

Alfonso the Wise: ‘King of the Three Religions’

Alfonso X, el Sabio (the Wise) (1221-1284) was King of Castille and León from 1252 to 1282. Like his uncle, Frederick II Hohenstaufen, who ruled in Sicily, and all of Christian Europe, as Holy Roman Emperor from 1220 to 1250, Alfonso was among the political rulers of his age who took the first steps to establish sovereign nation-states in Europe. And, like his uncle Frederick II’s Palermo, Alfonso’s Spain experienced an ecumenical flowering of scientific and artistic development, based on the cross-fertilization of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities living under its protection.

Alfonso’s central project of government was to make the Iberian peninsula—at the time, only partially reconquered from Islam—a unified kingdom, and its inhabitants a literate and cultured citizenry. He sought to create a nation-state (Spain) by creating a national language (Castilian), where neither yet existed. His *Cantigas de Santa María* song-poems were the first literary works in the Iberian peninsula to be written in the vernacular Castilian. His *Siete Partidas*, also in the vernacular, was Spain’s first legal code for the kingdom as a whole, establishing a national system of law where only local “fueros” (statutory rights) had held force previously. And, Alfonso authored the first general history of Spain, the *Crónica General de España*, before Spain as such even existed as a nation.

To accomplish these tasks, Alfonso sponsored a major scientific and translation center in the city of Toledo, building on the Twelfth-century achievements of Bishop Don Raimundo of Toledo, and Bishop Don Rodrigo Ximénez de Rada. Toledo became the world’s most important crossroad of the three great monotheistic religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Not only did they live in peace under Alfonso, but he set each to cooperate with the others around their common humanist heritage, in an exemplary ecumenical alliance—even at the height of the Christian Reconquest of Spain from the Moors, a centuries-long war in which Alfonso personally participated as a youth. It was this outlook that caused Alfonso to dub himself the “King of the Three Religions.”

All major translations at the Toledo School were executed by teams of two scholars working simultaneously—one whose mother tongue was the language of the document to be translated; the other being a native speak-

er of the target-language into which it was to be rendered. One of the earliest Toledo translations was of the Koran into Castilian, done by teams consisting of an Arab and a Christian. The same was done with the Hebrew Talmud.

At its height, Alfonso’s Toledo School of Translation had an incredible 12,000 students learning from the masters of European culture. One of the most distinguished Italian visiting professors, for example, was Brunetto Latini—the later teacher and mentor of Dante Alighieri.

The Common Good

The kind of kingdom Alfonso wished to make of Spain is best reflected in his famous legal code, the *Siete Partidas*, issued over the period 1251-1265, but not actually implemented until almost a century later. The stated objective of the *Siete Partidas* was to organize society not for the benefit of the few, but for the common good—a revolutionary proposal at the time: “The Law-Maker should love God and keep Him before his eyes when he makes the laws, in order that they may be just and perfect. He should moreover love justice and the common benefit of all.”

Alfonso emphasized the connection between such justice, and scientific knowledge: “He should be learned, in order to know how to distinguish right from wrong, and he should not be ashamed to change and amend his laws.” As opposed to such a just ruler, tyrants “prefer to act for their own advantage, although it may result in injury to the country, rather than for the common benefit of all.”

Presaging later developments in the emergence of the nation-state, Alfonso proclaimed that the only true authority to govern comes from the ruler’s dedication to the common good: “If [the ruler] should make a bad use of his power . . . people can denounce him as a tyrant, and his government which was lawful, will become wrongful.” In the midst of stratified European feudal society, Alfonso el Sabio explained what he meant by “the people”: “The union of all men together, those of superior, middle, and inferior rank, was called the people; for all are necessary, and none can be excepted for the reason that they are obliged to assist one another in order to live properly and be protected and supported.”

—Dennis Small