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Fundamentalism vs. Globalization, A Case Study: Medieval Spain

BIOGRAPHY: **Cindy Torres** is a Graduate Assistant at Purdue University Calumet, currently working on her Master's thesis in linguistics. She has a bachelor's in both English Professional Writing and Spanish International Studies and is a composition instructor, who also works as a Multilingual Specialist Tutor in the University Writing Center. Recent research has included work in the field of translation, linguistic analysis, and intercultural dialogue. This presentation is the result of her collaborative effort with Dr. Marisa Garcia-Verdugo, PUC Associate Professor of Spanish, focusing on the interfaith dialogue among the Jewish, Islamic, and Christian people of Medieval Spain which advanced the development of the nation's literature, philosophy, economy, art, and architecture. She intends to present her findings in conferences, discussing the roles fundamentalism and globalization played during the peaceful coexistence of these diverse people and the conflicts and expulsions arising from the dissolution of the intercultural dialogue still present today.

ABSTRACT: Fundamentalism and globalization are considered modern words originating in the early decades of the 20th century. Fundamentalism is a concept often associated with religious beliefs and defended by those who feel the need to maintain their original ideologies, thereby preserving their religious and social identities. Globalization, in contrast, is considered a vehicle for unification, prosperity, and peace. Both of these definitions suggest diverse implications tracing back many centuries. The perfect example illustrating the powerful interaction of these ideas is Medieval Spain and its multicultural society of Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Can fundamentalism and globalization co-exist, and if so what are the future implications involved? The Medieval period was a tumultuous time filled with religious and cultural tension across all of Europe; one exception was among the intricately connected, yet diverse, population of Spain. Until the eleventh century, Christians, Jews, and Muslims co-existed relatively peacefully developing an integrated form of globalization throughout the nation. During this period, cultures exchanged knowledge and technology progressing intellectual, economic, social, and philosophical dimensions. However, when struggles for power arose, this ideal form of globalization was shattered. Christians, Jews, and Muslims retreated back to their fundamentalist beliefs in order to conserve their communities' identities. A natural reaction to the risks involved in globalization is fundamentalism, yet if cultures respect and embrace the riches other cultures offer, globalization and fundamentalism may interact in powerful ways furthering cultural, economical, and political aspects of society peacefully today and tomorrow as they did for so many centuries in Medieval Spain.

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“The recognition of the intricacy of human life and society is essential to anyone who wishes to study either art or history – or their inevitable intersections” (Krow- Lucal 1).

Whether from distant lands or our own neighborhoods, it is often easier to dismiss the customs and belief systems of those who live differently than we do as mystical or exotic. Strengthening these misconceptions are our own ethnocentric views propagated by ethnohistoric data often filled with misrepresentations which in turn foster typecasting rather than attempts to understand and learn from these differences. Erroneous understanding grows each day as an encounter with another immediately becomes reflexive labeling of that person as the “other.”

The stereotyping and racism this spawns create an even more complex notion when characteristics of the “other” are integral parts of us and our own culture. When this occurs we often choose to ignore that “other” side among us and our nation, erasing their contributions and presence within our society; this erasing creates a false sense of homogenous culture and breeds prejudice that can lead to confrontational consequences ranging from ignorance and intolerance (discrimination) to tragedy (the Spanish Inquisition/the Holocaust).

Spain is widely considered a homogeneous Catholic nation, rich in the art, architecture, literature, language and imperialistic endeavors. This perception fails to acknowledge the Spain before the Spanish Inquisition and those Medieval Spaniards who made the nation as it is today. Little attention has been paid to the period before the Christian Crusades, during which intercultural interaction occurred among the Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Spain was never, as it can appear in our day, a uniform Christian nation built solely on the efforts of one people. Since Medieval times Spain’s very complex and rich history -- the result of many cultures’ contributions, especially the three fundamentalist monotheistic based cultures and their globalizational ideologies -- has been washed to the side and replaced with one based on misconceptions.

Fundamentalism and globalization are considered modern words originating in the early decades of the 20th century. Fundamentalism is a “movement advocating return to traditional principles: a religious or political movement based on a literal interpretation of and strict adherence to doctrine, especially as a return

to former principles” (Encarta 1). On the one hand, fundamentalism is a concept often associated with religious beliefs and defended by those who feel the need to maintain their original ideologies, thereby preserving their religious and social identities. However, extreme forms of fundamentalism become reactionary and exclusive, cutting off members from the real world and hindering intercultural progress.

Globalization, in contrast, is considered a vehicle for unification, prosperity, and peace.

“Globalization is a comprehensive term for the emergence of a global society in which economic, political, environmental, and cultural events in one part of the world, quickly come to have significance for people in other parts of the world. Globalization is the result of advances in communication, transportation, and information technologies. It describes the growing economic, political, technological, and cultural linkages that connect individuals, communities, businesses, and governments” (Encarta 1). Although both terms are considered to be relatively new ideas, their origins trace back many centuries. While the two ideologies seem to be in opposition, during Islamic Rule of Medieval Spain, fundamentalism and globalization worked together as each of the three monotheistic cultures interchanged knowledge creating the most dynamic nation of the time.

Much scholarly interest has emerged since Franco’s death in 1975 and his politics negating the roles Muslims and Jews played in Spanish history have dissipated. However, the majority of concern has focused on the discussion anti-Semitic origins in Spain, specifically post Crusades during Christian rule. Contrary to popular belief, Jews formed the first monotheistic religious communities in Spain. Remnants of grave markings have been dated as far back as 200 B.C.

From their very beginning, Jewish people were forced into a nomadic life, settling in various regions only to be expelled by the Christians who came to dominate each settled land. In Elvira in 305, the first known laws against Jews appeared. In 598, the Third Council of Toledo ordered conversion by force. Thousands converted and thousands fled. Property was confiscated; many were enslaved and forbidden to practice their faith. The arrival of the Bubonic Plague and Leprosy throughout Europe offered English, French and German Christians the rationalization to force Jews out of their countries. This landed them in various locales. Many Jews fled to Spain where they encountered a place within the Muslim society.

In 711, the Umayyad conquest began and Muslim conquerors released Jews from previous law and invited them to contribute to society. Here, the Jewish people coexisted peacefully until the eleventh century, flourishing “as traders, merchants, doctors, poets, and philosophers within the Muslim society” (PBS 1). Such tolerance allowed for the exchange of ideas and growth of intellect leading to the “highest achieving” culture of Medieval times (Thorton 3).

Although Islam “conquered” Spain and occupied the Iberian Peninsula, they offered their Christian and Jewish countrymen protection and religious tolerance considering them “People of the Book” in accordance to the Koran. Spanish intellectual, religious, and cultural life prospered. Muslims and Jews interchanged philosophical, scientific, and literary culture. Jews took part in activities at each level. During the period known as Umayyad Spain, caliphs (heads of community) Abd al-Rahman and the caliphate (kingdom) of al-Hakam ruled over their capital of Cordoba, which had become the “most cultured city of Europe.” Cordoba soared above even Paris and Constantinople economically and socially, housing numerous elaborately shelved libraries, mosques, public baths, and shops (Thorton 1). This is the period during which Cordoba and Granada became the grand centers of art and architecture—remnants of such time are still visible today. The Mughira pyxis, carved in Cordoba in 968 can be found in the Louvre today (*Saudi Aramco World* 3).

Because Islamic religion believes that “the glorification of God’s word” should come in the form of art instead of idol worship, art and poetry flourished. Art often took the form of arabesques—a unique combination of geometric shapes and nature or beautiful language in calligraphy and Arabic script. Literature and its translation from Latin to Arabic and vice versa also thrived as many Jewish and Christian followers began to use the Arabic language in addition to or instead of Hebrew or Latin (PBS 6).

At the same time that the arts flourished, there was a surge of economical and technological advances in the region. Engineering focusing on irrigation methods acquired from Western Asia was put to the test. Irrigational ditches were dug to water the various new plants Muslims introduced including rice, sugar cane, cotton, and fruits such as peaches and pomegranates. These products played key roles in international trade. Concurrently, the Muslim people shared their knowledge of paper, which they brought

from China, and together Cordobans developed new ways of manufacturing it more efficiently, which became especially significant in algebraic and trigonometric proofs, in addition to filling their enormous libraries.

The fields of mathematics and science broadened to include innovative theories and areas of study. Several revolutionary mathematical developments took place including the introduction of the concept of zero and the employment of Arabic numerals to replace Roman numerals. Also important was the use of letters to represent unknowns in algebra. These advances became central components of the astronomy, astrology, mineralogy and medicine (Colish 135).

During the Umayyad period, many Jewish men took part in intellectual and scientific arena. Many like Oisdai b. Issac shared their specialized knowledge, in his case medicine and law. He worked closely with caliph, al- Hakam II allowing him to teach others. Not only did he teach Spanish Jews of what they were ignorant, but he also allowed them to break free from reactionary Jewish authorities (Stillman 1). This moved them further from their exclusive fundamentalist positions, which restricted growth potential to that available solely within the basis and confines of the particular culture and disallowed development based on the sharing and incorporation of ideas and knowledge offered by “others,” which generated a sharp contradiction to the goals of globalization. Now, they were closer to true knowledge and integration into the global society, of which they held central roles. Fundamentalism and globalization co-existed. Neither ideology took over. Spain was neither run by intolerant fundamentalists nor by imperialists. Instead both sides were tolerant of the other. There was rich intercultural exchange at work.

However, with the arrival of the exclusive fundamentalist al-Moravids and al- Mohads, who held fast to their reactionary beliefs. “After 1031, the Caliphate of Cordoba split up into many small kingdoms. In 1094, Cordoba came under control of the al-Moravids; in 1149, the al-Mohads took control allowing for and resulting in the Christian kings’ rise to power over the Muslims and Jews (Thorton 5). Globalization began to break down as the unified Spanish society, divided and retreated to its three fundamental monotheistic religions, never to return.

During this time, many Muslims emigrated to the Near East or fell back into Sufism, a mystic/fundamentalist form of Islam, to reinforce social and religious identity. This not only created an anti-Christian sentiment among the Muslims, it also broke much of the tolerance for Jews, excluding them from their previously important positions within the scientific and philosophical communities. Jews were no longer welcome among the Muslims and were persecuted, ghettoized and expelled from Spanish Christian lands. Rejected, Jewish people no longer wrote in Arabic, they returned to Hebrew and began to practice fundamentalist Jewish, such as Taludism, Pietism, and Cabbalism in order to preserve (recollect) their religious identity.

The Medieval period was a tumultuous time filled with religious and cultural tension across all of Europe; one exception was among the intricately connected, yet diverse, population of Spain. Until the eleventh century, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim cultures inevitably intersected and co-existed relatively peacefully developing an integrated form of globalization throughout the nation. During this period, cultures exchanged knowledge and technology progressing intellectual, economic, social, and philosophical dimensions.

However, when struggles for power arose, initiated by exclusive fundamentalist reactionaries, this ideal form of globalization was shattered. Christians, Jews, and Muslims retreated back to their fundamentalist beliefs in order to conserve their communities' identities. A natural reaction to the risks involved in globalization is fundamentalism, yet if cultures respect and embrace the intentions other cultures offer, globalization and fundamentalism may interact in powerful ways furthering cultural, economic, and political aspects of society peacefully today and tomorrow as they did for so many centuries throughout Medieval Spain.

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