



CORDOBA

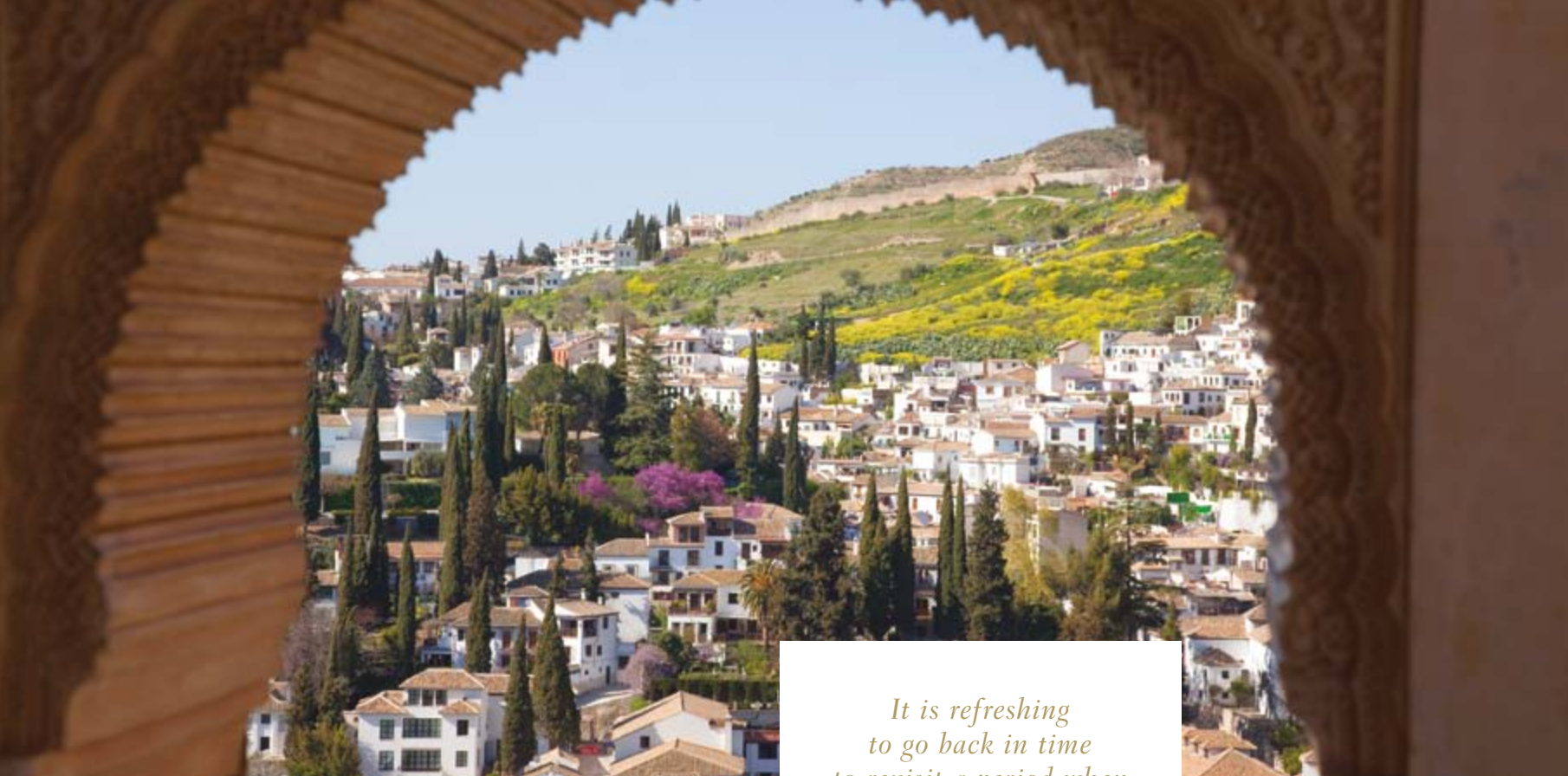
A LESSON IN TOLERANCE

By Cassidy Hazelbaker

For a brief while in Medieval Spain, Muslims, Jews and Christians were able to live together.

Cassidy Hazelbaker explores the Golden Age of Andalusia – a period of interfaith and cultural exchange.





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In a world where social, religious and ethnic differences separate people so acutely, it is refreshing to revisit a period when people from different faiths and cultures lived side-by-side with prosperity as a result. From the 8th century to the 11th century, the majority of the Iberian Peninsula was under Muslim Umayyad control. In Andalusia, known as Al Andalus, Cordoba was the capital; a place where Muslims, Christians and Jews exchanged knowledge and ideas. Among other things, this exchange benefitted commerce, philosophy, architecture and agriculture.

HISTORY OF UMAYYADS IN AL-ANDALUS

After the death of Prophet Mohammed in 632, leadership was passed through four successors, or caliphs. Following the assassination of the fourth Caliph in 661, the governor of Syria, Mu'awiye, seized power and established the Umayyad Caliphate. The caliphate was ruled by the Umayyad family for about one hundred years, a period which became known as the Umayyad Dynasty. The dynasty's origins are in Mecca, but Damascus became their capital. During a period of conquests and expansion, the dynasty was the largest empire and reached out to the Caucasus, the Maghreb, Sind, parts of Central Asia and the Iberian Peninsula.

The Umayyad conquest of the Iberian Peninsula took place between 711 and 718 and was led by General Tarek ibn Zayed. The invasion

resulted in the collapse of the Visigoth rule and in turn the establishment of the Islamic Empire era on the Peninsula, which was to be one of great enlightenment and tolerance.

As a result of the Third Muslim Civil War, which lasted from 744 to 747, a branch of the Umayyad family fled to Andalusia, where, in exile, they established the caliphate of Cordoba. Stability in Andalusia came with the establishment of the Umayyad caliphate, under which different Muslim groups came together to rule the territory. This time period is often known as the Golden Age of learning in Andalusia, where libraries, colleges and public spaces were established and where the study of poetry, literature and architecture was encouraged.

The arrival of Eastern thinking and knowledge to the Iberian Peninsula proved beneficial for agriculture as Eastern methods of farming had been fine-tuned during centuries of adapting to the tough climate and landS of the Middle East. Blending Eastern knowledge with European tradition increased the crop yield and made agriculture more efficient. Andalusia was a crossroads for many regions and the flux of travelers brought specimens and knowledge of foreign plants that resulted in a great interest in botany and agricultural experimentation.

Muslims and non-Muslims played a prime role in the society. A marked characteristic of tolerance throughout the caliphate was the freedom of conquered peoples to

retain their religions. Although they had to make concessions and had some limitations placed on them, these were not overly severe considering the standards of the time. As Professor Emeritus at Princeton University, Bernard Lewis, states in his book *The Jews of Islam*, “a recognized status, albeit one of inferiority to the dominant group, which is established by law, recognized by tradition, and confirmed by popular assent, is not to be despised.” Non-Muslims could work in the civil service and were not restricted to certain careers. They were not forced to live in separate areas and were able to make a meaningful contribution to society. This lack of cultural and religious separation proved beneficial for the entire community and led to a positive environment where learning and the arts were relished.

THE TEACHINGS OF MAIMONIDES

Maimonides was a Jewish philosopher and one of the most revered and well-known Torah scholars of the Medieval Period. Born in Cordoba in 1135, his formative years and experiences occurred in an environment of academic tolerance. Living in the cultural pluralism of



Andalusia, Muslim law, including Almohad legal thought, had a substantial influence on his work, as did Aristotlean theory, which was well-respected in Arab philosophical circles at the time. Maimonides' exposure to Muslim Arab thinking gave his philosophical research an extra edge. He drafted a code of Jewish law as well as established the 13 Principles of Faith, which are held to be the main tenets required for believers of Judaism. Maimonides also wrote his famous *Guide for the Perplexed* in Arabic in addition to other works written in Judeo-Arabic that allowed many Jewish scholars to contribute to theological debates, which at the time were mostly held in Aramaic, the language found in the Near East. Maimonides' works remain relevant in contemporary times, and *Guide for the Perplexed*, which deals with religious mysticism and general philosophical knowledge, later influenced European philosophers such as Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. The text was studied by scholars of many faiths. It is still referenced in the Middle East and elsewhere today.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCE

The Umayyad Empire also brought about a period rich in the creation of many buildings and mosques. The architecture of the time was characterized by muqarnas, voussoirs, domes, arches- horseshoe, crenellated, lancet and ogee, courtyards and decorative tile work. These artistic elements were found not only in Muslim buildings, but inspired similar building styles in

churches and castles. Two of the most famous structures that are still standing in Andalusia are the Mezquita and the Alhambra.

One of the most impressive examples of Moorish architecture, the Mezquita, was built on the site of the Roman temple of Janus in Cordoba. The mosque began as a church, which was purchased by the Umayyad prince Abdal Rahman and, starting in 784, and was remodeled over the next two centuries by Abdal Rahman and his successors. Seen as the heart of the city, the sheer majesty of the building was said to dazzle all Andalusians, regardless of faith. During the Reconquista in the 13th century, the mosque was reconverted into a cathedral under the order of King Ferdinand III.

Often described as a 'pearl set in emeralds' in reference to the contrast of the building and the surrounding forests, the Alhambra in Granada

began as a citadel constructed in the late 9th century and later contained a palace and residential quarters for subjects as well. It was designed, built and embellished by teams of Muslim, Christian and Jewish artisans, and includes courtyards, gardens and streams. The Alhambra was completed towards the end of Muslim rule in Spain and reflects the artistic and architectural variety of the Umayyad period.

During the Reconquista, Moorish artists and intellectuals took refuge in the structure.

CONTINUAL DIALOGUE

The co-existence of religions and cultures in Andalusia gradually came to an end between the 11th and 13th centuries with the Reconquista, when Catholic troops from Northern Spain overthrew the Umayyad rulers and retook the territory. Moorish rule continued in Granada until the 15th century, but eventually, it too came to an end. Under the Reconquista, most Muslims and Jews were expelled from Andalusia and thus the age of cultural and academic exchange culminated.

The Golden Age of Andalusia lives on. The art and architecture of the period can still be viewed throughout the region and the literary works produced by the great philosophers and theologians of the time continue to be referenced by many today. Cordoba has been designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO – a city whose spirit is still very much alive through remnants of the past. It is through the region's ruins of this Golden period that we recall an era of tolerance and cooperation which serves as inspiration for generations to come.