

Introduction

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The three opening articles in this issue, written by Paola Tartakoff, Alexandra Guerson, and Natalie Oeltjen and dealing with Jewish converts in the late medieval Crown of Aragon, raise interesting questions about the causes of Jewish conversion, royal policies regarding proselytizing and proselytes, the converts' relations with their former coreligionists, and Christian society's reception of the converts as well as the latter's desire to integrate. All three articles to some degree run against the historiographic grain: both Tartakoff and Guerson find that neither Christian pressure nor Jewish intellectual crises had much to do with Jewish conversion in the fourteenth century. Oeltjen's study of the *converso* confraternity of Sant Miquel at the beginning of the fifteenth century highlights the difficulty of categorizing *conversos* dichotomously as either crypto-Jews or sincere, assimilating Catholics.

Considering the amount of scholarly attention that has been devoted to Crown-sponsored mendicant missions to the Jews, religious polemics, and the supposed deleterious impact of philosophical study and attendance at the royal court on Jewish faith and identity, one is immediately struck by the absence of mendicant missionaries, heavy-handed monarchs, or "Averroistic" Jews in the articles of Tartakoff and Guerson. Though Tartakoff's focus on female apostates minimizes the possibility of philosophical study or court life having played a role in Jewish conversion, the fruits of her and Guerson's research lead to the conclusion that until 1391 most Jewish converts in the fourteenth-century Crown of Aragon abandoned Judaism for social or economic reasons, many of which were related to conflict within the Jewish community or the Jewish family. Tartakoff, for instance, cites cases of women apostatizing in order to marry the man of their choice (often a Jewish man who also converted) or to escape an abusive husband, while Guerson points to poor, excessively taxed Jews receiving baptism in the hope of improving their material circumstances or convicted Jews converting to avoid punishment. The evidence from Guerson's article lends support to the astute observation of Tartakoff that the pattern of conversion among fourteenth-century Sephardim was similar to that among pre-modern Ashkenazim and that it is therefore time to cease debating the relative valor and steadfastness of Iberian and northern European Jewries.

Since Tartakoff and Guerson treat Jewish apostasy during a century when the Crown of Aragon was hit hard by famine, plague, and war, it is worthwhile to ask whether the marked increase in such hardships in the latter half of the century caused a rise in the rate of conversion. Tartakoff (n. 34) is unwilling to draw such a conclusion, and imagining a steady trickle of Jews seeking baptism throughout the century as a result of unhappy domestic situations or social, political, and fiscal conflicts within the Jewish community is certainly reasonable. Guerson, however, asserts that the rate of conversion rose in the 1380s; it is possible that for some Jews the tax burden seemed heavier and clashes with coreligionists sharper and more aggravating. Oeltjen's citation of R. Simon Zemah Duran's criticism of the Majorcan Jewish community for its internal dissension prior to 1391 is perhaps supporting evidence. Still, the archival records examined by both Tartakoff and Guerson, however fascinating and revealing, do not allow for an accurate charting of conversion rates over the course of the century, or, at the very least, more archival research needs to be done before firm conclusions can be reached.

Such archival documentation is also rather opaque with regard to the religious convictions of the Jewish converts. Tartakoff posits that one of the converts she studied, Blanca, had a real "conversion experience" during the painful and perilous process of giving birth to her son. There is, on the other hand, good reason to question the sincerity of Jews who apostatized to overcome familial obstacles to their marriage to a beloved or to escape debt or punishment—that is, many of the apostates Tartakoff and Guerson discuss. Still, both authors present other evidence suggesting that some converts were committed to their new faith and not just opportunistic. Tartakoff emphasizes that converts braved economic hardship and emotional pain when they abandoned Jewish community, family and religion, and Guerson notes the efforts of zealous converts to proselytize among their former coreligionists. In most cases, conversion—true conversion—must have been a lengthy, gradual process that transpired in the months and years following the administration of baptism. Neither church nor state guided or supervised this process of conversion in a consistent or thoroughgoing manner either before or, as Oeltjen shows, after 1391.

One thing that is strikingly absent from Tartakoff's and Guerson's treatments of Jewish conversion prior to 1391 is Christian pressure or coercion. This suggests the necessity of taking a closer look at the state of Jewish-Christian relations in the fourteenth-century Crown of Aragon, which, it is worth emphasizing, was not the same as neighboring Castile with its devastating civil wars and anti-Jewish propaganda and violence. One could well ask whether Jewish apostasy in the Crown of Aragon was a consequence of Jewish attraction to Christian society or at least the result of interaction that was benign enough to have rendered Christian society and Christianity less

forbidding. Yet the coming violence of 1391 can hardly be ignored, even if it did, significantly, originate in Castile. How, then, should one understand the transition from the decades during which Christians played a largely passive role in Jewish conversion—that is, accepting but not demanding it—to the cataclysmic year of 1391, when Christians assumed an active and destructive role?

Another notable absence from the accounts of Jewish apostasy prior to 1391 is a monarch aggressively promoting proselytizing of the Jews. The king involved in almost all of the cases of Jewish apostasy examined by Tartakoff and Guerson was the long-reigning Pere III (1336–1387), whose ambivalent stance on the issue of Jewish conversion represented a marked shift from the policy of his grandfather, Jaume II (1291–1327), who actively encouraged mendicant missions to the Jews. Like any Christian monarch, Pere, both authors show, welcomed voluntary converts from Judaism, sometimes serving as their baptismal godfather and providing them with financial support when they experienced material difficulties. Yet Pere was at the same time mindful of the interests of his *aljamas*, whose financial health had obvious implications for his own treasury. Pere, Guerson demonstrates, therefore protected Jewish property from the claims of grasping *conversos* and Jewish communities from the harassment of overly zealous or extortionate *conversos*. Even as he licensed converts to preach to their former coreligionists, he circumscribed the time and place of their preaching to such an extent that the resultant conversion of a Jew would not possibly involve any coercion. King Pere was not keen to see the diminution of his tax-paying Jewish subjects. Nor was his son Joan I (1387–1396), who had to grapple with the enormity of thousands of forcibly converted Jews. For fiscal purposes, Joan treated the *converso* community of Majorca as if it were still a Jewish *aljama*, a factor, Oeltjen argues, of no small consequence for the *conversos*' position in Christian society. Still, in the case of King Pere III (I am convinced), something more than fiscal pragmatism—namely, a fundamental decency—guided him in his handling of Jews and Jewish converts. Since Pere's reign spanned half a century, it merits more attention among historians of the Jews of the Crown of Aragon and of Spain more generally.

The articles of Tartakoff and Guerson shed light on the difficult, often antagonistic relationship between the converts and their former coreligionists. Tartakoff brings the reader inside the Jewish home and highlights the dilemmas faced by Jewish wives whose husbands had apostatized. Fearing that their Christian husbands would not grant them a divorce and thus prevent them from remarrying or that they would lose their children, some women followed their husbands into the Church. That some female converts were later prosecuted for judaizing is perhaps, in light of such circumstances, unsurprising, though Tartakoff notes the paucity of evidence about the background of these judaizers. In any case, it is clear that there was no clean break

between converts and their Jewish families and communities. Guerson's emphasis on the intra-familial and intra-communal conflict that lay behind the apostasy of some Jews demonstrates why post-baptismal relations between converts and Jews were not only complicated and poignant but also bitter, as the hard feelings that had obtained between Jews intensified after one of the parties abandoned his or her ancestral faith. One can well imagine that the converts who wished to preach to or otherwise make trouble for Jewish communities were motivated by personal animosity as well as by enthusiasm for their new faith. The Jews and King Pere both seem to have intuited that something more than Christian love was driving these converts.

The overt hostility displayed by some converts toward their former coreligionists may also have been their way of dealing with the cool welcome they were receiving from their new Christian fellows, compensatory behavior intended to persuade suspicious and unfriendly Christians of the sincerity of their conversion. Even though baptism was supposed to make the apostates "new" men and women, their integration into Christian society was apparently neither rapid nor smooth. Tartakoff points out that "Christian aid did not come easily" to indigent converts, and she and Guerson both describe the special efforts that bishops and King Pere thus had to make to meet the converts' needs.

If Christian reception of Jewish converts was in some cases lukewarm and uncharitable before 1391, that it was cooler and even hostile after 1391 is hardly surprising. Christians had good reason to doubt the sincerity of the conversion of masses of Jews brought to the baptismal font under the threat of death, though they could not challenge the Church's position that the sacrament of baptism, once administered, was ineffaceable. Oeltjen shows that some Christians in Majorca expressed their distrust of and animosity toward the *conversos* in terms of race and honor, calling *conversos* "circumcised dogs" and denying them admission into certain artisan confraternities or participation in public processions because of their dishonorable Jewish lineage. Christian unwillingness to forget the *conversos*' Jewish background must in some cases have been strengthened by their knowledge of *conversos*' continued Jewish observances. Yet Oeltjen observes that Christian exclusion of the *conversos* was by no means universal in early fifteenth-century Majorca. The widespread and thoroughgoing ostracism of the Majorcan *conversos* (who would come to be known as *Xuetas*) was more a phenomenon of the later fifteenth century and after, when the Inquisition prosecuted and publicly condemned many *conversos* for judaizing, thereby tainting the entire New Christian community.

In the event, Majorcan *conversos* did not swallow Old Christian abuse and quietly yield to their discriminatory measures. Oeltjen discusses the efforts of *converso* tailors, in the face of resistance from their Old Christian

colleagues, to march in the *Corpus Christi* procession under their own banner. However much they were still attached to Judaism, *conversos* wanted to succeed and be regarded as honorable persons in Majorcan Christian society. They therefore established the *converso* confraternity of San Miquel in 1404. The confraternity enhanced the cohesion of the *converso* community and enabled its members to compete more effectively in the wider society. At the same time, the *conversos* could pay at least lip service to Christianity and allay the suspicions of some Old Christians. Oeltjen's analysis of the confraternity's statutes demonstrates that they were founded on both Jewish and Christian precedents. The confraternity was perhaps an appropriately ambiguous institution, a necessary manifestation of *converso* solidarity whose members could look to the past and to the future as they fashioned their own identity.

Royal policy did not always facilitate the converts' integration and assumption of a new identity. Disputes over inheritance and the like kept some converts entangled with the Jewish community and suspended, as it were, between two worlds. Sensitive to the interests of both converts and Jews, King Pere endeavored to treat such disputes in an evenhanded manner, which meant that he could not easily disregard the converts' previous lives as Jews and legal commitments to their erstwhile Jewish families and communities. Thus, as Guerson explains, the king required apostate litigants to provide Jewish witnesses to corroborate their claims, as if they were still Jews. In trying to attend to the concerns of both Jews and converts prior to 1391, neither King Pere nor any other Catalan-Aragonese monarch had managed to hammer out a clear, consistent policy for dealing with Jewish converts.

King Pere's successors, Joan and Martí, were therefore unprepared to deal with the immense number of *conversos* who emerged from the horrendous violence of 1391. Oeltjen notes that neither Crown nor Church did much to educate the Majorcan *conversos* in their new faith; nor did they take a strong stand against the discriminatory actions of Old Christians. Furthermore, because of the Jewish community's economic importance prior to 1391, the monarchy continued, for fiscal purposes, to treat its many baptized members as if they still comprised a corporate *aljama*. Financial concerns bound the *conversos* to their Jewish past, even those who might have desired to break free. Given the fluid and uncertain circumstances of the post-1391 years, King Martí was no doubt pleased to confirm the Majorcan *conversos*' foundation of a recognizably Catholic institution, the confraternity of San Miquel. It is nonetheless telling that the initiative had been taken by the *conversos* themselves and that they were left, to a large degree, to do with their new confraternity what they would.

Since documentation on this confraternity from after 1416 has not been located, Oeltjen notes, we cannot know just what effect membership in the

confraternity had on the identity, religiosity, and social integration of Majorcan *conversos*. The fragmentary sources studied by Tartakoff and Guerson also unavoidably leave the reader with questions about the motives, convictions, and post-baptismal lives of fourteenth-century Jewish converts. Still, all three scholars have uncovered compelling new evidence on Jewish converts in the late medieval Crown of Aragon, and have treated the evidence with rigor, imagination, and sensitivity. Our understanding of medieval Jewish converts, and of the Jews and Christians with whom they interacted, has been considerably enriched.

The fascinating article by Anke Koltsch on the support provided to Jewish converts by Lutheran Pietist institutions presents evidence that parallels some of the findings of Tartakoff, Guerson, and Oeltjen, notwithstanding the significant differences between the Catholic Crown of Aragon ca. 1300–1420 and the Protestant regions of the Holy Roman Empire ca. 1675–1780. As had been the case for many Aragonese and Catalan proselytes, many German Jews converted with the hope of escaping a life of poverty. For such Jews, Lutheran theological arguments were not likely to have been any more persuasive than the preachments of Catholic friars had been for the Iberian proselytes. Nevertheless, as Koltsch points out, there were German Jews whose decision to convert to Christianity was prompted by religious convictions, convictions that they felt compelled to express in their own writings trumpeting the triumph of Christianity. Such writings, however, were a form of special pleading on the part of converts who needed to persuade their new Lutheran coreligionists that their conversion was sincere. Koltsch observes that German proselytes, like fourteenth-century Aragonese and Catalan converts, found it difficult to integrate into Christian society where they were viewed with “suspicion and skepticism.” To the good fortune of the German converts, the secular and church authorities proved to be more helpful than the general population. In a manner somewhat reminiscent of King Pere III of the Crown of Aragon, German territorial princes provided relief to poor converts in order to facilitate their social integration. What truly distinguished the early modern Holy Roman Empire from later medieval Spain was the proselyte institutes and charities analyzed by Koltsch. Such institutions designed to provide social welfare and Christian education to converts did not exist in fifteenth-century Spain. Had they existed the sheer magnitude of the problem of *converso* judaizing in Spain may well have been reduced. Yet, even if early modern Germany compares favorably to fifteenth-century Spain in this regard, Koltsch is careful to remind us that the proselyte institutes and charities had only a limited success. Doubts about the sincerity of the converts persisted. Jewish conversion continued to be as unsettling a phenomenon as ever, for all the parties concerned.