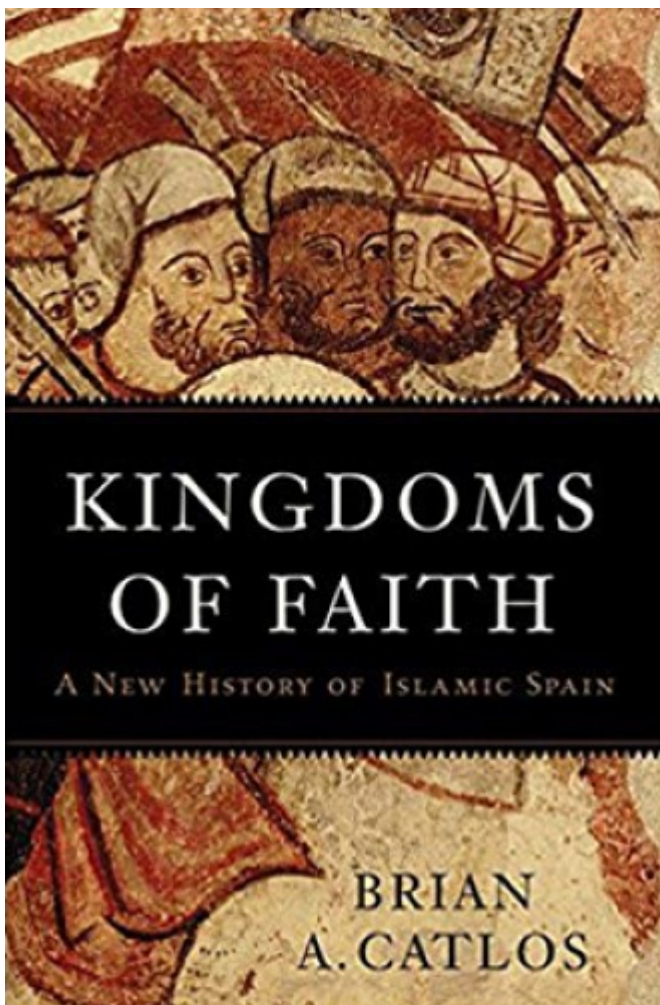


Tolerance and violence in medieval Spain

Brian Catlos offers a nuanced corrective to the competing histories of Islamic rule.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [November 7, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Kingdoms of Faith

A New History of Islamic Spain

By Brian A. Catlos

Basic Books

The English writer Saki once described an unhappy land that produced more history than it could consume locally. He might well have been speaking of medieval Spain, which regularly features in contemporary cultural debates. According to taste, it was either “the front line of a ‘clash of civilizations’; a foreign incursion on European soil; the theater of *Reconquista*, crusade, and Holy War; or a land of multireligious tolerance and *Convivencia*.” Each of these interpretations surfaces regularly in controversies about immigration, European identity, interfaith cooperation, and religious tolerance. Through repeated reuse and misuse over the years, the story of Islam in Spain has acquired a thick crust of legend and mythology. Brian Catlos’s new history is valuable not only because it offers a reliable foundation for any discussion of the subject, but because it offers little comfort to either side in modern political disputes.

The basic outline is familiar. In 711, Muslim forces from North Africa conquered Spain, which was ruled at the time by the Visigoths. Islamic Spain reached its zenith between 929 and 1031, when Córdoba was the seat of an ambitious caliphate. Christian kingdoms survived vestigially in the far north of the country, and over the centuries they expanded their power until by the 13th century they held a dominant role. The Muslim realm dissolved into petty kingdoms and city states, the *taifa*, until the last Muslim polity was crushed in 1492.

In this land of mixed ethnicities and religions, by some accounts Muslims, Christians, and Jews coexisted peacefully and productively. Readers may recall the wildly romantic PBS special *Cities of Light*, which still circulates in church discussion groups and adult education classes. In this idealized vision, *La Convivencia* persisted happily until it was overturned by fanatical outsiders—Christian Crusaders from beyond the Pyrenees and Islamist warriors from North Africa, like the black-veiled Almoravids. In this vision, the crisis of 1492 marked the triumph of Christian intolerance, and a precursor of the worst excesses of colonialism. Fallen Islamic Spain becomes a kind of multifaith dream world, a lost Camelot.

Like most such mythologies, the story contains both truth and falsehood. Most problematic is the central role that we today accord to rigidly defined religious identities, in a way that made little sense at the time. Catlos explains:

Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are seen as protagonists in an operatic history, battling it out on the stage of the centuries. Reinforcing their supposed civilizational differences, Christians and Jews are presented as “Europeans” and Muslims as foreign “Moors.” It is a perspective that invites nostalgia and moralizing, and it is appealing precisely because of its melodramatic oversimplifications.

This operatic model can be critiqued from many perspectives, but above all, “people are far too complex to be reduced to living caricatures of their religious ideologies. Religious identity was only one means by which individuals imagined their place in the world.” At every point, Catlos studies these Iberian identities through lenses of complexity, multiplicity, and nuance. For instance, it was hard not to be related to someone on the other side of the various religious divides.

Catlos’s title *Kingdoms of Faith* is double-edged. Yes, he says, every state and kingdom claimed to ground itself in religion, but that is very different from assuming that faith drove their actions (as opposed to providing a justification). Christian- and Muslim-ruled states coexisted for centuries in peace, not because of any ideological commitment to tolerance, but because they lacked any ideological need to crush or eradicate rival religions.

When states did go to war, military and political forces were extremely mixed, with Christians fighting for Muslim rulers, and vice versa. Catholic heroes like El Cid are best seen as freelance warlords, military entrepreneurs who played all sides of the religious fence. Even the Almoravids, who today we might see as a kind of proto-ISIS, relied increasingly on Christian mercenaries, the so-called *farfanés*, to the extent of allowing them to build churches in their Moroccan possessions. Political power and military success were too important to allow religious differences to interfere.

Catlos offers a fine illustration of contemporary attitudes when he describes the sack of the venerated shrine of Santiago de Compostela by the caliph al-Mansur in 997. Christian holy places were destroyed in what looks like a devastating act of blasphemy and iconoclasm. Yet al-Mansur’s army included Christians, and he gave strict orders against molesting the tomb of Santiago himself (Saint James), who was believed to be the brother of the prophet Jesus.

Also, to speak of tolerance or persecution raises questions of chronology in a time span of nearly eight centuries. Some eras were more open than others, and anyone seeking evidence of *La Convivencia* or persecution can find appropriate examples from some era. Generally, the ninth and tenth centuries were more tolerant, but in the 850s even glorious Córdoba produced some dozens of Christian martyrs who died for publicly proclaiming their faith. Yet as Catlos shows, this was a complex story, as the Christians went far out of their way to provoke conflict. The story appears in the index under V, for “Voluntary Martyrs of Córdoba.”

Some Islamic rulers were tolerant and broad-minded, and others were not. Sometimes Muslim rulers favored people of other faiths for pragmatic or selfish reasons. A king might choose a Jewish vizier because he would be wholly faithful and subservient, as he would not be allied to rival Islamic factions.

When *La Convivencia* did break down, it did so spectacularly. In 1066, Granada’s Muslims slaughtered thousands of Jews in an outbreak comparable to anything in the contemporary Christian West. As Catlos says, “Arab al-Andalus was no Shangri-la of open-minded tolerance.” Christian states likewise were often tolerant of their Muslim subjects, right up to the point that they were not. Muslim populations survived under a thin Christian veneer until Spain finally banished its Moriscos in 1614. Catlos neatly translates that term as “Muslim-ish Christians.”

Catlos shows how easily and rapidly organized Christianity collapsed in the face of emerging Islamic rule not because of threats of violence but because of the dissolution of older political structures. Also, he rightly shows that the combined force of Arabic culture and Islamic religion offered a powerfully tempting package for potential converts, especially in cities. Already by the ninth century, Christians were being forced to translate books into Arabic to reach their shrinking cohort of younger followers. The message offered by the conquerors was not so much “The Qur’an or the Sword!” as “The Qur’an or social exclusion, and being really unfashionable!” The latter proved just as effective.

Kingdoms of Faith is an exceedingly well-written and thoroughly researched book. Catlos’s emphasis throughout on nuance and complexity is an essential corrective to the stark dichotomies proposed in much contemporary mythology.

However, there are some contradictions between the stark arguments of Catlos’s introduction—religion usually justified what states were going to do anyway—and the numerous examples to the contrary that emerge in his narrative. We have

already seen the highly religious quality of al-Mansur's campaigns in the 990s, and plenty of other kings and local warlords carried out explicit campaigns of Islamization in conquered territories. Christians, of course, undertook their own religious purges. Perhaps the real true believers on either side were a minority in the long story of the Spanish wars, but you only needed a few determined zealots to enact authentic religious and social transformations. Some kingdoms of faith really were what the name implies.