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Convivencia and the “Ornament of the World”

Kenneth B. Wolf

Convivencia is a historical term used to describe the “coexistence” of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities in medieval Spain and by extension the interaction, exchange, and acculturation fostered by such proximity. It first emerged as the by-product of a famous debate between Américo Castro and Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz that dominated Spanish historical scholarship during the Franco years. Since then *convivencia* has taken on a life of its own, fueled in part by increased interest in multi-culturalism on the one hand and rising concern about sectarian violence on the other. The application of anthropological models has gone a long way toward clarifying the actual mechanisms of acculturation at work in medieval Spain and tempering the tendency to romanticize *convivencia*. But the weightier and saner parts of that research have yet to trickle down to the “Borders” crowd and romantic notions of medieval Spanish tolerance persist, fed, in large part, by the continued popularity of a single book: María Rosa Menocal’s *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (2002).

In a nutshell, Menocal’s thesis is that the unusual level of tolerance of religious difference that characterized the Umayyad period of Andalusian history was built not so much on “guarantees of religious freedoms comparable to those we would expect in a modern ‘tolerant’ state,” but on the “often unconscious acceptance that

contradictions—within oneself, as well as within one’s culture—could be positive and productive” (11). In other words, the dominant Islamic culture of al-Andalus was inclusive enough and apparently confident enough to contain many non-Islamic, and even *un-Islamic*, elements within in. Menocal distilled this thesis in part from the simple observation that Arabic, long before becoming the holy language of the Qur’an, had served as the vehicle for a sophisticated secular poetic tradition. As Islam spread, so did Arabic, bringing with it a highly-developed literary culture that could and did appeal to Muslims and non-Muslims alike (61-3, 75-8). Extrapolating from this Islamic receptivity to pre-Islamic poetry, Menocal painted the Muslim world as one that was originally open to contradictions of all types, as evidenced, on the one hand, by the translation into Arabic of Greek philosophy, and on the other, by the positive working relationships cultivated with non-Muslims. This was particularly true—in Menocal’s estimation, anyway--of the Umayyad dynasty. Deprived of its Damascus-based caliphate in 750--partly on the grounds that it was too willing to accommodate pre-Islamic cultures (54)--it managed to reinvent itself and its cultural open-mindedness in Spain beginning in 756. In Menocal’s own words, “the Umayyads. . . defined their version of Islam as one that loved its dialogues with other traditions”; (21)... they “created a universe of Muslims where piety and observance were not seen as inimical to an intellectual and ‘secular’ life and society” (87). Though the Umayyad caliphs of Córdoba lasted only until the civil wars of the early eleventh century, their ecumenical attitude outlived them and actually spread across Muslim Spain during the period of the Taifa kingdoms and then beyond the boundaries of al-Andalus altogether into Christian Europe. Using a series of roughly chronological historical vignettes, Menocal traced and illustrated

the proliferation of this cultural “open-mindedness.” Most of her chapters consider the careers of key individuals like Samuel Ha-Nagid, the great Jewish poet and vizier of the Taifa kingdom of Granada; Petrus Alfonsi, the converted Jew who introduced the English court of Henry I to the wonders of Arab science; Peter the Venerable, the abbot of Cluny who was responsible for overseeing the first Latin translation of the Qur’an; and Thomas Aquinas, whose controversial synthesis of Christian theology and Aristotelian philosophy was built on foundations laid by the Cordoban-born philosophers, Averroes and Maimonides. It will come as no surprise, given the author’s academic specialty, that literature holds pride of place for her as a marker of creative exchange. It was, for instance, the Arabic tradition of secular poetry that triggered the “golden age” of Hebrew poets in al-Andalus and then, in a vernacular form, infiltrated Provence, helping to shape the troubadour tradition. Moreover the rich body of “framed tales” that Petrus Alfonsi introduced to the Latin world, tales that would inspire Boccaccio and Chaucer, were derived from Arab sources.

I have no particular beef with Menocal’s thesis. It is certainly worth considering at least as a partial explanation for the cultural efflorescence that took place within Umayyad Spain and the Taifa kingdoms and influenced so many Jewish and Christian intellectuals and literary figures exposed to it. My problem with the book stems from its exclusive focus on those “golden age” (13) moments in Andalusian history that fit so nicely under a “culture of tolerance” rubric, moments that have been extracted from their more ambiguous and nuanced historical contexts. It is true, for instance, that Samuel Ha-Nagid excelled both as a Jewish poet using

models borrowed from the Arabic tradition and as a military commander leading Granada's Muslim forces in battle. But we also know from detailed, near contemporary memoirs that he spent his whole career looking over his shoulder, waiting for the dark day when his enemies would finally get the king's ear. In the end Samuel managed to survive his term as vizier, but his son and successor Joseph was torn apart by a mob that had been led to believe that the problems they faced in Granada were all a function of the machinations of the Jews. That is what I mean about the dangers of considering only the "golden moments" in *convivencia* history. In my opinion, the career of Samuel ibn-Nagrila should be approached the way a sea captain approaches an iceberg, understanding that what we see at first glance is only part of the picture and that it behooves us to look beneath the surface before we get too close.

Time will not permit me to contextualize each and every expression of this "culture of tolerance" that Menocal has assembled for her readers. For now I propose simply to focus on her choice of title—*The Ornament of the World*—using it as a kind of synecdoche standing for the work as a whole. At face value, it is simply a metaphor that encapsulates the optimism on the other side of the colon: *How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*. What a splendid ornament, a veritable beacon for a world weary of religious conflict, such a tolerant society would be! An excellent hook for the "Borders" crowd. But there is more to "ornament of the world" than meets the eye. Much more.

Menocal did not coin the phrase. She borrowed it from Hroswitha of Gandersheim (c. 930-c. 1002), the tenth-century Saxon nun and author, who used “ornament of the world” in its Latin form (*decus orbis*) in reference to Muslim Córdoba, capital of the Umayyad caliphate of her day. As Menocal explained, even from Hrosvitha’s “far-off convent at Gandersheim [she] perceived the exceptional qualities and the centrality of the Cordoban caliphate. ... For her...the bright lights of that world, and their illumination of the rest of the universe, transcended differences of religion.” (12) Menocal proposed to use the same term, but in reference to Umayyad Spain as a whole, as a way of commending its unusually high tolerance of cultural difference and contradiction.

Regardless of what one thinks about Menocal’s overall thesis, it would be hard for anyone familiar with Hroswitha and her writings to accept this characterization of her reference to Córdoba, which effectively treats the nun as if she were some farm girl dazzled by the lights of the big city in the distance. I will be considering Hroswitha’s use of “ornament of the world” and her description of Córdoba in some detail, not only to set the record straight as to why she referred to the city that way, but to show how Hroswitha’s less than complimentary view of Islamic Spain actually *can*, nonetheless, provide us with a convenient back-door into the complexities of *convivencia* when considered in its broader historical context.

Hroswitha’s reference to Córdoba as the “ornament of the world” appears in the prologue of a verse *passio* that she composed in honor of Pelagius, an early tenth-century Gallegan prince who was executed in Córdoba for religious offenses. How

was it that a German nun came to know the story of a near contemporary Iberian martyr? She heard it from Recemund—a.k.a. Rabi ibn Sid al-Usquf—a mozarabic Christian secretary to Caliph Abd ar-Rahman III who was sent as part of a caliphal delegation to the court of Otto I in 955. If she did not actually meet Recemund, she clearly spoke to people who had.¹

In any case, the prologue of the *Passion of Pelagius* begins:

In the western regions, there shone a fair ornament of the world, an august city, proud as a result of its newfound military might, a city that had been founded by Spanish settlers and was known by the famous name of Córdoba; a wealthy city, renowned for its charms, splendid in all of its resources, overflowing in particular in the seven streams of knowledge, and ever noted for its continual victories.

The first thing to be noticed is that nowhere does Hroswitha even hint that Córdoba's status as an "ornament of the world" has anything to do with its tolerance and openness to other cultures. She compliments the city only for its military power, its wealth, its charms, and its intellectual activity. These opening lines have the "boiler-plate" quality of a generic encomium to a prosperous, powerful city. Hroswitha would have been aware of similar paeans to ancient Rome, among other great cities. In fact she took one little turn of phrase in her prologue

¹ We know that Hroswitha and her monastery were well-connected to the Saxon court. For one thing, her principal tutor and later her abbess at Gandersheim was Gerberga, Otto I's niece. We also know that Hroswitha would, some years later, be given the task of writing a verse eulogy in honor of the emperor.

from the twelfth line of the *Aeneid* describing Carthage, which, Virgil tells us, was “founded by Tyrian settlers.” But of course here we are dealing with a Muslim city as seen through the eyes of a Christian nun, so we don’t expect the eulogy to last for long. And it doesn’t. Hroswitha continues:

In previous times this city had been fully subject to the true Christ, abounding with white-robed children baptized to the Lord. But all of a sudden a belligerent power overturned the well-established laws of the sacred faith and, spreading the error of its nefarious teachings, inflicted injury on its faithful citizens. The perfidious nation of the indomitable Saracens enticed the strong inhabitants of this city to war and forcefully took control of the destiny of this glorious kingdom. They exterminated the good king, cleansed as he had been by baptism, the king who had rightfully carried the royal scepter and who had so often restrained the citizens with appropriate laws. Now the people that he had left behind, overcome by the enemy sword, were defeated with great slaughter. Finally a perverse man, profane in both his life and his rite, appropriated the destiny of that entire kingdom to himself.

There is not much here that would suggest that the *Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*. But, again, we are dealing with the overthrow of a Catholic regime by a non-Catholic one and doing so through the lens of hagiographer almost 2,000 kilometers away. Under these circumstances, we would expect a black and white account characterized by stark oppositions. The text continues:

[This perverse man] placed his nefarious associates in the depopulated countryside and filled the mournful city with no few of his enemy forces. Pitiful to relate, he polluted [Córdoba,] that venerable mother of pure faith, with a barbaric rite by mixing his pagans among the rightful inhabitants, so that the former might induce the latter to abandon the ways of their fathers, and thus defile them through profane association with [the pagans].

Here, despite the distant vantage point and the unpromising *raison d'écrire*, Hrosvitha actually has managed to capture something resembling *convivencia*, at least *convivencia* as it might have appeared that far from the frontier: the forced and to her unimaginable "mixing" (*intermiscendo* is the word she chose) of Muslims and Christians. She was, of course, in no position, geographically or rhetorically, to appreciate how thin the Muslim occupation actually was and how, far from trying to convert the locals, the invaders were preoccupied with protecting their own nascent religious identity from excessive contact with the Christian majority. Hrosvitha continued:

But the tender flock, that would only be ruled by Christ the Shepherd, soon rejected the unhappy command of this perverse tyrant, saying that they preferred to die in support of their law rather than live like fools in service to some novel rite. When the king was informed of this, he realized that he would himself suffer greatly if he tried to inflict the bitter destruction of death on all of the [Christian] citizens of that prosperous city, which he had

managed to take in the first place only after numerous assaults involving a great deal of fighting. So, modifying his previously established decree, he enacted and proclaimed to the people a law to the effect that whoever preferred to serve the Eternal King and keep the faithful customs of their forefathers might do so lawfully without penalty.

Again, for the purposes of her narrative, Hroswitha grossly overestimated the number of Christians who, on religious grounds, would have found the occupation unacceptable. She also manufactured, for dramatic purposes, the part about the new governor needing to be cajoled into granting the Christians of Córdoba the right to live according to their own religious law. The Muslims all over their new and far-flung empire had long since come to the conclusion that they would get a lot further if they granted liberties to the communities of Christians, Jews, and even Zoroastrians that they encountered, as long as these peoples were willing to accept their authority. But Hroswitha at least understood that this arrangement between the Muslim conquerors and their *dhimmi* subjects was at its heart a pragmatic one. The occupying forces were simply outnumbered and could not afford to antagonize their new subjects.

Still the Christians of Córdoba were not given completely free rein, and Hroswitha knew it.

Only one condition was to be carefully preserved: that no citizen of this city blaspheme the gods made out of gold, which that prince—and those who

held power [after him]—worshipped; if he did, he must immediately be put to the sword, forced to suffer capital punishment.

There were, in fact, a number of restrictions placed on the lives of Andalusian Christians, including the ringing of bells, the building of new churches, and marriage to Muslim women. But for the purposes of Hroswitha's narrative, it made sense to focus all of her reader's attention on the proscription against blasphemy. Clearly Hroswitha had not gotten the message about Islam's commitment to monotheism and its strict taboo on the use of any graven images. Or more likely she *had* gotten the message—from Recemund himself, if not before--but chose to ignore it for reasons that we will get into later. We can at least give her credit for understanding that, as *laissez-faire* as the Muslims might have been with regard to intracommunity matters, they could not afford to let public displays of disdain for their religion go unpunished. The text continues:

These things having been done, the faithful city rested in feigned peace, buried amidst a thousand evils. But any of those in whom the fire of the love of Christ burned and felt compelled by a thirst for martyrdom to defame with words the marble [images] that the prince, prostrate and adorned with a crown, venerated with Sabeian incense, these he condemned to immediate death; their souls, purified by their own blood, made their way to heaven.

Based on this part of the prologue, it would appear that Recemund had shared with Hroswitha the stories of the martyrs of Córdoba of the 850s, many of whom publicly

denounced Muhammad and suffered decapitation for it. Or perhaps he told her about other, more recent martyrdoms of this type that, for lack of a Eulogius, left no trace in the written records. That Hroswitha, a nun, would root for the martyrs is hardly surprising. More interesting is her reference to the “peace” that prevailed once the “tyrant” allowed the subject Christians to worship as they wished. Granted, she described the peace as a “feigned peace” (*pace simulata*) that was “buried by a thousand evils” (*Obruta mille malis*), but it was still peace. This was her round-about way of acknowledging what anyone who had actually been to Córdoba could have told her—and that Recemund probably did: that most Christians did just fine under Muslim dominion, even though it required a cognitive leap for the first generation to get used to their new “Jew-like” status as a protected but subordinated community. Had Hroswitha known the word *convivencia* she might even have used it at this point, though, for polemical purposes, she would have dubbed it a “*conviventia falsa*.”

Such is the prologue of Hroswitha’s *Passion of Pelagius*, rendered for you bit by bit. But I want to push ahead, considering the story of Pelagius itself to see what it might have to tell us about *convivencia* and Hroswitha’s sense of Córdoba as an ornament of the world.

To her credit, Hroswitha not only managed to transliterate Abd ar-Rahman’s (912-61) name accurately (*Abdrahamen*) but captured his famous decision to upgrade the Umayyad emirate to a caliphate in 929. In her own words, “this sacrilegious man...believed himself to be the very king of kings, that all nations should become

subject to his command" (86-88). As Hroswitha told it, this hegemonic obsession led him to take aim at Christian Galicia, which had so far refused to submit to him. The caliphal armies made short work of the resistance, capturing the twelve principal Gallegan nobles and ransoming them at their great expense, all but their leader, the price of whose liberty was too steep. Ultimately he was released, but only after his adolescent son, Pelagius, had been given to Abd ar-Rahman as a hostage, to be held until the remaining sum could be paid. Pelagius was at first confined to prison in Córdoba, only to be released at the urging of certain nobles who realized that the boy, a singularly attractive one, was likely to find favor with the caliph. As Hroswitha put it, "they knew that the supreme lord of that prosperous city had been corrupted with the vice of the Sodomites, and that he ardently loved young boys who were handsome in the face, longing to join them to himself in a special friendship" (204-07). Cleaning and dressing Pelagius up for the occasion, they presented him to Abd ar-Rahman who was smitten with him at first sight. Placing Pelagius next to him on his throne, the caliph put his arms around him and tried to kiss him, only to have the young prince turn away. "It is not right that a man cleansed by the baptism of Christ should submit his chaste neck to a barbaric embrace, nor should a worshipper of Christ, anointed with the sacred chrism, accept the kiss of such a lewd slave of demons" (243-47). Taken aback by this rebuff, the caliph pointed out to Pelagius that his rejection constituted an act of blasphemy, a particularly dangerous thing to do given what Hroswitha had said in her prologue. The caliph advised Pelagius "with fatherly admonition" (260) to watch his tongue, and then proceeded to come on to him again in a very unfatherlike way, promising to make him second to him "in this proud kingdom." This time, when he

tried to kiss the youth, the caliph's lips were met by Pelagius's fist. His beard bloodied and his ego bruised, the jilted Abd ar-Rahman wasted no time in ordering Pelagius shot from a catapult over the city walls, expecting his body to be dashed on the rocks of the river. When Pelagius miraculously emerged from this unusual punishment unscathed, he was immediately decapitated. While his soul made its way to heaven, his body, recovered by fishermen and sold at a high price to faithful Christians in the city, was tested by fire and, when it passed, was honored with an appropriate burial.

You will have already sensed that this account tells us a lot more about Hroswitha and her world than it does about Pelagius and his. This becomes all the more apparent when we consider the *Passion of Pelagius* in the context of Hrosvitha's other writing projects, in particular the six plays that she authored. She wrote them, she tells us, because she was concerned about the deleterious effects of Terence's plays, which were a regular part of the Latin curriculum in monastic schools. For all of their stylistic sophistication, their female characters were simply not suitable role models for nuns. In an attempt to provide them with more appropriate reading material, Hroswitha set about crafting her own plays out of the lives of early Christian women who had made a point of dramatically rejecting this world in their pursuit of the next one. Predictably, among her heroines were Christian virgins from the Roman period whose vows of chastity were threatened by aggressive pagan suitors. Hroswitha must have figured that such protagonists, forced to defend their virginity with their very lives, would be particularly inspiring for nuns who considered themselves the spiritual descendants of such martyrs even

though their cloistered lives made their own virginity so much more secure and its defense correspondingly banal. In any case, we can safely assume, given Hroswitha's predilection for stories that could be both edifying and entertaining for her nuns, that the account of Pelagius's martyrdom would have struck a chord with her.

Hroswitha's experience with crafting the plays about virgin martyrs clearly influenced how she framed her account of Pelagius. For one thing, Hroswitha "Romanized" the account, thus bridging the temporal and conceptual gap separating the well-known Roman persecutions from this not-so-well-understood Andalusian one. This is most obvious in Hroswitha's depiction of the Muslims as idol worshippers. But it pops up in other places as well, for instance when she describes Pelagius being led from his prison cell "dressed in a toga" (226) at the "urging of the proud command of the Caesar" (224). More subtle are certain parallels related to the staging of the encounters between the martyrs and their persecutors. In the virgin-martyr plays, Hroswitha inevitably added a element of humiliation for the would-be tormentors, something designed to make an audience of nuns chuckle. In the play *Dulcinius*, for instance, the lecherous pagan governor who intends to have his way with three virgins ends up fondling and kissing soot-covered pots and pans instead. (*Plays*, 44). The very same intent to embarrass a would-be rapist is apparent, albeit in a less slap-stick form, in the *Passion of Pelagius*. When the caliph leans over the first time to kiss Pelagius, the youth, "mocked him, turning his mouth away and, to the king's great embarrassment, offering his ear to the royal mouth instead" (240-41). Granted, it's not as funny as the scene with the

cookware, but the effect is the same: not only is the violation thwarted, but the would-be violator is made to look silly.

The patterns in Hroswitha's mind may also help explain why her Pelagius does not seem at all offended by the prospect of a homosexual relationship. Remember what he said to the caliph after his first advance: "It is not right that a man cleansed by the baptism of Christ should submit his chaste neck to a barbaric embrace, nor should a worshipper of Christ, anointed with the sacred chrism, accept the kiss of such a lewd slave of demons" (243-47). The "turn off" for him is the idea of joining his Christian body to a non-Christian one. If we thought these words were Pelagius's own, we might be tempted to speculate about his sexual orientation. But knowing them to be the product of Hroswitha's imagination, it makes more sense to imagine her inadvertently feminizing him, choosing by default to treat his gender as a minor variation on what for her, given her literary experience with *female* victims of rape, was a well-worn theme. The only nod to his "manliness" turns out to be the punch that he landed on Abd ar-Rahman's mouth. The protagonists of Hroswitha's virgin-martyr plays did not do that sort of thing.

Understanding the broader context—both literary and institutional--within which Hroswitha was operating allows us to appreciate *in situ* her encomium to Córdoba, the one that inspired the upbeat title of Menocal's book. The history of historical writing in the Mediterranean world has many consistent themes, not the least of which being the tropes used by "barbarians" to describe their more "civilized" neighbors. Whether a Roman historian writing about the Greeks or a Gothic

historian writing about the Romans, the tendency was to describe the more civilized "other" as a formerly great, but now complacent, decadent power, grown soft and passive, even feminine, as a result of its own prosperity. Add Christianity to the mix, and the decadence of the "overly civilized" empire is easily translated into excessive worldliness: too much focus on the here and now at the expense of the "there" and "to come." If we consider Hroswitha's opening portrait of Córdoba in light of this, suddenly her "glowing" (32) description of the city makes poetic sense. It provides the perfect backdrop for Abd ar-Rahman, a sexually reprobate Muslim locked in a perfectly binary, epic confrontation with a sexually chaste Christian. To the equal and opposite extent that Pelagius, the protagonist, was fixated on the next world, Abd ar-Rahman, the antagonist, would have to be hopelessly mired in this one, a prisoner of bodily passions run amok. Understood this way, there is nothing in the least bit complimentary about Hroswitha's characterization of Córdoba as an "ornament of the world, renowned for its charms, splendid in all of its resources, overflowing in particular in the seven streams of knowledge, and ever noted for its continual victories." From her Augustinian perspective, such "ornaments of the world," were nothing more than the glittery, ultimately vacuous by-products of people who allowed themselves to be distracted from their proper pursuit of the "ornaments of the world *to come*."

Looking back over Hroswitha's *Passion of Pelagius* as a whole, it turns out to be a singularly unyielding source of images of *convivencia*. Aside from an ironic metaphor and a handful of passing references to Christian-Muslim cohabitation in the city, references that Hroswitha rendered almost unrecognizable by her

martyrologically-inspired rhetoric, there is nothing but confrontation in this account; nothing but a sensationalized, black-and-white overlay on what we know from many other sources was a world characterized by every possible shade of gray. Even the ultimate act of *convivencia* that was being foisted on Pelagius by the lecherous Abd ar-Rahman was summarily rejected, and not even on sexual grounds but on the grounds of cultural incompatibility. "So go," Pelagius toward his would-be lover, "and embrace those ignorant men who try, like you, to appease empty gods of clay. Let those who are servants of idols be your companions." (247-49). So much for inter-community relations. So much for *convivencia*. One might even go so far as to say that from Hroswitha's perspective, the kind of acculturation that characterized Christian-Muslim relations in tenth-century Córdoba was tantamount to an act of cultural sodomy: an unnatural union, without issue, to be abhorred. Considered from this perspective, Pelagius's refusal to submit to the caliph's advances was simply a microcosmic, metaphoric instance of Hroswitha's more general rejection of Muslim dominion in any form. Christians were not supposed to be subjected to Muslims and if they should ever find themselves in that situation, they were expected to "prefer to die in support of its own law rather than live like fools in service to a novel rite." All very interesting as a reflection of the Christian "party line," but what does this have to do with *convivencia*? Nothing, if we continue to use the term in the narrow, "culture of tolerance" way that Menocal uses it. But what if we were to broaden it?

There are three promising ways in which we could do that. First of all, instead of considering *convivencia* to be a strictly Andalusian phenomenon, or even an Iberian

one, we could extend its radius to include the entire Mediterranean, the shores of which Christians and Muslims divided between themselves. Regions where there was significant overlap, like Spain, naturally experienced *convivencia* differently than regions where there was very little, like Germany, but even the German experience of *convivencia* in this broad sense deserves to be considered, if for no other reason than to give us something with which to compare the Spanish experience. Second, there is nothing about the word “convivencia,” etymologically speaking, that suggests that we should limit its use to examples of *positive* interaction between the cultures. *A priori* we would expect “living togetherness” to generate as many negative interactions as positive ones (with both of these being vastly outnumbered by neutral ones). Third, we might even want to withhold judgment on what exactly we mean by a positive and negative interactions. As David Nirenberg has shown, the less harmonious moments in inter-community relations, moments that have traditionally been considered the antitheses of *convivencia* and even harbingers of its ultimate demise, probably *contributed* to the social cohesion that enabled the more neutral, daily manifestations of *convivencia*. As a corollary to this axiom, we should also keep in mind that many of the highly regarded examples of positive *convivencia* came with a “dark side.” For example, while Muslim authorities allowed subject Christian and Jewish communities a remarkable degree of autonomy as far as their own internal affairs were concerned, they did this primarily because they were concerned about the contamination of their own religious community through excessive contact with Christians and Jews. The same was true, *mutatis mutandis*, of the Christian authorities and their relationship with Jews and subject Muslims. As Thomas Glick observed, “the

communal autonomy of these groups, often represented as the very symbol of tolerance, was in fact the institutional expression of ethnocentric norms which held such groups in abhorrence, as tolerated but alien citizens who were not to share in social life on the same basis as members of the dominant religion" (174).

With this broader definition of *convivencia* in mind—one that, first of all, considers the Mediterranean as a whole; second, is willing to entertain the widest possible range of the results of "living togetherness;" and, third, is chary of over-hasty value judgments--I want to return to the *Passion of Pelagius* to see what it might have to offer to the discussion. This time, though, I will be focusing less on the literary forces that shaped it and more on the diplomatic historical context that gave Hroswitha with the idea to write it in the first place.

Recemund's trip to the Saxon court in 955 was part of a series of diplomatic exchanges between Abd ar-Rahman III and Otto I that began around 950 when the German king sent a delegation to Córdoba. If we can trust Liutprand, Otto was exercised about the disruption caused by Muslim raiders based at Fraxinetum, near St. Tropez. The caliph's response, which included language about Christianity that Otto found offensive, led the German king to detain the Muslim delegation for three years and finally to enlist his brother, the archbishop of Cologne, to craft a rebuttal. This letter was then carried to Córdoba by a monk named John from the monastery of Görz near Metz. Happily John's experiences at the caliphal court were captured in the *Life of John of Görz*, written by John of St- Arnulf with an eye to his fellow monk's canonization.

We learn in this account that when John of Görz finally reached Córdoba sometime in 953, he was met by Hasdai, the famous Jewish physician and minister to the caliph whose career is the subject of an early chapter in Menocal's book. Three months later, still waiting for an audience with the caliph, John received a visit from a mozarab bishop—perhaps the bishop of Córdoba—who was also named John. It is the subsequent interchange between these two Johns, recorded by a third one, that is of potential interest here as far as Hroswitha's *Passion of Pelagius* is concerned.

According to the text, the bishop went to John of Görz to dissuade him from sharing the potentially blasphemous contents of Otto I's letter with the caliph. As he explained:

Consider under what conditions we live. We have, as a result of our sins, been subjected to the rule of the pagans. Moreover we are forbidden by the words of the apostle to resist civil power. Only one source of solace is left to us: that in the depths of such a great calamity they do not forbid us to live according to our own laws. They can see that we are diligent followers of the Christian faith, and as such they honor us and welcome us, much the same way as they delight in their own company, all the while thoroughly detesting the Jews. So for the time being, we have been following this advice: that provided no harm is done to our religion, we obey them in everything else and follow their orders in all matters that do not affect our faith. So I advise you now to leave the bulk of these things unsaid, and to suppress that letter

altogether, lest you provoke a confrontation that will be dangerous for your and for your people when it is absolutely uncalled for. (Görz, 122)

This fascinating little peak behind the curtain of Christian life in mid-tenth century Córdoba cannot be taken entirely at face value, given the hagiographic purposes of the author. For one thing, Bishop John, of all people, would have understood that the Muslims were not pagans. A less obvious sign of tampering: that the bishop would regard the Muslim invasion as a punishment for the sins of the Spanish Christians. It's not that he *couldn't* have felt that way; it's just that based on the frequency with which this interpretation appears in transpyrenean sources--beginning with a letter written by Boniface in the mid-eighth century--compared to cispyrenean ones, it is more likely to have come from someone—like the German author of the text--on the outside looking in. Be that as it may, one part that is less likely to have been invented and at the same time much more interesting for our purposes is Bishop John's justification of his accommodationist strategy on the grounds of biblical proscriptions against resisting civil authority. The basic principle of "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" made a lot of sense in the first few centuries of Christian history, before the church could count on government support, and it would have made a lot of sense from the perspective of Andalusian bishops who had essentially been thrown back into pre-Constantinian times by the Muslim invasion.

But it did not make sense to John of Görz, not only because he would have had no way of knowing what Christian life under Muslim rule really looked like, but because

it was important to the author of his *vita* that he sound like a staunch defender of the faith. In any case he did not pull any punches, accusing the bishop of reneging on his responsibilities as a leader of the church by encouraging such friendly association with Muslims. John went on to assail the bishop for things that he had heard since his arrival in Córdoba that suggested very dangerous levels of accommodationism; to wit, that the bishop regularly abstained from foods proscribed by Islamic law and that he had even undergone circumcision! Again, the bishop defended his actions with an appeal to pragmatism: "Necessity constrains us, for otherwise there would be no way that we could live among them." "Indeed," he continued, "we observe [these customs] as something handed down to us and observed by our ancestors from time immemorial." (Görz, 123). Given the context, this response makes sense: by the mid-tenth century, the Andalusian Christians would have been so accustomed to the strategies of accommodation worked out by their ancestors that they would have considered them not only status quo but time-honored. John of Görz could not have been expected to see it that way. "Never could I approve of the divine laws being transgressed out of fear, or friendship, or on account of some human advantage." As far as he was concerned, it was not only his duty as a *diplomat* to deliver the letter; it was his duty as a *Christian* who should not pass up a chance to experience martyrdom firsthand. Again, John of Görz's ardor may have been exaggerated for effect, but his patent inability to put himself in Bishop John's shoes seems authentic enough.

As it turned out, John's refusal to leave Córdoba until he had fulfilled his mission by delivering the letter led to a diplomatic impasse that ultimately prompted the caliph

to send a new delegation to Saxony, leaving John behind in Córdoba to wait for the results. This was the one led by Recemund, who took the opportunity to pass on what he knew about Pelagius to Hroswitha.

Though a bit anti-climactic from a hagiographical standpoint and not entirely reliable from a historical one, the account of John of Görz's visit to Córdoba and especially his verbal show-down with Bishop John provides us with a reasonably close situational parallel to the encounter between Recemund and Hrosvitha. Like John of Görz, Hroswitha was the product of a Saxon world situated far from the frontier, a world where ideas about how to deal with Islam were expressed in the more confrontational, "black-and-white" terms that one would normally associate with distant vantage points. Like Bishop John, Recemund--who was, by the way, about to be rewarded for his service to the caliph with a bishopric of his own—would have naturally seen Islam from a different perspective, more akin to that of the Jews living in diaspora, who had learned over the centuries how to survive and even thrive living within a host society. Given this parallel, one is tempted to use what we know about the exchange between the two Johns to fill in what we don't know about the exchange between Hrosvitha and Recemund. If Hroswitha and Recemund were as different in their assessments of the Andalusian church as John of Görz and Bishop John were, then it is unlikely that Hroswitha would have heard anything like the dramatic story of Pelagius that she passed on to us springing fully formed from the mouth of Recemund. His version, that of a prominent Christian secretary to the caliph, would have been one designed not to ruffle any feathers in the Córdoba court. It may have been nothing more than an unadorned anecdote

about a Christian hostage that blasphemed and paid the well-known price for it. If we close our eyes and push this parallel a bit further, we can almost hear Hrosvitha's dumbfounded "John-of-Görzian" reaction: "don't you realize that your Pelagius is a martyr who was put to death by a tyrant and an enemy of the church?!" I wouldn't be at all surprised if Hrosvitha's (hypothetical) astonishment at Recemund's (hypothetical) matter-of-fact version of the events turned out to be the driving force behind the *Passion of Pelagius* as we know it.

Since one of my tasks today has been to problematize the idea of *convivencia*, I don't want to leave you with the idea that German Christians, living so far from the frontier, were utterly incapable of the kinds of positive interactions with Muslims that we associate with their Andalusian coreligionists. The *Life of John of Görz* will again prove helpful in this regard, if you let me press on a bit further into the account of John's diplomatic service. Just when it seemed that our hero had sealed his fate by insisting on delivering the letter to the caliph, just when it seemed that he would either die a martyr or be trapped forever in a kind of diplomatic limbo, Recemund's embassy returned from Germany and John was awarded his long-awaited summons from the caliph. Declining, the way a good monk should, to cut his hair, take a bath, or don the new clothes that were offered to him, John made his way to the palace where he finally found himself face-to-face with the great Abd ar-Rahman III, seated alone on a dais. After offering John his hand to kiss and a dais of his own, the caliph said, in a singularly conciliatory tone:

I know your heart has long been hostile toward me, and that is why I refused you an audience until now. You already know that I could not do otherwise. But I appreciate your steadfastness and your erudition, and I want you to know that anything that (I said that] might have disturbed you was not said out of any enmity towards you. Not only am I now welcoming you, but I assure you that you shall have whatever you ask for.

As he would later admit to his hagiographer, John “had expected to utter something harsh to the caliph, since he had long harbored such resentment.” Instead he found himself totally disarmed by the caliph’s sudden magnanimity. “Suddenly [John] became very calm and could not have felt more even-tempered in his soul.” He admitted to the caliph that he had indeed been “greatly exercised by the harsh tone of the emissaries.” But now, after the successful completion of Recemund’s mission, it was clear that all the sticking points had been removed. “This being so, [John] dismissed [his previous] thoughts completely and was glad that he had earned such generosity and favor and that he could now see true strength of purpose and real moderation in the royal heart, not to mention a most noble character.”

What a wonderfully Menocalian moment! A feisty monk who had harbored visions of becoming a martyr and had even upbraided his mozarabic namesake for not doing the same, melts in the face a unexpectedly warm reception from the caliph. But wait. It gets better. After John finally handed over the gifts that he had been withholding for so long, his mission was over and he asked for permission to go home. According to the account, the caliph was taken aback by the request. “We have waited so long to meet one another. Now that we have, is it right that we

should part as strangers? As long as we are together, there is an opportunity for each of us to acquire a little knowledge of the other's mind. Later we could even meet again at greater length, and, by the third time, forge a truly firm bond of understanding and friendship." (134) It doesn't get any better than this: after a three-year wait, a potentially confrontational, even violent meeting between a Andalusian caliph and a German monk turns into a chance to pick each other brains and to become friends.

But before we get too excited about this ecumenical blossom growing out of this bog of tense diplomacy, we need to read a bit further. John did agree to stay and when he was once again summoned to see the caliph, "he conversed with him on a number of subjects of mutual interest." What exactly were those subjects?

According to the text, they included "the power and wisdom of our king [Otto], the strength and number of his army, his glory and wealth, events of war, and many things of that kind." In short, the point of this exchange was reconnaissance, pure and simple; Abd ar-Rahman was using John to get a better sense of his principal competition to the north. It reminds me of the more famous conversation between Ibn Khaldun and Tamerlane some four centuries later, with the former expounding his theories about the rise and fall of dynasties while the latter asked him pointed questions about the military capacities of the various Mediterranean powers. When the caliph was not pumping John for information about the German empire, he was boasting that "his [own] army exceeded in strength that of any other ruler in the world." For his part John listened politely; "responding very little to this, saying only what might serve to pacify the caliph's mind." But in the end he could restrain

himself no longer: "I speak the truth when I say that I know no monarch of the world who is the equal of the king in lands or arms or horses." (135) There you have it: an opportunity for two individuals from two opposing camps to "acquire a little knowledge of the other's mind" and to "forge a truly firm bond of understanding and friendship" devolving into a pissing contest that even a monk could not resist.

My conclusion is a simple one that may not turn out to be worthy of the time spent it took to get to it: German texts of the tenth century are not the most promising sources for understanding *convivencia* if by *convivencia* we mean anything like Menocal's "culture of tolerance." But if we understand the term to be synonymous with Christian-Muslim (and Jewish) cohabitation of the Mediterranean basin and all of the moments, both golden and not so golden, that have been captured in contemporary sources, then the *Passion of Pelagius* and the *Life of John of Görz* turn out to be as important as, say, the poems of Samuel ibn-Nigrela for getting at the complexity of this particular brand of medieval pluralism.

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