

Dhimmitude: Jews and Christians Under Islam

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Except for Asia, all the countries that were conquered by *jihad* (Muslim holy war) in the course of history — from Arabia to Spain and the Balkans, including Hungary and Poland — were peopled by innumerable Christians and by Jewish communities. This geographical context is therefore the true terrain of interaction between the three religions. Actually, it was in Islamic lands that they opposed, or collaborated with, one another for up to 13 centuries. I have called this vast political, religious, and cultural span the realm of “dhimmitude,” from *dhimma*, a treaty of submission for each people conquered by *jihad*.

The historical field is generally studied in the context of “Islamic tolerance,” but “tolerance” — or “toleration” — is an ambiguous word since it implies a moral and subjective connotation. Moreover, this word “toleration” cannot encompass the historical density and the complexities of the numerous peoples vanquished by Islam over the centuries, as it is a vague and general notion used irrespective of space and time.

Instead of “toleration,” I have proposed the concept of “dhimmitude,” derived from the word *dhimma*. The vanquished, subject to Islamic law, become a *dhimmi* people, protected by the *dhimma* pact from destruction.

Islamic legislation governing *dhimmi* peoples was the same for Jews and Christians, although the latter suffered more from it — declining from majorities, at the dawn of the Islamic conquest, to tiny minorities in their own countries. The domain of dhimmitude comprises all aspects of the condition of the *dhimmi*: that is, the Jews and Christians tolerated under Islamic law. Dhimmitude as an historical category is common to, but not identical for, Jews and Christians under Islam.

Islamic law governing Christian *dhimmi*s developed from Byzantine Christian legislation enacted from the fourth to the sixth century. It aimed at imposing legal inferiority on native Jews of Christianized countries — lands that were subsequently Islamized. These early Christian influences on Islamic law are not limited to the juridical domain but also appear at the theological level.

The study of the Jewish *dhimmi* condition necessarily encompasses the theological and political interaction between the three religions. During Vatican II (1963-1965), for instance, the Arab Churches — yielding to pressure from their governments — strongly objected to the proposed suppression of the “deicide” accusation against the Jews. Yet the crucifixion of Jesus is not recognized in the Koran; therefore, the accusation of deicide is meaningless for

Islam. Such interferences by Arab governments in a strictly Judeo-Christian theological matter were intended to maintain the delegitimization of the State of Israel in a Christian context. Indeed, it was the deicide accusation that had structured Byzantine policy of Jerusalem’s dejudatization and the promulgation of a specific, degrading Jewish status. It was that same status that Muslim jurists adapted to the *jihad* context with harsher modifications, imposing it equally on Jews and Christians. Clearly, Jewish-Muslim relations also comprise those Jewish-Christian relations that were transposed within an Islamic context — particularly the Jewish status in Christian legislation. Similarly, the Islamic-Christian relationship cannot obscure its Jewish dimension because Islam associates Christians and Jews in the same *dhimmi* category — a specific category that was first enacted by Christians for Jews in a quite different theological context.

The study of dhimmitude comprises these multifarious aspects and requires an approach devoid of apriorisms. One can try to define the ideology that imposes dhimmitude on non-Muslim peoples: their obligatory submission by war or surrender to Islamic domination. One could examine its origin, the legal and political means used to dominate other peoples, the causes of its expansion or of its regression. Actually, it is a study of the ideology of *jihad*, whose jurisdiction — based on the modalities of battles and conquest — must be imposed on the vanquished peoples. How this or that land or city was conquered will determine for all time the laws to be applied there. Centuries after the Islamic conquest, Muslim jurists still consulted ancient chroniclers to determine whether churches and synagogues were legal or forbidden in towns or regions that had formerly been conquered, whether by surrender or by battles and treaties. Such regulations concerning religious buildings are still enforced in many Muslim countries today. So one discovers, throughout the ebb and flow of history, that dhimmitude is composed of a fixed ideological and legal structure. It constitutes an ideological, sociological, and political reality, since it is integrated into every aspect of those human societies which it characterizes. This is proved by its geographical development, its historical perennialism, and its present resurgence.

The body of law prescribing dhimmitude originated from a single source: Islamic power. Apart from a few minor differences regarding the *shari'a*’s (Islamic law’s) interpretation, the *dhimmi* status constituted a homogeneous unit applied in the *dar al-Islam*. But the peoples of dhimmitude comprised all the ethnic, religious, and cultural variations of the Islamized regions of Africa, Asia, and Europe — thereby implying regional differences. One must therefore study the local history of each *dhimmi* group in order to detect if the causes of differentiation were of a geographical or a demographical nature, or the result of pre-Islamic local factors. Thus, dhimmitude should en-

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compass the comparative study of all *dhimmi* groups, for territories were not just conquered; their Islamization could take three or even four centuries, while some regions had already been Islamized by migrations prior to their military and political conquest. The study of dhimmitude, then, is the study of the progressive Islamization of Christian civilizations. In this evolution, one detects permanent structures but also different local factors that facilitated or temporarily checked this process.

The confusion of the political and economic domain is an important element in the development of the mechanism of dhimmitude. In exchange for economic advantages, non-Muslim rulers conceded to the Islamic power an essential political asset: territory. This policy appears at the start of the Islamic-Christian encounter. In modern times, the financial interests of Lebanese Christian politicians with the Muslim world were decisive in the intercommunal struggle that led to the final destruction of Lebanese Christianity. In this context of political concessions in exchange for financial gains, one should emphasize that the economic domain belongs always to the short term and the conjunctural, while the political sphere is long-term and implies power, notably military power. Hence, this feature of corruption — paramount in the whole system of dhimmitude — which is, in fact, the surrender of political power (territorial independence) for the economic control by the *dhimmi* Church leaders over their communities.

It is evident that the civilizations of dhimmitude are extremely complex. The process of Islamization of such societies rested on several factors, the most important being the demographical one that transformed Christian majorities into minorities. This result was achieved through several means that combined legal disabilities and economic oppression in times of peace; and destruction, deportation, and slavery in wartime and during riots or recurrent political instability. Such a transformation of civilization and of peoples also implied an extensive mechanism of osmosis, including collaboration and collusion by the elites of those Christian nations that were engaged in the painful process of their self-destruction. Without this perennial collusion, the Islamic state could never have survived. Christians had collaborated in its development on all social levels and in every field, either by free choice or otherwise.

It was through Christian patriarchs and Jewish community leaders that the Islamic government imposed its authority, making of them its instruments in the control and oppression of their respective populations. Thus, entire *dhimmi* groups collaborated in the growth of the Islamic civilization. One could also investigate the way in which different Christian and Jewish groups reacted to dhimmitude. We know that there was a strong alliance between Arab-Muslim invading troops and the local Arab-Christian tribes, as well as with the Oriental Churches. Some members of the Christian clergy not only welcomed the Muslim armies, but also surrendered their cities. The Eastern Churches were always associated with Islamic rule and benefited from it, becoming thereby the sole administrators of millions of Christians. One can examine the role of the clergy, the military class, the politicians, and the intellectuals in assisting the Islamic advance that placed their own peoples under the yoke of dhimmitude. Documents of this kind abound concerning the later Ottoman conquest of the Balkans.

The conflict of interests within the *dhimmi* populations indicates that different forces were at work in each community: forces of collaboration and forces of resistance. Thus, dhimmitude encompasses various types of relationships at all levels

between the Muslim community and the dominated, tolerated, *dhimmi*s — relationships that were regulated by laws ensuring Islamic protection and that embrace politics, history, and conjunctural situations. Modern studies on the Turk-ish advance in the Balkan peninsula have mentioned the mental climate that prepared a society for its surrender. One finds an evolution at all social levels, combining compromise, collusion, and the corruption that facilitated the final submission.

A similar process could have been detected in the modern history of Lebanon from the beginning of the 20th century to the recent disintegration of Christian resistance. Here, the internecine conflict between the forces of collusion and resistance brought about the collapse of the targeted Christian groups. The situation in southern Sudan and in the Philippines provides contemporary examples of such internecine conflicts that could lead to similar situations.

Dhimmitude also encompasses the relationship between each *dhimmi* group, the religious rivalry between Churches seeking to use the Muslim power in order to diminish or destroy rivals. This domain also overlaps with the dynastic, political, and national conflicts between Christian rulers who obtained power through Islamic help. Since the status of dhimmitude lasted from three to 13 centuries, depending upon regions, it allows one to study numerous cases of different peoples — all theoretically subject to the same Islamic jurisdiction, with differences here and there.

What were the results of Muslim interference on the intercommunity relationships between the *dhimmi* peoples themselves? Did it keep their conflicts alive? How did the Muslim power manifest its protection? (The *dhimmi*s were, of course, protected by Islamic law.) There is also the conflict between jurists, inclined toward a more severe interpretation of the law, and the caliphs or rulers whose policies were sometimes more lenient — a problem still topical today. Therefore, the domain of dhimmitude consists of the interaction of the *dhimmi* peoples among themselves, with the Muslim power, and with the outside world. What were the consequences of the protection afforded to each *dhimmi* group by the European Christian countries? How did their political and commercial rivalries affect the interrelationship of the *dhimmi* peoples and their situation within their Muslim environment? And to this should be added the consequences of proselytism among the various contending Churches.

One might think that the history of dhimmitude had long since disappeared into a forgotten past, but this is not so. Specialists have called political Islamic radicalism a "return," thus implying the existence in the past of a political ideology that had disappeared and is now resurfacing. Optimistic analysts focus only on the economic and political factors that have contributed to the emergence of Islamic radicalism, although its ideologico-religious causes and traditional roots are so obvious that they alone would justify the use of the term "return."

Jihad militancy and the reintroduction of some of the *shari'a*'s provisions in countries where they had been abolished are now threatening indigenous Christians and other non-Muslim populations. The most tragic cases are found in Iran, Pakistan, Sudan, and Upper Egypt (by Islamists). Aspects of the *dhimmi* condition — abolished under European pressure from the mid-19th century on — is returning in these countries, and elsewhere.

Even antisemitic statements made by Abbé Pierre in April 1996, firmly condemned by the French episcopate and public opinion, are a reminder of a pervasive Christian dhimmi-

tude. Abbé Pierre — one of France's most popular public figures — reiterated that, because of their iniquities since the time of Joshua, the Jews had forfeited God's Promise. Apart from being a classic example of the Church's judeophobia, such a declaration was clearly aimed at pleasing the Muslims. Since the Judeo-Christian reconciliation initiated by Vatican II, the Arab Churches requested from the Vatican a strictly symmetrical attitude toward Jews and Muslims. This requirement establishes, in fact, a false symmetry between totally different theological, historical, and political contexts: the Judeo-Christian relationship and the Islamic-Christian relationship. The Jews were oppressed in Christian lands but never had any ambition to conquer them and impose their own laws there, whereas Islamic armies seized innumerable Christian lands in which only small, vulnerable, and scattered Christian communities survive today.

Abbé Pierre's earlier meditations at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem were thus symmetrically balanced by a visit to Yasir Arafat in Gaza, where he begged forgiveness for the West's creation of the State of Israel. But the good Abbé could have spared himself such scruples, for Israel's rebirth occurred despite the genocide of European Jewry, and from the start the Vatican only supported the Palestinian cause. But a "Palestinian genocide" has become a symbolic necessity to balance the genocide of the Jews. Overlooking a span of more than three millennia, Abbé Pierre chose to link — anachronistically and in a delirious amalgamation — today's Arab Palestinians with Biblical Philistines and Amalekites in the time of Joshua.

It is this desire for a specious symmetry that reduced to oblivion the tragic and painful domain of Christian dhimmitude, which could not be paralleled with a similar Jewish domination over Christian populations. Indeed, much effort has been deployed in Europe to establish similarities between Palestinians in Israel and *dhimmis*, especially by blaming Israeli security measures to counter Palestinian terrorism, which was conveniently glossed over as "freedom fighting." This attitude not only expresses a traditional Christian judeophobia — now totally rejected by the Vatican and other Churches — but also the complexity of Europe's relations with Israel and with Arab countries, where Christian rights are challenged by Islamists. As Europe's policy is determined mainly by its own strategic and economic interests, it shows no more sympathy to Eastern Christians than it does to Israelis. Islamic radicalism is feared, as it could provoke in Europe anti-Muslim reactions leading to economic retaliation and terrorism from Muslim states.

Since the beginning of this century, starting with the Armenian genocide (1896-1917), then the massacres of Christians in Iraq (1933) and Syria (1937), the condition of the Eastern Christians (in spite of their involvement in Arab politics) has constantly deteriorated. Thus, one can see how dhimmitude still influences the interaction of different religious groups. To be sure, many scholars have studied their histories separately, but the concept of dhimmitude provides a wider and unified framework for all those varied communities that have undergone the same experience throughout history.

It is interesting to examine the different paths that each *dhimmi* group felt compelled to adopt, either by historical circumstances or geography, to regain its liberty and dignity. The national liberation of *dhimmi* peoples meant that the jurisdiction of dhimmitude, imposed by *jihad*, was abolished; they could then recover their proscribed language, their history, and their culture. The Christian peoples of the Balkans fought for their national sovereignty, as did the Armenians

later, and the Jews in their own homeland; but Christians of the Middle East chose assimilation in a secularized Islamic society and became arabized.

As a result of European colonialism in Arab lands, as well as the rebellions and struggle for the national liberation of Christian peoples in the Ottoman Empire, hundreds of thousands of Christians were killed during the 19th and early 20th centuries in Muslim-dominated regions. Christians lived in constant fear of further atrocities. The Greeks were saved from a genocide in the early 19th century by the intervention of the Anglo-French and Russian armies. Their uprisings throughout that century were punished by massacres and the slavery and conversion of women and children. Similar reprisals struck both Serbs and Bulgarians in their own lands.

The genocide of the Armenians and atrocities in Iraq and Syria compelled the Lebanese Christians to create a refuge country for their persecuted brethren from neighboring lands. Some Lebanese were favorable to the restoration of a Jewish state in its historical homeland and were sympathetic to the Zionist cause, for they knew that the position of Jews and Christians under Islam was similar. But this current, led by the Maronite Patriarch Antun Arida and Beirut's Archbishop Ignace Mubarak, represented a small minority among the Eastern Christians, who remained, like the Vatican, adamantly hostile to a Jewish state in Palestine, and especially to any Jewish sovereignty in Jerusalem. Within the context of the Jewish national liberation movement, one should remember that Muslims and the Oriental Churches were hostile to a massive return of Jews to their homeland. Jews had been condemned to suffering and exile by both Christianity and Islam, and therefore Jewish sovereignty in Palestine-Israel was totally unacceptable. How much European opposition to a Jewish state had helped the execution of the Final Solution is a question that concerns historians of the Shoah. Clearly, antisemitism is intrinsically linked to the concept of Jewish evilness, which justifies a *judenrein* Palestine, especially Jerusalem.

Thus, one finds, in both the political and religious spheres, a hostile Islamic-Christian front against Zionism and later against the State of Israel. Many of these Oriental Christian leaders thought that this Islamic-Christian front against Zionism would help secure their position in the Arab world, first under the banner of pan-Arabism, and then under the slogan: "the just Palestinian cause." Palestinian anti-Zionist Christians, especially their clergy, were in the vanguard of the battle for the destruction of Israel. Some proudly participated in the worst acts of terrorism. Much of the anti-Israeli propaganda was formulated by Christian Palestinians in order to exacerbate traditional judeophobia in the West. Among them were clergymen from the Levant, such as Greek-Catholic Archbishop Hilarion Capucci. In fact, many in the West justified the *jihad* aims and tactics against Israel — and even against Jews everywhere.

The responsiveness of post-Shoah Europe to anti-Zionism has many geostrategic and economic reasons, but it also derives from the easy channeling of traditional judeophobia into anti-Zionism. Thus, it is not surprising that the PLO's official Christian representatives were much appreciated by politicians, intellectuals, and the European media. In antisemitic circles, they were endowed with a holy mission, embodied in the historic role of the Palestinian clergy. In Byzantine Palestine, the clergy had forbidden Jews to reside and pray in Jerusalem. One of the worst massacres of Jews occurred at the instigation of the Jerusalem Patriarch Sophronius, who suggested it in 628

to the Emperor Heraclius (610-641). Some years later, when the Arabs conquered Jerusalem from the Greeks, Sophronius tried to persuade Caliph Umar Ibn al-Khattab to forbid any Jewish presence in Jerusalem. So we see that even at this moment of the terrible defeat, slaughter, and anguish for Christians, the Palestinian Patriarch was obsessed by judeophobia. Sophronius, later canonized, died a few years after surrendering Jerusalem to the Muslim conquerors. When welcoming Yasir Arafat in 1995 to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem for the traditional Christmas Mass, Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah was happy to recall how Sophronius had delivered Jerusalem to Umar in 636; 40 years later — and until the 1860s — no cross could adorn a church in Jerusalem.

Throughout the centuries, Christian judeophobia in Jerusalem and Palestine was virulent. In my books, I have reproduced 19th-century reports from French and British consuls who were shocked by this hatred, which did lead to criminal acts. In this century, anti-Zionism cemented the Palestinian Islamic-Christian alliance with Hitler's ideology; this collaboration with Nazi Germany is well known.

Whereas the Shoah developed in a European context, anti-Zionism belongs to the domain of dhimmitude. Here the powerless Palestinian Christians — like Sophronius — had to rely on the Arab-Muslim force to prevent the restoration of a Jewish state. Among the multitude of events from the 20th century, historians in the next millennium may well be intrigued by two particularities: the first concerns the relentlessness shown by many European politicians in exterminating and pillaging European Jewry; the second concerns post-Shoah Europe, which is linked to the first by a similar desire of many to demonize Israel. Yet this 20th century has witnessed important Western strategic defeats in the Middle East. Armenian independence, promised at the end of World War I (Treaty of Sèvres) was never implemented; the same applies to the Kurds. Lebanon, considered as a paragon for the realization of an Islamic-Christian symbiosis, finally collapsed in a bloody tragedy. Massacres and slavery continue to ravage the Christian and Animist populations of southern Sudan; the war in the Philippines fueled by a secessionist Muslim minority group has claimed 120,000 lives over the past 20 years. Genocidal massacres have been perpetrated in numerous countries, but for 30 years the main target — constantly highlighted in the media — remained Israel. This extraordinary blindness was in part caused by the Palestinian clergy which, with its numerous religious and secular channels in Europe and elsewhere, helped to uphold the Palestinian issue as the world's first priority.

However, the militancy against Israel of the Islamic-Christian front paradoxically led to increased instability and anguish for Arab-Christians. The reasons are not difficult to find. In order to maintain this anti-Zionist front, Oriental Christians were obliged to make continual compromises. They were afraid to mention their own history of suffering and dhimmitude under Islam for fear of irritating the Muslim world; it became a taboo subject even in Europe. Eastern Christians, especially the Palestinians, thought that their support for the anti-Israeli *jihad* would secure their safety in a hostile environment. But this policy brought negative results: 1) The encouragement of an anti-Israeli *jihad* has fueled and developed a rhetoric of war-hatred against Christians because the dogma of *jihad* associates them with Jews. The more the Christians fought to delegitimize Israel, the more they weakened their own rights; 2) this factor had dramatic consequences for the Lebanese Christians. Like the Jews, their war for freedom in

their own country was a struggle to impose on the Islamic world the respect for their rights to dignity — not to be considered as an inferior group, ready for a modernized dhimmitude. And as a result of their common destiny with Jews in Islamic dogma, the *jihad* aggressivity rebounded against the Lebanese Christians inadequately prepared for such a confrontation. And since the history of dhimmitude and *jihad* was obfuscated in Europe — thanks to the Christian pro-Islamic, anti-Zionist lobby — and as the Palestinian cause became *the* sacred cause of the international community, when the PLO fought the Christians in Lebanon, the latter were soon abandoned.

Hence, the concealment of *dhimmi* history, and of the ideology of *jihad* — a deliberate policy maintained for decades in the West — has facilitated a return of the past, as the same political system is now inscribed in the program of today's Islamists.

There is another, no less important, aspect of dhimmitude: the psychological and spiritual one. The *dhimmi* mentality appears with no great differences in its Christian or Jewish version. One could examine it either in relation to the concept of rights or to that of toleration. One should bear in mind that the study of dhimmitude necessitates an examination of the common condition of both Jews and Christians who form one entity: the "People of the Book." They are thus complementary, and the rules applied to one group concern likewise the other. Another aspect of this complex historical domain relates to their mutual relationship in the world of dhimmitude, and to the manner in which each group viewed the other. Solidarity and mutual aid in time of persecutions existed, as did denunciation and revenge motivated by fear and greed. But, in general, a similar condition contributed to created mutual bonds of understanding.

Thus, one realizes that the concept of dhimmitude — rather than the term "tolerated minorities" — covers a wide domain of research. One can study its dynamic, its evolution, its modalities, and the interactions of diverse elements within this context that shed light on the areas of fusion, interdependence and confrontation between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Dhimmitude is a neutral concept and therefore a tool for historical investigation.

For me, as a Jew, this insight into Christian dhimmitude represented an intellectual experience that was not easy to undertake. This was not the domineering face of European Christendom, persecuting and triumphant, but the discovery of its persecuted, humiliated, and suffering *other* side. In short, Eastern Christianity's history of dhimmitude under Islam is a sort of "Jewish experience" — endured this time by Christians. This is why this history was so resolutely and intensely denied by most Eastern Christians, especially Palestinians. For a Jew, this quest constitutes a moral ascesis because it is no easy task to find expressions of the same suffering in one's persecutor. But this companionship gives a new approach to human trials and opens common perspectives of reconciliation with Muslims. It makes it easier for Jews and Christians to strive with liberal Muslims, thus freeing them from prejudices of the past and from the concepts of *jihad* and "tolerance," replacing them with new bonds of friendship and esteem between equals.

For the Jewish people — liberated from Christian anti-semitism in its own homeland, as well as from dhimmitude imposed on them by Islam — this long task of reconciliation with Christianity and Islam could strengthen respect between the three religions and their respective peoples. •