

Coexistence among the Peoples of the Book under Abd al-Rahman III

Craig Mackay

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Professor Ferreira

## Coexistence among the Peoples of the Book under Abd al-Rahman III

During the 9<sup>th</sup> century the emirate of al-Andalus was in a state of decay. External and internal threats were reducing the dominance of the ruling elite and the emirate was faced with the possibility of disintegration. Abd al-Rahman III, as the Umayyad heir, assumed the role of emir of al-Andalus during this time of turmoil within the Islamic community. Rahman III eventually proclaimed himself Caliph in 929 when an increased level of stability and prosperity had been reached within his territory.<sup>1</sup> Upon his enthronement, Rahman III pursued a policy of tolerance, allowing the Jews to join in the functions of the state using their skill, knowledge and expertise to the benefit of al-Andalus.<sup>2</sup> Rahman III was also forced to deal with muwallad (Iberian Muslims) and mozarab (Iberian Christians) resentment, working to pacify their opposition through military campaigns and religious propaganda.<sup>3, 4</sup> Further resistance arose as the Christian principalities of the north made incursions into the territory of al-Andalus, forcing Rahman III to dispatch military forces to subdue the Christian armies.<sup>5</sup> Following their submission, a peaceful relationship was established to economically benefit al-Andalus.<sup>6</sup> A policy of coexistence among the Peoples of the Book was pursued by Abd al-Rahman III as such an existence was conducive to economic prosperity. To pursue these ends, the Jewish community was tolerated and protected, while the muwallads, mozarabs and Christian principalities were managed through violence and enforced cooperation within the Iberian Peninsula.

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<sup>1</sup> Janina Safran, "The Command of the Faithful in al-Andalus: A Study in the Articulation of Caliphal Legitimacy," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 30, no. 2 (1998): 183-187.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond P. Scheidlin, "The Jews in Muslim Spain," *The Legacy of Muslim Spain* (1994): 191-192.

<sup>3</sup> Olivia Remie Constable, *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 62.

<sup>4</sup> Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi, "The Unique Necklace," in *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Source*, ed. Olivia Remie Constable (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 65.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Fletcher, *Moorish Spain* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1992), 57-59.

<sup>6</sup> Ibn Hayyan, "Muqtabis," in *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Source*, ed. Olivia Remie Constable (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 71-72.

Peaceful relations between the Muslims and the Jews were sustained under Rahman III as this relationship yielded benefits for the economy of al-Andalus. According to Qur'anic law, the Jews were to be tolerated, protected and allowed to practice their religion; however, they would also be required to pay the jizya tax.<sup>7</sup> It was thus in the economic interests of Rahman III to protect the Jews as a taxable population resource. The Jewish culture was also indifferent to ruling and did not possess any allies within the Iberian Peninsula or its surrounding territories.<sup>8</sup> The Jews therefore did not pose a threat to Muslims aspiring for government leadership and could be entrusted with important state and economic functions. This trust was particularly beneficial for the state given the high level of education in the Jewish population, making them ideal for diplomatic, financial and public administrative functions of the state. Additionally, as Jews living in a territory dominated by Muslims and facing possible persecution, they relied heavily upon the state for protection. As a result of these factors, the Jews became natural allies of the Islamic court.<sup>9</sup> Considering the Jewish education and loyalty to the Caliphate, it was an intelligent manoeuvre by Rahman III to protect and integrate the Jewish population into the economy as this would lead to further prosperity for al-Andalus.

Jewish culture developed in al-Andalus under the rule of Rahman III, generating a cooperative population which was economically useful to the Caliph. As a Jewish poet living during the Caliphate of Rahman III, Dunash ben Labrat's views expressed in his poem *There Came a Voice* are reflective of Jewish cultural values and perceptions in al-Andalus.<sup>10</sup> The poet,

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<sup>7</sup> Jessica A. Coope, "Religious and Cultural Conversion to Islam in Ninth-Century Umayyad Córdoba," *Journal of World History* 4, no. 1 (1993): 50.

<sup>8</sup> Scheidlin, "The Jews in Muslim Spain," 191.

<sup>9</sup> Scheidlin, "The Jews in Muslim Spain," 191-192.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Reading the Middle Ages: Sources from Europe, Byzantium, and the Islamic World* (North York: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 170.

after hearing a description of the beauties of al-Andalus by a fictional character in his poem, retorts:

... 'Be still!  
 How can you drunk your fill  
 When lost is Zion hill  
 To the uncircumcised.  
 You've spoken like a fool!  
 Sloth you've made your rule.  
 In God's last judgement you'll  
 For folly be chastised.  
 The Torah, God's delight  
 Is little in your sight,  
 While wrecked is Zion's height,  
 By foxes vandalized.  
 How can we be carefree  
 Or raise our cups in glee,  
 When by all men are we  
 Rejected and despised?'<sup>11</sup>

Labrat's poem is Jewish biased, reflecting the values and aspirations of the Jewish population within al-Andalus who dreamt of retaking the land of Israel. The poem invokes resentment and contempt towards the Muslim occupation of the Holy Land; however, allegiance is maintained to the Caliphate of Cordoba as the resentment is directed purely towards the Muslims residing in

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<sup>11</sup> Dunash ben Labrat, "There Came a Voice," in *Reading the Middle Ages: Sources from Europe, Byzantium, and the Islamic World*, ed. Barbara H. Rosenwein (North York: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 170-171.

the Holy Land. The Umayyad Caliphs of Cordoba were therefore not troubled by such expressions of Jewish contempt. Labrat states in the last verses of the poem that “by all men [the Jews are] rejected and despised.”<sup>12</sup> This statement illustrates the Jewish sense of helplessness and weakness, reinforcing Muslim dominance within the Caliphate of Cordoba. Considering the Jewish dependence upon the Caliphate for toleration and protection, *There Came a Voice* sustained the perception of a weak Jewish community.<sup>13</sup> The Jewish population were therefore ideal servants to operate within the economy of the Caliphate, as their aspirations did not contradict the welfare of al-Andalus and their community posed few dangers. Acceptance would only further benefit the economy.

Although the Jews were afforded a significant level of toleration and protection within al-Andalus, the muwallads and the mozarabs were pacified through violence. Throughout the 9<sup>th</sup> and early 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Muslim population within al-Andalus was rapidly expanding. The financial base of al-Andalus, which was heavily dependent the dhimmi payment of the jizya tax, eroded with growing Muslim conversion and destabilized the emirate.<sup>14</sup> Further problems emerged as the dominant Muslim-Berber and Arab populations opposed the increasing influence of the new muwallad population.<sup>15</sup> Conflict between the dominant Muslim sects and the muwallads resulted in muwallad rebellion, the most significant of which was the 880 revolt of muwallad Ibn Hafsun. By 899, however, Ibn Hafsun converted to Christianity and drew upon mozarab support within al-Andalus. He eventually died in 917 but his cause was carried on by his sons. Rahman III was able to suppress the forces of the Banu Hafsun (sons of Ibn Hafsun) and by 929 was the dominant leader of al-Andalus, proclaiming himself as Caliph. Ibn ‘ Abd

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<sup>12</sup> Labrat, “There Came a Voice,” 170-171.

<sup>13</sup> Scheidlin, “The Jews in Muslim Spain,” 191.

<sup>14</sup> Hugh Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal: A Political History of al-Andalus* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman Inc., 1996), 67-68.

<sup>15</sup> Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal: A Political History of al-Andalus*, 67-69.

Rabbihi, a contemporary Muslim poet of Rahman III, discusses the conflict between Rahman III and the dual muwallad and mozarab opposition in his poem *The Unique Necklace*:<sup>16</sup>

The campaign against [the Banu Hafsun] took place, carrying of the apostates [to their death].

Its beginning occurred when the imam, the elect of God, the most trustworthy of earth's inhabitants in matters of justice and in keeping promises,

Received news of the way in which the pig [Ibn Hafsun] had died, and that he had gone to hellfire,

[Ibn Hafsun's] sons wrote to [the Caliph] proffering their submission and [announcing] their entry into the [Islamic] community,

And [requesting] that he acknowledge their right to govern in exchange for their payment of the land tax and tribute.

Therefore the gracious [Abd al-Rahman III] chose [to comply with] that for his thoughts were constantly occupied with the granting of favours.<sup>17</sup>

In this passage, Rabbihi claims that the Banu Hafsun submitted to Rahman III and were subsequently granted the right to govern in exchange for paying taxes and tribute. Unfortunately this alliance did not endure as the Banu Hafsun betrayed the trust of the Caliph.<sup>18</sup> This poem, written during the reign of Rahman III, is heavily biased as it portrays elitist Muslim perceptions and paints Rahman III as generous, righteous ruler who upholds the tenets of Islam and is favoured by God. The poem appeals to the religion of the Muslims by accusing the enemies of the state of apostasy. The degree of bias is also evident in the position held by Rabbihi, who was

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<sup>16</sup> Constable, *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources*, 62.

<sup>17</sup> Rabbihi, "The Unique Necklace," 65.

<sup>18</sup> Constable, *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources*, 62.

a poet of the Umayyad court.<sup>19</sup> The poem therefore served as a piece of propaganda for Rahman III and the Umayyad dynasty, intended to generate loyalty and obedience towards the Caliphate from the Muslim population. Considering this bias, the level of cooperation between Rahman III and the Banu Hafsun identified in the poem is uncertain, as the poem was created to increase the reputation of the ruler and not to convey factual information. The actions of Rahman III described in *The Unique Necklace*, however, must be relatively accurate as truth must have been conveyed for the poem to have resonated with the Muslim community. The motivation behind Rahman III's leniency towards the Iberian rebels was likely a result of economic interests and not based on generosity or mercy. By suppressing the rebel groups when cooperation was possible, Rahman III would only be generating further resentment within the Iberian population. Instead he allowed the rebel leaders to maintain power as economic prosperity could possibly result.

Muwallad and mozarab rebellion was suppressed by Rahman III, who subsequently claimed the title of Caliph in order to stabilize al-Andalus and achieve economic prosperity. Despite the leniency of Rahman III towards the rebels, conflict continued between himself and the Banu Hafsun after they betrayed his trust.<sup>20</sup> As a result, Rahman III dealt with the rebellion violently, suppressing dissidents and firmly establishing himself as the dominant power within al-Andalus. When the rebels had been successfully eradicated, Rahman III declared himself Caliph in 929 in an effort to legitimize his reign.<sup>21</sup> A source of Rahman III's victory over the mozarabs and muwallads was the increasing conversion of Iberians to Islam, while the conversion of Ibn Hafsun to Christianity lost the rebel a significant level of support among the

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<sup>19</sup> Constable, *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources*, 62.

<sup>20</sup> Rabbihi, "The Unique Necklace," 65.

<sup>21</sup> Safran, "The Command of the Faithful in al-Andalus: A Study in the Articulation of Caliphal Legitimacy," 186-187.

growing muwallads population.<sup>22</sup> Rahman III capitalized on Muslim sentiment after the defeat of the Banu Hafsun by proclaiming himself Caliph. This proclamation induced the cooperation of his Muslim subjects as Rahman III presented himself to be the guardian of Islam against heresy and corruption. He claimed to possess the favour of God, who aided him in the holy war against the Banu Hafsun, eradicating polytheism and the Christian rebels. Rahman III gained further loyalty as this title united his people against the rival Fatimid Caliphate.<sup>23</sup> By appealing to the religion of his subjects, Rahman III portrayed himself as the Champion of Islam, allowing him to effectively stabilize his territory and achieve economic growth.

The Christians principalities of Leon, Castile, Navarre, Aragon and Barcelona came into conflict with Rahman III and were consequently subdued, ushering in an era of stability and economic prosperity in the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>24, 25</sup> Throughout the 9<sup>th</sup> century the Christian principalities had made incursions into southern territory at the expense of the Islamic emirate. Rahman III, coming to power in 912, sought to reverse the expansion of the Christians.<sup>26</sup> He quickly raised an army, calling upon the provinces of the emirate for soldiers and hiring mercenaries, then invaded the Christians territories in the north. Rahman III himself partook in the invasion, intending to prevent his generals from gaining loyalties or power at his expense following any victories.<sup>27</sup> Such accumulation of power in the hands of military officials could destabilize the government. Rahman III consequently participated in the invasion, allowing him to manipulate the loyalty of his subjects for the benefit of al-Andalus and further centralize his

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<sup>22</sup> Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal: A Political History of al-Andalus*, 68-77.

<sup>23</sup> Safran, "The Command of the Faithful in al-Andalus: A Study in the Articulation of Caliphal Legitimacy," 185-187.

<sup>24</sup> Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, 57-59.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas F. Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 36.

<sup>26</sup> Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, 53-57.

<sup>27</sup> Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, 59-61.



authority. This centralization would result in economic growth as taxes could be efficiently administered and collected.

Upon invading the Christian principalities of the north, Islamic forces crushed the Christian armies and expanded the territory of al-Andalus. The territorial gains of Rahman III created a larger arena for trade within the Iberian Peninsula, contributing to a healthy and growing economy. Additionally, the invasion encouraged patronage and allowed for further centralization as Rahman III appointed favoured officials to administer the conquered territories. The successes of the campaign and the few losses sustained by the army of al-Andalus resulted in a significant growth as both the wealth and power of al-Andalus increased.<sup>28</sup> Rahman III now stood as the most dominant ruler south of the Pyrenees' Mountains.<sup>29</sup> For the next century Rahman III and his successors would be able to manipulate the Christian principalities, maintaining Muslim dominance within the peninsula.<sup>30</sup> Rahman III's victory over Barcelona in 939 is illustrated in Ibn Hayyan's chronicle, *Muqtabis*, written a century after the events had taken place:

A group of their [Barcelona] kings agreed to [peace with Abd ar Rahman III]... [A Christian noble agreeing to peace] sent a delegation to the city to observe for him, and he asked for a guarantee of safety for the various kinds of merchants of his land [travelling] to al-Andalus, and that was agreed upon... [and] safe passage of all foreigners from the land of [the Christian noble], and any others from that community who capitulated with regard to their life, property, and everything their ships contained. They were free to engage in trade wherever they wished, so

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<sup>28</sup> Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, 57-61.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Hitchcock, *Mozarabs in Medieval and Early Modern Spain* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 41.

<sup>30</sup> Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, 59-61.

that their ships came to al-Andalus from that time on, and the profit increased because of it... Richildis, daughter of Borrell, the sovereign of her people among the Franks, followed the example of [the Christian noble]...<sup>31</sup>

This passage from Hayyan's chronicle states that Christian nobles, who agreed to peace and submitted to the Umayyad Caliph Rahman III, were to be protected from harm and allowed to trade with the Muslims in al-Andalus. This allowance led to profits for the complicit Christian territories and al-Andalus. The success of this relationship also had a significant influence on other Christian principalities, as cooperation came to be viewed as more beneficial than war. As a chronicle, this public historical document highlights the events between the Muslims and Christians in the Iberian Peninsula and possesses a significantly lesser degree of bias than the other documents discussed because it is written a century after the rule of Rahman III. Hayyan does not aim to manipulate the population for the benefit of the Caliphate; instead, *Muqtabis* is nostalgic for the times in which the Caliphate was at the height of its power.<sup>32</sup> The document therefore cannot provide insight into the values of the Muslims during the rule of Rahman III as it is not a contemporary work. Hayyan's chronicle proceeds to state that Rahman III required:

[The lord of Barcelona] terminate assistance to or friendship with all Christians who are not at peace with [Abd ar Rahman III]... and that he dissolve the relationship that existed between him and... the Lord of Pamplona. [The lord of Barcelona] had married his daughter to [the lord of Pamplona], so he annulled her marriage contract in obedience to [Rahman III], and guaranteed that all of those

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<sup>31</sup> Hayyan, "Muqtabis," 71-72.

<sup>32</sup> Hitchcock, *Mozarabs in Medieval and Early Modern Spain*, 41.

who relied upon him from those regions that he ruled would enter with him [in obedience to Rahman III].<sup>33</sup>

In this passage Hayyan describes the peaceful relations established between Rahman III and Barcelona. Rahman III dictated that the lord of Barcelona shall not engage in relations with Christian principalities hostile to the Caliphate. Rahman III also asserted that the lord of Barcelona terminate his relationship with the lord of Pamplona. The lord of Barcelona subsequently obeyed and broke ties with Pamplona, annulling the marriage of his daughter to the lord of Pamplona. Ibn Hayyan's chronicle is biased towards the Islamic caliphate as his historical account is presented from the perspective of the Muslim community, interpreting the relationship between the Caliphate and the Christians as mutually beneficial. Hayyan therefore is not allowing for Christian perceptions of this relationship. Despite this bias, the trade relationship between the Muslims and Christians established by Rahman III was to be peaceful, promoting a prosperous economy in al-Andalus.

Abd al-Rahman III pursued a policy of Coexistence among the People of the Book within al-Andalus, as such an existence was conducive to economic prosperity. Upon his enthronement in 912, Rahman III sought a policy of tolerance, allowing the Jews to operate within the state as their skills, knowledge and expertise could be used to benefit al-Andalus.<sup>34</sup> Rahman III dealt with muwallad and mozarab resentment using force and political manoeuvres, pacifying the opposition through military campaigns and religious propaganda.<sup>35</sup> The Christian principalities of the north offered additional problems, making incursions into the territory of al-Andalus. Rahman III responded by dispatching military forces to subdue the Christian armies. Following Rahman III's victory over the Christians, a relationship of coexistence was established which

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<sup>33</sup> Hayyan, "Muqtabis," 71-72.

<sup>34</sup> Scheidlin, "The Jews in Muslim Spain," 191-192.

<sup>35</sup> Rabbihi, "The Unique Necklace," 65.

economically benefited the Caliphate.<sup>36</sup> Rahman III was able to reverse the decay and disintegration of al-Andalus by pursuing a policy of coexistence and as a result, his Caliphate reached a state of unprecedented power and economic growth.

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<sup>36</sup> Constable, *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources*, 62.

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