CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS IN THE IBERIAN PENINSULA, 1000–1600

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Relations between Christians and Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula have received only intermittent attention, being relegated to a secondary position among research interests. Yet the daily coexistence of the two faiths over several centuries at various levels – social, religious and intellectual, among others – is itself remarkable enough to warrant a thorough survey of relations on either side of a frontier that was at times purely imaginary (Burns 1989: 307–30). Analysis of interfaith relations will surely enhance our knowledge in other areas by shedding new light on the coexistence of the two communities in the course of six complex yet fruitful centuries from the year 1000 to 1600 (Monferrer-Sala 2013: 47–59).

The Christian and Muslim communities of al-Andalus exerted enormous influence on Christian-held territories, though the nature of that influence varied over time. Relations between the two communities in urban areas differed considerably from those found in rural milieus, due in part to the different attitudes of the authorities and in part to the complete lack of links between the urban and rural worlds. Even within cities, interfaith relationships varied depending on the way each group chose to deal with the fact of daily coexistence. During the Córdoba Emirate, a period crucial to our understanding of the development of Christian communities in later centuries, the followers of Eulogius and Alvarus in the ninth century opted for outright defiance of the Islamic authorities, while other groups chose actively to collaborate with the state. The same is true of the muwalladūn, whose status as Christian converts to Islam led to their receiving better treatment than other Christian groups by the Islamic governors during the caliphate (Fierro 2005: 195–245).

The position of Mudéjares (mudajjanūn; referred to as ‘Moors’ or ‘Saracens’ in contemporary sources), Muslims living in reconquered Christian territories, varied. They were forced to adapt to a changing situation in these areas, but their status contrasted sharply with that of the later Moriscos (converts from Islam to Christianity), who experienced one of the harshest periods in the whole Islamic presence in the Iberian Peninsula.

Christians and Muslims became crucial ideological elements; their changing status reflected the shifting political discourse to which they were subordinate. Yet while the descriptions offered of each other by Christian and Muslim writers were undeniably tainted with the violence to be found in the world around them, in many cases interfaith relations provided a portrait of tolerant coexistence (Tolan 2010: 141–9).
Christians under Muslim rule

The varying fortunes of the Christians in al-Andalus during the Emirate (eighth-ninth centuries) and the Caliphate (tenth century) were marked from the year 1000 onwards by a long decline culminating in the arrival of the Almoravids, whose deportation policy — introduced in 1126 — lasted over ten years. Shortly afterwards, al-Andalus fell to the Almohads, one of whose avowed aims was to prevent the coexistence of Christians and Muslims (Albarrán 2014: 87–8; cf. Fierro 1997: 158–9, 165–8).

Data on the precise situation of Christian communities during this period are very scarce, although the sources confirm that Christians were still to be found even in rural areas at this late stage (Wasserstein 1985: 226–7). There is evidence that urban Christians enjoyed a certain degree of religious freedom, being allowed to hold public ceremonies and even ring church bells (Simonet 1983: 648–9). Indeed, they clearly felt safe enough to oppose decrees passed by the Islamic authorities (Ibn ‘Abdūn 1992: 150–1). One event that undoubtedly affected the Christian community in Seville was the transfer in 1063 of the relics of Saint Isidore to León, apparently prompted by a certain distancing of the Christian community in al-Andalus from the Church in Rome but also suggesting divisions between that community and the Christians of northern Spain.

The short history of the Christian presence in al-Andalus (711–1147) entered its final phase of decline in the eleventh century, culminating in the fall of Seville and the flight of Clement, the last Archbishop of the city (García Sanjuán 2004: 269–86; García Sanjuán 2009: 259–87). The period of Almoravid rule (1091–1147) was to have a decisive impact on the local Christian community, due not only to the changing political situation but also to the spread of the Christian kingdoms from the taifa period onwards (Fierro 1994: 466, 496). We can glean some idea of the cultural profile of these latter-day al-Andalus Christians from an examination of the heavily Arabised Christian community in Lisbon, which — led by its bishop — fought against the Portuguese and their Flemish and English allies, who finally executed the bishop and enslaved the Christian community in the mistaken belief that they were Muslims.

While it would be wrong to view the attitude of the Almoravid rulers to Christians as being prompted by the fanaticism and intolerance commonly attributed to them (Fierro 1997: 156–7), there is no doubt that their outlook marked a radical departure from that hitherto displayed by the Islamic authorities, creating a hostile climate and exerting growing pressure on the ahl al-dhimma, whose living conditions were thus rendered increasingly harsh. Ibn ‘Abdūn (eleventh–twelfth centuries) in his Risāla fī l-qādā’ wa-l-hisba (‘Treatise on the office of judge and market inspector’) sheds interesting light on Muslim–Christian relations in twelfth-century Seville (García Sanjuán 2003: 57–84; Deimann 2011: 107–24), deprecating over-close links between Muslims, Christians and Jews and stating that dealings between the communities should be regulated in accordance with Islamic precepts. For example, a Muslim should not act as a servant to a Christian:

A Muslim should not give massages to a Jew or to a Christian, nor should he clear their refuse nor clean their latrines, for the Jew and the Christian are better fitted to these tasks, which are tasks for vile people. A Muslim should not attend to the horse of a Jew or a Christian, nor serve as his muleteer, nor hold his stirrup, and anyone known to do so should be reprimanded.


He also urges that women should be banned from entering churches, on the grounds of the priests’ immoral behaviour. The following passage is of interest in showing that Ibn ‘Abdūn was aware of certain Eastern Christian practices, such as the fact that priests could marry; he highlighted this as
preferable to the Catholic prohibition of marriage for the clergy, which he regarded as harmful because it gave rise to the promiscuity which priests apparently displayed in al-Andalus. Also of interest is his reference to the celebration of the Circumcision of the Lord in the twelfth century, this being an ancient Christian feast of major doctrinal importance for the Roman Church:

Muslim women should be prevented from entering abominable churches, for the clergy are libertines, fornicators and sodomites. Frankish women should be forbidden to enter the church except on days of religious services or festivals, for there they eat, drink and fornicate with the priests, among whom there is not one who has not two or more of these women with whom he sleeps. They have adopted this custom through having declared lawful what is unlawful and vice versa. Priests should be ordered to marry, as they do in the East, and they should do so if they wish. No woman, old or otherwise, should be allowed to stay in the house of a priest as long as he refuses to marry.

(Ibn ʿAbdūn 1992: 150, no. 154)

He also states that priests should be forced to undergo circumcision in emulation of Christ’s circumcision, whose feast they celebrate:

Let them be forced to undergo circumcision, as al-Muʿtaḍid b. ʿAbbād made them do, for according to their assertions they follow the example of Jesus – God bless him and grant him salvation – and Jesus was circumcised; they themselves, who have abandoned this practice, have a feast that they solemnly celebrate, to mark the day of his circumcision.

(Ibn ʿAbdūn 1992: 150, no. 154)

Another interesting precept is that books of science written (or annotated) by Muslims should not be sold to Christians or Jews, lest they be translated and subsequently attributed to Christian or Jewish authors. He also recommends that Christian and Jewish doctors should not be allowed to attend Muslims:

Books of science should not be sold to Jews or Christians, save those which deal with their own law, for then they translate the books of science and attribute them to their people and their bishops, when they are really the works of Muslims.

It would be better not to allow any Jewish or Christian physician to treat Muslims, for they do not harbour good feelings for any Muslim, but are concerned only with curing those of their own faith, for how is one to entrust one’s life to someone who has no concern for Muslims?


The attempt to force Christians and Muslims to wear clothes which would identify them by bearing a sign of disgrace (Ibn ʿAbdūn 1992: 157, no. 169) is combined with other humiliating precepts. The contempt for Christians advocated by Ibn ʿAbdūn is clear in his insistence on equating them – and the Jews – with other marginal social sectors such as homosexuals and lepers, whose used clothes should not be sold to a Muslim buyer unless he has been duly forewarned:

The clothes of lepers, Jews and Christians, and of libertines, should not be sold unless the buyer has been given prior warning of their provenance.

(Ibn ʿAbdūn 1992: 154–5, no. 164)
Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala

Ibn ʿAbdūn also felt that the standard form of greeting should be banned among infidels, thus equating the *dhimmīs* with the devil (Ibn ʿAbdūn 1992: 157, no. 169), and urged that the ringing of bells in churches and shrines on Islamic soil should be prohibited. These matters are no mere anecdotal record of Ibn ʿAbdūn’s personal views; rather, they form part of the deep-rooted anti-Christian legal outlook voiced by some Muslim authors. Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1063) had already manifested his hatred of bell-towers, probably reflecting an earlier prohibition on bell-ringing that had subsequently been revoked (Lévi-Provençal 1957: 124–5).

An interesting light is also shed on dealings between Muslims and Christians with regard to the purchase of wine. From Ibn ʿAbdūn’s text we learn that black slaves or Berber servants would cross the river by barge to purchase wine for their masters, with the connivance of the bargeman:

They [the slaves] are to be forbidden to cross with vessels for buying wine from the Christians and, if they are caught doing so, the vessel should be broken and the local official alerted, so that the barge-man may be punished.

(Ibn ʿAbdūn 1992: 172, no. 204)

Although wine-drinking by Muslims was banned (Ibn ʿAbdūn 1992: 163, no. 186), it is known to have been widespread in certain circles in al-Andalus, as is confirmed by Ibn Quzmān (d. 1160), who portrays himself as a drunk (Ibn Quzmān 1989: 45, 58, 182). The contempt shown for Christians under Almoravid rule is clearly conveyed in Ibn Quzmān’s *Dīwān*, where – seeking to describe the world around him, and to some extent free of religious prejudice – he offers a fairly realistic picture of relations between Christians and Muslims and of the Muslim attitude to Christians. While Ibn Quzmān regards Jews as fellow citizens, equally harried by the belligerence of the northern kingdoms, Christians are viewed as ‘the enemy’ and, as such, are the object of harsh accusations of cowardice and treachery (Corriente 1990: 73–7).

Despite reports that from the earliest stage in the Islamic conquest there was a large-scale flight of bishops from dioceses in what had become Islamic territory (Simonet 1983: 121–2), surviving records from a number of episcopal sees show an uninterrupted roll of prelates until the late tenth century. This suggests that the church in Spain had little difficulty in reorganising itself and maintaining its organisation over the following centuries. In that respect, while bishops continued to be chosen by the local clergy, their appointment was often the prerogative of the reigning monarch: one such bishop was Recemundus, whose ‘Calendar’ lists a number of public feasts celebrated by Christians in the second half of the tenth century which persisted into the eleventh century and in which Muslims took part (Herrera Roldán 2010: 43; cf. de la Granja 1969: 1–53, 1970: 119–43).

Another relevant feature of the Christian Church in Islamic territory was its alleged isolation, a notion that must be viewed with caution since there is evidence that the doctrinal and disciplinary authority of Rome remained in force among Catholic communities in al-Andalus as late as the twelfth century. At this time, Bishop Julián of Malaga travelled to Rome to ask to be restored to his see, in which his community had replaced him after he was imprisoned by the Almoravids (Flórez 1792: XI, 332–4).

Muslims under Christian rule

As the Christian reconquest of the Peninsula proceeded, Mudejars, Muslims living in Christian territories, were allowed – thanks to the statutes governing their Islamic status – to maintain many of their religious beliefs and practices, including the pilgrimage to Mecca (*ḥajj*), which is known to have been performed even in the Morisco period (Harvey 1988: 11–24). Other ritual practices, including circumcision, were also maintained (Mami 1997: 218–23).
It should be stressed that while our knowledge of the Islam practised by Muslims living in Christian territories is drawn from descriptions offered by contemporary sources, these daily observances must be viewed in the context of the differing involvement of the Mudejar and Morisco communities in the socio-political structures of the time. Whilst the Mudejars were allowed to practise their religion in a fairly public manner, the Moriscos faced certain restrictions and prohibitions and were even forced to claim other beliefs when living as crypto-Muslims (Bernabé Pons 2007: 306–8).

From the twelfth century onwards, after the reconquest, the political situation underwent radical change; the Mudejars – once viewed as a dominant minority – became merely a tolerated minority, subordinated to Christian political pre-eminence. Even so, daily life continued to unfold in a climate of relative neighbourliness, in a delicate balance based on a coexistence at once self-interested and resigned; the Mudejars retained their identity as a community and also their religious rites, although they faced certain restrictions; for example, they could not engage in sexual relations with Christian women, and public proclamation of their Islamic beliefs was banned.

This latter aspect is not without interest when examining the social violence which was undoubtedly a feature of interfaith relations, as is highlighted by numerous studies of Christians and Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula. Yet the metahistorical idealisation that has grown up around the concept of ‘coexistence’ has succeeded in concealing to a large extent the conflict existing alongside it. There were two settings in which dealings between Christians and Muslims particularly tended to lead to violence: taverns and brothels. The presence of members of both communities in these venues gave rise to all kinds of scandals. Though sexual relations between Muslims and Christians constituted a punishable offence, they were nonetheless common. In Zaragoza, for example, the Christian authorities complained to King Ferdinand I that Muslims were dressing as Christians in order to engage in sexual relations with Christian women. Mudejars visited Christian taverns to drink wine, often getting drunk, starting fights and blaspheming against the Catholic faith (Hinojosa Montalvo 2004: 345).

Aljamiado texts (works in Castilian and other European languages written in Arabic characters), and especially the many records of trials held by the Inquisition from the fifteenth century onwards, point to the survival of prayer rituals among the Moriscos as a key element in enhancing cohesiveness among Muslim communities under Christian rule. Of particular interest for the study of Muslim–Christian relations is the analysis of the use of Christian proper names among Castilian Mudejars (those living in Aragon and Valencia tended to retain Arabic names); the Moriscos also at times adopted Christian forenames (Vincent 1983: 57–70). A key issue in this respect is the degree of acculturation of Mudejars throughout the Peninsula: the evidence clearly suggests that this varied considerably, depending on the length of time the Muslim population had lived in an area and on their local population density.

However, certain ritual practices retained by Mudejars and Moriscos were banned in the Christian kingdoms, including the muezzin’s call to prayer, prohibited in 1318 by King Jaime II. Such coercive measures gradually intensified, and by the fifteenth century legal provisions regarding Muslims were openly aggressive, undermining the rights granted by the Christian authorities. This led to a kind of mutual aggression between Christians and Muslims, which culminated in the implementation of measures against Muslim communities – for example, they were forbidden to erect mosques in areas where Christians lived – and to widespread Muslim insulting of Christian images. By the late fifteenth century, repression of the Muslims was starting to prompt collective panic, since these measures were widely viewed as a prelude to generalised forced conversion.

This is clearly a reflection of the deteriorating social situation faced by the Muslims as their status changed from Mudejar to Morisco, and while they accepted all the changes, they also
became the repositories of a religious legacy: Islam as practised in al-Andalus. This change in socio-religious status, engineered from above by the Christian rulers, overturned all the values of the Muslim community, which was reduced to hitherto unthinkable levels of degradation, involving forced conversion, exile and changes of identity; all this inevitably undermined the religious cohesion maintained by the Mudejars at an earlier stage (de Epalza 2001: 87–95).

The evidence suggests that the Moriscos, heirs to their immediate forebears the Mudejars, were able to construct an intelligent ideological outlook based on an acceptance of their subordinate status in their controversial dealings with the Christians. These tense relations were played out not only in their social dealings, but at every level of life: intellectual, religious and human; at times, it involved resort to *taqiyya*, dissimulation or concealment of their true faith (Cardaillac 1972: 17–122). That was the situation for some groups, but by no means for all Moriscos; some had become so acculturated that they were, in fact, in a state of transition from Islam to Christianity under varying conditions (Márquez Villanueva 1991). One notable consequence was the social rise of some converts (Echevarría 2002: 1, 555–65): Morisco families, for example, provided Catholic priests whose relations with their Muslim families varied (Caro Baroja 1985: 21). This social feature suffices to give an idea of the level of socio-religious interaction to be found at the time.

Muslim leaders soon realised that theological debate on Qur’anic matters was a crucial means of strengthening their relationship with the Christians (Daniel 1960: 127). These polemics belonged to an earlier Eastern tradition for which there were major precedents in al-Andalus (Burman 1994). Religious disputes – sharpened by the activities of Franciscan and Dominican missionaries in the Iberian Peninsula from the thirteenth century onwards, whose polemics were aimed at converting Muslims to Christianity – were thus common practice over a long period. The goal, however, was not just to out-debate one’s adversary but also to understand him and learn more about his ideas. Fortunately, a few texts of this kind have survived. Among the most interesting is an *aljamiado* version of the ‘Dispute on the [divine] unity’ copied in Castilian by ʿAlī al-Gharibo, where the dispute ranges – as it often did – over issues such as the Trinity and the divinity of Christ (Echevarría 1999: 68–71).

Repression of the Muslim population – initially implemented at a personal level – gradually gathered strength, fuelled by the preaching of St Vincent Ferrer and by the Church’s desire to defend the faith at all costs, a desire which culminated in the establishment of the Inquisition in 1484, marked by renewed intransigence and increasing hostility towards minorities. As a result, Muslims were soon looked upon as wholly unreliable, their Islamic views turning them into potential enemies. Anti-Muslim sentiment is apparent in Jaume Roig’s fifteenth-century verse narrative *Spill*, which tells how a woman – acting on the advice of an *aljīquī* – casts a love spell using the consecrated host. The most interesting feature of Roig’s account is that the very Muslim who urges the woman to desecrate the host eventually rejects Muhammad and embraces the Christian faith (Español Beltrán 1993–4: 325–45).

The portrait provided by Christian religious and legal authorities in the course of inquisitorial hearings – and also in theological works – is a kind of literary characterization blending the tragic and the comic, with occasional additions from relatively objective accounts. We are almost always offered a stereotype image of the Muslim, whose speech, dietary scruples and attire are unfairly mocked.

Yet the distinction between Christian and Muslim was far less clearly drawn in daily life than in religious and social affairs, where Islamic beliefs were openly ridiculed: a good example is the *Liber scalae Machometi*, adapted from the *Kitāb al-miʿād* (c. 1264). This work was deliberately chosen for adaptation, not because it provided reliable information about Islam but because its eschatological content could readily be refuted from the Christian standpoint (Echevarría 1994: 231–46).
We noted at the start that the frontier was in many cases purely imaginary. Indeed, the *Romancero fronterizo* portrays a highly complex type of man, one who fraternises with the enemy and adopts his customs, viewing him as a close neighbour often more appreciated than reviled. The abundant Morisco material in the *Romancero hispánico* (Menéndez Pidal 1953) provides a wealth of invaluable sociological information covering various aspects of the lives and outlook both of individuals and of Morisco communities. A literary idealisation verging on exoticism is to be found in the narrative genre known as the ‘Morisco novel’: the frontier knight – Christian or Muslim – shares a chivalric code with his adversary, and the Muslim knight is presented as a model of sensibility and devotion in love (Carrasco Urgoiti 2002: 307–43).

This friendly portrait of the Muslim was especially apparent in the work of one of Spain’s leading sixteenth-century writers, Fray Luis de León (1527–91), who – in contrast to the hostile image purveyed by the *Romancero antiguo* – presents an idealised view of the ‘wise Muslim’ (BAE 1855: 3):

*For he with thoughts aloof
By proud men’s great estate is not oppressed,
Nor marvels at the roof
Of gold, built to attest
The Moor’s skill, and on jasper piles to rest!*

(Que no le enturbia el pecho
de los soberbios grandes el estado,
ni del dorado techo
se admira, fabricado
del sabio Moro, en jaspe sustentado!)

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Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala

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156
Further reading


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