

# Moriscos and Jewish Converts: Religion as Cultural Identity

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In the early years of the 16th century, the Catholic Monarchs, who had expelled the Jews from Spain in 1492 – the same year in which the conquest of the Muslim kingdom of Granada was completed – decreed the compulsory conversion to Christianity of all Muslims living in the territories of the Crown of Castile. In 1526, the same decree was extended to the Muslims of the territories of Aragon and Valencia. Thus an end was put to the legal existence of Muslims in the Christian territories of Iberia, where they had lived with the name of Mudejares throughout the mediaeval period. There then begins (until the expulsion of 1610-1614) a long century marked by what is called the Morisco problem, this being the term for the “new Moorish converts”. Many of them continued as crypto-Muslims, in different manners and degrees of ritual practice and dogmatic knowledge, but in every case regarding themselves as Muslims and for that reason persecuted by the Inquisition. Nevertheless, not all suffered that persecution, because in the course of the “Morisco century” assimilation and integration progressively increased; the circumstances of the diverse groups of new converts were very different from the outset and would become more so as the 16th century advanced. Thus for example the old Mudejares of the kingdom of Castile had been immersed for a long time in Castilian society, they did

not speak Arabic or undergo circumcision, they were few in number and their presence was not a disturbing influence. It was otherwise with the Muslims of the recently conquered kingdom of Granada or of Valencia, where in the early 16th century they were numerous, were well organised in dense communities, had their own religious authorities and spoke Arabic. In the middle years of the 16th century a succession of decrees prohibited the Arabic language in speech and writing, the Arabic personal and family names, the traditional costumes, the baths, and “Moorish” music in festivals. These decrees produced not only a strong Morisco reaction (in particular the War of the Alpujarras in the late 1560s) but a debate between the various civil and ecclesiastical authorities on what were the ambits of human life that were subject to religion, and whether certain gastronomic, hygienic, linguistic or festive customs were a sign of religious affiliation. In other words, whether certain cultural features could be kept apart (as was maintained by the noble of Morisco origin Fernando Núñez Muley) from the sound observance of religious ritual and sincere belief, or whether it was necessary to eliminate the former to give full play to the latter. The defence of the Arabic language and the attempt to christianise it, or at least *de-is-lamise* it, gave rise to such noted phenomena as the famous fraud of the so-called Lead

Books of Sacromonte,<sup>1</sup> a supposed gospel dictated in Arabic by the Virgin Mary to some Arab disciples, early Christians who came to the Peninsula with St. James, which appeared in Granada in the 1590s. This was the most notorious attempt to separate or legitimise the features of a cultural identity vis-à-vis religious belief and practice.

Culturally, the Moriscos gave birth to phenomena such as the *aljamiado* literature, i.e. written in Romance vernacular with Arabic characters and a syntax and vocabulary deeply tinted by Arabic: a secret Islamic literature written in Spanish to which belong two books to be described here, the *Tratado de los dos caminos* and the *Tratado del Mancebo de Arévalo*. Each represents one of the many aspects which make “late Spanish Islam” (in Bernard Vincent’s terms) an exceptional laboratory for the study of the construction and preservation of identities, the complexity and hybridisation of various groups, the study of mechanisms by which a social body is marked out and marginalised or by which its normative behaviour, religious, cultural and political, is regulated. All of these aspects have proved an attraction to historians, philologists, specialists in literature and anthropologists. The Morisco phenomenon, well adapted to an inter-disciplinary approach, has been constantly fed by the discovery and exploitation of new documentary sources, trials of the Inquisition, cadastral and notarial registers and *aljamiado* manuscripts which have made it possible to uncover the different facets of a subject of unsuspected richness. The issues raised are constantly being renewed and give rise to the continuous publication of new studies and new interpretations. The subject of the convert Jews, which, though much older – it arises as early as the 15th century – overlaps

in many aspects with that of the Moriscos, and which Domínguez Ortiz considered the most important and specific problem of modern Spanish history, has received, in comparison, less attention from Spanish historians.

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From the times of the expulsion itself there was ample debate over its rightness and legitimacy – people who had received the sacrament of baptism were being expelled to North Africa, that is, to Muslim territory – and this debate was taken up by historians in the 19th century. The bibliography on the Moriscos makes up a very abundant department of studies, one which has made and continues to make rivers of ink flow, the “Morisco river” referred to by the book of Bernard Vincent.<sup>2</sup> The Morisco question is an emotive one and has a strong capacity for connecting with contemporary problems. It can be seen, to some extent, as a live issue which it is not always easy to approach in a purely historiographical way. In modern times, there hovers over Morisco history the presence of Muslims in Europe, who are the target of intense reactions. Some of these reactions and their formulations in the Press today (whether Muslims can be Europeans or not, whether they are Muslims above all else, whether they are unassimilable, whether they are going to alter fundamentally the societies in which they settle, whether their religious beliefs are compatible with our cultural and political values, whether they feel a “civilisational hatred” for Europeans, etc.), although

1. M. Barrios and M. García-Arenal (eds.), *Los Plomos del Sacromonte. Inversión y tesoro*, Valencia, Universitat de València, 2006.

2. B. Vincent, *El río morisco*, Valencia, Universitat de València, 2007.

expressed in other terms, strikingly recall the discussions and emotions aroused in 16th-century Spain and settled with the expulsion of the early 17th century. Then as now, the discussion hinges, in reality, on the possibility or the desirability of assimilation. Is not assimilation, after all, an infiltration? The question, when all is said and done, is always the same: can they be us? The fundamental nature of this question is not changed by the fact that nowadays it is no longer good form to speak of assimilation, in the name of respect and of the freedom of different communities, or of a particular interpretation of the term “multiculturalism”. For frequently what is under discussion is the definition of our own identity and its construction; a question that is complex, sensitive and in perpetual evolution. Historical writing and the output of social sciences centred on the question of preserving identity are less given to studying the reverse question, i.e. the achievement of anonymity, of a total or partial non-differentiation that permits the disappearance (and therefore near-invisibility) in their surrounding society of hundreds of thousands of Moriscos, convert Jews... and European Muslims.

### Two Morisco Works: *el Mancebo de Arévalo* and *Tratado de los dos caminos*

Between these two works I am going to speak about a whole century extends. *El Mancebo de Arévalo*<sup>3</sup> was written in *aljamía* in the early 16th century. The *Tratado de los dos caminos*<sup>4</sup> was written, in the Spanish language and

script, a century later in Tunis by an exiled Morisco. This is a first point to be noted and not an exceptional one (nearly all the Morisco literature produced in North Africa, and especially in Tunis, is written in Spanish, in Latin script) and demonstrates, in my view, that the Moriscos wanted to keep their literature secret, outside the reach of the society around them, both in Christian and in Muslim lands. Both the works mentioned were already well known, but they were not published in their entirety until a few years ago: they are profoundly personal works, anonymous, reflecting a life's career and a cultural and intellectual pilgrimage. They both bear witness to a disappearing world: the young man of Arévalo consorts with old men who lived in the former Muslim kingdom of Granada and with Aragonese Muslims who had known the times of Mudejar society, while the second author writes in Tunis as the Morisco world is coming to an end, that is to say, as the children of the exiles achieve integration into Tunisian society and forget the country and language of their parents. They are both works of exceptional richness and at the same time somewhat enigmatic, cryptic; a spiritual journey combined with a compendium of knowledge which the writers desire to pass on to those who come after them, and who will belong, irreversibly now, to a new world.

Let us begin with the first: a young Morisco from Arévalo agrees to the request of some compeers that he should collect in one text the fundamentals of the faith and rites of Islam, of which most of them have little or no knowledge. The Moriscos fear that these texts and their precepts, fundamental for leading the life

3. *Tratado (Tafsira) del Mancebo de Arévalo*, edition, introduction and notes by María Teresa Narváez Córdoba, Madrid, Trotta, 2003.

4. *Tratado de los dos caminos por un morisco refugiado en Túnez* (MS S2 of the Gayangos collection of the Library of the Real Academia de la Historia), edition, linguistic notes and glossary by Álvaro Galmés de Fuentes, prepared for press by Juan Carlos Villaverde Amieva, with a preliminary study by Luce López-Baralt, Instituto Universitario Seminario Menéndez Pidal (Universidad Complutense de Madrid), Seminario de Estudios Árabo-Románicos, Universidad de Oviedo, 2005.

of a good Muslim, will be lost. They consider that the well-educated youth is a good candidate to perform the task. The young man undertakes for that purpose a journey throughout the Peninsula collecting the lore of the old Moriscos – for example in Saragossa; interviewing survivors of the conquest of Granada; reading in their clandestine libraries manuscripts written both in Arabic and in *aljamiado*. The young man relates his journey within the familiar Islamic tradition of “travelling in search of knowledge”; he visits the masters and describes the people whom he interviews and from whom he learns. Thus there appear in his pages the sorceress and midwife Nozeita Calderán, who lives in a village of Cuenca, or Yuse Banegas in Granada, with whom he spends two months reading in his presence texts in Arabic so that the old Morisco may correct him. In Granada he also meets an old ascetic and mystic, called the Moorish Woman of Úbeda, who lives on the outskirts of the Puerta de Elvira, and to whom the Moriscos come in search of help and consolation. Yuse Banegas, his most exacting master and the one with whom he remains longest, says to him: “Son, I do not weep for the past, for there is no return to it, but I weep for what you will see if you have life and you remain in this land... All will be harshness and bitterness... the Muslims will be like the Christians, neither refusing their costume nor avoiding their foods. May His Goodness grant that they will avoid their works and that they may not follow the (Catholic) religion in their hearts.” But the *Tratado del Mancebo de Arévalo* is not only fascinating for its itinerary, for its apprenticeship and for being a compendium of advice and rules. It is so above all for its enigmatic Muslim spiritual messages and for what these reflect of the spirituality of the author himself. In the excellent introductory study, the editor of the text, María Teresa Narváez, shows that the *Mancebo* makes extensive use of the *Imitatio Christi* of Thomas a Kempis and

that he inserts in his text part of the prologue of Fernando de Rojas’s *La Celestina*. From the Morisco text there echo the words of Tetrarch, which Rojas translates and makes his own, and which in their turn quote Heraclitus. Let us recall that Stephen Gilman, in conjunction with Márquez, proposed that Fernando de Rojas’s status as a convert was a determining factor in explaining the harassed and anguished attitude of man before a meaningless universe that is radiated by the pages of *La Celestina*. One of the most interesting suggestions about the *Mancebo* comes from María Jesús Rubiera, who maintains that the young Morisco must have been a Jewish convert. The editor of the present volume does not agree, but it should be noted that the young man has recourse in his narrative to frequent meetings with Jews, and to quotations from Jewish books and sources, besides using certain terms characteristic of Jewish and judaising writings such as “Adonai” or “Dio” for God – Dio in the singular instead of Dios, because for Jews and Muslims there is only one God and not a Trinity. Al-Andalus, the lost paradise, is for the young man a “new Israel” fallen because of the sins of its inhabitants. Narváez maintains that the young man’s knowledge of Jewish texts and his visits to Jews, who allow him access to their home and their hidden books, demonstrate both the wide intellectual and spiritual curiosity of the author and the solidarity there was between the two minorities. That is possible, but we could also speak – and there are documented and numerous cases – of a conversion from Judaism to Islam. All in all, the *Tratado del Mancebo* is a fascinating text.

The *Tratado de los dos caminos* consists in the complete edition of another famous anonymous and unheaded manuscript, MS S2 of the Gayangos collection of the Library of the Real Academia de la Historia. The work was composed by one of the Moriscos expelled in 1609 and must have been written between 1630 and



Patio de los Leones, Alhambra, Granada (Spain).

1650. It is a complex and miscellaneous work, to some extent a treatise of moral and religious liturgy, with elements that show a spirit and sources that are fully Islamic. In the middle of this miscellany is a novel whose composition and sources belong wholly to the Spanish literature of the period, and is sprinkled with verses from Lope de Vega and Garcilaso among others. This novel uses the plot of one of the Sueños [*Dreams*] of Quevedo, making reference to images and symbolism from the Spanish painting of the period, which he undoubtedly knew and liked. The verses often appear in misquoted form, probably because the author kept them only from memory. This novel, which Oliver Asín titled *El arrepentimiento del desdichado* ["The Repentance of the Unfortunate"], is a kind of exemplary novel and is in harmony

with the thread that really gives structure to the work; this, as is well pointed out by Luce López-Baralt in the excellent introductory study, does not so much deal with repentance as show two paths that man can follow: the errant but pleasant path and the apparently austere and thorny path that leads to salvation. Hence the title given by Oliver Asín under which the edition here described appears. The novel finishes by passing on to the didactic part, consisting of regulations to be followed by the believer in the matter of marriage (including sexual relations and some explicit advice for achieving the satisfaction of the wife), ritual ablution, prayer, fasting, etc., in order to follow the right path. The whole work is sprinkled with fables, by way of examples, some of them very beautiful, in the manner characteristic of

didactic and moral literature since the Middle Ages. In these, the good man is the detached man, the one who acts with complete candour, putting his life and that of his own people in the hands of God; evil is no more than the appetite for the world in all its forms. While the author never cites his Spanish sources (Lope de Vega, Garcilaso or Quevedo), he does cite some of the Islamic ones, such as al-Ghazali, the *cadi* Iyad, Ibn Rushd or Ahmad Zarruq, whom he follows step by step in his treatise on marriage. There is no doubt that the sources of inspiration include Catholic spirituality.

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The work begins with some very interesting pages in which the author interprets the expulsion in a providentialist key, as a liberation which God grants to His beloved people (Philip III is the pharaoh who ends the captivity in Egypt), and in them he describes his arrival in Tunis and the good reception the Moriscos received from the Turkish Regency of Tunis. Next, he makes clear his intention in writing the work, at a time when several decades had elapsed since his arrival in the new land. That intention consists in bequeathing everything that the author knows, everything that he is, because he belongs to a class of men that is on the way out, to a world to which nobody now belongs. He does not want the things he guards in his memory to be forgotten, “for while we who came were living, [these things] were not forgotten, but now with the passing of time I relate it so that those who have been born here may know of me and of the few who remain.” Hence also the miscellaneous and at the same time very personal character of his work, in which the author seems to have wished to bring together

everything that has seemed to him important, significant, illuminating, instructive and even – despite the moral, critical and sometimes pessimistic character of the work – pleasurable. It is thus a work reflecting a moral and intellectual autobiography.

The excellent preliminary study by López-Baralt discusses the authorship and the different hypotheses that have been proposed, none of them convincing or sufficiently proved, on the manuscript and its other copies. It also situates the work within the context of Morisco literature in exile, of which she presents a well-documented and very useful summary of the state of scholarship. I was especially interested in, among other things, the need stated by López-Baralt to read between the lines, bearing in mind that the writer comes from a culture and a milieu where it was necessary to use secrecy, dissimulation, half-words and self-censorship. And she shows how the anonymous author does this in his veiled criticisms of the host country or the way he introduces the things he liked (the poetry, for example) about the country and the language he comes from. With this anonymous Morisco, as López-Baralt shows us, there exists also an obsession with honour, with appearances and with pride in the purity of blood.

### The Jewish Converts of Spain

An obsession with honour and with lineage was also a strong characteristic of the Judaisers who fled from the Peninsula during the 17th century, together with their taste for comedy and poetry. It is highly interesting to compare the literature of the Moriscos in exile with the Spanish literature of the Jewish converts, the “New Jews” of Amsterdam. We can take the example of three writers born in Andalusia (there are some authorities who maintain that the anonymous author of S2 was Andalusian):

Orobio de Castro, Juan de Prado and Miguel de Barrios. The first two were doctors who had studied medicine in Osuna and Alcalá respectively before going into exile. In the Netherlands they wrote an extensive literary corpus in Spanish, partly of apologetics and religious polemic, but also literary: Miguel de Barrios (afterwards David Levi) is the author of *Flor de Apolo* and *Coro de las Musas*. Together with Orobio de Castro, he founded a literary academy called the Academia de los Floridos, after the fashion of those which then existed in Andalusia, where poetic jousts used to be held. In addition, Orobio himself founded in Amsterdam in 1667, with his brother-in-law Samuel Rosa, a theatrical company.

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The case of the Jewish converts (first to Christianity, then to Judaism) differs from the Morisco case in that the former emigrated to an intellectually more stimulating milieu for their own interests, and in that they had received a university education, at least in the cases mentioned. They also had near by, in Brussels, Spanish nobles who liked to patronise some of their literary activities. But, while in contrast to the Moriscos they wrote in Latin and Spanish, like them they were steeped in the Spanish culture of the Baroque and in Catholic spirituality, and they were well versed in the intellectual instruments of contemporary Spain.

Especially interesting is the case of Juan de Prado, to whom Natalia Muchnik has recently

devoted a splendid book.<sup>5</sup> Prado, the son of convert Jews from Portugal, where he himself was born around 1612, was brought up in Andalusia and studied medicine and theology in the University of Alcalá de Henares, where he was a fellow student and friend of Orobio de Castro. He practised medicine while living in Andalusia (in Antequera, Lopera, Seville), where he had a first encounter with the Inquisition when he was accused of, among other things, maintaining that “every man is saved in his own law, whether Christian, Moor or Jew.” The fact is that Prado, like others of his university companions, was a Deist, i.e. a supporter of the doctrine that reason can reach a knowledge of God but cannot determine His attributes. With the threat of the Inquisition hanging over him and his family, Prado joined his patient and protector, the Archbishop of Seville Domingo Pimentel, in a journey to Rome. On the death of the archbishop he moved to Hamburg, where he converted to Judaism before settling in Amsterdam, where he continued his dedication to medicine and poetry and had very stormy relations with the Jewish community. His old friend and companion Orobio de Castro crossed swords with him from the standpoint of normative Judaism. He was expelled from the community and condemned by it at the same time as Spinoza, but Prado, in contrast to his young friend, sought pardon and asked to be readmitted to it. With Spinoza he maintained intense intellectual exchanges. In 1660 Prado left Amsterdam to settle in Antwerp, where he gravitated to Catholicism again and showed a wish for reconversion and return to Spain. He had managed to get a Spanish nobleman to mediate with the Inquisition for him to be admitted to reconciliation when he died

5. N. Muchnik, *Une vie marrane. Les pérégrinations de Juan de Prado dans l'Europe du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2005.

an accidental death. Muchnik shows us that Prado's is not an isolated or extreme case, but a representative one. We have here a spirit beset by doubt in an untiring search for the truth, not an adept of ambiguity or double-dealing: a case illustrating what the laboratory, the melting-pot of Iberia was in the 17th century. Finally I should mention that, in the view presented by Muchnik, Prado, besides having sought throughout his life to understand the relation of man to God through reason, in reality postulates a Judaism of culture and identity rather than a religious Judaism. The work is thus an interesting offering which

ought to be kept in mind for a re-reading of various Morisco texts.

These brief notes are only one aspect of what the Iberian Peninsula represented, in the Early Modern centuries, as a crowded crossroads of cultures and identities with a long history of pluralism and religious cohabitation which was still very close, and which differentiated it from the rest of Europe. The new situation of religious and political unification gave rise to a multiplicity of situations and re-definitions of identity and culture in which there remains much to learn and to interpret.