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Manipulating the Medieval Past:
Convivencia and the Politics of Religious Identity

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The Historical Significance of Convivencia

Beginning in the early 8th century CE, Muslim military forces under the authority of the Umayyad Caliphate swept across and seized political control over much of the Iberian Peninsula, recognized today as the geographic home of the modern countries of Spain and Portugal. Taking advantage of political turmoil in the contemporary Visigoth kingdom just as the Visigoths had in turn taken control of the peninsula from the Roman Empire centuries prior, the Muslim conquerors established their own political realms from which the religion of Islam eventually spread to join the other two Abrahamic faiths already present in the various communities of the peninsula. While the remaining Christian realms in the northern part of the peninsula, beginning with the Kingdom of Asturias, slowly reconquered this land from Muslim rule throughout the turbulent centuries of the medieval period, communities adhering to the three distinct Abrahamic faiths - Islam, Judaism, and Christianity - coexisted side by side for centuries, through means both peaceful and violent, throughout much of the medieval era. The exact nature of this “coexistence”, however, is still the subject of vigorous academic dispute today.

The term *convivencia* is a Spanish word that, when translated into English, speaks of a “living-togetherness” or “cohabitation” of multiple, distinct but interconnected entities. In the context of Spanish history, *la convivencia* is an idea that attempts to describe the complex and interconnected nature of social organization between the people of the three major Abrahamic faiths operating within the historical and geographical proximity of the medieval Iberian Peninsula. Originally popularized in 1948 by the Spanish philologist and historian Américo Castro in his massively influential work, *España en su historia*, this idea of medieval *convivencia* between the adherents of three distinct monotheistic faiths was a defiant challenge

to popular contemporary narratives of Spanish history deeply rooted in hundreds of years of nationalist and romantic discourse; a discourse which emphasized the continuous nature of a true, united Spanish cultural identity traceable to the Romano-Gothic period of classical antiquity, while simultaneously downplaying the cultural influences of historical Muslim and Jewish societies that had also left their respective legacies on the cultural heritage of the peninsula throughout the medieval era.¹ Although bitterly contested from its inception, especially by another prominent Spanish academic by the name of Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, this idea of an inter-faith convivencia had an immense appeal in its ability to confront or conform to a variety of contemporary historical myths surrounding the nature of medieval religious coexistence and Spanish cultural identity.

While undoubtedly serving as a milestone in the modern study of Spanish history, more recently Castro's concept of convivencia has come under new academic scrutiny. Many now assert that the idea of a Spanish identity founded in a seemingly cooperative, inter-faith exchange during the medieval period is poorly evidenced in historical records, and at the worst can be interpreted as advancing its own form of historical mythology.² To make things even more problematic, various interpretations of this medieval convivencia, whether they argue for an age of inter-religious harmony, or seek to disprove such a conception altogether, have themselves been used as political ammunition in a number of other arenas of historical contention, such as in questions of religious conflict between Christianity and Islam (complete with all the modern stigma and political discord that entails), or in the scope of Jewish history, which has at times

¹ Kenneth Baxter Wolf. "'Convivencia' in Medieval Spain: A Brief History of an Idea," *Religion Compass*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Jan., 2009), 72-85. p. 72-74

² For a summary of the weaknesses of "convivencia" as a model for understanding medieval Iberia, see: Maya Soifer. "Beyond Convivencia: Critical Reflections on the Historiography of Interfaith Relations in Christian Spain." *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies*. no. 1 (2009): 19-35.

advanced the notion of a “golden age” of inter-faith harmony in medieval Andalucía, and at others argued the complete opposite, all in order to legitimize contemporary political struggles.³

Perhaps most notable of all however, is that these very questions of religious tolerance, acculturation, and social identity that lie at the heart of Castro’s conception of *convivencia*, and that have stimulated so much politically charged historiographical debate throughout the centuries since the Middle Ages, were themselves used as political polemic during the medieval period as monarchs, chroniclers, and religious converts alike all sought to establish their own historical identity and political legitimacy defined in large part by how they were seen to interact with the religious “other”. From the ever-shifting 11th century political loyalties of El Cid and the turbulence of the “Reconquista”, to the contentious nature of religious terrorism of today, the very idea of *convivencia* and the medieval relationships it purports to describe have been manipulated and distorted throughout history to achieve various political goals based on rhetoric defining the nature of “us” vs. “them”. Starting in the medieval world and continuing through today, the question of tolerance and identity at the heart of *convivencia* has been innately, and divisively, political.

In order to demonstrate the inherently political nature of the idea of *convivencia* and the religious relationships it purports to describe, this paper will examine a few of the myriad of ways in which religious identity and questions of tolerance have been manipulated in scholarship throughout time, stemming from the medieval period itself. Starting with the historiographical concerns over the traditional narratives of Spanish history that ultimately led to Castro’s

³ Mark R Cohen. *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages*, Princeton University Press, 1994. Cohen’s book provides a brief discussion of the way life under Islam in medieval Andalucía has been portrayed in both “lachrymose” and “neo-lachrymose” conceptions of Jewish history.

formation of convivencia, this paper will then examine the medieval roots of these historical narratives and argue that the manipulation of religious identity was used for political expediency during the medieval era itself through the imposition of rigid ideological boundaries of social identity over what were otherwise dynamic and fluid inter-religious relationships. Ending with a brief examination of how convivencia has remained academically relevant in recent decades, this paper will argue that questions of religious identity and coexistence in the medieval period as described by convivencia continue to be divisive and powerfully relevant to the political and religious concerns of modern-day society.

“Eternal Spain” and the Rise of Convivencia

Since his interpretation of convivencia is fundamentally connected to the rest of Spanish historiography, understanding the immediate historical context that inspired Américo Castro to publish his influential work in the first place is instrumental to illuminating the various historical myths and their political motivations that place the nature of religious coexistence in the medieval period at their core. Writing from the United States in exile from the fascist dictatorship of Francisco Franco, Castro originally formulated his idea of Spanish identity based in medieval convivencia in direct opposition to what he considered a “chauvinistic” narrative of Spanish history championed by the Spanish political establishment. Seemingly obsessed with the idea of a “collective inferiority complex” that he felt weighed down upon self-identifying Spaniards, especially in retrospect of the terrible Spanish Civil War of the late 1930’s, Castro

himself writes that his interest in history developed out of the question: “Where do the Spaniards get their ideas about themselves?”⁴

In attempting to answer this question, Castro echoes the same nationalistic and existential fascinations of earlier 18th and 19th century Spanish historians, who had themselves sought to identify the origins of the contemporary “cultural malaise” afflicting Spain as its colonial empire declined in importance against the rise of British and French global hegemony. In an article examining how Spain’s past has been interpreted throughout Spanish history, historian John Victor Tolan writes of Spanish attitudes in the 18th century: “A. Dumas quipped that Africa began at the Pyrenees. Many Spaniards sympathetic to the Enlightenment were to come to the same conclusion: Spain was lagging behind the rest of Europe...”⁵ Tolan argues that the secular and republican inclinations of the European Enlightenment confronted and depicted 18th century Spain as a backwards, overly-religious, and obsolete autocracy. The growth in the popularity of empirical understandings of the world during the European Enlightenment, coupled with philosophical contentions for a more secular understanding of fundamental human rights, created a direct ideological conflict with the long-held view of the Spanish monarchy as a “Most Catholic” defender of the Christian faith. Global political developments such as the loss of Spanish colonies in the New World to the British and French, as well as colonial independence movements, compounded with the destructive French control of Spain during the tumultuous

⁴ Américo Castro. *The Spaniards; an Introduction to Their History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971. p. 2

⁵ John Victor Tolan. “Using the Middle Ages to Construct Spanish Identity: 19th and 20th-Century Spanish Historiography of Reconquest” *Historiographical Approaches to Medieval Colonization of East Central Europe: A Comparative Analysis against the Background of Other European Inter-ethnic Colonization Processes in the Middle Ages*. Edited by Piskorski, Jan M. Boulder: New York: East European Monographs; Distributed by Columbia University Press, 2002. 329-347. p. 332

events of the Napoleonic era in the early 19th century, only solidified the view that something was fundamentally wrong with the nation of Spain.

This disparaging depiction of Spanish history, which attributed Spain's supposed failure as a modern state to a history of intense Catholic piety and crusader zeal, is often referred to as "the black legend" of Spanish history. Even though the origins of this "black legend" date back to well before the 18th century, variations of it have persisted (especially in the historical imagination of the Anglosphere) up through the 20th century, as evidenced in the 1925 publication of one Francis J. Tschan, an associate professor at Pennsylvania State University. Discussing the fundamental causes of Spanish imperial decline, Tschan argues that "Spain was by nature ill-prepared to cope with trans-oceanic tasks so novel and so great."⁶ The nature alluded to here refers to both the geographical features of the peninsula, as well as the inability of the pious crusader mentality of the Spanish people to adapt to the economic processes necessary for a successful modern nation. Tschan argues that the mountainous and arid features of the peninsula negated the commercial impact of Spanish harbors on the development of the country's hinterland, thus the dominant region of Castile "...lingered long in a natural economy."⁷ This natural economy (as ostensibly opposed to a commercial one) was further reinforced by a "medieval regime" established through multiple religious conflicts with few economic benefits, which resulted in the dominance of a gentleman class with a deeply rooted "crusader" mentality that had little interest in economic affairs, ultimately leading to the collapse of Spain's global empire and its economic failure as a modern state.

⁶ Francis J Tschan. "The Fundamental Causes of the Decadence of Spain," *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (July, 1925) 265-284, p.266

⁷ Tschan. "The Fundamental Causes..." p.266

This “black legend” of Spanish history that originated from the condescension of Spain’s northern European neighbors apparently drove 19th century Spanish intellectuals who had a romantic and nationalistic view of Spanish history, such as Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo, to create their own opposing historical narrative with which they could redeem the Spanish image. According to John Victor Tolan, Menéndez y Pelayo condemned the influence of the “individualism” of northern Germanic peoples (the Franks) over Spanish identity, and instead emphasized the classical Hellenic and Catholic traditions that he argued had historically given the Spanish people a sense of unity.⁸ Author David K. Herzberger also notes Menéndez y Pelayo’s absolute emphasis on the Catholic nature of Spain over all else. Examining how Menéndez y Pelayo’s scholarship would later be utilized as propaganda by Francoist historians, Herzberger writes:

For Menéndez y Pelayo the past and future of Spain both begin and end with Catholic religiosity and orthodoxy. He repeatedly challenges the perception of history formulated by the free-thinking Krausists of the Institución Libre de Enseñanza... but more importantly, he places at the intellectual center of his work the idea of an authentic and eternal Spain.⁹

Although he was only one of a variety of historians writing at the time, Menéndez y Pelayo’s attempt to trace the foundations of modern Spanish culture to the classical civilizations predating the medieval period demonstrates a common idea featured throughout 19th century “traditionalist” narratives of Spanish history, which according to Tolan would “...still predominate among prominent Spanish intellectuals of the early 20th century.”¹⁰ This idea of a seemingly “eternal” Spain, traceable back to Romano-Gothic cultural institutions and attitudes, ignored the historical influences of Jewish and Muslim societies on the peninsula during the

⁸ Tolan. “Using the Middle Ages...” p.335

⁹ David K Herzberger. *Narrating the Past: Fiction and Historiography in Postwar Spain*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. p.21

¹⁰ Tolan. “Using the Middle Ages...” p.336

medieval period and instead cast them as barbaric invaders who for centuries had interrupted the progress of an otherwise continuous Spanish civilization.

Ultimately, this romantic narrative of “Eternal Spain” was capitalized on by the fascist Franco regime in the mid-20th century. After achieving victory in the devastating Spanish civil war, the military regime led by Francisco Franco sought to ideologically legitimize its control over Spanish society by appealing to a nationalist identity constructed through the lens of selective history. As Tolan notes, “Apologists for Franco were placed in prominent academic positions. They explained that Franco was *El Reconquistador* who had valiantly succeeded in expelling the infidels of 1939 just as his predecessors had done to those of 1492.”¹¹ In conjuring up the image of a noble, long-standing historical civilization steadfastly resisting the corruption of foreign influences (whether they be Marxist or Muslim), Franco attempted to legitimize the political authority of his military dictatorship by appealing to a nationalist historical identity rooted in a selective - and divisive - interpretation of the medieval past. Herzberger further illuminates this manipulation of history, explaining that a “useable past” is necessary for the legitimacy of any political state. He writes, “For the Franco regime... the State used the past to both underpin its existence as the fulfillment of Spain’s historical destiny and to give moral legitimacy to its claim of authority in the present.”¹² In order to maintain his authoritarian state, Franco capitalized on the nationalist 19th century narrative of Menéndez y Pelayo, and crafted a vision of “Eternal Spain” fundamentally linked to the contentious nature of religious divisions during the medieval period.

¹¹ Tolan. “Using the Middle Ages...” p.339

¹² Herzberger. *Narrating the Past...* p.16

Although the “traditionalist” narrative of an eternal Spanish identity enjoyed political prominence in the 19th and early 20th centuries, beginning in the second half of the 19th, a new historical interpretation emerged among literary scholars which emphasized the cultural contributions of historical Arab civilizations to European society. These “Arabist” historians highlighted the contributions of Muslim poets, philosophers, and scientific thinkers to what they saw as the comparatively backwards society of medieval Europe. As the historian Kenneth Baxter Wolf explains, “The nineteenth century witnessed both the Romantic fascination with Muslim Spain epitomized by Washington Irving and the more scholarly projects of French and Spanish Arabists, who saw in the cosmopolitan culture of Muslim Spain the antithesis of Christian Spain, past and present.”¹³ While these Arabist interpretations offered a foundational challenge to the more traditionalist narrative of an eternal Spanish identity, it was not until the second half of the 20th century that the literary insights of this movement would truly uproot the old model of Spanish history.

Ultimately, it was out of the stimulus provided by this new literary tradition that the Spanish philologist Américo Castro formed his conception of a medieval *convivencia* in direct opposition to the traditionalist narrative that had been imposed on Spain. Using evidence such as the *Cantigas* (songs) of King Alfonso “The Wise” to demonstrate that, at the very least, ideas of religious tolerance and acceptance towards Islam existed in the medieval imagination, Castro argued that the shared experiences and struggles that occurred through the close proximity of the three Abrahamic religions in medieval Iberia resulted in a conscious effort “... to develop and cultivate in their course a kind of upward aspiration...” from which he argued “... arose the authentic life of the Spaniards, which is not Tartessian or Celtiberian but simply that which is in

¹³ Wolf. "'Convivencia' in Medieval Spain..." p. 72

plain view before us.”¹⁴ Relying heavily on the use of literary sources and analyzing the evolution of the language of self and group identification in medieval documents, Castro rejected what he saw as a destructive and negative Spanish identity built upon political and materialistic considerations of history, and instead put forth his own interpretation based on what he observed from a wider selection of evidence. While Castro’s conception of *convivencia* would eventually come to dominate historiographical discussion of medieval Spain, much of his work, such as a critique of Menéndez y Pelayo as offered in the publication *El pensamiento de Cervantes*, was initially dismissed outright by Francoist Spanish academics as coming from a position of unrestrained bias.¹⁵

Surprisingly however, the loudest voice of direct opposition to Castro did not come from Franco’s “eternal” Spain, but instead came from another renowned Spanish historian-in-exile, Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz. Despite being a self-proclaimed “liberal” and an opponent of Franco’s dictatorship, in his 1956 publication, *España, un enigma histórico*, Sánchez-Albornoz held strongly to the traditionalist view of an “Eternal Spain”, and argued that the identity of the Spanish “race,” which he referred to as *homo-hispanus*, was rooted in the cultural institutions of Roman and Visigoth civilization.¹⁶ Critical of what he saw as an exaggeration of Christian and Muslim cultural exchange during the medieval period, Sánchez-Albornoz bitterly attacked Castro’s methodology, claiming that his reliance on literary sources led him to overstate the importance of the cultural relationships between religious groups living in the medieval peninsula. He maintained that, while some minor cultural exchange could be observed between the competing Abrahamic religions, the dominant Christian communities had no reason to

¹⁴ Castro. *The Spaniards...* p. 63

¹⁵ Herzberger. *Narrating the Past...* p.30

¹⁶ Wolf. "'Convivencia' in Medieval Spain..." p. 74

incorporate aspects of religious minority culture into their own. This, combined with the fact that any relationship between Christian and Muslim societies was "...during many centuries, superficial and hostile..."¹⁷ made any sort of substantial cultural diffusion impossible in his view. Sánchez-Albornoz strongly held that since there was little physical evidence of acculturation between religious groups, such as in social institutions or post-medieval Spanish architecture, Muslims and Jews simply did not leave a lasting historical impact on Spanish culture.

Notably, Castro and Sánchez-Albornoz approached the subject of medieval religious coexistence from two very different educational backgrounds, and each frequently considered the historical evidence employed by the other to be insubstantial. Due to his background as a philologist, Castro unsurprisingly looked towards linguistic evolution and literary sources for new insight into the world of the medieval Spaniard, and was suspicious of any narrative that he considered to be too materialistically deterministic. On the other hand, Sánchez-Albornoz took great pride in his background as a more traditional historian, and predominantly valued what he considered to be empirically verifiable evidence. Interestingly enough, Sánchez-Albornoz even went so far as to boast of his familiarity with historical sources, claiming that "...from the Paleolithic era until now, there is not a single page of Spanish history which is unfamiliar to me..."¹⁸ In fact, Sánchez-Albornoz believed himself and his reputation as a medieval historian to be so thoroughly grounded in proper methodological research and scientific rigor that he felt no need to provide noted citations for his arguments in *España, un enigma histórico*, explaining: "...these would have made the reading of this book tiresome without giving me greater credit

¹⁷ Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz. *Spain, a Historical Enigma*. Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1975. p. 196

¹⁸ Sánchez-Albornoz. *Spain, a Historical Enigma*. p.19

among scholars. They will know where my information comes from.”¹⁹ In retrospect, Sánchez-Albornoz’s inflexible position combined with his decision to omit source citations has done little to endear his position to later historians. As Thomas F. Glick writes in 1979, as well as being “...simply and clearly wrong” with his perception of Islamic culture in Spain, “Sánchez-Albornoz’s stimulus to intercultural studies has been so negative as to shut off whole areas of investigation.”²⁰ Ultimately, even though Castro appears to have left the more insightful scholarly legacy, the contentious Castro vs. Sánchez-Albornoz academic dispute speaks volumes of the centrality of medieval religious coexistence to the very character of the modern Spanish nation, with each respective historian utilizing the medieval Iberian past to illustrate the “unique” and “enigmatic” identity of Spain as a collective whole.

Religion and the Manipulation of Identity in the Medieval Period

While Sánchez-Albornoz’s boastful self-assurance might come across as a bit conceited to the 21st century historian, his deliberately declared expertise in all sources pertaining to Spanish history is illuminating in the sense that, when one considers many of the medieval documents and accounts with which he and other traditionalists believed themselves to be so intimately familiar, there is a deliberate tendency on the part of medieval and early modern chroniclers to claim a heritage and identity that dates back to classical antiquity in order to establish a sense of political legitimacy for their respective monarchical regimes. That is to say, aspects of cultural history, group identity, and inter-religious coexistence presented in medieval records have often been manipulated, and at times even deliberately misrepresented by their respective authors, all to suit various purposes of political expediency. In attempting to place the

¹⁹ Sánchez-Albornoz. *Spain, a Historical Enigma*. p. 34

²⁰ Thomas F. Glick. *Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979. p.10-11

foundations of modern Spanish identity in the culture of Visigoth-ruled Iberia, Sánchez-Albornoz ultimately continues a tradition of projecting social and spiritual unity that originates in the medieval record, predominantly emanating from the Spanish kingdom of Castile.

However, questions of religious identity and experience within the scope of medieval Iberia are not solely limited to royal chronicles seeking to legitimize the political authority of the Castilian crown. Although questions of religiosity and social identity as constructed against the defining boundaries of the religious “other” may seem fairly rigid as evidenced in “official” chronicles, they were by no means static throughout the centuries of the medieval period. Instead, they were directly influenced by the social pressures faced by local populations on a daily basis. As the predominant medieval Christian kingdoms of Castile and Aragon slowly conquered the lands once held by their Muslim neighbors to the south, the respective Muslim and Jewish communities that inhabited these newly conquered territories could not simply be expelled (at first), but rather had to be somehow incorporated into the expanding Christian realms. The interconnected but fundamentally unequal relationships between disparate religious communities that arose and evolved as a result of the basic material realities of geographical proximity can be seen in the varying ways that religious minorities were considered to operate and exist within a Christian-dominated socioeconomic and legal framework, a framework subject to change based on ever-evolving political circumstances.

In order to highlight the fluid nature of inter-religious interaction and identity in medieval Iberia and illustrate how this veritable “convivencia” has been subsequently misrepresented in the historical record, a variety of medieval evidence will be considered, including the portrayal of identity in royal chronicles and legal documentation, as well as an examination of the roles of religious minorities in literary and socioeconomic considerations. Through a close analysis of

these sources it will be demonstrated that an anachronistically fabricated “Gothic” legacy of historical identity - complete with implications of spiritual and political unity for the entirety of the peninsula - was crafted by Asturian and Castilian chroniclers and erected as historical narrative over the otherwise intricate and nuanced realities of interfaith existence during the medieval period. This heritage of divinely inspired political unity was then subsequently built upon by later nationalists such as Menéndez y Pelayo in order to legitimize and project a fundamentally Catholic and Castilian conception of national identity, and ultimately served as philosophical ammunition to Spanish nationalist agendas throughout the modern era.

The quest for “spiritual unity” across the Iberian Peninsula, and attempts to manipulate historical and religious identity to achieve such, are directly witnessed in the attempts of Castilian chroniclers to tie their respective monarchs to the Visigoth kingdom that had dominated the peninsula up through the 8th century. In a 1985 publication entitled “Spanish Historiography and Iberian Reality,” historian J.N. Hillgarth examines the way in which the history of the Iberian Peninsula has been manipulated since antiquity in order to convey ideas of spiritual and political unity.²¹ Beginning with the influence that the famous 6th-7th century clergyman Isidore of Seville (560-636) would have on later chroniclers, Hillgarth follows the work of subsequent “Spanish” historians through the centuries up to the modern era. Ultimately, he identifies a continual attempt to existentially unify the peninsula in historical narrative beginning at the start of the medieval “Reconquista” and continuing up through the work of Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, which he sees as directly aligned with a “Castilianist” school of historical interpretation. Describing the written evolution of Spanish historiography, Hillgarth declares, “There is a continual attempt to unify the peninsula, the driving engine behind which is

²¹ J.N. Hillgarth. "Spanish Historiography and Iberian Reality." *History & Theory* 24, no. 1 (February 1985): 23-43.

Castile.”²² This drive for unity becomes especially apparent, he says, in light of the history of Portugal and the fact that “The Gothic view of Spanish history never had much attraction for the historians of the other main Spanish kingdom, the Crown of Aragon.”²³ That is to say, the idea of a continuous sense of unity across the Iberian peninsula as can be read in many Castilian histories is not seen in the chronicles coming out of the medieval kingdom of Aragon, nor in the larger historiography of Portugal, which, especially as considered in the academic environment of the early 20th century according to author Thomas Harrington, has tended towards a “...movement away from a monolithically Castilian conception of Iberian life.”²⁴ For medieval Castilian chroniclers and subsequent Spanish historians looking to politically legitimize royal authority, however, the “Gothic” conception of Spanish history seems to be based upon a divinely ordained chronology that is directly inspired by the writings of Isidore of Seville.

Although the 7th century historical work of Isidore of Seville predates the Islamic conquest of the Iberian Peninsula by nearly a century, it nevertheless remains significant as a foundation from which later medieval Christians would construct a narrative of identity and spiritual “manifest destiny”. Celebrating the sacred and pristine natural features of the Spanish peninsula, Isidore of Seville traces the “rightful” possession of the province of Hispania from the Romans to the Goths in his *History of the Goths, Vandals, and Suevi*, which dates back to 624 CE. Seemingly in accordance with the will of God, this period of Gothic rule over the Iberian Peninsula comes across as a veritable golden age of “...royal emblems and great wealth, secure

²² Hillgarth. "Spanish Historiography..." p. 26

²³ Hillgarth. "Spanish Historiography..." p. 28

²⁴ Thomas Harrington. “The Hidden History of Tripartate Iberianism” *A Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula*. Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages ; v. 24. Edited by Cabo Aseguinolaza, Fernando., Abuín González, Anxo, and Domínguez, César. Amsterdam ; Philadelphia: John Benjamins Pub. Col, 2010. p.138

in the good fortune of empire.”²⁵ This divinely inspired portrayal of Gothic Spain would heavily influence later medieval historians also writing in Latin, as can be seen in the Chronicle of Alfonso III, which was likely written sometime in the late 9th century. In this later account, the heroic Pelayo (r.718-737), a nobleman of vague Gothic origin and founder of the Christian kingdom of Asturias, bravely leads an outnumbered Christian military force against an overwhelming number of oppressive “Ishmaelites”. When questioned how he might resist the Muslim hordes when even the great Visigoth kings had fallen to them, Pelayo responds: “Christ is our hope that through this little mountain... the well-being of Spain and the army of the Gothic people will be restored.”²⁶ This particular chronicle attempts to draw a deliberate, continuous link between a golden age of Christian unity as described by Isidore of Seville, and Pelayo’s heroic resistance to Muslim invasion, ultimately suggesting the historic restoration of the realm of the Visigoths.

That the chroniclers writing at the time of King Alfonso III of Asturias (r. 866-910) would try to portray the historic Pelayo as a messianic restorer of the ancient Christian Visigoth realm is particularly worthy of consideration, since it would appear that not all accounts of Pelayo’s initial resistance against Muslim rule are in direct agreement with this sentiment. As J.N. Hillgarth writes, “The acceptance of the Isidorian view of history was not immediate or universal. Some of the men of ninth-century Asturias saw the beginnings of their new kingdom as owing entirely to its native resources.”²⁷ Explaining further, Hillgarth argues that the earliest historical mention of Pelayo comes from the founding charter of the church of San Salvador of Oviedo, written in 812 CE. This charter attributes military successes against the Muslims to

²⁵ Olivia Remie Constable, *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997) p.3

²⁶ Constable. *Medieval Iberia*, p.41

²⁷ Hillgarth. "Spanish Historiography..." p. 27

“Christians and Asturians”, but makes no mention of any particular “Gothic” connection in reference to Pelayo’s origins, or the Kingdom of Asturias. Even more, Hillgarth notes that other versions of the aforementioned Chronicle of Alfonso III that appear to be written after the first linguistically diverge in particular references to the “Gothic” nature of the foundation of the new kingdom.²⁸ This divergence suggests that subsequent versions of the Chronicle were written to deliberately connect the founding of the Kingdom of Asturias to the conquered realm of the Visigoths, even though the original made no such connection.

Finally, it is worthwhile to note that in the following centuries, the Kingdom of Asturias ultimately transitioned into the Kingdom of León, from which in turn emerged the independent Kingdom of Castile in 1065 CE. With the eventual merging of the Kingdoms of Castile and León in the 13th century, the legacy of Pelayo as tied to the divinely ordained Isidorian legacy of the Goths appears to have been appropriated by Castilian monarchs, thus bestowing on the Christian Kingdom of Castile a deliberately manufactured historical impetus to spiritually unite the Iberian Peninsula, the same way the ancient Roman province of Hispania had once been “divinely” ruled by Visigoth kings. Ultimately, this development had tremendous implications for the religious future of the Iberian Peninsula; although as J.N. Hillgarth notes, starting in the 13th century, the tendency for Castilian chroniclers to champion what he describes as the “Gothic thesis” “virtually disappeared...for two centuries...when the Spanish kingdoms were much less concerned with pursuing the historical mission of fighting the Muslims which they were supposed to have derived from Pelayo than they were with fighting each other.”²⁹ The waxing and waning of the predominance of the “Gothic thesis” in Castilian chronicles in correlation to

²⁸ A discussion of the language in both of these documents occurs in footnote #13 in Hillgarth. "Spanish Historiography..." p. 27

²⁹ Hillgarth "Spanish Historiography..." p. 28

the changing momentum of the Reconquista in the 13th century suggests that in some way, the “messianic” mission and religious identity of Castile was subject to alteration in response to the political realities of interfaith coexistence during the medieval era. The fact that later histories would again attempt to manipulate and suppress these complex realities in favor of a spiritually united and eternal “Spain” is illustrative of its respective utility to political ideology.

Perhaps not so coincidentally then, this same time period stretching from the beginning of the 13th century and continuing through the 15th also contains some of the best historical examples of interreligious exchange and acculturation between Christians, Muslims, and Jews, as can be seen during the reign of the King Alfonso X “The Wise” of Castile (r. 1252-1284), or King Jaume “the Conqueror” of Aragon (r. 1213-1276). In the case of King Alfonso of Castile, one of the hallmarks of his reign was his sponsoring of scholarship, and the translation of texts originally written in Hebrew and Arabic into Latin. Alfonso’s royal court was also staffed with a number of Jewish bureaucrats. In fact, as historian David Nirenberg suggests, the utter “Jewishness” of Alfonso’s realm, and “barely Christian” character of his research served as points of ideological dissent among some members of Alfonso’s kingdom, allowing a noble-led tax revolt to gain philosophical legitimacy from anti-minority sentiment, and deprive Alfonso of nearly everything but his crown.³⁰ Case-by-case studies such as this one provided by Nirenberg demonstrate the intricate way in which interfaith exchanges played out in the daily social realities of medieval Iberia; realities composed of complex political and social concerns that are

³⁰ David Nirenberg. “‘Judaism’, ‘Islam’, and the Dangers of Knowledge in Christian Culture with special attention to the case of King Alfonso X, ‘the Wise’, of Castile”. *Mapping Knowledge: Cross-Pollination in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*. Edited by Charles Burnett & Pedro Mantas-España. Cordoba : CNERU (Cordoba Near Eastern Research Unit) – The Warburg Institute (London) – Oriens Academic, 2014 p. 264-265

ultimately washed over in the interest of political construction drawn around questions of religious identity.

A brief examination of the ways in which religious minorities can be seen to operate within such a complex Christian-dominated socioeconomic and legal framework throughout the medieval period also helps illuminate through juxtaposition the ways in which complex interreligious coexistence was subject to subversion under the guise of “Eternal Spain”. For example, in another publication examining the many ways that religious violence is seen to occur between religious groups during the late medieval period, David Nirenberg looks in particular at the mid-13th century Kingdom of Aragon, and notes that, “...perhaps as much as 35 percent of a total population of approximately 200,000 was Muslim... and in some rural areas Muslims constituted a majority of the population.”³¹ This large percentage of Muslims living under the Crown of Aragon suggests that they would have had a considerable impact on the economy of the kingdom and its capacity to feed itself. There is also the consideration that such a large demographic could conceivably wage a large and disruptive insurrection in the realm should their Christian lords become too antagonistic towards their faith.

Efforts to deal with this large population of religious minorities meant that they were often considered as the king’s “property”, or the king’s direct responsibility, and often afforded special rights such as the ability to openly practice their faith or self-govern, which were granted by “fueros” or community charters. One example of this can be found in a charter of protection granted by King Jaume “the Conqueror” in 1242 CE to the Muslim communities in a small region of Valencia. In the charter, the king guarantees his Muslim subjects the legal right to keep

³¹ David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996. p23

their lands, income, and religious faith, as well as providing them an amount of legal protection from Christian prosecution.³² It is also important to consider that *feuros* could be rescinded and changed over time, as can be seen in the Charter of Jaca, which, while originating in the 11th century, demonstrates that “bad *fueros*” could be remitted at the king’s whim in order to institute “good *fueros*” that purposefully encourage different patterns of settlement and behavior in the community.³³

Yet another example of fluid conceptions of interfaith relationships as understood in the medieval imagination can be witnessed in the medieval epic *The Poem of the Cid*, where Muslims are depicted as both friend and enemy to the Christian protagonist, Ruy Díaz de Vivar, also known as “El Cid”. It is of particular interest to note that the famous mercenary’s army is specifically described as being composed of both Christian and Muslim soldiers when El Cid faces off against the Christian Count of Barcelona in battle.³⁴ Additionally, as historian Richard Hitchcock points out, a trusted, Latin-speaking Moor also informs El Cid to be wary of the antagonistic young Christian lords known as the “Infantes”, who ultimately go on to betray El Cid and abuse his daughters. Hitchcock writes that, “...the language of the author of the *Poema* suggests a grass-roots understanding of ‘*moros*’ as friend or foe depending on the prevailing political situation and irrespective of race.”³⁵ While the historical validity of the poem can certainly be called into question in many parts, it effectively demonstrates that conceptions of religious minorities transgressed the apparently rigid ideological boundaries otherwise constructed by later political interests seeking to portray such attitudes as “superficial” or

³² Constable, *Medieval Iberia*, p. 213-215

³³ Constable, *Medieval Iberia*, p. 123

³⁴ Rita Hamilton, Janet Hunter Perry, and Ian Michael. *The Poem of the Cid: [a bilingual edition with parallel text]*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1984. p 73-75

³⁵ Richard Hitchcock. "Christian-Muslim Understanding(s) in Medieval Spain." *Hispanic Research Journal*. no. 4 (2008): p.319

“hostile” to suit a historical narrative of national and spiritual unity. There is little surprise there, given the amount of legal and socioeconomic evidence available to suggest that the very lives and well-beings of religious minorities were intricately connected to those of Iberian Christians. This complicated nature of interfaith convivencia stands out all the more then, when starting once again in the 15th century, the revival of the “Gothic” myth of Spanish heritage comes to dominate contemporary historical consideration in the Kingdom of Castile, and concerted efforts are taken to directly eliminate all traces of religious division within the realm.

Observing this resurgence of what he calls the “Gothic Thesis” in 15th century Castilian consideration, J.N. Hillgarth argues that this messianic appeal to “eternal” unity under Catholic kings was summarily revived by Jewish converts to Christianity, and once again took a prominent place in the writing of contemporary medieval historiography. One such convert Hillgarth points to is Soloman Halevi (also known as Pablo de Santa Maria) who crafted a “messianic” myth of Castilian history that presented the Kings of Castile as the rightful heirs to the legacy of the Visigoths, and the divinely ordained rulers of the Iberian Peninsula as well as the world beyond.³⁶ Historian Ryan Szpiech further elaborates on the work of Pablo de Santa Maria, claiming that his knowledge of Jewish literature and theology allowed him to write historical propaganda in favor of the rule of the contemporary King Juan, as well as simultaneously engage in polemical argumentation against the Jewish faith. Explaining the dual nature of the work, Szpiech claims that his use of Jewish learning “...allows a polemical subtext in the poem to exist alongside its literal, political message without forcing the reader to choose only one of the two.”³⁷ The case of Pablo de Santa Maria is particularly interesting, because his

³⁶ Hillgarth "Spanish Historiography..." p. 28

³⁷ Szpiech, Ryan. "Scrutinizing History: Polemic and Exegesis in Pablo de Santa María's *Siete edades del mundo*." *Medieval Encounters* 16, no. 1 (March 2010): 96-142. p.116

work represents a fusion of Jewish learning to Christian polemic, which ultimately served to mask a distinctly multi-faith literary heritage under a seemingly monolithic religious world view.

Ultimately, the revival of the Gothic legacy in the Kingdom of Castile and its association with a “spiritually united” Spain had massive historical implications when viewed in the context of the late 15th century marriage of the Kingdoms of Castile and Aragon under Isabella I and Ferdinand II, and the subsequent expulsion of the Muslims and Jews from Spain shortly following. It would appear that the manipulation of historical identity through the “official” chronicles of Castile facilitated the pursuit of a legacy of political and spiritual unification during the late medieval period, which ultimately influenced the way Spanish history would be written about and considered during the course of the following centuries, leading to a direct minimization in the later historical record of the role Muslims and Jewish religious minorities had in the Iberian peninsula of the Middle Ages.

One last example that illustrates the extreme disparity between projected religious identity and the fluid reality of interfaith existence - in spite of late medieval attempts to directly enforce the former and minimize the latter - comes from historian Maria del Mar Rosa-Rodriguez, who points to an early 16th century fatwa issued by the Mufti of Oran that allows Muslims living in Christian Iberia to “pass” as Christian in a society where non-Christians are not welcome. The fatwa declares that publically behaving in ways that might otherwise violate the teachings of Islam, such as eating pork and attending Mass, would be religiously acceptable so long as the believer’s heart was in the right place. Rosa-Rodriguez argues that the ensuing personal turmoil of religious believers, and the eventual fusion of old religious identity with new practices, crossed rigid lines of religious identity projected by the Christian political and

religious establishment and “...new kinds of hybrid religiosities emerged in a Spain that was historicized as monocultural by state officials both then and now.”³⁸ In the day-to-day convivencia between members of each distinct Abrahamic faith, social relationships and lines of religious identity could fluctuate within to the complex realities of human existence, but under the pretense of social and scholastic authority wielded by organized religion and state, these complex lines of interaction and identity were deliberately manipulated for political expediency. Such a manipulation of the medieval past remains exceedingly politically relevant to this day.

The Relevance of Convivencia to Modern Political Discourse

The complex (and inherently political) nature of religious identity and interfaith coexistence as it relates to medieval convivencia and the rest of Spanish history is still eerily relevant to the tense and polarized political discourse of the 21st century. In modern-day Spain, open advocacy for various cultural independence movements around the peninsula threatens the Castilian-centric identity of “Eternal Spain”, and its existential promise of spiritual and social unity for the peninsula.³⁹ On the other hand, other conceptions - and manipulations - of religious convivencia in medieval Iberia have also gone global, so to speak, as can be seen having developed from the context of religiously-inspired terrorism targeted against Western nations. This violent antagonism between “secular” modern nation-states and terrorist organizations that adhere to fundamentalist interpretations of Islam has spurred many to seek answers in the past, questioning if the states of the secular West (built upon a distinctly Christian cultural foundation)

³⁸ Rosa-Rodriguez, Maria del Mar. "Simulation and Dissimulation: Religious Hybridity in a Morisco Fatwa." *Medieval Encounters* 16, no. 1 (March 2010): 143-180. p. 156

³⁹ White, Sarah. "Catalonia Separatists Pin Hopes on September Vote After Setback." Reuters, May 26, 2015. Accessed May 27, 2015. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/26/us-spain-election-catalonia-idUSKBN0OB1LH20150526#top>.

can ever exist side-by-side with the Muslim world. As Kenneth Baxter Wolf writes, “ Since 9/11, concerns about fundamentalist Islam and its relationship to the ‘West’ have inspired a number of studies of medieval Spain, intent on exploring and assessing its reputation for *convivencia*.”⁴⁰ In this new light, Castro’s *convivencia* and the complex religious relationships of the medieval period are removed from previous nationalistic historical considerations, and thrown into another intensely political realm of debate.

Historian Mark R. Cohen notes this same politicization of the medieval Iberian past can be witnessed within the discourse of modern Jewish history as well. Examining what he describes as the “myth” and “counter-myth” of Jewish history, Cohen argues that in the 19th century, prominent Jewish intellectuals pointed to a “golden age” of religious tolerance in the realm of Andalucía during the period of Muslim control of the Iberian Peninsula in an attempt to shame their Christian European counterparts into giving them equal legal rights and representations within Christian society. Cohen explains:

Frustrated by the tortuous progress of their own integration into gentile society in what was supposed to be a “liberal” age of emancipation, Jewish intellectuals seeking a historical precedent for a more tolerant attitude toward Jews hit upon a time and place that met this criterion – medieval Muslim Spain.⁴¹

This seemingly utopian interpretation of the past, which Cohen refers to as the “lachrymose” conception of Jewish history, dominated the historical narrative up through the 20th century. It was then turned on its head in response to its appropriation by Arab polemicists seeking to condemn the creation of the modern state of Israel and the Zionist movement after World War II.

⁴⁰ Wolf. “‘Convivencia’ in Medieval Spain...” p.77

⁴¹ Cohen. *Under Crescent and Cross*. p. 3

Attempting to discredit claims of rampant anti-Semitism and of the need for an independent Jewish homeland, these Arab polemicists appealed to a “Golden Age” of religious tolerance between Jews and Muslims during the medieval period as evidence that the existence of Israel only upset the once harmonious peace. Of course, in a direct attempt to counter this myth, many Jewish intellectuals sought to portray Muslim ruled Andalucía, and history in general under Muslim rule, as religiously intolerant in the historical record as possible.⁴² This outright reversal in historical narrative founded upon the selective portrayal of medieval interfaith relationships speaks volumes to the politically divisive nature of *convivencia* and its susceptibility to historical manipulation. As can be seen both past and present, complex considerations of religious identity are often manufactured into a simplistic dichotomy of “us” vs. “them”, primarily in order to obtain a thin veneer of political legitimacy for contemporary behaviors.

As the day-to-day socioeconomic realities of medieval Iberia suggest, interfaith experiences transcended the simple, politicized categorizations that have frequently been sought in historical narratives. All at once medieval Iberian religious identity was subjected to a host of varying social influences and political concerns, and operated in a changeable and fluid manner. Nonetheless, throughout the centuries this complex *convivencia* and the questions of religious tolerance and identity that it entails have been manipulated and simplified by medieval chronicler and modern historian alike in order to achieve various political goals. During the medieval period these manipulations were often undertaken in the pursuit of a messianic sense of spiritual and political unity. This is evidenced not only in royal chronicles and official history, but in the very way ideas of the religious “other” evolved in institutional consideration when highlighted against the shifting socioeconomic conditions in medieval Iberia. This existential

⁴² Cohen. *Under Crescent and Cross*. p. 6-14

quest for unity has remained at the center of Spanish historiographical consideration and has been appealed to throughout the centuries as political circumstances have shifted over time. Even as Castro's formation of *la convivencia* sought to overturn centuries of nationalistic misrepresentation of the medieval past, it still elevated a conception of Spanish cultural "unity", built from the interfaith exchanges of the medieval era. Still today, even in the context of the 21st century, the very question of interfaith coexistence at the heart of the idea of *convivencia* continues to be incredibly relevant, as complex and interconnected religious experience continues to be manipulated and simplified, ever in the pursuit of political expediency. The innately political nature of *convivencia* as considered here is ultimately a testament to the ever-evolving push and pull of academic historical inquiry, where contemporary perspectives dictate perceptions of the past, and complex realities of personal experience are subsumed into historical narratives constructed to rationalize the present.

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