CHAPTER 4

Anti-Rabbinic Texts and Converso Identities: Fernão Ximenes de Aragão's Catholic Doctrine

Claude B. Stuczynski

An Anti-Rabbinic Text

How to read an anti-rabbinic text written in Portugal years after the mass conversion of the Jews in 1497? Historiographical debates centre around two hermeneutical possibilities: as the expression of an autonomous anti-Jewish established literary genre, the contra iudaeos, based on polemics against a Judaism that was more virtual than real; or as part of a critical, albeit distorted stance against New Christians or Conversos.1 According to the first view, real Conversos were mostly absent in these texts, becoming an excuse to recreate the long lasting Christian theological debate between


the Church and the Synagogue.\textsuperscript{2} Eventually, such anti-rabbinical tracts could also serve an internal Christian theological need: to fight against a tendency to “Judaize,” perceived literally and metaphorically as a regression from soul to flesh, from spirit to letter, and from eternal truth to the mere appearance of truth.\textsuperscript{3} According to the second view, beyond such stereotypes and clichés, anti-rabbinic polemical tracts contain useful data, being a complementary means to understand Converso religiosities, as appear in thousands of inquisitorial files.\textsuperscript{4} Through an analysis of the Catholic Doctrine for the Instruction and Confirmation of the Believers and the Extinction of the Superstitious Sects, and Particularly Judaism [Doutrina catholica para instrucçaõ e cõfirmaçaõ dos fieis e extinçãõ das seitas supersticiosas e em particular do Judaismo], Lisbon, 1625, by Fernão Ximenes de Aragão, I hope to show that those options do not exclude other interpretations.\textsuperscript{5}

As will be argued, traditional historiography inevitably leads to a useful, though limited, understanding of texts such as these. I believe that a better appreciation may be gained through a critical use of the methodologies endorsed by the ‘linguistic turn,’ such as those implemented by Quentin Skinner.\textsuperscript{6} Starting from the premise that every act of communication implies the acceptance or rejection of current beliefs, Skinner argues that a correct comprehension of discursive acts (oral or written) depends on deciphering their argumentative intention.\textsuperscript{7} This can be obtained through the contextualization of their language in relation to other discursive acts. This historical reconstruction avoids misconceptions based on a-historical and self-sufficient interpretations of texts and speeches. At the same time, it also prevents giving too much attention to the subjective motives of the author. Using Skinner’s methodology for the study of the Catholic Doctrine allows us to be more susceptible to its argumentation than to its sources, and hence shift the historiographical approaches. Therefore, rather than seeing such texts as mere

---


\textsuperscript{4} E.g. the aforementioned studies of I.S. Révah in note 2.

\textsuperscript{5} Fernão Ximenes d’Aragão, Doutrina catholica para instrucçaõ e cõfirmaçaõ dos fieis e extinçãõ das seitas supersticiosas e em particular do Judaismo, Lisboa, 1625.

\textsuperscript{6} “If we succeed in identifying this context with sufficient accuracy, we can eventually hope to read off what it was that the speaker or writer in whom we are interested was doing in saying what he or she said” (Quentin Skinner, “Interpretation and Understanding of Speech Acts,” in Visions of Politics, Volume I, Regarding Method, Cambridge, 2002, p. 116).