

Conversions to Islam late mediaeval Mediterranean (Nikolas Jaspert)

In the European Middle Ages, the possibility to choose one's own religion seems to have been extremely limited. Men and women were born into their religions and stuck to them without any alternative. According to this interpretation, only physical or structural violence could lead to conversions which were, significantly, much lamented and opposed by the respective religious authorities.

In the first part of my paper, I will confront this interpretation with the social practices of decision-taking in the late mediaeval Mediterranean. This confrontation will put the mentioned interpretation into perspective because not only conversions to Christianity, but also to Islam were much more frequent than commonly assumed. Texts from the Christian realms of the Iberian Peninsula provide intriguing evidence for this – texts that I would like to relate to the attempts of clerical and secular authorities to regulate processes of religious decision-taking. Whilst there is a multitude of sometimes picturesque accounts of religious plurality and diversity in the late mediaeval Mediterranean, there is only limited evidence of specific decision processes: The sources usually remain silent in regard to how the decision against one's own religion and in favour of a different one was actually taken.

In the second part of my paper, I will therefore present and analyze a report that has hardly been studied in German historiography. It was written around 1420 by a former Christian who indicates the reasons that led him to choose another religion – Islam. The text reveals religious decision-making as a complex, even tantalizing process. I will discuss if this is just an ex-post legitimation or if there could be other reasons for the way the text presents the issue of conversion. This dazzling narrative of decision-making leads to a number of further questions: for instance concerning the "range" of any conversion.