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Mark R. Cohen: Under Crescent and Cross

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INTRODUCTION TO THE 2008 EDITION

UNDER CRESCENT AND CROSS was published in 1994. It was a response to a polarization that had occurred, especially since the 1970s, in historical writing about Jewish-Muslim relations in the Middle Ages. At one pole stood those who adhered to the view, first espoused by European Jewish historians in the nineteenth century, that relations between Jews and Arabs were more harmonious than the so-called lachrymose relations between Jews and Christians in Europe. This was exaggerated by some into the idea of an interfaith utopia, a veritable “Golden Age,” with Muslim Andalusia as the model. According to this view, Jews lived securely, protected by a tolerant Islam, and achieved remarkable heights in medicine and in the political arena, holding prominent positions in Muslim courts and becoming assimilated culturally to Arab-Muslim intellectual society.

The literary achievement of the Jews of Andalusia and other parts of the Islamic world—the starting point for the “Golden Age” idea—cannot be denied, nor is it denied by Jewish scholars. Even the political application, however exaggerated, has a certain objective correlative, for some Jews did, indeed, achieve remarkable heights in official Islamic society. There is even a connection between the cultural and the political achievements. It is reasonable to assume that a second-class minority thoroughly adopts the culture of the majority group only if it enjoys a certain measure of comfort in society as a whole, let alone has access to intellectual circles in the majority society and to its corridors of power. But the interfaith utopia was a myth insofar as it ignored the Jews’ inferior legal status and the fierce persecution of non-Muslims (Jews and Christians) in North Africa and Andalusia in the twelfth century by the infamous “fundamentalist” Almohads, and other occasional outbursts of hostility and violence in Spain and elsewhere in the Islamic world.

These painful moments in Jewish-Arab history were also disregarded by Arab and Arabist writers in more recent times. They adopted the originally Jewish myth of the interfaith utopia and argued that relations between Jews and Muslims had been harmonious until the coming of Zionism. Absent Zionism, they asserted, the Arab-Israeli conflict would disappear. Some even suggested that Israelis give up their state and return to living under the benevolent protection of a tolerant Islam.

The Jewish response to these claims—the opposite pole—represented a drastic, 180-degree turn away from the Jewish image of the interfaith utopia. Jewish writers, some of them historians, most of them nonspecialist popular writers, journalists, or blog masters, put forth the claim that Islam

has been an intolerant religion from the very beginning, and that throughout the Middle Ages Islam persecuted Jews, treating them almost as poorly as they were treated by antisemitic, medieval Christianity. At its extreme, the revisionist theory brands Islam as an inherently antisemitic religion and blames Islam at its core, not Zionism, for the current conflict between Jews and Arabs. I have called this, alternatively, the “countermyth of Islamic persecution” and the “neolachrymose conception of Jewish-Arab history.” It ignores, one might say suppresses, the substantial security—at times verging on social (though not legal) parity—that Jews enjoyed through centuries of existence under Muslim rule, as well as the deeply Arabized culture of the Jews of the Islamic Middle Ages.

Faced with both myth and countermyth, I decided to write a book, using a comparative method, to explain why the Islamic Middle Ages—specifically, the period between the rise of Islam and the Mamluk period—were far more peaceful and secure for Jews than life in northern Christian (Ashkenazic) Europe, and reciprocally, and from a new perspective, why Jewish-Christian relations deteriorated so drastically in the central European Middle Ages. I tried to go beyond the simplistic observation that Islam has been more tolerant toward nonconforming minorities than Christianity, though that is true. This explanation for the more favorable treatment of Jews and other minorities in the Islamic Middle Ages, compared to the treatment of Jews meted out by medieval Latin Christendom, I felt was simplistic and inadequate. In order to set the historical record straight I needed to go beyond the religious explanation, and I tried to do that with this book.

Under Crescent and Cross appeared just after the Oslo Accords of 1993, and though I conceived its argument well before then, it was taken by some as supportive of the new, emerging rapprochement between Israelis and Palestinians. Events occurring since then—the attacks of September 11, 2001, and other terrorist acts of violence in Europe; the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; and the growing hostility between the West and Islam, believed by some to be a “clash of civilizations”—have strengthened the polarization I sought to correct. They tend to reinforce the belief held by some that Islam is, in its origins and by nature, evil. There are those who see the Islamist violence of today as a continuation of the violence in the past toward Jews and Christians. They point to the pervasive Muslim presence in the so-called new antisemitism in Islamic countries and in Europe. Some people have even challenged the belief that there ever was a period of Jews and Muslims living together and sharing cultural values in Muslim Spain. This latter view is expressed, for instance, in a recent article, “The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise” by Darío Fernández-Morera,¹ while the opposite pole has been reiterated in the encomium for the Spanish *convivencia* in María

Rosa Menocal's *Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*.²

Others have taken it upon themselves to push against the revisionist trend and work toward Islamic-Jewish understanding. In Germany, the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, or Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin, has for many years promoted intellectual interchange between Muslims and Jews through its "Working Group Modernity and Islam," its "Jewish-Islamic Hermeneutic Project," and its new research program, "Europe in the Middle East—the Middle East in Europe." Organizations in Europe, the United States, Israel, Jordan, and Morocco have sponsored interfaith dialogue between Jews and Muslims, as has the Emirate of Qatar. Scholars in Spain continue to cultivate the study of the flourishing of Jewish life and letters in medieval Andalusia. A European Platform for Jewish-Muslim Cooperation was founded in 2007 to promote Jewish-Muslim understanding. Bridge-building NGOs actively promote discussions of shared goals in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, while reasonable Palestinian and Israeli intellectuals regularly exchange views and discuss ideas for peace in the area. Promoting greater understanding, Judaism and Jewish studies are now taught in a number of Arab universities, such as in Egypt and Morocco (as of this writing, Tunisia is about to inaugurate a program). This parallels the already well-established and growing field of Islamic and Arabic studies in the West.

Under Crescent and Cross has enjoyed a largely positive reception by the academic and general public, notwithstanding some angry protests from the "neolachrymose" school. It has also made its way into several foreign languages: Turkish, Hebrew, German, and Arabic as well as French in 2008. It would seem, therefore, that others believe, as I do, that the book still has relevance. I believe that its historical message stands firm in the face of every temptation to read the present into the past. I hope that this new edition, with its new introduction and new afterword—alongside the foreign language versions—will reach even wider audiences than before and that it will continue to contribute to the moderate, objective, historical interpretation of the subject, both in the West and in the Middle East.

NOTES

1. Fernández-Morera, "The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise," *Intercollegiate Review* 41 (Fall 2006), 23–31.

2. Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (Boston, 2002); also translated into French and Spanish.