



Fernández-Morera, Darío. *The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise: Muslims, Christians, and Jews under Islamic Rule in Medieval Spain*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2016, 358 pp., \$29.95.

Modern Western culture is dominated by the concepts of political correctness, multiculturalism, and religious diversity. As a result, discussions of Islam are only encouraged when they highlight some aspect of religious tolerance, academic achievement, or cultural heritage. The consequence of this approach to history is a distorted view of Islam, one that is shaped more by political correctness than historical fact. One example of modern historical revision is the recent academic treatment of Muslim rule in medieval Spain.

For more than seven centuries, Muslims ruled medieval Spain and extended varying degrees of brutality or leniency to non-Muslim residents. If one were to read many of the recent academic publications on this subject, one would think that Muslim rule in medieval Spain was a bastion of religious tolerance, multicultural enrichment, and societal equality. However, author Darío Fernández-Morera, Associate Professor Emeritus in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Northwestern University, has written a new book to disprove the common myth that Muslim Spain was a “wonderful place of tolerance and *convivencia* [peaceful coexistence] of three cultures under the benevolent supervision of enlightened Muslim rulers” (2). In his book, *The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise: Muslims, Christians, and Jews under Islamic Rule in Medieval Spain*, Fernández-Morera utilizes primary source accounts and archaeological evidence to argue that Muslim rule in medieval Spain¹ resulted not in a homogenous blending of cultures and ideas, but rather in the destruction of Christian and Jewish culture and the subjugation of

¹Fernández-Morera utilizes various terms to refer to the region known today as Spain, including “medieval Spain” and “al-Andalus.” Those terms will be used interchangeably in this review.

Christians and Muslims in society.

Content Summary

Each chapter of Fernández-Morera's book is devoted to a specific aspect of Muslim rule in medieval Spain. These include the effects of *jihad*, the daily realities of life, and the experiences of women, Jews, and Christians. In chapter one, "Conquest and Reconquest," Fernández-Morera refutes the claim that Muslim rule in Spain emerged as the result of a slow migratory wave of Muslims eventually outnumbering non-Muslims. In contrast, he argues that the Muslim invasion of Spain was a religiously motivated conquest—one that saw most of the Spanish territory subdued in fewer than ten years (21). While the Muslims may also have been interested in financial gain, "the fundamental impulse" for the movement of Muslim armies through North Africa and into Europe "was to carry out a religious war—*jihad*" (22). While many modern scholars interpret *jihad* in spiritual terms, Fernández-Morera notes that, "what the correct understanding of the term is according to today's expert academic interpreters matters little for what actually happened" (23).

Capitalizing on weak military forces in southern Spain, the fierce, unified, and well-led Muslim forces conquered most of the Spanish territory using a mixture of "shock and awe" tactics and "peaceful" treaties (37). In these treaties, Muslim conquerors granted "momentary privileges and autonomy" to the Visigoth secular and religious leaders who surrendered and paid a tribute. This allowed them to keep their land, servants, and religion (37). In order to motivate people to surrender, the Islamic forces demoralized their enemies by desecrating Christian bodies, sacking villages, and enslaving thousands of people (37). The invaders also burned Christian churches and stole their treasures, as recorded in Alfonso X's *History of Spain* (40).

Fernández-Morera notes that early Spanish religious polemics from the seventh century on “consistently point out the use of violence by its followers” (47).

The Muslim invaders gave the conquered subjects three options: convert to Islam, submit as *dhimmi*s and pay tribute (*jizya*), or be killed (in the case of men) or enslaved (in the case of nonfighting women and children) (47). *Dhimmi*s were members of a subaltern class under the “protection” of Muslim rulers. Modern scholars who claim that the Muslims offered peace to conquered people present a half-truth. Muslims offered peace only as the alternative to death. Moreover, peace did not equate to equality if one remained a Jew or Christian. Thus, the Muslim conquest mixed brutal force with peaceful pacts, the second being “inseparable from and a consequence of the first” (48).

Muslim rule in medieval Spain was destined to end at some point because the Islamic forces never conquered the rebels in the northwestern mountains. Fernández-Morera notes that the “tough native Asturian and Galician populations in this region joined with those Hispano-Visigoths who had fled the invasion” (51). For hundreds of years, these rebels fought against the Muslims, but it was not until the beginning of the eleventh century that the Spanish people began to stem the tide of Muslim rule. Beginning in 1002, the Muslim caliphate broke apart into several smaller kingdoms, which resulted in a weakened military force capable of holding the Spanish territory. By 1085, the Christian *Reconquista* had conquered Toledo, the ancient capital of the Visigoth Christian Kingdom (53). With the fall of Seville in 1248, the *Reconquista* triumphed over Islamic rule (54). The so-called “migratory wave” of Muslim invaders was finally repelled from the Spanish territory after five centuries of rule.

Chapter two of Fernández-Morera’s text, “The Effects of the *Jihad*,” is a refutation of the claim that the Islamic invasion brought enlightenment to a cultural wasteland (58). Modern

scholars such as Thomas Glick, Chris Lowney, and Antony Wild have described Romano-Visigoth Spain as an unenlightened civilization of the European Dark Ages, and the Muslim empire as an enlightened source of culture and beauty (57). Fernández-Morera disputes this modern narrative and instead describes Spain as a “wonderland” compared to the “uncultured eighth-century Berber invaders,” despite the “bubonic plague, locusts, drought, and civil wars that ravaged Spain in the years before the Muslim conquest” (60). He notes that accounts from al-Qurtubi and Ibn Abd al-Hakam describe the spoils of war being looted from Spain and taken back to the Middle East, including plants, minerals, animals, philosophy texts, artwork, medicines, jewelry, clothing, and coins (61). The Muslim invaders were, according to historian Manuel Rincón Álvarez, “war-like, hungry for booty, but with no or very little capacity for absorbing culture and even less of interacting with the indigenous population” (63).

Over time, the Muslim invaders erased most of the cultural vestiges of the nascent Romano-Visigoth civilization through pillaging, destruction of pre-Islamic monuments, and conversion or expulsion of the Christian population (78). Few documents survived the invasion, beautiful church buildings were destroyed, and decorative sculptures and paintings disappeared. A common feature of Muslim conquests was replacing churches with mosques, either by converting them or destroying them and building new structures (79). In fact, one cannot find today in southern Spain any churches built prior to the Catholic Reconquest. Historian Jacques Fontaine observes that the destruction of churches may have resulted not only from Islamic teaching but also from a policy of erasing all Christian “power signs” from the region (80). Not only did the Muslim invaders conquer the Christian population; they also destroyed a nascent culture that was flourishing in a “Renaissance of European art and civilization” (81).

When Muslims conquered the Andalusian region, they instituted a new way of life. In

chapter three, “The Daily Realities of al-Andalus,” Fernández-Morera describes the governing rules and regulations that Muslims, Christians, and Jews had to obey and how those rules impacted daily life. This chapter is a direct refutation of scholars such as John Fox, Janina Safran, and David Levering Lewis, who describe al-Andalus as “an exemplary land of harmonious diversity and tolerance” (83–84). Fernández-Morera observes that the governing structure in al-Andalus was a hierocracy, a “government of clerics,” in which civil and religious law were indistinct (85). Muslim clerics ruled according to *sharia*, or Islamic law, a detailed code of religious teaching that impacted every area of life and proscribed any behavior deemed inconsistent with Islam.

By citing primary source documents, Fernández-Morera provides a sampling of the rules that governed both Muslims and non-Muslims in al-Andalus. Anyone who believed heretical doctrines was put to death (99). If a Muslim practiced another religion while pretending to be Muslim, he was considered an apostate and must be executed even if he repented (100). Open apostates were allowed to return to Islam, but if they refused or fell into open apostasy a second time, they were killed (100). Anyone deemed a “witch” was also killed (101). Blasphemy against Muhammad or Allah required death without the possibility of repentance, and the punishment could include crucifixion and being stabbed on a cross (101–102). Women and Muslim captives who turned from Islam and did not repent were to be killed if they fell back into Muslim hands (103). Sodomy was punishable by stoning and theft resulted in mutilation (103). Wine and pork were forbidden, as were musical instruments and singing (106–107).

In addition to the strict rules governing daily life, practical obstacles existed that prevented *convivencia* between Christians and Muslims. Christians were identified as “infidels” and could cause Muslims to be ritually unclean. Moreover, Christians were *dhimmis*, subjugated

non-citizens unequal to Muslims who were not allowed to practice publicly their own religion in Muslim-held territories (112, 114). As a result of the numerous laws governing daily life, and the distinction between Muslims and Christians, there existed no *convivencia* in al-Andalus, contrary to modern thinking. Rather, as Fernández-Morera notes, “Muslims, Christians, and Jews had a precarious coexistence” (116).

Modern academics praise the period of Umayyad rule in Islamic Spain as an example of “tolerance and *convivencia* of the three faiths,” but Fernández-Morera contests this claim (119). Using numerous primary sources, Fernández-Morera demonstrates that the Umayyads “elevated religious and political persecutions, inquisitions, beheadings, and crucifixions to heights unequalled by any other set of rulers before or after in Spain” (120). Muslim rulers practiced indiscriminate beheading of both Muslims and non-Muslims, including prisoners of war (123). The Umayyads also imposed harsh punishments on *dhimmi*s who openly professed non-Muslim religious views (125).

Abd al-Rahman III (reigned 912–929) undertook mass beheadings and crucifixions of Muslim heretics, Christian prisoners, and political enemies, even killing his own relatives for secretly practicing Christianity (125, 127). Another Muslim leader, al-Mansur (938–1002), whose influence began as regent to the child Caliph Hisham al-Muayyad, burned down Barcelona in 985, enslaving anyone who was not killed. He carried out more than fifty successful military campaigns against Christians and ordered “the dust on his clothes be collected after each expedition against [them] so that he could be buried under that glorious dust when he died” (135). During his reign, he ordered violent persecution against Christians and burned books that he thought were theologically deviant (135). Modern scholars do not dispute the events described in this chapter, but, as Fernández-Morera notes, “they point out the ‘extremism’ of the *martyrs*,

not of the presumably tolerant Umayyad rulers who ordered their slaughter. They have called these executed Christians ‘fanatics,’ ‘troublemakers,’ and ‘self-immolators’” (134). Thus, for modern scholars, the rampant beheadings, crucifixions, and general persecutions were a result of unruly Christians not submitting to Muslim rule, despite the fact that Muslim rulers used decapitation against their fellow Muslims “even more than against Christians” (137).

In the remaining three chapters, Fernández-Morera examines the plight of three groups in al-Andalus: women, Jews, and Christians. Chapter five, “Women in Islamic Spain,” is a detailed examination of the brutal conditions women endured during Muslim rule. Moreover, Fernández-Morera refutes the modern claim that “Muslim women in al-Andalus enjoyed a surprising degree of freedom, especially compared with women in Christian lands at the same time” (139).

Fernández-Morera provides a sampling of treatments that women endured based on the *Muwatta*, a collection of hadiths compiled by Malik ibn Anas (711–795). Muslim female circumcision was “legal, taken for granted, and praiseworthy in al-Andalus” (140). Women were condemned to death by stoning for sexual intercourse outside of marriage (144). If pregnant, the condemned woman could give birth and nurse the baby for a designated period before she was killed (144). The best practice for a Muslim woman, according to a legal jurist, was “staying in her house and being veiled when going out in public” (147). Women also needed a male agent for legal proceedings, were prohibited from visiting swimming pools, and were limited in their activity to the domestic sphere (148, 149, 155). Finally, women were subjected to sexual slavery, often because of their homeland being conquered by Muslim armies. Even when women were able to work as copyists or physicians, a practice highlighted by modern Western scholars, such women were usually enslaved Christians, “since female [free Muslim women] would not be

allowed by their husbands to leave the house to engage in such activities” (166–67). Thus, as Fernández-Morera observes, the vision of Muslim women walking about al-Andalus in freedom and luxury, working in all spheres of commerce and government, is a “wishful Western academic fantasy at best, and a shoddy professional reading of the historical evidence at worst” (168).

In chapter six, “The Truth about the Jewish Community’s ‘Golden Age,’” Fernández-Morera refutes the common claim that, like women, Jews in al-Andalus experienced a substantial degree of liberty and tolerance. Under Visigoth kings, the Jews had suffered much. As a result, the Jewish community often supported the Muslim invaders and even helped to guard cities for the Muslims (177). However, the Jewish community did not become a favored group. The Muslims did not consider Jews to be “allies” because of Quranic teaching (Q5:51), and the Muslim masses resented the wealth and influence many Jews had in the cities (178–79). As a result, the Jewish community experienced anti-Jewish riots, pogroms, assassinations, expulsions, and an eventual decline in status (179).

As *dhimmis*, Jews could practice their religion and rule themselves, but only within their own communities (180). Jews were seldom allowed to build new synagogues for fear of Judaism spreading, and they were prohibited from speaking against Muhammad. Moreover, Jews were prohibited from converting either to Islam or Christianity (188). In one example, the Jews were expelled from Cordoba in 1013 and their wealth was confiscated because they had sided with a defeated Muslim leader during an internal struggle between kingdoms (181). In 1066, a pogrom in Granada destroyed the city’s Sephardic community, a result of the rioting Muslim populace. These two examples demonstrate the precarious position of Jews in al-Andalus. To some extent, they experienced religious autonomy in their own communities, but nowhere did the Jewish community exercise hegemony (189).

In the seventh and final chapter, “The Christian Condition,” Fernández-Morera turns his attention to the plight of conquered Christians in al-Andalus and rebuts the common claim made by scholars such as Hugh Kennedy, Jane Smith, and María Rosa Menocal that Muslims were tolerant of fellow “People of the Book.” On the contrary, Christians had limited options in al-Andalus. If they did not convert to Islam, they were either killed, forced to flee for their lives, or relegated to *dhimmi* status. By the end of the twelfth century, the Christian *dhimmi* population in al-Andalus was almost extinct (208).

Under Islamic law in medieval Spain, Christian *dhimmis* endured terrible and humiliating conditions to ensure that they never gained power (209). *Dhimmis* were required to pay a special tax, the *jizya*, to ensure their “protection,” though, as the *Muwatta* declares, *jizya* is imposed on *dhimmis* “to humble them” (209). The *dhimmi* system was, as Fernández-Morera describes it, a “gangster-like ‘protection racket’” (210). As *dhimmis*, Christians could only celebrate their religion within churches and Christian neighborhoods. Christians also could not exercise political sovereignty in any form, carry weapons, or ride horses in Muslim areas (212). Thus, the *dhimmi* system was not a system of protection, but one of “exploitation and subjugation” (213–14).

Muslim rulers persecuted many Christian *dhimmis* for their unwillingness to convert to Islam and cease preaching Christianity. For example, the writings of the monk Saint Eulogius and his friend Alvarus record the events surrounding the “martyrs of Cordoba” (230). Between 850 and 860, under the reign of Umayyad Abd al-Rahman II, Muslim authorities reportedly executed dozens of men and women, including Saint Eulogius, for denying blasphemy laws and publicly proclaiming the divinity of Jesus and the falsehood of Muhammad as prophet (231–32). Fernández-Morera reports that nearly fifty men and women were executed by beheading or

boiling, and their cadavers “were hung upside down at the city gates to deter future martyrs” (232). Many Christians chose nonviolent protest rather than quiet subjugation, and they paid the price for it. Yet, modern scholarship describes these martyrs as “religious fanatics” and “recalcitrant and ignorant monks” who should have been “grateful to the tolerant Muslim authorities for so graciously allowing them to practice their religion” (233).

Critical Assessment

One positive feature of *The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise* worth noting is Fernández-Morera’s approach to history, which is distinct from the prevailing trend in modern academia. He claims that many recent studies are products of revisionist history, motivated more by politics and job security than by recorded history (7). According to Fernández-Morera, scholars of Islam, at least in the West, now live in a “culture of forgetting” (4). He observes, “In the past few decades, this ideological mission has morphed into ‘presentism,’ an academically sponsored effort to narrate the past in terms of the present and thereby reinterpret it to serve contemporary ‘multicultural,’ ‘diversity,’ and ‘peace’ studies” (5). Any historical event that conflicts with the progressive agenda is rejected as “retrograde, chauvinistic, or, worse, ‘conservative’” (5). University presses and scholars fear presenting Islamic domination in medieval Spain as anything but positive because they will be accused of “Islamophobia” (8). Thus, much scholarship over the past thirty years has presented a new version of Islamic rule in medieval Spain, a version that distorts historical facts to create for modern readers a more palatable version of events.

Fernández-Morera is an exception to the trend he describes in *The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise*, but he is not alone in his efforts. He builds on the work of recent scholars such as Adel Theodor Khoury, Roberto de Mattei, Alfred Morabia, and Sylvain Gouguenheim,

all of whom have faced opposition from university departments and did not publish their works with university presses (6). Fernández-Morera presents history not as he wishes it happened, but as primary source documents and archaeological evidence indicate it happened, supported by the more than one hundred pages of notes and bibliography included in his book. As Fernández-Morera writes, “Unless otherwise indicated, assertions in this book are abundantly supported by these medieval Christian, Muslim, and Jewish primary sources, which are either quoted in the text or cited in the notes” (11).

Furthermore, Fernández-Morera rejects the modern practice of “extrapolation.” Many Western scholars of Islamic Spain, according to Fernández-Morera, identify a few examples of non-Muslims exercising relative freedom and prosperity and assume that the non-Muslim masses would have experienced the same reality. He writes, “Wide-eyed visions of a wonderful because morally loose al-Andalus extrapolate from the dissolute lives of some Muslim rulers and their court intellectuals to the everyday life of the Muslim (or Jewish, or Christian) masses” (9). Yet, in the words of twelfth century political thinker Ibn Zafar (1104–1170), “[Priority must be given] to what is real rather than approximation” (9). Fernández-Morera presents ample evidence to prove that, in general, Muslim invaders destroyed civilizations and cultures, oppressed non-Muslims, and impeded non-Muslim religious practice—regardless of how a few non-Muslims enjoyed relative freedom and prosperity (57–138). Despite the few occasions when Muslims and non-Muslims interacted with one another “out of convenience, necessity, mutual sympathy, or love,” these three groups and their subgroups “engaged for centuries in struggles for power and cultural survival, manifested in often subtle ways that should not be glossed over for the sake of modern ideals of tolerance, diversity, and *convivencia*” (3).

Although Fernández-Morera seeks to prove that Muslim invaders oppressed and

executed untold thousands of non-Muslims in Spain, destroyed civilizations, and impeded non-Muslim religious practice, he in no way tries to equate medieval Muslim practices with “true Islam” or assert that contemporary Muslims should attempt the same practices. He never suggests that past aggressions by Muslims toward Christians should affect Muslim-Christian relations today. His work is based on the recorded actions of Muslims in al-Andalus. Fernández-Morera writes that the approach of the book does not “support a ‘clash’ between present-day civilizations” (10). Furthermore, he does not evaluate the personal beliefs or character of Maliki legal scholars in al-Andalus. Rather, “without ‘question’ or ‘interrogating’ the ‘subjectivities’ of the scholars,” his book “takes seriously and at face value their interpretations and practices” (11). Whether the actions of Muslims in al-Andalus were “right” according to Islamic texts or scholars of any historical period is irrelevant.

The “culture of forgetting” that Fernández-Morera describes operates according to the belief that any acknowledgement of past grievances is a hindrance to contemporary relations. Thus, if one acknowledges that Muslims in medieval Spain mistreated Jews and Christians, then contemporary Muslims, Jews, and Christians will not be able to live in peace. The dark side of history must be erased from society’s memory for the sake of societal peace. As a result, scholars rewrite history in a positive light to reflect modern cultural/moral/political expectations. However, the past is not a natural enemy of the present, and rewriting history is not the solution to modern social problems. If past grievances prohibit peaceful coexistence today, then the problem is not with history, but with modern people unwilling or unable to forgive the past and live in the present.

Given the controversial nature of the topic and his repeated critique of modern Western academia, one should not be surprised to find that Fernández-Morera’s book has not been well

received by some scholars. Mark R. Cohen, Emeritus Professor of Jewish Civilization in the Near East at Princeton University, published a book review in the *Catholic Historical Review* dismissing Fernández-Morera's book as an "unrelenting countermyth history" aimed at dispelling "the myth of Islamic tolerance" (Cohen, 541). According to Cohen, the root problem with Fernández-Morera's book is that it holds "tolerance" to a modern standard. Prior to the modern era, according to Cohen, tolerance was a "weakness" while intolerance was a "virtue" (Cohen, 541).

However, Fernández-Morera does not apply a modern standard of tolerance to medieval Spain. That standard has already been applied by modern scholars advocating the idea of *convivencia*. Fernández-Morera's book is a critique of the claim that Muslims, Jews, and Christians in al-Andalus lived in a culture of freedom and mutual appreciation that coincides with modern expectations of "tolerance." His concern is not to label the culture in al-Andalus as "tolerant" or "intolerant," but to demonstrate through primary source evidence that Jews and Christians suffered under Muslim rule—a reality that is overlooked by modern scholars seeking to rewrite history for the sake of modern political and cultural expectations.

Another complaint that Cohen has with Fernández-Morera's book is that Fernández-Morera "[exploits] the bountiful translations of Islamic legal texts and the plethora of Spanish sources on the subject," including the many references to Maliki law (Cohen, 542). According to Cohen, the destructive policies of the Muslims were intended to "stamp out a pervasive Muslim/non-Muslim coexistence" (Cohen, 542). Cohen writes, "'Exclusionary' legislation in Jewish and Christian law could be interpreted as a sign that Jews and Christians were identifying too closely with Muslims and Muslim-Arabic culture" (Cohen, 542). Thus, the violent treatment of Jews and Christians—including beheadings, forced slavery, limitations on public life, and

destruction of church buildings—was a result of Muslims and non-Muslims being too friendly, too accommodating, and too multicultural. Cohen’s view is difficult to maintain given that Muslim invaders often, upon conquering a city, immediately destroyed Christian churches and gave Christians the choice to convert, die, or become *dhimmis*. There was no chance for “pervasive Muslim/non-Muslim coexistence” to develop. Cohen’s argument is a convenient reading of the history to suit a modern narrative of interreligious dialogue and coexistence.

A second scholar who rejects Fernández-Morera’s conclusions is S. J. Pearce, Associate Professor at New York University, specializing in the intellectual history and literature of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in medieval Spain. Pearce rejects Fernández-Morera’s assertion that the medieval history of Spain has been “coopted [*sic*] anachronistically in the service of modern, liberal values such as racial diversity and religious tolerance” through the work of “left-leaning academics” (Pearce, 29). Instead, Pearce accuses Fernández-Morera of using the case of medieval Spain to “further an explicitly extreme right-wing and conservative Christian political and cultural agenda as it bears upon debates about politics, the establishment of religion and the very place of the academy in civic life” (Pearce, 31). According to Pearce, Fernández-Morera is incorrect in saying that the “utopian, progressive view” of life in medieval Spain “[dominates] scholarly discourse,” perhaps because the field in question is “an academic field that is not his own” (Pearce, 31). Thus, according to Pearce, Fernández-Morera is a scholar outside of his expertise seeking to promote an “extreme right-wing” political agenda by rejecting *convivencia* as left-leaning and progressive. However, Pearce’s conclusion in no way refutes the evidence that Fernández-Morera presents. She focuses her critique on Fernández-Morera’s academic prowess and methodology, claiming that he misuses sources and genres “by virtue of not being able to read them directly” (Pearce, 43). Thus, Pearce does not deny the events recorded in Fernández-

Morera's book, but rather dismisses the material because the book "misuses and misrepresents the academic study of medieval Spain in order to be able to position itself as the lone voice of truth in the publishing wilderness while simultaneously promoting a wildly inaccurate vision of medieval Spain" (Pearce, 35).

Both reviews described here illustrate the same general response to Fernández-Morera's book: dismissal. Fernández-Morera is dismissed as someone who is at best ignorant of the truth, and at worst rewriting history to advance a political agenda. The material presented in Fernández-Morera's book is incomplete or misrepresented, according to scholars such as Cohen and Pearce. Thus, Fernández-Morera provides an incomplete picture of daily life in medieval Spain. However, what neither Cohen nor Pearce do is demonstrate how the plethora of recorded atrocities committed by Muslims against non-Muslims in medieval Spain can be interpreted as anything other than consistent systematic oppression of non-Muslims.

Conclusion

Fernández-Morera's book has not been well received by many Western scholars, yet his book is needed now more than ever. In today's "culture of forgetting," history is being rewritten to suit the needs of modern society. Many scholars have reinterpreted Muslim rule in medieval Spain and presented it as a model for multiculturalism, diversity, inclusion, religious tolerance, and peaceful coexistence. The recorded instances of Muslims beheading non-Muslims, destroying church buildings, forcing thousands into slavery, and impeding religious practice are avoided, erased from memory, or conveyed as "outliers" in an otherwise peaceful occupation of the Spanish peninsula. Moreover, scholars describe *dhimmi*s as a protected class of citizens living under the benevolence of Muslim rulers, required only to honor their rulers and pay an annual tax. However, as Fernández-Morera proves in his book, discussing how much or how

little Christian *dhimmis* of Spain benefited from Islamic “toleration” obscures the fact that *dhimmis* “were by definition a subaltern group, a fourth- or fifth-class marginalized people in a hierarchical society, and that they were the victims of an extortion system, the *dhimma*, that gave them the choice that gangsters give to their victims: pay to be protected, or else” (239). By presenting a detailed historical account of life in al-Andalus, Fernández-Morera proves that, contrary to modern reinterpretations, “in Islamic Spain there was no tolerant *convivencia*, but a *precaria coexistencia*” (236).

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