

## The “Convivencia” of Jews and Muslims in the High Middle Ages

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The notion of “convivencia” was invented by Spanish historians to describe Christians, Jews, and Muslims living together more or less peacefully in medieval Christian Spain.<sup>1</sup> But the concept, if not the word itself, has equally been applied to Jewish-Muslim coexistence in the medieval Arabic-speaking Islamic world. Also commonly known as the “Golden Age” of Jewish-Muslim harmony, the idea especially pertains to Islamic Spain, from the mid-10<sup>th</sup> to mid-12<sup>th</sup> centuries, but it extends to the Judaeo-Arabic symbiosis in the entire Islamic world. The convivencia of the Islamic world and Reconquista Spain, taken together, is traditionally contrasted with the far less harmonious and culturally less integrated era of Jewish-Christian relations in the Ashkenazic lands of northern Europe.<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, many Spanish historians today would distance themselves from the rosy picture of convivencia in Catholic Iberia, just as many Jewish writers have done for the Islamic-Jewish experience. The most recent statement in this mood comes from a Spanish literary scholar, Darío Fernández-Morera, writing about “The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise” (2006).<sup>3</sup> The opposite pole has been reiterated in recent years in the encomium for the Spanish convivencia by Maria Rosa Menocal in her book *Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (2002).<sup>4</sup>

The debate about the convivencia of Jews and Muslims in Muslim Spain and elsewhere in the medieval Islamic world stems from opposing political motives. One side portrays Islamic-Jewish relations as utter harmony, a veritable “interfaith utopia.” This viewpoint originated among nineteenth-century central European Jewish historians, who had their own political axe to grind, living with the unfulfilled promise of emancipation and yearning, nostalgically, for the “freedom” and “tolerance” they thought they saw in Spanish Islam. The claim of Islamic tolerance has more recently been taken up by Arabs and pro-Arab western writers, who blame Zionism for undermining the harmony of the past. The other side, responding to the first, is represented by Jewish and Zionist writers, who see Jewish life under Islam in the Middle Ages as utter suffering and disaster and assert that Arab antisemitism of the twentieth century is firmly rooted in a congenital, endemic Muslim/Arab Jew-hatred. Both claims, however, are based on historical myths.

The truth lies somewhere in between. The convivencia of Jews and Muslims in Muslim Spain and elsewhere in the medieval Islamic world was real, but its harmony had limits. It was marked by a legally-prescribed regime of discrimination and even witnessed periodic outbursts of violence. Nonetheless, the cultural achievement of

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<sup>1</sup> See Thomas Glick’s introductory essay to, and the other essays in, the Jewish Museum exhibition catalogue, *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain* (New York, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter One in my *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> In *The Intercollegiate Review* 41 (Fall, 2006), 23-31.

<sup>4</sup> Boston: Little, Brown, 2002; also translated into French and Spanish.

Arabic-speaking Jewry; the political influence that some Jews attained in Muslim courts and Muslim intellectual circles; and the substantial security Jews experienced living among Muslims cannot be denied.

How shall we explain the wholesale Jewish adoption of Greco-Arabic science, as well as philosophy and medicine, culminating in the works of Maimonides, the intellectual acme of the Jewish-Arab cultural convivencia in the twelfth century? How shall we account for the new Jewish enthusiasm for Hebrew grammar in the early Islamic period that sprang up in imitation of Arabic grammatical studies? What explains the well known innovations in Hebrew poetry, reproducing the rhyme scheme and worldly themes of Arabic poetry as well as its resort to the language of scripture—Biblical Hebrew, paralleling Muslim use of the language of the Qur'an? How, too, shall we account for the remarkable role played by some Jews in the corridors of Islamic power? And we need also to understand why the Jews of Islam, in stark contrast with their brethren in Christian lands, who constructed their history as a long chain of suffering, preserved very little collective memory of Muslim acts of violence, or of being victims of antisemitism.

The answer to these questions does not lie in a simple contrast between tolerance (Islamic) and intolerance (Christians). It entails fundamental religious, political, economic, and social realities of the Islamic world—realities that contrast with those of northern Europe and, by comparison, explain more completely the symbiosis of Judaeo-Arabic civilization.

My own approach to this question, an approach developed in great detail in my book, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews of the Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press, 1994) and in a sequel article,<sup>5</sup> is comparative. I compare the situation of the Jews in the Islamic world with that of their brethren in Ashkenazic northern Europe because, or so it has seemed to me, the most fruitful way to illuminate differences in a comparative study is to take cases that are palpably different. To be sure, recent scholarship has shown that the Jews of Ashkenaz suffered rather less than traditional historiography has presumed, that they were much more aware of Catholic culture than previously recognized, and that they even adapted themes from Christianity into Judaism, if only for polemical reasons—what Ivan Marcus has felicitously called “inward acculturation.”<sup>6</sup> This revisionism has been extended to Christian Spain. At least one scholar has argued that the interfaith convivencia there reasserted itself during the darkest period of Jewish-Christian relations in the Catholic sector in the fifteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

The acculturation of the Jews in Islamic lands was more far-reaching, both inward *and* outward, than in Ashkenazic lands, a symptom of the greater comfort level experienced by Jews in the Arabic-speaking world. The comparative method explains not only why the Islamic High Middle Ages (the period between the rise of Islam and the

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<sup>5</sup> The sequel article is “Anti-Jewish Violence and the Place of the Jews in Christendom and in Islam: Paradigm,” in *Religious Violence between Christians and Jews: Medieval Roots, Modern Perspectives*, ed. Anna Sapir Abulafia (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2002), 107-137. *Under Crescent and Cross* has been translated into Turkish (1997), Hebrew (2001), German (2005), and Arabic (2007) and will also appear in French. The present paper omits footnotes, preferring to let the interested reader follow the documentation by referring to the book and article.

<sup>6</sup> See especially his article “A Jewish-Christian Symbiosis: The Culture of Early Ashkenaz,” in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. David Biale (New York, 2002), 449-516.

<sup>7</sup> Especially Mark D. Meyerson, *A Jewish Renaissance in Fifteenth-century Spain* (Princeton, 2004), based on data from one Jewish community in the kingdom of Valencia.

Mamluk period) were far more peaceful and secure for Jews than life in northern Christian Europe, but also reciprocally, and from a new perspective, why Jewish-Christian relations deteriorated so drastically during the central European Middle Ages.

This paper, based largely on the argument of *Under Crescent and Cross* but adapted to the theme of this conference on “Children of Abraham: Trialogue of Civilizations,” outlines the interrelating factors that made the Islamic/Arabic environment relatively more comfortable for Jews life was for their brethren living in northern Christendom, and which, in turn, fostered the cultural developments to which the literary sources so abundantly attest. It is based on the reasonable assumption that people, particularly a minority population considered inferior by the majority community, does not accept (and adapt) the culture of its surroundings unless it feels relatively secure living in its midst.

What then are the interrelating factors that made this thoroughgoing acculturation possible?

### **(1) The theological difference**

First, Islam as a religion abides the existence of Judaism more readily than Christianity. The New Testament contains a theology that rejects Jews on theological grounds, just as Judaism turned its back on Christianity by rejecting the messiah-God Jesus. Only St. Augustine’s famous doctrine of preserving the Jews as witness to Christian victory overrode the tendency in Christianity to extirpate Judaism from its midst, a doctrine that helped save the Jews from violent expulsion for many centuries to come. Nonetheless, this doctrine foresees a downtrodden, fossilized Judaism, rejected by God, whose choice of the New Israel, the Christian community, embodies a total denial of a creative future for the Jews.

In its theological attitude toward the Jews Islam presents a different face. The founder of Islam claimed neither messiahship nor divinity. While the Jews of Medina ridiculed him in his lifetime, Muhammad died a natural death. Thus, even though the Jews of his time (most of them, at least) rejected him, Muslims had no grounds for holding the Jews culpable for the demise of their progenitor, the root cause of what developed into Christian antisemitism. Without a “propheticide,” and lacking an iconographic tradition like Christianity’s that might have provided the illiterate Muslim masses with a graphic representation of Jewish enmity toward Muhammad in Medina, the Islamic-Jewish conflict could not generate the kind of tension and hatred that so inflamed the conflict between Christianity and the Jews.

The Qur’an approaches the Jews from a slightly different angle than early Christian texts. Like the New Testament, it contains negative verses about the Jews, condemning the rebellious biblical Israelites and their successors, the perfidious Jews who rejected and ridiculed the Prophet in Medina. And there are downright nasty statements about the Jews and their behavior. But the Qur’an also contains the nucleus of a kind of religious pluralism. It does not envision forcefully converting these non-believers—as opposed to the pagans—to Islam. A famous verse states: “There is no compulsion in religion” (Sura 2:256). Jews, like Oriental Christians, all of them “People of the Book,” were allowed to live in their communities and develop. They were not

fossils who had to be preserved only because they demonstrated by their abject state the triumph of Islam.

Islam, in contrast to early Christianity, did not have to struggle for centuries to gain recognition from a hostile and powerful enemy like Rome. The confidence instilled by early victories over the pagan Arabs in Arabia propelled the new religion to great triumphs as it went on relatively quickly to overcome the two huge but weakened empires of Byzantium and Persia. One result was that Islam never needed to portray itself as a “New Israel” or “New Christendom.” Unlike Christianity, it did not need the Jewish Bible to prove its own claims to truth. Shared claim to Scripture laid the foundation for continual tension between Christianity and Judaism over the interpretation of the message of Jewish holy writ and promoted centuries of interreligious polemics seeking to weaken Judaism’s grip on its adherents. Islam dismissed the existing texts of Jewish and Christians Scriptures as corruptions of their original, divinely inspired teaching, which was restored in the Qur’an. The foretellings of Muhammad in the Old and New Testament that form one of the themes of Islamic polemical literature are but a pale imitation of the much more essential Christian method of Old Testament exegesis. In its interreligious polemics, Islam was if anything more hostile towards Christianity than towards Judaism, because Christianity, with the apparent polytheism of its Trinity, was more repugnant to strictly monotheistic Islam. In brief, the religious character of Islam and the historical circumstances of its origins with respect to Judaism attenuated violent anti-Jewish feelings and help explain the circumstances in which a Jewish-Arabic symbiosis could take place.

## **(2) The legal position of the Jews**

In Islam, the Jews were granted the legal status of *ahl al-dhimma*, “protected people.” As one of two, sometimes three or more *dhimmi* groups, Jews were not singled out for special consideration. The natural discrimination against infidels common to all monotheistic faiths was thus diffused. No “law for the Jews” developed in Islam, as it did in Christendom, where by the high Middle Ages Jews were considered “serfs of the royal chamber,” the special “property” of monarchs or barons or towns, while the Catholic Church, in competition with secular rulers, asserted its own exclusive power over the Jews, invoking an old Patristic pejorative doctrine about the “perpetual servitude of the Jews.”

The Jews of Islam, alongside Christians and in some places other groups like Zoroastrians in Iran and Hindus in India, all of them *dhimmis*, enjoyed security guaranteed by the Islamic state. This was granted in return for an annual poll tax payment, the *jizya* of the Qur’an, and adherence to restrictions of the so-called Pact of `Umar that suited their lowly religious position vis-à-vis Islam. Non-Muslims could not erect new houses of worship nor repair old ones; they had to observe their religious rites indoors and quietly, so as not to insult the superiority of Islam; they were required to dress in distinctive garb; they were forbidden from holding office in Islamic government; and more. With the exception of the poll tax, however, the restrictive laws were often circumvented, with the tacit approval of the Muslim authorities, at least before the general decline in Jewish status that began around the twelfth-thirteenth centuries.

Residing as it did in a unitary corpus--the *shari'a* or holy law of Islam—"dhimmi law" was essentially consistent, predictable, and not readily given to arbitrary interpretation and application. Moreover, Jews (and Christians) were subsumed under the same legal umbrella, subject to (*not isolated from*) the law that governed Muslims. This is illustrated, for instance, by the wide-spread phenomenon of Jews (and Christians) repairing to Muslim courts. These courts were presided over by *qadis*, who administered *shari'a* law, which, like the Talmud, incorporates civil and "secular" as well as religious legislation. Though rabbis objected to Jewish utilization of Gentile courts as an impingement upon Jewish autonomy, they came to terms with the reality. Jews normally felt comfortable before Muslim judges and witnesses, and even Jewish rabbinical authorities conceded that *shari'a* courts treated Jews fairly.

The relative stability over time of the basic law regarding the treatment of non-Muslims, and their theoretical and often practical inclusion in the legal system of Islam, assured the Jews a considerable degree of integration and security against violence and against the irrational hatred we call antisemitism. Persecutions erupted--though much less frequently than in Christian lands—for instance, when a Muslim religious leader complained about violations of the bilateral Pact of `Umar; or when a ruler wished to prove his strict adherence to the fundamentals of Islam; or when Islam as a polity felt threatened from the outside by foreign powers. This happened, for instance, during the Catholic re-conquest of Muslim Spain, that began to achieve substantial victories in the eleventh century; after the Latin Crusaders conquered Palestine and other parts of the Levant at the end of the eleventh century; and at the time of the Mongol invasion from Central Asia in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In all these cases, *dhimmis* were suspected, not without rational basis, of real or potential collusion with the foreign enemy, which in Muslim eyes constituted forfeiture of their right to protection.

For most of the time, however, *dhimmis* were trusted enough to be allowed to hold public offices, circumventing an interdiction in Islamic law and giving Jews and Christians the opportunity to participate in the political life of the Islamic state. They served in the court bureaucracy, and functioned as diplomats and translators. Only the vizierate was beyond their reach, with the notable exception of the famous Samuel ibn Naghrela, vizier of the Berber-Muslim kingdom of Granada in the eleventh century. In Arab government bureaus, Jews and Christians practiced the art of letter-writing, including petitions, signature features of Arab literary and political culture which are emulated in the Judaeo-Arabic letters and petitions in the Cairo Geniza. At court they also learned the refined ways of Islamic courtier society and brought this back to their own Jewish communities, where they established their own Jewish courts. In these Jewish courts they commissioned poets to write poetic eulogies in Hebrew, and listened to poems about wine, women, and nature, mimicking the world of Caliphs, viziers, and wealthy men. Epistolary prose (in Judaeo-Arabic) and secular Hebrew poetry, invented in the Islamic period, gave Jews a feeling of embeddedness in Arab society and allowed them to share culture with their Muslim neighbors.

### **(3) The economic factor**

In the sphere of economic life, factors could either exacerbate or moderate oppression of the Jews. In the early Latin Middle Ages Jews fared relatively well, in large

part because economic factors moderated oppression. The Jews played an important role as international traders, bringing luxury items and eastern spices coveted by the Christian ruling class into the regions of northern Europe.

However, there were powerful countervailing forces. Time-worn Christian prejudice against mercantile profit-making coupled with feudal antipathy toward the independent-minded, newly-born towns in which Jewish merchants lived, relegated the urban Jewish trader and later moneylender--already scorned on religious grounds--to the status of an alien, marginal, and despised character---ultimately the target of irrational antisemitism.

In the Islamic world, things were quite different. Islam encouraged trade. Muhammad, himself a merchant, appeared on the historical scene at a time when commercial exchange over considerable distances was entrenched in the conquered areas of southwest Asia and North Africa. An urban middle class appeared in established Islamic cities centuries before similar developments in northern Europe. In these circumstances, the long-distance trader, including the Jewish merchant, could hardly be viewed as an alien. Moreover, for the most part, the Jews of medieval Islam were not identified with a set of economic functions that accentuated the lowly status assigned them by Islamic religion and law. Our main source, the documents of the Cairo Geniza, probably give disproportionate weight to merchants, because it is they, more than others, who wrote letters filled with or soliciting information that was needed to conduct business affairs with a minimum of uncertainty or risk. But the Geniza also proves that Jewish economic life was widely diversified over scores of skilled and unskilled professions, even including agricultural pursuits.

Islam bore no prejudice against profit-making and trade and evinced a positive view of city life. These attitudes afforded Jewish merchants more status and a greater degree of integration than was possible in feudal, northern Europe, where Jews were excluded from the system by their inability to take the Christian oath of fealty and by their general lack of landed holdings. In many ways, Jews were near equals of Muslims in the interdenominational marketplace. The traversability of boundaries between Jew and Muslim in daily economic affairs and the relatively relaxed ambience of interfaith relations in the Islamic marketplace created trust and bonds. This, in turn, diminished the ever-present religious disdain for Jews as members of an infidel religion and thwarted the development of irrational antisemitism such as arose in the Christian West in the twelfth century.

Why this happened in Europe at that time is much debated. The historian of medieval antisemitism, Gavin Langmuir, argues that the new, rational scholasticism in Catholicism in the twelfth century fostered a rational-empirical skepticism about such fundamental Christian beliefs as the Incarnation and the relatively new credo that the Eucharist represented the body of Christ. Seeking to repress their skepticism about such non-rational beliefs, Christians projected fantasies on the Jews--that they crucified Christian children and used their blood and flesh in their rituals, or physically tortured the holy wafer, earmarks of the irrational antisemitism that appears for the first time with destructive consequences in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

If a similar antisemitism did not emerge in the Islamic world it was due in part to what I have thus far described: the absence of theological competition between Islam and Judaism, the kernel of religious pluralism in the Qur'an, the stability and relative freedom

from arbitrary application of the law governing Jewish status, the egalitarian life of the marketplace, and the absence of non-rational credos such as the Incarnation and Transubstantiation that would have engendered doubt in the rational world of medieval Islam, requiring projection of irrational fantasies upon the Jews.

#### **(4) The position of the Jews in the social order**

The position of the Jews in the social order differed markedly in the Islamic lands. Jews in the Ashkenazic lands of Germany, France, and England were either recent immigrants or descendants of immigrants who did not shed their alien status, even centuries after their first settlement. The Jews of Islam were indigenous inhabitants of the lands conquered by the Arabs. Furthermore, they resembled and acted like their Arab neighbors. This is precisely why, in the first instance, dress regulations had to be enacted—to aid the ruling minority of Muslims in distinguishing themselves from the majority of non-Muslim Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians (and Hindus in India). The alternative, forced conversion to Islam, was impractical, as already recognized by the Qur'an.

For other reasons, too, Jews occupied a more stable and enduring place in the social order of Islam than they did in northern Christian Europe. Islam, like Christendom, is a hierarchical society. Jews occupied a place on the hierarchical ladder—a lowly place but a place nonetheless. The same was true of Christendom in the early middle ages, when society was still imperfectly Christianized, when Jewish long-distance merchants played an important role in the economy, and when Jews formed part of an ethnically pluralistic society of Germanic tribes, each with its own identity and recognized laws.

Beginning in the eleventh century, ethnic pluralism declined in the Christian West. The same century saw the rise of the crusading spirit and a deepening of Christian consciousness and piety in the population-at-large. Jews gradually began to lose the benefits that had supported their security and prosperity in the early Middle Ages. They came slowly but decisively to be excluded from the hierarchy of Christendom. By the thirteenth century, Christians had come to believe, with no rational basis, that Jews threatened to enfeeble Christian society. Furthermore, none of the complex models of subdividing Christendom into socio-professional "estates," which increasingly came to characterize the social order of Europe from the beginning of the thirteenth century, had any place for the Jews. Their marginal position within the hierarchy of Christendom was replaced by a trend toward exclusion, carried out in one of three violent ways: forced conversion, massacre, and, most effectively, the expulsion of most of western European Jewry from Christian lands by the end of the fifteenth century. Antisemitism was a driving force behind this exclusionist policy and an enduring legacy for centuries to come.

Things were different in the Islamic world. The Pact of `Umar required that non-Muslims remain "in their place," avoiding any act, particularly any religious act, that might challenge the superior rank of Muslims or of Islam. The *dhimmi*, however, occupied a definite and permanent rank in the Islamic hierarchy, guaranteed by Islamic holy law—a low rank, to be sure, but a rank nevertheless. Even when Islam became the majority religion in the conquered lands—in many places no earlier than the tenth

century--Jewish (and Christian) *dhimmi*s continued to occupy a recognized, fixed, and safeguarded niche within the hierarchy of the Islamic social order. In Bernard Lewis' words, they held a kind of "citizenship," though as second class citizens to be sure.

There is more. Ethnic and religious heterogeneity were much more extensive in Islamic society than in the increasingly monolithic Catholic society of medieval Europe. Arabs, Iranians, Turks, Kurds, Berbers, Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and others populated the social landscape, composing a "mosaic" that gave society a richly hued human and cultural texture. Further, the *dhimmi* group exhibited heterogeneity within its own ranks, with two (in some places three) non-Muslim religions cohabiting the same space. These sociological realities helped preserve the Jews' place within the social order of Islam and mitigated religious and social hostility, preventing the rise of irrational antisemitism. It also meant that Jews—in general, and not just the philosophers and the physicians--fraternized with Muslims on a regular basis, with a minimum of hostility. This sociability constituted an essential ingredient in the cultural interchange between Jews and Arabs of the high Middle Ages, a kind of "convivencia" anticipating the classic "convivencia" of Christians, Jews, and Muslims ascribed to Christian Iberia in the late Middle Ages.

### **(5) A paradigm for understanding Jewish-gentile relations in the Middle Ages**

The comparative insights into Jewish-Muslim relations in the Middle Ages developed in this paper help explain what in the medieval Middle East appears to be a "tolerant" relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, though, of course, I do not mean "tolerant" in our modern sense of full equality. They create a paradigm for understanding Jewish-gentile relations in general in the Middle Ages. The paradigm claims that anti-Jewish violence is related, in the first instance, to the primacy of religious exclusivity. Historically, religious exclusivity characterized both Islam and Christianity. But anti-Jewish violence was more pronounced in Christendom because innate religious antagonism was combined with other erosive forces. The first of these lay in economic circumstances that excluded the Jews from the most respected walks of life. The second lay in legal status, namely, the evolution of a special law for the Jews and a system of baronial or monarchical possessory rights--though varied in character and uneven in its application in different times and places<sup>8</sup>--that could be manipulated in an arbitrary manner. Religious exclusivity, economic marginalization, a special, arbitrary legal status, combined with another adverse factor, social exclusion, to rob the Jews of their rank in the hierarchical social order. The gradual replacement of the ethnic pluralism of Germanic society of the early Middle Ages by a medieval type of "nationalism," paralleling the spread of Catholic religious exclusivity to the masses, also contributed to the enhancement of the Jew's "otherness" and to his eventual exclusion from western Christendom, through forced conversion, murder, or expulsion. All these interrelated forces were largely absent in the Islamic world.

The Jews of Islam had substantial confidence in the *dhimma* system. If they kept a low profile, if they paid their annual poll tax, they expected to be protected and to be

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<sup>8</sup> A good statement of the variations in the status commonly called "Jewish serfdom" can be found in Simha Goldin, *Ha-yihud ve-ha-Yahad* (Uniqueness and Togetherness: The Enigma of the Survival of the Jews in the Middle Ages) (Tel Aviv, 1997), 14-30.

free of economic discrimination --not to be forcefully converted to Islam, not to be massacred, and not to be expelled. When the system periodically broke down, as it did under the fanatical Muslim Berber Almohads, who conquered North Africa and Spain in the mid-twelfth century, or earlier in 1066 in Granada, when the head of the Jewish community was assassinated and the Jewish quarter plundered by the mob (with much loss of life), Jews felt the impact of violence no less than the Ashkenazic Jews of Europe. But they recognized these as temporary failures of the *dhimma* arrangement. Doubtless this helps explain why Jews in Islamic lands under threat favored superficial conversion (like the Islamic *taqiyya* recommended for Muslims faced with persecution) over martyrdom, unlike their self-immolating Ashkenazic brethren, who had little hope of being officially allowed to return to Judaism after their baptism. In this they anticipated the response of Jews in Christian Spain—the so-called Marranos--who converted to Catholicism rather than accept a martyr's death during and after the pogroms of 1391. The paradigm developed in *Under Crescent and Cross* and summarized in this paper helps explain what in the medieval Middle East appears to be a “tolerant” relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims though, of course, I do not mean “tolerant” in our modern sense of full equality. It also helps explain why Jews were so ready to adopt the culture of the Arab-Islamic world during the medieval centuries.

Islamic civilization came into contact with the science, medicine, and philosophy of the Greco-Roman world much earlier than European Christendom. Translated early on into Arabic, these works gave rise to what a German scholar, Adam Mez, called, not without good reason, “Die Renaissance des Islams” of the tenth century.<sup>9</sup> Jews of the Fertile Crescent, the heartland of the Islamic Empire and the first center of the new Arabic science, medicine, and philosophy, had by that time abandoned Aramaic for Arabic. As Arabic was (unlike Latin) the language of high culture as well as of the Islamic religion--which was anyway less hostile towards the Jews and marked by relatively little formal anti-Jewish polemics--the Jews had both access to and interest in the translated texts read by Muslim intellectuals. This facilitated the cultural convivencia of the Judaeo-Arabic world, which began in the eastern Islamic domains and spread to the Muslim West. It was marked by wholesale Jewish adoption of Arabic, not only as their spoken language but also as their literary medium, and by Jewish imitation of Arabic poetry. It is what led to Jewish assimilation of philosophy, science and medicine. And it is what made possible the remarkable careers of such luminaries as Judah ha-Levi, the poet, physician, and philosopher, Samuel ha-Nagid ibn Nagrela, the Jewish poet and vizier, the towering figure of Maimonides, as well as scores of other Jewish denizens of Islamic courts and commercial society, less known because they did not leave books behind, but no less important as Jewish exemplars of the “convivencia” that reigned for several centuries during the Islamic high Middle Ages.

The culture of convivencia of Christian Spain had its roots in the Arabic period, in part because many of the same conditions that fuelled the Judaeo-Arabic symbiosis in the Muslim sector continued. The Jews' legal status was somewhat less harsh than that of the Jews of Ashkenazic lands in the high and late Middle Ages.<sup>10</sup> They pursued

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<sup>9</sup> The book was published in 1922 and has been translated into many languages, including English.

<sup>10</sup> The legal status of the Jews, though similar in principle to the “Jewish serfdom” in France, Germany, and England, was less injurious in practice. In the *fueros*, the town charters specifying immunities or

diversified economic endeavors, rather than being restricted to the small and problematic set of occupations that fostered Jew-hatred. And Spain was characterized by a kind of pluralism in the mixture of Catholics, Jews, and Muslims that composed its society and influenced cultural exchange. All of this changed with the anti-Jewish pogroms of 1391, the steady growth of a unified Catholic Spain in the fifteenth century, and the spread of antisemitism, the history of which is well known.

## **(6) Islamic antisemitism today**

The book on which this paper is based was published in 1994, a year after the signing of the Oslo Accords and the famous handshake between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat on the White House lawn. At the time of its publication, it was taken by some as being supportive of the new, emerging rapprochement between Israelis and Palestinians. Events occurring since then—the attacks of 9/11 and other terrorist plots in Europe; the wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq; the growing hostility especially in Europe between Europeans and Muslims; and the emergence of a new antisemitism propagated largely by Muslims—have, however, strengthened the polarization I came to correct. The mutual hostility between Israelis and Arabs, especially Palestinians, raises anew the question whether this hostility might have its roots in the historical relationship between Jews and Muslims. This bolsters one of the two myths that *Under Crescent and Cross* was meant to dispel. Nonetheless, I believe that the message of that book regarding the classical period of Islam stands firm in the face of every attempt to challenge its thesis, let alone to locate the roots of modern Arab antisemitism in the distant past.

The idea that modern Arab antisemitism comes from a medieval, irrational hatred of the Jews, similar to the antisemitism of Christianity, with its medieval origins, cannot be sustained. Understood as a religiously-based complex of irrational, mythical, and stereotypical beliefs about the diabolical, malevolent, and all-powerful Jew, infused in its modern, secular form with racism and belief in a Jewish conspiracy against mankind--antisemitism is not an indigenous or inherent phenomenon in Islam.<sup>11</sup> It was first encountered by Muslims at the time of the Ottoman expansion into Europe, which resulted in the absorption of large numbers of Greek Orthodox Christians.<sup>12</sup> This Christian antisemitism became more firmly implanted in the Muslim Middle East in the nineteenth century as part of the discourse of nationalism. Seeking greater acceptance in a fledgling pan-Arab nation constituted by a majority of Muslims, Christians in the Arab world, aided, among other things, by European Christian missionaries, began to use western-style antisemitism to focus Arab/Muslim enmity away from themselves and onto

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exemptions granted by the king or lord, Jews were accorded a large measure of equality with Christians and Muslims, especially during the early period of the Reconquista.

<sup>11</sup> This point has been made by Bernard Lewis and many other scholars. For a recent discussion of contemporary Islamic antisemitism in context, see the essays in the thematic issue on antisemitism in the Muslim world guest edited by Gudrun Kraemer, *Die Welt des Islams* 46 (2006), especially Kraemer's introductory essay, "Anti-Semitism in the Muslim World: A Critical Review," and Michael Kiefer's, "Islamischer, Islamistischer oder Islamisierter Antisemitismus." See also Alexander Flores, "Western Perceptions of Anti-Semitism and Islamic Discourse," *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture* 12 (2005), 95-100.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites: An Inquiry into Conflict and Prejudice* (New York and London, 1986), 132.

a new and, to them, familiar enemy. This Christian antisemitism has since become absorbed into the fabric of Islam as if it were there from the start, when it was never there from the start at all. The widely read Arabic translations of the late-nineteenth century Russian-Christian forgery, "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," seems to many Muslims almost an Islamic text, echoing old themes in the Qur'ān and elsewhere of Jewish treachery toward Muhammad and his biblical prophetic predecessors. The "Protocols" seem all the more credible in the light of the political, economic and military success of Israel. Sadly, the pluralism and largely non-violent attitude towards the Jews that existed in early and classical Islam seems to have lost its public face. Equally sad, age-old Jewish empathy with Islamic society among Jews from Muslim lands, and memory of decent relations with Muslim neighbors in Muslim lands in relatively recent times, have similarly receded. Comparative study of Jewish-gentile relations in Christendom and in Islam explains the difference between the two societies, though it does not make present-day Arab antisemitism any less unfortunate than its Christian roots. One can only hope for a time when a just and peaceful solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict will allow a correct memory of the past to play a role in attitudes of the present.