



## LS 819: al-Andalus 711-1492 – A Medieval Attempt at Toleration of Difference

Summer 2018 | May to June 2018 | Dr. Gary McCarron

A Simon Fraser University/GLS Travel-Study course

From 'Black Lives Matter' to clashes in Kashmir to Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa and the endless conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, it is readily apparent that we live an era of multi and inter-cultural conflicts and always fragile attempts at cooperation and conciliation. Spain in the years between 700 and 1400 has some uncanny parallels with the world we live in now, an era that witnessed a complicated quest for tolerance and accommodation among a multitude of ethnic and religious groups with diverse and often conflicting traditions and ambitions.

In 711 AD an Arab army from recently Islamized North Africa crossed into Visigoth Spain at Gibraltar and by 720 Muslim forces had defeated the Visigoth forces and occupied most of Spain up to the Pyrenees. The Christian Visigoths had inherited the Roman province of Hispania in the 6th century, but turned out to be no match for the Muslim Arab and Berber forces that were part of the remarkable expansion of Islam in the 8th century, stretching from Afghanistan to Spain.

For the next six centuries, until the renewed vigor of Christian forces began to regain much of Spain by the mid 1200's, Muslim Spain became a highly developed centre of learning, architecture, philosophy, manufacture and technology, and of high culture in general. Situated at the far Western edge of the Muslim world that was centered in Baghdad, Muslim Spain was quite 'independent' in many ways, relating more directly both economically and culturally with Muslim North Africa to the south and Christian lands to the north. Indeed, Muslim scholarship, libraries and sophisticated knowledge of Greek and Roman learning, especially of Aristotle, in Spain came to be a chief source of a late Medieval cultural 'awakening' in Western Europe.

## COURSE OBJECTIVES

- To explore the unique blending of Muslim/Christian/Jewish art, literature, poetry and architecture that came to characterize Andalusia
- To examine the transmission of Greek learning from Baghdad to Cordoba and on to Western Europe via Muslim philosophers such as Avicenna (Ibn Sina) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd) and Jewish philosophers such as Maimonides (Musa ibn Maymun).
- To assess the degree to which Muslim rule in Andalusia was successful in creating a society and culture based on toleration of disparate religious and cultural communities and to see if this experiment in attempting to live with 'difference' has anything to say about contemporary global conflicts.



## BACKGROUND

The Arab and Berber forces that spread out across Spain in the 8th and 9th centuries encountered a landscape occupied by Christians and, especially in the cities, by a large Jewish population. Both these peoples, according to Muslim Law, were 'people of the Book' and hence were to be both tolerated and accepted as full members of the larger community. Over time many of the Christians converted to Islam and Arabic became the dominant language of Spain, but it was never the intention of Muslims to 'convert' Christians and Jews since they were seen as people linked to the same belief system, albeit somewhat misguided.

What follows over the next few centuries are on-going attempts to learn to live together under law, but with only one community, the Muslims, having all the actual power. As one

author puts it: “Given the legal complications of interfaith marriage and conversion and the multiple occasions for interaction and engagement among Muslims, Christians, and Jews, legal boundary making was contingent and associational, flexible and negotiable”. It had to be this way because the reality on the ground was complex. There were Arabs from places as distant as Syria and Arabia, Moors from both pastoral/tribal and urban backgrounds, Jews with deep roots in Iberian culture, Christians who held fast to their religion, and Christians who had converted to Islam.

From @750 to @1000 there was what some call a kind of ‘Golden Age’ in Muslim Spain when a descendant of the Umayyad family that had ruled the Muslim world from the death of the Prophet until 750, arrived in Spain as a kind of refugee from the elimination of his family in Damascus. Abd al-Rahman established an Amirate in Cordoba in 755 and his descendants ruled until @1030. This was the great era of relative stability, of the beginnings of the great libraries, the building of the great Mosque of Cordoba, the spread of romantic poetry and the influx of ancient Greek manuscripts from Baghdad to Cordoba, Seville and other cities of al-Andalus. This era along with the final years of Muslim presence in Spain in Granada from 1200 to 1492 will be the focus of the GLS Travel-Study Program.

**To explore this unique experiment in the toleration of Difference we will live for two weeks in self-catering accommodation in Cordoba with side trips to Seville and other local sites of interest. On weekends participants will be free to remain in Cordoba or take local transportation to other centres of culture in Spain. For the final week of the course we will move to Granada, site of the Alhambra and of the final Muslim presence in Spain.**

#### REQUIRED TEXTS

In a series of pre-departure sessions and in seminars on site we will discuss the following texts:

Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (Boston: Little Brown, 2002)

Jannina M. Safran, *Defining Boundaries in al-Andalus: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Islamic Iberia* (Cornell Univ. Press, 2013)

Cola Franzen trs., *Poems of Arab Andalusia* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989)

#### USEFUL BACKGROUND READING

Hugh Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal: A Political History of al-Andalus* (London: Longman, 1996)

Michel B. Barry, *Homage to Al-Andalus: The Rise and Fall of Islamic Spain* (Dublin: Andalus Press, 2008) (illustrated story)

