

Defending the Reconquista at New College

A revealing Twitter exchange shows the necessity of rebuilding Florida's liberal-arts school.

By Bruce Gilley

The decision by Florida governor Ron DeSantis in 2023 to oust the radicals controlling the state's tiny liberal-arts college, New College of Florida, has elicited frenzied reactions from the global Left. The effort by a democratically elected government to bring political balance, educational excellence, and fiscal sanity to a failed public institution of 800 students is seen as nothing less than a collegiate March on Rome. The reaction has rather proven the point: The leftist control of higher education has become so totalitarian that even the slightest hint of deviance is viewed as a mortal threat to the revolutionary project.

I will be spending my 2024-25 sabbatical as presidential scholar-in-residence at New College. My own experience since President Richard Corcoran announced the appointment in February confirms the desperate need for such measures. The announcement has so far brought a [hit piece](#) in *Inside Higher Ed* and a flurry of records requests to my home institution from *The Guardian* newspaper.

Most telling for me, however, was a little exchange I had on X with one Eric Nemarich, a doctoral student in history at Harvard who taught a class at New College in fall 2023 on the medieval Mediterranean. Nemarich posted a reply to an [essay](#) I wrote on my New College plans, titled "Why I Am Joining the Reconquista."



A little history. The archetype of a *reconquista* (literally, “reconquest”) was the Christian retaking of the Iberian Peninsula from Muslim armies

that had conquered it between 711 and 718. The reconquest battles began almost immediately but accelerated after the so-called Al-Andalus became an independent Islamic caliphate in 929, cut off from international support. After the caliphate collapsed in 1031, the Christian kingdoms of the north mustered. The first major victory came in 1064. A papal council in 1123 declared that retaking Spain was just as important as retaking the Holy Land. By 1249, most of the Muslim rulers had been driven out.

Nemarich commented on X that my use of the term *reconquista* was out of date. Modern academics no longer thought of that period in Spain in terms of a “reconquest” but, rather, as a peaceful and tolerant era that was unfortunately disrupted by Christian and North African ruffians. On this view, the paradise of *convivencia* (living together), as it is known in historical circles, existed among the followers of the three Abrahamic, monotheistic religions as a result of enlightened Islamic leadership. The real tragedy was the *Reconquista* itself, which brought to an end an era of multicultural tolerance and scientific and artistic progress.

Nemarich related how he had instilled this correct perspective into his New College students by adopting the 2002 book *The*

Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain by the late Yale professor María Rosa Menocal.

I am not one to gainsay the right of professors to teach whatever perspective in whatever way they prefer. The Menocal book, and the *convivencia* interpretation, are certainly well within the bounds of reasonable scholarly perspectives. What does amaze me, however, is when scholars deny the possibility that their topic could be approached in any other way.

Menocal's book was a stroke of good timing. It came out just as American academics were in damage-control mode following 9/11 and trying to paint Islam in as favorable a light as possible. It was also widely criticized. Anna Akasoy, then a postdoctoral fellow at Oxford and now a professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, called it a "tendentious selection of historical material and perspectives" and an example of "using history in political debates." In other words, Menocal's book was what we might call the NPR version of medieval Spain. Indeed, NPR interviewed her on *Fresh Air*, where the host gushed about this hitherto unknown story of Islamic greatness and Christian barbarity.

I replied to Nemarich on X that I believed the concept of the *Reconquista* was grounded in solid realities of medieval Spain. The best scholarly treatment of this perspective had been offered by Dario Fernandez-Morera of Northwestern University in his 2016 riposte to Menocal, *The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise: Muslims, Christians, and Jews under Islamic Rule in Medieval Spain*. Fernandez-Morera argued that Islamic armies had conquered a flourishing civilization and had imposed a repressive and intellectually stagnant theocracy in its place, with a daily diet of beheadings, impalings, crucifixions, and rapes.

Fernandez-Morera's book, like Menocal's, was favorably

reviewed in many academic journals, I pointed out. Nemerich was having none of it. The book was “not taken seriously” by reputable scholars, he insisted. He cited the politics of the *Middle East Quarterly*’s editorial board, a body made up of centrist and conservative scholars, as grounds for dismissing the substance of their positive review, an approach that, if adopted by conservatives such as myself, would allow us to shrug off the significance of 99 percent of academic research. The job of scholars is to deploy logic and evidence, not character assassination, I noted.

“Can you even hear yourself?,” I asked. The Harvard history department has apparently trained out of its graduate students the ability to consider any academic viewpoints outside of the contemporary leftist mainstream. This was a reminder to me that the intellectual-capture problem in higher education goes deeper than the elimination of non-left perspectives. Rather, it is a trained incapacity of most scholars to even recognize that there *are* different perspectives. Nemerich’s book represented The Truth, Nemerich was saying, and alternatives like Fernandez-Morera were False.

I suggested that New College students who had taken Nemerich’s class should rush to the library to sign out Fernandez-Morera and judge for themselves. “The New College library does not carry it,” Nemerich replied. Of course it doesn’t!

I am not one of those scholars who imagine a Socratic paradise in higher education where all viewpoints are offered in every classroom and students are encouraged to seek truth with their open-minded professors. I do believe, however, that professors should be self-aware enough to recognize that their truth is someone else’s falsehood (even in the sciences, where debates on fundamental issues rage on) and to have the courage and integrity to accept this, even if they do not teach it. What is most galling about many leftist scholars who pretend that reasonable alternative viewpoints do not exist is not the ideological capture at work but something more basic:

intellectual shallowness. The most important implication of this insight is to work tirelessly with university leaders to cultivate gardens of viewpoint diversity within every department.

This little exchange is a stark reminder of why New College, like virtually every other institution of higher education in the United States, found itself in a state of intellectual involution circa 2023. If students in Nemerich's classroom knew they would be met with a barrage of "I'm a Harvard graduate student, I know there is only one Truth here!," they would almost certainly zip their mouths and write course essays pandering to Nemerich's Menocalian viewpoint. Surely, turning our young people into calculating sycophants of their professor's ideological bias is the saddest spectacle of all.

There is, of course, a direct parallel in this debate to the reforms at New College itself. Was New College before 2023 an Evergladian *convivencia* where an enlightened leftist faculty encouraged wide debate and multiple perspectives? Did the Marxists insist on giving space to Milton Friedman, Samuel Huntington, and Bernard Lewis? Or was it in fact an intolerant place with ritualized stonings of non-left viewpoints that was reconquered for good reason? The growing nostalgia one sees for the New College of the past reads much like the myth-making done by Menocal. But the myth of the *novum collegium* paradise seems as tendentious as its Andalusian counterpart.

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