Inter-religious Coexistence in Cordoba During the Umayyad Period

Ahmad Nur Fuad[1]

Abstract

This article attempts to explore the intricate socio-religious relations in Cordoba during the Umayyad period which was marked by unprecedented cultural vibrancy and intellectual ferment. Situated at the crossroads of diverse faiths—Islam, Christianity, and Judaism—Cordoba exemplified a remarkable coexistence that transcended religious boundaries. This article contends that the city's unique confluence of cultures, fostered by a spirit of tolerance, not only defined its historical identity but also served as a paradigm for interfaith harmony, intellectual exchange, and cultural synthesis. Examining the complicated interplays between social and religious elements, this article unravels the complexities of coexistence, conflict, and collaboration, illustrating how Cordoba's inclusive ethos propelled advancements in reciprocal peaceful co-existence. Beyond its medieval walls, the lasting legacy of Cordoban society provides a compelling historical precedent for fostering understanding, tolerance, and cooperation in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: *Inter-Religious Relations, Cultural Assimilation, Religious Tolerance, Cordoba, Convivencia*

INTRODUCTION

Cordoban society during the Umayyad period, from the eighth to twelfth centuries, has been characterized by its social and religious dynamics. Located within the heart of al-Andalus, this city is regarded to have served as the jewel in the crown of Islamic civilization during the Medieval Ages. Against a backdrop of intellectual efflorescence, architectural splendor, and cultural diversity, the intricate dance between social and religious elements unfolded, shaping the very fabric of Cordoba's identity (Torlak, et al, 2016; González-Gutiérrez, 2023). This article delves into the captivating narrative of social-religious relations that characterized this medieval metropolis, unraveling the complexities of coexistence, conflict, and collaboration that defined the unique Islamic Cordoba.

In examining the intricacy of socio-religious relations within Islamic Cordoba, this article argues that the city's unique confluence of diverse cultures, intellectual ferment, and religious cohabitation not only defined its historical identity but also served as a paradigm for interfaith or interreligious harmony, intellectual exchange, and cultural synthesis By unraveling the dynamics of coexistence, collaboration, and even conflict, this study aims to highlight the continuing legacy of Cordoba as a beacon of tolerance and innovation during a transformative period in Islamic history (Akasoy, 2010).

Within the landscape of Islamic Cordoba, the interplay between social and religious lives emerges as a testimonial evidence to the city's exceptional historical significance. This article argues that the city's unique confluence of cultures, fostered by a spirit of tolerance, not only defined its historical identity but also served as a paradigm for interfaith harmony, intellectual exchange, and cultural synthesis. Examining the complicated interplays between social and religious elements, this article attempts to explore the complexities of coexistence and mutual collaboration, illustrating how Cordoba's inclusive ethos propelled advancements in reciprocal peaceful co-existence. Cordoba, at its peak, was not only a geographic location but also a melting pot of cultural fusion, and religious pluralism. Accordingly, the coexistence of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in this great metropolis fostered an environment where diverse traditions and ideas converged. This unique harmony then significantly shaped the city's identity. This article reveals that Cordoba's legacy serves as an enduring example of how, during a crucial era in Islamic history, an inclusive and tolerant society could thrive inspiring lessons that resonate far beyond its medieval walls.

[1] Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia. E-mail: nurfuad@uinsa.ac.id

Socio-Historical Context

The presence of Muslims (both Arabs and Berbers) in the Iberian Peninsula beginning from 711 to 1492 has become an important part of the history of the Islamic world. Various Muslim dynasties that ruled Spain during that period have created economic prosperity, political stability, intellectual and cultural progress in many key cities in the region. Intellectual and cultural legacy eventually made an important contribution to the intellectual and cultural development in Spain or even Europe in modern times. Such a scholar as Hinkle even asserts that the Muslims had played a role as "civilizational bridge" (Hinkle, 2009).

One of the most important cities during the period of Muslim rule in Spain, particularly that of the Umayyad amirs and caliphs, from the eighth to twelfth centuries, was Cordoba, located on the banks of the Guadalquivir river (Arabic: *Wādī al-Kabīr*). In the tenth century, Cordoba became one of the important centers of politics and culture of the Islamic world, a city whose importance can be compared with Baghdad and Cairo, to the extent that a geographer of Baghdad Ibn Hawqal who visited Spain in the mid tenth century praised the progress of Cordoba and stated that only Baghdad or Constantinople could compete it (Grabar, 2007; Fletcher, 1992). In addition, Cordoba's fame spread among a number of European Christian intellectuals. In the middle of the tenth century, as stated by Menocal, Cordoba has been known as "the ornament of the world" (Menocal, 2002).

Before the coming of Islam to Iberia, there had been inhabitants with different religious backgrounds, such as Jews and Christians. Jews were in the Iberian Peninsula by the fourth century, and the first test of Jewish-Christian relations came in the Visigothic period. Kennedy, 2016). The Church was actually exhibiting a rather tolerant policy during the time period that Jews experienced a great deal of animosity. The theory that the conversion of the originally Arian Visigoths to Catholicism caused this hostility being rejected. In fact, it was Byzantine legal codes and anti-Jewish attitudes that strongly influenced the Catholic Visigothic kingdom. The main centers of Jewish population under the Visigoths appear to have been Toledo, Merida, Seville, Tarragona, and Narbonne, with other populations along the Mediterranean coast in Tortosa, Sagunto, Elche, and Adra. However, precise archeological evidence is lacking in the matter of where Jews lived and conjectures vary (Vaughan, 2003).

Originally, there was significant hatred among the Byzantines and their Visigothic rivals. Athangild, a Visigothic candidate of the rival faction struggling to gain control, invited the aid of the Byzantines in 551. The Byzantines were more than happy to use the excuse to enter the Iberian Peninsula: they took control of almost all of southern Spain, including such major cities as Cordoba, Granada, and Cartagena. The defeat of the Byzantines by Swinthila and the final expulsion of them from Iberia in 625 marked an end to their influence politically, but certainly not religiously (Watt and Cachia, 1965).

The social delineation among religious communities in the Iberian Peninsula during this period was primarily driven by political dynamics, with the dominant group exerting influence over others. Commencing in the fourth century, the status of Jews became precarious as Christianity ascended to the official religion of the Roman Empire. This instability temporarily abated following the collapse of the Roman Empire under the Visigothic rule. However, in 589, during the reign of Visigothic King Reccared I, anti-Jewish laws were enacted, marking the onset of persecution against Jews in the Iberian Peninsula (Gampel, 1992). This marked a pivotal moment in the degradation of the Jewish community within Christian society. By 613, King Sisebut intensified the pressure, mandating that Jews either embrace Christianity or face expulsion from Hispania. The Jewish population, alongside a minority of pagans, remained a marginalized presence until the arrival of the Umayyads in 711.

The Muslim conquest of Spain in 711 was the result of Berber troops entering from North Africa. The Iberian peninsula's name was then changed from Hispania to al-Andalus under Muslim control. The peninsula again gained significant numbers in 740 when immigrants from Syria and Iraq came to the region. During the eighth through the twelfth centuries, so many Berbers came to Spain that the majority of the population was soon Muslim. At the same time, there was significant emigration from al-Andalus to North Africa (Kennedy, 1996).

Al-Andalus at the time of Umayyad dynasty can be described as a very developed region, represented by one of its most important cities, Cordoba. The city had been very cosmopolitan at the time. The geographer Ibn

Hawqal who visited Cordoba in the second half of the tenth century states that the city did not have its equivalence in the Maghrib, nor the Upper Mesopotamia, Syria or Egypt in term of the number of its inhabitants, its width, its markets, its cleanliness, its mosque's architecture and public bathing. When big cities of Europe at the time had no more than thousands of inhabitants, Cordoba was inhabited by at least 100 thousand people in areas more than hundreds of hectare (Fletcher, 1992).

Demographic Composition

Cordoban society at the time of the Umayyad caliphate consisted of different ethnicities, cultures and religions. Muslim ethnic minority of Arab descendants occupied important positions as 'ulama, government officials, while other Muslim groups as soldiers, the Gothics and Hispanics who converted to Islam form a member of society. The Jews formed ten percents of inhabitants, a bit more than the Arabs, and equals to the number of Berbers. The Jews particularly involved in the business and intellectual enterprises. The majority of native Christian Mozarabs were Catholics of Visigoth rites, speaking in Latin variant close to Spanish, Portuguese and Catalan languages with Arab influences.

The large number of Berbers living in al-Andalus led to serious problems: the Muslims were sharply divided along national and ethnic lines, with strong rivalries between the groups often erupting in rebellion. Claims of social-climbing aristocrats of 'Arabic' descent intensified these rivalries. Many Berbers falsified their origins and genealogies and adopted Arab tribal names to establish association with one of the elite tribes of early Islam. The claim of 'Arabization' propaganda comes from this phenomenon since early Muslim chronicles of the conquests make it clear that the true Arabs were opposed to traveling beyond the boundaries of their homeland in the Arabian Peninsula (Novikoff, 2005).

Following the Muslim invasion and conquest in 711, the majority of Visigoths went out of Spain to other parts of Europe. But the Christian who did not leave were gradually joined by other new immigrants, many of which settled in the very heart of Muslim al-Andalus. These Christians enthusiastically adopted many elements of the luxurious lifestyle of the Muslims, including dress, architecture, interest in literature and poetry, and the Arabic language. The term "Mozarabs" refers to Christians who adopted the customs and styles of the Muslims without actually converting to Islam. However, many of these Mozarabs did not commit to the absolute requirements of the Christian religion. This can be seen evidently in the high degree of intermarriage between Muslims and Christians, particularly between a Muslim man and a Christian woman, usually resulting in the conversion of women. For example, as stated previously, the most powerful ruler of Muslim Spain, 'Abd al-Rahman III, was the grandson of a Christian Basque princess, and his son al-Hakam II also married a Basque girl. 'Abd al-'Aziz, son of Musa ibn Nusayr who conquered the Iberian peninsula and governed until he was killed in 716, married the wife of Rodrigo, the last Visigothic ruler (Vaughan, 2003).

Intermarriage also took place between Christian men and Muslim women. These marriages were actually a violation of Church law, but were frequently overlooked. Christian law imposed the death penalty on a free Christian woman who married a slave, Muslim, or Jew. This was clearly a double standard since Christian men were not threatened as Christian women. The most well-known example of this case is Alfonso VI of Leon who married Zayda, the daughter-in-law of al-Mu'tamid, the ruler of Seville from 1069-1091 (Vaughan, 2003).

Under Muslim control, the *dhimmah* was a contract that allowed non-Muslim indigenous people of the Iberian peninsula to continue about their ways of life under the agreement that they pay extra taxes, along with submission to Muslim superiority. The *dhimmis*, people protected by the *dhimmah*, were allowed to practice their own beliefs and traditions given that they did not interfere with Islamic law. The non-Muslims were not able to rise to positions of power in the state, nor were they granted the same privileges as Muslims.

Social Classes

The Arab-Muslims occupied a high social hierarchy. The Muslims had a social position higher than the Jews who was socially higher than the Christians. The Christian and Jews were regarded as *dhimmis* and had to pay *jizyah* (poll-tax). A half of Cordoban inhabitants are said to have been Muslims in the tenth century, and

increased 70% in the eleventh century. This was in part due to local conversion, despite its smaller number compared to the migration of Muslims from other regions in the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa.

One of the problems arising from the social interaction between Muslim and Christians was the question about the relationship between public and private religious identity. Most Christians saw the Islam of Cordoba as a religion of public life, of the court. Islam was seen as a set of cultural and social skill, rather than simply personal faith. The association of Islam with public life explains why –according to Christian sources- it was young men and not women who are converting to Islam. The public nature of Islam, particularly in Cordoba, may also have prompted Christians to think about their own religion in the same terms. Perhaps Christianity could not be defined by purely private even secret worship. Perhaps it needed to be part of the believer's public life as Islam so clearly was for Muslim believers. One of the major indicators of status at court was the extent to which one could claim to be Arab as opposed to simply Muslim (Coope, 1993).

There is a complex relation between lineage, cultural ability, and social status. Coope explains that in the case of ninth-century Cordoba being Arab was partly a question of blood. This means that people who could trace their lineage back to aristocratic Arab families enjoyed a certain social precedence. Cultural factor was at least as important as blood, however. High status at court or administration was often linked to the ability to speak and write Arabic language well and to knowledge of Arabic literature, either sacred or secular. Skill in Arabic language and letters did not always follow religious or ethnic line. One did not need to be either Muslim or of Arab descent to be expert in Arabic language or letters. There were many converts or *dhimmīs* at court who were respected and celebrated for their linguistic abilities. Therefore, any young man who wanted to work in government offices, regardless of his religious or ethnic background, was advised to learn Arabic (Coope, 1993).

Cultural Assimilation

During the Umayyad rule, the Jews and Christians who have been assimilated to Islamic or Arabic culture played important role in the development of Islamic culture. Menocal, as cited by Shenk, illustrates a 250-year experiment in creating what is described as a 'culture of tolerance', among Christians, Jews and Muslims. As has been discussed earlier, the situation is said to have begun since about 750 with the escape of 'Abd al-Rahman I (r.756-788 as amir) of the Umayyad dynasty from Damascus to the west after its collapse at the hand of the 'Abbasids. The new world of 'Abd al-Rahman I was marked by the "open heart and eclectic syncretism," suitable with the Umayyad character: skillful of performing the "best appropriation" with new things they found in the newly conquered land and culture (Shenk, 2006; Anderson & Owen [eds.], 2007).

With strong and capable administration, 'Abd al-Rahman I succeeded in reducing ethnic rivalries between Syrian and Berber soldiers in his kingdom, even when they once helped Charlemagne in an alliance against the Muslim power. 'Abd al-Rahman I was himself a son of mixed ethnicity (Berber mother and Syrian father). Therefore, he could become a good relative for the Berber settlers who came across from North Africa to the Iberian Peninsula in the early eighth century (Shenk, 2006).

From the earliest period of the Islamic conquest, the treatment of Christian and Jews in Muslim Iberia was determined by the Quranic teachings known as *dhimmah*. They became protected but subordinate minority within the Muslim state. Jews and Christians were allowed to worship and govern their communities according to their own religious doctrines and laws, but such autonomy was always restricted. In theory, at least, they were not allowed to build new churches or synagogues, to hold public religious processions, or ring church bells (Carr, 2009).

With the consolidation of Muslim rule in the Iberian Peninsula, a large number of Spanish Christians converted to Islam, either out of conviction or convenience, and became known as *muwallads*. The Christian communities that remained as a minority in the midst of a dominant Arab or Islamic culture were known as *mozarabes* or "Arabized" Christians. Like all minorities, the Mozarabs were faced with the risk of erosion of their distinctive religious and cultural character because of intense contact with the cultural traditions of the majority (Alfonso, 2008).

Although some Muslim authorities included Christians in their courts or administration, high office and important positions were reserved for Muslims and Arabic speakers. This tendency seemingly increased the

temptation among non-Muslims to convert to Islam. Even Christians who chose not to convert were not immune to Islamic cultural tradition that surrounded them. Many Mozarabs spoke Arabic as well as Latin, and the Mozarabic Church even incorporated Arabic into the liturgy. This unique fact was regarded as a violation by Christians outside Spain, who thought the Spanish Church to be heterodox, or deviating from orthodoxy (Carr, 2009).

Convivencia: Peaceful Inter-Religious Co-Existence

This wealthy and apparently stable state elicited much admiration at the time and nostalgia for the lost glories of Andalus has remained a minor but continuing motif in Arabic culture ever since. In recent years, in fact, there has been a renewed interest, especially in the west, in the concept of *convivencia*. Convivencia, 'living together' in Spanish, has come to be applied to the perceived situation in Andalus at the time of the caliphate when members of the three great monotheistic faiths, Muslims, Christians and Jews, lived together in harmony and, at least to some extent, shared a common culture (Kennedy, 2016). Assessing the social and religious development in al-Andalus during that period, many modern historians launch a debate on the existence of different religious and cultural groups and their harmonious social interaction. Some assert that what is popularly known as *convivencia* is typically Iberian phenomenon (Abate, 2018).

Literally, the word *convivencia* means 'living together'. Historically speaking, the term "*convivencia de normas*" is used by Ramón Menéndez Pidal to explain the phenomena of the coexistence of different forms of early Romance languages (Glick, 1992). As cited by Glick, Pidal highlighted the friction between different language norms as a competition. He also suggested that there had been a kind of cultural evolutionism, where the weakest would become extinct through means of natural selection (Glick, 1992). Even though this word is regarded as new in the history of medieval Europe, many historians suggest that European society at the time of James I was multicultural in nature, where people of different religions, languages, ethnicities, and cultural traditions lived and co-existed. However, there is a positive connotation to the word suggesting that people lived peacefully with one another.

The definition of *convivencia* sets the backbone for the more widely comprehended idea of *convivencia* as suggested by Américo Castro. Thomas Glick summarizes that "Castro retains something of Menéndez Pidal's usage, presenting medieval Iberian culture as a kind of a field of interaction among all kinds of cultural elements originating in the different confessional groups that, in his characterization, functioned like castes" (Glick, 1992: 12). As Glick said, Castro compares the different Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to the rigid caste system, although the use of the term caste to refer to the three different religious identities can raise serious problems. This suggests that there is no exchange between the three groups.

While there may not have been much movement between the three groups in regards to religious doctrine or belief, the culture was permeable to external influence. Glick continues to elaborate on the difference between assimilation, integration, and acculturation (Glick, 1992). For him, assimilation suggests that one religion dominates another, while integration proposes that there is a process of normalization. Acculturation, on the other hand, refers to cultural change as a result of physical and emotional interaction with a new group.

In addition to social context, the artistic styles of all three religions were often combined to create distinct visual languages for the Iberian Peninsula. Bright and colorful Mozarabic manuscripts were created and the horseshoe arch became well associated with medieval Spanish architecture. *Convivencia* allowed for cultural tolerance and exchange, although there was still a limitation. Focusing on the power struggle between Islam and Christianity, both groups were willing to use visual language differently in situations that best suited their needs. For example, Christian monasteries developed a distinct style that appealed to both Christians and Muslims in the sense that they were modest buildings that mimicked iconic symbolism found in Islamic art and architecture, like the banded horseshoe arch.

The more specific technicalities of all of these words lend themselves to be used in the argument regarding *convivencia*. María Rosa Menocal portrays a setting of cultural tolerance in medieval Spain in her *The Ornament of the World*. She writes:

> In its moments of great achievement, medieval culture positively thrived on holding at least two, and often many more, contrary ideas at the same time. This was the chapter of Europe's culture when Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived side by side and, despite their intractable differences and enduring hostilities, nourished a complex culture of tolerance [and] it found expression in often unconscious acceptance that contradictions [...] could be positive and productive (Menocal, 2002: 11).

The reason for this quotation is because Menocal's language is extremely suggestive and leads the reader to imagine an idealized image. Her choice in words, such as "positively," "positive," "productive," and "nourished," brings the reader into conceptualizing a place of peaceful interactions and of teamwork. While she fairly acknowledges the indisputable and conceptual differences between the religious groups, she emphasizes the tolerance during the period of time. She appears to be projecting current anxieties in her book as she makes comparisons to what modern day tolerance is (Menocal, 2002), although Menocal's optimistic understanding of *convivencia* is not unchallenged.

The historical situation is more nuanced. While it is accurate to say that there was minimal active persecution of Christians in Andalus, they were permitted to worship in churches and monasteries. Additionally, Christian bishops played a significant role in governing the Christian population. 'Abd al-Rahman III or al-Nasir (r.912-929 as amir, 929-961 as caliph)) even appointed the Christian Recemundo as an ambassador to both Aachen and Constantinople. Interfaith relations were not static, and in the ninth century, there was some resistance to Muslim rule. The 'martyrs of Córdoba,' a devout group of Christians, openly insulted Prophet Muhammad and the Islamic faith, leading to their deaths despite intervention from the opposing bishop of Córdoba and attempts by Muslim authorities to convince them to recant. In the early tenth century, a rebel leader in the mountains of southern Spain, Ibn Hafsūn, sought support by presenting himself as a champion of Christians (Kennedy, 2016).

During the reign of 'Abd al-Rahman III and the following Muslim rulers of the *ta'ifa* kingdoms, the coexistence of multicultural society happened. However, this situation was not uniquely Iberian, since in different regions outside Iberia there had been co-existence between Muslims, Christians and Jews in, for example, the Norman kingdoms of Sicily and in the principalities set up by the crusaders in Syria and Palestine. While co-existence in the latter areas was very short, the *convivencia* in the Iberian Peninsula lived longer than any other areas (Fletcher, 1992; Sofier 2009).

As was in previous decades, in the present time not all scholars agree with the theory that medieval Spain was colored by harmonious social relations between adherents of different religions. Dario Fernandez-Morera maintains that what is believed by many scholars as a peaceful coexistence of different religious entities (Muslims, Christians and Jews) in al-Andalus is "historically unfounded, a myth, [and] the fascinating cultural achievements of Islamic Spain cannot obscure the fact that it was never an example of peaceful *convivencia*" (Fernandez-Morera, 2006: 23). Fernandez-Morera views the reign of Muslim rulers in Cordoba was based on many intolerant policies, such as the demolition of the ancient Catholic church of Cordoba to build the mosque. He also states that during the reign of 'Abd al-Rahman I and his successor, 'Abd al-Rahman II (r.822-852 as amir), Catholics suffered repressive policies such as confiscation of property, enslavement and high taxation to support the building of Cordoba as a center of Islamic civilization (Fernandez-Morera, 2006).

A contesting view against the idea of *convivencia* has been advocated by Claudio Sánchez Albornoz. He maintains that the three religions do not serve as an example of a symbiosis relationship, but rather an "antibiosis" one (Glick, 1992). He defends that the reason for the appropriation of different cultures was due to fueling competition between religions. This lacks evidence and support as a theory, but creates a polemic discussion on the issue of *convivencia*. In an effort to make clearer the important role of religion, it is important to make a distinction between social and cultural tolerance (Ray, 2005). While there was a tolerance for cultural movement and interconnection between the three religions, there always remained a strict social hierarchy.

The *convivencia* of medieval Spain describes the cultural tolerance, but fails to acknowledge the drastic social and political prejudices. While certain regions adopted different styles to add to their visual lexicon, they never swayed in their hierarchical values. This means that while different culture was diffused and tolerated, ethnicities and religions play determinant role in the power one had in society (Lovat & Crotty, 2015).

During the caliphate, however, there is no historical evidence of Christian or Jewish resistance, nor any reports of persecution. As maintained by Kennedy, it is likely that, with an increasing number of people converting to Islam, Christians and Jews became less significant and posed minimal threats. The situation shifted in the eleventh century with mounting Christian military pressure from León, Castile, and Navarre. Christians were viewed as a potential fifth column, and under the rule of the Almoravids in the early twelfth century, many Christians chose to migrate northward. Despite the concept of convivencia signifying peaceful coexistence, it did not imply equality. Christians and Jews held a second-class status, and peaceful coexistence relied on their acceptance of an inferior position. Once this acceptance eroded, and Muslims perceived a threat, the fate of *convivencia* was sealed (Kennedy, 2016).

CONCLUSION

The social-religious relations that flourished within medieval Islamic Cordoba stand as an enduring testament to the transformative power of cultural exchange and religious tolerance. As we navigate the complex landscape of history, Cordoba emerges not merely as a geographical location but as a living embodiment of inclusivity, intellectual synergy, and cohabitation. The echoes of its legacy continue to resonate, reminding us that amidst diversity lies the potential for interreligious co-existence and collaboration. In contemplating Cordoba's rich landscape of coexistence, collaboration, and even to some degree conflict, this article uncovers a profound lesson – that societies can flourish when embracing differences, fostering mutual respect, and encouraging the free exchange of ideas. As we reflect on this historical epoch, Cordoba served as a guiding light, inspiring contemporary discourse on interfaith understanding, cultural dialogue, and the boundless possibilities that arise when diverse communities come together in pursuit of shared knowledge and shared humanity.

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