



Convivencia

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What is it?

Convivencia refers to the “coexistence” of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities in medieval Spain—particularly in those parts of Spain under Muslim rule—and by extension the cultural interaction and exchange fostered by such proximity. The term first appeared as part of a controversial thesis about Spanish historical identity advanced by Américo Castro in 1948. Since then interest in the idea of *convivencia* has spread, fueled in part by increased attention to multiculturalism and rising concern about religiously framed acts of violence. The application of social scientific models has gone a long way toward clarifying the mechanisms of acculturation at work in medieval Spain. This kind of scholarship has served to temper both the widespread tendency to romanticize *convivencia* in Muslim Spain and the less sanguine reactions that such optimistic assessments tend to inspire.

Who uses the concept?

Convivencia is a term still used by scholars of medieval Spain as a convenient shorthand for the religious pluralism that characterized the Iberian peninsula—and by extension the Mediterranean region as a whole—for centuries after the Muslim conquest. The term has been used by politicians in Spain in the hopes of inspiring cooperation among the different communities that make up the modern kingdom. It has also been adopted by modern apologists for Islam who see medieval Spain as an example of Muslim “tolerance” vis-à-vis Christians and Jews.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Convivencia has promoted intercultural dialogue in very positive ways insofar as it has inspired interest in medieval Spanish history, a kind of “safe space” for exploring the perennial challenges of religious pluralism.

What work remains?

Convivencia as a concept has inspired many historians of medieval Spain since the time of Américo Castro and it does not seem to be losing much steam. Most of the recent studies on the subject tend to focus on a single discrete period or place, trying to understand the complexity of inter-religious interaction in microcosm, rather than attempting to tackle the whole picture. More “big picture” work in a scholarly mode needs to be done.

Resources

- Catlos, B. A. (2014). *Infidel kings and unholy warriors: Faith, power, and violence in the age of crusade and jihad*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
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- Fernández Morera, D. (2016). *The myth of the Andalusian paradise: Muslims, Christians, and Jews under Islamic rule in medieval Spain*. Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute.
- Lowney, C. (2005). *A vanished world: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in medieval Spain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.