Religious Toleration in Land-Based Empires Document-Based Question

The Question

Evaluate the extent to which religious toleration strengthened the power of rulers in land-based empires from c. 1450 to c. 1750.

Directions: Read the seven documents that follow and answer the guiding questions after each one. Then complete the final task that is assigned.

The Documents

Document 1

Source: *Isaac Zarfati, a Jewish scholar born in Germany who settled in the Ottoman Empire, letter to the Jewish communities of Germany and Hungary, circa 1456, a few years after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453.*

> Brothers and teachers! friends and acquaintances! I, Isaac Zarfati, from a French stock, born in Germany, where I sat at the feet of my teachers, I proclaim to you that Turkey is a land wherein nothing is lacking. If ye will, all shall yet be well with you. The way to the Holy Land lies open to you through Turkey. Is it not better for you to live under Moslems than under Christians? Here every man may dwell at peace under his own vine and his own fig-tree. In Christendom, on the contrary, ye dare not clothe your children in red or in blue, according to your taste, without exposing them to insult and yourselves to extortion; and, therefore, are ye condemned to go about meanly clad in sad-colored raiment.

Key Terms

Turkey: the Ottoman Empire
Moslems: Muslims
Christendom: the Christian kingdoms of Europe
Under his own vine and his own fig-tree: a phrase from the Hebrew Bible meaning to live in peace and safety
Extortion: taking money from someone by threats

English rendering from Heinrich Graetz, History of the Jews, vol. 4 (1894). Graetz notes that the original Hebrew does not translate easily, so his version is free rather than literal.

Guiding Questions

1. **Close Reading:** What does Zarfati say Jews can do in the Ottoman Empire that they cannot do in Christian lands?
2. **Sourcing:** Zarfati wrote to persuade Jews in Germany and Hungary to move to the Ottoman Empire. How might that purpose shape his description of Ottoman rule?
3. **Contextualization:** The Ottomans had just conquered Constantinople. Why might an Ottoman sultan welcome new Jewish settlers, and how could they add to his power?

© 2026 Coffee House Historian. For single classroom use only. Not for resale, redistribution, or posting to shared/public sites without permission.

Document 2

Source: *Anthony Jenkinson, English merchant and envoy seeking trade with Persia, describing his audience with Shah Tahmasp, ruler of the Safavid Empire, at Qazvin, 20 November 1562.*

> . . . before my feet touched the ground, a pair of the Sophy's own shoes . . . were put upon my feet, for without the same shoes I might not be suffered to tread upon his holy ground, being a Christian, and called amongst them Gower, that is, unbeliever, and unclean: esteeming all to be infidels and Pagans which do not believe as they do, in their false filthy prophets Mahomet and Murtezallie.
>
> Then he reasoned with me much of religion, demanding whether I were a Gower, that is to say, an unbeliever, or a Muselman, that is, of Mahomet's law. Unto whom I answered, that I was neither unbeliever nor Mahometan, but a Christian. . . . Dost thou believe so said the Sophy unto me: Yea that I do said I: Oh thou unbeliever said he, we have no need to have friendship with the unbelievers, and so willed me to depart. I being glad thereof did reverence and went my way . . . and after me followed a man with a basanet of sand, sifting all the way that I had gone within the said palace, even from the said Sophy's sight unto the court gate.

Key Terms

Sophy: the European name for the Safavid shah
Suffered: allowed
Gower: a Persian and Turkish word for an unbeliever
Muselman: a Muslim
Mahomet: Muhammad
Murtezallie: Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, especially honored by Shia Muslims
Did reverence: bowed
Basanet: a little basin (editor's note)

Hakluyt's text from E. Delmar Morgan and C. H. Coote, eds., Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia (1886). Spelling has been modernized

Guiding Questions

1. **Close Reading:** List two things the shah does because Jenkinson is a Christian.
2. **Sourcing:** Jenkinson came to win trade for English merchants and left with nothing. How might that shape the way he describes the shah?
3. **Contextualization:** The Safavid shahs made Shia Islam the official religion of Persia and were rivals of the Sunni Ottomans. How might turning away a Christian envoy have served the shah's power?

© 2026 Coffee House Historian. For single classroom use only. Not for resale, redistribution, or posting to shared/public sites without permission.

Document 3

Source: *Jahangir, Mughal emperor (ruled 1605–1627), Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri, his memoirs, describing the reign of his father, Emperor Akbar (ruled 1556–1605).*

> The professors of various faiths had room in the broad expanse of his incomparable sway. This was different from the practice in other realms, for in Persia there is room for Shias only, and in Turkey, India, and Turan there is room for Sunnis only. As in the wide expanse of the Divine compassion there is room for all classes and the followers of all creeds, so, on the principle that the Shadow[1] must have the same properties as the Light, in his dominions, which on all sides were limited only by the salt sea, there was room for the professors of opposite religions, and for beliefs good and bad, and the road to altercation was closed. Sunnis and Shias met in one mosque, and Franks and Jews in one church, and observed their own forms of worship.
>
> [1] Kings are regarded as shadows of God. *(Editor's footnote)*

Key Terms

Sway: rule
Turan: Central Asia
Divine compassion: God's mercy
Franks: Europeans, here European Christians

Translation by Alexander Rogers, edited by Henry Beveridge (1909). The footnote is the editor's, not Jahangir's.

Guiding Questions

1. **Close Reading:** According to Jahangir, how was Akbar's empire different from Persia, Turkey, and Turan?
2. **Close Reading:** Jahangir says there was room for "beliefs good and bad." Does that mean Akbar thought all religions were true? If not, why might he allow them?
3. **Sourcing:** Jahangir is writing about his own father, whose throne he inherited. Why might he want to present Akbar's rule this way?

Document 4

Source: *Paul Rycaut, secretary to the English ambassador in Constantinople, The Present State of the Ottoman Empire, 1668, a description of the empire written for English readers.*

> And this is that sort of toleration the Turks give to the Christian Religion; they know they cannot force mens Wills, nor captivate their Consciences, as well as their bodies; but what means may be used to render them contemptible, to make them poor, their lives uncomfortable, and the interest of their Religion weak and despicable, are practised with divers Arts and Tyranny, that their toleration of Christianity is rather to afflict and persecute it, then any grant of favour or dispensation.
>
> The Mahometan Religion tolerates Christian Churches and Houses of Devotion, in places where they have been anciently founded, but admits not of holy Buildings on new foundations; they may repair the old Coverings and Roofs, but cannot lay a stone in a new place Consecrated to Divine Service . . .

Key Terms

Captivate: capture or control
Divers Arts: various methods
Then: than
Dispensation: special permission
Mahometan: Muslim

Original 1668 spelling and capitalization, from the Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership transcription.

© 2026 Coffee House Historian. For single classroom use only. Not for resale, redistribution, or posting to shared/public sites without permission.

Guiding Questions

1. **Close Reading:** According to Rycaut, what are Christians in the Ottoman Empire allowed to do, and what are they not allowed to do?
2. **Sourcing:** Rycaut was an English Protestant writing for English readers. How might that shape his judgment that Ottoman toleration is really a way to "afflict and persecute" Christianity?
3. **Corroboration:** Compare Rycaut's view of Ottoman toleration with Zarfati's in Document 1. What might explain the difference?

Document 5

Source: *The Sacred Edict, Maxim 7, Qing dynasty China. The maxim was issued by the Kangxi Emperor in 1670; the explanation was added by his son, the Yongzheng Emperor, in 1724. This edict was read aloud to soldiers and ordinary people twice a month, on the 1st and 15th, across the empire.*

MAXIM SEVENTH. DEGRADE STRANGE RELIGIONS, IN ORDER TO EXALT THE ORTHODOX DOCTRINE.

. . . The sect of the Western Ocean which honours Teen-choo, ranks also among those that are corrupt; but because these men [i. e. the Romish missionaries] understand the mathematics, therefore government employs them: of this you ought to be aware. To walk in these by-roads and deceive the people is what the law will not excuse. . . .

Soldiers and people! act conformably to his sacred injunctions; and stop the progress of these strange sects as you would that of torrents, flames, robbers, and thieves. Indeed the injury of torrents, flames, robbers, and thieves, terminates on the body; but that of false religions extends to the human heart.

Key Terms

Orthodox doctrine: the officially approved teaching, here Confucianism
Western Ocean: Europe
Teen-choo: Tianzhu, "Lord of Heaven," the Chinese name Catholics used for God
Romish: an old, unfriendly English word for Roman Catholic
By-roads: wrong paths
Injunctions: commands

Translation by William Milne (1817; 2nd ed. 1870). Words in brackets were added by Milne, a Protestant missionary.

Guiding Questions

1. **Close Reading:** What does the edict tell soldiers and ordinary people to do about "strange religions"?
2. **Close Reading:** Why does the government employ the European missionaries even though it calls their religion corrupt?
3. **Contextualization:** This edict was read aloud twice a month across the empire. Why would Qing emperors want soldiers and ordinary people to hear this message, and how could it strengthen their rule?

© 2026 Coffee House Historian. For single classroom use only. Not for resale, redistribution, or posting to shared/public sites without permission.

Document 6

Source: *Khafi Khan, Mughal official and historian, Muntakhab al-Lubab, written decades after the events, describing how Emperor Aurangzeb brought back the jizya in 1679. Akbar had abolished this tax in 1564.*

With the object of curbing the infidels, and of distinguishing the land of the faithful from an infidel land, the jizya, or poll-tax, was imposed upon the Hindus throughout all the provinces. Upon the publication of this order, the Hindus all round Dehli assembled in vast numbers under the jharokha of the Emperor on the river front of the palace, to represent their inability to pay, and to pray for the recall of the edict. But the Emperor would not listen to their complaints. One day, when he went to public prayer in the great mosque on the Sabbath, a vast multitude of Hindus thronged the road from the palace to the mosque, with the object of seeking relief. Money-changers and drapers, all kinds of shopkeepers from the Urdu bazar, mechanics, and workmen of all kinds, left off work and business, and pressed into the way. . . . At length an order was given to bring out the elephants and direct them against the mob. Many fell trodden to death under the feet of the elephants and horses. For some days the Hindus continued to assemble in great numbers and complain, but at length they submitted to pay the jizya.

Key Terms

Poll-tax: a tax charged per person
Jharokha: the palace balcony where the emperor appeared to the public
Sabbath: here, Friday, the day of Muslim public prayer
Drapers: cloth sellers
Urdu bazar: the camp market

Translation by John Dowson, in H. M. Elliot and John Dowson, The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians, vol. 7 (1877).

Guiding Questions

1. **Close Reading:** What reasons does Khafi Khan give for the jizya? How did Hindus in Delhi respond, and how did the emperor respond?
2. **Sourcing:** Khafi Khan was a Mughal official writing decades later. How might his position and the time that had passed affect his account?
3. **Corroboration:** Compare Aurangzeb's policy with Akbar's in Document 3. Which approach seems more likely to strengthen an emperor ruling a mostly Hindu population, and why?

© 2026 Coffee House Historian. For single classroom use only. Not for resale, redistribution, or posting to shared/public sites without permission.

Document 7

Source: *Narsingh, court painter, illustration for the Akbarnama, the official history of Emperor Akbar's reign, circa 1600–1605. Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.*



Context: This painting shows Akbar presiding over a night debate in the Ibadat Khana (House of Worship), a hall he built at his capital, Fatehpur Sikri, for discussions among scholars of different faiths. The two men in dark robes at the left are Jesuit missionaries from Portuguese Goa, whom Akbar had invited to his court.

Key Terms

Akbarnama: the official history of Akbar's reign, written by his court historian, Abu'l-Fazl
Ibadat Khana: House of Worship
Jesuits: Catholic priests of the Society of Jesus, who worked as missionaries
Goa: a Portuguese trading colony on India's west coast

Image from World History Encyclopedia (public domain). Original in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, CBL In 03.263b.

Guiding Questions

1. **Close Reading:** Describe what you see. Where is Akbar, who is gathered around him, and where are the Jesuits?
2. **Sourcing:** This painting was made for Akbar's official history. What message about Akbar was it meant to send to the people who saw it?
3. **Corroboration:** How does this image support or complicate Jahangir's description of Akbar in Document 3?

© 2026 Coffee House Historian. For single classroom use only. Not for resale, redistribution, or posting to shared/public sites without permission.

Final Task

Option A: Document-Based Essay

Write an essay that responds to this prompt: **Evaluate the extent to which religious toleration strengthened the power of rulers in land-based empires from c. 1450 to c. 1750.**

In your essay you should:

- Make a historically defensible claim that establishes a line of reasoning.
- Describe the broader historical context relevant to the prompt.
- Support your argument using at least four documents.
- Use at least one piece of specific historical evidence that is not found in the documents.
- For at least two documents, explain how or why the document's point of view, purpose, historical situation, or audience is relevant to your argument.
- Use evidence to show a complex understanding of the question, for example by explaining how the same ruler could both tolerate and limit other faiths, or how toleration served rulers differently in different empires.

Option B: Document Analysis and Discussion

Prepare to discuss the documents with your class or a small group.

1. Sort the documents. Write each document number in the column or columns where it fits. Many documents fit in more than one column.

Toleration strengthened the ruler	Restriction served the ruler, or toleration had limits

2. Which document gives the strongest evidence that toleration strengthened a ruler's power? Which gives the strongest evidence that rulers gained more from restricting other faiths, or that toleration had limits? Explain your choices.

3. Choose one document that could support both sides of the question. How could it be used each way?

4. Whose voices are missing from this set of documents? How might including them change your answer?

5. Where do you stand on the question? Be ready to support your answer with at least two documents.

© 2026 Coffee House Historian. For single classroom use only. Not for resale, redistribution, or posting to shared/public sites without permission.

Bibliography

Graetz, Heinrich. *History of the Jews*. Vol. 4, 272–73. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1894. Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/historyofje04grae.

Jahangir. *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri; or, Memoirs of Jahangir*. Translated by Alexander Rogers. Edited by Henry Beveridge. Vol. 1, 37. London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1909. Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/tuzukijahangirio00jahauoft.

Kangxi Emperor and Yongzheng Emperor. *The Sacred Edict*. Translated by William Milne. 2nd ed., 70–73. Shanghai: American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1870. Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/sacrededictconta00kangrich.

Khafi Khan. *Muntakhabu-l Lubab*. In H. M. Elliot and John Dowson, *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*, vol. 7, 296. Translated by John Dowson. London: Trübner, 1877. Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/cu31924073036778.

Morgan, E. Delmar, and C. H. Coote, eds. *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia by Anthony Jenkinson and Other Englishmen*. Vol. 1, 145–47. London: Hakluyt Society, 1886. Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/earlyvoyagestrav01morguoft.

Narsingh. *Akbar in the Ibadat Khana*. Illustration to the *Akbarnama*, c. 1600–1605. Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, CBL In 03.263b. Image from *World History Encyclopedia*, public domain. https://www.worldhistory.org/image/12135/akbar-in-the-ibadat-khana/.

Rycaut, Paul. *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*. Book II, chap. 2, 103. London: John Starkey and Henry Brome, 1668. Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, University of Michigan. https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A58003.0001.001/1:7.2?rgn=div2;view=fulltext.

© 2026 Coffee House Historian. For single classroom use only. Not for resale, redistribution, or posting to shared/public sites without permission.