The Institute of Ismaili Studies

# Andalusia, the Shrine of the Revealed Faiths*

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**Abstract**

This article charts the rise and fall of Muslim control of what was then known as al-Andalus. Once an oasis of tolerance and pluralism, this fiercely-contested region witnessed dramatic changes. From sharing religious buildings to the outright expulsion of the Jews and Muslims, the author explores the legacy of al-Andalus, including its pluralistic ethos and its contributions to the European Renaissance.

**Key Words**

Al-Andalus, ‘Abbasid, Umayyad, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Spanish Inquisition, Reconquista, Dark Ages, Renaissance, Arabic, Ibn Rushd, Moses Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas, Hebrew, Romance, Mozarab, Cordoba, Granada, Toledo, Madinat al-Zahra, Alhambra, Mosque of Cordoba, Muhammad Iqbal Morisco, Sephardim, expulsion, pluralism, meritocracy, and tolerance.

## The Memory of Al-Andalus, a Time of Tolerance?

In 1932, after attending the Third Round Table Conference held in London to discuss a future constitution for British India, the Urdu poet Sir Muhammad Iqbal visited Madrid, Toledo, Granada, Cordoba, and Seville. This visit inspired six poems including his ode *Masjid-e-Qurtuba* in praise of the Mosque of Cordoba. Iqbal exclaimed[1]

> *Ka‘ba of the friends of art! Majesty of the revealed faiths!*
> *Through whom the Andalusian land is revered as a shrine*

Many modern Muslim writers—Iqbal himself as well as Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan, the Chairman of the Muslim delegation to the Third Round Table Conference and later President of the League of Nations—were deeply nostalgic about al-Andalus and mourned its loss to the Christian *Reconquista*. But in these stanzas Iqbal seems to look beyond. Not only is he swept away by the artistic beauty of the physical elements of the mosque, but he peers behind its walls into the social, spiritual, intellectual, literary, aesthetic, and indeed political fabric of the peoples of this land. It is their aspirations and ideals which make this Mosque a symbol of the majesty of *all* the revealed faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. What were these ideals and aspirations? The answer, of course lies in the spirit of tolerance and open-mindedness of the peoples of this land. Iqbal and his contemporaries wrote amidst the gathering winds of discord and hate against neighbours of different colours, ethnicities, or faiths. In Andalusia they saw an example to be studied and emulated.[2] Today, this example is even more relevant as the monotheistic faiths, gripped by extremists, are caught in a downward spiral of suspicion and mutual recrimination.

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**A Land of Conquest, Refuge and of Expulsion**

Al-Andalus lasted for almost eight hundred years, from the year 92 AH to the year 897 AH after the Prophet's *hijra* to Madina, or in the Gregorian calendar from 711 CE to January 2, 1492 CE, that is to say from the conquest of al-Andalus by Tariq ibn Ziyad to the capitulation of Granada, which was soon followed in August 1492 CE by the expulsion of Jews from the territory which the victorious Christians now called Spain. Amassing the spoils of their conquest, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile funded the voyage of Christopher Columbus in search of even greater victories for the "Holy Faith" on behalf of, as Columbus notes in his journal, "Your Highnesses … Catholic Christians and Princes devoted to the Holy Christian Faith and the propagators thereof, and enemies of the sect of Mahomet and of all idolatries and heresies …".[3]

In 711 CE, Tariq ibn Ziyad's largely Berber army crossed the straits which were to be forever identified with him (Gibraltar is the corrupted form of Jabal al-Tariq – the mount of Tariq) to conquer al-Andalus. They were soon joined by Syrian Arab troops and together they undertook to push the boundaries further. In 732 CE, the northern-most limit was reached when 'Abd al-Rahman al-Ghafiqi confronted Charles Martel at Poitiers near Paris. Six days later, 'Abd al-Rahman was defeated, putting an end to Muslim expansion into France. Meanwhile, in Khurasan at the eastern edge of the Muslim empire, a revolt was stirring. In 750 CE the Umayyads were overthrown and the 'Abbasids became the rulers of the Islamic Empire. The 'Abbasids eliminated all of the Umayyads save 'Abd al-Rahman al-Dakhil who was at the country palace of Rusafa, on the banks of the Euphrates. Swimming across the river in flight, he eluded the 'Abbasids, finally reaching his mother's Berber tribesmen and thence entered al-Andalus in August 755 CE. In the following year, in the city of Cordoba, the surviving Umayyad 'Abd al-Rahman al-Dakhil proclaimed himself *amir* of al-Andalus.

Of Berber and Arab parentage, 'Abd al-Rahman initiated a policy of ethnic and tribal neutrality, avoiding the divisiveness of earlier governors. But some Muslim leaders allied with the French King Charlemagne to wrest Saragossa from 'Abd al-Rahman. The siege failed and as it retreated through the Pyrenees, the rear of the French army was severely attacked by the Basques, who killed the French commander Roland. In the twelfth century these events had been romanticized and transformed in the *Song of Roland*, a major milestone in establishing French as an independent language. Roland is depicted as the hero in an epic struggle between Christians and Muslims.

**A Temple, Church and Mosque, Public Pluralism and Private Longing**

In his final years, 'Abd al-Rahman undertook several projects, including building the Mosque of Cordoba at the site of an old church which itself had been built on the ruins of a Roman temple. This project retraced the building of the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus in the 640s. The Damascus mosque too had begun as a cathedral near the ruins of a Roman temple. The cathedral had once been a shared house of worship: Muslims praying in one half, and Christians in another. The Umayyads then bought the Christian half, demolished the old structure, and built the still-standing Damascus Mosque, stunning in its Byzantine-inspired architecture and mosaics. 'Abd al-Rahman had witnessed the pluralism and multi-ethnic nature of Syrian society – Muslim rulers of a predominantly (at that time) Christian population. Well aware that he would never again see his homeland, 'Abd al-Rahman now sought to revive the Damascene outlook and even its landscape in al-Andalus. He built a new *Rusafa*, in memory of the country palace he had left behind. Here, he composed a little poem, in which he bared his soul[4]:

*A palm tree stands in the middle of Rusafa*
*Born in the West, far from the land of palms*
*I said to it, "How like me you are, far away and in exile!*
*In long separation from family and friends*
*You have sprung from soil in which you are a stranger*
*And I, like you, am far away from home"*

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**Language and Vibrancy**

'Abd al-Rahman's poem was in Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, and the language of Arabic literature. But Arabic was also the language of administration, trade, and increasingly the language of learning. From al-Andalus to China, Arabic held sway, in the religious and secular settings. The dominance of Arabic led Paul Alvarus of Cordoba to complain[5]:

> *Christians love to read the poems and romances of the Arabs; they study the Arab theologians and philosophers, not to refute them but to form a correct and elegant Arabic … Who now reads the Latin commentaries on the Holy Scriptures, or who studies the Gospels, prophets or apostles? Alas… young Christians read and study with enthusiasm Arab books, they gather immense libraries at great expense; they despise Christian literature as unworthy of attention.*

Alvarus' lament is a familiar one. It echoes the struggle of communities to retain languages, cultures, traditions, and values and to transmit them to succeeding generations in the face of the barrage of a dominant language, media, and pop culture. But Alvarus also represents a negative attitude towards change. Certainly for the young, Andalusi culture was vibrant and growing, unlike the stodgy and now diminished culture of the Church. However, young Christians were not abandoning Latin Christian prayer for Arabic Muslim prayer. Rather, they were embracing the *secular* aspects of Arabic culture. That is to say, Arabic love-poetry sung from Baghdad to Cordoba, 'Abd al-Rahman's poem about a palm tree, and other literary nuggets in their "immense libraries" which Alvarus despised. Latin, with its narrow range of religious texts, could not compete with such a wealth of literature, culture, and learning. Even the Christian liturgy and Christian religious texts were soon available in Arabic. Christian Arabophiles were known by the disparaging epithet *Mozarab*, "wanna-be Arab", which eventually applied to all Christians of al-Andalus.

**Pluralism and Martyrdom**

In 855 CE, a small number of Christian fundamentalists conspicuously denounced Islam and its Prophet. Their hand forced, Muslim authorities ordered the public execution of these "martyrs". In later centuries, the memory of these "martyrs" defying forced conversion "by the sword" was the fuel for the *Reconquista*. But in the ninth century CE most Cordobans had a dim view of these hotheads. Despite the embellishment of these "martyrs" by Elogius, who compared them to early Christian heroes, Umayyad policies promoted neither forced conversions nor destruction of churches. Rather, in conformity with the Qur'anic acceptance of the Peoples of the Book, Jews and Christians retained their religious institutions. This was not modern pluralism within a secular state, for non-Muslims paid a special tax which Muslims did not pay, and had to observe restrictive regulations particularly regarding the public display of religious rituals. But in the ninth century CE, perhaps well into the nineteenth to say nothing of some parts of the world even today, these policies were indeed progressive.

This policy led, in al-Andalus, as also in Fatimid Egypt, to the appointment of qualified non-Muslims to high political offices. In January 929 CE, 'Abd al-Rahman III (r. 912-961 CE) declared himself Caliph and *amir ul-mu'minin* (Commander of the Faithful), the legitimate heir to the Prophet and rival to the Fatimid and 'Abbasid Caliphs. Twenty years later in the new palace city of Madinat al-Zahra, Hasdai ibn Shaprut, the Caliph's physician, who was a devout and practicing Cordoban Jew yet assimilated into the Arabo-Andalusian culture, headed the delegation of the Caliph in discussions with representatives of the Byzantine emperor in Constantinopole. Racemundo, the Mozarab bishop of Elvira, was Hasdai's colleague on this mission. Later, Racemundo became the Caliph's envoy to the court of Otto I. These appointments reflect the Caliph's confidence in his non-Muslim subjects, their

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trust in their sovereign, their thriving status under Muslim rule, and the ability to advance on the grounds of merit, regardless of religious background.

**The Sack of Cordoba**

Al-Hakam II, ‘Abd al-Rahman III’s son, continued the project to renovate the Mosque of Cordoba. Retaining the aesthetics of the old mosque, he added new elegantly decorated separate spaces for royal prayer. These opulent royal spaces, as indeed the palace city of Madinat al-Zahra, mark the increasing distance between the community and its ruler, foreshadowing the coming demise. Al-Hakam II’s premature death initiated a power struggle in which the chamberlain al-Mansur, supported by mercenary Berber troops, gained the upper hand. Resented by the Cordobans, al-Mansur needed the troops for his military campaigns against the Christians to the north. These campaigns had begun to acquire a fanatical and ideological perspective. The Berbers first purged al-Hakam II’s library. Then, a destructive raid into the minor Christian pilgrimage center of Santiago de Compostela resulted in the burning of the city and carting of church bells to Cordoba to be used as mosque lamps. Santiago was to become the rallying cry of the Reconquista. Today, Santiago remains a major site of pilgrimage. Continuing conflict between warring factions led to the sacking and complete destruction of Madinat al-Zahra in 1009 CE followed by the sacking of Cordoba in 1013 CE. The poet Ibn Shuhaid (d. 1035 CE) wept over its loss[6]:

*For the weeping of one who weeps with an eye the tears of*
*which flow endlessly is not enough [to lament the loss of] such as Cordoba*

An era had ended. The Caliphate of al-Andalus was formally abolished on November 30, 1031 CE. No longer united, al-Andalus fragmented into petty principalities for the next sixty years (1031-91 CE). The fall of Cordoba unleashed a period of political rivalry, but also cultural creativity in regional centers, fueled by a rapid economic recovery.

Samuel ibn Nagrila was the vizier who had successfully led Granada’s troops to conquer Almeria and then Seville. Like Hasdai ibn Shaprut before him, Samuel was Jewish, the scion of a prominent Cordoban trading family. At the age of 34 he became the *nagid* or head of the Jewish community of Granada. Samuel undertook the building of gardens and palaces, which are now invisibly buried. But his Hebrew poetry, which fed the Golden Age of Hebrew, is not forgotten. Through the activity of Samuel and others, Hebrew found its poetic voice speaking of lovers, battles, worldly and spiritual concerns, in short the subjects and concerns of Arabic poetry. The liturgical language of the synagogue had grown to become a living everyday language at home expressing secular sentiments. Arabic was no longer the only literary game in town. Hebrew as well as *Mozarabic*, an Arabic sprinkled with the spoken version of Latin called Romance, could now also be heard in song. Then, in 1064 CE, an army of Normans and Aquitinians from north of the Pyrenees laid siege and captured the trading center of Barbastro. In his booty, William VIII of Aquitaine took back women singers and entertainers. Influenced by the songs he had heard from them, the young William IX rebelled against Latin and began to write love songs in his own vernacular, adding to the growing list of languages of song, and establishing the troubadour tradition.

The principality of Seville reached the height of its power with al-Mu‘tadid (r. 1042-69) and his grandson al-Mu‘tamid (r. 1069-91 CE), probably surpassing Cordoba in size and wealth. A poet, al-Mu‘tadid boasted of his achievement:[7]

*What is called happiness has now been established*
*I sat down to receive in it the parlor of honour*
*If you, Oh God, wish to grant a favour to mankind*
*Make me the guiding lord of Arabs and non-Arabs!*

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**Feuds Amidst Pluralism**

Despite political fragmentation, ‘Abd al-Rahman’s project of pluralism still resonated. Even territorial conquest was achieved through shifting alliances between the Christian principalities of the north and the Muslim principalities of the south to oust rivals regardless of their religious affiliation. The death of Ferdinand of Castile left his sons feuding as they sought allies amongst Muslim rulers. Defeated by his brother, Alfonso sought refuge in Muslim Toledo, and through its help regained his throne. Then when Toledo was attacked, its weak ruler al-Qadir sought Alfonso’s help. But al-Qadir was too weak against his rivals, and offered Toledo to Alfonso, King of Castile, in return for safe passage and exile. The master of Toledo, Alfonso built the Church of San Roman atop the highest hill. The visual elements of the Church evoke the Mosque of Cordoba, from alternating red-and-white of the horseshoe arches, Latin inscriptions all around, and interior windows complete with Arabic writing! Alfonso had paid tribute to the dominant aesthetic fashion which Iqbal was to glorify centuries later in his poem. But times were changing. Alfonso had also declared Toledo to be the principal seat of the Iberian Church. Now the *Mozarabs*, who had practiced their liturgy in Arabic for centuries, were at odds with their Latin brethren. They too could sympathize with Alvarus’ lament as their indigenous tradition was pitted against a foreign imposition which sought to normatize Catholic ritual in the Latin tongue.

To some Muslims, Alfonso’s victory rang alarm bells. Earlier, in 1066 CE, anti-Jewish riots had erupted in Granada, a display of an ominous turn against non-Muslims who had thrived in the tolerant climate. The Almoravids of North Africa now entered the fray under the banner of defending Islam against the conquering Christians. They soon put an end to the feuding Muslim petty principalities and their shifting intrigues with their Christian neighbors. But to most Andalusian Muslims, the Almoravids were barbarian Berbers, who had imposed a fanatic perspective of Islam to correct [what the Almoravids considered to be] the deviant ways of the liberal Andalusian Muslims.

## Dangerous Ideas: Arab, Jewish and Christian

Intolerance and persecution by the Almoravids (1091-1147 CE) and later Almohads (1147-1269 CE) led to the exile of many of the best and brightest. Moses ibn Ezra moved to the Christian north, Judah Halevi moved to Alexandria. Alfonso managed to attract many Arabized Jews and Christians to Toledo, making this Christian city the paramount center of Arabic culture and learning. It was here, through translations by the “School of Translators”, that the Christian West gained access to the five hundred year old tradition of Arabic philosophical and scientific works, available in the city’s vast libraries. The vast transfer of learning, scientific instruments, technologies of craftsmanship, material culture, and above all “dangerous” philosophical ideas, was to lift Europe out of the Dark Ages, challenge the supremacy of the Church, and march into the Renaissance.

When the Almohad amir Abu Ya‘qub Yusuf (r. 1163-84 CE) was introduced to the young Ibn Rushd in Cordoba, he asked the philosopher a pointed question about the heavens, “Are they created or eternal?” Ibn Rushd was reluctant to broach the topic. The prince went on to discuss the merits of both sides, one supported by revelation, the other by the science of the period. Put at ease, Ibn Rushd engaged the *amir* of the “fundamentalist” Almohads, gaining his patronage for the project of explicating the work of the pagan Greek philosopher Aristotle.[8] Already during his lifetime, Ibn Rushd’s commentaries were being translated into Latin in Toledo. In his Latin guise, Averroes became known as the Great Commentator. Such was his sway, that the Renaissance artist Raphael included him in his Vatican fresco of the School of Athens (1510-11 CE). But in 1210 CE, barely 12 years after Ibn Rushd’s death, the study of his commentaries was banned at the University of Paris. In 1215 CE, the study of Aristotle was banned. Fifteen years later, the Pope specifically prohibited the study of Averroes in Paris. But the forbidden intellectual fruit proved to be too enticing, and Averroes and Aristotle continued to be studied, despite further bans in 1270 CE and 1277 CE by Stephen Tempier, bishop of Paris. These “dangerous” ideas advocated a rational, secular perspective of the

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workings of the natural world and the human mind as against the dogmatic and authoritarian views of the religious hierarchy. Even Thomas Aquinas, the author of the still-studied compendium of Catholic theology – *Summa Theologia*, paid grudging tribute to the Great Philosopher and his Great Commentator, in his polemical argument against Averroes' view of the intellect.[9] But Aquinas was deemed too close to the forbidden views of these non-Christian thinkers. Much of his writing was also banned until 1325, when he was canonized as a saint.

The Jewish philosopher, Musa ibn Maymun, now better known as Maimonides, was Ibn Rushd's contemporary. He fled Cordoba with his family to escape Almohad persecution of non-Muslims, arriving in Egypt in 1166. Maimonides became the personal physician to the ruler and also the head and spokesman for the Jewish community of Cairo. Like Ibn Rushd, Maimonides was also interested in the problem of the compatibility of philosophy and religion in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, which he wrote in Arabic. This text was subsequently translated into Hebrew and then, like several others, translated into Latin. Not prepared for its nonconformist message, it too, like many other texts, was deemed subversive by its detractors.

**Broken Promises and Forced Conversions, the End of al-Andalus**

The Almohads disintegrated during the first decades of the thirteenth century, leading to a new period of petty principalities. These were ripe for picking by the now powerful Christian rulers to the north. In 1235 CE, Fernando III, nicknamed "The Saint", occupied Cordoba, bringing an end to the Muslim rule of this city. Al-Andalus now consisted solely of Granada which held on for another century and a half. But on January 2, 1492 CE, Muhammad II agreed to the capitulation of Granada. As part of the agreement[10]:

> *Their highnesses and their successors will ever afterwards allow [the Granadians] to live in their own religion, and not to permit their mosques to be taken from them, nor their minarets nor their muezzins, nor will they interfere with the pious endowments which they have for such purposes, nor will they disturb the uses and customs which they observe.*

The agreement was broken almost immediately as Isabella confiscated a mosque and had it consecrated into a church. Muslims were forced to convert and became known as *Moriscos.* The reading of Arabic was prohibited and Arabic books were burned. On March 31, 1492 CE an edict was signed expelling all Jews from Christian Spain. 'Abd al-Rahman's project was finished.

**Muslim Pluralism: A Forgotten Legacy?**

But was it finished in *all* Muslim lands? Of the estimated quarter million to a million expelled Jews, most found themselves in familiar Muslim lands to the south, in the North African cities like Fez, Tlemcen, Marrakech, etc. They became known as the *Sephardim*. Today, this word is usually translated as Oriental Jews, but actually it derives from "Sefarad" the Hebrew word for al-Andalus. So, the "Sephardim" are the Jews who trace their ancestry to al-Andalus. At the request of the Chief Rabbi of Istanbul Eliyia Kapsali, the Ottoman ruler Bayazid II (r. 1481-1512 CE) invited the expelled Jews to emigrate to Istanbul and other parts of the Ottoman Empire like Bosnia, where once again they were a recognized, protected community of the People of the Book within a Muslim society. It is only with the spread of nationalism in Muslim lands in the nineteenth century, reflected in the collapse of the multi-ethnic states like the Ottoman Empire and the rise of Turkish, Arab, and Jewish nationalism, and their demands for a separate nation-state for each ethnicity, that we witness the steep decline of Jewish communities in the Muslim world. The "pure" Catholic Spain dream of Isabella and Ferdinand, which despised pluralism, had now become the predominant model of what a "modern"

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state had to be. The "Islamic" fundamentalist perpetrators of the despicable bombing of Jewish synagogues in Istanbul on November 15, 2003 betray their utter ignorance of the welcoming pluralism of Islamic civilization which Iqbal had commemorated in his poem to the Mosque of Cordoba. Their attitudes and actions very much resonate with the fanaticism of the Spanish Inquisition and *Reconquista*.

**Don Quixot's Arab Historian**

In 1605 CE, Cervantes published *Don Quixote*, possibly the first literary novel. The memory of al-Andalus still lingered. In perhaps the earliest example of magical realism, Cervantes fabricates the outrageous fiction that this novel was written by "Cide Hamete Banengeli, Arabic historian … I then went off with the Morisco into the cloister of the cathedral and asked him to translate for me into Castilian everything in those books that dealt with Don Quixote …". Having an Arabic connection must have been good for sales. But it was not a good time for the *Moriscos*. The Spanish government put an end to the failed policy of forced conversions, and by the time Cervantes published his sequel in 1615, *Moriscos* had been expelled from Spain.

Five hundred years after the fall of al-Andalus and the expulsion of the Jews, and four hundred years after the expulsion of Muslims, the story of al-Andalus, that shrine of the majesty of the revealed faiths, is largely forgotten. But the story has many lessons to teach.

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