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A Question of Coexistence

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The Arts of Intimacy: Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Making of Castilian Culture
by Jerrilynn D. Dodds
María Rosa Menocal, and Abigail Krasner Balbale. Yale University Press, 395 pp., $40.00

All Can Be Saved: Religious Tolerance and Salvation in the Iberian Atlantic World
by Stuart B. Schwartz
Yale University Press, 336 pp., $40.00

Biblioteca de la Real Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Madrid

A Christian consulting an Arabic text during a chess game with a Muslim, in an illumination from the Libro de ajedrez, dados y tables *(Book of Chess, Dice, and Tables) of Alfonso X the Learned, 1283; from* The Arts of Intimacy

Step into the Great Mosque of Córdoba—the *Mezquita*—and you find yourself transported to a world in which time appears to stand still and space to be dissolved (see illustration on page 42). Everywhere you look, you are faced by long, receding vistas of columns, some 850 in all, from which rise double tiers of intersecting horseshoe arches of alternating white stone and red brick. The overwhelming impression is one of regularity and uniformity and, above all, timeless serenity.

Yet look a little closer and what at first seemed uniform displays traces of diversity. The marble columns, for instance, are far from being identical. When Abd al-Rahman I, the emir of the Islamic outpost of al-Andalus, embarked on the construction of the Great Mosque in the year 780 of the Christian era, he made use of columns and capitals pillaged from Visigothic and Roman buildings over a vast swath of territory running from North Africa to Narbonne.

If the mosque evoked the great monuments of Umayyad Syria from which Abd al-Rahman had fled when his dynasty was overthrown, it also drew inspiration from the Roman buildings and the local vernacular forms of Visigothic Spain.

Indeed, according to tradition it was partly built on the ruins of the demolished Visigothic church of San Vicente, a place of worship that Muslims had shared with Christians until the new construction began. San Vicente itself had been built on the ruins of a Roman temple. Medieval Córdoba, with the Great Mosque at its center, was a place where cultures and civilizations met and intertwined.

Yet however eclectic its architectural forms, the Great Mosque was also a triumphant assertion of the dominance of Islam—a dominance that in the time of Abd al-Rahman I and his Umayyad successors extended to all but the northern fringes of the Iberian peninsula, where the Christians still held out. That dominance had begun when a Berber army crossed the straits of Gibraltar in 711 and overthrew the Visigothic state, the heir to Roman Spain. The conquest was swift, and what became the Umayyad caliphate of Córdoba reached the zenith of its power in the tenth century. Christian visitors were dazzled by the riches and splendor of the caliphate, but these concealed an internal fragility that would lead to power struggles, which in turn were followed by descent into civil war. In 1031 the caliphate fragmented into more than twenty petty states, known as the Taifa kingdoms. With the downfall of the Umayyads the great days of Córdoba were at an end, but its place as a center of Islamic civilization was taken by Toledo, located on what was then the caliphate's northern frontier with the Christian kingdoms.

In earlier times the capital of Visigothic Spain, Toledo now became the capital of one of the Taifa kingdoms, dazzling Christian visitors with the splendors of its luxurious lifestyle, just as their forebears had been dazzled by the splendors of Córdoba. But the internal feuds of a fragmented Islamic Spain gave the Christians their chance. In 1085 the ruler of the united kingdoms of Castile and León, Alfonso VI, who had himself tasted the delights of Toledo while in temporary exile from his own fractious realm, entered the city in triumph with his army. Henceforth Toledo would remain in Christian hands. But if this marked the end of one story it also marked the beginning of another. This story, extending from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries, is vividly told by a trio of authors in *The Arts of Intimacy*.

All three are specialists in the cultural history of medieval Spain, and María Rosa Menocal in particular is well known for her evocative survey of medieval Hispanic civilization, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*.[1] The purpose of that book was to give Western readers some idea of the achievements and influence of Islamic Andalusia, and *The Arts of Intimacy* follows in its footsteps. This is a book for the general reader, but one that takes into account the results of recent publications on the history of medieval Spain, to which it devotes an extensive bibliographical essay. There are no notes to the text, but the book contains numerous inserts, printed on an orange ground, providing additional information on people and places, along with selections of contemporary texts, both in the original and in translation. The result is an attractive volume, lavishly illustrated and handsomely produced, although its weight does not make it easy to handle, and my copy was no sooner opened than it broke away from its binding.

The history of the medieval Iberian peninsula, made up as it was of a complex of competing kingdoms, Moorish and Christian, fragmenting, merging, and reconstituting themselves in a bewildering variety of permutations and combinations, offers daunting challenges to the historian. Faced with the task of making the story comprehensible to the general reader, the authors of *The Arts of Intimacy* have kept the history of events to the minimum necessary for an understanding of the political and military background, and have concentrated their attention on the cultural history that is their special interest. Given the richness of that cultural history, this is a wise decision. The art, the architecture, and the poetry produced in the medieval Iberian peninsula are of such astonishing quality that a survey, especially when it is as intelligent and well presented as this one, can hardly fail both to illuminate and instruct.

What was there about medieval Iberian civilization that made it so richly creative? Central to Iberian history between the eighth and fifteenth centuries is the moving frontier. The Arab-Berber conquest of the peninsula in the course of the eighth century was put into reverse by a gradual southward movement of Christians from northern Spain into territory wrested back from the Moors. This movement, extending over many centuries and somewhat misleadingly known as the *reconquista*—the reconquest—has been retrospectively depicted as a holy war against Islam. In reality, although Christians spoke of a *crusade* and Muslims of a *jihad*, warfare between Christians and Moors was punctuated by long periods of peace, and Christian and Islamic kingdoms would make and break alliances among themselves as necessity dictated. The process of reconquest itself would end only in 1492 when the last Islamic redoubt, a greatly reduced kingdom of Granada, surrendered to the armies of Ferdinand and Isabella, the rulers of the united Spain created by their marriage.

In his *Moorish Spain*, still perhaps the most accessible general history of al-Andalus for the lay reader, the late Richard Fletcher wrote: "The plain fact is that between 712 and 1492 Muslim and Christian communities lived side by side in the Iberian peninsula, clutched in a long, intimate embrace" —an image that may have given the authors of *The Arts of Intimacy* their title. [2] Between Christian and Islamic Spain lay a porous frontier zone, expanding and contracting with the tides of war and settlement. The Moorish conquest had engulfed large communities of indigenous Christians, who came to be known as *Mozarabs*, Arabized Christians living under Islamic rule. Both the Mozarabs and the Jews, as "Peoples of the Book"—revealed texts recognized by Muslims—lived as protected religious minorities in return for their acknowledgement of Islamic authority and the payment of a special tax.

When Alfonso VI and his Castilians captured Toledo in 1085, he effectively took over and perpetuated the Islamic system of governance, promising the Muslim inhabitants in their turn physical protection, freedom of worship, and the use of their Friday mosque. As the Christian armies advanced southward, more and more Muslims fell under Christian rule, becoming a kind of mirror image of the Mozarabs and known as *Mudejares*, those "left behind."

What we find therefore, first in Islamic Spain and then in those parts restored to Christian rule, is the coexistence, especially in the cities, of an ethnically and religiously diverse population, with a degree of legal protection extended to minority groups. The situation, however, was always liable to sudden change. In the middle of the twelfth century, for instance, the Almohads, a conservative Islamic sect from Morocco whose armies had crossed over into Andalusia, embarked on a policy of persecution that drove many non-Muslims into Christian territory. Two centuries later, in 1391, the Jews were the victims of terrible pogroms at the hands of the Christians. But coexistence, dictated largely by convenience or demographics, or a combination of the two, was for long periods the order of the day.

The word *convivencia*—living together—has been used by Spanish historians since the early twentieth century to describe intercommunal relations between the peoples of the three different faiths. But in the new age of multiculturalism of the later twentieth century, not only did the word *convivencia* acquire a sudden fashionability, but it ceased to be a neutral term and came instead to suggest a state of harmonious coexistence, brought to an end only by the conquest of Granada and the expulsion of the Jews in 1492. [3] Over much of its existence medieval Spain thus came to be depicted as a uniquely tolerant society, a beacon of hope to a world being dramatically transformed by the mingling of peoples and the clash of civilizations.

The theme of María Rosa Menocal's *Ornament of the World* was the creation of what she called "a culture of tolerance," born of the coexistence and interaction of Christians, Jews, and Muslims in such cities as Córdoba and Toledo. In *The Arts of Intimacy*, by contrast, I have failed to find any use of the expression "a culture of tolerance," and

the theme of the book is the emergence of a distinctive Castilian cultural identity through the sharing of a "common space" with Islam and Judaism. In other words, this is a study of "cultural interaction" rather than of "a culture of tolerance." The retreat to more neutral ground seems to me to be salutary. There has been an excessive sentimentalization of the notion of a medieval Spanish *convivencia*, and "tolerance" itself is a slippery concept, especially set in the context of the Middle Ages, which would have found quite alien the idea of individual human rights.

In practice, *convivencia* was both fraught and fragile. Notably lacking was any sense of religious equality. Muslims and Christians alike regarded themselves as possessing the superior faith, and where they enjoyed hegemony, they accepted the other faith only on sufferance, although this was a sufferance that did not preclude Muslim kingdoms allying with Christian kingdoms against fellow Muslims, and Christians allying with Muslims against their coreligionists. But whoever was dominant, Christians, Jews, and Muslims were all the time being thrown together in the cities and towns, intermingling as they went about their daily business, although in some cities living in segregated quarters. Inevitably, rubbing shoulders in this way, they picked up some of their neighbors' habits, tastes, and customs. It was not unknown for Muslims to drop into Christian monasteries for a forbidden glass of wine. [4]

The Great Mosque and cathedral of Córdoba, Spain; from The Arts of Intimacy

Alongside this interaction at the popular level came the mutual interaction of elite cultures, although the superiority lay for centuries with Islamic Spain. Purveyors of a high Islamic civilization extending across the Middle East, the Umayyads brought with them from Syria a powerful tradition of cultural patronage, a delight in the arts of civility, and a deep respect for the science and learning of classical antiquity. The Christians with whom they came into contact must by contrast have seemed little more than crude barbarians.

But as *The Arts of Intimacy* shows, some of these Christians proved adept learners. Alfonso VI and his successors took over not only the palaces of the caliphs but also their traditions of cultural patronage. Under Christian rule, the ethnically and religiously diverse city of Toledo became in the twelfth century a great center of translation, from which Latin versions of Greek and Arabic texts on science, mathematics, and philosophy were diffused through Europe. The

cultural pluralism that characterized Toledo would move southward in the wake of the reconquest. When Ferdinand III, the conqueror of Seville, died in 1252, his son, Alfonso X— Alfonso *el Sabio*, the Wise (more properly the Learned)— built for his father in Seville's mosque, now transformed into a cathedral, a tomb on which the king's epitaph was inscribed in Latin, Arabic, Hebrew, and Castilian.

The authors of *The Arts of Intimacy* make a point of emphasizing the inscription written in Castilian because their concern is to trace the gradual forging of a distinctive Castilian identity and culture out of the interaction of cultures and peoples in the medieval peninsula. Castile proved to be precocious among Western European states in its embrace of the vernacular, and in Old Castile from the 1230s, Castilian was replacing Latin as the language of wills and all documents relating to property. [5] The glamour that now surrounds Islamic Spain makes it easy to underestimate the contribution to the formation of Castilian culture that was made by the northern regions of the peninsula, which possessed strong cultural and religious ties with France. But that culture, as *The Arts of Intimacy* makes clear, was heavily influenced by the simultaneous experience of coexistence and confrontation with Islam. As the authors point out, the ambiguities of an always ambiguous relationship are reflected in that great vernacular epic of medieval Castile, the Song of the Cid (*Cantar de Mio Cid*). The poem recounts the exploits of a warrior who would come to symbolize the victorious struggle of Christian Spain against the Moors, although in reality he was just as likely to be engaged in fighting fellow Christians.

Cultural interaction, however, is not necessarily dependent on a culture of tolerance. From the twelfth century onward there was a hardening of attitudes on both sides of the religious divide as the papacy proclaimed crusades and the Almohads *jihad*. But even as attitudes hardened and the Christians gained the upper hand following their great victory over the Moors at Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212, cultural and social life in Castile continued to reflect strong Moorish influences. The Mudejar population subjected to Christian rule in the wake of the reconquest applied their craftsmanship to building Christian churches that bore a marked Moorish imprint. Fifteenth- century Castilian court life was per-meated by Moorish tastes and customs, and when Ferdinand and Isabella accepted the surrender of Granada they did so wearing Moorish dress.

Yet a wide gulf was opening between practice and profession. The official Spain of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries would notoriously become a religiously intolerant society, establishing its Inquisition, expelling its Jews, and imposing Christianity on the Mudejares, now known as Moriscos, who remained in the peninsula after the reconquest of Granada. But in blaming Ferdinand and Isabella for their intolerant policies, it is easy to forget that medieval England and France had long since expelled their Jews. One explanation for the apparently obsessive preoccupation with religious purity and uniformity in the Spain of Ferdinand and Isabella may be found in their country's unfavorable image in Renaissance Europe as a land of "bad races" and suspect orthodoxy. [6] They possessed a strong incentive to counter an incipient Black Legend willing to draw on every conceivable anti-Spanish argument, including the long-standing *convivencia* of Christians, Jews, and Muslims, which made their country an anomaly in early modern Christendom.

The Spain ruled by their Habsburg successors has become a byword for intolerance. The determination to extirpate every scintilla of heresy and the requirement of "purity of blood" for appointment to office, even if it was not as comprehensive nor as effective as is sometimes suggested, are clear indications of intention in the upper echelons of government in church and state. It is natural to assume from official pronouncements and policies, culminating in the expulsion of the Moriscos four hundred years ago this year, that intolerance came to permeate the whole society of early modern Spain.

This is one of the assumptions that Stuart Schwartz, a professor of history at Yale University well known for his books on colonial Brazil,[7] sets out to challenge in *All Can Be Saved*. The range of its ambition, the extent of its documentation, and the breadth of its geographical scope make his new book a remarkable achievement. On the basis of hundreds of cases from the tribunals of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition, he has set out to prove the existence of a degree of religious tolerance at the popular level, not only in Spain and Portugal but also in their American possessions, that is totally at variance with the official ideology of church and state. He finds his evidence for this in statements made by those arraigned before the tribunals for heresy and deviancy, to the effect that "each can be saved in his own faith."

The cases he adduces make fascinating reading. In 1488, Juana Pérez, a peasant woman from Aranda, states that "the good Jew would be saved and the good Moor, in his law, and why else had God made them?" In 1594, Juan Fernández de Las Heras, a Spanish laborer brought before the Inquisition in Lima, argues that "each person being good can save themselves in their own law." These and many other cases make at least a *prima facie* case for Schwartz's thesis that, at the level of popular culture, the Iberian world was less rigidly orthodox in its Christianity and more open to the possibility of alternative roads to salvation than appearances suggest or historians have believed.

Schwartz himself is the first to recognize the problems inherent in his thesis. Inquisition records are notoriously difficult to interpret, given the possibilities of manipulation and misunderstanding on the part of the inquisitors. Even if the statements of prisoners and witnesses were indeed made as recorded, are they limited to a handful of individuals who for one reason or another were unwilling to accept the official line, or are they representative of views more widely held in society at large? If the latter, the conventional image of early modern Spain as an exceptionally intolerant society would appear to be seriously flawed.

If Schwartz's case histories do not exactly indicate a culture of tolerance, they would certainly seem to point to a subculture of dissent. For all those who spoke their mind, there must have been many more who were careful to keep silent. It was not wise to attract the attention of the Inquisition. "Tolerance," however, can move along a spectrum that runs from indifference, through an attitude of live and let live, to a firmly held conviction that neither Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, nor Jews have a monopoly on the truth, and that consequently all "can save themselves in their own law." Insofar as all these attitudes were to be found in early modern Spain, it is natural to wonder whether the medieval experience of *convivencia* among the three faiths created a particular predisposition in the Iberian world toward acceptance of the Other.

The Iberian conquest and settlement of America may further have worked to enhance this predisposition. Here Spaniards found themselves in daily contact not only with a large indigenous population that until the conquest had never even heard of Christianity, but also in due course with African slaves with their own belief systems, and growing numbers of people of mixed race. Richard Fletcher writes in his *Moorish Spain* that "colonial Mexico and Peru and Brazil were medieval Andalusia writ large."[8] The implications of this assertion still need to be worked out, but Schwartz's American evidence leads him to postulate the existence in the Iberian New World of "a vibrant culture at odds with the dominant ideologies of Church and state."

Any assumption, however, that the Andalusian experience may have left Iberian civilization uniquely qualified to accept the possibility of alternatives to the prevailing orthodoxy is to some extent subverted by Schwartz's wider argument that religious relativism was not "a peculiarly Hispanic phenomenon that had taken root during the *convivencia* of the

Middle Ages and had continued to flourish." On the contrary, although his evidence is overwhelmingly taken from the Iberian world, he is anxious to suggest that "the attitude of popular tolerance in matters of religion was a generalized phenomenon in much of Europe," and that popular doubts and tolerance "created a soil from which modern concepts of freedom of conscience and toleration eventually grew." In other words he wants to rescue the history of toleration from the exclusive hands of political and intellectual elites and restore to the common people their due place in the story.

To prove the truth of his ambitious claims would obviously require a much wider range of evidence, drawn from a variety of European societies instead of the Iberian world alone, but in raising the question of popular attitudes, and in documenting them so richly, Schwartz has written a trailblazing book. Recently, as far as Spain itself is concerned, his argument about popular tolerance has received a helpful reinforcement from an impressively researched study of a town in La Mancha that collectively came out in support of the attempts of its Morisco inhabitants to defy the decree for their expulsion in 1609, and subsequently welcomed back those who succeeded in returning surreptitiously.[9] This is not the response of a community held in the iron grip of racial and religious intolerance.

Yet there is a danger that Schwartz does not entirely avoid, of presenting his story as that of an onward march to "modernity," a word here used to refer to freedom of conscience and religious toleration. Recent events should surely give us pause. We have seen how in the Balkans, as in medieval Spain, people of differing faiths, ethnicity, and culture are capable of living together for a long time in relative amity, and then of suddenly turning on one another in a spasm of fury and an orgy of destruction. In seeking to trace the history of a "culture of tolerance," it is important not to forget that all too frequently a culture of intolerance lies only just below the surface.

The history of medieval Spain shows that the coexistence of peoples of different races and faiths is potentially a source of great cultural enrichment, but also that it can simultaneously be a source of profound social tension. Harmonious *convivencia* depends on the preservation of a delicate balance, always at risk of being upset by an unfortunate conjunction of behavior and events. An alteration in official policy or practice, an economic downturn, the inflammatory populist rhetoric of a demagogue, an initially trivial conflict between neighbors—all these are capable of transforming coexistence into violent confrontation overnight. Yet the story of that small town in seventeenth-century La Mancha contains a lesson of its own. Even in the worst of times humanity and decency can still make their voices heard.

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1. 1
   Little, Brown, 2002. ↩

2. 2
   1992; Phoenix Books, 2001, p. 8. ↩

3. 3
   See David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 9. ↩

4. 4
   Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, p. 94. ↩

5. 5
Teofilo F. Ruiz, *From Heaven to Earth: The Reordering of Castilian Society, 1150–1350* (Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 3 and 30. ↩

6. 6
Sverker Arnoldsson, *La leyenda negra* (Göteborg, 1960), pp. 21–22. ↩

7. 7
Among them are *Sovereignty and Society in Colonial Brazil: The High Court of Bahia and its Judges, 1609–1751* (University of California Press, 1973); *Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society: Bahia, 1550–1835* (Cambridge University Press, 1985); and *Slaves, Peasants, and Rebels: Reconsidering Brazilian Slavery* (University of Illinois Press, 1992). ↩

8. 8
Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, p. 7. ↩

9. 9
Trevor J. Dadson, *Los moriscos de Villarrubia de los Ojos:(Siglos xv–xviii): historia de una minoría asimilada, expulsada y reintegrada* (Madrid: Iberomericana/Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert, 2007). It is to be hoped that this pioneering work will in due course appear in an English version. ↩