

BOOK REVIEW

BETWEEN CHRISTIAN AND JEW: CONVERSION AND INQUISITION IN THE CROWN OF ARAGON, 1250–1391

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Paola Tartakoff, *Between Christian and Jew: Conversion and Inquisition in the Crown of Aragon, 1250–1391*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. 140 pages.

The recent publication of the paperback edition of *Between Christian and Jew: Conversion and Inquisition in the Crown of Aragon* by Paola Tartakoff reflects an increased interest in interfaith relations and the religious history of the Iberian Peninsula in recent years. Paola Tartakoff, a scholar on Jewish-Christian interaction during the medieval and early modern periods, successfully portrays that the complicated relationship between the Abrahamic faiths, especially in the Iberian Peninsula, is far from a new phenomenon. Her book focuses on 1250–1391, the century leading up to the horrific massacre and mass conversion of Jews in the Crown of Aragon, a kingdom within the Iberian Peninsula in what is now modern Spain. During this century, Christians and Jews worked productively together and mingled socially. However, inquisitors and the Catholic Church sporadically persecuted Jews and, consequently, Jews also felt negatively about Christianity. In her book, Tartakoff pushes back against the simplification of the relationship between Christians and Jews in the Crown of Aragon prior to 1391 and encourages further inquiry and research into the topic. Tartakoff follows the story of Pere, a Medieval Jewish convert to Christianity. As a result, she conveys the complexities of interfaith relations in Iberia at a time when the Catholic Church had an excess of power and how conversion and inquisitorial investigations impacted these tensions and prejudices. Overall, this book acts as an effective

foundation for future researchers to delve deeper into.

As a grad student, the story of Pere came to Tartakoff's attention when she discovered it in the footnote of an old book. After traveling to Spain to find the inquisitor records of his case, she came to realize that there were no articles or books written about this case, and it had been largely forgotten over time. In part one of *Between Christian and Jew*, Tartakoff dives into her findings from the inquisitor records and tells the story of Pere. After converting to Christianity, Pere states that he was coerced by Jews to denounce Christianity which nearly led him to burn at the stake as a Jewish martyr. This case led to a large inquisitorial investigation, around which Tartakoff structures her book. By focusing on this case, Tartakoff shows the complex relationship between Christians and Jews and how these inquisitorial investigations against Jews were often questionable. In Iberia at this time, Jews were allowed to practice their faith and were supposed to be allowed to be outside of the Christian fold. Therefore, they were not supposed to be impacted by inquisition. Due to the fact that Christians and Jews efficiently worked together and socialized together, it would appear on the surface that Jews were largely tolerated despite the Catholic influence within the region. Of course, as Tartakoff shows in her book, this was not always the case. Inquisitors did in fact prosecute Jews for blaspheming against Christianity and for allegedly attempting to bring Christian converts back to Judaism. Tartakoff lays the foundation of the book by introducing the productive yet problematic relationship between medieval Iberian Christians and Jews while investigating the case of Pere and the inquisitorial investigation of his alleged attackers. By structuring her book around this startling story, she effectively draws in the audience and makes the reader excited to dive further into the book.

Part two of *Between Christian and Jew* shows that the complexity of interfaith relations in Iberia was even more complicated due to Jewish conversion to Christianity. During this time, mass conversion had not occurred in the region, yet, some Jews, allegedly willingly, converted to Christianity. Tartakoff discusses Jewish converts to Christianity by continuing to highlight the case of Pere. While she states that Pere's case was unusual, she adds that Jews did in fact want converts to return back to Judaism, especially the family members of converts. Tartakoff describes Jewish converts as being in a "no man's land" because, despite the fact that the Catholic Church praised Jewish conversion and saw it as proof of Christian supremacy and truth, Jewish converts were still stereotyped as untrustworthy. Tartakoff shows that conversion to Christianity did occur, mostly as an attempt by Jews to have a better life, but converts became a group of their own, isolated both by their former Jewish brethren and their new fellow Christians. Tartakoff illustrates the prejudice that Jews and Christians had against each other despite living in the same region and working alongside each other. Furthermore, she successfully shows the Christian disdain for "Jewishness" and their harmful belief that Jews were dangerous yet inferior, even if they converted to Christianity. On the other hand, she posits that Jews also felt disdain and hatred towards Christianity and Christians. However, due to the limited sources available, Tartakoff admits that generalizations and assumptions must be made to attempt to understand the medieval Iberian view of Christian converts during the century on which that the book focuses. Due to the aforementioned complexity of Jewish-Christian relations in thirteenth and fourteenth-century Iberia, it is likely that we are not getting the full picture from the limited sources

that have been discovered. For these reasons, it is crucial to take the arguments and conclusions conveyed in the book with a grain of salt.

In the third and final part of *Between Christian and Jew*, Tartakoff delves further into the inquisitorial investigations and their consequences. As discussed in the book, many of these investigations were done under torture or threats of death. Inquisitions were deadly and could result in more taxes being burdened on whole Jewish communities. This resulted in further Jewish disdain for Christianity and Christians, which created an even larger divide between the faiths. While diving into this topic, Tartakoff argues that the documentation of the inquisitorial investigations in the Crown of Aragon during this time reveals little about the true story. Not only is there a limited number of sources available, the documentation that does remain was written by the inquisitors' scribes, who not only likely held a bias against those they persecuted, but also used summarization and paraphrasing when documenting the investigations. Therefore, all we can truly know about the lives of Jews during this time from these documentations is what Christians chose to document. These sources get even more cloudy when considering that the Jews being questioned were tortured. They knew that inquisitors could have them killed at the stake, which resulted in truth being withheld in many of these investigations. As Tartakoff mentions, our sources on these matters are scarce, riddled with bias, and have been likely translated on several occasions. Due to this, the takeaways presented are Tartakoff's own interpretations of very limited sources. Tartakoff's *Between Christian and Jew* undoubtedly leaves the reader with many questions. As I concluded the book, I found myself wondering how Jewish converts viewed themselves and their Jewish identities. Due to the limited available primary sources from both the inquisitors and Iberian Jews, the book can at times be very repetitive, and Tartakoff makes generalizations in an attempt to understand the lives of the subjects of the book. More research is needed to truly understand the interfaith relationships discussed in the book. Despite this, Tartakoff successfully portrays the complexities of interfaith relations during 1250–1391 in the Crown of Aragon with the limited materials she did have. Overall, her book argues that Jewish conversion to Christianity and the inquisitorial investigations of accusations of Jewish blasphemy may have increased the tensions and the complexity of the relationship between Christians and Jews. These events, including the case of Pere, were likely on the minds of inquisitors during the horrific events that would follow in 1391. As Tartakoff admits, much of this is speculation based on limited sources. Furthermore, she proves that the image of a religiously tolerant Crown of Aragon during the century before 1391 is not completely accurate and that much more research needs to be done on this topic.

By using the fascinating case of Pere as the foundation of her book, she leaves the reader captivated and interested to dive deeper. Although the book is targeted toward an academic audience, Tartakoff skillfully structures the book in a way that makes it palatable even for a non-academic audience. Tartakoff concludes her book by stating that she hopes it will encourage other researchers to delve deeper into the lives of Jews and Christians in the Crown of Aragon during this time period. While it is clear that much more research and investigation into the lives of Jews and Christians during this time period is necessary to get a clearer picture of their experiences, Tartakoff's book acts as an excellent foundation for further inquiry and research. Those interested in delving deeper into the lives

of medieval Jews and Christians certainly will find themselves enthusiastic to begin their own research.