



## Cities of Light: The Rise and Fall of Islamic Spain Discussion Guide

*If you are looking for a challenge this fall, if you are tired of hearing your religious identity or those of your friends maligned, if you want to be part of building an America that lives up to the amazing power of its values, if you want to put your personal religious or moral conviction into action – bring A Different Kind of Conversation About Religion to your campus this Fall.*

### Introduction

During the fall of 2007, the nation will be inspired by the most diverse and extensive campaign for religious cooperation and understanding ever – *A Different Kind of Conversation About Religion*. This campaign will be an outpouring of religiously motivated common action for the common good on university and college campuses and in communities across the country.

One great way to take part in *A Different Kind of Conversation About Religion* on your campus or in your community is to host a screening of a film about the history, current state of, or potential for religious cooperation and understanding in America and abroad. Consider inviting a professor, local religious or interfaith leader, or other local public figure to introduce the film and possibly moderate a discussion on it afterwards.

### Cities of Light: The Rise and Fall of Islamic Spain (1hr 56min)

*Cities of Light: The Rise and Fall of Islamic Spain* is a documentary on the rise and fall of a pluralistic society; a society where Muslims, Jews, and Christians had to live and work together in order to ensure the survival of their kingdom. Medieval Spain, with its cosmopolitan and diverse population, was not unlike many societies today. This guide is designed to help you and the members of your discussion group to explore some of the major themes in the documentary as well as some of your experiences living in an increasingly connected world. Our hope is that by reflecting on the history of Spain, you will be inspired to work toward building religious pluralism in your own society and promoting a different kind of conversation about religion.

When thinking about how you want to structure your dialogue, keep in mind that this film is two hours long. Be aware of the amount of time you have for showing the film and then hosting a discussion afterward. View the documentary ahead of time and note the sections that you find most compelling. The questions in this discussion guide



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are based on the larger themes of the movie and so are appropriate regardless of whether you show the documentary in its entirety or in specific portions.

### Setting Safe Space

It is important, before all else, to set a “safe space” for dialogue, a space where people from all backgrounds can feel comfortable sharing personal parts of who they are with others. This conversation, unlike the dominant conversation about religion in our society, will require a willingness to listen to those whose traditions are different from our own. Regardless of the size of the group, this is an important step to take to encourage honest and open reflection.

To set a safe space:

- Brainstorm about the guidelines participants will need in order to feel comfortable for this unique kind of conversation:
  - Ask the group: What do you need from yourself and others in order to feel safe having this conversation?
    - Examples of possible guidelines are: everyone has the right to pass; everything that is said is confidential; seek clarification if you don't understand something that is said; suspend your judgment; use 'I' statements; etc.
  - Someone in the group should take notes on the group's responses and then read the responses aloud to conclude setting the safe space.
  - The guidelines should be ones with which the entire group feels comfortable abiding.

### Discussion

The major themes this discussion guide will focus on will be three different components of religious pluralism: respect for religious identity, community, and common action for the common good. Part of your role as discussion facilitator is to be sensitive to your group dynamic. If specific topics arise that are engaging your group, be sure to help the group follow that topic without straying too far from the main themes.

- Respect for Religious Identity
  - North African Muslims arrived in Seville to aid its Muslims after the division of the Caliphate. Describe their reaction to the religious pluralism they found in Seville.
  - Have you ever had an experience coming from a (more) homogeneous community to a (more) diverse community? What was your reaction to



that experience? What about the reverse? What was your reaction to that experience?

- Community
  - How did the court of Caliph Abdelrahman III reflect the religious and ethnic make-up of his subjects?
  - Talk about a time when a leader (political, religious, youth, etc.) stressed the importance of religious pluralism in your own society. How did that affect you and your community?
- Common Action for the Common Good
  - Why did Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars all have to be involved in the translation of the Greek texts?
  - Give an example of a time when you worked on a project with someone of a different faith or background. Discuss how that experience was similar to or different from working with people from your own background.

### Reflections

- “Diversity creates friction. If you eliminate diversity, there will be no friction or creativity that results from that tension.” What does this quote mean? How can our society channel the energy of diverse communities into creative and positive action? What role can young people play in this endeavor?
- Spain’s diverse inhabitants connected on the basis of their shared values and hopes of a stable and prosperous future for their children. They developed a pluralism that is described as a “rough and ready tolerance.” What does this phrase mean to you? How can our world today benefit from this perspective?

### Concluding the Discussion

Thank everyone for their time and participation. Go around the group and ask for closing reflections, reactions, and comments from each person. If you would like, reflect back some ideas or comments that you think are particularly beneficial for the group to remember as your discussion comes to a close. Ask them to reflect on how the dialogue you just had is different from or similar to other conversations they have had about religion. Encourage the participants to host a dialogue of their own with friends, classmates, members of their faith communities, interfaith group, etc. as part of creating a different kind of conversation about religion in their community. Ask if the group wants to follow up with another dialogue or action. Propose an idea for a service event that you could do together as part of putting the idea of pluralism, which you just demonstrated in your dialogue, into action. If the group is interested, take a few moments to brainstorm what that action might be.