

## *The Dialogue of Cultures in medieval Spain*

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It is an extraordinary pleasure to be here, in a place that has become more or less the official representative of the al-Andalus which has been much evoked over the last several days. I am grateful to be invited here not only to Morocco, but to Rabat in particular. The ties between Morocco and al-Andalus are long, and deep, and complex. They begin in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century, but have their pivotal moment when 'Abd al-Rahman, the sole survivor of the Abbasid massacre of the Umayyads in Damascus, took refuge here in the Maghreb, in Morocco, because his mother was a Berber. When he got here he actually realized that all of the really exciting things were, for the moment at least, not in Morocco but rather in Cordoba. So he proceeded there, and that is the beginning of course of the true history of al-Andalus, which I will not recount here, but which is heard in the echoes of a room like this, which, for someone like me, is a room very resonant of Andalucía in every way. The direct ties with Morocco go to the very end just as they began at the very beginning, because in the 1600s, when the Moriscos, the forcibly-converted Muslims, were expelled from Spain, they came here in great numbers and brought their influences everywhere here. So it is a relationship that went back and forth.

Even though Al-Andalus has been much referred-to and cited and is symbolic of many things for many people, a great deal of its history is not actually very well known, and not known in details, but rather in a very rough pictures, and some simple ideas of what it was about are in fact largely not only incorrect but problematic. The ideas that this

was a long history of conquest and reconquest, for example, and that the contests were always between the Christians and the Muslims are both incorrect. The history is infinitely more complex sometimes contradictory and far more interesting than that. Arabic was the language spoken by Muslims most of whom were converts among the indigenous people of the peninsula. Arabic was also the language of Jews who had their "Golden Age" there and also, this least known of all, Arabic was the language of many Christians. And tolerance was created as a cultural and a political institution by the wonderful Umayyads who had an extraordinary and eclectic culture, and whose politics and policies were later inherited and emulated by many others including the Castilian Christians for a long period of time.

Twelfth-century Toledo, a Christian city, became the world capital of translation. And the dialogues which were translated and took place there made it an extraordinary and valuable culture; it was a culture of dialogue and of dozens of different kinds of dialogues. The truth is that most of the most important dialogues took place easily and informally everyday because in fact there was a multilingual society and everyone spoke Arabic and everyone also spoke some version of Romance. We did not have monolingual speakers. What was shared among the three religions – and this why it worked – was not only literally the languages, but the languages of everything else: the languages of music; of architecture; significantly, of philosophy; and of architecture: Christians built in the languages of the architecture that you see here, as did the Jews. Both of them understood that the architecture of the Muslims was also something that they could and should participate in. And they did. So as a result the very texture of everything that is Andalusian is almost always a dialogue of some sort.

Even if you look at the horseshoe arches along the back of this room, they too are part of the great Umayyad dialogue with the past: When the Umayyads arrived in the Iberian peninsula they took a great

deal of what they saw in the landscape around them which they made into their home. They saw the horseshoe arches on Visigothic churches and they made them Islamic, made them their own; and then they were also used afterwards both in Jewish synagogues as well as in Christian churches in Spain.

Now, in fact, there is also a long tradition of actual dialogues that come from medieval Spain written by many different people over a long period of time, many of them were written by converts and almost all of them were written as for purposes of conversion. I believe that the wonderful Ramon Llull was mentioned earlier in this conference, and the truth is that Llull, who wrote in Arabic and translated himself into Catalán (and thus created the Catalán vernacular as a written language) was actually the great theoretician of conversion. It is very interesting, and among the many paradoxes of medieval Spain, that the great dialogues that were written between parties of the three religions, and sometimes with a philosopher as well, yet they were written for conversion purposes. They in fact were extremely useful in terms of conveying – sometimes inadvertently – information about the other religions.

The most important kind of dialogue however, were the two dialogues implicit and explicit in the great translation movements of medieval Spain. The first thing that needs to be said is that in Umayyad Cordoba, i.e., until well into the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, there was no need for translations out of Arabic. Every educated person of course read and wrote Arabic, and the great libraries of Cordoba were based on the extraordinary work of translation done by the Abbasids in Baghdad. But after the end of the Umayyad period, there arose in Christian Toledo in the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century the first of two stages of translation which would change the face of Europe. The first stage is a stage during which philosophy and science were translated from Arabic into Latin; this activity lasted for nearly 150 years and

comprised not only translation of the Arabic library as it was known in Cordoba, but also the new work that was written during the 12<sup>th</sup> century in Spain, most importantly the great Aristotelian commentaries of that period written by the great Cordobans ibn Rushd (Averroes) and ibn Maymun (Maimonides). These works were translated very soon after they were written, and by the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Paris was in uproar because all of a sudden Aristotle was being taught there. The second translation movement followed immediately on the first. It is also in Toledo and it is a remarkable revolution in the history of translation at that time: the movement to translate – and not just the works of science and philosophy which had been the obvious things to translate, but also the literature – out of Arabic and into the vernacular, Castilian, which was a revolutionary thing.

The dialogues involved here are very profound and include in their own histories the fact that these translations at these various schools of translation were all done by groups of two or three translators literally talking and working together; it was never done alone. It was always done in teams and they were teams that were groups of Muslims, Jews, Christians working together. The translation movement encouraged, in fact provoked, the dialogue that has already been mentioned a number of times here, the internal dialogue between each of the three monotheistic religions and the Aristotelian tradition. I think we have to understand how critical this chapter is, and the very important role al-Andalus plays in this, not only because it produced figures of such magnitude and such importance in this area as Ibn Rushd and Maimonides but because it also provoked in men the necessity to have the same confrontation between rational thought and monotheism within the Christian tradition, which they had not previously had to have.

I'd like to finish by mentioning two important literary dialogues, although the truth is that Andalusian literature is also full of many

different kinds of dialogues. But two in particular are worth noting. First, in dialogue with Arabic poetry in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Hebrew reinvents itself in al-Andalus. The fully Arabized Jews were very much a part of the Arabic literary tradition, took it upon themselves to reinvent Hebrew poetry, so that like Arabic it, too, could have a vernacular as well as a liturgical function. And for 100 years, the great period of new Hebrew poetry is defined in this extraordinary productive dialogue among native Arabic speakers, who were Jews, who also knew biblical Hebrew, who wanted there to be a version of Hebrew that was a vehicle to all of the non-liturgical functions. It is on these pillars and out of this dialogue that the poetic golden age of Hebrew poetry is born. The second example is in many ways the most important one and is the one relevant literary form that was invented in Al-Andalus; that is the Muwashshaha a form that of course survives in the Maghreb and in Morocco. It is a form that is explicitly a dialogue, originally between the classical and the vernacular language, between Arabic and Romance, mostly, sometimes the dialogue between fusha and vernacular Arabic. It is poetry of a very complex kind, a dialogue between people who were not listening to each other, love poetry built on the back and forth between men and women, between the lover and the beloved, between Arabic and Romance, between the formal and the informal style, between all sorts of contradictions that are or were in fact necessary for the whole to work.

This is a culture that in many ways is defined by this form: not only a dialogue but a dialogue of contradictions which need each other in order to be a whole. For me this is a culture, and certainly a poetry that exemplify what the great American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald once said was a first rate intelligence. Fitzgerald said "the measure of a first rate mind is the ability to hold two contrary ideas at the same time." And that is what Al-Andalus represented.