



Thomas Arnold on the Pact of Umar

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Prof. Thomas W. Arnold states: [1](#)

When the Muslim army reached the vally of the Jordan and Abu 'Ubaydah pitched his camp at Fihl, the Christian inhabitants of the country wrote to the Arabs, saying: "O Muslims, we prefer you to the Byzantines, though they are of our own Faith, because you keep better Faith with us and are more merciful to us and refrain from doing us injustice and your rule over us is better than theirs, for they have robbed us of our goods and our homes" [2](#) The people of Emessa closed the Gates of their city against the army of Heraclius and told the Muslims that they preferred their government and justice to the injustice and oppression of the Greeks. [3](#) Such was the state of feeling in Syria during the campaign of 633-639 in which the Arabs gradually drove the Roman army out of the province. And when Damascus, in 637, set the example of making terms with the Arabs, and thus secured immunity from plunder and other favourable conditions, the rest of the cities of Syria were not slow to follow. Emessa, Arethusa, Hieropolis and other towns entered into treaties whereby they became tributary to the Arabs. Even the patriarch of Jerusalem surrendered the city on similar terms...the provinces of the Byzantine empire that were rapidly acquired by the prowess of the Muslims found themselves in the enjoyment of a toleration such as, on account of their Monophysite and Nestorian opinions, had been unknown to them for many centuries. They were allowed the *free* and *undisturbed* exercise of their religion with some few restrictions imposed for the sake of preventing any friction between the adherents of the rival religions...the extent of this toleration – so striking in the history of the seventh century – may be judged from the terms granted to the conquered cities, in which protection of life and property and toleration of religious belief were given in return for submission and the payment of jizyah. [4](#) ... As an example of such an agreement, the conditions may be quoted that are stated to have been drawn up when Jerusalem submitted to the caliph Umar b. al-Khattab: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate ! This is the security which 'Umar, the servant of God, the commander of the faithful, grants to the people of Aelia. He grants to all, wether sic kor sound, security for their lives, their possessions, their churches and their crosses, and for all that concerns their religion. Their churches shall be changed into dwelling places, nor destroyed, neither shall they nor their appurtenances be in any way diminished, nor the crosses of the inhabitants nor aught of their possessions, nor shall any constraint be put upon them in the matter of their Faith, nor shall any one of them be harmed." [5](#) Tribute was imposed upon them of five dinars for the rich, four for

[1](#): Information is taken with slight modifications from: Prof. Thomas W. Arnold, "The Spread of Islam In the world – A History of Peaceful Preaching" [Goodwork Books , 2005] , pp. 55-59

[2](#): Azdi: Futuh al-Sham by Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah al-Azdi al-Basri, ed. W.N. Lees [Calcutta 1854] p. 97

[3](#): Baladhuri: Liber Expugnationis Regionum, auctore Imamo Ahmed ibn Jahja ibn Djabir al-Beladsori, ed. M.J. de Goeje. [Leiden 1866] , p. 137

[4](#): Ibid. , pp. 74, 116, 121

[5](#): See Tabari; Annales quos scripsit Abu Djafar Mohammed ibn Djarir At-Tabari, ed. M.J. de Goeje et alii. [Leiden 1885-93] , i p. 2405

the middle class and three for the poor. In company with the Patriarch, Umar visited the holy places, and it is said while they were in the Church of the Resurrection, as it was the appointed hour of prayer, the Patriarch bade the caliph offer his prayers there, but he thoughtfully refused, saying that if he were to do so, his followers might afterwards claim it as a place of Muslim worship. It is in harmony with the same spirit of kindly consideration for his subjects of another Faith, that Umar is recorded to have ordered an allowance of money and food to be made to some Christian lepers, apparently out of the public funds. ⁶ Even in his last testament, in which he enjoins on his successor the duties of his high office, he remembers the dhimmis : “I commend to his care the dhimmis, who enjoy the protection of God and of the Prophet ; let him see to it that the covenant with them is kept, and that no greater burdens than they can bear are laid upon them.” ⁷

A later generation attributed to Umar a number of restrictive regulations which hampered the Christians in the free exercise of their religion, but De Goeje ⁸ and Caetani ⁹ have proved without doubt that they are the invention of a later age ; as , however, Muslim theologians of less tolerant periods accepted these ordinances as genuine, they are of importance for forming a judgment as to the condition of the Christian Churches under Muslim rule. This so-called ordinance of Umar runs as follows: “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate ! This is a writing to Umar b. al-Khattab from the Christians of such and such a city. When you marched against us, we asked of you protection for ourselves, our posterity, 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 travellers ; that we will receive any Muslim traveller into our houses and give him food and lodging for three nights ; that we will not harbour any spy in our churches or houses, or conceal any enemy of the Muslims ; that we will not teach our children the Qur’an ; 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 honour 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, 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 swine, 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 ; 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 marketplaces ; that we will strike the bells in our churches lightly ; that we will not recite our services in a loud voice when a Muslim is present, that we will not Carry palm-branches 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 slavest hat 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” ¹⁰ ...its provisions represent the more intolerant practice of a later age , and indeed were regulations that were put into force with no sort of regularity, some outburst of fanaticism being generally needed for any appeal to be made for their application. There is “abundant evidence” to show that the Christians in the early days of Muhammadan conquest had little to complain of in the way of religious disabilities.

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- ⁶: Baladhuri: Liber Expugnationis Regionum, auctore Imamo Ahmed ibn Jahja ibn Djabir al-Beladsori, ed. M.J. de Goeje. [Leiden 1866], p. 129
⁷: Ibn S'ad, Al-Tabaqat ,Vol. III (Leiden 1904) , p. 246
⁸: De Goeje, “memoire sur la conquete de la Syrie” (Leiden 1900) , p. 143
⁹: Caetani, “Annali dell’ Islam” (Milano 1905) , vol. iii , p. 957
¹⁰: Gottheil : Dhimmis and Moslems in Egypt. [Old Testament and Semitic Studies in memory of William Rainey Harper. Vol. ii. Chicago , 1908], pp.382-4