

Also in the last chapter, Turner's attempt to contextualize heresy trials is welcome, but the result is a mixed bag, again because of errors and confusions. For example, he argues that al-Mutawakkil's actions, '[c]ontrary to the usual understanding', do not define him as a Ḥanbalī (p. 135). But the real reason that the caliph cannot have been a Ḥanbalī is that, in the mid-third/ninth century, *no one* could be a Ḥanbalī (as Turner himself knows, since he quotes Christopher Melchert to that effect some seven pages later). In his conclusion, Turner asserts that, after al-Mutawakkil, no single group of sectarians could gain 'a decisive advantage...in determining normativity' (p. 149). But why assume that sectarians want everyone to agree with them? Declaring others out of bounds need not be about 'determining normativity'; it is just as likely to be about ensuring the purity of one's little group of faithful. In the early Islamic case, many sectarians both before and after al-Mutawakkil seem to have been content to follow their own truth and thereby ensure their own salvation. Whether others followed them or not was in most cases a matter of indifference. Of course Turner is right when he notes that caliphs were a special case: in theory at least, they were responsible for the salvation of the whole *umma*. But no doctrine of the imamate requires the imam to persuade others to join him. Rather, imami creeds make *believers* responsible for identifying and following the imam. This, *pace* Turner, is how the early caliphs seem to have understood their role.

This book is valuable for its attempt to fit caliphal interventions into a broader political narrative. The point that Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's trial was not a wild divergence from the norm is well taken, and serves as a welcome corrective to arguments made by other scholars, including me. Here I should add that Turner has kind things to say about my work, for which I am grateful. But the book suffers from too many problems of definition to provide the revisionist history it promises.

*Michael Cooperson*

UCLA

E-mail: cooperso@humnet.ucla.edu

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

By RYAN SZPIECH (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, *The Middle Ages Series*, 2013), xi + 228 pp. Price HB £39.00. EAN 978-0812244717.

Under the influence of Protestant notions of religiosity, scholarship has long prioritized the inner experience and spirituality of the convert in studies of religious change. More recently, academics have historicized the very notion of conversion and put a greater emphasis on social and political dimensions as well

as on the role of conversion within larger contexts of collective cultural and ethnic identities and its functions in discursive contexts. The present study adds to this more nuanced understanding of conversion, more specifically of conversion narratives, their textual and intellectual contexts and their social implications.

The author explores the role of such stories primarily in Christian polemical literature, composed from the late eleventh century onwards and directed against Jews and Muslims. The utility of the former members of these communities should hardly come as a surprise. Who would be a better witness to the weakness and indeed falseness of a faith than its former believers? And yet, the convert had to negotiate a thin line between his former and new identities, revealing and relying on a past he had rejected.

According to the present book, it was not only this intimate familiarity which gave ex-Jews and ex-Muslims their value. Their authority rested in the narrative rendering of their experience and has to be understood in apologetic and ideological contexts and against the backdrop of the expansion of authority in Christian thought as well as Christian views of salvation history. As medieval authors cited increasingly non-Scriptural sources, in particular philosophers, the convert was assigned a new role and his own authority. The narrative empowered him to use the new constellation of authoritative sources, scriptural as well as philosophical. Their position in disputational literature distinguished conversion narratives from their form and function in historical and devotional texts in which they were modeled after established hagiographical patterns.

Likewise, according to the author, the narrative functions as the embodiment of the conversion rather than as a posterior expression of an inner experience. This focus on the narrative character of conversion stories allows the author to identify the connections with Christian salvation history, which are embedded in a collective and social view of conversion. The stories 'can be seen as a form of learned discourse dedicated specifically to the allegorical expression of a theological vision of soteriological and ecclesiastical history' (pp. 23–4). The convert's story mirrors the divine plan of salvation.

In order to make his case, the author examines in the first chapter polemical treatises by two fifteenth-century converts to Christianity, the former Muslim Juan Andrés, author of an anti-Muslim text, and the former Jew, Pablo de Santa María who became a bishop. Both employed biblical and late antique tropes of conversion of a return to the truth and to faith, but in addition to divine support they can also rely on their intellectual powers. Unlike the former, however, who mostly focused on polemicizing against Islam, the latter struggled more extensively with the fraught relationship between Judaism and Christianity, which involved both continuity and rupture. While Juan follows a Pauline paradigm of completion and supersession, Pablo resolved some of the tensions by resorting to Augustine of Hippo who offered a unified model of time in which later events are foreshadowed by earlier developments.

The second chapter focuses on two twelfth-century converts from Judaism, Herman and Petrus Alfonsi, and the effects of the introduction of extra-biblical material into Christian disputational writing. Philosophical authorities in

particular allowed for expressions of the self which destabilized the conventional predominance of Biblical sources. Authors gained their authority by recounting the story of their conversion. Related to these developments were debates about rationalist strategies of proselytization.

In the third chapter, the author explores uncommon and brief cases of Christian conversion stories to Judaism from the ninth to twelfth centuries, concluding that these narratives were indeed much more significant for Christian theology than in Jewish literature. Instead of using conversion narratives to express views of redemption history, Jewish authors focused on the individual return to the faith. The conversion of the Khazar king constitutes a rare exception in its popularity. It reveals a greater interest in social rather than inner transformation and was described by the Jewish author Halevi as a mere imitation of real Jews.

The fourth chapter addresses the significance of translation and textual and linguistic knowledge, especially the extent to which authority was regarded as depending on familiarity with canonical texts in their original language.

Chapter 5 analyses a 'jargon of authenticity' which resulted from the above-described developments. This is well represented in the polemical work by the former Jew Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid, who argued with his former brethren of faith on the basis of his own knowledge of the Jewish tradition, but also emphasized the practical advantages for Jews if they converted to Christianity.

In ch. 6, select Islamic conversion narratives in polemical literature are explored for comparative purposes. They do not display many of the features identified in Christian literature above, but according to the author reflect Islamic representations of salvation history. Judaism, for instance, is portrayed as a false and superseded deviation rather than a prefiguration which can be exploited as a witness for the truth of Christianity. Some strategies, however, can be found in Christian as well as Muslim conversion narratives such as the familiarity with the texts of the convert's previous faith in their original language.

This well-written and convincing study will be of interest to scholars studying conversion narratives and polemical literature. That converts can be valuable witnesses is almost commonsensical, but the present study offers a much more detailed analysis of this function. Scholars of conversion to Islam and Muslim conversion narratives will be particularly interested in picking up the preliminary thoughts in ch. 6 and add their own insights to the comparative effort.

*Anna Akasoy*

*Hunter College, City University of New York*

E-mail: aa739@hunter.cuny.edu

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