

Dhimmīs in Fatimid Egypt: A View from the Islamic West

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Abstract

This paper is intended as an epilogue and concludes the papers of this collection by analyzing their content from the specific vantage point of a comparison with parallel developments and phenomena in the Maghrib and particularly in Islamic Spain (al-Andalus). The issues studied in the collection are thus reviewed in a wider geographical and chronological context.

Keywords

al-Andalus – Almohads – conversion – *dhimmīs* – Fatimid Egypt – ‘hidden transcript’ Islamic West – Maghrib

The prevailing view on the situation of *dhimmīs* during the period of Fatimid rule in Egypt portrays their communities as being under no significant threat and even flourishing, except for part of the reign of al-Ḥākim (386–411/996–1021), that is, mostly between 395–403/1004–1012, with the destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Fatimid Jerusalem taking place at the turn of the *hijrī* century, in 400/1009–1010. The rigorous and vexing policies then implemented led substantial numbers of *dhimmīs* to convert to Islam.¹ Such

¹ No specification seems to have been made regarding the branch of Islam adhered to (Ismailism? Sunnism?), although in an eschatological context one would expect the imposition of Ismailism. On the other hand, Sunnis remained such even if acknowledging the imam-caliph's rule.

policies—eventually recanted by the caliph before his disappearance, thus allowing the converts to return to their former beliefs—could be understood as having had as their ultimate goal the destruction of the Jewish and Christian communities by subjecting them to a pressure that affected their means of preservation and survival, such as the maintenance of their places of worship. But if this was so, that goal is not mentioned in the sources at our disposal, which are generally silent regarding why al-Ḥākim did what he did. There are, however, at least two exceptions, one found in a Christian source (see Maryann Shenoda's contribution here).

As regards the other, in his review of possible reasons behind the caliph's actions, Paul Walker refers to a Druze letter mentioning a pact by which the Prophet granted the Jews and the Christians 400 years for the appearance of their Messiah: if he failed to appear after that time, their protected status would come to an end. Mention of this pact is attested in the Islamic West. The Almoravid emir Yūsuf ibn Tāshfīn (453–500/1061–1106) is said to have attempted to convert the Jews of Lucena, a town in al-Andalus, under the influence of a tradition transmitted by the Cordoban esotericist (*bāṭini*) Ibn Masarra (d. 319/931), according to which Jews had to convert if by that century the prophet they were waiting for had not appeared.² Later, in the year 700/1301, a vizier of the Hafsid caliph in Ifrīqiya visited Egypt and expressed his indignation at the indulgence shown by the Mamlūks towards Jews and Christians; to forestall any legal justification for such leniency, the vizier argued that, “the covenant granting them protection had expired in the year 600/1203–4.”³ Belief in this end of an alleged pact establishing an expiration date for the *dhimma* status has clear eschatological overtones, as indicated by the mention of the Messiah to come and the link with the turn of a century. Eschatology had also been a crucial element when the Qarmatians declared allegiance to their young Mahdī in 319/931; in the events that followed, Qurʾāns were openly burned and “the treaty of protection (*dhimma*), which Islamic law

2 Felipe Maíllo, “The City of Lucena in Arab sources,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 8.2 (1993): 149–164 (156–157).

3 D.P. Little, “Coptic Conversion to Islam under the Bahri Mamlūks, 692–755/1293–1354,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 39/3 (1976): 552–569 (555, and note 12). On the Almohad case and possible precedent for the Hafsid view, see Maribel Fierro, “A Muslim Land without Jews or Christians: Almohad Policies Regarding the ‘Protected People,’” in *Christlicher Norden—Muslimischer Süden. Ansprüche und Wirklichkeiten von Christen, Juden und Muslimen auf der Iberischen Halbinsel im Hoch- und Spätmittelalter*, ed. Matthias M. Tischler and Alexander Fidora (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2011), 231–247.

grants to “scriptuaries”—Jews and Christians—was declared abolished, if they clung to the Torah and the Gospel, for the revelation once allotted to them was now also null and void.”⁴ This eschatological context seems to provide the most adequate framework for understanding what happened under al-Ḥākim, and it would also explain why the caliph reversed his policies, as if the measures taken responded to specific needs in a specific moment, and once that moment had passed new needs had to be faced.⁵

Paul Walker has pointed out that while what al-Ḥākim did could be regarded as going against Islamic law, for Ismāʿīlīs the law is in fact what the infallible living imām says it is. For his part, Yaacov Lev highlights the need of ascertaining what he describes as the “Fatimid self-perception and their attitudes toward non-Muslims,” attitudes that according to him reflect no religious bigotry and often a high degree of tolerance.⁶ Lev’s critical appraisal of both what the sources tell and how scholars have interpreted them provides an illuminating counterbalance to the focus on al-Ḥākim’s interlude. Particularly intriguing is his suggestion that the Fatimids’ attitudes towards the *dhimmīs* may have been informed by their own response to certain trends within Islam. Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī’s interpretation of the Qur’ānic verse “There is no compulsion in religion” as a proclamation of tolerance of intra-Muslim dissent (pointed out by Patricia Crone), once stated within Ismailism could have helped orientating Fatimid state policies towards both other Muslims and non-Muslim confessional groups, excluding forced conversion from the Fatimid agenda for ruling a polity in the here and now. Within this context, the trend of Coptic conversion to Islam during the Fatimid period cannot be traced in any precise way, although within this indetermination different proposals have been made.⁷ As shown by Lev, while the attempt to explore some of the factors influencing this process such as taxation leads to what seems like a dead end given the limitations of the sources, both literary and documentary, these sources provide richer material regarding other indicators such as disputes

4 Heinz Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi: The Rise of the Fatimids*, trans. M. Bonner (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 261.

5 His policies towards non-Muslims would perhaps acquire more sense if studied together with those affecting Muslims, as eschatological events would affect both.

6 This is to be contrasted with the view given by the Coptic sources that according to M. Shenoda reflect a strong sense of Coptic persecution not limited to the caliphate of al-Ḥākim.

7 The most recent analysis discussing previous studies is by Yaacov Lev, “Coptic Rebellions and the Islamization of Medieval Egypt (8th–10th Century): Medieval and Modern Perceptions,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 39 (2012): 303–344.

concerning the building or restoration of churches and monasteries. As long as Christian communities managed to preserve their religious institutions from both external and internal attacks, there were good chances for survival and withstanding Islamization. The Copts seem to have been able to manage successfully enough in this regard during the Fatimid period. Mikel de Epalza showed in a series of articles how in al-Andalus the attitude taken by some Christians led to a reduction in the number of episcopal sees; the scarcity of bishops affected the numbers of the clergy; and the absence of clergy weakened the communities, exposing them to Islamization.⁸ Although there is some discussion in the sources about building and rebuilding of churches in al-Andalus,⁹ the materials appear to be much richer in Egypt; this may be an indication of Coptic resourcefulness but also of a higher degree of pre-Islamic Christianization. As in al-Andalus, in Egypt Arabization preceded Islamization, but while struggle among competing Muslim factions by the mid-fifth/eleventh century seems to have been the main factor that weakened the Christian communities of the Delta, as suggested by Lev, in al-Andalus it was mostly the Christian military and economic threat that gave the *coup de grâce* to the dwindling numbers of Andalusi Christians.

The three contributions dealing with Christian sources have much to offer in terms of recovering what was going on inside the Christian communities. For those of us who are not familiar with those sources, Johannes den Heijer's discussion of what is being done to prepare for a critical edition of the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* together with the specific case study presented reveal in a most informative way the difficulties facing researchers in this field and how they can be overcome. I found particularly suggestive and intriguing the ascription of the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*—a compilation made in Arabic in the late eleventh century, on the basis of earlier and

8 A good summary in Mikel de Epalza, "Falta de obispos y conversión al islam de los cristianos de al-Andalus," *Al-Qantara* 15 (1994): 385–400. A similar proposal was made for Ifriqiya by Mohamed Talbi, "Le Christianisme maghrébin de la conquête musulmane à sa disparition: une tentative d'explication," in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 313–351.

9 The extant bibliography is discussed in Alejandro García Sanjuán, "La formación de la doctrina legal malikí sobre lugares de culto de los dimmíes," in *The Legal Status of Dimmi-s in the Islamic West*, ed. Maribel Fierro and John V. Tolan (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 131–155. For more recent contributions, dealing with these issues in the Islamic West, see the collection of articles edited by Dominique Valérian, *Islamisation et arabisation de l'Occident musulman médiéval (VII^e–X^e siècle)* (Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2011).

mostly Coptic sources, by the Alexandrian lay notable Mawhūb ibn Manṣūr ibn Mufarrij who added original Arabic materials, with continuations by others until the twentieth century—to “the canonical literary corpus of Arabic historiography.” The *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* is an Arabic text essentially produced in Fatimid times that records the history of Egypt from a Coptic Church perspective by organizing the information around the lives of the successive patriarchs. These biographies contain in addition much information on a large variety of phenomena and events. It was in response to the establishment of the Fatimid caliphate in the Islamic West and to both the threat and challenge it represented to the Sunnīs (Umayyad rulers and Mālikī scholars) that biographical dictionaries started to be written during the fourth/tenth century on an unprecedented scale, and covering diverse areas (jurists, judges, grammarians, poets, scholars in the sciences of the ancients, and those who had suffered religious persecution). The North African authors of these biographical dictionaries were interested not only in the biographical details that they could recover from various sources, but also in documenting their socio-cultural context and practices, as if aiming at preserving them from the possibility of disappearance but also in order to prove their soundness and value. Den Heijer points out that the way in which “particular communities and their representatives experienced their specific communal status and how these representatives negotiated their hierarchical and communal power in relation to Fatimid governance” are the central and common issues in the papers here collected. Similar concerns motivated the Sunnī authors of those biographical dictionaries written under the Fatimids.¹⁰

Regarding the case selected in den Heijer’s study, it tells the story of Bifām ibn Baqūra, a Copt who converted to Islam, and then apostatized between 427–487/1036–1094 and rejected any attempt at salvation on the part of the Muslim authorities, whose portrayal is nuanced and not overtly antagonistic. We have here a Christian non-confrontational tale as regards the Fatimid state that fits Mawhūb’s own personal links with the Fatimid administration. This is particularly evident in the intervention of the caliph who—unaware of the young man’s fate until after his execution—gives the body to his family so that they could bury him wherever they wished. In similar Christian tales of apostasy and recantation as found in the Andalusī context, recovery of the martyr’s body becomes a crucial issue, as the representatives of the state are portrayed

10 Sunnī reactions under the Fatimids are still relatively under-studied. A recent important contribution is Delia Cortese, “Voices of the Silent Majority: The Transmission of Sunnī Learning in Fāṭimī Egypt,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 39 (2012): 345–366.

as trying by any means to destroy it in order to hinder Christian devotion. Such tales reflect the militancy of those who were in favour of confronting the Muslim state because of the danger it entailed for preserving a Christian identity, and thus its representatives needed to be charged with a destructive agenda,¹¹—just the opposite of what we have here.

The case studied by Mark N. Swanson, found again in a complex multilayered narrative, tells the story of someone born from a Muslim father and a Christian mother who used to take him to church. Later he married a Christian woman and his desire to be a Christian increased. He was eventually baptized—after having first undergone what can be termed an auto-baptism, as church authorities were reluctant to accept his conversion—and changed his name to Jirjis. He was denounced, punished, released, denounced again, attacked by the mob, put on trial, condemned and eventually beheaded. The mob unsuccessfully tried to burn his body, but it was miraculously saved in order to be buried in a place where a church was built. This is a story close to those told of some Andalusī martyrs, many of whom were born into mixed marriages and were thus Muslims from a legal point of view, stories in which women often play a crucial role. As in the Andalusī case, this is a story meant to stimulate the desire for resistance and struggle against both Islamic society and those Church representatives inclined to appeasement with the state authorities. It does not reject coexistence with Muslims and non-militant Christians, but it proclaims that when confrontation is inevitable then it has to be. As pointed out by Swanson, for the protagonist of the story, anyone who tried to alter his martyrdom “even out of humanly good intentions could only be a servant of evil.” The case—perhaps reflecting an actual historical event—could have been recorded as a response to al-Ḥākīm’s persecution, but it may also reveal one of the currents existing within the Coptic Church, that of those who disliked close collaboration and allegiance with the Muslim state and who wanted to make it clear who the true lovers of God were, both inside the Church and in relation to other Christian groups such as the Melkites.

It was thanks to the Melkites’ links with the Byzantine Empire that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre could be rebuilt at the expense of the Emperor after the truce of 418/1027–1028. As shown by Johannes Pahlitzsch, these close links had advantages and disadvantages, as the Melkite community could gain

11 Juan Pedro Monferrer, “Mitografía hagiomartirial. De nuevo sobre los supuestos mártires cordobeses del siglo IX,” in *Estudios onomástico-biográficos de al-Andalus*. XIV. *De muerte violenta. Política, religión y violencia en al-Andalus*, ed. Maribel Fierro (Madrid: CSIC, 2004), 415–450.

or lose depending on the political relations between Fatimids and Byzantines. Another influencing factor was the arrival of Christian Armenians: while Copts and Syrian orthodox had to give up several churches and monasteries, the Melkites were not affected. A Christian Armenian became vizier in 529/1135 and his policies were regarded as having favoured the Christians. As happened in other cases in which *dhimmīs* were seen as having broken with their submissive status, an anti-Christian revolt ensued. In general, the massive Armenian immigration and the increasing influence of Christians stimulated anti-Christian feeling and polemical attacks, with the Andalusī al-Ṭurṭūshī (d. 520/1126) playing a crucial role with his teachings in Alexandria and his writings, both of which included anti-Fatimid propaganda—al-Ṭurṭūshī was a staunch Sunnī devoted to ward off any Ismaili influence among Muslims—in a way that perhaps could be described as a “hidden transcript,” to transfer to the Muslim context one of the threads in Frenkel’s, den Heijer’s, and Swanson’s contributions. Intra-Muslim divergences thus paralleled intra-Christian tensions.

Tensions also existed among Jews.¹² Miriam Frenkel’s paper does not focus on them, her interest being that of exploring how minorities take part in defining their own niches in society. There were traditional tactics of adaptation to which additional ones had to be devised in specific contexts. Frenkel deals with three of them, in each case offering translations of the texts analyzed. One of them, the first, belongs to that creative recreation of the past that can also be termed forgery. Islamic history could be used to foster the claim that Jews were an integral part of the Muslim community—had not the Prophet given their ancestors, the Jews of Khaybar, a bill of rights and privileges in gratitude for their help in battle? Had he not married one of them, Ṣafiyya, as claimed in the fourth/tenth century Judeo-Arabic document where such rights and privileges were listed (and of which a new translation is offered here)? For converts and non-Muslims, kinship established through women with Muslims in the past could be rewarding in the present. The already-mentioned Andalusī of non-Arab background Ibn Masarra reconstructed in his Cordoban dwelling the Medianan room of Mary the Copt, for reasons related to his esoteric beliefs but also most probably to his own *muwallad* identity. Was Mary not the Christian wife of the Prophet who begot his son Ibrāhīm and of whom it had been said:

12 Marina Rustow, *Heresy and the Politics of Community: The Jews of the Fatimid Caliphate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

“If Ibrāhīm had lived on, he would have been a truthful prophet; and if he had lived on, then he would have freed every Copt”¹³

Pahlitzsch’s cautionary reminder that much research is still needed for a better understanding of the history and culture of the Melkites during the Fatimid period is a *caveat* that underlies the rest of these contributions. Nevertheless, all of them demonstrate how many advances are being made on different fronts, especially as regards the most crucial one, that of the edition and close, enriching analysis of the sources.

13 Aisha Hidayatullah, “Mariyya the Copt: Gender, Sex and Heritage in the Legacy of Muhammad’s *umm walad*,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 21.3 (2010): 221–243 (222, 237).

