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**Dario Fernandez-Morera, *The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise: Muslims, Christians, and Jews under Islamic Rule in Medieval Spain*
Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2015**

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It is a widespread belief that the Islamic invasion of Spain in the eighth century ushered in an age of knowledge and religious tolerance, and should serve as a contemporary model of how three otherwise hostile religions could live together in amity. Almost all World History texts contrast the model of Muslim Spain's *convivencia* (living together, or multiculturalism) with the dark ages of Christian Europe. The Muslims are represented as tolerant, benevolent and the saviors of the knowledge of Greek antiquity, which they transmitted to benighted Europe, thus ushering in the Renaissance.

World leaders today who deplore Islam's current spate of murderousness announce that these militants are not real Muslims. Islam, they say, is the religion of peace. We have all learned our history this way. Unfortunately, we will all have to relearn it because this vision is a myth, not reality. A small but growing number of scholars are exploring the documents and archeology of Islam's earlier years, finding that reality does not support this myth.

Dario Fernandez-Morera is one of these scholars, and this work, in particular, should go far in demystifying Islamic Spain. He reexamines how Spain was conquered in the first place, noting that it was conquered not entirely by force, nor was it taken over by peaceful means. It was invaded, but the Christian Visigothic rulers of Spain were also bought off with the promise of generous terms as subject people rather than facing extermination.

However, once the conquest was completed (which included all of Spain except for the Basque north), the Muslim rulers showed themselves to be masters indeed, with other Spaniards treated most decidedly as second-class citizens. Whether these masters were tolerant or ferocious depended upon the temperament and mood of the leader, not a written system of laws.

Fernandez-Morera, in his Introduction, tells us that his interpretive stance is Machiavellian, not Panglossian. Indeed it is. He tells us how things really were, not how they might have been in the "best of all possible worlds."

For me, the fun of reading this book is that each chapter begins with quotations from the most famous scholars of Islam, professors from some of our most famous universities, who provide a Panglossian picture of this Andalusian Paradise. Fernandez-Morera quotes them at length, and then proceeds to provide reality backed by impressive documentation.

The reason for the widespread dubious scholarship can be traced back to the European writers of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, Voltaire and Gibbon, men with a cultural agenda of ridding themselves of religion, particularly Medieval Christianity, by creating a straw man for comparison: an enlightened Islam that never did exist in reality.

Even today, many Middle East Studies departments in American and European universities have morphed into apologists for Islam and its civilization, backed by grants from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and even Libya under Gaddhafi. Those scholars who do not play ball find it difficult to find publishers and are excoriated by their peers. However, there are some—a growing number now—who are questioning the long accepted mythology. The great Belgian scholar, Henri Pirenne, who wrote *Mohammed and Charlemagne* in the 1920s, was the first to challenge the accepted view of the rise of Islam by looking at the evidence. He was dismissed as an Islamophobe (if that word existed then).

Another book that reflects Fernandez-Morera's thesis is one that I reviewed in 2009. Entitled *Holy Warriors: Islam and the Demise of Classical Civilization*, it was written by John J. O'Neill, an Irish scholar who wrote under a pseudonym because the scholarly environment in the UK had become threatening.

Fernandez-Morera is an important source of this new scholarship. This book gives special attention to primary sources (medieval Christian, Muslim, and Jewish chronicles; literary works; religious and legal texts; and biographies) and usually quotes them verbatim so that nonscholars can read these materials. The sources are so overwhelming that it is difficult to refute their cumulative effect.

The structure of the book is apparent in the Table of Contents. Chapter 1, "Conquest and Reconquest," explores jihad, the religious motive behind the invasion. Jihad was not antithetical to lust for booty, which was expected to accompany the holy war.

Chapter 2 covers "The Effects of the Jihad, The Destruction of a Nascent Civilization." There has always been a question of how a relatively small group of soldiers could so easily conquer much larger and superior civilizations. For example, how did all of North Africa, once the breadbasket of the Roman Empire, go from entirely Christian and agrarian to depopulated, Muslim, and desertified almost overnight? The same question might be asked of how a sophisticated Persian Empire fell to a handful of savages from the Arabian desert? Conquests such as these may have more to do with internal dissention that made strong civilizations fall.

Chapter 3 gives us "The Daily Realities of al-Andalus." What was daily life really like?

Chapter 4 explores "The Myth of Umayyad Tolerance: Inquisitions, Beheadings, Impalings, and Crucifixions." It is an eye-opener to know that Inquisitions were a Muslim institution well before they became Spanish Catholic.

Chapter 5 covers “Women in Islamic Spain: Female Circumcision, Stoning, Veils, and Sexual Slavery.” (These are no different than the modalities of today’s ISIS and other Muslim jihadis.)

Chapter 6 sheds light on “The Truth about the Jewish Community’s Golden Age.” It was not as golden as once thought. But this is a complex story.

Chapter 7 describes “The Christian Condition, From Dhimmis to Extinction.”

This 351-page book is very readable. It is solid scholarship, but it is not written in ponderous academic style. I actually read it in on-line proofs and couldn’t put it down.