

RECONQUEST, DJIHAD, DIASPORA:  
THREE VISIONS OF SPAIN AT THE  
DISCOVERY OF AMERICA

Thus Spain has two frontiers: one bordering on the region of the Infidels, the other with the Ocean.

Ibn Hauqal, *Kitab Surat al-Ard* (t. 1, p. 108)

A crusading spirit colors the vision that most European historians, especially the Spanish, have of the Iberian peninsula's past. The classical conception of the Reconquest of the territory invaded by the Moors and redeemed for Christianity at the end of a secular war (in which the legendary figure of El Cid and Ferdinand the Catholic found glory) has been greatly qualified without ever having been abandoned entirely.<sup>1</sup> Leaving aside the modern controversies, we shall try to throw some light upon

Translated by Marc Metraux

<sup>1</sup> Ramón Menéndez Pidal, *España y su historia*, Madrid, 1957, t. 1, *Cristiandad y islam*, p. 355-356.

the origins of the ideology of the "Reconquest"; for it is just that: an ideology whose aim was to justify a certain political action. We can better understand its meaning if we compare it to the two other ideologies then competing for the Iberian peninsula, the Islamic holy war (*djihad*), and the Judaic eschatological hope linked to the *diaspora* of the Sephardim.

There is no reason to doubt the existence of an anti-Islamic crusade as early as the eighth century among the Christian communities in the Cantabrian mountains, in the form of a cult to the devotion of Saint Jacques, "slayer of the Moors" (*Santiago Matamoros*).<sup>2</sup> But this popular militant faith was to become a theme for historical explanation only at the end of the fifteenth century, at the very time that the Moslems were neutralized as a political and military force. By examining historiographic materials, the exploitation of the "fear of the Moors" for political ends, and the victory of the "Catholic Kings" over the kingdom of Granada, seem to have followed the pattern of a concerted effort. A Latin aphorism nicely summarizes this then completely new vision of Spanish history: *Hispania tota sibi restitua est*.<sup>3</sup> We must recall that after annexing the kingdom of Granada to the crown of Castile, Spain had recovered all of its territory; it was "once again complete." (The author of this aphorism, Antonio de Nebrija, was a humanist who was to create the first grammar of the Spanish language). But behind the "Reconquest" of the Moorish territory, was the *conquest* of a double future for the Castilian monarchy (which was united to the kingdom of Aragon by the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella). What was at stake was, on the one hand, the political unity of the Peninsula under Castilian hegemony (Castile was the most densely populated kingdom at the time), and, on the other hand, European predominance in Spain, a late restitution to the Empires of Rome and of Charlemagne, the *translatio imperii*.<sup>4</sup> After centuries of atomization of the economic, political, and military powers in the Mediterranean, and just when the Barbary galleons were threatening the Spanish and Italian coasts, the

<sup>2</sup> Américo Castro, *Santiago de España*, Buenos Aires, 1958, p. 30-38.

<sup>3</sup> Robert B. Tate, *Ensayos sobre la historiografía peninsular del siglo XV*, Madrid, 1970, p. 296.

<sup>4</sup> John H. Elliott, *La España imperial (1469-1716)*, Barcelona, 1965, p. 27-31.

## *Reconquest, Willaya, Diaspora*

rulers of Aragon-Castile concerted to meet the challenge in the name of the Christian Occident. This *Weltpolitik* of the Castilian monarchy was completely novel (and, with the conquests on the American continent, worldwide in scope from the outset), and in dire need of finding a historical tradition by which it could justify itself. This task was the responsibility of the chroniclers of the court, notably, Hernando del Pulgar<sup>5</sup> (a descendant of converted Jews),<sup>6</sup> and Andrés Bernaldez.<sup>7</sup> They had to elaborate an image of Spain's past which would justify the political actions of Ferdinand the Catholic, as well as his longer term ambitions. Charles V, the "alien" sovereign, at first badly accepted by Castilian nobility, was to fulfill the great plan of Ferdinand by acceding to the throne of an Empire, and Philip II would continue in the same path by sending Spanish forces into the northern battles against the Lutheran princes of Germany and the Netherlands, and against the French Protestants. The ideology of a Christian "Reconquest" was to attain its full elaboration with, curiously enough, one of the least conformist historians of the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Jesuit priest Mariana.

In his *General History of Spain*,<sup>8</sup> which covers the period between the arrival of the mythical hero Tubal (a town in Portugal, Setubal, preserves his memory) and the year 1621, Juan de Mariana devotes an important part of his work to Roman Spain. It is only in book IV that the Christian era is introduced, and writing about the "descent to earth of the Son of God," Mariana affirms that "Spain was one of the first provinces to embrace this Religion (Christianity) and was one of the most devout." (t. I, p. 174-175). A worthy heir of Nebrija and Marineus Siculus, Mariana established a double and privileged link between Spain and the Roman Empire on the one hand, Spain and the Church, "the holy temple founded on earth by

<sup>5</sup> Hernando del Pulgar, *Crónica de los Reyes Católicos*, J. de Mata Carriazo, ed., Madrid, 1943.

<sup>6</sup> Francisco Cantera Burgos, "Fernando del Pulgar and the Conversos," in *Spain in the Fifteenth Century*, New York, San Francisco, London, 1972, p. 296-393.

<sup>7</sup> Andrés Bernaldez, *Memorias del reinado de los Reyes Católicos*, M. Gómez Moreno and J. de Mata Carriazo, eds., Madrid, 1962.

<sup>8</sup> Juan de Mariana, *Historia general de España*, (1601), (ed. used, Madrid, 1780, 2 tomes).

the Son of God Himself," on the other. This was the first transcending foundation for the new anti-Islamic crusade and for Spanish hegemony. Furthermore, Spain's recent past, and notably the year 1492 which was decisive in many respects, was considered in the light of this divine affiliation, or better, as a providential mission "of all times" for Spain, that is, of course, Christian Spain. In the last two chapters of book LXXV, evoking the conquest of Granada by Ferdinand, who called himself "the Catholic," Mariana does not hesitate to say that, "in conclusion, it was thanks to this victory that all of Spain was won back to Our Lord Jesus Christ to Whom it had previously belonged." (t. II, p. 599). This event, the first of the three important events of 1492, seemed to Mariana to be one panel of a God-sent triptych which was also composed of "the discovery of the West Indies (...) a prodigious event that had been saved over many centuries for our time." (t. II, p. 605). Writing before him, under a preceding sovereign, and closer to the event, Francisco López de Gómara<sup>9</sup> had emphasized the relationship which a modern mind would deem fortuitous: the discovery of America and the conquest of Granada had taken place at the same time "so that the Spanish would incessantly be at war with the infidels." (*op. cit.*, Dedication to Charles V). The third event of the year was the expulsion (or conversion by force) of the Sephardic Jews. This was the third panel of the triptych which expressed the desire to lay transcendental foundations for a policy of religious intolerance and a break with nine centuries of coexistence among the Christian, Islamic, and Judaic faiths that were freely practiced on the Peninsula. This coexistence had not always been a pacific one, but while political hegemonies, the paying of tributes, and so on, had been the cause of numerous wars, the presence on Spanish soil of members of the three religious and cultural communities had never before been seriously challenged. In particular, Islam tolerated Jews and "Mozarab" Christians; Christians tolerated Jews, especially the erudite, financiers and doctors... We do not intend to deny the existence of pogroms, but they were popular movements which were disapproved of and fought against by the Portuguese monarchy into the sixteenth century.

<sup>9</sup> Francisco López de Gómara, *Historia general de la Indias—Hispania victrix* (1552), Library of Spanish Authors, t. XXII.

Hernán Pérez de Guzman, predecessor and mentor of H. del Pulgar considered the Jews and Moors of Castile as his compatriots.<sup>10</sup>

The “new politics” of Ferdinand and Isabella which resulted in the conquest of the Moslem kingdom of Granada, the expulsion of the Sephardim, the creation of the Court of the Inquisition, and which was completed after these sovereigns by the expulsion of the Moriscos, has occasionally been explained as the consequence of “popular demand.” We lack the space, and it is not our aim, to verify herein this hypothesis which remains unsubstantiated, but we may question its validity because of the extreme coherence which the historiographic expression of this policy reveals. Or rather we should say the “historical literature” or “apologetic chronicles”; was history in the past ever anything other than a vehicle for moral exemplification and a privileged ground in which the king appears as a hero and his policies an epic tale? For the chroniclers of the court of the “Catholic Kings,” it was a matter of interpreting each event as if it were a providential sign of God’s favor bestowed upon the royal couple of the two-headed monarchy (*tanto monta*), and presenting their policies (both inside and outside Spain) as a battle for the Christian faith, as a crusade. In this context, the idea of a “Reconquest,” while it hardly corresponded to the reality of the medieval history of Spain, fulfilled the search for a transcending, legitimating principle for the “new politics” inaugurated by Ferdinand and by Isabella, whose advent to the throne was, for her contemporaries, compared to that of the Virgin Mary Herself.<sup>11</sup>

To present the conquest of the kingdom of Granada by Ferdinand’s armies as the termination of a secular division of Spain that had always been entirely Christian, seems to be a completely idealized vision of the past. The expulsion of the Sephardim and the Moriscos of Granada was felt to be an expatriation by both; we can verify this by examining Arab and Judaic historiography of the time. It so happened that one of the greatest historians of Occidental Islam, Ibn Khaldun, who died at the

<sup>10</sup> H. del Pulgar, *Claros varones de Castilla*, ed. Robert B. Tate, Oxford, 1971, p. L.

<sup>11</sup> J. Pérez, *L’Espagne des Rois Catholiques*, Paris-Montréal, 1971.

beginning of the fifteenth century, was of Granada extraction. In his *Universal History*,<sup>12</sup> (*al Muqaddima*), he devotes several chapters to Spain (*Al Andalus*), and when he spoke of the "Andalusians" (= the Spaniards, as in the modern city of Fez, the so-called quarter of the "Andalusians") he was referring to the Moslems of Spain. For Ibn Khaldun, Spain was a Moslem land, a district of Arab-Maghrebian Islam, as history seemed to indicate. He saw a Spain which he considered sophisticated (the heritage of the Caliphate of Córdoba) but already decadent. The cause of this decline was, for him, attributed to the conquest of *Al Andalus* by the Christians. "The scientific tradition has disappeared from Spain along with *civilization...*" (*op. cit.*, t. II, p. 893) wrote Ibn Khaldun nostalgically reminiscing on that civilization which "had attained a peak (under the great Caliphs of Cordova) that was paralleled only in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt." (*op. cit.*, t. II, p. 820). Analyzing the causes of the retreat of Islamic "civilization" in front of the Christian "barbarity" and the person whom he called "the Despot" (King Ferdinand III of Castile, called "the Saint"), Ibn Khaldun referred back to the end of the Omayyad dynasty: "It is a question, for them, of the disappearance of a clan spirit," writes Ibn Khaldun, and adds that, "having fallen to the level of subjects, the individualistic Spaniards were subjected to force and humiliation." (*op. cit.*, t. I, p. 58). This same weakening of the clan spirit was the explanation Ibn Khaldun gave for the accession of the Nasirite dynasty in Granada, in spite of the hatred which the Arabs of Spain had for the Berbers whose power succeeded the Omayyad monarchy. "Ibn Al Ahmar sought support in the Zenaga chiefs against the (Christian) Despot (...) But the Merinite (Zenaga) sovereigns of Morocco hoped to conquer Spain." (*op. cit.*, t. I, p. 325). The Mohammedans of the Maghreb, we can observe, had conquering intentions on the Peninsula analogous to those of the Christian kingdoms, but for many centuries both lacked a sufficiently broad political vision to satisfy these aims, and their internal divisions paralyzed them. The founder of the Nasirite dynasty of Granada ruined the intentions of the Moroccan rulers, "he passed his royal power on to his heirs who

<sup>12</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *Discours sur l'histoire universelle (al Muqaddima)*, Vincent Monteil, ed., UNESCO Collection of representative works, Beirut, 1967 (3 tomes).

continue to exercise it today" (*ibid.*), wrote Ibn Khaldun; "today," that is the year 1397, more than a century before the fall of Granada to Ferdinand the Catholic. Just as the Christians, the Moslems based their vision of the world<sup>13</sup> and of history (in which past, present, and future were, so to speak, homogenized on a transcendental plane) on a providential plan. Opposed to the Christian *crusade* to reconquer the Peninsula was the *djihad* (holy war) of the Mohammedans. The holy war was canonically sanctioned in Islam, but military expansion was complemented by a great religious tolerance, equally with respect to the Jews as to the Christians—we know, for instance, that Jesus is considered as one of the prophets of Islam. Yet for Ibn Khaldun (whose work is much more important than the more limited Hispano-Moslem writings of Ibn Hayyan and Al Mas'udi), the confusion of political and religious spheres was as complete as with his Christian homologues. In his eyes, the height of the Caliphate of Cordova had been when the Omayyad Caliph Abd-ar-Rahman III had taken the title of "Commander of the Faithful," and the nickname "*An-Nasir li-din Allah*" (Victor in the name of Allah's faith) (*op. cit.*, t. I, p. 454). Ibn Khaldun never lost sight of the unity of Islam, which made Islamic Spain appear as the appendage or the heart of Hispano-Maghrebian Islam, according to the epoqe, and, after the fall of the Caliphate of Cordova, as a political extension of the Marinite Empire of Morocco. In this light, Moslem Spain seems to have been more closely tied to the destiny of the Maghreb<sup>14</sup> than the kingdom of Castile was (at the time) linked to the free kingdoms, including Navarre. This is equally true historiographically.

We can easily imagine the significance which Ibn Khaldun would have attributed to the fall of Granada in 1492. Twice he referred to the "reconquest" of Spain by the Mahdi in the year 683 of the Hegira (that is, 1284 A.D.); the predictions of Ibn Khaldun (*op. cit.*, t. II, p. 632 and 667) were not inconceivable. We know that under Charles V Europe lived in terror of "the Turk," that Moslems debarked in Naples, and later nearly took

<sup>13</sup> Ibn Hauqal, *Configuration de la terre (Kitab surat al-ard)*, J. H. Kramers and G. Wiet, eds., UNESCO Collection of representative works, Paris-Beirut, 1964, t. I, *Spain*, p. 107-116.

<sup>14</sup> André Miquel, *La Géographie humaine du monde musulman*, Paris-The Hague, 1967, p. 259-262.

Vienna. The prophecies that were current in the Moslem world announced the conquest of Rome (the capital of Western Christianity), of Constantinople (which indeed occurred, in 1453), as well as the reconquest of Spain, a country which seemed to play an important role in the confrontation between Islam and Christianity which was exacerbated during the second half of the fifteenth century. From a historiographic comparison, we can see that the "reconquest," presented by both sides as a recuperation of territory that had been torn away from a mythical empire, based on an equal degree of faith, was very simply a conquest. The Christian empire, the "Holy Empire," was no longer but an idealized notion, and the Turkish empire had long been dismembered. Transcendence, as Benedetto Croce pointed out, played a primordial role in the minds of the historians of the Middle Ages.<sup>15</sup> *Hispania*, as well as *Al Andalus* were more ideal models than they were ever stable territorial realities.

This land, disputed by both Moslems and Christians, was, however, also the home of another religious community, the Sephardic Jews, who had taken the name they had themselves given to Spain: *Sepharad*. Their establishment in the Peninsula was, for some of them, anterior to that of the Christians and Mohammedans, since it dated from before the Roman Empire. Their expulsion in 1492 was depicted in biblical tones by the chronicler Yosef Ha-Kohen, in an evocative book called *The Valley of Tears (Emeq Ha Bakha)*,<sup>16</sup> written slightly less than a century after the event. The author, born in Avignon of parents who originated from Cuenca (Spain), evokes the fall of Granada in the following terms: "Granada was under Arab control for seven hundred years; Ferdinand and Isabella, rulers of Spain, long laid siege to the city (...) it fell to them in 1492. The Jews who lived there constituted a booty and a prey..." (*op. cit.*, p. 116). This is a lesser known aspect of the fall of Granada than the woes which befell the Jews in the pillage. Ha-Kohen then recalls that the Jews of Christian Spain had allied themselves to the distinguished families of the kingdom until the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella, who instituted the Inquisition and even-

<sup>15</sup> Benedetto Croce, *Théorie et histoire de l'historiographie*, Geneva, 1968; *L'historiographie médiévale* (1925), p. 230-232.

<sup>16</sup> Yosef Ha-Kohen, *Emeq ha-Bakha (El Valle del Hanto)*, trans. by Pilar León Tello, Madrid-Barcelona, 1964.



## *Reconquest, Willaya, Diaspora*

tually exiled the Sephardim: "All the armies of the Lord (Yahwe), all those exiled from Jerusalem who were living in Spain, left this *land of curses*, in the fifth month of the year 5252, that is, 1492. They were dispersed to the four corners of the earth." (*op. cit.*, p. 117): Among those unfortunate victims of this modern diaspora, a man who was dropped on an island near the coasts of Provence sold his son to buy some bread for his agonizing father; but the old man died immediately thereafter, and, the author says, his son cried out: "Now Lord, do not delay: hasten to save us for it is in your name that we are massacred each day; we are considered as a flock to be sent to the slaughterhouse; hasten to our succour..." (*op. cit.*, p. 117). These passages from the history of Yosef Ha-Kohen diverge from his main source, Samuel Usque,<sup>17</sup> and seem to have been inspired by Ibn Verga. We can nevertheless observe how the diaspora of the Sephardim allowed for the rebirth of the eschatological hopes of European Jewry. As G. Scholem<sup>18</sup> pointed out, the association of the historical catastrophe with the belief in the imminence of the redemption, imposed a tone of pathos onto the Kabbala. We recall that already in the thirteenth century, a Jew of Saragossa, Abraham Abulafia, taking himself for the new Messiah, had asked the Pope to liberate God's People. Thus, the Catholic Kings seemed to appear no differently to the Jewish chronicler than as to the Arab historians, and in particular, the portrait of Queen Isabella constituted the keystone for the three incompatible providential visions of the history of Spain.

"She was a very courteous woman," wrote Hernando del Pulgar; "she had such an expression of serenity about her that even during her confinements she showed no sign of pain... She was very Catholic and devout, and in secret she gave alms." (*op. cit.*, chap. XXIV). Andrés Bernaldés went even further: "Who could recount the wonders of this most fortunate and very Christian queen, worthy of eternal praise?" (*op. cit.*, chap. CCII). According to Ha-Kohen, "It is upon her and her sovereign husband that the wrath of God fell: Yahwe is righteous! The Lord showed the jealousy he holds for His people and gave these

<sup>17</sup> Samuel Usque, *Consolaçam as tribulaçõs de Israel*, Ferrara, 1552.

<sup>18</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Les grands courants de la mystique juive*, Paris, 1968, chap. VII.

two rulers the just reward for their deeds. Their daughter died in Portugal; the eldest son of Ferdinand died of the plague and no male heir was left for their succession. Queen Isabella, the *accursed*, his wife, who dragged out her languishing life (...) is dead." (*op. cit.*, p. 120). The benediction of the Christian historians was echoed by the bitter condemnation of the Sephardi chronicler as that of the Moslem historian who, we recall, qualified the exemplary Ferdinand the Catholic, "Saint Ferdinand," as "the Despot." Behind these contrasting visions of the historical protagonists of Spain at the end of the fifteenth century lies, of course, the events themselves, but even more, an adherence to three transcendental visions of history which determined three antagonistic political forces. The old Alliance of the Jewish people with Yahwe was opposed to the new Alliance of the Christians of Spain with Jesus, a Judaic Messiah impugned by those who were still awaiting a new Davidic Messiah.<sup>19</sup> Alongside and against them rose the power of the conquering faith of Islam, tolerant in a dogmatic sort of way, open to infidels but anxious for military expansion.<sup>20</sup>

From the perspective of Christian providentialism, the discovery of the West Indies appeared to be "the most important event since the creation of the world, with the exception of the Incarnation of Our Lord," for Lopéz de Gómara (*op. cit.*). The riches of America were likened to a wonderful life-buoy thrown from Heaven to Christianity that was in danger of capsizing; the discoverer was mysteriously called Christopher, that is, "Carrier of Christ"... Perhaps he was a Sephardi, but this was never really proven. The common link of the three important events of 1492 was the faith, of the victors as of the victims, who accordingly arranged the facts as they saw fit. The Pope in Rome, the Commander of the believers in Damascus, and the Kohen of the Jews were the spiritual leaders of three religious communities which had cohabitated in Spain for nine centuries. This spiritual tripartition of the world, that Ibn Khaldun reminded us of, mysteriously corresponded to the vestments of the high priest and to the temple according to the Jewish historian Joseph

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Lafaye, "Le Messie dans le monde ibérique: aperçu," in *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez*, t. VII (1971), p. 163-185.

<sup>20</sup> *Una crónica anónima de Abd Al-Rahman III al-Nasir*, E. Levi-Provençal and E. García Gómez, eds., Madrid-Granada, 1950, (4), (22), (34).

(*Judaic Antiquities*)... In this respect, Spain was like a reduced model of the universe as it was then known (and it took over a century before America found a place in this model, since it constituted a *fourth* continent). Within the boundaries of its territory were superposed the history of three peoples and the conquering aspirations of two of them. Among these, at the end of the fifteenth century, one of them, dissatisfied with merely political and economic domination, sought to impose its faith as well. From that time on, *Sepharad* became the memory of a "land of curses," and *Al Andalus* the nostalgic image of a paradise lost; that was the price at which *Hispania*, Christian Spain, was, not restored (*restitua*), but wrested. The historian cannot allow himself to dream up history, but it is difficult to avoid imagining what would have happened if the three communities had continued to coexist on the Iberian peninsula, and what role a "triple Spain" could have played today: *Hispania-Sepharad-Al Andalus*. Beyond this utopic vision of things there are some difficult historical problems: Was the "new politics" of Ferdinand and Isabella an answer to some historical determinism, to a vital necessity for an emerging Spain after a long period of anarchy? Should we accuse the bureaucratic machine of Aragon?<sup>21</sup> Was the coexistence of the three communities of faith still viable, promising a great future, or was it condemned to disappear because of the political and military tensions between Christianity and Islam? Some indirect answers to these questions were advanced by Spanish literature in the century that followed. The fashion for Moorish novels; the nostalgic evocations of the Abencerages of Granada in poetry, novels, and in the theater<sup>22</sup>; the theme of "solitude" (*soledad*) as an expression of the loss of the Sephardim,<sup>23</sup> that we especially find in the picaresque novel; the condemnation by Cervantes of the expulsion of the Jews and Moors; all this sounds like a protest of the public conscience with respect to the "Reconquest" which, with the two expulsions, was in reality a double amputation for Spain.

<sup>21</sup> José Maria Font y Rius, "The Institutions of the Crown of Aragon in the First Half of the Fifteenth Century," in, *Spain in the Fifteenth Century*, p. 171-192.

<sup>22</sup> Maria S. Carrasco Urgiti, *El Moro de Granada en la literatura*, Madrid, 1956, Part I, *Origen y difusión del tema hasta 1700*, p. 19-90.

<sup>23</sup> Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, *Los judeoconversos en España y América*, Madrid, 1971, chap. X, p. 193-217.