

Den gåtfulla passionen

Essäer om den spanska världen

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December 16-20, 2017

Spain comes with bad connotations as far as I am concerned. Partly historical, partly contemporary reasons. Historically I see it as the bullying great colonial power during the 16th century meddling into continental affairs through its union with Austria under the Hapsburg dynasty. The great armada of 1588, the suppression of the Dutch lands, and the solid bulwark of religious reaction, with its inquisition, until the 20th century considered the epitome of cruel inquisitiveness¹. The Spanish domination would soon erode, and by the 18th century it was reduced to a second rate peripheral power, its dynastic connection to Austria was severed and instead French royalty was imposed on it. The decline continued during the next century resulting in the loss of their overseas colonies, except a few which were easily gobbled up by the Americans at the end, The contemporary view of Spain being that of the destination of mindless mass tourism in search of sun and beach and the generically picturesque. Spain is not part of Europe, in spite of its Catholic inheritance, which makes it both irrelevant as well as intriguing,

The main thesis of the book is that the Spanish culture is really an amalgamation of Christian, Jewish and Muslim. During the time of the political ascension of Christianity, it was spread all around the Mediterranean, with North Africa a solid bastion. Then in the seventh and early eight centuries there was the Arab conquest which overrun all of North Africa, along with the Mideast, and an inroad into Europe proper through the Iberian peninsula. The 'Muslim Onslaught' was stopped south of Tours in 732 by Henry Martell the grandfather of Charlemagne. Or so we are told at school. If it had not been for Martell, Christianity would have been wiped out, and we would all be bowing to Mecca and bless the 'invaders' liberating us from mistaken beliefs and giving us the only Truth. Or so we are led to conclude. It is true that up to the 18th century the Ottoman empire constituted an alternative world to the Christian, to some extent containing its expansion. The Turks threatened Europe, first by its expansion into the Balkans after the disintegration of the East Roman Empire, later on, as it was about to topple itself, it temporarily conquered Hungary as well and threatened Vienna. After that it ceased to be a serious threat. From the limited view of the Iberian peninsula the myth is that of a Muslim conquest and then five hundred odd years of an extended reconquest that culminated in the subjugation of the last Muslim stronghold and the expulsion of the Moors in 1492 by Ferdinand and Isabella, incidentally the same year as the Italian adventurer - Columbus - 'discovered' America and the short golden era of Spanish power was initiated. This is the Myth to which most people subscribe. Unlike Italy, Catholic Spain came under Islam,

¹ In fact many implements of torture have designations, such as the Spanish horse, pointing to their Spanish origin.

miraculously survived, keeping its faith, and then eventually purged itself of its invaders. It makes for an epic story, easy to understand, but, according to the author, an unfortunate retroactive interpretation, ignoring all the complexities of the actual situation for the benefit to Nationalism. The actual situation was, according to the author, a long sequence of wars and conquests between warring kingdoms and strongholds, a Brownian dance of alliances formed and broken, sometimes involving Christians and Muslims in temporary alliance against a common foe, be it a Christian or Muslim one. Religion not really playing any role in 'Realpolitik' only secular interests. In short this is a story without plot, and as such unsatisfying, as we want to make of history, to make it something else than just one damned thing after another, as something moved by human intentions, also on a grander scale.

However, the greatest interest of the author concerns the Jews. While most of Western Europe during Medieval times were off limits for Jews (or at least subjected to severe restrictions), this was not true of Spain and Portugal² where a substantial minority of Jews were living. They were not immune to prejudice or persecution and in 1391 many were forced to convert to Christianity. and in 1492 they had the grim choice between conversion or expulsion or even death. Some converted, but a sizable number chose to leave, as testified by the great number of so called Sephardi Jews who spread along the southern and eastern rim of the Mediterranean identified by their mother tongue a variant of Spanish. It seems that the Muslims traditionally were more tolerant of Jews than the Christians were³. Now, from the book, one gets the impression that the purpose of the Inquisition was not to weed out heresy in general, but to investigate any surviving Jewish practices among the converted. Those so called crypto Jews were in the unenviable position not to be too ardent in their Christian practices to invite suspicion, nor to be too lax and not to fulfill the expectations. Documents from the trials have recently been unearthed and provide most interesting reading, revealing that even if the court proceedings would not live up to modern demands, it was not the case of mere show trials, but they were actually interested in the substance of the accusations, and liable to discount witnesses who could be suspected of personal vendettas. However, the persecution of those suspected of being crypto-Jews could eventually mean that once a Jew always a Jew, so the question of Jewishness was not merely a cultural-religious one, but one that went deeper, and concerned the 'blood', thus anticipating modern anti-semitism referring to Darwin and racial stereotypes. Thus one surmises that an anti-semitism directed merely against Jewish business practices or

² The Jewish surname 'Rapoport' and hence more common variants such as 'Rappaport' means 'Rabbi from Porto'.

³ The traditional explanation of this tolerance were that Muslims were exempted from taxation, infidels were not, hence there was a strong incentive to let the latter remain non-Muslims. As to the Jews the Muslim really did not have any reason to persecute them. The Koran was to a large extent based on the Old Testament with common protagonists. The idea of monotheism was a Jewish one and was crucial to the revelation of Muhammad. Jews were not seldom referred fondly to as the people of the Book. Christians could on the other side refer to the Jews as those that had Jesus killed and refused to acknowledge him as the son of God, and the hypocritical Pharisees were of course Jewish intellectuals. However, the embarrassing fact remains, Jesus as well as his mother must have been Jewish. Religious dogma never survives literal criticism.

an aversion towards their religious traditions and rituals, is not really anti-semitism, only one that views Jews as fundamentally different from other people, biologically based and no mere conventions, deserves the name and the misappropriation we are taught to hold⁴.

Franco was an ally of Hitler, but he is usually commended for not joining him in the war⁵ and not persecuting Jews. However, the author reveals, when it came to saving Jews his attitude was niggardly, even when a case could be made for Spanish citizenship, he showed indifference, except when they had been deported and he could claim their abandoned possessions. Thus there is little to be said for Franco, maybe less than for Mussolini? Franco dominates 20th Spanish history, not only during his active life from 1936 until his death in 1975, but also as a reaction to his legacy. Spain under Franco was a conservative and economically backward region in Europe, not really part of it as I indicated initially. It was disparaged as a regime and thus shunned by political liberals and intellectuals⁶ but this did not defer tourists from visiting, nor Cold War politicians from co-operation impressed with Franco's stoutly anti-communist attitude. After his death there was a quick road to so called democracy, supposedly eased by the position of the King, hand-picked by Franco, not doubt as a result of an astute assessment of the dangers of his succession, as he had no real crown-prince, this being a common problem facing dictators. No Civil War ensued, instead there was an economic upswing⁷ and an approach to Europe that resulted in the mid 80's to membership in the EU, pushed by the Socialist Gonzales, a Blair figure, if any, ahead of Blair. But Franco would not have been happy with the federalization of the state and the centrifugal forces making more and more regions more and more independent visa vi the central government. The recent issue of the Catalan referendum does of course not enter in a book written in the mid-nineties and revised with an added epilogue, ten years later.

Is Spain a very religious country dominated by the Catholic church as Italy and Poland? The Catholic church may be an important part of social life, although attendance at mass is steadily declining, but that does not necessarily mean a religious engagement, in fact even the Swedes may be more religious than the Spanish. The fact is that Spaniards in general do not know the Old Testament very well, that part of the Bible being ignored by the church. He also points out that the rituals of the church are rather pagan, and the more or less obvious fact that the cult of the Madonna is really a cult of an idol, and that the great variety of saints, makes Catholic Christianity to a polytheistic religion, to the

⁴ The idea of holding the Jews as special can also be levied against the Jews themselves, and in that sense obsession with matters Jewish makes for a convergence between the anti-semites and the semi-phones. Once I came across a site which listed the common surnames of Jews in Norway. It was a Jewish site, whose purpose was to give support and indicate where to find friends. But of course it could as well have been an anti-Semitic site, whose purpose was to identify your foes.

⁵ He did however send a division to join in Barbarossa

⁶ When I revealed that I had visited Spain under Franco to an elderly colleague (Kolchin) and his wife at Columbia, they were truly scandalized. How could I? The Spanish Civil War was a formative political experience for those young during the 30's

⁷ Part of that had already been prepared by the Franco regime in the 60's, when the economy was being put into more capable hands (the author mentions with distaste the Christian organization Opus Dei) and as a result being liberalized.

glee of the Muslims.

The author in addition to general reflections of a historical, political and cultural nature, regales the reader with his own personal experiences, often of a rather mundane art. There is nothing wrong with that, on the contrary, but one is a little bit left in the dark as to the context of those forays. Obviously some of his sojourns must have been part of professional assignments as a journalist, but does that also apply to his early forays when his Spanish was rudimentary and could hardly have been a professional correspondent. One suspects that those were part of the 'Wanderjahre' of early youth, when the world opens up to you, and if you have the means and the enterprising spirit, you are free to explore to your heart's content. There is also a reference to toddling years in Mexico. One is intrigued and would like to know more, as especially as pertaining to the author's burgeoning Spanish. What motivated him to learn Spanish?

In a 2005 epilogue the author refers to the terrorist act in Madrid in 2004 as an event with the same far reaching ramifications as the fall of the wall. This is clearly silly hyperbole (with all due respect to the victims) which probably would embarrass him ten years later. The one terrorist attack which had far reaching political consequences and still remain in vivid memory is the one targeting the twin towers. The one in Madrid I only remember when prodded, and then I am unable to place it directly in time.

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