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Mutual Misperceptions: The Historical Context of Muslim-Western Relations

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I N F O R M A T I O N A N D R E S E A R C H S E R V I C E S

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Mutual Misperceptions: The Historical Context of Muslim-
Western Relations

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Major Issues

This is a paper as much about perceptions and beliefs as about historical truth: not all perceptions are justifiable in fact but, true or false, they can have the power to inform or inflame popular reactions and even influence the policies of governments. The paper does provide a skeletal historical background, but in the main it seeks to explain how this background has led to the kind of mutual misperception which can cause normally law-abiding people in an Australian city (Brisbane) to burn a mosque, or some Muslims to identify 'the west' as their principal enemy.

Yet it is no more valid to speak of Islam, and certainly not of political Islam, as some kind of monolith with a fixed anti-western viewpoint, than it would be to ignore the immense cultural, linguistic and religious diversity of the west, and to claim that it is, or has become, an anti-Islamic force bent on subjugating Muslims.

Historically, tolerance for the 'people of the book' (Jews and Christians) has been a feature of Muslim belief and practice. There have of course been exceptions, but in general Muslim religious tolerance was important in facilitating the spread of Islam in its early period, especially because such tolerance was rarely reciprocated. Nevertheless it is hardly surprising that, with a history of Islamic conquest, the Christian European states of the Middle Ages saw in Islamic civilisation their principal external enemy.

Muslims can recall not only the Crusades and Christian intolerance, but later western imperialism and colonialism. More recently, the consistent western support for Israel against the Palestinians has stimulated strong negative perceptions in the Muslim world.

The historical context presented in this paper, if taken simplistically and with 'bad faith', as it were, can superficially justify mutually negative perceptions. This is so because there is no denying that there is a good deal of historical 'baggage'—some more mythical than real—weighing down relations between these great societies.

However, a simple appeal to the sacred books of both cultures immediately gives the lie to those who—ruled by hate, prejudice or secular ambition rather than by genuine religious sentiments—allege that either Islam or Christianity truly countenances the commission of atrocities or any form of inhumanity. Nominal adherents of both creeds may indeed do such things, but this is to their personal discredit, and not to that of the religions whose names they have, in effect, hijacked for their own purposes.

Introduction¹

The atrocity committed in the United States on 11 September 2001 has again thrown into sharp relief the difficult relationship between the Islamic and western societies. Given the immense disparities and contrasts which characterise their components, it is of course no more valid to speak of 'western' society than of an 'Islamic' one. But the fact remains that there is a substantial perceived historical legacy—'baggage' as it were—weighing down relations between some of those whose deep religious background is Christian (even though many so-called Christian countries are in fact secularised) and some of those for whom Islam is the main cultural underpinning (even though there are secular states where Islam is the main religion of record, for example, Turkey, Egypt, Indonesia).

In his address to Congress on September 21, US President George W. Bush was at pains to distinguish between the religion of Islam and terrorists who invoke its name, or use Islamic terms like jihad, to justify their actions. Again, since the initiation of military action in Afghanistan, US officials have re-emphasised this point. But, as several incidents (apparently including several murders in the US and the burning of a mosque in Brisbane) demonstrate, some people have difficulty in drawing this distinction, irrationally viewing the actions of terrorists of Islamic background as discrediting the religion and making all its adherents culpable. The President's own use of the term 'crusade'—which in modern English usually means 'any vigorous, aggressive movement for the defence or advancement of an idea, cause, etc.'²—widely reported in the Middle East, could for some Muslims conjure its historical meaning of the anti-Islamic religiously justified military campaigns of the later Middle Ages (even though one such 'crusade' was actually turned against the Christian Byzantine Empire and looted Constantinople).

The purpose of this paper is to provide clients with some basic historical background, the better to understand the mutual misperceptions it explains. There are perhaps also some insights to be gained by setting out salient historical points and if not insights, at least some comprehension of the perceptual 'baggage' which so obviously influences relations to this day. This is, therefore, a paper as much about perceptions and beliefs as about historical truth: not all perceptions are justifiable in fact, but true or false they can have the power to inform or inflame popular reactions and even influence the policies of governments.

Dates in the historical sections of this paper are given in the Common or Christian Era (CE) format now in wide use, with their equivalent where appropriate in the Muslim calendar. Thus the year 2001 CE (old style 2001 AD) is 1380 After Hajira, or 1380 years

after the Prophet Muhammed left Mecca, controlled by his enemies, for Medina—the *hajira* or migration. Dates prior to 1 AH (622–1 AH) are given as CE dates only.

The Early Context

By about 400 Christianity had become the dominant religion of the declining Roman Empire, supplanting classical paganism, and was already establishing itself in territories beyond the Roman boundaries. Whereas the pagan Roman Empire had generally been most tolerant of diverse faiths (Christianity itself excepted, for reasons too complex to go into here), the Christian Empire had by 395 legislated against the practice of all other religions. By 500 the Roman Empire in western Europe was extinct, replaced by 'barbarian' kingdoms, but in its eastern parts—the Balkans, Asia Minor (modern Asiatic Turkey), Syria and Egypt—the Roman Empire lived on, slowly evolving into the so-called Byzantine Empire, a Christian state with its capital at Constantinople (formerly Byzantium, modern Istanbul) on the Bosphorus. (see Map One Appendix One)

However, there were significant religious divisions between the Asian and European parts of the remnant Empire. The Byzantine government unsuccessfully promoted various doctrinal compromises, but eventually moved to persecute adherents of the eastern view, whose loyalty to the Empire was thus undermined.

At this time the principal eastern enemy of the Byzantines was the Persian Empire, with its traditional Zoroastrian religion, controlling much of modern Persia and bordering Byzantium along the Euphrates river. Intermittent warfare between the empires rarely resulted in more than minor border adjustments, and there were lengthy periods of peace. Arabia was not part of either empire, but rival Arab tribes in the northern parts of the peninsula, bordering on Byzantium and Persia, were often clients or allies of one or other great power. The Arab tribes, involved in endless blood feuds, had a long-standing traditional polytheistic (ie, many gods and spirits) religious system.

From about 600 Byzantium underwent serious internal instability. A usurper known to history as the 'abominable Phocas' led a military revolt, killed the legitimate Emperor and ruled by terror for eight disastrous years (602–610). The Persians, taking advantage of Byzantium's distraction, overran Syria, Egypt and much of Asia Minor. It appeared that the eastern Roman Empire was about to go the way of its western predecessor.

That this did not occur was largely due to the efforts of one man, Heraclius, who in 610 overthrew Phocas and instituted a program of drastic reform. In a series of brilliant campaigns (622–629) Heraclius utterly defeated the Persians, burning their most sacred temples, and recovering Syria, Egypt and Asia Minor. By so doing, however, he also inherited the religious problems which had plagued his predecessors.³

The Birth of Islam

The year Heraclius began his successful campaign against the Persians (622) was also the year in which an Arabian trader, Mohammed, was forced to flee Mecca for the northern town of Yathrib (now Medina). From his early childhood, he was known for his abilities as an honest, reliable and good mediator. He came from the prestigious tribe of Quraish in Mecca. In the preceding period Mohammed had undergone religious experiences (believed by the faithful to be revelations) which led to him to denounce polytheism and embrace a belief in one God as the creator and mover of the universe. His followers, small in number at first, began to acclaim him as a prophet. His religious utterances were believed to be the actual words of God (Allah) and, as later recorded, they formed the text of the Islamic holy book called the Qur'an (commonly anglicised as 'Koran'). The belief system created by the Prophet was named *Islam*, which means both 'submission (to God)' and 'peace'. Muhammed's Allah was specifically identified with the God worshipped by Jews and Christians, and Jesus Christ was seen as a prophet, but not as the son of God. Muslims, emphasising the unity of God, reject the Christian Trinity.

Like primitive Christianity, early Islam appealed particularly to the downtrodden in society. Muhammed made no social, racial or economic distinctions among his followers: all Muslims were (and are) equal in the sight of God. Thus Islam also offered the Arab tribes a way out of the interminable blood feuds which characterised pre-Islamic Arabia. As he gained support in his hometown of Mecca, Muhammed became a threat to the established political and religious order there, because Mecca, with its sacred Black Stone (*kaaba*), was the centre of the traditional pagan Arabic religious and economic system. He and his followers therefore fled Mecca in 622 (1 AH) for Medina, a town riven by tribal feuds, to which he was invited as a mediator. This is the traditional date for the start of the Muslim era.

Muhammed successfully resolved Medina's internal troubles, thus gaining great authority for himself and credibility for his religious views. His religious and economic enemies in Mecca, seeing him established as a leader in a rival town, now sought to destroy him by military means. In a famous battle (at a place named Badr) fought in 624 (3 AH) the Muslims, though greatly outnumbered, defeated their opponents and gained further credibility for their religion. Six years later (630, 9 AH) they took Mecca itself and, purifying the *kaaba* of pagan associations, made it a central point of the new religion (it is to the *kaaba* in Mecca that all Muslims are enjoined to go on pilgrimage at least once in their lives if possible). By the death of the Prophet in 632 (11 AH) the Muslims were masters of the Arabian peninsula.

Islamic Civilisation

As will be described below, Islamic leaders rapidly conquered an empire reaching from central Asia to central Spain but, as the even greater Mongol empire some centuries later

showed, conquest is one thing and retention another. While the Mongol empire rapidly disintegrated, the influence and power of Islam has proven far more durable.

This durability was despite the shattering of Islam's early unity in 680 (59 AH) by the division between majority Sunni and minority Shi'ite elements (see box below), and by the subsequent disintegration of the unified political state into numerous smaller entities. Islam survived as a major force because, like Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism in their spheres, it became the basis of a civilisation. It is to medieval Islam that the world owes the preservation of many of the Greek classics, which reached barbarous western Europe via Arabic translations, and the fame of Islamic philosophers, scientists, doctors, architects and scholars exceeded that of all but the greatest Muslim rulers. Even the numerals now in common use worldwide were taken by the Arabs from India and spread far and wide: hence they are known as Arabic numerals, as distinct from the older and inefficient Roman numerals formerly in use in the west.⁴

In Muslim Spain there arose a society widely agreed by historians to have been one of the most brilliant and tolerant ever: Muslims, Christians and Jews intermingled, exchanging not just goods and services but ideas, and even today some of Spain's most beautiful architecture is a legacy of the period of Muslim rule. To pick an arbitrary date, in 900 (279 AH) western Europe was backward, largely illiterate, and a purchaser of luxury goods and the equivalent of what we would today call high-tech products (including the incomparable steel of Damascus, important when steel weapons were in wide use) from the advanced Muslim societies to the south.⁵ At this time the Muslim world was one of the most intellectually and scientifically advanced societies on earth.

As a religion, Islam is less hierarchically organised than the major Christian faiths. There is no Muslim in a position similar to that of the Pope, or even the Archbishop of Canterbury. Certainly nowhere in Islam can one find anything like a central directing or policy-making authority recognised by Muslims everywhere, though in the Shi'ite world the Ayatollahs approach such authority. The original ideal—a unified religious and political community of the faithful headed by a *kalif* (Caliph) in succession from the Prophet—has proven impossible of realisation since the split between Sunnis and Shi'ites (which was originally over the line of succession) broke out in 680 (59 AH), while the vast extent of the Islamic world after the age of conquest made political unity simply unsustainable.

Indeed the Sunni—Shi'ite division is but one of many within Islam. It has its liberals and conservatives, puritans, mystics and even 'heretics', just as do most other creeds. The *Wahabi* sect predominant in Saudi Arabia, for example, is often described as 'puritanical', whereas the *Sufi* form, common in Kashmir, is regarded as almost mystical.

Islam has become not a nation but a civilisation, probably more ethnically and culturally diverse than the Christian west. When one considers the enormous cultural differences between, say, Australia and Spain, the divisions which so disfigure Northern Ireland, even the distinctions between the British (themselves four peoples: English, Scottish, Welsh and

Irish) and the US, one readily perceives the unfairness of blaming all of these for the deeds of any one of them. Similarly, Islam includes in its number peoples from the Berbers of North Africa, to people of Slavic extraction living in the former Yugoslavia, Albanians, Arabs, Egyptians, Persians, Chinese, Turks, Malays, Javanese, people of the Indian subcontinent and central Asians, to name some of the more prominent groups. It is equally unfair, then, to visit upon Islam as a whole, or on all Muslims, blame for the present actions of a few dangerous fanatics or for deeds (or reputed deeds) centuries in the past.

Sunnis and Shi'ites⁶

The split between Sunnis and Shi'ites began on the Prophet's death in 632 (11AH) as a dispute over the succession to the Prophet between supporters of Ali, his cousin and son-in-law, and Abu Bakr. In the first instance, Abu Bakr was accepted as *kalif* (successor), and he was in turn succeeded by Umar. In this period the 'partisans' (*Shi'i*) of Ali were willing to accept the status quo, but under Umar's successor Uthman, a tribal leader of the Meccan Ummayyads who had initially opposed Islam, matters came to a head. Uthman was killed by a mob in 656 (35AH) and a reluctant Ali became *kalif*, only to be murdered in 661 (40AH). His son Hasan was named *kalif* but was forced to abdicate in favour of Mu'awiyah, another Ummayyad. Thereafter the Ummayyad establishment persecuted the *Shi'i*, and Hasan himself was brutally murdered in 681 (60AH). This murder became a central issue for all Shi'ite Muslims, who thereafter saw true legitimacy only in Ali and his descendants. The Shi'ite tendency to accept religious leaders as political ones goes back to the original ideal of a community of the faithful headed by a descendant of the Prophet.

Shi'ites are the majority in Iran and Iraq, and are found in significant parts of Lebanon and Afghanistan. There are also smaller pockets of Shi'ites elsewhere in the Muslim world (see Map Two Appendix One).

The First Era of Muslim Conquest

After his death in 632 (11 AH) Muhammed was succeeded by Abu Bakr as *kalif*—the word means 'successor'—and, on his death two years later, by the Caliph Umar (634–644, 13–23 AH). It was under the Prophet's successors that there took place one of the most remarkable campaigns of conquest known to history.

As already described, the Byzantine Empire had recently crippled its Persian rival, but was burdened by religious dissension and reconstruction of the recovered provinces. Thus, Muslim Arab raids into Byzantine and Persian territory met only disorganised resistance. Within ten years (by about 645, 24 AH), Syria, eastern Asia Minor, Palestine and Egypt were again lost to Byzantium, the latter two permanently.⁷ Broken-backed Persia and modern Iraq fell to Muslim armies in the same period.

The mutual damage recently inflicted by Persia and Byzantium on each other undoubtedly facilitated the Arab conquest, as did the religious ferment in the Byzantine territories. Nevertheless not all these territories willingly embraced the Arabs. Jerusalem, for

example, under the leadership of its Christian patriarch Sophronius, withstood a lengthy siege before finally surrendering. In Egypt, however, the more tolerant Arabs (see the discussion below) were welcomed as liberators from the religious oppression of the Byzantine government.⁸ Heraclius, much of his work in ruins, died a broken man in 641 (20 AH).

In the eighth and ninth centuries (first and second centuries AH) the tide of Arab conquest spread along the north African coast and into all but the northern part of Spain. At this time too the Muslims invaded India, conquering most of the Indus river valley, the core of modern Pakistan. An Arab army also invaded France, but was heavily defeated by Charles Martel at Tours (near Poitiers, about 160 km from Paris) in 732 (111 AH). In 751 (130 AH) an army decisively defeated the Chinese T'ang Dynasty's forces in central Asia, heralding the Islamicisation of this region. The Byzantine Empire, though deprived of Egypt, its other north African territories, Palestine and Syria, survived in a reduced form because despite several Arab attempts, including lengthy sieges in 674–78 and 717–18 (53–57 and 96–7 AH), Constantinople could not be taken. Somewhat later, in the ninth and tenth centuries (third and fourth centuries AH), Muslim forces conquered most of Sicily and even gained lodgements on the Italian peninsula. The Mediterranean, once dominated by the Roman Empire, had become a Muslim lake (see Map Three Appendix One).

Muslim Religious Tolerance

Islam's conquests were undoubtedly facilitated in some areas by the remarkable religious tolerance of its followers, a tolerance uncharacteristic of both the Byzantine Empire and the barbarian kingdoms of western Europe, which—when not pursuing the remnants of ancient paganism or persecuting Jews—were zealously persecuting Christian 'heretics'. To Muslims, however, Jews and Christians were 'people of the book' and were left undisturbed in their religious lives, being made liable only to a small annual tax (*jizya*) not payable by Muslims. In newly Muslim Damascus, Christians and Muslims shared the same building for their respective worships, until the Muslims purchased it from the Christian community.⁹ Even the Zoroastrians of Persia, though not seen as worshippers of the God of Jews, Christians and Muslims, were accorded toleration. Most conversions to Islam were unforced, though areas of pagan belief were sometimes required on pain of death to profess one of the tolerated faiths.¹⁰ In later times there were examples of Muslim rulers practising religious bigotry, but the core of Islamic belief always required tolerance for the 'people of the book'. This is strikingly illustrated by a very early document of the Prophet's, issued in 628, confirming Christian religious and civil liberties (see Appendix two).

The Muslim policy of toleration and the persistent intolerance of many Christian factions had important consequences, strikingly illustrated by the words of no less a personage than the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, around 1173. Addressing the Byzantine

Emperor Manuel I, who was contemplating a religious union with the western Church of Rome, the Patriarch said:

Let the Muslim be my master in outward things rather than the Latin dominate me in matters of the spirit. For if I am subject to the Muslim, at least he will not force me to share his faith. But if I have to be ... united with the [Latin] Roman Church, I may have to separate myself from my God.¹¹

And when in 1204 the Fourth Crusade, manipulated in classic realpolitik style by canny Venetian statesmen, attacked not the designated Muslim enemy but the Christian city of Constantinople, Pope Innocent III in Rome could only record his outrage:

How can we expect the Greek Church, no matter what straits it is in, to return to ecclesiastical unity and devotion to the Holy See when all that it sees of the Latins is an example of utter depravity and the works of darkness, so that with justice it despises them as worse than dogs?¹²

Thus intolerance and cynical realpolitik among Christians, contrasted with the Muslim policy of tolerance, vitiated the defence of Europe against the Arab threat.

The Second Period of Muslim Conquest

Western perceptions of threat were undoubtedly reinforced by the rise after about 1000 (379 AH) of Turkish power. Under two dynasties, first the Seljuks and later the Ottomans, Turkish invaders from central Asia who had already adopted Islam began to encroach not only on the Byzantine Empire but also on the pre-existing Muslim states of western Asia and north Africa. From 1071 (450 AH) Turkish Muslims began the conquest of Byzantine Asia Minor, a process essentially complete by about 1300 (679 AH). Hence Asia Minor is now called Turkey, its people mostly speak Turkish and have Islam as their majority religion.

Taking advantage of dissension inside the now-declining Byzantine Empire, the Turks gained a foothold in Europe at the strategic point of Gallipoli (1354, 733 AH). Thence they began the conquest of the remnant of the Empire and of the Balkan peninsula. In 1389 (768 AH) they defeated the Serbs at the first battle of Kosovo, and in 1393 (772 AH) the Bulgarians were likewise defeated at Trnovo. Both peoples were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire and during several centuries of Ottoman rule, numbers of them converted to Islam.

In 1453 (832 AH) the Ottoman Sultan Muhammed II (known as 'the Conqueror') besieged and finally captured Constantinople, thus bringing to an end the last survival of the Roman Empire. The remainder of the Balkan peninsula swiftly followed. In 1529 (908 AH) the great Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent confirmed Europe's fears of aggression by unsuccessfully laying siege to Vienna. As late as 1683 (1062 AH) the Turks were again at the gates of Vienna, but once more failed to take the city. From this time onward the rising

strength of European states outstripped that of the Muslim powers, who entered on a long period of stagnation and decline. The enfeebled Ottoman Empire survived until the end of World War I, when—having sided with Germany and Austria-Hungary—it and Austria-Hungary were dismembered in the name of national freedom for their subject peoples by the victorious Allies (see Map Four Appendix One).

Western Perceptions of Islam and Islamic Societies

Perceptions From History

The impact on western perceptions of the striking record of Muslim military conquest is as obvious as it was inevitable. With this as background, and given the marked disparity of power and resources then existing—which in some senses is perceived to exist today in reverse—it was perhaps no wonder that the Christian states of Europe and the Byzantine Empire often saw in Islamic civilisation a mortal threat and their deadliest external enemy. It is likewise unsurprising that, in an era when religion was a central issue to a degree the secularised modern westerner cannot easily comprehend, it was the religion rather than the nationality or ethnicity of the political and military foe which served both to identify and to condemn that foe.

European perceptions of Islam were further influenced by some practices of the Ottoman regime. Though it adhered to the policy of religious toleration enjoined by the Prophet, it had certain unique practices deeply offensive to its contemporary enemies. Of these undoubtedly the most potent was the system known as the *devsirme* (child tribute). This involved the forcible conscription of Christian boys, who were then raised as Muslims and formed the famous Janissary Corps, the Ottoman Empire's most feared troops, with no loyalty but to the Empire. Ironically, in parallel with this system the Ottomans also freely used Christian volunteer units, rewarding their voluntary service with land grants.¹³ The *devsirme* was abolished under Sultan Muhammed IV (1641–87, 1020–1066 AH) but its use was one of Europe's most powerful propaganda weapons. Edward Gibbon's hugely influential *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, written in the middle 1700s, a century after the *devsirme* was abolished, still recorded his (and the European intelligentsia's) understanding of this system:

The provinces of Thrace, Macedonia, Albania, Bulgaria, and Servia, became the perpetual seminary of the Turkish army; and when the royal fifth of the captives was diminished by conquest, an inhuman tax of the fifth child, or of every fifth year, was rigorously levied on the Christian families. At the age of twelve or fourteen years, the most robust youths were torn from their parents ...¹⁴

But there is more recent historical baggage to further complicate western perceptions of Islamic societies.

More Recent Perceptual Issues

It is probably fair to say that, once the Ottoman Empire ceased to be a significant military threat to Europe (after about 1700, 1079 AH), western cognisance of things Islamic went into a steep decline for the next 250 years. Apart from a few scholars, such as the Victorian era adventurer Sir Richard Burton—who, fluent in Arabic, disguised himself as a Muslim and went on pilgrimage to Mecca—most westerners viewed the Muslim world as backward, superstitious and, in all probability, as doomed to eventual cultural oblivion.¹⁵

The Oil Crisis

Unquestionably it was fear of this fate which inter alia stimulated a revival of Islam from the mid twentieth century. The emergence of oil-rich Muslim states gave sections of the Islamic world new economic clout, first exercised at the time of the Yom Kippur war in 1973 between Israel and its main Arab neighbours, Egypt and Syria. The resulting 'oil crisis' certainly drew western attention to the Islamic world, but by no means in a favourable sense.

Palestinian Terrorism

Similarly, the growth of Palestinian resistance to the new state of Israel, established in 1948 in reaction to the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust, also drew attention. This resistance developed to the point of active terrorism on a scale which, though as nothing in comparison to the September 2001 outrages, was nevertheless new and horrifying at the time. Through newly developed electronic media the world witnessed the destruction of three (unoccupied) hijacked commercial airliners in the Jordanian desert in 1970; two years later it watched as Palestinian terrorists killed eleven Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. Thereafter came a succession of terrorist incidents perpetrated, it should be noted, not in the name of Islam but in support of the Palestinian cause. Nevertheless, this distinction was unlikely to be made by indiscriminating observers.

Lebanon and Iran

In 1975 a long civil war broke out between Christian and Muslim elements in Lebanon, hitherto (wrongly) thought to be a model of religious and political harmony. The overtly Islamic revolution in Iran (1978–79) did not of itself damage the image of Islam—the Shah's regime being notoriously corrupt and oppressive—but the illegal seizure of the US embassy in Teheran and the violation of the diplomatic immunity of its staff, who were held hostage in peril of their lives for many months, undoubtedly did, especially because it set the United States on a policy course which involved demonising the Ayatollah Khomeini's regime and all it stood for. At times, as when it pronounced in 1989 what

amounted to a death sentence against author Salman Rushdie on religious grounds (a *fatwa*, or religious decree), the regime seemed determined to assist this process.

The Gulf War

Again, the military aggression practised by Saddam Hussein's Iraq against another Muslim state, Kuwait, in 1990 did not necessarily damage Islam's western reputation. But the Iraqi leader's cynical appeals to Islamic unity in the face of the impending UN operation against him were certainly unhelpful, notwithstanding that many Muslim states, including Saudi Arabia, site of important Muslim holy places, stood against Iraq. And of course it was the Saudi Arabian decision to admit western troops to its territory at this time which so offended a Saudi businessman, Osama bin Laden, who had already helped Afghan fighters resist the Soviet occupation (as had the US), that he turned to terrorism against the United States.

The *Taliban* in Afghanistan

Finally, the recent action of the Afghan *Taliban* regime in arresting eight foreign aid workers and putting them on trial for allegedly preaching Christianity to Afghans of course offends deeply held western sensibilities about freedom of religion. Similarly, the widely publicised destruction (on alleged religious grounds) of ancient Buddhist monuments outraged much world opinion, including in many Muslim nations (for example, Egypt and Indonesia) which have assiduously preserved their pre-Islamic cultural heritage. And the *Taliban* decree that Afghanistan's tiny Hindu population must wear distinctive clothing had most unfortunate resonances with the Nazi policy of requiring Jews to wear the Star of David, although there is no evidence that the regime intends to exterminate Hindus.

Ironically, *Taliban* intolerance contradicts Islam's historically great tolerance of other beliefs, a feature in which it could be said to have outperformed much recorded Christian conduct. The *Taliban* regime indeed represents, almost in caricature, nearly everything negative about Muslim societies that is believed in the west, and so reinforces those beliefs.

Western Media

From about 1970 onwards western media began to report more extensively on Arab and Islamic matters. Much of this reporting, however, focused on those aspects of Islamic life least likely to be attractive to western readers: the status of women in some highly traditional Muslim states like Saudi Arabia, the use of mutilation as a punishment for theft, public executions by decapitation and of course the *fatwa* against Rushdie. This pattern of reporting was, to be sure, based not so much on prejudice as on the well-known appetite of

the western media (and its consumers) for 'bad news' or stories that offend popular sensibilities. Nevertheless, it reinforced negative western perceptions already in place as a result of longer-term historical issues already described.

Assessment

Of course the history outlined above is probably known, even in so skeletal a form, only to a minority in the modern west. Nevertheless, the idea that Muslim states were once powerful and a seriously aggressive threat undoubtedly lies at the back of the popular mind, as it were, in many western countries. As one scholar writes:

For Christendom, Islam proved a double threat, religious and political, which often threatened to overrun Europe, first at Poitiers [ie, Tours in 732] and finally at the gates of Vienna [1529 and 1683].¹⁶

Much more could be said on the subject of western perceptions of Islam and the Islamic world, but perhaps sufficient material has been provided to show why it is that on the simplest and least thoughtful level it has been easy to characterise Islam variously as primitive, intolerant, cruel and once again a growing threat. That this perception is simplistic and unsustainable under considered analysis does not, regrettably, detract from its potency at this time of great stress and crisis.

Muslim Perceptions of the West

For much of history Islamic societies had a political and military ascendancy over the west. The loss of this ascendancy inevitably created resentment, perhaps not dissimilar to that so keenly felt in today's Russia, with its still-fresh memories of the days when Russia dominated the Soviet Union and the Soviet Union was a feared and respected superpower. At its height Islamic civilisation too was the equivalent of a superpower: today many Islamic states are classed as 'Third World' and it is much less than a century since many were colonial dependencies of western European imperial powers such as France and Britain.

Intolerance

When Islam arose it found the west and Christianity already there; it had to establish itself as a new force in the face of bitter resistance. Moreover, it soon found that its own tolerance for the 'people of the book' was not reciprocated by much of Christendom: Islam was condemned as the blackest heresy:

Islam was at best a heresy preached by a deluded or misguided prophet, and at worst a direct challenge to Christian claims and mission: 'the combination of fear and ignorance produced a body of legends, some absurd and all unfair: Muslims were idolaters

worshipping a false trinity, Muhammed was a magician, he was even a Cardinal of the Roman Church who, thwarted in his ambition to become Pope, revolted, fled to Arabia and there founded a church of his own'.¹⁷

Thus it took little time for Muslims to learn that Christianity, with its claim to sole universal truth, was not about to tolerate Islam as a faith with which it could share the worship of the God in which both claimed to believe. That western Christians are inherently intolerant is perhaps the first perception to have registered in early Islamic consciousness. The fervour with which the Roman Catholic and Byzantine Orthodox Churches pronounced their anathemas upon each other, fellow Christians, the brutal persecution of 'heretics' during the Iconoclast controversy which split the Orthodox church during the eighth century (first century AH), only went to confirm this perception, as of course did acts against Muslims themselves.

Military Aggression

Moreover, Islam had to face military threats from Christendom. While the Arabs held the military ascendancy during the first centuries of the Islamic era, this too only confirmed a natural (and well-founded) apprehension that, should the ascendancy be lost, Christian aggression would certainly follow.

All but the northern part of Spain had been conquered by the Arabs during the first phase of expansion. From their strongholds in the north, however, Christian princes planned the recovery of the rest of the country. The *reconquista*, as it is known in Spain, began in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (fifth and sixth AH) and was finally completed in 1492 (871 AH) with the fall of Granada, the last Muslim state on the Spanish peninsula. Though the Muslim inhabitants were temporarily left in comparative peace, later Spanish monarchs took severe measures against them, even expelling from the country those of their descendants (*Moriscos*) who had embraced Christianity (1609, 988 AH).

Islamic states from Egypt to Syria had to contend with the Byzantine Empire which in the ninth and tenth centuries underwent a great resurgence of power and prosecuted a war of reconquest against the Arabs. The Emperor Nicephorus II (963–969, 342–48 AH) earned from the Arabs themselves the title 'the White Death'.¹⁸ From about 860 to 1025 (239–404 AH) Byzantium conquered large areas of eastern Asia Minor and Syria, seized Cyprus and Crete and conducted naval raids on the Egyptian coast. Only the sudden death (by natural causes) of the great Emperor Basil II, succeeded by weak and foolish nonentities who rapidly brought the Empire to the point of collapse, headed off Byzantine campaigns against Egypt and Palestine, to say nothing of Christian Italy, which Basil II was preparing to attack when he died in 1025 (404 AH).¹⁹

The year Granada fell was also the year Columbus set sail and discovered the American continent. Meanwhile a succession of Portuguese mariners had sailed south down the African Atlantic coast, eventually rounding the Cape and reaching India (1499, 878 AH).

In so doing they outflanked the Islamic powers and broke their lucrative monopoly as middlemen in the trade between Europe, India and East Asia. This, together with the economic impact of Spain's looting of the American Aztec and Inca empires, was to have far-reaching effects and, in time, to turn the Islamic Middle East into a global backwater, from which status it was raised only in the last century, with the discovery and growing importance of oil.

The Crusades

The Spanish *reconquista* and Byzantine aggressiveness were only two expressions of a revived European militancy against the Islamic world. In the eleventh century (fifth AH) European religious and secular leaders, some cynical, some genuinely religious, began to whip up religious fervour against the 'heathens' and in particular to call for the recovery of the 'holy land' (Palestine) from Islam. This led to the launching over a period of about two centuries of successive 'Crusades' against the Muslim states of the Levant. At least one of these campaigns was little more than a mass migration of a pious, ill-armed and poorly trained rabble, who were no match for the Muslim defenders, but others were serious military operations which achieved real, if short-lived, successes and left a lasting impression on the Muslim psyche. Especially prominent in the Crusades were the Normans, whose aggressive and disruptive influence in Europe (for example, the conquest of England in 1066 and campaigns in Italy soon thereafter) many rulers were happy to divert eastwards.

In 1099 (478 AH), the First Crusade captured Jerusalem and sacked the city amid scenes of great slaughter. The Crusaders set up a number of kingdoms and principalities and lorded it over subject Muslim populations, though they sometimes formed temporary alliances with one or other neighbouring Muslim ruler. However, the great Sultan Salah-al-Din (Saladin) retook Jerusalem in 1187 (566 AH). In stark contrast to the atrocities committed by the Crusaders ninety years before, Saladin's troops on entering the city killed no-one and Christians were left undisturbed at their sacred locations (see Map Five Appendix One).²⁰

To many Muslims the Crusades were thus proof of western brutality and inhumanity, beyond the needs of war, and of western aggression towards and hatred of Islam. To quote a well-qualified writer:

For Muslims, the memory of the Crusades lives on as the clearest example of militant Christianity, an earlier harbinger of the aggression and imperialism of the Christian West, a vivid reminder of Christianity's early hostility towards Islam. If many regard Islam as a religion of the sword, Muslims down through the ages have spoken of the West's Crusader mentality for Muslim-Christian relations, it is less a case of what actually happened in the Crusades than how they are remembered.²¹

Imperialism and Colonialism

As discussed above, the diversion of world trade from the Middle East after the European voyages of discovery had disastrous consequences for most Islamic societies. As the west gained in vigour and began to expand, and as it began to lose much of its earlier focus on religion in favour of scientific thought and, later, commercialisation and industrialisation, Islamic society seemed to stagnate and to retreat into ancient verities. In the declining Ottoman Empire:

religious opposition blocked the printing of works in Turkish until the eighteenth century, even though the Jewish, Armenian and Greek communities had maintained presses for centuries. The enormous technological and intellectual advances which thrust Western Europe into the modern era were contemptuously ignored by the Ottomans.²²

Many parts of the Muslim world were therefore easy pickings for ambitious European colonialists as Europe entered its age of imperialism from the eighteenth century onwards. By the late nineteenth century, much of the Islamic world had become western colonies, subject to economic exploitation and an imposed foreign rule, and were little more than prestige counters to be shown off or even traded at western-dominated diplomatic gatherings. The French and Spanish were established in much of North Africa, the British dominated Egypt and the Sudan. Italy gained control of Libya. The Muslim heartland in the Arabian peninsula, nominally an Ottoman province, remained free at first because it was too remote and barren to be of interest and later because no state wished to allow others to control its reserves of oil. Even so, in the nineteenth century the British established themselves at Aden (in what is now Yemen) and the Gulf States.

Though one cannot over-generalise about the oppressiveness of western colonial rule, which varied in quality from region to region and according to the particular policies of each colonial power, it is inescapable fact that western powers seized their colonies by dint of superior force, or at least by the threat of force. The Ottoman Empire itself survived as long it did (till 1918, as the famous 'sick old man of Europe') only by accepting the successive losses of territory in the Balkans forced on it by the west, and because none of the great European powers was prepared to allow another to inherit its control of the strategic straits between Europe and Asia where Istanbul (formerly Constantinople) stands. After the final collapse of the Empire in 1918, most of its possessions in the Near East (exclusive of Turkey, which became independent under the celebrated Kemal Ataturk), Iraq, Jordan, Palestine and Syria, were shared out as British or French colonies under the guise of League of Nations mandates—an act which sat uncomfortably with the claim that the war had been fought inter alia for national self-determination and freedom. The fate of Palestine, and western conduct towards it, were to have far-reaching implications by no means fully worked through even today.

Palestine

After World War I Palestine, formerly part of the Ottoman Empire, became a British mandate. During the war, the British had gained valuable support against Turkey from Arab leaders won over by the famous T. E. Lawrence ('Lawrence of Arabia'). Subsequently they supported one of these leaders, Faisal, who therefore became King of Saudi Arabia. Thus the British were the instruments of Arab independence from Turkish rule and, because Faisal's people were *Wahabi* Muslims, of the establishment of this puritanical sect as the state religion of Saudi Arabia.

However, during World War I the British had made one other fateful decision. In November 1917, through the so-called Balfour Declaration, they informed the Zionist Federation's Lord Rothschild that:

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.²³

Precisely how the British expected to achieve the establishment of a Jewish 'national home' in Palestine without prejudicing 'the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities' is impossible to say. Certainly, in the period between the World Wars they moved very cautiously, the more so because once the Muslim population of Palestine realised the implications of the Balfour Declaration, its opposition was very clear.

However, the rules of the game were changed once and for all by the Nazi Holocaust of World War II. This monstrous outrage, perpetrated by an apparently civilised western state against millions of helpless Jews, created an irresistible postwar groundswell of support in the west—supported at the United Nations by the Soviet Union, which had had its own experience of Nazi inhumanity—for the establishment of a Jewish State in Palestine. The United Nations, dominated by western powers prior to the postwar wave of decolonisation, endorsed the concept, and tried to partition Palestine as fairly as it could. For their part, the Jews became determined that they would never be helpless again.

To the Palestinians, and to Muslims in general, this must have had all the appearance of Europeans trying to salve their consciences and clean up the mess of the Holocaust at the expense of the Palestinian people. It is unnecessary here to recount the further history of this region: suffice it to say that from an Islamic standpoint the surrender of important parts of Palestine, especially of Jerusalem, was unacceptable. When the neighbouring Muslim states went to war to prevent the establishment of Israel, the main Western powers backed the Jewish State against them, and so they were defeated. From that day forth, Muslims have seen the west, through its dominant state, the US, consistently support Israel against Palestinian claims and in several wars. This has without doubt been the most potent modern stimulus for powerfully negative Islamic perceptions of the west.

Other Issues

There are, however, other grievances. Although several important Muslim states, including Syria and Saudi Arabia, supported the war waged in 1991 to undo the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait, the aftermath has raised new issues. In particular, the long-term application of stringent sanctions on Iraq has had disastrous consequences for the people, and persistent US refusal to support lifting these sanctions has resulted in Washington (and, by extension, the west) being blamed for the human cost. The fact that Iraq has substantial funds available to it, through the UN oil-for-food program, which Saddam Hussein's regime refuses to spend to relieve the very real distress, is not well-known, even in the west, let alone in the Muslim world.²⁴ Again, it is a matter of perception rather than fact.

Equally unappreciated, due mainly to western failure to move in good time, was NATO's intervention in the former Yugoslavia to put an end to Slobodan Milosevic's campaigns against the Muslim peoples of Bosnia, and later of Kosovo. Matters might have been different had NATO pulled itself together in time to prevent the crimes, but as things played out, all NATO really achieved in either case was to halt them. Moreover, its military strategy in Kosovo, ostentatiously avoiding the use of ground forces, did nothing to prevent Milosevic carrying out the worst of the Kosovo 'cleansing' under cover of war conditions.²⁵

Reference could also be made to other issues, such as US military intervention in Lebanon (Beirut) in the eighties, the failed operation in Somalia, several postwar strikes against Iraq, the attack on an alleged chemical weapons plant in Sudan, all of which rightly or wrongly added to the image of the west of practising military aggression against, and unreasonable hostility towards, these Muslim states.

Assessment

It is perhaps just as easy for Muslims, looking back on a record including much western intolerance, aggression, exploitation and most recently dispossession, to make poorly considered generalisations about western society as it is for westerners to do likewise about Islam. According to its own lights the west is not normally aggressive or exploitative; it prides itself on its central values of democracy, free speech and hard-won religious tolerance (the latter after centuries of Catholic-Protestant intolerance and worse). Muslims living in the west have freedom of their faith, including the freedom to preach it, and if bigoted individuals or groups challenge this, laws protect Muslim rights.

But all of this is, perhaps, cold comfort to those in Palestine who were driven from their homes, and to others who see the disparities in power and wealth between the west and many Islamic states. Likewise, bearing in mind that most Muslims are probably no better acquainted with the details of history than are their western counterparts, it is unsurprising that it is not difficult, based on simple generalisations and without careful consideration, to

conclude that the west is, and always has been, Islam's principal religious and political enemy.

Conclusion

This paper records a sorry tale of intertwined negative perceptions, each feeding on the other, such that in times of crisis like the present it can be a dangerously simple matter for each society to view the other in the worst possible light. These perceptions sometimes have just enough basis in fact to be plausible unless carefully considered, though insufficient to withstand such consideration. Unfortunately, thoughtful consideration tends to be one of the first casualties of difficult times.

Yet, as was noted in the introduction to this paper, it is no more valid to speak of Islam, and certainly not of political Islam, as some kind of monolith with a fixed anti-western viewpoint, than it would be to ignore the diversity of the west. That there are those, calling themselves Muslims, who commit atrocities and name them jihad no more condemns Islamic societies or Islam as a religion than did, for instance, the notorious statement of Adolf Hitler—*by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord*—and his later actions serve to blacken the Christianity he so cynically invoked, or the western society whose values he openly scorned.²⁶

At the end of the day, however, it is really not difficult to provide suitable correctives for glib negative generalisations. Whatever one's personal religious beliefs or unbeliefs, the Holy Qur'an and the Christian Scriptures each give the lie to those who maintain that either Islam or Christianity—however misrepresented through those ruled by hate, prejudice or secular ambition—truly countenance atrocities and inhumanity.

Keep to forgiveness (O Muhammad), and enjoin kindness, and turn away from the ignorant.²⁷

So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.²⁸

Endnotes

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1. Note on maps: there is a dearth of non-copyright technically reproducible historical maps covering this topic. Hence the small number and less than ideal quality of the maps provided with the hard copy of this paper. DPL clients, however, can access better maps by using the links provided in this paper at <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/cib/2001-02/02cib07.htm> For copyright reasons, these maps cannot be made available to the general public.
 2. Macquarie Dictionary, 2nd ed., Chatswood, NSW 1991, p. 429.

3. Principal sources for this section are the early chapters of George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, N. J., 1969, and the later sections of A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284–602*, Oxford UP softcover edition 1986.
4. In Arabic the numerals are called *al-arqam al-Hindiya*, which means 'the Indian numerals'. Their ultimate Indian origin is attested by the fact that, unlike written Arabic, which is read right to left, the numerals are always read left to right. See 'Numerical Differences', *New Scientist*, 5 September 1998, p. 65.
5. 'Islamic Civilisation', eds, John A. Garraty and Peter Gay, *The Columbia History of the World*, Harper and Row, New York 1984, chapter 24, passim (chapter authored by Maan Z. Madina).
6. The source for this outline is John L. Esposito, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Oxford, 1995, vol. 4, pp. 56–7.
7. The Byzantines did recover parts of Syria for a few decades in the tenth and eleventh centuries.
8. Ostrogorsky, op. cit., p. 111.
9. *Islam: Empire of Faith*, documentary series aired on SBS TV earlier this year. Unfortunately the companion book to this series is not yet available in Australia.
10. The city of Carrhae (modern Harran in Syria), where classical paganism survived beyond the Muslim conquest, was one such case (830, 209 AH). Jones, op. cit., vol. II, p. 939.
11. Quoted in Philip Whitting, ed., *Byzantium: An Introduction*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1971, p. 103.
12. Whitting, op. cit., p. 115.
13. 'The Ottoman Empire', Garraty and Gray, op. cit., (chapter authored by Maan Z. Madina, p. 608.
14. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Pelican abridgement by D. M. Low, Harmondsworth, 1963, p. 797.
15. John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 46.
16. *ibid.*
17. *ibid.*, p. 38, quoting Albert Hourani, *Europe and the Middle East*, Berkeley 1980, p. 9.
18. Whitting, op. cit., p. 77.
19. *ibid.*, chapter IV, passim.
20. *Islam: Empire of Faith*, documentary series aired on SBS TV earlier this year. See also Whitting, op. cit., p. 104, quoting contemporary Greek Orthodox writer Nicetas Choniates' comments on Muslim conduct when Saladin retook Jerusalem (1187) contrasted favourably with his account of the Norman Sack of Thessalonica (1185).
21. Esposito, op. cit., p. 40.
22. 'The Ottoman Empire', op. cit., p. 614.

23. Louis L. Snyder, *Fifty Major Documents of the Twentieth Century*, Anvil Books, New York 1955, pp. 25–6.
24. In the six months ending 28 February 2001, Iraq earned \$US351.5 million through the program but sought UN approval to spend only \$21.6 million; of \$551.2 million available to improve water and sanitation services, Iraq spent only \$184.8 million. Mark Riley, 'Cashed-up Iraq shuns suffering', *The Age*, 1 March 2001, International News, p. 11.
25. Gary Brown, 'Strategy and Politics in the 1999 Kosovo War', in *The Use of Military Force in Kosovo*, Australian Defence Studies Centre Working Paper No. 54, ADSC, Canberra, 1999.
26. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, translated by Ralph Mannheim, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1943, p. 65.
27. *The Holy Qur'an*, translation by Marmaduke Mohammad Pickthall, sura 7 (al-Araf—the Heights), verse 119. Online at <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/quran/>
28. *Gospel of Matthew*, Chapter 7, verse 12 (Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition—the meaning of the text is not different in any Protestant version).

Appendix One: Maps

Map One: [Pre-Islamic Europe and Near East, c.565.](#)

Source: Phillip Whitting, ed., *Byzantium: An Introduction*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1971, facing p. 18.

For copyright reasons, this map cannot be made available to the general public.

Map Two: Sunnis and Shi'ites in the Modern Muslim World



Source: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/world_maps/muslim_distribution.jpg

Courtesy of the General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

Map Three: [The Islamic World after the First Period of Conquest](#)

Source: Columbia History of the World, p. 261.

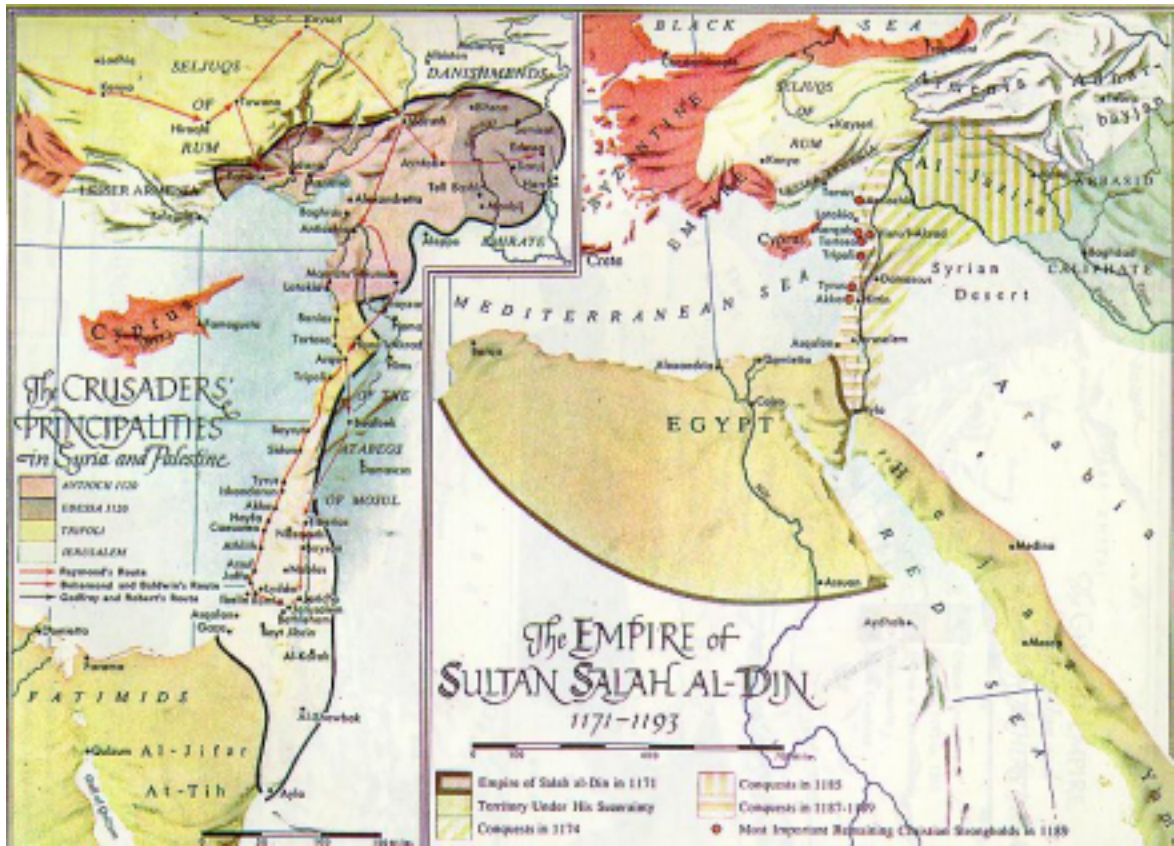
For copyright reasons, this map cannot be made available to the general public.

Map Four: The Muslim World c.1400



Source: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~rs143/map4.jpg>

Map Five: Crusader States and Saladin's Empire



Source: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~rs143/sultan.jpg>

Appendix Two

PROPHET MUHAMMAD'S CHARTER OF PRIVILEGES TO CHRISTIANS LETTER TO THE MONKS OF ST. CATHERINE MONASTERY

Dr. A. Zahoor and Dr. Z. Haq

In 628 C.E. Prophet Muhammad (s) granted a **Charter of Privileges** to the monks of St. Catherine Monastery in Mt. Sinai. It consisted of several clauses covering all aspects of human rights including such topics as the protection of Christians, freedom of worship and movement, freedom to appoint their own judges and to own and maintain their property, exemption from military service, and the right to protection in war. An English translation of that document is presented below:

This is a message from Muhammad ibn Abdullah, as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity, near and far, we are with them.

Verily I, the servants, the helpers, and my followers defend them, because Christians are my citizens; and by Allah! I hold out against anything that displeases them.

No compulsion is to be on them.

Neither are their judges to be removed from their jobs nor their monks from their monasteries.

No one is to destroy a house of their religion, to damage it, or to carry anything from it to the Muslims' houses.

Should anyone take any of these, he would spoil God's covenant and disobey His Prophet. Verily, they are my allies and have my secure charter against all that they hate.

No one is to force them to travel or to oblige them to fight.

The Muslims are to fight for them.

If a female Christian is married to a Muslim, it is not to take place without her approval. She is not to be prevented from visiting her church to pray.

Their churches are to be respected. They are neither to be prevented from repairing them nor the sacredness of their covenants.

No one of the nation (Muslims) is to disobey the covenant till the Last Day (end of the world).

This document is online at: <http://users.erols.com/zenithco/charter1.html> and is also accessible on the 'Islamic Resources' section of the page: <http://cmcu.georgetown.edu/>