

Christianity Encounters Islam

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Introduction: In order to define the subject under consideration and to clarify the discussion, some definitions will be useful:

- We are using the term 'Christianity' in its broadest sense, because it is impossible to enter the debate of who is or is not a real Christian when speaking of the area of Christian influence in relation to the Muslim world. Thus when we speak of the Nestorian¹ and Monophysite² Christians, our purpose is to discuss, not their doctrine, but rather the part they played in the expansion or retreat of Christianity.
- Similarly with Islam. The question of the various theological trends within Islam will interest us only insofar as it affects our topic.

Islam came into being about 600 years after Christianity, in a region whose population was not entirely pagan. In less than a century it had not only conquered regions which had previously been under Christian control, but also reached areas as yet untouched by Christianity.

In our own 20th century, we can say without fear of error, that in the face of Islam, Christianity is far from being a conquering religion, whereas Islam, with its 500 million faithful (some would even put the figure as high as 800 million) is undergoing, in this last quarter of the century, a resurgence of a strongly expansionist nature. When we think on the one hand of the commandment of Matt 28:19, which is taken up again in Acts 1:8, and on the other of Islam's reputation as a brick wall against which several decades of evangelistic efforts have exhausted themselves, we are led to consider how to reorganise the assault in an effective way. Our ambition is to be able to proclaim the gospel to Muslims more frequently and more effectively, having been informed of our responsibility and informed concerning Islam.

Why go back to the seventh century? First of all because the present is often the product of the past, and tomorrow is built upon today. Also because, by the end of the seventh century, Christianity had spent its expansionist energies and would not recover its missionary zeal until the colonialist era. And finally, because the seventh century was not only the time of Islam's birth but also of its most breathtaking conquests.

We will look first at the geographical distribution of the two religions in the seventh century. Then we will consider the progress of each from the seventh century to our own day. A third section will be devoted to statistical data. And finally, we will consider whether or not the integrist movements presently shaking up Islam are the heralds of an imminent new expansion.

¹ The Nestorians distinguished two persons and two natures in Jesus Christ.

² The Monophysites recognized only one nature in the person of Christ

CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM IN THE SEVENTH CENTURY

Christianity in the seventh Century

In Matt 28:19-20 and Mark 16:15) the risen Lord Jesus Christ gives his disciples the order to conquer the world. In Acts 1 He outlines the plan: from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. This commandment was fulfilled with respect to Jerusalem in Acts 1-7. The evangelisation of Judea and Samaria came after the persecution which arose in Acts 7. Philip went to Samaria, Peter to Corinth (amongst Gentiles). Other missionaries not known to us by name evangelised the pagans in Antioch (Acts 11). In Acts 13 Paul and Barnabas undertake their first missionary journey. Thus by the end of the century there were churches throughout the Roman Empire. Short-lived but terrible persecutions marked this first century: under Nero in 52-58 AD, the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in 70 AD, the persecution under Domitian in 96 AD. The second and third centuries were a time of martyrs, but above all of a conquering church. On the eve of an important battle, Constantine the Great (305-337) had a vision of the cross and received a message that he would triumph by this sign. With his accession to power, Christianity became a state religion; one of Constantine's successors would later go so far as to order all the pagan temples to be closed. From then on Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire.

We will not go into the invasion of the Teutonic peoples, who were Arians³ and who took over the Western empire, leaving only Britain and Ireland to the Catholics (375-429). The Franks, originally pagan, became Catholics after their king, Clovis (481-511), was converted through the influence of his wife Clothilde. In the East there were Nestorians in India (300), in China (600), and in Mongolia (700).

In short, by the middle of the seventh century, given the possibilities of communication and the known extent of the world, Christianity was the world's principal religion, and held this title undisputed. But clouds were already forming on the horizon: a new religion, Islam, was gathering momentum and was to sweep like a tidal wave over the conquered territory of the Christian world.

Islam in the Seventh Century

Islam arose in Arabia in the seventh century, between 610 and 615 AD when Mohammed began to preach the Qur'an. Arabia at that time was populated not only by pagans, who believed in one supreme God but worshipped other deities as well, but also by Jews and by Nestorian and Monophysite Christians.

Two cities played an important role in the development of the Islamic religion. Mecca was at that time a caravan town hidden in an arid valley. It possessed a famous cubic shrine, the Ka'aba, which served as a sort of Pantheon to which the pagan Arabs made pilgrimages.

Medina, on the other hand, was an oasis town. After the inhabitants of Mecca refused the prophetic message, Mohammed took refuge in Medina (622). Medina was to be the capital of emerging Islam, the place where it would take on its social and politico-military form. In 630, Mohammed took Mecca by military conquest) and in 632 he died in Medina. His people were by then united on the oneness of God and in submission to that God.

³ ie, did not accept the full divinity of Christ

First Expansion outside Arabia

The prophet's first successor, Bakr, united Arabia before sending his troops out to conquer other territories. His successor, Omar, imitated him, carrying out overwhelmingly successful campaigns against the Byzantine and Sassanide empires as well as in North Africa and elsewhere. In the space of 12 years, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Syria and Egypt fell into the hands of the Arabs. Some significant dates are

635: the Crossing of the Euphrates and Fall of Damascus

638: Fall of Jerusalem

642: Fall of Alexandria.

By this time the Sassanide Empire, which supported the Nestorian Christians in Arabia, had practically ceased to exist, and the Byzantines had lost both Syria and Egypt. How were the conquered peoples to be governed? As the Qur'an gave no instructions, the example of the prophet was considered; he had either massacred, expelled, or reduced them to the status of tributaries. Under the caliphs, the policy was more precisely defined. Pagans could convert without necessarily becoming fully-fledged Muslims. The People of the Book (Christians and Jews) could continue to practise their religion under Muslim protection, but were subject to certain obligations. To a large extent local customs were adapted into Islamic legislation.

The empire was divided into provinces: Syria, Egypt and Iraq were governed by military and political governors, assisted by local administrators recruited from the former Byzantine and Sassanide governments.

Second Expansion outside Arabia

In 660-661, the Omayyades won the power struggle between the different Arab clans. The second wave of Islamic expansion took three directions: Asia Minor and Constantinople (661-680); North Africa and Spain (685-705); Central Asia and India (705-715). Carthage was taken once in 685 and then definitively in 688. In 702 the Berber tribes of North Africa were defeated and from 705 to 708 the Arabs settled in North Africa. After a pause the campaigns were renewed, and by 716 all of Spain was in Muslim hands. In 732 the Muslims reached Poitiers (France) where they were finally stopped by Charles Martel.

In short, to quote G C Anawati, 'a lightning expansion took the Arab, thus Muslim, armies far from their homeland. In a century's time, they had reached the Gauls and were on the doorstep of India.'

PROGRESS OF CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM FROM THE SEVENTH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT

Progress of Christianity

Up to the end of the eighteenth century when the first missionary societies were founded, there is nothing noteworthy in Christian expansion. The few facts we might mention are these: the forced conversion under Charlemagne of all his subjects; the evangelisation of Scandinavia by British missionaries in the tenth century; unfruitful attempts to evangelise North Africa from the ninth to eleventh century; the Crusades in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries; some attempts to evangelise the African coastline: the Congo (1450), the Cape (1632), establishment of Sierra Leone under the British (1787).

But it was during the colonial period that evangelism reached out to almost every part of the world: the Americas, Asia and particularly south east Asia, Africa and the Islands. Even today it may be said that Christianity holds first place among the world's religions. But for how long? And has Christianity won any points over Islam? All of the Muslim countries of the Middle East, North Africa and Indonesia underwent colonization and have been the object of evangelistic efforts, but have for the most part remained 99% Muslim.

The Progress of Islam

From 750 AD onwards, Islam went into a period of stagnation as far as expansion was concerned; for a time, intellectual, commercial and artistic development became more prominent. In the eleventh century, the Muslim empire was sufficiently weakened for the Christian world to venture the Crusades. However, this provoked a reaction from the Muslims: from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries, the conquest of North India; from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, the conquest of Indonesia.

Muslim penetration of Black Africa began in the eleventh century, and by the thirteenth century a band of Muslim states linked Dakar to the Red Sea across the sub-Saharan prairies, thanks to the efforts of Berber merchants and itinerant preachers.

What is the situation today?

Europe There are 51 mosques and at least 100 prayer halls in France. As Eugene Mamnoni writes, 'With some two and a half million faithful, Islam is numerically in second place among religions in France. It is therefore not surprising that one mosque after another springs up alongside the catholic and protestant churches and the synagogues.' Of these two and a half million, 40,000 are French converts to Islam; the rest are immigrants.

In other countries, such as Germany, Belgium and England, there are important Muslim colonies essentially composed of immigrant workers. 16% of the population of the Soviet Union, or between 45 and 50 million people, are Muslims, which makes the Soviet Union the fifth largest Muslim power in the world. If present trends continue, 25% of the Soviet population will be Muslim by the end of the century.

Africa: North Africa is 99% Muslim and Islam has considerable strength in many countries south of the Sahara: 95% in Niger, 90% in Senegal, 30% in Burkina-Faso, 10% in Togo and Benin, and so on.

Others: Indonesia is 90% Muslim; there are two million Muslims in the USA. We could go on but the point is clear.

STATISTICAL DATA

What is the approximate relative strength of Islam and Christianity in the world today? The following figures, while not 100% accurate, nevertheless give an approximate overall view:

According to Anawati, Islam presently touches about one fifth of the world's population. Another writer affirms that Islam numbers 800 million faithful.

A number of authors estimate that Christianity claims over 1,500 million faithful.

Concerning Africa, Jeannine Olson writes the following: 'There were almost no Christians in sub-Saharan Africa until 1790. But in 1970, between one sixth and a quarter of the population call themselves Christians. Nevertheless, south of the Sahara, Muslims are comparable in number to Christians, and there are as many animists as Christians and Muslims together. Thus a gigantic task of evangelism lies yet before us' (Histoire de l'Eglise: Ed Cle, Yaounde 1972).

DO THE INTEGRIST MOVEMENTS HERALD A NEW ISLAMIC EXPANSION?

The Muslim world may be divided into two groups. Firstly, there is the Sunni 'right wing', which may be considered moderate and is to be found mainly in the moderate Muslim countries (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Syria etc). These Muslims are open to progress.

The 'left wing' is composed of movements which favour a radical return to the Qur'an and, in many cases, to holy war (jihad). This wing presently comprises firstly the Shi'ites (almost 95% in Iran, 60% in Iraq, 55% in Bahrain, and not altogether absent in other countries). Some demand a holy war to overthrow all potentates and take over the world. Secondly, the reformist Muslim Brotherhood, a movement founded in 1928. They hold positions of responsibility at different levels in many moderate countries, such as Algeria and Tunisia. Their goal is to make the governments return to Qur'anic law. Thirdly, the Islamic revolutionaries, for whom there is no possible collaboration with the 'renegades', as they call the moderate Sunni governments. No discussion; they simply slaughter the infidels. According to Nicole Cattani, 'though not strong enough to take power in the Arab countries, the integrists are powerful enough to disturb them' (Le Point, No 599 of 12 March 1984, p 85).

The question is whether or not this left wing of Islam will limit itself to perpetual creation of tension and local disorder. For, as C G Moucarray puts it, 'It is to be feared that, of these two opposite tendencies within Islam, the second (the integrist tendency) may overcome the first' (La Foi en Questions: Au Carrefour du Christianisme et de l'Islam, PBU, p 15).

Statements made by some integrist leaders suggest that things could go even further: 'In order to achieve the victory of Islam in the world, we need to provoke repeated crises, restore value to the idea of death and martyrdom. If Iran has to vanish, that is not important. The important thing is to engulf the world in crises. Those who are called to export the revolution will lose their unhealthy desire for comfort and will attain the maturity needed to fulfil their mission... The road to Jerusalem goes through Kerbala' (an Iraqi town), declares Khomeini (quoted in Le Point, No 599, 12 March 1984, pp 89 and 91).

In short, in the face of what Francois Nourissier calls 'the revival of Islam, a subtle but intractable expansionism', what are we to do? We must mobilize ourselves and find a new strategy to take up the challenge of the past (our lost territory), but also that of the present, that is, our failures over the centuries and the present advance of contemporary Islam.