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Convivencia:
Christians, Jews, and Muslims in Medieval Spain

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Senior Honors Project
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Abstract

Few time periods in world history offer as unique a glimpse into cultural cohabitation as the one in medieval Spain following the Arabic invasion and preceding the Christian Reconquest ended in 1492. Although the beginnings and ends of this history are filled with persecution and forced conversion, there existed a time in between of centuries of peaceful coexistence and cooperation, with mutual cultural exchanges that benefited Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

This project focuses on the inter-relationship of religion and culture in the time period of medieval Spain known as the *convivencia*. It includes an analysis of how this diversity of thought and level of enriched learning was achieved and how it contributed to the literature, art, and science of the Middle Ages. The cultural and legal features of this society that allowed for such a unique setting are examined, as well as specific examples of people and cities that illustrate the experiences of this unconventional environment. This project follows Spanish development until the end of the fifteenth century when the *convivencia* culminated with the unification of the Christian kingdoms of Aragon and Castilla resulting from the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella.

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Cultural Toleration in Context

Christian attitudes to Muslims in Spain could be seen as an odd mixture of great respect, resentment, and opposition. Wherever Christians looked around them, in their churches, their homes, their clothing, their language, they found themselves surrounded by and owing to Muslim influences. This undoubtedly helped to spur, and at the same time, quell hatred and hostility between the two groups. Jews, too, formed an important part of this cultural thread, but in a different context given their unique historical perspective. Under the Visigoths, the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula had suffered almost unrelieved persecution, ending finally in efforts to force them to accept baptism. In spite of the coercive Visigothic law, there is no sign of any actual influence that carried over upon later medieval Spanish law regarding the Jews. Throughout the centuries of Muslim dominance on the Iberian Peninsula, relations between Jews and Muslims were generally normal and even cordial. Likewise, Jews learned to dismiss their own prejudices that had viewed all Gentiles as “idolaters” and a potential threat to their very existence.

The new cultures that developed as a result of the experiences shared between them are a result of the cooperative relationships formed during Muslim rule of al-Andalus. The lessons learned from these experiences were to prove even more pivotal as the shift to a new Christian society occurred during and after the Reconquest. The experience of comparatively cooperative relationships during a time of intense diversity of thought and behavior facilitated the integration and acculturation, if not toleration, of cultures throughout Muslim al-Andalus.

A Brief History of the Iberian Peninsula, 711-1492

The Muslims from North Africa that came to settle present-day Spain were attracted to the region by the seemingly easy opportunity for conquest over the Visigoths, who were suffering from hundreds of years of civil discontinuity. The Visigothic kingdom was politically unstable, culturally impaired, and divided along both religious and ethnic lines. Even storied Christian mythology surrounding the events of 711, elaborated to describe how old Christian Spain had been lost to the Muslims, hinged on the political disarray, moral corruption, and decadence of the last of the Visigothic kings (Menocal 26). Visigothic territories as far north as Narbonne had been taken over by Muslims. Throughout the next three hundred years, the political order and cultural flourishing that Hispania had enjoyed under the Romans returned to the peninsula. The Muslims never took and held the entire peninsula; Christian strongholds remained in the mountainous regions of the northwest Atlantic coast and the Pyrenees. And although these scattered Christian settlements did result in the occasional skirmish, the political history of the peninsula during this time period is remarkably stable.

The new Muslim state of al-Andalus flourished under a fresh and distinctive identity. The original conquering armies, who became settlers along with those they brought with them, had been relatively few in number compared with the peninsula's population at the time. So these newcomers constituted only about one percent of the overall population in the first generation of conquest and settlement. They were an ethnic mix, part Arab and mostly Berber (Menocal 28). Due to high rates of conversion to Islam among older ethnic groups as well as Christians, al-Andalus quickly became not only larger, but also thoroughly interlaced in terms of ethnic and cultural origins within only a

few generations. The Visigothic society before them had been distinguished primarily by their ethnicity and remained a minority of outsiders during their several hundred years of dominance in Hispania. But Muslim power and authority, like the Christians before them, resided in a faith to which conversion was not only possible, but also encouraged. Islamic identity was inherently compelling given the range of civil advantages available to any Muslim, whether a recent convert or born into a long line of Islamic heritage.

This surge in development of the new Muslim state began to fade in 909 when a breakaway group of Shiites, who saw themselves as descendants of the prophet Muhammad's murdered son-in-law, succeeded in taking control of the empire's western provinces. In Tunis, on the tip of Africa not so far from al-Andalus, leaders from this group claimed direct descent from Fatima, Muhammad's daughter, and proclaimed their breakaway Islamic state to be the legitimate caliphate. Córdoba had enjoyed a distinct sense of identity and legitimacy from the outset, and Andalusians had been relatively content to live under the illusion that they were a mere province of the caliphate centered in Baghdad. Andalusians had tolerated paying homage to the faraway Abbasid capital in Baghdad, but the Fatimid faction in the much closer Tunis represented a dangerous rival for them. In 929, the ruler of al-Andalus, Abd al-Rahmān III, declared himself the true Defender of the Faith, the legitimate caliph of the whole Islamic world, and the religious leader of all Muslims (Menocal 30-31).

Bitter civil wars among the rival Muslim factions began in earnest in 1009, and for the next two decades they tore apart the splendid society of al-Andalus. The culture, not too long before at the height of its charms, was infiltrated and ruined not by foreign invaders, but by rebels within. The violent destruction in 1009 of Madinat al-Zahra, the

lavish and fabled Cordoban palace, just after the start of the civil wars is regarded by many historians as the end of the political well-being of an Islamic polity in medieval Europe. The dramatic divisions among the various communities of Muslims that were struggling to carve out political and religious legitimacy were highlighted in this event. Particularly intense were the divisions between Berber Muslims from North Africa, traditionally far more conservative and even fundamentalist, and the Andalusians, many of which were descendants of Berbers who had first settled the peninsula in the eighth century. Ultimately though, their identity had been decisively shaped during their 250 years of “independence” from the Umayyad caliphate, which was only partial independence in reality.

The full and official end of the Cordoban caliphate came in 1031, although factions known as *taifas* rose in the aftermath of the collapse. These individual cities became semi-independent states and began years of struggle among themselves to acquire the prestige and authority they had known under the Andalusian caliphate. This new development did mark a renewed sense of opportunity for Jews living in al-Andalus, however. Whole sectors of the prosperous and well-educated Jewish population left the old capital to join the new *taifas*, where many resumed the influential roles they had enjoyed in Córdoba. Also precisely at this point, the northern Christian territories began to consolidate as unified and increasingly powerful kingdoms. The Christian-controlled cities expanded slowly southward throughout the eleventh century and were in the same general competition as the Muslim cities in claims for territories and leadership. It is during this time that the famed Spanish military adventurer Rodrigo Díaz, better known as El Cid, lived and led his various armies into battle, fighting in the service of Muslim

and Christian monarchs alike. The death of a centralized and powerful state meant constant reshifting of borders, and Muslims suddenly found themselves living in Christian cities, along with “Arabized” Jews. Similarly, Christians from the north were traveling through and settling in areas that were just beyond their own borders geographically. An intertwining of language, religion, and cultural styles in general took place all around Iberia.

The beginning of the end for Muslim al-Andalus occurred in 1212 when Spanish Christians joined forces with northern European military forces against the Almohads. A decisive Christian victory at the battle at Las Navas de Tolosa resulted in nothing but further Muslim losses and retreats. Cities fell to the Christians one by one: Córdoba in 1236, Valencia in 1238, and the Almohad capital of Sevilla in 1248. The transition of power was complete when in 1492 the last of the Nasrids, Muhammad XII, fittingly handed the keys of his family’s royal house, the Alhambra, to Queen Isabella of Castilla and her husband, Ferdinand of Aragón. Just three months later, the initial stages of the Jewish expulsion were begun, and the *convivencia* was over.

Jewish-Arabic Relations

A Historical Perspective

The great Arab conquests that followed the rise of Islam resulted in the conversion of all the countries between Spain and Persia into a single territory. The majority of the Jewish people of that time came under Arab rule, beginning a long period of Jewish-Arab symbiosis. A common assertion among scholars is that the legal and actual position of Jews during the Middle Ages was much better in Muslim countries than

in Christian Europe. Although some of these claims are exaggerated, it is apparent that the legal status of the Jewish religion under Islam was significantly better than their situation in the Byzantine Empire. Additionally, the Jewish people of early Islamic times enjoyed a complete economic and social revival, which was not entirely the result of Arab influence. In many cases, Jews had the same opportunities available to the rest of the population. The taifa of Granada, for example, recruited a gifted young man named Samuel ibn Nagrila who quickly rose to the rank of vizier, or prime minister. At the same time, he became the first *nagid*, or head, of the Jewish community, and today is remembered as one of the most accomplished of the Hebrew poets of the Golden Age (Menocal 39-40).

The majority of Jews were still engaged in agriculture and manual labor at the time of the Muslim conquest. But farmers had a terrible time under Arabic rule, and the Jewish agrarian way of life eventually died out during the seventh and eighth centuries. The Jews made a recovery, however, as merchants and artisans, largely due to the “bourgeois revolution” of the ninth century. The Jews were active and fruitful participants of these early medieval times characterized by commerce and industry. It was during this time that the final shape of Judaism developed under Arabic influence. Jewish philosophy, law, religion, and even the Hebrew language were formulated around the Arabic model (Goitein 157).

Upon the fall of the Arabic reign during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Jewish-Arabic symbiosis began to lose its historical importance. The realm of the Arabs was wiped out completely, and by the beginning of World War I, not a single independent Arab state was in existence. Likewise, the Jews in Arabic-speaking

countries, despite having been at one time the majority of the Jewish people as well as important spiritual leaders, had all but faded out of Jewish history. The bulk of Judaism was then concentrated in Christian countries. Much has changed since then, of course, in terms of both the existence of Arabic states as well as the revival of the Jewish population.

In Iberia

Jews were settled in the Iberian Peninsula by the fourth century, and the first test of Jewish-Christian relations came in the Visigothic period. The Church was actually exhibiting a rather tolerant policy during the time period that Jews experienced a great deal of animosity. The theory that the conversion of the originally Arian Visigoths to Catholicism caused this hostility has now been rejected. In fact, it was Byzantine legal codes and anti-Jewish attitudes that strongly influenced the Catholic Visigothic kingdom. Originally, there was significant hatred among the Byzantines and their Visigothic rivals. Athangild, a Visigothic candidate of the rival faction struggling to gain control, invited the aid of the Byzantines in 551. The Byzantines were more than happy to use the excuse to enter the Iberian Peninsula; they took control of almost all of southern Spain, including such major cities as Córdoba, Granada, and Cartagena. The defeat of the Byzantines by Swinthila and the final expulsion of them from Iberia in 625 marked an end to their influence politically, but certainly not religiously.

The main centers of Jewish population under the Visigoths appear to have been Toledo, Mérida, Sevilla, Tarragona, and Narbonne, with other populations along the Mediterranean coast in Tortosa, Sagunto, Elche, and Adra. But precise archeological evidence is lacking in the matter of where Jews lived, and conjectures vary.

Arabic Immigration to Iberia

Muslim-born Arabs lived in the Arabian Peninsula and were confined to this region for the most part. The rise and spread of the Muslim civilization can be attributed entirely to converts to Islam, in areas such as Persia, Syria, Egypt, and North Africa. The Muslim conquest of Spain in 711 was the result of Berber troops entering from North Africa. The Iberian Peninsula again gained significant numbers in 740 when immigrants from Syria and Iraq came to the region. During the eighth through the twelfth centuries, so many Berbers came to Spain that the majority of the population was soon Muslim. At the same time, there was significant emigration from al-Andalus to North Africa. The large number of Berbers in al-Andalus led to serious problems; these Muslims were sharply divided along national and ethnic lines, with strong jealousies and rivalries between the groups often erupting in rebellions. Claims of social-climbing aristocrats of "Arabic" descent only intensified these rivalries. Many Berbers falsified their genealogies and adopted Arab tribal names to claim association with one of the elite tribes of early Islam. The claim of "Arabization" propaganda comes from this phenomenon since early Muslim chronicles of the conquests make it clear that the true Arabs were opposed to traveling beyond the boundaries of their homeland in the Arabian Peninsula (Roth 47).

Social Norms of Muslim al-Andalus

Following the Muslim invasion and conquest in 711, the majority of Visigoths fled Spain for other parts of Europe. But the Christians who did not leave were gradually

joined by other new immigrants, many of which settled in the very heart of Muslim al-Andalus. These Christians enthusiastically adopted many elements of the luxurious lifestyle of the Muslims, including dress, architecture, interest in literature and poetry, and the Arabic language. The term "Mozarabs" refers to Christians who adopted the customs and styles of the Muslims without actually converting. However, many of these Mozarabs did not adhere to the absolute requirements of the Christian religion. This is evident in the significant degree of intermarriage between Muslims and Christians, typically between an Islamic man and a Christian woman, usually resulting in the women's conversion to Islam. For example, the most powerful ruler of Muslim Spain, Abd al-Rahmān III, was the grandson of a Christian Basque princess, and his son al-Kaham II also married a Basque girl. Abd al-Azīz, son of Mūsā ibn Nusayr who conquered Spain and governed until he was murdered in 716, married the wife of Rodrigo, technically the last Visigothic ruler (Roth 58-59).

Intermarriage also occurred between Christian men and Muslim women. Technically these marriages were a violation of Church law, but were frequently overlooked. Christian law imposed the death sentence on a free Christian woman who married a slave, Muslim, or Jew. This was clearly a double standard since Christian men were not similarly threatened. The most famous example of this occurrence is Alfonso VI of León who married Zayda, the daughter-in-law of al-Mu tamid, the ruler of Sevilla from 1069-1091 (Roth 59).

The extent of Jewish involvement in slavery also sheds some light on their involvement in Muslim society. While there is not considerable evidence to indicate that they were involved in the slave trade, Jews did own slaves in both Muslim and Christian

Spain. After the reconquest of some cities in northern Spain, Jews were involved in the ransom of Muslim slaves and in the transport of them to al-Andalus to be redeemed. But the same is not true of the sale of Christian slaves to Muslims. Jews did own Muslim slaves in Aragón and Cataluña and in the reconquered cities of Andalucía and Toledo. These slaves were captives from the territories against which the Christians were fighting, and not the Mudéjars living in Christian cities. Because there is no evidence of Jews in Muslim Spain using slaves in agricultural work, it seems that the majority of Jews who owned slaves usually had no more than one or two, usually female, that worked primarily in the home.

In both Christian and Muslim Spain, men and women of all three religions were involved sexually with one another in every conceivable combination, including Muslim men with Jewish women or boys and Jewish men with Muslim women or boys. With respect to Jewish law, there was no difference between Muslim women and other Jewish women, but there certainly was in reality. Muslims, but not Christians, were clearly not considered on an equal level by the Jews. Not only was the keeping of concubines not discouraged in Jewish law, it was generally considered entirely permissible. Prostitution was prohibited by Jewish law, but a woman who gave herself to just one man made no violation at all. There is clear evidence that Jews in some Muslim countries, like Egypt, did, in fact, have Muslim concubines. This may have been too dangerous in Muslim al-Andalus. But even in Christian Spain, some concubines were Jewish, and some were even Christians. Ordinary sexual relations between Jews and Muslims, particularly Jewish men and Muslim women, were quite commonplace. Sexual relations with young boys, too, was so common and openly known in Muslim Spain that "it soon became

almost a normal form of sexual relations” (Roth 193). This kind of behavior was technically forbidden by Jewish law, and actual intercourse with an adult male, classified as thirteen and older, was punishable by death in biblical law, although flogging and other forms of punishment were much more common.

An interesting case is the famous poet Ibrahim, who wrote both Hebrew and Arabic poetry and was purported to have converted to Islam, but Muslim sources reflect considerable uncertainty as to this fact. Most believed he had converted, but when asked himself about the issue, Ibrahim replied in verse: “For men are the things apparent; for Allah that which is concealed.” He has left us with a few interesting, if not ambiguous, verses on the matter as well.

I have withdrawn from Moses for the love of Muhammad;
I am now in the right path, but had it not been for Allah I
should never have been directed.
What made me change my mind is this, that
the law of Moses was wanting in Muhammad.

There are two possible explanations for his poem. He either escaped the law of Moses by converting to Islam, or he saw it replaced by Muhammad. But a love interest offers a humorous third perspective to the poem. Ibrahim was in love with two boys, one a Jew and one a Muslim, with the names Musa (Moses) and Muhammad. These verses could simply be one of the many love poems he wrote about these two boys and his inability to choose between them (Roth 201-202).

Cities of al-Andalus

A defining characteristic of Muslim society, unlike their Christian contemporaries in the rest of Europe, was its urban quality. Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Alexandria, and

Fez were all large metropolitan centers, with equally large populations and a unique degree of internationalization. There were at least eight cities in al-Andalus with populations in excess of 15,000 in the eleventh century: Córdoba, Toledo, Almería, Granada, Majorca, Zaragoza, Málaga, and Valencia. Some estimates indicate that Sevilla and Badajoz were also among these most populous cities. Estimations of the Jewish population in these and other cities vary. Those with a very strong presence of Jewish inhabitants in al-Andalus include Sevilla, Toledo, Granada, Almería, and Huesca.

The size of one's house within these cities, as well as the number of patios and gardens it had, was determined by the wealth of the owner. Gardens and gardening were obsessions for the Muslims, not only for beauty and relaxation, but as a source of cool relief from the heat. Most homes had at least one, and often there were several. Fountains, too, were used for this purpose. By the ninth century, Córdoba was dotted with gardens and referred to as "The Meadow of Murmuring Waters" and "The Golden Meadow" (Paris 40). Wealthy homeowners enjoyed a natural system of air conditioning whereby water flowed through channels in the floors of the living quarters. This technique can be seen today at the Alhambra, the famously well-preserved and luxurious palace and gardens that exist as remnants from Muslim rule in Granada.

There is no evidence of compulsory separate quarters for Jews living in Muslim Spain. But Jews did tend to naturally live together, as was typical of other religious and ethnic groups at the time. A main factor in the existence of a "Jewish quarter" was the necessity of living within a strictly defined legal limit of walking distance from a synagogue. Another, of course, was the social inclination of living with neighbors of similar cultural and religious backgrounds.

There is evidence from Arabic sources of “Jewish cities,” those that were totally, or mostly, inhabited by Jews. Among the cities which were claimed to have been “Jewish” are Sevilla, Tarragona, Lucena, and Granada. Probably more likely, is the existence of two distinct and separate “cities” within one large city that had a substantial Jewish population. These were frequent in other Muslim cities outside al-Andalus like Baghdad and Fez.

In some instances, Jews seemed to have more power than their Muslim counterparts. Jews are reported to have comprised the majority of the inhabitants of Lucena. The historian al-Idrīsī says of the city, “The Jews live in the interior of the city and do not permit the Muslims to enter it. The Jews here are richer than in any other country of their submission to Muslim domination, and they have guards to prevent the attacks of their rivals” (Roth 141). Menahem Ibn Zerah too refers to Lucena as “a city entirely of Jews, and we have a tradition that they were of the remnant of the exiles of Jerusalem who dwelt there and built the city” (142). Similarly, Granada was known as “Granada of the Jews” because it was first inhabited by Jews, as far back as at least the fourth century.

Religious Codes and Policy

Mozarabs in Muslim Spain were considered to be in need of Christian missionary service from the Church almost as much as the “infidel” Muslims themselves. Pope Celestinus III ordered Martín López de Pisuerga, archbishop of Toledo, to send priests “learned in Latin and Arabic” to North Africa, Sevilla, and “other Muslim cities” to instruct the Christians there (Roth 60). A strange phenomenon in Muslim Spain was the

fanatical martyrdom movement of Córdoba, in which Christians openly defied Muslim law by publicly insulting Islam in a manner that they were warned would force the Muslims to execute the offenders. Muslims in Córdoba had even allowed the Christians to use half of their mosque for a church, but many Christian men and women happily chose the road to instant martyrdom, nearly all of them ending up as obscure saints as a result.

In direct contrast to the Mozarabs of Muslim Spain are the Mudéjars, Muslims living among Christians in centers of population that were predominantly Christian. Muslims certainly did not convert to Christianity in great numbers. Indeed, laws were in existence to discourage such conversions. Muslim slaves converted to Christianity by their Christian masters, for example, had their goods inherited by the master, and only if he died could their sons inherit the property. Many of these Mudéjars lived in northern Spain in parts of Aragón that were never part of the Reconquest of Christians over the Muslims. Burgos is an example of a Christian city in Castilla where Muslims lived until the end of the fifteenth century and documents attest to the existence of mosques. Following the *Cortes* of Madrid in 1476 and Toledo in 1480, both Jews and Muslims were ordered to live in separate barrios apart from Christians (Lynch 107). In 1485 the council of Burgos ordered that the gates of the Muslim quarter be closed at night because of concern about sexual relations between the three groups. The gates of the Jewish quarter were apparently allowed to remain open.

Medieval conversion to Islam is a topic of interest considering the cultural interactions occurring during that time. The height of conversion in Spain was the early tenth century, and another plateau of conversion occurred around 1107, with a slight

increase after (Roth 200). Evidence suggests that it was more permissible for Jewish men to convert to Islam than Jewish women. One instance of a Jewish woman converting to Islam resulted in Pedro III ordering the death penalty, but Jewish sources reveal that conversion of Jews to Islam, mostly men, was constantly taking place in Spain long before the Almohad invasion.

There is evidence of a general decree compelling Jews, as well as the few Christians among them under Muslim control, to convert to Islam. In fact, suspicion of genuine conversion to Islam is the reason cited by the Muslim ruler al-Marrākushī for regulations on the clothing worn by Jews and Christians at the time. He states, “If I were sure they are really Muslims, I would let them mingle with the Muslims by marriage and other matters; but if I were sure of their infidelity, I would kill their men and take captive their children and give their property to Muslims” (Roth 118). Indeed, Muslim judges kept close watch on Jews who claimed to have converted to Islam and accepted any testimony against them. If found guilty of false conversion, Jews could be killed, their property seized, and their wives and families exiled.

Despite the fact that Jews and Muslims had many religious laws in common, problems still arose. The slaughtering of animals was a particularly troublesome issue given the dietary edicts of each religion. The permissibility of Jews to slaughter the sacrificial sheep for Muslims, and even eating these with them, was typically acceptable. It was forbidden, however, for a Jew to rejoice with a Muslim on his holiday. But since Muslims are not idolaters, it was at least permissible to conduct business with them on holidays. In places where Jews and Muslims had a partnership in a store and divided the

profits equally, they could agree that the profits of sales on Friday go only to the Jew and those of Saturday only to the Muslim, in accordance with their respective Sabbaths.

Cultural Impact

It is clear that Muslims and Christians always regarded the other as the enemy and a threat to their power. Christians were always “accursed” or “enemies of the faith,” and the medieval Spanish Christian attitude to Muslims was extremely negative and hostile as well. Nevertheless, Christians and Muslims were in constant daily contact, not only in the more remote southern part of Muslim Spain, but also in the more populated regions of Aragón and Cataluña in Christian Spain. The close living environment and generally cordial relations between the two groups helped to prevent the kinds of stereotypes and hostility that characterized most European attitudes.

Architecture

Modern Spain owes a great deal of its architectural beauty to the early Muslims. Some of the most splendid architecture of the country is found in Muslim mosques, most notably the famous mosque in Córdoba. With its tedious mosaic tiles and red and white striped arches, along with the Alhambra in Granada, it has become the nation’s foremost example of Muslim architecture. Islamic influence can be found in medieval Christian architecture as well, in the form of the keystone arch, for example. Christian churches throughout Spain imitated Muslim inscription writing in the designs on their walls. So too did many of the Christian kinds, who either learned how to sign their names in Arabic or at least imitated Arabic signatory script in Romance.

Commerce and the Economy

Commerce played a key role in the economies of Islamic cities in Spain, with larger cities housing a special commercial district. Stores were generally located near the mosque in Muslim communities. There are numerous references to commercial activity between Spain and Egypt, and indeed, ships from Spain were arriving constantly in Egypt to do trade with Tunisia and Alexandria. One of the major sources of income in Muslim Spain were tunny fish, a member of the mackerel family related to tuna, which came from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean only in April. Jews were involved heavily in this trade, more so in drying and exporting the fish than in catching them. Dyed goods were not considered to be a profitable import to be sold in Spain, which may be explained by the importance of Jews in the silk industry. They are reported to have had a monopoly on crimson dye, explaining the tremendous market for imported brazilwood and other dyes among Jews. A common myth is that Jews engaged in this trade because it was despised by Muslims for its dirty nature. This appears to be unfounded as Muslims did and still do engage in dying today in North Africa. A crimson "plant" is purported by al-Jāhiz to have grown in only three places in the world, one of which was al-Andalus. "The only people who know this plant and the places where it grows are a group of Jews who pick it every year in the month of February" (Roth 147). Although they sometimes had their own market commissioners, Jewish merchants were also subject to Muslim supervisors. Muslim officials even enforced the payment of debts between Jews themselves, and imprisoned Jews for nonpayment.

Agriculture comprised an important part of the economy for al-Andalus, and indeed, the Muslims of Spain were famous for their accomplishments in the area. It was

the Muslims of Spain who introduced three-crop rotation. They grew virtually every kind of fruit and vegetable known today, even those with no reason to be expected to grow in the region, like rice and cotton. The Muslims in Spain were able to produce a sweeter fruit than in the rest of the world by developing methods of injecting perfumes and syrups into trees. Produce like olives, figs, guavas, peaches, apricots, cauliflower, and cucumbers were common in Muslim Spain, despite being totally unknown in Christian Europe. The Jews learned a great deal from the Muslims in terms of agriculture and horticulture. It was the Jews apparently that first introduced and cultivated the olive in Spain, a veritable staple of cooking in the region today.

The financial and legal capacity of Jewish participation in Muslim al-Andalus was somewhat limited in other aspects, however. Jews were forbidden to act as executors of wills and as guardians of children of deceased relatives or friends, for example. These activities were entrusted to “real” Muslims who raised the children in their own faith. These Muslims received permission to do as they wished with these children and their property.

Language and Education

In the end, it was al-Andalus’ vast intellectual wealth, aside from its prosperity in the material arena, that made it truly distinct. The caliphal library was said to contain some four hundred thousand volumes, compared to the largest library in Christian Europe, which held no more than four hundred manuscripts. And this library was only one of seventy in the capital city, where books were so adored that seventy copyists were employed in the book market who worked exclusively on copying Qurans (Menocal 33). Muslim scientists and physicians were of great importance in an era where Christian

knowledge was extremely weak, virtually non-existent. It was not uncommon to find a Muslim man knowledgeable in the areas of medicine, physics, and astrology, and the influences of these scholars on the Christian world lasted well beyond the medieval period. But Muslims were frequently ridiculed for their interests in astrology by Christians who regarded the science as somehow diminishing the importance and significance of God.

Jews studied with Muslim teachers, particularly true with the sciences. The greatest Muslim scientists and philosophers had Jewish students. Public literacy was a government priority for the Muslims of al-Andalus, and the knowledge of Arabic played a critical role in the cultural development of the Jews in their relations with Muslims. Moses Ibn Ezra, the illustrious Hebrew poet from Granada, observed that when the Muslims conquered the Iberian peninsula from the Visigoths the Jews learned Arabic language and grammar, which aided them in understanding Hebrew language and grammar. Evidently, the Jews who remained in Spain from the Visigothic era, who obviously had not known Arabic, were taught Arabic by the Muslims even prior to the massive immigration of Arabic-speaking Jews into Spain (Paris 49).

It was not unusual, in fact, for Spanish Jews to attempt to clarify Hebrew by comparison with Arabic. In his book on poetics, Moses Ibn Ezra shows the similarities between the Jewish and Muslim communities, and how Hebrew poetry derived from Arabic. Ezra points out that the Muslims of Persia, Iraq, and Syria “refined their speech and made pleasant their poetry and graceful their writing more than that of the actual Arabs.” He asserts that Arabic in its purest form was originally the superior language, and the original Arabs had produced the first and best poetry. Ezra is quick to point out,

however, that their status had deteriorated, and they had been replaced by others, including the Jews (Roth 173).

Language was an important area of cultural exchange for Muslims and Christians. Mozarabs learned Arabic and continued to write Arabic into the thirteenth century. While there is significant evidence of Christians learning Arabic, there are very few examples of Muslims who were fluent in, or even familiar with, Romance. Only two Muslims are mentioned as having regularly served as interpreters, and only one of these is said to have been fluent in Spanish (Roth 53). Indeed, there seems to have been widespread Christian neglect of Latin in favor of Arabic, which was seen as a more eloquent way of expressing oneself. The language of beauty and poetry, Arabic was considered a real artform. Indeed, Arabic was adopted as the ultimate in classiness and distinction by the communities of the other two faiths. Even today, Spanish words beginning with *al-*, of which there are many, can be attributed to the Arabic language.

Daily Life

Jews inhabited the southern region of Spain more heavily than the North under Muslim rule. Their numbers here help in part to explain the significant economic and cultural contributions they made to the region. Technically speaking, neither Christians nor Jews were supposed to hold any office that would enable them to exercise authority over Muslims. This law was frequently ignored in other Muslim countries, but Jews in prominent positions of power were rare in al-Andalus. Christians, of course, did not hold any positions of power since there were far fewer of them in al-Andalus, and the Muslims were at war with the Christians. This afforded the Jews a certain unique position in society. They were not considered the enemies by either the Muslims or the Christians.

They were indeed, “neutrals,” having their services utilized by both Muslims and Christians. In fact, during the early stages of the Christian Reconquest, Jews fought in both Christian and Muslim armies, despite this fact having no ultimate consequence on their long-term status within the country.

There are contradictory reports on the conditions of Jews living in Muslim Spain. While it certainly was not an ideal situation of peace and harmony, the plight of the Jews was not intolerable either, owing in large part to their substantial and influential representation within the population. Jews and Christians could not dress in clothing of people of position or of a “worthy man.” Furthermore, they were regulated to wear a distinguishing sign in some cities, to better recognize “their shame.” Muslims were warned not to massage Jews or Christians in the baths, nor tend to the animal of a Jew or Christian. Naturally, certain cities were more accepting in their toleration for Jews than others. For example, a riot broke out against the Jews of Córdoba in March of 1135 “because of a dead Muslim found among them.” Jewish houses were attacked and robbed, and a small number of Jews were killed. In stark contrast, a young Jewish merchant from Almería arrived in Fez just across the African border to sell some merchandise. In a letter to his father, this young Jew says that hatred of Jews in Fez is rampant, and “Almería is a place of salvation” in comparison (Roth 115).

Muslim-Jewish relations in the largely Christian area of Castile appear to be quite different. Jews here were an important part of business transactions. Both Muslims and Jews were involved in loaning to and borrowing from Christians and from each other in Castile. The official legal documents of Valladolid of 1293 contain complaints about penalties that Jews imposed on Muslims who were delinquent in repayment.

Incidentally, there is remarkable reference to the equal status of women as respected citizens in this area as well. No Muslim man or woman was permitted to convert to Judaism, neither should any Jew convert to Islam. In Valladolid, Muslims were required to wear long beards “as their law commands.” No Christian woman was allowed to nurse a Jewish or Muslim child, and vice versa. Muslims and Jews both faced similar regulations with regard to special taxes. The king of Córdoba declared in 1254 that Jews and Muslims of his city must pay the ten percent tithe to the Church on all property that they bought from Christians, just as the Christian owners had originally paid it (Roth 131).

There were some non-positive Jewish and Muslim interactions in Muslim Spain. Jews who lived in al-Andalus may not normally have had much to fear from the Muslims of Spain, but they very frequently ran into trouble when traveling. Ransom of Jewish captives, usually seized on the sea by Muslim or Byzantine pirates, was a serious problem. Additionally, the murder of Jews who traveled to other cities for business was not uncommon (Goitein 115).

The Shift to Christian Spain

The taking of the Muslim stronghold Alhambra on January 2, 1492 was purely ceremonial, as the terms of surrender had already been negotiated. According to historical accounts, Ferdinand and Isabella mounted the pristine hills that led up to the city dressed in their finest Moorish clothes for the momentous occasion. The terms of surrender had been agreed to several months before, in the fall of 1491, in a secret arrangement between the last of the Nasrids, Muhammad XI, and the Catholic Monarchs.

There was no bloodshed in the city and no damage was done to the revered palaces. Muhammad XI, known as King Boabdil, was said to have been overwhelmed with grief in having to give up control of Granada, city of the Nasrids for nearly three centuries. Legend holds that Boabdil sighed with regret on his way out of Granada, only to be chastised by his mother who asserted that he should not “cry like a woman for what he failed to defend like a man” (Paris 234). But given the events of the fifteenth century, he had no choice; surrender was imminent.

The terms of surrender had included the provision that Muslims would be allowed to practice their faith openly and without harassment in the new Christian state as full citizens, which was not a novel concept considering Muslims had been living in newly Christian states in this same land for hundreds of years as the political climate constantly shifted. For a time, the monarchs preserved many of the remnants of the Arabic world they had inherited. They moved into their palaces, and Isabella went so far as to consecrate the mosque on the Alhambra’s grounds and begin to worship there. But three months after the surrender of the Alhambra, the Edict of Expulsion of Jews was signed on March 31, 1492, and nowhere was its effects seen more than in society’s loftiest circles, where Jews and newly converted Christians were still working at the highest levels of the Christian government, as they had been for centuries. Long-term advisers to Isabella and Ferdinand suddenly found themselves without a job and without a country. One example of this is Isaac Abravanel, who was able to negotiate a small postponement of the final day for Jews to leave Spain from July 31 to August 2, which happened to correspond to the ninth of Ab in the Jewish calendar, the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (Menocal 249). Abravanel undoubtedly understood the magnitude of this

occasion in Jewish history and wanted it to be forever remembered with the weight it deserves.

Ferdinand and Isabella had guaranteed royal protection so the Jews could wind up their businesses, so long as they did not take gold, silver, or coins with them. This was an important caveat since the nation's wealth was held in precious metals and gemstones. In just three months, the Jews needed to translate their assets into tangible property that they could take with them. Many Jews simply gave their property away to Christian friends in defiance.

There was an immediate push for new conversions. Ferdinand and Isabella were desirous of acquiring more "Christians" to strengthen their new country and keeping talented people in the kingdom. Priests followed the Jews out of Spain up until the very end, holding out for converts. The king and members of nobility had arranged for ships to carry them away, and many chose instant conversion once they actually caught a glimpse of the boats that would take them from their homes forever.

Those that left went to North Africa, Italy, Flanders, the Low Countries, the south of France, and the expanding Ottoman Empire. Sultan Bayezid II was the only ruler to extend an unqualified welcome to the exiles in his empire. When asked about the wisdom of the Catholic Monarchs' decision to expel the Jews, Bayezid replied, "Can such a king be called wise and intelligent—one who impoverishes his country and enriches my kingdom?" (Paris 251).

Many Jews died in route, across the rough and rugged terrain of Spain in July. Hundreds more died when ships sank, captains threw them overboard, or were dropped off on remote islands where there were no food or water. Those whose suffering was

unbearable returned to Spain. By law, they were immediately baptized and consequently, watched like prey by the Inquisition. Some synagogues were destroyed, while others were converted to churches, and the Inquisition raged on for years more. Ferdinand and Isabella strove to effectively erase all memory of the Jews in Spain.

Just weeks after the banishment of the Jews, another voyage set sail from Spain, this time headed west. Spain would go on to conquer lands and cultures all across the world, eventually validating the old adage that the sun never set on the Spanish empire. This decisive culmination to the *convivencia* on the Iberian Peninsula and the imperial expansion in which it resulted is a poignant and ironic end for the empire that once flourished and made its mark under a most unique degree of cultural diversity.

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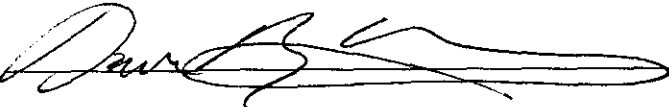
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