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# Creating Conversos: Genealogy and Identity as Historiographical Problems (after a recent book by Ángel Alcalá)

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**Creating *Conversos*: Genealogy and Identity as Historiographical Problems (after a recent book by Ángel Alcalá)**

**MERCEDES GARCIA ARENAL**

From the late fourteenth-century onwards, recurrent persecutions and killings of Jews, as well as the passing of different items of restrictive legislation, produced a series of mass conversions in Iberia. The major milestones include well known events such as the bloody persecution unleashed in Seville in 1391 by the notorious Ferrant Martínez, archdeacon of Écija, a process involving a series of pogroms which, by death or conversion, drastically reduced the size of the Jewish communities. Also famous are the preaching of the Dominican friar Vicente Ferrer, with his incitements to anti-Jewish violence, and the Dispute known as that of Tortosa which in 1414 produced the conversion of a great number of Aragonese rabbis (and thus of their communities), who had been forced to take part in the proceedings. All of these episodes took place in a tremendously agitated political century in Iberia. They were sometimes unrelated episodes, but teleological hindsight encourages us to see them as leading up to the final outcome of the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492. When the Catholic Monarchs made the final decision to expel Jews, however, there were very few Jews left to expel. Instead, there were a huge number of converts to Catholicism.

The forced conversion of Jews to Catholicism was followed between 1502 and 1526 (through a series of decrees promulgated at different times in Castile and Aragon) by the compulsory conversion of Muslims, who came to be known as *Moriscos* or *cristianos nuevos de moro* (new Christians who were formerly Moors). The general picture was further completed later, in the first half of the century, when numbers of Portuguese Jews immigrated to Spain, fleeing policies of expulsion and Inquisitorial persecution which had started later in Portugal than in Castile or Aragon. In this way the foundations were laid for what were to become the most significant problems in Iberian social history in the three centuries that followed.

All together, these movements of mass conversion represented a systematic attempt to turn the plural society, in ethno-religious terms, which had existed in the Peninsula during the Middle Ages into a society characterized by the imposition of one sole religion. The whole history of Early Modern Spain is marked by this trauma, that had profound consequences not only for the converted groups, but also for the society which had to absorb them.

The mass conversions initiated in 1391 sparked off a true genealogical obsession, guided by the desire to differentiate between Jews, Jewish converts and ‘natural Christians’, *cristianos de natura*. By 1393, for example, the king of Aragon was writing to different towns and cities of his realm warning them of the difficulties of distinguishing between ‘natural Christians’ and Jews, now that there were so many *conversos*.<sup>1</sup> This obsession was one of the necessary conditions for the creation of a new institution for the control of beliefs, the Holy Office of the Inquisition, founded in 1478. In principle it was seen as a way of watching over the correct incorporation of these Jewish ‘New Christians’ into the Catholic realm and, especially in the first decades of its existence, as a way of persecuting ‘Judaizers’. This genealogical obsession was also at the basis of the statutes of *limpieza de sangre* or ‘cleanliness of blood’ which started to be drawn up in Toledo in 1449 (the ‘Sentencia-Estatuto’).<sup>2</sup> The obsessive search for *limpieza de sangre* permeated and affected all Iberian societies at different levels of intensity, including those of the Americas.<sup>3</sup> It clearly found its main victims among formerly Jewish and Muslim New Christians, but it also profoundly affected the social body as a whole.

This desire to eradicate difference in the majority society was always combined with the fear of infiltration and contamination, and the disappearance of differences exacerbated the search for allegedly essential characteristics in those with Jewish ancestors. The pressures, then, which made themselves felt in mainstream society – rejection, moves towards absolute homogenization, and at the same time diverse means of stigmatization – were extremely complex and varied over time and in virulence, however much they were repeatedly expressed through the same stereotypes and, above all, through the notion of the stain borne in the blood.<sup>4</sup> The belief that descendants of *conversos* could not occupy positions

<sup>1</sup> The term contemporary historians usually prefer for this groups, *conversos* or *judeoconversos*, appear only rarely in early modern documents. Other designations were used much more frequently. These ranged from *cristianos nuevos*, ‘New Christians’ – a label the former Jews and their descendants shared with the *Moriscos* – to the more colloquial ‘*tornadizos*’, which referred not only to those who ‘se han tornado’ (have become) Christian, but also to those who go back (tornar/volver) to the evil of their first Error after having received Baptism. The most notorious designation, however, was ‘*marrano*’, an insulting term of uncertain origin. James. S. Amelang, *Historias paralelas. Judeoconversos y moriscos en la España Moderna* (Madrid: Akal, 2011), 87.

<sup>2</sup> Albert Sicroff, *Los estatutos de limpieza de sangre. Controversias entre los siglos XV y XVII*, (French original, 1960, Spanish translation, Madrid, 1985) is still the best introduction to the subject.

<sup>3</sup> Maria Elena Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford University Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> David Nirenberg has published important work on this subject, and has pointed out the connection between genealogical obsession and this problem of the need to differentiate: “Mass conversion and Genealogical Mentalities: Jews and Christians in Fifteenth Century Spain” *Past*

of power and privilege in the society of the ‘natural Christians’, and that mixed marriages should be avoided, had profoundly significant implications for the development of early modern Iberian society. How did that ideological construction become hegemonic, in spite of the contemporary voices that spoke out against it, even inside the Inquisition itself?<sup>5</sup> To what extent was the central issue power and to what extent were race and religion secondary or pivotal?<sup>6</sup> We are still in need of understanding the origins of the sort of ‘racism’ – and it is difficult to identify it in any other way, however much it might be said that the term ‘race’ was not coined until the nineteenth-century, or that ‘race’ is not the same as ‘genealogy’, or that the Spanish racism of those centuries was not based on a definition of somatic characters– the racism, then, without quotation marks, which is the end result of the belief that the blood of the *converso* is not cleansed by the grace of baptism, but is saturated forever in theological guilt by centuries of imbibing low and corrupt doctrines.<sup>7</sup> Historians have yet to throw enough light on the question of how sixteenth-century Spanish society created its own concept of race, i.e. how it transformed social classifications, cultural differences or religious beliefs into immutable products of nature.

In sum, Christian society had to redefine itself through confrontation with, and rejection of what it considered in religious and cultural terms to be characteristic of the groups coming from other religions, and it did so with an attitude of permanent polemic and re-affirmation. It was a question of creating a society that was deeply conformist in its support of a unique and rigid model, in an aggressively polemical and defensive attitude entrenched behind the statutes of *limpieza de sangre*; and at the same time it was also a society which produced movements of dissidence and resistance through different forms of mysticism

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*and Present* 174 (Feb 2002): 3-41, accessible on <http://past.oxfordjournals.org/content>; also “Enmity and Assimilation. Jews, Christians and Converts in Medieval Spain” *Common Knowledge*, 9:1 (2003) 137-155; “Was there race before modernity? The example of ‘Jewish’ blood in late Medieval Spain”, in *The Origins of Racism in the West*, ed. Miriam Eliav-Feldon, Benjamin Isaac and Joseph Ziegler (Cambridge University Press, 2011) 232-264.

<sup>5</sup> John Edwards, “A crisis of conscience in Golden Age Spain: the Inquisition against ‘limpieza de sangre’ ” in *Crisis and change in Early Modern Spain* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1993); first appeared in Spanish in *Bulletin Hispanique* 88, 3-4 (1986): 321-356.

<sup>6</sup> That race and religion are secondary as faced with the central question of power is Henry Kamen’s argument in his *Inquisition and Society in Spain in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Bloomington, Indiana: 1985). He has also argued that the blood purity statutes were not rigorously or generally observed.

<sup>7</sup> See also Jerome Friedman, ‘Jewish Conversion, the Spanish Pure Blood Laws and Racial Anti-Semitism’ *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 18 (1987) 3-29; and John Edwards, ‘The beginnings of a scientific Theory of Race? Spain, 1450-1600’ in *From Iberia to Diaspora: Studies in Sephardic History and Culture*, ed. Yedida K. Stillman and Norman A. Stillman, (Leiden: Brill, 1999) 179-196.

(*alumbrados, dejados, iluminados*) and the defence of interior religiosity, which were linked to movements of reform. *Judeoconvertos* took part in this movement of reform. The new converts constituted complex groups, in dialogue with Old Christians and open to the transmission and translation of ideas, images, and religious emotions. Subjected to the pressure of polemics, these groups could not avoid defining themselves through their engagement with each other.

Inquisition, *judeoconvertos*, *limpieza de sangre*, race. It would be difficult to find a more controversial set of historical themes than these, or a group of terms more difficult to tackle. Although the so-called ‘*converso* problem’ has profoundly marked all aspects of early modern Iberian history the scholarly attention dedicated to *judeoconvertos* has been, for a long time, following patterns that originate in the nineteenth-century and continue somehow until today. In the following pages I intend firstly to reflect upon ways of interpreting the *converso* question embedded in a long historiographical tradition and then point to a series of different approaches which are the bases of other, recent scholarly work. The long historiographical tradition that I shall be addressing either makes too much or too little of the *convertos*.<sup>8</sup> Excessive claims have been made for *convertos* as the near-exclusive fount of early modern Spanish economic dynamism, literary creativity or religious dissent. Yet other scholars have downplayed or ignored the truly unique nature and consequences of the *converso* phenomenon within a Europe increasingly accustomed to practices of spiritual dissimulation and subterfuge. Part of the problem is that historians sometimes reproduce in their work the same categories that were used in the sixteenth-century. We thus repeat the discourse of the past instead of explaining it.

With this in mind I will focus on some of the issues addressed in a book, also recent, by Angel Alcalá, *Los judeoconvertos en la cultura y en la sociedad española*.<sup>9</sup> I will make use of this book as an axis which will allow me to reconstruct the historiographical tradition previous and contemporary to Alcalá.

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The book I am referring to now is a compilation of articles published over several years which have been expanded and complemented by new research. One of the threads that weave the different parts of the book is its contribution to the debate on the question of an essential *converso* identity or a collective *converso*

<sup>8</sup> For a state of the art on *converso* and *morisco* historiography see James Amelang, *Historias paralelas. Judeoconvertos y moriscos en la España moderna* (Madrid: Akal, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Ángel Alcalá, *Los judeoconvertos en la cultura y sociedad españolas* (Madrid: Trotta, 2011), 579 pages.

identity. Again, I will focus exclusively on how this question is addressed by the historiographical tradition to which Alcalá claims to belong and to which he wishes to contribute with his book. An historiographical tradition in which historiography and history are closely knited. As Américo Castro, whose oeuvre looms large on Alcalá's book, said "any authentic historical construction is ultimately an expression of the life of the historian himself" ("toda auténtica construcción histórica es, en última instancia, expresión de la vida del historiador mismo").<sup>10</sup>

This, indeed, is one of the issues which I would most like to explore here: the inevitable dialectic between the past and contemporary thought, reflected in this case in historiographical consideration of the *conversos*. This dialectic reveals itself to be particularly pressing when issues of 'identity' are at stake. It is maybe not indifferent for the discussion proposed in this article to turn for a moment to Alcalá's own trajectory.

Ángel Alcalá was born in the province of Teruel, Spain, in 1929. As he explains in some of the chapters of this book, his family suffered the consequences of the Spanish Civil War, and after studying theology in Spain and in Rome, he became a professor of Spanish literature at New York University until his retirement. Alcalá is a knowledgeable and scholarly man, known for his careful editing of the trial records of Fray Luis de León, the works of Juan de Valdés and the complete works of Miguel Servet. In New York he has organized two important conferences on the Spanish Inquisition whose proceedings were later published in book form and edited by Alcalá himself.<sup>11</sup> Alcalá is, then, a scholar who was working (around the 1970s) during one of the periods in which the Spanish Inquisition has been most intensely debated, and one in which there was an effective renewal of focus to which he has contributed.

The book's coherence is woven around very clear and frequently reiterated proposals. According to Alcalá, the Inquisition was not a religious institution and was not founded for religious motives, but was political. The vast majority of the *judeoconversos* were good Christians, and some of them were even leading figures within Christianity, such as Fray Luis de León who, like other *conversos*, was accused and persecuted because he had *converso* ancestors rather than as a result of his Jewish beliefs. Finally it seems to be Alcalá's view that there is not a single reformer or radical thinker in early modern Spain who, if his genealogy is examined closely enough, does not turn out to be a *judeoconverso*. He is particularly interested in the *Alumbrados*, to whom he dedicates several chapters.

<sup>10</sup> Américo Castro, *La realidad histórica de España* (México DF: Porrúa, 1987), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Ángel Alcalá (ed.), *The Spanish Inquisition and the Inquisitorial mind* (New York, 1987) and *Judíos sefarditas conversos: la expulsión de 1492 y sus consecuencias* (Valladolid, 1995).

For him, the connection between *alumbradismo* and *judeoconversos* is self-evident. In order to understand these proposals, but above all in order to understand the strangely combative tone with which he writes and in which he stands up to his dialectical ‘enemies’, it is necessary to say something about the scholars who came before Alcalá, and the origins of the positions of those he defines in this book as his masters, namely Américo Castro and Benzion Netanyahu. It is necessary to consider, in other words, the ‘tradition’ to which Alcalá belongs, and the position he therefore takes up concerning the question of ‘*judeoconverso* identity’.

The concept of identity which we commonly use today is a product of nineteenth-century cultural nationalism which became extremely popular in social and humanistic studies in around the 1950s. Cultural difference was defined in opposition to ‘the other’ and served as a key differentiator between political entities, becoming an eternal essence transcending all considerations of time and place. The idea of culture as something which can be delimited and described as a coherent whole has nonetheless been placed in doubt in recent decades, as has the idea of the existence of a clearly defined and clearly separated ‘other’. At the same time, historical and social sciences have studied the complexity of cultural formations and group identities, as well as their momentary contingencies in time and space. It is now no longer possible, for example, to deal with the cultures of colonial powers independently of those of the lands which they colonized, nor to study the religious practices of Spanish Jews or Muslims in isolation from those of their Christian neighbours, or vice versa. The study of the ways in which societies and religions construct their similarities and differences has transformed our understanding of a whole series of cultural formations, including early Christianity as it stood in relation to Judaism, or contemporary Europe’s relationship to Islam. It can no longer be argued that a late fourteenth-century *judeoconverso* is the same as one from the late seventeenth or eighteenth-century. But even among those historians who admit the importance of these contingencies of time and space, essentialist notions related to the reproduction of deeply rooted categories will sometimes seep into the discourse. The categories created by various sixteenth-century power groups have taken hold to such an extent that it is difficult to revise or discard them. This is a very real problem for which there is no easy solution, because we need categories to understand events; but those categories can often be so narrow that they affect our understanding.

The first historians to speak of a *judeoconverso* identity were Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo and José Amador de los Ríos. The former set out, in his *Historia de los heterodoxos españoles*, of 1880, to show how exceptional heresy was in the terrain of Spanish religious belief, seen as immanently Catholic and orthodox. An important role in heresy had been played by peoples alien to

Spaniards themselves, such as *judeoconversos*, who were portrayed as excessively rigorous (having the burning zeal of the neophyte) and given to morbid and deviant mystical tendencies like messianism; and these tendencies were branded with the inheritance and influence of Judaism. The opposite could also be true, however, and *conversos* from the late fourteenth-century to the time of Spinoza were also portrayed as sceptical and godless. For Amador de los Ríos, author of a monumental and extremely well documented *Historia social, política y religiosa de los judíos de España y Portugal*, published in 3 volumes in 1875-76, it was the *judeoconversos* themselves who were responsible for the rigorous persecution of Jews, since before the existence of *conversos* there had been no persecution: “Ninguno [cristiano viejo] manifestó durante la Edad Media aquel infatigable e impío encono que aguzaban en la pluma de los neófitos el hierro destructor de la muchedumbre” (No Old Christian had shown throughout the Middle Ages that indefatigable and impious rancour which in the pen of the neophytes stirred up the destructive iron of the mob). This was a *converso* identity placed firmly in the field of polemics (the pen of the neophytes) which in turn stirred up the blind mob against its race. Apart from *judeoconverso* identity, what was also evident here was the defensive attitude of nationalistic historiography (i.e. national and therefore Catholic historiography) when it came to the existence of the Inquisition: the Holy Office was justified as the defender of a Catholicism under attack, and to attack Catholicism was to attack the very essence of Spain; instead, for those who had a sense of historical shame or even guilt, the *conversos* could be blamed for the spirit and direction taken by the Holy Office.<sup>12</sup>

With these proposals for a group identity, sketched out in the nineteenth-century, the *judeoconversos* have been portrayed as either fanatics or godless sceptics, with a divided identity which no longer knew how to be either Jewish or Christian. In recent times these qualities have acquired a positive sheen, making the *conversos* precursors of modernity and an advance guard of the Enlightenment. If they were neither proper Jews nor proper Christians, as was maintained in anti-*converso* writings of the fifteenth-century, then, some recent studies have proposed, they must have been ‘modern’.<sup>13</sup> However, it should be remembered that to make a positive interpretation of old-fashioned negative claims does not always mean that one avoids the trap of believing in a transcendental and essentialist notion of identity. Praise of Jewishness and anti-

<sup>12</sup> Eleazar Gutwirth, “*Conversos, Historiography, and Familiar Spirits*”, in *Late Medieval Jewish Identities. Iberia and Beyond*, ed. Carmen Caballero-Navas and Esperanza Alfonso (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2010) 27-40.

<sup>13</sup> A recent example is Yirmiyahu Yovel, *The Other Within: The Marranos; Split identity and Emerging Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P. 2009).



Semitism share the same essentialist notion of identity. Both follow the same logic.

But let us now consider the masters claimed by Ángel Alcalá. The first of these, Américo Castro (1885-1972), was a literary historian of extraordinary erudition, sensitivity and imagination. One of his merits was that he gave pride of place in historiographical debate to the issue of Islamic and Jewish influences on Spanish culture. His brilliant analysis of the influences that affected literary creativity in Golden Age Spain have changed our way of reading and interpreting the texts. However, his training as a philosopher (his reliance on Dilthey) and maybe his own personal vital trajectory led him to define ‘essences’ in a way which has dented his reputation and current standing among historians. Castro was very concerned with both Inquisition and *limpieza de sangre* as a main factor in inhibiting intellectual activity in Early Modern Spain.<sup>14</sup> His main idea concerning *conversos* is well-known: the *judeoconverso* element is of first importance in the formation of the ‘historical reality of Spain’ and there is no important mystic, thinker or writer of the Siglo de Oro who did not have a *judeoconverso* background which endowed his work with certain characteristics, namely melancholy, anguish and fatalism, the famous ‘vivir desviviéndose’: lives that were left unlived, or lives that were lived in anguish. Castro’s position with respect to the *judeoconversos* was quite ambivalent: admiring and appreciative, he considered them the creators of the highest achievements of intellectual production of the Spanish Golden Age, but also saw them as responsible for a whole series of bitter characteristics of the Hispanic essence or ‘character’. And, like Amador de los Ríos, he traced back to the ‘Jewish character’ the spirit of inquisition, the obsession with lineage, the inclement polemic and discrimination against former companions. In any case, the *judeoconverso* issue was one of prime importance, an inescapable element of an identity which marked the literary production, the very thought processes, of those writers who had a certain lineage. It is not clear, in Castro’s work, what the ‘Jewishness’ marking the work of *conversos* really was, or whether features of Judaism were translated into it, or whether it can be interpreted as the fact that the *conversos* thought as ‘Jews think’. Many of Castro’s followers and disciples have opted for a *converso* identity which we might call ‘positional’: the literary features seen in the works of *conversos* become, in their view, an indicator of the anguish and dread of knowing oneself to be in a position of fragility and social insecurity with respect to other Christians. This seems to entail, at times, the concept of a unified *converso* voice.

Benzion Netanyahu, whose work is the subject of an extremely long and enthusiastic chapter in Ángel Alcalá’s book, became well known mainly because

<sup>14</sup> On this issue, see the article by Henry Kamen, “Limpieza and the Ghost of Américo Castro: Racism as a tool of Literary Analysis”, *Hispanic Review* 64, 1 (1966): 19-29.

of two books about the *judeoconversos*, the first of which dates back to 1966 and was translated into Spanish in 1994 under the title *Los marranos españoles según las fuentes hebreas de la época (siglos XIV-XV)*.<sup>15</sup> In this book Netanyahu used Hebrew sources to show that the Jewish communities of Spain and the Diaspora no longer regarded the *conversos* as belonging to Judaism. However, the book by Netanyahu which had the greatest impact was his *The Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth-Century Spain*, which appeared in English in 1995 and in Spanish four years later as *Los orígenes de la Inquisición española en el siglo XV*, in a translation by Ángel Alcalá himself, in collaboration with Ciriaco Morón. For Netanyahu, all Inquisition proceedings were a farce, and no credibility whatsoever can be given to Inquisitorial sources, which limit themselves to repeating the same clichés, the same set of questions trial after trial. According to Netanyahu, by the end of the fifteenth-century all *judeoconversos* had become good Christians with no links to Judaism, and the persecution which they suffered from the Inquisition occurred as a result of anti-Semitism. Netanyahu made use of the Marranos to prove and exemplify an eternal form of anti-Semitism, which his book on the Spanish Inquisition traces back to ancient Egypt and takes forward to the Holocaust. As a consequence of this anti-Semitism, assimilation was an unattainable illusion. His main targets are those Jews who sought to assimilate, and he bases an argument in favour of the creation of the state of Israel on the fact that such assimilation was and has been always made impossible by anti-Semitism. Netanyahu considers the *converso* question from the point of view of Jewish national history.

Netanyahu's work sparked off a very heated controversy. One of the most debated of his proposals was that connecting Early Modern Iberia directly with Nazi Germany.<sup>16</sup> This is not the aspect that interests me here, but the question of the Jewish identity (or lack of it, according to Netanyahu) of the converts. A good number of Israeli historians from the so-called 'Jerusalem school', such as Yitzhak Baer, presented a more nuanced view of the complexity of the New Christians predicament and identity.<sup>17</sup> Other historians of this school, mainly Haim Beinart<sup>18</sup>, wrote more radically in support of the converts' Jewishness.

<sup>15</sup> Benzion Netanyahu, *The Marranos of Spain: From the Late 14th to the Early 16th Century, According to Contemporary Hebrew Sources* (New York, 2nd ed. revised and enlarged, 1973).

<sup>16</sup> More on this debate can be found in Yoseph Hayim Yerushalmi, *Assimilation and Racial Anti-Semitism: the Iberian and the German Models* (New York, 1982) or Christiane Stallaert, *Ni una gota de sangre impura. La España inquisitorial y la Alemania nazi cara a cara*, (Barcelona, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Baer can be considered the founder of modern scholarship on the Jews of Spain. His work was first published in Hebrew in 1945, but it was the Spanish translation, by José Luis Lacave, *Historia de los judíos en la España cristiana* (Madrid, 1981), which had a wider impact.

<sup>18</sup> Haim Beinart, *Conversos on Trial: the Inquisition in Ciudad Real* (Jerusalem, 1981).

Beinart in particular had a very different idea than Baer of '*judeoconverso* identity', identified by him with 'Jewish identity', and he defended the notion of the existence of crypto-Jewish converts, martyrs of Judaism and preservers of the Jewish religion during a prolonged period of resistance and fidelity. There are of course different interpretations of what constitutes the Jewish nation, who may or may not be counted among its number, raising questions of ancestry and so on: modern problems of Jewish identity cannot help but have an effect on any quest for 'authenticity'.

Alcalá claims that unlike the Inquisition, he follows Netanyahu in showing that most *judeoconvertos* were good Catholics. Good Catholics, but with a tendency towards religious dissidence and heterodoxy, towards "modernity". In various specific cases considered in his book his position is fuzzy. This is particularly true of his chapter on Miguel Servet and his allegedly *judeoconverso* origins (through a remote maternal great-grandmother) in the section which he entitles 'The secret key to his personality?'. In this chapter Alcalá seems not to see eye to eye with Américo Castro's proposal, in Alcalá's words, that "al interpretar la vertiente progresista de la cultura española adjudicándola particularmente a personas de casta conversa... no sólo se supuso que la familia de Servet tenía que acarrear sangre judía, sino que en tal suposición se cifraba la clave de la originalidad y aun de la intrepidez de Miguel" (to interpret the progressive tendency in Spanish culture by attributing it to persons of the *converso* caste in particular... not only was it supposed that the family of Servet had to bear Jewish blood, but in this supposition was found the reason for Miguel's originality and even his intrepidity) (p. 468). However, a few pages later in the same chapter (p. 520), he concludes: "Habiendo señalado a Servet, un parcial judeoconverso, un 'hereje perseguido', como origen de estas ideas, es muy probable que su ecumenismo teológico, su radicalismo intelectual y el coraje con que exigió que se reconozca el derecho a la libertad de conciencia se deban al influjo que en su mente y conciencia pudo tener su parcial origen judeoconverso" (Having picked out Servet, a partial *judeoconverso*, a 'persecuted heretic', as being the origin of these ideas, it is very likely that his theological ecumenism, his intellectual radicalism, and the courage with which he demanded the recognition of his right to freedom of conscience were due to the influence that his partially *judeoconverso* origin may have had on his mind and conscience).

It is perfectly possible to add other cases of eminent historians, contemporary to Alcalá who have been unable to avoid the use of categories which sometimes went against their own premises or ideas when applied to other objects of study. One example is Julio Caro Baroja in his book *Los judíos en la España moderna y contemporánea* [The Jews in early modern and contemporary Spain], first published in 1962 and again in 1978. The very title of this book

represents the adoption of a position, given that this is a study of the *judeoconversos*. Although Caro Baroja states in various parts of the book that many *judeoconversos* were good Catholics, the fact that the title of this work describes them as ‘Jews’ implies an acceptance of the notion of the ‘Jewish identity’ of the *conversos* which is not restricted by consideration of the practice of a religion. Like much of Alcalá’s book, that by Caro Baroja is mainly based on Inquisitorial documents and it gives priority – and in this it also resembles Alcalá’s book – to individual stories, to independent biographies. The biographies given by Caro Baroja are of course different: they include many stories of *conversos* who remained secret Jews, especially among those known as the *portugueses*. Caro Baroja had a taste for characters who were hard to classify, those who distanced themselves from groups or did not fit properly into them, or into anything else, as he showed in many of his other extraordinary books. His study of Jews also required a monumental amount of work in archives and on the individual life stories of people difficult to squeeze into group categories. But when he writes about individual *conversos* he seems to be making the fact of somebody having Jewish ancestors part of an idea of Jewishness far outside the singular cases he is describing. Moreover, Caro Baroja was still able to finish his work with an extremely confusing final chapter. He begins that chapter by explaining the personal reasons and concerns which caused him to write it. Faced with the terrible events that took place in Europe during the Second World War, Caro Baroja undertook his research as a kind of “examen de conciencia, en una revisión de mis ideas y de mis sentimientos en un punto esencial para el hombre europeo: ¿qué pensar de los judíos?” (examination of my conscience, a revision of my ideas and my feelings about an essential point for European man: what to think about the Jews?), and he continues by stating that it was not his wish to write “una obra de ‘una investigación científica’ como ahora se dice. Mi propósito, en última instancia ha sido el de escribir, más bien, un libro moral, sobre la moral y las costumbres” (a work of ‘scientific research’, as they say now. My aim has ultimately been to write instead a moral book, one on morals and customs) (p.273). He also explains that his ‘initial’ sympathy for Jews was very limited, but that his sympathy for the Inquisition was equally lacking, and he claims that this gives him a certain objectivity. He goes from there to a description of the ‘Jewish character’, of how that character has had its share of blame in the persecutions of Jews, and a presentation of the consequences and influences which ‘the Jew’ has had on the ‘Spanish character’ – all of which statements I would go so far as to describe as very startling, if not clearly anti-Semitic. These asseverations are even more surprising if one takes into account that they come from a man who a few years later was to publish an illuminating study of the myths of Spanish national character. Or one who in his magnificent book *Las formas complejas de la vida religiosa. Religión, sociedad y carácter en la España*

*de los siglos XVI y XVII* [The complex forms of religious life. Religion, society and character in sixteenth and seventeenth century Spain], published in the same year of 1978, included a chapter entitled ‘Seudobiología y seudoreligión: la “leche mamada” y el fermento’ (Pseudo-biology and pseudo-religion: “suckled milk” and ferment) which shows, to use his own words, ‘la conexión que se establece entre un criterio moral y un criterio biológico, o si se quiere, entre la religión y la patología, de suerte que a las faltas morales se les impone un castigo hereditario, físico, corporal’ (the connection which is made between a moral criterion and a biological one, or if it is preferred, between religion and pathology, so that moral failings are given a hereditary, physical, corporal punishment). He was referring here to the Agotes, but also to wet-nurses of *converso* origin whose milk was thought capable of Judaizing the child who drank it. This is just another example of the difficulty for Spanish historiography when it comes to discussing *judeoconvertos* and Jews, of the traps historians set for themselves in establishing transcendental identities, or of the influence of contemporary events on a historian’s research.

Many other historians tried to qualify some of Netanyahu’s ideas. One example of such a historian is Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, who as a result is often treated harshly and dismissively in Alcalá’s book. However, Netanyahu was in general terms right to point to anti-Semitism as an inherent hazard when dealing with ‘*judeoconverso* identity’, and he put his finger on an important issue when he highlighted the dangers for historians of sticking too closely to their sources. In my opinion, the main value of Netanyahu’s work is that the controversy which it unleashed made it necessary to embark upon a revision, a new hermeneutics of Inquisitorial records. It brought about a change in the close reading of trial proceedings and interrogations, and what they include or remain silent about: in other words, the clues which they do not follow up or which are deemed to be of no interest. It became necessary to look again at the figures of the informer, the Inquisitors and the so-called ‘familiares’ of the Inquisition. As a result we have come to realise that the Inquisition invested the actions and statements of its prisoners with significance for the basis of their lineage, and that it used this lineage to qualify and classify their crimes. Netanyahu was of course not the only scholar to point out this fact. Eleazar Gutwirth had argued convincingly in about 1980 that historians had in fact been reproducing the categories used in their sources, following in the footsteps of the Inquisitors themselves in the way they accepted the definition of groups, the priorities among their activities, and the very formulation of questions.<sup>19</sup> The parallel between Inquisitors and historians

<sup>19</sup> Eleazar Gutwirth, “Jewish-*Converso* Relations in XVth-Century Segovia,” in *Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies (Jerusalem, August 16–21, 1981)*, ed. World Union of Jewish Studies, 5 vols. (Jerusalem, 1982), 2, pp. 49-53.

became particularly obvious in questions of identity, that is to say, in the search for characteristics and classificatory hallmarks which was the ultimate aim of the investigations of both Inquisitors and historians, with the latter following the procedures of the former to the letter. Netanyahu was not right when he said that the *judeoconvertos* were all Christians, or when he claimed that all trial proceedings were a fiction, but he was correct to assert that lineage and genealogy constituted an essential element, a prism through which crimes were considered.

In recent decades, historians have become more sensitive to the question of how the Inquisition's classifications were always determined by the defendant's origin, independently of his or her practices or beliefs. Such origins conditioned interrogations, investigations and assessments of guilt in behaviour which could include anything from festive, hygienic or culinary manifestations, which today we would describe as cultural, to simple examples of blasphemy and other offences considered minor when they were committed by 'natural Christians'. The 'heretics' of various lineages shared, on the one hand, a whole series of religious positions opposed to Catholicism, but these positions were considered differently if the 'nature' of the prisoner differed. Thus, to give a specific example, rejection of the cult of images, or the iconoclasm which often went with it, was seen as a symptom of Judaism, Islamism, or Lutheranism, depending on whether the prisoner belonged to one of those groups because of his origins (the Flemish, French or foreigners in general were systematically suspected of Lutheranism). All three of these groups rejected oral confession, the cult of images, the dogma of the Holy Trinity and that of trans-substantiation, and the existence of Purgatory. They constituted, for mainstream society, a real *heterology*, the image in negative of the orthodox ongoing discourse as permanently re-elaborated by the institutional Church.<sup>20</sup> The three groups which the Inquisition classified as heretics shared a series of stereotypes in the eyes of Old Christians: particular emphasis was placed on the idea that they were conspiring with an external enemy to bring about the downfall of Spain, that they indulged in free or unbridled sexual activity which placed Spain in danger not only by undermining its most basic values, but by resulting in an excessive rate of reproduction which could alter the balance and the percentage of those who had 'pure blood'.

There is, at any rate, no doubt that to be obsessed with lineage like some historians (such as Américo Castro), to invest behaviour with a meaning which depends on the lineage of the person who carries it out, is to follow exactly the same logic as the Inquisition.

<sup>20</sup> Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

How to avoid the traps of identity and an excessively uncritical application of current values? Can we equate the fact of being *converso* with mysticism or with *alumbradismo*? I would suggest to place the study of *conversos* within a wider perspective, within a broader and thus richer framework, i.e. one which takes into account similar processes taking place in Europe at the same time, making the *judeoconverso* issue less specific and unique, connecting it with different religious movements of reform, and to open new vias of study on the much neglected question of the influence of Lutheran currents in Iberia.

As far as I know, it was John Edwards, in his well-argued article of 1988<sup>21</sup>, who first rejected the notion that religious dissent among converts should automatically be attributed to an ongoing affection for Judaism, and who first linked inquisitorial material on Judaizers with the general incidence of heresy and scepticism across Europe. Edwards' work provides a corrective to the long standing view arguing that the Inquisition was not founded for religious reasons, as was also claimed by Netanyahu and Caro Baroja. It is hardly necessary for me to insist on this point. For at least three decades, leading historians have made tremendous advances in defining the process known as 'confessionalization' which took place in Europe in the period after the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation movements. Confessionalization is the process of formation and definition of separate religious communities, and is in turn part of the formation process of the state. Political powers used confessionalization to lay down territorial boundaries at the same time that they used them to impose strict social control on their subjects. Confessionalization implied a fundamental historical change which meant ecclesiastical and religious alterations, but also closely linked social and political transformations. Delumeau, for example, analysed in various fascinating books the means used by the Church to inspire feelings of fear and guilt in believers regarding the sins and transgressions which they had committed,<sup>22</sup> and Adriano Posperi's work on 'tribunals of conscience' revealed the role of the sacrament of confession in the imposition of discipline, and an education in obedience and the acceptance of authority.<sup>23</sup> These were times and processes, then, when it is not possible to separate political institutions from religious ones. The Inquisition was both things at the same time.

<sup>21</sup> John Edwards, "Religious Faith and Doubt in Late Medieval Spain: Soria circa 1450-1500", *Past and Present* 120 (1988): 3-25. Included in J. Edwards, *Religion and Society in Spain, c.1492*, (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> Jean Delumeau, *Le Catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire* (Paris: 1971), or *La peur en Occident (XIV<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles): une cité asségée* (Paris: Fayard, 1978), (*El miedo en Occidente*, Madrid, Taurus, 2002); or *La péché et la peur: la culpabilisation en Occident* (Paris: Fayard, 1983).

<sup>23</sup> Adriano Posperi, *Tribunali della coscienza. Inquisitori, confessori, missionari* (Rome: Einaudi, 1996).

It is now nearly forty years since the concept of ‘social discipline’ first enlivened debates on the historiography of early modern Europe, and confirmed that without social discipline there can be no confessionalization. Social discipline was essential for confessionalization because in order to impose a hegemonic ideology it was necessary to achieve consensus among a large part of the community. The success of the Catholic Counter-Reformation after the Council of Trent would have been unthinkable without social discipline. With respect to the Inquisition, recent studies have shown that the act of informing or denouncing reflected both the interior acceptance of discipline and a consensus among the population subjected to such discipline.<sup>24</sup>

According to these views, the Holy Office was, without a doubt, a formidable apparatus of discipline and social control, but it could not avoid being instrumentalized in turn by other powers-that-be, as well as serving as a stage for the resolution of tensions among different social groups, and not only those with *converso* origins. It was, for example, used in instances of rivalry over local power.<sup>25</sup> If we look only at the total number of trial proceedings rather than the harshness of sentences, we see that the Inquisition tried mainly Old Christians whose beliefs or behaviour did not match the new dictates of Trent. The anxiety and uneasiness with which the Inquisition inoculated subjects of the Hispanic monarchy cannot have affected only the *judeoconvertos*; at the same time, the processes of ‘social discipline’ and confessionalization, the consensus created around a particular model, must inevitably have affected *judeoconvertos* as well. Thus it is that we find *judeoconvertos* (if we must insist on searching out lineages in this way) not only among *alumbrados* or reformers, but also among scholars and bureaucrats, Inquisitors and the regular clergy, and at all levels of society.<sup>26</sup> However, we can also find numerous *judeoconvertos* who tried to continue being Jewish in secret and who became ‘new Jews’ when they fled to settle in Livorno or Amsterdam.<sup>27</sup> It is difficult to find one sole category which covers them all, except for their lineage. It could be said that we can find individuals with a

<sup>24</sup>Thomas Werner, *Los protestantes y la Inquisición en España en tiempos de Reforma y Contrarreforma* (Leuven University Press, 2001).

<sup>25</sup>Jaime Contreras, *Sotos contra Riquelmes. Regidores, inquisidores, criptojudíos* (Madrid: Anaya, 1992); and José Pardo Tomás, *El médico en la palestra: Diego Mateo Zapata (1664-1775) y la ciencia moderna en España* (Salamanca: Junta de Castilla León, 2004) are both good examples of the Inquisition used by competing elites against their rivals.

<sup>26</sup>On the impossibility of the Inquisition of enforcing blood purity even among its own ranks, H. Kamen, *Spanish Inquisition* (Yale University Press, 1998) 238, and S. Haliczer, *Inquisition and Society in the Kingdom of Valencia, 1478-1834* (Berkeley: University of California U.P. 1990) 121-123.

<sup>27</sup>Yosef Kaplan, *Judíos nuevos en Amsterdam: estudios sobre la historia del judaísmo sefardí en el siglo XVII* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 1996).



*judeoconverso* lineage wherever we choose to look for them. As Miriam Bodian says, we should consider the *converso* issue as “a changing cultural construction, evolving over many generations and answering a variety of needs”.<sup>28</sup>

But we should remember that throughout Europe in the period after the Reformations religious conversion occurred on a scale which can perhaps only be compared with the conversion to Christianity of the Roman Empire, or the conversion to Islam of the Middle East and the southern region of the Mediterranean after the conquests of the eighth-century. In the Europe of the first centuries of the early modern period a very large number of people were faced with new beliefs, new religious formations and the disintegration or reformulation of others, with new personal identities. Like the *judeoconversos*, many resorted to Nicodemism, dissimulation, or to internal forms of religiosity. A whole series of Protestant sects were forced to practise Nicodemism and internal religion in a way which was not very different from the secret practices of those Jewish *conversos* or Moriscos who continued to practise Judaism or Islam. The role of *conversos* in movements of religious dissidence was conditioned less by the dissimulated survival of crypto-Jewish beliefs (and of course even less by an inheritance of blood) than by a forced religious Nicodemism, often in the form of a withdrawal into interiority, directly linked to the social stigma which was produced when stained origins were discovered. And it is this phenomenon, produced by a belief in stained blood and its stigmatization, which is most characteristically Spanish, and which makes events in Spain different from the processes referred to in the rest of Europe: the process through which early modern Iberians (and historians after them) were creating *conversos*: making the fact of somebody having Jewish ancestors part of an idea of Jewishness far outside the individual.

All other phenomena belong to the Europe of the Baroque period, and go far beyond the *judeoconverso* issue, even if they do include it. But although we are limiting our focus to what happened in Spain, recent research suggests that the climate of reform, the processes of spiritual concern and search channelled in different ways to those laid out by the institution of the Church, disgruntlement with or lack of trust in ecclesiastical hierarchies, intellectual scepticism and internal exile are all forms of behaviour in which members of seventeenth-century Spanish society took part, without there being a direct connection with their origin. It happened regardless of whether that origin was *converso* or Old Christian. As in the rest of Europe, conversions affected many aspects of the religious life of Iberian society and certainly drove different kinds of desire for reform. The most frequently repeated symptom of this desire is what Stefania

<sup>28</sup> Miriam Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese nation: Conversos and Community in Early Modern Amsterdam*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) 11.

Pastore in a recent and highly important book<sup>29</sup> calls 'Paulinism', a notion (already used by Marcel Bataillon in his seminal *Erasmus y España*) which was to prepare the ground for the reception of Erasmian and Lutheran ideas. Pastore proposes examining the construction in Spain of a religiosity of interiority, and the relationship between this religiosity and the *conversos*. Her view of the *conversos* is much more complex, rich and nuanced than that found in Alcalá's book. Particularly refreshing is the treatment she proposes of the first *alumbrados*, whom she depicts as supporters of the need for faith as illumination and of the idea of the redundancy of the Law, to the extent that some of them defended the existence of one sole Revelation, with Mohammed among its prophets. The typically *alumbrado* rejection of rules, rituals and ceremonies was based on a radicalism which ended up invalidating all signs of recognition or belonging. The recent research carried out by Pastore and other, mainly Italian, historians (such as Carlo Ginzburg, Adriano Prosperi or Massimo Firpo),<sup>30</sup> suggests that the *judeoconverso* element is no doubt important in the religious and social history of Spain, and may also have contributed towards channelling certain religious concerns or even acted as a catalyst for some of them; but this does not mean that they should be seen as the only factor, or that they were the only social group to pick up on the reforming impulse.

The arguments of Miriam Bodian follow the same line.<sup>31</sup> Her book *Dying in the Law of Moses* is based on four major Inquisition trials. Two of these men were of Old Christian origin; all four were accused of Judaizing, declared to be 'dogmatists' and burned at the stake. As Bodian shows in her important study is that in their challenge to ecclesiastical authority, the defendants drew their arguments in part from Jewish anti-Christian polemics, but were also inspired by Reformation and Lutheran currents which had penetrated all levels of society within the Iberian Peninsula. Like the Lutheran reformists, these four men stressed that the only source of religious truth was Scripture, in its literal sense. They also drew on Protestant anticlerical rhetoric, one of them even quoting Luther himself, while some looked towards the home-grown spirituality of *alumbradismo*, with its emphasis on inner religiosity and its disapproval of objects of worship. The behaviour of these 'martyrs', as they were later designated and celebrated by the exiled Jewish community of Amsterdam,

<sup>29</sup> Stefania Pastore, *Un'eresia spagnola. Spiritualità conversa, alumbradismo e Inquisizione (1449-1559)* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2004), Spanish translation, *Una herejía española*, (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> Carlo Ginzburg and Adriano Prosperi, *Giochi di pazienza. Un seminario sul "Beneficio de Cristo"* (Turin: 1975); Massimo Firpo, *Tra alumbrados e "spirituali". Studi su Juan de Valdés e il valdesianesimo nella crisi religiosa del '500 italiano* (Florence: 1990).

<sup>31</sup> Miriam Bodian, *Dying in the Law of Moses. Crypto-Jewish Martyrdom in the Iberian World*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

reflected the ‘aggressive and confrontational religious climate of the Reformation’<sup>32</sup>. We can conclude by saying that a battle was being waged across Europe—including Iberia— between those forces who wanted to define orthodoxies and those that began by resisting; and then (like the cases covered by Bodian) actively fought for what even then was being called freedom of conscience, and was not in the least the monopoly of individuals of Jewish origin. The Inquisition could not but classify them as “Judaizers”: to think or admit new categories of “heresy” would have been too corrosive, would have undermined the Inquisition itself.

To conclude: it is difficult, if not impossible, to speak of a *converso* identity in collective terms nor claim the concept of a unified *converso* voice. The presence, indeed prominence, of *conversos* in many spheres of early modern Spanish culture cannot be doubted. Maybe we can accept in individual cases the suggestion that sometimes their condition as New Christians, and what this condition entailed socially, had something to do with this prominence, and that their family background often gave rise to individual (or singular) creative responses. It is much more difficult and risky (to say the least) to posit that they were united by a specific way of viewing and interpreting religion, society, and politics.

It can be said that following in the footsteps of Américo Castro, Alcalá and others like him made considerable contributions in their day, and that these contributions made it possible to re-think Spanish history. The importance of their work is there for all to see. But since then historiography has advanced in new directions which have made the old terms of the debate no longer relevant, because the focus has been enlarged and placed within a wider picture. The radical and dramatic change that took place as the Middle Ages became the Early Modern period calls for a series of new questions to be addressed. As historians belonging to twenty-first century societies expressing in our own historiographical endeavours a reflection on our lives, we are bound to delve in questions which must arise out of an observation of the new boundaries Old Christians wanted to mark between themselves and New Christians. In particular, why did a society which fought so hard at the end of the Middle Ages to convert its minorities and assimilate them initiate such a violent reaction when clear differentiation disappeared, precisely because the assimilation it claimed to desire had begun to come about? How did Hispanic Christians justify resisting that loss of difference which they had once tried to impose? At what moment did the fear of infiltration become more powerful than the desire for assimilation and how did it co-exist

<sup>32</sup> Miriam Bodian, *op.cit.* p.xi.

with it? These are all pressing and intensely pertinent questions, relevant when we come to reflect on our own contemporary societies.