

Introduction: Group Formation and Maintenance in the ‘Abbāsid and Fāṭimid Caliphates, 750–1000

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Much of the work on the minorities of the Muslim world has been concerned with making a value judgement about the tolerance or intolerance of the caliphs. The idea of the *convivencia* of Umayyad Spain rests on the presumption that Muslims, Jews and Christians were treated equally in law. The converse is true for the proponents of *dhimmitude*, for whom the point of interest in Muslim societies is their mistreatment of religious minorities, both across history and in the present.¹

This kind of black-or-white comparison also holds sway in popular discussions, where the “tolerance” of Islamic societies towards their minorities serves as a proxy for judgements of Islam as a religion, or for comparisons of “Islam” and the West/ Christendom.

The identification of “tolerance” before the seventeenth century is a problematic feature of these comparisons: this was a world before a formal discourse of tolerance, let alone human rights.² Polytheists, apostates from Islam to other religions and the followers of other Arabian prophets during the *ridda* wars could all be subjected to religious compulsion.³ And the rights that were accorded to Jews and Christians were not simply intrinsic to their status as peoples of the book, but also contingent on the contracts allegedly drawn up between their ancestors and their Muslim conquerors.⁴ Their position as *dhimmi*s, as protected peoples, and the rights that came from this, were dependent on their continued acknowledgement of the Islamic conquests as legitimate and upon their continued acceptance of a subordinate political relationship.

A further problem with the way that the argument about Islamic tolerance is framed is that it is nomocratic. It implicitly frames Islam as a set of legal norms that Muslims are expected to abide by. We see this framing in the debate when modern commentators who seek to defend Islam acknowledge the oppression of non-Muslims by medieval Muslim

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¹Eduardo Manzano Moreno, “Qurtuba: Some Critical Considerations of the Caliphate of Cordoba and the Myth of Convivencia”, in *Reflections of Qurtuba in the 21st Century*, ed. E. Lopez Busquets (Madrid: Casa Arabe, 2013), pp. 111–31. Dario Fernandez-Morera, *The Myth of an Andalusian Paradise: Muslims, Christians and Jews under Islamic Rule in Medieval Spain* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2016), pp. 1–16, gives a survey of the “motivated blindness” of apologetic study of the Muslim conquest of Spain (though his rejection of the *convivencia* model leads him to an equally extreme position).

²Brian Catlos, “Accursed, Superior Men’: Ethno-Religious Minorities and Politics in the Medieval Mediterranean”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56 (2014): 844–69.

³Yohannan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), esp. pp. 76–80, 97, 122–3.

⁴*Ibid.*, 22–6, 44, 53, 60–1, 71–4.