

RB4013: Interfaith Dialogue, Technology and Pluralism

2020

Assessment Cover Sheet for the Textual Analysis

Assessment Due Date: 30th March 2020

Please complete the following

I confirm that this assignment which I have submitted is all my own work and the source of any information or material I have used (including the internet) has been fully identified and properly acknowledged as required in the school guidelines I have received.

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Word Count	2,708 words

Conduct a comparative literary analysis of 2,500 words covering two books (both focus on the Muslim Spain period and talk about pluralism during that period) which you are expected to compare and contrast and comment/write a commentary on.

Chris Lowney, in his 2005 book, *A Vanished World: Muslims Christians and Jews in Medieval Spain* and Maria Rosa Menocal in her 2002 publication *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*, each give an account of the history of Spain during the Medieval period. Menocal's work aims to demonstrate the contributive and lasting influence of the Islamic culture on the Iberian Peninsula, achieved through an era in which tolerance was prioritised and the diversity of faiths celebrated. In contrast, Lowney's work paints a different picture of the same place and period, arguing that the historiography of Medieval Spain has been excessively depicted as an exemplar of tolerance from Islamic rulers.

The statement for this essay focuses particularly on Menocal's questionable emphasis of the word "tolerance" and the belief that Medieval Spain is inapplicable to the present day context, so much so that any such application is not only unfair, but does a disservice to both periods. To add to this, the fact that both Lowney and Menocal possess different professional backgrounds is also postulated to have made a significant impact on the historical accounts they have drawn. To extrapolate these points from the texts, an investigation will take place focusing on why Lowney and Menocal have written of Medieval Spain in such divergent ways, as primary factor to which is that both come from markedly different backgrounds.

Menocal was a seasoned scholar of medieval culture and history, but the same cannot be said for Lowney, who is instead a business management consultant and a writer on the subject of leadership. Although this may instantly bring scepticism to the academic validity of Lowney's work, his expertise in the field of leadership would have nonetheless provided a unique perspective to the subject of Medieval Spain. However, Lowney does not definitively explore Medieval Spain from the perspective of his expertise in leadership which only highlights a missed opportunity on his part to convey the distinctive approach that would have set his work apart from Menocal's. In contrast, Menocal, being a specialist in this area instantly provides her with a characteristic advantage over Lowney. While Menocal's writing style takes on a form of nostalgia for Muslim Spain, she simultaneously paints the previous empire as abysmally intolerant (Menocal, 2002, p30). This was used as a technique by Menocal to further glorify the Islamic period so as to emphasise the cultural riches that the Muslims brought to Iberia which demonstrates a consistency in her line of argument.

Menocal's persistence to emphasise the plurality of Andalusian civilisation leaves her focusing too much on historical figures of a mixed identity, particularly Arabised Jews, as case studies for her work (Menocal, 2002, p41). Menocal's entire book leaves a distinct gap in the case studies she retrieves, namely resulting in a lack of a voice for the Arabo-Muslim leaders. Menocal's attempt to represent al-Andalus as a beacon of pluralism by focusing on those individuals not from an Islamic background undermines her argument that the Arab Muslim rulers of the age were indeed tolerant and welcoming of coexistence with Christians and Jews. This is a key example of where Lowney's work could have risen superior to Menocal's, yet as aforementioned, he missed the opportunity to conduct an analysis of the Muslim leadership from his perspective of leadership expertise.

Menocal's aims would have been more directly achieved if she had also used a sufficient amount of case studies for the Arab Muslim leaders to justify her overall postulation that Medieval Muslim Spain was indeed ruled by those whom share a pluralistic outlook for their society. Although Menocal successfully demonstrated Christian and Jewish acknowledgements of the plurality of Medieval Spain, she misses out a crucial class of figures – the leaders – in her investigation. This calls to question whether case studies on the leaders would align with her particular account of history (Menocal, 2002, p28-29). Although this undermines Menocal's argument, the structural issues in Lowney's work particularly inhibit his own ability to execute many of his key points.

Lowney chose to conduct his work without a chronological order which holds a drastic impact on the capacity for his account to be definitive and convincing. The achronological structure of Lowney's work means that it is difficult to follow and there is certainly less of a flow of narrative than in Menocal's work. This only undermines Lowney's ability to convincingly deliver his points and only serves to diminish his chance of creating a climatic and powerful momentum in order to cement his arguments. By contrast, Menocal achieves this momentum by taking on a chronological approach that instantly makes her work not only more understandable, but as a result, markedly more convincing. Here, we see Menocal's experience in historical academia shine through as the structure of her work is markedly superior to that of Lowney's which is yet another example of how each writer's background has shaped their entire approach to the subject and has consequently effected the historical account that they have each produced.

However, a commonality between the two writers is the clarity of their aims from the beginning of their respective works with Menocal clearly aiming to argue for the tolerant nature of Medieval Spain through the use of cultural and political examples (Menocal, 2002, p10-11). Meanwhile, Lowney adopts the use of anecdotes to make a comparison between the modern day and the events of Medieval Spain with an explicit goal from the start to emphasise these comparisons (Lowney, 2005, p105-107, 208). This clarity of aims represents a strength that both writers harness and execute in their works. In particular, Lowney begins his account by expressing the interfaith tensions of the time (Lowney, 2005, p10), but as the narrative takes hold and the book continues, Lowney softens his outlook towards the end and writes more on cohesion, perhaps as the ultimate tactic to relate his historical narrative to the need for cohesion in the highly globalised world of today (Lowney, 2005, p268). Despite the commonality in expressing their goals, both Menocal and Lowney still write two different narratives of Medieval Spain and although Menocal's superiority is found in her text's structure, the contents of her works does possess limitations.

Menocal's book is based on the stories and narratives produced by key historical figures who were present during the period which leaves her work anecdotal and perhaps biased too. This is due to her ability to control the figures from whom she derives her narratives. Menocal's attempt to construct and present Medieval Spain, specifically Cordoba, to the reader as an "Ornament of the World" clearly demonstrates her aims to convey this period in Spanish history as one in which religious pluralism was genuinely and successfully adopted (Menocal, 2002, p11-12). Indeed, Menocal has an agenda, not only to paint Medieval Spain as a champion of pluralism, but also to propose that the lasting Islamic influence on Southern Spain in particular contributed a series of cultural components like architecture, art and music that have come to form an important part to the overall Spanish cultural landscape (Menocal, 2002, p266-267, 277).

In contrast, Lowney's work focuses on a descriptive approach by exploring the beliefs systems (mainly Christianity and Islam) that existed during the period rather than the military actions of the government (Lowney, 2005, p157-165, p177-183). The fact that Lowney chose not to focus on the military operations of the rulers is, again, a missed opportunity on his part to approach the subject of Medieval Spain from the perspective of the leaders. This would have galvanised an understanding that Lowney would have been uniquely positioned to analyse as a leadership writer, yet he fails to achieve this.

Meanwhile, Menocal spends some of her writing focusing on the power of the Arabic language and its direct influence on the cultural and political landscape, particularly to convey its central role in the creation of a multicultural and pluralistic society (Menocal, 2002, p29). Arabic is perceived a more universal, multicultural language in contrast to the Latin used exclusively by the Church. As such, not only was Arabic feared by the Church, but it is portrayed by Menocal as possessing a unique power to create harmony and plurality in the society through the sharing of ideas by translating Arabic works. As such, Menocal goes as far to refer to this as the translation movement (Menocal, 2002, p267). Menocal's focus on language and its power to influence cultural harmony and how she conveys this into a discussion of religious tolerance is one of her most robust points which perfectly strengthens her overall argument.

However, what felt strange about Menocal's work was that the case studies she used go far beyond the geographical and temporal boundaries that her introduction established leaving both the geography and timeframe set out in the introduction as disconnected from the case studies she invokes (Menocal, 2002, p22-23). Here, Menocal is attempting to highlight her view that al-Andalus played not only a pivotal role in the history of the Mediterranean but in Europe as a whole by weaving in case studies from London to Damascus (Menocal, p147-158). As such, Menocal portrays al-Andalus as taking the central role in the affairs of the time – the leader of the time in many sense. However, this centrality attributed to Spain, particularly when considering the mighty power of Rome during the period, seems an exaggerated point on Menocal behalf, blinded by her persistence to portray al-Andalus not only as a place of tolerance, but one of European-wide influence.

Meanwhile, Lowney's focus on Islam and Christianity is important but he misses out an important narrative to be conveyed with regards to the treatment of non-Abrahamic faiths in Medieval Spain, namely the pagans, who were distinguished by the title *majus* (Lowney, 2005, p199-209). Harsh treatment of pagans in Andalusia was widespread as even Menocal herself alludes to (2002, p63). It is a criticism of both Lowney and Menocal that they failed to emphasise the costs to religious minorities despite all the cultural and scientific successes of the age. In all, Lowney's focus on Abrahamic faiths may be justified in the sense that Christians, Jews and Muslims made up the vast majority of the population in al-Andalus, but to make limited mention of other faiths suggests an imbalance. After all, isn't it the religious minorities whom suffer the most from intolerance, hence the study of them should be prioritised?

Moving on, Menocal, throughout her work, emphasises the concept of tolerance (Menocal, 2002, p11, p13, p30, p73), so much so that she features the word in the publication's title. However, we have to be critical of this term's usage and perhaps how what that term represents isn't exactly the ideal that we should be striving towards in the 21st century. One can understand tolerance as the acceptance that a group other than one's own group exists, but that the other group is still viewed with a sense of suspicion, xenophobia, and otherness. This begs the question of Menocal's use of the word tolerance itself and whether tolerance really should be the goal for a pluralistic civilisation. This highlights an issue with Menocal's entire argument in that she speaks of tolerance as though that is a valued aim, but aiming for acceptance should be the actual purpose of pluralism. However, if a true acceptance isn't established amongst those of a land, then the type of pluralism they create will be unsustainable.

Applying this train of thought to the contemporary context, we today strive for acceptance as the hallmark of religious pluralism rather than simply tolerance. In fact, simply settling for tolerance can be considered as one of the main instigators of an underlying xenophobia, one in which other cultures are tolerated because of other factors, such as peer pressure, economic factors, or media pressure, rather than because of genuine acceptance for that foreign culture. Therefore, to strive for acceptance through education and intercultural engagement is integral to the sustainability of a pluralistic society.

This highlights an underlying problem with both Menocal's, Lowney's and another works on history being that the application of modern understandings of terms like pluralism to circumstances in the Medieval era is misleading. Essentially, the equivalence of Medieval Muslim Spain as a type of morality story is in today's world both undermining of the advances made in the circumstances of contemporary times and also presents a distorted understanding that Medieval Spain upheld religious pluralism to the same extent that it is upheld today. This also highlights an issue with the premise for the entire work of Menocal as her book in particular is based on the presentation of Medieval Spain as a beacon of pluralistic light that we today should take direct inspiration from. Indeed, we should compare Medieval Spain with Medieval England or Medieval France, but to apply it to today's contemporary globalised society is both unfair and misunderstands the contexts of both the Medieval world and the contemporary world, consequently doing them both a disservice, particularly as we are facing challenges, both in frequency and rapidity, today that were not imaginable in previous centuries.

In conclusion, although they write about the exact same topic, Lowney and Menocal provide markedly different perspectives and understandings of the period. We might have it that one of them must be correct while the other's historical account has been distorted by their biased view of that time or even by their own personal religious affiliation. However, perhaps both writers are correct in their narratives as only one version of history cannot truly represent the complexity and diversity of perspectives and experiences held during that time.

Therefore, it is very plausible to say that both are equally accurate accounts of the same period and that because of the vastness, in both geography and chronology, that these accounts are dealing with, it is certainly possible that depict an equitable version of history. The very fact that there exists more than one version of the historical account itself suggests that our understanding of Medieval Spain is actually very good. In many cases in history, historiography has been the reward of the victor, but Menocal and Lowney's discrepancies over what really occurred during this time are representative of the fact that a true historiography has emerged; one that is muddled with contradictions between writers, one that isn't a clear cut one-size-fits-all account, and one that doesn't gloss over and avoid divergences from the dominant narrative.

Essentially, what can be understood from the analysis of these texts is that the backgrounds of the respective authors are wholly responsible for the approach that each have taken to study this period in history. In essence, the expertise of each author – Lowney in leadership and Menocal in medieval history – is dominating their view of the period and has resulted in the construction of two entirely different historical accounts. Each are studying the same period but through different lenses which is why their versions of history have diverged so far from each other. However, it is important to reiterate once more that Lowney would have had an advantage over Menocal if he had captured the opportunity to execute his expertise in leadership by focusing on accounts from Muslim leaders more as this was an element of Menocal's writing that was lacking.

Finally, bringing this to the context of contemporary times, in a world that has in recent years become increasingly intolerant, both Menocal and Lowney can agree that there are valuable lessons to be learnt from Medieval Spain. However, the inconsistencies of their works only come to demonstrate the inapplicability of Medieval Spain to the present day, thus reaffirming the statement of this essay. Furthermore, we shouldn't hesitate to reconsider the use of certain terms like tolerance and instead aim for the attainment of acceptance. As Menocal at the beginning of her epilogue queries "how and why does a culture of tolerance fall apart?" (2002, p267), perhaps this is the greatest lesson to learn from Medieval Spain; perhaps it is only the achievement of widespread genuine acceptance for different faiths through education rather than simply tolerance that will truly create a *sustainable* pluralistic society.

References

Lowney, C. (2005) *A Vanished World: Muslims Christians and Jews in Medieval Spain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Menocal, R. M. (2002) *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*. Boston: Back Bay (Little Brown).