

CHAPTER 1

Arab Christianity

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The history of Christianity among the Arabs is long and distinctive, stretching from within a few centuries from the time of Christ to the present, and developing its own character and forms of thought. For much of its history it has been bound up with Islam and, as far as can be seen, has employed Arabic as its main language of worship and teaching. This has meant it has remained separate from other parts of the Church for long periods, and that its writings have been largely unknown to most Christians outside.

The term 'Arab Christianity' is not easy to define with precision. It can be taken in broad terms as a definition of Christians who worship and teach their faith in Arabic, though this can include Syrian and Coptic Christians who have adopted Arabic as their everyday language. Here it will be taken in relatively general terms to designate Christians who lived in the Arabian peninsula and along the eastern frontiers of the Roman world, and later the Christians who have lived in the Arab heartlands and have continued to the present to confess their faith under Islamic rule.

The Earliest Traces of Arab Christianity

In his Letter to the Galatians, St Paul mentions that after his conversion experience he 'did not consult immediately with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but went away to Arabia and returned again to Damascus' (1: 16–17). It is attractive, and not entirely implausible, to imagine that he went to friendly fellow believers in the hinterland east of Damascus, or even went there to preach before any of his great missionary journeys. But this brief mention cannot support such inferences; the spread of the faith to Arabia cannot safely be documented at this early stage, and not with any assurance until the third century. According to Eusebius of Caesarea, there was a bishop of Bostra on the north–south trade route east of the Jordan in the middle of this century, and also synods convened in his see and

further south in Arabia Petraea at about the same time (*Ecclesiastical History* 6: 20, 37). Eusebius also suggests that the Emperor Philip the Arab (r. 244–59) was a Christian, most explicitly when he describes how the emperor wished to take part in the Easter vigil in Antioch in 244 but was barred until he had confessed his sins (*Ecclesiastical History* 6: 34). Some scholars accept the reliability of the historian's evidence, but others discount it as a rumour that is countered by other attestations to Philip's pagan beliefs (it is maybe an esteem-building retrojection analogous to later stories preserved by Christians under Islamic rule of the conversion of caliphs such as the 'Abbasid al-Ma'mūn (r. 813–33) and the Fāṭimid al-Mu'izz (r. 969–75).

These references to Arabian bishops in the third century are complemented by mention of their successors in the fourth century attending major church councils. One of the later versions of the lists of the Council of Nicaea in 325 includes among other bishops from Arabia a certain Pamphilus of the Tayenoi, possibly the bishop of the empire's Arab confederates whom authors referred to by this generic form of the name of the Ṭayy tribe. Fifty years later, one of the bishops who attended the Synod of Antioch in 363 was Theotinus of the Arabs. And in the latter decades of the century Moses, who was an ethnic Arab, worked as bishop among the Arab confederates in Syria and was instrumental in reconciling them with the empire after they had revolted.

These references to third- and fourth-century bishops are brief, and some are equivocal. But they nevertheless point to what is anyway the likely fact that there was a Christian presence among the Arabs on the fringes of the Roman Empire this early, and that it included some degree of ecclesiastical organization. The actual tribes among whom these bishops would have been active are not named in the sources, but it is not unlikely that one of these would have been the Tanūkhids, whose territory lay between the Euphrates and the major Christian See of Antioch. They and other such tribal confederations as the Ghassānids, Lakhmids and Salīhids occupied the territory between the Roman and Sassanian Empires to the north of the Arabian peninsula proper. They acted as important buffers between the two states, and their allegiance was keenly courted through the long centuries of warfare in which the respective imperial frontiers were repeatedly pushed east and west. Throughout the fourth century, and after it, these tribes were converted to Christianity, with the Lakhmids following the teaching of the Church of the East, and the Ghassānids adopting Miaphysitism. The Lakhmids, with their centre at Ḥīra near the southern Euphrates, were influenced by Christianity as early as the mid-fourth century, though since their allegiance was to the Persians their ruling house never followed the majority of the people into allegiance to the Church of the East. Ironically, under their pagan rule Ḥīra became a town of churches and monasteries, and the home of well-known Christian poets.

The Ghassānids had their main centre at Jābiya in the Byzantine province of Arabia, and then a later establishment at the important nomad shrine of St Sergius (martyred under Diocletian) further north near the Euphrates at Sergiopolis (Ruṣāfa), where their ruler al-Mundhir built an impressive audience hall in the later sixth century. They were staunch followers of Miaphysite teachings. Their leader Ḥārith Ibn Jabala was instrumental in having Jacob Baradeus and Theodore consecrated bishops over his territory in 542, with the consequence that Miaphysitism took firm hold in this part of the empire, and the Syrian Miaphysites became known as Jacobites.

This tribe had migrated to this area in the early fourth century and started as clients of the Salīḥids, who had converted to Christianity during the reign of the Emperor Valens (r. 364–78) under the influence of monks and priests who had lived among them. One of their leaders was remembered in later times as the founder of the Monastery of Dayr Dāwūd, which still continues in northern Syria. They remained allies of the Byzantines throughout the fourth and fifth centuries, but they were gradually displaced by the Ghassānids, who were recognized in their stead as leaders of the Arabian tribes by the Emperor Justinian. They disappeared from history after the advent of Islam.

The different denominational allegiances of these tribes reflect the doctrinal disagreements that racked the Roman Empire in the fourth century and afterwards. The Christological controversies that the major councils of the fifth century failed to resolve split Christians irrevocably into the three divisions of Chalcedonians, Diophysites and Miaphysites, and imperial efforts to quell rivalries and hostilities between them had the effect of driving them further apart, both in terms of the doctrinal positions they held and, in the case of the Diophysites, the areas they inhabited. When the School of Edessa was closed in 489 it was reopened in Nisibis in the Persian Empire, and influenced the hierarchy of that area to adhere to the Antiochene Diophysite Christology, with local Christians following their leaders in the form of faith they held.

In the Arabian peninsula itself Christian presence at this time is attested in the early centuries by the existence of communities of believers and bishoprics along the eastern and southern coasts. The names of bishops belonging to the Church of the East and also references to monasteries are recorded along the Arabian Gulf from as early as the fourth and as late as the thirteenth centuries, and along the coast of Hadramawt and Yemen until the ninth century. Christian missionaries were active in parts of the interior from an early date, and the town of Najrān in the northern Yemen was particularly known for its Miaphysite population. In 520 a number of Christians there were killed by the Jewish king Dhū Nuwās, an event that, according to Muslim tradition, is recalled in the Qur'an, 85: 4–8. News of this prompted the Byzantine emperor to encourage the Miaphysite Ethiopians to invade, and from 525 until 570, when the Persians captured this area, there was Christian rule and a Miaphysite hierarchy. A ruler from this period who is well known in Islamic tradition is Abraha, who made himself king in about 530. He built a cathedral at Ṣan'a, supposedly as an alternative religious centre to the then pagan *Ka'ba* at Mecca, and sent an expedition against this town in revenge for the assassination of a Ḥijāzī ally. It failed, and its overthrow has always been linked with the reference in Chapter 105 of the Qur'an to the divine intervention against the 'owners of the elephant' that caused flocks of birds to rain pebbles on them. The birth of Muḥammad is usually linked with 'the year of the elephant'.

Further north in the Ḥijāz the presence of Christianity in these centuries is difficult to plot with accuracy. The tribes of 'Udhrā, Judhām, Bahrā' and some of the Banu Kalb north of Madīna were converted sometime before the coming of Islam, and it has been suggested that several monasteries were established in their territories. If this could be established beyond doubt, it might prove extremely significant for explaining the knowledge of Christianity possessed by Muḥammad and his Muslim followers, but nothing can be ascertained beyond inference.

The Qur'an, which is almost universally dated to the early seventh century (between 610 and 632 if the accepted Muslim chronology is taken as a guide), and the earliest strata of Islamic history yield significant if isolated details about Arab Christianity in the Ḥijāz and further north at this time. The Qur'an itself comments throughout on stories that have obvious biblical antecedents, though the relationship between the forms in the two scriptures is rarely direct, and differences of detail are the subject of vigorous debate. And there is certainly one instance of a relationship between two brief accounts in the Qur'an (3: 49 and 5: 110) of Jesus creating birds from clay, breathing into them and causing them to fly, and the same incident recorded in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. In addition, it shows awareness of the key doctrines of the Trinity and divinity of Christ, though in forms that permit criticisms of them as distortions of monotheistic beliefs, the Trinity by suggesting that God is one of three (4: 171, 5: 73, 5: 116), and the divinity of Christ by suggesting that Jesus is a second God (e.g., 9: 30–1). And it furthermore refers to features of institutional Christianity, such as priests and monks (5: 82–3), monasticism (57: 27) and churches, 'with men in them celebrating his glory night and morning, men who are not distracted by commerce or profit from remembering God, keeping up the prayer, and paying the prescribed alms, fearing a day when hearts and minds will turn over' (24: 36–7), as well as corrupt practices among the clergy (9: 34) and maybe internal church divisions (13: 36). All this is suggestive of a rich Christian context in which the Qur'an originated and to which it reacts by applying its criterion of strict transcendent monotheism.

The channels by which Muḥammad may have come to know about Christian beliefs are equally difficult to detect. The Muslim tradition itself preserves some details, such as that his first wife's cousin, Waraqa Ibn Nawfal, was a Christian and thus able to interpret his first experience of prophethood in terms that conformed to biblical precedents, that he knew a Christian named Jabr who kept a market stall in Mecca, and most redolently that he met and was recognized by a Christian monk while on a caravan journey as a boy (Ibn Ishāq 1955: 79–81, 83, 95–7). This incident was amplified in both Christian and Muslim versions in later centuries, the Muslim portraying the monk, who is usually named Baḥīrā (cf. the Syriac title *bhīrā*, 'reverend') or Sarjis/Sergius, as performing a similar role to his relative Waraqa in recognizing Muḥammad as prophet in fulfilment of earlier expectations, and the Christian portraying him as a heretic who taught Muḥammad the distorted forms of Christianity that appear in the Qur'an. In connection with this, it is maybe significant that the Muslim tradition links Muḥammad's relationship with the Christian Jabr to an accusation levelled against the Prophet in the Qur'an: 'And we [God] know well that they say: Only a man teaches him [Muḥammad]. The speech of him at whom they falsely hint is outlandish, and this is clear Arabic speech' (16: 103). Clearly, some of Muḥammad's opponents thought that he was taught versions of biblical stories by a human teacher rather than God, as Muslim doctrine holds. And here, as well as in the Baḥīrā story, there may lurk the remnant of a link between the accounts in the Qur'an of events paralleled in the Bible and Arab Christian sources from which they derived.

These scant items do little more than stir speculation about the nature of the information that may lie behind the Qur'an (of course, the question does not arise in Islam because the Qur'an is almost universally accepted as the speech of God himself and

therefore free from literary dependence). And they raise the question about the form in which Christian teachings may have circulated among Arabs in the sixth and early seventh centuries, and particularly whether the Bible or any substantial parts of it had been translated into Arabic by this time and could be heard and understood by an Arab audience.

If Christianity had spread among the Arabs from the fourth century and there were bishoprics established, with churches and cathedrals, then it is not unreasonable to imagine that there would have been a liturgy in Arabic and also an Arabic Bible to meet the spiritual needs of believers. Some scholars contend that the circumstantial evidence is strong enough to indicate that there probably were a liturgy and translation of the Bible in Arabic by this time, but this evidence is never sufficient to expel all doubts. There is nothing, as far as can presently be concluded with certainty, that provides evidence for Arabic translations until well into the Muslim era; according to an uncorroborated report by Michael the Syrian (Chabot 1899–1924, II: 431–2) the first Arabic translation of the Gospels was made in the seventh century. And so it must be inferred that Christians followed liturgy in the languages in which it had been received, Greek or Syriac, and depended on oral forms of biblical stories (the occurrence in the Qur'an of many Syriac loan words, including the form *ʿĪsā al-Masīḥ* from *Īshōʿ Mshīḥā* for Jesus Christ, would seem to suggest that there was little, if any, native religious vocabulary among Christians at this time). This is one of the most perplexing problems relating to Arab Christianity in this period, together with the immediate background from which the Qur'an emerged.

The evidence for Christianity among the Arabs suggests, therefore, that while the faith was evident among leading tribes and along major coastal trading routes, where senior clergy were established and active, it may not in the three centuries following the peace of the Church have evolved into a church or churches that enjoyed institutional and intellectual independence from the main centres within the Byzantine world. The evidence forbids any firm conclusions, though maybe it points to Christianity more in a missionary than natively established form. The one exception will be the Church of the East, which by the end of the fifth century had asserted its independence of Constantinople and set up its own patriarchate, and had begun to engage in vigorous missionary work to the east into Asia and south into Arabia. These are signs that it possessed a definite sense of identity as a church in its own right.

The Muslim tradition that the *Ka'ba* in Mecca, at this time a pagan shrine, housed a representation of the Virgin and Child among its more than three hundred images of Arabian divinities is maybe indicative of the precarious nature of Christianity in this and possibly other parts of the Arab world in the early seventh century as it competed among the multiple forms of religion in circulation.

Arab Christianity under Islam

As what can be thought in many ways to be a response to the religious and social milieu in which it came into being, the Qur'an contains numerous comments on Christians and their beliefs. It addresses them directly as *Naṣārā*, a term that is usually understood

as a reference to the followers of 'the Nazarite', and is also accepted as referring to them indirectly in the term *Ahl al-kitāb*, 'People of the Book', which refers to communities in pre-Islamic times that had been given a revealed scripture by God and so shared a lineage with bearers of the Qur'an.

In some verses Christians are ranked at almost the same level as Muslims, and assured that they are accorded salvation (2: 62, 3: 55), and in one often-quoted verse they are placed next to Muslims themselves:

And you will find the most vehement of mankind in hostility to those who believe are the Jews and the idolaters. And you will find the nearest of them in affection to those who believe are those who say: 'We are Christians'. That is because there are among them priests and monks, and because they are not proud. (5: 82)

This verse appears to link the sense of communion between the two communities of believers with the quality of humility demonstrated by Christians, presumably a palpable characteristic that Muḥammad and others witnessed for themselves.

Other verses balance such comments of approval with criticism and hostility, remarking that Christians show exclusivity in their attitudes (2: 111, 2: 120, 5: 18, etc.) and are pointedly inimical towards Muslims (3: 65, 4: 153, 5: 59, all addressed to the People of the Book). Furthermore, they mislead people into false beliefs (2: 109, 3: 69), and teach wrong things (4: 171, 5: 77), and have abandoned God's promise and ended in internal strife:

And with those who say, 'Lo, we are Christians', we made a covenant, but they forgot a part of what they were admonished about. Therefore we have stirred up enmity and hatred among them till the Day of Resurrection, when God will inform them of their handiwork. (5: 14)

Elsewhere, the Qur'an gives content to this complaint by detailing Christians' inflated claims about Jesus, that he was God and Son of God (4: 171, 9: 30, etc.), and that the godhead is therefore plural:

O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion: nor say of God aught but the truth. Jesus Christ the son of Mary was a Messenger of God, and his word which he bestowed on Mary, and a spirit from him: so believe in God and his messengers. Say not 'Three', desist. For God is one God: glory be to him. (4: 171)

And it also suggests that the scriptures given to the People of the Book have not been handed down intact. It accuses them of concealing what is contained in their scripture (2: 140, 3: 71, 5: 15, 6: 91), of mispronouncing it in order to distort its meaning (3: 78), and of corrupting it by changing 'the words from their times and places' (4: 46, 5: 41). There is no amplification of what is intended here, and some scholars see these comments as referring only to isolated individuals among the Jewish tribes of Madīna scurrilously setting out to trick Muḥammad. But in the later Islamic tradition these verses were used as the basis for increasingly elaborate critiques of the integrity of the Bible.

It can be seen from these references that a lively debate is conducted in the Qur'an between the beliefs that were being enunciated by Muḥammad and the analogous though identifiably different beliefs of Christians and Jews. And there is evident competition for the true account of what is commonly accepted as a history of God's communication with created humanity. Thus, Abraham is severed from his intimate ties with the Jews and Christians, and identified as a Muslim:

Abraham was not a Jew or a Christian, but he was an upright man (*ḥanīf*) who had surrendered (*muslim*), and he was not of the idolaters. (3: 67)

And above all Jesus is portrayed as a prophet from God, and no more than human.

The Qur'an goes into considerable detail about who Jesus was and what he did, in its characteristically allusive style seeming to assume prior knowledge of what it refers to. It is as though it is drawing upon an ample stock of information and addressing a particularly problematic point. It describes the annunciation of his birth to Mary in two places and at some length (3: 42–7, 19:16–35), though emphatically stating that the miracle of his virgin birth in no way implies divinity for him but is entirely due to the power of God:

It does not befit God that he should betake to himself a son. Glory be to him! When he decrees a thing, he says to it only: 'Be', and it is. (19: 35, cf. 3: 47)

It calls him a word and spirit from God (4: 171 quoted above, 3: 45), a sign and a mercy from God (19: 21), it details his miracles of healing and resuscitation (3: 49, 5: 110), and it says that he was supported by what it calls the Holy Spirit (2: 87, 2: 253). Thus he was an elect messenger of God to a particular community, bringing them the Gospel (*Injīl*) from God (3: 48, 5: 46), and calling disciples to help him (3: 52). But it also insists that he was no more than human, created like Adam (3: 59), eating human food (5: 75), and a servant of God (19: 30). And it also details (61: 6) that he foretold the coming of a messenger after him, 'whose name is the Praised One' (*alḥmad*, derived from the same trilateral root *ḥ-m-d* as Muḥammad), denied being divine (5: 116–17) and, most devastatingly, was not crucified but was instead raised up to God out of the clutches of the Jews (4: 157–8). In such remarks can be detected a revision of Christian claims about Jesus to bring them into line with the dominant Qur'anic discourse about the transcendence of God, his distinctiveness from all other beings, who are his creatures, and his communicating with humankind through messengers who bring his revealed utterances and are protected from harm (though not oppression and persecution) by God himself. In the context of such a discourse, Jesus emerges as a signally superior human messenger, but definitely not divine despite all the unique features that attach to him. Strangely enough, his curious respite from crucifixion in accordance with God's frustration of the Jews' scheming to kill his messenger is paralleled elsewhere by references that suggest he does die (3: 55, 5: 117), though these have been given an eschatological colour in the Islamic exegetical tradition.

All these teachings provided warrants for the Muslims' attitude towards Christians as they brought the client populations under their rule and sought ways to treat them

socially and to comprehend the intellectual and religious differences that separated them from themselves. They were also guided by statements about Christians attributed to the Prophet, his *Ḥadīth*, which exerted almost as much force in practical terms as the Qur'an itself. Among the many thousands of statements that were accepted as incontrovertibly attributable to him appear such strictures as: Jews and Christians should be excluded from Arabia; followers of the cross will go to hell; on his return at the end of the world Jesus will smash the cross to pieces.

A further detail that gave Muslims a precedent for their treatment of Christians is recorded in the earliest biography of Muḥammad, which was written just over a century after his death. This recounts how a deputation of Christians from Najrān in southern Arabia came to visit him in Madīna in his latter years when he was becoming increasingly successful as a leader among the Arabs. They discussed matters of faith, and the invitation to come to a common agreement was revealed from God (Qur'an, 3: 64). When they departed, they agreed to pay tribute to the Muslims, and they were later regarded as having accepted the formal protection of the Prophet. This, together with the important injunction in the late passage Qur'an 9: 29 to fight against those People of the Book who do not do or believe what Islam teaches 'until they pay the tribute readily, being brought low', provide a basis for treatment of Christians and others in the emerging Islamic state.

Raiding parties from Madīna were sent north into the margins of Byzantine territory even in the latter years of Muḥammad's life. Under his immediate successors, the Rightly-Guided Caliphs who ruled in Madīna between 632 when he died and 661, these raids turned into invading armies that captured Egypt and North Africa, much of the Middle East, and the majority of Persia. By 715, when the Umayyads, the first dynasty of Islam, was ruling from Damascus, the empire extended from Spain in the west to the Indian Ocean, and from Central Asia in the north to the fringes of the Sahara. It took in all the former Byzantine provinces south of the Taurus Mountains and some of Anatolia beyond, and vast populations of Christians who inhabited the lands within the former imperial boundaries, as well as those who had settled in the western parts of the former Sassanian Empire along the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. Churches, monasteries with their schools, towns and cities all came under Muslim rule.

By and large, it appears that life for these new subjects did not change a great deal at first. There certainly were killings, but nothing that amounts to premeditated massacring or a policy to eradicate anyone who stood up to the new masters. In the case of many cities, in fact, the Muslim warriors refrained from pillage and kept themselves apart in their own encampments outside. Later Islamic history often typifies the takeover of particular cities in terms of a surrender agreement between the Christian inhabitants and the Muslim leaders, with suitable concessions included, and then relative freedom to continue as before. There may be considerable truth in the accounts that suggest greater leniency and restraint than was common for invading armies at the time, but Muslim historians' relations of these early times betray clear tensions over different religious sensitivities and practices: the second caliph, 'Umar Ibn al Khaṭṭāb (r. 634–44) found it necessary to place under his protection crosses on public buildings and gave personal guarantees that they would not be violated, while his generals in Syria and along the southern Euphrates stipulated that crosses might only be carried

in public procession on one day a year, and then outside Muslim areas of towns. 'Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705) and other Umayyad caliphs later had crosses on public display destroyed, and replaced the image of the cross on coins with a simple pillar (the founder of the dynasty Mu'āwiya (r. 661–80) first attempted this but found people did not accept the coins). This ubiquitous Christian symbol understandably irked people whose scripture denied the historicity of the crucifixion, and the necessity for caliphs to take steps to preserve images or to remove them shows how important it was to favour one or other part of the population.

That the Umayyads considered Christianity an abiding problem and even a threat is evidenced by the fact that when the caliph 'Abd al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem to commemorate the miraculous Night Journey of the Prophet from Mecca to Jerusalem and from there through the heavens, he had Qur'an verses that emphasize the oneness of God and deny Christian beliefs inscribed on prominent exterior and interior features. It was as though he was triumphantly admonishing his stubborn subjects.

By the early eighth century, Greek- and Arabic-speaking Christians and other communities who were recognized as People of the Book were in principle governed by a set of regulations that Muslims attributed to the second caliph 'Umar, and knew as the *Pact of 'Umar*. Whether they go back to him in any detailed form, and exactly what their form was in this early period, cannot be known for sure. But they certainly included the *jizya*, the poll-tax that is referred to in Qur'an 9: 29, the *kharaj*, a tax on land, and restrictions on church buildings and personal dress. Their governing principle was that the state would offer client communities protection, and they in return would observe the regulations and in addition would not bear arms. Thus they became *Ahl al-dhimma*, 'People of Protection', or simply *Dhimmis*.

It is known that the caliph 'Umar II (r. 717–20), who is remembered for his piety, reinforced these *dhimmi* measures, but for the most part little is heard about unrest between faiths in Umayyad times. The career of the Chalcedonian Greek-speaking theologian John of Damascus (c.660–c.750) is indicative, though maybe not typical, of how Christians fared at this time. The son and grandson of senior state officials in Damascus – his grandfather had handed over the keys of the city to the Muslims after the Byzantine governor had fled – he worked for many years in the caliphal chancery, all the time remaining a Christian and employing Greek for writing. Sometime in the early years of the eighth century he retired from public life and became a monk in the monastery of Mar Sabas east of Jerusalem, and there proceeded to set down the first substantial reflections on Islam that are known from a Christian author. They appear as Chapter 100 in his *On Heresies*, which forms part of his major compendium *The Fount of Wisdom*. What is striking about this reflection is that it reveals some knowledge of the teachings about Jesus in the Qur'an, but also a measure of mistakenness about other teachings in the scripture, and that it refers to Muḥammad in derogatory terms as a man fired with self-interest who learnt the contents of the Qur'an from a heretical monk, and passed it off as his own. Clearly, in John's eyes the Qur'an contained nothing to inspire or attract and could be dismissed as a sub-Christian forgery; Arabic was not a language to learn; and Islam, the faith founded by a merchant living on the desert margin, contained nothing to detain a cultured Christian who

lived within the intellectual ambit of Byzantium, at least in his mind if no longer in reality.

There is more than a hint of superiority in what John writes in this chapter, disdain for a faith that seems a parasitical form of Christianity, and confidence that arguments raised by its followers against the earlier beliefs can be soundly beaten down. But it has been argued that *The Fount of Wisdom* in general can be witnessed as a definite adjustment to the new reality. For in another part of this work, *On Christian Doctrine*, John provides a sustained statement of his own Chalcedonian beliefs, which can be read as an attempt to specify the distinctiveness of this form of Christianity and to distinguish it from others, explicitly from the competing forms of Christian belief that had suddenly acquired an equal status with the 'emperor's' form, which was known as just that, 'Melkite' (from *malik*, 'king'), and implicitly from Islam. The stream of works from authors of the various denominations against the beliefs of others can be seen as part of the same process, to express what is true of a particular Christian tradition in order to establish identity, guard against apostasy, and maybe inform Muslim rulers of the difference between them and others in order to gain better treatment. This is not expressed openly, but it fully explains the great number of statements of faith written within the denominations and the polemics written against them. The advent of Islam may have helped to establish firm doctrinal differences for the first time.

Christians in this early period were not slow to realize that the presence of Arabs in their midst was not like earlier incursions of raids or expeditions but something more permanent, which demanded an explanation. And they understandably turned to the Bible. Many were fully cognizant of the fact that Muslims were continuators of the teachings of Abraham, and the historian Sebeos, writing in about 660, recognized Muḥammad as a learned man who knew the law of Moses. But Muslims were definitely a threat to the Church, and others saw them as forerunners of the last days and invoked biblical predictions such as Daniel's vision of the four beasts (Daniel 7: 2–8) to interpret the events they had set off.

Given the success of the Arab Muslims in capturing such an expanse of territory so rapidly, and the added fact that non-Muslims were faced with new taxes under the new polity, it is understandable that there should be conversions from Christianity to Islam in these first generations of Islamic rule. An eloquent testimony to what was happening in the early eighth century and the practical consequences is given in the caliph 'Umar II's demand that his governors should not prevent Christians from converting. Clearly, the provincial rulers took a pragmatic view that envisaged the loss of tax income if conversions proceeded, while the pious caliph saw only the spiritual gains if they went ahead.

It is impossible to say on what scale conversions took place in these early years of Islam, though however they proceeded they are not necessarily a sign of a faith in decline. John of Damascus in his crisp dismissal of Islam and its claims to legitimacy maybe typifies the intellectual and cultural confidence of Greek-speaking Chalcedonian Arab Christians in Syria and around. And elsewhere the Church of the East was intently engaged in the missions it had conducted throughout Asia for many years. Missionaries had been active in Arabia before Islam, and had also directed their steps into Siberia and further east. In 635, three years after the death of Muḥammad, a group of monks,

among whom a certain Alopen is named, took the books of the 'luminous religion' as far as China. These missionary activities went on for hundreds of years and the bishoprics that were founded continued to receive consecrated incumbents, a sign of a church that remained vigorous rather than collapsing in apocalyptic inactivity.

Arab Christianity in the Classical Islamic World

In 750 the Umayyad dynasty was overthrown and was replaced by the 'Abbasid dynasty. With its original power base in Khurasān in the east of Persia, this was different in character from the Umayyads, owing more to Persian influence, though asserting its claim to be more Muslim. Within a few years the caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754–75) had built a new capital on the river Tigris at Baghdad and inaugurated a dynasty that lasted, at least in name, until the coming of the Mongols in the thirteenth century. The concentration of power maintained by caliphs in the first centuries of the new rule had a profound effect on all aspects of life within the empire: Arabic became the *lingua franca* with surprising speed, and the progress of learning in a multitude of disciplines involved followers of all faiths in an amalgam of intellectual activity from which emerged a distinctive Islamic culture. The contribution of Christians to this development and their engagement with it led to the appearance of new forms of thinking and a religious literature in Arabic for the first time, at least as far as can presently be told.

The position of Christians in early 'Abbasid society was, at least in appearance, privileged. A document written by the Muslim rationalist theologian and Arabic stylist Abū 'Uthmān al-Jāhīz (d. 868) in the mid-ninth century gives an intriguing insight into the freedoms they enjoyed, and is worth quoting at length,

They are secretaries and servants to kings, physicians to nobles, perfumers and moneychangers. We know that they ride highly bred horses, and dromedary camels, play polo . . . wear fashionable silk garments, and have attendants to serve them. They call themselves Ḥasan, Ḥusayn, 'Abbās, Faḍl and 'Alī, and employ also their forenames. There remains only for them to call themselves Muḥammad, and employ the forename Abū al-Qāsim. For this very fact they are liked by the Muslims! Moreover, many of the Christians fail to wear their belts, while others hide their girdles beneath their outer garments. Many of their nobles refrain out of sheer pride from paying tribute. They return to Muslims insult for insult and blow for blow. Why indeed should the Christians not do so and even more, when our judges, or at least the majority of them, consider the blood of a patriarch or bishop as equivalent to the blood of Ja'far, 'Alī, 'Abbās and Ḥamza? (al-Jāhīz in Finkel 1927: 328–9)

This gives a vivid summary of a group moving in society with few external constraints, flouting the regulations that governed it, and regarding itself as an elite. Al-Jāhīz was writing a diatribe that was intended for fellow Muslims to read, so it is possible that he exaggerated the situation and even misrepresented details. But his account can still be used, although with some caution.

The first point of information it gives is that Christians occupied senior professional positions in 'Abbasid Baghdad. Like John of Damascus a century earlier, they were

secretaries in the caliphal service, and there is evidence that in such positions some swayed government policy in favour of particular monasteries. They were also financiers and, maybe surprisingly, physicians to Muslim nobles. Indeed, the Bakhtishū' family of the School of Jundishāpūr retained this position for years, a virtual Christian dynasty maintaining the Muslim rulers in health. The practice of fathers being succeeded by sons in the same position was commonplace among Christian professionals at this time, presumably reflecting modes of education and maybe a reluctance to allow precious learning and skills to be divulged willy-nilly. It certainly permitted Christians to retain status as purveyors of 'Greek learning' at this time, and it earned them the admiration and envy of Muslims and others.

In the eighth and ninth centuries Christians also performed for Muslim rulers and nobles the important task of translating works from Greek, sometimes via Syriac, into Arabic. This was another cause of admiration and praise, and it made available the ancient learning in philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, medicine and other disciplines to monolingual Muslims. Individuals such as the Nestorians Ḥunayn Ibn Ishāq and his son Ishāq Ibn Ḥunayn were courted for their abilities and offered payment in gold.

Al-Jāhīz clearly recognizes the senior positions that Christians with these accomplishments enjoyed, and in doing so he clearly acknowledges the pluralist nature of urban society at this time, though the assumption underlying his remark is that Muslims dictate the overall terms and Arabic is the currency of communication.

His following remarks, however, hint at something darker. The series of points he makes about Christians pursuing aristocratic lifestyles, including sports and fashionable clothes, and adopting Muslim names show both the relative freedom they appear to have experienced in Muslim society and also a seeming desire on their part to be like the majority of their neighbours, an understandable reaction by a separate minority that felt its difference keenly. There may even be a hint of this group purposely exploiting its privileged position to show its open distaste for the regulations that in principle applied to it. Thus, they concealed the distinctive marks of dress they were required to show, and refused to pay the *jizya*, the most obvious token of their subservience to Muslim rule. Were they wanting to assimilate and obliterate marks of distinction, or were they trying to assert their identity by showing the power they possessed to ignore the age-old stipulations that established the relationship between Muslims and the *Ahl al-dhimma*? It is impossible to say, but it does seem justifiable to infer that at least in this case there were Christians who held positions close to the elite of Muslim society in the ninth century, but were sorely aware they were not fully accepted as part of that society.

The fact that al-Jāhīz can refer to regulations from the *Pact of 'Umar*, such as the undertaking by the scriptural clients not to dress like Muslims but to mark themselves out as different, not to use Muslim names, and not to retaliate when struck (in fact, these Christians either flout the regulations in systematic manner, or are portrayed as such for polemical effect), indicates that this continued to govern the place of the *Ahl al-dhimma*, as it would do so for centuries after. But his careful documenting of Christian indifference shows that it cannot have been enforced in any systematic fashion. The conclusion to which this diatribe points is that Christians moved within

'Abbasid Muslim society with some freedom and status, but rarely felt entirely part of that society.

This paradoxical relationship is typified in the experiences of one of the greatest patriarchs of the Church of the East, the Catholicos Timothy I (c.728–823), who led the church for forty years from his consecration in 780. His letters show he was involved with missionaries in regions he names as Persia, Assyria, India, China and Tibet, and in one he writes with some real feeling for the wives of men who remain in remote places for long years, offering to ask his missionary priests in these places to find them. He evidently functioned as the leader of a vast church that stretched the length of the Silk Road, with all the prestige and influence that involved.

Timothy also enjoyed some status in his own city. As Patriarch of the Church of the East he was recognized by the Muslim authorities as leader of all Christians throughout the Islamic Empire. And he was given access to the caliph's immediate presence. On one occasion in 781 he was invited by the caliph al-Mahdī to join in a debate stretching over two days on the differences between Christianity and Islam. 'Debate' is maybe not the appropriate term because even in Timothy's own Syriac account (the exchange was conducted in Arabic, and is recorded in a letter to one of his friends) it is clear that he is on the defensive against questions of a discomforting and even hostile nature from al-Mahdī that required considerable ingenuity and diplomacy to answer. Obviously, he could not say anything to insult Islam, but equally he could not betray his own Christian position. It seems that while the caliph took him seriously enough to devote time and attention to inquiring about the integrity of his beliefs, he was regarded as someone outside the circle of the court who could be subjected to the indignity of searching questions.

The difficulty of Timothy's position, and also his own skill in debate, is demonstrated by the best known of the many answers he gave on matters of Christian doctrine and attitudes towards Islam:

Our gracious and wise king said to me: 'What do you say about Muḥammad?' And I replied to his majesty: 'Muḥammad is worthy of all praise by all reasonable people, O my sovereign. He walked in the path of the prophets and trod in the track of the lovers of God. All the prophets taught the doctrine of one God, and since Muḥammad taught the doctrine of the unity of God, he walked, therefore, in the path of the prophets.' (Timothy in Mingana 1928: 197)

Evidently the caliph was satisfied with this because he did not press Timothy but moved on to other topics, presumably concluding that the Christian accepted the belief that Muḥammad was a prophet like those before him. But a Christian could also have felt satisfied, since he would have understood the patriarch to suggest that Muḥammad was only copying what the biblical prophets had done, with nothing original of his own.

It is quite clear from al-Mahdī's insistent interrogation in this meeting that he was fully aware of the differences in belief between Muslims and Christians, many of his questions being based upon what the Qur'an teaches about this, and that he thought that Christians could not presume upon the soundness of their beliefs but had to make a case for the rationality and coherence of what they taught. His attitude only reflected

what the great majority of Muslims accepted. But, still on the equivocal nature of the relationship between followers of the two faiths, this disagreement and disdain did not stop leading members of society and the general populace from visiting churches and monasteries, the continuing presence of which around and within Baghdad speaks eloquently of tolerance on the part of rulers. In a repetition, or possibly continuation, of a practice followed by the pagan Lakhmid ruling house in Ḥīra, 'Abbasid caliphs themselves would visit and sometimes spend periods in monasteries, presumably to enjoy the quiet and beauty of their gardens, to witness the spectacle of their liturgy on feast days, and even to sample the wine they produced. From the tenth century a distinct genre of *diyyarāt* (from *dayr*, 'monastery') literature sprang up among Muslim authors to document the location of monasteries and give descriptions of their character and advantages.

It is clear that Christians and Muslims were intimately connected socially and professionally in early 'Abbasid society. But they were also connected intellectually. For not only did Christian translators provide the raw information from which Muslims developed their own distinctive forms of philosophy, mathematics, medicine, astronomy and so on, but they also provided a stimulus that in significant ways led to the emergence of Muslim religious self-identity.

It has long been debated among scholars of early Islamic intellectual history whether the emergence of thinking of a theological nature (the term 'theology' only loosely approximates to the discipline called *'ilm al-kalām*, 'science of debate') is dependent upon discussions among Christians that were current at the time. Differences over the relationship between divine omnipotence and human moral responsibility in Umayyad times, and over the most apt characterization of God as possessing attributes which were formally discrete from his essence at about the same time, have been put down to the direct influence of Christian debates over free will and the Trinity. Whether or not this is true is open to question.

What seems definite is that Islamic religious thinkers in late Umayyad and early 'Abbasid times appear to have defined the character of Islam in part by contrast with Christianity and other faiths. While it is difficult to be categorical about this because the vast majority of works on religious topics from this time have not survived, it can be asserted with confidence from the evidence contained in later works that most Muslim scholars at this time wrote works against Christianity and other faiths. And it can be deduced from the relatively few polemics which survive that their purpose was not only to discredit the beliefs of the other but also to employ those beliefs to demonstrate the rational coherence of Islam. These works typically did this by identifying and refuting those doctrines that were in direct contravention to the key doctrines of Islam. Thus, in the case of Christianity they restricted themselves to the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation (identified as the uniting of the divine and human natures in Christ), and reduced the one to a simple tritheism (echoing the qur'anic criticism of calling God 'three' or 'the third of three') which could be shown to be internally incoherent, and the other to a mingling of the divine and human, with the irrational consequences of such a claim. The result is that such doctrines are shown to be unsustainable, with the obvious outcome that the only rational possibility is Islam.

Works of this kind, although appearing to be anti-Christian polemics, have as much claim to be apologetics for Islam itself. They use key doctrines of the other faith as

examples of error in those aspects that most closely concern Islam, without much concern for the faith as a whole or for other key elements within it. This trend reaches an extreme point in the tenth century when the first extant synthetic treatises of Islamic religious thinking were composed. In these the treatments of doctrines from other faiths usually occur at various points as appendices to expositions of their Islamic equivalents, where by exhibiting their own logical disarray they point up the integrity of what Muslims are enjoined to believe as the only viable possibility. In such compendiums of Muslim doctrine, Christianity, together with other faiths, becomes nothing more than a cautionary case of what is wrong in believing, and so an example that helps Muslims to know what is correct belief.

Despite this rather rough handling in polemical and theological works, Muslims in the early 'Abbasid period evidently knew a considerable amount about Christianity and its major beliefs and practices. Many surviving texts contain extensive details of doctrines such as the Trinity and two natures of Christ, while a few know about the atonement. They also know about Christian veneration of the cross and the main outlines of eucharistic services, as well as some of the contents of Christian scripture. Some Muslims evidently went to great lengths to inform themselves, and were able to distinguish between the Christologies of the major denominations, which they called Melkites, Jacobites and Nestorians. And a few had some idea of the earlier sects, including Arians, Marcionites and Sabellians, as well as proof texts Christians employed to support their doctrines. The immediate origin of this information is usually difficult to identify, though the details preserved by many early authors point to written sources, now for the most part untraceable, rather than oral reports from converts or Christians themselves.

This information, which suggests some interest in and acquaintance with Arab Christianity, did not, however, appear to influence Muslim attitudes in favour of the legitimacy of Christianity. The general estimation was that it was rationally confused in its doctrines because these were derived from a corrupted scriptural origin. Making use of the hints given in the Qur'an about alterations to the scriptures of the People of the Book, Muslim controversialists habitually demonstrated or assumed that the Gospels and other biblical books could not be trusted, either because they were misinterpreted by their possessors or because their texts themselves were distorted. This accusation of *taḥrīf*, corruption of scripture, was a commonplace from an early date, and it generated a vivid tradition of debate, with Muslims tending to argue that the original *Injīl*, the single Gospel text that had been revealed by God to Jesus for his community, had been lost or intentionally misplaced, and had been replaced by a number of reconstructions written by followers, from which four were chosen. This history could explain why Christians held wrong beliefs and doctrines, and why they persisted in wrong practices such as eating pork and failing to circumcise their sons. Such individuals as St Paul or the emperor Constantine were periodically implicated as wilful culprits into misleading the church into these nefarious ways.

An instructive sidelight on to Muslim assumptions about the Arab character of Christianity in the 'Abbasid centuries is cast by some of the accusations of *taḥrīf*. One favourite was to connect Jesus' prediction in Qur'an 61: 6 of *Aḥmad*, 'the greatly praised one', who would come after him with the Paraclete verses in the Gospel of John, and argue that the original form here was not *Parakletos* but *Periklutos*, 'renowned', 'famous'.

There is an obvious overlap in meaning between the emendation to the term in John and the Qur'anic term in Jesus' prediction, though the substitution only works in Arabic where short vowels are not usually written and the two forms would therefore be virtually identical. One Muslim argued in a similar way that the resurrected Jesus' instruction to Mary Magdalene in John 20: 17 to pass on to his disciples was not 'I go to my Father and your Father', but 'I go to my Lord and your Lord', because the forms of these two words in Arabic (Father, *ab*, and Lord, *rabb*) were close enough for the change to be due to scribal error.

It is maybe understandable that Muslims should take this kind of view because by about 800 Christians had begun to employ Arabic as their language of everyday conversation and in specifically religious contexts as well. While John of Damascus before 750 could write in Greek and be understood by a local audience in Palestine, translations of biblical and other key texts into Arabic were already being made at about this time in monasteries around Jerusalem. And by the early ninth century there were theologians writing, and more significantly thinking, in Arabic and employing arguments identical to those being found in current usage among Muslims. The most famous in these first generations of Arab Christian theologians were Theodore Abū Qurra (d. c.830), Melkite Bishop of Ḥarrān, Ḥabīb Ibn Khidma Abū Rā'īta (d. c.835) the Jacobite, and 'Āmmār al-Baṣrī (fl. 820) the Nestorian. The surviving works of each of these authors show that they were attempting to explain their theology to Muslims in terms and concepts which their audience would understand, and were responding to arguments levelled at their beliefs with answers expressly framed for thinkers who based their ideas on the Qur'an. It is not an exaggeration to say that for a few generations in the ninth century an original form of Christianity developed in Arabic within the context of Islamic theological discourse.

Of course, this development was a practical necessity as Christians started to be confronted with questions about their faith from the Qur'anic array of teachings which Muslims had available. But besides the necessities of apologetic, it is possible that Christians who were freed from the pressures of Byzantine conformity and its overriding influence developed their own native forms of thinking in a new language and intellectual grammar which they shared with Muslim counterparts. As they thought out the implications of their faith in a new context, they produced theologies that at the same time looked back to patristic antecedents and looked around to the intellectual tools and formulations that were immediately available.

Although parts of the Bible were translated into Arabic earlier, it seems likely from the available evidence that systematic translations of whole books were not accomplished until the middle of the ninth century. If there were Arabic-speaking Christian communities from much earlier times, this seems a rather late date, and as has been mentioned above some scholars suggest on circumstantial grounds that there must have been earlier translations. But not only is there no surviving copy from an earlier time, but there is a substantial lack of corroborative references as well. So it would appear that only at this time at the end of the first 'Abbasid century was there an obvious need for Arabic versions of the scriptures, presumably as fewer and fewer Christians were able to understand them in any other language. This was certainly the case among Coptic Christians, for whom from the tenth century onwards Arabic

increasingly became the language of religious writing and of worship alongside Bohairic.

Through the centuries of the 'Abbasid period the course of Arab Christianity increasingly became involved with Islam. The pressures of Islamic culture with its multiple attractions to induce minorities to conform, the ascendancy of Islamic religious thought and philosophy offering convincing rationalizations of the workings of the world and stern arguments against cherished beliefs, and the inbuilt social disparity of Christians in wider society all combined to set the churches on the defensive. How rapidly Christians converted to Islam is impossible to say, but as time goes on the confidence and sense of superiority that can be seen in such theologians as John of Damascus and Timothy I become scarce.

This is not to say that Christians within the Islamic empire necessarily felt beleaguered. The example of Yaḥyā Ibn 'Adī in the tenth century counters any such assumption. An Iraqi Jacobite Christian, he studied under a Nestorian and also the philosopher Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, and went on to become a leading figure in philosophy and theology in Baghdad. He wrote against Christians of other denominations, and also refuted Muslim theologians and philosophers of earlier times. And he left one of the most influential treatises on morals in the Islamic world, the *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*, *The Refinement of Morals*. He does not appear to have felt hampered in any serious way by being a Christian, though maybe the fact that major works in his theological output are not original compositions but painstaking responses to arguments put by Muslims a century earlier, and that his book on morals has so little obvious Christian character that it has often been attributed to Muslim authors, suggests that he was more aware of the all-embracing presence of Islam and the requirement to defend and conform than of verve and vigour in his own faith.

Of course, this inference can only be supposition, though it is maybe supported somewhat later by the work of a Melkite theologian, Paul of Antioch, who was Bishop of Sidon some time before the thirteenth century, probably late in the twelfth. His *Arabic Letter to a Muslim Friend* is both original and courageous, for it claims to detect in the verses of the Qur'an both support for the major doctrines of Christianity and actual articulations of these doctrines themselves. Outwardly a polite and reasoned treatise, in its unspoken intention it carries devastating criticisms of Islam. For the implication of what it maintains is that the true meaning of the Islamic revelation in its support for Christianity can only be discerned and identified with the help of Christian scripture. In other words, the Qur'an is a partial attestation to biblical truth and it depends on it.

Paul goes further. The conceit of his letter is that he has asked European experts about Islam and why they have not accepted the faith, to which they reply that the Qur'an itself proclaims it is an Arabic scripture and intended for Arabs, and they support their contention with copious quotations. What Paul implies here is that Islam is not a universal faith come to supersede Christianity or any other faith, but a local teaching intended for the desert Arabs. And Muḥammad is a local preacher, indeed sent by God, but directed only to Arabia and nowhere else. It is as though he came to bring his people to a rudimentary form of monotheism from the polytheism of their old ways.

Although such systematic views are not articulated openly in this letter, they are the unavoidable message of what it contains. They appear to be the fruit of a meditation on Islam by an Arab Christian who cannot reject this later religious phenomenon as mere charlatanism, as does John of Damascus four or so centuries earlier, and concludes that it is indeed God-sent, but with only a specific geographical relevance. Here is to be seen a continuing liveliness in Christian thinking, and indeed an anticipation of what in later centuries would be termed an inclusivist attitude towards the plurality of religions, but also a deep preoccupation with the reality of Islam, an apologetic concern to vindicate Arab Christianity in the evident difficulties it faces, and an attempt to show how the later faith has not in fact replaced the earlier but is instead dependent upon it.

This letter clearly appealed to Arab Christians (for whom it was presumably intended as a boost to faith) because it circulated among them for maybe a century before it was edited by an unknown scholar in Cyprus at the beginning of the fourteenth century and confidently sent to two Muslim scholars with the invitation to approve its arguments and acknowledge the authenticity of Christianity. Needless to say, it failed, though one cannot help noting its vivacity and boldness in identifying a relationship between Christianity and Islam in which both are part of God's dispensation, though the later faith is no rival to the earlier.

Paul may well have written his letter against the background of the crusades, and the fourteenth-century Cypriot editor certainly did. It is perhaps a mark of the degree of assimilation reached by Arab Christians who lived along the route of the crusading armies (though the ignorance of the invaders is not to be underestimated) that they were rarely distinguished in any major way from Muslims, and suffered many of the same degradations and massacres at the crusaders' hands.

The Decline of Arab Christianity

Just like Muslim Arabs living in the Mediterranean parts of Islamic domains, Arab Christians suffered considerable disruption under crusader rule. European priestly and episcopal hierarchies were established, and monastic and preaching orders began activities within the crusader kingdoms, often dislodging the older orders of priests and bishops and introducing alien forms of spirituality and worship. But devastating as this was, it was marginal when compared with what was going on further east. Through the thirteenth century the Mongols swept westwards from Central Asia and virtually destroyed the Islamic Empire in its old form. For four hundred years since the middle of the ninth century the central rule of the caliph in Baghdad had increasingly been eroded as warlords seized power in the state and local rulers asserted autonomy. But with this new Turkic threat the structure of the community was almost swept away. In 1258 Baghdad was sacked and the last 'Abbasid caliph to rule in the city was assassinated. For some time following this, Christians enjoyed a measure of freedom under rule that was not only favourable but also tipping towards conversion to Christianity itself. In fact, for some years the Patriarch of the Church of the East took up residence in one of the caliphs' palaces, and felt free enough to lead religious processions in public,

maybe the first since the city had been built. But the patriarchs gradually lost the rulers' confidence, and this short period of triumph over their former Muslim overlords gave way to humiliation and persecution, in which churches and monasteries were burnt and priests and bishops killed. The eventual outcome was that the Church of the East lost its position at the heart of public life and subsided into obscurity. Church communities ceased to exist in parts of Asia where they had previously been recorded, and the leadership withdrew from Baghdad. This decline was accelerated by the active persecution of Timūr i-Leng (r. 1396–1405) and his descendants, and the once great church, with its bishoprics stretching east, north and south, was lost to the world in its seclusion between Lake Van and Lake Urmia east of the upper Tigris.

Further west, Christians in Egypt and the Mediterranean coastlands fared almost as badly. From 1250 the Mamlūks seized power in Cairo, and presided over more intensive anti-Christian activities than before. Under the earlier Fāṭimid and Ayyūbid dynasties Christians had often been able to rise to senior positions in the state. And while there had been persecutions, most notably under the Fāṭimid caliph al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allah (r. 996–1021) when the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was destroyed and Christians were forced to distinguish themselves in public by wearing weighty wooden crosses, individuals had served as viziers and caliphal secretaries; just as under 'Abbasid rulers in eighth- and ninth-century Baghdad, there was no sustained animosity towards Christians on the part of the populace. Under the Mamlūks, however, Christians were repeatedly removed from positions to which they had been able to rise, and the mob regularly vented its frustration at inept governments by destroying churches and monasteries.

Such direct action against Christians in the Arab world was hard to bear, but it cannot have compared in power to sap the will and kill the spirit with the persistent anti-*Dhimmī* measures that influenced all aspects of relations between Christians and Muslims, particularly in public life. These measures had informed all aspects of relations between Muslim masters and Christian, together with other, subjects since an early stage in the Islamic era, as we have seen; although they were not frequently enforced in an active sense, they provided the general framework of communal, and presumably personal, relations, removing security and rendering client populations constantly on the defensive. Thus, while capable individuals might achieve prominence, they must always fear removal or worse at a ruler's whim or the mob's insistence.

This inequality of relationship and precariousness of position helps to explain why Arab Christianity ceases to have the resilience and strength of former times. With a few exceptions, such as the Copt al-Ṣafī Ibn al-'Assāl and his brothers in thirteenth-century Egypt, who not only held public office but also wrote works on their own faith and defences against Islam, there were no leading theological minds or creative intellects that left a lasting mark. And under the pressure of taxation and social discrimination there were steady numbers of conversions to Islam. This, of course, had happened since the earliest years of the new faith, but after about 1100 there seems to have been a gathering of momentum, until by the end of the Mamlūk era in the early sixteenth century Christians represented no more than 7 per cent of the total population in the Arab heartlands.

The victory of the Ottomans over the Mamlūks in 1516 brought much of the Arab Middle Eastern world under rule from Istanbul. And there was some change in circumstances for Christians. The *jizya* tax levelled against *Dhimmīs* was reduced, and financial incentive to convert was thereby removed. In addition, there was some consolidation of populations under the *millet* system, according to which each religious community adhered to its own laws and customs, with the result that populations tended to live in greater separation from one another, even within the same town, and there was less occasion for meetings and thus much less intermarriage.

As part of the Ottoman conception of the state, followers of a particular religion were all regarded as members of a single community or *millet*, each of which was thought as having one head. So just as the Muslims throughout the empire all came under the sultan, Christians of all denominations came under the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, an arrangement analogous to that under 'Abbasid rule when the Patriarch of the Church of the East was recognized as overall head. This arrangement naturally reduced the prestige of the leaders of other denominations, who inevitably ceased to play prominent parts in the life of the state. This did, however, change over time as a number of *millets* were given recognition and thus greater autonomy, although always under the state laws.

The separation of populations within the Ottoman Empire may have been instrumental in producing rapid expansion of Arab Christian communities in the Fertile Crescent in the sixteenth century and again in the nineteenth century when it swelled to about 20 per cent of the total population. The reduction in conversions that took place through interfaith marriage and economic incentives explains this in part, though the proximity of Christian populations to coastal areas (the combined result of attraction to the crusader states and flight from the Mongol invasions), where they came into contact with European trade and social influence, gave them greater prosperity than many Muslim communities; it also opened them to new developments in health care, such as the single measure of isolating families during epidemics rather than congregating together as Muslims tended to do. Together with widely available education, which Christians in the eastern Mediterranean lands championed, these differential factors accelerated Christian population growth in these periods within the empire.

Growth in prosperity and population led to mass emigrations. Within the Ottoman Empire population movements of Christians had taken place for centuries, as communities moved away from areas of intolerance to the greater safety of majority Christian regions, or were attracted by areas of economic boom. Then, from the mid-nineteenth century, Lebanese Christians (together with some of the Muslim population) left for America in order to avoid overpopulation, leading an exodus that continued through most of the twentieth century. There are now important communities of Arab Christians in major cities of the United States and Canada, Europe and Australia, together with religious hierarchies descended from the ancient episcopates of pre-Islamic and early Islamic times, and functioning in surroundings and against new challenges of which the leaders of old could never have dreamed.

Growth in prosperity and connections with the wider world also exposed Arab Christians to ideas that, like their predecessors under 'Abbasid rule in ninth-century

Baghdad, they mediated to the world of Ottoman Islam. In the eighteenth century, and more widely in the nineteenth century, Christians were instrumental in introducing knowledge of European advances in science, philosophy, politics, and so on. The resulting Rebirth, *Nahḍa*, as it was called, channelled mainly through newly founded newspapers and journals, had widespread effects on intellectual, social and religious life among both Christians and Muslims in the decades leading up to and away from the year 1900. And it was particularly influential on the growth of Arab nationalism, which clamoured for regional recognition within the Ottoman Empire. The secularist Baath Party, which in different guises rose to power in Syria and Iraq, was founded by Michel 'Aflaq, who came from a Christian background.

Nevertheless, the emigration of Christians steadily increased through the later nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. And it must be said that economic attractions cannot provide a full explanation for the exodus of substantial parts of the Arab Christian population of the late Ottoman and nation-state Middle Eastern world. Where there is tension within society, and discrimination between religions, and where increased Islamization marginalizes followers of other faiths – all factors recognizable from early Islamic times and attributable by theologians and ideologues to the Qur'an and the precedent of the Prophet and his successors – there is little incentive to stay when family members press invitations to join them overseas and the prospects at home are dim. The Christian population of the Arab world had by the beginning of the present century reached a low point never seen before, and there is no sign of reversal. While the long history of Arab Christianity continues, it does so in new environments where it must learn once again to survive in the tenacious way it has done in its original homeland for more than fifteen hundred years.

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