Christians in Afghanistan
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Christianity is usually known throughout history for its expansion, “from the Middle East to Europe and ultimately onto the global stage…we rarely think of major reverses or setbacks.”¹ However, this is not the case of Christianity in central Asia, and most notably in Afghanistan, where Christianity has altogether been annihilated from the country. Afghanistan, now referred to after its 2004 constitution as the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, has a history full of violence and territorial conquests, most recognizably between the Arabs and Mongols. While the country today is over 99% Islam,² it was once home to an array of religious groups including Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity. Even after the initial Islamic spread of the seventh century, Christianity and most other religions were free from persecution. Christianity and Islam co-existed for many centuries within the Afghan boarders, until the Mongol army invaded the country and began a long reign of power that included religious persecution. To better understand the eradication of Christianity in Afghanistan more clearly, this essay will focus on three main areas: the Islamic and Christian history of Afghanistan, how the two co-existed peacefully for centuries, and then hone in specifically on the Mongol empire of the thirteenth century, when Christianity was violently persecuted under the Mongol general, Ghazan. Today, everything in Afghanistan is closely tied to Islam, from its politics to social customs, but Afghanistan looked much different throughout its history.

The sparsely populated landscape of ancient Afghanistan made it “ripe for conquest but difficult to rule: empires rose and fell periodically throughout its history.”³ Before the Islamic conquests occurred in the seventh century, Afghanistan, situated in central Asia, was dominated by the

rivalry between the Turkic tribes to the north, the Greeks, and the Persians to the south. 4 The nomadic Turks were the first to inhabit the eastern parts of central Asia since before 1000 B.C. Alexander the Great’s conquests of Bactria and Sogdiana (ancient Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan) between 329-327 B.C was the next long lasting power in the region. Alexander was quick to consolidate his control “by urging his men to marry local women; he himself married a Sogdian princess, Roxana.” 5 In 226 A.D., Alexander’s Greco-Bactrian Empire was defeated by the Persian Sassanids, which remained in power for several centuries until “a series of incursions began around 650, when the first Arabs came, bringing with them the new faith of Islam.” 6

In the mid-seventh century A.D., the Arabs, “under the influence of Islamic zeal for conquest,” 7 overthrew the Persian Sassanids and reached Western Persia. One historian notes that the Arabs were “skilled at rapid mobile warfare, they were all able to exploit momentary weakness among their more civilized enemies.” 8 Arab conquests of central Asia spread quickly, displacing people from Basra (Iraq) to as far as the Kabul River Valley (northeastern Afghanistan) in a short time. It was here that they came into direct conflict with the Western Turks. After a prolonged war and under the revered general Abu Muslim of the Abbasid dynasty, the Arabs became “successful in winning over the entire Turkish population of Khurasan to the side of Islam.” 9 Around 809 A.D., the power of the Arabs waned and the Persian Samanids began their period of rule, expanding their boarders to Western India, near Baghdad. 10 While the Arab military power did not last, the Islamic faith they brought with them prospered and was adopted and spread by the Samanids, as it was to their political advantage to adopt the religion of their conquered people. The well-organized Samanids located their capital in Bukhara.

4 Rashid, 19.
5 Rashid, 20.
6 Rashid, 21.
8 Wahab & Youngerman, 51.
9 Fraser-Tytler, 24.
10 Fraser-Tytler, 25.
(southeastern Uzbekistan) from 864 - 999 and began a successful campaign of expanding the Silk Route. This subsequently caused the spread of the Persian language and made “Bukhara a trade, transport, and cultural center of the Islamic world.”

When the Afghan Turks came to power in 961, until 1221 when the Mongols took power, they too adopted the Muslim faith and helped spread it across the region.

While the Arab military supremacy over Afghanistan was not permanent, the Islamic faith they had brought with them “rather quickly prevailed over a vast area, becoming the majority religion in the most ancient centers of civilization.” Muslims revere the life of Mohammad, as he preached to have received revelations from God. Mohammad also exemplifies the greater and lesser jihad; the greater jihad involves looking inward to become a better human and being obedient to God, while the lesser jihad means to “sanction rebellion against an unjust ruler, whether Muslim or not, and…become the means to mobilize that political and social struggle.” Thus, the Arab people spread the message of Mohammad with strong religious zeal, believing it to be their duty to God to do so, and fought against what they believed to be the corrupt rulers over central Asia. Islam would conquer Afghanistan in the eighth century and presently takes hold of almost 100% of the population. Thomas Barfield, a professor at Princeton University, writes that there is no separation at all between the Afghanis way of life and Islamic influence. He states:

When religion is a way of life, it permeates all aspects of everyday social relations, and nothing is separate from it…Its influence is ever present in people’s everyday conversations, business transactions, dispute resolutions, and moral judgments

11 Rashid, 21.
12 Wahab & Youngerman, 262.
13 Wahab & Youngerman, 52.
14 Rashid, 2.
15 Wahab & Youngerman, 18.
However, before Islam became the state religion and way of life for those in Afghanistan, it was once home to an array of religions, including Christianity.

The Christian history in Afghanistan begins in the second century A.D., having been brought to the region by the apostles Thomas and Bartholomew. Writings from the Gospel of Thomas suggest Thomas preaching in Bactria, which today is in northern Afghanistan.  

By the third century, many laymen and clergy were documented to have spread across Northwest India, Afghanistan, and Baluchistan, engaging in missionary work with the people. While the Church saw mild success throughout the fourth and fifth century, it was not until the bishop Timothy arrived in 780 A.D. in Seleucia that the Church of the East began to see a period of successes.

The effect Timothy had on the church in the East is comparable to the successes of Charlemagne in the West. When Timothy arrived in the Middle East, he saw that the church was “culturally and spiritually Christian but politically Muslim, and he coped quite comfortably with that situation.” Timothy engaged often with Muslims, acknowledging the virtues of Mohammad, while still taking “every opportunity to explain and defend the Christian position.” Timothy was allowed to preach so freely about Christianity because Eastern Christians played a crucial role in building the Muslim culture and political sphere, acting as their advisors and translators. He was a great friend of the Caliphs, and when he died in 823 A.D., there were no worries that Christianity would be subject to persecution, as the two religions proved that they could operate peacefully with the other.

Christianity and Islam co-existed for over 600 years in Afghanistan before the Christian faith became eradicated from the nation. The prophet Mohammad was tolerant of his Christian subjects,
using many of them as translators when the conquests first began to spread throughout Asia.\textsuperscript{23} He is documented to have said, “there is no conflict between the word of God as it came to the Jewish prophets and to Jesus and his apostles, and the word of God as it was revealed directly to him [Mohammad].”\textsuperscript{24} Mohammad spoke of Jesus Christ with the highest respects, “but only as one of the greatest of the prophets.”\textsuperscript{25} Even with Mohammad implementing a special tax for Jews and Christians to pay in return for their religious freedom in the long run benefited Christians, as it paid for Islamic leaders to allow Christians to remain in the nation.\textsuperscript{26} Arabs were also “open by nature to the mixing and cross-fertilizing of cultures,” and encouraged the Arab people they brought to Afghanistan to marry locals, even if they were Christian.\textsuperscript{27} One historian, Philip Jenkins, even writes that the early Muslims were greatly dependent on Christians, as they were invaluable in their “resources for rising empires in search of diplomats, advisers, and scholars.”\textsuperscript{28}

Surprisingly, Christians too were welcoming of the Arabs, as they represented liberators from the religious persecution from which they were suffering under Sassanian rule. The Persian Sassanians, in power from 226 A.D. to the mid-seventh century, were cruel to its people and regularly participated in religious persecutions.\textsuperscript{29} Arab conquests in the mid-seventh century ironically symbolized religious freedom for Christians; imitating their charismatic and passionate leader Mohammad outweighed the usual motives for power and glory.\textsuperscript{30} In fact, the Nestorian patriarch Isho’yahb wrote in 650 A.D.:

\begin{quote}
The Arabs to whom God has granted at this time the government of the world...do not persecute the Christian religion: on the contrary, they favor it, honor our priests and the saints of the Lord and confer benefits on churches and monasteries\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{25} Moffett, 330.
\textsuperscript{26} Wahab & Youngerman, 54.
\textsuperscript{27} Denis Sinor, ed., \textit{The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 346.
\textsuperscript{28} Jenkins, 18.
\textsuperscript{29} Wahab & Youngerman, 51.
\textsuperscript{30} Wahab & Youngerman, 52.
\textsuperscript{31} Jenkins, 104.
\end{flushright}
Christian legal autonomy, too, flourished under the new Muslim rule because the “Christians formally codified their civil laws to match the Quranic law of the occupiers.” With the two religions being both respectful and tolerant of the other, one could not have predicted the eventual fall of Christianity.

The reason for the majority of Christians converting to Islam was not by force but from their own freewill. Many Christians believed that the Arab victories, and thus the Muslim triumphs over Asia, were a sign from God. Michael the Great, the twelfth-century patriarch of Syria, wrote:

“The God of vengeance…seeing the wickedness of the Romans who…cruelly robbed our churches and monasteries…raised from the region of the south the children of Ishmael to deliver us by them from the hands of the Romans.”

Christians believed the Arab victories to be a sign of divine judgment and adopted the Islamic faith seamlessly. The monotheistic theme in Islam, that *there is no God but Allah*, was easy for Jews and Christians to adapt, making the transition less radical, as opposed to the ancient religions of Afghanistan (i.e. Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism), who “apparently resisted more strongly.”

For those who did not become Muslim for religious reasons “changed their religions for convenience or advantage,” as it was in both their social and economic interests to convert. The many Christians who did convert thereafter the initial conquests, as stated before, co-existed with the Muslim people for many centuries until the Mongols took power in the thirteenth century and became the final blow to the already weakened faith.

Though the Mongols would eventually turn against Christianity, in the early years of conquest (starting at the beginning of the thirteenth century) they fought tirelessly to rid the region of Islam. The Mongol leader khan Hulegu (1217-1265) united with Euro-Christian forces to defeat the great Abbasid

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32 Jenkins, 110.
33 Jenkins, 105.
34 Wahab & Youngerman, 54.
35 Wahab & Youngerman, 31.
Hulegu’s joint army conquered Baghdad in 1258, and for a brief period of time, “Christians in the Middle East faced the prospect of life free from the pressures” of a hostile government. However, this victory was short lived. Hulegu, under the influence of his Christian wife, joined forces with Christian general Ked-Buka to conquer Syria in 1260 but was defeated by the Mamluk slave dynasty of Egypt, who were devout Muslims. Hulegu was forced to return back to Persia and from 1260-1295, the Nestorian church in Afghanistan was free from persecution, until Hulegu’s great-grandson, Ghazan took the throne in 1295. Though his Mongol predecessors had fought against Islam, he shocked his court when “he publicly announced his conversion to Islam,” and stated the official religion of his region, including Afghanistan, to be Islam. The Timurid dynasty would conquer Afghanistan in 1364, but in the years in between, the Mongols were ruthless in their religious persecution of Christians.

The ruthless destruction of Afghanistan by the Mongol army (perhaps 2,000,000 strong) led to the loss of Christianity in the country. Historically, Islam is thought to have spread violently through its belief in the lesser jihad. However, as mentioned prior, this was not the case for the early Muslims under Arab rule, but a mutation in the understanding of the lesser Jihad when the Turks and Mongols adapted the religion. Ahmed Rashid, a Yale Professor in Islamic studies, writes “nowhere in Muslim writings or tradition does jihad sanction killing of innocent non-Muslim men, women, and children.” The belief that it is just to do so under the prophet Mohammad is incorrect, and written into Afghan history solely “to justify their repression of women and minority ethnic groups.” Thus, when the Mongols adopted Islam and began to spread the faith using violence, it was not done in accordance with the true understanding of the religion.

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36 Moffett, 422.
37 Moffett, 423.
38 Moffett, 424.
39 Wahab & Youngerman, 60.
40 Rashid, 2.
41 Rashid, 3.
with Quranic law. Nevertheless, the Mongols believed their methods for conversion were compatible with Muslim doctrine, and did so until Christianity was wiped from the nation.

The Mongol leader Ghazan (1295-1304) was known to Christians as the angel of doom. After announcing that he and his court were now Muslim, his first order was for “the destruction of all churches, synagogues, and Buddhist temples throughout the land. Gone was the Mongol tolerance for all religions.” When the Christians had aligned themselves with Ghazan’s predecessors, many of them were known to harass Muslims in the streets. Thus, when the Muslims regained favor from the Mongol empire in 1295, they struck back at Christians with full force, even if they too were Mongols. Historian Samuel Hugh Moffett recounts in his work the tale of a Mongol patriarch being attacked in Maragheh by Muslim extremists, stating:

They beat him up, tied him up naked, hung him head downward, stuffed his mouth with ashes, and hit him…crying ‘Abandon your faith; turn Muslim and you will be saved’

Later when the Mongols would lose power to the Muslim Timur, conquerors of the Timurid dynasty (1346-1506), the persecution of Christians continued, as the Timurs believed the Christians were still allies with the Mongols. The Timurs believed the Christians to be “traitors—even accusing them of plotting mega-terror attacks on mosques and public monuments.” Muslim persecutions continued with great force, and by the end of the fifteenth century, Christianity had altogether been abolished from Afghanistan, whether Christians were killed under religious persecution or converted under the extreme pressure of Muslim extremists. As historian Philip Jenkins writes, “the deeply rooted

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42 Moffett, 476.  
43 Moffett, 476.  
44 Moffett, 476-477.  
45 Jenkins, 32.
Christianity of Africa and Asia did not fade away through lack of zeal, or theological confusion: it was crushed, in a welter of warfare and persecution.\textsuperscript{46}

Historically, the Roman Empire was known to successfully strike back against intruders. No one at the time could have predicted “that the Muslim conquest would mark a permanent transformation”\textsuperscript{47} and completely annihilate Christianity from its birthplace. In fact, Philip Jenkins accurately points out that Christianity is only affiliated as being European today by default because “Europe was the continent where it was not destroyed.”\textsuperscript{48} However, though Christianity has diminished greatly in the Middle East, and completely in Afghanistan, the effects of centuries co-existing together can still be seen with Islam today. Shi’ism, an Islamic sect practiced by 15% of Afghans,\textsuperscript{49} was greatly influenced by Christianity, most notably with the ritual of flagellation.\textsuperscript{50} But even so, the people of Afghanistan today have little to no interest in allowing other religions back into their nation. Even the declaration “of an 'Islamic Republic of Afghanistan’ in the constitution of 2004 provoked neither discussion nor concern.”\textsuperscript{51} Central Asia was once considered the centre of the world, linking China to Europe with the Silk Route, and being home to some of the most intellectual and culturally diverse minds in history,\textsuperscript{52} and though Christianity’s birthplace is predominately Muslim today, as Pope John Paul II once said, “truth will endure, in spite of dungeon, fire, and sword.”\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{46} Jenkins, 100.
\textsuperscript{47} Jenkins, 103.
\textsuperscript{48} Jenkins, 3.
\textsuperscript{49} Barfield, 40.
\textsuperscript{51} Barfield, 41.
\textsuperscript{52} Rashid, 15.
\textsuperscript{53} Jenkins, 2.
Bibliography


