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## The Islamic Iberian Peninsula: Cultural Fusion and Coexistence

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Mrs. Balzer

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### The Islamic Iberian Peninsula: Cultural Fusion and Coexistence

After the death of Muhammad in 632 C.E., Islam spread rapidly from Mecca to much of northern Africa. In 711 C.E., the recently-converted Muslim Berbers, who inhabited the regions of Morocco and Algeria, crossed The Strait of Gibraltar and conquered the Iberian Peninsula. The invasion of the Iberian Peninsula, today modern Spain and Portugal, marks the first time that Islam had reached the European continent. Muslim forces were in power in the peninsula for almost four hundred years, and much of that time was nonviolent and peaceful. The coexistence of Muslims, Jews, and Christians in the Iberian Peninsula was the longest period in history in which the three groups lived together in relative peace. The cause most often stated for the nonviolent coexistence is traced by many to the Qur'anic law which states people of Abrahamic faiths should be shown tolerance. While the Islamic law of religious tolerance did contribute to coexistence, the main causes for the lasting peace in the region were the small number of invading Berbers, initial fear of religious influence, the diffusion of Arabic language and literature, intercultural marriage, and disunity in the Caliphate.

Before the invasion of the Iberian Peninsula by the Berbers, the Visigoths were in power in the region from 586 C.E. to 713 C.E. Under the Visigoths, who were primarily Catholic, Jews were subject to anti-semitic laws aimed at eradicating them. While anti-semitic laws were enforced in varying degrees by the Visigothic kings, the Catholic Church remained more



consistent in its persecution of Jews. Jews in the Peninsula faced the most restrictions beginning with the reign of King Reccesuinth in 653 C.E. During the reign of Reccesuinth,

“Penalties for infractions of the law included loss of property, exile, and severe physical punishment—such as beatings and castration—but these punishments were replaced by the death penalty, which had been decreed by Reccesuinth for even minor infractions like performing a circumcision or refusing to eat pork” (Bachrach 27).

The Visigothic kings had used their power in the Church to execute their anti-semitic laws. “Yet if the Visigothic kings controlled anything within Spain it was the Church.” (Bachrach 13). From this, we can conclude that clergy and the Church were in a position of power before the Muslim conquest in the Iberian region. The goal of the Visigoths was to eradicate Jews either by genocide, or forced conversion. During the time of the Visigoths, Jews were barred from holding public office, or holding power over Christians. These laws crippled the Jews economically, forcing Jewish communities into poverty. Compared to the Visigoths, Islamic Iberia was much more tolerant toward Jews.

The level of religious tolerance in Iberia was much higher under the Berbers than it had been under the Visigoths. The invading Berbers numbered about 7,000-12,000, only a fraction of the Iberian population. In fact, “Christians were largely unaffected by the change of regime. And, as a result of the fears of the Muslim minority, their day-to-day contact with Islam was restricted” (Wolf 286). The Berbers were able to conquer the Visigothic Iberian Peninsula “not entirely, or even principally, by a function of their military prowess. Rather, it was a product of their willingness to offer remarkably favorable terms of surrender to the towns and local lords they encountered” (Wolf 284). The Berbers offered favorable terms of surrender, because they



were vastly outnumbered by the native population, and thus could not afford to lose troops to war. It is unclear why exactly the inhabitants of the Peninsula did not resist Muslim invasion. The lack of a stable monarchy may have fragmented and weakened the army and government of the Visigoths leading to favorable conditions for an invasion. From 586 C.E. to 713 C.E., the Visigoths had eighteen kings, seven of which were killed. It is possible that due to the frequent regime changes, Visigothic Iberia was ill-equipped to counter even a small invading force. Favorable terms of surrender, and fears of assimilation on both sides, resulted in the lack of initial interaction, contributing to a nonviolent coexistence, there was not an immediate threat to non-Muslims that would prompt them to go to war.

The small number of Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula also meant that the recent invaders were susceptible to the influence of surrounding cultures. “The Muslims remained a minority in their empire for some centuries, vulnerable to the appeal of these sophisticated cultures and the danger that the distinctiveness of the *umma* and the religion founded in Medina would dissolve through assimilation” (Safran 579). The threat of assimilation to the surrounding pre-existing cultures discouraged interaction between the Muslims and their recently conquered subjects as much as it interaction between did non-Muslims and the Berbers.

Perhaps, in part due to the isolation between conqueror and the conquered, Jews were not nearly as restricted after the invasion of the Berbers as they had been during the Visigothic era. They were able to practice their religion freely, without legal restriction, since “Islamic law allowed most conquered peoples to retain their religion. These non-Muslim groups—Primarily Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians—existed in fairly closed communities. Each religious community had its own structure of authority” (Coope 48). Along with Christians, they had to



pay a *Jizya* (a tax on non-Muslims), but they were free to practice Judaism. Since Judaism is an Abrahamic religion, Jews were given religious freedom. “Islamic doctrine distinguishes first between Muslim and non-Muslim peoples and second between those non-Muslims who are, like Muslims themselves, ‘Peoples of the Book’ (that is, Christians and Jews) and those non-Muslims who are ‘pagan’”(Shell 306). These monotheistic ‘People of the Book’ were given the right to practice their religions as long as they did not publicly insult or question Muslim doctrine. In the Islamic Iberian Peninsula, Jews reached a level of equality that they had never been able to attain under the Visigoths. “By at least the ninth century, Christians and Jews were regularly employed by the Emirs as tax collectors, ministers, and even bodyguards”(Wolf 287). While under the Visigoths, Jews were killed for their religious practices; after the Muslim conquest, they were able to hold offices in the government and govern themselves in their own communities. Muslims showed much more religious tolerance toward Jews than the Visigoths had, Jews had much more cultural freedom and social mobility under the Muslims than they had under the Visigoths.

As Muslims controlled the government, and became more powerful in Iberia, they were able to elevate the people in their society. Increasingly, non-Muslims were being drawn to the economic and social benefits of being a part of Islamic society. The influence of Islam threatened the Christian Church because “Christians converted to be able to participate more fully in Islamic society” (Wolf 287). In Iberian society, Muslims controlled all of the positions of power, so conversion was an appealing option to many Christians. With time, the fears of both Muslims and non-Muslims over interaction with one another waned. The first Christian writings of the invasion were written almost a century after the fact. After that first century, a letter entitled



*Indiculus Luminosus*, written by a Christian man named Albar, illustrates the level of diffusion that had occurred in the first century after the arrival of the Berbers.

Do not all the Christian youths, handsome in appearance, fluent of tongue, conspicuous in their dress and action, distinguished for their knowledge of Gentile lore, highly regarded for their ability to speak Arabic, do they not all eagerly use the volumes of the Chaldeans [Arabic literature], read them with the greatest interest, discuss them ardently, and collecting them with great trouble, make them known with every praise of their tongue, the while they are ignorant of the beauty of the Church and look with disgust upon the Church's rivers of paradise as something vile (Coope 62).

Albar's letter illustrates the high level of influence that the Muslim invaders had on the region, specifically on Christians. Christians and Jews often converted to Islam to attain a higher status in the Islamic society. In *Indiculus Luminosus*, Albar says the Christian youth are "conspicuous in their dress and action", which refers to the common practice of Jews and Christians wearing Muslim garb in order to be seen as a part of the upper class. "Conversion to Islam in the medieval period was not a mere religious conversion but a social conversion as well, because it involved the adoption of the Arabic language as well as Islamic cultural practices" (Boone, Benco 65). Muslims had the greatest impact on Christians not on the battlefield, as the word conquest usually implies, but on the culture of the Christians.

The Islamic law of tolerance toward Abrahamic religions is often given as the primary cause of peace in Iberia. While it explains the Muslim tolerance of other religions, it does not explain why Jews or Christians tolerated the Muslims. Three factors can account for coexistence



between all three religions: the spread of Arabic literature, the cultural exchange facilitated by intermarriage, and lastly, the establishment of the Caliphate in Córdoba.

The first factor contributing to cultural exchange was the spread of Arabic literature. The blending of culture led to most non-Muslims on the peninsula speaking Arabic as a second language, which facilitated the spread of Muslim ideas and music. With the spread of the Arabic language, came the spread of Arabic literature and ideas. In the ninth century, One Córdoba Christian named Alvero wrote about the influence of Arabic literature on the Christian society of the time.

Many of my co-religionists read the poetry and tales of the Arabs, study the writing of Muhammadan theologians and philosophers, not in order to refute them, but to learn how to express themselves in Arabic with greater correctness and elegance. Where can one find today a layman who reads the Latin commentaries of the Holy scripture? All the young Christians noted for their gifts know on the language and literature of the Arabs, read and study with zeal Arabic books and, building up great libraries of them at enormous cost and loudly proclaiming everywhere that this literature is worthy of admiration (BenAicha 258).

One of the fastest ways Muslim rhetoric spread among the upper class of Iberian Christians and Jews was through literature. The emergence of a newly accessible body of literature was appealing to young scholars. As the language spread, the old Latin that had been used in Roman times faded as Arabic became more prominent. By the late period of Muslim power in the Iberian region around 1000 C.E., Christians and Jews had assimilated into Muslim culture by adopting their language and dress. The diffusion and adoption of Muslim cultural practices



through literature was a large contributing factor to the cultural exchange that led to lasting peace in the region.

As the Muslims and Christians came into contact, their cultures diffused into one another. The cultural similarity which began to arise in Iberia is responsible for the lasting peace in the region. From the beginning of the conquest, all three groups in the region tried to prevent assimilation. Muslim religious leaders tried to prevent intermarriage because it “raised fears about the insinuation of ‘innovations’ that would corrupt the faith, and they created concerns about communal and individual identity” (Safran 576). If a Muslim man were to marry a non-Muslim woman, their children would legally be Muslim, but the non-Muslim woman had no legal obligation to convert. This was seen by many Muslim leaders as a risk to expose the children of an interfaith marriage to a corrupting influence that was not Muslim. Over time, more and more Muslims did intermarry since, “According to the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet, Muslim men were free to marry women of the ‘People of the Book’”(Safran 583). Intermarriage strengthened cultural ties between religions by exposing the children of intermarriage to a mixture of cultural practices. Intermarriage led the cultures of the Peninsula to become more homogenous and created an environment where cultures that were once separate, fused.

The last contributing factor to the long span of peace in the Iberian Peninsula was disunity in the governmental-religious structure of the Caliphate. At the time of the invasion, the Umayyad Caliphate was in power, but was overthrown by the Abbasids. In 750 C.E., “A descendant of one Abbas, the uncle of Muhammad, revolted against the Umayyads, captured Damascus, and ruthlessly massacred the caliph’s family. He thus founded the Abbasid dynasty.



Only one member of the Umayyads, Abdurrahman, escaped. He fled to Spain, where he set up an independent caliphate at Córdoba in 755” (Chambers 214). The Caliph was seen as the person closest to the prophet Muhammad, and exercised complete control over Islamic government and dogma. The largest impact the division of the Caliphate had on the culture of the Iberian Peninsula was moving their spiritual leader from Damascus to Iberia itself. This isolated Muslims in Iberia from Islamic influence from elsewhere in the Empire. The highest member of the government for the Muslims in Iberia would now be subject to the same cultural changes that were affecting the people living there. The Caliph’s relocation to Córdoba also severed Islam in Iberia from Islam in the rest of the Islamic Empire, which allowed for Islamic culture to evolve independently with less outside influence.

The historical event that is often used to argue that there was not a peaceful coexistence in the Iberian Peninsula is the Córdoba Martyrs Movement, a period from 851 C.E. to 861 C.E. when nearly fifty Christians were killed for publicly denouncing Muhammad. This is not an example of religious persecution, since the martyrs would have met the same fate if they had been Muslim and denounced Muhammad. The reaction of one Córdoba Christian is an example of how interconnected the two faiths had become over time. Eulogius was a Córdoba clergyman who defended the martyrdom of the martyrs after they were criticized by the Christians of Córdoba. He was asked, “how his candidates for martyrdom could be considered legitimate martyrs when they had ‘suffered at the hands of men who venerated both God and a law’” (Wolf 290). Many Christians in Córdoba thought that the Córdoba Martyrs were not in fact martyrs since their Muslim executioners were justified. This is one example of how Islam diffused into Christianity and led to the shared value of not denouncing Muhammad.



Much of the scholarship on the Islamic Iberian Peninsula can be divided into two main viewpoints, essentially the former agrees that Islamic Iberia was peaceful, the latter contests that idea. Peaceful coexistence or *Convivencia* has “been used to describe the tripartite society of medieval Iberia ever since it was introduced by the great Spanish philologist and historian Americo Castro in the 1940’s” (Ray 1). *Convivencia* is an interpretation of Iberian society that ranges from ‘harmonious’ to ‘more tolerant than the Visigothic era’. Those who disagree with Castro often claim that the notion of *Convivencia* is idealistic stating that the narrative of Iberia “has become mythologized to the point of suppressing the many conflicts of that era in order to satisfy a modern hunger for narratives of peace and harmony. With respect to its periods of tolerance and convivencia (coexistence), Spain was not unique” (Ousterhout 84). While stating that the Iberian Peninsula was without conflict due to religious or cultural differences may be idealistic, the lack of recorded conflict suggests that peaceful coexistence was plausible. The primary sources all point to the adoption of culture, “a medieval Saxon nun named Hroswitha had called the land of al-Andalus [Iberia] ‘the ornament of the world’ (Ousterhout 84), and the integration of Christians and Jews in a society administered by Muslims.

The initial display of tolerance and nonviolence by the conquering Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula was the catalyst for the cultural exchange that led to lasting peace in the region. Whether not using violence to conquer Iberia was a tactical decision due of their low numbers, or an expression of their obedience to the mandates of the Qur’an, the Muslim invaders showed religious tolerance to Jews and Christians. The largest contributing factor to the long standing peace was the cultural exchanges that occurred in the region. The adoption of the Arabic



language and Muslim dress along with intermarriage and an exchange of ideas resulted in peace in Iberia.



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