



THE MYTH OF "ISLAMIC" SPAIN

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I have just finished reading a volume that should be a required text for anyone enthusing about how enlightened and tolerant Spain was under Islamic rule in medieval times, [*The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise*](#) by Dario Fernandez-Morera.



The enthusiasm for the glories of tolerant Islam is suffused throughout modern scholarship, to the point of embarrassment. It is difficult not to conclude, after one looks at the actual historical facts that the scholars ignore and suppress, that their enthusiasm for Islam finds its roots in their distaste for Christianity. It is certainly not rooted in the historical evidence itself.

In this vision of Islamic Spain (renamed by the Muslim conquerors as “al-Andalus”), all three monotheistic faiths got along famously and all three enjoyed cultural flowering and prosperity under the watchful eye of a tolerant Islam.

In this version of history, the Christians of Spain were a benighted, primitive, and ignorant lot, who fortunately for them, ended up under Islam, which then offered them previously undreamt of opportunities to learn tolerance and culture. In this paradise Jews, Christians, and Muslims coexisted in a happy sunlit land, enjoying the benefits of convivencia—at least until the horrible Christians spoiled it all at the Spanish Reconquista, which recovered the land for Christendom and brought again the blight of intolerance and darkness to their land.

A few quotes will suffice to give the outlines of this vision. From David Lewis, two-time Pulitzer Prize Winner and author of [*God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe*](#): “In the Middle Ages there emerged] two Europes—one [Muslim Europe] secure in its defenses, religiously tolerant, and maturing in cultural and scientific sophistication; the other [Christian Europe] an arena of unceasing warfare in which superstition passed for religion and the flame of knowledge sputtered weakly.”

Or from an article in The Economist from November 2001, just a few months after the attacks of 9-11: “Muslim rulers of the past were far more tolerant of people of other faiths than were Christian ones. For example, al-Andalus’s multi-cultural, multi-religious states ruled by Muslims gave way to a Christian regime that was grossly intolerant even of dissident Christians”. Even British Prime Minister Tony Blair climbed on the bandwagon, saying in 2007, “The standard-bearers of tolerance in the early Middle

Ages were far more likely to be found in Muslim lands than in Christian ones".

In this Islamic paradise, Christian *dhimmis*, (literally, "protected ones") were content with their subordinate lot under their Muslim lords, happily paying the *jizya* tax required of all *dhimmis* or conquered peoples living under Muslim domination, finding the good life under Islamic "protection". (Paying money for "protection" is usually always a bad sign, as victims of the Mafia can attest).

Nonetheless, the picture proffered by the proponents of Islamic tolerance is one wherein the protected *dhimmis* had no reason to complain, and were justly grateful for the security and the opportunities they enjoyed. I can almost hear the strains of the music with which *Gone With The Wind* opens, and see the words coming up on the screen: "There was a land of cavaliers and culture called al-Andalus. Here in this pretty world, gallantry took its last bow. Here was the last ever to be seen of Muslim knights and their ladies fair, of master and of slave...Look for it only in books, for it is no more than a dream remembered. A civilization gone with the wind..."

Ah, al-Andalus, now gone with the wind: those happy *dhimmis*, contented and protected under their gallant masters! How sad that such gallantry is no more than a dream remembered! How sad that it is now gone with the wind!

Or...maybe not.

Maybe the slaves were not all that contented and happy under their gallant masters' protection, just as the happy land of cavaliers and cotton fields fondly remembered as "the Old South" existed only in the minds of those able to select among the facts and ignore the hard reality that obtained among those working the cotton fields. Maybe it all looked rather differently to the slaves themselves. And maybe the vision of a tolerant al-Andalus is no more accurate than the vision of a tolerant and gallant Old South.

As Fernandez-Morera's book points out, the picture of a tolerant Islam can only be drawn by selecting among the facts and zeroing in on a few of the upper classes, while conveniently ignoring the mass of people and suppressing certain other facts—even facts about those upper classes.

Thus we are told that women in Islamic Spain "were doctors and lawyers and professors" (thus John

Jackson, [The Empire of the Moors](#), 1991). One would never guess from this that free, respectable, and married Muslim women were required to be domestically cloistered, and veiled whenever they left the house, and that they could not be seen by anyone but their families. They were also routinely circumcised.

The women who were "doctors and lawyers and professors" were the sexual slaves of rich men, for whom the restrictions binding free respectable married women did not apply. As the Arabist Maria Luisa Avila points out, the slave girls engaged in these activities not out of their free will, but as a reflection of their condition as slaves and as a result of the specialized training to which they submitted. Free women were not really free when it came to learning.

Moreover, those who attended the talks of a woman transmitting hadiths or stories about Muhammad found themselves listening to them speaking behind a curtain, since respectable Muslim women could not mix with men. And it is likely that the women "doctors" were those responsible for providing female circumcision, since no man was allowed to see the genitals of a woman who was outside his family.

As far as tolerance for other faiths was concerned, the Maliki school of law which governed al-Andalus was among the strictest. Under it, as in the rest of the Islamic world, the Christian dhimmis were relegated to the very bottom of a heavily stratified social ladder.

At the top stood the Arabs, then the Berbers, then freed white Muslim slaves who converted to Islam, and then former Christians who converted to Islam. The dhimmis occupied the bottom rung, and they were never allowed to forget it. They had to pay the jizya tax for their protection, and were subject to a multitude of laws enforcing their fifth-rate status.

Thus, for example, a Muslim who raped a Christian woman would be lashed, while a Christian who raped a Muslim woman would be killed. A Muslim was entitled to blood money (i.e. compensation for injury or death), while a Christian was entitled to only half. The legal testimony of a Christian against a Muslim was not acceptable in court.

A Muslim could not initiate a greeting when meeting a Christian, but rather a Christian must greet a Muslim first. Only Muslims could celebrate their religion publicly and outdoors. Christians could not walk through Muslim cemeteries because this would defile the Muslim graves. Water, food, garments,

and utensils touched by a Christian became polluted and could not be used by Muslims. Christians were rarely allowed to build or even repair their churches.

They could not display crosses upon their persons or on the outside of their churches. They must stand up in the presence of Muslims. They could not carry weapons. They must not ride horses in Muslim areas, and had to ride donkeys side-saddle so that they could readily dismount and genuflect before Muslims. And of course Christians could convert to Islam, but any Muslim converting to Christianity (or Judaism) would be killed.

Not surprisingly, there were sometimes riots among the populace, and sometimes martyrdoms. Occasionally Christians rebelled, publicly denounced Muhammad as a false prophet, and proclaimed Jesus as divine, with the result that they were put to death (such as the famous martyrs of Cordoba).

Most Christians were prepared to tolerate their fifth-rate status and not rock the boat. But there should be no doubt that the boat in which they uneasily sat was not one which promoted tolerance or represented a happy garden in which everyone mixed and worked together as equals.

The academics who praise medieval Islamic Spain as a pretty world where *convivencia* and gallantry took their last bow are not telling the whole story. To learn the rest of the story (as Paul Harvey would say), we need to hear other voices as well. [*The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise*](#) is a good place to start.

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The [image](#) shows, "The Slave Market," by Otto Pliny, painted in 1910.

