

Matteo Al Kalak and Ilaria Pavan

Un'altra fede. Le Case dei catecumeni nei territori estensi (1583–1938) [Biblioteca della Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa. Studi 27]. Olschki, Firenze 2013, xv + 231 pp. ISBN 9788822262509. € 28.

This book gives a detailed history of the 'Houses of the catechumens,' institutions set up for the prospective converts from Judaism to Catholicism, in two of the main cities in the territories of the dukes of Este, Reggio and the capital, Modena. It runs from the time when plans were first made to provide a building for the purpose, in Reggio in 1583, to the final abolition of the institution, in the new kingdom of Italy, in 1866, and it ends with a brief survey of later conversions which increased steeply after the anti-Semitic measures taken by the Fascist government in 1938. The first three chapters, on the early modern period, are by Matteo Al Kalak, and the last two, on the nineteenth century, by Ilaria Pavan.

In the Renaissance, when their territories already held sizeable Jewish communities, the dukes of Este were famed for their tolerance and hospitality. With the expulsion of the Sephardic Jews from Spain in the late fifteenth century the dukes welcomed them in their cities, showering them with privileges and exemptions, and thus also drew ever more members of Ashkenazi communities originating from central Europe. As happened so frequently elsewhere, however, the favour of the rulers was not always shared by their subjects, and the clergy managed to foment hatred and resentment of the new arrivals. In the second half of the sixteenth century the anti-Jewish bulls issued by Pope Paul IV started to have their effect, and, in the course of the seventeenth century, ghettos were established in the towns and cities of the dukes of Este—in Mirandola in 1602, in Modena in 1638, and in Reggio in 1669.

For many years the conversions of Jews took place under the aegis of the local nobility or of the ruling house. The plans to establish a proper institution and to concentrate the catechumens in a building dragged on. It was a long time before such buildings could finally be said to exist—in Reggio in 1633 and in Modena in 1715. From the outset there was a considerable difference between the organizations in the two cities. In Reggio the 'Casa' was in the hands of the laity, in Modena of the clergy. Over the years the House in Reggio proved far more hospitable and generous than the one in Modena, allowing the new converts to remain there indefinitely after their conversion, while in Modena they could only remain for a few months. The institutions in both cities were in constant financial straits, but the House in Reggio did its best to continue to pay modest subsidies to those who had converted. The main point which the two institutions had in common was that they would only accept local Jews:

they were closed not only to Jews from other parts of Italy, but to Muslims and Protestants. Their organization was monastic, with strict measures to prevent the catechumens from having any contact with the Jewish communities and allowing them little freedom of movement.

Since the 'Case dei catechumeni' were so unappealing one wonders why anyone decided to convert—and indeed, the success rate of the institutions was negligible. In Reggio there seem to have been no more than 241 conversions between 1633 and 1866 and in Modena 410 between 1629 and 1938. This would amount, over the years, to an average of about 2% of the Jewish community. Every baptism, celebrated with splendour, was attended by an elaborate procession through the town, and was presented as a major triumph for the Church. And yet not only did many of the catechumens tend to be social outcasts—poor, lonely, and with little to lose—but few converted out of genuine conviction. The usual reasons for doing so were to gain financial and social support or preferment, to marry a Christian, or simply to escape from the family nucleus. To these must be added the relatively small number of 'forced conversions,' usually of Jewish children subtracted from their families by Christian servants and hurriedly baptized without the knowledge or consent of their parents. These, as much as anything else, aroused the anger of the Jewish community, and although the rules of the Houses fluctuated, arrangements were frequently made for either a rabbi or a relative to witness the catechumen's decision to enter the House and to guarantee that the entry was voluntary.

Yet, few though they were, the conversions seem to have been unaffected by the political events which rocked the institutions. The invasion of Italy by French revolutionary troops and the flight of the duke of Este, Ercole III, in 1796 led to the closure of the Houses and the declared emancipation of the Jewish communities with strict measures against forced baptisms. The conversions, however, continued as before. Under the Napoleonic government installed in 1800, too, the conversion rate remained stable. When the dukes returned to power in 1814 it was clear that they had abandoned all traces of the tolerance that had done such credit to their ancestors. The Houses were reinstated, even if much impoverished, and the rules were revived with a severity which increased when they were revised under the dynamic Bishop of Modena Luigi Reggiani in 1845. But the days of the 'Case dei catechumeni' were numbered. The dukes were finally ejected in 1859 and the institutions suppressed seven years later. The Jews of Italy were at last admitted as full citizens to the new kingdom.

What purpose had the 'Case dei catechumeni' in fact served? The authors of *Un'altra fede* conclude, convincingly, that they were, first and foremost, "enti assistenziali-caritativi," charitable institutions which did their very best to support their few impoverished converts. Otherwise the Houses can hardly

be regarded as successful enterprises. But *Un'altra fede* remains a fascinating book, beautifully written, admirably researched, and full of the most interesting information. It is an important contribution to the history both of the Jews and of the Church in the duchy of Este.

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