

Christian-Muslim Relations: Texts, Past, and Present

Written Assessment n. 1

The confrontation between Christianity and Islam is often associated with the clashes and encounters that have historically occurred between Christian Europe and the Muslim "East", in particular North Africa and the "Middle East", a term accused of Eurocentrism, like indeed many terms of western nature in need of a deconstruction (Cardini, 2007). The main misunderstanding lies in the fact of considering Europe as exclusively Christian, precisely omitting the long and lasting Muslim permanence which, despite the numerous expulsions, has never ceased (Ali Kettani, 1997). Among the many moments of meeting, exchange, but also confrontation, I chose to focus on the presence of Muslims in Spain and on the exacerbation of the expulsion practices pursued by the Catholic sovereigns and by the Inquisition with the aim of "purging" Spain of any religious minority. However, the "limpieza de sangre" was carried out in an ambivalent and fluctuating way, alternating between particularly bloody periods and more tolerant ones. On the meaning of the term "limpieza de sangre" itself there is no consensus at the historiographical level due to divergent positions and answers to the question whether racism is a modern or transhistorical phenomenon (Hering Torres, 2011). This question is extremely relevant for the purposes of the case study chosen here, since the purge of ethnic and religious minorities from Spain would have somehow inaugurated the subsequent phenomenon of modern racism on the basis of European societies during colonial imperialism. Is the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain the first historical case of racism (or proto racism) preparatory to the modern one? Although anachronistic for some scholars (Hering Torres, 2011), this association gives the opportunity to reflect on the different forms and manifestations of racism on a historical level and to what extent the case of Spain has had a significant impact on the relationship between Christians and Muslims. If a polarisation has occurred – which sees some scholars rejecting any historical association between the "limpieza de sangre" and modern racism and others who instead see the latter as the direct consequence of the former – the only way to overcome this impasse is to re-signify the polyvalence of the phenomenon of racism not necessarily and "universally" linked to the concept of "race" as it has been formulated by eugenics.

Starting from these premises and reflections, this paper intends to analyse the historical relevance of the expulsion of Muslims from Spain under King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile at the beginning of the sixteenth century¹, when the last Muslim stronghold of Granada fell to the Christians in 1492, followed by the definitive expulsion in 1609-1614.

The reconquest of Spain by the Catholic kings from the eleventh to the thirteenth century ended with the capture of Granada and the definitive expulsion of historically present religious minorities in the country, mostly Jews and Muslims. Even though Muslims and Jews who had converted to Christianity had the right to remain, the climate of intolerance was exacerbated by an inquisition tribunal aimed at unmasking the false converts, called "Marranos" in the case of the Jews and "Mudejars" in that of the Muslims (Jónsson, 2007). As for the Muslims, defined in general as "Moriscos", they lived in several regions of the Spanish peninsula, namely in Castile, where they were called Mudejars, in Aragon, known as Moors, and in Valencia named after Sarraïns (Corrales, 2020).

¹ In 1492 the expulsion or forced conversion of the Jews was decreed, while in 1502 it was the Muslims of Castile and in 1526 the Muslims of the whole country.

This first expulsion at the beginning of the sixteenth century did not solve the problem of the false converts, who secretly continued to profess their religion (Ali Kettani, 1997). In fact, many Moriscos continued to be secretly loyal to Islam and to practice the rites and celebrations associated with their faith.

From 1609, in just one year, 250,000 Muslims were forced to leave Spain, taking refuge mainly in North Africa (Jónsson, 2007). Scholars disagree on the exact number of Moriscos expelled from Spain and estimates range from 300,000 to 900,000 people (G. F. & S. P., 2013).

Defined as “the largest such migration in early modern European history” (Amelang, 2022, p.45), it is relatively unknown by non-specialists, while others speak of genocide (Ali Kettani, 1997). After the capture of Granada in 1492, the Catholic rulers guaranteed the protection of the Islamic religion, the Arabic language and the institutions associated with Islam (Ibidem). However, the promises made by the Catholic sovereigns soon proved to be empty ones. Mosques were soon converted into churches and lobbying for the conversion of Moriscos to Christianity was by no means rare. In Granada, these coercive actions gave the impetus for the organisation of a revolt, which, starting from the Albaicin in 1499, headed towards the Alpujarras mountains (Corrales, 2020). In 1501 by royal order books in Arabic were burnt (Ali Kettani, 1997). A series of measures followed which in the various regions forced the Moriscos to convert to Christianity. If some managed to stay, and others to return after an initial estrangement, the majority left never to return. Among the settlement countries we find above all Morocco and Tunisia (Corrales, 2020). It should be emphasised that a part of the Spanish civilian population did not agree with the expulsion of the Moriscos and some of them managed to return to Spain precisely because of the established relationships with locals. If, therefore, Spain's position was undoubtedly driven by religious intolerance towards the Moriscos (as well as the Jews) it is also true that spaces for exchange and negotiation both with Christians and with the Spanish institutions themselves did not cease to exist (Corrales, 2020).

Nonetheless, despite a plural and heterogeneous history, in which many variables came into play, it is interesting to note how the representations and imagery associated with the Moriscos often were rather homogeneous, far from an objective analysis of the historical facts. The example of piracy is fitting, to the extent that the increase in the phenomenon starting from the second decade of the seventeenth century was attributed to a supposed adverse reaction and desire for revenge on the part of the expelled Moriscos against the Christian Europe which had rejected them (Friedman, 1979). According to this interpretation, the increase in piracy and raids was directly linked to the expulsion of the Moriscos, who allegedly devoted themselves to this activity or at least collaborated with North African pirates. If this was the case of some Moriscos², it must be said that most of them integrated without difficulty into their new host societies, carrying out various activities, which had nothing to do with piracy. However, taking into account the objective increase in privateering activities in the Mediterranean and on the Spanish coasts, a sort of Pygmalion effect cannot be ignored.

Eliminating the “fifth column” of Islam by expelling the Muslims proved not only harmful to the cultural and economic development of Spain (Cardini, 2007), but also counterproductive by supplying the corsairs with discontented crew members who knew the Spanish coasts very well and making them more “uncomfortable” from the outside rather than within national borders.

To conclude, if many questions initially posed remain unanswered, it is clear that after centuries of more or less peaceful coexistence, the intolerant turn of the Catholic sovereigns in Spain has

² The creation by the expelled Moriscos of the base of Rabat-Salé, nerve centre of corsair activities, must certainly be mentioned.

benefited neither the country nor Christianity as a whole, representing one of the many historical misunderstandings, as Cardini defines them, between Christianity and Islam.

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