**Tensions on the Frontier**

Historian Thomas Devaney examines the rise of religious intolerance in medieval Spain.

The Christian civic and religious leaders of 15th-century Castile didn’t have televised news conferences or government websites to help them shape or respond to public opinion.

Instead, they staged public spectacles that served much the same purpose—including festivals, religious processions, and knightly tournaments that often included a theatrical narrative framework.


For Americans today, the term “frontier” implies action, says Devaney—a place “to be crossed, conquered, pushed back, and made civilized.” But for medieval Castilians it denoted a “borderland region,” an area for interactions between cultures. Christians living closest to the frontier between Castile and Granada had developed—despite their religious differences—lucrative trading partnerships with Muslims on the one hand, and, on the other side, partnerships that were disrupted with great loss to both sides whenever conflicts flared. So they tended to be the least enthusiastic about going to war with Muslims.

With the spectacles, rulers were trying to provide the people with what they guessed the populace wanted, says Devaney. The people, in turn, took the spectacles as evidence of the individual or group’s control.”

Often, spectacles staged by figures of authority had extensive subtexts that reflected a complicated balancing of competing interests. For instance, Don Miguel Lucas de Iránzo, the ruler of the frontier town of Jaén, was eager to resume military campaigns against Muslims across the border. But to do so, he had to “inspire a local population that was just as happy to trade with the Muslims as fight them,” Devaney writes.

Nothing would be the same, however, after spectacles later in the time period turned violent. In the 1470s in Córdoba, for instance, a religious procession ended in a riot. As the violence spiraled out of control, many of the town’s converts were killed, while others fled for their lives.

Devaney says that in the 32 years the book covers, people in the region moved from a kind of acceptance of difference to fear to, finally, dismissal, as the majority asserted that theirs was a Christian society. He calls the time frame of his book a period of “growing intolerance and a renewed push for holy war.”

The questions his book address-