

Islam and Andalusian Nationalism: Historical Interpretations for Independence

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The Foro Aben Humeya—Liberación Andaluza (Aben Humeya—Andalusian Liberation Forum) proudly declares in six languages on its home web page that “Andalucía no es España – Andalusia is not Spain.” In its “Breve historia de Andalucía” (“Brief History of Andalusia”), the same group also states that “Andalucía es un país con una superficie total de más de 87 mil kilómetros cuadrados y cuenta con una población de aproximadamente 7 millones de habitantes, encontrándose ubicada en la zona más meridional de la Península Ibérica.”¹ These comments are surprising because compared to the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia, Andalusia is not widely known as a region that actively pursues independence from Madrid. Nevertheless, some relatively small political organizations like Liberación Andaluza have developed platforms based on the creation of a free Andalusian nation. In this paper, I explore the relationship between extreme Andalusian nationalism and Islam. In particular, I evaluate the way separatists have interpreted the history of Muslim intervention in the Iberian Peninsula to support their view that Andalusia and Spain are distinct entities. Although these historical interpretations effectively combat some outdated notions about Al-Andalus, their clear political motivations make them unreliable guides to the complex history of the Iberian Peninsula in the Middle Ages.

Ali Kettani, founder of the Yama’a Islámica de Al-Andalus (Islamic Society of Andalusia), emphasized the link between Islam and Andalusian nationalism when he stated in a 1996 interview that “[y]o veo el nacionalismo andaluz como una experiencia cultural histórica común: primero, como experiencia del Islam” (cited in Escudero).² Historically, this relationship traces its origins to Spain’s 1978 constitution. Written after Francisco Franco’s death in 1975, this document abolished Catholicism as Spain’s state religion, granted Spaniards considerable religious freedom, and ceded new rights to regional governments previously hostile to Franco’s uncompromising central state (Williams 248). In Andalusia, approval of the new constitution inevitably led to the formation of special interest groups devoted on the one hand to protecting the rights of native Muslims and Islamic immigrants and on the other to winning increased regional autonomy or even complete independence. Not surprisingly, the interests of these organizations often coincided. In particular, Andalusian nationalists often turned to Islam’s historical presence in the southern part of the Iberian Peninsula to elaborate theories about a unique Andalusian identity. Bernabé López García and Ana I. Planet note in their article “Islam in Spain” that these theorists “became influenced by Islam and the Islamic dimension of the whole concept of Al-Andalus” (161). Consequently, it was easy for them to convert to Islam as part of their program to reclaim what they saw as their true cultural heritage. López García and Planet confirm that for as many as five thousand non-Muslim nationalists, “the transition from a specific Andalusian identity to an Islamic faith and identity was achieved without much difficulty” (161). The conversion of Andalusian separatists to Islam meant that by the end

¹ “Andalusia is a country with a land area of more than 87 thousand square kilometers and with a population of approximately seven million inhabitants. It is located in the southernmost region of the Iberian Peninsula.” All translations are my own.

² “I see Andalusian nationalism as a common cultural and historic experience: first, as the experience of Islam.”

of the 1980s, the most radical nationalist organizations doubled as special interest groups for Muslims.

Liberación Andaluza is an excellent example of a political association with both separatist and pro-Islamic tendencies in contemporary Andalusia. According to its home web page, this group is an “organización política que aspira, desde el acatamiento de la legislación vigente y la negación de la violencia como método político, [a] la reconstrucción nacional de Andalucía, a su integridad territorial y [a] la independencia, negando por tanto, la supuesta nacionalidad española, a la que estamos obligados a pertenecer.”³ It becomes apparent only after further investigation of the web site’s links that Liberación Andaluza also has close ties to Andalusian Muslim associations. For instance, the page entitled “¿Quiénes somos?” (“Who Are We?”) explains that the organization shared a central office with one of its founding members, Yama’a Islámica de Al-Andalus, until 1990. Although the two groups have since separated and Liberación Andaluza now claims that it is not an Islamic party, it does admit that “[h]istóricamente, fuimos y somos mayoría los militantes que hemos asumido el Islam como proyecto y creencia personal.”⁴ This disclosure refers directly to the important role played by Muslim converts in the organization. The fact that Liberación Andaluza shares a web site with Foro Aben Humeya, a cultural group dedicated to the reinterpretation of Andalusia’s Islamic past, is also indicative of its strong affiliation with Andalusia’s Muslim population.

Separatist organizations like Liberación Andaluza contend that Islam’s prolonged presence in the southern part of the Iberian Peninsula distinguishes Andalusia from the rest of Spain and justifies the foundation of a sovereign Andalusian state. In order to develop their historical arguments, these groups have repeatedly turned to the works of the nationalist politician Blas Infante Pérez de Vargas (1885-1936). Named the “Father of the Andalusian Fatherland” in the preamble to Andalusia’s 1983 autonomy statute, Blas Infante lobbied for Andalusian independence during the Second Spanish Republic (1931-1936), a period when Spain’s central administration granted extensive rights to regional governments. In an online article entitled “El resurgir de Al-Andalus: Blas Infante—Síntesis del ideal andaluz” (“The Renaissance of Al-Andalus: Blas Infante—Synthesis of the Andalusian Ideal”), Manuel Ruiz Romero explains that a 1924 visit to Morocco convinced Blas Infante that the best way for Andalusia to achieve home rule would be to emphasize its Islamic past. Thus, the politician wrote several interpretations of Andalusian history replete with “reflexiones y versos en lengua árabe, así como de etimología musulmana.”⁵ In the following paragraphs, I use Ruiz Romero’s brief review of Blas Infante’s historical thought, along with Ali Manzano’s more detailed article “Fundamentos de Andalucía en la obra de Blas Infante” (“Foundations of Andalusia in the Writings of Blas Infante”), to analyze the way Blas Infante employed historical interpretation to legitimate his claim for Andalusian independence.

Ruiz Romero writes in his introduction to Blas Infante’s historical works that “[e]l ideal político de Blas Infante...supone la recuperación de la memoria histórica de Al-Andalus, el estudio de las implicaciones actuales que la impronta de la cultura musulmana nos legó, y el rechazo a toda teoría centralista, basada en una hegemonía ideológica de lo cristiano que impone, menosprecia y rechaza. En una palabra: el falseamiento de la historia y la cultura de un pueblo para su mejor sometimiento.”⁶ This passage suggests that Blas Infante

³ a “political organization that, while respecting current legislation and rejecting violence as a political instrument, works for the national reconstruction, territorial integrity and independence of Andalusia, thereby rejecting the Spanish state to which we are forced to belong.”

⁴ “historically, we have adopted Islam as a project and personal belief, and most of us continue to do so today.”

⁵ “observations and verses in Arabic or with Arabic origins.”

⁶ “Blas Infante’s political ideal...presupposes the recuperation of the historical memory of Al-Andalus, the study of the present-day implications of the heritage left us by Muslim culture, and the rejection of all centralist theories

distinguished between conflicting interpretations of Andalusian history. On the one hand, the centralist Catholic version rejects Andalusia's distinct historical identity and incorporates the region's history into the larger story of the development of a united Christian Spain. On the other hand, the regionalist version reconstructs Andalusia's unique cultural heritage and emphasizes its historical separation from the northern and central parts of the Iberian Peninsula. Evidently, these interpretations offer widely varying accounts of the Islamic intervention in Al-Andalus.

According to Manzano, the centralist view of Spanish history identified by Blas Infante "tiene como objetivo...fortalecer la idea de la unidad de España, fundamentada en un supuesto estado visigodo...en cuyo seno ya existía esa unidad político-religiosa que la reconquista vino a reponer."⁷ This interpretation maintains that the Visigoths established a unified Catholic state in the Iberian Peninsula prior to the Muslim conquest and that this kingdom already exemplified the main characteristics of modern Spain. Thus, the conquest in 711 was a brutal fight between "cristianos indígenas y supuestos árabes extranjeros."⁸ The struggle led to a long period of foreign rule during which Muslims inhibited Catholic Spain's logical course of development. Finally, the Reconquest ousted the foreigners and revived the autochthonous Catholic state.

Clearly, a Catholic regime could employ this account of Spanish history to justify its hostility against Andalusian regional nationalists who consider Islam an important part of their identity. Indeed, Spanish governments dating from the reign of the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella (1469-1516) to the Franco dictatorship (1939-1975) have used historical evidence to support a homogenous Catholic state. Thus, Blas Infante was right to attack several important flaws in the centralist historical interpretation. Manzano notes, for example, that Blas Infante called the supposed continuity of the Catholic state between the Visigoths and the Christians of the Reconquest a myth. Many people who fought in the Reconquest were at least as "foreign" as the Muslims themselves. In particular, numerous Frenchmen entered the Iberian Peninsula to repopulate the land abandoned by both Christians and Muslims in central Castile. According to Manzano, Blas Infante considered it ridiculous to "identificar a estos franceses que han constituido el reino de Castilla en el siglo XI con...la administración visigoda en el siglo VIII."⁹

Luckily, critics like Blas Infante who have challenged centralist interpretations of Spanish history have helped to discredit these historical accounts in present-day Spain. Since Franco's death, democratic Spain has taken important steps towards recognizing Islam's important contribution to the country's diverse history. Escudero notes that the 1992 Acuerdo de Cooperación (Agreement for Cooperation) between the Comisión Islámica de España (Islamic Commission of Spain) and the Spanish state explicitly recognizes Islam's "'notorio y secular arraigo' en España y su 'relevante importancia en la formación de la identidad española.'"¹⁰ For this reason, it is surprising that contemporary Andalusian nationalists who employ Blas Infante's historical interpretations to legitimate their separatist agendas claim that the Spanish government continues to use centralist historical views to repress Andalusia's regional interests. Nevertheless, Liberación Andaluza does indeed state on its home web page that "[i]nventaron el mito de la invasión árabe, en el 711, y sólo desde el odio se puede justificar el porqué no se preocuparon, ni antes ni ahora, si ese mito

based on the hegemony of self-imposing, insulting Christian ideologies. In short, [these Christian ideologies represent] the falsification of the history and culture of a people [the Andalusians] to better subjugate that nation."

⁷ "attempts to strengthen the idea of the unity of Spain, based on a supposed Visigothic state in which already existed the political and religious unity later revived by the Reconquest."

⁸ "indigenous Christians and so-called Arab foreigners."

⁹ "to identify these Frenchmen who formed the kingdom of Castile in the eleventh century with...the Visigothic administration in the eighth century."

¹⁰ "'well-known, age-old roots' in Spain and its 'relative importance in the formation of the Spanish identity.'"

es, social y cronológicamente posible.”¹¹ Evidently, Andalusian separatist organizations like Liberación Andaluza rely on outmoded centralist interpretations of Spanish history to justify their anger over Spain’s supposed mistreatment of Andalusia. Without these historical views, nationalists would have no way to prove their claim that Spain continues to subjugate Andalusia today and, consequently, would be unable to legitimate their call for an independent Andalusian nation.

Blas Infante’s regionalist version of Andalusian history refutes and even inverts the centralist interpretation’s account of Islam’s intervention in Al-Andalus. Manzano explains that Blas Infante’s historical views part from the premise that the earliest pre-Roman inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula already shared a unique “ser andaluz.”¹² Thus, “[l]a historia andaluza...tiene una antigüedad de un millón de años.”¹³ Later, the Phoenecians, Carthaginians, Romans and especially the Visigoths invaded Andalusia and imposed their regimes on the region’s native tribes. Nevertheless, the Andalusian spirit lived on. Manzano writes that for Blas Infante, “[l]as sucesivas invasiones que sufre Andalucía suponen una simple influencia política, que marca los hechos externos...pero que no acaba con los hechos interiores que definen una cultura.”¹⁴ By the early eighth century, the latent Andalusian identity began to rebel against the increasingly intolerable Visigothic rule. In particular, the Andalusians found in the North African Muslims a suitable partner to overthrow the tyrannical Germanic invaders. Manzano explains that “[l]a conquista se produce—según Infante—por la ayuda que estos árabes prestan a los andaluces en su lucha contra el ‘régimen feudalista germano.’”¹⁵ In other words, “no hubo invasión”: there was no Muslim conquest. The Muslims entered the Iberian Peninsula not to overthrow a unified Spanish state, but to liberate the enslaved Andalusians. Subsequently, the union between Islam and the ancient Andalusian character led to “el afloramiento de una cultura que será—en palabras de Infante—‘foco cultural.’”¹⁶ Since the Muslims never conquered Andalusia, Blas Infante reasons that the so-called Reconquest of Spain was actually an invasion aimed at imposing Catholicism on the Andalusians, who by then had converted to Islam. Manzano concludes with Blas Infante that “[d]esde aquí hasta nuestros días, [hay] toda una historia de ocultación del ‘genio’ andaluz tras la aparente asimilación de la cultura impuesta.”¹⁷

Evidently, Blas Infante’s interpretation of Andalusian history, like the opposing centralist version, depends less on an unbiased examination of historical evidence than a desire to legitimate a predetermined political program. Consequently, numerous flaws undermine Blas Infante’s arguments. For instance, just as the centralists postulate an erroneous continuity between the Visigoths and the Catholics of the Reconquest, Blas Infante mistakenly identifies a single Andalusian character present in both the earliest inhabitants of the southern part of the Iberian Peninsula and later Hispano-Muslims. Since the concept of Andalusia came into being only when the Muslims entered the Iberian Peninsula and named it Al-Andalus after the Vandals, this idea about an ancient, stable Andalusian identity is entirely anachronistic (Williams 52). Additionally, Blas Infante fails to consider that during the eighth through eleventh centuries, Al-Andalus comprised most of

¹¹ “they invented the myth of the Arab invasion in 711 and only envy and hate can explain why they have not asked themselves, neither then nor now, if this myth is socially or chronologically possible.”

¹² “Andalusian essence or identity.”

¹³ “Andalusian history...is a million years old.”

¹⁴ “the successive invasions suffered by Andalusia constituted a simple political influence which characterized the superficial [historical] facts...but which did not eliminate the more profound facts that define a culture.”

¹⁵ “according to Blas Infante, the help lent by the Arabs to the Andalusians in their fight against the ‘feudalist German regimen’ led to the conquest.”

¹⁶ “motivate a cultural blossoming that was—to use Infante’s terms—a ‘cultural beacon.’”

¹⁷ “from then until today, [there is] an entire history of suppression of the Andalusian ‘essence’ and apparent assimilation of the hegemonic culture.”

the Iberian Peninsula (Williams 61). Castilian cities like Toledo have just as much Islamic architecture and history as other towns in the south. Thus, Muslim influences are not exclusive to contemporary Andalusia and do not provide an adequate basis for the region's separation from the rest of Spain. Finally, Blas Infante's arguments conveniently overlook the diverse groups whose varied identities have all contributed to the development of modern Andalusia. For instance, Blas Infante does not acknowledge the presence of Jews and Christians under Muslim rule in Al-Andalus. Evidently, he must sacrifice this diversity in order to promote a single Andalusian identity clearly opposed to what he considers Spain's distinct Catholic character.

In spite of the problems that plague Blas Infante's version of Andalusia's past, separatist groups have readily adopted his regionalist history to support their claims for Andalusian independence. In fact, the articles by Ruiz Romero and Manzano that I have used to summarize Blas Infante's historical thought appear on [Web Islam](#), a web site whose postings betray a clear tendency to promote Andalusian nationalism. The web pages of both Yama'a Islámica de Al-Andalus and Liberación Andaluza also contain articles about Blas Infante and links to his texts. Furthermore, Liberación Andaluza's "Breve historia de Andalucía" coincides on numerous points with Blas Infante's vision of Andalusian history. The subtitles of each section of this history—"La identidad andaluza en la prehistoria," "Dominación visigoda y proceso emancipador andaluz" and "Desde la conquista castellana hasta nuestros días"¹⁸—correspond to Blas Infante's ideas about an ancient Andalusian identity, the Muslim liberation of the Andalusians and the Catholic conquest of Al-Andalus. Clearly, Blas Infante's historical work is still valuable for Andalusian separatists today.

While extremist nationalists will undoubtedly continue to argue for Andalusian sovereignty for decades to come, Spain's increasingly better understanding of its Islamic past and greater acceptance of present-day Muslims will likely thwart a separatist success. Craig Whitlock's online article "A 'Chunnel' for Spain and Morocco" states that Spanish officials recently took steps to plan an underwater tunnel beneath the Strait of Gibraltar to connect Spain with Africa. This action exemplifies democratic Spain's willingness to strengthen its relations with a predominately Muslim country. Evidently, Andalusian separatists can no longer argue that Spain's Catholic state oppresses Andalusia's distinct Islamic character. In my opinion, these Andalusians should take pride in the achievements of Al-Andalus and in the unique Muslim society that flourished in the Iberian Peninsula for more than seven centuries. At the same time, they should recognize a wide variety of other historical influences that have both made Andalusia unique and identified the region with the rest of Spain. Luckily, the Andalusians whom I've met equally acknowledge their regional and national identities.

¹⁸ "Andalusian Identity Before the Dawn of History," "Visigothic Domination and the Process of Andalusian Emancipation" and "From the Castilian Conquest until Today."

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