

THE PRESENCE OF ISLAM IN ANDALUS

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‘When the right light is brought to play upon Spain,
her authentic reality is revealed in ever clearer lines.’

Americo Castro

INTRODUCTION

The Muslims – who in the present context are usually referred to as ‘the Moors’ – were in Spain for over eight hundred years. In many areas, especially in the south, which today still retains its ancient name of Andalucia, or Andalus, they formed an overwhelming majority of the population. Islam flowered and flourished in the land in a light which diminished the shadows of the Dark Ages in Europe, and which cast illumination where before there was only ignorance. As long as they remained established in the worship of their Creator, the Muslims of Andalus enjoyed a quality of life unparalleled in the rest of Europe:

Europe was darkened at sunset, Cordova shone with public lamps; Europe was dirty, Cordova built a thousand baths; Europe was covered with vermin, Cordova changed its undergarments daily; Europe lay in mud, Cordova’s streets were paved; Europe’s palaces had smoke-holes in the ceiling, Cordova’s arabesques were exquisite; Europe’s nobility could not sign its name, Cordova’s children went to school; Europe’s monks could not read the baptismal service, Cordova’s teachers created a library of Alexandrian dimensions.¹

Today the Muslims’ presence in Spain is virtually non-existent. Similarly, the Jews who once formed an influential and important minority during the period of Muslim rule have almost completely disappeared from Spain. There is no longer any trace of the Goths who were Unitarians by conviction, and who once ruled over Italy, southern France and Spain. Similarly, the Unitarian Christians who were known as the Paulicians and who came after the Goths, no longer exist in these countries.

The Muslims, the Jews, the Goths and the Paulicians all had one fundamental belief in common: they all affirmed that there is only One God. They were hated by the Roman Catholic Church because of this, and during different stages in the history of Spain they were systematically persecuted and massacred in the Name of God by this institution, and most of their books were destroyed.

An understanding of the basic pattern of the Trinitarian persecution of those who believed in the Divine Unity is essential for anyone who wishes to remove the dust and whitewash which up to now have liberally obscured the history of Spain. The history of Islam in Andalus – which is the name by which the Iberian peninsula was and still is known to the Muslims – cannot be understood without examining the nature of this pattern, for the Roman Catholic persecution of the Muslims in Spain was not an isolated event, but an extension of the earlier persecution of the Christian Unitarians and of the Jews.

It is therefore necessary to discover how it was that the Roman Catholic Church came to believe that it was ‘lawful’ to torture and kill the ‘heretic’ and burn his books – for Christ’s sake – ‘heretic’ being the appellation attached to anyone who disagreed with the Roman Catholic Church. Thus in order to view the history of Islam in Andalus in its true perspective it is necessary to first examine the early history of Christianity, and to see how Roman Catholic beliefs and policies first arose.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE MUDEJARES OF NORTHERN SPAIN

The treatment meted out to the Muslims and the Jews who remained in the territories newly occupied by the Trinitarian Christians became increasingly harsh as the Trinitarian Christians became more established in the land. The Jews and the Mudejares, as these Muslims came to be called, were tolerated only insofar as the Christians depended on them for their needs.

The Jews and the Muslims formed the economic backbone of the country, the Jews in the field of commerce and finance and the Muslims in the crafts and agriculture. The vast wealth which the Jews had accumulated made them an obvious and inevitable target of greed. It may have appeared to be easier to the Trinitarian Christians to replace the Jews with Christians in their function as the financiers, tax-collectors and moneylenders of Spain. Thus initially the Jews probably suffered more extensively than the Muslims.

The persecution and ultimate expulsion of the Muslims from Spain was a much longer process than that of the Jews. They were not only far more numerous than the Jews, but also pursued all the trades and fashioned all the necessities of ordinary everyday life. It was on their industry that the material prosperity of Spain depended. Their skills were in demand in every sphere of life. Many of them were honest and hard-working farmers whose knowledge of cultivation and skill in agriculture were matchless. These characteristics were apparent in every profession and trade that they were engaged upon. They were skilled shipbuilders and were masters in erecting buildings of all kinds. As physicians their services were in great demand. The Trinitarian Christians relied on their labour in satisfying the fundamental needs of food, shelter, and clothing. Friar Alonso Fernandez described the Muslims of northern

Spain in his *Historia de Plasencia* with the following words:

They were diligent in the cultivation of gardens, and lived apart from the society of Old Christians, preferring that their own life not be the object of gazing. Others were occupied in trade. They sold foods at the best stands in the cities and villages, most of them living by the work of their own hands. Others were employed at manual trades such as tinkers, smiths, shoemakers, soap-makers and muleteers. They all paid their taxes and assessments willingly, and were moderate in their food and dress ... They had no use for begging among their own people; and all had a trade and were busy at some employment ... none of them took up the sterile calling of monk, cleric, or nun ... All married – poor and rich, sound and lame ... They preferred work that required skill rather than brawn; they were weavers, tailors, rope-makers, sandal-makers, potters, shoe-makers, veterinaries, mattress makers, gardeners, muleteers, olive-oil pedlars.¹

The policy of the Trinitarian Christians was, therefore, to begin with, to harness the skills of the Muslims for their own profit. This, they believed, would be best achieved by taming them and making them obedient servants. They therefore set about stripping the Muslims of their way of life, while at the same time retaining their utility as slaves. Hence the popular saying, '*Mientras mas Moros mas ganancias*.' – 'More Moors more money.'² Ironically, the Muslims were despised by the Trinitarian Christians because of their economic dependence on them. Lea writes about these Muslims:

They constituted the most desirable population that any land could possess ... it was a curious perversity with which these good qualities were converted into accusations against them by their Christian persecutors.³

The basis of this contempt for the Muslims, however, was not founded on economic reasons. It was based on the Official Roman Catholic Church's denial of the fact that there had been another Prophet after

the Prophet Jesus. As far as anyone who accepted the prophethood of both Jesus and Muhammad, blessings and peace be on them, and their respective teachings – the same teaching – was concerned, and this was the position of the Muslims, the whole structure of the Trinitarian Church was clearly superfluous and unnecessary. This was also the case as far as anyone who rejected both of these Prophets and their teachings was concerned, which was the position of the Jews.

The only way the Trinitarian Church could assure its continued existence as an institution in Spain, its priesthood thought, was by stripping the Muslims and the Jews of their knowledge and beliefs, and of their way of life.

The Roman Catholics thus embarked upon the formidable task of changing the minds of the Jews and the Muslims, while at the same time retaining their utility as tamed and obedient slaves. In contrast with the Muslims, who had made no attempt to interfere with the religion or the property of the Trinitarian Christians when they were in power, the Trinitarian Christians were vigorously opposed to reconciliation and tolerance now that they were in power. To the conscientious mediaeval Roman Catholic, any friendship with a Muslim was regarded as a denial of the Pauline figure of 'Christ'. If a Muslim could not be converted to the official religion, it was therefore considered his duty to lay upon him such burdens that he would seek relief by becoming a 'Christian'.



Having virtually wiped out the Unitarian Paulicians of southern France with such efficiency, it was inevitable that the techniques and the institution of the Inquisition would be employed in Spain. Initially, however, persecution of the Jews and Muslims was carried out by the Trinitarian Christian army and the Old Christians whose families had never left Andalus and who were already living there. The whole machinery of the Inquisition was not established in Spain until after the persecution by the Roman Catholic Church was already well under way. In the codes known as *El Fuero Real* and *Las Siete Partidas*, the first issued by Alfonso 'the Wise' in 1255, and the second about ten years later, no mention of the Inquisition is made, although at this time the Mediaeval Inquisition in France was in its heyday. These codes contained

stringent regulations against 'heretics,' with the usual punishments of torture, burning and imprisonment, once the Trinitarian Church had ascertained the 'guilt' of the accused. However, there were no Friars to implement these measures efficiently, and in these early years their application was probably limited to those Muslims and Jews who seemed most antagonistic towards the Trinitarian Christians.

The absence of the Inquisition in the early persecution of the Muslims and Jews in Spain can be ascribed to two reasons. Firstly, the persecution began well before the Mediaeval Inquisition had been instituted in France and Italy. Secondly, it would not have been possible to apply the techniques of the Inquisition immediately after the conquest of northern Spain, simply because the techniques of the Inquisition were better suited to extermination than domestication, and in its first stage of persecution, the Trinitarian Christians were more committed to reducing the Muslims and Jews to obedient slaves than actually to wiping them out altogether. It was only when their complete elimination became the principal object of the Trinitarian Church that the Inquisition came into its own. Initially, however, the Trinitarian Christian rulers were not in a position to implement this policy:

The large population of Jews and of conquered Muslims gave them peculiar problems to deal with which would have been complicated rather than solved by the methods of the Inquisition, until the union of Aragon and Castile under Ferdinand and Isabella, followed by the conquest of Granada, enabled these monarchs to undertake seriously the business, attractive both to statecraft and to fanaticism, of compelling uniformity of faith.⁴

The early persecution of the Jews and Muslims took place simultaneously, and much of the legislation against them was directed with equal intensity at both of these groups. Similarly, once the Spanish Inquisition began its activities, the Jews came under attack just as much as the Muslims, and in fact the expulsion of the Jews from Spain was completed long before that of the Muslims.

For the sake of clarity the expulsion of the Jews will be dealt with in a separate chapter, the next chapter, but it should be remembered

that the following account of the measures used against the Muslims in the first wave of persecution in Spain applies equally to the Jews.



As long as the Muslims of northern Spain remained sure of their way of life, the Trinitarian Christians regarded them as a threat to their establishment. They therefore did their best to humiliate the Muslims, and to make them ashamed of who they were. In 1216, the Lateran Council decreed that a distinctive garment and a badge should be worn by all Jews and Muslims. This garment came to be known as the *san benito*. This measure was not only humiliating, but also dangerous, since it exposed anyone wearing such a garment to insult and ill-treatment, especially when travelling on the notoriously insecure highways. The enforcement of this measure led to innumerable murders on the high roads.

Having made the Jews and Muslims instantly recognisable, the Trinitarian Christian nobles set about the business of reducing them to obedient slaves, not of Allah, but themselves. The Muslims especially were gradually forced out of the towns and cities and onto the land, where they worked on the nobles' large country estates. Within a very short space of time the old feudal system, which had dominated the people of the Iberian peninsula before the Muslims came, was re-established. The rights and freedoms of the Muslims were rapidly restricted and diminished. In 1248, Pope Innocent IV ordered the king of Aragon, 'to permit no Moors save as slaves.' Even the freedom of ordinary commercial dealings with Muslims was discouraged. In 1250 it was decreed that no one could buy or sell anything from a Muslim unless he had first obtained a licence to do so.

Despite these humiliations and embargoes, many of the Muslims held to their way of life, and the practice of Islam continued. In 1312 the Council of Vienna complained that the Muslims living in Trinitarian Christian lands were:

... permitted to have priests who from the minarets of the mosques invoked Muhammad and sounded his praise and further that the people were allowed to gather around the grave of one whom they adored as a saint. ⁵