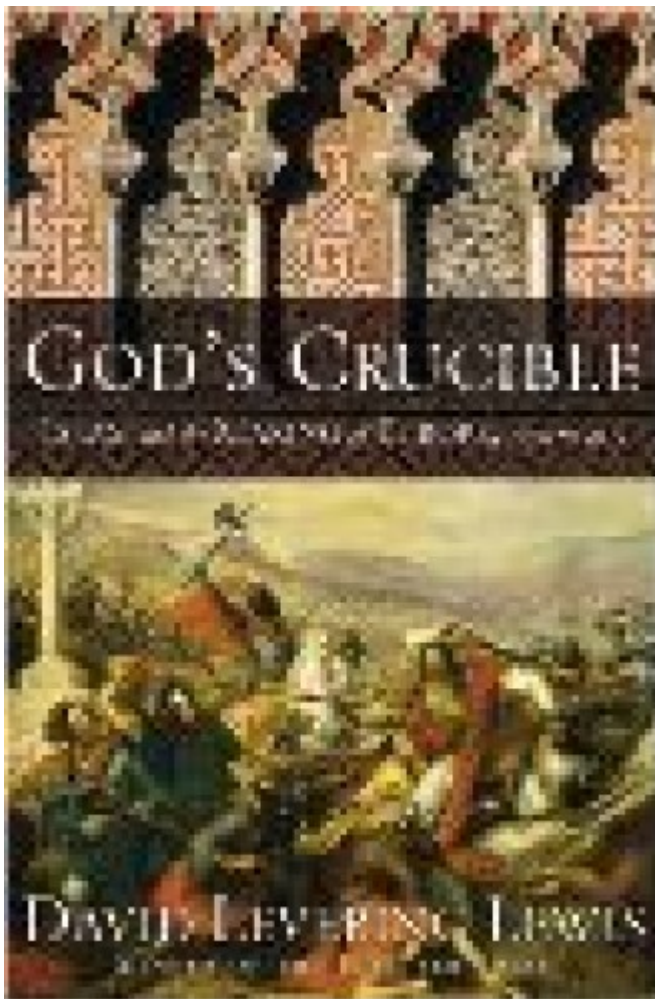


God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe, 570-1215

reviewed by [Todd Shy](#) in the [August 26, 2008](#) issue

In Review



God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe, 570-1215

David Levering Lewis

Norton

A fresh telling of the earliest encounters between the Islamic world and Christian Europe hardly needs justification. Legacies of these conflicts, David Levering Lewis notes with understatement, are “pressingly with us now.” *God’s Crucible* is a sweeping overview of the dramatic rise of Islam, the formation of something like Christendom in the West, and the subsequent confrontation of those cultures, especially in and around Spain.

Lewis’s narrative is impressively intricate. The strands of the story gather like caravans from across the ancient Near East and the Europe of the “Dark Ages.” Persian armies are here, locked in conflict with the Romans. The Byzantine Empire, its fleet spewing Greek fire, defends Constantinople with its impenetrable walls. The Islamic cities of Damascus and Baghdad become marvels of learning and architecture. An oversized Charlemagne recruits scholars to his court and slaughters infidels in battle.

In places, Arianism still competes with trinitarian orthodoxy. Nestorians follow paths of exile to the east (Marco Polo would encounter them in China). Vikings prowl the coastlines of northern Europe, pillaging, among other things, England’s monasteries. The definitive text of the Qur’an is established, and a minority Shi’a tradition separates from the Sunni majority. Italian popes form alliances with Frankish kings, setting the stage for investiture controversies to come. Epic poetry is written about battles in Spain. The severed heads of enemies, packed in camphor, are sent as trophies to victorious caliphs. Spices and luxury items from China and India travel across North Africa to fill the market stalls of Córdoba, Spain—home to 70 libraries, the stunning Great Mosque with its striped horseshoe arches, and the thriving Jewish community into which Maimonides is born.

With all its vibrancy, the Islamic world was centuries ahead of Christian Europe, leading Lewis to ask whether “defeat might have been preferable” for Europeans in their eighth-century confrontations. As it was, invading Islamic armies were turned back just north of the Pyrenees, first at Toulouse, then at the famous Battle of Tours, or Poitiers, in 732, one of the iconic moments in Western history. Lewis is good at heading off anachronistic readings of these junctures as grand clashes of religious civilizations: “For a grand seigneur of the 8th century, the high stakes at Toulouse involved personal honor and territory—family and lands. By no stretch of imagination was [Duke] Odo fighting to preserve the Catholic faith presided over by the bishop of Rome.” Concepts like Europe and Western civilization did not exist at

the time.

Islamic Spain, *al-Andalus* to its conquerors, is known now for being an emblem of relative tolerance in an otherwise intolerant time. Lewis contrasts the attitude of Islamic conquerors toward other religions with Charlemagne's: "The Qur'anic injunction that religion must be free from compulsion would, had he known of it, have made little sense to the king of the Franks, for whom state certification of confessional practice was a prerequisite." With certain caveats (no processions, for example, were permitted), Christians and Jews could maintain their religion practices and identities in Spain. But Lewis is careful not to romanticize Andalusian tolerance. Non-Muslims under Muslim rule paid a special tax. The revenue from this *jizya* was, he speculates, a sturdy disincentive for pressing the conquered to convert. Moreover, non-Muslims wore badges and distinguishing clothing, and for a Muslim to become Christian was a capital offense. The dynamic of Islamic policy was complicated. It was pragmatic as well as dogmatic—and perhaps, Lewis concludes, "based more on condescension than generosity."

The greater legacy of Islamic Spain was its role as a "conveyor belt" of ancient and modern knowledge to Christian Europe. The Arabs knew how to make paper, which made book production less arduous; beyond the Pyrenees, Europeans still used animal skins—parchment. The size of their libraries reflected Arab advantages in technology and in access to ancient sources: a single collection in Córdoba held 400,000 volumes, while Christian monasteries in Europe were lucky to have several hundred. Arabic numerals filtered into Europe via Spain, as did algebra (*al-jabr*) and the modern medical texts of Avicenna. Perhaps most influentially, the writings of Aristotle were copied and translated in Toledo, as part of what Lewis calls a "prodigious interfaith collaboration." Moreover, the Islamic commentator on Aristotle known in the West as Averroës provoked Christian scholasticism with his work. Aquinas declared that his own *Treatise on the Truth of the Catholic Faith* would refute the "Jews and Moors of Spain." The encounter between these two religions was academically fertile even as the *Reconquista* (the reconquest of Spain), the Inquisition and the Crusades became the bigger story.

God's Crucible is a weighty book, but the writing is quickened with imagination and metaphor. One "high-stakes negotiation" between a pope and a king, for example, "unfolded amid bearskins, stacked weaponry, snoring dogs, cluttered bones, and upturned wine jugs." It was a "timbered scene," Lewis adds, "pure *Beowulf*." Couched in expansive historical analysis, evocation like this has a humanizing effect.

We are reminded in passing that these historical figures lived in vivid, concrete worlds. They were not symbols of a long-ago struggle but participants, as we are. Charlemagne was six feet, three inches tall, Lewis tells us, and he wouldn't let his daughters marry. Inlaid in marble walls, phrases of the Qur'an were like "veins in the skin of the Great Mosque." Muhammad's son-in-law Ali was Hamlet-like, a "curious dyad of action and introspection." How refreshing in a book with this much ambition and range, and on a subject so urgent, to find these touches of patient eloquence.