

REVIEW

Paola Tartakoff

***Between Christian and Jew:
Conversion and Inquisition in the
Crown of Aragon, 1250-1391***

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Hussein Fancy, University of Michigan

On June 6th, 1391, spurred on by the vituperative preaching of Ferrand Martinez, the archdeacon of Écija, Christian mobs attacked the Jewish community of Seville, slaughtering thousands and forcing others into baptism. Anti-Jewish violence spread throughout Castile, Aragon, and Mallorca. These riots and forced conversions have been seen as a watershed, after which centuries of coexistence gave way to expulsion and inquisition. In *Between Christian and Jew*, Paola Tartakoff offers a much-needed exploration of the dynamics of conversion before the events of 1391. Grounded in rich archival evidence, Tartakoff argues that well before 1391, evidence of forced conversion of Jews to Christianity “lays bare the intensity of mutual hostility between Christians and Jews across a period whose first decades in particular have been celebrated as a time of interreligious harmony” (p. 1).

Tartakoff builds her narrative around the unusual case of one Aragonese convert from Calatayud, Alatzar (Eleazer), who converted to Christianity in 1340, taking the name Pere (Peter), only to publicly renounce his conversion three weeks later. Saved from the stake by a Dominican prior seeking to make sense of his “relapse,” Pere confessed before a hastily convened tribunal that a group of Aragonese Jews had convinced him to renounce Christianity and seek martyrdom for the sake of his soul. Pere himself was imprisoned for life, but his accusations led to a series of trials that unfolded over the

course of twenty months in Aragon, Valencia, and Catalonia. Ultimately, two more Jews, Janto and Jamila Almulí were imprisoned for life, and a prominent Jew, Jucef de Quatorze, was burned at the stake. The records of these inquisitions reside at the archives of the Cathedral of Barcelona.

The structure of the book is appealing. Tartakoff intersperses detailed analysis of these trial transcripts with broad contextualization. She draws on an array of secondary research to illuminate the particular case and artfully reflects her case back upon that broader context. The book itself is divided into three parts. Part One, “Before the Tribunal,” examines inquisitorial prosecutions of Jews and converts. Although Jews typically did not fall under the spiritual or temporal power of inquisitors, Tartakoff argues that these trials became a ground of Jewish-Christian conflict, in which the convert stood as a symbol of Christian superiority and the backslider was seen as a dangerous threat. Far from conflating Jews with heretics, inquisitions against Jews “w[ere] actually a façade for an operation whose primary aim was to punish [them]” (p. 21). Part Two, “At the Font of New Life,” examines the motivations and lives of Jewish converts to Christianity before 1391. Many converts, Tartakoff contends, were driven by practical as opposed to religious motivations, but in either case, their conversions were fraught with complications. Converts faced hostility from Christians, who were suspicious of their sincerity. Poverty and rejection ironically kept these converts bound to their Jewish past. Part Three, “By the Fire,” explores diverging Jewish attitudes toward apostates and is perhaps the highlight of the book. These attitudes were not only conflicted – riven between rejection and (possible) rehabilitation of apostates – but also reflective of conflict within the Jewish community, such as tensions between wealthy and poor Jews and between those with access to social protection and those without (p. 120). In the particular case of Pere, the Jewish community of Calatayud appears unusually aggressive. Those who provoked Pere to martyrdom, Tartakoff proposes, aimed simultaneously to punish his apostasy and challenge the Christian majority. As a whole, this bleak picture of competition

over converts leads Tartakoff to argue for greater continuity between the periods before and after 1391.

The great value of this book lies in its contribution to the social history of Jewish conversion to Christianity. In addition to the trial of Pere itself, Tartakoff collates and incorporates evidence from 200 other cases from the late thirteenth century through 1391. In this sense, one quickly sees that the practice of conversion differed widely from the ideal. Rather than experiencing a sharp break, a sudden turn in belief, converts often found themselves between communities. This divergence between ideal and practice, as Tartakoff rightly suggests, changed the significance of conversion itself. Re-Judaizing rituals, for instance, give a glimpse of the manner in which Jewish identity actively came to stand against Christianity while simultaneously borrowing from it. Tartakoff presents this all in a well written, admirably concise, and compelling read.

This focus on social history has its shortcomings. Although Tartakoff places the massacres of 1391 at the center of her argument, she never engages directly with the fractious debates about the historiography of these events. In the same vein, I would have hoped for a more direct engagement with the copious literature on conversion and inquisition, to which Tartakoff's findings have important implications. As such, this book should be read in conversation with recent works by Mark Meyerson, Ryan Szpiech, and Mark Pegg.

To be sure, the richness of this work will inspire new research into the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century archives of the Crown of Aragon. In her conclusion, for instance, Tartakoff points to the parallel experiences of Jewish and Muslim converts to Christianity as well as a failure of scholars to consider these communities together. Within the registers of the Archives of the Crown of Aragon, there exists significant and unexplored evidence that the relationship between these communities was more than parallel. Not only Jews, as Tartakoff suggests, but also Muslims were required to attend and silently listen to Dominican preachers. Moreover, Dominicans

cited the Qur'an in their attacks on Judaism. Indeed, like Jewish converts, Muslim converts to Christianity who "relapsed" were subject to inquisition and the death penalty. But perhaps most relevantly, Jewish converts to Islam were arrested and sentenced to death. These and other insights are a testament to the value of Tartakoff's study, which will inspire new scholarship and debate.