



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

[Review of: R. Szpiech (2013) Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic]

Wiegiers, G.

Publication date

2015

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Al-Qantara: revista de estudios árabes

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Wiegiers, G. (2015). [Review of: R. Szpiech (2013) Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic]. *Al-Qantara: revista de estudios árabes*, 36(1), 295-301. <http://al-qantara.revistas.csic.es/index.php/al-qantara/article/view/346/338>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

SZPIECH, Ryan, *Conversion and Narrative. Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013, 311 pp.

This carefully written, well researched, very rich and fascinating study concentrates on Medieval Christian apologetic and polemical writings, supplemented with Jewish and Muslim cases. The sources have in common that they include conversion narratives which introduce apologetic and polemical works (as separate forewords), are affixed to them (as a concluding afterword or even as a concluding part, such as in the case of Sa'id b. Ḥasan, see p. 192), or accompany polemical texts in an interwoven form (see for such a text, p. 117). All sources were chosen from the Western Mediterranean area, the region where the three communities and their religions were intertwined (to use

an expression of the late Havah Lazarus Yafeh) to such an extent that they could not help “identifying the other as character in its own narrative, either as historical or hermeneutical allies or as rivals.”

The introduction is devoted to the discussion of central questions and methodological and theoretical considerations. These include the role and function of such first person (conversion) narratives in the discourse of religious apology and polemic (apologetics and polemic being two sides of the same coin, see p. 3, 8, and the genre being defined as “an aggressive way to define and defend one’s beliefs,” p. 5), why the Christian, Jewish and Muslim writers told these stories and how such stories conveyed meaning and structure *as stories* reflecting communal religious identities rather than representations of individual histories (see also p. 218). The stage is set by a discussion of the case of Abner of Burgos/Alfonso de Valladolid (c. 1265/70-c. 1347), to which Szpiech returns extensively in chapter five. Szpiech makes clear that he approaches the conversion narratives as a discourse (p. 6) and as narrative. He focuses on documents written about conversion (“things made”— in the terms of Karl Morrison), and integrates in it the experiential aspects (“things felt”) without positing the interior as something preceding the exterior aspects (p. 23): “the polemical conversion narrative *is* [italics by Szpiech, GW] the convert” (p. 23). The introduction then turns to the narrative of the conversion, i.e. “the representation of events, consisting of *story* and *narrative discourse*, in which story is an event (the *action*); and narrative discourse is those events as represented” (p. 5). While strongly focusing on the literary aspects, the author attempts to challenge the generic boundaries between the archival, doctrinal and narrative sources aspects, and interdisciplinary. Connected to this aim he (rightly) posits that conversion can be studied as a discourse but that no generalisation as to its “substance” can be made. Indeed the “a priori” priority that is often attached to the experiential aspect is, as Szpiech remarks, induced by the Pauline paradigm in which this aspect is strongly dominated. His approach departs from that approach, very much in the way Clifford Geertz famously considered piety (and other religious moods, symbols and acts) as phenomena that can be studied as having a “public,” “observable” meaning (C. Geertz, “Religion as Cultural System,” in M. Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, London, Tavistock Publications, 1966, p. 10). The study is comparative in the sense that Jewish and Islamic cases serve as foils, to highlight the peculiarities of the Christian case (p. 27). Szpiech’s position in this regard is again strongly reminiscent of Clifford Geertz, who famously rejected universal comparativism, for example, in his *Islam Observed*. Nevertheless, he argues, there are recurrent elements in such narratives (enumerated on p. 117): the characterization of self before conversion, dramatization of the struggle and journey, tropes of divine revelation or prophetic dreams, and the trajectory of sacred history. The motive for paying more attention to Christian narratives is that “conversion and con-

version stories become particularly important in Christian treatises after the twelfth century because Christian notions of argumentative authority and proof begin to change at this time” (p. 7). This interest (also expressed in the subtitle of the book) is repeated on p. 20 where he tells us that he sees “the (conversion, GW) story’s details as products of a specific social, religious and ideological context rather than as fragments of an individual biography” and conversion narratives a primarily “intellectual” (p. 25). As such, they construct a (collective) “image of *auctoritas* –understood as both authority and, more problematically, authorship– through the symbolic testimony of the convert” (p. 21), the interest in the relationship between narrative, conversion, and authority especially becomes apparent when the three goals of this study are discussed. These are (1) to survey the place of conversion narratives in religious dispute and ask why and how the form of conversion narratives serves to express their polemical intentions, (2) to study the reasons for the renewed importance of stories of conversion in Christian arguments beginning in the twelfth century, and (3) to compare the Christian examples with a few Jewish and Muslim examples (pp. 5-6). This is done in a literary way, i.e. in the framework of the general focus of this study on ‘intertextuality’ viz. on the impact that the presentation of conversion in one context had on subsequent disputational writing, rather than on archival sources, and, so it seems, on salvation history (“Heilsgeschichte”) rather (in my own words) than history (p. 23-24).

Briefly put, the general argument of the book is that conversion stories play a more prominent role in Christian polemics than they do in Jewish and Muslim treatises because they more fittingly reflect Christian notions of revelation, salvation, and time (p. 6). Medieval Christian arguments had to rely for more on narration than Jewish (and Muslim) arguments because the former express a figural vision of salvation and a dialectical relationship between past, present and future, while the latter do not (pp. 116-17). I will return to the meaning of “more prominent” below.

In chapter one, it is argued that Christian textual narratives of conversion are heavily influenced by the canonical Acts of the Apostles, and in particular the paradigmatic conversion of Saul of Tarsus into Paul the Apostle, as a sudden repentance and sudden change in outer social identity as read and interpreted by Augustine of Hippo. The author does not trace the history of the influence of Augustine, but focuses on two cases of late medieval Iberian converts to Christianity, viz. Juan Andrés (his Muslim name is unknown; his conversion to Christianity allegedly took place in 1487) and the Jewish convert Solomon Halevi/Pablo de Santa María (d. 1435) (conversion around 1391) whose works became widely disseminated. In the latter’s work, the Augustinian position that conversion is gradual, and implies a figural, typological reading of the Jewish scriptures (which are after conversion are no longer to be interpreted “historically” and literally, but figuratively) can be found,

whereas in the former narrative the Augustinian element is avoided due to the fact, so the author argues, that Andrés refutes Islam, and not Judaism. (It is not entirely clear why the author could not have applied a sort of Augustinian paradigm to Islamic beliefs, but then the historical nature of the narrator and his religious background would have to be discussed, something Szpiech avoids, see p. 40). The author then turns more closely to the way Augustine resolved the place in Christian thinking with regard to the Jewish past. He accepted Israel but largely rejected the Jews, ascribing to them in the Diaspora the function of witnesses, until their conversion at the end of time. His model of conversion was through reading and rereading, unifying past, present and future in a spiral (dialectical) model in which the past unfolds into the present and becomes a part of future fulfilment. In it, conversion is brought about by God's grace, which thus makes a new understanding of the text. This doctrine about the nature of God's grace served to unify individual and sacred history in his reading of the Paul's letters, and Paul's conversion as described in Acts (pp. 54-55). This model also involves the necessity of "translation," viz. from the Hebrew into the Latin tradition. Authority is framed into both the scriptures, Jewish and Christian, and the personal authority of the convert who has inside-expert knowledge about his former religious tradition. But whereas in Augustine's *Confessions* the focus is on Biblical texts, in later times, particularly the twelfth century, through the introduction of (Aristotelian) philosophy and non-Christian exegetical authorities into Christian argument the model underwent important transformations. Solomon/Abner's late medieval work is a testimony to the evolution that the Augustinian model underwent: he makes use of post-biblical sources: rabbinical tradition, the Talmud, Christian exegetes as well as Aristotelian philosophy.

Chapter two jumps back in time to the period in which these transformations took place by discussing Moses/Petrus Alfonsi (conversion 1106), whose anti-Jewish and anti-Islamic *Dialogues against the Jews* were written in the beginning of the 12th century, and Judah/Herman of Cologne, whose *Little work on his conversion* was written in the middle of the 12th century. It describes and analyses the changing importance of Christian conversion stories which had been stabilized by the paradoxical formulations of Augustine's doctrine of grace (p. 54, 225), viz. religious identity as an expression of inner faith on the one hand and an outer manifestation of hierarchies of authority on the other (p. 226). In these works the transformation of Christian disputational writings is evident. Tensions between reason and authority, proof and appeal increased leading to include the narrativized experience, alongside reason and authority (p. 122, cf. p. 225). At the same time, the relations between Jews and Christian begin to change. The old, static typological approach was replaced by an active polemical attitude. Caroline Walker Bynum notes in the same period a process of replacement of linear-change (metamorphosis—the old self is completely replaced by the new self) by hybrid change (dialogue,

some elements of the old self remain) (pp. 223-224). For polemical writings and conversion stories this implied that the authority was no longer mainly based upon biblical texts, but more strongly on philosophical arguments and non-Christian authorities.

Chapter three takes the reader to Islamicate territory, and analyses conversion stories and polemical works written by convert to Judaism who migrated from Europe or converted (see the case of the Khazars) in the Middle East and North Africa. A number of Latin (Christian) and Hebrew (Jewish) accounts of conversion to Judaism are discussed, viz. the Latin chronicle *Annals of St Berin*, which tells about the German deacon Bodo/Eleazar (p. 93) (conversion middle of the ninth c.) who maintained a correspondence with the ninth-century Mozarab author Paulus Alvarus of Cordoba, the Ottonian account of Wecelinus, a clerk of Duke Konrad I of Carinthia (c. 1005), included in Alpertus of Metz's *De Diversitate Temporum*. Next, a number of Hebrew writings from the Cairo Geniza are discussed, viz. documents and treatises about the mythical conversion of the Khazars (among which correspondence between the Jewish Andalusian official, Ḥasdai b. Šaprut, and a Khazar named Joseph, and the correspondence included in the so-called Schechter letter). Conversion stories are included in two texts, the first (probably from the 11th century) being written by a monk who converted to Judaism, an apology in the form of fourteen pamphlets (p. 107) written for various priests (now lost), and the second the anonymous Hebrew *Book of Nestor* (12th century), which in turns also tells us about a priest who converted to Judaism (p. 108), the narrative of Giuàn/Obadiah of Oppido (no dating, see p. 110). The sources show that Jewish narratives do not balance the relation between the old and new self of the convert, but rather struggle with tensions between particularism and universalism, in line with Jewish religious tradition. Conversion stories-cum-polemics are apparently much rarer in these communities; the two cases found were briefly mentioned above. Not surprising, supersessionism is absent from Jewish writings (p. 119).

Chapter four analyses shifts in the thirteenth-century Christian narrative sources from personal narrative to a stress on linguistic and religious expertise with regard original texts in original alphabet and a turn to an appeal to later, Jews writings, especially the Talmud and Aggadic sources. It starts with an examination of these shifts as exemplified in the anti-Jewish and anti-Islamic polemics by the Dominican Ramon Martí (whose works do not present conversion narratives), and Ramon Llull's autobiography (the *Vita coetanea*) as a conversion story which the author considers to be closely connected with Llull's other works. In this chapter the use of Muslim doctrine as a testimony against the Jews as a "hermeneutical tool" becomes a conspicuous and highly interesting element. The importance of the (mastery of the) original language and text (as replacing the conversion narrative, see p. 133) culminates in the work of Llull. With regard to his works Szpiech lucidly analyses how his conversion

narrative and polemical writings are closely connected in a very original way.

Chapter five turns to the intriguing position of Abner of Burgos in whose works (almost all of them written in Hebrew!) categories between selfhood and otherness are blurred. In his work, the choice between the old religion (Judaism) and the new (Christianity) is not really made, leaving his readers with uncertainty with regard to their own religious options. Interestingly, later Christian convert sources such as Juan Andrés and Pablo de Santa María demonstrate the positions already present in the thirteenth-century sources. Abner's *Teacher of Righteousness* (*Mostrador de justicia*), its conversion narrative and polemical content, to whom Szpiech also devoted his PhD thesis in 2006, seems the subject that must have most occupied the author, perhaps because it signified "a critical turning point in the evolution of conversionary fictions" (p. 173).

The last chapter discusses works by four converts from different times and places, though all wrote their important polemical works in Islamic territory: the Jewish converts to Islam Samaw'al al-Maghribi (1126-1175), Sa'id b. Ḥasan of Alexandria (converted in 1298), 'Abd al-Ḥaqq al-Islami (14th century) and the Christian convert Anselm Turmeda/'Abd Allah al-Turjuman (c. 1325-1423/32). It demonstrates how Islamic polemical writings of Jewish and Christian converts to Islam written in Islamic territory are marked by a historical (not a figural) supersessionism, with a strong evidence of a close chronological and linear relationship between past and future. Judaism and Christianity are seen as falsifications of true Scripture rather than limited revelations.

In the conclusion, the fifteenth-century Jewish *Book of Ahitub and Salman* (written in Hebrew) serves to show how the model evolved even further. In this narrative the historical dimensions are given up. The three protagonists are completely fictional characters. The Jew Ahitub becomes the archetypal hero of myth, and Judaism the triumphant religion, the narrative mirroring the struggle that fifteenth-century Jews faced in Iberia's Christian Kingdoms, where the text was written, argue once more that "conversion stories make most sense when viewed *as stories* (italics by Szpiech) rather than as embellished but factual descriptions of historical events, actions or experiences." (p. 217).

The study reviewed here is very rich in historical and textual detail, and the preceding cannot be more than a discussion of its main theoretical and empirical arguments and sources. Studying and considering the general argument I found myself entirely convinced that the comparison between Christian conversion narratives affixed to polemical text and Jewish and Muslim ones counterparts is fruitful and leads to very interesting qualitative insights. It demonstrates the evolution of constructions of religious identity as expression of inner faith versus the outwards manifestations of hierarchies of authority within the Christian tradition in the Middle Ages. The argument shows how

particular expressions of individual identity and autonomy in the modern period can be traced back to the Middle Ages (see p. 226). I am not completely convinced, however, that the conclusion that the Christian model offers a more important example of the dialectical relationship between the conversion narrative, the polemical text structure of the conversion is justified at this stage, since the number of examples of conversion to Islam and Judaism dealt with is limited and so is number of cases of converts from Islam to Christianity. No further analysis is offered with regard to conversion narratives affixed to the extant polemical source materials in terms of numbers and periods. The author also convincingly argues that conversion narrative make more sense as stories than as representations of individual biography. Indeed “like a stained glass image, the conversion narratives fuse the depiction coloured by tradition with the real light of historical context” (p. 19). But within that historical context and across contexts, in the evolution of the Christian conversion models which the author discusses, I have not found much room for historical agency (discussed on p. 15). Yet, that agency seems to me something that cannot easily be left outside of consideration. Why could the exceptional position of Abner of Burgos as presented in his writings not indicate that individual psychological factors have influenced the narrative? Indeed, we have no way of testing this hypothesis in his case due to a lack of external sources, but perhaps a study of variations within conversion narratives attributed to persons in similar circumstances in the same period might help to shed more light on the aspect of agency? In this respect, it also seemed to me that in explaining the occurrence of conversion narratives more consideration could be given to messianism and prophecy as possible factors. If the conversion narrative ascribed to Abner tells us that God reveals himself to him in dreams (p. 162), why could that not also be taken as possible evidence of a public prophetic statement which can be studied as public religious utterance (i.e. not a thing felt, but as a “thing made”). Finally, the clear political connotation of some of these conversion narratives, especially those related to measures to close synagogues, churches or mosques and turned them into something else or are accompanied by forced conversions. What are these relationships, and how did they influence the narrative structure and the polemical arguments? To return to my introductory remarks, these are questions for further study of texts which are so carefully and fruitfully analysed in this highly needed study. It will undoubtedly be an indispensable tool and reference for all students of the intertwined relations between Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Medieval Mediterranean world in general and interreligious polemics in particular.

Gerard Wiegers
University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands