

Christian-Muslim Relations Before the Crusades

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I. Introduction

Three major world religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – claim Abraham as founder and exemplar, yet each holds the others to be in error. This has consistently caused conflict when the three interact. While Christianity sprung out of the Jewish homeland and out of the Jewish tradition, Islam rose out of a blend of portions of both Jewish and Christian traditions, yet rejected major doctrines and texts of each. Thus, major differences arose between Christianity, nominally the religion of most of the Middle East of Mohammad’s day, and Islam, fundamentally incompatible in most of its doctrine with Christianity. The history of this conflict is long and bloody, continuing to the present time; rather than discussing this history itself, it will be the purpose of this paper to examine the early roots and motivating factors of that history, particularly the interaction between the early Muslims and the native Christians of the Middle East before the year 1000 AD. The early causes for conflict are varied; the chief issues are doctrinal differences between the faiths, based particularly on the differences between the New Testament and Qur’an, and the Islamic concept of *jihad*, or “holy war.”

II. Christians and Muhammad

Muhammad, the prophet of Islam and author of the Qur’an, himself interacted with numerous Christians and spoke about how Muslims were to treat Christians. In fact, his eighth wife, Maryam, was a Christian slave girl, and his tenth wife, Um Habeeba, was the widow of a Christian man.¹ Moreover, Muhammad was familiar with the New Testament, at least in part, referring to the Injeel, or gospel (though not in the New Testament form), as part of the

¹ Shorrosh, Anis A. Islam Revealed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988. pp. 64, 66.

revelation of Allah, the god of Islam.² However, Muhammad was also careful to differentiate between Islam and Christianity,³ yet claims that Christians also have a reward from Allah and recognizes them as “people of the Book.”⁴ He even went so far as to make treaties with Christian groups, mostly Nestorians and Monophysites.⁵ Indeed, Muhammad “was both surprisingly tolerant of Christianity and surprisingly uninformed about it.”⁶ Yet while Muhammad’s actions and words were those of tolerance, the doctrinal issues remained. In particular, the divinity of Jesus and the passion narrative cause conflict; while the New Testament holds Jesus to be God and claims he both died and was resurrected, the Qur’an denies both assertions.⁷ Moreover, the doctrine of *jihad*, or “holy war,” based on Quranic commands to “fight in the way of Allah”⁸ and promises that those who do so obtain salvation,⁹ promotes fighting against non-Muslims, despite the statement that “there is no compulsion in religion.”¹⁰ Thus, the stage was set for conflict even during Muhammad’s lifetime.

III. The Jihad

Islam has often been called the “religion of the sword,” because of the frequent use of war terminology throughout the Qur’an. This is in some ways accurate, but in others misleading. While such terminology is found in greater concentration in the Qur’an than in the Hebrew Bible

² The Qur’an. Trans. M. H. Shakir. Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an, Inc., 1997. 3:3, 3:48, 3:65, 5:46, 5:47, 5:66, 5:68, 5:110, 7:157, 9:111, 48:29, 57:27. (Note: the Surah : verse format will be used here; i.e. 3:3 for Surah Al-Imran, verse 3).

³ The Qur’an, 2:135, 2:140, 4:171, etc.

⁴ The Qur’an, 2:62, 5:69, 22:17.

⁵ In particular, Muhammad made a treaty with the Christians at Najran (Mohammed, Ovey N., S.J. Muslim-Christian Relations. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999. p. 28) and is said to have made a treaty with the monks of the St. Catherine’s Monastery at Mt. Sinai in 632 (Shorrosh, 53).

⁶ Moffett, Samuel Hugh. A History of Christianity in Asia, Volume 1: Beginnings to 1500. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis books, 1998. p. 329.

⁷ The Qur’an, 3:59, 4:171, 4:157-158, 5:19, etc.

⁸ See, for example, 2:244, 4:74-75, etc.

⁹ See, for example, 3:157, 3:169, etc.

or the New Testament, it is always within a defining context. Muslims are not commanded by the Qur'an to fight whomever they please; rather, a *jihad*, which in the Qur'an means a "struggle or striving against evil," may be fought in the political sense only "against those who prohibit worship, those who create injustice, and those who force believers into exile."¹¹ Moreover, the term *jihad* refers to four kinds of struggles: those of the heart, those of the tongue, those of the hand, and those of the sword. Only the *jihad* of the sword, the political and military sense, is of relevance here. This form of *jihad* developed as a response to the oppression of the first Muslims by the Meccans, and was an intensifying of the small tribal battles known as *ghazw*; wars on the scale of the *jihad* were new to the Middle East at that time. The early *jihads* after Muhammad seem to have been fought primarily for reasons of economic and political power; the Arabs were here the aggressors, not the oppressed, as in the conditions outlined above. Moreover, these wars involved the weightiest opponents of the time: the Byzantine and Persian empires.

IV. Life After the Jihad

The interesting aspects of the encounters between conquering Muslim caliphs and conquered peoples lie in the situation after the conquering itself had taken place, when several distinctions were made among the conquered peoples. First and foremost, Arabs were distinguished from non-Arabs. For a non-Arab, some religious differences were tolerated, but, in nearly all cases, for the Arab the choice was Islam or death. The second distinction, between the different "peoples of the Book," that is, the Muslims as opposed to the Jews and Christians, was at first less severe. In some instances, Christians were allowed to keep their faith, and frequently, as in the sack of Jerusalem in 638, churches, crosses, and the like were left untouched. Finally,

¹⁰ The Qur'an, 2:256.

“people of the Book” were distinguished from pagans, such as Zoroastrians. The Christians generally fared better than the Zoroastrians because of the associations between Zoroastrianism and Persian nationalism.¹² Another key feature of the conquered peoples was the development of the *dhimmi*, a kind of religious ghetto, which provided freedom from oppression and from obligations such as the military draft and forced labor. Nonetheless, people in the *dhimmis* were under certain restrictions. For example, Christians under the Covenant of Omar in the ninth century could not criticize the Muslim religion, evangelize Muslims, display crosses in Muslim towns, build church, or refer to Jesus as God in the presence of a Muslim.¹³ Thus, while Muslim-Christian interaction in lands conquered by the caliphs was not always negative, it was not entirely positive, either.

V. Persecution of Christians Under Muslim Rule

Generally, Christians were not persecuted actively by their Muslim rulers until the time of Mahdi, the third ‘Abbasid caliph, who had Christian women whipped with up to a thousand strokes to make them apostatize. By about 820, Christians were forced to dress differently from Muslims, forbidden to build churches in Muslim towns, and Christians were not allowed to testify against Muslims, or, in some cases, for Muslims, in courts of law.¹⁴ In 850 AD the caliph Mutawakkil, known as “hater of Christians,” began a persecution of Christians which included deposing the Nestorian Patriarch Theodosius, prohibiting Christians from riding horses, forcing them to wear dyed garments with patches on their shirts, banning Christians from the markets on Fridays, forcing them to destroy the graves of their dead, forbidding their children to learn

¹¹ Randall, Albert B. Theologies of War and Peace Among Jews, Christians and Muslims. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1998. pp. 317, 331.

¹² Moffett, 337.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 344-6.

Arabic in the schools, forcing them to erect wooden images of devils on their gates, and forbidding the setting apart of any place for Christian liturgies.¹⁵ In other words, although Christian-Muslim interactions remained relatively civil for several generations after Mohammad's death in 632, within 220 years, there was open opposition between the two groups.

VI. Conclusions

Though both Islam and Christianity are fiercely monotheistic, each claiming to be the true religion of the God of Abraham, each recognizing the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and recognizing Jesus as the miraculously born Messiah of Israel, other crucial theological differences have led to a rift spanning more than thirteen hundred years. Christians worship Jesus as God, which is seen by Muslims as idolatrous. Muslims claim Muhammad as the supreme prophet of Islam, above Jesus, which is seen as blasphemous by Christians. These doctrinal differences, coupled with the oppression resulting from the *jihad*, or "holy war," paved the way for this history of conflict, despite the tolerance and peace offered Christians by Muhammad himself. This long history will only improve as members of each faith make genuine and sufficient efforts to understand the theology of the other and to reach out, as both traditions do so well, not in anger or fear, but in love.

¹⁴ Moffett, 356-7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 357-8.

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