

Book Review

The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World by John Morrow. Angelico Press: 2012

Mehraj ud din

The very idea of human existence in every civilizational discourse emerges from its onto-epistemological premise and every institutional offshoot develops in subservience of that world view. Islam being an egalitarian system, is quintessentially based on its onto—metaphysical premise intending to establish a welfare society based on Justice. The creation of Medinan state can be simply dubbed as a beginning of culminating the idea of “welfare state” inspired from the onto-epistemological glasses of Islamic worldview. After the migration to Medina, Muhammad drafted the first legal constitution, inclusive with diverse pluralistic underpinnings for existing faith systems—Christianity and Judaism—and other religious traditions known in history as like the people of the book “*mushabah bi ahl al-kitab*”. The book under review is a serious contribution in contextualizing the engagement of Prophet Muhammad with the Christian faith. Andrew Morrow sets out to offer concrete textual reasons, from the Prophet Mohammed himself, for an understanding of Islam that moves beyond stereotypes and reasserts the truly inclusive foundations of Islamic belief.

The book includes short introduction, three parts divided into seventeen chapters and end-matters (two appendices, bibliography and index). The author has collected, translated

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and contextualized Prophet Muhammad's (peace be on him) covenants with different Christian communities of his respective time including the Monks of Mount Sinai, Christians of Persia, Christians of Najran, Armenian Christians of Jerusalem, Christians of Assyria, and the Christians of the World. Andrew argues that these letters and treaties, which proclaim and define peaceful and mutually respectful relationships with Christians, have the potential to serve as a foundational source of Islamic belief and practice, on "equal footing" with the Koran and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad.

This work is divided into four parts (a) context of the covenants (b) original and translated text of covenants (c) Challenges of determining the authenticity of the covenants (d) witnesses and possible mode of transmitting the covenants. Due to the immense size and content of the book, the reviewer intends to review the first section of the book comprised of seven chapters (from page 1-201) and highlight its importance for achieving the target of Dialogue and possible peace between Christian and Muslim faith.

The first section "The Prophet Muhammad and the People of the Book" is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter "The Prophet Muhammad and the People of the Book" contextualizes the early life of Prophet Muhammad and dug deep to trace the roots of his encounters with the Christians. Andrew has presented a critical analysis of the constitution of Medina and its undisputed authenticity in Eastern and western academic circles. As Robert Hoyland argues that "the authenticity of the constitution of Medina is accepted by most of the scholars and even points out that Patricia Crone, a person with little love towards Islam and Muslims, admitted to its authenticity". (p.31) Furthering the debate, Andrew discusses the response of Judeo-Christian religions to the advent of Islam and the outright opposition of the Jews especially of Banu Qaynuqa, Banu Nadir and Banu Qurayzah. Dismantling the Orientalist Myth of expanding the Islamic rule under the banner of "peace Jihad", Morrow invokes the inherent argumentative "beauty of Quran, Prophet's sublime ethics and his generous and benevolent treaties, accords and covenants to those communities which

willingly submitted to the Islamic state”. (p. 42) His letters to the Emperor of Abyssinia, to Heraclius, to Muqawqis (Egypt), and to the Rulers of Oman and Ghassanids shows his will to invite all the factions across the territorial boundaries to the umbrella of Islam.

In Chapter 2 “The Prophet Muhammad and the Monks of Mount Sinai”, Morrow discussed the controversial and highly disputed document “The Covenant of the Prophet Muhammad with the Monks of Mount Sinai” concluded in the second year of the Hijrah, which many Orientalists summarily disputes as spurious. Despite its importance as a major milestone in Muslim-Christian relations, the covenant of the Prophet is virtually unknown to most Muslims and has historically received greater circulation and recognition among Arabic, Latin, and English—speaking Christians. This chapter mostly focuses on the unending diverse approaches to seek the “authenticity” of this covenant as some dates it to 1517 CE. (p. 75) Andrew while arguing that most traditional Muslim “ulama” accept the covenant of the Prophet Muhammad with the monks of Mount Sinai as authentic, its content is roundly rejected by certain groups of Islamic extremists. (p.77)

In Chapter 3—“The Prophet Muhammad and the Christians of Persia”, is also one of the important documents of historical importance and equally is seen with the doubt. Andrew assumes of three possibilities 1) the Persian version is the product of a very free translation of the Arabic original; 2) the Persian version has been tampered by Shi’ite scholars; or as far-fetched as it may seem, 3) the Arabic version of the Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of Mount Sinai is actually a translation from the original Persian. Seta B. Dadoyan argues that the covenant’s authenticity “cannot be established” but Andrew castigates it with the counter—argument that “it is not even disproved yet as well”. (p. 107)

While in Chapter 4—“The Prophet Muhammad and the Christians of Najran”, Andrew discusses the authenticity of its document as the covenant concluded between the Prophet and Christians from Sinai has received mixed reviews, with some scholars attesting to its authenticity and others considering it spurious, the “covenant of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of Najran has been castigated by both the Orientalist who brought it to light

and by the few others who are familiar with it”. (p. 115) Arguing the growing rift between Prophet Muhammad and the Christians of the Najran culminated into a treaty in the year of 10 A.H. was written by Abd Allah ibn Bakr to negotiate a more extensive understanding to establish certain rights and obligations between Christians and Muslims.

Chapter 5—“The Prophet Muhammad and the Christians of the World”, known in *Arabic as al-Ahd wa al-shurut allati sharataha Muhammad rasul Allah li ahl al-millah al-nasraniyyah*, literally, the Treaty and covenant which Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah, concluded with the Christian community, the covenant of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the world. Like the covenant of Mount Sinai, there are debates on the issues of its authenticity due to its resemblance in content with the covenant of Sinai and Najran. But that doesn’t make them forgeries rather show the shared common elements and conditions which were already present in the already written/signed covenants with the Christians of different communities. Chapter 6—“The Prophet Muhammad and the Assyrian Christians” is a covenant discovered before a century about which George Malech describes as the Agreement between Prophet Muhammad and Nazarene Christians of the East. Preserving the document until Selim I (1512-1520 CE), and then the same being shifted to Istanbul in 1517 according to George Malech and William Chauncey. Paradoxically, the Surma D’Bait, sister of Marshimun Benyamin, the patriarch of the Assyrian church of the east (1887-1918 CE) denies such transfer. Tracing its roots further, Andrew quotes Wigram and argues that “this document was preserved until the middle of the 19th century, when Kurdish hatred of Christians overcame their reverence for the Prophet and the grant perished in the “Massacres of Bedr Khan Beg” in 1847 and resulted in the destruction of this *ferman* (document)”. (p. 188)

Chapter 7—“The Prophet Muhammad and the Armenian Christians of Jerusalem”—establishes the commitment of Muhammad for not only reaching to Greek Orthodox Christians from Mount Sinai, the Coptic Christians of Egypt, the Assyrian Christians of upper Mesopotamia, and the Christians of Persia, but to the Armenian Christians of Jerusalem. Since the Eastern Roman Empire had expressed hostility towards him, Muhammad’s strategy

seems to have been to create a better zone of Greek, Assyrian, Armenian, and Persian Christian sympathizers, to extend his message and find a common ground against its enemy. Now preserved in St. James Library in the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem is actually the culmination of “Patriarch Abraham I tiresome efforts who travelled to Mecca in the 7th century to secure special privileges for the Armenian Christians from the Prophet Muhammad himself”. (p. 191)

In concluding the review of this path breaking scholarly work, I must admit the efforts of John Andrew Morrow to create a bridge out of this book between those of the Abrahamic faiths. Collecting the original manuscripts and the translations of these covenants vis-à-vis contextualizing and putting them in the test of objective historical comparative tests must be admired and applauded. Being academically objective and emotionally faithful seems to be missing the contemporary academic works which a reader or even a critical reviewer experiences at different instances of this book. This book can be used a key text in rethinking and redefining the relationship of Muslims with the Christians of the world and dismantle the “crafted hatred” between the two majoritarian faiths of contemporary world.
