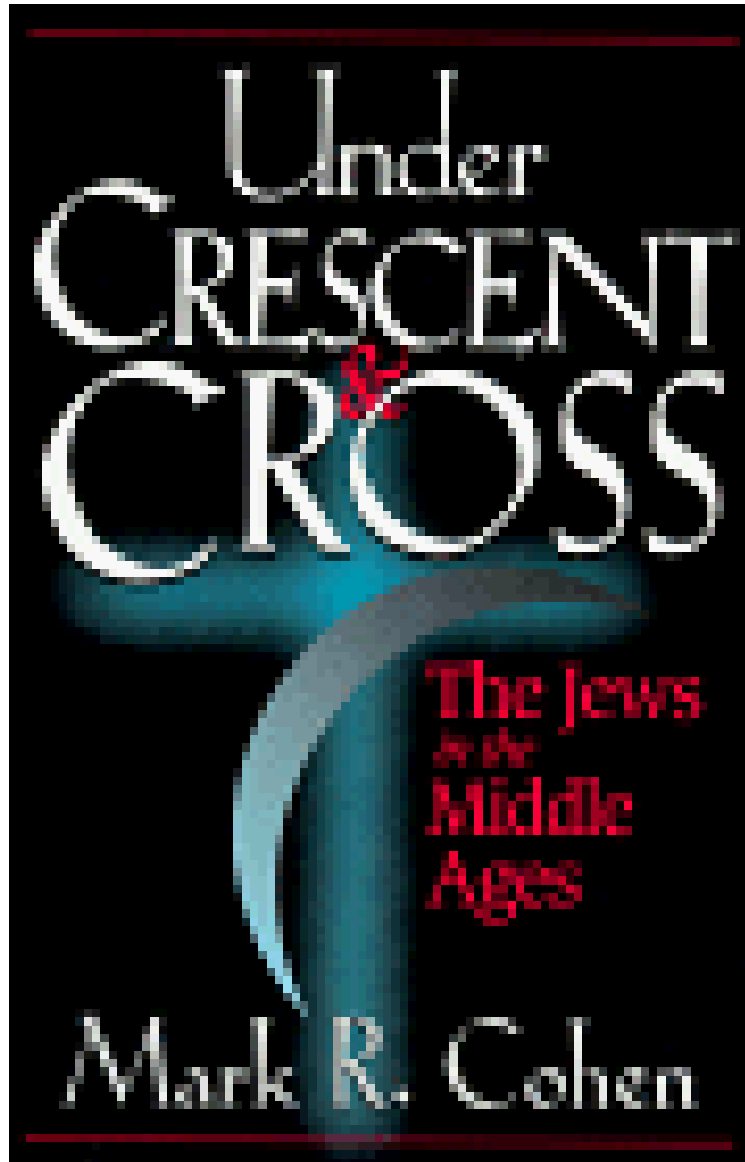


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Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages

Mark R. Cohen

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Mark R. Cohen : Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages:

30 of 36 people found the following review helpful. The Most Balanced and Thorough Study of its Kind. Highly Recommended!By goodmusicmanMark Cohen's comparative study of the status of Jews under Christendom and Islam during the Middle Ages is the most sophisticated, nuanced, meticulous, and persuasively-argued study of its kind. The extremely negative customer review on this page betrays the bias of its author. Citing from Bat Ye'or to demonstrate

that the Jewish position in Islam has always been wretched is an exercise in futility. Bat Ye'or is anti-Muslim to an extreme. She thanks "Judeo-Christian" values for the positive treatment Jews currently receive at the hands of the post-Holocaust Western world. As if the previous 1800 years of expulsions, libels, massacres, burnings at the stake, forced conversions, and genocidal attacks pursued in various periods by elements (i.e. states or populaces) loyal to the Catholic Church, the various Eastern Orthodox Churches and, in its first two hundred years, the Protestant Churches as well, never occurred or are somehow irrelevant. It was rather the separation of church and state that resulted from the 18th century Enlightenment that allowed for the fair treatment Jews currently experience in Western countries, although that too must be modified by the brutal pogroms in Russia in which thousands of Jewish men, women, and children were slaughtered, as well as the Holocaust perpetrated by European Christians, some of whom (such as in Croatia) were religious, though most were not. When thousands of Jews across Europe were being burned alive on the streets during the Black Plague (1348 and further), Jews in Muslim lands were able to live and practice their religion, without fear that the local Muslim populations would associate them with the devil and kill them on the basis of outlandish libels. The example of the Black Plague is particularly illustrative of the gap between the medieval Jewish experience under Islam and Christendom, since the Muslim lands were stricken as heavily by this epidemic as the Christian lands, and yet there is not one single recorded instance of Muslims accusing Jews of having been responsible for the plague, whereas in Christian Europe it was just this accusation that was so widespread and consistently served as a pretext for large-scale massacres of Jews. Sure, there were instances of persecution of Jews in Muslim lands, but they were few and far between, and the most significant of the limited number of such persecutions were carried out by heterodox sects such as the fanatical Almohades (Spain, 12th century) and the Caliph al-Hakim (Egypt, Palestine, early 11th century), who was clearly deranged in the most literal sense in the view of most historians. The fact that Jews were discriminated against throughout the Muslim world must be understood in the context of its time: in the Middle Ages, tolerance was not regarded as a virtue, but a weakness, and no one practiced it in the modern sense of the term. Without any doubt, the protected status accorded Jews in return for payment of the discriminatory taxes and other regulations was far better than their brothers in Christian Europe could imagine. Cohen cites numerous primary sources that demonstrate that the self-perception of medieval Jews themselves was that Muslims did not buy into the absurd accusations hurled against Jews in Christendom and that the Jewish experience under Islam was not regarded as "galut" (exile) in the same sense in which it was in Christendom. If there is any flaw in Cohen's book, it is in his ambiguously-worded statement on the very last page which might seem to suggest that the thirteenth century marked a new era for Jews under Islam, one that might perhaps (though Cohen doesn't say this) rival Jewish life in Christendom. Many of Cohen's own citations and much of his argumentation make it clear that this is not the case, and that instead Jews continued to experience a far more secure existence under Islam until the advent of the modern period of Jewish history (i.e. the 18th century) than they did in Christendom, though they were less secure than they had been in the classical period of Islam. This point will be clear to those familiar with the widespread massacres of the 14th century in Northern Europe, the continued persistence of the blood libel in Europe (absent in Islam), the Spanish Inquisition (including the pogroms that preceded it by a century), the expulsions and massacres following the Protestant Reformation, and the massacres of the 1648-1649 Cossack uprising--and the lack of such horrors in the lands of Islam. This is particularly true of the Ottoman Empire, which was a safe haven for Jews in the 16th and 17th centuries (though Catholic Poland was as well). It is just such nuances (i.e. sometimes Jews were persecuted in Muslim lands and sometimes they found haven in Christian lands) which are missed by advocates of what Cohen terms the "countermyth" of Islamic persecution, like Bat Ye'or. (The original "myth" debunked by Cohen is that Jewish life under Islam was an interfaith utopia when, in reality, Jews were always second-class citizens subject to hardships, though they sometimes rose above that position, as in Muslim Spain during the so-called "Golden Age.") Mainstream scholars such as Bernard Lewis, S. D. Goitein, and Cohen himself reject with equal vigor both myths. This nuanced approach is too complicated for people like Bat Ye'or (and Robert Spencer), who think things had to always have been how they are now. In short, people like Bat Ye'or are engaged in projectionism of the worst kind: the Muslim world today is teeming with the most virulent anti-Semitism imaginable, so it must have always been that way. However, history doesn't work that way. Trends change; the job of the historian is to analyze them dispassionately, which Bat Ye'or, having been expelled from Egypt in a humiliating fashion in the 1950s, is apparently not capable of. (In fact, it is the consensus of historians that anti-Semitism in its conventional sense did not exist in the Muslim world until modern times and that it was only introduced into it by Christian Arabs in the 19th century. See p. 208, note 28 of Cohen's book for sources.) As for the other methodological issues raised in the negative customer review, Cohen's book is so meticulous that all of these issues are treated by Cohen himself, some in the very Introduction to his book! Read the book and see for yourself. Just don't be taken in by polemicists who are more concerned with creating simple answers to complex problems (i.e. why did Jewish-Muslim relations deteriorate in the modern period?) than in analyzing history.

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Easy to read
By Neku
Easy to read, Cohen takes a point of view that parallels the medieval middle east and christian europe. Arguing that while both the middle east and europe could be hostile or tolerant to jews, ultimately the middle east would probably be the better place for jews to be during that period.

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Excellent work. It sets a new standard on this

subject. By REJ There is no better book on this subject. The juxtaposition between the Jews under Islam and Christianity is fair and unbiased. Prof. Cohen has extensive footnotes throughout the book on all of the topics and arguments. This book is both valuable for a beginner as well as for a scholar.

Did Muslims and Jews in the Middle Ages cohabit in a peaceful "interfaith utopia?" Or were Jews under Muslim rule persecuted, much as they were in Christian lands? Rejecting both polemically charged "myths," Mark Cohen offers a systematic comparison of Jewish life in medieval Islam and Christendom--the first in-depth explanation of why medieval Islamic-Jewish relations, though not utopic, were less confrontational and violent than those between Christians and Jews in the West.

From Publishers Weekly Jews in the medieval Muslim world faced much less violence and persecution than the Jews of European Christendom, concludes Cohen in this dense, highly rewarding comparative study. Under Islam, he writes, Jews, though considered infidels and subjected to humiliations and recurrent violence, nevertheless occupied a recognized, safeguarded niche within the social hierarchy, enabling them to achieve high status in commerce, medicine, the arts and government service. By contrast, Jews of the Christian world were marginalized and excluded from the prevailing society in the Middle Ages; theological hatred and deeply ingrained anti-Jewish feelings led to massacres, restrictions on Jews' movements and expulsions from towns and countries. Cohen, a Princeton professor of Near Eastern Studies, includes excerpts from period documents, letters, sermons, tracts and histories to buttress his edifying comparative analysis of Jews' legal position, economic activity, response to persecution and interreligious polemics under Islam and Christianity. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Library Journal Did medieval Jews enjoy peace and security while living in an interfaith utopia under the crescent of Islam but experience hostility and persecution under the cross of Christianity? In this important comparative history study, Cohen (Near Eastern studies, Princeton Univ.) sketches the social, political, and economic status of Jews in Christian and Muslim theology, law, and social practice from the beginning of the common era to Spain's expulsion of the Jews in 1492. He shows that while European Jews were first marginalized and then expelled from the social order, under Islam Jews participated fully in commercial and professional activities. Islamic culture gave the merchant great respect; Christianity did not. While much of this is known to specialists, Cohen advances our knowledge through a fine treatment of the huge literature and the application of social anthropological theory. Scholars will welcome the sound synthesis; general readers will appreciate the lucid style. For research and general collections. Bennett D. Hill, Georgetown Univ., Washington, D.C. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Kirkus sA thorough comparative study of the conditions of medieval Jewish life in Christian and Muslim lands. Cohen (Near Eastern Studies/Princeton) explores and explodes the recently resurrected myth of Arabs and Jews living in an "interfaith utopia," especially during the centuries of Islam's ascendancy. This fantasy of a tolerant Golden Age in Spain before 1492 (when Jews were expelled) is (European) Jewish in origin, but it gets a lot of spin from propagandists trying to show that Muslims can be anti-Zionists but have never been anti-Jewish. Among the scores of primary sources quoted here is a letter from Jewish philosopher-physician Maimonides (d. 1204), who writes that "none has matched [Islam] in debasing and humiliating us." Cohen modifies such statements and battles the "countermyth" of Arab savagery held by contemporary Sephardic Jews, who he views as competing with their Holocaust-surviving Ashkenazic counterparts. Before the 17th century, the frequency and harshness of both Christian and Muslim persecution is about equal, but Cohen deftly differentiates between the behavior of these two hosts by studying the particular economic and social conditions of various Jewish communities under different caliphs and kings. He analyzes all the decrees (Jews had to rise in the presence of Muslims) and restrictions (Jews could not own Christian land) with considerable historical and theological insight. Early Christians, facing life- and-death competition with Jews in the Roman empire, developed an adversarial faith that "fulfilled" Judaism and "demonized" Jews. Consequently, treatment of Jews in Christendom ranged from serfdom to expulsion. Mohammed's minions had no ongoing struggle with Arabia's quickly subjugated Jews, hence Christian and Jewish "people of the book" were "second-class subjects" but allowed some occupational diversity. For an academic study of the Middle Ages, remarkably accessible and timely. -- Copyright 1994, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.