Convivencia

Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain

EDITED BY

Vivian B. Mann

Thomas F. Glick

Jerrilynn D. Dodds

George Braziller

IN ASSOCIATION WITH

The Jewish Museum

NEW YORK

THE JEWISH MUSEUM IS UNDER THE AUSPICES OF
THE JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF AMERICA

Convivencia: An Introductory Note

Thomas F. Glick

This volume, and the exhibition that it accompanies, explore the history of cultural interaction among Christians, Muslims, and Jews in the Iberian peninsula. The exhibition presents the products of this interaction, from works of art and literature through scientific instruments to legal documents and articles of daily use; the essays in this volume consider both these objects and the social relations that configured them. In this way, it is hoped to convey something of the richness and complexity, and at the same the vital significance in the intellectual, cultural, and social life of Europe as a whole, of what a distinguished school of Spanish historians has called *convivencia*. The word, as we use it here, is loosely defined as "coexistence," but carries connotations of mutual interpenetration and creative influence, even as it also embraces the phenomena of mutual friction, rivalry, and suspicion. Accordingly, it is the aim of this opening essay to explore these connotations and the way in which they were acquired.

The word *convivencia* as we use it can be traced back as far as Ramón Menéndez Pidal, the great philologist and historian, who in his history of the Spanish language (*Orígenes del español*) used the term "coexistence of norms" (*convivencia de normas*) to characterize the contemporaneous existence of variant forms in the early Romance languages of the peninsula, for example the diphthongs of the open *o*, as in Castilian *puerto, puorto, puarto*. These norms he saw, in conformity with prevailing notions of cultural evolutionism, as competing with one another until all the variants but one were selected out.[1]

It was, however, Menéndez Pidal's disciple, Américo Castro, who first used *convivencia* in the sense in which we will use it in this book.[2] Castro retains something of Menéndez Pidal's usage, presenting medieval Iberian culture as a kind of a field of interaction among all kinds

of cultural elements originating in the different confessional groups that, in his characterization, functioned like castes [fig. 1]. But Castro's concept is more idealistic, for he sees the interaction of cultural elements, which for Menéndez Pidal was competitive and mechanistic, as intelligible only if filtered through the collective consciousness of the three castes. The filters were in large part ethnic: the castes possessed cultural elements and values that were idiosyncratic to them and that were selectively available for appropriation by members of the other, competing castes. The sense of self possessed by members of each caste was generated through the experience (*vividura*) of opposing the other two.[3] Thus far, *convivencia* still retains the competitive sense intended by Menéndez Pidal. But Castro imposes the further condition that the interactions be "historifiable" (*historiable*). For Castro, peoples only become ethnic actors when collectively possessed of self-awareness. Upon self-awareness Castro superimposes a teleological notion of destiny, of a people's "becoming something": the culture that the group projects is something that it itself recognizes as worthy. Finally, the cultural group must attain the ability to express this self-awareness in some form of high culture that becomes, thereby, the moving force of the society. Within this idealist construct it therefore follows that the Christians' struggle with Jews and Muslims takes place within the consciousness of Christians; and the same is true, *mutatis mutandis,* for the other two castes. It is here that *convivencia* attains its special meaning: it is the coexistence of the three groups, but only as registered collectively and consciously in the culture of any one of them.[4]

Not surprisingly, historians have had a great deal of difficulty dealing with Castro's labored idealist notions. He conveys no sense of the social dynamics of contact and conflict among the three groups. Mental processes are all that matter, and he fails to understand that those processes are shaped and to a certain extent determined by a social dynamic. For this reason, recent historians of ethnic relations in medieval Spain have preferred the term "coexistence," rather than *convivencia*. They have rejected Castro's view of intergroup relations as idealized, romanticized, and idyllic, presenting only the positive aspects of cultural contact and underrating the negative ones.

Here I would like to state how that social dynamic is presently perceived in post-Castro historiography, and then attempt to retrieve Castro's social psychological component and restate it in sociological terms.

II

To reformulate the question, we must inquire to what extent, and how, social distance configures the nature of cultural interchange. Any answer to this question must take full account of the complexities of the social dynamics of cultural interaction, and of the fact that the

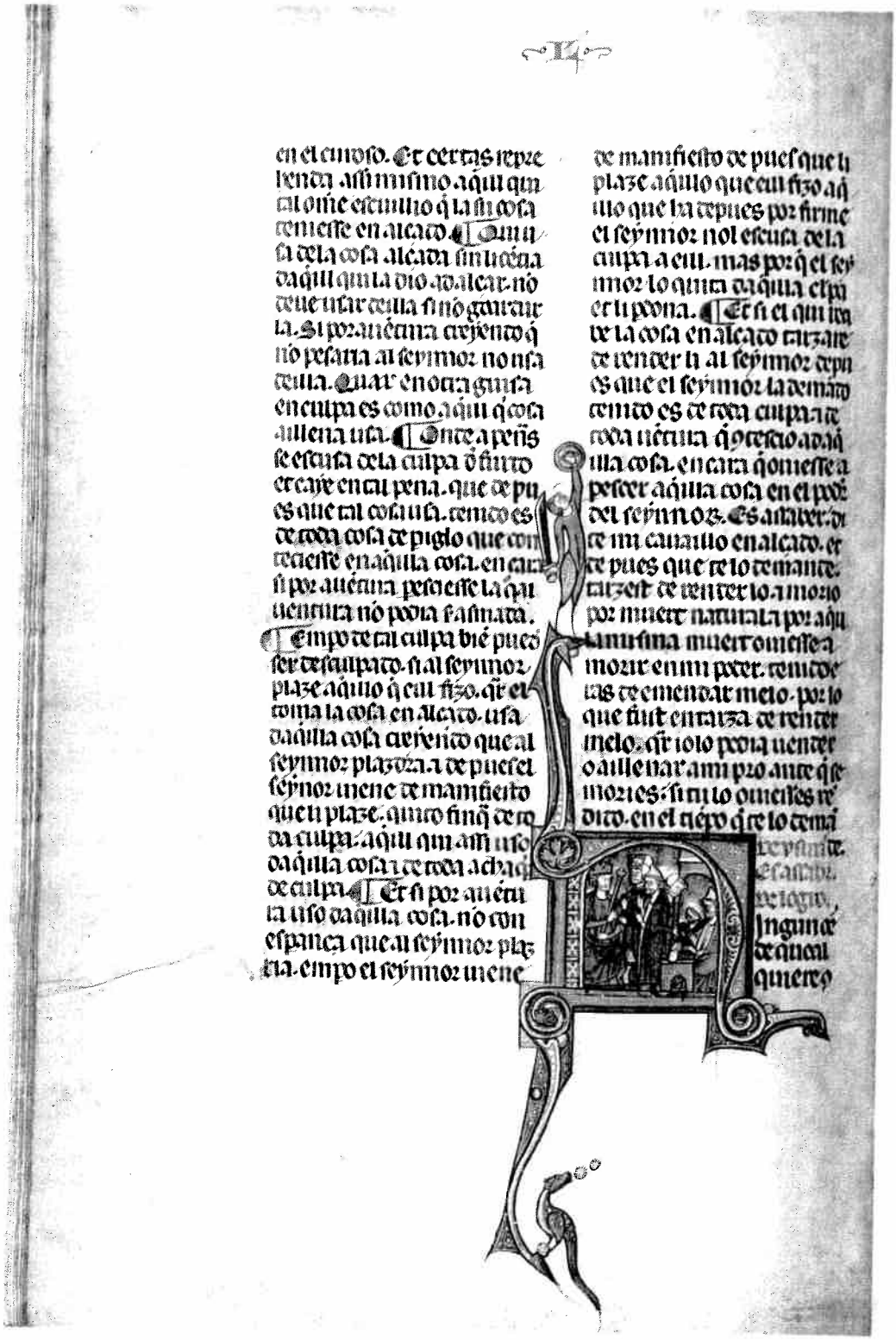

Figure 1

Feudal Customs of Aragon called "Vidal Mayor," Aragon, second half of the 13th century, Collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, 83.MQ.165 (Ms. Ludwig XIV 6), fol. 175 v (cat. no. 24)

This miniature depicts a Jew and a Christian engaged in economic activity (at right) and then appealing to the king to resolve their dispute (at left). *Convivencia* as cultural interaction was partly based on each group's perception of the others formed during activities such as those shown here.

relationship between cultural and social processes changes over time and according to specific contexts. It is also well to bear in mind Mark Meyerson's distinction between assimilation and integration.[5] To the extent that both Jews and Muslims were expelled, they were never assimilated by Christian society, and hence it is easy to argue that they were never acculturated either. But if they were not assimilated, they were indeed integrated; and integration, a process of normalization of day-to-day interactions, provides the immediate social context for cultural exchange.

Convivencia, under any kind of operational definition, must encompass the ability of persons of different ethnic groups to step out of their ethnically bound roles in order to interact on a par with members of competing groups. We admit, however, that many kinds of interactions are conditioned by ethnic role playing. Are there roles not ethnically bound? The ability of medieval peoples to assume them was limited, or rather interactions were sharply structured both by ethnic/religious ascription as well as by social class. Nevertheless one person can play multiple roles, some of which are more ethnically bound than others.

Elena Lourie, in her exploration of the differing roles that Jews and Mudejars (Muslims living under Christian rule) could successfully play in the medieval kingdom of Aragon, states that those Mudejars who had military skills were successful in playing the role of soldier in Christian units, regardless of ethnicity.[6] But Jews she views as unable to play multiple roles except in very limited, mainly socially marginal, contexts, as when Jewish and Christian criminals conspired without respect to ethnic identity, or in the specific case she describes, built on the ethnic connotations of moneylending in order to set up a clever confidence game.[7]

But what of less exceptional interactions? Lourie may be right in referring to St. Thomas's admiring citation of Maimonides as merely an instance of academic courtesy,[8] but the same cannot be said of Jews and Christians who formed translation teams. As we shall see,[9] in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Christian Spain, Christian translators were frequently subordinate to Jewish scholars whom they addressed as their "masters."

One of Lourie's goals is to test the "relative vulnerability" of Jews and Muslims to persecution in Christian Spain. One of her conclusions is that Mudejars ran less risk of mass assault (that is, pogroms) than Jews did, but greater risk of individual kidnapping and enslavement.[10] What were the cultural concomitants of vulnerability? On the face of it, there was an inverse relationship between vulnerability and cultural openness. As a group, Muslims were less vulnerable to persecution than Jews; yet their culture was more highly bounded and impervious to Christian pressures. Such a conclusion, while standing on its head the

commonsense expectation that tolerance would encourage acculturation, has a certain kind of psychological logic arising from the dependence of the persecuted on the persecutor. I raise the issue only to state, in another form, that the relationship between cultural dynamics and social dynamics is a complicated one and cannot be left to insight or ideology.

As Lourie also makes clear, the different social structures of Muslim and Jewish minority communities in Christian Spain affected differentially the reactions of each to pressures from the dominant caste. The Jewish community was internally stratified to a much greater degree than were the Mudejars.[11] It is precisely in the pattern of class stratification that we can locate the ability of Jewish *maiores* to interact with Christians, notably in the marketplace and in the financial departments of royal administration, by stepping out of their ethnic roles. This in turn makes intelligible the conversion of Jewish magnates and intellectuals in the fifteenth century, for substantial acculturation must be assumed to have been characteristic of members of this group prior to their conversion. Indeed, the working out of the cultural concomitants of class stratification among late medieval Jews will provide the necessary social grounding to strengthen and make more intelligible Castro's pioneering study of the Jewish presence in Spanish literature.[12] Castro, incidentally, wisely observed that class stratification among Christians strongly affected the different relationships of members of that caste to the Jews.[13]

In assessing the variety and range of cultural elements exchanged, we must recognize that these did not merely include vocabulary, techniques, or manners of speech, dress, or diet, and that acculturation involved conscious shifts of the most subtle and intimate nature. For example, in northern Europe, Jews living among Christians acquired from them a distinctive consciousness of self that distinguished both groups from their coreligionists in the Mediterranean world. Any notion that borrowing across cultural boundaries is merely superficial is wishful thinking.[14] The image of a sealed, pristine, pure, and uncontaminated culture that ethnic groups typically ascribe to themselves (even if only to lament its loss) is contrary not only to all the evidence but to everyday experience. There are no cultural isolates, not in remote jungles, and much less in the cosmopolitan towns of medieval Spain.

In both al-Andalus and Christian Spain the dominant caste wanted to isolate minorities religiously but not economically, creating an inevitable tension in intergroup relations.[15] This tension, however, opened up avenues for cultural interchange by making the market a place where ethnic distinctions mattered less than in other walks of life. A similar tension is revealed in the ethnic exclusivity of guilds. Meyerson notes that Christian guilds in late medieval Valencia feared revealing their technological secrets to Muslim rivals, at least in periods when the rattle of war could be heard from the frontier.[16] Muslims conveyed similar

fears: thus ibn ʿAbdun, in his treatise on regulation of the market, warns Muslims against selling books of science to Jews or Christians.[17] Such strictures, however, more than likely reflect the intensity of technical and scientific interchange that attracted the attention of religious zealots but was impossible to stop.

III

The social dynamic among the three castes can be described comparatively in a series of triangles or triads for each particular trait or context. For example, Jewish scholars acknowledged Muslims as their masters in al-Andalus, as Christian did Jews in Castile and Catalonia. Did Muslims so acknowledge Jews or Christians? Ibn Juljul, a Muslim physician, recounts the visit of the physician Yaḥyā ibn Isḥāq to a monastery to consult a monk about an ear ailment of the Caliph ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III and, later in the tenth century, ibn al-Kattānī (ca. 949–1029) studied with the Mozarab bishop Abū'l-Ḥārith, along with Muslim masters.[18] In al-Andalus it might have been rare for a Muslim to study medicine with a Christian or a Jew; but Mudejars of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries living under Christian rule were totally integrated into the Christian medical system, trained by Christians, and examined by Christian medical tribunals on scholastic texts.[19] Patterns of medical examination of minority candidates differed from place to place: in fourteenth-century Catalonia, Jews were generally examined by Jewish doctors, but in Valencia and Castile both Jewish and Muslim candidates were examined by Christians.[20] Such divergences from the general medieval model whereby minority candidates were to be examined by members of their own ethnic group reflect the pace of acculturation of minority groups to the dominant culture, the steady extension of control by Christians over the two minorities, and permutations in the dynamics of social interaction in those places that diverged from the model. The pace of acculturation naturally increased over time. In the fourteenth century, Spanish Jews, who had typically been teachers of medicine, now learned Latin scholastic medicine and philosophy from Christians.[21] By the late sixteenth century, so many Moriscos (Muslims resident in Iberia after 1492) were studying medicine in Spanish universities that one commentator complained that soon all physicians would be Moriscos.[22] A negative reading of these changes would conclude that despite the lessening of cultural distance among the three castes, social distance remained unchanged. A more positive view would be that movement in social distance lagged behind that of cultural distance because of the drag of blood-purity statutes and other instances of racialist prejudice.

The *dhimma* contract in al-Andalus that regulated the social interaction between Muslims and the minority communities also ensured that in the normal course of events such rela-

tions would be less supercharged emotionally.[23] Lourie's assertion that the caste hierarchy in Christian Spain was the "mirror image" of Islamic law[24] is not true as stated. The fact that the *dhimma* contract was a religious obligation upon Muslims provided those relationships with a solidity that the shifting sands of Christian administration and politics could in no way provide, although the *dhimma* model is clear. The Christians borrowed the model but implemented it as civil, not religious, law; therefore the borrowed version lacked the universal sanction of the original concept.[25]

Jewish religious doctrine was more threatening to Christians than to Muslims.[26] What statements could be made about the threat that Islam or Christianity held for the other groups? The employment of craftsmen of one caste by members of the others was, of course, commonplace and here the lines conjoining the triad would be of more equal value. By filling in many such triads the complex weave of the dynamic of social interaction could be reconstructed.

Historians' views of cultural contact frequently conceal two ideological modes or sets of preconceptions: one that emphasizes conflict and one that, while recognizing the reality of conflict, stresses cultural congruence and creative interaction. In Jewish history, for example, the first view—the "neo-lachrymose" view, as it has been called,[27] is promoted as a corrective to an older school that is considered to have portrayed various "golden ages" of the Jewish past in too idyllic and optimistic terms. In Spanish history a similar polarity characterized the polemic between Américo Castro and his detractors such as Claudio Sánchez Albornoz, who remarked that the symbiosis of the three castes as Castro depicted it was more nearly an "antibiosis."[28] Such polemics are the result of inadequate theoretical grasp of the relationship between social relations and cultural interchange, between social distance and cultural distance.

Castro's *convivencia* survives. What we add to it is the admission that cultural interaction inevitably reflects a concrete and very complex social dynamic. What we retain of it is the understanding that acculturation implies a process of internalization of the "other" that is the mechanism by which we make foreign cultural traits our own.

NOTES

1. See my article "Darwinismo y filología española," *Boletín de la Institución Libre de Enseñanza*, n.s., no. 12 (October 1991): 35–41.

2. Castro's cultural terminology, which was not clearly defined in Spanish, became distorted in English. Thus in *The Spaniards*, trans. by Willard F. King and Selma Margaretten (Berkeley, Calif., 1971), *convivencia* is rendered as "living-togetherness" (584). See my comment on Castro's terminology in *Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J., 1979), 292–93.

3. Castro, *The Spaniards*, 80.

4. The fact that the unconscious nature of most cultural processes eluded Castro need not detract from his understanding of experience registered consciously.

5. Mark D. Meyerson, *The Muslims of Valencia in the Age of Fernando and Isabel: between Coexistence and Crusade* (Berkeley, Calif., 1991), 216.

6. Elena Lourie, "Anatomy of Ambivalence: Muslims under the Crown of Aragon in the Late Thirteenth Century," in *Crusade and Colonisation: Muslims, Christians and Jews in Medieval Aragon* (Hampshire, 1990), 73. The case of Abraham el Genet, a Jewish member of a Muslim mercenary band in the service of the King of Aragon, may be the exception that proves the rule; Lourie, "A Jewish Mercenary in the Service of the King of Aragon," *Revue des Études Juives* 137 (1978): 367–73.

7. Elena Lourie, "Complicidad criminal: un aspecto insólito de convivencia judeo-cristiana," *Actas del III Congreso Internacional 'Encuentro de las Tres Culturas'* (Toledo, 1988), 93–108.

8. Lourie, "Anatomy of Ambivalence," 72.

9. See below, "Science in Medieval Spain: The Jewish Contribution in the Context of *Convivencia*."

10. Lourie, "Anatomy of Ambivalence," 2, 61.

11. Ibid., 2, 35, 41.

12. Américo Castro, *The Structure of Spanish History*, trans. by Edmund L. King, (Princeton, N.J., 1954) chapter 14. This chapter and the previous one ("The Spanish Jews") were omitted from the later recension of Castro's *magnum opus* (*The Spaniards*, n. 2 above).

13. Ibid., 489. For Castro, anti-Semitism was the mark of the lower classes, cultural exchange that of the upper.

14. On consciousness of self, see John E. Benton, "Consciousness of Self and Perceptions of Individuality," in *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, ed. Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 291, n. 89. On cultural borrowing, see, for example, my comment on Sánchez Albornoz's views in my *Islamic and Christian Spain*, 279–80.

15. Meyerson, *Muslims of Valencia*, 46.

16. Ibid., 128.

17. Noted by Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny, "Translations and Translators," in *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, 440, where she presumes that such prohibitions may account for a hiatus in scientific activity in Christian Spain in the eleventh century.

18. On Yahya ibn Ishaq: Juan Vernet, "Los médicos andaluces en el 'Libro de las Generaciones de Médicos,' de ibn Yulyul," *Anuario de Estudios Medievales* (Barcelona) 5 (1968): 457; on Ibn al-Kattani: D. M. Dunlop, "Philosophical Predecessors and Contemporaries of ibn Bajjah," *Islamic Quarterly* 2 (1955): 107.

19. Luis García Ballester, *Historia social de la medicina en España de los siglos XIII al XVI, I: La minoría musulmana y morisca* (Madrid, 1976), p. 43. García Ballester goes on to say that these Mudejar physicians were thereby cut off from "their own" scientific tradition, but that of course entails the unnecessary assumption that the culture of specified social groups is normally expected to remain intact.

20. Ibid., 47–48.

21. Ibid., 10.

22. Ibid., 111.

23. As Meyerson, *Muslims of Valencia*, 3–4, observes, one function of the autonomy of religious minorities was to isolate them from the majority. But another function was to provide rules for social and cultural interaction that, if followed, were designed to prevent or minimize conflict.

24. Lourie, "Anatomy of Ambivalence," 70.

25. See my discussion in *Islamic and Christian Spain*, 168–69.

26. A point made by many authors, such as Lourie, "Anatomy of Ambivalence," 56; Mark M. Cohen, "The Neo-Lachrymose Conception of Jewish Arab History," *Tikkun* 6, no. 3 (May–June 1991): 58.

27. Ibid., and Norman A. Stillman, "Myth, Countermyth, and Distortion," 60–64.

28. Claudio Sánchez Albornoz, *España: Un enigma histórico*, 2 vols. (Buenos Aires, 1956), 1:249: the decline in intellectual curiosity of the Christians was in part owing to their directing most of their energy to fighting the Muslims, "an effect provoked by Christian-Islamic antibiosis in the temperamental inheritance of the northern Spaniards."