

5: Cities of Light: Viewer's Guide Discussion Questions

Authors: Ernest O'Roark and Eileen Wood

Procedure:

Use these questions in pauses between the segments of the documentary.

Segment 1: Opening and Migration

*We'll lounge beneath the pomegranates,
Palm trees, apple trees,
Under every lovely, leafy thing,
And walk among the vines,
Enjoy the splendid faces we will see,
In a lofty palace built of noble stones.*

Ibn Gabirol, 11th century

- 1a. Describe the tone or feeling of Ibn Gabirol's 11th century poem.
- b. Does this sound like a place you would want to live in or visit? Explain.
- 2a. Which group may have lived on the Iberian Peninsula as early as the 1st century?
 - b. Which group arrived in Iberia in the 5th century?
 - c. Which group crossed into Iberia from Africa in the 8th century?

Segment 2: Foundation

1. Why did the new Muslim rulers give Christians and Jews in Iberia the status of "dhimmi" or protected people?
2. Abd al-Rahman's reign marks the beginning of a century of peace and prosperity centered on Cordoba. What were some of the achievements of this era?
3. What caused tension in other parts of al-Andalus?

Segment 3: Unity

In 929 Abd al Rahman III proclaims Al-Andalus independent from the rest of the Islamic Empire and himself Caliph, the legitimate successor to the Prophet Muhammad.

1. If you visited Cordoba during the reign of Abd al Rahman III, who and what might you see and/or hear?
2. What happens to Cordoba after the death of Abd al Rahman III's successor?

Segment 4: Division

1. Define "taifa."
2. Name several taifa kingdoms.
3. Why was this period of civil wars also a period of great cultural splendor?

Segment 5: Purification

1. What was Pope Alexander II's role in "purifying" Spain?
2. What was Muslim leader Abu Ishaq's role in "purifying" Spain?
3. How did the capture of Toledo by Alfonso VI result in the transmission of Islamic civilization to Christian lands?
4. In what ways did the typical lifestyle and culture of Al-Andalus offend the Almoravids?
5. According to the Almoravids, what was the cause of Islamic Spain's problems?
6. What was the role of the Almohads in "purifying" Spain?
7. What effect did the Crusades have on Christian and Muslim attitudes toward one another in Spain?

Segment 6: Crossroads

1. The Jewish scholar Maimonides and the Muslim scholar Ibn Rushd (Averroes) made similar contributions in their field. Describe their accomplishments.
2. What important work was being undertaken in late 12th century Toledo?
3. What was the significance of the outcome of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa?

Segment 7: Survival

1. One of the scholars says, "In some ways, Alfonso X epitomizes the schizophrenia in such a way that must have afflicted a lot of these medieval Muslims, Christians and Jews." He is implying that Alfonso's thinking and behaviors are often contradictory. What are some examples of this contradictory thinking and behavior on the part of King Alfonso X?
2. What event brings the Christian re-conquest of Spain to a sudden halt?
3. Describe an example of how Spanish architecture reflects what was going on during this time.

Segment 8: Loss

1. What effect did the fall of Constantinople in 1453 have on the Christian monarchs of Spain?
2. What was the Inquisition and who were its targets?
3. What role did Boabdil (Abu Abdullah) play in the fall of Granada?
4. What happened to the Muslims and Jews of Spain after the fall of Granada?

Viewer's Guide Discussion Questions

Answer key in parentheses.

Segment 1: Opening and Migration

We'll lounge beneath the pomegranates,
Palm trees, apple trees,
Under every lovely, leafy thing,
And walk among the vines,
Enjoy the splendid faces we will see,
In a lofty palace built of noble stones.
Ibn Gabirol, 11th century

- 1a. Describe the tone or feeling if Ibn Gabirol's 11th century poem. (*beauty, peace, etc.*)
- 1b. Does this sound like a place you would want to live in or visit? Explain (*Yes. Note that Ibn Gabirol seems to think that it's like a paradise.*)
- 2a. Which group may have lived on the Iberian Peninsula as early as the 1st century? (*Jews*)
- 2b. Which group arrived in Iberia in the 5th century? (*Visigoths – a Germanic tribe*)
- 2c. Which group crossed into Iberia from Africa in the 8th century? (*Muslim Berbers*)

Segment 2: Foundation

1. Why did the new Muslim rulers give Christians and Jews in Iberia the status of “dhimmi” or protected people? (*The Qur'an states that people of “the Book” should be allowed to practice their religion freely.*)
2. Abd al-Rahman's reign marks the beginning of a century of peace and prosperity centered on Cordoba. What were some of the achievements of this era? (*unity of authority, integrated culture – “open society,” one language – Arabic, trade brings an influx of goods and people, first music school under Ziryab*)
3. What caused tension in other parts of al-Andalus? (*Northern converts to Islam resent the fact that their conversion does not bring them better treatment than those who have not converted. They rebel.*)

Segment 3: Unity

In 929 Abd al Rahman III proclaims Al-Andalus independent from the rest of the Islamic Empire and himself Caliph, the legitimate successor to the Prophet Muhammad.

1. If you visited Cordoba during the reign of Abd al Rahman III, who and what might you see and/or hear? (*magnificent palace, ambassadors from far-off lands, diversity at court, bath houses, street lights, Jewish scholar, poet, and doctor Hasdai ibn Shaprut, medical school, Sicilian monk Nicholas, poetry and poets, libraries, water wheels and irrigation systems, gardens*)

2. What happens to Cordoba after the death of Abd al Rahman III's successor? *(It was a time of "fitna" or strife. Civil war. Berber army burns down Cordoba and slaughters Jews, Muslims, and Christians.)*

Segment 4: Division

1. Define "taifa." *(A relatively small, independent Muslim kingdom; a fragment of the shattered Cordoba Caliphate.)*
2. Name several taifa kingdoms. *(Cordoba, Seville, Toledo, Zaragoza, Granada, Malaga)*
3. Why was this period of civil wars also a period of great cultural splendor? *(Each ruler wanted to have the most brilliant court possible.)*

Segment 5: Purification

1. What was Pope Alexander II's role in "purifying" Spain? *(He made a proclamation in which he said relationships between Christians and Muslims were immoral.)*
2. What was Muslim leader Abu Ishaq's role in "purifying" Spain? *(He preached that Jews and Christians should not have authority over a Muslim. A mob in Granada was incited by a poem he wrote to riot and massacre a large number of Jews.)*
3. How did the capture of Toledo by Alfonso VI result in the transmission of Islamic civilization to Christian lands? *(Alfonso understood the value of Toledo's Muslim libraries and so prevented their destruction. Translation projects eventually transferred much of the knowledge into the rest of Europe.)*
4. In what ways did the typical lifestyle and culture of Al-Andalus offend the Almoravids? *(They are living a lavish, liberal lifestyle. Some drink wine. They mingle freely with Christians and Jews.)*
5. According to the Almoravids, what was the cause of Islamic Spain's problems? *(Diversity and the tolerance of Christians and Jews was immoral and had led to a corruption of Islamic values weakening Al-Andalus, which, in turn, was responsible for the success of Christian armies.)*
6. What was the role of the Almohads in "purifying" Spain? *(The same as the Almoravids only more so. They sought to make the diverse land a purely Muslim state. Christianity and Judaism were outlawed. Many were forced from their homes and had to flee to Christian territories.)*
7. What effect did the Crusades have on Christian and Muslim attitudes toward one another in Spain? *(The Crusades helped make religious differences the point of wars in Iberia. There was a hardening of positions on both sides. Tolerance was seen as immoral by both sides.)*

Segment 6: Crossroads

1. The Jewish scholar Maimonides and the Muslim scholar Ibn Rushd (Averroes) made similar contributions in their field. Describe their accomplishments. *(Both scholars were able to reconcile Aristotelian philosophy with religious beliefs. Their ideas led to similar philosophical works by Christian scholars.)*
2. What important work was being undertaken in late 12th century Toledo? *(The translation by diverse teams of scholars of important Arabic texts so that knowledge from Islamic civilization could be transmitted to the rest of Europe.)*

3. What was the significance of the outcome of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa? (*This was the final defeat of the Almohads, who then abandoned Al-Andalus, leaving the fragmented and relatively weak taifas to fend for themselves. Most of the taifas were then quickly overrun by Christian forces.*)

Segment 7: Survival

1. One of the scholars says, “In some ways, Alfonso X epitomizes the schizophrenia in such a way that must have afflicted a lot of these medieval Muslims, Christians and Jews.” He is implying that Alfonso’s thinking and behaviors are often contradictory. What are some examples of this contradictory thinking and behavior on the part of King Alfonso X?
2. (*Alfonso enacts laws and penalties for Jews and Muslims that are very harsh. But at the same time, his laws also provide some protections and privileges for Jews and Muslims. Alfonso also loves the Islamic culture of Al-Andalus including its poetry.*)
3. What event brings the Christian re-conquest of Spain to a sudden halt? (*The Black Death, or plague.*)
4. Describe an example of how Spanish architecture reflects what was going on during this time. (*Many buildings contain mixed elements of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic culture. Muslim craftsmen were often hired to construct Christian buildings resulting in mixed styles. Major buildings such as mosques changed hands and were converted to churches resulting in unusual combinations of styles.*)

Segment 8: Loss

1. What effect did the fall of Constantinople in 1453 have on the Christian monarchs of Spain? (*It made them more determined than ever to unite in an effort to make Spain a purely Christian land.*)
2. What was the Inquisition and who were its targets? (*The Inquisition was an investigation authorized by the Pope into the private religious lives of Spain’s people. Many suffered torture and horrible deaths at the hands of inquisitors.*)
3. What role did Boabdil (Abu Abdullah) play in the fall of Granada? (*An ambitious prince, Boabdil allied himself with Christian forces against his own kingdom. After making and then reneging on several deals with the Christians monarchs, he was finally forced to surrender Granada to Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492.*)
4. What happened to the Muslims and Jews of Spain after the fall of Granada? (*They were forced to convert or leave Spain. Some converted, but continued to practice their religious traditions in secret. Eventually, all Jews and Muslims including those who had “converted” were expelled.*)