

Andalusia: The Forgotten Europe

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We can view human history either as the inevitable unfolding of fated events or as a fabric whose shape and hue literally determines our future. Within this fabric we can envision images and stereotypes, fears and hopes, textbooks and policies; we can see, on the one hand, realms and relations fertile with new union, creativity and power or, on the other hand, options dismissed out of hand, too outlandish to be deemed imaginable. Often, the most contentious historical encounters are the most misrepresented; certainly the history of Islamic culture in Europe can be counted amongst such episodes, particularly as we witness the tragedies that have taken place in Bosnia and Kosovo. But such contemporary events can also provide keys to unlock crucial events of the past whose meaning might have eluded us, as we begin to rethink the very categories under which those events have been scrutinized.

Given our very deep reliance upon assumptions about identity that we have inherited from the nation/state system, it is very difficult for us to imagine times and places in which notions of identity were constructed differently. The idea that Spanish culture might, for instance, be the result of an intense struggle for, between and against the memory and reality of its Arabic and Hebrew past, rather than the self-evident national outgrowth of a particular ethnic group, is rarely taken as an initial assumption. As we look at the culture of Andalusia and its impact on Europe and the New World, it is quite remarkable to note that in most studies on the subject, non-Christian peoples (that is Muslims and Jews) are seldom referred to as Europeans. In fact, we find that a millennium of Euro-Islamic culture has essentially been excised from the script. We are used to finding St. Thomas Aquinas in our general curriculum but rarely encounter Ibn ‘Arabi or Moses Maimonides even though both were Spaniards. Here, Europeaness, and the assumptions of a common Christian set of reference points, has taken precedence over all the other elements that go into the composition of an identity. Nevertheless, we can all still imagine ways in which we privilege certain aspects of our own identities in different contexts; for

example, on some issues, gender may take precedence over religion; in others, nationality may take precedence over either gender or religion. Such entry points will enable us to look at the rich and diverse culture of Andalusia, as we privilege the categories of literature, philosophy or geographical location first, before thinking about religion.

As we concentrate our energies on Spain, we shall do so without neglecting the larger picture of which Spain forms only one essential part. This larger picture includes the Old Mediterranean or Levantine world, encompassing the classical antiquity of Greece and Rome; it also reaches back to Iraq and the origins of Ancient Near Eastern cultures in the Fertile Crescent. At the same time, Spain prefigures and traces the most far-flung legacy of colonization yet undertaken, moving towards the Americas in 1492, at the very same point when both Jews and Muslims were violently expelled from the Iberian Peninsula.

As the historian Richard Fletcher has noted:

The creative role of Islamic Spain in the shaping of European intellectual culture is still not widely enough appreciated. The scientific and philosophical learning of Greek and Persian antiquity was inherited by the Arabs in the Middle East. Translated, codified, elaborated by Arabic scholars, the corpus was diffused throughout the culturally unified world of classical Islam in the ninth and tenth centuries until it reached the limits of the known world in the West. And there, in Spain, it was discovered by the scholars of the Christian West, translated into Latin mainly between 1150 and 1250, and channeled off to irrigate the dry pastures of European intellectual life. The discovery of Aristotle's works by this route decisively changed the European mind. Navigational devices such as the astrolabe made possible the voyages of discovery to east and west. Newton's work would have been inconceivable without the knowledge of mathematics transmitted through Spain. The advances in medical science in the seventeenth century were grounded upon Arabic observation and practice. Europe's lead in resourcefulness and creativity, the vital factor in the history of the world for the six centuries preceding our own, was found in the large part on intelligent grasping at opportunities offered by the civilization of Islam; and that proffer came through Spain. (Fletcher, p.8)

At the same time, Islamic Spain is much more than a conduit; it represents, in itself, a period of enormous intellectual creativity and cultural symbiosis, leaving in its wake a rich and multi-faceted legacy that has been both glorified amongst

the Arabs and marginalized or suppressed in the West. In thinking about al-Andalus, we will attempt to understand those elements that made this long historical moment so indelible on the one hand, and so fragile on the other.