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Oriental Christianity and Early Islam
From Arabian Prelude to Theological Disputation

Some Preliminary Considerations

One of the most problematic issues confronting any serious research concerning Islam is that what we know of its establishment and early development can only be ascertained from documentation originating from within the Muslim community itself. Furthermore, the early biographies of Muḥammad date back to about one hundred and fifty years after his death by which time Islam had already expanded outside the confines of Arabia, become an empire, and experienced political and, more importantly, religious dissent. This means that such accounts as well as the sayings of the Prophet (*ḥadīth*) are more likely to reflect the period in which they were written rather than that of Muḥammad's lifetime. Then again, Eastern and Oriental Christian[1] chronicles

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[1] One needs to distinguish between "Eastern" and "Oriental" Christianity. Eastern Christianity refers specifically to those Christian communities who adopt the Byzantine rite. Oriental Christianity refers to those Christian communities who not only do not adopt the Byzantine rite, but also refuse to adhere to canons the Council of Chalcedon, especially regarding the issue of the human and divine natures in Christ. They include the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch (Jacobite Syrian Christian Church), the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, as well as the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Churches.

dating from the death of the Prophet referred to Islam in terms that were familiar to their respective traditions. They had scant knowledge of its doctrines and in most cases did not even consider it as a non-Christian religion. Pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian presence in Arabia, however, is quite well documented and recorded.[2]

Political and Religious Tensions in Pre-Islamic Arabia

Most introductory works on Islam refer exclusively to the establishment and preaching of Islam as if it were "a tale of two cities," namely Makka and Madīna. Lately a more considered approach has shed light as to how Islam in general and Muḥammad in particular succeeded in transforming the religious and political landscape as well as the factors that brought about such developments. This approach takes into consideration the wider framework within which the preaching of Islam originated and flourished.

Long before the rise and establishment of Islam, the Arabian peninsula had already found itself in the thick of a centuries-long struggle between the Roman (and later Byzantine) and the Sasānid (Persian) empires. The former had adopted Christianity as its official religion during the reign of Theodosius I (d. 395), whereas the Persians embraced the Zoroastrian religion. The Byzantine emperors had long-standing aspirations toward the Arabian Peninsula and were occupied in seeking control of the lucrative spice trade in the area and ultimately its route to India. The struggle in this region took the form of a proxy war in which two buffer zones were created. The clients of the Byzantines situated at Ǧabala the northwest of the peninsula were the Christian Ǧafnids (often called Ġassānids) whereas those of the Persians were the Naṣrid rulers (the so-called Laḫmids) just northeast of Arabia at al-Ḥīra. Another strong client of the Persians was the Jewish Ḥimyarite kingdom situated in the southern highlands of the Yemen. By the end of the fourth century AD its population had for some reason relinquished pagan worship and embraced Judaism. In the early part of the sixth century Ḥimyar was ruled by Yūsuf (known as Ḏū Nuwās) who initiated a general persecution of Monophysite Christians throughout his kingdom.[3]

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[2] In the Qurʾân one may detect many references to Biblical and Extra-Biblical episodes, together with Rabbinical writings especially the Babylonian Talmūd. Furthermore, Ethiopian, Coptic and East Syrian Christian presence, together with that of religious fringe movements of once Christian origin were also to be found scattered throughout pre-Islamic Arabia.

[3] For a more detailed account of the presence of various Christian communities in Ḥimyar and south Arabia. See, Irfan Shahīd, "Islam and the *Oriens Christianus*: Makka 610-622 AD,"

He began by killing some Byzantine merchants who were passing through the region on their way to India. This episode is recorded in the *Zuqnīn Chronicle* attributed to Dionysius of Tel-Mahre which was written some three hundred years after the event:

> Roman[4] merchants used to pass through the countries of the Ḥimyarites to come to the country of the Inner Indians, which is called the Auzalis in India and also to the countries (situated) further away than those of the Indians and of the Ethiopians. There are, namely, seven kingdoms of the Indians and of the Ethiopians: three of the Indians and four of the Ethiopians. These are (more) distant and are within the southern countries (situated) on the shore of the great sea which surrounds the whole world (and) which is called the Great Ocean. When the above-mentioned Roman merchants passed through the countries of the Ḥimyarites to enter the countries of the Indians to trade there as usual, the king of the Ḥimyarites, Dimnos (i.e., Ḏū Nuwās), learned (about it), seized them, killed them and plundered all their merchandise, saying: '(This is) because in the countries of the Romans the Christians wickedly harass the Jews who live in their countries and kill many of them. Therefore, I am putting these men to death.' In this way he used to kill many (merchants) until many (others) were seized by terror and refused to come (to the country) and the trade in the inner kingdoms of the Indians and of the Ethiopians ceased.[5]

He then proceeded to destroy an Ethiopian church in Ẓufar (or Ẓaphar)[6] and murder some three hundred Ethiopians. This act led to what was to become known as the pogrom at Naǧrān[7] where, after accepting the city's capitulation, Yūsuf then proceeded to massacre those inhabitants who had refused to renounce Christianity. This heinous act not only convulsed but also transformed the religious-political structure of central and south-western Arabia. At the instigation of the Byzantine emperor Justin I (d. 527), the Ethiopian Negus Ella Asbeha (also known as Kālēb) invaded south Arabia (c. 525 BC) and subsequently killed the king of Ḥimyar and burned down the palace of Saba'

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in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, eds Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark N. Swanson, David Thomas (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2006), 19-21.

[4] The term "Roman" here refers to the Byzantines, who were known as "al-Rūm."

[5] Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, *Chronicle* (known also as the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*) Part III, translated with notes and introduction by Witold Witakowski (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), 50-51.

[6] Today the city lies in the southernmost region of the Sultanate of Oman.

[7] See Irfan Shahīd, *The Martyrs of Najran* (Bruxelles: Societé de Bollandistes, 1971). During this period Naǧran was situated in the Yemen, whereas today it lies on the Saudi Arabian side of the border.

in order to avenge the martyrdoms of its Christians.[8] This expedition and the events that triggered it brought him in close contact with the major centres of paganism and Judaism in central and southwest Arabia which were later to play a significant part in the establishment and spread of Islam throughout the Arabian peninsula.[9]

It was at this highly sensitive juncture that Byzantium, under its new emperor Justinian (d. 565), who succeeded Justin in 527, began to play an active role by exploiting the re-established presence of Christians in Ḥimyar in order to oppose their Persian enemies. His plan was to enlist the support of the Ethiopians.

Kālēb had installed Christianity as the official religion for the kingdom for nearly fifty years, which not only allowed the Negus in Axum (the then capital of Ethiopia) but the emperor in Constantinople as well as the king of Sasānid Persia to confront one another indirectly in this remote region by intervening in the politics and the religions of Arabia. This, in turn, positioned all three rulers to become power brokers in the rapidly changing world into which Muḥammad was born, in about 570 according to the Muslim tradition enshrined in the Prophet's biography (*sīra*). Having pacified the region Kālēb then withdrew from Arabia and returned to Axum. This step, however, brought about a revolt led by other Ethiopian Christians, who had remained in the region, against Sumyafa Ašwaʿ (Esimphaios), the king Kālēb had installed in Ḥimyar. Eventually, the Ethiopians in Arabia overthrew Esimphaios, had him imprisoned, and installed Abraha, the son of a Christian slave from the Ethiopian port city of Adulis in his place as king.[10]

These dramatic events created a power vacuum that allowed the international role of the great powers of the eastern Mediterranean to become far greater than it ever had been before. It allowed the Byzantine and Persian empires to expand their diplomatic and military activity in the Arabian territory substantially.

The above-mentioned Ethiopian-Byzantine alliance was uncomfortable from a certain perspective. From the doctrinal point of view the Ethiopians would have had a very uneasy relationship with those Christian churches who adhered to the Canons of the Council of Chalcedon even more so following their schism from Byzantine Orthodoxy in the aftermath the Council of Ephesus in 431.[11] But

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[8] G. W. Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 98.

[9] See ibid., 103-104.

[10] See ibid., 103.107.

[11] With reference to the terms "Eastern Churches" and "Oriental Churches" as a result of this schism, see supra n.1.

Justinian seems to have detected an opportunity to disrupt Persian commercial activities in the Red Sea ports.

Abraha not only asserted his authority as the region's most powerful ruler and as a Christian, but at the same time he implicitly recognized his role as power broker, thereby exploiting and influencing the ambitions of the main players in the Near East. In 552 he launched a great expedition into central Arabia, north of Naǧrān and south of Makka. His armies went both north-eastwards and north-westwards. This two-pronged assault into the central peninsula may well have represented an abortive attempt to move into areas of Persian influence south of the Naṣrid (Laḫmid) capital of al-Ḥīra. Its failure and Abraha's eventual retreat marked the beginning of the end of his power.[12] That, in turn, provided precisely the opportunity for which the Persians had been waiting. An incompetent and brutal son of Abraha, whose name seems to have been Axum, presided over the dissolution of the Ethiopian kingdom of Ḥimyar.

The Ethiopian occupation and supremacy in south Arabia under Abraha and his two sons lasted for just half a century. Irfan Shahīd suggests that during this period some Ethiopic terms passed into Sabaic and Arabic, mostly military terms and possibly some religious Christian terms as well.[13] The name of Abraha is associated with the Cathedral of Sanʿa[14] and with a church in Maʿrib;[15] and this lends credence to the theory that the spiritual needs of the Ethiopian army then based in the Yemen must have been met by a number of Ethiopian clerics who celebrated the liturgy in their own rite and were obviously in possession of an Ethiopic Bible.[16] This would also explain the presence of Ethiopian preachers whose use of Scripture both in the Yemen and later on in Makka would introduce Muḥammad to both the Biblical and Extra-Biblical narratives which would later find their way in the Qurʾân and interwoven into some of its passages.

Eventually a Jew by the name of Sayf b. Ḏī Yazan succeeded in expelling the Ethiopians from Arabia with the aid of Chosroes I (Ḫusraw), king of the Sasānid

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[12] See Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis*, 115-117. Muslim scholars would later affirm that this incident is recorded in Q.105, known as the Sūra of the Elephant. The besieging armies of Abraha who were surrounding Makka and made use of elephants were supposedly beaten back by a flock of crows carrying small stones in their beaks who then proceeded to pelt these large animals with them.

[13] Shahīd, "Islam and the *Oriens Christianus*: Makka 610-622 AD," 13. See also, Martin R. Zammit, *A Comparative Lexical Study of Qur'anic Arabic* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

[14] The capital of present-day Yemen.

[15] This city still lies within the borders of present-day Yemen.

[16] See Shahīd, "Islam and the *Oriens Christianus*: Makka 610-622 AD," 14.

Persians,[17] whom he approached through the mediation of Persia's Naṣrid (Laḫmid) clients at al-Ḥīra in order to seek military aid in consolidating his position. Chosroes responded favourably and the Ethiopians were expelled from Arabia once and for all.[18]

The Persians believed that Christians of whatever confession remaining in Arabia, both inside and outside Ḥimyar, were no more trustworthy than the pagans living in the peninsula. The expulsion of the Ethiopians created a religious instability that was held in check only by the occupying Persians as well as a diaspora throughout western Arabia. Also, it was in Makka that a strong Ethiopian colony was to be found in the forty years or so that followed the Persian occupation. The ensuing mixture of pagans and Christians on the one hand and Jews on the other in Yaṯrīb (later known as Madīna) as well as the pagan majority (*mušrikūn*, "associators") of Makka at the time of Muḥammad, provided a fertile, if not volatile, environment in Arabia as well as an alibi for further conflict between the Byzantine Christian empire, which was allied with Ethiopia, and the Zoroastrian Sassānids allied with the Jews of Ḥimyar.[19]

Persian dominance, understandably welcomed by the Jews residing in the rest of the Arabian peninsula in view of former Persian backing of their co-religionists in Ḥimyar, was definitively established not long after Muḥammad was believed to have been born in Makka in the second half of the sixth century. As we shall see later, the existence of this hegemony would go a long way toward explaining the reason for the negotiations that took place between the two Arab tribes of Yaṯrīb (later called al-Madīna) which eventually led to the Prophet's departure and settlement in that city. This course of action would be known as the *hiğra*.[20]

Muḥammad and the Christians of the Arabian Peninsula

Due to the events referred to above, the sixth century witnessed an intensive Christianization of western Arabia, which affected Makka. The most important figure in it on the eve of the rise of Islam and during the early years of Muḥammad's mission was undoubtedly Waraqa b. Nawfal, the paternal first cousin of Ḫadīğa, the wife of Muḥammad. He is associated with a Gospel, an *Inğīl*, and both are the

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[17] Ḫusraw I, known as Ḫusraw Anūširvan (Persian: "Chosroes of the Immortal Soul"), or Ḫusraw the Just, (died AD 579), ruled the Sāsānid empire from 531 to 579.

[18] See Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis*, 117.

[19] See ibid., 118.

[20] See ibid.

most relevant, even crucial, early contact of Islam with the Christian Orient.[21] Some say that Waraqa was an East Syrian (Nestorian) priest and is revered in the Islamic tradition for being one of the first *ḥanīf*s (righteous people)[22] to believe in the claim of Muḥammad to prophethood.

When Muḥammad began preaching Islam (around the year 610 according to Muslim sources) his audience comprised not only pagans but also Christians and Jews. His encounter with all three categories was perhaps already established during his childhood and youth when he accompanied his uncle Abū Ṭālib, a caravan merchant, during his commercial travels across Arabia and probably even Ethiopia. Even Makka his home town was already a venue for preaching missions by Ethiopian bishops and clergy. Consequently, Irfan Shahīd is therefore right in affirming that:

> Christianity in Makka was reflected by both an Arab and an Ethiopian presence. The former was represented by such traces as *maqbarat al-Naṣārā*, 'the graveyard of the Christians,' the alleged pictures of Jesus and Mary in the Kaʿba, and in such localities in the environs of Makka as *masāğid Maryam*, 'the oratories of Mary,' and *mawqif al-Naṣrānī*, 'the station of the Christian.'[23]

In the light of the above, it would come as no surprise that when Muḥammad and his small community of followers were being persecuted by the polytheistic Makkans, he sent some of them to seek refuge precisely in Ethiopia. While commenting on Q. 5:82,[24] which praises Christians for the humility and piety

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[21] Shahīd, "Islam and the *Oriens Christianus*: Makka 610-622 AD," 13.

[22] This title is accorded to Abraham in the Qurʾân. See Q. 2:135; 3:67; 3:95; 4:125; 10:104; 16:120.123.

[23] Shahīd, "Islam and the *Oriens Christianus*: Makka 610-622 AD," 12-13; see also 26.

[24] This verse reads:

> Thou wilt surely find the most hostile of men
> to the believers are the Jews and the idolaters;
> and thou wilt surely find the nearest of them
> in love to the believers are those who say ′We
> are Christians′; that, because some of them
> are priests and monks, and they wax not
> proud;
> and when they hear what has been sent down
> to the Messenger, thou seest their eyes
> overflow with tears because of the truth they
> recognize. They say, ′Our Lord, we believe;
> so do Thou write us down among the
> witnesses.

of their monks and priests, the renowned scholar of the Qurʾân al-Zamaḫšarī (d. 1143) wrote this very interesting reflection:

> God's characterization of the Christians as being tender-hearted and as weeping when they hear the Qurʾân is in accordance with what is reported concerning al-Naǧāšī (the Negus of Ethiopia). When the immigrants to Ethiopia (in 615) appeared before him with the idolaters (curses be upon them), the latter tried to stir him up against the immigrants, demanding that he use measures of force against them. He said to Ǧaʿfar b. Abī Ṭālib: 'Is Mary mentioned in your scripture?' To this Ǧaʿfar answered: 'In our scripture one sūra is devoted to Mary, and he began to recite this sūra (Sūra 19) up to the words: 'That is Jesus, son of Mary, in word of truth' (v. 34). Then he recited Sūra Ṭā Hā (Sūra 20) up to the words: 'hast thou received the story of Moses?' (v. 9), and al-Naǧāšī wept. His seventy men who came as emissaries to the Messenger of God also did the same, (for) when the messenger recited to them Sūra Yā Sīn (Sūra 36), they then wept.[25]

During the time that Muḥammad was preaching in Makka Islam was envisaged in the Qurʾân as if it were one of the three branches that grew out of the common trunk of monotheism (the other two being Judaism and Christianity). His adherence to this system of belief brought upon him the scorn of the majority of the tribal leaders of the city who at times couched their antagonism within the context of geopolitical events occurring outside Arabia itself, some of which are recorded in the Qurʾân in order to highlight a particular moral teaching:

The Byzantines have been defeated in a nearby land. They will reverse their defeat with a victory in a few years' time – God is in command, first and last. On that day, the believers will rejoice at God's help. He helps whoever He pleases: He is the Mighty, the Merciful. This is God's promise: God never breaks His promise, but most people do not know; they only know the outer surface of this present life and are heedless of the life to come (Q. 30:2-7).[26]

This Makkan sūra opens with a reference to the defeat of the Byzantines at the hands of the Persians in 614 in Syria. The Persians even succeeded in carrying

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This passage from the Qurʾân has been quoted from *The Koran Interpreted*, trans. Arthur J. Arberry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

[25] Zamaḫšarī on Sūra 5:82 in Helmut Gätje, *The Qurʾân and Its Exegesis: Selected Texts with Classical and Modern Muslim Interpretation*, trans. and ed. Alford T. Welch (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), 134-135. I have taken some liberty with the text in inserting a different method of transliteration in order to make it consistent with the one adopted throughout this article.

[26] This passage from the Qurʾân has been quoted from *The Qur'an: A New Translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

with them the relic of the Holy Cross. This tragic event is recorded in, among other sources, the *Chronicle* of Theophanes of Edessa:[27]

> *Chron 1234* In year 6 of Heraclius and 27 of Ḫusrau, Šahrbaraz[28] struck against the city of Jerusalem, subdued it by war and killed in it 90,000 Christian persons. The Jews, because of their enmity for them, were buying them for a small price and killing (them). Šahrbaraz captured Zacharias, the Chalcedonian bishop of Jerusalem, and sent him to Persia, to Ḫusrau, with the revered wood of the crucifixion, and with treasure of gold and silver. He also exiled from Jerusalem the Jews.[29]

This event boosted the morale of the Makkans who interpreted it as a victory of polytheism over monotheism. It also accorded a sense of security for the Jewish community throughout Arabia. The Qurʾân, however, refers to the subsequent victory of the Byzantines which was to take place in 624. From this one can conclude that when the fortunes were reversed and the Byzantines won a resounding victory, this was to please the believers, that is to say, the monotheist Muslims. The year of the Byzantine victory was also the year of the Muslim victory at Badr. By that time Muḥammad accompanied by his followers (*muhāğirūn*) had already been residing in Madīna for two years and the three Jewish tribes living there were becoming wary of this charismatic leader who held both a religious and a political status in the city. He had now become not only the religious leader of a community of believers but also the political ruler of both his followers as well as of the two Arab tribes that had invited him over. It must also be noted here that his departure for Madīna, known as the *hiğra*, was epoch-making. It was not merely a migration, but a definitive and irrevocable step. It meant a complete break with the past, a point of no return, a decision from which there was no turning back. It may thus be compared with the decision taken by Joshua to cross the Jordan and enter the land of Canaan. The Book of Joshua itself states that the manna which fed the people in the desert for

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[27] Theophanes of Edessa, known also as Theophanes the Confessor (c. 758/760-817) was a Byzantine aristocrat who later became a monk. He is renowned for his continuation of the *Chronicle* initiated by his friend George Syncellus. His part records events beginning with the accession of Diocletian in 284 till the abdication of Michael Rhangabes in 813.

[28] Šahrbaraz was the Sasānid general tasked by Ḫusraw II with the campaign against the Byzantines.

[29] *Theophilus of Edessa's Chronicle and the Circulation of Historical Knowledge in Late Antiquity and Early Islam*, Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Robert G. Hoyland (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 65. Once again, I have taken some liberty with the text in inserting a different method of transliteration in order to make it consistent with the one adopted throughout this article.

forty years ceased on the morrow of their first Passover since their entry, "and the people of Israel had manna no more, but ate of the fruit of the land of Canaan that year."[30] Now they were no longer a desert people longing to return to Egypt. They now took possession of the Promised Land in order to build their future there.

The *hiğra* also brought about another dramatic development. First of all, the Arab tribes now found a political and a military leader who could stand his ground and thwart any possible alliance between the Jewish tribes of Madīna and the Persians (as was the case in the Yemen). Also, Muḥammad now demanded to be acknowledged by both monotheistic communities (Jews and Christians) as a prophet, a claim that neither community was ready to accept.

It goes without saying that neither the Jewish nor the Christian communities of Arabia were prepared to give recognition to Muḥammad as prophet for reasons that were obvious to both. The Jews believe that God's revelation came to an end with the death of the last prophet to be recognized as such, namely Malachi. It is known that right up till the third century A.D. the rabbinic scholars had already arrived at a concurred decision as to which books were to be considered as divinely inspired and which were to be set aside. At that point in history the authority of the rabbinic scholars was deemed as binding upon all Jewish communities both in Palestine and in the *diaspora*. From that moment they could not accept the claims to prophecy of any other person. The Christians applied a similar line of reasoning. In the Christian tradition divine revelation ended with the death of the last Apostle. Furthermore, it is common doctrine among Christians that one should believe in Jesus Christ as *the* Word of God incarnate and thus the final, perfect, and definitive revelation of God to humanity. Consequently, if a Christian were to acknowledge the Qur'ân as divinely revealed and Muḥammad as a prophet in continuation with the biblical tradition, this would lead to the dismantling of the very foundation upon which the Christian faith stands.[31]

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[30] Joshua 5:12. Texts from the Holy Bible are quoted from the *Revised Standard Version* (Catholic Edition).

[31] A number of Muslim scholars, both in the Mediaeval period as well as in our day, claim that the Bible originally did foretell the coming of Muḥammad, but Jews and Christians had erased all reference to such an occurrence. This assertion is made in the light of the accusation made by the Qur'ân itself against the Jews (and later extended to Christians) that they distorted, manipulated and even altered the revealed texts (*taḥrīf*) that were originally sent down to them by God:

> "God took a pledge from the Children of Israel... But they broke their pledge, so We distanced them [from Us] and hardened their hearts. They distort the meaning of [revealed] words and have forgotten some of what they were told to remember:

Here one must also take into account the existence of major Christian communities such as the East Syrians (Nestorians or, as they are known today, the Assyrian [Nestorian] Church of the East) as well as of a good number of religious fringe groups of Christian origin (such as the Arians) who sought refuge in Arabia from persecution by the Byzantines. These groups spread their own teachings in the areas around their settlements.

For the Qurʾân Christians remain "People of the Scripture" (*Ahl al-Kitāb*). At the same time there always lingers a certain hesitation among some Muslim polemicists as to whether they should be deemed *monotheists* (see, for example, Q. 2:62; 3:110-115; 4:55; 5:69.82), *unbelievers* (*kuffār*, see Q. 5:17.72-73; 9:30) because of their rejection of the Qurʾân and its teachings,[32] or *associators* (*mušrikūn*, see 5:72), due to their belief in God as Triune.

This issue explains the attitude of hostility that the Qurʾân later adopts when referring to Jews and Christians in Madīna as well as the way they were later treated by Muslims. During the conflicts that took place between Muḥammad and his followers on the one hand and the pagans of Makka on the other, the three Jewish tribes of Madīna were first accused of indifference, followed by suspicion, and finally of treason. One tribe (the Banū Qaynuqa) was exiled but allowed to take as much of their belongings as one camel per head could carry. Another (the Banū Nadir) was despoiled and exiled, whereas the third (the Banū Qurayza) was given the stark choice of conversion to Islam or death by the sword

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> you [Prophet] will always find treachery in all but a few of them. Overlook this and pardon them – God loves those who do good" (Q. 5:12a. 13; see also Q. 5:41; 2:75).

This passage has been quoted from M.A.S. Abdel Haleem's translation. There were also a number of Muslim scholars who were knowledgeable of the Bible (perhaps Jewish and Christian converts to Islam) and interpreted some of its passages both in the Old and in the New Testaments as residual of a possible reference to Muḥammad. Concerning the Old Testament, mention is made of Moses' foretelling of the advent of another prophet: "And the Lord said to me... I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him" (Deut. 18:18). As for the New Testament, a frequently cited text is that which forms part of the Farewell Discourse of Jesus during the Last Supper: "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor, to be with you forever" (Jn 14:16). This passage is frequently interpreted in the light of what the Qurʾân states:

> "Jesus, son of Mary, said, 'Children of Israel, I am sent to you by God, confirming the Torah that came before me and bringing good news of a messenger to follow me whose name will be Ahmad.' Yet when he came to them with clear signs, they said, 'This is obviously sorcery'"(Q. 61:6).

This passage has been quoted from M.A.S. Abdel Haleem's translation.

[32] The term "unbelievers" refers to those who do not embrace one's own religion, whereas "non-believers" are those who embrace no religion at all.

and slavery for women and children.[33] From this last tribe about 800 Jewish males were slaughtered.

Following these events, whoever refused to acknowledge Muḥammad as prophet and the Qurʾân as the sole criterion of truth[34] were condemned and considered to be the object of divine wrath. They were to be put to flight and humiliated; in the future they were to be fought "until they pay the tribute out of hand and have been humbled."[35]

These issues would frequently resurface in later centuries, when Islam began to rule vast swathes of territories that had once belonged to the Byzantine and Sasānid empires. We find them within the context of apologetics and polemics during debates between Muslim and Christian scholars outside of Arabia.

Before proceeding to the next stage of the narrative one must consider another major event which took place around January 632 when Muḥammad was now a triumphant religious and political leader, having entered Makka in triumph two years earlier and cleansed the Kaʿba of its idols and dedicated it to the worship of the one God, Allah.

The event concerns the arrival of a Christian delegation from Nağrān to Madīna in order to pay homage to the Prophet and to debate with him on certain key issues of Christian belief, especially those regarding Christology. This encounter is known as the *Mubāhala*. This delegation was composed of a magistrate (*ʿāqib*), a leader of merchant caravans (*sayyid*), and, apparently, a bishop (*usqūf*). It is said that Muḥammad received them well and they were even allowed to celebrate the Eucharist in the courtyard of his residence, which doubled as a mosque. However, it appears that nothing substantial came out of these discussions. Nevertheless, the delegation returned to Nağrān with an accord (*muṣālaḥa*) which consisted in the payment of an annual tribute in return for protection and a guarantee of safety for their lives, their goods, and their worship. It recognized their hierarchy without tithe. Furthermore, it did not require military service from them nor the provision of troops.[36]

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[33] By this time the alliance between the Jews of the Yemen and the Persian empire would have already made all Jewish tribes of Arabia the object of suspicion.

[34] See Q. 2:41.137; 3:23; see also Q. 4:47.105; 5:48.

[35] Q. 9:29.

[36] Robert Caspar, *A Historical Introduction to Islamic Theology* (Rome: P.I.S.A.I, 1998), 52. See also, Louis Massignon, "La Mubāhala, étude sur la proposition d'ordalie faite par le prophête Mohammad aux Chrétiens Bel-Hārith du Najrān en l'an 10/631 a Médine," in *Annuaire de l'EPHE* (1943): 5-25.

The Expansion of Islam Beyond Arabia

Islam, through its holy book the Qurʾân, evolved in its formative period from a religion that was essentially concerned with eschatology, prophethood and divine omnipotence, into one centred on God as legislator. The continual tension between Islam as preached at Makka and Islam as preached at Medina has been the hallmark of this religion to the present day.

Following the death of Muḥammad in 632 the Muslim community, galvanized by the Qurʾân together with the Tradition (*Sunna*) of the Prophet, embarked on a series of wars of conquest that, within the time-frame of just a century, resulted in an empire stretching from southern and central Spain in the West to the northern border of India in the East. These territories formerly belonged to the western and eastern Roman empires as well as to the Sassānid (or Persian) empire, all of which could boast of a civilization and a culture that spanned more than a thousand years. Both in their turn had been influenced by Hellenistic philosophy, whether Platonic or Aristotelian. At the same time, they came under the influence of Gnosticism, both Neo-Platonic and Zoroastrian/Manichaean. Islam, therefore, had entered unchartered territories in more ways than one, and its intellectual adventure was just about to begin.

One may adduce various reasons for the success of the military campaigns of the Muslim armies that conquered vast areas of the Mediterranean and of the Middle-East. Among these the most important are the following:

a. The decline in prosperity and strength of the Mediterranean world owing to the barbarian invasions coupled with the abandonment of agricultural land and the subsequent shrinking of the urban market.
b. The weakening of the Byzantine and Sasānid empires due to epidemics and long-drawn-out wars. In the preceding two centuries vast swathes of territory belonging to the Roman Empire in the West were reconquered by Justinian I. However, this meant that the Byzantine forces were now overstretched and were not being reinforced due to matters of internal instability, political infighting and frequent reappearances of the plague.[37]

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[37] See William Rosen, *Justinian's Flea: The First Great Plague and the End of the Roman Empire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2007). As Harry Turtledove has noted, "[t]hese reconquests, though, had cost the Empire far more in men and wealth than it could hope to realize from the regained land. At the beginning of the seventh century its overextended frontiers collapsed, and the next 120 years were little more than a desperate struggle for survival." *The Chronicle of Theophanes: Anni mundi 6095-6305 (A.D. 602-813)*, ed. and trans. Harry Turtledove (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), vii.

c. The Arabs who invaded the two empires were by no means a motley tribal horde, but an organized and disciplined force. Some of them had acquired military skill and experience in the service of these empires or in the fighting that followed the death of the Prophet. Also, use of camel transport gave them an advantage in campaigns fought over wide areas of the Middle East and North Africa. The prospect of land and wealth also served as an incentive and created a coalition of interests.
d. In some circumstances the majority of the population of the conquered countries were indifferent to who ruled over them, provided that they were accorded security, peace, and affordable taxation.
e. To some, replacement of Byzantines and Sasānids by Arabs even offered religious and civil advantages. Those opposed to the Byzantines by way of religious dissent[38] might have found it easier to live under a ruler who, contrary to the Byzantine emperor, was impartial in his treatment of so-called heterodox Christian communities. Also, Islam in these early stages did not as yet possess a developed system of doctrine and law and they were not interested in drawing distinctions among the various denominations under their rule, so long as they were numbered among the "People of the Scripture."

The Initial Reactions Among the Christian Communities of the Middle East

The first Arab-Muslim incursions outside of the Arabian peninsula were initially considered by the majority Christian population of the Middle-East as yet another series of raids undertaken by Arab tribes for the sole purpose of acquiring booty. It was thought that, having accomplished their task they would then retreat once more into the desert. However, this opinion soon changed, when these attacks began to take the form of a systematic invasion of Byzantine and Persian territory. Damascus was taken in 636, Jerusalem in 638, and Alexandria (which, owing to its rich wheat production, was considered to be the breadbasket of the Byzantine Empire) in 642. In the space of ten years Byzantine hegemony in the Middle East had been dismantled.

Furthermore, just as with the case of Arabia, the Arab-Muslim conquerors were faced with a Middle-Eastern Christianity that had already for centuries been fraught with theological disputes and schisms, compounded by the incessant

[38] These Christian communities were mainly Oriental Christians. See supra n. 1.

production of polemical works. This dire situation would later play into their hands, as they wittingly or unwittingly found themselves presiding over a policy of divide-and-rule.

As stated above, not all Christian churches reacted in the same manner to Muslim rule. It all depended on their assessment of Byzantine Orthodoxy and whether their doctrinal divergences from its teachings led to a more forceful and bellicose approach toward them within the confines of its territories. Of course, as stated above, from the perspective of the Muslim conquerors these distinctions made no sense at all. All of them were Christians irrespective of what they believed and how they articulated their teachings. They were all regarded equally. Also, the question arose as to how these conquerors were to be known. The term 'Muslim' was not used from the very beginning. Instead, they were connected to the Biblical characters from whom traditionally the Arabs were descended, namely Hagar and her son Išmael. Therefore, they were known as Hagarenes and/or Išmaelites. This nomenclature was not only ethnic in nature but disparaging in intent given that according to the Book of Genesis both Hagar and her son were sent away by Abraham at the behest of his wife Sarah. It also explains the application of the term "Saracen" by some Fathers of the Eastern Church, such as St John of Damascus (d. 749), who define it as "abandoned by Sarah."[39]

Faced with this increasing alien presence in their midst, whose nature and beliefs were still hard to define, Christian chroniclers and despatches from members of the hierarchy began to take on a more ominous and alarming tone. These invasions were described in apocalyptic and eschatological terms. Christian documents from this period rely heavily upon the symbolic language found in the Book of Daniel[40] and that of Revelation.[41] Together with the later conquests of Armenia and Persia they were taken as signs of divine wrath for the infidelities displayed and sacrileges committed by the Christian populations of these areas. This reaction is clearly portrayed in the following excerpt from a

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[39] In his tract *On Heresies*, John of Damascus writes that: "They are also called Saracens, which is derived from *Sarras kenoi*, or destitute of Sara, because of what Agar said to the angel: 'Sara hath sent me away destitute'" (Gen. 16:8). The text has been quoted from *Writings*, by John of Damascus, *The Fathers of the Church Series* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 37.153. Given that Islam in Mediaeval times was not as yet considered as a religion different from Christianity. The term *Saracens* applied to Muslims is in itself a word of uncertain etymology, even though certain sources indicate that it is derived from the Arabic *Šarqī* / *Šarqiyūn*, meaning *Oriental*.

[40] See, for instance, Dan. 9:26-27; 11:11-12, 36-37.

[41] See Rev. 11:2.

homily on Baptism by Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem (d. c. 638) delivered on the feast of the Epiphany around the year 636 or 637 in connection with the conquest of Bethlehem by the Arab-Muslim army:

> Yet these vile ones would not have accomplished this nor seized such a degree of power as to do and utter lawlessly all these things, unless we had first insulted the gift [of baptism] and first defiled the purification, and in this way grieved Christ, the giver of gifts, and prompted him to be angry with us, good though he is and though he takes no pleasure in evil, being the fount of kindness and not wishing to behold the ruin and destruction of men. We are ourselves, in truth, responsible for all these things and no word will be found for our defence. What word or place will be given us for our defence when we have taken all these gifts from him, befouled them and defiled everything with our vile actions?[42]

In spite of this sad account, the eventual capitulation of Jerusalem deserves to be mentioned, given its significance in history as the first encounter in open dialogue between two religious leaders, namely Patriarch Sophronius and Caliph ʿUmar b. al-Ḫaṭṭāb (d. 644) against the backdrop of the latter's visit to the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre.

Following the Battle of Yarmūk in August 636,[43] and the ensuing fall of Damascus in that same year, the Arab-Muslim armies had now set their sights on Jerusalem. The siege was conducted by general Abū ʿUbayda b. al-Ǧarrāh who offered the inhabitants the usual choices offered by besieging Muslim armies.[44] These were conversion to Islam, or capitulation of the city and the payment of a tax in exchange for security, or, in the case of continued resistance and the eventual fall of the city, destruction followed by death or slavery.

Given the fact that the earlier-mentioned sacking of Jerusalem by the Persians in 614 was still fresh in the memories of the Patriarch and the population, Sophronius with a heavy heart decided to surrender, but he placed one condition: that he would surrender only to Caliph ʿUmar in person. Abū ʿUbayda immediately despatched a messenger to Damascus in order to notify the Caliph. ʿUmar set out from Damascus and, having reached Jerusalem, presided over the

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[42] Patriarch Sophronius, *Holy Baptism*, 166-167 quoted in Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, New Jersey: The Darwin Press, Inc., 1997), 72-73. Given that in this homily there is no mention of the siege of Jerusalem one may conclude that the event had not yet taken place.

[43] The Battle of Yarmūk practically opened the way to the conquest of all Byzantine territory in the Middle East.

[44] This reflects the code of conduct in war throughout the Middle East going back to Biblical times. One only has to recall the advice of Jeremiah to King Zedekiah. See Jer. 38:7-23.

capitulation, which took place on the Mount of Olives (just outside the city walls) in February 638. The terms imposed were the following:

> In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. This is the assurance of safety which the servant of God, ʿUmar, the Commander of the Faithful, has given to the people of Jerusalem. He has given them an assurance of safety (*amān*) for themselves for their property, their churches, their crosses, the sick and healthy of the city and for all the rituals which belong to their religion. Their churches will not be inhabited [by Muslims] and will not be destroyed. Neither they, nor the land on which they stand, nor their cross, nor their property will be damaged. They will not be forcibly converted. No Jew will live with them in Jerusalem.[45]

The people of Jerusalem must pay the taxes like the people of [other] cities and must expel the Byzantines and the robbers. Those of the people of Jerusalem who want to leave with the Byzantines, take their property and abandon their churches and crosses will be safe until they reach their place of refuge. Those villagers (*ahl al-arḍ*) who were in Jerusalem before the killing of so-and-so,[46] may remain in the city if they wish but must pay taxes like the citizens. Those who wish may go with the Byzantines and those who wish may return to their families. Nothing is to be taken from them before their harvest is reaped.

> If they pay their taxes according to their obligations, then the conditions laid out in this letter are under the covenant of God, are the responsibility of His Prophet, of the caliphs and of the faithful.
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> The persons who attest to it are Ḫālid b. al-Walīd, ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣī, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAwf, and Muʿāwiyah b. Abī Sufyān. This letter was written and prepared in the year 15/636-637.[47]

Details of what followed the signing of the capitulation have been related by the learned physician and Melkite Patriarch of Alexandria, Eutychius Saʿīd b. Baṭrīq (935-940). His *Chronography* from Adam to the year 938, written in Arabic, provides interesting and unique information on events that took place in the two major Byzantine patriarchates of the Middle East, namely Jerusalem and Antioch. One may object that this account was written two hundred years after the capitulation of Jerusalem. However, given that these details had been preserved for such a long period of time and were put into writing during a period

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[45] Jerusalem had been barred to the Jews since the end of the Bar Kochkba rebellion in 135 AD.

[46] The meaning of these words is not clear.

[47] *The History of al-Ṭabarī, vol. XII: The Battle of Qādisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*, trans. Yohanan Friedmann (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 191-192

when relations between Muslim authorities and Christian subjects were already becoming strained, one has to lend credence to its fidelity and authenticity. Here is how Eutychius described what occurred:

> When the gate of the city was opened ʿUmar came in with his entourage and sat at the *atreion* of the Church of the Resurrection. When the time of prayer approached ʿUmar said to Patriarch Sophronius: 'I want to pray.' And he responded: 'Commander of the Faithful, pray in the place where you are now'. And ʿUmar [said]: I do not want to pray here.' The Patriarch then led him to the church of Constantine [the Church of the Resurrection] where he spread a mat made of straw on the floor of the Church. But ʿUmar said: 'I do not want to pray here either.' He went out to the steps that are at the gate on the eastern side of the Church of St. Constantine and he prayed alone on the steps. Then he sat down and said to Patriarch Sophronius: 'Patriarch, do you know why I did not pray inside the Church?' he answered: 'I do not know, Commander of the faithful.' And ʿUmar said to him: 'If I had prayed inside the Church, you would be losing it and it would have gone from your hands because after my death the Muslims would seize it saying: ''Umar has prayed here.' But give me a piece of *pergamene* to write for you a document.' And he wrote that Muslims should not pray on the steps as a congregation, but individually, and that they should not gather here for the purpose of [communal] prayer, nor should be called together by the voice of a caller [*muʾaḏḏin*].' And he gave it to the Patriarch... Then ʿUmar left to visit Bethlehem. When the hour of prayer approached, he prayed inside the Church under the western apse, which was completely decorated with mosaic. ʿUmar wrote a document for the sake of the Patriarch, that the Muslims should not pray in this place, except individually, the one after the other, nor congregate here for the purpose of praying, nor should they be called by the voice of a caller for prayer, and that no form of this document should be altered.[48]

While a number of authors described scenes of social turmoil, natural and cosmic disasters, and plagues as presaging what they considered to be indicative of the nature of the Arab invasions and conquests, some inevitably were concerned with these events as being harbingers of the end times. By far the best-known text written in such ominous tones is the one that has reached us as *The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*. The Methodius of the title supposedly refers to the martyred bishop of Olympus in Lycia (today Çirali in Anatolia, Turkey) who is known to have been executed around the year 312. The author of the narrative foresees the temporary eschatological interlude of the kingdom of the Arabs, which was to

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[48] Quoted in Daniel J. Sahas, "The Face-to-Face Encounter Between Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem and the Caliph ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb: Friends or Foes?" in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Islam*, eds Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark N. Swanson, David Thomas (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2006), 38-39.

be overrun by the Byzantines, thereby paving the way for the end times.[49] The account relies heavily on the prophecies laid out in the Book of Daniel.[50] This and other works written in a similar vein were designed to halt the alarming flow of Christian conversions to Islam as the Arab-Muslim rulers established and consolidated their position in these newly-conquered territories.[51]

Having consolidated their position and authority in newly-conquered lands, Muslim rulers took decisive steps in order to affirm Islam as religion and polity. Gradually Arabic became the new official language of the state, coins bearing Islamic symbols were introduced into the monetary system, non-Muslims were gradually barred from occupying high positions in the state bureaucracy. One of the signs indicating that a new political regime was now in place was the building of monuments whose clear intention was to demonstrate that Islam was leaving the stamp of its own authority. One of the clearest of these was the building of the Dome of the Rock (*Qibbat al-Ṣaḫra*) during the caliphate of ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 685-705). The fact that it was built on the Temple Mount where the Temple built by Herod once stood was already a political-religious statement in itself. Furthermore, the inscribed verses of the Qurʾân that grace the outer rim of the cupola are all intended to demonstrate that both Judaism and Christianity have been superseded and rendered obsolete by Islam; their claims and doctrines are false.[52]

What greatly startled Christian religious leaders was the alarming rate with which Oriental Christians in certain areas effortlessly abandoned their faith and embraced Islam. As one Syriac chronicler very candidly 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...
>
> 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 to Harrān and becoming Muslims in the presence of [government] officials. A great crowd did so... from the districts of Edessa and of Harrān and of Tella and of Rêš ʿAyna.[53]

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[49] See Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings in Early Islam*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam (13) (Princeton –NJ: Darwin Press, 1977), 266.

[50] See Dan. 11; 12.

[51] These authors had, of course Matt. 24:13 in mind.

[52] See Oleg Grabar, *The Dome of the Rock* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2006).

[53] Amir Harrak trans., *The Chronicle of Zuqnîm: Parts III and IV; AD. 488-775*. Mediaeval Sources in Translation 36 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1999), 324,

This new situation brought about a drastic transformation in the approach taken by both Eastern and Oriental Christian hierarchs and theologians.

Both Eastern and Oriental Christian theologians appeared to be fairly knowledgeable about the content of the Qurʾân and its points of agreement and disagreement with the Biblical narratives. The above-mentioned tract *On Heresies* by John of Damascus is clear evidence for this. The author affirms that throughout the Qurʾân one discovers abundant material that had been mined from the Bible, which was then interpreted in a highly distorted manner.

We find similar cases in tracts originating from Oriental Christianity. Such is the case of the Syriac Orthodox bishop Jacob of Edessa.[54] This comes in one of the many extant letters which he wrote to one John the Stylite[55] one of which discusses the tradition that the Virgin Mary was descended from 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,[56] although they deny the true Messiah who has indeed come... The Muslims, too, although they do not 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 has 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.[57]

The last sentence in this quotation clearly shows that Jacob is well aware of that verse in the Qurʾân which states: "People of the Book, do not go to excess in your religion, and do not say anything about God except the truth: the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was nothing more than a messenger of God, His word,

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quoted here in the trans. of J. G. Segal, *Edessa, "The Blessed City"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 206.

[54] Jacob of Edessa (d. 708) was a Syriac Christian writer who wrote in the classical Syriac language. For this reason, he contributed much to the development of Syriac theological thought and is considered to be one of the most prominent contributors to the Syriac Christian tradition.

[55] John the Stylite (d. 737/738) was a Syriac Orthodox monk and stylite who belonged to the monastic community of Atarib. He was renowned as an author and a member of a circle of Christian intellectuals who worked in northern Syria during the Umayyad dynasty.

[56] See, for instance, Psalm 2.

[57] Quoted in Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings in Early Islam*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam (13) (Princeton –NJ: Darwin Press, 1977), 166.

conveyed to Mary, a spirit from Him (Q. 4:171)."[58] In later times many Christian writers would repeatedly quote this passage in order to structure their apologetic arguments around it.

Christian scholars also had the advantage of a thorough formation in Greek philosophical thought, especially metaphysics and dialectics, an avenue which was not yet open to Muslim scholars. The latter method was inherited from Aristotle. Unlike the Muslims Christians were already in possession of these works in the original Greek, and in some cases in Syriac translation. In addition to following Aristotle, the Christians also applied a series of literary devices, primarily the Socratic method, which had already been in use for centuries. It had been applied in order to combat heresies and now in order to address arguments concerning Biblical texts and theological issues.

Together with this late acquisition of the full heritage of Greek thought, Muslim scholars in the ʿAbbāsid empire were already aware of the contents of the Bible, especially by way of those who converted to Islam from Judaism and Christianity. They could therefore debate with both Jewish and Christian scholars on points of scriptural and doctrinal diversion between the Bible and the Qurʾân.

It was now deemed both necessary and urgent for Oriental Christian theologians to compose and articulate apologetical manuals in order to argue the reasonableness of the Christian faith, as well as to preach its truthfulness. In the beginning, Syriac apologetical tracts took the form of a question-and-answer session intended to furnish Christian readers with handy responses to queries put by Muslims in their daily lives. In such works it is always the Muslim who takes the initiative to interrogate, and it is the Christian who responds usually by way of analogy. From these texts one may deduce that Muslim theological discourse had yet to develop and reach a level of maturity; on the other hand, Christians had to be wary so as not to put into question the dignity and status of Muḥammad within the Muslim community as well as to avoid totally any attempt at disparaging the Qurʾân. Among the early theologians involved in these debates one finds scholars such as Theodore Abū Qurra (c. 750 – c. 825) a Melkite bishop and theologian who argued for the reasonableness of the Christian faith against the challenges posed by Muslims and Jews as well as by Christians such as the East Syrians who rejected the dogmas proclaimed at the Council of Chalcedon (381). He was also a pioneer in articulating Christian

[58] This text is one of those that feature in the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock.

doctrine not only in Syriac but also in Arabic thereby making use of Muslim theological concepts.

Furthermore, already during the late seventh century, Syriac writers were aware of problems involving the interactions of Christians and Muslims in religious matters, and they sought ways to address them from a pastoral perspective. A case in point is once again provided by treatises and letters written by Jacob of Edessa, regarding canonical laws regulating relations between Muslims and Christians, especially where marriages of disparity of cult or conversions to Islam and eventual returns from apostasy were concerned. Such issues had to be addresses urgently but, at the same time, Christian leaders, whether they were patriarchs or bishops, were well aware that such delicate matters required prudence as well as solicitude for the good of the persons involved. Here are two typical responses to such cases in reply to queries sent by Addai[59] and John the Stylite respectively. In both instances they reflect Jacob's profound theological erudition as well as his pastoral solicitude:

> On distribution of the Eucharist to a woman married to a Muslim:
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> [*#75*] Addai: 'Concerning a Christian woman who willingly marries a Hagarene[60] [I want to learn] if priests should give her the Eucharist and if one knows of a canon concerning this. [I want to learn] if her husband were threatening to kill a priest if he should not give her the Eucharist, should [the priest] temporarily consent because [otherwise the husband] would seek his death? Or would it be a sin for him to consent? Or because her husband is compassionate toward Christians, is it better to give her the Eucharist and she not become a Hagarene?'
>
> Jacob: 'You have abolished all your doubts concerning this question because you said, 'If the Eucharist should be given to her and she not become a Hagarene". So that she will not become a Hagarene, even if the priest would have sinned in giving it and even if her husband were not threatening [the priest], it would have been right for him to give her the Eucharist. But [in truth] he does not sin in giving [it] to her. Then [as for] the other thing you said: 'If one knew of a canon concerning this.' If there is neither risk of apostasy nor her threatening husband, it is right for you to act in this way. Namely, because other women should fear lest they also stumble, for [this woman's admonition she should fall under the canons['sentence] for as long as it appears to those in authority that she is able to bear.'[61]

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[59] Addai mentioned here appears to be a Syriac Orthodox priest who belonged to the intellectual circle led by Jacob of Edessa. He bears no connection whatsoever with the composer of the Syriac liturgy known by the same name.

[60] That is to say, a Muslim.

[61] *Letter to Addai*, *Question 75* [*Harvard Syr*. 93, fols 26b-27a], slightly amended by the near-identical versions found in *Mingana* 8 and *Cambridge* 2023, in Michael Philip Penn, *When*

On returning to the Church after having converted to Islam:

[*#13*] John: 'If a Christian should become a Hagarene or a pagan and, after a while, he should regret [this] and return from his paganism, I want to learn whether it is right for him to be baptized or if by this he has been stripped of the grace of baptism.'

Jacob: 'On the one hand, it is not right for a Christian who becomes a Hagarene or a pagan to be [re-] baptized. He had been born anew by water and by spirit according to the word of our Lord. On the other hand, it is right that there be a prayer over him [said] by the head priest and that he be assigned a time of penitence for as long as is proper. After a time of penitence, he should be also allowed to share in the [divine] mysteries. We have this as confirmation: that those who were baptized by water but had not received the Holy Spirit were later made worthy of [the Spirit] by prayer alone and through the laying on of the hands by the head priest [Acts 8:14-18]. But concerning whether he had been stripped of the grace of baptism because he became a Hagarene, I have this to say: Concerning those things whose giver is God, it is not ours to say whether they are taken away, or indeed stripped, from whoever had received them. But this is God's alone [to decide]. He looks for their return and penitence because he does not want the death of a sinner.[62] Rather, he wants him to be separated [from evil] and to return. So here, in this world and in this present life, he will not take grace from him. But there, on that last day, [the day] of judgment, he will strip him of grace, take the talent from him as from the evil servant [Mt 25:28-30], and throw him into eternal fire.'[63]

Here again, one notes that Muslims were not as yet referred to by their formal name, but rather by a pejorative term indicating their supposed ethnic origin, that is to say, from Hagar and consequently from Išmael.

Overall, the fortunes of Christian communities during the eighth century greatly depended upon the inclinations not only of the caliphs but also of the regional governors. For example, Marwan II (r. 744-750) the last of the Umayyad caliphs to rule from Damascus appeared to be more amenable to Christians than some of his predecessors. The monastic chronicler Theophanes the Confessor (758-818) writes of his respect toward Christians as well as his justice in punishing those who had persecuted and killed them merely on account of their faith:

Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 164-165.

[62] See Ezek. 18:32.

[63] *First Letter to John the Stylite*, Question 13 [*Harvard Syr*. 93, fols 42b-43b, in Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*. 168-169. Concerning all three issues discussed by Jacob of Edessa in this article, see also, Michael Philip Penn, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 67-69.150-152.171-172.

> In the same year (744), at the request of the Christians of the east, Marwan allowed Theophylaktos, an Edessan priest, to be chosen patriarch of Antioch, since Stephen had died. Theophylaktos was adorned with spiritual gifts, and especially with discretion. With universal letters, Marwān commanded that he should be honoured by the Arabs.
>
> In Emesa (present-day Homs), Marwan hanged one hundred twenty Kalbites[64] and killed ʿAbbās in prison;[65] ʿAbbās had shed a great deal of Christian blood and had overrun and conquered many places. For this purpose, Marwān sent him an Ethiopian, who went to him and smothered him. The Ethiopian had bags filled with quicklime, which he put round ʿAbbās' head and nostrils. Marwān had devised this as a just punishment for a sorcerer. Many evils which have befallen Christians have sprung from wizards and summoners of demons. Also, ʿAbbās had a share in Walīd's blood.[66]

Oriental Christian-Muslim Debate Sessions

With the defeat of the Umayyads in 750 and the rise of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate a marked development took place in the geopolitical setting of Islam especially in the Middle East. The early ambition of the new rulers was that of establishing what they considered to be a truly Islamic Empire. In spite of its geographically strategic position as being almost equidistant from the western and eastern borders of Islamic territory as well as the commercial advantages stemming from its proximity to the Mediterranean, Damascus was considered by many as an Islamized city rather than an Islamic one. After all, it is one of the oldest capitals in the world and its establishment dates back to ancient Biblical times. The ʿAbbāsids, therefore, sought to build a new capital for the new civilization that they sought to construct. For this purpose, they chose to build Baghdad, which was far removed from the Mediterranean and North Africa. Spain was already lost to them with the establishment of the Umayyad Emirate, later to be called the Umayyad Kingdom, which was founded by the only surviving member of the

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[64] The Banū Kalb was an Arab tribe which mainly inhabited the desert of northwestern Arabia and Syria. Before the triumph of Muḥammad in Arabia they had professed Monophysite Christianity, but then converted to Islam. They rebelled against Marwān II because of his granting favours to their enemies the Qays, but it was swiftly crushed by the caliph.

[65] Theophanes is here referring to al-ʿAbbās ibn al-Walīd ibn ʿAbd al-Malik, the eldest son of caliph al-Walīd (r. 705-715) born of a slave concubine (*umm walad*). He was involved in the conspiracy to assassinate caliph al-Walīd II, who was a member of Marwān's family. One would presume that this was the main reason for his imprisonment and subsequent murder, although this would not disprove the reason offered by Theophanes.

[66] See supra n.51. The above text is quoted in *The Chronicle of Theophanes: Anni mundi 6095-6305 (A.D. 602-813)*, n. 421, 111.

family ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Dāḫil in 756. This new city was to be situated between the Tigris and the Euphrates right in the centre of what used to be called 'the Fertile Crescent.' It could therefore independently support a substantial garrison and a sizeable population. It lay also at the intersection between the trade routes of the Mediterranean and the Arabian peninsula and the Great Silk Road.[67] The ʿAbbāsids' dream was that of making Baghdad the heart of their empire as well as a truly cosmopolitan centre for commerce, scholarship, the arts, and religious thought. The move from Damascus to the newly-constructed capital Baghdad, undertaken under the caliphate of al-Manṣūr in 767 appeared to be more advantageous to East Syrian Christians than to the Byzantine-leaning Melkites.

Such a transformation did not go unnoticed by Christian leaders. It was for this reason that the East Syrian Patriarch (or Catholicos) Timothy I (r. 780-823) decided to relocate the Patriarchal See from Seleucia-Ctesiphon (present-day al-Madāʾin, which is situated around 35 km. south-east of Baghdad) to the new capital. In spite of the dubious means that he allegedly employed in order to accede to the Patriarchal throne, his leadership marked a golden age in the life of East Syrian Christianity.[68] He supervised the complete overhaul of the intellectual formation of the clergy thereby establishing a high standard of education for them as well as for the laity. He even succeeded in expanding the outreach of the Church to include the establishment of Christian communities in the Eastern Mediterranean, Central Asia and China. His presence in Baghdad brought him in close proximity with the caliphal court. It is precisely within this context that written accounts exist of a series of dialogues between him and caliph Al-Mahdī which took place around the years 781-782. These encounters again took the form of question-and-answer sessions, in which the caliph poses the question and the patriarch provides the answer. Here, the Patriarch adopts a two-fold strategy in his reply. On the one hand he applies philosophical discourse and argumentation while on the other hand providing coherent answers through the use of analogy. The exchange below refers to the issue of Christian belief in the Triune God:

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[67] Marco Polo, together with his father Nicolò and his uncle Maffeo, would pass through Baghdad on his way to the court of the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan in 1275.

[68] For a fuller account of the scholarly contributions given by East Syrian scholars during the eighth and ninth centuries see Sidney Griffith, "Syrian Christian Intellectuals in the World of Islam: Faith, The Philosophical Life, And The Quest For An Interreligious Convivencia In Abbasid Times," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 7 (2007): 55-73.

> The Sixth Question
> [The Blessed Trinity is One God]
> He (al-Mahdī) said, 'You profess the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit!' I (Timothy) said, 'Yes!'
> He said, 'Three Gods?' I said, 'These names, for us, indicate persons of the one God. As the Commander of the Faithful, his word and his spirit are one, not three caliphs, without separation of your word and your spirit from you; so also God with his Word and his Spirit are one God, not three Gods, for there is no separation of his Word and his Spirit from him. In the same way, the sun, with its ray and heat; it is one sun, not three suns...
> The Eighth Question
> [The Three Persons United and Distinct]
> *[2. The analogy of the apple]*
> As the aroma of the apple does not proceed from [only] a part of it and its taste from another, rather, from the entire apple the aroma proceeds and [the entire apple] begets its taste, without separation between its taste and its aroma, nor are they separate from it [the whole apple] (although its taste is not its aroma, and each one is not it [the apple], and the three are joined while separate, and separate while connected); so also the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are three persons, one nature with three intransitive properties. One God, with three essential revealed attributes.'[69]

Although these forms of dialogues usually ended in a stalemate, their purpose was never that of proving the truth of the Christian faith but rather that of establishing clarity as to what Christians really believe in as well as to demonstrate that their opponents have an erroneous impression of the content of Christian doctrine. The fact that these dialogues took place with the use of Arabic as a medium of communication substantially aided the process of inculturation of Christian intellectual and spiritual life within the fabric of Islamic civilization.

Also, mention must be made of two outstanding East Syrian theologians who excelled in the production of scientific and philosophical translations from Greek into Arabic as well as apologetical treatises throughout the ninth century. The first one is Ḥabīb b. Ḫidma Abū Rāʾita al-Tikrītī (d. c. 830) who applied Greek philosophy in his apologetical works and demonstrated a profound knowledge of Islam as a religion. The other theologian is ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī who was also a renowned ninth-century apologist and he is reputed to have been the first to come up with a work of systematic theology in Arabic.

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[69] *The Patriarch and the Caliph: An Eighth-Century Dialogue Between Timothy I and al-Mahdī*, A Parallel English-Arabic text ed. trans. and annotated by Samir Khalil Samir and Wafik Nasry Provo (Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2018), 12.16.

The Establishment of the *Bayt al-Ḥikma*

Up until the first half of the ninth century, one could not yet speak of a level playing field when it came to apologetical debate between Christians and Muslims, since the former would always take the upper hand in clinching the argument. The way would be gradually cleared in the first half of the ninth century when the ʿAbbāsid caliph Al-Maʾmūn (r. 813-833) founded in Baghdad in 832 the *Bayt al-Ḥikma* (House of Wisdom) which would serve as a translation bureau, a library, a book depository, as well as an astronomical observatory. The city had already developed into the political capital of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate; it was about to develop into the intellectual metropolis of the Islamic empire.

The caliph called together all the scholars throughout his domains in order to translate the entire corpus of Hellenistic thought from Greek, or from an already existing translation (presumably Syriac), into Arabic. This huge task was mainly undertaken by Christians, given the fact that they were bi-lingual and at times even tri-lingual. Among the most renowned Christian intellectuals and scholars who participated in such an enterprise mentioned must be made of Abū Zayd Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq al-ʿIbādī (808-873). He was fluent in four languages, namely Syriac, Greek, Arabic and Farsī. He was the most prolific translator of medical and scientific treatises, thereby laying the foundations of Islamic medicine. He is known to have translated more than a hundred works, which also included those originating from the classical Greek philosophical tradition such as Plato's *Timaeus* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Thus, the first translations of Aristotle, Plato, and Neoplatonic works from Greek into Arabic began to take place in the first half of the ninth century in Baghdad.

Al-Maʾmūn also availed himself of the aid offered by Indian mathematicians in order to enhance the study of mathematics, geometry and astronomy. In fact, the numerals that the Arabs use to this very day are Indian numerals and not Arabic.

This vast enterprise founded and financed by the ʿAbbāsids was to provide in the long term incalculable benefits to the entire world of scholarship both East and West as the translations undertaken would be copied and spread throughout the Islamic world, even as far as its the western border in Spain. It also was the remote cause of the establishment and development of the Scholastic movement in Western Christendom, beginning with the University of Paris. It was precisely at this very centre of learning that the division and method of the sciences and their teachings as established by the Islamic philosopher Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. c. 950) and translated and adapted by Dominicus Gundisalvi (c. 1110-c. 1190)[70]

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[70] Domincus Gundisalvi was Archdeacon of Cuéllar in the Archdiocese of Segovia. Together

in Spain took root. However, what became a gain for Western Christendom would not necessarily play to the advantage of the Oriental Christian world.

Decline and Eventual Disappearance

There was indeed a downside to this undertaking by Christian scholars. The positive steps achieved in employing Arabic terms to Christian theology and their application in the realm of Oriental Christian-Muslim theological debate gradually declined and ultimately ground to a halt by the middle of the eleventh century due to two significant developments. The first one was surprisingly that of the above-mentioned establishment of the *Bayt al-Ḥikma* (*House of Wisdom*) by Caliph al-Maʾmūn (813-833).

The translations undertaken mainly by Christians, especially in the field of philosophy, and particularly in the realm of dialectics, served to create a more level playing field when it came to Muslim-Christian debates. Following the translation of Aristotle's *Topics*, Muslims began to master the art of dialectics in order to refine their arguments and to counter those of Christians with their own. This development eventually served to render the entire enterprise of apologetical writings or theological debates ineffective given that the end result would be a stalemate.

But what really brought a steady decline and ultimately a halt to Christian-Muslim dialogue was the renewed interest of Muslims in the preservation of the Arabic language in its Qurʾânic form. Here we need to understand that by the ninth century the overwhelming majority of Muslims were no longer Arabs. Converts from Central Asia and Persia by far surpassed the Arabs. Islamic civilization in the ninth century also implies that here we are now talking of developments taking place two-hundred years after the death of Muḥammad. By that time Arabs had not only settled in non-Arab regions, but they also began allowing non-Arabic terms to enter into their own language. A significant difference was being detected between the Arabic of the Qurʾân and that being spoken in everyday life in the ninth century. There was a great risk that Qurʾânic Arabic would eventually become incoherent or indecipherable except for expert reciters (*qurrāʾ*) of the sacred text of Islam. This brought about a movement that spearheaded the study of Arabic grammar as applied in the Qurʾân, which led to

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with his Jewish colleague Ibn Dāwūd (Lat. Avendauth) he helped translate twenty philosophical tracts by Islamic scholars. He was also the author of five philosophical works. Among these one finds *De divisione philosophiae*, which was an adaptation of al-Fārābī's *Iḥṣāʾ al-ʿUlūm* (*The Enumeration of the Sciences*).

the establishment of schools of grammar (the most noted being those of Baṣra and Kūfa) that initiated the compilation of dictionaries and manuals of Arabic grammar and philology. For this purpose, scholars sought the aid of nomad Bedouin tribes living in the Arabian peninsula (who were the least prone to contact with the outside) in order to determine the precise meaning of terms used in the Qurʾân, which had either fallen out of use or else had been replaced by terms of non-Arabic origin. This movement succeeded in preserving and disseminating Qurʾânic Arabic as well as stabilizing the language thereby avoiding the prospect of its being lost forever. There was however a significant downside to this process because it also meant that Arabic was now being increasingly identified with the Qurʾân and consequently with Islam. Therefore, the Islamization of the Arabic language left Christian Arabic bereft of any theological or cultural significance. The use of Arabic in Christian theological circles thus began to decline and ultimately fade into insignificance. This was naturally accompanied with a lack of interest in any theological engagement with Muslim scholars by the middle of the eleventh century.

Conclusion

In spite of the above, the engagement of Oriental Christian scholars and high-ranking prelates was not a vain exercise. It is a prime example of engaging one's opponent on common ground, but there is perhaps an even better reason to be drawn. It also serves as a lesson for present-day Christian theologians living and working in "Western" secular societies, where religious language and concepts are fast disappearing. It is primarily due to this religious illiteracy that tensions and violence erupt periodically on the European continent, where ridicule has become integral to the right of free speech, thereby blurring significantly the distinction between this practice and psychological abuse. One former prime minister of the Republic of France went so far as to state that "Freedom of religion cannot be achieved without freedom of speech, even if it is sometimes used to express derision."[71] It would be more than worthwhile if we were to seriously consider the above-mentioned examples of Oriental Christian dialogue with Muslim religious scholarship and political authority as an effective approach method towards understanding Muslims living in our midst. For almost 1500

[71] 63rd United Nations General Assembly – Plenary Assembly – Item 45, Culture of Peace – Statement on behalf of the European Union by M. Alain Juppé, former prime minister and Special Envoy of the President of the Republic, New York, 12 November 2008 http://www.ambafrance-uk.org/Alain-Juppe-addresses-63rd-UN (accessed, 1st June 2024).

years Oriental Christians have lived side by side with Muslims both as neighbours and as subjects to their rule. In some countries they continue to suffer politically, religiously and socially. Yet their continued existence, albeit in some cases as an almost insignificant minority, is testimony to their resilience as well as to their witness to Christ's message: "It is not you who will be speaking – it will be the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."[72]

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[72] Matt. 10:20.