

The Rise of Spain

While southern and central Spain were under Arab rule, small, independent Christian states like Aragon*, Navarre*, Catalonia* or Castile* had survived the Muslim expansion in the shelter of the Pyrenees*. When the Christian sense of mission grew at the time of the Crusades*, it also showed effects on these states in the north of Spain. Freeing the Iberian Peninsula from Muslim control came to be seen as a religious deed. Powered by this motivation and supported by struggles among leading Arab families, Christian reconquest (=the Reconquista) turned into a successful movement. Of course, the expulsion of the Arabs left space for new powers, so religious zeal was combined with political motives from the start. A brilliant example of this is Rodrigo Diaz, called “El Cid” (=Arabic for “Lord”). This marvellous knight had played a crucial role in the conquest of the important Arab city of Toledo* in 1095. Soon after, however, he entered the Moors’ service because they granted him the lands he had conquered. In this way, El Cid was able to create his own kingdom of Valencia* on the east coast of Spain. However, soon after his death, Valencia’s military strength crumbled and the kingdom was integrated into Aragon. On the other hand, other newly developing kingdoms of the Reconquista proved to be long lasting. The best example is Portugal. In 1139, Alfonso proclaimed himself king after he had inflicted a decisive victory on the Muslims in the battle of Ourique in the southwest of Spain. Originally, Alfonso had only been Count of Portucale* and a vassal to the king of Castile. Considering Alfonso’s newly won territory and military fame, the king of Castile did not dare to question his claim for an independent kingdom, though. Papal recognition of this new Christian kingdom soon followed, and Alfonso’s successors began to establish an independent economic and administrative system. Portucale became the administrative centre and gave the new kingdom its name. The once small kingdoms of Aragon and Castile emerged from the Reconquista even stronger. After having captured the last Arab stronghold of Granada* in 1492, Castile dominated central Spain, whereas Aragon controlled the whole east coast.

Religious and Social Consequences of the Reconquista

At the end of the Reconquista, the Arabs were not easily substituted by another ruling class, but they had been pushed back by different Christian kingdoms for different reasons and in different ways over a period of several centuries. Thus, the Reconquista was bound to have effects on basically all regions and all spheres of life.

Simplistically, religious change is often portrayed as the main effect. Indeed, in the two centuries following the Reconquista, Spain turned into a thoroughly Catholic region, and the Reconquista might be seen as the starting point for this development. But it should not be forgotten that Christians had lived in Spain since Christianity began to spread in the Roman Empire. Due to the Muslims’ toleration of other religions, Christian tradition on the Iberian Peninsula had never been fully interrupted. Of course, with the return of Christian rulers, this faith got more official support for large scale projects like the building of a new cathedral. However, the religious atmosphere did not only change because of revived support of the Christians. It changed much more because of reprisals against other religions. Although Moors who converted to Christianity were not completely deprived of their rights, they often had to move to separate districts. Such a separation had already happened to the Jews under late Arab rule, but after the Reconquista, their separation was also enforced once again. Though they remained

under the official protection of the respective crown, such ghettos portrayed a clear break with the overall tolerant atmosphere of Moorish Spain. A reason for such steps of the new rulers is sometimes seen in their habits: they had virtually grown up fighting against other religions, and once a Muslim territory was occupied, it must have been difficult for them to let go of their convictions and treat their enemies as equals. Of course, it can hardly be judged how deep-rooted such convictions were since religious matters were always linked to worldly affairs. By attributing the Moorish population some districts in town, the new kings were able to clear the land for their own Christian followers. Binding these trustworthy followers to them by such rewards probably seemed to be a more predictable strategy than relying on the goodwill of a Moorish population. Moreover, kings usually presented themselves as being appointed to their office by god. But if kings had allowed the mingling of religious beliefs, or if they had tolerated the conversion to another religion on a large scale, they would automatically have undermined this picture.

Another reason for the stricter separation of the religions under the new Christian rulers has to be sought within the latest development of Christianity itself. As heresies* (i. e. “wrong” interpretations of the faith) became quite common in the fifteenth century, the ruling class strove to keep Christianity united since they feared that heresies endangered the religious justification of the established social order. In most Western European countries, this social order meant the feudal and manorial systems. In these systems, most positions had become hereditary. Although huge inequalities were fostered by this system, they were partly declared to be God’s will. For example, a widespread picture from 1492 still showed a group of bishops, a group of lords, and a group of peasants, and God telling them, “Thou shalt humbly pray. Thou shalt protect. Thou shalt work.” Accepting deviation from such religious teachings also would have meant accepting deviation from a fixed social structure. To prevent such deviation, the Inquisition* was renewed in Spain in 1481. It guarded the orthodoxy of Catholicism, mainly by persecuting – and if necessary torturing – people who questioned the rightfulness of Catholic dogma. The most important example of a heretic was still to come, though: Martin Luther* openly questioned the supremacy of the pope, thus triggering off the Reformation in Germany. Although he had not intended this, the interpretation of his theses caused a social upheaval with the Peasants’ War*, and, all over Christian Europe, monarchs were afraid that such a movement would spread. Although this never happened in Spain, the strong implications of the Reformation period could be felt here, too. Not only did they manifest themselves in the strict adherence to the Inquisition; they were also reflected in the foundation of the Jesuit order* by the Basque nobleman Ignatius Loyola*. In reaction to the manifold criticism of the papal church, he wanted to create an order which followed the pope’s commands unconditionally. Organised like an army, this order should come to play a leading role in the Counter-Reformation* and the conversion of the peoples of the New World. Thus, in Spain and the Spanish colonies, the Reformation resulted in an even stricter adherence to Catholicism.

Spain as a Part of the Habsburg Empire

This strict adherence was personified in the Emperor Charles V (1500–1558)*. As his biographers tell us, Charles was a very pious man with a strong interest in the unity of the church. But even more important, Charles was also a very powerful man who felt to have the means to achieve this aim. He

inherited an empire on which “the sun never set”: From his mother, Joanna the Mad*, Charles was to inherit Spain. Joanna was the daughter of Ferdinand of Aragon* and Isabella of Castile*. Although several other small kingdoms or counties had existed on the Iberian Peninsula after the Reconquista (Asturia, Leon, Navarra, Catalonia), they had been merged with Aragon or Castile mostly through intermarriage over the following three centuries. The marriage of Isabella and Ferdinand had finally united these two most important kingdoms in 1479. Aragon and Castile kept their separate administrations at first, but the latter would come to dominate not only Spain’s economy, culture, and language, but also the colonization of the Americas as a consequence of Queen Isabella’s financing of Columbus’s* explorations. The early Spanish colonisation in America played a strange double role in Charles’ concept as the defender of the “rightful Catholic faith.” On the one hand, Jesuits were sent to the Americas to convert the indigenous population. On the other hand, this population was often brutally exploited. Already under Queen Isabella, the system of the “encomienda” had been instituted. It allowed the conquistadors (adventurers financed by private investors) to collect tribute from the natives and use them as a workforce. Although this system also intended the conquistadors to care for the natives’ everyday needs and their spiritual salvation, the execution of this part of the deal could hardly be controlled from Spain. But it also seems that nobody was interested in monitoring this as long as the fixed shares of the tributes arrived at the court. In this way, immense riches flowed into the imperial treasury which Charles V needed to finance his participation in various religious wars into which he had been drawn on his father’s side of the family.

Charles’ paternal grandfather was the Habsburg King Maximilian I, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. After the early death of his father, Philip, in 1506 and the passing away of his grandfather, Maximilian, in 1519, Charles V inherited this position. Especially the emperors put him in the centre of the Reformation and its following military conflicts (see chapter “Reformation”). At the same time, he had to defend his Austrian possessions against repeated attacks of the growing Ottoman Empire*. Here, Charles could not rely on other Christian nations for support as he might have done at the time of the Crusades. On the contrary, the Ottoman sultan even managed to form an alliance with the French king Francis I of Valois, who felt surrounded by Charles’ possessions in Spain and in the Holy Roman Empire*. To prevent this encirclement, he had even run in the election to the Holy Roman Emperor himself. But since the choice had fallen on Charles, Francis used every opportunity to weaken the Habsburg Empire around him. His successor, Henry II, took up this tactical approach and allied with the Protestant prince elector Maurice of Saxony. Although this plan did not lead to any concrete success in the end, the constant war with France certainly distracted Charles V from the settlement of the growing religious dispute within the Holy Roman Empire. Charles himself felt to have failed in his central duty of preserving Christian unity. He eventually abdicated in 1556 and died a broken man two years later. Upon his abdication, Charles V separated his succession – probably as a consequence of his own futile attempt to govern such a vast empire. Charles’ brother, Ferdinand, received the Austrian possessions and followed him in the emperors, whereas Charles’ son, Philip, got Spain and Burgundy. The Austrian and the Spanish line of the House of Habsburg have remained separated ever since. For Spain, this separation does not seem to have been a disadvantage, though. Spain had served Charles as the core of his empire because it was not torn by religious turmoil. Spain

was also in a favourable financial position because of its American colonies and Burgundy's flourishing mercantilism. Thus, Philip inherited a comparatively well-organized kingdom.

Towards a Catholic Hegemony?

Philip II also inherited his father's religious sense of mission. Trying to establish Spain as Europe's Catholic hegemony, the perfectionist monarch first tried to increase control over and income from his own possessions before moving beyond. Philip basically achieved the opposite, however. The most obvious and costly example can be seen in the "defection"* of the Netherlands. The Spanish king wanted to suppress the Calvinist* faith in Burgundy's northern provinces and to include the region into his centralised government. However, he did not realize that both measures were counterproductive: in the Calvinist faith, a person's social position on earth predicts his chances of going to heaven. Therefore, Calvinists were usually highly industrious people. Moreover, Burgundy's mercantilist economy, based on trading and processing wool, could hardly be integrated into the agricultural system of faraway Spain. But the citizens' complaints were answered by brutal military oppression under the Duke of Alba. In the war that followed, Burgundy's rebelling northern provinces finally won their independence with the help of England in 1581. At this time, an anti-Catholic wave was sweeping England in reaction to the bloody rule of the deceased Mary the Catholic*, Philip's wife. Although Philip also courted the next English queen, the Protestant Elisabeth I* did not react. As England could not be returned to Catholicism by marriage connections and as Elisabeth allowed her pirates to raid Spanish gold transports from America, Philip decided to conquer the island. However, his Great Armada was sunk – partly by English cannons and partly destroyed by a storm. Thus, a Protestant nation came to be established in England. Even if the war officially continued for several years after this blow, no Spanish invasion needed be feared in the near future.

Nevertheless, the Catholic kingdom of Spain did not lose its position in Europe, but remained a stable factor in the development of the European nation states over the following two centuries. This position had newly been secured in the Battle of Lepanto (off the coast of present-day Turkey) in 1571, when King Philip's half-brother, Don Juan d'Austria, led the fleet of the Holy League* to a devastating victory over the Turks. This victory ended the Muslims' naval predominance in the Mediterranean. Spain's leading role in the Holy League, consisting of the Papal States as well as the Republics of Genoa and Venice among others, illustrates its influence among other Catholic states at such decisive moments. Moreover, Spain peacefully extended its sphere of influence in the Atlantic, too, by marrying into the Portuguese royal family. These examples underline that Spain clearly continued to play a leading role in both overseas trade and Christianisation. Although other countries like the Netherlands or England were catching up, they still had a long way to go before they could eventually overtake Spain. Of course, neither Charles V nor his son Philip II had been able to meet their own demand of reviving the tradition of a universal defender of the Roman church. But here, one part of the problem lay in the demand itself for this demand no longer reflected social or religious realities.