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*Conversion, Passing, and Covering: Christian Assimilation in Early  
Medieval Spain*

Jackie DeLuca

A historical examination of the interactions between Islam and the West during the early medieval period leads one to Spain. Muslim groups began invading southern Spain as early as the eighth century and by the ninth century they had established military and political control over many formerly Christian communities. The Christian individuals living in these newly conquered regions had options; they could accept Islam on any number of different levels or they could resist it completely, engaging in dangerous and often futile conflict with Muslim authority. For the sake of this paper I am solely concerned with the various ways in which Christians assimilated under Muslim rule. In the following pages I attempt to understand the behavior of ninth century Christians using a modern, if uncommon, sociological and legal theory. I approach this interaction of Islam and Christianity through a modern framework because recognizing different forms of assimilation allows one to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological and social climate which may have existed during the Christian reconquest of southern Spain in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Yale Law professor Kenji Yoshino has recently written on the concept of covering, an idea which he borrows from radical sociologist Erving Goffman's work in the late 1960's. Goffman explains that assimilation can take one of three forms: conversion, passing, or covering. All three forms are considered to be a response to the pressures that society places on those individuals who fall outside of the social or culture mainstream. The most complete form of assimilation, conversion, is when an individual completely alters or abandons his identity in favor of a more common or accepted one. Second is passing, understood to be the concealment of those characteristics which signal one's minority status. The third form, covering, occurs when one downplays identifying or stereotypical characteristics as an attempt to make her minority identity less central and less

obtrusive. Below I attempt to demonstrate that Christians in ninth century Spain engaged in all three forms of assimilation.

Conversion is the logical starting point for a discussion of Christian assimilation under Muslim rule. The literature tells us that over time, beginning at the end of the eighth century, Islam grew increasingly popular and the number of Christian converts rose (Wolf, *Medieval Christian Perceptions*, pg 93). This is not at all surprising given what we know about the nature of the new Islamic society. Kenneth Baxter Wolf explains that a “significant factor behind the increased assimilation was the attraction of participating in a culturally sophisticated and economically prosperous commercial empire that linked Spain with Africa, the Near East, and Central Asia” (pg. 92). The Muslims used both incentives and disincentives to draw, lure and coerce Christians into Islamic life. They made surrender an appealing option as they moved across the Iberian Peninsula. There were two main reasons for this tactical decision. First, imposing taxes in exchange for allowing current rulers to retain their political and military authority was much easier and more profitable than warfare. Second, Christians were kept isolated. Even though the Muslims had secured military control, they feared the proximity of the Christians. It was possible for these Christians to taint the minds, the beliefs, of the Muslim people. In response to this fear legal structures were put into place which clearly segregated the Christians from the rest of Islamic society. Wolf argues, and Yoshino and Goffman would agree, that this demotion to being second-class citizens, this loss of status, was enough to motivate Christian conversion to Islam.

These very same social and psychological factors would have also prompted some individuals to conceal their Christian identities and assimilate into Islamic society, without ever truly renouncing their Christian beliefs. An acute fear of this situation spurred the ninth century debate over the removal of an anathema from the “Formula of Abjuration” (Hanson, *Medieval Christian Perceptions*, p 55). Were Christians claiming to be Muslim only to escape persecution and discrimination? Sources are not clear on the extent to which passing may have occurred; however it is logical to assume that it must have, because both conversion and covering, respectively more and less extreme alternatives, are known to be methods of assimilation at that time.

Covering is slightly trickier to define than conversion and passing, which may explain its absence from sociological discourse since the 1960's and why it is just now becoming recognized and investigated by social and cultural psychologists. The distinction between passing and covering is subtle. The knowledge of the audience observing the behavior is crucial to determining whether passing or covering has occurred. For example, if an employer does not know that her employee is gay, and the employee consciously opts not to have a picture of his partner publicly displayed in his workspace, it could be successfully argued that he is trying and succeeding at passing as straight. Given the same situation, only with the employer possessing the knowledge that her employee is gay, one could argue that he is covering his queer identity. Not denying his queer identity but not flaunting it either. People cover their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender because societies and cultures discriminate based on individuals' membership to minority identity groups. Neither Yoshino nor Goffman address the concept of assimilation as it relates to religion. I believe that this is not because it does not occur on a significant level, but rather because both authors are primarily concerned with assimilation within secular American society. Wolf, in his discussion of ninth century Spain, describes how covering relates to religion.

Christians retained their religious identity, but did all they could to melt into the dominant society by avoiding anything that might, on the one hand, draw undue attention to their inferior religious status, and on the other, offend the religious sensibilities of their hosts (Wolf, *Medieval Christian Perceptions*, p 93).

Wolf is not only describing covering behavior, but he is also explaining why the phenomenon occurs. Christians were outsiders in Muslim society. They were ostracized and marginalized. While general feelings of religious tolerance existed, Islamic society did not accommodate for the social and religious expectations of the Christian communities.

Attempting to understand the religious identities of the Iberian Peninsula's conquered people is important not only

because it helps illuminate and detail the lives of the average person in the ninth century, but because it is useful in understanding the course of events that transpired over the next several centuries. In the twelfth century the Christians crusaded across the Iberian Peninsula attempting to reclaim the lands and people which they believed the Muslims had wrongfully taken. Historians and scholars work constantly to explain why these crusades were not entirely successful. I believe that the answer lies in the methods of assimilation which were used by Christians hundred of years earlier. Ninth century Christian identities were in flux; they were constantly shifting to accommodate the Islamic way of life; acculturation on some level was crucial to the survival of the Christian faith and the continued existence of Christian communities throughout the Iberian Peninsula. These peoples would have been even more strongly persecuted and discriminated against if they had constantly resisted all forms of Islam: cultural, social, and religious. Ultimately the Christian conquests were successful; a success dependent on personal and community identities which had slowly evolved and become the basis for the re-conquest movement.