Seth Kimmel

Parables of Coercion: Conversion and Knowledge at the End of Islamic Spain.

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Contrary to popular belief, the Moors were not expelled from Spain in 1492. In fact, the treaty of capitulation assured the conquered peoples the freedom to practice their religion, customs, and law as good vassals and servants of the Catholic Monarchs. But the policy of persuasive catechizing, favored by the first archbishop, Hernando de Talavera, was abandoned in 1499, when his successor, Francisco Ximénez de Cisneros, baptized some 4,000 inhabitants of Granada by force. After 1501 in Andalusia and 1525 in Aragón, Moors were forced to choose either conversion or exile; most chose the former. Henceforth these nominal Christians and their descendants would be known as Moriscos. The many failures to convert and assimilate this minority population culminated in a decree that between 1609 and 1614 sent approximately 300,000 Moriscos into exile. The focus of Seth Kimmel's erudite and densely argued study is the impact of the Morisco problem on Christian intellectuals in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His principal argument is that a long century of debates over the legitimacy of religious coercion and reflections on the failure of religious and cultural assimilation raised questions that led to significant shifts in the way intellectuals thought about the law, language, history, and economics.

One of the earliest debates occasioned by the Moriscos' resistance to assimilation was the efficacy of forced baptism. The theologians who assembled at the Council of Madrid in 1525, ignoring Thomas Aquinas's judgment to the contrary, concluded that the sacrament of baptism was effective *qua* sacrament. The suspicion that some Moriscos engaged in Islamic rites in secret or practiced Christian rites without sincere belief raised further nettlesome questions. Was it possible to "read" religious sincerity? What was the legal foundation for proving and prosecuting interior doubt in the presence of ritual compliance? Again, contrary to popular belief, there were dissident voices regarding the prosecution of hidden heresy. Some churchmen, notably Antonio de Guevara, the Bishop of Guadix and author of several Renaissance bestsellers, recommended that clerics practice dissimulation in the short term, that is, that they ignore signs of crypto-Islamic belief until the Moriscos had acquired the interior habits of Christian life. Kimmel takes pains not to separate historical figures into two camps, the benighted and the proto-modern advocates of tolerance. The reality was less tidy. The historical moment that began with the forced conversion of Spain's last Muslims and ended with their expulsion produced new questions regarding law, history, and language, and at the same

time found new justifications and methods for imposing religious orthodoxy. Coercion was “polyvalent” (80).

The third and fourth chapters address how the Morisco problem influenced the study and teaching of languages. The indecipherability of silent heresy drove home the troubling gap between word and meaning. Clerics debated whether the efficacy of using Arabic as a tool for evangelization outweighed the dangers of exposing Christians to Arabic and Hebrew sacred texts. The controversy surrounding the Sacromonte forgeries (parchments and lead books written in pseudo-Arabic discovered in the hills outside Granada in the 1590s) pitted philologists against the churchmen who wanted to believe the prophecies contained in the lead books. The varieties of Arabic, the way it evidently had changed throughout history, the difference between written and spoken languages, the cultural embeddedness of language usage—in short, the Morisco problem introduced an embarrassment of linguistic questions. At various points Kimmel suggests a parallel between the Jesuit pastoral philosophy of *accommodatio*—the willingness to adapt evangelization to local ceremonies and customs—and a linguistic pedagogy that emphasized “practice over a theology of exactitude” (77). Regrettably, Kimmel does not develop this insight coherently and he misses the opportunity to explore the broader connection between *accommodatio* and scholarly innovation that he suggests throughout the book.

In 1567, the crown promulgated new laws prohibiting a variety of Morisco cultural practices, such speaking and writing in Arabic, using Arabic names, visiting public baths, and performing traditional dances. These repressive measures in turn provoked debates over the distinction between religious belief and cultural customs. In 1568, in reaction to the draconian laws of the previous year, Moriscos rose up in an armed revolt known as the Second Alpujarras War. After three bloody years, Spanish troops under the command of Philip II’s half brother, Don Juan de Austria, finally put down the rebellion. After the war eighty thousand Moriscos men, women, and children were resettled in the interior of the peninsula by means of a forced march that proved fatal for many. As historians attempted to record the significance of this compromised victory, they also began to question the craft and purpose of history writing. In chapter five, Kimmel pays particular attention to two historians who challenged the laudatory conventions of official court chroniclers: Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, author of *Guerra de Granada* (The war of Granada; composed 1570, published 1627), and Luis de Mármol Carvajal, author of *Historia del [sic] rebelión y castigo de los Moriscos de este reino de Granada* (History of the Rebellion and Punishment of the Moriscos of this Kingdom of Granada; composed late 1570s,

published 1600). Both men consulted Arabic sources and paid heed to the legitimate grievances of the Moriscos. Neither history is properly speaking “maurophilic,” and in fact, Mármol Carvajal concludes on a triumphalist note. Nevertheless, both works reflect a commitment to produce more evenhanded accounts of events that did not fit into what was traditionally an apologetic genre.

In chapter six, Kimmel turns to the debates over the proposal to expel the Moriscos. Again, the Morisco problem provoked intellectuals to rethink traditional categories. Pedro de Valencia, in *Tratado acerca de los moriscos de España* (Treatise on the Moriscos of Spain, written 1605–6) advocated treating crypto-Islamic rites as secular crimes rather than heresy, thus removing the Moriscos from the Inquisition’s jurisdiction. This opposition to expulsion did not make him a proto-modern defender of religious tolerance; his proposed solution to the Morisco problem relied on compulsory intermarriage and resettlement. The Jesuit Ignacio de las Casas (not to be confused with the Dominican missionary Bartolomé de las Casas) also opposed expulsion, reframing the Moriscos’ resistance to Christian dogma as innocuous doubt and holding out the hope that they would be led to the true faith by natural reason. The polemics over expulsion were also waged with metaphors. Juan de Ribera, archbishop of Valencia and one of the staunchest proponents of expulsion, eschewing the parable of the wheat and tares (Matthew 13), reimagined the Moriscos as old and feeble trees that needed to be cut down.

In the aftermath of the expulsion, the Morisco became a “tool of imperial self-examination” (171). Some *arbitristas* (reformers), while defending the expulsion as necessary and just, recognized the unfortunate economic consequences—depopulation and agricultural decline—and acknowledged a connection between Old Christian animosity to Moriscos and the failure of assimilation. The productivity, sobriety, and fertility of the Moriscos, in contrast to the Old Christians’ notable disdain for manual labor and reluctance to marry, provoked reflection on the ethno-cultural factors of economic decline. It would be a mistake, however, to view the *arbitristas* as proleptically enlightened. Their writings represent “a curious mixture of astute and jingoistic analysis” (170).

Parables of Conversion is an ambitious book of great breadth and complexity. Kimmel’s prose is occasionally opaque and the copia of examples sometimes distracts from his central arguments. Simple declarative sentences are few and far between. Nevertheless, his wide-ranging exploration of the intellectual ferment that resulted from efforts to grapple with the Morisco question will reward the patient reader. The many intellectuals and scholars who appear in

these pages did not come to terms with the injustice of religious coercion, but the repeated failures of coercion were enough to induce some of them to reflect on the insufficiencies of their explanatory and justificatory frameworks.

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