



AL-ANDALUS: A HISTORY CONTAMINATED BY POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Posted on September 1, 2020 by Arnaud Imatz



We are highly honored to present the English-version of a series of questions (Q) that were asked of Dr. Arnaud Imatz, about Moorish Spain, and his answers. As regular readers of The Postil know, Dr. Imatz is a corresponding member of the Spanish Royal Academy of History and author of several important studies.

Q: What historical evidence can we base our claim that the supposed happy cohabitation of al-Andalus was a myth?

Arnaud Imatz (AI): Let us first clarify what the myth of al-Andalus is - all the more so as this is, as you know, denied, contested or even concealed, not only by extremist activists and polemicists, but also by academics anxious to defend their patch. In a few words, it is the idea of "Paradise Lost," of "the Golden Age," or "Eden," supported by an infinity of Arabic texts, but just as cherished by a good number of Europeans and/or Westerners.

In counterpoint, we find the notion, no less omnipresent, of the threat of the Christian world which is described as ignorant, brutal, barbarous, intolerant, militarist and... European. This idea was adopted by Arabists and a good number of 19th-century historians. According to them, the autochthonous character and the virtues of the Iberian Peninsula, necessarily acclimatized, softened and Europeanized the Islam of al-Andalus, giving it, inevitably, features distinct from the rest of the Islamic-medieval world. It is the idea of a tolerant, advanced or "progressive" Islam ahead of its time, which has been taken up by our contemporaries anxious to demonstrate the open, modernizing and tolerant character of Islam. This is the "irenist" vision of a harmonious coexistence of the three cultures, so prevalent among politicians, journalists and much of academia, that it has become almost impossible to correct. It is a kind of dogma imposed, despite all the historical research of rigorous and disinterested specialists who show just the opposite. For Al-Andalus was not an Eden, quite the contrary.

It is impossible to summarize in a few lines the mass of information, the multiple sources and historical documents (Arab-Muslim and Christian) on which Arabists, philologists and medieval historians rely to demythify and demystify the history of al-Andalus. I am tempted to say that if we want to talk about cohabitation, coexistence, even "tolerance" in the Iberian Peninsula of the Middle Ages (a tolerance whose history dates back to antiquity and not to the 18th-century as affirm the most chauvinistic ideologues, in particular the French), it is better to refer to the Christian kingdoms rather than to the Islamic part.

To be convinced of this, it suffices to recall the situation of women in al-Andalus, with the wearing of the veil, sexual slavery, female circumcision or circumcision (as a legal and social practice), stoning, or the total lack of freedom in the public space for the *hurra* ("free Muslim woman"), and then to compare this with the condition of much freer Christian women in medieval Spain.

We can also cite here the works of [Bernard Lewis](#) and, before him, those of one of the fathers of scientific Orientalism, the Hungarian, [Ignaz Goldziher](#), who showed, from numerous Arabic texts of the time, that ethnic and even racial criteria were commonly used in al-Andalus: Arabs from the north against Arabs from the south, Berbers against Arabs, Arabs against Slavs (the "Europeans"), Arabs and Berbers against Muladis (converted Muslims of Hispanic origin), and finally, all against blacks... and vice versa.

The [work](#) of the Spanish linguist, historian and Arabist, [Serafin Fanjul](#), is essential here, but we must also underline the importance of the studies of several medievalists and researchers in Ibero-Roman languages. For my part, I have contributed to making known, in French-speaking countries, the work of three of the best specialists in the area, two Spaniards and an American.

First, Serafín Fanjul, already cited, professor of Arabic literature, member of the Royal Academy of History, author of [Al-Andalus contra España](#) (2000) and [La quimera de al-Andalus](#) (2004), published in France in a single volume under the title, [Al-Andalus, l'invention d'un mythe](#) (2017).

Then, the American, Darío Fernández Morera, professor of Romanesque and Hispanic literature, and author of [The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise](#) (2015) [French title: *Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans dans al-Andalus*, 2018].

And, finally, Rafael Sánchez Saus, professor of medieval history, ex-dean of faculty and rector of university, member of the Royal Spanish-American Academy, author of [Al-Andalus y la Cruz](#) (2016) which was published in French as, [Les chrétiens dans al-Andalus. De la soumission à l'anéantissement](#) (2019) [*Christians in al-Andalus. From Submission to Annihilation*].

I cannot recommend enough the reading of these books, which have been the subject of several reissues, including the last in pocket-format (March 2019, August and September 2020). I regret and I am surprised that to date these two Spanish works have not yet been translated into English.

For my part, I wrote the introductions to the books of Serafín Fanjul and Rafael Sánchez Saus, while [Rémi Brague](#), recognized specialist in medieval philosophy (Professor Emeritus at the Sorbonne), kindly prefaced the work of Dario Fernández-Morera, as soon as I informed him that the publication in French was imminent.

I must add that other works by Spanish historians also deserve to be translated; among them, I should mention in particular, [Acerca de la conquista árabe de Hispania. Imprecisiones, equívocos y patrañas](#) (2011) [*Concerning the Arab conquest. Inaccuracies, Ambiguities and Deceptions*] by [Felipe Maíllo Salgado](#), Professor of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Salamanca.

The books by Fanjul, Fernández-Morera and Sánchez Saus are all definitive milestones in the demythification and demystification of the history of al-Andalus. They differ in their approaches and methods, but also because of the distinct expertise of their authors. However, they also complement each other perfectly.

Serafín Fanjul carefully analyzes the idea of the paradisiacal character or the "earthly Eden" of al-Andalus and then the "Arab" or Muslim survivals that allegedly passed from al-Andalus to Spain and shaped the Spanish character.

Dario Fernández-Morera examines the concrete cultural practices of Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities under Islamic hegemony, comparing them with other Mediterranean cultures, more particularly those of the Greco-Roman or Byzantine Christian Empire.

Finally, Rafael Sánchez Saus studies the fate of Christians in North Africa and Spain: the irruption of Islam and the constitution of the Arab Empire, the conquest and the birth of al-Andalus, the first reactions of Christians, the oppressive regime of the *dhimma*, submission, collaboration, orientalization and Arabization, the martyrs-movement, resistance, revolt, persecution and the final eradication of the Christians of al -Andalus.

These three authors presented their respective works, along with two of the best French specialists, [Marie-Thérèse](#) and [Dominique Urvoy](#), during the colloquium, "Al-Andalus, from Myth to History," held in Paris, on October 6, 2019, and sponsored by l'Association pour l'histoire (Association for History).

Q: Is there not, all the same, an intellectual contribution, with figures like [Averroes](#), along with considerable artistic, scientific and architectural developments, compared to an archaic period, which we owe specifically to Muslim Spain?

AI: It is not a question here of denying the most admirable and most famous cultural and artistic elements of al-Andalus, of sinking into a kind of reverse caricature, of indulging in the apology of the Christian world and of the [Reconquista](#) without the slightest restriction; in other words, to recreate exactly what one is justifiably reproaching the promoters of the myth for. It is only a question of dismantling the pillars of legend, the alleged marvelous interfaith harmony (between Jews, Christians and Muslims), the exaggerated valuation of cultural and scientific achievements, and the widespread idealization of the social and political successes of al-Andalus.

It cannot be stressed enough that the ideological interpretations and partisan culling that can be made of the work of Fanjul, Morera and Sánchez Saus lie beyond actual work of these scholars. These three researchers and historians only want to compare the usual view that we have of this part of the history of the Iberian Peninsula with proven and verified facts. And the facts speak for themselves. Now it is up to the reader to judge.

Having said that, I don't really understand what you mean by "archaic period." Should we understand that, despite ups and downs, even some violence, which would be, as we say, "inevitable in a medieval society," Muslim Hispania is the only true example of tolerance, thanks to the Muslim conquerors who imposed themselves on a barbaric, ignorant and intolerant Romano-Visigothic culture?

Does this also mean that this remarkable Muslim civilization was then destroyed by barbarian Christians, who seized the Peninsula again and imposed an even more intolerant regime than what existed before the arrival of the Berbers and Arab Muslims, and this was a real setback for Western progress? We can always dream!

The reality is that the culture of [Visigothic Hispania](#) was based on the heritage of Roman civilization and on the development of Isidorian thought. Even though this would have concerned only the elites, it was radically different from that of the Berbers and Arab conquerors, who for the most part could neither read nor write. The culture of the Visigothic kingdom had assimilated the "Greco-Roman Christian Empire." [Spania](#) (far south of present-day Spain) had been a province of the Byzantine Empire. I am aware of the contempt of some academics for the culture of the largely Romanized Visigoth

"barbarians." But following them, we quickly forget the place and the role played by such prestigious figures as [Eugenius II](#) of Toledo, [Leander of Seville](#), [Isidore of Seville](#), or [Theodulf of Orleans](#), to name but a few examples.

You mention the famous philosopher, Averroes (Ibn Rushdi). Dario Fernández-Morera devotes many enlightening pages to him. He nuances his portrait and recalls the lesser known side of the character. Averroes was a Malikite jurist who belonged to one of the most rigorous schools of Qur'anic exegesis, which was in the majority in al-Andalus. He was adviser to a ruthless Almohad [caliph](#), a judge responsible for monitoring the application of Sharia law, author of [Bidayat al-Mujtahid](#), a treatise containing the most edifying guidelines for use by Muslim judges (comments on the holy war, *jihad*, [jizya](#), stoning, etc.).

In reality, when it comes to mutual "great debts" between the various cultures, one must be extremely careful. These are always relative and partial. Two examples, among many others, may suffice to show this.

Let us first take the title of the journal of the [Institut du Monde Arabe](#) in Paris, [Qantara](#) ("bridge" in Arabic). The Spanish also know, as a noun and toponym, the word *Alcantára*, [Alcanadre](#), and some other derivatives from Arabic. But it should be added that the Arabic word *qantara* comes from the Syriac *qenterun*, which itself comes from the Greek *kentro*, or even from the Latin *centrum* (This point is explained and documented in the [Diccionario de arabismos y voces Afines en iberorromance](#) by philologist, [Federico Corriente Córdoba](#)).

Another, infinitely more striking example is that of the Koran. Philologists have shown that the sacred text of Islam, for Muslims, contains a lexicon of relatively abundant Latin and Greek origin (about 170 foreign terms). But would it not, for all that, be absurd, unreasonable, even impious, to claim that the Koran has a "great debt" to Rome and Greece?

A superficial analysis or vision of al-Andalus - like those of foreign travelers to Spain in the 19th-century, or those of the many current polemicists and ideologists - may lead to only a few particularly striking visual elements, such as, the [Alhambra](#), the [Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba](#), or the [Giralda](#) of Seville. But, as Serafin Fanjul says, these are just beautiful stones and nothing else. Rather, we should look for the living and active elements that have survived in society after 1492 or 1609 (the date of the expulsion of the last Moors). And here we have a veritable little breviary of received ideas which it is beneficial to

deconstruct.

One of the most oft-used arguments to support Islamic influence in Spain is the lexicon of Arabic origin that the Spanish or Castilian language has retained. Professor Fanjul has shown that it is in fact a total of three thousand words (with about two thousand more being minor toponyms), which come from the 13th-century (the period during which the Arabic lexicon is most present in Castilian literature); that barely 0.5% of the total (and 0.6% in the work of Cervantes in the 16th-century). Proportionally, it is very little, and even less so, as it is a vocabulary relating to medieval techniques (agriculture, weapons, construction, medicine) which have since largely fallen into disuse. There is also no Arabic lexicon with spiritual or abstract significance, which is very revealing. Finally, Arab-Muslim influences in the fields of food, clothing, popular festivals or music are just as limited - whereas in these same areas, Latin-Germanic and Christian filiations are predominant, even overwhelming.

Q: So where does this myth of al-Andalus come from? Why and how did it develop and what keeps it going today?

AI: It's very interesting to ask why the myth persists and why it is still developing today. The myth is spread by three categories of people. First, by politicians and journalists who, sometimes in good faith, are ignorant (like, for example, Obama, Blair or Macron) but often opportunists (they fear the censorship of "political correctness"). Second, by fanatics or extremist Islamophiles. And thirdly, by conformist academics, who defend tooth and nail their corporate interests. It is especially from the last two categories that the most virulent polemicists are recruited against the works of Fanjul, Fernandez-Morera, Sanchez Saus, and more generally against all the critics of the myth.

The most enthusiastic are usually supporters of the fanciful thesis that Arab Muslims never invaded Spain militarily. This thesis indirectly seeks to show that Catholicism is a religion foreign to Spain. It would have been, they say, repudiated by the inhabitants of "Hispania," and would have triumphed only some time, before the Muslim presence, by force and violence. This thesis was developed at the end of the 1960s by the Basque paleontologist, [Ignacio Olagüe](#) (who had been a member of the [JONS](#) - Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional Sindicalista - in his youth, the national-trade union political movement of [Ramiro Ledesma Ramos](#)). Today, it is taken up by Andalusian nationalists and in particular by the neo-Marxist philologist, professor of the University of Seville, [Emilio González Ferrín](#).

In the same exalted circle, we can cite the works of the orientalist and theorist of Unitarian

Universalism, [Sigrid Hunke](#), who worked in his youth for the SS ([Ahnenerbe](#) Research Institute). Partisan of National Socialist neo-paganism, apologist of Islam, "a virile religion against the Christian religion of effeminate slaves," she considered that the Arab-Muslim heritage of the West was more direct or even more important than the Greco-Roman. All these theses, or rather all these rantings, have as much credibility as those which make aliens the builders of the pyramids.

In the second category, that of conformist academics, not to say rigid pen-pushers, we find a good number of Arabists, anthropologists and a few medievalists. This is the case with the anti-Zionist anthropologist, [José Antonio González Alcantud](#), who does not fear ridicule when he asserts that "the deniers of the Andalusian link employ methods similar to those of the deniers of the Holocaust" (see his book, [Al Ándalus y lo Andaluz](#), 2017). We can also cite, as an archetypal example, although he is a complete stranger outside Spain, the historian at the University of Huelva, [Alejandro García Sanjuán](#), who has three obsessions and phobias: Christianity, the Church and the nation.

Among the militant "historians," we can also cite the American of Cuban origin, [María Rosa Menocal](#), or, in France, [Alain de Libera](#), [Jean Pruvost](#), [Abderrahim Bouzelmate](#), and the geographer, lecturer, willing libellist in style, [Emmanuelle Tixier du Mesnil](#) (see, [L'Histoire](#), no. 457, March 2019).

A more moderate Arabist in the diatribe is arguably Spain's Maribel Fierro (see, [Revista de Libros](#)), but she nonetheless reproduces in soft-mode some of the most hackneyed clichés. According to her, Arabist specialists have long known everything for a long time – that there would have been violence, but which was perfectly normal in a medieval society; that "there was a legal framework," and "the *dhimma* also had its advantages." In short, the myth exists only in the minds of those who claim it exists, who keep stressing it – now, move along, there's nothing to see here!

A last important factor explains the charges or indictments of these writers of history against Fanjul, Fernandez-Morera and Sánchez Saus – their resentment of the very positive reception, even admiring, by a good part of the big press, and their incontestably successful print-runs. Three months after the publication of Fanjul's book, it had already sold more than 15,000 copies. A record for a history book which has subsequently been the subject of several reissues in paperback and in pocket size. The books by both Fernández- Morera and Sánchez Saus' have also been notable successes.

But these mythologists of al-Andalus did not sit idly by. The bitterest and the most Manichean minds among them, those who knew they were condemned to having only a few hundred readers, used the

entire panoply of conventional weapons and stratagems, and desperately tried to fight back – with slander, insults, innuendos, attacks against religious beliefs or supposed political options, accusations of Islamophobia, nationalism, fascism, or even wanting to foment the clash of civilizations, without forgetting, of course, the terrorist use of the supposedly "scientific" argument and the call for repression or exclusion from the academic community. The trouble is that the arguments of Fanjul, Fernández-Morera and Sánchez Saus are solid, rigorous, balanced, and their sources are indisputable.

Q: Did the **jizya** have a real impact on the conversion of certain non-Muslims to Islam? Were the conversions, in this context, sincere? And what were the treatments reserved respectively for new converts and those who remained outside of Islam?

AI: The Christian *dhimmi* had to pay a higher tax than the Muslim, and regardless of his fortune, because he was a Christian. He had to humiliate himself in front of the authorities when paying them. But the discrimination did not end there; and they weren't just fiscal. Some example, the Muslim traveled on horseback and the Christian with a donkey; a Christian who killed a Muslim, even in self-defense, was inevitably condemned to death, although this rule did not apply in the reverse case; the testimony of a Christian against a Muslim was not admissible in court; a Christian had to get up when a Muslim entered, and he could only pass him on the left side, considered cursed; a Christian could not have Muslim servants or a house higher than that of a Muslim, without having to demolish it; a church, when it was not razed, had to be lower than a mosque; the fines imposed for the same offenses were less than half for Muslims; mixed marriages between members of submissive and Islamized populations and Arab women were almost impossible and absolutely prohibited between Muslims and pagans (*musrikies*). These were some of the so-called "benefits" of the *dhimma*.

We are told like a mantra that if tolerance in al-Andalus was not of course as it has been conceived since the 18th-century "that does not mean that there has not been coexistence more often than not, and a peaceful one at that." But the truth is, intransigence towards other religions was untenable. Under the Umayyads, the slightest resistance or serious rebellion of Christians was drowned in blood. Only collaboration and submission were possible. We know the brutalities of [Abd al-Rahman III](#) with his sex slaves, as his biographer [Ibn Hayyan](#) tells it; we know his pedophilic passion for the young Christian [Pelagius](#) whom he finally killed because he resisted him.

The Umayyads were the most determined defenders of Islam and the greatest head-cutters or "beheaders" in the history of al-Andalus. The situation of Christians and Jews was such that over the

centuries they did not stop migrating to the Christian kingdoms of the Spanish Peninsula. After the triumph of the Almohads, the Christian and Jewish communities had no other possible alternative but conversion to Islam, or deportation to Africa. By the 12th-century, the Christian community of al-Andalus had ceased to exist.

Q: Do the various initiatives in Spain, aimed at asking forgiveness from the Muslim community for the consequences of the Reconquista, seem to you to be historically founded, and why?

AI: It's totally absurd, but you can always dream. I do not doubt for a moment that in the logic of Muslims or Islamists this request is justified. Dar al-Kufr (the "domain of the infidels" or "domain of unbelief," or the "domain of blasphemy") is the expression they use to designate the territories where Sharia law was once applied, but no longer applies.

And this is precisely the case with Spain; or rather, a good part of Spain since the Reconquista (the border line was located for a long time in the center of the Peninsula, where the [Central System](#) that separates the current autonomous communities of Castile and Leon and Castilla-La Mancha). But after all, in their logic, why would they not be also justified in asking the same forgiveness for the consequences of the reconquest in that part of France conquered as far as Poitiers? That being said, as far as I know, we are not forced to accept this propaganda, or we have to forget that not only Spain but also North Africa were both Christian long before they were Muslim.

The [image](#) shows the "Martyrdom of Pelagius," by the Master of Becerril, painted ca. 1520.

Translated from the French by N. Dass.

