

Al-Andalus Rediscovered: Iberia's New Muslims, by Marvine Howe, New York, Columbia University Press and London, Hurst, 2012, 289 pp., \$25.00/ £18.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-184904-161-4

Ever since Washington Irving penned his 1832 *Tales of the Alhambra* about the beautiful citadel of that name in Granada, Westerners have developed a vivid interest in the poetic *Convivencia* of Moorish Spain. Public and private discourse defining Christian and Muslim communal relations, spaces and overlapping social identities has always been vigorous and never entirely neutral. Now another American, Marvine Howe, a former correspondent for the *New York Times* and author of several recent books on Morocco and Turkey, has produced an analysis of the burgeoning new Muslim minorities of contemporary Spain and Portugal, providing the general reader with a fascinating and insightful snapshot of the recalibrated relationships concerned.

This book has 13 substantive chapters and an epilogue that briefly touches on recent events in North Africa and the support of ordinary Spaniards for the liberty and democracy movements in these neighbouring lands. Books by journalists risk being academically lightweight, but they can also be refreshing and discerning, uncluttered by academic pretensions or specialized vernacular jargon. In collating and conflating information, their contribution is descriptive, illustrative and rhetorical rather than highly systematic or pedagogic. Howe's book is targeted at a fairly broad but liberal audience – not an academic one certainly – and the text is thus quite accessible. It will enhance any reader's comprehension of the Muslim community in modern *Hispania*. The author demonstrates an elegant measure of robust prose and helpful, if brief, explanations and summaries of key Islamic points (Ramadan and so forth), although no glossary or list of *dramatis personæ* is provided, which is regrettable. There are also no maps, although such an addition might have helped counterpoint many allusions and references to the geographic spread of the nascent and emerging Muslim population clusters (entirely urban at this point and, apart from Madrid, concentrated along the Mediterranean). There are other more noteworthy omissions.

For a journalist who relies a great deal upon – and emphasizes – personal interviews with her subjects, Howe has oddly chosen not to contact directly anyone irredeemably hostile to Muslim immigration. Instead she relies on a few – indeed, a very few – newspaper articles and internet blog sites. This restricts her coverage to largely positive and optimistic accounts about the debate on how to integrate and assimilate the new Muslim migrants and refugees. Other more uncompromisingly adverse views – the obscurantist right-wing *Plataforma por Cataluña* for example – are acknowledged only fleetingly. This is unfortunate, as some expository forms of qualitative evidence are always helpful, and this omission will allow critics to accuse her of bias. It would be interesting to learn, for example, how anti-immigration groups propose to answer the urgent labour problems of Spain and Portugal – or indeed the exact source of their hostility. These pertinent issues remain essentially unaddressed. Oddly, also, for a reporter, she appears to have missed some recent episodes altogether. In 2004, Mohamed Kamal Mustafa, imam of a small mosque in the small Spanish township of Fuengirola, was publicly rebuked for advocating wife-beating in a book he published. He was prosecuted, fined and jailed. Howe never mentions this event, despite the fact that it made international news at the time and stirred much debate globally. Ultimately, I suspect, this book will disappoint most scholars and only really appeal to first-year university students at best, although it will assuredly provide future historians and sociologists with an excellent snapshot of the Muslim community in Iberia in 2012.

We live in precarious times – a world allegedly enveloped in some sort of pseudo-*Kulturkampf* between Muslims and non-Muslims – despite the reality of multiple interaction and mutual prosperity. In her conclusion, Howe saliently observes:

The Iberian difference, in my view, is the commitment of political and civil leaders to dialogue with Muslims at the national, European and global levels. Spain and Portugal have been countries of emigration for centuries and for this reason show more empathy than other Europeans to immigrants, including Muslims. (225)

Northern Europeans may dismiss this new *Convivencia* as the allegedly traditional or stereotypical Mediterranean propensity for endless chitter-chatter, but in fact an on-going coterminous colloquy in both directions does seem to be a critical point of difference, with the experience of other European societies struggling or failing to integrate their Muslim minorities. We recall the ancient observation of the Roman historian, Titus Livius, when he wrote that we fear things in proportion to our ignorance of them. Communal identities (including subaltern ones) usually rely not only upon historical developments but also on shared resonant meta-narratives of the past itself and the present, which are sometimes inaccurate pseudo-intellectual fabrications forming a kind of constructed ignorance. The author captures and illustrates this ambiguous ambiance well with a review of the annual, popular and very public *Moros y Cristianos* festivals. However, she concludes that the absence of a common lexicon can be overcome through a modern schema of polite parlance rather than administrative or bureaucratic scrimmage. All caveats aside, *Al-Andalus Rediscovered: Iberia's New Muslims* has demonstrated that the unique Iberian model of continuous inter- and intra-communications has not only helped overcome the negative memories of the events that ended Moorish Spain, but may also serve as a useful catalyst for other societies (European or other) in removing, or at least reducing, fearful ignorance. Possibly the best guide-book on the subject currently in the market, this work will prove both a handy exploratory supplement and a stimulus for further research.

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