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Religious Pluralism in Egypt: The Ahl al-kitab in Early Fatimid Times

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Introduction

When the Fatimids conquered Egypt in 969, its society was truly pluralistic. Among the Muslims, the Sunnis were the mainstay of the population, followed by a sprinkling of the Ithna 'Ashari and Ismaili Shi'a. There was a sizeable indigenous Christian population (Copts and Melkites), and officials who hailed from these communities administered the financial and clerical bureaux in the main. A well-established Jewish community formed the backbone of Egypt's active involvement in commerce. The Fatimids, as the new rulers of Egypt, had to accordingly develop strategies to govern each of these distinct segments of the indigenous Egyptian populace, and to do so in such a manner as to form a cohesive whole.

How did the first two Fatimid *imam*-caliphs in Egypt fare in their endeavour to maintain a pluralistic community, or, indeed a pluralism of communities under their direct authority and administration? The paper explores the underlying principles that led to the humane and inclusive attitude that is, by and large, associated with the



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Fatimid approach to the *ahl al-kitab*. It elucidates the range of approaches and policies that the first two Fatimid *imam*-caliphs in Egypt implemented towards the *ahl al-kitab*, by highlighting examples of their dealings with them throughout the course of their reigns.

This paper thus critiques the view propounded by a number of western historians that, in espousing a liberal approach to the *ahl al-kitab*, the Fatimids had very little choice essentially hailing from a minority Shi'i Muslim branch and were, therefore, dependent upon the acceptance of their non-Muslim subjects. Likewise it challenges the view held by some historians that the *ahl al-kitab* had unbridled rights and opportunities under the early Fatimids.

Background

When the Fatimids entered Egypt in May 969, there already existed a significant, well-established, indigenous Christian and Jewish population. This is clearly attested to in the first public document issued by the celebrated Fatimid general Jawhar, upon his arrival in Egypt. The Safety Document (*aman*), which had been issued at the request of the prominent inhabitants of Egypt, states, 'the *ahl al-dhimma* will be treated according to previous custom'¹ meaning that the rights vouchsafed them under Muslim law would be granted and protected. In fact, as the events of the next couple of centuries would demonstrate, the *ahl al-kitab* fared considerably better under the Fatimids than they had done under previous Muslim regimes in Egypt.

Distinguished historians such as Samuel Stern, S. D. Goitein, and Gaston Wiet have noted the tolerant attitude adopted by the Fatimids toward the *ahl al-kitab*. Stern² and Goitein³ who approach the issue from different perspectives and through the lens of different sources, postulate that the Fatimids adopted this liberal posture, not as a matter of choice but, as a concession to the reality that they were representatives of a minority Shi'i group in a country that was predominantly Sunni. They also concluded that this was the rationale for their relatively tolerant attitude to the Sunni majority.



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More recently, Yacov Lev⁴ has given some attention to this issue. He points out a couple of interesting comparisons between the relative peace and lack of 'violent outbursts' suffered by the *ahl al-kitab* at the hands of the Muslim majority in Fatimid times, as compared with the previous Tulunid (868-905) and Ikshidid (935-969) regimes. He also notes the lack of reported hostility concerning the Fatimid employment of non-Muslims in the administration vis-à-vis Mamluk times (1250-1517) where this issue caused considerable resistance.

In considering why this may be so, he alludes to the fact that the Fatimids did not require their policies to be approved by the Sunni '*ulama* or indeed vetted by the 'Abbasids as was the case with the Tulunids and the Ikshidids prior to the Fatimids and the Ayyubids (1169-1250), and the Mamluks after them.

An important point that has to be borne in mind and which perhaps has not hitherto been as well appreciated in understanding Fatimid policies concerning their subjects, whether they were Muslims or not, is that the Fatimid *imam-caliph's* assertion to authority was indeed all-encompassing. He embodied the rank of the spiritual and temporal ruler appointed by divine designation (*nass*) and, therefore, divinely guided. According to this view, he was the only legitimate interpreter of the Qur'an. As the repository of all knowledge and justice, his directives were consequently accepted as laws. This exalted rank of the Fatimid *imam-caliph* was clearly articulated and embedded in public consciousness through a variety of measures: the promotion of Fatimid rites and law; the dissemination of learning in Fatimid palaces and mosques; their acknowledgement as true sovereigns of the Muslim world from the pulpits of the mosques in Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem, etc.

This self-view of the Fatimids freed them somewhat from the constraints faced by other Sunni Muslim rulers. Additionally, it meant that the Fatimid *da'is* adopted a very different role to that of the Sunni '*ulama* who saw themselves as people steeped in religious learning, and hence as safeguards of the *shari'a*, assuming the responsibility for policing the actions of the monarch. In the Fatimid worldview, it was the *imam* who was the guardian of the *shari'a* and the *da'is* saw their role as its effective propagators.

The *Ahl al-kitab* during the Reign of the *Imam-Caliph al-Mu'izz*



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On the whole, the *ahl al kitab* fared well during the brief reign of al Mu'izz (969-975) over Egypt. His policies concerning the Christians and the Jews are evidence of this fact. One of the yardsticks that the sources provide for measuring the freedom accorded to the *ahl al-kitab* by a Muslim state concerned the restoration of their religious buildings. A1 Mu'izz has been credited with granting permission for the restoration of the church of al Mu'allaka at Fustat. Interestingly, this action of the *imam*-caliph aroused some opposition, particularly from a Sunni shaykh, who vowed to die rather than allow the church to be repaired. Despite this encumbrance, al Mu'izz ensured that the church was fully repaired.⁵ This episode provides a good example of how the Fatimids sought to fulfil the commitments that they pledged to the *ahl al-kitab*. It is also in consonance with the tenor of tolerance that was practised by a number of other Muslim rulers from the Umayyad and 'Abbasid dynasties.

Although al-Mu'izz safeguarded the rights of the *ahl al-kitab*, he firmly upheld the limits on what was permissible to them and what was not. The Alexandrian notable, Mawhub b. Mansur b. Mufarrij, a Christian writer contemporary with the early Fatimids, reports at length on an instance of a Muslim who turned Christian – a matter of grave consequence as it was considered tantamount to apostasy. The issue was brought to al Mu'izz's attention who offered the youth a number of opportunities to recant. The latter refused repeatedly, whereupon he was publicly beheaded.⁶ The sources comment that his example acted as a severe deterrent to others who may have contemplated a similar move.

As a person who was deeply versed in his own religious tradition, yet interested in other faiths, particularly those of a revealed nature, al Mu'izz encouraged the learned men of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, to hold discourses (*munazarat*) in his presence.⁷ These were held in a generally amiable atmosphere with rude and unjustified remarks about other faiths not being permitted. Sessions of Jewish Christian dialogues were also encouraged by al Mu'izz, and often held at his court in his presence.⁸

A1 Mu'izz drew on the honed administrative skills of the *ahl al-kitab*. He appointed a Christian, Quzman b. Mina (Cosmas ibn Menas) as one of his chief advisors on



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financial matters. He then nominated Quzman as the official responsible for the collection of *kharaj* (land tax) in Egypt.⁹ The latter served in that capacity until the accession of al 'Aziz.

The *Imam*-Caliph al 'Aziz and the *Ahl al kitab*

In principle, the *imam*-caliph al 'Aziz pursued the same humane, but firm, policies towards the *ahl al kitab* as his father had done prior to him. An issue that needs to be aired at the very outset of the discussion on al 'Aziz's attitude towards the Christians and Jews concerns the religious persuasion of the first Fatimid vizier Ya'qub b. Killis. Apart from the notable exception of Lev, the majority of orientalist who touch upon the career of Ibn Killis, harp excessively on the vizier's links with Judaism. These writers uncritically assimilate information from some of the biased Christian and Jewish sources.¹⁰ They then present Ibn Killis as a great champion of the Jews merely garbed in the cloak of Islam.

Mann and Fischel¹¹ in particular pursued this line of thought. In discussing the personal frictions between the Coptic Patriarch Abraham and Ibn Killis for example, the overall impression given by Mann is that it was essentially a tussle between Christianity and Judaism; Abraham representing the former and Ibn Killis the latter. Mann, in fact, goes to the extent of remarking that Ibn Killis died a Jew and was only outwardly a Muslim. He then adds that Muslim sources deny this assertion.¹² This is not surprising, for the sources assert that Ibn Killis converted to Islam in the days of Kafur the Ikshid.¹³ How sincere his motives were for conversion is hardly a matter for us to judge. Yet even on that point, historians such as Ibn Khallikan (d. 1282) and Ibn Taghribirdi (d. 1470) stress that from the time of his conversion, Ibn Killis was a devout Muslim and that he often passed his nights in the recitation of prayers and the reading of the Qur'an.¹⁴ Evidence from the Cairo Geniza shows that although the Jews were invited to participate in his famed *majalis*, sometimes the vizier used these occasions for berating the Jews for their beliefs. Whilst the Jewish community and its historians did not appreciate this, it does lend further credence to the public espousal of Islam by Ibn Killis.

Moreover, it is untenable to question Ibn Killis' total absorption, not only in the Fatimid state apparatus, but also with the Fatimid Ismaili faith as a creed. This is



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amply borne out by his deep involvement in the religious sphere of the Ismaili community, particularly during the reign of al 'Aziz. The *vizier* was sufficiently learned in Ismaili *fiqh* (jurisprudence), for instance, to write a book on the subject, which was thereafter taught as the standard work on Ismaili jurisprudence at Fatimid mosques.¹⁵

In addition, it was on Ibn Killis' advice that al 'Aziz established resident *fuqaha*' at the Jami' al Azhar in 988 9. Every Friday, these *fuqaha*' gave lectures on Ismaili law at the mosque. The *vizier* even contributed financially towards the maintenance of these *fuqaha*'. Ibn Killis' patronage extended to other mosques as well. It was on his order that the maintenance and redecorating work was carried out at various mosques.¹⁶

The above discussion of Ibn Killis clearly reveals his total absorption in the religious atmosphere of the Fatimid age. In view of this evidence, it is rather unjustified of

bic translation on the right, Egypt.
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writers such as Mann to assert that Ibn Killis was only outwardly a Muslim.

Directives of al-'Aziz

Al 'Aziz undertook a number of measures to maintain his direct hold over the *ahl al kitab*. In this connection, for instance, the Fatimid caliph personally appointed to office the Patriarchs of the Melkite Church.¹⁷ An interesting fact to take into account is that al 'Aziz's wife and the mother of his heir, al-Hakim, was a Melkite Christian. It was her brother, Aristos, who was appointed the Patriarch of the Melkite church in January 986.¹⁸



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Like his father, al 'Aziz also sought to safeguard the interests of the *ahl al kitab*, so long as these did not infringe upon the rights of other segments of the population. He accordingly permitted Patriarch Ephraim to restore the church of St Mercurius in Fustat. The caliph even offered the Patriarch the funds necessary for the repair of the church.

Over the years, the church had fallen into ruin and had subsequently been used as a warehouse for storing sugarcane. When the Patriarch began the restoration, some of the local people offered resistance to him. Al 'Aziz acted in a manner reminiscent of what his predecessor, al Mu'izz, had done in a similar situation. He commanded a group of his *mamluks* (slaves) to stand guard at the site and to repulse anyone who attempted to hinder the repair work.¹⁹ The humane attitude of both al Mu'izz and al 'Aziz towards the repair of churches in fact led the rather partial Christian writer Mawhub. b. Mansur to remark that in the reigns of these two monarchs, 'there was great peace for the churches.'²⁰

Some of the most prominent people engaged in the personal service of al 'Aziz were of the *ahl al kitab*. The Christian doctor, Abu'l Fath Mansur b. Muqashshir, for example, was appointed by al 'Aziz as his personal physician and as such was well respected by him. Al 'Aziz's successor, al Hakim, also engaged his services as one of his physicians.²¹

A Christian *Wasita* the Case of 'Isa b. Nestorius

Al 'Aziz's liberal attitude towards the *ahl al kitab* can be discerned from the fact that a Christian *katib* (scribe), 'Isa b. Nestorius, was appointed in December 995 to the senior administrative post of *wasita*.²² In some ways this was reflective of the paradigm in the Muslim world at that time. The most powerful of the Buyid rulers and a contemporary of al 'Aziz, 'Adud al Dawla (949-83) also entrusted a Christian with the office of *vizier*. Subsequently, this trend was occasionally adopted by the 'champions of Sunni orthodoxy', the Seljuqs (1038-1194).²³

The Fatimid *imam*-caliph's sense of justice came to the fore when 'Isa abused his authority. The latter was accused of appointing, to the exclusion of all others, men of his own faith to key administrative posts. No sooner had this fact been brought to al



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‘Aziz’s attention than he had both the Christian *wasita* and his Jewish deputy in Syria, Ibn Menasseh, arrested. He imposed heavy fines on them both. Only at the intercession of al ‘Aziz’s daughter, Sa‘idat al Mulk, was ‘Isa eventually reinstated to his former post. ‘Isa could not step into office again, however, until he had agreed to abide by the stipulation that he would appoint Muslims to the various administrative posts. In addition, henceforth, al ‘Aziz is noted to have maintained a close surveillance over the Christian *wasita*.

Restraints on the *Ahl al kitab*

The imprisonment of ‘Isa and Menasseh by al ‘Aziz is illustrative of the fact that like the rest of the populace, the *ahl al kitab* too had to conform to certain rules. If they transgressed these regulations, punishment was imminent. Al Maqrizi (d. 1442) mentions an incident concerning the *ahl al kitab* that reiterates the above point. He states that some Christians went to al ‘Aziz and made certain requests to the caliph, apparently on the basis that they were from the *ahl al kitab*.²⁴ Unfortunately, al-Maqrizi does not provide any details of what these requests were, but the tone in which he reports this matter suggests inappropriateness, conveying the sense that some Christians were attempting to take advantage of their status. Al ‘Aziz is reported to have been extremely annoyed at them and threatened to punish them. As one of the people involved claimed to be very poor, al ‘Aziz gave him a sum of twenty dinars. However, he forbade them from ever returning in that manner.

Apart from instances of restrictions imposed on individuals of the *ahl al kitab*, certain constraints were also imposed on them as a community. In 977, the second year of al ‘Aziz’s reign, for example, a decree was issued which prohibited the Christians from participating in the rituals of Epiphany (*‘id al ghitas*).²⁵ Four years later, in 991 another official pronouncement forbade the Christians from celebrating the festival of the Cross.²⁶ However, this was not in any sense indicative of a permanent ban on the celebration of religious festivals by the Christians, as the very next year they were granted permission to celebrate the Festival of the Cross again.²⁷ These decrees need to be understood as measures taken to curb moral laxity. For, as al



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Maqrizi explicates, many vile practices (*munkarat*), which were ‘beyond description’, took place at these festivals.²⁸

Protection of the *Ahl al-kitab*

As the Fatimid *imam*-caliph, al ‘Aziz had the responsibility to ensure the safety of the *ahl al kitab*.²⁹ This he did with vigilance as the following incident reveals. As part of the war preparations against Byzantium, al ‘Aziz had authorised ‘Isa to construct a massive fleet. The fleet was to set sail on Friday May 15, 996. On that very day, fire broke out in the Cairo arsenal, destroying most of the ships. The populace of Cairo suspected the Byzantine residents of starting the fire. So they attacked them and looted their belongings. In the chaos that ensued, a couple of churches were plundered and a bishop was severely injured. Al-‘Aziz immediately took steps to restore order. He accordingly ordered ‘Isa to attend to the matter quickly and to deal with the malefactors with an iron hand. As a result, most of the loot was recovered and tranquillity restored.³⁰

Conclusion

The above examples from the reigns of *imam*-caliph al-Mu‘izz and al-‘Aziz serve to illustrate that the early Fatimids actively tapped the experience and expertise of the *ahl al-kitab* in Egypt based on the merit of individuals from these communities. Whilst they safeguarded and promoted their rights, they assertively maintained clear boundaries concerning what was permissible to them and what was not. A similar pattern of maintaining relationships and drawing on the meritocracy of individuals from other religious communities in Egypt, including the majority Sunni Muslims, can be clearly discerned in the sources.³¹

Grunebaum remarks that the political and cultural success of the Fatimids was due to their unusual capability to utilise, to best advantage, all groups, classes and communities of their lands regardless of race or creed. He adds:

All praise is due the Fatimids for having known how to induce the communities under their sway to develop their courage and enterprise and to preserve their intellectual élan without damaging that unity of



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the larger community which hinged on the dynasty's sense of purpose.³²

Notes

¹This document has been preserved in its entirety in some primary sources such as al-Maqrizi's *Itti'az al-hunafa' bi akhbar al-a'imma al-fatimiyyin al-khulafa'*, vol 1, ed. Jamal al-Din al-Shayyal, (Cairo, 1967), p. 105.

²S. M. Stern, *Studies in Early Ismailism* (Jerusalem, 1983), pp. 85-95.

³S. D. Goiten, *A Mediterranean Society* (Berkeley, 1967-88), vol 1, p. 31. For a critique of Goitein's views on the tolerant attitudes of the Fatimids, see S. Jiwa, 'The reign of the Fatimid Imam-Caliph al-'Aziz billah', PhD thesis, (Edinburgh, 1989), pp. 134-5.

⁴Yacov Lev, *State and Society in Fatimid Egypt* (Leiden, 1991), pp. 194-6.

⁵Mawhub b. Mansur b. Mufarrij is the real author of the *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church* and not Severus Ibn al-Muqaffa', as had been assumed for a long time. Trans. A. S. Atiya, et. al. (Cairo, 1943), Vol. 2, part II, pp. 144-5. This is conclusively proven by the research of Johannes den Heijer, 'Coptic historiography in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and early Mamluk Periods,' *Medieval Encounters* 2 (1996), pp. 67-98.

⁶*Ibid*, pp. 152-3. It is rather perturbing that when discussing al-Mu'izz's attitude to the *ahl al-kitab*, a number of present-day historians overlook incidents such as these, thereby fuelling the false perception that the early Fatimid rulers favoured the *ahl al-kitab* indiscriminately.

⁷On the tradition of *munazarat* in Fatimid Maghrib, see Ibn al-Haytham, *Kitab al-Munazarat*, English trans, *The Advent of the Fatimids*, (London, 2000).

⁸A well-known example of rivalry between Christian and the Jewish groups, the former represented by Patriarch Ephraim and the latter by Moses came to light at



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one of these sessions. Mawhub b. Mansur b. Mufarrij, pp. 137 144, Mann, I, pp. 17 18, *Palestine under the Fatimid Caliphs, I* (London, 1969), pp. 17 18.

⁹Mawhub b. Mansur b. Mufarrij, p. 148. Cf. Burkhard May, 'Die Religionspolitik der Agyptischen Fatimiden 969-1171', unpublished PhD thesis (University of Hamburg, 1975), p. 54.

¹⁰Such as Mawhub b. Mansur b. Mufarrij, op. cit.; Jules Leroy, 'Histoire de Abraham le Syrien, Patriarche Copte d'Alexandrie' in *Revue de l'Orient Chretien* (1909).

Detailed biographical accounts on Ibn Killis are available in the works of Ibn al Sairafi, Ibn Khallikan, al Kutubi and al Maqrizi. For a discussion of the sources on Ibn Killis and a good analytical account of his biography and achievements, see Yacov Lev 'The Fatimid Vizier Ya'qub b. Killis and the Beginning of the Fatimid Administration in Egypt', *Der Islam* 58 (1981), pp. 237 49.

¹¹Mann, op. cit; Walter J. Fischel, *Jews in the Economic and Social Life of Medieval Islam* (London, 1937).

¹²Mann, op. cit., pp. 17-18.

¹³Ibn al Sairafi, *Al Ishara*, 92; al Antaki, *Ta'rikh*, 434; Ibn al Dawadari, p. 226. Al Musabbihi as quoted by Ibn Khallikan, IV, p. 360; Ibn Taghri Birdi, *al Nujum*, II, pp. 45 6; Ibn al Asakir as quoted by Ibn Khallikan, IV, p. 366.

¹⁴Wafayat, IV, p. 360; al-Nujum, II, 45-6. Ibn Killis' commitment to Islam is corroborated further by the research of Mark Cohen and Sasson Somekh, 'In the court of Ya'qub b. Killis: A fragment from the Cairo Genizah,' *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, nos. 3-4, 1990, pp. 283-314.

¹⁵He based this work on the dicta of al 'Aziz and his predecessors. In June July 980 he read this work to a large audience of learned men assembled at his house. According to Ibn Khallikan and al Maqrizi, the book was thereafter used by the fuqaha' of the Jami' al 'Atiq as a source of legal opinion. Wafayat, IV, p. 363; Idris, 'Uyun al-Akhbar, V, p. 232; Ibn al Sairafi, *al Ishara*, 91; al Antaki, *Ta'rikh* 434; Khitat, II, 341. According to al Antaki, *Ta'rikh*, 434, the fuqaha' criticised Ibn Killis' work and refused to base their fatwas (legal judgements) on it.



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¹⁶Khitat, II, pp. 273, 341.

¹⁷Al-Antaki, Ta'rikh, pp. 408, 415.

¹⁸Ibn Muyassar, Ta'rikh, p. 415.

¹⁹Al Armani, op. cit., p. 118; Ibn al Muqaffa', p. 144, erroneously places the restoration of this church in the reign of al Mu'izz.

²⁰Al-Armani, pp. 150-1.

²¹Itti'az, I, p. 281; May, p. 64

²²After the vizier, this was the second most senior position in the vizierate. Itti'az I, p. 283; Al Antaki, Ta'rikh, pp. 441 2; al Duwal, p. 40. For a good discussion on the employment of Christian scribes by the Fatimids and in contrast, the 'Abbasids and the Saljuqs, see Leila al Imad, 'The Fatimid Vizierate, 969 1172', unpublished PhD thesis, (New York University, 1975), pp. 115 7.

²³Canard, Annales de l'Institut d'Etudes Orientales de l'Université d'Alger, XII (1954), pp. 84 88; Gustave von Grunebaum, Colloque, p. 210.

²⁴Itti'az, I, p. 275. Exactly what these requests were is unclear in the text.

²⁵Khitat, I, p. 265; Itti'az I, p. 242; for a detailed report on the celebrations of the Coptic Christians in Egypt, see Khitat, I, pp. 264 5.

²⁶Itti'az, I, pp. 271-2; Khitat, I, p. 265.

²⁷Itti'az, I, p. 276.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹For the privileges accorded to the Jewish monks during the reigns of al Mu'izz, al 'Aziz and al-Hakim, as listed in an official decree, see S. M. Stern, Fatimid Decrees (London, 1964), pp. 15 22.

³⁰For a detailed discussion of the event and its aftermath see [Shainool Jiwa](#), PhD thesis, op. cit. pp. 242-4 where the relevant sources are also cited.



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³¹For a comprehensive discussion of the imam-caliph al-‘Aziz’s policies towards the Sunni and Ithna ‘Ashari Muslims, see [Shainool Jiwa](#), PhD thesis, op. cit., Ch. 4, pp. 120-33.

³²Colloque, pp. 212-3.

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