

Book Review

The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise: Muslims, Christians, and Jews under Islamic Rule in Medieval Spain, by Darío Fernández-Morera, Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2016. 361 pages.

Reviewed by Dr. Roland Cap Ehlke

Dr. Darío Fernández-Morera teaches in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Northwestern University, is a former member of the National Council on the Humanities, and holds a PhD from Harvard University. In *The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise*, he takes on the widely held idea that Muslim hegemony in Spain (and beyond) was a good thing for everyone involved—whether Muslim conquerors, Christian and Jewish *dhimmis*, women, or slaves.

Fernández-Morera begins each of the book's seven chapters as well as the introduction and epilogue—and at times sub-chapters—with one or more politically correct epigraphs regarding the supposedly enlightened conditions of Muslim Spain. Some fifty such short quotations are scattered throughout the book. This review will follow the pattern by highlighting (and indenting) a number of entrenched attitudes to which the book responds.

Muslim rulers were far more tolerant of people of other faiths than were Christian ones. . . . Islam and the West: Never the Twain Shall Peacefully Meet? *The Economist*, 2001. (pp. 1-2)

The standard-bearers of tolerance in the early Middle Ages were far more likely to be found in Muslim lands than in Christian ones. Tony Blair, former prime minister of Great Britain, 2007. (p. 2)

In the Introduction, Fernández-Morera explains, “This book aims to demystify Islamic Spain by questioning the widespread belief that it was a wonderful place of tolerance and *convivencia* of three cultures under the benevolent supervision of enlightened Muslim rulers” (2). To that end, in addition to the oft-quoted Muslim sources, his research includes archaeology, coins, and Christian and Jewish sources.

The task is not easy. He recounts the case of author Sylvain Gouguenheim (*Aristote au mont Saint Michel*, 2008), who demonstrated that, contrary to current notions, Islamic civilization was for the most part “unreceptive to the spirit of Greek civilization” (6). Moreover, Aristotle had already been translated in France at Mont Saint-Michel, and even the Arabic translations were done by Christian scholars. In other words, there was a “continuity between Greek and European civilization . . . that did not require Islam’s appearance on the historical scene” (6). Gouguenheim’s work was condemned by the establishment, with—among other reactions—the Sorbonne University holding a “scholarly colloquium to denounce the book” (6).

This is what anyone who bucks the system can expect. Fernández-Morera attributes such reactions to professional self-preservation, political correctness, economics, and fear of being called Islamophobic.

We should think of the Muslims, in some way, as a migratory wave, just like the Visigoths, except two hundred [sic] years later. University of Chicago

Prof. David Nirenberg in PBS film *Cities of Light: The Rise and Fall of Islamic Spain*, 2007. (19)

Chapter 1, “Conquest and Reconquest,” takes on the notion that *jihad* was not a motivation in Muslim conquest. Fernández-Morera waxes sarcastic: “Now it is certainly possible that, for centuries, the medieval Muslim scholars who interpreted the sacred Islamic texts, as well as Muslim military leaders . . . misunderstood (unlike today’s experts in Islamic studies) the primarily peaceful and defensive meaning of ‘*jihad*,’ and that, as a result of this mistake, Muslim armies erroneously went and, always defensively, conquered half the known world” (23).

[A] great empire would replace the Romans in Spain, but it would be a Muslim empire rather than the Visigoth dynasty. . . . [Muslims] accomplished what Visigoths never could: they lifted Spain from her Dark Ages gloom and depression . . . Chris Lowney, *A Vanished World: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Medieval Spain*, 2006. (57)

Chapter 2, “The Effects of the Jihad: The Destruction of a Nascent Civilization,” shows that the “Dark Ages” were less dark than usually depicted and “quite enlightened when compared with Muslim culture prior to the Arabs’ conquest of the Middle East and North Africa” (58). Spanish Visigoth culture was advanced in various ways, including in its law code “that combined Visigoth practices with Roman law and Christian principles” (59).

To the “uncultured” Berber invaders, the Catholic Visigoth kingdom was “a wonderland” (61). Fernández-Morera attributes the distinctive horseshoe arch to

Greco-Roman origins and demonstrates Visigoth connections with classic civilization, while refuting the assertion that Islam preserved and passed on classical knowledge. He goes to question the “much vaunted Islamic ‘universities,’” which were but madrasas for studying religious texts and laws (65).

In arts and agriculture, learning and tolerance, Al Andulus [*sic*] was a beacon of enlightenment to the rest of Europe. James Reston Jr., *Dogs of God: Columbus, the Inquisition, and the Defeat of the Moors*, 2006. (85)

In chapter 3, “The Daily Realities of Al-Andalus” come to light. Making no distinction between civil and religious law, “sharia pervaded every aspect of life” in Muslim Spain (85). Muslim clerics were in control, holding to the Maliki school of jurisprudence (one of the four Sunni schools, and second only to the Hanbali school in its conservatism). Singing was forbidden (108); Muslims were not to socialize with Muslims of a different school of law, much less share with Christians and Jews (115); neighborhoods were segregated; Christians could not repair churches in Muslim neighborhoods, and so on (117). In summary, “Islamic Spain enjoyed no harmonious *convivencia*; rather, Muslims, Christians, and Jews had a precarious coexistence” (116).

Muslim Spain . . . experienced a golden age beginning in the latter half of the eighth century under the enlightened rule of the Umayyad dynasty in Córdoba. University of Michigan Prof. Mark Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 1994. (119)

The title and subtitle—“The Myth of Umayyad Tolerance: Inquisitions, Beheadings, Impalings, and Crucifixions”—sum up the contents of chapter 4.

The tenth-century ruler Abd al-Rahman III (name means “Servant of the Merciful”) proclaimed himself caliph and subsequently has “earned particular admiration among Western scholars . . . ‘Under this energetic and dazzlingly successful monarch . . . the territorial and cultural achievement of Spanish Islam reached its zenith” (125). Yet the fact is that the “enhanced beheading activity under Abd al-Rahman III was notorious” (125). He suppressed dissent, including from Muslims who followed a legal school other than the Maliki (128).

Under the caliph, as people exited the Córdoba mosque after the Friday prayer on March 2, 939, they were treated to the beheadings of “100 of the most important barbarians [that is, Christians],” an occasion both pleasing to the populous and praised in verse: “And in plain sight of everyone your sword annihilated them, / Among blessings and praises to *Allah*” (128-9). Other notable events under the reign of the “Servant of the Merciful” included crucifixions, the beheading in his presence of a sexual slave who had displeased him (131), and book burnings.

Islam has a proud tradition of tolerance. We see it in the history of Andalusia and Córdoba during the Inquisition [*sic*]. . . . Likewise, it is important for Western countries to avoid impeding Muslim citizens from practicing religion as they see fit—for instance, by dictating what clothes a Muslim woman should wear. President Barack Obama, speech at Cairo University, 2009. (140)

In chapter 5. “Women in Islamic Spain: Female Circumcision, Stoning, Veils, and Sexual Slavery,” Fernández-Morera points out, “The Muslim female’s circumcision (*khifad*, or ‘lessening’) was legal, taken for granted, and praiseworthy in al-Andalus” (140). While such circumcision was mild compared with that practiced today, it was—and continues to be—approved under Maliki law.

The same holds true for other practices discussed in this chapter. Contrary to the opinion that women in Islamic Spain enjoyed great freedom, the noted Maliki jurist Ibn Rushd (Averroes) stated, “These societies of ours overlook the skills of women because women are only used for procreation, being therefore destined to the service of their husbands . . .” (156).

“In short,” summarizes Fernández-Morera, “the vision of scores of bejeweled free Muslim women walking about al-Andalus with long flowing hair and elegant silk dresses, displaying their undulating and voluptuous bodies while freely enjoying life in public places and working as poets, lecturers, teachers, librarians, copyists, physicians, and so forth under the tolerant and enraptured eyes of Muslim men is a wishful Western academic fantasy at best, and a shoddy professional reading of the historical evidence at worst” (168). In contrast, it was the Christian women—from Queen Isabella down to the “cowgirls” (173)—who would lead the way.

The era of Muslim rule in Spain (8th—11th century) was considered the “Golden Age” for Spanish Jewry. Rebecca Weiner, “Sephardim,” Jewish Virtual Library. (177)

Chapter 6 deals with “The Truth about the Jewish Community’s ‘Golden Age,’” as Fernández-Morera quotes the noted Jewish historian of Islam, Bernard Lewis: “The Golden Age of Equal Rights was a myth” (177). Like Christians, Jews were People of the Book who lived under Islamic authority as *dhimmi*s, that is, protected people who had to pay the *jizya*, the poll tax and a sign of humiliation under Islam. Jews generally could not build new synagogues; their buildings had to be lower than those of Muslims; among other restrictions, they could not carry weapons, ride horses, or criticize Islam.

[Under Abd al-Rahman III] Muslim tolerance of the so-called People of the Book was high, and social intercourse at the upper levels was easy and constant. Harvard Divinity School Associate Dean Jane I Smith, 1999. (205)

Chapter 7 takes up “The Christian Condition: From *Dhimmi*s to Extinction.” When the Reconquista ended in 1492 and Christians entered Granada, “there were no Christian *dhimmi*s in the city” (208). The *dhimma* system was “a gangster-like ‘protection racket’ (pay ‘protection’ or else)” (210). Years of suppression under Muslim rule had included measures to reduce the non-Muslim population. Along with social stigma and the economic pressure of the *jizya*, (to which other taxes might be added), Muslim men could have up to four wives, and hence more children; children born to mixed marriages under law became Muslims; Christians could convert to Islam, but Muslims could not convert under penalty of death.

Muslims could celebrate their religion openly; Christians could not. As was the case with Jews, Christians who rose to high positions were rare exceptions: “Such

‘success’ involved only elites and did not extend to the masses” (209). Yet Christians did resist.

A notable example was that of the martyrs of Córdoba: “Between 850 and 860, . . . men and women, some of them belonging to Christian families who had converted to Islam (*muladis*), defied the authorities by publicly affirming their Christian faith and ridiculing and insulting Muhammad” (230). They were put down ruthlessly. For “proclaiming the divinity of Christ and the falsehood of Muhammad,” some fifty men and women were beheaded or boiled to death (231-2). And how has politically correct history treated them? According to University of London Prof. Hugh Kennedy, the incident “does show the tolerance and essential reasonableness of the Muslim authorities, but it raises interesting moral and theological points about self-inflicted martyrdom” (230).

Modern historians seem to agree that the [Muslim] invasion was not particularly cruel, or destructive . . . moreover, a large Christian population lived on for centuries in al-Andalus with legal rights and relative freedom of worship. Cambridge University Prof. Colin Smith, 1988. (235)

The Epilogue cites the famous Tunisian historian Ibn Khaldun who noted that “the majority of Muslim scholars were non-Arabs from the conquered nations,” that “the buildings and constructions in Islam are relatively few as compared to the dynasties preceding” Islam, and that “the buildings erected by Arabs, with very few exceptions, quickly fell into ruins” (236-7). In other words, the conquerors took advantage of the superior civilizations of the conquered.

In Spain, “Christians were at the bottom of a stratified Islamic world, where Arabs occupied the top, followed by Berbers, then by freed Muslim white slaves, and finally by *muladis* (converts) . . .” (239). Yet following the Reconquista, there would arise, as Fernández-Morera describes it, a “Spanish Golden Age” (240).

Darío Fernández-Morera has certainly done his homework in challenging established ideas by digging deeply beneath the “truisms” of textbooks, journals, scholars, and politicians. His select bibliography includes over 280 sources, with 65 listed as primary, while more than 960 endnotes, many of them with extra-textual information, take up 95 of the book’s 361 pages.

This is not a theological tome, but theologians as well as others will find it very helpful in dismantling some of the roadblocks that stand in the way of understanding and dealing with the real history and culture of Islam.