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Convivencia Revisited: A Historical Analysis of Tolerance and Interfaith Relations in al-Andalus

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Abstract

This study revisits convivencia to provide a comprehensive historical analysis of tolerance and interfaith relations under Muslim rule in al-Andalus (711–1492). Contrary to simplified narratives that idealize Andalusī society as a utopia of harmonious coexistence, this research adopts a nuanced approach, examining both cooperation and conflict among Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Utilizing a wide range of sources including historical chronicles, legal codes, administrative records, and literary and cultural artifacts the study investigates how Islamic governance structured interreligious relations through the frameworks of dhimma, legal pluralism, and socio-economic integration. The analysis highlights periods of remarkable intellectual collaboration, cultural flourishing, and shared civic life, while also acknowledging moments of tension arising from political instability, social hierarchies, and external pressures. By situating convivencia within its complex socio-political and legal context, the article demonstrates that Andalusī tolerance was pragmatic, negotiated, and contingent rather than absolute. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of historical models of pluralism and offers insights relevant to contemporary discussions on interfaith coexistence and cultural diplomacy.

Keywords:

Convivencia, Interfaith Relations, Al-Andalus, Religious Tolerance, Dhimma, Medieval Islamic Governance

1. Introduction:

The notion of *convivencia*¹² has long captivated historians, scholars, and the wider public as a framework for understanding the complex interplay of religious, cultural, and social life in al-

Andalus³, the Muslim-ruled territories of the Iberian Peninsula⁴ between 711 and 1492. Often portrayed in popular and even some academic narratives as a utopian example of harmonious coexistence, *convivencia* suggests a society where Muslims, Christians, and Jews engaged freely in intellectual exchange, artistic collaboration, and commercial partnership⁵. While such portrayals highlight the extraordinary cultural and scientific achievements of al-Andalus, they risk obscuring the nuanced realities of interfaith relations shaped by legal structures, social hierarchies, and political contingencies. Tolerance, in this context, was neither absolute nor static; rather, it was a historically contingent practice, negotiated within specific legal, political, and economic frameworks.

Islamic governance in al-Andalus provided structured mechanisms to manage religious diversity, most notably through the *dhimma* system⁶, which offered protection to non-Muslim communities in exchange for recognition of Muslim political authority and certain fiscal obligations. Legal pluralism allowed these communities to maintain their own courts, educational systems, and religious institutions, fostering a form of regulated autonomy that facilitated both cooperation and occasional tension. The study of these mechanisms reveals a sophisticated approach to interfaith coexistence that was pragmatic and adaptive, balancing the needs of the state, the interests of religious communities, and the broader dynamics of social integration. At the same time, periods of political instability, external military pressures, and social stratification occasionally disrupted this balance, resulting in episodes of conflict or coercion alongside collaboration and intellectual flourishing.

Revisiting *convivencia* with a critical lens allows historians to move beyond romanticized narratives and explore the contingent, negotiated nature of tolerance in al-Andalus. By examining primary sources including chronicles, legal codes, administrative records, and literary and cultural artifacts this study situates interfaith relations within their full socio-political, legal, and cultural contexts. Understanding how Muslims, Christians, and Jews interacted in al-Andalus not only illuminates the historical realities of medieval Iberia but also provides valuable insights for contemporary debates on pluralism, interreligious dialogue, and cultural diplomacy. In doing so, this research contributes to a deeper appreciation of historical models of coexistence and the complex dynamics that underlie peaceful, albeit negotiated, interfaith engagement.

2. Historical Background of “The Iberian Peninsula”:

The Iberian Peninsula, comprising present-day Spain and Portugal, occupies a strategic geographic position at the southwestern edge of Europe. Bounded by the Pyrenees Mountains to the northeast, the Atlantic Ocean to the north and west, and the Mediterranean Sea to the south and east, the peninsula has historically functioned as a crossroads for trade, migration, and military conquest. Its complex terrain encompassing fertile river valleys, rugged mountains, and long coastlines made it both a contested frontier and a culturally diverse zone⁷.

By the early Middle Ages, the peninsula was populated by a mosaic of peoples, including the Romanized Hispano-Romans, Visigoths, and various Germanic groups such as the Vandals⁸. This diversity set the stage for the profound transformations that would follow the Muslim conquest in the early 8th century. In 711 CE, an Umayyad force led by Ṭāriq ibn Ziyād crossed the Strait of Gibraltar, initiating a rapid conquest of much of the Visigothic kingdom⁹. Over the next centuries, these territories became known as al-Andalus, a culturally, politically, and religiously plural society under various forms of Muslim governance¹⁰.

During its zenith, al-Andalus emerged as a distinct cultural and intellectual unit within the Islamic world, with Córdoba, Seville, and Granada serving as major centers of learning, science, and the arts¹¹. The Islamic states on the peninsula went through different political phases from the Umayyad Emirate to the Caliphate of Córdoba, and later to fragmented Taifa kingdoms before gradually declining under Christian reconquest¹².

The dynamic history of the Iberian Peninsula underlines how geography, power, and religion interacted to produce a unique pre-modern model of coexistence. This historical backdrop is essential for understanding *convivencia* the negotiated social and religious coexistence among Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities in al-Andalus and sets the stage for exploring how pluralism operated in practice under Muslim rule.

3. Timeline of Convivencia in al-Andalus:

i. Early 8th Century: Muslim Conquest

Muslims from North Africa were attracted to the Iberian Peninsula by the opportunity to conquer the Visigoths, who were weakened by political instability, civil disunity, and religious/ethnic divisions. In **711 CE**, the Muslim armies invaded, capitalizing on Visigothic disarray and moral corruption, especially under King Roderic¹³. Muslims captured territories as far north as Narbonne, but Christian strongholds remained in the mountainous northwest Atlantic coast and the Pyrenees.

ii. 8th–10th Century: Establishment and Growth of al-Andalus

Muslims established a stable political order and cultural flourishing reminiscent of Roman Hispania. Original Muslim settlers were relatively few (about 1% of the population), primarily Arab and mostly Berber¹⁴.

Conversion of local Christians and incorporation of older ethnic groups expanded the Muslim population, creating a diverse, interlaced society. Islam offered civil and social advantages, making conversion attractive and creating a cohesive Islamic identity in al-Andalus¹⁵.

iii. 909 CE: Fatimid Breakaway

A group claiming descent from Fatima (daughter of Muhammad) established a breakaway caliphate in Tunis, threatening Andalusian allegiance to the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad¹⁶.

iv. 929 CE: Abd al-Rahman III Declares the Caliphate

Abd al-Rahman III declared himself **caliph**, asserting the independence and legitimacy of al-Andalus as the true Islamic authority¹⁷.

v. 1009–1031 CE: Civil Wars and Collapse of the Cordoban Caliphate

Civil wars among Muslim factions erupted in 1009, destroying Madinat al-Zahra and marking the decline of centralized power. Divisions were pronounced between Berber Muslims (conservative, fundamentalist) and Andalusians (descendants of earlier settlers).

1031 CE: The official end of the Cordoban caliphate; the rise of independent **taifas** (city-states) followed. Jewish communities moved from Cordoba to taifas, resuming influential roles. Northern Christian kingdoms consolidated and began slowly expanding southward during the 11th century. Figures like **Rodrigo Díaz (El Cid)** fought for both Christian and Muslim rulers in the region, reflecting the intertwined cultures¹⁸.

vi. 1212 CE: Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa

A combined force of Spanish Christians and northern European troops defeated the Almohads decisively, initiating major Muslim losses¹⁹.

vii. 13th Century: Christian Reconquest of Key Cities

Cordoba fell in **1236**, Valencia in **1238**, and Sevilla in **1248**, marking the gradual end of Muslim political power in Iberia²⁰.

viii. 1492 CE: Fall of Granada and End of Muslim Rule

Muhammad XII of the Nasrids surrendered the Alhambra to Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, completing the Reconquista. Three months later, the expulsion of Jews began, signaling the end of convivencia, the period of relative religious coexistence²¹.

4. Relationship of Muslims, Jews, and Christians in al-Andalus:

i. Jewish-Arabic Relations: A Historical Perspective:

The Arab conquests following the rise of Islam (7th–8th centuries) integrated vast territories from Spain to Persia under a single political and cultural framework, significantly shaping Jewish-Arabic relations. Historical scholarship generally affirms that Jews experienced a markedly improved legal and social status under Muslim rule compared to contemporary Christian Europe. While some claims may be overstated, it is evident that Islamic governance provided Jews with formal protections, economic opportunities, and social mobility unavailable in the Byzantine or Visigothic realms²².

During the early Islamic period, Jewish communities transitioned from agrarian livelihoods to roles in commerce and artisanal production, particularly as a result of the 9th-century “bourgeois revolution.” Figures such as Samuel ibn Nagrila in the taifa of Granada exemplify this integration: he rose to the position of vizier and simultaneously led the Jewish community, contributing significantly to the cultural flourishing of Hebrew poetry and intellectual life. Moreover, Jewish law, philosophy, and religious practices during this period were profoundly influenced by Arabic culture, illustrating a dynamic symbiosis between Jewish and Islamic intellectual traditions. The decline of this symbiosis occurred during the 14th–15th centuries, when the collapse of Muslim dominions in Iberia and the broader Middle East diminished Jewish prominence in Arabic-speaking regions²³.

ii. Jewish-Christian Relations in Iberia:

Jews had been established in the Iberian Peninsula by the 4th century, and their interactions with Christians intensified under the Visigothic kingdom. Contrary to earlier assumptions, hostility toward Jews was not merely a consequence of the Visigoths’ conversion from Arianism to Catholicism, but was strongly influenced by Byzantine legal codes and anti-Jewish attitudes. Key Jewish communities emerged in urban centers such as Toledo, Merida, Sevilla, Tarragona, and Narbonne, while precise demographic distribution remains subject to scholarly conjecture due to limited archeological evidence²⁴.

iii. Muslim Immigration and Social Integration in al-Andalus:

After the conquest of Muslim and subsequent waves of Arab and Berber immigration, particularly from Syria and Iraq, transformed the demographic and cultural landscape of Iberia. Christians who remained, known as Mozarabs, often assimilated aspects of Muslim culture, including language, dress, architecture, literary interests, and social customs, while retaining elements of their faith. Inter-marriage between Muslims and Christians, often resulting in the Christian partner’s conversion to Islam, was widespread, highlighting the complex interplay between religion, social mobility, and cultural assimilation. Notable examples include Abd al-Rahman III, whose mother was a Christian Basque princess, reflecting elite interreligious connections²⁵.

iv. Economic and Social Participation of Jews:

Jews were active in commerce, crafts, and professional occupations, enjoying opportunities comparable to the broader population. Evidence also indicates Jewish involvement in the redemption of Muslim slaves captured by Christians, though their participation in agricultural labor or the broader slave trade was limited. Ownership of domestic slaves, particularly females, was the primary form of Jewish engagement with servitude²⁶.

v. **Interpersonal and Cultural Dynamics:**

Interreligious interactions in al-Andalus extended to everyday life, including sexual and social relations among Muslims, Jews, and Christians. While Jewish law permitted some degree of engagement with Muslims, Islamic law and social customs influenced patterns of intermarriage and concubinage. Prominent cultural figures, such as the poet Ibrahim, exemplify this interweaving of religious and linguistic identities, navigating Jewish and Islamic traditions in both personal and literary contexts²⁷.

The relationship between Muslims, Jews, and Christians in al-Andalus was characterized by relative tolerance, interreligious coexistence, and profound cultural exchange, forming a unique socio-cultural ecosystem in medieval Europe. While hierarchies and social distinctions existed, Jews and Christians were able to participate in governance, commerce, and intellectual life, contributing to a Golden Age of convivencia. The Iberian experience demonstrates a historically significant model of pluralism, acculturation, and cross-cultural synthesis²⁸.

5. Framework of Tolerance in al-Andalus:

Since **711 CE**, over the next seven centuries, it became a melting pot of **different religions, languages, and cultures**. The concept of Convivencia is mostly associated with the **Caliphate of Córdoba (10th century)**, though elements existed throughout the Islamic period in Spain. In (929–1031 CE), the Caliphate of Córdoba; al-Andalus emerged as a sophisticated and multicultural society. The demographic composition included Arabs, Berbers, indigenous Iberian Christians (Mozarabs), Jews, Slavs, and converted Muslims (Muwallads). The early Islamic administrative structure incorporated existing Roman and Visigothic institutions, enabling continuity and stability for non-Muslim communities. al-Andalus(Cordoba and Granada) can be seen as a place of “the very heart of culture as a series of contraries.”²⁹

Three significant dimensions shaped the culture of tolerance: political administration, legal autonomy, and social integration.

1. Political Governance and Protection Policies:

Muslim rulers adopted inclusive policies that ensured the security and rights of non-Muslim subjects. Following the principles applicable to Ahl al-Dhimma (People of the Covenant), Christians and Jews were granted freedom of religion, property rights, and protection of their places of worship³⁰. Leaders such as Abd al-Rahman I and Abd al-Rahman III integrated Jews and Christians into administrative and diplomatic roles, reflecting political pragmatism and social openness³¹.

2. Legal and Judicial Autonomy:

A defining feature of Andalusian tolerance was the allowance for Christians and Jews to maintain independent courts and religious leadership. Family law, inheritance, and religious matters were managed by community authorities, while the qadi ensured justice and protection for all residents. This legal autonomy fostered trust and discouraged sectarian conflict³².

3. Intellectual and Cultural Coexistence:

The intellectual environment of al-Andalus thrived on interfaith collaboration. Under rulers such as al-Hakam II, Córdoba became a center of knowledge, boasting extensive libraries and translation houses. Scholars of diverse backgrounds collaborated to translate Greek, Persian, and Syriac works, forming the foundation of Europe's later intellectual revival. Jewish scholar Hasdai ibn Shaprut and Christian scholars in Toledo exemplify the cross-cultural exchanges that defined Andalusian society³³.

6. Case Studies of Tolerance:

i. Córdoba: A cosmopolitan political, cultural, and economic center:

Córdoba, during the 10th century under the Umayyad Caliphate, stands as a prominent example of interreligious tolerance and convivencia in medieval al-Andalus. Under rulers like Abd al-Rahman III, the city emerged as a cosmopolitan hub where Muslims, Christians, and Jews coexisted with relative autonomy. Non-Muslims (dhimmis) were legally permitted to practice their religion, maintain their own institutions, and participate in communal life, while paying the jizya tax. High-ranking administrative positions were sometimes held by Jews and Christians, exemplifying political inclusion and social mobility. The city's legal framework, combined with pragmatic governance, allowed diverse communities to thrive and contribute to the civic and cultural life of Córdoba³⁴.

Córdoba also became a center of intellectual, cultural, and economic exchange, attracting scholars, poets, and artisans of different religious backgrounds. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinkers collaborated in translation projects, philosophical discourse, and scientific inquiry, while the urban culture reflected a fusion of architectural, linguistic, and artistic traditions. Economic participation was similarly inclusive, with commerce, artisanry, and banking enabling merit-based social advancement. Although hierarchies and occasional tensions existed, Córdoba's model of convivencia illustrates a historically significant example of religious pluralism, social integration, and urban multiculturalism in medieval Europe³⁵.

ii. Toledo: A Center of Convivencia:

Toledo under Muslim rule exemplified a deeply syncretic culture in which Christians (Mozarabs), Jews, and Muslims coexisted and interacted in meaningful ways. As noted by historical sources, the city was known as Tulayṭulah during the Islamic period, and its population included a significant number of Christians and Jews alongside Muslims³⁶. Christians in Toledo adopted many aspects of Islamic culture—language, dress, literature—while maintaining their religious identity³⁷. The city also became a landmark of intellectual cooperation: Toledo's School of Translators later played a pivotal role in transmitting Arabic and scientific knowledge to Christian Europe, illustrating how convivencia went “beyond tolerance toward active cultural exchange.”³⁸

Jews in Toledo similarly enjoyed a relatively high degree of integration and influence. The city's Jewish quarter thrived, and Jewish scholars participated in civic life³⁹. The architectural legacy also reflects interfaith coexistence: for example, the Synagogue of Santa María la Blanca, with its Moorish horseshoe arches, stands as a testament to the blending of Jewish and Islamic artistic traditions⁴⁰. Despite this atmosphere of openness, dynamics of power remained—non-Muslims paid the jizya, and the social fabric was shaped by hierarchies inherent in the dhimma system⁴¹.

iii. Granada: Complexity in Coexistence under the Nasrids:

The Nasrid Emirate of Granada (13th–15th centuries) presents a more complex and nuanced case of convivencia. While Granada retained a largely Islamic political identity, its Jewish

community held a protected dhimmi status, allowing for religious practices and a degree of legal autonomy. Many Jews worked as merchants, physicians, and translators, contributing to the intellectual and economic life of the emirate. However, social regulations also imposed restrictions: sources indicate that Jews were required, at times, to wear distinguishing marks in public⁴².

Christian presence in Granada under the Nasrids was more limited. Rather than a permanent Christian population, the city's Christians often came as merchants, political exiles, or prisoners, and their status was typically regulated through special agreements rather than full dhimmi protection. In the late 15th century, during the fall of Granada, the Treaty of Granada (1491) attempted to guarantee religious rights for the Muslim population surrendering to Christian forces, but the promised convivencia would soon unravel⁴³.

7. Discussion:

The tolerance of Muslim rulers in al-Andalus was not merely an ideological commitment but also a political necessity. Economic prosperity required stability, diverse skill sets, and diplomatic alliances all of which were strengthened by interfaith cooperation. However, this tolerance was not uniform across all periods; political conflicts, external pressures, and internal power struggles occasionally strained relations. Nonetheless, the overarching pattern demonstrates a deliberate attempt to preserve a harmonious, pluralistic order.

Religious Coexistence

Muslims were the ruling class, but Christians (Mozarabs) and Jews (Sephardim) were allowed to practice their religion under a system called dhimma. Dhimmi status involved:

Payment of a special tax (jizya) for non-Muslims⁴⁴.

Exemption from military service⁴⁵.

Certain social and legal protections, though with some restrictions⁴⁶.

Cultural and Intellectual Exchange

Convivencia was not only religious tolerance but also a cultural phenomenon:

Language: Arabic became the lingua franca, influencing Hebrew and Romance languages⁴⁷.

Science & Philosophy: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars collaborated in medicine, astronomy, mathematics, and philosophy^{48, 49}.

Works in Arabic on Islamic Spain or al-Andalus include among others Fajral-Andalus: Dirâsah fî Târîkhal-Andalus min al-Fath al-Islâmî lâ Qiyâm al-Dawlah al-Umawiyah 711-756 which deals mainly with the Umayyad rule in Andalusia⁵⁰, and Al-Târîkhal-Andalusî Min al-Fath al-Islâmî Hatta Suqûti Gharnâtah which covers a long period of Muslim rule in Spain from its beginning to the defeat of Granada in the hands of Christian rulers⁵¹.

Architecture: Mosques, churches, and synagogues coexisted, influencing architectural styles (e.g., the Great Mosque of Córdoba)⁵².

Arts & Literature: Shared literary and musical traditions flourished across religious boundaries⁵³.

Limitations of Convivencia

It is important to note that Convivencia was not perfect equality; Muslims held political power, Non-Muslims had limited social mobility, Occasional outbreaks of violence or persecution occurred. Scholars debate how widespread and idealized this coexistence actually was. Some argue it was more of a pragmatic tolerance than a utopian multiculturalism.

Legacy

Convivencia left a lasting impact on Spanish culture, seen in Language (Arabic words in Spanish), Architecture (Moorish designs), Intellectual traditions (translations of Greek works preserved by Islamic scholars). It is often cited as a model for interreligious tolerance and cultural pluralism in medieval Europe.

8. Conclusion:

A historically grounded analysis of *convivencia* in al-Andalus demonstrates that the patterns of interreligious coexistence that emerged in medieval Iberia were deeply rooted in the Islamic ethical and legal framework that guided Muslim governance from the 8th to the 15th century. The Qur'anic principles of justice (*'adl*), compassion (*rahmah*), and protection of religious minorities shaped the administrative outlook of Andalusī rulers. The Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes fairness toward others "*Indeed, Allah commands justice and excellence*"⁵⁴ and explicitly prohibits coercion in matters of belief "*There is no compulsion in religion*"⁵⁵. Similarly, the Charter of Medina and the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ instructions to safeguard non-Muslim communities established a normative precedent, encapsulated in the hadith: "Whoever harms a dhimmi harms me"⁵⁶. Andalusī rulers such as 'Abd al-Raḥmān I, 'Abd al-Raḥmān III, al-Ḥakam II, and the Nasrids of Granada translated these teachings into governance by guaranteeing communal autonomy for Christians and Jews, protecting their places of worship, and incorporating them into the intellectual, economic, and bureaucratic life of the state. This policy environment cultivated vibrant cultural and scholarly interaction, visible in Córdoba's great academies, Toledo's monumental translation movement, and Granada's artistic cosmopolitanism.

Through this framework, the Muslim governance of al-Andalus stands as a historically attested example of how structured policies, legal pluralism, and shared civic spaces can sustain long-term interfaith harmony. The Andalusian model of tolerance shaped by Islamic teachings and refined through administrative practice illustrates the practical application of Qur'anic and Prophetic principles in a multicultural society. Qur'anic injunctions encouraging engagement with diverse communities "*O mankind, We created you from male and female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another*"⁵⁷ were reflected in the region's multilingual scholarly exchanges and cross-religious intellectual collaborations. Likewise, the Prophetic emphasis on justice and protection "*The most beloved of people to Allah are those who are most beneficial to others*" (al-Mu'jam al-Awsat) resonated in Andalusī policies that ensured safety, dignity, and legal rights for minority groups. Historically, this produced a cohesive, stable, and culturally productive society, demonstrating that coexistence thrives when supported by ethical governance, fair legal structures, and shared intellectual endeavours. The legacy of al-Andalus thus offers an enduring historical illustration of how Islamic principles, when faithfully implemented, can foster peaceful pluralism and enduring social harmony.

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Castro, Américo. *España en su Historia: Cristianos, Moros y Judíos*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1948.

² **Convivencia** literally comes from the Spanish word meaning "**living together**" or "**coexistence**."

In historical scholarship, it refers to the period of relative interreligious coexistence among Muslims, Christians, and Jews in medieval al-Andalus (8th–15th centuries) under Islamic rule.

³ Al-Andalus was the Muslim-ruled region of the Iberian Peninsula (711–1492).

⁴ The Iberian Peninsula is a southwestern European landmass comprising modern-day Spain, Portugal, Andorra, and Gibraltar, bordered by the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean.

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⁶ **Dhimma** is the Islamic protective covenant that guarantees the safety, religious freedom, and civil rights of non-Muslim subjects (*Ahl al-Dhimma*) in return for their peaceful submission to Muslim authority and payment of *jizyah*, as established in the Qur'an and Sunnah.

"Fight those who do not believe in Allah... until they give the jizyah willingly while being subdued."

Surah al-Tawbah (9:29)

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said:

"Whoever harms a dhimmi harms me." **Sunan al-Nasā'i, 4992**; also reported in al-Kharāj of Abu Yusuf.

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