CHRISTIANS UNDER MUSLIM RULE, 650–1200

Christians in Muslim Spain

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Muslim settlement and rule, 711–1000

Armies comprised mostly of Muslim Berbers entered the Iberian Peninsula in the spring of 711, in what seems to be an extension of territorial expansion from northern Africa. In some regions and towns their presence was met with armed conflict, such as when Roderic, King of Spain (r. 710–11), met Muslim armies in battle on the river Guadalete. The battle was a decisive victory for the Muslims. In other places, the arrival of Muslims was met with little resistance, and in some cases, especially in rural areas, local inhabitants were probably unaware of the new change in rulers. Once cognizant of the shift, they may have paid little attention to it as they were largely unaffected (Hitchcock 2014: 23–4). By the early decades of the eighth century, Muslim settlement extended over two-thirds of the peninsula, which became known as al-Andalus. It was governed by successive emirs from Córdoba until ʿAbd al-Raḥmān I (r. 756–88), who escaped the ʿAbbāsid revolution and fled to Spain, ruled as an Umayyad. By the tenth century, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III (r. 912–61) reigned over the independent Umayyad state of al-Andalus as self-declared caliph. In 1031, after several years of civil war, al-Andalus dissolved into independently ruled party states (ṭawāʾif).

Social conditions under which Christians and Muslims lived

The social conditions imposed upon Christians by Muslims from 711–1000 varied widely according to time and region. As noted earlier, for some inhabitants little change was effected in the shift from Christian to Muslim rule. In other cases, what amounted to dhimmī regulations were agreed upon between local inhabitants and Muslim leaders. This is the case with the Treaty of Tudmīr, signed in 713 between ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, first emir of Muslim Spain, and Theodemir (Tudmīr, in the Arabic source), the local ruler of Murcia. According to this treaty, local Christians are obliged to pay an annual tax (one dinar and equal measures of crops) in exchange for the protection of the Muslim army and the promise that Muslims would not interfere with local religious practices. Theodemir was allowed to retain his role as local governor provided he remained loyal to Muslim rulers and did not interfere with their affairs (Melville and Ubaydli 1992: 10–13). But even regulations like these were adapted over time, at some points falling out of place altogether only to be revived again later on. Thus, there were periods and places when
Christians achieved high degrees of social mobility. At other times and in other regions, Muslim rulers instituted stipulations that restricted social mobility.

The example of a group of Christians in mid-ninth century Córdoba, at least as it regards the social conditions of Christians in Muslim Spain, has perhaps received undue attention. Between 850 and 859 nearly 50 Christians were executed in Córdoba by the Muslim authorities for the crimes of apostasy – some were converts from Islam – and blasphemy – many publicly insulted the prophet Muḥammad. The episode has gained the attention of scholars interested in what motivated the Christians to pursue martyrdom in this fashion. Some see in the movement an expression of penitential angst whereby their deaths, secured assuredly by acts known to be punishable by execution, became the culmination of monastic vows leading to salvation (Wolf 1988). Others posit that the Christians were attempting to protest against the process of assimilation to Arab and Islamic culture (Coope 1995).

There may be some truth in these arguments, but the task of discerning the Christians’ motivations is made more difficult in light of the fact that the movement’s primary sources are limited to two Christian authors writing in Latin: Eulogius (d. 859), who wrote two accounts of the movement and an apology for it, and Paulus Alvarus (d. c. 862), who wrote his own apology for the Christian martyrs, half of which is an attack upon Muhammad and Islam, and an account of Eulogius’ martyrdom (Gil 1973). Much in these sources is devoted to hagiography, and details about Islam are highly polemicised. As a result, the historical details of the movement, not to mention the martyrs’ motivations, remain in question. Furthermore, there are no extant manuscripts for most of Eulogius and Alvarus’ works (only one tenth-century manuscript exists for Alvarus’ defence of the movement; modern editions of most of their works are based on manuscripts that are now lost). This suggests that the treatises were not widely read. Additionally, there are no known Arabic accounts of the Cordovan martyrs.

In light of this textual paucity, some scholars simply doubt the historicity of the martyrs movement. According to this argument, Eulogius and Alvarus, given the similarities their texts share with other martyrlogies, were simply anti-Muslim propagandists. Depending on earlier sources, some of them Eastern Christian hagiographies, they wrote embellished martyrlogies that reinforced their agendas against Islam (Monferrer-Sala 2004: 415–50). Whatever may have happened, it is clear that Eulogius and Alvarus were not representative of all the Christian communities living in mid-ninth century Córdoba. Likewise, the vehemence that characterises their descriptions of Islam and Muslims in Córdoba can hardly be taken as a fully accurate account of Muslim communities, the wider treatment of Christians, or the social conditions under which Christians and Muslims in the region at that time lived. In this light, though the Christian martyrs are provocative and will probably retain the interest of historians, their movement was probably far less sensational in its historical context than some of the modern scholarly attention it receives might suggest (Hitchcock 2014: 58).

An assessment of convivencia

In 1926, Spanish historian and philologist Ramón Menéndez Pidal adapted the word convivencia in his Orígenes del español. Therein, he used the term in order to describe the ‘coexistence of norms’ (convivencia de normas) that characterised the phonetic variants found in early Romance languages in Spain (Glick 1992: 1). Later on, Spanish historian Américo Castro popularised the word in his España en su historia: cristianos, moros, y judíos. Castro applied the concept, translated in an English edition of his work as ‘living-togetherness’ (Castro 1971), to the way he saw the social relations evident in medieval Spain’s multireligious and multiethnic society. In theory, then, the convivencia of Christian, Muslim and Jewish communities fostered a unique level of cultural interaction.
that was connected to the three religious communities’ proximity. In turn, according to Castro, this formed part of the Spanish reality (realidad) (Novikoff 2005: 22). Castro’s thesis generated much debate, especially among contemporary scholars such as Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz and Eugenio Asensio, and also among later scholars as well (Akasoy 2010; Novikoff 2005; Soifer 2009; Szpiech 2013; Tolan 1999; Wolf 2009).

This debate continues. In recent decades, the notion of convivencia has even gained increased popular attention, where it exists as a romanticised vision of intercommunal harmony that at times threatens to obscure the history of medieval Spain. As a result, other popular-level views push back against the fascination with convivencia, emphasising contexts of medieval discord (Rothstein 2003). Thus, despite the ebb and flow of social conditions for Christians and Muslims, a false dichotomy emerges from the debate where life in medieval Spain is viewed as either inherently intolerant, despite the popular attraction of convivencia, or uniquely tolerant. In the latter case, convivencia becomes a cure-all for the shortcomings of modern societies if only its citizens would hearken back to the multireligious utopia of medieval Spain.

The reality was in all likelihood far more complex. As the late historian John Boswell cautioned, ‘The question of convivencia . . . is intensely complicated, and the task of . . . trying to understand and describe this symbiosis is rather like . . . attempting to reconstruct a broken and crumpled spider’s web’ (Boswell 1977: 12). To begin with, there were indeed contexts in medieval Spain where Christian communities experienced wide social mobility and contributed to high degrees of cultural cohesion with Muslim and Jewish communities. But the coexistence of multiple religious communities, a part of convivencia, characterised numerous frontier zones all over medieval Europe and elsewhere (Soifer 2009: 29). So the concept, to whatever degree it existed, would not necessarily be unique to Spain. More importantly, using convivencia as a template for interpreting multireligious life fails to take into account the ‘uneven distribution of power among the three religious communities’ (Soifer 2009: 30; Tolan 1999: 390). Thus, convivencia, no matter how it existed, would be a way of life brokered by those in power; convivencia existed not insulated from violence but alongside it (Nirenberg 1996: 245; Szpiech 2013: 138).

To consider one example to explain the complexities of convivencia, the composition of much religious polemic exhibits cultural and linguistic borrowings between religious communities. For instance, a Christian text may be written in Arabic and thoroughly imbued with qurʾānic and Islamic (as well as Jewish) thought-forms. Some authors of texts like these even learned Arabic and bits of qurʾānic exegesis from Muslims in the context of congenial relationships, if not actual friendships. But this symbiosis existed for the purpose of projects designed to denigrate the other and safeguard members of one religious community from converting to another, even as other texts were meant to refine missionary efforts. These intentions would apply to projects such as Juan de Segovia’s trilingual Qurʾān, for which he depended heavily upon the Muslim faqih ʿIsā ibn Jābir (Wolf 2014), and even to Alfonso X’s translation programme (Echevarría 2005: 151–2), both efforts in some ways embodying the notion of convivencia but nevertheless failing to live up to it as well.

**Religious attitudes of Christian and Muslim authors**

A relatively small corpus of texts evincing specifically religious attitudes remains extant from the period 711–1000. Among these are the ninth-century treatises written by Eulogius and Alvarus discussed earlier. Eulogius preserves in one of his texts a passage from an anti-Muslim treatise written by his teacher, Speraindeo. Of particular importance, however, is the Istoria de Mahomet, a biography of Muḥammad written no later than the mid-ninth century by an unknown author. Eulogius also preserves this biography, and it appears in other late ninth-century works from
Spain as well. It is significant because it is one of the earliest known discussions of Muḥammad to appear in Latin. Some of the material in it is historically accurate. For instance, the author discusses Muḥammad’s upbringing as an orphan, his marriage to Khadija and a later marriage to Zaynab. Islam is described as a monotheism revealed to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. But the author uses these details for polemical means. Thus, regardless of accurate details, Muḥammad appears as a lustful false prophet and his followers as fools (Wolf 1990).

Significant religious attitudes are also revealed in Muslim texts. For example, Yaḥyā ibn Yaḥyā al-Laythī (d. 849), the jurist of Berber origin who helped to establish Mālikī law in Muslim Spain, is used as a source in a legal text that considers the question of whether or not Muslims should participate in Christian holy days or receive gifts and food prepared by Christians as a part of festival celebrations that were typically exclusive to Christians. The text makes clear that in some cases gifts were even exchanged between Christians and Muslims who were part of the same families. According to al-Laythī, such interreligious celebrations were repugnant, and Muslims should not be allowed to participate in them. If they did, they risked being included with Christians on the Day of Judgment (Melville and Ubaydli 1992: 28–31). Texts such as this one suggest that intercommunal mixing and even interreligious marriage occurred in medieval Spain. At times it may even have led to different religious communities becoming indistinguishable from one another. After all, if Muslims guilty of celebrating Christmas risked eschatological judgment alongside Christians then it was because they had essentially become Christians. As a result, texts such as the one citing al-Laythī’s legal opinion emerge that are intent on proscribing certain levels of interaction in ways that might leave religious communities more clearly distinct (Cuffel 2007: 242–3).

References


Further reading


