

Islam: History and Taboo

Bat Ye'or

In the detestable current political climate, it is tempting to maintain the taboos on those historical subjects that could be easily exploited by xenophobic parties. Dhimmitude — in which Christians and Jews are tolerated as subjects of Islam — is one such case.

Dhimmitude has existed for 13 centuries in the Muslim empire established on former Christian lands. Extending over more than a millennium and spread over three continents — Africa, Asia, and Europe — this field of history was the setting for *Jihad*, the Crusades, *Reconquista* and the Balkan and Israeli wars of independence. Numberless populations, swept along in the whirlwind of centuries, were marked in the crucible from which issued the death of civilizations and the birth of others. Dhimmitude convulsed the whole 19th century, and Europe — as obsessed as it was divided — floundered in endless debates on the Eastern Question or, in plain terms, on how to put an end to dhimmitude.

World War I effected a 180-degree turn. Colonial imperatives, World War II and the Cold War, oil, economic, geostrategic and religious interests in the Muslim world — so many factors combined to muffle this history in the nebulosity of myth. And today, a pressing desire for security recommends leaving this cadaver to rot in its bandages of lies and oblivion. Indeed, does History not have its own built-in dynamic of overcoming events, but also a dangerous susceptibility to a reactivation of conflicts? Is amnesia not preferable, particularly in the crisis period we currently live in? And yet this history of dhimmitude, which embraces a three-dimensional relationship of the People of the Bible — Jews and Christians — and of the Qur'an, seems to me essential if current ideological conflicts are to be unraveled and deadlocks broken.

Perhaps we have missed the opportunity to discuss it calmly. Because it was during this convulsive and bloody 20th century that it might have been possible to talk frankly and initiate that critical dialogue with the Muslim elites about dogmas and jurisdictions that were so traumatic for the "People of the Book" — Jews and Christians, whom Islam joined together in the same status, that of the *dhimmi* — protected because subjected. For decades it

BAT YE'OR's latest book is *The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude, 7th to 20th Century*, foreword by Jacques Ellul (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996). She is also the author of *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians Under Islam*, preface by Jacques Ellul (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, fourth printing 1996), and *Juifs et Chrétiens sous l'Islam: les dhimmis face au défi intégriste* (Paris: Berg International, 1994).

would have been possible for Jews, Christians, and Muslims to explore together the cruel episodes in this shared history in order to alleviate, if not eliminate, the cultural conflicts in which religious fanaticism takes root.

But there was a preference to recall only the "Golden Ages" of idyllic multireligious societies, inventing them if necessary, to such good effect that today one feels defenseless, disoriented, when brought face-to-face with the conflicts of another age, deliberately erased from history.

Perhaps it is already too late for this shared reflection on the past, which would have united us in the same effort for peace and reciprocal respect. Because now History, banished from memory, fills the whole field of the future. We see this history of dhimmitude, so long repressed by our collective cowardice, unfolding around us, before our very eyes. It is claiming victims in Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, the Sudan, Iran, Pakistan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and elsewhere It even forms part of our European daily lives, now ruled by anti-terrorist measures; in the Rushdie Affair, it demonstrates the permanent violation of our democratic liberties; it wreaks havoc among the Muslim élites, responsible for having concealed it. Yes, this forbidden history, banished from memory, is casting its dark shadow over the future, where one can already hear the clacking of green flags, raised from the Balkans to China, even with a close ally, Turkey, the only Muslim country to have opted for secularism.

History, as archaic prejudice, is thus taking its revenge; it returns, shattering the idle chatter, playing with the masquerade of ideologies, crushing populations, driving fugitives before it. And faced with these remnants of peoples, whom a modicum of courage might perhaps have saved, nothing remains but the empty shells of nonsense, the same old stories with which it was hoped to muzzle History.

Perhaps it is too late for talking — talking in the sense of speaking the truth and not lies. "Because we have mocked the world for forty years the world has mocked us," said Bashir Geymayel, a few hours before his assassination. Perhaps it is too late for an overpopulated planet, rendered hysterical at being transfixed by the noise that envelops it. Perhaps God's wager on man has been lost in the whitewashing of massacres and the thermonuclear and chemical weapons factories. Perhaps the time has now come for man to support God, so wearied by having borne such a bloodthirsty humanity for so long. Perhaps we will at last come to understand that this grasping, this mutual clinging of God and man in the same wager and the same despair could overcome the period of annihilation•