

Swimming the Christian Atlantic: Judeoconversos, Afroiberians and Amerindians in the Seventeenth Century

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The growth of academic interest in the 'Iberian Atlantic World' during the last decade has also witnessed the expansion of scholarship on the presence of, and role played in it by, Judeoconversos (or 'New Christians'): the descendants of Jews who were converted (often by force) to Christianity in the 14th and 15th centuries. Amongst the most notable works to have appeared in print on this subject have been the collection of edited articles gathered in *The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West, 1400–1800*, edited by P. Bernardini and N. Fiering; *A Nation upon the Ocean Sea: Portugal's Atlantic Diaspora and the Crisis of the Spanish Empire, 1492–1640*, authored by Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert and the edited articles assembled in *Atlantic Diasporas: Jews, Conversos, and Crypto-Jews in the Age of Mercantilism, 1500–1800*, edited by Richard L. Kagan and Philip D. Morgan.⁽¹⁾

Professor Jonathan Schorsch of Columbia University has pioneered an entirely new approach in the field. He does not offer a study of the 'vertical' relationship between the dominant 'Old Christians' and the various groups who lived within colonial society but were marginalised by the ruling elite: the Judeoconversos, Black Africans (whom Schorsch has chosen to describe as Afroiberians) and Amerindians. Instead of focusing upon the relationship between 'dominators' and 'dominated', Schorsch has preferred to examine and analyse the 'horizontal' relationship that existed between these three groups and the variety of way in which these groups interacted and perceived each other. His aim is to demonstrate that many of the racial attitudes of members of the dominant elite also circulated amongst the 'dominated' groups. All three groups suffered similar and different kinds of discrimination at the hands of Old Christians. Judeoconversos in particular were widely perceived (rightly or wrongly) to be secret Jews and the recently converted Black

Africans – both slaves and freedmen– were likewise distrusted by the Church because of the animist beliefs which many of them brought with them from Africa. Furthermore, both groups suffered from racial prejudice in the well-established caste system that developed in the Spanish and Portuguese American colonies. As Schorsch himself admits, this work focuses mostly upon the first two groups and predominantly upon ‘Black-Jewish’ relations. Schorsch has himself previously contributed to this field with his earlier book *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World*.[\(2\)](#)

The principal sources for this work are trial dossiers and other documents from the vast archives of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions as well as literary works produced by Sephardic Jews (former Judeoconvertos) mostly residing in territories under Dutch rule and thus free to practice their faith. Whilst the use of inquisitorial sources presents numerous problems and issues for modern historians, the religious identity of the Judeoconvertos is not the main focus of Schorsch’s work and he briefly outlines his methodological approach in the introduction (p. 10). The book is divided into two separate parts (the two volumes do not equate with the two parts) with a total of nine chapters between them. In the first chapter of this work, which is entitled ‘*Otherness and Identity*’ (pages 25–83), Schorsch considers the identities of the groups he is studying. He wisely avoids being sidetracked by any entanglement in the complex and heated debate surrounding the religious identity of the Judeoconvertos and points out the complexities and variations that underpinned Afroiberian identity in the Iberian Atlantic world. The first chapter therefore complements the introduction nicely and provides the reader with much of the essential background information that he or she will need to fully come to grips with the rest of the book. The following chapters (two to seven) do not follow any precise chronological or geographic pattern but rather delve directly into relations between Judeoconvertos and Afroiberians by presenting various instances of daily interaction between both groups. Schorsch demonstrates that the relationship was all the more fascinating and complex since relations of force could be radically inversed and could span from complicity and friendship to outright hostility. Judeoconverso masters owned African slaves and, like the rest of the European population, treated them as chattels (chapter four, ‘Masters and slaves under the stare of the cross’, pp. 169–207) but, as domestic servants, African slaves were also privy to the private life of their masters and were often incorporated to a greater or lesser degree into the family life of Judeoconverso families (chapter five, ‘Slaves and the downtrodden religion of their masters’, pp. 209–44). Furthermore, Africans working in the jails of the Inquisition were in contact with Judeoconvertos jailed by the Holy Office for crypto-Judaism and, as such, could wield a form of power over them. Motivated by a variety of different reasons, these Afroiberians often assisted Judeoconvertos by transmitting messages from and to captives and therefore undermined the authority of the dominant elite or at least of one of its most feared representatives: the Inquisition (chapter six, ‘Jailed Judaizers and their jailers’ servants’, pages 245–82). Some mixed-race individual even combined the different identities of Judeoconverso and Afroiberian: this was notably the case of the mixed-race Esperanza Rodriguez, the offspring of a Judeoconverso father and black African slave mother, who resided in the city of Mexico in the 1630s and 1640s and to whose life Schorsch devotes an entire captivating chapter (chapter seven, ‘Esperanza Rodriguez: a mulata marrana in Mexico City’, volume two, pp. 283–334).

The second part of this work contains two chapters (chapter eight, ‘The Racial imagination in the writings of (ex)-conversos’ (pp. 337–78) and chapter nine, ‘(Re)reading the Old/New World in the 1640s: the relación of Antonio de Montezinhos’ (pp. 379–477)). It focuses more on literary aspects of the question that Schorsch considers. In chapter eight, Schorsch analyses the literature produced by Judeoconversos or former Judeoconversos (Sephardic Jews residing in lands where Judaism was tolerated) with great care to expose the nature of Judeoconverso racial attitudes towards Blacks and Amerindians. Chapter nine focuses exclusively on the *Relación* of the former Judeoconverso Antonio de Montezinhos, who was born in Portugal around 1610 and spent a large part of his life in the Spanish Colony of New Granada (modern-day Columbia and Venezuela) before settling in Dutch controlled Brazil until his death in circa 1646–7. Montezinhos’ fascinating *Relación*, an account of his travels in South America in which he somewhat fancifully claimed to have come into contact with groups of ‘Jewish Indians’ from the lost tribe of Reuben, is expertly analysed by Schorsch in considerable detail. Schorsch highlights with great skill the fact that Montezinhos employs many of the [rhetorical](#) [2] [figures of speech](#) [3] as well as the racial imagery of the dominant elite in order to undermine them.

To conclude, Professor Schorsch has achieved a real *tour-de-force* and this book will be of enormous interest to all those who study the Iberian Atlantic, the Spanish and Portuguese empires, Judeoconversos and the Inquisition and Black African slaves and freedman in the early modern Iberian World. By opening a window onto the world of relations between dominated groups, Schorsch throws open an interesting field of research. The richness of the sources allows Schorsch to abundantly illustrate the points and observations he makes throughout the work. If one must make a minor criticism of this work it is that the dense prose and complex terminology employed by Schorsch results in a study that is hardly accessible to the general public or even undergraduate students. Furthermore, as its work focuses mostly on Judeoconversos and Afroiberians, one wonder whether it would not have been more expedient to publish the final chapter separately as an article (Schorsch certainly contemplated this possibility, p. 16). Judeoconverso perceptions of Amerindians are very much a secondary consideration compared to Judeoconversos/Afroiberian relations. It must be conceded, however, that their inclusion in the book does not detract from the original aim of the author but rather adds to our understanding of Judeoconverso racial attitudes. The first volume includes three maps (Columbia, the Bahian Recôncavo and Mexico) and an appendix is included at the end of the second volume containing a transcription and translation of an unpublished letter from Antonio de Montezinhos.

Notes

1. The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West, 1400–1800, ed. P. Bernardini and N. Fiering (New York, NY, 2001); Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert, *A Nation upon the Ocean Sea: Portugal's Atlantic Diaspora and the Crisis of the Spanish Empire, 1492–1640*, (Oxford, 2007) and the edited articles assembled in *Atlantic Diasporas: Jews, Conversos, and Crypto-Jews in the Age of Mercantilism, 1500–1800*, ed. Richard L. Kagan and Philip D. Morgan (Baltimore, MD, 2008).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Jonathan Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge, 2004).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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- [1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4867>
[2] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhetoric>
[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Figure_of_speech