

Islamic Renewal in Iberia and Latin America: Its Needs and Preconditions

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Foreword

The status of Islam in the Iberian world (Spain, Portugal and Latin America) is quite different from that in English-speaking countries, or in the former French colonies in North Africa, Black Africa and even in France itself. For this reason, the Islamic message needs to be presented to Latin America and the Iberian peninsula in a different fashion than to the English-speaking areas or to the French world.

In the first place, the original countries which are now called Spain and Portugal enjoyed nine centuries of Islamic rule, from the year 91/711 when Tariq ibn Ziyad first landed at Gibraltar, the mountain that still bears his name (Jabal Tariq in Arabic), until 1610 when King Philip III finally expelled the last Spanish Muslims from the Iberian peninsula.

Since that time Islam has not been tolerated there, although Christianity suffers no similar disability in Lebanon or Egypt, for instance. Muslims have long faced serious persecution in all the Spanish speaking countries or former colonies as far East as the Philippines and as far south as Argentina.

This is a vast area; in size it challenges the Arab or Islamic worlds, especially so far as the difficulty of gathering information about it is concerned. For this reason the present survey is more of an overview of the situation, so that we can consider what needs to be done in order to improve the treatment of Islam in those countries.

Hispanic Islam

Muslims need first of all to insist before the world that the Iberian peninsula (Jazirat al-Andalus) flourished, culturally speaking, under Islam. Those nine Islamic centuries (711-1610) were glorious, and they made the rest of Europe look pale and barbarous by comparison.

The southern portion of Spain that is still called Andalusia remains as al-Firdaws al-Mafqud or 'Paradise Lost' in the North African imagination, for Arab Spain was the source of their finest forms in art, letters and music, al-'adab al-'andalusi as this is still known and admired throughout the Arab world.

At the same time, present-day Spaniards and Latin Americans have an uneasy conscience about the genocide and devastation that the Catholic Inquisition brought upon Spanish Muslims and indeed upon the Hispanic mind itself; even modern liberal Spaniards or Portuguese know surprisingly little about this heritage if they have read only their own history books, though the monuments built by the Andalusian Muslims, or the captive Mudejar or Mudajjan workmen who lived after them, exist all around them.

This lack of knowledge is a fact not only in Spain and Portugal themselves, but also from Mexico to Chile in Latin America. Ask any contemporary person who speaks Portuguese or Spanish about what the Islamic past means in his culture, and he will give you only vague and prejudiced clichés about the "Moors", as modern Spanish and European textbooks still call the Spanish Muslims.

A personal friend of mine from Malaga on the Mediterranean coast, which was founded and named not by the Arabs, but by the Phoenicians hundreds of years before them, did not know much about the history of his own city until I got him interested in it.

Of course events like the seizure of Malaga by the Castilians in the year 1487 and the perfidy of the Catholic monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, towards its disarmed Muslim citizens who had surrendered to their mercy, do not make pleasant reading when contemporary civil rights are mentioned. They gave up their wealth as ransom, and yet were sold as slaves.

Cordoba and Seville were likewise cruelly depopulated and plundered when the northern Spaniards seized them in 1236 and 1248 respectively. Yet these cities plus Granada (Qurtuba, Ishbiliyya and Gharnata in Arabic), have been used by Chrysler, General Motors and Ford to name their most recent cars, reminding us of the exquisite craftsmanship for which the Andalusian Muslims were known, just as Toledo or Damascene swords are similarly famous.

Islamic Spain and Portugal had great thinkers too like Ibn Hazm, the first student of comparative religion in Europe, who wrote perceptively on love, or Ibn Tufayl, the Muwahhid physician and minister of state who originated the tale of Robinson Crusoe in Morocco and Spain seven centuries before Defoe did so in England; and his brilliant student Ibn Rushd or "Averroes" in the barbarian rendering of his name, who revived the study of Aristotle in the late XII century only a few decades before the rise of universities like Paris and Oxford in Western Europe.

The Spanish–Tunisian philosopher Ibn Khaldun founded the science of sociology and the philosophy of history long before the West picked them up through Vico and Saint–Simon, or now with Spengler and Toynbee, because the Tunisian watched the social and political unrest around the Mediterranean at first hand, and he knew Peter the Cruel of Castile in Seville where his family house: still stood a mere century after their expulsion, as well as Tamerlane in Damascus.

Poets like Ibn Zaydun of Cordoba and King Muctamid of Silves and Seville sung as beautifully about love and misfortune as any poet during the European romantic movement. All these men of letters were Andalusian Muslims whose contribution to world culture needs study and revival.

Thus any approach by contemporary Muslims from other countries to Ibero–America should be made with the object of recovering this neglected heritage, and awakening interest in it that must be based on genuine research and knowledge and not on platitudes reflecting prejudice and fairy tales. The Alhambra was a magnificent complex of public buildings; but it was not the whole of Andalusia; it was a dying reflection from one small southern kingdom that for two and a half centuries valiantly resisted the northern mountaineers from Castile and Aragon.

This Islamic heritage should thus be made real to the citizens of the Hispanic and Lusitanian countries today; but first it must become just as real to educated Muslims elsewhere in the world. Some Egyptian, Pakistani, Tunisian and Moroccan scholars have done research on this subject but more investigation and writing needs to be promoted. There is a group of Egyptians like `Abdullah Enan and Dr. Husayn Mu'nis, Moroccan professors like `Abdullah Genoun and Muhammad Dawd, and the late Professor `Uthman Ka'ak of Tunisia who have made these studies.

Moreover the information gathered must be publicized widely in Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, English and French. The Western myth that Arabs and Muslims are inferior, and should be called "Moors" and other contemptuous terms, must be laid to rest.

The first place to start must be with reliable Portuguese and Spanish versions of the Qur'an itself, the basic document for understanding the ethical system which prevails from Iberia and Morocco on the Atlantic coast through to Indonesia on the Pacific. A few translations exist today, and they are wretched; they have been carried out using no native Iberian Muslim sources at all, but only the usual carping European ones.

There is a great potential wealth too in Aljamiado or Portuguese, Spanish and Aragonese ajamiyyah

literature which we should revive, as well as increase discussion and commentary on it. Contemporary Western scholars dismiss it as having "only linguistic interest", which is too often its spiritual death in academic circles. Yet several AljamiadoQur'ans are waiting to be published in the Escorial library in the mountains northwest of Madrid and in the National Library in the Spanish capital. Portuguese universities and archives likewise are rich in these documents.

Thus we need to prepare and publish adequate texts on Spain, on the religion of Islam itself, and on the history and culture of the vast Islamic world from Spain and Portugal themselves as far West as Mexico and the Philippines, and as far south as Chile and Argentina.

We must remember that there are twenty-odd countries that need to be studied, one by one, and that each has its own set of laws; but at the same time, how their own ignorance leads them back to the same circumstances based on the cruel expulsion of Islam and the Spanish Muslims from the Iberian peninsula. Today there is no place in southern Spain, for instance, where a pious Muslim can pray freely. Arab tourists should demand this right quietly but firmly from the Spanish authorities.

Historical Considerations

The first Muslims who arrived in the New World may have been Muslim sailors from Lisbon in modern Portugal according to the Moroccan geographer al-'Idristi. Maybe some North Africans followed them, although Moroccan harbours have never been known for their adventurous seamen. The name of "Antillia" appears for a distant island on al-'Idrisi's XII-century map of the Atlantic, and this fact is impressive, as was the Moroccan's knowledge of even the far Indian Ocean where Sindbad sailed, all research that he had carried on from his study in the Mediterranean island of Sicily where he worked.

At the same time there are frescos in a temple in Chichenitza on the Yucatan peninsula off eastern Mexico dating from before the year 1002 which show non-Mayan sailors and warriors who have been taken prisoner in a sea battle. Bananas and peanuts are said to have travelled in this way to and from America even before Columbus.

Thus I recommend that Arab seafaring journals and archives should be investigated carefully; here is where the new universities in the Near East and Ibero-America can do some of their research.

Then came the Iberian colonial period overseas, which might be called the American "middle ages". The methods which the Castilians and Aragonese used in conquering Andalusia were put to use in America where they made serfs of the Indians, the Aztecs in Mexico, the Mayas in Central America, the Chibchas in Colombia, and the Incas in Peru, by establishing what they called encomiendas or 'stewardships' over them for the benefit of the conquerors, just as the vanquished Muslim artisans had been inserted in Catholic Spain.

Some of these Muslim workmen, the so-called "Mudejars", plus their Morisco brothers who were

unwilling converts to Christianity, also crossed the Atlantic. We do not know who these workmen were, for much of this travel was clandestine and done under assumed and non-Islamic names.

Generally the immigrants were not allowed to bring their wives along with them; yet nonetheless they formed the basic population of Muslims in the New World, especially the artisan classes in the Caribbean and Andean countries. Wollofs from Senegal were shipped as soldiers to Chile; Mandingos from Mali and Fulani from the great savannas of West Africa also came to other countries.

Any Muslims who arrived in Mexico, for instance, were eventually absorbed into that society, where they mixed with native Indians rather than with Spaniards or Creoles. Estevanico Dorantes was a Moroccan soldier who became an officer in the Spanish army and led an expedition into what is now New Mexico and Arizona in 1579. Belalcázar did the same in Ecuador and southern Colombia, founding the city of Popayan in the latter country.

Colonial society was fluid, though oppressive; but since the cities were large, these forced immigrants had to settle down there, and they eventually disappeared. The same thing happened in Cuba, in Colombia (or New Granada as it was then called), in Venezuela and the Andean countries of Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia (or Upper Peru) where there were silver mines and a concentration of urban wealth that demanded fine craftsmanship. Personally I need to know more about these aspects of Brazilian life.

These skilled workmen were carpenters, masons, blacksmiths, tile workers in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies. The Mexico City council, after many Spanish Muslims and Moriscos were enslaved and shipped to the colonies abroad, passed ordinances in the early XVII century to deny them guild privileges.

Their workmanship can be seen today in Guatemala, not only in the colonial buildings there, but also in modern structures which have adopted their style, especially in tiles on the floors and walls, in metal grillwork, both wrought-iron, brass and copper, and in fine cabinet making. Church ceilings were built in Colombia and Mexico by Mudejar workmen who adapted their careful carpentry to protect these buildings against the danger from earthquakes.

Peruvian cities have wooden balconies before the windows like those you can see along the Red Sea coast and the Persian Gulf, all designed to catch a breeze through their lattices. Ornamental doors made in Mudejar style are to be found in the mining towns of Bolivia.

Thus Islamic art and Muslim workmen were busy even during the time of the cruel Spanish colony, for as that great genocide, Cardinal Ximenez de Cisneros, once said: "They lack Our faith, but we lack their works." For this reason even the intolerant Catholic church transported many of these artisans to decorate their buildings in the Portuguese and Spanish overseas colonies.

These workmen came without their wives, as has been said, and so they intermarried into local proletarian families; their Muslim identity was eventually lost, but their handicraft lives on in the metal

grills, tiles and latticework of colonial and later buildings, as any visitor to Latin America can tell you. Today the danger is that any new immigrants to these countries may become nominal Muslims, as is their fate in North America too: Caracas is said to have as many as 30,000 Muslims, mostly of Arab ancestry, yet they have as yet built themselves no mosque.

How can they be awakened to a consciousness of this spiritual need? They must help themselves first before any governmental or educational agency can assist them.

The Black people living around Baia in Northeastern Brazil and in the West Indies need to recognize the truly Islamic features to be found in their present society. In Trinidad a Black who is also a Muslim is called a Mandingo, showing that his ancestors came originally from Mali or Gambia in West Africa. There is now a mosque on Dutch island of Curacao off the Venezuelan coast, but the Muslims there are largely East Indian and Arab in origin. Others live in Demerara in Guyana and in Barbados, where they have two places of worship.

Yet in Surinam the qiblahs in the mosques face West as they do in Indonesia from which these Muslims came, not East towards Mecca. This reminds one of the Great Mosque in Cordoba in Spain, where it faces south as they do in many mosques in North Africa.

Since these immigrants are assimilated into society, any study of this sort must be sociological and historical, so the new universities springing up through Ibero-America and the Middle East have a duty to promote such research. Muslim scholars need to study Latin America country by country, all twenty of them, in order to rewrite their history since the discovery of America by Columbus, and from even before that date.

They should study psychologically how their Islamic conscience and personality can be revived, so that Central and South America can rebuild their heritage and lines of communication with the Islamic world in Africa and the Middle East. Contacts with both ends are difficult, as could be seen in the XXX Orientalist Congress that was held in Mexico City in August 1976, where none of this vast heritage, rich though it is in Mexico itself, was brought to the fore by any Mexicans and explained to their Middle Eastern visitors. The visiting Orientalists likewise ignored it.

The total population of Latin America thus comprises the descendants of people from West Africa, Spain, Portugal and the Middle East who were already Muslims in their original homelands. In Trinidad and the Guyanas there further exist East Indian groups from the Indian subcontinent and Indonesia whose culture and religion have been neglected and muffled by the Dutch and British colonial authorities. With independence today they can win back that heritage and regain their pride in it again.

Like the new Nation of Islam in the United States, these forced migrants from Africa to the Caribbean area and Brazil were not all slaves or serfs, but Hispano-American laws have been construed against them, to make them conform and disappear into Christian society.

The Portuguese and Hispanic colonies bred legislation and engendered police methods that enforced these disabilities within society itself. Muslims could not pray freely to the One God in any Spanish country; the prevailing official attitude was actively hostile, and this mood was reinforced publicly since it was written into the Spanish laws themselves.

It was a harsh and cruel life for the victims, whose history has never been properly recorded; only Henry Lea, a Quaker historian from Philadelphia, tried to write it up at the beginning of this century, and few persons now read his writings on this heartless period.

Unfortunately many of these attitudes still prevail. In Argentina, for instance, only the man's name of Omar can be legally used today; Islamic and non-Christian names are forbidden by law, a legacy from the Inquisition, that "Holy" Office as the Catholic Church calls it. The whole school system has been contaminated for centuries: the modern republic of Colombia has a concordat or treaty with the Vatican that supervises all textbooks used in the public schools, not the church schools in that country

This practice occurs still in Spain itself, where the terms "Moors" (moros) and "Mohammedan" (mahometano) are used loosely and with prejudice. Passports are not issued to persons who cannot produce a birth certificate, which is only given by their Catholic parish. Burial used to be subject to a similar nuisance in many Spanish-speaking countries. Spanish and Hispanic laws are encrusted with such disabilities.

Brazil and the Portuguese Language

The huge country of Brazil stands out as a special case in this study because its language is Portuguese, and since its links with West Africa have been closer than most of Latin America. At least a quarter of a million Brazilians are said to be Muslims today, while as late as 1905 at the beginning of the present century, at least half of those of African ancestry in the Baia region on the north-eastern nose of Brazil that lies closest to Africa, were still practising Muslims. An underground of Islamic culture functioned there: the Male cult is still practised in Brazil, as a disguised form of Islam.

The Male movement as a concealed form of Islam must have come (like the Mandingos in Trinidad) from the West African country of Mali, another name that has only recently reappeared for a newly independent nation. Mali, so distant in both time and space, yet so pregnant with importance for the Islamic world!

These Male once formed a powerful Black minority, though they have almost disappeared so that some effort must be made to retrieve their heritage. They have secret mosques with "Oriental" customs such as taking off their shoes before entering them. Brazilian monuments and social customs of this sort need to be catalogued and classified for their Islamic content. Foreign sociologists do a botched job, especially Frenchmen after their Algerian experience; they do not seem to be qualified for this research.

Going back into history, the valiant Palmares republic was established by West African Muslims in the present states of Pernambuco and Alagoas during the XVII century along the lines of the inland empires of West Africa like ancient Ghana and Songhay. This movement almost liberated Brazil from colonial and Catholic rule – two centuries before this event actually took place. Macaco was the capital of Palmares, which held out as an independent state for almost half a century.

Many of these enslaved Africans were literate, especially if they happened to be Muslims, as were the Malay aristocrats whom the Dutch captured and shipped to South Africa at the same period in order to break the power of Islam in Indonesia. Educated slaves in both South Africa and Brazil (and even in the United States and Cuba), were thus generally Muslims, often from the Hausa, Fulani and Mandingo elite; Arabic lurked in their background as their prestige tongue.

Eventually some determined Portuguese-speaking freedmen went back to Benin (or Dahomey) and Nigeria; Lagos, Forcados, Escravos and Porto Novo are clearly Portuguese names they gave to the new cities which they founded at that time.

Uprisings like this occurred not only in Brazil during the XVII century, but also during the XIX, for Brazil was one of the last countries on earth to give up slavery as an institution, as late as 1883, or less than a hundred years ago. However in 1889 once slavery was abolished, the Brazilian archives on that subject were burned under the new republic (Brazil had been an empire until then).

Many Lebanese and Syrians have arrived in Brazil during the past century, and they all speak Portuguese now; perhaps these immigrant groups which are now active might be encouraged to accomplish such research, either through the Brazilian universities or by some Near Eastern educational foundation.

In Brasilia, the new capital, and in Rio de Janeiro the old one, there are Muslim communities: the Sociedade Beneficente Muculmana or “Muslim Beneficent Society” was founded in Rio in 1974. There are mosques there and in Sao Paulo, the largest city, where an Egyptian professor, Dr. Hilmi Nair, teaches at the local university. There are at least 3000 Muslims in Sao Paulo who have built two mosques. Londrina in –the state of Parana has one too; and there are others at Paranagua and Euritiba further south and east. (If any of these facts are incorrect, or can be expanded by this audience, I would appreciate knowing it).

We must remember too that Portuguese is not only the language of Brazil and Portugal today, but also that of Guinea-Bissau, Angola and Mozambique. If these countries are to be won over to Islam, it may be by means of the literature we can provide them with in that language. Interestingly too, Brazilian iron ore may soon be exported to the port of Gabes in southern Tunisia, where it will be smelted by Algerian oil and gas.

Remedies

The Iberian peninsula and Latin America thus need to be brought back into full fellowship with the Islamic conscience, so that the genocide and vandalism of recent centuries are remembered and yet forgotten. It will take a different and specialized corps of teachers and research workers to accomplish this, especially since the methods must be different than those used in North America or Europe. It must be based on two languages which are new for the Middle East, Spanish and Portuguese, as well as on Arabic and English; this alone will require special training of new workers or investigators.

Little of this research has been tackled in either Europe or North America, let alone in Latin America or the Arab world. The pro-Islamic groups—to be found there urgently need to be awakened to the importance of their enigmatic past, and encouraged to reach out and recover it for their children. Perhaps this conference may provide such a beginning.

We thus need to encourage younger scholars, both Arab Muslims and Latin Americans who can be encouraged to interact in their studies. Moroccans who know Spanish might form a special corps of such workers.

Can this be achieved through prizes or scholarships? Should more research be encouraged on Islamic history; on that of Spain and Portugal to bring their tangle of history clearer; on that of the Arabs themselves; and on Islam as well?

We urgently need studies and books describing these conditions, and the encouragement of their university presses and the Latin American book trade to publish their results. The “Colegio de Mexico” in Mexico City, the research institution in that country, now has an Egyptian professor; and there is likewise an Egyptian research centre in Madrid where Dr. Husayn Mu'nis worked. Peru has the lone centre for purely Islamic studies in all of South America, el Instituto Peruano de Altos Estudios Islamicos in Lima; but it has not been able to maintain a continuous correspondence abroad.

We must remember that for Latin America, this must be accomplished in the Portuguese and Spanish languages. We must make contact with the publishing industries in Buenos Aires and Mexico City as well as in Brazil. This might be through the Syrian and Lebanese groups, who are largely Christian; their assimilation to the local scene is common, especially if the immigrant has gone over to the Latin rite of Christianity. In Paraguay, for instance, the Syrian consul is a Christian, and so the answers to the questions I sent for this survey were inadequate since he was not aware of any Islamic needs.

Besides, the system of private schools throughout Latin America is generally Catholic and oriented towards the commercial or “upper” classes, who might more properly be termed oligarchs or plutocrats. Yet there are pockets of Arabs everywhere in Latin America; each city has a group of them, as one can discover by walking down any business street and reading the owners' names above the shop doors in the markets. A good percentage of them will be “Hadda” or “Muadi”, and other such Arab surnames. The

present president of Colombia, Julio Cesar Turbay Ayala, and a past one of Mexico, Plutarco Elias Calles, were of Arab descent.

Frankly it has been hard to gather much data on this subject. Yet even the Christian Lebanese immigrants to South America (and I might include much of Africa where these Lebanese have also gone as merchants and entrepreneurs) owe much to their over-all Arab heritage, even though many of them try to call themselves "Phoenicians".

Each capital in Latin America as well as any large city, should eventually have its mosque where men can pray once more to the One God. The Great Mosque in Cordobe, that twin of the Qayrawan in Tunisia, should likewise be returned to the same public prayer. At present its great doors close at sundown and open after dawn, so that three of the daily prayers cannot be performed there. There is no mosque at all in Granada, that city of vanished Islamic splendour.

Cemeteries must be provided too; although in some countries graveyards were secularized during the past century because under the old system Protestants and non-Catholics were buried along the road-side or in a potter's field (which is why the British have long insisted upon having their own cemeteries in Catholic countries).

This repression even of the dead has nonetheless brought about a reaction, especially as one of the results of the Independence movements during the past century: Mexico insisted upon state control of cemeteries, schools and hospitals. That republic in fact follows the French model for its public institutions very closely, and thus has secularized education as well; but this procedure has had much the same results as with the Spanish and Algerian colonial systems, for they still subject Islam and the Middle East to a prejudiced slant in their textbooks, as the Algerians knew too well under the French regime.

Nevertheless the work has already begun in order to reform this attitude. Even though the points in the questionnaire used for surveying this situation were generally inadequate and inapplicable to Latin America, nevertheless the silent yet eloquent testimony of the Mudejars in their remaining handicraft and motifs reveal this.

The sad and ironic "Dance of the Moors" in the Indian towns of Central America grotesquely recalls not only their own subjugation, but also that of the Spanish Muslims, who were likewise deprived of their civil rights in XVI-century Iberia. All of these factors now need to be gathered up and evaluated by the departments of history and sociology in the rising new universities of the Middle East and Ibero-America. The Muslim communities throughout our continent would also find strength and purpose if they could help in such a project.

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