

CONVIVENCIA

*Looking Back to Move Forward with
Inter Community Relationships*

For many centuries, and arguably for longer than a millennium, relationships between European Jewish communities and the Christian society amongst which they lived were skewed by Judeophobia, a racist dogma. The most modern of such biases is known as antisemitism - a euphemism for hatred of Jews, invented by the German racist Wilhelm Marr in 1879. Today, what some of us regard as a toxic attempt to change the historical meaning of this concept - the IHRA (international Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) - has moved the focus from a 'hatred of Jews as Jews' to hatred of Israel as a 'Jewish state'. This inaccurate and misleading 'Working Definition' of antisemitism has in essence weaponised the concept, silencing supporters of Palestinian rights and criticism of Israel, by defining it as antisemitic.

It is easy to forget that antisemitism as such did not really exist in the Arab and Muslim world as in Christian Europe. Most Jews in Muslim societies enjoyed a more cordial and welcoming relations with their host societies, treated as *people of the book*. Nowhere was this truer than in Palestine and Spanish Andalusia. While Jews, Muslims and Christians all lived together in Palestine in relative harmony until the Crusades, the situation was different in Catholic Spain until the Muslim invasion, and also after the Reconquista, (Christian reconquest). During the Muslim rule in Andalusia, the co-existence of the three faith communities was a high point in European history of cultural and political development, later to be redefined as *Convivencia*.

This concept of *Convivencia* is used in Spain for the coexistence of various faiths in the country - an achievement of progressive administrations. This does not provide an easy solution to racist tensions - right-wing groups continue to undermine common understanding, like in other political contexts. Its importance lies in connecting contemporary conflict resolution to a historical context.

Spanish *Convivencia* existed when Europe was typified by a sharp retreat from the zenith of the classical period, while the Andalusian Muslim administrations region enjoyed an unprecedented flowering of the arts and sciences, and philosophy, literature and poetry. This resulted from conscious government initiatives, building on the earlier achievements of the Caliphates in Baghdad and Damascus; Muslim governments during much of the period positively supported a collaborative social attitude, despite tensions punctuating this period¹.

This collaboration was based on commonalities that the three broad monotheistic religious groups shared, as well as iconic texts and practices. Muslim rulers developed a tolerant public sphere, institutions of learning, record-keeping, the use of science and the arts for advancing social aims; Indeed, it proved the most advanced governance method, harbouring many features further developed during the Renaissance and early modernity. Renaissance's incredible achievements are unthinkable without the Andalusian Muslim Golden Age.

Many of the benefits of this collaboration are still extant. Beyond the artistic flowering of the Andalusian cities into hubs of art, literature and architecture, benefits included rediscovery and preservation of much classical Greek and Roman philosophy, literature and drama, hounded out of existence by centuries of Christian religious hostility but survived in the Arab/Muslim world in the original, or in Arabic translation, retranslated into Latin and the 'vulgar tongues' - local European languages. Science and mathematics, which Arabs/Muslims had excelled in, helped develop mapping, astronomy and navigation. Advanced medicine and chemistry led to improvements in health and urban living.

The world as we know it today was transformed by this period of *Convivencia*. It was the specific mixture of ideas, beliefs and attitudes which enabled this unique metamorphosis. It ushered in great achievements as well as substantial social and political disasters, as Christian Europe used the knowledge of *Al Andalus* to subjugate other continents through industrialised slavery, colonialism, imperialism and racialised modes of social

control. Such inhumane policies have culminated in the terrifying atrocities of the Holocaust and various other genocidal attempts.

For this reason, we in the [Jewish Network for Palestine \(JNP\)](#) believe that a thorough examination of the *Convivencia* period, its influences and the historical lessons it teaches may assist in developing better international modes of race/faith relations in coming decades.

Furthermore, it may offer a firm foundation for more harmonious, creative and dynamic relationships between the religious and secular communities in Britain and the rest of the world. This approach builds on the commonality of beliefs underwriting universal human rights and may assist in resolving ethnic tensions caused by racism and the denial of the *other*. We also hope that building on such a foundation will enable just and durable solutions for the colonial conflict in Palestine, ones based on equity and direct negotiation, rather than the current focus on accentuating differences and using unequal power relations.

*This approach builds on the commonality of
beliefs underwriting universal human rights*

¹ For more on the period, see Vivian B. Mann et al *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain*, George Braziller, 1992, and Mark T. Abate (ed) *Convivencia and Medieval Spain*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, and Maria Rosa Menocal, *Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*, Little, Brown and Co. London, 2003

Professor Haim Bresheeth-Zabner is a Filmmaker, Photographer and a Film Studies Scholar, and Professorial Research Associate at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). He is the editor of *The Gulf War and the New World Order*, (with Nira Yuval-Davis), and the author of *The Holocaust for Beginners* (with Stuart Hood). His films include the widely shown *State of Danger* (1989, BBC2) – a documentary on the first Palestinian Intifada – and *London is Burning*, after the 2011 riots. He has also published in the Israeli *Haaretz* and the Egyptian *Al Ahram*. His latest book is *An Army Like No Other: How the IDF Made a Nation*, (Verso, 2020)