The Golden Age in Spain: How golden was it?

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Review Article by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In 2006, Oxford University Press published a book by Chris Lowney, “A Vanished World: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Medieval Spain.” The author asked me to write a blurb, and it was included on the back cover of the book. Here is what I wrote:

“Chris Lowney has written a meaningful book about interfaith cooperation and interfaith antagonism in medieval Spain. While it points to the many failures of those days, it also suggests important triumphs of the human spirit. Can we learn from this story and shape a better, more harmonious world? Can we afford not to learn from this story?”

An underlying theme of Lowney’s book, like so many publications dealing with Islamic Spain, is that Jews and Christians fared reasonably well under enlightened Islamic rule. While life was not always perfect, it was much better for religious minorities in Islamic Spain than in Christian Europe.

Historians refer to a “Golden Age” for Jews of Spain. The Wiki Encyclopedia entry for the Golden Age states: “The nature and length of this ‘Golden Age’ has been a subject of much debate, as there were at least three Golden Ages interrupted by periods of oppression of Jews and non-Jews. A few scholars give the start of the Golden Age as 711–718, the Muslim conquest of Iberia. Others date it from 912, under the rule of Abd-ar-Rahman III. The end of the age is variously given as 1031, when the Caliphate of Cordoba ended, 1066, the date of the Granada massacre, 1090, when the Almoravides invaded, or the mid-12th century, when the Almohades invaded.”

Many authors laud “convivencia”—the generally peaceful co-existence in Medieval Spain that allowed Muslims, Christians and Jews to live in harmony. It is clear that Jewish culture blossomed in Islamic Spain, with the emergence of great poets, grammarians, Bible scholars, talmudists, philosophers, scientists, mathematicians and more.

The blurb I wrote for Chris Lowney’s book reflects my doubts about the extent of Islamic tolerance of Jews and Christians. I wanted to be sure to mention that interfaith antagonism existed and that there were lapses in tolerance. But I also indicated that there were important triumphs of the human spirit, and that we today can learn much of value for maintaining a convivencia in our own times, a respectful and mutually beneficial harmony among people of various religions.

I was right about the failures that occurred under Islamic Spain. But was I right in pointing to that era as a positive model for religious co-existence? Was I too optimistic? Was I engaging in wishful thinking? Was I influenced by the overwhelming praise, by many authors and teachers, of the tolerance of Islamic Spain, and by the ubiquitous lauding of convivencia?

These questions have come to mind as I’ve been reading a newly published book, “The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise: Muslims, Christians, and Jews under Islamic Rule in Medieval Spain,” by Dario Fernandez-Morera, (ISI Books, Wilmington, 2016). The author is Associate Professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Northwestern University.

While various scholars have pointed to problems and low points during Islamic rule in Spain, Dr. Fernandez-Morera goes much further. His bold argument is that the notion of Islamic tolerance of Jews and Christians is a myth—it is simply not true. The idea of convivencia—the mutual cooperation and harmony among Muslims, Christians and Jews in Medieval Spain—belongs more to the realm of propaganda than to history.

The author quotes numerous scholars who shower praise on Islamic tolerance, on the remarkable “Golden Age” in interreligious cooperation. But he argues that these authors were engaging in “political correctness,” the fashionable presentation of a tolerant and benevolent Islam. He draws on writings of people who lived in Islamic Spain, people who described what life was actually like in their times. He draws on extensive scholarly sources, on archaeological discoveries, as well as on the abundant secondary literature of more recent scholars.

Dr. Fernandez-Morera notes that the famed Umayyad dynasty were followers of the Maliki school of Islam which had little love for non-Muslims. The early Muslim conquerors of Spain and their successors systematically razed churches or turned them into Mosques. They imposed Islamic law on Christians and Jews—known as People of the Book—which made it very clear that the minorities were to be subservient to Muslims. Although granted relative freedom to conduct their communities according to their own religious traditions, Christians and Jews were "dhimmis"—an underclass of "protected people" who had to pay a special tax for the privilege of living under Islamic hegemony.

Dr. Fernandez-Morera writes: "In short, Islamic Spain enjoyed no harmonious convivencia; rather, Muslims, Christians, and Jews had a precarious coexistence. Members of the three communities had to come into contact now and then. Sometimes they did business, or collaborated with one another, or dwelled near one another." (p. 117) Of course, as in all societies, kinder people interacted more kindly with those of the other groups. And of course, there are examples of periods of relative quiet. And there were individual Jews and Christians who rose to positions of power and influence. Nonetheless, the massive reality was that "dhimmis" were subject to ongoing humiliation, segregation, and violence.

The "dhimmi" regulations imposed a special tax on Christians and Jews. Various rules were intended to humiliate "dhimmis" and remind them of their subservient positions. Writing about restrictions placed on Jews in Islamic Spain, Dr. Fernandez-Morera notes that Jews "must not ride horses. They must show deference to Muslims. They must not give court evidence against a Muslim…They must not proselytize….They must not dress in such an ostentatious manner as to offend poorer Muslims…." (p. 180)

While Jewish communities continued to exist in Islamic Spain, Christian communities declined and ultimately disappeared. "By the end of the twelfth century, as a result of flight (or 'migration') to Christian lands, expulsions to North Africa, executions and conversions, the Christian "dhimmi" population had largely disappeared from al-Andalus. When Christians entered Granada in 1492, there were no Christian "dhimmis" in the city." (p. 208).

Professor Fernandez-Morera's book has a clear point of view. He is especially interested in highlighting the strengths and virtues of Visigothic Spain before the arrival of the Muslims in 711. He praises the Christian re-conquest of Spain. Had it not been for the "Reconquista," Islamic rule might not only have prevailed over all of Spain, but might have spread further into Europe. This would have led to the fostering of religious discrimination, the low status of women, the inhibiting of

intellectual freedom; it would have precluded the emergence of the Renaissance, and would have left the Western world in the same general condition as the rest of the Muslim world.

While some of the arguments of Dr. Fernandez-Morera seem over-stretched and even polemical, the overall impact of his research and his book must make one stop to think more carefully about the “Andalusian Paradise” and convivencia. Are scholars and politicians perpetuating this myth because it serves a useful purpose, because they—and we—want to believe it? How nice it would be to know that there was a time and place when Muslims, Christians and Jews worked side by side in mutual respect and kindness. How nice to think that it is possible for Islamic rule to be tolerant and benevolent.

President Barack Obama, in a speech at Cairo University, June 4, 2009, stated: “Islam has a proud tradition of tolerance. We see it in the history of Andalusia and Cordoba during the Inquisition [sic].” Prime Minister Tony Blair wrote (“Foreign Affairs, January/February 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.”

These politicians, relying on wishful and mythological thinking, seek to appease the Muslim countries and to glorify Muslim achievements. Perhaps they think they will thereby convince current day Muslim leaders to embrace the myth of Islamic tolerance, thereby creating bridges between the Muslim world and the West.

Dr. Fernandez-Morera has pointed to the unpleasant and politically incorrect reality that Muslim rule was “tolerant” to Christians and Jews, but only if the "dhimmis" were in a clearly defined inferior position, subservient to Muslims. This is hardly a framework for mutual respect and equal rights.

When I wrote my blurb for Chris Lowney’s book, I wondered: “Can we learn from this story and shape a better, more harmonious world? Can we afford not to learn from this story?” When I wrote those words, I obviously harbored the belief—the hope—that there was a period of convivencia that can be a model for us today. I thought that it would be foolish for us to ignore the positive aspects of life in Medieval Spain.

After reading Dario Fernandez-Morera’s book, I could write these same words, but with a very different meaning. Rephrased, my blurb for today would read: Can we learn from the story of religious persecution and humiliation that characterized Islamic Spain? Can we learn to shape a better, more harmonious world by insisting on genuine respect, equality, decency, and theological humility among

all religions? Can we afford not to learn these lessons?