Sacred Spaces: The Controversial Practice of Building Churches in Muslim Lands during the Mamluk Period

It is familiarly known among Muslims that Sharīʿa suggests the prohibition of participating in church construction. However, in historical accounts, a number of churches in Arab countries were built during the era of Islam. This led to ambiguities and the perception that the caliphs did not abide by Sharīʿa law then. Therefore, this essay aims to reveal the reasons and motives of those caliphs or other Muslim authority holders allowing the building of churches in Cairo during the Mamluk dynasty. Furthermore, this article seeks the extent to which Muslim authority holders contribute to the church building for Christians and the responses, attitudes and dynamics of Muslim residents around the churches built in their area. By employing the qualitative library method, by making primary and secondary pieces of literature as objects of study and then interpreting them from a historical point of view, this article indicates that life under the Mamluk dynasty was so dynamic. There was a different application for the restriction of building, rebuilding, or reopening churches between society and some sultans. While citizens acted massive attacks and destruction of the churches provoked by the fatwā of the elite, it seems there were also defenses from the authorities for this act of vandalism.

Keywords: Churches; Mamluk; Christian; Muslim; Cairo

Introduction

The issue of tolerance in Islam is a topic widely debated among academics, both implicitly and explicitly. Critics who perceive Islam as an intolerant religion often argue that certain Sharīʿa regulations discriminate against non-Muslims living in Islamic territories. These critics frequently base their arguments on the opinions of classical jurists regarding dhimmī communities and historical examples of state policies implemented by Islamic dynasties. For instance, they highlight rules such as the prohibition against dhimmīs building or renovating places of worship, the obligation to pay jizya, and restrictions on their participation in the state military.[1]

However, the claim that dhimmīs were prohibited from building or renovating places of worship becomes questionable when considering historical evidence, particularly in Egypt, where many churches were constructed during the Islamic period. For instance, the Church of 'Mar Marcus' in Alexandria was built between 29–56 AH, and the first church in the Roman province was established during the reign of Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik (47–68 AH). Moreover, Abd al-Aziz ibn Marwan permitted the construction of churches and other places of worship in Helwan, a city founded by Muslims.[2] Some Muslim rulers even contributed to the construction and beautification of Christian places of worship by building monasteries and creating gardens around them. Al-Maqrīzī records that eighty-six monasteries were built during the Islamic period, most of which were Jacobite, with some specifically dedicated to women. Additionally, during the Fatimid era, authorities allowed the Copts to construct churches in Cairo, reflecting a broader policy of permitting Christians to build churches and monasteries in other cities as well.

This phenomenon not only refutes the arguments of some scholars but also highlights debates surrounding the enforcement and flexibility of fatwās regarding the prohibition of building churches. Historical evidence suggests that the rule stating, "they will not build churches, monasteries, or synagogues in their cities or on their land, nor will they renovate the worship buildings of other religions that have been destroyed," often attributed to the ʻUmar Pact, was neither strictly applied nor consistently implemented by Muslim rulers. The ʻUmar Pact is frequently cited as a reference for such prohibitions; however, its authenticity, the timing of its issuance, and its validity as a legal basis have long been subjects of debate among scholars. Furthermore, some jurists permitted the construction of non-Muslim places of worship under specific conditions, such as the payment of taxes or maintaining a certain distance between these places of worship and Muslim settlements.[3]

During the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods, dhimmīs experienced relative peace and security, gaining significant wealth, influence, and power within society. Their prominence continued into the Mamluk period, where their societal role often became even more pronounced, sometimes surpassing that of Muslims within royal circles.[4] However, the Mamluk era (8th–9th centuries AH / 14th–15th centuries CE) was also marked by frequent riots and tensions between Muslims and Copts, culminating in the widespread destruction of churches. This duality—of significant conflicts alongside episodes of tolerance—has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry. Despite the challenges, the Mamluk period also witnessed the construction and reconstruction of churches, particularly in Cairo. These

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[1] Anver M. Emon, *Religious Pluralism and Islamic Law: Dhimmīs and Others in the Empire of Law*, *Oxford University Press*, vol. 5, 2012, 34.

[2] Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *Ghayr Al-Muslimīn Fī Al-Mujtamaʿ Al-Islāmī* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Usrah, 1992), 21.

[3]Joshua Mugler, “Recent Constructions: How the Churches of Classical Baghdad Were Built,” *Muslim World* 107, no. 3 (2017): 498–99, https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12194.

[4] Taqy al-Din Al-Maqrizi, *Tārīkh Al-Aqbāṭ Al-Qawl Al-Ibrīzī Li-l-ʿallāma Al-Maqrīzī* (Cairo: Dar al-Fadilah, 2012), 49.

efforts were characterized by intricate negotiations and complex socio-political dynamics, forming the central focus of this study.

The rules governing dhimmīs are closely tied to the classification of Muslim lands in Islamic legal tradition, which typically divides territories into three categories: 1) cities established by Muslims, 2) cities conquered by force, and 3) cities peacefully conquered through treaties.[5] According to the majority view, the construction or reconstruction of non-Muslim places of worship is prohibited in the first two types of cities, while in treaty-based cities, such activities are permissible if stipulated by the terms of the treaty.[6]

However, there are notable exceptions to this general rule. For instance, Hasan ibn Ziyad (d. 204 AH) and Muhammad ibn al-Hasan reported that Abu Hanifah permitted dhimmīs to construct places of worship outside city boundaries, such as in villages, agricultural areas,[7] or other locations not classified as cities.[8] Similarly, Ibn al-Qasim from the Maliki school and scholars of the Zaidiyya school allowed the building of entirely new places of worship even within Muslim cities.[9] While these opinions represent a minority view and deviate from the mainstream understanding, they underscore the nuanced and diverse interpretations within Islamic jurisprudence regarding non-Muslim places of worship.

Several scholars have explored topics related to church construction in Islamic territories, particularly during the Mamluk dynasty and earlier periods. For instance, Joshua Mugler examines the origins of churches and monasteries in Baghdad, focusing on the negotiation processes between Caliphs and the Christian community during the Abbasid era, using both Christian and Muslim historical sources. Mugler notes that while these sources provide details on the time and location of specific churches, they offer little information about the negotiation process for obtaining construction permission.[10] Similarly, Elif Keser-Kayaalp highlights instances in the Umayyad and Abbasid periods where some Caliphs permitted Christians to build and rebuild churches, particularly in regions such as Ṭur ʿAbdin in southeastern Turkey.[11] This permission, Keser-Kayaalp suggests, may have been motivated by a desire to foster loyalty among Christian communities. These examples underline the complexities of church construction policies in Islamic governance, reflecting both pragmatic and political considerations.[12]

Numerous studies, also, have explored the dynamics between the Mamluks and Christians, often highlighting the challenges faced by Christian communities under Mamluk rule. Richard Gottheil, for instance, noted that dhimmīs faced recurrent threats during this period. Similarly, Ira Lapidus observed a significant decline in the population of Coptic Christians, who became a minority under Mamluk governance.[13] Wiet further argued that although Mamluk rulers occasionally implemented policies favoring the Copts, especially during conflicts, these measures had little lasting impact. Moreover, Moshe Perlmann highlighted an increase in religious thought and fatwās expressing hostility toward Christianity after 1250. Consequently, much of the modern scholarship portrays the Mamluk period as a time when Christian communities in the East, particularly under Mamluk rule, experienced significant

[5] Taqī al-Dīn ʿAlī al-Subkī, *Fatāwā Al-Subkī* (Beirut: Dar al-Maʻrifah, n.d.), Vol. 2, 388.
[6] al-Kamāl Ibn al-Humām, *Sharḥ Fatḥ Al-Qadīr ʿalā Al-Hidāyah* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1970), Vol. 6, 58.
[7] Muḥammad al-Sarakhsi, *Sharḥ Al-Siyar Al-Kabīr* (Al-Sharikah al-Sharqīyah li-al-Iʻlānāt, 1971), 1529.
[8] al-Sarakhsi, 1533.
[9] ʻAbd al-Karīm Zaydān, *Aḥkām Al-Dhimmīyīn Wa Al-Mustaʽminīn Fī Dār Al-Islām* (Amman: Maktaba al-Quds, 1976), 96–99.
[10] Mugler, "Recent Constructions: How the Churches of Classical Baghdad Were Built."
[11] Elif Keser-Kayaalp, "Church Building in the Ṭur ʿAbdin in the First Centuries of the Islamic Rule," in *Authority and Control in the Countryside* (Brill, 2018).
[12] Keser-Kayaalp, 202.
[13] Ira M Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

decline and adversity.[14] A study conducted by Ghazi, et al., examines the phenomenon of restoration and renovation of several churches in Cairo and some of the main factors contributing to this phenomenon. He explained that factors such as political and economic stability, as well as policies implemented by Mamluk and ottomans rulers who were more tolerant of religious minorities.[15] This study, however, seeks to offer a nuanced perspective. While it acknowledges the existence of conflicts involving Muslim rulers and communities against Christians, it also highlights instances where Mamluk authorities took actions favorable to Christians. These include decisions to build, rebuild, reopen, or defend churches, demonstrating a more complex and multifaceted relationship between Muslims and Christians during this period.

This essay aims to explore the responses, attitudes, and dynamics of Muslim residents regarding the churches built in their areas. Additionally, this study seeks to investigate the reasons and motivations behind the Muslim authorities' decisions to allow the construction of churches in Cairo during the Mamluk dynasty and to what extent they contributed to this process. Utilizing a qualitative-library research method, this paper draws primarily on al-Maqrīzī's works, including *al-Sulūk li-Maʿrifat Duwal al-Mulūk*, *al-Mawāʿiẓ wa-al-Iʿtibār bi-Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-al-Āthār*, and *Tārīkh al-Aqbāṭ al-Qawl al-Ibrīzī li-l-ʿallāma al-Maqrīzī* as main sources, along with secondary literature related to the Mamluk period, including books, journals, and other relevant materials.

Dynamics of Muslim Residents around the Churches

As previously mentioned, many churches were built during the golden age of Islam, and under the Mamluk period, Christians held an important position in the kingdom. This, however, sparked a certain sentiment within the Muslim community. One significant moment of this sentiment occurred in 700 AH/1301 CE, when it reached its peak through a decree issued by the qadi, Najm al-Dīn ibn al-Rifʿah. This decree, titled *al-Nafāʾis fī Adillat Hadm al-Kanāʾis*, was a short juridical treatise in which he advocated for the destruction of all churches and synagogues in Cairo. Some chroniclers note that this text was used to justify the widespread attacks and destruction of churches.[16] Despite Ibn al-Rifʿah's position as a government official, Donald P. Little argues that the primary source of anti-Coptic sentiment did not originate from the kingdom or the grassroots community, particularly among the lower class. In response to Ibn al-Rifʿah's fatwā, the Mamluk authorities rejected his decree through an official edict issued by the chief qadi, supported by the consensus of contemporary jurists.[17]

On the other hand, the Mamluk kingdom also showed support for the Copts, particularly in the aftermath of incidents of church destruction. For instance, the authorities arrested the provocateurs, including al-Qusi – the author of a Sufi text that incited persecution of Copts. He was apprehended on charges of leading the destruction of dozens of churches in Qūṣ in 707/1307.[18] In the context of these riots, the fact that the general public was involved in the widespread destruction of churches, while the qadi and caliph leaders took steps to defend the Copts, suggests the presence of social jealousy within society. This social tension could easily be exploited, leading to acts of vandalism fueled by provocation.

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[14] Linda S Northrup, "Muslim-Christian Relation in the Mamluk Period, 1279-90" (McGill University, 1974), 109–10.

[15] Ahmad ʿAtiyyah Ghazi, Muhammad ʿAbd al-Wadud ʿAbd al-ʿAzim, and Ahmad Amin, "Tarmīm Wa-Tajdīd Al-Kanāʾis Bi-Madīnat Al-Qāhirah Fī Ḍawʾ Al-Wathāʾiq Al-ʿUthmāniyyah (923-1213 H / 1517-1798 M)," *Al-Majallah Al-Duwaliyyah Lil-Turāth Wa-Al-Siyāḥah Wa-Al-Ḍiyāfah* 14, no. 2 (2020): 23–58.

[16] Gowaart Van Den Bossche, "Destroying Churches by Performing Knowledge: Ibn Al-Rifʿa's Kitāb Al-Nafāʾis Fī Adillat Hadm Al-Kanāʾis (700/1301) and the Social Negotiation of Legal Authority," *Islamic Law and Society* 27, no. 4 (2020): 2.

[17] Van Den Bossche, 5.

[18] Van Den Bossche, 13.

The movement for church destruction reached its peak in 1320 CE and the subsequent years. The destruction of churches occurred simultaneously, spreading from Cairo, Alexandria, and Damietta in Lower Egypt to Qus in Upper Egypt. According to al-Maqrīzī, around sixty churches were destroyed in a single wave. Among the churches targeted were those in various locations, including a church in Qalaat al-Jabal, one in the land of al-Zuhri, another near the Nasserite pond, and several others in neighborhoods like al-Hamra, Haret al-Hikr, and Haret al-Rum in Cairo. Churches in Alexandria, Damanhour, Gharbia, Al-Sharqiyah, Bahnasawiya, Assiut, Manfalut, and Minya were also affected. In Upper Egypt, cities such as Qus, Aswan, and Al-Etfihiyah saw widespread destruction, with several churches demolished.[19] The authorities were stunned by the scale of the destruction and were unable to halt the violence. By 852 AH/1448 CE, historian al-Sakhāwī reported that no church in Egypt escaped damage. These events left a lasting impact on Cairo and the religious infrastructure of the Coptic community throughout the country.[20]

Before the peak of church destructions in Egypt in 852 AH, tensions between the Coptic and Muslim communities escalated significantly. Unresolved grievances among Muslims, exacerbated by rebellions and acts of vandalism committed by some Muslim groups, were met with retaliatory actions by the Copts. In response to the growing tensions, Copts engaged in acts of defiance, such as setting fires in Cairo and Fustat in 623 AH/1264 CE and 721 AH/1321 CE. These fires were seen as revolts and reactions to the injustices they perceived, particularly in response to the destruction of churches by Muslims. During the 721 AH/1321 CE revolt, the state intervened and clarified the situation by questioning the head of the Coptic community. The Coptic patriarch explained that these acts of defiance were the result of the "ignorant Christians" acting out of frustration. He further stated that they were attempting to avenge the actions of "ignorant Muslims" who had destroyed their places of worship. This exchange reflects the complex dynamics of retaliatory violence and the ongoing cycle of tensions between the two communities during this period.[21]

The consequences of the incident were severe. In the aftermath of the Coptic revolt and the retaliatory fires, the state imposed new restrictions on Christians and Jews. They were required to wear specific colors on their turbans to distinguish them from Muslims. Christians who refused to wear the mandated blue turban faced harsh penalties, including the confiscation of their property and that of their spouses. Additionally, Christians were barred from working for emirs or holding any royal positions within the kingdom. As a further measure, churches across Egypt were closed for a year.[22] This ban was only lifted after diplomatic efforts by envoys from the King of Ashkari, the Franks, who intervened to mediate the reopening of the churches. Following these negotiations, the Al-Muallaqa Church in the city of Egypt and the royal Church of Mikael were reopened.

One of the dynamics in society at the time was the tension surrounding the state's approval for the opening of churches. When the state granted permission for a church to open, the people often gathered to protest against the emir, his deputy, and the Christians. Among their grievances was that Christians were opening churches without proper authorization, and some even resisted wearing the prescribed turbans, which distinguished them from Muslims, citing their connections to the emir as justification for defying the rule.[23] During the Mamluk period, there was a clear reluctance among some members of society to allow churches to be built or opened in their neighborhoods. These individuals argued that

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[19] Taqy al-Din Al-Maqrizi, *Al-Sulūk Li-Maʿrifat Duwal Al-Mulūk* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah, 1997), Vol. 3, 39.

[20] Aziz Suryal Atiya, *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, ed. William Yewdale Adams, vol. 8 (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 3.

[21] Al-Maqrizi, *Tārīkh Al-Aqbāṭ Al-Qawl Al-Ibrīzī Li-l-ʿallāma Al-Maqrīzī*, 49–50.

[22] Al-Maqrizi, 50.

[23] Al-Maqrizi, *Al-Sulūk Li-Maʿrifat Duwal Al-Mulūk*, Vol 2, 34.

newly constructed churches could be torn down, referencing the fatwā of the head qadi, Najm al-Din, which supported such actions. On the other hand, some Christians appeared to enjoy preferential treatment due to their close ties with the authorities, which gave them the confidence to openly disregard the state-imposed rules.

On another occasion, the construction of the Barbara Church in Haret El-Roum led to unrest among the local residents. In response, they reported the issue to Emir Arghun, who forwarded the complaint to the Sultan at the House of Justice. Emir Arghun supported the complaint, resulting in the church being demolished and replaced with a mosque.[24] According to al-Maqrīzī, the Christians were upset by this action and brought their grievances to the qadi at the time, Karīm al-Dīn, who then passed the case on to the Sultan. This back-and-forth of complaints to the authorities reflects the strong religious sentiments present in society during the Mamluk period, highlighting the tensions between different religious communities and their ability to influence the state's decisions.

In Mamluk Egypt, while Christians sought to live freely within the boundaries allowed by state officials, Muslims often viewed them as a threat to public life and sought to marginalize them. One such example comes from the state official Jamāl al-Dīn al-Asnawī (d. 1370), who lamented that the government was not enforcing the regulations for dhimmīs, allowing Christians to bypass these rules with little fear of consequences. According to al-Asnawī, Christians were siphoning money from the state treasury into the coffers of monasteries and churches, leading a luxurious lifestyle supported by these profits. This economic privilege, combined with their resentment toward Muslims, fueled a growing sense of animosity. Christians, according to al-Asnawī, viewed Muslims as usurpers of their rights in a land that they felt was once their own.[25]

The authorities' treatment of dhimmīs, particularly in regard to their houses of worship, varied significantly. While some officials sought to enforce established rules, others took a more drastic approach by confiscating, looting, and even destroying churches, only to later regret their actions and initiate their reconstruction. In some cases, those responsible for the destruction of churches were punished, while in other instances, authorities issued orders to rebuild them, despite ongoing restrictions on the construction of new places of worship.[26] Overall, the treatment of non-Muslims in Muslim societies, particularly in the aftermath of the Crusades, became increasingly harsh and intolerant, reflecting broader shifts in political and social dynamics during that period.

During the war between the Mamluks and the Mongols, several Christian entities, including the kingdoms of Armenia and Georgia as well as Crusader groups, formed a coalition with the Mongols to attack the Mamluks. After the Mongols were ultimately defeated, the Mamluks sought revenge on their allies, particularly targeting Armenia in 1283-1284. This retaliation was driven by Armenia's significant role in burning mosques in Aleppo and culminated in the establishment of several treaty agreements that gradually diminished Armenian power.[27] The alliance between these Christian groups and the Mongols, along with their active support for the enemy,[28] further fueled Muslim resentment toward Christians, intensifying tensions between the two communities.

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[24] Al-Maqrizi, Vol 2, 34.

[25] David Thomas, "Christians under Muslim Rule, 650–1200: Christians in the Muslim Arab World.," in *Routledge Handbook on Christian–Muslim Relations* (London: Routledge, 2017), 71.

[26] Milka Levy-Rubin, "The Pact of ʿUmar," in *Routledge Handbook on Christian–Muslim Relations*, ed. David Thomas (Routledge, 2017), 86.

[27] Levy-Rubin, 80.

[28] Levy-Rubin, 82.

Furthermore, the relationship between the Mamluks and the Crusader states was another key factor in shaping interreligious dynamics, although their rivalry with the Frankish Crusader kingdoms was secondary compared to their conflict with the Mongols. The interactions between the Mamluks and foreign Christian powers often influenced the broader population but less frequently impacted individuals directly. Muslims regarded the Crusaders as invaders and treated them accordingly, viewing their presence as a direct threat to their land and sovereignty.[29] Moreover, the religious similarities between Coptic Christians and the Crusaders fueled suspicions that the Copts were allied with or acting as spies for the enemy.

The frequent wars with both the Crusaders and the Mongols are often cited as a factor that contributed to increased rigidity among scholars during this period. The Mongol conquest, particularly the devastating sacking of Baghdad in 1258 CE, left Egypt as the last major stronghold of the Islamic world. Under the Mamluks, Egypt assumed the role of the leader in defending the Muslim community through jihad against external aggressors.[30] Although the Crusader and Mongol threats differed in nature,[31] the shared fear of defeat—reminiscent of the fall of Baghdad—heightened Mamluk's vigilance against perceived enemies, including Christians, who were often viewed with suspicion as potential collaborators or traitors. The dense population and economic diversity of Cairo further created conditions where mobs could be quickly assembled and incited to violence, reflecting the tense and volatile atmosphere of the time.

Sectarian and religious conflicts, compounded by the enforcement of increasingly restrictive laws—such as limitations on employment opportunities—led many Copts to convert to Islam during the late medieval period. However, some of these converts reportedly continued practicing Christianity in private. Restrictions on constructing new churches and synagogues were occasionally circumvented by holding prayers in converted private residences.[32]

Some academics suspect that these rules aimed to subdue and compel Coptic Christians to become more compliant with the authorities. Both jurists and rulers, including caliphs and sultans, often referenced the "Pact of Umar" when formulating such regulations.[33] This pact served as a foundational text outlining the obligations and restrictions imposed on non-Muslims under Islamic rule. Among the rules enforced were requirements for Christians and Jews to wear distinct clothing, use donkeys as their mode of transportation, and refrain from building or renovating churches, synagogues, or similar structures. However, not all provisions of the pact were strictly applied. For instance, stipulations such as refraining from displaying crosses or religious books publicly, sounding church clappers softly, avoiding loud mourning processions, or not lighting streets or markets in Muslim neighborhoods were less consistently enforced.

Mamluk Sultan's Motives and Contribution to the Building of Churches

There is ongoing debate about whether Copts truly enjoyed life under Mamluk rule in Cairo. On one hand, they had the freedom to practice their religion and, in some cases, even held rights comparable to or exceeding those of Muslims. However, exceptions must be acknowledged during times of crisis,

[29] Northrup, "Muslim-Christian Relation in the Mamluk Period, 1279-90," 83.
[30] Mark N. Swanson, *The Coptic Papacy in Islamic Egypt (641-1517)* (The American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 102.
[31] Peter Malcolm Holt, *The Age of the Crusades: The Near East from the Eleventh Century to 1517* (Routledge, 2013), 204.
[32] Amina Elbendary, *Crowds and Sultans: Urban Protest in Late Medieval Egypt and Syria* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 171.
[33] Jason Welle, "The Status of Monks in Egypt under Early Mamlūk Rule : The Case of Ibn Taymiyya (With an Annotated Translation of Ibn Taymiyya ' s Fatwā on the Status of Monks)" 55 (2014): 46–49.

when violence against them erupts, whether instigated by Muslim communities or the authorities. Despite these challenges, the Mamluks' efforts to maintain stability and isolate the Coptic Church in Egypt from external influences should not be overlooked. The Copts represented the largest Christian community in Egypt and remained a significant minority within the broader population.[34]

Historical records about church construction during the Mamluk era are sparse, with only a few accounts referencing renovations, rebuilding, and reopening. One notable example is Saint Mark the Evangelist Church in Giza, which was destroyed after 800 AH (1397–1398 CE) and rebuilt in the 15th century.[35]

In al-Maqrīzī's writings, there is mention of a proposal by Christians to the Sultan requesting permission to renovate the walls of Barbara's Church in Haret El-Roum. The Sultan convened a meeting with elders and emirs to deliberate on the matter, and ultimately granted permission for the renovation. Interestingly, during the rebuilding process, Christians collaborated and even hired several Muslims to contribute to the construction, resulting in a well-crafted building.[36]

This account highlights the dynamics of social life during the Mamluk era. The appeal of Christians as citizens to the Sultan reflects a sense of engagement and negotiation within the society. Moreover, the fact that the Sultan sought advice from his advisors and emirs and granted permission underscores that the rights and status of Copts, despite being a minority, were acknowledged and considered within the framework of governance.

In another account, al-Maqrīzī mentions an incident involving Christians writing to al-Hussam Astadar al-'Alai, who was later appointed Emir of Tabalkhanah. They sought his assistance in overturning a judge's decision to imprison a Christian until he converted to Islam, citing that his grandfather had been a Muslim. This case was intertwined with a conflict over the construction of a church.[37] A heated debate ensued between al-Hussam, who supported the Christians, and the judges involved in the trial. This disagreement eventually escalated into sectarian tensions.[38]

Additionally, al-Maqrīzī records that one of the Coptic patriarchs petitioned Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad, requesting permission to reopen certain churches. This appeal highlights the efforts of religious leaders to advocate for their community during challenging times. Furthermore, Patriarch Benjamin II, who served during a relatively peaceful and stable period, is noted for funding the reconstruction of the Monastery of St. Bishoi in Scetis.[39]

The support of authorities provided Christians with a relatively strong and respected position within Mamluk society. This patronage was often motivated by mutual benefits and necessities. One significant factor was the expertise of Christians in specific fields, particularly in financial administration and other bureaucratic roles.[40] Their skills made them indispensable to the kingdom, allowing them to wield substantial influence, especially in critical governmental units like the Finance

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[34] C. E. Bosworth, "Christian and Jewish Religious Dignitaries in Mamlûk Egypt and Syria: Qalqashandî's Information on Their Hierarchy, Titulature, and Appointment (II)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 3, no. 2 (1972): 207.
[35] Taqy al-Din Al-Maqrizi, *Al-Mawāʿiẓ Wa-Al-Iʿtibār Bi-Dhikr Al-Khiṭaṭ Wa-Al-Āthār* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah., 1998), Vol 4, 448.
[36] Al-Maqrizi, *Al-Sulūk Li-Maʿrifat Duwal Al-Mulūk*, Vol 3, 4.
[37] Magdy Gerges, "Marsūm Li-l-Sulṭān Al-Ghūrī: Diyār Al-Barāmūs Wa-Ṣirāʿ Ḥawla Mumtalakāt Bi-l-Naḥrāriyyah," *Annales Islamologiques* 53 (2019).
[38] Al-Maqrizi, *Al-Sulūk Li-Maʿrifat Duwal Al-Mulūk*, Vol 4, 184-185.
[39] Swanson, *The Coptic Papacy in Islamic Egypt (641-1517)*, 103–4.
[40] Al-Maqrizi, *Tārīkh Al-Aqbāṭ Al-Qawl Al-Ibrīzī Li-l-ʿallāma Al-Maqrīzī*, 49.

Bureau. This department was arguably one of the most essential components of the administration, particularly in the capital.[41]

Copts who served in financial bureaucracies were often affluent, with their wealth surpassing that of many Muslims. Their financial and administrative expertise granted them considerable power and influence. For example, al-Mulk b. al-ʿAnnām, a Christian who held a prominent position as a chartered accountant in a respected financial institution, exemplifies this dynamic. Despite regulations that prohibited non-Muslims from working in certain government roles, al-Mulk was able to thrive. He wore a distinctive turban and silk dress, markers of his elevated status, and commanded the respect of royal elites, who stood before him in deference.[42] However, this prosperity and visible success among Coptic officials often fueled resentment among the broader population, particularly in economically disadvantaged communities.

Throughout Mamluk's history, Christians held several key positions and played important roles in politics. For example, in 679 AH (1280-1281 CE), the Patriarch of Alexandria was part of an embassy sent to the Byzantine emperor. His involvement in these negotiations could have been both a representation of Christian influence and a strategic move to pressure the emperor, helping to facilitate agreements with foreign powers. Secondly, the treaty with Genoa, concluded during this period, was signed in the presence of bishops and monks, highlighting the significant role Christian clerics played in the Mamluks' foreign relations, particularly with other Christian states. Thirdly, a certain Hibbat Allâh, a Coptic, held the *mustardy* (second deputy vizier) of Egypt.[43] Also, some Christians worked as scribes or clerks of the army bureau (*Kuttāb Dīwān al-Juyūsh*) in the Mamluk period. This institution was responsible for managing administration, archiving various records, and addressing logistical needs related to the military.

However, this was not always the case. In the Naḥrāriyya area, for example, Christians established a large church that became the center of the bishops' residence. Due to the significance of this church, its administration was closely tied to the civil administration of the country. The Copts in this area were able to build such a prominent church thanks to their influential status in society and strong economic standing. Despite this, the church still became a target for destruction. Even though influential Coptic figures in Naḥrāriyya had strong connections with the emirs and could appeal to them for the church's restoration, their efforts were unsuccessful.[44]

In addition to internal factors, external forces also played a role in influencing royal decisions. From the early 14th century onwards, trade with Venice, Genoa, and Aragon became highly lucrative for Egypt. These good relations with the Mamluk Sultans sometimes allowed foreign powers to exert pressure on behalf of their co-religionists. For example, in 702 AH/1303 CE, James II of Aragon sent an envoy to Egypt with large gifts for the Sultan and royal officials.[45] The purpose of these gifts was not only to show goodwill but also to ensure the reopening of the Harat Zuwaila Coptic Church for the Jacobites, as well as the Melkite St. Nicholas Church in Cairo—some even mention the Venetian Church.

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[41] Carl Petry, "Geographic Origins of Dīwān Officials in Cairo during the Fifteenth Century," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 21, no. 2 (1978): 168.
[42] Gowaart Van Den Bossche, "The Maghrebi Vizier and the Haughty Copt. Historiography, Polemics and Narrative in a Mamluk-Period Anecdote," *Annales Islamologiques* 52 (2018): 356.
[43] Northrup, "Muslim-Christian Relation in the Mamluk Period, 1279-90," 113–14.
[44] Gerges, "Marsūm Li-l-Sulṭān Al-Ghūrī: Diyār Al-Barāmūs Wa-Ṣirāʿ Ḥawla Mumtalakāt Bi-l-Naḥrāriyyah."
[45] Al-Maqrizi, *Tārīkh Al-Aqbāṭ Al-Qawl Al-Ibrīzī Li-l-ʿallāma Al-Maqrīzī*, 129.

In exchange for leniency and guarantees for Christians, the Aragonese also promised similar concessions for Muslims living under their rule. They also offered assurances for unhindered access to the Holy Places in Palestine.[46] Since 659 AH/1261 CE, Jerusalem had been under the sovereignty of the Mamluk Sultanate in Cairo, making it a significant issue in Christian diplomatic agreements. Requests for transit permissions for monks in Jerusalem, as well as the rebuilding of burial sites and places of worship, were commonly included in these covenants, along with provisions for entering the Holy Sepulcher without paying taxes.[47]

Diplomatic relations and treaties with foreign kingdoms also played a role in the Mamluk Sultanate's decision to allow the construction of churches. A notable example is the relationship between the Mamluks and Ethiopia. The Ethiopian king, who was Coptic, interceded on behalf of the Copts with the Mamluk sultans, particularly to ensure the protection of Christians in Cairo. In return, he pledged to protect Muslim mosques in Abyssinia.[48] A specific instance of this diplomatic exchange occurred in 847 AH/1443 CE, when the Ethiopian king sent a letter to Sultan Jaqmaq protesting the destruction of the Coptic monastery in the Delta, known as Dayr al-Maghṭis or Dayr al-Ghaṭs. The destruction had been ordered by Sultan al-Ashraf Barsbāy in 841 AH/1438 CE.[49]

Generally, the Kingdom of Abyssinia demanded that the Mamluks continue the tradition of tolerance upheld by their predecessors in respecting the Christian communities within their territory. This demand reflects Abyssinia's intention to ensure that Christians in Mamluk lands could peacefully perform their religious rituals while maintaining cross-religious stability between the two regions. In this context, Abyssinia emphasized the importance of an unwritten agreement between the two powers, committing to the mutual protection of each other's religious communities—Christians under Mamluk rule and Muslims in Abyssinian territories.

In the letter, Abyssinia also raised complaints regarding several discriminatory policies enacted by the Mamluks against Christians, including restrictions on Christian burials, the imposition of taxes deemed excessive, and actions by some Muslims that hindered Christians from worshipping or celebrating religious holidays in their churches. Additionally, the confiscation of church property by certain groups further strained interfaith relations within Mamluk domains. In a letter addressed to the Mamluk Sultan, Abyssinia openly compared this treatment with how they treated Muslims in Ethiopia, which was described as far more tolerant and respectful of religious rights. This comparison was not merely rhetorical but served as a diplomatic tool to highlight the imbalance in the inter-regional relationship.

The arrival of this letter, although accompanied by gifts as a gesture of respect, also contained implicit threats urging the Mamluks to meet Abyssinia’s demands promptly. Such letters were not uncommon in the diplomatic relations between the two powers, as Abyssinia had on several occasions leveraged strategic issues—such as threats to the Nile River’s flow—to pressure Mamluk policies concerning Christian minorities. This situation, as documented in the book of *Al-Tibr al-Masbūk fī Dhayl al-Sulūk*,

> “It is no secret to you or to your Sultan that the Nile River flows into your lands from our territory. We hold the power to divert its waters, preventing the flow from reaching your lands, for we control regions that would allow us to redirect the course before it ever reaches you. What restrains us from doing so is none other than

[46] Bosworth, “Christian and Jewish Religious Dignitaries in Mamlûk Egypt and Syria: Qalqashandî’s Information on Their Hierarchy, Titulature, and Appointment (II),” 209.

[47] Frédéric Bauden and Malika Dekkiche, *Mamluk Cairo, a Crossroads for Embassies: Studies on Diplomacy and Diplomatics* (Brill, 2019), 640.

[48] Atiya, *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, 8:3.

[49] Bauden and Dekkiche, *Mamluk Cairo, a Crossroads for Embassies: Studies on Diplomacy and Diplomatics*, 647.

> our reverence for Allah the Almighty and our compassion for His servants. We have conveyed to you what you must be made aware of; now consider carefully what course of action you should take, guided by what Allah has inspired in your heart. You can no longer offer any justification or defense for failing to address this matter."[50]

Despite the letter contains threatening, one noteworthy aspect lies in the diplomatic writing style employed by Zar' Ya'qub. The letter is crafted using language that seeks to find common ground with Islamic teachings, such as invoking the name of Allah and incorporating various praises commonly found in the prologues of Muslim correspondence or official documents. This strategy reflects an effort to establish more effective communication with the Mamluk authority by presenting Abyssinia as a counterpart with shared values. It also conveys an impression of interfaith solidarity among the Abrahamic religions, emphasizing shared doctrinal elements between Islam and Christianity, such as the concept of divinity and the veneration of certain sacred figures.

On the other hand, this is likely a diplomatic letter reflecting an official template commonly employed by the Kingdom of Abyssinia in establishing relations with other states. The phrasing of the letter was adapted to align with the values or local traditions of the recipient, aiming to strengthen ties and foster a conducive atmosphere for negotiation. The precise use of Arabic language in this letter demonstrates that both the Kingdom of Abyssinia and the Mamluks relied on experts with exceptional proficiency in Arabic.[51] Just as the Mamluks engaged scribes or chancellors to draft letters for their Sultan, the Abyssinians likely enlisted the help of Muslims or merchants within their domain who were skilled in Arabic.[52]

In responding to the letter from the Kingdom of Abyssinia, Sultan Jaqmaq adopted a firm yet diplomatic approach. He refused to comply with all the demands outlined in the letter and instead offered a symbolic gift to Abyssinia as a reciprocal gesture for their previous offering. Despite the Mamluk Sultanate's military strength, which could potentially counter Abyssinia's forces, the Sultan deemed it wiser to refrain from reacting with anger or indifference. This measured response was aimed at mitigating any adverse repercussions that might affect the vulnerable Muslim minority in Abyssinia, who were at risk of persecution.[53] Nonetheless, this rejection contributed to further escalation in bilateral tensions, ultimately leading to the severance of diplomatic relations concerning religious matters between the two powers.

Unfortunately, some sources also recorded that the Sultan responded to the Abyssinian delegates by scorning the envoy and ordering them to return to their country.[54] The more powerful status of the mamluks steers the Sultan to refuse the request without any pressure. Apart from that, another speculation is that the protection of places of worship, the demands of the Coptic Christian community in Egypt, and the willingness to protect Muslims in Abyssinia may only be Sultan's claims and rhetoric.[55] So, the Sultan quickly refused the request of the king of Ethiopia when the anti-Christian riots, which led to the destruction of many churches and monasteries in Cairo and throughout the country, happened.

[50] Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Tibr Al-Masbūk Fī Dhayl Al-Sulūk* (Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿah al-Amīriyyah, 1896), 167.
[51] Bauden and Dekkiche, *Mamluk Cairo, a Crossroads for Embassies: Studies on Diplomacy and Diplomatics*, 652.
[52] Bauden and Dekkiche, 652.
[53] Muḥammad b. Aḥmad Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ Al-Zuhūr Fī Waqāʾiʿ Al-Duhūr* (Cairo: al-Hayʾah al-Miṣriyyah al-ʿĀmmah lil-Kitāb, 2008), 239.
[54] Al-Maqrizi, *Al-Sulūk Li-Maʿrifat Duwal Al-Mulūk*, Vol 3, 87.
[55] Bauden and Dekkiche, *Mamluk Cairo, a Crossroads for Embassies: Studies on Diplomacy and Diplomatics*, 640.

When foreign powers intervened on behalf of Christians, the Mamluk authorities were sometimes moved to act, but these interventions did not always result in favorable outcomes for the Christian community. For example, when the Ethiopian king attempted to pressure the Mamluk authorities to treat Christians with more respect, his efforts led to the imprisonment, beating, and fining of Pope John XI in 1448. Occasionally, however, commercial pressures prompted the Mamluk authorities to reopen closed churches, partly for the benefit of foreign merchants.[56] This suggests that the economic situation can be more decisive in pressing than bilateral agreements involving two countries with their respective interests.

Conclusion

Most modern studies generally describe the Mamluk period as when Christian communities in the East living under Mamluk rule reached their lowest point. However, it is admittedly that some decisions of Mamluk authority also took sides with the Christians, notably in building, rebuilding, reopening, or defending churches. This is proven by the fact that in the days of mamluks, Christians enjoyed an essential position in the kingdom, which sparked sentiment in the Muslim community. Also, when the horizontal conflict happened, the authorities supported the Copts by refuting the fatwā on call on the destructing church by issuing an official decree and arresting the provocateurs.

The Mamluk cared for the Coptic Church because they were a substantial minority. The patronage of the authorities to Christians is because of their expertise in specific fields that make jobs such as financial administration and other bureaus specialed by them, so they have a powerful influence on the kingdom. External power like diplomatic relationships or commercial pressures can influence royal decisions to rebuild or reopen churches.

[56] Christopher J van der Krogt, "Christians under the Fāṭimids, Ayyūbids and Mamlūks," in *Routledge Handbook on Christian–Muslim Relations* (Routledge, 2017), 163.

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