

# Historical Theology

## The Church & Islam: The Beginning of the Middle-Ages

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### Historical Setting

“Whereas in the East the Church maintained its structure and character and evolved more slowly, in the West the Bishops of Rome (the popes) were forced to adapt more quickly and flexibly to drastically changing circumstances. In particular, whereas the bishops of the East maintained clear allegiance to the Eastern Roman emperor, the Bishop of Rome, while maintaining nominal allegiance to the Eastern emperor, was forced to negotiate delicate balances with the “barbarian rulers” of the former Western provinces. Although the greater number of Christians remained in the East, the developments in the West would set the stage for major developments in the Christian world during the later Middle Ages.”  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity\\_in\\_the\\_7th\\_century](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_the_7th_century)

### The Dawn of the Middle Ages

“When the armies of Islam came marching out of the Arabian Desert, a new world was born. In the first 600 years after Jesus’s death and resurrection, Christianity had set up its victorious banners across Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, creating “**Christendom**”. (*Christendom* means “the Christian domain” – a group of nations and territories which, despite political and cultural differences, were united by the fact that Christianity was the public faith in each of them.) [People often use the word today to refer to the idea of a society publicly committed to the Christian faith. From the reign of Roman Emperor Theodosius the Great in the 4<sup>th</sup> century up to the French Revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup>, it also meant the political union of Church and state, whichever of the two was the dominant partner.] However, in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Christendom suddenly found its most ancient lands being conquered, and its

civilization supplanted, by the fresh dynamic, and militant religion of Muhammad. Some historians have argued that this marked the true beginning of the Middle-Ages.” (Needham, 15)

“Of course, we must not think there was any clean or sudden break between the early Church period and the period we call the Middle-Ages. People did not wake up one morning and think, “The Middle-Ages begin today.” These divisions of time are something historians have invented for their own convenience, to make the study of history easier. Even so, the Christian world in the 7<sup>th</sup> century did experience a number of serious changes, which brought an end to one great chapter in its life-story and opened another. The key changes were:

“(i) **The rise of Islam.** This altered forever the way that Christians viewed the world; they could never again look out upon the earth without seeing millions of Muslims. The Islamic faith, from its origin to the present day, has always posed the greatest political and military threat, and the most awe-inspiring missionary challenge, to the followers of Jesus Christ.” (Ibid. 15-16)

“(ii) **The end of the Monophysite [məˈnəfəˌsɪt] controversy.**

“**Monophysites, Monophysitism** – From the Greek *monos* “one”, and *physis*, “nature”. Mono-physites believed that in the incarnation, the divine and human natures of Christ blended into one single divine-human nature. Monophysites therefore rejected the Creed of Chalcedon in 451, which taught that Christ had two distinct natures. The Monophysites were

strongest in Egypt, where they formed the Jacobite Church. The Ethiopian and Armenian Orthodox Churches also embraced Monophysitism ." (Needham, volume 1, p. 415)

"The Council of Chalcedon in 451 rejected the extreme Alexandrian Christology of Eutyches, who said that the divine nature of Christ had swallowed up His human nature. The Council's Creed also broke fresh ground by teaching that when the Church spoke of the incarnation, the Greek word **physis** meant "nature", not "person": Christ was one single person (**hypostasis**) in two distinct natures (**physis**). The Western Church, led by pope Leo the Great (440-61), together with much of the East, recognized the Council of Chalcedon as the fourth ecumenical Council, and its Creed as the third ecumenical Creed." (Needham, Vol. 1, p. 359)

"Unfortunately, Chalcedon failed dismally in its aim of bringing peace and unity to the Eastern Church or to the Byzantine Empire. [From this point onwards...historians refer to the Eastern Roman Empire as the Byzantine Empire.] In fact, a further 230 years of lively controversy lay ahead!...The same period also sparked off the most explosive tensions thus far in the relationship between the Eastern and Western Church, and (towards the end) witnessed the coming of a fearsome new enemy for Christianity from the deserts of Arabia – Muhammad and the Islamic faith." (Ibid. 360)

#### **“(iii) The birth of the Frankish empire.**

The 7<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the rise of Frankish power in the West, reaching its climax with advent of Charlemagne and the founding of the Holy Roman Empire in the year 800. East and West were now divided by both politics and religion: the Byzantine Emperor and the patriarch of Constantinople faced the Holy Roman Emperor and the pope of Rome. Henceforward the Christian world was in effect two worlds, divided by culture,

government, and religious issues. Here were the fateful seeds which finally bore fruit in the great East-West schism of 1054." (Needham, Vol. 2, 16-17)

"These deep historical changes, then, were landmarks which ushered Christianity out of the early Church period into a new era – the Middle-Ages (the ages "in the middle" between the patristic age and the age of the Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century." (Ibid. 17)

#### **Mark 3:22-27**

<sup>22</sup>The scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons." <sup>23</sup>And He called them to Himself and began speaking to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? <sup>24</sup>"If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. <sup>25</sup>"If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. <sup>26</sup>"If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but he is finished! <sup>27</sup>"But no one can enter the strong man's house and plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man, and then he will plunder his house.

#### **Life for the Church Under Islamic Rule**

"As we have seen, a "caliph" governed the Islamic Empire; Muslims regarded him as the political successor of Muhammad. The caliphs resided first at Damascus, then from 750 in Baghdad (which is in modern Iraq); they divided their huge territories into provinces called "emirates", ruled on the caliph's behalf by "emir".

"The attitude of the Islamic rulers toward their non-Muslim subjects was twofold. In Arabia itself, the general policy was to regard all Arabs as bound in perpetuity to Islam, and to use force to uphold this Islamic unity. However the policy toward

non-Arabs was different. When, for example, the Muslims conquered Persia, they made no attempt to force Persians to abandon their ancestral Zoroastrian faith and accept Islam. In fact, the Persian aristocracy continued to practice Zoroastrianism for many years under Islamic rule. Jews and Christians enjoyed a specially favored status in Islam. Muhammad had recognized both groups as worshipers of Allah, the one true God – those who had received His previous revelations (“people of the book”), although Muhammad thought they had corrupted those revelations. So Muslim rulers certainly did not attempt to force Jews or Christians to convert to Islam. They were allowed to continue worshipping God in their own way. The Monophysite Churches of Syria and Egypt, and the Nestorian Church in Persia, therefore, survived the Muslim conquest. In Damascus, the capital of the Islamic Empire until 750, Christians and Muslims shared the Church of Saint John for worship.” (Needham, vol. 2, 29)

“However there were serious disadvantages for Christians under Muslim rule. Christians in the Islamic Empire became segregated communities of second-class citizens, Their Muslim masters required them to organize as a *melet* (nation) under a bishop who was politically responsible for them. A non-Muslim community within an Islamic state were said to be in a condition of *dhimmitude*. This comes from *dhimmi*, an Arabic word meaning “protected”. Muslims applied the term *dhimmi* to native non-Muslim populations who surrendered by a treaty (*dhimma*) to Muslim rule. All Christians in *dhimmitude* had to pay a heavy poll tax (a tax not based on property or income – the same amount per person). Christians had to wear distinctive clothing. They were forbidden to own or use swords or horses. No public processions carrying crosses or icons were allowed Christians were not permitted to ring bells or beat drums to announce services of worship. Marriage between Christians and Muslims was forbidden. Most damaging of all,

Islamic law prohibited Christians from evangelizing Muslims; conversion from Islam to Christianity was punished by death.” (Ibid. 29-30)

“Given these conditions, it is not surprising that the Churches under Islam declined steadily in numbers. The majority of professing Christians converted to Islam to secure the benefits of full citizenship. Despite the official policy of tolerance, Muslims often violently persecuted Christians in local areas.” (Ibid.)

### Christian Responses to Islam

“Islam’s religious policy of forbidding Muslim conversion to Christianity made missionary work virtually impossible. Christian nations had only two practical ways of combatting the spread of Islam; they could fight it by the sword and by the pen. Fighting Islamic armies with Christian armies was a far more effective way of checking the growth of the Islamic Empire than writing books against Islam. Since Islam’s method of expanding its political authority was by military conquest, the Christians nations felt they had little option but to resist by defensive warfare.” (Ibid. 34)

Still, there were notable attempts in the Middle-Ages by Christians to evangelize Muslims. The two great trail-blazers of Christian mission in the Islamic world were the founder of the Franciscan order, Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), and Raymond Lull (1232-1316).” (Ibid.)

“The Church in the Middle-Ages produced a stream of Christian literature aimed at exposing the falsehood of Muhammad’s religion and defending the truths of Christianity against Muslim attack. Among the greatest Christian apologists against Islam were John of Damascus in the East and Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) and Raymond Lull in the west. (Ibid.)

The Christian apologist of the Middle-Ages concentrated their criticisms of Islam on two

major points: (i) the claims of Muhammad;  
(ii) the doctrine of God.

### **Resources:**

Needham, Nick. 2000 years of Christ's Power, Volume 1, The Age of the Early Church Fathers, 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> Century. Christian Focus Publications Ltd, 2016.

Needham, Nick. 2000 years of Christ's Power, Volume 2, The Middle Ages, 7<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Christian Focus Publications Ltd, 2016.

Wikipedia:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity\\_in\\_the\\_7th\\_century](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_the_7th_century)

“Those who insisted on the "one *physis*" formula were referred to as Monophysites, while those who accepted the Chalcedonian "two natures" definition were called *Dyophysites*, a term applied also to followers of Nestorianism.”

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monophysitism>

## **Monophysitism**

“The First Council of Nicaea (325) declared that Christ was divine (homoousios, consubstantial, of one being or essence, with the Father) and human (was incarnate and became man). In the fifth century a heated controversy arose between the sees and theological schools of Antioch and Alexandria about how divinity and humanity existed in Christ,<sup>[4]</sup> the former stressing the humanity, the latter the divinity of Christ. Cyril of Alexandria succeeded in having Nestorius, a prominent exponent of the Antiochian school, condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431, and insisted on the formula "one *physis* of the incarnate Word", claiming that any formula that spoke of two *physeis* represented Nestorianism. Some taught that in Christ the human nature was completely absorbed by the divine, leaving only a divine nature. In 451, the Council of Chalcedon, on the basis of Pope Leo the Great's 449 declaration, defined that in Christ there were two *natures* united in one *person*.<sup>[5]</sup>