



Was Islam Spread By Force?

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The second question posed at the start of this essay was: is it true that Islam was spread by force?

The answer is, in one sense, yes, but even this needs careful qualification. Warfare did play a major role both in the rise of Islam and its later diffusion. But some places were Islamised without any war at all, notably Malaysia and Indonesia. Above all, even where Islam was spread by jihad, it was not usually done the way people imagine. People usually think of holy warriors as engaging in something like Charlemagne's forced conversion of the Saxons, war for the extirpation of wrong beliefs throughout an entire community. But that model is very rare in Islamic history. The effect of war was usually more indirect.

The scholars said that all infidels had to be brought under Muslim sovereignty, but that Jews and Christians acknowledged the true God and had a revelation from him, so they could be allowed to exist under Muslim protection in return for paying poll-tax. All other infidels were pagans, so how were they to be treated? There is general agreement that the Arabs of Mohammed's Arabia got the choice between Islam and the sword, and that they did so because they had no religion, as one early scholar put it. (Paganism didn't count as one.) That's the best example there is on the Muslim side of the Charlemagne model, if I may call it that, and it is a juristic schematisation of history rather than historical reporting.

Some jurists insisted that this was how all pagans should be treated: people who did not acknowledge the sole sovereignty of God had no right to exist. Others said that for one reason or another, the Arabs were exceptional: all other pagans could be granted protection in return for paying poll-tax in the same way as the Jews and the Christians. This disagreement was enshrined in Muslim law, and modern Islamists typically go for the first view, equating pagans with modern secularists and atheists (among them is an associate of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, lionised in Europe by some of the very secularists whom his associate would force to convert). In pre-modern practice, tolerance usually prevailed as far as conquered communities were concerned. The only infidels who could not be allowed to exist in either theory or practice were apostates - who have become a highly sensitive issue today.

But if people were allowed to keep their religion under Muslim rule, how could the jurists define jihad as missionary warfare? How was it different from other forms of imperialism, such as the Crusades (which were fought for the recovery of the holy land, not the conversion of the Muslims) or secular expansionism?

The answer is that in effect jihad just was ordinary imperialism, but it was undertaken, or at least justified, on the grounds that it would result in conversion, if not straightaway, then sooner or later - and it usually did so too, in a number of ways. For a start, the Muslims routinely took a lot of captives. Male captives were often given the choice between Islam and death, or they might recite the Muslim profession of faith of their own accord to avoid execution. More importantly, captives were usually sold off as slaves, and slaves almost always ended up by converting because most slavery was domestic.

And above all, back in the conquered area, Muslim rulers would move in along with judges and religious scholars to build mosques, apply Islamic law, place restrictions on the building of non-Muslim houses of worship and introduce other discriminatory measures so that the original inhabitants were reduced to tributaries in their own land. They were not necessarily persecuted. The Muslim record of tolerance is generally good. (Obviously, there are plenty of examples of persecution of one kind or another; that religious minorities generally speaking did better under Muslim than under Christian rule under pre-modern conditions nonetheless remains true, however hackneyed the claim has become.) But the non-Muslims would soon have a sense that history was passing them by, that all the action was elsewhere, and this would translate into a feeling that their own beliefs were outmoded. So they would convert too, and that's the method that really mattered.

In sum, jihad typically spread Islam in much the same way that 19th-century European imperialism spread western culture (and/or Christianity): nobody was directly forced to accept western modernity, or Christianity, but by moving in as the politically dominant elite, the imperialists gave their own beliefs and institutions a persuasiveness that made them difficult to resist. Medieval Muslim scholars were well aware of this effect, and unlike their modern successors, they never tried to deny the role of war in the expansion of Islam.

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