

Islam's Tolerance toward Christians

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The Qur'an calls Christians and Jews "the People of the Book," meaning those who have a Divinely revealed holy book that they follow. Toward the end of the Makkan era of the Prophet's life, the Qur'an began to mention these people and gave them a special and honored place. They were first mentioned in: And argue not with the People of the Book ... (29:46).

Thus the Qur'an started the greatest ecumenical movement history had ever seen. All the Qur'an required of them was that they confirm the Last Prophet, for their own books told them that such a person was going to come.

The Qur'an, gradually deepening its intimacy with Christians, declared they were the nearest to Muslims in love, because their priests and monks are not proud, and because they listen to and recognize the truth of what the Messenger has brought (5:82-83). It also warns them against certain heresies, such as following those who earlier had gone astray (5:77), believing in the Trinity (4:171), or remaining in their rebellion and unbelief (5:68).

Many Qur'anic verses state that Jesus called people to believe in God's oneness, and that he called himself "a servant of God." The Qur'an stresses that his mother Mary (Maryam) was sinless, dedicated to the temple, and raised under Prophet Zakariya's guidance. It also relates the miracles God gave her, Jesus' miraculous birth without a father, miracles given to Jesus, his Prophethood, and his being raised to the sky by God (3:33-64). In Maryam:19, their behavior and postures are described and praised. Of all religions, Islam is the only one to attest that Mary was a virgin and gave birth to Jesus miraculously. Islam is even more sensitive about this subject than Christians. In fact, the Bible says in Luke (chapters 2, 4, 5) that Mary was engaged to a carpenter named Joseph, whereas the Qur'an mentions no such person.

The Qur'an rejects Christianity's fundamental beliefs that Jesus is divine and the Son of God. It asserts that his being distinguished among people or being given many miracles do not make him a deity. People who attribute a son to God are rejected, without clearly pointing out that the subjects are Christians (2:116). Thus the Qur'an wants Christians to understand the implication and correct themselves.

In the early days of Islam, Christians and Muslims were on very good terms. For example, when the Makkan's persecution became unbearable, the Prophet permitted those who wanted to leave to go to Ethiopia (615 CE / 5 AH). He said that the land was safe, for its ruler was just. A group of 15 Muslims including 'Uthman and the Prophet's cousin Ja'far, emigrated there. The Prophet sent Najashi a letter asking him to give refuge to these Muslims, which he did.¹ After a while, the Quraysh sent a delegation with many precious gifts to ask Najashi to return the Muslims. Najashi summoned them, and Ja'far explained the situation. Najashi wanted to learn what they thought of Jesus and Mary. Ja'far recited the beginning of Surah Maryam, which deals with the births of Prophet Yahya (John the Baptist) and Jesus. The emperor drew a line on the ground and said: "If there is a difference between our religions, it is as great as this line." Najashi refused the Qurayshi request.⁽²⁾

At that time, an internal war broke and threatened Najashi's throne. All Muslims who could fight supported the emperor. Most remained in Ethiopia until 7 AH, when the Prophet summoned them

to Madina. Najashi sent his son to the Prophet with a letter stating he had embraced Islam. The Prophet treated Najashi's men with great hospitality. Najashi died that same year, and the Prophet led his funeral prayer in Madinah.(3)

Relations between the Muslims and the Byzantine Empire started out as peaceful and in an atmosphere of good will. In the initial years of the Prophet's mission, war broke out between Christian Byzantium and Sassanid Persia. The Muslims in Makkah sided with the Byzantines, as they were People of the Book. Even though the Byzantines were severely defeated, Surat al-Rum, revealed just after the defeat, announced that the Byzantines would be victorious in a few years. This came true 9 years later, when the Byzantines crushed the Sassanid Empire. At roughly the same time, the small Muslim community in Madinah defeated the Quraysh at Badr.

In 6 AH, the Prophet sent letters to neighboring rulers. One was sent to Emperor Heraclius of Rome. The Prophet wrote: "In the name of God, the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate. From Muhammad, the servant and messenger of God, to the Roman's great King Heraclius. May peace be upon those who obey the right path. I call you to Islam in the way of a true Muslim. Become a Muslim and you will find salvation. Become a Muslim and God will give you twice as much as you actually deserve. If you turn away, you will be held responsible for your subjects. And you; O People of the Book! Come to a word common between you and us, that we shall worship none but Allah, that we shall assign no partner to Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside Allah. If they turn away, then say: 'Bear witness that we are submitters to Allah (as Muslims)'" (3:64). The Empire diplomatically stated that Heraclius rejected the invitation. However, historical sources insist that the emperor inwardly welcomed the invitation and remarked: "These places we are in now will be his in the near future."