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Sidney H. Griffith: The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque

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INTRODUCTION

THE STORY OF THE CHRISTIANS who are at home in the world of Islam has seldom been told in terms that highlight how their intellectual culture and even their denominational identities came to be expressed in the Arabic idiom of the Islamic culture of which they were for centuries an integral part. In the heyday of the classical world of Arabo-Islamic civilization in the Middle East, from the middle of the eighth century to the middle of the thirteenth century, Arabic-speaking Christians not only made major contributions to Islamic culture, but they also wrote philosophical and theological texts of their own in Arabic; they translated much of their several ecclesiastical traditions from Greek, Syriac, and Coptic into Arabic; and they produced scholars, scientists, and churchmen who in their own day gained enviable reputations in the Arab world. This book tells their story in broad outline, with copious bibliographical annotations for those who would like to learn more about this exciting and little-known chapter in the history of Christianity.¹

A number of first-rate studies of Christians in the Middle East have been published in recent years, but they have not been so much concerned with the history of the development and expression of Christian culture and learning in Arabic. Rather, their concern has been, for the most part, to set forth the internal history and fortunes of the several “Oriental” churches, the perilous demographic state of these communities since the fourteenth century, and to provide the historical statistics that chart their decline.² There have also been recent studies of the multiple hardships endured by Jews, Christians, and other “People of the Book” in their experience of life in the special status stipulated for them in Islamic law, a status that has recently been designated by the neologism, *Dhimmitude*, a term that echoes the Arabic word designating their legal standing.³ But another dimension

¹ Kenneth Cragg’s well received study of Arab Christian history largely ignores the intellectual and cultural accomplishments of the several Arabic-speaking churches, concentrating more on what he perceived to be their failure, successfully to meet the religious challenge of Islam. See Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (London: Mowbray, 1992). See also Sidney H. Griffith, “Kenneth Cragg on Christians and the Call to Islam,” *Religious Studies Review* 20 (1994): 29–35.

² See, e.g., Jean-Pierre Valognes, *Vie et mort des chrétiens d’Orient: Des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Fayard, 1994); Andrea Pacini, *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: The Challenge of the Future* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). There are also numerous, more popular works, such as Betty Jane Bailey and J. Martin Bailey, *Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003).

³ The several works of Giselle Littmann, writing under the pen name Bat Ye’or, have helped to popularize the neologism, *Dhimmitude*. See, e.g., Bat Ye’or, *The Decline of Eastern Chris-*

to the life of the Christians in the world of Islam also deserves attention and has often been neglected by westerners. It is the story of the religious, cultural, and intellectual achievements of the Arabophone Christians.

Many well-informed westerners are still completely unaware of the fact that there is a large archive of texts in Arabic composed by Christians from as early as the eighth century of the Christian era and continuing right up to today. Arabic is often thought to be simply the language of the Muslims.⁴ And hand in hand with the unawareness of Christian Arabic there has gone the concomitant unawareness of the considerable cultural and intellectual achievements of the Christians who have for more than a millennium been an integral part of the societies of the Arabic-speaking Muslims in the Middle East. It is almost as if in the western imagination the religious discourse and the intellectual concerns of Middle Eastern Christians were frozen in time, in the form they had at the time when the Islamic hegemony came over them in the seventh century. This unawareness of the continuing vitality of Christian life and culture in the world of Islam after the Islamic conquest is no doubt due in large part to the slow pace of the academic study of Christian Arabic in the West. It did not really become a going concern until the twentieth century,⁵ and then often only by riding on the coattails of other academic disciplines. The situation is almost a complete contrast with that of the study of Judeo-Arabic⁶ and the cultural and intellectual achievements of the Jews of Islam during the centuries when there were large Jewish populations in the Islamic world, not only in the East but also in North Africa and al-Andalus.⁷

By contrast with the case of the Arabic-speaking Christians, many of the seminal Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages who lived among the Muslims and wrote in Arabic are now well known to many educated westerners.

tianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude; Seventh–Twentieth Century (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996); *Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002). More on these works below.

⁴ See Mark N. Swanson, “Arabic as a Christian Language?” available at http://www.luthersem.edu/faculty/fac_home.asp?contact_id=mswanson. At the same Web site see also the author’s companion piece, “Early Christian-Muslim Theological Conversation among Arabic-Speaking Intellectuals.”

⁵ The standard reference book is still Georg Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, 5 vols. (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1944–53).

⁶ See Joshua Blau, *The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judaeo-Arabic* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1999).

⁷ See Norman Stillman, comp., *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979); Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994). On the three traditions intertwined in the Middle Ages, see Roger Arnaldez, *À la croisée des trois monothéismes: Une communauté de pensée au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993), esp. 153–275.

Their works and their languages have been studied in western universities for generations. Many readers, on the one hand, will probably recognize such names as: Sa'adyah ben Yosef Ga'on (882–942), Yehudah Ha-Levi (ca. 1075–1141), Avraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164), or Moses Maimonides (1135–1204). Who, on the other hand, even among Christian medievalists, has heard of Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (808–873), Theodore Abū Qurrah (ca. 755–ca. 830), 'Ammār al-Baṣrī (fl. ca. 850), Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī (893–974), Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286), or al-Mu'taman ibn al-'Assāl (fl. 1230–1260)? Strangely, there is one Arab Christian scholar of early 'Abbasid times whose name readers of the works of the Irish poet William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) might recognize. He was the Syrian “Melkite” Quṣṭā ibn Lūqā al-Ba'albakī (d. 912); Yeats used his name, under the form Kusta Ben Luka, to designate a mysterious interlocutor in his esoteric work, *A Vision*.⁸ But no one seems to know how Yeats came upon the name of this distinguished Arab Christian scholar, or indeed if he even knew much about his background.⁹

In the West, Christendom is often thought of as coterminous with the lands and cultures of the Latin Middle Ages, and many people nowadays are also unaware of the names of even the neighboring medieval Byzantine Christian writers and thinkers whose language was Greek or Slavonic, let alone the names of any Arabic or Syriac writers among the Christians who lived in the world of Islam. Latin Christians in particular have historically been inclined to think of the Christians of the Orient as schismatic or even heretical and so as people who left the church centuries ago. Now is the time to take steps to remedy this situation, first of all because the intellectual heritage of the eastern Christians belongs to the whole church and we are the poorer without any knowledge of it.¹⁰ But it is also the case that in the multicultural world of the twenty-first century, when Muslim/Christian relations are becoming daily more important worldwide, the experience of the Christians of the Orient who have lived with Muslims for centuries, and who have immigrated to the West together with the Muslims, is immediately relevant for those of us in the West who would be in dialogue with Muslims today and who would welcome some deeper knowledge of

⁸ William Butler Yeats, *A Vision* (London: Macmillan, 1937). See Suheil B. Bushrui, “Yeats' Arabic Interests,” in *In Excited Reverie: A Centenary Tribute to William Butler Yeats, 1865–1939*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares and K. G. W. Cross (London: Macmillan, 1965).

⁹ In another place Yeats spoke of “Kusta ben Luka himself once so learned and so eloquent could now, lacking me but twitter like a swallow.” Quoted from George Mills Harper, *The Making of Yeats's A Vision: A Study of the Automatic Script*, 2 vols. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 2: 408.

¹⁰ Typically of the western, Latin Christian attitude, even so sympathetic a figure as Louis Massignon (1883–1962) spoke of Islam, seemingly with approval, as the “vainqueur des chrétientés schismatiques d'Orient, qu'il encapsula dans sa gangue, comme ‘des insectes dans l'ambre.’” Louis Massignon, *Les trois prières d'Abraham* (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 112.

the history of our shared religious and intellectual heritage.¹¹ The time is long overdue for the Christians of the West to extend their modern ecumenical concerns to their coreligionists of the Islamic world.

The purpose of this book is to provide a succinct overview of the cultural and intellectual achievements, including the theological posture vis-à-vis Islam, of the Christians who spoke and wrote in Syriac and in Arabic and who lived in the world of Islam from the time of the prophet Muḥammad (ca. 570–632) up to the time of the Crusades at the end of the eleventh century and even beyond that time to the era of the very destructive Mongol invasions of the Middle East in the mid-thirteenth century. The title of the work, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, is meant to evoke both the overshadowing effects, as well as the protective shade, afforded by the shadow cast by the mosque over all other institutions in the Islamic world. It is seldom recognized that the establishment of Islamic, Arabic-speaking culture in the caliphate by the end of the ninth century, albeit that it eventually led to the declension of the local Christian communities and finally brought them to their modern demographic insignificance in the Middle East, nevertheless also provided the circumstances for two important developments in Christian life in early Islamic times. It fostered the articulation of a new cultural expression of Christian doctrine, this time in Arabic, and it provided the cultural framework within which the several Christian denominations of the Orient ultimately came to define their mature ecclesial identities. These unsung developments hold within them the seeds of a hope that once again, within a sphere of a religious freedom now unfortunately widely unavailable in Islamic countries, a Christian voice can once again be heard where Islam holds sway, in the very idiom of the dominant Islamic religious discourse. It could pave the way for the Christians of the world of Islam to lead their coreligionists in the rest of the world into a renewed Muslim/Christian dialogue and to hasten the general recognition of the fact that there is indeed an “Islam-Christian” heritage on which both Muslims and Christians can draw in their efforts to promote a peaceful and mutually respectful *convivencia* in the future.

Almost exactly one century ago, first at Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey, and then at seminaries in Chicago, Illinois, and Louisville, Kentucky, during the academic year 1902–3, William Ambrose

¹¹ This shared intellectual heritage is discussed in a comprehensive but summary way in the previously mentioned work of Roger Arnaldez, *À la croisée de trois monothéismes*. See also Richard W. Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Stephen O’Shea, *Sea of Faith: Islam and Christianity in the Medieval Mediterranean World* (New York: Walker, 2006).

Shedd of the American Presbyterian Church delivered a series of six lectures on the general theme of Islam and the Oriental churches.¹² His topics closely parallel those of the following chapters of the present book, with the difference that the scholarship of the intervening century has considerably enhanced our knowledge of the history and culture of the Christians who have lived with Muslims. And there is another important difference. Shedd's final chapter concerns the missionary heritage of the indigenous churches of the Islamic world, and he speaks of the campaign of the Christians of the West to conquer Islam. Now, a century later, while western Christians are still no less devoted to proclaiming the Good News, there is also a recognition of the right to religious freedom for all and the imperative for interreligious dialogue and comparative theology, important steps toward peace in the twenty-first century. My own final chapter searches for the theological, historical, and cultural postures Christians might now reasonably assume in their continuing encounter with Muslims, in the light of the lessons learned from the thought and experience of the Arabic-speaking Oriental churches in the early centuries of Islam. From this perspective one might think that modern advances in the world of Islamic scholarship and the current Christian readiness to dialogue with members of other religious communities, the times would offer a new opportunity for a measure of Christian/Muslim rapprochement, and for a renewal of mutual respect, rather than for continued confrontation and mutual recrimination. It is true that the lessons of history on this point do not offer grounds for heightened expectations, but the alternative to not making the effort to make things better is already well known and mutually destructive.

¹² W. A. Shedd, *Islam and the Oriental Churches: Their Historical Relations* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1904; repr., Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004).