

The Three Cultures of Spain

Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi

Spain is a particularly interesting country from the point of view of the three spiritual traditions of the West, that is, Judaism, Islam and Christianity. But first let us look at the area prior to the Spanish Golden Age.

The Iberian peninsula is a very mountainous country, almost cut off from the rest of Europe by the Pyrenees, but with a close proximity to Africa. During the Ice Age the peninsula was occupied by pre-historic settlers who did the remarkable paintings of bison, people and various animals in the caves of Altamira. After them came the Basques, who spoke a language which has no Indo-European relation whatsoever. Both of these groups may have come up from Africa which was then joined at the Straits of Gibraltar.

Around 1500 BC the Celts came from central Europe and spread into France, Britain and Spain. They, with the Basques, came to be called the Iberians. As a culture they were not yet a civilization. This term defines the level of a city based society, as against an agricultural or hunter-gatherer community. About 1000 BC the Phoenicians arrived from the Middle East and set up trading posts followed by the Carthaginians, Greeks and later Romans, who occupied and colonized the country. The Jews appeared, according to an old tradition, with the Phoenicians, but most were there as a result of the destruction of the Jewish state in the early centuries of the Common Era. They came as prisoners of war, exiles and slaves. Over time they became part of the general population living and working as equals at every level.

Under Rome Spain was transformed from a barbaric tribal patchwork into a well-organized province unified by Roman municipalities, roads and laws. It became a rich economy with a high standard of culture. The native tongues gave way to a vulgar Latin that was to later become Spanish. Aside from the Catholic Church's attempts at converting and isolating the Jews, it was a peaceful and prosperous land.

As the Roman empire gradually lost its vitality and decayed, so the Germanic barbarian tribes burst through the over extended frontiers in Central Europe to overrun the continent about 300 AD. One tribe called the Vandals led the invasion of Iberia followed by others. They set up a warlord state which is remembered in the name Andalusia. The Visi- or Western Goths, as the Germanics were called, became the governing elite of a resentful population. Mutual friction was increased by the Catholic Church which regarded the Goth's form of Christianity as heretical. It was only when one of their kings converted to the Latin rite that their rule was reluctantly accepted. However, the persecution of Jews continued.

The Gothic way of selecting a king was not by blood line but election, which meant a continuous struggle over power between the barons. This led to an unstable situation in which personal feuds dominated politics. A crucial situation occurred, when one of the kings raped the beautiful daughter of his then governor of Gothic North Africa. The father took his revenge by inviting the Islamic Moors to stage a punitive raid. The Moslems finding the Gothic aristocracy in a disunited condition decided to take over the whole peninsula. They were greatly assisted by the Jews who not only opened city gates, but garrisoned and administered the occupied zones, while the Moslems pressed on into France. For this service the Jews were given privileges not granted to their erstwhile Christian persecutors.

At one point 7 percent of the Roman empire's population was Jewish. They owned property, land and practised every profession, until they were restricted by the Christianized authorities to petty trading and usury. Banking was forbidden by the Church. Under the Moors the Jews flourished in relative freedom and became a very useful middle class to the Arab ruling caste. As such they were once more an integral part of a new cosmopolitan civilization. Thus it was that Spain became the home of three spiritual traditions.

The impact of Islam was dramatic. It brought in the culture of the ancient world that had been absorbed in the Moslem

conquest of the Greek speaking and Oriental lands. Many ideas, techniques and objects forgotten or unknown to the West were introduced to Spain. Music, architecture, astronomy as well as chemistry, mathematics and medicine were now studied where a century before only a barbaric culture had been dominant. Arabic became the vernacular, although Latin-Spanish was still spoken in the Christian home. However, many Catholics converted to Islam out of convenience, to avoid tax, or take advantage of the situation, as no Christian could rise to great status in a Moslem society, except as a soldier.

In contrast the Jews were not regarded as potentially hostile. Indeed many Moslem rulers preferred Jewish advisors who they could trust. This was because of the tribal tradition of deadly competition between rival clans in the Arab culture. The Jews were neutral and could be eliminated with impunity, if found wanting. Out of this delicate position came a number of important councillors, doctors and even Jewish generals who protected and advanced their own community's interests.

Under the Moors Spain became a beacon of civilization in a benighted Europe. Trade with the Middle East was established and the economy developed by large influx of Moslem and Jewish settlers. High culture blossomed. This was because the Islamic rulers wished their court of the Western Caliphate to be brilliant, if not better than that of the East centred in Baghdad. This policy attracted a pursuit of excellence in every field from agriculture to the intelligentsia. The prime example of this was the city of Cordova which became the country's capital. A huge population was served by many public amenities such as public baths, street lights, a university and great library. Its markets sold goods from all over the known world, while its magnificent houses, gardens and palaces were lived in by a wealthy cultivated elite. Even the poor were well off relative to the crude life of most of Christendom.

Besides the high level of craftsmanship and the liberal arts was the study of philosophy. Here the Arabs and the Jews shared the same, almost obsession, to relate Hellenic reason to their respective scriptures. The discovery of Aristotle's method of logic, the intellectual contemplations of Plato and later Pagan thinkers excited the quick Semitic minds of Arabs and Jews. To bring the "two truths" of Reason and Revelation together so as to prove their mutual veracity became a major occupation. Needless to say, some of the more conservative religious people were hostile to any analysis of the Koran or Bible, but they were initially ignored, until the drift away from the acceptance of pure faith became critical.

Many Christians from Western Europe came to study in Spain when they heard what intellectual activity was going on there. Toledo in particular became an important centre of meeting of the three faiths, where scholars and mystics could freely discuss the "New Learning," as it was called. It was here that the West's Renaissance began in the early Middle Ages as ancient and contemporary works were translated from the Arabic, usually by Jews, into Latin and other Western languages.

Alongside the interaction between the Spanish and foreign intelligentsia was the Moorish influence upon European attitudes and customs. In Arab poetry, women were treated with great gentility and put on a pedestal. Romantic love and courtly behaviour enhanced a Moorish warrior's image. This code of chivalry became the model for the ideal Christian knight through the songs of the troubadours, who wandered about the courts of Europe. The game of chess and good table manners, as well as improvements in cooking and other domestic practices entered Europe through Spain. However, the greatest export was a completely new way at looking at the world as Europeans became aware of a wider and deeper level of knowledge and perception of reality.

The Universities of Andalusia were the best in Western Europe that was still in its Dark Age. There were professors and departments of every known subject from theology to mechanics. Among these were Astronomy, which also meant Astrology. This had been developed far beyond the Babylonian and Greek stages, as Arabs and Jews mapped the sky and plotted its rhythms producing the most accurate astronomical tables of the time for the Christian King Alphonso, who had reconquered Toledo and made it his capital.

Alphonso had at his court the finest of every creative and learned profession from all the religions. However, he favoured the Moors and Jews to such a degree that his Christian courtiers, especially the clergy, were much concerned about the influence his infidel advisors exerted. The Jews were particularly influential, because as they spoke fluent Arabic as well as Castilian, and could understand the Moorish and Spanish mind. This intelligence was vital in a war situation in which Christians and Moslems were struggling over who should dominate the peninsula. The only people who could travel freely between both camps were the Jews. This made them important as diplomats, spies and merchants to both sides who needed intelligence

about their operations. The Jewish position of relative neutrality was useful, until the Moors were finally driven out of Spain in the late 15th century.

While the Christian reconquest was going on over several centuries, the three spiritual communities produced a galaxy of remarkable people. One was Ibn Gabirol, a Jewish poet and philosopher, who introduced Neoplatonism to Spain. Another was the Moslem mystic Ibn Arabi who developed Sufi ideas and cosmology. An example of Christian achievement was the philosopher Raymond Lully, who like the other two made an amalgam of all three traditions to produce his own version. All three were to have a major influence upon the development of the spiritual life of the West.

Meanwhile the competition between religion and philosophy reached a critical point in the Middle Ages in all three faiths. Thomas Aquinas used the Jewish Spanish philosopher Maimonides's work as a basis for reconciliation between the "two truths," pope or chief rabbi as a final authority, was split as the young intelligentsia in particular were fascinated by the Greek logic. They declared that faith in itself was not enough. It was at some point, in the 13th century, that the Jewish mystics decided to come out of their reclusive position to try and bring about a resolution to the problem.

The only place such a solution could be found was in Spain, as the rabbis there had a philosophical background. The French and German Jews were learned, but not in the Greek method. Their approach was more symbolic than metaphysical. The Spanish Jews were familiar with both and so it fell to them to present a convincing argument that no one could refute. The chief school to take the task on was in Gerona in Catalonia. This produced a rational mystical system which came to be known as Kabbalah. Once its formulation had been published, it spread like wild fire throughout the Jewish community, much to the annoyance of those who believed esoteric matters should be kept secret. Out of this movement came a vast body of mystical literature. The flower of such an impulse was the Zohar, which was to influence many Christians who produced their own version of Kabbalah.

Spain was the home of a unique period in history. It was host to a Golden Age in which tolerance and friendly interchange between the three religions of the West was possible. For a brief while, Cordoba and then Toledo were the spiritual capitals of Europe. It was in Spain that the most intelligent and skilful of several generations met to bring about the rebirth of Europe. It was only when the fundamentalist elements of all three faiths tried to restore their religions to simplistic forms that the process was restrained and then destroyed. After 1492 and the expulsion of the Jews, and later the Moors, two vital factors in the nation's life, Spain began to decline despite the illusion of great wealth and power bought by gold from the New World. Gone was the cultural interaction as the Inquisition made sure that Jewish and Moorish conversos, those who stayed and converted, became good Catholics. Spain is today, 500 years after 1492, just beginning to recognize her lost heritage.

[Back to top](#)

© Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi