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 Muslim; those were pagan, some Jewish or Samaritan. When the Arabs, for example, reached the famous monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai, the Christian monks did not have to convert, even at times to participate in the battle. When converting to Islam, the monks 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. Though they never doubted their status as members of a subordinate community, they were able to continue in the faith of their fathers at least as long as the Arab conquerors remained in power. When they converted 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 swore and still strives to fulfill his promise by preserving the world religion. Although not desiring to treat this claim lightly, historians instinctively seek for more mundane factors.

Neither the Persians 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 the ten-year war. Among the goals of the Christians was the recovery from the Byzantine Empire, the Persians and the Turks cross upon which Christ had been crucified. The result of this war was demographic decline and extreme discomforts 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 Roman-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 anywhere in Syria and Palestine, which were instead "defended by a fragile network of alliances among the neighboring Arab tribes. 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 the strength 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. Their relationship was a constant source of friction, and it often flared into open civil strife. This is especially the case following Heraclius' 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. The non-Jewish 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 Sarjum, the grandfather of John of Damascus, to the besieging Muslims. The terms of the agreement made between Sarjum and the Muslims were that Islam would be the State religion, would leave the lands and property of the inhabitants of Damascus, with the exception of the town—the east Romans of Byzantium. This account concerning Sarjum, 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 Muslim ability 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 Christian piety. The Church in the aftermath of the conquests of the Muslims was further amplified by their habit of identifying—perhaps against their own better judgment—political success with religious success. On this one continent, the Jews and the Muslims that 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 theolog-
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 “sins of the godless Arabs ... had captured [her] and does not yield the pas-
sage, 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 conver-
sion” and “cure [their] performance of acts which are hateful of God.” Only thus will the blood-saving 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, who had been
to Palestine: “Let us 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 overturning 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 judg-
ment. 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, igno-
rant 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 con-
vinced of the temporary nature of this divine chastisement; they did not know—and how could they?—that the Mus-
ilim presence was not temporary, but would radically change the face of the ancient world. For the next genera-
tion 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 sim-
plistic 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. Among the works bearing witness to this movement we can number the apocalyptic visions of Pseudo-Athanasius, John the Less, Pseudo-Methodius, Edras, the Syriac Chronicle of John of Ephes, 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, 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 separated from the unbelievers ... because that time [will] indeed [be] a testing furnace.” But then a king of the Greeks will suddenly appear and wrath-
fully subject the Muslims to servitude, then peace will reign in the land, until at last the Gates of the North are shuttered 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 divine inspiration to lead him, and then give up his spirit. Following this the Son of Perdition will be mani-
stified, 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.” In the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius we find an incor-
poration and expansion of earlier responses to Islam: the invasions are still seen as punishment for Christian sins, but this punishment has now been interpreted within an apoca-
lpycal 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 Chris-
tianity. Within another fifty years, around the middle of the eighth century, this is a need which would come to weigh heavily on the leaders of the Christian churches subject to Islamic rule, leaders who found them-

selves 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 messen-
ger of God." In this sentence beats the heart of Islam: pure monotheism accompanied by a deep trust in the messen-
gers of this monotheism, especially the last of its messen-
gers, Muhammad. It is this sentence which, when recited before the mosques and with inritance 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 a god is 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 begun, and has not been begun, 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 practice, 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" (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. 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. 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 com-
munity before the eschaton. As last in the prophetic line, it was only natural that Muhammad like the other messen-
gers be prophesied in the earlier Scriptures, not only in the Old Testament but also in the New. On this point, the perfec-
tion 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. There were prophesies in the New Testament which the Christians excised, but the Books of the New Testament have not been corrupted, and you have removed them."

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 eight century we find the beginning 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. 750) and his disciple Theodore Abu Qurrah (d. 808).

There are many arguments in the works of John of Damascus and Abu Qurrah that defend the traditional Christian teaching on the divinity 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 divided)—emphatically enjoins the Christians to ask what the Muslims what Christ is called in the Koran. The Muslims must answer that the Koran calls him the “Spirit and Word of God,” and 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 to return to the 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 scriptures?
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 apologetics 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 scriptures, 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, which a 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 be 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 may accuse us of falsely accusing him of being possessed, let him read the story found among them called The Forgiveness of Saisa. 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, fellowship with them [the demon], he fell to the ground in a demonic trance; and writing, 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 Saisa 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 pre-emptive 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.” Archaeological evidence suggests that the Christians of Syria-Palestine were using only one-half the number of churches in 750 that they had used in 600. An anonymous late-eighth-century Syriac chronicler records this state of affairs:

The gates were opened to them to [enter] Islam. The wazirs and the disdained slipped towards the pit and the abyss of perdiction, 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 precipitance; 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 beginning Moslems in the presence of (government) officials. A great crowd did so . . . from the districts of Edessa and of Harran and of Tell and of Rasina . . .

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 conception of an 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 hence to the Latin 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. Monothelitism: An attempted theological compromise in the controversy over whether Christ had two natures: one human and one divine. Monothelitism asserted that Christ had two natures but one will (hence the term “mono-theletos”). This position was endorsed for a time by imperial sanction but ultimately failed, having only exacerbat ed tension and being declared heretical at the sixth Ecumenical Council.


8. Ibid., 135.

9. A. Mingana, tr., Timothy’s Apology for Christianity (Cambridge, 1928), 35.


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