

Andalusia
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After surveying 700 years of Spanish history, from the 8th century to the 15th century, I conclude that history is very messy and that contradictions abound. This is relevant because *life* is very messy, and contradictions abound. If we can come to terms with messy *history*, we can come to terms with life in the present, with its messes and contradictions.

In the year 711 of the Common Era, Tariq ibn Ziyad led around 7,000 North African raiders into southern Spain. Within a short time, Christian-ruled Spain became Muslim-ruled Spain. We mention Tariq's name whenever we mention the rock of Gibraltar in the Mediterranean Sea. Jabal Tariq (Gibraltar) means "Tariq's Mountain."

One might think that Tariq was commended for his victory. That is not the case, as I learned in Chris Lowney's book entitled *A Vanished World: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Medieval Spain*. He notes, "Tariq ibn Ziyad's military heroics undoubtedly qualified him for an important role in Islam's newest province, but if politics' first law is not to screw up, its second is not to upstage the boss. Musa ibn Nusayr, governor of Islamic North Africa, arrived in Spain more peeved at his lieutenant than thrilled at the conquest. He thrashed Tariq with his riding crop, rebuked him for overstepping his authority, and demoted him."¹

We can find examples of magnanimous human behavior within the 700 years spanned by the existence of Andalusia (that is, "al Andalus" in Arabic). We can find examples of barbarity within the same period of time. At certain times in certain places, Christians, Jews, and Muslims cooperated in a multi-partner marriage of convenience.

In general, the level of cultural development in Al Andalus was more refined than anywhere else in Europe at the time. Science from astronomy to medicine was more highly developed. "The ninth-century Arab mathematician al-Khwarizmi (the English word 'algorithm' is a corruption of

¹ *A Vanished World: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Medieval Spain* by Chris Lowney, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005, page. 38.

his name) was one of a long line of scholars who grasped the potential uses of the number system pioneered by Indian mathematicians,” Chris Lowney writes. “While Europeans were still unsure what the zero was or why it mattered, Arab scholars were cranking through quadratic equations and complex geometric proofs . . . Thank his *Al-jabr wal-Muqqabala (Completion and Balancing)* for introducing us to the torture we still call *al-jabr* (algebra).”²

Classical Greek philosophical and literary texts had been lost to the West when tribes from the north overran the Roman Empire. However, translations in Arabic survived and were studied in al Andalus. If not for Muslim interest and expertise in science, philosophy, and literature, and if not for Muslim preservation of Greek classical works, the later Renaissance would not have taken flight so readily.

However, despite episodes of collaboration among Muslims, Jews, and Christians, all too often the multi-partner marriage of convenience turned into domestic violence. Slavery, forced religious conversion, exile, Inquisition, and bloodshed on an appalling scale: these disasters, too, were part of life in al Andalus. “The English-language word ‘slave’ traces its origin to . . . Slavic-speaking peoples of southeastern and eastern Europe, captured and sold into servitude across western Europe and especially into affluent al-Andalus throughout the Middle Ages.”³

We find exemplary behavior and also atrocities in al Andalus; contradictions abound. On the plus side, “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 . . . [but] legal records expose more sinister sorts of interfaith cooperation. A late 13th 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.’”⁴

Learning about the battles between Muslims and Christians and about the changing tides for Jews which followed in the wake of the battles, I felt as if I were watching the Weather Channel

² Page 77.

³ Page 94.

⁴ Page 205.

on television. Just like weather fronts, battle fronts moved this way and that way, except that in Andalusia the movement of the fronts was from south to north instead of from west to east, as with weather patterns in the United States. As Weather Channel regulars know, the Gulf Stream in the atmosphere above our heads and the El Nino current in the Pacific Ocean drive the weather patterns that scorch us or drench us. In the weather patterns of history, the Gulf Stream reminds me of our aspirations, and the El Nino current reminds me of our emotions, which arise from the deep with a startling power.

When I happen to catch the weather channel on television, the map of the country as a whole is less interesting than the pictures about a particular locale. In the same manner, broad generalities about al Andalus are less interesting than details about a particular locale. Let's hear it for microclimates! The microclimates of history touch us more powerfully than the grand sweep of history perhaps because our lives are lived in microclimates.

Let us consider for example the microclimate of 13th century Spain. Jews were not stigmatized to the extent that they so often were elsewhere in Christian-ruled lands in that era. The Christian Church's Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 condemned the "damnable mixing" of Jews, Muslims, and Christians, meaning economic and social mixing, as well as intimate "mixing." As a remedy, the Council members decreed "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.," according to Chris Lowney. "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."⁵

The decree was supposed to be binding on Spain, but what happened there? A succession of aggravated Popes wrote to a succession of Spanish Christian rulers demanding that they get with the program. Pope Gregory IX thought it might be helpful to be specific: "One round patch of yellow cloth or linen, to be worn on the uppermost garment, stitched over the heart and another

⁵ Page 200.

behind it, in order that they [Jews] may thus be recognized. The full size of this sign shall be four digits in circumference.”

It would be nice to think that Jews were not stigmatized in that microclimate because of a commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every person, regardless of religious persuasion. That would be a fantasy, however. The king did not want to lose the tax revenue that he received from Jews. But by the late 15th century, neither the tax payments of the Jews nor their intellectual and cultural contributions could protect them from forced conversion to Christianity or expulsion from Spain.

Most Jews had three months notice to convert or leave the country. This was in 1492, the same year that Christian forces ousted the last remaining Muslim rulers from Spain in the “Reconquista.” This, of course, was the same year that Italian Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean blue with the blessing of Spanish regents Ferdinand and Isabella, inadvertently discovering a new world. As Ramadan (Islam’s month of reflection) ends and as the Jewish High Holy Days begin, let us remember with sadness the year 1492, when the door of multi-faith “convivencia” in Andalusia was slammed shut. “Convivencia” means “living together.”

Some of the Jews who converted to Christianity in the late 15th century were sincere in their conversion. Some remained Jewish in their hearts and practiced Jewish rituals in secret. Some combined Judaism and Christianity in time-honored though officially prohibited syncretism. One newly Christian bishop “reportedly ended the Hail Mary prayer with a coda recalling the common heritage Jews alone shared with Jesus: ‘Holy Mary, Mother of God, *and my blood relative*, pray for us.’”⁶

Jews or Muslims who converted to Christianity under pressure in Spain and Portugal in the 14th and 15th centuries were called “conversos.” They were targeted by the Spanish Inquisition, which differed from other inquisitions in several ways. The Spanish Inquisition operated under royal control, not papal control, which actually meant that there were fewer limits on its power. Prior to the late 1400’s, inquisitors tried to get rid of all kinds of heresies. Spanish inquisitors,

⁶ Page 237.

however, narrowed their focus almost exclusively to finding false converts from Judaism to Christianity. It was a very efficient operation. Finally, the Spanish Inquisition sustained itself not by government funding or by papal funding but rather by fines and penalties imposed on those found guilty. The concept of “conflict of interest” had yet to be invented. ;)

I conclude this survey of selected historical microclimates with the connection between al Andalus and Unitarian history. Around 1511 Miguel Serveto was born. Unitarian Universalists tend to remember him by the name Michael Servetus. Next month it will be 456 years since his martyrdom. Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Mark Evens notes that when Miguel was growing up, thousands of presumed Muslims and Jews were burned at the stake. “They refused to convert. The main obstacle to their conversion: refusal to give up their radical monotheism and accept the Trinity: the doctrine that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

Mark Evens continues, “Thus Servetus came of age in a time and place where people were dying for their belief in a radically unitary God. Later, having used his Latin skills to study the Bible for himself and finding no basis for the Trinity there, he wrote a book, *On the Errors of the Trinity*. He was willing to die for his beliefs and was burned at the stake outside Geneva on October 28, 1553 by Calvin, with the book he refused to renounce tied to his leg.”

Evans concludes, “Perhaps the resolve he witnessed among the Muslims and Jews in his past Andalusian homeland strengthened his determination to stand by his truth to the end. His martyrdom for his Unitarian beliefs was a turning point in the Protestant reformation. The barbarity of the execution and the courage and eloquence of the victim provoked a backlash which checked the power of the conservative Protestants and opened up space for free thinkers.”⁷

The death of our religious ancestor Miguel Serveto helped to open up space for free thinkers, and for that, let us be grateful. Speaking personally, I come to terms with messy history filled with contradictions (and with messy life filled with contradictions) in three ways. First, I accept that

⁷ “Opening Our Hearts to a New Andalusia” by Mark Evens, see <http://www.sksm.edu/research/sermons/andalusia.pdf>. For information on Michael Servetus, see <http://www.25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/michaelservetus.html> on the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society website.

free *thinking* in the free and responsible search for truth and meaning is never all that is going on. Our lives, all lives, past and present, come together in a union of thought's aspirations *and* powerful emotions welling up from the deep. It is not possible to have spiritual health without having psychological health. The quest for religious depth, social justice, and a higher quality of life for everyone on this planet will succeed if and only if we attend to psychological suffering as if our lives depended on it, for they do.

Second, I come to terms with messy history and messy life by noting whether the conditions of "convivencia" are present – whether through numbers of people and their respective power we *must* find a way to live together or not. When it is possible to force others out of our space, we tend to do so. Third, our collective consciousness matters. Our aspirations, joined with the aspirations of others, form the Gulf Stream. Our emotions welling up from the deep, joined with the emotions of others, form the ocean currents. Together, the aspirations of this Gulf Stream and the emotions of these ocean currents determine the weather patterns of our life and the weather patterns of history. May we look within ourselves. May we see beyond ourselves. May it be so!