


PER L1183 / FT71903P
CONTRIBUTION OF CHRISTIAN ARABS IN THE ARAB-ISLAMIC CULTURE

BY

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A. THE EARLY CHRISTIANS

Arab Christians have, from early on played a special and important role in the shaping of the history and culture of the Arab world. The Christians from the Fertile Crescent in particular played a prominent role, for they were among the first to convert in Christianity and actively promulgate its teachings. As is commonly known, and attested in Acts 2:11, / Cretans and Arabians. And we all hear these men telling in our own languages about the mighty miracles of God, and Galatian 1:17 «I didn't go up to Jerusalem to consult with those who were apostles before I was. No, I went away into the deserts of Arabia, and then came back to the city of Damascus». So as we see in the New Testament, Arab Nabataeans were among the first converters to Christianity. Furthermore, the followers in Christ in Antioch first adopted the designation «Christian». Hence the Christians of the Arab world today are an autochthon community with deep and firmly established pre-Islamic roots. The Arab world is the birthplace of Christianity. This is a fact that all the peoples of the region identify as an integral part of their heritage, in much the same way that they identify with the legacies of Judaism and Islam, regardless of their particular religious convictions.

Another important aspect of Arab Christianity is its independence from Western churches. From the early days of Christianity, Arab Christians were free from the control. As a result, most were able to act according to their own religious inclinations and play an active and independent role in the formation and development of the Arab-Islamic caliphate.

Arab Christians contributed a great deal in various fields of Arab-Islamic civilization. The extent and importance of their influence is illustrated by the existence of the five-volume work by the German professor Graf entitled the «History of the Arab Christians».

It is, nevertheless, correct to refer to the Arab world as being Islamic, in spite of the contributions of Christian and other religious and linguistic communities in the region. In order to understand this we need to define what is meant by the term «Islamic».

Islam, like other religions, has influenced people in two distinct ways. The first is purely religious and thus confined to Muslims, whether of Arabic or other linguistic backgrounds. The second sphere of influence is traditional

1) Graf, GCAL I-V (194ff).
and this extends to all people living in a Muslim-dominated society, regardless of their respective beliefs. Islam therefore plays a fundamental role in the formation of the customs and attitudes of all Arabs, including members of Christian denominations in the Arab world. For this reason it is correct to describe both religious communities as participants in Islamic culture.

On these grounds, one might argue that the term «Islamic» is sufficient to describe the influence of the Islamic religion. The culture of the Arabic-speaking world is an old one that has its roots in the civilization of the Semitic people who inhabited the great Syria long before the advent of Islam. «Islamic» must, therefore, be hyphenated to the term «Arab» in order to properly describe the culture of the Arabic-Islamic world.

B. COMMON THEOLOGICAL BASIS OF CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

To whom the term «Arabic» refers is matter also in need of clarification. Muhammad the prophet Himself answered this question in an address to His followers where He said: «O people! Not one of you is an Arab by virtue of his father or mother, but rather by his tongue – his language. Therefore whoever speaks Arabic is an Arab».

وقال الرسول: "يا أيها الناس إن الرب الواحد، والأب الواحد، وليست العربية بأحدكم من أب ولا أم، وإنما هي اللسان، فمن تكلم العربية هو عربي...».?

We will now attempt to understand how Arab Christians managed to survive in Arabic-Islamic society, or not only did they survive, but they were fully integrated as well. They supported the caliphate and took an active part in the various aspects of society in the Islamic State. There existed a mutual tolerance and cooperation that can be better understood in light of the common theological basis of Christianity and Islam and the shared aspects of their community life:

1. Christians and Muslims share a belief in One God, the creator of heavens and of the earth. They also deal fundamentally with the same things: «Prophecy, worship, prayer, mercy, law, scriptures, patriarchs». Perhaps the most simple and eloquent example of the harmony of Christian and Islamic teachings is the principle commonly known as «The Golden Rule» - «Thus we have made you a medium nation» (Qur'an

we have made you a medium nation» (Qur‘ān 2:134).

2. All Arabs, whether Muslim or Christian, began to feel a new sense of self-confidence with the spread of Islam and the establishment of the caliphate, Arabs had previously been governed by numerous foreign powers, but with the spread of Islam they began to build on autonomous state of their own. This new confidence resulted in a feeling of unity among the Arabs in spite of their differences.

3. Tolerance towards other faiths is fundamental principle of Islam. It is a religion that accepts people of other beliefs within the framework of the Muslim State, particularly the Christians and the Jews. The following quote from the Qur‘ān defines the position of Islam in relation to other communities: «If thy Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind one people; but they will not cease to dispute» (Qur‘ān 11:118) لو شاء رَبُّك لَجعَلَ النَّاسَ أُمَّةً واحِدةً، ولا يزالون مخالفين.

We should remember, however, that the stance of Islam is not always the stance of those claiming to be its adherents, a well-known example of this tolerance is the flourishing of the Jews in Spain under the caliphate rule.

The nature of the eastern Christian communities as distinct entities had a significant influence on the society that surrounded it. They were divided by many theological controversies from the very outset of Christianity until the advent of Islam.

These disputes destroyed the original simplicity of Christianity, described so eloquently in the words of Christ: «... And let me teach you, for I am gentle and humble» (Mat 11:29); also we read: «From your pure and simple devotion to our Lord» (II Cor 10:3); «I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. Be as wary as serpents and harmless as doves» (Mt 10:16).

These disputes constituted a strong juxtaposition to the clear and relatively simple doctrinal teachings of Islam. This contributed to the successful

3) Quotations from the Bible and the Qur‘ān: «believe in that which has been revealed to us, and revealed to you; our Ilāh (God) and your Ilāh (God) is one» (Qur‘ān 29:46); and «But al-Birr (piety, righteousness) is the quality of one who believes in Allāh, the last Day, the Angels, the Book, the Prophets» (Surat 2:177); and «Innānā min an-nās bīhā Allah, who created the heavens and the earth» (Qur‘ān, al-A‘rāf: 54) and in the Gospel: «... Who created heaven and everything in it and the earth and all that it contains and the sea and its inhabitants» (The Revelation 10:6).
spread of Islam to many parts of the Arab world.

Arab Christians submitted easily to their Muslim conquerors, and in many cases welcomed the new rulers of the region. Islam came to Eastern communities ruled by the Byzantine empire, promising peace and security to people who were at that time suffering from oppression, tyranny and great financial burdens.

The alternative system offered by the Caliphate State, provided those regions with a government much lighter in its demands on its subject. In the words of bishop (Usquf) Nestouri, after the conquest of Damascus: «In truth, those Arabs whom God has now given power... do not fight the Christian religion, but rather defend our freedom to practice and respect our clergy and offer assistance to the churches and monasteries»\(^4\).

C. SYRIAN INHABITANTS

A very important but complicated topic in the discussion of the Arab Christians is the question of land ownership and cultivation. In spite of the relevance of this topic to the present work, it is one that requires specific and careful study and is too vague to summarize in a satisfying manner. We will attempt only to outline the issue. It is known that the most of the land remained in the hands of the native inhabitants, who cultivated it. It has also been established that the majority of those inhabitants were Syrian and Nabataean farmers (أصحاب القرى) in Syria and Coptic farmers in Egypt. Those lands were considered «Jarāğiyyah» (خراجية), which meant that the payment of the İjarāğ land tax required of its owners, land owned by Muslim farmers was theoretically considered «İşriyyah» (عشرية) and required the paying of a lower tax.

We can speculate from documents dating back to the time of the levying of the İjarāğ (خراج) tax and other sources, that the majority of the land was İjarāğiyyah (خراجية). This could lead us to conclude that most of the land was owned by non-Muslims and that the majority of the caliphate’s subject were Christians. We cannot however, be certain of this as the Caliph ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAziz ordered that all the land should remain İjarāğiyyah no matter who cultivated it.

\(^4\) Georges QURM, Taʾaddad al-adyān wa-anzimat al-ḥukm, Dār al-Nahīr, Beirut, 1979, p. 147.
D. ACTIVITIES OF ARAB CHRISTIANS IN THE CALIPHATE

Very shortly after the conquest of Islam, it became obvious that the Arabs of Syria and Mesopotamia, the majority of whom were Christians, stood firmly on the side of their Muslim conquerors. They took active part in the workings of the new system, the caliphate. It should be noted that under the Umayyads, the Abbasids and the Fatimids, Christians were left on their jobs and positions. We read in the traditional Arabic sources, such as al-Maqdisi or al-Maqrizi that every bureau had Christian employees and most of the scribes of Syria and Egypt were Christians.

Neither was the participation of Christians in the Caliphate State limited to simple jobs, as is commonly held, but extended to higher position as well, including those of ministers in the Caliphate.

It is even possible to suggest that the caliphate depended quite heavily on the Christians of Syria, for their culture was highly developed in comparison with those of the rest of the Middle East. For example, the first Umayyad caliph, Mu’awiyah, put the Christian Sarqun family in the highest positions of the caliphate, Mansur ibn Sarqun was his secretary and he remained in this position even when Mu’awiyah was succeeded by ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwân. Mansur ibn Sarqun’s son and grandson also in the seventh century A.D., he became famous for his stand against the Icon movement. He later worked in the position of secretary and the latter became the famous John of Damascus. Born in Damascus he became a monk and dedicated himself to Christian theology until he died in the Monastery of Mar Saba in Jerusalem in 760 A.D. The fact that he was a very enlightened man with a deep understanding of both the Christian heritage and Islam, not to mention his own Arabic-Christian background and good relations in the Ummayad court, made him a pioneer in the Christian-Islamic relations.

Other important Christians under Mu’awiyah include ibn Aṭāl, his personal physician and governor of Ḥoms; the celebrated al-Aḥṭal at-Taqlabi, his court poet who came from a well-known Christian family and was known to wear the cross.


Mu'āwiya also conscripted his soldiers from among the Syrians. As a result his army was named the ḡayṣ al-Ṣām (the Army of Syria). The Syrians, and therefore the Christians, were a pillar of his caliphate.

Mu'āwiya also turned to Egypt's Coptic Christians in the building of the Islamic navy. In fact, their contributions were very significant in this regard.

The Copts were skilled in shipbuilding in particular, as well as in other branches of culture and economics.

They built the arsenal Dār aš-Šinṭah in Alexandria and ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ibn Marwān, the governor of Egypt, sent 3,000 specialists in shipbuilding - most of whom were copts - to Tunisia to build an arsenal there as well.

The first Arabic scribes of the caliphate were Christians who came mostly from Ḥirah in Iraq. Christians also invented the Kufic script in which the first copies of the Qurān were written. In fact, the Arabic script in general was developed by the Nabataeans of Petra who were also Christians.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of Christians in Islamic culture was in the field of translation. This was important because it represented the first step and key for the Arabic-Islamic world to all the other sciences. Obviously, the majority of translators from Syrian and Greek into Arabic were Christians. Among the first was Stefan the Great who worked for Prince Ḥālid ibn Yazīd, grandson of Mu'āwiya. Translation into Arabic continued actively during the Umayyad period and into the Abbasid dynasty until the Caliph Māmūn, who established the Dār al-Ḥikmah in Baghdad. This was an academy of science and translation with which many great scientists, translators and commentators were associated. Perhaps the most famous of these was Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq al-Ṭibādī who was a scholar/translator of Christian faith who reputedly knew four languages.

We learn much about the Christians of the Abbasid period from the writings of Abū ʿUṯmān al-Ǧāḥiz (d. 255 A.H./868-9 A.D.). This great writer was one of the most famous of the Abbaside community, but in doing so, managed to record a considerable amount of interesting information about the Christians from that period. From his treatise entitled al-Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā (A Reply to the Christians), we learn that the Christians formed a middle, and even upper class of doctors, goldsmiths,

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writers and merchants and generally played an active role in Islamic society.

What makes them (the Christians) great in the eyes of the common people and beloved among the lower classes is that among them are the scribes of the leaders, the farrāṣ (home secretary) of the kings (فرّاش الامراء), the doctors of the nobles, druggists, sarrāf (money changers or some kind of bankers) (صراف) and merchants... They possess unshakable power, their clothes are cleaner and their products are better.

In spite of the fact that when one of them (the Christians) marries a woman he cannot exchange her for another, nor can he marry another besides her, nor al-tasarruf ʿalayhā (التساوي علىها) (to keep a mistress) they are everywhere and have conquered the nations by virtue of their numbers and abundance of their children.

The fame of the Syrian Nestorians as physicians (in particular the Bohtāši family) made Ġāhīz envious and he condemned the domination of Christians in the medical field in the stinging prose of his well-known book, al-Buḥalāʾ (the people of Avarice). He illustrates the situation for us in a story about a man from Baghdad named Asad b. Ġānī. He is a well-educated doctor with a good reputation. In spite of this and the fact that Baghdad is suffering from a year of epidemics, he does not have much work. The narrator asks him why this is so and he answers that firstly, his name is Asad—a Muslim name—and not Jūḥānā or Ṣālibā (Christian names). His last name, b. Ġānī, also indicates that its owner is a Muslim.

On top of this, he wears only cotton, unlike Christians who wear black silk (precious dress). Finally, his mother tongue is Arabic, whereas to be a successful doctor, should be the language of a graduate from the academy Gundi Sābūr.

E. ARABS—CHRISTIANS & MUSLIMS—ARE AGAINST THE CRUSADERS

A very important period in the history of the Arab Christians is the time of the Crusades. Ironically, these were troubled times for the Christians of the East, for although the Crusaders claimed to come in the name of Christianity, they in fact did much to weaken and permanently damage the

8) Al-Ḡāḥiq Abū ʿUṯmān, Ṭanāʾil al-Ḡāḥiq, t. 3, pp. 16, 18; Al-radd ʿalā al-naṣārāʾ, pp. 301-351, revised by ʿAbd Al-Salām Hārūn, Cairo, 1979.
9) Ibid., pp. 318, 320, 322.
community of their Easter «brethren». According to the Lebanese Archbishop George Khodr in his article he quoted from Ṭārīḥ Dīmaṣq by ibn ʿAsākir «decided on a majority of Syrians (i.e. Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine in modern time), during the first five centuries after the advent of Islam and up until the Crusades, were Christians; after the Crusade ended, however, the vast majority of Syrians were Muslims»

But professor A. Hourani had put it in this way: «The conversion of Christians and, perhaps to a lesser extent, of the Jews to Islam turned a majority into a diminishing minority. As Islam changed from being the religion of a ruling elite to being the dominant faith of the urban population, it developed its own social institutions, within which Muslims could live without interacting with non Muslims».

The situation of the Arab Christians during the crusade war was difficult because they were forced to make an impossible choice between supporting their religion and supporting their people. The fact remains that they mainly chose to side with their Muslim brothers and many Christians converted to Islam in order to avoid this dualism altogether.

When the Latin knights had established themselves in Jerusalem one of their first actions was to seize the property held by the Eastern Orthodox Church, including the Church of St. Anne. The historian Prawer lists many examples of this and adds that the Crusaders also took over 30 villages surrounding Jerusalem.

In 1098, after the Crusaders took Antioch, which was the oldest and most important center of Christianity in the East, they abolished the Eastern Orthodox hierarchy and exiled the patriarch Yūḥannā al-Jāmīsī to Constantinople. The same thing occurred the following year in Jerusalem; the Eastern Orthodox, Coptic and Syrians hierarchies were expelled from the churches and were replaced by Latin patriarchs. The entire Orthodox hierarchy was relocated to Constantinople and did not return to Jerusalem, until 1187 A.D. under the Sultanate of Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn, the Ayyūbīd Sulṭān.

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F. ARAB CHRISTIANS AT THE COURT OF ŞALĀH AD-DIN

«Yet Muslims proved to be more tolerant of Arab Christians than the Crusader knights, in particular the court of Şalāh ad-Din where Christian Arabs played an active role. The Sulṭān Şalāh ad-Din was not merely a man of war, but also a patron of knowledge and progress who gathered many great scholars, writers, physicians, poets, etc. under his patronage. A good number of those were Christians. For example, ibn Muṭrān, who was a friend of Şalāh ad-Din. He was born in Damascus where he studied theology and later became a physician under the Ayyūbids. Many of his manuscripts have survived to the present day.14

Another important Christian of the court of Şalāh ad-Din was Ya‘qūb ibn Saqlab from Jerusalem, who was fluent in Latin and worked for many years in a hospital in Jerusalem.15

Al-Yabrubdi Abū l-Faraq was another Christian who came from Şaydāyā (Syria), a lovely mountain town near Damascus where the majority of the inhabitants were Christian farmers. He himself was also a farmer, as well as a doctor in the Ayyūbīd court.16

Another doctor, philosopher in the court was the famous Spanish Jew ibn Maymūn. Among the first and the most important surgeon during the Ayyūbīd dynasty was the Christian ibn al-Quṭṭ al-Karākī al-Naṣrānī (Christian) who was born in Karak, south of Jordan, in 1333 A.D. and who worked in a castle in ʿAğlūn. He later moved to the Ayyūbīd court in Damascus. He left to posterity two books entitled al-ʿUmdah fi Ṣinaʿat al-Ǧirāḥah (the basics of the Surgical profession) and Ġāmiʿ al-ʿGaraḍ fi Ḥifẓ as-Sīḥāh (General Objectives in Health Preservation). These two works were edited by Professor Sami Ḥamarneh and were published by the University of Jordan.17

Finally, as I said before, Christians remained a majority population of

16) Ibn Anī ʿUṣayyīf, Ibid., p. 610.
«Bilād aṣ-Ṣām» (Great Syria) until the Crusaders. These wars brought devastation to the Arab-Islamic nation including the Christians of «Bilād aṣ-Ṣām», the Eastern Church and especially the Orthodox Church.

During this period the middle class of the Islamic world was comprised of mostly Christian people. They were economically active and cultural dynamic at that time\(^\text{18}\).

The fact remains that the Christian Arab are in no way aliens to Muslim Arab Society: A Society whose history and culture they have shared for over fourteen centuries.

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