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Perspectives **The Seventh-Century Christian Obsession with the Jews: A Historical Parallel for the Present?**

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In the seventh century, the Arabs embarked on the conquest of the world in the name of Islam. The Caliphate replaced the Persian Empire and Christian Spain and conquered much of the Byzantine Empire. The latter, however, seemed to ignore the threat of the new invaders and their religion. Instead, the Byzantine political and intellectual elite focused increasingly on the Jews in tracts and legal measures. The situation has certain parallels with the present.

During the early and mid-seventh century, when Islam was on the rise, the Arabs began their conquest of vast areas of the known world. Imbued with religious zeal and possessing great military skill, they spread their new creed for nearly a century and put an end to long-reigning kingdoms. These included the Christian Byzantine Empire in the Eastern Mediterranean, which encompassed Syria, Palestine, and Egypt; the Zoroastrian Persian Empire, whose lands embraced Persia and Babylonia - renamed Iraq by its new masters; and western Christian areas of North Africa and Visigothic Spain. Charles Martel stopped the Muslim advance in Poitiers, now France, in 732.

Although the Persian East and the Iberian West were important acquisitions for Islam, the focus here is on the powerful heir to the glory of ancient Rome, the Byzantine Empire (whose capital Constantinople was not conquered). Why did Jerusalem, a prosperous center of religious pilgrimage and locus of historical memory, the pride of Orthodox Christianity, surrender in 638 to the "Saracens," the strange and barbarous hordes from the desert?

Why did the Byzantine Imperial leadership miscalculate the power of the invader and lose so much territory and prestige? And how did intellectual and political figures of the time explain and cope with this major moral and military setback?

Historical Parallels?

The answers to these questions may provide insight into our own times, though historical parallels must always be viewed with caution.

It is noteworthy that the imminent Arab-Islamic advance did not seem to occupy the intellectual, religious, and political elite of Byzantium. The Imperial forces had entered Jerusalem in 628, reasserting their power after fourteen years of rule by the Persians, who destroyed nearly all the churches and monasteries in Palestine and decimated its Christian population. The Emperor Heraclius consecrated the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in 630 and restored the "True Cross," the physical relic of the Crucifixion, venerated by Christians.

Was Byzantium blinded by the victory over its formidable foe? Or had the Empire grown used to the frequent border raids by Arabs and others, so that it did not view the Muslim advance as out of the ordinary?

Indeed, Byzantine attention was not directed toward the enemy at the doorstep, but against Jews of the realm. The Emperor and the two leading churchmen, Maximus the Confessor and his friend and colleague, Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, increasingly expressed virulent criticism of the Jews and Judaism.¹

Forced Conversion

On 31 May 632, apparently under the influence of these churchmen, Emperor Heraclius took the unprecedented step of issuing a decree of forced conversion of his Jewish subjects to Christianity.² This edict encompassed the areas of Asia Minor (now Turkey), Syria, Palestine, Greece, Egypt, and the Balkans. Although it was not implemented, the decree alienated the Jews, many of whom had allied themselves with the Persians earlier in the century. Longstanding discriminatory policies and laws influenced Samaritans and non-Orthodox Christians, along with Jews, in favor of the Arab invaders.

Furthermore, in 633-34, Maximus and Sophronius devoted exaggerated attention to anti-Jewish arguments including verbal violence. At the same time, Maximus called the Arabs "harsh and foreign." He first viewed them as a passing annoyance, and later regarded their conquest of Jerusalem as an act of God against Christian sinners. As for Sophronius, his lament on the fall of Jerusalem castigates the Jews more than the Arab conquerors.³

According to the scholar Carl Laga, "the preoccupation...with the Jewish problem had obviously come to the point of turning into an obsession, which blinded the Christians to the real historical impact of the Arab onslaught, reducible, in their opinion, to a new phase of God's actualized punishment of the Christians for their sins, but especially of the Jews for their eternal *apistia*" (unbelief).⁴

Inability to Confront the Real Enemy

Why is it that Byzantium was unable to confront the real enemy that threatened Christendom with physical destruction and lethal consequences but engaged instead in a sustained anti-Jewish outburst? Laga points out that the Jews fell easily into their traditional role as a target of ecclesiastical odium that blamed them for the Empire's predicament.⁵

According to leading Byzantinist Averil Cameron, the reasons for the anti-Jewish bellicosity during the seventh century were cumulative: long-term stigma resulting from the church fathers' writings, the intense anti-Jewish and anti-heretical activities and legislation of the Emperor Justinian in the mid-sixth century, the fact that Jews were considered supporters of certain factions or contenders for the throne in the late sixth century, and the Jews' reputation as sympathizers of the Persians.⁶

Other scholars believe that Jews mainly served as a surrogate or a literary and artistic construct in place of the Muslims whose power Christianity could not break.⁷ In any case, the persistence of the Jews, who saw the decline of Christian power and may have felt or been perceived to have felt a certain *schadenfreude*, evoked the old stereotypes and prejudices more powerfully because of the Byzantine Empire's defeat by the Caliphate. The stubborn Jews, therefore, became an outlet for the frustrations of the churchmen.

The Contemporary Predicament of Christianity

Recalling the traumas of the seventh century brings to mind some of the travails of Christianity in our times and the continuing obsessions of large parts of the Christian and post-Christian world with the Jews. Then, as now, Christianity was made up of many denominations. Over a decade ago, after some seventy years of intermittent struggles, the West - Christian and post-Christian - defeated a longstanding adversary, the Soviet Empire, just as Byzantium first lost to Persia in 614, after centuries of sporadic wars, and later overcame the Persian kingdom in 628.

Today, a new group of people have immigrated into Europe and North America, though not in the form of armed hordes. Substantial parts of this Muslim population are not prepared to accept minority status. They keep their distance from Christian or post-Christian majorities whose lifestyles they eschew and condemn.⁸ They welcome converts and are eager to spread their faith.

Despite these trends, a significant number of Christians and post-Christians in European governments, along with many churches and Christian leaders, seem more preoccupied with issues relating to the Jews and the Jewish state, like the clergymen Maximus and Sophronius in the seventh century. The persistence of Judaism and the Jewish people and the existence of a viable Jewish state apparently present difficult challenges for many Christians.

The obsession with the Jews, which many of the established churches have displayed as their ranks have thinned out, represents a denial of external reality as manifested in the spread of Islam and Islamist ambition. Thus, in addition to increasing anti-Semitism, blaming the Jews could harm Christianity by deflecting it from the real challenge it faces, as it did in the past.

If this is the case, the Christian legacy of patristic anti-Semitism represents a flaw of such proportions that it could paralyze the healthy tendency to self-defense in the face of existential danger.

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Notes

1. Carl Laga, "Judaism and Jews in Maximus Confessor's Works: Theoretical Controversy and Practical Attitude," *Byzantinoslavica*, No. 51, 1990, pp. 177-88.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

3. Sophronius, *Anacreontica*, No. 14, ed. M. Gigante (Rome, 1957); Laga, "Judaism and Jews," pp. 187-88.

4. Laga, "Judaism and Jews," p. 188.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Averil Cameron, "Blaming the Jews: The Seventh-Century Invasions of Palestine in Context," in *Melanges Gilbert Dagron, Travaux et Memoires*, No. 14 (Paris: College de France, 2002), pp. 57-78.

7. D. M. Olster, *Roman Defeat, Christian Response and the Literary Construction of the Jew* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994); Kathleen Corrigan, *Visual Polemics in Ninth-Century Byzantine Psalters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

8. David Pryce-Jones, "The Islamization of Europe?" *Commentary*, December 2004, pp. 29-33.

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