CHAPTER FOUR

THE CONVERSION OF THE MOORISH KNIGHTS

Conversion and baptism

The contacts thus produced by these foreign groups are the most important, for they led not only to borrowing but to fusion and to new developments; but there were others, as for instance those due to military service abroad and to slavery... These external circumstances led not to any definite crossing of religious frontiers, in which an old spiritual home was left for a new once and for all, but to men's having one foot on each side of a fence which was cultural and not creedal. They led to an acceptance of new worships as useful supplements and not as substitutes, and they did not involve the taking of a new way of life in place of the old. This we may call adhesion, in contradistinction to conversion. By conversion we mean the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.

(A. D. Nock, Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo, Oxford, 1972, pp. 6–7.)

The nature of conversion is difficult to define, given that the word itself can cover a range of different meanings that may include an intense personal experience leading to a change of religion, a process of mystical illumination within the heart of a religion in which a person has been brought up since birth, or the mere acceptance of a faith imposed by external circumstances. Conversion processes can be individual or collective, free or imposed, and no case necessarily involves the complete renunciation of a previous way of life or an immediate transformation of the social environment of the convert or converts. Bulliet’s studies of conversion to Islam insist on the importance of their social character, since the subjects of the study, groups of individuals in the Middle East during the early medieval period, are defined by their nationality or tribal allegiances as much as in religious terms. Allowing for chronological and terminological differences, one of Bulliet’s most important contributions lies in the definition of another two types of convert: the ecstatic, whose previous religion had not lived up to his spiritual expectations, causing his discontent and who sometimes became a zealot after his change of religion, and a majority of non-ecstatic converts, i.e. individuals who were
generally satisfied with their previous religious life and who converted for mundane rather than spiritual reasons. For non-ecstatics, the greater the resemblance between their lives in the new religion and the way they used to live in their previous faith, the happier they will tend to be. Bulliet tends to believe that most cases belong to the second group, though perhaps without bearing in mind that ecstatic converts often leave accounts of their reasons for changing religion. In the case of the Moorish guard, the issue must remain open to debate, for no personal testimony was ever recorded which might lead us to favour one or the other of the two types.

The divisions between different types of conversion postulated by Nock and Bulliet are in any case difficult to apply to the Hispanic Middle Ages, because many of the converts to Christianity from Judaism and Islam were probably somewhere between the tendencies I have just outlined. It is difficult to know to what extent any individual’s attitude was one of conversion or adhesion, i.e. whether he took an ecstatic or a non-ecstatic position, because we almost always lack a convert’s own account of personal experiences. In fact, these were exactly the same kinds of problems of interpretation faced by the Christian monarchs of the realms of the Iberian peninsula in their contacts with the Jewish and Mudejar communities found in their territories.

Given its situation of political dominance, the Christian religion was of course the one that achieved the greatest number of conversions within the Hispanic realms during the 15th century. This was aided by the fact that Jews and Muslims found themselves in positions of clear minority in almost all of those realms, except Valencia. In some cases the conversions can be attributed to personal conviction, in others to social pressure, the influence of the cultural norms of the majority, or an attitude of conformity with a given situation. Some of these factors must have been present in the

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2 This is the case of the numerous treatises written between the 12th and 15th centuries by renowned conversos, who felt the need to justify their change of religion to members of their new community and who therefore make attacks of one kind or another on the faith they have just abandoned. The best known examples in the Iberian Peninsula were Pedro Alfonso de Huesca, Anselmo Turmeda, Pedro de la Cavallería and Alonso de Cartagena. Their works have been edited as follows: Pedro Alfonso de Huesca, Diálogo contra los judíos, Dialogo contra los judíos (ed. various authors), Huesca, 1996; M. de Epalza, La Tuhfa, autobiografía y polémica islámica contra el cristianismo de ‘Abd Allah al-Taryumán, Rome, 1971/Madrid, 1993; Pedro de la Cavallería, Zelus Christi contra iudeos, saracenos et alii inimicos Christianae fidei, Venice, 1592; Alonso de Cartagena, Defensorium unitatis Christianae, ed. M. Alonso, Madrid, 1973–75.