

### 3 THE COPTIC-ORTHODOX CHURCH UNDER ISLAM: 1<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY (639-750 AD)

#### 3.1 Amr ibn al-‘Âs conquers Egypt

It is unlikely that the Arab armies of Islam initially intended to conquer the Middle East and North Africa. It is more likely that their initial attacks on countries outside the Peninsula were mere raids for booty in order to support the central institutes of the budding state in Mekka and Medina. Only when the Arabs realized how weak their neighbors had become did they decide to proceed to occupy their lands.<sup>1</sup> When they occupied non-Arab lands, the original intent was exploitation, not Arabization or Islamization. Those concepts became more central to the policies of the Arab conquerors when it became clear that the conquests were not a temporary issue.<sup>2</sup>

In December 639 an Arab army under ‘Amr ibn al-‘Âs decided to launch a raid from Palestine into the Sinai Desert for looting the border-town al-‘Arîsh. That went so easily that ‘Amr decided to march further into Egypt. In 640 he conquered the Byzantine fortress of Babylon, an area that is now enveloped in the city of Cairo. In 641 the Byzantine troops in Egypt surrendered, though Alexandria held out for one more year. Cyrus, the Greek-Orthodox patriarch of Alexandria, eventually signed a treaty with ‘Amr, resulting in the withdrawal of the last Byzantine troops.<sup>3</sup> When in 644 the second caliph ‘Umâr ibn al-Khaṭṭâb (634-644) was murdered by a Persian slave, the initial wave of wars and migration of Arabs came to a halt.<sup>4</sup>

One of the main reasons why the armies of Byzantium were unable to stop the Arab attacks was that they were exhausted from their own war with Persia. They had signed a peace agreement in 628 but this had not given them enough time to recover sufficiently to stop the Muslim armies. Some of the semi-Christianized Arab tribes in the area of Jordan threw in their lot with the Muslims aiding them in conquering Syria and Palestine. This support for the Muslim armies may have been induced by the desire of these Christian Arabs to be liberated from Byzantium’s religious impact in order to develop a more indigenous Christian faith,

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<sup>1</sup> Thus M. Shaban, ‘Conversion to Early Islam’, in Nehemia Levtzion (ed), *Conversion to Islam* (New York, 1979), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, *Arabs in History*, pp. 49-51; Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, pp. 140-142.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>4</sup> Amir Hassan Siddiqy, *Decisive Battles of Islam* (Kuwait, 1986), pp. 57-62.

but the fact that Byzantium had shortly before withdrawn its financial support for border protection probably also played an important role.

Albert Hourani, a son of Lebanese Protestant immigrants to Great Britain and a historian at Oxford, thought that the easy Arab victories were a matter of plain indifference of the conquered. The Byzantine and the Sāsānids rulers were not indigenous themselves:

To most of them it did not matter whether they were ruled by Iranians, Greeks or Arabs. Government impinged for the most part on the life of the cities and their immediate hinterlands; apart from officials and classes whose interest were linked with theirs, and apart from the hierarchies of some religious communities, city-dwellers did not care much who ruled them, provided they were secure, at peace, and reasonably taxed. The people of the countryside and steppes lived under their own chiefs and in accordance with their own customs, and it made little difference to them who ruled the cities.<sup>5</sup>

Byzantium had placed a high tax burden on their provinces of Egypt and Syria. It was persecuting the Copts and other churches of the Middle East who did not agree with the decisions of the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451). These two factors had not created any love for Byzantium among the Christians of these lands. The treatment of the Copts by the Byzantines was so bad, that George C. Anawati, an Egyptian Church historian, concluded: 'That meant pushing the Copts into accepting anyone who seemed able to deliver them from their religious and political persecutors'.<sup>6</sup> The Arabs were almost welcomed as liberators, according to Lewis.<sup>7</sup>

The Arab armies were large enough to defeat the Byzantine and other armies, but not for dominating the societies they conquered. The Miaphysite Churches of the Middle East were now liberated of the Byzantine persecutions, while the Muslims were not able yet to interfere in their ecclesiastical life. In Egypt the Arab armies were based in Fustât, which is part of present Cairo, and in the harbor of Alexandria. It took 40 years before the Muslim Arab soldiers were allowed to settle wherever they wanted in Egypt.<sup>8</sup> It can be concluded that initially, for many Churches that fell under the rule of Islam, the freedom for Christian witness in the public domain increased. Not only could the Churches show

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<sup>5</sup> Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London, 2002, first edition 1991), p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> George C. Anawati, 'The Christian Communities in Egypt in the Middle Ages', in Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (eds), *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eight to Eighteenth Centuries* (Toronto, 1990), pp. 237-238.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, *Arabs in History*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>8</sup> Shaban, 'Conversion to Early Islam', pp. 28-29.

their Christian faith through their *koinonia* and *diakonia*, but the *kerygmatic* witness was also possible in the public domain.

It is questionable that spreading Islam was the motivation behind the expansionism of the Arabs; it was *Arabianism*, not Islam, which triumphed first. Between the military conquests and the religious conversions of the conquered regions a long period intervened. Early on in Islamic history conversions to Islam were often discouraged. Such conversions meant less fiscal income that could be shipped back to the Hijâz, the center of the expanding Arab World.<sup>9</sup>

The Arab armies retained the apparatus and personnel of the Byzantine administration and did not interfere with their internal civil and religious administration. Jews and Christians were called *dhimmîs*, short for *Ahl al-Dhimmah* (People of the Covenant), in accordance with Islamic canon law.<sup>10</sup> The fact that initially Islam was identified with Arabianism is clear from the status of converts who began to throng to Islam from among the conquered peoples. The new believers could only enter the religion of the state by becoming clients (*mawlâs*) of one or another of the Arab tribes. In theory these people were equals of the Arabs, but in reality the Arabs looked down upon them as socially inferior and they tried to exclude them from the material benefits of being Muslim.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.2 The Church under the Umayyads

After almost two decades of anarchy, Mu'âwîyâ, caliph since 661, decided to safeguard the unity of the Arab empire by centralization. His first step was to make Damascus into his residence and the powerbase of his new Umayyad dynasty (661-750). Damascus had a well-established cultural and administrative tradition with able local officials who made it possible to control the remote areas of Arabia, Egypt and Iraq. Mu'âwîyâ relied on Syrians, who were mainly Christians, and on the posterity of the Christian Arabs of Palmyra, to run the administration. The chancellor of Mu'âwîyâ was a Syrian Christian, Manşûr ibn Sarjûn, whose family had brought to power some of the financial controllers of Byzantium before Islam came to Syria.<sup>12</sup> This predominance of Christians was to the exclusion of the Arab immigrants from the Hijâz.

All over the Arab empire, the number of converts to Islam grew, especially in the Arab garrison cities. According to Lewis this was be-

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<sup>9</sup> Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, p. 145.

<sup>10</sup> See the entry on Dhimma, in H. A. R. Gibb and J. H. Kramers (eds), *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden, 1974, first edition 1953), p. 75.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis, *Arabs in History*, pp. 55-58.

<sup>12</sup> Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, pp. 194-5.

cause of the ‘disposal by the Arab masters of the empire of vast sums of money’. It was attractive to become a *mawlá*, as Arabs did not have to pay a poll tax, *jizyah*, but only a minimal religious tax, *zakâh*. Beside that, a *mawlá* was entitled to a stipend.<sup>13</sup> Lewis described the problems these conversions created for the treasurer of the Muslim empire:

[The] whole structure of the Arab states was based on the assumption that a minority of Arabs would rule a majority of tax-paying non-Muslims. The economic equalization of the [non-Arab Muslims] would have meant a simultaneous decrease of revenue and increase in expenditure. That could have only resulted in complete breakdown.<sup>14</sup>

Under Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (685-705) conversions were discouraged for these fiscal reasons, and also because the Arabs usually looked down upon non-Arabs, and did not want to integrate them into their *umma*.<sup>15</sup> Ibrâhîm spoke in this context about ‘the Arab’s belief in [the] superiority of his race and language’ and he considered it ‘no wonder [...] that this attitude aroused the anger and discontent of the non-Arabs against the Umayyads’.<sup>16</sup> Many of the non-Arab converts to Islam felt attracted to Islamic opposition movements that usually held egalitarian beliefs.<sup>17</sup>

‘Abd al-Malik ruled the empire as a centralized monarchy, modified by Arab tradition and by the remnants of the idea of theocracy. He was

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<sup>13</sup> Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, p. 218. Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 41-42, describes how in the first century of Islam the only reason non-Arabs had for accepting the highly discriminatory status of the *mawlá*s with its many disadvantages, must have been that their other options were even worse. He concludes they were mainly prisoners of war that escaped from slavery or death, or farmers in the worst state who needed an income in the city. Bulliet speaks of ‘riffraff’ in this context. In an article ‘Conversion Stories in Early Islam’, in Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bkhazi (eds), *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eight to Eighteenth Centuries* (Toronto, 1990), pp. 128-132, Bulliet argues that in early Islam, conversion was mainly a matter of choosing to be part of the community of Arab conquerors. Only later would the convert find out what it meant to be a Muslim. According to Bulliet, only in the fourth century of Islam, conversion became a much more spiritual, religious issue.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis, *Arabs in History*, p. 72. The ‘last thing the Muslims wished was to exterminate or to convert them all’, Neill generalizes for the whole period from 500-1000 CE. He tries to correct the ‘tragic picture’ that Christian tradition has drawn of the Islamic conquests, a picture that focuses on two options: death or apostasy. Whereas that picture is indeed incorrect and one-sided, Neill seems to underestimate the lasting impact of those periods in Islamic history when Christians were indeed forcefully driven to the fold of Islam. Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, pp. 63-64.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, *Arabs in History*, p. 72.

<sup>16</sup> Hassan, *Islamic History and Culture*, p. 98. He wrote his book towards his death in 1968, at the time when the Egyptians were fighting a war against Saudi Arabia over the future of Yemen. Perhaps this resulted in his negative statement.

<sup>17</sup> Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, p. 232.

the first Muslim to create Islamic coinage, an important symbol of power and identity. He also laid the basis for a fiscal renewal, which his successors could complete into what became the Islamic system of taxation.<sup>18</sup> ‘Abd al-Malik gradually replaced the old Byzantine and Persian administrative systems with a new Arab system and used Arabic as the official language of administration and accountancy. This encouraged more and more people to become literate in Arabic, as that was the basis for upward mobility. One result of that was that the word ‘Arab over time no longer denoted someone from the Arabian Peninsula, but any Muslim speaking the language of the Arabs, irrespective of his or her nationality.<sup>19</sup> The tribes of the Arabian Peninsula were thus rapidly losing their special position and were against the centralization of the empire. They formed a theocratic opposition, stressing the voluntary and religious aspects of the caliphate.<sup>20</sup>

Under the Umayyads, the Christians still had much space for a public *kerygmatic* witness. One of the greatest examples of such witness is John (Yûḥanná) of Damascus, who had enjoyed a classical Greek education. He wrote the first Christian tract against Islam. He was the grandson of Manṣûr ibn Sarjûn, and was brought up at the court of Caliph Mu‘âwiyá, where he was good friends with Mu‘âwiyá’s son and heir Yazîd. Yûḥanná inherited his father’s office of chancellor for Syria.<sup>21</sup>

Yûḥanná’s dogmatic work entitled *Sources of Knowledge* included a chapter titled ‘Concerning Heresies’ in which Islam was treated.<sup>22</sup> A tract, *Disputes between a Saracen and a Christian*, is ascribed to Yûḥanná; it has been plausibly suggested that he did not write it but that it was based on his oral teachings.<sup>23</sup>

Yûḥanná had a fairly accurate picture of Islam. In the *Disputes* Yûḥanná treated, among other themes, some issues that were discussed

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<sup>18</sup> Lewis, *Arabs in History*, p. 78.

<sup>19</sup> Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, p. 240. Presently, in many Arab countries the word *Arab* is also used specifically for Bedouins of any background.

<sup>20</sup> Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, p. 232.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford, 2004, first edition 2002), pp. 5-6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 195-6. John of Damascus was the champion of the Orthodox iconology. Most of his writings are part of the internal Byzantine discussions on theology, with no reference at all to the Islamic rule over the Christian lands of the Middle East. It seems he saw Islam as just a temporary problem in the Christian lands. See for instance John of Damascus, ‘An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith’, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds), *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* Second Series Vol. IX (Grand Rapids, 1989, first edition 1898). In Louth, *St John Damascene*, p. 76, Louth rejects the criticism that John never wrote these chapters on Islam.

<sup>23</sup> Louth, *St John Damascene*, pp. 76-77. In his entry on John of Damascus, Studer does not mention his tractate against Islam. B. Studer, ‘John Damascene’, in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* Vol. I (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 442-443.

among Muslims at the Umayyad court; he seems to have participated in some public debates in the caliphal palace. The *Disputes* reflects the debates of those days between the *Qadarite* theological school that stressed human freedom against the idea of predestination (*al-Qadar*) as defended by the Jabarîyyah school of thought. Yûḥanná also participated in the dispute between those who held that the *Qur'ân* was created and those who supported the view of an uncreated *Qur'ân*.<sup>24</sup>

As Yûḥanná involved himself in the iconoclast controversy of the Church, defending the usage of icons in worship, it seems that the Byzantine Emperor Leo III discredited him at the court in Damascus. This may have led to Yûḥanná's decision to retire to a monastery in Palestine.<sup>25</sup> The resignation from the caliphal service also coincided with the time when Caliph al-Walîd changed the administrative language from Greek to Arabic.

Yûḥanná was an example of the important public role Christians could play and the space for their public Christian witness; his retreat to the monastery also indicates the limits of that freedom. Moreover, the strict anti-Christian legislation of 'Umâr ibn 'Abd al-'Azîz showed that the trend was against Christian freedom. In 718 'Umâr became caliph. Muslim historians stress his piety, justice, and his pioneering role in spreading the faith.<sup>26</sup> During his reign the first mass movement of conversion to Islam took place. 'Umâr's main aim was to reconcile the non-Arab converts with the Arab Muslims. Those who converted to Islam formed a growing class of people refusing to pay anything but the lower rates of Muslim tax which was originally reserved for Arabs only. 'Umâr granted the converts most of their wishes, for example that from that time *jizyah*, the poll tax, was only to be paid by the *dhimmîs*. This decision crippled the finances of the state. As the number of Arab landowners also grew, the income from tax diminished even further. Many Imazighen and Persians adopted Islam to enjoy the pecuniary privileges.<sup>27</sup>

The *dhimmîs* were subjected to humiliating restrictions due to the rules of 'Umâr.<sup>28</sup> They were officially excluded from serving in the ad-

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<sup>24</sup> Louth, *St John Damascene*, pp. 80-83. Much in the biography of Yuh}anná remains unclear. He may have gained much of his knowledge of Islam from the monks in Palestine. See Louth, *St John Damascene*, pp. 3-14

<sup>25</sup> See Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, pp. 245-246.

<sup>26</sup> See for instance Hassan, *Islamic History and Culture*, pp. 96-97. He speaks about the 'bright page' and a 'glorious period' in Muslim history, without mentioning the fate of the *dhimmîs* under 'Umâr II.

<sup>27</sup> Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, p. 219.

<sup>28</sup> One version of the so-called *Pact of 'Umâr*:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate!

This is a writing to 'Umâr from the Christians of such and such a city. When You [Muslims] marched against us [Christians]: we asked of you protection for ourselves, our pos-

ministration and they were subjected to rigid social and financial disabilities. These restrictions included having to cut their forelocks, wear distinctive clothing, ride without saddles, and they were prohibited from building churches. During the eighth century, four successive caliphs so persecuted Christians that some bishops left their see and many Christians became Muslim. During that century the Copts often rose in revolt and each time their rebellion was suppressed.<sup>29</sup> This shows that by then, the Islamic rule over the Christian Middle East had become more severe than the Byzantine rule had ever been; under the Byzantines, there were never any large defections of Coptic-Orthodox bishops or mass conversions for being relieved of the pressure by the authorities.

The rules of 'Umār were strictly implemented at various times but often they were not. Christians continued to serve in the administration of the empire for centuries. It would only be under the 'Abbāsīd Caliph Mutawakkil (847-861) that *dhimmīs* were again subjected to demeaning and strict measures.<sup>30</sup> One reason why it was difficult to implement the

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terity, our possessions, and our co-religionists; and we made this stipulation with you, that we will not erect in our city or the suburbs any new monastery, church, cell or hermitage; that we will not repair any of such buildings that may fall into ruins, or renew those that may be situated in the Muslim quarters of the town; that we will not refuse the Muslims entry into our churches either by night or by day; that we will open the gates wide to passengers and travelers; that we will receive any Muslim traveler into our houses and give him food and lodging for three nights; that we will not harbor any spy in our churches or houses, or conceal any enemy of the Muslims. That we will not teach our children the Qu'rân; that we will not make a show of the Christian religion nor invite any one to embrace it; that we will not prevent any of our kinsmen from embracing Islam, if they so desire. That we will honor the Muslims and rise up in our assemblies when they wish to take their seats; that we will not imitate them in our dress, either in the cap, turban, sandals, or parting of the hair; that we will not make use of their expressions of speech, nor adopt their surnames [infidels must not use greetings and special phrases employed only by Muslims]; that we will not ride on saddles, or gird on swords, or take to ourselves arms or wear them, or engrave Arabic inscriptions on our rings; that we will not sell wine [forbidden to Muslims]; that we will shave the front of our heads; that we will keep to our own style of dress, wherever we may be; that we will wear girdles round our waists [infidels wore leather or cord girdles; Muslims, cloth and silk]. That we will not display the cross upon our churches or display our crosses or our sacred books in the streets of the Muslims, or in their market-places; that we will strike the clappers in our churches lightly [wooden rattles or bells summoned the people to church or synagogue]; that we will not recite our services in a loud voice when a Muslim is present; that we will not carry Palm branches [on Palm Sunday] or our images in procession in the streets; that at the burial of our dead we will not chant loudly or carry lighted candles in the streets of the Muslims or their market places; that we will not take any slaves that have already been in the possession of Muslims, nor spy into their houses; and that we will not strike any Muslim. All this we promise to observe, on behalf of ourselves and our co-religionists, and receive protection from you in exchange; and if we violate any of the conditions of this agreement, then we forfeit your protection and you are at liberty to treat us as enemies and rebels.

<sup>29</sup> Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* Vol. 2, p. 303.

<sup>30</sup> Lewis, *Arabs in History*, pp. 79-80. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, pp. 232-234.

rules of ‘Umâr was that under the Umayyads non-Muslims still formed the vast majority of inhabitants; Jews and Christians were needed for running the administration and the sciences of the empire. Because of this, Christians could still play an important role in public life and enjoy certain freedoms. Except in the Arabian Peninsula, Muslims formed less than ten percent of the population in the total realm they ruled in the Umayyad period.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Hourani, *History of the Arab Peoples*, pp. 29, 43.