Introduction

This passage, with which Paul Albar of Córdoba introduces his account of his friend Eulogius’ execution in 859, may seem straightforward enough. It relies on scriptural and hagiographical commonplaces and inscribes the dead man into the ranks of those saints who have gone before. But, when the passage is set in its context, a fascinating problem comes into view. Eulogius, the martyr in question, had himself been the hagiographer and tireless advocate of 48 other Christians who, in one remarkable decade (between 850 and 859 CE), were decapitated for public blasphemy against Islam in Muslim-ruled Córdoba. Albar describes the achievement of holiness by the other hagiographer in dualistic, spatial imagery: the saint is one who casts light into dark places and provides riches for an impoverished household. These imaginative categories are windows into the high stakes of the hagiographical project around the martyrs of Córdoba, and they frame the phenomenon animating this paper: how the understanding and representations of holiness within a community may both be conditioned by and directly intervene in interreligious social stresses.

Holiness is, however, a difficult and indeterminate object of study—if indeed it is ‘an object’ at all. We find holiness ascribed, in different respects at different times, to extraordinary people, places, days, texts. According to a faithful understanding, those who manifest holiness are advanced along a spectrum of
participation in the divine purpose for the historical world and, in some cases, are elevated across the ordinary thresholds of human possibility; as Peter Brown describes it, the saints are “sheathed in the majesty of the full presence of God” (Brown 2002: 7). Kenneth Wolf, by contrast, takes up the analysis of holiness in Spain as a ‘social product,’ apart from its theology: here, holiness is “attributed by a community to an individual perceived as having actualized in some particularly meaningful way the values and ideals that inform that community’s existence” (Wolf 1988: 65). I will stand at the crossroads of these discussions and analyze the martyrs of ninth-century Córdoba by accounting for two, reciprocally influential, contested spaces in which their holiness was at issue: on the one hand, the political order and cultural blend of the city itself and, on the other, the highly debated process of commemorating those who gave their lives resisting that city’s spiritual regime. I will argue that this latter struggle for authority over the meaning and heritage of these voluntary martyrdoms sheds critical light on the conditions of anxiety which made possible the more deeply rooted struggle for the soul of a society perceived by some of its inhabitants (including the martyrs) to be facing cultural extinction and smothering by sin.

“The majority of the victims deliberately invoked capital punishment” (Wolf 1988: 1)—that is, they spoke Arabic, were familiar with the municipal legal code, and were able to produce public declarations of ‘blasphemy’ that would force the hand of the Cordovan judicial system. On the part of the government, the actions of Christians offering themselves up for execution appeared at first to be flabbergasting, then exasperating, then insidious. The first deliberate martyr, a monk named Isaac, had previously been an eminent figure in the Muslim government: the so-called ‘secretary of the covenant’ responsible as an intermediary for representing Christian affairs before the emir. Isaac requested

1 Max Weber, too, acknowledges that, although the charismatic authority of holy people does not have its basis of legitimacy in the recognition of it by a community, there can be no assessment of such authority without recognition, freely given legitimation, and, in certain cases, veneration. I invoke this line of analysis, not at all to exclude the possibility of a transcendent origin of holiness but because the question of such origins is outside the purview of my study. Here, I observe theological categories (which themselves make reference to God and God’s manifest relations with individuals and physical phenomena) as they are nested in the lexicon of the human interpretive genres, which operate within the social flows and cultural characteristics of particular communities.

2 Some 14 months earlier, a priest (‘Perfectus’) had been executed for denouncing Islam—after being harassed by a crowd—but he, like the few other Christians who had been executed in Córdoba for religious crimes up to that point, “was dragged forcibly to his passion” (Eulogius of Córdoba, Memoriale sanctorum preface; in Wolf 1988: 108).