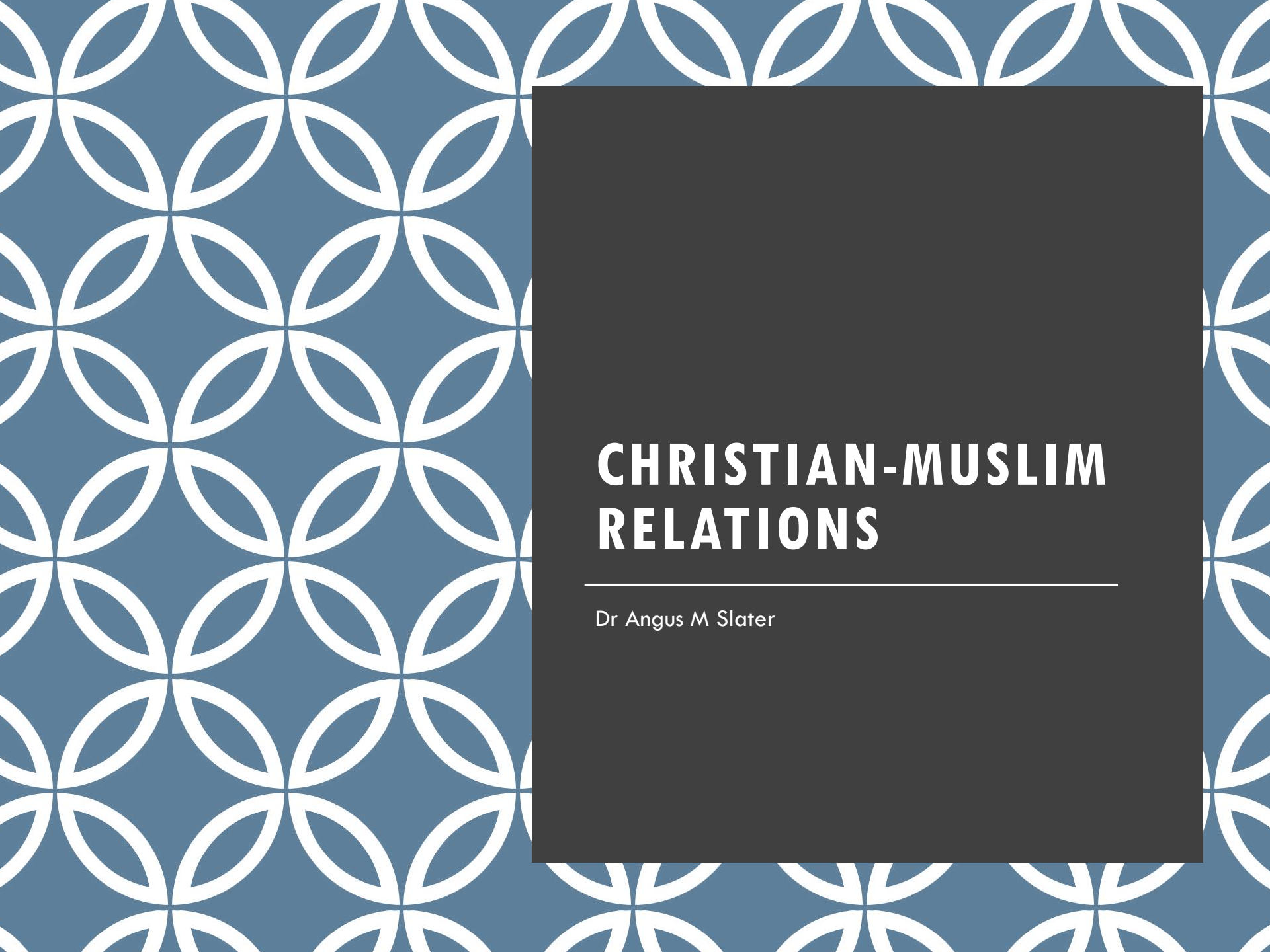




CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Dr Angus M Slater

REVISION

In the last section, we explored the nature of pre-Islamic Arabia, its connections to other parts of the ancient world and its complex and varied religious landscape. We also began the advent of the Islamic faith, examining Muhammad's early reported interactions with Christians and the Christian tradition, spanning from his youth to his death.

In addition, we looked at the various places that Christianity and Christians appear in the Qur'anic revelation, along with some explanatory context to the changing patterns of relation that we saw.

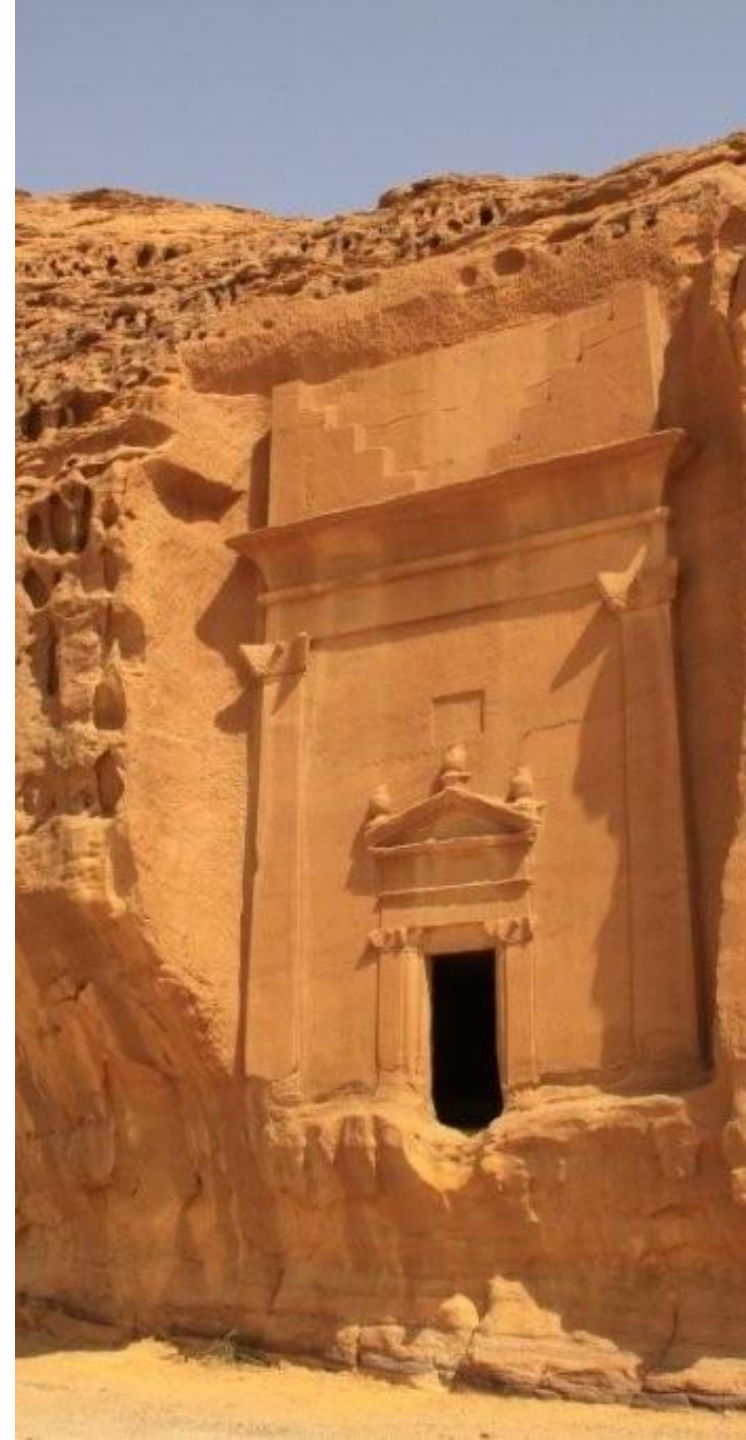


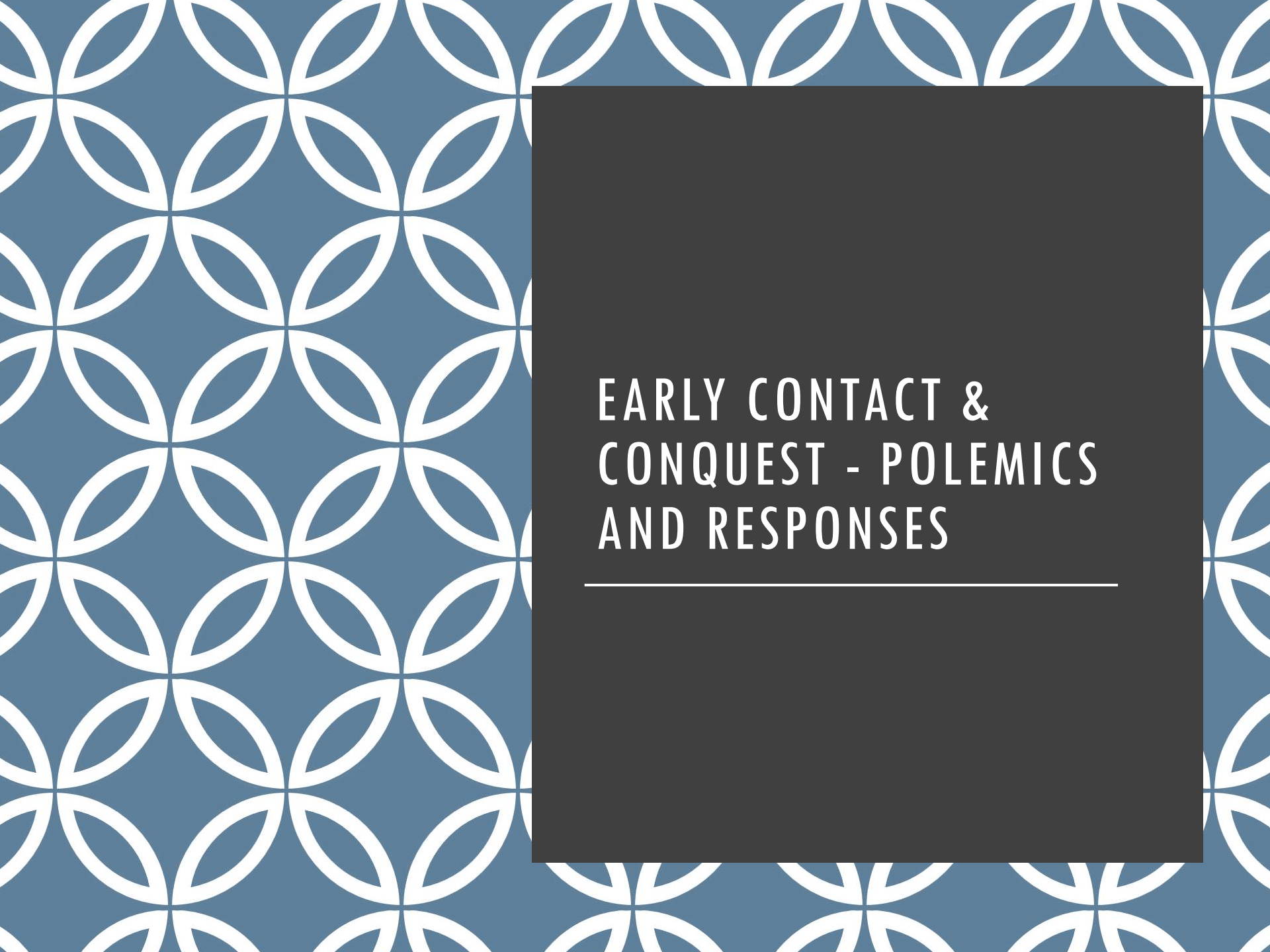
REVISION

Your readings hopefully gave you further detail about this critical historical period of Christian-Muslim interaction, with the two chapters from *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions* aiming to offer a broad sweep of additional detail.

You also had two readings more specifically focused on the relationship of the early Islamic tradition to the figure of Abraham, a critical figure also in the Jewish and Christian traditions, and a key hook around which early interaction took place.

Make sure that you take the time to discuss the readings in the appropriate Moodle section.





EARLY CONTACT & CONQUEST - POLEMICS AND RESPONSES

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In this section, we have a significant amount of ground to cover.

We will be examining the first few centuries of time after the beginning of the Islamic tradition, focusing on the rapid expansion of the Islamic Caliphate.

We will then turn to Christian responses to the birth and military successes of the Islamic world, before looking at the various ways in which the dynamic between Christian communities and Islamic rulers played out in recently conquered areas.



EARLY CONQUEST AND THE SPREAD OF ISLAM



EARLY CONQUEST AND THE SPREAD OF ISLAM

The early decades of the Islamic community, both during the life of Muhammad and during the rule of the first four Caliphs was a time of great social, religious, geographical, and political change.

The change from being a small, persecuted, community in Mecca to the ruling structure of an empire that spanned from Iberia to Afghanistan took only 40 or so years – even more impressive, when you realise that the fastest form of travel at the time was by horse or camel.

This military conquest heightened the dynamics already present in the relationship between Christian and Muslims and brought with it a number of difficult social tensions.



EARLY CONQUEST AND THE SPREAD OF ISLAM

Initial conquests of Arabia, and the various tribes and cities within it, occurred relatively quickly once the Islamic community had settled itself within Mecca. These occurred largely within the lifetime of Muhammad.

This expansion, characterised by speed, a low population, and cultural (if not religious) homogeneity proved to be relatively straight forward and unproblematic for the fledgling Muslim empire.

The land conquered, while still an expansion of the Muslim community's political power, was relatively underpopulated, under resourced, and critically unclaimed by either of the two larger political entities in the Near East (the Byzantines and the Sassanids).

THE SPREAD OF ISLAM, 622 – 750 CE





EARLY CONQUEST AND THE SPREAD OF ISLAM

It is the next stages of expansion that we will be focused most closely on in this section, the expansion that took place under the initial Caliphs (Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali) and then the further expansions that took place under the Umayyad's.

This expansion outside of the borders of Arabia was a significant change in the superpower dynamics of the Near East which had, up until this point, been dominated by the slugfest between the Byzantine Empire and the Sassanid Empire. With both having worn themselves out fighting intermittently with the other and distracted by internal crises, the invasion of the early Muslim community (the Rashidun Caliphate) engendered a swift collapse of the Sassanid Empire and a retreat of the Byzantines from around 50% of their territories.



Byzantine Empire

Sasanian Empire

Rashidun Caliphate

Constantinopolis

Merv

Salmas

Amol

Melitene

Nishapur

Amida

Van

Rhagae

Side

Seleucia

Tarsus

Edessa

Nisibis

Mosul

Antiochia

Hamadan

Nahavand

Herat

Aleppo

Seleucia

Ctesiphon

Esfahan

Tripolis

Berytus

Sidon

Palmyra

al-Hirah

Susa

Istakhr

Caesarea

Damascus

Jerusalem

Siraf

Alexandria

Gaza

Muscat

Badr

Medina

al - Yamama

Mecca

al - Tai'if

Sana

Axum



EARLY CONQUEST AND THE SPREAD OF ISLAM

These conquests differed from those undertaken during the lifetime of Muhammad in a number of different ways – all of which posed difficult social, political, and religious challenges to the nascent Islamic state.

These included:

- 1 – The geographical expanse
- 2 – The political necessity of empire
- 3 – The religious variety of subject peoples



EARLY CONQUEST AND THE SPREAD OF ISLAM

The sheer geographical extent of the early Muslim conquests posed its own challenges of governance, control, and military security, complicated by the splitting of the Caliphate into civil war twice in its early history.

In addition, the geographical extent of the Caliphate brought into contact with a number of peoples of different cultural backgrounds, foreign to Arabia, and with significant historical and cultural legacies of their own.

This cultural dynamic, between Arab and non-Arab, Persian and Syrian centres of power, continued to exert an influence on the development of early relations between Christian and Islamic communities and still to this day has an impact on intra-Islamic dynamics.



EARLY CONQUEST AND THE SPREAD OF ISLAM

This geographical expansion brought about political and structural challenges that the earlier Islamic community had never had to face. In the space of a few generations, the development of an entire system of imperial rule and governance was required.

This system of imperial rule was made complicated by the relatively small numbers of the early Muslim community and the relatively inexperienced nature of its administrators. Controlling and exerting influence across vast swathes of territory required the co-option of previously existing local elites, usually of a different cultural and faith to their rulers.

This diversity and reliance on it produced a number of examples of co-habitation on the part of early Christian and Islamic communities, such as Christian administrators and government officials in recently conquered territories.



EARLY CONQUEST AND THE SPREAD OF ISLAM

The last challenging characteristic I want to highlight in this section is the changing nature of religious belonging in these early conquests, both among the Muslim's engaged in them, and the others subject to them.

During the period of the Rashidun Caliphate, the energetic and violent attentions of the native tribes of Arabia, who had up until this time warred amongst themselves, was turned outward through a religious strategy of conquest. This changed the nature of warfare – impelling a religious motive to the act of conquest and a religious sanction on it.

In addition, the populations conquered outside Arabia were largely already either Jewish or Christian – within the Byzantine lands of Syria and Egypt the vast majority of peoples were Christian, while in the Sassanid lands the Nestorian Church had a strong presence.

This period of encounter represents the first significant interaction of the Islamic community with sizeable communities of Christians – as is therefore critically important for understanding later patterns of interaction.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO THE COMING OF ISLAM

CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO THE COMING OF ISLAM

The responses offered to the coming, and dominance, of Islam in the Near East vary hugely according to the historical time period of contact, the geographical location, the particular Christian grouping making the response, and the length of time since initial conquest.

Generally, there are three types of response which emerge in different times and spaces:

1. Islam as the fulfilment of the Old Testament
2. Islam as judgement on Christian theological and political enemies
3. Islam as a Christian heresy



ISLAM AS THE FULFILMENT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The initial reaction of Christian communities to the coming of Islam was to attempt to interpret these historical events through the readily available religious sources – the scriptures, particularly the stories of the Old Testament concerning Abraham and his descendants.

These stories in Genesis seem to suggest that, much like those promises made about Isaac's descendants (who Christians and Jews see themselves as being), Abraham's other son Ishmael and his descendants, would also be a significant player in religious-theological history.

God promises Abraham:

'But God said to Abraham: ' ... I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman [Hagar] also, because he is your offspring' (Gen 21:12-13)

'I will make him a great nation' (Gen 21:18)

These promises regarding Ishmael's descendants were seen to refer not just religiously to Islam, but also ethnically to the Arab peoples when the Christian community is first trying to make sense of Islam.



SEBEOS

An example of this approach is one of the earliest response to Islam available, from the Armenian Bishop Sebeos in 661AD.

He explains the rise of Islam and the place of Muhammad as following the prophecies given to Abraham about Ishmael – ‘Being very learned and well-versed in the Law of Moses, he taught them to know the God of Abraham’

According to Sebeos, Muhammad encouraged his followers to see themselves as the descendants of Ishmael, and that it was there turn to become a great nation.

As Moorhead (1981) notes:

‘Sebeos reports that both the Jews and Arabs were descended from the patriarch... ...and seems to have accepted this connection between God’s Old [Testament] Dispensation and the Arabs of his time’.



DIVINE JUDGEMENT

In addition to, and somewhat later than, the notion of Islam as descendants of Ishmael, came a reading of Islam as a form of divine judgement on Christians, usually brought about by the evil acts of the opposed Christian sect. This change came about as it became more obvious that Islam, rather than seeing itself as bound solely to the ethnic descendants of Ishmael, saw itself as a replacement of the revelation given to Christians as well.

The notion of divine judgement for waywardness, and a call to repentance and renewal, is again a reuse of biblical tropes in order to understand changing circumstances – e.g. Jeremiah, Nebuchadnezzar, etc – as well as providing useful ammunition in intra-Christian disputes, such as those over the Council of Chalcedon (451), which still raged among eastern Christians.



DIVINE JUDGEMENT

This theme can be seen particularly prominently in the words of non-Byzantine Christians – Nestorians or Monophysites – who use it in order to denounce the changes imposed by the Byzantine sponsored Council of Chalcedon.

For example, the Coptic Severus of Asmounein writes:
'The Lord abandoned the army of the Romans [Byzantines] as a punishment for their corrupt faith, and because of the anathemas uttered against them by the ancient fathers, on account of the Council of Chalcedon'

While, the later Monophysite Michael the Syrian wrote:
'The God of vengeance... raised up from the south the children of Ishmael to deliver us from the hands of the Romans... It was no light benefit for us to be freed from the cruelty of the Romans, their wickedness, anger and ardent cruelty towards us, and to find ourselves in peace'.



JOHN OF DAMASCUS

The third form of response to the rise of Islam is best personified by John of Damascus, a prominent Melkite (Byzantine aligned, but living in Muslim controlled areas) Christian living between 675-749AD in Damascus and Palestine.

John, whose grandfather Mansur ibn Sargun had surrendered Damascus to the Muslim invasion, had grown up around and with the Muslim community in Damascus, acquiring a strong familiarity with the internal beliefs and practices of the Islamic faith that is missing from earlier responses.

His familiarity with Islam, and his general erudition, shines through in the two works which relate to this context, his *De Fide Orthodoxa*, a description of the Orthodox faith, and his *De Haeresibus*, a list of Christian heresies of which Islam is presented as one.



JOHN OF DAMASCUS

In *De Haeresibus*, John lists 100 forms of Christian heresy that should be guarded against, listing Islam as the 101st.

He shows a great of knowledge of Muslim beliefs, including the pagan character of pre-Islamic Arabia, Muhammad's preaching of monotheism, aspects and passage of the Qur'an, and practices, like the circumambulation of the Ka'ba, circumcision, and abstention from wine.

In addition, John showcases his knowledge of what the Qur'an states regarding Jesus as the Word of / from God, his miraculous conception, his role as the Spirit and Servant of God, and his crucifixion (but not death).

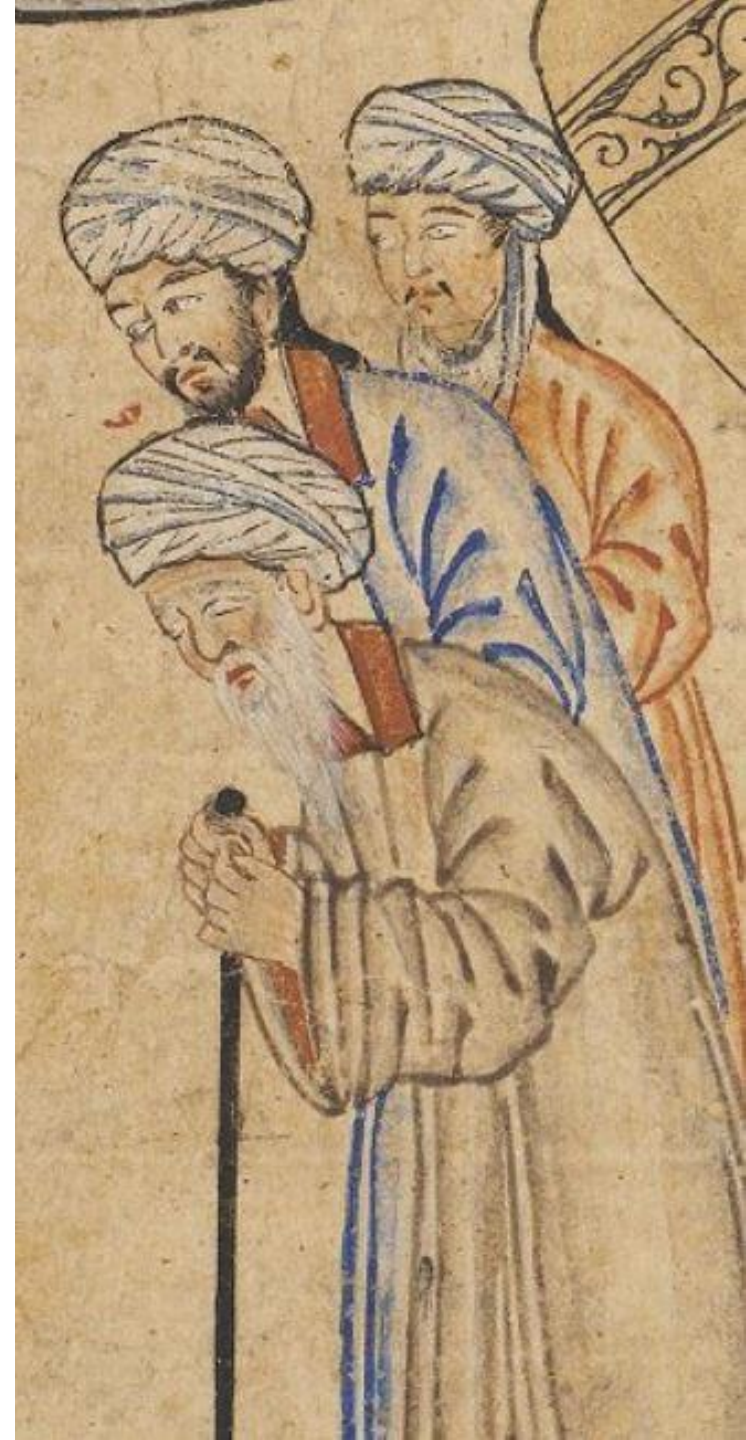


JOHN OF DAMASCUS

The similarities displayed in the Islamic beliefs about Jesus and Christian beliefs about Jesus, lead John to argue that Islam is a form of Christian heresy, or corruption.

He sees the influence of the texts of the Old and New Testaments, as well as of the Arian Christian heresy, as present in Islamic beliefs and therefore suggests that one should think of Islam as a development of already existing Christian heresies.

Although John does not explicitly make the link, there is a suggestion that this stance results from the story of Bahira that we covered earlier – one can see the connections made between early Christian-Muslim contact during the life of Muhammad and speculation about theological influence.



JOHN OF DAMASCUS

There is a third text sometimes attributed to John of Damascus, but possibly written by his disciple Theodore Abu Qurra, that deals with the inter-relationship of Islam and Christianity at this time more fully.

The *Disputatio Saraceni et Christiani* forms a kind of argument manual for Christians engaging with Muslims, focused on two important questions: the relationship between free will and God's omnipotence, and the identity of the 'word of God'.

This writing offers a glimpse into the theological discussions emerging in the space between Christianity and Islam and go on to have a significant impact on the topics of importance in both later Christian theology and Islamic kalam.



CHANGING ATTITUDES IN THE EARLY ISLAMIC CALIPHATE



CHANGING ATTITUDES IN THE EARLY ISLAMIC CALIPHATE

We have already seen that attitudes of the emerging Islamic community towards Christians had changed, even during the lifetime of Muhammad, as changing circumstances had generally brought about worse relations between the two communities.

We can see this changing attitude towards Christians in passages such as 9:29 in the Qur'an, but also towards Jews (from, say, Medina to Khaybar).

As the Muslim community moved on from the lifetime of Muhammad, this later attitude of tension and antagonism became the norm – the Islamic treatment of the Jews and Christians of Arabia after the life of Muhammad, the Byzantine garrison of Gaza, and the monasteries of Mount Sinai all attest to this – but this attitude towards conquest did not necessarily extend once governing was required.



CHANGING ATTITUDES IN THE EARLY ISLAMIC CALIPHATE

The difficulty of governance meant that some forms of accommodation with the largely Christian populace of the conquered territories was required.

The general outline of these accommodations can be seen in (later) documents like the Covenant of 'Umar. With much geographical and historical variation, this boiled down to military and political power being firmly reserved to the Muslim class, while those of other religions were free to worship within their own communities on payment of the *jizya*, a tax toward the maintenance of the state.

This state generally only extended to those non-Muslim populations who had surrendered to conquest and did not extend to those who resisted.

READINGS

READINGS

This period of Christian-Muslim is fascinating and relatively understudied – it really sets up a great deal of the later interaction of these two great religious faiths.

You have been provided with two primary sources materials to illuminate your understanding of the period – the section concerning Islam from John of Damascus' *De Haeresibus* and a copy of the *Covenant of 'Umar*.



READINGS

Stroumsa, G. (2015-07-01). Barbarians or Heretics?. In The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity. : Oxford University Press.

Penn, M. (2012-08-01). God's War and His Warriors: The First Hundred Years of Syriac Accounts of the Islamic Conquests. In Just Wars, Holy Wars, and Jihads: Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Encounters and Exchanges. : Oxford University Press.

Both the above readings offer further depth to the theological milieu into which Islam emerged and the difficulties associated with encapsulating its theological and political challenge effectively.

Stroumsa, G. (2015-07-01). Jewish-Christians and Islamic Origins. In The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity. : Oxford University Press.

This reading offers some further development of John of Damascus' initial theory of Islam as Christian heresy, examining the historical basis for similar claims made in 'revisionist' Islamic studies.