



*The Ornament of  
the World*

*How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a  
Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*

by María Rosa Menocal

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A Reading Group Guide

## A conversation with María Rosa Menocal

*What was “the ornament of the world”? Where does the expression come from?*

The expression is a reflection of the Islamic culture of medieval Spain, which was in many ways the great culture of medieval Europe. From about the mid-eighth century until about the year 1000 this was an Islamic polity, centered in Cordoba, which at its height, in the mid-tenth century, declared itself the center of the Islamic world. “The ornament of the world” was an expression coined at this time, an especially valuable testimony because it was a famous nun, Hroswitha (she wrote plays), who used this lovely expression. She lived in a nunnery in Germany and she never visited al-Andalus—which was the Arabic name for medieval Spain—but she knew about the extraordinary cultural achievements of Cordoba from the archbishop of al-Andalus. This highest-ranking Christian of the realm had visited the courts of Germany because he was a part of the caliph’s diplomatic corps—along with the highest-ranking member of the Jewish community, who was in fact the caliph’s foreign minister. They were both part of that cosmopolitan and multi-religious culture of Islamic Spain that was materially and intellectually the most advanced in Europe for a very long time.

*What do you mean when you refer, in the book’s subtitle, to a “culture of tolerance”?*

This means several things. In the first instance, for several hundreds of years—that’s a very long time for a good thing to last!—it meant a liberal and productive understanding of what is called the *dhimma* in Arabic, the “covenant” that is part of Islamic religious law (which means it can’t be changed!) that mandates the protection of the two other “Peoples of the Book,” or *dhimmi*, as Christians and Jews are called, when they live under Muslim sovereignty. As with any law, religious or secular, interpretation is everything, and, as we understand all too clearly today, there can be wildly divergent understandings among Muslims—as well as among Christians and among Jews—about how to interpret and apply almost any aspect of a law.

The *dhimma* was interpreted in a particularly benign and generous way by the first rulers of Islamic Spain. The “founding father” of Western Islamic culture was in fact the survivor of a coup in Damascus that changed the course of Islamic history—and he and his descendants established themselves in Spain, where their rather promiscuous and open cultural vision and their lenient application of the *dhimma* covenant established itself so deeply that by the middle of the tenth century we see what that German nun was so impressed by: a prosperous and library-filled Islamic society within which the Christian primate is not only thoroughly Arabized (which at the time meant also a level of education in the classical tradition, including Greek philosophy, that was unimaginable in the Christian West) but a respected and successful member of the Islamic community. And the Jewish community was even more successful and prominent.

Most important, however, is that Muslims, Christians, and Jews did not have separate cultures based on religious differences but rather were part of a broad and expansive culture that had incorporated elements of all their traditions, a

culture that all could and did participate in regardless of their religion. Writing poetry in Arabic was what educated people did, not just Muslims; and when the Jews of Toledo built a synagogue with horseshoe arches they were adopting the signature style of a culture rather than of a religion—indeed, those same horseshoe arches, which are the unmistakable sign of the Great Mosque of Cordoba, were themselves adopted by the early Muslim rulers of Cordoba from the old Visigothic Christian churches. It was, in other words, a culture that rejected religious or political correctness as the basis for any sort of aesthetic or intellectual value.

*What does The Ornament of the World tell us that we ought to know about today?*

The first thing it tells us is that these three religions have a shared history that is itself part of European history and culture. And that this was not merely a grudgingly shared moment but instead a very long and illustrious chapter in the history of the West. The fact that it eventually ended—which many people point to in order to diminish it or to claim that enmity is the only possible condition for these three monotheistic faiths—in no way negates the many rewards, social as well as cultural, of that age.

The second crucial thing it tells us is that the enemies of that kind of tolerance and cultural coexistence were always present and came from quarters within all three faith communities. As I said before, it was then (as it is now) clearly a matter of differing interpretation of the same scripture and the same religious traditions. Sometimes it was Muslims who objected to the policies of tolerance of other Muslims; sometimes it was Christians who were appalled by intermarriages; and sometimes it was Jews who claimed that the Arabization of Jewish culture was a betrayal of their heritage.

*Isn't the period described in your book generally regarded as the "Golden Age" of Jewish culture? Why did it occur there and then?*

The Jews of al-Andalus flourished because they were able and willing to assimilate into the Arabized culture of Muslim-dominated Spain. This was a two-way street. First of all, the benevolent social policies of the rulers of Cordoba were the indispensable foundation, and even though there were tolerated and successfully Arabized Jewish communities throughout the Islamic world during the Middle Ages (and beyond), it is also true that none ever achieved the heights of prominence and cultural achievement that the Andalusian communities did, and I think that has to do with the special qualities of the Andalusian interpretation of the *dhimma*.

But beyond the tolerance of the ruling Muslims—and, later on, of many ruling Christians—it was also crucial that the Jewish community did not imagine that they were any less true to their faith and their own traditions because of their assimilation. This was far more than a mere linguistic matter but involved the adoption of nearly all aspects of the culture of the moment, profane poetry in Arabic and the study of Greek philosophy and a dozen other things that others would later consider “not Jewish.” In many ways the Jewish community exemplified the wonderful principle about accepting contradiction in one’s identity that was once wittily enunciated by F. Scott Fitzgerald: that the first-rate mind is the one that can hold two contradictory ideas at the same time. Indeed, the major figures of the Golden Age (all of whom lived in the period after the fall of the Caliphate of Cordoba and thus in very uneasy political times) were great precisely because they thrived while holding complex and contradictory values. My favorite is the first great poet of the Hebrew revival, who proclaimed himself the David of his age

in one of his poems, a poem where he is celebrating the victory of the army he had led to battle for his Muslim sovereign.

*Did any of what went on in medieval Spain shape European culture beyond?*

The easiest influence to recognize has always been the material one, since in fact Europe was virtually flooded by a whole range of technological and material products that arrived either from or through Spain. For example: dozens of different kinds of foods and a whole orchestra's worth of new musical instruments, as well as such objects as the astrolabe, which allowed the measurement of star positions so that one could navigate once out of sight of land. But what we should all now understand clearly is that, then as now, it is nearly impossible to isolate material and technological influences from broader cultural ones, and among the many ironies here is that during much of this long chapter of European history it was the Muslims, or the Muslim-dominated culture of Spain, that was regarded warily as the revolutionary cultural avant-garde that purists thought threatened traditional values. New music, philosophy that challenged the principle that faith was unquestionable and not subject to rational scrutiny, a whole range of high-tech products, including some that made it possible to build vast libraries—all of this and more came across the extremely porous and ever-changing borders between the different parts of Europe, which of course was not yet anything like the collection of distinct nation-states it would later become.

One of the keys to understanding the Middle Ages is to grasp precisely that borders were far more fluid and that educated people (and often others) were far more multilingual than they would later become. And at a certain point, toward the end of the eleventh century and then for several hundred

years thereafter, the great rage was for the translations that you could get in Spain. The Christian city of Toledo became what one could fairly call the center of Europe's intellectual life for some time as translators and would-be translators flocked there from all over Christian Europe to partake of the near-frenzy of translation of the philosophical and scientific texts both from the Greek tradition and from the Muslim tradition that had been translating and interpreting the Greeks (as well as developing many scientific fields) since the late eighth century in Baghdad.

*Why is this chapter of European history—which, after all, lasted some seven hundred years—so little known?*

It is interesting that we mostly grow up being taught that Greek philosophy—to continue that good example—is unknown during the Middle Ages and that it is “rediscovered” during the Renaissance. The word *Renaissance*, of course, means “rebirth,” and it was intended to suggest that it was the rebirth after the long darkness of the medieval period, a darkness that included ignorance of the classical tradition. To a certain extent this was just the typical disdain of one period that follows another: we, as “moderns,” tend to be dismissive or contemptuous of those before us, whom we see as less advanced in one way or another. But beyond that I believe that incomprehension of the medieval period—and so all its bad press and the distortions about it—was rooted in the rise of the nations, with their relatively clearly defined identities, more often than not with single languages and single religions perceived as necessary to the sorts of national and cultural unities that were developing. Paradoxically (from our “globalized” perspective), medieval Europe was increasingly incomprehensible as a place without easy borders among peoples and cultures. And most incomprehensible (and rep-

rehensible, for many) was medieval Spain, Muslim and Jewish as well as Christian.

The stereotype of the Middle Ages as a period of religious intolerance and warfare is in part also the product of the latter period, and especially so among Spanish historians, who had to justify the expulsions of both Jews and Muslims from Spain. That later mentality simply could not fathom that there was once a time when religious difference was no more (and sometimes less) important than other causes for violence among communities. It is of course true that there was intolerance and warfare that pitted one faith against another. As I said before, within each of the three faiths there were figures, at times influential, who argued stridently for intolerance and believed in religious warfare. But this was far from universal, and Realpolitik as well as genuine tolerance were at least as often the rule of the day: the Spanish national hero known as the Cid in fact fought bitterly against the Castilian monarch of his day, and for periods of time was the leader of Muslim armies. His name is actually an Arabic word—it was what his troops reverently called the great warrior, “lord.”

*Do the Muslims remember this extraordinary period in their history?*

Indeed they do, although it is more often than not a vague memory—and sometimes as distorted as the memory within the European tradition, as Osama bin Laden’s recent references to al-Andalus make clear. For him, and for some others, it is just a slightly different version of the same cliché about perpetual religious enmity and warfare that is pervasive in the West. And just as Christian Spaniards of recent centuries have a hard time imagining or accepting that the Cid would have just as gladly gone into battle against a Christian



as a Muslim, some latter-day Muslims have a hard time imagining that much of the crucial destruction of al-Andalus came at the hand of fundamentalist Muslims, Berbers from Morocco, long before any Christian army did the slightest bit of damage.

But al-Andalus has also long stood as a revered memory of a time when the Islamic world was at its height in many ways, and there has always been in some quarters an understanding that in considerable measure this was because of the tolerance it exhibited toward both other religious communities and other cultures. There's a superb scene in the movie *Lawrence of Arabia* where we see an eloquent reflection of this, of the memory of al-Andalus as a unique moment in the history of the Arabs. Prince Faisal accuses Lawrence of being one of those "desert-loving Englishmen," whereas the Arabs instead love fountains and gardens—and the epitome of such love, and a grandeur that once shamed what was a dimly lit northern Europe, comes soon enough in the conversation when the embattled prince, weary of war, evokes the memory of the "vanished gardens of Cordoba." In Arabic poetry the "gardens of Cordoba" have for centuries been a complex trope both for the heights of cultural achievement and centrality as well as for the commensurate depths of tragic loss. And the Great Mosque of Cordoba—even in its mutilated form, with a rather grotesque Baroque church inserted right in the middle of it—is among the most breathtaking and moving mosques ever built anywhere in the Islamic world, to which odes have been written.

*How did you come to write this book?*

I began my academic career as a scholar of medieval poetry, and I was always especially interested in the songs of the troubadours, which in many ways revolutionized the culture

of Europe during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, with new instruments, new beats, and new ideas about love. This, in turn, led to two interests that are at the heart of *The Ornament of the World*: The first is that marvelous multi-lingual and very innovative culture of al-Andalus, which undoubtedly contributed to the musical and lyrical “revolution” of the troubadours of southern France. And the second is the question of how and why the medieval period has been, and continues to be, so grossly misrepresented in almost all of our histories—from the fact that we have so little knowledge that medieval European culture included, *centrally*, the study of Greek philosophy as it was interpreted by hundreds of years of Muslim and Jewish commentaries to the fact that we still use the word *medieval* to mean “dark” and “unenlightened” when, in some respects, Europe has never been as enlightened since as it was then.

After decades of teaching both about Islamic Spain and about the whole series of cultural revolutions, most of them tied to Spain in one way or another, that make medieval Europe far more modern and “relevant” than anyone is likely to imagine, I decided I wanted to write a book on this for the general public. Among the many issues I felt were illuminated in interesting ways are those that have to do with “identity” and “political correctness,” since medieval (as opposed to later) European culture was in many ways delighted to have a complex identity—and one quite at opposite extremes from anything like political correctness. I began writing *The Ornament of the World* about four years ago and finished in the summer of 2001, and felt satisfied that I was telling a story that had a lot to offer our culture and our times. Since then, of course, the unimagined events of September 11 have added a dimension of relevance that is, for me, bittersweet.

## Questions and topics for discussion

1. Did reading *The Ornament of the World* in any way change your view of the Middle Ages? How? Why do you think the perception of the Middle Ages as a dark and benighted era has persisted over the centuries?
2. What features does the Quran have in common with the scriptural texts of the other two “Peoples of the Book”? In what ways do the three scriptures differ? Discuss the role that pre-Islamic poetry played in the creation of a certain poetic ethos in Arabic culture.
3. What are the origins of the dhimma statutes in Islam and why were they so crucial during the years of the expansion of Islam? Are there comparable regulations regarding other faiths in either Judaism or Christianity?
4. Discuss the reactions of the Christian and Jewish communities to the arrival of Islam in the Iberian peninsula. Why did these two communities react so differently to what was, in effect, the same level of protection afforded them as dhimmi communities? What might explain the very high rate of conversion among Christians?
5. The years of relative political chaos that followed the dissolution of the caliphate were years of increasing cultural riches. Discuss the seeming paradox of the positive effects of the disintegration of the caliphate. Can you think of other historical moments characterized by political instability that produced comparable cultural flowering?

6. How and why did the translation movement, especially the stage during which the sciences and philosophy were the principal texts being translated, change the landscape of northern Christian Europe? What problems did the arrival of the Greek philosophical tradition pose for the three monotheistic traditions, and why? How have these same problems—the opposition between faith and reason, as many would see it—continued to shape Western civilization since the twelfth century?
7. Discuss the shifting attitudes on the part of the ruling Christians from the beginning of the thirteenth century on. What role did the Almohads play in this period?
8. Consider the construction of so-called *mudejar* (i.e., “in the Arab style”) palaces and other monuments in the fourteenth century. Does it seem plausible that someone like Peter the Cruel would have been interested in making explicit reference to the “culture of tolerance” that preceded him? Or had the style at that point become merely “Spanish” style, devoid of any attachment to religion?
9. Discuss the ways in which the events of 1492 are not—as some would argue—the predictable outcome of the medieval history of Spain but instead, for many of those living through it, something unimaginable.
10. What can a work of literature convey about a historical moment that a work of history cannot? How is our vision of medieval Spain enriched by reading the works of writers who mined their exquisite imaginations as well as their understanding of history? If you were going to take some “episode” from the history of medieval Spain and turn it into a short story or a novel (or a play or a poem . . .), which historical episode would you choose and why?