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CHRISTIANS UNDER THE FĀTIMIDS, AYYŪBIDS AND MAMLŪKS

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As an outbreak of plague was abating in Cairo in June 1419, Sultan al-Muʿayyad summoned the Coptic pope, Gabriel V. Before an assembly of Muslim judges and other scholars, Gabriel was beaten, threatened with death and upbraided because the Christian ruler of Abyssinia was mistreating his Muslim subjects. Then the muḥtasib of Cairo (the market inspector or more accurately ‘inspector of public spaces’; Stilt 2011: 1), Ṣadr al-Dīn ibn al-ʿAjami, reproved the patriarch harshly because the Christians of Egypt were violating the sumptuary regulations (ghiyār) and failing to show proper deference towards Muslims. After deliberating with the ʿulamāʾ, the sultan decreed that henceforth Christians must no longer be allowed to work in any state administrative bureau. The vizier’s Christian secretary, al-Akram Fadāʾil, already imprisoned, was then cudged and paraded semi-naked in the streets as an example of what awaited any Christian serving in the sultan’s administration. Since some Christian scribes dared to assume the prerogatives of Muslims and rode horses or donkeys, all Christians in Cairo and neighbouring Fustāṭ would now have to walk.

According to the Muslim historian Ibn Taghrībirdī (d. 1470), Christians and Jews withdrew from state administration, reducing the length of their turbans and the width of their sleeves. Any who dared to ride a donkey in Cairo were beaten and stripped, while Christians’ attempts to bribe their way back into office were rebuffed. Hitherto, Muslims, even descendants of the Prophet, had been treated rudely by non-Muslim officials to whom they were forced to defer; the violence they suffered was comparable to that experienced by Muslim prisoners of the crusading Franks. For Ibn Taghrībirdī, the change was like a second Islamic conquest of Egypt. Some Christians even turned to Islam, though maybe not sincerely. Perhaps God would forgive the sultan his sins for thus demonstrating the supremacy of Islam and ending the exaltation of Christianity (Popper 1957: 67–9; Stilt 2011: 119–21).

This episode, which was not unique, illustrates several features of the Christian experience under Fāṭimid, Ayyūbid and especially Mamlūk rule, particularly in Egypt. Enforcing the traditional regulations pertaining to dhimmīs was often part of a larger programme of moral and religious reform, on this occasion conducted by Ibn al-ʿAjami to secure divine favour and hence relief from the plague (Stilt 2011: 116–19, cf. 83–7, 92–101). Centuries after the Islamic conquest, despite intermittent attempts to purge them, Christians continued to hold influential and lucrative positions in government service. Commonly accused of abusing their power, they were valued for their skills but expendable. Diverting antagonism towards
non-Muslim officials deflected it away from rulers themselves and offered some satisfaction to
the aggrieved, especially in times of social distress. Indeed, the pressure to humiliate non-Muslims tended to come primarily from the disadvantaged elements within the populace rather
than the ruling elite that was guilty of employing Christian officials. Increasingly, such initiatives were encouraged by Muslim polemicists, who reminded readers that reducing the status of dhimmīs vis-à-vis believers was required by the shari‘a. Occasional outbreaks of persecution, often more violent and destructive than moderate Muslim jurists or rulers countenanced, induced Christians to convert to Islam and contributed to the decline of Christianity under
Islamic rule.

**Rulers and jurists**

Between 969 and 1517, Egypt’s heads of state were drawn in succession from two dynasties, the
Fāṭimid (969–1171) and the Ayyūbids (1171–1250), and then from two regiments of emancipated
slave soldiers, the Bahri Mamlūks (mainly Qipchaks, 1250–1382) and the Burji Mamlūks
(mainly Circassians, 1382–1517). The transition from one regime to another was seldom as
clear-cut as these dates imply, however, and each held substantial additional territories for lengthy
periods – especially in Syria. Ayyūbid rule there lasted until early 1260, and the Mamlūks only
secured their hold over Egypt and occupied Syria by defeating the Mongols later that year. Apart
from the persecution instigated by al-Hākim (996–1021), the Fāṭimids are usually judged to
have treated their Christian subjects better than any other regimes considered here (Samir 1996:
177–9). The Caliph al-‘Aziz (975–96) was influenced by his Christian wife (Lev 1991: 191), and
in their second century, as largely nominal rulers of Egypt, the Fāṭimids were ‘served’ by seven
powerful Armenian viziers. Only the fiṭḥ, Bahrām al-Armanī (1135–7), was a Christian, but the
others remained sympathetic towards adherents of their ancestral religion (Lev 1991: 59; Dadoyan
1996: 193, 203, 205, 206, 207, 209, 212; Parker 2013: 227). The Ayyūbids were also comparatively
benign, especially in contrast to the Mamlūks, who more frequently acceded to popular agitation
against Christians.

As expounded by medieval Muslim writers, the shari‘a is inherently discriminatory: it makes
legal distinctions between believers and unbelievers to the detriment of the latter. A range of
duties and restrictions imposed upon the ahl al-dhimma (‘people of the pact of protection’, hence
dhimmīs) was listed in the so-called Shurūṭ ʿUmar, the pact attributed to the Caliph ʿUmar ibn
al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 644). It was reproduced in variant forms by Muslim writers such as the Mālikī jurist Abū Bakr Muḥammad al-Ṭūrṭūshī (d. 1126), who settled in Alexandria (Lewis 1974: 217–19; Levy-Rubin 2011: 171–2). Enforcing these regulations was one of the duties of the muhtasib,
as explained in handbooks for this official such as those written by the Syrian al-Shayzarī (d. 1193) and the Egyptian Ibn al-Ukhwūwa (d. 1329; Stilt 2011: 55–62).

These and other Muslims who wrote about the status of non-Muslims did not merely reiterate
eternal verities based on the Qur‘ān and prophetic sunna as interpreted by their predecessors: they also reflected the social tensions of their own day. The Mamlūk period, in particular, was
characterised by frequent wars with Franks, Mongols, Timūrids and Ottomans; violent factional
conflicts within the ruling elite; and natural disasters such as earthquakes, pestilence and low
Nile floods causing famine. Blaming economic problems on corrupt Christian bureaucrats and
accusing them of colluding with enemies of the state, anti-Christian polemicists such as Ghāzī
ibn al-Wāsīṭī (d. 1312) and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Asnawī (d. 1370) called for a more stringent
application of the law pertaining to dhimmīs. Meanwhile, jurists such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and
his disciple Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) advanced ever harsher interpretations of the law
Marks of Christian subordination

Central to the relationship between Islamic rulers and their Christian subjects was the annual poll tax. *Jizya* was originally understood as tribute in lieu of military service payable by male *dhimmis* who were not permitted to bear arms, though Badr al-Jamālī, the Fāṭimid’s first Armenian vizier (1073–94), based his power on an army of fellow ethnics that may have included Christians (contrast Lev 1991: 95–6, with Dadoyan 1996: 203). Women, children, slaves, the infirm and, usually, monks were not charged *jizya*, which was typically reckoned at four dinars from the rich, two from the middling sort, and one from the poor (Buckley 1999: 122). Much of the charity dispensed by churches and monasteries went to paying the *jizya* of poor Christians (el-Leithy 2006: 94).

Since the Qurʾān (9:29) links *jizya* as tribute with the subjugation of those from whom it was collected, there was some debate over whether they should be ritually humiliated while paying (Cohen 1994: 56, 69). According to the Shāfiʿi jurist Ahmad ibn al-Naqīb (d. 1368), the *jizya* was a debt to be collected like any other ‘with leniency and politeness’, though *dhimmis* were not to be greeted with the Islamic offer of peace (*al-salām ‘alaykum*; Keller 1994: 608). The *muḥtasib* manuals advocated slapping each *dhimmī* on the neck, addressing him as ‘infidel’ (*kāfir*) and demanding payment, which was then to be tendered with humility (Buckley 1999: 122–3; Stilt 2011: 122). Ibn Qayyim proffered as the consensus view that the *jizya* was a humiliating penalty (*’uqūba*) rather than a fee (*ṣūra*), for the right to reside safely in Islamic territory (Cohen 1994: 69, 230), even if it did not need to be reinforced with a slap (Thomas and Mallett 2012: 992). Whatever the procedure, the indigenous Christian inhabitants of Egypt and Syria were marked as outsiders.

Christians were not permitted under the Pact of ʿUmar to build new churches or monasteries or to repair old ones, but the Fāṭimids (Lev 1991: 185–9) and some Ayyūbids usually implemented a more lenient policy. Some early Fāṭimid caliphs visited and patronised monasteries by giving them land and constructing buildings (Samir 1996: 184), as had some of their Tūlūnid predecessors (Werthmuller 2010: 104–6). Al-Ḥākim, however, ordered the destruction of churches, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem in c. 1009, before changing his mind and permitting extensive though incomplete rebuilding (Lev 1988: 78–9). The arrival of the Ayyūbids with their undisciplined troops led immediately to church destruction – with local Muslims joining in the looting – and later to the confiscation of lands endowed by the Fāṭimids (Lev 1999: 187–8, 192). Sultan al-Kāmil (1218–38), however, offered both patronage and protection when he visited the monks of St Macarius in 1228 (Werthmuller 2010: 62, 106, 121–6).

Inevitably, Christians settled and built churches in cities founded by Muslims, such as Fustāṭ, originally an Arab garrison town, and Cairo, established as a residence for the Fāṭimid caliphs, and the lawfulness of these buildings was contested in the Mamlūk period. Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim, both Hanbalīs, held that Christians should not be allowed to keep them. Ibn al-Rīfāʿ (d. 1310), the Shāfiʿī *muḥtasib* of Fustāṭ, argued that the onus was on Christians to prove their legality, but the chief Shāfiʿī *qāḍī*, Ibn Daqīq al-Īd (d. 1302), expressed the government’s view that presumed existing structures were legal unless proven otherwise. Ibn al-Ukhwūwa similarly assumed that all existing Egyptian churches predated the arrival of Islam and held that the *muḥtasib* should allow the repair of any that were not completely ruined (Stilt 2011: 114). Nevertheless, Ibn al-Rīfāʿ’s arguments were taken seriously by later scholars such as Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 1355), and they influenced popular views (Ward 1999: 74–5, 79–80, 82–3; Thomas and Mallett 2012: 692–4, 856–62, 2013: 88–91).

Allowing the public expression of Christianity risked conferring credibility upon it, just as Islam’s domination of public space was intended to demonstrate its veracity. Following the *Shurūṭ ʿUmar*, al-Shayzarī wrote that Christians must not openly display wine or pork, read their
Under the early Fatimids, Christian festivals such as Epiphany and pre-Christian observances such as Nawrūz (New Year) were celebrated openly, with many Muslims participating. Apart from al-Ḥākim, the caliphs who alternately promoted, constrained or suppressed such festivities seem to have been more concerned with morality and public order than religion (Lev 1988: 81–2, 1991: 192–3; but cf. Werthmuller 2010: 33). Muslim participation in Christian festivities was still a matter of concern for the rigorist Ibn Taymiyya (Thomas and Mallett 2012: 867–8, 874–6), and the Muslim historian al-Maqrizī (d. 1442) describes ostentatious celebrations on Palm Sunday in the early fifteenth century in the town of Akhmūn (el-Leithy 2006: 86).

The Ṣhrūṭ ʿUmar and the muḥtaṣib handbooks required Jews and Christians to dress distinctively so that Muslims would recognise them as social inferiors and treat them accordingly. As Ibn al-Ukhuwwa explained, dhimmīs were to ‘wear clothes other than those of Muslims in order to be known by them’ (Stilt 2011: 117). Al-Shayzārī noted that Christian men were required to wear a girdle or belt, the zummār, and a cross; in the public baths, they were to be distinguished by a metal ring about the neck. Women had to wear one black and one white slipper or clog (Buckley 1999: 121–2). Following the Pact, the same authors wrote that dhimmīs were not allowed to carry weapons or to ride horses though they might ride mules as long as they used side-saddles. Originally a mark of honour, the zummār became under Islamic rule a means to stigmatise non-Muslims (Cohen 1994: 62–4). Ibn al-Ukhuwwa lamented that Christians were riding mounts and dressing better than Muslims, while Ibn al-ʿĀjami’s 1419 instructions, though mentioning neck bells in bathhouses and blue buttons for women, focussed on turbans and sleeves as indications of wealth and status. There was no reference to the zummār, suggesting that this garment was not at issue (Stilt 2011: 116–18). Ordinary Christians, most of them peasants, could not break the ghīyyār rules by riding horses and wearing luxurious apparel: it was those who flaunted wealth and power, particularly high-status officials, who caused offence (Northrup 1990: 254).

The vulnerability of Christian officials

Despite their legally subordinate position, dhimmīs often rose to positions of influence over non-Muslims as government officials, which enabled them to function as intermediaries between rulers and the Christian population (Lev 1988: 84). Christian physicians who served Muslim rulers, such as Abū Shākir, who lived in al-Kāmil’s palace, played a similar role (Zaborowski 2005: 184). The administration inherited by the Fāṭimids included numerous Christians, though only a few attained the highest posts (Lev 1991: 190–1). After initially dismissing them, Ṣālah al-Dīn employed so many Copts that the continuator of the History of the Patriarchs could rejoice that ‘God turned their lowliness into power, and their humiliation into honour, and abhorrence of them into love, and their weakness into strength’ (Parker 2013: 229; cf. den Heijer 1996: 69–77 for this source). Well-placed Christian officials could secure permission to restore churches, often paying the cost themselves, and they even funded a revival of Coptic art and scholarship in the thirteenth century (el-Leithy 2006: 93–4; Swanson 2010: 78, 83–4). It was not unusual for government clerks to discover a monastic vocation, sometimes leading to episcopal consecration, as in the case of the hapless Patriarch Gabriel V (1409–27; Swanson 2010: 67, 89, 120; el-Leithy 2006: 94–5). Al-Sānī Abū l-Majd was a senior official in the dīwān al-jayṣh (army bureau) before retiring to the monastery of St Anthony – only to be recalled by the sultan (evidently al-Kāmil) and placed in charge of the dīwān al-naẓar ʿala l-diyyār al-miṣriyya, the principal government department of the La ḍār al-miṣriyya, the principal government department of
Egypt. He was a builder and benefactor of churches and leader of the Coptic community during the long papal interregnum between 1216 and 1235 (den Heijer 1996: 84–5; el-Leithy 2006: 93, 95; Werthmuller 2010: 108–9).

In a society that still had a substantial if declining proportion of Christians, Christian officials proved indispensable in both central and local administration. With no system of formal training, the required skills were passed on from father to son or uncle to nephew, while Christian bureaucrats may have kept their taxation and administrative systems unnecessarily complicated so that it was difficult for outsiders to master them (Little 1990: 275–7; Samir 1996: 190). When Sultan al-Ashraf Khalīl proposed in 1293 to demonstrate his new-found commitment to banning Christian scribes by burning some alive before the Cairo Citadel, the influential amīr Baydarā persuaded him not to since ‘these men run the financial bureaux. They husband the moneys and the taxes, so that the sultan cannot dispense with their services’ (Little 1976: 554).

From the twelfth century onwards, Muslim writers increasingly denounced the employment of dhimmīs in government. Allegedly corrupt and dishonest, they were charged with promoting immorality (such as wine drinking), plotting against Muslims and their security, exploiting the people to enrich themselves and promoting co-religionists at the expense of Muslims (Cohen 1994: 68). Making no pretence of impartiality, al-Asnawī urged therefore that only Muslims should be employed by the state and accused dhimmīs of hating them (Perlmann 1942: 846–7, 850–1, 859–60). Ibn al-Wāṣīṭī could cite numerous texts, precedents and anecdotes, including a version of the Shurūṭ ‘Umar, to demonstrate the evils of illicitly employing dhimmī khāṭībs. An ascetic had allegedly warned, for example, that ‘If their swords are not drawn against us, then are their pens, which are as sharp as swords’ (Gottheil 1921: 423–4, 427). Christian administrators purportedly held the unconscionable view that they were justified in reclaiming whatever wealth they could since Muslims had taken Egypt from them illegally (Perlmann 1942: 847–8; Samir 1996: 180–1, 192). Pointing to egregious violations of ghiyār, polemical writers exploited the trope of the haughty Copt to arouse popular antagonism (el-Leithy 2006: 98). A recurring pattern of crackdowns began in 1293 when a Christian official led a Muslim debtor by a rope through the streets near the mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn (Little 1976: 553; Werthmuller 2010: 50–1).

Protecting and exploiting Christians

By definition, the ahl al-dhimma were non-Muslims guaranteed security precisely as long as they obeyed the rules applying to them. During the Fāṭimid conquest of Egypt (969), al-Muʿizz sent troops to suppress youth gangs (ahdāthāl) in Tinnīs who were mistreating Christian men and women (Lev 1988: 83). Documents from the Fāṭimid period show that dhimmīs could petition the chancery when facing legal difficulties – to the extent that a Muslim official complained they were receiving preferential treatment (Rustow 2013: 319–26). When Ṣaḥāḥ al-Dīn captured Aleppo in 1183, his reassertion of the ghiyār occasioned popular attacks on non-Muslims, which he denounced as unjust, ordering his amīrs and governors to ensure dhimmīs received the protection of life and property that was their due (Eddé 1999: 465, 2011: 402–3).

As this example suggests, the security offered by the Islamic state was not merely against the threat of outside invasion but, in practice, primarily against the Muslims among whom dhimmīs lived. Resignation to one’s status as a dhimmī, a direct consequence of the Islamic conquests, was the alternative to adopting Islam or being fought. Some versions of the Pact of Ṭāhā of ‘Umar have an appended acknowledgement by the Christians originally supposed to have agreed to it that they would forfeit their protection if they breached any of its conditions (Lewis 1974: 219; Levy–Rubin 2011: 172; Stilt 2011: 113). As Ibn al-Naqīb observed, violation of the Pact rendered dhimmīs liable to the same treatment as prisoners of war – most likely enslavement or execution, though
the latter could be avoided by timely conversion (Keller 1994: 604, 607, 609). Pace Little (1976: 554), therefore, al-Ashraf’s 1293 demand that Christian khātibs convert or be killed was not necessarily illegal since their very occupation could be deemed an infringement of the conditions of dhimma. Indeed, Ibn Taymiyya and other jurists argued that accepting employment as a state administrator in itself nullified a dhimmī’s pact of protection (Yarbrough 2012: 15, n. 11). The Shāfi’ī al-Khabūshānī, one of Ṣāliḥ al-Dīn’s advisors, wanted to kill any dhimmī caught riding a horse (Eddé 2011: 401 ‘Khubūshānī’), but such harsh interpretations were not normally adopted by those in authority.

Muslim rulers often regarded dhimmīs (and, to be fair, sometimes their Muslim subjects too) as resources to be exploited rather than subjects to be safeguarded. Al-Hākim’s attacks on church property augmented his own wealth and that of others: looters even seized wood from buried coffins (Lev 1988: 78–9). Under the Fāṭimids and other rulers, Christians chose their own leaders, whose appointment was ratified by the state (Rustow 2013: 311–16). Coptic patriarchs, however, were normally required to pay 3,000 dinars to the government upon election, and when rival factions referred disputes to the Muslim authorities, the outcome was more often a fine than a satisfactory resolution (Saleh 2001: 385–92). After the election of Pope Gabriel III in 1262, his rival, John VII, offered Sultan Baybars’ vizier Bahā’ al-Dīn Ḥannā 5,000 dinars, so Gabriel was sent to a monastery. When Cairo was damaged by fire in 1265, Baybars blamed the city’s dhimmīs and proposed to burn them in a pit but was persuaded instead to levy a huge fine of 500,000 gold dinars in instalments of 50,000. Since John proved unable to raise the money, he was dismissed and Gabriel finally installed – but he was no more successful, so John was reinstated in 1271. The money was evidently paid by a former chancery scribe, Būlus, known as al-Habīb, who had joined a monastery and allegedly discovered hidden treasure that he used for charity. When Baybars questioned him, al-Habīb counselled patience: no doubt the sultan would eventually acquire all his money in the form of fines imposed on subjects who could not pay (el-Leithy 2006: 95–6; Swanson 2010: 97–9).

When foreign powers intervened on behalf of Christians, rulers were sometimes moved to action – but not always to their advantage. The efforts of Zar’a Ya’qob (Constantine I) of Ethiopia to pressure the Mamlūk authorities into treating their Christian subjects better resulted in Pope John XI’s suffering imprisonment, beating and a fine in 1448 (Swanson 2010: 123–4). Occasionally, though, commercial pressure induced the Mamlūk authorities to reopen closed churches, in part for the benefit of foreign merchants (al-Maqrīzī in Lewis 1974: 232; Little 1976: 557–9).

**Christians as scapegoats**

More often, Muslim rulers of doubtful legitimacy sought domestic approval by demonstrating their Islamic credentials as enforcers of the dhimmī regulations. Considering themselves infallible, the Fāṭimid imāms presumably cared little for the views of Sunnī scholars or the masses as long as their authority was not threatened (Lev 1991: 195). When Shīrkhū and his nephew Ṣāliḥ al-Dīn took control of Egypt in 1169, however, they needed to demonstrate the restoration of Sunnī Islam and the demise of Shi‘ism. Ṣāliḥ al-Dīn faced a similar need when posing as a champion of orthodoxy while displacing the heirs of Nūr al-Dīn in Syria. Evidently at the urging of the ‘ulamā’, whose support he needed, he therefore reasserted the normative legal restrictions on dhimmīs throughout his territories (Eddé 1999: 464; 2011: 401–2). Once established, though, the Ayyūbids showed less interest in subordinating Christians (Werthmuller 2010: 43–9).

Having come into the Islamic world as slaves without any family, most Mamlūk sultans lacked dynastic legitimacy and had to earn their position. Even those who belonged to dynasties might only be figureheads unless they proved themselves, like the Qalāwūnī al-Nāṣir Muḥammad,
initially enthroned in 1293 but twice deposed before ruling continuously from 1310 to 1341. In 1301, when a visiting maghribi vizier was scandalised by the sight of a wealthy Christian riding a horse while his retainers fended off beggars, the amūrū Baybars al-Jāshnakīr and Salār – the strongmen behind the boy-sultan – re-imposed the dhimmī laws (al-Maqrīzī in Lewis 1974: 229–32; Little 1976: 555). With the ghiyār still in force nine years later, the vizier Ibn al-Khaltīlī reported that the Christians of Egypt sought its abolition in return for adding 7,000 dinars to the annual jīzā levy. Despite the attractiveness of the proposal, the newly restored sultan was shamed by Ibn Taymiyya into rejecting it: divine – or popular – favour was worth more than money (Little 1976: 559; el-Leithy 2006: 95; cf. Ibn Kathīr in Lewis 1974: 233).

Rulers could also channel discontent away from themselves by directing it against non-Muslim administrators. Exploitation by sultans and officials was a commonplace, but when such oppression was framed as dhimmī arrogance towards Muslims, the blame could be directed at a politically acceptable culprit: it was the Christian secretary, not his Muslim master, who was publicly punished in 1419. Popular resentment against the heavy exactions of the Mamlūk regime was often directed against its Christian employees, who, it was conveniently assumed, were seeking personal gain rather than carrying out instructions (Little 1976: 561; el-Leithy 2006: 97–100).

Those who resented what they saw as the pretensions of unbelievers sometimes took the law into their own hands by rioting in the name of hisba, the Islamic duty of commanding good and forbidding evil (el-Leithy 2006: 77–80). At least in Mamlūk Egypt, the instigators of such popular disturbances were typically anti-establishment Sufis, more precisely poor fuqarā’, who distanced themselves from the officially sponsored hospices (khānaqāhs). They mobilised the urban populace (ʾāmma) and especially the harāfīsh, a substantial mendicant underclass class found in all large cities and even the countryside: precisely the sort of economically marginalised Muslims likely to feel aggrieved at the sight of relatively prosperous Christians (Little 1976: 553, 557, 562–3, 567; el-Leithy 2006: 79, 110–12). The government was obeyed in Cairo when it ordered the closure of churches in 1301, but, in Alexandria and the Fayyūm, mobs demolished four churches that had allegedly been restored recently and also destroyed Christians’ houses that were higher than those of their Muslim neighbours in defiance of the Shurūṭ Umar. As al-Maqrīzī noted, these popular actions reflected the anti-dhimmī views of Ibn al-Rīfā rather than the more moderate, officially endorsed, opinion of Ibn Daqīq (Lewis 1974: 231–2).

**Persecution, conversion and martyrdom**

Under pressure from the state and the mob, including direct threats of execution, many Christians adopted Islam, though doubts about their sincerity were conveyed by calling them not Muslims but musālima (singular muslīmān; Little 1990: 263–7, 277–83). There developed a recurring pattern that began with a public incident and included reasserting the ghiyār, dismissing dhimmī khāṭībs and demolishing churches. This cycle produced converts whose families, the polemists realised, often remained Christian (Gottheil 1921: 444–5; Perlmann 1942: 858–9; Little 1990: 273–4) – as did the sympathies of the musālima. Al-Nuwayrī (d. 1333), a historian and bureaucrat himself, accused one muslīmān, Taqī al-Dīn, who held the title of nāẓīr al-nīqzār (chief financial supervisor) of subverting the cadastral survey (rawk) conducted for al-Nāṣir in 1315. Not only was the rate of jīzā reduced, but the tax could even be evaded by Christians who changed village since it was now to be collected by individual amūrū rather than the central government (Little 1976: 561, 1990: 264).

When the ghiyār regulations were promulgated yet again in 1354, however, Sultan al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ declared, according to al-Maqrīzī, that there were to be no forced conversions, and anyone who claimed to convert would be required to attend a mosque regularly. Coupled with the
confiscation of 25,000 faddāns (nearly 16,000 hectares) of ecclesiastical property and another episode of destroying ‘newly restored’ churches (with the sultan’s permission), this measure evidently resulted in a wave of permanent conversions. Al-Maqrīzī declared that ‘when the Christians’ affliction grew great and their incomes small, they decided to embrace Islam’; indeed, many converts married Muslim women and raised worthy Muslim offspring (Little 1976: 567–8; al-Qalqashandi in Lewis 1974: 234–5; el-Leithy 2006: 98–9). The persecution of 1354 has been identified as a turning point in ‘the reduction of Copts to a tiny minority’ in Egypt (Lev 1988: 74), though some historians argue that Arab immigration, religious intermarriage and Coptic demographic decline had already reduced the Christian population of Egypt to below 20 per cent before the Mamlūks took power (O’Sullivan 2006: 75). Nor was the 1354 purge of Christian officials definitive, as the events of 1419 show.

Only occasionally did Muslims become Christians, and Patriarch Cyril III (1235–43) issued deliberately opaque instructions on the matter (Werthmuller 2010: 77–84, 145–8) because both apostasy and inducing a Muslim to convert were capital crimes (Buckley 1999: 123). Most apostates from Islam were Christians who had converted under pressure and later repented, so the Coptic Church developed a ritual for their readmission (MacCoull 2000a: 147–50; cf. Thomas and Mallett 2013: 179–81). After al-Ḥākim stopped forcing khāṭibs to convert, he allowed some to resume dhimmī status when they offered themselves for martyrdom. Many others followed, though a few applicants who had demonstrated apparent commitment, even going on pilgrimage to Mecca, were later executed as apostates (Lev 1988: 87–8; Werthmuller 2010: 36). Before the 1281 Battle of Homs, some accountants and officials in Damascus only consented to Sultan Qalāwūn’s demand for conversion once the noose was placed around their necks, but later their appeal to revert to dhimmī status was accepted by a Mālikī qādī (Northrup 1990: 254–5).

A few reverts openly demanded and were granted expiation – or purification – through martyrdom, such as the flax merchant John of Phanijōt in c.1211. A wave of martyrdoms from about 1380 included similarly provocative reverts and others who publicly deprecated Islam (Swanson 2010: 115–17). In 1512, a Christian called Ṣalīb persisted in denouncing Islam until he was nailed to a cross (šalīb) and paraded on the back of a camel. Christian opinion was divided over the propriety of seeking martyrdom, in part because it threatened to arouse antagonism towards the community, but hagiographers constructed their stories to affirm Coptic identity and discourage apostasy (MacCoull 2000: 74–5; Zaborowski 2005: 6–7; Armanios and Ergene 2006: 123, 137).

Conclusion

Day-to-day Christian–Muslim interaction between the tenth and sixteenth centuries, largely unrecorded, was presumably less dramatic than the events highlighted here. For example, urban Jews, Christians and Muslims could share neighbourhoods and conduct business together (Werthmuller 2010: 40–1). Many Christian khāṭibs served rulers who valued their skills, and some rose to positions of power and influence. Their inferior legal status, however, ensured that they were always more vulnerable than Muslims in similar roles, for they could more easily be dismissed, or worse, to demonstrate a ruler’s piety or assuage popular discontent. Attacks on prominent Christian officials undermined their religious communities, depriving them of leadership, patronage and charity – including money to pay the jizya. During the Mamlūk period particularly, Muslim writers reminded believers of their superiority in the estimation of Allah and encouraged them to humiliate and plunder unbelievers. As the condition of dhimmīs was eroded by the combined effects of šari’a-based anti-dhimmī laws and outbreaks of extrajudicial violence, more and more of them turned to Islam, reducing their former co-religionists to a besieged minority.
References


Further reading