

13: Analyzing Secondary Sources: How Do Modern Historians Assess the Significance of Muslim Spain?

Author: Susan Douglass

Overview:

This activity sums up the points made in *Cities of Light* about the lasting importance of Muslim Spain to world history and Western civilization. It provides quotations from several recent works on the issues of tolerant coexistence in al-Andalus, and on the contribution to European culture of this period and this society. The quotations also explore the difficulties and possibilities of tolerance among cultural groups then and today.

Objectives:

Students will

- Analyze synthesizing statements about al-Andalus and its contribution to world and European history from recent works of cultural, political and literary history.
- Assess the role of Islamic Spain and some of the Christian kingdoms as places where knowledge was prized and explain the roles of Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars in its development and transfer to Europe.
- Draw inferences between past and present using the example of al-Andalus.

Materials:

- Student Handout 13a: *What Do Modern Historians Say about the Importance of Islamic Spain in World History?*
- Activity Sheet 13b: *Experts in Cities of Light Sum Up the Importance of Islamic Spain to the World Today*

Time: 1-2 class periods (plus homework if desired), or as an assessment tool

Procedure:

1. Distribute Student Handout 13a: *What Do Modern Historians Say about the Importance of Islamic Spain for World History?* The class may be divided into groups to analyze each passage, or individual passages can be assigned for homework, with a paragraph explaining the meaning of the quotations. This could serve as preparation for a class discussion on the significance of Islamic Spain and its contribution to world history in the eyes of modern historians. The quotations can be used as prompts for culminating essay questions.
2. Distribute Student Handout 13b, which contains quotes from the experts featured in the documentary *Cities of Light*. These quotations summarize and reflect on the legacy of Islamic Spain, its mixture of tolerance and intolerance, and the lasting lessons and contributions to the world. Divide students into groups to discuss and then share with the group, or use the quotations as writing prompts. Finally, students are assigned to “be an expert” and write their own opinion in the form of a memorable quotation in the final space on the page.

Student Handout 13a: What Do Modern Writers Say about the Importance of Islamic Spain for World History?

Francis and Joseph Gies in the book *Cathedral, Forge and Waterwheel* (1994):

“One of the Middle Ages’ most important creations, the medical school, was founded at Salerno in the eleventh century, when by no coincidence the earliest cultural contacts with Islam occurred... [then] ...It was the Muslim-Assisted translation of Aristotle followed by Galen, Euclid, Ptolemy and other Greek authorities and their integration into the university curriculum that created what historians have called “the scientific Renaissance of the 12th century.” Certainly the completion of the double, sometimes triple translation (Greek into Arabic, Arabic into Latin, often with ... Spanish ...) is one of the most fruitful scholarly enterprises ever undertaken. Two chief sources of translation were Spain and Sicily, regions where Arab, European, and Jewish scholars freely mingled. In Spain the main center was Toledo, where Archbishop Raymond established a college specifically for making Arab knowledge available to Europe. Scholars flocked [there]...By 1200 “virtually the entire scientific corpus of Aristotle” was available in Latin, along with works by other Greek and Arab authors on medicine, optics, catoptrics (mirror theory), geometry, astronomy, astrology, zoology, psychology, and mechanics.”¹

Richard Fletcher in the book *Moorish Spain* (1992): “The plain fact is that between 712 and 1492, Muslim and Christian communities lived side by side in the Iberian Peninsula...sharing a land, learning from one another, trading, intermarrying, misunderstanding, squabbling, fighting—generally sharing in all the incidents that go to furnish the ups and downs of coexistence...The most fortunate beneficiaries of this coexistence were neither Christian nor Muslim Spaniards but the uncouth barbarians beyond the Pyrenees. The creative role of Muslim Spain in the shaping of European intellectual culture is still not widely enough appreciated. Apart from anything else, it is a most remarkable story. The scientific and philosophical learning of Greek and Persian antiquity was inherited by the Arabs in the Middle East. Translated, codified, elaborated by Arabic scholars, the corpus was diffused throughout the culturally unified world of classical Islam...until it reached the limits of the known world in the west. And there, in Spain, it was discovered by the scholars of the Christian west, translated into Latin mainly between 1150 and 1250, and channeled off to irrigate the dry pastures of European intellectual life...Europe’s lead in resourcefulness and creativity, the vital factor in the history of world for the six centuries preceding our own, was founded in large part on intelligent grasping at opportunities offered by the civilization of Islam; and that proffer came through Spain.”

“...There was yet another way in which the encounter of Christian and Muslim in medieval Spain has powerfully affected later and distant human experience. Medieval Spaniards and Portuguese worked out by trial and error ways in which to administer large tracts of newly conquered territory and to govern their inhabitants. Thus, when an overseas empire was acquired in the sixteenth century, models and precedents existed for the guidance of those whose task it was to rule it. In this as in so much else there was little that was new about the so-called ‘early modern’ period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Colonial Mexico and Peru and Brazil were medieval Andalusia writ large. Much that is central to the experience of Latin America follows from this.”²

Norman Daniels in the book *The Arabs and Medieval Europe* (1979): “What the 12th century translators had set out to do was achieved with complete success. Europe recovered all that it had lost in the philosophical and scientific fields at the end of the classical age; and it received this body

¹ Francis and Joseph Gies, *Cathedral, Forge, and Waterwheel* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), pp. 159-160.

² Richard Fletcher, *Moorish Spain* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1992), p. 8, 6.

of knowledge in a form which had been improved by centuries of Arab work on it....Although we have seen that Europe would have recovered its lost store of learning directly from the Greek, if it had not done so first from the Arabic, it is still true that it came through Arabic...The real importance of the restoration of learning was that Europe once again shared with its co-heirs of antiquity this whole vast area of knowledge and skills. In other ways Europe and the Arabs would begin to diverge...when that happened they remained linked in learning longer than in any other way.”³

Rosa Maria Menocal in the book *Ornament of the World* (2002): “[According to] F. Scott Fitzgerald’s wonderful formula... ‘the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideals in the mind at the same time.’ In its moments of greatest achievement, medieval culture positively thrived on holding at least two, and often many more, contrary ideas at the same time. This was the chapter of Europe’s culture when Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived side by side and, despite their intractable differences and enduring hostilities, nourished a complex culture of tolerance...This only sometimes included guarantees of religious freedoms comparable to what we would expect in a modern ‘tolerant’ state; rather, it found expression in often unconscious acceptance...could be positive and productive....The very heart of culture as a series of contradictions lay in al-Andalus...It was there that the profoundly Arabized Jews rediscovered and reinvented Hebrew; there that Christians embraced nearly every aspect of Arabic style—from the intellectual style of philosophy to the architectural style of mosques—not only while living in Islamic dominions, but especially after wresting political control from them...there that men of unshakable faith, like Abelard and Maimonides and Averroes, saw no contradiction in pursuing the truth, whether philosophical or scientific, or religious, across confessional lines....It was an approach to life and its artistic and intellectual and even religious pursuits that was contested by so many—as it is today—and violently so at times—as it is today—and yet powerful and shaping nevertheless, for hundreds of years.”⁴

Discussion Questions:

1. According to the Gies’ statement, where did most of the transfer of scientific knowledge from take place, when, and why was it significant that these translations took place?
2. Cite three ways in which Richard Fletcher believes that Muslim Spain affected the modern world. How does he characterize the relationship among diverse groups living in medieval Spain?
3. Who are Europe’s “co-heirs of antiquity”? Why does Daniels think it is important that Europe and Islam had this body of knowledge in common?
4. Why does Rosa Maria Menocal think that difference and contradictions are creative? How did al-Andalus provide an example of this creativity in diversity?
5. How and why does Menocal compare the contradictions and creativity of a tolerant approach to life and culture in medieval and in our modern societies? What does she find similar to both times?

³ Norman Daniels, *The Arabs and Medieval Europe* (London: Longman, Librarie du Liban, 1979), p. 301-302.

⁴ Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Muslim Spain* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), pp. 10-12.

Student Handout 13b: Experts in *Cities of Light* Sum Up the Importance of Islamic Spain to the World Today

Feisal Abdul Rauf:

... the reconquest of Spain by the Catholics and by the Christians created very much a sense of loss and even until today Muslims who visit Andalusia, Cordoba and Granada and Seville, feel this nostalgia, feel the sense of loss.

Ahmad Dallal:

When there is diversity, there is by definition friction. But of course, if you eliminate diversity, and everyone would be the same. There would be no friction, but there would be no creativity that results from that tension....

Raymond Scheindlin:

So, a kind of a rough and ready togetherness came about, not an ideological tolerance, but a practical kind of tolerance...

Dede Fairchild Ruggles:

I think that we're fascinated by Islamic Spain because we project into it our own desires for a world where Jews, Christians and Muslims all kind of got along, more or less got along....And when you look at that and it's wishful thinking- you wish that in the modern world relationships were easier.

Chris Lowney:

...just think of what medieval Spain gave to Europe. We have this technology for making paper. We have this irrigation technology...We have these medical ideas and all of these things came about only because cultures interacted and borrowed from each other...and we see that to a greater or lesser extent, people have to find a way to live together, find a way forward, despite some of the contradictions they feel, despite the fact that, you know, your belief is heretical in my eyes, but we're still here together in this city and we may have shared values and we're going to find a way to make this work for the good of our own children and families....

You are the expert. Now write what YOU think is important about Islamic Spain:
