

Neighborhoods and Religion: the Caliphate of Córdoba as an example of the question of religious coexistence

by Natacha Klein Käfer

The topic of the *“Weimarer Rendez-vous mit der Geschichte”* 2012 could not be more current. Neighborhoods, their social implication, potential for conflicts and demand for coexistence are a subject of extreme relevance, especially in a year that saw the events in the Gaza Strip become more and more violent. This situation is a present evidence of how religious differences play a huge role in the relationship between neighbors throughout history, being they people, States or institutions. The podium on November 18, *“Multikulti damals: Nachbarschaft der Religionen von der Antike bis die Neuzeit”* addressed exactly this question, making a historical tour through the theme neighborhood and religion.

In this tour, the audience had a glimpse of many different contexts, starting by the ancient Greece, presented by Prof. Veit Rosenberger. The panel followed with two examples of the question of neighborhood and religion during the Middle Ages, one in Spain, presented by Dr. Christiane Fiebig, and another in Germany, presented by Dr. Katharina Mersch. At the end, Prof. Susanne Rau presented the context of the Early Modern period, emphasizing the different aspects found in France and Germany.

Córdoba under the Caliphate that ruled the Iberian Peninsula after the Muslim conquest in the 8th century is the perfect example to analyze interreligious neighborhoods. Muslims, Christian and Jewish people had to share a delimited geographical space, which means they had to find ways to live together and appease the tensions between the different groups. Christiane Fiebig, from the University of Erfurt, presented the historical overview of the Caliphate of Córdoba, highlighting the aspects which enable this coexistence.

According to Fiebig, the Caliphate, proclaimed in 929 by Abd-ar-Rahman III, supported what has been seen as a multicultural society, based on a certain principle of tolerance. But under which conditions this scenario can be considered an actual acquaintanceship of the *Al-Andalus* society? There is a specific social and economic background behind this vision of an ideal period of coexistence.

The *Al-Andalus* society had differences that went beyond the simple religious division. Even the Muslim community was composed by various ethnic groups that were seen differently. Furthermore, new and old Muslims also were perceived in different ways. The new converts, former Christians, were part of a new social group. Even so, the Caliph had interest in the coexistence with the other monotheist religions, supporting a system that was more than a simple cultural acquaintanceship, but a legal framework to enable Christians, Muslims and Jews to live together. This system, called *ahl al-dhimma*, put the followers of "scriptural religions" as people under protection, but also established a tax to be paid. The *lingua franca* was the Arabic, no longer the Latin. The domination was clearly Muslim, but the Christian and Jewish *dhimmis* had many rights remaining.

However, the idea of *La Convivencia* - as this period of coexistence was called - should not be confused as a time of peace. The *dhimma* system did not get rid of the conflicts in the area. The Christian quest to reconquer the land lost to the Muslims kept ongoing and the violence did not cease. The system was not enough to eliminate the strife, but established pragmatic solutions to the situation they were facing.

This idea of a less dogmatic and more pragmatic system helped them to keep the Andalusian society standing in relative coexistence. Even though it was far from the idealized period that has been presented by the previous historiography, it is a great instance to see the question of neighborhood on history, a question that continues so crucial nowadays.