

KINGDOMS OF FAITH: A NEW HISTORY OF ISLAMIC SPAIN

(BRIAN A. CATLOS)

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I read this book, about the history of Spain under Muslim rule, hoping it would be less biased than Darío Fernández-Morera's *The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise*, which I found to be too polemical in its criticism of Islamic domination. This book was closer to neutral, on the other side of neutral, but the author, Brian Catlos, has taken a fascinating period of history and made it boring. It's not that the writing is bad, it's that he takes a kitchen sink approach that loses the reader in minutiae, with so many *dramatis personae* that there is no drama. Still, *Kingdoms of Faith* is useful as a reference work, and in addition, I think that the history recounted here has much to say about conversion of Muslims in lands reconquered by Christendom, past and future.

Catlos's specialty is the medieval intersection of Christianity and Islam, so he is certainly competent to write this book. His basic premise is that to view Muslim Spain (from roughly A.D. 700 to A.D. 1492) as some kind of paradise of *convivencia*, where everyone got along and flourished in a wonderful, tolerant atmosphere, is completely wrong. Nor, though, was it a hellhole of constant oppression for non-Muslims, as sometimes portrayed in reaction to the myth of *convivencia*, as by Fernández-Morera. Rather, it was a place like any other, where many people pursued their various interests, sometimes in cooperation and sometimes in competition, violent or not. Yes, competition was always cast within a confining mold of Muslim domination and yes, religion tended to assume a primary role, but that still meant a great deal of flexibility and variance in human relations. This has the ring of truth, and comports with actual human behavior much more than the ideologically freighted descriptions of Muslim Spain, meant to have modern-day applicability, that we are usually offered.

The author begins with a brief outline of the rise of Islam (failing to bow and scrape by adding "Prophet" before every mention of Muhammad's name, a refreshing change from most modern Western writing). He then turns to the Muslim invasion of Visigothic Spain, shortly after A.D. 700. (He notes that "Al-Andalus," the Muslim term for

the conquered lands, probably derives from the Visigothic *landahlauts*, meaning “inherited estate,” something I did not know.) Documentary history of this period is pretty slight and encrusted with both Christian and Muslim legend, but in short the divided Visigoths lost the only major battle and the rest of Spain was quickly mopped up by Muslim forces moving in from North Africa. Quite a few of the Visigoth nobility apparently joined up with the Muslims, beginning a pattern in Spain of religious antagonists fighting side-by-side when it was in their interests to do so. (Catlos rejects the common scholarly contention that Spain’s Jews actively assisted the Muslim conquest, deeming it a “literary trope” that pleased the imaginations and interests of later generations of Muslim and Jewish writers.) Those Visigoth lords who did not join up usually still eventually signed up as vassals of the new Muslim overlords, a common enough maneuver in medieval times, and one that benefited both conquerors and conquered. After all, as everywhere in its conquests, Islam was interested in two things: acknowledged supremacy and tax revenue. As long as those were on offer from the conquered, there was no reason to upset the apple cart, and much reason to keep it rolling. Then over time, naturally, many of the great, followed by the small, converted to Islam, for personal benefit.

Catlos describes the complex organization of the Muslim political and military forces, where the initial conquest was led, on his own initiative, by a Berber, Tariq ibn Ziyad, a protégé and client of an Arab, Musa ibn Nusayr, a protégé and client of the sixth Umayyad caliph, al-Walid, who had appointed him governor of Ifriqiya (roughly, Roman Africa). It’s not totally the author’s fault, and in part it’s due to the unfamiliarity of Muslim names to the Western ear, but at this point the book’s major fault shows up—an astonishing volume of names, a flood of names. Thousands of names, or at least well in excess of a thousand. On nearly every page several new people are introduced, most of whom are not heard from again. A professional scholar could parse these people, their importance, and their relationships, but even a well-informed amateur reader is nearly overwhelmed. Catlos should have cut this down, either by not naming everyone, or by not including everything that happened. It does not really usually matter that, in the umpteenth such instance, Ali ibn Whoever rebelled against his cousin Al- Whatever

and got executed as a result. More thematic treatment and less cast of characters would have been better.

Soon after the initial conquest, by A.D. 750, the Umayyads were replaced by the Abbasids, who tried to exterminate the Umayyad line. This had notable consequences for Spain, because the sole surviving Umayyad heir, 'Abd al-Rahman, fled to the Berbers in Ifriqiya (his mother's people), and then organized a takeover of Muslim Spain from the Abbasid governor. As usual in early Islam, the tensions between Arabs and non-Arabs played an important role (as well as the Yamani/Qaysi distinction among Arabs) and Spain under early Islam was just as divided as it had been under the Visigoths, making al-Rahman's task easier. These divisions also made it impossible for Islam to subdue the Christians in the mountainous north, if for no other reason than they were usually bought off to keep them quiet and uninvolved in intra-Muslim disputes, but who provided the seed of the later reconquest of Spain. Ultimately successful, 'Abd al-Rahman had the good fortune to live long enough to consolidate his reign and construct the foundations of a long-lasting monarchical system, in part based on adherence to the Maliki school of Islamic law (and inaugurate widespread destruction of Christian churches).

He also set up Córdoba as his capital, a center of culture, though one about which a great deal of propaganda is told today in order to distract the eye from modern Muslim cultural desuetude by exaggerating past Muslim glory. Its best-known architectural feature was the Great Mosque, which still stands (now a church, as it was before 'Abd al-Rahman destroyed the previous Byzantine Church of St. Vincent on the site). Only later did Córdoba adopt the sparkling guise we are told to remember it in, but its roots were set early.

As always in Muslim history, however, succession was a major problem, resulting in nearly inevitable civil wars after the death of each capable monarch. Even when the succession worked adequately, powerful lords usually took advantage to increase their own power at the new monarch's expense. Again, name follows name, until in 822 'Abd al-Rahman II took the throne, great-grandson of the original 'Abd al-Rahman. He inherited a far more Muslim Spain than his name ancestor, but also one that was facing the rise of the Franks under Charlemagne and the increasing domination of northern Spain by Christian kings—who were

still, for now, mostly semi-vassal states fighting each other, but a sign of future trouble for Islam. So, gradually, Muslim Spain consolidated and became ever more monolithically Muslim, reaching its temporal apogee under 'Abd al-Rahman III (grandson of the II), a cruel but competent monarch who took the title of caliph, the first time for a Muslim Spanish ruler. He constructed Córdoba into the Muslim capital, building a fantastic palace, Madinat al-Zahra, still a tourist attraction today. Muslims have built this palace into a place of exaggerated legend; you will often hear of the "Olympic pool-sized lakes of mercury," which Catlos more accurately characterizes as "basins" (to catch and reflect light), though that's eye catching enough. It's unlikely, whatever Catlos says, that there were 400,000 books. But no doubt it was impressive and Córdoba a city of considerable brilliance.

Catlos does not make the mistake of ascribing advanced science and medicine to Islam, much less to Muslim Spain. In all of the Muslim world, including Spain, astronomy was fairly sophisticated, for religious and astrological reasons, but mathematics and medicine, and all other science, were second-order, second-rate, and even often frowned upon. (Although Catlos does not mention it, anatomical knowledge under Islam was always minimal, since unlike in Christian Europe, dissection was totally forbidden.) He discusses, for example, that the foremost pharmaceutical compendium throughout the known world in this time was written by a Greek in the first-century Roman army (Pedanius Dioscorides), then translated into Arabic and used throughout the Muslim world. Catlos does incorrectly ascribe a variety of minor inventions, such as the mechanical clock, to the Muslim world, and wrongly claims the Umayyads used Greek Fire, but it's hard to avoid such errors, due to the ubiquity of propaganda on this topic.

The reason that Spain gradually became more monolithically Muslim was that there were plenty of incentives for Christians to convert, even short of the occasional organized violent persecution. (Jews converted too, though there is less documentary evidence, and Jews were more accepted by Muslims, then at least, than Christians.) Social and economic benefits to conversion were significant, and with some exceptions, it was impossible to rise high in government service or to gain political power as a Christian. As always, the Muslim focus in Spain was supremacy of Islam, not Islam being the sole acceptable religion (although only

Christianity and Judaism counted as acceptable religions), so conversion was not forced. But over time it continued inexorably.

This was a two-way street, however. As the Christian Spaniards rolled south, regaining their land, the usual pattern was for the upper classes and the educated among the conquered Muslims to flee to areas still under Muslim control, either North Africa or the Middle East, despite Christian attempts to persuade them to stay. They fled not because they were afraid of persecution, but because it was intolerable, even inconceivable (and forbidden in Islam) to remain in a place where Islam was no longer the supreme authority. Still, quite a few Muslims stayed, for profit or because they had no choice, and accepted a status less formal than, but very similar to, the dhimmi status Christians had had under Islam. And those upper-class Muslims who stayed usually, over time, converted, just as had their own ancestors converted to Islam.

And so it went for the next five hundred years, even if, in Catlos's name-heavy telling, it feels more like a thousand. Different groups come to power and then pass from the scene; innumerable alliances are formed and broken among and between Muslims and Christians. The Christians continue to rise. The Muslims fragment into small taifa kingdoms, are partially reunited under the Almoravids and the Almohads, yet are gradually ground down by the Christians, no paragons of unity themselves. By the 1200s the Christians, ascendant across the known world, had reconquered most of Spain, but it took until 1492 until the final victory, over Granada.

Once the Christian Spaniards had reconquered the whole country, the position of Muslims gradually deteriorated. Various practices associated with Islam were banned, such as "Arab-style baths," as well as the ownership of slaves (an exclusively Muslim practice by that time, since slavery had been ended in Christian Europe centuries before), and in general, being Muslim became, over time, more and more of a debility. Most converted, especially of the upper classes, who no longer really had the option of emigration, since the so-called Golden Age of Islam had long since passed, so there was little place to go where they would have been accepted, or that was attractive. Ultimately, seen (largely correctly) as fifth columnists eager to aid Muslim raiders from North Africa, clients of the Ottomans, in 1609 all remaining Spanish Muslims were given the choice of conversion or expulsion, ending the Muslim presence in

Spain (until today, when fresh invaders have been eagerly invited by the unwise, stupid, or malicious, but that is another story). This action had a practical backdrop; Spain's rulers by 1609 had less reason to keep the Muslims happy than they had in 1492, when Muslims powered much of the Spanish economy. Gold and silver from the New World was their funding now, and the skilled crafts dominated by Muslims had been largely taken over by Christians, converts or otherwise. (One wonders why the entire Muslim world is now an economic basket case; nobody would apply "economic powerhouse" to any country with a Muslim majority. Cultural enervation? Oil? Interesting question.)

Catlos occasionally falls prey to the common problems of modern Western writers talking about Islam, but it's not really too bad, especially in these days of philo-Muslim propaganda. True, he frequently adopts the common trope of, when describing some Muslim bad behavior towards Christians, hastily adding as a supposed parallel some comparable Christian bad behavior, but never describing Muslim bad behavior when talking about Christian bad behavior. Cruelty by Muslim rulers is surrounded by qualifying statements heightening ambiguity, such as "alleged," "is said to have," or "legend tells us"; cruel behavior by Christian rulers is flatly stated as fact. Mosques are "beautiful"; churches are "hulking." On the other hand, Catlos is generally quite even-handed, noting, for example, that the violence and effect of the Spanish Inquisition is grossly exaggerated by modern propagandists. Thus, I have no real complaints about bias in this book.

So that's Muslim Spain, neither paradise nor hellhole. What I'm interested in is what this says for the future. As I have noted before, and others have noted before me, rapid mass conversion of Muslims to Christianity has never occurred. Possibly this is attributable to the sealed nature of Islam, complete in itself and convinced of the utter and necessary superiority, temporal and spiritual, of Islam and Muslims (not to mention that apostates get killed). On the other hand, rapid mass conversion of Christians to Islam has never occurred either. What we think of as mass conversions, in formerly wholly Christian areas such as the entire Middle East, were actually gradual events taking place over many hundreds of years, spurred both by force and by the desire for gain, with mechanisms well illustrated in microcosm by Catlos. What we tend not to think about is that the same process works in reverse, from Islam

to Christianity, as Catlos also illustrates. We don't think about it because examples are fewer, and also because Christianity is less triumphalist than Islam, which holds that any land that once becomes Muslim must be Muslim forever. (That means that any devout modern Muslim believe that Spain must return to the Muslim fold, a goal towards which many Muslims are actively working.) Which religion formally dominates an area is less of a focus for Christians. In addition, the conversion processes between Islam and Christianity are not precisely a mirror image, since the attitude toward subordinate religions is structurally different in Islam and Christianity, but in practice, over time, when the ruling elite is one of those religions, whatever that religion is, it seems clear that eventually most people (at least those who stay) become that religion, if the new ruling culture is competent, vibrant, and confident, and uses some combination of carrot and stick.

Let's run a thought experiment. We can start with two premises (which I will assume, not prove here, though I have proved them elsewhere) and see what insights into the possible future follow. First, Christianity is a superior religion. Aside from it being true, the cultures that are actively Christian are the cultures that have accomplished most in human history, and created everything good about the modern world. Second, the political future of the world is not so-called liberal democracy, which is doomed as a result of its attractive, but bogus, Enlightenment doctrines. Liberal democracy, or more accurately all political systems derived from the Enlightenment, merely awaits the knowledge of the form of its Destructor. Soon enough, it will be replaced by something, hopefully something better. My vote (not that voting, at least by the masses, is going to be important in the future) is for a return to an improved version of pre-Enlightenment Western culture, in which Christianity will be the dominant, officially approved and encouraged religion, what I have called "pluralism lite." In such a case, a renewed society of the West, or the successor society to the West (if there is one) will continue the fight that Islam currently has with the West, since as many have pointed out Islam always has bloody borders. But likely with more success, leading to direct conquest of currently Muslim lands. In fact, let's start with Turkey. We will call the capital, oh, "Constantinople" and the whole area "Asia Minor." What happens then?

Well, if the conversion process Catlos outlines is still viable in the modern world, over time, Islam will decay and Christianity will rise in those reconquered lands, returning them the way they were, and the way they should be. Since Islam is, as Winston Churchill famously and acidly described, not a religion conducive to dynamism (the brief period perceived as a Muslim Golden Age was exactly that, brief, and relied mostly on the shaking up and recombination of exhausted civilizations taken over by Arab barbarians), this process of reconquest and conversion could actually proceed fairly quickly. What the effect of modern technology would be is unclear to me, however, it might accelerate the process, or it might retard it, in that local Muslims could more easily look to areas where Islam still ruled, and use technology to resist conversion and consolidation by Christians. Plus, in the modern world, the combination of Islam with modern ideologies, most in evidence in Seyyid Qutb's blending of Kharijite Islam with Leninism, is a potent force. Not to mention simple nationalism, a relatively modern phenomenon. It is far from clear that a people under the thumb of their new Christian overlords would simply gradually acclimatize as in the past; ideology, the search for transcendence in the here and now, has proven a powerful force, the more so if combined with transcendence in the non-temporal realm. Thus, this reconversion process is not as simple as analogizing to sixteenth-century Spain; it might well not go according to plan. (Providing a society-binding outward-looking set of non-religious goals, such as space, might help.)

Of course, the most recent time a Western nation tried to dominate Muslim nations directly, in Iraq and Afghanistan, it hasn't gone so well, and it most definitely hasn't gone in the direction I outline. Afghanistan is irrelevant; it is *sui generis* and not subject to conquest, as should be known to everyone by now. Its people will have to see the light on their own, but Islam is extremely attractive to patriarchal and violent tribal societies (since that is its own origin, and much of its core theology is straight pandering to such groups), so that's not likely anytime soon. Iraq, cradle of civilization, is a different matter. But it's a false counterexample to my plan—the United States isn't Christian, and anyway didn't come to conquer and rule, but to offer unwanted democracy to unwilling people not fit for self-government. In fact, due to our failure of nerve and the general stupidity of George W. Bush and his henchmen,

Christianity has as a result been effectively snuffed out in Iraq. Sending the modern Charlemagne with Abrams tanks to stay would be a completely different thing. Perhaps the world is just too different now, but I suspect that is presentism.

No doubt, like all such events in human history, this process would have a great number of unforeseen and unintended consequences, some good, some bad. But history rolls on, and since it's not going to roll on in the gentle way Francis Fukuyama hoped three decades ago, we might as well sign on for something with a long, honorable, and successful pedigree, some type of muscular Christianity that drives the world forward—that is, in the opposite direction it's heading now.