

Muslim Spain and the Rise of Iconoclasm and Individualism by Reem Elghonimi

In the turbulent history of medieval Spain, the influx of diverse conquering peoples and the resulting amalgam of represented nations and faiths introduced highly varied intellectual and cultural trends. This is especially true in the case of the Muslim expansion beginning in 711, which brought both North African Berbers and Arabs from multiple states into the Iberian Peninsula. Over the course of centuries, the intersection of peoples and ideas would give rise to inevitable, brilliant permutations that might never have arisen at all in their own homogeneous ethnic and religious communities. Specifically, the lives of two monarchs, the Muslim Abd al-Rahman III of Cordoba and the Christian Alfonso X of Castile, and one enlightened philosopher, Ibn Tufayl, resonate with both the remarkable intellectual achievements they bequeathed onto their homeland as well as the new paths they forged as iconoclastic exemplars.

Abd al-Rahman III

The caliph Abd al-Rahman III, “al-Nasir” (912-61), occupied a momentous place in the historical narrative of Muslim Spain. A third-generation descendant of the first Umayyad prince *émigré* to seek refuge on the Iberian Peninsula, al-Nasir expanded his realm’s holdings, united various constituent groups, and assembled a multi-faith royal court. In pursuing diverse political, intellectual, and cultural objectives, he drew on his extensive successes in multifaceted areas to assert tenth-century Spain’s primacy - as well as his own pivotal place in Hispania’s chronology – on both the European and Islamic world stage.

Occupying Ceuta’s port in 931, Abd al-Rahman decidedly halted North African raids into Andalusia. In Spain proper, as he enjoyed more and more successful expeditions against Asturias and Leon and secured armistice treaties with both houses, the Count of Barcelona also sued for peace. The queen of Navarre, Toda, at times violating her peace treaty and then re-applying for peace, finally succumbed and journeyed to Cordoba with her son Garcia and grandson Sancho (known as “the Fat” due to a syndrome of excessive obesity) to negotiate a suspension of hostilities with al-Nasir as well as procure a remedy for her grandson’s condition. Not only was the armistice process fruitful, the caliph also set his own physicians the task of healing the boy, who was duly cured. In this way al-Nasir unified the extensive central and southern regions of Iberia and initiated the zenith of the Umayyad dynasty. His political abilities were indubitably corroborated, and the ensuing years of his reign attested to this power in the reception of many emissaries from neighboring states: Otto, the king of the Slavs and Germans, ambassadors from Constantine, the Byzantine emperor, and other kingdoms.

In the middle of the tenth century Abd al-Rahman appointed a Jewish man of letters, Hasdai ibn Shaprut, as his financier and court physician. Continuously promoted to higher offices, Hasdai irrevocably reached the position of foreign secretary; he was the second-in-command to the most illustrious caliph at the peak of Islamic Spain because Hasdai’s designation coincided with al-Nasir’s ringing declaration that he was the self-appointed Caliph of all Islamic lands. As a diplomat of Muslim Andalusians receiving the Byzantine emperor’s delegation, Hasdai was an extremely trusted source. When Constantine VII presented al-Nasir with a unique gift, Dioscorides’ original manuscript in Greek, On Medicine, Hasdai took upon himself the organization of a translation team to render it into Arabic.

A resounding outcome of al-Nasir’s rule was the ascendancy of Jewish and Muslim letters—linguistics besides literature. The Cordoban translation movement galvanized by Hasdai was the first step in a series of exemplary endeavors. The completion of the Arabic edition of On Medicine was a stellar inception, and a later result was the assembly of a council of Talmudic scholars that further

spurred development of Hebrew as a learned language. In addition, Abd al-Rahman invited the renowned Muslim poet Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi to his court, propelling the Umayyad court into its period of primacy in Arabic literature. The distinguished philologist Abu Ali 'l-Qali also accepted an invitation to the caliph's court and occasioned an awakening of Arabic literary activities, surrounded by a host of equally prominent scholars, writers, and physicians.

Convivencia, the societal harmony between people of various faiths, was commendably practiced by al-Nasir and manifested in his high regard for and appointment of Hasdai ibn Shaprut, the Jewish intellectual, as court diplomat/vizier. As a result of such tolerant practices, an influx of Jews into Hispania occurred during this period. As Montgomery Watt asserts, "Certainly in the Arab state at this period Muslims, Christians, and Jews seem to have mixed freely with one another and to have shared fully in a common culture." In turn, many important families had Muslim and Christian members.

By far the most splendid cultural legacy bequeathed by Abd al-Rahman is the ambitious construction of the exquisite palatial complex, Madinat al-Zahra – the City of Zahra - named after his beloved wife and situated on the fringes of Cordoba. Exquisite gardens, palaces, zoos, pools, jeweled architecture and lifelike statuary graced the city. Beginning construction in 936, the caliph chose not his own name but that of his beloved wife, Zahra. Admired by him for her intellectual and political insights, she was a soul mate he immortalized in stone; Zahra wrote poetry and delighted in the arts, so her husband endeavored to embody in Madinat al-Zahra the precious and lovely aesthetic of its namesake. It was a mile-long city, half a mile wide, and comprised of an aviary, four immense fishponds, 300 baths, over 400 residences, and an armory. Lakes of quicksilver, roofs of gold and silver, chandeliers of giant pearls, and alabaster statues of animals adorned the palatial complex.

Refining and culling the choicest aspects of Iberian life in the tenth century, the self-declared caliph of all Islam, Abd al-Rahman III, effected an immense transformation. Ushering in a period of great posterity to Islamic Spain through his diligent efforts to protect and unify his state, he was not heedless of the importance of the arts and letters. Al-Nasir's translation movement, patronage of physicians and medical learning, and lifetime endowment of Madinat al-Zahra, the aesthetic marvel, all testify to the fact that under his rule, Hispania ascended to her most acclaimed heights. By inculcating tolerance, language, and aesthetics, Abd al-Rahman achieved brilliance in every field in Andalusia. According to Mahmoud Makki, "It is no exaggeration to say that he was one of the greatest statesmen to rule Spain in any era." A powerful yet temperate leader, as well, he exemplified military might both in securing his territories and in advancing the cause of peace.

Alfonso X

The dynamic figure of Alfonso X of Castile, "The Learned" (1252-84), clearly illustrates a triumphant yet tragic period in Spanish history. Envisioning a forthcoming bright age for Christian Spain, the monarch implemented extensive reforms in language usage, codification of law, and state policy to ensure religious freedom. In overreaching his political status by electing himself Holy Roman Emperor, however, Alfonso was not successful in either that endeavor or asserting Iberia's military dominance. Thus, his reign is characterized by vacillations that are difficult to decipher. Though they thereby hinder conclusive assessments about Andalusia's condition under *El Sabio* in the thirteenth century, the brilliant successes and disastrous failures nevertheless reveal a complex yet discernible pattern in the chronology of Spanish progress in the medieval epoch.

With a majority Muslim populace, Alfonso inherited an impressive territory for Christian Spain, comprised of central and southern regions, as a result of his father's ceaseless re-conquest military campaigns (Lowney 208). He showed concern in legitimating his subjects' diverse faiths in his canon of law, *Siete Partidas*. The seventh *partida* explicitly records the rights of Muslims and Jews to freely practice their religions. Further, the two groups could adjudicate their own cases and establish their respective community's religious legislation as long as it did not contravene state law. Not to

steal any thunder from *El Sabio*, but his tolerant aspirations in the thirteenth century nonetheless had roots in the eighth-century Muslim conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, which gave rise to the coexistence of the followers of the three Abrahamic faiths rather than forced conversions, depopulation of Hispania's long-time citizens, or expulsion. Michael Hamilton Morgan's comments on this precedent clarify the point: "Even so devout a Catholic as Queen Isabella... will dress in Muslim fashion when she calls on the last emir of Granada, and her Catholic predecessors like Alfonso the Wise will adopt the tri-religious model of the Umayyads, with Muslim and Jewish advisors at his side." Obviously, in regard to the tolerant practices of the tenth-century Umayyad caliph Abd al-Rahman III, Alfonso did indeed have notable historical precursors.

Alfonso employed Jewish scholars towards his goal of augmenting astronomical knowledge. Assembling a multicultural team of translators to render Arabic sciences into Latin and Spanish, he sparked a revolution in a number of areas: the creation of institutions of higher learning, translations, language vernacularization, and multi-faith cooperatives. Alfonso succeeded in replacing Latin immediately with Castilian but also in replacing the historical significance of the Islamic and Arabic worldview with a new Spanish Castilian perspective. Travel to Toledo also experienced a quickening as students of knowledge hastened to Andalusia from France, Germany, and Italy to partake of the intellectual awakening. As such, Alfonso the Wise effected, in large part due to the translations he commissioned from Arabic into Latin, a transmission of Islamic science and philosophy that dramatically influenced the intellectual development of Western Europe.

Widely considered a visionary, *El Sabio* intrepidly broke new ground in cultural innovation. Besides translating Arabic and Hebrew works into his chosen vernacular, Spanish, he similarly established a precedent in preferring it – Spanish, or contemporary Castilian – as the official language for his canon of law, replacing the elitist Latin. In his propagation of literature, poetry, the arts, law and history, Alfonso apparently recognized the undeniably unifying principle of adopting one state vernacular language for the historical documentation of both legal records and literary works. One theory for his novel conception has a solid grounding in the five-centuries-long historical ascendancy of the Arabic language in Muslim Spain:

The model closest at hand, of course, was the one just vanquished Islamic empire had provided, with its near-universal use of Arabic. Over four hundred years after Alvarus had railed against the abandonment of Latin by the Christians of Cordoba, Castilian, a kissing cousin of the Mozarabic the Cordobans spoke, began its road to dominance among the competing children of Latin (Menocal 224).

Despite favorable advances in his intellectual and cultural ventures, Alfonso demonstrated dubious skills as a military leader and political ruler. Displaying irresolute tactics with the Marinid dynasty of Morocco, he allowed them to raid and pillage the Iberian Peninsula towards the end of his reign. By far, the largest time and economic drain on Spain's resources resulted from Alfonso's willful attempts to gain the Holy Roman Crown. Pursuing this elusive pipe dream for independence, glory, or power, he was nevertheless unsuccessful. In leaving a weakened state at his reign's end, Alfonso of Castile was also unable to bequeath his strong commitment to *convivencia* onto his heirs although the flourishing arts and letters he nurtured would long endure.

Ibn Tufayl

Abu Bakr ibn Tufayl (d. 1185) was born early in the twelfth century in a small village northeast of Granada. A gifted student of medicine and philosophy, he propitiously met a distinguished patron of the sciences, an Almohades sultan named Abu Ya'qub Yusuf. The Sultan employed him as court physician and philosopher, giving him free rein in speculative theology and allowing him to question ritualized dogma. Though the Muslim rationalist wrote prolifically, only two

of his works are extant. The most noteworthy is Hayy ibn Yaqzan, credited with being “one of the most original books of the Middle Ages” (Myers 45). Not only is the tale a work of philosophy, it is additionally an allegory about the quest for the Divine on a spiritual plane as well as a desert-island survival adventure in the purely physical realm.

The protagonist Hayy is deserted on an uninhabited island as a baby and is reared by a doe. The central motif is the gradual progress of human life in developmental stages. Physiological, psychic, mental, philosophical, and spiritual phases, in turn, preoccupy Hayy. The search for the meaning of life and death fuels his anatomical and scientific inquiries, laboriously explored by means of animal dissections, observations of natural phenomena, and an empirical framing of sensory experience as attempts to understand life’s vital force. Finally, as an adult, the hermit turns to philosophical questions in an individual quest for purpose. Hayy’s cumulative set of acquired understanding and realizations of natural and scientific harmony propel his incipient metaphysical encounter as the next phase of human progress: a search for spiritual harmony. When he shifts his gaze to the celestial sphere and pursues a path of reflection and solitude, the ascetic experiences a vision of the divine and achieves inner light, metamorphosing into a saint. The novel can be considered a moral tale, with didactic presumptions, principally due to the extensive spiritual themes of enlightenment as sacred exalted experience. A summary of the fable’s content, then, is the emphasis on human progress and the application of empirical strategies in explaining the natural world, individuality, and ethereal aspirations.

The allegory interrogates authority of any kind due to its antipode’s –individualism – ineluctable centrality in Enlightenment discourse. As the self-taught philosopher, Hayy seeks knowledge in numerous fields, driven by necessity in many cases but also subsequently, issuing forth as a consequence of intentional inquiry. As such, he employs observation, induction, deduction and logic in empirically validating his knowledge. The first half of the hermit’s life highlights this use of reason as an exemplar of human existence. Reasoning, as self-teaching, confronts the question of society’s or religious authority’s entrenched positions. His individual agency, in opposition to authoritarianism, signifies Hayy’s freedom to engage his reason and mold his own religious identity.

The last episode of the work expounds a model of religious and political toleration. With his companion Absal, Hayy visits a nearby island in an attempt to educate its inhabitants who have ritualized their religious doctrines and overwhelmingly live in worldly excess. They resist the saint’s efforts to guide them towards the path of spiritual illumination, displaying instead suspicion and hostility. Hayy acknowledges their freedom of conviction and reassures them that he was mistaken in introducing doubts about the veracity of their traditions. By recognizing the inherent dangers of coercion or manipulation, Hayy sought to erase any residual tension that could occasion subsequent political turmoil. By emphasizing Hayy’s realization of the manifold routes to truth and that, although human beings are equally capable of reason, those who wish to supersede it with reliance on inherited dogma retain the freedom to do so, ibn Tufayl demonstrates the latent harm of coercive social or political mandates and instead shapes the definition of and the discourse surrounding the principle of toleration. As such, the paradigm appeared at a critical time in twelfth-century medieval Spain to cope with religious fanaticism and its incipient threats to security and stability; nevertheless, it offered the selfsame promises to seventeenth-century Europe ravaged by wars and internal religious dissension.

Beginning with a translation of *Hayy* into Hebrew in 1349, various publications of the novel followed in its remarkable European reception. Literary translations occurred but predominantly the process of transformation involved attendant suppressions, violent excisions that concealed and repudiated the origins of the initial text, and a cultural appropriation of the didactic content of the tale rather than mere literary borrowings.

In attempting to position Ibn Tufayl in the discourse of the European Enlightenment, an epistemological study resurrects his memory and the contributions of his novel as a frame of significance. The goal is evidently reform, to promote an (enlightened) academic atmosphere receptive to the possibility of the emergence of key ideations long considered to be products of Western

civilization, counterintuitively, from the East as bequeathed legacies of Muslim and Arab civilizations. Through a detailed analysis of the innovative paradigms engaged in Hayy ibn Yaqzan and by amassing and linking numerous European references to and translations of the novel, a wealth of data is made available. In understanding how the term “enlightenment” actually emerged in seventeenth-century England, this thesis gains ground in offering the ascetic-philosopher’s climactic spiritual elevation and illumination as a potential origin whose position and agency in the early modern period must be sufficiently demystified.

This important philosophical novel influenced genres five centuries later. Hayy ibn Yaqzan was not only a springboard for survival tales such as Robinson Crusoe after its early eighteenth-century English translation but, further, propagated the much loftier vanguard of Western Europe: Enlightenment thought, which influenced the British Arabist Dr. Edward Pococke as well as Locke, Rousseau and Spinoza. Edward Pococke’s renowned Latin translation of Hayy ibn Yaqzan, Philosophus Autodidactus, in the seventeenth century set into motion the principle that the human intellect could, by degrees and without supernatural or miraculous events, reach an awareness of the Divine. Ibn Tufayl’s highly original work broke tradition on several fronts. He was iconoclastic in the sense that he taught fellow Muslims to search for an internal and individual spiritual practice. However, living as he did in a multi-faith environment such as medieval Hispania, he is obviously making the same observation about Judaism, Christianity, and all other religions as he did not give his protagonist any religious or national affiliations. In this way, he is a fitting role model for Pococke, Locke, Rousseau and other philosophers of the early modern rational Deism movement, as he relates that reason is not only incumbent on Muslims, but is a universal human capacity. God-given intellect may be used to reach its Creator. Moreover, the novel indicates there is no one religious level for all people but rather degrees of excellence or striving, and that there can be no compulsion in religion in attaining to any one truth. This principle of the paramount importance of free will is a central theme of the European Enlightenment. The Spanish Muslim ibn Tufayl created Hayy ibn Yaqzan in the twelfth century; it finally made its return journey home in its translation, El filósofo autodidacta, into Spanish only in 1934 – the very last language it was rendered into - at the tail end of its movement through Hebrew, Latin, other European languages, English, and Russian.

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