

February 26th

CONVIVENCIA, PART 1

How did Spain and Portugal become Muslim Andalusia then Christian again? And how did that tremendously affect the Americas and our world? It is the story of Convivencia, “mingling” of the faiths in the middle ages. Iberia was conquered quickly by Berber Muslims in 711. The people there were Christians, part of a West Goth kingdom. Original inhabitants were part Basque, part Celts, part of a people that were related to Romans and Etruscans. All were dark-haired and the Celts were tall, but the Goths are the southern band of Swedes that entered the Roman Empire in the 400s. The Muslims were just 10% of their conquered kingdom, but with time Muslim held territory became increasingly Islamic – 10% of population in 816, 45% in 913, 70% in 1010, 80% in 1105 and 90% in 1200. Muslims gained “converts” by persecution and taxation and at times terrorism. Andalusian peace and co-existence was always tense. The easy way out for Christians was to become Muslim.

Iberia consists of ranges of mountains, 4000 – 7000 feet high, surrounding a high plateau. The plateau is dry, 18 – 25” rain per year and good for grazing but not for most agriculture. In the northwest are the Asturia Mountains, the Cordilleras in the north, Pyrenees in the east, and Morenas in the south. Hills adjoin Portugal in the west. The South is full of beautiful valleys of olives, grapes, and citrus fruit growing. Muslim conquerors headquartered here. They felt like they were in paradise and it quelled their attempt to expand into Europe. They had cavalry that rode in confusing turns and swung curved swords that were very effective against soldiers of little armor. But at Tours (Poitiers, 732) in central France, they met their match with Franks under Charles Martel who used a throwing ax. It could be thrown from as much as 20 yards and inflict a deep wound. Beaten back, they tried again in the next decade but the Franks under Pepin ran them out again in 759.

At death, Mohammad turned over his leadership in 632 to his friend Abu Bekr as Khalifa “representative” (of God). Ali, a young cousin, and Mohammad’s surviving uncle, Abbas, were disappointed in this choice and this disagreement led to the Sunni/Shia split that still exists to this day. Mohammad probably had little desire to conquer beyond Arabia but Abu Bekr found a brilliant Arab general, Khalid. When they heard some Syrian Arabs were being mistreated by Byzantium, they rushed to the rescue, defeated the Romans and then the Persian Sassanid Empire. The Arabs were motivated by desire for arable land and poured into the area. Abu Bekr lived only 2 years, to 634, and a new Caliph was appointed, Omar. Khalid found himself demoted but under the service to Abu Obeida and conquered Egypt in 641. Omar, like Mohammad, like Abu Bekr, was puritanical and almost monastic, but the generals loved their newfound wealth. Omar was assassinated in 644, but as he died, appointed six men to choose a successor. They wound up choosing Othman, a member of the Umayyad clan, once Mohammad’s nemesis. The Umayyads lorded it over others, a rebellion ensued, and Othman was assassinated. The leaders chose Ali. All this led to a war between Mohammad’s relatives and his companions. Muawiya, a Quraish (rich tribe) man of the world who put little stock in Mohammad’s teaching, ran Ali out of Medina to Kufa north in Mesopotamia and killed him in 661. On this site the Shiite Muslims have raised the Golden Mosque of Kufa, Iraq to their hero. Shiite pilgrimages there are as important as to Mecca itself. Thereupon the Umayyads established their capital in Damascus.

What does this have to do with Spain? We're getting there! In 711 Berber converts from Morocco conquered Iberia. In 750, the former followers of Abbas (Abbasids) led a successful coup against the Umayyads in Damascus. A certain Abd er Rahman and his two small sons fled. The 2-year old clung to his back as he swam across a river, but the 6-year old couldn't keep up and was killed by pursuing Abbasids. Rahman escaped to Andalusian Spain, gathered some followers and conquered Q'doba (Cordoba). As the last Umayyad, his relatives had him declare himself Caliph. In 756, the Berbers were confused about who was Caliph and worried about losing their conquest. Rahman played it smart. In order not to disrupt commerce or cause Christians to rebel, he granted religious freedom to Christians and Jews. He undertook civic works to make run-down Cordoba into a wonderful city. Meanwhile it was so far from Damascus, somewhat dry, it was considered a backwater and not given much attention. Hence Andalusia became a separate state.

Some things to note: Berbers, not Arabs had been the conquerers. Yet among the conquerors there was a lot of distrust in this bloody new religion of fellow Muslims. Many early leaders were not the least interested in religion, but power. Autocratic rule and a faith where even minor infractions could lead to loss of limbs or heads, meant that not only Muslims but also Christians played it close to the chest. It continues today where the Muslim nations are the world's least entrepreneurial and innovative. Greeks wrote everything down and Hebrews could all read, but Muslims were mostly illiterate and saw little use for writing, instead loving poetry. Thus when the modern numbering system arrived from India around 1100, Islam was the conduit, not the origin.

Jews loved being able to assume positions of influence in Rahman's Cordoba. Christians were allowed to continue churches, but sharing the faith was punishable by death. No new churches could be built, and church buildings were converted at will to mosques.

Were there any Christians who held out? There was one. Pelayo (Pelagius in Latin) who was a noble in northern Asturia. He hid with a band of followers while Christian bishops begged him to comply with the rulers. (No doubt worrying about their own fate, if he didn't.) But Pelayo avoided capture until the Muslims gave up. His tiny territory in extreme NW Spain became Leon. Eventually, there sprung up other Christian states – Castile, Navarre, and Aragon in the Cordilleras and Pyrenees. However, 800 AD, almost all of Iberia was held by Muslims.

Nest week, The Christian Comeback.