

Book Review

The Ornament of The World—How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created A Culture Of Tolerance In Medieval Spain-. Little Brown-2002-ISBN 0-316-56688

Undoing the familiar notion of the Middle Ages as a period of religious persecution and intellectual stagnation, María Menocal brings us a portrait of a medieval culture where literature, science, and tolerance flourished for 500 years. The story begins as a young prince in exile—the last heir to an Islamic dynasty—founds a new kingdom on the Iberian peninsula: al-Andalus. Combining the best of what Muslim, Jewish, and Christian cultures had to offer, al-Andalus and its successors influenced the rest of Europe in dramatic ways, from the death of liturgical Latin and the spread of secular poetry, to remarkable feats in architecture, science, and technology. The glory of the Andalusian kingdoms endured until the Renaissance, when Christian monarchs forcibly converted, executed, or expelled non-Catholics from Spain. In this wonderful book, we can finally explore the lost history whose legacy is still with us in countless ways.

Author Biography: **María Rosa Menocal** is R. Selden Rose Professor of Spanish and Portuguese and head of the Whitney Humanities Center at Yale University. She lives in New Haven, CT.

The above description is from the publishing company, critics in general have also lavished praise on this book. I find the book particularly informative and relevant in the circumstances we face in USA.

From the following Kirkus Reviews the reader gets a broad outline of this book:

A resonant and timely case study of a time when followers of the three monotheisms set aside their differences and tried to get along. Golden ages always turn out to have their rotten linings, but the centuries when a tolerant Muslim dynasty ruled over most of Spain were uncom-

monly free of nastiness. So writes historian Menocal (Humanities/Yale Univ.) in this unusually graceful study, a sturdy and eminently readable exploration of the unknown depths of cultural tolerance and symbiosis in our heritage that may help revise our view of the Middle Ages. Ruling from 756 until 1492, the Ummayyads and their political descendants took a broad view of life, according equal status to their fellow peoples of the Book, the Christians and the Jews of Spain. In time, these peoples blended and became nearly indistinguishable, a troubling matter to those powerful Christian regimes elsewhere in Europe who branded their Spanish brethren as Mozarabs, or, in Menocal's translation, wanna-be Arabs. This equality, or dhimma, led to great things, including the flourishing of scholarship and the arts, to say nothing of virtually unlimited opportunities in a booming commercial environment brought on by the absence of ethnic strife. The era's monuments, the great towers and mosques of southern Spain, still endure, as does its great literary testament, *Don Quixote*, a postscript to the history of a first-rate place. Alas, writes Menocal, this wonderland came crashing down with the late medieval clash of Inquisitorial Christian armies and fundamentalist Muslims, when purity of blood and of faith became the ideals of a Spain determined to root out its Islamic heritage, intolerant ideals that were soon to be transported to the New World. Contemporary Israeli poets and Arab intellectuals pine for the glories of al-Andalus, as did Federico Garcia Lorca and Antonio Machado. So, too, does Menocal.

My Personal Thoughts:

I find this book very illuminating in that it documents the very long and rich tradition of tolerance which Muslims have demonstrated when they have been in control and ruled in Medieval Spain. Menocal suggests that we in the contemporary western world have a lot to learn and perhaps emulate from this historical experience. In my conversations with members of other

faiths I use this book as a reference and always point out that in January 929, at the height of Islamic civilization in Spain, Abd al-Rahman III had officially taken the title of Commander of the Faithful, caliph of the Islamic world, successor to the Prophet at the head of the entire Muslim community. When I share the fact that caliph Abd Rahman III appointed a Jewish Rabbi, Hasdai, as the Grand Vizier-Prime Minister of this caliphate, the reaction is invariably one of surprise and a request for the reference to my statement. On page 80 author writes: "Although for us it may seem astonishing that one of the most public faces of this Islamic polity, at its peak of power and achievement, should be a Jewish scholar, famously devoted to finding and aiding other Jewish communities in their scattered, worldwide exile, such suppleness was a natural part of the landscape of this time and place." It is not surprising that from this rich and tolerant society nurtured by the Muslims that the greatest Jewish philosopher of all times, Moses Maimonides, found a receptive place for his work and in the process flourished.

After reading the book I also learnt that the fall of the Medieval Islamic Spain was set in motion in 1009 after the violent destruction of Madinat al-Zahra, the Versailles of Cordoba. This city was sacked by rampaging Berbers who had been invited by the desperate rulers of the Caliphate. The North African Berbers from Morocco held extremists—fundamentalists—views regarding Islam and considered the native Andalusian Muslims weak in faith who dealt in interfaith dia-

logue, had treaties with Christians and Jews and promoted them. The Berbers ruled harshly, imposed harsh extremist rule, stayed as tyrants and sowed the seeds of colonization and eventual destruction. Civil unrest was provoked and Imam al-Ghazali's books were burnt in the public square. While we have all learnt that in 1492 Isabelle and Ferdinand took final control of Andulasia, after reading this book I realized that the process had started over three hundred years earlier with the start of internal strife amongst Muslims, the imposition of an outside, puritanical brand of Islam and intellectual suffocation (book burnings etc). All of these factors played into the demise of the Andulasian civilization. It reminds me of the statements one often hears in Muslim communities in America when labels of 'good' Muslim and 'bad' Muslim are tagged on with impunity.

I find many parallels between the state of Muslims in Spain during the later period, and our current status and felt that the JIMA readers would benefit from reading, and learning from this excellent book, hence the selection of this book for review.

Submitted by Dr. Faroque Ahmed Khan.
Professor of Medicine, State University of New York, Stony Brook; Master, American College of Physicians; member, IMANA Board of Regents; member, Majlis Al-Shura, Islamic Society of North America; President, Islamic Center of Long Island; Associate Editor, JIMA