

Ryan Szpiech, *Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic*

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Ryan Szpiech. *Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. xiv, 314 p. ISBN 9780812244717. US \$59.95 (hardcover).

Ryan Szpiech wants us to think about “religious conversion” differently. Since the birth of the disciplines of anthropology, psychology, and sociology over a century ago, scholars have been interested in explaining why and how individuals have dramatically upended their lives by “converting” from one religion to another. What psychological processes go into such a movement? When can a conversion be said to be *final*—or can it ever be said to be? What of those who convert under duress? Can they even be said to have converted? These, it should be said, are not Szpiech’s questions. Following the insights of the medievalist Karl Morrison, he argues that conversion is not a general human phenomenon or a label well-suited to describing change in any time and place, but is instead “a placeholder for other protean concepts and paradigms that explain and qualify change of religion in different ways” (16).

Szpiech’s questions in this book are rather different, and they focus intently on the literary representation of conversion. He wishes to understand “what place such first-person [conversion] stories had in the discourse of religious apology and polemic” (3). He has uncovered a connection between medieval Christian apologetic/polemical literature, on the one hand, and narratives of conversion *to* Christianity, on the other, and his aim is to explain this link. In his view, the connection between conversion and apology for Christians is “most evident in their shared arguments concerning individual and collective identity, arguments that, in turn, share a fundamentally *narrative* structure” (4).

In the first chapter, Szpiech sets for himself the ambitious task of showing both that the fourth-century North African theologian Saint Augustine (particularly through his reading of the Apostle Paul) established a paradigm of conversion that would endure through the medieval period and that this paradigm came to be radically transformed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as a result of the turn towards scholasticism. The second chapter picks up this topic, with Szpiech's claim that the paradigm of conversion was changing due to the rediscovery of Aristotle's philosophy. He begins with a discussion of the transition from "authority (*auctoritas*)" as the primary basis of religious argumentation—that is, appeals to the claims of venerable past figures—to authority paired with "reason (*ratio*)". As a result, the very notion of *auctoritas* was up for re-definition and expansion, and Szpiech argues that the convert, as a kind of rhetorical figure, was able to be construed as a new kind of authority because of his "association with the otherness of the unconverted infidel and his status as one faithful to the goals of Christian discourse" (90). The third chapter serves as a sort of interlude, in which Szpiech presents the way in which conversion functioned in medieval Jewish sources. The infrequency of conversion narratives in these sources helps him to buttress his argument that conversion is a "particularly *Christian* theological category" (92).

He resumes his argument about Christian representation of conversion in the fourth chapter by transitioning to the thirteenth century, in which emerges a new emphasis on "foreign language as a marker of authenticity" (120). In the writings of Dominican polemicists, particularly Ramon Martí, the Talmud and the Quran became authorities in their own rights, even as they were "flawed" to a certain degree, which could be used against the religious communities that produced them (124). This effected a "displacement," in which the convert's authority was transferred to the one possessing linguistic expertise (141). In the fifth chapter, Szpiech shows how the emphasis on the personal experience of the convert and on expertise in languages converges in a single late medieval figure: Abner of Burgos, who took the name Alfonso of Valladolid upon his conversion from Judaism to Christianity. Abner/Alfonso writes in Hebrew and in a manner that is highly sympathetic to the Jewish religion from which he converted; for Szpiech, the distinction between "selfhood and otherness" which lay at the heart of the discourse of conversion began to be blurred (173). But these two were never fully conflated, and the supersession of Judaism by Christianity remained the paradigmatic focus of medieval conversion narratives.

The final chapter represents yet another departure, this time to consider conversion in Islamic sources. Szpiech demonstrates that accounts of conversion *to* Islam, like their Christian (but not Jewish) counterparts, dramatize “a general plot of soteriological history” (213). They are fundamentally narrative, but the theology that they represent is understandably different from Christian conversion narratives: “Islam is not characterized as an ironic inversion of what went before ... but as the cancelling of all previous faiths” (213).

This is a stimulating book that due to its breadth of source material will appeal to a wide range of readers. Moreover, Szpiech’s theorization of conversion as a literary phenomenon will undoubtedly help enrich the longstanding scholarly conversation about the nature of religious identities.

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Abner of Burgos	Alfonso of Valladolid	Aristotle	auctoritas
Christian discourse	conversion stories	Islam	Judaism
Karl Morrison	medieval Christian polemical literature		
medieval Jewish sources	medieval polemic		
narratives of conversion to Christianity		Paul the Apostle	Ramon Martí
religious conversion	Saint Augustine	scholasticism	selfhood
the literary representation of conversion		the Quran	the Talmud