

Cordoba – Some thoughts following my visit: 5-13th November, 2016

Summary

I conducted 8 interviews and had 3 site tours of the Mezquita, one with an archaeologist, Dr Raphael Blanco of the Department of Archaeology, University of Cordoba, explored by foot and car the new as well as the Old City, attended a Mass in the Transept (the name given to the Gothic nave built in 16-17th Century) on Sunday 6th and carried out observations of the interactions between staff and visitors in and around the site.

Mass

The Mass in the Mezquita was fascinating. There was no problem entering. Ann and I just followed other members of the congregation walking through the Patio de Los Naranjos and when challenged at the door – said “Mass” and we were let through. The congregation was mostly local Spanish with, it transpired, attendance from many local parishes in the region. There were some tourists, of whom a high proportion seemed to be Chinese. There were quite a lot of male wardens standing at the periphery of the Transept, helping with chairs but also constantly observing the congregation. Photography during the service was forbidden. The service was led by the Dean (?) and was largely very traditional in form and male-dominated. At the same time, there was a noticeable amount of lay participation in the readings and the prayers, and the choir was mixed and lay. After the service, the senior clergy stood at the front on the chancel steps to allow parishioner groups to stand beside them with signs of local villages and towns held aloft and have their photographs taken. I had the strong impression that this was a service designed to extend links to the rural hinterland and had the effect of serving as a small pilgrimage.

There was one amusing and revealing incident involving a Chinese tourist. Going up to receive the wafer-bread with other communicants, this tourist did not swallow the bread but held it in his hands. On returning to his seat, he drew slight attention to himself by appearing to giggle. Immediately two or three of the wardens approached him and quite assertively gesticulated that he should eat the wafer, which he did. Not having witnessed something like this before, I wonder if this is a new phenomenon resulting from social media: a photograph of the wafer could be posted on Facebook, or even the wafer itself sold on eBay.

Visiting the Mezquita.

It is clear that the controversy over shared worship and the dispute over ownership have led to the presence of a large number of wardens. I counted 15 on the first visit and 16 on my second, dressed fairly uniformly in blue blazers but not in uniforms. All male. This is excluding those at the door and at the ticket offices. At the close of visiting hours, their firm and respectful channelling of visitors towards the door was a polished operation.

The official pamphlet for visitors has changed in an almost unrecognisable way since my visit in November 2015. The title has reverted to *Monumental Site: The Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba*, while previously it was the *The Cathedral of Cordoba*. The previous pamphlet of 2015 opened with: ***The Mother Church of the Diocese: The Cathedral Chapter welcomes you to Cordoba’s Holy Cathedral Church. The entire grounds of this outstanding building that you are going to visit was consecrated as the mother church of the Diocese in the year 1236....*** In contrast, the 2016 pamphlet begins with: *The Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba is one of the most exceptional monuments in the world, a testimony to the ancient alliance of art and faith. Its Islamic architecture, with Hellenistic,*

Roman and Byzantine touches, comes together with Christian architecture to create one of the most beautiful examples of its kind.....

The lighting in the Mezquita is interesting. Originally the sides of the Mezquita leading into the Patio de Los Naranjos were open which allowed light and air to flow into the interior. Since ??? they have been closed which creates an effect which may or may not be deliberate: most of the Islamic areas are in shadow under subdued lighting except for the Transept which is well lit and also has high clear glass windows through which sunlight pours into the aisles, chancel and choir. A simple binary is created of dark Islamic areas and light Christian areas. Worshippers walk through the dark into the light.

In the north and north-eastern section (the area known as the enlargement of Almanzor) there was an extensive exhibition set between the coloured Islamic arches of baroque crucifixion tableau made up of some 20 settings carved out of wood, plaster and stone. The work is elaborate, ornate and graphic with blood, wounds, contorted faces and twisted bodies – a panoply, or, a pornography of Christian suffering. Presumably such an exhibition is again an unsubtle attempt to emphasize the Christian use of the space, to Christianise the space, even those spaces which are clearly Islamic. The result is clearly to break up the visual impact of the arches and to remove one of the primary aesthetic features of the site which is the jungle of arches stretching in all directions, almost as far as the eye can see.

Public ownership/shared worship

My overall impression is that the issue of shared access to prayer and worship, although highly charged, is a minority interest amongst the residents of Cordoba. It certainly is not emanating from the Cordoban Muslim community which is small and more concerned with improving the material conditions of their members and the facilities available to them. The controversy is subsumed by a cultural and political debate and contest over rival interpretations of the historical narrative of the city, and hence its current identity as a cultural beacon not only for Andalucia but also for Spain. The debate centres on the extent to which the Islamic past of the city should be recognised and celebrated or to what extent should it be minimized and made secondary to the dominant Christianised culture of Spain.

The debate does not fall along the Christian-Muslim divide. It is quite common for Cordoban Roman Catholics to say “*I am going to the mosque (Mezquita) to pray*” ,or, “*My daughter got married in the mosque (Mezquita)*” without any sense of irony or incongruity. The debate is more nuanced and relates as much if not even more to the tensions between Spain’s political centre and regions, between Castillian centrifugalism and Andalusian centripetalism. And it is in this area that the debate over public ownership and the extent to which the Church is entitled to have title over the site and the revenues it generates resonates more widely and is of greater political significance. Shared worship would be a nice symbol for some, but public ownership and management is an issue that exercises many more in Cordoba and Spain. The issue of revenues from tourists visiting the site going into the coffers of the Church when the Mezquita has received considerable funding for its restoration and upkeep from national, regional, local and international agencies, is regarded as a flagrant exploitation of a local resource that is not benefitting the residents of Cordoba.

The position of the Diocese – a missed opportunity?

It was a great shame that the Diocese spokesperson, Father Augustin, was unwilling to speak to me. See Interview notes. In the time available to me in Cordoba, I was not able to make contact with any other senior clergy who could provide me with a perspective from the Diocese's point of view. However, as a son of an Anglican Bishop myself, I am both familiar with some of the concerns that ecclesiastical authorities have regarding the use and management of property –it was the staple diet of breakfast table discussions at home – and the imperviousness to criticism that senior clergy have in the face of what they see as volatile populism and opportunistic politicians.

In this context, I recall a private conversation I had in 1993 with one of the most senior clergyman in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem where he was responding to my research on property sales by the Patriarchate to Israeli government bodies. Looking at me directly in the face, he said that what I failed to understand is that the actions the Patriarchate was taking now should be seen in the light of thousands of years of history. In order to survive in Jerusalem over this long period and, more importantly, into the future, it was necessary to be careful of the extent it allied itself to ephemeral popular movements like Palestinian nationalism. Maintaining good relations with the ruling authorities was an essential ingredient in the Patriarchate's pre-eminent position in Jerusalem. This ultra-long historical view has both a theological and an institutional basis and is, I would argue, an important lens through which to analyse the position of the Diocese of Cordoba regarding the Mezquita.

Nevertheless, one can see how the Diocese is misreading the range of options available to religious people in addressing the tension between faith and secularism and between national and universalistic values. The attitude and manner of the Diocese appears to be myopic and narrowly focussed and out of step with key milestones in Cordoba's history. Emphasizing the establishment and promotion of a separate Christian identity and narrative in the Mezquita seems to be retrogressive, unimaginative and part of a tired, worn-out world-view. It may serve specific internal ecclesiastical purposes and short-term populist trends, but it lacks vision and a sense of greatness.

Using the mixed architectural heritage, rich history and religious traditions of the Mezquita and Cordoba, the Diocese could have offered an inclusive and embracing view of Christianity as a great facilitator of pathways to God. Yes, it may have to surrender some control - inclusiveness is inherently democratic and a little messy - but it could have established itself as a beacon of interfaith understanding, co-existence and dialogue in the city without compromising its essential Christian message. Rather than the rather tribal and grasping approach it seems to be currently taking in the controversy over access and ownership, this would have been a much greater contribution to Cordoba's past, present and future and one which Christians would have been proud to be associated with.

Checklist for Observation

- Demographics of visitors
- Official staff – wardens – numbers, gender, plainclothes, uniform
- Official signage and literature.
- Use of space – focus on security, on architecture, on specific locations within monument, on traffic of visitors, on sales?
- Prominence of altars, figures, icons
- Access and closed areas.
- Lighting, seating, maintenance