Introduction

Interreligious Encounters in Polemics between Christians, Jews, and Muslims in Iberia and Beyond

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by legal restrictions against Judaism and Islam in the Iberian Peninsula and by persecutions, conversions, and social violence, but also by cultural exchange—when the tension between assimilation and segregation reached its climax. It is a period that witnessed not only the disturbances in Toledo and Pedro Sarmiento’s statute against converts (studied here by Giordano) but also the defense of the medieval status quo—Christian convivencia with Jews and Muslims—by the likes of the bishop of Ávila, Alonso de Madrigal, El Tostado (studied by Echevarría). It was a long century in which the physical and symbolic borders separating the three religions, while being transformed, remained extraordinarily porous—a time of unstable religious ideas and identities. In spite of religious prohibitions, the members of Iberia’s different faiths interacted by means of commonly held notions, that is, they made use of religious ideas and symbols as ways of interrelating. This is the century that saw the founding of the Inquisition, the conquest of Granada, the expulsion of the Jews, and the various stages in the conversion of Muslims, when the border between the church and the synagogue had become tenuous and Islam continued to be officially recognized. At this time the converso problem—not only that of how to regard converts but also how to be a convert, how to know what to retain from one’s old religion after conversion—was of primary importance. It was a century defined by confrontation and redefinition but also one in which the rigid turn taken by Spanish Catholicism had still not come to pass. The intensity of the debates presented in the following chapters shows that, during the long fifteenth century, other paths were still open and various solutions still seemed possible.

Efforts to convert Jews and Muslims, in addition to the defensive efforts of these communities to keep their members, led to the production of a considerable number of polemical texts. The forced conversions that took place in Iberia between the end of the fourteenth century and the first decades of the sixteenth gave rise to crypto-Muslim and crypto-Jewish groups whose former identities, religious beliefs, and culture were attacked through the different kinds of texts and images that were discussed at the conference. These texts were not only Christian polemics directed against Judaism or Islam and their respective reactions: Jews and Muslims also wrote polemics against each other’s religion. We were interested in focusing on religious polemics in a framework of shifting identities, languages, and both religious and erudite knowledge. Polemics against Islam and Judaism also provided the opportunity for Christians to clarify their own doctrines against competing Christian groups. This is because polemics do not usually serve primarily to convince an opponent, but rather to protect the religious identity of the group to which the polemicist belongs and his own religious authority among his co-religionists,