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Music & Arts

Interculturalism in Iberia



Marvine Howe describes the humane immigration policies of Portugal and Spain. (Photo courtesy Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding)

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In an effort to develop a more humane immigration policy, Lisbon and Madrid implemented what came to be known as “interculturalism,” with an emphasis on intermingling rather than side-by-side coexistence, and equal rights for citizens and immigrants alike. While the policy had different manifestations, Howe said—very centralized in Portugal (with 40,000 Muslims), more decentralized in Spain (home to 2 million)—the principle was the same.

Author and journalist Marvine Howe discussed her latest book, *Al-Andalus Rediscovered: Iberia’s New Muslims* (available from the AET Book Club) at a March 30 appearance at Georgetown University’s Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding in Washington, DC. Her appearance was co-sponsored by Georgetown’s BMW Center for German and European Studies.

In his introductory remarks, Jonathan A. Brown, professor of Islamic studies and Muslim-Christian understanding at Georgetown, cited several of Howe’s earlier books, including *Morocco: The Islamist Awakening and Other Challenges* (also available from the AET Book Club) and *Turkey: A Nation Divided Over Islam’s Revival*.

The former *New York Times* correspondent and Ankara bureau chief began her remarks by noting that, with the exception of the Spanish soccer team’s No. 1 FIFA ranking, “most of the news out of Iberia is bad,” given the recession and soaring unemployment.

“It was another world when I began the book” in 2006, Howe recalled. Both Spain and Portugal had flourishing economies, and were the top destinations for immigrants to Europe—in large part because the two countries welcomed Muslim and other immigrants.

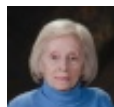
Curious as to why these two countries were able to create such an innovative and humane immigration policy, Howe said she concluded that it was not an effort to make amends for such historical events as the 1492 expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain or the countries' colonial pasts. Instead, she was told by Portuguese and Spaniards alike, "We are emigrant nations, and thus have a special empathy" with immigrants to their shores. "We wanted to do better," they explained.

Moreover, Howe noted, the Iberian peninsula has a history of outreach to the Middle East—even under Francisco Franco—and today seeks to attract Middle Eastern investment. Howe described Spain and Portugal as "leaders in the anti-'clash-of-civilizations'" effort, noting that their citizens and governments do not distinguish between Middle Easterners and Muslims.

There have been bumps in the road, of course: Howe cited the economic recession, a few terrorist attacks, and the increased presence of radical Muslims in the post-9/11 era. For the most part, however, the reaction of the governments and citizenry has not been extreme. There have been no race riots since 2000, she pointed out, and the Muslim communities have dealt quietly but effectively with radical clerics in their midst. Even as Muslims are leaving due to the failing economy—although many are retaining their Spanish or Portuguese citizenship—mosques are opening their doors to their non-Muslim neighbors.

"Interculturalism is working and has a good chance to work," Howe concluded. "Iberian Islam is here to stay."

—Janet McMahon



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