

Dhimmi or not Dhimmi?: Religious Freedom and Early Islam

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St. John of Damascus, whose life bridged the seventh and eighth centuries, remains today one of the leading Eastern Orthodox theologians and is counted among the Roman Catholic “Doctors of the Church.” Glimpses of the storied life of him and his family during the first century of Islam epitomize some of the key themes and questions of this study. John, or Mansur ibn Sarjun al-Taghlibi as he was known in his lifetime, was born into an influential Christian Arab family in Syria during the reign of the Umayyads, Islam’s first and most expansive dynasty. His namesake grandfather had served as a high-ranking financial official under Heraclius, the last of the Christian Byzantine emperors before the conquest and occupation of Syria by Muslim armies. As a high Byzantine official, John’s grandfather had helped negotiate the Byzantine surrender of Damascus to the Muslims, and would actually continue as a chief financial officer under the new masters. St. John’s father, Sarjun ibn Mansur, carried on—and even improved upon—the family tradition, serving as the chief financial administrator for the entire Middle East under the Umayyad caliph. Sarjun was clearly a Christian and yet remained for his entire career a leading official in the new Muslim administration. St. John himself initially followed his ancestral career path and served in a very powerful and influential capacity within the Umayyad administration; he, along with other Mansur family members, essentially controlled the finances of the Umayyad Dynasty. At the age of forty-one, for reasons not altogether clear in available sources (but probably involving treachery by a Byzantine emperor), John was likely forced from his office. He then joined a monastery, from which he would make his permanent mark on history.

As a monk, John was a prolific writer. Most famous for his impassioned defense of icons, John also wrote strong refutations of various Christian heresies, including denunciations of what he called the “Heresy of the Ishmaelites” (by which he meant Islam), as well as powerful and influential expositions on the Trinity, Creation, and the Incarnation among other topics. His hymns continue to be sung in eastern and western Christian churches alike. Two of them have been commonly translated into English hymn books as “Come ye Faithful, Raise the Strain” and “The Day of Resurrection! Earth, Tell it Out Abroad!” Throughout his life, whether as a public official or a monk, John, like millions of other Christians under Muslim rule in his day remained free to practice his Christian faith, and publicly.

From the same Umayyad Muslim court, specifically during the career of St. John’s father, comes a story of a seemingly different hue. Recorded by Bar Hebraeus, a medieval Jew turned Christian bishop and philosopher from Antioch, Syria, the story involves the *catholicos* (Patriarch of the Church of the East) Hnanisho‘ I:

Hnanisho‘, who succeeded Yohannan Bar Marta in the dignity of catholicus, was consecrated at Seleucia in the year 67 of the Arabs. The metropolitan Yohannan of Nisibis, known as Garba [‘the Leper’], was offended with him for the following reason. When ‘Abd al-Malik, son of Marwan, the king of the Arabs [Umayyad caliph] arrived in the land of Sen‘ar [Babylonia], Hnanisho‘ came to meet him and offered him the usual presents. The king said, ‘Tell me, catholicus, what do you think of the religion of the Arabs?’ The catholicus, who was always prone to give hasty answers, replied, ‘It is a kingdom founded by the sword; and not, like the Christian faith and the old faith of Moses, a faith that is confirmed by divine miracles.’ The king was angry, and ordered his tongue to be cut out, but several people interceded for him, and he was allowed to go free. All the same, the king commanded that he should not again be admitted into his presence.¹

This was likely the first public instance (certainly the most gutsy proclamation) of the oft-repeated line that Islam is “a religion” which was “established by the sword.” On the one hand here, we witness three generations of financial officials of the Mansur family living publicly as

¹ Bar Hebraeus, in *Ecclesiastical Chronicle*, eds. J.B. Abeloos and T.J. Lamy, ii. 136–40 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2012).

Christians within the Muslim court unmolested, and, on the other, a bishop who nearly loses his tongue for his frank honesty. While some today might latch onto the second story, taken together, these episodes provide historical insight into the status of religious tolerance within the early Islamic world. In the context of Late Antiquity, the period stretching roughly from the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine to the early centuries of Islam, on the whole and on balance, Islam actually stands out for the comparative religious freedom and tolerance it afforded many—by no means all—non-Muslims.

Rather than using the terms “freedom” and “tolerance” in the abstract, this study aims to understand them within the historical context of Late Antiquity. This era was, without a doubt, a particularly violent time in the history of the Mediterranean and the Near East. Wars and rumors of wars were the norm over the centuries leading up to the rise of Islam, and would continue to be so during the first century and more of the Islamic realm. Frequent and protracted wars between the Roman and Sassanian Persian Empires prior to the rise of Islam caused many to believe firmly that the world was locked in a violent apocalyptic struggle. Apocalyptic speculation ran rampant on both sides of the frontier between these empires, and it is fairly certain that the influential notion of “Holy War” was first articulated and declared within the Christian Byzantine army in this tense setting.² The sudden appearance of conquering armies from a new and unprecedented direction, the Arabian peninsula, simply brought a fresh set of players into a violent political landscape. Trying to explain the rise of Islam while arbitrarily isolating it from this larger context of political and religious violence and conquest is fundamentally misleading, even if all too common in current debates.

² Peter Sarris, “The Eastern Roman Empire from Constantine to Heraclius (306-641),” in *The Oxford History of Byzantium*, ed. Cyril Mango, 19-59, at 55 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

The distinction between conquest—essentially violent by definition—and the forced imposition of religion is a critical one, and too often overlooked in popular discussions on the rise of Islam. Revisiting and looking a little closer at Hnanisho‘ I’s boldly delivered line above might prove a helpful starting point. Note that he answers that the “religion of the Arabs” was a “kingdom founded by the sword; and not, like the Christian faith and the old faith of Moses, a faith that is confirmed by divine miracles.” The first part of Hnanisho‘’s statement would be supported by all modern scholars; the Islamic kingdom was, without a doubt, established by conquest and the sword. But what Hnanisho‘ seems to be juxtaposing is the fact of military expansion of the Islamic realm with the fact that Christianity initially spread by way of stories of miracles and divine signs. An overwhelming number of primary sources directly attribute the rise of Christianity to these miracles and signs. In fact, whatever one might think of their plausibility, nothing outranks miracle stories in ancient sources attesting to reasons for Christianity’s rise.³ On the other hand, Christian, Zoroastrian Persian, Jewish, and Muslim sources are all in full agreement that the armies of Islam conquered and with magnificent brutality. No surprises there. As one leading scholar of early Islam recently has written, while essentially all scholars take a violent conquest for granted, “no scholar believes that the Muslim conquerors were out to impose their religion by force; even going back a century or more I cannot think of any who has espoused this view.”⁴ This goes for scholars of all stripe—left and right—who study early Islam. The simple fact, demonstrable as we will see by abundant evidence on all sides, is that forced conversions played no significant role in the early rise of Islam. The evidence instead points to

³ See Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire, A.D. 100-400* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) and Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

⁴ Patricia Crone, “Among the Believers,” *Tablet Magazine*, August 10, 2010, 4.

remarkable relative tolerance and freedom in religious choice and worship in these early centuries, a situation which would continue for at least two centuries after the rise of Islam.

But before we look at that evidence directly, we must consider the extent of religious freedom under the realms which preceded Islam's rise. The argument here depends on this comparison to establish its notions of relative tolerance and freedom. The Late Antique world saw the appearance of what many have called the "state church," a new phenomenon in world history. The "state church" was global in scope, and insisted on uniform belief, rejecting alternatives and variations in ways unknown in prior ages. Rulers and religious leaders of the great empires of the Near Eastern and Mediterranean past, such as the Assyrians, for example, were confident that their god Ashur ruled the cosmos as his hunting ground; the early Persian emperor Darius knew that his god Ahura Mazda gave justice, truth, and light; Roman emperors of the earlier empire believed that proper rituals of the Imperial Cult maintained *pax deorum*, the peace with the gods. But none of these leaders had insisted that their subjects or citizens actually *believe* in rigorous systems of doctrine or dogma. Nor were their conquests aimed at gaining new worshippers or converts per se. By contrast, leaders of Late Antiquity, both the Christian Roman emperor and the Sassanian Persian King of Kings, pushed for conversion itself as a means of unification and expansion. One fifth-century Persian priest addressed the Sassanian King of Kings: "Valiant king, the gods have given you your empire and success. They have no need of human honor; but if you convert to one religion all the nations and races in your empire, then the land of the Greeks [i.e., Byzantines] will also obediently submit to your rule."⁵ This emphasis on actual conversion as a prerequisite to political unity was unknown in the ancient world before Late Antiquity, but would play a very powerful role within it, especially among Romans,

⁵ Elishē, *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, trans. Robert W. Thomson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 63.

Byzantines, and Sassanian Persians. The Christian Roman emperor Theodosius I, among others, declared the death penalty for any pagans who worshipped publicly, less than a century after the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. Among the Christians in particular, the potent combination of political universalism and monotheism was overwhelming. The knowledge of one God could both justify the exercise of imperial expansion (hence, in part, the constant wars mentioned above) and make that imperial rule more effective—One God, One Faith, One Empire, One Emperor.⁶ This ideology did, in fact, inspire Christian leaders to convert others at the point of the sword.

The Christian Roman/Byzantine Empire actually went one further, though, than merely insisting on conversion to Christianity within the realm; one had to convert to, and maintain the correct variety of Christianity. In the century preceding the rise of Islam, Christian emperors showed remarkable intolerance even to all variations of Christianity beyond that of the Imperial Church (known as Chalcedonian or Melkite⁷). Groups deemed heretical like Nestorians and Monophysites were brutally persecuted by the Imperial Church for holding to alternative views concerning the relationship between Christ's person and his nature. Note that Nestorian, Monophysite, and Chalcedonian/Melkite Christians all affirmed the Nicene Creed, and thus, the divinity of Christ and the Holy Trinity, in addition to everything else affirmed in the Creed. The remarkable intolerance of the Byzantines is clearly shown in the opening section of the law code of the Byzantine emperor Justinian, promulgated about a half-century before Muhammad's birth:

It is Our will that all peoples who are ruled by the administration of Our Clemency shall practice that religion which the divine Peter the apostle transmitted to the Romans. . . . We shall believe in the single Deity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit under the guise of equal majesty and of the Holy Trinity. We command that those persons who

⁶ See Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: The Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁷ The term "Melkite" literally means "imperial," and should not be confused with those modern Middle Eastern Catholic Christians who are known as Melkites.

follow this law shall embrace the name of Catholic Christians [i.e., Chalcedonian]. The rest, however, whom we adjudge demented and insane, shall sustain the infamy attached to heretical dogmas. Their meeting places shall not receive the name of churches, and they shall be smitten first by divine vengeance and secondly by the retribution of Our own initiative which we shall dispense in accordance with the divine judgment.⁸

That such stern measures were not simple political posturing will be demonstrated shortly through the voices of Nestorian and Monophysite Christians within the Muslim realm. Several accounts exist of Nestorian and Monophysite bishops actually encouraging their congregations to submit to—or even embrace—political rule of the Muslims because they knew that Muslims would necessarily be more tolerant to their faith than their former Byzantine masters who insisted, under persecution, on Chalcedonian orthodoxy.

As Islam arose and expanded, it immediately came to rule over millions of Christians (as well as Jews and Persian Zoroastrians). To be sure, Muslim rulers saw themselves as bringing what they saw as Allah’s righteous order to the universe, much as the ancient empires noted above had claimed to bring divine order with them. It is one thing, however, for conquerors to claim to be bringing a “righteous order” based on their religious ideology, but quite another to actually insist that subjects believe and embrace the religious claims. Historical instances of forced conversions of Christians and Jews are essentially non-existent from Islam’s first two centuries, the era when Muslims conquered and subdued more people and territory than they would at any other time in their history. By all historical accounts, relative religious freedom and tolerance, even if not always encouragement, were the general rule.

Bringing the *Qur’an* and other early Islamic writings to bear on this issue is necessary at this point, but notably thorny. Debates on the authenticity, reliability, and origins of these texts are poignant and often very contentious. As one scholar notes, “The sources we rely upon to

⁸ *Codex Iustinianus* 1.1.1; cited from Cyril Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of the New Rome* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), 88.

narrate about Islamic origins are late, sometimes written centuries after the events they claim to describe; they contradict one another, and they show signs of sectarian coloring and religiously-motivated redaction and omission.”⁹ By the time the texts came to be written down, in other words, at least a century and a half after the action, the texts were shaped by subsequent events and developments and do not necessarily impart as clear information on the early years as one might like. The status of non-Muslims changed over time, and later texts often unwittingly impose their own contemporary mores onto the past in the telling.

With the range of proposed dates for the composition of the *Qur’an* itself, spanning up to two centuries after the death of Muhammad, it is not always easy to nail down what it can tell us about Islam’s early years. Even if one is convinced by the view of a minority of current scholars and posits that the *Qur’an* is actually a very early text (as I am), the text still cannot be read as a straightforward indicator of how early Muslims actually interacted with Christians and Jews in particular. Cherry-picking (or, more euphemistically, proof-texting) individual passages from the *Qur’an* in order to demonstrate a pre-established view of Islam is all too common in current politicized discussions, conservative and liberal alike. As far as historical reality is concerned, it is hardly worthwhile to simply invoke, say, a passage from the *Qur’an* such as *surah* 29.46, “Do not debate with the people of the book [i.e., Christians and Jews] except with courtesy . . . say, ‘We believe in what was revealed to us and revealed to you. Our God and your God is one’” to prove one image of Islam, or conversely invoke a *surah* like 9.5, “Kill the unbelievers wherever you find them. Seize them, besiege them, ambush them in every way,” to prove another. As historians have long maintained, individual passages from the *Qur’an* are no more a sure guide to the way early Muslims actually treated non-Muslims than Psalm 137:9 gives solid indication that the ancient Hebrews frequently bashed enemies’ infants’ heads against stones.

⁹ Jack Tannous, review of *Muhammad and the Believers*, by Fred M. Donner, *Expositions* 5.2 (2011): 126-141.

The *Qur'an*, in the words of the leading living scholar of Islam's earliest years, itself "displays a considerable variety of opinions on the question of activism or militancy, ranging from an almost pacifistic quietism, in which only verbal confrontation is allowed, through permission to fight in self-defense, to full authorization to take an aggressive stance in which unbelievers are not only to be resisted but actually sought out and forced to submit."¹⁰ As this same scholar then cautions, when reading the more aggressive passages from the *Qur'an*, "it is important to remind ourselves here, however, that the *Qur'an* speaks of fighting unbelievers, not Christians and Jews, who were recognized as monotheists."¹¹ It is also important to remember that Islamic teachings are themselves a product of historical process. The now-famous (infamous) *Shariah* law emerged and developed over time, and one must always be aware of anachronism in assuming that any current or past understanding of *Shariah* guided Islam from the beginning.

All this is not to say that the *Qur'an* and other early texts are useless for answering the questions before us, so long as we also look for corroboration from actual historical accounts from the time. Both within the pages of the *Qur'an* and as attested by many such early accounts, Christians (and Jews) maintained special status as "People of the Book" (*Ahl al-Kitab*) and *dhimmis*, "protected people"; Persian Zoroastrians generally held the latter status as well. There was little, if any, forced conversion among peoples of these faiths. This represented a distinct break from general Late Antique tendencies to insist that all subjects embrace a narrow orthodoxy, as encouraged by the "state church" model described above. This relative tolerance was in part simply pragmatic, no doubt; for a few centuries after the initial conquests, Muslims remained a minority among Christians in former Byzantine holdings and among Zoroastrians

¹⁰ Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and Believers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 84-85.

¹¹ Donner, *Muhammad and Believers*, 85.

within Persia. Enslaving, decimating, or forcibly converting the vast unconverted majority were hardly viable options. All non-Muslims, though, were required to pay a special tax, the *jizya*. *Dhimmis* could even keep the defensive walls of their cities intact so long as they did not quarter troops within them rebellious to the regime.

Ultimately, the most clear indicator of whether Muslims actually practiced religious tolerance are probably the writings of Christians and Jews themselves who came under Muslim rule. Many of these *dhimmis* within the early Islamic realm were Nestorian or Monophysite Christians. While none of these writers deny that the Islamic conquest was generally violent, several such writers demonstrate clearly that the early Muslims were decidedly more tolerant than their former Christian Byzantine masters. John Bar Penkaye was a late seventh-century Nestorian Arab Christian writer living in Syria, and a contemporary of St. John of Damascus. He wrote an important eyewitness account of Islamic conquest and early rule, noting at one point that the “kingdom of the nomads” (as he terms the Muslim rulers) demands tribute, but that otherwise they permitted the local Christians to maintain whatever faith they already held.¹²

A fellow Nestorian and seventh-century patriarch, Isho’yahb actually presents his Muslim overlords as outright favorable toward Christians, and not merely tolerant. His writings provide one of the most complete accounts of relations between the Muslim rulers and the Christians in his region. In a letter to one of his bishops he records that the Muslims “not only do not fight Christianity, they even commend our religion, show honor to the priests and monasteries and saints of our Lord, and make gifts to the monasteries and churches.”¹³ A fellow seventh-century bishop, an Armenian historian named Sebeos gives us further insights into the early conquests of Islam and the relationships between the Muslims and the Jews in

¹² Cited from Donner, *Muhammad and Believers*, 112.

¹³ Cited from Donner, *Muhammad and Believers*, 114.

particular. One of many relevant facts he records is that the first governor of Muslim-ruled Jerusalem was himself actually a Jew.¹⁴ While this fact might well show a continuity from the Roman and Byzantine Empires, which had long histories of co-opting local elites to help rule rather than simply eradicating them, it does suggest that the status of *dhimmi* could actually be even more than a simply tolerated status. The family history of St. John of Damascus could provide further corroboration.

While many *dhimmis* lived (sometimes even thrived) under Muslim rule, some continued to ponder the question of why God had allowed the Muslims to conquer and rule over them. Writing in the 680s, the Syrian Christian John bar Penkaye wrote in his account of Islam's rise that he saw it as "due to divine working"; particularly, it appears, against his prior Byzantine overlords:

When these people [Muslims] came, at God's command, and took over as it were both kingdoms [Byzantine and Sassanian Persian] . . . , God put victory into their hands in such a way that the words written concerning them might be fulfilled, namely: 'One man chased a thousand and two men chased ten thousand' (Deut. xxxii.30). How otherwise could naked men riding without armour or shield have been able to win, apart from divine aid, God having called them from the ends of the earth so as to destroy by them 'a sinful kingdom' (Amos ix.8).¹⁵

Other Christian writers of the time would likewise speak of "the victory of the sons of Ishmael" as the will of God. Some struck a decidedly apocalyptic note by presenting the Muslim victory as fulfilling prophecies of the Fourth Beast of Daniel and other apocalyptic visions from the Old and New Testaments.¹⁶ Sebeos, the Armenian bishop and historian mentioned above was unambiguous that the Muslims brought with them devastating conquest: "Who can recount the horror of the Ishmaelite invasion which inflamed both land and sea?" Immersed in Scripture, he

¹⁴ Donner, *Muhammad and Believers*, 114.

¹⁵ Cited from Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin, 1997), 524.

¹⁶ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 532.

sought out an explanation from there: “The blessed Daniel foresaw and prophesied such disasters which would come upon the earth when he represented by four wild beasts the four kingdoms which were to arise in the world.”¹⁷ For non-Chalcedonian Christians, there was no problem with seeing that one of the kingdoms prophesied for destruction was actually the persecuting Byzantine Empire, and Islam was God’s veritable tool.

Further evidence of Muslim interaction with Christianity and Judaism comes from records and remains of Christian holy sites and space as well as the shape and form of early Islamic architecture. Surviving architecture provides some solid testimony to corroborate the picture which emerges from the sources above. While at times, early Islamic architecture potentially demonstrates a desire to replace Christianity with Islam, the full record is far more in support of a picture of the same type of tolerant interaction we see in the written sources.

The first major example of Islamic architecture constructed was the Dome of the Rock, built specifically on the long-vacant site of the Jewish Temple. This monument has been variously interpreted through time, but most agree that it makes a strong statement that the new religion of Islam could hold its own within a world in which the impressive monumental architecture of Christianity had long dominated. The construction of the monument, though, reveals a deep respect for Christian architecture and traditions. As the foremost 20th-century scholar of the Dome explains, here as elsewhere in early Islamic architecture “there was almost nothing that could not have been accepted and understood by non-Muslims,” to the point that it is often difficult to distinguish between what is specifically Muslim from what was Byzantine or had been Sassanian.¹⁸ The thin walls, classical columns and roofing and dome are directly reminiscent of Christian ecclesiastical architectural style, dominant in the region for centuries.

¹⁷ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 534.

¹⁸ Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 167. The analysis that follows here owes much to Grabar.

The marble decoration throughout the Dome of the Rock is specifically in a Christian Byzantine style and the walking passage around the central outcropping rock is done directly in Byzantine ambulatory baptistery style. “Only the absence of representations of the human figure and the Arabic dedicatory inscription reveal this building as not a Byzantine building.”¹⁹

The Dome of the Rock, incidentally, contains the first dateable quotation from the *Qur’an*, set in stone, one might say in the last decade of the seventh century. At first glance, it would appear to argue directly against the point of this paper. A 240 meter long inscription in Arabic, running around the interior part of the Dome itself, it seems to send a message that the architecture apparently does not (*surah* 4.171):

O ye People of the Book, overstep not bounds in your religion; and of God speak only truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, is only an apostle of God, and His Word which he conveyed into Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him. Believe therefore in God and His apostles, and say not “Three.” It will be better for you. God is only one God. Far be it from His glory that He should have a son. His is whatever is in the heavens, and whatever is on the earth. . . . God witnesses that there is no God but He: and the angels, and men endowed with knowledge, established in righteousness, proclaim there is no God but He, the Mighty, the Wise.²⁰

The anti-Christian tone of this passage seems apparent enough at first glance. A theological statement in a religious building does not itself necessarily reveal a basic intolerance, however. Recall that St. John of Damascus remained safe and thriving at this exact time even as he denounced the “the Heresy of Ishmael.” The fact that theological claims and counter-claims could be countenanced under the Umayyad rulers suggests a certain type of freedom and tolerance, so long as one was not as blunt (or rash) as Hnanisho‘ I. It might bear mentioning, again, that disagreement with the theological position of Byzantium would not have gone so well; it is well known that many Nestorian and Monophysite Christians were driven out of

¹⁹ G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar, eds., *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 228.

²⁰ Translation in Grabar, *Formation of Islamic Art*, 59-60.

Byzantium at this time. Public theological dispute like this suggests not intolerance but rather a certain relative degree of freedom to debate and disagree. It is also significant to note one of the central curiosities of this particular inscription: It was decipherable only in part due to the way the natural lighting was designed, and only small portions of it could be read at any given time of the day until the modern invention of artificial light. Thus, for all its apparent denunciation of Christianity, it was actually extremely difficult and impractical to read.

While the Dome of the Rock was built on empty holy space, the second most famous early Islamic building seems to suggest a certain hostility to Christianity; and yet, again, an understanding of the architectural history tells a more nuanced tale. The Great Mosque of Damascus (still standing and active today) was built directly on the site of the Cathedral of St. John, which was dismantled and cleared to make way for the mosque. While the actual reasons for dismantling the church remain uncertain, it does bear noting that this is one of the few, if only, times in early Islamic history that an actual church building was dismantled to make way for a mosque on the same spot. But even here, the architectural form of the mosque is derived directly from the format of a Byzantine basilica church. Muslims clearly saw themselves as superior, but they were not bent on eradication of prior religious forms.

A final architectural example specifically demonstrates ways in which Christians and Muslims continued to interact directly over these early centuries, and even on the same sacred space. In Rusafa, in Iraq, there was a sacred shrine and church built in memory of the early Christian martyr St. Sergius. St. Sergius remains to this day one of the most revered saints among Middle Eastern Christians. In antiquity, Arab Christians were known to carry icons of St. Sergius with them into battle. The shrine itself attracted a unique set of patrons in Late Antiquity. The Byzantine emperor himself patronized it, as did the Sassanian Persian King of

Kings Khusrau II, a Monophysite Christian Arab tribal leader named al-Mundihr, and even the Umayyad caliph Hisham (r. 724-43), who chose a nearby site for his country residence.

Archaeological work has revealed that an early mosque was built here, which actually shared the same courtyard with the church of St. Sergius, and would continue to do so into the tenth century.²¹ The mosque was literally linked by a mutual courtyard to a Christian holy site and church, and both the Christian church and Muslim mosque were long active together. Some have even suggested that the Umayyad caliph Hisham had personal devotion to Saint Sergius because of stories of healing associated with the Christian shrine. Centuries later, a Victorian traveler in the area by the name of Charles Doughty noted that Muslims continued to honor St. Sergius by making pilgrimages to the site and tying votive rags (a common practice within Islam) at the shrine.²² Although it would be naïve and/or seriously misleading to interpret this one site as proof of utopian peace and harmony throughout the entire Islamic realm, the evidence from the architecture corroborates the literary evidence, and points to an interaction between Muslims and Christians that was far more complex and interesting than the oft-repeated story of a clash of civilizations. One could add to this section descriptions of hundreds of church buildings which have remained active within Muslim lands through the centuries. It hardly needs to be noted that Christians have not always enjoyed freedom in these areas in the succeeding centuries.

If within the first two centuries of Islam, forced conversion did not play a significant role, conversion to Islam did proceed apace and would escalate in the years after. The parts of the Islamic world which had been Christian before the Islamic conquests retained Christian majorities for several centuries after Muhammad's death.

²¹ See E. K. Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain: St. Sergius between Rome and Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

²² Fowden, *Barbarian Plain*, 203.

Conversion to Islam was itself actually a rather simple process. The most basic requirement was to repeat the *shahada* – “There is no God but God and Muhammad is His prophet.” Within Islam there was, as there is now, a distinct absence of an elaborate ritual of conversion. There was no process akin to the catechumenate of the Christian church, that is, teaching the ways of the faith prior to official membership within the church. The only real external requirement was circumcision for men if they were not already circumcised.

It is well known that the early Islamic armies and navies were staffed by a large number of professing Christians. The first “Islamic” navy, in fact, to take on the Byzantines was made up almost entirely of professing Christians from the Levant. Yet the evidence does suggest some major conversions within the army, even in the early years. In the area of Iraq, for example, 1,000 horsemen converted together at one point early in the conquest. In North Africa, 12,000 Christian Berbers in the Islamic army converted at once, thereby receiving (it appears) a higher stipend. Outside the army, financial incentives for conversion were a real possibility for many. The tax structure of the Islamic *umma* for these early centuries was such that Muslims did not have to pay the burdensome *jizya* tax or head tax. Converting, thus, removed taxes. More materialist (and cynical) historians have declared conversion to Islam a simple tax loophole. At all events, the Islamic realm was the first in history where tax depended upon confessional identity. Obviously, once the vast majority of the inhabitants of the Islamic world were committed Muslims, something had to change, and Muslims came to be taxed in later centuries.

Recent and detailed studies of available conversion data suggest that the conversion of most areas to an Islamic population was gradual. Documentation of conversion can be traced in

Christian records and chronicles, Islamic historical traditions, travel accounts by Muslims and Christians alike, surviving tax registers, and even personal names.²³

In the early ninth century, two centuries after the death of Muhammad, Christians still maintained a clear majority in areas where the data is clear enough to analyze, probably no less than 60% for most of that century. Freedom and tolerance declined in some areas as Christians became a smaller and smaller minority, it appears. As a general picture, the evidence suggests that by the beginning of the eleventh century (a full four hundred years after Muhammad), the Islamic world contained about 80% Muslims, and a fair bit more in some areas. Areas such as Egypt and parts of the Levant maintained significant Christian minorities thereafter and they still do on up to the current day.

Entering the established world of Late Antiquity, one early Muslim conqueror declared that civilized world a garden, which his armies were intent on subduing but not destroying. Instead, he declared poignantly that this would be a “garden protected by our spears.”²⁴ Such protection seems to have included extending relative religious freedom and tolerance to the non-Muslim inhabitants of that “garden.” Nothing in this study is meant to imply something about what Muslims *really* believe, past or present, or what they should believe and/or practice. My point is not a theological or a political one or a social one. I am not trying to claim some “Golden Age” of religious tolerance, as the historically flawed 2005 Ridley Scott film “Kingdom of Heaven” and some contemporary observers have attempted to do. Islam has developed historically, and will continue to do so. Speaking as an historian of Late Antiquity, it is clear to me that Islam established a realm with relative religious freedom and tolerance in a world which had little. It demonstrably did so with a violence which was thoroughly in tune with its age.

²³ Richard Bulliet, “Conversion to Islam and the Emergence of Muslim Society in Iran,” in *Conversion to Islam*, ed. Nehemiah Levtzion, 30-51 (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979).

²⁴ Cited from Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150-750* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 194.

There were spears which maintained and surrounded this “garden.” It is also clear enough to me that Islam of the seventh to ninth centuries bears little resemblance to Islam of today in many areas of the world. Why and how that difference is a topic for the scholar of the modern world.