

Whose Spain Is It, Anyway?

David A. Wacks, University of Oregon
wacks@uoregon.edu

When nations write their histories, ethnic and religious minorities, people displaced by migrations, and other marginalized groups do not tend to feature in them until they are able to organize and make an outcry. In the United States in the 1950s and 60s, Native Americans, African Americans, and Chicanos, all of whom had been present since the nation's origins, organized to claim their political power, and as part of the process lobbied to have their voices included in school and university curricula. In Spain, the task of acknowledging voices silenced by history is much more difficult. Absent any significant Muslim or Jewish bloc in Spain, the question becomes an interior monologue: What do Spanish Islam and Judaism mean to *Catholic* Spain? And even more problematically, given the history of massive conversion from Judaism and Islam to Catholicism, Catholic Spaniards ask themselves, where do *they* (Jews and Muslims) end and *we* (Catholics) begin? Spain's identity as a modern nation-state depends on non-Islam and non-Judaism. It is well-known that many Spaniards descend from Jewish and/or Muslim ancestors and many aspects of Spanish culture are indebted to the medieval Jewish and Muslim communities in Iberia. Yet our capacity to understand these cultural contributions has been fundamentally clouded by the bloody process by which these elements of the Spanish past were appropriated by modern Spanish culture. What do medieval Iberia and its violent past tell us about race relations today?

Jews in Spain have a history going back to (at least) the Romanization of the Peninsula. By the 1492 Edict of Expulsion, Jews had lived on the Peninsula since at least the fourth century CE. Muslims first came to the Peninsula in 710, and the great majority of the Peninsula would soon come under Muslim rule, to stay so until the beginning of the eleventh century, when northern Christian principalities began to make significant incursions into al-Andalus (Muslim-ruled Spain and Portugal). During the early centuries of Muslim rule, many Iberian Christians converted to Islam. Even after the tide turned in favor of Christian rule in the thirteenth century, the Kingdom of Granada remained under Muslim rule until 1492 CE.

The story one reads in Spanish textbooks is that with the defeat of Granada and the expulsion of the Jews and subsequent conversion of Muslims beginning in 1502 CE, Spain was now a Christian land. However, the majority of Andalusí Muslims (Muslims from al-Andalus) were, in fact, descended from Christians already living in Iberia when al-Andalus was established, which puts the idea of an "Islamic invasion" into question. In any event, because the Catholic Church had declared crusades to conquer Iberia, Spanish nobility implied a legacy of crusade. Conquistadors carried this mindset to the New World: that conquest and conversion of non-Christians was an inherently Spanish concern and central to their emerging national identity. The country's patron saint James (Santiago, Christ's disciple who according to tradition preached the gospel in Roman Hispania) is nicknamed "Muslim Slayer" (*Matamoros*), and eventually gave his name to the Mexican city just across the border from Brownsville, Texas.

Muslim and Jewish Iberians *loved* their country (al-Andalus in Arabic or Sefarad in Hebrew), and sang its glories unapologetically. Around the year 1200 CE, the Seville-based poet Ismail ibn Muhammad al-Shaqundi proudly declared, "I praise God that I was born in al-Andalus and that he has given me the good fortune to be one of her sons. . . . To exalt North Africa over al-Andalus is to prefer left to right, or to say the night is lighter than the day. Ridiculous!" At

about the same time in Toledo, Judah al-Harizi, writing in Hebrew, described his homeland as “a delight to the eyes. Her light was as the sun in the midst of heaven. The Perfume of her dust was as myrrh to the nostrils and the taste of her delicious fruits was as honey to the palate.” In 1615, Miguel de Cervantes gave voice to the pain of displacement many Moriscos (the last Spanish Muslims) felt in the lines of *Don Quixote* only two years after their final expulsion: “We did not know our good fortune until we lost it, and the greatest desire in almost all of us is to return to Spain; most of those, and there are many of them, who know the language as well as I do, abandon their wives and children and return, so great is the love they have for Spain; and now I know and feel the truth of the saying that it is sweet to love one’s country.” Spanish Jewish voices looked back at Sefarad with similar nostalgia, though it was mixed with bitterness over their own persecution and expulsion.

Though in recent years Spain and Portugal have offered citizenship to descendants of the Jews they expelled in 1492 and 1497 respectively, they have not extended the same courtesy to descendants of Andalusí Muslims, who are still considered strangers in their ancestral lands, “Eastern” or “Oriental” intruders in the Christian West. “Maghreb,” the Arabic name for the Kingdom of Morocco, essentially means “west.” The Iberian Peninsula is just as far west as Morocco. So, whose West is it anyway? Jews had been there in the West since Hispania belonged to the Roman Empire (which is still considered “the West” even though it included places such as Syria and Egypt that are not typically considered “Western” today), to when al-Andalus was in the Western reaches of the Arab world.

Andalusí monuments have long been considered part of Spain’s national patrimony. Today’s Spaniards are the guardians of some of the most amazing monuments in the Arab world, including the Alhambra fortress of Granada, the Giralda (ex-minaret, current bell tower) of the Cathedral of Seville, the Mosque of Córdoba, and the Alcázar or Fortress of Seville, to name a few. The question has always been whether the Spanish were curating the monuments of a subject colonial culture, as were the British in Egypt or India, or whether the Alhambra was, in fact, part of their own national cultural legacy.

The appropriation of Muslim and Jewish monuments in Spain followed a complicated series of events in which the Christians sometimes tolerated, sometimes persecuted, but finally expelled the Muslim and Jewish populations. King Ferdinand III of Castile (1230–52 CE), earned sainthood for conquering the important Andalusí cities of Qurtuba (Córdoba) and Ishbilya (Sevilla). Fernando’s son Alfonso X (r. 1252–84 CE) took a very different approach to religious coexistence. He established a school of Arabic studies in Seville and proposed the translation of the Qur’an, the Torah, the Talmud, and the *Zohar* (the foundational text of Jewish mysticism, written in Spain in the thirteenth century) into Castilian, the dialect of vernacular Latin that would eventually become known as Spanish. While he did maintain policies that by today’s standards seem harshly anti-Semitic (for his example, he legislated distinctive dress codes for Jews and forbade them to leave their houses during Holy Week), Alfonso was far more tolerant in his treatment of Jews and Muslims than other Christian monarchs.

Nonetheless, a rising tide of popular anti-Semitism over the course of the fourteenth century culminated in a wave of violent pogroms that swept Spain in the summer of 1391. Over

Author’s Open Access postprint version. For version of scholarly record, see publisher’s version: Wacks, David A. “Whose Spain is it, anyway?” *Whose Middle Ages? Teachable Moments for an ill-used past*. Edited by Andrew Albin, Mary C. Erler, Thomas O’Donnell, Nicholas L. Paul and Nina Rowe. Introduction by David Perry. Afterword by Geraldine Heng. Fordham University Press, 2019. <https://www.fordhampress.com/9780823285563/whose-middle-ages/>

the course of the fifteenth century, the situation grew worse so that by the second half of the century, the Pope would celebrate Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand as “The Catholic Monarchs” in recognition of their conquest of Muslim-ruled Granada and subsequent Expulsion of the Jews (1492 CE) and forced baptism of Muslims (1502 CE). Thus, Spain began to imagine itself as a wholly Christian society, inoculated against its Jewish and Muslim past by its zeal in eradicating these creeds from its midst.

All of this means that Spain and Portugal, since 1502 and until quite recently, have had virtually no officially Jewish or Muslim population. Subsequently, social prestige in Spain was largely a function of how actively not-Jewish or not-Muslim one was, or perhaps by how many Muslims your family killed on the battlefield. At the end of the fifteenth century, the Castilian poet Jorge Manrique (a high-ranking noble) could state quite plainly in a now-famous poem of his that “the good priests and monks earn salvation by praying and crying out to God/ and famous knights by suffering in struggle against the Muslims.” A steady stream of official letters of crusade from Rome reinforced this attitude with economic and spiritual support for those Iberian Christians who fought against Muslim-ruled Granada. This wedding of respectability with overt anti-Semitism persists, in modified forms, even today. Popular anti-Jewish violence historically swelled during Holy Week, when those faithful remembering the death of Jesus would visit local Jewish communities with violence in what they imagined was revenge for his death. In the city of León during Holy Week, it is traditional to drink wine mixed with lemonade, a practice still referred to as “killing jews” (*matar judíos*). By the same token, a town in Castile was, until 2015, named Castrillo Mata Judíos (*Camp Kill Jews*)—it’s now named Castrillo Mota de Judíos (*Jew Hill Camp*).

Given all this, it’s no surprise that the Hebrew and Arabic literature of the territory currently known as Spain and Portugal didn’t make it into the required reading lists of today’s Spanish school children and university students. In fact, despite the massive outpouring of very high-quality Arabic poetry produced on the Peninsula, you’d be hard pressed to walk into a popular bookstore in Madrid and find an anthology of Andalusí poets in Spanish translation.

However, despite centuries of Inquisition, expulsions, and cultural policing, Iberia remained a place where Jewish and Islamic culture continued to survive in different ways. The Expulsion of the Jews—and conversion to Christianity of those who chose to remain in 1492—transformed Spain from being the most important center of Hebrew learning in the Jewish world to being the most important center of Hebrew learning in the Latin Christian world. Many learned rabbis became Christians, entering the Church. Thus, Spain’s humanist universities excelled in Hebrew scriptural studies, and a team of scholars at the University of Alcalá de Henares published the first polyglot Bible (including the Hebrew, Latin, Greek, and Aramaic texts) in Europe in 1517 CE. However, one could also get into trouble studying Hebrew the *wrong* way. A few decades later, a Hebrew professor at the University of Salamanca, Friar Luis of León—a *converso* or descendant of Jews converted to Christianity—was jailed by the Inquisition from 1572–76 CE for translating the Song of Songs directly from Hebrew into Spanish (translations of Holy Scripture into the vernacular were technically prohibited at this time).

Author’s Open Access postprint version. For version of scholarly record, see publisher’s version: Wacks, David A. “Whose Spain is it, anyway?” *Whose Middle Ages? Teachable Moments for an ill-used past*. Edited by Andrew Albin, Mary C. Erler, Thomas O’Donnell, Nicholas L. Paul and Nina Rowe. Introduction by David Perry. Afterword by Geraldine Heng. Fordham University Press, 2019. <https://www.fordhampress.com/9780823285563/whose-middle-ages/>

The study of Arabic and Hebrew had long been one way in which Christian Iberian monarchs sought to dominate Muslim and Jewish minorities. Back in the thirteenth century, King Alfonso X of Castile and the friar Ramon Llull both opened schools of Arabic for Christian clerics to learn the language of the Qur'an. For them, the study of Arabic had two distinct goals: On the one hand, if you could understand the Qur'an, you had a better chance of converting Muslims; on the other, Castilian-speaking Christians stood to learn a great deal from Arabic books of science and astronomy.

Despite this early Christian Iberian interest in the superior material and scientific culture of al-Andalus, many Spaniards still do not consider Iberian Muslims and Jews and their cultural legacy as part of their own cultural identity. Why is this? The question of race may have something to do with it. Though modern sources often represent Andalusí Muslims as Black Africans (and to be sure there were some Black Africans among Andalusí Muslims), as far as we know the Muslims of the Peninsula were not, in general, physically distinguishable from their Christian neighbors: For example, sources describe the Caliph Abd al-Rahman III as having red hair and a red beard, which he dyed brown in order to appear more authentically Arab. Religious difference, which fulfilled a social function similar to that of what we like to call "race" today, was instead marked by clothing, hairstyle, food, and (sometimes) language. Some sources, such as the richly illustrated thirteenth-century *Cantigas de Santa Maria* of Alfonso X, depict Jews with stereotyped Semitic features that "normalize" after baptism (for example, large exaggerated noses become smaller), which suggests that these depictions were not meant to be physically accurate but rather to represent the spiritual transformation of Christian baptism.

Mass conversions of Jews in 1391 and 1492 CE, and then of Muslims in 1502 CE, created substantial populations of Christians who had once been practicing Jews or Muslims, or who had descended from practicing Jews and Muslims. These converts (*conversos*), who as Christians, did not face the same social restrictions as when they were Jews or Muslims, were now free to occupy powerful positions in Church, at court, and in local administration. One such convert, Pedro de la Cavallería, who after his conversion rose to power at the court of Alfonso IV of Aragon, was accused by the Inquisition of continuing to practice Judaism secretly. In his defense, he testified that his conversion (sincere or otherwise) unlocked tremendous social advancement for him. Inquisition records report him having said, "Could I as a Jew, ever have risen higher than a rabbinical post? But now, see, I am one of the chief councilors of the city. For the sake of the little man who was hanged [Jesus], I am accorded every honor, and I issue orders and decrees to the whole city of Saragossa." The rapid rise of such converts was a threat to Old Christians' sense of superiority; they sought a way to make the New Christians second-class citizens, as they had been as Jews. The answer was in the blood. Baptism, they argued, could not wash away the stain of Judaism from the blood of the *converso*, and if a Jew, by virtue of her stained blood, could not make a legitimate Christian, they should not enjoy the benefits accorded to other Christians whose blood was "pure."

In the middle of the fifteenth century, the state began to issue Blood Purity Laws (*estatutos de limpieza de sangre*), similar to the Nazi Nuremberg laws, restricting the rights and freedoms of New Christians. These were meant to keep New Christians as second-class citizens,

limit their professional and economic prospects, and reduce their social influence. These laws were backed by considerable force. Starting in 1478 CE, the Spanish Inquisition, nothing less than a massively international secret police (the *Santa Hermandad* or Holy Brotherhood), with relatively unlimited powers and resources, violently policed the borders of Spain's Christian identity. Charged with rooting out heresy in Spain's Christian community, the Inquisition ruthlessly targeted New Christians, incentivizing Spanish subjects to denounce their friends, neighbors, and family members for Judaizing, or practicing Judaism in secret. In some cases, they were authorized to persecute unconverted Jews as well. This very powerful institution soon became a very rich one as well: They were empowered to confiscate the property of their prisoners, with a cut going to the Crown. The incentives proved irresistible, and the Inquisition established offices all throughout Spain, the New World, and the Philippines.

Despite the threat of incarceration or even execution, many New Christians continued to practice Judaism and Islam clandestinely. Moriscos (literally "Muslim-ish"), as converts from Islam were derisively called, created an underground literature, written in Spanish with Arabic characters: *aljamiado* (from the Arabic word *ajamiyya* or non-Arabic language). Over the sixteenth century, the Spanish Crown issued a series of edicts meant to strip the Moriscos of their culture. They banned the use of the Arabic language in books and in daily speech, along with banning the traditional food, dress, music, and even communal baths used in Morisco communities. This increasing repression led to a bloody civil war in which Morisco forces, often viewed by Old Christians as a fifth column of Spain's rival Mediterranean superpower, the Ottoman Empire, rose up in the Alpujarra mountain range south of Granada and held off royal troops for three years before being brutally put down. Despite this decisive military defeat, at least some Moriscos continued to practice their culture and religion until their expulsion from Spain in the beginning of the seventeenth century. It is a little-known fact that less than a decade before the Mayflower reached Plymouth Rock, Spanish Muslims were continuing to live a legacy of Islam with nearly nine centuries of history, and Spanish Jews, some of whom had been educated at Catholic universities, plotted their escape to Amsterdam and Italy where they could live openly as Jews. Like it or not, for all the Inquisition's efforts over more than a century, Spain was still the land of the Three Cultures.

Further Reading

Students looking to learn more about Spain's Muslim and Jewish heritage should read the engaging and thought-provoking *The Ornament of the World*, by Maria Rosa Menocal (Boston: Little Brown, 2002), which is a standard work in the field. For focused studies of Muslim and Jewish history, respectively, see Brian Catlos, *Kingdoms of Faith: A New History of Islamic Spain* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), and Jane S. Gerber, *The Jews of Spain: A History of the Sephardic Experience* (New York: The Free Press, 1992). Matthew Carr tells part of the later story of the Muslim expulsion in *Blood and Faith: The Purging of Muslim Spain* (New York: New Press, 2009).

Author's Open Access postprint version. For version of scholarly record, see publisher's version: Wacks, David A. "Whose Spain is it, anyway?" *Whose Middle Ages? Teachable Moments for an ill-used past*. Edited by Andrew Albin, Mary C. Erler, Thomas O'Donnell, Nicholas L. Paul and Nina Rowe. Introduction by David Perry. Afterword by Geraldine Heng. Fordham University Press, 2019. <https://www.fordhampress.com/9780823285563/whose-middle-ages/>

James T. Monroe's *Hispano-Arabic Poetry: A Student Anthology* (2nd ed., Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2004) offers a highly accessible collection of some of the most important Arabic poets of medieval Iberia, while Peter Cole's *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950–1492* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) introduces readers to some of the rich corpus of Hebrew poems from the Peninsula.