

John Andrew Morrow, **The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World**, Angelico Press - Sophia Perennis, ABD 2013. ISBN: 978-1-59731-465-7

Until I was given the manuscript of this text for review, the possibility that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) devised various treaties and sets of covenants, called *al-ahad wa al-shurut*, to honor the autonomy and beliefs of Christian communities of his time had never occurred to me. Western culture tends to treat the three major religions as if they were separate and distinct, not to mention oppositional. Yet, the works of current scholars, Dr. John Andrew Morrow and Dr. Reza Aslan among them, provide ample evidence of the enmeshing and relatedness of these one god beliefs and of the importance of looking at events and individuals through a lens that locates them “in their time and place.”

Intense and lengthy research into hundreds of religious, governmental, and scholarly sources, revealed a fact unknown, not just to Christians, but to Muslims as well. The author speculates that political pressures contributed to the denial or nullification of these agreements, yet neither of those factors succeeded in burying their existence. After reading through the book and taking these historical realities into account, the first question about the covenants is “Why not?” rather than “Why?” Though the details of his biography differ, many agree that the Prophet Muhammad had dealings with Christians back into his early teen years, to a time in 582 AD, when, traveling with one of his uncle’s caravan’s, he was invited to sup with priests from a monastery in Syria. The abbot of the monastery had just that day looked out onto the travel route below the building’s seat on a hillside, and, seeing a single cloud hover directly over a particular young man’s head, had a premonition. He asked that all those traveling with the caravan join him for dinner, and during the meal he learned the name and history of that boy. The abbot, Bahira by name, knew that Muhammad would become a person of power and distinction. While this account is well known, a similar incident took place in the Sinai where the abbot of the Monastery of St. Catherine actually requested, and was granted, a pledge of perpetual protection which the Prophet signed with his handprint.

Later, as much traveled businessman, Muhammad became familiar with all the leading philosophies and religions of his day. Himself a relatively open-minded believer in one god, he had little quarrel with others of that kind, whether they were Arab *hunaifa*, Christians or Jews. The onset of his divine mission did not alter the Prophet’s benign view of Christians. While evolving as the leader and divine messenger of Allah in the first years after Muhammad took his followers to Medina, he did not forget that broader view of the world gained from early travels. When the Christian people of Najran approached him, asking to be a part of his Ummah (community) but declining to adopt Islam, the Prophet granted the request. He wrote and delivered to the Najranis a

covenant called *The Covenant of the Prophet with the Christians of Najran*. In this and many other similar texts, Muhammad (pbuh) did not demand conversion but rather asked for solidarity. They were the documents of a diplomat as well as a religious designate.

No one can deny that, like Christians, Muhammad (pbuh) led his early Muslims into war. Personally a peaceful man and one who was a constant and generous arbiter for continuously quarreling factions, Muhammad took his role as Messenger of Allah seriously, and would defend his Ummah to the last breath. Yet, battle was rarely engaged solely on the basis of religion. Says the author, “the Prophet was at peace with those who were at peace with him. However, anyone who expressed hostility towards him or who exhibited belligerent or combative behaviors would be subject to conquest.”

This book reveals, from one historical kernel of fact to the next, how Muhammad came to build both an ever-expanding reach over the spiritual lives of the people, and a network of allies and neighbors who bore him no animosity. Most important in these pages are the covenants themselves, the promise of coexistence and tolerance that was given out of respect for people’s differences and the need to honor each person’s humanity. Dr. Morrow has done with this book as Martin Luther King Jr. did with his “Letter from the Birmingham Jail,” called people to account for straying from what they are purported to stand for. He is saying, “Here are the covenants. Read them! Honor them, and honor the intent of the Prophet.”

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