The Untold Story of Two Faiths: Christianity and the Origins of Islam

by

Michael Scott Bos

Date: 9 April 2018

Approved:

Dr. J. Warren Smith, Supervisor

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Dr. J. Warren Smith, D.Min. Director

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in the Divinity School of Duke University

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Abstract

In the history of Christian-Muslim relations, the rise of Islam and its encounter with Christianity is often characterized as the competition between two missionary religions, but this is a narrative formed by Western Christianity’s engagement with Islam long after Islam’s formation. It represents an anachronistic understanding of how Christians and Muslims viewed and related to one another in the formational period of Islam. In particular, it neglects the history of Syriac Christians who lived amidst Muslims in the first centuries of Islam’s existence, and therefore a significant part of the earliest engagement between Muslims and Christians has effectively been a lost history. When works on Islam recognize the presence of Syriac Christians (Eastern, non-Chalcedonian Christians), it is generally confined to two areas: their work in translating philosophical and scientific texts into Arabic during the golden age of Islam, and their status as ahl adhimmah (protected people). There remains a gap in our understanding of the relationship they had with one another and how this may have shaped each religion’s self-understanding as they navigated a new form of religious pluralism. This study examines the Church of the East and its relation to Islam in the 7th to 9th centuries CE. This will help flesh out our understanding of Christianity’s early relationship to Islam through the lens of the Church of the East with the hope that it may help inform relational possibilities between followers of these religions today.
Dedication

To my wife, Tena, who has been my number one supporter as well as my editor, reading every word I wrote through the program.
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Introduction

One Story, Two Versions

From the inception of Islam, Muslims and Christians have recognized their connection to one another, and sometimes this is expressed in legends and stories that seek to bolster the relationship they share. Within the Islamic tradition, there is the well-known story of the Christian monk, Bahira (known as Sergius in Latin). The story begins when Muhammad was twelve years old and joined his uncle, Abu Talib, on a business trip to Busra, Syria. Bahira lived in a monastery in Busra that was on the main caravan route. Because of this, he saw many caravans pass by him on the way to trade their goods. As Muhammad’s caravan approached the city, Bahira noticed there was something special about it, so he sent word to them that he wished to extend his hospitality and have them join him for a meal. They gladly accepted and set out for the monastery, leaving Muhammad behind to watch the camels. When they arrived, Bahira immediately noticed that someone was missing, and he insisted that the invitation was for all of them. Thus, they sent for Muhammad to join them. When Bahira saw Muhammad, he immediately could see in his face that he bore the sign that marked him as becoming a great prophet. Through this story, a Christian features prominently in confirming the prophethood of
Muhammad. If one travels to Busra today, it is possible to visit the (alleged) monastery of Bahira.¹

There is also a Syriac Christian version of this story that is unknown to many.² It chronicles the same encounter between Muhammad and Bahira, but in this version Muhammad stays with Bahira so he can be catechized in the Christian faith. As part of this, Bahira composes a book of Christian teachings for Muhammad, and this book is called the Quran. Unfortunately, as the tale goes, “Muhammad's later followers, and especially the Jews among them, distorted the original Qur’n into the form in which the Muslims now have it.”³ This version of the story speaks to Syriac Christianity’s perceived influence on Islam.⁴

As we will explore in this thesis, there is interesting research emerging on the relationship between Syriac Christianity and the origins of Islam. The popular author John Philip Jenkins states that the design of mosques, ritual observances such as

¹ http://www.islamiclandmarks.com/syria/monastery-of-bahira-the-monk
³ Ibid., 38-39.
⁴ Another connection between Syriac Christianity and Islam was their disposition toward images. We often associate the Eastern Church with beautiful images and iconography, which seems directly counter to the lack of images in Islam. East Syriac Christianity, on the other hand, had a reputation of being “staunchly anti-images.” Images did find their way into their churches until the Middle Ages. See Heleen Murre-Van Den Berg, “Syriac Christianity,” in The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity, eds. Ken Parry, David J. Melling, Dimitri Brady, Sidney H. Griffith, and John F. Healey (Blackwell, 2000), 265. Jenkins believes that East Syriac Christians would find that often their icons were safer under Arab rule than under the Byzantine Christians. See John Philip Jenkins, The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died (HarperCollins: 2008), 107.
prostration during prayer and fasting, and even some of the content of the Quran, are all derived from Eastern Christian churches. Unfortunately, Jenkins does not cite sources for drawing such a conclusion. Care needs to be taken in how we construe this relationship, but it is a relationship that needs to be explored. As we will see in this thesis, by developing a better understanding of East Syriac Christianity, one will also have a better understanding of the origins of Islam.

**Misinformation about Islam and Present-day Efforts**

There is much work to be done for people to accept this may be possible. Daily we read about Islam through the machinations of ISIS, Boko Haram, the Taliban, or Al Qaeda—just to name a few. We learn of the kidnapping of young girls, newly discovered mass graves, journalists taken hostage, and IEDs claiming soldiers’ lives. This has continued to raise concerns about Islam and its influence on the behavior of those who follow it. These concerns are further incited by anti-Muslim sites such as Jihad Watch, Stop Islamization of America, and Politically Incorrect. This has resulted in increased

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5 Jenkins, Ibid., 37. We will look at these influences in more detail in chapters 2 and 3.
6 Jenkins writes, “Only by understanding the lost Eastern Christianities can we understand where Islam comes from, and how very close it is to Christianity.” Ibid., 38.
negative attitudes and behaviors toward Muslims. The Brookings Institution published a study on American attitudes toward Muslims. It cites an ABC News poll immediately after 9/11 in which “Americans had a more favorable view of Islam than unfavorable, 47 percent to 39 percent.” A decade later, in 2011, a new poll showed “that 61 percent of Americans expressed unfavorable views of Islam, while only 33 percent expressed favorable views.”

In 2015 the FBI saw a 67% increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes from the previous year. In a 2016 poll, 59% of Americans believe there is “a lot” of discrimination against Muslims and 76% believe it is increasing. What is more startling is that the religious group with the most negative attitude toward Muslims is white evangelical Protestants. Unfortunately, only 13% of the American population thinks it knows Islam “well” or “very well,” and 61% do not or are unsure if they want to learn more about Islam.


10 Ibid.


12 “Poll Results: Islam,” YouGov US (March 6-9, 2015) https://today.yougov.com/news/2015/03/09/poll-results-islam/ (accessed January 12, 2018). There is a more recent survey, which began in 2014, that indicates that people are feeling more positive toward Muslims. From 2014 to 2016, “more Americans express ‘warmer’ feelings toward Muslims on a thermometer scale than they have in the past, while there has been a decline
Today, interfaith proponents and scholars of Islam have focused on correcting the tremendous amount of misinformation about Islam, and it is being done at multiple levels. This encompasses things as far ranging as Search for Common Ground’s alternative vocabulary for journalists on commonly misunderstood Islamic terms, i.e., *sharia, Allah, fatwa and jihadist*,13 Georgetown University’s Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding and its work in education and engagement; or the many individuals, such as Reza Aslan, who provide a more generous and progressive understanding of Islam.14 These types of initiatives help to strip away the misinformation so that there can be a fairer understanding of Islam.

**From Misinformation to Missing Information**

At one level, this thesis shares the same goal as other efforts in correcting the misinformation about Islam and combating the resulting Islamophobia, but as we witness daily in the media, this is not an easy task. In part this is because those who ascribe in the share who say Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence among its followers.” See “U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream: Findings from Pew Research Center’s 2017 survey of U.S. Muslims,” Pew Research Center (July 26, 2017), [http://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/findings-from-pew-research-centers-2017-survey-of-us-muslims/](http://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/findings-from-pew-research-centers-2017-survey-of-us-muslims/) (accessed January 12, 2018).


14 Reza Aslan, *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*, Updated edition (New York: Random House, 2011). These are only a few representative examples to show the types of work being done to correct the misinformation about Islam.
malevolent motives to Muslims often do so from a presumed understanding of Islam’s heritage: it is a religion of the sword that from the beginning has sought to extinguish all other forms of religious devotion. This is a common thread in the anti-Muslim sites mentioned earlier. For them, Islam cannot become what it has never been: a religion with an irenic disposition toward others. Therefore, there are many who work to recast the origins and evolution of Islam to demonstrate that it bears within its religious DNA the ability to have more generous views and positive relationships with non-Muslims than anti-Muslim positions acknowledge. Though this thesis shares this same goal, it will approach this from another standpoint. In particular, it will focus on the Church of the East, better known by most of us as Nestorians. This means that rather than focusing on misinformation, this thesis will focus on the missing information about the relation between Christianity and Islam through the lens of the Church of the East during Islam’s formative years in the 7th through 9th centuries CE.

The Church of the East is part of the Syriac Christian tradition, which represents a breadth of denominations and theological positions, such as the Armenian Church, Coptic Church, and the Oriental Orthodox Churches in Ethiopia and India. These other branches of Christianity represent important entry points into Christianity’s relationship to Islam and the variety of ways and places this relationship evolved. However, this thesis will focus on the Church of the East and its presence in Persia, though it extended far beyond this, for two reasons. First, the Church of the East held a special place within the Islamic empire in the first two hundred years of Islam’s existence. There was a period in which
the head of the Church of the East served as the representative of all of Christianity to
Islamic authorities. By focusing on the Church of the East, one can better understand the
depth of the relationships Muslims had with Christians during this period. Second, the
Church of the East has been cast as “Nestorian,” which implies it is a heretical branch of
Christianity with which Western Christianity need not be concerned. However, one of the
most influential theologians connected with the Church of the East was at times
celebrated by the Eastern and Western church. And even though councils proclaimed
individuals and theological positions as heretical, it did not mean that the Church of the
East was necessarily received as such, which will be explored in chapter 1. What we will
learn is that not only was the Church of the East connected to Islam, it continued to be
connected to Western Christianity. This is not to say they were always in “communion”
with one another, but there were periods of rapprochement that demonstrate their
continued relationship. Therefore, speaking as a Christian, the story of the Church of the
East is an entry point into the larger world of Eastern Christianity in which we learn that
their story is our story and their heritage is our heritage. With the pressing issues of
Muslim-Christian relations before us, we will be hindered if we do not claim this history
and learn from it to help find a way forward.

Unfortunately, because many Syriac Christians belong to the non-Chalcedonian
churches, who were anathematized at the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE and again at the
Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, Western churches have paid little attention to them in
the subsequent history of the Church and have not fully claimed them as part of our
history. What we in the West have overlooked is that these anathematized communities continued to grow numerically and geographically throughout Asia. As we will see in this thesis, some conclude that up until 1000 CE, non-Chalcedon Christianities rivaled the Western Church in numbers and influence in the Christian world.¹⁵

There is also a linguistic reason that little attention has been given to Syriac Christianity. Most Western church historians work with Greek and Latin but do not know Syriac. Likewise, scholars of Islam can work with Arabic and Persian but not with Syriac. This has left a linguistic gap that has kept the scholarly community distanced from the primary sources from that period, some of which are now being translated.¹⁶

Present-day Understandings: A Textual and Linguistic Relationship

Because of theological biases and the linguistic gap, there is a resulting information gap in our understanding of the intimate relationship between Christianity and Islam in Islam’s formative years (see timeline at end of this chapter). To give one a sense of the traditional assumptions about the relationship between Christians and Muslims, it is helpful to examine Hugh Goddard’s treatment of this topic in his seminal work, A History


of Christian-Muslim Relations. While he makes clear that early Christian engagement with Islam was with non-Chalcedonian Christians, he addresses this from the roles they had rather than the relationships they developed. Therefore the ways they may have engaged and influenced one another is largely absent. When he does speak of influences, he references two things. First, he notes the influence Syriac Christians had by expanding Islam’s intellectual framework through the philosophical and scientific works Christians translated into Arabic for Muslims. These translation efforts are associated with the establishment of the bayt al-hikmah (House of Wisdom) in Baghdad by Caliph Harun al-Rashid in the 9th century CE. It served as the intellectual center of Islam, and through it Muslims procured philosophical and scientific texts from the known world, such as Aristotle, Plato, Euclid and Ptolemy. These were translated into Arabic and then were assimilated and disseminated in the Islamic empire. This was part of the Arabicization of the empire, and several Syriac Christians were prominent translators for the Muslims. Second, Goddard notes, “What is less well known, however, is that influence also went the other way, and this can be seen in, for example, the increasing use of the Arabic language by Christians in the Islamic world in this period, and also in the translation of

\[\text{\textsuperscript{17}}\text{ Hugh Goddard, } A \text{ History of Christian-Muslim Relations} \text{ (New Amsterdam Books: 2000), 55.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{18}}\text{ John Esposito, } Islam: \text{ The Straight Path} \text{ (5\textsuperscript{th} ed., Oxford University Press: 2016), 58-59.}\]
the Bible into Arabic.”19 As Arabic became the language of the empire, so too did it increase in use within Syriac Christianity.

In mentioning these two influences, Goddard depicts the relationship as a textual and linguistic one. Before delving into the missing information that will help expand our understanding of the relationship they had, it may be helpful to address some of the overarching mischaracterizations of the relationship between these two faiths in the 7th to 9th centuries CE, which will be explored in greater detail in this thesis. This will give one a sense of the larger framework into which the story of the Church of the East’s relationship to Islam will fit.

**Recharacterizing Christianity’s Relationship to Islam**

Often the undervaluing of Christianity’s relationship to Islam has to do with mistaken assumptions about the relative size of the religions in relation to each other. There is a plotline that assumes that with the growth of the Islamic empire, Christians were quickly expelled from Arabia, and because of Islam’s evangelistic zeal, Christianity was reduced to a minority presence within the rest of the Islamic empire.\(^{20}\) The resulting consequence was constrained contact between Christians and Muslims.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 55.

\(^{20}\) Goddard mentions the expelling of Christians from the Arabia Peninsula after Mohammad’s death, but he does mention the possibility of Christians remaining for an additional 200 years in Najran based on archeological evidence. Op. cit., 42.
This characterization is problematic on several fronts. First, it took time for Muslims to develop a strong religious identity. As Jenkins observes, “Muslims were slow to identify themselves as a distinct religion wholly separate from Jews and Christians. Matters were seen rather in ethnic terms, and early chronicles speak not of Muslims and Christians but of Arabs and Syrians.”\(^\text{21}\) This is in part because conflicts in this period represented regions more than religions and thus identification was with one’s region and/or ethnicity.

Related to this is the question of Islam’s desire to convert Christians. While later in history Islam developed more of an emphasis on conversion, in the first centuries of Islam “through most of their conquered territories, the new Muslim rulers had little interest in forcing conversions, and in the early stages did not even encourage them.”\(^\text{22}\) Ernst believes Islam’s emphasis on conversion did not develop until the modern colonial era as a response to the “preoccupation of Christians with missionary activity.” Ernst states that this emphasis on evangelism “has no equivalent in Islamic history before modern times.”\(^\text{23}\) When missionaries encountered Muslims in the colonial period, they projected their own evangelistic intent on Muslims, portraying them as having a desire to convert the world. Eventually, some Muslims responded by using the same language and

\(^{21}\) Jenkins, op. cit., 103-104.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 104. See appendix for timeline on key events in Islam.
\(^{23}\) Carl Ernst, Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World (The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 44.
Therefore, it would be inaccurate to characterize the early relationship between Christians and Muslims as a competition for converts. This is not to discount the fact that there were Christians who wanted to convert to Islam during this period, nor that there were periods in which Muslims emphasized conversion. Some of the theological works produced by Syriac Christian theologians were developed to prevent this. In addition, “Conversion was all the easier because, in these early centuries, Islam bore a much closer resemblance to Christianity than it would in later eras, making the transition less radical.”

There is also growing evidence that Christianity continued in Arabia for several hundreds years after the advent of Islam, and most are not aware that within the rest of the Islamic empire “perhaps 50 percent of the world's confessing Christians from the mid-seventh to the end of the eleventh centuries found themselves living under Muslim rule.” Even though Muslims governed these areas, often the Christian population outnumbered the Muslim population. Because of this, their relationship with one another was more than textual or linguistic. They lived in a period in which “Syriac Christians ate with Muslims, married Muslims, bequeathed estates to Muslim heirs, taught Muslim

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24 Ibid., 44.
27 Griffith, op. cit., 11.
children, and were soldiers in Muslim armies.” 28 Griffith concludes that “The recognition of this situation prepares us to see how a new opportunity for cultural and intellectual accomplishment presented itself, even for the Christians who lived under the rule of Islam during this period.” 29

With this in mind, Goddard’s mention of translation efforts and the use of Arabic points to a deeper level of engagement. With respect to the translation work by Syriac Christians, it was more than Christians being used by Muslims to advance the agenda of the empire. Syriac Christians had their own internal interest in philosophy as a source in their theological pursuits. 30 Because of this mutual interest in philosophy, “By the ninth century, Arabic-speaking Christian and Muslim philosophers in Baghdad were together commending the philosophical life as a workable model for interreligious convivencia in a city that by their time had a large and important Christian population.” 31

The influence of the Arabicization of Christianity also points to a depth of engagement not touched upon by Goddard. A shared language allowed them to address and engage one another’s theologies more directly, which at times resulted in a clash of conclusions about the topics being addressed. This is what is often highlighted, if it is mentioned at all. “But on another level it is also true that the dialogue between them,

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28 Penn, op. cit., 7.
29 Griffith, op. cit., 12.
31 Griffith, op. cit., 117.
which the public culture they shared made possible, also allowed them to discuss together such issues as the ontological status of the divine attributes, or the effects of the acts of the divine will on human freedom, in ways that mutually influenced the shape of their communities’ discourse on these and other topics on their shared discussion agenda.”

To state this in stronger terms, when the Christians began speaking Arabic, they were “bound over to a language that is bound over to Islam.” This impacted the way Syriac Christians framed their theology and the Islamic sources they used in doing so, which will be explored in chapter 2.

These aforementioned factors resulted in a much more charitable view of Islam by Syriac Christianity than their Western counterparts. They were also sympathetic to the emerging sacred tradition within Islam. Whereas the European Christian response to the rise of Islam resulted in the vilification of the Prophet Muhammad, even identifying him as the anti-Christ, Syriac Christians were often much more favorable.

This is because the lives of Christian leaders were inextricably entwined with their Muslim neighbors. Christians held prominent positions within Islamic governments. The upper echelon of Christian leaders “were often used as ambassadors, consulted for political advice, or even solicited for prayer.” Therefore, rather than Christians avoiding the centers of Islamic power, they often sought it out. This also stemmed from a sense of

[32] Ibid., 157.
[33] Griffith is citing Kenneth Cragg, Ibid., 157.
[34] Jenkins, op. cit., 111.
affinity with Islam that led Christian leaders to seek physical proximity to Muslim leaders and theologians.

The catholicos (patriarch) Timothy is instructive on this count. He is a fascinating figure who is largely unknown to the Western church. He became the catholicos of the Church of the East (Nestorian) around 780 and reigned until 823 CE. When he assumed control, he became the leader of nearly twenty-five percent of the world’s Christians spread throughout Asia.35 One of his bold moves was to move the holy see from Seleucia-Ctesiphon to Baghdad, the seat of Islamic power.36 From there he engaged the caliph and other Muslim leaders, and encouraged the continued missionary activity of the church, expanding the Christian presence into new regions.

Timothy lived and led in a time when the difference between Islam and Christianity were not seen in the stark terms they are today. Some Christians viewed Islam, not as another religion, but as a Christian heresy.37 This may help explain Timothy’s ability to find positive connections between Islam and Christianity, and it may explain the tone of his famous encounter with the caliph al-Mahdi. As Timothy advocated for the Christian faith with the caliph, he ended by asking al-Mahdi to imagine:

we are all of us as in a dark house in the middle of the night. If at night and in a dark house, a precious pearl happens to fall in the midst of people, and all become aware of its existence, every one would strive to pick up the pearl, which will not

35 Ibid., 5. Jenkins tends to estimate numbers on the higher side. As we shall see in chapter 2, some are challenging traditional numerical assumptions.
36 There is debate as to whether the preceding catholicos moved the see to Baghdad.
37 Ibid., 184.
fall to the lot of all but to the lot of one only, while one will get hold of the pearl itself, another one of a piece of glass, a third one of a stone or of a bit of earth, but every one will be happy and proud that he is the real possessor of the pearl. When, however, night and darkness disappear, and light and day arise, then every one of those people who had believed that they had the pearl, would extend and stretch their hand towards the light, which alone can show what everyone has in hand. The one who possesses the pearl will rejoice and be happy and pleased with it, while those who had in hand pieces of glass and bits of stone only will weep and be sad, and will sigh and shed tears.\(^{38}\)

Timothy’s point was that while all believe they possess the truth, “the final truth will not be known in this world.”\(^{39}\) We cannot say with certainty whether Timothy thought he was having an intra or interfaith debate, but we do know that the assumed similarities between them shaped how he and others in the Syriac Church approached Islam.

**Filling the Gap**

As is evident from this overview, there is largely unknown story about the relationship between the Church of the East and Islam. Because non-Chalcedonian Christianity has been ignored in general, and because of the lack of knowledge about the early era of Christian-Muslim relations, the narrative usually begins with Western Christianity’s encounter with Islam. In one of the best selling introductions to Islam, *Islam: the Straight Path* by John Esposito, he too omits the relationship between Syriac Christians and Muslims, and he is a highly respected scholar in this area known for his sensitivity

\(^{38}\) He’s citing from a work edited by Alphonse Mingana, ibid., 17.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 17.
toward Islam. Because of this he summarizes the views of one toward the other as follows: “For the Christian West, Islam is the religion of the sword; for Muslims, the Christian West is epitomized by the armies of the Crusades.” What is missing is the story of other Christian experiences of Islam in its formative period, where expansion is not marked as much by the sword or violent conquest as it is by negotiation and relationships. The space of this thesis does not allow one to address how present day characterizations may to a degree be a projection of contemporary understandings upon history (see the work of Ernst referred to earlier), but a part of this is due to the missing information about Syriac Christianity’s relationship to Islam.

This thesis will build on the work of Sidney Griffith, who wrote *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* (2008), which won the Albert C. Outler Prize on ecumenical church history. In it he advocates that the level of dialogue, debate and mutual influence between Christians and Muslims in the first centuries of Islam is far greater than has previously been thought. He believes there is an “Islamo-Christian” heritage upon which both religions can draw to find new ways to engage each other today. In order to uncover this, he leads the reader into the world of the Nestorians, Jacobites and Melkites, i.e., the indigenous Christians in the area in which Islam was born. Interestingly, in another work

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40 Esposito, op. cit., 63.
he also shows that there were Christians who treated Islam as Jewish. His careful works prompt one to reconsider the relation of Christianity to the origins of Islam.

I have a dictum I developed in the course I teach on Islam. It is this: one cannot learn the story of Islam by reading the Quran, but one must know the story of Islam to understand the Quran. In this thesis I advocate that an important part of the story of Islam is its relation to the Church of the East. By understanding this story, not only does it help us better understand Islam, it also helps us understand an unknown part of our Christian heritage. And with a better understanding of this, we may be able to approach the relationship between these two faiths in new ways inspired by an old but previously unknown history.

This thesis will approach this in the following manner. Chapter 1 is an introduction to the Church of East, which represents the East Syriac Christian presence that Islam engaged when it first arose. Since many are not acquainted with the Church of the East, other than knowing they are labeled “Nestorians,” a heretical branch of Christianity, it is important to have a basic understanding of who they are before understanding who they are in relationship to Islam.

Chapter 2 examines the Church of the East’s experience and relationship to Islam from the inception of Islam in 622 CE to 823 CE, the end of the reign of Timothy I.

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catholicos of the Church of the East under whom it is believed the church experienced its “golden age.” Here we begin to trace the influence of the Church of the East on Islam, and Islam’s influence on the Church of the East. Through this one begins to see the emergence of an Islamo-Christian heritage.

Chapter 3 highlights Islam’s experience of the Church of East by examining scholarship that has emerged in the last fifty years that challenges the traditional narrative about the origins of Islam. Using historical-critical methods, a growing number of scholars are concluding that Islam was formed by drawing on Christian rituals and texts. These findings are generally categorized as “revisionist” because they revise the inherited narrative that Muslims have about Islam’s beginnings. I use the term “revisionist” cautiously. I highlight this research not in an attempt to revise the narrative but to deepen our understanding of the relationship between the Church of the East and Islam. Just as Judaism and Christianity have a shared heritage, so too does Islam and Christianity.42

Finally, the conclusion explores the implications of this research for my own ministry, both as a Christian leader and interfaith proponent. It is my hope that this work helps deepen our understanding of the relationship between Islam and Christianity while also correcting stereotypes about Islam. In doing so it allows us to envision a better relationship between Christians and Muslims by building on our past.

42 Judaism could also be included but is outside the scope of this thesis.
Timeline for Islam

570 C.E. Muhammad is born in Mecca.

610 C.E. According to Muslim tradition, Muhammad is visited by the angel Gabriel while on retreat in a cave near Mecca. The angel recites to him the first revelations of the Quran and informs him that he is God's prophet. Later, Muhammad is told to call his people to the worship of the one God, but they react with hostility and begin to persecute him and his followers.

615 C.E. Because of the persecution, Muhammad sent a group of eighty people to Ethiopia. The king of Ethiopia was a Christian from the Church of the East and was known as a hospitable and just man.

622 C.E. After enduring persecution in Mecca, Muhammad and his followers migrate to the nearby town of Yathrib (later to be known as Medina), where the people there accepted Islam. This marks the "hijrah" or "emigration," and the beginning of Islam and the Islamic calendar.

630 C.E. Muhammad returns to Mecca with a large number of his followers. He enters the city peacefully, and eventually all its citizens accept Islam. The prophet clears the idols and images out of the Kaaba and rededicates it to the worship of God alone.

632 C.E. Muhammad dies after a prolonged illness.


632 C.E. The Muslim community elects his father-in-law and close associate, Abu Bakr, as caliph, or successor. The Islamic empire expands into Persia and Muslims now control the Sassanian capital, Seleucia-Ctesiphon.

634 C.E. Death of first caliph Abu Bakr; Umar ibn al-Khattab becomes the second caliph.

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638 C.E. Muslims enter the area north of Arabia, known as "Sham," including Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq, which includes the occupation of Jerusalem; construction begins on the al-Aqsa mosque.

641 C.E. Muslims enter Egypt and rout the Byzantine army. Muslims consider their conquest as the liberation of subjugated people, since in most instances they were under oppressive rule.

644 C.E. Caliph Umar is assassinated; Uthman ibn Affan becomes third caliph; this is when the Quran was collected and put into his final form.

655 C.E. Islam begins to spread throughout North Africa.

656 C.E. Caliph Uthman is assassinated; Ali ibn Abi Talib becomes the fourth caliph.

661 C.E. Imam Ali is killed, bringing to an end the rule of the four "Rightly Guided Caliphs": Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali.

661-750 C.E. This marks the beginning of the Umayyad rule.

711 C.E. Muslims enter Spain in the west and India in the east. Eventually almost the entire Iberian Peninsula is under Islamic control.

732 C.E. Muslims are defeated at Potiers in France by Charles Martel.

750-1258 C.E. The Abbasids take over rule from the Umayyads, shifting the seat of power to Baghdad, beginning a period of great cultural renaissance.

786-809 C.E. Harun al-Rashid is the caliph (legendary exploits recounted in *The Thousand and One Nights*); this is the height of the Abbasid caliphate.

813-33 C.E. al-Mamun is caliph: this is a period of intellectual activity including the translation of ancient Greek materials into Arabic, thus preserving them for Western culture.
Chapter One - The Church of the East: an Introduction (32 CE – 622 CE)

**Founding Narratives**

The Letters between Jesus and Abgar

The beginnings of the Church of the East are the beginnings of Christianity itself. Christianity was in its formational period in which orthodoxy and heresy were yet to be defined, the canon of sacred scripture was yet to be established, denominations were yet to be formed, and Jesus was in the midst of his ministry on earth.

Part of the legends surrounding the origins of the Church of the East go back to the Magi, who were believed to be Aramaic speaking persons from Edessa, which would become an important center for the Church of the East. ¹ But the better-known story traces its beginnings to the ruler Abgar V the Black (13 - 50 CE), who was the king of Osrhoene and resided in the capital city of Edessa. ² Though today Edessa is an insubstantial town


² These are important traditions that animate and authorize the life of the Church of the East. They represent the shape of the gospel that was born and grew in a Syro-Aramaic setting, but we Westerners know little of the resulting ministry and mission of Syriac Christianity. Sebastian Brock, a noted Oxford scholar in this area, attributes several factors to this: 1. The *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260-339 CE), became the model that was followed by subsequent historians, and his focus was on Christianity in the Roman Empire. 2. The fifth century controversies over Christology, particularly the Council of Chalcedon (451), left Syriac Christianity, both West Syriac (Monophysite) and East Syriac (Nestorian), branded as schismatic and heretical, hence requiring little attention be given to it. 3. With less regard for the Syriac tradition, the post Chalcedonian focus was on the Latin West and Greek East, and further, few in theological departments knew Syriac. It is this unknown and forgotten Christianity that will be explored because it was the Christianity that was on the front lines of engagement when Islam was born and being formed. While this chapter cannot give a detailed history of the Church of the East, it will provide a brief introduction so that one has some sense of who they were prior
known as Urfa in Eastern Turkey, then it was the crossroads of two important caravan routes. One was the Old Silk Road, running from Roman Antioch to India and China, and the other route stretched from Armenia to Egypt. Along with its commercial significance, it served as a buffer state between the empires of Rome and Persia. It also had sacred significance in the unfolding story of faith. It is here that “Abraham passed through there on his way to Canaan, though that was long before it became Osrhoene. Abraham's father died in Harran, only twenty-five miles from Edessa, and there Isaac found his wife Rebekah.”

The story goes that King Abgar sent emissaries to Palestine, and while passing through Jerusalem, they heard of a new prophet who performed miracles of healing. Knowing that their king was very ill, they informed the king of the prophet, named Jesus. Upon hearing this, Abgar wrote a letter to Jesus inviting him to visit Edessa so that Jesus could heal him. Abgar also offered Jesus refuge in Edessa because of the opposition he had heard Jesus was facing from the Jews. Here is the exchange between Abgar and Jesus as recorded by Eusebius of Caeserea (c. 260-339 CE), known as the “Father of Church History”:

4 Ibid., Kindle Locations 1166-1168.
5 There are questions about how accurate Eusebius was in his history, and the fact that he counts the exchange between Abgar and Jesus as authentic only increases the questions about the accuracy his work. Ibid., Moffett, Kindle location 1191-1193.
Abgar Uchama, the Toparch, to Jesus the Good Saviour who has appeared in the district of Jerusalem, greeting. I have heard of you and your cures, how they are accomplished without drugs and herbs. For, as the story goes, you make the blind recover their sight, the lame walk, and you cleanse lepers, and cast out unclean spirits and demons, and you cure those who are tortured by long disease and you raise dead men. And when I heard all these things concerning you I decided that it is one of two things, either that you are God and came down from heaven to do these things, or are a son of God for doing these things. For this reason I write to beg you to hasten to me and to heal the suffering which I have. Moreover I heard that the Jews are mocking you, and wish to ill-treat you. Now I have a city very small and venerable which is enough for both of us.  

Jesus wrote back to him saying:

Blessed are thou who didst believe in me not having seen me, for it is written concerning me that those who have seen me will not believe in me, and that those who have not seen me will believe and live. Now concerning what you wrote to me, to come to you, I must first complete here all for which I was sent, and after thus completing it be taken up to him who sent me, and when I have been taken up, I will send to you one of my disciples to heal your suffering and give life to you and those with you. 

The Church of the East believes that this promise was fulfilled and is what brought Christianity to the region. Their tradition holds that from the Twelve Apostles commissioned by Jesus, Thomas came to the East and evangelized India and China. As part of Thomas’s mission, he chose Thaddeus, “Addai” in Syriac, from among the

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6 Atiya, op. cit., 244.
7 Ibid., 244. Also contained in (with some omissions) Moffett, op. cit., Kindle location 1194-1202.
9 Addai’s disciples, Mari and Aggai, also hold a distinguished place in the spread of Christianity in this region, Baum, op. cit., 12.
Seventy Apostles whom Jesus appointed, to evangelize “Edessa, Nisibis, Mosul, Arbela, Beth Garmai, and Babylonia.”

The Doctrine of Addai completes this story. It was written around 400 CE in support of Thaddeus’s role in establishing Christianity in the region. There it is told how Thaddeus came to Edessa as an apostolic missionary and began by reaching out to the Jewish community. When King Abgar V learned of this, he sent for Thaddeus and was healed by him. The next day the king assembled all his people and had Thaddeus explain how he had the power to heal and to tell the people “the history of the coming of Christ.” Upon hearing this, “all the city rejoiced in his doctrine.”

Because of the traditions of King Abgar and Thaddeus, Edessa became known as the “mother of Syriac Christianity.” It was also believed to be the home to the letter of Jesus to Abgar and the grave of the Apostle Thomas, whose body was brought to Edessa as its final resting place. This made Edessa a venerated city for Christians in that region. However, in the eyes of the Church of the East, their role is greater than representing the beginning of Syriac Christianity. They believe they hold two “firsts” for all of Christianity. “Syrian tradition honors Edessa as the capital of history's first Christian kingdom, Osrhoene” and Abgar V the Black as the first Christian King.

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10 Luke 10:1-24 records Jesus appointing the seventy apostles. Other ancient mss read “seventy-two.” In Western Christianity they are referred to as the “Seventy Disciples,” and in Eastern Christianity they are referred to as the “Seventy Apostles.”
11 Baum, op. cit., 12.
12 Moffett, op. cit., Kindle location 1210-1215.
13 Baum, op. cit., 13. There are other traditions that hold Thomas was buried in India. Baum, 56-57.
14 Moffett, op. cit., Kindle location 1382.
Founding Narratives: What They Tell Us about the Church of the East

For some these founding narratives hold no historical veracity. Jesus did not write to Abgar, and the Apostle Thomas did not send Thaddeus to Edessa. They are mere legends that were developed over time to give apostolic authority and status to their movement.\textsuperscript{15} If a king had accepted Christianity at such an early date, surely someone would have made note of this. Instead, the first mention of this does not occur until two hundred fifty years later in the writings of Eusebius. The reality is that there is scant documentation in the first century of any Christian presence in Edessa. As F. C. Burkitt observed, “We are in much the same position as if we had to reconstruct the course of the Reformation in England from a series of English Bibles (Tyndale to King James), together with a few tales taken out of Foxe’s Book of Martyrs.”\textsuperscript{16} It is not until the latter part of the second century that there are writings that attest to historical figures with any certainty.\textsuperscript{17}

There is one historical connection that may provide the source for these founding narratives. It is likely that King Abgar V the Black may have become conflated with King Abgar VIII the Great (reigned from 177-212 CE), who during his rule made Christianity the state religion, which made him the first Christian king.\textsuperscript{18} This point is interesting to consider. In the West we view Constantine’s favoring of Christianity within his empire as a major shift marking when religion first becomes enmeshed with the politics of an

\textsuperscript{16} Moffett, op. cit., Kindle location 1239-1245.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., Kindle location 1378-1381.
\textsuperscript{18} Baum, op. cit., 13. This is a contested point with other kingdoms, such as Armenia.
empire. Some label this as the “Constantinian shift” that changed the trajectory of Christianity. Yet elsewhere within Christianity, religion and empire were coalescing in other ways. In the case of King Abgar VIII, this occurred one hundred years before Constantine.

Generally, scholars on the history of the Church of the East treat these founding narratives as lore and legends that were later fabrications to lift up the importance of the Church of the East. However, Samuel Moffett attempts to make a case that the story of Thaddeus may be historically plausible. He bases this on five elements he believes are significant in helping us understand the beginnings of Christianity in that region.

First, because Christianity spread through the travels of merchants, Moffett believes it is likely that Christianity spread from Jerusalem through Edessa, a major intersection of trade routes approximately 475 miles north of Jerusalem. Moffett says this phenomenon is attested to in the spread of Christianity in the Kingdom of Armenia in the early centuries of Christianity.

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20 Perhaps rather than rueing the day the two became intertwined we should turn our attention beyond Western Christianity and learn from how others have navigated this reality. Exploring this theme is outside the purview of this thesis, but I wanted to mark this as a topic for further consideration.
21 Wilmshurst skepticism was already noted, and Baum also views them as developing much later than tradition attributes them. Op. cit., 14. L.W. Barnard also sees them as a later fabrication; see “The Origins and Emergence of the Church in Edessa during the First Two Centuries A. D.,” Vigiliae Christianae Vol. 22, (Jan 1, 1968): 162.
22 Moffett, op. cit., Kindle location 357-360.
Second, with the rise of Christianity, there were also known tensions between Jews and the emerging Christian community, resulting in some Christians migrating to Persia. Moffett says that though the existence of the letters between Abgar and Jesus are doubted, the mention of offering refuge to Jesus because of tension with the Jews represents a reality of the time.\(^\text{23}\) This, he believes, could help explain the presence of Christians in Edessa in the first century.

Third, during the first century there were also tensions between Rome and the Jews, of whom Christians were considered part. When the Jewish War began in Judea in 66 CE, this started the systematic march by the Romans to extinguish any Jewish presence. It would culminate in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Because of this persecution, Moffett indicates that many Jews sought refuge in Persia and beyond,\(^\text{24}\) marking this period as the “Second Diaspora” for the Jewish people. Moffett believes these Jewish communities provided “a natural, ethnic network for the beginnings of Christian advance.”\(^\text{25}\)

Fourth, Moffett believes these previous two points help explain “the Jewish nature of Edessa’s early Christianity.”\(^\text{26}\) While the “when” of Christianity is debated, the “who” of the Christian community in Edessa shows evidence of taking root in Jewish communities by those who had fled the difficulties in the Roman Empire.\(^\text{27}\)

\(^{23}\) Ibid., Kindle location 1253-1258.
\(^{24}\) Ibid., Kindle location 1263-1266.
\(^{25}\) Ibid., Kindle location 372-385.
\(^{26}\) Ibid., Kindle location 1270-1271. See also John Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions: The Church AD 450-680* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1989), 96.
\(^{27}\) Moffett, op. cit., Kindle location 1266-1271.
Fifth, and finally, in the struggle between Rome and Persia, the ability of the Persian Parthians to overthrow the Greek Seleucids on the eastern border of the Roman Empire would make the Kingdom of Osrhoene part of Persia. Osrhoene served as a buffer client state for the Parthians during their reign from 247 BCE - 246 CE. Moffett sees this as preparation for the Christianity that would grow there:

The weaknesses of the Parthians, in fact, may have been another preparation of the gospel like the Roman peace. Their relative lack of cultural identity, their nomadic indifference to all but war, the hunt, and tribal intrigue, the absence of a strong and predominant religion among them—all these factors, instead of impeding the progress of the Christian faith, seem to have given it better opportunity to plant in Persia some of the first roots of an Asian Christianity. Their [Parthian] capital, Seleucia-Ctesiphon, on the Tigris River north of old Babylon and just south of later Baghdad, became the ecclesiastical center of the Church of the East.28

Because of these factors and what is known about Christianity in Edessa in the first century, Moffett seeks to treat the founding narratives of the Church of the East with an openness to the possibility that there was a missionary named Thaddeus (Addai) who came to Edessa and established the Christian community there. Moffett states:

The Addai [Thaddeus] traditions were as persistent in the early church of Mesopotamia as the Thomas traditions were in India. By the end of the fourth century Addai was commonly accepted by Syrian writers both Eastern and Western as the founder of their church. The fact that so strong a center as Edessa was content with one of the lesser-known Seventy rather than with one of the original Twelve supports the view that the historicity of Addai's mission was too well known to be easily set aside. He seems to deserve the honor tradition has given him as the father of the Church of the East which we call Nestorian.29

28 Ibid., Kindle location 426-431.
29 Ibid., Kindle location 1248-1252.
If we compare Moffett’s assumptions with other scholarship, the Jewish base and influence on Christianity in Edessa is strongly presumed. Wilmshurst questions when Christianity emerged in Edessa, but he assumes in all probability it was established in Jewish communities. Baum and Winkler are also uncertain of when Christianity was established in Edessa, but they too presume that it was established within Jewish communities. However, they associate this with the longstanding Jewish presence that existed in Mesopotamia since the Babylonian exile and not from more recent refugees. Barnard, like Moffett, sees an affinity between early Christianity in Edessa and the Qumran community. Barnard traces this connection to the way Christianity is expressed in texts that originated in that region. However, Barnard, like other scholars, shows restraint in asserting the Jewish basis of Christianity in Edessa as a certainty. With little literature available from the first two centuries of Christianity in Edessa, Barnard can only conclude that it is “likely” that Christianity in Edessa was born in a Jewish milieu. Moffett may have overstated the Jewish-Christian connection, particularly linking Jewish refugees to Edessa after 70 CE, to be able to trace the origins of the Church of the East to the first century of Christianity. Without this link, it is difficult to receive the story of Thaddeus a possibility.

33 The question isn’t whether there was a Jewish community in Edessa. This has been established by things such as Jewish graveyards and inscriptions. It is when and the degree to which Christianity established itself through these Jewish communities. See A.F.J. Klijn, “Christianity in Edessa and the Gospel of Thomas,” Novum Testamentum Vol. 14 (Jan 1, 1972): 70-77.
Whether or not Thaddeus pioneered Christianity in Edessa remains a matter of debate, but the pioneering spirit of the Christianity that took root there would become clearly evident. Despite the hardships and persecution that these Christians faced in the first century—both religiously and politically—those who would eventually form the Church of the East did not seek to withdraw from the world. They would come to embrace the church as “a community of believers called to a covenant of war not so much against the world as for the world against the darkness.”

From the Apostles to Appellations

Before we proceed any further, we need to discuss the terminology for the group that we have referred to as the “Church of the East.” Because we are seeking to name something that was forming in the early period of Christianity, which was fluid and still evolving, there were not yet denominations and divisions by which we know Christians today. The Christians to whom we are referring were the result of the spread of the gospel among people who would become Christians in the broadest sense. It would take centuries before Christians would define themselves into subgroups that would be known by their distinctive history, geography and theology. Because the group we are studying has been called many names, it is helpful to acquaint oneself with the various appellations used to refer to them.

34 Emphasis added, Ibid., Kindle location 1354-1357.
As one may surmise from the beginning of this chapter, the church locates itself in eastern Christianity, and hence “east” appears in many names to make this clear. Because they also use Syriac as the language of the church, “Syriac” and “Assyrian” also are used in their name. From a scholarly viewpoint, the “Apostolic Church of the East” is used frequently, as is the “East Syriac Church.” Others refer to them as the “Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East” and the “Ancient Church of the East.” These latter two were used by many of the adherents of the church. They currently bear the name of the “Assyrian Church of the East” in which “Assyrian” was added by western missionaries in the second half of the 19th century. In 1976 this was adopted as their official name.

There are other appellations associated with them. They have been called the “Persian Church” because of where they originated, though they would spread far beyond Persia into India and China through their missionary efforts. Therefore, this name is a limited description of who they are and where they are. They have also been referred to as the “Pre-Ephesian Church” based on their acceptance of the Councils of Nicea (325 CE) and Constantinople (381 CE) but not of Ephesus (431 CE).

What one might find surprising is that two branches of the Church of the East are in communion with Rome. The “Chaldean Catholic Church” and the “Syro-Malabar Church,” which is located in India. This may seem impossible theologically given that

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35 Part of this stems from a growing emphasis on an ethnic identity that is non-Arab and is derived from the ancient Assyrians. See Heleen Murre-Van Den Berg, “Syriac Christianity,” in The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity, eds. Ken Parry, David J. Melling, Dimitri Brady, Sidney H. Griffith, and John F. Healey (Blackwell, 2000), 250.
the one name by which many people know them is “Nestorian.” This is based on the
name of an individual from the Church of the East who was branded a heretic by the
Council of Ephesus (431 CE), which was reinforced by the Council of Chalcedon (451
CE). Many who learn church history in the West continue to use the term “Nestorian” to
refer to them as a way of indicating their heretical status in relation to the Western
Church. As we will see later in this chapter, the Church of the East’s theology is not
based solely on Nestorius, and the theological positions of the Church of the East have
been recognized in the West. With this, it is safe to assume that “Nestorian” is a
misrepresentation and pejorative term for them that should not be used.36

This leaves open the question of what we are to call them today. Though they now
bear the official appellation of the “Assyrian Church of the East,” there is tendency to use
the name that reflects their branch or period in which one is discussing them. Therefore
since early East Syriac sources used the “Church of the East,” this is the term that is used
in this thesis because it depicts their designation during the period covered.

By whatever name they are called, in the following pages one needs to listen for
how the Church of the East emerged from one global church. And even though by the
time of the rise of Islam, the Western Church, represented by Rome and Constantinople,

36 Baum, op. cit., 3-5. There are those that advocate for the use of “Nestorian” because
there is evidence this was used as a self-designation beginning in the 8th century. See Gerrit J.
Reinink, “Tradition and the Formation of the ‘Nestorian’ Identity in Sixth to Seventh-Century
Iraq,” Church History and Religious Culture 89.1-3 (2009): 217-250. However, this is contrasted
with the report that even through the 8th century, the Church of the East rejected the term
“Nestorian” and preferred to be called “Ibad” (servants of God); Baum, 43. For a fuller discussion
of this, see Sebastian P. Brock, “The 'Nestorian' Church: a lamentable misnomer,” Bulletin of the
John Rylands Library 78:3 (1996): 23-35. Because of this debate, there are many who use
“Nestorian” to refer to them, which we will see in some of the quotes used in this thesis.
would become distinct from non-Chalcedonian Christianity, it should be viewed as a time of estrangement rather than a divorce.\textsuperscript{37} The relationship was not over, and there would be times of reconciliation between the two.

\textit{The Church of the East Takes Shape}
\textit{Patriarchally, Monastically, Theologically and Academically}

There are four streams of development that gave shape to the Church of the East. They organized themselves patriarchally, spread the faith monastically, identified themselves theologically, and became known academically throughout the Christian world.

\textbf{Organizing Patriarchally}

Like the legends of the origins of the Church of the East, so too there is a legend about the founding of their first patriarchal see. The story goes that when Thaddeus came to Edessa he had with him a disciple and fellow apostle, Mari. Tradition reveres Mari as the one who did much of the “leg work” to evangelize the region. As part of his missionary efforts, it is said that Mari established the patriarchal see in Seleucia-Ctesiphon and served as the first catholicos (“bishop” or “patriarch”) of the Church of the East. However, the establishment of such a see is not mentioned in the Church of the East’s synods until 497 CE.\textsuperscript{38} What is known in history is that when the Sassanids overthrew the Parthians around 226 CE, it inaugurated a change in the milieu in which Christianity

\textsuperscript{37} Griffith, op. cit., 12.
\textsuperscript{38} Baum, op. cit., 12.
would evolve for the next four centuries. For its first two hundred years the Church of the East was Syrian; now it would live increasingly in a Persian culture. As part of this shift, the Church of the East established its center in the capital of Sassanid empire, Seleucia-Ctesiphon. As its relationship to the West decreased, it looked increasingly eastward to its relationship with its Indian counterparts.\(^{39}\)

This shift would provide opportunities and challenges for the Church of the East. As the Sassanian Empire expanded, it practiced the deportation of prisoners to Persia, which meant that many Christians from the conquered Eastern Provinces of Rome were deported and eventually would become part of the Church of the East, though not without struggles.\(^{40}\) The Syriac Christians and Greek Christians held different views about how to order themselves and with whom authority was held. The Sassanian rulers also made Zoroastrianism the state religion, and because of their antipathy toward other religions, they prevented the Church of the East from being too organized, lest it challenge Sassanian order and religion.\(^{41}\) This did not mean that the Christians were without influence within the Sassanian Empire. During the reign of Yazdgird I (399–421 CE), he “sought to ease political tensions with the Roman Empire and began to integrate Christians into imperial politics. Thus began the period of diplomatic exchanges between the two great empires of Late Antiquity, exchanges in which the Christian hierarchy of

\(^{39}\) Moffett, op. cit., Kindle location 2175-2181.
\(^{40}\) Baum, op. cit., 11-12.
\(^{41}\) Ibid., 12.
Persia played an essential role. Several Persian diplomatic missions to the neighboring Christian empire were led by bishops and patriarchs of the Church of the East.\textsuperscript{42}

Though the church was not well organized internally, it continued to grow and expand into new areas that would become a loose affiliation of independent dioceses. It would not be until the 4\textsuperscript{th} and 5\textsuperscript{th} centuries CE that the Church of the East would begin to organize itself by moving away from independent dioceses to a Roman style patriarchate, granting primacy to the metropolitan (patriarch, catholicos) of the Sassanian capital of Seleucia-Ctesiphon.\textsuperscript{43} Because of the dispute over leadership between the Syriac and Greek Christians, the Church of the East held its first synod in 410 CE, the Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. It was convoked by the Sassanian king, Yazdgird I and co-moderated by the Roman bishop, Marutha of Maipherkat. During the synod, a letter from the “Western” fathers was read that had three requests: 1) “in each city and its surrounding area there should be only one bishop, ordained by three bishops, who possess the full authority of the metropolitan and head of bishops, i.e. the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon.” 2) The liturgical feasts of Epiphany, Lent and Easter, which were mentioned specifically, should be celebrated together on the same days. And 3) the creeds and canons of the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) should be adopted.\textsuperscript{44} All three of

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{43} Wilmshurst, op. cit., 32.
\textsuperscript{44} Even though the creed of Nicaea was adopted it was adapted to CE. There were two versions, the East Syriac version which included theological elements from their theology and the West Syriac version which was a literal translation of the original. Debate over which was approved, leaning toward West, but it shows that this act of adopting and adapting made them less in line with the Western church than it may appear, Baum, op. cit., 16.
these recommendations were eventually adopted by the Church of the East. This helped end the conflict between the Syriac Christians and the Greek Christians deported from the Roman Empire, and it enshrined the patriarch of Seleucia-Ctesiphon as the head of the Church of the East.

This demonstrates that during this time the Church was not yet divided into East and West, and there was still a sense of unity between Christians, wherever they were located. Eventually, however, the Church of the East would move to a more autonomous stance in relation to the West. In the Synod of Dadisho in 424 CE, they declared their autocephaly “through the rejection of the ‘right of appeal’ to the West.” They also strengthened the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon as the head of the Church of the East by claiming that he was the leader “in the same sense that Peter was head of the apostles.” Because of this, the Church of the East needed no further *cathedra Petri* over it through Rome or Antioch. For the head of the Church of the East “there can be no earthly authority over him.”

Eventually the Church of the East would come to see itself as the “fifth patriarch for the Orient” alongside the four western patriarchs: Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, and Antioch. They omitted Jerusalem because they only recognized the Councils of

45 Wilmshurst, op. cit., 15  
46 Baum, op. cit., 19.  
48 Ibid., 20.
Nicea (325 CE) and Constantinople (381 CE), not Chalcedon (451 CE), which gave Jerusalem autonomy as a patriarchy.49

Spreading Monastically

Figure 1: Map of the Church of the East in the Sassanian empire (around 500 CE). Baum and Winkler, 31.

The heart of the founding narratives for the Church of the East emphasized the need to reach out to those around them. The tradition of Thaddeus recounts that under his

49 Ibid., 37.
leadership the church "grew and prospered," and "‘instead of gold and silver he enriched the Church of Christ with the souls of believers’ whose pure lives and care for the poor and the sick so commended them to the people of Edessa that ‘even the [pagan] priests of Nebu and Bel’ found that they now had to share equally with the Christians the honor and respect of the city."\(^{50}\)

This spirit was integral to the success of the Church of the East, and it found its way into the expression and expansion of the faith through the development of monastaries. There was a strong ascetic element within the Eastern Church emphasizing things like celibacy and sexual abstinence, and thus the pathway to becoming a fully devoted Christian involved self-denial. However, as the practice of asceticism evolved, it did not result in a retreat from the world, as it did among the saint-ascetics in Egypt, who withdrew into cells and caves. The Church of the East “with its travel and trading traditions, stressed mobility and outreach."\(^{51}\) Their faith was formed at the intersection of ancient trade routes, which brought with it an acquaintance with people from the countries of the East, and it allowed them to travel to these places.\(^{52}\) These individuals became wandering missionaries who took their concern for others into the world so that they could spread the faith.\(^{53}\)

These wanderers would eventually develop a monastic tradition that would help make the Church of the East a global presence in their known world. Monasteries became

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\(^{50}\) Moffett, op. cit., Kindle location 1232-1235.
\(^{51}\) Ibid., Kindle location 1803.
\(^{52}\) Atiya, op. cit., 257.
\(^{53}\) Moffett, op. cit., Kindle location 1805-1809.
outreach stations that provided help for the poor and provided a base for evangelism to those who were not Christian. This formalized the missionary spirit that would lead to the expansion of the Church of the East. Even though they lived as a conquered people, they found ways to thrive during the reign of the Parthians, the reign of the Sassanians, and the reign of Islam.

It is also important to note that these monk-missionaries were also open to engaging the thought world of those they sought to reach. By 600 CE they had reached China and began expressing the gospel in Buddhist and Taoist terms. In China and southern India, some of the missionaries created a distinct symbol for Christianity by joining the cross with the lotus, the symbol of Buddhist enlightenment.

**Identifying Theologically**

The Church of the East is forever tied to the Nestorian controversy in which the theology of Nestorius (386-451 CE), the patriarch of Constantinople, was condemned in the Council of Ephesus (431 CE). The debate was rich and nuanced, and it cannot be covered in any depth here. What can be highlighted in this brief treatment is that the theology of the Church of the East is based more upon that of Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428 CE) than Nestorius. Theodore is known as the “Interpreter” by the East Syrians. And though the Council of Ephesus condemned Nestorius and the Second Council of Constantinople

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54 Ibid., Kindle location 2856-2866.
56 Moffett, op. cit., Kindle location 3847.
condemned Theodore, at times the Chalcedonian Churches acknowledged the Church of the East as within the boundaries of orthodoxy. Therefore, the way these figures are cast historically does not necessarily correspond with the way the Church of the East has been received.

The theological controversy in which Nestorius and Theodore were embroiled revolved around the difference between two schools of thought: the Alexandrian school, represented by Cyril (r. 412–444 CE), the patriarch of Alexandria, and the Antiochene school, represented by Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople (r. 428-431 CE). This controversy was fueled by politics and theology. Cyril was concerned because his patriarch had recently been “demoted” within the church hierarchy. While formally the leaders of Rome and Alexandria were known as the greatest patriarchs, the Council of Constantinople (381 CE) made Rome and Constantinople the two greatest patriarchs, hence lowering Cyril’s position and esteem. This may have motivated Cyril in his theological disagreements with Nestorius and the Antiochene school he represented.

The center of the controversy was focused on Nestorius taking issue with describing Mary as theotokos (God-bearer), a term important to Cyril. Cyril grounded his use of theotokos in what it said about Jesus, believing it was a term necessary to give full expression to the unity of the divine and human in the Incarnation. Nestorius, however, believed that Mary could only give birth to Jesus’s human nature, and thus he did not condone the use of theotokos, lest it imply that Mary gave birth to God. Additionally, Nestorius was concerned with the status that theotokos imputed to Mary. He was disturbed by the growing devotion to Mary and believed the idea of Mary as a “God-
bearer” might turn her into a goddess like figure. Therefore Nestorius advocated that Mary be called *christotokos* (Christ-bearer), which he thought expressed the unity of the divine and human in Jesus while avoiding elevating Mary to the realm of the divine.\(^{58}\)

The difference in the way Cyril and Nestorius spoke of the unity of Christ represented Nestorius’s concern about divine impassibility. Nestorius believed that divine impassibility may be compromised if Christ had only one nature, as advanced by Cyril.\(^{59}\) Therefore when Nestorius spoke of the unity of the divine and human in Christ, he avoided language that would have the God-man being born or dying, which left uncertainty about his views about the divinity of Christ. The end result was that because *theotokos* was popular among the masses, Nestorius’s challenge to the use of this term brought his vague Christology under greater scrutiny. This was sufficient for Cyril to bring charges of heresy against Nestorius for his lack of clarity about the divinity of Christ, and at the Council of Ephesus (431 CE) Nestorius was condemned as a heretic.\(^{60}\)

Today, there are those who believe that Nestorius has been unfairly characterized because he did emphasize the unity of the divine and human in Christ.\(^{61}\) And there are those who believe that he was guilty of heresy as history records. Nestorius himself complicated this because he was given the opportunity to recant and refine his views, which he refused to

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\(^{58}\) Ibid., 156.

\(^{59}\) One cannot confine Cyril’s view to a “one nature” approach because he spoke of the one nature and two natures of Christ. But Nestorius’s rebuttal was to the one nature emphasis that Cyril had. See Mark J. Edwards, “One nature of the word enfleshed,” *Harvard Theological Review* 108 No. 2 (April 2015): 289-306.

\(^{60}\) Moffett, op. cit., Kindle location 3878-3898.

\(^{61}\) Dancy, op. cit., 153-163.
do. Therefore, at the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), Nestorius was dismissed and banished to Egypt, and this was done with the approval of the Antiochene bishops in attendance.\textsuperscript{62} From this point forward, unfortunately, “Nestorian” became “a convenient dirty word with which to tar any of one's theological opponents who followed the Antiochene christological tradition,” much like today “a right-wing politician might try to smear his socialist opponent by calling him a communist.”\textsuperscript{63}

While Nestorius remains strongly associated with the Church of the East, it was Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428 CE), Nestorius’s teacher, who gave shape to the theology of the Church of the East and its relation to Chalcedonian Christianity. During Theodore’s lifetime he garnered much respect as biblical scholar and theologian. Daniel Schwartz states how “The canons of the Council of Chalcedon also mention him [Theodore] favorably, accepting Ibas of Edessa’s characterization of him as ‘a herald of the truth and doctor of the Church.’”\textsuperscript{64} Theodore was also popular in Edessa, where his works were beginning to be translated from Greek into Syriac so they could be used in the School of the Persians in Edessa (the importance of the school will be discussed in further detail in the next section). After Theodore’s death (428 CE), there was fall out in Edessa after the Council of Ephesus (431 CE). The leanings of the Alexandrian school won the day and the views of Nestorius were condemned. Rabbula, the bishop of Edessa

\textsuperscript{62} Baum, op. cit., 25.
(411-435 CE), aligned himself with the new theological consensus and anathematized Theodore and his works because they represented the Antiochene theology that had been condemned. However, after Rabbula’s death, Ibas became bishop of Edessa (r. 435-451 CE) and he not only reinstated Theodore and the corpus of work he had produced, he also initiated a large translation project to make Theodore’s works available in Syriac. While the impetus may have been to resource the library of the School of the Persians, some suspect it was more than this. It may have had ecclesio-political significance as well. In the midst of the theological debate taking place, it may have served as a stark indicator to the followers of Rabbula that the person and theology that Rabbula had condemned would now become the “theological identity marker of the East Syrian Church [the Church of the East].”65 This represents the beginning of Theodore’s work providing the theological foundations for the Church of the East.

Theodore’s theology was more nuanced than Nestorius in his approach. When it came to one of the principal issues with Nestorius, his refutation of the use of theotokos, Theodore still struggled with its use and at times rejected it, but when pressed on the issue of who was born of Mary, he said: “It is right to say both [the Word and Jesus], but not for the same reason. For although the man has come to be in the womb, this is not

true for God the Word who exists before every creature.”

This still left unanswered questions about Theodore’s understanding of the divinity of Christ.

The larger theological debate continued between the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools on how to understand the relation of the humanity and divinity of Christ. The two schools both understood Christ to be central to humanity’s redemption, but they did so with different emphases. The Alexandrian school emphasized Jesus’s divinity since it would take a divine Christ to save sinners. As part of this, they saw the necessary unity of the divine and human in Christ in one nature. However, from the Antiochene viewpoint, salvation is possible because Christ took on a perfect human nature and it was the human nature that suffered for us. Thus they took care to differentiate between the two natures of Christ to clearly preserve the humanity of Christ. For Theodore, Jesus’s struggles and suffering must be experienced through his human nature. Theodore said, “If it was the Deity who conquered [sin], then nothing he did would benefit us.” It would be a mere “show” with no salvific effect.

Ultimately, the result of this debate was that the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) adopted the belief that “Christ was incarnate in two natures (physeis), and constituted one hypostasis and one person (prosopon).” This was in response to the charge levied against the Antiochene school, now labeled “Nestorians,” that they held that Christ was

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67 Ibid., Kindle location 3827.  
68 Baum, op. cit., 22-23  
70 Wilmshursts, op. cit. 31.
two persons, hence diminishing the unity of the humanity and divinity of Christ. In actuality, Theodore’s theology helped the Church of the East express the position that “that Christ was incarnate in two natures (kyane) two hypostases (qnome) and one person (parsopa).”\(^71\) Theodore made clear in a homily that there cannot be two “persons” in Christ because this would undermine the unity between Christ’s humanity and divinity.\(^72\) This understanding has some affinity with the Chalcedonian definition, but unfortunately the term qnome in Syriac, which is close in meaning to hypostasis, can also be understood as “person.” This led many who held the Chalcedonian position to conclude that the Church of the East was in fact Nestorian and believed in two persons in Christ. Unfortunately, Theodore did not help with this confusion because “he regularly sought to distinguish between some actions of Jesus that were proper to his human nature and others that were proper to his divine nature.”\(^73\) Theodore’s ultimate concern was that if Christ has only one complete nature, it is that of the Word, and he believed this neglected the witness of the New Testament that Christ was completely human. Therefore his defense of the humanity of Christ was of paramount importance to him.\(^74\)

Ultimately, in the Second Council of Constantinople (553 CE), Theodore and his writings were condemned around his use of two hypostases rather than the orthodox position of one hypostasis. Theodore believed his expression of one person (parsopa)

\(^71\) Ibid., 31. The emphasis on two natures in one person would become known as dyophysitism.
\(^72\) Baum, op. cit., 27.
\(^73\) Schwartz, op. cit., n.p.
was trying to get at the same sense of the Chalcedonian definition but with a needed refinement. Ultimately it was not received as such, and the council determined that Theodore’s approach reduced Christ to a mere man.\textsuperscript{75} Interestingly, when Theodore was asked his position, he said, “If someone wants to ask me whom do I finally say Jesus Christ to be, I say: ‘God’ and the ‘Son of God.’”\textsuperscript{76} Obviously this did not stem the tide of criticism that he was not orthodox enough, but it does indicate that even though his theology was eventually condemned, it gave theological room for the Church of the East to express itself.

Even with the condemnations of Theodore and Nestorius, there were times of rapprochement between the two schools. In 433 CE John of Antioch and Cyril of Alexandria forged an agreement known as the “Formula of Reunion,”\textsuperscript{77} which helped pave the way to the Chalcedonian understanding that would take shape nearly twenty years later. With the continuing influence of Theodore of Mopsuestia, the Church of the East developed its first Christological creed, which reflects a more orthodox understanding of the union of the person of Christ. In the Synod of Acacia (486 CE), they declared:

Further, let our faith in the dispensation of Christ be in the confession of two natures, of the divinity and of the humanity, while none of us shall dare to introduce mixture, mingling or confusion into the differences of these two natures; rather, while the divinity remains preserved in what belongs to it, and humanity in what belongs to it, it is to a single Lordship and to a single (object of) worship that we gather together the exemplars of these two natures, because of the

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 394.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 420.
\textsuperscript{77} Baum, op. cit., 25.
perfect and inseparable conjunction that has occurred for the divinity with respect to the humanity.

And if someone considers, or teaches others, that suffering and change have attached to the divinity of our Lord, and (if) he does not preserve, with respect to the union of the prosopon [person] of our Savior, a confession of perfect God and perfect Man, let such a person be anathema. (Trans. S.P. Brock)\textsuperscript{78}

This expression would find acceptance within Roman Christianity. As part of the diplomatic efforts between Persia and East Rome (572-591 CE), an envoy was sent to Emperor Maurice in 586/7 CE. It was lead by Ishoyab I of Arzun, catholicos of the Church of the East. The topic of religion arose and the catholicos gave the emperor a written creed expressing their beliefs. The emperor gave this to the patriarchs John of Constantinople and Gregory of Antioch, and they “judged the creed to be orthodox and without error.” They marked the moment by celebrating the Eucharist together.\textsuperscript{79} Though not part of the period covered in this thesis, in 1994 the pope of the Catholic Church and the catholicos of the Assyrian Church of the East, as it is now called, signed a “Common Christological Declaration” in a move toward full communion with one another.\textsuperscript{80}

Whatever one concludes about the orthodoxy of the Church of the East, he or she must acknowledge that to label it Nestorian is too restrictive, and the theological room provided by Theodore of Mopsuestia gives the space to explore its relationship to Chalcedonian Christology. This helps explain how it is that two branches of the Church of the East are in full communion with Roman Catholicism today, as was noted earlier in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 29
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 36.
\textsuperscript{80} Parry, op. cit., 261.
Unfortunately, the possibility of seeing the Church of the East, along with Oriental Orthodox Christianity, as part of the larger Christian community with whom we engage in mission has been hindered by contemporary experiences. Historically, the Western church has largely ignored these expressions of Christianity because they are non-Chalcedonian, but with the American missionary advance into the Middle East and Southeast Asia, there was direct contact with the Church of the East and its non-Chalcedonian cousins, and this has shaped how we view them.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries CE, there was a major Christian missionary effort in the East in the lands that Syriac Christians called home. This was on the heels of western colonization efforts as well. The experience of the American Board for Foreign Missions is instructive in how their contact with non-Chalcedonian, Syriac Christianity was cast. The American Board organized the efforts of the Presbyterian family of churches and became one of the largest American mission organizations during this time. Mary Walker looked back on the documents of the American Board to see how American missionaries framed their encounter with indigenous Christians in that region. It is clear that non-Chalcedonian Christianity was viewed as something that needed “renovated” or “reformed” to be able to be of service to the missionaries in their quest to evangelize Jews and Muslims. And at times contempt was expressed toward what they perceived as heretical forms Christianity. In summarizing the views of many, one person said, “The ignorance, idolatry, and scandalous lives of their members [non-Chalcedonian Christianity] preach louder and more effectually against Christianity, than the united
voices of all Protestant missionaries in its favour.”\textsuperscript{81} The rites, ceremonies and “superstitions” of non-Chalcedonian churches were viewed as suspect, but the American missionaries did not put their energies into challenging these practices. Instead they hoped to focus on the gospel and invest in the increasing number of “evangelical native Christians.”\textsuperscript{82}

Sadly, the exchange between American missionaries and indigenous Christians generated conflict between them. It also created tensions within the indigenous Christian communities as American missionaries developed subgroups within these churches that they deemed authentic expressions of Christianity. These experiences still loom in the memory of how Americans view Christians in the Middle East, making non-Chalcedonian Christianity a religious “other” rather than an extension of us.

Fortunately, with the growth of the ecumenical movement in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century CE, relationships between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Christianity have greatly improved, leading to many official statements of communion and cooperation. We, at the level of the local church, still have much work to do to restore our relationship with non-Chalcedonian Christians so that we can better work together for the common good. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ with whom God has called us to work for the welfare of the world. As was said in the introduction and as we are learning about


\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 216.
the Church of the East, their heritage is our heritage, and in reclaiming this, there is much we can learn to inform our way forward in Muslim-Christian relations. It is hoped that this thesis helps move us in this direction.

Renown Academically

The theological positions we have highlighted were more than the mere musings of a few individuals. They represent a great intellectual tradition that would grow within Syriac Christianity and the Church of the East. This was represented in the schools of Edessa and Nisibis. It was through these institutions that the theology and philosophy of the Church of the East would be formed and transmitted.

Tradition holds that the school of Edessa was founded by Thaddeus as part of his evangelistic efforts, but this is highly unlikely. In the early years of Christianity there were teacher-student circles that helped form the faith of future leaders, which helps explain the diversity of Christianity that existed during its formative years there.83 There was probably a similar situation in Nisibis in its early years.

The formation of a theological academy did not occur until the 4th century CE. When the Sassanians overthrew Nisibis in 363 CE, this brought an end to the “first school of Nisibis,” and those studying there found refuge in Edessa. In particular, Ephrem the Syrian (306-373 CE) settled in Edessa and founded “the school of the Persians in

83 Baum, op. cit., 21.
Edessa,” or as some refer to it, “the school of Edessa.” It would become a flourishing intellectual center, and its founder, Ephrem, would be generously remembered in history by the Oriental Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox, and Catholicism. This is in part because not only did the school help form the theology of the Church of the East, it also brought developments in Western theology in conversation with that of the East. It is through this exchange that the “main and the richest contributions of Syria to the Christian tradition”—exegetical, liturgical, spiritual and poetic works—were transmitted westwards. And likewise the study of Greek philosophy was part of the academic tradition in Edessa, known as the “Athens of the East.” “Greek philosophy was taught in Syriac and translation from Greek into Syriac and from Syriac into Greek was common practice.” While the exchange between East and West occurred, the influence of Theodore of Mopsuestia grew and the theology of the Church of the East became more prominent within the school’s teachings.

Unfortunately, with the underlying tensions between the Alexandrian and Antiochene approaches to theology, Emperor Zeno closed the school in Edessa in 489 CE in an attempt to unify all churches under the creed approved in Nicaea and Constantinople. His goal was to end any Antiochene opposition, perceived or real, to the Chalcedonian theology that was to help unify the empire. In turn what this did was to

84 Ibid., 21.
85 Ibid., 22.
86 Meyendorff, op. cit., 97.
move the Church of the East into Persia, distancing itself from the Western church. With the closure, the head of the school in Edessa, Narsai (c. 399-502 CE), along with many students and teachers, found refuge in Nisibis, and there they would build on the tradition founded in Edessa and establish an intellectual center. This new institution was solidly Antiochene and Theodoran in its theology. Charges of Nestorianism and its “two persons” view of Christ continued to be levied against them, but they continued in the tradition of Theodore and emphasized only one person in Christ. The Church of the East’s synods in 585 and 605 CE made Theodore the “irrefutable standard” for their theology.

The school of Nisibis would become “the closest the Christian world possessed to a great university, a worthy successor to the academies of ancient Greece…. The fame of Nisibis spread around the world, supplying a model for the pioneering Latin Christian scholar Cassiodorus in far-off Italy. It was at Nisibis that much of the ancient world’s learning was kept alive and translated, making it available for later generations of Muslim scholars, and for Europeans after them.” It was through their efforts that the works of Aristotle and others are known to us today.

As one can now see, the schools did more than wrestle with questions internal to Christianity. They also engaged the broader intellectual traditions that informed and influenced discussion and debate. Jenkins observes that “Christians needed to maintain

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89 Baum, op. cit., 37.
90 Jenkins, op. cit., 77.
the highest intellectual standards because of the constant competition they faced from other faiths.⁹¹ The Church of the East, for example, was also engaging Buddhism, Zorastrianism, Judaism and Manichaeanism. This diverse intellectual background would become even more important when faced with the rise of Islam.

**On the cusp of Islam**

As history moves toward the rise of Islam, one more turn of events would give shape to the Church of the East’s identity vis-à-vis other religious traditions. In 540 CE a war broke out between Rome and Persia, and with some of Persia’s success, they shipped their captives to the heartland of the Church of East. “As many as 300,000 Jacobite Christians⁹² were reputedly transported deep into Persia,” and “For the first time the Nestorian Church had to deal with a large body of Christians with opposed theological beliefs within the borders of the Persian Empire.”⁹³

This led to three things: First, they adopted a more polemical approach. Previously the scholars of the Church of the East “eschewed controversial subjects, and occupied their time blamelessly with the exposition of the Scriptures, the explanation of the liturgy and the composition of devotional literature.”⁹⁴ Increasingly, in the 6th and

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⁹¹ Ibid., 46.
⁹² Jacobites believed there was only one nature, divine, and not two natures that were unified in one person. This is known as monophysitism.
⁹³ Wilmshurst, op. cit., 52. This tension continues to this day. The Jacobites, which include the Syrian Orthodox Church, opposed the inclusion of the Church of the East in the Middle East Council of Churches. Parry, op. cit., 262.
⁹⁴ Wilmshurst, op. cit. 92.
early 7th centuries CE their work became more polemical in tone when some wrote against the Zoroastrians and Jews, “the traditional enemies of the Church of the East” and the growing threat of the Jacobites.\textsuperscript{95} In 612 CE the Jacobites attempted to take over the Church of the East by making their candidate the patriarch. Because of the tension between them, the shah intervened and for nearly twenty years did not allow the Church of the East to fill the position of catholicos.\textsuperscript{96}

Second, this also meant that the Christian presence was growing in the region. It is believed that upwards of fifty percent of the population was now Christian in the Sassanian Empire.\textsuperscript{97} In 628 CE, several prominent families within the Church of the East organized a revolt against shah Chosrau (Khosrow) II in an attempt to make Christianity the state religion. Rather than meeting with success, the region fell into chaos and the Sassanian empire ended. Thus the region was weakened on the cusp of the advance of Islam.\textsuperscript{98}

Third, with the tensions with the Jacobites and between Rome and Persia, members of the Church of the East began fleeing to Arabia, settling there to escape the conflicts.\textsuperscript{99} They would join the existing Arab Christian community that was part of the Roman province of Arabia. Meyendorff believes that “The ecclesiastical, cultural and political importance of these communities was substantial. It is there, before Islam, that

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 93.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 65ff.
\textsuperscript{97} Baumer, op. cit., 94.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{99} Wilmshurst, op. cit., 73.
the classical Arabic language was first spoken and written…. The New Testament was translated into Arabic. It is for these educated Christian Arabs of Syria the Quran was put into writing, rather than for the unlettered Bedouins of the Arabian Peninsula.”\textsuperscript{100} Cragg believes that “it was probably Christian missionaries in Arabia who invented the Arabic script itself.”\textsuperscript{101} He goes on to say that “there were vital Christian, and Jewish, factors in the very availability of Arabic vocabulary for the articulation of Islam.”\textsuperscript{102} Lest this sound too “one way” in influence, Griffith, drawing on the work of Cragg, would note how Arabic influenced the larger Christian community within the Islamic empire. He said, “when Christians in the caliphate outside of the Arabian Peninsula began speaking Arabic, they found themselves ‘bound over to a language that is bound over to Islam’,” as was noted in the introduction.\textsuperscript{103} This made an impact on how Christians approached their faith. Whatever weight one wants to give to this influence, it demonstrates that the Church of the East, along with other Christians, would have a strong presence in the place and relationship to the people who would give birth to Islam.

\textsuperscript{100} Meyendorff, op. cit., 110.
\textsuperscript{101} Kenneth Cragg, The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East (Mowbray, 1992), 45.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 45.
Shared Stories: The Sleepers of Ephesus

There is a story within early Christianity about the “Sleepers of Ephesus.” This would become an important tradition within Syriac Christianity, as well as throughout Christendom. The story is told that during the reign of emperor Decius (249-251 CE), the emperor visited Ephesus and issued an edict that anyone who did not offer sacrifice to the pagan gods would suffer the death penalty. Seven young Christian men learned of this threat and fled the city to prepare themselves for martyrdom. They eventually went into a cave to pray, and while there they fell asleep. When they awoke, one of them was sent to the city to buy food. Upon entering the city, the young man was amazed at what he saw. Buildings bore the symbol of the cross and people were speaking freely of Jesus. When he went to pay for a loaf of bread, he tried to use coins bearing the emblem of Decius, which the vendor had not seen before. Unbeknownst to the young man, they had not slept for one night. They had slept for nearly two hundred years. They had awoken to a time when there was now peace for Christians under the emperor Theodosius the Younger (408-450 CE). Because of the miraculous nature of what had happened, the young man was taken to the bishop, and he recounted his tale of what had happened. Upon hearing of this miracle, the bishop declared that their experience confirmed the resurrection of the dead. Emperor Theodosius summoned them and wanted to extend to them royal honors for their experience, but instead they were granted their wish to return to the cave. There
they fell asleep permanently.¹ Babai the Great (551-628 CE), one of the theologians of the Church of the East, would say of this tradition, “The Holy Scriptures call death sleep; thus, too, the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus.”² For Babai, and many others, this was proof that the dead are asleep until the final resurrection.

This same story is told in the eighteenth Surah of the Quran, and in this version the sleepers are known as the “People of the Cave.” There is little historical context given, which assumes that there was already a familiarity with the story. Unlike the Christian version of the story, the number of sleepers is not specified, and they had a dog as a companion who guarded the entrance to the cave. In the Muslim version of the story, the young men fled their own people because their community had fallen into idolatry. Therefore theirs was an act that was taken to preserve their faith, not to escape persecution. When they finally awoke and sent one of the sleepers to buy food, God caused the people to become aware of their presence and the miracle that had occurred. This was intended by God as a sign that the end is near and judgment will soon come. But some people misunderstood the sign and wanted to worship the sleepers and build a mosque on the site of the cave. This was not permitted and it became a teaching moment on who deserves worship, God, and who does not, God’s servants.

¹ There are a variety of accounts of this story, some including greater detail such as the names of the seven young men. The Syriac versions debate whether there were seven or eight sleepers. George Archer, ”The Hellhound of the Qur'an: A Dog at the Gate of the Underworld.” *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 18, no. 3 (2016): 7.
² Ibid., 9.
As we compare the two versions, in the Christian version Archer concludes that “the Sleepers remind the listener of the persecution, burial, and resurrection of Christ. In this case, the reality of Christ [and Christ’s death and Resurrection] is pluralised to foreshadow the general resurrection of the dead at the Eschaton. Like Christ and the Sleepers, all the faithful will enter the sleep of death and rise again on the Last Day.”³ In Islam, however, “following from the Qur’an’s low Christology, the Sleepers serve as a warning against the worship of God’s servants and saints as second divinities and possible intercessors.”⁴ People must turn to God because “it is only God who sees and hears everything.”⁵

While scholars probe the significance of this shared story, one of them used it as a means of rapprochement between Muslims and Christians. Louis Massignon (1883-1962 CE), a Catholic scholar of Islam and pioneer in Muslim-Christian relations, began an annual pilgrimage to the Chapel of the Seven Saints (of Ephesus) in Le Vieux-Marche, France.⁶ His vision was to bring together Muslims and Christians to a site that symbolizes a tradition shared by Christians and Muslims. To this day, the faithful from both traditions gather together in this simple chapel to pray for forgiveness and seek peace between them. Through the tradition of this pilgrimage, the story of the Seven Sleepers

³ Ibid., 8.
⁴ Ibid., 8.
⁵ Ibid., 9.
⁶ There are many sites within Christianity and Islam associated with this tradition.
has become a symbol of the potential for positive relationships between Christians and Muslims.\textsuperscript{7}

\textbf{Shared Sources and Dependency}

Most people have little knowledge of Islam, let alone an awareness of the many stories and traditions that are shared by both faiths. Griffith notes that as scholars have become aware of these similarities, some “have even carried this enterprise to the point of suggesting earlier Christian or Jewish parallels for practically every doctrinal formation to be found in Muslim theology, regardless of its own Islamic context.”\textsuperscript{8} Griffith counsels caution in overextrapolating the dependence of Islam upon Christian and Jewish sources. He states, “From its inception Islamic religious discourse is recognizably and uniquely Islamic, and distinctly non-Christian in its thought, format, and style.”\textsuperscript{9} Therefore, as we explore the connection between the Christian tradition and Islam, which we examine in this chapter and delve into more deeply in the next, we will seek to do so in terms that respect the integrity of Islamic thought rather trying to reduce it to a distorted facsimile of the Abrahamic faiths that preceded it. It is better to speak of influences rather than the wholesale adoption of Christian beliefs and practices that existed at the time of the emergence of Islam.

\textsuperscript{8} Sidney H. Griffith, \textit{The Beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic: Muslim-Christian Encounters in the Early Islamic Period} (Ashgate, 2002), 78.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 78.
Traditional Narratives and the Church of the East’s Experience of Islam

First Contacts

Tradition holds that the Church of the East had a positive relationship with Islam from its inception. “Arab Christian literature makes mention of correspondence that was sent by the Prophet Muhammad and the caliph Omar to Ishoyahb II,” who was catholicos of the Church of the East from 628 to 645 CE. Ishoyahb “is reputed to have received from each a letter of protection for Persian Christendom.” Though this tradition attests to the strength of their relationship, these letters may have been developed at a later date so that the leaders of the Church of the East could provide evidence for later Muslim rulers about the amicable relationship they had enjoyed from the inception of Islam. We also see this amicable relationship portrayed in the tradition of the East Syriac monk, Bahira, which we mentioned in the introduction to this thesis as a story told by Christians and Muslims. It was Bahira who confirmed the special mission of Muhammad and helped educate him. While these traditions reveal some level of reality about the relationship between the Church of the East and Islam, we need to look at what is known historically to better understand their experience.

The Arab Conquests (632-732 CE)

\[^{10}\text{William Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, The Church of the East: A Concise History. (Routledge Curzon, 2003), 41.}\]
\[^{11}\text{Ibid., 41.}\]
The first one hundred years of Islam are often referred to as the period of “Arab conquests,”\(^\text{12}\) which was a remarkable period of expansion for Islam. Within this short span of time Islam spread as far west as Spain and as far east as China. Islam began with Muhammad and his followers emigration to Medina in 622 CE, and by 637 CE the caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab (r. 634-644 CE) led an empire that stretched from Arabia into Syria and was on the doorstep of Jerusalem. The citizens of Jerusalem, sensing defeat was imminent, insisted that the caliph himself come to negotiate the treaty under which they would live. When Umar arrived, he met with Sophronius, the patriarch of Jerusalem, who served as the representative of Rome. This became a pivotal moment in the relationship between Christianity and Islam:

According to the Christian account, when the gates of the city were opened, Caliph Umar and his companions went directly to the courtyard of the Anastasis, the great Church of the Resurrection, known today in its shrunken form as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. When it came time to pray, Umar said to Sophronius the patriarch, “I would like to pray.” Sophronius said, “Pray wherever you wish.” But Umar would not pray in the church. So the patriarch directed him to another church. But Umar said he would not pray there. He explained that if he prayed in the church it would be taken from the Christians and made into a shrine because “Umar prayed there.” So Umar wrote out a document granting Christians the right to hold on to their churches and forbidding the Muslims to pray in their churches or even in front of the churches.\(^\text{13}\)

It is also remembered that this agreement brought with it restrictions for Christians.

Meyendorff states that the caliph “issued a document guaranteeing the preservation of

\(^{12}\) Or “Great conquests” or “Islamic conquests.”

\(^{13}\) Robert Louis Wilken, The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity (Yale University Press, 2012), 293. This represents the treaties that would be forged between the conquerers and the conquered throughout this period; see Michael Bonner, Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practices (Princeton University Press: 2006), 87.
Christian churches and the property rights of Christians [but not allowing any new buildings], on the condition that they would not manifest their faith in the streets, avoid preaching to Muslims, would not prevent conversions of Christians to Islam, and adopt an attitude of submissiveness and loyalty to the conquerers. These principles would regulate the survival of Christian communities under Islam for centuries.”

For some the encounter between Umar and Sophronius has become a symbol of the generous disposition of Islam toward Christianity, and for others it is a symbol of the constraints that Islam placed upon Christianity.

The two ways of symbolizing this story represents the two poles around which people categorize Islam. In the spirit of interfaith generosity, some want to categorize Islam as a religion of peace. And those who are fearful of Islam want to categorize it as a religion of extremism. We must be careful in essentializing any religion in this way because all religions bear a more complex history and diversity of expression than we often acknowledge. With respect to Islam, its history and relationship to Christianity is a very complex one. This is especially true during the period of the Arab conquests. With Islam’s rapid expansion, Christians experienced a certain level of “destruction and mayhem,” but unfortunately some use this as the principal lens through which they see the relationship between Christians and Muslims. Wheatcroft writes, “From the mid

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14 John Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions: The Church AD 450-680* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1989), 358. There are several variations of this treaty, so details as to what was part of the original treaty are in question.

seventh century, ‘Islam’, was seen as the prime external challenge to True Christian Faith…. The image of ‘Islam’ as enemy, competitor, and arch-adversary grew more complex and more potent over time.”\textsuperscript{16} In defining their relationships in this way, he is focusing on Latin and Greek Christianity, not all of Christendom, though his title states he is. And this reductionist view overlooks the complexity of their relationships and the varieties of their experience. Therefore, to understand the nature of the relationship between the Church of the East and Islam during this period, we will introduce five overarching historical conditions that will pave the way to better understand the Church of the East’s experience of the Arab conquests. This is not to soften the fact that conquests occurred. Territories were conquered and control of the populations was in the hands of the Muslim conquerors. But this alone does not tell the story of the Church of the East as to what the conquests represented and how they were experienced.

First, when Islam first emerged, the surrounding area had been the battleground between the Sassanian and Byzantine empires. Both were weakened from their conflict, and within their respective territories, many were discontent with the way their rulers had treated them. As Islam expanded through military and diplomatic means, “the Arabs were cautiously welcomed by the Christian population” in Northern Mesopotamia.\textsuperscript{17} This area had been under Roman rule since 629 CE, and Syriac Christians were persecuted in an attempt to impose Chalcedonian doctrine. Arab control of this territory represented an

opportunity to receive better treatment and status. John Bar Penkaye, a theologian with the Church of the East in the 7th century, even went so far as to cite Gen. 16:12, Deut. 32:30 and Zech. 3:2 as proof texts for the “divine calling of the Arabs.” In Southern Mesopotamia, which was under Sassanian rule and far less oppressive than Roman rule, the reception of the advance of Islam was more neutral. There was no loyalty to the Sassanians, and the Christians knew they would be in a subordinate position regardless of who would rule them. Muslims saw the Christians in Mesopotamia as potential allies and looked favorably on the Church of the East, even granting special privileges to them. Additionally, the Church of the East was known for its learning and erudition, as we highlighted in the previous chapter, and this would create a desire for Muslims to learn from them. Because of this, Emhardt and Lamsa believe that “the Arabians conquered Mesopotamia, but in reality they were conquered by the highly developed civilization of the land.” It was into this milieu that Islam entered the world of the Church of the East.

Second, there is a stereotype associated with the Arab conquests that depicts Islam as being spread by the sword. This is seen in Christian histories about the conquests. Meyendorff attributes Islam’s extraordinary expansion to holy war, which he associates with *jihad).* However, *jihad* as a concept in Islam, still in its formative state at


20 Meyendorff, op. cit., 356.
this time, would not develop until the 8th and 9th centuries CE. Bonner states that *jihad* was not a motivating principle in the Arab conquests: “there was no forced conversion, no choice between ‘Islam and the sword’. Islamic law, following a clear Quranic principle, prohibited any such thing: dhimmis [the protected non-Muslim population] must be allowed to practice their religion.” Omar draws upon the work of Khalid Abou El Fadl, “who has emphatically stated the case when he argued that *jihad* should not be confused with the medieval concept of holy war. ‘Holy war (in Arabic *al-harb al-muqaddasah*) is not an expression used by the Qur’anic text or Muslim theologians. In Islamic theology, war is never holy; it is either justified or not.’” This is why jihad and “holy war” are not highlighted as part of the Arab conquests in this thesis. When the concept of *jihad* developed in the 8th century CE, it would place emphasis on the “greater *jihad*,” which is the internal struggle to live the faith, with a secondary emphasis on the “lesser *jihad*,” which is the defense of the faith with words or actions. This does not mean that there were not places where coercion was exercised, but this is not representative of the principles and practices that Muslims sought to maintain. The notion that Islam was spread by the sword was created by some of the early Christian theologians within the first two centuries of Islam as a way to defend the Christian faith over against Islam. The argument was that Christianity was a religion of peace, and people accepted Christ

21 Michael Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practices* (Princeton University Press: 2006), xvi. Ye’or notes how during the first two centuries Islam was in its embryonic form and would not have a more fixed character until later in its development. Bat Ye’or [Giselle Littman], *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude; Seventh-Twentieth Century* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), 69.
22 Ibid., 90.
because of the miracles he performed confirming the gospel. They said that Islam, however, was spread by military might. In these theologians’ eyes, the true test of a religion’s legitimacy is how a religion is established and less about its development in history.  

“These theologians argue, therefore, that the first converts to Christianity, unlike the first converts to Islam, never converted for any illegitimate reason.”

When these same Christian theologians were confronted with their own history and the militant examples in Hebrew scripture, they either explained it as necessary to defend the faith, which was viewed as legitimate, or distanced themselves from Hebrew scripture. They never allowed Muslim theologians the same room to interpret their own sacred text and history, nor did they account for the origins of Islam in Medina, where Islam was born peacefully through Muhammad and his followers—a people who had lost status and security because of their commitment to their faith, just as the followers of Jesus had suffered. This emphasis would give rise to depicting the Arab conquests as won with the sword. Contrary to this stereotype, some historians of the Church of the East see this period as “one of the most peaceful and prosperous periods in the history of Eastern Christianity.”

As we shall see later in this chapter, the “golden age” of the Church of the East occurred under Islamic rule.

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25 Ibid., 203.

26 Dorroll, op. cit., 206.

27 Emhardt, op. cit., 77.
Third, in much of the land that the Muslims conquered, Christians remained the majority. Baum notes, “even long after the Arab conquest, Christians outnumbered Muslims in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Mesopotamia.” As Islam rapidly expanded, the Muslim conquerors did not seek to impose their religion, their language, or a particular form of government upon the lands they ruled. It was sufficient that the lands were under Muslim control. Therefore the Arab conquests were more about the control of territories than they were the conversion of their populations. Christians were left to govern themselves, and Muslim authorities would work through their patriarchs. They even discouraged conversion to Islam so that non-Muslims would continue to pay the land tax (kharaj) and poll tax (jizya) to live as protected people (ahl al-dhimmah) within the Islamic empire. Overall, the situation was much like the experience of the Church of the East under the Sassanians and their relationship to Zoroastrianism. As for Christians who lived outside of major cities, they may never have met a Muslim during their lifetime even though technically they were under Muslim rule. This was a result of the understanding forged by Caliph Umar (634-644 CE) that the Arabs should settle in towns

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28 Baum, op. cit., 42.
30 The Arabization and Islamization of the empire would begin under the caliph, A’bd al-Malik b. Marwa’n (r. 685–705 CE) and continue into the Abbasid empire. See appendix to Chapter 1 for timeline.
31 Bonner, op. cit., 92.
32 Eventually the land tax (kharaj) would also apply to Muslims as well. This was to make up the shortfall of tax revenue with fewer non-Muslims. Ibid., 86.
33 Wilmshurst, op. cit., 95.
34 Ibid., 101.
and not the countryside. This would make them available for military service as required. In turn, the indigenous, non-Muslim population in the countryside would pay the taxes that would fund the needs of the expanding empire.\textsuperscript{35}

Fourth, while there were Christians who converted to Islam, this was motivated more by pocketbooks, persuasion and positions than the sword. There is a famous letter that the Catholicos Ishoyahb III (r. 649-659 CE) of the Church of the East wrote to one of his colleagues in which he complains about the number of Christians in Oman who had converted to Islam. He was extremely disappointed that they had embraced Islam so that they did not have to pay the taxes levied on non-Muslims. Additionally, Ishoyahb III wrote about how favorably they were treated by Muslims. He said, “As for the Arabs, to whom God has at this time given rule over the world, you know well how they act towards us. Not only do they not oppose Christianity, but they even praise our faith, honor the priests and Saints of our Lord, and give aid to the churches and monasteries.”\textsuperscript{36} Ishoyahb III also admitted that “there was something dangerously seductive about the new religion. Many thoughtful Christian scholars of that period agreed with him. Not only were the Muslims preaching the word of one God, in terms which clearly showed Jewish and Christian influence, but they were doing so in plain, simple language which the common people could understand.”\textsuperscript{37} Wilmshurst concludes that during this period “Islam was, in the eyes of many Christians, a rational faith, and

\textsuperscript{35} Bonner, op. cit., 60.
\textsuperscript{36} Wilmshurst, op. cit., 105.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 105.
one that did not strain the credulity of its adherents.”  Even though some conversions to Islam took place, Penn states that “in the first two and a half centuries of Islamic rule, the actual number of converts from Christianity to Islam did not threaten the survival of Syriac Christianity.” Islamic rule also provided opportunity for advancement. Because Christian culture was more advanced than that of the Arabs, Christians served in prominent positions within the Islamic empire. To take advantage of this opportunity, some Christians would downplay their faith or convert to Islam, though it was not necessarily a condition for this.

Fifth, today we tend to portray identities during this period as primarily religious, imagining that Christians and Muslims each defined their relationships and allegiances based on faith. However, Uriel Simonsohn’s work on conversion to Islam concludes that current scholarship “warns us against speaking of non-Muslim communities in definable terms before the ninth century…. Although the visible definition of the groups was religious, their composition could at least partly be dictated by other factors that also have group-creating power so to speak, in particular status, kinship, ethnicity and territorially.” “Kilpatrick demonstrates the manner in which familial, social, and even professional ties overrode religious differences in ninth-century Iraq,” and other studies

[38] Ibid., 106.
show similar results both before and after the ninth century.⁴² Therefore, we need to be careful in historically identifying and dividing people’s experiences solely by religion. “Identity in the premodern world was itself often flexible.”⁴³ As mentioned in the introduction, Jenkins points out that “Muslims were slow to identify themselves as a distinct religion wholly separate from Jews and Christians. Matters were seen rather in ethnic terms, and early chronicles speak not of Muslims and Christians but of Arabs and Syrians.”⁴⁴ Additionally, there was fluidity between the two faiths and how people associated themselves with it. Penn notes that in the first two centuries of Islam there were “Muslim like” Christians and “Christian like” Muslims.⁴⁵ The religious boundaries and borders between Christians and Muslims were more porous during this period than often acknowledged. This means we cannot write history anachronistically and depict their experiences as one in which the advance of Islam always became an isolating force among non-Muslim religions—or worse yet represent the conquests as a “clash of civilizations.”⁴⁶ The ability to be in relationship with Muslims, and the variety of relationships between Muslims and members of the Church of the East, prevent us from categorizing the Arab conquests in this way.

⁴² Ibid., 649.
⁴³ Bonner, op. cit., 90.
⁴⁴ John Philip Jenkins, The Lost History of Christianity (HarperCollins, 2008), 103-104.
⁴⁵ Penn, 2015, op. cit., 155-167
⁴⁶ Samuel P. Huntington made this phrase popular and through it he indicated that there would be a clash of civilizations between cultures with Islam playing a prominent role because of its extremism. The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (Simon & Schuster, 1996).
These factors may explain why "during the early years of the Arab conquest, to judge purely by the literature produced at this period, the Church of the East was more interested in its internal concerns then in reacting to the challenge of Islam."\textsuperscript{47} We also see that the cumulative force of these realities cause us to reconsider how we understand things like the Arab conquests, the spread of Islam, religious identity, the degree to which they had relationships with one another and the types of relationship they had. One very important note needs to be made as we further explore this relationship. This thesis focuses on the relationship of the Church of the East to Islam. Different denominations in different geographic areas had different experiences. Further, Muslims did not see all Christian groups in the same way. The Church of the East held a favorable place among Muslims. Therefore what one reads in this thesis should not be construed to represent the entirety of the Christian experience within the Islamic empire during the period being examined.

**The Church of the East’s Golden Age (732-823 CE)**

During the Arab conquests, the laissez-faire approach of the Muslim leaders began to change, particularly under the leadership of Caliph Abd al-Malik b. Marwan (r. 685–705 CE). He would begin the Islamization and Arabization of the empire.\textsuperscript{48} In an effort to standardize the empire and bring the different places and people into conformity with a single standard, it would eventually lead to fewer positions being available to Christians

\textsuperscript{47} Wilmshurst, op. cit., 129.
\textsuperscript{48} Penn, 2015, op. cit., 25.
in the government. It also meant that the Muslim rulers would exert greater influence on the affairs of Christians. For example, caliphs could dictate who became the catholicos. “Between 650 and 1050 twelve of the total thirty catholicoi of the Church of the East were imposed by the Islamic rulers.” Even with these constraints, the Church of the East would enter the golden age of its influence and expansion.

As we learned in the previous chapter, the Church of the East was a missionary movement, and just as they had expanded under Sassanian rule, so too would they expand under Islamic rule. The Church of the East would continue to grow in India and advance into Sri Lanka. They continued to grow in numbers and expanded their geographical reach in China, even making it into Tibet. They would also establish themselves in Turkestan and around the Caspian Sea. Already having a presence in Persian Gulf, they expanded into Yemen and Egypt. By 823 CE, “the Church of the East claimed tens of millions of adherents in 230 dioceses with twenty-seven metropolitans.” Wilmshurst believes these numbers should be halved, recognizing the difficult in estimating accurately for this period. Even with this, Wilmshurst believes the Church of the East would become the largest Christian denomination within the Islamic empire, though the Jacobites were catching up. This is what led Wilken to conclude, “more than any other

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49 Baum, op.cit., 43.
50 Ibid., 60.
51 Ibid., 61. While the size of the Church of the East is generally represented with these numbers, there are those who are more cautious in this. Wilmshurst’s estimates there were 2,000,000 at this time (op. cit., 155). This is reflective of Wilmshurst’s more pessimistic tone toward the status and experience of Christians during this period.
52 Wilmshurst, op. cit., 101.
ancient Christian communion the Church of the East made Christianity into a global religion.”

During this period, there would be a shift within the Islamic empire. The era in which the Umayyads ruled (661-750 CE) came to an end, and the Abbasids took control of the caliphate and would rule until 1258 CE. As the Abbasids continued the process of Islamization, they also prioritized religion over race. “True religion, not Arab birth, was to be the basis of Islamic rule.” In the end the difference would be that while “the Umayyad empire was Arab, the Abbasid was more international.” Christians remained the majority of the population. “Before 850, Muslims were still a minority, accounting on average for less than 20 percent of the population. After 950, they were in a majority, accounting for more than 60 percent.” This also entailed a shift in where the center of power was located geographically. In 762 CE, the capital of the Islamic empire would move from Damascus to Baghdad, and the Church of the East would be the only Christian group permitted to move their patriarchate to there.

The Church of the East assumed a mediating role between Muslims and Christians. Because the Church of the East was known for its rich intellectual tradition, large libraries, and knowledge in medicine, mathematics, science, philosophy, theology, law, and many other disciplines, they became “cultural mediators” within the Islamic

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53 Wilken, op. cit., 245.
55 Ibid., Kindle location 7561-7563.
56 Wilmshurst, op. cit., 138.
57 Moffett, op. cit., Kindle location 7367.
empire. This would give them access to the caliph and senior members of the ruling court. The catholicos of the Church of the East would even become “the official representative of [all] the Christians to the Abbasid caliphate.”

He would become “the most influential non-Muslim at the court.” Murre-Van Den Berg characterizes the transition from the Umayyads to the Abbasid caliphs as one in which the Church of the East would enter “a period of relative prosperity and considerable cultural influence.”

As was noted in the discussion of the Arab conquests, religious identity and relationships were more fluid than we have previously understood. There are many examples that represent this. One such example is Khalid al-Qasri, who was one of the most important government officials of his time. He was the provincial governor of Mecca and Iraq (r. 724–738 CE), which constituted key territories in the caliphate. His mother was a Christian, and he “showed great consideration to Iraq's Jews, Christians in Zoroastrians.” He is also said to “have built his mother a church behind the mosque in Kufa, and to have claimed once that Christianity was superior to Islam.” It is probably not surprising to learn that he had his critics and was accused of being too much of a freethinker.

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58 Baum, op. cit., 64.
59 Ibid., 59.
61 Ibid., 253.
62 Wilmshurst, op. cit., 110.
63 Ibid., 110.
During the reign of Caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 786-809 CE), a great library and center of learning was established in Baghdad that was known as the House of Wisdom (bayt al-hikmah). Muslims, Jews and Christians studied there and engaged in dialogue and debate about theology, philosophy, science and many other areas. This important center “was staffed essentially by Nestorian scholars who mastered Syriac, Greek, and Arabic, and who were commissioned to translate the scientific and philosophical works of the Greeks.”

If we look slightly past the period under consideration, there was an interesting development in the political role that a Christian would come to hold. “The Caliph al-Mu’tadid (892-902) agreed to the appointment of a Nestorian as governor of the important region of Al-Anbar in the neighborhood of Baghdad, the capital of the empire.” We often confine the roles that Christians could hold as subservient to Muslims, but in this case a member of the Church of the East was appointed to a position with political power over Muslims in an important center of the Islamic empire. Because of this, “Christians were tempted to claim full rights of equality with all Muslim fellow-citizens.”

We noted earlier that the caliph Umar (r. 634-644 CE) had imposed restrictions upon Christians that would become the model that future caliphs would use for non-Muslims, particularly under the efforts of the Islamization of the empire. However, often

65 Ibid., 271.
66 Ibid., 271.
these restrictions existed in theory and were not necessarily imposed. The Church of the East was permitted to expand and build new churches, even though theoretically policy and practice would have not permitted this. This shows that even though technically there were restrictions, they were eased by the Abbasids for Christians, particularly the Church of the East.

If there is one person associated with the Church of the East’s golden age, it is the catholicos Timothy I (r. 780-823 CE). Timothy developed a reputation for knowing how to play the ecclesiastical game. It is said that when the patriarchate became open and voting was to take place, Timothy had heavy bags brought in and placed in sight of the bishops. Accustomed to simony and knowing that Timothy came from a wealthy family, they assumed they were filled with gold for them. After they voted for Timothy, they went to collect their prize, but to their dismay the bags were filled with stones. Timothy would use his shrewdness and winsomeness to advance the Church of the East.

Timothy lived through the reign of five caliphs, and he knew all of them personally. His famous debate with Caliph al-Mahdi (r. 775-785 CE) would become the model for Christian-Muslim engagement. It took course over two days, and Timothy, a prolific author, recorded this debate, which centered on their understandings of Christ and Muhammad. “There was no declared winner of the debate. In a sense both won, for

67 Ibid., 271.
68 Christoph Baumer, The Church of the East (l. B. Tauris, 2006), 151.
70 Wilmshurst, op. cit., 144.
the affair ended in what could be described as the high point in Muslim and Christian relationships in the whole history of the Muslim conquest.”

Timothy furthered the Church of the East’s commitment to the worldwide spread of the gospel, and this helped spur the geographic expansion of the Church of the East, and along with it the creation of new ecclesiastical provinces within the areas they had reached. This is why he has became a legendary figure strongly associated with their golden age, and why he is remembered as “one of the greatest patriarchs of the Church of the East.”

Timothy’s leadership and the Church of the East’s influence led John Mason Neale to conclude in 1850 CE, “the Nestorian Church at the height of its power under the Abbasids was as influential as the Roman papacy.” Wilmshurst says this idea has persisted about them, though he believes it to be an overstatement. He gives more weight to the not so golden experiences of this period, which will be discussed in the next section.

Given the traditional narratives associated with the relationship between Christians and Muslims from 622 to 823 CE, it is remarkable that the Church of the East could have held such privilege during this period. We have already explored many of the reasons why this was possible, but Baumer adds two more important ones. He says, “The Church of the East had two distinct advantages over other Churches as well. First, of all the Christologies, the Nestorian most closely resembled the Islamic interpretation of Jesus, since it emphasized his humanity and did not call Mary God-bearer. Second, the

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71 Moffett, op. cit., Kindle location 7613-7614.
73 As quoted by Wilmshurst, op. cit., 155.
Church of the East had for centuries been hierarchically independent of the arch-enemy Byzantium.”

In the end, there was no one reason for such a relationship to emerge between the conquered and the conqueror, but the various influences came together in a way that would lead to their remarkable, and largely unknown, story.

**Not All Was Golden**

While this may have been the Church of the East’s golden age marked by much influence, not all was as golden as it seemed. In some ways, at the height of the Church of the East’s influence it was also on the precipice of decline.

The experience of members of the Church of the East was not even, depending upon where one lived. While during the period of the Arab conquests life remained relatively unchanged for Christians in rural areas, often never encountering a Muslim, this would begin to change. The process of Arabization, which began with the Umayyads and continued with the Abbasids, would result in a colonization of rural areas, which sometimes resulted in marginalizing the status and rights of Christians. As a Muslim presence reached these areas, and with a weak central authority to oversee these places, Christians were more vulnerable to being taken advantage of by the greedy, making them pay higher taxes than required. They were also susceptible to raids from nomadic

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74 Baumer, op. cit., 148.
75 Bat Ye’or, op. cit., 63.
plunderers. Overtime, people began abandoning their land and the desertification of some areas would occur.\textsuperscript{76}

There were also periods of persecution. Even though the debate between Timothy I and Caliph al-Mahdi reveals the generosity of al-Mahdi toward Christians, at one point he was angry at the victory of the Byzantines on the border, so he ordered the destruction of some churches.\textsuperscript{77} There were also difficulties under the reign of Caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 785-809 CE), known to us through \textit{Arabian Nights} fame, who reigned during the height of the Abbasid’s golden age.\textsuperscript{78} Toward the end of his reign he ordered that all churches in the borderlands be destroyed. How many were actually destroyed is unknown, and ironically, Harun would also help to rebuild churches.\textsuperscript{79} The caliph “also revived an earlier practice of forcing Christians, Jews, and other religious minorities to mark themselves publicly as non-Muslims by their dress.”\textsuperscript{80} There were also difficulties under Caliph al-Mamun (r. 813-833 CE). This was not so much because of the caliph’s restrictive policies but because he was sympathetic to the Muatazalites, who were Muslims who used reason and Greek philosophy in developing theological positions. Those who wanted a more traditionalist approach, relying on the Quran and Sunnah, galvanized in their opposition to the caliph, creating problems for the Christian

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\textsuperscript{76} Baumer, op. cit., 150.
\textsuperscript{77} Moffett, op. cit., Kindle location 7704
\textsuperscript{78} Not all would see this period as the golden age. Some would point to the Muhammad’s lifetime, others to the four rightly guided caliphs, and still others to a later period. Eickelman, op. cit., 33-34.
\textsuperscript{79} Moffett, op. cit., Kindle location 7717.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., Kindle location 7724.
community as well. Because of the marginalization experienced during their “golden age,” which at times could result in physical threats, “many Christians migrated to the Byzantine empire and settled there, and those who remained behind were viewed with suspicion by the Muslims.” There was also “an exodus of Christians to such places as Sinope on the Black Sea.” This movement toward Islamization continued. Caliph Mutawakkil (r. 847-861 CE) “took alarm at the explosion of new knowledge pouring into the empire from non-Muslim sources. His caliphate hardened the empire into a pattern of rigid Sunnite orthodoxy that began to stifle independent research and scientific inquiry and increase the suppression of religious dissent by force when he thought necessary.” These were all signs that while the Church of the East was reaching its peak, signs of its imminent decline were also present.

Though Christians remained the majority during this period, the tide was turning and more Christians began to convert to Islam. Some found Islam attractive, questioning “whether it represented another heretical Christian (or Jewish) sect or if Mohammed might not really be the promised paraclete.” Its “down-to-earth” approach

82 Baum, op. cit., 59.
83 Moffett, op. cit., Kindle location 7694-7696.
84 The narrative begins to turn more from coexistence to conversion, not that one can categorize the early or latter periods covered in thesis quite so neatly. It is only to give an indication of shifts that were occurring.
85 Baumer, op. cit., 152.
to religion and “simple, comprehensible creed” attracted many. Not only was Islam itself found attractive by some, the continuing economic inducements incentivized people to become Muslims by relieving the need to pay the taxes levied on non-Muslims. And while the Umayyads had little interest in conversion, the Abbasids sought to Islamicize the empire and were more eager to see people become Muslims. This, coupled with the fact that Christians could convert to Islam but Muslims could not convert to Christianity, made the changing pattern of affiliation hard to counter. As Wilmshursts noted, “with both the intellectual attraction to Islam and the practical benefits it made it compelling to convert.” Therefore the sway toward Islam was more than a religious one. There were also political and economic forces at play. With this growing trend, by 900 CE Muslims would become a majority.

**More Than Relationships**

Sidney Griffith has done pioneering work on East (Church of the East) and West Syriac Christianity’s relationship to Islam, and through this he has found that the story of these two faiths is about more than their relationship. It is about the way they influenced one another. There is a sense in which Islam, through the Quran, acknowledges the depth with which the two faiths are interrelated, even encouraging its followers to seek the

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86 Baumer, op. cit., 152.
87 Wilmshurst, op. cit., 138.
89 See previous note on this and Bonner, op. cit., 89. Jenkins estimates that Muslims constituted 40% of the population by 850 CE and nearly 100% by 1100 CE. Jenkins, op. cit., 113.
counsel of those who had revealed scripture before Islam. In the Quran, God says, “If you are in doubt about what We have sent down to you, ask those who were reading scripture before you” (10:94). This connection is more than the shared stories. As was alluded to at the end of the last chapter, Christians, who lived in the region and spoke Arabic, also had rich liturgical and confessional languages in Syriac. Griffith believes the echoes of Syriac Christianity “can yet be heard in the very diction of the Qur’n.” There has much research and debate on the degree of influence Syriac and Aramaic, of which Syriac is a dialect, had on the Quran. But the debate points directly to the Syriac Christian tradition, particularly the Church of the East, and the potential influence its liturgies and traditions had on the development of the Quran.

This was not a one-way influence. As Christians began to theologize in Arabic, it presented its own challenge. Griffith notes, “One of the most persistent problems to be faced by the Christian Arabic writers… was the challenge of how to express the distinctive teachings of Christianity in an Arabic idiom in which the religious vocabulary had already acquired strong Islamic overtones.” “A notable feature of their work is their adoption of the methods, and even the technical terminology of the Islamic ‘ilm al-kalam [literally “science of debate” which is thought of as “Islamic theology”], in an effort to translate Christian theological concepts into the religious idiom of the Arabic

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90 One can also find verses that give counsel in the opposite direction.
92 For a summary of this, see Emran Elbadawi, “The Impact of Aramaic (Especially Syriac) on the Quran,” Religion Compass 8/7 (2014): 220–228.
language.” 94 This would give shape to the Church of the East’s, as well as other Eastern Christian’s, approach to theology.

Moffett cites another possible influence of the Church of the East on Islam, which has to do with its Christian community in Arabia. He writes:

G. E. von Grunebaum makes the important point that unlike the Jacobite Monophysites of Arabia, who remained nomads, the Nestorian Christians of Hirta formed a close community calling themselves “servants of God” whose inner unity transcended traditional Arab tribal differences. He goes further to suggest that this was not only the “first known example of Arabic speakers grouped by a common ideology,” but may well have been a model for the later politico-religious “community” of the Muslims, the umma. 95

Therefore the way that the Church of the East formed community in pre-Islamic Arabia may have influenced the Islamic conception of community that would transcend tribe, race, and ethnicity.

Because of the number of similarities with Islam, some Christians of this period considered Islam a heresy rather than another religion. 96 The similarities also served as an enticement to convert to Islam. To stem the tide of these conversions, it gave rise to “the composition of the first Christian apologetic tracts in the Islamic milieu.” 97 Griffith goes on to add that “the seemingly comprehensive challenge to Christian faith prompted at least two important Christian writers, one in Greek and the other in Syriac, to produce the first ever comprehensive, summary compendia of Christian doctrine.” 98

95 Moffett, op. cit., Kindle location 6027-6030.
97 Ibid., 35.
98 Ibid., 40.
As Christians engaged Islam, Griffith has found that “it is relatively rare in Christian Arabic texts from the early Islamic period to find passages quoted from the Qur’n and directly attributed to the Islamic scripture by name.” But when Christians did cite the Quran, it may be surprising to find that they did it as support in proving Christians claims. Additionally, “Christians in the early Islamic period not infrequently spoke of Muhammad, as a king pleasing to God for having saved the Arabs from idolatry.” Perhaps the most generous example of this is Catholicos Timothy’s comments about Muhammad in his debate with Caliph al-Mahdi, which we referenced earlier in this chapter. Timothy said:

Muhammad is worthy of all praise, by all reasonable people, O my Sovereign. He walked in the path of the prophets and trod in the track of the lovers of God. All the prophets taught the doctrine of one God, and since Muhammad taught the doctrine of the unity of God, he walked, therefore, in the path of the prophets. Further, all the prophets drove men away from bad works, and brought them nearer to good works, and since Muhammad drove his people away from bad works and brought them nearer to the good ones, he walked, therefore, in the path of the prophets. Again, all the prophets separated men from idolatry and polytheism, and attached them to God and to his cult, and since Muhammad separated his people from idolatry and polytheism, and attached them to the cult and the knowledge of one God, beside whom there is no other God, it is obvious that he walked in the path of the prophets. Finally, Muhammed taught about God, His Word and His Spirit, and since all the prophets had prophesied about God, His Word and His Spirit, Muhammad walked, therefore, in the path of all the prophets.

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99 Ibid., 55-56.
100 Ibid., 167. This did not mean that they presumed that the Quran was revealed scripture. It was a tool in advancing the claims of Christianity.
101 Ibid., 104.
102 Moffett, op. cit., Kindle location 7600-7608.
This speaks to the tone that Christians displayed in their writings about Islam. After examining the works from this period, Griffith states:

And the apologetic works themselves are obviously products of the Islamic world; they could not be confused with Christian texts written in any other cultural milieu of the early medieval period. For one thing, these works lack the extremely negative rhetoric of contemporary Greek or Latin anti-Islamic texts, and they are singularly lacking in the customary invective these compositions directed against Muhammad, or the Qur’an. Rather, in the Arabic texts written by Christians in the world of Islam it is clear that the intention of their authors was to compose a Christian discourse in the Arabic language, sufficient both to sustain the faith of Christians living in that world and to commend the reasonable credibility of Christianity to their Muslim neighbors in their own religious idiom.¹⁰³

The need for Christians to defend their faith and articulate their identity need not result in the demonization of the other.¹⁰⁴ The Church of the East’s experience and engagement with Islam shows that it can take a more positive tone. In the end, it prompted Christians to express more thoroughly what grounded them as Christians, and it called upon them “to maintain the highest intellectual standards because of the constant competition they faced from other faiths.”¹⁰⁵ This also meant that just as Christians believe they had some influence on Islam, so too the engagement with Islam would shape Christianity. This period would come to “affect the shape and style of Christian theology in all of its phases forever thereafter, even well beyond the confines of the world of Islam.”¹⁰⁶ Jenkins would deem this as a necessary development because the key difference for survival is

¹⁰⁴ Not that there weren’t some who took a more negative posture.
¹⁰⁵ Jenkins, op. cit., 46.
¹⁰⁶ Griffith, 2008, op. cit., 44.
“how deep a church planted its roots in a particular community, and how far the religion
became part of the air that ordinary people breathed.”\(^{107}\)

To speak of theological influences is not the same as having theological agreement. Initially, Christian theologians did not engage Islam but focused on the
looming question: why would God allow them to be under Arab rule? The predominant
Christian position was that it was punishment that God allowed for the sins of the
people.\(^{108}\) It was also a time they sought to place their current position within a larger
apocalyptic narrative in which in the end God will set things right and Christians will
prevail.\(^{109}\) As their contact with Muslims grew, they moved into theological and
philosophical exchange in which issues surfaced that would be debated between
Christians and Muslims for the next millennium. The central issues included the faith of
Abraham, who stands as a shared progenitor of their religious traditions. Muslims wanted
to know what Christians considered the substance of the faith and doctrine of Abraham,
and if it was Christian, why is not Christ mentioned? With the strict monotheism of
Islam, the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation were also debated. With the
prominence of Muhammad in Islam, there was debate around the Christian assessment
of his status as a prophet. There was also considerable debate about whether the Quran was
a revealed scripture. For Muslims, for whom the greatest sin is associating anything or
anyone with God (\textit{shirk}), the Christian practice of venerating crosses and icons was

\(^{107}\) Jenkins, op. cit., 35.

\(^{108}\) Sidney H. Griffith, “Disputing with Islam in Syriac: The Case of the Monk of Bêt Halê

\(^{109}\) Ibid., 35.
problematic and continued to be a point of contention. Through all of these disputes, there was a continuing debate on how one recognizes the true religion. Therefore, while we examine the relationships and influences these two faiths had on one another, we cannot forget that it also raised theological issues that would divide them for centuries to come.

While we have seen that scholars of Syriac Christianity can intimate and sometimes point to the possible influence of Syriac Christianity on Islam, as we shall see in the next chapter, scholars of Islam make bolder assertions about this.

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Chapter 3 - Islam’s Relation to the Church of the East:
Traditional Narratives and New Understandings
(622 CE - 823 CE)

The Prophet Turns to the Church of the East for Help

There is an important story in Islam about how the Prophet Muhammad handled the growing problem of persecution by the people of Mecca, the city in which Muhammad lived. After Muhammad began receiving revelations from God in 610 CE, he shared this with those around him and they began to embrace the message he preached. As the group grew, it became clear to the Meccans that the values and beliefs this group embraced may challenge the status quo of their society. Threatened by this, the Meccans began to persecute the people who were part of this new movement. As the persecution intensified, in 615 CE Muhammad sent a group of eighty people to Ethiopia\(^1\) for protection.\(^2\) The king of Ethiopia was a Christian from the Church of the East and was known as a hospitable and just man.\(^3\)

With the departure of this group to Ethiopia, the Meccans began to fear that the small band of Muslims may grow in size and may also develop allies. Therefore they sent an emissary from Mecca to the king to inform him that the members of this group were

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\(^1\) Then known as the Kingdom of Abyssinia, which comprised the northern half of present day Ethiopia.

\(^2\) The story has different versions, some listing two migrations to Ethiopia, one in 615 CE and a second in 616 CE. The number of people sent also varies. I have used the shorter version since this serves an illustrative purpose.

\(^3\) Today Christianity is represented by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which is considered a part of the Oriental Orthodox, who are non-Chalcedonian but are not part of the Church of the East.
not refugees; they were in fact fugitives trying to escape the consequences of their wrong actions. The king, being a wise man, knew there was always two sides to a story, and so he summoned the representative of the Muslims to give an account for why they had come to his kingdom. The representative told the king:

O King! We were ignorant people and we lived like wild animals. The strong among us lived by preying upon the weak. We obeyed no law and we acknowledged no authority save that of brute force. We worshipped idols made of stone or wood, and we knew nothing of human dignity. And then God, in His Mercy, sent to us His Messenger who was himself one of us. We knew about his truthfulness and his integrity. His character was exemplary, and he was the most well-born of the Arabs. He invited us toward the worship of One God, and he forbade us to worship idols. He exhorted us to tell the truth, and to protect the weak, the poor, the humble, the widows and the orphans. He ordered us to show respect to women, and never to slander them. We obeyed him and followed his teachings. Most of the people in our country are still polytheists, and they resented our conversion to the new faith which is called Islam. They began to persecute us and it was in order to escape from persecution by them that we sought and found sanctuary in your kingdom.4

Hearing this, the emissary tried a new strategy. He declared that not only were they fugitives, they also reject the divinity of Christ and said he was a mere man. The king then asked the Muslim representative of their view of Jesus, and he replied, “Our judgment of Jesus is the same as that of Allah and His Messenger, in other words, Jesus is God's servant, His Prophet, His Spirit, and His command given unto Mary, the

innocent virgin.”⁵ Upon hearing this, the king said, “Jesus is just what you have stated him to be, and is nothing more than that.” He then said to the Muslims, “Go to your homes and live in peace. I shall never give you up to your enemies.”⁶

The king would come to learn of the many similarities between their faiths, which gave the Muslim community special status within his kingdom. They would stay there until they could return to join Muhammad in Medina, where the Muslim community had migrated in 622 CE. In the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (sunnah), it is recorded that when Muhammad learned that the king had died, he said to the community, “A righteous man hath died today. Rise, therefore, and pray for your brother Ashamah [the king].”⁷ This expresses the close connection the Prophet, and by extension the Muslim community, had to the Church of the East.⁸

The representation in this exchange is as reported by Muslims, and it is intended to show the strength of the relationship based on a shared core of beliefs. However, it should not be viewed as a theological exchange representative of what the Church of the East believed at that time. Instead, it should be viewed as something that symbolized Muslims’ affinity with Christians.

To get at the bond expressed in this story, it is helpful to highlight the concept of ahl al-dhimmah, which means “people (ahl) who are protected (dhimmah)” or more

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⁵ Ibid., n.p.
⁶ Ibid., n.p.
⁷ Imam Abu 'Abd-Allah Muammad Ibn Isma'il Al-Bukhari, Sahih al-Bukhari: The Early Years of Islam, Muhammad Asad trans. (Islamic Book Trust, 1981): 179. Other variations expound on this to show that the king had become a Muslim.
⁸ They are called Nestorians in the footnote to this tradition (hadith). Ibid., 179.
simply phrased, “protected people.” It was used as a designation for Christians, Jews, and at times other religions. Today when one reads about Islam, *dhimmah* is viewed as a legal category that prescribed and proscribed what non-Muslims could do while living in Muslim occupied lands. However, at the time of the Prophet, the use of this term did not represent a legal category. Instead it gave a sacred character to the relationship. What is unknown to many is that *ahl al-dhimmah* is a concept that developed over time, and the origin of its meaning tells us something about the early Islamic view of Christianity.

Mahmoud Ayoub notes that “*dhimmah* as a concept was first used to designate moral and spiritual relations among communities of faith, but was later reduced to a mere name or designation of subordinate communities.” *Dhimmah* was originally used to describe a covenantal aspect to a relationship. Ayoub states, “even before Islam, Arab society regarded bonds of *dhimmah* as sacred.” As Islam made use of this concept and gave it a moral base, Jews and Christians were called the *dhimmah* of God (people part of God’s covenant), not simply *ahl al-dhimmah* (protected people). This is something that is omitted in introductory texts to Islam, yet it has great significance for how Muslims viewed Christians. *Dhimmah* of God points to God’s covenant of protection with humankind, and in referring to Christians and Jews as *dhimmah* of God, it extends this sacred sense to the relationships Muslims would have with Christians and Jews. One can

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9 For the implications of this status for the Church of the East, see chapter 2.  
11 Ibid., 29.  
12 Ibid., 32.
hear this echoed in the story of Muhammad and the king. Over time, however, the dhimma of God were reduced to ahl al-dhimma, and with that the relationship moved from “that of a sacred responsibility or divine charge to one of a legal relationship.” In understanding the original sense of dhimma, it shows that the nascent movement that would become Islam saw itself in a special relationship with Christians and Jews. The question remains whether the relationship went beyond a bond, and if these non-Muslim groups would influence and give shape to what would eventually be called Islam, to which we now turn our attention.

In the last fifty years, there has been a growing body of research on the origins of Islam that have used historical-critical methods, and this is shedding light on the relationship and influence Christianity had on Islam. This chapter will provide an overview of this research as a way to see the potential new ways of understanding the rich relationship the two faiths have shared with one another. As we will see, some of this research is far too speculative upon which to base any conclusions, but the combined force of this scholarship calls for a closer examination of how we understand Islam’s relationship to Christianity. Minimally, it can help us tell the story of origin and evolution of Islam in a way that better highlights the place of Christianity in it.

13 Ibid., 31.
Traditional Narratives and Islam’s Relation the Church of the East (632-823 CE)

I teach a course on Islam and use John Esposito’s *Islam: the Straight Path* as a textbook. In introductory texts, the similarities between Islam, Christianity and Judaism are always referenced. Esposito states, “Like Jews and Christians, Muslims worship the God of Abraham and Moses, believe in God’s revelation and prophets, and place a strong emphasis on moral responsibility and accountability.”14 But beyond this, not much mention is made of the relationship between Christianity and Islam. In Esposito’s case, he does highlight some of the variations in the Islamic tradition that are shared with Judaism and Christianity,15 but ultimately he frames their relationship as one in which “Muslims tolerated Christianity, but they disestablished it.”16 When speaking of the golden age of the Abbasids in the 8th and 9th centuries CE, he presents the desire to collect and translate manuscripts from other parts of the world as an Islamic initiative. He makes no mention of the Syriac Christian presence that before the advent of Islam had already amassed large libraries and had been collecting, translating and studying manuscripts on philosophy, science, medicine, law, and many other fields. As we have already pointed out, from a cultural and civilizational standpoint, Islam engaged and built upon what was already being done by Christians and other religions, and further, they

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15 Ibid., 22-23.
included Christians in their quest to increase their knowledge.\(^\text{17}\) Esposito, who is an advocate for and active participant in Christian-Muslim relations, overlooks the rich history of relationships that these religions shared as Islam was taking shape. Until we know the broader story, it will not be able to inform how we understand the past in ways that can inform the potential for the future. Sadly, what is true of Esposito’s book is true of most introductory texts to Islam.\(^\text{18}\) Absent this broader story, Esposito concludes, “Despite their common monotheistic roots, the history of Christianity and Islam has more often than not been marked by confrontation rather than peaceful coexistence and dialogue.”\(^\text{19}\)

To further explore the ways we can understand this relationship, we now turn to Islam’s relationship to Christianity with particular attention to the Church of the East. I offer the following very cautiously. This is for two reasons. First, I am a non-Muslim, and second, much of what is summarized in this chapter represents a revisionist understanding of the origins of Islam. Having said this, the work that will be reviewed has been done by non-Muslim Islamicists because they are the ones who introduced historical-critical methods in the study of Islam.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 58.
\(^{18}\) If we look at three other best selling introductory works, this is true of them as well: Reza Aslan, \textit{No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam}, Updated edition (Random House, 2011); Karen Armstrong, \textit{Islam: A Short History} (The Modern Library, 2000); and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, \textit{Islam: Religion, History, and Civilization} (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), which only devotes seven pages to the period covered in this thesis. If we turn to a more specialized introduction, the exploration of the relationship of Christianity to Islam remains absent; see Gerhard Endress, \textit{Islam: An Historical Introduction}, Carole Hillenbrand, trans. Second edition (Edinburgh University Press, 1994). In introductory works, the relationship is often confined to their status as \textit{dhimmah}.
\(^{19}\) Esposito, op. cit., 63.
Before proceeding, it is important to know the traditional understanding of how devout Muslims approach the origin of Islam.²⁰ They believe that Islam began with the revelations God gave to the Prophet Muhammad beginning in 610 CE until his death in 632 CE.²¹ Muhammad was both a prophet and messenger of God,²² and what God revealed to Muhammad was written down by others and would become the Quran. Muhammad was only the conduit through which God gave this revelation, and Muhammad did not influence it in any way. The result is that Muslims believe that the Quran is not based on his or anyone else’s thoughts and experiences. Furthermore, Muslims do not view the Quran as a new revelation. God also revealed God’s will to Jews and Christians, which is why Muslims refer to them as the “people of the book” (ahl al-kitab). Muslims believe the sacred texts of the Jews and Christians were corrupted over time. Therefore the similarities between Islam and what preceded it are because the same God revealed them—not because of contact and influences between people of these faiths. This also means that the Quran does not represent something new. It represents the original revelation and will serve as “the final revelation of the God of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad.”²³ Additionally, the sayings and actions (hadith) of Muhammad

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²⁰ It is very important to understand that Muslims do not approach faith and belief in the same way, as is true in any religion. There are cultural Muslims, nominal Muslims, traditional Muslims, progressive Muslims, LGBTQ Muslims, etc. Therefore, what is summarized here is the traditional approach to how the origins of Islam are understood.

²¹ 622 CE, with the emigration (hijra) of Muslims from Mecca to Medina (Yathrib), marks the beginning of Islam.

²² “God” is used instead of “Allah” because “Allah” is the Arabic term for designating “God” and was used by monotheists, including Christians. It is not a name assigned to God by Muslims.

²³ Ibid., 21.
were collected and together they form an authoritative tradition (sunnah) for Muslims.\textsuperscript{24} There is a sense in which Muhammad is the “living Quran” so that people can see how God’s will is to be embodied, but this is only by example. Muhammad is not viewed as divine nor is he to be worshipped. With this understanding in mind, what is summarized in this chapter is not offered so one can assess whether it is corroborative of the Muslim understanding of the origins of their faith. It is offered so that one can see how the use of historical-critical methods by non-Muslim Islamicists are yielding results that should be in conversation with those who study Syriac Christianity. In doing so, we may be able to better assess the ways in which we can broaden the story of the relationship between Muslims and Christians.

Rethinking the Origins of the Relationship between Islam and Christianity

A good starting place is the work of Fred Donner, a scholar on the origins of Islam at the University of Chicago. He recently summarized the shift that has occurred in the understanding of the origins of Islam, and from this we can explore other works that have been done.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{24} For an expanded summary of the traditional understanding of the origins of Islam, see Fred M. Donner, \textit{Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam} (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 39-50.

Donner gives attention to Peter Brown’s *The World of Late Antiquity: Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad.*\(^{26}\) Not only did Brown re-periodize scholarly focus around the 2nd through 8th centuries, which lead to today’s categorization of this period as “Late Antiquity,” he also gave attention to the rise of Islam. He extended attention from the decline and fall of the Roman Empire and the end of Sassanian reign to the cultural and civilizational shifts that would occur with the emergence of Islam in the Near East and the growth of Christianity in Europe. Brown would cast the emergence of Islam as part of the “excited acclamation of new growth.”\(^{27}\) If we look beyond what Donner summarizes, Brown does not offer new insights into the relationship between Christianity and Islam, particularly as it relates to the Church of the East. However, by recasting this period more positively, he helps cast Islam in a fairer light. For example, he is equitable in striking a balance between the military means Muslims used for expansion and the model of Muhammad, who Brown says “created a religious empire in Arabia almost exclusively through negotiation.”\(^{28}\) This is not revisionist in its understanding, but it begins to acknowledge how existing cultures influenced the development of Islamic civilization.

Marshall Hodgson’s work also points in this same direction, though not mentioned by Donner. In *The Venture of Islam,* while not addressing the ways Christianity or Judaism may have influenced the religious tradition of Islam, he points to the influences these and other religions had on the cultures and civilization that would

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 7.
\(^{28}\) Ibid., 193.
emerge with the rise of Islam. He says, “Many non-Muslims—Christians, Jews, Hindus, etc.—must be recognized not only as living socially within the sphere of the Muslim culture; they must be recognized as integral and contributory participants in it, engaging actively in many of its cultural dialogues.²⁹” His distinction between religious tradition, culture, and civilization is helpful because too often influences between religions are framed solely in religious terms, which misses the cultural engagement that occurs between them. Additionally, Brown and Hodgson are a healthy counter to the notion that Muslims came with a fully developed culture and civilization to which all others must conform. Nearly seventy years before Brown and Hodgson’s works, Ignác Goldziher, a “father of Islamic studies,” said, “For a long time we have been content with the simple assertion: All of a sudden Islam came into existence and immediately sprung up into broad daylight.”³⁰ Goldziher then proceeded to advocate for the inclusion of a more modern and critical approach so we could learn how Islam evolved. The work of Goldziher, Brown and Hodgson would pave the way for scholars to introduce historical-critical methods into the study of the origins of Islam.

In the 1970s, the emphasis on outside influences on the development of Islam would move into the sphere of its religious tradition, particularly the Quran. Until then, non-Muslim scholars generally believed the Quran was a product of Muhammad’s own

life and thought, though they did not believe the Quran was revealed by God. Donner says that the “first blow” to this understanding came with the 1970 dissertation and subsequent book by Günter Lüling, *Über den Ur-Koran* (On the Original Qur’an).³¹

Donner writes:

Lüling’s critique was theologically-based and proposed an alternative view of how the Qur’an had developed and, consequently, of Muhammad’s career. In Lüling’s view, the Qur’an was in part a reworking of older liturgical hymns of a hitherto unknown Arabic-speaking Christian community in Mecca. According to him, Muhammad had begun his life as a member of this Christian cult, but came to disagree with some of its theology and consequently altered these strophic hymns to reflect his new religious views. Lüling attempted, by making various changes to the standard Qur’an text, to uncover what he thought was their original Christian meaning.³²

Though Lüling’s work was heavily criticized, it did open the door to begin to reconsider the origins of the Quran and Islam, and in doing so it drew a direct connection to Christianity.

In 1977, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook published *Hagarism*, which Donner considers “the most important single book in Islamic studies in the twentieth century.”³³

In their research they set aside traditional Islamic sources and sought to reconstruct Islam’s origins through non-Muslim sources. This work, which Donner notes was impeccably researched and hence harder to dismiss, concluded that Islam was formed when Jews living in Edessa were evicted by the Byzantines and fled to Arabia. There they would join forces with Muhammad to reconquer the Holy Land from the Byzantines.

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³² Ibid., 7.
³³ Ibid., 11.
Though Donner does not mention this, Crone would go on to do work that would advocate for a Jewish Christian influence on the Quran. By “Jewish Christian” she means those who continued to follow Jewish practice as Christians and that devotion to Jesus was “a part of God’s covenant with Israel, not as a transfer of God’s promise of salvation from the Jews to the gentiles. Some of them regarded Jesus as a prophet, others saw him as a heavenly power, but all retained their Jewish identity and continued to observe the law.”\(^{34}\) Crone compared emphases in Jewish Christianity with similar emphases in the Quran and concluded that there must have been some level of Jewish Christian influence on Islam and the formation of the Quran. In particular she holds up the Quranic emphasis of “Jesus as a prophet to the Israelites and Mary as an Aaronid” as very difficult to dismiss as not originating with Jewish Christianity.\(^{35}\) This, however, runs counter to Griffith’s claim that the Christians to whom the Quran would refer and with whom they were in relationship were “the ‘Nestorians,’ the ‘Jacobites,’ and the ‘Melkites.’”\(^{36}\) Crone’s work makes an interesting connection because, as noted earlier in this thesis, Edessa was an important center for the Church of the East, and their faith had a strong Jewish character. It raises the question as to whether the Jewish character of the Church of the East could also account for these influences.


\(^{36}\) Griffith, op. cit., 8.
This trend toward revisionist understandings continued and led to some speculative results. Karl-Heinz Ohlig edited and contributed to an interesting work that represents a German-based research society called “Inārah,” which means “enlightenment” in Arabic. They are an interdisciplinary group that uses a broad range of approaches, including archaeological, sociological, linguistic, philological and epigraphic means to rethink the origins of Islam. Rather than engage the traditional narrative of the origins of Islam, they often disregard sacred sources and seek to reconstruct the rise of Islam based on scholarly evidence alone. One of the members of this society, Christoph Luxenberg (pseud.), challenges assumptions about the origins of the Quran and believes its source was Syriac Christian texts that were molded into what is now known as the Quran. Donner notes that this has been received with varying levels of confidence in his scholarship, both because his work is difficult to navigate and his credentials are unknown. Ohlig also refers to traditions that could have been a prototype for Muhammad. In the history of the Church of the East, he cites the story of the “preaching Arab merchant” who upon embracing Christianity would spread the message within his country and beyond. Ohlig speculates as to whether this influenced the story of Muhammad, the one who moves from merchant to prophet. Ohlig also believes it is possible that “muhammad” was a Christological title that was originally used by Arabs to

38 Christoph Luxenberg (pseud.), The Syro-Aramiac Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran (Prometheus Books, 2007).
refer to Jesus, which he reports is found on inscriptions of coinage in the latter part of the 7th century and early part of the 8th century CE.⁴⁰ He speculates that the Christological title *muhammad* underwent a historicization that would eventually designate a person, the Prophet Muhammad, as the one who was instrumental in giving birth to Islam.⁴¹ Ohlig also draws a connection between Christianity and Islam through Islam’s use of “servant of God” (*abdallah*), which in the Quran is used in reference to Jesus.⁴² Because this terminology is also used in the Christian tradition, Ohlig believes it originated there. An interesting connection to this is that in a previous chapter we noted that “servant of God” was a self-designation used by members of the Church of the East in Arabia. Volker Popp draws even a stronger connection with Christianity by claiming that the Umayyads began as “Nestorian Christians.”⁴³ In a later work, Popp would extend the influence of Christianity until the early 8th century. He believes the period of “Arab religious development until then should be characterized as Christian, and only after this does a new religion, Islam, begin to form.⁴⁴ All of this remains speculative, but it has generated interest and debate about how we approach the origins of Islam.

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⁴¹ Ibid, 267. Jacques Waardenburg notes the same impulse in projecting ideals back in history with the “rightly guided caliphs.” He says that “Islam developed the nostalgia for a pure, paradigmatic religious community that supposedly existed under the first four caliphs.” *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 45.

⁴² Ibid., 253.

⁴³ Donner, 2015, op. cit., 17.

In less speculative fashion, the inclusion of research beyond literary sources has reshaped our understanding of Islam. Donner holds up one such example in Peter Pentz’s *The Invisible Conquest. The Ontogenesis of Sixth and Seventh Century Syria*.\(^{45}\) In Pentz’s work, Donner indicates it shows a different view of the Arab conquests. Pentz’s contribution is summarized by Donner as follows: “The rise of Islam, rather than being seen as an episode of violent destruction and discontinuity, appeared instead to be what one scholar called an ‘invisible conquest,’ because at most sites in the Levant the transition from Byzantine to Islamic rule was so gradual as to be imperceptible, at least in terms of the archaeological evidence—in contrast to the image gained from literary sources, both Christian and Islamic.”\(^{46}\) This helps corroborate some of the new understandings we have about the Arab conquests, as was addressed in chapter 2.

Finally we turn to Donner’s research in this area as presented in *Muslims and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*.\(^{47}\) Donner begins by noting that the Quran “overwhelmingly uses the term “Believers” (*mu‘minun*) rather then “Muslims.”\(^{48}\) Because the idea of monotheism was already well established in the area in which Islam was born, and because of the similarity of beliefs and practices they shared, Donner believes this helps explain why the Believers had an ecumenical approach toward fellow monotheists. Though the Believers may have seen themselves as a separate group,


\(^{46}\) Donner, 2015, op. cit., 15.

\(^{47}\) Donner, 2010, op. cit.

\(^{48}\) Donner, 2010, op.cit., 57. There are instances of followers being referred to as “Muslims” as well, but much less often.
Donner does not believe the evidence suggests they saw themselves as a new or separate religious confession.\(^{49}\) He states, “Closer examination of the Qur’an reveals a number of passages indicating that some Christians and Jews could belong to the Believers’ movement—not simply by virtue of their being Christians or Jews, but because they were inclined to righteousness.”\(^{50}\) Therefore Christians and Jews were considered Believers, along with those who embraced the monotheism preached by Muhammad.\(^{51}\) As the Believers movement grew and expanded during the Arab conquests, the encounter with the people of the lands they would conquer did not need to take the form of “violent conquest.” This is because “the overwhelming majority of these communities consisted already of monotheists who were, for this reason, eligible in principle for inclusion in the Believers’ movement.”\(^{52}\) This meant that people were required to align themselves politically with the movement but not religiously, since they were already monotheists. Donner believes that it would not be until the late 7\(^{th}\) and early 8\(^{th}\) century CE that “the Believers’ movement evolved into the religion we now know as Islam, through a process of refinement and redefinition of its basic concepts. Islam, as we understand it today, is thus the direct continuation or outgrowth of the Believers’ movement rooted in the preaching of Muhammad and the actions of his early followers, even though it would be

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 69.
\(^{50}\) Ibid., 70.
\(^{51}\) Ibid., 70.
\(^{52}\) Ibid., 109. Donner notes that this is in accord with the results of the sociological and archeological research that has been done.
historically inaccurate to call the early Believers’ movement ‘Islam.’”

If this is true, what is missing in Donner’s work are the ways in which Christianity (and other monotheists) influenced the ultimate character of Islam. It is here that the bridge between Islamic studies and early Christian studies would benefit from being in conversation.

**Broadening Sources and Conversations**

The preceding summary highlights the ways that the inclusion of non-literary sources has shaped our understanding of Islam. Goddard believes that focusing exclusively on literary sources “tends to focus on `official’ or `ideal’ Islam, what Muslims ought to believe and do, or at least what Muslims are told they ought to believe and do.”

What can easily be missed is the way Islam has been experienced and lived, which includes its relationships with others. The same is true of Christianity. As Islamic studies and early Christian studies have broadened the sources they use, so too the conversation between these two disciplines must broaden. There is a larger, richer and deeper story about the way that Muslims and Christians have experienced one another, and this must be lifted up, lest people think that the misunderstandings and stereotypes about the origins of Islam form the pattern and potential for our relationship today. Care must be taken not to use too speculative of sources to create new understandings. Not only would it lack the staying power as a platform to inform and influence the potential

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53 Ibid., 195.

for the relationship between Christians and Muslims, it would also carelessly and unnecessarily undermine the founding narratives and sacred stories of Muslims. It is not that we should shrink back from using the modern tools of scholarship that may yield challenging results, but we must do it with integrity and care if we expect the same approach to the Christian tradition by Muslims.
Conclusion
History, Leadership and Christian-Muslim Relations

A Reflection on the Meaning and Place of History in Christian-Muslim Relations

Sometimes it is said, “the way to the future is through our past.” For religions, this is always true. It is not that we return to the past, nor does the past restrict the future, but for religious life the past and future are in constant dialogue with one another seeking to inform our way forward. This dynamic can be represented in the principle of movement and the principle of continuity.¹ The principle of movement represents the need for our sacred traditions and stories to be relevant to new circumstances and to be able to answer new questions. The principle of continuity reminds us that whatever the response is to new circumstances and questions, it must be rooted in our sacred traditions and stories upon which we base our faith. These two principles can often be in tension with one another. However, if we let go of one of these principles, it has stark consequences for the life of faith. If we give up the principle of movement, then our religious traditions ossify. The result is that they become better suited to represent the past than they are to speak to us today. This can be seen in Christian fundamentalist movements in which the Christian tradition is fixed and needs no movement (or must not move!) to address any new challenges presented to it. This can also be seen in Islam as it moved from the golden age of its intellectual and cultural development to medieval Islam in which the

¹ Marshall G.S. Hodgson, Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History, Edmund Burke III, ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 237; these principles are based on the work of Muhammad Iqbal, of whom Hodgson is critical.
belief developed that “knowledge is better conserved than created.”² In both examples, people are only inheritors of their religious traditions, and the role of leadership is to place it on exhibit for all to see. On the other hand, to forget the principle of continuity risks that the answers given to new circumstances are a religious response in name only. In reality they have become a religious cloak over contemporary trends and ideologies. If this becomes the case, our religious heritages are lost and so too anything that offers a distinctive, religious perspective.³ There is no longer anything revelatory about religion.

From this perspective, I believe the untold story of these two faiths needs to bring the past and present into conversation in ways that are desperately needed today, but we can only dialogue and debate about our past if we know our past. I recall being at a meeting with Christian representatives from the Middle East Council of Churches and our Muslims counterparts, and the question arose, do we break for prayer for Muslims in the middle of a session or do Muslims wait to pray afterwards? This started a protracted conversation with Muslims and Christians weighing in about the place of prayer in our meetings. People began to draw on their sacred histories to advance their point of view. At first, it did not seem to help move us forward because someone always had a conflicting story or anecdote to share. One individual finally said, “What we have here is a conflict of historical recollection.” It took days to sort through this “conflict of recollection” and how our past traditions can inform the present, but eventually we found

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a way forward in which most everyone felt it was continuous with their traditions yet moving our relationships forward. The solution was that sessions did not need to break at the exact time of the call to prayer, but there would be a planned break in which all could pray. It may seem to outsiders that people were overly concerned about this matter, but the question raised and how it was handled were testing our views of one another and the traditions we represented. My hope is that the story represented in this thesis, and those like it, can be a part of what is remembered, discussed and debated as we find a way forward in the relationships between Christians and Muslims.

In thinking about the value of history and its connection to Muslim-Christian relations, the work represented in this thesis can lift up our shared history to provide a historical entry point to think about our pasts and the positive ways they have intersected with one another. As was cited in the introduction, Griffith believes we have an Islamo-Christian heritage to explore. Richard Bulliet also builds a case for this through the concept of an “Islamo-Christian civilization.” He proposes that “the Christian society of Western Europe—not all Christians everywhere—and the Muslim society of the Middle East and North Africa—not all Muslims everywhere… belong to a single historical civilization.”

His focus is specifically on Latin Christianity’s relationship to Islam, which he sees as “a prolonged and fateful intertwining of sibling societies enjoying sovereignty in neighboring geographical regions and following parallel historical trajectories. Neither the Muslim nor the Christian historical path can be fully understood

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without relation to the other.” In making his case for this, Bulliet points to the concept of a Judeo-Christian civilization as a helpful reference point. These two faiths did not need to exist without conflict or always in direct physical proximity to acknowledge their intermingling in the development of Western civilization; so too, Bulliet proposes, we do not need to hold these conditions as necessary to conceive of an Islamo-Christian civilization. However, if we add to Bulliet’s claim the presence of the Church of the East and its non-Chalcedonian cousins within the Islamic empire, and the ways they influenced one another at the religious, social and civilizational levels, it only strengthens the consideration of an Islamo-Christian heritage. This opens the possibility to explore what we share, as well as what divides us, when engaging one another.

This also helps counter the popular narrative about the beginnings of Islam, which are too often linked to the sword, conquests and conversions, making it seem that we, as Christians, must find a way to relate to Islam despite its past. While we must acknowledge the challenging parts of our shared history, we also need to know the history that points to the positive relationships that Christians and Muslims had from Islam’s inception. Then rather than carry the perceived weight of history, it may lighten the load. And we no longer need to conclude that Christians and Muslims must enter into relationships despite their history. They can enter into relationships because of their shared history.

5 Ibid., 10.
6 This was highlighted in Hodgson’s Venture of Islam in chapter 3.
Stories like these can also help us see Muslims differently. There are some who see Muslims through the lens of ethnicity, as if being Muslim is akin to having a religious DNA. This means their expectation is that all Muslims believe and act in the same way by virtue of being Muslim. We need to create awareness that there have been manifold ways that Muslims have expressed their faith and approached relationships with non-Muslims, and this has not changed. Today, there are conservative Muslims and progressive Muslims, militant Muslims and irenic Muslims, devout Muslims and nominal Muslims, straight Muslims and gay Muslims, just as there are in any religious tradition. Because many have incorrectly understood the origins of Islam, believing it began as a militant and proselytizing movement, they believe that by extension it is part of the DNA of Islam and all who call themselves Muslims. I am advocating that we must hold up stories like that of this thesis, not as paradigmatic of the Christian-Muslim experience, but as part of the larger history that demonstrates how Muslims have approached relationships with Christians and Christians have approached relationships with Muslims.

This will also help counter one of the greatest inhibitors to learning about other religions: essentialism. When we try to boil down a religion to its essence, it creates a false choice for people about the religion in question. For example, some people try to essentialize Islam as a religion of peace, while others do so as a religion of violence. Having worked with people who are reluctant to engage Muslims, if our efforts are to

7 On the matter of LGBTQ persons, this is a controversial topic within Islam, as it has been in Christianity. Citing this isn’t to give an Islamic position, only to recognize the diversity of persons who are Muslim.
help them see Islam as a religion of peace but then the news highlights an attack on innocent people in the name of Islam, it forces a choice that Islam is one or the other. They may have started to embrace Islam as a religion of peace, but now they may feel a need to reconsider this choice and view Islam as a religion of violence. Essentialism forces a binary choice that cannot grow and sustain our views about and relationships with people of other faiths. In the end, those who are deciding whether to engage the “other” are left to the whim of whatever current information they have been given and how it fits with the essentialist views before them. The story told in this thesis highlights that Christianity and Islam are complex religious traditions, and within each there are diverse self-understandings and ways of understanding the “other” in our midst.

It may appear that I am placing too much hope on one slice of history’s ability to effect change in the way Christians and Muslims approach one another. I do not believe this one story has the power to correct the problems mentioned above, but for those of us active in Christian-Muslims relations, we need to learn these stories, hold up these stories, and debate these stories with the hope that we can find a way to move our relationships forward while maintaining continuity with our sacred traditions. The way to the future may very well be through our past.

**Pilgrimage and the Power of Shared Stories**

I was inspired by the story of Louis Massignon and how he developed an annual pilgrimage to the Chapel of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, which was shared in chapter 2. It prompted me to think about the power of pilgrimages. Many Christians make a
pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Muslims to Mecca because of their historical and spiritual significance. One way to foster better relationships is to create pilgrimages in which Muslims and Christians travel together to the places that have spiritual and historical significance for both faiths. Following the history represented in this thesis, a pilgrimage could visit some of the sites associated with the Church of the East and Islam, giving people a chance to learn about an unknown branch of Christianity and the unknown origins of Islam.8

In connection with this, Omani officials have demonstrated interest in the Jews and Christians who lived in Oman in the past. In my time there, people would reference the prior existence of a Jewish community in Sohar as evidence of their positive disposition toward Judaism. Since there is more to be discovered about the Church of the East’s presence in Oman as Islam arose, further work in this area could help Oman draw upon its history as it seeks to embrace religious pluralism as a permanent feature of their existence. It could also be a place of pilgrimage for Muslims, Jews and Christians.

**Theological Leadership**

Since the theme for the Doctor of Ministry program at Duke is “leadership in the Christian tradition,” I have been thinking about how what I have learned in this thesis informs the way I lead. As we increasingly talk about the rise of the nones, the decline in church attendance, and what it means to live in a post-Christendom world, I am struck by

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8 I do not mean “unknown origins of Islam” in the revisionist sense, but in the relationships they had with Christians from the inception of what would become Islam.
the story of the Church of the East and how it was birthed and grew under the Parthians, Sassanians and Muslims. They did not need the hegemony of political power or religious influence to grow and live out their mission, which has me thinking about what allowed them to do so. The following are some thoughts about this.

First, I think key people within the Church of the East exhibited theological leadership. By this I mean that they realized the need to engage the cultures and religions in which they lived in ways that helped their members understand what it meant to be a Christian in these contexts. To do this, they could not retreat and isolate themselves from the ways non-Christians were approaching religious identity. The Church of the East sought to articulate who they were and why they existed in new ways and in new languages. To put this another way, they focused on why they existed and who they were in the midst of other cultures and religions, not just what they should do and how they should do it. I wonder if today, in the face of great cultural shifts and challenges, we have focused too much on the “whats” and “hows” of church life. People want to know the seven things that will grow attendance, the three ways to reach millennials, or how to run a great children’s ministry, but we may be missing the importance of rethinking and rearticulating the “who” and “why” of our existence, which gets to the heart of our faith. Without this core, I am not sure we will find a way forward. I think we may need to extend the concept of leadership beyond organizational abilities to the theological abilities that are needed to rethink the faith so we can reimagine the future. I recognize that there are theologians whose work is in this area, but I wonder how many Christian leaders are engaged in this way.
Second, because the leadership of the Church of the East was interested in engaging the people and thought world in which they lived, they sought to be at the center of where power resided. This reminds me of Andy Crouch’s book, Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power. In it he recognizes the corrupting influence of power “unless we find a way to a restored relationship with the Giver of power.” His point is not that power should be avoided. It is about having the right relationship to God, the source of power, who enables this power to be used as a creative influence in the world, not a coercive one. Crouch further recognizes that “Institutions create and distribute power, the ability to make something of the world.” It seems leadership in the Church of the East recognized that institutions have this power, even if bearing the name of another religion, and if they wanted to make something of the world, they needed to be a part of these institutions. This is also reminiscent of James Davison Hunter’s thesis about change in To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World. Hunter believes that change comes from the top down through elites to the general masses, but he states that these are “elites who do not necessarily occupy the highest echelons of prestige.” The reason that elites are important is because they serve as the gatekeepers to institutions and networks that represent large spheres of social life. The Church of the East in general, and Catholicos Timothy I in particular, seem to have understood intuitively that to effect change they needed to find a way to participate

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10 Ibid., 170.
11 James Davison Hunter, To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 42.
in the institutions that were shaping the culture and civilization in which they lived. They
did not allow fear to isolate them. Their faith drove them to engage those at the center of
power so that they could advance their mission. As a leader, I wonder what institutions
and centers of power we should be engaging to advance our call to be the body of Christ
in the world. I don’t have an answer, but I think it is an important question to ask.

Finally, the story of the Church of the East’s relationship to Islam helps us recast
how we view mission. We often see our mission as solely to others. It is to those in need;
it is to non-Christians. However, we also need to be able to see our mission as with
others, especially if we have any hope of working for the common good of all. Through
the history shared in this thesis, we see there were times that leaders in the Church of the
East embraced a mission with the Parthians, Sassanians and Muslims for the welfare of
all people. So too we must find ways to be in mission with Muslims for the welfare of all
in our world. In the words of God to those in exile, “seek the welfare of the city where I
have sent you” (Jeremiah 29:7)
Bibliography


Biography

Michael S. Bos is the senior minister of Marble Collegiate Church in New York City, and he is the president of The Collegiate Churches of New York. He is ordained in the Reformed Church in America and also has standing in the United Church of Christ. He was raised in Western Michigan, received his Bachelor of Science from Grand Valley State University (Allendale, MI) and his Master of Divinity from Western Theology Seminary (Holland, MI). He also studied at the Free University (the Netherlands) and the University of Exeter (U.K.). Michael received the George Nathan Makely Award in Old Testament Language and Literature (1988), the Samuel van der Ploeg Award in Church History (1989), the Seminary Award in Christian Ethics (1989), the John and Mattie Osterhaven Graduate Fellowship (1989), and the Smith Fellowship (1996). For his work in bringing together Christians, Muslims, and Hindus in Oman to aid low-income workers, he has been featured in the Berkshire Encyclopedia of Religion and Social Justice and received the U.S. Ambassador’s Award for Community Service. Michael resides in New Jersey with his wife, Tena, and has two children, Alicia and Austin.