

CONVERSOS AND THE SPANISH INQUISITION

By David M. Gitlitz

University of Rhode Island

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THE END OF TOLERANCE

Spain had an enormous Jewish community in the middle ages and toward the end of the 14th century large numbers of them were converted to Catholicism. A “converso” is literally someone who was formerly Jewish and is now Catholic. They converted for all kinds of reasons. Some of them were forced; some of them went willingly into Catholicism. The term converso was applied not only to the generation that converted but also to their children and their grandchildren and on down through the generations.

In 1391 there were terrible riots sweeping across southern Spain. People were offered the choice of converting or being killed. Some 20,000 converted under those circumstances. They had no intention of becoming Catholic. They were not educated in Catholicism and they went on living their Jewish lives as they wanted. Twenty years later there were a series of preaching campaigns run by the Dominicans, which converted many tens of thousands of Jews, largely by persuasion. These people were interested in becoming Catholic, of joining the mainstream Catholic society, and they were given open access to jobs and to possibilities that they'd never had before. By the time the Inquisition was founded, a couple of generations later, there were the children and grandchildren of people who had been converted with no intention of becoming Catholics and others who had, who were the grandchildren of people who were trying very hard to put their Jewish past behind them - all of them in extended families with people who were still Jewish. They attended Bar Mitzvahs, they attended circumcisions, they attended Easter holiday processions and these different groups co-mingled in ways that were very complex in Spain.

WHY THEY CONVERTED

One of the things that encouraged people to convert was the fact that, as Christians, they would have access to parts of society which had previously been denied to them. By the 1450's, the converts had become the new urban middle class. They were dominant in business. The «old Christians» were folks who had been Christian for many generations and the «new Christians» were the recent converts. The Spaniards felt it was important to make the distinction difference between old Christians and new Christians, because they were afraid that the new Christians were taking over certain key middle class positions in society and that troubled them greatly.

Some people converted because they had swords to their throats and they had a choice of converting or dying. Others were offered the opportunity of social mobility or economic mobility. Many converted because they fell in love with someone who was Catholic and the only way they could marry them was to convert to Catholicism, there were dozens and dozens of those. Many people bought the argument of the Dominican preachers who said, believe in a God who is all powerful and all knowing and is just. All you had to do was look at the soaring cathedrals and the squalid Jewish synagogues to know that while God once favored the Jews he had changed sides. Many of the converts joined the Church as monks, as priests, some of them rose to positions of great power. Some of them even became Inquisitors because they believed in their heart of hearts that Christianity was now the true religion.

THE CONSEQUENCES

The effort to convert people was designed by the Church to promote unity but the society was not willing to accept this and certain groups within the church were not willing to accept it either. They were not willing to accept the converts as

fully equally participating Christians and, increasingly, barriers were erected to try to keep them separate. Rather than decreasing the number of categories in society it actually increased them over the long haul and produced incredible tensions.

The Spaniards officially tried to get the converts to assimilate. They passed laws prohibiting them from following their former Jewish customs or from fraternizing with their former Jewish friends and relatives but there was no enforcement mechanism and those laws had very little effect. They tried separating the Jewish community from the convert community by ghettoizing the cities for the first time in serious forced ways and that didn't do succeed either. They expelled the Jews from cities like Seville to try to isolate the converso community from contact with the Jews and that didn't promote assimilation either. Increasingly there were voices that said we need an enforcement mechanism, a policing mechanism to ensure that the converts don't continue to identify as Jews and to practice as Jews and the only way to do that is to separate them from the Jews and to punish them or coerce them from continuing their Jewish practices in any way.

The Spanish Inquisition officially had no jurisdiction over Jews. It only had jurisdiction over Catholics. Once a Jew had converted and accepted the waters of baptism then they were officially Catholic and it was the job of the Church to ensure that they were fully believing, fully practicing Catholics and that they shed their Jewish beliefs and customs. The Inquisition was focused on that.

David M. Gitlitz

David M. Gitlitz is a writer, former provost and currently Professor of Hispanic Studies at the University of Rhode Island. David Gitlitz holds a B.A and Ph.D. from Harvard University. He divides his time among research on three broad areas: the Golden Age of Spanish literature, Spanish-Jewish history, and pilgrimages. He has authored or co-authored several books on Hispanic literature, Sephardic history, and pilgrimage, including:

Secrecy And Deceit: The Religion of the Crypto-Jews. Culled from Inquisition documents, David Gitlitz documents the religious customs of the Iberian Jews who converted to Catholicism, largely under duress, in the 14th and 15th centuries in Spain, Portugal, and their American colonies.

A Drizzle Of Honey: an Inquisition cook-book. Forced to convert to Catholicism during the Inquisition, many Jews in Spain kept alive their culture and identity in secret. Their food traditions have been re-created in these recipes, which are mingled with stories about the people who created them.

