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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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Convivencia

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Convivencia

Maribel Fierro

Convivencia - in Spanish 'living together'- is a term used to refer to specific social and religious features of Medieval Iberia and there is a history behind it. It is often employed in order to project a certain interpretation of the past from a present in which many give value to societies characterized by ethnic and religious pluralism and inclusivity. Because of its links to present concerns, its heuristic potential has been subject to debate. Reflecting on how, when and why the term *convivencia* came into being and on its use can be helpful in two senses: to force us to find more effective ways to grasp in its complexity Medieval societies such as those of the Iberian Peninsula, and to introduce historical awareness when dealing with our modern concerns.

The term *convivencia* was coined by a literary historian and philologist, Américo Castro (1885-1972), who fled Spain during the Civil War after having been on the side of the Spanish Republic and thus against the coup d'état headed by General Franco. Castro went into exile to the United States and there he taught at different Universities. It was during his American exile that he wrote the works that made him famous and that revolved around the notion of *convivencia*. For him, Spain came into being out of the living together of the three monotheistic religious groups that had inhabited for centuries the Iberian Peninsula - Jews, Christians and Muslims. Therefore, all of them, regardless of their fate, were part of the history of Spain. His was an inclusive approach that went against the conservative narrative that conceived the history of Spain as revolving around the 'Reconquista', the centuries-long Christian military takeover of the lands that had been conquered by the Muslims in 711 and that was conceived as a 'recovery' of something previously owned that had been lost. Castro concentrated on the living together of different religious groups under Christian rule, a situation made possible by the Islamic precedent of the dhimma status, that is, the Islamic legal framework that guaranteed that non Muslims could live in Muslim societies subject to discrimination but without suffering persecution. Christian initial 'toleration' of other religions would have continued the Islamic practice in al-Andalus. Castro was not much interested in historical knowledge, but in capturing what made Spaniards 'Spanish', developing a complicated vocabulary to deal with issues of identity, ethnicity and multiculturalism. These are issues that had always been of great interest in the USA in relation to their own 'melting pot' narrative, and were extended to the 'West', especially

since the second half of the 20th century, in relation with post-colonialism and emigration.

Convivencia means 'living together', something that can be a fruitful thing, but that can also involve abuse, tensions and violence. In Spanish, the term suggests living together like in a family or in a marriage, thus implying that it could be nurturing and pleasant, but also the opposite. When used to refer to the Iberian Medieval past, *convivencia* tends to transform al-Andalus in general, and more specifically Cordoba, in a paradigm for representing those



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Medieval Islamic societies in which the *dhimma* status opened possibilities for the co-existence of different religious groups and for intense cultural exchange. The end of Iberian *convivencia* is usually associated with the year 1492, when the expulsion of the Jews and the conquest of the last Muslim kingdom, Nasrid Granada, took place, initiating a period that would lead eventually to the forced conversion of Muslims and then to the expulsion of the Moriscos.

The 'Cordoba paradigm' is also used as a reminder that present tensions and escalation of conflicts expressed in cultural and religious terms should not be equated with 'Islam'. Al-Andalus and Cordoba are considered to provide the historical experience of a Muslim society in European territory that had integrated non Muslims and in which the coexistence of different religious communities led to extraordinary achievements, including interfaith harmony, artistic splendour, refined material culture, as well as intellectual development and cultural efflorescence that led to the Renaissance. September 11 gave a new impulse to this representation of al-Andalus as a place in which the three religions had managed to live together and to share much in cultural terms. Maria Rosa Menocal's book *The ornament of the world. How Muslims, Jews and Christians created a culture of tolerance in Medieval Spain* (2002) was one among other books appearing around the same time that tried to counteract post-September 11 anti-Muslim feelings and trends by stressing *convivencia* in the Iberian Peninsula. The book's success seems to reflect a widespread conviction that without historical antecedents, peaceful interactions could have neither present nor future. The search for historical antecedents was, however, older than the term and the book. Nineteenth century European Jews had already made use of al-Andalus when looking for a place out of the ghetto in European society, taking it to be a successful precedent of 'integration' into a non Jewish society that had had beneficial results for the Jews as they were able to insert themselves into the host culture without losing their identity.

All this points to the need groups feel to explore new narratives to make sense of their present, here more specifically new narratives about the history of Spain and also Europe in which Islam and Muslims are not necessarily or exclusively the 'other', but also a part of it. The Muslim presence for more than 800 years in the Iberian Peninsula is crucial in any discussion of Spanish national history. In this paper, I have been using the emic term, al-Andalus, instead of the expression Muslim Spain in order to refer to that presence. There is something to gain and something to lose in using one term or the other. Al-Andalus was the term employed by the Muslim inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula to refer to the territory in which they lived. Muslim Spain may seem to be a more inclusive expression from the perspective of the present, while al-Andalus appears to separate the Muslim past from such present while in reality what it does is to give historical depth to our present realities. History is change and to project back our present in the past tends to obscure change.

Against this background, the term *convivencia* has the advantage of moving the focus from conflict and confrontation to contact, interaction and cross-fertilization. But concentrating on the latter forgetting the former could also become a problem. When the less pleasant aspects of *convivencia* are put aside, this may lead to acerbic antagonism and criticism as reflected in the book by the conservative Catholic writer Dario Fernandez Moreras entitled



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The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise (2016). It can also distort our grasp of the past, by obscuring for example the fact that it was mostly the subaltern groups (Christians and Jews) who developed an interest and an appreciation for Islamic things, while Iberian Muslims seem to have been less inclined to do the same with Christians and Jews - with the exception of the early and late periods of al-Andalus, that is, the period of Islamization and the period of Christian political and military superiority. Moreover, it can lead to an 'idealization' of al-Andalus in which historical realities are superseded by Romantic and emotional renderings of the past that concentrate on attractive and positive subjects such as perfumes, poetry, music and joie de vivre (Charles Hirschkind's recent book is a manifesto for this kind of approach) while calamities, poverty, persecution, war and so on are relegated in spite of the fact that they are all the ingredients that make a normal Medieval society as al-Andalus was.

Thus, highly divergent 'Andalusi' realities have come into being according to the interests of those who promote them, both in the past and the present. Within Arab and Islamist discourses, as pointed by Hisham Aidi, secularists underline al-Andalus's 'pan-confessional humanism', and on their part Islamists contend that it was a strict adherence to sharia that led to the rise of Islamic Spain while secular decadence led to its ignominious downfall.

Convivencia is a term unequally used within the academic milieu. Most Spanish historians have not contributed to the activity of elevating Medieval Spain to the category of a multicultural reference point, a point made by Eduardo Manzano among others. Spanish traditional conservative historians, as mentioned before, are interested in stressing conflict, while progressive and 'liberal' historians do not see in *convivencia* a tool that can enable us to acquire a more full-bodied vision of the past, but a political concept that aspires to transcendence and essence instead of historical knowledge. Another criticism is that it may obscure the uneven distribution of power among the three religious communities, as well as the social, cultural and religious tensions that existed between the individual and the groups to which such individual belonged (an issue studied by Jonathan Ray in relation to the Jews). It may also lead to Iberian exceptionalism, thus forgetting that religiously mixed milieus were standard realities in most of the Islamic world.

Given that *convivencia* mostly evokes the existence of different religious groups, it raises the issue of the role of 'religion' for collective and individual identities and how it relates to other constitutive elements of the complex way in which belonging is established, such as language, ethnicity, gender, social status, age, etc. Brian Catlos has rightly pointed out that *conveniencia* (convenience) more than *convivencia* may better reflect the dynamics that were at stake in the living together of different groups, proposing that the fabric of interfaith relations was held together by a system of overlapping reciprocal interests and negotiated, utilitarian arrangements. On the other hand, the term *convivencia* has been extended to refer to contexts other than those of the Iberian peninsula, as for example historians of Jewish-Christian relations in northern Europe have started to de-emphasize persecutions and stress the peaceful aspects of interfaith coexistence.

In sum, born in specific circumstances, subject to debate, rejected by some and upheld by others, the term *convivencia* has found success outside the academic world and there is no



indication that it will stop circulating. While it has serious shortcomings arising from some of its uses, it can still be helpful as it seems to promote discussion about how we can render more intelligible the past and about how that past affects our present.

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