

THE CHRISTIANS OF AL-ANDALUS: SOME AWKWARD THOUGHTS

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RESUMEN

Los cristianos tuvieron oportunidades para sobrevivir como tales en al Andalus, aunque esta supervivencia no se realizó de una manera colectiva, ni en la España islámica ni en la cristiana. El estudio se inicia en los años 850-859 (mártires de Córdoba), 1085 (conquista de Toledo) y culmina en 1120 (movimientos masivos de población en la frontera de las dos religiones).

PALABRAS CLAVE: Cristianismo, Islam, Al Andalus, Edad Media.

ABSTRACT

The Christians had opportunities to survive in Al-Andalus. This survival is not accomplished in one way collective, in the Spain Islamic and in the Christian. The study begin in the years 850-859 (martyrs of Córdoba), 1085 (conquest of Toledo) and ended in 1120 (massive movements of population in the frontier of the two religions).

KEY WORDS: Christians, Islam, Al-Andalus, Middle Age.

As one who works in an area outside, though also adjacent to, the Christian Hispanic world, that of Islam in Iberia, I am sensitive to the need to engage with the problems of contact with this Christian world, and aware also of the difficulties which doing so involves. These are problems of materials, of methodology, of training and approach, of linguistic variety and historiographical temperament. So I am grateful for the opportunity to think in this

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context about problems which have been a concern to me in slightly different areas for some time. Because of the nature of the encounter between Muslim and Christian in the peninsula, these are also problems of the historical variety of historical explanation, informed as this is both by the local and the patriotic and by the problems of the present. In the atmosphere of the immediate, in particular, those of us who are concerned with the past of Islam find ourselves facing special difficulties: on one side we may be accused of using—or we may be expected, or even tempted, to use—our expertise to jump on an anti-Islamic bandwagon; on the other hand we risk falling into the trap of pleading—or alternatively, we may be expected, or tempted, to plead—a cause which is not ours. ‘Not ours’, of course, because we are scholars, and ‘not ours’ also because we are concerned with the past, not the present. I hope to be able to avoid at least most of these difficulties.

All this by way of introduction, and of thanks. As to my thesis today, it is very simply expressed. In discussing the Christians of al-Andalus, the term ‘religión’, from the title of this article, is very useful, in a number of ways. It can be used to describe the beliefs and practices of the Christians in Islamic Spain. It can be used to try to draw a human, a social and even a legal boundary round the Christian population there. It can even be used, though with limited real value, to label the literature of the members of this group.

If, on the other hand, we are to try to employ the terms *etnia* and *nación*, for these Christians we find ourselves in a difficulty. Both of these terms, vague as they are, have value and usefulness, but perhaps rather for periods and areas and, dare I say it, groups, which do not include the Christians of al-Andalus. The fact of the Reconquest can very easily make us see the Christians of al-Andalus as somehow the vanguard of that process, as the critical seedbed of the Christian group identities of later medieval Iberia. As far as I can see, however, these Christians represent nothing of the kind. They were doomed to disappear: and they did disappear. They have no share in the Christian identities of medieval and modern Spain and Portugal. In what follows, I shall endeavour to explain, and, I hope, to justify, why I say this.

Christians lived under Muslim rule in al-Ándalus for some eight centuries, from 711, the year of the Conquest, until 1492, the year of the fall of Granada. It is natural to ask what happened to these Christians, and especially to ask about the nature of their identity as a group under Muslim rule. It is natural to ask such questions about any minority in the Arab or the Islamic world. It is all the more natural to ask such questions in the context of the Iberian peninsula. Among all the countries conquered by the Muslim Arabs in the first century of their expansion outside Arabia, Spain is the only one which returned to a pre-Islamic identity before the modern age. It happened in the twentieth century to

Palestine, now Israel, and it happened in a somewhat modified form also to Iran. But both of these, in their different ways, are special cases. The Iberian example stands out so much that we are bound to ask questions about the status of the Christians there, about their role in this process, about what all this can tell us about the nature of their historical experience as a group in the eight centuries of the existence of al-Andalus. However, the, perhaps rather cruel, fact is that the Christians, as a group, have no significant identity in al-Andalus and play no role, as a group, in the history of their country. from the start right up to the end, and also beyond that, in Christian Spain. This may seem an unduly harsh judgement. I think it can be defended.

Three cardinal dates, three sets of events, punctuate this history. The first is the period of the so-called 'martyrs' of Cordoba, from 850 to 859. The second is the period immediately following the reconquest of Toledo, in 1085. And the third is just a few decades later, in the 1120s, when Alfonso I of Aragon took some 10.000 Andalusi Christians back to Christian Spain with him following an expedition to the south and the Almoravids in their turn deported, or expelled, another twenty thousand or so to north Africa, suspect as potential fifth-columnists. These are not the events that are usually highlighted by students of the Christian past in al-Andalus. But I think that in their different ways each of them illustrates what I argue here and that a case can be made for seeing them, together, as constituting the milestones of critical importance in this history.

Let me begin with the martyrs. In the first place, of course, we should note that these are not martyrs in any normally accepted sense of the term. When they sought out death for themselves, Christianity in al-Andalus was in no formal danger: it was not proscribed; its practices were not forbidden; its priests were legally recognised; there were Christian monasteries, with monks living and working in them; churches functioned; Christians were governed according to a legal regime using laws which were in some sense Christian; above all, Christians were free, with but minor restrictions, to believe and to worship as they pleased. More than this was true: Christians formed the great, the huge, majority of the population; they enjoyed access to the ruler and his court: many were employed there, in government, often at high level; in certain areas of the country the Christians also enjoyed the protection of special treaties from the time of the conquest; and there were even Christians who held senior rank in the government itself. So the term 'martyrs' should be used with caution. In trying to evaluate the actions of these 'martyrs' and to judge what they were aiming at, therefore, it is in this context that we need to view them.

The martyrs of Cordoba have attracted a good deal of scholarly attention in the past, and continue to do so to this day. Simonet was the first to devote sustained serious study to them, but he was followed by quite a number of others. Most recently, we have had two American studies, by Jessica Coope and Ken-

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neth Baxter Wolf. However, the best study remains, in my view at least, that of E.P. Colbert. This is an interesting fact not least because the author was a scholar writing from a very deliberate Catholic standpoint, and indeed he published his work at the Catholic University of America. Nonetheless, his book is a model of careful, cautious and sympathetic scholarship, free of all bias or partiality. It also, more than most other studies, includes much real detail about the martyrs and the social context in which they operated and the literary context in which we are informed about them. What jumps out at us if we read these modern works, and even more if we read the sources themselves, is the remarkable degree of cultural, and hence, we may assume also social, and in consequence also political integration which reveal. Christians in al-Andalus and Muslims seem by this time, little more than a century after the conquest, to have embarked on a course, very similar to what went on everywhere else in the emergent Islamic world, of active mutual engagement.

Christians and Muslims in al-Andalus lived next door to each other; they engaged in commerce with each other; they farmed next to each other; they worked alongside each other in administration; they spoke to each other (to do this you need to have a common language); they took each other to court over normal everyday legal disputes; they married each other; they even went over from the religion of one to that of the other. Among the martyrs and their families we find many examples of Christians who were government clerks, of others who were fluent in Arabic, of Christians who were inter-married with Muslims.

Of course all was not so simple, nor so ideal as this may make it sound, nor were things equal or balanced. Not all Christians knew Arabic; nor did all Muslims know Latin - or even Arabic, for that matter, for many, very many at this stage, were Berbers. In particular there were certain restrictions, for example on who could marry whom: a Muslim man could marry a woman of any faith; a Muslim woman could marry only a Muslim man; but a Christian man could marry only a Christian woman. He might not, at least in theory, marry a Muslim woman. A Christian could, as many did, convert to Islam. A Muslim, of whatever background, might not cross over to Christianity. Apostasy was forbidden. And it was a capital offence.

In fact, the society set up by the conquerors in al-Andalus, as elsewhere, was one with many one-way streets. It offered many freedoms to its non-Muslim subjects; but they were its subjects. This is the pattern that has created the Arab-Islamic world of today. One of these one-way streets was language. If we cannot say that there was a very strong and deliberate language policy on the part of the government in al-Andalus, we also cannot deny that there was something of the kind Arabic was the language of the rulers; it was the language, increasingly, of administration; it was the language of culture; it was

the language of the dominant religion; it was the language of prestige in the country as a whole. Those who wanted to get on, those who wanted or needed to get on with the rulers, with the state, needed to know Arabic. Everything encouraged the local population to learn Arabic. And as they learned Arabic, they tended to lose, or at least to downgrade, their Latin.

Another one-way street was religion: as in other areas conquered by Islam in its first century, it is difficult to point to outright persecution of non-Islamic faiths. The normative historical narrative has it that Islam largely respects the two older monotheistic faiths, tolerates their followers and their practices (within certain not wholly unreasonable limits) and permits them to survive. They pay a price for this: subordination to the Islamic state order, payment of certain special taxes, and the acceptance of a smallish number of restrictions - no public display of Christian symbols, or ringing of bells, for example, nor permission to carry arms (or serve in armies). This is the normative narrative, and it is to a surprising degree also the reality. Missionary work, conversion to Christianity, was also forbidden - that would mean apostasy from Islam, which was not allowed. But while Islamic missionary work as such was relatively rare, at least in the period that is of interest here, Christians *were* allowed to convert to Islam. Conversion to Islam was therefore a one-way street. Once you were in, there was no way out. We have an example from ninth-century Cordoba of a little boy who seems to have had a family quarrel and to have run away from home. Apparently he decided as a result to convert to Islam. After a while, a little boy away from home, he, with his parents, wanted to reverse the process: it was impossible. The court decret that he must remain a Muslim. All this meant, *inter alia*, a permanent demographic drain for the Christians: every time someone converted to Islam, this meant a decline in the Christian population, the loss to Islam for all eternity of all his (or her) descendants, together with a corresponding gain for the Muslim population, as well as a gain, for all eternity, of all his (or her) (Muslim) descendants. This was what is nowadays called a zero-sum game, and, if the Muslims could not lose, the Christians by the same token could not win. And as with language, everything encouraged the local Christians, at least after a while, to take on the faith of their rulers.

These two one-way streets, language and religion, were the two most important features of the Christians' situation. They are also the two against which the Christian martyrs of the mid-ninth century railed the most. They had good reason to do so. Alvarus of Cordoba, in his famous complaint about the Arab rulers, complains mainly about the attractiveness of their language to young Christians. The martyrs' principal target was their religion. What the martyrs' movement confirms for us is the fact of conversion, both to Islam and to the use of Arabic. This began as early as the eighth century, at a level sufficient to cause concern to the Christians. However we interpret and explain the

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actions of the martyrs, in the ninth century, it is clear that they are a response to these changes which were taking place in their society.

In al-Andalus the next two centuries witness an almost total transformation in the cultural aspect of the local Christians. By the beginning of the eleventh century, they have stopped writing in Latin; they have almost stopped writing altogether; what little they do write is in Arabic, and is for the most part translations into Arabic of the parts of the Scriptures which were necessary for the liturgy. Apart from this, we also have a large work of canon law from as late as the second half of the eleventh century (which is currently being prepared for publication by Hanna Kassis, in British Columbia) - but that is all. This is a Christian population that is almost completely arabicised in speech, in culture, and in social norms. Conversion to Islam would, but for the Reconquest, have been the logical next step.

Let us move to my second *cas témoin*. This is the series of events following the fall of the taifa kingdom of Toledo to the Christians under Alfonso VI of Castile in 1085. The new ruler was quick to promise religious freedom to the Muslims (and Jews) of the city. As to the Christians, they regained the full religious freedom characteristic of the ruling section of the population that their ancestors had lost nearly four hundred years earlier. But in the interim, they had also been fairly isolated from the rest of Christian western Europe. They had developed their own variations on the norms of western Christianity. They had also retained an older form of handwriting which was no longer in use in western Europe. I do not have to tell that all of these things, and more, were now changed. French clerics, especially from Cluny, came in with the new rulers, and they brought with them changes to the Christian character of the Christianity that returned in triumph to the old Visigothic capital. If the glory of Toledo was restored in the Visigothic capital, it was not a Visigothic glory that shone in the city. And it was by the same token not the Mozarabic Christianity of the Christians who had spent four centuries under Muslim rule that we find enjoying new life in that city after 1085. The very ritual of their prayers was all but abandoned, just as these Christians themselves do not come to form a significant element in the new ruling class of the growing Christian world of northern and central Iberia.

My third witness is what happened in the early twelfth century. In the middle of the 1120s, Alfonso I of Aragon led an expedition down as far as the southern coast of the peninsula. He had been promised, we are told, that some 12.000 local Christians would rally to him and lend him support against the Muslim rulers. We even hear of the existence of lists of these future supporters. (It would be wonderful if such lists had survived and were available today!) The promised support did not materialise. The king returned home, but he took

with him a large number, we are told around 10.000, of Andalusí Christians to help in the resettlement of border areas. And we then hear that the Almoravids, perhaps closing a stable door rather unnecessarily after the horse had shown no inclination to bolt, deported, or exiled, some twenty thousand Andalusí Christians to north Africa.

Apart from any other effects that it had, these two actions, the Christian and the Muslim, must have had a disastrous effect on the Christian demography of al-Andalus. The numbers involved, 10.000 for the Christians removed to Aragon. 20.000 for those removed by the Almoravids to north Africa, are huge for the period. We should not feel it necessary to accept them as literally true. But even if they are greatly exaggerated the sheer scale of population loss which the story reflects must have been extremely damaging to the Christian population.

Let us add to all this a further fact. We do not know whether the Christian population of al-Andalus by, say, the eleventh century was predominantly urban or rural in character. There are good arguments on both sides. I tend to believe that it was probably rather urban than rural, but I recognise and accept the strength of the opposing arguments. My point here is not greatly weakened if there was a rural majority. But if the Christian population was in fact largely urban, and if the Almoravids, seeking to remove what they saw as potential sources of fifth-column support for Christian attacks, removed mainly urban Christians from al-Andalus, then the consequence is clear. Peter Brown drew attention long ago, in relation to Christianity in late Roman north Africa (the parallel is not far-fetched, I should suggest), to the urban character of Christianity, and especially the urban structure of the Church itself. The effect of these events of the early twelfth century on what was left of Andalusí Christianity must, I think, have been wholly catastrophic. Without an urban base, deprived of much of its demographic strength, by now wholly arabicised in speech and in culture, Christianity in al-Andalus, like Christianity anywhere else, must have been a frail flower. We hear little of Christians in al-Andalus thereafter, and everything that we do hear suggests forceful repression and decline of Christianity there to near extinction. We do hear from time to time of religious syncretism, but this is more likely to point, if anything, to an after-effect of Christian conversion to Islam; of Christians and Christianity as such, however, very little. By the time of the final capitulation of Granada, there were scarcely any Mozarabic Christians in the Nasrid Kingdom.

All of this is not news. There can be no quarrel about the fact that the Christians of al-Andalus did not survive, as an identifiable group within Iberian society, and about the prediction that, if al-Andalus itself had survived, they would still not have survived within it. The real question must be why did they fail to do so. If we look at other groups in the Islamic world, like the

Jews, and even at other Christian populations, such as those of the Holy Land, or Egypt, then we see other, more successful, patterns, and this leaves a puzzle. What was so special about Spain and about its Christians that led to this outcome? Or, alternatively, what was so special about these other groups or territories that enabled them to have different outcomes from Spain. I think that it is the others that are different - though of course we can present either side as the norm from which the other deviates.

First, the Jews: both in the Islamic world and in the Christian, from long before the rise of Islam, the Jews had learned how to adapt themselves to the peculiar circumstances of exile, dispersion, legal and social discrimination, the positive attractions of conversion, and much else. A shared language, in particular, characterised their ability to maintain links across vast distances. The loss of such a language, by contrast, is a sign of the decline of a Jewish community. The Jews of the east, of the Persian empire and of the remains of the eastern Roman empire, had a shared language, or set of languages - Hebrew and Aramaic. If we consider the Jewish community of late pre-Islamic Spain, however, what we see is precisely the opposite: we have no evidence at all of knowledge of any language other than Latin among these Jews: and we have every indication that these Jews were, one way and another, dying out. Under Islamic rule, however, the Jews benefited from a rise in their status, socially and legally, the ability easily to create and maintain links all over a wider world, a new shared language, Arabic, and, especially important, links with the new world-culture of Islam. All of these things combined to give them a group identity within the Islamic world that enabled them to survive, and to flourish. Not always and not everywhere, but in enough places and periods to ensure that they made major contributions to the history and survival of Jewish culture and of the Jewish people during the middle ages.

If we turn to the Christian communities of other Islamic territories, then we have a variety of patterns. Several facts stand out here: first, most Christian communities in Arab lands have died out. If we look at the area from Morocco to the Persian Gulf, we see Christian communities in these heartlands of ancient Christianity either dead or in eclipse. Secondly, Christian communities in the Arab world seem to survive largely thanks to special circumstances: those in Palestine survived, until recently at least, because of the special character of the Holy Land for Christians, and because of the existence of special institutions like the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, pilgrimage from the West, and much else. In fact, as a generalisation, but one with a good deal of truth to it, we can say that west of Egypt, Christianity died out under Islam. Spain should not, perhaps, have been very different.

Nevertheless, Spain was a little special. We should ask why did this fate afflict—or appear so likely to afflict—Christianity in the land of Isidore? There

are good rounds for thinking that it should not have done. First, Spain, the Iberian península, was a distinct political entity before the arrival of the Muslims. In the lands of the early Arab conquests, this was extremely rare: only of Iran, an empire which was wholly submerged in the new world of Islam, can we say the same. Virtually everywhere else that was conquered by the Arabs at the start had the status of a province of a greater empire, and lacked much by way of local identity and specificity. Spain was different.

As against this, however, we have to remember that we are concerned here with the Christians of the territory that actually came to be controlled by Islam, not with the Christians of the north. These latter were indeed able to develop an identity and an ideology connected to the lost territory - but it took them some centuries to develop it to a point where it could actually serve them usefully for the purposes of reconquest. And at the same time as it did that, it more or less definitively and deliberately excluded the Mozarabs. The ideology of reconquest had little room for such niceties as Christians living under Muslim rule in the Iberian península. They did not share in the struggle, and they were no real part of the design for future success.

In a sense, this was not very surprising. Even from the point of view of the Mozarabs themselves, their situation was very different from that of the Christians of the north. They had lost little by the conquest, both individually and as a group. For the most part they had not lost territory or lands - for the great landowners, like the rest of the Visigothic Christian elites, had fled northwards. The Christians who had remained largely retained their lands, if not always with the same rights or security of tenure. But they retained them. Their legal status was changed, for the worse, it is true, but as they were the vast, the immense, the overwhelming majority, this meant that everyone's status was less good than it had been, and where everyone suffers, few suffer by comparison with others. In most circumstances, most of the time, the change would not have been very visible. New rulers meant new taxation, but taxes always have to be paid, and to an eighth-century peasant it may not have made much difference who the distant landlord or ruler was who was taking his money. And in the same way, the religious and linguistic changes that came with the new rulers may well have had very little impact outside Cordoba, in the countryside. These were, in any case, slow to impose themselves, and probably slower still to be felt.

So our question needs to be changed a little. We need to look at these Christians more closely. And when we do, we note that, considered as a group with special group identity and group needs, they are in a very curious and difficult situation. First, because of the loss of their elites through flight and emigration in the early eighth century, it is hard to know very much about any

cohesive group identity that they may have had. The martyrs movement may allow us to glimpse certain types of leadership and even of elite groupings, but we cannot really be sure; and whatever else such glimpses do, they also confirm that such elites were weak. We do not really feel, as we look at our sources, from the very beginning, that the Christians of al-Andalus constituted a group with any special sense of its own identity or its own definition, in a positive sense, in the Iberian peninsula at this time.

In addition to this, these Christians were unable, so far as we can see, to do what Christians elsewhere in the Islamic world did, and that was to create and to maintain ties, especially religious and cultural ties, with Christians elsewhere. Such ties helped Christian communities everywhere, like Jewish ones too, to sustain themselves, especially as their status and numbers fell in later periods. We note this problem in respect of ties with the Christianity and Christians of northern Spain and Europe (though there are, I know, exceptions of some importance here); and we note it also, with virtually no exceptions at all, in respect of contacts with the great Christian communities of the east. Here there were great possibilities, but they seem never to have been exploited at all. We hear of one of the martyrs, for example, a man called George, as having come from Jerusalem (he had apparently not had a bath for twenty seven years - truly an example of suffering for God); and we hear also of alms being sent by Spanish Christians to the Christians of the east, but these do not add up to a great deal of significant contact. The Jews were able to do it, but the Christians were not. This is a very striking fact, and it cries out for explanation. There are linguistic and also political reasons which help to explain it, but they seem insufficient.

Much of this comes out further if we look at what little the Christians of al-Andalus did do to try to assert themselves. On the political front, it is striking that they seem not to have participated alongside their northern Christian co-religionists in their struggles against the Muslims. And even if we look internally, we see that Christian participation in the political and social struggles of the emirate itself in the eighth to tenth centuries was very limited. Politically, all we have, really, is the character of Ibn Hafsun. He did, it is true, engage in a genuine political struggle against the Umayyads, But does he represent any kind of Christian opposition to the Cordoban rulers? I doubt it. It is true that he tried to use Christian ideas and to attract Christian support from outside the borders of al-Andalus, and he also claimed a distinguished Christian, pre-Islamic ancestry for himself. However, most of this was political opportunism or simple make-believe. I have argued recently that the impressive Christian genealogy, going back for generations into the Christian past of pre-Islamic Spain, that we have for Ibn Hafsun is pure invention. We have no good reason to accept it as genuine or as reflecting anything other than one of Ibn Hafsun's

attempts to locate possible sources of support for himself. It tells us nothing of his real background, just as it had no success in winning him the support he was looking for.

More internally still, we have the phenomenon of the martyrs and the episode of the adoptionist heresy. As to the martyrs, I have already indicated that, regardless of their individual heroism, I think they reflect a weakness among the Christian population of al-Andalus. On one hand, their movement certainly should be seen as a reaction to the fact of Muslim rule, Muslim domination of Christian life in al-Andalus, and the inevitable decline of Christian culture and even Christian population. On the other, the form that that reaction took should indicate to us something of the challenge facing these Christians. If these Christians chose, in effect, to go down fighting, nevertheless, down is where they went. And it is difficult to see what other result their sacrifices might have had in the realities of the time and the place. Similarly, the problem of adoptionism should be seen in this context as variously a reaction to the temptations of Islam and, as against this, an attempt to strengthen internal discipline among the Christians. This latter was a necessity for these Christians, perhaps more than for Christians in other Islamic lands. Emigration to Christian Spain was still a feature of their life, more than elsewhere. And conversion to Islam, especially among the lettered, if the martyrs movement reflects the reality, was beginning to deplete their numbers. Everything was against them. All that we hear of the religious life of these Christians reminds us of American cowboys drawing up their wagons in an ever tighter circle in the face of the Muslim Indians.

The fortunes of the Christians of al-Andalus were in a sense closely tied to those of al-Andalus itself. When things went well for al-Andalus, arabicisation became more attractive an option for Christians there. But increased arabicisation tended to increase also the isolation of such Christians from the Christians of western Europe, while it did little, as we have seen, to increase their ties to Christians elsewhere in the Islamic world. As a result, the pressures, social, religious, and cultural, leading towards islamisation became all the greater. On the other hand, when things went badly for al-Andalus, and especially during the reconquest, this did not help the local Andalusí Christians either. If they survived at all as Christians, they will not have survived as Mozarabs, but as Christians *tout court*. To be a *viejo cristiano* may have been a sign of some sort of distinction, but can we identify any later medieval Spanish Christian at all as a descendant of Mozarabs? I doubt it. (I do not agree, it should be clear, with the very broad definition of the term Mozarab adopted by Thomas Burman in his recent book; it seems to me that people on the ground, there, then, would have adopted something much closer to popular notions of genetic definition of identity). Once again, the comparison, and the contrast, with the Jewish case is striking.

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The advance of the reconquest did only further damage to these local Christians. As al-Andalus declined in absolute size and strength, its Christian population, as we have seen, also declined in size and strength too. And along with this, they also lost any role or platform for expression that they might have had previously. Their culture had become —again the contrast with the Jews is apt here— a sub-set of the over-arching Arab-Islamic culture around them, but they were by now too weak to make anything of it. In this sense, they were bound to suffer, oddly enough, from the rise of the Christian states of northern Spain. When the reconquest returned large areas to Christian rule, the Christians soon found themselves submerged among the conquerors. We should compare here the fate of the local Christians of the Holy Land at the time of the Crusades. Then, they, too, found themselves ignored by the new rulers, who did not really know how to relate to these Christians who dressed and ate and spoke and behaved just like the Muslims. Ignored, and certainly not seen as the vanguard of any Christian revival there.

In the end, the conflict in the Iberian peninsula came to be a clash of civilisations, to pick up a phrase from our own time. In the end, there was a conflict genuinely between Islam and Christendom. between two faiths and two cultures and two areas of political being and identity: Arab-Islamic versus Christian Europe/Spain. In this conflict (as also during the Crusades, as also in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the middle east in general), the Christians of the Islamic world were the classic men in the middle, and like the men in the middle in most such conflicts, they lost.

I have recently been trying to look at some individual Christians under Islamic rule. Two of my characters, in particular, seem to me to offer us glimpses of the twilight zone that was Christianity in the peninsula under Islam. Two poets; two pictures of Christian life under Islam and of how modern historiography has sought to portray Christian life under Islam. The first is a man called Ghirbib. He was involved in the rebellious activity of Toledo against Cordoba in the early eighth century, a mere three generations or so after the conquest. He is said to have composed poetry in support of the rebels, encouraging them in their fight. Among the Arabs, poetry has always offered one of the great vehicles of political propaganda, and his verses are said to have been highly effective. A few lines of his verse survive, and, although they are not concerned with the rebellion, do demonstrate an ability to handle Arabic well enough to compose poetry in that language. The great Reinhard Dozy thought that Ghirbib was a child of Christian converts to Islam, and that his participation in the rebellion, via his verses, reflected local Christian aspirations to be free of Cordoban rule. This view, though not universal, has generally held the field, no one has disagreed with it openly, perhaps because of the

immense authority, of Dozy. If it were correct, it would be remarkable: a Christian converting to Islam, very shortly after the conquest, apparently in Toledo, on the very farthest edge of the Islamic and Arab worlds, at a time when there were hardly any Arabs or speakers of Arabic in the peninsula, very far away from any teachers who might not only teach him to speak Arabic but also instruct him in the highly complex skills and difficulties of composing poetry in that tongue. It would be remarkable. In fact, despite the authority attached to the name of Dozy, and despite what may be seen as the attraction of being able to identify a, sort-of, Christian who was so clever that he could compose anti-Umayyad poetry in the language of the conquerors, Ghirbib was actually not of Christian Spanish descent at all. He seems to have been of pure Arab background.

My second poet is altogether different. His name is Abu al-Hasan Mas'ud b. Abd Allah. We know almost nothing about this man - when he was born, when he died, where he lived, anything about his education, his career, the identity of any patrons whom he may have had, and so on. He may have lived in the eleventh century, but that is little more than an informed guess, based on what little we are told about his poetry, and a date in the twelfth century would be equally plausible. His poetry, in its turn, is wholly unremarkable. It is completely typical of the culture and the overall period to which our poet belonged. However, one fact, alone, about this man, makes him different. He was almost certainly a convert from Christianity to Islam. This is interesting, because, in contrast to Ghirbib, three or more centuries before him, now we are no longer surprised at a former Christian, or the son of one, who can write Arabic poetry. It is in fact what we expect. Christians in Islamic countries by this time not only can write Arabic, they almost universally cannot write anything else. More than this, our ability to identify this man as a Christian is rather evanescent: we should almost certainly not be able to identify his children and their children as descendants of a Christian (other than in the sense that everyone in twelfth-century al-Andalus probably was such). The process of accommodation, of acculturation, of absorption in the identity of the Arab-Muslims of al-Andalus, was complete.

CONCLUSIONS

Neither of my poets offers a perfect reflection of the encounter between Christian and Muslim in the Iberian peninsula and of the fate of the Christians under Islamic rule. But both, I think, do offer us angles from which to view the phenomenon of that encounter, in the context of the three processes which I mentioned at the start, the martyrs, what followed the reconquest of Toledo,

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and the deportations of the 1120s. Ghirbib was not a Christian, or a Mozarab, at all, though he was a rebel against a Muslim ruler in a country with a hugely Christian population. He was a Muslim and an Arab, speaking and composing poetry in the language of the Arabs. Abu al-Hasan Mas'ud actually was not a Christian either, he was a convert to Islam and part of a process that will have made his descendants Arabs, speaking and composing poetry in the language of the Arabs. The Arab made his living, or his name, by rebelling against the rulers, and writing poetry; the convert made his living, or his name, by writing poetry for the rulers. The one reflected some nineteenth century ideas about Christians under Islamic rule; the other shows us where such Christians actually ended up. The first, from the eighth century, demonstrates two things. He shows the extent to which Christians were totally excluded from the political process, in al-Andalus as in other areas conquered by Islam, from the very beginning to very end. And it also shows how our desire, as historians and as people who lived later, to see the Christians of the Islamic world as, somehow, active politically makes us see them even where they could have had no place. The second, from the period round the deportations of the twelfth century, demonstrates the way in which Christian identity in al-Andalus had actually become the identity of the Muslims.