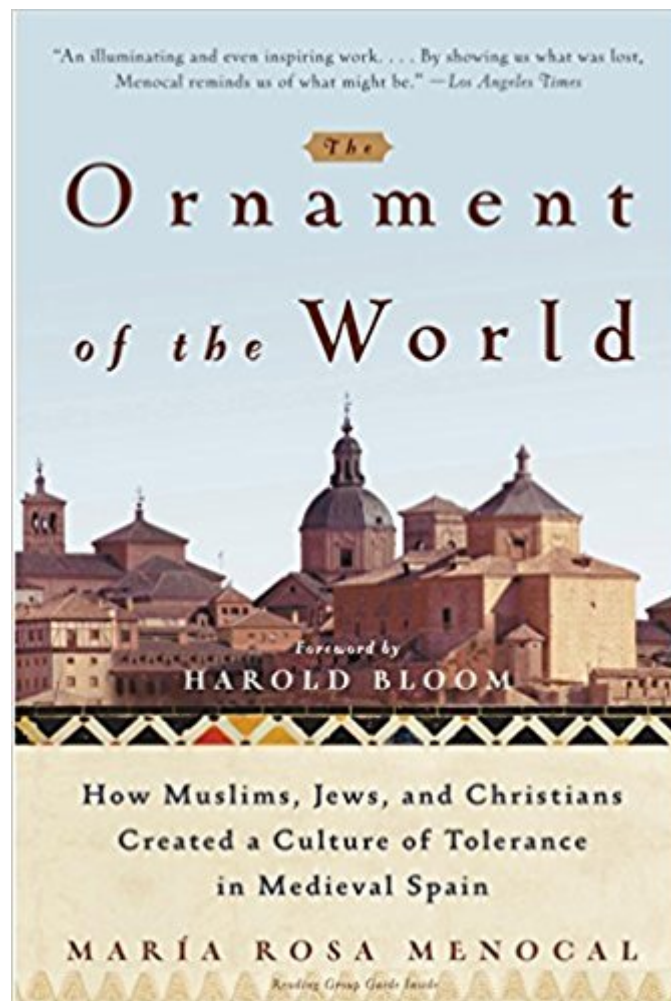


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# The Ornament Of The World: How Muslims, Jews And Christians Created A Culture Of Tolerance In Medieval Spain



## Synopsis

Widely hailed as a revelation of a "lost" golden age, this history brings to vivid life the rich and thriving culture of medieval Spain where, for more than seven centuries, Muslims, Jews, and Christians lived together in an atmosphere of tolerance, and literature, science, and the arts flourished. of photos. 3 maps.

## Book Information

Paperback: 315 pages

Publisher: Back Bay Books; Reprint edition (April 2003)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0316168718

ISBN-13: 978-0316168717

Product Dimensions: 8.2 x 1 x 5.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 8.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

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## Customer Reviews

I enjoyed this book. From my limited understanding of the time period and my inability to read history (facts after facts never interest me... the human element, devoid of many historical accounts, does...), I have read the positive reviews and the negatives. I can understand either. I will say this book is a great introduction. It is romantic, an account of a world seen with Rosy-Tinted Scholarly eyes. Perhaps it is not going to be the greatest book for the nitpicking historians - and hey, I can see their point - but it is a good place to start, to know the names, the dates, and some of the scenery. I wish more history books were like this. What is 'history' - a story... the word is there within the greater word most scholars will defend, arguing our need to be objective and search for the facts ('just the facts, 'mam'). But isn't that life, "stories" interweaving, facts important sidenotes to the human element. I respect this work because it has introduced me to a world I have heard about before. It will be my choice to move on further and read other works. Those who have written their one-star reviews have their point. There is a lot missing here. I don't doubt it. But if a work of history introduces and inspires curiosity, is that a bad thing? Ideals are ideals and ideally, this isn't meant for the historian but for the layman. I am a layman, I enjoyed it. If you're looking for an introduction to

a fascinating time in Spanish/Western history, this is a fine place to start. I don't know enough to squabble over details or put the author down for 'misreading' history. I'll simply say, Menocal has written a story about a time and place. Her writing is infused with melancholy and wonder, looking back to the golden aspects of a time believed to be harmonious.

My wife and I have a home in Andalusia. We also are enthusiastic but 'minor' league students of Moorish & Jewish history in Spain. So I bought this book as a easy-to-please, generalist and wanna-be fan. Unfortunately, this book comes up light on two levels: the lack of new insights and the lack of sharp writing spoils the book for me. For example, Menocal provides few new revelations about the role of Moors and Jews in Medieval Spain. Her book also lacks good story telling on the major figures and thought leaders of this 700-year period. I found Menocal's analysis sharp and able, but sometimes overdone. And like too many academics, Menocal is neither a good storyteller nor writer. More broadly, the fundamental premise of the book: That Arabs, Jews and Christians lived peacefully under Moorish rule, is more romantic than true. Except for a very brief period of 50 or so years around 900 AD, there was more persecution than tolerance over the 700 year Moorish period. Ask the Jews of Granada that were slaughtered in 1066, or the thousands of Christians who were deported by the Almoravid dynasty to Morocco as slaves in 1126. During the same period, it is well known the Berbers of Northern Africa would frequently pillage Spain, robbing Andalusian Arabs and Christians alike. Later, of course, a united Christian Spain would deport the heavily taxed and persecuted Moors in 1492; some authorities report Muslims were forced to leave their children behind as slaves for the Christian Monarchs to work in various trades. I believe the book's only bright light is an interesting and original tale about how the enlightened Arabs and Jews of the period translated and preserved some of the world's best literature and science thought lost after the fall of Rome and Greece.

Not a history in the traditional sense, "The Ornament of the World" presents a number of biographical vignettes displaying the richness of literature, art, science, and philosophy in both al-Andalus and Christian Spain and how this intellectual renaissance resulted from the blending of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian heritages. The stories are valuable and fascinating because they rescue an important legacy from the oblivion of the ill-named "Dark Ages." Unfortunately, this rescue mission is hindered by an ill-conceived and even more poorly executed thesis. One of the major problems with Menocal's work is that she never tells us what she means by "a culture of tolerance." It is an odd and ambiguous phrase containing two very loaded words. Does "culture" refer to artistic

and intellectual life, or to the religious, political, and social climate, or to the entire civilization and its customs and mores? Does "tolerance" merely mean mutual influence (in literature and art) or, more broadly, social acceptance (in everyday life)? On the one hand, the phrase "culture of tolerance" could signify the artistic and intellectual life created by the mixture of three religious heritages. On the other hand, it could mean a climate of economic acceptance and social open-mindedness. Or it could mean something in between: that the fusion of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish traditions resulted from (or perhaps resulted in) a more "tolerant" society. That the Iberian peninsula experienced an unprecedented tri-cultural fusion during the medieval period is nearly incontrovertible. Al-Andalus (as well as parts of Christian Spain) enjoyed a unique flowering of philosophical, architectural, and literary pursuits underscored by multilingual translation activities. Whether that indicates "tolerance" is another matter.

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