are attempts to demonstrate something that is otherwise invisible. (19) Rather than try to depict the actual inner conversion itself, Szpiech therefore works from the narratives that these conversions leave in their wake. He is less interested in conversion as a person’s experience of a “thing felt,” than as a narrative construction, a “thing made.” (3) “I aim, then, not only to look *at* the text (rather than *through* it), but more important, to look *around* it, to ask why it was made and why it was placed in its context [ ... ] neither the representation nor the reality can stand apart from the other.” (19) This is stated more boldly elsewhere: like “the saint’s *vita*, the polemical conversion narrative literally *is* the convert.” (23) Szpiech argues convincingly that a conversion narrative is a *chronotope*, whether or not it happens to be a factual account at all: “Conversion stories function as a sort of shorthand of belief, summing up an entire theology of history in a single symbolic gesture of faith.” (219) The narrative stands in for, reenacts, and, in a single moment, presents the fullness of salvation history and orthodoxy’s rejection of the old/false/heretical religion: “The representation of individual conversion thus deliberately mirrors historical change.” (218) Szpiech argues that these conversion accounts are fundamentally Christian because they “more fittingly reflect Christian notions of revelation, salvation, and time,” (6) specifically following the models of Saul/Paul in the Bible and Augustine in the *Confessions*.

Obviously, conversion accounts are much more central to Christian self-understanding and apologetics than to the other two main Abrahamic traditions, yet perhaps the most interesting aspect of the book is the inclusion of Jewish and Muslim conversion narratives. The inclusion of Jewish and Muslim materials does, however, expose the book’s one minor shortcoming (of which the author is aware): the analyses of these non-Christian accounts are not as developed as perhaps they ought to be. This reviewer was left hoping that either Szpiech or other scholars will develop this aspect of the work further in future studies.

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### **Genealogy and Knowledge in Muslim Societies: Understanding the Past**

SARAH BOWEN SAVANT and HELENA DE FELIPE (Eds), 2014

[Exploring Muslim Contexts]

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

vii + 156 pp.

£70.00 (hardback)

ISBN 9780748644971

Sarah Bowen Savant and Helena de Felipe have collected an excellent series of chapters in this volume, which considers the diverse role that genealogy has played and the uses it has been put to in Muslim societies. A broad sweep has been taken with these