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Performing heritage at Cordoba's Mosque-Cathedral

Mar Grier^a, Avi Astor^a and Marian Burchardt^b



^aDepartment of Sociology, Autonomous University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain; ^bInstitute of Sociology, Leipzig University, Leipzig, Germany

ABSTRACT

This article explores the politics of cultural heritage in societies experiencing secularization and religious diversification by examining recent efforts made by Cordoba's Cathedral Chapter to emphasize the Christian origins and identity of the iconic Mosque-Cathedral. We argue that the Cathedral Chapter's approach to managing and narrating the building over the past two decades responds largely to tensions stemming from the divergence between the primacy of its Islamic or multi-religious identity characteristic of popular representations of the building, both within Spain and beyond, on the one hand, and the primacy of the building's Christian identity as manifested in the institutional arrangements concerning its ownership, management, and use, on the other. While this divergence has been a source of periodic tensions since the 1970s, such tensions have been amplified by recent symbolic acts and popular movements contesting the Church's dominion over the Mosque-Cathedral, as well as by broader societal changes that have diminished the Church's power and influence and heightened its sense of vulnerability. We identify and analyse four main strategies employed by the Catholic Church to (re)narrate the meaning of the building and assert its Christian roots and identity: (1) archaeological projects attempting to demonstrate its Christian foundations; (2) liturgical practices presenting it as a church to establish its Christian identity; (3) discursive practices framing Catholic traditions and rituals as 'intangible heritage' crucial to the building's successful preservation; and (4) the unconditional prohibition of Muslims from performing Islamic prayers. In our research, we have focused on the utilization of museological methods and the interweaving of diverse repertoires (scientific, artistic, religious), by Catholic actors, aimed at authenticating and validating novel interpretations about the origin and Christian character of the building.

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CONTACT Marian Burchardt  marian.burchardt@uni-leipzig.de  Beethovenstr. 15, 04107 Leipzig, Germany

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Introduction

In contexts of advanced secularization, religious buildings and artifacts are increasingly redefined as cultural heritage, desacralized (Meyer 2019) and museified (Sansi 2016). Religious monuments acquire their status as heritage sites through complex technical and bureaucratic procedures which bestow secular cultural value upon them while reducing their religious aura to a mere testimony of a vanishing religious past. As historian Todd Weir (2021, p. 223) puts it, 'Secularization is changing the function of religious buildings, turning historical sites of liturgical practice into travel destinations, performance spaces or cafes.' The religious character of sacred sites may thus diminish once they undergo a process of heritagisation and become spaces for tourist consumption.

Yet, there are also cases where we find just the opposite, namely the reassertion of the religious identity of sites recognized as cultural heritage. The reconversion of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque after over 80 years of functioning as a (secular) museum is a notable example. Cordoba's iconic Mosque-Cathedral, the focus of this article, has also undergone significant religious revitalization in recent decades despite – and indeed as we argue here, in response to – deepening processes of secularization in Spain. This religious revitalization has been entwined with a more general process of re-narrating the building's history and significance, raising questions regarding the possibility, as well as the limits, of changing durable representations of built structures and other forms of material heritage (Gieryn 2002).

Since the 2000s, Cordoba's Cathedral Chapter of Canons,¹ an extension of the Catholic Church that manages the building, has promoted a series of initiatives aimed at establishing and affirming the Mosque-Cathedral's Christian character and identity. In 2004, it supported recommencing archaeological excavations beneath the Mosque-Cathedral's surface that purportedly revealed the remnants of a Visigoth church (San Vicente) at the site when they were initially undertaken during the 1930s. Despite skepticism expressed by experts about whether the remnants were actually from a church complex, the Cathedral Chapter set up a museum for the Basilica of San Vicente inside the Mosque-Cathedral in 2005 (Ruggles 2011, Arce-Sainz 2015). The basilica was also foregrounded in new leaflets for tourists entitled 'The Cathedral of Cordoba.' The term 'Mosque' was conspicuously omitted from the title. In 2006, the Church solicited and obtained official ownership over the building, registering it as the 'Sacred Church Cathedral of Cordoba.' Temporary exhibits of significant magnitude displaying diverse Catholic artefacts and traditions have been organized by the Cathedral Chapter in collaboration with other local and international institutions inside the building with increasing frequency.² New rhetoric has been developed deeming the Mosque-Cathedral a 'living building' whose successful

preservation has resulted from its ongoing functioning as a church. Novel framings of Catholic rituals associated with the site as 'intangible heritage' that merits official recognition and protection appear in a recent report issued by the Cathedral Chapter about the building's essence and future management. Whereas in the past Muslims had been invited to pray at the Mosque-Cathedral on occasion, they have been expressly prohibited from engaging in any semblance of prayer within the building's confines in recent decades (Monteiro 2011).

These developments raise a set of intriguing questions: What explains the paucity of initiatives aimed at establishing and affirming the Mosque-Cathedral's Christian foundations and identity since the 2000s, as well as the extreme militance against any type of Muslim religious expression? Which broader cultural, political, and religious dynamics shape practices of heritage-making and play a role in (re)interpreting the building's historical significance? What strategies are developed, and which resources are mobilized to transform the meaning of the site and the stories being told? And how has the growth of Spain's Muslim population shaped the politics surrounding its Christian heritage?

We argue that the Cathedral Chapter's approach to managing and narrating the building over the past two decades responds largely to tensions stemming from the divergence between the primacy of its Islamic or multi-religious identity characteristic of popular representations of the building, both within Spain and beyond, on the one hand, and the primacy of the building's Christian identity as manifested in the institutional arrangements concerning its ownership, management, and use, on the other. While this divergence has been a source of periodic tensions since the 1970s, such tensions have been amplified by recent symbolic acts and popular movements contesting the Church's dominion over the Mosque-Cathedral, as well as by broader societal changes that have diminished the Church's power and influence and heightened its sense of vulnerability.

Given the persistence of popular understandings of the Mosque-Cathedral as a Muslim or multi-religious structure, and the heightened susceptibility of the Church to criticism amid deepening secularization, the Cathedral Chapter has invested significant resources into establishing the building's Christianness and suppressing activities that might support alternative visions for its management as a multi-religious temple or secular museum. We identify and analyse four main strategies pursued by the Catholic Church to (re)narrate the meaning of the building and to assert its Christian roots and identity:

- (1) archaeological projects that seek to demonstrate its Christian foundations
- (2) liturgical practices that establish its Christian identity by performing it as a church

- (3) discursive practices that frame Catholic traditions and rituals as 'intangible heritage' and crucial to the building's successful preservation; and
- (4) the unconditional prohibition of Muslims from performing Islamic prayers.

Our analysis demonstrates the Cathedral Chapter's proactive efforts to redefine the significance of the Mosque-Cathedral through a multifaceted approach encompassing performative, narrative, scientific, and museum curatorial practices. Our findings highlight the performative aspects of tangible heritage and the interweaving of diverse repertoires of knowledge and practice (scientific, artistic, religious) for the purposes of resignification and proprietary consolidation. These observations illuminate the intricate relationship between heritage transformation, religious landscapes, and the expression of national identity (Astor *et al.* 2017).

Methodologically, this article is based on the triangulation of data from various sources, including a review of media coverage and expert reports, ethnographic observations, and semi-structured interviews. Our review of international, national, and local news items provided us with information on recent developments and controversies related to the Mosque-Cathedral. In order to learn about the role of experts in these controversies, we analyzed expert reports (and counter-reports) on the management of the monument, documentation related to the cultural and religious exhibitions displayed within the building's confines, and historical and archaeological analyses of its origins. We additionally carried out ethnographic fieldwork between 2017 and 2022. This fieldwork involved four participant observations of guided tours of the Mosque-Cathedral, as well as individual observations within the building and its surroundings. Finally, we conducted semi-structured interviews with actors involved in controversies and local dynamics surrounding the building's ownership and management, including local activists, art specialists, religious actors and academics.

This article builds upon and extends our previous research on the politics of religious heritage (Astor *et al.* 2019, Griera *et al.* 2019, Burchardt 2020) by focusing more explicitly on the strategies and resources employed by the Cathedral Chapter of the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba to reinforce a narrative of Christianization regarding the monument. In this article, we show how museological, artistic and religious resources and forms of knowledge are actively mobilized with the aim of promoting a narrative emphasizing the building's Christian dimensions and downplaying its Islamic elements. More broadly, we seek to contribute to a deeper understanding of how shifts in religious and political landscapes not only impact the symbolic significance of heritage sites but also have tangible implications for their material conservation and cultural management.

Religion, contested heritage, and the politics of authenticity

Our article contributes to recent debates in sociology, cultural studies, and heritage studies on controversies concerning the importance of religion for national identities in secularizing European societies. As fewer and fewer people identify with, or actively participate in Christian life, questions about how to anchor national belonging and how to manage forms of cultural heritage, such as iconic religious sites, that serve to materially express collective identities have become particularly virulent (Astor *et al.* 2019, Balkenhol *et al.* 2020). Ashworth and Tunbridge's (1996, 30) notes that cultural heritage is indelibly marked by concerns over property:

All heritage is someone's heritage and therefore logically not someone else's: the original meaning of an inheritance implies the existence of disinheritance and by extension any creation of heritage from the past disinherits someone completely or partially, actively or potentially.

All processes of heritage-making thus involve acts of inclusion and exclusion. However, only *certain* symbols, artefacts, places or practices become flash-points for contestation over collective identity. Scholars have therefore explored the ways and criteria according to which powerful institutions and their respective regimes of 'invaluation' (Bendix 2018) accord heritage status to these places and objects. In the case of the Mosque-Cathedral, there was no dispute over the question of *whether* it was worthy of the designation as heritage and the protection that it heralds, but rather over the precise terms of conservation and the historiographical narrative through which it was to be presented to the public; a point which harkens back to the question of *whose heritage* it is, of inclusion and exclusion.

As Gieryn (2002, 35) reminds us, 'Buildings don't just sit there imposing themselves.' Their social, cultural, and historical meaning is the object of permanent (re)interpretation. The reconfiguration of their meaning is especially likely in times of political and cultural change. The meaning of heritage is flexible, malleable, and the product of negotiations and power imbalances among actors involved in heritage-making (Lowenthal 1998). Multiple strategies may be deployed to promote new visions of a building's significance, and resources may be invested to authenticate new historical narratives.

In this scenario, one of the central questions is how exactly different groups seek to legitimate their claims on heritage, as well as how it is that the political and cultural constructions of heritage are experienced as real, as historically constituted. In an important contribution, van de Port and Meyer (2018) have suggested the notions of the 'politics of authentication' and the 'aesthetics of persuasion' as central to such claims-making and the experience of heritage. To authenticate a heritage site as belonging to a particular tradition, people often draw on essentialist arguments that purport to

establish a real and indisputable reality. Academic research and practices can be highly implicated in this process. As we highlight below, archaeology plays a major role in what we call strategies of authentication and, in the process, becomes a field of politicized contestations itself. This quest for authentication often involves the reconstruction of the purity of the site's origins, emphasizing its connection to a specific cultural or historical narrative. With the term 'aesthetics of persuasion', by contrast, van de Port and Meyer (2018, 22) seek to foreground 'the processes through which forms of cultural heritage, as powerful 'sensational forms' (Meyer 2006) that convey a sense of direct presence of the past, become appreciated and appropriated, as if they were real essences.' Observing the multiple efforts to reframe the Mosque-Cathedral, materially and discursively, as essentially a Christian church, the relevance of this perspective for our case is immediately clear. There is no question about the capacity of publics to appreciate the Mosque-Cathedral, the religious traditions it houses, and the Andalusian past it evokes in their realness. The point is rather how different groups experience it – Catholics, Cordoba's residents, and Muslim tourists, and the strategies used by the actors involved in its management to shape these experiences.

Finally, we are inspired by research that emphasizes how practices and logics of the museum blend into religious heritage sites and their management. In her book *Destination Culture: Museums, Heritage and Tourism*, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) developed what she called a 'political economy of showing' and sought to theorize the dialectics of collecting and displaying ethnographic objects. Such objects, she argues, become ethnographic objects through their detachment from the surrounding context and their subjection to particular methods of the museum (documentation, preservation, and presentation). In our study, we are interested in how Catholic actors have resorted to museological methods and procedures in order to achieve not the detachment of Christian objects but their re-embedding within the Mosque-Cathedral, as well as the role of these museological methods in authenticating and validating new interpretations of the building's significance.

The Muslimness of the Mezquita in popular memory and representations

In 1985, the distinguished Spanish architect, Rafael Moneo published an article entitled, 'The Life of Buildings: The Extensions of the Mosque of Cordoba,' in the Spanish journal, *Arquitectura*. Moneo's motivation for writing the piece grew out of his puzzlement at how the *Mezquita* (he referred to it only as the 'Mosque') remained 'itself' despite all the interventions undertaken after its consecration as a church, most notably the addition of a giant

cathedral nave, a sacristy, and a series of chapels (Moneo 1985, 35). Why, he wondered, was it still understood primarily as a mosque, rather than a cathedral? His answer was that, unlike paintings, architectural works could undergo significant material and functional alterations over time without losing their essential character and integrity (Moneo 1985, 26).

Using the *Mezquita* as an illustrative example, Moneo (1985, 35) wrote that its 'features, formal compositional schemes are so solid that once they were defined they became forever fixed, both the building's image and structure, neither of which would be substantially altered by the interventions that were produced over the course of time.'³ Moneo contended that it was a testament to the *Mezquita's* architectural greatness that its identity and integrity persisted despite the myriad modifications that had been made over the centuries. 'The life of buildings,' he argued 'is supported by their architecture, by the permanence of their most characteristic formal features and, even though it seems paradoxical, it is such permanence that permits us to appreciate changes' (Moneo 1985, 35).

What interests us here is not the validity of Moneo's rather crude materialist perspective on architecture and cultural representation, but the main premise and puzzle upon which his article was based, namely that the Mosque-Cathedral continued to be known primarily as the *Mezquita* despite having undergone such radical aesthetic, functional, and symbolic alterations. His analysis was not intended to be political. Although his general commentary and exclusive use of the term '*Mezquita*' (rather than Mosque-Cathedral) when describing the building could be read as a defense of its original Islamic identity, such a reading would be anachronistic. At the time, there was no significant controversy over the building's management, and Moneo appeared to be earnestly trying to make sense of why the *Mezquita* remained as such in name and image despite being consecrated as a church and used as a cathedral for so many centuries.

Moneo's reflections speak to the primacy of the Mosque-Cathedral's Islamic identity in popular representations of the building. Ordinary Spaniards are more likely to recognize the building as the *Mezquita* or *Gran Mezquita de Córdoba* than the *Catedral de Córdoba*. The same is true beyond Spain. In this vein, anthropologist Elena Arigita (2014, 1) writes:

If Cordoba has an image recognized throughout the world, it is undoubtedly that of the pillared hall of its *Mezquita*. Not only is it the city's greatest tourist attraction, but it also constitutes a central image of the *Andalusí* memory and is one of the benchmarks of Europe's Islamic legacy.

When the Mosque-Cathedral was included in UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1984, it was listed as the 'Great Mosque of Cordoba.' Three of the four criteria that served as the basis for ICOMOS' recommendation to extend World Heritage status to the building related to its Islamic aspects. These included:

- (1) its 'considerable influence on western Muslim art from the 8th century' and on 'the development of 'Neo-Moresque' styles of the nineteenth century;'
- (2) its 'highly relevant testimony to the caliphate of Cordoba (929-1031)'; and
- (3) its 'outstanding example of the religious architecture of Islam.'

The fourth criterion related to 'the dimensions and the boldness of its interior elevation.' The recognition of the Mosque-Cathedral's artistic and historical value thus emerged primarily from its importance for the history of Islamic civilization and influence on Islamic architecture and made no mention of Christianity.

The Mosque-Cathedral's salience as an Islamic icon is also evident in the esteem bestowed upon it in the Muslim world. In 1966, the Saudi king, Faisal bin Abdulaziz, was reported to have cried upon visiting the building when he was awarded the prestigious Order of Civil Merit Collar by Franco for his diplomatic and commercial collaboration with Spain. During the 1970s, two international 'Islam-Christian Conferences' involving political and spiritual leaders from Arab countries were held at the Mosque-Cathedral due to its importance to the Muslim world and powerful symbolism as a meeting point of different religious traditions. Muslim participants were invited to pray before the mihrab (prayer niche), an act that, as we explain below, has become virtually unimaginable at present. Today, the Mosque-Cathedral remains sacred for Muslims around the globe and is a popular destination for Muslim tourists despite the Cathedral Chapter's efforts to undermine its Islamic legacy.

Rising tensions surrounding the Cathedral chapter's dominion

As mentioned at the outset, the Cathedral Chapter's concerns about challenges to the legitimacy of its dominion over the Mosque-Cathedral have grown since the 2000s, spurring it to be more assertive in affirming the building's Christian identity. There were some notable controversies prior to this period regarding the identity and management of the Mosque-Cathedral. In 1972, for instance, in anticipation of a visit from representatives of ICOMOS, a group of prominent intellectuals and architects led by Rafael Castejón, the director of Cordoba's Royal Academy of Sciences, Fine Arts, and Noble Arts, and Rafael de la Hoz, the Housing Ministry's Director General of Architecture and Technology during the final years of Franco's dictatorship, proposed 'purifying' the *Mezquita* by removing the nave, installed in its center in 1523, and other Christian elements. While this episode triggered the Cathedral Chapter's deepest fear – namely that the Cathedral of Cordoba's survival was at risk should its authenticity come into question – the proposal never mustered significant public

backing and was not seriously considered in discussions with experts from ICOMOS.

There was also a controversy in 1982 over a contingent of Muslim dignitaries praying in the Mosque-Cathedral without permission from the Cathedral Chapter. They attended a 'Hispano-Muslims Friendship Conference' organized by the popular communist mayor, Julio Anguita. The Cathedral Chapter expressed indignation with Anguita for the provocation, but it was an isolated episode. Since those who prayed were foreign dignitaries, there was little fear that the event would spark a broader movement to challenge the Cathedral Chapter's dominion.

What, then, led the Cathedral Chapter to becoming increasingly assertive in affirming the Mosque-Cathedral's Christian identity in the 2000s? This shift was likely the result of a combination of concrete symbolic acts and popular mobilisations challenging the Cathedral Chapter's control over the building's management, as well as broader societal and political changes that it perceived as threatening to its dominion.

With deepening religious diversification in Europe, North America, and beyond, the Mosque-Cathedral has become a symbol of the 'Cordoba paradigm' (Argitia 2014), and therefore aligns with larger projects in the realm of cultural politics around religious pluralism, interreligious conviviality, and dialogue (Griera 2020). At the same time, it has been portrayed by some as a symbolic representation of the enduring conflict between Islam and Christianity and has been used (and presented) as a material marker of the victory of Christianity over Islam in Europe. There are clear echoes here in the way Istanbul's Hagia Sophia has been fashioned by some as a symbol of Islam's victory over Christianity and how such motives have presumably played into its recent reconversion. The mobilization of these different discursive repertoires in the political and heritage field has given new relevance to exercises of (re)interpretation and strategies of authentication. These strategies have important ramifications for processes of inclusion and exclusion. Rather than adapting to Spain's new plural landscape and integrating values of inclusivity within the management of the Mosque-Cathedral, the Cathedral Chapter has sought to consolidate its dominion over all aspects of the building's management and representation to stave off potential challenges to its exclusive ownership and control.

To comprehend the public controversy surrounding the Mosque-Cathedral, one must consider the influence of local historical and cultural dynamics. Notably, the controversy intensified following reports that the Catholic Church had 'immatriculated' the Mosque-Cathedral, registering it as its own property for an administrative fee of €30. The so-called 'immatriculation' was possible through an obscure legal procedure introduced by José María Aznar's right-wing government and allowed the church to safeguard its control over hundreds of other properties (Báez and Rosa 2017, Astor *et al.*

2019). During the same period, the Catholic Church made efforts to highlight the building's Christian legacy on the tourist brochures and leaflets, and even changed its name in the application Google Maps (Reina 2014). These acts intensified public controversy locally and beyond. A coalition to defend the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba was promoted by local city activists, and a petition at Change.org gathered over 400.000 signatures (Astor *et al.* 2019). Prior to the petition, a regional community of Muslim converts had announced their demand to convert the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba into a shared place of worship and ecumenical encounter. While these protests had different origins and demands, each questioned the Christianization of the monument and the Church's narrative. In the context of these challenges to the Church's control over the building, the Cathedral Chapter increasingly sought demonstrate and perform the Mosque-Cathedral's Christian origins and identity.

The quest for origins: archaeology and practices of authentication

Archaeology plays an essential role in the process of constructing a Christian foundational narrative about the Mosque-Cathedral. It is also one of the domains of greatest friction between academics, activists, and religious authorities. The Cathedral Chapter is adamant that the *Mezquita* was built on top of a Visigoth church called the Basilica of San Vicente (Carvajal López 2021).⁴ The Mosque-Cathedral's official website includes a section called, 'Discover the monument,' which details the Cathedral Chapter's vision of the building's foundations. A 3D visual simulation comprising overlapping layers illustrates how the *Mezquita* was originally erected on 'Christian soil'. The website also contains a chronology in which most of the indicators correspond to the Christian period.⁵ The key narrative conveyed by the website is that the foundations and core features of the building are Christian, not Muslim.

The theory of the Basilica of San Vicente is not only displayed on the webpage but is also staged inside the monument. Near the main path of the visitor's entrance, there is a pane of glass on the floor through which it is possible to view an illuminated mosaic that, according to an explanatory plaque, was part of the original San Vicente church.⁶ All visitors entering the Mosque-Cathedral encounter markers (i.e. the plaque, the glass, the special illumination) that give symbolic importance to the 'archaeological evidence' that authenticates the Christian foundations of the building. During our fieldwork, we observed how most guided tours (whether official or not) stopped around the glass flooring. Guides animated tourists to view the mosaic and shared explanations about the Christian origins of the monument.⁷ On rare occasions, the guides outlined the controversies and made clear that there was no consensus on the Basilica of San Vicente. Most

tours, however, used the mosaic as a starting point for narratives that emphasized the Christian origins of the building.

Academic and professional archaeologists have expressed scepticism regarding the straightforward interpretation of the archaeological remains as evidence of the Basilica of San Vicente (Arce-Sainz 2015). This interpretation has also been questioned by the multidisciplinary team of experts hired by the Cathedral Chapter itself. In a public conference held in the Mosque-Cathedral in 2020, archaeologist Raimundo Ortiz stated, 'We have not been able to identify a Christian Basilica under the Mosque of Cordoba.' (cited in Moreno 2020).

The theory of the Basilica of San Vicente was originally based on data obtained from Arabic manuscripts. The texts claimed that Abderraman I built the Mosque of Cordoba over the San Vicente church, which he had purchased from Mozarabic Christians. According to contemporary Spanish archaeologist, Fernando Arce-Sainz (2015), the most extended account affirmed that Muslim soldiers demolished all of Cordoba's churches except for a place of prayer that Muslims and Christians shared. However, Arce-Sainz argues that these sources may relate cultural myth rather than historical reality. In a similar vein, Carvajal López (2021) writes that the idea of the existence of an earlier church might be a cliché imported by the same Andalusian authors from their Eastern colleagues.

Nonetheless, the existence of these Arabic sources referencing the presence of a Christian church at the site of the Mosque-Cathedral was cited as justification for archaeological excavations beneath the complex. Archaeologist Felix Hernández was the first to undertake such excavations in a systematic fashion during the 1930s.⁸ Though he left behind some documentation, he never published a definitive statement about the excavations.⁹ As also stated by other archaeologists (e.g. Gómez Moreno), there was no conclusive archaeological evidence to support to the idea of the Basilica's existence. The possibility of its existence was not flatly denied, but it was made quite clear that the mosaics discovered did not belong to a church but rather a domestic structure.

The archaeological debate lay dormant for decades as conservation work was devoted to other issues. However, between 2004 and 2005 a local archaeologist, Pedro Marfil, who was the official architect of the Cathedral Chapter for many years, resumed the archaeological work in an attempt to find definitive proof of the Basilica. Marfil was one of the first authors to propose a new theory about the Mosque-Cathedral's origins based on the idea of an 'episcopal complex'. According to him, the excavations did not furnish proof of the existence of a previous basilica because what lay underneath the mosque was not only a small Christian church but also an episcopal palace, made up of different buildings, and a thus sign of the power of Christianity in the city. Marfil articulated the theory of the episcopal complex already in the 1990s following the

discovery of a grave in the area, which he took as proof of the existence of a Christian complex. As the archaeological excavations advanced, the theory regained special prominence and has remained essential to narratives explaining the Christian origins of the Mosque-Cathedral, despite the scepticism expressed by numerous medievalists (Arce-Sainz 2015).

In 2005, amidst Marfil's work, the 'Museo San Vicente' was created within the Mosque-Cathedral. The museum was conceived as a place to exhibit artefacts that, according to Marfil and others, belonged to the historical and original Christian building. The museum is indicated at the entrance of the Mosque-Cathedral and occupies a central place in the building. The general narrative presents the artefacts as 'definitive' proof of the existence of a church in the area. The exact space of the museum is slightly confusing for visitors since there are no clear demarcations separating it from the rest of the building. However, the use of classical museum markers (e.g. glass vitrines or signs with explanations) serves to foster the authenticity of the artefacts exhibited and bestows credibility upon the Christian narrative. As Luis Recio Mateo, a local historian and guide of the Mosque-Cathedral, stated a few days before the inauguration of the museum:

'It will be this inauguration, which from now on will allow us to visualize in situ the sacred Christian character of the place where the most important Islamic monument in Spain is located [...] From now on, it will not be possible to explain the Arab Mosque without first mentioning its historical Christian origin.' (Cited Arce-Sainz 2015).¹⁰

In 2017, a new excavation campaign was commenced under the auspices of the Cathedral Chapter. The results remain contested. According to some, the archaeological excavation confirms the existence of an episcopal palace under the Mosque-Cathedral (Raya 2022). According to others, it falsifies the theory of the Basilica of San Vicente (Moreno 2020).

The Mosque-Cathedral as a 'living building' and a site of 'intangible heritage'

The Cathedral Chapter of Cordoba has additionally sought to authenticate the Mosque-Cathedral's identity as a primarily Christian structure by emphasizing its active use as a place of Catholic worship and its connection to a variety of 'intangible' Catholic traditions. Mass is held in the Mosque-Cathedral on a daily basis, and Christian musical concerts are organized with regularity. Public exhibitions of Catholic artefacts and traditions are also occasionally displayed within the building's confines. For instance, in 2021, an exhibition entitled, 'Art and Brotherhoods in Cordoba,' was assembled in collaboration with an association of local Catholic brotherhoods and featured during the second half of the year. Exhibitions of this sort were criticized in a report issued in 2017 by the 'Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba

Coalition: Everyone's Patrimony' (*Plataforma Mezquita-Catedral de Córdoba: Patrimonio de tod@s*), a coalition of heterogeneous progressive activists contesting the Catholic Church's ownership of the building, for comprising an 'abusive use and denaturalization of the Mosque-Cathedral.' The authors of the report argued that filling the Mosque-Cathedral with Christian iconography and presenting it first and foremost as a cathedral in promotional videos and evening events constituted a 'historical falsification' of 'a monument recognized globally for its Islamic architecture' (*Plataforma Mezquita-Catedral de Córdoba* 2017, 2).

Audio and visual displays that direct attention to the Christian dimensions of the Mosque-Cathedral function as part of what the anthropologist Birgit Meyer (2010) has termed an 'aesthetics of persuasion,' insofar as they engage diverse senses and sensibilities, with the effect of making claims about the building's Catholic identity more palpable. Various figures associated with the Cathedral Chapter have also emphasized how the practical uses and performances of the Mosque-Cathedral as a Christian space have been indispensable to its conservation. Specifically, they argue that maintaining the structural and aesthetic integrity of the Mosque-Cathedral has been enhanced by its functioning as a 'living building' where Catholic worship remains active.

Current references to the Mosque-Cathedral as a 'living building' constitute a rather blatant distortion of the concept's original formulation in the aforementioned 1985 article written by Rafael Moneo. In 2014, one of the chief architects in charge of the Mosque-Cathedral's conservation, Gabriel Ruiz Cabrero, co-opted this expression to make the case that the Mosque-Cathedral 'is divinely conserved because of its everyday use.' These remarks were made amid the aforementioned controversy over the ownership of the Mosque-Cathedral.

Ruiz Cabrero's line of reasoning has made its way into the description of the Mosque-Cathedral on UNESCO's World Heritage Convention site, which states that the building's 'continued religious use has ensured in large part its preservation.' (UNESCO World Heritage Convention 2023). The framing of the Mosque-Cathedral as a 'living building' has recently been foregrounded in a report published by the Cathedral Chapter detailing its vision for the site's future management (Plan director 2021). The report was written by a team of specialists, including Ruiz Cabrero and two other architects, an archaeologists, an art historian, an engineer, and several canons, among other collaborators.

Citing Moneo's 1985 article, the report establishes the Mosque-Cathedral's character as a 'living building' in the introduction. What is novel about the report is how it assimilates the notion of the Mosque-Cathedral as a living building within a larger framework that foregrounds the Mosque-Cathedral's 'intangible heritage,' a concept that has become increasingly central to

discussions surrounding cultural heritage since UNESCO's development of the 'Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage' in 2003. The report on the Mosque-Cathedral includes an entire chapter on intangible heritage, with subsections on (Christian) music, church bell ringing, and holy processions, which are described as being inscribed in the Mosque-Cathedral's 'DNA, in its genesis, and in its existence' (Plan director 2021, 248).

Aware that the value of intangible heritage stems from both historical longevity and ongoing vitality, the narratives advanced by the Cathedral Chapter are simultaneously historical and presentist. Hence its simultaneous obsession with origins and use of biological metaphors (e.g. DNA), on the one hand, and its emphasis on the importance of current practices and functional uses, on the other. The report dates the Mosque-Cathedral's intangible heritage back to its consecration as a church. What remains alive in the building are its Christian traditions, whereas Islamic traditions are relegated to a now defunct past. There is no discussion of reviving 'lost' Muslim traditions associated with the building.

There are potentially significant stakes to discourses that invoke intangible heritage. For instance, if various Christian traditions associated with the Mosque-Cathedral are recognized as intangible heritage, they become protected, thus consolidating the Church's monopoly over the religious practices that take place in and around the building. As we will see in the following section, the Cathedral Chapter has taken a progressively hard line in forbidding Muslim ritual practice in the Mosque-Cathedral so as to ensure that the only intangible heritage associated with the building is Catholic.

The impossibility of sharing sacred space

Debates about the possibility of allowing Muslims to use the Mosque-Cathedral for Islamic prayer and opening the building to multiple, or even shared, forms of worship have occurred repeatedly in recent decades and have become more pronounced since the beginning of the millennium. In 2006, the president of an association called the 'Islamic Council of Spain' (*Junta Islámica de España*), Mansur Escudero, performed a prayer at the entrance of the Mosque-Cathedral to protest the rejection by Cordoba's bishop of his request to open the building for Islamic worship. In an interview with journalists, Mansur declared:

'The prayer was meant to testify to the fact that we are neither claiming ownership or the building, nor asking for a shared liturgy [...] We only have the sincere demand that the building be converted into an ecumenical center in which believers of all faiths can pray.' (Figueras 2006)

He also said:

'The Mosque-Cathedral is a world heritage site, and Cordoba aspires to become the European cultural capital in 2016. It is an emblematic place and what could

be better than to convert it into a leading example of *convivencia* (conviviality) in these times when interreligious dialogue is so difficult.' (Ibid.)

Briefly before, the association had sent a letter to the Nuncio Apostolico del Pontifice in Spain, Manuel Monteiro de Castro, asking the Mosque-Cathedral to be opened to Islamic worship in order to 'awaken the conscience' of Christians and Muslims and to bury past antagonisms. They also asked the Nuncio to forward the letter to Pope Benedict XVI in Rome. Accompanied by the request for a personal meeting with the Pope, the letter alerted the Pope to the existence of fundamentalist currents in Islam and Christianity and suggested that converting the Mosque-Cathedral into a truly multireligious site would establish an admirable example to be followed by other interreligious initiatives around the world. It also clarified that this demand was not meant to articulate nostalgic longings for an historical *al-Ándalus* but that, instead *al-Ándalus* never ceased to exist as a reality: 'Spain is *al-Ándalus* and *al-Ándalus* is Spain' (ibid.). Mansur Escudero thus asserted a species of historical continuity that might be read as an implicit statement on the Mosque-Cathedral's true nature as Islamic.¹¹

Cordoba's bishop Juan José Asenjo forcefully rejected Escudero's demand, arguing that such a move neither contributed to peaceful coexistence nor promoted interreligious dialogue between Catholics and Muslims. He added that it would create confusion among the believers about the true nature of the site and that it threatened to promote religious indifference. Contrary to this outright rejection, some, albeit modest, political support for the idea was voiced at the local level by the leftist party Izquierda Unida (IU), which suggested that the demand for shared worship was legitimate and there should not be a problem in initiating such a process. And while already in 2004, a local group of socialist (PSOE) and leftist (IU) deputies had supported a petition organized by Spain's Islamic Commission (*Comisión Islámica de España*) to hand over parts of the building to Muslims, foreign minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos (PSOE) denied that there was any need for debate.

Contrary to such views, however, the discussion reached the boiling point again when on 1 April 2010, roughly a dozen Austrian Muslim tourists, out of a group of 118, knelt inside the building to perform an Islamic prayer and provoked a violent encounter with the security guards (Monteiro 2010). Two were arrested for a brief period by the police. Cordoba's bishop immediately condemned the act, which according to eyewitnesses appeared to be pre-planned as group members had entered the building through different gates, communicated through walky-talkies and shielded their leader during his prayer when the security guard arrived and sought to intervene.

The Muslims, by contrast, suggested that their prayer was a spontaneous expression of their religious sentiment upon experiencing the aesthetic

beauty of the building. Other commentators who were sympathetic toward the tourist group, including the Islamic Council, argued that Muslims from abroad were understandably confused due to a lack of clear indications as to what they were allowed or not allowed to do regarding ritual practice. A similar incident occurred again in 2017 when a Pakistani Muslim tourist and resident of the US prayed in the Mosque-Cathedral (La Voz de Cordoba 2017). He apparently jumped over the fence that separated the hall from the *mihrab*, the niche in the wall that indicates the direction of Mecca, until security guards became aware of the incident and rushed to detain him.

Most recently, and perhaps most prominently, the issue of allowing Muslim prayer re-emerged in the aftermath of the decision taken by Turkey's Council of State following the initiative of Turkish president Erdogan to reconvert Istanbul's iconic Hagia Sofia into an active place of Islamic worship. Serving as a Greek Orthodox Church from 360 until Constantinople's conquest in 1453, this building had been converted to a Sunni mosque and then turned into a secular museum under Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish republic in 1930. Immediately, afterward Bin Muhammad al-Qasimi, Sheikh Sultan of the Arabic Emirate of Sharjah, suggested in an interview with a local news channel that it was now also time to reopen the Mosque-Cathedral for Muslims. He even stated: 'We demand the return of Cordoba's Mosque, which was granted to the church, as this is a gift which doesn't belong to those who don't deserve it.' (Saraswat 2020). Interestingly, still during his visit of Cordoba and the Mosque-Cathedral in the context of the high-level 'Alliance of Civilisations' meetings in 2014, Erdogan had urged the Spanish government to follow the Turkish example of the Hagia Sofia and turn the Mosque-Cathedral into a secular museum. Also in 2020, Noura Al Kaabi, the minister of Culture and Knowledge Development of the United Arab Emirates, condemned the Hagia Sofia's reconversion, which she saw as motivated by personal interests.

In all these contexts, Catholic officials, in particular those belonging to the Cathedral Chapter and Cordoba's bishop, have deployed a range of different arguments to dispel proposals for shared usage of the building. Most importantly, they argue that it is theologically impossible to conduct religious rituals in one and the same building together with adherents of a different religious tradition. This, they contend, is true for both Catholic Christians and Muslims.¹²

Based on such doctrinal considerations, they also suggested that opening up the Mosque-Cathedral for Muslims is tantamount to saying 'Catholics, you need to leave now' (El Confidencial Autonomico 2010). In particular, bishop Demetrio Fernández stated, 'You need to know, in places where Muslims pray, nobody else can pray. That means that if I permit Muslims to pray in the Cathedral of Cordoba, we will already have to leave the day after

tomorrow. To allow Muslims to pray in the Cathedral for Catholics is equivalent to saying goodbye and good night, and that would be irresponsible.' (El Mundo 2010). There is thus a background fear that ceding space to Muslims would be the first step in a process of their own expulsion from the building. Stating that those demanding shared use apparently ignore the theological tenets of both Catholics and Muslims, they have also sought to disqualify secular liberal commentators on the issue. Several politicians and trade union leaders from the left-liberal camp had argued that inviting Muslims to share the building would have positive effects on tourism in the city, hence addressing the issue from a more instrumental perspective (Religion en Libertad 2010).

Catholic officials in control of the Mosque-Cathedral have not always been consistent in their approach to Muslim worship. As mentioned above, over the course of the twentieth century, several exceptions were granted for high-status Arab elites from the Gulf, such as Saddam Hussein and other Muslim dignitaries. For that reason, Islamic leaders such as Escudero rejected the notion that canon law prohibited Islamic prayers in the Mosque-Cathedral (Tremlett 2010).

In developing arguments around the possibility for shared worship, it has been common to frame the Mosque-Cathedral as metonymic of larger issues and historical processes. During a public debate on the question of shared worship, bishop Fernández defended the Catholic title deed of the Mosque-Cathedral by saying: 'Attacking the Cathedral means attacking the heart of the church' and that the Mosque-Cathedral was 'a vital necessity of Christianity's organigram' (La Vanguardia 2014). Fernández thus portrayed the role of the Mosque-Cathedral in dramatic terms as the center and lifeline of Christianity as such, suggesting in a perhaps exaggerated fashion that the integrity of the building as Christian was key to the integrity and future of Christianity. While we remain agnostic on this latter point, we highlight the sociological mechanism in which the issue of Islamic worship and its continued banning carries the burden of safeguarding the future of Christianity, and the way the iconicity of the building affords it the power to lend credibility to such far-reaching claims. This iconicity is not least engendered by the fact that the Mosque-Cathedral is very often portrayed as a metonym of the entire encounter and confrontation of Christianity and Islam in the Mediterranean region as the essential European frontier, of Christians' victory and Muslims' defeat, and of the perceived need to protect Christian lands against contemporary Muslim advances. In the same roundtable discussion mentioned above, other participants made far-flung references to the 'myth of the three cultures' and medieval Iberian *convivencia* denouncing it as false, and suggesting that under medieval Islamic rule, Christians, Muslims and Jews did not mix but lived under a regime of apartheid in which differences in rank enabled the cruellest forms of persecution (La

Información 2014). Additionally, Catholic officials rejected the proposal by arguing that 'the Catholic Church has been here for sixteen centuries while Muslims were here only four and a half centuries' (El Confidencial Autónomo 2010). They thus turned the duration of their control of the space into an argument of lawful exclusive occupation.

Conclusions

'This is a cultural war, and we are losing it,' suggested Ismael,¹³ an Andalusian activist, when asked in a personal interview about the controversies surrounding Cordoba's Mosque-Cathedral. His statement echoed sentiments that have been widespread in Cordoban and Andalusian civil society in recent decades. The disputes over the management and ownership of the Mosque-Cathedral have remained salient and have confronted contrasting legacies and narratives regarding the meaning and value of the monument. Ismael believes that the Catholic Church has gone too far in Christianizing the site, and that there were nefarious political interests aimed at belittling Cordoba's Islamic past. Ismael belongs to a group of cultural activists who are passionate about the multireligious history of Andalusia and who have been active in denouncing the Catholic Church's conservation practices. Through online public campaigns, legal actions, and political measures, they have accused the Catholic Church of presenting a distorted version of history that gives disproportionate weight to the Mosque-Cathedral's Christian dimensions. The Catholic Church has consistently dismissed these critiques and defended its actions by stating that the Mosque-Cathedral is a 'living monument', currently functioning as a cathedral, and that it is precisely its ongoing use for Christian liturgy that accounts for its successful preservation. The Cathedral Chapter has opposed narratives that consider the Mosque-Cathedral an emblem of multi-religious coexistence.

The increasing presence of Islam in the peninsula, along with the rise and prominence of narratives that celebrate the diverse and cosmopolitan history of Al-Andalus, have undoubtedly contributed to the Cathedral Chapter's defensiveness. The Christianization of the Mosque-Cathedral is thus intimately linked to Islam's re-emergence as a significant presence in Spain, a development that has also contributed to friction surrounding traditional 'Moors and Christians' celebrations. As García Sanjuan (2018, 133) has argued, the growing importance of Islam globally and the increased Islamic presence Spain 'have created an environment within which two opposing understandings of Al-Andalus have come into conflict: a conservative view, dismissive of the historical legacy of Al-Andalus, and a progressive perspective, favoring its integration into national historical memory.'

Over the last twenty years, the Catholic Church has worked intensively to frame the Mosque-Cathedral as a hallmark of Christianity and has encouraged

a reading of history based on the notion of '*Reconquista*'; in other words, the idea that Spain is essentially a Catholic country that has had to face the continuous threat of Islam (García-Sanjuán 2018, Rodríguez-Temiño and Almansa-Sánchez 2021). Due to its iconicity, the Mosque-Cathedral has become a political battleground in which the two sides of this ideological divide struggle for dominance. Aligned with conservative political forces, the Cathedral Chapter has used various strategies to defend its narrative and has mobilized resources from the domains of both religion and heritage.

On the one hand, as we have argued, the Cathedral Chapter has intensified religious practice within the Mosque-Cathedral by promoting religious events, celebrations, and symbolisms with the aim of solidifying the Christian identity and character of the monument. There is a constant effort to reshape the 'sensational form' (Meyer 2006) of the building and the 'genre' in which it is inscribed (Whyte 2006) through generating an aesthetics that might work to disguise, or conflate, the Islamic dimensions of the monument. On the other hand, the Cathedral Chapter has undertaken several measures aimed at foregrounding the Mosque-Cathedral's Christian dimensions and defining it as part of Spain's Catholic cultural heritage. The establishment of the San Vicente Museum and the display of Christian artifacts on the building's premises are two notable examples. Drawing attention to the intangible Christian heritage associated with the Mosque-Cathedral and framing the monument as a 'living building' whose ongoing preservation depends critically on the vitality of Catholic liturgy have likewise fostered what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) calls a 'political economy of showing' which serves to reinforce the primacy of the structure's Christian origins and identity. Despite all its efforts, however, the Mosque-Cathedral remains the *Mezquita* for most, which is precisely why the Cathedral Chapter's efforts are unlikely to abate any time soon.

While buildings with entangled religious legacies like the Mosque-Cathedral may be officially converted into particular kinds of temples or museums at specific moments in time, processes of conversion or reconversion are ongoing and in need of continual performance via public acts and social practices that reinforce certain narratives while holding others in check. Simultaneously, the entwined religious legacies embedded in the architectural fabric and public representations of these structures are not easily subdued. Returning momentarily to the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque in 2020, Steiner and Neumeier (2021, p. 221) point to the building's 'long track record of resisting any kind of top-down efforts to pigeonhole its status,' whether as a mosque or a museum. Despite Erdoğan marshalling the full symbolic power of the state to impose a strictly Muslim identity on the building, it remains a powerful symbol for Christians and others around the world with different perspectives

on its identity and cultural significance. As with the Hagia Sophia, efforts at imposing a narrow definition of the Mosque-Cathedral's 'true' identity remain unpersuasive to many and demand perpetual renewal.

Notes

1. According to official sources, 'The Cathedral Chapter of Canons is a college of priests responsible for carrying out the most solemn liturgical duties in the Cathedral Church. It is also the Cathedral Chapter's duty to fulfill the offices entrusted to it by the law or the Diocesan Bishop' (Code of Canon Law, no. 503). The Chapter is currently composed of 18 Catholic male local authorities. For more information, see: <https://mezquita-catedraldecordoba.es/la-catedral/el-cabildo/> [Accessed 30 July 2023].
2. See for instance, the organisation of the exhibition 'Change of Era. Cordoba and the Christian Mediterranean' inaugurated in December 2022, and aimed at attract an interntional audience. See: <https://mezquita-catedraldecordoba.es/comunicacion/noticia/notas-de-prensa/cambio-de-era-cordoba-y-el-mediterraneo-cristiano/> [Accessed 30 July 2023].
3. Moneo contends that rather than transforming the essence of the *Mezquita*, the cathedral nave installed in 1523 had paradoxically brought even greater unity to the mosque by giving new purpose to an earlier extension of the structure added by Almanzor between 976 and 1002 that now encircled the nave.
4. We submit that the existence of the basilica is especially controversial in certain scholarly circles but less contested in broader public debates.
5. Of the 25 historical milestones included in the chronology, only 6 correspond to the Muslim period of the building, all others refer to Christian events or those linked to the restoration of the building.
6. The plaque states 'The knowledge of this site comes to us through some documental references and the results of excavations undertaken by Félix Hernández in the 1930's, as well as thanks to more recent discoveries made by means of archaeological studies carried out in 2017. This research, completed throughout the expanses of the building, is what brings to light the discoveries of a series of walls and flooring belonging to San Vicente. In this way, various spaces were found under the foundational chapel of Abd al-Rahman I. Among them, there are quarters with a rectangular floor that leads to the central nave of a building with a basilica floor. In addition, the presence of an apse construction is attested, as well as certain traces of a deposit of water, which possibly came from a baptismal font. Parts of the pieces recovered in these excavations are currently on display in the exhibition area of San Vicente and in the Archaeological Museum of Cordoba'.
7. Guides who want to work at the mosque must obtain the approval of the Cathedral Chapter and pass specific exams. See also: ABC de Córdoba, 2023. ¿Quieres ser guía oficial de la Mezquita-Catedral de Córdoba? Estos son los requisitos para los nuevos exámenes de junio [online], *ABC de Córdoba*, 3 May, Turismo. Available from: <https://sevilla.abc.es/andalucia/cordoba/quieres-guia-oficial-mezquitacatedral-cordoba-requisitos-nuevos-20230503113425-nts.html> [Accessed 30 July 2023].
8. He was not the first archaeologist excavating the area but the first to do it in a more systematic and scientific manner. In 1920, the first architect who

excavated this part of the foundational Mosque was R. Velázquez Bosco, of whom the supporters of the existence of the church say that he found the 'first ashlar of the church of San Vicente'.

9. In relation to this matter, Ana María Vicente, one of Hernández' research assistants wrote that 'According to what Don Félix told us on different occasions, the remains he found there, and which he passed on to a meticulous plan, left him somewhat perplexed about the existence of this church [San Vicente] because, although they are presented in an east-west direction [he refers to certain walls that appeared in the prayer room], what could be the foundation of the central nave is ridiculously wide, apart from the fact that no vestiges of the chancel or of any characteristic element of the structure of a Paleochristian or Visigothic liturgical building were discovered'. (Vicente, 'Perfil científico y humano de D. Félix Hernández', p. 176 cited Arce-Sainz 2015, 21).
10. See also: Diario Córdoba, 2005. San Vicente, en la Mezquita-Catedral [online]. *Diario Córdoba*, 20 January, Cultura. Available from: <https://www.diariocordoba.com/cultura/2005/01/20/san-vice-mezquita-catedral-38810391.html> [Accessed 7 December 2022].
11. On this episode, see also Argitia (2014).
12. Doing so, they ignored much empirical and historical evidence on practices of sharing places of worship among Christians and Muslims in the Mediterranean region; see for instance Albera and Couroucli (2012).
13. The name is a pseudonym for purposes of confidentiality. Ismael was interviewed in April 3th 2020 in Cordoba.

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Notes on contributor

Mar Griera is a professor in the Sociology Department at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. **Avi Astor** is an Associate Professor at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. **Marian Burchardt** is a professor in the Department of Transregionalisation at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Leipzig and the Leipzig Research Centre Global Dynamics (ReCentGlobe). He is also a Senior Research Partner at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Multicultural Societies, Göttingen.

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