

A Muslim King Makes a Gesture Toward Christians

The day before Easter in the Western world, King Abdullah of Jordan, a Muslim, [announced](#) that he is funding the restoration of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

That may seem like mere inside baseball to non-believers. But in the wider picture of what's sometimes called the "clash" of Muslim and Western civilizations, it's a big deal.

Said church is believed by Catholic and Orthodox Christians to be built over the burial place of Jesus, from which most Christians believe he emerged transformed by his resurrection from the dead. It was built by St. Helena, mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine, in the fourth century. And in 637...

"...Caliph Umar, Muhammad's second successor, respected the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, leaving it as a Christian place of worship instead of turning it into a mosque. It is thanks to this first important gesture made by the Caliph, that the niche of the Holy Sepulchre has survived as a Christian place of worship in the face of the many vicissitudes Jerusalem has faced throughout its history."

The peace treaty signed by Jordan and Israel in the 1990s, decades after Israel's defeat of the Arabs in the 1967 war, affirmed the "prerogatives" of the Hashemite kings of Jordan over the "holy places" in Jerusalem, which included the Christian places such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as well as the Muslim ones such as the Al Aqsa Mosque.

Now the Israelis have honored that agreement more in the breach than in the observance, because they still claim Jerusalem as their "undivided" capital. But it also serves Israel's interest to let Abdullah exert some influence over

the holy places. As conflict rages throughout most of the Middle East, King Abdullah is a discreet ally of Israel, which doesn't want to undermine that arrangement. The holy places have also been the focus of low-intensity but gradually increasing conflict since the 1967 war—not only between Muslims and Christians, but also, scandalously, [among Christians themselves](#). So while Abdullah's gesture has an obvious political dimension, the politics of it benefit *everybody*—except the Sunni and Shia fanatics who want to impose their particular versions of Islam on everybody else.

Isn't that the sort of thing we want?

In the Middle East, at any rate, such religious matters matter a great deal. From a distance it's easy for Americans and Europeans to get the impression that Islam *as such* is so intolerant toward other religions that no stable, mutual accommodation between Muslims and non-Muslims is possible. And if the more radical Sunni jihadis or the theocratic regime in Tehran are what Islam is really about, that would be true.

But Islam is a much more complex reality than that.

Yes, Islam was first spread by the sword, conquering most of the Eastern-Christian world during its first century of existence. Yes, Muslims empires, when they existed, tried to conquer even more Christian lands in subsequent centuries. So today's plague of religious violence by Muslims against non-Muslims—and against each other—is not exactly unprecedented.

But there's also an important strand of tolerance in the history of Islam that has never entirely disappeared. The Sufi branch of Islam, for example, has always maintained it.

So King Abdullah's gesture is an important reiteration of tolerance as well as a political move. After a year or so in which ISIL has been committing what the U.S. State Department calls "genocide" against Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East, it couldn't come at a better

time. Muslims and Christians will remember it long after today's conflicts. And that's reason for hope.