

THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY
IN MOROCCO

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Abstract:

This article sheds light on the history of the Christian presence in Morocco, their life experience during the various countries and sultans who ruled Morocco, and how it was spread. The article also tells the experience of Christians, from different ethnicities and races, in Morocco and how they could coexist with Moroccan citizens considering various cultural and linguistic challenges.

Keywords: Morocco, Christians, History.

Introduction:

Actually, in the historical context, Morocco was home to several groups of religions and faiths, and one of these groups was Christianity.¹ Also, Moroccans should take pride in its Abrahamic heritage before the coming of Islam. Ahmed Taoufiq al-Madani says that when the Roman existed in North Africa around [146 BC], the Amazigh started to worship the Roman gods and named them with the Amazigh names. They exchanged the worshipping of gods.² El-Madani continues that when Christianity appeared in the east in the era of the Caesars [around second century], many Roman people converted to this religion and brought it to North Africa. When Christianity reached North Africa, Amazigh people embraced it because they believed that this religion commands to brotherhood, equality, and morals.³

To study the topic of Christianity in Morocco, one is obliged to know the details and the origins of this issue, and how it was spread in this country. In addition, there are several different points of view of some historians who conducted research about this topic that will be mentioned. Some questions are being raised in this article: what are the reasons that paved the way for Christianity to appear in Morocco? What is the starting period of this phenomenon? And how did Christianity spread in Morocco?

1Badiaa al-Kharrazi, *Tarikh al-Kanissa al-Nasraniya fi al-Maghrib al-Aqsa*, 18.

2 Ahmed Taoufiq al-Madani, *Qartajana fi Arba'ati'usour*, 113.

3 Ibid.

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Before immersing into the topic of Christianity in Morocco, it necessary to give a historical overview on the arrival of Islam into Morocco. Shedding light on the date of its existence as well as knowing how it was brought into the country.

The Islamic period in al-Maghreb countries (modern Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya) started in the era of Umayyad under their general Uqba ibn Nafi' al-Fihri in 681 AD. Badi' al-Kharrazi says that Uqba led his military campaign in al-Maghreb until he arrived at the Atlantic Ocean. When Uqba died, Kusaila¹ started to control the area again in North Africa and reached until al-Qayrawan, but he was killed by Zuhair Ibn Qais in 687 AD. Afterward, Hassan Ibn al-Nu'man continued the mission of conquest and led another campaign to the same direction. After the death of Ibn al-Nu'man in 705 AD, Musa Ibn Nusayr took the floor to finish the Islamic conquest in Morocco. Even though Islam existed in Morocco in the time of Musa ibn Nusayr between 705-16 AD, many people in Morocco were still Christians and Judaism.²

Ali Dabuz states that Kusaila was smart and strong. In addition, he was a very religious Christian and loved by Berber tribes. Later one, he converted to Islam. He accepted this religion because of the ethics and the behaviors of Muslims that he noticed when he was captured by them. He saw that Islam is quite different than what he heard from Romans.³ According to Badi' al-Kharrazi, the effects of Christianity and other religions in Morocco still existed until the era of Idriss I.⁴

Since that time, as al-Kharrazi says, there was no presence of Christianity in Morocco. When the state of Idrissids was gone, several principalities ruled Morocco such as *Zanata*, *Maknasa*, *Maghrawa*, and so on. Years later, Almoravid Empire came to rule the country. However, there are some historical sources say that Christians lived peaceful life under the Almoravid Empire in Spain because they respected their religious and social rights and allowed them to own some Churches.⁵

Christianity in Morocco After the Islamic Conquest

1Koceila Ibn Lamzem was the king of Amazigh in North Africa before the Islamic conquest.

2Badi' al-Kharrazi, *Tarikh al-Kanissa al-Nasraniya fi al-Maghrib al-Aqsa*, 20.

3Mohammed Ali Dabuz, *Tarikh al-Maghrib al-Kabir*, 61-62.

4Badi' al-Kharrazi, *Tarikh al-Kanissa al-Nasraniya fi al-Maghrib al-Aqsa*, 19.

5 Ibid. 20.

This section will highlight the history of Christianity in Morocco after the Islamic conquest. Also, will discuss the beginning of Christianity in Morocco at this period, and the relationship between Morocco and Christianity. Before going into this part, it will be helpful to talk briefly about the dynasties and the Empires that ruled Morocco after the Islamic conquest.

Almoravid Age in Morocco (1056-1147)

Around 1070 AD Almoravid dynasty was established in Morocco. Ahmed Hachmaoui states that Almoravid dynasty had the power to band together the first political sectarian unity in Morocco. Almoravid Empire was the largest Empire that stretched over Africa and Andalusia. After the Battle of Sagrajasin Spain in 1086 AD, this dynasty became the strongest one in the Islamic West. Its power helped the dynasty to create several relationships with other Islamic states, on the one hand and Christian European countries on the other. These relationships enhanced Morocco's international connections to become more powerful in many aspects.¹

Al-Hachmaoui continues saying that the existence of Christianity in Morocco, during this period, was associated with the Moroccan conquest of Andalusia by Youssef ibnTachfin in 1086AD. Since that time, Christians started immigrating to Morocco from Andalusia. Some of them worked for the state, but others were engaged in the Almoravid military.²

Almohads Age in Morocco (1147- 1269)

Almohads inherited a strong and great Empire from Almoravids, and they developed it to become the largest Empire in Morocco. This superpower aided the Empire to link up many political relationships with Muslims and Christians.³Hachmaoui says that Almohads grouped several connections with Christians in Sicily and Southern Italy. Because of its power, many European countries wanted to exchange business and to create peaceful relationships with Almohads in Morocco.⁴

The relationship between Almohads and Christians, compared to Almoravids, changed a lot, as Muhamed Sarouti states, because many Christians in the era of Almoravids got higher positions in the state while others worked for the military. But that was not the case during the time of Almohads.⁵Sarouti adds that some says that once the Almohads became the

1 Ahmed Hachmaoui, *al-Fi'at al-Uropiya al-Muqima bi al-Maghrib Ayama al-Sa'diyyin*, 35.

2 Ahmed Hachmaoui, *al-Fi'at al-Uropiya al-Muqima bi al-Maghrib Ayama al-Sa'diyyin*, 81.

3 Ibid. 37.

4 Ibid.

5Muhamed Sarouti, *Tarikh al-Tanssir fi al-Maghrib*, 137.

head of the state, everything was changed for Christians. For instance, when the Sultan Abdalmumen became the head of the state in 1146 AD, he said that his state should include only Muslims. For the Christians or Jews either should convert to Islam or leave the country. Accordingly, some of them converted to Islam, some were killed, and others took leave to *Tulaytila*/Toledo in Spain.¹

The era of Almohads was characterized by two different periods. The first period marked by the harsh behavior against Christians, but the second one was totally changed because religious and military Christians began to come into Morocco. Also, many Christian missionaries came to Morocco in order to supervise the religious life of Christians who were living there.² This period was characterized by the arrival of the first group of missionaries in Morocco. That time was the beginning of the Franciscans movement that started with Francisco de Asis in 1208 AD, then followed by a religious meeting in 1219 AD that gathered about 5000 priests in order to send missionaries to different places around the world.³ According to al-Kharrazi, Christian missionaries used the method of dialogue and discussion in order to succeed in their mission because they faced strong rigor from Almohads.⁴ According to VieraPawliková-Vilhanová "it was believed that without effective and active communication it was impossible to pursue the conversion with the Africans."⁵

It can be said that the most important thing that characterized this era was the building of the church in *Marrakush*. In this regard, Abbas al-Jirari says that al-Ma'moun implemented the conditions of Christians and allowed them to build a church in the center of *Marrakush*.⁶ Actually, there are several factors that have made the Almohad state allow the Christians to build the church in *Marrakush*. For example, Almohad changed their relationships with Christians and accepted their conditions because of the extreme weakness which began after the Battle of al-'Uqab battle in which Sultan al-Nasser al-Mohidi fought against Christian armies from different parts of the European Empire. This; however, was the main cause of losing their state in Andalusia.⁷

Almohads acted harshly with Christians in Morocco and Andalusia. However, in the last period of Almohads, Christians achieved one of their goals which was the building of the church in Marrakesh. They achieved this goal because Almohads were very busy in Andalusia against Christians.

1 Ibid.

2 Ahmed Hachmaoui, al-Fi'at al-Uropiya al-Muqima bi al-Maghrib Ayama al-Sa'diyyin, 41.

3 Badi' al-Kharrazi, *Tarikh al-Kanissa al-Nasraniya fi al-Maghrib al-Aqsa*, 22.

4 Ibid.

5 VieraPawliková-Vilhanová, Christian Missions in Africa and Their Role in the Transformation of African Society, 254.

6 Abbas al-Jirari, *Durus al-Tarikh al-Maghribi* 115.

7 Badi' al-Kharrazi, *Tarikh al-Kanissa al-Nasraniya fi al-Maghrib al-Aqsa*, 25.

Marinid Age in Morocco (1269-1465)

During the Marinid period of time, several Christian countries instituted relationships with Marinid in different fields. Despite experiencing wars most of the time, this did not prevent them from establishing peaceful relationships. Many Christians from different parts of Europe lived in different places around Morocco since the Almohad period. Then, in the era of Marinid their numbers multiplied.¹ In the era of Ya ‘cub ibn Abdulhak , as Harakat mentions, Morocco signed a treaty of reconciliation twice with the kingdom of Castile. The first one in 1277 AD and the second one in 1282 AD, then signed the third one with Sancho IV of Castile 1285 AD in the same era. Even though wars began after the reconciliations between these two countries, the economic and the business relations still existed.²

Later on, the relationship between Marinids and Christians deteriorated because Marinid killed the Christian leader Garcia ibn Anton³ and his army. This act pushed Christians to change their conduct toward Moroccan Sultans.⁴

Nevertheless, there were positive relations between Marinids and Christians that cannot overlooked. As’ir says that some leaders in the Marinid army destroyed some legacies that Christians inherited from the Almohad period, but Marinid fixed it rapidly. In 1308 *Sultan* Abu Thabit ‘Amir *Almarini* heard that Youssef ibn Muhamed ibn Abi Ayad, the leader of his army, killed some Christians in *Marrakush* and took their properties. In order to avenge them, Abu Thabit killed Youssef Ibn Muhamed with his followers and hung their heads on the gates of *Marrakush*.⁵

As a conclusion, the time of Marinid was characterized by a kind of openness towards foreign countries which allowed Christians to live with some rights and justice, that normally give to *Dhimmi* in Islamic country,⁶ in Morocco Morocco to the extent that most of them joined the military.

1 El-Bashir As’ir, *al-Tansir fi al-Janub al-Maghribi Agadir waMarrakushUnmudajayn*, 43.

2 Ibrahim Harakat, *al-Maghrib ‘Abra al-Tarikh*, 82.

3 This name mentioned in several Arabic sources, but I could not find it in any other place.

4 Al-Nasiry Abu al-Abass, *al-Istiqsa li AkhbarDuwal al-Maghrib al-Aqsa*, 125-26.

5 El-Bashir As’ir, *al-Tansir fi al-Janub al-Maghribi Agadir waMarrakushUnmudajayn*, 46.

6 *Dhimmi* a non-Muslim living under the protection of a Muslim state. She/He is exempt exempt fromduties of Islam likemilitary and zakah but must insteadpay a taxcalledjizyah.

Wattasid Age in Morocco (1465-1554)

Wattasid state was Characterized by the invasion of the Portuguese and the Spanish to the Moroccan Coasts. One of their goals was to spread Christianity and military in Morocco in order to control its economy.¹ According to Harakat, Portugal totally failed in the field of missionary activity. In addition, this period marked with diplomatic relationships between Morocco and Portugal after wars that brought together those two countries. These wars ended with a peace treaty that was signed by Sultan Ahmed Wattasi and the king of Portugal John III around 1538 AD. This treaty imposed eleven years of peace.²

Harakat continues explaining that several Jewish and Christian minorities lived in the era of Wattasids and left their traces in the Moroccan history. Christians had the ability to live among Muslims because they had their own business and churches in different places around the country. Even though, Moroccans have never forgot that these people colonized their coasts.³ Abdelhadi al-Tazi states that in the era of Abu al-Abbas Wattasi 1525-50 AD, several priests came to Morocco to learn Arabic and develop his knowledge, such as the priest Nicola Klinar. He was welcomed by the Sultan Abu al-Abbas where he received a full encouragement to do so. The same thing with the priest Andre de Spolete who came for the evangelization, and the Sultan sent him to Fez in order to meet with scholars of al-Qarawiyyin University to exchange ideas. However, in the first meeting with scholars, they asked the Sultan to send the priest away; otherwise, he would face problems because of his ideas.⁴

To conclude, the era of Wattasids was more open and flexible with people from different cultures because of their relationships with Christians. Nevertheless, Wattasids were careful towards the effects of missionaries on the faith of individuals in Morocco. Wattasids failed to expel the Portuguese from Morocco, and the Sultans compromised with the Portugal and signed an armistice agreement for eleven years.

Saadian Age in Morocco (1554-1659)

During the Saadian era, the most influential issue was the full military confrontations against the Portuguese who wanted to seize the Moroccan coasts and its treasures. They took advantage of the weaknesses of the internal

1 El-Bashir As'ir, *al-Tansir fi al-Janub al-Maghribi Agadir waMarrakushUnmudajayn*, 47.

2 Ibrahim Harakat, *al-Maghrib 'Abra al-Tarikh*, 84.

3 Ibid. 192

4Abdelhadi al-Tazi, *al-Tarikh al-DiplomasiLilmaghreb min Aqdami al- 'Ussur ila al-Yawm* 304.

situation in Morocco.¹ According to Abdelkarim Karim, it was very expected that Morocco will be rescued by Wattasid from the danger of the Portuguese, but in vain.² At that time, Moroccans started looking for someone who can free them from the Portuguese colonization. Suddenly, appeared the founder of the Saadis, Sultan Abu Abdellah 1540-1557 AD, who made the double effort and expelled them from some places around Morocco.³

According to Abdelmajid Qaduri, the contemporary writings in Portuguese say that the occupation by the Portuguese of the Moroccan coasts was by divine will, and the colonization of Ceuta brought a glory to the Christ and the Christians.⁴ Even though Portuguese left negative effects on Moroccans, but that was not an obstacle for Saadis to connect diplomatic relationships with Portuguese.⁵ Abdelhadi al-Tazi explains that in the time of Abdelmalek Ibn Zaidan (1627-1630 AD), the ambassador of France, Isaac Razilly, visited Safi in order to build a Christian mission, but many problems prevented him to do so. The same thing appeared again in 1630. At the same date, the general Christian conference suggested to send missionaries to Morocco in order to save Christians from Islam.⁶

Al-Tazi says that they tried to send other missionaries in the time of Ahmed al-Abbas ibn Muhammed 1654-1659 AD, the last Saadis Sultan, but they did not succeed. Later on, they began their mission regularly, and started sending missionaries to Tetouan, Sale, Fez, and Marrakush to protect Christians.⁷ It can be concluded that the most interesting deed in the Saadiyin's era was the "Battle of the three Kings, also called Battle of the Wadi al-Makhāzin, defeat dealt the invading Portuguese armies of King Sebastian by the Saadi sultan of Morocco, 'Abd al-Malik 1578 AD."⁸

The Alawi Age in Morocco (1659)

According to al-Tazi, at the period of the Alawi (1659), Christians were messengers between Moroccan state and Catholic palaces. Among Christians were some religious people who used to be a link between Moroccan Sultans and Catholics in the issue of the exchange of prisoners or some

1 El-Bashir As'ir, al-Tansir fi al-Janub al-Maghribi Agadir waMarrakushUnmudajayn, 51.

2 Abdelkarim Karim, *al-Maghrib fi 'Ahdi al-Dawlah al-Sa'diyah* 33.

3 Al-Nasiry Abu al-Abass, *al-Istiqsa li AkhbarDuwal al-Maghrib al-Aqsa*, 228.

4 AbdelmajidQaduri, *al-Mghrebwa Europa ma Bayna al-Qarnayni 15 wa 18*, 90-91.

5 El-Bashir As'ir, al-Tansir fi al-Janub al-Maghribi Agadir waMarrakushUnmudajayn, 55.

6 Abdelhadi al-Tazi, *al-Tarikh al-DiplomasiLilmaghreb min Aqdami al- 'Ussur ila Al-yawm* 183.

7 Ibid.

8Britannica Academic, s.v. "Battle of the Three Kings, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-the-Three-Kings>

emergency problems. At the time of Moulay Ismail, Christians (1645 - 1727) reached the maximum of the freedom that can give to non-Muslims or Dhimmis in Muslim country, and Churches became widespread around Morocco such as in Meknes, Fez, Tetouan, Safi, and Agadir.¹ The same source, also, says that some Christians were counselors in Moroccan palaces such as Etienne Rey who was very close to the prince Muhamed III.²

The nineteenth century was characterized by the existence of different groups of Christians in Morocco, and the increase of the proselytizing activities that came as a result of the openness of Morocco to Europe.³ Al-Nadory writes that when Catholic missionaries began their mission in Morocco, the Protestants followed suit. Even though they started their mission openly in public places, they failed. Short time later, their activities became only providing health services, financial and food aid.⁴ Al-Nadory continuously saying that Catholic and Protestant activities increased significantly in North Morocco in the time of Moulay Hassan I.⁵

Generally, the era of the Alawi (1659 AD) in Morocco was marked with a type of openness to Europe, and kind of freedom that can Christians or Dhimmis get in non-Muslims country. More importantly, Christians experienced their mission among Muslim society without any difficulties.

Conclusion

This research concludes that the first existence of Christianity was around second century with the colonization of the Roman Empire to Morocco. As well as, The existence of Christianity in Morocco took two periods, pre-Islamic and post-Islamic period. The pre-Islamic period started with the Roman Empire and lived through several other ages such as the Vandals, and the Byzantine, while the post-Islamic period started with Oqba ibn Nafi al-Fihri, the Islamic conqueror, in 681 and contained with many other ages and Empires such as Almoravid Age, Almohad, Marinid, Wattasids, Saadis, and the Alawi one.

1 Abdelhadi al-Tazi, *al-Tarikh al-Diplomasi Lilmaghreb min Aqdami al- 'Ussur ila Al-yawm*, 286.

2 Ibid. 286

3 El-Bashir As'ir, *al-Tansir fi al-Janub al-Maghribi Agadir wa Marrakush Unmudajayn*, 58.

4 Rachid Al-Nadory, *al-Maghrib al-Kabir: al-'Usur al-Qadima Ususuha al-Tarikhiya al-al-Hadariya Wa al-Siyasiya*, 496.

5 Ibid. 496.

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