



The Cross and The Crescent: The Dramatic Story of the Earliest Encounters Between Christians and Muslims

By Richard Fletcher

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In this immensely readable history that couldn't be more timely, award-winning historian Richard Fletcher chronicles the relationship between Islam and Christianity from the time of Muhammad to the Reformation. With lucidity and sound scholarship, Fletcher demonstrates that though there were fruitful trading and cultural interactions between Muslims and Christians during the period when the Arabs controlled most of the Mediterranean world, each group viewed the other's religion from the beginning as fundamentally different and suspect. Eschewing moral judgments and easy generalizations, **The Cross and the Crescent** allows readers to draw their own conclusions and explore the implications for the present day.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Richard Fletcher reminds his readers that the scope of his book is limited, even though the story he is telling is not. An adept historian who writes with clarity and expertise, Fletcher sets for himself the nearly impossible task of relating the complex interrelations between the Islamic and Christian worlds from the 7th to the 16th centuries, focusing on the Mediterranean, but touching upon Northern Europe, Asia Minor, and even on the vast reach of the Mongol Empire. Fletcher describes the establishment of Islam in the 7th century and the subsequent rise of the Abbasid Empire a century later and describes the shift from an Islamic society defined by Arab ethnicity to a ruling power defined by religion and culture. Initially, Fletcher explains, Christians were tolerated (but disdained) in the fast-expanding Islamic world primarily because they provided a link to the ancient Greek and Roman learning their conquerors coveted. However, in less-receptive regions, such as North Africa, Church leaders fled to Sicily and southern France, weakening a Christian presence in those areas.

While Fletcher provides many examples of interaction between the two worlds--including diplomacy, pilgrimage, trade, and most obviously, war (the Crusades)--he maintains that these contacts were never solidified by an earnest attempt on the part of these diverse cultures to "blend." In the best of times there was coexistence. In the worst, there was outright persecution. The reversal of Islamic supremacy took many centuries. Fletcher cannot explain the complex reasons for this in great detail. However, he does provide some provocative insight. The Islamic world flourished when it was most open to ancient thought. Similarly, the groundwork for European hegemony was laid when 13th-century Christian thinkers began to absorb and expand on Islamic learning. By contrast, the Islamic world withdrew "from intellectual receptivity" at the height of its power. There is a lesson to be learned here. The exchange and integration of ideas can be mightier than the sword. --*Silvana Tropea*

From Publishers Weekly

This illuminating study of Christian-Muslim relations in the Middle Ages shows just how intractable the conflict between Islam and the West has always been. Historian Fletcher (Bloodfeud; Barbarian Conversion; etc.), covers the period from the first Muslim conquests in the seventh century to the 16th-century peak of the Ottoman Empire. The story is one of frequent military conflict, but also of trade, diplomacy, technological diffusion and intellectual exchange as the Muslim world absorbed and elaborated the science and philosophy of the Greeks and then retransmitted them to Europe. Despite these far-reaching economic and cultural interactions, Fletcher argues, Christians and Muslims lived in "a state of mutual religious aversion," even in border regions like Spain where substantial populations of both faiths lived side by side; Christians viewed Muslims as bloodthirsty heretics, while Muslims sneered at Christian trinitarianism as a self-contradictory polytheism superceded by Muhammad's revelations. Fletcher's stress on early modern Europe's growing (but unrequited) openness to and curiosity about Islam as the key to the evolution of the notion of religious pluralism--a development rooted ultimately, he feels, in the multiplicity and diversity of Christian theological traditions--is fairly conventional rise-of-the-West historiography. Still, he ably synthesizes a mass of historical material on the ways in which people both accommodated and resisted the influence of alien religions in their lives. The result is a readable, nuanced account that raises profound questions about the role of religion and ideology in shaping our worldview.

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From Booklist

Rather than comparing Islam and Christianity, historian Fletcher surveys the first 900 years of relations between the realms of Christianity and Islam. Following Muhammad's death in 632, an Arab-led Islamic empire explosively expanded to Persia in the east and Spain, via North Africa, in the west and absorbed the previously Christian Levant. When the Crusades began in 1095, Seljuk Turks rather than Arabs or the Persians who succeeded them ran Islam's empire. After the Crusades petered out two centuries later, the Ottomans seized leadership. They lost Spain but rubbed out Byzantium, charged into the Balkans, and by 1529, besieged Vienna. All this time, trade in goods between Christian and Islamic lands flourished.

Exchange of ideas occurred mostly between Islamic Spain and Christendom, however, and finally Islam discouraged it altogether. The most striking common characteristic of Christendom and Islam for most of this period was denial of religious pluralism; indeed, no one of either faith formulated anything like it until modernity was at hand. An invaluable, nonpartisan review of some too-little-known history. *Ray Olson*

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Users Review

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