Muslim regard for Christians and Christianity, 900-1200

David Thomas

Muslim attitudes towards Christians who lived within the increasingly fragmented Islamic world remained governed by the so-called Pact of ʿUmar, though it is unclear how far its stipulations were applied beyond the exaction of the jizya.¹

The evidence of such texts as the 11th-century *Khabar al-Yahūd wa-l-Nasārā* (q.v.), in which the Fatimid Caliph al-Ḥākim retires from his meeting with the heads of the main client faiths to consult the sources about the treatment of dhimmīs, and of Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥāmān al-Kātib’s *Al-durr al-thamīn* (q.v.) from the later 12th century, which tells how the Ayyūbid Sultan Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn renewed the dhimmī regulations, indicates that they were not regularly enforced or even well-known, at least in Egypt. The fact that the Caliph al-Qādir (r. 991-1031) is specifically recorded as re-introducing them in Bagh-dad, and al-Ḥākim (r. 996-1021) eccentrically and cruelly in Cairo, suggests that while the regulations were always present in potential they were not systematically invoked.

It might well be that the majority of Christians living under Islamic rule were generally tolerated, if not welcomed as full participants in society. Certainly, Christian professionals who had something to offer, such as medical or linguistic skills, do not appear to feel any undue opprobrium: the leading 10th-century scholar Yahyā ibn ʿAdī (q.v.) moved within Baghdad intellectual circles as an equal to any Muslim he knew, and among elite intellectuals exchanges about philosophical or medical matters were not impeded by religious barriers. But Christians always risked being dismissed from their jobs if they advanced too far. And the steady flow of converts who have left renunciations of their Christian beliefs – al-Ḥasan ibn Ayyūb (q.v.) and Naṣr ibn Yahyā (q.v.) are two of the most vocal – is a strong indication that the incentives to accept Islam, or disincentives to resist it, were never

---

completely absent from social and professional relations. Even Yahyā ibn Ḥādī was pressurized to define and defend the intellectual probity of the doctrines he upheld.

While the evidence for widespread conversions to Islam remains inconclusive, the absence of extensive references in many Muslim works of history and geography in this period is at least consistent with the reality of a faith community that was in decline, lacking in momentum and increasingly marginalized in society. This period is marked by the first historical works written by Muslim authors that survive in more than fragmentary form. As might be expected, they contain mentions of Christians in accounts of day to day living within the Islamic world as well as of battles against the Byzantines and later the crusaders. But since many of these are only incidental and show little explicit awareness of Christians’ religious status, they suggest that to their authors Christian communities were evidently not important or powerful religious or social elements.

Historians who do not appear to give special attention to Christians or Christianity are listed below, while notable exceptions are treated in separate entries in what follows. However, a word of caution should be added. It is possible that in some histories at least, Christians are singled out as alien and hostile by sophisticated structural elements and indirect portrayals such as actions rather than descriptions, as well as repetitive designations such as ‘associator’ or ‘polytheist’. Fuller analysis of these histories, as well as similar apparently unyielding works, may show more widespread attitudes towards Christians than is immediately apparent.

The historians Abu l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad ibn Wādhī al-Yaʿqūbī (d. 905 or after), Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), Abū Naṣr al-Muṭṭahhar ibn Tāhir (or al-Muṭṭahhar) al-Maqdisī (d. after 966) and Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf ibn al-Azraq al-Fāriqī (d. 1176-77) give enough valuable information about Christianity or indications of their attitude towards it to merit entries in what follows. The attitudes of others are less clear, and the details they give about Christians are generally scanty.²

² The list given by C. Hillenbrand, ‘Sources in Arabic’, in M. Whitby (ed.), Byzantines and crusaders in non-Greek sources 1025-1204, Oxford, 2007, 283-340, pp. 310-13, 322-23 (including authors who did not only write about the Byzantines and crusaders) has been taken as the basis for what follows. It provides full listings of editions and studies of these works.