

# Again on Forced Conversion in the Almohad Period

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The forced conversion of Jews and Christians that took place in the early Almohad period has been a subject of debate, with positions ranging from the view that it had little impact<sup>1</sup> to the contention that Muslims were also affected, since everybody in the territories conquered by the Almohads had to convert to their understanding of religion, including Muslims.<sup>2</sup> At the root of the debate is the scant information provided by the sources, as well as the diverging interpretations of what the Almohads were fighting for, especially regarding the early stages of the movement. This debate is, in fact, closely linked to how Almohadism itself is defined, and how its evolution from a revolutionary movement started by a charismatic figure, the Mahdi Ibn Tūmart, to an imperial ideology seeking to ensure the survival of the Mu'minid dynasty<sup>3</sup> affected the narrative of its origins and early stages. No consensus exists at the moment regarding these issues, and much research is still needed before an explanatory framework can be formulated that makes sense of the available evidence, without distorting it but also without uncritically submitting to it. Taking this background into account, this paper's aim is to review the terms of the debate as they stand today, to expand our purview by looking at the consequences of the forced conversions, especially as regards the converted Jews, and also by examining how the Mu'minids themselves were eventually obliged to face a similar choice: whether or not to convert to Christianity. In the thirteenth century the idea developed in Christendom that the conversion of Muslims to Christianity was possible, a conviction that Robert I. Burns called "the dream

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1 Molénat, "Sur le rôle des Almohades."

2 Bennison, "Almohad *tawhīd*."

3 That is, the dynasty started by Ibn Tūmart's student 'Abd al-Mu'min.

of conversion”<sup>4</sup> and Charles-Emmanuel Dufourcq, “a great mirage.”<sup>5</sup> Again, we are now just starting to document how a similar dream or mirage emerged in Islamdom as early as the twelfth century, when, in addition to the rise of the Almohad movement, there was also growing interest among Andalusī scholars in the figure of Heraclius—the Byzantine emperor thought to have secretly converted to Islam after being convinced by the prophecy of Muḥammad. The reason for this seems to have been connected with the political need for twelfth-century Muslim rulers to justify their acceptance of Christian rule over Muslims in some parts of the Iberian Peninsula and the danger of conversion that such situation entailed. By suggesting that the Iberian Christian rulers were in fact descendants of the crypto-Muslim Heraclius, the ensuing anxiety could be allayed.<sup>6</sup> But again we are here moving in mostly uncharted territory requiring often highly speculative approaches. The scarce, incomplete, and elusive nature of the evidence at our disposal prevents us for the time being from offering definitive answers or strong explanatory claims, although it provides new and unexpected perspectives on ideas and aspirations relating to religious conversion that circulated among Muslims.

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The Almohad empire during the sixth/twelfth century covered North Africa, with the exception of Egypt, and part of the Iberian Peninsula, this being the first time that the whole of the Maghreb (Islamic West) was united under a single dynasty, that of the Muʾminid caliphs, the successors of the Mahdī Ibn Tūmart. The square shape of the silver coins (dirhams) and the square inscribed into a circle on the gold coins (dinars) that the Muʾminids minted were a simple—though not simplistic—way to make it known throughout Almohad territory that something new had appeared, a different type of authority that distinguished the Muʾminid caliphs from previous rulers. Those coins were inscribed with formulas proclaiming, “God is our Lord, Muḥammad is our Prophet, and the Mahdī is our imam.”<sup>7</sup>

The Mahdī—which means the “rightly guided one”—is a Messianic figure found in the Islamic tradition, usually understood to be a descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad and associated with the end of times, who will appear before the Last Hour and bring justice. The label has also been applied to rulers

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4 Burns, “Christian-Islamic Confrontation in the West.” See Cenival, “L’église chrétienne de Marrakech au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle”; Huici Miranda, *Historia política del imperio almohade*, 2:546.

5 Dufourcq, “La Couronne d’Aragon et les Hafsides du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle,” 65.

6 Fierro, “Heraclius in al-Andalus.”

7 Fontenla, “Especificidad de la moneda almohade”; Bresc, “L’intrigant ‘carré dans le cercle.’”

not directly associated with eschatological times in order to highlight the right guidance they provided to their subjects.<sup>8</sup> In the Almohad case, the Mahdī was a Masmuda Berber born in a village in the Sus region (of Morocco) south of the Atlas who was known as Ibn Tūmart and who died in 524/1130. His “official” biography states that he travelled to the East to study, visiting Egypt and also Baghdad, where he met the famous scholar al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111). After his return to the Maghreb around the years 510–11/1116–17, Ibn Tūmart started to preach against the evil practices and beliefs he found in the lands he visited while journeying from Tripoli to Marrakech. He even preached in Marrakech before the Almoravid ruler. Because of this preaching in which he publicly commanded right and forbade wrong, thus imposing on others his own understanding of proper moral behavior, Ibn Tūmart’s life was in danger, and he eventually fled back to his native village of Igilliz and later moved with his followers to Tinmal, in the Atlas Mountains south of Marrakech. There he built a religious and military base that absorbed neighboring tribes using persuasion but also coercion (the local inhabitants of Tinmal were massacred). The base grew so powerful that he was able to mount a military challenge to the Almoravids, although he was not successful in conquering their capital city, Marrakech.<sup>9</sup>

The conquest was carried out by Ibn Tūmart’s successor, the Zanata Berber ‘Abd al-Mu’min (r. 527–58/1132–63), who entered Marrakech in 541/1147 and whose political and military acumen enabled him to establish an empire from Tripoli to the Atlantic coast and from al-Andalus to the southern part of what is now Morocco. ‘Abd al-Mu’min also managed to neutralize possible rivals from among the Almohad shaykhs (the leaders of the Berber tribes who had followed Ibn Tūmart) and the other disciples of the Mahdī. Succession in the leadership of the movement after him was limited to his own descendants, the Mu’minid caliphs.

It was under ‘Abd al-Mu’min that the forced conversion of Jews and Christians was decreed. When Ibn Tūmart moved to his native lands, where he held religious and political authority, there is no indication that he had to deal with any Jewish or Christian communities there, so we do not know what Ibn Tūmart’s views on the legality of their existence were. The local people in Igilliz and Tinmal are assumed to have been Muslims, although it is difficult to

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8 Fierro, “Le mahdī Ibn Tūmart et al-Andalus”; García-Arenal, *Messianism and Puritanical Reform*.

9 On the problematic nature of Ibn Tūmart’s biography, see Fierro, “El Mahdī Ibn Tūmart. Más allá de la biografía oficial.” On his standard biography, see Lévi-Provençal, “Ibn Toumert et ‘Abd al-Mumin”; Huici Miranda, *Historia política del imperio almohade*, 1:23–108 and 2:581–611; Bourouiba, *Ibn Tūmart*. See also other studies collected in Fierro, “Almohads.”

establish their degree of Islamicization. Some of them fully adhered to Ibn Tūmart's doctrines, while others who showed disaffection were fought against and massacred, or forced to obey Ibn Tūmart both as a religious and a political leader.<sup>10</sup>

The Almohad policies regarding Jews and Christians and more generally the non-Almohads have been the subject—as mentioned above—of a number of studies with different perspectives. Some consensus exists among those who accept the information found in Arabic and Hebrew sources: they agree that a forced conversion took place in the early stages of the Almohad empire, and that the understanding of 'Abd al-Mu'min's decree is hampered by the fact that there are few Almohad texts that provide insight into the reasons behind this forced conversion and also by the fact that most sources are late and written by authors who were far removed in time from the events described.

Modern Maghrebi historians tend to downplay the actions taken by the Almohads against Jews and Christians. For example, in one of the most recent studies on this issue, Mohamed Chérif calls for putting an end to the clichés about alleged Almohad fanaticism, denying the existence of a systematic, official, and continuous Almohad policy against the *dhimmīs*, while acknowledging that there was some temporary oppression of the Jews, who suffered the purifying policy of the Almohads in the same way that non-Almohad Muslims did—a policy that Chérif qualifies as a program of unification. Chérif stresses that the Almohads were doctrinally Sunnis—this in spite of their Mahdism and their extreme use of *takfīr* (accusation of infidelity) against their opponents—that their “aberrant” behavior responded to political, not doctrinal causes, and that Almohad texts can be adduced to prove that they were not hostile to the Jews.<sup>11</sup> According to Chérif, one such text is found in al-Baydhaq's “Memoirs” about the Mahdī Ibn Tūmart. When Ibn Tūmart, returning from the East, arrived in Tunis, there were discussions regarding a deceased Jew who had prayed like a Muslim: should the Muslim funeral prayer be performed over him? Ibn Tūmart was in favor and performed the funeral prayer for the converted Jew himself, while he censored the jurists who had opposed it.<sup>12</sup> For Chérif, this legal opinion offered by the Mahdī proves that he did not hold an anti-Jewish position.

But there is another way to read this anecdote. We know very little about al-Baydhaq, except for what he himself says in his “Memoirs”—which in fact

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10 Benhima, “Du *tamyiz* à l'*i'tirāf*”

11 Chérif, “Encore sur le statut des *ḍimmī*-s sous les Almohades.”

12 Al-Baydhaq's “Memoirs” are preserved in a unique manuscript edited and translated by Lévi-Provençal in *Documents inédits d'histoire almohade*: see p. 50 (Arabic text), pp. 75–76 (French translation).

are more about ‘Abd al-Mu‘min, the student and successor of Ibn Tūmart, than about his teacher and Mahdī. In other words, the “Memoirs” were written fundamentally to address the needs and the problems faced by ‘Abd al-Mu‘min, the first Almohad caliph, and the emerging imperial dynasty, and it is in this light that we should read what they have to say about the events of Ibn Tūmart’s life.<sup>13</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, Ibn Tūmart’s *riḥla* (travel of study) as described by al-Baydhaq serves the purpose of proving that Ibn Tūmart was entitled to be considered a Sunni scholar, one who had undergone rigorous training during his stay in the East, such that he could be acknowledged as a true scholar (*‘ālim*), as his pupil ‘Abd al-Mu‘min deemed him when they met near Bougie (in modern Algeria). It was then that ‘Abd al-Mu‘min, who was himself performing his *riḥla*, realized that the knowledge he was seeking was in the possession of the man whom he had just encountered, and he therefore decided to stay in the Maghreb, attaching himself to Ibn Tūmart. As a true scholar, Ibn Tūmart would thus have been capable of writing a book, Ibn Tūmart’s *Kitāb*, also known as *A‘azz mā yuṭlab* (“The Most Precious Thing Sought,” i.e., knowledge), which deals with legal and theological issues. Ibn Tūmart’s *riḥla* to the East thus plays a prominent role in the legitimization of both Ibn Tūmart’s and ‘Abd al-Mu‘min’s credentials as scholars, but there are reasons to doubt that it took place. The contact with al-Ghazālī in Baghdad has long since been discredited, and the fact remains that there is no independent evidence for Ibn Tūmart’s stay in the East except for what some Almohad sources claim (al-Baydhaq’s “Memoirs” are mostly silent about this part of Ibn Tūmart’s life, recording only his stay in Alexandria on his way back to the Maghreb). Moreover, the itinerary followed by Ibn Tūmart after he disembarked in Tripoli and set off over land towards his birthplace—as reported by al-Baydhaq—traces in reverse order the Almohad conquests carried out by ‘Abd al-Mu‘min a few decades later. It is thus an itinerary that legitimizes ‘Abd al-Mu‘min’s conquests by claiming the presence and preaching of the Mahdī in the conquered territories. In fact, the preaching as recorded by al-Baydhaq gives doctrinal support to certain issues that became relevant only under ‘Abd al-Mu‘min’s rule. One such issue was how to be sure of the faith of the Jews who had been forced to convert. By telling the story of the Jew in Tunis who acted as a Muslim but whose true religious beliefs were doubted, and by giving Ibn Tūmart’s doctrinal position that the Jew’s conversion should not be subject to doubt and thus that funeral prayers according to the Islamic norms should be performed for him, al-Baydhaq was supporting the view that those who had been forced to convert had to be treated as true believers. The

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13 Bombrun, “Les Mémoires d’al-Baydaq.”

mention of Tunis is significant, since in that town ‘Abd al-Mu‘min had in fact forced the Jewish population to convert.<sup>14</sup> If this line of argument is granted, then Chérif’s recourse to al-Baydhaq’s text to prove Ibn Tūmart’s position regarding the Jews cannot be accepted: al-Baydhaq’s text on the funeral prayer for the former Jew in fact was produced in response to a problem belonging to the reign of ‘Abd al-Mu‘min and provides no evidence whatsoever regarding Ibn Tūmart’s alleged favorable stance toward the Jews.

It is not only Ibn Tūmart’s alleged *riḥla* that can be doubted as a historical fact. Most of his “official biography” is open to critical analysis and even to rejection, making it extremely difficult to recover the historical Ibn Tūmart. The excavations that a French-Moroccan team is conducting in Igilliz, the birthplace of Ibn Tūmart, and in the surrounding area will allow us to understand better the context in which he grew up and thus to reconstruct his origins without depending exclusively on how he was represented by his followers.<sup>15</sup>

What cannot be doubted is that in certain places in North Africa ‘Abd al-Mu‘min followed a policy of forcefully converting the Jews and that the same policy was later applied in al-Andalus to the Jews and to the small number of Christians who were still living there. As time went by, and as their original revolutionary impetus gradually slackened or was deliberately toned down, the Almohads started to abandon, to nuance, or to revisit some of their original peculiarities, and their convergence with Sunni Islam increased. The Almohads under the Mu‘minids were, in fact, subject to a process of Sunnification that moved them away from the Mahdist outlook of their origins, which were close to Shi‘ism.<sup>16</sup> This process was strengthened by the conquest of al-Andalus, a land with a long and well-established Sunni tradition, where the old religious and legal elites offered resistance to the more revolutionary aspects of the original Almohad policies and pressed for them to be changed.<sup>17</sup> While Émile Fricaud has pointed to the existence of this process in the sources at our disposal—a process that he calls de-Almohadization—mainly after the fall of the Almohads (in 646/1248 in the Iberian Peninsula and in 674/1275 in the extreme Maghreb), there is evidence that it started earlier as a toning down of the more innovative aspects of the Almohad movement. This process had the result of obliterating how things had been done in the early stages of the

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14 Fierro, “Algunas reflexiones sobre el poder itinerante almohade.”

15 Staevel and Fili, “*Wa-waṣalnā ‘alā barakat Allāh ilā Īgīlīz*”; Staevel, “Sociétés de montagne et réforme religieuse.”

16 Fierro, “The Almohads and the Fatimids.”

17 A‘rāb, “Mawqif al-muwaḥḥidīn min kutub al-furū‘ wa-ḥaml al-nās ‘alā l-maḍhab al-ḥazmī.”

movement, and thus the reasons behind some of the Almohads' actions have become obscured and un-intelligible.

If we concentrate on those things that are most puzzling, and less Sunni, and we assume that they represent the original phase of the Almohad movement, what do we get?

We get a man called Ibn Tūmart, the son of a local leader in the Anti-Atlas Mountains south of Marrakech, who succeeded in uniting a number of Mas-muda Berber tribes under his leadership against Almoravid rule. Before that, Ibn Tūmart left his people for some time in search of knowledge: he travelled to the area of Bougie, where he met 'Abd al-Mu'min, and he was probably also in Marrakech. He did acquire some kind of religious and legal knowledge, although from whom is unclear (no local teachers are mentioned), and the extent of this knowledge is also unclear. In his native village of Igilliz and later in Tinmal, Ibn Tūmart surely spoke in Berber with his followers. His teaching there must have focused on the professions of faith that became such a prominent symbol of what the Almohads stood for: God's unity (*tawhīd*) and the rejection of anthropomorphism.<sup>18</sup> However, we lack any contemporary evidence on the specific contents of such teachings during Ibn Tūmart's lifetime and on the practices he imposed on his followers, since no texts or coins dated to his times have been preserved. Ibn Tūmart certainly had the charisma to attract followers from different tribes, such as the Zanata Berbers of Western Algeria, 'Abd al-Mu'min's tribe. Once he was back in his homeland, accompanied by some of the disciples who had gathered around him during his travels, Ibn Tūmart's leadership was strong enough to enable him to purge his local enemies, and these purges contributed to consolidating his leadership. Berber nativism was a strong feature of the original movement. Berber tribal structures were used to organize the movement,<sup>19</sup> the Maghreb was presented as the region of the Islamic world where Truth and the knowledge associated with it were located, and the Berber language was used in religious practices and to convey religious beliefs. Around the time 'Abd al-Mu'min became the leader of the movement, we start to have contemporary texts, and thus it becomes possible to identify Almohad beliefs and practices. In 'Abd al-Mu'min's day we know that Ibn Tūmart was presented as the Mahdī, and also as *wārith maqām al-nubuwwa* (heir to the station of prophecy); that the creed attributed to him that concentrated on God, with very little to say about the Prophet

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18 Massé, "La profession de foi (*'aqīda*) et les guides spirituels (*morchida*) du mahdi Ibn Toumart"; Urvoy, "La pensée d'Ibn Tūmart"; Serrano, "¿Por qué llamaron los almohades antropomorfistas a los almorávides?"

19 Kisaichi, "The Almohad Social-Political System."



Muḥammad, was taught in both Berber and Arabic; and that a *kitāb* was also attributed to him. All of this suggests that Ibn Tūmart may originally have been closer to a prophet, in the line of the Berber prophets—some of whom had their own Scripture—who had appeared in the early centuries after the Muslim conquest as part of the process of acculturation to Islam,<sup>20</sup> and that Ibn Tūmart's representation as a Mahdī may have been a later adaptation more suitable for the new and more deeply Islamicized lands that the Almohads conquered outside their original territory.

Let's assume that the historical Ibn Tūmart was closer to a Berber prophet, a charismatic leader who heralded the original monotheistic religion as proclaimed in Ibn Tūmart's creed with its emphasis on the unity and omnipotence of God. Ibn Tūmart and his followers led by 'Abd al-Mu'min imposed that religion in the territories they conquered and on the peoples that submitted to them, peoples who were considered slaves of the original Almohad believers—this is one of those puzzling facts recorded in Almohad historiography.<sup>21</sup> When the Muslims first conquered North Africa, the pagan Berbers had been enslaved and forced to convert to Islam.<sup>22</sup> Some centuries later, the enslavement of the non-Almohads by the Almohads seems to have been an analogous policy. This means that the conquered peoples must have been considered non-believers by the Almohads, even if they were Muslims, and therefore that they could be enslaved and forced to convert to the religion of their conquerors. This conversion seems to have consisted of acknowledging the existence of God and the right guidance of Ibn Tūmart (the prophecy of Muḥammad is briefly mentioned in the long version of Ibn Tūmart's creed as we have it from 'Abd al-Mu'min's time). Once the Almohads conquered more-Islamicized and more-Arabicized territory such as northern Morocco, Ifrīqiya, and especially al-Andalus, a process of convergence with a more Sunni-like Islam began. Some features were preserved that recalled the nativistic origins of the movement. For example, Ibn Tūmart's grave in Tinmal became a place of pilgrimage, while the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina (where the Prophet Muḥammad is buried) was abandoned for some time. Other features reveal that the religion

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20 Farhat and Triki, "Faux prophètes et Mahdis dans le Maroc médiéval"; Fierro, "Mahdisme et eschatologie dans al-Andalus"; García-Arenal, *Messianism and Puritanical Reform*.

21 On the texts that demonstrate that the Almohads considered conquered peoples as slaves, see Marín, "Dulces, vino y oposición política," 108–11.

22 Brett, "The Islamisation of Egypt and North Africa," 14–21. This forced conversion was still mentioned in an eleventh-century Andalusī legal source, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr's *Kitāb al-kāfi*. See Müller, "Non-Muslims as Part of Islamic Law": "Captured boys that are not members of a religion of the book, like Vikings (*maǧūs*), Sicilians, Turcs, Indians, Daylamis, or Berbers or Baǧwāṭīs, are forced to become Muslims (*ǧubirū kulluhum 'alā l-islām*), be they of age or not."



of the Almohads had been formed in an Islamic context and that the pressure from Sunni-like Islam could not be resisted: for example, the Muslim mosques were not replaced by new buildings to be used for a new type of prayer, but they were purified.<sup>23</sup> This purification seems to have been thought necessary because of the belief that the Muslims who had prayed there were not proper believers (because of their anthropomorphism) and thus not pure; there is a long section on purification (*tahāra*) in the *kitāb* attributed to Ibn Tūmart.<sup>24</sup> This interest in purification appears to be closer to Shi'ism than to Sunnism. Shi'is consider that unbelievers (including Jews and Christians) are inherently polluted, something that only a minority of Sunnis believe.<sup>25</sup>

As mentioned, Ibn Tūmart is not known to have dealt with Jews in Igilliz and Tinmal, the centers of his religious and political activity. His successor, 'Abd al-Mu'min, did. It was under his rule and that of his successor, Abū Ya'qūb Yūsuf (r. 558–80/1163–84), that Jews and Christians were forced to convert or expelled, both in North Africa and al-Andalus. Christians emigrated to the northern Christian kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula, while Jews either converted or emigrated from Almohad lands, with some choosing other countries within Islamdom. This happened after the conquest of Marrakech in the year 541/1147, when 'Abd al-Mu'min is said to have told the Jews and Christians who lived in the territory under his rule that their ancestors had denied the mission of the Prophet, but that now they (i.e., the Mu'minids and the Almohads) would no longer allow them to continue in their infidelity. As the Almohads had no need of the tax (*jizya*) they paid, *dhimmīs* had now to choose between conversion, leaving the land, or being killed. In the text recording this episode,

23 The Almohads did build new mosques. The first was built by 'Abd al-Mu'min in Marrakech (1147–56) on the site of the Almoravid palace. This mosque was followed by a second (1154–58), which was attached to it but whose orientation was different. This double mosque has long puzzled modern scholars. One new interpretation is that this was a way to keep the Almohads separate from the rest of the population. See Ghouirgate, *L'ordre almohade [1120-1269]*, 359–66.

24 Ibn Tūmart, *A'azz mā yuṭlab*, 100–183.

25 For the Shi'i position, see Soroudi, "The Concept of Jewish Impurity." For the Maliki position, see Safran, "Rules of Purity," 208–9, dealing with the interpretation of the Qur'ānic verse 9:28, according to which infidels (*mushrikūn*) are impure (*najis*): they are either temporarily impure because they have become polluted (for example, by eating pork or drinking wine) or they are inherently impure. This last interpretation led to the prohibition against non-believers in mosques and other sacred spaces (such as the sanctuaries of Mecca and Medina). I do not know of a specific Almohad text in which non-Muslim monotheists are declared to be impure *per se*, but this was the Zāhirī position of Ibn Ḥazm.

transmitted by Ibn Ḥamūya/Ibn Ḥamawayhi al-Sarakhsī,<sup>26</sup> we find an explanation of why the Almohads did what they did, an explanation that tries to make sense of the Almohads' behavior, shocking from a Sunni point of view, as *dhimmā* status was normally understood as having no expiration date. However, such behavior might be related to a minority trend within Sunnism. According to this trend, represented by the jurist al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), once demography was favorable to the Muslims, they would no longer be in need of non-Muslims and could therefore abolish the *dhimmā* pact.<sup>27</sup> The pact therefore had an expiration date. This doctrine might have inspired 'Abd al-Mu'min.<sup>28</sup> However, if that was the case, the argument he made was somewhat circular: Jews and Christians no longer had a place in Almohad territory because everybody (including non-Almohad Muslims) was obliged to convert, and as everybody would be from then onwards an Almohad who would pay their taxes, the *jizya* (the specific tax that non-Muslim monotheists had to pay) became redundant. Thus, Jews and Christians were no longer needed and had to either convert—as the Muslims did—or leave; otherwise they would be killed. But perhaps there was another reason that induced 'Abd al-Mu'min to impose conversion, and Ibn Ḥamūya/Ibn Ḥamawayhi al-Sarakhsī's report was a way to insert his decree into an Islamic framework. I have explored the possible reasons that motivated the forced conversion elsewhere.<sup>29</sup> One reason may have been that Almohad territory was considered a new Ḥijāz and therefore a land that had to be rid of any religion other than the true one, just as Muḥammad had prescribed for the Arabian Peninsula. Another possibility is that 'Abd al-Mu'min was moved by the belief that all human beings possess an innate nature (*fiṭra*) that corresponds to Islam, whereas being a Jew or a Christian depends on the family in which one has been born, which could have con-

26 Ibn Ḥamūya/Ḥamawayhi al-Sarakhsī was a Syrian who came to the Maghreb in 593/1196–97, served the Almohad caliph al-Manṣūr, and died, after returning to the East, in 642/1244–45 or 652/1254–55. His informant was a member of the Banū 'Aṭīyya, secretaries of the Almohad caliphs. Ibn Ḥamawayh's text was quoted by al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348). The first scholar to deal with it was Munk, "Notice sur Joseph ben-Iehouda," 43. He was followed by Dozy, *Recherches sur l'histoire et la littérature de l'Espagne*, 1:370 (he also quotes *Chronica Adefonsi Imperatoris*, chap. 101) and by Hopkins, *Medieval Muslim Government in Barbary*, 62.

27 Ward, "A Fragment from an Unknown Work."

28 There is another possibility related to the payment of *jizya*: the money collected from Jews and Christians was considered to be always licit and therefore was given as alms (Lev, *Charity*, 48) in contrast to that collected from Muslims, which was often considered to be tainted because the legal regulations of just taxation were not followed. If 'Abd al-Mu'min declared that *jizya* was no longer needed, this could have been a way of claiming that Almohad taxation was always according to the law.

29 See above, the first note.

vinced him and the Almohads that they were charged with the mission of restoring to true belief not only the Muslims but also those born as Jews and Christians. I am more inclined to see the original reason for the forced conversion in the influence of both eschatological and Ismaili beliefs regarding the appearance of a Messianic figure (the Mahdī, the Qā'im) who would bring about the disappearance of religions other than Islam,<sup>30</sup> something that the Fatimid caliph al-Ḥākim (r. 386–411/996–1021) seems to have attempted during his turn-of-the-century reign.

Whatever the reason that moved 'Abd al-Mu'min to order the forced conversion of Jews and Christians together with that of Muslims (signaled in the latter case by the memorization of Ibn Tūmart's profession of faith), the case of the Jews became particularly salient in two inter-related ways: the preoccupation with Jewish ancestry and the interest in portraying converts from Judaism in a positive light.<sup>31</sup>

Regarding the first aspect, in Islamic societies Jews were often represented as secret agents of foreign heresies, to the point that it would be difficult—as Steve Wasserstrom has shown—to find a Muslim heresy that was not at one time or another traced back to a Jewish originator, while at the same time Muslim heretical groups were compared to the Jews.<sup>32</sup> The imputation of Jewish ancestry could also be an insult, as happened even with some members of the Umayyad family.<sup>33</sup> The Jews had a lowly status, and an accusation of Jewish origin may have been thought an effective way to denigrate an opponent. Non-Arab and especially Jewish blood was usually considered to have a particularly degraded status in the kinship system. The same kind of associations can also be documented in the Islamic West, where certain individuals considered to be suspect in their doctrinal views were accused of having Jewish ancestry. For example, in Cordoban Umayyad propaganda against the Fatimids during their rule in Ifrīqiya, the Fatimid imam-caliph was called a Jew, and Jewish origins were also attributed to Ṭarīf, the alleged prophet-founder of the religion of the Barghawāṭa.<sup>34</sup> This tendency seems to have increased under the Almohads,

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30 According to Abū 'Amr al-Dānī (d. 444/1053), the end of times will be characterized by various phases, during some of which the natural order will be altered, so that Muslims will also convert to Judaism and Christianity: Abū 'Amr al-Dānī, *Al-Sunan al-wārida fi l-fitan*, 3: 544, no. 234.

31 In what follows I quote passages from Fierro, "Ibn Rushd al-Ḥafid (Averroes) and His Exile to Lucena."

32 Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew*, 157–58. See also Nettler, "Islamic Archetypes of the Jews," and Taji-Farouki, "Thinking on the Jews."

33 Ward, "Muhammad Said."

34 Talbi, "Hérésies, acculturation et nationalisme"; Dernouny, "Aspects de la culture et de l'Islam du Maghreb médiéval"; Iskander, "Devout Heretics".

where we find that prominent scholars such as the philosopher and jurist Ibn Rushd al-Jadd (Averroes), the Banū Zuhr family of physicians, and others were said to have Jewish ancestry.

Regarding the second aspect, as the Mu'minid caliphs sought to adapt the initially revolutionary Almohad movement to new imperial needs, their concern about the consequences of the early policy of forced conversion provoked anxiety and also embarrassment.

As regards the anxiety, it is conveyed in a famous text describing how, decades after the forced conversion, under the third Almohad caliph, Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb al-Manṣūr (r. 580–95/1184–98), those Jews who had converted to Islam were obliged to dress in a distinctive, humiliating way. They were no longer Jews from a legal point of view, but “new (Almohad) Muslims” whose sincerity was doubted.<sup>35</sup> According to the text, had the caliph been sure about their faith, he would have allowed them to intermarry with those who were Almohads or Muslims converted to Almohadism and to mix with them in all normal affairs of life. Had he been sure of their infidelity, he would have killed the men and enslaved their children, giving their property to Muslims. The problem was precisely that he did not know what their true nature or status was.<sup>36</sup> The Jewish scholar Ibn 'Aqnīn, who himself had been forced to convert, recorded in his *Tibb al-nufūs* the suffering and discrimination to which the converts were subjected, being forbidden to own slaves, to take part in some legal acts, to marry “old Muslims,” and so on. Ibn 'Aqnīn's concluding statement is telling: “The more it appears that we obey them as to everything they tell us, and incline after their Law, the more they oppress and enslave us.”<sup>37</sup> The anxiety was related not only to the impossibility of knowing the true beliefs of those forced to convert but probably also to the fear of contamination by the original beliefs of the new believers<sup>38</sup> and perhaps to tensions between the forced converts and the believers in terms of competition for positions and status in society. This is well known for the case of forcibly converted Jews in Christian Spain, where we also find the connected phenomena of the statutes of *limpieza de*

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35 Doubts about religious sincerity can be found in other times and places without necessarily arising from forced conversion, as even voluntary converts could be suspect in their beliefs for a number of reasons. Some telling examples in Cook, “Apostasy from Islam,” 257, and Fierro, “The Judge, the Vizier and the Ruler.”

36 See 'Abd al-Wāḥid al-Marrākushī (d. after 621/1224), *Kitāb al-mu'jib fī talkhīṣ akhbār al-Maghrib*, 223; Huici Miranda, *Historia política del imperio almohade*, 380–81. Maimonides, Ibn 'Aqnīn, and Joseph ben Yehuda are examples of converted Jews who practiced Islam outwardly and were educated and socialized as Almohad Muslims.

37 Hirschberg, *A History of the Jews in North Africa*, 1:196, 201–2, 356.

38 For a discussion of similar fears in Mamluk Egypt arising from the conversion of the Mamluks and also of the Copts, see Berkey, “The Mamluks as Muslims.”

*sangre* and accusations of crypto-Judaism leveled against dissidents or critics of normative religion.<sup>39</sup> Al-Manṣūr's anxiety as recorded above seems to indicate that the assimilation of the Jews was considered possible, because they would have been allowed to inter-marry with believers of non Jewish origin had their sincerity not been doubted, so that they were not being constructed as an 'impure' race. What mattered was the issue of ascertaining true belief.<sup>40</sup>

As regards the embarrassment, it led to narratives seeking to ensure that the forced converts were accepted as believers as we have seen in al-Baydhaq's text, according to which Ibn Tūmart was in favor of taking outward practice as indicative of internal belief. It also led to narratives portraying Jews in a good light, as the following examples illustrate. Al-Manṣūr's secretary Ibn 'Ayyāsh al-Burshānī (d. 618/1221) wrote a document for a Jew in which he described the man as someone endowed with piety and nobility ("al-birr wa-l-karāma").<sup>41</sup> The caliph directed Ibn 'Ayyāsh to find support for such a description of a Jew, who was after all an unbeliever (*kāfir*), in the Prophet's Tradition (*sunna*). Ibn 'Ayyāsh did manage to find a hadith that allegedly supported the part about nobility (*karāma*), but he failed with piety. It was the caliph himself—putting Ibn 'Ayyāsh to shame—who quoted a Qur'ānic verse that confirmed also the part about piety (Qur'ān 60:8).<sup>42</sup> Another narrative from the Almohad period deals with a miraculous story about a pious Muslim who lived in Mecca and who had dreamt twice about being together with a certain Jew on the Day of Judgment. After having these dreams and wondering how the Jew, who served the sultan of Egypt, could be saved, the pious Muslim decided to visit the Jew to learn if he might deserve salvation for a virtuous act he had performed. The Jew eventually remembered a good thing he had done only for God's sake. Relieved, the pious Muslim told him the dreams he had had, and the Jew,

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39 Nirenberg, "Mass Conversion and Genealogical Mentalities."

40 This issue was not limited to the Jews. What about deaf people? How could they be true believers? Averroes (d. 595/1198) wrote a tract dealing with this problem. See Fierro, "Notes on Reason."

41 It should be noted that *taqwā* is not employed here, *taqwā* being the Qur'ānic term for the discussion of the relationship between nobility and piety according to the famous Qur'ānic verse 49:13 ("Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most god-fearing of you," in the translation of A. J. Arberry).

42 This story can be found in Ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 776/1374), *Al-Iḥāṭa fi akhbār Gharnāṭa*, 2:482–87; Ibn Simāk (8th–9th/14th–15th centuries), *Al-Zaharāt al-manthūra fi nukat al-akhbār al-ma'thūra*, 133–34, no. 88. It has been translated in Velázquez Basanta, "Ibn 'Ayyāsh al-Burshānī"; Velázquez Basanta, "De nuevo sobre Ibn 'Ayyāsh de Purchena"; Velázquez Basanta, "Ibn 'Ayyāsh al-Burshānī, Abū 'Abd Allāh," no. 356.

astonished, converted to Islam<sup>43</sup> (the fact that a Jew could be saved indicates that the problem of being a Jew had to do with belief, not ethnicity). Almohad historical narratives about the revolt of Cordoba's *arrabal* during the emirate of the Umayyad emir al-Ḥakam I (r. 180–206/796–822) include the story of how the Muslim scholar Ṭālūt was saved thanks to the virtuous act of his Jewish neighbor, a story originating in the history of Ibn al-Qūṭiyya (d. 367/977) but which was amplified by later authors.<sup>44</sup>

These are all stories that show that Jews could be good, noble, and pious, that conversion should follow from conviction and not coercion, and that a Jew who converted to Islam had to be treated as the equal of the rest of the believers. As mentioned above, these and other narratives are to be understood within the context of suspicion towards those who had been forced to convert on the one hand, while such suspicion and anxiety provided, on the other hand, the context in which political and religious opponents of the Almohads or those who were believed for different reasons to have deviated from strict allegiance to their ideological or political program were discredited with accusations of Jewish ancestry.

The story recorded above about the Jew described as noble and pious suggests that there were Jews during the reign of al-Manṣūr who followed their own religion—that is, were not crypto-converts. We have other evidence that points to the presence of Jews in Almohad territory: for example, a Jewish poet, Abū l-Ḥajjāj Ibn Ḥasday al-Yahūdī, wrote a panegyric for al-Manṣūr,<sup>45</sup> and in 1247 a Jewish family from Sijilmasa was granted safe-conduct to move to the kingdom of Aragón.<sup>46</sup> This and other evidence still needs to be brought together and analyzed in order to assess its scope and its connection with the flourishing Jewish communities that are attested later on under the post-Almohad dynasties in North Africa. The Almohad experience, however, greatly

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43 Al-Ḍabbī, *Kitāb bughyat al-multamis fi ta'riḫ rijāl ahl al-Andalus*, no. 154; see also Pocklington, "Ibn Ṭāhir al-Qaysī, Abū 'Abd Allāh," 409–14, no. 2382.

44 'Abd al-Wāḥid al-Marrākushī (d. after 621/1224), *Al-Mu'jib*, 45–47; Spanish transl., Huici Miranda, *Historia política del imperio almohade*, 16–17; Ibn 'Abd al-Malik al-Marrākushī (d. 702/1302), *Al-Dhayl wa-l-Takmila li-kitabay al-Mawṣūl wa-l-Ṣila*, 4:150–52; Ibn Sa'īd (610–85/1213–86), *Al-Mughrib*, 1:43. For an analysis of this anecdote, see Molina, "Ṭālūt y el judío," who points out that, in al-Dhababī's rendition of the story, the Jew also eventually converted to Islam.

45 Abū Baḥr Ṣafwān b. Idrīs al-Tujībī, *Zād al-musāfir wa-ghurraṭ maḥyā al-adab al-sāfir*, 205–9. I owe this reference to Prof. Jaafar Benalhaj Soulami. This information disproves the idea that there were no panegyrics written by Jews for Arabs in al-Andalus: Decter, *Dominion Built of Praise*, 14.

46 Regné, "Catalogue des Actes de Jaime I, Pedro III et Alphonse III," 168, doc. 36. See also Del Valle, "The Jews of al-Andalus under Almohad rule."

diminished the number of native Jews in al-Andalus, as is clear from their almost complete absence in Nasrid Granada.

By the end of their rule, the Mu'minids—whose founder, 'Abd al-Mu'min, had been responsible for one of the few episodes of forced conversion that took place in Islamic lands—had to face the issue of conversion in changing circumstances and in a different form. Rumors circulated among Christians that some Almohad and post-Almohad rulers had converted or had the intention to convert to Christianity.<sup>47</sup> As in the case of similar stories told about some rulers in the East, what lay behind those rumors was the need to justify the fact that Christian rulers were signing alliances and reaching agreements with Muslim rulers. This justification was based on distinguishing bad Muslims from good Muslims—i.e., those who could help the Christians against other Muslims from those who would not. Cooperation with the former was legitimated by suggesting that they had converted or might convert to Christianity.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, the Christian military advance and the conquest of former Muslim territory did not give rise in the thirteenth century to any attempt at forced conversion of the Muslims now living under Christian rule.<sup>49</sup> But the perspective of losing their power led some Mu'minid princes to convert to Christianity in order to maintain their status, as happened in the case of the famous Abū Zayd.<sup>50</sup> Having become a vassal of the Crown of Aragón in 1236, he seems to have converted to Christianity at that time, but he kept it hidden from his subjects for twenty-eight years, revealing it only in 1264, at a moment when the political situation made it advisable.<sup>51</sup> Others converted openly, as did an Almohad official called Ibn 'Abbād during the conquest of Almohad Majorca (1229–31) by King James I of Aragón (r. 1213–76). Ibn 'Abbād converted to Christianity in 627/1230 and actively preached to others the need for conversion. His followers convinced the peasants to help the Christians in their fight against the Almohad army, stating: “There is no antagonism between

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47 Fancy, “The Last Almohads,” 125.

48 As argued by Knobler, “Pseudo-Conversions and Patchwork Pedigrees.”

49 Echevarría, “Implicaciones políticas y sociales de la conversión,” 880, quoting Alfonso X's *Las Siete Partidas*, fol. 76v (“Por buenas palabras et convertibles predicaciones deven trabajar los christianos de convertir a los moros, para fazerles creer en nuestra fe, e aduzirlos a ella, e non por fuerça ni por premia, ca si voluntad de nuestro señor fuesse de los aduzir a ella, e de gela fazer creer por fuerça, él los apremiaría, si quissiese ...”).

50 Barceló Torres, “Sayyid Abū Zayd”; Burns, “Príncipe almohade y converso mudéjar.”

51 As analyzed by Fancy, “The Last Almohads,” 108. The Mu'minid prince Abū Zayd, who allegedly converted to Christianity at the hands of Alfonso X of Castille according to a passage found in *Al-Dhakhīra al-saniyya* (Ramírez del Río, “*Al-Dajīra al-saniyya*. Una fuente relevante,” 32, quoting *Al-Dhakhīra al-saniyya*, 96), is a case of mistaken identity with Abū Zayd, who converted under James I of Aragón.



the two religions (*laysa bayna al-dīnayn taḍādd*)<sup>52</sup> and whoever we meet who does not accept this will be considered evil.”<sup>53</sup> The suggestion here seems to be that there is concordance between Islam and Christianity, an idea that might have helped the Muslim population of Majorca to adapt to the defeat of the Almohads at the hands of the Christians. This happened in the very place where Ramon Llull, born in Majorca shortly after the Christian conquest (ca. 1232), developed his conviction that infidels (Jews and Muslims) could be converted to the true religion, Christianity, by a method—embodied in his *Ars magna*—that was universal and thus intelligible to every human being and that would lead to the erasure of what divided humankind.<sup>54</sup> This Christian “dream of conversion” can be linked with the idea that we find in the early Almohad period: that what the Almohads had brought back was the original monotheistic religion, the religion of Abraham that Jews, Christians, and Muslims had in common.<sup>55</sup>

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52 The meaning of the term *taḍādd* is “contrast; the coming together of two opposed meanings in the same word.”

53 Ibn ‘Amīra al-Maḥzūmī, *Kitāb Tārīḥ Maḥūrqa*, 97–98; cf. 111 and 117.

54 Fidora, and Rubio, eds., *Raimundus Lullus*.

55 Fierro, “Conversion, Ancestry and Universal Religion,” 165–68.

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