

An ancient echo of NYC mosque debate in Córdoba, Spain

Córdoba, Spain, was a center of art and culture under medieval Islamic rule and an inspiration for the original name of the planned New York City mosque.



A man exits the front of a lower Manhattan building that will possibly house the Córdoba Initiative Mosque and Cultural Center in New York.

(Lucas Jackson/Reuters)

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Madrid —

The debate raging in lower Manhattan and across the United States over the controversial planned New York City mosque is nothing new to Córdoba, Spain.

There the mixing of cultures and religions, both in war and in harmony, has been the norm for more than a thousand years. The Islamic cultural center and mosque that Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf hopes to build was originally named Córdoba House, after the city that was ruled by Muslims from the 8th to 13th centuries.

The city's Islamic period and longstanding arguments about its meaning – a symbol of tolerance and hope or an expression of an expansive and aggressive faith? – is an ancient reflection of the current US back and forth over mosques and their meanings, driven by the controversial project, now called Park51 after the project's location two blocks from the old World Trade Center.

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Just as the planned mosque in New York is fueling controversy – as is the promise by the leader of a small church in Florida to burn Korans on Sept. 11 – Córdoba's ancient mosque, considered by some to be the finest architectural achievement of Moorish Córdoba, has been a point of contention for centuries.

At its height, Córdoba was considered by some to be one of the greatest achievements of the medieval Islamic world – a center of art, architecture, and scholarship.

For much of the Islamic period, Córdoba was a bastion of tolerance. It ushered in a renaissance for Jews in Spain, who were persecuted by Christian rulers in the 7th century. The great Jewish philosopher and Torah scholar Maimonides was born there around 1134.

That Maimonides's family fled Córdoba for North Africa when he was a boy after an intolerant Islamic dynasty conquered the city is one

of the reasons that US politicians like Newt Gingrich deemed the original name an "insult." There were also periods in which large numbers of Jews or Christians were killed.

Unique Córdoba: mosque and cathedral in one

The Great Mosque today is one of Spain's most visited attractions. The complex, which includes a massive prayer room of white and red painted archways plus an outdoor orange grove, was built in four phases over 200 years starting in the 8th century.

To be sure, early disputes were over aesthetics as much as they were over ecumenical values.

In 1523, well after Spanish Christians had conquered the city, the Roman Catholic Church decided to knock down several rows of arches to build a cathedral almost in the center of the rectangular mosque. At first, the city rebelled against the plan, but King Carlos V sided with the Church – until he saw the result: "You have done what has been done elsewhere, and you have undone what was unique in the world," Carlos reportedly said.

The finished product, however, is certainly unique. The cathedral's proportion of the Islamic complex is roughly what would happen if a tennis court were made to fill the last 30 yards of a football field. And while the mosque/cathedral is protected by the Culture Ministry and has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1984, it is owned and managed by the Catholic Church, which holds regular masses there.

Córdoba controversy

For around two decades, Spain's Islamic communities have requested that the complex be used for both Christian and Muslim prayer. Letters have reached the Spanish prime minister and the pope. Neither institution has responded, and the Church hasn't budged on its preservation of the site as one for Catholic prayer alone.

Guards at the site ensure that Muslims do not pray. In March, a few Muslim tourists from Austria knelt down inside the mosque and were soon surrounded by security. An altercation erupted, and according to the guards, the tourists assaulted them – a charge the visitors deny.

A week later, a non-Muslim tourist from Rhode Island sat down in a yoga position in the mosque to protest what happened to the Austrians, and she, too, was escorted from the complex. In January a group of students led by an imam and a nun from Maryland were thrown out because the two teachers attempted to explain the site without an official guide.

"The paranoia is reaching absurd levels," says Mansur Escudero, a Córdoba-based psychiatrist and the head of the Junta Islámica, one of Spain's largest Muslim associations. "These anti-Islamic events only strengthen the extremists and terrorists. And what is happening in New York is similar. There is a clear political manipulation of emotions and symbols, and I find that dangerous. Sacrificing principles such as religious freedom is serious. I hope that the Americans come to their senses."

The exploitation of symbols, said Mr. Escudero, is what is fueling anti-Islamic sentiment in Europe and now in the United States. "The people behind the mosque near ground zero chose the name Córdoba because it symbolizes a historical period in Spain when Christianity, Judaism, and Islam lived side by side," he said.

The history

There are different opinions on what the Golden Age of Córdoba symbolizes. Some say Al-Andalus – Muslim-controlled Spain between the 8th and 15th centuries – is a symbol of Islamic domination. Others see it as a period of great religious tolerance. History shows something in between – with different hues at different points during the 500-year Islamic period.

The Muslims conquered Córdoba in 711, the year they began their invasion of Spain. Around 40 years later, Abd al-Rahman I of the Umayyad Dynasty, fleeing a massacre of his family in Damascus, began building Córdoba into one of the Western world's most influential cities that would reach its apex in the 10th century.

Abd al-Rahman III proclaimed the Caliphate of Córdoba in 929 to rival seats of power in Damascus and Baghdad, starting a massive

public works campaign including the construction of a palatial city just outside Córdoba called Madinat al-Zahra, about a third the size of Central Park.

Today it is one of Spain's most important archaeological sites from the Islamic period. The next caliph, Al-Hakam II, brought to the city men of letters and science, art and architecture, turning Córdoba into a leading center of scholarship and culture.

Also during the 10th century, Jews and Christians – while subordinate to Muslims – lived in relative peace. Some held important positions within the caliphate bureaucracy. The head of customs was a Jew who negotiated trade relations with the Christian Byzantine Empire. The Córdoban ambassador to Constantinople was a Christian cleric. Churches, mosques, and synagogues abounded.

Nevertheless, disputes between the religious groups did occur. In the 9th century, the Christians of Córdoba complained that the ban on church bells was not fair when the muezzin could call Muslims to prayer. This and other bickering led to a violent clash which left many dead Christians. In 1011, as Muslim nobles fought one another for control of the caliphate (it would never regain its glory and fell 20 years later), another religious conflict ignited, this time between Muslims and Jews. The latter were killed.

Likewise today, the disputes – albeit less violent – continue. And while the petition for Muslims to be allowed to pray at the Great Mosque does not appear to be going anywhere, on Sept. 11 this month a group of Muslims, Christians, and Jews plan to form a human chain linking the synagogue with the mosque. It will be difficult to misread the symbolism.

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