H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jean-Claude Schmitt. *Die Bekehrung Hermanns des Juden: Autobiographie, Geschichte und Fiktion.* Stuttgart: Reclam, 2006. 398 pp. EUR 28.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-15-010562-7.

Reviewed by Dean Phillip Bell (Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies)

Published on H-German (April, 2007)

Truth and Fiction: Conversion, Autobiography and the Middle Ages

Originally published in French in 2003 by the outstanding medievalist Jean-Claude Schmitt, this edition brings to a German-reading public a thorough historical investigation of a complicated and increasingly discussed text. The text is the *Opusculum de conversione sua* (late twelfth century), the allegedly autobiographical account of the conversion of Judah, later Hermann, the Jew in the twelfth century. In addition to the historical and literary analysis itself, the volume includes a German translation of the original Latin text, as well as an excerpt from a related document, the *Leben des Grafen Gottfried von Cappenberg* (ca. 1150-55). Taken together, then, this book raises important questions about how to read and interpret an intriguing historical source and also offers valuable resources for teaching.

Schmitt gives a brief overview and chronological tour of the text's content as well as a detailed evaluation of the manuscripts and a very instructive review of the wide-ranging historiographical interpretations of the text. Schmitt begins the study in earnest by considering whether medieval texts, or historical texts in general for that matter, should be seen as accounts of "reality" or whether they are more akin to works of fiction. Spending a good deal of time on scholarly discussions about the nature of historical writing and the notion of truth and fiction in the Middle Ages, Schmitt dismisses a rigid distinction or polar opposition between truth and fiction. He posits that it is better to speak of truth *and* fiction rather than truth *or* fiction. Medieval people, Schmitt points out, saw truth and falsity as theological constructs, with truth being primarily about authorized authenticity, that is to say, something guaranteed, in this case, by the Church.

Schmitt's analysis contextualizes the text, while simultaneously subjecting it to a rigorous, if at times selective, literary evaluation with certain motifs and aspects of the text receiving a great deal of attention. In particular, Schmitt focuses on issues related to autobiography, dreams, and the nature and process of conversion. Schmitt sketches the nature of medieval autobiography. He provides a particularly useful discussion about the notion of authorship in the Middle Ages and the impact of oral culture on the construction of medieval writing. In addition to the much-discussed literary corpus of Augus-

tine, with which he begins, Schmitt also examines a wide range of autobiographical writings from the High Middle Ages. He concludes, not surprisingly, that autobiography in the modern sense did not exist in the Middle Ages.

Because of the centrality of dreams and their interpretation throughout the text, Schmitt spends significant energy exploring the role of dreams and their interpretation in Christianity and Judaism, giving attention to both biblical narratives as well as contemporary writings. The role of symbols and language is considered as Schmitt interprets the construction of the text and the relation between dreams, conversion and Christian autobiography. In this regard, Schmitt offers a very interesting comparison to the dream interpretations, the connection of visions and exegesis, of Rupert of Deutz, himself an important figure in the *Opusculum*.

Schmitt assesses conversion in the text by examining several important themes, including religious debate and baptism. He explores in great detail the narrative disputation between Judaism and Christianity, particularly as it is constructed in the encounter between Judah and Rupert of Deutz. While considering more generally high medieval "disputations," both real and staged, Schmitt pays very close attention to certain aspects of the debate in the *Opusculum*. He notes that despite his prominence, Rupert was not alone successful in converting Judah. Genuine conversion, the narrative seems to imply, is more spontaneous and draws from experiences. The role of debate and polemic is secondary. In its connection with conversion, Schmitt also discusses baptism at great length. He marshals an impressive array of secondary literature and primary sources for comparison before turning to the specifics narrated in the *Opusculum*, where his analysis lavishes attention on naming practices for converts and the possible reasons for Judah's name change to Hermann.

But Schmitt reads the notion of "conversion" much more broadly than simply conversion from Judaism to Christianity. In this narrative and the numerous other conversionary reports at the time Schmitt sees an emphasis on reform and renovation within the Church. In the end, Schmitt argues that the text was less focused on bringing additional Jewish converts to the Church; rather it served an internal function for the Premonstratensian abbey of Cappenberg, with its focus on the ecclesiastical debate between clerics and monks. At the same time, the conversion presented an ideal for a Christian society, whose aim, the text instructs, should be a spiritualization of society and transformation of the material and fleshly, as represented by the Jews.

The careful narrative approach utilized by Schmitt draws effectively from contemporary literary analysis and it affords historians the opportunity to look for internal logic in the text. It also allows Schmitt to bring together a diverse range of historiographical findings and to compare an impressive assortment of contemporaneous texts. Seen from a medieval Jewish perspective, however, such an analysis could almost normalize what was in many ways itself a polemical text. Regardless of the internal focus and logic, for which Schmitt lays out a very good case, the text, in its very presentation of Judaism and (from the perspective of the alleged author) a vengeful Jewish community, could provide powerful fodder against medieval Jewish society. Intellectually, the text is not terribly compelling–the "Jewish" attack on Christianity is lengthy and focused, whereas the response is rather brief and one-dimensional. The text clearly lumps Judaism with the "material" and fleshly that internal Christian reforms are seeking to correct and overcome. To that extent, it is not simply the literary structure of the text or even the chain of reception that needs to be examined. Rather, how such a text conformed to and added to a tradition of denigrating Jewish society–and, as Robert Chazan has argued in his *Medieval Stereotypes and Modern Antisemitism* (1997), how high medieval texts may have contributed to a shifting presentation of the Jews from a historical enemy to a real-life, contemporary and allegedly criminal element–needs to be given more consideration. Still, in the end, this is a very useful and sophisticated analysis, one that should be placed within the context both of medieval Church history and evolving Jewish and Christian polemics and encounters in the High Middle Ages.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-german

Citation: Dean Phillip Bell. Review of Schmitt, Jean-Claude, *Die Bekehrung Hermanns des Juden: Autobiographie, Geschichte und Fiktion*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 2007.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13090

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.