Today, as in the past, al-Andalus evokes a wide variety of images and reactions. One need only “google” the term al-Andalus to see more than two million entries, ranging from art to dance, contemporary music and hotels to study-abroad programs; from festivals and blogs on history and culture to calls to jihād. Idealization of and a renewed interest in al-Andalus, especially vis-à-vis its linkage to modern political events, is evinced even through television programming: e.g., the Public Broadcasting Service’s airing of the 2007 documentary Cities of Light: The Rise and Fall of Islamic Spain. All these recent views of al-Andalus and medieval Iberia remind us how very different yet how very similar 711 is to 9/11 and 3/11.

In any period, in any cultural configuration, there are boundaries, whether permeable or not, visible or not: boundaries of belief, language boundaries, social boundaries of culture and religion, boundaries of government and political rule. Boundaries are clearly mutable as they shift and change; and boundaries—either by crossing or respecting them—bring about contact of one sort or another: contact of resistance or tolerance, of reaching across or of staying within borders. Cultures meet without necessarily accepting or rejecting one another. Boundaries and their crossing need not bring about influence or contention, simply contact.

In medieval Iberia, contact is usually discussed within the context of the three cultures: Christian, Jewish and Islamic. Al-Andalus, past and present, may evoke nostalgia for a lost paradise or golden age, but the exact dating, or even existence, of such a “golden age” is not universally accepted. Most scholars will agree that, if it did exist, it included and centered around the Umayyads of Córdoba and the caliphate that ended in 1031. The “peaceful” co-existence of the three cultures, even within a golden age, is also subject to interpretation. In general, one can identify two major critical stances regarding cultural contact in Iberia. On the one hand, some
scholars, such as María Rosa Menocal, maintain that tolerance was woven into the structure of Andalusian society, where the *dhimmī* (‘People of the Book’; that is, Jews and Christians), were protected under the Islamic rule of the caliphate, albeit with certain social restrictions (see, for example, Menocal 29-30, 72-73). It can be argued, then, that in al-Andalus Jews in particular lived with more freedom to participate in the political and social spheres than they did in Christian Europe. However, scholars such as Bernard Lewis and Mark Cohen argue that a golden age of tolerance is not based in historical fact but is rather a myth propagated as part of an ideological struggle fostered by scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as a reaction to the oppression of Jews in Eastern Europe and the Zionist movement.

In al-Andalus, under Islam, the Jews prospered in some contexts, for example, under the reigns of ‘Abd al-Rahmān III (r. 912-961) and al-Ḥakam II (until 976), in the service of the caliphate, but the pogroms against the Jews in Córdoba in 1011 and in Granada in 1066 deny a generalized pacific co-existence. With the Almoravids in the Peninsula, tolerance became even more problematic, with moments of some exception, such as the rule of ‘Ali III of Morocco (r. 1106-1142), who was defeated by Alfonso VII, Emperor of Spain, in 1138 and by Afonso I of Portugal a year later. Under the Almohads the fate of the Jews was sealed; they were forced to convert to Islam or flee, and synagogues were destroyed. Both Jews and Christians fled to the north. “As a result of the Jewish (and Christian) exodus, the cultural and linguistic boundaries were renegotiated. The status of Arabic, as well as that of Hebrew, would be brought to the foreground not just in the period that followed the North African invasions and during the subsequent process of adaptation to the new Christian setting, but over the course of the next three hundred years” (Alfonso 17). Thus the shift in tolerance redrew the boundaries of politics, culture and language.

The same can be said for the Christians. The Visigoths and their heirs, upon the rapid conquest by the Islamic forces, experienced periods of tolerance and intolerance as borders were redrawn. Indeed, tolerance toward the Christians may have been nothing more than a political strategy resulting from liberal surrender treaties offered to and negotiated by the Christian rulers (Lowney 38).

The extent of tolerance, then, is difficult to determine. How is tolerance defined and measured? How tolerant was the tolerance? With the Christian movement into Islamic territories, the debate continues, albeit in a different vein. Clearly Christian political rule over Jews and Muslims