

SOME NOTES ON
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JEWS AND CHRISTIANS
UNDER MUSLIM RULE

by

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Islam, the third of the three monotheistic religions, and today one of the greatest world-religions, was born in the seventh century in Arabia. There is no doubt among scholars that it was born under direct influence of both Judaism and Christianity, the only point of discussion being the question whose influence was deeper or more lasting, that of Judaism or that of Christianity. Only modern Muslim scholarship (in sharp contrast to classical Islam) tries to deny this basic fact, feeling as if the admittance of any influence on the beginnings of Islam threatens, as it were, its originality or heavenly source. These feelings are of course nourished by the acute anti-western attitude of modern Muslim scholars, both against white, Christian Europe and the United States and against Judaism, world Jewry and especially the State of Israel. It is because of these feelings that modern Muslim scholarship, for the time being, tries to avoid the academic study of both Judaism and Christianity and their influence on the development of early Islam. There are even modern Muslim attempts to rewrite the traditional Muslim exegesis of the Qur'an without having recourse to the "Israiliyyat" - Jewish and Christian material - which medieval Muslim scholars found very helpful in explaining the Qur'an. Also there do not exist, for the time being at least, any Muslim institutions for the academic study of Judaism and Christianity and their common denominators with Islam, a basic prerequisite for real dialogue to be carried on.**

The Qur'an, of course, testifies clearly to the influence of both Judaism and Christianity on early Islam. In fact there were large Jewish settlements in and around Al-Madina and Christian heterodox monks were always wandering around the desert, preaching and spreading the basic ideas of their faith. The Qur'an accepts all the basic monotheistic ideas such as

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** There exist, of course, Muslim institutions which deal with Judaism, but these cannot be termed academic. They deal, e.g. with the reprinting of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" or of the medieval Christian charges against the Talmud, etc. (I may be permitted here to point out the fact that in Israel there exist of course several academic institutions for the study of Islam and the history of the Arabs, some of which have gained world-wide academic repute and instruct many hundreds of students, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Druze, Bahai and others.)

those of God's unity and transcendence, his being God of the cosmos and history, his covenant with man and man's moral responsibility for his deeds, the Day of Judgment and many others. The Qur'an also contains much material from both the Old and the New Testaments, including stories, terms, concepts, Laws. Perhaps one may say with Geiger, Noeldeke, Torrey and other Jewish and Christian scholars that the *amount* of Jewish material in the Qur'an is larger than the amount of Christian material in it. (For example, the stories in the Qur'an about Moses are much more numerous and detailed than the few stories about Jesus.) One also has to bear in mind that Islam was from its very beginnings a religion of law, of halakhah, such as Judaism is – if not more so. But in spite of these and other similarities to Judaism one has to state, on the other hand, that the whole *atmosphere* of early Islam is much more Christian than Jewish (Wellhausen was the first scholar to stress this point with Tor Andrae and others following him). This atmosphere expressed itself in the great dread before the Day of Judgment, the excessive feeling of guilt in early Islam and therefore the inclination towards nightly vigils, baptism and so on. It is because of this dual influence on early Islam that several scholars put forward the idea that the main influence on Muhammad and young Islam came neither from Judaism nor from Christianity but from some kind of Jewish-Christian sect like the Elkesaites or Ebionites. Others suggested various possible sources of influence, including some Jewish heterodoxy of the Dead Sea Sect kind and S. D. Goitein even explains the later clash between Muhammad and the Jews of Al-Madina as being mainly a Jewish clash between the orthodox Rabbinite Talmudic Jews of Al-Madina and Muhammad's heterodox Jewish teachers from Mecca, who seemed to have been deeply influenced by Christian ideas and practices. We certainly cannot go into details here, nor decide who of all the scholars may be right, but we have to accept the fact that both Judaism and Christianity influenced young Islam.

This fact becomes even more complicated if we add Muhammad's later disappointment and frustration with both Jews and Christians. Being convinced that he was only "translating" the monotheistic faith into "clear Arabic", Muhammad hoped that the Jews of Al-Madina (there were far fewer Christians around) would follow him and accept his message. But the Jews refused to do so and even ridiculed him as a prophet who perhaps did not know how to read and write and who clearly mixed up historical data in his revelations, by describing for example Haman as being the Vizier of Pharaoh, or Miriam the sister of Moses as being Jesus's mother. Therefore, very soon after the "Hidjra" from Mecca to Al-Madina in 622 Muhammad detached himself both from Jews and Judaism and Christians and Christianity and developed his own Arabic version of monotheism, especially through connecting Abraham and Ishmael with the Ka'aba in Mecca, as the famous Dutch scholar Snouk Hurgronje was the first to point out. Muhammad's

attitude towards the earlier monotheistic religions became ambiguous or divided into two separate levels: ideally he still felt closely connected to both Judaism and Christianity (and here may lie a point of hope for future relations between all three religions!) and in fact Islam never denied its special relationship to the two other monotheistic religions. But on the concrete level Muhammad now charged both Jews and Christians with the deliberate falsification of their scriptures (an ancient Samaritan and Christian charge against Jews) not only in order to justify the Muslim presentation of biblical material, which included many discrepancies and contradictions between the Qur'an and the Old and New Testaments, but also because of his claim that the Bible contained clear prophecies about his (Muhammad's) coming and God's wish that men should follow him – a fact which both Jews and Christians obviously denied . . .

From now on we have a kind of double attitude in Islam: an almost positive one to Judaism and Christianity as religions, and a deeply negative one to Jews and Christians, the followers of these religions, while distorting them, as it were. Therefore the Jewish tribes of Al-Madina and its vicinity were now one after the other expelled or exterminated, the Christian inhabitants of Southern Arabia later to follow. In this connection one should add here that generally one may discern in the Qur'an a more positive attitude towards Jews, perhaps because the number of Christians in North Arabia was very small at that time. I shall quote one well-known verse in this context, often used also in modern political discussions (Sura V, The Table, verse 82): "You will find the most vehement of mankind in hostility to those who believe (the Muslims) – the Jews and the idolaters. And thou wilt find the nearest of them in affection to those who believe – those who say: Lo, we are Christians! that is because there are among them priests and monks and because they are not proud."

This emotional difference in the Muslim attitude towards Jews and Christians in fact almost disappeared later and famous literary critics treated the Christians very harshly as did, e. g., Al-Djahiz (died 869) in a special epistle of his against them. Perhaps, as I said, these differences in attitude can be explained by the actual number of either Jews or Christians concerned, their social status and power and so on. In Muhammad's time it was the Jews who aroused his accusations, but two hundred years later the Christians were the object of envy and hatred because many of them were wealthy and held powerful posts in the administration. But on the whole one may say that Islam usually treated both Jews and Christians as one entity, in one category of the "Protected People", that is to say of people adhering to the monotheistic religions that influenced early Islam (later including also the dualistic Zoroastrians (!) – because of historical reasons). These "protected" people were given the choice of living under Muslim rule in return for paying a special poll tax, unlike the idolaters who – at least theoretically – were

given only a choice between embracing Islam or dying by the sword. The "Protected People", the Jews and Christians, could adhere to their own faith, but many humiliating restrictions were imposed upon them, some of which went back directly to Byzantine anti-Jewish legislation. In Arabic, however, these restrictions were called the "Covenant of Umar" and attributed to the second Caliph of Islam (634-644), but perhaps originated only later during the Umayyad Umar II's reign (717-720). What kind of restrictions were these? First of all, the "Protected People" had to dress differently (headwear, girdles) mainly in special colours (yellow for Jews, blue for Christians, red for the Samaritans). But here I have to add that this restriction in the Muslim East had a much less humiliating connotation than the yellow badge in medieval and Nazi Europe (and this badge actually was brought to Europe from the East, probably by the Crusaders). In the East many different classes of people (soldiers, merchants, scholars) dressed differently so that they could be distinguished from each other. Therefore this law has to be looked upon differently in East and West. Other restrictions on Jews and Christians related to government posts, the height of houses (always less than Muslim houses), the use of riding animals (only donkeys could be used by them, and without riding saddles) etc. The building of new churches or synagogues, as well as repairing old ones, was totally forbidden, as was also the testifying of non-Muslims against Muslims in the courts. (For more details see Appendix.) All these and many other restrictions remained in full force up to modern times (in some countries, like Yemen, up to the middle of this century!) and had a deep effect on the life and psychology of the people concerned.

But in early Islam, most of the time, these restrictions were not really enforced and Muslims tolerated Jews and Christians much more than European Christians tolerated the Jews in medieval times. Perhaps it was because Islam was used to large numbers of minorities and different peoples living under its rule, from its very beginning; perhaps because Islam had no "deicide complex", if I may say so; or perhaps because in its first centuries Islam was rather liberal and open-minded when compared to medieval Europe. But even so, early Islam also knew of fanatic rulers such as the Umayyad Umar II at the beginning of the eighth century, Al-Mutawakil the Abbasid in the ninth century, Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah the Fatimid in the eleventh century. These and others dramatically enforced the restrictions mentioned, turned churches into mosques and incited the mob against both Jews and Christians. In later generations what was the exception to the rule became ordinary everyday life. With the Egyptian Mamluk rule, or even before that, from the 11th-12th century on, and later during the Ottoman Empire, from the early sixteenth century down to modern times, the conditions of both Jews and Christians deteriorated more and more: the Dark Ages of Islam produced exactly the same religious fanaticism as in medieval Europe.

The more their conditions deteriorated the more Jews and Christians drifted apart from each other, becoming rivals in every sphere, especially economically, and each one endeavouring to improve his condition with the Muslim rulers, often at the expense of the other. Here perhaps we find the basis for attitudes of modern times, with Eastern Christianity still trying to make friends with Islam as against Judaism; but before coming to modern times let us stop for a moment and look back at some theological points of interest.

There is no doubt that in the Middle Ages the common ground of the three monotheistic religions was felt and understood much better than in our times. The adherents of these three religions realised that they had common enemies to fight and that their weapons and ways of battle were essentially the same; they realised that they had much more in common than what divided them into three different religions, like the common belief in one transcendent God, the creator of the world *ex nihilo*, the Day of Judgment, Paradise and Hell, however one may explain them, and the belief in man's moral obligations and religious duties. All these and many other ideas stood in direct contrast to both Greek paganism and philosophy, and Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologians tried to refute the basic pagan tenets in many writings. Of course we cannot survey here the vast amount of writings, influences and even themes of polemics, but I shall give at least one very clear and not so well known example of this common fight.

Al-Ghazzali, one of the most famous thinkers of Islam (d. 1111) wrote, among many others, a book in Arabic called: *God's Wisdom as Seen through His Creatures*, in which he tried to show how marvellous and thoughtful and wise God's creation is, in every detail of nature, whether plant, animal or man. He gives special attention to the marvels of man's body and his development from the embryo to the grown-up man. All this is clearly aimed at the philosophers' denial of planned creation and really stimulates even in modern readers a feeling of religious wonder for God's marvellous creation. Now one of the chapters of a Jewish book of approximately the same date is of exactly similar nature and content. This is the second chapter of Bahya Ibn Paquda's well-known book *The Duties of the Heart*, also written in Arabic, as Jews did under Muslim rule and in Spain. For some time scholars believed that Bahya's chapter was only a copy of Al-Ghazzali's book, a Jewish plagiarism of a Muslim work. And indeed both are extremely close in structure and language so that scholars can fill out gaps in one book with parts of sentences in the other! The only difference is that wherever the Muslim author quotes Muslim sages or sources, the Jewish author quotes Jewish sources or sages to the same effect. Sometimes he does not even trouble himself that much, but simply changes the Muslim names into Jewish ones, leaving the quotations as they are, because he felt no difficulty at all in accepting these Muslim sayings into his own tradition

(and moral problems of plagiarism did not arise in the Middle Ages; on the contrary, it was regarded as a good deed to spread good ideas, notwithstanding the fact that they were other people's ideas!). Anyhow, to come back to our Jewish author Bahya, whenever he found a quotation of Muhammad's friends and followers, say Abu Bakr and Umar, he substituted names of Jewish sages of the Talmud, say Abbajje and Rabba, or instead of Muhammad's wife A'isha he put Deborah the prophetess, and so on. But after a time scholars found out that he could not have copied from Al-Ghazzali's book because new data showed that undoubtedly he lived before him! Certainly it could not be the other way round, that the well-known Al-Ghazzali, who lived in the East, copied from a Jewish author in Spain who wrote Arabic in Hebrew characters, as Jews usually did (not that Al-Ghazzali did not copy others – this he did quite often, as we shall presently see). Things seemed to be inexplicable until my late teacher D. Z. Baneth found an earlier Christian manuscript which seemed to be the source of both the Jewish and the Muslim authors. An anonymous author, undoubtedly Christian because, among other things, he mentions the Trinity, started to praise God's wisdom in his creation, and the Jewish and Muslim authors copied him extensively, changing only the quotations or the names of the quoted people and sources. That this could happen at all seems to be a very decisive proof of how close the adherents of those three religions felt in the Middle Ages, especially in their common fight against Greek philosophy, which represented then what we today perhaps call unbelief, secularism, radicalism and so on. What a pity that we today have lost the feeling of our common ground!

But I do not want to paint too rosy a picture. Even in the Middle Ages things did not go that smoothly and many theologians were engaged in writing voluminous tractates, and not very friendly ones, against each other: mainly Muslims against Jews and/or Christians, but also Jews against Muslims or Christians, and Christians against Muslims or Jews. In this context I have to stress again a quite forgotten point; that essentially Judaism and Islam are closer to each other than to Christianity. Although early Islam was so much indebted to Christianity, the two religions are basically different from each other. The Christian faith is based on the belief in the redeeming power of the Saviour and is realised in symbolic acts of sacraments. But Islam, like Judaism, denies emphatically the ideas of a personal Redeemer and Saviour, of the Trinity and so on. Thus, for example, one of the recurring themes of Muslim-Christian polemics was that Jesus was an ordinary man, though born miraculously of a virgin, and that he was a prophet like others before him. If he had been more than that, how could he have been crucified, and how did he feel hunger and thirst and pain on the cross, and how could he call in vain to his Father in heaven, who seemed to have abandoned him! Also, as I have already mentioned, Islam, like

Judaism, is basically a religion of law, of commandments, in which the observance of ritual and ethical injunctions is intended to sanctify every moment of life. These commandments are incorporated in God's law which consists of the written revelation and the oral law and which, in both religions, is expounded by private sages or Ulama, who take the place of organised clergy in Christianity. Because of these and other similarities, it seems that at least theoretically Judaism and Islam are much closer to each other than to Christianity. But let us come back now to modern times and make a few short remarks upon them.

Modern times in the Muslim East started perhaps with Napoleon's expedition to Egypt at the end of the eighteenth century. It is especially since then that Muslim scholars became engaged in a deep process of adjusting their traditional spiritual values to the requirements of the modern western world. This process is yet at its very beginning, despite the long time that has passed since it began, and some of its most important religious issues have not yet even been raised. This process obviously started and was accelerated by foreign European Christian influences. Unfortunately these influences brought with them also some very negative ideas about Jews and Judaism, and Christian European antisemitic ideas found in the Muslim Middle East a very fruitful soil. We mentioned before the humiliating restrictions on the "Protected People", both Jews and Christians, and in Muslim medieval religious literature everyone can find antisemitic ideas, sayings and polemics. But it seems that up to modern times, the Middle East did not know that intense hatred of Jews so characteristic of medieval Christian Europe. Now, Christian antisemitic ideas were gladly accepted by Islam and used (long before the foundation of the State of Israel!) against Jews: for example, the blood libels, the ritual murder accusations, which appeared first in the nineteenth century in what is today Lebanon and Syria, later in Egypt. Another antisemitic idea completely foreign to Islam was the western Christian idea of Jews having killed Jesus. The Qur'an says explicitly that "They slew him not, nor crucified him, but it appeared so unto them" (Sura IV, Women, verse 157), expressing perhaps the same heretic Christian idea as Docetism. Nevertheless, in modern Muslim propaganda against Jews and Judaism the accusation of deicide is often used. Things, of course, become more and more complicated now because of the political problems, Christian Arabs trying to prove their genuine Arabness, as it were, by being extremely fanatic to the Arab cause. At the same time, Christianity in Muslim view becomes more and more identified with the treacherous West and there seems to be spreading in Islam today a longing for vindicating Islam's truth once more through crushing both Jews and Christians, or Israel and the West. This is perhaps because, as is well known, Islam, unlike Christianity, came into the world together with a marvellous historical success, conquering in less than one hundred years almost all the ancient world and building an

empire greater than Rome at its peak of success. The truth of God's word to Muhammad was vindicated, as it were, through power. Consequently Islamic law divides all the world into two parts, the region under the rule of Islam, and the area of war. In theory, no Islamic state is allowed to make permanent peace with a Christian or any other power, as is stated in the Qur'an, "Fight . . . until religion everywhere belongs to God", i. e. to Islam (Sura II, The Cow, verse 192).

Of course, historical practice has shown that this is in theory only, but as long as such and other theories prevail in Islam (or in any of our traditions), it will be extremely difficult to bring about a peaceful coexistence among Jews, Christians and Muslims. I may, therefore, conclude now with the question: What can *we* do in order to foster better relations between the adherents of these three religions? Let me answer: We must first search once more for our common ground, start with a "reinterpretation in integrity" of our traditions, as well as study the others thoroughly and hope for a real, living and authentic dialogue with each other. Even if this may seem still far away, especially with regard to Islam, our endeavour may yet be a small contribution towards a peaceful coexistence in the Middle East.

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APPENDIX:

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THE PACT OF UMAR (SEVENTH CENTURY)

We heard from Abd al-Rahman ibn Ghanam (died 78/697) as follows: When Umar ibn al-Khattab, may God be pleased with him, accorded a peace to the Christians of Syria, we wrote to him as follows:

In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate.

This is a letter to the servant of God Umar [ibn al-Khattab], Commander of the Faithful, from the Christians of such-and-such a city. When you came against us, we asked you for safe-conduct (*aman*) for ourselves, our descendants, our property, and the people of our community, and we undertook the following obligations toward you:

We shall not build, in our cities or in their neighbourhood, new monasteries, churches, convents, or monks' cells, nor shall we repair, by day or night, such of them as fall in ruins or are situated in the quarters of the Muslims.

We shall keep our gates wide open for passersby and travellers. We shall give board and lodging to all Muslims who pass our way for three days.

We shall not give shelter in our churches or in our dwellings to any spy, nor hide him from the Muslims.

We shall not teach the Quran to our children.

We shall not manifest our religion publicly nor convert anyone to it. We shall not prevent any of our kin from entering Islam if they wish it.

We shall show respect toward the Muslims, and we shall rise from our seats when they wish to sit.

We shall not seek to resemble the Muslims by imitating any of their garments, the *qalansuwa*, the turban, footwear, or the parting of the hair. We shall not speak as they do, nor shall we adopt their *kunyas*.

We shall not mount on saddles, nor shall we gird swords nor bear any kind of arms nor carry them on our persons.

We shall not engrave Arabic inscriptions on our seals.

We shall not sell fermented drinks.

We shall clip the fronts of our heads.

We shall always dress in the same way wherever we may be, and we shall bind the *zunnar* round our waists.

We shall not display our crosses or our books in the roads or markets of the Muslims. We shall only use clappers in our churches very softly. We shall not raise our voices in our church services or in the presence of Muslims, nor shall we raise our voices when following our dead. We shall not show lights on any of the roads of the Muslims or in their markets. We shall not bury our dead near the Muslims.

We shall not take slaves who have been allotted to the Muslims.

We shall not build houses overtopping the houses of the Muslims.

(When I brought the letter to Umar, may God be pleased with him, he added, "We shall not strike any Muslim".)

We accept these conditions for ourselves and for the people of our community, and in return we receive safe-conduct.

If we in any way violate these undertakings for which we ourselves stand surety, we forfeit our covenant (*dhimma*), and we become liable to the penalties for contumacy and sedition.

Umar ibn al-Khattab replied: Sign what they ask, but add two clauses and impose them in addition to those which they have undertaken. They are: "They shall not buy anyone made prisoner by the Muslims", and "Whoever strikes a Muslim with deliberate intent shall forfeit the protection of this pact".