Reading Against the Grain

Interpreting Hostile Sources on Religious Minorities In Early Modern Europe

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In the early modern period, when it came to religion, the mainstream Church dominated everything it touched. It asserted itself so fully that no other religion could thrive alongside it. Such was the case for the Moriscos and Anabaptists trying to maintain their own cultural identity in a world determined to create homogeneity. *The Trial and Martyrdom of Elizabeth,* a seventeenth-century Anabaptist account of Dirks' interrogation and execution in Amsterdam (1549) and *Doubting Conversion: The Spanish Inquisition Investigates a Morisco* (1622) a legal record of the Inquisition's investigation of Diego Díaz in Cuenca, Spain.[1] Both sources illuminate how institutions sought to regulate belief and behavior, revealing the theological and social pressures faced by religious minorities. In this paper, I will analyze the sources, provide a methodology to my approach in using hostile sources such as these, and evaluate the insights they offer into the mechanisms of religious persecution, the construction of communal identity, and the ways in which institutional power sought to regulate belief and behavior in early modern Europe.

Examining *The Trial and Martyrdom of Elizabeth Dirks* through its production reveals its constructed purpose, moving beyond the surface narrative. The document is an excerpt from *Martyr's Mirror*, a seventeenth-century martyrology compiled by T. J. van Braght. The trial took place in 1549 in Amsterdam. Dirks—an Anabaptist woman from Friesland—had fled a convent and became associated with the Anabaptist leader Menno Simons. Dirks was arrested and questioned by Catholic authorities on the grounds of heresy. The text is not ac-

1 Denis R. Janz, ed., *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductio*ns, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 157-160; "Doubting Conversion: The Spanish Inquisition investigates a Morisco (1622)," in *Lives Uncovered: A Sourcebook of Early Modern Europe*, ed. Nicholas Terpstra (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 217-220.

quired from judicial records but from Martyr's Mirror, a compilation of martyr's testimonies made by Dutch Anabaptists to honor their co-religionists who died. Nevertheless, while it may have been stylized or condensed by Anabaptist editors, we cannot discount its origin as a trial record. Thus, the document functions dually: as a reflection of Catholic judicial procedure and as a curated Anabaptist narrative of resistance and martyrdom.

The formal construct of the source demonstrates a dual nature. Firstly, it takes on a dialogue style that reproduces a question-and-answer format, typical of heresy proceedings. Dirks is labeled as "Elizabeth" while her interrogators are labeled as "Lords." There are doctrinal questions regarding baptism, mass, ecclesiastical authority, and forgiveness of sins.[2] In addition to that, and perhaps more intriguingly, there are features of martyrology that become apparent on a keener read. Dirks' resolve, her endurance despite torture, and her unwillingness to confess is palpable. For instance, when presented with respite from torture she responds, "Ask me, and I shall answer you: for I no longer feel the least pain in my flesh, as I did before."[3] From this, we can deduce that the text serves a descriptive purpose and a prescriptive one. It provides an account for legal proceedings and simultaneously promotes a moral ideal. Furthermore, the record can be considered a reasonably accurate representation of her own beliefs; despite being a Catholic trial document, she appears remarkably learned and articulate, traits not presented in the interest of the Church. This suggests that the document holds a degree of reliability. Given its prescriptive aim to shape community identity, the intended audience was clearly other Anabaptists. We can therefore infer that the editors of *Martyrs Mirror* were seeking to exhort their brethren amid persecution while affirming core Anabaptist doctrines despite said persecution. Dirks is portrayed as a spiritually literate and disciplined woman who is unflinching, and unapologetic about her convictions. Her answers reflect theological positions taken by the Anabaptists. For example, she rejects the Mass as a sacrament, denies the priest's authority to absolve sins, articulates a soteriological position in which Christ is both necessary and sufficient for salvation, and—most controversially among other Christians—refuses to accept the validity of infant baptism.[4]

The reliability of the account is complicated by several factors. The first layer of complication is that it is a Catholic trial record (a hostile source). Early modern legal transcripts were already shaped by significant filtering, as a clerk would summarize or reframe dialogue to meet legal standards. The fact that Dirks was being tortured further complicates reliability, as testimonies given under duress are not reliable by nature. A second layer is the hagiographical bias introduced by its martyrological presentation. The editors of the text emphasize Dirks' heroism and theological eloquence, and they may have amplified or simplified aspects of the interrogation to serve spiritual goals. Taking these factors into

2 Janz, *A Reformation Reader,* 158.
3 Janz, *A Reformation Reader,* 159.
4 Janz, *A Reformation Reader,* 158.

consideration, the source cannot be treated as a fully transparent account but can be used as a potentially factual interrogation with strong editorial intention.

A similar but institutionally distinct form of filtering is evident in the second source, *Doubting Conversion: The Spanish Inquisition Investigates a Morisco* (1622). It is an official legal document that records the prosecution of Diego Diaz, a meat cutter from Belmonte, Spain. Due to it being an inquisitorial proceeding, it reflects the priorities of the Spanish Inquisition. The record was produced at Cuenca in 1622.[5] This was a time when the Inquisition aimed to identify and punish apostasy among forcibly converted populations. The fundamental question this source cannot resolve is: how many Moriscos (or conversos) were not genuine in their Christian faith? Despite being expelled from Spain in 1609-1614, some Moriscos (Muslims who converted to Christianity) remained and were always the subject of suspicion of secret apostasy. This sets up the source for a tense climate of surveillance and suspicion.

Several parties take credit for the authorship of the source. Diaz provided an initial confession and a defense. The source notes that he did not sign them because he was illiterate.[6] His statements in the prosecution are written by the notary, Baltassar Irigoyen y Alamoria, while the charges against him were formulated by the prosecutor, Doctor Alonso de Vallejo.[7] The source belongs to the genre of Inquisition court proceedings. It includes an initial confession, accusation, and a written defense. The transcript included proposed evidence that Diaz was a false convert. They accused him of being a “Mohammedizer” on the grounds of avoiding pork, neglecting Mass, changing his shirt on Fridays, and cooking with olive oil instead of lard.[8]

The intended audience of the document was the Tribunal of the Holy Office, which was responsible for determining guilt, sentencing, and punishing. On one hand, Diaz’s purpose is to defend his innocence by affirming his Christian identity and challenging the credibility of his accusers, notwithstanding the overwhelming amount of institutional power held by the prosecution.[9] On the other hand, the prosecution’s purpose was to draw up evidence enough to condemn Diaz or possibly torture to elicit further confession.[10]

When viewed through this prosecutorial lens, even the most mundane details of Díaz’s life become charged evidence. Superficially, the document reveals the daily practices of a Morisco in early seventeenth-century Spain. It records Diaz’s food choices, clothes, hygiene, work habits, and religious observance. These mundane activities are filtered through the lenses of suspicion and inferring Is-

5 Terpstra, *Lives Uncovered*, 217.
6 Terpstra, *Lives Uncovered*, 219.
7 Terpstra, *Lives Uncovered*, 218.
8 Terpstra, *Lives Uncovered*, 218.
9 Terpstra, *Lives Uncovered*, 220.
10 Terpstra, *Lives Uncovered*, 219.

lamic loyalty from trivial actions.[11]

Considering all of this, reliability concerns arise from the source. Firstly, Diaz's true statements may not be well represented by the scribes who recorded them due to his illiteracy. Moreover, the threat of torture—requested by the prosecutor—renders the testimony suspect.[12] In addition to that, Diaz cannot make a spontaneous statement as he can only answer questions. The use of cultural markers instead of questioning intent as evidence for apostasy reveals a discriminatory aspect of the prosecution. These factors indicate that the text is shaped far more by coercion, cultural prejudice, and institutional priorities than by the authentic voice of the accused. Ultimately, the source reveals mechanisms of Inquisitorial suspicion, and the criminalization of Morisco cultural practices.

Despite being separated by local, temporal, and confessional differences, these sources are appropriate to compare because they share a common structure, purpose, and methodological challenges. Both sources originate from an interrogation proceeding where the religious minority is questioned by a powerful institution. Both authorities in the sources come into the proceeding with pre-conceived notions which affects how the questions are framed and consequently, the answer given. Despite having different theological targets, both sources frame the religious minority through hostile interpretive lenses. Because of these parallels, both sources address the same fundamental methodological problem: how to extract trustworthy historical data from records that were created to punish, coerce, or denigrate the people they portray. Thus, contrasting the two highlights the unique challenges encountered by various minority communities while also shedding insight on more general trends in early modern governmental power, religious monitoring, and the literary production of deviance.

Because both documents were produced by institutions hostile to the individuals they describe, my approach relies on methods suited to reading adversarial or disciplinary sources. I examine each text through reading against the grain, identifying what the documents reveal unintentionally about belief, authority, and social control. I treat doctrinal statements, accusations, and patterns of questioning as evidence of the priorities and assumptions of the institutions that produced these records. I also attend to the limits of these documents by considering what they omit, idealize, or distort. This methodological caution allows me to use these hostile records not for the 'truth' about Dirks or Díaz, but to reconstruct the ideological and disciplinary frameworks that sought to define them.

In the face of a myriad of reliability concerns, *The Trial and Martyrdom of Elizabeth Dirks* still provides us insight regarding Elizabeth Dirks' theological positions, which in the face of Catholic questions were defiant stances. The source is a repository of Anabaptist attitudes. First, I will evaluate the theological position that earned them the name "Anabaptist" (re-baptizer) from other Chris-

11 Terpstra, *Lives Uncovered*, 218-219.
12 Terpstra, *Lives Uncovered*, 219.

tians. Anabaptists not only reject baptism but also reject the idea that salvation can be gotten during baptism. This is demonstrated by one of Dirk's responses, "No, my lords, all the water in the sea could not save me; but salvation is in Christ (Acts 4:10)." This quote powerfully separates the physical act of baptism from the spiritual reality of salvation. It reliably shows that for Anabaptists, baptism was an outward sign of an inward, pre-existing faith, and had no salvific power in itself—a direct rebuttal of Catholic (and Lutheran) infant baptism theology. Secondly, Dirks articulates the Anabaptist posture towards communion. When asked about the Holy Sacrament, she responds with, "I have never in my life read in the Holy Scriptures of a holy sacrament, but of the Lord's Supper." She favors "Lord's Supper" instead of sacrament, with its implications of priestly mediation, and by doing so, underscores the Anabaptist approach toward communion. To them, it is a memorial practice and symbolic ordinance that was instituted by Christ. According to Catholic ecclesiology, the church is conceived as the locus of God's real and abiding presence on earth. Dirks responds to a question about whether she considers the church the physical house of God with, "No, my lords, for it is written: 'Ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, "I will dwell in them and walk in them." 2 Corinthians 6:16." Her response questions sacramental and institutional authority found in church buildings and liturgical spaces. It also aligns with broader Anabaptist theology, which emphasized the gathered community of believers over ecclesiastical hierarchy or material sanctuaries. In the interrogation setting, her scriptural citation functions not simply as a doctrinal clarification, but an assertion of a competing vision of where divine presence resides and who has access to it.[13]

Furthermore, the source provides an account of the reality of persecution and martyrdom for Anabaptists. The source states that she was tortured by the use of thumbscrews until she bled. The source concludes when she is sentenced to death by drowning. Her sentence is reminiscent, rather sadistically, of core Anabaptist teaching of rejecting infant baptism.[14] Equally significant is the source's challenge to assumptions about women's passivity in the Reformation era. The interrogators say, "We say that you are a teacher, and that you seduce many."[15] They saw her as somebody who could organize, persuade and instruct others—roles that were usually assumed by men. From the concern of the authorities, we can infer that Dirks exercised influence within her community to an extent which was considered a threat to the orthodox order. What's more, her ability to cite scripture is not only a sign of biblical literacy but also a sign of interpretive confidence, which underscores her authoritative role.

While the preceding analysis highlights what the document can disclose, it is equally important to acknowledge the substantial limits of what it cannot. It cannot provide an objective reconstruction of Dirks' interrogation, her physi-

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13 Janz, *A Reformation Reader*, 158.
14 Janz, *A Reformation Reader*, 160.
15 Janz, *A Reformation Reader*, 157.

cal experience, or the experience of Anabaptists in other regions of Europe. The dialogue has perfect citations and rebuttals while the actual proceedings must have been fragmented and less rhetorically polished. Finally, because it presents a single, idealized Anabaptist voice, the document cannot illuminate the internal diversity of the movement or the range of theological and political positions held by other Anabaptist groups.

From the Inquisition interrogation of Diego Diaz, there is some information that we can reliably extract. This information includes: the ideological and legal framework of the Inquisition, the machinery of power and procedure, and the social and cultural landscape. Diaz's accusations reflect the Inquisition's priorities. We can deduce that the Inquisition was seeking a cultural homogeneity in Spain despite having Moriscos—formerly Muslim converts to Christianity—who were distinct culturally from the Castilian Christians. Going from this premise, the Inquisition viewed specifically, often mundane, acts as evidence of apostasy. Specifically, the Inquisition interpreted mundane, daily acts as signs of heresy. For instance, Diego Diaz is accused of not eating pork (eating pork is prohibited in Islam). This reliably tells us that dietary laws were a key marker of religious identity and that adherence to them was seen as a deliberate rejection of Christianity. The Inquisition made no exceptions for dietary preferences or palate differences; eating pork was a proof of true conversion. Furthermore, the Inquisition closely policed outward expressions of piety. He is accused of not owning a rosary and failing to instruct his children on the Christian faith.[16] These accusations demonstrate that the Inquisition was policing religious adherence. Finally, the source reveals how language and cultural expression were also suspect. Diaz is accused of speaking Arabic and singing Moorish songs.[17] This reveals that language and culture were inextricably linked to faith in the eyes of the authorities. The preservation of Arabic itself was suspected. Though not explicitly stated, the Inquisition court glorifies the concept of "Limpieza de Sangre" (purity of blood). This is the main reason that Diaz is a suspect in the first place. The document reliably illustrates that conversion was often not considered sufficient; "blood" and lineage were seen as determinants of belief. This idea is demonstrated by the quote, "Asked to declare if he was descended from Moors or Moriscos or from any other bad sect reproved by our Holy Catholic faith, and if on different occasions some people who were disgusted with him had called him "Moor."[18]

Beyond the content of the accusations, the formal construction of the trial record reveals the Inquisition's distinctive methodology. The structure of the questions themselves is particularly telling. For example, the Inquisition used leading questions instead of the standard open-ended question. The question, "Why has he not heard Mass on Sundays or festivals of obligation?" was

16 Terpstra, *Lives Uncovered*, 218.
17 Terpstra, *Lives Uncovered*, 219.
18 Terpstra, *Lives Uncovered*, 217.

used, rather than the open-ended "Do you hear Mass on Sundays?"[19] Notably, the document fails to list witnesses from the prosecution. However, Diaz brings to question the credibility of his accusers and alleges malicious intent on their end. This defensive move is revealing; it implies that accusations could stem from personal vendettas within a broader culture of surveillance in Inquisition Spain. While their motives are unclear, their existence is a reliable data point. It proves that the Inquisition relied on a community-level informant system. The fact that a neighbor, a servant, or even a family member testified against Diaz reveals a society fractured by mutual suspicion. Besides that, the very existence of this case in 1622 is significant considering that Moriscos were expelled from 1609-1614 and Muslims were forced to convert a century before then. Due to this, we can glean that there was still a notable Morisco presence; the Inquisition remained consistently paranoid about the "Morisco problem" long after the expulsion and that crypto-Islamic practices, or at least cultural habits perceived as such, persisted stubbornly.

In conclusion, both *The Trial and Martyrdom of Elizabeth Dirks* and *Doubting Conversion: The Spanish Inquisition Investigates a Morisco* (1622) both reveal more about the authorities that produced them than the people they condemned. The Anabaptist martyrology and the Inquisition transcript are not transparent accounts of Dirks or Díaz, but documents of institutional power. Their biases become evidence. When it comes to these hostile sources, it is better to analyze how and why things are said more than what is said. By doing so, we uncover the mechanisms of control in early modern Europe: one community shaping memory through persecution, another enforcing conformity through surveillance.

19 Terpstra, *Lives Uncovered*, 218.