La Convivencia: Did the Catholic reconquest of Granada in 1492 bring an end to peaceful religious coexistence in Southern Spain?

The Muslim surrender of the vassal state of Granada on 2nd January 1492 completed the Catholic *Reconquista*[1] of the Iberian Peninsula. Whilst at first a certain degree of tolerance was shown towards non-Catholics, forced conversions and expulsions overseen by the devout Isabella soon ensued. Many historians have portrayed the Muslim rule over Al-Andalus, the name given by the Muslims themselves to the region, as a multicultural paradise where the 'People of the Book' lived in harmony. Presumably then, the infamous Inquisition established under the Catholic Monarchs, attempting to consolidate Christian rule in newly unified Spain, would stand in great juxtaposition to this quasi-utopia. However, this society of religious coexistence which may have been the hallmark of Al-Andalus in its formative years was already beginning to deteriorate early in the eleventh century once power had shifted from Umayyad princes to nomadic Berber tribes. Thus, the notion of religious and cultural intolerance, albeit not carried out by the Berbers in such extreme measures, was firmly established in the Peninsula well before Muhammad XII, last Muslim ruler of Granada, handed over the keys of the city to Los Reyes Católicos.

Throughout the eight-hundred years of Al-Andalus, the Peninsula did not remain under continuous dynastical rule. It began as a province of the Umayyad Caliphate in 711 AD, ruled by the Umayyad dynasty and based in Damascus, Syria. Once the Umayyads were overthrown by the Abbasid Dynasty, Al-Andalus became an independent Emirate under Abd al-Rahman, exiled Umayyad prince who established himself as Emir, or commander. In 929, his grandson Abd-al-Rahman III proclaimed himself *caliph,*[2] rendering the Peninsula an independent Caliphate. This period of the Peninsula is seen as its Golden Age, with an inherent culture of tolerance allowing individuals of all religions to contribute to the blossoming astronomical and scientific advancements within it (Menocal, 2002.) Crippling civil war ensued in the early eleventh century and left the Caliphate divided into a number *taifas*.[3] Now weakened, independent taifas frequently fell to the raids and attempted conquests of burgeoning Christian states in the North and were forced to request the aid of the Almoravids, Berber rulers of the Maghreb.[4] The dynasty not only withheld the Catholic armies from completing Reconquista but also annexed all Taifa kingdoms, bringing them under Berber rule. The Almoravids were succeeded by a fellow Berber[5] dynasty, the Almohads, and a second civil war brought a subsequent period of division, with taifas soon yielding to the Christian North. All that remained of Muslim rule in the region was the Emirate of Granada under the Nasrids, until its final surrender to the Catholic Monarchs on 2nd January 1492. Many residual Muslim elite, such as Boabdil, the last Nasrid ruler of Granada, found life under *Los Reyes Católicos*[6] intolerable and escaped to their homeland of North Africa (Kamen, 1983.) What had begun as somewhat of a mutual respect between

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[1] *Reconquista: (Spanish, meaning 'reconquest')* the period generally marked between the Umayyad conquest 711 and the fall of the Nasrid kingdom of Granada 1492, with Catholicism fighting to retake Iberia

[2] *Caliph*: (Arabic) leader/steward

[3] *Taifas*: (Arabic) the independent Muslim principalities of the Iberian Peninsula that emerged following the fall of the Umayyad Caliphate of Córdoba between 1009-1931

[4] *Maghreb/al-Maghrib: (Arabic, meaning* 'the west'), a subregion of North Africa under predominantly Muslim rule

[5] *Berber:* an ethnicity of several nations mostly indigenous to North Africa/the Maghreb

[6] *Los Reyes Católicos: (Spanish, meaning 'The Catholic Monarchs')* Ferdinand and Isabella

Catholics and Muslims soon turned to a rigorous policy of forced conversion under Cardinal Cisneros, establishing the infamously cruel Spanish Inquisition.

However, the very nature of tumultuous rule and the lack of a single dynasty meant that the culture of tolerance and harmonious coexistence which Al-Andalus is thought to champion was simply not a ubiquitous reality. Muslim conquerors brought to the Peninsula two contrasting ethnic groups – Arabs, namely the Umayyads, and Berbers (Marín-Guzmán, 1991.) Naturally therefore, the nature and origin of each clan shaped their approach as the conquerors towards the conquered, the Jews and Christians. The Umayyad family, whose rule continued until the turn of the eleventh century, formed part of the Muslim elite with quintessential Arabic interest in academia and oversaw cultural developments such as the construction of the famed Mezquita of Córdoba. The family had an educated Arabian background, originating as merchants of the Quraysh tribe of Mecca (Menocal, 2003.) Thus, it is hardly surprising that the guiding principles of Almoravid and Almohad rule, given their simple nomadic way of life, were a far cry from those of the comparably erudite Umayyad elite. Whilst a certain level of tolerance was shown to the Jewish and Christian populations by the Umayyads, the far more fundamentalist Berbers initiated the slow collapse of Convivencia in Al-Andalus. It could even be argued that the Spanish Inquisition, often incorrectly portrayed as 'shattering the peace' of Muslim rule, could be seen as the physical implementation of the same intolerant views that the Berber dynasties equally held.

Andalusian society under the Umayyads was upheld by a fairly rigid hierarchal structure. The top of the pecking order was occupied by the Arab Muslims and followed by Non-Arab Muslims, comprised of Berbers, who largely formed the rural proletariat, and Muwallads, converts of Iberian descent. Below this were the non-Muslim free persons, predominately Christians and Jews, who were second-class citizens and held the status of *dhimmis*.[7] As 'protected people' they were provided with legal protection in return for acknowledgement of and loyalty to the political supremacy of the ruling Muslims. The dhimmis were required to pay a tax known as the *jizya*,[8] generally understood as the fee for legal protection. It could certainty be argued that dhimmis were clearly several notches below the Muslims on the Andalusian social ladder, and perhaps the dhimmah system and jizya tax can be seen as a form of humiliation in separating non-Muslims from their Muslim 'superiors'. However, the dhimmis were given a freedom of religion (besides a handful of restrictions such as prohibition on constructing new houses of worship [Menocal, 2003] unmatched in comparison to the intolerance of Catholic Europe. The Jewish and Christian communities also enjoyed a sense of independence from the state, with intra-religious disputes being resolved by ecclesiastical or rabbinical courts (Menocal, 2003.) Eighth Umayyad caliph, Umar II, reportedly commanded in a letter not to "destroy a synagogue or church…as long as they have reconciled with and agreed upon with the Muslims." [9] Therefore, we can see that a certain degree of coexistence was sustained as each religious group accepted their societal position, albeit an inferior one for non-Muslims, and thus gained relative autonomy. Whilst a religious group being given a second-class citizenship may be seen as intolerable from a modern viewpoint, the status and presence of Jews in Andalusian society was still

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[7] *Dhimmi: ('protected person', Arabic)* a term denoting non-Muslims living in an Islamic State with legal protection

[8] *Jizya*: *(Arabic root 'jaza' meaning to compensate)* a per capita yearly taxation levied on permanent non-Muslim subjects of a state governed by Muslim law in return for the safety of their lives

[9] Recorded by Abu 'Ubaid Ibn Sallam in his book, Kitab al-Amwal, p.123

recognised by the Umayyads. Importantly, any form of citizenship involves rights and tolerance to some degree by the dominant group. Thus, whilst the dhimmis were certainly regarded as inferior, they maintained a freedom to practice their faith and regulate aspects of their communities, unique in Medieval Europe, without fear of persecution from the state.

Furthermore, there were instances to show dhimmi citizens rising in societal ranks to hold high positions in Umayyad bureaucracy. A Christian named Revemund held a secretarial post under Abd-al-Rahman III and was even sent as ambassador to Germany in 955-56. Moreover, Jewish scholar Hasdai ibn Shaprut served as a Umayyad diplomat and physician to Abd-al-Rahman himself and gained the ruler's trust as a faithful councillor and confidant (Wikipedia, 2020.) It could be argued that the ability of Christians and Jews to reach such high-ranking posts and work alongside Umayyad rulers would indicate that this period of Al-Andalus was tolerant to the degree that they could significantly elevate their social and intellectual position. So, inferior status of dhimmitude did not inhibit non-Muslims to establish themselves as respected members of Umayyad society. Furthermore, for the Jewish community, increased freedom and potential for higher social standing under the Umayyads was welcomed following sustained persecution under the preceding Visigoths (Karabell, 2007.) Whilst society under the Umayyads may hardly have been described as egalitarian, we can see evidence of mutual respect and trust between the ruling Muslim class and the Jewish and Christian populations.

The invasion of the conservative North African dynasties in the early eleventh century was near paradoxical, undercutting the policy of toleration which had been fostered by the Umayyads (Dodds, 1992.) The Almohads, the second of the two Berber dynasties, were particularly infamous for extreme religious fanaticism which was far more evident during their rule than that of the Umayyads. Previously, Al-Andalus had been essentially governed by the Arab aristocracy, beginning with the Umayyads and subsequent independent Taifa kings, such as the Abbadid clan of Iraqi noble pedigree who ruled Seville (Soravia, 2011.) Disparagingly, Almoravid and Almohad rulers who succeeded the independent Taifa rulers descended from desert tribes from the North Maghreb in Africa. Whilst Umayyad culture was intrinsically Arabic in nature, it could be argued that their higher echelon and ties to intellectual hubs such as Damascus formed the basis of their more 'liberal' attitude towards the intermingling of religions, at least in the context of Catholic Europe. Inversely, the more simple, mountainous and tribal roots of the Almoravid and Almohad clans would have undoubtedly fuelled their intolerant orthodoxy and rejection of Iberian intermingling (Carroll, 2001.)

Particularly intolerant was the fundamentalist Almohad dynasty. The rebellion in which they had seized power was led by Berber scholar Ibn Tumart, recognised by his followers as the *Mahdi* [10] – the divinely appointed leader tasked with realigning Islam from its deviation and restoring the kingdom of heaven on earth (Lewis, 1984.) Thus, it is clear from the offset that Almohad rule was entirely averse to the Convivencia upheld by previous Muslim leaders, perceived by Ibn Tumart as 'deviation.' Indeed, their puritanical fervour is evident in the series of reforms they made in the early twelfth century. Jews and Christians once

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[10] *Mahdi: ('al-mahdi' meaning 'the guided one' in Arabic) an eschatological redeemer of Islam who will appear before the Day of Judgement to rid the world of evil*

considered 'protected people', were given the choice of conversion or death. The Almohad fanatics, believing their mission of *jihad*[11] was 'divine', set their sights on saving willing non-Muslims through a process of forced conversion or disposing of infidels (Roth, 1976.) We can see how the relative religious freedom upheld by the Umayyad Caliphate, where Christians would even hold worship in the Great Mosque of Córdoba (Carroll, 2001), was utterly thwarted by fanatical ideology under the Almohad Berbers. Christians and Jews who had been comparatively free to practice their faith some hundred years prior to Berber invasion were now faced with a choice of death or abandoning their beliefs. Jews and Christians had always been the subordinate group in society throughout Muslim rule, but they had now been stripped of the protection and security which they were once guaranteed. This undoubtedly led to immense immigration of Christians and Jews to more tolerant lands. Prolific Torah scholar Maimonides wrote in a treatise that he and his family had decided to flee to lands where the Torah may be observed without fear (Roth, 1994.)

Whilst this doctrine of intolerance may seem completely incongruous to the Umayyad system of dhimmitude, it holds an interesting similarity to the methods of the Spanish Inquisition some three-hundred years later. The Alhambra Decree of March 1492, issued by the Catholic Monarchs following Reconquista, ordered the expulsion of practicing Jews, or those unwilling to convert, from the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon by the end of July that year (Sephardic Studies, 2017.) The fundamental ideology which underpins both edicts was an utter intolerance of the 'outsider.' In both cases, the dominant power naturally sees the subordinate as inferior and thus able to be dealt with in whichever way the ruler sees fit. Indeed, a twelfth-century decree issued by the Almohads forbids Muslim merchants from selling the 'garments of lepers, libertines, Jews or Christians' without indicating original ownership (Roth, 1994.) The immoral and almost vulgar connotations of lepers and libertines, when coupled with non-Muslims, clearly illustrates the disdain of the Berber ruling class and their view of Jews and Christians as morally or spiritually impure. One could argue that sentiments of scorn are mirrored through the Catholic idea of 'blood purity', or *limpieza de sangre.* Following Reconquista, this judgement was applied to 'Old Christians', or those with no Jewish or Muslim ancestry, and thus considered 'pure'. For the Jewish converts to Christianity, the Biblical precedent of deicide which led to the crucifixion of Christ was a particularly hard to shake and was seen as a basis for 'impurity' of ancestral blood. In the sixteenth century, Cardinal Silíceo issued the first exclusionary statute of limpieza de sangre in Toledo, rendering the taint of *converso*[12] blood an inhibitor to ecclesiastical appointments (Roth, 1994.) These statutes, given royal approval by Philip II in 1556, exemplify the same contempt and almost disgust of the Almohads towards the non-Muslims. Moreover, the term *marrano,*[13] used to refer to nominally converted Jews and Muslims who continued to covertly practice their faith, alludes to the disdain of the Catholics. The irony of a term associated with pigs in Spanish demonstrates a sentiment of near disgust with which the non-Catholic community was viewed. Thus, the concept of

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[11] *Jihad: (Arabic, meaning striving/struggling);* can refer to any effort with aim to conform to God's guidance but frequently connotes war

[12] *Converso: (Spanish, meaning 'converted')* a term applied to a Jew who converted to Catholicism in the Peninsula, or one of his/her descendants; also known as a 'New Christian'

[13] *Marrano*: *(Spanish)* contextually has pig-like connotations, referring to the Muslim/Jewish prohibition on consuming pork

superiority and inferiority on religious grounds is evident in both the Almohad Muslim and the Catholic rule, in great disparity to the earlier Umayyad idea of Convivencia. Furthermore, it could be argued that both Berber fundamentalism and Catholic 'crusading' spirit not only viewed the 'Other' with contempt but also a certain degree of fear. A significant contributing factor to the Alhambra Decree was the Catholic concern that practicing Jews could incite Judaic reversion within the recently formed converso population. Jewish presence was seen as a corrupting force within Christian society, and thus the eventual solution was the complete elimination of any nonconformists (Roth 2002.) Furthermore, the economic success of the Jewish community in Christian society may have given impetus to their expulsion. Jews accumulated great affluence from usury, a practice barred from Catholics, and came to dominate industries such as cloth and jewellery (Proach, 2013.) Many conversos also rose through the ranks of government and nobility. The immense power that they held, despite being a marginalized group in society, may well have fuelled anti-Semitic feeling and jealousy amongst Catholics. The inception of the Inquisition by Ferdinand and Isabella may have been principally driven by the desire to secure Catholic orthodoxy, but the influence of a non-Catholic population as a destabilising force religiously and financially may have motivated action taken specifically against them following complete Reconquista. Thus, not only was there a Catholic fear towards the Jewish community on theological grounds, but perhaps on socio-economic grounds also.

It could be discerned that the 'Jewish conspiracy' perceived by the Catholics somewhat echoed the Muslim sentiments towards non-Muslims once the more tolerant Umayyad rule had dissolved. The peace of Convivencia was often threatened when Jews and Christians were seen to be accumulating too much power or wealth than their position as second-class citizens allowed for (Lewis, 1984.) This jealousy is exemplified in the pogrom of 1066 in Granada, which began when a Muslim mob targeted Jewish *vizier*,[14] Joseph ibn Naghrela. Whilst Naghrela had been accused of badmouthing and even instructing violence towards the Berber ruling majority of Granada, he was known as an influential yet ostentatious figure (Lewis, 1984.) As vizier and *nagid*,[15] he attracted the envy of many Berbers. Whilst the Berber mob may have begrudged Naghrela's gaudiness, a nuanced element of fear may have played a part in the attack. The threat of a powerful non-Muslim, who possibly had the ability to surpass Muslim rivals in influence, endangered the structure of Andalusian society and the superiority of the Muslim classes. Thus, the contempt, intolerance and possibly even fear of subordinate groups is evident in both the latter years of Muslim rule in the Peninsula and following Catholic reconquest, dating the destruction of Convivencia hundreds of years before Reconquista was completed.

The ideological gulf between a ruling class of sophisticated Arab urbanites and nomadic desert tribes underpins the undoing of Convivencia, once a principal tenet of 'Golden Age' Al-Andalus. The arrival of the Catholics in 1492 is often seen as responsible for the utter dismantling of an Iberian multi-faith paradise, yet the invasion of Berber dynasties, particularly the Almohads, signalled a shift in the status of dhimmis in the Peninsula. The sentiments of intolerance, scorn and perhaps even fear emanating from Almohad rule was continued by the Catholic Monarchs completed Reconquista in Granada. The surprising common ground between the principal tenets of seemingly antithetical Berber tribes and

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[14] *Vizier: (Arabic)* a high-ranking political advisor in the Muslim world
[15] *Nagid: (Hebrew)* a Sephardic term meaning leader of the Jewish community

royal Spaniards indicates that the end of peaceful coexistence was not wholly brought about by *Los Reyes Católicos,* indeed the establishment of the Inquisition could instead be seen as the execution of the staunch fundamentalism that the Berber clans brought to the land some four hundred years prior. Whilst the Catholic reconquest of Granada in 1492 may have been the final nail in the coffin for Convivencia, an Almohad attitude of hostility, in great disparity to Umayyad amity, began a gradual demolition of harmonious coexistence. Moreover, given that the Golden Age of Al-Andalus flourished during a time when Convivencia was at its best, perhaps we should celebrate multiculturalism and diversity as a source from which advancements akin to those of the time can take place.

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