Jewish communities occupied an ambivalent position in medieval Christian society. In many cases, even as they abided by their own traditions and theologies, Jews shared a common vernacular, cultural preferences, business and economic relations, aesthetics, even friendships with their Christian neighbors. Yet the specter of conversion loomed large in both communities during this period. Among Jews, this found expression in the pronounced concern that apostates might lure others to follow them, take communal wealth, or reveal potentially damaging information about Jewish books and learning to Christian authorities. On the Christian side, even as the church showed increasing interest in missionizing and engaging Jews in theological debate, there was widespread concern that Jewish converts might be drawn to Christianity by the potential for social or financial benefits rather than by true conviction. Nevertheless, folded into the traditional understanding of Judaism among Christians was a clear missionary imperative and an expectation that Jews who recognized the truth of Christianity would be rewarded with redemption and would help lay the foundation for the Second Coming.

Conversion to Christianity from Judaism was culturally, socially, and politically charged during the high middle ages. The shared biblical foundations slated a distinctive place for Jews in the Christian redemptive narrative. As Jeremy Cohen has shown, Augustine made a clear argument for the continued protection of Jews and Judaism in the Christian world that provided the basis for papal policy and debate throughout the middle ages.¹ This ‘doctrine of witness’ built upon the fundamental role of Jews in the Christian narrative of redemption to bolster rhetorically and historically the position of the relatively new faith of Christianity in a late Roman culture that revered antiquity. Augustine’s reading of Psalm 59 as a call for the protection of Jews and Judaism in Christian society is the most direct assertion of this view.² His argument that Jews should retain their proper status as
Jews, maintaining their role as the protectors of the first revelation and the outdated observance of biblical laws that Christianity superseded set the foundation for the protection of active Judaism in Christian lands. But it also all but undercut the need to missionize among Jews. The tension between a policy of protection and the call for mission marked the role of Jews in Christian society as a source of anxiety throughout the middle ages.

In this paper I will examine how narratives in which converts expressed theological values came to represent the deep tension between the need to preserve Jewish identity and the mandate to expand the Christian mission. My discussion will focus on two already well-known twelfth-century autobiographical works: Opusculum de conversione sua by Hermannus quondam Judaeus and Dialogi contra judaeos by Petrus Alfonsi. Hermannus converted to Christianity in the Rhineland during the first half of the twelfth century then wrote this account of his conversion some time later from his position as provost of the Premonstratensian house of Scheda. The text remains in two medieval manuscript copies, both of which bear signs that indicate they had been copied for and kept in monastic libraries. Petrus Alfonsi converted in a recently conquered city on the frontier of the Aragonese conquest of Muslim territories in Iberia in 1106. This work clearly garnered a wider audience since it remains in 80 manuscript copies, a good number of which were copied and held in twelfth and thirteenth centuries monastic houses. Both authors announce themselves as converts. This information plays a pivotal role in shaping the conceptions of conversion and converts represented in the texts. The Opusculum provides a narrative account of the events that led to Hermannus’s conversion, whereas Petrus Alfonsi’s Dialogi deals with the author’s conversion in a very brief passing remark in the opening prologue of the book, while the bulk of the text plays out a dialogue between two characters: Petrus, who converted to Christianity from Judaism, and a Jew named Moses, which had been the name of the author prior to his conversion. That the provenance of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century copies of these works has been traced primarily to monastic houses suggests that the readers were mostly members of religious orders who may have had a particular concern with the dynamics and tribulations of conversion. How readers responded to such conversion accounts was informed by expectations of and assumptions
about the role allotted to Jews and Judaism in the Christian narrative of redemption as well as the essential nature of Jews stubbornly resistant to the truth and Jewish communities as bastions of carnality.

There is little evidence that the church was terribly concerned with devising theological or missionary strategies to speed the conversion of Jews to Christianity before the spread of Cluniac conceptions of Christianity. As David Berger has noted, “the fundamental theory governing Jewish status in early medieval Europe was marked by tension and ambivalence – a result of the contradiction between the theoretical goals of a universal Christian mission and an argument for toleration that came close to discouraging Jewish conversion.” Beginning in the eleventh century, efforts by the Roman Church to reform and preserve Christendom laid the groundwork for clerics and laity alike to imagine, and at times take practical measures to realize, a utopic ideal of world-wide Christian unity. By the mid-twelfth century, the crusading movement became perhaps the most direct and wide-ranging effort to achieve this goal. It succeeded in expanding the imaginary and practical boundaries of Christendom far beyond local geographic and theological concerns. Though the ideology of crusading as a mechanism for achieving Christian unity emerged and transformed along with the effort to conquer and then control Jerusalem, an all-encompassing vision of Christendom found expression in church-sanctioned preaching missions in preparation for military campaigns and diplomacy with the Byzantines, as well as movements that developed on the fringes of official actions, like the People’s Crusade and the devastating attacks in Jewish communities in the Rhineland in the led up to the First and Second Crusades.

The degree to which Crusader attacks on Jews were fueled by missionary zeal has been disputed, but it is clear that the Jewish responses to the Crusaders made a deep impact on Christian observers. As the anti-Jewish violence by Crusaders demonstrates, a practical tension existed between a church policy guided by Augustine’s call to ‘slay them not’ and the avenues that were available to most laity to express personal piety. Jewish responses to these violent encounters also reinforced this ambivalence. The exaltation of self-immolation or qiddush ha-shem as represented in Hebrew narratives of attacks during the early Crusades
established something of a blueprint for a heroic and pious response for members of the Jewish community who faced the specter of forced baptism or violent death at the hands of Christians. According to the *Mainz Anonymous*, the earliest Hebrew account Jewish responses to Crusading violence, some faltered under pressure during the 1096 attacks and survived having been baptized. In these cases, the chronicler emphasizes that the victims were insincere in their conversion and returned to Judaism at the earliest opportunity. Conversion to Christianity is represented here as a temporary and clearly undesirable expedience, yet a necessary one for those who lacked the fortitude to achieve *qiddush ha-shem*. The deep-seated revulsion at the prospect of baptism demonstrated by Jews in the Rhineland in 1096 confirmed and reinforced Christian expectations that Jews were either incapable of recognizing or willfully rejected the truth. Insincere converts – those who accepted baptism simply to save their own lives with the intent of returning to Judaism the moment circumstances permitted – made this point with great force.

At the root of this apprehension about conversion in both communities was an ongoing effort to take stock of what constituted authentic Christianity or Judaism. To put it slightly differently, ongoing efforts to iron out who was a true Jew or Christian raised questions about what factors determined membership in those communities and on what basis inclusion might be compromised or revoked. In the medieval Christian context, the conversion of Jews, therefore, merited special care and attention. Voluntary conversion occupied a conceptual space somewhere between forced conversion as a means of establishing unity and Augustine’s effort to utilize the symbolism of Jewish history to advance the Christian redemption narrative. Though the church placed great stock in the conversion of Jews to Christianity Jewish converts were generally viewed with suspicion.

What constitutes conversion, how converts announce and perform their conversion, and how an individual’s conversion acquires meaning for both the individual and the community are historically and socially contingent. Volitional conversion from Judaism to Christianity reflects more than the fact of accepting baptism. Individual motivations, family concerns, social and cultural responses within both communities to a personal decision to leave the community, rituals and traditions, food ways, and liturgical rhythms all play a
significant role in determining what it was that constituted or was accepted as authentic conversion in any given time and place. Many of these variables are beyond the grasp of the historian, and may even have been beyond the comprehension of the converts themselves. A good deal of evidence testifying to the complex social circumstances of medieval conversion from Judaism to Christianity reveals relatively superficial details of the experience. Official documents, like baptismal registries and notarial records, offer evidence that conversions took place. As Paola Tartakoff has shown, communications between converts and royal or ecclesiastical authorities often indicate that many Jewish converts sought baptism because they had been promised remission of guilt for crimes committed or release from debts incurred prior to conversion, or conversion simply improved their economic or social standing.\textsuperscript{11} While such evidence leaves no doubt that the circumstances precipitating such conversions were complicated, the essentially transactional nature of the evidence makes it nearly impossible to glean an emotional or spiritual impulse driving the decision to convert. Moreover, since such records rarely represent more than a snapshot in time, there is no way to gage how deeply committed these individuals became to their new faith.\textsuperscript{12}

In contrast, firsthand conversion accounts offer what may be a more holistic view of the conversion experience. Personal conversion accounts usually focus on or at least make passing reference to the struggle that led to the spiritual transformation. The twelfth- and thirteenth-century aesthetic favored conversion accounts with a dramatic, tension-filled struggle between good and evil that played out as an internal spiritual struggle in the face of obstacles presented by hostile forces. Signaled by the acceptance of a more perfect form of devotion, whether by accepting baptism, for those turning to Christianity from outside, or by embracing a religious or monastic life for those already within the faith, conversion was not a routine circumstance—socially, psychologically, or practically. In both cases, conversion was realized in the identification and actualization of an improved form of devotion. Since first-person conversion accounts map a laborious process, whether as a result of personal anguish or external impediments, in which the subject sought a more complete and pure means of serving God, narratives of conversion from Judaism to Christianity complicate the image of the obstinate Jew.
The problem with conversion

Since medieval treatments of conversion are, by definition and intention, heavily laden with significance, their credibility is not always without question. The nature of religious conversion itself, both as a phenomenon and as a narrative or literary construct, poses a considerable challenge in any effort to examine conversion historically. As Karl Morrison has aptly noted, moderns distinguish between the text and the event, while medievals conflated the two. This difference of perception renders medieval conversion accounts nearly opaque to the modern analytical eye. People entered the Christian faith from the rise of Christianity through the middle ages under a wide variety of different circumstances, ranging from a dramatic internal transformation to compulsory mass conversion. The difficulty of homing in on a definition of conversion begs the question whether it is possible at all to make medieval conversion as a phenomenon transparent or even approachable through critical and especially historical study. A brief survey of modern traditions of reading conversion historically and culturally is useful here. The theoretical literature on conversion is vast, so I will focus on two foundational works that continue to shape this discourse.

William James and Arthur Nock laid the early foundations for a scholarly engagement with conversion as a historical phenomenon. James and Nock trained their sights on cases in which the converts’ dynamic inner transformation found expression in an irrepressible need to commit the trials of their struggle to writing. Both of them viewed the motives for and mechanisms of conversion as fundamentally linked with a conception of the individual defined along the lines of a Cartesian ideal of fully realized individual agency and autonomy. And both were intrigued by the fact that conversion emerged from and, in a very basic sense, functioned to preserve doubt.

For James, the study of conversion is part – a central part, certainly – of his expansive phenomenological reflection on religion and religious experience. Religiosity, he argues, is a form of neurosis. But for James not all neuroses are alike: those forms of religiosity that
allow for or even encourage productive self-reflection and self-realization provide a handy mechanism that might be used to maintain psychological stability. Conversion and radical religiosity signal a spiritual pathology. Those suffering in this state experience an elevated consciousness of their individuality and of the relationship between the self and either the human community or the divine. Religiosity and conversion provide a means by which some can, in James’s view, remedy this form of spiritual pathology. The process of conversion manifests according to two basic models. On one extreme is a volitional conversion, a gradual “building up … of a new set of moral and spiritual habits.” On the other extreme is a fully engrossing and immediate conversion, “in which the subconscious effects are more abundant and often startling.” This form he calls conversion via self-surrender. Conversion of this sort is both more dramatic and more volatile, and thus poses a real danger of dramatic reversal. James’s preference for the latter form reflects his belief that self-surrender is symptomatic of a psyche struggling to emerge from near catastrophic existential turmoil. Psychic repair, the hard work conversion effects, demands a highly developed intellect and well-honed sense of self awareness. James’s differentiation between volitional conversion and conversion of self-sacrifice provided a means of distinguishing true conversion from conversion as a practical measure. His model for true conversion is explicitly Christian, largely reserved for the educated elites who have imbibed the mechanisms and vocabulary for careful introspection, and the experience often results in a personal testimonial.

Building upon some similar assumptions about the nature of religious experience and conversion, Nock approaches the problem from a distinctly historical perspective. The central question of his classic work *Conversion* is how and why gentile populations around the Mediterranean during the early centuries of the common era came to accept and internalize Christian ethical and moral principles. In other words, how did they become Christian and what did it mean to become Christian? Nock adopted an expansive and comparative approach, examining the meaning and significance of conversion among members of various ancient Mediterranean faiths, including Judaism, mystery cults, Hellenist philosophy, and finally Christianity. His definition of ‘true’ conversion clearly
evolves from the Christian ideal: “By conversion,” he states, “we mean the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right. It is seen at its fullest in the positive response of a man to the choice set before him by the prophetic religion.”

Nock proposed a hierarchical taxonomy of types of conversion, distinguishing between true conversion and conversion driven solely by pragmatic motives. To this end, he identified three types of faith or religion, each of which demands its own form of commitment. The first and least well developed, in his view, is a “wholly static” form of religion observed by small insular and circumscribed communities whose members simply share a set of ritual or obligatory actions. He suggests that such religions lack a real theology but cohere only as a result of the members’ participation in the cult. At the next, slightly more sophisticated level, are national or ethnic cults that develop in a manner that allows for an influx of individuals and large groups to demonstrate loyalty to political or military leaders by incorporating worship of a new set of gods alongside their already established beliefs and practices. While such faiths reward loyalty, he suggests, they do not demand exclusive devotion, so conversion serves practical but not necessarily spiritual needs. Finally, at the top of his hierarchy, are the “wholly dynamic” prophetic religions. Participation in these faiths demands an intellectual and emotional commitment and, for entry from outside, complete renunciation of all previous beliefs, practices, even personalities as evidence of a fully-fledged commitment to the new faith. For Nock, true conversion occurs only in the prophetic faiths.

Nock and James both built their analyses of conversion on assumptions that are a bit uncomfortable for twenty-first century readers: Nock’s argument that primitive faiths offered no spiritual solace, and James’s notion that the fuel for religiosity builds from emotional rupture are rooted in a strongly Romantic conception of history. In both cases, an emphasis on individual experience and agency makes it possible to disaggregate individual religious experience from the non-rational religiosity of the masses. And both present the Christian ideal of conversion as the most advanced and spiritually pure form.
Though the mechanisms and methodologies of their arguments are different, James and Nock viewed the study of conversion as a study of the emergence of the fully realized individual. In this sense, they shared and passed along to future scholars a progressivist lens through which to view the history of religious conversion. A deep anxiety about what it means to redefine, from the core, the essential qualities that make an individual what and who she is runs as an undercurrent through both works. Closely linked to this concern is the ever present fear that a convert’s transformation might prove fleeting, or worse, insincere.

This is an enduring discourse. It persists in some recent scholarship on medieval converts, even as that work pursues questions of a very different order and takes for granted a very different set of cultural and epistemological assumptions. For example, Avrom Saltman’s 1988 article on Hermannus quodam Judaeus is very much concerned with determining what constitutes true conversion. Troubled by some details of Hermannus’s *Opusculum de conversione sua*, or *A Little Work on His Conversion*, Saltman examined the work in search of “Jewish” symbols and tropes. On the basis of this reading, he determined that the *Opusculum* was lacking any hint of a Jewish authorial voice. Moreover, he claimed that the text included narrative details that no Jew, even an apostate, could or would ever have written. He concluded that it was not a text written by a Jewish convert to Christianity at all, but rather a work of fiction written by a reformist monk for his brethren. Saltman’s analysis was driven by a fairly troubling essentializing approach to Jewishness and Jewish culture, but for my purposes today, it is sufficient to note that he asked different questions of this text than he would of medieval chronicles or charters. Saltman seems to expect that Jewish values and cultural expressions are immutable and that conversion narratives themselves are trustworthy only if they conform to a set of predetermined expectations.

Paola Tartakoff’s excellent study, *Between Christian and Jew*, for example, attempts to circumvent this problem by offering a bifurcated narrative. One thread presents the story of Pere, a Jewish convert who was very nearly burnt on the stake after publicly returning to Judaism under the influence of a Jewish benefactor; the other examines the daily life challenges converts encountered as they tried to integrate into Christian society in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Catalonia. Tartakoff studiously avoids any impulse to
draw general conclusions about conversion based the singular case of Pere, surprisingly well documented though it is. Yet she cannot help but suggest that the case of Pere converges with evidence showing that many converts chose baptism for very practical utilitarian reasons, whether financial or social.\textsuperscript{18}

The crucial role James and Nock played in shaping the terms and structure of scholarly reflection on conversion is worthy of reflection precisely because it has had such staying power.\textsuperscript{19} Though their efforts to define and then identify ‘authentic’ versus ‘false’ conversion are disquieting they nevertheless remain quite compelling. While it would be tempting to reject their approach whole-cloth as a relic of its time, to do so would be very difficult. Their reading of conversion is driven explicitly by the sources themselves. The fact that medieval sources are consistently inconsistent in the attitudes they express about converts and conversion fuels an anxiety about the depth of converts’ commitment to their newly found faith. The approach I have adopted in the pages that follow endeavors to test the limits of historical and phenomenological analysis of conversion by focusing on rhetorical and authorial voices in the \textit{Opusculum} by Hermannus quondam Judaeus and the \textit{Dialogi} by Petrus Alfonsi.

\textbf{Conversion and medieval converts}

Perceptions of conversion are directly related to cultural conceptions of what constitutes belonging – in other words, what made a Christian recognizable as a Christian in manner and conduct during the middle ages. At the most basic level, in the high middle ages, any child born to a Christian parent was baptized at birth and was therefore expected to conform to requisite ritual and doctrinal norms of the faith. Demonstration of identity was built into the daily workings and rhythms of society; those who deviated from the norm through criticism of clerical authority, efforts to dramatically reform or intensify ritual, practice or doctrine, or distancing oneself from the community came under ecclesiastical scrutiny. The ritual calendar required laity to participate in regular practices that served to train lay Christians in the proper modes of behavior and expression; these rituals also
provided witnesses for a performative demonstration of faith. The practice of confession, for example, which was for lay Christians an annual ritual, formalized a regime of self-discipline that guided the penitent toward a sort of moral and emotional training. Beginning at an early age, confession served as a process of discipline that instructed the penitent in the physical and verbal language of contrition, grief, and shame for the sins committed during the previous year. Penitential manuals helped priests pose questions that would lead the confessor to sins hidden or suppressed. The exchange would have been relatively consistent throughout western Christendom. But it would also have been very much inflected with the local customs, modes of behavior, and social dynamics of the immediate community in which it took place. The repetition of this ritual and others like it socialized the penitent to a set of values by which his or her behavior might be compared with that of other parishioners. By the high middle ages, ecclesiastical leaders were primarily concerned with assuring that Christians conformed to an accepted orthopraxy. Being born into a Christian family and having embodied the physical, emotional, and doctrinal bearing of western Christianity was sufficient to signal that one was sufficiently or essentially Christian. This meant that, short of deliberate abrogation, abandonment, or amendment of established practices, there would be little reason to question the authenticity of a born Christian’s Christianity. Within the economy of sin and repentance that was built into the liturgical and moral rhythm of Christian life, the temptation to sin was an organic part of the human experience that all Christians confronted.

Though the church prized converts from Judaism to Christianity, the fact that their commitment to the faith – the authenticity of their Christianity – was not taken for granted speaks to a fissure in the evangelical imperative at the base of Christian theology since Paul. Responses to and understandings of Jewish conversion into Christianity were directly shaped by conceptions of what it meant to be Jew. That Jewish converts into Christianity might have been drawn for reasons other than authentic faith was a perennial suspicion among Christians throughout the middle ages. Such concerns were fueled by preachers who deployed in sermons and polemics alike an arsenal of stock caricatures depicting Jews as obstinate, motivated only by carnal or capital impulses, willfully blind, and perpetrators of
deicide. Such stock images cast Jews as thoroughly unbending in their dedication to Judaism. Yet the expectation that Jews would convert into Christianity was, of course, woven directly into the very fabric Christianity since its earliest history. Petrus Alfonsi and Hermannus quondam Judaeus illustrate the tension between the expectation and suspicion of Jewish conversion. Both personally attest to the author having experienced a radical turning of heart that enabled him to recognize the truth of Christianity. Both call attention to the fact that even as they wrote as Christians they made use of knowledge and skills acquired prior to their conversion. Indeed, both texts profess to offer an intimate introduction to Jewish thinking and interpretation. But there is an undercurrent of defensiveness or self-consciousness on the part of these authors woven into their rhetoric and narratives that give some sense of how the authors themselves understood conversion as well as how they imagined their audience perceived of conversion.

Hermann quondam Judaeus’s *Opusculum de conversione sua* is one of a very small number of medieval personal accounts of a medieval Jew’s conversion into Christianity. It professes to contain a detailed sequential accounting of the spiritual struggle that led the author to question Jewish biblical interpretation and ritual, and in the end brought him to the baptismal font. Hermannus opens the account of his journey to conversion by describing a dream he had as well as the essentially Jewish interpretation provided “Isaac, a man then of great authority among the Jews;” he closes the narrative with a new interpretation of the same dream only this time informed by a first-hand knowledge of Christian symbolism. The dream frames the narrative, drawing a clear line from the point when Hermannus became aware that Judaism was not providing him with answers to the theological questions that were beginning to trouble him to the time of his writing, when he set out to compose the account of his conversion.

The narrative that unfolds between the two dream interpretations plots Hermannus’s spiritual and social alienation from Judaism. The details of his attraction to Christianity and alienation from his family and community play out through a series of events and practices that resonate in the context of this narrative as truly and essentially Jewish, at least from a Christian perspective. He first builds an intimate relationship with
Christians and Christianity after a bishop visiting Mainz from Münster sought a loan from Hermannus. Seeing the bishop as genuinely good and trustworthy, he extends a loan, but without demanding a pledge of collateral. Incensed at his poor judgment, his family sends him to live with the bishop until the loan has been repaid in full. He remains in residence with the bishop for several months under the watchful eye of Baruch, a member of the Münster Jewish community whom the family enlisted as his guardian. During this extended sojourn with the bishop, Hermannus attends sermons, acquaints himself with Christian symbols and imagery, observes the bishop engage in theological discussions, and participates – indeed, initiates – disputation with clerics, most famously, with the abbot Rupert of Deutz. His eventual return to the Jewish community is troubled. Disconcerted by Hermannus’s affinity for Christians and Christianity, Baruch takes it upon himself to report this behavior to the young man’s family “greatly weakening the affection of my parents and friends toward me with accusations that contrary to what was allowed, I had consorted with Christians in such an eager and familiar way that I could now be thought, not a Jew, but a Christian.”

His attraction to Christianity does not abate. After returning to the Jewish community, Hermannus surreptitiously integrates Christian observances into his daily life by privately engaging in extended fasts and prayers in the hope that his diligence might inspire a divine sign that will answer his questions. He marries under pressure from the community but continues to seek answers from Christians. Meanwhile, he continues to confront clergy on the streets to instigate theological debate. Through the sincere prayers of two nuns he finally recognizes Jesus as his savior. He returns one last time to the Jewish community (this time to Worms), where he delivers a Christian sermon in the synagogue. Finally, he kidnaps his younger half-brother to bring him to Christianity, then submits to baptism. Fearful that he would find himself led astray once more, he joined the Premonstratensian monastery at Cappenberg “and changed my life with my way of dress, according to the rule of St. Augustine, to await the end of the present life and the promise of the one to come.”
Yet writing this work does not appear to have been a spiritual or cathartic experience for the author. In the opening passage, framed as a letter to a fellow monk, the author asserts that he wrote the work in Latin as an answer to queries from “many religious both men and women” who “persist in trying to find out from me how I converted from Judaism to the grace of Christ and whether, among the first beginnings of my conversion, I endured temptations of the malign Enemy.” The stated pastoral function of the text demands a sequential narrative with clearly delineated actions, reactions, and progress towards the known outcome of authentic conversion. This chronological organization hinges on the fact that it is a narrative about personal experience. Hermannus’s interactions with the Jewish community, his pressing need to find solace and acceptance in the Jewish community, even after he has made his attraction to Christianity clear, are crucial to establishing his expertise in Jewish interpretation and his understanding of how the community itself functioned. This works at more than one narrative level. Emphasizing that his training in Torah was exceptional reinforces the message that his turn away from Judaism emerged from a clear understanding of the inadequacy of Jewish texts and practices, as well as divine grace. The Opusculum thus tells an edifying story. Efforts to persuade Hermannus through exegesis and debate fall short; but charity and loving prayer, two signature virtues of monastic life, solidify his ability to forsake Judaism.

It is precisely his struggle against the attraction of friends and family, the comfort of familiar life rhythms, and the organizational authority of the Jewish community that renders his conversion credible and edifying for an audience of cradle Christians. As preamble to this work attests, Hermannus’s status as a (former?) Jew followed him throughout his Christian life. The fact that he points this out to his reader in the opening passage of the text signals that he was aware of and attentive to his reader’s aesthetic and spiritual sensibilities. This text can be read in part as a primer on the internal structure and interconnectedness of Jewish communities and how they socialized members. Exegetical conventions that were deeply rooted in the Gospels consistently cast Jews and especially the leadership of organized Jewish communities in decidedly negative terms. Some of these details correspond with what we know of organized Jewish life in medieval Europe but in
the logic of the narrative, they work to affirm largely negative perceptions of the Jewish community. For example, explaining the conditions that made it necessary for Hermannus to spend an extended period of time in an intimate Christian domestic setting helps reinforce assumptions about the Jews’ willful blindness to Christian truth while also providing evidence that pursuit of wealth and carnal desires overpower more benign impulses.31 But it also bears witness to the fact that true Jewish conversion was possible. The Opusculum presents conversion as a multifaceted process. Hermannus’s conversion is not entirely volitional. It unfolds slowly, with fits and starts, over the course of years. It is revealed at the end of the text that the dream Hermannus found so disquieting in his youth signaled that he had been selected for conversion by God. The gift of grace, which was bestowed on him alone among those of his community enabled him – after considerable effort – finally to recognize both Christian love and Christian theological truths.32 The rest of the Jewish community remains enveloped in blindness, impervious to Hermannus’s struggle. One might expect that the author would have taken the polemical opportunity to push the argument a bit farther to represent the Jews as active agents of the devil, but he refrains. Though the devil does appear at two crucial junctures in the narrative, it is interesting that the text never explicitly figures these terms.33 However, in contrast with Hermannus’s struggle between divine grace and personal will, the Opusculum represents the efforts by Hermannus’s family and community to prevent his conversion as thoroughly base human actions grounded in self-interest. Any desire they may have had to keep their child in the family is overshadowed by their efforts to recuperate a loan and to undermine his search for salvation.

Charity is both the message and the medium of conversion in this text. With the gift of grace Hermannus gains the capacity to see Christianity as truth and Christians as good and kind, even as the rest of the Jewish community remained entrenched in an adversarial, confrontational relationship with Christianity. Acts of kindness on the part of Christians, not theological argument win Hermannus’s respect and love. Indeed, the many disputations and sermons he participates in or witnesses merely seem to expand the rhetorical arsenal he can use to defend of Judaism.34
Whereas the *Opusculum* makes a strong case that grace and charity were productive missionary techniques while disputation failed to have an impact on Hermannus’s commitment to Jewish interpretations, Petrus Alfonsi’s *Dialogi contra iudaeos* offers a very different conceptualization of conversion. The *Dialogi* is a twelve-part disputation that lays out a wide array of arguments *contra iudaeos*. Like all medieval anti-Jewish polemical tracts, this work goes to great pains to highlight the theological and interpretive fallacies of Judaism. But in contrast with much literature in this genre, the author makes it clear that the *Dialogi* was written by someone who possessed firsthand experience and deep understanding of the theological issues that divided Judaism and Christianity. Drawing attention to his former position as a Jew poised between Muslim and Christian intellectual spheres, Alfonsi presents his conversion to Christianity as the product of a thoughtful though not entirely transparent intellectual transformation.

The *Dialogi* opens with a fairly conventional statement of creed, proclaiming Alfonsi’s acceptance of the trinity, the virgin birth, the Jews’ responsibility for the crucifixion, and finally the resurrection. Having internalized these truths, the author states, he attained “so exalted a degree of this faith, by the impulse of divine mercy, [that] I took off the cloak of falsehood and was stripped bare of the tunic of iniquity and was baptized.” He continues: “At the moment of baptism, in addition to those things that were already mentioned, I believed in the blessed apostles and the holy Catholic Church.” But while he self-consciously directs his readers’ attention to the fact of his conversion, he makes absolutely no effort to present or examine any internal spiritual struggles or doubts that may have led him to reject Judaism and embrace Christianity; nor does he make any claims about the possibility that this book might be used to encourage the conversion of others.

Indeed, the degree to which this work presents a first-person account of conversion is quite limited, which is interesting in itself. Petrus Alfonsi is very self-conscious about demonstrating that his understanding of Christianity emerged from a careful consideration of the theological and philosophical merits of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Indeed, his status as a converted Jew is essential to the structure and the rhetorical impact of this work. It opens with a frame narrative within a frame narrative, each of which provides
information that the author believed was crucial for understanding the theological
disputation that follows. The first of these frames introduces the author and his authorial
intentions. At the outset, Alfonso explains the circumstances that brought him to compose a
polemical text. He had converted from Judaism to Christianity under the patronage of King
Alfonso I of Aragon in the newly Christianized city of Huesca. He informs his reader that he
had been a highly respected and accomplished member of the Jewish community. As such,
his conversion to Christianity met with skepticism and derision from his former community
members, who charged that he had left the fold due to a failure of his learning or a desire for
“worldly honor” or gain. “Therefore” he tells his reader

I have composed this little book so that all may know my intention and hear my
argument, in which I set forth the destruction of the belief of all the other nations, after
which I concluded that the Christian law is superior to all others. Moreover, last, I have
set down all the objections of any adversary of the Christian law and, having set them
down, have destroyed them with reason and authority according to my understanding.”

He explains that he arranged the work as a dialog pitting the newly Christian Petrus against
his former self, the Jewish Moses. Finally, having accounted for his credentials, Alfonso then
provides an outline of the structure of the book and its arguments – the first four chapters
demonstrating the fallacy of Judaism, the fifth “destroying the law of the Saracens,” and
each of the final six dealing with central Christian theological doctrines.

Though the second frame narrative is quite brief, it serves as a passageway into the
fictional world of the dialog between convert and Jew, Petrus and Moses. Having already
explained his authorial choices to his reader, Alfonso moves on to set the dramatic scene.

From the tender age of youth a certain one, a most perfect friend, named Moses stuck by
me, who had been my companion and fellow student from the very earliest age. When
word reached him that I had chosen the Christian faith, having abandoned the law of my
fathers, he came to me in haste…. Wearing the expression of an indignant man on his
face as he approached and upbraiding me, he greeted me not as a friend but as if I were
a stranger…”
Alfonsi gives no indication of how he intended his reader to use this text, but by layering his frame narratives in this way, Alfonsi signals that this is no ordinary Jewish-Christian debate. Rather, one might conclude that he crafted the disputation to reveal the process by which he came to recognize the truth of Christianity; perhaps he even conceived it as a practical guide intended to help other Christians formulate persuasive arguments that might be used to persuade other Jews to follow his path to Christianity. Except that at the conclusion of the disputation, when Petrus and Moses part company, neither one of them has been persuaded of the truth of the other’s claims. In other words, though Moses repeatedly concedes that Petrus’s reason and method of argument are superior to his own, he remains convinced that his own sources of authority and interpretation are superior. He departs still confident in the truth of Judaism.

This text represents a very different conceptualization of conversion than we saw in the *Opusculum*. The fact of Petrus Alfonsi’s conversion establishes the narrative parameters for the debate that unfolds in the following chapters, but the mechanics of that conversion, its significance for the author, and what triggered it all remain invisible. More importantly, Moses’s failure to convert at the end of the text points to a very interesting conceptualization of conversion. The narrative device of identifying both disputants with the author complicates the representation of conversion. The structure of Alfonsi’s work places the reader in the unusual and possibly uncomfortable position of recognizing that Moses, Petrus, and their narrative animator shared an educational framework, experience of social and religious alienation, and didactic function in the setting of the dialogue. Alfonsi depicted Moses as a Jew who had access to Muslim and Christian intellectual spheres but remained steadfast in his Jewish faith. But Petrus, who found Christianity after working to identify which faith best cohered with philosophical reasoning, represents an important counterpoint to the Jewish Moses: that is, he is a Christian who put aside Judaism and Islam because reason permitted him to see that they were fundamentally flawed. The third narrative voice, that of the author/stage manager, presents an understanding of Christianity shaped by exposure to and understanding of Judaism and Islam. But by claiming identity with both characters – both of whom he mobilized to demonstrate the truth of Christianity –
and responsibility for the shape of the dialogue, Alfonsi himself raises questions about the
efficacy of conversion and the mechanics of writing about conversion.

Alfonsi’s method of drawing attention to the fact of his conversion from Judaism to
Christianity is among the more fascinating and distinctive characteristics of this work. And
though he pointedly holds back from dramatizing or contemplating the process or
significance of his conversion, the very fact of his conversion sets the disputation in motion.
Petrus Alfonsi’s conversion appears to have been an intellectual turn, fueled by
philosophical reasoning, that made the truth of Christian theological arguments apparent to
him. This conversion, Alfonsi seems to suggest, neither dulled his understanding of Jewish
traditions and literatures nor clouded his apprehension of Christian theology or doctrine.
Rather, it provided him the tools to carve out a domain of expertise within Christian
philosophy. In addition, this work provides the first known Christian engagement with and
refutation of rabbinic literature and offers a systematic discussion of Islam and Muslim
tenets. The very fact that he was born and educated in a Jewish community in an Arabic
speaking Muslim land established his authority both as an interpreter of Jewish texts and as
an expert in things Muslim. Thus, the experience and knowledge he acquired as a Jew
marked him as invaluable to Christianity, but not solely in the traditional or theological
sense. Instead, his value emerged from the clarity of thought produced by a true
understanding of other theological or religious doctrines.

These two texts are clearly very different in style, structure, and in their
representation of the role of the convert. But turning attention to the similarities between
them casts into relief some of the common tropes and narrative devices and points to some
shared views of how conversion translated into narrative and how Christians who were
born into the faith may have recognized, learned from, and grappled with the transition into
Christianity of those who converted from outside. The authors of both texts establish that
they had been held in high regard in the Jewish community for their learning and piety. This
expertise positions them as credible and valued additions to community, in part, it would
seem, because they brought with them prized information about Judaism; they duly made
this information available in their written works. This is especially evident in the Dialogi.
Petrus Alfonsi announces in the prologue that the Jews “had considered me well-trained in the books of the prophets and the sayings of the sages, and to have even a portion, although not great, of all the liberal arts.” In a clunky and not terribly convincing aside, he asserts that he wrote the disputation in order to counter the Jews’ claim that he converted to satisfy his vanity or because he never really understood the law at all, not because he had been convinced of the truth of Christianity. At first glance, this explanation, which he explicitly links to his own experiences, seems to suggest that his intent is to persuade his Jewish critics. But the fact that the text is written in Latin belies this assumption. There is no doubt that he spoke to a Christian audience.

Disputation plays a central role in both works as well. There has been a good deal of scholarship on the proliferation of disputation literature in the twelfth and thirteenth century and the implications of this turn for the acceptance and treatment of Jews in western Christendom. The question of whether the authors of these texts intended them as practical works intended to convince Jews that their interpretations and practices were incorrect remains open, though. This discourse was both practical and edifying for Christian readers. It offered a clear demonstration that the truth of Christianity could be communicated to Jews. It also presented those truths to Christian readers in a pleasing and organized manner. Yet both texts also call into question the efficacy of this discourse as missionizing strategy, at least implicitly. Much of the Opusculum traces Hermannus’s efforts to engage in debates with various Christian clergy. The most extended of these, of course, is an extended disputation with Rubert of Deutz instigated, according to the narrative, by Hermannus himself. Hermannus argues that Christians “Bear a great prejudice toward the Jews. You spit on them with curses and loathing as though they were dead dogs, although you read that of old, God chose them for himself as his own people.” By drawing attention to this regime of abuse heaped upon Jews by Christians, in combination with what Jews perceived to be a hypocritical disregard for their position as God’s first chosen people and, by extension, their role in the Christian redemption, Hermannus issues a rebuke against the efficacy of disputation as a means of drawing Jews toward the truth of Christianity. The fact that he summarizes Rupert’s response to arguments advanced by Hermannus, rather
than laying them out in detail, reinforces this message – a message that he makes repeatedly in the course of the text.

Petrus Alfonsi’s Dialogi makes a similar point, albeit with a bit more subtlety. Though framed as a disputation, the Dialogi makes it very clear that persuasive argument alone – even a persuasive argument grounded in philosophy and building on a deep knowledge of the Jewish sources – will not be sufficient to convince Jews of the truth of Christianity. This text provides a fully developed, multifaceted repudiation of Judaism. Nevertheless, the Jewish disputant, unlike the author of the text, remains steadfast in his faith.

Animaing the voice of a convert is a powerful tool in a monolithic religious community. It allows exposure to the seemingly authentic and unmediated thoughts and values of someone who came to recognize truths that for the reading audience could be taken for granted as completely self-evident. These texts express very timely concerns about mission and conversion. The Dialogi and the Opusculum were intended for – and reached – an audience of scholars and monks. As such, albeit in very different ways, they address aesthetic, theological, and intellectual concerns that developed in those settings. Over the course of the twelfth century the church advanced several methods of disciplining the faith and practice of ordinary Christians and monastics alike. At the same time, reformed monastic orders attracted lay and clerical converts as well. Speaking as converts into Christianity, Hermannus and Petrus gave voice to a progressive but also, in some way, contentious conception of conversion. They represent an expectation that Christian unity might be achieved through carefully managed mission, but also that the process of conversion is ongoing.

The historical study of conversion poses methodological and conceptual challenges. As Karl Morrison has observed, “conversion is a name and not a thing, and that word is a metaphor…. From the outset, then, the history of ‘conversion’ is a history of metaphorical analysis.” Consequently, the study of conversion as a historical phenomenon is always, of necessity, theoretical. We can talk historically about conversion in many ways: as an administrative fact, for example, when a convert’s name can be entered in baptismal
registry, or as a literary fact, in the event that the convert saw fit to record her or his emotional or spiritual journey, or as a legal problem, when the authenticity of conversion is called into question. But these are residual traces of an internal struggle that do not capture or reflect the motivations, emotions, or personal experiences of conversion.

2 "‘As for my God, his mercy will go before me; my God has shown me this in the case of my enemies, DO not slay them, lest at some time they forget your Law; scatter them by your might.’ God has thus shown to the Church the grace of his mercy in the case of her enemies the Jews, since, as the Apostle says, ‘their failure means salvation for the Gentile.s.’ And this is the reason for his forbearing to slay them – that is for not putting an end to their existence as Jews, although they have been conquered and oppressed by the Romans; it is for fear that they should forget the Law of God and thus fail to bear convincing witness… Thus it was not enough for the psalmist to say ‘Do not slay them, lest some time they forget your Law,’ without adding, ‘Scatter them.’’" Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1984), XVIII.46, 828.
8 See Albert of Aachen, "Historia Hierosolymita," in *Recueil Des historiens des croisades. Historiens occidentaux. Par les soins de l’Académie Royale des inscriptions et des belles-lettres*, vol. 4,


12 The vast majority of documents of this sort date from the 13th or 14th century. There are several reasons for this, perhaps the most important of which was the concentrated on the part of the Crown, the church, and municipal leaders to collect and preserve fiscal and demographic records.


15 James, Varieties of Religious Experience, 163 and 164 respectively.

16 Nock, Conversion, 7. See pages 4-8 for his taxonomy of religious types.

17 For example, Nock argues that the first form of religious commitment described above “is the system of religious observances of a small social unit with elementary needs and interests and not important contacts with other cultures which have either material or intellectual superiority or a cult and belief capable of exciting curiosity and attention.” Ibid., 6–7.


19 Mark David Baer has recently updated this approach by identifying four different forms or degrees of conversion: acculturation, adhesion or hybridity, syncretism, and transformation. His goal in demarcating these forms of conversion is to provide a model that recognizes individual as well as communal shifts. Marc David Baer, “History and Religious Conversion,” in The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 25–47.

20 This discussion is indebted to John Arnold’s work on lay religion in the late middle ages. See John H. Arnold, “Inside and Outside the Medieval Laity: Reflections on the History of
who were present when they saw me, the strongest assailant of the paternal traditions, while community: “Can you imagine how great a stupor of amazement then seized all the Jews

Deviation from these norms of behavior, whether by advancing an argument for extra canonical interpretations and behaviors or by engaging in the practice of magic or healing, fit into the category of heresy and was thus subject to ecclesiastical investigation and punishment. The eleventh century saw a considerable rise in the number of heresy accusations and investigations this incline continued through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The literature on the rise of heresy is vast. A few select references that tie in with the thrust of this discussion will have to suffice here. B. Stock, The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) shows that the rise of literacy had an impact on the dissemination of ideas even to those who were not literate, which meant that extra-clerical interpretations of central Christian tenets circulated more widely and with greater authority; G.R. Evans, A Brief History of Heresy (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), a broad chronological survey of heresy from the dawn of Christianity until the 21st century; Dominique Iogna-Prat, Order and Exclusion: Cluny and Christendom Face Heresy, Judaism, and Islam, 1000–1150 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), traces the history of the Cluniac order as an instrument of reform through Peter the Venerable’s effort to reshape Christendom in accordance with Cluniac values and mores; R.I. Moore, The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

Conversion within Christianity to monastic life was understood to be an on-going process that unfolded over the course of a lifetime. See Morrison, Understanding Conversion.


Conversion, Conversion and Text, 77. “ad quendam cognatum meum Ysaac nomine, magne tunc apud Iudeos auctoritatis virum.” Niemyer, Hermannus, 71.

The literature on the rise of heresy is vast. A few select references that tie in with the thrust of this discussion will have to suffice here. B. Stock, The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) shows that the rise of literacy had an impact on the dissemination of ideas even to those who were not literate, which meant that extra-clerical interpretations of central Christian tenets circulated more widely and with greater authority; G.R. Evans, A Brief History of Heresy (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), a broad chronological survey of heresy from the dawn of Christianity until the 21st century; Dominique Iogna-Prat, Order and Exclusion: Cluny and Christendom Face Heresy, Judaism, and Islam, 1000–1150 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), traces the history of the Cluniac order as an instrument of reform through Peter the Venerable’s effort to reshape Christendom in accordance with Cluniac values and mores; R.I. Moore, The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

Conversion within Christianity to monastic life was understood to be an on-going process that unfolded over the course of a lifetime. See Morrison, Understanding Conversion.


“Qui, ut dudum mihi fuerat comminatus, parentum et amicorum meorum suis erga me accusationibus plurimum infirmavit affectum, asserens me contra licitum tanta Christianis sedulitate ac familiaritate adhesisse, ut iam non Iudeus, sed Christianus existimari potuerim, nisi simulata pietate paternam religionem habitu solo mentitus fuissem.” Niemyer, Hermannus, 93.

He takes this opportunity once more to tout his reputation as a revered member of the community: “Can you imagine how great a stupor of amazement then seized all the Jews who were present when they saw me, the strongest assailant of the paternal traditions, while
they had hoped that I, as Jew of the Jews, would be their defender?” Morrison, *Conversion and Text*, 104. “Quantus itaque putas tunc omnes, quae aderant, Iudeos stupor apprehenderit, cum me paternarum traditionum suarum fortissimum viderent expugnatorem, quorum me fidellissimum, utpote Iudeum ex Iudeis speraverant esse defensorem?” Niemyer, *Hermannus*, 113.


38 He does this both explicitly (“Nam quia scriba doctus in lege a meis existimabar...” Niemyer, *Hermannus*, 97) and through practical example in his ability to deploy biblical prooftexts as arguments in defense of Jewish interpretations. This approach clearest in his representation of disputation with Rupert of Deutz. Niemyer, *Hermannus*, 76-83.

39 Jean-Claude Schmitt has argued that the *Opusculum* emerged directly from the broad context of medieval autobiographical – and more precisely, confessional – writing. This assessment responds to Avrom Saltman’s assertion that this text contained no authentic Jewish symbolism or narrative strategies and that it therefore must have been produced by a member of the Premonstratensian community in Cappenberg, where Hermannus was baptized, to flesh out the story of a Jewish convert into the order. On the basis a deep and multilayered literary and cultural context, Schmitt argues that the *Opusculum* was thoroughly embedded in both Christian and Jewish literary and cultural traditions. While he does not engage or take issue with Saltman’s claim that the text is a fabrication, he does complicate the understanding of medieval authorship generally and also more specifically in this text. Schmitt’s approach is productive. Since he is not interested in making absolute claims about who wrote the *Opusculum*, he draws attention away from the essentialistic and fundamentally problematic question of authentic authorship that has so preoccupied scholars since Saltman’s article and refocuses on the literary attributes of the work. Like Schmitt, I am not interested in proving the identity of the author of this text. Instead, I am directly concerned with how this text represents perceptions and understandings of the mechanics and significance of conversion. See Avrom Saltman, “Hermann’s *Opusculum de Conversione Sua*: Truth and Fiction,” *Revue des études juives* 147, no. 1–2 (1988): 31–56 and Jean Claude Schmitt, *The Conversion of Herman the Jew: Autobiography, History, and Fiction in the Twelfth Century*, trans. Alex J. Novikoff, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

40 In his revised interpretation of the dream in the final chapter of the book, he states: “Jews, who, on account of the Law received from God, took for themselves first place among all other nations, envied me for having been worthy to receive Christ’s grace, of which they themselves were unworthy.” Morrison, *Conversion and Text*, 111. “Iudei, qui propter acceptam a Deo legem inter ceteras sibi nationes principatum usurpabant, Christi me gratiam, qua ipsi indigni erant, meruisse inviderunt.” Niemyer, *Hermannus*, 123.

41 In the first instance, Hermannus blames the devil for enveloping him a haze of confusion as he tries to escape the city of Mainz after having kidnapped his brother; in the second, he attributes the significant anxiety he endures as he enters the baptismal waters to the work of the devil. Morrison, *Conversion and Text*, 105 and 107-108, respectively; Niemyer, *Hermannus*, 115 and 118-119, respectively.

42 I am still working though how and in what way the kidnapping and forced conversion of Hermannus’s brother complicates this.

43 In order to distinguish between the author and the characters in this text, I will refer to the Christian disputant as Petrus, the Jewish disputant as Moses, and the author as Alfonsi.


38 Petrus Alfonsi, Dialogue Against the Jews, 42–43. “A tenera igitur pueritiae etate quidam michi perfectissimus adheserat amicus nomine Moyses, qui a primaeua etate meus consocius fuerat et condiscipulus. Ad hunc cum peruenisset sermo, quod ego paterna lege relicta christianam delegissem fidem... ad me festinus peruenit, in ipso aduentu quendam uultum ferens hominis indignantis et increpans salutavit me more non amici, sed quasi alieni...” Petrus Alfonsi, Dialogus, 10.


40 Petrus Alfonsi, Dialogue Against the Jews, 41. “Cumque notum esset Iudeis – qui me antea nouerant et probauerant peritum in libris prophetarum et dictis doctorum partem etiam, licet non magnam, habere omnium liberalium atrium...” Petrus Alfonsi, Dialogus, 4.

41 For a systematic examination of the role of disputation in conversion narratives, see the excellent study by Ryan Szpiech, Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic, The Middle Ages (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).


43 Morrison, Conversion and Text, 81. “Magnum vos Christiani Iudeis preiudicium facitis, qui eos ac si canes mortuos execrando et abhorrendo conspuitis, cum legatis, Deum sibi eos ab antiquo ex omnibus mundi nationibus in populum peculiarem elegisse.” Niemyer, Hermannus, 77.

44 Guibert of Nogent, for example, followed his mother, who converted to a religious life, into monastic life at a young age chose to remain, rather than to turn to a life in the world. * Karl F. Morrison, Understanding Conversion (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), 2.