

## LESSON TWENTY-FOUR – Islam and the Church

### Islam and the Church

- When the armies of Islam came marching out of the Arabian desert, a new world was born.
- In the first 600 years after Jesus death and resurrection, Christianity had set up its victorious banners across Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, creating Christendom.
- 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.

**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:**

- 1. 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.**
  - 2. The end of the Monophysite controversy. As long as the largely Monophysite populations of Syria and Egypt were citizens of the Byzantine Empire, their doctrinal quarrel with the orthodox Chalcedonians was bound to produce political conflict with the Empire and to divide the Byzantine Church. So, when the forces of Islam conquered Monophysite Syria and Egypt, the controversy between Monophysites and Chalcedonians lost its ability to create theological and political division within Byzantium. The mainstream Eastern church, centered in Constantinople, was now free to pursue other lines of development, troubled no longer by the internal dispute which had torn it apart for 200 years.**
  - 3. The birth of the Frankish empire. The 7<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the rise of Frankish power in the West, reaching its climate with the 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. Henceforth, the Christian world was in effect two worlds, divided by culture, government and religious issues. Here were the fateful seeds which finally bore the fruit in the great East-West schism of 1054.<sup>1</sup>**
- 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.

## Muhammad

- In more recent decades, some Western scholars have questioned the traditional account of Muhammad's life or even his very existence.
- One serious issue is that no biography of Muhammad was written until roughly 150 years after Muhammad's death.
- However, many non-Islamic sources close to Muhammad's lifetime testify to his historical reality.
- Muhammad was born in the city of Mecca, an important religious and trading center near the south-western coast of central Arabia in 570 or 571.
- He belonged to the powerful Quraish tribe. His father, however, died before Muhammad's birth and his mother died when he was only 6 years, so the young Muhammad was raised by his uncle, Abu Talib.
- Abu Talib belonged to a poor branch of the family and Muhammad worked for him as a lowly shepherd.
- But the hardships of childhood gave way to prosperity in adulthood as Muhammad became a very successful merchant working for a wealthy widow named Khadijah, whom Muhammad ended up marrying.
- The marriage produced two boys and four girls; the youngest of the girls, Fatima was Muhammad's favorite and married her father's cousin, Ali, who was to be Islam's fourth caliph (leader).
- Muhammad's commercial journeys from Mecca through Arabia to Syria brought him into contact with Jews and Christians, with whom he discussed religion.

## The Rise of Islam

- Although the prevailing form of Arabian religion was tribal paganism, there was an economically powerful Jewish minority, and quite a large scattering of Monophysites, plus a smaller number of Nestorians and orthodox Chalcedonian hermits.
- There were also in Arabia at that time various native groups who, under Jewish and Christian influence, had become dissatisfied with the Pagan idolatry of their homeland; they began worshiping the Creator-God alone, but without embracing Judaism or Christianity.
- Muhammad became one of those worshippers of the one God. When he was not away on a trading journey, he adopted a habit of meditating alone in a cave on Mount Hira, near Mecca.
- Then in 610 came the central experience of Muhammad's life, which was to divert the entire river of human history into a fresh and revolutionary channel; for in that year, Muhammad received what he believed to be the first of many personal revelations from God, launching him into his amazing career as the prophet of Allah (Allah is simply Arabic for God). According to Muhammad, the angel Gabriel appeared to him while he was meditating in the Mount Hira cave and gave him the following message:

**“Read, in the name of your Lord, who has created all things, who has created man of congealed blood. Read, by your most beneficent Lord, who taught the use of the pen; who teaches man that which he does not know.” (Qur’an, sura 96)<sup>2</sup>**

- Muhammad was at first terrified. He did not know whether it was really the angel Gabriel or some demonic deception which had appeared to him.
- Khadijah believed in the divine origin of Muhammad’s experience, on the basis that God would not allow a good man such as Muhammad to be deceived.
- Slowly, quietly at first, Muhammad became the center of a new religious movement in Mecca, as he began criticizing Paganism and idolatry and calling on people to worship Allah alone.
- The number of his converts grew; the most important of these earliest Muslims were Muhammad’s young cousin Ali, his friend Abu Bakr (who would become Islam’s first caliph), his one-time enemy Omar (who would become Islam’s second caliph), and his son-in-law Othman (the third caliph).
- The new faith, Islam (which means submission) had its roots in Muhammad’s overpowering conviction of the unity or oneness of God.
- Muhammad interpreted Allah’s oneness to mean that He, the Creator and Lord of the universe, was a single individual person, separated by an infinite distance from His creation by His unique possession of divine attributes – there could be no other gods.
- The divine attribute Muhammad emphasized most was power: Allah alone had power, and therefore He alone was the cause of all things, both good and evil. Idolatry or violating Allah’s oneness by acknowledging any other god, was the supreme sin. Muhammad’s concept of God’s oneness ruled out any belief in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which Muhammad felt was no better than a Pagan idolatry of many gods.
- He regarded Jesus as his forerunner, sinless and virgin-born, a miracle-worker, the greatest of God’s prophets apart from Muhammad himself, but not the divine or eternal Son of God who became flesh. Muhammad also refused to accept that Jesus had been crucified; God would not allow His prophets to be treated so shamefully.

**Muhammad summed up his new religion in five main points or the “five pillars of Islam”:**

1. ***Shahadah*, or confession of faith – “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet.”**
  2. ***Salah*, or prayer five times a day, said facing towards Mecca.**
  3. ***Zakah*, or giving charitable gifts of money as a welfare contribution to the poor.**
  4. ***Sawm*, or fasting in the holy month of Ramadan.**
  5. ***Hajj*, or the pilgrimage to Mecca, which a Muslim must try to make at least once.<sup>3</sup>**
- Another sacred duty emphasized in Islam, although not one of the five pillars, is *jihad*, often translated “holy war.” The basic meaning, however, is “struggle.” Muslims understand *jihad* as referring both to personal struggle for obedience to Allah’s will and to the struggle to spread Islam to the world – by preaching, writing, diplomacy or warfare.
  - The source of divine revelation for the Islamic faith was the Qur’an, a series of 114 messages dictated to Muhammad (as he claimed) by the angel Gabriel.

## The Spread of Islam

- After Muhammad's death, Islam's third caliph, Othman, collected these messages into a single authoritative edition. The Qur'an is so gloriously majestic and beautiful in its original Arabic that Muhammad pointed to it as the one sure proof that he was inspired by God; the only "miracle" he ever performed was the writing of the Qur'an.
- Also crucial for Islam was the *hadith* – traditions about what Muhammad had said and done; these were important because Muslims accept Muhammad as the perfect example of how a man should live, and try to model their lives after him.
- The hadith collectively form the *sunna* or "path." The Qur'an and the hadith, together with *ijima* (the consensus of the Muslim community – or, according to some, of Islamic legal scholars), make up the threefold authority which Muslims must follow.
- Muhammad's religious movement encountered increasing levels of opposition and persecution in Mecca from the majority of the city's inhabitants, especially the chiefs of the Quraish, the most important tribe. Muhammad's condemnation of idolatry threatened the economic power which the Quraish leaders derived from Pagan ceremonies and pilgrimages connected with the *ka'ba*, an ancient Arab shrine in Mecca.
- Pagans ridiculed Muhammad, accused him of being demon-possessed, and beat up, tortured and killed his followers. Muhammad was protected by his uncle Abu Talib, but when Abu Talib died, Muhammad and his pioneer Muslims were forced to flee from Mecca to the more northerly city of Yathrib, or Medina, as it was later named.
- This happened in the year 622, the year of the *hejira* (emigration). The Islamic calendar starts from this event.
- The *hejira* marked the turning point in Muhammad's fortunes. His preaching met with almost total success in Medina.
- After several bloody battles between Muslim forces of Medina and the Pagan Meccans, in 630 Muhammad was able to return to Mecca with an army of 10,000 warriors, a triumphant military conqueror.
- He won over most of the Pagan population by sparing their lives with a general amnesty, destroyed the images of Mecca's Pagan gods, and made the ancient Meccan shrine, the *ka'ba*, into the most holy place of Islamic worship.
- Before the rise of Islam, Arabia had enjoyed no political unity. It was mostly a patchwork of independent nomadic tribes. By the time of Muhammad's death in 632, he had unified the region both politically and spiritually under his own leadership.
- From the outset, Islam was a faith which spread its territory by the sword. Inspired by an exalted religious passion, the Arabic Muslim armies under Muhammad's successors, the caliphs, embarked on a military campaign to extend their domain outside of Arabia.
- Within a hundred years, they had created a huge Islamic Empire, stretching from India to Spain. The world had rarely known armies like this before: brave, tough, completely sober (Islam does not allow Muslims to drink alcohol), and burning with a zeal for their faith which made them unafraid of death.

## The Spread of Islam into the Byzantine Empire

- To see why the Christian world could offer so little resistance to the Muslim invaders, we have to step back and look at the disunited state of the Byzantine Empire in this period.
- As we saw previously, the Byzantine Empire in the 7<sup>th</sup> century was badly split along geographical lines by the doctrinal conflict between the Chalcedonians and the Monophysites.
- The Chalcedonians, who accepted the Creed drawn up at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, were strongest in Greece, the Balkans and Asia Minor; the Monophysites, who rejected the Creed of Chalcedon, controlled Syria and Egypt.
- The mainly Coptic population of Egypt was racially Semitic rather than Greek, and spoke Coptic in preference to Greek.
- Their hatred of the Byzantine Chalcedonian Emperors encouraged them to feel a sense of Coptic nationalism against rule from Constantinople. There was a similar Monophysite nationalism in Syria.
- The Persian wars of 606-629 revealed just how alienated the Syrians and Egyptians were from the Byzantine government.
- The Sassanid Empire of Persia went on the offensive against Byzantium and invaded Syria, capturing Antioch.
- By 618 they had conquered Palestine and Egypt too. The Monophysite populations of Syria and Egypt welcomed the Pagan Persians as liberators from the oppressive rule of Byzantium. The Byzantine Emperor Heraclius, 610-641, seemed to be in a hopeless situation.
- But astonishingly, he raised and trained a new army, and in a series of brilliant campaigns in 622-628 Heraclius not only restored Syria and Egypt to the Byzantine Empire, but carried the war into the center of Persia, crushed the Persian army at Nineveh, and effectively destroyed Persia as a world power.
- It was a stunning success for Byzantium. However, Heraclius's forces had to return home; they were too stretched to remain in the Persian heartlands. So, the final fruit of Heraclius's destruction of Persian power was the Persian Empire, with its rich territories east of the Euphrates River, had little military strength left to offer as sustained resistance to the Muslim armies when they arrived.
- After Muhammad's death in 632, many Arabian tribes rebelled against his successor Abu Bakr, who ruled as caliph from 632 to 634. Abu Bakr spent much of his brief caliphate subduing the rebellion and then turned his attention outwards to Syria and Persia.
- Under the next caliph, Omar, the Muslim conquest of the Byzantine Empire began. In 635, the Muslims besieged and captured Damascus.
- In 637 they took Jerusalem. In 638, Antioch, Caesarea and 17 other cities along the Syrian coast fell to Muslim forces.
- By 639 they had conquered the whole of Syria. In 640 Muslim troops invaded Egypt; Alexandria fell in 641.
- The Monophysite populations of Syria and Egypt welcomed the Muslims as liberators from Byzantium, as they had welcomed the Persians 20 years earlier.

- It seems certain that the Islamic armies would not have been able to conquer Syria and Egypt so easily, unless Syrians and Egyptians had already felt deeply alienated from Byzantine rule.
- Three of the five patriarchates – Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria – were now under Islamic rule. Meanwhile, another Muslim army had invaded and conquered Persia in 639 – another quick victory for the Muslims, made easier by Heraclius’s shattering of Persian power in 622-628.
- Further Eastern conquests brought Afghanistan and northern India under Muslim control by the early 8<sup>th</sup> century.
- In the Middle East, the Muslims turned their attention to destroying what was left of the Byzantine Empire, whose frontiers they had rolled back into Asia Minor. Muslim fleets captured or laid waste many of the Mediterranean islands.
- By 651, the southern part of Asia Minor was under Muslim control. So too was most of Armenia. The Muslims inflicted a crushing naval defeat on the Byzantines in 655 at the Battle of Phoenix (the southern coast of Asia Minor).
- Finally, under their 5<sup>th</sup> caliph Muawiyah, the Muslim forces on land and sea gambled all their strength in the supreme effort to capture Constantinople itself.
- However, the Muslims met with total failure and defeat. A recently invented Byzantine secret weapon called “Greek fire” ravaged their armies and ships.
- Then a storm off the coast of Pamphylia smashed the Muslim fleet. Finally, the great Byzantine Emperor Constantine IV wiped out the Muslim army at the battle of Syllaeum in 678. In 679, Constantine IV and caliph Muawiyah ceased hostilities and officially recognized each other’s territory.

## **The Spread of Islam in the Western Roman Empire**

- In the West, Muslim armies swept on from Egypt into North-West Africa. Here they encountered strong resistance from the Berber people. It took the Muslims 50 years of savage fighting to subdue the Berbers, who then embraced the new faith themselves and became strict and zealous Muslims.
- In 711, an Islamic Berber army crossed over from Africa into Visigothic Spain, and by 718 had conquered almost the whole of it – the northern coastlands alone remained under Visigothic Christian control.
- The Muslims then pushed on into France. At Tours, in north-west France, they were met by a Frankish Catholic army. Here in 732, the Muslim general Abd-er Rahman fought one of the decisive battles of world history against the Frankish general Charles Martel.
- The battle of Tours was a victory of Charles Martel and the Franks; it permanently halted the Western progress of the Islamic Empire. The Franks forced the Muslims back into Spain and there they stayed for the next 700 years.

## The Splintering of Islam

- The unity of the Islamic Empire was at first impressive, but it did not last. Religious dissention arose after the murder of Othman, the third caliph, in 656, Muslims divided into two parties.
- One argued that the leadership of the Empire must be hereditary within the family of Muhammad, through Ali and his relatives. Ali was married to Muhammad's daughter Fatima, so that his children were Muhammad's grandchildren. This group was known as the *Shiat Ali*, "the party of Ali" – or the *Shias*, as they came to be called. Shias held that a living leader, an imam, chosen by God from among Muhammad's family, was essential to the right guidance of the Islamic community.
- By contrast, the other party believed that the nation's elders should freely elect each new caliph or that the caliph himself should appoint his successor, and that caliph did not need to belong to Muhammad's family; this party is called the *Sunnis*.
- They held that the sunna was more important than a living leader for the guidance of the faithful. The champion of the Sunnis was Muawiyah, the governor of Syria and friend of the murdered caliph Othman; he and others claimed that Ali had arranged Othman's assassination and demanded justice.
- The Shias and Sunnis plunged the Islamic Empire into its first taste of civil war. Ali emerged from this conflict as the 4<sup>th</sup> caliph.
- But Ali was still opposed by Muawiyah, who had built up a formidable army in Syria which owed its loyalty to Muawiyah personally. After Ali's assassination in 661, Muslims accepted Muawiyah as Islam's 5<sup>th</sup> caliph. Muawiyah managed to keep the sons of Ali under control during his caliphate.
- However, when he died, the Shias refused to recognize Muawiyah's son Yazid as the new caliph; for Ali's party, Yazid was an illegitimate tyrant, imposed on the Muslim community by his father.
- So, the Shias under Ali's son Husein planned a military uprising; Yazid's forces, however, defeated them in battle in 680 at Karbala (near Babylon). Husein's plans for an uprising had been discovered and quashed by Yazid, so that the Shia army at Karbala consisted of little more than Husein's extended family and a few close supporters.
- His death was ever afterwards considered a martyrdom by Shia Muslims, and Husein himself seems to have gone to Karbala in the spirit of a martyr.
- The Sunni victors at Karbala had massacred Ali's family, but the Shia party survived the disaster. These fierce internal conflicts created a permanent religious division in the Islamic world between Sunni and Shia Muslims.
- The secession of Muslim Spain from the rest of the Islamic Empire in 756 weakened the Empire's political unity.
- In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Shia Persia became effectively independent from the caliphs who ruled in Baghdad. So did Morocco, Tunisia and Libya in North-West Africa.
- In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Egypt also seceded and became an independent Muslim kingdom. This political and territorial break-up of Islam paved the way for the Western Catholic conquest of the Middle East by the Crusaders in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

## Islam and their Non-Muslim Subjects

- Just as the Christian faith had done, Islam developed its own rich theological traditions and differing schools of thought. It had a massive influence on the Western Catholic theology, through its Arabic translations of the Greek philosopher Aristotle and commentaries on his writings, which Christian scholars then translated into Latin.
- Also fascinating to Christian mystics were their Islamic equivalents, the Muslim mystics or Sufis as they were called. It seems likely that Christian mystics and Sufis had quite a wide influence on each other, as well as both drinking from the common fountain of Neoplatonism.
- As we have seen, a caliph governed the Islamic Empire; Muslims regarded him as the political successor of Muhammad. The caliphs resided first in Damascus, then from 750 in Baghdad; they divided their huge territories into provinces called emirates, ruled on behalf of the caliph by an emir.
- The attitude of the Islamic rulers towards 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 towards non-Muslims was different. When, for example, the Muslims conquered Persia, they made no attempt to force the Persians to abandon their ancestral Zoroastrian faith and accept Islam.
- Muhammad had recognized both groups as worshippers 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.
- Muslim rulers 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.
- 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* (meaning nation) under a bishop who was politically responsible for them. A non-Muslim community within Islamic states 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 for worship.



- Marriage between Christians and Muslims were forbidden. Most damaging of all, Islamic law prohibited Christians from evangelizing Muslims; conversion from Islam to Christianity was punished by death.
- Despite the official policy of tolerance, Muslims often violently persecuted Christians in local areas. The caliph al-Hakim decreed a systematic persecution of the church in the period 1015-1020, until his fellow Muslims assassinated him for claiming deity.

## Christianity in the Muslim World

- What is perhaps surprising is the extent to which Christians were able to flourish under Muslim rule. The caliphs employed many Christians and Jews as civil servants, much as the German Arian conquerors of the Western Roman Empire had employed Nicene Orthodox.
- This was especially true in Persia, where Muslim rulers employed Nestorian Christian scholars to translate the great works of Greek philosophy into Arabic, thus channeling the wisdom of ancient Greece into the new world of Islam.
- When the caliphs moved the Empire's capital from Damascus in Syria to Baghdad in Persia in 750, the first great principal of Baghdad University was a Nestorian Christian.
- The most distinguished Nestorian writer and thinker under Muslim rule was Timothy I. Timothy was elected catholicos (leader) of the Nestorian Church in 780 and was probably the greatest man to ever occupy the office.
- Highly educated in Greek philosophy and the early church father, he translated Aristotle into Arabic and wrote the classic work of Christian apologetics, *Dialogue with al-Mahdi*, which was directed towards Muslims.
- Al-Mahdi was the caliph from 775-778; Timothy enjoyed close and friendly relations with him and his successor Harun-al Rashid.
- The most outstanding Christian figure who lived and worked under Islamic rule was John of Damascus (675-749), often called the last of the Greek church fathers. John was the prime minister of the caliph Abd-ul-Malek in Damascus in the earlier part of his life.
- Later he retired to the Saint Sabbas monastery near Jerusalem, where he wrote his theological masterpiece, *The Fountain of Knowledge*. This book was divided into three parts. Part one dealt with questions of philosophy and part two with heresies; part three was titled *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, and is one of the most profound and influential presentations of Eastern Chalcedonian theology ever written.
- John was a firm adherent of the Creed of Chalcedon, and opposed both Nestorianism and Monophysitism; he based his teaching largely on the Cappadocian fathers, and accepted the developments in Christology which Leontius of Byzantium and Maximus the Confessor had pioneered.
- The third part of John's book was translated into Latin in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and had quite an impact on the growth of Western systematic theology.
- The most tolerant and fruitful Christian-Muslim relationship were those of Muslim Spain. In 756, Spain seceded from the Islamic Empire and became an independent Muslim state.

- The Berber Muslims in Spain called “moors” practiced a remarkable degree of religious tolerance towards Christians and Jews; many Christian communities survived unmolested under Spanish Muslim rule for centuries.
- Islamic Spain had its fair share of Christian martyrs, but generally speaking the Muslim rulers left the Spanish Church alone as long as it made no attempts to criticize Islam or convert Muslims.
- In fact, it was in Islamic Spain that Western culture and civilization reached their highest development in the early Middle Ages, with a strong contribution from the significant Spanish Christian minority.
- Its most glorious period was the reign of the great emir Abd al-Rahman III (912-961). Arab culture gained such a powerful hold over the Spanish Church that the Christian scholars of Spain had to translate the Bible and liturgy into Arabic; the Spanish-Arabic liturgy was known as the “Mozarabic liturgy.”
- Through Muslim Spain the riches of Eastern civilization, which combined both Greek and Islamic elements, flowed into Western Europe, which was highly uncivilized by contrast.

## **Missions to the Muslims**

- Islam’s religious policy of forbidding Muslim conversion to Christianity made missionary work virtually impossible.
- Christian nations had only two practical ways of combating 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 Christian nations felt they had little option but to resist by defensive warfare.
- There were some 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, and Raymond Lull.
- Lull was born into a wealthy Catholic family in Palma on the island of Majorca, off the coast of Spain; Catholics had only just conquered Majorca from Islamic rule.
- Living on Majorca put Lull in close contact with the Muslims of southern Spain, and he conceived it as his special mission in life to bring the Gospel to Muslims.
- He learned Arabic from a Spanish Muslim slave whose freedom he purchased and with financial backing from the king of Aragon he established a special Franciscan convent at Miramir on Majorca. Here other monks could learn Arabic and prepare for missionary work among the Muslims.
- Lull himself went on three missionary journeys to Tunisia and Algeria in North-West Africa, where his preaching aroused such fierce Muslim opposition that he narrowly escaped with his life.
- Lull wrote treatises on Christianity in Arabic and his influence helped persuade pope Clement V to decree in 1311 that teachers of Arabic and other Eastern tongues should be

appointed in several universities so that Christians could learn the languages of Islam and thus be better equipped to understand, refute and evangelize Muslims.

- Lull is often seen as the great pioneer Christian missionary to Muslims; he was also a great scholastic theologian, and one of the first Western theologians to write in a language other than Latin.
- The Church in the Middle Ages produced a stream of Christian literature aimed at exposing the falsehood of Muhammad's attack.
- Among the greatest Christian apologists against Islam were John of Damascus in the East and Thomas Aquinas and Raymond Lull in the West.

**The Christian apologists of the Middle Ages concentrated their criticisms of Islam on two major points: 1. The claims of Muhammad; 2. The doctrine of God.**

- 1. The Christian apologists portrayed Muhammad as a deliberate deceiver, who fabricated his new religion out of Jewish myths and Christian heresies. Often, they identified Muhammad with the false prophet in the book of Revelation. They criticized his moral character especially his excessive indulgence in sexual desire (after the death of his wife Khadijah, Muhammad took at least 14 wives and several concubines). Because no new doctrinal or moral revelations were expected after Christ and the apostles, they denied that Muhammad was a true prophet. They rejected Muslim attempts to find the coming of Muhammad prophesied in the New Testament as a distortion of genuine New Testament teaching (Muslims claimed the coming of the "helper" or "counselor" was referring to Muhammad and not the Holy Spirit). The apologists also defended the reliability of the New Testament text against Muslims claims that Christianity had corrupted it.**
- 2. The conflict between the Christian and Muslim doctrines of God centered on the Trinity, the incarnation, divine sovereignty and the question of true versus idolatrous worship.<sup>4</sup>**

**The Trinity. Christian apologists explained and defended the Trinity, seeking to show how it in no way violated the oneness of God. Muslims accused Christians of having three gods; the apologists responded that Father, Son and Holy Spirit fully and equally possessed one single divine essence, nature and being: one God in three persons.**

**The incarnation. Clearly the status of Christ was central to the Christian-Muslim debate. The Christian apologists strove to show that Christ was God incarnate, not as the Muslims claimed, a mere prophet. They often tried to turn the Qur'an itself against Muslims, pointing out the high claims it sometimes makes for Christ, teaching His unique virgin birth and calling Him the "Word of God."**

**Divine sovereignty. Christian apologists attacked as blasphemous the Muslim view of God's sovereignty – that God is the ultimate cause of all things, evil as well as good. They argued that God is the cause of all good, but not of evil. Evil is caused by the misuse of free-will by created beings. God creates and sustains the will that does evil, permits it to do evil, and exploits its evil for good, but He does not cause it to do evil.**

**Worship. Muslims accused Christians of idolatry because they worshipped the Virgin Mary (Muslims consistently misunderstood the Trinity to mean the Father, the Mother and the Son). They also attacked Christians for venerating icons of Christ and the saints. The Christian apologists were on weaker ground here. They could easily refute the false understanding of the Trinity as including Mary. However, it was more difficult for them to prove to Muslims that the religious veneration given to Mary was not worship in the strict sense of the term. They defended the use of icons as teaching aids for those who could not read. The apologists also turned the accusation of idolatry back on the Muslims; they pointed out that at the “grass roots” level, ordinary Muslims placed all sorts of created powers between God and human beings, such as the *jinn* – spirits created from fire that lived on earth and had to be appeased and warded off by magic.<sup>5</sup>**

- At a theological level, the first Christian apologists against Islam laid down the basic arguments which Christians have traditionally followed ever since.
- The Muslim-Christian wars and the loss of so much ancient Christian territory (especially the Holy Land) to Islam, created a deep emotional fear and hatred of Muslims in Christian lands.

---

<sup>1</sup> 2000 Years of Christ's Power, Volume 2, The Middle Ages, Needham, Nick, pages 16-17

<sup>2</sup> 2000 Years of Christ's Power, Volume 2, The Middle Ages, Needham, Nick, pages 16-17

<sup>3</sup> 2000 Years of Christ's Power, Volume 2, The Middle Ages, Needham, Nick, page 20

<sup>4</sup> 2000 Years of Christ's Power, Volume 2, The Middle Ages, Needham, Nick, pages 35-36

<sup>5</sup> 2000 Years of Christ's Power, Volume 2, The Middle Ages, Needham Nick, pages 36-37