

Building the past through the eyes of the present.

Were the Kingdoms of Medieval Spain a model of tolerance?

María Jesús Fuente
Universidad Carlos III de Madrid

Over the last ten years, several famous and infamous figures, have referred to Medieval Spain in noteworthy ways. The first of them was Osama Bin Laden, who, in October 2001, the day that the bombing of Afghanistan by the American troops started, said: “The world must know that we will not allow in Palestine a repetition of the tragedy of Al Ándalus”. Bin Laden went along with the path followed recently by Arab scholars of idealizing the Arabic past, in particular the culture of Al Andalus.

Three years later, after the attacks on the trains in Madrid in March 2004, President of the Spanish government, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, proposed the alliance of civilizations. In a speech he pointed out:

I represent a country, Spain, that has always been a crossroads and point of encounter of cultures, traditions and religions. We have a multiple and diverse identity, with strong Mediterranean roots, and we work on it because we know and appreciate its wealth. We aspire, as we did in the famous Toledo School of translators and at other times of our history, to be introducers, translators and facilitators of encounters and dialogues.

More recently, in his speech at El Cairo University, President of the United States Barack Hussein Obama also remembered that past: “Islam has a proud tradition of tolerance. We see it in the history of Andalusia and Cordoba during the Inquisition”. This small historical mistake does not decrease the interest of the comment. Obama’s words resemble those said by Peter Salovey, Dean of Yale College, to the freshman in 2004:

One of your teachers here at Yale is Professor Maria Rosa Menocal...[who] has written an exciting book that focuses on the region of Andalusia and especially on the city of Cordoba during the middle ages. Her scholarship reveals that medieval Spain was characterized by an unusual – unusual to this day – “culture of tolerance”.

Salovey was referring to María Rosa Menocal’s *The Ornament of the World: How*

Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain, where she makes the argument that these communities were tolerant of one another and, as a result, the minorities, Christians and Jews, assimilated the culture of the dominant Muslim group. She implies that they lived in a harmonious way, a good *convivencia*, as argued by Américo Castro in *España en su historia: cristianos, moros y judíos* (1948). For Castro, la “vividura hispánica”, the Spanish society and its way of being and living were the result of the dialectics among the three groups, shown chiefly in the harmony of relations and in the process of acculturation and integration of the minorities. Castro confronted an anti-jewish and anti-islamic tradition whose roots are as deep as the Middle Ages, whose growth was very strong from the XVIth century on, and who had very powerful defenders still at the end of the XIXth century¹. But scholars other than Castro and Menocal have seen more conflict than harmony in the relations of the three communities. Why all these scholars explained those relations in such different ways?

Recent confrontations between Western and Islamic societies, and between Jews and Muslims, have led many people to try to look for harmony among these communities. This interest has called attention to the interactions between Christians, Muslims and Jews in Medieval Spain. In this paper I will examine that interaction and at the ways in which contemporary concerns have shaped historians' depictions of Medieval Iberian societies, and even how that distant past is now being used by politicians. Despite debates about the role of pluralism in forming Iberian identities, pluralism provides models, whether of *convivencia* or conflict, that now dominate discussions of Western medieval culture in general. The paper traces the roots of this debate through the centuries. I will focus on what one scholar calls, “an interdisciplinary field blossoming like very few in medieval studies”², one that has helped to spread the knowledge of the Spanish multicultural society. Present times have taken the three communities as a model to follow for those involved in tumultuous relations in some parts of the world. For them the idea of harmony of a “culture of tolerance” is important.

I. Interaction between Christians, Jews and Muslims in medieval Spain: harmony or

conflict?

The defenders of the “culture of tolerance”³ root this idea in the cultural interchanges that took place during the eight centuries of Arabic rule over the Iberian Peninsula. The influence of Arabic culture on Jewish intellectuals is remarkable in the first centuries (from the VIIIth to the XIth) of the Arabic state, Al Andalus, and at the end of the Middle Ages in the Spanish Kingdoms. There is no doubt that this influence is important. However, to analyze the relations, cultural interchanges or acculturation, more fields than poetry, literature, music and so on should be considered. The study of these relations is much more complex. During the eight centuries that these three cultures lived next to one another, sharing the same space, they could relate to one another in many different ways, depending on time, space, political forms, religious attitudes and economic interest.

The first difference to take into consideration is space and time. Between the VIIIth and the XIIIth centuries most of the Peninsula was controlled by an Arabic power. From the middle of the XIIIth century the Christian Kingdoms of the North were the dominant rulers of most of the peninsular space. So to analyze the interaction among the three communities it is necessary to look first at the nature of the relations during the Arabic predominance and then during the Christian predominance.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the conquest of Spain by the Arabs did not force mass conversions to Islam. Christians and Jews could keep their faiths and properties, only paying taxes to the new rulers. The Jewish community, in spite of the heavy taxation, received the conquerors very well, even helped them to come, because Arabs allowed them to practice their religion, and, more important, Jewish people could live free and escape the terrible persecutions of the last decades of the Christian Visigothic Kingdom that had ruled Spain before the Arabs. As a result the Jews came to be some of the most distinguished men of culture of Al Andalus.

The Christian community was not so lucky; they moved from being rulers to being ruled, and though the conquerors signed pacts with the nobility and the

Christians could continue living as they used to, there were many problems especially in important cities. Uprisings in Córdoba (*el motín del arrabal*), and in Toledo (*la jornada del foso*) were bloodily repressed by the Arabic authorities; the discontent came from poor Christians who lived in very bad conditions in those cities. While in cultural matters the ruling court of Córdoba was brilliant⁴, the social reality showed a very different picture. Christians did not participate so actively in the cultural arena of Córdoba as Jews did. Little by little the number of Christians was diminished, as the conversions to Islam increased. The tolerance of the Arabic state came to an end with the collapse of the Al Ándalus caliphate and the arrival of two powers (the almohads and the almoravids) from North Africa, who came to help the divided powers of Al Andalus, at risk of being conquered by the Christian kings of the North. By the end of the XIth century, the almoravids, and by the end of the XIIth century the almohads, frightened Jews and even tolerant Arabs with their intolerance. Jews fled to the Northern Hispanic Kingdoms and Arabs to Africa.

From the middle of the XIIIth century the Northern Christian rulers conquered a large part of Al Andalus, and they controlled the bulk of the peninsular territory. The Christian rulers did allow Muslims and Jews to practice their religion, though from the beginning of the XIVth century both minorities were under pressure to convert to Christianity. Using sermons and persecutions, Christians got many conversions, though many Jews and Muslims continued living in Castile and Aragon practicing their faith. Both minorities influenced the cultural arena: Muslims in the field of architecture; as good masons they built many churches and buildings in the style called *mudéjar*, the name by which the Muslims were called. In other fields no Muslim influence is perceived, which is normal because the most educated Arabs who lived in the conquered lands left the places where they lived and moved to the South to be under Arabic rule. Jews, with a better social position, became important figures in the field of Literature, though in some cases their work had a strong Arabic influence⁵.

Cultures that deserved the complement of “tolerant” in their interactions were chiefly poetry, music, literature and visual arts, in other words, “high culture”. It was at

this cultural level that interchanges took place. But what about “low culture”? At this cultural level nothing seems to have changed; every community tried to preserve its own customs. During the centuries that the Jews lived in Al Andalus they kept their cultural identity. The women were in charge of keeping rites and customs related to religion in the house, using the home as a fortress to avoid foreign influences. There they celebrated the most important religious ceremony, the Sabbath. So rites and customs of everyday life and of especial moments of people’s lives, birth, marriage and death, were probably intact when they migrated to Christian Kingdoms. The Jews continued cooking, cleaning and educating their children in the Jewish culture, clear signs that they kept their identity during the times they were living on Arabic lands. Something similar happened when Muslims and Jews were living under Christian rulers: both communities kept their religion and customs, the women the main practitioners and perpetuators of the cultural identity of their communities.

If it is necessary to look at the two levels of culture, high and low, to see where the “culture of tolerance” was possible, it is essential to define the word tolerance, because its meaning can be explained in different ways. In fact the meaning is very different today than at the end of the Middle Ages. If the *New Oxford American Dictionary* today defines tolerance as “the ability or willingness to tolerate something, in particular the existence of opinions or behavior that one does not necessarily agree”, in the *Vocabulario Universal*, at the end of the Middle Ages tolerate was “padecer, sufrir, comportar, sostener y durar” (endure, suffer, entail, sustain, last)⁶. According to H. Salvador one tolerates what was impossible to get rid of. This was “the only attitude that was possible to adopt when facing what was not possible to assimilate”⁷. This way of understanding tolerance contradicts Menocal’s idea of “culture of tolerance”, as she implies that cultural interchanges, which went along with assimilation, were the proof of tolerance.

II. *Convivencia*, coexistence, convenience

Salvador's position on tolerance is shared by other scholars who have understood and explained the relations among the three communities in this different way.⁸

To define the relations as *convivencia*, arguing the term is equivalent to an idyllic paradise, has captivated some scholars. However in some cases, the use of the word *convivencia* does not imply the meaning of tolerance or harmony. Good examples are the book of Norman Roth *Jews, Visigoths and Muslims in Medieval Spain: Cooperation and Conflict*, and the book *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain* edited by Vivian B. Mann, Thomas F. Glick and Jerrilynn D. Dodds⁹.

Roth, though pointing out that cooperation and conflict defined the relations, sticks to the idea of *convivencia* as similar to harmonious relations, when he says:

Christians of the Reconquest... learned soon and well the lesson, if not exactly of tolerance (in nowadays meaning), but at least of cooperation, of *convivencia*. This is one of the many things that make Spain great, and that the rest of Europe could have learned for their proper wellbeing¹⁰.

In *Convivencia*, Benjamín R. Gampel uses the word *coexistencia* (coexistence) to define the way of relating the three communities that lived in the same neighborhoods. These groups had businesses patronized by people of the three communities, they kept ideas that affected and “infected” them mutually, though they not always confided in “the other”, and the permanent competition could change harmony into hatred.¹¹

Several scholars have defended the idea of coexistence among them Miguel Á. Ladero Quesada and Eloy Benito Ruano in the book *Las tres culturas*¹². Ladero points out that “more than convivencia there was coexistence limited by many inequalities, which allowed the different groups to live in a fragmented society without continual violence and with interchangeable cultural values”¹³. Benito Ruano argues that “the exaltation of the convivencia in Spain of the three cultures during the Middle Ages has become a stereotype, a myth, not only for historical research, but also for the society in general”¹⁴.

A new term, convenience, has been put forward more recently by Brian Catlos. He argues that harmonious relations were the result of interests of different kinds¹⁵: “In the legal, economic and social spheres negotiated agreements moved by mutual

interests – convenience – dictated the relations among groups and individuals”¹⁶. This author, in his search of good arguments to defend his theory, emphasizes the interest of the individual over the interest of the community, even though these interests did not always coincide. Some of his examples would respond very well to the statement of Emile Durkheim who said “there is nothing less constant than interest. Today, it unites me to you; tomorrow, it will make me your enemy. Such a cause can only give rise to transient relations and passing associations”¹⁷.

Looking at aspects other than cultural, it is difficult to sustain the idea of *convivencia* or the culture of tolerance. One of the first scholars who defended the incompatibility of culture of tolerance and social conflict was Thomas Glick, who pointed out two grave errors in the interpretation of intercultural relations in the Spanish Middle Ages: “the first is that ethnic conflict and cultural diffusion are mutually exclusive phenomena... The second fallacy is to equate acculturation, a cultural process, with assimilation (a social one) and to assume that the lessening of cultural distance must perforce result in the diminution of social distance”¹⁸. This point of view is shared by H. Salvador Martínez, who stresses the incontrovertible reality of cultural *convivencia*, but points out the lack of what would have been a real *convivencia*, the social *convivencia*, arguing that for this to exist it was necessary that a similar judicial status existed, which did not exist, either in Al Andalus or in the Christian Kingdoms. The policy of the kings was “tolerant on the surface, but discriminatory deep down”¹⁹.

This discrimination, however, did not apply to the members of the highest levels of society. In Al Andalus Christian noblemen were warmly welcomed in noble Muslim houses, so “noblemen of both sides had less problems assimilating than people of the same religion but of lesser status”²⁰. Something similar happened in the Christian Kingdoms, where many kings had Jewish counselors. However, it is safe to say that problems among groups were not provoked by religious beliefs but they were the result of social and economic struggle. Rich or poor, problems emerged depending on particular circumstances, or on specific interests. For example, the most disdained in the crown of Aragon were the Muslims; in the crown of Castile, the most rejected were

the rich and influential Jews. In Aragon *Mudéjar* men used to work as peasants or masons, occupations of low consideration, and *mudéjar* women worked as housekeepers, nursemaids or prostitutes. Jews men were in higher occupations as lawyers, doctors, bankers, tax collectors and so on; while the kings were very fond of them, noblemen and normal citizens hated the Jews for their social position or wealth.

Tolerance and assimilation were different depending on different factors: social status (economic situation, functions in the society or gender), and regional location. Some scholars have also pointed out that there were differences between individual and community relations; while relations between individuals or small groups could be good, it was not always the case between the groups to which these individuals belonged. On the other hand, the attitudes of the majority towards the minorities did not depend on relations between individuals or small groups, but, as David Nirenberg pointed out “the most dangerous attitudes toward minorities, or at least toward Jews, do not draw their strength from the interactions of individuals and groups within a society, but from collective beliefs, beliefs formed in the Middle Ages and transmitted to the present day”²¹.

Beliefs contributed to discrimination and racism, modern concepts not found, at least in theory, in medieval society. These ideas have been taken into consideration by Benzion Netanyahu, who accused Christians of being racist, as a rebuttal to the idea of Americo Castro, who said that Jews had defended their community in a way that could be considered racist.²²

III. The use of the past

Employing different words to define the model of relations between the three

communities and the different ways of looking at those relations has depended on politics, ideology and history²³, and today on the influence of this moment in time (“presentismo”): the situation in the Middle East and the Arabic emigration to Europe.²⁴

At the beginning of the third millennium, the attacks at the World Trade Center of New York in 2001 increased the need to understand the background of those groups that have turned the first decade of the XXIst century into one of the bloodiest of recent decades. The United States is one of the countries where much attention has been given to the study of *convivencia* in the medieval Spanish past, as shown in research and teaching about this topic.

Two recent conferences have dealt with the Subject. In 2007, the University of Wisconsin at Madison held a conference, “Al-Andalus: Cultural Diffusion and Hybridity in Iberia (1000–1600)”, with the goal of analyzing how Christians, Jews and Moors interacted and produced hybrid cultures of *Mozárabe*, *Mudéjar*, Sephardic, and *Morisco* traditions”. The outcomes of the conference will be published soon in *Medieval Encounters*. This year another conference with the title of “Convivencia” took place in Madrid, as a joint project of the Spanish Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas and the German Max-Planck Institute.

Several American universities have courses such “Muslims, Christians and Jews in Medieval Spain”, or just “Medieval Iberia”, which study the relations between the three cultures, the *convivencia* and the cultural influences. Brandeis, Brown, California at Irvine, Fordham, Georgetown, George Washington, Pennsylvania, Santa Cruz and Yale, are some of the American universities with these courses. Toronto University in Canada, Aberystwyth in Wales and Saint Andrews in Britain offer similar courses.

Most of these courses are an outgrowth of the emphasis on harmonious relations that have fascinated some American historians. These historians have shown the possibilities of *convivencia* and dialogue among people of the different groups. A good example is found in an article by Monica Green, who remarks: “What fascinated me most was the idea of Christian and Jewish women conversing directly among

themselves”²⁵. Her fascination was probably the result of a belief in the contrary idea, the one of conflict among communities. Some historians, such as Colin Smith, in the search of evidence of peaceful relations, found more conflict than harmony²⁶. As other historians he had to follow Elena Lourie’s idea, expressed in the title of her article “A Society Organized for War: Medieval Spain”²⁷.

Others who also have seen more conflict than harmony are John Boswell, David Nirenberg, Manuela Marín, Teófilo Ruiz and Louise Mirrer. Teófilo Ruiz has labeled the idea of *convivencia* as a “rosy picture”²⁸, and Manuela Marín as an “element of propaganda”²⁹. It is safe to say that seeing harmony or conflict is the result of the political and religious interests of this first decade of the XXIst century. Models are looked for in the past and those selected tend to reflect the bias of the scholars. Afterwards, these data or these ideas are used by politicians if they serve their interests, as in the cases pointed out at the beginning: the dream of Al Andalus remembered by Bin Laden, the School of Translators of Toledo highlighted by President Rodríguez Zapatero, or the culture of tolerance emphasized by President Barack Obama.

Louise Mirrer underlined that “recent writers have openly stressed medieval Spain’s relevance to contemporary identity and society. But this also runs the risk of tilting the complex historical past in favor of a more present-minded agenda”³⁰. Historians who are building the past according to the interests of the present, should take into consideration that this topic is a labyrinth; it is easy to go into, but difficult to find a way out.

- ¹ . One of the most opposed to the idea of acculturation was Francisco Javier Simonet: "The Arabs did not contribute to our civilization any substantial or formal element whose relevance can be measured in terms of benefit and usefulness or by its long maintenance. As it happened with other barbar nations [...], settled in the middle of a highly civilized nation, they shone for some time on the remains of the vanquished"; F. J. Simonet, *Glosario de voces ibéricas y latinas usadas entre los mozárabes precedido de un estudio sobre el dialecto hispano-mozárabe*, Madrid, Real Academia de la Historia, 1888, p. XLVI. Translated in María Ángeles Gallego, "The Languages of Medieval Iberia and their Religious Dimension", *Medieval Encounters*, 9, 1, 2003, p. 120. Simonet in "Ensayo crítico-histórico acerca de la mujer árabe-española", *Memoria presentada al IX Congreso Internacional de Orientalistas*, Granada, 1891, defended the superiority of the andalusians in relation to the Muslims of other parts of the Caliphate because of the Christian influence. The assimilation of christian virtues was done through Christian women married to invader men, and they "teach their children superior ethical principles". Other scholars, as J. Ribera, also stressed the role of Christian women in the integration of the invaders. However Ribera did not agree with the ideas of Simonet, neither José Amador de los Ríos, who in *Historia social, política y religiosa de los Judíos de España y Portugal*, (3 vols., Madrid, Imprenta de T. Fortanet, 1875-6), defended the role of the Arabic culture of Al Ándalus as a "contribution to the glory and growth of the intellectual culture of Iberia." (vol. I, p. XV)
- ² . Alex Novikoff, "Between Tolerance and Intolerance in Medieval Spain: an Historiographic Enigma", *Medieval Encounters*, 11, 1-2 (2005), p. 7.
- ³ . A. Novikoff, poses these questions related to the way of understanding the culture of tolerance: "What exactly does "cultural tolerance" mean? Is there a difference between cultural tolerance and, say, social tolerance? Indeed, how do we define tolerance *tout court*?", "Between Tolerance and Intolerance...", p. 8.
- ⁴ . Paul Alvarus, who lived in Córdoba in the ninth-century Christian wrote a letter to the german an eyewitness account of the spread of Arabic culture
- ⁵ . Posibles influencias de la literatura de *maqamat* árabe en algunos escritores cristianos (Jaume Roig), Wacks defiende que esa literatura influyó en los escritores judíos (*Seder Takhemoni*), quienes luego influirían en los cristianos (David A. Wacks, "Reading Jaume Roig's *Spill* and the *Libro de buen amor* in the Iberian *maqama* tradition", *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, vol. LXXXIII, 5, 2006, pp. 597-616, p. 600 y ss.). El *Libro de buen amor* también parece estar influenciado por la literatura de *maqamat* judía (p. 611 y ss.), algo que defiende también Lida de Mankiel en *Dos obras* (pp. 31-32). Wacks apunta: "If we fail to consider and interrogate seriously the role of Arabic and especially Hebrew authors as vital contributors to this culture, we are painting the literary scene of medieval Iberia in something less than full-spectrum colour" (p. 616).
- ⁶ . "Universal Vocabulario" de Alfonso de Palencia. *Registro de voces españolas internas* (1490), John M. Hill (ed.), Madrid, 1957, p. 185
- ⁷ . H. Salvador Martínez, *La convivencia en la España del siglo XIII. Perspectivas alfonsíes*. Madrid, Polifemo, 2006, p. 125.
- ⁸ . A very interesting revision of the historiography on this topic in Alex Novikoff, "Between Tolerance and Intolerance in Medieval Spain".
- ⁹ . *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain*. Nueva York, George Braziller and The Jewish Museum, 1992.
- ¹⁰ . Norman Roth, *Jews, visigoths and muslims in Medieval Spain: cooperation and conflict*, Leiden, Brill, 1994, p. 38.
- ¹¹ . Benjamin R. Gampel, "Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Medieval Iberia: Convivencia through the Eyes of Sephardic Jews". *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians*, pp. 11-37, p. 11: "pluralistic society where communities often lived in the same neighborhoods, engaged in business with each other, and affected and infected each other with their ideas. At the same time, these groups mistrusted each other and were often jealous of each other's successes, and the ever-present competition among them occasionally turned to hatred".
- ¹² . Gonzalo Anes y Álvarez de Castrillón (coord.), *Las tres culturas*, Madrid, Real Academia de la Historia y Forum Barcelona, 2004. This book put together the lectures on this topic of several academics of History in the Real Academia de la Historia.
- ¹³ . Beginning of the sessions of lectures "Las tres culturas", Madrid, Real Academia de la Historia, 2004, p. 2.
- ¹⁴ . Beginning of the sessions of lectures "Las tres culturas", p. 1.
- ¹⁵ . Brian A. Catlos has developed his theory in several articles and in the book *The Victors and the Vanquished. Christians and Muslims of Catalonia and Aragon, 1050-1300*, Cambridge University Press, 2004
- ¹⁶ . Brian A. Catlos, "Contexto y conveniencia en la corona de Aragón: propuesta de un modelo de interacción entre grupos etno-religiosos minoritarios y mayoritarios", *Revista d'Història medieval*, 12, 2001-2002, p. 268.
- ¹⁷ . Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, New York, The Free Press, 1964, p. 204.
- ¹⁸ . Thomas F. Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages: Comparative Perspectives on Social and Cultural Formation*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 4.

- ¹⁹ . H. Salvador Martínez, *La convivencia en la España del siglo XIII*, p. 127.
- ²⁰ . *La alimentación de las culturas islámicas*, Manuela Marín y David Saines (eds.), Madrid, Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional, 1994, p. 103,
- ²¹ . David Nirenberg, *Comunidades de violencia*, p. 12.
- ²² . Ben Zion Netanyahu, *De la anarquía a la Inquisición. Estudios sobre los conversos en España durante la Baja Edad Media*. Madrid, La Esfera de los Libros, 2005, p. 15 y ss.
- ²³ . Jonathan Ray, "Beyond Tolerance and Persecution: Reassessing Our Approach to Medieval Convivencia," *Jewish Social Studies* 11, 2 (Winter 2005), 1–18
- ²⁴ . María J. Viguera, "Cristianos, judíos y musulmanes en al-Andalus", *Cristianos, musulmanes y judíos en la España Medieval. De la aceptación al rechazo*, Valladolid, Ámbito, 2004, p. 45.
- ²⁵ . Monica Helen Green, "Conversing with the minority: relations among Christian, Jewish, and Muslim women in the high middle ages", *Journal of Medieval History*, 34 (2008), p...
- ²⁶ . Colin Smith, *Christians and Moors in Spain*, 3 vols. Warminster, Aris & Phillips, 1988-1992.
- ²⁷ . Elena Lourie, "A Society Organized for War: Medieval Spain," *Past and Present* 35 (1966), 54-76)
- ²⁸ . Teófilo F. Ruiz, *Spanish Society, 1400-1600*, Harlow, Eng, Longman, 2001, pp. 95-96
- ²⁹ . Manuela Marín and Joseph Pérez, eds., *Minorités religieuses dans l'Espagne médiévale*, Aix-en-Provence, Editions Edisud, 1993. Introduction.
- ³⁰ . Louise Mirrer, "Afterword" in *Charting Memory: Recalling Medieval Spain*, ed. Stacy Beckwith, New York, Garland, 2000, p. 323.