

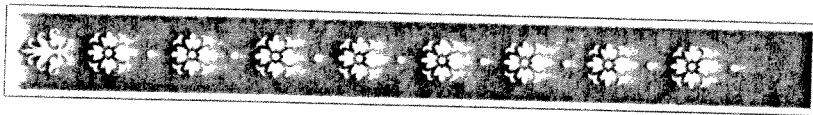


A Vanished World

Muslims, Christians, and Jews
in Medieval Spain



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17. A Common Life Shared Among Three Faiths



"Damnable Mixing"

In the nearly two thousand years since Jesus died, popes have convened only twenty-one Ecumenical Councils of the Catholic Church. Delegates to the first, at Nicea in 325, hammered out a creed enunciating the still-intact formulation that Jesus is "true God of true God . . . of the same substance as the Father." In 1962, some two thousand bishops gathered for Vatican Council II, the most recent council, which Pope John XXIII envisioned as an *aggiornamento*, or "updating" of the Church for the modern world. The Council fathers frankly acknowledged unhappy chapters of Christianity's past relations with other religions. One document greeted the Muslim people "with esteem," acknowledged the "many quarrels and hostilities" that had marred Church-Muslim relations, and "urged all . . . to strive sincerely for mutual understanding." The same document addressed the Jewish people: "Mindful of her common patrimony with the Jews . . . [the Church] deplores the hatred, persecutions, and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at any time and from any source."

The Council fathers may have been recalling the work of predecessor bishops at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, who had condemned what they called "damnable mixing." One decree lamented that "by

mistake Christians join with Jewish or Saracen women, and Jews or Saracens with Christian women." The Council fathers prescribed a remedy: "That such persons [Jews or Muslims] of either sex, in every Christian province and at all times . . . are to be distinguished in public from other people by the character of their dress." Within a few years of the Council's close, Jews in Sicily and England were getting used to sewing distinguishing patches to outer garments, while Jews in some Germanic principalities were unmistakable in their conical hats. In many regions, the Council had merely legitimized policies already practiced in and beyond Christendom. Jews in Paris, for example, had long endured the humiliation of a distinctive dress code, as had Jews in Muslim-ruled North Africa.

While much of Christian Europe complied with the Lateran decrees, Fernando III's Spain proved recalcitrant, provoking a steady stream of reprimanding correspondence from Rome. In 1221, Pope Honorius III complained to Toledo's archbishop that the "Jews of your diocese do not observe [distinctive dress statutes], with the result that under the veil of error this damnable sin of intermingling may be committed." A decade later, Pope Gregory IX futilely pressed Castile's king to comply and also proceeded to "beg and earnestly warn" King Sancho VIII of Navarre to fall into line. In 1239, the exasperated pope wrote the Navarrese again, even detailing the precise insignia that papal authorities had in mind: "one round patch of yellow cloth or linen, to be worn on the uppermost garment, stitched over the heart and another behind it, in order that they [Jews] may thus be recognized. The full size of this sign shall be four digits in circumference." But the mounting pile of disapproving papal correspondence only confirmed what prelates from Castile and León had earlier concluded in stunningly plain language at their Council of Valladolid: the Lateran Council's discriminatory dress decrees were "in large measure neglected" throughout much of Spain.

Why? Correspondence between Pope Honorius III and King Fernando sheds light on Spain's defiance. Fernando worried, as the pope summarized it, that "serious misfortune may befall [his] kingdom" were he to subject Spain's Jews to conspicuous badges, conical hats, or other humiliating paraphernalia. The monarch guessed that Jews would "choose rather to flee to the Moors [i.e., to Spain's Muslim-ruled

south] than to be burdened with such a sign." If they emigrated, León-Castile would suffer the "serious misfortune" of losing the Jews—and their tax revenues.

Fernando's motives for refusing to adorn Jews with humiliating badges were plainly self-serving. No lofty human rights rhetoric elevates his correspondence with papal authorities, nor does he protest that stigmatizing dress would fundamentally demean the Jews. The monarch's brand of religious tolerance features no paean to cultural diversity and issues no idyllic appeal for interfaith dialogue. Indeed, one senses that he might willingly enough have subjected Jews to the humiliation had he been certain of preserving their tax revenues and commercial savvy.

Fernando's was the imperfect, even grudging acceptance of one's neighbor simply because one must. England and France could better afford to pin badges on Jews, tiny minorities bearing scant impact on their overall economies. Many English and French villagers had never met a Jew or a Muslim; it was far easier to discriminate against those known abstractly as blasphemers and heretics rather than flesh-and-blood neighbors, merchants, or customers. Fernando's kingdom, on the other hand, was everywhere dotted with Christian towns and villages deeply accustomed to the religious other in their midst. The Lateran Council's bishops may actually have believed that "damnable mixing" among Muslims, Jews, and Christians was happening, as they put it, "by mistake." But the mixing that took place across Iberia was no mistake at all. No yellow cloth patch, dunce cap, or other warning beacon could have preempted commercial, social, and even intimate relations among Spaniards of diverse faiths.

Nowadays, Muslims, Christians, and Jews most typically interact in great urban centers like London and New York, vortexes that in every generation draw the ambitious and the desperate, those desiring fame and those desiring only a day without hunger. But Spanish portraits of common life can be sketched not only in Toledo's libraries, where multi-faith translation teams toiled, but just as vividly in tiny Cuenca, even today a fairly isolated town perched in the foothills of mountainous terrain some hundred miles east of Madrid. Medieval Cuenca was neither populous, nor wealthy, nor particularly fertile. Yet, straddling as it

did the frontier fault line between Muslim and Christian Spain, this otherwise charmless town exerted endless fascination for would-be Crusaders and conquerors. First established by Muslims, Cuenca was later captured by Christians, reconquered by Almoravid fighters in the early 1100s, and reclaimed once and for all by Christian Castile's King Alfonso VIII in 1177. With each change of control some Cuencans fled rather than submit to new rulers espousing a contrary faith. Yet many others remained and persevered, resilient fatalists grown genetically accustomed to watching and coping as cross yielded to crescent (or vice versa) each generation or so.

When royal counselors codified this twice Muslim—twice Christian town's laws and privileges, one might have expected wary treatment for non-Christians who had so recently been the enemy. Yet, the Code of Cuenca pointedly instructs that "whoever may come to live in Cuenca, whatever condition he may be, whether Christian, Moor, or Jew, free or servile, should come in safety." Odd though it may seem to welcome Christianity's perceived antagonists, the practice evinces what might be called frontier logic. Christian monarchs were anxious to establish viable frontier settlements as bulwarks against future attack. Alfonso, like his contemporaries, had virtually no standing army and limited financial resources with which to defend each newly won chunk of frontier. A thriving local community prosperous enough to equip a militia and maintain town walls was any Christian monarch's best hope of securing freshly conquered territory.

The same approach was followed all along the frontier. The town of Chivert had a legal code that instructed Muslims and Christians to man the town ramparts and fight side by side against Muslim raiders or foreign invaders. "The Moors of Chivert should defend themselves and their property together with the [Christian] Brothers [Hospitaller] as best they can," it declaimed. When French armies attacked Gerona in the late 1280s, hundreds of Muslim archers and lancers converged from nearby towns to assist its besieged Christian and Muslim defenders.

Cuenca's law code was, of course, an abstract document. That the code prescribed certain behaviors hardly guarantees that daily life unfolded accordingly. Modern statutes urging pedestrians not to litter, for example, have hardly brought spotless sidewalks to urban America. But

even individuals who shunned the idealized behaviors enshrined in Cuenca's code bowed to the economic necessities of life in small, mixed-faith villages. Iberian towns and villages were often hamlets of fewer than one thousand persons; cooperation with neighbors—whatever their faith—was virtually unavoidable.

There was, for example, not the least bit of idealism in King Jaime I of Aragon's 1258 decree that one municipal bakeoven would serve the small Valencian town of Navarrés, "to which both Christians and Saracens, present and future, are bound to come for baking their bread." Few if any medieval peasant homes had a bakeoven. The balky contraption was too large for a peasant dwelling, and stoking it to a temperature suitable for baking bread would have entailed an uneconomic, laborious investment merely for one or two daily loaves. The King Jaime who licensed Navarrés's one oven was recognizing the same economic reality that governed countless other Iberian towns, where day after day some three dozen loaves shaped at home by Muslim, Christian, and Jewish hands would rise peaceably alongside one another in the municipal oven.

The floury substance of these loaves reflected another elaborate experiment in interfaith relations. With water so scarce in much of al-Andalus, its Muslim overlords had imported irrigation technology from the similarly water-poor Mideast to construct elaborate canal networks. Disputes inevitably erupted between upstream farmers suspected by their downstream neighbors of hogging water; Muslim rulers accordingly established local water councils to mediate such quarrels. As the Christian Reconquest subsumed one Andalusian town after another, Christian and Muslim villagers learned to share life-giving water not only across farms but across faiths. Arab-engineered canals snaked through Muslim and Christian fields alike, and water councils brought Muslim and Christian farmers together to sort through disputes.

As the harvest approached and burgeoning fields beckoned would-be crop raiders, other opportunities for interfaith cooperation emerged. Farmers in Daroca for a time pooled their funds and paid a night watchman to guard both Muslim and Christian wheat fields. Harvested grain became grist for mills that in smaller towns were shared by Muslim, Christian, and Jewish farmers alike. Elsewhere along the winding

course of the streams powering these mills, wives and slaves of these Christian, Muslim, and Jewish farmers could also be found working in close proximity, laundering clothing at some location outside the town walls designated for this purpose. The most intimate, vulnerable, watery engagement of all was the custom of stripping down and sinking into a shared communal bath. Bathhouses, inevitable fixtures of Andalusian towns, were unheard of luxuries to Christian immigrants following the Reconquest's wake. Ripe northerners who once contented themselves with one or two cold water baths each year suddenly looked forward to luxuriating, weekly hot water soaks.

But first, religiously mixed communities had to sort out the nitty-gritty logistics of sharing this treasured resource. Larger cities like Seville could afford segregated facilities, designating some for Christians and others for Muslims. Smaller towns had no such alternative, especially after restricting certain days each week for women bathers. Christian men used Teruel's bathhouse on some days and Jews and Muslims on others; in Valencia and Tortosa, Jews, Muslims, and Christians all soaked at will, with no segregation by religion (which seems to have been the convention practiced all along in Muslim-ruled al-Andalus). Interreligious bathing days seem to have been most customary for women, perhaps because no obvious sign like circumcision constantly reminded the bathers of the religious differences that separated them.

These Jews, Muslims, and Christians did not purposely seek each other's company to build a richer common life. Indeed, each community typically preferred to segregate itself where circumstances allowed. The five hundred Jews who made up some 10 percent of thirteenth-century Burgos's population could do just that. They lived, shopped, worked, and worshipped in the comforting confines of their own religious culture, a substantial enough community to provide a livelihood to Jewish merchants. But smaller Ávila, like most Iberian towns, afforded no such critical mass. A medieval census reveals Jews sprinkled throughout the town, occupied as locksmiths, weavers, blacksmiths, shopkeepers, a butcher, quilt maker, carpenter, and a chair maker. Few to none of these craftsmen could have made a decent living without cultivating non-Jewish customers.

A medieval craftsman learned his trade and its secrets from a father or mentor. Under the circumstances, certain regions or religious communities occasionally came to dominate a given trade. Valencia's Muslim dye masters, silk processors, potters, and glass makers were so highly esteemed by Christians, Muslims, and Jews alike that King Jaime I of Aragon dissuaded these uniquely skilled craftsmen from migrating to Muslim Granada by granting exemptions from certain taxes. Similarly, Jewish physicians were so deeply respected that their presence at the royal court was more commonplace than remarkable. Indeed, they supplied their healing arts in even the most intimate and privileged of settings, exemplified in a thirteenth-century court document referring to the Jewish physician who served the cloistered nuns of Las Huelgas monastery.

If monastery walls and the status of consecrated religious virgins proved no barrier to the "damnable mixing" of commerce among the faiths, neither did the strict dietary regulations stipulated by Muslim and Jewish law. Then, as now, it seems, a good butcher could draw clientele regardless of faith. One Granadan poet ranted that Jewish butchers "slaughter beasts in our markets" and sell to Muslims. Christian butchers in Valencia similarly complained that Muslim and Jewish competitors were successfully poaching Christian customers.

Indeed, some savvy Muslims, Christians, and Jews even partnered in interfaith businesses, pursuing customers from multiple faith communities while remaining open on each partner's respective Sabbath. Such ventures presented theological conundrums, and even the great Maimonides, when not ruminating on God's nature, grappled with the more mundane dilemma of dividing profits from a Jewish-Muslim business partnership. The "second Moses" suggested the eminently logical arrangement that the shop's Friday revenues go to the Jew (who could work on the Muslim holy day), and Saturday sales accrue to the Muslim partner. The fourteenth-century Muslim Mahoma Abenfo and the Jew Abraham Avenrrabi trusted each other enough to sign for a business loan in Saragossa as cocreditors. In nearby Borja, Christian and Muslim partners jointly ran an inn situated in the town's Jewish quarter.

Some of these interfaith relationships inevitably soured, and the en-

suing legal repercussions demonstrate that Jews, Muslims, and Christians not only did business together but made mischief together. We know that Muslims and Christians jointly patronized certain taverns from legal records of tipping bouts that ended badly. In Elche, inebriated Muslims and Christians were more than once tossed into jail to sleep off drunken rows that erupted in a tavern. The incidents spurred a Muslim petition that the king forbid Muslims from drinking in Christian-owned inns—not out of some pious desire to enforce Muslim bans on drinking alcohol, but as a clever maneuver to secure a monopoly on Muslim business for Muslim barkeeps!

Legal records expose more sinister sorts of interfaith cooperation. A late thirteenth-century Tarazona gang of Christians and Muslims was accused of abducting a Muslim woman to sell into slavery, a reprehensible crime ideally suited to interfaith partnership: because frontier Christians would typically buy Muslim slaves, and vice versa, one partner would be well positioned to procure the human goods and the other the “customers.”

The constant friction of shared village life occasionally generated sparks of misunderstanding and resentment, but also inevitably kindled mutual understanding and accommodation born of countless daily interactions at bakeoven, mill, butcher stall, tavern, and water council. To be sure, believers of each religious tradition never forgot the confessional differences that separated them from neighbors. It would have been unthinkable, even blasphemous, for medieval Spanish religious leaders to engage in the interfaith dialogue pursued in a modern world anxiously groping for harmonious interfaith relations. But daily conversations about the weather, prices, the quality of produce, or the latest village scandal enabled each to perceive others as multidimensional human beings, rather than objectified as caricatures of Jew, Christian, or Muslim. If close interfaith friendships were far from normal, they were not unheard of. Witness the poignant story of a thirteenth-century Christian girl who fled an abusive forced marriage to take refuge with a sympathetic Jewish friend. Who knows how many other stories of kindness or friendship remain untold; illiterate medieval peasants in small, paperless villages left no diaries of daily life's adventures, concerns, and amusements.

Of course, the “damnable mixing” that the Lateran Council’s bishops most abhorred was sexual, and such mixing occurred far too regularly to be “by mistake.” To be sure, most such liaisons show medieval society at its worst. Prostitutes found clients outside their own religious tradition. Slave owners of all three faiths purchased slaves outside their faith group, and owners slept with female slaves as a matter of common practice. Sexual revulsion of the religious other was surmounted in such cases only to exploit, humiliate, and degrade another human being.

But one also finds signs of more genuine intimate relations. One Moorish poet encapsulates in a single couplet both his infatuation with a Christian girl and society’s disapprobation of their liaison: “I have a girl among the Christians, who bolts like a shy gazelle round the churches. I am in raptures over her; but passion among the cloisters and the churches is a sin.” The eleventh-century Jewish poet Moses Ibn Ezra of Granada was just as deeply enthralled by a young Muslim woman: “By the hand of the Muslim doe [female] is my soul destroyed and my heart by her eyes is torn.” Many such relationships remained clandestine. When they became public, the lovers instantly became outcasts from their respective communities. Fear of social condemnation invariably crushed most such relationships before they fully blossomed. But more than a few medieval Spaniards chose love over faith and family, like a young Muslim girl of Liria who left behind an angered and stunned father to begin a new life beside her Christian beloved.

Such reflections of common life among Christians, Muslims, and Jews, plucked from across towns and across centuries, are in one respect exceptions that prove a rule. Coexistence was fragile; members of each faith group preferred to build their own homogeneous society than to forge a mixed one. Frequently enough, however, that choice was unavailable. In consequence, an eloquent interfaith dialogue was occurring all over Spain every day in countless ways, the pedestrian but rich dialogue of daily life where one learns to accommodate the customs and beliefs of another through myriad quotidian interactions while baking, laundering, buying, selling, sowing, and reaping. Unfortunately, glimpses of these everyday victories of goodwill over hate are

rare and fleeting. History inordinately concerns itself with the affairs of society's "great and good"; few medieval scribes were inclined to waste a scrap of parchment on the unremarkable lives of illiterate commoners. Still, the few anecdotes that can be pieced together suggest that ordinary Muslims, Jews, and Christians sometimes triumphed to forge accommodations with neighbors of different faiths, creating a common life unlike any other achieved or even imagined elsewhere on Europe's continent in the medieval era.

King Alfonso X inherited this Christian Spain, greatly increased in size through his father Fernando's conquests and including an Andalusia dotted with rural villages where majority Muslims adjusted to life under Christian rule. A thirteenth-century chronicler recounted Fernando's purported deathbed challenge to his son and heir. After rehearsing his many conquests, Fernando told his son, "If you know how to preserve in this state what I leave you, you will be as good a king as I, and if you win more for yourself, you will be better than I, but if you diminish it, you will not be as good as I."

But Alfonso was a man unwilling to measure his life by his father's yardstick.