'Much is lost when we take historiographical categories for granted'. An Interview with Mercedes García-Arenal

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Mercedes García-Arenal hardly needs an introduction. Trained as an Arabist and based at the Center for Human and Social Sciences (CCHS) of the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC) in Madrid, she is widely regarded as one of the most influential scholars of early modern religious history. Her work has reshaped the historical understanding of the political, social, and religious implications of encounters among Jews, Christians, and Muslims across the Iberian Peninsula, northern Europe, and the Mediterranean. She has reconstructed stories of exile, of inquisitors and suspects, conversions and contested identities, religious minorities negotiating power, translations and interpretations of sacred texts—and of books, many books: read, recited, censored, confiscated, desired, prophesied. Over the past six years, she has led an ERC Synergy project on the impact of the Qur'an on European religious and cultural history from the Middle Ages to the early modern period, in both Christian and Islamic contexts (EuQu*: The European Qur'an. Islamic Scripture in European Culture and Religion 1150–1850*). The project brought together four universities and two partner institutions, and generated research and academic initiatives—conferences, workshops, exhibitions—across the world. This conversation will focus on the past six years devoted to the history of the Qur'an in Europe, especially the last one, 2025. From there, we will revisit some of the themes and critical questions that have shaped her long and productive intellectual journey.

Opening

Mercedes, too often we forget that geography is a constitutive part of history. That is why I would like to begin with five places where we met in 2025 for EuQu events. Each place opens onto a broader research question—historical, historiographical, or methodological—that you've explored throughout your career, and that I'd like to revisit with you in light of today's global political and religious scenario. These places are Tunis, Amsterdam, Lake Como, Uzbekistan, and Granada. And then a sixth, pointing to the near future: Oxford.

Tunis

In February 2025, we were in Tunis for a conference that went well beyond EuQu's timeframe, focusing on Islam and the Qur'an in colonial, anti-colonial, and post-colonial Maghrebi contexts. It immediately made me think of your early work on the Moriscos expelled after 1609–1612, who rebuilt their religious lives in North Africa, and of your research on the origins of modern Morocco. Looking backward, I cannot help recalling your studies on the bildiyyin—Jews converted to Islam whose trajectories revealed, long before EuQu, how porous and historically contingent religious identities could be. Those articles already

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showed how Iberian histories were refracted and reconfigured on Maghrebi soil, and they seem to resonate strongly with the questions we are revisiting today. In many ways, being in Tunis felt like a return to your beginnings. Your groundbreaking studies on Islamic minorities expelled from Catholic Spain clearly intersect with post-colonial scholarship and with the rethinking of Spain's national history in the early post-Franco years. Starting from Iberian legacies in Africa allowed you to adopt, very early on, an exilic perspective—people and books outside Europe, yet marked by European cultural elements. Exile, displacement, imprisonment: these themes run through your work, from Africa to Iberia to the Palermo Inquisition, which you explored in a 2018 conference and book with Giovanna Fiume. In that book, **Parole prigioniere*****, especially in your essay on the graffiti of cell no. 2, you move from and beyond Julio Caro Baroja and Carlo Ginzburg's methodological suggestions, developing the idea of a 'polyphony of voices' as a new way to approach the religious culture of dissidents and prisoners. Thinking about the range of biographies and sources you have investigated, how would you describe the hermeneutical potentials of isolation—exile, imprisonment, marginalisation—to the formation of religious identity through time?***

Tunis is important to me for several reasons, and it allows me to explain how my research trajectory developed. I began my work studying the Inquisition trials of Moriscos—the forcibly converted Muslims living in Christian Spain. My doctoral dissertation focused on these trials, and from there I became increasingly interested not only in individual lives but also in the forms of local Islam practiced by Moriscos, and in the extent to which Inquisition records could be used as reliable historical sources. At the time, there was considerable debate about whether such sources were trustworthy for reconstructing religious practices.

My research then led me to North Africa. I first went to Morocco because I wanted to understand whether Morisco Islam was a degraded or fading form of Islam, or whether it differed significantly from contemporary Maghrebi traditions—in sixteenth-century Morocco and in Tunis. This naturally brought me to the question of exile, since many Moriscos, before and after their expulsion, migrated to North Africa. Exile, in fact, became a crucial lens through which I shifted from social history to cultural and religious history. I became interested in how forced conversion affected both the converted communities and the majority society that had to absorb them, as well as in the ideological mechanisms—messianism, lineage, genealogy, prophetism—that were mobilised to legitimise forced conversion.

Seclusion also emerged as a key theme. In sixteenth-century Europe—marked by religious wars, the Protestant Reformation, Catholic reform, mysticism, and the *alumbrados*—many people were imprisoned for religious reasons. Prisons, including Inquisition prisons, became laboratories for observing how identities of resistance were formed: sometimes defiant, sometimes tending toward martyrdom, sometimes oriented toward evasion or secrecy. Crypto-Islam, crypto-Protestantism, and other

forms of clandestine religiosity show how secrecy itself became a constitutive element of marginalised communities. This interest in secrecy has remained a transversal thread throughout my work.

Tunis, however, has an additional, more personal significance. It was my first real contact with the Arab world: as a university student, I spent two consecutive summers there studying Arabic before later traveling to the Middle East—which I loved—and to Morocco. These are very different countries, and although my research does not focus directly on colonial history or the Spanish political presence in North Africa, returning to Tunis for the EuQu conference required us to engage with the interests of our hosts and with an important exhibition then on display at the Bibliothèque Nationale. This pushed us—very productively—to move beyond the immediate boundaries of the project and to consider broader questions. For me, the crucial issue was how sources produced in the Iberian Peninsula for anti-Islamic polemics from the sixteenth century, shaped European conceptions of Islam in the long run. How Iberian observers described local Morisco Islam contributed to long-lasting European ideas about what Islam is. Tunis, in this sense, offered a vantage point from which to trace these genealogies across time and space.

Amsterdam

In March 2025, you organised in Amsterdam, with Gerard Wiegers, a workshop on intellectual collaborations in the study of the Qur'an that crossed religious and ethnic boundaries. The question was whether, and how, Muslims—'old believers', voluntary or forced converts, slaves or prisoners—played an active role in the study, interpretation, and translation of the Qur'an carried out by Christian scholars in Europe. And you also considered Eastern Christians and Arabic-speaking Jews. Having worked with you at CORPI, your previous ERC project on conversion and religious polemics in the Mediterranean, the continuity with your earlier work was immediately clear to me. You first studied converts and the dynamics of conversion—especially dissimulated or forced ones—then turned to the role of converts and other marginal figures in the study of the Qur'an. I'm thinking, for example, of the Muslim translator Juan Gabriel, who worked with Martín de Figuerola, bishop of Valencia, and Cardinal Egidio da Viterbo. Why is it important for you to show that the study and circulation of the Qur'an in European Christian contexts also involved actors who were neither Catholic nor Protestant? And how do you relate the factual reality of these collaborations to the Christian or post-Christian rhetoric that often celebrates interreligious cooperation?

To those questions I would add: what was the role of converts and Muslims as participants in Christian knowledge of Islam? And if this participation existed, to what extent was 'Orientalism' a cultural creation born of the circulation and exchange between two interrelated religious ensembles?

Our decision to organise this conference in Amsterdam, in collaboration with the local team, stems from a long-standing scholarly dialogue between Gerard and me, and from a shared interest in Muslim minorities living in Christian territories in Europe. In my own work, I have spent many years grappling with the categories conceived by traditional historiography on these minorities—especially on the Moriscos. They have often been described as an isolated 'bubble', a closed and inassimilable group. This view largely reflects the rhetoric of early modern Spanish sources, particularly those advocating for their expulsion, which portrayed Moriscos as a kind of social 'tumour' that could simply be excised.

My research has moved in the opposite direction. I have tried to show that both Morisco elites and non-elites participated in the broader Christian majority culture. I have also sought to explore their agency, including how Morisco scholars collaborated with, appropriated, or transformed Christian intellectual and devotional materials. Let me give you just an example. One of the cases I have worked on, also in collaboration with my colleague in Amsterdam, concerns a Morisco author who, after his exile, wrote a polemical treatise in Marrakesh against Christianity—against the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, and so on. Yet when we examined the text closely, we discovered that he drew extensively on contemporary Christian devotional literature, including well-known works circulating in Spain. We are therefore interested in understanding how Muslims living in Christian territories could appropriate Christian rhetoric and devotional forms, transforming them into impeccable Islamic arguments. This interweaving of religious traditions tells us a great deal not only about lived religion in sixteenth-century Europe, but also about how religious and hence scholarly categories are constructed—and how much is lost when we take historiographical categories for granted.

This connects to a broader point I have been developing within the European Qur'an project. In Christian Europe, Islam has long served as an instrument or mirror for internal Christian debates. What Christians did with Islam—and even with the Qur'an—was often less about Islam itself than about Anglicanism, Protestantism, or intra-Catholic controversies such as the one related to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Islamic materials were mobilised for purposes entirely different from those for which they were originally written. But the Qur'an was not only a Christian object of polemic, scholarship, or curiosity; it was also central to the lives of Muslims living in Europe, often in complex social conditions. Different confessional traditions read and use the Qur'an through their own lenses. And the way they read it tells us as much about their own theological frameworks as it does about the Qur'an itself. This is why it is so illuminating to study how different Christian readers engaged with Arabic and Islamic texts: what works they selected, how they read them, how they understood them. The same dynamic can be observed with Jewish texts—think of Christian Kabbalah or the Christian appropriation of the *hebraica veritas*. There is a persistent idea that the 'true' version of Christianity is already hidden in the scriptures of the other two religions. Examining these dynamics and the individuals who collected such books

or used them to articulate particular ideological positions helps us understand how deeply entangled these traditions were within late medieval Christianity, Renaissance humanism, the Republic of Letters, and beyond.

Lake Como

In June, as a collaboration between EuQu and CORE (*Co-Produced Religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam*—the research group coordinated by Katharina Heyden and David Nirenberg between Bern and Princeton), we organised a conference on the concept of the 'excluded third'. Taking place at Villa Vigoni, the German-Italian Center for European Dialogue, the aim was to explore the tripartite and asymmetrical dynamics that have shaped the relationships among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam across historical contexts ranging from antiquity to the contemporary world: exclusion of one religion by the other two, stigmatisation or incorporation of one religion to counteract another; alliances of two against one; twofold political instrumentalisation; and the use of one tradition's exegetical heritage to codify or to challenge another. CORE's premise is that none of the three religions can be understood historically without the others—that each is, in a sense which has been the object of fruitful debates, 'co-produced'. And we also discussed cases in which this applies to the Qur'an and its reception. Someone like Samuel Pallache, to whom you devoted arguably your most popular book,* A Man of Three Worlds*, written together with Gerard Wiegers and translated into several languages, including Italian, Hebrew, and Arabic, is exemplary in this regard. Looking back, your work on the biographical and social implications of interreligious coexistence found in Lake Como an ideal setting to move from individual cases to a broader conceptual paradigm revolving around dynamics of religious 'co-production'. Why do you think it is essential to study Judaism, Christianity, and Islam together to understand European religious history? Why is it no longer sufficient to examine only binary relationships between two of these traditions, as scholarship has been doing for so many years?

It is indeed a heuristic novelty to study Judaism, Christianity, and Islam together, but this has much to do, contextually, with the internal organisation of disciplines within Western academia. If you belong to a department of Hebrew or Jewish Studies, or to a Christian theological faculty, or to Arabic and Islamic Studies, you already have more than enough to do within your own field. At most, you might engage with a second interlocutor, but rarely with all three. The linguistic demands alone—Hebrew, Latin, Arabic—require years of training. It is simply too great an effort, and one that is not always rewarded institutionally. Academic careers tend to favour scholars who remain safely within the boundaries of their own departments, not those who work in the margins or in contact zones, or across disciplines. There is also a certain patrimonial instinct among scholars: we become protective of our subjects and fear that working across traditions may dilute or confuse them. Terms such as 'syncretism' or 'overlapping' often carry suspicion. Yet when we study people who actually lived in

contact zones, we see that they themselves inhabited these ambiguities. Their identities and practices do not fit neatly into the categories we have inherited. Much of the literature on religious polemics shows precisely this: the three religions cannot be understood if studied separately or only from a doctrinal, monolithic perspective.

This is why Villa Vigoni was so important. One of the epistemological challenges was to make theologians and historians truly speak to one another. Theologians tend to work with clearly defined doctrines, while historians observe how those doctrines shift over time. Seeing them engage directly—especially in the context of interfaith polemics—made it clear that religious change does not arise solely from internal dynamics, but also from contact with other traditions. To understand European spirituality, religion, and intellectual history, we must therefore study all three traditions together. The notion of religious co-production helps us in this regard, as it serves to describe the interpretative processes through which neighbouring traditions, precisely by interacting, imagine, delineate, and refine their own theological identities. It underscores that no religion develops in isolation: each is continuously shaped and reshaped through its engagement with the others.

Let me give you an example from my recent work. In Inquisition trials, when someone was arrested, their property was confiscated and inventoried, including their books. I began studying the Christian devotional books found in the homes of Judeo-conversos in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These were perfectly orthodox Catholic works—devotional treatises, biblical histories, texts on prophecy. Yet many of these same books later ended up on the Index of Forbidden Books. This happened because established religion needed to draw clear boundaries: to define what counted as Catholic and what lay outside Catholicism. If people outside Catholicism were using Catholic materials, those materials themselves had to be reclassified and excluded. In this way, the practices of Judeo-conversos and Muslims helped shape the very contours of Catholicism in Spain. The Index, in this sense, becomes a striking example of co-production: the boundaries of orthodoxy were defined in response to how others engaged with Catholic texts.

This brings us back to the relationship between theology and history, which is central in places like Germany, which you know well, especially since the introduction of Islamic theology as an academic discipline fifteen years ago. Such epistemological dialogue does not happen as clearly in other parts of Europe. Yet it is crucial—not only theoretically but also practically—for understanding how religious traditions interact, transform, and define one another. It is certainly a topic worth returning to in future academic initiatives.

Uzbekistan

In early October, on the initiative of Roberto Tottoli, we organised a conference in Uzbekistan comparing Qur'an translations in Europe with those produced in Central Asia. It was a revealing moment: a well-established European historiographical tradition had to shift its focus and epistemic lens from Europe

and the Mediterranean to Asia. The strong interest in EuQu's work by local institutions and the discovery of vibrant local scholarship on the Qur'an showed that there are extra-European spaces—politically, geographically, and intellectually significant—where institutional attitudes toward religious history move in a direction very different from what we see today in Europe or the United States. In the EU, especially in France and Spain, EuQu has been criticised in parliamentary settings for allegedly placing the Qur'an artificially at the centre of European history and identity—in these contexts, the Qur'an instead is seen as a 'foreign' text, in fact incompatible with the theologically determined and politically biased paradigm of 'Judeo-Christianity', now reframed through a sovereigntist lens. In Uzbekistan, by contrast, the Qur'an is central to the rediscovery of national identity, but in an explicitly historical and cultural sense: the promotion of investigations of 'Uthman's early Qur'an, the monumental religious architecture of Samarkand and Bukhara (mosques, madrasas, mausoleums), the role of Timur Barlas and the Timurids, the legacy of Mongol dynasties—all this unfolds without ruptures with Soviet culture, and with a strong desire for intellectual exchange with Western Academia, the European one in particular. Angelika Neuwirth, with her much-debated monograph* Der Koran als Text der Spätantike. Ein europäischer Zugang*, was already moving in this direction: if the Qur'an is part of the literary paradigms of late antique Europe, then it is part of European culture. Why, by contrast, do some in Europe consider it problematic to study the impact of the Qur'an on the continent's religious history? And why do you believe it remains essential to continue doing so?

Your question is a political one, and I am always somewhat uncomfortable with political questions. When we began the EuQu project, we assumed that any difficulties would come from Muslim communities—perhaps from fundamentalist groups who might object to our studying Qur'anic translations, accusing us of appropriation or Orientalism. But this has not been the case at all. Our experience in Uzbekistan last summer showed the opposite: in Muslim countries, there is enormous interest in these research topics. Research institutes, public discourse, cultural institutions—everywhere the Qur'an is at the centre, not only as scripture but as a cultural, aesthetic, and intellectual artifact. And the translation of this sacred text, as of all other sacred texts, is problematic and a matter of debate in non-Arabic-speaking Muslim countries. The fact that the situation is so different in Europe has to do, I believe, with a renewed—perhaps never fully absent—idea of purity. A desire for purity within Europe that is not only religious but also, let us say, physical or racial. This is closely tied to the resurgence of nationalism, which has grown stronger in recent years. When we launched the project, we did not anticipate how powerful this return of nationalist sentiment would be. We thought the Qur'an could be approached from an intellectual and historical perspective without provoking sensitivities. Yet it has generated enormous problems and attacks. This forces us to reflect on the meaning and relevance of what we do, and on why certain areas of research are so difficult for some people

to accept. There is a persistent effort to draw clear boundaries, to avoid 'contamination' or 'infiltration'. But this is misguided.

As I mentioned, much of what we study shows that Islam has long served as an instrument—or even a pretext—for Christians and later Europeans to debate among themselves. The same has happened with Judaism, as you know. Our project focuses on Islam, and one of the most striking examples is how Islamic texts circulated in sixteenth-century England to debate whether bishopric as a religious institution should be abolished, or how they were used by Antitrinitarian Protestant groups, such as the Socinians, to polemicise against the Catholic Church. What does that have to do with Islam? And yet Islamic materials were mobilised in these internal Christian controversies. From the perspective of intellectual history, this is extraordinarily revealing. If one knows the circulation, translation, and collection of Arabic books well, one can trace the theological and political history of Europe through them. Book history and history of theology, with its political implications, emerge as two inseparable dimensions of the same historical process. For me, this has become absolutely clear.

Granada

At the end of October, you organised at the School of Arabic Studies in Granada the final EuQu conference, where the results of the various teams were discussed and compared. The Madrid group's work was complemented by an exhibition on Qur'ans and Qur'anic materials circulating in Iberia between the Middle Ages and the early modern period—both in dominant Islamic contexts (Almohad, Nasrid) and among Islamic minorities or converted Muslim communities under Catholic rule. The research carried out on the ways Qur'anic manuscripts were transcribed and used, on their preservation in private homes and in Islamic mosques, on the redactional models of the Qur'an in relation to Maghrebi or Eastern traditions, on techniques of recitation and prayer, and on the exegetical literature—including popular forms—that developed from them, all demonstrate, in your view and that of your team, that this substantial and varied corpus of Qur'anic material must be considered constitutive of a 'European Qur'an'. This conclusion, for which Iberian Islam is again at the centre of the stage, recalls your widely disseminated book with Fernando Rodríguez Mediano,* The Orient in Spain*, which shows—through Churchmen like Archbishop Hernando de Talavera or much-debated cases like the Lead Books of the Sacromonte—how the study of Arabic was constitutive of early modern Catholic Spain. How 'exportable' are Iberia's interreligious dynamics to other European and extra-European contexts on a historical level? Can the historical uniqueness of the Iberian context—once analysed and broken down into its constituent elements—become an analytical tool that allows us to approach other issues and scenarios, even those far removed from the Iberian model in both geography and chronology?

Granada was, in many ways, a return home for me. One of my main areas of research, together with Fernando Rodríguez Mediano, had been the Morisco fraud known as the Lead Books of the Sacromonte. Through the extensive archival work we carried out on the fabrication of a supposed ancient Arabic Christian text—a Gospel dictated in Arabic by the Virgin Mary to her Arabic disciples—we explored the construction of sacred origins (an issue that also concerned other parts of Europe, especially Italy and France), the incorporation of a particular version of Islam allegedly linked to primitive Christian Arabs—not only a *hebraica veritas* but also an Arabic-Islamic *veritas*—and the process by which the Spanish monarchy sought to build a national Church in opposition to Rome. A process not so different from what unfolded in England with Anglicanism. All these issues were present for me during the conference at the Escuela de Estudios Árabes, alongside the exhibition and the presentation of our final results. Granada itself allowed us to reflect on the Iberian dimension of the project, and on the forms of Iberian Catholicism that took shape against—or through—Islam, Judaism, and the Roman Church.

One of the most debated aspects was the panel organised by our Madrid team, which focused on what we might call the 'Iberian Qur'an'—but understood within its Islamic context. As I have said, when we began EuQu, we intended to study the Qur'an primarily within European intellectual history. We did not set out to study Islam itself. Yet, as the project unfolded, it became clear that we were also studying Islam within Europe. The Qur'an was not only a Christian object of polemic, scholarship, or curiosity; it was also central to the lives of Muslims living in Europe, often in complex social conditions. The collecting of *tafsir*, the preservation of manuscripts in private homes, the devotional uses of the text—all of this showed that the Qur'an in Europe was simultaneously a Christian and an Islamic Qur'an.

Why an Iberian Qur'an then? Because the Iberian case reveals how deeply entangled Europe has always been with Islam. And here I must return to something that became even clearer to me in Uzbekistan: contemporary European knowledge of Islam is overwhelmingly shaped by Arab, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean Islam. That is what we instinctively think of as 'Islam'. But when you go to Uzbekistan, or to India, or to Indonesia—as we did—you discover vast worlds in which Islam is lived, practiced, and conceptualised in very different ways. This is why the notion of 'local Islam' has always been important for me. Even with a sacred text, there are different ways of dividing it, reciting it, interpreting it, and transmitting it. In Granada, we saw again how Iberian Islam—through Spain and through its connections with Rome—entered Europe. This is the Islam that Europe came to know.

For our project, this has been crucial. We wanted to understand the intellectual and religious history of Europe, and many aspects of that history become clearer when we follow how Islamic sacred texts were used, appropriated, or rejected. The microscopic dimension—the Iberian case—illuminates the macroscopic one. And Iberia is not the only example. Italy, and especially Rome, offers another laboratory: in the early modern period, as the Catholic Church lost territories to Protestantism, it

sought to attract the Arabic-speaking Eastern Churches to Rome. Institutions such as the Maronite College, the Propaganda Fide, the Collegio dei Neofiti, and the production of catechisms in Arabic show how Arabic—and even the Qur'an—became tools for defining Catholic identity. Typography, translation, and linguistic expertise were essential instruments for shaping the Catholic encounter with Islam. So, in a sense, Iberia is unique, yes, but not isolated. It is one of several laboratories, though certainly on a particularly large scale, in which Europe defined itself through its engagement with Islam.

Oxford

And finally, the sixth place: Oxford, where you will soon spend several weeks at the Bodleian Library to deliver the prestigious Lyell Lectures. Your title—* Muslim Books in Christian Hands: From Iberian Moriscos to Early Modern Europe*—speaks for itself. You have increasingly come to see religious books—not only the Qur'an—as a driving force in European religious history. Books, either manuscript or printed, run through your work: not only 'high' theological literature, which you once called 'spiritual', but also texts for less learned readers, such as Morisco collections of Qur'anic materials or political prophecies linked to messianic figures and charismatic leaders, which were also disseminated among non-learned people. In the past two years, you've focused on the reading practices and book cultures of scholars and travellers—figures like Nicolas Clenard or Fernando Colón, and now you are going to work on a Morisco reader and writer such as Muhamad Alguazir. Their libraries condense the entire universe of your research: painstakingly assembled collections later dispersed, which, once reconstructed, reveal both individual interests and composite models of traditions that seem incompatible outside the mind that brought them together. In your recent work, the book itself—not only its author or translator—takes on an 'interstitial' role, an expression used by historians of early Christianity to define the first 'followers of the Way' who did not yet define themselves nor were yet defined as Christians: the book as a medium through which religious identity fractures and reconstitutes itself, resists monolithism and political instrumentalisation, opens to traditions later perceived as 'external', and renews itself between harmonisation and conflict, incorporation and rejection. How much of what is condensed in the microcosm of books helps us understand broader social and religious realities beyond libraries and readers' minds? In Madrid, we spent many afternoons in your office discussing books that had apparently nothing to do with our ongoing historical investigations… and yet they shaped our research questions and instilled in us doubts and ideas about our actual work. Do you think we are driven by what we might call an archaeological and even nostalgic impulse—one rooted in a time when the historian was, above all, a humanist and an insatiable, omnivorous reader of literature and philosophy? Or do you feel that,

in the way you study the past through the circulation of books, you have found a further opening onto the future?

This is the most difficult question you have asked me, because in fact I came to religious books rather late in my career. As I mentioned at the beginning, I started as a social historian. I paid close attention to individual trajectories, to microhistory, and I owe a great deal to the Italian *maestri* who opened for me new ways of understanding society and religion. Religious books expanded in my work gradually—partly because of the Lead Books of Granada, which I have mentioned, partly through co-directing the EuQu project, and partly because I was invited to deliver the Lyell Lectures in Oxford, which are explicitly bibliographical and focused on the history of the book.

A telling example of what I am going to present in Oxford is the trajectory of certain Christian books read by Moriscos, which later reappeared on the Index of Forbidden Books. These itineraries remind us that the circulation of texts was never unidirectional: Moriscos and pious Catholics, in different ways, shaped one another's ways of understanding and living religion. Yet these encounters also compel us to question the stability of the very categories we use. To what extent can we meaningfully describe these configurations as distinct 'religions'? What comes into view is the ambush of sectarian subjectivities, and of the hermeneutics, politics, and sociologies that produce them, raising the unsettling possibility that the vocabulary of 'religions' may not be fully adequate to capture those subjectivities.

Over the years, I accumulated a great deal of material, not only on the books people read—such as those confiscated by the Inquisition—but also on the books that were translated, and on who decided which books should be translated. For example, I had already been working on the period immediately after the conquest of Granada, when evangelisation and missionary activity began. If you look at the books translated under royal patronage in those years, involving personalities such as the archbishop of Granada, Hernando de Talavera, Cardinal Cisneros, and the Catholic monarchs themselves, you understand much better the intellectual and political intentions behind them. Alongside the full or partial translation of the Qur'an by Juan de Segovia and Juan Andrés, there were many other works—devotional texts, catechisms, and lives of Christ. These choices reveal the logic guiding the early modern monarchy. This helps explain why Spain, which for centuries had allowed Jews and Muslims to live legally in their own communities—as in the Ottoman Empire—suddenly expelled the Jews and forcibly converted the Muslims. Such a dramatic shift cannot be explained simply in terms of 'good' versus 'evil', or 'tolerance' versus 'intolerance'. These moral binaries are comforting when one wishes to avoid complexity, but they do not help us understand historical change. These transformations were extremely complex, and books played an important role in them.

You might say—and you already claimed it, not wrongly—that books are important to me because they matter to me personally. I live among books of all kinds, not only historical ones. But what interests me is not Islamic books alone; it is the

books that were translated, patronised, edited, censored, or forbidden. Studying these books is extraordinarily illuminating for understanding what kind of religiosity was being constructed, and for what purposes—often imperial or political. Through them, we can observe how authorities managed what we would now call propaganda, how they invented traditions, and how they shaped collective identities. This is not only an Iberian phenomenon. Rome, France, and other European centres show similar dynamics. Think of Guillaume Postel, constantly searching for traces of the Gauls in the Qur'an, or Annius of Viterbo and the Etruscans; or of the Typographia Medicea Orientalis in Rome, which was committed to the use of Arabic script and was crucial for Catholic engagement with Islam. These processes reveal trajectories and nuances that, to me, are often more telling about people's lives than the actions of armies and kings—though, of course, books often supported those armies and kings.

Epilogue

Well, I should just thank you very much for your time, for sharing so many concerns and ideas, and leave you now. But I cannot restrain myself from acting, at least for a while, as a prophet rather than as a chronist, thus looking at a slightly farther future. May I ask you what comes after Oxford? What intellectual horizons do you see opening beyond the geographies we have discussed?

If I look beyond Oxford, I realise that much of what I still want to explore grows out of the project that preceded EuQu—especially my ERC on religious conversion. That work has profoundly shaped the way I look at religious history. I became interested not only in what happens to individuals when large numbers of people convert, but also in how these conversions affect the majority society: the mechanisms of assimilation, the construction of something perceived as inassimilable, the rhetoric of fear—fear of contagion, fear of infiltration. Issues and dynamics that have been investigated in the collective book *After Conversion. Iberia and the Emergence of Modernity*. The investigations collected here show how the collapse of Iberian pluralism and the mass conversions of Jews and Muslims generated not only new religious identities but also new interpretive categories that historians must interrogate rather than inherit. Inquisition labels such as 'Judaising' or 'Mohammedanising' did not simply describe dissent; they produced it, shaping the very phenomena they claimed to detect. The historian's task is to dismantle these categories, to read sources against their prescriptive grain, and to understand how genealogy, faith, race, and suspicion became entangled in defining 'orthodoxy'. Iberia thus becomes a laboratory for examining how sources manufacture the realities they record, and how historical inquiry must confront the opacity of interior belief and the epistemic violence of classification.

Looking at the aftermath of forced conversions, I wanted to understand both the causes of these processes, such as messianism and millenarian expectations, and their consequences: scepticism, distancing from religion, and forms of unbelief that emerge when people are exposed to intense, militant religious messages. Are they

convinced? Are they confused? Do they want to join, or do they withdraw? These psychological and emotional dimensions are essential for understanding religious identity. This also relates to what people choose to keep when they must abandon a religious identity: food, music, gestures, festivals—elements that suddenly acquire enormous emotional weight. Exile, which we discussed earlier, plays a role here as well. Inquisition sources are invaluable for this kind of work, because they contain both the narratives of people's lives and the inventories of their confiscated goods. In borderlands such as Mallorca, Sicily, or Malta, you find individuals who convert repeatedly, or who convert and then return. These cases are extraordinarily revealing. This is why microhistory remains essential for me: I need many small, apparently marginal examples to begin to see larger patterns, like assembling a mosaic whose design only becomes visible at a certain distance.

At the moment, I am particularly interested in clandestine baptism—both in Ottoman lands and in Mediterranean border zones. One might assume that baptism would be clandestine only where Christianity is forbidden, but that is not always the case. Sometimes baptism has a talismanic function even for Muslims who remain Muslim but wish to baptise their children for protection. This raises questions about the talismanic and protective dimensions of religion that we too often dismiss as 'magic' or 'superstition'. But why should these practices be considered magic, while kissing the statue of the Virgin during a procession is considered true religion? Why is one superstition and the other devotion? These margins of belief, these zones where categories blur, are crucial for understanding the making of the three religions we have been discussing.

I would like to continue along this path: to explore the margins of beliefs which are not, and should not be, a priori or externally defined.