

## THE RISE OF MUSLIM SPAIN: AN EPITOME OF RELIGIOUS MODERATION

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### ABSTRAK

Menelusuri sejarah Islam dan kontribusinya yang tak tertandingi terhadap kebangkitan intelektual dan ilmiah Eropa pada periode abad pertengahan akan membangkitkan rasa ingin tahu tentang apa yang sebenarnya menghasilkan prestasi yang begitu besar dan unik dalam sejarah agama-agama dunia. Terobosan yang dicatat oleh agama di Sisilia pada masa modern Italia tetap tak tertandingi hingga masa kontemporer. Lembah Mazara del di ujung barat Sisilia - yang merupakan tempat tinggal orang-orang Arab Muslim pada abad ke-7 Masehi - memahami makna moderasi. Bahwa Islam tidak menolak perkembangan dan transformasi lebih baik diapresiasi oleh Andalusia -Spanyol. Semenanjung Iberia, mulai dari abad ke-6 M hingga akhir abad pertengahan, menjadi saksi sebuah Islam yang berdampingan dengan para penjelajah Muslim moderat yang benar-benar mendukung rekayasa ulang dan pertumbuhan masyarakat. Makalah ini, dengan latar belakang ini, berusaha untuk menceritakan kembali kisah bagaimana prinsip moderasi dan inklusivitas Islam membangun kembali Spanyol yang bobrok dan menjadikannya sebagai teka-teki ilmiah bagi seluruh Eropa. Dengan analisis historis komparatif, makalah ini berfokus untuk membawa terobosan penting ini kembali ke radar referensi bagi umat Islam kontemporer dan non-Muslim dengan tujuan untuk menampilkan kembali Islam yang citranya telah dirusak oleh orang-orang yang gagal untuk menyerap hipotesis moderasi.

**Kata Kunci:** Muslim Spanyol, Moderasi, Abad Pertengahan, Renaisans, Semenanjung Iberia.

### ABSTRACT

*Navigating through the annals of Islam and its unparalleled contributions to Europe's intellectual and scientific renaissance in the medieval period would arouse the curiosity to inquire about what actually brought about such a great and unique feat in the history of world's religions. The breakthrough that the religion recorded in Sicily in modern day Italy remains unmatched up to the contemporary times. Mazara del valley to the far Western part of Sicily – being the settlement of the Muslim Arabs in the 7<sup>th</sup> CE - understood the parlance of moderation. That Islam is not averse to development and transformation could better be appreciated by Andalusia –Spain. The Iberian Peninsula, beginning from the 6<sup>th</sup> CE to the later part of the medieval epoch, witnessed an Islam alongside moderate Muslim explorers that*

*was truly supportive of societal re-engineering and growth. The paper, given this background, undertakes to retell the story of how the Islamic principle of moderation and inclusivity rebuilt a dilapidated Spain and made her the scientific enigma for the entire Europe. With a comparative historical analysis, the paper focuses on bringing this epochal breakthrough back to the radar of reference for contemporary Muslims and non-Muslims alike with a view to re-presenting Islam whose image has been dented by people who fail to imbibe its moderation hypothesis.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Muslim Spain, Moderation, Medieval period, Renaissance, Iberian Peninsula*

## INTRODUCTION

It is usually argued that Europe developed fundamentally through retrieving and connecting with the Greco-Roman civilizations (Samir, 2011). This argument goes on to create the sensation that no other non-Western world or religious system ever has an input in the making of contemporary Europe. It is further held in several circles within and outside Europe that it is the atavistic responsibility of the Europeans to set the pace for scientific and ethical templates for others to follow. Very little is openly discussed, widely written and circulated that at certain periods in the annals of Western Europe – nay Europe in her entirety - mortals who were culturally, socially and religiously different from the people of the continent had once upon a time laid the foundations upon which the contemporary political, economic and philosophical bliss is built. Like Britain, France and many other nations in the Western Hemisphere, Spain equally underwent a plethora of stages of cultural development (Woodward, 1956, p.171). Truly, she had witnessed and gone through several phases of cultural experimentation, immersion and advancement, most especially in the eighth century. Were those encounters and experiences palatable to the expectations of the Spaniards? No aspects of Western history could be as complete as expected without an unalloyed recognition of the Arabs or the Moors as the intellectual leaders of the Western world (William & John, 1939, p.332). A very striking part of historicizing in this manner is the awe that usually accompanies the assertion that the medieval Muslims were the teachers to the European intelligentsia who later championed the renaissance and the reformation activism. This till eternity would sound and appear enigmatic and puzzling to many Europeans and non-Europeans alike. It has been argued (Briffault, 1919) that, no matter the intentional prevarication, there is not a single jot of the European renaissance that does not owe its gratitude to the sterling imprint of the Islamic civilization.

That some Muslims – whether ancient or contemporary -- may have done something unthinkable or perpetrated what is unfriendly to humanity does not render the entire edifying efforts of others useless. Islam is considered as a war-like religion as a result of the desperate and bloody deeds of some Seljuks while trying to foist the religion on conquered communities (William & John, 1939, p.238). The framing here forms the basis of what some European historians regard as the justification for the dislike and hatred of the Muslims alongside their religion in certain quarters. The Turkish Seljuks would not be denied by any Muslim historian. Although the culture of the Iberian Aborigines became positively influenced by the war-like Romans who had invaded the area in the 4<sup>th</sup> CE, the experience greatly differs from the encounter the Spanish had with the Muslim revivalists: the Romans had clearly subjugated the Iberian people (Haring, 1947, p.26).

When Spain fell into the hands of the Germanic Visigoths in 414 CE owing to the decline in the wielding influence and vortex of the Roman Empire, the new invasions by the uncivilized Goths weakened the flowering Romanized culture of the Iberian Peninsula (Nicholson, 1943, p.10). They sustained a similar legal tradition with a view to reinforcing Roman civilization. They imposed on the Spanish people their version of Christianity - Catholicism - with the motive of creating the impression that nothing had actually changed (Angel, 1946, p.30). Was the motive of the Germanic Visigoths informed by the move to transform the Spanish society to the betterment of the Spanish Aborigines? The motive was to further weaken the zeal from any of the aboriginally Spanish to wrestle political power from them. The maltreatments that the people of Andalusia had witnessed from these Germanic people prompted them to long for Muslims' alternative. Did the Muslim rulers of Spain force their way into the country and foist their socio-political idiosyncrasies on their host community? The subjugated Spanish had got an inkling of what non-Muslims were enjoying in other lands being governed by the Muslim army and leaders. Nestorian Patriarch Geoff III in his letter to Simeon, the Archbishop of Rifardashir as well as the head of all the bishops in Persia, pointed out that:

“The Arabs, to whom God has given power over the whole world, know how wealthy you are, for they live among you. In spite of this, they do not assail the Christian creed. To the contrary, they have sympathy with our religion, and venerate our priests and saints of our lord, and they graciously donate to our churches and monasteries” cited in Arnold Thomas (1913, p. 102). The

article therefore argues that political retrogression and economic underdevelopment are not synonymous with the spirit of development in Islam, neither is the religion compatible with non-inclusivity nor religious suppression of people of other faiths. Andalusia remains an eternal frame of reference for this submission. What Europe continually treasures today does not owe its roots to any other civilizational imprint other than the Islamic civilization. That the Arab or Muslim world is obliged to look inward into its political and cultural traditions to come to terms with the causes of its contemporary socio-economic and political woes as argued by Wickham (2002: x) is an indication of historical ingratitude and a conspiracy of silence over the real phenomena that are responsible for such contemporary woes. Does it ever sound logical and palatable that the Muslim world that engineered and sketched the path to progress for the contemporary Europe is this backward and strangulated?

The September 11 2001 attacks negatively disfigured the global standing and respect for Islam and the Muslims. The incident as devastating and image-denting as it is, is not enough to discredit what the religion and its adherents have stood for in the annals of the European renaissance and the world in general. At the point where humanity could have been subjected to eternal doom and Christianity – the remaining Roman heritage among the Spaniards – completely phased out of the Western Asia, the Islamic principle of moderation came to the fore to manacle the Muslim conquerors of West Asia and the Iberian Peninsula. A religion that succeeded in rendering a hitherto devastated and subjugated Spain into the cynosure of all European eyes in awe and admiration could never breed nor harbor nonconformists, fanatics nor extremists.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **THE SOCIAL-CULTURAL CONTOURS OF THE IBERIAN PENINSULA**

The Spaniards about whose contact with the medieval Muslim Arabs this work targets are neither Romans nor Germans. They are Paleolithic people who basically comprise Spaniards, Portuguese, and sometimes Andorrans, Gibraltarians and Southern French (Lorenzo et al., 2011, p. 2582). The striking part of their historical reference to the Iberian Peninsula is that the name has come to be identifiable with the people of Spain and Portugal. They came to be identified by this nomenclature through the ancient Greek geographers who themselves were under the rule and control of the Roman Empire (Claire et al., 2002, pp. 68-69). Inferably, both the Spanish and the

Portuguese are different from the Greeks, the Romans and the Gothic tribes that later conquered, influenced and ruled over them. It is probable to admit that the long period of both the Greco-Roman and the Gothic imperialism over the Hispanic people and communities took away virtually all their domestic cultural imprints. At this point, the conversion of the Aboriginal Iberian people to Christianity under the Greco-Roman hegemony could be described as different from the conversion of Saint Augustine of Hippo which fitted perfectly into a model of religious affiliation precipitated by personal conviction (Jessica, 1993, p. 47).

Transiting from late antiquity towards the clearer and wider medieval period in Western Europe demanded that two important organizational necessities would have to be upheld. Wickham (1984:6) argues that Muslim rulers of Spain gave primacy to the overhaul of the socio-economic and fiscal arrangements of the late Roman Empire. Spain that the Muslim world encountered during its conquest of the Iberian Peninsula in the 7<sup>th</sup> CE was a Visigothic society. These tribes of people basically were of three subdivisions and included the Visigoths, the Ostrogoths and the Vandals. They originally originated from the ancient Gothic homelands in Scandinavia and Northern Poland, most especially from Northern Europe, and were fundamentally Barbarians. These Germanic races of people, through one of their ambitious and desperate leaders, Clovis, conceived of the adoption of Christianity with a view to allying themselves and their tribal extraction with the Gallo-Roman aristocracy in Spain (Jessica, 1993, p. 47). As argued by Zeev Rubin (1981: 34), the Visigothic embracement of Christianity actually took place between 381 and 386 C.E, after having been able to cross the Danube. A great caution, however, needs to be exercised in tracing the origins of the Spanish Jews as well as their "maligned" involvement in the Muslim invasion of Spain. According to Norman Roth (1976: 145) over-reliance on the Christian sources of the conquest of Spain in the 6<sup>th</sup> CE would be highly counter-productive. This is owing to the fact that those accounts were written many centuries after the event. In short, they lack all indices of accuracy, and one of the hallmarks of wasatiyyah is being circumspect when ascribing to others certain acts and deeds whose impacts might end up tarnishing their images.

#### **MUSLIM INPUTS: THE SCIENTIFIC RISE OF THE WEST**

"It is highly probable that but for the Arabs modern European civilization would never have arisen at all; it is absolutely certain that but for them, it would not have assumed that character which has enabled it to transcend all previous phases of evolution"... Robert Briffault (1919: 190).

The West has been notorious for a deliberate glossing over whatever is beautiful about Islam and its natural power of transformation. Oftentimes, the impactful imprints that the vanguards of the religion had had over Europe during her intellectual stagnation in the medieval period up to the initial stages of the Enlightenment epoch are deliberately obliterated from contemporary European history. The Spanish Moors had developed farming in the subsistence category through introducing improved systems of irrigation and experimenting with new crops and products (Hume, 1901, p.109).

In fact, the most urbanized country in the 8th century CE happened to apply to two major provinces in Iraq, with 20 to 30 percent city inhabitants out of more than 10,000 total inhabitants (Bosker, et al., 2008, p.9). Application of population control measures was a cerebral brainwave of the Arabs. In the eighth century, the total population of Arab lands stood at 1,325,000 without any incidence of congestion, while in the Christian Europe, it was 407,000 and 390,000 in Byzantium with the popular attendant social deprivation (Botticini & Eckstein, 2012, p.33).

Europe, through Spain, became able to access the art of printing and minting, coinage of gold for commercial transactions, courtesy of the input of the Muslim scholars and intelligentsia of Spain. The only surviving gold carnage expertise in the Western Europe would come either from Greek or Arab mints (Block, 2014, p.6). Spanish reading culture revolutionized the entire European quest for updated reading. The transformative efforts of the Moorish Muslims in Spain culminated in reduced costs of books because industrially manufactured paper was introduced by the Moors into Spain (Woodward , 1956, p.172) In the spheres of science, Europe - not only Spain - had no other teachers other than the Arab Muslims. Spheres of scientific endeavors such as Arithmetic, Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry, Astronomy, Chemistry, Medicine and Botany became some of the important courses that the universities and colleges throughout Muslim Spain were known for (Hume, 901, p.140). Great scientists like Abas bin Firnas were produced by Moslem Spain. Here is a great Mathematician and Aero-physicist who laid down the principles of contemporary Aeronautics. Draper (2009:111) summarizes the whole accounts of the exemplary anecdotes of the religious moderation of the Arab Muslim leaders of Spain whose effect was the rebirth of Europe in the following words:

"In 813 CE, when the pendulum of the caliphate fell on AL-Ma'mun, he transformed Baghdad into a global citadel of learning as the greatest capital. He instructed that all books of

science be made available and surrounded himself with learned men (scientists). He exceedingly honoured and compensated them. During his reign, Muslim universities were opened for European students, and several European Kings and statesmen did intend a visit to Muslim lands for medical attention".

### **THE ACTUAL RECIPE FOR THE GREAT EXPLOITS**

The exploits recorded by Muslim Arabs and their Moorish brethren in the Iberian Peninsula as well as in Europe generally owe a great deal of actualization to their internalization of the principle of the Islamic moderation. By and large, their entry into the nook and cranny of the West came by chance, and they immediately realized the delicacy and difficulty that became associated with the new distant setting. The pioneer batch of the Muslim immigrants to Sicily comprised just less than one hundred Arab Muslims who, within just a year, had multiplied and grown up to four hundred. The major watchword they had clung to was that the sharia is shrouded in inerrancy, but given their delicate condition, they could not render it binding on the Latin Italians who were their hosts. The Arab Muslims in this Gallo-Italian environment set out as adventurers. As for the Arab Muslims in Spain, they - by invitation - had set out on their journey into the Iberian Peninsula as conquerors, voyagers and restorers. The guiding principles with which they had aligned is their practical understanding of chapter 2:143 of the Quran which says:

"And thus We have made you a moderate nation that you may be witnesses over the people and that the messenger may be a witness over you". The Arab Muslims demonstrated through self-effacing nature that they indeed deserved to rule and liberate the world around them. They did achieve this without jeopardizing their faith nor depriving their fellow human beings their much deserved humanity and freedom.

The Muslim rulers of Western Europe – though they had every means to have decreed that – did not evoke and make binding the anti-human idea of imposing a theocratic leadership arrangement on the people of Sicily, Spain and others. Their conviction about the untold hardship that doing so could have unleashed on these tyro Europeans, coupled with the inevitable manacles that Islam had imposed on them as leaders and administrators, held them back. That Spain was referred to as “Muslim Spain” wasn’t because the atmosphere was unfavorable for other religions to thrive and exist. Rather, the appellation came from many European intelligentsia who took their time to compare the glory their continent recorded under the auspices of a people who professed

Islam as a religion. After all, the Romans had also ruled these mortals under the Byzantine design. No iota of the Islamic ideals was forced down the throat of the Spaniards nor the Italians nor Central Europeans. It was moderation that was in action. The medieval France didn't give room for the same humane and natural atmosphere during her heydays. In a 2015 op-ed, Anglican priest Giles Fraser commented as follows: *“At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, France’s war against the Catholic Church reached its bloody conclusion. By Easter 1794, the same revolution that once proclaimed freedom of conscience had forcedly closed down the vast majority of France’s 40,000 churches. What began with the confiscation of church property and the smashing of crosses and chalices, ended with forced conversions and the slaughter of priests and nuns at the guillotine”*, quoted in Daniel Haqiqatjou (2020:23).

What could be inferred here is that while the Muslims held sway in all the nooks and crannies of the medieval Europe, such did not occur. There is not going to be any compassion for what some disgruntled Muslims in the contemporary times do by creating a false picture for the religion or acting in ways that definitely dent the image of the beautiful messages that the religion of Islam is laden with. The major worrying issue is the conspiracy of silence from the West as regards such phenomena. The world was not sleeping when the miscreants through whom the Al-Qaeda project was launched primarily against the Soviets in Afghanistan were taken to the White House in Washington by President Ronald Raegan, and got paraded before the American press on March 25 1985 as freedom fighters who have the fighting spirit of America’s founding fathers (Mamdani, 2004, p.128). Truly, some Muslim countries and societies are misrepresenting the religion and go beyond all known logical boundaries in advancing their ill-intentioned claims. However, their mistakes do not change the redemptive images of the religion in the annals of European renaissance. To keep mute on such beautiful images of the glorious past and capitalize only on the mistakes of the contemporary Muslims to attack Islam and its teachings, ideas and ideals is stereotypical. Edward (1994: viii) summarizes such attitude as follows:

“Standards of truth about human misery and oppression were to be held to despite the individual intellectual’s party affiliation, national background and primeval loyalties. Nothing disfigures the intellectual’s public performance as much as trimming, careful silence, patriotic bluster, and retrospective and self-dramatizing apostasy”.



## CONCLUSION

Traversing the middle path of moderation is a non-negotiable phenomenon in situations where exerting power and exhibiting irreversible authority become an index of arbitrary hegemony. People almost always measure the degree of divinity and infallibility of a religion through how the leaders and clergy within the ecclesiastical procession of such faith handle delicate issues of humanity whenever they are entrusted with political power. Without any flight at exaggeration, at a point in time in the history of the world, Arab Muslims ruled Spain and many other contemporary European societies. These Muslim Leaders together with their scholars administered the Iberian Peninsula for close to 800 years during which their scientific, philosophical and technological prowess was essentially felt and appreciated throughout the medieval Europe. This triumph came about as an outcome of the resilience of the Muslims, of their focus and of their conviction that the communities over which they were presiding greatly differed from their original environments, and that adopting the middle course would fetch them success. Eventually, they recorded unparalleled triumphs. If the encounters are not echoed by the beneficiary nations anymore, the annals of Islam would continue to enliven them in order that contemporary Muslims could understand that over-jealousness does not build nations.

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