

# Christianity's Earliest Encounters with Islam

By John C. Lamoreaux

The Holy Land in the seventh century was not a desirable place to live for Orthodox Christians—unless they were looking for martyrdom. First the Zoroastrian Persians invaded, which led to the widespread destruction and dislocation of Christian culture. Then, after the Roman emperor Heraclius had regained the territory, government officials attempted to reconcile feuding Christians by vigorously promoting a compromise but heretical theology called monothelism.<sup>1</sup> This only created further strife between the Christians of the Holy Land, as well as between them and the Church at Constantinople.

As if this all were not enough, in 634 a new threat appeared on the horizon—the armies of Islam. No one had expected this, unless they could have read the “portents.” For it was said—by later Christian chroniclers—that on the night of Muhammad’s birth “the crosses on all the churches in Byzantium began to sway, bloody lances shone from a sky without a moon, the sacred emperor was troubled in his sleep, and two monstrous creatures crawled out of the Nile.”<sup>2</sup> Within a few years all of Palestine, Egypt, and most of Syria had been conquered by the Muslim armies: three of the five patriarchates were now within *Dar al-Islam*, the “House of Islam.”

Consideration of these events of the troubled seventh century may offer insight into the nature of the Muslim challenge to Christianity. With this end in view, several questions about Christianity’s first encounter with Islam will occupy our attention: How were the armies of Islam in such a short span of time able to conquer such wide tracts of territory belonging to the Christian Byzantine Empire? What theological criticisms did the Muslims make of Christianity? And how did the Christians living under

Islamic rule explain the military success of the Muslims, answer their theological criticisms, and establish a *modus vivendi*?

## The Muslim Conquests

Traditional misunderstandings of Islam and its origins are difficult to overturn. Although they are no longer current in scholarly circles, misconceptions still linger, reinforced by media presentations of Islam.

Did Islam begin as a desert religion of uncivilized nomads? To be sure, it originated in the deserts of Arabia, but among the moderately rich and prosperous inhabitants of the Hijaz, in particular in the thriving young cities of Mecca and Medina. Because they were located on the trade routes, expensive spices and numerous other luxury items passed through these cities on their way from the Far East to the population centers clustered around the Mediterranean basin. Muhammad and many of the early Muslims were traders and merchants, and good ones at that. They lived in cities and thought themselves a class apart from those who remained in the desert with their flocks and herds. One of the earliest goals of the young Muslim community was to persuade their nomadic brethren to settle, for unless one made the transition to urban life, it was hard, or perhaps even impossible, to live as a fully observant Muslim.

After the conquests, Muslim care and attention was lavished upon the settled regions; the leaders of the Islamic empire knew that the stability and prosperity of the conquered regions must be maintained intact, for those regions provided a stable economic base for the nascent empire. Ali, Muhammad’s son-in-law, said, rather than disperse the non-Muslims of the Sawad, allowing their land to go to waste, “Leave them to be a source of revenue and aid for the Muslims.”

Did Islam conquer by the sword, offering to subject peoples the choice between Islam or death? Although it is true that the armies of Islam conquered many regions—presumably with swords!—there is no evidence that they forced large scale conversion on their subject populations. On the contrary, some in the armies of the conquest were not even Muslims; some were pagan, some Christian, some Jewish or Samaritan. When the Arabs, for example, reached the famous monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai many of the Christian Arabs living around it, without converting to Islam, joined the Muslims and went on to conquer Egypt. The Samaritans living in northern Palestine were said to have given such effective aid to the invading Arabs that for many generations they were exempted from certain taxes.

If subject peoples surrendered their cities to the Arabs, they were given treaties which guaranteed their rights as religious communities within the new Islamic empire. Although they never doubted their status as members of a subordinate community, they were able to continue in the faith of their fathers and even at times to participate in the new government established by the Muslims. St. John of Damascus, for example, before retiring to the monastery of St. Sabas near Jerusalem, spent many years as one of the highest officials in the civil service of the Muslim Empire.

Muslims have traditionally assigned their success to the guidance of God, who strove and still strives to fulfill his purpose by establishing Islam as *the* world religion. Although not desiring to treat this claim lightly, historians instinctively seek for more mundane factors.

Neither the Persian nor the Byzantine empires were in a state to withstand the Muslim conquests. At the time the conquests began, they had just finished fighting each other in a long and exhausting war which wrought devastation upon both participants. This twenty-five-year war had all the characteristics of a religious crusade in that foremost among the goals of the Christians was the recovery from the infidel Persians of the *very* cross upon which Christ had been crucified. The result of this war was demographic decline and extreme dislocations in the agricultural and urban life of the eastern parts of the Byzantine Empire.

A second factor in the dramatic success of the Muslims was the weakness of Byzantine resistance. The Romano-Persian war had been fought mainly on fronts in the north, in the Caucasus and what is now northern Iraq. Thus, the main strength of fortifications and manpower was not to be found in the soft underbelly of Syria and Palestine, which were instead “defended by a fragile network of alliances among the neighbouring Arab tribes.”<sup>3</sup> Not only were these alliances fragile, but also the Arab tribes were more than willing, should the circumstances permit, to turn upon and plunder the settled regions that they were supposed to be protecting. In short, the Byzantines simply did not have adequate defenses with which to withstand an organized Arab onslaught coming from the south.

Finally, many of the peoples of the Holy Land were dissatisfied with Roman rule. Semitic by culture, they had

never been fully pressed into the Hellenist mold: “For almost a millennium, since the conquests of Alexander the Great, these two life-styles had coexisted in mutual incomprehension.”<sup>4</sup> It seems also that in the early seventh century these differences had grown more pronounced, often irrupting into open civil strife. This is especially the case following Heraclius’s reconquest of the Holy Land, for in order to fund his expensive crusade against the Persians he had been forced to levy heavy taxes upon the inhabitants of all the provinces. So dissatisfied were the Christians, not to mention the Jews and Samaritans, that the Muslims were sometimes welcomed as liberators. The Christian chronicler, Eutychius of Alexandria, records the capitulation of Damascus by Sarjun, the grandfather of John of Damascus, to the besieging Muslims. The terms of the agreement made between Sarjun and the Muslims were that the Muslims would spare the life of Sarjun, the family of Sarjun, the lives and property of the inhabitants of Damascus, with the exception of the *Rum*—the east Romans or Byzantines. This account concerning Sarjun, himself Orthodox, comes from the pen of an Orthodox writer. It is this which makes it so striking. One would expect, and indeed finds, such sentiments among the Jacobites, Nestorians, Jews, and Samaritans, all of whom had been victims of Byzantine coercion. It is surprising to find them as well among the Orthodox Christians.

These three factors perhaps more than any others account for the structural inability of the Byzantine Empire to defend itself against the Arab tribes united by Islam and impelled by the Muslim leadership towards the conquests of the settled regions surrounding the Arabian peninsula.

## Christian Responses to the Conquest

When the Arabs conquered the Holy Land, the Christians of the Byzantine Empire were compelled to interpret the meaning of this conquest with respect to God’s overarching plan for humanity, and themselves in particular. It was commonly thought that theirs was the last world empire, destined to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth, destined to endure until the consummation of history: a belief whose roots went deep into the soil of ancient Christianity. The need for Christians to explain the success of the Muslims was further amplified by their habit of identifying—perhaps against their own better judgment—political success with religious truth. One sixth-century Christian, for example, said to the Jews that because they had sinned against the 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 into the faces of the Christians by the victorious Muslims. The new prophet Muhammad declared in his new Scripture, “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?” Given such a theologi-

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cal worldview, how did the Christians of Syro-Palestine respond to the success of the Muslims and the social upheavals that followed in the wake of the Arab conquests?

The Christians who lived through the conquests and their immediate aftermath tended to view them as temporary divine chastisements for their sins—the sins of the *Christians*. When St. Sophronius of Jerusalem preached to his congregation on Christmas Eve 634, just as the conquests were beginning, he noted that the Christians of Jerusalem were unable to make their customary pilgrimage to Bethlehem because the “slime of the godless Arabs . . . had captured [her] and does not yield the passage, but threatens slaughter and destruction if we leave this holy city and if we dare to approach our beloved and sacred Bethlehem.” He further notes that this has resulted from our “countless sins and [our] very serious faults.” He then urged his congregation “to correct themselves” and “shine forth with repentance” and be “purified by conversion” and “curb [their] performance of acts which are hateful of God.” Only thus will the blood-loving blades of the Arabs turn back upon themselves. In the opinion of Sophronius all that was needed in order to avert the conquest was a sincere communal repentance.

About the same time that Sophronius was preaching to his beleaguered congregation in Jerusalem, St. Maximus the Confessor in Alexandria was writing to a friend named Peter. Maximus bids him 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 laid waste by wild and untamed beasts.

Maximus describes the Arabs as a people “who . . . delight in human blood . . . whom God hates, though they think they are worshipping God.” He hints at how the Arabs are “announcing the advent of the Anti-Christ” and storing up wrath against themselves on the day of judgment. As was the case with Sophronius, the cause of the Arab’s 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

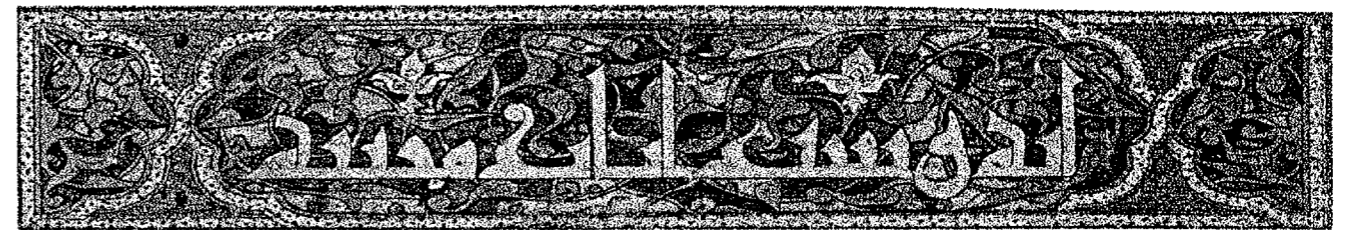
mystery of the sufferings of the God who became flesh for our sake.

Finally he urges Peter to hold fast to orthodoxy and to avoid persecution, but if necessary, to suffer death for his faith.

The writings of Sophronius and Maximus give insight into the earliest Christian responses to the Muslim conquests, responses formulated as the conquests were beginning or within a few years of their onset. Both were convinced of the temporary nature of this divine chastisement; they did not know—and how could they?—that the Muslim presence was not to be temporary, but was radically to change the face of the ancient world. For the next generation of Christians there were other questions which had to be answered, questions raised by the continued presence of the Muslims, unanswerable by the perhaps overly simplistic solutions of Maximus and Sophronius. What happens if the Muslims do not go away? Does this mean that God has abandoned the Christians?

In the light of these new questions we find beginning around 690 a new type of response to the Muslims and their continued presence: a widespread apocalyptic movement that attempted to understand Muslim success in terms of the impending day of universal judgment.<sup>5</sup> Among the works bearing witness to this movement we can number the apocalypses of Pseudo-Athanasius, John the Less, Pseudo-Methodius, Edras, the *Syriac Chronicle of John of Phenek*, and the *Armenian Chronicle of Sebeos*.

*The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, a text written in Syriac by an Orthodox author probably between the years 685 and 692,<sup>6</sup> declares that God granted the Muslims power over the Christians for the sake of the latter’s punishment and purification, until “few from many will be left over who are Christians.” God did this, not because he loved the Muslims, but because the Christians were sinful. As a result of this punishment the Christians will be “tried and the believers be separated from the unbelievers . . . because that time [will] indeed [be] a testing furnace.” But then a king of the Greeks will suddenly appear and wrathfully subject the Muslims to servitude, then peace will reign in the land, until at last the Gates of the North are shattered and the barbarian nations descend upon the civilized world for one apocalyptic week. With angelic help the king of the Greeks will destroy those nations, allow his diadem to ascend to heaven, and then give up his spirit. Following this the Son of Perdition will be manifested, but quickly delivered into hellfire, while the saints enter into the kingdom of heaven, 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 Pseudo-Methodius* we find an incorporation and expansion of earlier responses to Islam: the invasions are still seen as punishment for Christian sins, but this punishment is now interpreted within an apocalyptic framework. Such an interpretation explains well the continued presence of the Muslims and God’s reasons for granting them military success, though unfortunately it does little to answer Muslim theological criticisms of Christianity. Within another fifty years, around the middle of the eighth century, this is a need which would come to weigh heavy upon the consciences of the leaders of the Christian churches subject to Islamic rule, leaders who found themselves confronted not only with Muslim criticisms, but also with an increasing number of Christian conversions to Islam.

### Muslim Criticisms of Christianity

“There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God.” In this sentence beats the heart of Islam: pure monotheism accompanied by a deep trust in the messengers of this monotheism, especially the last of its messengers, Muhammad. It is this sentence which, when recited before witnesses and with intention, makes a person a Muslim. “There is no god but God”: from this it follows that anything or anyone who sets himself up as a peer of God sins most grievously. Indeed, the one unforgivable sin in Islam is *shirk* (association), the associating of anything whatsoever with the supreme oneness of God. Under this ban falls not only primitive and sophisticated forms of idolatry, but also belief in a Trinity of persons in the Godhead and in the Incarnation of one of those persons. As the Koran says, “He is God, One, God, the everlasting refuge, who has not begotten, and has not been begotten, and equal to Him is not any one.”

The Koran teaches that the unity of God is the message delivered by all of the prophets, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. Unfortunately, after its delivery each of the messages was corrupted by the community to whom it was delivered. As one Muslim theologian, Abd al-Jabbar, explained:

The Messiah came to revive the Torah and put it into practise, saying: “I have come to act according to the Torah and the orders of the prophets before me; I have come not to abolish, but to complete. It

is easier in the eyes of God for heaven to fall upon the earth than to abolish anything from the Law of Moses. If any man therefore sets aside anything of this, he will be called small in the kingdom of heaven” (cf. Mt 5:17-19 and Lk 16:17). Thus did [Christ] and his disciples act until he passed away from this world. . . . But then [the Christians] began to introduce changes and alterations and new practices into religion; they sought worldly power and tried to gain the hearts of men by serving their desires, and wished to get the better of the Jews and take their revenge upon them, even if this meant abandoning the true religion.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, in the original Gospel mention had not even been made of the cross or of Christ’s crucifixion: this also the Christians had added.<sup>8</sup> This cycle of revelation and corruption continued until the time came when God chose to bring forth his last prophet, Muhammad. His would be a community which would never go astray, the last community before the eschaton. As last in the prophetic line, it was only natural that Muhammad like the other messengers be prophesied in the earlier Scriptures, not only in the Old Testament but also the New. On this point, the perfidy of Christians was especially manifest, for they had excised those portions of the Gospels where Christ himself had predicted the coming of the prophet Muhammad. One Caliph said, “There were many testimonies but the Books have been corrupted, and you have removed them.”<sup>9</sup>

We can conveniently sum up Islamic criticisms of Christianity under two rubrics: (1) the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation, and (2) the corrupted nature of the message taught by Christians. Though these were not the sole objections to Christian teaching, they were certainly the most important, striking as they do at the very heart of the Christian faith.

### Christian Responses to Muslim Criticisms

Among the earliest responses to the Muslims we find very little knowledge on the part of the Christians as to the religious message of Islam or as to the criticisms which the Muslims were making of Christianity. It was not until the Christians realized that Islam was going to be around for the duration that they began to respond to its theological criticisms and to treat it as a rival religion competing for the allegiance of the popular base of the Christian Church. This entailed the defense of Christianity against the criticisms of

the Muslims—and not only a defense, but also an offensive polemical campaign. Towards the middle of the eighth century we find the beginnings of a detailed apologetic and polemic response to Islam. Our earliest Orthodox Christian responses to Islam are found in a number of works by St. John of Damascus (d. c. 750) and his disciple Theodore Abu Qurrah (d. c. 820).

There are many arguments in the works of John of Damascus and Abu Qurrah that defend the traditional Christian teachings on the doctrine of the Trinity. The Damascene—after asserting that the Muslims, by calling the Christians “associators” (insofar as they associate a Son of God), set themselves up as “cutters” (insofar as they are cutting off parts of God)—enjoins the Christians to ask the Muslims what Christ is called in the Koran. The Muslims must answer that the Koran calls him the “Spirit and Word of God,” as indeed it does. The Christians are then urged to argue that this Word must be either created or uncreated. If it is created, then the God who created it lacked a Spirit and a Word, which is absurd, for how then could he have created it. If it is uncreated, then the Christians are shown to be correct in teaching that God has a coeternal Son. With the same end in view, the following dialogue is found in the works of Abu Qurrah:

*Arab:* Tell me, is Christ your God?

*Christian:* Yes.

*Arab:* Do you have another God besides Him?

*Christian:* No.

*Arab:* Are then the Father and the Spirit utterly worthless to you?

*Christian:* Hear me! Your scripture in actual fact stands here, having come down from heaven, as you claim. I ask you, do you have any other scripture besides this?

*Arab:* And I answer that I have no other.

*Christian:* Do you therefore disown all other scripture?

*Arab:* Yes.

*Christian:* What? If another book were present, having the same scripture, would you disown that scripture?

*Arab:* It is not a different scripture, but the same, even if it exists in different books.

*Christian:* Accordingly, I also say that the Father and the Spirit are not different things besides the Son, even if in a different hypostasis He is found.

Not a terribly sophisticated argument! Nonetheless, one can well imagine that Abu Qurrah, as bishop of Harran, would have found this and similar apologies helpful for fortifying his congregation against Muslim criticisms, especially since they were short and easily remembered.

To the Muslim claim that Christians had corrupted their revelation, in particular that they removed those portions of the Gospel in which Christ prophesied the coming of a final prophet named “Muhammad,” Abu Qurrah responded with an analogy:

If someone comes before a judge and claims to be owed a loan, either having a written record which he alone possesses, or claiming to have lost such a written record, what does the judge decide that such a man ought to receive?

The Muslim had to respond that such a man would receive nothing because he had no independent evidence to support his claim. To which the Christian responded that the Muslims accordingly had nothing from the Gospel, insofar as they had no evidence other than the testimony of Muhammad himself that Christians had corrupted their revelation. More than this, argued Abu Qurrah, there were other proofs that Muhammad was not and could not be the prophet of God. Not only was the theology he taught the “theology of a madman,” teaching an unworthy conception of God; but also Muhammad’s prophetic states were in Abu Qurrah’s eyes too like demonic possession to be considered divine:

And so that no one might accuse us of falsely accusing him of being possessed, let him read the story found among them called *The Forgiveness of Saissa*. For she was his wife, and upon her being suspected of adultery, he banished her to the house of her parents, and after a few days, fellowshipping with them [the demons], he fell to the ground in a demonic trance; and writhing, so that those present said that a deep prophecy was being brought down to him; and after a short while, standing up, he was asked what the vision was. And he said that the forgiveness of Saissa had come down to him, and on the grounds that he had been assured of her purity by the angel, he received her back again.

We find then in the works of these two authors not only apologetic defenses of Christian teachings, but also preemptive strikes against the prophetic authority and moral uprightness of Muhammad. Though perhaps insufficient to bring about the conversion of Muslims, for purposes of internal consumption they were more than enough to convince the Christians of the rightness of their cause.

### Conclusions

Try as they might, through polemical and apologetic arguments, the theologians and bishops were unable to stem the tide of conversion by Christians to Islam. Indeed, after 750 the “Christian community in Damascus appears as a ghetto which seems to have lost its upper stratum.”<sup>10</sup> Archaeological evidence suggests that the Christians of Syro-Palestine were using only one-half the number of churches in 750 that they had used in 600.<sup>11</sup> An anonymous late eighth-century Syriac chronicle records this state of affairs:

The gates were opened to them to [enter] Islam. The wanton and the dissolute slipped towards the pit and the abyss of perdition, and lost their souls

as well as their bodies—all, that is, that we possess . . . Without blows or tortures they slipped toward apostasy in great precipitancy; they formed groups of ten or twenty or thirty or a hundred or two hundred or three hundred without any sort of compulsion . . . going down to Harran and becoming Moslems in the presence of [government] officials. A great crowd did so . . . from the districts of Edessa and of Harran and of Tella and of Resaina . . .

Some converted to Islam because they thought it to be the true religion; others converted because by so doing they would be able to escape certain taxes and obtain government jobs no longer open to non-Muslims. Though the decimation wrought by conversion radically altered the face of the churches subject to Islamic rule, nonetheless, the Christians maintained their sense of communal identity. Eventually they adopted Arabic as their liturgical and theological language and were able to develop within this new context their own distinctive Arab Christian identity. This identity contributed greatly to the brilliant intellectual climate of medieval Baghdad and was in the main responsible for the transmission of Greek thought to the Arabs and thence to the Latins in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Even today the Arab Christians of the Middle East, direct descendants of those whom we have considered here, give witness to the vitality and surprising

tenacity of Christianity, even when subject to the rule of an alien faith. □

### NOTES

1. Monothelism: An attempted theological compromise in the controversy over whether Christ had two natures: one human and one divine. Monothelism asserted that Christ had two natures but one will (hence the term “mono-thelite”). This position was enforced for a time by imperial sanction but ultimately failed, having only exacerbated tension and being declared heretical at the sixth Ecumenical Council.
2. Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove* (1939; Grand Rapids, 1980), 91.
3. Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971; New York, 1989), 170.
4. Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (London, 1986).
5. For an overview of this movement and the various literary sources, see F.J. Martinez, ed. and tr., “Eastern Christian Apocalyptic in the Early Muslim Period: Pseudo-Methodius and Pseudo-Athanasius,” 2 vols., Dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1985.
6. For the date and religious affiliation of the author, see S. Brock, “Syriac Sources for Seventh-Century History,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* (1976) 2: 34. Insofar as the Syriac version is still unpublished, I quote from the translation of P. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, ed. Dorothy deF. Abrahamse (Berkeley, 1985).
7. S.M. Stern, tr., “Abd al-Jabbar’s Account of How Christ’s Religion was Falsified by the Adoption of Roman Customs,” *Journal of Theological Studies* (1968) 19: 133.
8. *Ibid.*, 135.
9. A. Mingana, tr., *Timothy’s Apology for Christianity* (Cambridge, 1928), 35.
10. Ihor Sevchenko, “Constantinople Viewed from the Eastern Provinces in the Middle Byzantine Period,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* (1979–80) 3/4: 736.
11. Robert Schick, “The Fate of the Christians in Palestine during the Byzantine/Umayyad Transition, 600–750 A.D.,” Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1987, 369.

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