The United States of Al-Andalus: Washington Irving’s Granada and the Disestablishment of Zion

Adam John Waterman
American University of Beirut
aw06@aub.edu.lb

Drawing upon Washington Irving’s little read histories of Andalusian Islam, this paper will explore the representation of Al-Andalus in nineteenth century American literature. It will argue that the trope of Al-Andalus offered a counterpoint to the Puritan discourse of New Jerusalem, as that figure informed post-revolutionary conceptions of American nationality. As David Boruchoff has suggested, despite significant doctrinal differences, the Christian powers that colonized the Americas, each mobilized a missionary, millennial discourse in which the success of the colonial enterprise was understood to represent the fulfillment of eschatological prophecy. In the early nineteenth century, as the United States sought to reconcile its republican heritage with a rising sense of imperial mandate, this ideology was revived, as the advocates of Manifest Destiny sought to link the Puritan “mission into the wilderness” with the continental expansion of American power. Recently, scholars like Nabil Matar, Ussama Makdisi, Lester Vogel, Hilton Oberzinger, and S. Ilan Troen have explored the relationship between this history and the emergence of Zionist designs on greater Palestine. In this paper, I will suggest that early American “islamophilia,” much of it connected to the appearance of Washington Irving’s work on Al-Andalus, might be understood to index a counter-hegemonic movement, one that sought to engage the reality of imperial power by forwarding an alternative model of sociality and cohabitation. If the trope of New Jerusalem was part of a Restorationist discourse that necessitated the eradication of indigenous populations in the service of a larger prophetic agenda, as Matar has argued, Irving’s emphasis on the lived urbanity and historical legacy of Muslim Granada offers a different perspective on the ends of state power, one that foregrounds its role in the mediation of difference and the realization of justice.