Multifaith mosaic: PBS's Cities of Light

by Jason Byassee in the November 13, 2007 issue

Andalusia, the vibrant, southernmost region of Spain, is famous for its party culture, bullfighting and oceans of sunshine. The cathedral spire in the largest city, Seville, which towers over the old quarter, guides pedestrians to the third-largest church in Christendom.

This ancient corner of the world provides a remarkable story about creative interaction between the three Abrahamic faiths. This story, told in video form in *Cities of Light: The Rise and Fall of Islamic Spain* (shown originally on PBS and now available as a DVD), disrupts the usual historical account of how religious conflict was put to an end only by the rise of the Enlightenment and the secular state. Christians, Muslims and Jews lived together in relative harmony in the region that Muslims called Al-Andalus for the better part of seven centuries before the Enlightenment. It was only after Christians and Muslims elsewhere in Europe and Africa took offense at this tradition of interreligious cooperation that Al-Andalus's era of tolerance crumbled. The region's history offers a dramatic and alternative picture of the possibilities of religious tolerance and peaceful interfaith interaction.

Christians, Jews and Muslims came to the Iberian Peninsula in different waves. Jews came first, perhaps as refugees from the Jewish war with Rome in the first century. Christianized Visigoths arrived after sacking Rome in 410. Muslims burst from the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century and fought their way across northern Africa to the base of the Pyrenees.

The Catholic Visigoths had been persecuting the Jews for nearly a hundred years by the time the Muslims arrived and assumed control of the region. After such treatment, the Jews were happy to welcome Muslim rule. One scholar relates that the conquering Muslims had no need to garrison the towns they took. All they had to do was arm the Jews, who would defend the towns against their former Christian persecutors until the Muslims returned.

As Islam conquered the region, cultural life flourished. Muslim leaders built magnificent buildings on the same sites as Christian cathedrals. One early ruler, Abd ar-Rahman I, built a mosque in Córdoba modeled on the palaces in Damascus. In one of the many striking images of *Cities of Light*, the camera glories in this mosque's towering Arabesque arches and crisscrossing vaults, decorated with glass tessarae brought from Greek Byzantium. Muslim palaces had running water and gas lighting not just indoors, but along prominent streets. Abd ar-Rahman III served his guests sorbet made from ice brought from the Pyrenees. And he employed a Christian priest as his ambassador to the German emperor Otto I, with whom Al-Andalus signed a significant peace treaty. The first musical conservatory was established under the directorship of a musician brought from Baghdad. Caravans of camels brought Arabic books, and emissaries from Byzantium brought Greek volumes of science.

By the end of the 10th century Córdoba's library was the envy of the world. Abd ar-Rahman III's personal physician was Jewish and one of the era's most important poets. Agriculture boomed as hydraulic advances improved old Roman aqueducts and brought irrigation and warm baths even to small towns. Without converting to Islam, Christians and Jews adopted Arabic as their conversational language. All this in the 10th century!

Though the political stability brought by leaders like Abd ar-Rahman III did not last, Al-Andalus's remarkable interreligious exchanges continued. After the kingdom broke into several kingdoms, each vying for power, Jewish and Christian poets and courtiers found places of employment. Northern Christian kingdoms allied themselves with small Muslim kingdoms against larger Muslim kingdoms. Perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned is that it is better for power to be shared among people of several faiths rather than placed in the hands of leaders of one religion. One Jewish poet, Ibn Nagrela, rose so high in the Muslim court of Granada that he not only wrote poetry and directed cultural affairs, but led armies.

Cities of Light suggests that a backlash of religious fundamentalism rose up against these efforts at interreligious cooperation. For example, Muslims in Granada were so offended by the power of Ibn Nagrela that they launched a mob that killed his son and murdered thousands of Jews. Pope Alexander II, angered by Muslim rule and Christian cooperation with it, urged Christians to take back old lands. The Muslim kingdom of Seville recruited reinforcements from North Africa to fight encroaching Christians, and these North African Berbers were horrified to see fellow Muslims

drinking alcohol and cooperating with people of other religions. In 1013, Muslims burned the libraries at Córdoba and Seville, forced out Christians and Jews and swept away the period of religious cooperation.

Nevertheless, rich religious interactions did not disappear. Alfonso VI, a Christian king who retook the ancient Visigothic capital of Toledo, did not burn its great library. He recognized greatness even in texts written in languages he did not understand. He referred to himself as the “emperor of the two religions.” Jews expelled from southern Spain found relative freedom in Christian kingdoms to the north, bringing cultural and religious texts with them, “fructifying” Christian Europe and laying the seeds for the Renaissance. Though Muslim rulers had often been better for Jews than Christian ones, during the 12th century “Christendom was the land of opportunity for Jews,” according to Raymond Scheindlin of Jewish Theological Seminary.

Conflicts that began in the 11th century intensified in the 13th. Christian and Muslim puritans elsewhere continued to take offense at the cooperative activities in Al-Andalus. As Muslim fundamentalists persecuted Jews and Christians in Spain’s south, Christians undertook a reconquest of Spain. With the Reconquista of Córdoba in 1236, Abd ar-Rahman’s mosque was reconsecrated as a Catholic church. The narrator of *Cities of Light* calls this an act of “utter domination,” but surely the result was better than demolishing the building. Muslim Al-Andalus continued to exist for another 200 years in the holdout Islamic kingdom of Granada.

The growing Christian empires of the north did not crack down on Muslims and Jews entirely until the 15th century and the onset of the plague. Christians sought a scapegoat for the decimations wrought by the plague, and the Jews were a convenient target. Muslim conquest of Constantinople in the east led to renewed fervor against the Muslims in the west. The year 1492 is not only the year of Columbus’s voyage (made possible by astrolabs based on the work of Muslim astronomers); it is also the year in which Ferdinand and Isabella, the “Catholic monarchs,” expelled all Jews from Spain and reconquered Granada. Jews and Muslims who wished to stay had to convert, though many maintained aspects of their religious practices (the resulting religious pastiche was one reason the church instituted the Spanish Inquisition). Finally, in 1609 half a million “Moriscos”—Muslims who had been forcibly converted to Christianity— were expelled as well.

The vestiges of Al-Andalus—its architecture, gardens, artwork, illuminated manuscripts—come alive in *Cities*. The scholars and requisite experts in the film are enthusiastic and engaging. Only the rather pitiful historical reenactments are ineffective in conveying the grandeur and intrigue of the period (it's hard to compete with the *Lord of the Rings*).

What is most significant about *Cities of Light*, however, is its portrait of a form of religious tolerance that was not "ideological," says Scheindlin of JTS, but "practical." Simply seeing the vestiges of Muslim and Jewish life in southern Spain speaks volumes: the tiny, intricate Jewish quarter in Seville is now, ironically, devoid of Jews, except for tourists. Another local square in town, called La Plaza de la Inquisición, tells why. Spain celebrated *los Reyes Católicos* for centuries after its expulsion of all non-Catholics. Interreligious and intercultural exchange, difficult as it is at times, is surely preferable to uniformity at the point of a sword. Our own vantage point suggests that such peaceable interaction is not merely valuable; the future of civilization depends on it.