

# Islamic Spain: Model of Peaceful Coexistence

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The Islamic world of pre- and early medieval Spain has elicited the interest of many religious and secular scholars because of the peaceful coexistence by diverse ethnic and religious communities. The Moorish presence in Spain is still a subject of debate. Was Islam beneficial to Spain? What course would history have taken without the Muslim presence? What are the lingering results of Spain's relationship with Islam? Why did the Moors stop short of occupying the entire peninsula at the height of their expansive campaign? How were they able to depart so elegantly at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century? Answers to these questions depict one of the most glorious chapters in Spain's history with a civilization far superior to anything Spain had ever known.

## **A Historic Overview of Islam In Spain**

In 711 a Berber and Arab Muslim army of 7000 men, under the leadership of Tariq ibn-Ziyad, crossed the Straits of Gibraltar from northern Africa to the Ibe-

rian Peninsula and was soon able to conquer the Iberian cities of Cordoba, Guadalajara, and Toledo. By 719 the invading forces (known as the Moors), ruled from the Gibraltar strait, to the coast, and to the Pyrenees. Judging by the names they gave to places and cities, one can conclude that many of the Berbers who arrived with the Arabs were still Christians.

Why the Muslims did not occupy the entire Iberian Peninsula from the beginning is a question that remains unanswered. Even more intriguing is the fact that the Muslims apparently had no intention of occupying it later. Apart from the Battle of Rio Barbate, the Muslims proceeded unchecked across Spain with an army of only about 25,000 and with only a few towns resisting.

Prior to the Muslim arrival, the Christian Visigoths ruled a Spain that was totally falling apart. Many of the idle aristocracy opposed the Crown, the peasants lived in alienation, and the Jewish community (whom the Visigoths had persecuted through harsh and restrictive anti-Jewish legislation), had no loyalty for the rulers (Kennedy 1996, 14-15). The Iberic peninsula was helpless before the invasion. Christians and Jews could no longer tolerate the rule imposed by the Visigothic oli-

garchy, so both groups welcomed the Arabs and Berbers as liberators. It is more appropriate to refer to the native people as accomplices rather than as conquered people.

“Part of the greatness of Moorish culture in Spain,” says Burckhardt,

lay in the harmonious co-existence of the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities under Arab rule. The tolerance shown by Islam both here and elsewhere appears to be in marked contradiction to the violence with which it extended its hold . . . It is all the more remarkable that once the fighting ceased the Muslims treated the Christians and Jews with a tolerance which on the whole neither the Christians nor the Jews displayed under their own jurisdiction (1972, 23).

Muslims began to focus their attention on what they called al-Andalus (southern Spain, Andalusia) and develop a civilization far superior to anything Spain had ever known. As Chejne describes it, “these processes of conquest and reconquest, lasting almost eight centuries, had enormous repercussions on the two contending societies, affecting attitudes, religious affiliations, language, customs—indeed a whole identity and way of life” (1983, 2). Under the Umayyad dynasty, al-Andalus flourished and reached its peak by 1031, but from then on, Islamic Spain gradually plunged into a state of division and chaos because of both internal and external enemies.

In 1031 the caliphate was officially abolished and regional lead-

ers began to emerge as fully independent principalities. The collapse of centralized rule opened the door for Christian kingdoms to emerge, which forced the many Islamic independent kingdoms to pay tribute before finally conquering them.

The Arabs were forced to retreat bit by bit until by the thirteenth century, their once extensive domain was reduced to a few scattered kingdoms deep in the mountains of al-Andalus, where they not only survived but flourished for the next two hundred years. However, on January 2, 1492 Ferdinand and Isabella hoisted the banner of Christian Spain above the last Muslim kingdom. Boabdil, the last Moorish king rode weeping into exile with the bitter words from his aged mother, Ayxa, ringing in his ears, “You do well to weep as a woman over what you could not defend as a man (Irving 1991, 835)”

### **Tolerance in a multiracial culture**

During the Islamic rule in Spain, Jews, Christian Ibero-Romans, Muslims Berbers, Almohads and Almoravids from North Africa, Arabs (Syrian warriors), slaves recruited from non Muslim Europe and eventually freed, mercenary Slavs, Muwalladun (Christian and Jewish converts to Islam), all coexisted together. “Foreigners were attracted to al-Andalus both by the permeability of its society and by its wealth, and Christians, among others, established themselves more or less easily in society there” (De Epalza 1992, 151). By 770 people of many races from North

Africa and Arab countries had emigrated to al-Andalus, and had intermarried with the various nationalities including the native population, resulting in a fairly heterogeneous country, and all within a few generations. This became the junction point where “Western Europe, the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic world formed an interdependent economic system” (Glick 1979, 21).

Reigning with wisdom and justice, Muslims treated Christians and Jews with tolerance and respect with the result that many embraced Islam (Jackson 1972, 32). Though scholars still do not agree how fast the Christian population converted to Islam, it is very likely that, as in other areas of the Islamic world, as many as two centuries passed before the majority of the population became Muslims. In Whishaw’s words, “the Christian hierarchy, Christian worship, and Christian monasticism continued practically without interference for something like two hundred years after the Moslem conquest” (2002, 17).

Muslim Spain has been described as

high culture and political instability, characteristic of the Muslim states. The emirs patronized, with discriminating judgment, all aspects of the arts and of technology. They were tolerant and supple in relation to the large Mozarabic (Christian) and Jewish communities in their cities. They were sophisticated in their diplomatic and trade relations with Europe, Byzantium and North Africa . . . The emirs were far less prejudiced in re-

ligious and ethnic matters than are most of the rulers in the world today (Jackson 1972, 30-31).

The large community of Christians, like the sizeable minority of Jews, had been granted the same protected religious minority status (*dhimmi*) as Christian and Jews elsewhere in Islamic lands. As “People of the Book”, they were allowed a substantial amount of autonomy (O’Callaghan 2003, 12). They were free to worship God and follow their own beliefs. “In accordance with Muslim tradition, the Christian and Jewish Communities retained their own organization under their own priests and rabbis. They had separate law courts for their family and business affairs. They controlled their own religious buildings and community schools. The special lump-sum taxes which were levied on all non-Muslims in lieu of military service were apportioned within the community and collected by their own officers (Jackson 1972, 25). The cultural prominence of Jews in the civilization of al-Andalus was accompanied by a surprising Jewish prominence in the political affairs of the land.

Under Abd-er Rahman II (Umayyad period), however, a change of attitude occurred and persecution ensued, during which many Mozarab Christians were put to death for abusing the memory of Mohamed and conspiring against the government (Jackson 1972, 31). While the political rulers of al-Andalus never fully overcame the ethnic and re-

ligious pluralism of the peninsula, the multiculturalism of Islamic Spain gave birth to a distinctive new culture that lived on in Spain even after Muslim rule ended, and is still present today not only in Spain but also in the Americas.

The Christian *Reconquest* of lower Andalusia took place quickly, because of the strong alliance between the Catholic kings and because the geography made it easy. After more than 700 years, al-Andalus ceased to exist as a political division. The treaty of Granada, ending Muslim rule, guaranteed religious tolerance to the remaining Muslim population. Among the treaty's sixty-seven articles, were laws concerning security, freedom to worship in mosques without being insulted, laws to protect civilian rights to travel, laws protecting the muezzins' authority to call to daily prayer, and laws guaranteeing that no Muslim would be molested during the month of fasting, or during the daily performance of devotional acts.

After the Treaty of Granada, the wealthy and learned Muslims chose to migrate to Muslim-ruled areas depriving their communities of natural leaders. Initially, the remaining Muslims lived within Spanish Christian Kingdoms under a set of regulations similar to regulations Christians had lived under during Islamic times. Muslims were allowed to continue practicing their own religion; they governed the internal affairs of their community on the basis of their Islamic law; they were forbidden to proselytize among

Christians, and were strongly encouraged to convert. Muslim men were forbidden to marry Christian women, though Christian men could marry Muslim women. Muslims were subject to burdensome taxes, and required to wear distinctive clothing to indicate their infidelity. Tailors were not allowed to make garments nor silver-smiths jewels according to their Moorish style; their purification baths were prohibited, and all births were to be monitored by Christian midwives to ensure that no Muslim rites were performed. Disarmament was to be enforced by a rigid inspection. In 1502 an edict by Ferdinand and Isabella officially pronounced Islam illegal in Spain and its continued practice was a criminal activity.

In the early sixteenth century, however, after having expelled the very large Jewish population from the peninsula, the Spanish kings forcedly converted the large remaining Muslim population to Christianity (Moriscos), though the great majority converted only in name.

Though Muslims were highly productive and skillful they became troublesome because of their unwillingness to completely assimilate and soon were expelled from Spain. Some 275,000 moors quit Spain, carrying their property, scientific knowledge and arts with them to the detriment of Spain.

Describing the contrast between Europe and Muslim Spain at its peak, Scott (1977) writes:

Yet there were knowledge and learning everywhere, except in Catholic Europe. At a time when

even kings could not read or write, a Moorish king had a private library of six hundred thousand books. At the time when ninety-nine percent of the Christian people were wholly illiterate, the Moorish city of Cordoba had eight hundred public schools, and there was not a village within the limits of the empire where the blessing of education could not be enjoyed by the children of the most indigent peasant, . . . and it was difficult to encounter even a Moorish peasant who could not read and write.

To make the contrast even more vivid, Thomson adds:

Europe was darkened at sunset, Cordova shone with public lamps; Europe was dirty, Cordova built a thousand baths; Europe was covered with vermin, Cordova changed its undergarments daily; Europe lay in mud, Cordova's streets were paved; Europe's palaces had smoke-holes in the ceiling, Cordova's arabesques were exquisite; Europe nobility could not sign its name, Cordova's children went to school; Europe's monks could not read the baptismal service, Cordoba's teachers created a library of Alexandrian dimensions (1931, 164).

Caliph Al- Hakam II (961-976) founded a library of hundreds of thousands of volumes. During the conversion campaign, however, Cardenal Ximenes burned in public bonfires over 1,005,000 volumes, including unique works of Moorish culture.

### **Legacy**

The Arabs suddenly appeared in Spain to fill her with their activity and genius. They endowed her with glamour, building an edifice of light

which sent its rays into Europe and inspired it with the passion for study, freedom and respect. Art, science, philosophy, trade, industry and agriculture were possible framed in the Islamic principles of freedom and respect for the values and religious beliefs of the non-Muslim people groups.

Lane-Poole insightfully concludes:

For nearly eight centuries, . . . Spain set to all Europe a shining example of a civilized and enlightened state. Her fertile provinces rendered doubly prolific, by the industrious engineering skill of her conquerors, bore fruit an hundredfold. Cities innumerable sprang up in the rich valleys in the Guadelquivir and the Guadiana. . . Art, literature and science prospered as they prospered nowhere in Europe . . . with Granada fell all Spain's greatness. For a brief while, indeed, the reflection of the Moorish splendor cast a borrowed light upon the history of the land which it had once warmed with its sunny radiance. The Great epoch of Isabella, Charles V and Phillip II, of Columbus, Cortez and Pizarro, shed a last halo about the dying monuments of mighty State. Then followed the abomination of dissolution, the rule of Inquisition and the blackness of darkness in which Spain has been plunged since ever. In the land where science was once supreme, the Spanish doctors became noted for nothing but their ignorance and incapacity . . . the arts of Toledo and Almeria faded into insignificance . . . The land, deprived of the skillful irrigation of the Moors, grew impoverished and neglected; the richest and most fertile valleys languished and were deserted; most of the populous cities which had filled every dis-

trict of Andalusia, fell into ruinous decay; and beggars, friars, and bandits took the place of scholars, merchants and knights. So low fell Spain when she had driven away the Moors. Such is the melancholy contrast offered by her history (1920, vii-ix).

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## Book Reviews

Lingenfelter, Judith E., and Lingenfelter, Sherwood G. 2003. *Teaching cross-culturally: An incarnational model for learning and teaching*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books. 134 pp.

The Lingenfelters, a husband-and-wife team, bring to this volume appropriate credentials. Both have doctoral degrees in the subject area and both are currently teaching: Judith at Biola

University, Sherwood at Fuller Theological Seminary. Both have extensive experience in cross-cultural teaching, at home and abroad. This is Sherwood's fourth book on the interplay of culture and mission published by Baker (*Ministering cross-culturally*, 1986; *Transforming culture*, 1992, revised 1998; *Agents of transformation*, 1996).

The intended audience is "the western-trained educator who is working or planning to work in a