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## Review of Brian Catlos, *Kingdoms of Faith: A New History of Islamic Spain*

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**Catlos, Brian. *Kingdoms of Faith: A New History of Islamic Spain*. New York: Basic Books, 2018. xi + 482 pp. + ill.**

Islamic Spain, or al-Andalus, occupies a central place in the Spanish national mythology. Whether as a birthplace of *convivencia*, a romanticized peaceful coexistence of Muslims, Christians, and Jews, or the target of an inexorable Christian march toward the “reconquest” of Spain in 1492, al-Andalus provides ample fodder to mythmakers of every political stripe. Those writing about al-Andalus must confront and dismantle the myths or risk joining the ranks of propagandists. The introduction to Brian Catlos’s highly readable and captivating history of Islamic Spain makes the author’s intentions quite clear: the aim is to disabuse his popular audience of the notion that medieval Iberia was either the stage for a “clash of civilizations” or an interfaith utopia (1). The rest of this hefty volume – more than 400 pages – stays true to this promise. In Catlos’s depiction, Islamic and Christian kingdoms of medieval Iberia were a place of shifting religious identities and unstable alliances, where religiously motivated hatred was outweighed by double-dealing pragmatism and grudging toleration. Every college instructor looking for an introductory text on medieval Spain that is both accessible and grounded in recent scholarship will do well to consider using Catlos’s new history. That said, the sections of Catlos’s book dealing with religion, legal culture, and the arts may need to be paired up with secondary sources that treat these subjects in greater depth.

The stories Catlos tells are well-known from secondary literature, but here they are gathered into a narrative arc that encompasses nine hundred and three years of Iberian history: from the Islamic conquest of the Visigothic kingdom in 711 to the final expulsion of Moriscos (converted Muslims) from Spain in 1614. They are largely about wars, palace intrigues, military alliances, dynasties, kings, and other powerful personalities – mostly elite men, but occasionally women and freed slaves who managed to build influential patronage networks. Catlos’s focus on elites is due to the nature of the Andalusian sources, “produced by rulers, bureaucrats, and men of religion” (5), but also to his abiding interest in power and the messy, undisciplined way in which it was pursued by various political actors in medieval Iberia.

The thirty short sections that make up Catlos’s grand canvas break down the information into more digestible portions. The sections, in turn, are grouped into six Parts, each covering between 100 and 200 years of history. Parts I-III of the book detail the politics and culture of the Umayyad and the *taifa* periods, whose social order mirrored the contemporary “diverse, cosmopolitan, and culturally sophisticated” imperial societies of the Fatimid and Abbasid caliphates (157). Catlos argues that the religious identity of each group comprising the Andalusian society was counterbalanced by intra-communal fissures, ethnic affiliations,

patronage networks, and class tensions (110). In Part IV, Catlos challenges the common characterization of the Almoravid and Almohad conquerors from North Africa as “fundamentalist,” and “intolerant,” arguing that their arrival did not bring the destruction of the Andalusí culture or cause a lasting disruption to religious toleration (259, 278). Not even the conquest of most of al-Andalus by the Christian forces by the middle of the thirteenth century spelled an end to the pragmatic acceptance of religious minorities, even though Catlos acknowledges that the status of *mudéjars* (Muslims of Christian Spain) was much more volatile than that of the *dhimmi* groups under Islam (Part V, 332). The final sections of the book (Parts V-VI) show that Christian Castile and Nasrid Granada inherited the fractious internal politics of the earlier period. Ultimately, only the marital and political union of the Castilian and Aragonese Crowns sealed the fate of the Muslims of Granada, and eventually of the *mudéjars* and Moriscos of Spain. In 1614, after the last Moriscos were expelled, “the age of Islam in Spain had come to an end” (422).

Catlos’s insistence on the permeability of religious boundaries and multiplicity of identities works as a valuable corrective to the nationalist narratives of *convivencia* and *Reconquista*. Some readers may find that in an effort to shift the emphasis away from religion Catlos overstates his case. Anticipating potential criticism of this approach, he stresses several times that religious identity was an important factor in Iberian history, but invariably backtracks and qualifies the statement with a follow-up observation that it was “only one factor out of many,” or even dismisses religious motivation as a cover-up for the true, pragmatic considerations (4, 326, 428). This argument may find a receptive audience among students who often are already preconditioned to believe that religion is only a ruse for economic and political motivations, but it contradicts much of modern scholarship on the crusades and other subjects. Therefore, it would make pedagogical sense to assign Catlos’s book alongside works of by scholars who attribute greater agency to religious identities.

Some of the book’s slip-ups are minor, but this reviewer finds them bothersome. Among them are attempts at awkward humor and gratuitous appeals to pop culture and current politics: e.g., “fake news” and “make al-Andalus great again” (170, 255) and the claims that the Andalusí elite culture revolved around “bling, bros, and biyatches” and that “Ibn Abi ‘Amir had grabbed Spanish Christianity by the bells” (94, 193). Catlos’s statement that “Karaites did not recognize any authority other than the Talmud” is erroneous: they only accepted the authority of the written Torah (151). His claim that Hasdai ibn Shaprut harbored “messianic ambitions” is overblown and not supported by the evidence (219).

These complaints aside, *Kingdoms of Faith* is a masterful work, an invaluable reference source, and a welcome addition to both scholarship and popular literature on Muslim Iberia.

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**Ringrose, David. *Europeans Abroad, 1450–1750*. Lanham, Maryland; Boulder, Colorado; New York; London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019. xi + 286 pp. + 13 ill. + 20 maps + 5 tables.**

Readers who know the author's previous work will expect far more than the title suggests; they will not be disappointed. Based on his own research and teaching experience, as well as broad reading, Ringrose challenges prevailing interpretations of the role of early modern Europeans in the broader sweep of world history. He lays the groundwork with a brief overview of factors that led them to venture beyond the world they knew in search of new opportunities for trade with known partners in Asia, unknown islands and lands to claim, and peoples to convert to Christianity. By the middle of the fifteenth century, Europe had emerged from the economic depression following the Black Death, and the Mongol Empire had been replaced by a number of successor states, one of which—the Ottoman Empire—was in an expansive phase that restricted European trade with Asia.

The cultural baggage that Europeans carried with them, their reception in other parts of the world, their response to the realities they faced, and how those elements combined shape the central arguments of the book. Chapter Two explores the standard categories of nation, society, and religion as sources of European identity. Based on numerous studies in the past several decades, the author argues that these categories were much more fluid than earlier definitions assumed. The modern concept of nation did not exist in the early modern centuries; loyalty was given to a particular monarch or other leader. Moreover, loyalties often shifted, depending on the circumstances, and when Europeans traveled abroad, they were often lumped together in the perceptions of their host societies, regardless of their points of origin. At home or abroad, family, kinship, and business networks formed the core of personal identity and loyalty. Similar networks in other societies around the globe made it easier for Europeans to understand and relate to those societies, sometimes merging with local networks so thoroughly that they ceased to identify with Europe in any meaningful sense.

The author then surveys the most important empires in the early modern world, focusing on those that included large land areas and populations, stable governments, and the capacity to raise large armies and to regulate and encourage