
Professor Tartakoff’s first book provides a valuable insight into Jewish-Christian relations in the Crown of Aragon before the pogroms of 1391, and especially into the mentalities of adherents of both religions. She vividly portrays the tensions between the two and, in particular, she puts a human face on those caught up in the contest between the rival faiths. Her main point is that there was mutual hostility and suspicion between Christians and Jews long before 1391, during what has been portrayed as a golden age of *convivencia* in which the three religious communities of Iberia, Christian, Jewish, and Islamic, lived in mutual respect and harmony. Professor Tartakoff’s research undermines this rosy picture and demonstrates the hatred and anxiety with which Christians and Jews regarded each other in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

The backbone of her research is a set of inquisitorial records from the Archive of the Cathedral of Barcelona of trials that took place in 1341. In that year a Jew named Alatzar Camariel, from a village near Calatayud in Aragon, was baptized into the Christian faith, taking Pere as his new Christian name. The reasons for Alatzar’s conversion are not known but the records of the inquisition reveal that his friends and former co-religionists, upon discovering that he had converted, convinced him to repent and to present himself to the Inquisition in Calatayud to be burnt at the stake to save his soul and as an act of purification for having sullied himself with baptismal water. This set in motion a train of events that eventually snared Alatzar/Pere and a number of others in the legal toils of the Inquisition and reveal much about both Jewish and Christian attitudes to conversion and to the rival faith.

The Inquisition’s original targets were Cathar and Waldensian heretics. It was established in Aragon in the early thirteenth century to snare those heretics who had fled over the Pyrenees to escape the Albigensian crusaders though it soon shifted its focus to *relapsi*, Jews who had converted to Christianity, most often under duress, and then sought refuge among Jewish *aljamas* in the Crown of Aragon with the intention of resuming their lives as Jews. For the church authorities this was apostasy, a capital crime, even though the church recognized that forced conversion of non-Christians was
not likely to lead to the inner spiritual transformation that was the true aim of proselytizing. Once a convert was baptized, any reversion to Judaism was seen as backsliding and, in effect, an attack on Christianity. In this it was not only the relapsus himself who was guilty, but also any Jew who encouraged the apostate or even who succoured him on his wanderings or in his attempt to be reabsorbed into the Jewish community.

Tartakoff is very good at drawing out the different perspectives of the two religious camps. She makes the case that the church was fearful of losing the souls of Christians and established the Inquisition more to protect Christianity than to scourge non-Christians. For this reason the Holy Office concerned itself with rooting out and burning Jewish literature that it perceived to be blasphemous and might persuade converts to relapse or even to cause “cradle Christians” to embrace Judaism. Tartakoff points out that the Inquisition had the Jews of Aragon in its sights a century and a half before the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition. Inasmuch as the Inquisition confiscated the goods of those convicted of heresy, blasphemy or encouraging apostasy, it often chose to prosecute wealthy members of Jewish aljamas who might have encouraged converts to return to Judaism or who tried to shield them from the authorities.

In the second section, “At the Font of New Life,” Tartakoff examines the position of converts in both the Jewish and Christian communities and in their possible motivations for conversion. Some had converted at the point of a sword, this occurring frequently during depredations of the Pastoureux. These converts normally sought to resume their lives as Jews once the danger had passed, but there were many other motivations for conversion. Some converted as a way of escaping or mitigating punishment, sometimes for crimes of violence against other Jews, or in order to keep property that was liable to confiscation. Some had been expelled from Jewish communities and were effectively outlaws. In fact, in the records, the act of conversion is commonly described as the rejection of one law—the law of Moses—and the acceptance of Christian law. This points to the fact that law in the fourteenth century was not territorial but personal and that to be cast out of one’s community was to find oneself an outlaw and vulnerable. For such outcasts, conversion to Christianity provided protection and also, as Tartakoff points out, an avenue for gaining revenge on those who had rejected them.