

The Rights of Non-Muslims in Islam (part 6 of 13): The Right to Freedom of Belief II

Description: Islam gives members of other faiths the right to practice their faiths. A historical analysis of Islamic principle of 'No compulsion in religion.' Part 2.

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Muslims protected Christian churches in the lands they occupied from being harmed. In a letter to Simeon, the Archbishop of Rifardashir and leader of all the bishops of Persia, the Nestorian Patriarch Geoff III wrote:

'The Arabs, to whom God has given power over the whole world, know how wealthy you are, for they live among you. In spite of this, they do not assail the Christian creed. To the contrary, they have sympathy with our religion, and venerate our priests and saints of our Lord, and they graciously donate to our churches and monasteries.'[\[1\]](#)

One of the Muslims caliphs, Abdul-Malik, took the Church of John from the Christians and made it part of a mosque. When Umar ibn Abdulaziz succeeded him as the new Caliph, the Christians complained to him about what his predecessor had done to their church. Umar wrote to the governor that the portion of the mosque that was rightfully theirs be returned to them if they were unable to agree with the governor on a monetary settlement that would satisfy them.[\[2\]](#)

The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem is known to historians to be the one of the holiest places of worship in Judaism. Some time ago, it was completely buried under rubble and heaps of debris. When the Ottoman caliph Sultan Sulayman came to know of this, he ordered his governor in Jerusalem to remove all the rubble and debris, clean the area, restore the Wailing Wall, and make it accessible for Jews to visit.[\[3\]](#)

Unbiased Western historians acknowledge these facts. LeBon writes:

'The tolerance of Muhammad towards the Jews and Christians was truly grand; the founders of other religions that appeared before him, Judaism and Christianity in particular, did not prescribe such goodwill. His caliphs followed the same policy, and his tolerance has been acknowledged by skeptics and believers alike when they study the history of the Arabs in depth.'[\[4\]](#)

Robertson wrote:

'The Muslims alone were able to integrate their zeal for their own religion with tolerance for followers of other religions. Even when they bore swords into battle for freedom for their religion to spread, they left those who did not desire it free to adhere to their own religious teachings.'[\[5\]](#)

Sir Thomas Arnold, an English Orientalist, wrote:

'We never heard of a report of any planned attempt to compel non-Muslim minorities to accept Islam, or any organized persecution aimed at uprooting the Christian religion. If any of the caliphs had chosen any of these policies, they would have overwhelmed Christianity with the same ease with which Ferdinand and Isabella exiled Islam from Spain, or with which Louis XIV made following Protestantism a punishable crime in France, or with which the Jews were exiled from England for 350 years. At that time Eastern churches were completely isolated from the rest of the Christian world. They had no supporters in the world as they were considered heretical sects of Christianity. Their very existence to this day is the strongest evidence of the policy of Islamic government's tolerance towards them.'[\[6\]](#)

The American author, Lothrop Stoddard wrote, 'The caliph Umar took the utmost care to tend to the sanctity of the Christian holy places, and those who became caliph after him followed his footsteps. They did not harass the many denominations of pilgrims who came annually from every corner of the Christian world to visit Jerusalem.'[\[7\]](#)

The reality is that non-Muslims were treated with more tolerance among the Muslims than anything they experienced with other sects of their own religion. Richard Stebbins spoke of the Christian experience under the rule of the Turks:

'They (the Turks) allowed all of them, Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox, to preserve their religion and follow their consciences as they chose: they allowed them their churches to perform their sacred rituals in Constantinople and many other places. This is in contrast to what I can testify to from living in Spain for twelve years; not only were we forced to attend their Papist celebrations, but our lives and the lives of our grandchildren were in danger also.'[\[8\]](#)

Thomas Arnold mentions in his 'Invitation to Islam' that there were many people in Italy at that time who longed for Ottoman rule. They wished they could be granted the same freedom and tolerance that the Ottomans gave to their Christian subjects, for they had despaired of achieving it under any Christian government. He also mentions that a great many Jews fled persecution in Spain at the end of the 15th century and took refuge in Ottoman Turkey.[\[9\]](#)

It is worthwhile to reemphasize the following point. The existence of non-Muslims for centuries across the Muslim world, from Moorish Spain and Sub-Saharan Africa to Egypt, Syria, India, and Indonesia are clear evidence of the religious tolerance extended by Islam to people of other faiths. This tolerance even led to the elimination of Muslims, such as in Spain, where the remaining Christians took advantage of Muslim weakness, attacked them, and wiped them out from Spain by either killing them, forcing them to convert, or expulsion. Etienne Denier wrote, 'The Muslims are the opposite of what many people believe. They never used force outside of the Hejaz.'[\[10\]](#) The presence of Christians was evidence of this fact. They retained their religion in complete security during the eight centuries that the Muslims ruled their lands. Some of them held high posts in the palace in Cordoba, but when the same Christians obtained power over the country, suddenly their first concern was to exterminate Muslims.'[\[11\]](#)

Endnotes:

- [1] Arnold, Thomas, *'Invitation To Islam,'* p. 102
- [2] Qaradawi, Yusuf, *'Ghayr al-Muslimeen fil-Mujtama' al-Islami,'* p. 32
- [3] Hussayn, Abdul-Latif, *'Tasamuh al-Gharb Ma'l-Muslimeen,'* p. 67
- [4] LeBon, Gustav, *'Arab Civilization,'* p. 128
- [5] Quoted in Aayed, Saleh Hussain, *'Huquq Ghayr al-Muslimeen fi Bilad il-Islam,'* p. 26
- [6] Arnold, Thomas, *'Invitation To Islam,'* p. 98-99
- [7] Stoddard, L.W., *'The Islamic World At Present,'* vol 1, p. 13-14
- [8] Quoted in Qaradawi, Yusuf, *'al-Aqaliyyat ad-Diniyya wa-Hal al-Islami,'* p. 56-57
- [9] Arnold, Thomas, *'Invitation To Islam,'* p. 183
- [10] Hejaz: the Western part of Arabia that includes the cities of Mecca and Medina.
- [11] Denier, Etienne, *'Muhammad The Messenger Of God,'* p. 332

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