

Strangers in Their Own Land

How Moorish Occupation Conditioned Spanish Views of the New World

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The Spaniards watched with bated breath. The dust, having been kicked up by hundreds of natives who had just arrived, had yet to settle making visibility difficult. The cause of all this commotion was the arrival of the great Cacique, Atabalipa, who had come in a great show of force. For weeks he had been searching for the “Christians” as the Spaniards had become known. In response, Captain Francisco Pizarro, leader of the Spanish expedition, had eagerly sought out Atabalipa in hopes to avoid any conflict.¹

A peaceful conquest was always desired over one by the sword. Such actions only delay the inevitable. All the more reason to seek friendly terms with the Cacique of this land now. Prior to his arrival, the Spanish had preached their desire to be at peace with Atabalipa to all they encountered. As Christians, they professed their love for Atabalipa and swore to aid him through an alliance. Now that he sat before them in his palanquin, surrounded by hundreds of loyal followers, a heavy silence plagued the audience they had sought after for weeks. For a brief moment it seemed no one would move.

Finally a priest, travelling with the Spaniards to spread the word of God, burst forth from the lines. He begins preaching to Atabalipa about the greatness of the Christian God. Promising that they are his friends and that they love him very much, he insists that the Cacique should come to see Captain Pizarro in his house up the road. During all this the priest held a crucifix in one hand and the Bible in the other. When it seemed the priest had finally stopped, Atabalipa gestured that he would like to see the book.

Whether or not he knew it was the Bible, and what it meant to the Spaniards, is cause for debate. In either case, once he had hold of it, he promptly discarded the Bible over his shoulder. The priest was horrified. While the translator ran to retrieve the Bible, the priest in fury turned

¹ *The Conquest of Peru*, trans. J. H. Sinclair (New York: New York Public Library, 1929).

back towards the homes, where the brunt of the Spaniards force was concealed, and cried out “Come out, come out, Christians, and attend to these unfriendly dogs who do not care for the things of God. That Cacique has thrown on the ground the book of our sacred law.”² What followed was nothing short of a massacre. The Spaniards mowed down the immediate party of Atabalipa with a volley from their cannons and muskets. They then charged their ranks with their swords and spears killing and maiming all in their path.

Once the initial party was decimated, and Atabalipa a prisoner, they then charged in to the plain where thousands of Indians were retreating. Without remorse they slaughtered them until the field was littered with bodies of “six or seven thousands Indians not counting the many others who had their arms cut off and other wounds...”³ Why did it go so wrong? Why were scenes like this happening across the New World? More importantly, why were the Conquistadors, identifying themselves as Christians and pious men of God, displaying such a violent nature in their conquest of the New World and conversion of its native people?

To write this off as simply an unfortunate period of jingoism by the Spaniards would be, in my opinion, a huge disservice to Spain and undermine any real attempt to understand the actions of these men. One needs to take in to account that Spain was coming off the success of the Reconquista ending centuries of Moorish rule in the Iberian Peninsula. Numerous authors have written on this explosive topic that led to centuries of violence and religious paranoia.⁴

² *The Conquest*, 32.

³ *The Conquest*, 33.

⁴ Joseph F. O’Callaghan, *A History of Medieval Spain* (Cornell University Press, 1975), 6, 98-105, 127-130, 669; Richard Fletcher, *Moorish Spain* (New York: Herry Holt and Company, 1992), 1-38, 49-94; Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 48-53, 70-80, 184-6; Thomas F. Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages* (Brill Academic Publishers, 2005), 22-24, 211, 394; Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin’s Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico* (University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 61, 89-199, 211; James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 87-96, 246; Teofilo F. Ruiz, *Spain’s Centuries of Crisis: 1300-1474* (Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 150-163; Stuart B. Schwartz, *All Can Be Saved* (Yale University, 2008), 62-3, 79-80.

The Moorish occupation had very dire consequences that would span centuries after it ended, and I argue that the Moors inadvertently conditioned the Spaniards to become the conquistadors as we know them today. The loss of land, culture, and identifying religion at the hands of the Moors led directly to the development of radical Christianity that emerged from Spain. This development started a wave of violence that began with the Reconquista, led to the Spanish Inquisition and would eventually lead to the rape and devastation of the New World.

It should be mentioned that my examination of this will be from the subjective view of the Spaniards. Atrocities occurred on both sides of the Reconquista and later in the New World. To argue morality or justification for any one side would be a tiresome exercise in regards to what we're really interested in. Rather, I seek to understand the mind of the 15th century Spaniard. What must it have been like to develop a nation's identity after years of oppression to the Moors? How did that affect their behavior towards outside cultures? Through examination of several episodes in both the Reconquista and conquest of the Americas, it is clear that a hereditary anger at Muslim oppression is at the core of the shocking religious violence the Spaniards inflicted on the native people. That will be the focus of this paper.

Let us briefly discuss the events that led to the Moors domination of the Iberian Peninsula. In the early 8th century, the peninsula was a collection of Visigothic kingdoms. While they shared a culture, they were in no way united. Perhaps this was recognized by the Moors in their initial raids along the coast. For what was initially sporadic raids quickly turned into a full scale invasion. By 720 all Visigothic lands had been pacified.

While the size of the invading force was quite low compared to the conquered, they wasted no time in asserting their control. Most of the peninsula was under Moorish control with

the exception of the small kingdom of Asturias in the north. The country the Visigoths had known changed before their very eyes. Borders of kingdoms were demolished and redrawn into communities called Caliphates. Within each city was assigned a Qadi, an appointed official who ensured Islamic law and religious standards was maintained regardless of what God you believed in.⁵ The crux of the problem was not only that the Spaniards had been conquered but were now losing their entire culture in the process.⁶ Christians quickly became second class citizens. Where there was a large Jewish population they found themselves even lower. The Jewish population was accommodating to their new masters. So much so that the time of Moorish occupation was considered the “Golden Age” for the Jewish population. By embracing Islamic culture, to include their dress, they were no longer regularly targeted for religious persecution. Because they were more willing to assimilate, Jews were integrated into the new society more smoothly than their Christian counterparts. This meant more opportunities of employment, trade and administrative offices. This didn’t go unnoticed by the Christian minority and only furthered their suspicion and mistrust of both Islam and Judaism. While Islamic law did allow for “religious freedom” for People of the Book, both Christians and Jews, it was a begrudging tolerance at best.

Assurances early on that other religions would be allowed to continue practicing were conflicted frequently by the actions of the Moor ruling class. Christian churches were routinely destroyed or converted into mosques. One of the most harrowing examples of this was by the dictator Almanzor who set out on a *jihad*, or holy war, against the Christians in early spring of 997. In addition to murder, rape, and pillaging of the country side, one of his most infamous acts concerned the church of Santiago de Compostela. This church was built on what was rumored to

⁵ *Moorish*, 6-7, 36-38.

⁶ While the term Spaniards is not accurate at this point in history, for sake of fluidity I will refer to them as such for the remainder of this paper.

be the resting site of St. James, the patron saint of Spain, and a frequented pilgrimage site for European Christians.⁷

Not only did Almanzor sack the surrounding town but also razed the church, took its wooden doors for ship building and confiscated the bells for the great mosque in Cordoba. The devastating blow to Christian morale was summed up by one anonymous author: “At that time in Spain divine worship perished; all the glory of the Christian people was destroyed...”⁸ Was nothing sacred? The Christians were promised that they would be allowed to practice their faith. They paid a hefty tax to do so under Islamic law. What good was this payment though if frequent atrocities were being waged against them? Even if they had been left in peace they didn't have a proper church to seek solace in. If a Christian church wasn't destroyed it was often converted into a mosque to accommodate the growing number of Muslim worshipers. Back alley taverns were becoming ad hoc churches considering the worsening conditions for their religion. They could be Christians but the preference was not to be seen acting as such.

Making matters worse was that the number of Christians was dropping at an alarming rate. While some of this is attributed to migration, casualties in the *jihads*, and executing those who spoke out against Islam publicly, these were all very small compared to the real reason: conversion. American historian Richard W. Bulliet noted that in the 9th century the number of Islamic names was rising dramatically in archival records.⁹ As stated before, the number of Muslims who actually came to Spain was relatively low. Furthermore, by 800 only 8% of the indigenous population in al-Andalus, as Spain was known, had become Muslims. How then could Islamic rates rise at such an exponential rate?

⁷ *Medieval Spain*, 127-130.

⁸ *Historia Silense*, trans. Justo Perez de Urbel and Atilano Gonzalez (Ruiz-Zorrilla Madrid, 1960).

⁹ Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1979).

Bulliet confirmed that it was conversion to Islam on several fronts. By tracing backwards through time he noted the years that families jumped from traditionally Christian names to Islamic ones. The rate at which this occurred couldn't have been from reproduction nor was there enough immigration at this point to cause it either. He compared these records with those of the expansion of mosques in rural communities. While it can be argued that major mosques were expanded for outward signs of strength and status at times, what need would there be for the smaller ones? The answer is simply to accommodate the growing number of worshippers. By 900, 25% of the indigenous population had converted and by 950 that number had doubled. By 1000 the number peaked at 75%.

The numbers themselves are startling. Especially if you visualize it from a Christian Spaniards point of view. As a Christian you were considered less than. You were now outnumbered. You were barred from participating in certain businesses or holding certain political offices. Arabic was even infiltrating your language in words connected with agriculture, trading, crafts, and civil administration. To this day, the majority of these words are either present, or closely resembled, in the Spanish language. The very culture that developed around you dictated that in order to live a meaningful life, to make ends meet, you needed to convert to Islam.

Conversion not only meant a new God and religious book in the Koran. It meant a new dietary regimen. New clothing dictated by Islamic law for both men and women. Even hygiene had to be considered. It wasn't a simple choice for anyone then nor would it be now. This is why several of the Christians migrated north to Asturias in order to avoid these dramatic changes. For the Christians, they had become strangers in their own land. This was the tipping point for Spain. The occupation had spanned several centuries. One that had built to an unbearable point. Spain had "sacrificed" herself for the rest of Europe. She alone was under the

rule of the Moors. The rest of Europe had profited and flourished from their misfortune. As bitterness took hold of their collective conscience, from it stemmed a national myth that would lead to a legacy of intolerance and massive xenophobia.

Ushered in by the clerics, and embraced by the Catholic royal and aristocratic elites, the notion of the Reconquista came to light. “A sacred patriotic struggle to wrest power from alien hands and restore Christian dominion.”¹⁰ Outsiders had forced them to convert, to migrate, to change the very essence of their identity. Their lives had been destroyed. From this point forward they were determined to never be the victim again. Xenophobia would be embraced and justified by any means in order to protect Spain.

United by their faith and similar cultures the Spaniards waged war for hundreds of years against the Moors. All the while their zeal for their cause and their God grew to epic proportions. Literature of the day became a key way in which to strengthen the resolve of the common Spaniard. In Alfonso X’s *Estoria De España*, a collection of Spain’s history, he states his reason for having the compilation written: “We did this so that the beginning of the Spaniards might be known...; how the Christians later began to recover the land...; and afterward how God reunited her.”¹¹ Alfonso’s writing, setting the bar for historians and writers after him, purposely wrote in a manner that would include biblical, classical and clerical texts. In this manner he effectively compared the struggle of Catholic Spain’s fall, rise and restoration to that of Christianity’s own growth, crises, and transformation.¹² This comparison, once embraced by a population and then employed via warfare, formed a tidal wave that the Moors had no hope of stopping.

¹⁰ *Moorish*, 7

¹¹ Alfonso X, *Primera crónica general de España* in Roberto J. González-Casanovas, ed. *Imperial Histories from Alfonso X to Inca Garcilaso: Revisionist Myths of Reconquest and Conquest* (Scripta Humanistica, 1997) 47.

¹² *Imperial Histories*, 47.

To further this cause the Spaniards needed a hero to rally around. Alfonso reached back through history and latched on to one of the earliest successes against the Moors - Prince Pelayo and the Battle of Covadonga. It was the first significant victory of a Christian force against the Moorish tide racing across Iberia. Fought in 722, Pelayo and a small force defeated a large Muslim army in the mountains of northern Spain. This victory led to the emergence of the kingdom of Asturias. As this would later become the safe haven for all Christians fleeing Islamic authority, this battle is widely considered the beginning of the Reconquista. “..Not wishing to forget his mercy, remembered his grace, and wished therefore to keep Prince Pelayo in his countenance, just as a small spark from which later might arise light in the land...so that the light of Christianity and of his servants might not entirely be extinguished in Spain.”¹³ Wishing to keep the biblical theme, Alfonso paints Pelayo as not only a savior of the Spanish people but also a biblical judge. If the Spanish were worthy, Pelayo would triumph and allow their country to live on. More importantly, the light of Christianity wouldn't flicker out under the heavy hand of Islam. How else could such an improbable victory be explained if not the work of God Himself?

This idea that God willed the Spaniards to rise and reclaim their land birthed a national mindset that they had been chosen for a special purpose. This is evident when you consider Bartolomé de Las Casas' comments on his mission with Columbus to the New World: “God... granted [Columbus] the keys to this awesome sea... By this can be seen how much the empire and principality of Jesus Christ will be extended, how much his Holy Church will spread, how expanded will be the frontiers of the Christian religion. ..”¹⁴ Not only were the Spaniards high on themselves with the development of their military strength, but now also viewed themselves

¹³ *Primera crónica*, 28

¹⁴ Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias in Imperial Histories*, 130.

as the true nation of Jesus Christ. Destined to expand and reclaim souls for the Church after so many had been lost to the Reformation and the constant expansion of Islam. Whatever the New World provided, it would be for the greater glory of the Emperors of Catholic Spain and for God.

Las Casas reaffirmed this mindset stating, “By means of the temporal riches and treasure [of the Indies] all Christendom would be made stronger...so that the enemies of our Catholic faith might not as before dare to challenge it...; Spain alone, with God’s help with the sinews of war, which are the monies drawn from our Indies, could defeat and subject them.” The line was drawn. All were aware, even the priests, of what these new lands were meant for. Profits that are made would strengthen the crown and what peoples they encountered would be converted. Christianity had spent too long at the bottom. Now that they had risen to the top they would do everything in their power to remain there.

To the great misfortune of the New World population, this meant zero tolerance from the Spaniards. As the Reconquista had shown them, religious toleration was no longer practicable, and for that matter dangerous, when the amount of non-Christians was greater than the ruling class. “The unity and integrity of the state seemed to demand the end of religious diversity.”¹⁵ The Spanish had reason to fear other religions. The Moors, while initially small, swelled to overwhelming numbers in Spain forcing Christian exile. Within this swell was the flourish of the Jewish population seeming unaffected by their Muslim rulers. Even elements of the new Protestantism were prodding at the borders of northern Spain. Small numbers of religious factions could be just as damaging as large ones. The only solution was the one in which Catholic Spain embraced. Eliminate all other religions. This policy was in full effect the moment the Spaniards hit the shores of the Americas.

¹⁵ *Medieval Spain*, 669.

Consider Father Diego de Landa, Bishop of Yucatan 1571-79, and the manner in which he approached the natives. After being shown a collection of books, both religious and educational, he stated “they contained nothing in which there was not to be seen superstition and lies of the devil, we burned them all.”¹⁶ What is striking here is that Landa had all the books burned regardless of religious connotation. The fact that it was an outsider interpretation of their world was danger enough. This is on par with the edict by Philip II in 1567 who imposed a series of laws catered to destroying all remnants of Arabic culture. This included many things such as the use of Arabic, burning of books in that language and use of Moorish names, ceremonials and customs.¹⁷ Xenophobic acts like this would repeat widespread across the New World.

While it was clear that the conquistadors had discovered great civilizations in their own right, the fact that it wasn't Spanish made them hostile towards it. Human sacrifice, a regular practice of the Aztecs, was one of the glaring differences they cited. In 1518, Licenciado Alonso Suazo was sent to the New World to investigate reports of mistreatment of the indigenous people. While his report initially credits the Mexicans on being far more sophisticated than given credit for his tone shifts suddenly upon viewing the sacrifice of a human. He reassures himself, and the crown via his report, that “these people were, after all, barbarians, in desperate need of Spain's humanizing influence.”¹⁸ This “humanizing” influence must have seemed anything but from the standpoint of the natives. During negotiations for peace with Cortes in Mexico, the Mexican chief Xicontencatl sent fifty messengers to Cortes with terms. Cortes blatantly stated, “I took all fifty and cut off their hands and sent them to tell their chief...they

¹⁶ Diego de Landa, *Landa's Relación de Las Cosas de Yucatan* in *Ambivalent Conquests*, 70.

¹⁷ *All can be saved*, 63.

¹⁸ *Malintzins*, 127.

would see who we were.”¹⁹ Presumably Cortes tortured most of them even more before this atrocious act occurred. However, this was a routine practice in European warfare as a way to extract information. Perhaps in this context the conquistadors weren’t unique. One could surmise that had it not been the conquistadors committing these acts, any other European country could be just as guilty. During the most savage times of the Reconquista, atrocities such as these were the norm. So much so that the coat of arms for Alcanadre depicted the severed heads of Moors. The savagery of warfare by “civilized” nations well practiced before it ever arrived in the New World. It’s only natural to expect that it would travel with the Spaniards.

Early on it was clear that the conquest would be in the Spaniards favor. With colonization a foregone conclusion, plans were made to firmly take hold of this New World. The Americas provided not only a chance at fortune and glory, but a chance to increase the ranks of Catholicism that had been decimated by the Reformation and onslaught of Islam. This meant the full scale conversion efforts of the Catholic Church. In an effort to proselytize in mass, the Spaniards made it clear that their God was the only option left to the natives. After all, this was the same God that had saved them from the oppressive regime of the Moors.

In their eyes, since God had saved them it was their duty to save these natives as well. Bernal Diaz, one of Cortes’ trusted captains during the conquest of Mexico, remembers one of his first encounters with the natives stating: “...for we told them then that we were Christians and worshipped one true and only God, named Jesus Christ... That we believe in Him and worship Him, but that those whom they look upon as gods are not so, but are devils, which are evil things...”²⁰ The Spaniards were committed to erasing the native’s ceremonies and customs

¹⁹ *Malintzin*, 61.

²⁰ Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain* Stuart B. Schwartz, ed. *Victors and Vanquished, Spanish and Nahua Views of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000) 138-139.

from their daily lives that in those early days “teaching focused more on training in correct external behavior than on the transference of knowledge.”²¹ In short, even if the natives didn’t know what they were doing, the Spaniards found a solace in them attempting to acclimate to Catholicism. Effort could be accepted. However, lack of assimilation or open hostility to the conversion effort, as the Moors did before and after Granada, was met with a very different approach.

During his time as Provincial, Bishop Landa launched his own Inquisition in the Yucatan and ordered many more throughout the new world under the concessionary Papal Bull.²² It had been discovered that several of the natives in the Yucatan had been returning to their own religious practices. In addition, reports from Peru stated that several of their natives were practicing their religions in the confines of the forest at night. Even more disturbing were reports from Portuguese Brazil that their slaves were bringing forms of Islam that they had practiced prior to their capture in Africa.²³ With threats appearing both internally and externally, every effort needed to be made to control the situation.

Through their own Inquisition, Landa and his fellow friars engaged in an aggressive campaign of torture in order to identify all those that could threaten their cause. Their justification being that the natives, “...had returned to their ancient and evil customs, worshipping idols and sacrificing to them publicly and in secret.”²⁴ So severe were the punishments that fear preceded the friars where ever they went. For whatever group they fell upon would inevitably face “the hoist,” a popular torture tool of the friars where one was hung by his wrist and then weighed down by heavy stones from his ankles. So painful was this

²¹ *Ambivalent Conquests*, 47.

²² *Ambivalent Conquests*, 74-75,

²³ *Peru’s People*, 39; *Recreating Africa*, 87-89.

²⁴ Landa, *Relación*, 81.

practice that several of the natives would falsely confess to worshipping idols just to end the pain.

Originally it had been the conquistadors themselves who had abused their powers to the point where relations seemed ready to collapse. Now that the friars themselves had been gripped by religious zeal, much like their counter parts conducting the Inquisition back in Spain, these two forces working in tandem were doing more harm than good. While the natives had been conquered, they wouldn't remain pacified with such behavior.

Such abuse of power prompted one of the more notable speeches conducted by Fray Anton de Motesion and his denunciation of his peers: "You are all in mortal sin...for the cruelty and tyranny you show these innocent people... Tell me: By what right and justice do you hold these Indians in such cruel and horrible servitude? Are you not obliged to love them as yourselves? Do you not understand this? Do you not feel this? ... You can be certain that in the state you are in, you can no more be saved than [the] Moors or Turks who lack or reject the faith of Jesus Christ."²⁵ One of the greater insults against a fellow Spaniard at the time was to compare him to a Moore. Motesion purposely does so here to illustrate how far they had fallen. Their practices against the natives people in no way resembled the noble cause of Christianity that they promoted at every turn. Giving in to the generations long hatred of foreign cultures, the Spanish looked anything but a country championing God and His Christian teachings.

The massacre at the hands of Pizarro and his men is the epitome of hypocrisy for today's reader. The image of a priest ordering a slaughter, for the throwing of a Bible no less, is not readily acceptable to most people. What one needs to take into account is the fact that Pizarro, his men, and the writer of this account found it perfectly acceptable to commit such violence.

²⁵ *Imperial Histories*, 131.

After our examination of Spanish history, we now know that their atrocities against the native population was fueled by centuries of religious war with the Moors. With each success, the myth that God willed a Spanish victory over Islam grew. This myth evolved into their national identity and bolstered the notion that their actions were prompted and justified by God. To dismiss the Spaniards in the New World as simply another chapter of imperialism would completely hinder our ability to understand these men. One isn't born with mass slaughter and torture ingrained in them. They arrive at this point through conditioning of the world around them. For the Spanish, this conditioning led to a radical and violent form of Christianity that permanently altered the lives of the New World natives, much like the Moors had for them centuries before.