PART IB

The Middle Ages
In the regions that came under Muslim control in the seventh and eighth centuries, Muslims
themselves were far outnumbered by followers of other faiths, among whom Christians were by
far the greatest majority in Egypt, the Fertile Crescent and Spain. In the early centuries of Islam
they continued to form a substantial sector of the population, and their religious, cultural and
intellectual activities would have ensured that Muslims could not ignore them.

The Qurʾān itself attests to the presence and influence of Christians in its repeated references
to them and their beliefs, particularly what they claim about Jesus. Whether or not it notes dis-
tinctions between the Christologies of the various churches is not clear, though it knows some of
the essentials of Jesus’ life, including Deutero-canonical details such as his creating birds from clay
and causing them to fly (Q 3:49; 5:110), the key doctrines of the Trinity and the divine Sonship of
Jesus (4:171; 5:73; 5:116), and possibly the definition of Mary as bearer of God (5:116). It is also
aware of the Gospel as the scripture of the Christian community, though it knows it as a single
book (Injīl) that was given to Jesus during his earthly life (more like the Christian kerigma), and
while there is no clear indication that it refers to forms of Christian worship (though the refer-
ence to Jesus causing a table to be sent down from heaven at the disciples’ request in Q 5:112–15
is reminiscent of elements in Eucharistic celebration), it makes a clear reference to churches in
which ‘the name of God is commemorated in abundant measure’ (Q 22:40), and also to priests
and monks (Q 5:82; 9:31; 9:34; 57:27).

Evidently, Christians, their doctrines and practices were prominent elements in the milieu in
which the Qurʾān came into being. This continued to be the case in the Islamic world for cen-
turies to come. It is attested by the incident in Ibn Ishāq’s foundational biography of Muḥammad,
written in the mid-eighth century, in which the young Muḥammad is identified by the Christian
anchorite Bahīrā (Ibn Ishāq 1955: 79–81), both blessing him and acknowledging the advent of
the new religion that will replace Christianity. It is also attested in an unlikely way by a number
of books written in the early centuries by Muslims about monasteries in the Islamic world, of
which the Kitāb al-diyyārāt (‘Book of monasteries’) by Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī al-Shābushā (d. c. 1000)
is the best known. These works are essentially secular in tone, usually celebrating the setting of
the monastery and its gardens, and relating stories about visits by groups of Muslims as well as
Christians. Included in these groups were caliphs themselves, of whom some were such frequent
visitors that they were said to know the liturgy conducted in monastic churches, to have been
romantically involved with monks’ daughters or young monks and, in the case of the Caliph
al-Ma'mūn (r. 813–33), to have secretly converted to Christianity before his death (possibly a Christian retort to the Muslim story of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (r. 610–41) desiring to convert to Islam at the time of Muḥammad).

An equally informative attestation to the continuing public presence of Christians in Muslim conurbations is given by the Pact of ʿUmar, the legal basis of relations between Muslims and their client populations that in principle governed the conduct of Christians and other dhimmīs in Islamic society. According to the Pact, Christians agree, among other points, not to ‘display our crosses or our books in the roads or markets of the Muslims; we shall use our clappers in our churches very softly; we shall not raise our voices when following our dead; we shall not show lights on any of the roads of the Muslims or in their markets’ (Stillman 1979: 157–8). This comes from a relatively late version of the Pact (in Abū Bakr Muḥammad al-Ṭūṭūshī’s Sirāj al-Mulūk, dated 1122), though the repetition of it confirms all the more emphatically that throughout the early Muslim centuries Christians must have been accustomed to practise their religion in public much as they had always done, by means of processions led by crosses, with holy books displayed and flanked by candles, and singing dirges in funeral processions. Even though such demonstrations of piety must have been curtailed somewhat, especially in the Muslim quarters of cities, together with the regular beating of clappers to call the faithful to prayer, they would have served to remind Muslims that Christians were a continuing presence in society.

Despite the change of rule from the seventh century onwards, as Muslim power became established in areas where Christians predominated, it appears that in many respects the Christian population in the Islamic Empire continued to live much as they had previously done. In remote rural areas it is unlikely that they saw Muslims at all often, and they may largely have been aware of them through the taxes that were exacted from them (maybe with the demand for some form of ritual self-abasement). In the cities and towns Christians will inevitably have been much more aware of Muslims, through interactions with them on a daily basis. The frequent business negotiations and transactions that would have formed part of urban life presumably led to the need to distinguish Christians and other dhimmīs from Muslims that is expressed in another stipulation in the Pact of ʿUmar, that they should wear distinctive hairstyles and clothing and bind yellow sashes around their waists. The fact that they were required to show they were different is evidence of lower regard for them or mistrust on the part of Muslims.

The well-known Melkite theologian John of Damascus (d. c. 749) served for many years as an official under the Umayyad caliph, as did the Nestorian doctor ʿAlī ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī (d. c. 865), who was secretary to a succession of ʿAbbasid caliphs, one of whom, al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–61), made him a nādim (special companion) before playing a prominent role in his eventual conversion to Islam. Similarly, the Fāṭimid bureaucracy in Egypt largely relied on Christian officials (Samir 1996), while Fāṭimid caliphs grew increasingly reliant on viziers from Armenian Christian backgrounds (Dadoyan 1996). All this serves to explain why the Pact stipulates that Christians should show respect to Muslims and give up their seats for them, and possibly why they should not teach the Qurān to their children (so as not to facilitate their participation in Muslim society). It also illustrates why as early as the first years of the eighth century the Umayyad Caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 685–705) decreed that non-Muslim government officials should not occupy positions of seniority over Muslim officials, and that Arabic (not Greek) should be the language used in official documents.

Christians remained a strong presence in Muslim society. Nevertheless, with the Pact of ʿUmar looming over their every public action they could not have felt entirely at their ease. Whether its stipulations were actually invoked regularly or remained largely a theoretical framework for relations, its very existence constituted a reminder that Christians were not equal with Muslims.
even though Muslims may have applauded them for their knowledge and skills and may at times have shown them approbation and respect.

A telling insight into the conduct of Christians in Baghdad in the mid-ninth century suggests they knew they were not equal and reacted by doing all they could to prove to themselves and their Muslim neighbours their indifference towards their status. This comes in a letter written by the religious scholar and stylist Abū ʿUthmān ʿAmr ibn Baḥr al-ʿĀḥīz (d. 869) in which he prefaces a series of arguments against Christian beliefs with an explanation for the popularity of Christians among Muslims. He frames his comments as a castigation of the Muslim populace for tolerating Christians who dress like them, pursue the same pastimes as them, use the same names and retaliate at will when Muslims hit them, and they even encourage Christians when they do this. By contrast, he himself makes it clear that Christians should know their place in Muslim society (al-ʿĀḥīz 1927: 327–30). What makes the conduct of this group shocking is that, allowing for the hyperbole that is not untypical of al-ʿĀḥīz’s essays, they took elements of the Pact of ʿUmar and deliberately flouted them. Even if in reality they did not go to the extremes that scandalised al-ʿĀḥīz, they apparently still wanted to prove they were immune from Muslim legislation. Were they expressing a need to show they were part of wider society in Baghdad by obliterating distinctions, or were they purposely showing detached disdain for this legislation? It is difficult to say on the basis of al-ʿĀḥīz’s resentful remarks, though whichever explanation fits the facts behind his rhetoric, their actions evidently stem from some impulse to stress there was less difference between themselves and Muslim society than there probably really was.

Al-ʿĀḥīz and numerous other Muslims in the early centuries acknowledged that Christians served many useful purposes. Not only were they efficient as secretaries in the state bureaucracy and indispensable as translators of works from the ancient world – Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq and his son Ishāq ibn Ḥunayn were recognised as true experts in making texts from Greek and Syriac accessible to a monolingual Arabic-speaking readership – but they were also necessary as medical doctors to serve the needs of caliphs as well as the general populace. But while some Muslims in Baghdad may, as al-ʿĀḥīz implicitly concedes, have been over-impressed with their knowledge, abilities and sophistication, others were rather more clear-eyed about what they saw. For example, a fatwā attributed (with some uncertainty) to the historian and Qurʾān commentator Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) rules that Christians, together with Jews, should be expelled from Muslim lands ‘when there is no specific need for them’ (Thomas 2010: 186). In other words, Christians are not an integral part of Muslim society, maybe even a contaminant, and should only be tolerated when they show they are useful. Such a judgement does not speak of an open society, and it provides a possible explanation for the actions of the Christian group in al-ʿĀḥīz’s letter: they were aware of being aliens in the very places where their churches had stood since before the time of Islam, and they therefore insisted that they were not affected by anything that this social and religious system levelled at them.

Sentiments such as al-Ṭabarī’s were not restricted to Baghdad and the early ʿAbbasid era. While Christians in Mamlūk Egypt were intent on living as freely as their positions as officials allowed, Muslims attacked them with as much intent on removing them from public life. Among a number of Muslim authors, the state official Jamāl al-Dīn al-Asnāwī (d. 1370) complains that the state does not enforce the dhimmī regulations and thus allows Christians to ignore them without fear, not least by siphoning money from the treasury in the coffers of monasteries and churches, living lives of luxury derived from their gains, and despising Muslims whenever possible. Their reason for this disagreeable conduct is that they regard Muslims as usurpers of their rights in a country that has been stolen from them (Mallett 2013: 131).

Items such as these suggest that while there may have been many instances of shared living and respectful cooperation, there were more than a few instances of seething hostility between Muslims
and Christians. In the final analysis, the latter were client people, and at any moment the anti-
dhimmī measures could be invoked against them or a Muslim might complain that they failed to
show proper deference to his position. For all the use they were to Muslims, they were not part
of the same society, while trust, friendship and acceptance must have been rare commodities in
their dealings with their Muslim masters.

As well as having to defend their livelihoods and possibly their own and their families’ safety
in Muslim society, Arab Christians were increasingly compelled to defend the principles of their
faith against arguments that were totally unrelenting and unaccommodating. Christians hardly
ever succeeded in making Muslims accept the integrity of their beliefs or their compatibility with
reason or persuaded them that Christian doctrines were any more than degenerate and often
puerile. In the early Islamic period they were constantly on the defence against attacks inspired
by uncompromising interpretations of the doctrine of tawḥīd allied with versions of their own
beliefs that were derived by Muslims from the Qurʾān.

Strangely enough, the doctrine of the atonement was rarely discussed between Christians
and Muslims. On the Muslim side, the whole issue was something of a dead letter because it
conflicted with belief in a God whose omnipotence rendered any idea of sacrifice for sinfulness
or reconciliation for waywardness unnecessary and also with the curt, dismissive insistence in Q
4:157 that the Jews had not killed or crucified Christ, but in fact God had rescued him from the
scene. Thus, Christian attempts to explain in narrative form how God had sent his Son to earth
in order to overcome the Devil who held humans in his power were met with derision as childish

On the Christian side, it may well have been that since the main matter of contention among
the churches concerning Christ was the manner in which his human and divine natures were
united, they did not discuss the doctrine of the atonement often or fully enough for Muslims to
take much notice.

Muslims did, of course, take notice of the doctrine of the Trinity, and their reason for doing
so probably reflects their fundamental interest in intellectual encounters with Christians as well
as the power balance that is evident in the asymmetrical social relations. For Muslims, the idea of
three entities existing without distinction between them simply did not make sense. They could
not see that if the Persons of the Godhead were each self-subsistent with independent character-
istics of their own the Godhead could be said in any rational sense to be a unity. Christians made
repeated attempts to prove otherwise, most creatively borrowing the concept of the divine attrib-
utes that was being developed among Muslim theologians in the early ninth century. According
to to this, the qualities that characterised God, such as his being alive, rational, all-powerful and so
on, were each derived from an attribute of life, reason and power that existed in addition to God’s
essence but as attributes were not distinguished from it. At first glimpse, this afforded an excellent
vehicle for explaining the Persons and their relationship with the divine substance, and some
of the first known Arabic-speaking Christian theologians in the early ninth century made use of
it, though both they and their Muslim opponents soon came to see the shortcomings. One of
the generation of Christians theologically active at this time, the Nestorian ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī,
explained that just as the attributes life and reason are superior to the others because the others
are generated from these two, so they can be taken as analogies of the Holy Spirit, the Life of God,
and the Son, the Word of God, though the analogy cannot be complete because the Persons were
self-subsistent while the attributes were not – ‘neither God nor other than God’, as one familiar
Muslim formula put it.

The use of this particular analogy continued for centuries, though there is no sign that any
Christian was under the misapprehension that the doctrine of the Trinity and tawḥīd, the doc-
trine of the absolute oneness of God to which all Muslims subscribed, were entirely congruent.
Christians appear to have made use of the Muslim concept of the divine attributes as a means of helping their interlocutors to understand the divine mystery. This approach represents the stance that many took towards Muslim inquiries and arguments, not so much to try to prove how the Trinitarian God was one in the sense of a strict unity but to show how the one God could be understood in richer and fuller terms that might make him more comprehensible and approachable than unyielding Muslim negations.

Such holding off from being drawn into arguments set in Muslim terms that could potentially result in distortions of traditional Christian doctrines typifies Christian approaches to encounters in the first centuries of Islam. It is as though theologians were content to explain themselves just sufficiently to demonstrate that their formulations were consistent with reason, at least as they saw them, though not to surrender ground. They remained confident, for all their defensiveness, and saw no reason to give in to pressures that might require them to express the Trinity in modalist terms or the Incarnation in terms of divine inspiration of a human prophet.

Some Christians from the safety of anonymity or the protection of Christian territory went beyond defensiveness and took the attack to the Muslims. Thus, in the ninth century a pseudonymous author writing in Baghdad under the name ‘Abd al-Masih al-Kindi wrote a scathing diatribe against the virtue and probity of Muḥammad and the integrity of the Qurʾān (Tien 1993), the two fundamentals of Islamic religious identity, and somewhere around the year 1200 the Melkite Paul of Antioch, bishop of the crusader enclave around Sidon, wrote for a so-called Muslim friend an explanation of how the Qurʾān, when it was rightly read, supported the authenticity of the Bible and the rationality of Christian doctrines, and he did not hesitate to make minor changes to the text of the Qurʾān to help it support his arguments (Thomas 2001: 205–13). These are examples of Christians confidently and assertively resisting the pressure of Islamic society to explain Christianity in Muslim terms or else abandon it.

While there are no clear signs of widespread conversion to Islam in the early centuries, enough Christians did convert to cause concern. Stories of the martyrdom of Christians who typically suffered, contained strong messages about resisting temptation and staying loyal to the true religion. Doctrinal treatises, such as the ones in which ‘Abd al-Masih al-Naṣārī based his explanation of the Trinity on Muslim doctrines of God, were aimed at readerships who needed the strength of clear guidance in their faith to stop them giving it up. Attacks on Muhammad and the Qurʾān demonstrated the ungodly flimsiness of Islam’s foundations. By and large, Christians retained fortitude against outside pressures in these centuries despite prejudice, discrimination and occasionally persecution, as well as the increasing prevalence of Arabic as the vogue language and Muslim ways as the fashion to follow in society. But decline had set in, and the Arab churches found it increasingly hard to withstand the onward surge of Islam.

References


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Further reading