

NON-MUSLIMS IN MEDIEVAL MUSLIM SOCIETY

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As the Muslim Empire expanded it encompassed many non-Muslims within its borders. These non-Muslims were treated differently dependent upon their faith: Christians and Jews as fellow monotheists were given legal rights and obligations. While their treatment varied over time and they were often seen as second-class citizens, they were able to function fully within Islamic society. Non-monotheists, however, were unable to similarly function in Islamic society. From the time of Mohammed, they were seen as dangers to believers, and were more often used as slaves than taking a full and free role in society. As such, they were stereotyped and treated less like human than as animals.

Jews and Christians were treated differently from other non-Muslims from the time of Mohammed. Upon arriving in Medina, Mohammed made agreements with the Jews that guaranteed their rights to property and freedom of religion as long as they did not act against the Muslims¹. In fact, the early Muslims of Medina as considered “The Jews [...] as one community with the believers” and allies against non-believers and enemies of Islam². The Jews were allowed the same legal rights as Muslims, and were protected by Muslims; in return, they were expected to pay taxes and similarly extend their protection to the Muslims³. The Jews were given this consideration – and by extension so too were the Christians – because of their belief in a single God, essentially the same as the Muslim’s Allah, and their shared faith in the Old Testament prophets. They can all be classified as “God-fearing believers”, and thus worthy of God’s protection⁴. Of course, if the Jews revolted against the Muslims, they could expect no mercy: Mohammed himself fought against Jews who resisted his rule⁵.

¹ Ibn Hisham, *The Life of Mohammed*, 231.

² *Ibid.*, 233.

³ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 493.

As the Muslim Empire extended in the seventh and eighth centuries, they encompassed more and more non-Muslims. Although some were inevitably converted to Islam, many non-Muslims remained under Muslim rule. The Jews and Christians in the Islamic empires retained many of their freedoms, but were subject to restrictions and discrimination. However, while the Jews and Christians were considered second-class citizens, they were able to function within Islamic society far better than other non-Muslims.

Ibn ‘Abdun, writing in twelfth century Iberia, clearly thought that Christians and Jews were inferior, but from his writing we can see that they were also an integral part of life in Muslim Spain. Ibn ‘Abdun describes the Jews and Christians as “vile” and “better fitted” for trades such as massage, refuse collecting or latrine cleaning. He bans Muslims from performing for Jews or Christians such trades as these or acting as a muleteer or even aiding them onto horses⁶. Their lives are clearly not considered worth as much as those of Muslims: cargo ships were forbidden from being overladen to not endanger Muslims’ lives⁷: presumably any ships crewed entirely by non-Muslims could be as overladen as it liked.

Jews and Christians seem to have been considered somewhat immoral and even unclean in Moorish Spain. Christian churches are described as “abominable” and the priests “evil-doers, fornicators and sodomites”. It is interesting that Ibn ‘Abdun takes offense to the rules of celibacy of Christian priests: he considers their refusal to marry as unnatural and destined to lead to fornication⁸. He bans all Muslim women from churches, which is not surprising, but also bans “Frankish” (i.e. Western Christian) women from the churches except for specific

⁶ Ibn ‘Abdun, “The Markets of Seville,” in *Islam from the Prophet Mohammed to the Capture of Constantinople*, ed. Bernard Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 163.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

services or festivals⁹. This seems to be a reversal, or at the least a weakening, of the original covenant of Mohammed that established the Jews in their religion¹⁰. Muslims also saw the refusal of Christians to perform circumcision as strange and some believed that they should have been forced to undergo the operation. As circumcision is often considered clean, perhaps this is partially why Christian and Jewish clothing was considered in the same category as garments from a “sick man” or a “debauchee” and not to be sold without warning the intended purchaser¹¹.

Jews and Christians were expected stand apart from the Muslims in Islamic society. They were expected to wear a “distinguishing sign by which they are recognized to their shame”, and forbidden from dressing as in the “costume of people of position.”¹² However, this restriction was inconsistently enforced, and while Ibn ‘Abdun wrote that they were “the devil’s party”, they were implicitly still functioning members of society¹³. Ibn ‘Abdun wrote extensive rules for the marketplace, including very details rule for food handling, and yet he only mentions that Jews must not slaughter meat for Muslims¹⁴. By considering his omission of further rules, we can assume that all other food services were open to the Jews and Christians.

It is also important to consider Ibn ‘Abdun within the context of his times. He was writing in twelfth century Seville, when the armies of the Christian Reconquista were already threatening his city. Already the Muslims of Seville had been forced to pay tribute to Christian kings and to call in for help from other Muslims; by the end of the thirteenth century, Seville had been taken by the Christians. It is not surprising that Ibn ‘Abdun showed a great deal of antipathy towards Christians. Indeed, given the political climate, it seems more surprising that Ibn ‘Abdun did not suggest more restrictions upon non-Muslims.

While the situation of Jews and Christians in Muslim society was relatively free of restriction, the

situation of other non-Muslims was not so positive. From the beginning of Muslim society, Mohammed had marked the pre-Muslim pagans as particular enemies of Islam. Polytheists were not considered part of the *umma*, nor were they allowed to “take of the property or person of Quraysh under his protection nor shall he intervene against a believer.”¹⁵ They were thus apparently denied the same legal rights as the believers.

As the Muslim armies extended their Empire, the conquered non-Muslims were often used as slaves. They were seen as less than Arabs, even less than fully men, more malleable and better suited for slavery. Kai Kaus writes “you can mould a non-Arab to your ways”.¹⁶ These non-Muslim peoples, whether they were Tatars, Armenians, Hindus or Nubians were stereotyped and their worth determined by their physical characteristics and these perceived character traits, as animals rather than as individual men. For example, Hindus are described as “evil-tongued, and in the house no slave-girl is safe from him.”¹⁷ Kai Kaus describes dispassionately the process of slavery for the benefit of Muslims¹⁸, without consideration of the slave himself, from which we can surmise that non-Muslims were of no intrinsic worth in Islamic lands.

The attitude of Muslims towards non-Muslims in medieval Islamic society was determined by the religion of the non-Muslim. Despite some negative images of Jews and Christians, they were able to function fully in Islamic society, given legal rights and obligations. Polytheists were not given such consideration and were unable to function fully in Islamic society, being seen as less than fully human and more suited to be slaves.

⁹ Ibid., 163.

¹⁰ Ibn Hisham, *Mohammed*, 231.

¹¹ Ibn ‘Abdun, “Seville,” 164.

¹² Ibid., 164.

¹³ Ibid., 165.

¹⁴ Ibid., 164.

¹⁵ Ibn Hisham, *Mohammed*, 232.

¹⁶ Kai Kaus, “The Purchase of Slaves,” in *Anthology of Islamic Literature*, ed. James Kritzeck (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), 165.

¹⁷ Ibid., 164.

¹⁸ Ibid., 166.

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