

Religious and Cultural Conversion to Islam in Ninth-Century Umayyad Córdoba

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TEACHING courses in medieval history at various American universities versifies, I have found that students readily understand St. Augustine's conversion to Christianity, whatever their doubts about the larger relevance of his *Confessions*. Augustine's conversion fits a model of religious affiliation that makes sense to twentieth-century Americans because his conversion was primarily a personal matter. It was motivated by his particular family history and personality, and by his intellectual and spiritual quest for meaning. The transformation he underwent was primarily internal, a shift in the way he understood the meaning of his life.¹ The conversion of the Germanic tribal leader Clovis to Christianity, on the other hand, puzzles students. A personal spiritual quest in this case was secondary; Clovis's main goal was to ally himself and his people with the Gallo-Roman aristocracy and with the prestigious political and cultural tradition of the Roman empire. This conversion strikes students as hypocritical, as "not real," because it does not primarily represent a transformation of the inner self; rather, it represents a shift to a new cultural and social identity. It was as much a conversion to *romanitas* as to Christianity.

¹ Chana Ullman, *The Transformed Self: The Psychology of Religious Conversion* (New York, 1989). As a psychologist, Ullman understands conversion as a personal transformation brought about by emotional needs and psychological stress.

The gradual process by which peoples of the Middle East and southern Spain converted to Islam during the centuries after the Arab conquests has more in common with Clevis's conversion than with Augustine's. This is not to say that individual spiritual and emotional needs played no role in these conversions. Along with whatever internal shifts in perception accompanied conversion, however, a change in religious affiliation involved practical and dramatic changes in people's social ties and cultural practices.

Islamic law allowed most conquered peoples to retain their religion. These non-Muslim groups—primarily Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians—existed as fairly self-enclosed communities. Each religious community had its own structure of authority and could handle most legal matters internally. Islamic and non-Islamic restrictions on intermarriage meant that members tended to marry within their own communities. Particularly in the early decades of Islamic rule, members of the subject religious groups generally spoke a language and maintained cultural practices very different from those of the ruling Arab Muslims. Those who converted to Islam in such a sectarian society might well experience changes in their inner perceptions, but they would also be faced with concrete and external changes in their social groups, marriage opportunities, and legal status, and in the body of linguistic and cultural skills they were expected to possess.²

The purpose of this article is to examine the process of conversion to Islam in one part of the medieval world: ninth-century Islamic Spain, or al-Andalus, to use the Arabic name. The sources pertaining to conversions at that time and place are particularly useful for understanding conversion to Islam as a conversion to a new group identity and culture.

Islam today is, like Christianity, a religion of many peoples and cultures; it has flourished in areas as diverse as the Middle East, Africa, and Indonesia. Muhammad and his immediate successors

² Richard W. Bulliet discusses the social and cultural dimensions of conversion to Islam in his *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979) pp. 33–42. S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, 5 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967–88), vol. 2, offers a detailed description of how subject religious communities functioned in Fatimid Egypt. Changes in religious affiliation can, of course, be tied to changes in cultural and legal status in the modern world as well as in the Middle Ages. For a theoretical discussion of these issues in a modern context, see Suad Joseph, "Muslim-Christian Conflicts: A Theoretical Perspective," in Suad Joseph and Barbara L. K. Pillsbury, eds., *Muslim-Christian Conflicts: Economic, Political, and Social Origins* (Boulder, 1978), pp. 1–60.

in the seventh and early eighth centuries, however, had foreseen a more limited scope for Islam: it was to be primarily a religion for Arabs. Muhammad insisted that pagan Arabs convert to the new religion, and he waged war against tribes that resisted.³ But after an unsuccessful attempt to convert the Jewish tribes at Medina to Islam, he abandoned the idea of converting Jews and Christians.⁴ When Muhammad's successors went on to conquer the eastern Mediterranean, Iraq, Persia, north Africa, and southern Spain, they viewed these campaigns as wars of conquest, but not as wars of conversion. Muslim Arabs were destined to rule over other peoples as a warrior elite, supported by the tribute of an essentially undisturbed and unconverted population. Arab soldiers, settled in garrison towns, were expected to remain physically segregated from the subject population.⁵ Muhammad and his immediate successors had a clear-cut image of how society in the conquered areas would work: Arabs would rule, and Islam would be an Arab religion.

This simple model of society was quickly supplanted by a much more complex reality. The goal of maintaining a separate Arab Muslim elite proved unworkable; men in the garrison towns soon began to view themselves as settlers rather than soldiers and to intermarry with local populations.⁶ Once the conquerors became settlers, a gradual process of acculturation began, by which the Arab elite adopted and developed uniquely Islamic versions of Byzantine and Persian administration, art, and architecture, and of Christian and Jewish theology and ascetic practices.⁷ The goal of a strictly Arab Muslim leadership also proved to be impractical. The conquerors quickly realized that they could rule most efficiently by leaving much of the Sasanian Persian and Byzantine administrative machinery intact, and that this would mean leaving experienced non-Arab bureaucrats in positions of power.⁸

³ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford, 1956), pp. 40–150.

⁴ A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Lahore, 1955), pp. 239–70; Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, pp. 192–220.

⁵ Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 37–45.

⁶ M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History: A New Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 165–89.

⁷ Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven, 1973); Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1961), 1:410–72.

⁸ The Barmakid family, for example, were originally Buddhist priests from the Oxus region who converted to Islam and became prominent in Abbasid administration in the mid eighth century (Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 1:294–95). The Chris-

Finally, the ideal of Islam as a strictly Arab religion also broke down. The conquered peoples, particularly if they lived near a center of Muslim administration, had strong incentives to adopt the dress, manners, language, and eventually the religion of their conquerors. Conversion happened gradually, and non-Muslims may have remained in the majority in some Islamic lands until the tenth century or even later, but the process of conversion was under way by the eighth century.⁹

Although the appeal of Islam as a religious system was undoubtedly an element in these conversions, social and economic factors played a role as well. Social and legal relations between Muslims and non-Muslims were controlled by a set of laws called the *dhimma*; a non-Muslim member of an Islamic society was referred to as a *dhimmi*.¹⁰ *Dhimmi* were tolerated in that they were entitled to some legal protection from the government; they were allowed to practice their religion and to be governed by their own laws and customs insofar as those did not conflict with Islamic law. They were not, however, tolerated in the sense of being regarded as equals.¹¹ *Dhimmi* had a separate and clearly subordinate social and legal status. They paid a special poll tax called the *jizya*; their testimony in court carried less weight than that of Muslims; they were obliged to wear distinctive clothing and to refrain from processions or other public displays of their religion. Christians, for example, were not allowed to ring church bells. Although they were not specifically excluded from any pro-

tian family of John of Damascus had been in government service under Byzantine rule and continued in service after the Arab conquests; unlike the Barmakids, they never converted to Islam. See Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam* (Leiden, 1972).

⁹ The sources give little quantifiable information about conversion in this early period. Richard W. Bulliet makes some educated guesses about conversion rates in his *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period*. See also Nehemia Levtzion, *Conversion to Islam* (New York, 1979).

¹⁰ For a summary of Islamic law as it applies to non-Muslims, see Joseph Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 130–33. A fuller description of these laws, along with texts in translation that illustrate their application, can be found in Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi*, trans. David Maisel, Paul Fenton, and David Littman (Rutherford, 1985). An older but still useful general work on the subject is A. S. Tritton, *The Caliphs and Their Non-Muslim Subjects* (London, 1930). *Dhimmi* status was not extended to paganism, but only to those religions recognized by Muslims as monotheistic and possessing a revealed scripture. This definition was at first applied to Christians and Jews, and was later extended to Zoroastrians and some other groups. See Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton, 1984), p. 20.

¹¹ Lewis, *Jews of Islam*, pp. 3–66.

fession, *dhimmi* were technically not allowed to hold any position that would give them authority over Muslims.

Most of these regulations were enforced only sporadically. Their intent is clear, however: to remind non-Muslims of their inferior status. This purpose is especially plain in the case of rules concerning etiquette: if a Muslim and *dhimmi* meet in a narrow street, the *dhimmi* must step aside and make room for the Muslim. Although cases of large-scale violence against non-Muslims were rare in the medieval period, *dhimmi* suffered various indignities. A priest in ninth-century Cordoba, for example, complained that children delighted in singing indecent songs (*cantica inhonesta*) in his presence.¹² One motive for converting to Islam would be the understandable desire to enjoy full social and legal status in the community.

Mutual acculturation between Arabs and the conquered peoples, the need to retain non-Arabs in powerful administrative posts, and the conversion of *dhimmi* to Islam all led to the formation of a complex society in which the boundaries between Arab Muslim rulers and the subject populations were not so clearly drawn as Muhammad and his immediate successors had expected. This complexity at times sparked social tensions between Muslims and *dhimmi* and between Arabs and non-Arabs.

Information about the rate of conversion to Islam in al-Andalus is even more limited than for other Islamic societies.¹³ But although it is impossible to come to any definite conclusions about conversion in al-Andalus as a whole, Arabic and Latin sources do illuminate the process of conversion at the Islamic

¹² Eulogius of Córdoba, *Memoriale sanctorum* 1.21. Eulogius's complete works can be found in Juan Gil, *Corpus scriptorum muzarabicorum*, 2 vols. (Madrid, 1973). Eulogius also reports that in 853 the Umayyad amir Muhammad I, in response to Christian protests that had broken out in Córdoba, talked of having all male Christians put to death, but was dissuaded by an adviser (*Memoriale sanctorum* 3.7). Lewis cites an almost identical story told by a sixteenth-century archbishop of Corfu, in which the Ottoman sultan Murad III threatened to execute all the *dhimmi* under his rule, but was dissuaded by his mother and a trusted adviser (*Jews of Islam*, p. 51). Neither story can be verified through other sources, and they may in fact represent a standard motif in *dhimmi* writing.

¹³ Bulliet argues for a slow conversion rate relative to other Islamic territories. W. Montgomery Watt, *A History of Islamic Spain* (Edinburgh, 1965), suggests that people converted quite quickly. One problem in discussing conversion, especially for rural areas, is determining exactly what people were converting from; some scholars argue that most of the population held more or less pagan beliefs thinly overlaid by Christian practice. See Joyce Salisbury, *Iberian Popular Religion, 600 B.C. to 700 A.D.* (New York, 1985).

capital of Córdoba in the ninth century. The sources also tell about tensions between Córdoba's various religious and ethnic groups and about the controversies surrounding bureaucrats who were *dhimmi* or recent converts to Islam.

In 711 an invading army consisting of a small number of Muslim Arab commanders and a much larger number of recently converted Berbers moved into Spain from north Africa.¹⁴ The Visigothic rulers of Spain were, for a variety of reasons, unable to resist the invaders,¹⁵ and most of the peninsula very quickly fell to Muslim control, or more precisely to Arab Muslim control. Until 750 al-Andalus was ruled by a series of Arab governors under the loose control of the Umayyad caliphs in Damascus. When the Umayyads were overthrown by the Abbasids in 750, Umayyad supporters invited Prince Abd al-Rahman to rule in al-Andalus.¹⁶ He and his descendants ruled as amirs, and then as caliphs of al-Andalus, until 1031.

Although the Muslim invaders had little trouble establishing their rule in al-Andalus, governing the area proved to be more difficult.¹⁷ Only recently converted to Islam and mostly non-Arabic-speaking, the Berbers did not have a great deal in common with their Arab leaders, and they resented Arab privilege. They launched a series of revolts that plagued the government at Córdoba until the mid ninth century. Factionalism among the Arabs themselves was another source of trouble. Resistance from the non-Muslim population was a problem as well. Ethnic groups like the Basques had always resented centralized government (as they still do); they had resisted the Visigoths and were prepared to resist the Muslims.¹⁸ At times the very survival of a centralized Islamic government seemed in doubt.

The turning point came under the reign of the Umayyad amir

¹⁴ Evariste Lévi-Provencal, *Histoire de l'Espagne musulmane*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (Paris, 1950), 1:8–30, gives a narrative of and a list of sources pertaining to the Muslim invasion of Spain.

¹⁵ Many urban dwellers in particular disliked the Visigoths because they did nothing to facilitate trade or the development of urban areas, and because they persecuted the economically important Jewish merchants. Aloysius K. Ziegler, *Church and State in Visigothic Spain* (Washington, 1930), pp. 186–99.

¹⁶ Lévi-Provencal, *Histoire de l'Espagne musulmane*, 1:333–38.

¹⁷ Pierre Guichard, *Al-Andalus* (Barcelona, 1976), pp. 276–84, 442–57, argues that ethnic conflicts among Arabs, Berbers, and native Iberians were much more important to the early history of al-Andalus than were religious conflicts.

¹⁸ See Abilio Barbero and Marcelo Vigil, *Sobre los orígenes sociales de la Reconquista* (Barcelona, 1974), pp. 13–106.

Ahd al-Rahman II (822–52).¹⁹ Abd al-Rahman's father al-Hakam had subdued most of the provincial revolts, resulting in a corresponding increase in tax revenues. The Abbasids, who had periodically supported revolts against the Cordovan government, now faced serious problems at home and could no longer indulge in covert operations against the Umayyads. Abd al-Rahman II took advantage of this unprecedented peace and prosperity. He introduced additional and more specialized offices at court, modeling his bureaucracy after that of the Abbasids in Baghdad. He was the first amir to limit his public appearances and to adopt an elaborate court ritual, favoring the image of a distant, eastern-style ruler (the image that the Abbasids cultivated) over the more egalitarian Arab style of leadership that the Umayyads had traditionally embraced.²⁰ His reign saw the first exchange of ambassadors between Córdoba and Constantinople; the Greeks now considered the Umayyads worthy of serious attention and recognized that they would be natural allies against the Abbasids.

Abd al-Rahman II also set out to imitate the cultural sophistication of the Abbasid court at Baghdad. Poets, musicians, and philosophers frequented the Umayyad court, while the court's demand for luxury items, such as jewelry and spices, soared. Many of these commodities were brought in from the Abbasid east. At one point Abd al-Rahman purchased, at great expense, a necklace that had supposedly belonged to one of the wives of the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid.²¹ The amir was eager to import Abbasid style to Córdoba, and he was willing to pay for it. One of his most influential acquisitions was a famous singer and musician named Ziryab who had worked at the courts of both Baghdad and Kairouan.²² Ziryab arrived in al-Andalus with his family and entourage in the early 820s, an event that seems to have had as powerful an impact, if on a smaller audience, as the Beatles'

¹⁹ Lévi-Provencal, *Histoire de l'Espagne musulmane*, 1:240–73.

²⁰ The Abbasid caliphs adopted Persian court rituals and theories of absolute kingship. This type of rulership was at odds with Arab tradition, which saw the clan's leader as no more than first among equals, and it also drew objections from Muslim jurists, who stressed that the caliph must be subject to Islamic law, just like any other believer. See Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 1:280–98. A description of Cordovan court ritual in the mid ninth century, at the height of its elaboration, can be found in John, Abbot of St. Arnulf, *Vita Johannis abbatis Gorvensis*, ed. G. H. Pertz *Monumenta germaniae historica: Scriptorum* (Hanover, 1841), 4:369–77.

²¹ Lévi-Provencal, *Histoire de l'Espagne musulmane*, 1:264.

²² Al-Maqqari, *Nafh al-tib*, ed. Ihsan Abbas (Beirut, 1968), 3:122–33.

arrival in the United States. Ziryab changed the musical tastes of the Cordovan elite. He also introduced them to deodorant, laundry whiteners, and new, more elaborate styles of dress; his hairstyle was widely adopted and became a badge of good taste among courtiers. Ziryab, who was an educated man as well as an arbiter of style, also popularized the notion that a courtier should be well read in a variety of fields.

The mid ninth century, then, was a time in which the bureaucracy and court ritual at Córdoba were being developed and elaborated, and in which the Muslim leadership was working to transform what had been a provincial capital into an international center of Islamic culture. It was also a time of great friction between Muslims and Christians.

The 850s were the decade of the so-called martyrs of Córdoba.²³ Between 850 and 859 the Muslim high judge, or *qadi*, ordered the execution of fifty Christians. They were executed on two different types of charges. Most of the fifty were accused of publicly making insulting remarks about the prophet Muhammad, denouncing him as a liar and a madman, or of openly preaching the doctrines of Christianity. A Christian showing disrespect for Islam in these ways was subject to the death penalty.²⁴ A few of those executed came from Muslim or partially Muslim families, and were therefore considered legally Muslim by the Islamic government; these people were executed as apostates to Christianity. Most of the martyrs (as some of their Christian contemporaries called them) deliberately invited execution by walking into the *qadi*'s court and denouncing Muhammad or by preaching the gospel in Córdoba's central mosque. About half of those killed were clergy or were living under a monastic vow at the time of their deaths. This movement was not, however, confined to monks, nuns, and clergy, groups one might expect to be particularly hostile to Islam. It included a soldier in the amir's army, former civil servants of the Islamic government, and children of Muslim parents. The government, in response to these

²³ The main sources for the martyrs' movement are Paul Albar, *Indiculus luminosus* and *Vita Eulogii*; Eulogius of Córdoba, *Documentum martyriale*, *Liber apologeticus martyrum*, and *Memoriale sanctorum*. Recent editions of these works can be found in Gil, *Corpus scriptorum muzarabicorum*. The Arabic sources, unfortunately, refer only indirectly to the martyrs.

²⁴ Not all schools of Islamic law demand the death penalty for a first offense, but all agree that criticism of Islam on the part of a *dhimmi* is a serious crime. Lewis, *Jews of Islam*, pp. 39-41.

acts of public disobedience, enforced legal restrictions on *dhimmi* more strictly than was apparently usual, and may even have threatened violence against Christians.²⁵

Given the diverse nature of the martyrs as a group, it is difficult to arrive at any simple explanation for their actions. The difficulty is made worse by the limitations of the sources describing the movement. Paul Albar and Eulogius of Córdoba, the two contemporaries who left accounts of the martyrs, were Christians who clearly despised Islam and were interested in writing persuasive anti-Islamic polemic; their interpretation of events must therefore be accepted only with caution.²⁶ But although the precise motives of the individuals who were executed will remain unknown, both Albar and Eulogius make clear how they understood the martyrs' movement. Both authors returned time and again to their belief that Cordovan Christians were converting to Islam at an alarming rate, and that even those who remained Christian were becoming increasingly assimilated to Islamic culture. They lament how young Christian men had abandoned the study of Latin letters in favor of Arabic, and how even those who had not formally converted behaved like Muslims and sought jobs at the court. Albar and Eulogius understood the martyrs' actions as a protest against conversion and assimilation, and as a warning to other Christians that unless they resisted such trends vigorously, their religion and culture would be absorbed by Islam.

Although Albar and Eulogius were biased observers, their concerns about conversion and assimilation seem credible, given that they were writing just as the Islamic court was undergoing its bureaucratic and cultural flowering. The Islamic court now had two things to offer: jobs in the civil service, and access to a rich cultural life. Generally in the Islamic world, these opportunities were available not only to Muslims but also to Christian and Jewish men of talent and education who were willing to make certain accommodations to Islamic culture.²⁷ It seems likely that such

²⁵ See note 10 above.

²⁶ Recent secondary works addressing these problems include Edward P. Colbert, *The Martyrs of Córdoba (850–859): A Study of the Sources* (Washington, 1962); Jessica Coope, "Muslim-Christian Relations in Ninth-Century Córdoba," diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1988; Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *Christian Martyrs in Muslim Spain* (Cambridge, 1988); and James Waltz, "The Significance of the Voluntary Martyrs of Ninth-Century Cordoba," *Muslim World* 60 (1970): 143–59, 226–36.

²⁷ Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 2:374–80, suggests that *dhimmi* found places in government because many Muslims saw government jobs as undesirable; such positions were often precarious and left one vulnerable to the ruler's whims.

incentives led to increased assimilation to Islamic culture and a growing number of conversions to Islam among Christians in Córdoba. Arabic sources also offer some confirmation that Christians and former Christians were employed at court.²⁸

The attractiveness of Islamic culture in the mid ninth century and the incentives to convert to Islam raised several related questions for Cordovan society: What exactly did it mean to convert to Islam? What did it mean to be a Muslim? Or for that matter, what did it mean to be a Christian? The answers to these questions about religious identity were not as clear-cut as one might suppose. The most obvious response to the first question is that one ceased to be a Christian and began to be a Muslim by passing through a formal ritual of conversion. In the case of Islam this meant the recitation before witnesses of the *shahada*, Islam's most basic profession of belief in a single god and in the prophecy of Muhammad; "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his prophet." Neither the Christian nor the Muslim sources, however, focus on such decisive moments of conversion. Authors of both faiths were more interested in the whole constellation of attitudes and practices that Christian and formerly Christian men had to adopt in order to be successful at the Islamic court. It is in connection with these cultural adaptations that questions arose as to the precise meaning of Muslim or Christian identity.

Islam, like Judaism, is centered on an extensive law code, the Sharia, which regulates many aspects of the believer's life, from prayer to family life to conduct in the marketplace. Christians who converted to Islam were expected to adopt all aspects of Islamic practice. Even men who remained Christian, however, could not hope for serious advancement at the Islamic court unless they followed enough of the Sharia to avoid giving offense to Muslims. Muslims were particularly sensitive about violations of food and hygiene laws. A Christian source from the tenth century reports that Muslims at the palace refused to work with men who did not respect Muslim food restrictions or who were uncircumcised. The fact that a man was a Christian was not necessarily a problem for Muslims, but a Christian who was physically polluted by the eating of pork or by not being circumcised was intolerable.²⁹ Christians who opposed assimilation focused on the issue of circumcision as much as Muslims did, and they were

²⁸ See the story of Ibn Antonian, below.

²⁹ John, Abbot of St. Arnulf, *Vita Johannis*, p. 372.

deeply offended by Christians who made this concession to Islamic culture. One anti-assimilationist Christian gives a graphic account of how painful and difficult the operation was when performed on a middle-aged Christian courtier.³⁰ The author's account suggests the almost physical loathing he felt for Muslims and assimilated Christians. It also supports the testimony of other sources that Christians were under pressure to become circumcised if they wished to remain at court; the operation was not one an adult would undertake lightly.

This preoccupation with circumcision is interesting in that circumcision is not a major issue in the scripture of either Christianity or Islam. New Testament references to circumcision occur in Paul's letters, and although Paul considered it to be unnecessary, he by no means forbade it.³¹ Circumcision receives correspondingly scant attention in Islamic scripture. The Qur'an does not mention it at all, while the Hadith refer to it only briefly as a desirable practice, along with keeping one's nails trimmed.³² Cordovan Muslims appear to have passed over other, more basic aspects of Islamic law. For example, both Qur'an and Hadith strictly forbid the consumption of alcohol, yet there is no evidence that any person was ever dismissed from the court for drunkenness.³³ Circumcision may have seemed particularly important in a pluralistic society like that of Córdoba, as it created a visible and permanent mark on the body showing where one's cultural loyalties lay.

The men who worked with a Christian courtier knew that he was a Christian, no matter how meticulously he followed certain Muslim practices. In the context of more casual social contacts, however, many Christians in Córdoba, whether or not they worked at the court, "passed" as Muslims. Such passing took different forms. In some cases, Christians did not actually claim to

³⁰ Samson of Córdoba, *Apologeticus* 2, pref., 3, in Gil, *Corpus scriptorum muzarabicorum*.

³¹ Acts 15:1–5, 16:3; 1 Cor. 7:18; Rom. 2:25–29.

³² "Circumcision (*khitān*)," in C. E. Bosworth, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden, 1960), 5:20–22.

³³ Samson, *Apologeticus* 2, pref., 2, accuses courtiers of participating in wild drinking parties. As an anti-assimilationist Christian, Samson is not an objective source of information, but Islamic court culture in this period did encourage practices that were not always compatible with Islamic law. The ninth-century Abbasid court poetry of Abu Nuwas, for example, celebrated wine drinking and homosexual love.

be Muslims, but dressed and behaved in such a way that they could not readily be identified as *dhimmi*. As one Christian source reported, "They do not fortify themselves with the sign of the cross when they yawn" or make any statements about religion that would identify them as Christians.³⁴ In 851, according to this same source, a Christian merchant named John was severely beaten by a crowd of Muslim merchants for swearing by the name of Muhammad: "You often take our prophet's name in vain, thinking little of him, and to people who do not know you are a Christian you often confirm your lies [about your merchandise] with oaths of our religion, even though you believe them to be false."³⁵ This anecdote suggests that passing oneself off as a Muslim was a fairly common practice, albeit one that could lead to trouble. It also suggests that the dress code prescribed by the *dhimma* was not consistently enforced, so that men like John did not stand out as Christians to the casual observer.

A different form of passing was practiced by Christians who were children of mixed marriages. Islamic law permits mixed marriages, although only between a Muslim man and a *dhimmi* woman. Children of such a union must be raised as Muslims; the child of a Muslim father who follows another faith is guilty of apostasy, a capital offense.³⁶ Many children of mixed marriages in Córdoba, however, were secretly Christian, because of their mother's influence or perhaps because their fathers were themselves recent converts to Islam and still had ties to Christian family members. To avoid charges of apostasy, these people led a double life, appearing in public as Muslims but secretly practicing Christianity at home.³⁷

Christians in ninth-century Córdoba disagreed about the morality of such accommodations to Islamic culture. Most Christians seem to have regarded some degree of cultural accommoda-

³⁴ Albar, *Indiculus luminosus* 9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁶ Islamic law generally assumes that the father determines the religion of his children, so that the children of a Muslim father and a *dhimmi* mother would be legally obliged to practice Islam. The eighth-century jurist al-Shaybani implied that if either parent is Muslim, the child must practice Islam or be considered an apostate. His arguments appear in *The Islamic Law of Nations*, trans. Majid Khadduri (Baltimore, 1966), pp. 195–229.

³⁷ We know about some of these children of mixed marriages because they were in fact convicted of apostasy and died as martyrs. Eulogius describes such cases of apostasy in *Memoriale sanctorum* 2.7, 2.8, 2.10.

tion as acceptable. Merchants like John saw no reason to draw attention to their second-class status as *dhimmi*. Many Christians believed that Islam and Christianity were not fundamentally all that different. They argued that both Muslims and Christians “worship God and the law,” and that Islam, like Christianity, is “a cult of the true God.”³⁸ Accepting some aspects of Islamic culture was simply a question of common sense or good manners and had no serious religious implications.

Other Christians, however—notably those who became martyrs or were associated with them—saw the practices of passing for Muslim or conforming to Islamic law as deeply significant, perhaps even as acts of apostasy. At the base of these differing opinions lay fundamental questions about what it meant to be a Christian. If a man became circumcised, kept Islamic food laws, and worked among Muslims all day, being careful not to give offense or mention his own religious views, was he still a Christian? What if he allowed customers and casual acquaintances to believe he was a Muslim? Finally, what about the man who actively declared to the world that he was a Muslim, yet in his heart thought of himself as a Christian? In what sense was he a Christian?

The answer given by those involved in the martyrs’ movement was that such individuals were not true Christians. Several of the martyrs were executed as apostates rather than for preaching against Islam; these martyrs were offspring of mixed marriages who decided that it was sinful to hide their true beliefs, and who made public professions of Christianity.³⁹ While most Christians were prepared to accept the ambiguities associated with negotiating a course between Christian and Islamic Córdoba, there was a small but vocal minority who preferred death to an uncertain religious identity.

Questions about the relationship between public and private religious identity may have arisen for Christians partly because of their perceptions of Islam. The Islam that Christians saw in Córdoba was a religion of public life, of the court. It was the set of cultural and social skills that were needed in order to be successful. Christians seemed unaware that there could be a more inward-looking, private side to Muslim piety; and indeed, the great courts of the Islamic world have not traditionally cultivated the Islam of

³⁸ Eulogius, *Apologeticus martyrum* 12.

³⁹ Albar, *Indiculus luminosus* 9.

the sufis. This association of Islam with public life explains why, according to Christian sources, it was young men and not women who were converting to Islam. Women were not competing for success in the public arena and therefore did not have the same incentives as men to conform to the religion of the rulers.⁴⁰ The public nature of Islam in Córdoba may also have prompted Christians to think about their own religion in the same terms. Perhaps Christianity could not be defined by purely private, even secret worship. Perhaps it needed to be part of the believer's public life as well, as Islam so clearly was for Muslim believers.

Passing as Muslim and conforming to Islamic law were forms of accommodation to Islamic culture that were of particular concern to radical Christians, who saw such practices as nothing less than apostasy. Another type of accommodation that raised questions about religious identity for both Christians and Muslims was the adoption of Arab culture by Christians and former Christians.

One of the major indicators of status at court was the extent to which one could claim to be Arab (as opposed to simply Muslim). Being Arab in ninth-century Córdoba was partly a question of blood, meaning that people who could trace their lineage back to aristocratic Arab families enjoyed a certain social precedence.⁴¹ Cultural factors were at least as important as blood, however: High status at court was linked to the ability to speak and write Arabic well and to a knowledge of Arabic literature, both sacred and secular.

Skill in Arabic language and letters did not always follow religious or ethnic lines. Not all Muslims knew Arabic well. Arab Muslims who came from particularly old and respected families made a point of importing Arab women to many and of speaking

⁴⁰ More generally, Cordovan Muslim society seems to have put less pressure on Christian women to convert because women's religious beliefs were not regarded as terribly important. According to Eulogius's biographical sketches of the martyrs, Christian women married to Muslims often remained Christian, and the daughters of such marriages were often allowed to practice Christianity as well, although this technically made them apostates. They were charged with apostasy only when they drew public attention to their religious beliefs. See Eulogius, *Memoriale sanctorum* 2.7, 2.8. One daughter of a predominantly Muslim Arab family was even a nun; she too was eventually executed as an apostate. See *ibid.*, 3.17.

⁴¹ Even Eulogius, who presumably despised all aspects of Arab culture, noted with pride that one of the women martyrs came from an old and distinguished Arab family. See Eulogius, *Memoriale sanctorum* 3.17.

only Arabic,⁴² but these aristocratic Arabs never constituted more than a small minority within the Muslim population of al-Andalus. Much of the original invading force had been made up of non-Arabic-speaking Berbers; native Iberians who converted after the invasion also did not speak Arabic. One Arabic chronicle commended an Iberian Muslim religious leader as a fine, devout Muslim, but ridiculed his inability to employ the Arabic definite article correctly, a common problem for those who learn Arabic as a second language.⁴³ On the other hand, one did not need to be either a Muslim or of Arab descent to be skilled at Arabic letters; both the Latin and Arabic sources mention *dhimmi* and converts at court who were celebrated for their linguistic abilities.⁴⁴ Any young man who wanted a career in government, regardless of his religious or ethnic background, was well advised to begin studying Arabic at an early age.⁴⁵

Radical Christians condemned Christians who studied Arabic, just as they condemned those who adopted Muslim practices. Christian authors who supported the martyrs' movement complained about young men who chose to devote themselves to Arabic rather than Latin letters, as in this passage:

What trained person, I ask, can be found today among our laity who with a knowledge of Holy Scripture looks into the Latin volumes of any of the doctors? . . . Do not all the Christian youths, handsome in appearance, fluent of tongue, conspicuous in their dress and action, distinguished for their knowledge of Gentile lore, highly regarded for their ability to speak Arabic, do they not all eagerly use the volumes of the Chaldeans, read them with the greatest interest, discuss them ardently, and collecting them with great trouble, make them known with every praise of their tongue, the while they are ignorant of the beauty of the Church and look

⁴² For a discussion of languages in al-Andalus, see Julián Ribera y Tarragó, *Disertaciones y opúsculos* (Madrid, 1928), 1:27–56.

⁴³ Al-Khushani, *Kitāb al-quḍāt bi Qurtuba*, ed. and trans. Julian Ribera y Tarragó (Madrid, 1914), pp. 24–26, 161–63 (text), and 31–33, 200–202 (translation).

⁴⁴ Eulogius, *Memoriale sanctorum* 1, pref., 2.2. See also the story of Ibn Antonian below.

⁴⁵ As in the case of religious conversion to Islam, it was young men, not women, who were pressured to study Arabic. Eulogius tells us that the martyr Aurelius, a secret Christian from a religiously mixed family, was pressured by his Muslim relatives to begin studying Arabic letters at a young age. See Eulogius, *Memoriale sanctorum* 2.10.

with disgust upon the Church's rivers of paradise as something vile?⁴⁶

Such authors were concerned not only that Christians would abandon their religion, but also that they would reject the entire western, Latin literary tradition in favor of Arabic letters.

This concern about the fate of Latin letters was justified. Descendants of the original invaders, especially those who intermarried with native Iberian families, adopted Romance as the informal spoken language of the home and marketplace; Romance was also, naturally, the first spoken language of Iberian converts to Islam.⁴⁷ Latin, however, was never adopted as a vehicle of Islamic thought. The linguistic situation of al-Andalus was therefore quite different from that of Persia, where the Arab invaders also encountered an ancient literary tradition. Arabic was the dominant language of high culture throughout the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, but by the eighth century, Persian poetry, fables, and treatises on government were being translated into Arabic, and they strongly influenced Abbasid court literature. After the collapse of Abbasid power in the tenth century, an Arabic-influenced form of the Persian language became a vehicle for Islamic culture, both religious and secular.⁴⁸

This adaptation of the indigenous literary tradition to Islamic needs never took place in al-Andalus. Latin letters at the time of the Muslim invasion were too restricted to Christian liturgical uses to be of much interest to Muslims. Outside the church, Latin high culture was not firmly entrenched; classical traditions had been weakened by the centuries between the fall of the western Roman empire and the Arab invasions.⁴⁹ In Persia, the popula-

⁴⁶ Albar, *Indiculus luminosus* 35; translation by Colbert, *Martyrs of Córdoba*, p. 301.

⁴⁷ See note 37 above. Al-Khushani described a case in which a speaker of Romance (*ajamī al-lisān*) brought a complaint before the amir's officials, so Romance was apparently known at court. See Al-Khushani, *Kitāb al-quḍāt*, pp. 94–97 (text), 116–19 (translation).

⁴⁸ Pahlavi, the ancient literary form of Persian, became restricted to Zoroastrian liturgical uses after the Muslim invasion. The new Persian literary language that eventually emerged was Dari; originally a southwestern dialect, it spread throughout the Persian world and became an important language of high culture in the tenth century. Dari was written in Arabic script and was influenced by Arabic syntax and loan words. Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 1:280–314; Lapidus, *History of Islamic Societies*, pp. 91–92, 152–61; "Iran, Literature," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 4: 52–75.

⁴⁹ Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam*, pp. 114–15.

tion's conversion to Islam did not mean the end of the indigenous high cultural tradition. In al-Andalus, it did.⁵⁰ For Christians who knew and cared about the Latin literary tradition, language became a symbol of cultural loyalty, much like circumcision. A true Christian studied Latin; a man who studied Arabic had gone over to the enemy.

The radical minority of Christians associated with the martyrs' moment believed that one's religion and one's culture in a broader sense must be congruent: a man could not be an expert at Arabic letters and still be a good Christian. For most Cordovan Christians, however, and for the Muslims, the relationship between cultural and religious groups was still being established. A further question for Muslims was the degree to which blood determined a person's identity as an Arab and as a Muslim.

The complexities of these issues are illustrated by the career of Amr Ibn Abd-Allah, who during the reign of the amir Muhammad I (852–86) twice held the position of *qadi*, the highest religious office in Córdoba.⁵¹ Amr was from an Iberian Muslim family and was, according to one source, the first non-Arab to hold the office of *qadi*.⁵² Both terms ended with his being deposed from office, the first time because he ruled against the interests of a powerful courtier named Hashim Ibn Abd al-Aziz, the second time for theft and accepting bribes.⁵³ Long before any rumors of graft or theft merged, however, Amr's appointment was opposed by Córdoba's prominent Arab families, who were uncomfortable with the idea of a non-Arab *qadi*. Many said that it was acceptable for him to carry out his legal duties as *qadi*—which consisted of settling legal disputes on the basis of the Sharia—but that they did not believe he was qualified to lead the community in prayer during Friday services at the mosque.

⁵⁰ Although Latin literature did not influence Islamic court literature, Romance poetry influenced two forms of Arabic poetry: the *zajal*, written in colloquial Arabic, and the more formal *muwashshahat*. See Emilio García Gómez, *Poemas arábigoandaluces* (Madrid, 1940); James Monroe, "Kharjas in Arabic and Romance," in Alfred Welch and Pierre Cachia, eds., *Islam: Past Influence and Present Challenge* (Edinburgh, 1979); Alan Jones, "Sunbeams from Cucumbers? An Arabist's Assessment of the State of Kharja Studies," *La Corónica* 10 (1981): 38–53.

⁵¹ Al-Khushani, *Kitāb al-quḍāt*, pp. 117–26, 141–45 (text), 144–55, 175–77 (translation); Ibn al-Qutiyya, *Tarīkh iftitāh al-Andalus*, ed. Ibrahim al-Abyari (Cairo and Beirut, 1982), pp. 86–88.

⁵² Ibn al-Outiyya, *Tarīkh iftitāh al-Andalus*, p. 88.

⁵³ Al-Khushani describes the conflict with Hashim; Ibn al-Qutiyya refers only to the charge of theft.

Until Amr was charged with various unethical activities late in his second term, everyone seemed to believe that he was a devout Muslim and an expert in Islamic jurisprudence. Yet he was not quite a proper Muslim in Arab eyes, not quite the sort of person who should be entrusted with the community's spiritual well-being. Behind the spiritual question may lie a social issue. At Friday prayer, the *qadi* acts as the imam. His position is at the head of the congregation, and he acts as a model for the other believers to follow in prayer. The Arabs voiced their objections to Amr's role as leader of prayer by saying, "We will not pray behind him."⁵⁴ They may have found it socially embarrassing to pray behind and thus show deference to a non-Arab in a public setting. This sense on the part of the Arab elite that Amr was not really one of them probably contributed to his downfall as much as did any criminal charges or conflicts with courtiers.

Ambiguities of culture, religion, and blood are illustrated most dramatically by the career of a civil servant at Córdoba known in the Arabic sources as Ibn Antonian.⁵⁵ Ibn Antonian was a Christian who converted to Islam and an Iberian who identified himself completely with Arab culture. His career demonstrates both the extent to which a talented and ambitious man could manipulate his cultural identity in ninth-century Córdoba and the limitations to such change.

Ibn Antonian is mentioned in both Latin and Arabic sources, suggesting that his story was of interest to Christians and Muslims alike. Still a Christian when he entered government service, he quickly rose to a high position. The sources agree that his swift promotion was a result of his intelligence and linguistic abilities. He was renowned for his elegant style in both written and spoken Arabic, and he also knew Latin well enough to act as the Muslim government's correspondent with European princes.⁵⁶ During the reign of Muhammad I, he converted to Islam. According to the Arabic sources, he converted because the amir made it known

⁵⁴ Al-Khushani, *Kitāb al-quḍāt*, pp. 117–18 (text), 144 (translation).

⁵⁵ Ibn Anionian's story appears in Ibn Hayyan, *Al-Muqtabis min anbā' ahl al-Andalus*, ed. Mahmud Ali Makki (Beirut, 1973), pp. 138–42; Ibn al-Qutiyya, *Tarikh iftī-tāh al-Andalus*, pp. 95–98; al-Khushani, *Kitāb al-quḍāt*, pp. 130–34 (text), 159–64 (translation). The Latin sources do not mention him by name, but he is probably the government official and recent convert to Islam whom Eulogius described as the *exceptor rei publicae*. See Eulogius, *Memoriale sanctorum* 2.15,3.2.

⁵⁶ Medieval Islamic governments generally employed *dhimmi* or recent converts as translators between Islamic and western languages. Most Muslims regarded the study of non-Islamic languages as demeaning. See Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (New York and London, 1982), pp. 71–88.

that he favored Ibn Antonian for the office of chief administrator (*al-katib-al-azim*) but was not willing to promote a *dhimmi* to such a high position. According to a Latin source, he converted at the height of the martyrs' movement because Muhammad I indicated that he could no longer tolerate *dhimmi* at court.⁵⁷ Whatever his reasons, Ibn Antonian converted to Islam, and he became head of the Umayyad bureaucracy.

The degree of Ibn Antonian's assimilation to Arab culture is illustrated by the way he is described in the Arabic chronicles. The chronicler al-Khushani generally used the word *ajami* to refer to a Christian. *Ajami* is, strictly speaking, a broad cultural rather than religious designation; it means someone who is not an Arabic speaker and by extension someone who is not culturally an Arab. In the eastern Islamic lands it referred to a Persian speaker, in al-Andalus to a speaker of Romance. Even when referring to the time before his conversion, however, al-Khushani never described Ibn Antonian as an *ajami*, but always as a *nasrani*, a Nazarene. He was a Christian, but he could not be labeled as a nonspeaker of Arabic.

Ibn Antonian's conversion went smoothly at first. He was no doubt circumcised and willing to conform to relevant aspects of Islamic practice even before his formal conversion. He had also mastered the Arabic language and other aspects of Arab culture. When pressed by circumstances, he completed the process of conversion with a formal profession of Islam. This conversion led to a high position in the Islamic government.

As soon as he became chief administrator, however, Ibn Antonian became the object of considerable suspicion. Two accusations were leveled against him: that he was not really an Arab, and that he was not really a Muslim. The same Hashim who caused so many problems for Amr Ibn Abd-allah attempted to discredit Ibn Antonian. Hashim, who prided himself on his Arab lineage, complained to Muhammad I that it was unseemly for a non-Arab to hold such a high post.⁵⁸ Other courtiers complained that Ibn Anto-

⁵⁷ Eulogius, *Memoriale sanctorum* 3.2. Because Islamic law does not, strictly speaking, permit *dhimmi* in positions of power, *dhimmi* bureaucrats were subject to occasional purges throughout the Islamic world in this period. Jean Maurice Fiey, *Chrétiens syriaques sous les Abbassides* (Louvain, 1980), pp. 26–28, 30–39, gives examples of mass dismissals of *dhimmi* from the Abbasid government.

⁵⁸ Ignoring Ibn Antonian's conversion, Hashim suggested that the Umayyads would be objects of ridicule at the Abbasid court in Baghdad because they had appointed a Christian to such a high post. Hashim was playing on the Umayyad leadership's tears that the Abbasids would see them as provincial. Ibn al-Qutiyya, *Tarikh iftitāh al-Andalus*, p. 96.

nian's conversion had been a ruse, and that he continued to practice Christianity in secret. The amir eventually dismissed him on the basis of these accusations. Even after Ibn Antonian died, Hashim sought to discredit his former colleague. He found numerous witnesses who testified that Ibn Antonian had died professing Christianity, which would have made him an apostate and caused his property to go to the state treasury rather than to his family.

Ibn Antonian's career suggests that a Christian or former Christian could rise to a certain status within the Islamic power structure without undue problems, provided that he possessed fluency in Arabic and excellent social skills. Above a certain level, though, being a non-Arab and a recent convert could become a heavy liability. Still, Ibn Antonian continued to enjoy some support among the Cordovan elite even after his dismissal. Many courtiers disliked Hashim and saw him as an opportunist who wanted the position of chief administrator for himself; for every witness Hashim produced saying that Ibn Antonian died a Christian, another would testify that he was a devout Muslim, testimony that ultimately led the *qadi* to allow the family to inherit.⁵⁹ Muslims, like Christians, seem to have held a variety of opinions as to the meaning of cultural and religious conversion.

The careers of Ibn Antonian and Amr Ibn Abd-Allah raised troubling questions for Muslims: Were converts equal to other Muslims? Could they hold positions of authority? What constituted a true conversion? Was Ibn Antonian's conversion too closely tied to his political ambitions, even for the practical, career-oriented Umayyad court? What made a man an Arab? Was it a question of cultural literacy, blood, or both? Were Arabs better Muslims than non-Arabs? Were Arabs uniquely qualified for positions of authority?

The legal status of converts was clarified quite early in the history of Islam. In the seventh century, Arab rulers attempted to maintain the link between Arab and Muslim identity. To convert to Islam, a non-Arab had to become the *mawla*, or client, of an Arab tribe, a position that implied second-class status. By the early decades of the eighth century, however, this situation had begun to change, and under the rule of the Umayyad caliph Umar II (717–20), non-Arab Muslims were granted a legal and fiscal sta-

⁵⁹ Only al-Khushani describes Hashim's suit against Ibn Antonian's estate.

tus more or less equal to that of Arab Muslims.⁶⁰ The goal of equality for converts was furthered when the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyads in 750. Because their core of support lay in Khurasan, among converts and among Arab Muslims who had assimilated to the local culture, the Abbasids promoted the ideal of an empire based on allegiance to Islam and not on Arab ethnicity.⁶¹

Questions about Arab supremacy in government and society were not entirely laid to rest by these legal decrees or by the Abbasid revolution. The Umayyad caliphs gave Islamic government a decidedly Arab stamp, for example, by promoting Arabic as the exclusive language of government.⁶² Despite Abbasid policy favoring equality among all believers, Arabic continued to be the language of government and culture at the Abbasid court. In the long run, the spread of Islam to non-Arab peoples made it inevitable that Muslim identity would cease to be equated with Arab identity. After the collapse of Abbasid power in the tenth century, Persian became an acceptable vehicle of Islamic culture; with the Turkish invasions of the tenth and eleventh centuries the tradition of Arab dominance in government ended.⁶³ In the ninth century, though, these issues had not yet been completely settled.

They were probably further from being settled in al-Andalus than in the Abbasid empire. This was in part because Spain did not have as widespread and entrenched an indigenous high culture as did Persia, so that a challenge to Arab cultural supremacy was less feasible. Furthermore, there was no Abbasid revolution in al-Andalus. The Umayyads came to power in al-Andalus on the basis of aristocratic Arab support and thus had less reason than the Abbasids to promote an ideal of equality among all believers. Finally, al-Andalus, despite the amir's efforts to import culture, was still the provinces. Cordovans were the last to learn how to arrange their hair, and they also lagged behind in their efforts to settle these difficult questions of cultural and religious identity.

Conversion to Islam in ninth-century Córdoba, and the tensions that accompanied it, can be understood as part of a process that was taking place throughout the Islamic world. As the rulers

⁶⁰ Lapidus, *History of Islamic Societies*, pp. 45–53.

⁶¹ M. A. Shaban, *The Abbasid Revolution* (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 138–68.

⁶² Abd al-Malik (692–705) and al-Walid I (705–15) in particular promoted Arabic as the language of government and public life. See Shaban, *Islamic History*, pp. 100–126.

⁶³ Lapidus, *History of Islamic Societies*, pp. 126–61.

of a multicultural empire, Muslims were struggling to define what it meant to be a Muslim and to determine what the roles of Arab Muslims, converts, and *dhimmi* ought to be in an Islamic society. At the same time, certain characteristics specific to ninth-century al-Andalus—in particular the insecure position of Latin high culture and the continued high status attached to being an Arab—help account for the confusion, discomfort, and anger that Muslims and Christians alike clearly felt when faced with questions of cultural and religious identity.