Project: Religious Hybrids: Converts and Renegades in Medieval Iberia

My project for the NEH Summer Institute on Cultural Hybridities began as an effort to study Christian converts to Islam in Late Medieval Iberia. After the month in Barcelona, the numerous readings, the excellent talks, and the many discussions with the other participants, my ideas changed. Religious conversion is a conscious decision for change. But change from what to what? On a superficial level it would be easy to argue that these individuals were converting from Christianity to Islam. However, one must ask what did these terms mean in Medieval Iberia and what cultic practices, beliefs, and behaviors went with each. In short, in order to truly understand religious conversion in Medieval Iberia, we must first understand the religiosity of Medieval Iberia. My current research, in progress and nurtured by the Summer Institute, aims at a book-length project on this question of Iberian religiosity.

My goal, as the Summer Institute began was to write a brief article on the Christian rhetoric on religious conversion, notably the harsh polemics directed at Christians who converted or considered converting to Islam. As the Institute progressed however, I began to think in bigger terms and to start developing some of the questions and ideas that could drive and sustain a book-length project. In studying Christian converts to Islam, the reasons proposed by Alfonso of Valladolid, a Jewish philosopher and convert to Christianity, as to why a person was not likely to convert to another faith is an instructive starting point. Alfonso provides his readers with 11 reasons why Jews opted to stay Jews instead of choosing the path of Christianity. The list matches up well with the obstacles that religious sociologists have detailed in modern conversion experiences and includes among the impediments an unwillingness to leave behind one’s life; the shame and scorn faced by converts; and the loss of status and property. The final reason given by Alfonso was the lack of trained teachers who could instruct the potential convert in the ways of the new faith. In his understanding of conversion, Alfonso may have been relying too much on his own personal experience and desires of what conversion should entail, notably the necessity of an intellectual grounding in the new faith. We know that for the majority of religious converts this was not the case and that in most circumstances a passing knowledge of the religion they were converting to seems to have been enough. The argument that I am developing is that acculturation, religious interpenetration, cultural hybridity, convivencia (if we still choose to use that word) or however we describe the situation in Christian Spain made conversion that much more accessible to those who were contemplating it. Jonathan Ray, in an article published in 1996 and speaking of Jewish anxieties about conversion, has argued as much noting, “acculturation
might lead to assimilation and the abandonment of the Jewish community.”

I am particularly drawn to the idea of religion in the Iberian Peninsula as functioning in a Third Space of hybridity, drawing from the work of Fredric Jameson and Hommi Bhabha.

Several of the readings that we did for the institute helped to refine my ideas. The readings on the Mediterranean that accompanied Peregrine Horden’s talk got me to thinking about the question of conversion in terms of corruption or perhaps more accurately what David Abulafia has described as “enrichment”. As a starting point we need to ask, how did the Iberian religions “corrupt” each other? How did they enrich each other, but also alter their basic theological tenets, ritual practices, and devotional space? For the two minority religions of the Peninsula, Islam and Judaism, the changes are sometimes too obvious as Christian lordship severely influenced and constricted many of their cultic practices. The question becomes harder to answer for Christianity as the dominant religion and one not so easily affected by social, political, economic, or military pressures. In its dominant state, was Christianity also “corrupted” and if so, how?

Cynthia Robinson, among others, has already been looking at this issue. In fact, Robinson’s article on “Trees of Love, Trees of Knowledge,” argues that “in Iberia from the late thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries, a ‘medieval commonplace,’ … is grafted onto a growing preoccupation with the conversion of Jews and Muslims to Christianity.” This notion coincides neatly with the speculative musing put forth in the recent The Arts of Intimacy. “But what if,” the authors ask, “in the Iberian peninsula, religion, politics, language, and art never quite align? What if, like electrons, they revolve in different constellations, forming and reforming new bodies, each with different properties, evanescent attractions and repulsions? And as with electrons, one can never quite measure the location and movement of these parts of history at the same time.” What if, I would add, the lines of religious difference which we imagine to be so rigid and definitive are in fact much more fluid and porous? What if religion, instead of being an entity apart, is understood in the same way as other cultural elements? Instead of defined by strictly enforced and guarded boundaries, perhaps we should think of religious in belief in Iberia as more permeable and susceptible to foreign, corrupting influences. This fluidity was, in fact, what some Christian missionaries were counting on when they tried to convert Muslims to Christianity. The late 13th century Dominican William of Tripoli argued that the key to converting Muslims was to use the many connections between the two faiths as the basis for conversion. The ease with which these boundaries could be transgressed and the congruence between
the two faiths, however, could flow both ways. And this brings me back to my original question: how was religiosity constructed in Iberia? How much of a “medieval commonplace” or a “third space” was there when it came to religiosity? Answering this question will go a long way towards helping us understand the conversion of Christians to Islam and how Christians understood conversion. Was conversion the intellectual transformation described by Alfonso de Valladolid or was it a simple shift within the boundaries of the medieval commonplace, which required a slight nudge into already familiar spirituality and cultic practices? At this very early stage, I am proposing that indeed the shared religiosity of medieval Iberia helped to facilitate the spiritual aspects of conversion, and if I am right then answering the social, economic, political, and personal reasons why individuals converted should come a little easier.

Finally, I would like to touch lightly on the question of how I would like to go about uncovering this shared religiosity? I think that some of the work done in the sources mentioned earlier is a great start, but there are other approaches that might also prove profitable. Sermons aimed at Christians and in particular the boundaries that these try to enforce can tell us where religious authorities saw cracks in the Christian armor and sought to reinforce it. Legal treatises and law codes can also identify areas of concern and anxiety as kings, bishops and inquisitors tried to squeeze the “third space” out of existence. In the coming months, I would like to identify other sources that can at least obliquely help me to fashion a better understanding of the religious hybridity that I think existed in the Peninsula.

