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CA18129 - Islamic Legacy: Narratives East,
West, South, North of the Mediterranean
(1350-1750)

***Islamic Legacy:
Narratives East, West, South, North of the Mediterranean (1350-1750).***

A Thesaurus under Discussion.

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***Between Coexistence and Convivence: The
Convenience of Ethno-Religious Diversity in the
Pre-Modern Mediterranean and Beyond
[Coexistence, Convivencia]***

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Between Coexistence and Convivence: The Convenience of Ethno-Religious Diversity in the Pre-Modern Mediterranean and Beyond [Coexistence, Convivencia].

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One of the defining characteristics of the Mediterranean region in the pre-Modern era was its ethno-religious diversity. Not only was the region a patchwork of principalities characterized by different religious affiliations but many of these societies had significant populations who belonged to religious outgroups, and which often played powerful and influential roles in the economy and administration. This multi-religious Mediterranean comes into high relief in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, when with the rise of Islam the entire region came to identify almost exclusively with “Abrahamic monotheism” – a doctrinal religious culture that recognized the common origins of Christianity, Islam and Judaism, and ceded a certain legitimacy to non-believers within that tradition, but at the same time emphasized religious, social, and legal boundaries that separated these communities. All recognized also that a religiously diverse society should be structured as a hierarchy of communities, in which those who adhered to the faith of the ruler enjoyed full privileges and benefits, while others enjoyed a legitimate but secondary status.

These social and legal structures were codified in detail early on in Islamic scripture and legal thought, which established the principle of *dhimma* (“the pact of protection”) as the framework for establishing the status of minority populations in the era Islamic hegemony over the Mediterranean (roughly to 1100). Legal thought in the pre-Modern era, however, was aspirational, and while *dhimma* provided a model for the integration and subordination of minority peoples, their status and opportunities in real life often exceeded or contradicted the principles laid out under law. As Christian principalities expanded into Muslim territory and acquired important minority populations, they took a similar approach to integrating minorities, at times imitating or emulating these Islamic precedents.

However, it was neither doctrine nor law that established the ground rules of minority-majority relations, rather it was the practical demands of governing and of managing complex interrelated Mediterranean economies that required such approaches be adopted by rulers, regardless of their confessional identity. This was rooted in several factors, including the Mediterranean’s character as an aggregate of specialized micro-regions – a fact which encouraged commerce and specialization, and therefore made kingdoms of different religious orientations interdependent. Frequently, the powers that expanded into the Mediterranean region did not have a population sufficient or the technical expertise to maintain the economies of conquered lands, and this opened up further opportunities for minority peoples. Thus, while there were episodes of destructive conquest and displacement, in many cases conquest was achieved as a consequence of



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bilateral negotiations between the conquered and conquerors, each of whom realized they needed each other in order to pursue their agendas. This process was facilitated by the fact that the peoples of the region shared in common religious, intellectual and cultural tradition, which lubricated social integration and acculturation. The integration that resulted was further reinforced by the fact that religious identity was only one mode of self-identification, and that in many contexts, peoples of differing religious communities did not see themselves as rivals but rather as collaborators. In the final analysis, this ethno-religious diversity was initiated and endured because it was “convenient” – which is to say it met the needs and expectations of all concerned. Thinking of it on these terms, rather than as “coexistence” or “convivencia” enables us to understand why apparently stable intercommunal relations could suddenly spin into violence, and then just as quickly reestablish a “normal” stability, and how both individuals and collectives could engage in relations that ran against the declared principles of their ideologies.