

The Advent of Islam And Arab Christians

By Dr. George Khoury

1-The Arab Prophet

During his lifetime, Muhammad reacted differently at different times to Jews and Christians depending on the reception they accorded him and also on his dealings with Christian states. At first, Muhammad favoured the Christians and condemned the Jews because they acted as his political opponents. This is reflected in Sura 5:85 :

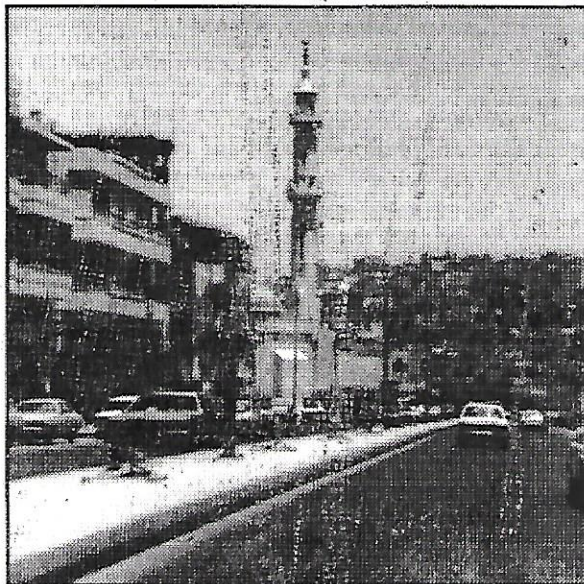
Thou wilt surely find the most hostile of men to the believers are the Jews and the idolaters; and thou wilt surely find the nearest of them in love to the believers are those who say, "We are nasara"; that, because some of them are priests and monks, and they wax not proud. (Sura 5:85; see also Sura 2:62; 5:69; 12:17).

Later he turned against them and attacked their belief that Jesus was God's son (Sura 9:30), denounced the dogma of the Trinity (4:17), and pointed to the division of the Christians amongst themselves (5:14). Most often though, Muhammad adopted an intermediate position: the Christians are mentioned together with the Jews as "People of the Book," while their claim of possessing the true re-

ligion is refuted. (See Sura :114; 3:135, 140; 9:29). And they will be punished by God.

Fight those who believe not in God and the Last Day and do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden--such men as practice not the religion of truth, being of those who have been given the Book until they pay the tribute out of hand...That is the utterance of their mouths, conforming with the unbelievers before God. God assail them! How they are perverted! They have taken their rabbis and their monks as lords apart from God, and the Messiah's, Mary's son, and they were commanded to serve but One God; there is no God but He (Suras 29-31).

During his lifetime Muhammad settled his relations with Christian po-



litical entities by treaties whereby they were allowed to keep their churches and priests, and also had to pay tribute and render some services to Muslims.

During the period of two hundred years following Muhammad's death, the attitude of Islam to Christianity remained generally similar to what it had been during the closing years of the prophet's life; Christianity was regarded as parallel to Islam,

but corrupt. To this extent, Islam was superior. The outstanding consequence of this period, however, was the impressing on the masses of ordinary Muslims the view that Christianity was corrupt and unreliable. This, together with the death penalty for apostasy, kept the Muslims in lands ruled by the scimitar effectively insulated from Christian propaganda. Let us view this more closely, considering first the period immediately following the death of the prophet in 633 C.E.

2- The Covenant of Umar I (634-644)

The year after the death of the prophet in Arabia, the stage was set for a full-dress invasion of neighboring lands. In 634 the Arab forces won a decisive victory at Ajnadayn, and Damascus surrendered to Khalid ibn-al-Waleed in September 635.

Jerusalem capitulated in 638 and Caesarea fell in 640, and between 639 and 646 all Mesopotamia and Egypt were subjugated. The last links connecting these Christian lands with Rome and Byzantium were severed; new ones with Mecca and Medina were forged. In about a decade the Muslim conquests changed the face of the Near East; in about a century they changed the face of the civilized world. **Far from being peripheral, the victories of Islam proved to be a decisive factor in pruning life and growth of Eastern Christianity.**

After the Arab invasions have stopped, there arose the problem of administering these new lands. Umar ibn-al-Khattab (634-644) was the first man to address himself to this problem. Despite the fact that later additions were made to it, it is agreed that the surviving covenant represents Umar's own policy. The conquered peoples were given a new status, that of dhimmis (or ahl-al-Dhimmi). As dhimmis they were subject to tribute which comprised both a land-tax (later kharaj) and a

poll-tax (later jizyah) while they enjoyed the protection of Islam and were exempt from military duty, because only a Muslim could draw his sword in defense of Islam.

3-The Ummayyads

The Ummayyad caliphs (661-750) lived as Arabs first and Muslim second. As a consequence, their era was liberal in both political and religious matters. However, during the rule of the Ummayyad caliph Umar II (717-720) there arose the concern to summon conquered peoples to Islam and to create favorable conditions allowing an equitable or better participation of all Muslims in the social and political life of the community. Umar was shocked that non-Muslims should exercise authority over Muslims, and tried to prevent it. In Egypt he removed some of the Coptic officials from their positions and replaced them by Muslims, and it seems that he applied this policy throughout the whole empire. He wrote to the governor of Egypt: *"I do not know a secretary or official in any part of your government who was not a Muslim but I dismissed him and appointed in his stead a Muslim."* This policy of Umar II was translated during the later Abbasid era into a major program due to the discontent of many Muslims with the excesses and corruption of the liberal Ummayyad caliphs and the frustration that non-Arabian Muslims, especially Persian Muslims, felt on being treated as second-class citizens. Also due to external political circumstances and to the unruly and socially disruptive conduct of some Christian groups, Umar II reacted with some vehemence against the Christians. He abrogated the jizyah for any Christian who converted, and imposed other demeaning restrictions:

Christians may not be witnesses against Muslims. They may not hold public office. They may not pray aloud or sound their clappers. They may not wear the qaba', nor ride on a saddle. A Muslim who

would kill a Christian would be liable to a fine, not death. He abolished the financial arrangements whereby churches, convents and the charities were maintained.

Despite these exceptions, Ummayyad rule was characterized on the whole by political as well as religious and intellectual liberalism. That is why Ummayyad caliphs, with the exception of Umar II, did not press for or even favor, conversion to the Islamic faith.

4-The Abbasid Era (750-1258)

With the Umayyad's fall in 750 the hegemony of Syria in the world of Islam ended and the glory of the country passed away. The coming to power of the Abbasid dynasty marked a radical change in the balance of power within the caliphate. In a vast and complex body such as the caliphate had now become, there was an intricate network of party interests, sometimes conflicting and sometimes coinciding. The recovery of the equilibrium was thus no simple matter; and for the whole of this century, (i.e., the 8th century) the caliphs had as a prominent aim the framing of a policy which would rally the majority of the inhabitants behind it. In an Islamic environment, it was inevitable that such a political struggle should have religious implications. First, and vis-à-vis other Muslim groups, the Abbasid caliphate touched a number of risings of Kharajites who refused to submit to the new rule. There were also other opponents who questioned the legitimacy of the Abbasids' claim to the caliphate. As for the Christians as well as for the rest of ahl-al-Dhimmi, the Abbasid era would prove to be less tolerant of non-Muslims and would either reenact old anti-Christian legislation or create new restrictions.

The Abbasids chose Baghdad for headquarters, though for a short period of time al-Mutawakkil (847-861) transferred his seat back from Iraq to Damascus (885). As the Melkites were few in numbers in Mesopotamia it was the Nes-

torians and the Jacobites who under Abbasid rule shared more strongly in the literary life of the country and brought greater contributions. The beginning of the Abbasid caliphate until the reign of al-Mutawakkil (847-861) marked the zenith of the Nestorian Church from mid 8th century to mid 9th century. This prodigious success was made possible by the great number of zealous and educated monks, formed by the many schools existing at the time. In Baghdad itself, there were apparently many important monasteries, groups of professors, and students. There were, for example, the school of Deir Kalilisu and Deir Mar Fatyun and the school of Karh.

In the last two schools medicine and philosophy were taught along with the sacred disciplines. Christian physicians and especially scribes exerted some kind of tutelage within the Nestorian Church, and tried their best to obtain for their community a more benevolent legislation from Muslim rulers. Though the Abbasids showed tolerance towards the other religious, non-Muslim groups, still their tolerance was displayed mostly vis-à-vis some of their coreligionists who lived on the margins of traditional Islam.

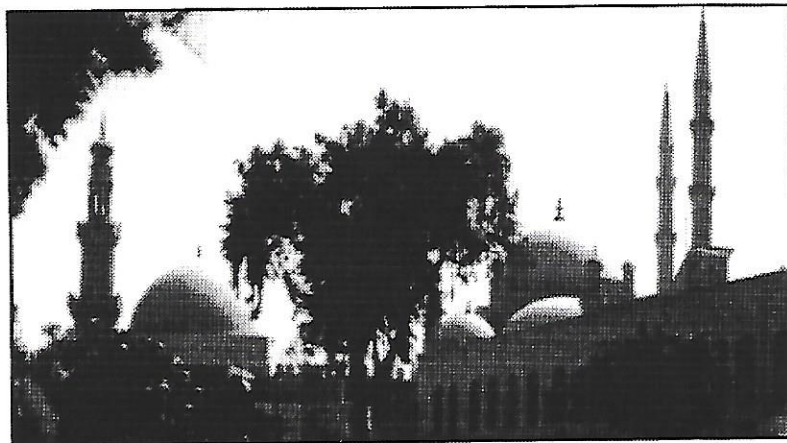
The Christians, especially the Melkites who lived in the eastern provinces of the empire, had much to endure. Before, al-Mutawakkil Abu Gafar al-Mansur (754-775) imposed many vexing measures upon the Christians. In 756, he forbade Christians to build new churches, to display the cross in public, or to speak about religions with Muslims. In 757, he imposed taxes on monks, even on those who lived as hermits, and he used Jews to strip sacristies for the treasury. In 759, he removed all Christians from positions in the treasury. In 766 he had the crosses on top of the churches brought down, forbade every nocturnal liturgical celebration and forbade the study of any language other than Arabic. In 722, he required both Jews and Christians to exhibit an

external sign to distinguish them from other believers. Abu Gafar al-Mansur also put in prison, for different reasons, the Melkite Patriarch Theodoret, the Patriarch Georges, and the Nestorian Catholicos James. Al-Mahdi (775-785) intensified the persecution and had all the churches built since the Arab conquest destroyed. The Christian tribes of Banu Tanuh, which counted 5000 fighters, were forced to embrace Islam. Angered by the defeats he incurred at the hands of the Byzantines, al-Mahdi sent troops to Homs in Syria, to have all the Christians abjure their faith. However, many of these laws were not enforced. For example, when Umar II tried to dismiss all dhimmis from government services, such confusion resulted that the order was ignored.

The Barmakid viziers, of Turkish origin, who were the strong arm of the Abbasid caliphs, seem to have manifested a certain measure of benevolence towards ahl-al-Dhimmi (the tributaries) and especially towards the Christians. It is only at the end of the rule of Harun al-Rahid

(786-809), i.e., after the disgrace of the Barmakids, that some measures were taken against the Christians. Harun al-Rashid re-enacted some of the anti-Christian and anti-Jewish measures introduced by Umar II (717-720). In 807, he ordered all churches erected since the Muslim conquest demolished. He also decreed that members of tolerated sects should wear a prescribed garb. But evidently much of this legislation was not enforced. Under his son al-Ma'mun (813-833) there was in 814 a general persecution in Syria and in Palestine. Many Christians and church dignitaries escaped into Cyprus and into Byzantine territories. Conditions under al-Watheq (842-847) did not improve and were sad indeed for the Christians.

Under al-Mutawwakil (847-861) there was intensification of discontent on the part of Christians due to harsh conditions imposed on them. In 850 and 854 al-Mutawwakil revived the discriminatory legislation and supplemented it by new features, which were the most stringent ever issued against the minorities. Christians and Jews were enjoined to affix wooden images of devils to their houses, level their graves even with the ground, wear outer garments of yellow color, and ride only on mules and asses with wooden saddles marked by two pomegranate-like balls on the cantle. Basing their contention on a Qur'anic charge that the Jews and the Christians had corrupted the text of their scriptures (Surs. 2:70; 5:16-18), the con-



temporary jurists ruled that no testimony of a Jew or Christian was admissible against a Muslim.

Legally speaking, the law put the male dhimmi below the male Muslim in nearly every way. It protected his life and property but did not accept his evidence. Eight acts put the dhimmi outside the law: conspiring to fight the Muslims, copulation with a Muslim woman, an attempt to marry one, an attempt to turn Muslim from his religion, robbery of a Muslim on the highway, acting as a spy or a guide to unbelievers, or the killing of a Muslim. However, despite these stringent laws, the social status of Christians was not that bleak. The consequences of this anti-Christian legislation were mitigated to a certain degree by the

number and influence of some Christians in prestigious and vital professions, such as in medicine and high positions of government; e.g., Abu I-Hasan Sa'id ibn Amr-ibn-Sangala, who occupied the position of secretary under the Caliph al-Radi (934-40), and who was as well appointed as special secretary for the two sons of the Caliph in 935, and also Minister of Expenditure, and who rendered inestimable services to the Christians. Because Islam prohibits the practice of usury to Muslims, Christians exercised a certain monopoly on the trades of goldsmith, jeweller, and moneylender. Consequently, many Christians were rich and this stirred further feelings of jealousy against them. On the whole, relations between Muslims and Christians were peaceful and unfair laws were not always enforced.

However, the Christians could not help but feel and endure the stigma of inferiority. Even the literature of Islamo-Christian controversy should not mislead us on their true condition in the land of Islam. The tolerance they enjoyed was not the result of a state policy consistently upheld

by all the caliphs. On the part of the caliphs, it was mostly motivated by their concern to protect and advance the sciences and the arts. The Islamization of Syria and Iraq and other lands no doubt facilitated Arabization. After the Arab military victory, there was the conquest and victory of Islam as a religion when many Christians in Syria and other lands converted to Islam to escape their oppressive and humiliating conditions. Finally there was the linguistic victory as Arabic supplanted Greek and Syriac.

In the Next Issue we will deal with the Arab Christian Literature of the 8th-9th Centuries.