glaringly obvious. Nonetheless, there are clear-cut achievements and some progress has indeed been made. The key issue is: “Why does the Islamic vision fail to be realized in the present-day Muslim world?”

Chapter VIII: “The Future Course of Action”. This chapter makes a well-rounded set of suggestions for action which most Muslims would agree with. One of the principal suggestions is the need to make a peaceful struggle for political reform. Here Chapra uses the buzzword “democracy” as a desirable goal, and has indicated elsewhere in the book that one of the reasons for Muslim decline was a lack of democracy. I believe that decentralized-decision making which is responsive to the needs of the people is essential for progress. Currently “democracy” is often taken to mean free elections, and we have considerable historical experience that freely elected rulers can be extremely exploitative and unresponsive to the needs of the masses. The use of the word democracy tends to highlight the wrong set of issues and should be avoided. Developing quality institutions in response to the genuine public needs and avoiding those ‘foreign experts’ who have quick magic fixes will be essential to ensure the success of the Muslim ummah.

Asad Zaman

*   *   *


*The Fortress of Faith: The Attitude Towards Muslims in Fifteenth Century Spain* by Ana Echevarria is the twelfth volume in Brill’s Medieval Iberian Peninsula (MIP) Texts and Studies series. The author is an independent historian who has written a number of articles on Christian-Muslim cross-cultural relations in medieval Iberia, and the present work is a revision of her doctoral thesis.

The book focuses on the critical decades leading up to the conquest of the Muslim kingdom of Granada in 1492, with particular emphasis on the period 1430-1470. A basic premise of the work is that a large number of studies have been conducted on the fall of Granada itself, yet few scholars have looked at the approach towards Muslims articulated by Christian intellectuals in the final stages of the Reconquista, in anticipation of the event. Echevarria maintains that most of the research in the area of medieval Christian views on
Muslims has been useful (she mentions the works of Southern, Daniel, Burns and others), but has not gone as far as to include the fifteenth century. To meet this need, and to connect evolving Christian views to the end of Muslim political rule in Iberia, the author utilizes information contained in religious treatises, chronicles and royal legislation (cortes, fueros reales, and the Siete Partidas). In particular, Echevarria emphasizes the importance of four authors who wrote between 1450 and 1461, in the belief that their works signal the revival of the polemic genre against Islam as a result of historical events of the time. These four authors are Pedro de la Cavallería (counsellor to King Juan II and member of the Saragossa town council), Juan de Segovia (a lecturer at the University of Salamanca), Cardinal Juan de Torquemada, and Alonso de Espina (the confessor of Enrique IV and a renowned preacher).

Following an introduction with the usual historiographical commentary, Fortress of Faith begins with a discussion of the political approach to Muslims from 1430 to 1470. In this chapter, she develops the theme of the Christian crusade against al-Andalus (Granada) in the fifteenth century in terms akin to efforts aimed at the Holy Land. The section is useful for untangling the myriad rivalries and approaches of Christian monarchs among themselves, firstly, and for evaluating their relations with the Holy See. This type of detail in regard to the Spanish Christian political climate and its relation to wider European developments is usually encountered in works dealing exclusively with Christian Spain as opposed to those dealing with Muslim Iberia. Since this book is likely also to garner the attention of scholars and general readers interested in Andalusian matters, this material may be an unexpected and enlightening treat: it diffuses any notion of monolithic Reconquest.

The second and third chapters outline the intellectual approaches and styles of the four selected Christian authors, discussing their source material (Latin and Arabic; written, oral and observed), their tendencies towards or against pacifism with regard to Muslim communities under Christian rule and those on the frontiers, and their styles of presentation (sermons in vernacular; reports in Latin to be reproduced for other church officials). The information is given depth through discussion in subsequent chapters of the long-standing polemic between Christian and Muslim authors in medieval Iberia, in particular describing Christian explanations for the success of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) and the rise of Islam, and the subsequent spread of Islam throughout a large part of the Eastern hemisphere. This material constitutes the bulk of Echevarría’s book, but is somewhat difficult to follow, as there are many names, dates and documents discussed, not always within a clear narrative structure. At times it seems as though the information is offered as a laundry list of independently interesting points that have some affiliation with each other, but adequate transitions seem to be missing,
making it difficult for the reader to form a coherent sense of the information provided.

The difficulty in reading the book is that there are numerous mis-spellings and grammatical errors scattered throughout the text. Though the author’s first language is not English, her translation is adequate. The errors that survive in the text engender some annoyance and point mainly to the failure of the editors to make suitable corrections, a fact which undermines the high reputation of the publishers.

Another unfortunate feature of the book is that many, though not all, of the Latin and Spanish quotes from primary sources are left untranslated. This may not pose a problem for specialists but is a potential blind spot for general readers or those interested in “Muslim Spain”, many of whom are likely to pick up this book. When translated, these passages may be found in the footnotes, yet far too many are left untranslated. Furthermore, considering that many readers may be unfamiliar with medieval Catholic ecclesiastic hierarchy and terminology, it may have been useful to include such information in a glossary at the end of the book. Such information would help the reader understand the competing interests and approaches described in the book.

Despite these concerns, Echevarria does underscore a number of significant points in her discussions. For example, she highlights the fact that many Christian authors had as their main audience not Muslim scholars or lay persons, but other Christians, in order to reinforce their faith through polemical arguments. She also reviews the long-standing Christian attempt to understand Islam only through a Christian framework, the most immediate result being that Islam was viewed as a heresy or a sect of Christianity, rather than an independently manifested faith tradition. Another outcome of this view was the early attribution of various Biblical identities to Muslims, such as “Chaldeans” and “Saracens”, which eventually gave way in polemical works from the ninth century onward to other labels such as “Infidels”, “Pagans”, and even “Enemies”. The fears of Christians represented by such terms were heightened by the Turkish threat and the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 by the Ottomans, setting the stage for the works of the four authors studied by Echevarria.

The latter part of the book describes the ambivalent nature of Christian policy in the fifteenth century towards Muslims (Mudejars), among the religious leaders as well as the political establishment. Laws hampering Muslim life that were initiated by the monarchs would often be overlooked to encourage Muslims to remain in Christian territory, for their skilled labour was needed, and likewise monarchs would circumvent edicts from religious authorities. Echevarria also provides insight into the process of conversion to
Islam and back to Christianity among mercenary soldiers who spent time at the Granadan court in support of one or another ruler, until such time as the ruler was forced to seek help or refuge in Castile.

Echevarría’s premise that the four authors (Cavallería, Segovia, Torquemada, and Espina) signal a revival of the polemic genre against Islam is somewhat undermined by the great lengths she goes to, to show the connections between these authors and their predecessors in Spain and elsewhere in Europe. The substantive contents of these authors’ works remain largely consistent with earlier works, and Echevarría states that “their only innovation is presentation and connections” (p. 102), suggesting they form part of a continuum of Christian polemic that did not necessarily see a significant hiatus. Moreover, the “micro”-history that Echevarría briefly touches upon here and there, such as the information about the multiple conversions of certain groups of soldiers, and the uncertain and countervailing policies of Christian monarchs in the middle decades of the fifteenth century, point to a complex situation in the peninsula, one which appears to be in flux, despite strong ideological expressions available in the form of the four authors’ works. All of this is to say that while the loss of Constantinople may have reverberated throughout Europe in various ways (politically, religiously) and may have elicited some crusading spirit, it did not necessarily trigger a polemical whirlwind designed to bring about the downfall of the kingdom of Granada. Its position was already precarious before the mid-fifteenth century, and on the other hand, the possibility of its continued survival beyond 1492 depended more on shifting Christian and Muslim alliances in the peninsula than a religiously motivated directive. If the output of the four authors were tied more closely to the ideological positions of the Catholic Monarchs after their propitious union, perhaps the argument would have greater weight.

Fortress of Faith is a useful work for understanding the core arguments used by Christian authors historically to refute Islam and convince the followers of Christianity of the correctness of their faith. As such, it also serves to enhance one’s understanding of contemporary misunderstandings and stereotypes about Islamic beliefs and practices that have been transmitted over the centuries in the Western consciousness.

Munir A. Shaikh

* * *