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PREFACE

THIS BOOK HAS BEEN in the making for many years. It all began when more than twenty-five years ago I was a fellow at Dumbarton Oaks and in regular conversations with the Byzantinists who were my constant conversation partners there, and with Professor Irfan Shah in particular, the master of Byzantine/Arab studies, who has continued to give me constant encouragement and help. In those days, Professor Gil Constable was the benevolent and broadminded director of Dumbarton Oaks, to whom I herewith acknowledge my gratitude for his unstinting vocacy and support. At that time I had proposed to write an account of the responses of the Christians in the so-called Oriental Patriarchates, as the Greeks called the Episcopal sees of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, the challenges posed for them by the Muslims under whose hegemony most of the Coptic, Syrian, and Arabic-speaking Christians lived. Little did I know how long it would take me to accomplish the project; at that time there were few scholarly studies of the relevant materials in Greek, Syrian, and Arabic to which I could turn for help. I spent many years writing articles about individual Christian Arabic and Syriac writers and their compositions, translating and commenting on some texts and editing others. The fall semester of the academic year 1991–92, I profited immensely from a semester's stay in the Institute for Advanced Study at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, at the invitation of Professor R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and the late Professor Hava Lazarus-Yaféh; the community of scholars in Jerusalem in my fields of interest is unequalled anywhere. Finally, in the fall of 2004 I was appointed to John Carroll University’s Walter and Maureen Tuohy Chair of Interreligious Studies, a situation that allowed me the opportunity to write as public lectures the general essays that, after much revision, would become the chapters of this book. I am most grateful to Professor David Mason, the director of the chair, and to all my erstwhile colleagues in the university’s department of religious studies, particularly Dr. Zeki Saritoprak, for their warm welcome and unstinting hospitality during my time in Cleveland.

For more than thirty years I have been a member of the faculty in the Department of Semitic and Egyptian Languages and Literatures at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, where I took my own graduate degree under the guidance of the late Msgr. Patrick W. Skehan, and now retired Professor Richard M. Frank. Needless to say, my debt to them is beyond calculation and well beyond what a simple acknowledgment here can adequately repay. For all of these years I have had the privilege to work in the incomparable library of the university’s Semitics D
partment and its Institute of Christian Oriental Research; again I am much indebted to the library's curator, Dr. Monica J. Blanchard, who for many years has gone well beyond the call of either duty or friendship to provide me with the often hard to find resources I have needed for my researches. Over these same years I have received much support from my colleagues and students, too numerous to list individually here; they, and our current chairman, Professor Michael Patrick O'Connor, have offered me their friendship and scholarly companionship, without which I surely would not have been able to work so happily for so long.

A number of people have read some or all of this book's chapters and have offered many helpful comments, not to mention their very welcome corrections of my unwitting errors of fact or interpretation. Among them I wish particularly to thank Professor Christopher Blum of Christendom College in Front Royal, Virginia; Professor Robert L. Wilken of the University of Virginia; Dr. Norbert Huttensteiner of the Catholic University of America; Fred Appel and Meera Vaidyanathan of the Princeton University Press; Dawn Hall, my copyeditor; and the two anonymous readers whom the press appointed to evaluate my work; their remarks and suggestions have very much improved the final product. I am particularly grateful to the Institute of Christian Oriental Research at the Catholic University of America; Professor Joseph Patrick of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem; and the British Library for permission to reproduce here the illustrations that belong to them.

Finally I wish to express here my gratitude for the support of my family, friends, and confreres, all of whom, again too numerous to mention here, have patiently, willingly, and supportively endured the vagaries of one absorbed for so long in the preoccupations of research and writing. I owe special thanks to Marlene Deboe for her support and her skillful help in the assembly of the text, and to Professor Christine M. Bochen of Nazareth College of Rochester, New York, for long years of personal solicitude and inspiration.

This book is not a comprehensive presentation of its subject. Rather, I conceive it to be a general introduction to the study of Christian cultural and intellectual life in the world of Islam, from the time of the prophet Muhammad to the time of the Crusades and the Mongol conquest of the Middle East in the middle of the thirteenth century. For this reason, and to lead the reader to further sources of study, I have included copious bibliographical annotations in the text. It is my hope that the book may thus become something of a reference source for the study of the Christian Middle East among English speakers, who are not yet well served with an abundant literature in this field. I, and all who work in Christian Arabic studies, owe much to the pioneering work in our time of Fr. Samir Khalil

Washington, D.C. September 200
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The story of the Christians who are at home in the world of Islam has seldom been told in terms that highlight how their intellectual culture and even their denominational identities came to be expressed in the Arabic idiom of the Islamic culture of which they were for centuries an integral part. In the heyday of the classical world of Arabo-Islamic civilization in the Middle East, from the middle of the eighth century to the middle of the thirteenth century, Arabic-speaking Christians not only made major contributions to Islamic culture, but they also wrote philosophical and theological texts of their own in Arabic; they translated much of their several ecclesiastical traditions from Greek, Syriac, and Coptic into Arabic; and they produced scholars, scientists, and churchmen who in their own day gained enviable reputations in the Arab world. This book tells their story in broad outline, with copious bibliographical annotations for those who would like to learn more about this exciting and little-known chapter in the history of Christianity.

A number of first-rate studies of Christians in the Middle East have been published in recent years, but they have not been so much concerned with the history of the development and expression of Christian culture and learning in Arabic. Rather, their concern has been, for the most part, to set forth the internal history and fortunes of the several "Oriental" churches, the perilous demographic state of these Communities since the fourteenth century, and to provide the historical statistics that chart their decline.

There have also been recent studies of the multiple hardships endured by Jews, Christians, and other "People of the Book" in their experience of life in the special status stipulated for them in Islamic law, a status that has recently been designated by the neologism, Dhimmisâde, a term that echoes the Arabic word designating their legal standing. But another dimension

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3 The several works of Giselle Littmann, writing under the pen name Bat Ŷe’or, have helped to popularize the neologism, Dhimmisâde. See, e.g., Bat Ŷe’or, The Decline of Eastern Chris-
to the life of the Christians in the world of Islam also deserves attention and has often been neglected by westerners. It is the story of the religious, cultural, and intellectual achievements of the Arabophone Christians.

Many well-informed westerners are still completely unaware of the fact that there is a large archive of texts in Arabic composed by Christians from as early as the eighth century of the Christian era and continuing right up to today. Arabic is often thought to be simply the language of the Muslims. However, in hand with the unawareness of Christian Arabic there has been a concomitant unawareness of the considerable cultural and intellectual achievements of the Christians who have for more than a millennium been an integral part of the societies of the Arabic-speaking Muslims in the Middle East. It is as if in the Western imagination the religious discourse and the intellectual concerns of Middle Eastern Christians were frozen in time, in the form they had at the time when the Islamic hegemony came over them in the seventh century. This unawareness of the continuing vitality of Christian life and culture in the world of Islam after the Islamic conquest is no doubt due in large part to the slow pace of the academic study of Christian Arabic in the West. It did not really become a going concern until the twentieth century, and then only by riding on the coattails of other academic disciplines. The situation is almost a complete contrast with that of the study of Judeo-Arabic and the cultural and intellectual achievements of the Jews of Islam during the centuries when there were large Jewish populations in the Islamic world, not only in the East but also in North Africa and al-Andalus.

By contrast with the case of the Arabic-speaking Christians, many of the seminal Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages who lived among the Muslims and wrote in Arabic are now well known to many educated westerners.

Their works and their languages have been studied in western universities for generations. Many readers, on the one hand, will probably recognize such names as Sadiqah bint Yosef Ghaon (882–942), Yehuda ha-Levi (ca. 1075–1141), Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164), or Moses Maimonides (1135–1204). Who, on the other hand, even among Christian medievalists, has heard of Humphrey ibn Ishaj (808–873), Theodore Abu Qurrah (ca. 755–ca. 830), Anmar al-Bashi (fl. ca. 850), Yahya ibn Adi (893–974), Bar Hebraeus (d. 1268), or al-Mu'taman ibn al-Assal (fl. 1230–1260)? Strangely, there is one Arab Christian scholar of early Abbasid times whose name readers of the works of the Irish poet William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) might recognize. He was the Syrian "Mellite" Qustâ ibn Lujjat al-Ba'labak (d. 912); Yeats used his name, under the form Kusta Ben Luka, to designate a mysterious interlocutor in his esoteric work, _A Vision._ But no one seems to know how Yeats came upon the name of this distinguished Arab Christian scholar, or indeed if he even knew much about his background.

In the West, Christendom is often thought of as coterminous with the lands and cultures of the Latin Middle Ages, and many people nowadays are also unaware of the names of even the neighboring medieval Byzantine Christian writers and thinkers whose language was Greek or Slavonic, let alone the names of any Arabic or Syriac writers among the Christians who lived in the world of Islam. Latin Christians in particular have historically been inclined to think of the Christians of the Orient as schismatic or even heretical and so as people who left the church centuries ago. Now is the time to take steps to remedy this situation, first of all because the intellectual heritage of the eastern Christians belongs to the whole church and we are the poorer without any knowledge of it. But it is also the case that in the multicultural world of the twenty-first century, when Muslim/Christian relations are becoming daily more important worldwide, the experience of the Christians of the Orient who have lived with Muslims for centuries, and who have immigrated to the West together with the Muslims, is immediately relevant for those of us in the West who would be in dialogue with Muslims today and who would welcome some deeper knowledge of the East.


_10_ Typically of the western Christian attitude, even so sympathetic a figure as Louis Massignon (1888–1962) spoke of Islam, seemingly with approval, as the "maitre de chétigraphes schismatiques d'Orient, qu'il encapule dans sa galaxie, comme des insectes dans l'antre." Louis Massignon, _Les trois prises d'Abraham_ (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 112.
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the history of our shared religious and intellectual heritage. The time is long overdue for the Christians of the West to extend their modern commen
tical concerns to their coreligionists of the Islamic world.

The purpose of this book is to provide a succinct overview of the cul
tural and intellectual achievements, including the theological posture vis-
à-vis Islam, of the Christians who spoke and wrote in Syriac and in Arabic
and who lived in the world of Islam from the time of the prophet
Muhammad (ca. 570–632) up to the time of the Crusades at the end of the
eleventh century and even beyond that time to the era of the very de
structive Mongol invasions of the Middle East in the mid-thirteenth cen
tury. The title of the work, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, is meant
to evoke both the overshadowing effects, as well as the protective shade,
afforded by the shadow cast by the mosque over all other institutions in
the Islamic world. It is seldom recognized that the establishment of Isla
mic, Arabic-speaking culture in the caliphate by the end of the ninth cen
tury, albeit that it eventually led to the decalage of the local Christi
communities and finally brought them to their modern demographic in
significance in the Middle East, nevertheless also provided the circum
stances for two important developments in Christian life in early Islamic
times. It fostered the articulation of a new cultural expression of Christian
doctrine, this time in Arabic, and it provided the cultural framework within
which the several Christian denominations of the Orient ultimately came
to define their mature ecclesiastical identities. These unseem developments hold
within them the seeds of a hope that once again, within a sphere of a reli
igious freedom now unfortunately widely unavailable in Islamic countries,
a Christian voice can once again be heard where Islam holds sway, in the
very idiom of the dominant Islamic religious discourse. It could pave the
way for the Christians of the world of Islam to lead their coreligionists in
the rest of the world into a renewed Muslim/Christian dialogue and to
hasten the general recognition of the fact that there is indeed an “Islamol
Christian” heritage on which both Muslims and Christians can draw in
their efforts to promote a peaceful and mutually respectful convivencia in
the future.

Almost exactly one century ago, first at Princeton Theological Seminary
in Princeton, New Jersey, and then at seminaries in Chicago, Illinois, and
Louisville, Kentucky, during the academic year 1902–3, William Ambrose
Shedd of the American Presbyterian Church delivered a series of six lec
tures on the general theme of Islam and the Oriental churches. His top
ics closely parallel those of the following chapters of the present book, with
the difference that the scholarship of the intervening century has consid
erably enhanced our knowledge of the history and culture of the Christians
who have lived with Muslims. And there is another important difference.
Shedd’s final chapter concerns the missionary heritage of the indigenous
churches of the Islamic world, and he speaks of the campaign of the Chris
tians of the West to conquer Islam. Now, a century later, while western
Christians are still no less devoted to proclaiming the Good News, there is
also a recognition of the right to religious freedom for all and the impera
tive for interreligious dialogue and comparative theology, important steps
toward peace in the twenty-first century. My own final chapter searches for
the theological, historical, and cultural postures Christians might now rea
sonably assume in their continuing encounter with Muslims, in the light of
the lessons learned from the thought and experience of the Arabic-speaking
Oriental churches in the early centuries of Islam. From this perspective
one might think that modern advances in the world of Islamic scholarship
and the current Christian readiness to dialogue with members of other re
ligious communities, the times would offer a new opportunity for a mea
sure of Christian-Muslim rapprochement, and for a renewal of mutual re
spect, rather than for continued confrontation and mutual recrimination.
It is true that the lessons of history on this point do not offer grounds for
heighened expectations, but the alternative to not making the effort to
make things better is already well known and mutually destructive.

I

"PEOPLE OF THE GOSPEL,"

"PEOPLE OF THE BOOK"

CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIANITY

IN THE WORLD OF ISLAM

Jews and Christians in the Qur’an

Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians were no doubt in the audience to whom the Qur’an first addressed the word of God in “a clear Arabic tongue” (16:108 and 26:105), as the Qur’an itself says of its message. Indeed, on its own terms the Qur’an presumes the precedence of the Torah and the Gospel in the consciousness of its audience, and insists that in reference to the earlier divine revelations it is itself “a corroborating scripture in Arabic language to warn wrong doers and to announce good news to those who do well.” (46:12) In the Qur’an, the voice of God even advises the Muslims, “If you are in doubt about what We have sent down to you, ask those who were reading scripture before you” (10:94).

Just a brief acquaintance with the text of the Qur’an is sufficient to convince any reader that it presumes in its audience a ready familiarity with the stories of the principal narrative figures of the Old and New Testaments, as well as with an impressive array of Jewish and Christian lore. It offers a critique of Jewish and Christian faith and practice in many ways; it contrasts the Jewish and Christian understandings of the Torah, the Prophets, the Psalms, and the Gospel, to cite the pages of the Bible the Qur’an mentions by name. So the question naturally arises in connection with this state of affairs: Who were the Christians in the Arabic-speaking milieu of Muhammad and the Qur’an, and what were their affiliations with Christian groups elsewhere? The Qur’an does not really offer much explicit help in this inquiry, confining itself for the most part to admonishing the followers of Jesus. But in the terms in which it addresses the Christians in its Arabic-speaking audience about their religious formulas, their beliefs and practices, the Qur’an does offer scholars some tantalizing clues about the ecclesial identities of the Christians of pre-Islamic Arabia. These often-enigmatic pieces of evidence have in fact become ample grist for the academic mill that grinds out hypotheses on the subject with great regularity. So it is important first of all briefly to review some of the terms in question.

Although the Qur’an addresses Christians directly and speaks about them in a number of places, ironically it never actually mentions the name “Christians.” For the most part, Christians in the Qur’an are included among those whom the text calls the “People of the Book,” the “Scripture People,” or “scripturaries” (ahl al-kitāb), a general expression that occurs some fifty-four times and in addition to Christians includes Jews and to some extent Zoroastrians. Once, the particular designation “Gospel People” appears (5:47). But more interestingly, the name for Christians that is used some fourteen times in the Qur’an, and which all modern interpreters translate as “Christians,” is the Arabic term an-Naṣārā’īn. There is some controversy about its etymology and exact significance, but the modern scholarly consensus is that it is simply the Arabic form of the name “Nazareans” or “Nazarenes,” adjectives that are normally taken to refer to people from Jesus’s hometown of Nazareth in Galilee. In the singular it is applied to Jesus in the Gospels (cf. Matthew 2:23), and in the plural, already in the New Testament (Acts 24:5), it is a name referring to Jesus’s followers. While the term “Christians” early on became the primary designation for Jesus’s followers (Acts 11:26), the name “Nazarenes” apparently continued in use in the Aramaic-speaking milieu of early Christianity for some time. It appears as a name for “Christians” in Syriac texts, written by east Syrian writers living in the Persian empire in pre-Islamic times, particularly when they report references made by non-Christians to Christians.  


3 For a general discussion, see J. Spencer Timingham, Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times (London and New York: Longman, 1979).


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Granted then that the “Nazarenes” in the Qur’an really are “Christians” by another scriptural name, which the Qur’an doubtless uses for its own rhetorical purposes, one next wants to know more about their Christian theological profiles. And this too is a matter of considerable controversy among scholars. Suffice it to say for the present purpose that in the opinion of this writer the community identity of the Christians in the Qur’an’s audience must be determined in reference to the whole profile of Christians and Christianity that emerges from the Qur’an’s references and allusions to their scriptures, beliefs, and practices. The matter should not be determined just on the basis of the etymologies of particular terms and phrases taken in conjunction with certain theological constructions that modern interpreters think they can plausibly impose on them. When approached from the broader perspective that I advocate, it seems reasonable to propose that the Christians to whom the Qur’an refers, whose doctrines and ecclesiastical lore the text actually reflects, are none other than those who would in due course be subsumed under the three names later Muslim Arab writers would regularly use for the Christians in their midst: the “Nestorians,” the “Jacobites,” and the “Melkites.”

In Muhammad’s lifetime, Christians who may reasonably be associated with these denominations, albeit somewhat anachronistically, were certainly making inroads from the surrounding peripheries into Arabia along trade routes and other well-established pathways, spreading Christianity among the Arabic-speaking tribesmen, even into the Hijaz. And while the documentation for this activity is sparse, it is not nonexistent. The Qur’an, with its wealth of biblical allusion and evocation of Christian themes, is a principal piece of the evidence, notwithstanding the contemporary revisionist, scholarly theories that posit its composition in its final form well over a century after Muhammad and outside of Arabia.

Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, and Ethiopic were the languages of the Christian communities on the edges of Arabia; over the preceding centuries they all had relationships with the Arabic-speaking tribesmen of the interior.

6 This seems to me to be the flase in the otherwise brilliant article by P. de Vos, “Naṣṣūni and Ḥaurān,” where, in agreement with earlier commentators, the author takes the term as Naṣṣūni in the Qur’an to refer to a community that early Christian historiographers called Naṣṣūni in the end of the New Testament period until its disappearance in the fourth century (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, and Leiden: Brill, 1998; Edward-Marie Gallois, La mésnie et son prophète, Amor origin de la Palestine, 2 vols. Stuttard, 1910). 7 This line of thinking, which considers both the rhetoric of the Qur’an and the etymology of its words and phrases in its historical context, is pursued in two forthcoming studies: Sidney H. Griffith, “Syriatics in the Arabic Qur’an: Who Were They? Those who said that Allâhn is the Third of Three” according to al-Mâ’ârîd (73) in press, and Griffith, “Christians and the Arabic Qur’an: A Comparative Study of the Narratives of the ‘Companions of the Cave’ in the Qur’an and in Syriac Tradition,” to appear.


10 Hence the charge of Muhammad’s adversaries recorded in the Qur’an: “We know that they say only a human being teaches him. The language of the one to whom they point is foreign; this is a clear Arabic language,” 16 al-Wâlid 103. See Claude Giliotti, Les ‘informateurs’ juifs et chrétiens de Muhammad,” Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam 22 (1998): 84–126.

11 No plea is made here for the far-reaching proposals of Christoph Hetem, Der arabische Papua (Tubingen: Der arabische Buch, 2000). For my thoughts on the subject, see Griffith, “Syriatics in the Arabic Qur’an” and “Christians and the Arabic Qur’an.”

find the closest in affection to the believers to be those who say: "We are Nazarenes," for among them are priests and monks, and they are not arrogant" (5:82), the text also says in another place, "Neither the Jews nor the Nazarenes will be pleased with you until you follow their religion" (2:120).

What is more, it accuses these "Scripture People" of changing the words of the Bible, concealing them and distorting their meaning (2:75-59; 3:78; 5:12-19).\(^\text{12}\) Clearly then, the Qur'an speaks to a measure of estrangement among the believers in its audience,\(^\text{13}\) between those who will be Muslims on the one side, and the Christians, along with the Jews, on the other side, granted that the greatest number of the Qur'an's religious adversaries would have been the native Arab polytheists, who are never called "believers." Even before Muhammad's death in Medina in the year 632, relationships between the burgeoning Muslim community and the "People of the Book" in Arabia had come to the point that the Qur'an itself had to dictate a principle to govern the relationship between the Muslims, and the Jews and Christians. The text tells the Muslims: "Fight those among the "People of the Book" who do not believe in Allah and the Last Day, who do not forbid what Allah and His Messenger have forbidden and do not profess the true religion, till they pay the poll-tax (jizya) out of hand and submissively (9:29)."

Nevertheless, in spite of this charge, which in later Islamic times would become the statutory principle behind the social policy of discrimination between Muslims and the "People of the Book" in the world of Islam, the Qur'an still envisions dialogue between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The text goes so far as to advise the Muslims, "If you are in doubt about what We have sent down to you, ask those who were reading scripture before you" (10:94). And the Qur'an further says, "Do not dispute with the 'People of the Book' save in the fairest way;\(^\text{14}\) except for those of them who are evil-doers. And say: 'We believe in what has been sent down to us and what has been sent down to you. Our God and your God is one and to Him we are submissive'" (29:46).

Given these considerations, it is clear that already in the lifetime of Muhammad, and in the very provisions of the Qur'an, Jews, Christians, and Muslims have had a warrant for dialogue with one another since the


very birth of Islam. But, as we all too readily also recall, the dialogue has not normally been a happy or even a productive one, especially if we study its history only from the perspective of the Christians who lived outside of the world of Islam, who never participated in any meaningful way in the culture of the Islamic world or ever engaged in real conversations with Muslims.

The Arab Occupation of the Levant

By the year 732, just one hundred years after the death of the prophet Muhammad, Arab military forces, mightily inspired by Islam, had consolidated their hegemony over a large stretch of territory outside of Arabia, which thereafter would become the heartland of the enduring "Commonwealth of Islam." This expanse of territory, embracing major portions of the Roman and Persian empires of Late Antiquity, included numerous Christians. They were by far the majority of the population in the former Roman provinces, in the three so-called Oriental Patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, as well as in North Africa and Spain, where the government had been officially Christian. The Christians also constituted a numerically respectable, demographic minority in the land of the Persians, where for all their numbers they never in fact enjoyed any significant political preference.\(^\text{15}\)

It is important to take cognizance of the seldom acknowledged fact that after the consolidation of the Islamic conquest and the consequent withdrawal of "Roman"/"Byzantine" forces from the Fertile Crescent in the first half of the seventh century, perhaps 50 percent of the world's confessing Christians from the mid-seventh to the end of the eleventh centuries found themselves living under Muslim rule.\(^\text{16}\) Conversely, during these same first four centuries of the Muslim government of these large territories, roughly up to the time of the Crusades, the very centuries during which the classical Islamic culture was coming into its own, the Muslims themselves still did not make up the absolute majority of the population everywhere in the caliphate, nor even in Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, where by the end of the tenth century the largest populations of the speakers of Arabic lived.\(^\text{17}\) The recognition of this situation prepares us to see how a new opportunity for cultural and intellectual accomplishment


presented itself, even for the Christians who lived under the rule of Islam during this period.

The Christian communities—who were in a position the most immediately to interact with the Muslims in the centers of Islamic culture and power outside of the Arabian peninsula after the conquest, first in Damascus in Syria, and then more significantly in Baghdad in Iraq after the foundation of the city in the year 767—were for the most part Arameans, in the sense that their ecclesiastical languages were Aramaic, albeit with a constant reference to conciliar and doctrinal developments that had found their first expressions in Greek in the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries. In the case of Christians living in Sinai, Palestine, or Trans-Jordan, where the “Byzantine” Orthodoxy of the council of Chalcedon (451) held sway from the mid-fifth century onward, and where Greek was the dominant ecclesiastical language in the international monastic communities, the Aramaic dialect of the local churches was Christiant Palestinean Aramaic. In Syria and Mesopotamia, where the local Christian communities straddled the former frontiers of the Roman and Persian empires, and where—“Byzantine”—Roman imperial Orthodoxy was widely rejected, 19 Syriac was the Aramaic dialect that served as the dominant ecclesiastical language.

Most Syriac-speaking Christians at the time of the Islamic conquest accepted Christological formulas articulated the most effectively either originally in Greek by Philoxenus of Mabbug (ca. 440–523), echoing the earlier theology of St. Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) (the so-called Jacobites or Monophysites), or they accepted formulas articulated in Syriac by Narsai (d. 505) and Babai the Great (551/2–628), reflecting the positions of Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350–428), composed originally in Greek a hundred years earlier (the so-called Nestorians). In other words, already at the time of the Islamic conquest and throughout the early Islamic period, most Aramean Christians, along with the Copts in Egypt and the Armenians in the Caucasus, did not accept the “Byzantine” imperial orthodoxy of the first six ecumenical councils. The resulting schisms had already estranged the ma-


**CHAPTER 1**

**CHRISTIANITY IN THE WORLD OF ISLAM**

**Christians under Muslim Rule**

The history of Christians under Muslim rule is a history of continuous, if gradual, diminishment; over the centuries the numbers declined from a substantial majority of the population in many places in the conquered territories in the times before the Crusades, to significant minorities in most of the Islamic world by Ottoman times. It is hard to pinpoint the proximate causes of this gradual Christian diminishment, beyond the natural attrition that the attractiveness of a new religious allegiance would have held out to socially, upwardly mobile individuals in the subject, Christian communities. One factor was certainly the social condition of Christians under Muslim rule. For not only did the Muslims rule, and their Arabic language become the medium of public discourse, but also the public space, the chyscape, the landscape, and the public institutions all conspired to display the public culture of Islam in its formative period. The situation was evocatively described by the late Oxford historian, Albert Hourani:

By the third and fourth Islamic centuries (the ninth or tenth century AD) something which was recognizably an “Islamic World” had emerged. A traveler around the world would have been able to tell, by what he saw and heard, whether a land was ruled and peoples by Muslims. . . . By the tenth century, then, men and women in the Near East and the Magrib lived in a universe which was defined in terms of Islam. . . . Time was marked by the five daily prayers, the weekly sermon in the Mosque, the annual fast in the month of Ramadan and the pilgrimage to Mecca, and the Muslim calendar. 

Already in the first third of the eighth Christian century, in the time of the caliph 'Abd al-Malik (685–707), Muslim authorities had begun definitively and symbolically to appropriate the Arab-occupied territories outside of Arabia for the new political reality in the world, the burgeoning Islamic commonwealth. From the religious perspective, the program for the display of Islam had two principal features. Positively, there were the efforts in stone, mortar, and coinage to declare everywhere the Islamic shahada, the testimony of faith in one God and His messenger Muhammad, throughout the land; negatively, there was the correlative campaign to erase the public symbols of Christianity, especially the previously ubiquitous sign of the cross. Positively, the most dramatic enactment was the building of the caliph 'Abd al-Malik’s monument to Islam in Jerusalem, the Dome of the Rock, with its explicitly anti-Christian inscriptions, taken substantially from the Qur’an. But perhaps the policy with the most far-reaching subsequent effects was the caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz’s (717–720) program for promoting the equality of all Muslims, be they Arab conquerors or new converts to Islam. This policy would in due course become a plank in the political platform of the movement that by the middle of the eighth century brought about the Abbasid revolution and ushered in the era of the growth and development of the classical culture of the Islamic world. Socially speaking, these developments had their effects among the Christians living under the caliphs’ rule; they may well have made conversion to Islam a more attractive option than heretofore, especially among the socially more upwardly mobile Christian families. They certainly made the Muslim authorities more attentive to the development of policies for regulating the social lives of Jews, Christians, and other non-Muslims living within the Muslim polity.

Earlier mention was made of the special poll tax (al-jizya), which according to the Qur’an is to be demanded of the “People of the Book” living among the Muslims, and of the appropriately submissively, low social profile Christians should assume in paying it (9:29). Historically, after the conquest and the consolidation of Islamic rule in the conquered territories, over a period of time a legal instrument known as the Covenant of ‘Umar gradually came into being to govern this low social profile expected of the Christians, Jews, and other tax payers. The stipulations came originally from the treaties concluded between the Muslims and the cities and garrisons they conquered in the seventh century in the time of the second caliph, ‘Umar I (r. 634–644), hence the name of the compilation of these and later stipulations, the Covenant of ‘Umar. Over time, other considerations dictated a more ideal approach to the matter, and by the middle of the ninth century, when the Covenant seems to have reached its classical form, legal scholars had elaborated several theoretical schemes for...

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the governance of non-Muslims in Islamic society, some of which included a whole series of stipulated civic and personal disabilities thought to be appropriate to the status of those who by then were being called the *dhimmis* populations.  

Classically, the *tax* (*al-jizya*) came to be considered the price to be paid by the “People of the Book” for the special “protection” or “covenant of protection” (*ad-dhimmah*) the Islamic government would then assume for them. It was thought of as a kind of accountability, even responsibility, for dependent persons on the part of the government, not without a note of displeasure in the verbal root of the Arabic word, which basically means “to affix blame” or “to find fault.” Persons in this situation are then described by the Arabic adjective *dhimmis*, meaning someone under the protection and responsibility of the Islamic government. In modern discourse on the subject, the neologism *dhimmitude* has come to express this theoretical, social condition of Jews, Christians, and others under Muslim rule. In classical Islamic times the *dhimmis* populations were to be governed through the offices of their own leaders, who were then held responsible for both the taxes and the good behavior of those under their care. In later Ottoman times, this arrangement came to be called the *millet* system, a term frequently used for it by modern scholars.  

There is no doubt then that in view of the stipulations of the Covenant of 'Umar the *dhimmis* populations of Christians in the Islamic world were what we would now call “second class citizens,” if the term “citizen” can even be meaningfully used of people whose presence in the body politic is merely tolerated. The legal disabilities that governed their lives required subservience, often accompanied by prescriptions to wear distinctive clothing and to cease from the public display of their religion, and, of course, to refrain from inviting converts from among the Muslims. Christian wealth, buildings, institutions, and properties were often subject to seizure.

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even became philosophers in their own right who would then be the teachers of Muslims, who in due course would themselves become world-class philosophers whose names and works are to this day discussed in the histories of philosophy and whose ideas are taken seriously in ongoing philosophical discourse. Al-Farabi (870–950), Ibn Sīnā/Avicenna (980–1037), and Ibn Rushd/Averroes (1126–1198) are the Muslim philosophers with the most immediate name recognition in this connection, but they were far from being the only ones. And, of course, their accomplishments sparked yet another translation movement in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, this time in the Islamic-Christian west, in places like Bologna, Toledo, and Barcelona, where eager minds translated philosophical texts from Arabic into Latin and provided impetus for the flowering of scholastic philosophy and theology in the works of Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Duns Scotus, through the earlier achievements of scholars such as Abelard and Albert the Great.

But beyond unalloyed philosophy, which for all its intellectual importance never actually took a commanding position in Islamic thought, and from the perspective of the contents of Arabic texts surviving from the early Islamic period, it is in the realm of what one might call interpersonal or interreligious thinking and writing, or even comparative theology and exegesis, that for our present purposes the most interesting material is to be found in the works of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim authors. For in what has been called "the sectarian milieu" of the early Islamic period, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish thinkers were all struggling to present their distinctive religious claims in relationship to the challenges posed by one another, and often in what one can only call "Judaizing," "Christianizing," or "Islamicizing" discourse, depending on the individual case. For example, in the realm of scriptural exegesis, early Muslim commentators can be seen simultaneously to be engaged in "Bibliizing" their presentations of Qur'anic figures or elements from the biography of the prophet Muhammad, while at the same time they are "Islamicizing" their accounts of biblical themes or persons. Sometimes modern researchers can identify earlier or even contemporary Jewish or Christian texts featuring the same traditions with which the Muslim scholars were working in their own distinctive way.

Similarly, in the origins and full flowering of the distinctively Islamic *ilm al-kalam*, or reasoned discourse on important themes in the religious worldview, be it of the Mu'tazilite or Ash'arite traditions, one can often discern not only formal, methodological points of comparison with the discourse of earlier or contemporary Christian thinkers, in Greek, Syriac, or even Arabic texts, but also thematic continuities. Of course, in the end the Islamic "take" on these common religious themes and exegetical traditions was distinctively Islamic, to the degree that they cannot truthfully be called influences or borrowings. Rather, they were parallel exercises in wrestling with the same conceptual problems, within the same or comparable scriptural horizons, with which earlier traditions had wrestled. These were also issues in the current discourse of the same contemporary, rival communities whose positions had to be bested, or even falsified, in the Muslim effort to commend to contemporaries the verisimilitude of, in this instance, a distinctively Islamic doctrine.

Conversely, within the social context and time frame of these very developments in early Islamic thought, which were undertaken not in Arabia but in the Islamic centers of the conquered territories, where the "People of the Book" with their well-developed intellectual traditions were still very much in the demographic majority, the way was opened for a comparable discourse of opportunity for both Jewish and Christian theology and apologetics, newly under siege by challenging Muslims. For, beginning in the second half of the eighth century in Palestine, continuing into the ninth century in the rest of Syria and in Mesopotamia, and finally getting under way in the tenth century in Egypt, Christians in the world of Islam eventually came to adopt Arabic not only as the lingua franca of daily life in the caliphate, but even as an ecclesiastical language. Of course, by this time the religious lexicon in Arabic had already been co-opted by Islam, and unlike the earlier situation in pre-Islamic Arabia, the newly Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians outside of Arabia in the ninth and tenth centuries in
the conquered territories were faced with the imperative of translating their teachings into and commending their faith in a religious vocabulary that had now become suffused with explicitly Islamic connotations, insinuated there in no small part by the Qur'an's and the Islamic tradition's earlier critique of Jewish and Christian beliefs and practices. In other words, the Jews and Christians living in the Islamic world were faced with the apologetic necessity, one might also call it an opportunity, both for Islamicizing, so to speak, the Arabic expression of their Jewish and Christian teachings and for both Judaizing and Christianizing the current Islamic discourse devoted to reasoned argumentation (Ihl al-d UEFA) in defense of the true religion. Christian writers in Arabic who exercised this double option would have had two audiences in mind, the first of them being their own Arabic-speaking fellow Christians, whose conversion to Islam they would have hoped to forestall. Their second audience was the Muslim, and eventually the Jewish, scholars with whom they were often engaged in controversy, and whom they would have hoped to persuade of the reasonableness, if not of the truth, of Christian doctrines in spite of their apparent rejection in Jewish sources, in the Qur'an, and in early Islamic tradition.

Christian Responses to Challenge

Historically, whenever Christians have come into new cultural circumstances it has been their constant practice to translate their scriptures and other ecclesiastical books into a new target language and to proclaim the Gospel message in the idiom and thought patterns of their new circumstances. It was no different in this respect when the Christian communities of the Middle East and Spain faced the multiple challenges of life under Muslim rule in the years when Arabic became the language of public life in the caliphate. But there was this one big difference: this was the first time, and historically so far the only time, when Christians have been faced with the necessity of translating, defending, and commending their religion in a new language and in new cultural circumstances, still within the borders of their own conquered homelands, where in due course, over a period of centuries, most Christians eventually either emigrated or converted to another religion, in this instance Islam. Only in Spain, and then only amid great social upheavals and multiple historical injustices, was the situation eventually reversed.

This historically unique set of circumstances helps to explain why it came about, after the Christians began to decline precipitously in numbers in the Islamic world after the time of the Crusades and the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century, when Muslim anti-Christian policies became more pronounced under the influence of rigorously strict constructionists of the

Covenant of Umar like Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328),43 that many Christians lost interest in renewing the Arabic expression of their faith. They continued to use the Arabic language of course, and to copy the texts produced in earlier times, as they did to this very day. But after the thirteenth century the creative genius for borrowing the cultural and linguistic idiom of the Muslim Arabs for the proclamation and defense of Christianity seems to have waned. In some places, such as among the Coptic Orthodox of Egypt, a certain resentment of the Islamic tone of the traditional language of Christian theology in Arabic has come about in more recent times. More and more, especially in the Diaspora communities, the energies of Christian scholars have turned away from the Medieval, Arabic expressions of their theologies, with their accompanying Islamic nuances, to the study of the patristic and liturgical sources of their several confessions, in the original languages of those sources.44 Some communities, such as the Armenians and the Ethiopians, never made any significant move to Arabic in the first place, having all along preferred to preserve their own traditions in their own ancestral languages, albeit with many texts translated from pre-Islamic, Syriac sources. Their histories are beyond the purview of the present study.

For a time, from the late eighth century to the twelfth century, Christians in the Arabic-speaking world of the Muslims did produce an impressive archive of translations and original compositions in Arabic that amounted to a new expression of Christian faith in new, religiously challenging circumstances. It truly had within it the seeds of a new theological development, perhaps even in the manner described by John Henry Newman in his nineteenth-century classic The Development of Christian Doctrine. Ultimately, however, this new set of theological efforts fell short of the goal and eventually they disappeared into history, hardly to be remembered today except by those learned in the lore of the Oriental Christian communities. The question before us now is why should we in the western world in the first decade of the twenty-first century be interested in these Christian Arabic texts from the early Middle Ages?

The answer to this question is twofold. In the first place, from a strictly scholarly point of view, it has become clear that for a fuller picture of the growth and development of Islam in its early years, it is imperative to consider not only Islamic sources, often composed many years after the events they describe, but also to see it from the perspective of those non-Muslims

who witnessed Islam's rise in the world and wrestled with its challenges in contemporary texts that are still accessible to us. Second, in the world of the twenty-first century, Muslims are no longer just "over there," in another world from the one inhabited by western Christians and Jews. They are here among us, our neighbors, friends, co-workers and co-believers in the one God, creator of all that is, with whom we are engaged on a daily basis both at home and abroad, both in struggle and in dialogue. Surely then we have much usefully to learn from the study of the works of the Jews and Christians who first seriously engaged the Muslims in their own world so long ago, and in their own language of faith, long before the intervening times of colonialism and imperialism, with their accompanying mutual invective and recrimination, the rhetoric of which to this day characterizes and distorts many western views of the challenge of Islam.

The following chapters will in turn explore the first Christian responses to Islam, the birth of Christian theology in Arabic, the hopes on the part of some Christians who lived in the Islamic world that the cultivation of a philosophical way of life would provide a space for a harmonious convivencia between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. There will also be some discussion of how Christian self-definition continued to develop even in the world of Islam. The studies are put forward with the hope that today Jews, Christians, and Muslims might be inspired to undertake the unlikely task of turning the historical clash of theologies between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism into an exercise in comparative theology, which will hopefully be more successful in promoting a mutually tolerant interreligious dialogue than has proved possible heretofore.46

46 For the very beginnings of Islamic history, an invaluable survey of early, non-Islamic sources is provided in Robert Hoyland, Seeing Islam as Other, Saw II: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 13 (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1997).

46 In this connection, see the interesting collection of studies in Barbara Roggema et al., eds., The Three Rings: Textual Studies in the Historical Dialogue of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2005).

II

APOCALYPSE AND THE ARABS

THE FIRST CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO THE CHALLENGE OF ISLAM

First Notices

The first notices in texts written by Christians in the Roman and Persian territories neighboring Arabia that refer to incursions of marauding Arabs in the years immediately following the death of Muhammad in the year 632 show little or no awareness that these raids were part of the larger military campaign that would in due course be recognized as the Islamic coo-quest. Rather, the writers of the few texts from the seventh century we have in hand that refer to these events seem initially to have considered the depredations we now recognize as constituting the first phase of the conquest as little more than incursions by Arab tribesmen from the desert, of the sort with which they were long familiar whenever the rule of the Roman or Persian emperors was weak in the lands bordering the deserts of Arabia. And as a matter of fact, in the fateful decade of the 630s imperial control in the area could not have been weaker; both Rome and Persia were still reeling from the debilitating effects of their decades-long war (609–28), a struggle that had just concluded with the Roman emperor Heracleius's (r. 610–41) signal victory over the Persians in the year 628.2

Less than a decade later, at the battle of the Yarmuk in Syria in 636, where the invading Arabs defeated the Roman army, and at the battle of Qadisiyya just west of the Euphrates in what is now Iraq in 637, where they defeated the Persian army, symbolically, as later chroniclers would think of it, the Arab forces won victories that in times to come would be seen to have marked the beginning of the demise of both Roman and Persian rule for good in the territories stretching east from the eastern shore of the

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Mediterranean. In a reoriented configuration, these very regions were destined to become the heartland of a newly inaugurated "Islamic empire," and in due course the spiritual homelands of an "Islamic commonwealth" of nations in the centuries to come.

In the wake of the first stunning military exploits, the major centers of Christian life in the East came quickly one by one under the hegemony of the invading Arabs: first Damascus (635), Jerusalem (637), and Antioch (637); and then Edessa in Syria (640), Alexandria in Egypt (643), and Seleucia/Chersones, the capital of Sassanid Persia, just beyond the Tigris (646). So within just a dozen years after the death of Muhammad, three of the five patriarchates of the Roman Christians, plus the Persian seat of the catholics of the "Church of the East," had come under the rule of the Arabian prophet's enthusiastic followers.

The Christian writers who first took notice of the Bedouin invasions in the 630s registered their alarm at the approach of the Arabs, whom they as often as not called "Saracens," "Hagarenes," or "Ishmaelites," and from the beginning they seem to have been aware of the fact that novel religious motivations inspired the invaders. For example, in a text written in Greek by a recently converted Palestinian Jew, probably in the year 634, the author tells of the incursions of the Arabs and of a "false prophet" who had appeared among them, and of the inquiries that were made about him.

The text reports a question put to a learned Jew, "What can you tell me about the prophet who has appeared with the Saracens?" To which he replied, "He is false, for the prophets do not come armed with a sword," and the learned man avers that the prophet may in fact be the Antichrist.

Then, according to the text, the questioner made further inquiries and he "heard from those who had met him that there was no truth to be found in the so-called prophet, only the shedding of men's blood. He says also that he has the keys of paradise, which is incredible." This earliest known Jewish Christian polemic against Islam here attributed to Jewish observers, thus voices negative themes, which will reappear constantly in later Christian texts, that evaluate the religion of the Arabs from a Christian point of view: bloodshed, Antichrist, the sensual nature of paradise. The earliest known Christian reference to Muhammad by name occurs in a Syrian chronicle composed around the year 640, where the text mentions "a battle between the Romans and the Arabs of Muhammad in Palestine twelve miles east of Gaza" in the year 634.

Of particular interest for our present purposes are texts that refer to the Arab occupation of Jerusalem and the establishment of a Muslim place of prayer on the Temple Mount. As we shall see, from the very beginning of the confrontation between the Muslims and the Christians outside of Arabia, Jerusalem quickly became the symbolic location of their rival statements of scriptural faith. And it began already at the conquest, in the time of Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem (d. ca. 639) and Caliph Umar I (c. 634–44), who quickly became the literary figures of record in both the Christian and the Muslim narratives of the surrender of Jerusalem.

In Patriarch Sophronius's sermons on holy days like Christmas and the Epiphany in the years between 634 and 637 we find his remarks about those whom he took to be murdering Arabs. Giving voice to a theme that would often occur in Christian homilies of the period, already in his syn- odolesque letter on the occasion of taking possession of the city the patriarch had spoken of the fear of the Saracens, "who, on account of our sins, have now risen up against us unexpectedly and ravage all with cruel and feral design, with impious and godless audacity." But it is in his sermon on the Epiphany, probably in the year 636, that Sophronius gave a description of

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4 On the significance of these terms, see Garth Fowden, Empire in Commonwealthe Consequences of Monarchism in Late Antiquity (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Hugh Kennedy, "The Decline and Fall of the First Muslim Empire," Dir Islam 81 (2004): 1–29.


6 These terms had long been used by Christian writers from the early Christian period onward to refer somewhat fearfully to the Bedouin Arab tribesmen of the desert; in Islamic times they were transferred to the Muslims. The etymology and basic sense of the term "Saracens" is disputed. The terms "Hagarene" and "Ishmaelite" refer respectively to Abraham's concubine Hagar and her son Ishmael (Genesis 16), conceived as the biblical ancestors of the Bedouin Arabs. The scripture says of the infant Ishmael, "He shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against every man and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell over against all his brethren" (Genesis 16:12). Of the grown Ishmael, the text says, "God was with him, and he grew up; he lived in the desert and became an expert with the bow" (Genesis 21:20).

In the Islamic context, the religious sense of rejection implied in the terms as they were used by Christians to refer to Muslims is heightened by allusion to St. Paul's comments about Hagar and Ishmael, in his epistle to the Galatians 4:21–31: "Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia" (v. 25), and "Cast out the slave and her son" (v. 30).

7 Quoted from the Doctrina Jacobi Nuperrapeutici, as translated in Hoyland, Seeing Islam as Others Saw It, 57. For further discussion of this text, see David M. Olster, Roman Defect, Christian Response, and the Literary Construction of the Jew (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), esp. 158–79.

8 Hoyland, Seeing Islam as Others Saw It, 120. On this chronicle, see Palmer, The Seventh Century, 5–24.


10 Hoyland, Seeing Islam as Others Saw It, 69.
events that are more easily recognizable as campaigns in the Jerusalem area in service of the Islamic conquest. And once again he spoke of the sins of the Christians as having brought on the depredations. He said,

That is why the vengeful and God-hating Saracens, the abomination of desolation clearly foretold to us by the prophets, overrun the places which are not allowed to them, plunder cities, devastate fields, burn down villages, set on fire the holy churches, overturn the sacred monasteries, oppose the Byzantine armies arrayed against them, and in fighting raise up the trophies [of war] and add victory to victory. Moreover, they are raised up more and more against us and increase their blasphemy of Christ and the church, and utter wicked blasphemies against God.\(^{11}\)

One recognizes in these last remarks the patriarch’s incensed reaction to what he must by then have come to recognize as a rival religious critique of Christian faith and practice. In the end, of course, the Muslim forces took the city of Jerusalem in the year 637, and in due course they established a mosque there, most probably on the Temple Mount.\(^{12}\) There is a Christian account of the event appended to the original text of a book called *The Spiritual Meadow* (*Prastum spiritualis*), in its Georgian version, written years previously by Patriarch Sophronius’s friend John Moschus (d. 619 or 634). The author of this additional passage wrote:

The godless Saracens entered the holy city of Christ our Lord, Jerusalem, with the permission of God and in punishment for our negligence, which is considerable, and immediately proceeded in haste to the place which is called the Capitol.\(^{13}\) They took with them men, some by force, others by their own will, in order to clean that place and to build that cursed thing, intended for their prayer and which they call a mosque.\(^{14}\)

\(^{14}\) Quoted in the translation of Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 72.

\(^{13}\) There is some difference of opinion among modern scholars about the location of the "Capitol." One scholar argues that it first was on the site of the Holy Sepulchre and only later was it thought to have been on the Temple Mount. See Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, "The Location of the Capitol in Aelia Capitolina," *Revue Biblique* 101 (1994): 407–15. Arguably, *The Spiritual Meadow* had the Temple Mount in mind.


Christian legend says of the surrender of Jerusalem to the Muslims that Patriarch Sophronius insisted on handing over the city only to the Arab "king," the caliph Umar, in person. Islamic legend in its turn presents Umar’s entry into Jerusalem as a humbly solemn affair, in which the pious Muslim caliph upstages the haughty Christian patriarch in religious fervor. As the story goes, Umar refused the patriarch’s invitation to pray in the church of the Anastasis/Holy Sepulchre lest the Muslims later expropriate it. Rather, he repairs to the Temple Mount, left abandoned amid ruins by the Christians, and there offers his prayers and leaves instructions for the construction of a mosque, the Mosque of Umar, to mark the Islamic respect for and claim to the Holy City.\(^{15}\) It seems obvious that these legendary accounts owe much to the later role of Jerusalem in the discourse of Muslims and Christians about the sanctity of the Holy City and its symbolic importance in the relationships between the two communities.

While the city of Jerusalem thus became in the course of time both the site and the symbol par excellence of the confrontation between Christianity and Islam from the very beginnings of Islamic rule outside of Arabia, a symbolization that would be enhanced not only in the accruing legends of later times but even in the architecture of the Islamic appropriation of the Holy City in the late seventh century, in other places the conquest sometimes received what modern scholars are often tempted to interpret as mixed reviews, if not positive commendations in Syria, Coptic, or Armenian Christian sources. In Syria, for example, while most texts from the seventh century speak of the depredations of the Arabs and of the destruction and mayhem they wrought, some are seen to put a happier construction on events. The patriarch of the Church of the East, for example, Isho’yab III (d. 659), wrote a letter not long after the year 637 in which the following passage occurs, often, as here, quoted out of context. "As for the Arabs, to whom God has at this time given rule over the world, you know well how they act towards us. Not only do they not oppose Christianity, but they praise our faith, honor the priests and saints of our Lord, and give aid to the churches and monasteries."\(^{16}\)

Similarly, Coptic or Jacobite Syrian texts are sometimes quoted by modern historians, in which the authors refer to the relief from heavy Byzantine taxes or the escape from religious persecution their communities are alleged to have achieved as a result of the Arab conquests. However, in their contexts, as in the case of the passage just quoted from Patriarch Isho’yab’s letter, closer inspection reveals that the writers were not so much...
voicing a welcome for what we recognize in hindsight as the onset of the Islamic conquest, as they were invidiously comparing even Arab rule, which they disdained, to the oppressive conduct of their previous governors. They viewed their erstwhile Roman rulers as unorthodox Christians or, as in the case of Isha'yab, their Persian rulers as supporters of their Christian rivals. In other words, already at the time of the Arab conquest the theme of infra-Christian, rivalry and intercommunal polemic found its way into the discourse of the Christian response to Islam. Otherwise, the Christians of all communities unanimously regarded the conquest as a disaster, and when they were not blaming it on their own sinfulness they were citing the sins of their Christian adversaries, whom they regarded as heretics, as the proximate cause of the conquest and of the death and destruction it brought in its wake.18

First Responses

As the seventh century came to an end, and the Arab invaders showed no signs of returning to the desert as they had done so many times in the past, Christian writers began to pay more attention to the religious ideas of the conquering tribesmen. It was not long before the first, piecemeal Christian religious and theological assessments of what the Arabs believed began to appear. At first the references to what we recognize as Islamic ideas are oblique, and they are mentioned by way of contrast. For example, in the 690s a monk in the monastic communities of Sinai, Anastasios of Sinai (d. ca. 700) by name, who was a staunch supporter of the teachings of the six councils of Byzantine orthodoxy, wrote a book in Greek called Hekayas (The Guide). His purpose was to warn the communities against those whom he regarded as "Monophysites," and particularly against the teachings to be found in the works of Severus of Antioch (ca. 465–538). In the course of his work he refers a number of times to what he calls the "false notions of the Arabs," notions the reader easily recognizes as Islamic ideas, for Anastasios makes no explicit reference to Muhammad, the Qur'an, or to Islam.19


By way of example, we may briefly examine here just one of the several passages in which Anastasios of Sinai shows his familiarity with Islamic ideas and furnishes evidence that already in his time Christians were engaging in religious controversy with Muslim Arabs. In the preface to the Hekayas Anastasios sets forth his reasons for writing the book. Having already listed ten reasons, he finally offers the following one:

Because, prior to any discussion at all, we must condemn however many false notions about us the opponent has, as when we set out to converse with Arabs we have first to condemn anyone who says, "Two gods," or anyone who says, "God has carnally begotten a son," or anyone who makes prostration as to God, to any creature whatever, in heaven or on earth. Likewise, in regard to the rest of the heresies, it is necessary first to condemn however many false opinions about the faith they have. For, giving heed to these things, they accept the rest more eagerly.20

The first thing to notice in this passage is that religious controversy with Arabs, and its already customary procedure, is put forward as an example of the procedure that Anastasios is proposing to use in his Hekayas. Further, it is clear that what should first be rebutted, in Anastasios's view, are the false notions the opponent already harbors. He gives three examples of such notions, from what his reader is expected easily to recognize as false Arab notions about what Christians believe. On examination it quickly appears that these "notions" about Christian beliefs can all be found in the Qur'an, in the very terms in which Anastasios mentions them.

Already in the context of suras 8–11 (16), which contains a clear rejection of the polytheism of the pagan Arabs, one finds the explicit injunction: "God said, 'Do not accept two gods. There is but a single God. So, fear me'" (16:1). Then, in the later suras 9–10 (16:10), precisely this language is used again to reject what the Qur'an perceives to be the erroneous belief of Christian preaching about Jesus, son of Mary. In the context of 16:10 to 114, where the Qur'an presents a fairly comprehensive sketch of the Islamic view of Jesus and his mission, and a threat of eternal punishment to any one of Jesus's followers who would later disbelieve (vs. 115), there is the description of a scene in which Jesus stands in judgment before God: "God said, 'O Jesus, son of Mary, did you tell people, 'Take me and my mother for two gods instead of God?'" (vs. 116).

Surely the standard Christian proclamation that Jesus is God, the son of God, and Mary his mother, is the mother of God, would have been sufficient to elicit the Qur'an's adverse judgment. Whoever among the Arabs who invaded Syria/Palestine, who had heard the Qur'an proclaimed, would
certainly have thought, on the basis of *al-Mā’idah* 5:116, that Jesus’s disbelieving followers taught that he and his mother were two gods. Accordingly, Anastasios reminds his reader: this is a false notion about Christians that one must condemn before engaging in controversy with Arabs.

The false Arab notion that what Christians believe involves God in the carnal generation of a son also has its roots in the Qurʾān. A constant feature of Muhammad’s reaction against Christian teaching is the phrase, “They say God has taken a son; praised be He. Nay, whatever is in the heavens or on the earth is His, all are subservient to Him” (*al-Baqarah* 2:116; and cf. *an-Nisāʾ* 4:171). Anastasios’s very wording of this false Arab notion, as he would have it, once again ties the rejection of a Christian doctrine in with the Qurʾān’s earlier rejection of pagan ideas, as in *al-A’ālām* 6:101, where the assumption that God has offspring is explicitly associated with the unacceptable notion that such a proposal would involve God with a female consort: “The Creator of heaven and earth—how does He have offspring? He did not have a female consort. He created everything.” Clearly then, in the Qurʾān’s view, to say that God has a son, or that Jesus Christ is God’s son, would involve God in a twofold imposibility: it posits Mary as God’s consort; and Jesus and Mary as two gods instead of God. These are precisely the false notions about what Christians teach that Anastasios says one must clearly anathematize before arguing with Arabs.

In the Qurʾān’s view, as is already clear from the passages quoted above, for example, in *al-Baqarah* 2:116, to make a prostration to Jesus, son of Mary as to God, would automatically involve one in the pagan worship of creatures. The Qurʾān’s constant admonition is: “The Lord of the heavens and the earth and what is between them, worship Him, and be constant in worshipping Him. Do you know any other worthy of His name?” (*Maryam* 19:65). Accordingly, Anastasios notes that before arguing with Arabs, one must anathematize whoever worships any creature in heaven or on earth. He assumes it is a false notion of the Arabs that Christians are guilty of such misguided worship.

For our purposes, what we have to learn from analyzing this and other passages in Anastasios’s *Hodges* is both that he, a Greek-speaking Christian in the Sinai in the late seventh century, was aware of the Qurʾānic terms of Muslim religious teaching, and that he was accustomed to having conversations with Muslim Arabs, presumably in Arabic, about ways in which he thinks they are mistaken in what they believe about Christian doctrine. Furthermore, it is interesting to note in passing, and the issue will come up again below when we speak about St. John of Damascus’s ideas about Islam, Anastasios obviously thought that it was appropriate to consider Islam a kind of Christian heresy, for having spoken of the false notions of the Arabs he went on to say, “Likewise, in regard to the rest of the heresies, it is necessary first to condemn however many false opinions about the faith they have.”

Similarly, Syriac writers of the same time period were also aware of problems involving the interactions of Christians and Muslims in religious matters, and they even spoke of instances in which Christians and Muslims shared the same religious ideas. A case in point is provided by passages in the works of the Syrian Orthodox bishop, Jacob of Edessa (d. 708), who wrote canonical legislation about relations between Muslims and Christians, and who spoke about Islamic religious ideas in some of his letters. For example, he stipulated that one need not rebaptize a Christian who became a Muslim and then returned to the profession of Christianity, and that it is legitimate to offer the holy Eucharist to a woman who is married to a Muslim and who threatens to apostatize otherwise.

The most striking evidence of Jacob of Edessa’s awareness of Muslim religious thought, and even of passages in the Qurʾān, comes in a letter he wrote to one John the Styliste about the fact that the Virgin Mary was of the house of David. Jacob wrote as follows:

That, therefore, the Messiah is in the flesh of the line of David . . . is professed and considered fundamental by all of them: Jews, Muslims and Christians . . . . To the Jews . . . it is fundamental, although they deny the true Messiah who has indeed come . . . The Muslims, too, although they do not know nor wish to say that this true Messiah, who came and is acknowledged by the Christians, is God and the son of God, they nevertheless confess firmly that he is the true Messiah who was to come and who was foretold by the prophets; on this they have no dispute with us . . . . They say to all at all times that Jesus son of Mary is in truth the Messiah and they call him the Word of God, as do the holy scriptures. They also add, in their ignorance, that he is the Spirit of God, for they are not able to distinguish between word and spirit, just as they do not assent to call the Messiah God or son of God.

The last sentence in this quotation clearly shows Jacob of Edessa’s awareness of the passage in the Qurʾān that says, “The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, is only Allah’s Messenger and His Word, which He imparted to

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23 See the texts quoted in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 162–63.
Mary, and is a spirit from Him" (an-Nisā' 4:171). In later times many Christian writers would quote this passage and build their apologetic arguments on it. But the reference to it in Jacob of Edessa's letter shows that already by the last decade of the seventh century, Christians in the newly occupied territories outside of Arabia were aware of the teachings of Islam and of the Qurʾān already before most people there were speaking Arabic or had adopted it as a church language.

Apocalypse Now

Roughly in the time of the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (685–707) and during the reigns of his sons and successors (707–50), Christian writers in the caliphate turned their attention from merely recording the vicissitudes of the conquest and making note of what to them were the eccentric, new beliefs of the Arabs, to the long task of articulating a theological and apologetic response to the religious challenge the Muslims now posed to the Christians in the occupied territories. And it may well have been the case that a precipitating cause of this defensive, apologetic undertaking was the assertive campaign launched by ʿAbd al-Malik and his successors publicly and monetarily to proclaim the permanent hegemony of Islam in the land and in the public sphere generally.25 In this connection, the most notable enterprise of the campaign was undoubtedly the building of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. The building was begun around the year 692 and presumably was completed by the turn of the eighth century.26 At least two previous caliphs, ʿUmar I (r. 634–44) and Muʿawiya (r. 661–80), in recognition of the religious significance of Jerusalem and of the Temple Mount in particular for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike, had been engaged in building activities on the same site. But ʿAbd al-Malik's structure, striking in its architectural statement to this very day, was in a class apart. In the cityscape of Jerusalem in the late seventh century, the Dome of the Rock stood seemingly by design over against the Church of the Anastasis/Holy Sepulchre and other Christian structures in the Holy City,27 and it monumentally proclaimed the Islamic appropriation of the city the local Christians called the "Mother of the Churches."28 But there is more.

The beautiful Kufic inscription in gold leaf that goes around the base of the dome, on both its inner and outer faces, using passages from the Qurʾān, over and over again proclaims among other things, "There is no god but God alone. . . He did not beget and was not begotten . . . Muhammad is the messenger of God. Such too was Jesus son of Mary. . . Praise be to God who has not taken a son. . . Religion with God is Islam. . . Those who had been given the scripture differed only after knowledge came to them, out of envy for one another."29 The import of these repeated Qurʾānic phrases is crystal clear: Islam has supplanted Christianity even in Jerusalem on the Temple Mount where previously Christians had seen the signs of their own succession to the Jews.30 Symbolically and chronologically, the construction of the Dome of the Rock marked the beginning of the era when Christians living in the caliphate seriously undertook the task of rebutting the Muslims' charges against them.

Apocalypse was the earliest genre in which Christians initially expressed their most sustained response to the religious challenge of Islam, and as we shall see, even here symbolically Jerusalem stood at the high point of the narrative.31 While a number of writers spoke of turmoil, natural disasters, and plagues as portents of what they thought of as the scourge of the Arabs, some inevitably were concerned with these events as signs of the end times. By far the most well known text in this vein is the one that has come down to us under the somewhat mystifying title The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methuselah.32 The Methodius of the title refers to the ancient Methodius, martyr, prolific writer, and bishop of Olympus in Lycia (d. 312), who according to the narrative foresees the troublesome interlude of the kingdom of the Arabs in the eschatological calculus Christians had projected for the history of the world on the basis of the prophecies in the biblical book of Daniel. In the Apocalypse, the Methodius character explains how the interlude of Arab domination, all immediate evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, will not really disrupt the unfolding sequence of the four

31 See Harald Suermondt, Die geschichtslogische Reaktion auf die einfallenden Muslime in der eklesiastischen Apokalyptik des 7. Jahrhunderts (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1985); Martinez, "La literatura apocalíptica."
kingdoms of the prophecies in the book of Daniel, destined to end with the kingdom of the Greeks. Rather, he says, the depredations of the Arabs are part of God’s plan for the era of punishment for sin that is destined to usher in the final days of world history.\^\^\*

Methodius of Olympus was not in fact the author of the *Apocalypse*, hence the epithet “pseudo” attached to his name in modern references to this work; the text was composed originally in Syriac in northern Syria, during the time of the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik and probably around the year 691. The author was most likely a Jacobite, or perhaps even a “Chalcedonian” Christian, one of those soon to be called Melkites; he described an apocalyptic vision that reconciled the evident fact of the Islamic conquest with the earlier Christian eschatological expectation, based on the visions of Daniel, of four world empires leading up through six millennia to the last days of the world in the seventh millennium. In the end, Pseudo-Methodius assured his readers, after many vicissitudes and catastrophes, including the punishing rule of the Arabs, the sons of Ishmael, the last Roman emperor, the leader of the final kingdom of the Greeks, really would, after a time of confusion and cleansing suffering, place his crown on the cross of Christ on Golgatha, in Jerusalem, and offer his kingdom to God the Father.

The *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* was soon translated from Syriac into Greek and very soon thereafter into all the other languages of early and medieval Christianity.\^\^\* It inspired hope in Christians under Muslim rule for a millennium and more. But it was only one of a number of such works composed in Syriac in the first decades of the eighth century.\^\^\* There were other apocalypses and there were works in other genres as well, particularly apologetic compositions designed to staunch the initial flow of Christian conversions to Islam in these years of the consolidation of Muslim rule. For, as one Syriac chronicler very poignantly put it,

The gates were opened to them to enter Islam. The wanton and the dissolute slipped towards the pit and the abyss of perdition, and lost their souls as well as their bodies—all, that is, that we possess...\^\^\*\^\*

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Without blows or tortures they slipped towards apostasy in great precipitancy; they formed groups of ten or twenty or thirty or a hundred or two hundred or three hundred without any sort of compulsion... going down to Harran and becoming Muslims in the presence of [government] officials. A great crowd did so... from the districts of Edessa and of Harran and of Tell and of Reš‘Ayn.\^\^\*

It was this social circumstance, the dawning attractiveness of conversion to Islam in the first decades of the eighth century, that no doubt prompted the composition of the first Christian apologetic tracts in the Islamic milieu.\^\^\* The first of them were written in Syriac and they took on a literary form and included a line of argumentation that would in due course become standard features in the Christian response to the challenge of Islam in later times.

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First Apologies

The two earliest Syriac apologetic tracts that have come down to us from early Islamic times both feature a literary scenario in which a Christian spokesman finds himself in a setting in which he is being interrogated about his faith by a prominent Muslim. The Christian supplies satisfying answers to provocative questions in ways that not only justify the reasonableness of Christian faith but also that suggest that Christianity is in fact the true religion according to which God wills to be worshipped. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the anonymous writers of these works intended to furnish Christian readers with ready answers to the challenges that must often have been posed to them by Muslims in the course of their daily lives.

Probably the earliest such text is the one in which a now unknown writer presents an account in the form of a letter on the alleged occasion when the Jacobite Patriarch John Sedra (r. 631–48) was interrogated by a Muslim emir, perhaps Umayr ibn Sa‘d al-Anṣāri, on Sunday, May 9, AD 644.\^\^\* It is typical of such compositions that the authors furnish enough details

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to suggest historical verisimilitude for their narratives without supplying the particulars that would allow any further specification. In all probability the present text was first composed by a Syriac writer during the first third of the eighth century, although it comes down to us in a manuscript copied in the year 874. The body of the text is concerned with reporting the patriarch’s replies to leading questions that were posed by the emir. The questions, seven in number, are such as one would expect to have often been posed to Christians by Muslim interlocutors, given the Qur’ān’s known critique of Christian faith and practice. The emir’s questions are as follows:

“Is there just one Gospel which does not vary in any way and which is held to by all those who are and call themselves Christians?”

“What do you say Christ was: God or not?”

“When Christ was in the womb of Mary, he being God as you say, who was bearing and managing heaven and earth?”

“What doctrine and faith did Abraham and Moses have?” and, if Christian, “why did they not on that account write and inform clearly about Christ?”

The emir demands that “if Christ is God and born of Mary and if God has a son, this be shown to him literally and from the Law.”

The emir asks “about the laws of the Christians: what and after what fashion are they, and if they are written in the Gospel or not,” and he inquires about the particular case of inheritance law.

These queries actually embody the substance of the Islamic critique of Christianity and in one form or another they would be the questions Christian apologists in the world of Islam would be answering for centuries to come. Similarly, the patriarch’s replies voice the first lines of response that later Christian apologists would eventually develop into a new articulation of the Christian articles of faith, suitable for the particular requirements of those who lived with Muslims. We will study these developments in some detail in the next chapter.

Meanwhile, we should mention another anonymous, early Syriac composition that also features the dialogue format involving a Muslim interrogator and a Christian respondent. This one is normally described as the dialogue of the monk of Bet Ḥillā and a Muslim notable. The scene is set almost a century after the time of Patriarch John Sedra (d. 648), most likely


in later texts composed by Christians who live in the world of Islam; the monk gives it as his opinion that Muhammad “was a wise man and a God-fearer, who freed you [Arabs] from the worship of demons and made you acknowledge that the true God is one.” At the end of his account of their dialogue, the monk reports that the Arab notable offered this final testimony: “I testify that were it not for the fear of the government and of shame before men, many would become Christians. But you are blessed of God to have given me satisfaction by your conversation with me.”

Clearly this Syriac text was written for a Christian audience, and its purpose was surely to communicate a certain confidence to Christians who may have been tempted to convert to Islam. The message was that Christians really did have satisfactory answers to the religious objections Muslims posed for them. Indeed, the text even further suggests that Muslims could see the reasonableness of Christian faith; only the possession of political and military power, the author suggests, and social convention, prevented the Muslims’ conversion to Christianity. It is rhetoric of a sort well suited to instill a sense of hidden superiority in subaltern, socially subject populations, not only in the world of Islam but in many other historical circumstances as well.

Syriac-speaking, Christian writers in early Islamic times were also adept at汲取ing elements from Islamic religious tradition and turning them to a Christian purpose. An example is the work begun by a now anonymous Syriac author of the late eighth or early ninth century called by its modern editor, “a Christian Bahira Legend.” Bahira is the name of a Christian monk who, according to Islamic tradition, recognized the mark of prophethood on the body of the young teen-aged Muhammad when the boy once came with a caravan from Mecca to Syria. The Christian author of the legend composed a work made up of equal parts of apocalyptic material on the order of that to be found in the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius and a section purporting to tell the story of the monk’s catechism of Muhammad. The monk, now known as Sargis/Sergius Bahira, the term bahira in Syriac being a reverential title for a monk on the order of the English term “venerable,” is said to have been a renegade monk who out of compunction for his sins undertook the task of instructing Muhammad in Christian teachings and even of composing them into a book of revelations for him to be called the Qur’an. Unfortunately, according to the legend, Muhammad’s later followers, and especially the Jews among them, distorted the original Qur’an into the form in which the Muslims now have it. Their subsequent triumph in the Islamic conquest then, according to the legend, was heard on the horrors detailed in the apocalyptic section of the work, calamities allowed by God, the Christian monk supposed, in punishment for the sins of the Christians.

There has been much controversy in modern times about this kind of literature, composed anonymously as it was, and initially in the indigenous languages of the Christians in the Islamic world like Syriac, Coptic, or Armenian. Scholars have been eager to point out its fictive qualities and to deny its historicity. While this judgment is certainly true on a literal level, it is also irrelevant to the original, sodoreligious purpose of such compositions. All the details in such texts that seem to make an appeal for historical verisimilitude are surely intended to lend the narratives a measure of authenticity, not so much from the perspective of the historical record as such, but from the point of view of a now publicly disenfranchised, religious worldview that is nevertheless sure of its own veracity, which it represents as unknowingly acknowledged even by those who publicly contest it. The anonymous authorship of these compositions also testifies to their relevance as underground literature, with an “insider” readership, whose confidence it was this literature’s main purpose to bolster. The Christian, dhimmis population was helped by these texts to savour a sense of seemingly rightful superiority in the face of all the evidence to the contrary in their daily circumstances of life. Between the lines of all these texts there lurked the question that in the no doubt fictional story of their encounter, the Muslim noble is made to put straightforwardly to the monk of Bêt Hille: “While I know your religion is right, and your way of thinking is even preferable to ours, what is the reason why God handed you over into our hands and you are driven by us like sheep to the slaughter, and your bishops and your priests are killed, and the rest are subjugated and enslaved with the king’s impositions night and day, more bitter than death?”

The Sectarian Milieu

Apocalypse and legend were not the only Christian literary responses to the challenge of Islam that the Muslim campaign for the appropriation of the public sphere in the conquered territories elicited in the eighth century.

43 All the quotations are from Griffith, Syriac Writers on Muslims, 27–37.
46 See especially Reinhak, “The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature.”
47 See the insightful comments in Leo Strauss’s essay, “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” which mutate mutandis may provide some help in interpreting the fuller sense of the texts under discussion here. See Leo Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 22–33.
48 Dihyabekir M5 95, private typewritten, p. 15.
This was also the period, after the time of the early “traditionalists” of the seventh century, of the burgeoning Islamic intellectual life that of early Abbasid times. One has in mind here the groundbreaking work of figures such as Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. ca. 728), Hasan al-Basri (d. 728), Muhammad ibn Ishäq (d. ca. 767), and al-Wæqi (747–822), to name only four. The works of these Muslim scholars contributed substantially to the shape of the new Islamic religious discourse, produced in the social context of the encounter between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim claimants to religious verisimilitude, which John Wansbrough has so challengingly and aptly called “the sectarian milieu.” These exciting developments in Islamic scholarship provided the challenging background for yet another intellectual development in the presentation of Christian thinking in the world of Islam. The seemingly comprehensive challenge to Christian faith prompted at least two important Christian writers, one in Greek and the other in Syrian, to produce the first ever comprehensive, summary compendia of Christian doctrine.

Arguably, the very first summum theologiarum in Christian intellectual history was St. John of Damascus’s (d. 749/764) composite work, De Fide orthodoxa, or The Fountain of Knowledge. He wrote it in Greek, perhaps as a monk of Mar Saba monastery in the Judean desert, and in the first half of the eighth century, the very years of the burgeoning of Islamic religious scholarship just mentioned. Most Christian scholars have taken his work to represent the last of the patristic era in the East and to have been addressed to a largely monastic audience whose eyes and hearts were turned toward Constantinople in Byzantium. But that is to read John of Damascus’s work entirely from the point of view of Byzantium, where John never lived and where his writings on subjects other than the veneration of the holy icons made no notable impression until some centuries after his lifetime. In his own time he was called “Saracen-minded” by the Iconoclasts in Constan-

51 This is the position adopted by Andrew Louth, St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
52 See Basil Smood, Die theologische Arbeitweise des Johannes von Damaskus, Studia Patristica et Byzantina, 2 (Ettal, Germany: Buch-Kunstverlag, 1956), 131. This was also the period, after the time of the early “traditionalists” of the seventh century, of the burgeoning Islamic intellectual life that of early Abbasid times. One has in mind here the groundbreaking work of figures such as Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. ca. 728), Hasan al-Basri (d. 728), Muhammad ibn Ishäq (d. ca. 767), and al-Wæqi (747–822), to name only four. The works of these Muslim scholars contributed substantially to the shape of the new Islamic religious discourse, produced in the social context of the encounter between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim claimants to religious verisimilitude, which John Wansbrough has so challengingly and aptly called “the sectarian milieu.” These exciting developments in Islamic scholarship provided the challenging background for yet another intellectual development in the presentation of Christian thinking in the world of Islam. The seemingly comprehensive challenge to Christian faith prompted at least two important Christian writers, one in Greek and the other in Syrian, to produce the first ever comprehensive, summary compendia of Christian doctrine.

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56 While it is clear that John of Damascus himself considered The Fountain of Knowledge to be an integral work, albeit composed of three distinct parts, it seems from manuscripts and other evidence that the components seldom if ever actually circulated together; see Andrew Louth, St. John Damascene, 31–37.
he calls it the forerunner of the Antichrist. 57 John applies their name to the Muslims. 58 His discussion of Islam is obviously well informed; for example, one can easily discern his allusions to passages in the Qur'an. But John’s approach is entirely polemical, and in accordance with this purpose he actually caricatures those aspects of Islamic teaching and practice that he mentions. His purpose is to discredit the religious and intellectual claims of Islam in the eyes of inquiring Christians. But the interesting thing to notice for the modern scholar of the history of the relations between the Muslims and the Christians over the centuries is the fact that John of Damascus includes Islam as the last in his list of Christian heresies. 59 Indeed he speaks of Muhammad as having been one who, “having happened upon the Old and New Testament, likewise having probably been in conversation with an Arian monk, contrived his own heresy.” 60 John’s use of the word “heresy” here amounts to an admission that the Muslims for all their differences are after all in the same world of discourse with the Christians. When it comes to religious matters, albeit that the differences are substantial, John’s critique of the heresy of Islam may be seen as a reply to the Qur’an’s own polemical critique of Christianity, which in Christian eyes is simply wrong. But what one wants to emphasize in the present context is the fact that John of Damascus’s response to the challenge of Islam was not confined to just the polemical passage against “the heresy” contrived by Muhammad that John included in the De Haeresibus. Rather, the response to the commanding intellectual challenge of Islam across the board must be considered to have been a motivating factor behind John’s whole conception of The Fount of Knowledge. His larger purpose would have been to provide the Christian teachers of the burgeoning Melkite community with a compendium of orthodox doctrine useful for their response to the whole range of challenges facing them, the attacks of their Christian rivals, the Jacobites, the Nestorians, and the Manicheans as well as the Muslims, whose rule allowed the Christian rivals of the Melkites also to flourish.

Similarly, in the Syriac-speaking community of the Church of the East in the waning years of the eighth century another scholar also composed a summary presentation of Christian teaching for the instruction of those of

57 Le Coz, Jean Damascène, 210. 58 See the discussion of the significance of the epithet “Islamelles” in n. 6 above.

59 The idea that Islam is a heresy, even the epitome of all heresies, would become popular not only in Byzantium, but even in western anti-Islamic Christian treatises. See Harun Boštjan, “A Treasury of Heresies: Christian Polemics against the Koran,” in Stefan Wild (ed.), The Qur’an as Text, ed. Stefan Wild, 157–75 (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

60 Le Coz, Jean Damascène, 210–12. Given the language of this passage, it is difficult to understand how Le Coz, pointing to John’s earlier use of the word ḥanṣaf, to designate the ancient “religion of the Jashaites” can say without further nuance in his introduction to the text, “Jean appelle l’Islam ‘Religion des Ishaîites’, et l’utilisation du mot religion montre bien que, pour lui, ce n’est pas un simple hésard chrestienne” (p. 89).
them is the obvious intermingling of questions of faith and practice in such a way that it is also clear that the shape of theology itself is determined in this milieu by the apologetic imperative to justify the reasonableness of religious beliefs in virtue of the public practices they entail. This feature of the apologetic enterprise will become especially evident when we turn our attention in the next chapters to the discussion of Christian theology in Arabic. Meanwhile, it seems clear from both St. John of Damascus's *The Fountain of Knowledge*, written in Greek, and Theodore bar Koni's *Scholion*, written in Syriac, that by the end of the eighth century, the intellectual challenge that Islam posed for Christians had already imposed upon Christian writers in that milieu the task of turning their attention to the comprehensive presentation and defense of the reasonableness of Christian faith in response to a new and virtually comprehensive rejection of its major tenets. This development would affect the shape and style of Christian theology in all of its phases forever thereafter, even well beyond the confines of the world of Islam.

III

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY IN ARABIC

A NEW DEVELOPMENT IN CHURCH LIFE

Syriac Beginnings

By the end of the eighth century, Christian thinkers who lived among the Muslims were already doing theology with the challenges of Islam uppermost in their minds. One of the earliest and most interesting of them was the long-lived Patriarch Timothy I (727/8–823), who served as catholicos/patriarch of the Church of the East for the last forty-three years (780–823) of his life.¹ Patriarch Timothy's transfer of his see from its traditional location in Seleucia/Ctesiphon, the erstwhile capital of the Persian emperors, to Baghdad, the seat of the Muslim caliphate since the city's foundation in 767, symbolically expressed the new orientation in Christian thinking. The move gave the patriarch much more ready access to the centers of power in the new world order. This was important to him not only for the sake of the administration of the dioceses of his far-flung church, but also for the support of the church's missionary enterprises, which in his time, even under Muslim rule, extended eastward far into Central Asia along the so-called silk road and southward into India. But Patriarch Timothy was more than an able church administrator. He was an accomplished scholar whose interests brought him even into contact with the Muslim intellectuals of the caliph's court.

The fruit of Patriarch Timothy's scholarly concerns is preserved in a large collection of letters, really letter-treatises, which he addressed to monks and fellow bishops on any number of topics of interest to him or of importance to the life of the church.² Timothy wrote in Syriac, but it is clear that he was competent in Greek and, of course, fluent in Arabic. Several of his letter-treatises enjoyed a wide circulation and afford us now a precious insight into how Christian intellectual life in the caliphate developed in tandem


with the interest of Muslim intellectuals. Timothy's Letter 40 provides a case in point.3 Ostensibly it is an account of a discussion the patriarch says he had with an Aristotelian philosopher at the caliph's court about the definitions of logical terms and their proper deployment in Christian theology. In fact, the text contains an exercise in a style of religiously inspired reasoning that would soon become standard fare in apologetic treatises written by both Muslims and Christians in Arabic. In the introduction, which clearly states Timothy's apologetic purpose in writing the letter treatise, Timothy very interestingly describes the Muslims as "the new Jews." He says, "In the days of Herod, Pilate and the old Jews there was both defeat and victory, and truth and falsehood. So also, now, in the days of the present princes, in our own time and in the days of the new Jews among us, there is the same struggle and the same contest to distinguish falsehood and truth."5

What makes Letter 40 especially important for our inquiry is its topical outline. Not only are a number of the standard topics of religious controversy between Muslims and Christians mentioned, but also Timothy reports that his conversation with the philosopher at court began with a discussion of the modes of human knowledge in general and then moved on to a discussion on the terms one should use to express knowledge about God. In short, what would much later in and another place be called theology and the theory of knowledge, in the early Islamic period in the Arabic-speaking milieu often prefaced interreligious conversations about the controversial doctrinal issues that separated Muslims and Christians. This procedure would in the coming years develop into a standard feature of both Christian and Muslim kalām treatises in Arabic. In this context, the Arabic term kalām, which literally means simply "speech" or "talk," came to articulate the formal, intellectual exercise in the systemic defense of the credibility of religious doctrines, developed originally by Muslim apologists, but not without some debt to earlier, even Syriac speaking Christians.6 Eventually, kalām-style treatises in Arabic became the medium for theological development, even in Christian thought in the world of Islam.


The mention of the Aristotelian philosopher at the caliph's court with whom Patriarch Timothy says he had a conversation reminds one that the patriarch himself was one of the first of a long line of Christians to be commissioned by a caliph to produce an Arabic translation of a work of Aristotle. Around the year 782 the caliph al-Mahdi (r. 775–85) commissioned Timothy to make a translation of Aristotle's Topics, the book of the Organon that deals with dialectical reasoning. He worked from an earlier Syriac version, but with consultation of the original Greek. The patriarch accomplished this task with the help of his associate and coreligionist, Abū Nāḥ al-Anbārī, who at the time was the Christian secretary of the Muslim governor of Mosul.8 This detail helps us to notice how already by this time a network of Christian scholars, dependent on their own earlier school traditions, were prepared to participate with Muslims in the development, especially in Baghdad, of what during the next two centuries would become the remarkably inclusive culture of early Islamic intellectual life, based largely on the Graeco-Arabic translation movement. As for Patriarch Timothy, his own scholarly endeavors brought him to the point of reaching beyond the boundaries of the institutions of his own Church of the East in his search for books and manuscripts. He is on record as having made use of the services of an intermediary to borrow materials even from the Jacobite monastery of Mār Mattī near Takrit, midway between Baghdad and Mosul.9 But this is not all; Patriarch Timothy was also one of the first Christian apologists to bring the defense of Christian beliefs and practices right into the caliph's court.

The most well known text from the pen of Patriarch Timothy I is undoubtedly the account he composed originally in Syriac some time after the occasion when on two successive days he was summoned to the presence of the caliph al-Mahdi to engage in a debate on the relative merits of Islam and Christianity.10 As Timothy reported them, the issues discussed all had to do with the standard topics of conversation between Muslims and Christians on religious matters. The caliph raises the standard Islamic objections to Christian doctrines and practices, and the patriarch provides suitable apologetic replies. In literary form, the patriarch's Syriac text is a
letter addressed to an unnamed correspondent. The preface is in a florid style, and it is highly rhetorical, but not devoid of interest. In it Timothy voices some difidence about the “vain labor” involved in such a composition, and he complains that he is carrying out the task of writing it, “not without difficulty, nor without unwillingness.” What may have proved daunting to the patriarch was the knowledge that his best apologetic efforts would carry little conviction for Muslims, nor would they do much to prevent upwardly mobile Christians from converting to Islam, especially from within his own Church of the East. Several times in his report of the two sessions during which Timothy says he answered the caliph’s questions, he alludes to the Muslim’s desire for arguments from nature or from the scriptures, and his wariness of arguments based on reasoning processes, or his caution in the face of the logic-chopping rebuttals in debate style that were the normal apologists’ stock in trade. Patriarch Timothy’s letter, which amounts to an apologetic catechism for Syriac-speaking Christians living with Muslims, was an immediate success in the Syriac-speaking Christian communities. It seems to have circulated widely and for a long time in its original Syriac recension. There was even a Syriac epitome in circulation of the report of Timothy’s first session with the caliph, presented in a simple question and answer format, which for a long time in the manuscript tradition was attributed to another author. But very soon the whole work was also translated into Arabic in a somewhat augmented form, and in this language Patriarch Timothy’s report of his days in debate with the caliph al-Mahdi has enjoyed a large popularity among all the communities of Arabophone Christians. For by the last years of the eighth century Arabic was itself becoming an ecclesiastical language.

Ecclesiastical Arabic

The earliest surviving evidence for the use of written Arabic by Christians living under Islamic rule in the conquered territories comes from the last third of the eighth century. By that date, Arabization, as it is called, or the spread of Arabic as the public language of business in the caliphate, brought about the circumstance that members of the Christian communities living within the dār al-islām themselves had to embrace Arabic not only as their daily language but in the ecclesiastical sphere as well. This

11 Mingana, Woodbrooke Studies, 2: 91.
12 See, e.g., ibid., 2: 154 and 156.
14 See Patman, L’église et l’islam sous Timothée I.

move, the adoption of Arabic as a church language, happened first in the community that would be called “Melkite,” whose patristic and liturgical tradition had been and would remain Greek. But increasingly from the eighth century onward, as the Melkite ecclesial identity grew into full maturity, Arabic in fact became this community’s language of communal identity. Beginning in the second half of the eighth century, if not somewhat earlier, and reaching its stride in the ninth century, the Melkites, largely in the monasteries of Jerusalem, the Sinai, and the Judean desert of Palestine, produced an archive of Christian Arabic texts in a distinctive Arabic idiom.

and even in the beginning in a characteristic manuscript hand, which included translations of the scriptures, lives of the saints, and other classical texts of the church, as well as original compositions in Arabic. This community's enculturation into the world of Islam, therefore, was principally accomplished by their adoption of the by now thoroughly Islamicized Arabic language as an ecclesiastical language.

The earliest translations of the Bible into Arabic for which we have any clear documentary evidence come from this period. While there undoubtedly was a pre-Islamic, proto-Arab Christian culture among the Arab-speaking Christians who were in the Qur'an's original audience, it seems to have been the case that in due course it was entirely subsumed into the nascent culture of Islam, or it disappeared at an early date in the Islamic era, along with the Christian allegiance of many of the Arab tribesmen who made up the early armies of the conquest. The evidence for any translations of the Bible or of liturgical texts into Arabic that they may have produced either has not survived or has not yet been discovered. Rather, the earliest extant texts of the Bible in Arabic translation belong to a family of Palestinian, Melkite manuscripts, the earliest of which can in all probability be dated to the late seventh century, and they contain the four Gospels, translated from Greek, with hints of a relationship to earlier translations from Greek into Christian Palestinian Aramaic. They are equipped with rubricated notations marking the pericopes to be read during the several liturgical seasons of the year, according to the calendar of the old Jerusalem liturgy that persisted in use in the Syro-Palestinian communities until the Byzantinization of the Holy City's liturgical usages replaced it at the time of the return of Constantinopolitan influence over the see of Jerusalem from the eleventh century onward.

Most of the works surviving in the archive of "old south Palestinian" Arabic manuscripts, as these early Melkite texts have been called by Joshua Blau, the modern scholar who has studied them most closely from a grammatical point of view, are translations. Out of the sixty or so works in the archive that Blau studied closely, he is sure of only five of them as original compositions. All of these are apologetic works, that is to say the translations, fall into the category of "church books," texts that Christians require for the ordinary conduct of their internal religious affairs. Among them is a group of thirty-five items, consisting mainly of homilies, saints' lives, martyrograms, patristic selections, and so forth, while twenty-one pieces are Arabic versions of parts of the scriptures. This ratio of original compositions to translations, leaving room for the reassignment of some of the hagiographical items to the status of originals, accords well with what one otherwise knows of the sociohistorical situation of Christians in Syria/Palestine in the ninth and tenth centuries; the new cultural circumstances were forcing them to spend most of their energies translating their religious heritage into the new public idiom of the Islamic world. Beginning somewhat earlier, and continuing haphazardly even well into the Islamic period, these same Palestinian monasteries had also sponsored translations of many similar texts into Christian Palestinian Aramaic. But, whereas the texts in this Aramaic dialect were intended totally for local use, the Arabic texts potentially spoke to a much wider world. In fact, a survey of the colophons of many of them reveals the fact that their network included communities in Palestine, Edessa, Harran, Antioch, Baghdad, Damascus, Sinai, and Alexandria in Egypt. The best way to get a sense of the range and significance of this translation movement is briefly to consider the activity of two of the translators whose names we happen to know. Their work may serve as a model for the accomplishments of their numerous colleagues, who are now known only by the many anonymous texts that happen to have survived until our times.

Anthony David of Baghdad, a monk and scribe of Mar Sabas monastery in the Judean desert in the late ninth century, is known from the colophons of two Arabic manuscripts he wrote in the year 885/6 for Abba Isaac of Mount Sinai. These manuscripts, Vatican Arabic MS 71 and Strasbourg Oriental MS 4226 (Arabic 151), contain translations from Greek into Arabic of a number of patristic texts, such as the life of Epiphanius of Salamis by John of Constantinople, the lives of the monks Euphymius and Sabas by Cyril of Scythopolis, along with works by Anastasios of Sinai, Ephraem Gracius, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Athanasius of Alexandria, Isaac of Nineveh, and others. The case of the last-named writer, Isaac of Nineveh, is particularly interesting because his ascetic works had in the previous century been translated from Syriac to Greek by the monks Patrikios and Abramius at Mar Sabas monastery, testifying to an already flour-


17 It seems not improbable that Arabic-speaking, Christian priests, preachers, and teachers in pre-Islamic times may have had private notes or texts, even in Arabic, which would have served them as aids de mémoire. See Gregor Schoeler, *Écrits et transmises dans les dixièmes de Hadram* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2003), 26–39.


20 Blau, *Grammar*, 267: 42–54, with the original compositions described on pp. 21–23. One suspects that the number should really be six, if not seven.


the Pure Virgin Mary,25 and the other Theodore Abu Qurrah’s Arabic tract on the veneration of the holy icons.26 The second manuscript: Stephen of Ramla wrote contains an Arabic translation of a Gospel lectionary that belongs to the family of Arabic texts of the four Gospels mentioned above; it is one of the earliest dated manuscripts of the Gospels in Arabic.

The “church books” translated by these monks and their colleagues would have served the ongoing needs of the members of the Melkite community, whose vernacular language would increasingly have been Arabic. The apologetic, original compositions in Arabic that they copied represent the first steps taken by the Melkites to address themselves to issues beyond their own internal community life, issues that take into account questions raised by Muslims and others, and which inevitably would by the late eighth century have been raised in Arabic.27 In the subsequent centuries of Christian Arabic literature, this proportion of a large number of translations of Christian texts in other languages, relative to a small but steady output of original compositions in Arabic, would be maintained.

The Earliest Arab Christian Theologian

With the possible exception of two texts now preserved only in several papyrus fragments,28 the oldest apology for Christianity in Arabic, and thus the earliest original Christian composition in Arabic now known, is undoubtedly the work preserved in an old parchment manuscript from Sinai (Sinaitic Arabic MS 154). In 1899 most of it was published and translated into English under the title On the Trinity Nature of God.29 Subsequent studies have expanded our knowledge of this important work, allowing one the opportunity now to review it from the point of view of its interface with

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27 See Griffith, “The Monks of Palestine.”

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Fig. 2. Mar Sabas Monastery in the Judean Desert
Established in the year 483 CE by St. Sabas (439–532) and long known as the “Great Laura,” Mar Sabas was home to many of the Greek, Syriac, Christian, Palestinian, Aramaic, and Arabic-speaking monks who contributed so much to Christian intellectual culture in Islamic times. The monastery flourishes to this day. (Courtesy of Professor Joseph Parrish, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.)

ishing translation culture in the Judean desert monasteries in the eighth century.23

Stephen of Ramla was a monk of the monastery of Mar Chariton in the Judean desert in the last quarter of the ninth century. He worked on two manuscripts that have survived to modern times, British Library Oriental MS 4950, which he copied in the year 877, and Sinai Arabic MS 72, which he finished in the year 897.24 The first of these texts contains two compositions originally written in Arabic, the one a summary presentation of Melkite theology in Arabic called The Summary of the Ways of Faith in the Trinity of the Unity of God, and in the Incarnation of God the Word from
in these revealed scriptures, to anyone who wants insight, [who] understands things, recognizes the truth, and opens his breast to believe in God and his scriptures.\textsuperscript{33}

One notices straightway the apologist's intention to make his case for the Christian teaching from the scriptures; he names the Law, the Prophets, the Psalms, and the Gospel. Reading his words with the Qur'an in mind, as the author himself surely had it, one notices that these are precisely the biblical books the Qur'an names, and what is more, the author's statement "that God and his Word and his Spirit are one God," is surely in this context an evocation of the passage in the Qur'an that is most comprehensively critical of Christian doctrine, that is surat an-Nisa' 4:171. It is a passage to which later Christian apologists return again and again because it explicitly speaks of the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, as "God's Word" and as "a Spirit from Him." But what is truly surprising is to notice that as the text goes on the author is willing to include the Qur'an by name among the scriptures from which he is prepared to quote in testimony to the credibility of the doctrine of the Trinity! At one point in the development of his argument, in search of testimonies for a notion of plurality comprehended within the affirmation of the oneness of the Godhead, he turns to the scriptures for citations of passages in which the one God speaks in the first person plural. He says,

You will find it also in the Qur'an that "We created man in misery [90:4], and We have opened the gates of heaven with water pouring down [54:11], and have said, and now you come unto us alone, as We created you at first [6:94]." He said also, "Believe in God, and in his Word; and also in the Holy Spirit [4:171]," but the Holy Spirit has brought it down "as a mercy and a guidance from thy Lord [16:64, 102]," but why should I prove it from this and enlighten [you] when we find in the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms and the Gospel, and you find it in the Qur'an that God and his Word and his Spirit are one God and one Lord? You have said that you believe in God and his Word and the Holy Spirit, so do not reproach us, O men, that we believe in God and his Word and his Spirit: and we worship God in his Word and his Spirit, one God and one Lord and one Creator.\textsuperscript{34}

It is relatively rare in Christian Arabic texts from the early Islamic period to find passages quoted from the Qur'an and directly attributed to the Is-


\textsuperscript{31} Samir Arabic MS 154, f. 100v. Unaccountably, Gibson omitted this leaf from her edition of the text.


\textsuperscript{33} Gibson, An Arabic Version, 3 (English), 75 (Arabic). Here the English translation has been adapted from Gibson's version.

\textsuperscript{34} Gibson, An Arabic Version, 5–6 (English), 77–78 (Arabic). The awkward English translation has been slightly altered and while awkwardness remains, hopefully the point is clear; phrases from the Qur'an are included in the passage.
In the context of the Melkite milieu of Palestine in the eighth century, the Arabic tract On the Triune Nature of God exhibits an attitude toward the world of Islam that finds in it not only a major challenge to Christian faith but also a cultural transformation that furnishes both a new idiom in which that faith must be articulated if it is to continue to carry conviction and a new opportunity for the proclamation of the Gospel. The writer did not argue against Islam directly. Rather, his intention was to commend the truth of Christianity to his readers, some of whom may have been Muslims, but for whom the Arabic-speaking Melkite Christians, who may or may not have found conversion to Islam an attractive religious option. We do not know the name of the writer of this tract, nor do we know where he composed it. He was most probably a monk in one of the monasteries of the Judean desert, Mar Sabas or Mar Chariton. He wrote the tract because in his day there was a pressing need for an effective catechesis in Arabic to support the faith of the Christians and to take advantage of the opportunity to proclaim the Gospel in a new social and political context. He was the first of a long line of Christian theologians to write in Arabic.

Pastoral Problems of Christians among Muslims

We may learn something of the social circumstances among the Christians under Islamic rule, which made the composition of tracts in Christian theology in Arabic a practical necessity, from the writer of another anonymous Christian Arabic text from the early Islamic period. It is the Summary of the Ways of Faith mentioned earlier as one of the works copied by Stephen of Amila in the year 877 at the monastery of Mar Chariton in Palestine. The now unknown author spoke very concretely of the changing cultural and religious circumstances that prompted his own apologetic work. The Summary consists of twenty-five chapters, many of them comprised of pre-existing pieces put together into a well-articulated ensemble. In the opening chapter, after a recitation of the Nicene/Constantinopolitan creed, the author remarks that ever since its publication it has been the task of Christian scholars to defend this creed vigorously against adversaries who would subvert it, and he mentions that no past adversary has been as formidable as the Muslims. He says that the present problem is that while the religious language of people in the past was over-subtle in theological matters, "the language of this community about God is a clear language which the broad mass of people understands." He means Arabic and he goes on to specify...
I mean their saying, lá ʾilāha ʾilla Allāh. By lá ʾilāha ʾilla Allāh they mean a God other than the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. According to what they say, God is neither a generator nor is He generated,37 nor, according to what they say, is the Holy Spirit anything but a creature among creatures. So their saying lá ʾilāha ʾilla Allāh and what we say is one in words but very different in meaning. That is because when we, the assembly of Christians (an-Naṣṣārī) say lá ʾilāha ʾilla Allāh we mean by it a living God, endowed with a living Spirit (nūh) which enlivens and assists, an intellect (naj) which gives determination to whatever it wills, and a Word by means of which all beings come to be.38

So it appears from this remark that some contemporaneous Arabic-speaking Christians were making the first phrase of the Islamic shahādah their own; that they did so at all is a measure of their enucleation into the world of Islam. It also appears that some of the Arabic-speaking Christians were using Islamic language to conceal their Christian faith and to protect themselves from the reproach of the Muslims. The author says of these heretics, Arabic-speaking Christians that they are a race living in the midst of the Muslims who rule over them, "a race born among them, grown up with them, and educated in their culture. They conceal their faith and disclose it only when suits them."39 The author then has this to say of these dissimulating Christians:

They are the hypocrites (mudhafān) among us, marked with our mark, standing in our congregations, contradicting our faith, forfeters of themselves (al-khāṣṣi), who are Christians (Naṣṣārī) in name only. They disbelieve in their Lord and in their God, Jesus Christ, the son of Mary; due to the disparagement of strangers they are ashamed to describe for them any of their Lord’s actions in the flesh.40

The author of the Summary of the Ways of Faith pinpoints Christology as the decisive issue in Christian/Muslim relations in his day. He contends that once Christians have given way on this issue, the distinctiveness of their faith is eclipsed, and he describes the situation of such “wavering,” Arabic-speaking Christians, whose ways he opposes, as follows. He says:

If you ask them about Christ our Lord, they maintain that he is a messenger like one of the messengers;41 they do not favor him in any way over them, save in the pardon he brought and in the taking of precedence. They are not concerned to go to church, nor do they do any of the things which Christians do in their churches. Openly declaring themselves to be in opposition to the trinity of the oneness of God and his incarnation, they disparage the messengers, the fathers, and the teachers of the New Testament. They say, “What compels us to say ‘Father,’ ‘Son,’ and ‘Spirit,’ and to maintain that the Messiah is God? We are content with that which the Israelites were content; God is one (Deuteronomy 6:4). We have no need for the hypostases, nor for what mere human beings deem impermissible.”42

The author warns such Christians, “Beware, the group you applaud is too smart for you and too bright for your arguments.”43 So he proposes to offer them a better way of thinking in his Summary of the Ways of Faith. One supposes that other writers of apologies for Christianity in Arabic were similarly motivated by the same kind of pastoral necessity that prompted this anonymous author to take up his pen and to write Christian theology in Arabic.

In this same connection, another text from the early ninth century, which also offers an insight into the social circumstances obtaining among the Christians at the time and which similarly prompted the author’s response, is Theodore Abu Qurrah’s (ca. 755–ca. 830) Arabic tract in defense of the Christian practice of venerating the holy icons. Abu Qurrah wrote the tract soon after the year 800; the circumstance that elicited it was a situation that manifested itself in the behavior of some Christians at the Church of the Icon of Christ, in the metropolitan city of Edessa. The problem was, as Abu Qurrah put it:

Many Christians are abandoning prostration to the icon of Christ our God. ... Anti-Christs, especially ones claiming to have in hand a scripture sent down from God, are reprimanding them for their prostration to these icons, and because of it they are insisting on them the worship of idols, and the transgression of what God commanded in the Torah and the Prophets, and they sneer at them.44

It is clear in the context that Muslims are the principal “anti-Christs” involved in the obloquy so many Christians feared. After having presented his arguments from scripture and reason in substantiation of the practice of venerating icons, Abu Qurrah cites some of the taunts the non-Christs voiced. For example, some people said, “If the icons of the saints are entitled to prostration by way of honor, make prostration to me; I am, they

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37 See the Qur’an, Jhūlq, 112:3.
38 British Library Oriental MS 4950, f. 5v.
39 Ibid., f. 6r.
40 Ibid., f. 6v.
41 See the Qur’an, al-Muṣādah 5:75.
42 British Library Oriental MS 4950, f. 7v.
43 Ibid., f. 7v–8r.
maintain, someone who is the image of God.\textsuperscript{484} Others were afraid that if non-Christians saw "an icon of Christ shamefully crucified, they would say to us, 'Woe unto you! Are you not ashamed that this is your God?'"\textsuperscript{485} Abū Qurrah argued that the icons are public proclamations of the truths for which authentic Christians are willing to bear the consequences for their testimony to their veracity. The pastoral problem was that some Christians were seeking to make accommodations with their oppressors in the matter of their public behavior regarding the icons, and this was the occasion for Abū Qurrah's treatise. This situation, writ large, was the circumstance that prompted the beginnings of Christian theology in Arabic.

Arabic-Speaking, Christian Theologians

Theodore Abū Qurrah is actually the first writer, whose name we know, who regularly wrote Christian theology in Arabic. He was a Melkite from Edessa in Syria, and he was perhaps for a time a monk in the monastery of Mar Saba in the Judean desert. He was certainly in frequent association with the monastic establishment in Jerusalem. He was Bishop of Harrān in Syria in the early years of the ninth century.\textsuperscript{486} A prolific writer, Abū Qurrah wrote both in Syriac and in Arabic, although none of his work in Syriac is known to have survived to our time. In Arabic almost twenty of his compositions are known and published.\textsuperscript{487} And there are some forty-three, mostly very

\textsuperscript{484} Griffith, A Treatise on the Veneration of the Holy Icons, 88.

\textsuperscript{485} Ibid., 94.


\textsuperscript{488} The Greek texts attributed to Abū Qurrah were collected by Jakob Grimm in 1606 and republished by J. P. Migone, Paralogia Graeca, vol. 99, cols. 1445–1601. Few of them have been systematically studied.


sent the first full generation of creative thinkers among the Arabic-speaking Christian writers.\textsuperscript{54} There were many other writers, of course, whose names have not come down to us even when their works have survived anonymously in the manuscript tradition. While responding to the challenges of Islam was high on their agendas, the first Arab-speaking theologians, like the major Christian thinkers in the caliphate in the following generations, were also in a major way concerned with arguing in Arabic on behalf of the orthodoxy of the Christological formulas of their own confessional communities. In this way it came about that it was only in the early Islamic period, and in the Arabic language, that the three principal Christian churches of the world of Islam, the Melkites, the Jacobites, and the Nestorians, came to the full statement of their confessional identities.

In their more direct responses to the religious challenge of Islam, Abū Qurrah, Abū Rā‘īthah, Ammār al-Baṣrī, and their anonymous colleagues all wrote tracts in Arabic in which they addressed themselves to the intellectual search for the true religion and the signs that would verify it, as they often put the matter. This effort was in large part shaped in response to the contemporary program of Muslim scholars to commend the religious credibility of Islam, and to demonstrate that the signs of true prophecy and religion are verified in the career of Muhammad, the teachings of the Qur‘ān, and in the religion of Islam. The Christian writers of later generations in Syria and Iraq in all three of the mainline communities, such as the Jacobite Yahyā ibn ʿAdī (893–974),\textsuperscript{55} the Nestorian Elias of Nisibis (975–1046),\textsuperscript{56} the Melkite Paul of Antioc (ca. 1180),\textsuperscript{57} again to name only the most well known of them, all followed suit.\textsuperscript{58}

In the meantime, Muslim scholars and writers were taking note of the


\textsuperscript{57} See Paul Kouyou, Paul d’Antioche: Études médiévales de saint (Beaune: Imprimerie Catholique, 1964).

\textsuperscript{58} For a comprehensive list and description of the Christian Arabic writers and their works in all three of the principal denominations up to the middle of the fifteenth century, see Georg Graf, Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literature, vol. 2, Studi e Testi, 133 (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1947). See also the systematic bibliographies in R. Capar et al., ed., "Bibliographie du dialogue islamico-chretien," Islamocristianism 1 (1978) no 7 (1981).
Christian philosopher and apologist Yahyā ibn ʿAdī (d. 974). While he was there, Abū ʿUmar twice visited the sessions of some famous Muslim scholars of the city, but he vowed he would never attend them again. He was shocked at what he found in them. He is reported to have given the following account of his experience:

At the first session I attended I witnessed a meeting which included every kind of group: Sunni Muslims and heretics, and all kinds of infidels: Majūjis, materialists, atheists, Jews and Christians. Each group had a leader who would speak on its doctrine and debate about it. Whenever one of these leaders arrived, from whichever of the groups he came, the assembly rose up for him, standing on their feet until he would sit down, then they would take their seats after he was seated. When the meeting was finished with its participants, and they saw that no one else was expected, one of the infidels said, “You have all agreed to the debate, so the Muslims should not argue against us on the basis of their scripture, nor on the basis of the sayings of their prophet, since we put no credence in these things, and we do not acknowledge him. Let us dispute with one another only on the basis of arguments from reason, and what observation and deduction will support.” Then they would all say, “Agreed.” Abū ʿUmar said, “When I heard that, I did not return to that meeting. Later someone told me there was to be another meeting for discussion, so I went there and I found them engaging in the same practices as their colleagues. So I stopped going to the meetings of the disputants, and I never went back.66

Clearly, Abū ʿUmar can be taken as a spokesman for the Muslim traditionalists in the later ʿAbbāsid era, who may well have been in the majority already in Yahyā ibn ʿAdī’s day. The visitor from Spain clearly disapproved of the very easy exchanges between the intellectuals of the several religious communities as he observed them in Baghdad at the very time that Yahyā himself was so fond of promoting them.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the center of gravity in the evolution of Christian Arabic literature shifted from Baghdad and the East, westward into Egypt. The Copts, who included some Melkites in their number, were by this time mostly Jacobites, that is, Monophysites in their confessional identity. They had begun to write theology in Arabic and to translate their church books into the new language of the dominant Islamic culture only in the tenth century. They did not suddenly abandon their own Coptic language, as scholars have sometimes suggested,67 but it was certainly the case that by the thirteenth century Arabic had become as much and more so an ecclesiastical language in Egypt as it was already in Syria/Palestine and in Mesopotamia.

The earliest Coptic Orthodox author regularly to write in Arabic, whose name we know, is Severus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (ca. 905–987). In the Arabic-speaking world Severus’s apologetic works have been among the most frequently copied and the most widely disseminated of all Christian texts in the Arabic language.68 After the time of Severus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, Arabic quickly became the principal language of the Copts, and they went on to produce more texts in Arabic than all the other Christian communities in the caliphate put together; the list of the known authors and their works in our period is extensive.69 In addition to numerous florilegia of patristic texts and translations from the scriptures and the works of earlier Christian writers, historical texts are among the more well known Christian Arabic works produced in Egypt. In this connection one might mention in particular the Annals of the Melkite patriarch, Eutychius of Alexandria (877–940),70 and the famous, multi-authored History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria,71

In the thirteenth century in Egypt there dawned what some scholars have called a golden age in Christian Arabic literature.72 It is symbolized by the activities of a remarkable family of Christian scribes and writers who are altogether called the Awdād al-ʿAsāl, the sons of ʿAsāl, who flourished during the middle years of the thirteenth century, 1230–60.73 They were principally three, ʿAs-Safi, Hibartallah, and al-Muṭṭama, who undertook impressive projects of manuscript discovery, copying, translating, and original composition of Christian theology in Arabic.74 One of the notable features of their work is the obviously ecumenical character it assumed; they

67 See, in this connection, the findings of Jason E. Zaborowski, The Coptic Martrysdom of...
the texts remain in Arabic, with very few translations into western languages. The field of study is ripe for further development.

It remains only to mention that in al-Andalus, Islamic Spain, there were also Arabic-speaking Christian theologians. By the ninth century they too were translating the scriptures and other church books from Latin into Arabic and writing Christian theology and apologetics in the public language of the caliphate. The earliest such writer whose name we know is ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn al-Qāṭif (d. 889), the son of the very Paulus Alvarus of Córdoba (d. 861), who in the previous generation wrote so vehemently against the Muslims in Latin and decried the adoption of Arabic on the part of young Spanish Christians. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn al-Qāṭif composed an apologetic treatise in Arabic against the Muslims. Unfortunately, the latter work survives only in portions quoted from it by a later, thirteenth-century Muslim writer of polemics against Christianity, known only as Imam al-Qarṣūbī. After ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn al-Qāṭif, both because of a dearth of such material from the intervening period and the vicissitudes of time and history, modern scholarship knows of no other apologetic or polemic works written originally in Arabic by Spanish Christians until late in the eleventh century. For the latter period, three important texts from the environs of Toledo, produced between the years 1120 and 1200, have been studied by Thomas E. Burman; he has edited the surviving Latin translation of the now lost Arabic original of the longest and most important of them, the so-called Liber De al-Maqṣūr, 1920); F. Paul Sabat, Vingt traités philosophiques et apologétiques d’auteurs arabes chrétiens du IXe au XIVe siècle (Cairo: H. Friedrich, 1929).

There is at least one anthology of texts by multiple authors in English translation: N. A. Newman, The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries (632–900 A.D.); Translations with Commentary (Hatfield, PA: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1995).


reliantly sought out the best Christian tracts in Arabic from earlier times wherever they could find them, be their authors Nestorians, Jacobites, or Melkites. One of the family members, al-Muʿtaman, probably taking his cue from an earlier writer named Abu‘ Ali Naṣṣib ibn Yunus (d. after 983), a Melkite in the circle of the Jacobite Yabhy ibn ‘Adī in Baghdad, spoke in his magisterial Summary of the Principles of Religion of how all the Christian communities and denominations professed the same faith in Christ, albeit that they differed in their theologies. Finally, among the Copts there was Shams ar-Rūsāl Abū al-Barakāt, often known under the name Ibn Qabar (d. after 1321). He wrote a virtual encyclopedia of Christian theology in Arabic, into which he subsumed texts of many earlier writers from the several communities, to the extent that his work is almost a reference book for Christian theology and ecclesiastical practice in Arabic, from its beginnings to the thirteenth century. He called it A Lamp in the Darkness, a title that might well evoke a sense of the many difficulties and disabilities that Christians under Muslim rule in the Middle East increasingly came to experience, especially in the wake of the Crusades, the Mongol invasions of the mid-thirteenth century, and the long years of Mamluḳ rule (1254–1517) in Egypt and in the Arabic-speaking world of Islam more generally.

In spite of the steady crescendo of scholarship in the area of Christian Arabic theology in the Middle East, especially in the twentieth century, it remains true that most of the writers of the early Islamic period remain unknown, and an even larger number of their texts remain unedited in their manuscripts, which are often hidden away in monastic libraries in the Levant, as well as in the major libraries of the Middle East and Europe. Scholarly labor has for the most part concentrated on the difficult task of providing critical editions and translations of individual works by the most important authors. A few anthologies have appeared, including brief selections from the writings of the major authors over the centuries, but...
nuhdanāt. \(^{84}\) For the rest, the Christian Arabic theological heritage of Islamic Spain is known mostly from reports of long lost works, rather than from any surviving manuscripts that contain them.

**Arabic-Speaking Jews and Christian Theology in Arabic**

Just as the Christian communities living under Islamic hegemony eventually adopted Arabic as an ecclesiastical language, as well as their language of everyday communication in the caliphate, so too did the Jewish communities in the several parts of the world of Islam follow in the same path at just about the same time. Like the Christians, Jews too, from the late eighth century onward, had important institutions in Bagdad, the seat of the Exilarch, and the scholarly center for the earliest Arabic-speaking scholars in the community.\(^ {85}\) As in the Christian case, no Jewish text in Arabic is known to have survived from pre-Islamic times. But in due course, once Jews widely adopted the public language of the world of Islam, Arabic eventually became one of the most important vehicles of Jewish thought in the Middle Ages, not only in the Middle East but perhaps more importantly in North Africa and Spain,\(^ {86}\) a circumstance that helps explain the fact that Jewish Arabic texts have received much more scholarly attention in the West in modern times than have Christian Arabic ones.

The earliest Jewish texts in Arabic in all probability appeared in the very period in which Arabic-speaking Christian theologians were beginning to write theology and to compose apologetic and polemical tracts to counter the religious challenges posed by both Jews and Muslims in the Islamic milieu. Significantly, the earliest Jewish Arabic texts reflect the same social and interreligious concerns, mutatis mutandis, as the ones with which the Christian writers were concerned.\(^ {87}\) In fact, the most prominent early Jew-

\(^ {84}\) See Burman, *Religious Polities and the Intellectual History of the Muslims*.


\(^ {87}\) See, e.g., the study by David Sklare, "Responses to Islamic Polities by Jewish M-

ish texts in Arabic were written not explicitly against the Muslims but against the Christians. This is the case with the famous *Ithāra‘ Maqālib*, the work of Dāwūd ibn Marwān al-Muqāmmil, who in all probability flourished in the first half of the ninth century.\(^ {88}\) He was a Christian convert who reconverted to Judaism, who wrote in pointed detail, with the exact knowledge of a former “insider,” against the doctrines and practices of his erstwhile Christian colleagues. His case reminds one of the roughly contemporary Muslim, anti-Christian polemicist, ‘Ali Rabbān at-Tabari, who was a Christian convert to Islam and the author of both a “Refutation of the Christians” (*radd at-ta‘l al-nasara*)\(^ {89}\) and a book demonstrating the truth of Islam called the “Book of Religion and Empire” (*Kitāb al-din wa al-dawla‘*).\(^ {90}\) The careers of these two converts from Christianity in the ninth century, the one to Judaism, and the other to Islam, readily testify to the multidimensional nature of the interreligious apologetic and polemical enterprise of the period, dominated as it was, in Arabic, by the contemporary growth and development of the Islamic *Ibn al-Kalām*.

Another Jewish text of a similar nature, which in its present form probably has its roots in the same ninth century, Arabic-speaking milieu, is the anonymous, anti-Christian work called in Arabic, *Qiṣṣat muṣjudāt al-ṣūqf*, and in its later Hebrew translation, *Sefer Nesiṭor ha-Komer*.\(^ {91}\) A kalām work in its form and style, like its Christian and Muslim counterparts in the same era, it argues in defense of the credibility of Judaism as the true religion, against the claims of contemporary Christian and even Muslim controversialists. Centuries later, in its Hebrew translation this work brought the religious controversies of the world of Islam in Abbadid times into the polemical milieu of the Latin Middle Ages.

These two texts, the *Ithāra‘ Maqālib* and the *Qiṣṣat muṣjudāt al-ṣūqf*,


lamic world was that now they participated in the religious controversies among themselves, and between the two of them and the Muslims, on an equal footing as members of subaltern, theoretically protected, minority groups, subservient under the common religio-sociological label in the Islamic polity as “People of the Book” or “Scripture People.” In these circumstances the Jews and Christians developed independent discourses in Arabic that nevertheless were intertwined with one another in many ways, and with the evolving Islamic discourses in the same linguistic and cultural milieu.

The earliest major author of Jewish thought in Arabic whose name we know was a contemporary Sa‘d ibn Yunus al-Faysalī, who was Egyptian by birth but who moved to Baghdad as an adult, where he was a contemporary of Иndian and Persian scholars such as Abū Bishr Matta ibn Yūnus (d. 940) and Yahyā ibn ‘Adi (893–974), along with the Muslims, Abū l-‘Irāqī Ahmad ibn ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-‘Udārī (975–1032), the famous Sunni maṣalla, Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (ca. 870–950), and Muḥammad ibn Zakariyā al-Rāzī (864–925), to mention only the most prominent Muslim philosophers of the time. Sa‘dī, like several of the earliest Arab Christian writers, held a prominent position in his own Jewish community; he translated the scriptures and other important Jewish texts into Arabic, he commented on parts of the scriptures, and in addition to many other intra-Jewish scholarly undertakings, he wrote original works in Arabic that reflect the controversies and concerns of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinkers of the era, most notably for the present purpose, in his Book of Beliefs and Opinions. But his philosophical acumen was also much in evidence even in biblical commentary, as is evident in his Arabic translation of and commentary on the book of Job.

Like the earliest Christian thinkers who wrote in Arabic, so too was Sa‘dī involved in intracommunal, virtually denominational controversies that had their roots in earlier history, but which came to the fore in a newly consistent way in early Islamic times. In the Jewish instance, in ninth-century Baghdad, this was particularly the controversy between the “Rab-
Christian Theology in Arabic

lieu, which is the focus of our present concern, was achieved by Moses Maimonides (1138–1204), who was originally from Andalusia but who spent most of his working life in Egypt. Maimonides's Guide for the Perplexed, to name only his most famous book outside the Jewish community, addresses from the Jewish perspective, and in the same Arabic language, many of the philosophical and theological issues that concerned the contemporary and earlier Christian and Muslim thinkers. Indeed, in the Guide Maimonides is one of the few Jewish writers in Arabic actually to mention by name earlier Muslim and Christian authors who discussed the same issues that concerned him in his famous book. Of the Christians, he mentions particularly John Philoponos (ca. 490–ca. 570) and Yab-yab ibn 'Adi (893–974). Yab-yab would have been appalled to know that Maimonides named him as one of those from whom the Muslim mustakallimîn learned the arts of the 'ilm al-kalâm. Yab-yab prided himself on being an Aristotelian logician, and in his own work he disparaged the methods of the mustakallimîn. It was just a generation after Maimonides's lifetime that the golden age of Christian Arabic literature dawned in Egypt, highlighted, as we have seen, in the works of the so-called 'Abd al-Azîzî, who flourished in the environs of Cairo between the years 1230 and 1260.

Finally, among the Arabic-speaking Jewish writers who flourished in the time of those who inaugurated Christian theology in Arabic in the world of Islam, we must mention Sa'd ibn Mansûr ibn Kammâna (ca. 1215–ca. 1285), a little-known Jewish philosopher who lived in Baghdad in a politically catastrophic period, who nevertheless around the year 1285 wrote a well-known book in Arabic in comparative apologetics. He called it Tanâîl al-akhbâh li li-l-nâsî al-khatlât, a title usually translated into English as "Examination of the Inquiries into the Three Faiths." In it, Ibn Kammâna follows closely the arguments of the Muslim mustakallimîn in connection with their efforts to show the authenticity of Muhammad's prophetic mission; he compares their arguments with those put forward by Jews and Christians, concluding that the case for the claims of Judaism is


107 See Lazarus-Yafeh, Interwoven Worlds.
the strongest. The very title of his book testifies that as late as the thirteenth century in Baghdad, religious and philosophical inquiry was still in many ways conceived by the local scholars as featuring a colloquy between the "three faiths (milâl)": Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But Ibn Kammûna's own experience was a harbinger of things to come; he was attacked by a mob in Baghdad, furious at the treatment of Islam in his book, a development that precipitated his flight from the city. Subsequently, several Muslims composed tracts against Ibn Kammûna's book, and in the early fourteenth century a Jacobite Christian writer, Abû l-Hasan ibn al-Mahûma, wrote a series of critical marginal notes (al-hawâshi) appended to Ibn Kammûna's chapters on the Jews and the Christians.

While modern commentators speak rather easily of a colloquy between the scholars of the three faiths in early Islamic times, and indeed the works of the Arabic-speaking Jews, Christians, and Muslims of the period do regularly cite one another's beliefs and practices, one must nevertheless point out that evidence for actual conversations between the scholars of the three communities, either literary or viva voce, is rare. Seldom are the Christian scholars mentioned in the works by Jewish authors we have mentioned, nor are the contemporary Jewish scholars, with the notable exception of Ibn Kammûna, mentioned by the Christian writers. They and the contemporary Muslims lived and wrote in the same milieu and responded to one another's arguments, often in a caricatured fashion. But the colloquy can now only be traced by a comparative study of their texts, a difficult and very specialized task that requires a rare expertise in at least two of the three traditions, not to mention uncommon linguistic skills.

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113 See the analyses of Barbara Roggema, "Epistemology as Polemic: Ibn Kammûna's Examination of the Apologetics of the Three Faiths," in Roggema, The Three Rings, 47–68.
114 See Roggema, "Epistemology as Polemic," 50.

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IV

THE SHAPE OF CHRISTIAN
THEOLOGY IN ARABIC

THE GENRES AND STRATEGIES
OF CHRISTIAN DISCOURSE
IN THE WORLD OF ISLAM

The Genres of Christian Arabic Theology

One can discern a theological development in the works of the Christian authors who wrote in Arabic in the early Islamic period. This development comes into view in the ways in which these writers articulated their Christian doctrines in parallel, almost in tandem, with the evolving patterns of Islamic religious thought in the same period. The same might be said of many of the works of the contemporary Jewish writers whom we have mentioned. In this context, Christians sought to defend the reasonableness of their distinctive doctrines in terms of the same religious idiom as that employed by their Muslim interlocutors and counterparts, who, in accord with the teachings of the Qurân, often rejected the central Christian doctrines. In contrast with the previously standard modes of Christian discourse in Greek or Syriac, for example, the Arabic-speaking Christian writers often built their arguments on ways of thinking that the Muslims had initially elaborated in view of commending their own faith in the Qurân and in the traditions of the prophet Muhammad. As a result, the discourse of the Christian apologists in Arabic presents a conceptual profile that cannot easily be mistaken for Christian theology in any other community of Christian discourse. For example, their approach to the reasoned articulation in Arabic of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation involved the effort to express the former in terms of the contemporary Islamic discussion of the ontological status of the divine attributes, the Qurân's "beautiful names of God," and the latter in terms of the Islamic discussion of the signs of authentic prophecy and true religion. This theological development be-
genres of Christian apology in the world of Islam are already in evidence. One may categorize them under the following four descriptive headings: "the monk in the Emir's majlis," "the master and the disciple," the apostolical, and the formally systematic treatise.

The Monk in the Emir's Majlis

Three of these texts, excluding Theodor bar Köni's work, are the earliest examples of a distinct genre of Christian apologetic literature, which, in Arabic, became the most popular of all the apologetic genres: "The Monk in the Emir's Majlis." Typically, as the name implies, the texts in this genre feature accounts of monks or other ecclesiastics summoned into the presence of Muslim authorities and required to defend their faith in open debate with a caliph, an emir, and/or a phalanx of Muslim scholars. The narrator tells the story of their encounter and details the course of the conversations. In the case of Patriarch John I and the Muslim emir, the narrative is in the form of a letter, sent as if from the patriarch himself by a member of his entourage. It tells of the occasion, on Sunday, May 9, probably in the year 644, when the patriarch was allegedly summoned to appear before the emir 'Umayr ibn Sa'd al-Anṣārī to answer questions about Christian faith and practice. According to the narrator, the letter was composed in the first place to allay fears in the Christian community about the patriarch's safety. But there are other issues as well, including an intra-Christian agenda. For example, the narrator says that the patriarch spoke to the emir in behalf of all the Christians, not just for his own Jacobite community; even the Melkites are said to have prayed for him. What is more, although the encounter between the patriarch and the emir is said to have taken place at a very definite time in the first half of the seventh century, all indications are that the text, in the form in which we have it, was written in the early eighth century. This circumstance calls attention to the fact that the narrative has a literary and social function of its own, independent of its historical point of reference. It is an apologetic text, intended for circulation in the Syriac-speaking, Christian community. In its narrative the reader is invited to participate imaginatively with the narrator in a scenario into which a Christian has been brought to give an account of himself and his way of faith, both to himself and to an inquisitive, domineering Muslim, in a context that mirrors with some verisimilitude the very religiously challenging milieu in which he, the reader, actually lives. The


narrative details furnish this scenario of verisimilitude; its social function, in the context of the story's composition, extends beyond a simply documentary purpose to an exemplary one.

The same can be said with even more confidence about the account of the debate between the monk of Bēt Ḥallē and a Muslim notable. In this narrative the background details are kept to a minimum; there is no real chance of learning anything concrete about the interlocutors, other than the fact that it is surely plausible that a monk in a monastery in the environs of Antioch in the first third of the eighth century could well have had the opportunity to get into a conversation about religion with a disabled Muslim soldier. In the narrative the emphasis is on the debate itself, on the topics that two men are said to have discussed, and on the fact that in each instance the monk could give such satisfactory answers to the Muslim Arab's questions that were it not for social pressure, as the narrative has him say in conclusion, the Muslim would have become a Christian. The topics are those that would be the standard ones in Christian apologetic literature produced in the Islamic world for the next millennium and more. They include: the faith of Abraham; the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation; the Christian estimation of the status of Muhammad as a prophet, and of the Qur'an as a revelatory scripture; the Christian practice of venerating crosses and icons; and how to recognize the true religion. The action in the story is in the monk's deft handling of the Muslim's questions; he always scores the debater's point, and thus shows the Siraic reader how the religious challenge of Islam in arguments about religion can best be met.10

In Patriarch Timothy's account of his conversations with the caliph al-Mahdi, the same topics are discussed. The patriarch himself composed the letter in which the account is given, addressed to his friend Sergius. He was in the habit of writing public letters of this sort; one might even call them letter-treatises, the epistolary conventions being just that, a matter of conventional literary style.11 The reader is invited to observe the patriarch giving brilliantly satisfactory answers to the Islamic challenge to Christian teachings in a way that not only commended the veracity of the Christian doctrines and practices, but did so in a style of writing that subtly discounted the claims of Islam in seemingly inoffensive language as well. It is no wonder that this text circulated in the Christian communities for centuries in its own language, in its entirety and also in an abbreviated form, and eventually in Arabic translation.12

Fig. 3. Ibn Bakhtishū' and the Emir Sa'id-Din in Discussion
In the thirteenth-century Arabic manuscript containing the work by Ibn Bakhtishū' called *Animals and Their Uses*, the illustration portrays the author, who was from a famous Christian family, in a colloquy with his Muslim patron. Such conversations between the members of the intelligentsia of the several religious communitiess were common in Abbasid Baghdad. (British Library Oriental Manuscript 2984, thirteenth-century Arabic, ff. 101v–102. Arabic translation of Aristotle's "Animals and Their Uses," by permission of the British Library.)

From the ninth century onward, the genre "The Monk in the Emir's Majlis" flourished, especially in Arabic. One finds the names of some of the most well-known Arab Christian apologists associated with it. In this connection, after the account of Patriarch Timothy's encounter with al-Mahdi, one thinks most immediately of the dialogue of the monk Abraham of Tiberias with the emir 'Abd ar-Rahmān al-Hāshimi in Jerusalem around the year 820,13 of the story of the debate of Theodore Abū Qurrah (ca. 755–

13 See Giacinto Balus Maruzzo, *Le dialogue d'Abraham de Tébériade avec 'Abd al-Rahman*
seems to have had its widest circulation, the central scenario of the catechizing of Muhammad by the monk is enhanced, in line, it seems, with the heightened interest in debate and apologetics among Arabic-speaking Christians from the ninth century onward. The point of the narrative is to maintain that in its original form, the Qur’an, as Bahira is supposed to have taught it to Muhammad, proclaimed the truth, as Christians see it, about all the issues in controversy between Muslims and Christians. According to the story, Jews and others subsequently corrupted this true Islamic scripture into the form in which the Islamic community now actually has the Qur’an. In the narrative the monk is the principal character who artfully commends the truths of Christianity. In this way his role approximates that of the principal characters in the works that more properly compose the apologetic genre, “the Monk in the Emer’s Majlis.”

Questions and Answers

Theodore bar Koni (fl. ca. 792) seems to have been the first Syriac writer to employ the genre, “the Master and his Disciple,” in a Christian apologetic work written in response to the religious challenge of Islam. At the heart of the genre is the “Question and Answer” style of textual presentation. In time to come the literary conventions of this scholarly style would contribute much to the development of the formalities of the Christian and Islamic science of kalām, the systematic discipline of interreligious disputations in Arabic.

Bar Koni used this “Question and Answer” style throughout his summary presentation of the doctrines of the so-called Nestorians, the ecclesiastical community we now call the Assyrian Church of the East, in the book he entitled simply Scholion. In it he included a chapter, chapter 10, specifically dedicated to the apology for Christianity in response to questions posed by a would-be Muslim. In the preface of the chapter, Bar Koni explained his choice of genre in the chapter this way: “Although

On this theme see Griffith, “The Qur’an in Arab Christian Texts.”


it is a full refutation against the ḥanfī,23 and a ratification of the faith, we are putting it in questions [and answers] according to our custom in the whole book; the student takes the part of the ḥanfī, and the teacher the part of the Christians.24

Within the framework of the questions and answers in this “Master” and “Disciple” scheme, Bar Koni discusses the principal topics of controversy between Christians and Muslims, beginning with Christian usages that have a public face, such as the rite of Baptism, the Eucharist, and the practice of venerating the cross. Then he moves on to the doctrines that are always at issue, the Trinity and the Incarnation. The Master’s answers to the Disciple’s questions are clever defenses of the doctrines and practices under challenge. The persuasive quotients of the arguments that are advanced are vouched for in the conclusion, where the Disciple/Muslim is made to declare: “Even though I believe that these things are so, I cannot abandon the tradition (maslihnāshād) that I hold and become a convert because I am ashamed of the reproach which is in human disgrace.”25

This Question and Answer format went on to become quite popular among later Arabic-speaking Christian apologists, even when they dispensed with the literary argumentum personae of the more popular Master and Disciple dialogues and adopted a very systematic, almost academic tone. An example of this genre in one stage of its evolution may be seen in the Question and Answer dialogue included in chapter 18 in the comprehensive, apologetic work in Arabic I call the Summa Theologiae Arabicae; its given title is: “Summary of the Ways of Faith in the Trinity of God and in the Incarnation of God the Word from the Pure Virgin Mary.”26 The table of contents of this work gives the following description of the chapter:

In chapter eighteen, in our answer to their questions to us about the Trinity, about Christ, our Lord, and his incarnation, about baptism,

25 Ibid., 383.

ablations, marriage, and the rest of their questions about those features of Christianity concerning which we are in disagreement with them, we have cited from their own theology (kalām) and descriptions (sifāt) of Christ, our Lord, what will give the believers the advantage over them in their questions to them—to the effect that Christ is God, the Word, the uncreated Creator of creation; he is prior to the worlds (ʾālamān), and his origin is not from the Virgin Mary.27

The text is disposed in the form of thirty-four questions, to which the writer gives answers along the lines set forth in the paragraph just quoted. One notices the author’s avowed intention to quote from Islamic sources in his text, thereby making a bid for credibility in the interreligious context. The popular character of the discourse is still evident, even though the “dialogue” has been included as a chapter in a much more systematic work. But it is noteworthy that in fact this composition circulated independently of the Summa Theologiae Arabicae in several other manuscripts.28 Among the many unpublished Arab Christian manuscripts there are yet other examples of texts in this genre awaiting study and publication. A good case in point is a work contained in a twelfth-century Sinai manuscript, purporting to be a monk’s replies to a Muslim shaykh’s questions about the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, which the Muslim poses after having read a work titled simply “Refutation of Christians” (ar-ridād al-ʿāli al-nassūr). As the title paragraph announces, the work is presented as a reply to questions put to a priest-mend by a Muslim shaykh in Jerusalem, and it is titled, Questions and Answers, Rational and Divine (masāʾil wa n-iyībāb allaqiyyāt wa ilāhiyyāt).29

By the first half of the ninth century this genre of apologetic literature had become highly developed among the Christians who were participating with Muslim intellectuals in the ʿilm al-kalām, or the science of discussing about religion. A good example of it may be seen in the work called Kīthā al-mašīʿī al-ṣ-aʿībāb, the “Book of Questions and Answers,” by the Nestorian writer of the ninth century, Ammār al-ʾBaṣṭī.30 As the title indicates, the substance of the work is a sequence of questions

(masā'il) and answers (ajwībāh), which are arranged numerically under four topical chapter headings (maqālāt). But the questions and answers themselves are not now disposed in the text according to the old Erota-
pokrisis style of the Master and Disciple dialogues. Rather, they are phrased in the conditional style familiar from Islamic kalam texts. Here the “question” is the protasis of the statement, and the “answer” is its apodosis, for example, “If someone says (in qāla qā‘ilun) or asks (alala sā‘ilun) such and such, we say (qulna) thus and so.” With this device Ammār proceeds to develop his argument in defense of Christian doctrines in a system of consecutive dilemmas designed to thwart the views of his adversaries. Ammār introduces the Kṣaḥ al-masā‘il wa l-ajwībāh with a preface that is in the form of a prayer for the reigning caliph, whom he does not name, and for himself, that he might accomplish the task before him. His view of the caliph’s responsibilities, as revealed in the preface, is instructive. The “Commander of the Faithful” (amīr al-mu‘minīn), as the Muslims customarily called the caliph, is the one who in their view has the care of God’s religion. Ammār says that his role in religion is:

To exert an effort to strengthen it, to certify the knowledge of it, to set up the argument (al-buṣjah) against those who disclaim it, or deny it, or differ from it, or turn away from it . . . so that he may thereby encourage the Muslims, hold them together, scrutinize their opinions, exercise discernment, in the balance of the mind with which God has graced him, when something comes to his ears which departs from their doctrine, or the meanings of their arguments.31

Ammār prays that in his own weakness and deficiency in the face of the task before him, God will encourage him “to attempt that for which my ability is too little, before which my power of reflection falls short of the burden that has been put upon me in this matter, to bring it to completion for the amīr al-mu‘minīn.”32 It is noteworthy that Ammār supposes that the caliph’s writ extends to a concern for the right exposition of the truths of religion as set out by a Christian. Then Ammār states the purpose for the composition of his book. He says:

What I have set out upon in this book, God strengthen and aid the amīr al-mu‘minīn, is the advancement of argumentation concerning the Creator, be He blessed and exalted; a statement concerning the atestation of the oneness of His lordship, praise and glory be to Him, and holy be His names; the establishment of an argument against those who deny Him; and, in behalf of His economy (lisāhibīrus), the endorsement of a proof, the truthfulness of which cannot be refuted.

31 Hayek, Ammār al-Hasrī, 93-94.
32 Ibid., 94.

and a process of reasoning (qiyās), the verity of which cannot be invalidated.33

If the reader did not know otherwise, thus far he would certainly think that the author of this piece was a Muslim. Michel Hayek, the text’s modern editor, argues that Ammār’s prefatory dedication of his work to the caliph, as if in composing it he were complying with an official request, was a ploy on the author’s part “to assure himself of a captatio benevolentiae from the Muslim reader.”34 But, since such dedications were conventional also in the works of Muslim scholars, one may just as well understand it to be an intentional bid on Ammār’s part to be taken seriously as a participant in the ongoing dialogue of the mutakallimūn of his time, the Arabic-speaking Muslim and Christian controversialists concerned with defending religious credibility. One gathers as much from his statement of the book’s purpose. His concern with demonstrating the existence and oneness of the Creator, along with the presentation of arguments geared to refute “deniers,” certainly accords with similar concerns on the part of contemporary Muslim controversialists. It is only when he comes to his reasoning about God’s economy, as revealed in the sacred scriptures, that Ammār launches into his specifically Christian apology. He attempts to show that the basic Christian doctrines are logically consequent upon the conclusions reached earlier, in the first part of his treatise. There is no reason to doubt that with this methodology, Ammār intended to commend belief in Christianity, in the scholarly idiom of the day, to the intellectuals who were the adepts of the Islamic ikhāt al-kalâm, as well as to those Arabic-speaking Christians who may have been liable to be convinced by Islamic arguments. His work represents the high point of the development of the scholarly, literary genre of the “Master” and his “Disciple,” in the service of Christian apologetics.

The Epistolary Exchange

A very popular genre in Christian apologetics in the Islamic world in early Abbasid times was the epistolary exchange. Typically there is an initial letter in which a Muslim correspondent is represented as calling a Christian to Islam, detailing the reasons why he should consider Islam the true religion; in reply, there follows a text attributed to a Christian correspondent, whose much longer letter defends the veracity of Christian doctrines, and attacks the claims of Islam to be the true religion. The correspondents may be well-known persons in the world of early Islam, or their names may be devised by the authors of such pieces to signify their religious confessions.

33 Ibid., 94 and 95.
34 Ibid., 17.
In either case, it is important to remember that in the forms in which these kinds of texts have come down to us, the letters attributed to both parties may be thought to make up a single apologetic work. In other words, the text may not be the transcript of an actual correspondence, but a unified composition, perhaps based on the report of an alleged correspondence between the parties.

"Three such epistolary exchanges in the Christian Arabic repertoire have received much scholarly attention in modern times. They are: the correspondence between the Byzantine emperor Leo III (r. 717–41) and the caliph 'Umar II (r. 717–20); 28 the correspondence between the Muslim character 'Abd Allāh ibn Ismā'īl al-Hāshimi and the Christian character 'Abd al-Masīḥ ibn Iṣḥāq al-Khādījī; 29 and the correspondence between a Muslim astronomer at the caliphal court in Baghdad, Abū ʿIsā Yahyā ibn al-Munajjim, and two well-known Christian scholars and courtiers, Hunayn ibn Iṣḥāq and Qaṭṭā ibn Lāqā. 30 There is also the case of the letter of the caliph Ḥārūn ar-Rāshīd (r. 786–809) to the Byzantine emperor Constantine VI (r. 780–97) summoning him to Islam, but no reply from the emperor seems to have survived. 31 Of the three complete exchanges of letters, by far the most influential one has been the so-called al-Hāshimi/ al-Khādījī correspondence.

'Abd Allāh's letter on the one hand is a very summary statement of the Islamic creed as expressed in the shahādah, the formula of faith in the one God and in the prophethood of Muhammad, along with the other four of the five pillars of Islam. 'Abd al-Masīḥ's reply on the other hand is a long defense of the standard Christian doctrines and practices, according to the customary outline of topics in the more popular apologies for Christianity, along with a vigorous polemical against the Qurʾān, the prophet Muhammad, and the teaching and practices of Islam. The two letters, circulated as units of a single work, the correspondences are presented as members of the

28 See Jean-Marie Gaudeul, La correspondance de 'Umar et Leon (vers 900), Studi arabo-islamici del PISAI, no. 6 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica, 1995). See also the discussion and further bibliography in Hoyland, Seeing Islam, 490–501.


The caliph al-Ma'mūn was a well-known sponsor of free interreligious debates; for this reason among others he was often highly esteemed by Christians in the caliphate and a tradition even grew up among them that he was a crypto-Christian. See Mark Swanson, "The Christian of the 'Abbasid Tradition," in Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule: Church Life and Scholarship in Abbasid Iraq, ed. David Thomas, 63–92, The History of Christian-Muslim Relations, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2003).


has been used in English and French translations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by Christian missionaries in the West seeking to convert Muslims. By its very popularity it has somewhat overshadowed the other works in this genre of apologetic writing, a circumstance that should not mask the fact that the genre was a popular one among Christians living in the Islamic world from the ninth century onward.

Unlike the al-Fāhūmi/al-Kindī correspondence, the other two works mentioned in this category, the Leo/Amr correspondence, and the correspondence of al-Munajjim with Ebnayn ibn Iṣḥaq and Qasī ibn Lūqā, involve historical characters. Nevertheless, as the texts have circulated in the Christian communities they have taken on a literary life of their own, independently of any actual events that may have inspired their composition in the first place. In them the letter (as-risālah), an important literary genre in its own right in Islamic Arabic, became an apologetic treatise in the literary format of an epistolary exchange, one that made its bid for verisimilitude in the world of Islam by reason of the fact that in Islamic history there was already the literary precedent, recorded in the strata of biographical literature, that in his day Muhammad had himself provided for letters to be sent out by messengers from him to Roman, Persian, and Abyssinian leaders, among others, summoning them to Islam.43

Already long before the rise of Islam, in Greek and Syriac texts among others, it had become conventional to use the formality of letter writing in composing the prefaces to treatises on a wide variety of subjects. Typically, the writer would address his treatise to someone who is represented as having written to him requesting information on the subject to be discussed. After modestly protesting his liabilities, and soliciting prayers, the writer would then carry on with the treatise. It was a convention that could easily be combined with many other literary genres, including all the ones being discussed in this chapter.44 What makes it distinctive in the present context is that the claim of letters actually sent and received, to or from known or totally fictional characters, is an important literary feature of the apologetic narrative of the genre I am calling here the “Epistolary Exchange.”


The Systematic Treatise

While the most well known and colorful works of Christian apologetics written in Syriac and Arabic in the Islamic world were anonymous and composed in the literary genres already discussed, the major apologists and theologians whose names we mentioned in the previous chapter more often wrote tracts of a less dramatic and a more expository character. They were sometimes letter-treatises, with prefaces of the kind described above, called ṣawādī in Syriac, or risālah in Arabic. Alternatively, many of them bear the simple names, “treatise,” or “tract” (māʾirā in Syriac, maymar/minar, or simply kitāb or muqallah in Arabic), and they discuss all the topics at issue between Christians and Muslims. As often as not they are exercises in Chris- tian kalām, the characteristically Islamic style of religious discourse in Arabic, in which the authors make a bid to defend Christian beliefs and practices utilizing the apologetic conventions in which the Muslim controversy of the early Islamic period were in the habit of commending Islamic faith and life. Alternatively, some of these Christian writers, as we shall see, proceeded in a more philosophical and formally logical mode, again, in the manner of the philosophers in the world of Islam.

The earliest Christian apologetic treatise of this sort is a now anonymous one, called by its modern editor, "On the Trinity Nature of God."46 It was written in Arabic in the eighth century, most probably around the year AD 755.47 It is an essay in Arabic in which the author proposes to defend the truth of Islamic influence on style.


47 There is some scholarly disagreement about the date. See Mark N. Swanson, "Some Considerations for the Dating of Ḥi ṣawādī Allāh al-wāḥīd (Sinai Ar. 154) and Al-‘Imām’s waḥīd al-bā‘id (London, British Library or 4950)," in Actes du de Congrès international d'études arabes chrétiennes, ed. Samir Khalil Samir, published in Parole de l'Orient 18 (1993): 117–41. A line in the text says, "If this religion were not true from God it would not have stood so unshakably for seven hundred and forty-six years" (Sinai Arabic MS 154, f. 110r). Swanson convincingly makes the point that the author would most likely have counted the years according to the Alexandrian world era. But he then goes on to speculate that the lapse of 746 years should be counted from the year of Christ’s crucifixion, which theologically might have been taken by the writer to mark the end of Judaism and the beginning of Christianity. Accordingly, Swanson dates the text to the year AD 785, or 746 years from the crucifixion, which, according to the computation of the Alexandrian world era, would have taken place in the year AD 42. It seems more likely to me that whatever his theological view may have been, the writer would have meant to compute 746 years from the beginning of the calendar sequence of Christian years, which begins with the Incarnation in all systems. According to the computation of the Alexandrian world era, the Incarnation would have happened in the year AD 9. Therefore, in my opinion, one should add 746 years to 9, in order to ac-
the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation on the basis of scriptural testimonies, including the Qur'an. At the beginning of the work the author wrote:

We do not separate God from his Word and his Spirit. We worship no other god with God in his Word and his Spirit. God showed his power and his light in the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms and the Gospel, that God and his Word and his Spirit are one God and one Lord. We will make this clear, if God wills, in these revealed scriptures, to anyone who wants understanding, [who] perceives things and recognizes the truth, and opens his breast to believe in God and his scriptures.  

Another work, written in Syriac, which may well be the second oldest Christian apologetic treatise from the early Islamic period, takes a completely different approach. It is a letter-treatise, written by Patriarch Timothy I in the year 780/1, and addressed to a man named Sergius, the future metropolitan of Elam. In it the patriarch defends the veracity of the doctrines of the Trinity and of the Incarnation, and justifies several Christian religious practices, on the basis of the proper definition of philosophical terms and the deployment of Aristotelian logic. In fact, he says that in the letter he is reporting the gist of his conversations on these matters with an Aristotelian philosopher whom he met at the caliph's court.  

The earliest writer of systematic, Christian apologetic treatises in Arabic whose name we know is Theodore Abū Qurrah (ca. 755-830). He flourished in the first decades of the ninth century and wrote some sixteen treatises in Arabic on topics of Christian theology, with Muslims always among his silent dialogue partners. His purpose was to explain the tenets of Melkite theology in the Arabic idiom of the contemporary discussions about religion among the Muslim maktūbat, as well as to defend the proposition that Christianity is the true religion. In the first generation of Christian theology in Arabic, Abū Qurrah was joined by fellow Melkite writers, such as the author of the now anonymous Summa Theologicae Arabicae, and Peter of Bayt Ra’s, author of a long apologetic work called Kitāb al-burḥān or “Book of Proof.” Among the Jacobites the first apologist to write treatises in Arabic was Ḥabīb ibn Khālid Abū Ra‘īrah, a contemporary and debating partner of Theodore Abū Qurrah. His works include defenses of the Jacobite Christology of Severus of Antioch (ca. 465-538) against the attacks of the Melkites, as well as arguments in behalf of the doctrines of the Trinity and of the Incarnation against the challenges of Islam. In the Nestorian community, after Patriarch Timothy I, whose works have been discussed above, the most notable apologist and theologian, also mentioned earlier, was ‘Abba al-Basīrī, who flourished in the ninth century. In addition to the Kitāb ma‘āl wa l-a‘jūbih, which we have already discussed, ‘Abba al-Basīrī also wrote a very closely reasoned tract on the discernment of the true religion called, like the comparable work of Peter of Bayt Ra’s, Kitāb al-burḥān or “Book of Proof.”

For the later generations of apologists, it will be sufficient for the present purpose simply to mention some of their names. A number of them are immediately recognizable by reason of their major contributions to the intellectual life of the early Abbāsid caliphate. Among them were Isḥāq Ibn al-Kaḥšāb (d. 872), author of a popular treatise, “On the Unity and Trinity of God”; Ḥunayn ibn Iṣḥāq (d. 873), well known for his role in the translation of Greek philosophical and scientific texts into Arabic; Yūhān ibn Ḍa‘ī (d. 974), a Jacobite from Taqrit, who was both a famous logician and a formidable apologist for Christianity; and ‘Abba ibn al-Muqaffā‘ (d. 1000), the first Copit whose name we know who wrote Christian theology in Arabic. Elias of Nisibis (d. ca. 1049), a controversialist whose works

54 See Bo Holmberg, A Treatise on the Unity and Trinity of God by Isḥāq Ibn al-Kaḥšāb (d. 873) (Lund, Sweden: Phus Utra, 1989).
57 For discussion and bibliography, see Sidney H. Griffith, “The Kitāb Miḥālī al-‘Adī of
were widely distributed in the Christian communities in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and Paul of Antioch, a twelfth-century Melkite bishop whose efforts to defend Christianity and its teachings on the basis of texts cited from the Qur’an elicited a strong Islamic reaction. Many more names could be mentioned, but perhaps these will suffice to call to mind the range of works produced by Christian apologists in the Islamic world in the Middle Ages. The enterprise reached its apogee, as we mentioned in the previous chapter, in Egypt in the thirteenth century, with the activities of the remarkable āṣāf family of scholars who worked in Ayyubid times not only to produce their own treatises but also to compile collections of the works of many of the earlier apologists and theologians who wrote in Arabic, from all the church communities.

The Apologetic Agenda

The apologetic agenda for Christian controversialists in the Islamic world was largely set in response to the challenges to Christian faith voiced by Muslims in the early Islamic period, as they are now found recorded in two kinds of early Islamic texts: first, the Qur’an, and second, in the traditions of the prophet’s biography and the early literature pertinent to the establishment of Islam as the religion of a new community, the “community of believers” (al-umma). It is particularly important in this connection to take account of the issues that emerged in the project to define the biography of Muhammad the prophet, from the time of Muhammad Ibn Ishaq (d. 768), whose name is associated with the first systematic efforts in this enterprise, to that of ‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām (d. 834), whose recension of Ibn Ishaq’s biography of Muhammad gained almost canonical status among Muslims under the title Sirāt rasūl Allāh. The sixty some years during which this work was coming to its maturity correspond to the years during which the Christian apologetic undertaking in the Islamic world was finding its first expression, as we have seen.

As Uri Rubin has recently shown, the prophetic profile of Muhammad that emerges from the fully developed Sirāh, or biography of the prophet, rests basically on an Islamic adaptation of the scriptural themes of attestation, preparation, revelation, persecution, and salvation, as they are found in the biblical profiles of the prophetic figures in the contemporary reli-

gious discourse of Judaism and Christianity. Moreover, in his study of this same Sirāh literature almost twenty years earlier John Wansbrough had already shown that the Islamic development of these themes, in the period he so aptly styled The Sectarian Milieu, can be seen to express the inner Islamic, apologetic, and polemical response to the religious claims of Judaism and Christianity, as they would have been marshaled against nascent Islam at that time. In this connection Wansbrough identified a dozen or so “polemical topoi,” the origin of which, he said, “was interconfessional polemic and . . . their selection was imposed upon the early Muslim community from outside.” The same may be said, mutatis mutandis, of both the topics and the modes of expression in Arabic of Jewish and Christian theology, apologetics, and polemics in the early Islamic period. One may think of the situation of the three Arabic-speaking religious communities in the early Islamic period as one in which mutually reactive thinking was the intellectual order of the day.

For convenience’s sake one may list the topics of Christian theology in Arabic under two headings: topics developed in response to the teachings of the Qur’an, as they were interpreted by the Muslim muḥaddithun, the exeges of the Islamic scripture, and systematized by the mu’tazalūn, the Muslim controversial theologians; and the topics designed to rebut the claims of the Islamic prophethood, as it was elaborated in the Sirāh literature just described. In general, the more popular works of Christian apologetics featured a heavier concentration on topics under the latter heading (i.e., the Islamic prophethood), while the authors of the systematic treatises tended to concentrate their attention on the defense of the Christian doctrines directly challenged by the Qur’an.

Responding to the Qurʾān’s Critique

The principal Christian articles of faith directly challenged by the Qurʾān are the doctrine of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Virtually every Christian theological or apologetic work written in Syriac or Arabic in the early

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62 Wansbrough, The Sectarian Milieu, 14. For the list of topoi, see 40–42.
63 For a systematic survey of the topics of controversy and the Christian response to them in the broad range of Arabic Christian literature in the early Islamic period, see the comprehensive study of Paul Khoury, Maṣūmiyyaw para servir a l’étude de la controverse théologique islamico-chrétiennne de langue arabe du VIIIe au XIIe siècle, 3 vols., Religionenwissenschaftliche Studien, 11/1–3, 2, 3 (Würzburg, Germany: Echter Verlag, and Altenberge, Germany: Teubner-Verlag, 1989, 1991, 1997).

66 See Šami, Pou et cœure en Irak.
67 See Paul Khoury, Paul d’Anversch, évangile méthiste de Sidon (XIIe s.), Recherches, t. 34 (Leir: Imprimerie Catholique, 1964).
Islamic period included a defense of these doctrines. Often the agenda was broadened to include such other issues as the authenticity of the canonical Gospels, the doctrine of the freedom of the will in moral choices, and issues in Christian life and worship, such as the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, the veneration of the cross, and the holy icons.

The authors of the systematic, apologetic treatises typically approached the discussion of the Trinity and the Incarnation in two ways: they argued either from scripture, or from reason;64 sometimes they employed a combination of the two strategies. But in these texts there is often a marked preference for arguments from reason. In one text, for example, now preserved only in Greek, Theodore Abū Qurrah recalled the challenge of his Muslim adversary as follows: "Persuade me not from your Isaia or Matthew, for whom I have not the slightest regard, but from compelling, acknowledged, common conceptions."

Always the efforts of the apologists were to show that the standard Christian doctrines reflect the teachings of the uncorrupted scriptures66 and that the dogmatic formulas used by Christians were not really vulnerable to the charges leveled against them by Muslim polemicists, such as the charge that they are not scriptural but the product of church councils held under the auspices of the Byzantine emperors.67 Special efforts were expended to find an appropriate Arabic vocabulary in terms of which to translate the technical expressions of Christian theology as they had been deployed earlier in Greek and Syriac. This enterprise often involved the further effort to define certain Arabic terms in a technical way for the purpose of theological discussion, even when the ordinary connotations of the terms in common Arabic-speaking usage militated against the senses intended in doctrinal contexts.68 This was to remain a major problem for Christian theology in Arabic; by the time of the earliest Arabic-speaking Christian apologists, all of the religious vocabulary in Arabic had already been co-opted by Islamic religious discourse, which often systematically excluded the very meanings wanted by Christians, or at the very least Muslims Islamicized the terms in a way contrary to Christian thinking.

In defense of the doctrine of the Trinity, most Christian apologists who wrote in Arabic adopted the strategy first encountered in the Greek works of St. John of Damascus.69 who situated the discussion in the context of the debate soon to be underway among Muslim controversialists, the mutakallimin, about the ontological status of the divine attributes (al-ṣifāt Allāh) as expressed in the "beautiful names" (al-ḥasābāt al-burāq) of God culled from the Qurʾān.70 Typically this involved the Christian claim that all of the attributes of essence and action, as both Christians and Muslims distinguished them, can reasonably be shown to presume the presence of three irreducible, substantial attributes: "existing" (masjīd), "living" (huṣn), and "speaking" (nāšīf);72 on which all the other attributes can then logically be argued to depend. The apologists then proposed that these three substantial attributes indicate the three persons or hypostases (gūdūl/ugīnūn) of the one God, who is one in ṣuṣa (jawhur) as the Christians teach, and three in the divine persona (parāpō/yaṣṭīf, ʿibādā), Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, of which, according to the Christians, the Bible so clearly speaks.73 Different Arabic-speaking theologians approached this discussion in different ways, often favoring different Arabic terms as equivalents for the traditional Christian technical vocabulary, but all of them inevitably employed the basic strategy of presenting the doctrine of the Trinity in the

66 There are the two modes of argument that both Muslims and Christians recognized. Theodore Abū Qurrah, for example, actually distinguished three modes of inquiry: from the scriptures, from the works of the traditional teachers, and from reason. See the detailed discussion in Sidney H. Griffith, "The Controversial Theology of Theodore Abū Qurrah: A Methodological, Comparative Study in Christian Arabic Literature" (PhD diss., Catholic University of America, 1978), 66–135.

67 Theodore Abū Qurrah, Greek Opusculum 24, PG, vol. 97, col. 355B.

68 Muslim scholar, following the prompting of the Qurʾān, maintained that the scriptures as the Jews and Christians actually have them have been distorted and corrupted. See Jean-Marie Gaudreault and Robert Caspar, "Testes de la tradition musulmane concernant le tabarij (fausisification) des écritures," Islamocristiana 6 (1980): 61–104. See also Sidney H. Griffith, "Arguing from Scripture: The Bible in the Christian/Muslim Encounter in the Middle Ages," in Scriptures and Pluralism: Reading the Bible in the Religiously Plural Worlds of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, ed. Thomas Heffernan and Thomas Burman, 29–58, Studies in the History of Christian Traditions, vol. 123 (Leiden: Brill, 2006).


68 By way of illustration, one need only mention the term jawhur, used by philosophers and theologians to translate the Greek term ousia, but which in Arabic inevitably suggests a concrete nugget like a jewel, or an atom. On this problem, see Sidney H. Griffith, "Theology and the Arab Christian: The Case of the 'Melkite' Creed," in A Faithful Presence: Essays for Kenneth Creagh, ed. David Thomas, 184–200 (London: Mowbraya, 2005).


72 Different Christian authors at different times and places used different vocabulary to identify the three substantial attributes. See Khoury, Matières pour servir à l'étude de la controverse théologique, vol. 2, esp. 13–113.

context of the Islamic discussion of the ontological status of the divine attributes. This approach, while not totally unknown in earlier Christian discourse, nevertheless retained the stamp of the Islamic milieu in which it was articulated.

Often in the more systematic treatises the apologists embedded this kind of argumentation in the larger context of a theory of human knowledge and a theology that shared all the characteristics of a typical exercise in Islamic kalām. It can be seen that in this way the intentions of the Christian writers were to commend the credibility of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, and other doctrines as well, in the very idiom of the Islamic religious discourse of their day. In this novel form of discourse traditional Christian Trinitarian theology, originally articulated in Greek or Syriac, came to be translated and transposed into the Arabic discourse of the intellectual world of Islam, in a design and vocabulary very different from that of the Patristic era and largely unfamiliar to Christians outside of the Islamic world. It is for this reason that in modern times some Arabic-speaking Christian theologians in Egypt have called into question the authenticity of the development of doctrine that took place in the Islamic milieu, and they have proposed a return to the traditional Christian discourse of the patristic era.75

Responding to the Claims of Islamic Prophetology

In the religious literature of the early Islamic period, Muslim scholars elaborated a Qurʾān-based history of salvation that enabled the controversialists, the mustahallimin of their community, to develop an apologetic line of argument in defense of the true prophethood of Muḥammad based on what they called the daʿāʾ ilā an-nuṣurwah, or the "indications of prophecy." In the context of the controversy with Christian apologists, the claims of this "prophetology" weremarshaled in arguments about the identity of the true religion. The topics that were always included under this heading were the integrity of the scriptures; the teachings about God and the messengers who claimed to have been sent by God; the signs by which the messengers might be recognized; the religious practices and the religious traditions of the followers of the

true religion, such as the direction they faced when at prayer; the moral teachings of the messengers; the character of the rewards and punishments awaiting human beings at the end of this life; and the true status of Muḥammad, the Qurʾān, and Islam.

This list of topics can be found in almost all of the more popular genres of Christian apologetics in Syriac and Arabic written in the early Islamic period. While it is evident that Christian apologists and polemists were engaged in rejecting the claims of Muslims under all of these headings, and that they were bent on proving that Christianity alone is the true religion that promotes the true teaching on all of these subjects, the list of topics itself is a distinctly Islamic one. This outline of topics, and the prophetology on which it rests, would not be found in a Christian apologetic work outside of the context of the dialogue with Islam. Two issues in particular are worth special attention in connection with this topical outline.

The first issue is that almost all of the Christian apologists argued that the decisive factor in proof of the claim of Christianity to be the true religion is the attestation provided by the evidentiary miracles worked in testimony to its veracity by Jesus of Nazareth, and those worked in Jesus’s name by his apostles and disciples. The apologists came back to this theme again and again, and they often contrasted it with the situation in Islam. A number of them even quote the Qurʾān passages that seem to dissociate Muḥammad himself from any claim to be a Thaumorropogos, and they attack the Islamic appeal to the miraculous inimitability of the Qurʾān (ṣīḥat al-ṣuwar), sometimes going to great lengths in the attempt to demonstrate that the text of the Islamic scripture is anything but inimitable, and claiming greater admiration for other Arabic compositions. It is interesting to observe in this connection that it is precisely in the ninth century, the era of the first appearance of some of the most polemical Christian attacks in Arabic against the Qurʾān, that one finds the earliest systematic development of the doctrine of the miraculous inimitability of the language of the Qurʾān, the ṣīḥat al-ṣuwar, among the Muslim mustahallimin.76

The second issue worth special attention in connection with the Chris-


76 See the discussion in Griffith, "Faith and Reason in Christian Kalām." 78

77 See Swanson, "Are Hypostases Attributes?"
努力来证明，出于伊斯兰神学的考虑，基督教是真正的宗教，是神学的一种，是自己证明它的正确性。这是一种对基督教徒/神学人的努力，试图通过排除伊斯兰教的任何一种信仰来证明真正的宗教，至少是他们自己的满足。这是一种对基督教徒/神学人的特别提到的关心。虽然几个人的基督学家，他们已经提到我们正在讨论的这一段，也许是最具特殊性地表达于‘阿米尔·阿巴斯’在他的“书本的证明”，Kitāb al-

他坚持认为，在这个主题的讨论中，必要性是明显的，即作为标志的宗教真理。他说，

"我们所教的圣人将不得不遵守任何一种的宗教，因为它是建立在世界的证据之上的，所以当他们没有在它的任何一种属性中找到时，这将使它得以建立。"

他列出了七个不名誉的，世界性的动机来宣传一种宗教，它包括了以下几项：刀剑和挑衅（as-ṣarif）、种族歧视（ar-riḍa  wa l-maṣā idin），个人偏好（al-hayūn），部落冲突（as-sawā’），以及许多的法律和实践（as-tarži fi l-ḥamdi）。他和其他的基督教学家争辩道，他们可以合理地认为他们在他们的人民中被鼓励去改变并接受伊斯兰和其他非基督教宗教，提供了一种可能的这种不名誉原因，这些基督教学家认为，没有人可以证明他们在基督教中已经足够善良和真实的基督教徒，或者他们拥有一个真正 colonized religion。即使他们认为他们拥有一个真正 colonized religion，或者他们拥有一个与自然的宇宙相关的宗教，因为他们只被证明是与宇宙相关的人类，而这种人类的宗教可以来证明真宗教。33

一些基督教学家，尤其是著名的作者，如《rīalah》的《al-Kidfi》和其他的《al-Hašimi》的代表，但显然，他们已经证明了这个策略。34

32 Hayek, Ammār al-Baṣrī, 29.
33 See ibid., 30-33.

number of others as well, echoing these same modes of thought argued at a considerable length that by reason of their worldly qualities, Muhammad cannot be considered a prophet, nor can the Qurʾān be esteemed to be a book of divine revelation, nor can Islam be the true religion. These writers present their case as graphically as possible, and they highlight every trait they can portray as morally objectionable from a Christian perspective. Most of the popular works of Christian apologetics and polemics that develop these themes are anonymous. In addition to the al-Hašimi/al-

35 Generally speaking, the works of popular apologetics written in Arabic by Christians, such as the purported transcripts of interviews between monks and emirs, survive in a greater number of manuscript witnesses than do the other, more systematic apologetic and polemical tracts written by Christian authors in Arabic or Syriac in the early Islamic period. It seems clear that the primary intention of the writers of the more popular works was to dissuade their Christian readers from acceding to the ever-present temptation to convert to Islam, and second that they also intended to give these same Christian readers a sense of the superiority of their religion over Islam. As for any potential Muslim readers of their works, the Christian authors' intent must have been to induce a sense of unease about his religion in any one of them who might pick up the work. But this observation brings up the whole issue of the audience for whom the Christian apologetic wrote.

The Audience for Christian Arabic Texts

Broadly speaking, one may think of the audience of the Christian apologists who wrote in the world of Islam as being made up of both Christians and Muslims, and as ranging from the general population of the literate to
the intellectually and socially elite in both communities. The circumstances vary from work to work.

The earliest texts were clearly addressed to the Christian community. Certainly this was the case with works composed in Syriac, which very few if any Muslims would have been prepared to read. As for the works composed in Arabic, by the very nature of the case they would be open to personal attack of any person literate in the Arabic language. But given the preface remarks of many of the authors it is clear that Christians themselves were the primary audience for the apologetic texts, in all the genres. Often the texts are addressed to inquirers whose names are mentioned, or they are presented as reports of how a particular monk or bishop fared when he was interrogated about his religion in an emir's or caliph's majlis. Presumably these works were addressed to the Christian community.

Yet some Christian Arabic texts did find Muslim readers. And the more formal treatises, which deal with philosophical or theological topics, sometimes even elicited a response from a Muslim writer. One recalls, for example, the Mu'tazilite controversialist (mustakallim) Isā ibn Sābiḥ al-Murādī (d. 840), mentioned in the previous chapter, who wrote against Theodore Abū Qurrah,66 of the caliph, probably al-Ma'mūn, to whom 'Amrā al-Baṣrī all but dedicated his Kitāb masā'il wa l-ajwābih67 and one of the mustakallim Abu Hudhayl ibn-Allāh (d. ca. 840), who wrote a tract against 'Amrā al-Baṣrī by name.68 Perhaps the most famous instance of a Christian apologetic work that attracted the attention of Muslim readers is Paul of Antioch's letter-treatise (risālah) to a Muslim friend in Sidon,69 in which the author argues in behalf of the veracity of Christianity from the Qur'ān. No less a figure than Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328), so authoritative a figure among many modern Muslims, wrote his famous work al-Jawāb ar-sabiḥa, "The Right Answer," specifically against an abbreviated form of Paul of Antioch's risālah.70


67 See Haych, 'Amrā al-Baṣrī, 93–94.
69 See Khouz, Paul d'Antioche, 169–87 (French); 59–83 (Arabic).

Clearly, therefore, at least some Muslims took cognizance of Christian apologetic and polemical works. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that Christians themselves were the primary audience for such works. But a consideration of their broader potential audience raises two other issues, one literary and the other historical. The literary question inquires about a given author's intentions in composing his work, how did he put it together in view of his intended audience? The historical question is concerned with what can be learned about the actual relations between Muslims and Christians in the early Islamic period from the works included in these several genres of apologetics and polemics that have been reviewed in this chapter. In other words, do their narratives have a historical fundamentum in re or a basis in real life?

From the literary perspective, one must distinguish between the popular genres of apologetics and the more scholarly exercises in controversial theology, the kāmil texts, and the works of philosophical theology. The latter is instances of a formal, almost academic discourse, in which both Muslims and Christians engaged. While they are dialogical in character, and serious in their apologetic intent, they are didactic and logically systematic in their presentation of material. Their authors do not, by and large, seem to have attempted to engage the reader's imagination; they do not seem to have intended to instill an attitude in the reader, nor to affect his mood, nor to prompt him to a course of action. Rather, with a show of rational demonstration, their purpose was to make an appeal to the authority either of reason or of divine revelation, or both. The authors seem always to have been seriously earnest in their intentions. They wanted to convince their readers of the truth of the matters under discussion as they saw it.

The more popular genres of discourse, in contrast, have about them an air of imaginative engagement, even entertainment. They have serious points to make and important truths to communicate, but they also bespeak an attitude of an assumed superiority, almost in disguise, that they want to suggest to the reader. To wit, Christians really do have the true answers to religious questions, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, and Muslims are somehow radically mistaken. The characters in the narratives of the popular genres of apologetics and polemics are often types, on the order of dramatic personae; they are usually not recognizable personally, but they suggest readily recognizable personae in the society; their names are most often symbolic, even when they are the names of real persons. In the narratives they are playing a role, not representing themselves in any real way. And the role is most often that of a Muslim who cannot be bested in an argument about religion by a Muslim, even by a highly placed person or a well-known scholar. Subliminally, the details of the narratives themselves then suggest the superiority of Christianity to Islam. In the repartee of debate in the narrative the characters being delight to the
reader in their one-upmanship, and in the cleverness and acuity of their responses to provocative questions. If only it were so in real life! But what can be learned from these texts about the conditions of real life in the caliphate? Do these texts reflect it in any significant way? Here we come to the historical questions.

Many modern scholars are skeptical about the idea that there is much of a historical basis for the fictional scenarios of the more popular genres of Christian apologetics in the early Islamic period. For example, Gerrit J. Reinink, in an article considering the Syriac report of the conversation between Patriarch John III and the emir 'Umayr ib Sā'īd mentioned above, says the following:

The oldest examples of Syriac apologetics in response to Islam are not the result of actual Muslim-Christian dialogue or disputation, but have to be considered as literary fictions written by Christians for the members of their own communities, with the purpose of warding off the increasing danger of apostasy. It is an "autochthonous" literature.91

Other scholars have registered similar judgments about the historicity of the encounters between Muslims and Christians that the more popular apologetic works written by Christians in Arabic in the early Islamic period seem to report. At the very least, the more skeptical commentators are prepared to concede only that in some instances there may have been encounters between the Christian spokesman and the Muslim official involved in a given text, but that later writers, mostly now anonymous, have simply used these well-known occasions as settings for their literary exercises in religious apologetics and polemics. What leads scholars to such judgments are a number of factors, chief among them being two considerations: most such narratives were written by unnamed writers long after the events they claim to narrate; and most of them deal with the prophet Muhammad, the Qur'an, and Islam in such a negative and openly polemical way that it hardly seems possible that such statements could ever have been uttered in Arabic in an emir's majlis, or in any other public forum. It is further remarkable that such negative texts by Jews and Christians written in Arabic have circulated at all, let alone seemingly so prolifically, over so many centuries within the world of Islam.92 It all seems so unlikely to modern scholars, given their ideas about what medieval Muslim authorities would or would not tolerate. Moreover, there is scarcely any mention of any of these events in Islamic sources. Nevertheless, when all is said and done, we do have these Christian texts in Arabic and we must come to some understanding about their historical verisimilitude, or lack of it.

In this connection it may serve the historian well to consider the role of the institution of the formal "salon of inquiry" (majlis al-munāṣabah) in Arabic-speaking high society in the early Islamic period, as the conventional setting in the courts of caliphs and emirs for free discussions about religion and many other topics.93 One knows from many reports how popular such sessions were among numerous medieval Muslim scholars and officials. What is more, there are also reports about how some more pious Muslims in those days were themselves shocked and offended when they attended such sessions for the first time. In this connection one should recall the interesting passage from the biographical dictionary of the Andalusī writer Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥumaydi, quoted in the previous chapter, in which the author tells the story of Abū ʿUmar Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Sādī. He visited Baghdad at the end of the tenth century and twice attended sessions of interreligious conversations held at the homes of prominent men. The experience shocked him, and he vowed that he would never attend such sessions again. But the report of the conventions followed in the sessions Abū ʿUmar attended sheds light on the historical circumstances evoked in many of the popular Christian apologetic texts.

Considering such a report, the modern scholar would perhaps be well advised to be cautious in his judgments about what might or might not have been allowed in public scholarly discussions in the world of Islam in medieval Baghdad and elsewhere. The well-known practice of open debate may have provided the real-life basis for many of the literary compositions of the popular Christian apologetics written in Arabic and Syriac in the early Islamic period. Their often undoubtedly fictional narrative, to be successful, would nevertheless seem to have required at least that measure of verisimilitude provided by the evocation of a recognizable social behavior of their own time and place. Incorporating such a scenario, an author could transmit in his narrative the signals his reader would need, successfully to imagine a situation not irrelevant to his own as a Christian in an Islamic society, who wanted to be reassured that while it was not widely recognized, he still might be convinced that his own Christian religion really was the true one, and that it could be shown to be so, even in the idiom of the social conventions of the Arabic-speaking world of Islam.

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92 See Moritz Seidenschmidt, Polemische und apologetische Literatur in arabischer Sprache zwischen Muslimen, Christen und Juden (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1877).

The Profile of Islam in Christian Arabic Texts

The Christian apologetic texts in Syriac and Arabic from the early Islamic period reflect the fact that their authors had a detailed knowledge of the teachings of Islam, the Qur'an, and the hadith literature, as well as of the biography of the prophet, and the history of the caliphate. However, for the most part, the ways in which they used this information, to present a profile of Islam, its institutions and teachings, in a manner that made it particularly vulnerable to Christian polemic, was not exactly to what could reasonably be considered a fair view of Islam on its own terms. At its best Islam was presented in these texts as a teaching "on the way" to the truth, or even as in some way fulfilling some biblical promises. For example, in the account of the monk Abraham's performance in the majlis of the Muslim emir in Jerusalem in the early ninth century, the unknown author says of the Qur'an's claim that Muhammad was the "seal of the prophets" (al-Abrāhīm 33:40): "He is not a prophet (God preserve you); he is only a king with whom God was pleased, by means of whom and in whom God fulfilled his promise to Abraham regarding Ishmael." 994

Christians in the early Islamic period did infrequently spoke of Muhammad as a king pleasing to God for having saved the Arabs from idolatry. The further idea voiced in the passage quoted here, that in the person of Muhammad and in his mission God fulfilled a promise to Abraham in regard to Ishmael (Genesis 17:20), is singular. It shows a deeper sensitivity to Islamic religious claims than these texts normally recognize. It sounds a theme that one does not hear again in so many words in Christian responses to Islam until the interreligious writings of Louis Massignon in the twentieth century. 995

Regarding the person of Muhammad, Patriarch Timothy I was perhaps the most generous of all the Christian apologists. In the Arabic account of his session in the majlis of the caliph al-Mahdi, the patriarch is made to declare:

"Muhammad deserves the praise of all reasonable men because his walk was on the way of the prophets and of the lovers of God. Whereas the rest of the prophets taught about the oneness of God, Muhammad also taught about it. So he too walked on the way of the prophets. Then, just as all the prophets moved people away from evil and sin, and drew them to what is right and virtuous, so also did Muhammad"

As for the Qur'an, again we may quote from the account of Patriarch Timothy's encounter with the caliph. This time we quote from the presumably original Syriac text, where we find the following statement:

"Our King said to me: "Do you believe that our Book was given by God?" And I replied to him: "It is not my business to decide whether it is from God or not. But I will say something of which your majesty is well aware, and that is that all the words of God found in the Torah and in the Prophets, and those of them found in the Gospel and in the writings of the Apostles, have been confirmed by signs and miracles; as to the words of your Book, they have not been corroborated by a single sign or miracle... Since signs and miracles are proofs from the will of God, the conclusion to be drawn from their absence in your Book is well known to your Majesty."

So we see that even the friendliest of Christian apologists who lived in the world of Islam in the early Islamic period stopped short of accepting Muhammad as a prophet in any canonical sense, and of accepting the Qur'an as a canonical book of divine revelation. Nevertheless, the portrait of Islam as it is found in the writings of the Syriac- and Arabic-speaking apologists in this milieu is recognizably true to the reality, albeit somewhat out of focus from an Islamic perspective. And the apologetic works themselves are obviously products of the Islamic world; they could not be confused with Christian texts written in any other cultural milieu of the early medieval period. For one thing, these works lack the extremely negative rhetoric of contemporary Greek or Latin anti-Islamic texts, and they are singularly lacking in the customary invective these compositions directed against Muhammad or the Qur'an. Rather, in the Arabic texts written by Christians in the world of Islam it is clear that the intention of their authors was to compose a Christian discourse in the Arabic language, sufficient both to sustain the faith of Christians living in that world and to commend the reasonable credibility of Christianity to their Muslim neighbors in their own religious idiom.

94 Marcello, Le dialogues d'Abraham de Tibériade, #110.
V
CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY IN BAGHDAD
AND BEYOND
A MAJOR PARTNER IN THE
DEVELOPMENT OF CLASSICAL ISLAMIC
INTELLECTUAL CULTURE

Philosophy and the Christians

While the Christian theologians who wrote in Arabic in the early Islamic period, whose works have been our concern up to this point, were for the most part associated with monasteries and other ecclesiastical institutions, many of them, along with other Christian intellectuals in the caliphate prior to the time of the Crusades, also played a role in the burgeoning intellectual life in the caliph's own capital city of Baghdad and beyond. Some were physicians, some were philosophers, and some were logicians, mathematicians, copyists, or translators. Some were also Christian apologists and theologians, as we have seen. All of them contributed something to the newly flowering culture of the classical period of Islamic civilization. But in no society-wide enterprise did Christians take a more prominent role than they did in the famed translation movement undertaken in Baghdad from the eighth to the tenth centuries, when philosophical, scientific, and sapiential texts from the Hellenistic and Persian worlds were systematically being translated from Greek, Syriac, and Pahlavi into Arabic. This enterprise not only brought the learning of ancient Greece and Persia to the new world of Islam, it also became the impetus for new developments in philosophy itself in the Arab world, and for a new appreciation of the philosophical way of life, which some Christian and Muslim intellectuals together thought could become the vehicle for a more fruitful dialogue between members of different religious communities in the caliphate.

It has often been acknowledged by scholars, as Dimitri Gutas has recently pointed out, that the vast majority of the translators of Greek and Syriac texts into Arabic in the early 'Abbasid translation movement were

1. Their names are duly recorded and their contributions to the movement are amply described, but hardly anyone discusses the work of these scholars and translators as having a part to play in the Islamic translation movement and also in the intellectual life of the churches to which they belonged. Rather, one gets the impression from most discussions that it was simply a matter of these Christian scholars hiring out their translation services to Muslim patrons who brought their contributions to Islamic scientific and philosophical interests, but that the translators themselves had little or no interest in or use for the texts they transmitted. Modern scholars of the translation movement often fail to mention other works by the translators, especially if they are religious texts, or sometimes they fail to mention even translations of philosophical texts made for Muslim patrons by translators who are otherwise known only as theologians or scholars of religion. For example, in the previous chapter we mentioned the fact that Patriarch Timothy I (r. 780–820) translated Aristotle's Topis at the behest of the caliph al-Mahdi (r. 775–85), a fact duly noted by Dimitri Gutas in his magisterial study of the translation movement, but he makes only passing mention of the patriarch's other works and ignores altogether Timothy's account of his conversation with an Aristotelian philosopher at the caliph's court about the ways of knowledge and the doctrine of God. Similarly, in the previous chapter we mentioned that Theodore Abu Qurrah (ca. 755–ca. 830), who is otherwise known primarily as a religious writer in Greek, Syriac, and Arabic, nevertheless did make an Arabic translation of the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise De virtutibus andarum for Tahir ibn al-Fusaya, the caliph al-Ma'mun's (r. 813–83) famous general from Khorasan. But Gutas makes no mention of this translator or of the translations of philosophical texts attributed to him.


3 See Gutas, Greek Thought, Arabic Culture, 61 and n. 1.

4 See Mechthild Keller-Rost, "Ein pseudoscholastischer Traktat über die Tugend" (unpublished Ph. D. diss., University of Erlangen, 1965). For more on this text and other translations by Christian religious thinkers, see Sidney H. Griffith, "Arab Christian Culture
To be fair, one of Gutas’s concerns in his landmark book was to argue that the translations themselves were not what inspired Muslim interest in Greek science and philosophy. Rather, he says, it was the other way around; the scientific and philosophical interests of Muslims provided the impetus that created the market for the translators. He goes so far as to say the following:

It is therefore inaccurate to say or infer that Greek culture “flourished” in the monasteries and Christian centers before and during the first century of Islam, and that the Graeco-Arabic translation movement simply drew upon the pre-existing knowledge of Greek of the Christians. . . . The Greek of the Syriac schools was not sufficient for the new standards required by the rich sponsors of the translations, and translators accordingly invested time and effort into learning Greek well because by then it had become a lucrative profession.5

This observation is undoubtedly true from the perspective of Gutas’s study of the larger process of the transmission of Greek literary and scientific culture to the Arabic-speaking world, but it leaves the mistaken impression that there were no philosophical interests among Syriac or Arabic-speaking Christians of the early Islamic period beyond the lucrative opportunity for translation he mentions. The fact is that these Christian scholars, albeit that they were newly primed by the serendipitous possibilities of financial gain, were also building on earlier traditions in their own communities. They used their skills not only to translate but also to employ philosophical and logical thought in support of their faith commitments and to commend the philosophical life itself as a fruitful development that might provide the social possibility for harmony between Christians and Muslims in the caliphate. Accordingly, after a brief review of the earlier progress of Greek philosophy and logic, particularly that of Aristotle, in the intellectual concerns of the Christians of the Orient, in this chapter we shall focus our attention on several representative figures in the translation movement who were also significant Christian thinkers in the Arabic-speaking world of the Muslims.

Syrian Christian Philosophers

In earlier Christian history, and coming to fruition in the fourth century, Greek-speaking Christian intellectuals had already done their best to co-

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and even to refine the expression of the religious claims themselves. Of
course, this respect for the integrity of philosophy did not prevent
Christian philosophers from taking issue, on philosophical grounds, with
positions espoused by Aristotle and other non-Christians that they deemed
to be in contradiction with positions they held on religious grounds. For
example, and most notably, they defended the biblical doctrine of creation
as opposed to the Aristotelian hypothesis of the eternity of the world.11

As it happened, there was an impressive number of Syrians with ties to
Edessa and the Monophysite/Jacobite, or Syrian Orthodox, church who
took up the practice of philosophy in Alexandria and elsewhere from the
sixth century onward. They and their so-called Nestorians, or Church of
the East, colloquists in Edessa, Nisibis, and the surrounding Syriac-speaking
milieu in the eighth and ninth centuries made up the community of schol-
as in whose footsteps Arabic-speaking Christians such as Hunayn ibn Isḥāq
(808–873) and Yahyā ibn ʿAdi (893–974) and their students would fol-
low in the ninth and tenth centuries.12

The story begins back in the days of John Philoponus (ca. 490–ca. 570),
a Jacobite Christian student of the Neoplatonist Ammonius, son of Her-
 melas, in Alexandria.13 Philoponus functioned both as a philosopher and
as a defender of Christianity. Indeed, one may make the case that his trou-
bles with the Christian authorities over the issue of his perceived “Trithe-
ism” and other dogmatic matters had their roots in his philosophical and
logical concerns, rather than in any purely heretical, theological consider-
ations.14 In any event, there was a student of Philoponus in Alexandria, a
fellow Jacobite, who later switched his allegiance to the Melkites; he was
from the Syriac-speaking environs of Edessa, and his name was Sergius of
Rash‘ayn (d. 536). He became the first-known link between the enthusi-
sists for Aristotle in Neoplatonist Alexandria and the Syriac-speaking
communities in northern Syria.15 Subsequently, their numbers would increase
to the point that a modern historian could marvel at how much an enthus-
iasm for classical Greek science, philosophy, and literature, and especially
for the works of Aristotle, flourished in the Syriac-speaking community of
the Jacobites, while at the same time they seemed to languish in neglect in
contemporary, Greek-speaking Byzantium.16

In Syria the study of the works of “the Philosopher” and of other Greek
thinkers always involved translation into Syriac as the first step in the en-
terprise. It went hand in hand with the wider project to translate Greek
scriptural and theological texts, an undertaking that began in earnest in the
sixth century as thinkers in the flourishing churches of the so-called Jacob-
ites (Syrian Orthodox) and Nestorians (Assyrian Church of the East) were
struggling to define their social and ecclesiastical identities,17 largely in re-
action to the doctrines and policies of the conciliar orthodoxy enforced in
the Roman Empire from the time of the emperor Justinian I (r. 527–65)
onward.18 It is important to insist on this broader framework of the de-

11 The doctrine of creation was already well developed in the philosophical mode of “Chris-
tianism” in the works of the Cappadocian Fathers of the Byzantine church. See Pelikan,
Christianity and Classical Culture, 90–106, 248–62. In the sixth century, Christian philosophers
in the Neoplatonist tradition of Alexandria took up this issue in more immediate philos-
osophical terms. See, e.g., Christian Wildberg, trans., John Philoponus: Against Aristotle on
For more information on John Philoponus, see the bibliographical notes below. Later, in Is-

camic times, Arabic-speaking philosophers would again be struggling with the issue of the cre-
ation versus the eternity of the world. See the summary discussions in Joel L. Kraemer,
Philosophy in the Renaissance of Islam: Abū ʿAlī Muhammad ibn Muhāammad al-
Sijistānī and His Circle (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 198–200; Herbert A. Davidson, Proof for Eternity,
Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987),
es., 122–60.

12 Many of these early Syrian “Aristotelians” and their works were discussed already in
Ehud Gecht, Les catégories d'Aristote dans leurs versions syro- byzantines (Beirut: Institut Fran
cais de Damas, 1948), esp. 1–32. But see Henri Hugonnard-Roche, La logique d'Aristote du grec
aux syriques: Études sur la transmission des textes de l'Ougarit et de leur interprétation philos-

13 See H.-D. Saffrey, “Le chrestien Jean Philopon et la survivance de l'école d'Alexandrie

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contemporary, Greek-speaking Byzantium.16

15 See especially Sebastian T. Brock, “From Antagonism to Assimilation: Syriac Aristotelian
philosophy of the Seventeenth Century,” in Emotions in Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the

16 In this connection see the important study in Alon Goldfarb and Theresa Hainthaler,
Christian in Christian Tradition, vol. 2, From the Council of Chalcedon (451) to Gregory the Great
velopment of ecclesial identities as the context for the Syrian translation movement, often conducted in connection with intercommunal apologetic and polemical concerns and particularly in connection with the peculiar definition and deployment of the technical terms of the controverted theological and Christological formulations.\textsuperscript{19} To discuss the translations in isolation from the larger spectrum of the intellectual preoccupations in connection with which they were in fact accomplished, as is often done in modern scholarly studies of the Syriac translations, is to leave them in a hemispherical limbo where their only significance then seems unaccountably to be merely to prepare the way for the much better known Graeco-Arabic translation movement of early Islamic times. The practice of discussing the Syriac translations apart from the needs that prompted their production in the first place also lends support to the modern, stipulated separation and isolation of the claims of reason and revelation respectively in the minds of the translators and their associates. In fact, as we shall see, their efforts were most often to use the distinction of the one set of claims to bolster the verisimilitude of propositions drawn from the other one.

From the time of Sergius of Resh‘aya to that of Yahyâ ibn ‘Abbî, both Syriac-speaking Jacobites, more than four hundred years elapsed. Over that long period of time, in the careers of an impressive number of mostly other Jacobite scholars from the environs of Edessa, some with direct ties to the philosophical school in Alexandria, the fortunes of Aristotle and Greek philosophy and science more generally, grew steadily in the Syriac-speaking world. In this connection one might mention the names of Severus Bekkht (d. 666/77), Athanasius of Balad (d. 696), Jacob of Edessa (685–708), George, Bishop of the Arabs (d. 724), and Theophilos of Edessa (d. 785),\textsuperscript{20} bringing the chain of scholarly work well into Islamic times. This tradition of cultivating Greek learning in Syriac translation, flourishing in the Syriac churches well before the time of the early Abbasid translation movement, formed the intellectual heritage of a Jacobite scholar such as Yahyâ ibn ‘Abbî’s immediate scholarly predecessors in his hometown, the Jacobite enclave of Takrit in the Persian domain in the preceding century, in the careers and works of men such as Ḥāfīz ibn Khudam Abî Ra‘ījah (d. before 850), the first Jacobite to write theological tracts in Arabic, and Nonnus of Nisibis (d. after 862), who wrote apologetic and exegetical works in both Syriac and Arabic.\textsuperscript{21}


\textsuperscript{20} On these scholars and their work, see Cecory, \textit{Les catégories d’Aristote}, esp. 16–32; Brock, “From Antagonism to Assimilation,” esp. 22–27; Hugonnard-Roche, \textit{La logique d’Aristote}.

\textsuperscript{21} For Abî Ra‘ījah, see Georg Graf, \textit{Die Schriften des Jacobiten Ḥāfīz ibn Khudam Abî


\textsuperscript{24} On the Nestorian school system, beginning with the famous school of Nisibis, see Gerrie J. Reinkink, “‘Idedra Gewen Dim und Nisibis Shone Forth!’: The School of Nisibis at the Transition of the Sixth–Seventh Century,” in Drayvers and MacDonald, eds., \textit{Centres of Learning}, 37–39. The Jacobite metropolitan, Marqabtî of Takrit (d. 649) wrote of how those whom he called Nestorians in his day, wanting to steal away to the simple people to their own errors, sought to establish a school in every village, many of which, he says, were pedagogically excellent. See F. Navi, “Histories d’Aboudemmeh et de Marouta,” \textit{Patronologie Orientale} 3 (1905): 65–66.


\textsuperscript{26} See Sebastian P. Brock, “Two Letters of the Patriarch Timothy from the Late Eighth Century on Translations from Greek,” \textit{Arabic Sciences and Philosophy} 9 (1999): 233–46.

In the meantime, in the Syriac-speaking community of the so-called Nestorian Church of the East, interest in Aristotle and the Greek sciences presumably did not lag far behind that of the Jacobites, although the chain of scholarly tradition over time is initially harder to follow.\textsuperscript{22} Paul the Persian (fl. 531–75), who was a younger contemporary of the initially Jacobite Sergius of Resh‘aya, with similar ties to Alexandria, cultivated a strong interest in Aristotelian thought, but in the end he became a convert to Zoroastrianism in Persia, at the court of Khusrav Anûshirwân (r. 531–79).\textsuperscript{23} While interest in Greek learning certainly flourished in the widespread Nestorian school system in the Syriac-speaking milieu, in centers such as Nisibis, al-‘Ilara, the monastery of Dayr Qurrah, and Jundisâbûr,\textsuperscript{24} one does not find much mention of Aristotle or of the cultivation of Greek logic in Nestorian Syriac texts until the time of Patriarch Timothy I (727/8–823), who, as we have seen, in his letters in Syriac tells of his discussions with Aristotelian logicians at the court of the caliph al-Mahdi (r. 775–85) in Baghdad.\textsuperscript{25} It is noteworthy in this connection that Patriarch Timothy had to make arrangements to borrow copies of Aristotle’s \textit{Topikos} and parts of the \textit{Organon} from the Jacobite monastery of Mar Mattai, between Mosul and Tagrit.\textsuperscript{26} Nevertheless, by the mid-eighth century Nestorian scholars, such as members of the Bukhtishu family, with their connections
with Jundisabir in Iran, \(^{27}\) Hunayn ibn Ishaq (808–873), who hailed from the Nestorian capital of the Lahmids, al-Hira in Iraq, \(^{28}\) and Abû Bishr Matta ibn Yûnus (d. 940), from the flourishing Nestorian monastery of Dayr Qannû not far from Baghdad, \(^{29}\) who became “the founder of the Aristotelian school in Baghdad early in the tenth century,” \(^{30}\) would all come to be among the dominant Christian scholars in the Graeco-Arabic translation movement in early Abbasid times. In fact, the Nestorian Abû Bishr Matta, as we will see, would be one of the Jacobite Yahya ibn 'Adi’s principal teachers.

Concomitantly, in Islamic intellectual circles associated with the caliph's court in Baghdad from the early ninth century onward, many theoretical concerns, not entirely dissimilar to those that had prompted the interest of Christian intellectuals in the study of Greek philosophy and science in earlier times, had already conspired to attract Muslim thinkers such as Abû Yusuf Ya‘qub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi (c. 801–866) to the study of the logic and philosophy of Aristotle in its Alexandrian dress. Gerhard Endress says that for al-Kindi, “philosophy was to vindicate the pursuit of rational activity as an activity in the service of Islam.” \(^{31}\) When more Arabic translations of “the Philosopher’s” works, initially done largely by Syriac-speaking Christians, became available, so in this same spirit were more Muslim thinkers attracted to them. A major case in point is provided by the work of Abû Nasr al-Farabi (ca. 870–950), who had studied Aristotelian logic with two Nestorian Christian scholars, Yuhanna ibn Haylan (d. 910) and Abû Bishr Matta ibn Yûnus, mentioned above. \(^{32}\) Al-Farabi went on to become a world-class philosopher in his own right, and prominent among his concerns, in addition to his interest in political philosophy, was the relationship between reason and revelation. \(^{33}\) In the present context what is immediately relevant is the fact that he too, a Muslim, along with his own logic tutor Abû Bishr Matta, was one of the principal teachers of the Christian philosopher and theologian Yahya ibn 'Adi. Another important Muslim physician/philosopher of the period, a man who had taken Socrates as his model in the philosophical life, Muhammad ibn Zakariyya al-Razi (864–925), \(^{34}\) and who lived for a decade or so in Baghdad during the time of the caliphs al-Ma'tmid (892–902), is also sometimes named as one of Yahya’s teachers. \(^{35}\) The young Jacobite logician could hardly have had a more illustrious cast of mentors and tutors at a time when the translation movement in Baghdad was reaching its apogee.

According to Gerhard Endress, “The undisputed master of philosophy, for the Christian schools of late Hellenism as well as for the Muslim transmitters of this tradition, was Aristotle: founder of the paradigms of rational discourse, and of a coherent system of the world.” \(^{36}\) This is certainly a point of view shared by a medieval Syriac-speaking chronicler from the Jacobite community. At the point in the anonymous Syriac Chronicon ad Annun Christi 1254 Pertinens at which the chronicler comes to the discussion of what he calls the “era of the Greeks,” by which he means the time of Alexander the Great (r. 356–323 BC) and his Seleucid successors in the Syriac-speaking frontier lands between the Roman and Persian empires, he has this to say about Aristotle and the importance of his works for the Christians:

At this time, Aristotle, “the Philosopher,” collected all the scattered kinds of philosophical doctrines and made of them one great body, thick with powerful opinions and doctrines, since he separated the truth from falsehood. Without the reading of the book of logic [miladiha] that he made it is not possible to understand the knowledge of books, the meaning of doctrines, and the sense of the Holy Scriptures, on which depends the hope of the Christians, unless one is a man to whom, because of the excellence of his [religious] practice, the grace of the Holy Spirit is given, the one who makes all wise. \(^{37}\)

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27 See Gunas, Greek Thought, Arabic Culture, 118.
30 Gunas, Greek Thought, Arabic Culture, 14.
37 L.-E. Chabot, ed., Anonymi Aquitarii Chronicon ad Annun Christi 1254 Pertinens,
In 'Abbasid times there were more Christian thinkers interested in the philosophies and sciences of the Greeks than just those Aristotelians among the Jacobites and the Nestorians who took their texts and commentaries from the Alexandrian tradition. And there were more Muslims whose philosophical and scientific interests reached well beyond a single-minded devotion to Aristotle. Nevertheless these were the Christian and Muslim philosophers who shaped the intellectual milieu in which Ḥanṣayn ibn Ḥishāq and Yahyā ibn 'Adi pursued their careers. And just as the Muslims among this generation of philosophers wanted "to vindicate the pursuit of rational activity as an activity in the service of Islam," so did Ḥanṣayn and Yahyā and their associates intend to vindicate with the same philosophy the doctrines and practices of the Christians and the Christology of the Nestorians and the Jacobites respectively. Indeed, one important reason for the sustained interest in Aristotelian thought among the Jacobites and Nestorians of the time, and a significant impetus behind their projects to translate texts from Greek into Syriac from the sixth century onward, and latterly into Arabic, was precisely the need for "the philosopher"'s definitions and distinctions of terms in the effort evermore clearly to differentiate and defend their confessional formulas, and hence their ecclesiastical identities. This process was still underway by the time of the Islamic occupation in the seventh century of the largely Syriac-speaking, Aramean homeland. It continued well into Islamic times, with the Muslims themselves now becoming new participants in the enterprise to find ways clearly to articulate and to defend their own distinctive religious identities. By the ninth century, Arabic-speaking Christian and Muslim philosophers in Baghdad were together commending the philosophical life as a workable model for interreligious convivencia in a city that by their time had a large and important Christian population. [...]

In this light then the Jacobite, Nestorian, and Muslim teachers in Greek logic and philosophy appear to have flourished at a time in Baghdad when interconfessional and interreligious interest in the works of the Alexandrian Aristotelians went hand in hand with a concern among both Christians and Muslims to show that their own religious traditions accorded best with the requirements of the life of reason lived in pursuit of the highest knowledge, and to argue that they and their coreligionists alone were the true heirs of Aristotle. In this context, the Christians were concerned to refute the counter claims not only of Muslims, but of other Christian groups as well.

Similarly, Muslim philosophers not only rejected the distinctive religious doctrines of the Christians, but they disclaimed the intellectual approach of the Muslim religious controversialists, the mutakallimūn, as well. In the end, in Baghdad in the tenth century, some Muslim and Christian philosophers shared a passion for the philosophical life that bound them together in ways that featured Christians such as the Nestorian Abū Bishr Māṭār ibn Yūnus and the Jacobite Yahyā ibn ʿAdi championing the claims of philosophy against the methods of the Muslim mutakallimūn, while Muslims such as Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī and Abū ʿIsa al-Warrāq (d. ca. 862) were taking issue from a philosophical perspective with the principal doctrines of the Christians. At the same time, the Jacobite Christian Yahyā ibn ʿAdi used his expertise in Aristotelian logic and philosophy to defend Christian doctrines and practices both against the challenges posed by Muslims and to attack Nestorian Christological formulas, all the while using the same means to commend the veracity of Jacobite Christological teachings. But these Christian thinkers’ engagement with the logic and philosophy of Aristotle was not limited to mounting rational or theoretical arguments against the positions of their doctrinal adversaries.

Like the philosophers of Late Antiquity from whom they borrowed so much, Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq and Yahyā ibn ʿAdi and the Muslim and Christian members of their circles of scholars in medieval Baghdad wanted to live the philosophical life as such, and to cultivate the practice of philosophically inspired “Spiritual exercises,” very much in the context of their Christian and Islamic religious commitments.

### Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq

The one Christian philosopher who on anyone’s account played a major role in the early phase of the ʿAbbāsid translation movement whose name many in the West might actually recognize is the already-mentioned Nestorian Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq (808–873). He was a contemporary of the first generation of Christian theologians who regularly wrote in Arabic, men like Theodore Abū Qurraḥ, Ḥabīb ibn Khidmah Abū Kāṭīfah, and ʿAnmār al-Baqrī, whose careers we have discussed in previous chapters. Ḥunayn was a member of the Arab Christian tribe of ʿIbād from al-Ḥira, hence the sobriquet al-ʿIbādī, which we often find added to his name in the sources. By all accounts he was a precocious youth, the son of a pharmacist, who received his early medical training at the famous Persian school of Jundisāpur. Subsequently he traveled widely, both within the world of Islam and beyond it, even into Byzantine territory. A Syriac speaker from birth, on his travels Ḥunayn was interested in perfecting his knowledge of languages such as Greek and Arabic, and he was constantly in search of manuscripts, especially scientific, medical, and philosophical texts. He says himself that in his youth he was already engaged in translating the works of the Greek physician Galen. Ḥunayn gained considerable fame in the caliphate as a physician and as a translator of Greek texts into Syriac and Arabic. In due course he became the chief physician of the caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–61), and in his maturity, in conjunction with the officials at the famous library in Baghdad called Bayt al-Ḥikmah, or House of Wisdom, he administered a whole school of translators, including most famously his son Isḥāq, who worked with him especially on philosophical texts, and his nephew ʿHubaysh, his preferred collaborator on scientific works. In addition to translations of numerous philosophical, medical, and other scientific
tific texts produced by Ḥunayn and his school, according to the reports that have come down to us, Ḥunayn himself was the translator of a number of the works of Aristotle into Syriac that his son Ishaq then translated into Arabic, with Ḥunayn subsequently reviewing them. But medicine and the translation of Greek texts were not Ḥunayn’s only concerns, albeit that they were an important source of income for him and they are his major claim to fame in the eyes of most latter-day western scholars. He was also an active apologist for his Christian faith and a proponent of the philosophical way of life.

Some reports claim that Ḥunayn had a hand in the translation of the Septuagint Bible into Arabic. However that might be, he did compose some apologetic tracts, one on proofs for the existence of the one God, creator of all that is, and one on the ways and means of discerning the true religion, two themes that figure prominently in the works of contemporary Christian Arabic theologians. A later Christian writer, the thirteenth-century Copt, al-Mu’taman ibn al-Aswāl, mentioned earlier, describes another work by Ḥunayn on the end of human life and the reckoning for one’s freely chosen behavior in this world that each person will then face in the world to come. But perhaps the most interesting text to mention in connection with Ḥunayn’s involvement in religious apologetics is one that features his participation with another Christian scholar and translator in an exchange of letters with a Muslim acquaintance at the caliph’s court who had addressed a letter to Ḥunayn in which he summons him to the profession of Islam.

Around the year 855, the astronomer ʿAlī ibn Yahyā al-Munajjim (d. 888) wrote a letter to Ḥunayn ibn Ishaq in which he offers arguments framed in the manner of an Aristotelian logician to prove that Muhammad was truly a prophet sent by God. Al-Munajjim proposes that consequently it is incumbent upon Ḥunayn as a reasonable man to convert to Islam. Ḥunayn replies with a letter of his own in which he points out from his logician’s point of view the formal and material fallacies in al-Munajjim’s syllogisms. Along the way Ḥunayn mentions reasons why one might consider Christianity to be the true religion. Then, almost a generation later, another Christian scholar, the Melkite Qusta ibn Lāqā (c. 830–912)47 responded once again to al-Munajjim’s proposal with yet another letter, this time addressed to the astronomer’s son, in which Qusta takes issue with the substance of al-Munajjim’s arguments, particularly one in which he had put forward the Muslim doctrine of the immortality of the Qur’an as an evidentiary miracle in testimony to the veracity of the Islamic scripture. Qusta ibn Lāqā counters this claim with a disquisition on the nature of literary prosody and the observation that by its very nature it cannot sustain the comparison al-Munajjim’s argument would demand of it. Sometime thereafter a presumably Christian editor assembled the three pieces of correspondence into a single publication that then circulated in Arabic-speaking Christian communities as part of the growing archive of popular apologetic literature.48

In the effort to commend the philosophical way of life among his contemporaries, Ḥunayn ibn Ishaq composed a work that came eventually to enjoy a wide circulation among scholars in the Arabic-speaking world and even beyond it in translation. This was his Kitāb ʿaḍāb al-falāsifīn, sometimes called Nasīḥat al-falāsifīn, titles that mean roughly “gnomic sayings” or “instructive anecdotes” of the philosophers.49 It is a collection of quotations by and about ancient wise men and philosophers that was meant to serve a practical purpose for people who would make the effort to inform their daily lives and the policies of their societies with the best moral insights philosophy had to offer. Indeed, Ḥunayn, like his contemporary the Muslim Aristotelian philosopher Yaʿqūb ibn Ishaq al-Kindi (c. 800–ca. 857), understood that in addition to offering the means to defend the credibility of divine revelation, philosophy was also a way of life, not just a mode of intellectual inquiry or scholarly discourse on abstruse topics. And in their day one of the ways in which people translated philosophy into daily life was by reading the biographies of wise men of the past and meditating on their words of wisdom. Ḥunayn and other Arabic Christian writers in


49 Qusta ibn Lāqā’s name, in the spelling Kusta ben Luka, is given to William Butler Yeats’s mysterious interlocutor in his esoteric work A Vision.


As just a brief review of his bibliography shows, Yahyā was much involved with both Aristotle’s *Topics* and his *Physics*, the two works Dimitri Gutas has identified as of crucial interest in what he calls “the exigencies of inter-faith discourse” in the era of the translation movement.54 In all his works on these and other philosophical topics, Yahyā seems to have stayed close to the teaching of Aristotle and his Alexandrian interpreters, a circumstance that earned him some obloquy in later years, when later Muslim philosophers such as Ibn Sinā/Avicenna (d. 1037) and others voiced their disdain for the work of those whom they viewed as the staid and unadventurous Aristotelians of Baghdad.55

In view of the clash between the philosopher-logicians and the more traditional Muslim religious thinkers in Baghdad in the ninth and tenth centuries, many modern commentators have said that for the philosophers in that milieu, including Yahyā ibn ‘Adi, the use of reason was deemed superior to religion in the search for answers to life’s ultimate questions. In this connection Gutas has written, “Just as logic is superior to grammar in that it is universal and supralingual — so Abū Bishr Matta’s and Yahyā’s argument in defense of logic ran — so also is philosophy, the use of reason, superior to religion in that it is universal and supranational (since each nation has its own religion).”56 For Joel Kraemer, this view was a basic tenet of the philosophic humanism of Islam in the Buyyid period, and he goes on to say that “the chief architects of this philosophic humanism in our period were the Christian philosopher Yahyā ibn ‘Adi and his immediate disciples.”57 For Kraemer, Yahyā was “first and foremost a philosopher,”58 even in his theological treatises.

However, for the Christian theologians of the Baghdad milieu, Aristotelian logic had, by way of contrast with the case among Muslim religious thinkers, long been an auxiliary discipline. Yahyā and the other Christian apologists, like Hunayn ibn Isāq in the preceding century, were thinking and writing within a tradition that had long since learned to present the claims of their religious convictions in the Greek idiom of Aristotelian 50

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51 Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arab and Islamic Culture*, 61–74.
53 Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arab and Islamic Culture*, 103.
55 Ibid., 106–7.
logic, even when translated into Syriac or Arabic. What is more, the doctrinal positions that Yahyā and the other Christians defended in Syriac or Arabic were initially formulated in Greek philosophical and logical terms. They were constantly being defended by appeal to the logical requirements of the proper definitions of the originally Greek terms, even in their Syriac and Arabic versions. This agenda was still the operative one in the ninth and tenth centuries, in response to the religious claims of Islam, when the challenge for Christians was not so much reason versus revelation, but the development of an appropriately logical and philosophical, not to say theological, vocabulary in Arabic. And it is surely from this perspective that a thinker like Yahyā ibn 'Adī would have found the categories of the philosophers far more congenial for his religious, apologetic purposes in Arabic than the methods peculiar to the contemporary Muslim *mutaqallimun*.

In addition to his work as a logician, philosopher, and translator, Yahyā was also a prolific writer in the area of Christian theology and apologetics. In this connection, his concerns were not limited to the customary topics of the Christian apologetic agenda developed in the previous century; they extended to issues of public morality, as in his book on the reformation of public morals, his treatise on sexual abstinence and the philosophical life, and to the larger question of the general human pursuit of happiness and the avoidance of sorrow. But when all is said and done, the defense of the doctrines of the Trinity, and of the Johannite Christology in the doctrine of the Incarnation, loom largest among Yahyā ibn 'Adī’s theological concerns. They are the primary topics in the more than sixty works Gerhard Endress lists under the heading of “Christian Theology” in his bibliography of Yahyā’s works. So effective were Yahyā ibn 'Adī’s apologetic works in the eyes of other Christian writers in Arabic that large portions of them were excerpted for inclusion in compilations of texts on doctrinal topics by other Arabic-speaking apologists in later times.

Particularly notable among them were the Coptic scholars of the thirteenth century, whom we mentioned in previous chapters.

Like Musa ibn Ishaq before him, Yahyā ibn 'Adī was devoted to the cultivation of the human mind and the pursuit of the philosophical life as the most humane way to promote a realm of public discourse in which both Christians and Muslims could participate. He was convinced that in the end reason could serve the interests of revelation, and devotion to philosophy could preserve the decencies of life in common. His argument on behalf of this position was based on the following principle: “Men are a single tribe (iqlab), related to one another; humanity unites them. The adornment of the divine power is in all of them and in each one of them, and it is the rational soul.”

On this basis Yahyā offered suggestions for how one might aim to become “a perfect human being” (*al-insān al-kāmil*) by extinguishing vices and cultivating virtues in one’s own life. For him the requisite perfection then consists in the acquisition of what he calls “true science” and “godly wisdom”; they bring one closest to God. It is clear too that while he speaks much in the *Reformation of Morals* about kings, aristocrats, and the members of the ruling classes of the pluralistic Islamic society in Baghdad in his day, Yahyā’s own favorite people are those whom he calls “scholars,” “monks,” and “ascetics.” He says that what “is considered good for them is clothing of hair and coarse material, traveling on foot, obscurity, attendance at churches and mosques and so forth, and abhorrence for luxurious living.” Furthermore, he says, their task is to “give people an interest in eternal life.” Yahyā’s talk of scholars, monks, and ascetics, and churches and mosques in the *Reformation of Morals* evokes his view of the Islamo-Christian milieu in which he lived and worked. It invites the supposition that in his pursuit of philosophy in the interreligious company of Muslim, Jacobite, Nestorian, and Melkite Christian teachers and students, Yahyā hoped to cultivate among them all a sense of “humanity.” He called it *al-insānīyyah*, a term best translated as “human behavior,” the cultivation of which Yahyā thought should foster the growth of a measure of mutual esteem among the upholders of religious convictions who are inherently critical of one another.

64 See, e.g., Mistré, “Traité sur la continence,” 1.3–4, 33.2–3, and 34.5–7.
66 Ibid., 5:45, 62.
Colloquy between Christian and Muslim Philosophers

Muslim thinkers, too, were interested in fostering the philosophical way of life in society, and many of them, like Yahyā’s own master al-Parābī, had much to say about the qualities of “the virtuous city” (al-madinah al-fauḍlah), as he characterized the ideal society, and the role of religion in fostering its well being.67 They also discussed the ascetic and spiritual exercises that would be best calculated to foster the life of reason and religion in such a society. For example, in Yahyā ibn ‘Adī’s day a lively debate ensued between Christian and Muslim thinkers over the right parameters for the practice of sexual abstinence in the philosophical life, with Yahyā championing complete abstinence for those fit for it, as in the ancient Christian monastic life. His Muslim adversaries argued to the contrary that in this as in other such matters, right reason teaches that virtue stands in the middle, fostering moderation over complete abstinence, which they argued is harmful to individuals, injurious to society, and detestable to God.68

Already in the first generation of philosophy in the Islamic world, “the philosopher of the Arabs,” al-Kindī (d. 867) had been concerned to commend the goods of the philosophical life to society at large in the matter of coping with normal human problems. He composed a small treatise, On the Art of Distilling Sorrows,69 in which he sought, not unlike the ancient Boethius (ca. 480–524/26),70 to apply the consolations of philosophy to the alleviation of life’s inevitable miseries. This small book caught the fancy of a number of Christian writers in the next generations, and three of them, Elias al-Jawhari (fl. 893) of the Church of the East, the Copt Severus ibn al-Muqaffa’ (d. ca. 1000), and Elias of Nisibis (d. 1046) of the Church of the East, all wrote books in Arabic in answer to al-Kindī’s treatise in which they named the Muslim philosopher and his work and quoted from it, but they proposed a very different generation. While all three Christian treatises are very different works on their own terms, they agree with al-Kindī in commending an attitude of long suffering in the face of human misery rather than one of engaging in rigorous rational argument. But unlike al-Kindī the three Christian writers may be said to “theologized” the

67 See Muhsin S. Mahdi, Al-Farabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Vattay, Farabi et l’Ecole d’Alexandrie.

Philosophy in Arabic in the Latin West

Unbeknownst to the Christian and Muslim translators and philosophers in Baghdad in the days of the 'Abbasid translation movement, the fruits of their labor would in due course reach way beyond the limits of the Islamic world to foster the study of philosophy and the pursuit of the philosophical life in medieval Europe, where their Arabic versions of the works of Greek-speaking philosophers and scientists came into Latin translations and sparked yet another intellectual renaissance.71 In al-Andalus in the twelfth century, Archbishop Raymond of Toledo (r. 1126–51) “was responsible for the initial patronage and organization of the loose body of scholars who made up the Toledo ‘school of translators,’72 which “remained in operation well into the thirteenth century, attracting world-class scholars like Michael Scot and Herman [of Carinthia].”73 And while Toledo was the epicenter of this new, western translation movement, translations were also made in a number of other places in Spain and Italy during these centuries, enlist the services of famous translators such as Robert of Keton, Adelard of Bath, Gerard of Cremona, Petrarch Alfonso, John of Segovia, and John of Salisbury to name only the most well

known.\(^{75}\) Their efforts benefited not only scientists and philosophers in the Latin West, but they prompted a change in theology as well.\(^{76}\)

Philosophical and scientific texts were not the only ones translated from Arabic into Latin in Spain. As in the East, the Christian translators were also interested in the texts that defended Christian faith in the context of the Islamic challenge. And so it happened that among the Arabic texts that the abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable (ca. 1094–1156), commissioned for translation during his visit to Toledo in the 1140s was the Correspondence between al-Ḥāshimi and al-Kīnānī, originally composed in Arabic by a Christian apologist and polemicist in the ninth century, perhaps in the environs of Baghdad.\(^{77}\) As we mentioned in the previous chapter, it was one of the texts that had the widest circulation of all Arab Christian works in the early Islamic period. And just to be able to end where we began in the discussion of Christian theology in Arabic, we now know that there was also a Latin translation of Patriarch Timothy’s account of his debate with the caliph al-Mahdi available in the West in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century.\(^{78}\) So through the efforts of the translators the “church in the shadow of the mosque” did bequeath to the church in the West a small portion of her more popular interreligious heritage along with the riches of the philosophy of Aristotle and the wider range of Greek science and philosophy.


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VI

**WHAT HAS BAGHDAD TO DO WITH CONSTANTINOPLE OR ROME?**

**ORIENTAL CHRISTIAN SELF-DEFINITION IN THE WORLD OF ISLAM**

Communal Identities

Church historians have normally told the story of the schisms in the Christian community resulting from the decisions of the councils of Ephesus in 431 and Chalcedon in 451 as having come about gradually, roughly during the century that elapsed between the time of Chalcedon and the council of Constantinople II in 553. The latter council in particular gave definitive force to the policy of the Byzantine emperor Justinian I (r. 527–65) to enforce Chalcedonian orthodoxy throughout the Roman Empire. It is a story told almost exclusively from the point of view of Roman imperial orthodoxy, which even uses the denominational adjectives anachronistically, the polemically inspired epithets, Nestorian, Jacobite, and Melkite, and, of course, the entirely polemical designation Monophysite, as designations for what are then regarded as dissident churches.\(^1\) But the fact is that none of the communities designated by these names existed as fully developed, ecclesial entities in the sixth century, albeit that the Christological controversies out of which they emerged were certainly in full spate at that time. It was not until almost fifty years later, after the time when the emperor Heraclius (r. 610–41) lost the territories of the so-called Oriental Patriarchates to the Islamic conquest at the battle of the Yarmuk in 636, that at the council of Constantinople III (681) Roman imperial orthodoxy found its own full doctrinal definition in formulas that would prove lasting. It was reaffirmed finally just over a century later, in connection with the Byzantine Iconoclast controversy, at the council of Nicea II in 787. But another forty-some years was wanted before the publication of the earlier focus of the *Symphonic Orthodoxia* in 843, and the establishment of the Feast of Orthodoxy.\(^2\) So in fact the ecclesial identities of the enduring


churches in the East did not come to their maturity until well after the rise of Islam. This being the case, and since most of the non-Chalcedonian Christians lived under Muslim rule in the Oriental Patriarchates, one must consider the challenge of Islam as itself having been a factor in the Christian, community-building process. This was especially the case of the three communities who lived with the Muslims, the Nestorians, the Jacobites, and the Melkites, to use the troika of names one finds most frequently in Muslim sources for them. Actually, as we shall see, the communities of Christians in the Islamic world included more than just these three; from the beginning there were also the Copts, the Armenians, the Georgians, and the Maronites, not to mention the Greek Orthodox, the Latins, and the Mozarabs of Spain.

The Christians who lived in the world of Islam shaped their enduring ecclesial identities, both culturally and intellectually, within the context of several local determining circumstances: their encounter with the Muslims, their adoption of the Arabic language, and their isolation from other Christian communities outside of the Islamic world. They came to their maturity as separate church communities for the most part within the world of Islam and without interference from or significant contact for long periods of time with the patriarchal sees of either Constantinople or Rome. This was the case even for the Melkites, as we shall see, who professed the faith of Byzantine imperial orthodoxy, for a crucial period in their history they were cut off from easy access to Constantinople. The break in two-way communication between Constantinople and Jerusalem extended during the crucial century and a half from around the year 815 to the time following the Byzantine emperor John Tzimisces's (d. 976) "crusade" into Syria and Palestine in 975. This was the very period of the effective Arabization of church life in the caliphate and the first phase of Christian theological development in response to intellectual pressure from Muslim桌ortives. These circumstances then, along with the concomitant doctrinal disagreements on the part of the Nestorians, the Jacobites, the Copts, and the Armenians with the Greek- and Latin-speaking churches, provided the historical situation of creedal and cultural estrangement that in turn produced the perception of alienation on the part of the Christians of the Islamic world from their brethren in the West. One might even take the appearance of this phenomenon to be the definitive moment in the historical transition in ecclesiastical history from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages. In these circumstances the Nestorians, Jacobites/Copts, and Melkites, the classical denominations of the Christians in the Islamic world, can be seen emerging in their mature identities, formulating their differences in polemical reactions to one another in tracts most often written in Arabic.

**Nestorians**

The community that both Muslims and Christians have over the centuries regularly called the Nestorians are often said to have their heritage back to Patriarch Nestorius of Constantinople (c. 428–31) and his refusal to accept the epithet Theotokos as a fitting title for Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Their fate is said to have been determined at the Council of Ephesus in 431 when both Nestorius and his theological position were anathematized. From the historical point of view, this simplistic account of the origins of the church called Nestorian is false. Nestorius's theological struggle with Patriarch Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) over the significance of the Mari title is something of a "red herring" as far as any correct account of the origins of the so-called Nestorian church in Persia is concerned. Rather, the sociohistorical community lamentably misnamed Nestorian by their adversaries for polemical reasons had its origins not in Patriarch Nestorius's struggles with Patriarch Cyril in Byzantium, but in the Syriac-speaking, academic communities of Edessa and Nisibis in the days of the schoolman Narsai (d. 503) and Bishop Bar Sauma of Nisibis (d. before 496). These scholarly churchmen and their associates cultivated an enthusiasm for the Greek works of Theodore of Mopsaestia (ca. 550–428), who, inspired by his own teacher Diodore of Tarsus (d. ca. 390), had rooted his theology in a close reading and interpretation of the literal text of the scriptures. Narsai and his followers, first in Edessa and then in Nisibis, under the leadership of Bishop Bar Sauma, began the task of translating the works of Theodore into Syriac. In the Syriac-speaking world, so-called Nestorian writers devotedly called Theodore of Mopsaestia "the blessed interpreter." In due course, his works would become the touchstone of right thinking for all those in communion with the Church of the East, whose patriarchal see was Seleucia/Cresiphon in Persia.

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Already during his days in the school of Edessa, before his flight to Nisibis in 471, Narsai and his associates had parted company with his erstwhile friend, Jacob of Serug (ca. 451–521) and those who agreed with him over the exegetical authorities whose works should be considered normative in the catechetical school. The latter would not accept Theodore of Mopsuestia as their only master, and they paid allegiance more to the works of the Cappadocian Fathers and to those of Cyril of Alexandria. This disagreement forced Narsai’s move to Nisibis, there to found the school that would become well known in subsequent generations as the intellectual center for the burgeoning Church of the East, as the principal Christian community in Persia came to be called after the synods of Seleucia/Ctesiphon in the sixth and early seventh centuries had clearly defined its creedal identity. For this community in its beginnings Narsai wrote a Syriac melkā in which he celebrated the memory of the three “doctors” and “fathers” they venerated: Diodore, Theodore, and Nestorius. The latter was included because in retrospect he could be seen to be of the same school of thought as Theodore, and his erstwhile companion, John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407), both of whom were students of Diodore. But what stands out in Narsai’s melkā in addition to the names of those he honors is the poignant recollection of the intellectual and social struggles between the parties of two schools of thought in Syriac-speaking Edessa in the late fifth century. Arguably, what would later be called the Jacobite and Nestorian churches had their intellectual and sociological origins in the struggles between the masters in the schools of Edessa and Nisibis over the exegetical and theological traditions they would follow. Matters came to a head in the time of the Byzantine emperor Justinian I (r. 527–65), who after

many confrontations forced the issue in the so-called Three Chapters controversy (543/4) that eventually resulted in the formal condemnation of Theodore of Mopsuestia, his works, and their supporters at the council of Constantinople II in 553. Thereafter the decisions of the council of Chalcedon in 451 were accepted in Byzantium as articulating the official orthodox Christology of the church in the Roman Empire. Syriac-speaking dissenters from this policy found refuge in the frontier zones of their homeland, the borders that exist between Rome and Persia.

The so-called Nestorian church can be seen coming into existence in its distinctive canonical and confessional identity outside the borders of the Roman Empire in Persia through the decisions of the series of councils in the sixth and early seventh centuries mentioned above, the collected acts of which have been published by a modern editor in the Syriac Synodical, a collection of documents that reached its final form only in Islamic times. Its theological profile found its clearest statement in Syriac in an important work by Babai the Great (551–629), which in the West is most often called by its Latin title, Liber de unione. In this book Babai set out the distinctive Christology of the Church of the East in the carefully defined terms of the developed theology of Theodore of Mopsuestia. But no sooner had this been accomplished than the Islamic conquest reached Seleucia/Ctesiphon in the year 645, and for the rest of its early history the so-called Nestorian Church of the East was left to define its sociological identity within the new circumstances provided by the world of Islam. Her creedal and exegetical teachings were articulated in Syriac by writers who lived in Islamic times, men such as Patriarch Timothy I, Theodore bar Koni, Isho’ b’y Nūn, Isho’ dād of Merv (ninth century) and others, living in Islamic times. Her doctrines were defended in Arabic against both the challenges of Islam and the polemics of rival Christian denominations by writers such as ‘Amīr al-Baṣrī (fl. ca. 850), Elias al-Jawarti, ‘Abd Allâh Ibn Ṭayyib (d. 1043), Elias of Nisibis (975–ca. 1046), and ‘Abd Isḥāq bar Berlā (d. 1318), to name only those whose names are most prominent. These Syriac- and Arabic-speaking writers of Islamic times were the
ones who presented the Church of the East in what would be her enduring aspect.13

Due to the missionary activity of this Church of the East, Christianity spread not only into South Arabia and Iran but across the silk routes of Central Asia into China by the seventh century, and southward into India. Much earlier, certainly before the fourth century, Syriac-speaking Christians had already brought their faith across the Arabian ocean with the merchant fleets into the Malabar Coast and southern India generally, where to this day the so-called Thomas Christians still celebrate their Syrian heritage.14

Jacobites (Jacobites)

When the teacher Jacob of Serug broke with his colleague Narsai in the school of Edessa in Syria in the late fifth century over the issue of what would be the authoritative exegetical and doctrinal traditions in the Syriac-speaking churches, his theological associates and his students eventually gave their allegiance to Patriarch Severus of Antioch (ca. 465–538, r. 512–18), who clearly articulated the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria in his Cathedral homilies delivered in Greek, soon to be translated into Syriac, the only language in which they all survive; one of them being preserved in Coptic.15

In the Syriac-speaking community in the environs of Edessa, the ground had already been prepared for their reception, especially in the monastic communities, by the works and influence of Philoxenus of Mabbug (ca. 440–523).16 When the emperor Justinian’s policies subsequently forced public allegiance in Byzantium to the Chalcedonian Christological formula, those who followed the faith articulated by the long-deposed Patriarch Severus went underground. Their numbers and their perseverance were increased in the Syriac-speaking communities with the consecration of the sympathetic bishop Jacob Baradaeus (ca. 500–578), who was installed in Edessa in 542 at the behest of the leaders of the Ghassanid Arab tribal confederation who were important allies of Byzantine power on the Syrian and Arabian borders. Subsequently, due to the tireless clandestine activities of Bishop Jacob to support those who rejected Chalcedon and accepted the doctrine of the Patriarchs Cyril of Alexandria and Severus of Antioch, the whole community of them in the Syriac-speaking milieu came to be called Jacobites by their adversaries.17 But still, sociologically speaking, in spite of the currency of epithets such as Jacobite or the even more polemical Monophysite to describe them, there was not yet a full-fledged ecclesiastical community, a hierarchically separate and independent Jacobite church. Byzantine emperors and churchmen, such as Zeno (r. 474–91) with the Henoticum in 482, and Heraclius with his support of the doctrines of Monenergism and Monotheletism and his Euchthesis of 688, were still looking for ways to accommodate those whom they considered Syrian dissidents within the communion of Byzantine orthodoxy well into Islamic times. Arguably, it was not until the late seventh century that political release from the control of the government of Byzantium provided the Syriac-speaking Jacobite communities now living under Arab government the opportunity to consolidate their denominational identity with their own fully independent hierarchical structures.

It is evident in the Greek works of writers such as Anastasios of Sinai (d. ca. 710) and John of Damascus (d. ca. 749) that within the Islamic world already in the early eighth century controversy between the several Christian communities, the nascent Melkites, the Jacobites, and the Nestorians, was already high on the list of Christian intellectual concerns in the new sociopolitical circumstances in which they now found themselves. In this milieu, Jacob of Edessa (ca. 640–708), writing in Syriac, most effectively articulated Jacobite doctrine and practice in an idiom that would in due

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16 For a quick overview of the thought and works of Jacob, Severus, and Philoxenus, see

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course become the standard expression of his church's theological identity. Then, beginning in the ninth century, when writers from all three communities were bringing these intercommunal, Christian controversies into Arabic, the spokespersons for the Jacobites, who often wrote both in Syriac and Arabic, men such as Habib ibn Khidmah Abū Rāṭah (d. ca. 851), Nomus of Ninisib, Yahyā ibn ʿAbbās (893–974), Abū Ḥajī Ḥabīb Zay'ah (943–1008), and Gregorius Abū Ḥalīfah ibn al-Ṭibrī (1225/12–1286), known in the West as Bar Hebraeus, all played a role in further defining the Jacobite religious identity not only in response to the challenges of their Christian adversaries but also in this very context, providing their responses to the religious challenges of the Muslims. These writers presented the Jacobite or Syrian Orthodox Church in what would be her enduring aspect.19

Copts and Armenians

There were two Christian communities in the world of Islam whose faith was the same as that of the Jacobites and who were in communion with them, but who preserved their own communal and ecclesiastic identities, with their own hierarchies, apart from the Syriac-speaking Jacobites. They are the Copts of Egypt and the Armenians. The Copts had their early Christian heritage both in their own language, Coptic, and in Greek, the dominant language of learning in the ancient patriarchate of Alexandria and the language in which St. Cyril of Alexandria, the principal theological authority for the Copts, wrote his letters and treatises. From the tenth century on, they exploited the other mainline denominations in the caliphate, also adopted Arabic. In fact, as we have mentioned earlier, in due course the center of Christian literary productivity in Arabic shifted from Iraq and Syria/Palestine to Egypt, and eventually the Copts produced more Christian texts in Arabic than all of the other Christian denominations living in the world of Islam put together. Because of their acceptance of Patriarch Severus of Antioch’s concise presentation of Cyril of Alexandria’s Christology in his Cathedral homilies, the Copts were often put together with the Jacobites in discussions of the denominational differences among the Christians in the world of Islam, albeit that they are the much larger community and have their own independent church structures.20

The Armenians too, for the most part, have professed the same faith as the Jacobites while retaining their own independent hierarchical structures and their own language and ecclesiastical literature and cultural traditions.21 They have borrowed much from Syriac sources, but they have never adopted Arabic as a church language although they have lived in all parts of the Islamic world since the very beginnings of Islam and have long been fluent in Arabic for purposes of everyday life.22 Also from the very beginnings of Islam there has been an important Armenian enclave in Jerusalem where they have persistently represented the Jacobite point of view in theological controversy with the local Melkites from the early years of this community’s distinctive, ecclesial development. Interestingly, there is even some evidence that from the seventh century onward there was a group of Armenian Chalcedonians in Jerusalem engaged in theological activity and producing texts that had a considerable influence on ecclesiastical and political developments back home in Armenia.23

Melkites

While the Nestorian and Jacobite churches were already in the process of formation prior to the rise of Islam, albeit that they achieved the full expression of their enduring ecclesiastical identities only in the first centuries of the caliphate, the Melkite community as a sociologically distinct community of Christians came into existence only in Islamic times and in the world of Islam. They professed the faith of Byzantine orthodoxy, but very much in the Arabic-speaking milieu of the Islamic challenge to Christian

18 Much work remains to be done on Jacob of Edessa, a figure whose importance in the history of the Jacobites, the Syrian Orthodox Church, would be difficult to overestimate. For now, see Han J. W. Drijvers, “Jakob von Edessa (633–708),” in Theologische Realencyklopädie, vol. 16 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993), 468–70; Dirk Knisheer and Lucas Van Rompay, “A Bibliographical Clavis to the Works of Jacob of Edessa,” Hugoy 1 (1998), http://syriaca.cua.edu/Hugoy/Vol1/Clavis.html.


faith. The name Melkite seems first to have been used by Syrac-speaking Jacobites, and perhaps even by Maronites, to designate those Christians in the caliphate who accepted the teachings of the sixth ecumenical council of the Byzantine imperial church, Constantinople III (681).24 Their most authoritative spokesperson was John of Damascus (d. ca. 749), who wrote in Greek.25 But they were also the first of the Christian denominations to adopt Arabic as an ecclesiastical language.26 The process of Arabization began already in the second half of the eighth century, and the earliest Christian writer regularly to write in Arabic whose name we know was the Melkite Theodore Abū Qurrah (ca. 755–ca. 830), who wrote not only to respond to the religious challenge of Islam but also very much to state the claims of the Melkites over against those of the Jacobites and the Nestorians. The Melkites, like the others, argued with both Muslims and their fellow Christians that they were in their own view the only truly orthodox Christians. The see of Jerusalem and the monasteries of the Judean desert, particularly Mar Saba, would remain the intellectual center for the Melkites, but members of their community were to be found throughout the Arabic-speaking world, from Alexandria in Egypt to Antioch in Syria and even in Baghdad.27 Spokesmen for the Arabic-speaking Melkites in addition to Abū Qurrah included writers such as the now anonymous ninth-century author of the popular Disputation of the Monk Abraham of Tiberias with an Emir in Jerusalem, Qustā ibn Luqā (ca. 830–912), the historian Sād ibn Bīrīq (877–933), also known as Patriarch Euthychius of Alexandria, Abū l-Pādī Abī Allāh ibn al-钯d al-Anṭākī (fl. ca. 1050), and Paul of Antioch (ca. 1180). These major writers, among many others, presented the profile of the Melkite church in what would be its enduring form in the Arabic-speaking world.28

But a further word must be said about the epithet Melkite. In its first and most appropriate usage it was not synonymous with the Greek Orthodox denomination; they were often called ar-Rum, that is, the Romans, or the Byzantines, by Arabic-speaking Muslims and Christians alike, meaning the Greek Orthodox church of Byzantium. Rather, by contrast with the Greek Orthodox, the Melkites were Arabic-speaking Christians in the world of Islam who were nevertheless in communion with the Greek Orthodox whose faith they shared. If they were to be designated by an ethnic or linguistic label at all, which historically was never the case, they might well have been called the Arab Orthodox. The Crusaders called the Melkites Syri in Latin, for reasons which need not detain us now, but the fact that they used a distinctive name for them indicates that at that time they were still perceived to be a different community from the Greeks. After the time of the Crusades, and especially in Ottoman times, when the Greek Orthodox Church gained the upper hand over their coreligionists in the old Oriental Patriarchates, the Melkites were for all practical purposes subsumed into the Greek Orthodox Church. In modern times, adding to the terminological confusion, the old designation Melkite was co-opted after 1729 by the largely Arabic-speaking Melkite Greek Catholic Church, a community that in the eighteenth century came from the Orthodox Church into union with Rome.29

Maronites and Georgians

Along with the Melkites, whose theological and liturgical heritage was Greek and Aramaic/Syriac,30 there was another Syrac-speaking community prominent in Syria/Palestine in the early Islamic period, the Maronites whose heritage was the classical Edessan Syriac tradition. Like the Melkites, the Maronites also possessed the faith of Chalcedon. But some Maronites, according to several early Melkite writers, at least for a time had

also accepted the monothelitism supported by the emperor Heraclius’s 
Ecthesis in force between the years 638 and 648.31 However this may be, from 
the ecclesiastical point of view, albeit that they retained their own communal 
identity and hierarchical independence, the Maronites were coreligionists 
with the Melkites, and their theological positions were discussed in con-
junction with those of the Melkites even by the Muslim commentators. In 
the twelfth century (1182), the Maronites formally entered into communion 
with the see of Rome, with whom they had in fact never been at odds. 
This move then provided the sociological criterion for considering them a 
separate community of Christians in the world of Islam.32 But by this time 
the Melkites too were having identity problems, given their imminent 
absorption among the recently returned Greek Orthodox, as mentioned 
above.

Also in the Melkite milieu in the early Islamic period and sharing their 
creedal allegiance completely were the Georgians, like the Armenians a 
separate language community. They had a presence in the Holy Land from 
the middle of the fifth century onward. One of the most important contribu-
tions of the Georgian monks, particularly in the early Islamic period, was 
their activity as translators. Numerous texts, originally written in Greek and 
Arabic, have survived only because they have been preserved in Georgian 
translations.33 One of the most important Georgian texts to come out of 
this milieu and to survive to modern times is the so-called Palestinian-
Georgian Calendar.34 It is a unique document in that it offers us a first-
hand look at the liturgical practices of the see of Jerusalem in the period 
before the assertion of Byzantine Greek influence in the area, in the 
course of which the Melkite ecclesial identity was gradually eclipsed by that 
of the Greek Orthodox, and the Jerusalem church adopted the reformed 
liturgy of Constantinople.

The Muslims and Christian Ecumenism

Muslim observers of the Christian churches in their midst did their best to 
describe and understand the differences between the Melkites, Jacobites,

32 See Elias El-Hayek, “Struggle for Survival: The Maronites of the Middle Ages,” in Ger-
vers and Bikhaiz, Conversion and Continuity, 407–21; Harald Suermann, Die Grundzüge 
Geschichte der Maronitischen Kirche, Orientalia Biblica et Christiana, vol. 10 (Wiesbaden: 
Harriussowis, 1998).
33 See B. Peraud, “An Account of the Georgian Monks and Monasteries in Palestine,” 
34 See G. Garitte, Le Calendrier palestino-grecien du Sinaiticus 34 (Xe siècle) (Brussels: 

Oriental Christian Self-Definition

Nestorians, and their associated ecclesial communities. Two writers in par-
ticular, Abū Ḥabl al-Warrāq (d. ca. 860)35 and the Mu’tazilite Abū al-Jabbār 
al-Hamdānī (d. 1025),36 not to mention the Andalūsī scholar Ibn Ḥazm 
(994–1064),37 and others too numerous to mention here, discussed the 
varying doctrines in great detail in the context of their refutations of Chris-
tian beliefs and practices. The Muslim commentators noted that the three 
mainline Christian denominations agreed with one another on almost 
every point of doctrine, and that their theological divisions were predicated 
amost solely on their differing confessional formulas in the expression of 
their several views about how the union of the divine and the human in 
Christ may the most truthfully be stated. Arabic-speaking Christian writ-
ers were well aware of the same issue, though most of them went to great 
lengths in their Arabic works, in full view of the Muslims, vigorously to de-
defend the veracity of their own denomination’s formulas against those 
of their Christian adversaries. And it was in this process that the several 
churches came to what would be the enduring expressions of their differ-
cences. Nevertheless, there were also some ecumenists among the Christian 
writers who thought that in the face of the multiple challenges from Islam 
it would behove the Christians to look beyond their mutual differences 
for the sake of presenting a united defense of Christianity’s claim to be the 
true religion.

In the tenth century, the Melkite Abū ʿAlī Naṣīf ibn Yūnīm (d. after 983) 
wrote a treatise in which he proposed the then novel idea that Christians 
living among Muslims should come to some accord among themselves, 
recognizing that they do in fact confess the same faith, while they express 
it in different confessional formulas. The Copīt al-Mu’tāman ibn ʿAṣāl then 
took up this idea in the thirteenth century, and in his magisterial work in 
Arabic, the Summary of the Principles of Religion, relying on the Melkite 
Ibn Yūnīm’s suggestion, he explained how all the Christian communities 
and denominations in fact professed the same faith in Christ, albeit that 
they differed in their theologies.38 Mu’tāman also included quotations

See David Thomas, Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū Ḥabl al-Warrāq’s “Against 
the Trinity,” University of Cambridge Oriental Publications, no. 48 (Cambridge: Cambridge 
University Press, 1992); D. Thomas, Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity: Abū Ḥabl 
al-Warrāq’s “Against the Incarnation,” University of Cambridge Oriental Publications, no. 59 
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
36 See S. Stern, “Abū al-Jabbār’s Account of How Christ’s Religion Was Plausible by the 
Adoption of Roman Customs,” Journal of Theological Studies 19 (1968): 128–85; Willerd 
Gabriel Said Reynolds, A Muslim Theologian in the Secular Milieu: Abū al-Jabbār and the 
Critique of Christian Origins, Islamic History and Civilization, Studies and Texts, vol. 56 
37 See Theodore Palfiati, Excerpta at Polychemica Discorsi: Ibn Hazm on Jewish and Chris-
38 See Samir Khalil Samir, “Un traité du cheikh Abū ʿAlī Naṣīf ibn Yūnīm sur l’accord des
Public Christian Worship

Just as different Christological formulas served as internal identity markers among the several communities of Christians in the world of Islam, so did certain patterns of public religious behavior serve as external markers between Christians and Muslims. One of these, which often aroused the disdain of Muslims in early Islamic times, was the Christian practice of venerating the cross and the icons of Christ and the saints. In fact, there is a story told about Hunayn ibn Ishāq (d. 873), the Nestorian physician, philosopher, and translator, which nicely illustrates just how the practice of venerating icons could serve as a sure marker of a genuine Christian in the world of Islam. According to the story, which is presented as Hunayn’s autobiography, Hunayn had an enemy at the caliph’s court, a fellow Christian physician, Gabriel Bukhtishu’, who wanted to do him harm, so this enemy told the caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–61) that in spite of his pretense to the contrary Hunayn really was not a practicing Christian but “an atheist who believes neither in the oneness of God nor in the afterlife. He hides behind a mask of Christianity, but in fact denies God’s attributes and repudiates the prophets.”40 Bukhtishu’ tells the caliph that the proof of it would be that Hunayn would actually be willing to spit on an icon of Jesus and his mother Mary. Bukhtishu’ then convinced Hunayn that the caliph, having been given such an icon, was tormenting the Christians with it by asking them, “What do you think of it? Isn’t it the image of your god and his mother?”41 Then, according to Hunayn, the caliph gave the icon to Theodosius, but he says, “I want you to tell me how you deal with someone who spits on it.” Theodosius gives the following reply:

“If he is a Muslim, then there is no punishment, since he does not recognize its sanctity. Nevertheless, he should be made aware of it, reproved, and reproached—in accordance with the severity of the offense—so that he never does it again. If he is a Christian and ignorant, people are to reproach and rebuke him, and threaten him with awful punishments, and condemn him, until he repents. At any rate, only someone totally ignorant of religion would commit such an act. But should someone in full command of his own mind spit on this image, he spits on Mary, the Mother of God and on our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Hunayn goes on in the narrative to tell of the punishments he endured and of how in the end he was saved from his ignominy. But his story eloquently testifies to the sanctity of the icons among the Christians in his day and to how readily the icons served as moments of confrontation between Muslims and Christians. It was customary for Muslim polemists to charge Christians with idolatry on account of their veneration of crosses and icons. An early but anonymous Muslim controversialist put it as follows in his charge against a Christian correspondent:

“You extol the cross and the image. You kiss them, and you prostrate yourselves to them, even though they are what people have made with their own hands. They neither hear, nor see, nor do harm, nor bring

42 Ibid., 112.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 113–14.
any advantage. The most estimable of them among you are made of gold and silver. Such is what Abraham's people did with their images and idols.45

There are archaeological evidences of the destruction and defacement of Christian images in the early Islamic period due to the conflict with Muslims they aroused. There is also some evidence that Christians themselves may have altered or defaced some images to avoid trouble with the Muslims in this matter.46 And there were certainly Christians who because of the Muslim polemic against the veneration of crosses and icons began themselves to shy away from the practice out of a fear of public obloquy. Theodore Abū Qurrah himself wrote a tract in Arabic, drawing on the previous work of John of Damascus in his three discourses in Greek Against the Calumniators of the Holy Icons,47 to combat this very development as a pressing pastoral problem among his fellow Melkites. As Abū Qurrah explained it, someone had informed him of the fact that in the Church of the Holy Icon of Christ in Edessa48 there were Christians coming there to worship who were now unwilling to pay the customary veneration to the icon. He stated the problem this way:

Many Christians are abandoning prostration to the image of Christ . . . and to the images of his saints . . . because non-Christians, and especially those who claim to be in possession of a scripture sent down from God, rebuke them for their prostration to these images, and because of it impugn to them the worship of the idols, and the infringement of what God commanded in the Torah and the prophets, and they sneer at them.49


51 On the meaning and importance of the gibal for Muslims, to determine which they often engaged in some fairly complicated calculations, see A. J. Wensinck and D. A. King, “Kib"a," El, new ed., vol. 5, 82–88.

52 See, e.g., the matter discussed already in one of the earliest apologetic texts in Syriac, the dialogue of the monk of Bet Hall with a Muslim notable, Ḥayyūhūk Sīrāq; MS 95, f. 14. On this text see Sidney H. Griffith, “Disputing with Islam in Syriac: The Case of the Monk of Bet Hall and a Muslim Emir,” Hugoye 3, no. 1 (2000), http://syrcem.cua.edu/hugoye.
application of the stipulations included in the Covenant of 'Umar and other legal traditions that were meant to govern the statutory low profile the People of the Book were required to maintain in Islamic society after the payment of a special poll tax (al-jizyah, cf. al-Tawbah 9:29). Christians and Jews were publicly marked off from the Muslims by a number of social disabilities, sometimes including even a distinctive attire and distinguishing badges they were required to wear.

Over time, these measures, which were seldom consistently or systematically enforced, nevertheless by their very theoretical currency must have contributed substantively to the development of a subaltern mentality among Christians in the world of Islam. They may well have played a significant role in the well-attested, gradual, demographic decline of Christians in much of the Islamic world, which became apparent in the Mamluk period (1254–1517), when in consequence of the harsh attitude against the dhimmis population on the part of the rigorist thinker Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) and his colleagues about non-Muslims, all significant intellectual coloquy between Christians and Muslims in the world of Islam seems gradually to have diminished to insignificance. At this time Ibn Taymiyya, and others such as Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292–1350) and Taqi ad-Din as-Suhudi (1274–1355) to name only the most prominent thinkers, revived the much earlier opinion of the historian, Qur'an-commentator and traditionalist, al-Tabari (839–923), according to which Jews and Christians should be expelled not only from Arabic proper, but from any Muslim-dominated area.


in which the Muslims had no real need of the services of the dhimmis population.

The very mention of the legal disabilities that theoretically applied to Christians living within the Islamic polity forcefully reminds one that the profession of Christian faith amid the sorrows of Dhimmitude, which Islamic law and practice imposed on Jews and Christians, was a costly witness, and at times it entailed real martyrdom. While Christian martyrlogies in Syriac, Coptic, Arabic, and even Greek and Latin from the early Islamic period are not numerous, there are nevertheless some very important ones, which help the modern reader gain a better understanding of the sometimes precarious position of Christians in early Islamic society.

Christian Martyrs in the World of Islam

By the time of the Islamic conquest, Christians in the Roman Empire had already been seen as the age of the martyrs as definitely in the past; it was the time before Constantine had taken the first step early in the fourth century in the process that would lead eventually to the establishment of Christianity as the religion of the empire. But with the establishment of Islam in the territories of the Oriental Patriarchates as a consequence of the Islamic conquest in the seventh century, Christians in fact came face to face with the first comprehensive, official rejections of the principal doctrines of their religion since the days of the anti-Christian polemicists, Celsius (fl. ca. 178), Prophryr (ca. 232–ca. 303), and Julian the Apostate (332–363), who had all written powerful works against Christian faith some four hundred years in the past. And as was the case in the earlier instance in the Roman Empire, so too in Islamic times did the new, Muslim polemicists have the power of their government behind them. For example, it seems that the Muslim scholar Abū ʻUthmān Amr ibn Bahr al-Jābih (777–867), who was also a prominent literary figure in his day, wrote his well-known essay, "Refutation of the Christians" (Kušub ar-radd 'alā 'umāratā) expressly at the request of the caliph al-Munawwakli (r. 847–861), who was one of the first Abbasid caliphs systematically to promote specifically anti-Christian policies throughout the caliphate. In these circumstances, conditions were
once again ripe for deadly confrontations between Christians and the authorities of the government over matters of religious faith. Unlike the case in the pre-Constantinian, late Roman Empire, there was no general persecution of Christians as such in the Islamic world. Rather, to the contrary there were even some legal protections for them as People of the Book, albeit that amid the sorrows of Dhimmihude, at various times and places in particular circumstances Christians and Jews were in fact victims of violence and massacre. On these occasions it was often the case that the causes of violence were an amalgam of social, political, economic, and even ethnic hostilities affecting the pursuit of power, and not religion as such, although religion may often have been an aggravating factor. Sometimes in these circumstances, because of their perceived implication in these hostilities, local Christians and other People of the Book were deemed by some Muslim authorities to have forfeited the statutory protection (dhimmihude) otherwise normally guaranteed to them in virtue of their payment of the special poll tax (al-fiyahhah) and general maintenance of a low social profile as the Qur'an demands of them (al-Tawbah 9:29). So, while Christians were certainly sometimes the victims of atrocities at the hands of Muslims, which are a matter of historical record in the chronicles written in Syriac and Arabic in the early Islamic period, Christians were not normally subject to outright persecution in the world of Islam simply by reason of being Christian. Nevertheless, there were Christian martyrs in early Islamic times who suffered at the hands of Muslim authorities; they are often called "neomartyrs" to distinguish them from those who underwent their trials during the earlier, pre-Constantinian Age of Martyrs.

One of the earliest neomartyrs whose story is preserved in Syriac chronicles was Cyrus of Harran (d. 770). His situation is particularly instructive, and illustrative, of the complications one often finds in the Christian martyrology composed in the world of Islam, because it highlights the social ambiguities that commonly abound in these accounts. As was the case in other such narratives from a later time, it emerges from this story that from the point of view of the Muslim authorities, Cyrus was executed not for being a Christian but for having been an apostate from Islam, albeit that his testimony was cherished by Christians as that of a martyr because of his willingness to suffer even the penalty of death for his adherence to the Christian faith. It appears that earlier in his life, for reasons that are no longer clear, but that one account characterizes as due to "some passion," Cyrus had in fact become a Muslim, and this circumstance is what put his life in jeopardy with the Muslim authorities when he reconverted to Christianity. Since he refused to rectify his lapse from Islam, he was thereafter sentenced to death, the statutory penalty for apostasy in the Islamic legal system. This situation in turn introduced a new consideration into the Christian conception of martyrdom, one that put the accent on the personal testimony of the martyr and his disparagement of Islam rather than on the persecutor's direct challenge to the martyr's Christian faith. It would become a standard feature of most Christian martyrologies from the Islamic world.

While Christian martyrologies written originally in Arabic are not numerous, there are a half-dozen of them surviving from the early period in Greek, Georgian, Armenian, and Arabic, mostly from the Melkite community in Syria/Palestine. They are precious sources of information about the difficulties between Muslims and Christians in the early Islamic period. In all six of them, as in the case of the Syriac account of the ordeal of Cyrus of Harran, conversion from Islam to Christianity emerges as a central problem in the narratives. Three of the martyrs reportedly lost their lives precisely because they were apostates from Islam. In the accounts of the other three martyrs, the protagonists, in addition to reviling Islam, the Qur'an, and Muhammad, were all engaged in attempts to persuade Muslims to convert to Christianity, especially those who had recently apostatized from the church. And of course, independently of their historical verisimilitude, which by all accounts is very high, the narratives themselves became an important part of the effort on the part of the churchmen of the time to strengthen the faith of Christians tempted to convert to Islam. In the narratives that recount the martyrs' exploits there is usually a report...
of an interview between the martyr and a caliph, an emir, or some other Muslim official, in which the martyr takes the opportunity of his moment in the public eye to give instructive on the rudiments of the Christian faith, along with a declaration of what he considers to be the shortcomings of Islam as a candidate to be the true religion. It is tempting to think that these martyrs’ speeches were in fact among the circumstances that enhanced the popularity of a distinct genre of apologetics among Christians in the early Islamic period that I call the Monk in the Emir’s Majlis; most of the widely distributed texts of popular apologetics in the early period were in this genre, or one closely related to it, and the earliest exponents in Arabic have martyrological settings.

One Christian martyr narrative from among the Melkites, surviving in both Greek and Arabic, from early ‘Abbasid times, is surely completely legendary. It tells of a king who converts from Islam to Christianity, and who loses his life in testimony to his new Christian faith. In the Arabic recension of the story he is identified as none other than the caliph al-Ma’mūn (r. 813–33). The circulation of this story in the Christian community in the Islamic world reminds the modern reader that the martyr accounts served many purposes beyond just the memorial of the sufferings of individuals who gave their lives in testimony to their faith. In the communities in which these were read, such narratives also fulfilled the social function of strengthening the resolve and confidence of members of a social and religious minority by suggesting that in regard to their truth claims and their moral rectitude the martyrs and their coreligionists really were, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, superior to those in power over them, a superiority that even members of the oppressor class were themselves sometimes depicted in the martyrologies as being willing to confess.


68 See Griffith, “The Life of Theodors of Edessa,” 159–60. See also Mark N. Swanson, “The Christian ‘Abdu’llah Tradition,” in Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule: Church Life and Scholarship in Abbasid Iraq, ed. David Thomas, 63–92 (Leiden: Brill, 2005). Another martyr’s narrative with similar features, but from a different Islamic milieu from that of the Melkites, is the Bohairic account of the martyrdom of the Copt, John of ‘Phanijjīt, in Cairo in Ayyubid times. Like a number of the other neomartyrs, John had converted to Islam and then, having repented, reconciled to Christianity, thereby making him liable to Muslim eyes to the death penalty for the crime of apostasy from Islam. From a Christian perspective, the author of the martyrology presents John as being acutely conscious of the moral pollution he had incurred in his life by his conversion to Islam. In his response to the queries of the sultan, who actively searches for ways to save John’s life and who proposes a number of worldly inducements to secure a happy solution to the seeming legal impasse, John is reported to have replied, “I need neither gold nor garment nor horse nor wealth. Rather, I am a polluted man. May my lord the king purify me with his sword, or grant me the favor of my faith.”

In the account of John’s arrest, trial, and execution, the Coptic author presented the story, embellished with details that highlight the martyr’s Christian goodness and sincerity, and these qualities are portrayed as winning the admiration even of his Muslim captors and guards. Contrarwise, the narrative puts an accent on what Christians would regard as the negative moral qualities of Islamic life and religious practice. In this way the author provides the Christian reader with what Jason Zaborowski calls a “hidden transcript.” He points out that this transcript articulates the narrative in Christian terms that effectively invert the dominant, Islamic ideology under which the Copts were living. It transforms the narrative into an expression of Coptic, Christian values that are shown to undercut the moral claims of Islam at the same time as it encourages Christians to be true to their faith, even under duress. The text is therefore a particularly good example of the ways in which all the accounts of the neomartyrs written by Christians living within the world of Islam had the potential to reaffirm and shore up the sense of Christian solidarity in times and places in which their public confessional identity was almost submerged under the social and cultural weight of Islam.

The Martyrs of Cordoba

Perhaps the most well known of all the accounts of Christian martyrs in the world of Islam comes from a community we have not much discussed. It


70 Zaborowski, The Coptic Martyrdom, 105.

71 See the important introductory chapter in ibid., 11–34.
is the story of the martyrs of Cordoba in Spain, who suffered during the 850s. Their story is told in Latin by Euphrosus of Cordoba/Toledo (ca. 859), one who himself joined their number a short time after the events he recounted. We learn of the times and their challenges from Euphrosus’s friend and biographer, Paulus Alvarus (d. 860), who described the cultural situation of the Christians in Islamic Spain in his own day as follows:

My fellow Christians delight in the poems and romances of the Arabs; they study the works of Mohammadan theologians and philosophers not in order to refute them, but to acquire correct and elegant Arabic style. Where today can a layman be found who reads the Latin commentaries on Holy Scriptures? Who is there that studies the Gospels, the prophets, the Apostles? Alas, the young Christians who are most conspicuous for their talents have no knowledge of any literature or language save the Arabic... The pity of it! Christians have forgotten their own tongue, and scarce one in a thousand can be found to be able to compose in fair Latin to a friend.

Being painfully conscious of this high degree of enculturation into the life of the world of Islam on the part of their Christian contemporaries, in the decade of the 850s some fifty monks and others put themselves forward for martyrdom in Cordoba by publicly denouncing Islam, ridiculing the Qur’ân, and insulting the prophet Muhammad. The Muslim authorities are portrayed in the accounts as being reluctant to impose the death penalty; they delay the proceedings and offer numerous opportunities for those determined to be martyrs to think better of their purposes. Nevertheless, in the end these Christians were executed. Their purpose in pressing the issue was publicly to affirm their faith and openly to reject Islam, as well as to impugn the claims to religious credibility of the Qur’ân and the prophet Muhammad. The martyrs’ actions created controversy among the local Christians themselves, at least some of whom thought that forcing the issue in this way was contrary to the true spirit of the ancient martyrs, who had not sought confrontation with the pagan authorities, but when arrested and brought to trial had accepted death rather than to forsake their faith. Some Christians of Andalusia seem also to have thought that the actions of the Cordoba martyrs were counterproductive to the mis-


67 It may well have been the case that the Franciscans who sought martyrdom at the hands of Muslims in North Africa in the early thirteenth century were inspired by the martyrs of Cordoba. See John V. Toland, Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 214–23.


words bemoaning the progress of Arabic among talented young Christians have just been quoted above. For the rest, it seems that it was not until the eleventh and twelfth centuries, after the fall of Toledo in 1085, that Christians again wrote apologetic or polemical works in Arabic in Spain in response to the religious challenge of Islam. An interesting feature of these latter day texts is the debt they owe to the Arabic Christian literature of the East that seems to have been readily available to Christians in Spain at that time.\footnote{See Burnet, Religious Polemic, chs. 14, 15, 16–27. See also, for the earlier period, Dominique Millot-Gérard, Chrétiens mauresques et culture islamique dans l’Espagne des VIIIe–IXe siècles (Paris: Édouard Champion, 1984).} While we know of the existence of many more of them, barely a half-dozen of these Arabic Christian texts composed in Spain have come down to us, the rest having fallen victim, one supposes, to the vicissitudes of the religious and cultural antipathies of the Reconquista and its aftermath.

Christians in Islamic Spain shared many of the experiences of their coreligionists in the East, including the formation of a distinct social identity that afterward made them seem foreign and suspect to their own coreligionists living beyond the borders of Islam. This is one of the reasons why the heritage of the Arabic-speaking Christians has so often failed to come to the notice of western Christians over the centuries. But in the case of Muslim Spain, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the failure of westerners to know much about the Christians of the world of Islam, a romantic legend about the glories of a harmonious and tolerant convivencia between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Andalusia in Islamic times, and in Toledo after the Christian conquest of that city in 1085, has relatively recently captured the popular imagination.\footnote{See, e.g., Maria Rosa Menocal, The Ornaments of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002); Roger Garaudy, L’Islam en occident: Cordoue, capitale du peuple (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997). Some writers, while taking cognizance of the Christians’ endurance of Dhimmitude in this milieu, nevertheless still somewhat wishfully speak of an age of enlightenment or of a dialogue of cultures. See Chris Lowery, A Vanished World: Medieval Spain’s Golden Age of Enlightenment (New York: Free Press, 2005); Hans Küng, Der Islam: Geschichte, Gegenwart, Zukunft (Munich and Zurich: Piper, 2004), 461–68; Stephen O’Shea, Sea of Faith: Islam and Christianity in the Medieval Mediterranean World (New York: Walker, 2006).} In this connection, it is important to remember the observations of the historian who is reportedly the one who first used the felicitous term convivencia to describe the modes of mutual accommodation that obtained between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Spain in Islamic times.\footnote{See Wissevitch, Infidel, 67.} Américo Castro wrote that, “Each of the three peoples of the peninsula [Christians, Moors, Jews] saw itself forced to live for eight centuries together with the other two at the same time it pas-}

sionately desired their extermination.”\footnote{Américo Castro, The Structure of Spanish History, trans. Edmund L. King (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), 54–55. See the important historiographical study of Alex Novikoff, “Between Tolerance and Intolerance in Medieval Spain: An Historiographic Enigma,” Medieval Encounters 11 (2005): 7–36.} Furthermore, Castro underlined the fact that the peaceful coexistence these communities enjoyed was very much determined by the stipulations of Islamic law regarding protected minorities. He wrote, “Those who did not disturb the peace of the Saracens were allowed to enjoy their own peace in the Saracen cities... Spanish tolerance was the result of a modus vivendi, not of a theology.”\footnote{Castro, Structure of Spanish History, 225 and 226.}

While the situation of the Christians in al-Andalus was a special one, and given the fact that Américo Castro used the concept of convivencia as a methodological principle for plotting the course of what he considered to be the determining factors in Spanish history, the term has nevertheless taken on a life of its own in the contemporary parlance of historians and those concerned with interreligious dialogue. To the degree that we may appropriate it to refer to the modes of accommodation reached between the dominant Islamic polity and the subaltern religious communities (Jews and Christians) in the wider world of Islam in Abbasid times (750–1258), the term and concept of convivencia seems particularly apt to evoke the intellectual and social history of those Christians who not only came to a new expression of their own traditions in Arabic, but in the process also made essential contributions to the growth and development of the cultural cycle of Islam.
VII

BETWEEN THE CRESCENT AND THE CROSS

CONVIVENCIA, THE CLASH OF THEOLOGIES,
AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Intertwined Religious Discourses

When the Christians living in the territories that came under Islamic rule during the first century after the death of the prophet Muhammad (ca. 570–632) eventually adopted the Arabic language, beginning for some of them as early as the second half of the eighth century, although they took up Arabic for their own purposes, they also by that very fact opened a public channel of communication with the Muslims about religion and culture. The ensuing conversation was both indirect and direct. It was indirect in the sense that Christian theology, and apologetics in Arabic addressed primarily to Christians, was nevertheless readily available to the perusal of Muslims by reasons of its being in the Arabic language. The conversation was direct in that among the Christian Arabic texts from the early Islamic period some of them were in fact openly addressed to Muslims. Muslim scholars in their turn sometimes responded by name to texts written by Christian authors; and sometimes they wrote about Christian doctrines and practices and developed their own Islamic theology in ways that indicated they were very familiar with the Christian texts. But communication between Christians and Muslims was not the only result of the adoption of Arabic by Christians. The use of the Arabic language also provided the opportunity for the development of Christian theology in a new key, within a new frame of reference and with new challenges for Christian apologists.

One of the most persistent problems to be faced by the Christian Arabic

writers whose works were mentioned in earlier chapters was the challenge of how to express the distinctive teachings of Christianity in an Arabic idiom in which the religious vocabulary had already acquired strong Islamic overtones. As Kenneth Cragg so aptly put it, when Christians in the caliphate outside of the Arabian Peninsula began speaking Arabic, they found themselves “bound over to a language that is bound over to Islam.”1

In addition to this difficulty, there were also numerous accompanying problems in translating the technical terms of Christian theology from their original Greek and Syriac into Arabic. The translators of Greek philosophical texts into Arabic faced similar problems, and in both instances the Arabic words and phrases chosen to render the technical terms took on nuances as translation terms that reached well beyond their usual ranges of meaning, and for this reason they were likely to be unintelligible to the general reader who would come across them in their new contexts.

Most Arabic Christian writers in the formative period of Islamic history strove to translate and to clarify the doctrines and distinctive confessional formulas of their several denominations in their Arabic treatises and tracts, rather than to rethink in the Islamic milieu how best to articulate the Christian message anew. Some modern Christian historians and theologians have faulted the early apologists for this option. These commentators view it as a lost opportunity on the part of the early Arabic Christian writers; they could have chosen to reformulate Gospel Christianity in the new Arabic idiom in view of the challenges of the Qur'an, rather than to have imported the divisions and obscurities of an earlier Christian era into the new world order.2 But as we have argued in the previous chapter, it was only in Islamic times that the several denominations of the Christians in the Middle East actually came into full and enduring expression of their identities as distinct Christian communities. So one must ask the question, did not the Arabization of Christianity in the early Islamic period pave the way for a clash of theologies more than it offered the newly Arabic-speaking Christians an opportunity for new developments in the presentation and expression of their most basic doctrines?

On one level it is certainly true that a clash of theologies characterized the relationships between Muslims and Christians in the early Islamic period, in the sense that their shared reasoning issued in radically opposed

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3 See, e.g., Cragg, The Arab Christian, where this point of view is one of the author’s principal themes.
conclusions on major religious topics. But on another level it is also true that the dialogue between them, which the public culture they shared made possible, also allowed them to discuss together such issues as the ontological status of the divine attributes, or the effects of the acts of the divine will on human freedom, in ways that mutually influenced the shape of their communities’ discourse on these and other topics on their shared discussion agenda. The early development of the Islamic *'ilm al-kalam, for example, certainly betrays its debt to earlier Christian topics and modes of discourse. But at the same time, early Christian apologetic texts in Arabic in their turn also clearly show their debt to the methods and manners of the Muslim *mantiq al-kitāb as well as to the list of their conventional topics of conversation. So, on a deeper level, in the formative period of Islamic thought in the ‘Abbasid era, before the disruptive incursions into the Arab world from both the Mongol East and the Latin West in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there really was in some measure a community of discourse about religion between Muslims and Christians in spite of the clash of their theologies, and in spite of the civil and social disabilities under which the Christians, together with the Jews and other religious minorities, lived.\footnote{See Shlomo Pines, “Some Traits of Christian Theological Writing in Relation to Muslim *Kalam and to Jewish Thought,” in Shlomo Pines, Studies in the History of Arabic Philosophy, The Collected Works of Shlomo Pines, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996), 108–25, 79–99; C. H. Becker, “Christian Polemic and the Formation of Islamic Dogma,” in Muslims and Greeks in Early Islamic Society, ed. Robert Hoyland, 18: 245–57, The Formation of the Classical Islamic World (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004).}

Similarly, the early ‘Abbasid translation movement in which so many Christians participated, as well as the scientific and philosophical circles that flourished in Baghdad in the same and subsequent centuries, in which Christian and Muslim scholars so often worked together, were responsible for introducing into the intellectual fabric of the Islamic world a measure of Hellenism that would leave its permanent mark there. All of these developments testify to the important role Christians played in the elaboration of the classical culture of the Islamic world in its first flowering.\footnote{See Munlim A. Sirky, “Early Muslim-Christian Dialogue: A Closer Look at Major Themes of the Theological Encounter,” Islamic and Christian-Muslim Relations 16 (2005): 451–76. And see also the pertinent essays in Barbara Roggema et al., eds., The Three Kings: Textual Studies in the Historical Dialogue of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2005).}

In the early centuries of Islam, there was a certain esprit de community among Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars on some levels, which bound them together in the deeper structures of their cultural and intellectual lives in spite of the clash of their theologies and the wall of *Dhimmitude, which held them in different and even opposite social and religious allegiances.\footnote{On this theme, see especially Roger Arnaldus. À la croisée des trois monothéismes: Une communauté de pensée au Moyen Âge (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993). See also Arnaldus, Three Messengers for One God, trans. G. W. Schlabach et al. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).}

Already in the earliest phase of the process of Islam’s self-definition in its distinct religious identity, the preexisting Jewish and Christian realms of discourse provided both the template and the foil for so much of what would become the characteristically Islamic exegetical and liturgical idiom. Even earlier, the Qur’ān itself in its origins obviously participated in a dialogue of the scriptures, with the Torah, the Psalms, the Prophets, and the Gospel named in the Qur’ān as the partners of record in the conversation.\footnote{See John Wansbrough, The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Uzi Robin, Between Bible and Qur’ān: The Children of Israel and the Islamic Self-Image (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1999).} While the Qur’ān definitely offers a critique of Jews, Christians, and others in terms of the actual state of their religion, it also presumes in its audience a familiarity with biblical narratives, as well as with other aspects of Jewish and Christian lore, faith, and practice. In short, the Qur’ān and early Islam are literally unthinkable outside of the Judeo-Christian milieu in which Islam was born and grew to its maturity.

In spite of the clash of theologies that the Jewish and Christian adoption of Arabic in the early Islamic period made evident within the Islamic world itself, the underlying sibling relationship and history of commonality between the three communities of faith are also unmistakable. This history’s claim to be the imperative ground for interreligious dialogue between Jews, Christians, and Muslims seems to be unimpeachable, especially since it is a fact that even through the long centuries of mutual hostilities the fortunes of the three communities have become, if anything, even more irrevocably intertwined.\footnote{See John Reeves, ed., Bible and Qur’ān: Essays in Scriptural Intersectuality, Symposium Series, no. 24 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).}

In the early centuries of Islam, there was a certain community of interests between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars on some levels, which bound them together in the deeper structures of their cultural and intellectual lives in spite of the clash of their theologies and the wall of *Dhimmitude, which held them in different and even opposed social and religious allegiances.\footnote{The best single source and reference book for the history of Christian/Muslim relations is undoubtedly J. M. Gaudenç, Encounters and Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History, 2 vols., Collection "Studi arabo-islamici del PISA" no. 15 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d’Islamistica, 2000).}
The Qur’an and Dialogue

The Qur’an envisions a continuous dialogue between Muslims and Christians, and while dialogue, understood as simply conversation between two or more partners, is not always agreeable or friendly, it is nevertheless communication. Indeed, the Qur’an presumes the priority of the Torah and the Gospel and insists that in reference to the earlier divine revelations it is itself “a corroborating scripture in the Arabic language to warn wrong doers and to announce good news to those who do well” (al-’Alaq 46:12). In the Qur’an, God then advises the Muslims, “If you are in doubt about what We have sent down to you, ask those who were reading scripture before you” (al-Qur’ān 10:94). Further, the Qur’an assumes that the dialogue between Jews, Christians, and Muslims will sometimes even take the form of arguments about religion, for one passage says, “Do not dispute with the People of the Book save in the fairest way,” except for those who are evil doers. And say: ‘We believe in what has been sent down to us and what has been sent down to you. Our God and your God are one and to Him we are submissive’” (al-’Ankabūt 29:46). In this context of dispute between Jews, Christians, and Muslims the Qur’an foresees that the disputants will want to put forward proof texts from the scriptures in support of their contentions. In this connection the Qur’an has advice for the Muslims: “They say: ‘None will enter Paradise except those who are Jews and Christians.’ Such are their vain wishes. Say: ‘Bring forth your proof of bukhānakum if you are truthful’” (al-Baqā‘arah 2:111). Here the proof envisioned is precisely proof from scripture. These and similar passages are the texts that corroborate the presumption that the Qur’an envisions a continuous interreligious conversation between the Muslims and the ‘Scripture People’ (Ahī al-kitāb).

There is one Qur’anic narrative in particular in which the occasion of the revelation of a passage, according to Islamic tradition, was the visit of some Christian notables from the south Arabian town of Najrān to Muhammad in Medina. On that occasion the discussion between them had turned to the subject of Jesus, the Messiah, and to the question of what is the truth concerning him. It reminds one of Jesus’ own question to his disciples, “Who do men say that the Son of Man is?” (Matthew 16:13). According to Islamic tradition, the Christian delegation from Najrān turned away from the challenge to engage in the ancient ceremony of mutual and formally calling God’s curse down (muskāhālah) upon whichever of the two parties was not speaking truthfully on that occasion in Medina when the question as to the true identity of the Messiah was put. Louis Massignon (1883–1962) thought that St. Francis of Assisi restored the balance in this matter when in the magistri of the Ayyūbid sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil (r. 1218–38) at Damietta in 1219 he challenged the faith of the sultan and even underwent ordeals of fire unscathed, according to some tellings of the story. But this interpretation overlooks the witness of

to the traditional account, on this occasion the following verses came down to Muhammad:

Jesus in God’s sight is like Adam; He created him from dust, then said to him: “Be,” and there he was. [This is] the truth from your Lord; so do not be one of the doubters. To those who dispute about it after the knowledge which has come to you, say: “Come now, let us call our sons and your sons, our wives and your wives, ourselves and yourselves. Then let us invoke a malediction (nabakāhīl) and so bring God’s curse on those not telling the truth.” (al-Mundhir 3:59–61)

This Qur’anic evocation of the occasion of a Muslim/Christian encounter during Muhammad’s lifetime certainly does not reflect a friendly, interreligious dialogue. Rather, the conversation is confrontational and the prophet is instructed to issue a challenge to the visiting Christians of Najrān; it is an instance of the Qur’an’s critique of a central Christian doctrine, the doctrine of the Incarnation. And in that very capacity, it may serve as a Qur’anic icon for the character of the Christian/Muslim dialogue that took place within the world of Islam after the Islamic conquest and after the Christians in the occupied territories adopted the Arabic language. In the interim, Muslims challenged and critiqued major points of Christian faith, and Christians responded vigorously in defense of their defining doctrines and practices. It is interesting to note in this connection that while the Qur’anic text invokes malediction and curse, it nevertheless also on the face of it, once the adversaries would have staked their lives and those of their loved ones on their own steadfastness in faith, leaves the judgment between the two parties in this matter in the hands of God.

According to Islamic tradition, the Christian delegation from Najrān turned away from the challenge to engage in the ancient ceremony of mutual and formally calling God’s curse down (muskāhālah) upon whichever of the two parties was not speaking truthfully on that occasion in Medina when the question as to the true identity of the Messiah was put. Louis Massignon (1883–1962) thought that St. Francis of Assisi restored the balance in this matter when in the magistri of the Ayyūbid sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil (r. 1218–38) at Damietta in 1219 he challenged the faith of the sultan and even underwent ordeals of fire unscathed, according to some tellings of the story. But this interpretation overlooks the witness of

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Christian intellectual life in the intervening centuries in Syriac and Arabic in response to the religious challenge of Islam, as well as the testimonies of the Christian neo-Manichaics, who in Islamic times might also be considered to have taken up the Qur'ān's challenge to testify to the Gospel truth as they believed it to be.

The Religion of Abraham

The Qur'ān also puts forward a *theologoumenon* that many in modern times have taken to be a helpful one in the search for a foundation on which to build a certain solidarity of faith between the People of the Book, the Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims, which might prompt them to engage in interreligious dialogue with a sense of developing a relationship with one another that is warranted in scripture. It is the idea that the "religion of Abraham" that precedes them all in time, somehow also scripturally unites them. The Qur'ān asks, "Who has a better religion than (din) than one who submits himself to God, does right and follows the true religion (mil-lah) of Abraham the 'faithful gentle' (ḥānīf)?" God has taken Abraham as a friend (kahtīlān) (aw-Nisāʾ 4:125). As it happens, one can find the epithet "God's friend" applied to Abraham in the scriptures of all three communities. In the Hebrew Bible there is the phrase, "But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, offspring of Abraham my friend..." (Isaiah 41:8); and in the New Testament there is the statement, "You also see how the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as justice' (Genesis 15:6); for this he received the title 'God's friend'" (James 2:23).

The Qur'ān says further, "Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian (naṣrāniyyas), but a 'faithful gentle' (ḥanīf) and a musīlim. And he was not one of the polytheists (al-musūribiñin) (A l-Imrān 3:67). In this passage, while the adjective musīlim is transliterated with a lower case "m" to indicate that here it means "one who is submissive," and not that Abraham was a "Muslim," there is in fact no upper- or lowercase lettering in Arabic, and so many Muslims would naturally hear it to mean simply that the patriarch was a Muslim avant la lettre, in the same way that the early Chris-

18 Eusebius wrote that, "Even if we are clearly now, and this really fresh name of Christians is recently known among all nations, nevertheless our life and method of conduct, in accordance with the precepts of religion, has not been recently invented by us, but from the first creation of man, so to speak, has been upheld by the natural concepts of the men of old who were the friends of God...especially Abraham...If the line be traced back from Abraham to the first man, anyone who should describe those who have obtained a good testimony for righteousness, as Christians in fact, if not in name, would not show wide of the truth...To that it must clearly be held that the announcement to all the Gentiles, recently made through the teaching of Christ, is the very first and most ancient and ancient discovery of true religion by Abraham and those lovers of God who followed him...Faces show that at the present moment it is only among Christians throughout the whole world that the manner of religion which was Abraham's can actually be found in practice." Eusebius of Caesarea, The Ecclesiastical History, trans. Kessell, and Lake, and E. R. Laurel, The Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 4:1, 41-65.


in the early Islamic period had their own, very different, approaches to the Qur'an.

**Arab Christians and the Qur'an**

The Qur'an was obviously a major text in the world of the Arabophone Christians, and in their works one can distinguish two levels of its presence. On the one hand, and without any pertinent comment by them on the phenomenon, their Christian Arabic texts are replete with words and phrases from the Qur'an that had entered the common parlance of the Arabic-speaking people long before the time when Christians living in the conquered territories adopted the Arabic language. On the other hand, some Arab Christian writers explicitly discussed the Qur'an and quoted from it. Some of them depicted the Qur'an as a flawed scripture, and they detailed its shortcomings. Others, in the course of their arguments with Muslims, appealed to texts from the Qur'an, sometimes citing it by name, sometimes not; they cited it both in witness of the truth of their polemics against Islam, and even in testimony to the truth of the Christian positions they were defending.

Two texts of the ninth century in particular present the Qur'an in its canonical form as an incredible scripture. One of them, the ingenious Christian legend of the monk Bahārī, in both its Syriac and Arabic versions, suggests that the Qur'an was originally a Christian book that an errant monk had dictated to Muhammad. At one point, at the end of one section of the narrative, the monk says:

Many other things I wrote for him, too numerous to mention, by which I sought to turn him to believe in the truth and a recognition of the coming of the Messiah into the world, and the condemnation of the Jews in regard to that which they say of our Lord, the true Messiah.

In the sequel, the writer says that Jews ultimately subverted the monk's original intentions, and he accuses the renowned, early Jewish convert to Islam, Ka'b al-Āshbār, of having distorted the original Christian text of the Qur'an into the canonical Islamic one, which is therefore flawed and unreliable. In this way the author of the legend sought to reverse the customary Islamic charge against the Jews and Christians of the distortion and

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...corruption (ṣatābīf) of the Torah and the Gospel, and in the process he also explains why the Qur'an is now an incredible scripture.

On a more directly polemical note, another Arab Christian writer of the ninth century, the author of the legendary correspondence between al-Hīšāmi, the Muslim, and al-Kindī, the Christian, building on the allegations contained in the Christian Bahārī legend, engaged in a comprehensive polemical against the Qur'an that was designed to demonstrate its utter failure as a credible divine scripture. He discussed its origins, its collection after the death of Muhammad, and the claims made by early Muslim writers about the inimitability of its text (i'jās al-Qur'ān). Of all the Arab Christian works that have come down to us, this anonymous polemical contains the most negative attack against the authenticity and the credibility of the Qur'an as a prophetic text. With this work in the background, it may then come as a surprise for the modern reader to learn that other Christian writers in the early Islamic period actually quoted the Qur'an in their apologetic works for its probative value.

In one of the earliest Christian Arabic texts we know, the work its modern editor called *On the Triune Nature of God,* a text composed some time in the second half of the eighth century, the now unknown author evoked the Qur'an in two remarkable ways. First of all, he composed an introduction to his own work, in which he modeled his Arabic diction on the prosody of the Qur'an, interweaving unmistakably Qur'ānic themes and expressions into the text. Second, in the section of the work in which he cited passages from the scriptures in witness of the veracity of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity he included quotations from the Qur'an, without

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31 On this work, which was briefly discussed in an earlier chapter, see Bénédicte Landro, *Chrétiens et Musulmans en Irak: Attitudes Nostalgiques vers-vois de l'Élam*, Études Chrétiennes Arabes (Paris: Carlspris, 1994), 78-89.


33 There is a record that Abu Nūh al-Āshbārī, a contemporary and supporter of Patriarch Timothy I, wrote a "Refutation of the Qurʾān" (*Taḥṣīl al-Qurʾān*). While this work was reportedly examined at the turn of the twelfth century, in a manuscript of the late thirteenth century in the Shāh collection, no more has since been heard of it in the scholarly literature. See Landro, *Chrétiens et Musulmans en Irak*, 53-54.

course of their arguments to show the truth of the doctrine of the Incarnation, a number of Melkite writers evoked the following verse of the Qur’an: “It is not given to any mortal that Allah should speak to him, except by revelation or from behind a veil (min wara'i bi hijabin) (asb-Shur'ah 42:51). The apologists suggested that the veil the Qur’an mentions is none other than the human nature of the Messiah, from behind which the Son of God, God the Word, addressed mankind.39

Christian apologists were certainly aware that Muslim scholars put entirely different interpretations upon the quotations from the Qur’an, which the Christians appropriated for use in their arguments in support of the credibility of Christian doctrines. But the apologists could nevertheless suggest, at least to their own coreligionists, that on the face of it, the Qur’an’s text, when taken out of its own Islamic hermeneutical frame of reference, could bear alternate interpretations, which could plausibly be advanced from a Christian perspective. This exercise did not involve the presumption on the part of the Christian writers in Arabic in the early Islamic period that the Qur’an was in their view a genuine scripture, containing divine revelation on the level of the Bible. Nevertheless, they could and did make use of its authority in the Arabic-speaking milieu to commend the veracity of the Christian doctrines that were in dispute between themselves and their Muslim interlocutors.

Christian Belies Lettres in Arabic

We have heretofore spoken almost exclusively of the religious, philosophical, and theological components of Christian Arabic culture in the early Islamic period. While these concerns are the dominant ones in the surviving literature, one must not forget to mention in passing that Christians also composed works of a literary character in Arabic. The earliest and most famous of these are undoubtedly the poems of Ghyath ibn Ghashib ibn Salt al-Akhthal (ca. 640–ca. 710), a Christian Arab of the tribe of Taghibi whose language echoed that of the pre-Islamic Arabic poets.40 He flourished in the milieu of the Umayyad caliphs, whose praise he sang in his verses.41 While in hagiographic sources al-Akhthal is reported to have had an association with the younger St. John of Damascus (d. ca. 749), his po-

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39 See the discussion of the allusion to this verse in Melkite texts in Swanson, “Beyond Proof-Texting,” and Griffith, “Answers for the Shaykh.”
etry reveals little if any religious concern, be it Christian or Muslim; he was a panegyrist whose colleagues were the early Muslim court poets. Nevertheless, al-Akhqal may be claimed as one of the earliest, if not the earliest, Arab Christian writer whose name we know. Unlike most of the later Christian Arabic writers, his work has a permanent place in the larger canon of classical Arabic literature.

Another Christian poet, from a much later time, whose Arabic works are now available for modern readers, is the Palestinian Salamīn al-Ghazālī, who flourished during the last years of the tenth and the early years of the eleventh century. Along with more conventional works of Melkite theology, Salamīn composed haunting poems of grief and religious fervor, which often evoke memories of the Holy Land and pilgrimage to the biblical loca sancta. Unfortunately, none of his works has been translated into a modern western language, a circumstance that highlights the neglect that continues to plague the memory of the Christians of the world of Islam among their coreligionists outside of the Middle East.

In addition to poetry, Christian authors also composed works in other literary genres. One of the most popular of these is the Arabic magāmah, a prose work of fiction that usually focuses on the exploits of a single, tricksterlike character whose wit and hidden wisdom exposes the foibles of rich, learned, or well-placed members of society. It came into prominence in the eleventh century, its most popular representations being found in the well-known works of the slightly later writer, Muḥammad al-Qāsim al-Hāṭirī (d. 1122). But already in the early days of the genre's popularity, Ibn Buṭṭān (d. 1066), a disciple of the famed Nestorian physician, monk, and theologian Abū l- Phụ bright Ibn ar-Tayyib (d. 1043), was composing magāmahī in what would become the classical style; two of them achieved a considerable fame, the Banquet of the Physicians and the Banquet of the Priests. The latter composition is available for modern western readers in a French translation.45


While Christians were writing in Arabic already in the eighth century, as we have seen, and have continued to do so to the present day, they also continued to employ the indigenous languages of their several communities. Among them, Greek was the first to disappear from daily use, probably because it was largely an ecclesiastical and scholarly language. It enjoyed a continued currency in Melkite church circles, but even there the community also continued to produce translations from Greek into Christian Palestinian Aramaic well into the twelfth century. And in Jerusalem, Georgian-speaking monks translated texts from both Greek and Arabic into their own language, sometimes thereby preserving texts that otherwise would have been lost to posterity. A remarkable case in point is the valuable liturgical calendar of the Melkites that preserves the memory of the old Jerusalem liturgy from the time before the Byzantine reforms; the Arabic original has not survived.48

Syriac has persisted in use, especially among the Maronites, Jacobites, and Nestorians, even enjoying something of a renaissance in the thirteenth century, when bilingual writers such as the Jacobite Gregory Abū l- Phụ, known as Bar Hebraeus, (1225–1286), who wrote in both Syriac and Arabic, could confidently draw on the works of both the traditional Christian masters and Muslim thinkers such as Ibn Sīnā (980–1037) and al-Ghazālī (1058–1111). Some in the Syriac-speaking communities have even used the script of their language to write in Arabic, a writing commonly called Garshûnî, which is in general use among Christians to this day, especially, but not exclusively, in liturgical texts.49

Much controversy surrounds the issue of the fate of the Coptic language among the largely Arabic-speaking Christians of Egypt. It seems gradually to have faded from common use after the thirteenth century, but it is important to note that at the beginning of that century a martyrology featuring a confrontation between a Christian and the Muslim authori-

ties, presumably intended for a popular audience, could still be written in Coptic.  

Armenian Christians have been constantly present in the world of Islam and on its immediate borders from early Islamic times onward. While

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53 For an account of the Armenian church as it relates to the history of the churches discussed in this book, see Nina Ganolian, L'Église arménienne et le grand schisme d'orient, CSCO, vol. 574 (Louvain, Belgium: Peters, 1999).
there is a rich literature in Armenian, there has not been much modern scholarly study of the treatment of Islam in Armenian texts. Yet we know that Armenian historians took notice of the apologetic and polemical exchanges between Muslims and Christians. For example, an Armenian translation of a portion of the so-called Correspondence between the caliph 'Umar II (r. 715–20) and the Byzantine Emperor Leo III (r. 717–41) is included in the Armenian historian Ghevond's (d. ca. 790) account of the Arab conquest. This Correspondence features a Christian apologist's response (Leo) to an anti-Christian text by a Muslim writer ('Umar); scholars are still uncertain about the original language of the letter of Leo. It may have been written originally in Arabic; the Arabic text of the 'Umar side of the correspondence has been published, but the Arabic text of the Leo portion remains unedited and unstudied, although its existence in a Sinai Arabic manuscript is reported. The immediate point is to highlight the Armenian writer's attention to this correspondence, suggesting that such literature would have caught the interest of a broad spectrum of Armenian readers.

All of the Christian communities who lived within the world of Islam in the early Islamic period strove to cultivate good relations with Muslims at the same time that both in Arabic and in their own languages they clearly marked the differences between the two creeds. Their immediate purpose in much of their writing about Islam was to forestall Christian conversions to Islamic faith. Nevertheless, their acculturation into the Arabic-speaking, Islamic commonwealth inevitably resulted in a measure of Arabization and even of Islamicization in their diction, both in Arabic and in their native languages, as they strove to find a common discourse between themselves and those who posed the major local challenge to their faith. These developments in turn, along with a number of theological issues, seem to have played a role in the estrangement of Oriental Christians from their coreligionists in the West and outside of the world of Islam.

Today's Muslim/Christian Dialogue

Western Christian thinkers engaged in interreligious dialogue with Muslims in the modern world, and those who have in recent times been concerned with comparative theology in the study of Christianity and Islam, have seldom if ever taken any useful cognizance of the intellectual history of the Christians who lived for centuries in the world of Islam and who wrote Christian philosophy and theology in Syriac and Arabic. When the Christians of the Islamic world claimed their attention at all, modern western scholars have contented themselves with offering denominational histories of the dwindling communities, with little or no mention of their intellectual and cultural engagement with Muslims or of their scholarly accomplishments in the era of the growth and development of the classic cultures of Islam. Even those scholars who have offered in-depth studies of Islamic and Christian theologies in comparison with each other have restricted themselves on the Christian side to the works of the major thinkers of the medieval West, such as Peter Abelard (1079–1142/3), Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), or Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), just to name the most well known among them. The one notable exception in this general pattern of western scholarly neglect of the Christian East is the attention westerners have paid to the contributions of the Christian translators of Greek philosophical and scientific texts into Arabic in early 'Abbāsid times. In this connection alone one finds some ready name recognition among modern scholars for individual Arabophone Christians such as Ḥunayn ibn ʿIṣḥāq (808–873) or Yahyā ibn ʿAbdī (893–974). Otherwise, the Christian thinkers of the Islamic world with whom we have been concerned are known only to a small group of specialists. It is time to factor their thought into today's dialogue between Christians and Muslims and to include their works on the reading lists of the comparative theologians.


It should readily become apparent that when the works of the early Arab Christian apologists are read in conjunction with those of the best of today's Christian theologians writing in dialogue with Muslims, the testimony of the earlier thinkers enriches the discourse, much in the way that in Christian theology more generally patristic literature continues to provide a resource for the modern theological enterprise.

In this age of religious pluralism, one often hears it said that the works of early Christian writers in the Islamic world such as those we have been discussing here are too polemical to reward the efforts of today's scholars of the Muslim world to master them. This wrongheaded idea fixe prevents those who harbor it from noticing how adroitly the major Arabic-speaking apologists for Christianity in the early Islamic period tailored their arguments to the modes of thinking and even the Arabic diction of the developing Islamic sciences in their day. It also prevents students of the early phases of the growth and development of Islamic religious thinking from taking cognizance of one of the major intellectual frameworks within which Muslim thinkers in the formative period unfolded what would become the master confessional narratives of Islamic faith.

After the formative period of Islamic thought, the end of which William Montgomery Watt dated as early as the year 950, the main lines of Christian thought in the Arabic-speaking, Islamic milieu had already been drawn. As we have seen, later Arabophone Christian writers and thinkers, up to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Egypt, collected, fine-tuned, and synthesized the apologetic and theological discourse of earlier Christian authors. After their time, and up to the twentieth century for all practical purposes, the Arabic idiom of Christians under Muslim rule in the Middle East remained constant, but not frozen. There were notable writers and major cultural figures among these Christians during the long centuries of the communities' decline into demographic insignificance. But the vocabulary and even the parameters of their Christian discourse in Arabic remained remarkably stable. During these centuries the concerns of Christians had more to do with survival and with establishing relationships with Christian churches outside of the Islamic world. This latter process, which involved the arrival of numerous Christian missionaries from the West in the Middle East, in the end brought even more drastic changes, multiplying divisions within the indigenous churches and adding entirely new ecclesial communities with little or no connection to the histories of the Christian churches which, as it were, had grown up with Islam. Meanwhile,
from at least the thirteenth century onward, a state of continuous war between Muslim states and western Christian nations continued to embitter Muslim/Christian relations.

In the Middle East the early promise of more harmonious common life between Muslims, Christians, and Jews, as in the intercommunal salons/nasabils of tenth-century Baghdad, gave way, especially after the Mongol devastations of 1258, to the harsher views of non-Muslims propagated by scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) and many subsequent Muslim teachers. It may well have been the case that the demographic diminishment of dhimmis communities from the fourteenth century onward, reducing the political and social power of Jews and Christians in Islamic society, contributed substantially to the atmosphere that favored the harsher views of these minorities. In Andalusia, visions of an always-fragile convivencia gave way after the full success of the Reconquista to the definite embitterment of exile for Jews and Muslims, and the persecuting zeal of the victors who seemed eventually to want to erase every trace of Judaism and Islam from the population. Thereafter, in the wider world of Islam, wherever Christians have lived in close association with a Muslim majority, with few exceptions, such as in Jordan, Syria, and Iraq until recently and for a season in Lebanon, intercommunal hostilities have abounded, often with attendant violence between Muslims and Christians. One need only mention the names of the places still featured in the nightly news to make the point: Egypt, Iraq, the Sudan, Nigeria, Algeria, East Timor, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan, to mention only the locations of the most prominent, recent flash points.

Outside of the Islamic world, for a millennium and more, up until the middle of the twentieth century, constant states of war, and subsequent colonialism and imperialism have deeply embittered Muslims and Christians against each other and so made efforts at religious rapprochement almost unthinkable for most of this period. The combination of religious animosity, cultural disdain, and military hostility that obtained between Muslim and Christian polities for well over a millennium produced on both sides a large literature of mutual rejection. The virulence of this literature seemed to increase with time, especially after the Ottoman encroachments into Eastern Europe from the fifteenth century onward, combining cultural, religious, and political attacks. Over the course of time the mutual denunciation of the other became almost subconscious. It was relieved only occasionally by intellectual borrowings, and sometimes by a romantic, intercultural fascination on the part of some westerners for the Arab East. As for the Muslims, until Ottoman times they seldom showed much interest in the civilization of Western Christians; when they did they found it sorely wanting. By the dawn of the twentieth century, and well up into the century, the levels of religious animosity and the vicissitudes of almost continuous warfare between Muslim and Christian countries would not have made many people think that efforts at some measure of rapprochement were in the offing. But in the West, Christian thinkers with a broad experience beyond the borders of their homelands were already, early in the twentieth century, beginning to have a change of heart and mind. Many of them had participated in early missionary efforts in Islamic lands, efforts that had the net effect not of converting Muslims but, as mentioned above, of splintering the remaining Christian communities in the Islamic world even further than they had been before the arrival of the missionaries. In the Roman Catholic Church the newer considerations in the field of missiology and the experiences of several influential pioneers in interreligious dialogue in the early years of the twentieth century would ultimately find expression in the revolutionary statements of Vatican II (1963–65). Similar statements have been issued by many other Christian churches. Now it is time for westerners to consider the lessons to be learned from the experience of the Christians who have lived in the world of Islam for centuries.

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