

HUM 3557: Jews, Christians, Muslims: Medieval Light on Modern Issues
Study Guide 2.1 (Oct. 14-20): The Rise of Islam through Christian Eyes

Assigned readings:

-Tolan, *Saracens*, pp. 3-20, 40-104: chapters 1 (“God and History in the Christian West”), 3 (“Early Eastern Christian Reactions to Islam”), and 4 “Western Christian Responses to Islam [Eighth-Ninth Centuries]”)

-John of Damascus, “The Heresy of the Ishmaelites,” in *A Textual History of Christian-Muslim Relations (Seventh-Fifteenth Centuries)*, ed. Charles Tieszen, pp. 15-19

-“A Christian Account of the Life of Muhammad,” in *Medieval Iberia*, ed. Olivia Remie Constable, pp. 48-50.

The three assigned chapters in John Tolan’s *Saracens* present three different historical and geographic contexts. Chapter 1 (which we had skipped earlier) focuses on the writings of Isidore of Seville, an early seventh-century bishop in the Christian Visigothic kingdom that ruled what is today Spain and Portugal, after the collapse of the Roman Empire in western Europe. ***Although Isidore (c. 560-636) was a contemporary of the prophet Muhammad (c. 570-632), he knew nothing of the emergence of Islam.*** Why begin a book about medieval Christian views of Islam with a chapter on someone who knew nothing about Islam??? Isidore’s encyclopedic writings illustrate how early medieval Christians understood their world: when they encountered Islam, they tried to fit it to these pre-existing ideas about history, geography, ethnography, and religious diversity.

In chapter 3 (we read chapter 2 two weeks ago to help introduce the Qur’an), Tolan talks about the responses of Christian writers in the Near East to the Islamic conquests in the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries. I have included a short piece by one of these writers, John of Damascus, a Syrian Christian whose father was a civil servant for the Umayyad caliphs. John may have also been a civil servant, but he retired to a monastery. In this excerpt from his treatise on Christian heresies, he describes Islam (“the heresy of the Ishmaelites”) as if it were a new Christian heresy.

In chapter 4, Tolan turns to western Europe and considers the place of Islam in the writings of the Venerable Bede, a monk in early eighth-century Northumbria (today: northern England), and the responses of Christians in Spain to the Muslim conquest. I have also included the short and slanderous “biography” of Muhammad which Tolan explains that the Christian monk, Eulogius of Cordoba, claimed to have copied in a Christian monastery in Spain. As Tolan says, it includes some basic facts about Muhammad but these “are presented in the worst possible light, twisted almost beyond recognition by the hostile pen of the author.” (As in the case of the caricatures of Jesus in the Toledo Yeshu and Talmudic writings, or the bitterly anti-Semitic Christian texts we will soon read, I remind all of you that one part of our course is understanding conflict and prejudice. That involves looking it and analyzing the very ugly portrayals of a religion, its believers, and its most revered figures which its hostile rivals sometimes created.)

As we enter Unit 2, we shift our attention from the scriptures to the relationships among different religious communities and the ways they represented each other. Here, I begin with “snapshots” of key moments and concepts in the history of Christianity, Europe, and the Near East from late antiquity to the early middle ages to supply you with a historical context

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

1. Martyrdom in Christian History: Tolan discusses two sets of examples of Christians who were martyred (killed because of their faith) by Muslims: first, in the Near East (pp. 55-57), then, in Spain (pp. 85-97). To understand their significance, one must be aware of the place of martyrdom in Christian history...

In the Gospels, Jesus predicted several times that his followers would suffer persecution (e.g., John 15:18-20, Matthew 24:9). In Acts 7, we saw how the deacon **Stephen** was stoned to death by the Jews after delivering a speech rebuking them for rejecting Jesus and earlier prophets. We also learned of Herod's killing of James the apostle (Acts 12:1-2). During the second century, Christians suffered sporadic, local persecution by Roman authorities, not for what they did or believed as Christians, but for refusing to take part in religious and civic rituals that involved sacrifices or worship of pagan deities or the emperor. Some Christians sought out martyrdom ("voluntary martyrdom") by turning themselves in, but Christian leaders often condemned this. After 235, the Roman empire entered a period of crisis and Christians were subjected to widespread, systematic persecution under the emperors **Decius (249-251)** and **Valerian (253-260)** and in the **Great Persecution** during the first decade of the fourth century. Martyrs were commemorated with accounts of their trials, suffering, and execution. Once the persecutions ended, the courage of the martyrs was remembered as a "heroic age" for the church. Martyrdom was celebrated in the writings of early fourth-century historian **Eusebius** and the late fourth-century poet **Prudentius**, and it became a heroic ideal for later Christians.

The stories of Christian martyrs, revered as saints by Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians, may be more widely known today, but there were also numerous cases of Jewish martyrs, killed by the Greek and Roman authorities in Palestine and elsewhere for defending their religious traditions and practices. They were remembered and memorialized in Jewish literature and rituals, and their examples contributed to the shaping of contemporary Christian ideas about martyrdom and its portrayal. Important examples include the **woman with seven sons** killed during the Maccabean Revolt in the 160s BC, and the **Ten Martyrs**, rabbis who are commemorated as martyrs killed by the Emperor Hadrian, although they may, in fact, have been martyred at different moments following the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD and the Bar Kokhba revolt of the 130s.

2. The Third-Century Crisis, the Division of the Roman Empire, the Conversion of Constantine, and the End of the Empire in the West: When Tolan introduces the seventh-century bishop Isidore of Seville, he is describing *a post-Roman world in western Europe* with the Visigoths ruling over the former Roman provinces of Spain. When he talks about the seventh-century Muslim conquest of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, he refers to a Christian Roman Empire in the East with its capital at Constantinople. This was the world that had emerged from the crises and transformation of the Roman Empire which I described briefly in the Study Guide for Week 1.6 as a background to the emergence of Islam and our readings from Fred Donner's, *Muhammad and the Believers*.

After the crisis of the third century, the reforms of the emperor Diocletian, and the collapse of the tetrarchy (the system of co-rulership he initiated), the emperor Constantine's rule brought two fundamental changes to the Roman Empire. First, his own conversion to Christianity in 312 was followed in **313 by the Edict of Milan**, proclaiming toleration for Christians. After this, the Roman emperors were Christian, with the exception of a brief pagan restoration under

Emperor Julian (361-363), and the pace of conversion to Christianity quickened throughout the empire. Under **Emperor Theodosius** (379-395), Christianity became the state religion, as public support for pagan cults ended and pagan practices and associations were restricted or banned. Second, Constantine founded a new Eastern capital, **Constantinople** (today Istanbul, Turkey), in 324, on the site of the ancient city of Byzantium. The new capital was dedicated in 330. Although Constantine ruled a unified empire from 324 until his death in 337, the division between East and West, originally established under the tetrarchy became permanent after his death (with only brief periods of united rule, as in the last years [392-395] of Theodosius' reign).

With its capital at Constantinople, the Eastern Roman Empire endured until the Ottoman Turks captured the city in 1453. It is often referred to as the **Byzantine Empire** (named after the city of Byzantium), though its Greek-speaking Christian inhabitants called themselves “Romans” throughout the Middle Ages. This was the Christian Empire that battled the Muslims in the Near East in the seventh and eighth centuries. When the Muslim Arabs began raids and military campaigns in the 630s, the Eastern Empire under **Emperor Heraclius** and its rival, the Sasanian Persian Empire, had been weakened by nearly three decades of war, as I explained in the Study Guide for Week 1.6. Major territories (Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia) had changed hands and Constantinople itself was threatened by the Persians.

In western Europe, the Western Roman Empire faced civil wars, military rebellions, and invasions by the Goths and other coalitions of peoples in the late fourth and fifth centuries. Rome was sacked by the Goths (410) and Vandals (455), the last Roman emperor in the West was deposed in 476, and the western provinces of the Roman Empire came under the control of the “barbarian” peoples. The **Visigoths** eventually ruled over modern Spain and Portugal, and converted from Arian Christianity to Catholic Christianity under King Reccared in 589. The Franks ruled over modern France and, in 800, one of the Frankish kings, Charles the Great (Charlemagne) took the imperial title again, re-establishing the “Empire” as what is known as the Holy Roman Empire in the West.

3. Church Doctrine and Heresy in the Christian Empire When Toland describes the Muslim conquests and Christian responses to Islam, he frequently refers to “heresies,” forms of Christianity that deviated from orthodox teaching and were condemned by Christian bishops and councils. At first, Christian writers viewed Islam as a new brand of heresy, and Islam profited from the way heresies divided Christians within the Christian Empire. What were these Christian heresies and how did they shape the reception of Islam in the Christian lands of the Near East?

I briefly introduced heresy, and specifically the **Arian heresy**, in Study Guide 1.4, when we discussed John Chrysostom and the ways in which his attacks on the Jews were a tool for attacking Christian heretics. Remember, you can't have heresy without orthodoxy, and you can't have orthodoxy without authorities and institutions who are empowered to define “correct” and “incorrect” belief and practice. Even our brief look at the Gospels made clear that the earliest followers of Jesus had different perspectives on Jesus' life and mission. Throughout the first centuries of Christianity, Christian texts reveal a remarkable variety of beliefs concerning Jesus and his teachings.

In the third and fourth centuries, we move from a period of Christian “diversity” to one in which there are sharper boundaries between “orthodox” and “heretical” belief. Why? As Christianity grew, a network of Christian communities led by bishops defined a widely accepted body of Christian teaching. With the conversion of Constantine and the establishment of a

Christian Empire, the emperors sought to enforce uniformity in doctrine and practice, and the consolidation of church institutions made it possible to do so. In the fourth and fifth centuries, church councils (**Nicaea in 325**, Constantinople in 381, Ephesus in 431, and Chalcedon in 451) and the contemporary writings of the Church Fathers (leading theologians, usually bishops) determined the basic principles of Christian doctrine that would be accepted throughout the Middle Ages. In particular, these defined *the relationship between Jesus' human and divine nature, the Trinity (three "persons" in one God: Father, Son, Holy Spirit), and Mary's role as "mother of God"*, and *addressed questions about free will, divine grace, and salvation*. Some of these questions, not necessarily addressed directly or consistently in the New Testament, had grown in importance, as educated elites, familiar with Greek philosophy, converted to Christianity and sought to shape a more comprehensive theological and philosophical framework for belief.

In the seventh-century Near East, deep divisions over doctrine sparked conflicts between local Christian communities and imperial authorities. In addition, Christian communities in Mesopotamia and other areas beyond the borders of the Eastern Roman Empire often adhered to doctrines and practices regarded as heretical by the imperial church of Constantinople (sometimes known as the **Melkite church**). Tolan mentions two major movements: The **Nestorians**, named after Nestorius, a fifth-century patriarch of Constantinople, were condemned as heretical at the fifth-century councils of **Ephesus** and Chalcedon: they argued that Jesus' human and divine natures were separated, while the orthodox position held that the two natures were united and inseparable. The Nestorians remained important in Mesopotamia and Persia, outside of the Christian Roman Empire. The **Monophysites** believed that Jesus had only a single nature, and they emphasized his divinity. They rejected the **Council of Chalcedon's** definition of Jesus' two inseparable natures. Alexandria, Egypt was a center of Monophysitism and it was popular in the Near Eastern provinces of the Eastern Roman Empire, alienating those populations from imperial rule. The Eastern Emperors made some attempts to compromise with the Monophysite position. Justinian (527-565), for example, moved from persecution of the Monophysites to unsuccessful efforts to bridge the gap between their position and the doctrines approved at the Council of Chalcedon. Emperor Heraclius promoted a doctrine known as **Monothelitism** by which Jesus had two natures (human and divine) but only a divine will. This position, however, was condemned as heretical by the Third Council of Constantinople in 681.

TOLAN, SARACENS, CHAPTERS 1, 3, AND 4

CHAPTER 1: "God and History in the Christian West, c. 600"

Tolan uses the encyclopedic writings of Isidore of Seville to show how Christian clergy and intellectuals understood history, geography, ethnography (the differences among peoples), and religious diversity (pagans, Jews, Christian heretics) in the early seventh century. Isidore (c. 560-636) was a contemporary of Muhammad. As bishop of Seville, he was a leading churchman in the Visigothic kingdom of Spain. His encyclopedic writings were widely read in the Middle Ages. Although *Isidore was unaware of Islam*, his writings illustrate how medieval Christians looked to the Bible and the classical learning of ancient Greece and Rome to explain their world. For some time, the historical, geographic, ethnographic, and religious categories that we find in Isidore's work (and that of other early Christian writers) would be applied to the new religion of Islam. *Be sure to understand what these categories were, and, in the later chapters, pay*

attention to how they recur and are applied to Islam. As we consider later Christian responses to Islam, we must always ask whether these writings reflect direct knowledge of the new religion and contact with Muslims, or whether they are trying to “fit” a largely unknown religion and culture to pre-existing concepts based on the Bible, history, and the learning of classical antiquity.

Quotations to note and think about:

“While in other religions God is timeless and man’s history essentially cyclical, for the three Abrahamic monotheistic faiths, history is linear and the study of history is a window on the divine plan for humankind.” (p. 6)

Referring to the Jews’ parody of Jesus’ life (the *Toledoth Yesu* which we read about in Week 1.5) and the Christians’ caricatures of Muhammad, Tolan says, “...These legends...show how an embattled, despised religious minority created walls and boundaries between itself and the dominant (Christian or Muslim) majority. Because he had a detailed and disparaging biography of the founder of the majority religion, with derogatory explanations for its principal rites and holidays, the Jew (or Christian) could protect himself from doubt, could construct a wall of contempt between himself and Christianity (or Islam).” (p. 18)

Tolan addresses the hostility among these religions, “It is precisely because Christians and Jews are fighting for rightful ownership of a common spiritual heritage that their disputes can be so bitter. Each claims to be sole legitimate heir to Moses and Abraham; each claims exclusive rights to the correct interpretation of the Torah: those who are ‘too close for comfort’ provoke ‘uncharacteristic and bitter fury.’ When Islam steps forward as a third claimant to that heritage, the attacks from Jews and Christians will be harsh.” (p. 18)

Key names and terms

-**Eusebius**, early fourth-century author of *Ecclesiastical History* and *Chronicle*, links traditions of biblical history and Roman imperial history (p. 6)

-**Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies***, an encyclopedic compilation of knowledge (p. 5)

-**Isidore’s *Chronica maiora* (*Greater Chronicle***, uses six-age structure for biblical and classical history) and *On the Origins of the Goths* (legitimizes the lineage and history of the Visigoths who ruled Spain and had converted from Arian Christianity to Catholicism in 589) (pp. 6-8)

-**Isidore’s *Against the Jews***, treatise, proving Christian doctrine based on the Hebrew Bible, and attacking Jewish practices as described there (pp. 14-15)

-**Antichrist**, enemies of Christ, particularly one who comes before the Second Coming to mislead Christians as a false Christ (pp. 8-9)

-**Saracens, Agarenes, Ishmaelites**: names Christian writers used to give Near Eastern desert tribes a “genealogical ethnography” based on Biblical figures: Sarah, Abraham’s wife; Hagar, Sarah’s slave who bore a child to Abraham; and Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar) (pp. 10-11, 18)

-**Simon Magus**, magician and protagonist of a legendary contest with Peter and Paul, seen by Christians as a prototype for later heretics (pp. 12-13)

CHAPTER 3: “Early Eastern Christian Reactions to Islam”

Tolan begins by examining how Christians in the Near East responded to the rise of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries. For the most part, these Christians had lived in the Christian Roman Empire of the East and they were deeply divided by disputes over Christian doctrine, particularly about Jesus’ divinity and humanity. Many Christian writers whom Tolán discusses lived in territories that had come under Muslim rule, but some wrote from the Christian capital, Constantinople. The earliest writings focused on explaining the historical phenomenon of Islam’s rise: the conquest of Christian lands by a people whose exact religious beliefs remained obscure to Christian writers. As Islamic rule was consolidated in the Near East, more and more Christians converted to Islam. Now, Christian writers had to come to grips with Islam as a distinct religion, and their writings, whether *apologetic (defending Christianity)* or *polemical (attacking Islam)* directly address Islamic beliefs and practices, the teachings of the Qur’an, and the traditions surrounding the prophet Muhammad. There is a double audience for these works: some were directed at Christians, discouraging them from converting to Islam; some began to address Muslim religious figures directly, opening debates on scripture, history, doctrine, and practice.

As you read these different Christian responses to Islam, ask these questions: how do Christians “fit” Islam into their understanding of history? how do they respond to its religious beliefs and practices? what do Christians single out for attack and why? are their writings based on direct understanding of Islam or on some of the categories described in the discussion of Isidore in chapter 1? how do the different circumstances of the Christian authors (where they lived, their contacts and relations with Muslims...) affect their writing? who are they writing for? how and why do the Christian writings evolve over time?

Key names and terms

- Sophronios**, patriarch of Jerusalem, surrendered the city to Caliph ‘Umar through a treaty in 637; his sermons portrayed the Arab invasion as a punishment for Christian sins (pp. 42-43)
- Anastasius of Mt. Sinai**, a monk who wrote against the Monophysites, saw the Arab invasions as punishment for the Monophysite heresy, and associated the Muslims with demons and idolatry (pp. 43-44)
- Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius**, a Syriac work of c. 692, presented as if it were written by an early fourth-century bishop, Methodius of Olympus. Using the scheme of the six ages, it links the Arab invasions with the imminent end of the world, interprets them as punishment for Christian sins, demonizes the invaders, warns Christians against apostasy (renunciation of their faith), and predicts that the Christian Empire will rise again before a final series of calamities, including the coming of the Antichrist, heralds Jesus’ Second Coming (pp. 46-50)
- John of Damascus**, an orthodox Christian from a prominent Damascus family who served the Umayyad rulers as an administrator, later entered a monastery, wrote in Greek on heresy and on Islamic beliefs and scripture in his *Fount of Knowledge*, and defended Christianity against Islam in his *Disputation between a Saracen and a Christian* (pp. 50-55)
- Anthony Ruwah** and **Ampelon**: two Muslims in the Near East who converted from Islam to Christianity, were put to death by Muslim authorities for apostasy (renunciation of one’s religion), and celebrated as martyrs by Christians (pp. 55-57)
- Theodore Abu Qurrâh**, *On True Religion*, an early ninth-century Arabic treatise that uses reasoning to demonstrate the truth of Christianity and its superiority to other faiths (pp. 58-59)
- the *Risâlat al-Kindî*, this Arabic work, probably of the early ninth century, presents a supposed

exchange of letters between a Muslim and a Nestorian Christian at the Baghdad court of the Abbasid caliphs in which they discuss religious doctrines; it is likely by one Christian author, familiar with Islam and the Qur'an, who set out to refute Islamic doctrines, attack the prophet Muhammad, and defend Christian teaching (pp. 60-64)

-**Theophanes the Confessor**, monk of Constantinople, wrote a *Chronicle* in about 815, and explains Muslim military successes as a result of Christian divisions caused by heresies (pp. 64-67)

CHAPTER 4: “Western Responses to Islam (Eighth-Ninth Centuries)”

Turning to Western Europe, Tolan discusses the place of Islam in the writings of the Venerable Bede, an English monk, and the Christian response to the Muslims in Spain which was largely occupied by the Muslims in the early eighth century. Bede's extensive writings on theology, history, and other subjects may be compared with those of Isidore of Seville: both men drew heavily on scripture, the Church Fathers, and classical learning. Unlike Isidore, Bede wrote during and after the Islamic conquest of the Near East, North Africa, and Spain. Nonetheless, much of his writing fits the new religion to earlier examples of heresies and enemies of Christianity.

Within Spain, Tolan discusses how two sets of historical chronicles explained the Muslim conquest: a pair from the mid-eighth century, shortly after the conquest, and others from the end of the ninth century produced in the independent Asturian kingdom that preserved Christian independence and eventually led Christian resistance to the Muslims in the mountains of northern Spain. His treatment of the chronicles frames a longer discussion of the martyrs' movement in Cordoba, the Muslim capital, in the 850s, and its echoes elsewhere in Spain and Christian Europe. Faced with the growing dominance of Islamic culture, a few Christian clerics actively sought martyrdom by confronting Muslim officials and denouncing Islam. The martyrs' movement divided the Christian community of Cordoba between those—including Christian bishops—who sought accommodation with the Muslim authorities and those like Eulogius and Paulus Alvarus who encouraged and—in the case of Eulogius—eventually joined the martyrs. Besides defending and celebrating the martyrs, Eulogius and Alvarus also wrote polemical works against Islam, and Eulogius circulated the short, defamatory biography of Muhammad which we are reading. In conclusion, Tolan notes that, as late as the year 1000, four centuries after Muhammad's life, there was still little direct information about Islam available in Christian Europe. When contacts between Christians and Muslims increased in the eleventh century, Christian writers would rely heavily on sources, like the Bible, the Church Fathers, and Isidore, written before the appearance of Islam.

As you read this chapter, I recommend that you apply the same set of questions I proposed for chapter 3: how did Christians “fit” Islam into their understanding of history and respond to the religion of Islam? what did Christians single out for attack and why? were their writings based on direct understanding of Islam or on some of the categories described in the discussion of Isidore in chapter one? how were Christian writings shaped by their different circumstances, audiences, and purposes?

Key names and terms

-**Bede (c. 673-735)**, a monk of Northumbria (northern England), mentioned the “Saracens” in works like *De locis sanctis (On the holy sites)* and the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. His descriptions were often based on the Bible or related to those of other non-Christian peoples who attacked Christian territories. As the Muslims advanced in western Europe, they gained more prominence in his work, and the Christian kings of the West replaced the Byzantine emperors as protagonists in the defense of Christianity (pp. 72-77)

-**Latin chronicles of eighth-century Spain**: The *Chronicle of 741* and the *Chronicle of 754* present themselves as continuations of the seventh-century chronicles of John of Biclar and Isidore of Seville. The *Chronicle of 754* describes the Muslim conquests more negatively as a punishment for the sins and excesses of Byzantine and Visigothic rulers, and paints the fall of Visigothic Spain as a catastrophe of historic proportions. (pp. 78-85)

-**Mojarabs**: Christians who lived under Muslim rule in Spain and gradually became “Arabized”, using Arabic and becoming assimilated to aspects of Arab and Islamic culture (p. 83).

-**the martyrs of Córdoba**, Christians, mainly clerics, who sought martyrdom by insulting Muhammad and denouncing Islam before the Muslim authorities in Córdoba, Spain, in the 850s; their movement responded to the increasing dominance of Islamic culture (pp. 85-97); when their relics and cults spread to northern Europe, their stories were assimilated to the familiar stories of the early Christians persecuted by the Romans

-**Eulogius of Córdoba**, priest and author of the *Memoriale sanctorum*, celebrating the martyrs of Córdoba, and the *Liber apologeticus martyrum*, a defense of the martyrs which also includes a defamatory biography of Muhammad. He died as a martyr in 859 (pp. 85-95).

-**Paulus Alvarus of Córdoba** wrote a life of Eulogius and a treatise, the *Indiculus luminosus*, in which he defended the martyrs, criticized Christian accommodation with the Islamic rulers, and identified Muhammad as one of the Antichrists. His son, **Hafs ibn Albar**, wrote Arabic poems, translated the Psalms into Arabic, and wrote a defense (Apology) for Christianity in Arabic—all signs of how Christians were becoming assimilated to Arab culture in Spain (pp. 85-97).

-**the Asturian chronicles**, three chronicles (*The Prophetic Chronicle*, *The Chronicle of Albelda*, and *The Chronicle of Alfonso III*) written in the Christian Asturian kingdom of northern Spain in the 880s, interpreting the Muslim conquest in biblical terms as the punishment of Christians for their sins or those of their leaders, and looking forward to the restoration of Christian “Gothic” rule in Spain (pp. 98-100)

Key quotation:

“Christian belief held an honored if subservient place in Muslim theology, just as the Christian bishop held an honored but subservient place at the emir’s court [the court of the Islamic rulers of Spain]. There is however no room in Christian theology for lesser revelations; all prophets outside of Christianity are false prophets, devotees of Satan who must be fought.” (pp. 87-88)