

Church History I

(Early Church to Scholasticism)

Week 6 – Islam and the Christian Response

Introduction: Few things made a bigger difference in the Christian world than the dawning of the new Religion of Islam. The church was forever changed, its powers diminished or established, in the way it was able to deal with the Muslim attempts at takeover.

I. Eastern Empire

1. The Byzantine Empire continued past the Fall of Rome and the Roman Empire.
 1. The East succeeded in surviving until 1453.
 2. Although this is somewhat misleading to say. From the 11th-12th century onward, the Byzantine Empire was comprised mainly of a city-state of Constantinople itself.¹ **PTQ**
2. Important features of the Eastern Rule
 1. Greatest Eastern Emperor (Justinian 527–565) **PTQ**
 - i. Although he grew up poor his family in the Imperial guard eventually became emperor. Thus he was taught and trained as a young man in Latin and Greek.
 - ii. As an emperor one of Justinian's greatest feats was his work as a conqueror.
 - a) "Justinian's main preoccupation as emperor was reconquering territory that the empire had lost to barbarians. Justinian delegated authority to his top general, Belisarius, who launched campaigns against the Ostrogoths in Italy and the Vandals in North Africa."²
 - b) "These campaigns were for a time successful; The Byzantines even recaptured Ravenna, the capital of the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy, where the most beautiful mosaics from the Byzantine period can still be seen today. In North Africa, Justinian rebuilt towns, aqueducts, and forts."³ **PTQ**
 - c) "But Justinian's warring, for all the blood and treasure spilled, was actually quite successful. By the time of his death, Justinian's kingdom could rightly be called an empire. Almost all of Italy and North Africa were recovered, in addition to gains in places such as the Balkans and Armenia."⁴
 - iii. Justinian was also intentional in building society
 - a) After large swathes of Constantinople had been burned to the ground from internal conflicts (specifically the Nika Riots). Justinian went on rebuilding the city.
 - b) The greatest of these feats included rebuilding a church on the site of one built in the early 5th century. This church was called the Hagia Sophia. **PTQ**

¹ "Byzantine Empire Summary," Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed October 17, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/summary/Byzantine-Empire>.

² William J. Bennett, *Tried by Fire: The Story of Christianity's First Thousand Years* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2016), 267.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 268.

- “The signature stylings of the church certainly are worthy of admiration. The church’s many arched windows allowed for an abundance of sunlight to gleam off of the rich marble inside, illuminating the interior. The central dome of the church, ringed by arches at the base that let in sunlight, seemed to float above the rest of the building (this can be confirmed even today). The ceiling was overlaid entirely with gold, and dozens of columns and precious stones adorned the inside.”⁵
- c) One aspect of this would be his creation of a succinct law and code of law textbook.
 - “the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* (Body of Civil Law) was the last great work of law from the ancient world. The *Corpus* was much more comprehensive than anything that had come before it, and sought to put order to thousands of various laws governing the empire since ancient Roman times.”⁶ PTQ
 - “Instead of the law being a collection of individual pronouncements, it became a systematized set of rules guiding multiple areas of public life, including later systems of canon law. More pieces were issued over time, and the code included a law textbook called the *Digest*, one of the very first legal textbooks in the world.”⁷
- iv. He also was heavily involved in the church and had particular ideas about what should be accepted or not.
 - a) The period saw ongoing Christological controversies (e.g., Monophysitism / Miaphysitism)
 - Monophysitism teaches Christ had one nature, while Miaphysitism teaches that Jesus, the Incarnate Word, is fully divine and fully human, in one nature. PTQ
 - b) Later, the iconoclast controversies (iconoclasm rising in the early 8th century under Leo III and successor emperors), which reshaped church–state relations in the East and had long political consequences for Byzantine relations with Syria, Egypt, and other provinces
 - Iconoclasm was “A debate that persisted for several hundred years, almost entirely within the Eastern church, as to whether depictions of Jesus, Mary, or the saints could be incorporated into worship. Permission on the matter ebbed and flowed according to who was emperor. Ultimately, the pro-icon party prevailed.”⁸ PTQ
 - c) Oddly enough, although the East often disavowed icons. They were more than willing to accept reverence for historical objections. The most specific example was in what the East believed was the cross of Christ.
 - A story of this continues about when the next emperor, Heraclius, found himself at a losing battle with the Persians, in which they took what some

⁵ Bennett, [*Tried by Fire*](#), 273.

⁶ Ibid., 274.

⁷ Ibid., 275.

⁸ Ibid., 402.

assumed to be the cross of Christ. It was retrieved in 627 after sacking the Persian capital at the Battle of Nineveh.⁹ **PTQ**

2. Bad Financial decisions
 - i. The Kingdom has a history of being unwise with Money. Justinian exemplified that role well.
 - ii. Much of the dissatisfaction about Justinian seemed to stem from his lack of financial wisdom.
 - iii. These difficulties were only exacerbated by the plague that swept through the empire at that time. **PTQ**
3. Caesaropapism
 - i. Caesaropapism is “the concentration of a high degree of secular and religious authority in one man.”¹⁰ **PTQ**
 - ii. “Justinian never distinguished Roman state tradition from Christianity. He considered himself to be completely a Roman emperor and just as fully a Christian emperor.”¹¹
 - iii. “He defined the mission of the pious emperor as “the maintenance of the Christian faith in its purity and the protection of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church from any disturbance.”¹²
4. Continuation of the Greek Language
 - i. Greek ended up becoming the official language of the East.
 - ii. The majority of Greek manuscripts of the Bible that exist today are ones that existed in and survived in Constantinople. **PTQ**

II. The Rise of Islam

A. The Prophet

1. “The prophet of Islam, Mohammed, was born about 570.
2. After he received what are recorded in the Koran as revelations from the angel Gabriel, Mohammed gathered a small following in and around Mecca, in the Arabian Peninsula.
3. In 622, he and his band were driven out of Mecca by rivals. Their retreat to Medinah (the *Hegira*) was turned into victory, however, as more and more Arabs rallied to the cause of Allah and his prophet.
4. In 630, Mohammed returned in triumph to Mecca. Two years later, when Mohammed died, Arabia was one-third Muslim.”¹³

B. The Religion

1. Koran/Quran
 - i. The basic teachings of Islam are known as the Five Pillars: the profession of faith (shahadah), daily prayer (salat), giving to the poor (zakat), fasting during Ramadan (sawm), and pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj) **PTQ**

⁹ Bennett, [Tried by Fire](#), 282.

¹⁰ Ibid., 275-276.

¹¹ Bruce L. Shelley, [Church History in Plain Language](#), ed. Marshall Shelley, 5th Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 184.

¹² Ibid., 184.

¹³ Mark A. Noll, [Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity](#), Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 109.

- ii. Muhammad likely developed much of his theology through contact with Christian areas like Syria and northern Iraq, though he claimed Islam was an extension of the religions of Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. **PTQ**
 - iii. While Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, believes in one God, it differs significantly by denying Jesus's divinity and viewing him only as a prophet
 - iv. Some scholars, like Christophe Luxenberg, suggest the Koran was actually composed from Christian literature in Syriac or Aramaic and Arabic oral traditions, with many passages potentially being misunderstood due to linguistic complexities or liturgical misunderstandings. **PTQ**
 - v. To minimize differences within the Korans, at some point in history, Uthman had the Muslims gather up and burn. This was done to different copies that were not identical to what was chosen as the correct copy.
 - It is also worth knowing that the Quran is only inspired in Arabic. **PTQ**
 - vi. For example: Surah 5:116 – “And when God said, 'O Jesus son of Mary, didst thou say unto men, 'Take me and my mother as gods, apart from God'?' He said, 'To Thee be glory! It is not mine to say what I have no right to. If I indeed said it, Thou knowest it, knowing what is within my soul, and I know not what is within Thy soul; Thou knowest the things unseen”
2. Salvation according to Islam
- i. Is focused on being righteous. However, if someone is not more virtuous than not, then there is always another option.
 - ii. Immediate entrance to Paradise is promised to those who die in Jihad. (Holy War)¹⁴
PTQ
- C. The Conquest
- 1. This desire for conquest is primarily focused
 - 2. “Two years after that (*Muhammed's death*), under Abu Bakr, all Arabia had turned to Islam. Within another decade, Arab armies inspired by Islamic teaching had taken Syria, Palestine, and Persia (modern Iran) and had conducted raids as far east as the borders of India. In 642, Islam entered Egypt.”¹⁵
 - 3. Attacks on Constantinople were happening as early as 674, and other significant areas were falling to Islamic control, like Carthage in 698, and even the entrance into France was occurring in the early 700s.¹⁶
- D. The Treatment of Conquered Nations
- 1. Under the pact, Christians and Jews were given the status of *dhimmi*—non-Muslim citizens of an Islamic state. Under *dhimma*, non-Muslims could live in a certain place and practice their religion provided that they paid a tax to Muslims—*jizya*—which relegated them to second-class-citizen status.¹⁷
 - i. Below is a list of rules for conquered nations. **PTQ**

¹⁴ Robert C. Walton, [*Chronological and Background Charts of Church History*](#), Revised Edition, ZondervanCharts (Zondervan, 2018), 39.

¹⁵ Noll, [*Turning Points*](#), 109.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Bennett, [*Tried by Fire*](#), .

- ii. We shall not build, in our cities or in their neighborhood, new monasteries, Churches, convents, or monks' cells, nor shall we repair, by day or by night, such of them as fall in ruins or are situated in the quarters of the Muslims.
- iii. We shall not manifest our religion publicly nor convert anyone to it. We shall not prevent any of our kin from entering Islam if they wish it.
- iv. We shall show respect toward the Muslims, and we shall rise from our seats when they wish to sit.
- v. We shall not sell fermented [alcoholic] drinks.
- vi. We shall not display our crosses or our books in the roads or markets of the Muslims.
- vii. We shall use only clappers in our churches very softly. We shall not raise our voices when following our dead.
- viii. We shall not show lights on any of the roads of the Muslims or in their markets. We shall not bury our dead near the Muslims¹⁸

III. The Christian Response

- A. Failure to defeat the enemy quickly.
 - 1. Although the Muslim invaders had attacked an immense number of areas, even in previously powerful empires, few people and places managed to put up a successful defense.
 - 2. The one exemption to that may be the city of Constantinople itself.
 - 3. However, the previous fractioning of the empire in the west, the weakening of the eastern empire due to bad leadership, and wars with the Persians created a perfect opportunity for the Muslims to run through immense amounts of territory.
 - i. Sadly, theological difficulties (Arianism, Monophysitism, iconoclasm) and personal qualms also helped create disunity among those before the Muslim onslaughts. **PTQ**
- B. The Defender of Christian Europe
 - 1. "Without any recourse to avoid destruction, the nobles of the area encompassing what is modern-day France appealed to King Charles of the Franks for protection. He agreed to help them. Charles was the most powerful sovereign in Europe at the time, and he had proved his prowess in battle many times."¹⁹ **PTQ**
 - 2. "Anticipating further incursions into France, Charles spent nearly ten years training a set of conscripts, and he requisitioned land from the church to sell in order to raise money to train his troops.
 - 3. When the Battle of Tours commenced in October 732, the Muslims were surprised to encounter such a talented fighting force. Also to Charles's advantage was the weather. The battle took place the middle of autumn, a time when the Franks expected the annual cold spells in France. The Muslims, on the other hand, were unaccustomed to the cold. **PTQ**
 - 4. The battle commenced with a week of minor parries, but eventually Charles's stall tactics induced the Islamic commander."²⁰
- C. The removal of Muslims from Europe was not completed until later, but the advance into Europe was stopped here.

¹⁸ Bennett, [*Tried by Fire*](#), .

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

Conclusion: Although tempered for a time, the emergence of Islam made eternal changes to the Christian religion. In some ways, it helped purify it by destroying people of heretical groups. In other ways, it caused Christianity to move back into a defensive position. It also formulated the majority of Christendom's strength back towards the West instead of the East. However, this only intensifies with the coming renewal of the Holy Roman Empire through Charlemagne.

Church and State in the Byzantine Empire (c.500–800)

EMPEROR	DATES OF REIGN	IMPACT ON CHURCH
JUSTINIAN	527–565	Advanced caesaropapism. Sought triumph of Chalcedonian Orthodoxy over Arianism and Monophysitism. Empress Theodora supported Monophysites. Built Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Condemned some teachings of Origen as heretical. Condemned "Three Chapters" (including Theodore of Mopsuestia) by royal decree in 544, favored Christology of Cyril of Alexandria. Called Fifth Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 553. Persecuted pagans, Manichaeans, Montanists.
HERACLIUS	610–641	Affirmed Monothelitism in 638.
CONSTANS II	641–668	Issued edict forbidding discussion of number of natures or wills of Christ. Tortured and exiled Pope Martin I and Maximus the Confessor for ignoring edict.
CONSTANTINE IV	668–685	Called Sixth Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 680. Condemned Monothelites, declared Pope Honorius heretical.
JUSTINIAN II	685–695	Called council at Constantinople that widened gap between Eastern and Western churches by allowing deacons and presbyters to marry and rejecting other Western church practices.
LEO III (the Isaurian)	717–741	Promulgated edict against the veneration of icons in 726, initiating Iconoclastic Controversy. Decreed removal or destruction of all icons in 730.

		During his reign, Pope Gregory III excommunicated the iconoclasts.
CONSTANTINE V	741–775	Called council to condemn icons, persecuted those who venerated them.
LEO IV	775–780	Permitted icons outside Constantinople.
CONSTANTINE VI	780–797	Mother Irene served as regent, favored icons, and convened Seventh Ecumenical Council at Nicea in 787. Affirmed veneration of icons but regulated their use. ²¹

²¹ Robert C. Walton, [*Chronological and Background Charts of Church History*](#), Revised Edition, ZondervanCharts (Zondervan, 2018), 33.

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