



Heinrich Wenzel, The Destruction of the Bechtholdy (1600), painted by Christoph Wenzel during his war and conversion of the 1600s (late 16th century)

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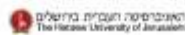
THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF CONVERSION  
& INTER-RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTERS  
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# AGENTS OF CONVERSION

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## BARKAN HALL

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## **Polemical Encounters: Was Polemical Literature an Agent of Conversion?**

Mercedes García-Arenal CSIC, Madrid

Late medieval and early modern Iberia was a fruitful field for polemical literature in all its different genres: *Disputatio*, *Apologia*, *Confutatio*, the dogmatic treatise, the Humanist dialogue, the hagiography and martyriology of the Counter-reformation, the Baroque sermon, the convert's spiritual autobiography, the devotional images, and many others. Whether this literature was written to convince members of a different religion to change allegiances, or if it was mainly directed to reinforce the beliefs and attitudes of the Christians that produced the polemical work, has been long debated by historiography. Taking the perspective of the latter, this paper argues that the effect of polemics was, no doubt, to reinforce boundaries, perhaps even to erect barricades between groups of different religious affiliation. To what extent writers of polemical works were themselves convinced of the efficacy of the texts they produced? Or even of the religion they purported?

The question I will address in this contribution is if this literature had any efficacy in converting people, whether individuals or groups, whether they were agents of conversion or not. I will analyze some polemical texts in which converts (generally the authors themselves) argue that they have been convinced to change their religion because of listening to sermons or to public disputes. I will also consider the cases, mainly through inquisition trials, in which polemical literature has induced doubt or skepticism in a believer because of comparativism or because the "wrong" arguments of the attacked religion had appeared as more convincing than those of the polemicist. I will finish by arguing that polemics are an agent of conversion mainly because of giving authority and legitimizing those who take political and legal measures for mass conversion and mention a few and significant cases.

## **The Problem of Conversion in the Guaraní-Jesuit Missions of Paraguay**

Brian Owensby

Beginning with a close reading of Antonio de Montoya's *The Spiritual Conquest Accomplished by the Religious Society of Jesus in the Provinces of Paraguay, Paraná, Uruguay and Tapé* (1639) and the famed seventeenth-century *Cartas Anuas* of the Guaraní-Jesuit Missions of Paraguay, this paper will explore the encounter between Jesuit missionaries and indigenous people, especially the Guaraní, in seventeenth-century Paraguay. The paper will emphasize the early role of material exchanges and the centrality of the disruption of Guaraní space, economy and political structures that resulted in the famous Jesuit Missions of Paraguay, seen by many Europeans then and since as perhaps the most successful conversion experiment of the New World. Against this background, the paper will focus on the points of contact between Guaraní and Jesuit ideas through the lens of anthropological and ethnographic studies that permit us to see how Guaraní concepts of reciprocity (*mborayu*), gift and virtuous self-sufficiency (*aguyje*) could be overlaid on Jesuit notions of grace common good and individual salvation guided by the abiding sense among the missionaries that "when all that is necessary for sustenance is well, all that is spiritual increases and flourishes." Such juxtapositions have largely escaped a historiography bound within Eurocentric notions of what counts as religion, and thus what counts as conversion. Indeed, I contend that there was as much an "economic conversion" as a "religious" one. I will conclude with a reflection on José de Peramás's *The Republic of Plato and the Guaraní* (1793), written from exile in Italy, which suggests how the 150-year long history of the missions became a myth of conversion.

The paper aims at three broad conclusions and a question. First, while not to negate the importance of religious conversion as such, we risk misunderstanding what is going on at the nettle of conversion if we see it as a strictly "religious" process; religion as separate from something as seemingly mundane as "economic" life is a Western epistemic projection that did not hold unambiguously among seventeenth-century Europeans and made no sense to the Guaraní. Second, by insisting on that which is rigorously "religious" in our conversion accounts, we tend to overlook the extent to which the targets of conversion had their own ideas about how to incorporate new ideas into their lives. There is no reason to suppose that the Guaraní were unwilling to adapt themselves to novel understandings, especially in the given circumstances; by holding them to some notion of "full" conversion according to an external standard, we flatten our account of what actually happened. Third, by treating conversion so narrowly we are unable to see that the anxiety of the converter may have been far more acute than that of the

converted. Many Jesuits seemed to go back and forth between thinking they had wholly succeeded or miserably failed. Some recognized in the end that the reality could perhaps not be fully understood in terms of success or failure as such, as evidenced by their penchant for counting the number of baptisms and confessions, that is by emphasizing externally verifiable indications of their activity over “true,” “internal” conversion. Finally, could it be that the lesson of the Jesuits and the Guaraní is that conversion need not be seen in all cases – may best not be seen – as requiring a tight meeting of minds? Perhaps “conversion,” at least in some circumstances, is less about the “successful” conveying of a particular set of ideas from converters to converted, than it is about the ways already existing ideas may be similar enough to enable mis(sed)understandings to remain within a range of always-partial comprehensibility.

### **Images of Franciscan Missionaries in Italian Art and Sermons**

Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby

This paper examines the representations of missionaries in the Franciscan Italian context. It first examines the central myth of St. Francis activity as a missionary in Egypt; next alludes to St. Clare and the Clarissan experience; discusses the early missionaries in Morocco and concludes with brief references to visual images depicting Franciscan missionary activities in the New World. The concept of mission was central to Franciscan legacy as expressed by the examples of St. Francis, St. Clare and the Early Franciscan missionaries to Morocco and was tightly connected with the conversion of the infidels or the martyrdom of the Franciscan friars. While St. Francis encounter with the Sultan ended with a triumphant conversion of the Muslim ruler, it was a failed attempt of martyrdom; St. Clare's experience symbolizes an unfulfilled dream to gain martyrdom while her Clarissan followers in Acre succeeded. The early Franciscan missionaries in Morocco were praised not for their abilities to convert the infidels but for their heroic death and in art they are depicted in the dramatic moment of their beheading rather than when preaching. While St. Francis' trial by fire before the Sultan was central to the Franciscan medieval and Renaissance visual traditions, the scenes of St. Clare and the Saracens or the martyrdom of the early Franciscan missionaries in Morocco hardly appear in Italian medieval art; there are only a few examples indicating that the missionary ethos was not central. This situation changed significantly in the sixteenth century with the wide circulation of the St. Clare Saracens episode or the depictions of the Early Franciscan martyrs in Morocco. Furthermore, in the Age of Exploration, there were new representations of contemporaneous missionaries active

in the Far East and in the New World and a renewed glorification of the missionary efforts of the Franciscan Order.

### **Conversion into Conversion: Guillaume Postel and his Mission to the Jews**

Judith Weiss

Guillaume Postel (1510-1581), the renowned orientalist and linguist yet often repudiated mystic, built substantial parts of his theological and messianic thought on Jewish traditions and most prominently on the Kabbalah. In addition, already as a young man he dreamt of universal conversion to Catholicism composing comprehensive treatises, directed to Jews and Muslims, dedicated to this cause. Among other works, Postel composed two missionary treatises in the Hebrew language, which were overtly aimed at convincing Jews of his unique version of millenarian Catholicism.

In my lecture, I will focus on the second of these Hebrew treatises, entitled *Ta'am haTe'amim*. Following a short introduction on Postel's mystical and Kabbalistic thought, his familiarity with contemporary Judaism and Jews and his theological attitude toward conversion in general, I will investigate the unique features of *Ta'am haTe'amim* as a missionary treatise, with the aim of sketching Postel's general concept of conversion. As will be shown, while many explicit and implicit means have been employed in this treatise in terms of language, form, rhetoric and contents in order to attract Jews and convince them of Postel's ideas, other strategies utilized in this treatise, for example – Postel's vehement critique of Catholic tenets - often seem quite curious. My claim will be that considering the entire gamut of the heterogeneous features of *Ta'am haTe'amim* as a whole, could shed light on Postel's objective which was to convert Jews into another state of “Conversion”.

## **Where Have all the Sufis Gone?**

### **Some Comments on the Islamization of the Turks of Central Asia in the Tenth Century**

Reuven Amitai

While there have been some important studies on the question of the conversion of Turks to Islam in the tenth and eleventh centuries, many questions remain unanswered and others need further attention. This situation is partly due to the very incomplete nature of the historical record, but part of the problem are certain methodological (if not ideological) conceptions that still influence the field. This talk will review both central passages in the sources and key modern studies in an attempt to move forward our understanding of this important development in Middle Eastern and Central Asian history. One tentative conclusion is that the role of Sufis in this process – long a linchpin of Islamization studies – is virtually non-existent for this early period. Other agents of Islamization can be suggested: traders, scholars and even representatives of nearby Muslim states.

### **Sufi Saints and the Making of Christian Converts in Thirteenth Century Syria and Anatolia: Hagiographical Tales in their Regional Settings**

Daphna Ephrat

This paper will examine the role played by medieval Sufi saints as converters of indigenous Christians by focusing on the hagiographies of three renowned Sufi saints: Shaykh al-Yunini (d. 1221), known as the Lion of the Levant; Jalaludin Rumi (d. 1273), the celebrated mystical poet of Konya; and Hajji Bektash (d. 1337), perhaps the most famous of all Anatolian Sufis. By situating the conversion tales in their religious and social context the paper will flesh out the diverse versions of Islam that the revered figures enacted as disseminators of true faith in the public sphere, the various strategies they deployed to make converts along the way, and the importance ascribed to conversion as a manifestation of their spiritual power. At the same time, the mapping of hagiographical accounts – both geographically and historically – will point to commonalities and differences in the motivations of the converts and in the meanings and implications of conversion. While sharing the belief in the existence of charismatic figures capable to avert calamities and help the needy, non-Muslims must have been attracted to such figures no less due to the fascination exerted by sainthood than by the conditions of their life and the ability of their leadership and institutions to cater for their religious and substantial



needs. This must be true with regard to Anatolian Christians who sought leadership, safety, and aid that the declining Greek Church could no longer provide, and who could attach themselves to the Sufi saint without forsaking their old life and communities.

**Discrete Disputes: Catholic and Jewish Proselytizers among the Portuguese Merchants  
of Seventeenth Century France**

Carsten L. Wilke

The colonies of Portuguese “New Christian” merchants in the French seaports grew in the early seventeenth century due to the steady influx of refugees from the Iberian Inquisitions. Though France did not allow the public practice of Judaism, most immigrant families adopted Jewish ways in their domestic life; a large minority, however, was content to live in security as Catholics or even denounced their neighbors’ clandestine heresy. Inquisitorial files attest to the proliferation of private disputes, as well as to the intervention of missionaries, be they Spanish priests, self-styled rabbis from Amsterdam, or local individuals who wrote polemical texts for the promotion of their respective faiths. My lecture will review the conversion agents of both sides and describe the oral, manuscript and printed media that they used in local communication as well as in their continental correspondence. I conclude that their local audience was reluctant to embrace the strict confessional choices that these apologists put before them; moreover, most of the conversion agents themselves were ambivalent personalities who exacerbated missionary zeal in order to atone for their dubious past.

**A Spirited Woman Rather than an Imbecilic Man: Conversion in an Immanent Universe**

Alexander van der Haven

In November 1895, the German judge and mental patient Daniel Paul Schreber underwent a religious conversion experience, an event that is mostly ignored by the readers of his now canonical 1903 memoir of his experiences as a psychiatric patient. What is so interesting about this conversion narrative is that Schreber did not describe this conversion as the departure from his previous religious views and the embrace of the immanent religious worldview that had been revealed to him through religious visions. Instead, he described it as the acceptance of a development that he had vehemently resisted thus far, namely the transformation of his body

into that of a woman under the influence of divine “rays”. In my lecture, I will present Schreber’s conversion and bring his sex change and conversion to an immanent worldview together by outlining how both are rooted in his turn to search for salvation in the this-worldly realm after the Kantian worldview in which he was reared had made that impossible.

### **Converso Merchants as "Secret" Agents of Portugal's Imperial Catholicism**

Claude B. Stuczynski

While in the Iberian Peninsula Conversos were suspected and persecuted for purportedly being “secret Jews”, especially during the 17th century, some Catholic Conversos and pro-Converso elements "revealed" that Converso merchants simultaneously contributed to the grandeur of Portugal's imperial projects and helped to expand the Catholic faith around the globe, as Christian merchants of Jewish origin “chosen” by God's spiritual and carnal election. In other words, Converso merchants were “de facto” missionaries who deserved to be recognized and celebrated by the Old Christian Iberian society. My argument is that these claims are much more than mere apologetic responses to anti-Converso argumentation. They reveal a specific way of conceiving commerce and wealth as soteriological means to advance Christianity.

### **Converting the Jews of Early Modern Rome: New, Old and Failed Tactics**

Emily Michelson

Weekly, public preaching was the showy centerpiece of a broad campaign to convert the Jews of Early Modern Rome. This practice, which began in the late 16th century and continued through the 18th, reached its most stable point in the late 17th century with the appointment of Gregorio Boncompagni as preacher to the Jews. Boncompagni held the post for 39 years. Although he published nothing, he left behind an enormous and practically unknown body of manuscripts. The descendant of Jewish converts, Boncompagni was a skilled Hebraist and close collaborator of the great Hebraic scholars of his era. He was also a pillar of his Dominican convent, and its greatest patron. Yet a life of privilege ensconced in thriving Catholic institutions did not lead to unexceptional conformity. This paper will examine two contradictions in Boncompagni’s mission to the Jews. How did he depart from centuries of fixed conversionary traditions and strategies, seeking to convert the Jews through new, untested sermon topics? And

why, despite his prolific output and intellectual prominence, did he reconsider the very nature of his profession, and consider himself a failure?

### **Tools in the Hand of God:**

#### **The Missionaries of the London Society and their Role in the Conversion of the Jews**

Dr. Agnieszka Jagodzińska

The London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews (LSPCJ) was the oldest and the largest British Protestant organization that carried out missions to the Jews. It was established in 1809 in London but soon moved beyond the English borders, reaching Jewish communities on three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa. One of their most important missionary fields was the Kingdom of Poland with its large Jewish population. Thanks to the unique collections of the archival materials from England, Poland and Israel, the Polish case offers an important insight into the dynamics of Christian missions and Jewish conversions.

In my paper, I wish to address the following questions: Was the understanding of the religious conversion in the Evangelical missionary enterprise? How were the missionaries of the London Society expected to “promote Christianity amongst the Jews” in Poland in the 19th and early 20th century? What was their role in this process? What were the means and strategies which they used? As I am going to argue in my paper, although the conversion was perceived as purely spiritual process depending solely on the decision of a convert, the missionaries of the Society were expected to facilitate the religious, social and cultural transition between the Jewish and the Christian world.

**Conversion, Confrontation, Controversy:  
Jesuit Responses to Islam in the Seventeenth Century**

Paul Shore

For the seventeenth-century Society of Jesus, engagement with the world of Islam involved several tactics and several desired outcomes. The conversion of Muslims was a high priority, both because of the perceived threat to Christian European society that Islam presented, and because conversion narratives, once published, demonstrated the skill and devotion of the Jesuits. Even failed attempts at proselytizing could result in narratives of heroic martyrdom and relics, both useful tools in the Society's self-presentation. This lecture will examine the work of Michel Nau, a French Jesuit missionary and scholar active in Aleppo in the 1640s, as well as discussing the conversions of captured soldiers, women and children along the frontier between the Ottoman and Habsburg empires, as reported in Jesuit "annual letters." Finally, we will see how a heretofore unexamined translation of the Qur'an into Latin made by Jesuit Ignazio Lomellini in 1622 sheds light on how future missionaries of the Society were trained, how the multiple audiences of Jesuit conversion narratives were addressed, and what Jesuits understood about the faith of the Muslims they sought to convert.

**Jesuit Efforts for Converting Ascetic Figures in Ethiopia and India  
during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries**

Leonardo Cohen

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, missionaries from the Society of Jesus arrived at very distant corners of the world. Among other places, hundreds of missionaries reached India and Ethiopia, two places that for different reasons were understood as an important base for the diffusion of the faith in the East. But beyond the spread of Catholicism to "gentiles" and "schismatic peoples", the missionaries devoted considerable efforts to promoting Catholicism among local ascetics in both Ethiopia and India. Two essential motivations, in addition to concern for the salvation of each one of these souls, were behind the Jesuits' intention to bring the ascetics closer to Catholicism: first, they considered that, as virtuous and devoted men, they could put their devotion to the service of the "truth" of the Catholic religion; Secondly, the Jesuits understood perfectly the role played by these men within their own societies as referents

of sanctity, therefore, they considered them as indispensable key figures in the attempt to spread Catholicism in the whole society.

Among the different Catholic orders, the Jesuits were carriers of a particular way of asceticism. For that reason, their attitude towards ascetic figures of other religions is full of ambivalences. The present paper tries to answer some questions that arise from this specific encounter. What was the attitude of Jesuit missionaries towards the ascetic practices of the holy men in the societies they hoped to convert? Was the conflictive relationship with other forms of asceticism a reflection of the inner tensions within the Society of Jesus itself? Did these ascetics evoke the methods and “excesses” of Catholic mendicant orders? Could the methods and way of life of the ascetics ever obtain the approval of the missionaries, even while their cult was a strange one or their god a false one?

**The Reality of Conversion and the Rhetoric of Sainthood in the Jesuit Missions to Asia:  
Francis Xavier and Matteo Ricci**

Joan-Pau Rubiés Mirabet

The early modern Catholic missions were built around great expectations of converting masses of “gentiles” to the true religion. The reality of conversions - both in number and in quality - was of course far more difficult, and missionary literature often relied on rhetorical exaggeration in order to keep the missions going. Crucial to this rhetorical effort was the figure of the missionary saint. By examining the role of conversion of gentiles in the construction of the paradigmatic images of Francis Xavier and Matteo Ricci, this paper will explore the intimate relation between conversion, sainthood, and the process of propaganda through edification. It will also ask the question: what mattered most in the end?

## **Keys and Bridges: Evangelical Missionaries in Southwest China and the Christian Translation of Culture and Myth**

Gideon Elazar

This paper is an attempt to describe the way in which contemporary missionaries working in Southwest China, make use of local culture and myth to further the cause of spreading the gospel. They do so by finding and explaining on what one missionary I interviewed termed “keys and bridges”: local cultural and religious concepts that bear resemblance to certain elements in the Biblical narrative or in Christian theology. Most commonly, keys and bridges would include: myths of a primordial great flood and other biblical stories, traditions of a monotheistic nature, and prophecies regarding messianic figures. While the use of keys and bridges associated with minority cultures has been part of the Protestant mission to Yunnan since its inception, recent years have seen the rise of a popular form of this method, targeting the Han Chinese majority. Thus, in contemporary China, both local and foreign Christians work to promote the idea that the Chinese have a long lost monotheistic history, a cultural trajectory that has been forgotten under the influence of Daoism and Buddhism and is currently being restored by Christianity. Furthermore, the use of keys and bridges may also include attempts to produce Christian versions of local objects of veneration, such as Tibetan Thangka paintings, to appeal to local audiences.

These methods serve a double purpose: on the one hand, they may be seen as a means of indigenization – a way of implying that rather than being a foreign religion, Christianity may be seen as an authentic expression of a given culture. At the same time, the use of keys and bridges has significant implications for the missionary himself. By presenting these commentaries on local traditions and myths, the missionary assumes the role of translator: one who has the ability to reveal the hidden nature of a given culture to the locals themselves. Thus, by moving between fields, cultures and geographies, the missionary translator is able to recreate an alternative narrative of local history and authenticity.

## **Are You with the Jews, Your Father's People, or with your Mother and the Gentiles?**

Moshe Yagur

Family ties have an important role in the process of conversion – either by severing old ones and forming new ones within the new religious community, or otherwise by maintaining old relations, which can be seen as a barrier for a “complete” conversion.

As is well known, in the Jewish tradition it was largely accepted that family ties, both marital and blood ties, were not affected by one's conversion. Perhaps less known is the fact that this legal possibility led, at least in Jewish communities in Medieval Islam, to the social reality of “mixed families”, where one spouse – usually the husband – was a Jewish convert to Islam, while the other was still Jewish. Such a reality, in a general context of ongoing daily contacts between Jews and converts, led to the possibility of re-conversion back to Judaism.

In my talk, I will concentrate on a special aspect of this reality – the possibility, and encouragement, of the re-conversion of converts' children. I will supply some evidence from responsa literature as well from published and un-published Geniza material, and then discuss the meaning of this phenomenon for larger issues such as Jewish attitudes towards apostates, the family as an identity-generator, procedures of re-conversion, and the perceived agency of converts and their children.

## **Family Ties: Children and Conversion in Late Medieval Ashkenaz**

Ahuva Liberles Noiman

In this lecture, I wish to focus on children who considered conversion from Judaism to Christianity in late medieval German lands. A number of judicial cases preserved in Hebrew manuscripts as well as in archival documents shed light on the wide implications conversion had on family structures: When one parent was baptized and the other chose to stay loyal to his or her former religion, relationships and family ties were unraveled and the offspring of converts often found themselves caught between religious and social worlds. In these documents, it is attested that children of converts in late medieval Germany stood before a spectrum of options on the threshold of baptism, and were not uniformly forced into the dominant religion. This paper will address the following questions: What were the decisive factors influencing children in their decision? What role did Jewish and Christian authorities play in this scenario? How did gender complement the treatment regarding such children? Can we speak of a revised meaning

to the legal term “free will” on the threshold of Reformation? I will further suggest examining a connection between baptism and rites of passage concerning adolescence in both religions at the turn of the medieval era.

### **Agents of Conversion in al-Andalus (Islamic Iberia)**

Janina Safran

The Muslim conquest of most of the Iberian peninsula in the early eighth century of the Common Era and the establishment and maintenance of stable rule by the Umayyad dynasty for two and a half centuries (c. 756-1013) set in motion processes of economic, social, and cultural transformation. As in other regions conquered by Muslims and subject to enduring Muslim rule, Christians and Jews became Muslim. How and when this happened, in broadly historical and demographic terms, is not expressly evident in extant sources. Evidence demonstrates that conversion took place: biographical dictionaries and chronicles identify individual converts and their descendants, conversion formularies define the legal terms of conversion, and legal texts address questions of legal status, rights, and duties, associated with conversion, since conversion involved moving from one legal category into another. Richard Bulliet’s application of innovation adoption theory to conversion in his often-cited *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period* (1979) neatly makes use of evidence we have – names in biographical dictionaries of Muslim scholars – to suggest that individual conversion took place in al-Andalus, as elsewhere, over centuries, beginning gradually, accelerating as more individuals were exposed to converts, and tapering off (in the tenth century). The theory presents conversion as a sociological phenomenon and does not treat adopting Islam (changing religion) as different from adopting another potentially or actually beneficial innovation. The affective aspect of conversion is not accessible in the sources and not relevant to the theory. With an understanding of the historical legal, political, social, and economic context, one may surmise why someone might be an “early adopter” or a “late majority adopter” and look for confirmation of types in the sources.

Given the sources, what can we say about agents of conversion? How individuals came to conversion, who helped them, and how, and what conversion meant to converts and agents remain tantalizingly opaque. Andalusí legal sources from the ninth and tenth centuries support Bulliet’s emphasis on the importance of social networks in the adoption of Islam. These texts allow us to identify some of the agents of conversion and recognize how the conversion of families could take place over generations.



This paper will discuss agency from the perspective of the ninth and tenth century legal sources in terms of personal relationships and contexts of conversion. Muslim jurists treated conversion as an individual decision made freely by an adult of sound mind, and so, with certain exceptions, conversion appears as a rational choice. If the legal sources present conversion dispassionately as a rational decision, contemporary accounts of the ninth-century Christian martyrs of Cordoba describe instances of conversion or reversion to Christianity in expressly salvific terms and agents of conversion appear to be acting as “soldiers of Christ.” This is not to say that Muslims viewed conversion in one way and Christians another, but to recognize the distinction of the two types of sources. The paper will suggest how, paired together, the two types of sources offer a way of thinking about multiple coinciding registers of conversion. Looking specifically at how the sources address the religion of children, as a matter of law and a matter of faith, accentuates the importance of family relationships in conversion and suggests a particular arena of contestation.

### **Premodern Muslim Rulers as Agents of Officials’ Conversion: Rules and Exceptions**

Luke Yarbrough

It is often stated in modern historical scholarship that non-Muslim state officials were unlawful according to Islamic law. Therefore, historians explain, many high-profile individuals converted to Islam in order to obtain positions in Islamic states. My contribution seeks to re-evaluate and complicate this narrative. I examine several documented cases—both well-known and hitherto unknown—in which rulers required non-Muslim officials to convert in order to obtain employment or promotion. These cases, I argue, represent significant exceptions that prove the general rule according to which Muslim rulers, for structural reasons that I will explain, often preferred non-Muslim officials. Both the employment of non-Muslim officials and the stated refusal to employ them represent political strategies used by Muslim rulers. Conversely, conversion and refusal to convert are most productively understood as strategies used by non-Muslim literate élites in their own pursuit of valued resources. As a consequence, rulers who required their officials to convert were not mechanically applying Islamic law, but taking part in a subtle negotiation among various factions among their subjects, and within their own calculus of expected advantage. Episodes to be considered include the famous conversion of Ya‘qūb b. Killis, the far less well-known non-conversion of the Christian al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Amr

(also tenth century), and the virtually unknown partial conversion of two Christian official families at the behest of the caliph al-Nāṣir (late twelfth century).

### **Jewish Conversion Narratives and Documentary Evidence – Who Really Were the Agents of Mass Conversion in South Italy?**

Nadia Zeldes

The Jewish communities of southern Italy experienced mass conversions twice in their history: in 1294 and again in 1495. Both events are mentioned in Jewish narrative sources, and certain agents or converters are named as the principal actors in each case.

As regards the conversions of the 1290s, Salomon Ibn Verga's *Shevet Yehudah* names the "judges" (whose identity has yet to be determined) as agents of conversion, while Samuel Usque in his *Consolation for the Tribulation of Israel*, and Joseph Hacoheh's *Emeq Habakha* both name the king and the nobles as agents of conversion. Non-Jewish sources suggest that conversions in that period were a long drawn process rather than the result of a single event or a royal decree, and there is also some doubt as to the element of coercion involved. My discussion will focus on these narratives but I will also refer in passing to the events of 1495 and their presentation in Jewish narratives.

### **Evidence of Conversion, Conversion of Evidence: Óláfr Tryggvason and the Conversion of the North Atlantic**

Rosie Bonté

Norwegian king Óláfr Tryggvason was the 'Apostle of the North', a zealous missionary who Christianized both Norway and the Norse North Atlantic between 995 and 1000 through a clever combination of fair speech and brute force. This, at least, is how he is depicted in the thirteenth-century Icelandic sagas. But how accurate can such narratives be, far removed as they are in time — and often, in space — from the events they purport to describe? My aim here is to reassess the role played by Óláfr in the North Atlantic through a close study of the sagas associated with the conversion of Iceland's neighboring Norse-speaking colonies of Orkney, the Faroe Islands and Greenland.

In this paper, I explore the literary presentation of the conversion across three key sagas — Orkneyinga saga, Færeyinga saga and Eiríks saga rauði — but also examine these texts within a broader multi-disciplinary context, discussing evidence from disciplines as diverse as archaeology, genetics, and place-name studies, and assessing the extent to which it supports or contradicts the saga narratives. Drawing on the framework of cultural memory, I question whether the role played by Óláfr Tryggvason in connection to the conversion of these communities might have been deliberately exaggerated by saga authors, who used these narratives as a medium for discourse on contemporary issues, and I suggest that the sagas may in fact tell us more about Icelandic identity and the country's relationship with the Norwegian kings in the thirteenth century than about the tenth-century North Atlantic.

### **Nuns as Agents of Conversion in Early Modern Italy**

Tamar Herzig

This paper expounds the important, yet hitherto understudied, role of nuns in facilitating Jews' conversion to Christianity in early modern Italy. First, I examine cases from the pre-Reformation era in which nuns allured unmarried Jewish girls, or women fleeing unhappy marriages, to spend time in their convents in the hope that their charitable, communal life would attract them to Christianity—thereby circumventing an undesired marital fate. Nuns capitalized on the fact that Jews regarded convents as celibate surroundings in which their chastity would be protected, so potential converts retained the option of returning to their families. The second part of the paper explores the increased institutionalization of nuns' activities as convertors after the Council of Trent (1545-1563), following the designation of specific nunneries for the task of instilling the Catholic faith in the hearts of neophytes' daughters, and of instructing female catechumens. I discuss nuns' participation in the efforts to coerce unwilling daughters of baptized Jewish men to accept baptism, and the Church's growing support of the monachization of baptized Jews. Finally, I argue that the possibility of sending one or more daughter to a convent—thereby reducing their dowries and disposing of unmarriageable daughters—provided an economic incentive for conversion to Jewish fathers in economic difficulties.

## **From the Margins to the Center, the Voyage into Conversion**

Keren Abbou Hershkovits

Conversion to Islam in the early period has been the subject of many studies. Scholars examined the process of conversion in different places and periods, endeavored to identify agents of conversion as well as incentives to convert. The proposed paper will contribute to this growing interest by looking into female agents of conversion and in particular to emotional aspects of their form of actions. Specifically, I will unpack situations in which women are presented as converts and the means in which they put to use, with the aim of shedding light on such questions as: are their actions or modes of converting any different from those used by men? Did they achieve different consequences than male converts? And if so, in what terms?

I will argue that agents of conversion act within a particular set of power relations. Women were no different, their actions as converters may indicate negotiations over authority and social position. While they were not challenging social order, women nonetheless used their designated position as mothers, wives and sisters to generate interest on the part of their (at times male) surroundings and hence to direct people into converting. Seen from this perspective, conversion was a form of asserting power by women at the emergence of Islam.

## **Women as Agents of Conversion to Islam: The Significance of Saḥābiyāt Models**

Uriel Simonsohn

For many, conversion to Islam in the Middle Ages did not entail an obliteration of family bonds, to the extent that they remained in close proximity with their non-Muslim relatives, at times under the same roof. Accordingly, it is with little surprise that we find in our sources recurring attempts on the part of communal leaderships, both Muslim and non-Muslim, to take advantage of these ties in order to draw additional converts (or bring lost sheep back into the fold, depending on the communal perspective behind these attempts). Considering a sample of biographic entries about women from the time of the Prophet, found in biographic collections known as *ṭabaqāt*, as models for future converts, I wish to argue for the potential missionary office of female converts to Islam in the context of religiously-mixed family ties.

The utility of biographic compilations has been well noted by historians for the study of women and gender relations at large in Islamic societies, given the relatively prominent place women occupy in them. Recent studies have also noted the transformation of women

biographies over time, reflecting a progressive trend of restricting women's place to a so-called private sphere and underscoring their tasks as wives, mothers, and midwives. Yet while biographies have survived and shifted to meet changing perceptions and ideals, biographies reporting the acts of women converts have remained almost intact.

The biographies of the women who converted to Islam during the time of the Prophet tell the stories of women whose choices and deeds were likely to be of relevance to future generations of female converts. Special note is made of their courage, the example they had set for others to follow and their loyalty to the Prophet and the community of believers. In some cases, we find women who converted to Islam and were shortly after followed by their husbands; and mothers who drew their sons towards belief and proper conduct, and cheered them into battle. At the same time, these women were also prepared to endure social seclusion and at times violent persecutions, consequent to their choice to join the Muslim fold. As such, their image was to set an example for other women in other times to follow suit.

**Jews as Agents of Conversion in Medieval Christendom:  
Between Calumny and Misperception**

Paola Tartakoff

During the central Middle Ages, popes, kings, bishops and inquisitors repeatedly accused Jews of seducing unsuspecting Christians into Judaism. Christian authorities also prosecuted individual Jews and entire Jewish communities on charges of having brought Christians into the Jewish fold. In light of Jewish-Christian power dynamics in medieval Christendom—not to mention Jewish reluctance to accept converts—the Christian conviction that Jews actively recruited converts seems divorced from all reality. My paper explores the factors that shaped this conviction. It argues that some of these factors had nothing to do with actual Jewish-Christian interactions; instead, they pertained to internal Christian sensitivities. My paper argues also, however, that some aspects of actual Jewish-Christian interactions could indeed have fueled the charge that Jews actively recruited converts. Through the analysis of evidence of Christian awareness of the experiences of a small number of thirteenth-century Christian converts to Judaism, it suggests that Christians could, at times, have perceived particular aspects of Jewish involvement in Christian conversions to Judaism as evidence of active proselytizing. In so doing, my paper considers the significance of differences between the procedure for

conversion to Judaism and the procedure for conversion to Christianity, and it asks to what extent “active proselytizing” can be in the eyes of the beholder.

### **Avitus of Vienne’s Mysterious Heretics, or How to Talk Like an “Agent of Conversion”**

Yaniv Fox

The early years of the sixth century were an exciting time for the Catholic episcopate in the Burgundian kingdom. The aging king, Gundobad, was gradually handing over the reins of government to his son, Sigismund. Unlike Gundobad, who was sympathetic to the Catholics but still nominally Homoian, the young prince had adopted Nicene Christianity and was making the necessary preparations to convert the entire kingdom once he assumed power. Like all periods of religious transition, however, this was also a potentially dangerous time – what would be the role of the old guard in this brave new future? It is then that an enigmatic group of heretics – the “Bonosiacs” – enter the scene. Originally adherents of a fourth-century schismatic bishop from Naissus (modern-day Niš, in Serbia), these heretics had long since vanished into the mists of time. What were they suddenly doing in the sixth-century West? This paper will endeavor to answer this question, and to contextualize the religious language of Bishop Avitus of Vienne, the prelate of Burgundy and the main architect behind Sigismund’s religious policy.

### **The Soteriological Geography of Late Medieval Mission to the East**

Uri Zvi Shachar

Odoric of Pordenone, an Italian friar who embarked on a missionary voyage to Asia, related his undertakings upon the return home in 1330, producing one of the most widely circulated texts in late medieval Europe. The story was translated to many vernaculars and is now also recognized as one of the foremost sources for the anonymous Mandeville text. Although the narrative concerns the affairs of a friar on his way to preach Latin Christianity in China and India, the titles under which it circulated – *Itinerarium de Mirabilibus Orientalium*; *De Rebus Incognitis*; *Les Merveilles de la Terre Sainte* – disclose a different focus. The opening lines further crystalize the dual nature of the enterprise: “Many people relate various things about the ways and the conditions of the world. Nevertheless this is to know that I, friar Odoric from Marchie Julien, having desired to cross the sea and wanting to go to the parts of the non-

believers so as to bring about their conversion, saw and heard there many great and marvelous things.” At the very least, contemporary readers viewed an indulgence in the marvels of the exotic east as equally appealing as, and compatible with, a narrative concerning proselytizing the unbelievers. Indeed, for late medieval readers, travel and mission were profoundly entangled, evidenced also by the sheer volume of contemporaneous tracts in which the two are interwoven (Riccoldo da Montecroce’s *Liber Peregrinationis* and Jordan of Severac’s *Mirabilia Descripta*, are just two notable examples).

Despite this clear tension, however, rarely have scholars pondered the intersection of the two traditions. In placing such narratives alongside Marco Polo’s *Devisement* and suchlike premodern best sellers, scholars have implicitly suggested that their true import for their readers was in providing exotic entertainment, with the missionary encounter with the heathen being no more than rhetorical lip-service. Conversely, historians of the mendicant mission to Asia and Africa have seen these travel reports as rigorous ethnographic taxonomies necessary for the preaching that is to follow, wrapped in entertaining mirabilia only meant to draw the attention of lay audiences.

This talk, then, aims to outline a framework that gives account to the geographical sensibilities ingrained in mendicant missionary ambitions. The itinerant nature of mission narratives, I wish to suggest, was neither rhetorical nor strictly didactic. Rather, it has to do with the universalist theology that undergirded the enterprise for many practitioners. The intellectual stakes of these texts suggests that the desire to carry the witness of Christ’s passion, even at the risk of martyrdom, had more to do with absorbing spaces into the orbit of the universal church, than with the unlikely chance of baptizing local listeners. The itinerary, in its physical and textual manifestations, then, was neither wholly inquisitive nor adventurous; rather it involved a performative act whose purpose was to bring both people(s) and places into the spectrum of Christian salvation.