

The Independent on Saturday 03.05.03

Muslim Spain helped defeat the Dark Ages

From Sayed-Iqbal Mohamed
West Ridge

YOUR correspondent Michael McCarthy's reference to Spaniards being subjected to rape, plunder, etc. under Muslim rule (*Your Views*, April 19) is based on downright prejudice. A cursory glance of the writings by Christian, Jewish and other scholars tell of a period that was unparalleled in history regarding a most advanced civilisation.

Rabbi Ken Spiro says Muslims of Spain impacted on the Jews that led to some of the greatest Jewish scholars, writers and philosophers. "Indeed, things were so good for the Jews there, that to this day, half the Jewish world is known as *Sephardi*, meaning Spanish." Later, Ferdinand and Isabella expelled all the Jews, putting an end to the largest and most distinguished Jewish settlement. Most of the Jews who constituted an intelligent, cultured and industrious class in Muslim Spain, settled in Muslim countries of North Africa.

Others were welcomed by the king of Turkey with kindness. Bertrand Russell informs us that Muslims throughout the Middle Ages were more civilised and humane than Christians, who persecuted Jews.

The Jews at most times were not ill treated by the Muslims. The Arabs preserved Greek literature and the West recovered what it had lost of the Grecian heritage initially through Muslim (Moorish) influences. Dean Derhak maintains that long before the Western Renaissance there was a place of humanistic beauty in Muslim Spain where Muslims turned the "land of the vandals" (Al-Andulus) that resembled the rest of Europe in all its squalor, into a bastion of culture, commerce and beauty.

While tolerance was unheard of in the rest of Europe, Muslims having developed a rich, sophisticated society, took a tolerant view towards other

faiths. Students from France and England studied at the feet of Muslims. Franz Rosenthal states that the Muslims made possible an unprecedented growth of literary production by making paper available. Individual fields and disciplines were compartmentalised and provided a broadened, more varied world outlook, immeasurably enriching western literature. Christian communities, according to Professor Phillip Hitti, had the freedom to practise their faith. Muslims introduced the zero and Arabic numerals and enriched the world with pure and applied botany, astronomy, mathematics, physics, geography and other subjects.

Hitti adds it was to the eternal glory of medieval Muslim thinkers of Baghdad and Andalusia (Spain) that they reconciled monotheistic religion and Greek philosophy, passing them on harmonised into Europe, marking the beginning of the end of the "Dark Ages".

From the eighth century to about 1200 AD, Muslim Spain was the most civilised and materially advanced area of Western Europe with 70 libraries and 900 public baths in Cordoba alone. Muslim Spain, according to Francesco Gabrieli, led to the diffusion of eschatological ideas in the Latin

West that may have influenced Dante. Arabo-Spanish strophic poetry had formal and substantial influence on Romance lyrics. Regarding tolerance, he asserts that the Islamic state considered Jews and Christians the "People of the Book" and provided legal protection while the law of Christianity when it regained Spain showed intolerance and persecuted Muslims. Norman Daniel says that despite the aberration of individuals and mobs, Christians and Jews survived in Arab and other Muslim countries, whereas the half-hearted attempt of canon law to define conditions which would permit Muslims to survive in Europe, did not stand the strain of time.

Muslims were forced to convert to Christianity. There were no forcible conversion of Jews and Christians under Islam.

McCarthy can support Bush and the centuries of prejudice that started against Muslims in Spain, spread through the Crusaders. Or, he can seize the recent opportunity by joining the millions who have come together in solaridity against the likes of Bush and Saddam to form a new world order based on love and peace.