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The Space Between Love and Hate: Coexistence During Convivencia

John Franzwa
Western Oregon University, jfranzwa19@mail.wou.edu

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John Franzwa, Western Oregon University, undergraduate student, “The Space Between Love and Hate: Coexistence During Convivencia”

Abstract: The period preceding the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Iberia in the late 15th and early 16th centuries was marred by conflict. The extent and degree of the discord has long been fiercely debated amongst scholars in two camps. Many late 20th century scholars have accepted the concept of Convivencia or “coexistence,” which argues that Jews, Muslims, and Christians lived in relative harmony with one another, peacefully blending their different cultures together. Others argue that there was no amicable cohabitation between the rival cultures and that Convivencia is a modern creation of later historians. This study focuses on Christian and Muslim primary source documents centering on 15th century Castile to gain insight of this debate. By analyzing personal accounts of daily life as well as legal documents including capitulations, land distributions, a Sunni Muslim breviary detailing social laws, a glimpse of the attitudes and feelings of individuals living within the supposed Convivencia can be seen. This research demonstrates that while Convivencia might not have been attained, there were genuine and earnest efforts by both the Christian ruling class and their Muslim subjects to live together without violence or severe oppression.

The Space Between Love and Hate
Coexistence During Convivencia

John Franzwa
Western Oregon University
Undergraduate
Phi Alpha Theta
Alpha Iota Xi Chapter Member

By the end of the European medieval period, the Iberian Peninsula – containing the modern nations of Spain and Portugal – was firmly Christian. The monarchs of the Iberian kingdoms were Catholic, and a vast majority of the population were Catholic as well. Beginning in the eighth century with Muslim invasions under the authority of the Umayyad dynasty, Christian and Muslim forces had grappled for territory for several centuries in a struggle that has been dubbed the *Reconquista*. By the end of the fifteenth century, the Reconquista officially ended with the conquest of the last Muslim controlled territory, the kingdom of Granada, and Muslims were soon expelled from the peninsula entirely.¹ The long period of conflict followed shortly by the forced expulsion of the Muslim minority indicates strong anti-Islamic views within Iberia, but to what extent is a question that has been debated by historians since the nineteenth century and continues today. On one end of the spectrum is the opinion that Iberian Christians and Muslims were so ideologically incompatible that there was little-to-no cooperation or cultural appropriation between them. The counterargument claims that Christians and Muslims lived together in relative peace on a day-to-day basis. This stance argues that despite occasional episodes of violence, the different social groups within medieval Iberia lived interconnected lives that involved a significant amount of coherence and cultural transmission. This romantic theory has been dubbed *convivencia*, which literally translates to “living together” or “coexistence.” While there was never complete acceptance or harmony between the opposing social and religious groups, it is clear from surviving records they attempted to coexist. While that attempt ultimately failed, evidence indicates that expulsion was not an intended outcome from Christian rulers or their Muslim subjects.

Historians have fiercely debated the questions of *convivencia* for decades. One belief amongst historians is that the incompatibility of Islam and Christianity coupled with the desire

for resources and land inevitably led to confrontation. As historian Joseph O’Callaghan wrote, “the Christian struggle against Islamic Spain can be described as a war of both territorial aggrandizement and of religious confrontation.”² Others have drawn the conclusion that while the Reconquista was a long process within Iberia that predated the Crusades by several centuries, ideologies of the Crusades were used to great effect as justification for Christian expansion at the expense of Muslim interests in the later Middle Ages. Carlos Laliena, for instance, stated that “the development of the idea of crusade influenced the process of the Reconquista.”³ These stances all seem to reflect the same principal theory that the Reconquista as well as the eventual expulsion of Muslims from Iberia demonstrate the steadfast refusal of Spanish Christians to permit Muslims a place in their kingdoms.

Other historians argue that the cultural influences of coexistence between Muslims and Christians cannot be denied. English and Cultural Studies professor Lhoussain Simour claims that what is described as the European Renaissance only occurred due to significant influence from the Islamic world, notably from Iberia.⁴ Simour claimed “it is this Muslim legacy, which has been systematically suppressed and consistently denied by Western historiography ever since the Renaissance.”⁵ As evidence, Simour points to the methods through which Christian conquerors incorporated Muslim architecture and infrastructure as Muslim principalities – known as *taifas* – were “reconquered” during the Reconquista, practices that largely upheld for most of the Middle Ages. Close inspection of Christian and Muslim accounts, such as testimonials given in criminal trials in the fifteenth century, demonstrate the ability for the followers of the rival religions to coexist in Iberia. Finally, this study explores legal codes from both Muslim and Christian perspectives in the fifteenth century to reveal the attempt to maintain

peace. These studies illustrate the effort put forth by Christian rulers and Muslim subjects to achieve *convivencia* within fifteenth century Iberia.

The dominant religious culture of the Iberian Peninsula changed hands multiple times over the course of the Middle Ages. It consisted primarily of multiple Christian kingdoms, chief among them the Visigoths, following the end of Roman rule in the region in the fifth century. Muslim armies then conquered the region in the eighth century, dubbing the peninsula Al-Andalus. Predictably, the culture of Al-Andalus was Islamic. The precepts of Christendom (often stemming from papal influence and the perception from Christian rulers across Europe) could not allow a rival religion to hold sway over perceived Christian territory. Slowly, beginning in the eighth century and continuing into the fifteenth, one taifa after another was conquered in the name of Christianity, led by the forces of the kingdoms of Aragon and Castile. This culminated in the surrender of Granada, the last remaining taifa in Iberia, located on the southern coast, to the combined forces of King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile in 1492. The fall of Granada marked the completion of Christian takeover or Reconquista of Iberia.

Christians were both aware and comfortable with incorporating Muslim methods and infrastructural techniques, as Muslim territory was absorbed into Christian kingdoms. The *Libros de repartimiento* were legal documents that detailed the redistribution and modification of the “reconquered” lands of Iberia from Al-Andalus into Christian kingdoms.⁶ One record, describing how the city of Orihuela was to be resettled and reorganized in 1272 following its capture by the Christian kingdom of Castile-Leon, noted that the irrigation systems created by Muslims were satisfactory. It was written to “repair the drainage ditches (and) irrigation canals of the territory of Orihuela, so that the water might flow without impediment just as it flowed in the time of the Moors.”⁷ The same document also acknowledged that water distribution policies should not be

changed because “they lawfully had in the time of the Moors” an accurate and effective process.⁸ While it was necessary for Christians to free the land from Islamic rule, this writing indicates that Islamic-created infrastructure was deemed effective – possibly even better than the current systems within Castile-León. Crucially, not only the physical achievements but the intellectual contributions were noted in the passage. The *repartimientos* indicate that Christian minds were open to recognizing and accepting contributions to their society, regardless of whether they were Christian or not in origin. While this is a far cry from Christian acceptance and adoption of Muslims, it does demonstrate that Christians did not simply reject everything that was Islamic out-of-hand.

Religious minorities existed within Iberian taifas and kingdoms regardless of the dominant religion. Christians could live and practice their religion in Al-Andalus, provided they acknowledged Muslim rule and paid additional taxes.⁹ Over generations some Christians eventually converted to Islam, but many stayed true to their faith. While staying Christians, they did however adopt many other practices of Islamic culture, including dress, language, and architecture. These “Arabicized” Christians were numerous enough to have a separate term identifying their specific social group – *Mozarab*.¹⁰ As the rule of Iberia switched from Muslim to Christian hands, a similar situation (albeit inversed) to that of the Mozarabs occurred. Like Mozarabs, specific terminology was used to identify these minority groups: a *Mudejar* was a practicing Muslim under Christian rule, while a *Morisco* was a Spanish Muslim that had converted to Christianity.¹¹ The use of these terminologies can be found in legal codes and records, which indicates that these minorities were numerous enough to be recognized as well given a place within the social infrastructures of the Christian kingdoms.

The daily social lives of the people also involved a significant amount of peaceful interaction between the religions. It is important to note that while most of the population was Christian, a significant number of Muslims remained in Christian Iberia by the end of the Reconquista. This can be seen in the use of two terms exclusive to this location and time: *Morisco* and *Mudejar*. These groups intermingled and lived alongside Christians in relative peace. A rule book written by Ice de Gebir, a Mudejar judge residing in the Castilian city of Segovia in the fifteenth century, supports this claim. He writes that a good Muslim must “honor your neighbor, whether he be a stranger or a relative or an unbeliever.”¹² An unbeliever in this context would apply to Christians or Jews, demonstrating that Muslim authorities are promoting peaceful cohabitation between the factions. Ice de Gebir advocates that Muslims should not only honor their Christian neighbors, but they should also “desire for your neighbor that good which you desire for yourself.”¹³ As a both a devout Muslim and a government official, de Gebir attempts to help Muslims find a middle ground with their Christian fellows. He argues that living by the tenets and morals of Islam requires an individual to be at peace with their neighbors. Therefore, Muslims should not be creating or encouraging conflict within their communities. Ice de Gebir’s writings imply that even if living conditions were not ideal, Muslims should endeavor to coexist as peacefully as possible with Christians, providing another example of genuine effort towards Convivencia rather than friction and intolerance.

Iberian Christians appeared to share the Muslim desire for amity. Recorded testimonies from Aragon of Christians regarding a murder trial of a Muslim for killing another Muslim illustrate Christian nonchalance towards the threat of their Muslim neighbors.¹⁴ The event occurred in Valencia, a city within the Christian kingdom of Aragon in 1491. Two separate Christians, a tailor and a weaver, both described how they had dined and attended a celebration

with Muslims and Christians together.¹⁵ Both accounts also comment on having friendly conversations with Muslims, which neither the witnesses or trial recorders observe as significant or unique. Even more noteworthy in this account is the fact that the celebration mentioned is concerning the feast of Corpus Christi, a decidedly Christian religious holiday, which celebrates the Eucharist, the consecrated body and blood of Christ. If there was a remarkable social gap between Muslims and Christians, it would not be surprising to have only Christians in attendance of such a feast day. The simple consideration that Muslims and Christians ate together, talked together, and attended and observed an important Christian holiday celebration together has significant implications that there was in fact minimal tension between the distinct groups based on religion within Valencia. This level of familiarity could be due to Valencia having a larger Muslim population than many other Christian territories, resulting in a more thorough intermingling of the social groups.¹⁶ However, large Muslim populations were not common throughout Iberia.

Towards the end of coexistence in Iberia, Muslim accounts again demonstrate Christian efforts to expropriate and assimilate aspects of Muslim culture. It is not disputed that by the beginning of the sixteenth century, the relationship between Islam and Christianity across Iberia had deteriorated to the point of an acrimonious separation. As relations began to break down between Christians and Muslims, an anonymous author wrote a poetic appeal to the Ottoman Sultan Bayazid II, the de facto leader of the Islamic world at the time.¹⁷ The identity of the poet is unknown beyond the fact that they were a Muslim residing in Granada in 1502 when it was written, less than a decade after Christian conquest. While lamenting the difficulties Muslims were currently experiencing at the hands of their Christian rulers, the poet describes how mosques had been converted to churches and other religious spaces had been used for Christian

purposes. The author bemoans this repurposing, writing that “those towns and their beauty” have become “strongholds for the worshippers of the Cross.”¹⁸ Again, Christians have looked at achievements of Muslims (this time architectural), and deemed their mosques fully capable of supporting Christian practices, at least functionally. This practice echoes similar actions by earlier European Christian societies when confronted with a rival religion. In efforts by the Christian church to convert pagans throughout the fifth through eighth centuries, pagan religious sites were often converted into Christian churches and shrines.¹⁹ Over time these early strategies, coupled with assimilation of Christian and pagan customs and holidays, had proved effective as subsequent generations become predominantly Christian, with paganism largely fading away. It is likely that Iberian Christians of the late Middle Ages were attempting to replicate those established effective conversion strategies, based on the descriptions provided in the poem to Bayazid II. However, if Christians were completely intolerant of Islam, then a razing of those mosques rather than assimilation would seem to have been more appropriate. What was erected by Muslim hands was accepted by Christians, even at the conclusion of the Reconquista. Like the *repartimientos*, this evidence illustrates that rulers and governmental officials of Christian Spain showed little reluctance to both use and benefit from Muslim works, even if they had to change its original intent.

By the end of the fifteenth century the tenuous relationship began to falter despite the efforts by Christian rulers to have a smooth transition of power. The Christian monarchy that was in control attempted to keep the differing groups apart from one another while maintaining Muslim freedoms, in a medieval attempt at the “separate but equal” policy. While history has shown that their methods of coexistence were ultimately unsuccessful, once again it is the attempt itself that needs to be emphasized and acknowledged. Castilian records of the clauses

and edicts imposed following the conquest of Granada by the combined forces of Castile and Aragon in 1491 point to this effort to accommodate the newly conquered Muslim population.²⁰ As bad as things became between Christians and Muslims, the intent for unity cannot be dismissed. King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile made several decrees in the Capitulations of Granada to the effect that Muslims would have enjoyed a life after Christian conquest similar to their life prior. Included in the Capitulations were promises that the Moors would not have to pay any more tribute to their new Christian rulers than what they had already paid to their previous Muslim rulers nor would they be forced to give anything (such as food, property, or housing) to their new rulers without their consent.²¹ A key promise was that “law suits which arise between Moors will be judged by their law ... and by their judges,”²² which allowed Muslims to continue to police themselves. Such an allowance would not be made by a ruler who did not trust that they could live peacefully with their subjects. The declaration that “Christian slaughterhouses would be separated from Muslim ones,” seems particularly considerate to the specific halal dietary requirements of Muslims, showing a level of understanding between Christian rulers and Muslim subjects.²³ It is important to note here that many of these guarantees provided this protection for three years, after which it was expected that Muslims would either leave the kingdom or convert to Christianity.²⁴ The three-year protection infers two crucial things: The Capitulations were not a long term solution; they were a temporary balm during a transitory period; and Christian rulers did not want to destroy their Muslim subjects; they wanted to give them an opportunity to either adjust or leave. This attitude is reminiscent of earlier Christian behavior of conversion through assimilation. But other statements like “no Christians might enter mosques where the Muslims perform their prayer,” also demonstrated the intent to separate followers of the two religions.²⁵ Knowing that the

attempt at coexistence would soon be abandoned entirely leads to an understanding of this declaration as an attempt to curb more conflict before it could start. These capitulations from Ferdinand and Isabella indicate that their feelings mirrored the beliefs of Ice de Gebir, emphasizing neighborly respect to make what would ultimately be a final attempt of peaceful coexistence.

Detailed analysis of the sources shown here makes it clear that Christians did attempt to maintain their working relationship with Muslims up to the end of the medieval period in Iberia. Christians attempted to honor the rights, freedoms, and beliefs of Muslims, even in a victory over Granada that would have allowed them to be as severe as they wanted. While there is little evidence that Christians (or Muslims) ever truly embraced harmony or unity, there is significant evidence that both sides attempted to live alongside one another. Violence, and eventually expulsion, may have been the ultimate result, it did not appear to have been the intended goal. Christians were comfortable keeping and maintaining the architecture and infrastructural works of Iberian Muslims. Christians chose to engage in social activities with Muslims such as meals and holidays. Every one of these facts accurately reveal that the Christian rulers as well as their Christian subjects were reasonably tolerant of a Muslim presence among them right until the end.

¹ Olivia Remie Constable, ed. *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 385.

² Joseph F. O'Callaghan, *Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 7, in Carlos Laliena, "Holy War, Crusade and "Reconquista" in Recent Anglo-american Historiography about the Iberian Peninsula," *Imago Temporis: Medium Aevum*, vol. 9 (2015): 109-122.

³ Carlos Laliena, "Holy War, Crusade and 'Reconquista' in Recent Anglo-american Historiography about the Iberian Peninsula," *Imago Temporis: Medium Aevum*, vol. 9 (2015): 109-122.

⁴ Lhousain Simour, "The Victors and the Vanquished: Recovering the History of Al-Andalus." *Annals of Stefan Cel Mare University of Suceava. Philosophy, Social and Human Disciplines Series I* (2014): 43-54.

⁵ Simour, "The Victors and the Vanquished ...," 47.

⁶ "Libros de repartimiento (1291-1491)," trans. Thomas F. Glick, in *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources*, ed. Olivia Remie Constable (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 228-231.

⁷ "Libros de repartimiento," 231.

⁸ "Libros de repartimiento," 231.

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- ⁹ Judith M. Bennet, *Medieval Europe: A Short History*, 11th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011), 72-73.
- ¹⁰ Aaron Michael Moreno, "Arabicizing, Privileges, and Liturgy in Medieval Castilian Toledo: The Problems and Mutations of Mozarab Identification (1085-1436), *UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations*, UCLA, 2012.
- ¹¹ Constable, *Medieval Iberia ...*, 400.
- ¹² Ice de Gebir, "Breviario sunni (1462)," trans. L.P. Harvey, in *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources*, ed. Olivia Remie Constable (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 328.
- ¹³ Ice de Gebir, "Breviario sunni ...," 327.
- ¹⁴ "Socializing and Violence on Corpus Christi Day (1491)," trans. Mark Meyerson, in *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources*, ed. Olivia Remie Constable (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 338-340.
- ¹⁵ "Socializing and Violence on Corpus Christi," 339-340.
- ¹⁶ Bennett, *Medieval Europe...*, 215.
- ¹⁷ "Verses to Bayazid II (ca. 1502)," trans. James T. Monroe, in *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources*, ed. Olivia Remie Constable (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 363-370.
- ¹⁸ "Verses to Bayazid II," 367.
- ¹⁹ Bennett, *Medieval Europe...*, 47.
- ²⁰ "Capitulations of Granada (1491)," trans. L.P. Harvey, in *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources*, ed. Olivia Remie Constable (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 344-351.
- ²¹ "Capitulations of Granada," 347-349.
- ²² "Capitulations of Granada," 347.
- ²³ "Capitulations of Granada," 349.
- ²⁴ Bennett, *Medieval Europe...*, 299.
- ²⁵ "Capitulations of Granada," 346.

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