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THE "PURIFICATION" OF MEDIEVAL SPAIN

Inquisition, Expulsion, and the Price of Intolerance

> [W]e are informed by the inquisitors and many other people, religious, churchmen, and laymen, of the great harm suffered by Christians from the contact, intercourse and communication which they have with Jews, who always attempt in various ways to seduce faithful Christians from our Holy Catholic Faith. . . . [We] decree that all Jews male and female depart our kingdoms and never return. . . . And if they do not observe this and are found guilty of remaining in these realms or returning to them, they will incur the death penalty.
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> —Expulsion Decree, March 1492

On October 19, 1469, in a private ceremony shrouded in secrecy and intrigue, the seventeen-year-old heir to the crown of Aragon married the eighteen-year-old heiress of Castile. From the union of Ferdinand and Isabella, who had first met just four days earlier, a unified Spain would ascend to great heights of glory. At the time of the wedding, and for much of

the preceding two hundred years, Spain was one of the most religiously diverse societies in Christian Europe. Ferdinand himself had Jewish ancestors on his mother's side.[1] Twenty-three years later, as Jewish-funded Spanish ships reached the shores of America, Ferdinand and Isabella would famously order the expulsion of Spain's Jews. Spain's turn to increasingly virulent intolerance—not just against Jews, but against converted Jews, Muslims, converted Muslims, Protestants, and eventually even Jesuits—fatally undermined its rise to power, destroying any chance for world domination.

Unlike any of its northern European neighbors, medieval Spain had a large Muslim minority, the result of centuries of earlier Islamic rule. In Aragon, some 35 percent of the total population of roughly 200,000 were Mudejars, the term for Muslims living in Christian lands. In some rural areas, Muslims were actually a majority. Spain was also home to the overwhelming majority of Christian Europe's Jews, who had been expelled at various points from England (1290) and France (1306, 1322, and 1394) and massacred repeatedly in Germany (1298, 1336–38, and 1348). As a result of this unusual coexistence of religious communities, Spaniards were worldlier about non-Christians than many of their fellow Europeans. "No Iberian writer fantasized, as the German Wolfram von Eschenbach did, that the offspring of a Christian-Muslim couple would be mottled white and black; they knew better."[2]

Of course, Spanish tolerance should not be overstated or confused with the "respect for difference" that tolerance implies in the twenty-first century. Jews and Muslims were often confined to separate quarters and required to wear special identifying emblems. Intermarriage with Christians was punishable by imprisonment, torture, or even execution. Although there was no fear of mottled offspring, Muslim women caught fornicating with Christian males were sometimes stripped naked and whipped in the streets. Popular anti-Semitism, frequently fomented by the clergy, periodically erupted in violence and waves of forced conversions. The latter created a significant class of so-called *conversos* (converted Jews), who would then be suspected—often correctly—of secretly contin-

uing to practice Judaism. The spasms of anti-Semitic violence could be shockingly brutal. In June of 1391, Jews were massacred in Seville; the pogrom quickly spread to Córdoba, Toledo, Valencia, and Barcelona, resulting in mass throat-slitting and thousands of conversions.[3]

But once again, what matters is *relative* tolerance, and despite such bursts of horrific violence, Spain was for most of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the best place—sometimes the only place—for non-Christians to live and prosper in western Europe. Many of Spain's Muslims benefited from special treaties, granting them the right to practice their own religion and to be governed by their own laws. In places like Valencia, Mudejars lived largely autonomously, interacting only with other Muslims and speaking only Arabic. In other locales, Muslims were much more integrated into Christian society. In Aragon and Catalonia, for example, Muslims and Christians lived side by side, buying each other's goods and services. Mudejars came to dominate certain local industries, most prominently the building trades.[4]

The situation of the Jews was quite different. Whereas the great majority of Mudejars were agricultural laborers—most of the Muslim elite having emigrated to Islamic lands—Spanish Jews were principally urban and far more acculturated. All of Spain's Jews spoke a form of Spanish, typically in addition to Hebrew and Arabic. While most Muslims were vassals of feudal and ecclesiastical lords, Spain's Jews were under the immediate control and protection of the king, paying taxes directly to the royal treasury.

Jews in Spain participated in a striking range of economic activities. Jewish men were cobblers, grocers, tailors, shopkeepers, blacksmiths, silversmiths, butchers, chemists, beekeepers, dyers, and jewelers. Their clientele included many Christians and Muslims. Jewish women were weavers, spinners, and midwives. Some Jews were major sheepherders. Others were landowners, leasing property from small farms to large estates to great vineyards and orchards.

Though most Spanish Jews were, like most Spanish Christians, of modest means, a disproportionate number occupied positions of

respect and influence, and a few rose to astonishing heights of wealth and power. Jews were among Spain's most celebrated court astronomers, philosophers, cartographers, and doctors. A Jewish physician attended every Castilian king of the fifteenth century. Jewish tax collectors were common throughout the country, and Jewish merchants were important in Spain's import-export trade. The wealthiest Jews were royal treasurers and financiers, advising, bankrolling, and even (as *conversos*) intermarrying with Spanish royalty and nobility. Jewish families in Castile were apparently instrumental in arranging Isabella's marriage to a prince with Jewish ancestry. During the first few decades of Ferdinand and Isabella's rule, the inner court circle included not only *conversos* but a number of practicing Jews, including Abraham Senior, the treasurer of the Santa Hermandad (the centralized militia) and one of the most powerful men in Spain.[5]

The benefits Spain reaped from its relative tolerance were vital to its territorial expansion and imperial rise. Besides the intangible rewards of cultural and intellectual invigoration, Spain gained two essential advantages from its non-Christian populations: manpower and money.

When the Spanish kings reconquered Muslim-held lands, they initially followed the same successful strategy pursued by Achaemenid Persia or ancient Rome: They allowed these communities to maintain their own customs, to practice their own faith, and in some cases to govern themselves. The immediate result was a considerable increase in the population under Spanish rule. For example, the crown of Aragon doubled in size through military conquest in the thirteenth century. By tolerating the Muslims who already lived there rather than attempting to expel or exterminate them, Spain was able both to secure its conquest and to obtain the labor it needed to farm the fertile soils of southern Spain. Indeed, the need for agricultural labor was a chief reason the Spanish kings entered into treaties with their conquered Muslim communities, allowing the latter to practice Islam.

At the same time, by opening itself to Jews, however grudgingly, medieval Spain reaped enormous financial gains. The Jews of

this period had access to one of the most extensive commercial, trading, and lending networks in the world. They dominated the global diamond industry and were major players in the early development of international finance. From the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, Jews served as treasurers and revenue collectors for an astonishing number of Spanish kings, noble houses, bishops and archbishops—even cathedral chapters. Jewish money lending was critical to sustaining the royal fisc, both in the form of direct loans to the crown and as a major source of tax revenue. (In return for the privilege of lending at interest, all Jewish loans were taxed by the king.)

An example of the indispensability of Jewish financiers can be seen in the fourteenth-century civil war between King Peter "the Cruel" of Castile and his bastard half brother Henry of Trastámara. Peter's chief treasurer was the powerful Jewish financier Samuel Halevi, who built the stunning synagogue in Toledo that still stands today. As part of his strategy for usurping Peter, Henry painted his bid for the throne as a Christian crusade against the "evil presence" of Jewish financiers and tax collectors in the royal court. But after defeating Peter, Henry too found he could not do without Jewish capital and financial expertise; his chief royal financial officer would turn out to be a Jew, as would his private physician. A century later, it would be Jewish bankers' money that financed Spain's initial expeditions to the New World.[6]

INQUISITION AND INTOLERANCE

In 1478 the Spanish Inquisition was founded by papal bull. Thus ended the era of Spanish relative tolerance.

A church institution led by the Dominican order and vested with draconian powers, the Inquisition was charged with purifying the country of heretics. Interestingly, "heretics" referred not to openly practicing Jews or Muslims but rather to false Christians. Starting in 1480 the Inquisition began hunting down, trying, and often torturing and executing *conversos* who despite their professed Christianity were universally suspected of secretly practicing

Judaism. Soon, however, Spain would turn to the business of eliminating every Jew and every Muslim from its territory.

In 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella issued their famous decree giving Jews the choice either to convert to Catholicism or to leave Spain within four months. According to one estimate, 200,000 Jews left Spain, roughly 120,000 of them going to Portugal and the rest to Italy and the Ottoman lands. In 1502, the Muslims of Castile were ordered to convert or emigrate. Almost all chose to convert, creating a massive new group called Moriscos. A similar decree soon followed for the Muslims of Aragon. In 1526 the Inquisition began prosecuting Moriscos for failing to practice Christianity. The Spanish monarchy had officially embraced intolerance, and for an empire hoping to rise in global preeminence, this was a staggeringly bad move.[7]

The first wave of the Inquisition decimated Spain's *converso* population. In Valencia between 1494 and 1530, nearly one thousand *conversos* were convicted of "judaizing" and sentenced to death. In Seville over roughly the same period, an estimated four thousand *conversos* were burned at the stake. Terrified, tens of thousands of *converso* families fled.

The mass exodus of Spain's *conversos* and Jews left a catastrophic financial vacuum. Castilian culture did not favor finance or trade. There was a distinctly anti-entrepreneurial streak among Spain's Castilian elite, who exalted instead the warrior, the priest, and the aristocratic landowner. Nevertheless, before 1492, foreign bankers played virtually no role in Spain. As the Spaniards themselves saw it, "[O]ur kings . . . did not need bankers foreign to the kingdom. The Abrahams, Isaacs, and Samuels sufficed." This domination of finance by Jews and *conversos* was in many respects a healthy state of affairs: Jews had a powerful interest in maintaining the strength of the Spanish state, on which they depended for their protection. Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, this symbiotic relationship served the Spanish kings well. By the end of the 1400s, the Spanish crown united under Ferdinand and Isabella was one of the richest in Europe, and Spain "the greatest power on earth."

But by attacking its Jews and *conversos*, Spain destroyed its own primary source of credit and thereafter became completely dependent on foreign bankers, including the Dutch, the Germans, the French, and especially the hated Genoese ("white Moors," as a resentful Spaniard called them). The price of capital increased. As early as 1509, the Genoese were making loans at such high rates of interest that the archbishop of Seville sought to ban them, but Ferdinand sanctioned them on grounds of necessity.

Within a few decades, Genoese bankers controlled the provisioning of the Spanish fleet, and "[f]oreign bankers ran the Crown's finances." This dependence on foreign financiers was particularly perilous because these were the years of Spain's most aggressive imperial expansion, particularly in the Americas, with naval expeditions and warfare calling for seemingly limitless sums of money. Hence the ironic emergence of an empire that was essentially insolvent even as it discovered and exploited the vastest reserves of precious metals yet encountered.[8]

The fantastic gold and silver mines of Central and South America poured their ore onto Spanish ships, but the ore was pledged in advance to foreign bankers who had financed the ships, the army, and the luxurious opulence of the Spanish crown. Royal bankruptcies occurred in 1557 and 1575. Suddenly, the crown reawakened to the utility of Jewish financiers.

In 1580, Spain absorbed the kingdom of Portugal and, desperate for capital, Philip II began to accept loans from Portuguese Jews and "New Christians" (the *conversos* of Portugal). Many of these New Christians attained great wealth, becoming important investors in Spanish international trade, making fortunes in Brazilian sugar, Asian spices, and African slaves. Some Portuguese New Christians emigrated to the Spanish American colonies, where, for example, they dominated the Pacific trade in and out of Lima. Others returned to Spain—the land their ancestors had fled a century before—believing that the period of persecution was over.[9]

They were mistaken. Perversely but predictably, a new paroxysm of religious intolerance surged through Spain. In the 1590s, the dormant Inquisition came back to life, starting with a relentless

campaign of persecution, torture, and execution directed at New Christians in La Mancha, who were denounced as secret Jews by their debtors. *Limpieza de sangre*—or "purity of blood"—once again became a battle cry, as old statutes were resurrected banning anyone with Jewish blood from holding positions in government, universities and colleges, and military and religious institutions. In 1600, the Inquisition of Lima attacked Portuguese New Christians in Peru. In 1609, Spain commenced another mass expulsion, this time directed not at Jews but at Muslims and "secret" Muslims. By 1614, Spain had driven out about a quarter million Moriscos, destroying its own agricultural base in the south.[10]

With ebbs and flows, Spain persisted in this fanatical, self-destructive intolerance throughout the seventeenth century. In 1625, thirty-nine New Christians were executed at an *auto-da-fé* in Córdoba. In 1632, the Inquisition celebrated another act of faith in Madrid, burning seven "judaizers" to death before King Philip IV. At Granada in 1672, seventy-nine more were burned at the stake. And at Madrid again in 1680, twenty-one "perfidious Jews . . . God's worst enemies" were executed before Charles II and his court. All told, the Inquisition burned some 32,000 "heretics" at the stake. At the same time, the empire took on the mission of defender of the faith in Europe, spending fortunes on wars against Protestants in Germany, France, and the Netherlands. In 1767, King Charles III actually expelled Spain's *Jesuits*, supposedly because of "machinations" so "abominable" that the king had to keep "the most absolute silence on th[e] subject."[11]