CHAPTER ELEVEN

RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AND IDENTITIES IN THE IBERIAN PENINSULA

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INTRODUCTION

“There are only two families in the world, my old grandmother used to say, the haves and the have-nots (el tener y el no tener)” (Don Quijote II, ch. xx). The early modern Spanish sage who made this observation, Sancho Panza, was no Marxist before Marx. Rather, he voiced the common sense that everyone around him learned early in life: that a great gap separated men and women whose lot in life was to enjoy wealth and power from those who lacked them. Nowadays, when people speak of assuming, dropping, and changing their identities with stunning ease, it is worth recalling that in earlier periods the widespread poverty that the vast majority of men and women suffered severely limited their ability to control, much less better, their own fates—a matter of no little importance for one’s identity. That said, Sancho’s aphorism actually echoed a similar remark made earlier by his master Don Quijote: that the world was divided into two lineages, those falling over time from high social position, and those rising from the ranks of commoners to become great lords (Don Quijote I, ch. xxi). Which suggests that while fate played a strong hand in assigning and otherwise shaping status and identity in early modern Spain, some individuals were able to end their lives in a different place or position from whence they had started out. Early modern society afforded a certain margin for change in the activities and appearances by which people wound up making their way in the world, and this was as true of the dynamic patchwork of localities that made up the Iberian world as anywhere else in Europe.

Despite its importance both then and now, relatively little has been written on the question of identities in Spain and Portugal from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries (although see Thompson 1995; Rodríguez-Salgado 1998; Burdiel and Casey 1999; Ballester Rodríguez 2010; and above all Feros 2017). When surveying what is largely uncharted terrain, it is prudent to begin with certain basic clarifications. The most crucial of these—albeit a point often obscured by widespread belief that Iberian history took a radically eccentric path in comparison with that of the rest
of Europe—is that the contours of what is now referred to as individual identity in Iberia from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries diverged little from those found in the rest of the continent. There as elsewhere determining and describing who one was started at birth, as each newly born child acquired his or her immaterial inheritance of name, family and kin group, and local place, along with even more communal features such as religious faith or ethnic category. Historians and social scientists distinguish these initial overlapping markers of identity in diverse ways, by referring to scale (individual versus collective, macro versus micro), location (inhabiting centres versus peripheries), status, and the like. To be sure, ascribed identities of this sort could eventually be resisted and rejected as well as assumed and asserted. Neither fully facts nor fictions, they constituted a collective framework within which all persons received and refined a sense of place within various close—but only rarely closed—communities.

Not surprisingly, the options of voice, exit, and loyalty that developed elsewhere as means of finding one’s way amid possibilities and constraints thrived in Iberia as well. The same could be said for another pattern of behaviour associated with the early modern era, self-fashioning. Indeed, one of Spain’s most influential gifts to the rest of early modern Europe was the picaresque novel, whose plots focused precisely on the means by which resourceful individuals from unpromising social backgrounds could scheme their way up the social ladder through clever use of deception and disguise.

The historian has little choice but to take as a starting point the resolutely individual nature of early modern identities. Each man and woman had a life to live, and a soul to save. Yet even the most determined loners—such as the mystics and hermits who sought eternal life through cloister and rigorous isolation—joined the rest of society in defining themselves and others as members of the groups to which they belonged. Early modern Iberians developed firmly relational notions of selfhood. They thought of individuals collectively, as members of aggregates—chosen or inherited—bound together publicly by shared ties, contacts, and vested commitments. At the same time, they derived much sense of position and belonging from their awareness of the existence near and far of other persons and groups from whom they differed. What brought together some Spaniards and Portuguese—faith, language, work, residence in city versus the countryside, race or colour, among many other qualities—separated them from others, both within and beyond the peninsula.

To repeat: these social signals of collective identification and separation closely resembled those found in the rest of Europe. Place in local society within and beyond the peninsula was structured and allocated in much the same ways. Dominating as the broadest contours were gender; class, which was directly linked to occupation or trade; ethnic and often linguistic background; and religious allegiance and activity. Mediating between these macro-categories and micro-positions within local hierarchies stood the bedrock foundation of identity: the family, a construct that ranged from the individual household to the broader kin group (Davis 1986). Two other large-scale sources of differentiation that shaped collective and individual identities were vassalage—while serfdom had virtually disappeared from Spain by the end of the Middle Ages, the seigniorial regime was still alive and well—as well as vecindad, or local citizenship based on permanent residence (Herzog 2003). Both of these
conditions bore directly on what was perhaps the most direct indicator of local status, the personal and familial ownership of property.

Yet despite these basic similarities with virtually all other European societies, both the realities and the constructions of collective identities in Iberia departed from those found in the rest of Europe in three major ways. These special characteristics were:

— a significant, albeit not exclusive, set of internal political, cultural, and linguistic loyalties, which reflected the underlying pluralism of what many outsiders (and later historians) saw as a strongly unified state;
— a metropolitan sense of identity that was one of the many consequences of the construction and maintenance of vast overseas empires; and
— the persistence of religious heterodoxy within states regarded throughout Europe as a model of spiritual uniformity.

COLLECTIVE MARKERS

The construction in the late fifteenth century of a strong and more unified— while still notably composite— monarchy under Ferdinand and Isabella impressed observers throughout the rest of Europe. One of the earliest and more closely watched exercises in early modern state-building, it won the respect of hardened analysts such as Machiavelli and Guicciardini. Outside perception of Spain’s growing external power as well as internal strength merely increased when its Habsburg ruler became the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1519. In one fell swoop a hitherto peripheral country was suddenly thrust into the centre of continental politics. Yet outsiders often failed to see something well known to the Spaniards themselves: that while they were subjects of the same crown, they were not fellow citizens in the sense of residing in the same country. Instead, as the preceding chapters have analysed in detail, the Iberian peninsula— especially prior to the succession crisis of 1700–1714— was divided into a number of discrete polities, each of which attributed to the common sovereign different powers and prerogatives.

In practice this meant that while from the early sixteenth century on all Spaniards professed allegiance to the same (and invariably distant) monarch, the vast majority regarded themselves as more closely bound to other, more immediate loyalties. It is in fact quite difficult to ascertain how many early modern Spaniards thought of themselves as such. Beginning in the later Middle Ages allusions to Spain and a Spanish identity increased in various forms of public discourse, especially among the educated elites. This frame of reference not only continued to expand during the sixteenth century, but it also broadened its social base, as shared experience as soldiers or settlers outside the peninsula provided a strong stimulus to thinking in what would now be called national terms. Yet in many respects Spain continued to function more as an assemblage of diverse peoples, each with its own traditions, institutions, and cultures, than as a unitary whole. This powerful sense of local community was anchored in equally local patron saints and other objects of devotion. The early modern period saw widespread promotion by bishops, antiquarians, and civic authorities of relics, tombs, and venerable objects of local saints and martyrs, many of whom not only antedated the Muslim period but also even the Visigoths. This “local religion” upheld and drew upon an equally strong sense of local identity,
deeply rooted in sacred geography. Which version of Virgin Mary one worshipped, or which saint to whom one prayed for protection served as the basic foundations of community throughout the peninsula (Christian 1981; Rowe 2011; Olds 2015).

Plural collective identities—and the pronounced localism on which they rested—were the norm throughout all of Europe at this time. However, the Spanish case constituted a mix of its own. In the case of Catalonia, for instance, the most visible among many markers of divergence was linguistic. Most early modern Catalans spoke only Catalan, and while the proportion among them who also spoke (and wrote) Spanish increased during the early modern era, until the eighteenth century their ranks were by and large limited to those who lived in cities and larger towns or near major highways. Having a language of their own did much to foster a separate sense of ethnicity—that is, the form of collective identity that conceives of difference from others largely in terms of culture, history, and behaviour. Early modern Catalans moreover linked these sources of distinction to their other major singularity, a constitutional political system that was characterised above all by its success in placing substantial limitations on monarchical authority.

A similar mixture of linguistic and cultural autonomy and defence of traditional forms of local government against outside (including royal) interference also characterised the other major node of ethnic differentiation, the Basque Country. A borderland like Catalonia, the area comprising the triangle of Biscay, Guipúzcoa and Alava was endowed both with a language unrelated to the Romance tongues spoken in the rest of the peninsula, as well as an impressive degree of local self-government. (Basque was spoken in much of neighbouring Navarre as well, which also enjoyed considerable autonomy in its relations with Madrid.) Finally, the inhabitants of Galicia, in the northwestern corner of the peninsula, spoke a language of their own, known as gallego. However, royal oversight of this kingdom was much the same as that found almost everywhere else in the peninsula.

By contemporary and even later standards early modern Iberia sheltered an impressive range of local identities. The peninsula’s topography and its division into a wide range of eco-systems played a major role in fomenting this diversity, which in turn helped generate a high degree of institutional pluralism at both local and intermediate levels. That said, it is important not to overstate this, nor to confuse early modern ethnic and geopolitical identities with the exclusivist claims of modern nationalisms. Clearly there were separate species within the Iberian aviary. Yet many Catalans had no trouble referring to themselves as being both Catalan and Spanish. Thus, the humanist writer Cristófol Despuig in a series of dialogues extolling his home town of Tortosa (published in 1557) referred to Catalonia as the best part of "our Spain", which he described as a peninsula whose inhabitants were divided into three nations, Portugal, Castile, and the Crown of Aragon. That said, it was a rare Catalan indeed who confused him or herself with a Castilian; Despuig certainly did not, and strongly resented what he saw as arrogant claims to superiority on the behalf of Castile's language, military prowess, and political might (Despuig 1981, 35–38). Thus, as in most of the rest of Europe, the early modern era in Spain witnessed growing reference to pan-Spanish frameworks, in which all the Iberian peoples participated—except the Portuguese, who for the most part harboured no doubts about their not being Spaniards, not least because of the literary and other strengths of their own language. (At the same time, they knew how to distinguish among
their own, between, for example, the minhotos of the north and the alentejanos from the centre-south, readily identifiable from their speech, if nothing else.) In both kingdoms local distinctiveness did not diminish thanks to the rise, great or small, in national sentiment. In this Spain’s experience closely resembled that of France. In both countries an expanding sense of a shared national identity, especially but not exclusively at the level of political and social elites, did relatively little to alter the deep localism in which most men and women lived their daily lives.

Crucial to this slowly growing sense within both Spain and Portugal itself of a shared identity as Spaniards and Portuguese in addition to being Castilians, Catalans, Galicians and the like, was the experience of empire. All three major Iberian kingdoms expanded in various directions beginning in the late Middle Ages. The Crown of Aragon moved eastward into the Mediterranean; Castile pushed southward during the last stretch of the so-called Reconquest, the final phase of which focused on the absorption of the kingdom of Granada; and Portugal headed toward the west and above all south into north Africa and the Atlantic Ocean. The long-term result was the creation of the two most extended state structures in the early modern world. While the Portuguese empire saw a greater proportion of its population leaving the metropolis for colonies overseas, the Spanish empire—the eventual amalgam of the widely dispersed territories under Aragonese and Castilian rule combined with the western Habsburg holdings in continental Europe—tempted a greater number of its subjects to try their luck abroad, as soldiers, merchants, artisans, clergy, and the like. The deep impact on the homeland of such massive out-migration, both temporary and permanent, is dealt with extensively in the rest of this book. The emphasis of this chapter is on the ways in which this sort of common experience contributed to the development of a broader, pan-Spanish identity. For if there were any condition or experience that in addition to being ruled by the same king led all sorts of residents of the Iberian peninsula to think of themselves as Spaniards or Portuguese in addition to their other, more local identities, it was empire.

It was moreover no accident that outward expansion proved to be the crucible in which many of the more extreme visions of a specifically pan-Spanish identity took shape. The final phase of the conquest of Granada, which culminated in 1492, consolidated a triumphal notion of the war as a “Reconquest” that not only strengthened Ferdinand and Isabel as monarchs, it also brought to the forefront an intensified version of the crusader ideology that eventually prevailed over the less fraught habits of coexistence that had moulded relations between Christians, Muslims and Jews during much of the Middle Ages. Other currents joined in—among them millenarianism and messianism—to foster an ever more providential view of Spain not just as a political and military power, but also of Spaniards as a people chosen to become the most strenuous defenders of the Catholic faith in Europe, as well as its most determined propagators abroad. This dual sense of mission will be discussed at greater length below. What is worth remarking here is the special way in which this shared national vision was refracted outside Spain.

While a growing number of early modern Spaniards were thinking of themselves as such, they gradually constructed a collective vision that emphasised deep loyalty to Catholicism on the one hand, and more political markers such as military prowess and natural lordship on the other. Bookshelves rapidly filled with expressions of an ever firmer collective self-confidence, ranging from a veritable explosion in local
histories and hagiographies to an equally impressive outpouring of biographies (and autobiographies) of exemplary movers of collective destinies. Such literature showed Spaniards depicting themselves as agile in body and mind, brave and effective warriors, and austere and easily scandalised by French and Italian weakness for luxury. Renowned for their sobriety and self-control in words as well as deeds, they valued decorum and above all honour in their personal behaviour and in their modes of literary and artistic self-representation.

Yet beneath the level of formal discourse and imagery lurked another plane on which pan-Spanish identity took shape. This was the realm of demotic, daily-life encounters between Spaniards and others with whom they entered into contact. Here a much less flattering stereotype of Iberians developed. Many if not most early modern Europeans knew exactly what a Spaniard was. He—they rarely thought, or at least, wrote about Spanish women—was proud, boastful, and vain, an exemplar of arrogance and blind self-conceit. Yet at the same time he was a hypocrite: all show and pretence in his extravagant external display of Catholic piety, but underneath a cynic or even worse, an atheist or secret Jew or Muslim. Much of the rest of Europe—and above all Italy and the Netherlands—forged a collective image, a “mirror of Spain” that characterised it as “oriental” thanks to its Muslim and Jewish substratum (Hillgarth 2000). Outsiders saw the mixed ancestry of Spaniards reflected in an ambiguous religious identity that prized pretence and dissimulation. In their view, suspect origins gave rise to spiritual weakness, not pre-eminence, and rendered Spaniards and Portuguese unfit for hegemony over other nations. Foreign slurs that they were secret Jews or Muslims contributed to an obsession with origins and “blood purity” that shaped not only the identification of Iberians by outsiders, but also the self-understanding of the insiders as well.

Very few peoples in early modern Europe inspired such a strongly negative reputation as did the Spaniards. Then again, few others had so many enemies. The latter included the French, their strongest and oldest rivals; Italians, many of whom lived (and chafed) under their imperial rule; and above all the English and the Dutch, not just religious foes but also those who most feared (not unreasonably) being conquered by Spain. All these constituencies, and particularly the northern Europeans, made signal contributions to the collective vengeance known as the “Black Legend” (Maltby 1971; García Cárcel 1992). This began as a propaganda campaign of pamphlets and broadsides combating the reality or threat of Spanish rule, and eventually spawned into a multi-front attack on Spaniards themselves as cruel, haughty, vengeful, envious, treacherous, and hypocritical fanatics (the inconsistencies in this characterisation did not matter much to its creators). In time backwardness, ignorance, and near-comic ineptitude joined this congeries of faults. It took a long time for Spain to shed this negative reputation; indeed, much of it lingered well into the twentieth century, and on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. And while its impact on the self-image of Spaniards themselves was not that pronounced, it was one of several factors that contributed to isolating Spain from the rest of Europe during the long march to modernity.

There is a certain irony in early modern Spaniards being singled out in the rest of Europe as fanatic Catholics and the torchbearers of intolerance. After all, Iberia’s recent past had exemplified the very opposite. During a large part of the Middle Ages most of Spain’s population had been Muslim. At the same time elsewhere in
the continent did Jews meet with as much acceptance and prosperity as in Spain and Portugal. The early modern period replaced this deeply rooted, if often conflictive, coexistence with a radically exclusive approach to the role of religion in public and private life. The new spirit of spiritual and intellectual closure had far-reaching consequences for both individual and collective identities. Above all, religion became the fundamental sign and substance of difference and thus of identity. And while the same was true for the rest of Europe, Spanish society regarded the continental-wide conflict between Catholics and Protestants that occupied the centre stage there from a certain remove. Instead, it wrestled with its own inner demons, those of its own singular past, and which lay dormant in the present.

DEALING WITH FORCED CONVERSION

The end of the legal coexistence and social acceptance of Iberia’s religious minorities began in the later Middle Ages (Amelang 2013). Crucial to this outcome was the deep trauma of the Black Death of the mid-fourteenth century and the ensuing power vacuum and dynastic conflict in the peninsula. These overlay deeper religious currents which included the Church’s adoption of harsher policies toward the Jews at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, as well as the ever more determined preaching of the mendicant orders whose apocalyptic and millenarian hopes comprised the “dream of conversion” (Burns 1971). An even more dramatic turn took place in 1391. The incendiary sermons of the Archpriest of Écija Ferrant Martínez incited his fellow Christians not to suffer the Jews among them. These provoked a series of episodes of violence that culminated in a wave of pogroms that not only wreaked death and destruction in numerous Jewish communities, but also the forced conversion of thousands of individual Jews. Pressure on the survivors continued through public debates such as the Disputation of Tortosa (1413) and the preaching campaigns of St. Vincent Ferrer later in the same decade. The result was a new wave of demoralised converts, many of whom were convinced that Jews would never regain the rights they had enjoyed in the past. The first half of the fifteenth century thus witnessed the consolidation of a fundamentally new social identity, that of the “New Christian”, also referred to as a converso or confeso.

Among the more visible converts were the so-called court Jews who played a prominent role in the administration of Castile and Aragon. Many of them went on marry into the lower and middling ranks of the nobility. Other conversos bought seigneuries or held permanent positions as aldermen in municipal governments—both key paths to social promotion and acceptance within the privileged classes (Márquez Villanueva 2006). The middle and lower classes felt threatened by their success and allied with the traditional nobility wishing to preserve its social pre-eminence and perquisites to oppose the converts’ rise to power and prestige. The most important of these revolts—and one with especially ominous implications for the future—was that led by Pero Sarmiento in Toledo in 1449. The rebels’ promulgation of the so-called Statute-Sentence that decreed that converts from Judaism could not hold public office in the city or the surrounding area under its jurisdiction is generally considered to be the first piece of “blood purity” legislation passed in the peninsula (Sicroff 1985; Domínguez Ortiz 1978).
Other forms of reaction to the unexpected social rise of formerly Jewish families that managed to intermarry into the traditional Christian elites included a new interest in genealogy and a growing, even obsessive identification with the ancient Goths, that is, the inhabitants of the peninsula prior to the Muslim invasion of the early eighth century. Here traditional religious antisemitism overlapped with anti-Muslim sentiment, as “Old Christian” families sought to distinguish themselves by tracing their ancestry back to the period prior to the rise of the Muslims in alliance with the Jews, seen as their allies against the Christians. The official historiography of the period similarly presented medieval Spanish history as a “Reconquest” and or recovery of the “true” Spain following its loss to the Moors. Thus, there emerged a proto-national discourse tightly organised around a single and exclusive religious identity. It partook along with much of the rest of Europe of the same effort to stress the antiquity of individual nations that claimed to have emerged during the prolonged disintegration of the Roman Empire. What was more unique about the Spanish case was its highly racialised cast, which included the equation of rival religions with racial as well as spiritual inferiority. In this view, “Goth” and “Old Christian” were one and the same. Further extensions of this identification include the positive overtones associated with *vizcaínos*, or Basques, who took pride in being one of the few areas of the peninsula that had never been under the dominion of either Romans or Muslims. On the other side of the religious-racial spectrum stood the *portugueses*. These were individuals and families of Jewish origin who took refuge in Portugal following the expulsion of 1492, only to be forcibly converted by royal order in 1497. Following the union of the Spanish and Portuguese Crowns in 1580 many of their descendants returned to Spain, where they prospered as traders and economic middlemen. There they met with considerable social success as well, especially during the reign of Philip IV, whose court welcomed them as merchants and especially financiers. In fact, throughout the seventeenth century the term “Portuguese” stood for “Jew” in popular discourse.

The opposition between “pure” Gothic blood and “impure” Jewish or Muslim blood intensified during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Nirenberg 2002). Mass conversion and genealogical obsession connected in many ways, for example in discreet changes of surnames, along with other hints of the social weight attached to names and lineages. The so-called “converso problem” was an idiosyncratic but fundamental feature of early modern Spanish and Portuguese identities, even if it had deep roots in the Middle Ages. And the contrast between “true” Spaniards and Portuguese and their opposites could be easily transferred to other oppositions, overseas as well as at home. The range of such distinctions was aptly summarised by the humanist Francisco de Támaro in 1556 when he thanked God “for making us Christians and not pagans, civilised and not barbarians, Spaniards and not Turks nor Moors ...” (Elliott 1989, 57).

One could even characterise the consequences of the forced conversions of Jews (and later Muslims) as a massive identity disorder, or even crisis. It moreover rested on an explicit ideology of assimilation and homogenisation through obligatory absorption into the Catholic fold that was full of cultural implications. Conversion in such a context and on such a large scale necessarily transformed a wide range of customs, rites, food habits, festivities, and even speech (both written and spoken Arabic was prohibited, while the use of Hebrew was often identified with Judaism).
All this was aimed at making difference disappear. Yet that very goal raised problems of its own. The eradication of reliably readable boundary markers that rendered Jews and Muslims easy to identify led “Old Christians” to devote special effort to remembering the origins of themselves and others. At the same time, they made efforts to find both formal and informal means of discriminating and stigmatising New Christians, thus hindering their social assimilation into the majority.

Two instruments were tapped for the complex task of blocking this infiltration. The first was the Inquisition. While the so-called Holy Office was founded in 1478 in order combat heresy in general, it focused on one type of apostasy or denial of faith in particular: “judaising”, that is, the clandestine adherence to Judaism of recent converts and their descendants. The other was the spread of “statutes of blood purity”, that is, regulations that required written and sworn proofs of Old Christian status in order to obtain most types of public office, privileges, or benefices, as well as entering the royal administration, military orders, the more prestigious university corporations, and certain professional guilds. The statutes evolved mostly at a local level and did not lead to the creation of a uniform body of legislation in either Spain or Portugal. In fact, there was little effort at codification until the period of Philip II, who showed surprisingly little enthusiasm for them. These laws were the most direct expression of a systematic effort to limit the political and economic power and social prestige of the New Christians in the name of protecting religious orthodoxy.

Not surprisingly, the Inquisition played a major role in promoting the principle and practice of limpieza de sangre. In 1501 Ferdinand and Isabel issued two decrees that stipulated that no offspring of anyone penanced by the Holy Office could hold public office, or even exercise medicine, without royal permission. Strictly speaking, this prohibition did not affect all conversos, only those who had been found guilty of judaising. But it did not take long to conflate the two categories, and to turn a converso background into a form of infamy. The Inquisition itself did its best to link Jewish descent and heresy. Thus, it closely interrogated suspects about their precise family histories. And crimes against the faith such as blasphemy, denying the after-life, or showing disrespect toward sacred images were punished more harshly if the suspect was a New Christian.

Creating and defining blood purity was one of the more singular features of early modern Iberian society. Its importance should not be underestimated. As this peculiar identification between genealogy and orthodoxy took hold, there emerged a fundamental social requirement: that the honour of an individual, and of his or her family, required the obligatory display of pure blood.

IDENTITY AND BLOOD

Hierarchies of blood based on notions of purity and impurity were of course neither new nor exclusively Spanish. Medieval European society in general took for granted that blood lines, beginning with that of the king, constituted the basis of the feudal order. But Spain gave rise to an unusually harsh application of this symbolism as it associated impure blood not so much with vassalage as with Jews. (Ironically, aristocrats suffered more risk of social jeopardy in this regard, due to the greater frequency—or visibility?—of conversos marrying with nobles than with commoners.) The ideal of pure blood not only became a powerful instrument for
the creation of new social hierarchies. It also fostered the emergence of novel forms of social identification.

The Inquisition created lists of the individuals it punished known as *mantas*, which they then made public by being displayed in cathedrals and other churches. The same was done with *sambenitos*, the penitential robes that heretics were forced to wear during the ceremonies of sentencing and punishment known as *autos de fe*. Public infamy thus became an additional sanction for a crime of spiritual deviance that was at the same time one of *lese majesté*. Other means by which bloodlines could be registered and exposed included the creation of books containing lists of surnames and other genealogical information regarding families known to contain “stained blood”, largely through intermarriage with Jews. The most infamous of these was known as the *Libro verde de Aragón* (literally the “green book of Aragon”). It and others like it circulated widely and were often used to weed out candidates for office, to smear a rival or enemy, and above all to avoid compromising marriages. The ease with which they could smear a family’s reputation finally led the crown to order all known copies to be burned in 1606 (this order was repeated in 1615 and 1622). The situation got so out of hand that even certain publicly printed works of professional genealogists wound up being banned (Domínguez Ortiz 1973, 22). For what was at issue here was not just the honour of individual families. The existence of such texts also threatened the power of both the king and the Inquisition to determine the outer limits of social acceptance.

Another curious figure related to the question of blood purity was the so-called *linajudo*. This was a specialist hired by families in need of a *probanza de sangre* or affidavit of blood purity. Once contracted this individual would search for documents, witnesses, and other forms of proof needed to provide official certification. Recent studies have revealed much about this fairly sordid profession, whose mainstay could pass with ease from bribery to extortion (Pike 2000; Soria Mesa 2015). Ironically, the corruption of the *linajudos* and their massive manipulation of documents could also serve on occasion to certify the blood purity of manifestly “impure” lineages, thus facilitating the social ascent of the very sort of families that blood purity statutes tried to exclude. It was by no means all that difficult to obtain (or to forge) the papers needed to cover up unpleasant facts about one’s family, especially since the crown itself—perennially short of cash—sold privileges, seigneuries, tax exemptions, and public offices on a massive scale. In the end, the swarms of rules and exclusions whose aim was to prevent social mobility often wound up providing a means of achieving it, and the restrictions of *limpieza* were no exception.

The efforts of the Inquisition and of Spanish and Portuguese society at large to put an end to religious dissidence in the form of the practice of a minority religion such as Judaism (not to mention the efforts by a handful of Spaniards to promote Protestantism) were uncontestably successful. In this sense, both Jews and Protestants appeared in the imaginary of early modern Spain in particular as negative identities expressing the very essence of what Spain and its people most dreaded and opposed. Such imaginary opposition lingered well into the nineteenth century, when the first large-scale efforts to rethink the role of Jews in the Iberian began to take effect. The same cannot be said, however, of the other “stain” or identitarian problem for the vast majority of early modern Spaniards. For the case of the moriscos—one of several labels applied to the descendants of Iberia’s formerly Muslim population—was
different from that of the converted Jews. It diverged from the latter in numerous respects, but one proved to be especially crucial: whether their collective identity as former Muslims would ever permit their successful integration into a militantly Christian society.

**THE OTHER “NEW CHRISTIANS”**

It is often forgotten that the moriscos were, along with the descendants of the Jews, the target of blood purity laws, and that they also were officially blocked from various forms of upward social and economic mobility. Muslims had long lived as legal subjects of all the Iberian kingdoms during the Middle Ages. During centuries the possibility of fleeing across borders to Islamic territories mitigated the increasingly harsh treatment the *mudéjares*, or Muslims living under Christian rule, received in the later Middle Ages. If anything, the Muslims had an outward focus or refuge that the Jews lacked, and were able to use that to their advantage despite the slow erosion of the Islamic presence in the peninsula.

The conquest of Granada by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492 was followed by no overt change in the traditional royal policy of official toleration of Islam. However, the monarchs soon launched a campaign to convert their Muslim subjects through preaching and other forms of missionary activity, which included discouraging the use of Arabic, along with traditional food, dress, and other signs of identity. The growing pressure eventually provoked a response in 1502, when the population of the largest Muslim neighbourhood in the city of Granada, known as the Albaicín, revolted against the increasingly harsh restrictions. This provided the Christian authorities, and the royal agent Archbishop Cisneros in particular, the pretext they needed to order the conversion to Christianity of all Muslims in the Crown of Castile. Those who refused to do so were forced into exile in North Africa. In the mid-1520s similar measures were decreed for the Muslims of the Crown of Aragon, most of whom lived in Valencia and Aragon proper in large rural communities under the jurisdiction of feudal lords who had little interest in disturbing the status quo. Forced baptism was promoted there by local “Old Christians” who resented the Muslims as direct economic competitors willing to work for lower wages in exchange for the protection offered by the aristocratic landowners. The so-called *Germanies* (literally “brotherhoods”) revolt of 1519–1522 followed a familiar path of expressing opposition to feudal oppression by striking at their Muslim vassals. Imbued with much the same millenarian fervour found in the rest of Europe at this moment, the *agermanats’* attacks on Muslim neighbourhoods and the murder of scores of local inhabitants led to widespread conversion by the survivors. After the revolt subsided and the former Muslims sought to return to their previous status, they met with strong opposition from the Inquisition and theologians who argued that the baptism, while occurring under duress, was nevertheless valid, thanks to the sacramental nature of the act. In 1526 king Charles V finally ratified this policy and extended it to all the remaining Muslims in the Crown of Aragon. This controversial decision brought the official existence of Islam in Spain to an end and inaugurated the so-called “morisco problem”.

The problem was in large measure the product of a war followed by colonisation. Most moriscos wished little more than to live in peace as far from the embrace of
“Old Christians” as possible. Little tempted by assimilation, they preferred instead
to be left alone. And in Granada and Valencia their opting for seclusion met with
considerable success. Their relative isolation and the active connivance of their lords
allowed them to continue to practice Islam (and to speak Arabic) fairly undisturbed.
However, the situation was different in the rest of the peninsula. In Castile in par-
ticular the morisco population was considerably smaller, more dispersed, and above
all more urban. As a result, far fewer moriscos there knew Arabic, and were more
assimilated into the customs of Old Christian society.

Following several decades of uneasy truce, the Inquisition began in the 1540s to
crack down on moriscos in both Castile and Aragon. The Holy Office pursued not
only those who practiced or professed Islam, but also those who ate suspicious foods
such as couscous, who fasted for the wrong reasons, who sat on the ground instead
of in chairs, or who played traditional musical instruments and participated in
ancestral dances. Even more compromising were those who celebrated the victories
of Islam over Christianity in the hot and cold wars that plagued the Mediterranean
world throughout the sixteenth century. In short, any action or speech that the
Inquisition interpreted as expressing or exalting a sense of communitarian identity
that distinguished moriscos from the Christian majority was read as a sign of faith in
Islam, and thus liable to vigilance and persecution. Particularly harsh punishments
were meted out to moriscos who possessed books or manuscripts written in Arabic, or in *aljamía* (Spanish transliterated in Arabic script). Whether or not such texts promoted Islam, they were seen as promoting an identity that failed to adhere to that of a true, sincere Christian. What we would now refer to as “cultural difference” was then almost invariably condemned as a sign of heterodoxy.

Many moriscos did not meekly accept the forced conversions or the outlawing of their ancestral customs and language. The 1502 rebellion in Granada was followed by a similar revolt in the Espadán mountains in Valencia in the mid-1520s. But the greatest uprising took place in the mountains south of Granada in 1568–1570. The so-called Alpujarras War witnessed ferocious violence and numerous atrocities committed by both sides, including the widespread torture and martyrdom of Catholic clergy and the massacre of all the inhabitants of morisco villages. The collapse of order was such that Philip II was forced to bring veteran Spanish troops from Italy under the command of his half-brother Don Juan de Austria to quell the revolt. The aftermath was just as brutal: the king ordered the deportation of virtually the entire population of Granada’s moriscos—both those who rebelled and those who had remained loyal to the crown—to the rest of Castile. The exiles were scattered in small groups in towns and cities in northern Andalusia, La Mancha, and beyond. Above all, the violence left behind a deep fear of the moriscos as an internal enemy as determined and resourceful as were the Muslim pirates that attacked Spanish ships throughout the Mediterranean.

The possibility of ridding Spain of moriscos was first brought up in the Council of State in the early 1580s. Philip II—doubtless chastened by his earlier missteps in Granada—showed little sympathy for so extreme a measure, but his successor Philip III finally acquiesced to strong pressure from the clergy and others to order the expulsion of first the Valencian moriscos in 1609, and shortly thereafter those from the rest of Spain as well (García-Arenal and Wiegers 2014). While many factors intervened in this outcome, the most important was the invincible perception of so-called Old Christians that the formerly Muslim New Christians and their descendants could not be trusted to be either loyal Spaniards or true Christians. Their final removal from Iberia signalled the creation—at last—of an exclusively Catholic polity, in practice as well as in theory. It also meant the constricting of “Spanish” identity to a single set of spiritual as well as political parameters.

The impact of the expulsion was as uneven as the sequence of events that had led to it. Not surprisingly, there were moriscos who were thoroughly assimilated and devout Christians, and some of them managed either to escape eviction or eventually to return to the peninsula following a prudent period abroad (Dadson 2014). Recent studies have also highlighted the existence of morisco elites at a local level. Their members played crucial roles in mobilising networks of support for the threatened moriscos, in addition to paying bribes in order to obtain special delays and concessions for themselves and others, and to expatriate morisco capital. Some even managed to turn the genealogical obsessions of Old Christian society in their favour. One especially telling example is that of the Granada-Venegas lineage. Like other members of the Nazirid aristocracy that ruled Granada prior to 1492, they had seized the opportunity to undergo baptism as Christians prior to the general orders to convert. From there they successfully married their way into the southern nobility, and even claimed for themselves the status of “Old Christians”. The Granada-Venegas
commissioned an elaborate history of their lineage whose author dutifully held that they were not descended from moors but from “Moorish kings”, and that their lineage dated back to the pre-conquest Goths. Even more extraordinary, and most likely linked somehow with the same noble families from Muslim Granada, was the notorious forgery known as the “Lead Books” whose discovery in the 1590s led to the creation of the Sacromonte shrine in Granada (Harris 2007; García-Arenal and Rodríguez Mediano 2013). These referred to patently faked lead tablets written in a bizarre imitation of ancient Arabic script that purported to hail from a circle of Arabic-speaking early Christians who, after receiving a direct revelation (in Arabic!) from the Virgin Mary had accompanied the Apostle James in his mission to Spain, and who then were martyred by the Romans. The aim of this audacious fraud was to uncouple the Arabic language from Islam, to offer an alternative martyrdom to that of Christians killed by Muslims during the recent Alpujarras war, and to claim for early Hispanic Christianity an Arabic variant that would confer greater legitimacy on (and protection for) their morisco descendants. This was one of several attempts to depict Muslims not as external invaders, but as ancient, “natural inhabitants” of Spain. This broadly based if doomed effort wound up producing one of the most interesting statements about identity written in early modern Iberia (Núñez Muley 2007). In an attempt to convince royal officials not to unleash the Inquisition on the moriscos, the Granadan noble Fernando Núñez Muley wrote a lengthy plea in 1567 that argued that “Moorish” language, dress, music, dances, and other customs were precisely that: customs that reflected popular traditions, not Islamic precepts. While the petition failed to prevent the crackdown that provoked the disastrous revolt of the following year, it did offer a remarkable exercise in early anthropology, based on a strikingly precocious recognition of the difference between social practices and religious rules, and their implications for the definition and representation of identities under conditions of extreme duress.

As in the case of the “New Jews” of Amsterdam—that is, the (largely Portuguese) conversos who in the seventeenth century returned to Jewish orthodoxy in the Dutch Republic, while retaining strong traces of their Iberian origins—the expelled moriscos emitted clear signals from their exile regarding the complexity of their identity and self-representation (Kaplan 2000; Bodian 1997). For example, those who wound up in Tunisia continued to speak Spanish for almost two centuries. The literature they wrote in that language provides an intriguing parallel to that of the Jews in Holland, in terms not only of language—many were fluent in Spanish as well as Portuguese—but also in lingering themes, stylistic devices, and background references. Both moreover expressed a fondness not only for poetry but also the contests known as “jousts”, and cited Lope de Vega as a favoured authority. Carrying such a background into exile was the rarest of compliments, and an eloquent testimony to how shared cultural references can equip a surprisingly broad range of individuals and groups with the fundamental instruments and modes of expression of their identities.

**AFTERWORD**

Much more remains to be said about identity in early modern Iberia. This chapter has tried to convey some of the immense complexity of this issue. At the same time,
it has underlined the singularity of the play of collective identities in the peninsula, and above all how its multi-religious medieval past and the means by which it was exorcised in the early modern period created a situation at first sight far removed from that prevailing in the rest of Europe. Not that religious dissimulation and the imposition of orthodoxy by fire and blood were unknown elsewhere in the continent. The sufferings of the final adherents of minority faiths in Iberia pale in comparison with the far greater numbers of those persecuted by the rival Christian confessions in the rest of Europe, not to mention the tens of thousands of women executed north of the Pyrenees as witches. But few other countries had managed to entangle the different identities they housed so deeply, and then to unravel them into separate, even opposed strands. It took centuries to work out the implications, and even today, the peoples of Iberia continue to wrestle with the consequences.

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