



The Ornament of the World

In the history of al-Andalus, there seems to be a surprising correlation between rising political disunity (following the dissolution of the Caliphate) and rising cultural florescence. Why might this be? And can you think of other, analogous examples from world history, or the present day?

What role does language play in the history of Al-Andalusian culture? What is a “Mozarab”? What is “Judeo-Arabic”? And what implications do these terms have for the way we think about identity, ethnicity, and language in modern times?

What do you think about Menocal’s insistence on the “uniqueness” of the culture of tolerance of Andalus? Is it convincing, or overstated? What was it based upon? What lessons, if any, does it hold for issues of tolerance and coexistence in the contemporary world?

While there is a tendency to see Muslims, Christians, and Jews as stable, internally coherent communities in interaction with one another, Menocal’s book sheds light on tensions, rivalries, and divisions *within* each of these communities. What were some of these divisions, how did they change over time, and what implications did they hold for relations between faiths?

For those of you already familiar with one or more of the great literary classics discussed in this book (*El Cid*, *Don Quixote*, *The Song of Roland*), did Menocal’s portrayal change your understanding of those works, and, if so, in what way?