

# The Relationships Between Muslims and Christians: From Prophet Muhammad to Abbasid Caliph Mahdi

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## ABSTRACT

The title reflects the relationship between Christians and Muslims from Prophet Muhammad to Abbasid Caliph Mahdi and this study will examine how the dialogue between Christians and Muslims has been improved.

Muslims have taken Prophet Muhammad as one's model to improve the relationship in a friendly. The relationship between Christians and Muslims and also the relationship Muslims and other religions' followers dates back to Prophet Muhammad and after the Prophet Muhammad, the relationship has made too much progress since then.

## Müslümanlarla Hıristiyanlar Arasındaki İlişkiler: Hz. Muhammed'den Abbasi Halifesi Mehdi'ye

## ÖZET

Çalışmamız, Hz. Peygamberden Abbasi Halifesi Mehdi'ye kadar ki süreçte Müslüman-Hıristiyan ilişkilerini ele almaktadır. Müslümanların, Hıristiyanlar ve diğer din mensupları ile ilişkilerinde tek model hiç şüphesiz ki; Hz. Muhammed olmuştur. Müslümanlar ile Hıristiyanlar arasındaki ilişkilerde olduğu gibi Müslümanlar ile diğer din mensupları arasındaki ilişkilerin temeli de Hz. Muhammed'e dayanmaktadır. Hz. Peygamber'den sonra bu ilişkiler farklı aşamalarda günümüze kadar devam etmiştir.

Hulefa-i Raşidin döneminde, Müslümanlar ile Hıristiyanlar arasındaki diyaloglar müspet ilişkiler çerçevesindeydi. Bu dönemde münasebetler farklı nüanslarla da olsa, Hz. Peygamber zamanında olduğu gibi devam ettirilmeye çalışılmıştır. Hz. Muhammed döneminden sonra Müslümanlar, birçok yerleri fethederek İslam'ın kendine has ruhuyla birlikte huzur ve maneviyatını getirerek, bu özellikleri buralarda tatbik etmişlerdir.

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There are a lot of religions in our present world. All religions of today have roots in the past. Clearly, in our great world, is getting smaller “small world” where religious and cultural pluralism seem an inescapable reality, we are witnessing the beginning of new age in relationship between Muslims and Christians in particular. All mankind has been created as the most honoured of all creatures in the universe. There is no doubt about it. Actually, all people, in proportion to his own capability, looks for kindness and beauty according to the values of the society in which he grew up and the information he could obtain. Everybody is inclined to love and friendship. If he hasn't any intellectual illness, what guides him will be the knowledge and values he obtained. Certainly, even inter-religious dialogues cannot be exempt from these principles.

We most certainly need presence today more than before. Our world reached a phase where it bears many disasters despite wide opportunities offered by new modern technologies. On the other hand, unequal distribution of resources and income, injustice in economy, inequality among people and societies produced many unprecedented struggles.<sup>1</sup> Clearly we are living in this small world and this earth belongs to all of humankind and definitely there is no another one where we can keep on

<sup>1</sup> Mahmut Aydın, *Modern Western Christian Theological Understanding of Muslims Since the Second Vaitcan Council*, USA: Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication, 2002, s. 1-7.

our life. Therefore, stopping these negatives is one of the most important responsibilities of the whole humanity with all its institutions. The only sensible route of achieving this will be spreading the culture of peace, and relationship.

The title reflects the relationship between Christians and Muslims from Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) to the early relationship with Christians after the first Caliphs and this study will examine how the dialogue between Christians and Muslims has been improved. Certainly, if we study the Holy Qur'an and Hadith carefully, we could see how the relationship between Christians and Muslims based on and will be improved by believers. Muslims have taken Prophet Muhammad as one's model to improve the relationship in a friendly. The relationship between Christians and Muslims and also the relationship Muslims and other religions' followers dates back to Prophet Muhammad and after the Prophet Muhammad, the relationship has made too much progress since then.

During the time of the Prophet Muhammad, there were some tribes belonged who were Christians in Saudi Arabia (earlier 7th century). Christians had already come to the Arabian Peninsula before Islam but Christianity couldn't get its own power toward Arabian people (Arabs) and Christianity couldn't be spread on the Arabian Peninsula. Seen from a certain perspective, the Christian and Muslim relationship absolutely began before the institution of many of the Islamic rites.

Prophet time's relationship was very friendly between Christians and Muslims. Relation of Muslims to Christians was different from the relationship others. According to the Qur'an, the relationship of Christians is more kind than Jewish. The Qur'an informs about this subject: "Thou wilt find the most vehement of mankind in hostility to those who believe (to be) the Jews and the idolaters. And thou wilt find the nearest of them in affection to those who believe (to be) those who say: Lo! We are Christians. That is because there are among them priest and monks, and because they are not proud."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Al- Qur'an chapter 5 (al-Ma'idah), verse 82.

When Muhammad became the prophet and the suras of the Qur'an revealed in Mecca and Medina do demonstrate that Muhammad had a better knowledge of Christianity and other religions and thus, that he must have had some contact with Christians and also another people there. Muhammad didn't wait long for his religion to become known, after became the prophet. God has seen fit to complete the religion of Islam even before his death. After revelation, it was revealed to the Prophet that his mission should be universal. Muhammad is said to have sent envoys to the leaders of the kingdoms and princes of the world, bordering Arabia in order to invite them to the religion of Islam.<sup>3</sup> The embassy to the king of Persia, Chosroes Parvis was received with disdain and contumely. He was haughtily amazed at the boldness of the Mecca fugitive in addressing him of invitation to Islam and dismissed the envoy from his presence with great contempt. When the Prophet received information on this treatment, he calmly observed: "Thus will the Empire of Chosroes be torn to pieces."<sup>4</sup> The embassy to Heraclitus, the Emperor of the Romans, was received much more politely and reverentially. He treated the ambassador with great respect and sent the Prophet a gracious reply to his message.<sup>5</sup>

I would you like to add the Prophet's invitation to show the Prophet's relationship with Christians on this subject. The contents of the Prophet's invitation were as follows: "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, and the Merciful. This letter is from Muhammad the slave of Allah and His Messenger to Heraclitus the ruler of Byzantine. Peace is upon him who follows the right path. Furthermore, I invite you to Islam, and if you become a Muslim you will be safe, and Allah will double your reward, and if you reject this invitation of Islam, you will be committing a sin by misguiding you subjects."<sup>6</sup> The Prophet added this verse on this invitation: "Say (O Muhammad): 'O People of Scripture: come to a word that is just between us and you, that we worship none but Allah,

3 Muhammed Hamidullah, *İslam Peygamberi*, Salih Tuğ (çev.), İstanbul: İrfan Yay, 1993, C.1, s. 308.

4 Hamidullah, *age.*, s. 351-383.

5 Hamidullah, *age.*, s. 343-350.

6 Z. Konrapa, *Peygamberimiz İslam Dini ve Aşer-i Mübeşşere*, İstanbul: Fatih Yayınevi, 1967, s. 368.

and that we associate no partners with Him and that none of us shall take others as lords besides Allah.' Then, if they turn away, say: 'Bear witness that we are Muslims.'"<sup>7</sup>

Another envoy was sent to an Arab prince of the Ghassanite tribe, a Christian feudatory of Heraclitus. This prince, instead of receiving the envoy with any respect, cruelly murdered him. This act caused great consternation among the Muslims, who considered it as an outrage of international obligations.<sup>8</sup>

No more than a hundred and fifty years passed from then until the voice of Islam were waving between Spain in the west and India, Turkistan and indeed in the east. Thus by joining Islam, the territories of al Sham<sup>9</sup> Iraq, Persia and Afghanistan have linked the Arabian Peninsula with the kingdom of "the Son of Heaven." on the other hand, the Islamization of Egypt, Constantinople, Burqah, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco have linked the native land of Muhammad (p.b.u.h) with Europe and Africa.<sup>10</sup>

According to Islamic history, at the first emigration, we are witnessing the best friendship between the Prophet Muhammad and Christians King, Al Najashi (Negus). Makkan persecution of the Muslims increased in intensity. Many Muslims now became so subject to torture and murder that Muhammad instructed them to disperse throughout the world. When they asked where they should go, he had heard of the righteousness, tolerance and hospitality of the neighbouring Christian king of Abyssinia, he advised them to escape to Abyssinia (today Ethiopia), the Christian kingdom, where "a king rules without injustice, a land of truthfulness, until God leads us to a way out of our difficulty."<sup>11</sup>

Muslims immigrated to Abyssinia at Muhammad's advice. The first group to emigrate included four women and eleven men. After leaving Makkah, they arrived in Abyssinia where they lived under the protection

7 Konrapa, *age.*, s. 369.

8 Hamidullah, *age.*, s. 327-330.

9 Al Şham, or Diyar al Sham refers to the territories presently known as Lebanon, Syria, Paletsine and Jordan. (Nuri, Ünlü, *Anahatlarıyla İslam Tarihi*, İstanbul: M.Ü.İ.Fak. Yay, 1984, s. 110)

10 M. Watt, *İslam Avrupa'da Hulusi Yavuz* (çev.), İstanbul: İz Yayıncılık, 1991, s. 97-113.

11 A. C. Es Sehhar, *Peygamberimiz Efendimiz*, M. Varlı (çev.), İstanbul: Çağaloğlu Yayınevi, s. 84-85.

of the Negus until they heard that the Muslims in Makkah had become secure against Quraysh's attacks, as we shall see a little later. When upon return they found the Quraysh's persecution stronger than it ever was before, they immigrated once more to Abyssinia, this time about eighty men, not counting women and children. This larger group, of Muslims lived in Christian King Al Nejashi's country until after the Prophet's emigration to Yathrib. Their emigration to Abyssinia is usually referred to as "the first emigration in Islam."<sup>12</sup> Clearly, it is understood that Prophet's time, the relationship between Christians and Muslims was very friendly. The Prophet Muhammad invited people to Islam and the role of the Prophet in this period was in particular that of an announcer and warner and teller people a piece of Islam.

After Prophet Muhammad the relationship between Muslims and Christians was developed in different line. Because of the Muslim-Arab conqueror (Fatih) that conquered new places, the Middle East and Northern Africa brought the faith of Islam with scripture of Islam and their own language and was created Islamic Polity and a new structure with the Caliph as a supreme leader.

Abu Bakr was Caliph for only two years, three months and ten days. This was a relatively very short period of time in the life of people. But during this short period, Abu Bakr was able to do considerable things for young religion. These achievements have made his name immortal. They have placed him among the greatest men of all time. When Abu Bakr too over, Islam was confined to Arabia alone. And here, too its hold was rather shaky. In many parts of the country, Islam was but a name. It was not a way of life with most people. Scores of tribes had thought of the Prophet has a mere king. They tired to throw off his yoke as soon as he was no more. Abu Bakr taught these people a lasting lesson. He taught them that Islam was a way of life.

Abu Bakr was as sincere as he was firm in faith. He lived up to every word of what he said at the beginning of his Caliphate. He was never

<sup>12</sup> Es Sehhar, *age.*, s. 85-88.

anything but the faithful agent of Allah and His Apostle, and the humblest servant of his people. It was this fact which won him deepest love and respect for all classes of his people. The result was that Islam took an unshakable hold on the country of its birth. Soon it gathered enough strength to overlap its boundaries. It struck at the two most feared powers of the time. Abu Bakr had put Islam on the road to worldwide expansion.<sup>13</sup>

The Prophet showed by his example who that goal could be reached. He showed how the power of the State shouldn't be used for private ends but for the public good. Abu Bakr was the first among his followers to live up the Prophet's example. He got no personal gain out of the Caliphate. He spent every minuted of the last two years of life in the service of his people, but got not a money as wages. In short, Abu Bakr showed the world what government of the people, for the people, and by the people really meant.<sup>14</sup>

Omar was Caliph for ten and a half years. This period stands out as the golden age of Islam. Omar personally looked into the smallest affairs of the people. He worked like a empyee full time. At night, he went around the city to find out for himself how people lived and felt.<sup>15</sup>

Omar had a big state to manage. He proved more then equal to the task. He was called upon to took after huge military campaigns, going on at one and the same time, in the east and west. He met this challenge with breathtaking succes. History was nothing to put beside this achievement. After he was called upon to bring peace and order to his vast state. Here again his success was unequalled. The freedom, justice and security which he gave to his people were unknown in any other part of the world.<sup>16</sup> Usman was Caliph for about twelve years. Despite internal troubles, Usman's Caliphate did see expansion of the state. Nort Africa was added to it. Risings in different parts were quikly put down.

13 Mahmut, Şakir, **Dört Halife, Hulefa-i Raşidin**, İstanbul: Kahraman Yayınları, 1996, s. 101-131

14 H. Dursun, Yıldız, **Doğuştan Günümüze Büyük İslam Tarihi: Hulefa-i Raşidin ve Emeviler**, Konya: Kombassan Yay., 1994 s. 59-62.

15 Yıldız, **age.**, s.106-183.

16 Ö. Rıza, Doğrul, **Asr-ı Saadet**, İstanbul: Neşriyat Yayınları, 1978, s. 325-331.

In the course of almost six centuries, from 7 to 13 A.D, Muslim civilization displayed its openness in a constant with other cultures and civilizations. In the last instance, this openness was promoted by the spirit of religious and cultural tolerance prevailing in the oikumene of the Arab-Muslim Caliphate, which expanded from the Indus to Gibraltar. The Persian wisdom and Greek reason became component parts of the Muslim spiritual culture. In conditions of political-legal and religious pluralism within the framework of Islam, the creators of the classical culture of the Arab-Muslim middle ages were not only Arabs, but also representatives of many other peoples. Despite various controversy and fights between the Arab-Muslim world and Medieval Europe, as well as the various collisions within the Caliphate itself, Baghdad, Cairo, and Cordoba became the major cultural centres which defined the course of interaction with other civilizations.

This frankness to relationship has, exactly, allowed medieval Europe to consider as a component of its own culture not only the heritage of antiquity received from the Arabs, but also the many achievements of classical Arab-Muslim in the fields of science. It is interesting to note, that on the basis of interaction between civilizations independent cultures were generated and developed which simultaneously belonged to Islamic and European civilizations.

The early relationship with Christians after the first Caliphs, doesn't contain all of the discussions available to us from this period but contains more specific information regarding the three dialogues which appear to have characterized and influenced the development of these talks in general. The Christian-Muslim relationship actually began before the institution of many Islamic rites; firstly we are seeing the some various contacts with Christians which had been done by the Prophet Muhammad, also after the Prophet these contacts has been improved by Muslims. The general atmosphere of the three dialogues, which is very brief in itself, again reflects the situation of its environment. These historical dialogues are very important and indeed a milestone in the Islamic history.

The relationship between Christians and Muslims changed first disputes of religion started towards Islamic understanding with 'Amr al-'As



by the Patriarch of Antakya (Ancient city in Turkey) Yuhanna ed Dimiski (Johannes Damascenes). The general history and the chronology, permit us to say that it concerns a dialogue of “the Patriarch John I with the Amr al-As in a city of Syria in 639.<sup>17</sup> John of Damascus (Johannes Damascenes), an eminent theologian of the Eastern Church, drives his surname from Damascus, where he was born about the close of the seventh century. His Arabic name was al- Mansur (the Victor), and he received the epithet Chrysorrhoeas (gold-pouring) on account of his eloquence.<sup>18</sup>

This early relationship contains the bare essentials of what was later to follow; the Muslim centres in on the versions of the Gospel and the deity of Christ, and the Christian reply draws heavily on Old Testament references.<sup>19</sup>

The studies of John of Damascus on the subject of Islam reinstructional in nature and even his example dialogues with Muslims. After giving a short introduction to Islam, in which he also explains Muslim principles, John begins to show how various Islamic understanding can be formed. The brief dialogue of Theodore Abu Qurra is also as it portrays an application of the Muslim principles of progressive revelation and a typical Melkite response according to the methods related by John of Damascus.<sup>20</sup>

The discussion extended day by day especially those that had been started by Dimiski (J. Damascus). These arguments have been a model argument by his supporters until today. A lot of books were written by Christian’s authors towards the Islamic understanding. In Muslim literatures these books were called as reddiye (polemics).<sup>21</sup> In time, Islam would prove to otherwise. Also polemic books were written towards Christianity by Muslim’s ulamâ. Unfortunately, practically no discussion appears to have been preserved from the first 100 years of Christian-Muslim interaction.

17 M. Aydın, *Müslümanların Hıristiyanlara Karşı Yazdığı Reddiyeler ve Tartışma Konuları*, Ankara, T.D.V. Yayınları, 1998, s. 28.

18 Newman, *age.*, s. 137.

19 Newman, *age.*, s. 8.

20 Casim Avcı, *İslam Bizans İlişkileri (M. 610-847)*, (Yayınlanmamış Doktora Tezi, Uludağ Üniversitesi SBE, 1997), p.111

21 Aydın, *age.*, s. 28-29.

The relationship of the Umayyad Caliph Umar II with Byzantine Emperor Leo III, there is a tradition in Eastern Christian Churches, often referred to by Oriental Christians even at present day, to the effect that early in the 8th century there was exchange of letters on the questions of the respective merits of Christianity and Islam, between the Umayyad Caliph Umar II (717-720 A.D) and the Byzantine Emperor Leo III, the Isaurian (717- 741 A.D), which the Emperor refuted the claims of Islam.<sup>22</sup>

We have notices of this correspondence in various sources. The Byzantine Chronographer Theophanous (d. 818 A.D), writing of the second year of the Caliphate of 'Umar, the year when there was a great earthquake in Syria, and when 'Umar was making great efforts to have the Christians of his realm accept Islam, says: "he also sent a letter to the Emperor Leo, thinking that he might persuade him also to accept Islam," a statement which is repeated in much the same word by Cedrenus<sup>23</sup> (c.1100 A.D).<sup>24</sup>

The following discussion between the Caliph Mahdi (775-785 A.D) and the Patriarch Timothy I (780-823 A.D) are the first examples of the Nestorian-Abbasid dialogue. Shortly after coming to power, the Abbasids changed the capital of their empire from Damascus to Baghdad; a move which also took the court of the caliphs away from the religious influence of the Melkites (Orthodox) and Jacobite in the West and brought them into sphere of the Nestorians in the East.<sup>25</sup>

The dialogue, theological discussion between the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I and the Abbasid Caliph Mahdi had strong reasons for believing that it contains as faithful an analysis as could possibly be made under the circumstances of the questions and answers of the Caliph and the Patriarch.<sup>26</sup>

It should be emphasized that writing a history on the relationship which has been debated from Prophet's time to our present time in the

22 Avci, *age.*, s.115.

23 Cedrenus, George Cedrenus or Kedrenos was the author of Byzantine world history. He was a Greek monk, of whose life nothing is known. Bkz. Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology, <http://www.ancientlibrary.com/smith-bio/0667.html> (available. 2011)

24 Newman, *age.*, s. 57-58.

25 Newman, *age.*, s. 57-163.

26 Avci, *age.*, s.150.

world. There is always a need for Christians and Muslims to grow in mutual knowledge and esteem. Even when they have been living side by side for many years, perhaps for centuries, real knowledge and appreciation of the other is often very slight. An effort has to be made; otherwise the harmony that has been taken for granted may suddenly be threatened.

Certainly the relationship between Muslims and Christians can be discussed in the several contexts, positive and negative. Among others, there is the current world situation in which there are conflicts being waged in parts of the world. There is the continuing relationship at the level of leadership between Islam, by scholars and various Islamic organizations around the world, and Christianity, by the Vatican, the World Council of Churches and Pope John Paul II in particular.

Muslims and Christians also another religious people have been living together for over 1400 years and have always engaged actively with the other. From the first days after Hz. Muhammad the traditional mutual perceptions began forming and gave rise to certain attitudes that have influenced Muslim-Christian relations ever since. As Muslims began to encounter Christians they did so armed with some knowledge of Christianity and the the tenets of Jesus. After the death of the Prophet in 632 the Islamic territories expanded and within a short time spread covered the Middle East and North Africa and within these territories were huge populations of Christians. For hundreds of years there were probably larger populations of Christians and other faiths than there were Muslims and they lived at peace with each other.