

"For God, Spain, & El Cid"

During the centuries-long struggle of the Spanish *Reconquista* against the Muslim occupiers of Iberia, one name stands out above all others as the exemplary Christian knight.

by William F. Jasper

On a sandy beach on the north coast of Africa sit a dozen richly robed men, surrounded by scimitar-wielding men-at-arms, some standing, some mounted. From their opulent raiment and bejeweled fingers, the seated men are obviously individuals of some importance. In fact, they are the emirs of Spain, the Moorish kings who have been ruling the petty Muslim kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula since the collapse of the unified Caliphate of Cordoba.

They are rulers who are accustomed to issuing commands and expecting obedience without delay. They are accustomed to being feared by others. But a shadow of fear steals across their faces as they behold a black-robed figure approach at the gallop, his dark Arabian steed kicking up sand like a whirlwind. The dark rider, Ben Yusuf ibn Teshufin, jumps from the saddle and confronts the emirs, eyes blazing. Like a coiled steel spring releasing its pent-up energy, Ben Yusuf unleashes his venom on the pampered Iberian princelings:

The Prophet has commanded us to rule the world. Where in all your land of Spain is the glory of Allah? When men speak of you they speak of poets, music-makers, doctors, scientists.... Where are your warriors? You dare call yourselves sons of the Prophet? You have become — women!

Burn your books! Make warriors of your poets! Let your doctors invent new poisons for our arrows — let your scientists invent new war machines! And then — Kill! Burn! Infidels live on your frontiers — encourage them to kill each other.

And when they are weak and torn — I will sweep up from Africa — and the empire of the One God — the True God, Allah — will spread, first across Spain, then across Europe, then — the whole World!

Thus opens the 1961 movie spectacular *El Cid*, one of the great epic films of all time. Produced independently by Samuel Bronston and directed by Anthony Mann (famed for his Hollywood westerns), *El Cid* stars Charlton Heston in the title role



Charlton Heston stars as the larger-than-life Spanish knight Rodrigo de Vivar in the 1961 cinematic epic *El Cid*.

as Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar, El Cid (The Lord), and Sophia Loren as his wife, Chimene. Boasting a cast of thousands, stunning cinematography, and a magnificent musical score by Miklos Rozsa (who also composed the scores for *King of Kings* and *Ben Hur* — which won him an Academy Award), *El Cid* brings to the screen the riveting story of one of Christendom's great-

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est champions against an enduring foe.

Rodrigo de Vivar, Spain's most revered hero, was a real person, a Spanish Christian knight and prince who ranks with Arthur and Charlemagne in European lore. After the Moors swept over Spain (711-715), it took nearly 800 years (until 1492) for the Christians to finally win back complete control over their country from the invaders. Historian Warren Carroll has called this *Reconquista* (Reconquest) of Spain "the longest war in the history of the world." Launched by King Pelayo from his tiny mountain kingdom of Asturias in the far north of Spain, the Reconquista moved back and forth in fits and starts over the centuries, as the Spaniards fought the Moors and fought among themselves.

Rodrigo de Vivar appears at about the midpoint in the lengthy saga of the Reconquista. Born in 1043 near Burgos, his eventful life culminates with his capture of the city of Valencia from the Moors in 1094 and his successful defense of the kingdom against an immense Muslim horde in 1099, the same year that the Christian armies of the First Crusade recaptured Jerusalem. El Cid saves Valencia, but at the cost of his own life. Ever the true knight, he finds a way to fight on for God and country even after death. Mortally wounded and knowing that his army may lose heart and the enemy forces will rally if he does not take the field on the morrow, with his dying breaths Rodrigo extracts a vow from Chimene and his most trusted officers. *El Cid* pays homage to the legend (which is very probably true) that Rodrigo had his corpse dressed in full armor and mounted on his horse to lead his men into battle. The ruse worked and the enemy, believing the invincible Cid had recovered, fled in terror and was routed.

While film critics and movie buffs will argue over *El Cid's* artistic merits (or alleged lack thereof), it is the lessons of history the film imparts that concern us here.

Unlike many of Hollywood's "historical" films that bear no resemblance to historical reality, *El Cid* had the benefit of Ramon Menendez Pidal, one of

Spain's greatest medieval scholars, as adviser. Senor Pidal, who was then in his 90s, had devoted more than half a century of his life to researching the Cid and the Spain in which the legendary crusader lived, fought, loved, and died. Bronston and Mann wisely availed themselves of Pidal's vast knowledge of the subject, as well as his incomparable library of books, maps, portraits, letters, journals, and historical documents.

The Muslim vs. Christian conflict that forms the backdrop of *El Cid* will have a more personal resonance for Western audiences today than it did when the movie was released. The 9/11 terror attacks, the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the daily images of turbaned, *Qur'an*-wielding Muslim fanatics make the filmic villain Ben Yusuf a very believable and relevant character.

To many viewers, no doubt, the central story of *El Cid* confirms the conviction that conflict between Islam and Christianity is ineluctable. On one level, of course, that is true; the two faiths are incompatible and fundamentally in opposition to each other. Christians living in Muslim lands today are facing an increasing amount of discrimination and persecution from a newly militant Islam. And,

conversely, Muslims in Christian (or post-Christian) lands are increasingly demanding that their newly adopted countries change their age-old customs and laws to accommodate Islamic *sharia* law. Such aggressive intransigence virtually guarantees escalating social conflict. And when it comes to the *really* militant followers of al-Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, and other groups who believe that Allah wills unremitting *jihad* against all unbelievers, the conflict inevitably becomes violent.

However, should *all* Muslims be viewed as murderous zealots like Ben Yusuf, against whom we are locked, unavoidably, in a life-or-death struggle? Obviously not. Without succumbing to political correctness, we can acknowledge that many Muslims are honorable, sensible, temperate human beings who hold to a live-and-let-live attitude not unlike our own. And, where possible, we can and must live peaceably and tolerantly with them.

One of the strengths of *El Cid* is its illustration of this principle of vigilant

On location: Actor Charlton Heston mails his vote for the Oscar nominees as a Spanish Civil Guard watches near Madrid, Spain, during the 1961 filming of *El Cid*. (Inset: DVD cover of *El Cid*)



tolerance, as exemplified in the relationship between Rodrigo and Emir Moutamin, the Muslim king of Zaragoza (Saragossa), Spain (played in the film by Douglas Wilmer). Moutamin — a real, historical character — is a very intelligent, cultured, courageous, moderate, and honorable man who is shown in the movie as a dissident emir very much at odds with the fanatical Ben Yusuf. Nevertheless, Moutamin's fellow emirs convince him that it is his duty as a Muslim to support them in their battles against the Christians. Rodrigo defeats and captures them. But in a move that surprises all concerned, rather than executing the emirs, he offers them mercy and freedom if they will vow never again to draw the sword against Christian Spain.

Moutamin does so vow, with the full intent of keeping that vow. He is so struck by the honor and virtue of Rodrigo that he dubs him al-Sayyid (El Cid, The Lord) and becomes Rodrigo's most loyal and trusted ally against Ben Yusuf and his Almoravid Moors from Africa. This is historically accurate, and as the film portrays, Moutamin does more to help El Cid rid Spain of the fanatical elements and take back Valencia, than does El Cid's "Christian" sovereign, the treacherous King Alfonso.

Of course, there were other Muslim emirs who also pledged their loyalty to Rodrigo and then betrayed their vows. Moutamin, however, proved himself and showed that there are honorable men of all faiths. The Moutamin-El Cid alliance also demonstrated the necessity at times of a temporary alliance with a less-than-ideal partner against a more manifestly, more deadly mutual enemy. In this regard, the villainous Ben Yusuf is a rough analog to Putin's communist regime in Russia and its "Islamic" terrorist surrogates who present an ongoing threat to Christian and Muslim alike. ■



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