

Was Islam Spread by the Sword?

The idea that Islam was spread by the sword has had wide currency at many different times and the impression is still widespread among the less reflective sections of the media and the wider public that people converted to Islam because they were forced to do so. This is, of course, a very useful argument in all sorts of ways. It allows non-Muslims to explain the otherwise problematic fact that so many people converted to Islam when it was, clearly, an inferior or even completely wicked religion. Claiming that people were forced to convert meant avoiding the difficult idea that people might have converted because of inadequacies or failings among the Christian clergy or worse, the intolerable thought that Islam was the true religion and that God was on the side of the Muslims. So much easier, then, to say that people were converted because they had no choice or rather that the choice was between conversion and death.

In this paper I want to consider the role that violence and armed might played in the spread of Islam in the central Middle East between the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 and about the year 1000. By the central Middle East I mean the lands between Egypt in the west and Iran in the east. All these lands, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Iran were conquered in the years between 632 and 650. It was an astonishing series of campaigns and victories, campaigns and victories which have affected the history of the area ever since.

If we want to abandon cliché and take this discussion further, we must start off with the Quran and ask what the Muslim sacred text says about conversion and violence. The Quran contains a number of passages instructing the Muslims as to how they should relate to the unbelievers and the different passages seem to give very mixed messages. There are a group of verses which recommend peaceful argument and discussion with the non-Muslims in order to convince them of the error of their ways. 16:125, for example, exhorts the Muslims to “Invite all to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching: and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: For your Lord knows best who has strayed from His path, and who receives guidance”. A number of verses suggest that at least some Muslims were very reluctant to

join military expeditions and they are rebuked for staying at home and doing nothing when they should have been fighting “ in the path of God”. The number and urgency of these exhortations suggests that there was a quietist group among the early Muslims who were, for whatever reason, reluctant to fight aggressive wars for their new religion.

In some passages those who do not fight are shown to be missing out on the temporal benefits of victory as well as rewards in the life to come. Sura 4:72-4, makes it clear to them “Among you is he who tarries behind, and if disaster overtook you [the Muslim force], he would say “God has been gracious unto me since I was not present with them”. And if bounty from God befell you, he would surely cry, as if there had been no friendship between you and him: “Oh, would that I had been with them, then I would have achieved a great success. Let those fight in the path of God who sell the life of this world for the other. Whoever fights in the path of God, whether he be killed or be victorious, on him shall We bestow a great reward”

Other verses stress only the spiritual rewards Sura 9: 38-9 for example, reads, “O believers! What is the matter with you that when it is said to you, “March out in the path of God” you are weighed down to the ground. Are you satisfied with the life of this world over the Hereafter? The enjoyment of the life of this world is but little when compared with the life of the Hereafter. If you do not march forth, He will afflict you with a painful punishment, and will substitute another people instead of you. You cannot harm Him at all, but God has power over everything”. Here we find the idea, expressed in so many pious conquest narratives, that the rewards of the afterlife were, or at least should be, the motivating factor for the Muslim warrior.

There are also passages which suggest a much more militant and violent attitude to non-Muslims. The classic statement of these views in the Qur’an comes in Qur’an 9:5 “When the sacred months are past [in which a truce had been in force between the Muslims and their enemies], kill the idolators wherever you find them, and seize them, besiege them and lie in wait for them in every place of ambush; but if they repent, pray regularly and give the alms tax, then let them go their way, for God is forgiving, merciful”. This verse can almost be considered the

foundation text for the Muslim conquests and its terms are echoed in numerous accounts of the surrender of towns and countries to Muslim arms. It is somewhat tempered by other verses such as 9.29 “Fight those who do not believe in God or the Last Day, and who do not forbid what has been forbidden by God and His Messenger [Muhammad], and those among the People of the Book who do not acknowledge the religion of truth until they pay tribute [*jizya*], after they have been brought low”. This verse, and others like it, make it clear that the People of the Book (that is Christian and Jews who have revealed scriptures) should be spared as long as they pay tribute and acknowledge their position as second class citizens.

Muslim scholars trying to reconcile these apparently contradictory statements claimed that the earlier, more pacific passages were abrogated or replaced by the later ones. The militant verses, especially 9:5 cited above therefore represent to final Muslim view on Holy War. However, it would be wrong to imagine that the argument was cut and dried at the time of the early Muslim conquests and it was not until almost two hundred years after the death of the Prophet that the definition of *jihād* began to be formalised by such scholars as Abd Allāh b. Mubārak (d. 797)¹. Quran certainly provided scriptural support for the idea that Muslims could and should fight the unbelievers, but at no point does it suggest that they should be presented with the alternative of conversion or death. The alternatives are conversion, submission and the payment of taxes or continuing war. Some, like the distinguished Syria jurist Sufyan al-Thawri (d. 778) argued that violent *jihad* could only be justified if it was defensive. Many later ascetics and mystics argued that there were two sorts of *jihad*, the lesser *jihad* which involved military force against the unbelievers and the greater *jihad* which was the internal struggle every good Muslim conducted with his own impious and unworthy thoughts and deeds. This interpretation

¹ See Mottahedeh, R. P. and al-Sayyid, R., “The Idea of the *Jihād* in Islam before the Crusades” in The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World eds. A. Laiou and R. P. Mottahedeh (Dumbarton Oaks, 2001)

has attracted support among many modern Muslims but there is no evidence for it in the early texts. In short, the Quranic exhortations can be used to support the extension of Muslim political power over the unbelievers wherever they are, but they cannot be used to justify compulsory conversion to Islam.

The nature of the early Muslim conquests in the Middle East made forcible conversion almost impossible. The Muslim armies were comparatively small, between ten and twenty thousand are possible estimates for the numbers in the armies which conquered Syria and Iraq, probably fewer in Egypt and Iran. To be sure, more Arab Muslims emigrated from Arabia to settle in the newly conquered areas but even so the Arab Muslims were a small minority, perhaps 10% of the population of Egypt and perhaps 20% of the most densely settled area, Iraq. In these circumstances, forcing unwilling people to convert was out of the question.

According to the traditional accounts, much of the Arab conquests was achieved by treaty and we have texts of many of these agreements. Here, for example is the treaty that was made by the Caliph Umar with Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, probably 638:

“In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. This is the assurance of safety (*amān*) which the servant of God Umar, the Commander of the Faithful, has given to the people of Jerusalem.. He has given them an assurance of safety for themselves, for their property, their churches, their crosses, the sick and healthy of the city and for all the rituals which belong to their religion. Their churches will not be inhabited by Muslims and will not be destroyed. Neither they, nor the land on which they stand, nor their cross, nor their property will be damaged. They will not be forcibly converted. No Jew will live with them in Jerusalem.

The people of Jerusalem must pay the poll-tax like the people of other cities and must expel the Byzantines and the robbers. Those of the people of Jerusalem who want to leave with the Byzantines, take their property and abandon their churches and crosses will be safe until they reach their place of refuge. The villagers (*ahl al-arḥ*) (who had taken refuge in the city at the time of the conquest) may remain in the city if they wish but must pay taxes like the citizens.

Those who wish may go with the Byzantines and those who wish may return to their families. Nothing is to be taken from them before their harvest is reaped.

If they pay their taxes according to their obligations, then the conditions laid out in this letter are under the covenant of God, are the responsibility of His Prophet, of the caliphs and of the faithful”. There then follows a list of witnesses including Khālīd b. al-Walīd, Amr b. al-Ās and the future caliph Muḳāwīya b. Abī Sufyān”.

As with all such treaties, there are doubts about its authenticity. It survives not as an original document but as a text inserted in the narrative of Tabari’s great *History of the Prophets and Kings* written about 250 years after the event. Nonetheless, this agreement or one very similar to it must have been arrived at, for the Christians certainly did remain in Jerusalem and they remained in possession of their churches, as they have, in fact, right down to the present day.

There were clear fiscal incentives not to encourage the spread of Islam. As we have seen, Quran itself had laid down that the unbelievers should pay taxes, called *jizya*, which was originally a generic name for tribute of all sorts. By the period in the late eighth century when the Muslim fiscal system reached its maturity, it had been established that the *dhimmis* should pay a poll-tax. All landowners were now obliged to pay the *kharaj* or land tax but the *dhimmis* suffered under extra fiscal burdens. The produce of the *jizya* was very useful because it was paid in cash. This became specially valuable in the years when structure of caliphal finance collapsed. Land tax became much more difficult to collect and was often assigned away to bureaucrats or soldiers. Petty rulers and warlords could still collect the *jizya* in cash money. There were, in short, clear reasons why Muslim governments would not want to encourage conversion to Islam. They were in most cases effectively unable to prevent conversion but they were certainly not going to use force to achieve it.

There are a few specific examples of the active discouragement of conversion to Islam. One of the clearest of these can be seen in then account of the trial of Afshin 840. Afshin was one of the leading generals in the army of the caliph al-Mu’tasim and he had played an important part

in the famous campaign against the Byzantine city of Amorion in 833. He was also hereditary ruler of the small mountain principality of Ushrusana, southeast of Samarqand. In 840 a conspiracy of his enemies caused him to be arrested and put on trial. The charge was apostasy, that is to say abandoning Islam because it was a charge that carried the death penalty. One of the accusations was that he forbidden the preaching of Islam in his domains, though he of course was a Muslim himself. Two witnesses were produced, pious men who had gone to these wild areas to preach. They showed the court the wounds that they bore as a result of the flogging that Afshin's men had inflicted on them and Afshin was obliged to admit that he had indeed ordered their punishment for he had an agreement with his people that he would not allow Muslim missionaries in. Ushrusana was certainly not typical of the rest of the Muslim world but the story does show that the powers that be were unlikely to enforce conversion to Islam.

Another indication that compulsion or the threat of punishment were not widespread can be seen from the very small numbers of Christian martyr stories dating from the early years of Islam. If there had been compulsion, with punishment meted out to those who would not abandon their faith, their heroism would certainly have been remembered and recorded. The martyr narratives we do have mostly come from Syria and Palestine. The martyrs fall into fairly specialised groups. There were apostates from Islam, far, as we have seen, converting from Islam to another faith was always regarded as worthy of death. In these cases, however, there was considerable reluctance to enforce the penalty and the would-be martyrs were given ample opportunity to recant. The other group were victims of random violence. Perhaps the most notable of these were the 40 martyrs of St Sabas. They, and a number of other holy men in the Judaeian desert, were killed by Bedouin in the disturbed years which followed the death of Harun al-Rashid in 809. In this case there was no implication that they were slain because they refused to convert to Islam: they were simply killed because the Bedouin wanted to steal their property and take over their land. The destruction of the monasteries at this time was certainly a blow to

Palestinian Christianity but it was not part of any sort of general policy. It was the result not of government action but the break down of government,

The sources suggest that a crude assumption that people were offered the choice of conversion to Islam or death has little if any historical validity but that did not mean that military force played no part in the spread of Islam. The Arab conquests of the seventh century established Muslim government over large areas of the Middle East. They did not make Islam into a majority religion. The work of Dick Bulliet on conversion to Islam suggests that the process began quite slowly and gathered pace in the ninth and tenth centuries. We would probably be correct in suggesting that by the year 1000 the majority of the population of the central Middle East were Muslims though there were differences and Iraq, for example, almost certainly became a Muslim majority country a century before Egypt. In the absence of any sort of census or statistics, much of this is little more than guess work but it is clear that while conquest was dramatic and rapid, taking a couple of decades, conversion was much slower, taking three centuries before the Muslims came to predominate.

On the other hand, it is most unlikely that Islam would have come to enjoy the dominant role it has in the area today if the early Arab conquests had never taken place. However appealing the teachings of Muhammad were to the people of the seventh century, it was unlikely that they would have made much headway in the lands of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires. Is it conceivable that Islam would have spread through peaceful missionary activity?

In both these empires there was a state supported religious institution to which anyone with pretensions of elite status would be expected to belong. In the Byzantine Empire there certainly were people who were not Christians, Jews, Samaritans and, probably, still some pagans but anyone who wanted a post in the government or the army was a Christian. Furthermore, just being a Christian was not enough: you had to be the right sort of Christian. Specifically, you had to accept the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon of 451 and the idea that Christ combined two natures, human and divine, in one body. The large number of Christians in the area who did not

accept these propositions were excluded almost entirely from positions of power and influence. In such a society, it is hard to believe that Muslim missionaries would have been permitted to preach the doctrines of the new faith.

The religious position in the Sasanian Empire was much more pluralist. Members of the Persian elite were virtually all Zoroastrians but, especially in Iraq, there were large numbers of Christians, Jews, Mandaeans and others. All these usually co-existed in some harmony but they were never allowed to challenge the position of Zoroastrianism as the dominant faith. It is possible to imagine that Muslim missionaries could have operated in this society, but only as long as they maintained a low profile, perhaps challenging the position of Christianity among the Aramaean people of Iraq but certainly not the position of Zoroastrianism among the Persians.

It was of course the military and political victory of Islam which opened the way for mass conversion even if, as we have seen, the pace was initially slow. Conversion was partly achieved by missionary activity no doubt, but in fact we hear very little about that except in unusual areas like Ushrusana. There were lots of great preachers but they mostly seem to have preached to the converted. Instead Islam seems to have spread by attracting people rather than by reaching out to them.

In any age there will always be people who change their religion, convert from one to the other, purely on a wave of pious enthusiasm and religious inspiration. It is not perhaps too cynical to suggest that there are many others who have more mixed motives. Islam was the elite religion. By converting to it, a man could, in theory at least, become a member of that elite. Conversion offered both career and social advantages. At a stroke it meant freedom from the hated poll-tax. It often gave the opportunity to move from the static and stifling environment of the village to one of the expanding towns which were so typical of the early Islamic world. The Muslim authorities did not force people to convert but the structure of Muslim government did encourage people to make that choice.

The Muslim government also encouraged conversion to Islam by low level restrictions on dhimmis. There is not much indication of these in the first two centuries of Islam but by the 850s in the reign of Mutawwakil, decrees were being issued to force non-Muslims to dress in certain ways to forbid them to bear arms or ride horses. Of course, these rules may well not have been generally enforced, at least not for very long, but they did represent a form of non-violent coercion.

Another way the actions of government encouraged conversion was the use of Arabic.

So, in answer to my original question, I would like to give an apparently paradoxical answer. Islam was not spread by the sword but without the sword it would not have spread.