



# A Vanished World: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Medieval Spain

By Chris Lowney

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**A Vanished World: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Medieval Spain** By Chris Lowney

In a world torn by religious antagonism, lessons can be learned from medieval Spanish villages where Muslims, Christians, and Jews rubbed shoulders on a daily basis--sharing irrigation canals, bathhouses, municipal ovens, and marketplaces. Medieval Spaniards introduced Europeans to paper manufacture, Hindu-Arabic numerals, philosophical classics, algebra, citrus fruits, cotton, and new medical techniques. Her mystics penned classics of Kabbalah and Sufism. More astonishing than Spain's wide-ranging accomplishments, however, was the simple fact that until the destruction of the last Muslim Kingdom by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in 1492, Spain's Muslims, Christians, and Jews often managed to bestow tolerance and freedom of worship on the minorities in their midst.

*A Vanished World* chronicles this panoramic sweep of human history and achievement, encompassing both the agony of Jihad, Crusades, and Inquisition, and the glory of a multi-religious, multi-cultural civilization that forever changed the West. Lowney shows how these three controversial religious groups once lived and worked together in Spain, creating commerce, culture, art, and architecture. He reveals how these three faith groups eventually veered into a thicket of resentment and violence, and shows how our current policies and approaches might lead us down the same path.

Rising above politics, propaganda, and name-calling, *A Vanished World* provides a hopeful meditation on how relations among these three faith groups have gone wrong and some ideas on how to make their interactions right.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

*Starred Review.* This bold and compassionate articulation of medieval Spanish history, with its complex interactions among Jews, Muslims and Christians, speaks directly to contemporary international crises. Lowney (*Heroic Leadership: Best Practices from a 450-Year-Old Company That Changed the World*) is more explicit in providing ethical lessons than Maria Rosa Menocal in *Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*, but his convictions are gently woven into the narrative and are never didactic. Lowney tells the tale of coexistence, and its eventual unraveling, with detail, delicacy and verve, avoiding a romanticized exaggeration of tolerance. He is hardheaded about the motives that underlay an acceptance of religious diversity in medieval Iberia, and is acutely aware of the period's dark ironies: for instance, Muslim Granada survived by selling out its coreligionists in Seville, and Alfonso the Wise had a schizophrenic relationship with Spanish Jews. Lowney's account reflects a good deal of recent scholarship and avoids stereotypical recasting of the Black Legend; students of medieval history will learn much from Lowney's fresh perspective. But he remains sensitive to the indissoluble pain that accompanied the disasters of the late Middle Ages. This engrossing and illuminating book deserves the attention of a wide public. One map. *Agent, Jim Fitzgerald.*(Apr. 6)  
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From [Booklist](#)

To organize Spanish history from the Muslim conquest of 711 to the completion in 1492 of the Catholic *Reconquista*, Lowney deploys a set of minibiographies. The author's main concern, however, is not biographical: writing with contemporary religious strife in mind (Lowney's first words are about the Madrid terrorist atrocity of March 2004), the author explores the thoughts and actions of his subjects--Muslim, Christian, or Jew--toward the religious other. Lowney's eye on the present does not negatively affect his presentation as popular history, for the portraits are vivid and even mordant, and strict historical accuracy is often impossible to ascertain. Unrolling the centuries, Lowney includes heroic icons such as El Cid, and figures who, like him though not as famous, were less than convert-or-die totalists in religious conflicts. Lowney's accomplished work comprehensibly covers medieval Spain and connects the country's past to its present. *Gilbert Taylor*  
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Review

""A Vanished World" provides a walking journey inside the astonishing history of medieval Spain's life for Muslims, Christians, and Jews. A fascinating historical lesson about an era that reflects the best and the worst of humanity's attempts to coexist."

-- Fajri Ansari, President of the Network of Religious Communities and Resident Imam of Masjid Nu'Man, Buffalo, New York

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