

# Introduction

## *Voices in the History of Christian-Muslim Relations*

The history of Muslims and Christians encountering and engaging one another is a story of great complexity and nuance. It resists just one interpretation and forces those who wish to accurately understand the history to consult a variety of sources and perspectives. Consider, for instance, the story told to us by the eleventh-century mosque of Bab al-Mardum, hidden among the web of narrow streets in Toledo, Spain.<sup>1</sup> Travellers who visit the little structure today, having recuperated from a steep descent down the Calle de las Descalzas, may enter the mosque and gaze in wonder at its blind arcades, multi-lobed arches, and—most notably—nine ribbed domes that clearly pay homage to the Grand Mosque of Córdoba.<sup>2</sup> A closer look, however, reveals another influence: the

1. For a detailed description of the structure, see Susana Calvo Capilla, “La mezquita de Bab al-Mardum y el proceso de consagración de pequeña mezquitas en Toledo (s. XII–XIII),” *Al-Qanṭara* 20, no. 2 (1999): 299–330 and Jerrilynn D. Dodds, María Rosa Menocal, and Abigail Krasner Balbale, *The Arts of Intimacy: Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Making of Castilian Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 112–22. See also, Calvo Capilla, “Reflexiones sobre la mezquita de Bab al-Mardum y la capilla de Belén de Toledo” in *Entre el califato y la taifa: Mil años de Cristo de la Luz (Actas del Congreso Internacional, Toledo, 1999)* (Toledo, Sp.: Asociación de Amigos del Toledo Islámico, 2000) and Calvo Capilla, “La capilla de Belén del convent de Santa Fe de Toledo: ¿Un oratorio musulmán?” *Tulaytula* 11 (2004): 31–73.
2. *Ibid.*, 46; Marianne Barrucand and Achim Bednorz, *Moorish Architecture in Andalusia* (Köln, Ger.: Taschen, 2007), 88; Dodds, Menocal, and Balbale, *The Arts of Intimacy*, 116.

columns supporting the mosque's domes predate the structure by many centuries. In fact, they are Christian columns from a period when Visigoths ruled Spain. The mosque of Bab al-Mardum was formerly a Christian church, and the builders who constructed it repurposed the church's columns for their mosque.

Using scraps of the former church in the mosque's construction was, of course, practical and resourceful. But the irony, however deliberate it may or may not have been, should not be missed. With the new mosque complete, Muslim worshippers (or even passersby) not only saw a triumphant mosque where a church once stood, but they might have also noticed that Christian pillars were now supporting Muslim domes. There is no evidence to suggest that anyone viewed the new mosque in this way, but if the architectural submission was noticed, then it could have reminded onlookers of a reversal of fortunes: the eighth-century shift from Christian to Muslim control of Toledo. Might the eleventh-century mosque with its Christian pillars tell a story that reopened a very old wound?<sup>3</sup>

Moving past these Christian columns by walking around the structure's perimeter, a relatively enormous apse adds to the mosque's story. Less than a century after the mosque was completed, Christian armies recaptured Toledo. Then, having passed into the hands of the Knights of St. John, the mosque was reconverted to a church, the Cristo de la Luz, in 1183. The apse most clearly marks this retransformation; at first glance, it is an extension sympathetic to the original tastes of the mosque's designers. Indeed, it remains honest to the Muslim architecture by employing the same style of foundation,

3. The conquest of Toledo by Muslim armies in the eighth century was swift and required little military effort. According to some sources, the city was abandoned before the Muslims' arrival. In any case, the power shift may have gone almost entirely unnoticed by rural dwellers, though those remaining in urban centers like Toledo would have faced changes, perhaps even architectural ones, more squarely. See Richard Hitchcock, *Muslim Spain Reconsidered: From 711–1502* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

brickwork, and cornice. Likewise, it retains the blind arcades, lobed arches, and ceramic roof tiles.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the original structure and its addition maintain architectural symmetry. The church's apse carries on where the mosque left off, a testament to cooperative architecture, mutual dependence, and a history of coexisting relationships between Muslims and Christians.

And yet there is still more to this little mosque-turned-church story. Stepping back from the Cristo de la Luz's beautiful design, perceptive onlookers may notice that the twelfth-century Christian addition—the apse—is grossly out of scale when compared to the rest of the structure. Indeed, the apse is so much larger that it appears to consume the tiny mosque. Once more, the irony of such disproportion must not be missed, for the apse may have stood in some minds as a statement of triumphalism. The Christians who commissioned the church's reconversion to a church could have simply destroyed it and built a fresh structure. A more powerful statement, however, would be to repurpose what was already there. Thus, the vanquished mosque becomes the stuffed and mounted animal in the victorious Christian hunter's den.<sup>5</sup> Where Christian capitals once served Muslim domes, a mosque is now subservient to a church, a symbol of receding Muslim control of Spain. Again, we have no evidence that anyone viewed the church in this way, but the perspective gives way to the suggestion that, perhaps at least to some, the reconverted structure represented contempt. However medieval Christians and Muslims looked upon the church-turned-mosque-turned-church, does the Cristo de la Luz tell a story of subjugation or mutual appreciation? And what of the many kinds of stories that lie in between perspectives of subjugation and appreciation?

4. Alejandro Lapunzina, *The Architecture of Spain* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2005), 130.

5. Dodds, Menocal, and Balbale, *The Arts of Intimacy*, 121.

Traveling north of the Cristo de la Luz to the library of El Escorial near Madrid, one finds another curious story. In this case, it is told by a manuscript of the *Books of Chess, Dice, and Board Games* commissioned in the thirteenth century by Alfonso X, King of León and Castilla.<sup>6</sup> In it, descriptions of games are accompanied by exquisite miniatures illustrating various chess problems and game situations. The miniature concluding the section on chess depicts a red-bearded Muslim in his tent hosting a blond Christian nobleman. The tent bears a *basmalah* (“In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful”) in blue *kufic* script and is topped with a green pendant.<sup>7</sup> Both men rest on striped cushions positioned on either side of a chessboard, the remaining pieces of which suggest that the match is nearly complete.<sup>8</sup>

Like the Cristo de la Luz, this medieval miniature dramatizes the history of Christian-Muslim relations in many ways. In one sense, Muslims and Christians could frequently be at odds with one another, sometimes to a violent degree. Indeed, the characters in the manuscript illumination are playing a mock game of war while being sheltered by the cool shade of a war tent. The Muslim wears a large, sheathed sword, and his two lances stand outside near a tent flap. Close examination of the chessboard reveals similar tension. The

6. Alfonso X, el Sabio, *Libros de acedrez, dados, e tablas* (late-thirteenth century), MS T.I.6 (facsimile), Biblioteca Monasterio del Escorial, Madrid (henceforth MS T.I.6); reproduced as *Libros del ajedrez, dados, y tablas*, 2 vols. (Madrid: Edilán, 1987). A detailed description and analysis of this text is Sonja Musser Golladay, “*Los libros de acedrez dados e tablas: Historical, Artistic and Metaphysical Dimensions of Alfonso X’s Book of Games*” (PhD diss., The University of Arizona, 2007). See also, Olivia Remie Constable, “Chess and Courtly Culture in Medieval Castile: The *Libro de ajedrez* of Alfonso X, el Sabio,” *Speculum* 82, no. 2 (April 2007): 301–47.

7. Golladay transliterates the inscription as “Bismillahir-Rahmanir-Rahim,” i.e., *bismi-llahi al-rahmani al-rahimi* (“In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful”). See Golladay, 956n682.

8. For a detailed description of this particular miniature, comprising folio 64r of the manuscript and illustrating chess problem 103 (its corresponding text appears on folios 63r and 63v), see *ibid.*, 366–68, 956–58. For a transcription of the accompanying text, see *ibid.*, 1338–39.

Christian's pieces are severely depleted. Cornered, he faces imminent checkmate in exactly eleven moves.<sup>9</sup> The Muslim looks on, fully expecting his decisive victory.

In an entirely different sense, one can look past the war tent and mock battle at what may very well be two friends enjoying one another's company, wiling away an afternoon over a friendly match of strategy and intellect. In fact, the Muslim is depicted reaching with his left hand towards a *carafe* and drinking glass. With his right hand he appears to motion for his companion to take a drink, and the Christian seems to gesture appreciatively in response.<sup>10</sup> It is a rather harmonious scene, reminiscent of frequent instances of inter-communal cohesion, cooperation, and the prosperous exchange of ideas. What story does this miniature tell us? Can the history of Christian-Muslim relations be described as one of mutual enmity or friendly encounter? Alongside the *Cristo de la Luz*, what stories are left untold, and what perspectives remain unconsidered by the miniature?

An examination of religious treatises yields similarly complex stories. On the one hand, we find authors like Eulogius, the ninth-century Christian priest from Córdoba who, in a treatise recounting the alleged acts of Christian martyrs, looked at those embracing Islam and wrote that they were taking a "cup from a rotten sewer" (*cloacae putrientis poculum*).<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, we can also find those like the ninth-century Muslim caliph al-Ma'mun who, as we are told in

9. "The dark pieces play first and give checkmate to the white King in eleven moves with the same players, neither more nor less" (*Los prietos iuegan primero e dan mathe al Rey blanco en onze uezes con los sus iuegos mismos ni mas ni menos*). MS T.I.6, fol. 63r and Golladay, 1338.

10. Golladay, 956 and 956–57n685. We cannot be sure as to the players' true identities. Some suggest the Christian is Alfonso X and the Muslim Ibn al-Ahmar, but textual evidence may suggest that the Christian is an unknown prisoner of war playing a game with his captor. See *ibid.*, 957–58.

11. Eulogius, *Memoriale sanctorum*, II.7.2 in Ioannes Gil, ed., *Corpus scriptorium muzarabicorum*, 2 vols. (Madrid: Instituto Antonio Nebrija, 1973).

a supposed account of his debate with a Christian monk, announced to his opponent: “This is a court of justice and equity: none shall be wronged therein. So advance thy arguments and answer without fear, for there is none here who will not speak thee well. . . . Let everyone speak who has the wisdom to demonstrate the truth of his religion.”<sup>12</sup> Even in the context of theological treatises like these, we see a dichotomy of contempt and respect, not to mention the myriad of perspectives that overlap and lie in between those extremes. The history of Christian-Muslim relations demands careful study.

As a point of departure, the study of Christian-Muslim relations in this book begins by consulting sources coming from within the genre of theological literature—texts written by Christians about Islam or by Muslims about Christianity. These include texts devoted to religious apologetic or polemic, theological treatises, responses to theological questions, and accounts of theological debates. Other valuable sources—archaeology, poetry, general histories, legal texts, travel literature, and so on—will be left to other books. As a result, this study cannot entirely characterize the history or trajectory of Christian-Muslim relations, but it should provide readers with a helpful introduction to the ways in which Christians and Muslims reflected theologically about each other. In addition, since much of the content within the texts I introduce forms the basis for the discussions that take place between Christians and Muslims in our contemporary society, readers are also given a foundational understanding of the key themes of theological engagement in present-day Christian-Muslim dialogue. Thus, like al-Ma'mun, I attempt to let as many voices speak as possible so that we can begin to understand the history of Christian-Muslim relations with greater clarity.

12. Quoted in Alfred Guillaume, “Theodore Abu Qurra as Apologist,” *The Muslim World* 15 (1925): 46.

In what follows, then, the reader is given brief introductions to authors and their religious treatises in order to set them in proper context and draw the reader's attention to some of the key theological topics presented in the texts. This is followed by a selection of important passages taken directly from the texts, which allow the texts to tell us their stories instead of us merely reading *about* them. A select bibliography at the end of the book provides recommendations for secondary literature that may be helpful for pursuing the topics, the history, or the primary sources even further.

This format helps us to achieve two goals. First, it helps introduce readers to primary sources, and second, it helps them encounter the major theological issues that emerge from those sources. It must be said that many introductions to the history of Christian-Muslim relations rarely give the reader an opportunity to read extended sections from an actual medieval text. At times, brief passages are quoted or titles are referred to, but readers are left without hearing medieval authors speak for themselves. Of course, interested readers can consult the many available modern editions of these texts (some of them in translation), but this can be a daunting task; many editions will be inaccessible to someone beginning his or her study of Christian-Muslim relations. In short, while readers may learn something *about*, say, John of Damascus or Abu 'Isa al-Warraq in historical overviews, in this book they read John and al-Warraq in their own words. Just as importantly, readers discover, in turn, the theological topics medieval authors were concerned with and where those fit in the overall context of Christian-Muslim engagement. As a result, the book can be used to initiate conversations about how Christians and Muslims discuss, disagree, and attempt to communicate the theological distinctions of divine unity, Trinitarian theology, Christology, soteriology, anthropology, revelation, or the use of Scripture.

This study unfolds over the course of six chapters that are arranged chronologically. I begin in the seventh century with *The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* and move gradually forward to the fifteenth century, ending with texts by Nicholas of Cusa. Roughly speaking, the book covers the medieval era. Of course, narrowing the range of writings to specifically theological ones in this period leaves a wide variety of texts from which to choose. Why this particular collection? The texts included here are some of the most important ones, forming the foundations of how Christians and Muslims engaged one another theologically. Some of them may appear in translation elsewhere, but they are collected together here because, as a whole, they represent many of the most essential texts for those who wish to understand the history of Christian-Muslim theological engagement and the fullest range of theological issues that arise from this history. Further, the theological topics that emerge from these texts continue to appear in present-day works about Christian-Muslim dialogue. Helping readers to encounter this collection of primary sources will help them form the groundwork for more study in the field.

In the conclusion, I map the ground the book covers by charting some of the literary topoi of Christian-Muslim theological engagement. Here, many of the common theological themes found within the texts are highlighted and given brief analysis. This is followed by a small glossary of some of the more obscure terms encountered in the texts.

### **A Few Words on Transliteration and Format**

In most English works devoted to Islamic studies, a system of transliteration using Latin characters represents Arabic letters and vowel markings. Although these systems vary, many incorporate a



dot or macron above or below a letter to indicate a long vowel or a particular Arabic letter with no real equivalent in English. In this book, a simplified system of transliteration is used whereby Arabic words are italicized and rendered into English without dots or macrons. The Arabic letter *ayn* is represented with a ‘ and the *hamza* is represented with a ’. Common Arabic words or names such as Muhammad, caliph, or Qur’an are left unitalicized. In Arabic proper names, the patronymic form “ibn” is abbreviated to “b.” unless it appears as the first part of a name (e.g., “Ibn Hazm”). A similar system of transliteration is also applied to other languages that would normally require specific diacritical marks.

The texts selected are originally found in previously published editions. Some of these were published over a century ago, and others come from editions that were published in countries such as the United Kingdom. In each case, every attempt is made to retain the original publication’s spelling and grammatical formats. This explains why, for example, an American spelling of a word is found in one text while a British spelling of that same word may be found in another text.

In some cases, punctuation has been altered in order to ease the reader’s job in following the text. Finally, asterisk dividers (\*\*\*) are used to indicate where sections of texts have not been included or in order to distinguish between the end of my introduction to a text and the beginning of a text.