



HFM 006 – Islam and Tolerance of Christianity in History

Michael Rank: This is the History in Five Minutes Podcast, the #1 podcast for learning about anything in history in no time at all! I'm your host, Michael Rank.

So this is a pretty controversial question of, 'In history, which religion was more tolerant to members of a different religion?' It's a question that has been going on since the establishment of Islam and how Christian-controlled states treated their Muslim subjects and how Muslim-controlled states treated their Christian subjects. A way to begin to look at this question is to think about something that happened recently.

In April 2011, the Organization of the Islamic Conference which is an umbrella group for 57 Muslim nations issued a report stating that the incitement of religious hatred be criminalized around the world. This report made no mention of Christianity and Judaism receiving religious hatred, but it singled out Islam as a unique recipient of longstanding religious discrimination. Some of the events that they referenced were in 2006 when a Danish newspaper published cartoons of Mohammed that incited riots throughout the Muslim world, or last year, when Pastor Terry Jones burned a copy of the Quran. They and other Muslim rights groups claim that Muslims have always treated other religions with respect.

In response, some critics would say that's news to them since Christianity or conversion to Christianity from Islam is essentially criminalized in nations like Saudi Arabia and people had been executed as such in Iran. Critics like Robert Spencer say that throughout history Islam has been the one to impose itself in a totalitarian fashion onto other religions. He and others say that wherever Islam is spread it made free worship for other religions impossible.

So between these two versions, which idea is correct? In a sense, both assertions are correct and neither one is correct. It's true that Islamic regimes, especially in the middle ages and early modern period, never promoted anything like individual liberty among its subjects. In 1780, the Umayyad caliph, Umar II, issued a mandate to Christians living on conquered lands. They could either convert to Islam, pay a poll tax for being a non-Muslim, or be killed. Christians were also routinely enslaved and subjected to the confiscation of their property. In Islamic courts, their testimony would only be worth the fraction of the Muslims and permission to build a new church was dependent on the generosity of the Muslim ruler at the time.

Yet, we should keep in mind that oftentimes Christians and Jews enjoyed better lives under Muslim rulers than vice versa in the past. Keep in mind that these events occurred in the middle ages and the early modern period, a time when nobody had the constitutional assurance of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This is way before the Bill of Rights. So we have to think about this in a historical context.

It's noteworthy that in Muslim states Christians and Jews had a social space carved out for them. Throughout much of history, most Muslim leaders were far less interested in harassing their non-Muslim subjects as they were collecting their tax money. For a lot of these Christians and Jews, they could practice their religious beliefs and attend their churches and were for the most part left alone. When Ottoman Sultan Selim I wanted to convert all of his Christian subjects to Islam, his advisers ruled out the idea because the majority of the revenue came from the Christian poll tax.



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Indeed, when Jews fled Spain in the late 1400's during the Spanish Inquisition, many of them made for the Ottoman Empire where they were well received. Their descendants still live in Turkey, and in some parts of Istanbul, one can still hear the language of Ladino which is a Hebrew-inflected form of Spanish.

In the modern era, Muslim nations had generally established a poor track record of protecting religious minorities. In 2012, religious freedom reports ranks nearly all Muslim countries as partly free or un-free for religious expression of a non-dominant religion. Attempted terrorist attacks in United States and Europe are often accompanied by statements from the attacker justifying their actions by commands from the Quran demanding all Muslims to engage in holy war for Jihad against non-Muslims. In 1998, Osama Bin Laden declared an open-ended Jihad against the entire Western World which became the rally and cry for Al Qaeda.

In response to these trends, Christians and Jews in the Middle East have engaged in a mass exodus from Muslim dominated countries for decades. For example, if you go to Michigan, there's a huge Arab population, but a significant fraction of these people aren't Muslim. They are Middle Eastern Christians who have left the Middle East because of prosecution. Yet, as is often the case, the historical record is more diverse and complex than current events are made to suggest. As Muslim immigration to Europe and America increases each year, approximately 15 million Muslims live in Europe. According to some recent accounts, the Muslim population has surpassed the Jewish numbers in America. Maybe, there are some lessons to learn about interreligious coexistence that we can take from the past.

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