Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam
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Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam

Edited by
John Victor Tolan

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<tr>
<td>AASS</td>
<td>Acta Sanctorum.</td>
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<tr>
<td>BT</td>
<td>Babylonian Talmud.</td>
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<td>CSCO</td>
<td>Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalum. Leuven, 1903–.</td>
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<td>CSEL</td>
<td>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum. Vienna, 1866–.</td>
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<td>De con.</td>
<td>De consecratione, the third part of Gratian’s Decretum.</td>
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<td>EI²</td>
<td>Encyclopaedia of Islam. 2nd ed., Leiden, 1960–.</td>
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<td>EETS</td>
<td>Early English Text Society.</td>
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<td>GCS</td>
<td>Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller. Berlin, 1897–.</td>
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<td>Henry</td>
<td>MS Oxford Bodl. Laud misc. 85.</td>
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<td>MGH</td>
<td>Monumenta Germaniae Historica.</td>
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<td>MGH Epist Saec.</td>
<td>XIII Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Epistolae saeculi XIII e Regestis Pontificum Romanorum.</td>
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<td>MGH SS</td>
<td>Monumenta Germaniae Historica, <em>Scriptores.</em></td>
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<td>PO</td>
<td><em>Patrologia orientalis.</em> Paris, 1907–.</td>
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<td>St. B.</td>
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Introduction

John Tolan

For medieval Christians, Islam presented a series of disquieting challenges. Militarily, most of the Christian world fell into Muslim hands in the seventh and eighth centuries, and much of the rest of it succumbed to the expansion of Muslim dominion by the sixteenth century. Intellectually, Muslim science and philosophy were built on an edifice of Greek, Persian, and Hindu learning inaccessible (until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries) to the Latin West.¹ The Muslim world developed a thriving trade-based economy; Italian and Byzantine merchants saw the Muslim lands as opulent and sophisticated. Theologically, Islam presented a series of quandaries: Were Muslims pagans? Were they heretics or schismatics?

There were never any clear, monolithic answers to these questions. Individual Christians, depending on their own experience with Muslims, their interests, prejudices, and preoccupations, portrayed Islam in very different ways. Polemicists wrote theological refutations of Islam; historians attempted to explain Islam’s origins and expansion; lawyers defined the legal status of Muslims living in Christian lands; exegetes defined Islam’s role in the divine plan; diplomats vilified or apologized for Muslims, depending on what kinds of alliances they were trying to justify; epic poets imagined Muslim warriors as embodiments either of demonic hostility or of chivalric ideals.

Few of these writers used the words “Islam” or “Muslim”; instead they spoke of “Saracens,” “Hagarenes,” “Arabs,”
"Turks," "Pagans," "Moors," or simply, those who follow the Law of Muhammad. Christians defined Muslims as they defined themselves: through a complex (and not often distinguished) mix of ethnic, linguistic, and religious definitions. Islam is both a rival civilization and a rival faith (or Law, lex, to follow the most common Latin usage).²

The medieval texts treating Islam are many and varied: It is beyond the purpose of this collection to give a thorough catalogue of these works.³ Rather, the authors of these essays provide a series of vignettes, of discrete examples of medieval Christian perceptions of Islam. In choosing the articles that make up this collection, I have been driven by two fundamental principles. First, I wanted each article to acquaint readers with new, unfamiliar texts (unfamiliar at least to students of Muslim-Christian relations); hence I preferred essays on the “Tathlíth al-waṣānīyah” or the legal documents of Manuel I Comnenus to analyses of Dante, the Chanson de Roland, or Peter the Venerable. Second, I wanted the collection to reflect the wide range of medieval Christian interest in (or preoccupation with) Islam. The texts that our authors analyzed vary widely in genre (travelogue, miracle accounts, history, epic, polemic, exegesis, and so on), in language (Arabic, Syriac, Armenian, Latin, Greek, Italian, French, Spanish, and Dutch), and date of composition (from the seventh to the sixteenth centuries). The variety of Christian response to Islam will become clear, as will the persistence of several key themes.

The first generations of Christians to face Muslim invasions see Muslims as a formidable political and military force, but know and care little about their religious beliefs. It is only in the following generations, as the Christian majority assimilate to Arabic culture and convert in large numbers to Islam, that Islam becomes a religious threat; then and only then do Christians feel a need to confront the religious challenge of Islam, to fit it into the context of divine history, and to refute it through polemic. This same pattern occurs in two very different societies at opposite ends of the Mediterranean, as we see in Chapters 1 and 4 by John Lamoreaux and Kenneth B. Wolf, respectively.
Christians of the eastern Mediterranean had contact with Arabs long before the rise of Islam; the earliest Christian authors who discuss the Muslim conquest are largely ignorant of the religious nature of the dramatic military successes that they describe in detail. This is as true of chroniclers writing in Armenian, Syriac, or Greek in the seventh century as of those writing in Latin in the eighth century. While some writers consider the Muslim conquest divine punishment for Christian sins, they are unaware that their Muslim conquerors are not the Arab pagans familiar from texts of the Roman era.

As Arabic becomes the dominant language of the new Muslim empire and as conversion to Islam facilitates entry into government service, growing numbers of Christians convert to Islam. Leaders of the Christian communities look on with alarm and seek ways both to explain and to stem this tide of conversions. Hence the need for anti-Muslim polemic, written not for a Muslim audience, but in order to convince Christians not to convert: Islam needs to be explained to the Christian faithful, its dramatic successes have to be placed logically in the context of a (Christian) divine plan, and Islam itself has to be shown to be some form of diabolical error.

Again, the articles of Lamoreaux and Wolf show a strikingly similar picture in seventh-century Syria and eighth-century Spain. In both cases, Christian polemicists explain Muslim success by putting it into an apocalyptic context (in the eastern Mediterranean, Maximius, Sophronius, Pseudo-Methodius, and the anonymous *Doctrine of Jacob Recently Baptized*; in Spain, Eulogius and Paul Alvarus). Various apocalyptic traditions had long predicted mass conversions to a "false" Judaism or Christianity, a sect of error with the outward appearance of piety; just as Jews had used these traditions to explain the successes of Christianity, now both Christians and Jews employ them to explain those of Islam. Muhammad (or Islam) is a manifestation of Antichrist.

This leads to defamatory biographies of the Prophet, something that soon becomes a staple of anti-Muslim polemic. Some of these biographies show familiarity with Muslim traditions; some reflect earlier polemics against heresiarchs such
as Arius; some reflect—more than anything else—their authors’ abilities to create wild images of depravity and perversity.\footnote{5}

Conversions and their concomitant tension at times lead to martyrdom. In the East, prominent Muslim converts to Christianity (such as Anthony of Ruwah) become martyrs. This conversion in the face of death is held up to local Christians as a testimony to the truth of Christianity. The cult centered at the new martyr’s tomb gives focus and cohesion in the face of pressures to assimilate; the hagiographer, of course, writes of miracles produced at the tomb. In Córdoba, Christians seek martyrdom by deliberately attacking Islam and its prophet before a Muslim judge (qadi); the majority of Córdoba’s Christians oppose this movement, and even its apologists admit to a lack of miracles produced by these new saints. These martyrs and their apologists are unsuccessfully trying to convince their compatriots that Islam is a diabolical heresy.

In northern Europe, far from the threat of Muslim invasion, ignorance about Islam—and indifference toward it—helps create the fantastic, diabolical, anti-Trinitarian Saracen idolatry of the chansons de geste. In the Chanson de Roland, the Saracens of Zaragoza worship a trinity of golden idols: Mahomet, Apollin, and Tervagant. They destroy the golden idol of Mahomet when it fails to prevent their defeat at the hands of Charlemagne. The Muslim here is the quintessential other, the ideal enemy. The basic outlines of this Saracen paganism are found in many other French epics.\footnote{6}

As northern Europe developed increasing contacts with the Muslim world (through trade, crusades, and translation of Arabic texts into Latin), a more thorough response to Islam became necessary. Two Latin authors of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries responded by crafting defamatory verse biographies of Muhammad: Embrico of Mainz and Gauthier de Compiègne.\footnote{7} Embrico, weaving together elements of the eastern Christian polemical biographies of Muhammad and a sort of inversion of the topos of hagiography, created a crude heresiarch that his readers could love to hate and whose followers they could safely hold in contempt. Tutored by a heretical Christian Magus, Muhammad preaches lechery and incest, stages bogus miracles, and puts to death Christians who oppose his new law.
After God punishes him with epilepsy, he explains away his fits by saying that his soul had left his body to commune with God. God kills him for his impieties and his corpse is devoured by pigs. The wily Magus places Muhammad's remains in an iron casket which is suspended by magnets, making the people believe that it floats through divine favor.

While authors north of the Pyrenees created an imaginary Islam that they could safely hold in contempt, those in Spain were forced to confront the real Islam; the most accurate information on Islam in medieval Europe comes from Spain. The ignorance about Islam that Wolf describes in some of the early Latin texts gives way as Christians learn Arabic. In the ninth century Paulus Alvarus, one of the Latin apologists for the Córdoba martyrs, complains that Andalusian Christians are more interested in learning Arabic than Latin. Thomas Burman (in Chapter 5) demonstrates that by the twelfth century these Arabicized Christians, or Mozarabs, develop a new breed of anti-Muslim polemic that combines knowledge of three distinct textual traditions: Muslim holy writings (in particular Qur'ân and Hadith), Eastern anti-Muslim polemic, and Latin theology. Petrus Alfonsi, an Andalusian Jew who converted to Christianity in 1106, composed his Dialogi contra Iudaeos in 1110. In the fifth chapter of the Dialogi Alfonsi attacks Islam, following—to a large extent—the Arabic text attributed to 'Abd al-Masih b. Ishâk al-Kindî.

In 1142 Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny, traveled to Spain to meet with Alfonso VII, king of Castile and León. In the course of this voyage, it seems, Peter conceived a plan to forge a new, comprehensive, rationalist attack on Islam. He put together a team of translators and had the Qur'ân, the Risala of al-Kindî, and other texts translated into Latin. He also composed two polemical texts of his own. Later Spanish Christians, writing in the vernacular or in Latin, continued to have a knowledge of Islam superior to that of their northern contemporaries; in the fifteenth century, this fact is clear in the writings of Paul of Burgos and Juan de Segovia, as Philip Krey shows in Chapter 7.

Yet the old perceptions of Islam as idolatry die hard, not only in the Latin East but even in Byzantium. In Chapter 3, Craig L. Hanson examines a Byzantine polemical tradition that equates
Islam with idolatry and shows how Emperor Manuel I Comnenus (1143–80) becomes embroiled in a controversy with the orthodox ecclesiastical hierarchy when he argues that this is inaccurate.

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries bring Islam more prominently to the consciousness of northwestern Europeans, both through the crusades and—perhaps more important—through the arrival of Arab philosophy and science in European centers of learning. Not surprisingly, this leads to new apocalyptic speculation about the role of Islam in the divine plan. Krey shows in Chapter 7 that some Latin theologians, such as Alexander Minorita and Pierre Auriol, see the crusades as the beginning of the end of Islam; Nicholas of Lyra argues, on the contrary, that the Christian successes in the Crusades are but minor impediments to an ever-expanding Islam. Apocalyptic tradition had long predicted that an alliance of Christians, Eastern and Western, would fight an international alliance of Muslims, pagans, and heretics. Hence it is with foreboding that Joachim of Fiore reports the rumored alliance between Muslims and Cathars (as shown by David Burr in Chapter 6).

The invasions of the Mongols in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries lead to new apocalyptic speculations. Some Christian exegetes identify the Mongols with Gog and Magog (as Burr shows). Some Western Christians hope to unite with the Mongols to form an anti-Muslim alliance;¹¹ some know that there are Christians among the Mongol subjects. There are stories that conversion of key groups of Muslims to Christianity has already begun, and that these groups are ready to help Christians recover Jerusalem (as William Patrick Hyland shows in Chapter 9). When the Mongols convert to Islam, Christians in both the East and West explain this in apocalyptic terms. It seems (to the less cautious) that the world is uniting against the Christians, that the forces of Gog and Magog have been unleashed.

Apocalyptic scenarios are less common, it seems, in Eastern Christian responses to Islamization of the Mongols. One Armenian scribe, in a fourteenth-century colophon, identified Muhammad as a forerunner of the Antichrist; another colophon describes the Muslim Mongol leader Oldjaytu as resembling the
Antichrist. More commonly, however, persecution and conquest were seen as punishment for Christian sins (as David Bundy shows in Chapter 2).

An author's perceptions of Islam or of particular Muslims often depends on his political and military alliances. Bundy shows that Het’um II, a fourteenth-century king of Cilician Armenia, justified his alliance with the Muslim Mongol Il-Khan because he was the enemy of the Egyptians, and (Het’um claimed to believe) he intended to conquer Jerusalem and restore it to the Christians. The sixteenth-century speculations that the Shiite leader Isma’il Safavi was a crypto-Christian are informed by the same sort of political concerns (as Palmira Brummett shows in Chapter 15). Political purposes can work the other way, as well: John Phillip Lomax (Chapter 8) examines how Pope Gregory IX accuses Emperor Frederick II of Muslim sympathies in order to justify excommunicating him.

In their attempts to make sense of Islam, these medieval authors could draw on the theological tracts of earlier polemicists, from the defamatory biographies of Muhammad, and the apocalyptic passages of the Bible, to the Saracen idolatry of the French Epic tradition, and—occasionally—the experience of travelers to Muslim lands. Many authors combined two or more of these traditions in a single text: either awkwardly juxtaposing them or deftly weaving them together. In Chapter 10, Geert H.M. Claassens shows how Vincent of Beauvais, in his *Speculum historiale* (composed between 1246 and 1253) made use of both the polemical works of theologians and the defamatory biographies of Muhammad. When Jacob van Maerlant creates a Dutch version of Vincent's work, the *Spiegel Historiael* (1283–88), he rearranges Vincent's material in order to create a livelier narrative focused on the life of Muhammad.

Gloria Allaire (Chapter 11), in her analysis of the *Guerrino il Meschino* by Andrea da Barberino (c. 1371–1431), shows Andrea's curious blending of various and contradictory elements. At several points Andrea depicts Saracens worshiping Muhammad as a god and at times as part of the standard idolatrous trinity of the chansons de geste. Yet elsewhere he distinguishes clearly between paganism and Islam and condemns Muhammad as a false prophet. The protagonist
Guerrino sees Muhammad tortured in hell (in a passage reminiscent of Dante’s *Inferno*, xxviii, 22-33) and reports seeing his casket suspended by magnets at the mosque in Mecca. Guerrino is both hostile to and dismissive of the religious practices of Saracens. Yet these polemical elements are secondary for Andrea: Guerrino is a mercenary fighting for Muslims, and at one point defending Mecca against a Turkish attack. Andrea’s descriptions of religious practices (like those of eating habits) are more exotic than polemical.

This same spirit of exoticism pervades *Mandeville’s Travels*, as we see in Chapter 12 by Frank Grady. The fictitious Sir John, like Andrea’s Guerrino, is a Christian mercenary fighting for Muslims. Absent here, however, are the elements of the epic tradition; instead, Sir John throughout recognizes the monotheism of Islam and Muhammad’s role as prophet. He admires the piety of Muslims, implying that it is superior to that of most Christians. This brings the *Travels* uneasily close to seeing Islam as a legitimate alternative to Christianity. The author avoids this by putting an apocalyptic prophecy in the mouth of the Muslim Sultan: Islam will end, and soon, through mass conversions of Muslims to Christianity. The end of Islam is clearly written in the divine plan, and Christian readers can generously indulge in their admiration of Muslim piety and culture.

Such confident magnanimity becomes impossible as Turkish armies march into the heart of Europe; clearly, Islam is not disappearing. Sixteenth-century Western writers exude fear of an expanding Islam and call, in many cases, for European military action against the Ottomans.

Gonzalo de Arredondo y Alvarado’s *Castillo inexpugnable de la fe*, written at the behest of Charles V in 1528, is a call for renewal of crusade against the Turk and for Christian unity behind Charles. In Chapter 13, John S. Geary shows how Arredondo portrays Turks as barely human: violent, cruel, lustful, and bent on converting Christians to error. Since this is a call to war, portrayals of Islam as a religion can only be hostile. Drawing on a variety of medieval anti-Islamic texts, including the corpus of Peter the Venerable, Arredondo portrays Muhammad as a follower of the devil.
Muslims within the Spanish kingdoms also caused difficulties for Spanish rulers. In the newly conquered lands of Granada, conquest and forced conversion of Muslims sparked several Morisco revolts, which were in turn violently quelled. Ginés Pérez de Hita sympathized with the oppressed Moriscos, though he is forced to express these sympathies indirectly in his *Guerras civiles de Granada*, as Rhona Zaid shows in Chapter 14. He attacks violence and greed on the part of Spanish mercenaries, while he overlooks incidents of Morisco violence and avoids portraying the war as a conflict of religions: For example, he does not mention that the Moriscos had destroyed several churches and monasteries. Differences between Christian Spaniards and Moriscos are downplayed in order to emphasize their common humanity.

Europeans long hoped for an Eastern ally to aid in their fight against Islam: Prester John, the Mongols. In the early sixteenth century, a Shiite Türkmen arouses similar hopes: Isma’il Safavi. In Chapter 15, Palmira Brummett analyzes the growth of the European myth surrounding Isma’il: A potential ally against the Ottomans, his Shiism is made into a crypto-Christianity. While Europeans can no longer view Sunni Ottomans with the same kind of sympathy that one sees in *Mandeville’s Travels*, Shiism is distant and exotic enough for such admiration. Some authors give the boy Isma’il an Armenian monk as his tutor; one even says that his mother was an Armenian Christian. These portrayals serve both to justify military allegiances with a non-Christian and to fuel hopes that some sort of apocalyptic solution to the problem of expanding Islam is at hand. Apocalyptic speculation is always tinged with a mix of hope and fear, hence some authors’ ambivalence towards Isma’il: Is he Christian or Antichrist? Parts of the legend have him set himself up as a god, worshiped by his troops.

Throughout this period, we find a wide variety of Christian responses to Islam: from friendly to hostile, from condescending to fearful, from calls for crusade to plans for alliance. There is no unified Christian response to Islam, no universally accepted explanation of the role of Islam in the divine plan. Both as a rival religion and as a rival civilization,
Islam was tremendously successful. It was hence appealing, intriguing, and frightening. The attraction of Muslim learning, Muslim culture, and Muslim sophistication was extremely strong; it is what Maxime Rodinson has called "la fascination de l'Islam." But the more Christians were attracted to Islam, the stronger others felt a need to condemn it—for it was this attraction, more than the might of Muslim armies, that was most threatening to Christendom. It is not unusual to see both this attraction and this repulsion expressed by the same author.

To a large extent, one's opinion of Islam is a product of how much one knows about Islam and of how much contact one has with Muslims. Perhaps even more important, though, are the needs and interests of the Christian author. If the Saracen (or Moor, or Turk) is the Other, he is an Other who may conveniently be deployed to fit the needs of each Christian author.

NOTES

1. On the translation and transmission of Arabic science to the West, see Lindberg, "The Transmission of Greek and Arabic Learning to the West," 52–90. His bibliography should be supplemented with several more recent works: D'Alverny, "Translations and Translators," 421–462; and Beaujouan, "Transformation of the Quadrivium," 463–497; and the articles in La diffusione delle scienze islamiche nel medio evo europeo.

2. Hodgson (Venture of Islam 1:57–60) distinguishes between these two ideas by using "Islam" only to refer to the religion and "Islamdom" to refer to Muslim civilization (on an analogy with "Christendom").

3. The most extensive bibliography of texts dealing with Christian-Muslim relations is Caspar et al., "Bibliographie du dialogue islamico-chretien." For texts of Latin polemic, see Daniel, Islam and the West. The best introduction of Western Christian views of Islam remains Southern, Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages. See also the recent survey by Berriot, "Remarques sur la Decouverte de l'Islam par l'Occident," 11–25. The present collection is meant to complement two
recent collections of essays in the field: Gervers and Bikhazi, eds., *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*; Powell, ed., *Muslims under Latin Rule, 1100–1300*. The basic works on the Byzantine tradition are those of Adel-Théodore Khoury (listed in the Bibliography). For an overview of the situation in Spain, see Ron Barkai, *Cristianos y musulmanes en la España medieval*.

4. See Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages*, 33–35, who presents a curve of conversion based on a series of informed hypotheses. No hard demographic data on conversion is available for this period.

5. I am currently writing a history of Christian biography of Muhammad.

6. The bibliography on the Saracen paganism of the chansons de geste is extensive; the most important recent works are those of Norman Daniel and Paul Bancourt. (Daniel, *Heroes and Saracens*. See bibliography for Bancourt’s works.)


10. See Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*.


I. Eastern Christian Responses to Islam
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CHAPTER 1

Early Eastern Christian Responses to Islam

John C. Lamoreaux

In the seventh century the Muslims swept into the lands of Eastern Christianity; overnight a good portion of Orthodox believers lost their Christian empire. Although the conquests were unexpected, they could not go unexplained. There was a need to account for the success of the Arabs and the apparent defeat of the Christians. This was especially true insofar as patristic authors had tended at times to identify religious truth with political success. One church father, for example, declared to the Jews that because they had sinned against their creator in crucifying Christ, their "good fortune has [been] transferred to the Romans." For "if the Lord is righteous in all his ways and you, as you say, do not go astray, why has your people, your city, and your temple... received wrath like this?" Such arguments were easily thrown back upon the Christians. The new prophet Muhammad declared, "The Jews and the Christians say: We are the sons of God and his beloved. Say: Why then does he punish you for your sins?" Above and beyond such concerns, the Christians needed to find a way to live in the new and sometimes hostile environment ushered in by the Muslim invasions. Numerous texts produced by the Christians living under Islam addressed themselves to these concerns. Some were composed by Melkite (Orthodox) believers, others by Jacobites and Nestorians. In what follows the former will be of primary concern, though the latter will be touched on for the sake of contrast.
The Muslim Conquest and Its Aftermath

In the century preceding the Muslim conquests the Byzantine Empire had been growing ever more intolerant of its religious minorities. This intolerance was directed primarily against Jews, Samaritans, and Jacobites. The Nestorians had by then established themselves in Persia, and were thus little influenced by Byzantine policies. This persecution resulted in discontent and disloyalty among the religious minorities. In the sixth century the Samaritans led a number of revolts that were put down by the Byzantines only with great difficulty. The Jews assisted the Persians during their invasion in the early seventh century and participated in the massacre and exile of tens of thousands of Christians. One chronicler states that they killed more Christians than did the Persians. Furthermore, from the middle of the sixth century the Jacobites had begun to organize an alternative ecclesiastical hierarchy that stood in opposition to that of the state-supported Melkites.

The Melkite church of Syro-Palestine on the eve of the Muslim conquests had very little popular support. This was true especially in the Patriarchate of Antioch where its rival, the Jacobite church, could draw upon the support of villages, nomadic Arabs, and rural monasteries. It was only in the Patriarchate of Jerusalem that there was significant popular support for the Melkites, but even there it seems to have been confined to urban centers. In addition, they were there opposed by the Jews and Samaritans who perhaps accounted for some 10 to 15 percent of the population. To some extent the Melkite church leaders were looked upon as foreigners by the indigenes. The culture of Syro-Palestine had never been fully assimilated into the mold of the Hellenistic world. The Jacobite church, on the other hand, was closer to the "roots" of local society, a fact reflected in its use of Syriac for liturgical purposes. There was, furthermore, a deep resentment on the part of the indigenes (whether Melkites or Jacobites) to Byzantine attempts at doctrinal compromise, especially the heresy of Monotheletism, which was first coming to be an issue of contention on the eve of the Muslim conquests.
And then the Muslims came. In 634 the Byzantines met the Arabs in battle at Ajnādāyn, the ancient Yarmūth in the vicinity of Wādī al-Simt, some twenty-five kilometers southwest of Jerusalem. The battle was hard fought, but eventually the Byzantines were routed and their commander killed. Again in 636 the opposing forces engaged at the battle of Yarmūk. The fighting was fierce, so that at first even the Muslim women were required to participate. Eventually, however, the Muslims gained the upper hand and inflicted a decisive defeat upon the Byzantines, many of whom were killed in the fighting and subsequent retreat. The courses of these two battles show that when the Byzantines met the Arabs on the field of battle, the former still proved a formidable enemy: their army was anything but moribund. The fighting was intense and the battles were lost only as a result of "divisions between the commanders and unfavorable terrain." Nevertheless, although the Byzantines could not match the Arabs on the field, it would at least be expected that they could maintain their defenses in the cities, especially as the Arabs had little experience in siege warfare and lacked siege engines. Khālid b. al-Walid, for example, had to borrow ladders from a monastery in order to climb the walls of Damascus. And yet, apart from Damascus and Caesarea, the cities put up little resistance. In most cases there was a token effort at defense (to receive favorable terms) or no effort at all. There seems to be no option but to conclude that the Byzantines lost Syro-Palestine because the towns did not resist the invaders. This unexpected defeat, as Gibbon with characteristic trenchancy once suggested, is indicative of changes that had taken place in Byzantine society: for "the empires of Trajan, or even of Constantine or Charlemagne, would have repelled the assault of the naked Saracens, and the torrent of fanaticism might have been obscurely lost in the sands of Arabia."

It has been argued that the most probable explanation for this seemingly needless capitulation is to be found in the extensive demographic decline and economic weakness to which the cities of Syro-Palestine had been subject since the fifth decade of the sixth century. It was no longer the land of cities with spacious agoras and thriving commerce, but "a country in fact more similar to Merovingian Gaul than to second- or fifth-
century Syria." The evidence for the decline of urban centers is impressive and hard to dispute. But here let us treat it as the background upon which danced the shadows of a more ethereal change: the breakdown of the ideals of romanitas. As will be argued in what follows, at the time of the Muslim conquest many inhabitants of the Byzantine empire no longer felt themselves subject to the demands of romanitas. Allegiance to one’s religion or sect thereof weighed heavier on the conscience than duties to either city or state. The religious character of the age is more redolent of Ottoman millets than of Constantine’s or Theodosius’s late antiquity.

Very little disruption of Melkite church life occurred during the conquests. The leaders of the Muslims were men who had long been used to the settled life; they were merchants who knew that the infrastructure of the conquered territories must be maintained. Archaeological evidence for church destruction is almost nonexistent. At Rihab, Christians were able to dedicate two churches in the year 635, in the midst of the conquests and apparently unhindered by them. Indeed, Orthodox building activity was greater between the years 635 and 640 than in the years following the Byzantine reconquest of Syro-Palestine from the Persians. In general, it was in the Muslims’ own interest to maintain the conquered communities intact, insofar as they provided a stable economic base for the nascent Muslim empire—as ‘Alî, Muhammad’s son-in-law, said with respect to the non-Muslims of the Sawād, “Leave them to be a source of revenue and aid for the Muslims.” Administrative papyri from Egypt, which date from within a few years of the conquests, give evidence for the remarkable degree of bureaucratic continuity maintained during the transition from Byzantine to Arab rule. Later the stability of Syro-Palestine was subject to increasing strains with the shift of the Islamic capital to Baghdad, a general economic decline, and an increase in nomadization, but these events fall outside the temporal limits of our present concern.

However, life for the Melkites did not continue as before. Now that the sources and means of coercion had been removed from Christian hands, there came about a leveling of the various sects: all now stood equal as religious minorities in an Islamic land—minorities not with respect to numbers, but rather in their
legal status. In effect, the Melkites lost their privileged position vis-à-vis the Jacobites and Nestorians, not to mention the few remaining communities of Montanists, Bardesanites, and Marcionites. This change is illustrated by the fact that it was only during the reign of the Umayyad caliphs that the first Nestorian monasteries appeared in Palestine—Tell Masos was founded sometime before 700, and the Monastery of the Mount of Olives is first attested in 739. Similarly, in Egypt, the original sites of Egyptian monasticism which were in decline by the sixth century due to Byzantine persecution, underwent a revival in the context of stability provided for the Monophysites by the Muslims. In much the same way, it was only under the Muslims that the Jews were able to transfer the Sanhedrin from Tiberias to Jerusalem, an action which would have been unthinkable under Byzantine rule.

A second long-term consequence of the Muslim invasions: The Melkites under Islam were for all practical purposes cut off from their compatriots in Rome and Constantinople. Many of the Greek-speaking Christians and leaders fled before the Muslim conquerors to lands still held by Christians; they left behind a church in which the majority of believers were Syriac speakers, who, although Orthodox, would have considered much of Greco-Roman culture as foreign. This had the long term effect of semiticizing the Melkite church under Islam, with a concomitant recovery of their Syriac heritage and eventually their adoption of Arabic as a liturgical and theological language. Offhand references in the life of St. Stephen of Mar Sabas show that by the late eighth century, Greek was all but unknown in the great monastery of Mar Sabas, its place having been taken by Syriac and Arabic. Moreover, following the death of Theodore Abu Qurrah in 820, we know of few Greek compositions originating from the Melkite Church under Islam. Theodore himself composed the majority of his works in Syriac and Arabic. He also wrote a number of Greek tracts, but these were short and some were even translations from Arabic originals.

Once the Arabs were able to establish a working bureaucracy in Syro-Palestine, they quickly imposed land and head taxes upon all non-Muslim inhabitants. The Muslims were subject to a different and lighter set of religious taxes.
sources often speak of the burdensome nature of these taxes and the inducement they gave Christians to convert to Islam. One Syriac chronicler writes:

The extortions and the poll tax on the Christian people were intensified beyond measure and began to bring about devastation on the earth. . . . The Christians, however, lest the tributes in the Arab epoch become more and more heavy, beyond their endurance, and [lest] the evils of the bitter extortions suddenly suffocate them, and [since] they had not yet learned to escape from one place to another, and [since] here the gate into paganism [i.e., Islam] opened to them—all the wanton and slack slipped into the pitfall and the well of perdition.32

The sheer terror raised by tax season is well seen in the *Vita* of St. Stephen of Mar Sabas where the beatings and threats of the tax collector caused even a church official to seek refuge in the protection offered by conversion to Islam.33 Muslim sources report a similar state of affairs. The governor of Egypt, for example, wrote to ‘Umar II (717–720) and informed him that Christians were converting to Islam in order to escape their taxes.34

Added to these general fiscal burdens, Christians were subject to various social indemnities meant to emphasize their subordinate status in Islamic society. Many of the restrictions on Christians that appear in later literary sources seem to belong to the last half of the Umayyad period. In the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik (685–705) many Christians were dismissed from administrative posts in the Muslim bureaucracy when the language of the state registers was changed from Greek to Arabic.35 At the same time there was initiated a public campaign for the destruction of images offensive to Muslim sensibilities.36 It was also at this time that archaeological evidence begins to suggest that a moderately widespread destruction of images was taking place in the churches of Syro-Palestine.37 A decade or so later, in the reign of ‘Umar II, it was reported that Christians were forbidden to pray loudly in their churches, to ride horses with saddles, to ring the bells in their churches, and to dress like Arab soldiers.38 ‘Umar II is also said to have ruled that if an Arab killed a Christian, that Arab must pay a blood price of five
thousand dirhems, but that he could not be executed for his crime. The total effect of all these incidents is best illustrated by the fact that Christians were using only one-half the number of churches in 750 that they had used in 600.40

The changing circumstances of the late seventh century would naturally have tended to impress upon the Melkite Church leaders the danger that Islam was beginning to pose to Christianity. Here was a threat to the popular base of the church, the first since the accession of Constantine. Furthermore, and more significant, the various restrictions imposed by the Muslims would have had great effect upon the hierarchy of the church and its ability to function independently under Muslim rule, as well as upon its ability to provide spiritual and material relief for its flocks.

Roman Views of the Pre-Islamic Arabs

Before turning to the earliest Christian responses to the Muslims, it should be remembered that the Romans were not unfamiliar with the Arabs prior to the Muslim conquests. For centuries late-Roman authors had drawn upon the reservoir of Jewish, pagan, and biblical writings, and on the basis of this material had formulated an image of the Arabs as a race of people with an innate ferocity and proclivity to heresy. Ammianus Marcellinus (d.c. 400), for example, in describing the battle of Adrianople which took place in 378 and in which the Romans were aided by Arab mercenaries, wrote:

The contest was long and drawn out, both sides separated on equal terms. But the [Arabs] had the advantage from a new event, never before seen. One of them, a man with long hair, naked except for a loin-cloth, uttering hoarse and dismal cries, with drawn dagger rushed into the thick of the Gothic army, and after killing a man applied his lips to his throat and sucked the blood that poured out. The [Goths], terrified by this strange and monstrous sight, after that did not show their usual self-confidence.41
Reports such as this, which mention the fierceness of the Arabs as warriors and as the "robbers of Arabia," abound in both pagan and Christian literature. Unless by chance they had converted to "the rational flock of Christ," as indeed many did, they were but the "wolves of Arabia." Pre-Islamic authors also associated the Arabs with the characters of Judeo-Christian sacred history. On the basis of the book of Genesis they often described the Arabs as the descendants of Abraham through Hagar. This allowed the Christians to understand the various names by which the Arabs were known, even before the rise of Islam. They were called "Saracens" because Hagar had been sent away from Sarah empty (Sarra-kenê). They were called "Ishmaelites" insofar as they were descended from Ishmael. They were called "Hagarians" due to Ishmael's birth from Hagar. These fictitious genealogies could sometimes be called upon to serve theological duty. For example, concerning St. Euthymios's treatment of Arab converts to Christianity, Cyril of Skythopolis, abusing Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, said that

[St. Euthymios] kept [the Arab converts] with himself for forty days, illuminating and confirming them with the word of God. He then allowed them to depart, no longer Agarenes and Ishmaelites, but descendants of Sarah and heirs to the promises, by baptism transferred from servitude to freedom.

Such identifications as these date back at least to the first century before Christ. We find them in Jewish authors such as Josephus, as well as in the writings of pagan authors. Molon, for example, a Greek historian from the first century B.C., whose work survives only in fragments, told how Ishmael went off to Arabia with his twelve sons and became a ruler there. This, he said, accounts for the fact that there are twelve kings of Arabia who bear the names of Ishmael's first twelve sons.

With respect to the religion of the Arabs, here also information abounds in pre-Islamic Christian, Jewish, and pagan literature. Clement of Alexandria and Arnobius, among others, inform us that the Arabs worshiped a stone. Josephus and Sozomen speak of the Arabs' Jewish customs. They are circumcised at the age of 13, because "Ishmael, the founder of
their race, born of Abraham's concubine was circumcised at that age." They abstain from pork and practiced many other Jewish customs, indeed, "many among them still live in a Jewish fashion." Certain pagan authors saw the Arabs as a source of arcane knowledge. Similarly, and in a more sinister fashion, there are accounts in Jewish and Christian literature of Arab customs such as child sacrifice, demon worship, and magic. In the Talmud, for example, with reference to Genesis 25:5-6 ("Now Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac; but to the sons of his concubines, Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the east.") Rabbi ben Abba says that the only gifts which were imparted by Abraham to the Ishmaelites were the "unholy arts" of magic. The land of Arabia also had a reputation as something of a breeding ground of heresy. John of Skythopolis, an early sixth-century commentator on the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, in reference to a text in the writings of Dionysius wherein Elymas the magician is mentioned, says rather offhandedly that Arabia has many like unto Elymas who profess various Christological heresies.

Examples like these could be multiplied endlessly; but the point, I think, is clear. The Christian authors who first encountered the Muslims would not do so tabula rasa; rather, they would bring to their first interpretations of Islam and its place in sacred history a whole series of unfavorable stereotypes. This is especially true insofar as many of these authors, in particular the Melkite ones, were unable or unwilling to distinguish between Arabs and Muslims.

The Religious Minorities and Islam

The earliest responses to the Muslims on the part of religious minorities were in general quite favorable. In 634, on the eve of the conquests, the Emperor Heraclius issued an edict which commanded that all Jews in the Empire be baptized. In order to escape forced conversion Palestinian, Syrian, and Egyptian Jews fled in large numbers both to the protection of Persia and to the invading Muslims. Sebēos likewise reports that certain Jews
acted as guides for the Arabs in their invasion of Palestine.\(^{55}\) Furthermore, we are told by the Muslim historian al-Balâdhrî that a certain Jew named Joseph led the Arabs through a secret passage under the walls into Caesarea, thus facilitating its downfall.\(^{56}\) The Samaritans of Palestine aided the invading Muslims to such an extent that they were later exempt from certain taxes.\(^{57}\) Al-Balâdhrî also reports that, like the Jews, they supported the Arabs as spies and guides.\(^{58}\) By 639 the Samaritan council and high priest were reestablished, and this with the permission of the Caliph Abû Bakr. As a result, it was for some time popular for Samaritans to name their children after their new patron.\(^{59}\)

There are but few sources originating from the hands of Jews or Samaritans that allow us insight into their own perceptions of the Islamic conquests, and those that are extant are difficult to use. One such source is a piyyû t or liturgical poem that was composed after the initial Arab victories but before the fall of Jerusalem and Caesarea.\(^{60}\) In this work it is clear that Jewish perceptions of the conquests were initially extremely positive, indeed, were imbued with an apocalyptic fervor which understood the conquests as presaging the coming of the Messianic age.

The king of the West and the king of the East
Will be ground against one another,
And the armies of the king of the West will hold firm in the Land.

And a king will go forth from the land of Yoqtân
And his armies will seize the Land,
The dwellers of the world will be judged
And the heavens will rain dust on the earth,
And winds will spread in the Land.\(^{61}\)

In this passage the author refers first to the battles between Byzantium and Persia in the early seventh century that resulted in the devastation of the Persian army and territory, and then speaks of the armies of Yoqtân, one of the sons of Eber known from the book of Genesis (10:25–30), the eponymous ancestor of the southern Arabian tribes. This and similar sources, although lacking in historical detail, tell us at the very least that there was
present in the Jewish community at the time of the Muslim invasions the hope that these events would at last free the Jews from the yoke of infidel rule and usher in the Messianic age.\(^62\)

When we examine the earliest non-Melkite Christian sources we find a similar enthusiasm, but without the strong apocalyptic overtones present in Jewish responses to the Muslims. Ḥisyāw III, Nestorian Catholicos in the 650s, in his fourteenth epistle wrote with respect to the Muslims:

> These Arabs, whom God has now given sovereignty over the world, are disposed towards us as you know. They are not opposed to Christianity. Indeed, they respect our religion and honor the priests and the saints of our Lord and they give aid to the churches and monasteries.\(^63\)

This is more than rhetoric: As was mentioned above, Nestorian monasteries first began to appear in Palestine only under the Muslims. Clearly, the rule of the Muslims was for the Nestorians a better state of affairs than had been the rule of the Byzantines. Similarly, when the Arabs were forced to abandon Emesa due to Byzantine advances under Theodore, they returned to the inhabitants taxes that had been collected insofar as they were now no longer able to give their protection to the inhabitants. At this moment the residents said that they preferred the Arabs to the tyranny of the Byzantines. This is probably more than propaganda: the story is recorded in both Christian and Muslim sources.\(^64\) In 661 the Monophysite Armenian bishop Sēbēos wrote of Muhammad that he was learned in the law of Moses, that he taught the Arabs to know the God of Abraham, and that for their part by "abandoning the reverence of vain things, they turned toward the living God, who had appeared to their father Abraham."\(^65\) He further explained that God intended to fulfill in the Arabs the promises made to Abraham and his descendants, for which reason the Arabs were to possess the territory that God had granted to Abraham.\(^66\) Thus, they left the desert and with God's help overcame the armies of Byzantium.\(^67\) The Monophysite chronicler John of Nikiu in the last decades of the seventh century wrote of the conquests that God, "the guardian of justice," allowed the Islamic conquests for the sake of his persecuted people, the Monophysites, and as punishment upon those who "had dealt treacherously against Him," to wit, the
Orthodox. A later Monophysite chronicler explained that the Byzantines had been given over to the Muslims "as a punishment for their corrupt faith," and because of their heretical acceptance of the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon. In the early eighth century, when the Muslims were seeking to consolidate their control over Caucasian Albania, they were aided by factions from within that did not want the Monophysite Albanian church to submit itself to the authority of the Byzantine Orthodox church. The uniform nature of the responses of the non-Melkites, whether Jews, Samaritans, Monophysites, or Nestorians, although understandable given the realities of the social and political developments outlined, is even more striking when contrasted with the equally unanimous and diametrically opposed Melkite responses to the Muslim invasions.

The Earliest Melkite Views of Islam

Between the years 634 and 640 Maximus the Confessor, while staying in Alexandria, wrote a letter to Peter the Illustrious. In the course of the letter Maximus exhorts Peter to pray and remain awake.

And especially when . . . nature herself teaches us to take refuge in God, when she uses the present dire circumstances as a symbol. For what could be more dire than the present evils now encompassing the civilized world? . . . To see a barbarous nation of the desert overrunning another land as if it were their own! To see our civilization [politeia] laid waste by wild and untamed beasts who have merely the shape of a human form!

Maximus goes on to describe the Arabs as "a Jewish people who . . . delight in human blood . . . whom God hates, though they think they are worshipping God." The author hints at how the Arabs are "announcing the advent of the Antichrist" and storing up wrath against themselves on the day of judgment. He then explains the cause of the Arabs’ success—Christian sins!

For we have not conducted ourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ. . . . We have all acted like wild
beasts towards one another, ignorant of the grace of God's love for humans, and the mystery of the sufferings of the God who became flesh for our sakes.76

And finally he exhorts his readers to remain fast in their orthodoxy, to avoid persecution as long as possible, and if necessary, to suffer death for their faith.77 In general, although Maximus hints at the conquests as announcing the advent of the Antichrist, his emphasis is on its function as a temporary divine chastisement for Christian sins. The impression one gets from the letter is that all that needs to be done in order to turn back the Muslim tide is a sincere communal repentance.78

Another source for early Melkite views of Islam is the writings of Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem (d. 639).79 He mentions the Arabs in three contexts: a Christmas sermon of 634,80 a synodical epistle of 634,81 and an Epiphany sermon of 637.82 Though much of his ink is spilt recounting Saracen misdeeds—"Why is the flow of blood continual? Why are bodies prey for the birds of the sky? Why are churches destroyed and the cross insulted?"83—at times he attempts to understand the significance of what was then beginning to happen. He claims that the Christians were experiencing these tribulations because of their own wickedness, and like Maximus he thought that repentance would turn the Muslim advances.84 At the same time we find in his works the beginnings of an apocalyptic understanding of Islam. In his Epiphany sermon he calls the Arabs the "Abomination of Desolation predicted by the prophets."85 We are further told by Theophanes the Chronicler (whom Gibbon calls "the father of many lies") that when 'Umar first entered Jerusalem, Sophronius cried out, "Verily, this is the Abomination of Desolation established in the holy place, of which the prophet Daniel spoke," and that with many tears the white-haired champion of Orthodoxy "lamented over the Christian people."86 Absent from the works of Sophronius, as well as from those of Maximus, is any sense that the Arabs were spurred by a new religion. He refers to them as "filled with all diabolical savagery," "godless Saracens," "godless and impious," and so on87—a tirade worthy of Cyril of Alexandria. He has no concept of the religious nature of the conquests.
A third early reference to the conquests occurs in a rather unusual work entitled *The Doctrine of Jacob Recently Baptized*, which dates from within a few years of the onset of the Muslim invasions. Although most likely a work of theological fiction, the text purports to be a dialogue taking place in July of 634 between a Jew recently converted to Melkite Christianity, by the name of Jacob, and his Jewish friend, Justus, both of whom had arrived at Carthage from Palestine in that year. Jacob had come first, been forcibly baptized, thrown into prison, and while there became convinced of the truth of Christianity through reading the scripture. He then argued with the other Jews of Carthage and convinced them that Jesus was the Messiah. When Justus arrived he condemned Jacob for what he had done. There follows in the text an account of the dialogue between Jacob and Justus. Justus is not convinced that the Messiah has already come, because the fourth beast of Daniel 7:23ff. (the Roman Empire) has not yet fallen to the ten horns, nor has the little horn, Hermolaus Satan, yet come. Eventually Justus agrees that the fourth beast has fallen, the ten horns have come, and that the little horn has arisen, for “truly we can see a diminution of the empire of the Romans.” The clinching argument is given by Justus himself, whose brother, Abraham, had written to him from Caesarea that “a deceiving prophet has appeared among the Saracens.” At his coming the Jews rejoiced, for his Saracen followers had killed the hated Byzantine official, Sergius the candidatus. It is further reported by Abraham that this prophet was preaching the advent of “the Coming One, even Christ.” When Abraham referred this matter to a learned Jewish scribe, he was told that this prophet “is a deceiver, for prophets do not come with swords and chariot, do they?” Abraham goes on to say that he has heard from those with this prophet that “you can find nothing true in the so-called prophet, except the slaughter of men.” This is more than enough evidence to convince Justus that this new prophet is indeed the little horn, Hermolaus Satan, and that the Christ whom the Christians worship is the true Christ.

In the accounts examined the outline of a clear pattern has begun to emerge. All felt called to give explanations of the Arab’s success. The Melkites, those who had lost their empire,
ascribed the success of the Muslims to Christian sins. After the fashion of the Deuteronomic cycle, the Arabs are seen as a temporary divine chastisement intended by God to bring the Christians back to a righteous manner of life. At the same time there is a hint of apocalypticism in the works of Maximus and Sophronius, although its significance is tempered by the more general themes of chastisement and repentance, and this to such an extent that one is almost tempted to see it as more rhetoric than serious sentiment. The case is otherwise with the Doctrine of Jacob. Hermolaus Satan (i.e., Muhammad) is seen as a deceiving prophet whose coming has brought about the end of the Roman Empire. He is the final piece in the eschatological puzzle, the little horn of Daniel. Our anonymous author's whole framework for understanding the Muslim conquests is apocalyptic. Furthermore, none of the three authors we have examined sees any positive value in what was beginning to happen. The Arabs were either without religion, or were under the sway of a false prophet. Our authors, especially Maximus, constantly contrast the civilization of Christian Byzantium to the beastly character of the Arabs. Unlike Ḩσḥyaw III they cannot hope for increased freedom, and unlike Sebēos they cannot see anything positive in the new religion of the Arabs.

In the case of Jews and Samaritans, although we have few accounts from their own hands, their actions would seem to suggest that they welcomed the Muslims, or at the very least, that they aided the Muslims to the best of their ability, limited though it was as a result of various Byzantine indemnities. At the same time there seem to have been present in the Jewish community Messianic expectations which saw the defeat of the Byzantines and Persians as a harbinger of the eschatological age. This really should not be surprising, given the high degree of Messianic fervor present in the Jewish community at the time of the Persian conquests in the early seventh century. Jacobites and Nestorians also appear to have looked upon the Muslim conquests with a guarded hope for increased freedom. At the same time, there were some who, like Sebēos, saw positive religious value in the new monotheism of the Arabs and who ascribed to this monotheism a place in the sacred history of Judaism and Christianity. Other Monophysite authors, mostly of
a later date, saw the defeat of the Byzantines as a punishment for their heresy and their persecution of the Monophysites.

The responses of the religious minorities taken as a whole show that the Muslim invasions were looked upon as a generally positive state of affairs by the non-Melkite inhabitants of Syro-Palestine—not usually because of some inherent value attached to Islam per se, but rather insofar as the events were seen as playing an important role in the maintenance and furtherance of the communities of the religious minorities themselves. The bonds and duties of the Christian empire of Byzantium were no longer of cardinal importance; they had been replaced by the religious communities themselves as the primary locus of identity and obligation. A change has taken place. In order to appreciate its extent and significance consider, for example, Joshua the Stylite’s account of the Persian war of the early sixth century. He saw the devastation wrought by the Persians as a chastisement from the hand of God to bring back his chosen people, the Christians of Byzantium, to a holy manner of life.96 In his understanding of the significance of the Persian invasion the bonds of city and state remain strong. Joshua’s devotion to Anastasius, “the believing emperor,” is still very much in the fashion of the earlier age of Constantine and Theodosius.97 Furthermore, civic pride and trust in the fact that Edessa is “the city of Christ” are strong themes in the work.98 This is even more striking when we remember that Joshua was himself a Monophysite and that he wrote in the vicinity of Edessa, a stronghold for the non-Chalcedonian traditions. In his work the bonds of romanitas are immeasurably stronger than they were to be a little over one hundred years later when the Muslims invaded Syro-Palestine.

Melkite Reassessments of Islam

In time, these early explanations are no longer satisfying. The liberated find that they have not been liberated, whereas those who have lost their power find that they have not lost as much as they thought. When the Christians realize that the Muslims are there to stay, new strategies must be devised to account for
the continuing presence of the Muslims and to provide a way of living under their rule. The element of explanation is not as strong in these later responses. Its place has been taken by an almost tacit acceptance of the fact that the Muslims' presence is permanent, at least until the apocalyptic end is ushered in. Of paramount importance in these later responses is rather the need to establish the religious legitimacy of Christianity. Above and beyond the rising tides of conversion to Islam, the mere existence of Islam and its claims to have succeeded Christianity represented a challenge to the leaders of the Christian communities.

Toward the end of the seventh century there was a massive surge of apocalyptic activity among the Jews and Christians living under Islam. Among the Jews, for example, Abû'lsâ of Isfahan in the late seventh or early eighth century claimed to be a prophet and harbinger of the Messiah. He revolted against the Muslims and was joined by numerous Persian Jews. Although eventually he was killed and his army defeated, his followers claimed that he was not dead, but instead had entered a cave and disappeared. The movement that he had founded (the Isunians or Isfahanians) is known to have continued in existence as late as the tenth century. At about the same time there began to appear among Christians and Jews a number of apocalyptic works dealing with Islam. These include the apocalypses of Pseudo-Athanasius, John the Less, Esdras, Samuel, and Rabbi Simon ben Yôhay. Another such text is the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius, an extremely popular work which was early on translated into Greek and from which, in turn, Slavonic and Latin versions were made. The original Syriac text was composed between 685 and 692. Its author was probably Orthodox, although his work was widely read by the Jacobites and Nestorians as well. In what follows the Syriac version is utilized. Therein it is stated that the Muslims were given to rule over the Christians for their punishment and purification, until "few from many will be left over who are Christians," not because God loved the Muslims, but because the Christians had sinned exceedingly. In this way Christians will be "tried and the believers be separated from the unbelievers... because that time [will] indeed [be] a testing
furnace." But then suddenly a king of the Greeks will come forth in wrath and reduce the Muslims to a servitude one hundred times more severe than their own. A time of incomparable peace will be established, until the Alexandrian Gates of the North will be shattered and the nations hitherto held in abeyance will descend upon the civilized world for one week. The king of the Greeks with angelic help will destroy them in one hour, allow his diadem to ascend to heaven, and then die. After this, the Son of Perdition will be revealed, but quickly delivered into Hellfire, while the saints enter into the heavenly kingdom, where they "shall offer up praise and honor and veneration and exaltation now and at all times for ever and ever." In the apocalypse of Methodius we find not so much a giving up of earlier views of Islam, but an incorporation and expansion of those views. The invasions are still seen as punishment for Christian sins, but this punishment is now placed firmly within an apocalyptic framework that interprets all events in terms of cosmic history and an imminent end.

A second type of new response consisted of initial attempts at doctrinal refutation, which is to say, polemics. This activity can be found among all sects of Christians. Our earliest Melkite example is Anastasius of Sinai (d.c. 700), a monk and polemicist against the heresy of Monotheletism. In his third sermon he connects the success of the Arabs with Constans II's (641–48) exile of Pope Martin I (d. 655) for his resistance to the Ekthesis and Typos. Elsewhere he attempts to refute the Muslims—though seldom by name, speaking instead of "unbelievers" or "certain men." Occasionally he refers to Quranic stories and Islamic doctrines such as Satan's refusal to bow down to Adam or Muslim rejections of the Trinity. In general, he seldom attempts an outright refutation of specific Islamic doctrines, but contents himself with assimilating those doctrines to earlier theological errors, whether of the Jews, Manichaeans, Severian Monophysites, or Samaritans.

Among the Melkites the project started by Anastasius really only began to blossom some fifty years later in the works of John of Damascus (d. 749) and still later in those of Theodore Abu Qurrah (d.c. 820). Characteristic of these later works is their pastoral intent. The treatises are directed toward the
Christian community itself: they are written in simple Greek or Arabic and the format is such that they provide easily remembered arguments that could be used by Christians challenged with the claims of Islam. It seems likely that bishops and monks were composing such treatises in an effort to stem the growing tide of conversion that was at that time first beginning to threaten the Christian communities. As an example of this sort of text and their polemic strategy, as well as their pastoral intent, consider the following opusculum that Theodore Abū Qurrah composed in the late eighth century. It is in dialogue form and opens with an Arab asking a Christian the following question:

A. [Arab] Tell me, is Christ your God?
X. [Christian] Yes.
A. Do you have another God besides Him?
X. No.
A. Are then the Father and the Spirit of absolutely no value to you?
X. Listen! Your scripture in reality stands here, having come down from heaven, as you claim. I ask you, do you have any other scripture besides this?
A. I answer that I have no other.
X. Do you therefore disown all other scripture?
A. Yes.
X. What? If another book were present, having the same scripture, would you disown that scripture?
A. It is not a different scripture, but the same, even if it exists in different books.
X. Well then, I also say that the Father and the Spirit are not different things besides the Son, even if He is found in a different hypostasis.

Clearly not a terribly sophisticated argument! Taken by itself, it would lead one to suspect that the Persons of the Trinity are really nothing more than reflections of some archetypal Godhead—a teaching not likely to pass muster in the sophisticated theological environment of Abū Qurrah’s day. Nonetheless, one can well imagine the aged bishop of Harrān teaching his beleaguered congregation such arguments in an effort to shore up the community against the tides of conversion.
Another way that the Christians under Islam attempted to reconcile themselves to the continuing presence of the Muslims was through the production of new hagiographical texts and the promotion of new cults. The \textit{passiones} of these neomartyrs, whether or not they record historical events, play a subtle role in the Christians' attempt to acquire religious legitimacy. These texts are in many respects exercises in Christian polemics against Islam. They often contain extended discourses on the legitimacy of Christianity. Many of them attempt to portray in the sharpest colors the contrasts between Christian perseverance and Islamic roguery. Consider, for example, the life of St. Anthony Ruwah, who was martyred under Ḥārūn al-Rashīd on Christmas Day 799.

Our soon-to-be saint was of the Arab nobility and a member of the tribe of Quraysh, the same tribe from which Muhammad himself had sprung. Later church tradition goes further and makes him a close relative of Ḥārūn al-Rashīd. He lived near Damascus in a monastery dedicated to St. Theodore, which the Muslims had confiscated and converted into a government palace. Although the monastery had been confiscated, the Christians were apparently still allowed to hold services in the sanctuary. Our earliest account of his life records that Ruwah was wont to steal the elements of holy communion, vandalize the crosses and coverings of the altar, and terrorize the priests when they prepared mass. One day when the church was empty, Ruwah shot an arrow at the icon of St. Theodore; miraculously, however, the arrow returned and pierced his own hand instead. A few days later, as Ruwah watched the priests prepare communion, instead of the elements of bread and wine, he saw a "lamb whiter than snow kneeling and above it a white dove fluttering." That night as Ruwah lay pondering what he had seen, he was visited by St. Theodore, mounted and in arms, who chastised him for his behavior toward the priests and the church. As dawn was breaking "faith in our Lord Jesus Christ fell upon his heart like fire." He then proceeded to travel to Jerusalem, where he asked the Patriarch to baptize him. The Patriarch, however, refused for fear of Muslim reprisals and instead sent him to the river Jordan where Christ would baptize him in secret. Two days' journey brought him to the river
Jordan—more precisely, to the very spot upon which Christ himself had been baptized—and there he met two monks who baptized him and clothed him in the monastic habit.\textsuperscript{132} When he returned to Damascus, his family denounced him to the chief judge of Damascus for his apostasy.\textsuperscript{133} Eventually, after severe trials and a long imprisonment, he was brought before the Caliph Hârûn al-Rashîd.\textsuperscript{134} When Ruwah refused the Caliph's offer of money and honor in exchange for his reconversion to Islam, he was beheaded and crucified on the banks of the Euphrates.\textsuperscript{135} While the body hung from its gibbet, signs appeared in the sky at night; thus the Caliph was forced to intern the body in a place called "the Convent of the Olives," but to no avail, for many had already come to believe in Christ.\textsuperscript{136}

The general course of events here is much the same as in other texts: for example, the \textit{passiones} of St. Abo of Tbilisi (d. 786),\textsuperscript{137} St. Pachomios (d.c. 800),\textsuperscript{138} and St. ‘Abd al-Masîh (d.c. 860).\textsuperscript{139} In each case it is an Arab and former Muslim who is martyred. Also, the Muslim is usually presented as being either a government official or at least someone very learned in the Islamic religion. Such a representation increases the polemical value of the texts. If highly placed members of your religious opponents convert, the legitimacy of your own religion is thereby increased—even more so if they are Arabs by birth and learned enough to know what they are rejecting. The value of such saints is further emphasized by the almost immediate propagation of their cults. St. Anthony Ruwah, for example, was venerated within a few years of death, as is clear from an offhanded reference in Theodore Abû Qurrah's tract on the veneration of icons:

\begin{quote}
In our own day there was a famous martyr, a convert of the [Arab] nobility. His account is well known. May Christ remember us by means of his prayers! His name was Mar Anthony. He was wont to tell everyone whom he met that he had come to believe in Christianity only because of a miracle which he had seen respecting the icon of St. Theodore.”\textsuperscript{140}
\end{quote}

Ruwah, though himself a Melkite, came eventually to be venerated among the Maronites and Monophysites. Further, his cult was celebrated in Ethiopia, Georgia, and Syro-Palestine.\textsuperscript{141}
New saints, such as St. Anthony Ruwah, clearly fulfilled a need that older saints were unable to meet—that of establishing religious legitimacy for the Church under Islam.

Conclusion

Early Christian responses to the Muslims were far from monolithic: various strategies were employed by different authors at different times. In part, this diversity was a result of the social and political realities with which the Christians had to deal both before and after the Muslim conquests. The religious minorities welcomed the change of rulers, whereas the Melkites, those who had connected their fate with that of an empire, looked upon the new state of affairs with fear and trembling. Despite this marked diversity, however, in every case the need to account for the Muslims is manifest. A category for them had to be found; a place in sacred history had to be assigned. Only thus were the Christians able to maintain their worldview intact and find a way of living in the new milieu ushered in by the Muslim conquests. At the same time, during this crucial period of transition it is possible to detect a far subtler change, the breakdown of *romanitas* and the duties that it entailed vis-à-vis civic and imperial loyalty. Religion and one’s sect thereof had begun to displace the empire as a locus of identity.

On the basis of the few sources that remain, I have attempted to outline the various types of Christian responses to the Muslims in relation to their very concrete and often bitter contexts. But it must be emphasized that these are intellectual responses. What we do not know, what would really illuminate the nature of early Eastern Christian perceptions of the Muslims, is the day-to-day religious life of the Christians in relation to their new Muslim overlords. What happened, for example, to monastery landholdings? How did the loss of imperial support affect the church’s ability to maintain its properties, charities, and missionary work? We would further like to know how lay views of the hierarchy changed when the Muslims began to interfere in the election of church officials and to depose recalcitrant leaders for more malleable candidates. Though we
have glimmers of the high ecclesiastical and monastic responses to the Muslims, the effect of the conquests upon the day-to-day functioning of the Church and upon the great majority of Christian believers remains in near-total darkness.

NOTES

1. This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 26th International Congress on Medieval Studies, May 1991.


3. Ibid., 72 (T), 70 (V).

4. Sūrah 5, 18.


11. Hitti, History of Syria, 417: “At its thickest Hellenistic culture was only skin-deep, affecting a crust of intelligentsia in urban settlements.”


14. al-Baladhurī, Kitāb Futūh al-Buldān, 121.

15. Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, 3:134.


18. See the comments on "the disintegration of the citizen-body of the Graeco-Roman city state into religious and racial groups" in Liebeschuetz and Kennedy, "Antioch and the Villages of Northern Syria in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries A.D: Trends and Problem," 86.

19. For the Menas Church, see Lux, "Der Mosaikfussboden der Menas-Kirche in Rihāb," 34-41; Mittmann, "Die Mosaikinschrift der Menas-Kirche in Rihāb," 42-45; for the Church of the Prophet Isaiah, see Avi-Yonah, "Greek-Christian Inscriptions from Rihāb," 70. The Metropolitan Theodore mentioned in the dedicatory inscription of this church can now be dated, Mittmann, "Die Mosaikinschrift," 42.


21. Al-Baladhuri, Kitāb Futūh, al-Buldān, 266. See also the comments of the chief Qādi of Hārūn al-Rashid, Abū Yūsuf Kitāb al-Kharāj, 140–141.

22. For example, see Grohmann, "Greek Papyri of the Early Islamic Period in the Collection of Archduke Rainer," 5–40.


31. See Simonsen, Studies in the Genesis and Early Development of the Caliphal Taxation System; Dennett, Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam; Løkkegaard, Islamic Taxation in the Classical Period.

32. Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahrê, Chronicle 2.381.18–20, as cited in Witakowski, The Syriac Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysus, 44.


34. al-Tabari, Taʾrîkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulûk, II/1354.

35. Al-Baladhuri, 193.

36. Chronicon ad A.C. 846 pertinens, 234 (T), 178 (V).

37. Schick, 363.


40. Schick, 369.

41. Adapted from Ammianus Marcellinus, Res gestae 31.16.5–6 (3:501–503).

42. For the “robbers of Arabia,” see Julian the Apostate, Orations 1.21B (1:52).


44. Ibid., 21.


47. Clement of Alexandria, Protrepticus 1.4.46, GCS 1 (1905), 35; Arnobius, Contra nationes 6.1, CSEL 4 (1875), 222.


49. Sozomen, Church History 6.38, PG 67, 1412C.

50. Porphyry, Life of Pythagoras 11–12 (41).
51. BT Sanhedrin 91a.

52. Scholia, PG 4, 360CD. Perhaps a reference to the Monophysitism of the Arab tribes of Ghassân.

53. On the forced baptism of Jews in the seventh century, see Blumenkranz, Juifs et chrétiens dans le monde occidental, 97–138.


55. Sebēos, History, 123.

56. Al-Balādhuri, 141.

57. Ibid., 158.

58. Ibid.


62. It is important to remember that at the time of the Persian invasion Messianic expectations were already rife among the Jews of Palestine, as is witnessed by the attempts to restore temple services, The Midrash of Elijah, and The Book of Zerubbabel. For details, see Avi-Yonah, The Jews of Palestine, 160–169.

63. Ísō’yaw III, Liber epistularum, 251 (T), 182 (V). For his life and works, see Fiey, "Ísō’yaw le Grand."

64. Al-Balādhuri, 137; Chronicon ad A.C. 1234 pertinens, 229 (T), 195–196 (V).

65. Sebēos, 122.

66. Ibid., 123.

67. Ibid., 123–124.

68. John of Nikiu, Chronicle, 186.


71. For the date, see Sherwood, An Annotated Date-List of the Works of Maximus the Confessor, 40.

72. PG 91, 538. With language echoing the Olivet Discourse.

73. Ibid., 540.

74. Ibid. Maximus' reference to the Muslims/Arabs as a "Jewish people" is not necessarily indicative that he was aware of the "irredentist and messianic character of the conquests," as has been
suggested by Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 155 n. 27. It could just as easily be accounted for in terms of pre-Islamic views of the Arabs, such as were discussed above.

75. PG 91, 540.
76. Ibid., 541.
77. Ibid., 541-544.

78. It is interesting, if not ironic, to note that Maximus' hostile Syriac biographer attributed the conquests to the sins of Maximus himself. "For following the wicked Maximus the wrath of God punished every place which had accepted his heresy." Brock, "An Early Syriac Life of Maximus the Confessor," 313 (T), 318 (V).

79. For his life and works, see von Schönborn, *Sophrone de Jérusalem*, 51-118.

82. Sophronius, "Logos eis to Hagion Baptisma," 151-168; on the dates for these three works, see Schönborn, *Sophrone de Jérusalem*, 102-104.

83. Sophronius, "Logos," 166.
87. Sophronius, "Weihnachtspredigt," 507, 514; "Epistola Synodica," PG 87, 3197D.

88. *Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati*; the text is also preserved with some variations in Ethiopian, Grébaut, ed. and trans., *Sargis d'Aberga*.

89. In the introduction to his Greek edition of part one of this text F. Nau suggests 640 as a date of composition, *La didascalie de Jacob*, 715. Because of the text's "lack of hindsight in respect of the outcome of the Arab invasion," Crone and Cook have suggested with some plausibility that Nau's date is too late, *Hagarism*, 152. It is extremely unlikely that the text preserves Jewish views of the Muslims, as has been suggested by Moorhead, "The Earliest Christian Theological Responses to Islam," 272 n. 4. Neither should it be considered a "Jewish document," as is stated by Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Diversity*, 342 n. 25.

90. *Doctrina Jacobi*, 63.
91. Ibid., 86.
92. Ibid.
93. Ibid.
94. Ibid.
95. Ibid., 87.
96. Joshua the Stylite, *Chronicle*, 3–4. See also the account of the miraculous egg upon which was written “The Greeks shall conquer,” ibid., 57. On Joshua, see Gelzer, “Josua Stylites,” 34–49.
97. Ibid., 6.
98. Ibid., 52–53.
100. Similarly, the movement of the enigmatic Maruta seems to have had Christian apocalyptic overtones, see *Chronicon ad A.D. 846 pertinens*, 179–180 (T), 234 (V).
102. Late seventh or early eighth century from northern Mesopotamia, *Gospel of the XII Apostles* 15–21 (T), 34–39 (V).
109. Ibid., 48.
110. Ibid., 48–49.
111. Ibid., 49–50.
112. Ibid., 50.
113. Ibid., 51.

114. On the rise of this activity, see Abel, Les Caractères historiques; Khoury, “Apologetique byzantine contre l’Islam (viiiᵉ–xiiiᵉ siècle)”; Sdrakas, Ἡ κατά τοῦ Ισλάμ πολεμικὴ τῶν Βυζαντίων Θεολογῶν.

117. Ibid.
119. Ibid., 113.

120. On John of Damascus, see Sahas, John of Damascus on Islam; on Theodore Abū Qurrah, see I. Dick’s introduction to Maymar fī wujūd al-Khāliq wa al-Dīn al-Qawīm, as well as the comments of Joseph Nasrallah, “Regard critique.”


126. Ibid., 120-1.
127. Ibid.
128. Ibid., 122.
129. Ibid.
130. Ibid.
131. Ibid., 123.
132. Ibid., 123–124.
133. Ibid., 124.
134. Ibid., 124–125.
135. Ibid., 125–126.
136. Ibid., 126.
137. Schultze, “Das Martyrium des heiligen Abo von Tiflis.”
138. PG 100, 1199–212.
140. Theodore Abū Qurrah, De cultu imaginum, 33 (T), 34–35 (V).

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