

THE ORTHODOX
CHURCH IN THE
ARAB WORLD
700–1700

An Anthology of Sources

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FOREWORD BY

Metropolitan Ephrem (Kyriakos)

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Introduction

Samuel Noble and Alexander Treiger

Arab Christianity—A Neglected Area of Church History

The Middle East is the birthplace and the ancient heartland of Christianity, where the first Christian communities were founded by the apostles. On the eve of the Islamic conquests in the seventh century CE, Christians formed a majority or a plurality in most areas of the Middle East. They spoke and wrote a variety of languages, including Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian, Middle Persian, and Sogdian. Arabic, too, was spoken by those Arab tribes and sedentary populations in Arabia, Palestine, Syria, and Iraq who had converted to the Christian faith in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries.

In the course of the seventh century, an estimated half of the world's Christians found themselves under Islamic rule.¹ The Islamic conquests set in motion two processes affecting these Christian communities: the process of Arabization, causing them gradually to adopt Arabic as a spoken, literary, and liturgical language (often alongside their ancestral tongues) and the much slower, yet persistent process of Islamization. To the degree that they underwent Arabization but not Islamization, Middle Eastern Christians are Arab Christians, though those of them who do not consider themselves to be of Arab descent, such as the Copts of Egypt or the Maronites of Lebanon, often reject the term.

Middle Eastern Christians successfully adapted to the new reality shaped by the Islamic conquests and developed new and unique ways of bearing witness to the Christian gospel in a culture largely defined by Islam. Though their proportion in the total population declined significantly over the centuries, Middle Eastern Christians in general and Arab Christians in particular have retained their cultural importance up to the present day.

Christian theological literature in Arabic is at least 1300 years old, the oldest surviving texts dating from the eighth century.² Pre-modern Arab Christian literature embraces such diverse genres as Arabic translations of

the Bible and the Church Fathers, Biblical commentaries, liturgical texts, lives of the saints, homilies, theological and polemical treatises, ascetical literature, devotional poetry, philosophy, medicine, history, and diaries, as well as archival documents that offer indispensable information on Arab Christian and Middle Eastern history.³ As the catalogs of Christian publishers in Cairo and Beirut and now a plethora of Christian websites in Arabic clearly show, Arab Christian literature continues to flourish today.⁴

Despite all the above, in the Western historiography of Christianity, the Arab Christian Middle East is treated only peripherally, if at all. The popular assumption, current even among scholars of Christianity, is that in the wake of the Islamic conquests, Christianity abandoned the Middle East to flourish elsewhere, leaving its original heartland devoid of an indigenous Christian presence. To make things worse, the term “Arab” is widely—though needless to say incorrectly—regarded as synonymous with Muslim, and so even the very notion of Arab Christianity appears to many to be a contradiction in terms.

Even those Westerners who are aware of the existence of Arabic-speaking Christian communities—primarily through personal contacts with émigré Middle Eastern Christians living in the West—are rarely able to name even a single author or literary work from the Christian heritage in Arabic. This is hardly surprising, as virtually no such authors or works are mentioned in the standard histories of Christianity available to the Western reader and the existing translations of such texts are not easily accessible to nonspecialists. (The bibliography at the end of this anthology will offer a guide to these translations.)

To take just a few examples: though Middle Eastern and Arab Christianity would easily merit their own volume in such a detailed and otherwise excellent work as Jaroslav Pelikan’s five-volume *The Christian Tradition*, all one finds is a number of scattered references to one or two Arabic-writing Christian theologians.⁵

Similarly, Kallistos Ware’s *The Orthodox Church* simply remarks that after the Islamic conquests, “[t]he Byzantines lost their eastern possessions, and the three Patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem passed under infidel control.”⁶ Little is said about the subsequent history of these patriarchates until they resurface again much later in the narrative, in the chapter devoted to the Orthodox Church in the twentieth century. Arab Orthodox Christians are referenced only once, in connection with the contemporary situation in the patriarchates of Antioch and Jerusalem.⁷ Only one Arab Christian author from the preceding centuries is mentioned.⁸ The chapter entitled “The Church under Islam” begins with the Ottoman conquest of Constanti-

nople in 1453, with not the slightest hint that three patriarchates had been under Islamic domination for more than eight centuries prior to that date.⁹

Even more recently, John McGuckin, in his monograph *The Orthodox Church* (2008), takes the position that “[a]fter the rise of Arab [read: Muslim] power in the seventh century, the once great Christian communities of Antioch and Alexandria fell into disastrous decline.”¹⁰ The reader is made to understand that the decline was so drastic and so disastrous that there is hardly any need to comment on these communities’ subsequent fate.

The same neglect of Arab Christianity is evident also in McGuckin’s recent two-volume *Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity* (2011). Though this encyclopedia features separate articles on Orthodoxy in Latvia and Orthodoxy in Lithuania, it has no comparable article on Orthodoxy in Lebanon. Sporadic references to Arab Orthodox Christianity are only found in entries on the patriarchates of Antioch and Jerusalem and in the entry on the “Syrian Orthodox Churches.” The latter, however, somewhat confusingly reports that “[t]he Syrian Orthodox Christians, in the Byzantine sense (i.e., those that accept all seven ecumenical councils) . . . belong either to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East or the Antiochian Orthodox Church”¹¹—despite the fact that the “Greek” Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch *is* the Antiochian Orthodox Church. There is not a single entry in the entire encyclopedia on any Arabic-writing Christian theologian.

It is only in recent years that surveys of Christianity in general and Orthodox Christianity in particular have begun to include chapters on the “Arabic tradition.” Thus, Kenneth Parry’s *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity* (2007) features a chapter on Arab Christianity, as does the volume *The Orthodox Christian World*, edited by Augustine Casiday (2012). Likewise, the *Cambridge History of Christianity* volume on “Early Medieval Christianities” (2008) features a general survey chapter on “Christians under Muslim Rule.” This subject is taken up much more extensively in the German manual *Das orientalische Christentum* by Wolfgang Hage (2007) and in the excellent Russian study *Blizhnevostochnoe Pravoslavie pod Osmanskim vladychestvom* (Orthodox Christianity in the Middle East under Ottoman Rule) by Konstantin Panchenko (2012). The first monograph in English that attempts to do justice to the richness of the Arab Christian tradition while also being accessible to the general reader—Sidney Griffith’s *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*—was published in 2008.¹²

These are hopeful signs for the future, yet much work remains to be done before this important aspect of Christian history can be fully appreciated. Close to 90 percent of the vast corpus of Arab Christian literature has not yet been edited or translated, let alone adequately studied. Numerous texts,

including documents of considerable importance, are unknown even to Arab Christians themselves, being buried in the manuscript repositories of Europe and the Middle East, while many others have been edited in Arabic but remain inaccessible to the English reader.

The present anthology—the first of its kind—intends to fill this important gap. It is the editors' hope that it will mark a step forward in correcting this deplorable Western myopia with regard to Arab Christianity by making accessible in English representative selections from major Arab Christian works, several of them previously unpublished, written during the millennium from 700 to 1700.

For the sake of consistency, this anthology focuses on one particular tradition among the many varieties of Middle Eastern Christianity (on which more below): what we shall term “Arab Orthodox Christianity.”¹³ Arab Orthodox Christians are those Arabic-speaking Christians who accept the definitions of the seven ecumenical councils (including the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon) and are in communion with the other Orthodox churches: the churches of Greece, Russia, Serbia, Romania, Georgia, and others. Traditionally, these Christians were called “Melkites” (literally “royalists”) by their opponents, a term that implied that the Arab Orthodox were followers of the Byzantine emperor in matters of doctrine and ritual.¹⁴ In Arabic, they are frequently called “Rum Orthodox”: “Roman” (i.e., Byzantine-rite) Orthodox. In the West, they are often called “Antiochian Orthodox,” due to the fact that the majority of their churches in North America are affiliated with the Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch.

It must be mentioned in this connection that even as Arabic came to predominate within the Middle Eastern Orthodox Christian community, Syriac and Christian Palestinian Aramaic long remained in liturgical use in many regions,¹⁵ while Greek, Georgian, and even Persian and Turkish were also employed in some times and places. Since, however, these languages lie outside the scope of this anthology, it is to a more detailed account of the history of the Arab Orthodox community—and of Arab Christianity in general—that we must now turn.

Arab Christianity before the Rise of Islam

Arabic was among the first languages in which the Gospel was preached. The Book of Acts mentions Arabs as being present at the first Pentecost in Jerusalem, where they heard the Christian message in their native tongue.¹⁶ Not long thereafter, the Apostle Paul states that immediately after his con-

version he traveled to Arabia.¹⁷ The term “Arabia” as used by Paul presumably refers to the Nabatean kingdom, centered in Petra in present-day Jordan. While ethnically Arab, the Nabateans had come to use Aramaic as they became sedentarized. In the early second century CE they were conquered by Rome and incorporated into the Roman Empire as the province of Arabia Petraea.¹⁸ It is such sedentary Arameo-Arab groups that were the first Arabs to be exposed to, and to gradually embrace, Christianity.

Other than the people of Arabia referenced by Paul, one can mention the Arameo-Arab Abgarid dynasty of Edessa (present-day Urfa in Turkey). According to some early Christian sources (e.g., the fourth-century Church historian Eusebius of Caesaria and the fifth-century Syriac text *The Doctrine of Addai*), King Abgar V the Black (d. 50 CE) was converted to Christianity by the Apostle Addai, thus becoming the first Christian king.¹⁹ Scholars have disputed the historicity of this information and the identity of the Abgar in the story, sometimes attempting to equate him, instead, with Abgar VIII the Great (d. 212). Whatever the identity of the king who converted to Christianity, it is undeniable that the Abgarid dynasty of Edessa was early on favorable to, or at least tolerant of, Christianity and that the new faith had gained acceptance in the city by the end of the second century CE.²⁰

The spread of Christianity to Arabic-speaking nomads and semi-nomads soon followed.²¹ The chief areas of the Arabian Peninsula to have had a significant Christian population were the southern Arabian city of Najran (near the modern border between Saudi Arabia and Yemen), the northeast edge of the peninsula (especially the city of al-Hira near modern Kufa in Iraq and the coastal region of Qatar), and the desert areas bordering Byzantine Syria and Palestine. It is in this last region in the fourth century CE that the Byzantines began to recruit semi-nomadic Arab tribes to secure the porous border region from incursions from the desert. As part of this arrangement, the Arabs allied with Byzantium were required to convert to Christianity. It would appear that these new converts quickly became zealous for the Nicene Orthodoxy they had received: when the emperor Valens (r. 364–78) attempted to enforce Arianism as the creed of the Empire, these Arab *foederati*, led by their queen Mavia, revolted against his rule and successfully demanded that a pro-Nicene Arab hermit named Moses be ordained their bishop.²² Writing in the fifth century CE, the church historian Sozomen claims to have heard odes composed in Arabic that celebrated Mavia’s victory over Valens. Not only is this the earliest account of Arabic poetry, it is also the earliest account of an oral Christian literature in Arabic.²³

In the fifth century the relative unity of the Christian world was shattered by intense controversies over Christology. These controversies came to define

the communal and theological identities of Arabic-speaking Christians both before and after the rise of Islam. The first stage of the controversy centered on the debate between the patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius (d. 451) and the patriarch of Alexandria, Cyril (d. 444). A pupil of Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428), Nestorius was educated in the Antiochene tradition of theology and scriptural exegesis. This tradition emphasized the distinction between the divinity and the humanity of Christ and rejected theopaschite expressions (i.e., language ascribing “suffering” to God). Nestorius declared, therefore, that the Virgin Mary ought to be called “Christotokos” (Birthgiver of Christ) rather than “Theotokos” (Birthgiver of God) because birth could not be properly ascribed to God and hence Mary gave birth only to Christ’s humanity. The leader of the opposition to Nestorius was Cyril, whose native Alexandrian school of theology and exegesis emphasized, by contrast, the unity between the divinity and the humanity in Christ, stressed the identity of Christ with the pre-eternal God the Word, and endorsed theopaschite language. This controversy came to a head at the Council of Ephesus of 431, which deposed and exiled Nestorius and canonized the title Theotokos.

While it is considered the Third Ecumenical Council by Eastern Orthodox Christians, the Council of Ephesus was rejected by many Christians in Syria and Mesopotamia, who were faithful to their Antiochene theological identity. Thus, the church of the Sasanian Empire, headed by the Catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, rejected the condemnation of Nestorius. Its Council of Seleucia-Ctesiphon of 486 elevated Theodore of Mopsuestia’s exegetical works to the level of official dogma and accepted a Christological definition that ruled out all theopaschite expressions (including the term “Theotokos”), while safeguarding the unity of the person of Christ on the basis of a “prosopic” rather than “hypostatic” union of divinity and humanity.²⁴ While this church officially referred to itself as the Church of the East, it was soon called “Nestorian” because of its Christological teachings.²⁵ Because of its independence from the imperial church in Byzantium, the Persian rulers accepted the Church of the East as the only legal variety of Christianity within the Sasanian Empire and allowed it the freedom to proselytize anyone except ethnic Persians, who were required to follow the official Zoroastrianism of the state.

The second divisive controversy erupted at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, considered the Fourth Ecumenical Council by Eastern Orthodox Christians. Inspired by Pope Leo I’s *Tome* of 449, the council affirmed that after the Incarnation Christ is confessed “in two natures,” divine and human. This affirmation of two natures in Christ was criticized by the more radical followers of Cyril as a concession to the Nestorians. These uncom-

promising Cyrillians insisted instead on “one nature of God the Word incarnate” (an originally Apollinarian formula used by Cyril) and consequently rejected the Council of Chalcedon. They were henceforth called monophysites by their opponents and are today less polemically called Miaphysites (from the Greek *mia physis*, one nature).

Opposition to Chalcedon was particularly strong in Syria and Egypt. In Syria the sixth-century bishop Jacob Baradaeus (ca. 500–78) founded a Miaphysite hierarchy independent from the imperial Chalcedonian church. His followers were soon called “Jacobites” by their opponents.²⁶ In Egypt, after the council of Chalcedon, Chalcedonian and Miaphysite bishops alternated. Two separate hierarchies eventually emerged in the sixth century, beginning in 537–38 when the emperor Justinian (r. 527–65) consecrated a second, Chalcedonian patriarch of Alexandria, Paul, as rival to the reigning Miaphysite patriarch, Theodosius. In 576, when the Miaphysite patriarch Peter IV ordained approximately seventy bishops, the process of creating two separate hierarchies—the Chalcedonian and the Miaphysite (later to be called, respectively, “Melkite” and “Coptic”)—was essentially complete.²⁷

In the wake of Chalcedon, the Miaphysite church proved to be extremely successful among the Arabs. The major Byzantine allies during the sixth century, the Arab tribe of Banu Ghassan (Ghassanids), were won over to the Miaphysite cause even though they remained politically loyal to Constantinople. It is in fact the Ghassanid ruler al-Harith ibn Jabala (d. 569) who was operative in the ordination of Jacob Baradaeus as bishop.²⁸

Another important Christian center in the Arab world, the southern Arabian city of Najran (mentioned above) was largely brought within the Miaphysite orbit through its close connection to Ethiopia. In the year 523, the Yemenite king Yusuf Dhu Nuwas, who had converted to Judaism, began a persecution of the Christians of Najran.²⁹ Several hundred Christians, including their leader al-Harith (in Greek, Arethas; not to be confused with al-Harith ibn Jabala mentioned above) were martyred.³⁰ Provoked by the deaths of these Christians, the Ethiopian king Kaleb invaded and conquered Najran.³¹ After several years of direct Ethiopian rule, the viceroy Abraha declared himself king of southern Arabia, building a cathedral in Sana‘a (Yemen).³² Around the year 570 he attempted to invade the important trade city of western Arabia, Mecca, with an Ethiopian army that included war elephants. The defeat of this army was later remembered in the Qur’an in the “Chapter of the Elephant” (*Surat al-Fil*).³³

At the same time, the Church of the East was able to expand its influence among the Arabs of northeastern Arabia, especially among the ruling tribe of Banu Lakhm (Lakhmids) in the city of al-Hira on the lower Euphrates,

near present-day Kufa in Iraq. The Lakhmids functioned as a Persian client state, protecting the Sasanian Empire from Arab incursions in much the same way that the Ghassanids served to protect the Byzantines. A bishopric of al-Hira seems to have existed from at least 410. By virtue of their high urban culture, the Christians of al-Hira, coming from a variety of tribal backgrounds, were seen by the nomads of the peninsula as a distinct group and were known as the “‘Ibad,” a term meaning “servants” (of Christ).³⁴

Even before the official conversion of the Lakhmid king al-Nu‘man ibn Mundhir (r. 583–ca. 602) to Nestorian Christianity towards the end of the sixth century, al-Hira was a thriving Arab Christian cultural and political center. The poetry of the sixth-century Arab Christian poet from al-Hira ‘Adi ibn Zayd (d. ca. 600), for example, has many Christian motifs, including a fine retelling of the Biblical story of the creation of the world and the Fall in Arabic verse.³⁵

Later Muslim historians and geographers mention al-Hira’s several churches and monasteries, some of which were built by the Lakhmid Christian queen Hind (mid-sixth century). One of these monasteries, called “The Monastery of Hind” (Dayr Hind) after its benefactress, remained active well into the Islamic period. An Arabic-language inscription that was once located over the door of this monastery’s church attests to the importance of this Arab Christian queen:

Hind, daughter of al-Harith son of ‘Amr son of Hujr, the queen, daughter of kings, mother of the king ‘Amr son of al-Mundhir, handmaiden of Christ, mother of His servant and handmaiden of His servant, built this church in the time of the King of Kings Khosrau Anushirvan and the bishop Ephrem. May the God for whom she built this church forgive her sins, have mercy on her and her son, accept their prayers, and raise them up for the establishment of truth. May God be with her and with her son unto ages of ages.³⁶

Although al-Hira was eclipsed by the new garrison city of Kufa soon after the Islamic conquest, it did remain for some time a center of Arab Christian culture: the famous Christian translator of Greek texts into Syriac and Arabic, Hunayn ibn Ishaq (d. 873 or 877), was born and received his earliest education there. Nestorian Christianity was also prominent in the coastal area of Qatar (in Syriac: Beth Qatraye), along the western shore of the Persian Gulf, and in recent decades archeologists have uncovered the remains of a number of monasteries in that area. The famous seventh-century East-Syriac ascetic writer Isaac the Syrian was originally from that region.³⁷

Given the strong Christian presence among the Arabs in the northern

and southern edges of the Arabian Peninsula, going back to at least two centuries before Islam, it is an important question whether there also existed pre-Islamic Arabic translations of the Bible and of the Christian liturgy. So far this question is unresolved, and evidence for such translations remains inconclusive. One likely reason for this is the strongly oral nature of pre-Islamic Arab culture. Although we know of a very elaborate poetic tradition among the Arabs in pre-Islamic times (the Arab Christian poet ‘Adi ibn Zayd from al-Hira has already been mentioned above), this poetry seems to have been composed and initially transmitted orally and was only written down some two centuries after the rise of Islam. Though the Arabs had an alphabet before Islam, the only pre-Islamic Christian examples of its use are graffiti and inscriptions such as the one at Dayr Hind. Thus, while it seems probable that the Christian scriptures would have been conveyed in Arabic before Islam, it is likely that they were transmitted orally; hence the dearth of evidence for their existence.³⁸

Yet another unresolved issue relating to pre-Islamic Arab Christian literature is what influence such a literature, whether written or more likely oral, had on subsequent Christian literature in Arabic. One can hope that future research will shine light on this question.

Arab Christianity during the Lifetime of Muhammad

The founder of Islam, Muhammad, was born in Mecca to the Arab tribe of Quraysh in 570—the year of Abrahah’s unsuccessful siege of the city, called the “Year of the Elephant” in the Muslim sources. Orphaned at a young age, he was raised first by his grandfather and after the latter’s death by his uncle. According to the Muslim tradition, at the age of nine or twelve while accompanying his uncle’s caravan and passing through the city of Bosra in Syria, Muhammad met a Christian hermit named Bahira who reportedly predicted Muhammad’s future prophetic career. It is interesting to note that there exists a highly polemical Christian “counterversion” of this encounter, preserved in both Syriac and Arabic. The Christian legend treats Bahira as a heretical monk who taught Muhammad the Qur’an: “Muhammad was a humble boy, cheerful, good-natured, clever and eager to learn,” the Christian legend patronizingly claims. “He accepted Bahira’s teaching and observed it, and he came to Bahira day and night, until the Qur’an was written. He continued to visit Bahira frequently, sought his advice in his affairs and followed it.”³⁹

The Muslim understanding of the Qur’an’s origins is, of course, quite different. The Qur’an is seen as the word of God revealed piecemeal to

Muhammad through the mediation of the angel Jibril (Gabriel) over the last twenty-two years of his life (610–32). The Muslim tradition claims that Muhammad was initially frightened by the Qur'anic revelation and was not sure whether it could be trusted, until his first wife's cousin Waraqa ibn Nawfal, who is said to have been a Christian well versed in the scriptures, reassured him of the Qur'an's divine origin. As in Bahira's case, we can see how the Muslim tradition uses Waraqa's image for the apologetic purpose of having a Christian confirm Muhammad's prophethood. The fact that Muslim historians deemed it plausible that a relative of the founder of Islam would have been a Christian is further testimony to the appeal that Christianity held even for the Arabs of Mecca.⁴⁰

Thus Islam's holy book, the Qur'an, was composed in an environment to a significant degree familiar with Christians and Christianity. It frequently addresses them directly or makes reference to them by the name "al-Nasara" (Nazarenes) or, on one occasion, "Ahl al-Injil" (the People of the Gospel). While some earlier scholarship, now outdated, attempted to identify the Christians addressed in the Qur'an with various heretical groups (e.g., the Collyridians who worshipped the Virgin Mary as one of the Trinity), the current consensus is that the Qur'an's Christians belonged to the same divisions of Middle Eastern Christianity that exist today, especially the Jacobites and Nestorians.⁴¹ More recent research has highlighted the degree of familiarity with Biblical texts that the Qur'an assumes among its audience.⁴²

The Qur'anic view of Christians is complicated and contains a number of elements. Alongside Jews and the so-called Sabians (usually identified by modern scholars with the Mandeans), the Qur'an considers Christians to be "People of the Book," distinguishing them, in virtue of their possession of written scriptures, from polytheistic pagans. It goes even further with regard to Christians, stating that they are "closer in affection" to the Muslims "because they have priests and monks among them and they are not arrogant,"⁴³ while at the same time it is more critical regarding the specifics of Christian belief. Central to the Qur'an's understanding of God's unity (*tawhid*) is a rejection of the Christian belief in the Trinity.⁴⁴ This is expressed most pointedly in Sura 112, which states that "God is one, God the Supreme."⁴⁵ He does not beget and is not begotten. There is no one equal to Him."

The Qur'an adopts elements of the Christian understanding of Jesus while strenuously denying other aspects. While it frequently refers to Jesus as the Messiah or Christ (*al-Masih*) and goes so far as to say that he is "God's word, which He cast upon Mary" and "a spirit from God,"⁴⁶ who was born of a virgin,⁴⁷ performed miracles, and was "supported" by the holy spirit,⁴⁸ it states also that Jesus is merely one in the line of prophets and

messengers and can in no way be considered to be God's Son. Moreover, it claims that Jesus was not crucified, but it only "appeared" so, while in reality "God lifted him up" to heaven.⁴⁹

Arab Christians and the Muslim Conquest of the Middle East

While the Muslims were initially a persecuted minority in predominantly polytheist Mecca, they quickly reestablished themselves as a closely knit community in Yathrib (Medina) after moving to that city in 622, an event known as the Hijra. From Yathrib, they were able not only to fend off the polytheist Meccans' attacks but also to gain control over the entire Arabian Peninsula, including Mecca, during Muhammad's lifetime. After Muhammad's death in 632, under the rule of his immediate successors, the so-called "rightly-guided caliphs," the Muslim armies advanced swiftly through the Middle East and North Africa, dealing a death blow to the Sasanian Empire and conquering Byzantium's richest provinces: Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. Weakened by continuous warfare between the Sasanians and the Byzantines, the major cities of the Middle East, all with significant Christian populations, surrendered in rapid succession: Damascus fell in 635; Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Antioch, and Jerusalem in 637; Alexandria in 642.⁵⁰

Later Christian and Muslim traditions would tell the story of an encounter between the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronius (d. 638 or 639), a close associate of John Moschus and Maximus the Confessor, and the second Muslim caliph 'Umar (d. 644).⁵¹ Laying siege to Jerusalem, after two years of ravaging the nearby countryside, the Muslim general Abu 'Ubayda ibn al-Jarrah offered the city the three standard alternatives: conversion to Islam, surrender and payment of taxes, or destruction of the city. The Byzantine army had essentially abandoned Palestine after its defeat at the Battle of Yarmuk in 636 and so, as in Damascus and later Alexandria, the responsibility for negotiating with the invaders fell to the bishop of the city. As conversion to Islam (a completely unknown faith at that time) was inconceivable and military resistance to the Muslims in the absence of a Byzantine army posed too great a risk, Sophronius decided to surrender the city—but only to the Caliph 'Umar personally. 'Umar ceremonially rode into Jerusalem on a camel in February 638 and made camp on the Mount of Olives. It was there that Sophronius met with him to hand him the keys to the Holy City.

It is only in the history of the tenth century Arab Orthodox patriarch of Alexandria, Eutychius (Sa'id ibn Batriq, r. 935–40) that the most famous

detail would be added as an embellishment to the story, apparently designed to strengthen the local Christians' claim to protection of their holy sites. According to Eutychius, when the city had formally surrendered and 'Umar entered the walls of Jerusalem, he was led by Sophronius to the Church of the Resurrection (the Holy Sepulchre). Inside the church, 'Umar announced to Sophronius that he desired to pray, and Sophronius had some mats brought out so he could do this. But 'Umar refused to pray in the church, pointing out that if he were to do so his followers would use it as a pretext for turning the church into a mosque. Instead, he prayed on the steps of the church and signed a charter prohibiting Muslims from holding communal prayer and sounding the Muslim *adhan* (call for prayer) in the proximity of the church.⁵² Eutychius (or his source) complains, however, that in "his time" 'Umar's protection charter had been violated and the Muslims had taken over a part of the gallery of the church, building a mosque there and calling it the Mosque of 'Umar.⁵³

In modern times it has become commonplace to portray Miaphysite Christians, who dissented from the official Byzantine Christology, as welcoming the transition to Muslim rule. Though this may be partially true for Egypt (we hear, for instance, that the Coptic patriarch Benjamin encouraged the Coptic population of Pelusium—now Tell al-Farama, in the Nile delta—to support the invaders),⁵⁴ there is no evidence of comparable activities or sympathies among the Miaphysites of Syria.⁵⁵ Moreover, even in Egypt, opposition to Chalcedonian Christology did not necessarily translate to opposition to Byzantine rule, let alone support for the Muslim invasion. Even one of the most vehemently anti-Byzantine authors of the time—the seventh-century Coptic historian John of Nikiu, who argues that the Muslim conquest of Egypt was brought about by the emperor Heraclius's persecution of the Miaphysites—still makes clear that he has no sympathies for the Muslims. He condemns, in no uncertain terms, those "false Christians" who collaborate with the invaders, convert to Islam, and then fight their former co-religionists.⁵⁶ The earliest Miaphysite literary responses to the conquest in *both* Syria and Egypt take the form of apocalypses that portray the arrival of the Muslims as a catastrophe presaging the end of times.⁵⁷

The three earliest Orthodox authors to mention Islam and the conquests, Sophronius of Jerusalem, Maximus the Confessor (d. 662), and Anastasius of Sinai (d. ca. 700), also reacted strongly against the Muslim invaders. In his *Synodical Letter* and *Christmas Sermon* of 634 and in his *Baptismal Sermon*, delivered at Epiphany, probably in 637, Sophronius reflects the progressive terror that gripped the residents of Jerusalem as the "Saracene invaders" approached the city and laid waste to surrounding areas.⁵⁸ Simi-

larly, in a letter written between 634 and 639, Maximus describes the Muslim invaders of Egypt as “a barbarian tribe from the desert sweeping over other people’s land as their own” and laments that “a civilized country is being devoured by wild and untamable beasts, human only in appearance.”⁵⁹ Writing some fifty years later, Anastasius of Sinai appears to have traveled extensively through the territory of the caliphate, defending Orthodoxy both against Christological heresy and the new theological threat posed by Islam. In his *Narrationes*, Anastasius even goes so far as to call Muslims “associates of the demons” and responds to the Muslim confession of faith, the *shahada*, with the proclamation “there is no God but the God of the Christians.”⁶⁰ At roughly the same time, an anonymous seventh-century appendix to John Moschus’s *Spiritual Meadow*, preserved only in Georgian, refers in the harshest terms to the construction of a mosque on Jerusalem’s “Capitol” (the Temple Mount) and urges Christians not to collaborate with the Saracen settlers.⁶¹

In many respects the Muslim conquests had immediate effects on the lives of the conquered populations. Having enjoyed a position of power for three centuries, Christians suddenly found themselves, alongside Jews, with a new, second-class legal status as “subject peoples” (“*ahl al-dhimma*” or “*dhimmis*”). In exchange for the payment of a head tax (the *jizya*) and submission to a number of other restrictions,⁶² they were granted permission to organize their religious communities on autonomous lines and were exempted (indeed, forbidden) from military service. This arrangement, however, initially applied only to Christians who were *not* Arabs. The Muslim conquerors seem to have been considerably less tolerant of *Arab* Christian tribes. According to one report, the caliph ‘Umar insisted that they should be fought until they converted to Islam or died. When he eventually agreed to impose on the Arab Christians from the tribe of Taghlib conditions of surrender, he specifically prohibited them from baptizing their children (a prohibition they later disregarded); at the same time, he acceded to their request to pay a different and less humiliating kind of tax than the *jizya*.⁶³

Another crucial change that affected the Orthodox Christian populations of the Middle East, now subjects of the Muslim caliphate, was that they were separated from Byzantine territory and had difficulty maintaining ties with their co-religionists in the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Instead, they found themselves for the first time within a single polity that also included Christians living to the east of the Euphrates, in former Sasanian lands. Whereas the Byzantine government had favored the Orthodox and the Sasanian government had shown preference to the Church of the East, under the early Muslim rule all Christians—Orthodox, Miaphysite, and Nestorian—were to

have equal status as dhimmis.⁶⁴ This unprecedented situation brought about new forms of competition and interaction between the various Christian communities, who, along with the Muslims, would all gradually come to adopt Arabic as their principal language of cultural and intellectual discourse. In this environment intra-Christian polemic, written mostly in Arabic and focused especially on Christological issues, became a major literary genre. Despite this intra-Christian polemic, however, Christians freely exchanged ideas across Christological divisions as they endeavored to defend their shared faith against Muslim attacks.

In other respects, however, after the initial shock and chaos of the conquest, the subsequent period was marked by a high degree of social and cultural continuity with the Byzantine era, and the archaeological evidence in particular shows few signs of wide-scale devastation and disruption of the patterns of life in the seventh century, contrary to what one might expect from literary sources.⁶⁵ The policy of Muhammad's four immediate successors, the so-called "rightly-guided caliphs," toward the Christians seems to have been limited to expelling them from Arabia (in accordance with Muhammad's injunction that "no two religions shall coexist in the Arabian Peninsula") and enforcing the conditions of surrender on dhimmi populations in the newly acquired territories. The Muslim conquerors consciously retained the status of a separate military caste, preferring to live apart from the conquered populations in newly built garrison cities (*amsar*) such as Basra and Kufa in Iraq (both founded in the late 630s), rather than in old cities like al-Hira, where the influence of the pre-Islamic elites was still predominant.

Arab Orthodox under the Umayyads

In the year 661 the fourth caliph, 'Ali (r. 656–61), was assassinated by a Muslim rebel, and governance of the Muslim community was seized by his rivals, the Umayyad family, a branch of the Arab tribe of Quraysh living in Syria. The resulting transfer of the capital to Damascus was initially beneficial to the Orthodox Christians of Syria and Palestine, at least in terms of providing them with an opportunity to maintain their elite status. While the first four caliphs had attempted to rule from the far-off Medina (and in the case of 'Ali, from Kufa in Iraq) and were largely preoccupied by the conquest of new territory as well as rebellions and civil war among the Muslims, Umayyad rule gradually brought about a period of relative political stability during which the new rulers could develop their institutions of governance. Initially, the Umayyads maintained the Byzantine administrative system and even for a time kept Greek as the language of bureaucracy.⁶⁶ This meant that

Orthodox Christians with knowledge of Greek coming from families such as that of John of Damascus, which had been previously employed by the Byzantines, were able to keep their social prestige and influence by serving in the Umayyad administration.

However, already the caliphs ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705) and his son al-Walid (r. 705–15) took measures to promote Arabic and Islam and to curb Christianity’s influence in the Islamic empire. The most significant of these measures was the adoption of Arabic under ‘Abd al-Malik as the official language of the administration. In addition, these two caliphs made the first significant efforts to claim the “public space” for Islam. In Jerusalem ‘Abd al-Malik ordered the construction of the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount. Designed to rival the Christian monuments of the city, especially the Church of the Resurrection (the Holy Sepulchre), it was decorated with Qur’anic and Qur’an-style verses that criticized the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation.⁶⁷ In Damascus al-Walid demolished the Orthodox Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist, which had previously incorporated designated worship spaces for both Christians and Muslims, and converted the space into the Umayyad Mosque.⁶⁸ During the construction of the mosque, the head of John the Baptist was reportedly found in a crypt beneath the former cathedral. On al-Walid’s orders it was reinterred, and a special column was erected in the mosque to mark its place. Until this day the Umayyad Mosque houses a shrine of John the Baptist (Yahya ibn Zakariyya), whom the Muslims revere as one of the prophets. Byzantine architects and craftsmen were employed in the construction of both the Dome of the Rock and the Umayyad Mosque, adding a layer of architectural continuity with the Byzantine period, even as the buildings themselves sought to marginalize Christianity and assert the dominance of Islam.

Usually attributed to the caliph ‘Umar II (r. 717–20), though sometimes associated with the earlier ‘Umar (r. 634–44), the so-called “Pact of ‘Umar” laid out the specific restrictions by which Christians were obligated to abide in order to maintain their “protected” status as dhimmis.⁶⁹ Many of these restrictions also aimed at curbing Christianity’s presence in the public sphere, while others sought to humiliate Christians and mark them as separate from, and inferior to, Muslims. In addition to the requirement of paying the *jizya*, already mentioned above, the “Pact” also forbade Christians from building new churches or repairing old ones. Christians were not allowed to proselytize Muslims or even to attempt to dissuade family members—including spouses and next-of-kin—from converting to Islam. They could not teach their children the Qur’an or imitate the Muslims’ clothing, speech, or behavior. They were forbidden from riding horses or carrying swords and were required to wear distinctive dress, including a special belt called

the *zunnar* (from the Greek *zonarion*). Even if not consistently enforced by the Muslim authorities, these restrictions delineated the behavior expected of Christians in the minds of many Muslim jurists, as well as the populace. Several rulers, however, such as the 'Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–61) and the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim (r. 996–1021), attempted to enforce the letter of the “Pact” with great brutality.⁷⁰ Even in modern times the “Pact” is used as the ultimate justification for restrictions on the building and repair of churches still enforced in a number of Muslim-majority countries, including Egypt.

Further radical measures aiming at curtailing Christianity’s public presence were taken by the Umayyad caliph Yazid II (r. 720–4), who issued a decree forbidding the public display of crosses and icons and calling for their destruction.⁷¹ Possibly in response to this edict, and to Muslim iconophobic attitudes more generally, local Christians in Transjordan protected their churches by shifting around the tesserae of their floor mosaics so as to eliminate human faces and animal figures and replace them with floral and geometric ornamentation.⁷² While Yazid II’s anti-Christian decree was short-lived within Muslim territory, it may have had an impact on the beginnings of iconoclasm within the Byzantine Empire.⁷³

The issues faced by Orthodox Christians living in Syria and Palestine under Umayyad rule are best illustrated by the life and works of John of Damascus. Born into a local Greek-educated Damascene family of Arab or Aramaean background (his Arabic given name is Mansur ibn Sarjun) with a tradition of service in the imperial administration, John followed his family’s tradition and worked as a senior official in the Umayyad treasury. Possibly because of the shift from Greek to Arabic in the administrative apparatus and ensuing changes in the personnel, John left his post and joined one of the monasteries of Palestine, traditionally said to be the famous lavra of Saint Sabbas (Mar Saba). At that time, the Orthodox Church of Jerusalem, under the leadership of patriarch John V (r. 706–35), was consolidating itself after the devastations wrought by the Persian and Muslim invasions.⁷⁴ With its important monasteries and a strong tradition of loyalty to Chalcedonian Orthodoxy, Jerusalem became the natural center of Orthodox Christianity in Muslim lands. Jerusalem’s prestige was also due to the role played by its patriarchs and monks in opposing monotheletism in the seventh century, which had been initially promoted by the imperial church in Byzantium.⁷⁵

Originating from the heart of Orthodoxy within the caliphate, John’s writings and hymns first spread among the Orthodox Christians in the Muslim lands, while gaining acceptance in Byzantium only later on, well after the author’s lifetime. It is likely, therefore, that in his writings John was

much more concerned with the plight of Christians under Muslim rule than with the situation in far-off Byzantium.⁷⁶ While he was certainly aware of iconoclasm in the Byzantine Empire, it is primarily his personal experience of Yazid II's iconoclasm and the apologetic need to counter Muslim accusations of idolatry that motivated his celebrated defense of the icons.⁷⁷

Likewise, John's dogmatic works reflect the sectarian milieu of Umayyad Syria. The heresies that he devotes the most attention to refuting—Monophysitism, Nestorianism, Manichaeism, and Messalianism—were at that time all active in Syria but were less immediately relevant to Byzantium.⁷⁸ In his defense of Orthodox Christology, John sought to clarify Orthodox dogma through a precise explanation of technical terms within an Aristotelian framework, a trend already evident half a century earlier in Anastasius of Sinai's *Hodegos*.⁷⁹ This trend would later continue in Arab Christian literature and would become the major form of polemical discourse between the rival Christian groups, as well as of Christian polemic against the Muslims.

Chapter 100 of John's *On Heresies* and the (apparently spurious) *Dialogue between a Saracen and a Christian* represent the earliest direct Orthodox Christian responses to Islam. These works demonstrate firsthand knowledge of Islam and of several passages from the Qur'an.⁸⁰ Significantly, during John's lifetime, Damascus was the center of the early attempts at forging a rationalist Islamic theology, *kalam*, especially focused on the debate between proponents of determinism and partisans of free will. A number of scholars have attempted to identify John's influence among those Muslims who argued for free will,⁸¹ while others have seen parallels between John's apologetic theology in the *Fount of Knowledge* and the methodology of early Islamic apologetic theological reflection.⁸²

John of Damascus was by no means the only significant Orthodox Christian figure writing in Greek while living under Islamic rule in the eighth century, a time of relatively insignificant literary production in Byzantium. Andrew of Crete (d. ca. 740) and Cosmas of Maiuma (d. c. 752)—both of whom, together with John of Damascus himself, were famous for their contributions to Orthodox Christian hymnography—are also associated with the monastic milieu of Palestine in the Umayyad period.⁸³

‘Abbasid Rule and the Birth of Arab Christian Literature

The Umayyads were not descendants of the immediate family of Muhammad and therefore were constantly haunted by doubts over the legitimacy of their rule over the Muslim community. In the year 750 they were swept

away by a revolution begun in the eastern Iranian province of Khorasan in the name of descendants of Muhammad's uncle 'Abbas. The 'Abbasid revolution ushered in significant changes in Islamic society and thus greatly impacted the situation of Christians living under Muslim rule. In 762 the seat of the caliphate was transferred from Damascus to the newly founded city of Baghdad, built in the vicinity of the old Sasanian capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon. This change reflected a transition from Byzantine to Iranian models in court life and administration and from Bedouin Arab to Persian models in literary culture. It proved most beneficial for the Nestorian Christians, whose church was centered in Iraq and who were quick to move their patriarchal see from Seleucia-Ctesiphon to Baghdad. With their demographic predominance in Iraq and their catholicos' easy access to the caliphal court, the Nestorians were able, at least unofficially, to regain something of the status they had held under the Sasanians prior to the Muslim conquest.⁸⁴

In the caliphate's new capital, Christians of all communities were able to maintain a significant degree of social prestige. According to the famous ninth-century Muslim litterateur al-Jahiz (d. 868 or 869), many Christians in Baghdad were relatively well-off and were employed as "secretaries to the government, attendants of kings, doctors to the nobility, sellers of perfume, and financiers."⁸⁵ At the same time, Christian intellectuals made indelible contributions to the burgeoning philosophical and scientific culture of 'Abbasid Baghdad as translators of Greek and Syriac philosophical, scientific, and medical works into Arabic.⁸⁶

The sheer volume of their translation activity is startling. As summarized by Dimitri Gutas, it encompassed "astronomy and alchemy and the rest of the occult sciences; the subjects of the quadrivium: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and theory of music; the entire field of Aristotelian philosophy throughout its history: metaphysics, ethics, physics, zoology, botany, and especially logic—the *Organon*; all the health sciences: medicine, pharmacology, and veterinary science; and various other marginal genres of writings, such as Byzantine handbooks on military science (the *tactica*), popular collections of wisdom sayings, and even books on falconry."⁸⁷ Though the majority of the translators were Nestorians, one can also mention a number of Arabic- and Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians: Yahya ibn al-Bitriq,⁸⁸ Qusta ibn Luqa, Istifan ibn Basil, Nazif ibn Yumn, and possibly also 'Abd al-Masih ibn Na'ima al-Himsi, the author of an influential Arabic adaptation of Plotinus's *Enneads*, known as the *Theology of Aristotle*.⁸⁹ In addition to their work as translators, both Qusta ibn Luqa and Nazif ibn Yumn were authors of theological treatises that expressed Orthodox theological beliefs in the philosophical language of their day.⁹⁰

Less fortunately for the Christians, the 'Abbasids instituted a new conversion policy radically different from that of the Umayyads. They were the first Muslim rulers to encourage conversions of non-Arabs to Islam, abolishing the requirement that non-Arab converts should become affiliated with an Arab tribe. This resulted in a dramatic surge in the rate of conversions, reflected in contemporary sources.⁹¹ Thus, the West-Syriac *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, written ca. 775 in the region of Tur 'Abdin (present-day south-eastern Turkey), reports group conversions of entire villages.

The gates were open to them to [enter] Islam. . . . Without blows or tortures [Christians] slipped towards apostasy in great precipitancy; they formed groups of ten or twenty or thirty or a hundred or two hundred or three hundred without any sort of compulsion . . . going down to Harran and becoming Muslims in the presence of [government] officials. A great crowd did so . . . from the districts of Edessa and of Harran and of Tella and of Resh'ayna.⁹²

It is against this complex backdrop of the early 'Abbasid period that we find, a generation after the death of John of Damascus, the beginnings of a Christian literature in Arabic. Already in the early eighth century there is evidence that Arabic was coming into use in a liturgical setting. There survives a bilingual fragment of Psalm 78 (LXX: 77) in Greek and Arabic written in Greek letters that was used in the Orthodox Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist in Damascus before its conversion into the Umayyad mosque. This seems to reflect a situation where a priest who did not know Arabic needed to minister to Arabic-speaking faithful who did not know Greek.⁹³ Such linguistic diversity had long been a feature of Orthodox worship in Syria—and even more so in the pilgrimage centers of Palestine where, prior to the Muslim conquest, interpreters would translate Biblical readings and sermons from Greek into the local Palestinian dialect.⁹⁴

As the number of pilgrims declined and ties to Constantinople weakened over the course of the first century of 'Abbasid rule, Greek gradually fell into disuse in the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. This is demonstrated by the backgrounds of the monks populating the Palestinian monasteries. Whereas until the mid-eighth century many of the monks came from the major Greek-speaking cultural centers of Byzantium, by the ninth century the situation changes radically, and those monks whose identities are known to us from manuscript notes all have ties to Arabic- and/or Syriac-speaking regions of the caliphate.⁹⁵

It is these Arabic-speaking Orthodox monks of Palestine who were the first to systematically adopt Arabic as a Christian literary language.⁹⁶ In the

second half of the eighth and over the course of the ninth century, they translated liturgical texts, much of the Bible, saints' lives, and various patristic works from Greek and Syriac into Arabic and composed the first original Arab Christian theological works. Some texts were translated practically simultaneously into several languages, as is the case with the works of Isaac the Syrian, translated at the monastery of Mar Saba in Palestine from the original Syriac, first into Greek (by the monks Abramius and Patricius, ca. 800) and subsequently into Arabic and Georgian.⁹⁷ The Arab Christian literature produced in this Orthodox Palestinian milieu addresses the immediate needs of Arab Orthodox Christians seeking to maintain their communal identity in an environment defined by an ever more assertive and sophisticated Islam.⁹⁸

The earliest attempts at developing Orthodox Christian theological literature in Arabic are anonymous. This is the case with the **Apology for the Christian Faith** (chapter 1), which opens this anthology.* Written in Palestine in the second half of the eighth century, it demonstrates the challenge of articulating Christian beliefs in a language already permeated by Islamic theological vocabulary and the idiom of the Qur'an. Strikingly, in its apologetic endeavor to demonstrate the truth of Christianity, the text seeks to turn this difficulty into an advantage and does not hesitate to cite passages from the Qur'an itself as evidence for the Christian belief in a triune God.

Another anonymous text from the ninth century, *A Compilation of the Aspects of the Faith in the Triunity of God and the Incarnation of God the Word from the Pure Virgin Mary*, commonly referred to as the *Summa Theologiae Arabica*,⁹⁹ begins by explicitly decrying those Christians who shy away from proclaiming the distinctive dogmas of their faith in the face of Muslim criticism, accusing them of vacillation and hypocrisy. Indeed, in addition to its emphasis on the distinctiveness of such Christian beliefs as the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, and the power of the Cross, the text stresses the Christian believers' obligation to set themselves apart from their Islamic environment, listing beliefs that disqualify those holding them from being considered Christians as well as canons that discourage mixing with non-Christians. It is clear that the author of this treatise is concerned with the process of assimilation of Arabic-speaking Christians into the Islamic environment, which he sees as a dangerous development that can lead to apostasy. Yet even as he is concerned about assimilation, he consistently employs language resonant of the Qur'an and Islamic theology and evinces familiarity with contemporary theological debates among Muslims.

* For texts translated in this anthology, the reader is directed to more detailed references provided in the "Suggested Reading" section of each chapter. A detailed guide to translations of Arab Orthodox literature into English and other languages is provided at the end of the volume.

The most significant figure of this early period is **Theodore Abu Qurra** (chapter 2), bishop of Harran in northern Syria (present-day southeast Turkey) in the early ninth century. Writing in Arabic, Greek, and possibly Syriac, Abu Qurra sought to articulate the teachings of the Orthodox Church within the context of the new interconfessional free-for-all that emerged under Islamic rule. Elaborating on the themes addressed earlier by John of Damascus and Anastasius of Sinai, Abu Qurra wrote polemical tracts against Jacobites, Nestorians, Jews, and Muslims as well as doctrinal treatises on the Orthodox faith, including a treatise in defense of icons.¹⁰⁰ Abu Qurra's criticism of those Christians who were abandoning the practice of prostration before icons, particularly before the miraculous image of Christ in Edessa (the *mandylion*), is strikingly similar to the *Summa Theologiae Arabica*'s rebuke for wavering Christians shying away from proclaiming Christian beliefs in the face of Muslim criticism.

Another important figure representing the early flowering of Arab Orthodox theology is Peter of Bayt Ra's (Capitolias in Transjordan), the author of the long apologetic work *The Book of Proof*, formerly ascribed to Eutychius of Alexandria, which includes a fascinating account of the Christian holy places in Palestine, Transjordan, and Syria.¹⁰¹

As a result of the surge in conversions to Islam in the early 'Abbasid period, religious polemic and interreligious debates became the call of the day. Christian-Muslim religious disputations often happened in special prearranged gatherings, called *majlis*, and were conducted before an audience, where a Muslim ruler would grant a Christian monk or theologian the permission to present his views and argue against a Muslim interlocutor or even against the ruler himself. Thus, accounts of such debates, both historical and fictional, developed into an extremely popular genre.¹⁰² The present anthology includes an English translation of selections from one such debate, probably written in the ninth century: *The Disputation of the Monk Abraham of Tiberias* (chapter 3). In this disputation, set in Jerusalem around the year 820, the monk Abraham not only successfully debates three Muslim interlocutors in the presence of a Muslim emir but also, through the power of the Cross, passes three thaumaturgic tests—drinks poison with no harm, exorcises a demon, and does not get burned in fire—leading to the conversion to Christianity of several witnesses. In an environment where ordinary Christians would have needed to answer questions about their faith from Muslims, disputation texts such as this served as an accessible, entertaining form of popular catechism.¹⁰³

The complex experience of living under Islamic rule also stimulated new developments in **Hagiography** (chapter 4). Apostasy from Islam was

punishable by death under Islamic law, and so we hear of a number of Orthodox Christians who converted to Islam, reverted to Christianity, and were martyred at the hands of the Muslim officials.¹⁰⁴ Such martyrdom stories—many of them originating from the Palestinian Orthodox milieu—served as a powerful tool in the hands of the Christian authorities to dissuade their flock from converting to Islam in the first place. The present anthology contains an integral translation of three such stories: the passion of Anthony Rawh, martyred in Raqqa (Syria) in 799; the passion of ‘Abd al-Masih al-Ghassani, martyred in the Palestinian city of Ramla in 857; and a miraculous story of a Muslim who converts to Christianity after seeing a Eucharistic miracle in the church of Saint George in Lydda and is then martyred for publicly proclaiming his conversion.

Arab Orthodox authors also dedicated themselves to writing histories. Though Qusta ibn Luqa, the famous translator mentioned above, reportedly wrote a world history, it is no longer extant, and the two earliest surviving examples of this genre are the history of the Patriarch of Alexandria, Eutychius (Sa‘id ibn Batriq, d. 940), already mentioned above,¹⁰⁵ and the world history of **Agapius** (chapter 5), the tenth-century Orthodox bishop of Manbij (Mabbug or Hierapolis in northern Syria).¹⁰⁶ The present anthology includes an English translation of excerpts of Agapius’s history, dealing mostly with the history of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint), Christian attitudes to Scripture, and the Christian claim that the Jews had deliberately tampered with the text of the Torah.

Another important Arab Orthodox historian is Yahya al-Antaki (early eleventh century), who composed an influential sequel to Eutychius’s history, covering the period up to the year 1033–34.¹⁰⁷ Yahya’s history is a crucial historical source for the persecution of Christians (and Jews) during the reign of the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim, on which more will be said shortly.

Arab Orthodox in Fatimid Palestine

In the late tenth and early eleventh centuries new political circumstances affected the development of Arab Christian literature. The ‘Abbasid caliphate based in Baghdad, which at its heyday in the eighth and ninth centuries had outshone any empire of its time in power and size, by the tenth century had largely disintegrated into a collection of small local dynasties governing its former territory nominally in the name of the ‘Abbasid caliph.

In 969 the North African Fatimid caliphate—a powerful rival to the ‘Abbasids, representing the Isma‘ili branch of Shi‘i Islam—conquered Palestine, devastating the monasteries and causing large numbers of monks to

flee to Constantinople. The cultural impact of these refugees, who naturally brought along important liturgical and ascetic manuscripts with them as they fled, should not be underestimated. This is likely the time, for instance, when the Greek translation of the works of Isaac the Syrian, produced at Mar Saba ca. 800, as mentioned above, was first introduced to Byzantium.

A generation later, the mentally unstable Fatimid caliph al-Hakim (r. 996–1021), scandalized by the miracle of the Holy Fire in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem,^{*108} unleashed an unprecedented persecution of Christians (and Jews) in both Egypt and Palestine, destroying countless churches, including the Holy Sepulchre itself (which was subsequently rebuilt with Byzantine help).¹⁰⁹ It is the mass emigration of Christians during al-Hakim's persecution that seems to be primarily responsible for the decline of the Greek and Arab Orthodox Christian community in Egypt, leaving the Copts as the only significant Egyptian Christian group.¹¹⁰

Living under al-Hakim's persecution, the bishop **Sulayman al-Ghazzi** (chapter 6) composed a large body of devotional poetry as well as several dogmatic treatises. In Sulayman's poetry—presented in this anthology for the first time in a Western language—his joy in the mystery of the Incarnation and celebration of the Christian holy sites of Palestine (many of which were destroyed in his lifetime) contrasts with his highly personal lamentations over the loss of his son and grandson.

Another, virtually unknown, Arab Orthodox author from this period is the monk and priest Salih ibn Sa'īd, whose monastic name is Christodoulos. He was born in Jerusalem ca. 980 and moved to Egypt at the age of nine when his father became a Fatimid civil servant. During al-Hakim's persecution, Salih fled Egypt and traveled to Edessa to venerate saints' relics and then journeyed all over Syria and Palestine, preaching and strengthening the Orthodox communities there. Subsequently, he returned to Jerusalem and served for five years as a priest in the newly rebuilt Church of the Resurrection (the Holy Sepulchre). He ended his life as a monk on Mount Sinai. Probably put in charge of the monastery's rich library, he would fill empty spaces in manuscripts with edifying notes and valuable recollections of his life and travels. His notes, many of which survive, are eloquent witnesses to interreligious tensions among Christians, Muslims, and Jews in the first half of the eleventh century and the challenges that Christian communities faced in the wake of al-Hakim's persecution.¹¹¹

* The Holy Fire is an annual celebration that takes place on Holy Saturday (the eve of Orthodox Easter), when fire believed to descend from heaven lights the candle of the Orthodox patriarch of Jerusalem and is then distributed to the faithful. Modern videos of the Holy Fire celebration are easily available on the Internet.

The Byzantine Reconquest of Antioch

While bringing unprecedented hardship to the Christians of Egypt and Palestine, the disintegration of 'Abbasid rule ushered in an age of cultural revival in northern Syria. One of the most detailed and fascinating accounts of Orthodox Christian life during this time is found in the story of the life and martyrdom of the patriarch of Antioch, Christopher (r. 960–67), written by the *protospatharios* (a Byzantine imperial title of honor) Ibrahim ibn Yuhanna (d. ca. 1025), who as a youth had been an eyewitness to the events he described.¹¹²

As recounted by Ibrahim ibn Yuhanna, Christopher, whose name in the world was 'Isa, was originally a native of Baghdad. He traveled to Aleppo to serve as a secretary to one of the emirs under the local Hamdanid ruler, Sayf al-Dawla (r. 945–67). At some point during his service, Christopher went to Antioch with the intention of being consecrated Orthodox catholicos of Baghdad.^{*113} This was during a time when the Orthodox communities of Baghdad and Romagyris (Shash, located near modern Tashkent) were disputing which city should have leadership over Orthodox populations in the eastern parts of the Islamic world.

Before the dispute could be resolved, the patriarch of Antioch, Agapius ibn al-Qa'barun (r. 953–59) died. With the support of Sayf al-Dawla, Christopher was elected patriarch. Immediately, he arranged to have two catholicoi consecrated: a native of Aleppo named Majid for Baghdad and a native of Antioch named Euty chius for Romagyris. Because of his close relationship with the Hamdanid court, Christopher was able to successfully negotiate tax concessions and other advantages for his flock.

In the 960s, Christopher's political connections with the Hamdanids came to cause him difficulties. As the Byzantine army was slowly advancing toward Antioch, a revolt against Hamdanid rule erupted in the city. In order not to be perceived as supporting the rebels, Christopher fled to the Monastery of Saint Simeon the Elder outside Aleppo and returned to Antioch only after the revolt had been quelled. Soon after this, on May 22, 967, Christopher was assassinated by political rivals of Sayf al-Dawla. He was quickly viewed as a saint and martyr, and his remains were interred at the monastery of Arshaya outside Antioch, then in the Cathedral of Antioch, and finally, during the reign of the patriarch Nicholas II (r. 1025–30), in the House of Saint Peter.

* In regions that were large enough to support several metropolitans but were too far away from Antioch, a catholicos would be appointed to oversee local metropolitans, while himself representing them on the patriarchal synod. This arrangement is analogous to the modern concept of an autonomous church.

It is striking that Christopher was given this level of veneration while Antioch was under Byzantine rule, even though he was killed on account of his unwavering loyalty to his *Muslim* patron. One reason for this may be the number of his disciples who would continue to hold positions of importance in the Church of Antioch.

Two years after the patriarch Christopher's death, the armies of the Byzantine emperor Nikephoros Phokas (r. 963–69) entered Antioch and advanced through the coastal region of Syria as far south as Latakia.¹¹⁴ During the century of Byzantine rule that followed, the region of Antioch did not lose its Arabic-speaking character. Rather than reverting to Greek as a literary language, Arab Orthodox theologians—writing for the first time under Christian rule—translated numerous Greek patristic texts into Arabic and composed original Christian works in that language.¹¹⁵

The first generation of Antiochene translators from Greek into Arabic includes Antonius, abbot of the famous Monastery of Saint Simeon the Wonderworker on the Black Mountain near Antioch,^{*116} and Ibrahim ibn Yuhanna, the author of the life of the patriarch Christopher, mentioned above. Before becoming abbot of the Monastery of Saint Simeon, Antonius was a monk at Mar Saba. He was responsible for the Arabic translations of several treatises of John of Damascus (including his *Dialectica* and the *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*), as well as the *Spiritually Beneficial Tales* of Paul of Monembasia, a contemporary of Antonius, who occupied the bishopric of Monembasia in the Peloponnese in the year 955. A protégé of the patriarch Christopher, Ibrahim ibn Yuhanna was the author of several hagiographic works (of which the life of Christopher is the only extant example) and the translator of several *Orations* of Gregory of Nazianzus, a section of Dionysius the Areopagite's treatise *On Divine Names*, dealing with good and evil, and possibly some Greek sermons attributed to Ephrem the Syrian. Another disciple of Christopher, Chariton, abbot of the Monastery of Arshaya near Antioch, translated a selection of the works of Theodore the Studite (d. 826) into Arabic.

The most prolific translator of Greek texts into Arabic, however, was the eleventh-century Orthodox deacon 'Abdallah ibn al-Fadl (chapter 7). Benefitting from an excellent education in both Greek and Arabic, Ibn al-Fadl produced not only numerous translations of the Church Fathers (John Chrysostom, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus, Isaac of Nineveh, John of Damascus, and Andrew of Crete, among others) but also a translation of the Psalms

* According to the eleventh-century Christian physician and traveler Ibn Butlan, this monastery was half the size of the caliphal palace in Baghdad, and its wealth was estimated as 400,000 dinars per year.

that would continue to be copied and printed well into the nineteenth century.^{*117} In his original theological works, most of which are still unpublished, as well as in marginal notes appended to his translations, Ibn al-Fadl displays a wide awareness not only of the patristic tradition but also of contemporary trends among the philosophers and theologians of Baghdad, both Christian and Muslim.¹¹⁸ Ibn al-Fadl's works are emblematic of the cross-pollination between Byzantium and the Arab world that is so characteristic of Antioch under Byzantine rule in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

As a result of the endeavors of Ibn al-Fadl and other translators, as well as the work of earlier Palestinian translators, primarily at Mar Saba, a large corpus of patristic works came to be available in Arabic, including most of the works of John Chrysostom, the Cappadocian Fathers, Maximus the Confessor, and John of Damascus. This translation activity also spread beyond Byzantine territory into Muslim lands. Thus, the works ascribed to Dionysius the Areopagite were translated into Arabic in 1009 in neighboring Damascus, then under Fatimid rule.¹¹⁹ Nor was the translation activity in the region of Antioch limited to translations into Arabic. During that same period, translators such as Eprem Mtsire (Ephrem the Lesser; d. ca. 1101) translated many of these same patristic works from Greek into Georgian.¹²⁰

The Antiochene translation movement also included such monastic works as the *Ascetical Homilies* of Isaac the Syrian and the *Book of the Ladder* of John Climacus, as well as the otherwise unknown treatise *The Noetic Paradise* (chapter 8). Originally written in Greek in Palestine, probably in the seventh or eighth century, *The Noetic Paradise* was most likely brought to Antioch by monks fleeing the Fatimid persecution of Christians in Palestine. This spiritual manual, a masterpiece of Greek patristic literature, no longer extant in Greek but available in Arabic, remains unpublished in any language and is presented to the English reader here for the first time.

Although Arabic seems to have been the primary language of culture in Byzantine Antioch, important Greek works were composed there as well. The most significant among these for Arab Christian literature are works of the eleventh-century author Nikon of the Black Mountain. Though he came from a noble family of Constantinople, Nikon did not receive an education fitting his station, a fact that he frequently laments. After a brief military career he became a monk at one of the monasteries of the Black Mountain near Antioch where the abbot was the former metropolitan of Anazarbus, Luke. Nikon apparently enjoyed Luke's favor, but when the latter died he was expelled from the monastery by fellow monks displeased by the strict

* Ibn al-Fadl's translation of select Psalms was even used for decoration of a seventeenth-century Christian house in Aleppo, now preserved in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin.

monastic discipline that he was trying to impose. Despite this, however, the patriarch Theodosius III (r. 1057–59) made Nikon the supervisor of the monasteries around Antioch. Nikon accepted this appointment but refused to accept the title of archimandrite. After a failed attempt to found his own monastery, Nikon resided at the Monastery of Saint Simeon the Wonderworker, and after the Seljuk seizure of Antioch (1084), he ultimately settled at the Monastery of the Mother of God of the Pomegranate (*tou Roidiou*).¹²¹ As references to the “Franks” in his works suggest, Nikon was also a witness to the Crusader conquest of Antioch in 1098 and must have died around the first decade of the twelfth century. Nikon’s two most significant literary works are the *Pandectes* and the *Taktikon*, which were both translated into Arabic during his lifetime or shortly thereafter. The latter work includes two different monastic *typika* and a record of Nikon’s correspondence with the abbots of various monasteries around Antioch, an invaluable source for the history of monasticism during this turbulent time in the city’s history.¹²²

Gerasimus, abbot of the the monastery of Saint Simeon the Wonderworker near Antioch, is another prominent writer from this period. His only surviving work is an Arabic apology for Christianity in five parts entitled *An Exhaustive Compilation on the Doctrine that Brings Cure*, in which he cites “testimonies” for the Christian faith from the Old Testament, the works of pagan philosophers, and finally, from the Qur’an.¹²³ Practically nothing is known about Gerasimus’s life, except that he must have lived before the destruction of his monastery by the Mamluks (on which see below). Though it is conventional to place him in the thirteenth century, there is no compelling reason to assign him to this late period. For all we know, he might have been active much earlier and have been a contemporary of Nikon. In fact, one of the chapters of Nikon’s *Taktikon* contains a letter to his “spiritual son” Gerasimus on the subject of the conversion of the Georgians to Christianity.¹²⁴ Though it cannot be proven without further evidence, it is at least possible that this Gerasimus is the Arabic-speaking author of the Apology.

Finally, mention should be made of the Arab Orthodox bishop of Homs, **Agathon** (chapter 9), introduced for the first time in English in this anthology. Also an Antiochene, he was approached by a delegation of the dignitaries of Homs (Emesa) in Syria asking him to become bishop of their city. He accepted the post with much trepidation, considering himself to be unworthy of the task. Yet several years later he resigned his post in the wake of canonical irregularities and certain unspecified “blasphemies” among the high clergy. In order to justify his decision, he wrote an extensive apology, which contains a lengthy disquisition on the nature of priesthood—perhaps the most elaborate discussion of the subject in all of Arab Christian literature.

Although there is little direct mention of Latin Christianity in Arab Orthodox literature prior to the sixteenth century,¹²⁵ the patriarch of Antioch, Peter III (d. 1056) was an active participant in the dispute between Rome and Constantinople that led to the Great Schism. A native of Antioch, and thus likely an Arabic or Syriac speaker who was educated in Constantinople, Peter corresponded with both Dominic, the archbishop of Grado, and Michael Cerularius, the patriarch of Constantinople (r. 1043–59), arguing that, while Latin liturgical practice—especially the use of unleavened bread for the Eucharist—was incorrect, this should not lead to schism. Despite his efforts, in the schism of 1054, Antioch ultimately sided with Constantinople.¹²⁶

Arab Orthodox under the Crusaders, Mongols, and Mamluks

With the arrival of the Crusaders in the Levant and the conquest of Antioch (1098) and Jerusalem (1099), Orthodox Christians in the Crusader principalities found themselves in the new situation of living under foreign Christian rule.¹²⁷ While the Crusaders had relatively friendly and cooperative relations with some indigenous Christian communities (notably the Maronites, who entered into union with the Roman Church in the twelfth century, and the Armenians), Orthodox Christians, called *Graeci et Suriani* by the Crusaders,¹²⁸ were treated with distrust on account of their ties to Byzantium, the very recent schism between Rome and the Eastern patriarchates, and (in the case of the Arab Orthodox) their “Saracen” language and culture that they shared with Muslims.¹²⁹

The mostly Greek-speaking Orthodox hierarchy of the patriarchate of Jerusalem, which had already been in disarray by the time of the First Crusade, was quickly replaced by Latin bishops. In the patriarchate of Antioch, a similar situation emerged after the Orthodox patriarch of Antioch, John the Oxite, initially reinstalled by the Crusaders, fled to Constantinople. The Crusaders then elected their own Latin patriarch of Antioch, Bernard of Valence, and for the next century there would be parallel patriarchates of Antioch and Jerusalem, one Latin and the other in exile in Constantinople. Though this state of affairs, which continued until the Crusader conquest of Constantinople in 1204, sometimes caused resentment on the part of the local Christians, in many places there is also evidence of ecclesiastical symbiosis and liturgical communion between the Latin and the Greek and Arab Orthodox clergy.¹³⁰

The challenging circumstances of the Crusades did not end Arab Orthodox literary activity in the Levant. An important author from this period who displays a close engagement with Islamic theology is **Paul of Antioch** (chapter

10), a late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century bishop of Sidon. In his *Letter to a Muslim Friend*, presented here for the first time in English, Paul of Antioch attempted to reinterpret the career of Muhammad within a Christian framework and to prove the veracity of Christianity on the basis of passages from the Qur'an. In his outwardly courteous and polite but in fact highly provocative and subversive letter, Paul boldly argued that the Qur'anic message was meant only for pagan Arabs and did not apply to Christians at all and that, moreover, the Qur'an itself urged Christians to remain loyal to Christianity and resist conversion to Islam. Paul of Antioch's *Letter*, as well as its subsequent adaptation by an anonymous Christian from Cyprus (prepared in the early fourteenth century), stirred sharp reactions from Muslim scholars who continued writing refutations of it for the following century and a half.¹³¹

Another important author of the period is Patriarch Athanasius II of Jerusalem (ca. 1231–44), the author of a collection of homilies for the Sundays of the year and major feasts. It is possible that these homilies were originally written in Greek, but they were soon translated into Arabic for the benefit of the Arabic-speaking faithful of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. To judge from the large number of manuscripts of these homilies, they enjoyed considerable popularity.¹³²

The arrival of the Mongols—who were initially favorably disposed toward the Christians and, under the influence of their (Nestorian) Christian wives, were themselves considering conversion to Christianity—briefly raised the hopes of the Christians of Damascus for a restoration of Christian rule.^{*133} After the Mongol conquest of Damascus in March 1260, the Christian communities secured a protected status from the Mongol rulers and launched a triumphant procession with crosses through the streets of the city. Muslim chroniclers report with indignation that the jubilant Christians went as far as pouring wine on Muslim bystanders and on the walls of the mosques. After the Mongol defeat at the hands of the Egyptian Mamluks at 'Ayn Jalut (Palestine) in September of the same year, the Christians of Damascus faced a bloody reprisal, with the Orthodox cathedral of the Mother of God (the "Maryamiyya") burned to the ground.^{†134}

The ensuing conquest of Syria by the Mamluks ushered in a long dark period in the history of Middle Eastern Christianity from which we have few

* A Syriac manuscript illustration from that time period even depicts the Mongol Khan Hülegü and his Christian wife Doguz Khatun as the new Constantine and Helen.

† This was not the first time the Maryamiyya was destroyed: it had been destroyed in 924 (as reported by Sa'īd ibn Battīq), then again in 950 (as reported by the Muslim historian Ibn 'Asakir), and then in 1009, on the orders of the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim. Later on it suffered in the earthquake of 1759 and was destroyed again in the anti-Christian riots of 1860.

literary remains. When the Sultan Baybars (d. 1277) sacked Antioch in 1268, he massacred the city's Christian population and destroyed the monasteries in its vicinity, including the famous monastery of Saint Simeon the Wonderworker. Antioch would never recover from this blow. It was under these circumstances that the patriarchal see of Antioch was removed from the city and was eventually transferred to Damascus, where it remains until the present day.¹³⁵

The same disastrous fate awaited the Christian inhabitants of Tripoli in Lebanon upon the Mamluk conquest of the city from the Franks in 1287. The little-known Arab Orthodox poet Sulayman al-Ashluhi, an eyewitness to the events, described the events of the fall of Tripoli in the following way:

People asked me, "You wretched one, why are you crying?"
 I responded, "My brothers, my heart is distressed.
 I cry over the Christians, I lament what befell them
 That Tuesday which became the day of disaster.
 The Turks entered the streets, attacking the city,
 Encircling it from land and sea, with all its inhabitants. [. . .]
 How many youths they slaughtered in front of their mothers' eyes,
 Youths crying, 'Mother, from where did this day come to me!' [. . .]
 The Orthodox church further added to my grief,
 On account of it I became drunk with sorrow.
 I remember it jostling with people on festivals,
 When the candles were lit, and the priest was jubilant. [. . .]
 How many voluptuous girls would walk by its side,
 Their stature is like branches of the ben tree. [. . .]
 It is now in ruins and desolation, with no worshippers;
 Thank God, at least the owls took it as their residence."¹³⁶

With the other changes that swept through the Middle East in the fourteenth century—the Islamization of the Mongols, the Black Death of the 1340s, and the devastating military campaigns of Tamerlane—the Christian population of the Middle East entered a period of steep decline, and there remain very few examples of literary works written by Arab Orthodox Christians in this period.

Arab Orthodox under the Ottomans

The incorporation of Syria and Palestine, as well as Egypt, into the Ottoman Empire in the early sixteenth century reversed the tide and was benefi-

cial to Orthodox Christians in the Middle East.¹³⁷ Ironically, this was due to the fact that by this time the Ottoman Empire also controlled Constantinople (conquered in 1453) and the Balkans. This meant that, for the first time since the early seventh century, Arab Orthodox Christians of the Middle East were reunited within a single polity with the Orthodox Christians of those regions. This greatly facilitated travel and communications between the patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem among the linguistically diverse Orthodox communities of the empire. On the other hand, extremely harsh taxes imposed on Christian populations by the Ottomans, as well as the Ottoman practice of demanding exorbitant bribes in exchange for approval of new patriarchs and bishops, resulted in a constant state of financial ruin for the Christian communities, particularly in the Patriarchate of Antioch. The need for outside funding as well as assistance in raising the level of education among the clergy and the laity would become a major impetus for the patriarchs of Antioch to travel abroad and maintain correspondence with foreign Christians, both Orthodox and Roman Catholic.

This expansion of the horizons of the Arab Orthodox coincided with a tremendous increase in western Europe's interest in the eastern Mediterranean. At first, this interest was chiefly commercial. In 1535, eager to make the Ottoman Empire more competitive with the Italian merchant states, particularly Venice, the sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (r. 1520–66) granted a lower rate of tariff to French merchants, the first of the so-called "capitulations." Soon afterward similar agreements were made with the other major European trading powers. This led to the first significant, more or less permanent, European presence in the Levant since the Crusades.

This European, and especially French, involvement with the Middle East created new opportunities for Roman Catholic missionary activity in Ottoman territory. While in the wake of the Crusades Rome had maintained sporadic contact with the churches of the Middle East, particularly the Maronites, and there had long been a Franciscan presence in the Holy Land, it was only in the sixteenth century that the Catholic Church made concerted efforts to missionize Middle Eastern Christians with the aim of uniting them to Rome. In 1552 elements of the Church of the East in northern Mesopotamia, motivated by internal quarrels, entered into communion with Rome and formed the Chaldean Catholic Church. In the 1580s the Jesuit mission to Syria, headed by Leonardo Abel, sought to exploit the schism between two rival Orthodox patriarchs of Antioch, Michael al-Hamawi and Yuwakim Daw', in order to draw each of the contenders into union with Rome. Michael al-Hamawi submitted a written confession of the Catholic faith to the pope, but since he had already lost the battle over the see of Antioch to

Yuwakim Daw' and had no real power, the Catholic Church soon lost interest in him. Yuwakim Daw', on the other hand, rejected the pope's offer of union. The Orthodox metropolitan of Tripoli, Anastasius ibn Mujalla—one of the most talented Arab Orthodox theologians of the sixteenth century—wrote a (still unpublished) anti-Latin theological treatise in response to the Catholic missionaries. Interestingly, in addition to traditional arguments against the Latins, Anastasius also polemicizes against the Gregorian calendar, introduced by the Catholic Church in 1582.¹³⁸

In 1588 the Maronite College was founded in Rome to educate Maronite clergy and spread Counter-Reformation ideals in Lebanon. In 1622 the Congregation de Propaganda Fide was established to coordinate Rome's missionary endeavors and was charged with the task of conducting all correspondence with the churches of the Middle East. Such missionary activities were greatly facilitated by the presence of European merchants, and the French government in particular saw the promotion of Catholicism in the Ottoman Empire as a foreign policy priority. Under the terms of the capitulations (especially those of 1673, which granted French priests diplomatic status), missionaries were able to use their ministry among European Catholic merchants and diplomats in the Levant as cover for clandestine missionary activities among Middle Eastern Christians.

Aleppo and the port cities of Tyre and Sidon became the chief centers of Roman Catholic activity in the Levant. The missionaries' strategy was not to seek out individual converts because doing so would run the risk of creating conflicts with both the Orthodox leadership and the Ottoman authorities. Instead, they attempted to win over Orthodox elites, both among the clergy and among the Orthodox merchant class that was rapidly developing as a consequence of the expansion of trade with Europe. This goal was achieved through education—teaching, preaching, and hearing confessions—and the cultivation of personal relationships. For this reason much of the Roman Catholic missionary activity at the time took place in the private chapels of wealthy Orthodox families. These efforts were largely successful, in that these activities were often welcomed by Orthodox bishops who were all too aware of their own clergy's educational deficiencies. Thus, the wealthy Orthodox merchant class came to be attracted to the religious and spiritual expressions of Christianity favored by their European counterparts.¹³⁹

As a result of relative political stability and of the new cultural factors surveyed above, the early Ottoman period witnessed a powerful cultural revival among the Arab Orthodox in Syria. Perhaps the most momentous transformation of Arab Orthodox cultural life during this period was brought about by the gradual introduction of printing. Printing was slow to

arrive in the Arab world, despite the fact that the earliest Arabic printing press was established in Venice as early as the end of the fifteenth century. Among some Arab Christians and even more so among Muslims, there was considerable resistance to this new technology.¹⁴⁰ This meant that Arabic-speaking Christians who desired printed books were dependent on Italian printing presses and, more often than not, on material support from Rome for funding, preparing, and distributing printed Arabic texts. The first Arabic-language printing press in Orthodox hands was founded at the beginning of the eighteenth century in the principality of Wallachia, then nominally under Ottoman suzerainty, and was imported to Aleppo in 1706. In 1720 it was moved to Lebanon on account of opposition to its use among conservative Orthodox Christians.

Despite its high costs and slow adoption, printing technology came to have a profound impact on Arab Orthodox religious life. One main reason for this is the nature of the books printed. They were not the literary, theological, and philosophical works of the sort collected in this anthology; rather, printing focused primarily on psalters and liturgical books. In addition, Roman presses also produced Arabic translations of Counter-Reformation spiritual and theological manuals for use and distribution by Catholic missionaries in the Levant.

Another aspect of the cultural and spiritual impact of printing is illustrated by the career of Meletius Karma.¹⁴¹ Born in Hama (Syria) in 1572 to the family of a priest who died when he was still a child, Meletius, whose given name was 'Abd al-Karim, went as a youth to the Monastery of Mar Saba in Palestine. After spending two years there and mastering Greek, he was called back to Syria where he served as a deacon and then as a priest. After being consecrated as metropolitan of Aleppo in 1612, he oversaw the revision of nearly all the major liturgical texts as well as the Bible. This was done on the basis of printed Greek liturgical texts that he generally followed slavishly, despite the assurances in many of his writings that he also consulted a variety of Arabic and Syriac liturgical manuscripts.¹⁴² Subsequent patriarchs of Antioch would favor Meletius's liturgical texts. Thus, in the case of Arab Orthodox as in the case of other Orthodox churches, the ready availability of printed Greek liturgical texts led to the elimination of local liturgical particularities in favor of standardization. Meletius's revision of the *Synaxarion* was an especially stark break with the Arab Orthodox tradition, as it effectively suppressed the unique character of Antioch's church calendar, replacing it with that of Constantinople.¹⁴³

Meletius's time as metropolitan of Aleppo was marked by the instability and infighting that was all too frequent in the Patriarchate of Antioch in the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; in such circumstances it is remarkable that Meletius was able to undertake his labors at all. In 1615, only three years after his consecration as metropolitan, Meletius was forced to travel to Constantinople to defend himself against accusations leveled against him by the patriarch of Antioch, Athanasius II Dabbas (r. 1611–19), the same patriarch who had consecrated him as metropolitan of Aleppo. Following the death of Athanasius II in 1619, the Patriarchate of Antioch was torn by a schism between supporters of the metropolitan of Sidon, Ignatius Atiya, and those of the metropolitan of Bosra and the brother of the late patriarch Athanasius, Cyril Dabbas. Meletius strongly supported Ignatius and, as a result, was constantly attacked by the followers of Cyril, who even arranged that the Ottoman authorities would throw him in prison in 1625 on the grounds that he owed back taxes. It was only under pressure from Ignatius's political protector the Druze emir of Lebanon, Fakhr al-Din ibn Ma'n (d. 1635), that a council was convened at Ra's Baalbek to resolve the conflict. Cyril apparently knew that his cause was lost and so did not attend the council, and Ignatius was recognized as the legitimate patriarch. Following Ignatius's death in 1634, Meletius was elected patriarch and took the name Euthymius II at his consecration in May of that year.

His patriarchal reign would last only seven months. Incapacitated by illness, he resigned his patriarchate in December 1634 in favor of Meletius of Chios (r. 1634–37) and died on January 1, 1635. After his death a number of Jesuit missionaries resident in Syria at the time claimed that Karma had been poisoned on account of his close cooperation with Latin missionaries (as metropolitan of Aleppo, he had encouraged the Jesuits to found a school there and as patriarch of Antioch he did the same in Damascus) and on account of his secret desire for union with Rome. As shown by later events, such a pro-Roman attitude was threatening not only to traditionalists within the patriarchate but also to the Ottoman authorities, who were concerned that their Christian subjects would start looking to the authority of a European power.

All the major trends among Arab Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman period join together in the career of **Macarius Ibn al-Za'im** (chapter 11), the patriarch of Antioch in 1647–72 and a central figure in the Arab Orthodox revival of the Ottoman period. A protégé of Meletius Karma, who like Karma also became patriarch after having been metropolitan of Aleppo, Macarius authored a largely unpublished notebook that reveals a vast knowledge of the history and traditions of the Church of Antioch. As patriarch, Macarius traveled twice overland to Russia via Constantinople, Wallachia, Moldavia, and Ukraine in order to solicit funds from the Orthodox rulers of these lands. While in Russia he played an important role in advising the

patriarch of Moscow, Nikon (r. 1652–58), during the latter’s liturgical reforms, which, like those of Meletius Karma, were stimulated by the ready availability of printed Greek liturgical texts. On his second visit to Russia in 1666, Macarius participated in the trial against Patriarch Nikon. The extensive diary kept during these travels by Patriarch Macarius’s son and secretary, Archdeacon **Paul of Aleppo** (chapter 12), provides invaluable information on the history of the Orthodox Church in the Ottoman Empire, southeastern Europe, Russia, and Georgia,¹⁴⁴ as well as on the relationship between the different Orthodox communities at the time.

In contrast to the modernizing efforts of his teacher Meletius, Macarius was keenly interested in restoring and preserving the medieval heritage of his church. This was achieved largely through the copying and distribution of manuscripts of old works, many of which, without the efforts of Macarius, would likely have been lost to history. In addition, in his *Book of the Bee* (*Kitab al-Nahla*) and in the *Synaxarion*, he celebrates the lives of many of the writers mentioned in this anthology, honoring many of them, including ‘Abdallah ibn al-Fadl, Nikon of the Black Mountain, Gerasimus, and Paul of Antioch, as saints.¹⁴⁵

In addition to his close ties with the Orthodox churches of Eastern Europe, Macarius also maintained correspondence both with the Congregation de Propaganda Fide and with King Louis XIV of France (r. 1643–1715), seeking financial aid and donations of printed books. He also continued his predecessors’ support of Latin missionaries, allowing them to preach and hear confessions of the Orthodox faithful. This policy would have serious consequences in the following generations.

When Macarius died in June 1672, his grandson Constantine was elected patriarch and consecrated with the name Cyril V.¹⁴⁶ During this time rivalry between the two cities of Aleppo and Damascus would cause a schism with deeper repercussions than the one that had happened earlier in the century. Although Cyril had the support of the people of Aleppo, he was held in suspicion by the inhabitants of Damascus, who were concerned about the increasing Latin influence in the church. The Damascenes suspected Cyril was too young to combat this Latin influence effectively—it was even rumored that he was too young to be canonically elected as patriarch. Appeals were made to Constantinople to block Cyril’s consecration. These appeals were successful, and Neophytos of Chios, a nephew of Macarius’s predecessor, Euthymius III of Chios (r. 1635–47), was appointed by Constantinople to be patriarch of Antioch. This was the first direct intervention by the Patriarchate of Constantinople in the election of a patriarch of Antioch since the Crusader period. Although the Orthodox churches of the Ottoman Empire were notionally organized according to the so-called “*millet* system,” in which the Ottoman

sultan recognized the patriarch of Constantinople as the head of all the Orthodox Christians in the empire, until that time for all practical purposes the Patriarchate of Antioch had managed to maintain its independence.

Aleppo's merchants, arguably the single most influential bloc among the Arab Orthodox laity, were unwilling to accept Constantinople's interference in the affairs of their church. They used their considerable connections and financial resources to bolster Cyril's position in both Constantinople and Damascus. Unable to compete, Neophytos resigned from the patriarchate in 1682 in favor of Cyril. This, however, would not mean the end of Cyril's troubles, as it had become clear that in the eyes of the Ottoman authorities the see of Antioch was permanently up for sale. In 1685 the French were able to buy the sultan's recognition of the strongly pro-Catholic Athanasius III Dabbas as patriarch. A year later Athanasius made a secret profession of faith to the pope of Rome, but in 1687 Cyril's supporters were able to win back the sultan's recognition for Cyril. The patriarchal see continued to be disputed between the two men until a compromise was reached in 1694 whereby Cyril would remain patriarch while Athanasius would be made metropolitan of Aleppo and would have the right of succession to Cyril after the latter's death. Rome, however, continued to recognize Athanasius as the rightful patriarch of Antioch, setting the stage for schism. As metropolitan of Aleppo, Athanasius became an energetic supporter of union with Rome.

In Cyril V's later years he came to favor union as well and signed a Catholic profession of faith in 1716. When Cyril died in 1720, Athanasius III Dabbas was chosen as patriarch, with the condition that he travel to Constantinople to meet with the Ecumenical Patriarch. Surprisingly, after this meeting, during the four brief years of his patriarchate, he would prove to be as strong an opponent of union with Rome as he had been a supporter of it during his time as metropolitan of Aleppo. Upon Athanasius's death in 1724, the people of Damascus elected the pro-Rome Cyril VI Tannas as patriarch, while both the people of Aleppo and the patriarch of Constantinople opposed his election and instead consecrated Sylvester, a monk from Cyprus, as patriarch. Cyril Tannas fled to Lebanon and received Rome's recognition as rightful patriarch. From this point on, there would be two parallel hierarchies in the Patriarchate of Antioch, one in communion with Rome and the other maintaining its historical communion with the other Orthodox churches.

The schism of 1724, occurring during a time of rapid social change in the Middle East, marked a significant break with the past for both Catholic and Orthodox communities. Under Roman tutelage the Arab Catholic ("Melkite") community in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came under strong Latin theological and liturgical influence—a process that only

began to be reversed in the late nineteenth century with Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Orientalium Dignitas* of 1894. Similarly, the Arab Orthodox of the Patriarchate of Antioch would remain under a series of ethnically Greek patriarchs until 1899.^{*147} These patriarchs would continue the work of Meletius Karma in bringing the Arab Orthodox liturgy and *synaxarion* into close conformity with the practice of Constantinople—a process that resulted in a sort of “cultural amnesia” of the Arab Orthodox past. Though over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries both Arab Catholics and Arab Orthodox continued to read, copy, and study manuscripts of texts from the earlier Arab Christian tradition, many of these texts eventually became forgotten. Even today, sadly, they remain unknown to the majority of Arab Orthodox and Catholic faithful themselves. It was only in the first decade of the twentieth century that the Jesuit Louis Cheikho and the Melkite Catholic priest Constantine Basha prepared the first printed editions of medieval Arab Orthodox texts, thus making them available to a wider audience. Translations of these texts into European languages—French, German, English, and Russian—also began to appear. Their efforts were continued by Georg Graf, Ignace Dick, Samir Khalil Samir, Joseph Nasrallah, Sidney Griffith, and many others.

The present anthology hopes to continue this promising trend by introducing to the English reader some of these unduly forgotten texts. It is the editors' hope that it will help stimulate further interest in Arab Christianity, a fascinating and culturally important but long-neglected chapter in the history of the Orthodox Church. As the texts assembled in this anthology show, the unique witness of the Orthodox Church in the Arab lands holds important lessons for us today. These texts, representing the major genres of Orthodox literature in Arabic—theology, hagiography, church history, religious polemic, devotional poetry, and ascetical literature—enrich our understanding of Orthodox Christianity. They also provide a more balanced understanding of the multicultural and multireligious society of the Arab Middle East, of which Orthodox Christianity has always been and—we pray—will always remain an integral part.

* In 1899 Meletius II Doumani—the first Arab patriarch since 1724—was appointed to the see of Antioch, with intense diplomatic support from the Russian Empire.