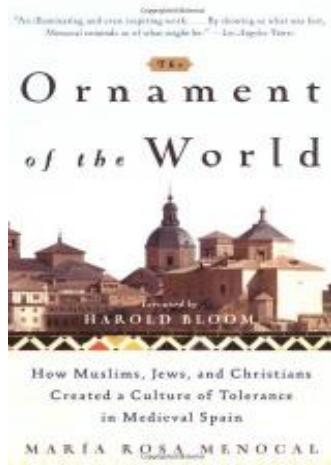


# The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain

by María Rosa Menocal



## About the Book

A fascinating history of a brilliant lost civilization with powerful lessons for the modern world.

"Once upon a time in the mid-eighth century, an intrepid young man named Abd al-Rahman abandoned his home in Damascus, the Near Eastern heartland of Islam, and set out across the North African desert in search of a place of refuge. Damascus had become a slaughterhouse for his family, the ruling Umayyads, who had first led the Muslims out of the desert of Arabia.... This sole survivor was undoubtedly too young?he was in his late teens or early twenties?to be terrified at the odds against him, nor was his flight westward, toward what was the farthest frontier of the Islamic territories, as arbitrary or hopeless as it might have seemed...."

"This book tells the story of how this remarkable turn of events... powerfully affected the course of European history and civilization. Many aspects of the story are largely unknown and the extent of their continuing effects on the world around us is scarcely understood...."

-From **The Ornament of the World**

A portrait of the vibrant civilization of medieval Spain, **The Ornament of the World** is the story of an extraordinary place and time. Both history and literature often depict the Middle Ages as a dark and barbaric period, characterized by intellectual backwardness and religious persecution. Now María Rosa Menocal brings us an altogether different vision of medieval Europe, where tolerance was often the rule and literature, science, and art flourished in a climate of cultural openness.

The story begins as a young prince in exile?the last heir to a glorious Islamic dynasty?flees the massacre of his family and founds a new kingdom on the Iberian peninsula: al-Andalus. Combining the best of what Muslims, Jews, and

Christians had to offer, al-Andalus and its successors influenced the rest of Europe in dramatic ways, giving it the first translations of Plato and Aristotle, the tradition of love songs and secular poetry, advances in mathematics, and outstanding feats of architecture and technology.

In a series of captivating vignettes, Menocal travels through time and space to reveal the often paradoxical events that shaped the Andalusian world and continue to affect our own. Along the way, we meet a host of intriguing characters: the brilliant and dedicated Jewish vizier of a powerful Muslim city-state; the Christian abbot who commissions the first translation of the Quran; the converted Jew who, under a Christian name, brings a first taste of Arabic scholarship and storytelling to northern Europe.

This rich and complex culture shared by the three faiths thrived, sometimes in the face of enmity and bigotry, for nearly seven hundred years. Ironically, it was on the eve of the Renaissance that puritanical forces finally triumphed over Spain's long-standing traditions of tolerance, ushering in a period of religious repression. In the centuries since, even the memory of the vital and sophisticated culture in which Muslims, Jews, and Christians once lived and worked side by side has largely been overlooked or obscured.

In this remarkable book, we can at last uncover and explore the lost history whose legacy is still with us in countless ways and whose lessons—both inspirational and cautionary—have a powerful resonance in today's world.

## Discussion Guide

1. Did reading **The Ornament of the World** in any way change your view of the Middle Ages? How? Why do you think the perception of the Middle Ages as a dark and benighted era has persisted over the centuries?
2. What features does the Quran have in common with the scriptural texts of the other two "Peoples of the Book"? In what ways do the three scriptures differ? Discuss the role that pre-Islamic poetry played in the creation of a certain poetic ethos in Arabic culture.
3. What are the origins of the dhimma statutes in Islam and why were they so crucial during the years of the expansion of Islam? Are there comparable regulations regarding other faiths in either Judaism or Christianity?
4. Discuss the reactions of the Christian and Jewish communities to the arrival of Islam in the Iberian peninsula. Why did these two communities react so differently to what was, in effect, the same level of protection afforded them as dhimmi communities? What might explain the very high rate of conversion among Christians?
5. The years of relative political chaos that followed the dissolution of the caliphate were years of increasing cultural riches. Discuss the seeming paradox of the positive effects of the disintegration of the caliphate. Can you think of other historical moments characterized by political instability that produced comparable cultural flowering?
6. How and why did the translation movement, especially the stage during which the sciences and philosophy were the principal texts being translated, change the landscape of northern Christian Europe? What problems did the arrival of the Greek philosophical tradition pose for the three monotheistic traditions, and why? How have these same problems—the opposition between faith and reason, as many would see it—continued to shape Western civilization since the twelfth

century?

7. Discuss the shifting attitudes on the part of the ruling Christians from the beginning of the thirteenth century on. What role did the Almohads play in this period?

8. Consider the construction of so-called mudejar (i.e., "in the Arab style") palaces and other monuments in the fourteenth century. Does it seem plausible that someone like Peter the Cruel would have been interested in making explicit reference to the "culture of tolerance" that preceded him? Or had the style at that point become merely "Spanish" style, devoid of any attachment to religion?

9. Discuss the ways in which the events of 1492 are not ? as some would argue ?the predictable outcome of the medieval history of Spain but instead, for many of those living through it, something unimaginable.

10. 10. What can a work of literature convey about a historical moment that a work of history cannot? How is our vision of medieval Spain enriched by reading the works of writers who mined their exquisite imaginations as well as their understanding of history? If you were going to take some "episode" from the history of medieval Spain and turn it into a short story or a novel (or a play or a poem . . .), which historical episode would you choose and why?

## Author Bio

Born in Cuba and raised in Philadelphia, Maria Rosa Menocal received her Ph.D. in Romance Philology from the University of Pennsylvania. She taught at Bryn Mawr College and at Pennsylvania and then, for the last 16 years, at Yale, where she is now the R. Selden Rose Professor of Spanish and Portuguese and director of the Whitney Humanities Center. Author of the critically acclaimed *Shards of Love*, a provocative treatment of the origins of European lyric poetry, Professor Menocal has published widely in the field of medieval literature and culture. Her co-edited volume, *The Literature of Al-Andalus* in the Cambridge History of Arabic Literature series, is a recent example of her special interest in the vibrant mixed cultures of Spain. Maria Rosa Menocal is also the mother of two children, and lives mostly in Manhattan, where she cooks and writes, though not always in that order.

## Critical Praise

"... [An] unusually graceful study, a sturdy and readable exploration of the 'unknown depths of cultural tolerance and symbiosis in our heritage' that may help revise our view of the Middle Ages."

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