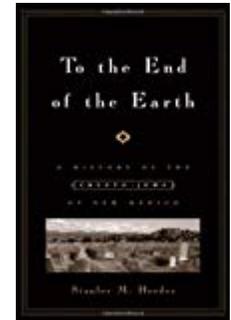


**Stanley M. Hordes.** *To the End of the Earth: A History of the Crypto-Jews of New Mexico.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. 376 pp. \$39.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-12936-7.



**Reviewed by** Matt O'Hara

**Published on** H-Atlantic (July, 2006)

In 1642 the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Mexico City arrested María de Rivera and her mother, Blanca Méndez de Rivera, suspecting that the two were *judaizantes*, literally "judaizers" or clandestine practitioners of Jewish observances, a term commonly translated as crypto-Jews. *Conversos* (individuals who had converted from Judaism to Catholicism) and their descendents were forbidden to travel to Spain's possessions in the Indies, but historians of the subject know that many made the journey across the Atlantic. The Inquisitors of the Holy Office were responsible for "reconciling" to the faith those *conversos* who continued to engage in Jewish practices. A few days after her arrest, María bemoaned their fate to her mother. "We're lost," she said, "and we'll have to flee to the ends of the earth" (p. 1).[1] Languishing some four years after her arrest, María de Rivera would eventually die in the secret prison of the Inquisition.

Suspected or actual crypto-Jews such as Rivera and her mother comprised part of the elusive Atlantic World diaspora that historian Stanley Hordes traces in *To the End of the Earth: A*

*History of the Crypto Jews of New Mexico.* Hordes follows the faint trail of crypto-Judaism from the late medieval Iberian peninsula to post-conquest New Spain, continuing through to present-day New Mexico. Covering a broad geography and chronology, Hordes suggests that the legacy of a deep crypto-Jewish history can still be found in contemporary New Mexico. Ultimately, however, the book's argument is more suggestive than definitive, partly a result of the scarcity and ambiguity of the extant sources documenting this past.

The book is organized around eight chapters. Synthesizing secondary sources, chapter 1 offers a pithy overview of the *converso* experience on the Iberian peninsula prior to 1492, explaining some of the social, cultural, and political pressures that led to the conversion or expulsion of most Iberian Jews at the end of the fifteenth century. Chapters 2 through 4 describe the emergence of a *converso* diaspora in New Spain during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and the gradual northward migration of some individuals with probable *converso* ancestry, a claim supported by the author's research into the Mexican Inquisi-

tion's *judaizante* cases. Hordes finds patron-client networks surrounding a number of prominent individuals of apparent New Christian ancestry, suggesting a relatively cohesive *converso* community in seventeenth-century New Spain.

Many of the *judaizante* cases for central New Spain, often centered on Mexico City, occurred in two large Inquisitorial sweeps, one in the 1590s and a second beginning in 1642. The proximate cause for both of these waves of cases was Spanish fear of the substantial Portuguese population in New Spain and that group's potential to foment political unrest within the colonies. The 1642 investigations, for example, occurred not long after the successful revolt led by the Portuguese Duke of Bragança in 1640, which ended Spain's sixty-year dominance of Portugal. Hordes argues that such attacks on suspected crypto-Jews in central New Spain, and also in the northern frontier region of Nuevo León, led some individuals of *converso* ancestry to continue their diasporic flight "to the ends of the earth," including to the recently settled frontier of New Mexico. This claim is fairly well substantiated by Hordes's extensive genealogical research in Mexico, Spain, and Portugal, which unearthed compelling, if circumstantial, evidence demonstrating New Christian ancestry for a number of early New Mexicans.

Subsequent chapters trace this *converso* population and its practices up to the apparent vestiges of crypto-Judaism in some contemporary New Mexican communities and families. Chapter 6 covers the period from 1680 to 1846, focusing especially on the years when Europeans reestablished a presence in New Mexico following the Pueblo revolt of 1680. This was a time, Hordes asserts, when the factors that led to earlier persecutions of suspected crypto-Jews were reduced, such as the conflict between civil officials and Franciscan missionaries in the years preceding the revolt. The Holy Office also seems to have been less interested in prosecuting *judaizante* cases, which means that Hordes was forced to rely on ge-

nealogical records and marriage patterns to determine the extent of New Mexico's *converso* population and its cohesion as a community.

Chapter 7 examines the first century of U.S. rule in New Mexico (1846-1950), using naming pattern data to suggest a potential resurgence of crypto-Jewish identity following the region's separation from Mexico as a result of the U.S.-Mexican war. For instance, Hordes notes a substantial increase in the number of biblical names given to children where the name was not associated with a Catholic saint's feast day near the child's date of birth. The most plausible explanation for such a change, Hordes suggests, was a newfound sense of security for crypto-Jews following the abolition of the Mexican Inquisition in 1821 and the formal freedom of religion that came with U.S. annexation. Chapter 8 describes some potential remnants of New Mexico's *converso* and crypto-Jewish past in the form of cultural practices reported or observed among families and communities in twentieth-century New Mexico, including abstinence from eating pork, animal slaughters meant to minimize the consumption of blood, and grave-stones carved with potentially Jewish symbolism.

The author's interpretations raise some concerns. Hordes often assumes that the presence of *converso* descendents in New Spain or New Mexico, or even Inquisitorial investigations of crypto-Judaism, demonstrate the existence of a crypto-Jewish population. For example, Hordes often uses the term *converso* and crypto-Jew synonymously, when the terms mean very different things. The former refers to forced converts from Judaism to Catholicism or their descendents, while the latter refers to one who has undergone a forced conversion but who self-identifies as Jewish or practices Jewish observances in secret. Historical sources may have sometimes conflated *converso* with *judaizante*, but the tension between these two terms and their changing meaning over time demand careful examination by researchers. Hordes might have resolved this re-

viewer's concerns by spending more time explaining the social context surrounding the Inquisition files that are the documentary foundation of the book. Who denounced these supposed *judaizantes*? Why? What was their relationship to those they denounced? As Hordes notes, a politically motivated denunciation does not rule out that the charges were true. It does mean, however, that the historian must approach such cases with a great deal of caution.

*To the End of the Earth* offers an intriguing thesis: practices and individuals in contemporary New Mexico can be traced back to a crypto-Jewish diaspora originating in the fifteenth-century Iberian peninsula. The book is at its best when it sticks close to its documentary base, such as the thoughtful examination of occasional waves of *judaizante* investigations conducted by the Mexican Inquisition. At other points, however, Hordes's data is open to a number of potential interpretations. The Inquisition cases he used, for example, may tell us as much about the political battles that spawned them as they do about the crypto-Jewish practices that they were meant to investigate. The very ambiguity of such data and the author's ambitious attempt to trace a centuries-long crypto-Jewish presence in New Mexico--one of the outermost reaches of the Atlantic World--would make this book an interesting choice for a graduate seminar on historical method or Atlantic World diasporas.

#### Note

[1]. Quoted in Robert Ferry, "The Blancas: Women, Honor, and the Jewish Community in Seventeenth-Century Mexico" (paper presented at the Fourteenth Annual Conference of the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society, Albuquerque, November 10, 2001), pp. 22-23.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-atlantic>

**Citation:** Matt O'Hara. Review of Hordes, Stanley M. *To the End of the Earth: A History of the Crypto-Jews of New Mexico*. H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. July, 2006.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11990>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.