

QURTUBA: SOME CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF THE CALIPHATE OF CORDOBA AND THE MYTH OF *CONVIVENCIA*

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La *Convivencia* («the Coexistence») is the period of Spanish history from the Muslim Umayyad conquest of Hispania in the early eighth century until the completion of the Christian Reconquista in the late fifteenth century, when Muslims, Christians and Jews in Moorish Iberia lived in relative peace together within the different kingdoms (during the same time, however, the Christian reclaiming of land conquered by the Moors was ongoing). The phrase often refers to the interplay of cultural ideas between the three groups, and ideas of religious tolerance. James Carroll invokes this concept and indicates that it played an important role in bringing the classics of Greek philosophy to Europe, with translations from Greek to Arabic to Hebrew and Latin.¹

As the Internet becomes a source of globally accessible knowledge, notions encapsulated within it, which appear in a search result almost as instantly as the era we live in, give us a good idea of the perceptions that are generally upheld and deemed universal. The paragraph cited above is particularly revealing. The entry on the English version of *Wikipedia* is often the first point of contact for many readers with an interest in the Hispanicism *Convivencia*, which in recent years has been fully accepted not only in English but also in other languages such as French and German. Note that the article puts forward a vision of the history of the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages, whereby «*la convivencia*» [sic!] refers to a whole «period» that spans from the 8th to the 15th centuries, in which time Muslims, Christians and Jews lived together in «relative peace» within each of the Kingdoms. Another aspect it addresses is the intercultural contact between these three groups as this *convivencia* favoured translations from Greek to Arabic and from Arabic to Hebrew or Latin.

Given the nature of this renowned online encyclopedia, in all likelihood the content of this entry will be modified in such a way that a future search will result in a notably different, possibly even improved, article. Yet beyond its scant exactitude the entry dem-

¹ «*La Convivencia*», Wikipedia. The Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Convivencia [consulted on 9 April 2013].

onstrates that the Middle Ages in Spain have become a historical reference for illustrating ideas related to coexistence in the three main monotheistic religions; many more examples could be cited. Thus the popular decision to build an Islamic centre in central Manhattan, New York, a stone's throw away from Ground Zero, the area destroyed in the September 11 attacks, was originally going to be called Cordoba House, named after the Spanish city «where Muslims, Christians and Jews co-existed in the Middle Ages during a period of great cultural enrichment created by Muslims», according to the person behind initiative, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf.²

During his acclaimed speech at Cairo University in June of 2009, us President, Barack Obama, referred to the tradition of tolerance within Islam, making a specific reference to Andalusia and Cordoba.³ In fact, diverse documentaries made in recent years by British and American producers have, in turn, also focused on very similar ideas.⁴

Throughout the pages that follow I aim to demonstrate that elevating Medieval Spain to the category of a historical and multicultural reference point in recent decades has, generally speaking, been with little or no input from Spanish historians. They have been caught unawares and reluctantly view the emergence of a concept based more on generic perceptions —the supposed existence of tolerance, pacific coexistence and the broad and free circulation of ideas— than clearly defined historical circumstances. Moreover, given that the tendency to compare these perceptions with current situations, *convivencia* has become an easy diversion for a present that gives rise to extremely tense multicultural relationships, particularly between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Therefore, a model has been assembled that, despite attempts for it to provide inspiration for the present, is used instead to legitimise a set of alternatives that do not always respond to identical, or even compatible, motivations. This will be explored further below. As a result, although certain authors have provided significant contributions to ideas that are implicit in *convivencia*, the term has ultimately become a «political concept»; branding it in this way does not mean I am transmitting a judgement value, but more a description of its very nature that enables the terms of its discussion to be clarified. As a tool that can enable us to acquire a more full-bodied vision of the past, *convivencia* has very obvious limitations, as demonstrated below in

² Feisal Abdul Rauf (2010). «Building on Faith», *The New York Times*, 7 September 2010.

³ In every version of the speech I have read, including the official version released by the White House, there is one glaring error. The transcript says: «Islam has a long tradition of tolerance. We see it in the history of Andalusia and Cordoba during the Inquisition». But this doesn't make much sense and it's possible that something has been lost somewhere. The speech can be found at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09> [consulted on 10 March 2013].

⁴ For instance, the documentary *After Rome: Holy War and Conquest*, directed by the current Conservative Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, and shown on BBC 2 in December of 2008, or *When the Moors Ruled in Europe*, directed by Bettany Hughes and broadcast on Channel 4 in November of 2006. There is also *The Ornament of the World*, currently being produced by Karim Media, based on the homonymous book by the sadly deceased *María Rosa Menocal*.

an attempt to apply it to a specific example, the Caliphate of Cordoba. At the same time, this contraposition between political and historical concepts gives rise to a broader and more complex debate on the role of historical knowledge and its relevance in contemporary societies. This will be referred to in the last part of the essay.

CONVIVENCIA: THE GENESIS OF A CONCEPT

Despite its huge popularity, *convivencia* is a concept that has never really evolved. After its associations with the three monotheistic religions, its formulation corresponds to the ideas of the great philologist Américo Castro (1885-1972). Whilst exiled in the USA during the Spanish Civil War, Castro conceived a unique interpretation of the history of Spain that, along with other notions, encompassed the idea that during the Middle Ages a special kind of Muslim-inspired tolerance had enabled *convivencia* among what the author called the three castes: Christian, Jewish and Muslim. This tolerance, one of many decisive influences brought by Islam, played a part in shaping Spain's unique history. The supremacy of the Christian caste during the Late Middle Ages paved the way to a «conflictive age» in the 15th and 16th centuries that was characterised by intolerance, persecution and the exclusion of the other two subjugated castes.

In devising his thesis, Américo Castro was never particularly systematic; in fact, his ideas were constantly shaped and honed from 1948, when the first edition of what was then titled *España y su historia* surfaced, to 1966, when the same work underwent significant modifications to become *La realidad histórica de españa*.⁵ Moreover, the idea of *convivencia* never formed a core part of his thinking, which was more aimed at finding out the origins of the Spanish people, or as Castro himself put it, «Hispanically constructed man».⁶ His long digressions on the people, understood as the main agent of history, on the inextricable link between «Spanishness» and religion, on the «dwelling place of life» and «the living context» as the ideal and lived experience of every community, and so many other elements, were part of a vision that Américo Castro formed during his years exile and which ultimately aimed to explain the «essence of the Spanish people».

Thus it is not surprising that Américo Castro never adapted to the historiographical patterns in use. The scant interest in the series of historical events, the mix of information from diverse time periods, the tireless search for singularity and the most implausible parallels, the little relevance granted to economic aspects and even the outlandish idea —based on Wilhelm Dilthey's hermeneutic hypotheses— on the predominance of native historians as opposed to foreigners in terms of understanding one's own history, were numerous ways of rejecting any type of allegedly «scientificist» knowledge regarding an understanding of the

⁵ Guillermo Araya (1983). *El pensamiento de Américo Castro: estructura intercastiza de la historia de España*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, pp. 41-47.

⁶ Américo Castro (1949). «El enfoque histórico y la no-hispanidad de los visigodos», *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispana*, 3, pp. 234-235.

past based on *lived experience*. For Américo Castro the aim of historical interpretation was to find the components of the «dwelling place of life» shaped by the Spanish people; one of these components was the «*convivencia*» of the three castes, which, somewhat imprecisely, Castro appeared to identify with two points in history: one being the Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba in the 10th century, and the other the 13th century Christian Kingdoms. The characteristics that were eventually imposed themselves in the «conflictive age» not only repudiated this component of the Spanish «dwelling place of life», but they also represented a hindrance to Spain's progress.⁷

If this is examined strictly from the perspective of the history of Spanish thought, the work of Américo Castro is discernibly linked to the tradition that the so-called *Generation of '98* had been reflecting upon «existence» and the «history of Spain» characterized by a past of imperial glory and a present of decadence and international marginalization. The Spanish Civil War, from 1936-1939, did little more than deepen, even to the furthest extremes, this consideration. It is no coincidence that the first edition of *España en su historia* coincided exactly with the appearance of texts and publications such as *Los españoles en la historia*, by Ramón Menéndez Pidal (1947), *España como problema* by the then Falangist Pedro Laín Entralgo (1949), *España sin problema* by the then Francoist and Opus Dei member, Rafael Calvo Serer (1949), and *España: un enigma histórico* that Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, also in exile, published in Buenos Aires in 1957 in what was a direct response to the work of Américo Castro — the work gave rise to bitter controversy between both others. There were also countless reviews, commentaries and articles published in the wake of these works by supporters and detractors of the diverse *ideas of Spain*.

This is not the place for a detailed analysis of these authors and works that clearly do not adhere to the frameworks that are occasionally portrayed from a present-minded perspective. A deeply anti-Franco author such as Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz brought to light a vision of the Middle Ages that eventually became a canonical reference for those historians most in favour of the regime, following the arguments laid out by Ramón Menéndez Pidal, who also harboured doubts about the regime.⁸ By contrast, the deeply conservative Arabist, Miguel Asín Palacios, sided with the victors of the Spanish Civil War, alluded to the ideas and motives shared, harmoniously, by Christianity and Islam during the Middle Ages as a parallel that justified the unwonted presence of the important contingents of Moroccan troops in the ranks of Franco's army during the Civil War.⁹ The same resource in Spain's history pervaded many aspects of the political discourse around the time, and

⁷ Américo Castro (1984). *España en su historia: cristianos, moros y judíos*. Barcelona: Crítica, pp. 47-61.

⁸ See the indispensable prologue by Diego Catalán in 1982 on Menéndez Pidal, in *Ramón Menéndez Pidal. Los españoles en la historia*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe.

⁹ Eduardo Manzano (2000). El arabismo español en el siglo xx: la construcción de un esencialismo, in *Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla, Manuel C. Feria García and Eduardo Manzano Moreno. Orientalismo, exotismo y traducción*. Cuenca: Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, pp. 23-28.

General Franco, besides proclaiming in 1938 his intention to establish «a University of Advanced Eastern Studies where Muslim students will have the chance to research the ancient splendors of their civilization by using comprehensive documents preserved by Spain», did not hold back from giving his own view of the situation between religious communities during the Middle Ages in a speech given in 1937 that outlined his government's program:

The fierce persecution by Marxists and Communists in everything representing the existence of spirituality, faith or worship, we oppose with the sense of a Catholic Spain with its Saints and Martyrs, secular institutions, social justice and Christian charity; a huge spirit of understanding that was formed in the Golden Age of our History, when strong Catholicism and sense were the weapons in the reconstruction of our historical unity, where the mosques and synagogues were under the tolerant tutelage of the Catholic State, within the spirit of understanding in Catholic Spain.¹⁰

In this intersection of historical perspectives, Américo Castro's was always characterised by the response to a genuinely liberal and progressive ideology.¹¹ His commitment to integrating al-Andalus history into the history of Spain was a far cry from General Franco's unprecedented idea of granting access to Spain's Muslim past to Muslims themselves; in fact, as P. Martínez Montávez pointed out, the great merit with Castro lies in giving prominence to an Islamic past in which Spanish Arabists had agreed to attribute a subordinate role.¹² That said, this did not then become a specifically and well-defined consideration of al-Andalus, quite possibly because in the Arabist bibliography Castro never came across materials open to being incorporated into his interpretation, possibly due to the disappointment caused by «broad critical reservation, in many cases blatantly sceptical, that the most renowned and illustrious representatives of this Arabism expounded in their innovative ideas».¹³

Obviously, when Américo Castro pointed to the importance of the Arab conquest in the formation of the «Spanish people» and «*convivencia*» inspired by a supposed Islamic

¹⁰ For the interview see Declaraciones de S. E. a Manuel Aznar, 31 December 1938, in *Francisco Franco Bahamonde (1939). Palabras del Caudillo: 19 de abril de 1937-31 de diciembre de 1938*. Barcelona: Seix y Barral Hnos. Edit. F. E., p. 314. For the original version of the speech (in Spanish) by Francisco Franco Bahamonde (1937). *Habla el Caudillo [textos seleccionados de discursos y escritos del Caudillo]*. Gijón: Luz, page. 33.

¹¹ As appropriately demonstrated by Américo Castro, Juan Goytisolo and Javier Escudero Rodríguez (1997). *El epistolario: cartas de Américo Castro a Juan Goytisolo, 1968-1972*. Valencia: Pre-Textos.

¹² Pedro Martínez Montávez (1983). «Lectura de Américo Castro por un arabista», *Revista del Instituto Egipcio de Estudios Islámicos*, xxii, pp. 21-42.

¹³ Pedro Martínez Montávez (2010). Américo Castro y los moriscos, in *Julio Rodríguez Puértolas. El pensamiento de Américo Castro. La tradición corregida por la razón*, published online in the Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com> [consulted 15 March 2013].

root system, he did so based more on his own perceptions and developments than on the resource of profound and meticulous documentation on al-Andalus.¹⁴ The lack of a solid foundation of documents and the prominence acquired by the «Spanish people» resulted in the work taking on a marked political character, without doubt much to his disappointment, the value of which depended on his ability to offer relevant keys to the present. This purely political characteristic defined how it was subsequently received and thus led to something unexpected: while its core —the considerations of the essence of the «Spanish people», the «dwelling place of life» and the «living context»— lost validity in the new political frameworks that emerged after the end of the Franco regime, his brilliant perceptions of medieval multiculturalism began to fuel a growing interest in societies that had to deal with new challenges, unimaginable in previous decades, during the last quarter of the 20th century.

CONVIVENCIA: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CONCEPT

The fact that Américo Castro lived in exile in the United States and worked at many universities was particularly important in the dissemination of a work that was already worthy of interest in its own right. In 1954, *La realidad histórica de España* was translated by Princeton, with an Italian version also surfacing one year later. In 1963 the work was also translated into French, and further still in 1971 Berkeley published a new translation titled *The Spaniards. An Introduction to their History*, which was reviewed in the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Economist* and the *Times Literary Supplement*.¹⁵ Therefore, it is safe to say that Castro was one of the Spanish humanists with the widest international exposure throughout the 20th century.¹⁶

This resulted in numerous foreign studies that came into contact with Spain's Middle Ages by means of the unique vision set forth by Castro's theses, which had a far-reaching impact on departments of Spanish, Medieval Studies, Jewish studies, Islamic Studies and, more recently, Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies. Naturally, the interpretation of these theses in academic circles had little or nothing to do with concerns about the being or essence of Spain, but instead opted for a defined analysis of multiculturalism, issues linked to identities and processes of mixed races —aspects already believed to have been approached, virtually in their infancy, by the work of the Spanish philologist, and which, for instance, in a society like the American one was of the utmost importance due to strong multicultural pressures.

¹⁴ Bernabé López García (2000). «Enigmas de al-Andalus: una polémica», *Revista de Occidente*, 224, January 2000, pp. 49-50.

¹⁵ Guillermo Araya (1983). *El pensamiento de Américo Castro: estructura intercastiza de la historia de España*. Op. Cit., p. 313.

¹⁶ By contrast, the book by Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, *España: un enigma histórico*, was only translated in 1976 by the Fundación Universitaria Española, although the real impetus came from the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica, as noted by Bartolomé Clavero (2013). *El árbol y la raíz. Memoria histórica familiar*. Barcelona: Crítica, p. 100. Therefore, this constituted a pro-government publication given that outside of Spain nobody was particularly interested in the digressions of a historian from the town of Ávila and the vicissitudes of the *homo hispanicus*.

These interpretations resulted in a more developed formulation of certain ideas encapsulated in the concept of *convivencia* that have now taken on a very different character.¹⁷ In 1969, Th Glick and O. Pi-Sunyer published an article that looked at the unwillingness of Spanish historians to pay heed to the potential in their discipline by assimilating certain concepts from social sciences, whilst also advocating the need for a theory that explains the process of acculturation developed in the Iberian Peninsula in medieval times, casting aside «the agonizingly obscurantist neologisms» Américo Castro had employed to describe the phenomena recognized by others through cultural anthropology. The limits defined by religious identity were not always as rigid in the Middle Ages in Spain given that they highlighted the phenomena of the conversion or transfer of knowledge and techniques; what Castro had called *convivencia* came to be defined as «stabilized pluralism», what was «a stage of arrested fusion or incomplete assimilation».¹⁸

Th F. Glick subsequently developed these ideas in later works. Despite the lack of any discernible connection to the idea of *convivencia*, his book on irrigation in Valencia (1970) was a pioneering study on the creation of irrigated areas for cultivation in the south west of the Peninsula, explained as the result of a process of spreading techniques and farming that were led by peoples from the Middle East and North Africa that had settled in the area after the Arab conquest and who experienced profound changes that moved towards very different social conditions centuries later following the Christian occupation in the region.¹⁹ In a later publication Glick tried to give these ideas a more generalized character, emphasizing the fact that these processes of change and cultural dissemination in the Iberian Peninsula during the medieval period did not necessarily require pacific contact. Furthermore, the coexistence of the three monotheistic religions was never the result of a politics of tolerance in the modern sense of the word, but rather ethnocentric absorption in which the social exclusion of the communities involved (Christian and Jewish, in the case of al-Andalus and Muslim and Jewish in the Christian Kingdoms) was implicit. Concepts such as integration, assimilation and ethnic or religious ascription proved that they had a more dynamic character with what was understood as a *castiza* (pure-blood Castilian) idea of *convivencia*.²⁰

¹⁷ Kenneth Baxter Wolf (2009). «Convivencia in Medieval Spain: a Brief History of an Idea», *Religion Compass*, 3/1, pp. 72-85.

¹⁸ Thomas F. Glick and Oriol Pi-Sunyer (1969). «Acculturation as an Explanatory Concept in Spanish History», *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 11 (2), pp. 136-154.

¹⁹ Thomas F. Glick (1970). *Irrigation and Society in Medieval Valencia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. There is also a Spanish translation (1988). *Regadío y sociedad en la Valencia medieval: del Cenía al Segura*. Valencia: Del Cenía al Segura.

²⁰ Thomas F. Glick (1979). *Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. There is also a Spanish translation (1991). *Cristianos y musulmanes en la España medieval (711-1259)*. Madrid: Alianza, D. L. Tand (1992). *Convivencia: an Introductory Note*, in Vivian B. Mann, Thomas F. Glick, and Jerrilynn Denise Dodds. *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain*. New York: G. Braziller, in collaboration with the Jewish Museum, pp. 1-9.

Years later, Castro's ideas were picked up again by David Nirenberg in order to develop a brilliant interpretation of how the «violent communities» were shaped and identifiable in the 14th century. These communities, fuelled by structural conflict that responded to recognizable patterns in diverse contexts, were always prone to violence due to individuals' capacity to manipulate them at particular times and in particular places. Thus the concept of *convivencia* moved away from simply meaning pacific coexistence towards harboring confrontation and persecution. In all cases it involved sides of the same coin generated by tensions within a society marked by religious identity.²¹

Quite significantly, while these considerations were produced in an American setting, Spanish historiography followed a very different path: the exhausted discussion on the *essence of Spain* coincided, as already mentioned, with the end of Franco's regime and the search for new horizons far away from the essentialist premises that had dominated the scene up to that point. These old moulds came to be seen as obsolete very early on by such influential authors as Jaume Vicens Vives (1910-1960), who argued:

[...] In one way this period is characterized by the liquidation of a series of anachronistic positions (in general, those of the scholarly and philological school of Castilian nationalism), and in another way by the birth of a new concept of writing history, responsive to real life and pulsating with human blood, and incompatible with great abstract themes and with those political and ideological drugs that have poisoned Hispanic historiography.²²

Initially this «new concept of writing history» looked for references in the Annales School before becoming influenced by trends in historical materialism, very much in vogue in the Europe of the seventies and eighties. Although these movements were never dominant (Spanish historiography has traditionally been predominantly conservative), they were very dynamic and shared work methods and even positivist traditions that had always, in one way or another, been upheld in Spain. In another highly influential book, Abilio Barbero (1931-1990) and Marcelo Vigil (1930-1987) in 1978 referred to the ideas of both Américo Castro and Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz in highly critical terms, considering them «a masking of the historical reality of Spain, which would become something transcendent joined to metaphysical and racial constants», given that «instead of considering the real

²¹ David Nirenberg (1996). *Communities of Violence. Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. There is also a Spanish translation (2001). *Comunidades de violencia: la persecución de las minorías en la Edad Media*. Barcelona: Península.

²² Jaume Vicens Vives (1970). *Approach to the History of Spain*, 2nd revised edition [prologue]. California: University of California Press. Please see also the previous edition in Spanish, Jaume Vicens Vives (1960). *Aproximación a la Historia de España*, 2nd edition [prologue]. Barcelona: Teide.

determinants in the history of Spain, it converts them into an essence with knowledge that goes beyond scientific investigation». Both authors showed very little interest in gaining knowledge of the essence of Spanishness: «our aims are more modest and are reduced to the study of the changes experienced by the social organizations that existed in the Iberian Peninsula at a particular time». ²³

In this work, more closely attached to the documents or specific themes linked to social and economic change, the intercultural relations that, as I have already pointed out, can be considered encapsulated in Castro's idea of *convivencia*, did not hold a dominant position. It was not about a plot driven by an apparent general antagonism towards the great Spanish philologist, as is sometimes upheld by his supporters, but rather a shift in attitudes represented by the influence of European historiography and its most dynamic movements, which, during those years, did not show a great deal of interest in either cultural studies or the origins of peoples. These two themes would often go hand in hand with the terrible consequences widely recognized in post-war Europe. This must also be added to the unusual academic planning in Spain, inherited from the last university reforms under the Franco regime, in which, significantly, the departments of Medieval History and Arab or Hebrew Studies operated separately, and sometimes divergently, thus not generally «coexisting». ²⁴

This explanation of the reasons outlining how Américo Castro's ideas were perceived would be incomplete without mentioning the appearance of a completely unexpected element that progressively gained importance throughout the last quarter of the 20th century. The increasing predominance of the Arab world, in particular, and the global reach of Islam as a political ideology was generally in parallel to the increased tensions not only in the Middle East —as stressed by the three wars in the Persian Gulf and the flare-up of the Palestine conflict— but also in other regions. Influential works such as Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996) set out the theory that the ideological struggle that had defined the Cold War led to a time marked by clashes between cultures, thus giving rise to an understanding of multicultural realities and their struggle. The September 11 attacks in 2001, and those that followed in Madrid, London and other parts of the world, further accentuated this viewpoint, which forced a reconsideration and re-examination of the existing ideas of Islam and its historical tradition at a time of extreme reactions and mixed emotions.

It is within this context that the appearance of diverse works, aimed at the public at large, that focus on al-Andalus must be understood. Added to the American academic

²³ Abilio Barbero and Marcelo Vigil (1978). *La formación del feudalismo en la Península Ibérica*. Barcelona: Crítica, pp. 18-19.

²⁴ I have alluded to this problem in Eduardo Manzano (2009). Desde el Sinaí de su arábica erudición. Una reflexión sobre el medievalismo y el arabismo recientes, in *Manuela Marín (ed.). Al-Andalus/España. Historiografías en contraste: siglos XVII-XIX*. Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, pp. 213-230.

tradition, which has been asserting the interest encapsulated within the study of multiculturalism in Andalusí society, was the need to find a discourse that articulated responses to such a traumatic situation. María Rosa Menocal (1953-2012), a professor of Spanish and Portuguese literature at Yale University, was writing a book on multiculturalism in Cordoba of the Umayyads when she witnessed the September 11 attacks with her work already finished and considered the impossibility of «understanding the history of what was in another epoch certainly an ornament of the world without seeing the reflections of this history just on our doorstep».²⁵ Therefore, she decided not to change her already written work, which offered a vision of the Umayyad Caliphate as a culture of tolerance and was inevitably compared with the barbaric scenes of the present.

Other authors followed a similar path. For instance, Chris Lowney, a former Jesuit and ex-director of J.P. Morgan, published *A Vanished World: Christians, Muslims and Jews in Medieval Spain* (2005) just after. This work looked at the glory of the three communities' joint achievements and the tragedy of not having known how to preserve them, arguing that «medieval Spain could have shown the way» to recover this spirit of collaboration. In *God's Crucible. Islam and the Making of Europe* (2008), David Levering Lewis, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his biography of an American civil rights leader, compared the tolerance of the Andalusí society with a Western Europe that extolled war values, religious fanaticism and slavery.

It is certainly significant that while all of these works were translated into Spanish, in Spain the celebrations of tolerance and the splendor of al-Andalus were of a much more dispersed and generic nature.²⁶ Of course, there have been countless mentions of the tolerance or splendor of the al-Andalus *civilization* in reports, literary pieces and official speeches —as highlighted by authors such as Serafín Fanjul— but, generally speaking, there have not been other works comparable to those already referred to with a palpable and specific agenda of the acceptance of the al-Andalus culture.²⁷ By contrast, the Spanish authors that have addressed these themes have done so frequently from highly critical stances of the idealization of al-Andalus as a model of tolerance, expounding, incidentally, open hostility towards the historical presence of Islam in Spain and developing the devastating idea that Spain has been permanently confronting Islam, from the spring of the year 711 up

²⁵ María Rosa Menocal (2002). *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*. Boston, London: Little, Brown, Postscript, p. 283. There is also a Spanish translation (2003). *La joya del mundo: musulmanes, judíos y cristianos, y la cultura de la tolerancia en «al-Andalus»*. Barcelona: Plaza & Janés.

²⁶ Chris Lowney (2006). *A Vanished World: Muslims, Christians and Jews in Medieval Spain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; and Levering Lewis (2008). *God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe, 570 to 1215*. London: W. W. Norton.

²⁷ The only exception is possibly Juan Vernet (1999). *Lo que Europa debe al islam de España*. Barcelona: El Acantilado. However, it is worth noting that this book is by one of Spain's finest Arabists and reveals his extraordinary contribution to the field of the history of Arab science and technology. Despite a more indirect relationship to al-Andalus, the incredible output of Francisco Márquez Villanueva must also be mentioned.

to the recent spate of terrorist attacks.²⁸ It is thought-provoking that these views have been predominant in Spain and, furthermore, encouraged for the most part by authors with barely any knowledge of the matter. The absence of specialists in such generic digressions on al-Andalus means that, by and large, the alternative is not to enter into generic historical constructions of one kind or another, but to accurately formulate the critique.²⁹ Obviously, this clash of essentialist discourse has «wrong-footed» medieval studies in general and Arabism in particular, meaning that now is the time to analyze the causes of this discrepancy.

DIVERGENT PERSPECTIVES

In the USA, a greater development in cultural studies explains, in part at least, certain differences between Anglo-Saxon, and in particular US, historiography and Spanish (and even French) historiography in terms of the theme of *convivencia*, aptly outlined by Ryan Szpiech in his recent work.³⁰ This author's essay puts this said divergence down to the existence of a wider conflict between empirical and interpretive traditions, already present in the development of philological studies from the 19th century onwards, as well as in strictly historical studies. The split between hermeneutics and empiricism corresponds to the rupture of the nexus established by German Romanticism between *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft* —the first term is understood as the notion of learning as personal self-fulfillment, the second as knowledge that should lead to this fulfilment through science. The rupture of this symbiosis in the second half of the 19th century in favor of science that, free from any form of subjectivism, fully reached humanistic studies and was exemplified in the detachment between interpretive and linguistic philology. For Szpiech, this serves to explain the path taken by figures such as Américo Castro or his contemporary Erich Auerbach (1892-1957), who also opposed scientific history —given the difficulties in making use of it in experimentation— in favor of figurative history dominated by interpretation and essentialist ideas.³¹

²⁸ Serafín Fanjul (2002). *Al-Andalus contra España: la forja del mito*. Madrid: Siglo XXI de España; also Serafín Fanjul (2004). *La quimera de Al-Andalus*. Madrid: Siglo XXI de España; César Vidal (2004). *España frente al islam: de Mahoma a Ben Laden*. Madrid: La Esfera de los Libros; Rosa María Rodríguez Magda (2008). *Inexistente Al-Ándalus: de cómo los intelectuales reinventan el Islam*. Barcelona: Nobel. This last book was awarded with the Jovellanos International Essay Prize.

²⁹ Fernando Bravo López (2009). «Islamofobia y antimusulmanismo en la obra de Cesar Vidal», *Revista de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos*, 8, pp. 47-71; Eduardo Manzano (2001). «Reseña a Serafín Fanjul, *Al-Andalus contra España*», *Hispania*, LXI/3 (2009), pp. 1161-1164; María Isabel Fierro (2004). «Idealización de al-Andalus», *Revista de Libros*, 94; Luis Molina (2004). «Reseña a Serafín Fanjul. La quimera de al-Andalus», *Al-Qantara*, xxv, pp. 571-575; and Fernando Rodríguez Mediano (2006). «Reseña a Serafín Fanjul, *La quimera de al-Andalus*», *Aljamía*, 18, pp. 295-300.

³⁰ Ryan Szpiech (2013). *The Convivencia Wars: Decoding Historiography's Polemic with Philology*, in *Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Karla Mallette. A Sea of Languages: Rethinking Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 254-295.

³¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 266-284.

This divergence also explains the distancing of recent Spanish Arabism regarding the more culturalist and interpretive approaches that authors such as Julián Ribera (1858-1934) and Miguel Asín Palacios (1871-1944) developed in the first half of the 20th century —nowadays this has resulted in a closer link to internationally dominant approaches in the field of Arab studies. Consequently, while this discipline developed a kind of aversion to any form of high-flown rhetoric, the Cultural Studies and Literature departments in the USA followed a reverse process characterized by prevalently comparative ideas and a fascination with the study of identities and the phenomena of hybridization by means of post-colonial and interdisciplinary perspectives.³²

This critique is a reasonable one and worthy of attention: we have been so concerned with demonstrating that the concept of *convivencia* does not have any historical backing that we have failed to explore the possibilities encapsulated in the cultural complexity of the Middle Ages in Spain. It is also true that social history in Spain has traditionally cast cultural aspects aside, even to the point that in many cases their interpretation seem more akin to Russian *kolkhozy* than the, somewhat indistinguishable, ideal and material aspects that shaped medieval societies. Hence there is still validity in the critique by Glick and Pi-Sunyer that argues that Spanish historians have not always been fully aware of the possibilities offered by a multicultural study of the Middle Ages in the Iberian Peninsula. Indeed, it gives the impression that a field of study that certainly requires significant analysis should reconsider its themes of examination from fresh perspectives, accepting a «cultural shift» that, for the most part, has gone unnoticed to date.

With this critique in mind, other aspects of debate brought about by the work of Szpiech are also worth examining —one points to a certain theoretical inanity by Spanish and French authors consumed in the kind of scientificism that clings to data.

Without refuting that this has been true in many cases, as occurs in many historiographical traditions and, of course, without being negative, it is worth remembering that the field of medieval studies —in reference to its generic form— has given rise in Spain to a considerable number of theoretical debates within historical materialism, linguistics and social anthropology.³³ Although it is true that these debates have not moved in similar directions to those predominant in the USA, I do not believe that only those interpretations focused on multicultural issues are the ones that have looked to transcend empirical data; the contributions to social history have been both important and extensive.

³² *Idem*, pp. 283-284.

³³ Manuel Ación (1998). «Sobre el papel de la ideología en la caracterización de las formaciones sociales: la formación social islámica», *Hispania*, 58 (200), pp. 915-968; Pierre Guichard (1999). «A propos de l'identité andalouse: Quelques éléments pour un débat», *Arabica*, 46, pp. 97-110; Eduardo Manzano (2012). Al-Andalus: un balance crítico, in *Philippe Sénac. Histoire et Archéologie de l'Occident Musulman (VIIe-XVe siècle: Al-Andalus, Maghreb, Sicile)*. Toulouse: Université Le Mirail, pp. 19-31.

More specifically, in the field of Arabism the abandonment of dominant viewpoints in the first half of the 20th century was also down to, I believe, a deep mistrust of such an idealization of the discipline that the works of authors such as Ribera, Asín Palacios and García Gómez took on. Once again, it involves the tendency to understand the key parts of the field of Spanish historiography. The end of the Franco regime coincided with a deep crisis inside Arabism in terms of both identity and objectives —the former was characterized by the break-up of the nebulous field of «Semitic studies», while the second was determined by the progressive irrelevance of the study of al-Andalus, which seemed to interest very few (not even Américo Castro and his supporters) and which neglected the study of contemporary issues, for example, that were in greater social demand.

Therefore, the context Spanish Arabists were faced with in the seventies is worth recalling in order to gain an understanding of subsequent developments. Moreover, it is fair to say that due to such large gaps of knowledge there was the overriding need to open completely unprecedented fields: for instance, Islamic Law, barely studied up to that point; historical linguistics —it is still assumed that in al-Andalus Romance languages were generically spoken; or contemporary studies, completely ignored until that point. The list of pending tasks was quite simply colossal. Under these circumstances, Arab studies, in my opinion quite correctly, looked towards increasing basic knowledge that was then even more precarious. Before embarking upon the easy route of essayism with scant and erratic data, Spanish Arabism took the difficult, and sometimes misunderstood, route of laying more solid foundations in a discipline that had previously been considered secondary.

In fact, the fervent reaction Szpiech finds in authors opposed to the concept of *convivencia* —what leads him to talk of «wars» surrounding the term and «vociferous criticism»— can not only be attributed to a rejection of any kind of perspective that implies an interpretive focus. Bruna Soravia has argued how unusual it is to verify the absence of references to recent studies on al-Andalus in books and articles about medieval multiculturalism in the Iberian Peninsula published in English.³⁴

Of course, it is not about a subjective appreciation of this author. If the bibliographies of many of these works are examined, besides the conspicuous absence in the section of primary sources, it is true that the authors have barely used a bibliography in Spanish, Catalan, French or Portuguese —the languages that, besides English, the most relevant contributions over the last three decades have been published in. Therefore, the problem is a recurring one. Can credit be given to interpretations that base their conclusions on at times very summarized knowledge of not only the evidence available, but also the abundance of recent contributions that have appeared in a particularly active historiography? I don't think it comes as a surprise that the answer on this side of the Atlantic has often been far from affirmative.

³⁴ Bruna Soravia (2009). Al-Andalus au Miroir du Multiculturalisme. Le Mythe de la Convivencia dans quelques Essais Nord-Américains Récents, in *Manuela Marín (ed.). Al-Andalus/España. Historiografías en contraste: siglos XVII-XI. Op. Cit.*, p. 352.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that many of these interpretations aren't looking for irrevocable historical solidity, their aim is to demonstrate that if in the past there were epochs in which it was possible to create conditions where different cultures were able to enter into dialogue together, in the present day we should follow these examples and try to advance along similar lines.³⁵

When worded in this way, of course it is difficult not to agree with such a proposal. The problem lies in the fact that once we have accepted the sacrifice of historical exactitude for the sake of such a laudable objective as universal brotherhood, not only do the rules stop working, but many could also demand political capitalization from this message. Above we saw a Muslim leader evoke «a great period of cultural enrichment *created by Muslims*»; however we also saw a dictator imbued with militant Catholicism refer to the tolerant tutelage of *The State* providing shelter for the mosques and the synagogues in medieval Spain. A similar kind of message with radically different objectives. If I had to choose, I would, without any shadow of a doubt, subscribe to the message implicit in President Obama's speech — I'm sure many other truly liberal American and European academics would do the same — but, for example, does this speech convince those that see *convivencia* in al-Andalus as a result of the strict application of Islamic Law in terms of the *dhimmi* laws?

Similar sources have lead authors like Manuela Marín to argue, quite rightly, that the use of *convivencia* «does nothing more than create new elements of confusion in a debate already tainted in numerous aspects».³⁶ The tainted debate and this confusion are aspects that I feel suitably explain many Spanish historians' resistance to addressing themes in which experience shows that the messages are never as apparent as hoped, and the reception of these messages is never as simple as expected.

Furthermore, the high-flown rhetoric also gives rise to other problems. We have seen that it is possible to select images and perceptions illustrating medieval *tolerance* in order to draw conclusions regarding the ideals of *convivencia* between cultures and religions. Adhering to a similar method, however, we have also seen other authors reach very different conclusions, emphasizing the long history of the irremediable clash of cultures that has existed until the present day. This vision also looks to the past to plan the present, calling on the undeniable existence of past *reconquistas*, *holy wars* and *Crusades*, which would prove the historical impossibility of agreements that are not based on rights of ownership. This perspective vindicates the odd number of historical pages of violence and wars as proof of a realist perspective

³⁵ On this matter see the telling words of the great Harold Bloom in the prologue to the work of María Rosa Menocal in 2002 «Menocal's Andalusia [...] may to some degree represent an idealization, healthy and useful», in *María Rosa Menocal. The Ornamant of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain. Op. Cit.*, p. xii.

³⁶ Manuela Marín and Joseph Pérez (1992). «L'Espagne des Trois Religions. Du Mythe aux Realités. Introduction», *Revue de Monde Musulman et de la Méditerranée*, 63-64, p. 23.

that acknowledges the inevitability of conflict as opposed to an idealized concept that prefers to focus on the scant and ephemeral even number of pages of pacific coexistence. For instance, such a vision even goes so far as to justify the expulsion of religious minorities during the Modern Era, arguing that despite it being a somewhat painful measure, in Spanish society it would have avoided the tragic inter-community tensions experienced by other countries. Once again there are very different conclusions, yet the same conception of history as a window to the present and looking to past precedents for current situations works in exactly the same way.

As I have outlined previously, when the resource of historical exactitude is nullified and what we are faced with is the use of the past to manage the present, the consequences are unpredictable: from an undesired capitalization of our ancestors' great achievements (*my ancestors vs your ancestors*) to the exacerbation of antagonistic discourses that strive to obtain their reasons in the bottomless trove that is history and from which arguments can be procured to justify almost anything.³⁷ Therefore, is it so surprising that medievalists and Spanish and French Arabists have abstained from delving deeper into these essentialist labyrinths? Hence it is the time to go back and ask ourselves to what extent ideas tainted by the concept of *tolerance* can be applied to historical interpretation.

CONVIVENCIA AS A HISTORICAL CONCEPT

As already referred to, one of the periods in history normally ascribed a great deal of social tolerance is that which corresponds to the epoch of the Umayyad Caliphate. At the time, the splendor reached by Cordoba, the capital of this Caliphate, was normally associated with a favorable environment of respect towards others and the, even unconscious, acceptance of archetypal contradictions that gave rise to a strong creative drive, visible in significant intellectual, artistic and even social achievements. Therefore, the best of Islamic tradition was the result of an attitude of acceptance towards the integration of highly diverse influences that didn't relinquish its own marks of identity.³⁸

In order for this argument to work we must consider the fact that into the 10th century —the time of the Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba (929-1031)— there was this environment of multiculturalism and respect towards difference. The details surrounding this issue, however, are not quite as apparent. They show Caliphs from Cordoba that were presented and acted as jealous guardians of orthodox religion, hounding the followers of the philosopher Ibn Masarra, putting a stop to any attempt at Shia infiltration and, in the case of Almanzor, ordering works of philosophy, astrology and doctrinal controversies kept

³⁷ Eduardo Manzano (2009). *Pensar històricament al altre*, in Maricó Jauné i Miret (ed.) (2009). *Pensar històricament. Ètica, ensenyament i usos de la història*. València: Publicacions from the Universitat de València, pp. 103-122.

³⁸ María Rosa Menocal (2002). *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*. *Op. Cit.*, p. 79 and ss.

in the library of Caliph al-Hakam to be burnt. This, along with other information, do not allow us to describe the social atmosphere in the Caliphate of Cordoba as «tolerant», in general terms at least; violence always lurked in al-Andalus society and could erupt in highly varied ways and circumstances.³⁹

Outside the sphere of the Muslim community, the data we possess on Jewish and Christian communities from the epoch of the Caliphate of Cordoba is very scant — this comes as somewhat of surprise given the clout of the platitudinous definition of *convivencia*. We know practically nothing about Jewish communities in the earliest al-Andalus period. In 711 they definitely supported the Arab conquerors and the *dhimmi* laws also definitely enabled them to free themselves from the savage laws the Visigoth monarchs had ordered them to abide by during the period that came before.⁴⁰ That said, we ignore the expanse of the Jewish communities, how they were organized, what role they played or in what social dynamics they were immersed in; in fact, when Jewish people are mentioned in the epoch of the Caliphate of Cordoba, in truth only one figure that monopolized and centralized all the available information is mentioned: Hasday ibn Ishaq ibn Shaprut. What we know about him would hardly fill an encyclopaedia, but at least it tells us that he was born in Jaén, that he was a doctor, and that in the court of ‘Abd al-Rahman III he also upheld the position of secretary (not vizier, as is often wrongly asserted), acting as an emissary to the Caliph in the embassies as he appeared before the Christian kings or as an intermediary for the arrival of Juan de Gorze, the ambassador of the Emperor Otto I. His interest in the translation of Dioscorides’s *Materia Medica*, and, primarily, his patronage of authors such as Menahem ben Saruq and Dunash ben Labrat who, besides being poets were also the founders of Hebrew lexicography in al-Andalus, has given Haday the worthy reputation as an initial precursor to the illustrious Judean-Andalus culture.⁴¹

Given that the data we possess from this epoch is either about him as a person or his immediate surroundings, it is difficult to know to what degree the example of Hasday is an exceptional case or a symptom that points to the highly relevant role of Jewish communities in al-Andalus during the Caliph period.

The information on the Christian communities from this period is not much more extensive. If hagiographical sources are anything to go by, although during these times there were still the last death rattles of the movement of voluntary martyrs that had caused mayhem in the Cordoba community in the previous century, in other regards the situation inside the

³⁹ María Isabel Fierro (2004). *Violencia, política y religión en al-Andalus durante el s. iv/x: el reinado de ‘Abd al-Rahman III*, in *María Isabel Fierro. De muerte violenta. Política, religión y violencia en al-Andalus*. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC); Laura Bariani (2003). *Almanzor*. Donostia-San Sebastián: Nerea, pp. 104-105.

⁴⁰ Raúl González Salinero (2000). *Las conversiones forzosas de los judíos en el reino visigodo*. Madrid: CSIC.

⁴¹ Ángel Sáenz-Badillos and Judit Targarona Borrás (1988). *Diccionario de autores judíos (Sefarad, siglos x-xv)*. Córdoba: El Almendro, pp. 50-51; Ángel Sáenz-Badillos (2004). «Gramáticas y léxicos y su relación con el judeoárabe. El uso del judeoárabe entre los filólogos hebreos de al-Andalus», *ILU, Revista de Ciencias de las Religiones*, ix, pp. 75-93.

Christian communities in al-Andalus appears to have been calm. Likewise, there is also another prominent figure here: Recemundo, Bishop of Elvira, who was also employed by the Caliph in the role of ambassador and intermediary to Juan de Gorze, and also ventured into intellectual endeavors: the writing of the *Calendario of Cordoba* around 961.⁴²

Relations in the Christian community in al-Andalus, however, needed to have specific elements given the atmosphere of fierce conflicts that took place between al-Andalus and the Christian Kingdoms, notably resolved in the frequent military campaigns sent to fight against the North of Spain. This, for instance, would explain early references to Pelayo, the illustrious martyr child, by 'Abd al-Rahman III; which must also be understood within the framework of these political relations and which gave rise to the early writing of a Passion based on the event, and in far-off Lower Saxony another Passion dedicated to Pelayo in the second half of the 10th century by the nun Hroswitha.⁴³

Broadly speaking, this constitutes the most important information we have on the Jewish and Christian communities in the epoch of the Caliphate of Cordoba. Is it fair to speak of tolerance in al-Andalus society solely because Hasday ibn Ishaq ibn Shaprut and Recemundo carried out missions at the service of the Caliph and upheld or favoured noteworthy intellectual activity? If we strictly adhere to this data it proves difficult to think in this manner. The employment of Jews and Christians in diplomatic missions or as interpreters was as common as the punishments handed out for not adequately undertaking these missions,⁴⁴ whilst writing or inspiring determined works can be explained within the climate of creative expansion that characterized the epoch of the Caliphate. Furthermore, the written output directly linked to both figures is explained not so much in the sense of their religious confessions, but in finding themselves integrated into the courts of the Caliphate — this is precisely where the term «the splendor of the al-Andalus Caliphate» stems from. It can never be stressed enough that this Caliphate was the most powerful political system the Iberian Peninsula, and even Western Europe, had seen since the end of the Roman Empire; this is demonstrated by the astronomical amounts amassed by the Umayyad's tax system. The extraordinary intellectual and artistic output generated by this Caliphate is explained not by the existence of a climate of tolerance, but by increased resources produced in this epoch, which the Umayyad Caliphs and their courts greatly benefited from.⁴⁵

⁴² Ann Chrystys (2002). *Christians in al-Andalus (711-1000)*. Richmond: Curzon Press, pp. 80-134.

⁴³ Juan Gil (1972). «La Pasión de Pelayo» *Habis*, III, pp. 161-202. The expression «ornament of the world» comes from Hroswitha. See the interesting conclusions reached by Kenneth Baxter Wolf in 2007 in relation to the book with the same title, «Convivencia and the Ornament of the World», Spartanburg, South Carolina: Southeast Medieval Association, Wofford College.

⁴⁴ See, for instance, the threats of severe punishment ordered by al-Hakam II to the Muslim Judge of the Christians from Cordoba, Asbag ibn 'Abd Allah, for not having correctly translated terms from a Christian embassy in the book by Ibn Hayyan and 'Isa ibn Ahmad al-Razi (1967). *El Califato de Córdoba en el «Muqtabis» de Ibn Hayyan: anales palatinos del Califa de Córdoba al-Hakam II*. Madrid: Sociedad de Estudios y Publicaciones, p. 185.

⁴⁵ Eduardo Manzano (2006). *Conquistadores, emires y califas. Los omeyyas y la formación de al-Andalus*. Barcelona: Crítica.

By contrast, what does indeed epitomize the figures of Recemundo and Hasday is the profound Arabization of Christian and Jewish communities, which also corresponds to Latin and Hebrew being maintained, at least by the wealthier classes. This Arabization was not only limited to linguistics, it also fully entered into cultural areas, aptly highlighted in the celebrated epigram attributed to the aforementioned Dunash ben Labrat: «Make your garden the books of the devout, your paradise the Arab scriptures».⁴⁶ Such testimonies cause rivers of ink to flow in the celebration of a society that successfully prompted a Jewish writer show their appreciation for the Arab legacy. Nevertheless, a more fitting appreciation would put things into perspective: seen from the position of merely the search for tolerance, these verses serve as little more than a reflection on a supposed process of cross-fertilization, disregarded because of their unidirectional nature. Seen instead from a «transcultural» perspective, these facts would lead us towards «a more nuanced conceptualization of the complex interaction between Andalusí Jews [I would also add between the Mozarabs] the Arab Islamic culture».⁴⁷

Besides deducing *tolerance* and *convivencia* as historical concepts given their strong political permutations, one way to carry out this conceptualization would be to shift the emphasis from religious identity to cultural identity. From this point of view, a Jewish author writing poetry in al-Andalus should be considered as ascribing to the Arab-Andalusi cultural tradition, whose genesis must be understood within the frameworks of this deeply Arabized society under the cultural guidance of the ruling class. Likewise, Moorish texts should be demarcated within Castilian culture without having to consider religion or the origin of their authors. That said, these social experiences in their current conception have been divided into stationary behaviors with direct genealogies with the present and are considered somewhat unprecedented by the fact they have coexisted together. If we were able to rid ourselves of the monolithic identities that tend to shape orthodox religions, it is possible that we would be able to more competently refine transcultural developments in history by relating them to processes of social change.⁴⁸

Primarily, such a perspective would enable us to break away from the equivalents between religions and cultures, considering them as the manifestation of social dynamics capable of embracing elements with very different origins. Furthermore, this perspective would also enable a more adequate exploration of the phenomena linked to the existence of dominant cultural paradigms — quite clearly Andalusi Arabic and the Hispano-Romance linguistics from the North of Spain — and the behaviour of cultures in circumstances of control.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Quoted by Ross Bran (2002). Reflections on Arabic and the Literary Identity of the Jews in al-Andalus, in *María Isabel Fierro* (ed.), *Judíos y musulmanes en al-Andalus y el Magreb. Contactos intelectuales*. Madrid: Publicaciones de la Casa de Velázquez, p. 14.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 19. See also Esperanza Alfonso (2008). *Islamic Culture Through Jewish Eyes. Al-Andalus from the 10th to the 12th Centuries*. Nueva York: Routledge.

⁴⁸ See, for instance, the thought-provoking considerations of Jonathan Ray (2005) on the matter. «Beyond Tolerance and Persecution: Reassessing our Approach to Medieval Convivencia», *Jewish Social Studies*, 11 (2), pp. 1-18.

⁴⁹ Federico Corriente (2000). Tres mitos contemporáneos frente a la realidad de Alandalús: romanticismo

A VINDICATION OF HISTORICAL CONCEPTS

In the pages above I hope I have demonstrated that the concepts of *tolerance* and *convivencia* are ineffective as tools of historical knowledge. They involve political concepts employed by different agents, under different circumstances, that embody development programs with highly variable aims. Therefore, we need to be very aware that this content is used with fairly common objectives that can also be personified by very different sectors, while certain notions tied to these concepts must be incorporated into historical interpretation with a clearer idea of what has gone before. The reality of medieval Iberian societies was a multicultural one, and continuing to consider every aspect as stationary behaviors makes little sense; there is a broad spectrum of situations brought about by the proximity, contact and the threat of other cultures, and their wealth can be better understood if we cast aside platitudes associated with the idea *convivencia*, as well categorization that is intent on defining Judaism, Christianity and Islam as *cultures* when in actual fact they are *religions*. Thus the possibility of defining a kind of Christianity and Arab Judaism in al-Andalus emerges in the same way that the culture of the Spanish Kingdoms ceases to be identified exclusively as an element of Christianity.

Yet this reflection gives rise to one obvious critique: upon distinguishing, unequivocally, between political and historical concepts, it would seem that I am advocating the absolute dissociation between the present reality and history, thus upholding a concept of the latter that is far removed from any commitment and focused on the search for knowledge with no other aim than erudite indulgence. Such a history that lacks any connection to the present would be no more than irrelevant antiquarian academic theory. This critique could originate from authors such as Simon Doubleday, authors that have been particularly astute in ruling out any temptation to establish a *cordon sanitaire* to the past, considering that it must be:

[...] urgently relevant, sometimes in terms of analogies, sometimes in terms of long-term historical continuities, and sometimes because exposure to Spanish history might sensitize us to the horrors of repression, imperialism and intolerance, no matter their cultural origin.⁵⁰

But this stance is not without its own problems. Pursuing the relevance of the past could become labyrinthine; as Doubleday himself acknowledges, historical analogies, for example, are not always adequate. This is also stressed by Islamic leaders, who endeavor

filoárabe, cultura mozárabe y cultura sefardí, in Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla, Manuel C. Feria García and Eduardo Manzano Moreno. *Orientalismo, exotismo y traducción*. Op. Cit., pp. 45-46.

⁵⁰ Simon R. Doubleday (2008). Criminal Non-Intervention: Hispanism, Medievalism, and the Pursuit of Neutrality, in Simon R. Doubleday and David Coleman (eds.). *In the Light of Medieval Spain. Islam, the West and the Relevance of the Past*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 10-11.

to draw exact parallels between current armed interventions from the West and the Crusades in the Middle East; such an analogy could appear unfounded inside our comfortable academic enclaves, but maybe it does not seem so preposterous to an Iraqi citizen. So are some analogies pertinent and others not? Who decides this pertinence? The same could be said for the search for long-term historical continuities. Is it, therefore, necessary to recall platitudes linked to the history of Spain as a string of cruel and violent episodes from the time of the Visigoths to the Spanish Civil War, as some authors have attempted to highlight in order to offer a not-so-positive image of Spain? Should we recall the perceptions of certain observers on the «continuities» as tangible proof of the existence of certain old «Spanish customs» that involve «indiscriminately massacring enemies»?⁵¹

In truth, the only way for us to escape these unfathomable essentialist labyrinths is precisely to reclaim the value of historical knowledge itself. By defending this knowledge I am not upholding a lack of commitment or comfortably settling into the ivory tower. The very opposite. The transforming nature of historical knowledge inexorably forces us to stress a commitment to the present, which is what the great historians of the 20th century, such as Marc Bloc, Lucien Febvre and Eric Hobsbawm were always fully aware of. In the same way that knowledge of the cosmos —despite its radical distancing from us— has played a part in decisively molding the perceptions about ourselves, increased knowledge about the past, as far away as it may seem, works towards augmenting historical awareness in our societies, thus contributing to social progress.

Naturally, although no-one can propose either the development of «definitive histories» or the culmination of the aim of «historical objectiveness», it is true to say that our knowledge of the past has increased as exponentially as other aspects of knowledge documented in other sciences. Never before, throughout history, have we been in such a position to say so much about the past, nor have we been in a position to understand so well the complex processes of change that run into the present. Contrary to what the advocates of more reactionary thought search for, this present never repeats the past, never presents eternal recurrences, and is never determined by the weight of history: it is, pure and simple, a product of change. For that reason it can never be understood without knowing how this change has been produced, or, how the past has developed. That is where its radical relevance stems from. The day that historians understand that they don't need to «sell» their goods by appealing to parallels, continuities or essences, a giant step will be taken towards recognizing history as a discipline without which the present makes little sense.

In the case we are dealing with here, I wanted to demonstrate in this essay to what extent the concepts of *tolerance* and *convivencia* mean certain «siren songs» that, despite appearing to put the wind firmly in our sails with many good intentions, can end up generating con-

⁵¹ This testimony is by an Austrian sociologist that arrived in Barcelona in August 1936. See Tom Buchanan (2007). *The Impact of the Spanish Civil War on Britain: War, Loss and Memory*. Brighton; Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press.

traditions to such an extent that it is hard to break away from them. Naturally, in deeming them as political concepts, I did not want to assign them a pejorative meaning —historical knowledge, made clear in the previous paragraph, is deeply political. Rather my intention was to verify that they represent a program of mobilization based in the present with objectives that can be both diverse and constitute alternatives that exist to capitalize on counterposed, or even identical, discourses. In the face of this mobilization program, the historical concepts laid out here as a way of understanding the past appear to be less ambitious in scope, when in fact, and in practice, they are much more resonant. Understanding that al-Andalus was a society that underwent steep processes of change clashes head on with essentialist views that, from one perspective or another, insist on trying to convince us that we have not moved one iota for a thousand years. Asserting that cultures were as equally changeable as they were prone to control or being under domination convinces us that, ultimately, like ourselves, our ancestors also had to face new and unpredictable decisions, similar to the ones that define our own era.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Eduardo Manzano Moreno has a PhD from the Universidad Complutense in Madrid and *Master of Arts* in Near Eastern Studies (School of Oriental and African Studies) from the University of London. As Head of the Centre for Human and Social Sciences at CSIC (2007-2012), he is a specialist in al-Andalus history and the political implications of historical memory. He has also contributed to significant work on the history of Jerusalem during the First World War. Within his extensive body of work, the following publications are of note: «The Iberian Peninsula and North Africa» (in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, edited by Chase F. Robinson, 2010); «Épocas medievales» (in *Historia de España*, edited by Josep Fontana and Ramón Villares, 2010); *Conquistadores, emires y califas: los omeyas y la formación de al-Andalus* (2007); and *La gestión de la memoria. La Historia de España al servicio del poder* (in collaboration with Juan Sisinio Pérez Garzón, Ramón López Facal and Aurora Rivière) (2002). Similarly, he has been a member of the Editorial Board of the science magazines *Hispania*, *Al-Qantara*, *Arqueología y Territorio Medieval* and the *Journal of Medieval Studies*.

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on how *convivencia* has become a universal reference regarding the Middle Ages in Spain. The distant origin of this reference point can be found in the ideas of the Spanish philologist Américo Castro, but it has also been reworked to become a tool with which to meet the multicultural challenges that have arisen in societies since the last quarter of the 20th century. Therefore, *convivencia* is a political and not historical concept. This contraposition between political and historical concepts raises a broader and more complex discussion of historical knowledge and its relevance in contemporary societies.

KEYWORDS

Al-Andalus, *convivencia*, Umayyads, Caliphate, Cordoba.