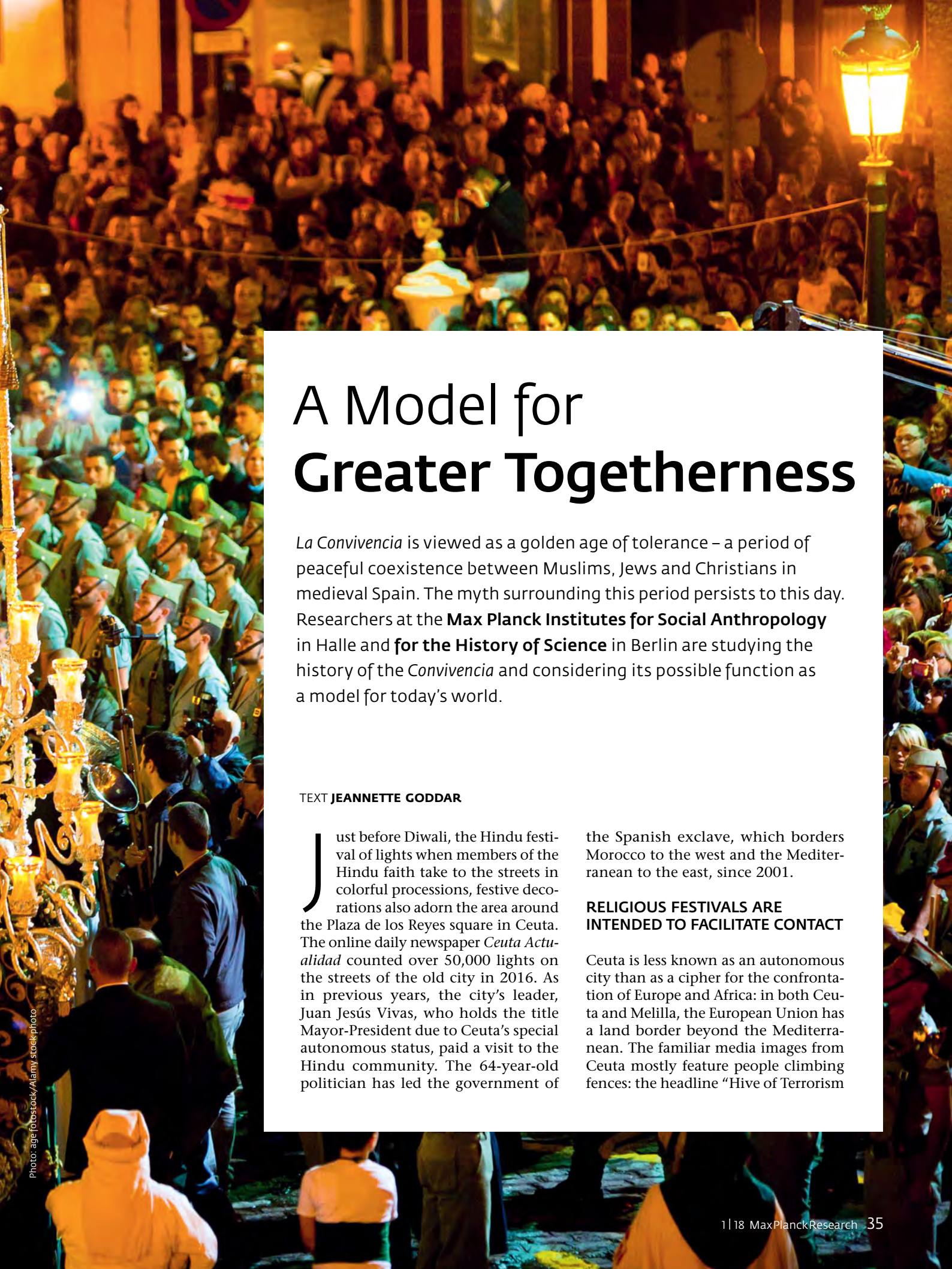




Living faith: In Ceuta, a Spanish exclave in North Africa, the religious communities play a very prominent role in public life: Christians – here in a traditional procession for Holy Week – Muslims, Jews and Hindus alike.



A Model for Greater Togetherness

La Convivencia is viewed as a golden age of tolerance – a period of peaceful coexistence between Muslims, Jews and Christians in medieval Spain. The myth surrounding this period persists to this day. Researchers at the **Max Planck Institutes for Social Anthropology** in Halle and **for the History of Science** in Berlin are studying the history of the *Convivencia* and considering its possible function as a model for today's world.

TEXT JEANNETTE GODDAR

Just before Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights when members of the Hindu faith take to the streets in colorful processions, festive decorations also adorn the area around the Plaza de los Reyes square in Ceuta. The online daily newspaper *Ceuta Actualidad* counted over 50,000 lights on the streets of the old city in 2016. As in previous years, the city's leader, Juan Jesús Vivas, who holds the title Mayor-President due to Ceuta's special autonomous status, paid a visit to the Hindu community. The 64-year-old politician has led the government of

the Spanish exclave, which borders Morocco to the west and the Mediterranean to the east, since 2001.

RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS ARE INTENDED TO FACILITATE CONTACT

Ceuta is less known as an autonomous city than as a cipher for the confrontation of Europe and Africa: in both Ceuta and Melilla, the European Union has a land border beyond the Mediterranean. The familiar media images from Ceuta mostly feature people climbing fences: the headline "Hive of Terrorism



Top Under one roof: This Hindu shrine in Ceuta contains not only images of the goddess Durga and other Hindu gods, but also Christian and Muslim symbols.

Bottom In the open: Muslims in Ceuta mark the end of Ramadan – the month of fasting – with the traditional celebration prayer.

on the Outer Borders” has already appeared in a reputable national newspaper based in Zurich.

Juan Jesús Vivas doesn’t attend Diwali because a particularly large number of Ceuta’s 82,000 inhabitants believe in Brahma, Shiva, Vishnu and the rest of the Hindu pantheon; over 95 percent of Ceuta’s inhabitants are Christians and Muslims. Vivas attends because he understands that the joint celebration of religious events – be it Diwali, Yom Kippur, Eid-al-Kabir or Easter – is a means of promoting social peace and stability. “When Vivas became Mayor in 2001, Ceuta was completely divided,” says anthropologist Brian Campbell from the Max Planck Institute in Halle.

Christians and Muslims kept to themselves. It was very clear who was in charge: the Christians considered themselves the city’s true citizens and divided power among themselves, and the Muslims had to make do with whatever remained. The certainty regarding who belonged and who didn’t ran so

deep that immigrants who had arrived from South America in the 1980s were naturalized before Muslims who had been living there for generations. Christians and Muslims have cohabited in Ceuta since it was conquered by Portugal in the 15th century. It was later ceded to Spain.

CEUTA CAN’T BE REDUCED TO ITS BORDERS

Brian Campbell himself comes from a country located on the external border of Europe: Malta. Since 2011, he has spent time among the inhabitants of Ceuta over the course of many visits, some of which lasted several months. It all started because, at the beginning of his doctoral career, he was searching for a “textbook example of multiculturalism.” In Ceuta he found, along with many other things, a place where, although people coexist under extraordinary conditions, the actual situation bears no relation to the image presented in the European media. “Ceuta can’t

» Every society carries within it the roots of violence – but also the potential for reconciliation.

be reduced to its borders,” explains Campbell, “People live there and they love it because it’s their town. And, like people everywhere, they try to make the best of what their lives have to offer.”

And they are supported in this by the mayor: In an environment in which ethnicity and religion are extremely interconnected, where Muslims are almost always of Moroccan descent and Christians almost always have Iberian roots, Juan Jesús Vivas deliberately involves the different religious communities as actors in the city’s policies. “Instead of suppressing ethnicity, culture and religion, he uses them to bring people into contact with each other. He gives them positive connotations rather than negative ones,” explains Brian Campbell.

Every religious community that celebrates festivals or other rituals receives financial support. There is one non-negotiable condition: the spaces and squares – and the buffet – must be open to all the city’s inhabitants, including those with a different religious affiliation or with no religion at all. As quickly becomes evident, this creates an opportunity for people to talk to and get to know one another, and thus also to establish trust. But as Campbell reports, it’s about more than that. It fosters a sense of belonging that firmly establishes that, irrespective of who or what they believe in, they are all Spaniards.

The mayor has given his model a name: *convivencia*. A quick check of the word in a Spanish-English dictionary yields both “coexistence” and “cohabitation.” When applied to societies comprising people of all persuasions, and even to families, these aren’t the same

thing: the former implies a space that is used jointly by several people or groups, while the latter implies that these people or groups make joint use of all the structures in which their shared lives, including the contact between them, are organized. “People who cohabit share more than just the space,” adds Campbell, “they live, not alongside each other, but with each other.”

LA CONVIVENCIA WAS A GOLDEN AGE IN SPAIN

In the historiography, particularly the Spanish version, *convivencia* stands for much more than this: it denotes a period during which large parts of the Iberian Peninsula were under Muslim rule and became known as “al-Andalus.” The Berber-Muslim military commander Tariq Ibn Ziyad, who invaded the peninsula from the Mediterranean, gained control of the then Visigoth Kingdom in 711. This marked the beginning of a period in which the Iberian Peninsula was governed first as a caliphate and later by numerous – initially – Muslim kingdoms, which were subsequently converted to Christian rule under the *Reconquista*.

Apart from Christians and Muslims, the region was also inhabited by a minority of Jews. Christians didn’t regain power until 1492, with the *Reconquista*, and then they wanted the entire country for themselves: the last Muslims were reported to have been expelled from the region in 1614, despite the fact that many of them had long since converted to Christianity.

This also marked the end of an era in which Spain flourished intellectually,



Temporary Ceuta resident: Social anthropologist Brian Campbell spent weeks and sometimes even months in the Spanish exclave to get to know how the different religious and ethnic groups there live together.



Left Collegial exchange: Helge Wendt, Elena Serrano and Mònica Colominas (left to right) work on historical aspects of the *Convivencia* at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science.

Right Dialogue across the ages: A 14th-century image shows Islamic philosopher Averroes (left) in a fictitious disputation with the ancient scholar Porphyry. Averroes, who lived in Spain in the 12th century, is renowned for his works on ancient Greek philosophy, especially the writings of Aristotle.

culturally and economically: Córdoba, the capital of the caliphate, was the third largest city in the world in the 10th century and famous for its art and crafts, poetry and philosophy. One of the most popular stories from “al-Andalus” concerns the fascination with Aristotle and ancient Greek philosophy on the part of Muslim philosophers, especially Ibn-Rushd, who is better known in Europe under the Latin name Averroes.

PEACE WAS FRAGILE EVEN IN THE GOLDEN AGE

Whether people coexisted or cohabitated, and how or even whether they did so peacefully in the Christian-Jewish-Muslim collective, is still a matter of dispute. On the one hand, the idea of this period as a golden age of tolerance survives, and there is evidence that a sense of belonging prevailed among the different religious communities – also, incidentally, at joint festivities. On the other hand, it’s impossible to speak of the *Convivencia* as an era of equality: those who governed did

so with varying degrees of violence. Conflicts repeatedly arose, as did religiously motivated persecution – including the massacre of the Jewish population in Granada in 1066.

Günther Schlee, Director at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, refers to it as a period of “relative peace with highs and lows,” but also one that lacked anything even approaching equal rights: “The society of that period can’t be considered under the aspect of the modern principle of equality,” says Schlee. On the contrary, the Caliphs considered the non-Muslims as *dhimmis*, or protected persons: “They collected taxes from them, assigned them a clear role, for instance in relation to the professions they were allowed to practice, and guaranteed that they would be provided with a certain level of protection in exchange,” explains the scientist.

Günther Schlee and postdoctoral researcher Brian Campbell are just two of the approximately 15-member multidisciplinary research partnership working under the umbrella of the Max Planck Society. As part of their project

entitled “*Convivencia. Iberian to Global Dynamics 500–1750*,” they are carrying out research with scientists from the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin, the Max Planck Institute for European Legal History in Frankfurt am Main and the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, which is also part of the Max Planck Society.

THE RELIGIONS COMPETED IN DISPUTATIONS

American historian David Nirenberg is also involved in the project as an external scientist. As far back as 1996, he presented a groundbreaking exploration of cohabitation on the Iberian Peninsula in his book *Communities of Violence. Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages*. Roughly speaking, Nirenberg considers violent conflict to be a systemic feature of the *Convivencia* – part of a process that makes social stability and peaceful cohabitation possible again.

At the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin, historians are investigating the paths by which knowledge is transferred. “We are inter-



ested in how ideas from one human community enter another, be it between societies, down through the ages, or even from academic or religious elites to the general population, and vice versa," explains Elena Serrano, who, in addition to carrying out her own historical work, is responsible for the coordination of the project. An example of this approach is the research carried out by her colleague Helge Wendt, which focuses on the writings of indigenous groups in the 16th and 17th centuries in Mexico and Peru and examines how the latter held on to their convictions, which came under pressure through colonization, and passed them on.

Arab studies expert Mònica Colominas is carrying out research in Berlin on the so-called polemics. As used in this context, the term has little to do with the vernacular understanding of the word "polemical". What is meant here, rather, are documents in which the different – and competing – religious communities recorded their arguments and with which they entered into contact with each other. Specifically, Colominas

is examining the traditions of the Muslims in the period starting in 1500, when the Iberian Peninsula was entirely under Christian rule again.

The exchange of positions between Christians, Jews and Muslims was entirely normal in the Middle Ages, explains Colominas: "From Bagdad to Barcelona, under both Muslim and Christian rule, the followers of different religions came together for public disputations." All the participants prepared for such events – which sometimes took on the character of a spectacle – by compiling sophisticated texts: "After all, each participant wanted to emerge as victor, or at least perform as well as possible."

HISTORICAL PARALLELS ARE OF LIMITED VALIDITY

The polemics provide insights into the strategies adopted by the different religious communities to try to convince their counterparts of the greater validity of their positions. As Colominas's colleague Helge Wendt explains, this had nothing to do with traditional reli-

gious conversion: "The rational age had begun. Even colonial efforts relied more often on the power of persuasion than on forced conversion."

Within the religious communities themselves, the polemics fulfilled a number of purposes: "They strengthened the community's self-esteem, fostered communication and helped with the further development of ideas," says Colominas. They also helped channel disputes – and thus, similar to the role suggested by David Nirenberg's theory, served as a sort of safety valve. Helge Wendt identified another purpose in his analysis of the indigenous writings: "They made it possible to express things that weren't actually allowed to be said: when someone states something that is prohibited and another person – generally a superior – contradicts it, the censured idea is still conveyed, and thus preserved."

A glance at the polemics studied by Mònica Colominas also reveals how Muslim communities of the late Middle Ages asserted themselves in a Christian environment: How did they comply with the five pillars of Islam, which



include the five-times-daily prayer and fasting during Ramadan? To what extent could Muslim minorities compromise or suspend these practices in order to better fit into society? Who had the authority to allow such compromises and speak on behalf of the Muslim community?

Certain parallels to the present day are obvious, even if Colominas – entirely in keeping with her role as a historian – points out that every era is different and stands for itself. As she attests, the questions that arise are similar: “Then, as now, people were asking what kind of strategies they should adopt to stand their ground in a setting that functions very differently.” This sums up quite accurately what the Convivencia project can and wants to achieve: the aim, says Günther Schlee, is to carry out a “general comparative study of forms of societal integration. One emphasizes description over explanation and gives rise to a stimulating exchange of information and ideas from the perspective of different academic disciplines.”

According to Brian Campbell, “People constantly seek explanations for things in the past – parallels help us sort out the world.” Science can’t ignore this. But what can the – in Campbell’s case – reverse perspective on today’s Ceuta contribute to the research on the conditions in medieval times? “Ceuta is a living model,” says Campbell. “In an area of 20 square kilometers, people there ask themselves every day: What does convivencia mean to us?” To put it very briefly and, as always, to ignore the exceptions, the answer is: convivencia should be more than coexistence – togetherness rather than just a parallel existence.

THE EXCLAVE IS NO MULTICULTURAL IDYLL

What Campbell did not find in Ceuta, however, was a multicultural idyll. At its core, he describes the city as having massive disparities in terms of power and resources between the almost equally large Muslim and Christian populations, with an almost entirely

Christian middle and upper class, on the one hand, and high rates of unemployment, school dropouts and poverty among the Muslims, on the other.

In education, too – where opportunities and therefore the future distribution of resources are decided – the roles are also clearly divided: “In many schools, exclusively Christian teachers teach exclusively Muslim students,” says Campbell, “and only in Spanish: Arabic, the language spoken by many Muslims at home, is not spoken in either the schools or the administration.” The fact that many Muslims see themselves as being very much excluded from equal opportunities results in frustration – and criticism of the model: “A considerable number of people see the shared rituals simply as a move designed to distract from who still holds all the power,” says the social anthropologist.

As a result, tensions are the order of the day – at times in connection with the very festivities that are meant to bring people together. “Of course there are also religious groups in Ceuta that refuse to

Left State theatrics: Every few years, the people of Ceuta are invited to kiss the Spanish flag and declare their loyalty to the country – a dubious ritual for Muslims, as their affiliation with Spain is constantly questioned.

Right Skeptical observer: Günther Schlee, Director at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, challenges the myth of the *Convivencia*. According to his research, the members of the different religious groups were anything but equal.



eat with other groups,” says Brian Campbell. “As is the case everywhere else, *the* Muslims do not exist there any more than *the* Christians.” Nor are violent confrontations uncommon.

After six years of observing the system in Ceuta, Campbell also believes that *convivencia* is not a fixed state, but a process. “The question is not: peaceful or not peaceful, but that of conflict and solutions,” he says. This, too, follows Nirenberg’s approach that every society carries within it the roots of violence – but also the potential for reconciliation.

Seen in this way, *convivencia* becomes a social model that creates structures needed for dialogue – which is helpful in the event of conflict, as these structures can then be activated without having to first engage in the complicated process of creating them. Brian Campbell hopes it will be possible to transfer this model – not to other societies, but as a theoretical framework that scholars and other experts might use to study other places: “Does this framework fit? And if not, why not?” ◀

TO THE POINT

- Ceuta, a Spanish exclave in North Africa, tries to foster peaceful cohabitation between different religions and ethnic groups by using religious festivals as an opportunity for the groups to get to know each other and to establish contact between them.
- The model for this system is provided by *la Convivencia*, the historical period that stands for the peaceful cohabitation of Christians, Muslims and Jews on the Iberian Peninsula in the Middle Ages.
- Even though violent conflicts repeatedly arise in Ceuta, there is evidence of a sense of belonging beyond religious boundaries and of the existence of an intellectual exchange and interaction between the different religious groups.
- Despite this, the historical *Convivencia* and its adaptation in Ceuta is insufficient as a social model due to the fundamental difference between living conditions in medieval Iberia and contemporary Germany.

GLOSSARY

al-Andalus: Arabic name for the parts of the Iberian Peninsula under Muslim rule between 711 and 1492. The term is also sometimes used to refer to the period.

Indigenous groups: Population groups that lived in an area prior to colonization by other peoples.

Comparative studies: A scientific discipline that compares the literature of different cultures; in a broader sense also the scientific comparison of different cultural phenomena.