Final Report Summary - CORPI (Conversion, Overlapping Religiosities, Polemics, Interaction: Early Modern Iberia and Beyond)

CORPI has addressed a wide range of questions regarding the social, religious and cultural consequences of the forced conversions that took place in Iberia in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Through a series of royal decrees, Iberia was dramatically transformed from the religiously plural society that it had been during the Middle Ages into a mono-confessional one. Judaism and Islam were forbidden, as were their sacred texts. This transformation of a religiously plural society into a mono-confessional one was of tremendous consequence and took place in conjunction with the establishment of the Inquisition and with the crisis produced by the Protestant Reformation, both of which brought into question the sources of religious authority. Public indoctrination, evangelization, religious polemics—
including attacks on Judaism and Islam as well as refutation of the arguments of Judaism and Islam against Catholicism—all became part of everyday life for the inhabitants of Iberia.

The forced conversions made necessary a degree of disputation and evangelization that led to many of the conflicts this project has analysed. We have demonstrated that widespread forced conversion created knowledge of, and even familiarity with, the religions of the former minorities. A paradox was that out of the circumstances forced conversion created there emerged a multiplicity of religious options, as a result of the contact with religious faiths that had previously been encapsulated within their own communities. Contact among the three religions thus affected the development of each of them in new and often unforeseeable ways. Iberia became a polemical arena and polemical social, cultural and political fields became factors in the way the three religious communities interacted in the diverse regions of the peninsula and overseas in their empires. Polemics was partly a theological discourse, but it was also a form of social practice that carried with it real consequences in the field of interreligious encounters. These included not just the changing relations among different communities of faith but also the internal apologetics of each.

We have also shown that the Christian polemical tradition’s confrontational method of comparison effectively if unintentionally placed the idea of truth within a context that invited vacillation, doubt, and unbelief. We began by exploring religious polemics as a way of tracing the boundaries of Spanish Catholicism and more specifically the emergence within and around it of doubt, scepticism, and unbelief. The crisis of identity produced by forced mass conversions touched off inner crises about the nature of Truth. Insistent and widespread efforts by both religious and civil authorities to attempt to regulate religious practices and beliefs inadvertently gave rise to anxiety, doubt, and indeterminacy over the essence of these beliefs and practices, and even over the very essence of religion itself. After forced conversion, dissimulation became the all-pervading ingredient in the cultural and religious life of early modern Spain to an unprecedented extent. The relation between dissimulation and scepticism has required a reconsideration of the broader cultural history of the Hispanic World that the project has been unraveling.

Finally, we have shown that forced conversion changed not only the idea of belief, but also that of conversion itself. Since from the outset forced converts were not expected to be good Christians (a presupposition that clearly undermined belief in the transforming capacities of Baptism) and after creating the separate social and religious category of “Old Christians” the Spanish Catholic community saw itself as a community of blood in which the notions of religion and race were increasingly intertwined.

The project has devoted considerable effort to elucidating the ideas through which forced conversion was legitimized and has explored its importance in the sphere of politics, both national and international. Thus political prophecy and especially the propagandistic self-presentation by Ferdinand and Isabella and Charles V as the Last World Emperors whose destiny was to unite the whole of humanity under the same religion, have been closely studied, among many other themes. All these aspects are novel and go beyond the state of the art. Finally, we have begun to identify and trace the development of similar ideas and processes in other areas of European, especially Italy and France. Our aim here has been to explore a new historiographical point of view which reveals the many and unexpected ways in which Catholic Europe contributed to the European “crisis of knowledge” along with other processes that have been considered as marking the way to Modernity.
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