EARLY CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISLAM

I. Mark Beaumont

The earliest written Christian references to Islam

One of the earliest accounts of the Arab conquest of the Middle East is by Sophronius, the Chalcedonian Patriarch of Jerusalem from 634 to 638. In his Christmas sermon of 634 he refers to the invasion of the Saracens, who have prevented him from travelling from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to preach, and says that he would be glad to see the downfall of these bloodthirsty opponents who ‘dare to approach our beloved and sacred Bethlehem’ (Hoyland 1997: 70). In his sermon for Epiphany in 636 or 637 he asks why the Saracens have set churches on fire, overturned monasteries, mocked the cross and blasphemed Christ. His answer is, ‘We are ourselves responsible for all these things and no word will be found for our defence’ (Hoyland 1997: 73). He believes that God has allowed the abomination of desolation, foretold in scripture as a judgment for the sins of his people, to visit them. In the process, the Arabs are depicted as anti-God followers of the devil.

In 638, Sophronius surrendered Jerusalem to the Caliph ʿUmar. Despite the rhetoric of his sermons, damage to church buildings appears to have been limited, since ‘archeological evidence for church destruction is almost non-existent’ (Lamoreaux 2000: 6). While Sophronius does not record the religious practices of the Arabs, the earliest witness to the Arab invasion of Egypt, in an anonymous sermon in Coptic from around 640, mentions that they fast and pray, though the preacher condemns them for either massacring or enslaving the people (Suermann 2009: 128–9). As Suermann points out, this is counterevidence to the claim that Egyptian Copts welcomed the Arabs as liberators from the oppression they had experienced under Byzantine rule. However, it would have been possible to combine outrage at Arab excesses with a welcome to the Arabs by Copts for freeing them from the Byzantine grip.

John, Coptic bishop of Nikiou, wrote his Chronicle around 700 in Coptic, in which he describes the Arab conquest of Egypt as God’s punishment for the Chalcedonian Melkite Patriarch Cyrus who had persecuted the Miaphysite Copts. Those in the Coptic population who collaborate with the Arabs are condemned for following ‘the detestable doctrine of the beast, this is, Mohammed’. He speaks of ‘the horrible deeds by the Muslims, impossible to describe’, even though he acknowledges that the Arab conquest freed the Coptic church from Byzantine oppression (Fiaccadori 2009: 214).

Support for the claim that the Copts benefitted from being liberated from Byzantine control is found in the fact that ‘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' (Lamoreaux 2000: 7). Perhaps the story in Egypt was one of immediate limited violence at the time of invasion followed by a relatively peaceful period in which the Coptic Miaphysite Christian majority were able to organise their own affairs without interference from the Byzantine Chalcedonian Christian minority who had freely harassed them before the arrival of the Arabs.

Ishoʿyahb III of Adiabene, Patriarch of the East Syrian Diophysite Church from 649–59, witnessed the conquest of northern Syria and Iraq by the Arabs in 637. In a letter written in Syriac to Simeon, a fellow East Syrian leader, he concedes that God has given the Arabs rule over the world, but this has turned out to be better than expected. He says, ‘not only do they not oppose Christianity, but they praise our faith, honour the priests and saints of our Lord, and give aid to the churches and monasteries’ (Hoyland 1997: 181). Another testimony to the results of the Arab conquest of the east Syrian heartlands beyond the Euphrates comes in an anonymous history of the Arab conquests of territory inhabited by East Syrian Christians written after 652. The Chronicle of Khuzistan refers to the Arabs as Ishmaelites whose leader is Muhammad and who worship in Mecca at the dome of Abraham. The writer ascribes their success to the will of God (Teule 2009: 131–2).

Hoyland thinks this relatively positive assessment of the Arabs by East Syrian Christians is partly due to Ishoʿyahb’s successful personal relations with the new rulers and partly to the reality that the Christians ‘had no lost or diminished sovereignty to lament’, so they sought ‘freedom to pursue their worship unmolested in return for political loyalty and payment of taxes’ (Hoyland 1997: 25). There is a marked difference of tone between these East Syrian assessments of the Arab conquest and those of the Chalcedonian Patriarch of Jerusalem and the Coptic preacher in Egypt, the former commenting on the new rulers and their ways with some mild interest, the latter lamenting the assaults and the loss of religious freedom they suffered.

Early indications of the beliefs of the Arabs are given in the Armenian History of Sebeos, written between 655 and 661. The writer tells of an Ishmaelite merchant named Muḥammad who preached ‘the way of truth’ to his people ‘as from God’ and brought them knowledge of the God of Abraham from the story told by Moses. They believed that God had spoken to them, and so they abandoned their ‘vain cults’ and ‘returned to the living God who had revealed himself to their father Abraham’ (Hoyland 1997: 535–6). The writer pictures Muḥammad preaching to his people about the conquest of Palestine, saying, ‘You are the sons of Abraham, and God will realise in you the promise made to Abraham and his posterity’ (Hoyland 1997: 129). Despite the fact that the writer does not mention the Qurʾān, he knows that ‘Muḥammad legislated for them not to eat carrion, not to drink wine, not to speak falsely, and not to commit fornication’ (Hoyland 1997: 131).

This account of Muḥammad’s teaching as being in continuity with the story of Abraham in Genesis does not mean that the writer approves of the sons of Ishmael. On the contrary, he regards them as fulfilling the vision of the fourth beast in Daniel 7:23 in their horrific invasion of the known world, which has brought fiery destruction everywhere. Tim Greenwood points out that this is the first of a series of Christian apocalyptic interpretations of the rise of Islam (Greenwood 2009: 142).

One of the most popular apocalypses, the Syriac Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius, was written in 691–2 and was subsequently translated into Coptic, Greek and Latin. The writer describes seven millennial periods based on the year–weeks of the book of Daniel and depicts the Muslim rulers as the sons of Ishmael who rule in the fifth millennium out of seven; they will be superseded by the Greeks, who will defeat them and establish a Christian kingdom. However, during the reign of the Ishmaelites many Christians will be seduced into apostasy, which will separate the sheep from the goats in the true church (Greisiger 2009a: 164–7). The Syriac Edessene Apocalypse of
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692 repeats the belief that the sons of Hagar will rule until the king of the Greeks defeats them (Greisiger 2009b: 174).

Another trajectory in apocalyptic writings from the late seventh century sees the overthrow of the Muslims as the work of the Antichrist. The Book of main points, written by the East Syrian monk John of Penek between 686 and 693, says that God sent the sons of Hagar to bring judgement on the Christians for their failure to repent but that their rule will be superseded by the Antichrist, who will destroy them (Greisiger 2009c: 179). These different interpretations of the aftermath of Muslim rule reflect a common theme that the day was near for the undoing of the Muslims, even though God had sent them to discipline the church.

Michael Bonner points out that there was much apocalyptic writing in the second half of the seventh century by Jews and Christians as well as Muslims. Then, around 700, ‘this speculation began to cool down, especially since the Arabs and Muslims were clearly there to stay’ (Bonner 2004: xxxii). By the turn of the eighth century the consolidation of Arab rule with the adoption of Arabic as the language of administration meant that Christians had to adjust to a new cultural dominance. They either turned to polemic against Islam or to apologetic use of Islam to support Christian truth.

Christian polemical writing

The rejection of the Arab invaders as ‘blasphemers’ was the first polemical response to their religious views. Anastasius of the monastery of Mt Sinai wrote a Guidebook in Greek, Hodegos, between 680 and 690. In his collection of stories from his visits to Cyprus, Damascus, Jerusalem and Egypt between 650 and 690, he attempts to encourage Christians to remain firm in their faith and not embrace Islam. He calls Muslims ‘associates of the demons’, and in imitation of the Muslim confession of faith, ‘There is no god but God’, he confesses, ‘There is no other god than the God of the Christians’ (Binggeli 2009: 198). In his Guidebook he shows intimate knowledge of Muslim beliefs about Christ.

When we wish to debate with Arabs, we first anathematise whoever says two gods, or whoever says that God has carnally begotten a son, or whoever worships as god any created thing at all, in heaven or on earth. . . . When the Saracens hear of the birth of God and of His genesis, they at once blaspheme, imagining marriage, fertilisation and carnal union.

(Hoyland 1997: 94)

Hoyland argues that such detailed knowledge of Muslim convictions must have arisen from ‘real discussion with Muslims’ (Hoyland 1997: 94).

John of Damascus retired from working in the government bureaucracy in Damascus to the monastery of Mār Saba near Jerusalem, possibly during the reign of the Caliph ‘Umar II (r. 717–20). His work in Greek On heresies includes the heresy of the Ishmaelites, which never refers to Islam but does outline several beliefs of the ‘Saracens’. He lists the ridiculous notions that Muhammad received a book from heaven, that Jesus was not crucified, that Ishmaelites kiss a black stone and that polygamous marriage and divorce are acceptable (Glei 2009: 298–9). John’s belief that Muhammad was influenced by an Arian Christian monk was to have a widespread influence in Greek-speaking Byzantine regions and subsequently became received wisdom about the Muslims in the Latin-speaking West.

The polemical approach was consistently followed among Greek-speaking Christians in the Byzantine Empire. Theophanes the Confessor wrote a Chronography in Greek between 810 and
814 in which he relates the history of Byzantine relations with the Muslims. In Syria and Palestine he reports that as a result of the civil war between the sons of Hārūn al-Rashīd from 809 to 813, the churches of Jerusalem and the monasteries of Palestine were made desolate and sometimes profaned. Many Christians fled to Cyprus or Constantinople to escape martyrdom, but the monks of Judea at Mār Sabas were able to continue. He describes the Muslims as ‘deniers of Christ’, ‘God’s enemies’, ‘impure’ and ‘a people with an evil religion’ (Vaiou 2009: 428–31).

In ninth-century Muslim Spain, the public denunciation of Muḥammad by a monk named Isaac in Córdoba in front of the emir’s palace in 851 resulted in his execution for blasphemy. Within a few days, a Christian soldier serving in the emir’s army and six monks and priests followed Isaac’s example. What is known as the Martyrs of Córdoba movement led to the deaths of nearly 50 Christians in ten years (Baxter 2000: 95). In the aftermath of the executions, Christians were divided in their reaction. Some denounced Isaac and his followers. Others such as the Córdoban priest Eulogius supported them, setting out a defence of their actions in Memoriae sanctorum and Liber apologeticus martyrum. Eulogius wanted to answer Christians who refused to accept that Isaac and the others could be considered legitimate martyrs when they had ‘suffered at the hands of men who venerated both God and a law’ (Baxter 2000: 96). He asked in return, ‘What is the purpose of believing that a demoniac full of lies could speak the truth. That one enveloped in fallacies could provide a law?’ (Baxter 2000: 97). Eulogius shares John of Damascus’ opinion that Muḥammad was instructed by an Arian heretic and therefore qualifies as the false prophet predicted by Christ (Baxter 2000: 99).

The notion that Muslims were heretical Christians was also found in Coptic circles in Egypt. The Arabic homily of Pseudo-Theophilus of Alexandria probably reflects early eighth-century conditions in Egypt. The writer is concerned with the large numbers of Christians embracing Islam, which he describes as a Christian heresy or even a form of deviant Judaism (van Lent 2009: 257–9).

By the early ninth century some Christians promoted the view that the Qurʾān was written by or influenced by heretical Christians or Jews. The Syriac Legend of Sergius Bahīrā is found in West and East Syrian forms dating probably from the early ninth century. A Syrian monk called Sergius Bahīrā discovered the young Muḥammad in Arabia and, after seeing a vision of him as the future leader of the Arabs, taught him basic truths about God suited to his rather backward culture. For example, he taught the physical pleasures of the afterlife as they would more easily be accepted by the Arabs. The essential Christian message is enshrined in the Qurʾān in the recognition that Christ is a ‘Word of God and a Spirit from Him’ (4:171). Sadly, a Jew named Kaʿb al-Aḥbār corrupted the teaching of Sergius Bahīrā after the latter died, so that these Christian elements were obscured (Roggema 2009c: 600–2).

The affair of the Qurʾān found as an appendix to an East Syrian version of the Legend of Sergius Bahīrā states that the Qurʾān was originally written by the Syrian monk Bahīrā but that a Jew named Kaʿb al-Aḥbār added his ideas about the lex talionis and divorce. The governor of Iraq, al-Hajjāj Ibn Yūsuf, found that the text of the Qurʾān was corrupt and called for all copies to be collected and destroyed. He consulted Christian leaders who explained the Bible to him and then had the parts that he liked written down, naming some of the sections after biblical prophets and giving the title ‘the Qurʾān’ to the final production. This reflects the Islamic tradition that al-Hajjāj Ibn Yūsuf divided the Qurʾān into sections and chapters (Roggema 2009a: 595–6).

The most popular account of the Christian influence on the production of the Qurʾān, judging by the large number of extant manuscripts, is in the so-called Apology of al-Kindī, written in Arabic probably in the early ninth century. The epilogue claims that the Caliph al-Maʿmūn (r. 813–33) had the work read to him, which if accurate provides a date for the writing. According to the contents of the work, a Christian Arab named ʿAbd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī replies to a letter
purportedly written by the Muslim ʿAbd Allāh al-Hāshimī, who has invited him to embrace Islam, though this letter is obviously not written by a Muslim but probably by al-Kindī himself. ‘It is hardly credible that any Muslim intellectual, even in the court of al-Maʾmūn, would have been party to the summary portrayal of Islam found here, a mere preface to al-Kindī’s rebuttal’ (Griffith 2008: 87). His account of the Qurʾān echoes the Legend of Sergius Bahīrā. Muḥammad was instructed by the monk Bahīrā, although the monk died and two Jews began to influence the young Muḥammad with their opinions. They changed the text of the Qurʾān by adding stories about the Old Testament prophets. Sidney Griffith points out that this Christian Arabic text is unique for ‘the impudent tone of voice that disparages the Qurʾān and Muhammad in a way that is reminiscent of the Byzantine anti-Islamic polemical treatises written in Greek from the ninth century onward’ (Griffith 2008: 87).

### Christian apologetic writing

The influence of Sergius Bahīrā on Muḥammad was not always regarded as detrimental. The earliest reference to this idea sees the Christian monk as a teacher of truth rather than heresy, so that the Qurʾān contains basic Christian doctrine and undistorted teaching. The East Syrian Disputation between a monk of Bēt Hālē and an Arab notable, written in Syriac, is set in the 720s when Maslama was governor of Iraq. The author believes that the qurʾānic understanding that Christ is ‘the Word of God and his Spirit’ shows that Muḥammad knew Luke 1:35, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most High will overshadow you’ (Roggema 2009c: 270).

This dialogue between the Muslim and the monk portrays Muḥammad in a positive light.

**Arab:** Tell me the truth, how is Muhammad our prophet considered in your eyes?

**Monk:** As a wise and God-fearing man who freed you from idolatry and brought you to know the one true God.

**Arab:** Why, if he was wise, did he not teach us from the beginning about the mystery of the Trinity as you profess?

**Monk:** You know, of course, that a child, when it is born, because it does not possess the full faculties for receiving solid food, is nourished with milk for two years, and then they feed it with meat. Thus also Muhammad, because he saw your simpleness and the deficiency of your understanding, he first taught you of the one true God . . . for you were children in terms of your understanding.

*(Hoyland 1997: 538)*

Here Muḥammad is presented as someone who has received instruction in Christian doctrine and has accepted it but has decided in his wisdom that his people are not ready to believe the truth of the divinity of Christ or the Trinity, which he himself upholds.

Despite believing that Sergius Bahīrā taught an Arian Christology to Muḥammad, John of Damascus does find the divinity of Christ acknowledged in the belief that Christ is the Word of God and a spirit from him found in the Qurʾān. In his Heresy of the Ishmaelites, John rebuts the accusation of Muslims that Christians are guilty of associating Christ with God when they call him Son of God by drawing attention to the fact that Muslims call Christ Word and Spirit of God. He argues, ‘If the Word of God is in God, then it is evident that he is God as well. If, however, the Word is outside of God, then, according to you, God is without Word and Spirit. Consequently, by avoiding the association of a partner with God, you have mutilated him’ (Janosik 2011: 283).
This discovery of the Trinity in the Qurʾān is repeated in an anonymous treatise, *On the triune nature of God*, written possibly around 755 in Arabic. This is the earliest known defence of the Trinity and Incarnation in the language of the Muslims, who are addressed in the work several times. The writer uses qurʾānic language to defend the Trinity.

Believe in God and His Word; and also in His Holy Spirit; surely the Holy Spirit has brought down from your Lord mercy and guidance. . . . You find in the Qurʾān that God and His Word and His Spirit is One God and One Lord. You have said that you believe in God and His Word and His Spirit, so do not reproach us, you people, for believing in God and His Word and His Spirit.

*(Beaumont 2012: 114)*

The Virgin Mary is described in terms taken directly from the Qurʾān 3:4, as the one ‘whom God chose above the women of the worlds’ (Swanson 1998: 298). The author refers to characters found both in the Bible and the Qurʾān; Adam, Noah, Abraham, Lot and Moses, and adds vocabulary from the Qurʾān to the biblical account. For example, in his narrative of Moses the author has three quotations from the qurʾānic stories of Moses; ‘Pharaoh made himself a god’, Q 4:164; ‘God spoke to Moses directly from the right side at the mount’, Q 19:52; and ‘God was mighty, Lord of vengeance’, Q 3:4 (Swanson 1998: 310). Swanson points out that the writer sees the Qurʾān as a pre-Christian rather than a post-Christian text: ‘The writer finds the telos of the sequence of apostle-stories not in the (seventh century) figure of Muhammad, but rather in the (first-century) figure of Christ, understood to be the incarnate Word of God who accomplished what prophets and apostles could not’ (Swanson 1998: 317).

Griffith argues that this treatise sees in Islam not only a challenge to Christian faith but also ‘a new idiom in which that faith must be articulated if it is to continue to carry conviction and a new opportunity for the proclamation of the Gospel’ (Griffith 2008: 57). There is no polemic against the Qurʾān here, and the author defends the truth of Christianity before Muslims as well as Arabic-speaking Christians who may have been drawn to convert to Islam (Griffith 2008: 57).

The weaving-in of allusions to the Qurʾān is also part of the style of Theodore Abū Qurra (d. c. 830), Chalcedonian Bishop of Harrān, who had a reputation for debating with Muslims. Abū Qurra’s treatise *On the necessity of redemption* begins with the qurʾānic vocabulary of revelation, ‘God sent down (anzala) the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai’ (Swanson 2003: 170). The treatise goes on to refer to Q 99:8, ‘Whoever has done an atom’s weight of evil shall see it’; Q 3:181–2, ‘What your hands have forwarded’; Q 3:191, ‘God did not create in vain’; and Q 38:27, ‘God is not a frivolity’ (Swanson 2003: 170–3).

In the report of a two-day encounter between Timothy I (d. 823), Patriarch of the East Syrian church, and the Caliph al-Mahdī that took place in 780, the denial in the Qurʾān of the Christian belief in the crucifixion was turned to an affirmation of Christian convictions. When the Caliph turns his attention to the cross he quotes Q 4:157, ‘They did not crucify him’, and he waits for Timothy’s response. Timothy declines to comment on the quoted text and instead refers to Q 19:33, where the infant Jesus says, ‘Peace be on me, the day I was born, the day I die, and the day I am raised alive’. He interprets this to mean that Jesus died and was brought to life. Al-Mahdī does not agree with the chronological reading of the text, explaining that Jesus is not yet dead but he is going to die, to which Timothy presses the chronological case for the priority of death over exaltation: ‘If Jesus is not dead he would not have ascended to heaven. But it is affirmed by you that the ascension of Jesus to heaven and his resurrection took place a long time ago, as your book testifies’. Timothy challenges, not the veracity of the Qurʾān, but al-Mahdī’s interpretation of it (Beaumont 2005: 24–5).
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The Muslim denial of the Incarnation was challenged by appealing to the portrait of God sitting on his throne that occurs 18 times in the Qurʾān. The West Syrian theologian Ḥabīb ibn Khidma Abū Rāʾiṭa (d. c. 830), who is associated with Takrit, wrote a Risāla fī l-tajassud (‘Letter on the Incarnation’) containing 44 answers to questions about the Incarnation which might typically be asked by Muslims. Question 29 unusually is posed to a Muslim: ‘Do you not describe God as being in heaven and on the throne?’ Abū Rāʾiṭa makes direct reference to the Qurʾān here and proceeds to argue that a Muslim must accept that God ‘is in heaven and on the Throne and in everything’, and therefore there is no contradiction in the Christian belief that ‘the Word was incarnated in its entirety yet is still in everything’ (Keating 2006: 258–9).

The East Syrian theologian, ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī (d. c 865), wrote the first systematic apologetic theology in Arabic, titled Kitāb al-burhān ʿalā siyāqat al-tadbīr al-ilāhī (‘The Book of the proof concerning the course of the divine economy’), in which he responds to objections to Christian teaching made by Muslims. In his treatment of the denial of the Trinity in the Qurʾān, he alludes to the way the latter refers to God’s word and spirit, as John of Damascus had done, and then confronts the allegation of Muslims that Christians worship three gods:

We are blameless before God concerning the accusation of speaking of three gods. On the contrary, in saying the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we only want to affirm that God is ‘living’ and ‘speaking’. The Father is the One we refer to as having ‘life’ and ‘word’, ‘Life’ is the Holy Spirit, and ‘Word’ is the Son. This is not, as our opponents attribute to us, that we make a female partner for God, and a son from her. May God be greatly exalted above that!

(Mikhail 2013: 374)

Two Qurʾānic texts are referred to by ʿAmmār here. Q 4:171, ‘Do not say “three”. Stop it! It will be better for you. God is one God’, contains the accusation which ʿAmmār seeks to deny by arguing that the Trinity affirms the oneness of God, while Q 72:3, ‘God has taken neither a female partner nor a son’, was used by Muslims to discredit the Christian belief in the divine sonship of Jesus. ʿAmmār joins in an already established tradition of denial of the accusation by forming his own version of Q 4:171, ‘Far exalted is God above having a son’, in ‘May God be greatly exalted above that’ (Beaumont 2013).

Conclusion

Early Christian attitudes to Islam varied from outright hostility towards Muḥammad as Antichrist and a consequent rejection of the message of the Qurʾān to a belief that Muḥammad was well-intentioned and brought to his own polytheistic people the message of God as one, which he had received from a Christian monk. Thus, they argued that the Qurʾān reflects that instruction and can be interpreted as supporting the Trinity and Incarnation.

References


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Further reading


