

The Myth of the *Myth of the Andalusian Paradise*:  
The Extreme Right and the American Revision  
of the History and Historiography of Medieval Spain

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Since Washington Irving's embassy to Spain (1826-1829) and his subsequent publication of stories and essays collected under the title *Tales of the Alhambra*,<sup>2</sup> American readers, artists, and politicians have imagined and drawn inspiration from the medieval period of Spain's history — before Spain was Spain, as such. Anglophone<sup>3</sup> fascination has continued through the contemporary period, often standing as a proxy for domestic issues, even in the United States, a country with no medieval past of its own and a fraught contemporary relationship with both Spanish and Arabic, the modern languages that are the heirs to the languages of culture and state in Spain's Middle Ages. A proliferation of popular writing shows the appetite for medieval Spanish culture and history.<sup>4</sup> It also finds its way into political discourse, where it is held up as an aspiration of tolerance on the political left and an Islamic dystopia on the political right.<sup>5</sup> But as any other societies of any other time and

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to my colleague Matthew Gabriele for comments on an early draft of this chapter. Any infelicities or mistakes are, of course, my own responsibility.

<sup>2</sup> First published under the *nom de plume* Geoffrey Crayon, *The Alhambra*. London: Henry Colburn, 1832. The revised edition, under his own name and with the title *Tales of the Alhambra* was published both in the United States and Great Britain in 1851. On Irving's role in bringing Spain to the English-speaking world, see Rolena Adorno, "Washington Irving's Romantic Hispanism and its Columbian Legacies," in *Spain in America: The Origins of Hispanism*, ed. Richard L. Kagan. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002. 49-104; and Richard L. Kagan, "Blame it on Washington Irving: New York's Discovery of the Art and Architecture of Spain," in *Nueva York: 1613-1945*, ed. Edward J. Sullivan. New York: New-York Historical Society, 2010. 155-71.

<sup>3</sup> This chapter will mostly deal with the North American context. For parallels in Great Britain, see chapters 3 and 4 of Mariam Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts from Spain*. London: Victoria and Albert Press, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Recent examples in literature and film include: G. Willow Wilson, *The Bird King*. New York: Grove Press, 2019; Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*. New York: Vintage, 1995. Ridley Scott, dir., *Kingdom of Heaven*, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Newt Gingrich opposed the construction of the Cordoba House cultural center in downtown Manhattan in 2010 by saying, in part: "The proposed 'Cordoba House' ... is a test of the timidity, passivity and historic ignorance of American elites. For example, most of them don't understand that 'Cordoba House' is a deliberately insulting term. It refers to Cordoba, Spain — the capital of Muslim conquerors who symbolized their victory over the Christian Spaniards by transforming a church there into the world's third-largest mosque complex"; the statement is posted on Gingrich's web site: <https://www.gingrich360.com/2010/07/mosquestatement/> (accessed 9/2019). Conversely, Barack Obama

place, those of the Iberian Peninsula during the European Middle Ages were neither clearly one thing or the other: not a Boscian hellscape, but nor a garden of earthly delights. But as the peoples and places of medieval Spain enter the Anglophone political discourse, the extreme right has seized upon the dystopian vision in order to assail the scientific study of history and promote a presentist, anti-intellectual agenda that uses medieval history to promote its ideals for the modern world.

### ***The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise***

One recent contributions to the popular debates on the nature of interfaith conflict and coexistence in medieval Spain and its utility in contemporary political discourse is Darío Fernández-Morera's *The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise*.<sup>6</sup> The book argues that through the work of left-leaning academics, promulgated by ideologically sympathetic journalists and politicians, the medieval history of Spain<sup>7</sup> has been coopted anachronistically in the service of modern, liberal values such as racial

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commented during his visit to Cairo in 2009 that "Islam has a proud tradition of tolerance. We see it in the history of Andalusia and Cordoba"; the text of Obama's speech is available via the *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html> (accessed 9/2019).

<sup>6</sup> Darío Fernández-Morera. *The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise*. Wilmington: ISI Books, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> In general, I will use the terms *medieval Spain*, *Iberia*, and *al-Andalus* interchangeably to refer to the lands of the Iberian Peninsula; each toponym has merits and drawbacks, both historical related to contemporary usage. Fernández-Morera seeks to insist that Spain is the only historically accurate term to use because Arab historians used it alongside al-Andalus and because it had been a Roman territory so it's most appropriate to use the name that is based on a term coming from a Romance language (48-51). However, to write about Spain in the Middle Ages is a delicate and often-anachronistic proposition that requires definition, explanation, and ultimately walking a fine terminological line. While Spain naturally did not exist as the kind of political entity that we know today, the name *España* derives from a Roman understanding of the geography of its westernmost province, *Hispania*, which it occupied beginning in the 3rd century before the common era; in his Latin-language *History of the Goths, Vandals, and Suevi*, the Visigothic bishop Isidore of Seville (d. 636) uses *Hispania* when he praises the verdancy of the land of the old Roman province, by then ruled by the Goths. It is not until the second half of the thirteenth century that we see the toponym *España* utilized in Romance-language prose texts, when it first occurs in the Castilian king Alfonso X's *Estoria de Espanna* referring to his kingdom of Castile as well as to (but distinct from) the Andalusian principalities that pledged loyalty to him. The term was, in fact, initially a borrowing from the Occitan, used by French pilgrims to describe the inhabitants of the land south of the Pyrennes whom they encountered on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela; and so the close connection of the land of Spain to the toponyms *España* and *Spain* that Fernández-Morera asserts is less close than he would like to believe. And while this panorama drawn from the most canonical texts from Spain would seem to suggest that the term *España* and its variants is the name of an entity that emerges along with the earliest Castilian desires for a political and linguistic hegemony, the rupture is not nearly so complete, neither along the linguistic nor the temporal axis. Numismatic evidence shows a complete conflation of the geography and idea of a greater Hispania with the geography and idea of an Arabophone, Islamicate al-Andalus in the early years of the Umayyad emirate in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries; when Arabizing Hebrew poets sought to laud their land in a meter that would require a word with two long syllables and a short one rather than two short ones and a long, they lauded *Espanya* (*es-pam-ya*, long-long-short) instead of and as equally as *Sefarad* (*se-fa-rad*,

diversity and religious tolerance. It examines this ostensible phenomenon by trying to redefine two concepts that have become veritable buzzwords in the study of al-Andalus: *convivencia* (literally: living-together-ness) and *reconquista* (reconquest). *Reconquista* represents an older historical model of medieval Spanish history that holds that Muslims conquered the Iberian Peninsula, drove the Visigothic rulers into the north where they bided their time until they and their descendants could reconquer the territory that was rightfully theirs.<sup>8</sup> This model is, by and large, no longer in use in scholarship because it is not supported by historical evidence and is, instead, a construction from the sixteenth century and later used to justify the integrity of Spain as an ethnically and linguistically Castilian nation-state with Catholicism as the official (or, in the contemporary period, specially emphasized<sup>9</sup>) religion. However, the idea of a Catholic reconquest of Visigothic territories seized and held temporary by Muslim invaders has an extensive afterlife in popular culture and politics.

The other buzzword is *convivencia*, literally nothing more or less than the state of Jews, Christians, and Muslims living in close proximity in the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages. This term, however, has come to signify more than it did at its origins: The term *convivencia* was first used in Spanish in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century to describe the political unification of Catholic principalities

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short, short, long). Narratives of continuity and rupture both have their partisans in the modern world and both have implications for the terminology used to describe the Iberian Peninsula in the Middle Ages; but all told, the notion that there was no *Spain* in the Middle Ages is as oversimplifying and equivocating as the notion that Spain has always been what it is today, even in the Middle Ages. (The bulk of this note is drawn from the section “A National Spain and a Jewish Spain” in S.J. Pearce, “‘His (Jewish) Nation...and His (Muslim) King’: Modern Nationalism Articulated Through Medieval Andalusí Poetry,” in *His Pen and Ink are a Powerful Mirror*, eds. Adam Bursi, S.J. Pearce, and Hamza Zafer. Leiden: Brill, forthcoming 2020; a longer discussion of the toponymy may be found there. The long and the short of it, though, is that the name of the place has always shifted and has never been wholly religiously, linguistically, or imperially contingent.)

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of Reconquest historiography, particularly as it had its origins in Spain, see Alejandro García-Sanjuan, “Rejecting al-Andalus, Exalting the Reconquista: Historical Memory in Contemporary Spain,” *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 10:1 (2018): 127-45.

<sup>9</sup> The Spanish Constitution of 1978, Article 16.3 reads: “There shall be no State religion. The public authorities shall take the religious beliefs of Spanish society into account and shall consequently maintain appropriate cooperation with the Catholic Church and the other confessions.” The official English translation of the constitution, from which this citation is drawn, is found in the digital archives of the Boletín Oficial del Estado, <https://www.boe.es/legislacion/documentos/ConstitucionINGLES.pdf>, accessed 9/2019.

in medieval Spain.<sup>10</sup> In modern scholarship, it is first used to describe interreligious coexistence in the work of Julian Ribera and Ramón Menéndez Pidal, with the former describing *convivencia* as a set of shared intellectual interests and regular day-to-day contact that might eventually verge on “racial solidarity” while recognizing its fragility<sup>11</sup> and the latter writing about the possibility of *convivencia* between Christians and Muslims prior to the arrival of the Almoravids in the Iberian Peninsula,<sup>12</sup> a historical rupture which he saw as cutting off that possibility.<sup>13</sup> Menéndez Pidal also used the term to refer to the coexistence and competition of various types of vulgar Latin with Germanic languages and incipient Romance dialects in the Iberian Peninsula in the medieval period.<sup>14</sup> The term came to take on its most widely accepted usage with the 1948 publication of Américo Castro’s field-defining *España en su historia*, where the word comes to refer to a syncretic and unitary culture in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims participate.<sup>15</sup> Like many scholars of medieval Spanish literature who founded the discipline in North America, Castro was a republican refugee from Spain under Franco’s rule, and his medieval Spain was quite distinct from the official, nationalist line about the country’s history.<sup>16</sup> There is a tendency to caricature Castro as a modern idealist and the idea of

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<sup>10</sup> Ryan Szpiech has traced the development of the term in his “The Convivencia Wars: Decoding Historiography’s Polemic with Philology,” in *The Sea of Languages: Rethinking the Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*, ed. Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Karla Mallette. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. 135-61; the historiography outlined in this paragraph largely follows Szpiech’s article.

<sup>11</sup> Julian Ribera y Tarragó. *Discursos leídos ante la Real Academia Española*. Madrid: Imprenta Ibérica, 1912. 54.

<sup>12</sup> The Almoravids were a Sanhaja Berber dynasty based in Marrakesh that also adhered to the Mālikī legal school and that arrived in the Iberian Peninsula at the invitation of al-Mu’tamid, the emir of Seville to join him in his fight against Alfonso VI of Castile; the Almohad and Andalusī factions subsequently split and engaged in infighting, challenging the idea that this period was marked exclusively by *jihād* waged by Muslims against Christians.

<sup>13</sup> Ramón Menéndez Pidal, *El Cid en la historia*. Madrid: Jiménez Molina, 1921. 30-1.

<sup>14</sup> Menéndez Pidal, *Orígenes del español*. Madrid: Calpe, 1926. 526.

<sup>15</sup> Américo Castro. *España en su historia*. Buenos Aires: Losada, 1948. The volume was translated, revised, and updated as *The Structure of Spanish History*. Princeton: UP, 1954; both versions of the work have been regularly reissued and reprinted and are widely available.

<sup>16</sup> Denise K. Filios, “Expulsion from Paradise: Exiled Intellectuals and Andalusian Tolerance,” in *In the Light of Medieval Spain: Islam, the West, and the Relevance of the Past*, ed. Simon Doubleday and David Coleman. Routledge: New York, 2008. 91-114; Eduardo Subirats, ed. *Américo Castro y la revisión de la memoria*. Barcelona: Libertarias Prodhufi, 2003.

*convivencia* as a kind of friendly, pie-in-the-sky multiculturalism but this is not an accurate reading of his work and nor does it represent the current state of the field seventy years on, which seeks to explain the mechanisms of social and cultural interaction that result from the incontrovertible fact of Jews, Christians, and Muslims living together; contemporary scholarship does not seek to idealize that coexistence.<sup>17</sup> It also understands the concept of tolerance not as a kind of idealized harmonious co-existence of people of different faiths in a temporal and geographic environment, but rather as a deeply sub-optimal set of facts on the ground that people worked with, in, and around; in other words, scholars of medieval Spain recognize that to be merely tolerated is not actually a desirable state of affairs for their subjects.<sup>18</sup> *Convivencia*, then, is a word that won't go away;<sup>19</sup> but it does not represent a kind of tolerant fantasia and nor does it govern the academic study of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in medieval Spain.

The stated goal *The Myth* is “to demystify Islamic Spain by questioning the widespread belief that it was a wonderful place of tolerance and *convivencia* of three cultures under the benevolent supervision of enlightened Muslim rulers”<sup>20</sup> and to pull back the supposed veil of positive portrayals of medieval Spanish society “to show a humanity both suffering and inflicting suffering.”<sup>21</sup> In short, Fernández-Morera aims to replace the utopian, progressive view that he incorrectly imagines

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<sup>17</sup> For a variety of panoramic surveys of *convivencia* and its place in the academic study of medieval Spain, see: Anna Akasoy, “Convivencia and its Discontents,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42:3 (2010): 489-99; Maya Soifer Irish, “Beyond Convivencia: Critical Reflections on the Historiography of Interfaith Relations in Christian Spain,” *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 1:1 (2009): 19-35; and Kenneth Baxter Wolf, “Convivencia in Medieval Spain: A Brief History of an Idea,” *Religion Compass* 3:1 (2009): 72-85.

<sup>18</sup> Georgina Dopico, “Tolerance? Blood Purity and Inquisition in Early Modern Spain,” MARC Distinguished Lecture, New York University, 3/1/16; Stuart Schwartz, *All Can Be Saved*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Brian Catlos has proposed substituting the term *conveniencia* for *convivencia* to highlight this arrangement as one of pragmatic convenience rather than idealized coexistence. Brian Catlos. *Kingdoms of Faith: A New History of Islamic Spain*. New York: Basic Books, 2018. 428-9.

<sup>20</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 9.

dominating scholarly discourse in an academic field that is not his own<sup>22</sup> with a dystopian one of his own invention. By cherry-picking evidence, relying on outdated and explicitly partisan scholarship, adopting a messianic and omniscient authorial voice, and misrepresenting his opponents in order to argue against straw men he can vanquish rather than flesh-and-blood ones he cannot, Fernández-Morera uses the case of medieval Spain to further an explicitly extreme right-wing political and conservative Christian political and cultural agenda as it bears upon debates about politics, the establishment of religion, and the very place of the academy in civic life.<sup>23</sup>

Fernández-Morera explicitly aligns his work with the political right when he sets himself and his project of medieval cultural history in opposition to

“the critical construction of a diverse, tolerant, and happy Islamic Spain... part of an effort to sell a particular cultural agenda, which would have been undermined by the recognition of a multicultural society wracked by ethnic, religious, social, and political conflicts that eventually contributed to its demise — a multicultural society held together only by the ruthless power of autocrats and clerics... In the past few decades, this ideological mission has morphed into ‘presentism,’ an academically sponsored effort to narrate the past in terms of the present and thereby reinterpret it to serve contemporary ‘multicultural,’ ‘diversity,’ and ‘peace’ studies, which *necessitate rejecting as retrograde, chauvinistic, or, worse, ‘conservative,’ any views of the past that may conflict with the progressive agenda.*”<sup>24</sup>

Here Fernández-Morera casts the academy as the bogeyman without explaining the mechanisms by which it has been able to achieve all that he claims and thereby sets himself up to slay a shadowy, ill-

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<sup>22</sup> Fernández-Morera’s academic work is on later Spanish literature and does not focus on the Arabic or Islamic contexts that still remained during the early modern period. This is not to say that scholars should never evolve or cross field or disciplinary boundaries; on the contrary, a place like medieval Spain can only be studied with extensive interdisciplinary work. However, for a first foray into a new field to be an attempt to tear it down to its studs raises some suspicion about that scholar’s interests and investments in the field of study.

<sup>23</sup> Fernández-Morera’s book perhaps does not fall as far to the right on the political spectrum as to be properly called Alt-Right; however, it certainly does reflect the themes and concerns of the otherwise extreme new right (or “alt-light”), which supports slightly less extreme and even more diffuse versions of the principles supported by the Alt-Right. For more on the gradations of right-wing thought to have emerged since the rise of the Tea Party movement in American politics since 2010, see: Thomas Main. *The Rise of the Alt-Right*. Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2018; George Hawley. *The Alt-Right: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford: UP, 2019; and Jens Rydgren, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of the Extreme Right*. Oxford: UP, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 4-5. Emphasis mine.

defined, behind-the-scenes, liberal historiographic manipulator; he never identifies or explains the nature of the academic sponsorship that he sees operating in this way. He also highlights as mere buzzwords particular ideas and values that have been traditional bugbears of the right wing; and he claims adherence to those values necessarily requires a falsification of history, one which he is uniquely situated to rectify. His beef with a liberal academy<sup>25</sup> is long-standing: in 1996 he authored a volume entitled *American Academia and the Survival of Marxist Ideas*, which casts the majority of academic work as a kind of self-serving Orwellian double-think that operates the service of liberal political ideas and was initially forged by Marxist ideology;<sup>26</sup> this approach to scholarship shows through in *The Myth*.

In addition to criticizing liberal ideas and values, Fernández-Morera situates his historiographical approach on the political new right through his explicit aim of vindicating Spain's Catholic past in a way that closely mirrors and brings to an Anglophone audience the historiographical jiu-jitsu of Francisco Franco's nationalist dictatorship, which is articulated clearly in the preamble to the Law of November 24, 1939 Creating the Spanish National Research Council. This law, signed into effect by Franco himself, establishes the council in order to defend Spanish history against Enlightenment thought and the diversity of opinion:

“At the most decisive crossroads of history, the Hispanic people concentrated its energies toward the creation of a universal culture. This must also be the noblest ambition of Spain in the current moment which, facing poverty and the paralysis of

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<sup>25</sup> Conservative publications and pundits maintain that liberal bias amongst university faculty has negative impacts on the breadth and fairness of university education. However, recent research is suggestive that conservative politicians are more concerned about liberal bias in universities than conservative students' experiences suggest is warranted; other research has shown that political views do not seem to have an impact. Both sets of studies have been reported on in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Steven Johnson, “Is Political Bias in Grading a Myth?,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 2/13/19, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Is-Political-Bias-in-Grading-a/245694>, accessed 9/19; even the more traditional conservative-leaning (as opposed to new right) publication *The National Review* presents this research as challenging the standard conservative narrative about liberal bias in university faculty, as in Musa al-Gharbi, “Ideological Discrimination in Academia is More Complicated Than You Think,” *The National Review* 9/9/19, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/09/ideological-discrimination-colleges-universities-complicated/>, accessed 9/2019.

<sup>26</sup> Darío Fernández-Morera. *American Academia and the Survival of Marxist Ideas*. Westport: Prager, 1996. The volume is sarcastically dedicated “to my fellow professors, without whom this book would not have been possible.”

the past, feels the will to renew its glorious scientific tradition. Such an endeavor must, above all else, have its foundations in the restoration of the classical and Christian unity of the sciences that was destroyed in the eighteenth century...A counterweight must be put in place to balance against the single-minded overspecialization of our epoch, returning the sciences instead to their regimen of public access, which implies a return to the imperatives of planning and hierarchy. In conclusion, order and the essential ideas that inspired our Glorious Movement must be imposed upon this culture so that the purest lessons of the universal and Catholic tradition may be brought to bear upon the exigencies of modernity.”<sup>27</sup>

The Spanish National Research Council was thus founded as an academic arm of the Falange and put to the task of undoing the supposed damage of modernity, secularism, academic specialization, and the Enlightenment; of the “restoration of the classical and Christian tradition” to a place from which it could govern scientific investigation; and vindicating through academic writing the cultural values represented by Franco’s movement.<sup>28</sup> Fernández-Morera articulates similar goals for his project of restoring Spanish history to a traditional view that upholds Christians as the rightful inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula when he declares that “the Christian Hispano-Roman civilization in the early eighth century was superior to that of the North African Berber invaders.”<sup>29</sup> The language of the restoration of traditional values and religion is particular to extreme right political thought, both in Franco’s era and in the contemporary period.<sup>30</sup> In particular for the

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<sup>27</sup> “En las coyunturas más decisivas de su historia concentró la hispanidad sus energías espirituales para crear una cultura universal. Esta ha de ser también, la ambición más noble de la España del actual momento que, frente a la pobreza y paralización pasadas, siente la voluntad de renovar su gloriosa tradición científica. Tal empeño ha de cimentarse, ante todo, en la restauración de la clásica y cristiana unidad de las ciencias destruida en el siglo XVIII... Hay de crear un contrapeso frente al especialismo exagerado y solitario de nuestra época volviendo a las ciencias su régimen de sociabilidad, el cual supone un franco seguro retorno a los imperativos de coordinación y jerarquía. Hay que imponer, en suma, al orden de la cultura, las ideas esenciales que han inspirado nuestro Glorioso Movimiento, en las que se conjugan las lecciones más puras de la tradición universal y católica con las exigencias de la modernidad.”<sup>27</sup> *Boletín oficial del Estado*, 28 noviembre 1939, 6668-71. <https://www.boe.es/datos/pdfs/BOE/1939/332/A06668-06671.pdf>, accessed 8/2019, translation mine.

<sup>28</sup> For more on this subject see Julio Escalona Monge, Cristina Jular Pérez-Alfaro, and María Isabel Alfonso Antón, “El medievalismo, lo medieval y el CSIC en el primer franquismo,” in *El franquismo y la apropiación del pasado*, ed. Francisco José Moreno Martín. Madrid: Editorial Pablo Iglesias, 2017. 159-88.

<sup>29</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 237.

<sup>30</sup> Jens Rydgren, “The Radical Right: An Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, ed. Rydgren. Oxford: UP, 2018. 2.



Spanish case, vindicating an eternally and inherently Catholic Spain requires subscribing to a vision of Castilian (linguistic and ethnic) hegemony that is simply historically inaccurate, flattening out all kinds of Christian religious identities and praxes along with the non-Christian ones.<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, in this statement of purpose, Fernández-Morera signs on to the presentist brand of history he claims to abhor and, furthermore, demonstrates that he is undertaking the kind of qualitative value judgment that is not part of the purview of the academic practice of history. While I am not comparing Fernández-Morera to Franco,<sup>32</sup> I do wish situate his work within the long twentieth-century history of his kind of project that sets out with the goal of vindicating and elevating Christian Spain in the service of very explicit political commitments, in spite of Fernández-Morera's claim that his work and thinking are apolitical. The task of the historian is not to prove the superiority of one civilization or culture over another, and nor is history as a discipline equipped to pass that kind of judgment; that is the role of the politician, the propagandist, the polemicist. And in this case, the historian behind *The Myth* is promoting propaganda traditionally associated with the Spanish far-right.

Fernández-Morera additionally situates the book on the political right through his choice of publisher: ISI Books is the publishing wing of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, a think tank that counts itself as one of the founding groups of 20<sup>th</sup>-century conservative political thought and promotes “teaching students like you the core ideas behind the free market, the American Founding,

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<sup>31</sup> See Janina Safran. *Defining Boundaries in al-Andalus: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Islamic Iberia*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2013; and Jessica Coope. *The Most Noble of People: Religious, Ethnic, and Gender Identity in Muslim Spain*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> For an argument that the new extreme right is not fascism per se but has “affinities to fascism,” see Nigel Copsey, “The Radical Right and Fascism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, ed. Rydgren. Oxford: UP, 2018. 105-20. David Neiwert draws a closer connection between fascism and the extreme right in the afterword to his *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump*. New York: Verso Books, 2017. The new extreme right in Spain also tiptoes toward the country's own fascist past, as in Vox party leader Santiago Abascal's now-notorious “Living Spain” speech at Vistalegre ahead of the 2018 elections in that country. That speech, laden with references to Spain's glorious medieval, Catholic past that defended Europe against Islam, is full of insinuations that Abascal tacitly accepts critics' attempts to label him as a fascist, all the while explicitly rejecting that connection; the speech may be viewed online: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t\\_ClfZ5amIE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_ClfZ5amIE), accessed 9/2019.

and Western civilization, ideas that are rarely taught in your classroom.”<sup>35</sup> Among its core principles is “traditional values,” which it defines as “the values, customs, conventions, and norms of the Judeo-Christian tradition that inform and guide a free society. Without such ordinances, society induces its decay by embracing a relativism that rejects an objective moral order.”<sup>36</sup> Both of the civilizational frameworks mentioned in this statement, western civilization<sup>37</sup> and Judaeo-Christian<sup>38</sup> civilization, are increasingly important to both the academic and popular right in that they both enshrine Enlightenment-period ideas about the character of nations and religious groups and then project these ideas backwards in ways that often uphold Christian-supercessionist and white-supremacist ideas of national and individual identity.<sup>39</sup> And in fact, in the last page of the work

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<sup>35</sup> “About ISI,” <https://home.isi.org/about/about-isi>, accessed 1/2019. It is perhaps worth mentioning that Fernández-Morera holds that university presses will not publish the kind of work that his volume represents because of fear and ideological weakness: “University presses do not want to get in trouble presenting an Islamic domination of even centuries ago as anything but a positive event, and academic specialists would rather not portray negatively a subject that constitutes their bread and butter” (8). In fact, a university press associated with a major Catholic university in the United States declined to publish the book before Fernández-Morera submitted it to ISI; however, the choice was not made out of fear and certainly not out of a desire to lessen the importance of Catholics in history or of Catholic history, but rather because of the many historical and historiographical flaws that are foundational to the work (pers. com. with one of the blind reviewers for the press, 6/2018).

<sup>36</sup> About ISI,” <https://home.isi.org/about/about-isi>, accessed 1/2019.

<sup>37</sup> Recently, various medieval historians have written on this topic for a general audience in the wake of conservative American politicians invoking the idea of western civilization in racially-charged ways: Matthew Gabriele and David Perry, “Steve King Says He Was Just Defending ‘Western Civilization,’” *Washington Post* 1/2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/01/15/steve-king-says-he-was-just-defending-western-civilization-thats-racist-too/?utm\\_term=.cc0f77aa4a89](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/01/15/steve-king-says-he-was-just-defending-western-civilization-thats-racist-too/?utm_term=.cc0f77aa4a89), accessed 1/2019; and Sarah Bond, “What Rep. Steve King Gets Wrong about the Dark Ages and Western Civilization,” *Forbes Online*, 6/2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/drsarahbond/2016/07/23/stevekingandthedarkages/#6a69a3175980>, accessed 2/109. Academic writing on the subject includes: chapters six and eight of Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006; Eugene Weber, “Western Civilization,” in *Imagined Histories*, ed. Anthony Molho and Gordon Wood. Princeton: UP, 1998. 206-221; Thomas Patterson, *Inventing Western Civilization*. New York: UP, 1997; and Silvia Federici, *Enduring Western Civilization*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 1995.

<sup>38</sup> Douglas Hartmann, et al., “One (Multicultural) Nation Under God: Changes Uses and Meanings of the Term ‘Judeo-Christian’ in the American Media,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 4:4 (2005): 207-34; K. Healan Gaston, “Interpreting Judeo-Christianity in America,” *Religere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 2:2 (2012): 291-304. See also especially the respective chapters by Marianne Mayonet, Michael Fagenblat, Warren Zev Harvey, Izhak Benyamini, Amanda Kluvel, and Anya Topolsky in *Is There a Judeo-Christian Tradition?: A European Perspective*, ed. Emmanuel Nathan and Anya Topolski. Boston: DeGrueter, 2016. Jewish cultural critics have been pushing back against the idea of a Judeo-Christian culture as early as the 1960s, as in Arthur Cohen, “The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition,” *Commentary Magazine*, November 1969, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-myth-of-the-judeo-christian-tradition/>, accessed 2/2019.

<sup>39</sup> When I use the term white supremacist here, I am not strictly referring to members of the Klan and their ilk; rather, the academic definition of white supremacy, informed by the field of critical race theory, as articulated by the legal

Fernández-Morera makes explicit the fear of a lost, superior, Christian, Western Civilization that guides his historiographical misadventure: “Without the Christian resistance and eventual Reconquest, first against the Umayyad Caliphate of Córdoba and then against the Berber Almoravid and Almohad empires, the Spain of today could well be an extension of the cultures of North Africa and the Middle East.”<sup>40</sup> Fernández-Morera’s counterfactual speculation is reflective of the fear of non-white and Muslim immigration to and presence in the west that characterizes the ideologies of the new extreme right.<sup>41</sup>

Politics and religion aside, Fernández-Morera’s project falls victim to a major flaw in its very conceptualization: There is no serious scholar working today, on any point of the political spectrum, who thinks that al-Andalus was any kind of “paradise.” *The Myth*’s myth is itself a myth. By challenging an imagined narrative of peaceful, happy, multicultural tolerance with a narrative of Islamic depravity and Catholic supremacy, he is not really substituting a badly-constructed narrative with the correct one but instead replaces one fiction with another that better suits his political and cultural commitments. As David Nirenberg has observed, “When we turn to history — medieval or any other — in order to demonstrate the exemplary virtues of a given culture or religious tradition in comparison with another, we are often re-creating the dynamics we claim to be transcending.”<sup>42</sup> In this case, Fernández-Morera is replacing his perception of a left-wing fantasy with his own right-

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scholar Frances Lee Ansley, is: “a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings” (“Race, Class, and the Future of Civil Rights Scholarship,” *Cornell Law Review* 74 (1989): 933; note, too, that this definition is thirty years old and that this is not, as some claim, a trendy and of-the-moment recalibration of the term.

<sup>40</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 240.

<sup>41</sup> Aristotle Kallis, “The Radical Right and Islamophobia,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, ed. Jens Rydgren. Oxford: UP, 2018. 42-60.

<sup>42</sup> David Nirenberg, “Sibling Rivalries, Scriptural Communities: What Medieval History Can and Cannot Teach Us About Relations Between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,” in *Faithful Narratives: Historians, Religion, and the Challenge of Objectivity*, ed. Andrea Sterk and Nina Caputo. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2014. 68.

wing and Catholic fantasy; rather than replacing a fiction with inconvenient truths, he is in fact attempting to replace one fantastical narrative with another, casting scholars of medieval Spain as the cartoon villains in this scenario for an audience primed for the image and fantasy of the liberal, academic, historiographic scoundrel.<sup>43</sup>

## A Scholarly Critique and Corrective

Chief among Fernández-Morera's historiographic villains is María Rosa Menocal's 2002 popular literary history, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*.<sup>58</sup> *Ornament* is a history of literature and culture — and not of politics, economics, war, or even of religion *per se* — that offers readers case studies of individual writers and thinkers whose work exemplifies the kinds of natural learning and synergistic literary culture that develops when people who speak different languages and practice different faiths but value literature, thought, and knowledge all the same live together in a place, whether they like it or each other or not. Menocal's "culture of tolerance" is this, rather than the peaceful, pleasant, happy mode of existence that it is often misrepresented to be. The book has become something of a lightning rod amongst scholars who study the history of the Iberian Peninsula in the Middle Ages. Many of the academic critiques of *Ornament* come at it obliquely, critiquing it not for what it is, but treating it as something that it is not: reviews tend to react as if it were a bad political history rather than assessing it as a literary history, and tend to critique it as if it were an academic book and not as one meant for a popular audience.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Kim Phillips-Fein, "How the Right Learned to Loathe Higher Education," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1/2019. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-the-Right-Learned-to/245580>, accessed 3/2019.

<sup>58</sup> María Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Jews, Christians, and Muslims Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*. Boston: Little, Brown, 2002.

<sup>59</sup> Kenneth Baxter Wolf went so far as to have delivered an entire keynote talk at the Southeastern Medieval Association in 2007 (posted by the author: [https://www.academia.edu/21470056/Convivencia\\_and\\_the\\_Ornament\\_of\\_the\\_World](https://www.academia.edu/21470056/Convivencia_and_the_Ornament_of_the_World), accessed 9/2019) devoted to taking apart the title of the book *The Ornament of the World*, when, in fact, that was not a title of Menocal's choosing. It is

Like *Ornament*, *The Myth* is a trade book written for a general audience. Unlike *Ornament*, however, it invokes the contemporary academy and academic historians as its archvillains; and so although it is not the correct approach to judge a popular book by scholarly standards, it is necessary to consider scholarly approaches in writing about *The Myth*, its rhetoric, and its politics in order to address the author's claims that academic malfeasance underpins the argument he opposes with his own. In other words, the present essay is not principally an assessment of where *The Myth* falls short of the standards of academic historiography (although it will also certainly demonstrate that), but rather of the extent to which it misuses and misrepresents the academic study of medieval Spain in order to be able to position itself as the lone voice of truth in the publishing wilderness while simultaneously promoting a wildly inaccurate vision of medieval Spain. Fernández-Morera seeks to distinguish himself from other "recent scholars in the English-speaking world" whom he does not identify, who "have not adopted the approach of the present book, which looks at these cultures synchronically and comparatively, examining literary, historical, legal, religious, biographical, archaeological, and other cultural materials in order to show a humanity both suffering and inflicting suffering."<sup>60</sup> In fact, this is a completely inaccurate representation of the present state of the field, in which scholars do all of those things, but without the desire to prove a preconceived notion about human suffering. His methodology as he explains it, then, is to utilize the approaches of current

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worth mentioning that the body of the talk is a critique of the book's title "as a kind of synecdoche standing for the work as a whole." This is not necessarily the most forthright way to critique a book; in addition to quite literally enacting the cautioned-against behavior of the maxim about judging a book by its cover, anyone who has published a book, scholarly or popular, knows that publishing houses retain final control over the title. In fact, in this case Little, Brown replaced Menocal's working title, *A History of a First-Rate Place*, with *The Ornament of the World*. So separate is the title from the body of the work that when the book was translated into a variety of languages, the title changed widely to reflect different aspects of the book; and so while the Spanish title of the book is rendered literally as *La joya del mundo*, in Italian it is entitled *Principi, poeti, e vizir*; in German *Die Palme im Westen*; and in French, simply, *L'andalousie arabe*, which is the same form of the Arabic-language title, *Al-Andalus al-'Arab*. (A full list of translations of *Ornament* may be found at: <http://mariarosamenocal.com/the-ornament-of-the-world.html>, accessed 2/2019.) And so, to critique Menocal's book on the basis of a title without any indication of her role in choosing or approving it is to not engage with her work her work; instead, it suggests a desire to hatchet the book for other reasons, on any pretext.

<sup>60</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 9.

scholars, but to arrive at different conclusions, hardly the fulsome rejection of the academy that the work claims to be.<sup>61</sup> Even though he rejects and then accepts current scholarly methods, Fernández-Morera ultimately chooses to replace scholarly approaches almost completely with rhetoric from the extreme political right that he then leaves unsupported by evidence.

The remainder of this essay will identify and analyze a representative sample of the rhetorical techniques and historiographical strategies that Fernández-Morera employs to misrepresent this history and historiography of al-Andalus in order to appeal to a politically right-wing and extreme right-wing readership. In addition to peppering his work with very fundamental and simple errors of fact, he cites and attempts to analyze sources that he cannot read in the original, thereby limiting his understanding of the situation to texts that have been translated — that is to say, filtered through the interpretation of at least one other reader; he disregards the way that genre works to create culturally and temporally specific meaning in texts; misunderstands the nature of religion as a category in the Middle Ages; relies upon modern stereotypes of religions and their adherents; and ignores and misrepresents the state of the field all the while claiming to debunk the current state of that selfsame field. Through a series of counterexamples drawn from a wider panorama of medieval sources than Fernández-Morera uses and a more comprehensive and up-to-date picture of the field, this essay will demonstrate the character and extent of his selective reading and interpretation as well as the ways in which the “interpretive stance”<sup>62</sup> of *The Myth* serves extreme right-wing political needs

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<sup>61</sup> As Maribel Fierro comments in her review of *The Myth* (*Al-Qantara* 39:1 (2018): 239-53) that “the book’s objective is not —as is usually the case— to answer a series of questions based on a reading of the source material. This book is the reaction of the author (hereinafter FM) to various studies written mostly by contemporary scholars, where FM sees an approach to the historical experience of al-Andalus that he considers to be not only incorrect, but even blameworthy, and goes so far as to suggest that such criticism applies to the near totality of studies in circulation” (248).

<sup>62</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 3. He in fact describes the book’s “interpretive stance” as “a Machiavellian one.” Yet absent a definition of what Fernández-Morera, who claims to be opposed to jargon, means by this, it leaves the reader wondering what, exactly, his approach is. Machiavelli is a figure with enough different reception histories and enough different afterlives that this claim to Machiavellian interpretation allows a broad swath of readers to identify with Fernández-Morera’s approach. The only clue he gives comes in the epilogue: “A Machiavellian analysis can apply to the Muslim invasion of Hispania Edward Said’s shrewd observation: ‘thinking about cultural exchange involves thinking about domination and forcible appropriation: someone loses, someone gains.’ The book has therefore argued that in

while claiming to be a neutral response to left-wing political interference in historiography. This critique will stand as a representative sample of the ways in which the rhetoric and modes of historical thinking popular on the political right come to bear in this work.

## Misrepresenting Popular and Scholarly Writing about al-Andalus

Fernández-Morera fosters the misconception amongst his lay readers that there is no need to engage with the previous work on a topic in order to write a new history.<sup>63</sup> Even beyond the standards, practices, and norms of academic history writing, *The Myth* is meant to be a work of history with an embedded historiographic critique of the field; to do so honestly requires engaging with the field as it is and not partially, incorrectly, or in a caricatured form. In other words, in order

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cultural terms alone, the invasion, conquest, and colonization of Christian Spain during the first half of the eighth century by Islamic warriors was a disaster for the Christian population because a nascent, post-Roman, Christian civilization was nipped in the bud. The pre-Islamic Hispano-Roman-Visigoth population was in no need of being ‘civilized’ by a hegemonic Islamic empire” (236); it is still not clear what role Machiavelli plays here. By way of comparison, when Anouar Majid invokes Machiavelli as part of the framing of the first chapter of his *We Are All Moors: Ending Centuries of Crusades Against Muslims and Other Minorities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), he specifies that he is drawing on the political theorist’s description of Ferdinand of Aragon’s treatment of his Muslim vassals as a lens through which to interpret later Castilian kings’ treatment of Muslim and crypto-Muslim populations (9-10, 31-58).

<sup>63</sup> I was invited to contribute this chapter to the present volume on the basis of a short blog post review that I wrote of *The Myth* in March, 2017 (<https://wp.nyu.edu/sipearce/2017/03/17/paradise-lost/>); because I had, in effect, previewed some of my arguments online, I had the opportunity to observe the ways in which lay readers who debate this kind of theme on the internet respond to a critique of the rhetorical strategies and methodological flaws of the volume. They insist that discussions of methodology are irrelevant and only want to know about errors of fact, understand history to be a simple enumeration of events and dates rather than a narrative of change over time, and see no need to engage with competing analyses of facts or alternative narratives. A few examples will suffice: A reader using the name P.J. Norelius commented: “A rather dishonest review. The author is unable to point out any really aggravating mistakes in Fernández-Morera’s book, so she resorts to faulting him for minor slips and technicalities... More seriously, she accuses him of ‘linguistic ignorance’ and depicts him as relying solely on translations of primary sources.” I also shared the review on Goodreads (<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1945842993>), where a user with the screen name Rytis commented: “The lengthiest piece of fallacious gibberish I’ve ever read! I was expecting to see some historical refutation, but all I found was constant complains about authors use of translated sources and arguing over semantics. Dishonest review.” Goodreads user with the screen name Josef Duben defends Fernández-Morera’s belief that history can be written without engaging with the field: “The book references to primary historical sources — it is more clear approach than referencing to the secondary sources — if you write about fall of Rome, you do not have to reference to E. Gibbon.” The role of internet comment forums in the development and dissemination of extreme-right thought and rhetoric and attempts to diminish and circumvent the value of expertise and scientific investigation is by now well established. For more general writing on this phenomenon, see “The Alt-Right and the Internet” in Hawley, *The Alt-Right*, 106-28.

to make the claim that nobody writes about a certain topic or that all scholars have a particular bias or blind spot, the critic must be sure that this is the case rather deducing it because he is not aware of the work on that topic or overlooked it because it does not conform to his argument or has not yet been translated into a language he can read. Yet this is precisely what Fernández-Morera does: He claims that many subjects are unexplored that in fact have an extensive body of literature. By doing so, he seeks to elevate his own stature to that of the proverbial truth-telling prophet rejected in his own land — in this case the academy — for his frank assessment of the ills of society.<sup>64</sup> In order to accomplish this elevation of his own stature, Fernández-Morera misrepresents both academic and popular writing about al-Andalus; in this section I will offer two examples of the latter and then incorporate examples of the former throughout the rest of the chapter.

Throughout *The Myth*, Fernández-Morera seeks to strengthen his position as the sole truth-teller about medieval Spain to popular audiences, revealing facts that academics seek to keep hidden from a general readership; in doing so, he shows his role in the historiographic discourse to be of greater import to him than the historiography itself. In the course of criticizing the Umayyads for cultivating a culture wholly derivative of the Visigothic one, he writes that “the flowering of Islamic art in Spain took advantage of the nonrepresentational aspects of Hispano-Roman-Visigoth art. Famously, Muslims adopted the Visigoth horseshoe arch seen in many Islamic buildings.”<sup>65</sup> In the footnote to this sentence and the subsequent note, he goes on to lament not being the first one to notice this — a fascinating rhetorical move that illustrates that his chief interest is in being the lone voice in the wilderness and not in the full exposition of Andalusian history and historiography:

“I thought I had been the first to point this out, in an earlier version of this chapter, but then Horgel Michiels e-mailed me to say that it had already been noticed, as indeed it was, by Ernest T. Dewald, “The Appearance of the Horseshoe Arch in Western Europe,” *American Journal of Archeology* 26:3 (July-September 1922): 316-37. That the

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<sup>64</sup> For the origins of this figure of speech, see the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 4.

<sup>65</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 66-7.



Muslim conquerers adopted the Visigoth horseshoe arch is common knowledge among Spanish art historians, though Arabists and historians of Islamic art regularly ignore it.

For remaining examples of the Visigoth horseshoe arch, see among others the church of San Juan de Baños. These horseshoe arches have a *peralte* of one half of the radius of the circumference, as does the ‘Muslim’ arch — or, put otherwise, the stones that form the arch go over the 180 degrees of the imaginary circumference of the arch. No Catholic churches were left in southern Spain after the Muslim tide retreated.”<sup>66</sup>

In these two notes, he creates the impression that this was noticed in 1922 and ignored until he could recover it, ignoring the state of play in the academic fields not only of Spanish art history but also Arabo-Islamic history, historiography, and art history, where the place of the horseshoe arch is so well-known and oft-repeated as to be something of a cliché. And furthermore, he tries to maintain his status as first-at-something in an interview he gave to promote the book, in which he concedes that this is not an idea original to him but claims to be the first person to share the idea with a general, non-academic readership: “People don’t know that. You have to ask a specialist about those things.”<sup>67</sup> In fact, knowledge about the provenance of the horseshoe arch in Islamic and

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<sup>66</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 268-9 n.43 and n.44. A few glosses on these notes are in order: First, the presence and provenance of the horseshoe arch in Andalusí architecture is so well known as to verge on historiographical cliché; the idea that Islamic art historians ignore this is absurd; more on this in the following paragraphs. Second, it is not clear what Fernández-Morera means when he says that “no Catholic churches were left in southern Spain after the Muslim tide retreated.” Church buildings with horseshoe arches are still standing, other churches from that period are still standing, and we have legal and historical sources from various points of inflection and conquest in the Middle Ages that protect church buildings in newly-Islamicized cities. Even the more indigenously-Spanish practices of Christianity have remained in pockets in spite the historical encroachment of Rome and to this day it is possible to attend a daily Mozarab-rite Mass in the cathedral church of Toledo, as it has been since the early thirteenth-century intervention of Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada in favor of the rite against the Roman rite that had gained popularity and ecclesiastical authority in Spain in the eleventh and twelfth centuries: <http://www.catedralprimada.es/es/info/rito-hispano-mozarabe/horario-de-culto/> (accessed 9/2019). The final non-sequitur in these two notes is fascinating. He is implying that architectural elements themselves are inherently confessional: that arches are either Christian or Muslim. Art historical analysis does not tend to view architecture in this way. For a brief overview on ways of writing about the relationship between art, architecture and religion, see the discussion in Nasser Rabbat’s review of the reinstalled Islamic art galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. “The New Islamic Art Galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art,” *Artforum* 50:5 (2012). <https://www.artforum.com/print/201201/the-new-islamic-art-galleries-at-the-metropolitan-museum-of-art-29813>, accessed 9/2019.

<sup>67</sup> Perry Atkinson, “Focus Today: Interview with Darío Fernández-Morera,” 3/2016, <https://youtu.be/REljGDVQJDs>, accessed 9/2019; the cited comments are found from minutes 7:10-7:15. In terms of situating the rhetoric of this complaint in the current landscape of political communication, one cannot help but hear echoes of Donald Trump’s regular observations about what people don’t know when in fact he is referring to common knowledge that he himself might have only learned recently; for examples see Melissa Chan, “5 Things President Trump Says America Doesn’t Know,” *Time Magazine*, 3/24/17 <https://time.com/4711495/donald-trump-america-doesnt-know/> (accessed 8/2019).

Islamicate architecture in Spain is widely known both in specialized and popular publications; as an example of the latter one can cite Menocal's lavishly illustrated book *The Arts of Intimacy*, book co-authored with historian Abigail Balbale and art historian Jerilynn Dodds for an educated lay audience, which explains the origins of the horseshoe arch in Spain and offers many examples of its presence in Visigothic contexts that still survive to this day [fig. 1].<sup>68</sup> In sum, Fernández-Morera is not invested in an accurate representation of Andalusí history or the historiography that allows us to know about it; rather, he is interested in building himself up as a historiographical hero at all costs: including at a cost of the truth.<sup>69</sup>

But Fernández-Morera's misrepresentation of the state of the field goes beyond the purely self-serving to the erroneous and the deceptive for the sake of sustaining his political argument. In at least one case, he tries to pass off sloppy right-wing popular writing about the subject as sloppy left-wing writing about the subject in order to further his political agenda. Epigrams are one of the key ways in which Fernández-Morera introduces his opponents' perspectives and then refutes them in the body of his work; the author explains the structuring of his work in this way:

"As the epigraphs in this chapter indicate, it is widely believed that Islam granted to Spain's Jewish community, composed largely of Sephardic Jews [sic, see above], a substantial degree of liberty and tolerance. According to this view, the idyllic life for Spain's Jews was interrupted by the invasion of the 'fanatical' Almoravids and Almohads, and later by the 'intolerant' Christian kingdoms during the Spanish Reconquista. However, the fact of the matter is that the life enjoyed by the Sephardim, within and without their communities, was full of limitations long before

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On the ideological and rhetorical relationships between Donald Trump and the extreme right, see "The Alt-Right and Donald Trump," in Hawley, *The Alt-Right*, 172-84; while Hawley does not consider Trump to be part of the alt-right himself, he notes that the new extreme right is "energized by Donald Trump" (179).

<sup>68</sup> Abigail Krasner Balbale, Jerilynn D. Dodds, and María Rosa Menocal. *The Arts of Intimacy: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Creation of Castilian Culture*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2008; the book is still in print and was reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement* and other widely read publications, so there can be no question about its availability to the public.

<sup>69</sup> For a more general discussion of this kind of rhetoric, see Bruce McComiskey. *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition*. Salt Lake City: Utah UP, 2017.

the invasion of the Almoravids and Almohads, and that the Catholic kingdoms eventually became a place of refuge for Jewish families.”<sup>70</sup>

However, by bowdlerizing<sup>71</sup> the texts he cites and misrepresenting the political interests of their publishers he calls into question his ability or willingness to represent sources fairly and accurately; and, furthermore, he undermines his own argument that nostalgia for a pleasant al-Andalus is the exclusive province of liberal academics and like-minded actors in the press and politics.

The first epigram of chapter six is drawn from the article “Sephardim” on the web site Jewish Virtual Library.<sup>72</sup> It contains a brief overview of the history of Jews in Spain before moving on to its main topic, the Sephardi diaspora; it ostensibly illustrates the attitudes of the mainstream, liberal scholars against whose work Fernández-Morera sets his own. The quoted passage reads: “The era of Muslim rule in Spain (8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century) was considered the ‘Golden Age’ for Spanish Jewry.

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<sup>70</sup> Fernández Morera, *The Myth*, 177.

<sup>71</sup> For an example of this bowdlerization, we may consider the second epigram in the chapter: “The years between 900 and 1200 in Spain and North Africa are known as the Hebrew ‘golden age,’ a sort of Jewish Renaissance that arose from the fusion of the Arab and Jewish intellectual worlds. Jews watched their Arab counterparts closely and learned to be astronomers, philosophers, scientists, and poets. At its peak about one thousand years ago, the Muslim world made a remarkable contribution to science, notably mathematics and medicine. Baghdad in its heyday and southern Spain built universities to which thousands flocked. Rulers surrounded themselves with scientists and artists. A spirit of freedom allowed Jews, Christians, and Muslims to work side by side” (*The Myth*, 179). Fernández Morera attributes this quotation to an article by Francis Ghiles in a 1983 article in the journal *Nature* entitled “What is Wrong With Muslim Science?”; however, his citation is only partially accurate. Ghiles’ article is in fact a review of a book review of Ziauddin Sardar’s 1982 monograph *Science and Technology in the Middle East*, a volume that is in fact critical of overly-rosy presentations of science in the Islamic Middle East. The *Nature* review of that book actually opens with the portion of the text cited by Fernández-Morera beginning with “at its peak” and continuing through the end of the citation. The first two sentences appear nowhere in Ghiles’ review; instead they come from the FAQ section of a web site called *Jews for Allah* ([www.jews-for-allah.org/](http://www.jews-for-allah.org/), accessed 1/2019), which appears to be aimed primarily at encouraging Jews to convert to Islam. The web site’s tagline is the somewhat theologically garbled “Accepting the Messiah Jesus without the Christian theology,” which does not reflect mainstream Islamic understandings that Jesus was a prophet but not, as he is held to be by Christians, the messiah. Its subsection “Jews not for Judaism” is headed: “You are not alone. Thousands of Jews are leaving Judaism.” Across the board, the site consistently conflates Jews and Israelis and makes approving reference to the debunked anti-Semitic tract, *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The editors of the site have also mounted a fundraising campaign to create a translation of the Qur’ān into Hebrew for explicitly proselytic purposes. In response to a query about the role of minorities in Islamicate civilizations, the FAQ section introduces Ghiles’ review with those two sentences as an editorial response to the question and then quotes the opening sentences of Ghiles’ review to support that response ([www.jews-for-allah.org/history-of-love/jewish-golden-age.htm](http://www.jews-for-allah.org/history-of-love/jewish-golden-age.htm), accessed 1/2019). In other words, the text as cited in Fernández-Morera’s epigram is cited from Jews for Allah rather than directly from the review; the author erroneously combines the web introduction with the citation from the book review.

<sup>72</sup> Rebecca Winer, “Judaism: Sephardim,” *The Jewish Virtual Library*. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/sephardim>, accessed 1/2019.

Jewish intellectuals and spiritual life flourished and many Jews served in Spanish courts. Jewish economic expansion was unparalleled.”<sup>73</sup> An examination of the article in its entirety reveals it to be compromised by erroneous information on both the small-detail and big-picture scales. Some of the errors are relatively minor (although not insignificant), such as giving the date of the conquest of Toledo by Alfonso VI as 1089 instead of 1085 and implying that Muslim rule ended in the Iberian Peninsula in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. But other errors reveal a broader misunderstanding of the religious history of al-Andalus, misunderstandings upon which Fernández-Morera is willing to hang his own argument. Of greatest consequence for the political and religious stakes of Fernández Morera’s book is an erroneous description in the article of the evolution of Christian belief in Visigothic Spain: Following an explanation of Visigoths’ religious beliefs, namely that they adhered to the apostolic Arian Christian faith before converting en masse to Catholicism in the year 587,<sup>74</sup> the article’s section on Visigothic rule concludes with the assertion that “in 638 C.E., the Arian Visigoths declared that ‘only Catholics could live in Spain,’”<sup>75</sup> thereby demonstrating a fundamental misunderstanding of the religious sea-change that took place by virtue of that conversion of and the incompatibility of Arian and Catholic belief on the part of the author of the article. By selecting this article as the source for his epigram Fernández-Morera can seemingly support his contention that writing on medieval Spain ignores or misrepresents Christian history although this is in fact a broader pattern of errors in the article “Sephardim” and not exclusive to the history and theology of Christianity. Some bad work will always be published regardless of its politics; that does not make it representative of the state of the field or the quality of its scholarship as a whole. And as a popularizing encyclopedia article, it is also not representative of the kinds of academic studies with

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<sup>73</sup> Winer, “Sephardim,” apud Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 177.

<sup>74</sup> On Arianism, see Maurice Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy: Arianism Through the Centuries*. Oxford: UP, 2001; and Richard Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversies*, 318-381. New York: Baker Academic, 1988.

<sup>75</sup> Winer, “Sephardim.”

which Fernández-Morera claims to be taking issue. But beyond choosing a weak, straw-man adversary in the form of this encyclopedia article, Fernández-Morera has chosen one from a site that makes its political leanings clear; and they are not ones that support his overall argument about the liberal biases of the academic study of medieval Spain. The Jewish Virtual Library is digital encyclopedia project of the non-profit organization American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise; its web site fawningly sports quotations from right-of-center politicians Benjamin Netanyahu<sup>76</sup> and Donald Trump speaking in their capacities as the heads of their respective governments.<sup>77</sup> Rather than illustrating that liberal professors are the sole source of his pernicious imagined myth of al-Andalus as a paradise he instead shows that positive portrayals of Islamic Spain can also be promoted in popular sources supported by right-wing political and religious organizations and that those idealized portrayals can be made to serve right-wing agendas. He has taken an example of sloppy writing about the topic from a right-wing web site and implicitly passed it off as an example of what is wrong with left-wing popular writing on the topic.

In sum, *The Myth* claims to be a critique of an academic field of study gone far of the rails, but this is an argument that can only be sustained through a variety of misrepresentations of that field and the outright and explicit dismissal of its value. The book is not what it claims to be but is rather a critique of something that does not exist as portrayed; in other words, the Cervantista at the

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<sup>76</sup> Benjamin Netanyahu, as of this writing still the prime minister of Israel, is an interesting figure in this context. His father, Benzion Netanyahu, was a prominent if controversial historian of the Spanish Inquisition. Netanyahu *père's* magnum opus, *The Origins of the Inquisition in 15th-Century Spain* (New York: Random House, 1995), argues that does not only argue that blood purity drove the Inquisition, but that such an interest on the part of non-Jewish civic officials began much earlier than previously believed. Netanyahu's approach to Jewish history is not universally accepted within the academy where it is seen more as a morality play about the dangers of Jewish assimilation written in the wake of and as an attempt at explaining the full impact of the Holocaust. Despite the tepid reception of the work in academic historical circles, it has been suggested that clear through-lines exist between the father's historiography and the son's politics, particularly with respect to an overriding pessimistic outlook on the place of Jews in history. Notably, Netanyahu *fil's* gave a copy of his father's *The Origins* to Pope Francis when he visited the Vatican in 2013.

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/about-aice>, accessed 1/2019.

heart of it all is driven mad by fictions of a lost Spain, has outfitted himself as a hero in old and tattered gear, and is now tilting at windmills that are giants in his mind only.

### **A Multilingual Middle Ages and a Monolingual Modernity**

Central to Fernández-Morera's methodology is "special attention to primary sources" which, he claims, "in modern publications on Islamic Spain frequently are not a part of the narrative and often not even part of the notes." The reader of the present chapter is encouraged to consult any of the books and articles referenced in the notes here to see the extent to which scholars do, indeed, rely upon primary sources for their analysis, presenting them to their readers so that those readers can engage completely with the material and the scholars' analysis of it; this is yet another respect in which Fernández-Morera's assessment of his competition and of his book's role in filling a lacuna in the scholarship is inaccurate. Furthermore, Fernández-Morera's own presentation of primary sources is fragmentary and selective at best and actively misleading at worst. And finally, the rhetoric surrounding his presentation of the primary sources is evocative of the language used in right-wing political and reportorial discourse, only further highlighting the lie of Fernández-Morera's claim to neutrality and rejection of presentism.

To begin at the end, when Fernández-Morera explains erroneously that he includes in his work a representative panorama of primary sources so that readers can "decide for themselves whether the widespread hagiographic interpretations of Islamic Spain are warranted or not,"<sup>79</sup> he uses language that echoes Fox News' recently-retired slogan: "We report, you decide." Journalistic watchdog agencies challenged the news network for promoting reporter opinion in three-quarters of

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<sup>79</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 11.

news stories even in the face of that slogan,<sup>80</sup> which was ultimately exchanged for the more transparent tag line, “opinion done right.”<sup>81</sup> On the face of it, the idea of presenting a spate of evidence to readers and allowing them to draw their own conclusions is a noble goal and one of the foundations of good scholarship and good public writing. However, in the current political moment, the language of “decide for yourself” has come to connote protesting a bit too much in defense of right-wing opinions masquerading as truth; and it is impossible not to hear such protest echoing in the pages of *The Myth*, particularly given the very real limitations of Fernández-Morera’s presentation of those sources.

The question of sources from a place and moment in history as multilingual as medieval Spain necessarily raises the question about language usage. Fernández-Morera assures his readers that he will be sharing sources with them “verbatim.”<sup>82</sup> By using this word, Fernández-Morera seeks to assure the reader that he is presenting the texts exactly as they were written and the reader therefore has direct access to medieval thought. However, all the texts appear in English translation, and so at their very essence none of the quotations are verbatim renderings. It is axiomatic that translation is always an act of interpretation; and so the texts as they are presented to the reader are always refracted through an interpretive lens. This will always be a concern for any book that cites non-English text for an Anglophone audience; however, Fernández-Morera elevates his own work with text by ignoring or denying the problems that translation can pose rather than by addressing it head-on, ultimately promising his readers something that he cannot deliver.

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<sup>80</sup> Jim Romenesko, “PEJ Study Challenges Fox’s ‘We Report, You Decide’ Slogan,” *The Washington Post* 3/14/05, <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2005/pej-study-challenges-foxs-we-report-you-decide-slogan/>, accessed 9/2019.

<sup>81</sup> Brian Steinberg, “Fox News Unveils New Slogan,” *Variety* 9/26/18. <https://variety.com/2018/digital/news/fox-news-unveils-fox-nation-slogan-opinion-done-right-1202958247/>, accessed 9/2019.

<sup>82</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 11.

Although Fernández-Morera gives no indication of being able to read Arabic, that does not stop him from taking up analysis based upon the specific and language of the sources — in translation. The inaccessibility to the author of the primary sources makes his analytical exercise — in philology? close reading? It’s hard to know what to call the practice of putting pressure on a single word in translation — both futile and ridiculous. For example, Fernández-Morera frames the arrival of Umayyad forces in the Iberian Peninsula in the early-to-mid-8<sup>th</sup> century in terms of *jihād*, an Islamic concept that is often rendered in English as “struggle in the path of God” and can include everything from programs of personal improvement on the part of individual believers to out-and-out holy war.<sup>83</sup> Fernández-Morera he notes that “it is important to examine the way in which the concept of jihad as a religiously motivated war was understood in the Muslim legal texts and other Andalusian sources of the time.”<sup>84</sup> In this respect, Fernández-Morera is correct: In order to understand a religio-legal concept, it is necessary to view it both as it is delineated in sacred and legal texts as well as how it was implemented in practice; however, that is not what his discussion does. Let me set out the absurdity of this exercise in plain terms: Fernández-Morera is attempting to refine the standard definition of a term in a language that he cannot read. Instead, he makes wildly unfounded claims that Andalusī texts only ever use the term *jihād* to mean waging holy war, citing not the texts themselves but rather secondary sources such as dictionary definitions, and simply ignoring the texts that do deal with *jihād* in its other senses. For example, he ignores the presence of Sufis in al-Andalus who very much treated *jihād* as a spiritual exercise and wrote about it in those

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<sup>83</sup> For an overview of *jihād*, see Michael Bonner. *Jihād in Islamic History: Doctrine and Practice*. Princeton: UP, 2006. Fernández-Morera dismisses this work in a single sentence in a footnote: “Bonner waffles in his treatment of jihad and tries to show its nice side” (253, note 40). In other words, Fernández-Morera objects to Bonner’s presentation of a complete panorama of *jihād* practices rather than focusing only on its manifestation in the context of holy war; what Fernández-Morera describes as “waffling” is in fact Bonner offering the full picture of the practices comprised by the term *jihād* to his readers. It is not possible for Fernández-Morera to sustain the two claims at once: that the Islamic world is a perpetually war-torn dystopia and that nobody besides him writes completely about religious life in the Islamic world.

<sup>84</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 22.



terms as well as the heterodox discussions that took place amongst various stakeholders about the aims and privileges of *jihād* as a practice of war that was as much about practical political considerations as religious ones.<sup>85</sup> Where Fernández-Morera claims that “the infidel had practically no right in this struggle; the Muslim has every right,” scholars have shown, through careful reading of primary sources that are off Fernández-Morera’s radar screen, that Muslim *mujāhidūn* often partnered with non-Muslims against Muslims in order to make gains that were material, practical, and spiritual in different measures. It is not just that Fernández-Morera’s single-minded focus on legal sources means that he paints a picture of life in al-Andalus as it might have been mandated by law rather than how it played out in practice, but rather that he selects sources that support his claim, ignores the ones that challenge it as well as the ones that he cannot read, and tells his readers that he is giving them all the evidence, carefully analyzed. He is not giving his readers all the evidence and it is certainly not carefully analyzed.

The language barrier means that *The Myth* simply cannot engage with sources on their own terms, in spite of Fernández-Morera’s insistence that that is what he is doing. In her review of the volume, Maribel Fierro writes straightforwardly about the implications of working only with translations in this case: “What he has not consulted — because, with a few exceptions that Fernández-Morera appears to have overlooked, they are not available in translation — are the compilations of fatwas, which is where he would have discovered the jurists’ great efforts to contextualize doctrine in specific circumstances.”<sup>86</sup> He can’t analyze the words and doesn’t have

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<sup>85</sup> Readers are advised to consult studies on *jihād* in al-Andalus that do, in fact, engage with the relevant texts, including: Javier Albarrán, “La frontera en disputa: El yihad como discurso centralizador y el espacio fronterizo en al-Andalus,” *Intus-Legere Historia* 12:2 (2018): 58-92; Abigail Krasner Balbale, “Jihād As Political Legitimation” in *The Articulation of Power in Medieval Iberia and the Maghrib*, ed. Amira Bennison. Oxford: UP, 2014. 89-91. Alejandro García-Sanjuan, “Bases doctrinales y jurídicas del yihad en el derecho islámico clásico (siglos VIII-XIII),” *Clio & Crimen* 6 (2009): 243-277; and Cristina de la Puente, “El Yihād en el Califato Omeya de al-Andalus y su culminación bajo Hišām II,” in *La Península Ibérica y el Mediterráneo en los siglos XI y XII*, ed. Fernando Valdés. Aguilar de Campo: Fundación Santa María la Real, 1999. 23-38.

<sup>86</sup> Fierro, “Review of *The Myth*,” 251.

access to the whole panorama of sources; the translated ones are not representative of the corpus as a whole. Yet Fernández-Morera defends his oligolinguistic approach, claiming that recourse to texts in the original languages is irrelevant. He writes that the myth of tolerance “can hardly be explained by linguistic ignorance, since the primary medieval Latin, Spanish, Arabic and Hebrew sources required for a good general understanding of Islamic Spain have been translated into accessible Western languages”<sup>87</sup> and that those who cannot read sources in the original “can find consolation in the fact that they are no worse off than the celebrated Córdoba Muslim cleric Ibn Rushd (“Averroes”), a polymath who achieved lasting fame by commenting on the technical and difficult texts of Aristotle without knowing Greek and after reading them in twice-mediated translations.”<sup>88</sup> As Fierro has noted, it is not just a question of reading texts as they come down to us rather than mediated through a translation, but is also a question of having full access to the full range of sources that still exist; as medievalists we regularly face the fact that many sources from our period simply have not survived to modernity for a range of causes, from simple degradation of the physical materials, to poor cataloguing and access, to the seizure and destruction of collections and archives during war, to Inquisitorial and state censorship policies. Because of this we do not have the luxury of defining our textual corpora in such a way that ignores the relatively limited amount of

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<sup>87</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 4.

<sup>88</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 13. Conversely, Fernández-Morera suggests that what he sees as unfavorable treatment of Visigoths might be due to the fact that scholars of medieval Spain do not read French or Spanish: “One factor may be that scholars are simply unaware of the reality. Consider that the best monographic studies of Hispano-Roman-Visigoth art and culture are available only in Spanish and French. Those Islamic studies scholars who write on Islamic Spain may not understand how the achievements they scribe to Islam in Spain actually reflect Islam’s assimilation of elements of other cultures” (82). While it is true that Anglophone scholars can always do more to keep abreast of and cite the scholarship produced by our Spanish colleagues especially, the notion that scholars of medieval Spain whose disciplinary background is in Islamic Studies don’t read French or Spanish scholarship is risible. What is interesting to note in the contrast between these two comments on the need to read works in their original language and have access to texts that have not yet been translated is that Fernández-Morera considers modern French and Spanish to be necessary while all of the medieval languages are rendered superfluous again demonstrating that this is really a book about modern ways of thinking about the Middle Ages and not an attempt to get at the medieval period itself. It is also perhaps telling that Fernández-Morera, doing so much of his analysis in translation, runs to the assumption that the reason people might be wrong is because they don’t read enough or the right languages. On this phenomenon, see David Gramling, *The Invention of Monolingualism*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.

material that does still exist. And in spite of Fernández-Morera's appeal to Averroes' commentary on Aristotle, it must be noted that standards and practices in all sorts of fields have changed and been updated quite dramatically since the twelfth century: I cannot speak for Fernández-Morera, but I myself would not want my medical care to be based on nothing more than Averroes' medical writings and practice as a physician; why should best practices in the humanities warrant less?

### **The (Dis)Function of Sources and Genres**

In addition to misreading the sources by virtue of not being able to read them directly, Fernández-Morera ignores the role of genre in analyzing the texts that form the basis of his work. Historians and scholars of the literature of medieval Spain — just as all historians and literary critics — use different types of sources to answer different types of questions: For example, business documents are a better measure of medieval economies than letters by poets complaining that their patrons have not paid them for their poetry. As much as Fernández-Morera would like to deny it, historical chronicles often go beyond simply recounting what happened and instead reflect the perspective of the author<sup>89</sup>; and even a text that might seem as clear-cut as a religious polemic might serve just as well to tell us about how, for example, a Muslim cleric sought to unite his own community as much or more than as he was trying to disprove Christianity or Judaism. His own book is a case in point that a work of history can claim to be one thing while in fact being another beast entirely. However, Fernández-Morera ignores questions of genre and of audience and instead draws upon categories of sources that cannot provide the kind of information that will really support

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<sup>89</sup> For the classic scholarly treatment of the role of genre and literariness in the creation of historical texts, see Gabrielle Spiegel, "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 65:1 (1990): 59-86.

his claims. Instead he consistently asks sources to do things that they cannot do, and then declares victory over them and over their earlier readers when they fail to do those very things.<sup>90</sup>

One example comes in the form of his treatment of the life of the poet-vizier Samuel ibn Naghrīla, (d. 1055-6) who rose to prominence in the emirate of Granada, then ruled by the Zirid dynasty, a group with its origins in North Africa. In Granada, Ibn Naghrīla served as a vizier and general to the Muslim emir of the kingdom of Granada but was also the leader, or *nagid*, of that city's Jewish community and the best of its poets. He earned himself the nickname "twice the vizier" for his military and poetic prowess. His poetry covers topics from fatherhood to the battlefield to the value of both healthy and pleasing foods; some of his most significant poems were written to and about his beloved son Yehosef would succeed him as both the *nagid* and a government official in Granada. Samuel's own writings and those that survive that tell his story from others' perspectives demonstrate that he was deeply engaged with both Jewish and Muslim thinkers and cultural leaders of the day and with their ideas. His poetry is secular in nature but written in what medieval Jews considered to be the divine language — Hebrew — and drew often and strongly on biblical and other religious language, all the while using the rhyme and meter schemes of his Arabic-speaking Muslim counterparts.<sup>91</sup> By connecting the biblical roots of Hebrew poetry with the Arabic-language realities of his day, Ibn Naghrīla was able to demonstrate, through his poetry, that he was a fully participant in his Jewish community and in the courtly society of the Islamic emirate of Granada. The sources show us over and over again that he was respected as a leader by his fellow Jews and an

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<sup>90</sup> Reference works such as *Understanding Medieval Primary Sources*, ed. Joel Rosenthal. New York: Routledge, 2011. are designed to help students orient themselves in the conventions of different documentary and literary genres; in general, this is a set of analytic skills that people learn when they come to the broad field of medieval studies and similar handbooks exist for a variety of medieval subfields.

<sup>91</sup> For basic biographical details see Judith Tarragona, "Samuel ibn Naghrella," *Encyclopedia of Jews in Islamic Lands*. Leiden: Brill, 2010. Accessed through Brill Reference Works Online, 9/2019.

administrator by his Muslim counterparts at court; the reader of *The Myth* would never know that, though.

Ibn Naghrīla's life is very well documented in a range of sources written during his life, immediately following his death, and more distant in time after that. All of these sources, written in Hebrew and Arabic, fall within specific genres of Arabic and Arabizing Hebrew literature. And so, as much as Fernández-Morera would like to take these sources simply at face value, doing so means the loss of a great deal of literary and historical contextual information embedded in the conventions of the genres. The stylized conventions of genre are an important part of a text both of what they can tell us both when they are adhered to and especially when they are transgressed. Fernández-Morera's apparently lack of familiarity with several important genres of Arabic literature (or at a charitable minimum, his unwillingness to engage with those generic categories) makes it impossible for him to grapple with those texts or present them to his reader. Fernández-Morera claims that Abū Ishāq of Elvira's satirical poem full of invective against Jews as one that "reflects popular Andalusian views about 'the power of the Jews.'"<sup>92</sup> He does this simply by presenting the text as a self-evident denunciation of Jewish power rather than engaging with the rhetoric and the highly formulaic Arabic poetics that governed the writing of such compositions and in fact allowed Muslim poets to make far more detailed and sophisticated arguments about the religious landscape of their world.<sup>93</sup> Not only does he treat poetry as a straightforward historical chronicle, he omits the entire oeuvre of Ibn Naghrīla himself: in other words, he wants poetry to serve as history but has no interest in hearing Ibn Naghrīla's version of it.<sup>94</sup> Ibn Naghrīla, who lived many lives in the many sources, medieval and

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<sup>92</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 182.

<sup>93</sup> This discussion of the sources for Ibn Naghrīla's life follows the work of Ross Brann in *Power in the Portrayal*. Princeton: UP, 2002.

<sup>94</sup> *Divan Shemuel Hanagid*, ed. Dov Jarden. New York: Hebrew Union College Press, 1966. Interested readers who do not read Hebrew may consult Peter Cole's translations of Ibn Naghrīla's poems in his volume *The Dream of the Poem*, Princeton: UP, 2007.

modern, that describe him, is here made into a voiceless historical pawn in Fernández-Morera's historiographical chess game. After cherry-picking evidence, close-reading texts as if they were not a product of their time and place, and conflating individuals into a faceless mass on the basis of a shared religion rather than shared traits, Fernández-Morera deals Ibn Naghřīla a historiographic coup-de-grace by failing to treat him as a writer himself.

By way of a second example, law codes, Fernández-Morera's genre of particular interest, are a specific kind of writing that must be read as aspirational rather than strictly reflective of reality on the ground. Any reader who has ever ridden in a car traveling faster than the posted speed limit knows this to be true. As a corporate body, 21<sup>st</sup>-century denizens of the United States of America largely aspire to be members of a society in which people drive with the necessary caution when operating a fast, heavy machine with the potential to kill. Speed limit laws are in place to promote this ideal and to try to effect it as an outcome; the fact that the laws are in place does not mean that they are always obeyed. That laws, legal theories, and rulings existed to separate and render identifiable members of different religious groups certainly do reflect what today we might call a closed-minded or discriminatory approach, as Fernández-Morera notes, again engaging in a bit of the presentism he so protests. However, they neither represent the totality of legal theory, as per Fernández-Morera's selective approach, nor do they represent the application of legal theory in life as it was lived by average people day-to-day, the life that Fernández-Morera claims to want to focus on.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> In his recent history of the laws governing Muslims living under non-Muslim rule, Alan Verskin distinguishes between legal manuals or law codes and specific juridical rulings in response to a particular case or question.<sup>95</sup> And although he is writing about Islamic law here, Verskin's distinction holds for Jewish law as well. And in his legal history of urbanization during the Almoravid period, Camilo Gómez-Rivas writes at some length about the ways in which legal thinking evolved over time and interacted with social realities. See Alan Verskin. *Oppressed in the Land?: Fatwās on Muslims Living under Non-Muslim Rule from the Middle Ages to the Present*. Princeton: UP, 2013. 3-8. and Camilo Gómez-Rivas. *Law and the Islamization of Morocco under the Almoravids*. Leiden: Brill, 2015. 33-8. It is also worth noting that Fernández-Morera completely omits from his bibliography Verskin's study specifically of Islamic law in relationship to territorial conquest in the Iberian Peninsula in any of his discussions of legal sources: *Islamic Law and the Crisis of the Reconquista: The Debate on the Status of Muslim Communities in Christendom*. Leiden: Brill, 2015. For recent theoretical thinking about Jewish law in society, see

Yet Fernández-Morera makes a show of his superficial readings of the texts that do not take into account genre, evidence, or historical context. He explains that “without ‘questioning’ or ‘interrogating’ the ‘subjectivities’ of the scholars of the Maliki school of jurisprudence in al-Andalus, this book takes seriously and at face value their interpretations and practices.”<sup>96</sup> What Fernández-Morera is, in effect, describing here is an interpretive strategy called *close reading*. This technique, pioneered by the literary-critical school known as The New Criticism, which flourished during the 1940s and 50s, considers only the language of the text and nothing external to it — it does not consider the role of the author or any events that the text might respond to.<sup>97</sup> In other words, this is not any kind of methodological innovation on Fernández-Morera’s part; but more seriously, it is not an approach that is well-suited to the legal and other documentary and historical sources that Fernández-Morera seeks to center in his narrative nor to the kind of cultural history he seeks to write. Law codes, legal rulings, and other juridical documents have roots and an impact in a historical moment and a place that cannot be separated from the text itself; and those sources, especially the prescriptive ones, do not necessarily tell us what was happening on the ground. At the same time, Fernández-Morera also wisely cautions his readers to “keep in mind that the texts examined are ‘historically situated constructs,’” a term that he cannot let slide into his own writing without pointing out that it is “modern critical jargon.”<sup>98</sup> In explaining his approach, Fernández-

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Rachel Rafael Neis, “The Seduction of Law: Rethinking Legal Studies in Jewish Studies,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 109:1 (2019): 119-38. Fernández-Morera’s specific example deals with laws against interfaith marriage; for a study of the realities on the ground as reflected in the kinds of sources historians can use for social history, see David Nirenberg, *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014, especially chapters 2-3 and 5.

<sup>96</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 11.

<sup>97</sup> The effective manifesto (or, perhaps better-put, the anti-manifesto) and definitive history of The New Criticism is Cleanth Brooks’ essay, “The New Criticism,” *The Sewanee Review* 87:4 (1979): 592-607. Among the foundational works of new-critical theory include Brooks’ *The Well-Wrought Urn*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1947; and Wimsatt and Beardsley’s “The Intentional Fallacy,” *The Sewanee Review* 54:3 (1946): 468-88.

<sup>98</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 10.

Morera uses scare quotes to affect a tone of mockery towards not just select text-critical methodologies but toward the idea of methodology at all. He tries to have his methodology both ways and misleads his non-academic readers by trying to persuade them that it is possible to arrive at a historical truth through the unfiltered reading of unvarnished text while also conceding that all texts have biases and are often written under the constraints of genre, time, and place that do render them subjective and in need of Fernández-Morera's dreaded "interrogation" in order to understand them well.<sup>99</sup>

### **Misunderstanding Religion in General and Specific Terms**

Even though he writes about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and their adherents in the Middle Ages and assures his readers that his work "does not pass judgment on today's Muslims, Jews, or Christians, or on their religions,"<sup>100</sup> Fernández-Morera uses the modern understanding of those religions and of religion as a category in order to support his preconceived notions about their development and practice in the medieval period. The notion of religion as a category, and as a category separable from the civil, and determined by one's personal beliefs and identity — all assumptions that are present in Fernández-Morera's discussions of religion — are both wholly modern and grounded in Christianity. *Religion* is neither a theological category nor a native, organic one.<sup>101</sup> "The very conception of religion... [was] opened up by a number of early modern scholars,

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<sup>99</sup> Similarly, in his epilogue, he explains that "this book has... 'problematized,' 'unveiled,' and 'uncovered' al-Andalus" (235). This kind of framing suggests that he is not interested in developing or using a robust methodology that suits his perspective on how literary and historical criticism should be done, but instead prefers to twist and poke fun at a methodology that he disdains.

<sup>100</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 9-10.

<sup>101</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith. "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Relating Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. 179-96.



both Catholics and Protestants.”<sup>102</sup> And so to assess medieval Judaism and Islam as “religions” is to assess them according to the standards of modern, Christian faith, theology, and history: presentism, indeed. To be sure, scholars of medieval Judaism and Islam use the term regularly, but the best scholarship is aware of the incompatibility of the terminology and the context, and accounts for it.<sup>103</sup> As a consequence, the discussion of religion generally and of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in particular in *The Myth* imposes modernity upon the Middle Ages and fails to get at the heart of the subject.

Fernández-Morera characterizes, in part, the history of religion in medieval Spain as a zero-sum game that pits Jews against Christians. Fernández-Morera claims that that historians care too much about the histories of Muslims — and especially of Jews — and not nearly enough about what he views as what should be the standard historical narrative, that is, one that gives pride of place to Christians and Christian societies: “Some recent scholars in the English-speaking world have done excellent work, but with the exception of Emmet Scott<sup>104</sup> they have either concerned themselves mainly with the Jewish experience or not adopted the approach of the present book...”<sup>105</sup> This bitter criticism demands engagement. Rather than taking a survey of the field, determining that there is not enough focus on Christian minorities<sup>106</sup> for his liking and then carrying out a study to remedy the

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<sup>102</sup> Guy Stroumsa. “The Scholarly Discovery of Religion in Early Modern Times,” in *The Construction of a Global World: Patterns of Change*, eds. Jerry H. Bentley, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and Merry Wiesner-Hanks. Cambridge: UP, 2015. 313.

<sup>103</sup> For example, see the recent essay Jonathan Decter, drawing upon his current research: “Things Jewish: The View from Judeo-Arabic,” *Marginalia Review of Books* 6/5/19, <https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/things-jewish-view-judeo-arabic/>, accessed 9/2019/.

<sup>104</sup> Emmet Scott appears to be a pseudonym for an individual who has made a career writing books that attempt, unsuccessfully, to debunk various and diverse fields of study; it is unclear what his intellectual background is to prepare him for such a task.

<sup>105</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 9.

<sup>106</sup> Among the studies of Christian communities in Islamic Spain that Fernández-Morera appears to have overlooked in his assessment of the state of the field include: Ann Chrystis, *Christians in al-Andalus, 700-1100*. New York: Routledge, 2002; Jessica Coope. *The Martyrs of Cordoba: Community and Family Conflict in an Age of Mass Conversion*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995; Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *Christian Martyrs in Muslim Spain*. Cambridge: UP, 2014 reprint. Other studies have examined the impact of multiconfessional contact specifically upon Christian populations all of which are

lacuna he has identified, Fernández-Morera instead criticizes his colleagues for focusing too much on Jews. Fundamentally, this complaint is based upon two false premises: First, that the study of medieval Spain is a zero-sum game in which any attention paid to Jews and Jewish history detracts from Christians and Christian history. And built upon this first premise is a second, namely that the cultures in which Christians participated could be separable from those of Muslims and Jews. But rather, the historical reality on the ground represented a “Castilian culture,” that is, a single, unitary, organic culture in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims could participate with various religious and other inflections;<sup>107</sup> no one thread of a unitary culture can be pulled out without the whole thing unraveling. Although the framing of Jews, Christians, and Muslims as participants in three separate or one unitary cultures does reflect some scholarly and many popular discussions of life in medieval Spain, the notion of a zero-sum historiography pulls this perspective toward the extreme right, which holds that “Jews [are] a separate ‘race,’ and one with interests that are inimical to whites.”<sup>108</sup> Antisemitism is hardly the exclusive province of the extreme right,<sup>109</sup> but the fear of replacement of Christians by Jews is a prominent feature particular to the new right; this perspective was most prominently on view in the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally in 2017, at which alt-right protestors prominently chanted, “Jews will not replace us.”<sup>110</sup> Yet in spite (or perhaps because) of this hostile

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absent from Fernández-Morera’s bibliography include Remie Constable, *To Live Like a Moor*; and Vivian B. Mann, *Uneasy Communion: Jews, Christians, and the Altarpieces of Medieval Spain*; and Charles Tiezen, *Christian Identity Amid Islam in Medieval Spain*. Leiden: Brill, 2013.

<sup>107</sup> Balbale, Dodds, and Menocal. *The Arts of Intimacy*.

<sup>108</sup> Hawley, *The Alt-Right*, 13.

<sup>109</sup> An overview of extreme, new-right antisemitism may be found in Ruth Wodak, “The Radical Right and Antisemitism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, ed. Jens Rydgren. Oxford: UP, 2018. 61-84; and in the second section of Deborah Lipstadt, *Antisemitism Here and Now*. New York: Schocken Books, 2019. 29-80. For a broad history of anti-Judaism and its relationship to antisemitisms old and new, see David Nirenberg. *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2013.

<sup>110</sup> News coverage of the event focusing on this chant and the alt-right “replacement theory” includes Emma Green, “Why the Charlottesville Marchers Were Obsessed with Jews,” *The Atlantic* 8/15/17, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/nazis-racism-charlottesville/536928/>, accessed 9/2019; and Yair Rosenberg, “Jews Will Not Replace Us: Why White Supremacists Go After Jews,” *The Washington Post* 8/14/17, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/08/14/jews-will-not-replace-us-why-white->

perspective reflected in the text of his work towards his medieval Jewish subjects and the scholars who study them and the ominous allusion to the possibility of his perspective and preferred medieval subjects being supplanted by Jews, Fernández-Morera goes on to revise their history, too.

Because of the religious history of the United States, American popular and scholarly conceptions of religion as a category understandably tend to frame the tenets and practices of Protestantism as the model or standard, with other religions' conformity to that standard determining their legitimacy.<sup>111</sup> Brent Nongbri, a historian of early Christianity, notes that "an especially popular way of viewing religion is a kind of inner disposition and concern for salvation conceived in opposition to politics and other 'secular' areas of life... such a view of the world is foreign to ancient cultures."<sup>112</sup> Crucially, Fernández-Morera adopts exactly this popular view, expecting that medieval Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are, first, largely indicated by the inner personal beliefs of their adherents and, second, separable from civic life. In other words, he expects a modern style of personal faith and of separation of church from state in the medieval period and deems the period, well, "medieval" when he does not find it.<sup>113</sup> Fernández-Morera writes about the

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[supremacists-go-after-jews/](https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/10/10/when-white-nationalists-chant-their-weird-slogans-what-do-they-mean) accessed 9/2019. Ideological contextualization of this phrase is provided by the Southern Poverty Law Center: <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/10/10/when-white-nationalists-chant-their-weird-slogans-what-do-they-mean>, accessed 9/2019. A historical overview of replacement theory and its relationship to the alt-right's ideological fear of a so-called "white genocide" in which Jews are amongst the populations that stand to replace white people, see Kevin Feshami, "Fear of White Genocide: Tracing the History of a Myth from Germany to Charlottesville," *Lapham's Quarterly* 9/6/17, <https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/roundtable/fear-white-genocide>, accessed 9/2019. It is also worth reading Jo Livingstone, "Racism, Medievalism, and the White Supremacists of Charlottesville," *The New Republic* 8/15/17, <https://newrepublic.com/article/144320/racism-medievalism-white-supremacists-charlottesville>, accessed 9/2019, for the implication of the Middle Ages in this same ideology and rhetoric.

<sup>111</sup> Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2013. 18. See also: Jonathan Z. Smith, "God Save This Honorable Court: Religion and Civic Discourse," in *Writing Religion: The Case for the Critical Study of Religion*, ed. Steven W. Ramey. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015. 17-31.

<sup>112</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 24.

<sup>113</sup> For a brief, readable overview of *medieval* as an adjective to mean backwards, see Eric Wesicott, "Stop calling Trump 'medieval': It's an insult to the Middle Ages," *Vox* 2/25/19, <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2019/2/25/18217156/trump-medieval>, accessed 9/2019; and María Rosa Menocal, *Writing Without Footnotes: The Role of the Medievalist in Contemporary Intellectual Life*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2001. ##.

“lack of separation between politics and religion in the Jewish communities of Spain,”<sup>114</sup> and that “the most fundamental fact of life of Muslims in al-Andalus is that no distinction existed between civil and religious law. Put otherwise, throughout the history of Islamic Spain...religion was the law and therefore Islam was the law”<sup>115</sup> as if this were a phenomenon particular to medieval Spanish Jewish and Muslim communities rather than a feature of medieval life as a whole<sup>116</sup>: Religious systems in the Middle Ages did not distinguish between religious, legal, and political matters but rather encompassed all of those aspects of life.<sup>117</sup>

In addition to misrepresenting the entire system and category of medieval religion, Fernández-Morera reveals a very paltry understanding of the specific religious communities that made their home in the Iberian Peninsula in the medieval period. A prime, extended example of this comes in the form of Fernández-Morera’s discussion of the Karaite community in medieval Spain. The extent of Karaite presence in Spain is still a major historiographic debate; while the size of such a community is not agreed upon, it is clear that it was never particularly large. Rather than the presence of individuals or communities, Karaites had their major impact in Spain through the circulation of texts and ideas from eastern communities. Fernández-Morera does not see fit to inform his readers that the question is not settled and instead chooses to pretend to know that there was a large and oppressed community of Karaites living in the Iberian Peninsula in the medieval

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<sup>114</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 191.

<sup>115</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 85.

<sup>116</sup> Additionally, even if “Islam was the law,” this does not mean that Jews and Christians did not conduct legal business in their own courts and have recourse to Islamic courts, as well, if they were not satisfied with the outcome provided by their own community’s legal systems. On the phenomenon of medieval legal pluralism, see Uriel Simonsohn, *A Common Justice: The Legal Alliances of Christians and Jews Under Early Islam*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

<sup>117</sup> By way of example of something that a modern person might not consider a religious matter but fell within a religio-legal system in the Middle Ages is a Mamluk-era *fatwa* about whether it is permissible to describe a bald man as bald and under what conditions it might be permissible to do so; for a discussion of this *fatwa*, and an analysis of its text and the foundational religious texts that allowed the jurist Ibn Ḥajar to arrive at his ruling, see Kristina Richardson, *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2012. 111-29.

period. As Daniel Lasker notes in an article that Fernández-Morera cites in his work, that “Spanish Karaites have left behind no written records, and we know about their existence almost solely through the Rabbanite writings of the period.”<sup>118</sup> Since the publication of Lasker’s article, a very limited number of documents that can be localized to Spain and attributed to a Karaite writer have been discovered. Nevertheless, the paucity of documentary sources strongly suggests that there was never a large, flourishing, or permanent Karaite community in Spain. Lasker asserts, again in the same article which is cited in Fernández-Morera’s book: “The lack of extant literary remains from the Spanish Karaite community should in no way lead to an underestimation of its influence on the course of Jewish intellectual history”<sup>119</sup>; in other words, all we can say for certain is that their ideas held great sway. The narrative prose sources written by Rabbanite observers that hint at the possible presence of Karaites in Spain include writings by Rabbanite authorities about how to engage theologically with Karaites, personal correspondence, belletristic texts, most of which Fernández-Morera ignores wholesale.<sup>120</sup> He writes about Karaite Jews and Judaism in Spain not only through gross misrepresentations of the state of the question but, of even greater consequence, by

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<sup>118</sup> Daniel Lasker, “Karaism in 12<sup>th</sup> Century Spain,” 179. Fernández Morera cites the sentence in Lasker’s article that comes before this one, “Rabbanism, however, was not the only form of Spanish Judaism in that period; there was also a substantial Karaite community living side by side with the Rabbanite population.” Taken together, these two sentences reflect Lasker’s maximalist position on the size of a potential Karaite community in Spain; even with that position, he concludes his article by observing that “We cannot reconstruct with assurance the nature of their religion, the size of their community, their origins, or their fate. Nevertheless, Rabbanite sources indicate that this Jewish group was not negligible” (195). Some scholars agree with him, while others adopt the absolutely minimalist position that there was never a Karaite community in Spain, with the documentary sources reflecting the traces of sojourners and the literary references using the term *heretic* as a more generic insult rather than a reference to a specific population of Karaites. Most historians of Karaism walk a line somewhere in between, holding that there were some Karaites in Spain but probably not a lot. This is not because they seek to minimize the place of Karaism in Spain, but rather because it is all that the documentary record can support. On these various hypotheses of the extent of Karaite presence in the Iberian Peninsula and the dissemination of Karaite ideas, see Ryan Szpiech, “L’hérésie absent: Karisme et karaites dans les œuvres polémiques d’Alfonso de Valladolid,” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 182: 196-7. With all of that said, the documentary record is ever-shifting (again, as we shall see below), and it is possible that more evidence will come to light to support the idea of a larger community. However, that evidence, if it exists, is not yet known to scholars.

<sup>119</sup> Lasker, “Karaites in Spain,” 179.

<sup>120</sup> A comprehensive bibliography for the study of Karaite history and thought is Barry Dov Walfish and Mikahil Kizilov. *Bibliographia Karaitica: Annotated Bibliography of Karaites and Karaism*. Leiden: Brill, 2011.

misunderstanding and misrepresenting not only Karaite Judaism but its relationship with other Judaisms and the other Abrahamic faiths. His Karaite coda to chapter six of the work is an example not only of bad history and historiography but also basic errors of fact.

Karaites are often described as Jews who reject the Oral Torah and rabbinic authority, although a more precise and accurate definition describes their legal-theological movement as “a Jewish religious movement of a scripturalist and messianic nature.”<sup>121</sup> Yet Fernández-Morera introduces the Karaites to his readers with an interpretation that epitomizes the historiographical problems presented by thinking about Jewish history within the framework of a Judaeo-Christian civilization. He writes that “the word *Karaite* [is] derived from the Herew *Karaim*, meaning ‘Disciple of Scripture.’” The precise parsing of the term is still a matter of debate amongst scholars, but to be precise, it is something closer to “readers” than Fernández-Morera suggests. The origins of the phrase that he uses to name the Karaites, “disciples of scripture,” are, at their root, Calvinist, taken from Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: “If true religion is to beam upon us, our principle must be, that it is necessary to begin with heavenly teaching, and that it is impossible for any man to obtain even the minutest portion of right and sound doctrine without being a disciple of Scripture.”<sup>122</sup> Using this terminology helps to create the erroneous impression that Karaites are the Calvinists of Judaism, the purveyors of a “sola scriptura” movement devoid of its own schools of legal reasoning. Fernández-Morera himself may not have imported the phrase directly from Calvinism, but rather via some reference to a letter written by the Karaite historian Avraham Firkovitch,<sup>123</sup> although the provenance of the phrase as it is used in *The Myth* is not made explicit.

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<sup>121</sup> Meira Polliack, “Preface,” *Karaite Judaism: A Guide to Its History and Sources*. Leiden: Brill, 2003. xvii.

<sup>122</sup> John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 2009. book 1, chapter 6, argument 2.

<sup>123</sup> Firkovitch’s letter from Cairo, written in Hebrew and with the term “disciples of scripture” rendering his Hebrew expression “*benei mikra*” (lit: sons of the Bible), is published in Menahem Ben-Sasson and Ze’ev Elkin, “Abraham Firkovitch and the Cairo Genizah: Following Up on a Matter in the Man’s Archive,” *Pe’amim* 90 (2002): 66-7. The translation of *benei mikra* appears as “disciples of Scripture” in Peter Cole and Adina Hoffman’s *Sacred Trash*. New York:

The use of this phrase in Firkovich's letter reflects not a portrayal of medieval Karaite theology on its own terms, but rather a drive toward political and cultural alliances between Karaites and Protestant Christians unique to 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>-century Karaites as part of the emancipation of Jews in central and Eastern Europe.<sup>124</sup> Thus, Fernández-Morera imports an anachronistic and inappropriately Christian perspective; as accidental as this importation may have been, it comports with the overall goal of the work to vindicate Christianity in a historical context, making the book more modern theology and polemic than medieval history.

Furthermore, Fernández-Morera stakes his argument to demographics and identity in a way that almost reads like a right-wing caricature of liberal concerns about the definition and assertion of identity and is suggestive of the fungibility of identity as a philosophical framing that can support arguments at both ends of the political spectrum.<sup>125</sup> He suggests that the paucity of scholarship on Karaites in Spain is because “the history of Karaism has been written by the victors, the Orthodox. Practically all scholarly works on Karaism are written by non-Karaites.”<sup>126</sup> There are three major problems with this claim: First, Fernández-Morera incorrectly contrasts Karaite Jews with Orthodox Jews. The majority of Jews, those who are not Karaites, are known as Rabbanite Jews for their extensive tradition of rabbinical legal and theological reasoning. By referring to Rabbanite Jews as the orthodoxy, he is reinforcing the idea of Karaism as a non-normative heresy, the idea that he so deplores in his medieval Rabbanite subjects and his contemporary academic colleagues. Fernández-Morera himself takes issue with the idea of Karaites being considered as heretics in contemporary

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Shocken Books, 2011. 26. One would have to review the studies of Karaites listed in Fernández-Morera's bibliography to divine his source for this very particular — and, again, ultimately very Protestant — phrasing.

<sup>124</sup> Dan Shapira, “On Firkowicz, Forgeries, and Forging Jewish Identities,” in *Manufacturing a Past for the Present: Forgery and Authenticity in Medievalist Texts and Objects in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, eds. Janos Bak, Patrick Geary, and Gabor Klaniczay. Leiden: Brill, 2015. 157-8.

<sup>125</sup> On stylistic and philosophical fungibility in extreme-right rhetoric, see Angela Nagle. *Kill All Normies*, New York: Zero Books, 2018. 34-8.

<sup>126</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 324, n125

scholarship: “Karaism (called a ‘sect,’ or at best a ‘heresy,’ by its medieval Orthodox [sic] enemies, who were referred to as ‘rabbanites’ since the tenth century) represented the gravest internal threat to the unity of medieval Spanish Judaism.”<sup>127</sup> However, not only is he himself replicating this episteme, he is also launching a jeremiad against intellectual problems that have long since been solved and superseded. Although the important early scholarship did treat Karaites as a kind of heretical, non-normative sect within Judaism, that has not been the case for decades and in study after study, we see historians of Karaism reject this older way of thinking. For example, Marina Rustow explains the origins of her research on Egyptian Karaites over the course of writing her recent social history of that community:

The question with which I began my research, then, whether the Qaraite were a sect, has led me to the wider problem on which this work focuses: What would the history of the Jewish community look like if viewed without the presumption that Qaraite were a sociologically separate group?<sup>128</sup>

By way of a second example, in the section “Jewish History Beyond Sect” of the introduction to his *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, Fred Astren writes:

Descriptions of Karaism are often defective because observers maintain simple notions of definition that ultimately become reductionist. When one or two primary elements of Karaism are used to define the whole, then the great variety found in Karaite practice, belief, and historical experience cannot be incorporated into the description.<sup>129</sup>

Both of these scholars, as well as Meira Polliack, whose concise definition of Karaite Judaism I cited above, represent examples of the increasing contemporary challenges to their academic discipline and its historical tendency toward treating Karaism as an anomaly or a Jewish heresy. And so, when

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<sup>127</sup> Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 200.

<sup>128</sup> Marina Rustow, *Heresy and the Politics of Community*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2008. xv-xvii.

<sup>129</sup> Fred Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*. Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 2004. 17. It is worth noting that where Astren upholds the idea of Karaism as a sect, it is strictly limited to the literary domain; in other words, he portrays Karaite literature as sub-type of Jewish literature without wading into the social-historical realities of daily life. (Again, this is simply a question of different, recognized, established fields of history-writing rather than of right or wrong approaches to the material.) And even there, Astren notes that “the sectarian relationship increasingly was marked by accommodation from one or both parties” (9).



Fernández-Morera complains that Karaites are overlooked and misrepresented, he can only make that claim by disregarding the most recent twenty-plus years of scholarship on Karaite Judaism that rejects a polemical medieval outlook as its starting point.

Second, by consistently capitalizing the O in Orthodox and, as in the citation in the previous paragraph, conflating capital-O Orthodox Jews with Rabbanite Jews, Fernández-Morera is not simply using orthodox as an adjective opposite to heterodox, but is rather referring to a specific denominational movement within modern Judaism. Orthodox Judaism emerged in the nineteenth century as a response to Reform Judaism and other religious consequences of the Enlightenment and the European emancipation of Jews<sup>130</sup>; it is not a medieval phenomenon.<sup>131</sup> In this way, Fernández-Morera is not only implicating his academic colleagues in an alleged malpractice but also making a large group of contemporary Jews into the scoundrels of medieval history. Furthermore, in order to make this claim of the exclusion of Karaite historians from the contemporary academic discussion, Fernández-Morera must also overlook significant demographic realities: The estimated population of Karaite Jews today worldwide is well under 50,000 individuals, while the estimated population of Rabbanite Jews is over 14 million; a representative sample, then, of Jews who are historians would include far fewer Karaites than Rabbanites.

Finally, the third issue is the identitarian one. Fernández-Morera complains that not enough Karaites are engaged in writing Karaite history, making a point of highlighting that the historians Yitzhak Baer, Nathan Schur, and S.D. Goitein were not Karaites when he cites their work on Karaism. (Oddly, though, Lasker is also not himself a Karaite but is not singled out for such

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<sup>130</sup> Jeff Eleff, “Engaging Reform,” chapter 1 of *Modern Orthodox Judaism: A Documentary History*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2016. 3-26.

<sup>131</sup> Interestingly, early reformers sought to align themselves with medieval Karaism, so the notion of parallels between Rabbanite/Karaite and Orthodox/Reform are not without historical foundations; those foundations are not to be found in the Middle Ages, though; they are fully a post-Enlightenment development. It is also worth noting that in spite of what those reformers might have liked to think, from a scholarly perspective there are significant differences between the classical Reform Judaism of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Germany and Karaite Judaism (Astren, *Karaite Judaism*, 17).

emphasis on his religious identity in the notes.<sup>132</sup>) Where Karaites did and do write Karaite history, Fernández-Morera does not see fit to include them in his book, instead choosing to omit the evidence that would contradict his argument. A particularly notable omission is, aside from the one uncredited borrowing of his turn of phrase, the entire cultural and scholarly oeuvre of Firkovich, who was himself a Karaite leader and cantor who was also a scholar and collector of Karaite manuscripts.<sup>133</sup> Thus, in addition to the erroneous take on the identity of Karaite historians, Fernández-Morera seems to be raising the question of scholars' religious identity simply to score political points as part of the fungible discourse of identity adopted by the extreme right rather than to hear what Karaite scholars and subjects have to say about Karaite history or to engage in a broader discussion about the merits of the diversity of the body of academic historians.

## Conclusions

All in all, *The Myth* seeks to demonize academic cultural history and literary studies in the service of an extreme-right political agenda by badly warping their tools and then declaring victory when those tools do not perform their tasks adequately. Academics who are trained with these tools and methods will recognize the chicanery; the intended audience for a popular history may not. Ultimately, then, Fernández-Morera is taking advantage of his audience of lay readers who are already favorably disposed toward highly critical representations of Islam and Islamic sources in order to present himself as the lone voice of truth in a messy and partisan academic wilderness, knowing that non-academic readers will not necessarily recognize the deceptive techniques he uses

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<sup>132</sup> Dario Fernández Morera, *The Myth*, 324, n125; 325, n131.

<sup>133</sup> Tapani Harvianen, "Abraham Firkovich," in *Karaite Judaism*, ed. Meira Polliack. Leiden: Brill, 2003. 875-92; and Dan Shapira, "On Firkowicz, Forgeries, and Forging Jewish Identity," in *Manufacturing a Past for the Present*, ed. Patrick Geary, et al. Leiden: Brill, 2015. 157-69. For a classic but unfavorable assessment of Firkovich, see Abraham Harkavy, *Altjüdische Denkmäler aus der Krim*. Saint Petersburg, 1876.

to craft that image. He is feeding into existing conservative anger about Islam and about the very possibility of religiously and racially integrated societies in order to make himself a hero and is doing so at the expense of educating and engaging his readers. A book like this succeeds at promoting its extreme-right political ideology by distorting its sources, obfuscating its methods, and counting on readers to be hoodwinked all the while leaving them convinced that they are receiving the real truth.

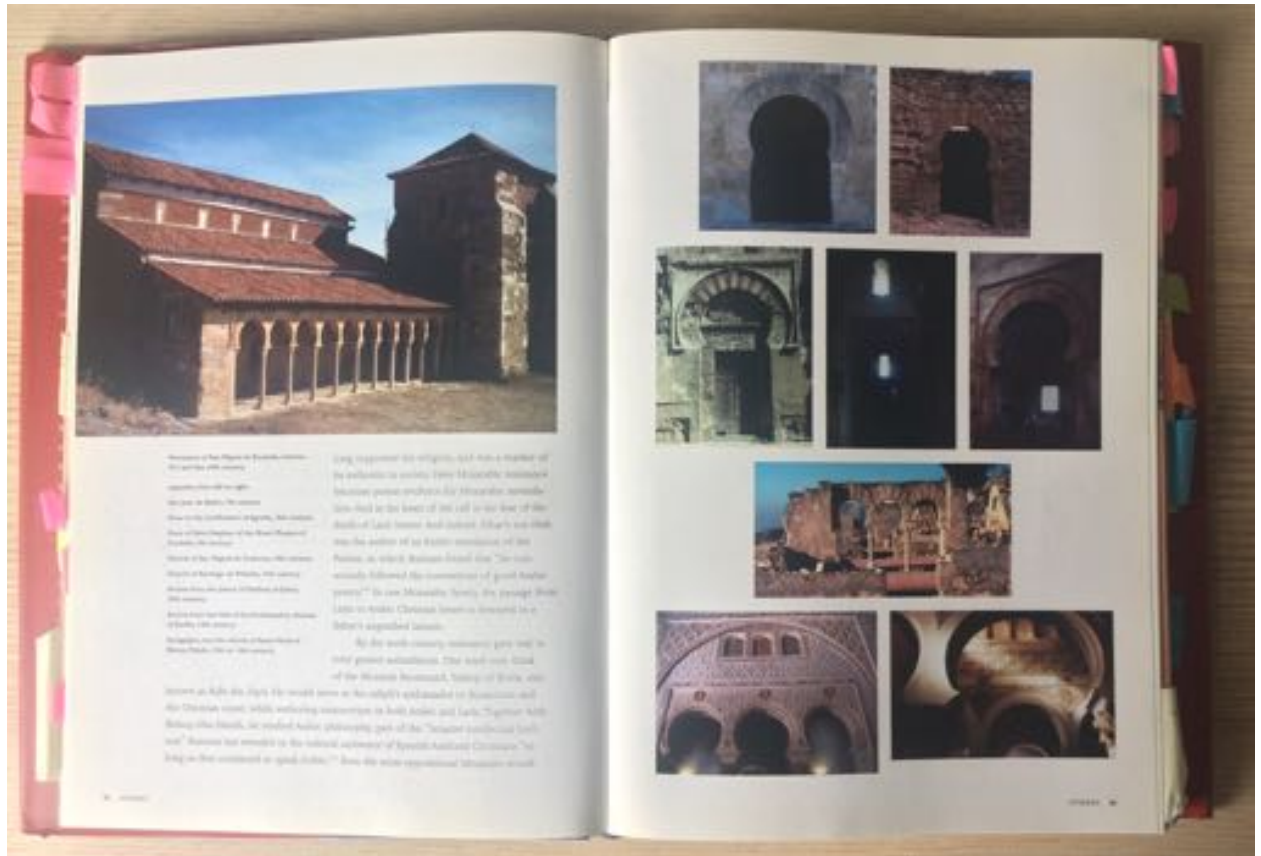


Fig. 1. *The Arts of Intimacy* by Balbale, Dodds, and Menocal (New Haven, 2008), open to pages 82-3 which show the provenance and diffusion of the horseshoe arch in medieval Spanish architecture before and after the Islamic conquest; the volume uses both text and images to convey to a general readership that the form was adopted in Islamic and Islamicate architecture from Visigothic buildings and remained a part of the local architectural vernacular under both Christian and Islamic rule.