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The Reconquista

At first the conquered Christians of Iberia didn't know what to make of the Muslims. Though they were ruthless, other rulers had been as well. Christians couldn't speak Berber or Arabic and surmised they were just heretics who could be converted. The Koran was untranslated and mysterious and Rahman promised tolerance. But as time went on, some horrifying atrocities by the conquerors took place. Resistance sprang up on the borders. The tiny kingdom of Leon in extreme northwest Spain was the home of Santiago de Compesto Church, the site where Jesus' disciple, James the Lesser, had founded the first small Christian following. When brutal Al Mansur, Chamberlain of Rahman III began to attack the small Christian kingdoms of the north and east they united – Galicia, Leon, Castile, Navarre, and Catalonia. Mansur led 57 campaigns, all successful. But he paid his mercenary armies by loot, and political opposition in Andalusia came about from those who didn't like the scorched earth raids that left the economies in shambles. Mansur's son tried to claim the caliphate and the citizens of Cordoba rebelled in 1010. At this time 2/3 of Iberia was Andalusia and 70% of population had become Muslim. But the rebellion destroyed Andalusia's leadership and palace. Henceforth, the Muslims fell into rival city-states – Hueva, Badijoz, Cordoba, and Granada. Meanwhile, south of Leon an area captured was known as the county of Portugal surrounding the city of Porto.

It is during this era when modern secular historians laud and magnify the Iberian “tolerance.” There was a lot of art, poetry and music (Yikes! Mohammad disliked music and it was forbidden in the east.) shared between groups in Muslim-dominated Iberia. Secular historians adore this, but people of the era lived a not so idyllic existence. There was huge mutual distrust, like the Balkans, where rival groups lived cheek to jowl, hating others but forced, by strong rulers to coexist. Christians couldn't read the Arabic Koran and had no clue what it taught. They tried to placate and follow Muslim rules, despite violent eruptions by the Muslims. For 400 years they endured, but many fled to restart lives in the Christian north. Nonetheless, many Christians became Muslim. Music blossomed and spread to troubadours of France. The Jew, Samuel of Nagid, was hired by Granada's king as Vizier (royal manager). He wrote Hebrew lyrics to Arab rhyme and tunes and served well. His son got his Vizier's job but was arrogant then assassinated by Muslims leading to the first of three major massacres of Jews.

In 1085 the combined Christian army under Castile conquered Toledo. Toledo was the ancient Visigothic capital in central Spain, just south of present day Madrid. In exchange for the keys to the city, Alfonso, the Castilian commander, guaranteed safe passage for the Muslim king. What Alfonso got was a cosmopolitan city. Though it was on the edge of Andalusia, its libraries had 400,000 books, many of them recopied Greek and Roman texts. This was in an era when big monasteries in feudal Europe might have a few hundred books. But things weren't over yet. The leader of Seville of Granada (extreme southwest near Gibraltar) appealed to the Almoravids of Morocco to come help. They helped themselves. This highly puritanical faction defeated Castile in the battle of Zallaga, then turned on Seville itself and conquered it in 1091. Andalusians, they argued, were lax. Al Mutamid of Seville tried to turn to Alfonso but it was too late. All of Muslim Spain was taken over by the fanatic Almoravids. Jews, Christians, even refugee Muslims, began to flee to Toledo. Many of the Christians spoke Arabic (Mosarabs) and they had their own liturgy of the mass. Northern Christian clergy were closely tied to Rome and

Rome demanded the Mosarabs conform. The northern clerics, caught in controversy, decided to do a sort of trial by ordeal. They threw copies of the two liturgies into a fire and the Roman liturgy burned exonerating the lesser burned Mosarabic one. Thus, the winning liturgy was adopted by most of Spain, contrary to Rome.

In the 1100s there was a revival of learning in Northern Europe fueled by old Roman manuscripts in libraries of Toledo in Latin, Greek and Arabic. Europeans wanted to know about Aristotle and others. Jews who had fled the Almoravids (Moors) translated many documents to Hebrew and then to Latin leading to a 12th century renaissance of Spain. Averoes of Cordoba, a Muslim, wrote commentaries on Aristotle. Trying to figure out the balance of revelation and reason in philosophy, he came down on the side of reason. That was significant because Thomas Aquinas studied Averoes thoroughly. He then penned the Scholastic view that reason plus faith allows you to figure out everything. Among the Christian states there arose a desire to engage the Muslims in debate and discussion. But all Korans are written in Arabic. (They still are. Translations are not acceptable to Muslim scholars.) Peter the Venerable convinced a mathematician, Robert of Ketton of England (who knew Arabic from math studies) to go to Toledo and translate the Koran into Latin, 1143. Thereafter, the church came to realize that Islam was totally at odds with Christian faith and now had the polemics against Islam. This happened soon after the Crusades began in 1094, when a massacre of Christians in Jerusalem led the European Christians to retaliate and begin a hundred years of war.

The Almoravid Moors allowed no travel across borders. The cross – fertilization stopped and Christians began to rediscover their roots. Returning from the Crusades, Archbishop Rodurrigo Jimenez de Rada wrote a history of Spain and influenced the Christians to fight the Moors. In 1212 he was killed in the battle of Tolosa but the Christians won and were now in a position to conquer. Over the next 60 years Ferdinand III of Castile conquered all the remaining Muslim city-states except Granada, the southern-most in 1248. The collapse of Algarve emirate became the kingdom of Portugal. Granada had been an ally and was allowed to stay Muslim. But after their rather senseless attack on the town of Zahara in 1481, Ferdinand and Isabella of Castile-Leon went to war and utterly defeated Granada in 1492. Moors and Jews from Granada were forced to leave Granada in the aftermath. Post 1492, the nation of Spain became very proud, having conquered Islam while much of southeastern Europe fell to the Ottomans. Moors were forced out of the land, most going to North Africa. Many Jews had become Christians to avoid resettlement and keep their property. Envy over their property led initially to the Spanish Inquisition where recent converts were interrogated over their faith and many killed. It was a tragic conclusion of what should have been a celebration. The Spanish church also was somewhat independent of Rome which precluded a Reformation there. Large numbers of Jews, who had fled persecution in the rest of Europe, were now faced with a dilemma in the Inquisition. Many agreed to go to Brazil and the Americas, taking their Jewish surnames with them – Perez, Suarez, Leone, Rivera. Reaction to the Inquisition also encouraged Navarre and Catalonia to stay at arm's length from Spain. Finally, the legacy of fighting back and forth with cavalry, grazing the Spanish plateau, made horsemanship and cattle raising prime among the Spanish.

Today, The Way of St. James, a walking pilgrimage across northern Spain from the Pyrenees to Santiago to visit the birthplace of Iberian Christianity and the backs-to-the-sea resistance to Islam is one of the most respected endeavors in Spain.