

SPAIN BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

By

ANTONIO IGLESIAS LAGUNA

Spain as an Eastern Country :

Among all the European nations having ever built a bridge between Eastern and Western civilization, Spain is perhaps the country that better preserved the Oriental heritage. Much better than Greece, Rome or Byzantium. Greece absorbed much of the Oriental cultures of her age, specially in her origins, but she remained Greek, I mean European, throughout the centuries. It is for this very reason that we, Europeans, talk about Greek culture and thought as the living source of our spiritual life. Rome, too, was imbibed of Oriental spirit but for the Romans the Orient consisted only of far-off provinces that had to be protected and raised to Roman standards of civilization. Greece formed the European mind. (Byzantium should be considered as a kind of Christian bulwark able to resist the Asiatic onrush till 1453, in which year Constantinople was conquered by the Turks.)

Lastly, the great powers of modern Europe — England and France — came to the Orient with a view to subduing it. Colonization, Imperialism were means for a political task which besides the political enslavement included the diffusion of European ideas and habits but not the opposite, though the total impermeability was impossible. Those countries were more interested in (cheap) raw materials than in cultural values. The antagonism brought about the jealousy between both of them. In Egypt, for instance, England and France clashed in Napoleonic times. The invasion of Syria proved to be of no avail and Napoleon had to return to France in August, 1799, but this war only reflected the struggle for supremacy in the Middle East between both nations. Their colonial mentality is well illustrated, as Dr. Ahmad Anwar, Egyptian Ambassador in Madrid remembered in a lecture at Zaragoza, by the fact that the French Prime Minister, M. Jules Ferry, denied in the year 1885 before the French Assembly that the Human Rights Declaration may have anything to do with Negroes.

thern Spain. For the same reasons when France conquered Mauritania we took the necessary steps for protecting the Canary Islands. Britain, for instance, has more than once tried to convert these two Spanish provinces into a British colony.)

We are living today in a changing world, in a world where colonialism and imperialism are regarded as curses we cannot put up with. In this connection the Spaniards feel like all the Afroasian countries because we are still suffering under colonialism. We are sure of the final disappearance of colonialism, but in any case nobody can overlook the historical and geographical fact that Spain and Africa are complementary parts of a whole. Summing up, it is convenient to remind oneself that Spain, as regards her policies towards the Oriental world, has been conquered before conquering herself the tiniest bit of land; that Spain has lived under Oriental influence 2.500 years and only exerted her own influence during the last five centuries; that even in those bygone days when my country was a sea power in the Mediterranean she always fought a defensive war, never trying to rule over peoples, though this might have been possible in several occasions. It is therefore correct to speak of Spanish political inhibition (in the Mediterranean) as well as of a continuous trend towards friendship and cultural intercourse with Arab countries.

Spain learned very much from the Muslims, adopted their culture and established blood ties with them. We are proud of our Arab past. We believe that this common origin secures the continuity of our friendly relations with the Arab world. This community of ideals and interests gives its special flavour to our spiritual presence in the Oriental world though one must not forget that Spain is an European country and a Roman Catholic one. Our preference for the Arabic civilization has nothing to do with Imperial preferences or Imperial rights to be defended with warships, parachutists and airborne troops. It is the result of a common destiny. Kinships due to political domination, to a colonialist past are doomed to disappear, to show their real face. (Those who have to suffer under them will only be glad to see them in jeopardy, to free themselves from such „relatives“). The Holy Quran says in this connection : „And when the trumpet is blown there will be no kinship among them that day, nor will they ask of one another“.

Spain as a Western Country :

Nobody should think I am (trying to make amends for eventual errors in the past or) (suggesting to show (before your eyes) the image of one Spain) that could be an intergral part of the Mussu-
man world. Were this the case, one would have to explain how it is possible that my country be a Roman Catholic one, that no Muslim minoritics live there like in Bulgaria or Poland, not to speak of ou
overwhelming Muslim population like in Albania. Of course not. Spain remains a part of Europe. Spain began her carrier as a modern
nation with the discovery of America, in 1492, i. e. the same year of the Granada surrender. Nations must undergo a physical growth in order
to achieve historical maturity. Important are only the elements compos-
ing national body. On the other hand Spain has absorbed Oriental
elements during 25 centuries and they cannot be thought of, ignored,
excluded without maiming the very framework of our soul. Nobody
should, however, think these Oriental elements are the principal ones.
To believe this is the usual error of some Arab historians, who mistake
themselves and their readers by taking no account of our history as a
whole, limiting their research to Muslim Spain. Why not to Greek,
Carthaginian, Roman, Byzantine or Visigothic Spain? I don't wish
to refute such an illustrious historian as Amir Ali but I cannot help to
smile when I read these words printed in his famous „History of the
Sarracens“ : “The Moors were banished; for a while Christian Spain
shone, like the moon, with a borrowed light; then came the eclipse, and
in that darkness Spain has grovelled ever since”. The truth is just
the opposite. After having achieved her national maturity in 1492,
Spain rose during a couple of centuries to preeminence in Europe
and throughout the world, attained her Golden Century. Her definitive
political fall in 1898 has to be explained as the result of a hopeless
struggle with rising European powers like Germany, France and Great
Britain. Our downfall is logical due to the enormous task we took on our
shoulders. The reasons for our decay should not be looked for in the ext-
istence or absence of Muslim communities in our country after 1492.
Had Spain remained Muslim (until today) during those hright centu-
ries) the European nations would not lave spared her, just as they did
not spare the Ottoman Empire, Persia, India or the Arab world.

I must reassert it. Spain is an European country though in a peculiar way having little in common with the Europeanism of Germany, Italy or France. Europe means for us something else. We are Europeans *as well, mainly* Europeans but not *exclusively* Europeans. (Just as the Russians are European and Asiatic at the same time.)

My country, due to her geographical situation lives inside a magic triangle : Europe, America and Africa. Not to understand this is the best way for misunderstanding Spain. The Frenchmen say "Africa begins at the Pyrenees". Well, Africa may begin at the Pyrenees. We are proud of it, we don't forget there are racial links between the Iberian and the Berber tribes since prehistoric times. In spite of it Spain differs from Africa just as Africa differs from Spain. I consider necessary to lay stress upon this reality, (as Muslim historians went sometimes so far as to identify Mussulman Spain with Africa and the Orient. They wrote by the by pages of delicious candour about the Christian invaders of Al-Andalus.) The Spanish arabist Isidro de las Cagigas has proved that only a few thousand Muslims have been necessary for conquering Visigothic Spain. Including the Almoravide and Almohade troops who came thereafter, the Arab and African soldiers occupying the Peninsula during the famous eight centuries never supposed the bulk of our population, only a small part of it. To put it in other words, the Spanish Muslims have been no foreigners but mainly Spaniards converted to Islam. For this reason the reconquest was actually a civil war between christian and Musulman Spaniards.

Islamic toleration permitted the existence of big Christian and Hebrew communities in Al-Andalus. Marriages between Christians Muslims, military alliances between Christian and Muslim princes with a view to overruling Muslim or Christian enemies have not been seldom but, as a matter of fact, the general inv. The case of Muslim Spain bears a striking likeness to that of Muslim India, though there is a capital difference : Muslim power was destroyed in the subcontinent by European nations, not by the natives themselves as it happened in Spain. (Therefore the outcome has been different : Spain remains today a compact, homogenous people; India is composed of peoples speaking many languages, belonging to many races, believing in many religions.)

Spain can be proud of her Arab heritage without forgetting her Christian tradition. The Muslim presence in the Peninsula enriched our spirit, changed it partially but it did not substantially modify a national genius which had had occasion for developing along original lines many centuries before the advent of Islamic civilisation. Let us not forget that Roman Spain supplied the Roman Empire with philosophers, economists, writers, poets and emperors. Thus, my country had the obligation of maintaining a culture, a spirit that had moulded our mind since the arrival of Greece and Rome to our coasts. Christianity came with the Romans and it intended to stay. The Reconquest was started in 718, seven years after the Visigothic defeat, and the rolling back could not be prevented by the Mussulmans. It seems exaggerated to speak of eight centuries of Muslim Spain. Forty per cent of the Iberian soil had been reconquered as early as 1065, at the death of Ferdinand I. The southernmost point of the Peninsula, Tarifa, fell in Christian hands in 1292. As a matter of fact Muslim Spain had been reduced to an enclave two centuries before the fall of Granada.

Please, bear also in mind that Christian Spain was not isolated from Europe. The European countries, Italy and France mainly, granted Christian Spain the cultural and spiritual support she barely needed for resisting the pressure of Islamic civilization that, as everybody knows, was paramount and better than our own during the first centuries of this confrontation. Roman tradition, Christian religion and European backing in this crucial period modelated Spain and made my country European for ever in spite of the Oriental marks and the spiritual ties with the American continent. Had Spain been forgotten like Albania, she would be to-day a different land. History decided thus and to ignore its lessons seems the best way for misunderstanding a nation. (To overlook the permanent reality of Christian Spain amounts to forget the existence of Pharaonic or Ptolomeic Egypt. The vigorous personality of Egypt, if compared with that of other Muslim countries, has its roots in the historical grandeur before Islam. Nomadic peoples who never produced a great civilization possess a single cultural layer. This might be the case of the Eskimos not that of Egypt and Spain.

Arab and European Civilization :

Let us see Spain with European eyes. A German, a Briton, a Frenchman, a Scandinavian will tell you that Spain, considered as an European country, is a very queer one. They notice racial, spiri-

an European country, is a very queer one. They notice racial, spiritual, cultural differences we are always aware of. These traits are the sequel of our Oriental past, specially of our Arab tradition. In our literature, our folklore there are many traces of this Eastern trend. Spanish chivalry and hospitality have Islamic roots. The Spanish language, on account of our Roman ancestors, remains a Latin language up to the present day; has, however, adopted many thousands of Arabic and Persian words. The Spanish poetry uses strophes akin to the Arabic ones. Our early medieval poetry, as Damaso Alonso says, has not Provençal but Muslim origins. Our oldest poems contain Arabic and Spanish words gracefully intermingled. In present Spain there are many towns and villages the holydays of which — the feasts of Moors and Christians — call up those happy days in which bigotry did not hinder a common life. There is still a Spanish village, Benamahoma (Cadiz), i. e. the town of Mohammed children, where the warlike show always ends with a Muslim victory.

Thousands of Spanish geographical names have an Arabic origin. This happens because Al-Andalus was not simply a reservoir of Islamic civilisation but one of its chief centres. Muslim culture developed there nurtured by the Spaniards themselves, who fastored it with the same passion they put in the advancement of Roman culture. „Whatever can be done by sheer force of genius of the impulse of some ardent passion, whether in the physical or in the spiritual world, that a Spaniard has done”, writes the British historian Havelock Ellis. The same author remembers that the old Iberians formed part of a great Mediterranean race which reached from Spain to Africa, where they may still be seen in their present form, by the ancient called Lybians, by the modern Kabyles and Berbers. A kinship that maintains itself due to the Carthaginian presence in Spain that explained even in Roman days, the curious affinity between Africa and Spain in the resemblance in literary spirit between the Latin African writers and Spanish writers.).

Muslim Cordova could boast of a cultural christian traditint several centuries old going back to Hosius, Seneca and Lucan. It flourished in Cordova the highest civilization of its time, its university was the chief centre of European learning, and Albucasis, Abenzoali Al Hazem (and Averroes) were the chief scientific luminaries. Any way I must repeat it, they were Spaniards who developed a Muslim culture just as centuries before other Spaniards had developed in

the same place the Roman and Christian civilization. Spain was always an active, dynamic agent of Muslim learning. When the Spanish Muslims were compelled to leave the Peninsula they tried to maintain alive their cultural tradition on African soil; but having been deprived of their roots they did not succeed in the long run and brought forth a mimetic civilization, a constant repetition of the glories of Al-Andalus.

The interest for Muslim culture will on the other hand be kept alive by Christian Spaniards who travel through Africa and Asia and sometimes accept Islam. For instance, Leon de Granada, whose real name was Hassan ben Mohammed, born at Granada in 1491, author of a (giant) "Description of Africa" (1526); Luis de Marmel Carvajal, who lived 22 years in Africa, principally in Tunisia, author of a "General Description of Africa" (1573); Ali Bey el Abbasl, already referred to; Hach Mohammed el Bagdadi (José Maria de Murga), and Sheikh Ismail (Joaquin Gatell).

I have pointed out the survival of Christian Spain inside Muslim Spain. This survival accelerated the Reconquest. The Christian kingdoms of North Spain kept a watchful eye on these fellow-believers and tried to establish their rule over them. The Reconquest must therefore be considered as a roll-back, as a turn of the tide, as a civil war between both communities and not as a Spanish invasion of the Spanish fatherland). Codera has proved that many Latin languages and dialects were spoken in Al-Andalus, where Arabic was simply the official language. Latin was at the same time employed for literary and canonical purposes; the Christians of the VIII-XI centuries could not of course create a civilisation rivalising with that of Cordova. They lived on scanty books and had no libraries like that of al-Hakem II. Therefore the great writers of this period are Muslims like Algazal, Ibn Abd el-Rahiml, Aben Hanl, Azzobaidi, Habid, Radia. It is the great age of zéjel and muwassaha. But the Christian tradition instead of dying away lives underground, in Cordova itself, thanks to the scholarship of men like Speraindeo, Saint Eulogius, Paulo Alvaro and Abbot Sanson. Notwithstanding the Muslim civilization grows and the Christian decays. In the days of Abd-ar-Rahman III there are in Cordova only a few Christian intellectuals, who later on migrate to Northern Spain, attracted by the intellectual revival of Cluny in the XII century. Parallel to it, Mussulman learning fades away in Al-Andalus from the XIII century onwards. Abul Beka, Alwacaxi and Aben Cuman are the last representatives of a folk fighting now not for literary

supremacy but for physical survival. The Spanish language is born, the great medieval authors write their masterpieces, the Spaniards acquire slowly the sense of nationality and they do their best in order to bring the whole country under their rule.

Summing up

Spain has enjoyed the Oriental influence during many centuries but, I must reassert it, she never forgot her European roots. Present Spain is the result of this encounter and peaceful meeting of East and West. The Western world prevailed at the end but the Oriental traits are there and nobody can deny them. It is for this reason that Spain means a compromise between both cultures. She is the only European nation who can boast of an Oriental heritage without being indeed an Oriental country. In the days of Spanish hegemony in the world our historical destiny held us aloof from the Muslim world and sent us across the seas to create our own civilization in the Western Hemisphere. Notwithstanding the Mussulman world was never forgotten and the Spanish speaking countries overseas have also got something from the essences of the Spanish soul. The mudéjar architecture, that of Muslim architects working in Christian Spain, could be the best exponent of this. Mudéjar, a style which you can find in America in the cathedral of Santo Domingo, in the house of Diego Colon, in Santo Domingo de Tunja, in San Francisco de Cartagena. Finally, let us remember there are big Syrian, Turkish and Libanese colonies in South America bringing together the Arab and Spanish ideals. The similarity between both of them has paved the way for cultural movements considered impossible one hundred years ago, for instance the revival of Arab poetry. Is it not surprising that some of the greatest Arab poets of this century were born in the Western Hemisphere? Poets like Fawzi Maahuf and Al-Karawi born in Brazil, like Younan Khalil Youbran and Naima born in the USA, like Ilias Qonsul born in Argentine. Ilias Qonsul is a bilingual poet writing both in Arabic and Spanish.

Spain, a nation between East and West, a country that although it belongs to the West is proud of her Oriental ancestry. The only European land that has treasured the best essences of the Arab soul and can therefore say that its friendly relations with the Muslim world are deep-rooted and everlasting. Spain a country with European mind and Arab soul.

Antonio Iglesias Laguna