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TURNING AND RETURNING

Religious conversion and personal testimony in Iberian societies

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In 1423, Alfonso the Magnanimous, King of Aragon (d. 1458), sent a letter from the Castel Nuovo in Naples, to Tunis, offering its recipient free passage on any ship, Christian or Muslim, “to any of our lands”. The offer included passage for his wives, children, servants, and all worldly goods. This extraordinary privilege was granted without condition, “non obstantibus quod fidem xpianam, ut percepimus, abnegaveritis, et propterea crimina plurima et enormia comiseritis” (Calvet 1914, 41) [Even though, as we knew, you denied the Christian faith and thereby committed many great crimes]. The addressee of the letter is “dilectum nostrum fratrem Entelmum Turmeda alias alcaydum Abdallah” [our beloved friar Anselm Turmeda alias alcaide Abdallah], i.e., the Mallorcan Franciscan Anselm Turmeda (ca. 1352–ca. 1424/30), known after his conversion to Islam (ca. 1387) as ‘Abdallāh al-Tarjumān. This was not the first such high-profile letter sent to Anselm/‘Abdallāh. Eleven years prior, Benedict XIII (Pedro Martínez de Luna), papal claimant in Avignon, wrote to him to offer absolution. Benedict recounts how, “temptatus a diabolo...habitu Ordinis Fratrum Minorum...ac fidei cristiane proposito penitus derelictis, eiusdem secte ac sarracenorum perfidie te dedisti” (Pou y Martí 1913–14, 467) [tempted by the devil...[and] having thoroughly abandoned the habit of the Franciscan order...and the way of life of the Christian faith, you gave yourself to the same perfidious sect of the Saracens]. In exchange for his return to Christian lands and to the Christian faith, “omnem culpam ac reatum apostasie huiusmodi...remittimus” (467) [We remit all guilt and charge of such apostasy].

In the years between these two letters, Turmeda himself wrote a narrative of his conversion in Arabic titled *Tuhfat al-adīb fī al-radd ‘alā ahl al-ṣalīb* [Gift of the Lettered One to Refute the People of the Cross], a lengthy apology for Islamic belief and polemic against Christian dogmas that begins with a detailed autobiography. After describing his youth and education in Mallorca and Aragon, he tells how he studied for a decade in Bologna under the tutelage of a learned old Christian. One day he asked his master about the identity of the “paraclete” or advocate, whom Jesus mentions in the Gospel of John (e.g., 15:26). “The old man began to weep... ‘You should know, my son, that the Paraclete is one of the names of... Muḥammad, Peace be upon Him.’... ‘O master,’ I exclaimed, ‘What is to be done then?’ ‘My son,’ he said, ‘you should enter the religion of Islam’” (Epalza 1994, 215–19; trans. Boase 1996–97, 63–64, with my changes). Shortly after, Turmeda made his way to Tunis, professed his faith in Islam, married, and began

a lifelong career in service of the Ḥafṣid empire. He never accepted either offer of return to Christianity or Christian lands.

Turmeda's case, while unique in many ways, is also representative of some of the key aspects of the history of conversion in medieval Iberia. The rivalry between Islam and Christianity, dramatized on a small scale in Turmeda's account, can in general terms be understood as the same contest that frames nearly the whole span of medieval Iberian history, from the arrival of Muslim troops in 711 to the final conquest of Muslim Granada in 1492. Anselm's journey from Mallorca to Tunis and from Christianity to Islam mirrors in reverse that slow conquest, and even foreshadows the migration of many Moriscos (former Muslims forcibly converted to Christianity in 1501 and after) to Tunis after their final expulsion from Iberia in the seventeenth century. The contest for Anselm's allegiance by Christians and Muslims alike echoes the theological struggle for Christian supremacy over other faiths, including both Islam and Judaism, that was a defining feature of the medieval Church. The format of Anselm's attack on his former faith is also representative of the tradition of polemical writing by converts—from Judaism and Islam to Christianity, from Christianity and Judaism to Islam, and in some rare cases, from Christianity or Islam to Judaism—that became more popular over the course of the Middle Ages and laid the groundwork for the development of the genre of autobiography in the early modern period. Finally, the survival of documents about Turmeda, written from both Christian and Muslim perspectives, raises one of the most important issues at stake in studying medieval conversion: the question of how to reconcile religious change understood as a social process, and conversion understood as a metaphor of culture expressed retrospectively in words and images.

Using Turmeda's example as a point of departure, this chapter will consider conversion in medieval Iberia both as a social phenomenon and as a literary and theological construction. It will first provide a broad overview of conversion in social and political terms, offering a bird's-eye view of some key changes that shaped religious encounters in medieval Iberian history. It will then raise the question of methodology, suggesting that although "conversion" serves as a useful historiographical shorthand for larger and more complex social processes, it is most meaningfully studied from a critical perspective as a metaphor of cultural expression. After surveying a few texts that recount conversion stories told from different narrative perspectives, such as *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* of Gonzalo de Berceo (d. before 1264), the *Cantigas de Santa María* of King Alfonso X (d. 1284), and subsequent Romance fictions, it will consider the place of conversion in theological treatises such as the *Kuzari* of Judah Halevi (d. 1141), the *Llibre del gentil y dels tres savis* of Ramon Llull (d. 1316), and the *Sefer Aḥiṭub ve-Tsalmon* (ca. 1420–50). It will conclude by comparing these to first-person accounts of conversion by three well-known converts who, like Anselm Turmeda, also wrote polemical attacks on their former faiths: Petrus Alfonsi (converted ca. 1106), Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid (d. ca. 1347), and 'Abd al-Ḥaqq al-Islāmī (late fourteenth century). Although these examples are widely disparate in date, focus, and context, conversion appears in all of them as a rhetorical tool or narrative device, a reflection not of single events in mundane history but of a theologically inflected prophetic history. These examples show that conversion in Iberian societies was as much a *topos* of discourse as it was a phenomenon of Iberian social and religious history, and merits critical treatment as an aspect of poetics and a metaphor of culture more than as a historical fact or event.

Conversion in Iberia: a brief historical overview.

The Iberian Peninsula is unique in medieval history in part because it was the only European territory in which Muslims enjoyed independent polities, and in part because it also was home to a sizeable Jewish population, established far earlier and in greater numbers than anywhere else

in Latin Christendom. While communities of Jews had been scattered throughout parts of the Mediterranean (e.g., Alexandria, Rome, parts of Greece) since antiquity and continued to exist in areas of the former Roman Empire (such as Constantinople), their communities were in most places of moderate size. Between the fall of Rome and the year 1000 CE, the majority of Jews was to be found east of Palestine in Babylonia or in North Africa and Iberia, mainly in Islamic rather than Christian territories. Because of the long duration of Islamic rule in al-Andalus and the sizeable Jewish population there up to the twelfth century, Iberia was the only land in Europe or the western Mediterranean—with the exception of Sicily in the tenth to twelfth centuries—shared by sizeable populations of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. For this reason, pre-modern Iberia is also a uniquely fruitful location to consider the history of religious change, constituting what Mercedes García-Arenal and Yonatan Glazer-Eytan have called “a laboratory of conversion” (2019, 3).

Conversion from Judaism to Christianity—held up as a Christian ideal since the first century—was an important topic of debate in Iberia before the arrival of Islam in the eighth century. While much discussion of “Jews” took place in the total absence of real Jewish communities, anti-Jewish thought had a measurable effect on social interaction as well. Small pockets of Jews had settled in Iberia in the Roman period and those that remained under Visigothic rule faced considerable religious hostility and little legal protection, including the threat of forced conversion. The question of coercion presented a theological conundrum in the medieval church, in which forced conversion was at once prohibited and, in sacramental terms, still recognized as spiritually valid. A papal recommendation against forced conversion had existed in Latin Christendom since the time of Pope Gregory I (reg. 590–604) (Gregorius 1982, 48). Nevertheless, only a few decades later, King Sisebut (d. 621) ordered the forcible baptism of all Jews in his kingdom. Although Bishop Isidore of Seville (d. 636), at the Fourth Council of Toledo in 633, forbade conversion by force, he nevertheless partially upheld Sisebut’s ruling by deeming all earlier forced baptisms as valid and binding (Vives, 1963, 211). This Janus-faced policy established a contradictory pattern of Christian treatment of Jews in Europe that continued to obtain in later centuries, leading to both pastoral and theological arguments that appealed to Jews to convert and outbursts of violence that forced them to accept baptism.

The arrival of Islam to the peninsula in 711 initiated a process of radical social and political change that eventually yielded numerous conversions to Islam. Islam spread initially through the expansion of culture, forbidding coercion in religion and promoting an inclusive and ecumenical “community of believers” in which Jews and Christians “did not need to ‘convert’ to anything in order to become active participants” (Donner 2010, 114). In Iberia, as elsewhere in the expanding Islamic world, conversion was not an imperative so much as cultural assimilation and political submission, which allowed Jews and Christians the freedom to maintain their own religious traditions as subject populations. Jews and Christians, named as monotheistic “people of the Book” (*ahl al-kitāb*) who recognized prophetic tradition as revealed in scriptures, enjoyed a protected status under a “covenant of protection” (*dhimma*) that prevailed under Islamic rule. As *dhimmīs*, Jews and Christians were allowed to practice their religions and establish their own internal legal systems, in exchange for accepting second-class status involving payment of a poll tax and observance of limits on their public expression of religion and social authority (Cohen 1994, 54–55, 112).

Although strictly prohibited from direct insolence to Muslim authority or disrespect to Islam, the *dhimmī* population enjoyed religious autonomy and was largely free from coercion or persecution. This may have relieved the pressure to convert to Islam, but it did not greatly slow the process of cultural assimilation. As Richard Bulliet has suggested through a study of rates of conversion to Islam in the Middle Ages, conversion proceeded slowly but steadily during the

period of the Emirate in the first two centuries of Islamic rule in Iberia (756–929) (Bulliet 1979, 114–127). Although his model does not discuss the total percent of Muslims in Iberian society, it suggests indirectly that by the time of the Caliphate of Cordoba (929–1031), a majority of the native population had converted to Islam (Catlos 2014, 19). Muslim society in al-Andalus was composed of a small Arab elite, a large Amazigh (Berber) contingent, and a large class of “new Muslims” (*muwalladūn*), made up of recent converts and their descendants (Glick 2005, 184). Despite occasional outbreaks of violence against Jewish and Mozarabic minorities such as the well-known “martyrs’ movement” of Mozarabic Christians in ninth-century Cordoba (Coope 1995) or the attack on the Jews of Granada in 1066 (see Ashtor 1992, 2:187–89), the Muslim-*dhimmī* relationship guided inter-religious interaction under Islamic rule even after the arrival of the Almoravids in the late eleventh century. The situation shifted somewhat with the military campaign of Aragonese King Alfonso I in 1125. After aiding Alfonso in his failed bid to take Granada, many Mozarabic Christians either migrated north or were deported, leading some to convert to Islam in order to remain (Lagardère 1988: 15; Fierro 1997: 155–56). During the period of Almohad rule that began in the middle of the twelfth century and saw the elimination of *dhimmī* privileges, Christians became scarce in al-Andalus, as can be discerned from contemporary sources such as the poetry of Ibn Quzmān (Corriente 1990).

Jews, on the whole, fared rather differently, at least through the Almoravid period. Although concrete documentation to measure Jewish life under Islamic rule in the Emirate period is lacking, it is assumed that Jewish society began to flourish at this time. It was in the ninth century that Bodo, a deacon in the palace of Louis the Pious (d. 840), fled south and converted to Judaism, taking refuge in Cordoba (Reiss, 2019: 52–55). He there engaged in an epistolary debate with Mozarabic (Christian) author Paulus Alvarus (himself, apparently, also of Jewish ancestry). It is telling that Bodo chose to relocate to Islamic lands after his conversion, a choice not unlike that of various other converts to Judaism in Christian Europe who apparently found the *dhimmī* contract more accommodating to Jewish life. Numerous references to such converts were preserved in the Cairo Geniza, a storeroom in the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustāṭ (Old Cairo), where documents from local Jewish life were stored between the ninth and nineteenth centuries (Goitein, 1967–93: 2:304; Yagur 2017, 16–71). By the tenth century, Jews were numerous in al-Andalus and Jewish culture began to enjoy an efflorescence in all areas—literary, economic, intellectual, religious—unlike anything seen since the Second Temple period (Ashtor 1992, 1:241–42). While there is little information about Jewish conversion to Islam in this period, the picture of Jewish success suggests that culturally Arabized Jews faced relatively little pressure to assimilate religiously, and that this situation continued even in the Almoravid period.

Eventually, the Almohads abolished the *dhimma* agreement and the twelfth century saw widespread migration of Jews to Christian territories and to other areas of the Islamic world as well as more conversion (Stroumsa 1995). Most famously, the philosopher Maimonides left Cordoba in adolescence and, like numerous Jews of the period, was forced to feign conversion to Islam (Stroumsa 2009, 59). After living for a time in Almohad Fez, he finally settled in Cairo, then a part of the Fatimid Caliphate, where he emerged as a leader of the Jewish community. In addition to his voluminous religious and philosophical writing, he also wrote numerous epistles, including a letter to a willing convert to Judaism and another discussing feigned conversion as a means to escape duress (60). His example makes evident the radical restriction of Jewish religious freedom imposed under the Almohads of al-Andalus.

Beginning in the late eleventh century, as Christian forces pressured the Almoravid territories from the north, a sizeable population of Muslims came to accept Christian political sovereignty and remained to live as religious minorities in Christian kingdoms. While they hardly formed a coherent population with any kind of single group identity, historians have come

to categorize them as *mudéjares*, referring to their status as a subject population that remained after conquest.¹ This population responded to Christian conquests differently in different regions. Around Toledo and western Castile, a good portion of the conquered Muslim population converted, perhaps, as Catlos proposes, because the presence of Mozarabic Arabized Christians originally from Andalusī territories facilitated the acceptance of Christian religion without the loss of Arabic culture (2014, 24, 48). By contrast, conquests further south and in Aragon produced less conversion to Christianity, instead leading to the formation of a larger *mudéjar* class. After the conquests of Almohad territory, many other Muslims, especially the intellectual and political class, migrated south to the new Nasrid kingdom of Granada, or to North Africa.

The *mudéjares* who stayed in Castile and Aragon came more from the laboring classes than from the intelligentsia, and enjoyed a limited right to religious and legal autonomy. While stories of prominent converts have survived—such as the famous case of Abu Zayd, Almohad ruler of Valencia, who converted and took the name Vicente Belbís in 1232 (Burns 1987)—conversion to Christianity was not common enough to eclipse *mudéjar* identity, although acculturation to Romance cultural norms was widespread (Catlos 2014, 82). Nevertheless, legal texts from both Christian and Muslim traditions explicitly sought to control conversion between Islam and Christianity. The *Siete partidas*, the extensive law code prepared by King Alfonso X of Castile in the thirteenth century (reg. 1252–84), prohibits under pain of death Christian conversion to Judaism (VII.24.7) or Islam (VII.25.4). It also orders (VII.25.5) that those who convert and then return to Christianity be prohibited from productive economic life, facing the loss of “honors and earnings” unless (VII.25.8) the convert provide some important service to the Christians (Alfonso 1807, 3:673, 677–680). While such conversions were relatively rare, evidence of them still survives in archival sources (Nirenberg 1996, 127–28).

Parallel to the *Partidas*, the so-called *Leyes de moros*, a fragmented fourteenth-century Romance translation of part of the book of Malikī jurisprudence *Kitāb al-tafrī* [Book of Derivations (of Legal Principles)] of Ibn al-Jallāb al-Baṣrī (d. 1007)—a work widely disseminated among Iberian Muslims—similarly stipulates death for Muslims who convert to another faith (Gayangos 1853, 142; cf. Abboud-Hagggar 1999, 2:571–72).² A more nuanced question raised on both sides was the legality of converting between other laws, such as Muslims adopting Judaism in Christian territory. The Christian jurist Oldradus de Ponte (d. ca. 1337) suggests that a Jew should be allowed to convert to Islam, judging it to be a “viam minus malam” (Zacour 1990, 77) [path of lesser evil], a judgment invoked in the fifteenth century in the real case of a Muslim woman converted to Judaism in Talavera (Nirenberg 1996, 190–94). The *Leyes de moros/Tafrī* more explicitly orders that “la syerva et el christiano et el judio, sy se tornaren los unos a la ley de otros, non les enpesca” (Gayangos 1853, 143; cf. Abboud-Hagggar 1999, 2:572) [The female slave, the Christian, and the Jew should not be prohibited if they convert to the law of the others]. Caught between two legal traditions, and competing with Jews for preeminence in Christian society, the *mudéjares* played an important role in Christian society in Castile until the end of the fifteenth century, when they were forced to accept baptism. Similar decrees of forced conversion followed in Aragon in 1526. The last Muslims of Iberia survived through the sixteenth century as Moriscos, forcibly converted crypto-Muslims, eventually facing expulsion from the peninsula between 1609 and 1614.

At the same time, while Jews found a new and useful role in Christian society in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, they also faced increasing hostility from ecclesiastical leaders, including pressure to convert. This shift was part of a broader process of consolidation of Christian orthodoxy across Europe that involved new policies and norms governing Christian interaction with non-Christians. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215), initially responding to

the spread of Christian heresy in southern France, articulated a broad policy of ecclesiastical order and discipline. Lateran IV also coincided with the emergence of mendicant orders of friars such as the Franciscans and Dominicans, both producing missionaries and scholars that propagated a new, more systematic vision of Christian orthodoxy, including the organization of “inquests” (*inquisitionibus*) into heretical belief and behavior (Cohen 1982, 45). In the middle of the thirteenth century, Humbert of Romans, Master General of the Dominican Order, encouraged the study of Arabic and Hebrew to facilitate missionary campaigns in the Holy Land (Vose 2009, 45), leading to more intense critical reading of non-Christian sources by select groups of Dominicans in Aragon (Chazan, 1989: 30; Vose 2009, 107, 129).

As part of such efforts, Friar Raymond of Peñafort helped organize a debate in Barcelona in 1263 between the converted Jew Friar Paul Christiani and the leader of the Catalan Jewish community, Nahmanides (d. 1270). It centered on the Christian claim that post-biblical Jewish literature in the rabbinical tradition, above all the Talmud, proved that the Messiah had already come and that Christian dogma was true. In the wake of the debate, Pope Clement IV (reg. 1265–68) issued a bull (“*Turbato corde*”) urging friars to serve as inquisitors to investigate not only heretical Christians but also Jews who might have encouraged conversion to Judaism or helped converts return to the Jewish fold (Grayzel, 1989: 103; Tartakoff 2012, 27–28). One of the most prominent Dominicans working in the period of the Barcelona Disputation was Ramon Martí (d. after 1284). He developed the arguments from the Barcelona Disputation in his elaborate polemical treatise *Pugio fidei* (Dagger of Faith), based on citations of biblical, Talmudic, and midrashic literature, doing so “ut Deo cedat ad gloriam et honorem, fidelibus ad confirmationem, et fidei defensionem et infidelibus ad veram et utilem conversionem” (Ramon Martí 1687, 6) [in order to render glory and honor to God, confirmation and defense of faith to the faithful, and, to the unfaithful, true and useful conversion].

The aggressive policies of the thirteenth-century church, which mirrored and fomented a popular anti-Jewish hostility expressed in Christian preaching, were at odds with the protected status of Jews and Muslims as property and servants of the crown, an embodiment of the “king’s treasure”. This tension reached a breaking point in the summer of 1391, when anti-Jewish riots broke out in Seville and quickly spread across much of the peninsula. In a matter of months, thousands of Jews were killed and many thousands more were forced to convert to Christianity, although exact figures are not possible to determine (Baer 1961, 2:96; cf. Mitre Fernández 1994, 54). Zealous preaching campaigns over subsequent decades such as that led by Vincent Ferrer (d. 1419) produced the conversion, in name at least, of many thousands more. One of the converts from 1391, Jerónimo de Santa Fe (Joshua Halorki), led the Christian offensive against the Jews at the Disputation of Tortosa in 1413–14, repeating many of the arguments about Christological themes in post-biblical Jewish sources that had been adduced at the Disputation of Barcelona and in the works of Ramon Martí (Baer 1961, 2:170–232).

Among the many changes brought about by these riots and subsequent conversion campaigns, most important was the emergence of a new class of converted Jews (*conversos*) that was caught between two social and religious identities. Many *conversos*, forced to adopt Christianity in public, maintained some Jewish traditions and beliefs in their private life, and a culture of suspicion began to emerge in which *converso* religiosity was scrutinized. Such scrutiny intensified over the course of the century, eventually leading to the formation of the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition by the Spanish monarchs in 1478 and, in 1492, the expulsion of all unconverted Jews from Castile and Aragon. While the initial focus of the Inquisition was the religious habits of *conversos*, its scope widened in the sixteenth century to include Moriscos, Protestants, and other “heterodox” groups (Peters 1989, 101). By the early sixteenth century, the once-diverse societies of Muslim and Christian Iberia had been consolidated both politically

and religiously. Conversion, conquest, and expulsion drove Jewish and Muslim religious life underground and, eventually, eradicated it from the peninsula.

Conversion as a historiographical problem: between metaphor and event

This sketch of broad historical trends might offer a coherent overview, but what does it really tell us about conversion *per se*? To locate a conversion on a timeline of events is to assign it a fixed and recognizable shape, one that is expected to recur in various historical contexts and periods in a meaningfully similar way. Is this expectation justified? Are the conversions to Islam of the Maghrebi Amazighs in the late seventh century and of Christian Visigoths in the early eighth—at a period when Islam was a young religion without a robust intellectual and legal tradition—similar to the conversion of Anselm Turmeda in the late thirteenth century, when Islam boasted of libraries of exegetical, legal, philosophical, and scientific literature and represented a formidable military threat to Christian dominance all across the Mediterranean? Can the feigned and temporary “conversion” of Maimonides under duress be compared to the coerced but largely permanent “conversions” of many Iberian Jews after the riots of 1391? If, as upheld at the Fourth Council of Toledo, forced baptisms are binding, must conversion always involve belief? Must it be publicly performed and witnessed? Can it be compared across religious traditions?

The case of Anselm Turmeda with which this chapter began, while a fitting embodiment of many aspects of Iberia’s history of conversion, is also representative of the conceptual problems that accompany that history. Most pressing among these problems is the central question of how conversion can be treated as a historical subject at all. On the one hand, Turmeda’s conversion is straightforward for historians. Although the texts surrounding Turmeda’s conversion—both Christian letters and his own compositions—are stylized and full of figurative language, Turmeda was a real person, and his profession of Islam (perhaps around 1387) was a real event that affected Christian–Muslim relations in the western Mediterranean in the early fifteenth century. Even decades later, the prospect of his return to the Christian fold was apparently of such momentous importance that it merited conciliatory letters from some of the top brass of the western Mediterranean. There is, in this sense, no doubt that his conversion “took place” and it is logical to see it as a verified historical occurrence.

On the other hand, one might ask, what did his conversion entail, and is that meaning consistent across historical (and culturally different) accounts? What, after all, can actually be known of his, or any, turn of faith? Judging by the words of king and pope, he was guilty of apostasy. He “denied the Christian faith”, “committed great crimes”, and “gave himself” to the “perfidious sect of the Saracens”. But in his own words, he stood before the sultan and, before both Muslim and Christian onlookers, “professed my belief in the true faith” (Epalza 1994, 228–29; trans. Boase 1996–97, 68). How can his story—or any story of conversion or apostasy—be told without bias? The facts and the meaning of Turmeda’s turning depend on which documents we are reading, all of which were written decades after the events they recount.

Turmeda’s story underscores the point that analyzing religious change as a coherent phenomenon requires making decisions about its meaning that are not based on objective, or even commonly shared, parameters. This problem is acute in the history of religion because conceptualizing conversion in terms of facts—dates, locations, events—imparts to religious change a specific shape, distinguishable from other possible shapes. It presumes that conversion “happens” at some discrete point in time and thus can be compared to other measurable historical events (Szpiech 2013, 9–10). How can such conceptions be justified? As Karl Morrison has noted, what survives from the history of conversion is not facts but texts, and readers “cannot determine exactly what happened in the event of conversion or recover the unspoken content that the

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text held for its author” (1992, 4). What can be historicized is not some idea of “conversion” per se, but its representation in a multitude of contrasting words and images. The elasticity of the concept of conversion, and the essentially Christian nature of the language with which it is discussed, are evident in the variety of terms used to name it.³ The word “conversion” (Cast. *tornarse, convertirse*) might equally denote a “turning towards” faith or a “turning away” from sin, a change of heart or a change of affiliation. Conversion can be voluntary or forced, gradual or sudden, a radical departure from or a “coming home” to orthodoxy. Morrison points to this variety, stating, “the history of ‘conversion’ is a history of metaphorical analysis” (1992, 2), a study of cultural rather than social history.

In the context of the medieval Mediterranean, in which virtually all conversion was conversion between monotheistic faiths whose differences hinged on rival interpretations of shared figures and events in prophetic history, conversion can be meaningfully approached not simply as a figure of language, but as a temporal metaphor. All conversion, as it has emerged from Christian tradition, makes sense not as a single moment but as an event whose meaning depends on what precedes and follows it. Thus, if conversion is a metaphor, it is always one embedded in the context of a narrative structure, however implicitly. Bruce Hindmarsh has pointed out the close connection between the idea of conversion and the structure of narrative, noting, “If narrative in its classical form is defined as a plot with a beginning, middle, and end ... then all narratives are, in one sense, conversion narratives” (2014, 346). Iberia is, in this sense, not simply a “laboratory of conversion”, but even more, a laboratory of conversion stories.

Romancing conversion

Given the social landscape, conversion is not surprisingly a prominent and recurring theme in Iberian literature, conceived of both as a movement between religious communities and as a spiritual renewal from within. Early Romance literature contains numerous accounts of moral and spiritual transformation, what Lozano-Renieblas calls the “hagiography of conversion” (Lozano-Renieblas 2000, 161). For example, the thirteenth-century poem *Libro de Santa María Egipcíaca* recounts the repentant turn from prostitution of Saint Mary of Egypt. Similarly, the *Vita coetanea* (Contemporary Life) of Mallorcan polymath Ramon Llull describes the author’s Franciscan-like “conversion to penance” when visions of Christ transformed him from a vain jongleur into a committed missionary and spiritual philosopher (Vega 2002, 19–22, 261).

A number of the Marian miracles in Gonzalo de Berceo’s *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* (Miracles of Our Lady), written in the Riojan Romance dialect in the middle of the thirteenth century, dramatize similar scenes of penitence. Of the 25 stories, two also deal explicitly with the conversion of Jews to Christianity. Miracle 16, “The Jewish Boy”, retells the popular tale of how a young Jew, wanting to play with his Christian friends, took communion with them on Easter. When his father found out, he grew angry and threw the boy into the oven, but the Virgin Mary protected him. The neighbors, Jews and Christians, discovering the crime, then threw the father into the oven in the boy’s place, and “cantaron grandes laudes, fizieron rrica festa” (Gonzalo 2006, 200; 1997, 79) [they sang great lauds, they had a lavish celebration]. Even more explicit is the conversion of the Jews in miracle 23, “the Merchant of Byzantium”. When a Jew asked a Byzantine merchant who might guarantee his loan, the latter named Jesus and Mary. Later, after the merchant was detained on business and unable to return in time to pay his debt, he threw what he owed into the sea and it miraculously floated to the door of the Jew on the day it was due. When the merchant returned home, the Jew claimed he had not been paid, until the statue of Christ spoke and accused him of lying. He confessed and “*elli con sus compannas fo luego convertido, murió enna fe Buena, de la mala tollido*” (Berceo 2006, 281; 1997, 122, with my changes)

[He and his companions were immediately converted;/ he died in the good faith, wrested from the bad one].

The format of conversion through miraculous Marian intervention is elaborated on a much greater scale in the *Cantigas de Santa María* (Songs of Holy Mary) of King Alfonso X, written in Galician-Portuguese in the 1270s. Alfonso's *Cantigas* reuse 19 of Berceo's 25 plot lines, recounting some 356 miracle stories (out of 427 total songs). Among these, 18 stories deal explicitly with conversion (one Cathar heretic, two doubting Christians, four pagans, five Muslims, and six Jews, including both conversion stories found in Berceo).⁴ *Cântiga* #4 retells the "Jewish boy" story, adding that, after Mary protected the boy, "*a Judea criya, / e o menço sen al / o batismo recebia*" (Alfonso 1986–89, 1:66; 2000, 7) [the Jewess came to believe, and the boy received baptism at once]. *Cantiga* #25 retells the Byzantine merchant story, describing how in the end, the Jew "*bêes ali logo de chão / en Santa Maria creeu / e en seu Fill', e foi crischão*" (Alfonso 1986–89, 1:122; 2000, 35) [at once believed wholeheartedly in Holy Mary and in Her Son and became Christian].

Some of the converts in the *Cantigas* become Christian after Mary's miraculous protection from harm in battle (#28, #205), her revival of a dead child (#167), or her protection from the devil (#192). *Cantiga* #46 tells a unique story in which a Moor went abroad "per crischãos guerjar e roubar" [to make war on the Christians and pillage], robbing an image of the Virgin Mary as booty. Because the image caused him to have religious doubts, he challenged God to show him a sign, agreeing to convert to Christianity if he did.

Adur pod' esta razon
toda o mour' encimar,
quand a omagen enton
viu duas tetas a par,
de viva carn' e d' al non,
que foron logo mãar
e deitar
leite come per canudos...
Quand' esto viu, sen mentir
començou muit' a chorar,
e un crerigo viir
fez, que o foi batiçar. (Alfonso 1986–89, 1:173; 2000, 62)
[The Moor had scarcely uttered this when he saw the statue's two breasts turn into living flesh and began to flow with milk in gushing streams. When he saw this, verily he began to weep and had a priest called in who baptized him.]

This motif linking conversion with lactation appears in other Romance texts, such as the Castilian version (late thirteenth-century?) of the popular Eastern romance *Flores y Blancaflor* (Wacks 2019, 119). In this text, the Christian countess Berta nurses both her own daughter, Blancaflor, and the Muslim son of her captor, Flores. The boy eventually agrees to convert to Christianity, "*ca la naturaleza de la lecha de la Christiana lo mouio a ello*" (Arbesú 2011, 116–17) [because the nature of the milk of the Christian woman moved him to it].

Conversionary apologetics

These and numerous other examples of fiction and poetry in Ibero-Romance from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries depict conversion in idealized terms as the denouement of a plot

conflict or the culmination of a miracle. Other texts make use of conversion as the basis of a theological or apologetic argument, such as the early thirteenth-century fragment *Disputa entre un cristiano y un judío* [Dispute between a Christian and a Jew], one of the earliest Iberian examples of Jewish–Christian polemic in Romance (Castro 1914). Texts of this sort—systematic treatises defending one religion or attacking another, such as the *Tuhfā* of Turmeda—offer brief descriptions or allusions to conversion as rhetorical devices to justify or affirm a religious argument. Polemical texts were immensely popular in medieval monotheistic traditions, appearing in a wide variety of languages, forms, and cultural contexts. Although they are often studied apart from belletristic literary texts in poetry and prose, this separation according to perceived genres can prove reductive. The many ways that conversion appears in medieval writing demand a comparative, thematic analysis of different textual witnesses rather than a strict adherence to categories based on generic literary forms.

One of the most influential stories of conversion from this tradition of conversionary polemics is also one that, like Turmeda’s text, raises the historiographical problem of how to understand fictional accounts of allegedly real events. Among the various references to Jewish conversion preserved in the Cairo Genizah are a handful of documents relating to the legend of the Khazars, a semi-nomadic Turkic tribe in the central Asian steppe north of the Black sea. According to various sources, some of the nobility and royalty (and perhaps commoners as well) abandoned their tribal religion and adopted Judaism around the turn of the ninth century. The Genizah collection preserves letters exchanged between one of the Khazar leaders named Joseph and the Cordoban grandee Ḥasdai ibn Shaprut (d. ca. 975), Jewish physician and minister to Caliph Abd al-Raḥmān III. The Khazar legend was preserved in the collective memory of Andalusī Jews for centuries, and served as the basis for a philosophical defense of Judaism by Iberian poet Judah Halevi, the *Kitāb al-radd wa-l-dalīl fī al-dīn al-dhalīl* [Book of Refutation and Proof in Defense of the Despised Faith], now considered one of the masterpieces of medieval Jewish literature. Written by Halevi in Judeo–Arabic between 1130 and 1140, it is better known to posterity as *Sefer Ha-Kuzari* [Book of the Khazar/Kuzari], the title of the Hebrew translation made a few decades later by Granadan Jew, Judah ibn Tibbon (d. after 1190).

The bulk of the text consists of a rationalist defense of Judaism, but Halevi frames this philosophical content with a narrative of the conversion of the Khazar king. Halevi begins by saying that he was asked to gather arguments to defend Judaism against its critics, both internal and external. “This made me remember the arguments of the rabbi who studied with the Khazar king who converted to Judaism some four hundred years ago” (Judah 2009, 47). Halevi then opens the story with a classic motif of medieval conversion narratives, a dream:

It begins with the king having a recurring dream of an angel who appears to him and tells him, “Your intentions are desirable to the Creator, but not your deeds” ... This prompted the king to explore other belief systems and religions. Ultimately, the king, together with a great populace of Khazars, converted to Judaism.

(47–48)

The story told in the *Kuzari* transforms historical events into a legend of Jewish myth and a frame to contain a philosophical defense of Judaism.

The actual details of the moments of “turning” are spare. The path to the king’s conversion is described as a search for the meaning of his dream, consisting of a brief discussion with a philosopher, a Christian, and a Muslim, followed by a long discussion with a rabbi that takes up most of the first book of the work. The king is full of doubts and the process of conversion is not rapid, but little by little, the rabbi convinces him of point after point, helping him to

comprehend the meaning of his prophetic dream. At the start of book two, “the king eventually revealed his recurring dream to his chief officer” (Judah 2009, 141). The two set off to a distant mountain cave, a kind of rustic synagogue, where they met with local Jews. Their conversion is then related in a single sentence: “they disclosed their identity to them, embraced their religion, were circumcised in the cave, and then returned to their country, eager to learn the Jewish law”. After keeping their conversion secret for a time, “finally they revealed their secret to the public and prevailed upon the rest of the Khazar population to convert to Judaism” (142). The rest of the work, including three lengthy remaining books, consists of a detailed account of the king’s questions and answers with the rabbi who teaches him about Jewish thought and belief.

In its presentation of a conversion story in the context of a religious apology for Judaism and rationalist polemic against rival faiths, the *Kuzari* might also be compared to later works that use a similar format. One that deserves mention is Ramon Llull’s *Llibre del gentil i dels tres savis* [Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men], from ca. 1274–76, which tells a similar story of a gentile king in search of true religion. The king hears the cases of a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim presented in turn, eventually choosing one of the three, although the wise men ask not to hear which (Ramon Llull 2001, 206). This multi-voice debate structure is repeated again in the fifteenth century in a lesser-known Hebrew work from Aragon, the *Sefer Ahitub ve-Tsalmon* [Book of Ahitub and Salman], from ca. 1420s–40s. This anonymous work tells of a righteous queen of an unnamed island whose people follow a variety of religious ideas without certainty of any one true faith. Like the king of the Khazars, she has a crisis of faith while in bed, when “a profound plan came into her mind: find rules for her people so that there would not be different opinions” (Lara Olmo and Carlos, 1988, 8). After sending her wisest men off the island, one returns as a Jew, another as a Christian, and a third as a Muslim. After holding a debate between the Christian and Jew, she calls on the Muslim to mediate, and when he chooses to convert to Judaism, the queen and the whole island follow, leaving the Christian to commit suicide in disgrace (199). The Jew then teaches the queen the tenets of Judaism. Clearly modeled on the *Kuzari* but also resembling the structure of the *Book of the Gentile*, the *Book of Ahitub* uses rational and exegetical arguments to defend the true faith, and employs conversion as a plot device to punctuate the triumph of the protagonist and the defeat of the Christian enemy.

Testimonies of conversion

Polemical texts like these not only make use of conversion stories as rhetorical frameworks. Many also link conversion stories to the first-person testimony of an allegedly real author as a way to lend authority to the text or authenticity to the authorial voice. Such first-person accounts build on what was the standard model of conversionary rhetoric throughout the Middle Ages, the model of Augustine of Hippo in the *Confessions* (397 CE) (Hindmarsh 2014, 347). Just as Augustine tied his conversion to a refutation of Manichaeism, Western authors in the twelfth century and after began to link their conversion stories to polemical writing against their former faiths. One of the first Iberian—and European—texts written about conversion in this way was the *Dialogus contra Iudaeos* [Dialogue against the Jews] of Petrus Alfonsi of Huesca, converted to Christianity in 1106. The work proved to be one of the most widely read polemical works of the Middle Ages, circulating around Europe and being preserved in many copies (Tolan 1993, 98–99; Petrus 2018, XII–XVII).

It is not necessary to summarize the content of the arguments, which present a dialogue between a Christian and a Jew divided over twelve books, including four books disproving Judaism, one book disproving Islam, and seven books proving the foundations of Christian truth. What is most germane in this discussion is the highly innovative structure of the dialogue, first introduced in

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the opening frame of the text, in which the voice of “Peter”, the Christian persona standing in for the author, converses with “Moses”, Peter’s (and the author’s) name before conversion. Conversion here is not an experience or a miraculous event, but a rhetorical device used to structure the work and authorize the argumentation. The two voices represent a split in the perspective of the author himself, whose Jewish self, Moses, “salutavit me more non amici sed quasi alieni” (Petrus 2018, 10) [greeted me not as a friend but as if I were a stranger]. Unlike the religious dialogues like the *Kuzari* or Llull’s *Book of the Gentile*, in which different characters represent different religions, the *Dialogue* introduces conversion as a split in the identity of the author Petrus Alfonsi, who invokes his own individual conversion as proof of his knowledge and experience.

Petrus Alfonsi’s *Dialogue* is the first of a number of Iberian polemical treatises in which personal experience serves to authenticate religious arguments. As Petrus boasts to Moses, the Jews “qui me antea nouerant ... probaverant peritum in libris prophetarum et dictis doctorum” (Petrus 2018, 4) [who had known me previously ... had considered me well trained in the books of the prophets and the sayings of the sages]. One author who follows Petrus’s model—both in content and in form—is the fourteenth-century convert Abner de Burgos, known after his conversion to Christianity around 1320 as Alfonso de Valladolid. Unlike Petrus and many subsequent polemical authors, Abner/Alfonso continued to write in Hebrew after conversion, seeking to engage directly with fellow Jews in debate. His earliest and longest text, the *Moreh Tsedeq* (Teacher of Righteousness), survives now only in a Castilian translation, under the title *Mostrador de justicia*. Like the *Dialogue* of Petrus Alfonsi, the *Teacher* is structured as a dialogue between Jewish and Christian selves, a Christian “Teacher” (Heb. *Moreh*, Cast. *Mostrador*) and a Jewish antagonist, the “Rebel” (Heb. *Mored*, Cast. *Rebelle*). Also like the *Dialogue*, the prologue represents the conversion of the author himself from Judaism, establishing this double perspective as a means of authorizing the arguments to follow.

Unlike the *Dialogue*, however, the conversion of the author that opens the work is represented in dramatic narrative detail, constituting one of the most substantial medieval examples of a first-person narrative of conversion in a Romance language.

Caté la premia de los judios, el mi pueblo donde yo era, que sson en esta luenga captividad queixados e quebrantados e angustiados en ffecho de los pechos, el pueblo que descendieron de la ssu onrra e del ssu loor que ssolian aver, e non an ayuda nin ffuerça en ssý. E acaesçió un dia, penssando yo mucho en este pleito, que entré a la ssignoga con gran lloro e amargura de mi coraçon, e ffiz plegarias a Dios ... E de la gran coyta que tenia en mi coraçon e de la lazeria que avia tomado canssè e adormesçime; e vy en vision de ssuenno un grand omne que me dizia: “Por qué estás adormesçido?”

(Abner 1994–96, 1:13)

[I saw the burden of the Jews, my people from whom I am descended, who are, in this long captivity, oppressed and broken and burdened heavily by taxes, this people that has lost the honor and glory it once had, which has no help or strength in itself. And it happened one day, as I was thinking much on this plight, that I went into the synagogue with great cries and bitterness of heart, and I prayed unto the Lord ... And in the great anxiety which I had in my heart and from the toil I had taken upon myself I grew tired and fell asleep. And I saw in a dream vision a great man who said to me: “Why are you asleep?”]

The details of this scene—a Jew falling asleep in the synagogue while praying for relief for his people from the pressures of Christian rule—is unique in Romance literature, as is the content

of the Jewish sources that Abner cites —Talmud, midrash, Arabic, and Hebrew philosophy—to support his pro-Christian agenda. After his dreams and study continued for some 25 years, “convertíme a la Ley de los christianos publicament, loado sea Dios, por salvar mi alma de los mis pecados e de los pecados de todos los judios, que tenia a cuestras ssi non descubriesse a ssus orejas lo que me mostraron del çielo” (1:15) [I converted to the Law of the Christians publicly, God be praised, to save my soul from my sins and from the sins of all the Jews, for whom I was responsible if I didn’t reveal to them what was shown to me from heaven]. This opening represents one of the most elaborate conversion narratives from medieval Iberia, offering a unique example of the fusion of both Hebrew and Romance literary traditions and of Christian and Jewish ideals of faith.

The argument that, as Morrison notes, there is no “general morphology of conversion, applicable to conversion as a universal human experience” (Morrison 1992, xv) is exemplified by comparing Abner/Alfonso’s dramatic narrative—full of visions, doubts, delays, and a narrative climax—with the telegraphic narrative of North African Jew ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq al-Islamī. Virtually nothing is known of this author other than that he was born in Ceuta in the fourteenth century and converted to Islam, writing an anti-Jewish polemic (tentatively dated to the 1390s) entitled *Al-Sayf al-mamdūd fi l-radd ‘alā aḥbār al-yahūd* [The Outstretched Sword in Refutation of the Jewish Sages]. The text consists of five chapters, each on a common theme from Muslim apologetics (proof of Muhammad’s prophethood, the falsification [*tahriḥ*] of Scripture by Jews and Christians, etc.). The author relates his conversion in a brief prologue.

Sixteen years ago, [God] revealed to me the truth, about which the rational person does not doubt ... It was part of the wisdom of God that [my destiny] remain concealed and secret within Him, without his revelation or manifestation, until He favored me and inspired me [to know] that this destiny was not sufficient for me nor was it going to save me, but rather that it was my duty to spread [the teaching] of His unity and proclaim His non-human character and His glory, making known the faith in His prophet Muhammad ... I hastened to do that which would save me from painful punishment and which would bring me close to tranquil paradises. In this way, I began to speak the words of [God’s] unity and lack of human attributes, testifying that there is no God but the One God, who has no equal, and testifying that Muhammad is His servant and messenger.

(‘Abd al-Ḥaqq 1998, Arabic 9–11)

Like Abner/Alfonso and Petrus Alfonsi, ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq makes use of his conversion to authorize his attack on his former religion, but unlike both he does not structure his text as a dialogue between selves but as a straightforward theological polemic. For ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq, conversion to Islam is simply compliance with the will of God, not a hermeneutical puzzle or internal struggle as in Abner of Burgos or Anselm Turmeda.

These examples of what can be called “testimonial” narratives are just some of the texts from the Iberian world or western Mediterranean dramatizing conversion in a first-person voice (García-Arenal 2001). Other salient examples include the account of Solomon Halevi, known as Pablo de Santa María after his conversion to Christianity around 1391, who narrates his account of conversion as a kind of ethical will to his son, Alonso de Cartagena; or the account of Juan Andrés, who opens his anti-Muslim *Confusión o confutación dela secta mahomética y del alcoran* [Confusion or Confutation of the Muhammadan Sect and the Qur’ān], published in 1515, with an account of his conversion from Islam in 1487. Additional examples can be found from across Europe and the Mediterranean, including the *Opusculum de conversione sua* [Little Work about

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His Conversion] by twelfth-century convert Herman (Judah) of Cologne, the Hebrew conversion narrative of Giuàn d’Oppido, from Norman Italy, converted to Judaism at the dawn of the twelfth century, or the elaborate narrative of Jewish convert to Islam Samaw’al al-Maghrebī that forms part of his anti-Jewish polemic *Iḥām al-Yahūd* [Silencing the Jews], from ca. 1163.⁵ Although these texts are all different in perspective, language, and argument, they all present conversion—like the narrative of Anselm Turmeda that began this chapter—through a personal narrative of psychological and spiritual transformation, involving many of the same plot elements such as unexpected dreams, secrets and disclosures, physical and existential journeys, and scriptural exegesis that reveal hidden destinies through prophecy and prediction. In all of these, conversion functions as more than just a subject or an experience. It is also a rhetorical device expressing a plot climax, the resolution of a protracted dramatic struggle. In Iberian conversion stories, as in those told across the medieval and early modern Mediterranean, conversion reflects broader hermeneutical and historical arguments between rival faiths. Positioned between event and rhetoric, these conversion narratives reflect a double imperative of expressing the microcosmic uniqueness of individual experience and the universal, macrocosmic exemplarity of polemical argument.

Conclusion: conversion and coercion

Conversion narratives in medieval Iberia offer a lens through which to consider broader shifts in social and religious relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Yet they are not transparent testimonies, but rather are constructed pieces of writing that shed more light on cultural and religious norms than on events in social, political, or economic history. Varied accounts—both those of a known author, like Anselm Turmeda, and of invented subjects, like Halevi’s Khazar king—appear in Iberia in the context of polemical or apologetic religious writing. In a similar way, conversion appears in Romance poetry and narrative from this period as a useful plot device signifying the culmination of action and the resolution of conflict.

These examples appeared in the context of large social upheavals. The mass conversions of 1391, followed by the imposed conversions of Muslims in Castile in 1501 and in Aragon in 1526, all represent cases of radical violence in which conversion was a force that reshaped Iberian society in the mold of a homogeneous, Catholic polity. The contrary conceptions of conversion as both an act of will and an act of violence, as both the product of belief and the result of ceremony or sacrament, make the topic of conversion a problematic subject for historiography as much as a fruitful object of literary and iconographic analysis. These multiple and contrary ideas persisted throughout the Iberian Middle Ages, shaping Iberian history, thought, and culture in every period, from as early as the anti-Jewish Visigothic policies of the seventh century to well past the traumatic expulsions of 1492 and 1609.

Notes

- 1 The term *mudéjar* derives from the Arabic term *mudajjan*, “one who remains” (or *ahl al-dajn*, “people who remain”), terms that only appear in the later Middle Ages (Harvey 1990, 3–4).
- 2 On the translation and circulation of the *Kitāb al-tafri’* in Romance (or *Tafria*), including various Aljamiado versions, see Abboud-Haggar (1999, 1:13–33); and see the comments by Harvey (2005, 155).
- 3 A full discussion of these terms is provided in Szpiech 2013, 26–27, 99–100, 247n17, 260n7.
- 4 Jews: #4, #25, #85, #89, #107, and #108; Muslims: #28, #46, #167, #192, #205; pagans: #15, #196, #306, #335; Christians: #8, #16; heretic: #208.
- 5 These texts are all considered in more detail in Szpiech 2013, which provides a full bibliography for each.

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