

ABSTRACT

When the Crescent Met the Cross

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The Abbasid Empire supplanted the Umayyad Empire in 749 AD and within two-hundred years it had initiated a Golden Age of science, culture, and religious thought. This Golden Age was made possible by both the Muslim and Christian subjects of the empire. My thesis explores the dynamic relationship between Muslims and Christians since the beginning of the Arab conquests in the Levant to the end of the First Abbasid Period in 950 AD. The first chapter examines the defining encounters between Muslims and Christians prior to the Abbasid Empire. The second chapter describes how Christians and Muslims collaborated to initiate a translation movement in the Abbasid empire. The translation movement brought thought from the Greek and Persian empires to the Abbasid capital in Baghdad. The final chapter reviews the historical development of the First Abbasid period so that we might learn from past relations. Overall, this thesis describes the first encounters between Muslims and Christians in order to learn from the past.

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WHEN THE CRESENT MET THE CROSS:
MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS DURING THE FIRST ABBASID PERIOD

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INTRODUCTION

Learning from the Past

The Abbasid Empire supplanted the Umayyad Empire in 749 AD and within two-hundred years initiated a golden age of science, culture, and religious thought. This golden age was made possible by both the Muslim and Christian subjects of the empire. This thesis will explore the relationship between Muslims and Christians since the beginning of the Arab conquests in the Levant until the end of the First Abbasid Period in 950 AD. After defining their relationship, Christians and Muslims collaborated to initiate a translation movement in the Abbasid empire (749 AD – 1300 AD). The translation movement brought thought from the Greek and Persian empires to the Abbasid capital in Baghdad. This thesis describes the historical development of this era so that we may learn from past relations to improve our own.

Origin and Motivation

This topic originates from my personal interest in interreligious relations and the origins of my faith. As an American Christian, I have always loved learning about the history of my faith, which originated in the Middle East. My studies have put me in contact with many Muslims. Interacting and relating with Muslims can often be challenging, but also rewarding. Through conversation I have come to recognize some differences as well as similarities in our worldview. This work, therefore, is my attempt at describing the history of early Muslim-Christian encounters in order to learn from the past.

My motivation for writing this thesis is to help lessen the discontinuity in contemporary Muslim-Christian relations. Most Muslims and Christians should know more about the other faith tradition. While levels of ignorance vary, most Muslims and Christians could benefit from a better understanding of the other faith. My motivation, therefore, for this work is combating the mutuality of ignorance shared by Muslims and Christians alike. I hope to offer a historical perspective on formative Muslim-Christian encounters as a tool for contemporary relations.

Objective of Work

My objective is to describe the earliest political and intellectual relationships between Muslims and Christians and highlight their encounters during the translation movement, a movement that started with the Abbasid Empire to translate knowledge from both the West and East into Arabic. Focusing on this movement will provide practical learning points for American Christians. My intended audience are Christians living in North America and Europe; interested in the formative relationships between Muslims and Christians. Most of my experiences are in North America, where most Christians are fairly ignorant of Islamic history and of the richness of Muslim-Christian encounters. Many define Islam by what media pasquinades from the past twenty years. Few North Americans realize the depth, breadth, and diversity of Muslim-Christian relations throughout history. I hope to provide a snap-shot of some of the first, most defining interactions between Muslims and Christians that may shed light on the varied nature of relations, providing practical learning points for those who hope to know more about how to best relate to Muslims in light of our shared history.

Method Used

My research method for this thesis was to rely on secondary sources as well as a limited number of primary sources. After reading the works of many scholars examining Muslim-Christian relations during the Abbasid Empire (749-1258), I compiled my research into three categories. My first chapter explores the defining interactions between Muslims and Christians leading up to the First Abbasid period (749-950). The second chapter explores the relationship between Muslims and Christians during the translation movement. The third chapter revisits the descriptions in the first two chapters to provide practical learning points for contemporary Christians meeting Muslims.

The first chapter explores the defining moments of early and formative Muslim-Christian relations; beginning with the Arab conquest in the seventh century. When Arabs conquered the Christians living in the Levant and Mesopotamia, many Christians did not see Muslims as a distinct religion. In fact, in the first encounters between Muslims and Christians it is difficult to easily grasp the differences between the religions because of their commonalities. With the advent of the Umayyad Empire (661-750) and the construction of the Dome of the Rock (691), Islamic faith became more defined in relation to Christianity. By the start of the first Abbasid period, Christians and Muslims had clearly differentiated themselves from each other

The second chapter explores the first Abbasid period through the lens of the translation movement. After detailing the place of Christians in the Abbasid Empire, the chapter focuses on the role of Christians and Muslims during the translation movement. Both Christians and Muslims were essential to the movement's success and their shared work as translators led to increased dialogue and interaction than was the case in previous

periods. The translation movement led to a “golden age” in the Abbasid Empire; due in part to the energetic collaborations between Muslim and Christian scholars.

The third chapter explores possible links between this history and how avenues of such events might help enrich contemporary Muslim-Christian interactions. The chapter summarizes primary themes in the two preceding chapters to provide practical advice for Christians who seek meaningful relationships with Muslims. Advice offered centers on avoiding the mistakes of the past while emulating the successes in dialogue and understanding. Finding common ground between Muslims and Christians is an essential starting point for successful relations.

Limits

The content of this thesis is obviously limited by my linguistic ability. As an undergraduate, I appreciate that there are many undiscovered nuances and intricacies in the academic study of early Muslim-Christian relations. I also lack the expertise to meaningfully access many of the primary sources on Muslim-Christian relations. As an undergraduate, I have worked to improve my Arabic skills—helpful for reading some of the primary sources available for this study. But, in the future, I will need a better understanding of Syriac, Greek, and Latin before bringing to this study the necessary gravitas.

CHAPTER NUMBER 1

Defining the First Muslim-Christian Encounters

This chapter will argue for a hybridity narrative that acknowledges the development and syncretism of Christianity and early Islam. The first Muslim interactions with Christians present clear challenges in defining religious boundaries. Often, allegiances were based on non-religious factors, including ethnicity, language, and social status. While the concept of *Arabism* is often conflated with Islam, the former better represents the relationship that developed between Syriac Christians and Arab Muslims. This chapter argues that the relational dynamics between Muslims and Christians became more defined by specific developments with historical culminations (such as Abd al-Malik's policies of Islamization and Arabicization). This chapter also notes the development of Christian responses, which sheds light upon the both seemingly positive and negative interpretations of early relations.

1.1 Sources on the First Encounters

The nature of the first relations between Christians and Muslims has been analyzed for centuries yet interpretations continue to evolve. Prior to the eighteenth century, European scholars wrote about the relations based on Greek and Latin sources rather than Arabic and Syriac sources. The latter posed linguistic barriers that most were unwilling to overcome. Michael Penn writes, "In the past, most scholars of the first interactions between Christians and Muslims consulted Greek and Latin sources instead of Arabic and Syriac sources. The

latter does not suggest the Clash of Civilizations that some historians have asserted”.¹ Arabic and Syriac sources present perspectives that were closer to the events that unfolded in the seventh and eighth centuries. Syriac sources are more abundant than Arabic sources and will be utilized throughout this chapter to explain the difficulties of differentiation between Muslims and Christian. These sources suggest contrary narratives to the divided or harmonious relationship models historians have forwarded in the past.

1.1.1 The Value of Syriac Sources and Source Methodology

Syriac sources on the first encounters between Christians and Muslims suggest a far more dynamic relationship that developed over time rather than a dogmatic insistence on clash or harmony. Michael Phillip Penn believes that Syriac sources suggest more than just difficulties of differentiation, which has been extrapolated from some Latin and Greek texts, but perennial overlap. Penn’s book “argues not simply that Syriac authors were slow to distinguish Islam from Christianity, but that Syriac texts reflect much more substantial and long-lasting overlap between Christianity and Islam than the standard narrative allows”.² Noting similarities between Christianity and Islam is important when studying the origins of the latter. When Arab Muslims first encountered Christians, the emerging religion was hardly developed and fluid adaptation was prevalent.

This chapter explores information on the sources used to interpret the first encounters between Muslims and Christians to show where various interpretations arise. The sources’ slants developed over time. Generally, for the first two hundred years,

¹ Michael Philip Penn, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christianity and Early Muslim World*, Divinations: rereading late ancient religion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

Christians viewed the Arab Muslim conquest as a loss rather than a beneficial occurrence. It was not until the writings of Dionysius, two-hundred years later that Christians wrote about the conquests in a positive light.³ Narratives that suggest total subjection or harmonious relations alleviating Byzantine Rule disregard the spectrum of sources available. The first Syriac sources are negative in outlook, but, within only a couple years, more ambivalent perspectives arise suggesting the relationship's dynamism.

Finally, regarding sources, it is helpful to understand their unreliability. Chase Robinson notes that historical accounts relating to Muslim-Christian relations can often be misleading. The political motivations, constructions, and corporate ideals must be appreciated before employing sources at face value: "little can be said with much confidence" regarding the nature of Islamic conquest in Northern Mesopotamia based on available sources.⁴ The primary sources on the earliest Muslim-Christian relations are difficult to understand without a thorough appreciation of context. The writings of Syriac Christians, European Christians, and Arab Muslims have distinct political and religious purposes. Discovering a sense of the relationship's nature is achievable, but not with complete certainty. This chapter considers Syriac and Arabic sources because they were most affected by the Arab conquest. General trends in Muslim-Christian encounters are discernable, but observations that claim certainty are unreliable due to rampant subjectivity in the source material.

³ Ibid., 17.

⁴ Chase F. Robinson, *Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest: The Transformation of Northern Mesopotamia*, Cambridge studies in Islamic civilization (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 28–29.

1.1.2 First Syriac Sources

The first Syriac sources indicate that the Arab conquest of the Levant (634-638) was destructive. The Syriac sources were written by various members in what is defined as the Oriental Orthodox church. The terms used to describe divisions in the church (i.e. Miaphysite, Jacobite, Melkite, Nestorian, etc.) are sometimes regarded as pejorative; but, unfortunately, those titles are the best terms in the English language to describe variations within the Oriental Church. This paper will use those common terms for the sake of clarity, without intending to offend members of the church. An account written in 637 C.E., most likely by a Miaphysite, was translated, “Many villages were destroyed through the killing by the Arabs of Muhammed and many people were killed”.⁵ The source fails to mention the religious make-up of the conquerors, but notes their ethnic identity as well as their leadership. The source recognizes Muhammed as the inspiration of the conquest, but does not mention religion. The *Account of 637 C.E.* is corroborated by an account written in 640 C.E. The *Account of 640 C.E.*, probably written by another Miaphysite, is translated, “About four thousand poor villagers from Palestine—Christian, Jews, and Samaritans—were killed, and the Arabs destroyed the whole region”.⁶ The account also describes the killing of monks in Qedar and Bnata by the Arabs.⁷ This account is more specific denoting that the Arab conquest affected the peoples of Palestine irrespective of religion. The Christians were killed in a similar fashion to the Jews and Samaritans of the region. The author betrays his personal agenda by focusing on the monks killed at Qedar and Bnata. He notes that the monks were holy men, inferring the callousness and lack of awareness by

⁵ Michael Philip Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷ *Ibid.*

those who killed them. Again, the author describes the conquerors by their ethnic origins rather than religious leanings. This trend will continue in early Syriac writings as the Arab identity is deemed more recognizable than the Islamic faith.

1.1.3 Porosity of Religion in Early Syriac Sources

The early conquest writings are not homogenous. Some sources indicate a more peaceful take-over while others, such as the sources previously cited, present a picture of a more hostile conquest. Overall, the first writings indicate that Arabs, not Muslims, conquered Northern Mesopotamia. From this point, the “writings by Christians under Muslim rule shifted their focus to other topics, concentrated less on why or how the conquests occurred and more on what Christians should do in their wake”.⁸ Leading up to the First Abbasid period beginning in 750, the political and intellectual encounters between Muslims-Christians were diverse. Christian writings indicate both apocalyptic interpretations of the Arab Conquest and the porosity among the faiths. However, a crucial development regarding Muslim-Christian relations is the bifurcation of Arab and Muslim identities that emerges among non-Muslim interlocutors.

One of the first Syriac sources that proscribes religious orientation to the Arabs is Isho'yahh III's (d. 659) letter to his congregation. Isho'yahh writes his congregation so that they will better understand the Arab's demands. He distinguishes the term “Arab” from the term “Hagarene”.⁹ The term “Hagarene” is the term favored by most Syriac sources to describe the ethnic origins of the Arabs. While Hagarene does not indicate an understanding of a separate religion, the term originates from the claim the Arabs make of

⁸ Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 51.

⁹ Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, 33.

their Biblical origins. Hagar—mother of Ishmael, is the traditional mother of the Arab people. For Isho'yahh, the Arabs relate to the faith of Abraham, but he still perceives Arabs as political rulers rather than religious adversaries. Within his congregation letter, he quotes from the Book of Matthew “give what is Caesar’s to Caesar and what is God’s to God”.¹⁰ Relating Arab rule to Caesar not only illuminates the Syriac Christian relationship to the Arabs, but suggests an acceptance of Arab rule. Isho'yahh and his congregation have faith that God will deliver them from Arab rule, but, in the meantime, they will abide by their political demands.

Despite Isho'yahh's distinction between “Arab” and “Hagarene,” Islamic identity did not stand alone because Islam was intimately tied to the Arab tribal system until the Abbasid Caliphate. To become a Muslim, it was assumed one had to become an Arab first.¹¹ Under Umayyad Rule, there were few conversions because of this fact. Conversion, however appealing, was an arduous task that required a total transformation of identity. The peoples of the Levant viewed religion as corporate and innate.¹² Despite these views, however, the relationship between Muslims and Christians was often blurred. Syriac sources imply that the strict religious boundaries that exist today were less defined during the first encounters.

One of the first sources that indicates a porous relationship between Muslims and Christians is the *Maronite Chronicle*. The chronicle was written by a Maronite Christian, which is from a branch whose origins are near Mount Lebanon and identifies with the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 33. Translation from Syriac writing.

¹¹ Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia- and How It Died*, (New York: Harperone, 2008), 112.

¹² *Ibid.*

Roman Catholic church. The chronicle records debates between Miaphysites and Maronites, which were adjudicated by the Umayyad Caliph Mu'awiya. The content of the debate is not listed in the source, but there were clear disagreements between the Miaphysites and the Christians of *Mar Maron* (Maronites). Additionally, the source notes when the caliph visited Jerusalem and prayed at Golgotha, Gethsemane, and Mary's Tomb.¹³ The adjudication of a Christian disagreement by a Muslim Caliph seems anachronistic. For most of the history between Muslims and Christians in the Middle East, legal cases were divided into separate religious courts. For example, under the Ottoman *millet* system, intrareligious issues were adjudicated by intrareligious judges. Mu'awiya's role in this source shows the breaking of boundaries between Christians and Muslims. The caliph not only adjudicates Christian issues, but reveres Christian holy sites. While Jerusalem is revered in Islam, the holy sites mentioned in this source are usually reserved for Christian pilgrims. Whether the events in the chronicle actually occurred will never be proven with certainty; however, the source indicates that the boundaries between Christians and Muslims were not definite, even if this source is only rhetorical in its function. The chronicle also notes that the Caliph refused to print the symbol of the cross on the minted coins.¹⁴ This refusal displays an interesting balance in emerging Muslim-Christian relations. As the minority in Syria, Muslims would have felt pressure to appease their subjects. The previous examples of religious convergence may have been acts of appeasement whereas the refusal to print the symbol of the cross represents Muslim

¹³ Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, 55–61.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

hegemony. The first Muslim interaction with Christians balanced convergence and divergence to maintain power and define Islam.

The muddled relationship between Christians and Muslims is also exemplified in Theodute's writing. Theodute (d.698) was a late seventh-century Miaphysite Bishop of Amid in modern Syria. The source *Life of Theodute* provides insights on a more "porous" relationship between Muslims and Christians. For example, Theodute's ordination is witnessed by both Arabs¹⁵ and Christians. The Hagarenes listen and follow one of Theodute's homilies. And, at one point, an Arab governor seeks Theodute's blessing and then helps him build a new monastery.¹⁶ In Theodute's writing, the terms "Arab" and "Hagarene" are interchangeable. Both refer to what we today would describe as Muslim. The "Arab-Hagarene" attendance at his ordination and the "Arab-Hagarene" interest in Theodute's homilies displays a religious relationship with shared origins and beliefs. Taking this source at face-value poses problems, but, at least, it suggests that Christians believed "Arab-Hagarenes" were similar enough to appreciate a Christian message. This source, like the *Maronite Chronicle*, portrays "Arab-Hagarene" authority as sympathetic to the Christian faith. The motivations behind the governor's patronage are unclear, but the encounters between Christians and Muslims are evident. This source shows a remarkable level of understanding and interaction between the two faith communities.

¹⁵ This refers to what we today describe as Muslims. Theodute calls the Muslims and Arabs and distinguishes them from Syriac Christians. Theodute seems unaware of the possibility for an "Arab" Christian in his context.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 141–142.

1.1.4 Porosity and Conversion in Early Syriac Sources

Some of these porous encounters led towards conversion. Jacob of Edessa's letters to John the Stylite indicate civil issues regarding marriage and religious practice. Jacob of Edessa (640-708) was a Miaphysite Bishop from Edessa who was ordained in 684 AD. Christian women were marrying Hagarene men and there were many instances of conversion.¹⁷ Jacob does not respond to apostasy with aggression, but states it as a matter of accepted fact. He seems to respect the Hagarenes and places them within the Biblical narrative because of their lineage and beliefs in one God. He writes that the Hagarenes are of the line of David and "they all firmly confess that [Jesus] truly is the Christ who was to come and was foretold by the prophets".¹⁸ Perhaps Jacob's lack of concern over the conversion is due to his probable religious misunderstandings; either Jacob misunderstands the Muslims beliefs on Jesus or Muslims in Syria had not yet defined their views Christ. Jacob's writing pairs Christians and Muslims in opposition to the Jews who reject Jesus as the Christ. This source displays not only the similarities between Christians and Muslims, but also an attempt to reconcile the faiths.

1.2 Cultural (and Religious) Differentiation

Ultimately, Muslim and Christian communities shared a remarkable number of similarities in the seventh century. Philip Jenkins argues that Islam adopted many Christian practices while the faith developed. Jenkins argues that Muslim fasting during the month of Ramadan was modeled after the Christian Lent. The practice of prostration during prayer

¹⁷ Ibid., 164–168.

¹⁸ Ibid., 171.

was common among both faiths and both religions practiced veiling women.¹⁹ Fasting and prostration were hallmarks of Eastern Christianity that Muslims willingly adopted. The practice of veiling women was common among Syriac Christians, but this practice was also common for the peoples of the Arab Gulf. Jenkins' point elaborates on the convergence of Islam and Christianity, which involved adoption and adaptation.

1.2.1 Cultural Adoption

Not only did Muslims adopt Syriac Christian traditions, but Christians began to embrace Arab Muslim culture as well. The colophons in the British Library additional section include some of the earliest examples of Syriac Christians using the *hijra* date.²⁰ A colophon is a publisher's mark or emblem on the spine of a book or on the title page. In two works in the British Library additional section, numbered 14,666 and 14,448, have colophons that list *hijra* dates. These *hijra* dates were used by Syriac Christians. The *hijra*, or emigration, marks the start of the Islamic calendar in 622 AD. The calendar begins when Muhammad flees Mecca for Medina, the advent of the *umma* (Muslim community). The *hijra* date in a Syriac source shows both the influence of Arabic and Islam on the Syriac Christians. Another example of Syriac Christian convergence with Arab Islam is the *Chronicle of 724*, which claims to be the first Arabic document translated into Syriac. This source shows the influence of the Arabic language and Islamic thought. The Syriac translation of the Arabic source retains "its source's traditional claim of Muhammed being God's *rasul*".²¹ In other words, a Syriac Christian translated an Arabic source claiming the

¹⁹ Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 194–196.

²⁰ Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, 77, 144.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 195–196.

Prophet Muhammad is God's messenger. These two sources indicate the commonplace that Islam and Arabic began to occupy in the Syrian society as well as the relative tolerance for the new religious, linguistic, and cultural norms.

1.2.2 Cultural Differentiation

The patterns of adoption, convergence, and porous boundaries were not ubiquitous; in fact, these patterns proved fleeting as Islam became more defined. *The Letter of Athanasius of Balad in 684* warns Christians of "unlawful mingling with *hanpe*".²² The word *hanpe* initially referred to "pagans," but it developed over time to denote Muslims. Penn argues that this source may have been one of the first to include Muslims based on the historical context and sacrifices mentioned.²³ This equation of Muslims to paganism separates Christians from Islamic practices. While there may have been some areas of common ground, there were also instances of divergence. The sacrificial practices of Arab Muslims were foreign to Christians and served to separate the faiths.

The faiths became increasingly defined as Christians better understood Muslim beliefs. John of Damascus is one of the first Christian writers to confront Islam directly. John warns Christians of the pitfalls of Islam and labels it a heresy.²⁴ Labeling Islam as a heresy rather than a separate religion indicates that the beliefs of Muslims and the Qur'an were perceived as similar to Christianity. John frequently references the Qur'an in his apology, displaying his knowledge of Arabic. John came from an illustrious Christian

²² Ibid., 82.

²³ Ibid., 80.

²⁴ N. A. Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries, 632-900 A.D.: Translations with Commentary* (Hatfield, Pa: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993), 137, 139.

background and felt personally connected to the Arab conquest. His grandfather supposedly handed the keys of Jerusalem to ‘Umar during the Arab conquest. His writings respond to Islam and criticize some of its beliefs. However, his writing is only possible because of the Arabic language. Nonetheless, John does not describe Islam as a separate faith, rather, he refers to it as a Christian heresy. John’s writing does not share the mutuality that other Syriac sources share and invites research on the origins of differentiation between Muslims and Christians.

1.2.3 The Pact of Umar

To discover the origins of differentiation, we must return to John’s grandfather and the Arab conquest. After the conquest of Jerusalem, Caliph ‘Umar established a pact with Christians under Muslim rule. The Pact of ‘Umar (720?) is written from the point of view of the Christians under Islamic rule stating:

1. That Christians could not build or repair churches, monasteries, and convents in Muslim quarters of the city.²⁵
2. That Christians be open and available to Muslim travelers in their cities.²⁶
3. That Christians will be loyal to their Muslim rulers and not plant spies.²⁷
4. Christians are not permitted to read the Qur’an, prevent conversions to Islam, or announce their religion publicly.²⁸

²⁵ Bernard Lewis, ed., *Islam: From the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), para. 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, para. 2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, para. 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, para. 4,5,10.

5. Christians are not permitted to act like Muslims with language, dress, and traditions.²⁹

Essentially, the Pact of ‘Umar established a clear divide between Christian and Muslim life. Christians would “receive safe-conduct” for honoring the pact and would “forfeit the covenant [*dhimma*] if they broke the undertakings of the pact.”³⁰ This pact suggests a bifurcated society, but as previously mentioned, Syriac sources from the Umayyad period display an on-the-ground breaking of those boundaries. The pact’s first obligation is that no “new monasteries, churches, convents, or monks’ cells” shall be built by Christians.³¹ This was clearly transgressed earlier with Theodote’s relationship with the Arab governor. Overall, the tenets of the pact are only loosely followed during the Umayyad period. The pact is more significant, however, for its interpretive implications.

For centuries, many historians have interpreted the Pact of ‘Umar as the advent of Christian subjugation by Muslim authorities. Kenneth Cragg writes, “by disadvantaging non-Muslims it gave an incentive to becoming Muslim”.³² By hindering and disadvantaging Christians, it relegated Christian faith. First, this believe ignores the pull factors to Islam. Christian conversion to Islam is mediated by both push and pull factors. Perhaps the pact pushed Christians towards Islam, but the numerous advantages of becoming Muslim under Muslim rule equally incentivized Islam. Second, this quote oversimplifies the historical context of the pact. For example, Albrecht Noth interprets the Pact of ‘Umar as a set of protections for Muslims, not discrimination against Christians.

²⁹ Ibid., para. 6,7,8,9.

³⁰ Ibid., 219.

³¹ Ibid., 218.

³² Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (London: Mowbray, 1992), 59.

The first part of the pact pertains to the inviolable space of Christians. Noth argues that the Muslim minority in Northern Mesopotamia had to protect itself from Christian dominance in order to maintain rule.³³ From this perspective, the pact becomes a protective document with discriminatory effects. The pact's intentions are for the preservation of Islamic security and stability. Non-Muslim subjects present a threat to Islamic rule; thus, control of the medium for religious instruction and a method to counter beliefs must be implemented.

Further, the pact represents some of the first examples of differentiation between Christians and Muslims. Noth interprets the regulations in the Pact of 'Umar on clothing as means of visibly differentiating Christians and Muslims. In the pact, Christians were restricted from dressing like Muslims.³⁴ These restrictions imply that Christians and Muslims were difficult to distinguish. Based on the sources mentioned early, Christians and Muslims were already crossing numerous religious boundaries. Differentiation was necessary for Muslims to maintain power in Syria. Thus, restrictions on the clothing that Christians were allowed to wear became less about subjection and more about differentiation. This point is not meant to neglect discrimination and persecution, but to provide an understanding for Arab Muslim regulations, which lead towards differentiation at the least, discrimination most commonly, and sporadic persecutions.

³³ Albrecht Noth, "Problems of Differentiation between Muslims and non-Muslims". Robert G. Hoyland, *Muslims and Others in Early Islamic Society*, vol. 18., Formation of the classical Islamic world (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 107–108.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 116; Lewis, *Islam*, 217.

1.2.4 The Dome of the Rock

Early Christian writings reflect increased levels of subjection by various rulers. Apocalyptic literature, responding to the reign of Abd al-Malik (646-705) and his sons (685-750), is often interpreted in the context of al-Malik's treatment of Christianity. During this period, a campaign was launched to "proclaim the permeant hegemony of Islam" culminating with the Dome of the Rock in 692.³⁵ The Dome of the Rock was built on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, revered as a sacred place for the Jewish and Christian faiths. The design and location were supposed to supplant the existing religious architecture such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Dome was built higher than the church and more visible in the Jerusalem cityscape. Around the base of the Dome, in gold Kufic inscriptions, are phrases that assert the superiority of Islam over Christianity.³⁶ The Dome of Rock was the symbolic beginning of Islamic hegemony, which forced a Christian response.

1.3 Response to Differentiation

Despite initial ambiguity between Islam and Christian, the Pact of Umar and the Dome of the Rock differentiated the beliefs of the Arabs from the Christians in the Levant. These landmark events prodded a Christian response, which was initially drastic and apocalyptic, but later attempted to reconcile and accommodate within Islamic hegemony.

³⁵ Sidney Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*, Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the ancient to the modern world (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 32.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 33. The phrases include: "There is no god but God alone...He did not beget and he was not begotten...Muhammad is the messenger of God. Such too was Jesus son of Mary...Praise be to God who has not taken a son...Religion with God is Islam...Those who had been given the scripture differed only after knowledge came to them, out of envy on one other."

1.3.1 Apocalyptic Writings

Correspondingly, in the late seventh century, several prominent apocalyptic writings on Islam emerge, including the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, the *Apocalypse of John the Little*, and the *Edessene Apocalypse*.³⁷ One example of apocalyptic literature is the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Ephrem*. Pseudo-Ephrem's apocalyptic writing places the "Arab Hagerenes" within the framework of Christian eschatology. The author foresees the eventual destruction of the Hagarenes by the Romans as an indication of Christ's return.³⁸ Adapting to life under Muslim rule is not an option in apocalyptic literature. It predicts the imminent end to Arab rule and the return of Christ. It is beneficial to note, these narratives come at either the same time or shortly after sources that indicated the blurred lines between Christians and Muslims. As Christians grasped for a more nuanced understanding of Arab Muslims, they became concerned with not only political aspects of Arab rule, but the theological issues with Arab Muslim hegemony.

Another apocalyptic writing, the *Chronicle of Disasters from 716*, conflates Umayyad Rule with the natural disasters—plagues, earthquakes, and hailstorms—that afflicted the Syriac Christians.³⁹ Penn notes that this text indicates further proof that the caliphs were interpreted as a part of God's punishment for Christian heresy.⁴⁰ However, the natural disasters in this passage also indicate factors that led towards strained relations. Whereas discriminatory rulers may have been a source of some apocalyptic literature, natural disasters, famines, and other difficulties may have also added to a perception of

³⁷ Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, 100–130.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 39–46.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 192.

God's righteous punishment. The combination of factors, not just Muslim rule, seems to have led Syriac Christian to believe in a wrathful God.

Apocalyptic literature during the early eighth century was not uniform. Most sources agreed that the Arabs were part of God's punishment, but sources differed over the duration and extent of punishment. For example, the *Chronicle of 705* refers to the "conquerors as Arabs (*tayyaye*) without giving this term any explicit religious significance".⁴¹ This chronicle differs from previous apocalyptic narratives because Arab rule is not viewed as fleeting. This source holds that Arab rule is not permanent, the source is more temporal and less eschatological. This source represents a transitory point between Christian disdain for Arab rule and acceptance in the current age. Early Syriac sources do not suggest a clash of civilizations nor overly positive relationships between Muslims and Christians. They represent a dynamic relationship that is difficult to define and impossible to characterize with overarching descriptions. Negative narratives of the initial reactions seem to emerge in apocalyptic literature as well as Greek and Latin sources. Positive narratives, on the other hand, emerge later.

1.3.2 Reinterpretation of the Arab Conquest (A More Positive Perspective)

Narrations that defined the Arab conquest as a liberation appeared over two-hundred years after the event. Penn writes, "Dionysius was the first to suggest that the Muslim conquest rescued the Christians from the oppressive Byzantine Empire".⁴² Historians that paint the initial interactions between Muslims and Christians as harmonious start with Dionysius. Dionysius's account was written towards the end of the first Abbasid period, around 840

⁴¹ Ibid., 157.

⁴² Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 48.

C.E. He relies on previous histories, but adds significant distinctions. First, he claims that the Arab conquests were welcomed by the Syriac Christians as rescuers from Byzantine oppression. He also adds anecdotal narratives that suggest God's support of the Arab conquest. At important moments in the battle the Arabs cry out to God for help and they are granted victory. This narrative, when read objectively, is misleading. An objective reading of Dionysius's work leads us to believe that the Arab-Muslims were welcomed as liberators. However, just because they were preferred does not mean they were welcomed. Furthermore, historical context is necessary to understand Christianity under Islam. Christians who wrote about Islam under Islamic hegemony were not free to express their true beliefs. They were encouraged to fight amongst each other but threatened with their lives if they were to criticize Islam. Overly positive writings must be understood with context that suggests a far harsher reality. As Penn argues, "The first two-hundred years of Syriac conquest accounts easily disprove" Dionysius's account.⁴³ Even though Dionysius's account is a history of the first encounters between Muslims and Christians, he is two-hundred years removed from the event and does not understand the oppression that Syriac Christians continue to live under. While early Syriac accounts express crestfallen attitudes with the fall of Christian hegemony, two centuries of broken ties with Byzantine rule left Dionysius unconnected with Christian rule. He was relatively protected under Abbasid Rule and applies his understanding of Muslim governance anachronistically to the initial encounters.

Another account that interpreted initial encounters positively was Bar Hebraeus's account in the thirteenth century. Hebraeus's account prompts Chase Robinson to write,

⁴³ Ibid., 49.

“Christians, for their part, reciprocated, and are often given to receive the conquerors warmly, frequently offering provisions and food”. He also concludes: “The conquest story that appears in the Syriac *Ecclesiastical History* of Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286) is a case in point”.⁴⁴ Hebraeus’s historical context is beyond the scope of this thesis; however, first hand Syriac accounts seem to disprove this positivity. While there is evidence of both encounters and clashes, there is a lack of evidence for the welcoming of conquerors. According to the chronology of Syriac sources, it took years before Christians and Arab Muslims shared the same cultural spaces. Hebraeus’s account must have relied on revisionist works, like Dionisius’s writing, to paint such a welcoming interpretation of the conquest. Christians and Muslims had moments of convergence and mutuality, but the Arab conquerors were not ubiquitously welcomed by Syriac Christians.

1.4 Transition to Abbasid Rule

After the first century of development in Muslim-Christian relations, the Umayyad Caliphate was succeeded by the Abbasid Caliphate. During the First Abbasid period, the process of Arabicization brought Christians and Muslims closer together. As mentioned earlier, the treatment of Christians varied with each Caliph, but many Christians were bilingual during this period and members of the society.⁴⁵ The process of Arabization was significant for the future of Muslim-Christian relations. The initial language barrier clearly defined and separated the two faiths. Syriac Christians defined Muslims by their language and ethnicity rather than by their religion. With an increase in Arabic knowledge, communication was facilitated. A significant result of this communication was a translation

⁴⁴ Robinson, *Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest*, 16.

⁴⁵ Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 40.

movement into Arabic. The dominance of the Abbasid Caliphate in human history is due, in part, to Syriac Christians who not only made up a significant number of the population but facilitated the translation of global works of literature into Arabic. In fact, during this period some of the greatest Abbasid thinkers were members of the Christian community.

Abbasid Rule positively impacted Christian communities in several ways. For one, Christians integrated themselves within the Arab society because they had the skills necessary to become bureaucrats and elites.⁴⁶ During the Abbasid period, religious identity remains a factor, but social structure is based on status rather than religion. Chase Robinson's work on *Empires and Elites* will be utilized to describe the transitional relationship between Muslims and Christians, which often blurs religious identities.

On the other hand, Abbasid Rule also marked the decline of Christianity in the Middle East. The gradual Christian diminishment is due to the Arabic language and Islamic culture.⁴⁷ During this period, "The Abbasids overcame Umayyad regionalism by establishing an imperial administration and by fostering the *shari'a*".⁴⁸ Umayyad regionalism allowed for Christian communities to remain relatively autonomous. Under Abbasid Rule, Christians became more integrated into the Islamic Caliphate, but were also subject to official Arabicization and Islamization. Conversion became more prevalent as well as periodic pogroms. Declines in the Christian population fell in a similar manner to Jenkins' ratchet model. Steady declines were sporadically increased by a variety of factors including Muslim leadership, environmental factors, disease, and wars.

⁴⁶ Amira K Bennison, *Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the 'Abbasid Empire*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 23.

⁴⁷ Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 14.

⁴⁸ Robinson, *Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest*, 166.

1.5 Conclusion

The first encounters between Christians and Muslims are difficult to define and require careful interpretation of often neglected primary sources. Historians that fail to carefully consider historical context when objectively reading sources regarding early Muslim-Christian relations fail to fully appreciate the relationship between the faiths. As the relationship between Muslims and Christians developed, primary sources reflect the fluid, and unstable relationship. The dynamic Muslim-Christian relationship that entered the first period of Abbasid Rule was redefined by a stronger bureaucracy and growing Islamic political and social dominance. Regardless, Christians played an integral role during the first Abbasid Period as thinkers and translators.

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CHAPTER NUMBER 2

Translation and Transformation

This chapter will focus on the development of the Abbasid translation movement (750-950) in relation to Muslim-Christian relations. It will introduce: 1) the development of the movement (prior to Abbasid Rule), 2) the role of Christians, 3) the role of Muslims, 4) the continued influence of the movement, 5) concluding points regarding contemporary implications.

2.1 From Umayyad to Abbasid Rule

By the mid-eighth century, the homeland of Syriac Christianity had shifted from Umayyad to Abbasid governance. Despite the hegemony of Islam, Christians remained a majority of the Abbasid Empire's populace until the end of the ninth century.⁴⁹ In fact, in terms of global Christianity, "Perhaps 50 percent of the world's confessing Christians from the mid-seventh to the end of the eleventh centuries found themselves living under Muslim rule."⁵⁰ Christians under Muslim rule became increasingly assimilated into Arab Muslim culture during this period, unlike the previous period of Umayyad governance.

As discussed in the last chapter, Syriac Christians were slow to understand the new Islamic religion that entered Syria during the seventh century. Kenneth Cragg explains that the Christian's "Ignorance of Arabic and the linguistic custody in which Islam made itself

⁴⁹ Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian*: 56.

⁵⁰ Sidney Harrison Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 11.

difficult to reckon.”⁵¹ Arabic language and Arab culture were interwoven with Islam for most of the seventh century. These linguistic and cultural barriers limited Islam to Arabs and led to a level of ignorance on the part of majority Christian communities. It is to be expected that Christian communities conflated Islam with Arab language and culture during the first centuries of interaction. Islam was not truly separate from Arab identity until the Abbasid Caliphate.

Under the Abbasid Caliphate, governance was centralized and consolidated to an unprecedented level. A process of Arabization and Islamization gradually took root in the region. Sidney Griffith notes the uniqueness of the situation; “This was the first time, and historically so far the only time, when Christians have been faced with the necessity of translating, defending, and commending their religion in a new language and in new cultural circumstances.”⁵² The “new language” Griffith refers to is Arabic. During this period, Syriac Christians were forced to adapt their way of living, speaking, and thinking to Arabic. Not only was everyday conversation transformed, but ecclesiastical language was adapted to meet the new normal.

The transformation of the Christian vocabulary was part of an Abbasid attempt to Arabize and Islamize their subjects. This effort to assimilate all members of the Muslim community led to the first apologies in Christian literature in both Syriac and the new *lingua franca*—Arabic.⁵³ Islam was no longer restricted to the Arabs, and the religion was made more readily available to Christians, Jews, and other religious minorities under

⁵¹ Cragg, *The Arab Christian*, 59.

⁵² Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 20.

⁵³ Sidney H. Griffith “Comparative Religion in the Apologetics of the First Christian Arabic Theologians,” Robert G. Hoyland, ed., *Muslims and Others in Early Islamic Society*, vol. 18., (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004).

Abbasid Rule. Likewise, Arabic language became the primary mean of trade and conversation across the empire, and was essential for all subjects irrespective of religious persuasion. In response to both phenomenon, Christians were forced to defend their faith against Islam while writing in Arabic. This first period of Abbasid Rule gave rise to several Christian thinkers whose responses indicate the place of Syriac Christians under Islamic hegemony.

2.2 Development of the Translation Movement

The translation movement that developed under Abbasid Rule in the eight-century had its roots in Muslim-Christian relations under Umayyad Rule. Prior to the Umayyads, under the Rashidun, Christian- Muslim encounters were rare. Under the Umayyads, Muslims began learning from Christian scholars. This trend continued during the reign of the Abbasids who were initially enthusiastic to learn about Greek culture, but eventually their attitudes shifted towards rejection.⁵⁴ The Abbasid Period was the first time that Muslims and Christians shared meaningful encounters on a common linguistic playing field. Prior to Abbasid Rule, Muslims and Christians did not share the same language and their relations suffered from their shared sense of mutual linguistic ignorance.

The first permeations of Arabic as the *lingua franca* of the Levant originated during the Umayyad period. Under the reign of Caliph Abd al-Malik (b. 646 AD – 705 AD), Arabic became more prominent in the Levant. In 691, Abd al-Malik terminated the Christian symbolism of the Byzantine Empire and replaced it with Islamic and Arabic

⁵⁴ Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Encounters & Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e Islamici, 1984), 25.

symbols. One of many examples were the coins used by the empire. Abd al-Malik replaced Byzantine coins with Arab coins featuring Arabic calligraphy.⁵⁵ Despite the introduction of Arabic in the Levant, Christians did not embrace the Arabic language during the seventh century.

Christian ignorance towards Arabic effected their knowledge of and relationship with Islam. Kenneth Cragg writes, “Ignorance of Arabic and the linguistic custody in which Islam made itself difficult even for alert non-Muslims to reckon with the new religion”.⁵⁶ Despite the growing prominence of the Arabic language, Syriac Christians maintained their long-standing linguistic traditions. Overall, Christians failed to adapt to the Arabic language and Arab culture under Umayyad Rule.

Therefore, the Syriac Christian population suffered under Umayyad governance. Sidney Griffith describes the situation of Christians under the Umayyads as a gradual Christian diminishment under the Arabic language and Islamic culture.⁵⁷ However, dhimmitude (the inferior position that Christians held in the Islamic society) could be seen as “a new cultural opportunity for articulation and defense of Christianity in Arabic”.⁵⁸ Christians failed to defend their religion in Arabic during the Umayyad Period, which gave Muslim theologians time to build defenses against Christianity. Although Muslim rulers saw Christians as religiously inferior, they found value in their Christian subjects during the first Abbasid Period.

⁵⁵ Cragg, *The Arab Christian*, 56.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵⁷ Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 14.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

Syriac Christians had a comparatively robust educational system and were familiar with the Mediterranean world. Prior to Islam, Syriac Christians had developed an educational system that spanned cultural and linguistic barriers. The West Syriac Christians established schools in Amida, at the monastery of Qenneshre and in Antioch. The East Syriac Christians (sometimes also referred to as Nestorians) had three great schools in Nisibis, Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and Jundishapur.⁵⁹ These schools focused on both religious and secular education based on the Greek tradition. Syriac Christians had a long tradition of translating Greek texts into Syriac. These Greek texts were the cornerstone of Syrian education and highly influential in the development of Syriac culture. The initial rulers of the Abbasid Empire recognized the necessary value of education and employed Christians to assist in the intellectual development of the nascent Abbasid Empire and Islamic religion. As translators, Christians proved valuable to Abbasid rulers and were able to develop cogent apologies in the language of their overseers—Arabic.

2.3 The Role of Christians

When the Abbasids adopted Arabic as the official government and everyday language, they departed from previous Islamic governments. Previous Islamic rulers had allowed conquered peoples to conduct business in their native tongue whether that be Greek, Persian, or Syriac.⁶⁰ Syriac Christians were forced to adopt Arabic alongside their native language. Therefore, many Christians under Abbasid Rule were skilled polyglots who were

⁵⁹ Samir Khalil Samir Jr., “The Role of Christians in the Abbasid Renaissance in Iraq and in Syria (750-1050),” Ḥabīb Badr et al., *Christianity: A History in the Middle East* (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, Studies & Research Program, 2005), 498.

⁶⁰ Sandra Toenies Keating and Ḥabīb ibn Khidmah Takrītī, *Defending The “people of Truth” in the Early Islamic Period: The Christian Apologies of Abū Rāʾīṭah*, v. 4 (Leiden, Netherlands; Boston: Brill Publishing, 2006), 19.

connected with either Mediterranean cultures if they were from Syria or Persian cultures if they were from Mesopotamia. Syriac Christians were: 1) forced to respond to Islam in Arabic, 2) subject to theological transformation, and 3) valuable translators under some Abbasid rulers.

2.3.1 Responding to Islam

After Arabic was made the official language of the Abbasid Empire (affected both officials and everyday people), Christians were properly introduced to Islamic theology (prior Christian apologists, like John of Damascus, were knowledgeable concerning Arabic but he was not forced to respond in Arabic. Additionally, his apologetics were written for a Greek audience sympathetic to the plight of the Syrian Christians. Christian apologists under Abbasid Rule responded to Islam in Arabic with a Muslim audience in mind. Through their writing, they had to disprove Islam and defend the principles of their faith which were under attack) and forced to respond in Arabic. The Christian communities in Syria faced a two-pronged linguistic problem. Christian doctrine had to be translated into Arabic to remain relevant; however, Arabic was already suited to Islam by the time Christians began the translation.⁶¹ In other words, the religious language of Arabic was already “suffused with explicitly Islamic connotations”.⁶² Christians were challenged with defining Christian doctrine within a linguistic tradition weighted towards Islam. While Christians rearticulated theological apologetics and biblical passages into Arabic, there was

⁶¹ Thomas W. Ricks, *Early Arabic Christian Contributions to Trinitarian Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 3–4.

⁶² Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 20.

no effort to translate the entire Bible. Because the Bible remained in Syriac, theological changes were not drastic and more developmental.

The challenge for Syriac Christians to respond to Islam in Arabic was historically unique. Sidney Griffith writes:

This was the first time, and historically so far the only time, when Christians have been faced with the necessity of translating, defending, and commending their religion in a new language and in new cultural circumstances.⁶³

While Christians have adapted the message to different languages and cultures, this was a peculiar instance in history when Christians were forced, out of necessity, to translate their own customs, traditions, and practices into a new language and culture.

Within the first fifty years of Abbasid Rule, Syriac Christians had adopted Arabic as at least a secondary language. By the end of the ninth century, the three major Christian apologists—the Nestorian Ammar al-Basri, the Melkite Theodore Abu Qurrah, and the Jacobite Abu Ra'itah—wrote in Arabic.⁶⁴ Each apologist grew up in a different part of the Abbasid Empire and came from different Christian traditions. Despite the differences in Christian doctrine, the common experience of being under Muslim rule united Christians in their apologies and polemics against Islam.

2.3.2 The Six Christian Defenses Against Islam

During the first Abbasid period, Christian theologians who felt compelled to respond to Islam developed many arguments to defend the Christian faith. In Abjar Bahkou's book,

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Keating and Takrītī, *Defending The "people of Truth" in the Early Islamic Period*, 23.

Defending Christian Faith: The Fifth Part of the Christian Apology of Gerasimus, he outlines six defenses that Christians commonly used against Islam. Although Gerasimus lived in the twelfth or thirteenth century (hundreds of years after the first Abbasid period) his manuscripts are useful because he provides reflection on Christian apologies. His scholarship shows both the development of the writings and their long-standing traditions. The six defense that he uses, that Christians developed during the first Abbasid period, are:

1. **The universality of Christian faith.** Unlike Islam, Christianity has spread throughout the world and adapts to different cultures. It is relevant in different languages and maintains its meaning no matter the context.⁶⁵
2. **The Trinity can be explained with logical arguments.** Many Muslims repudiated Christians for believing that Jesus was God. They thought that Christians worshiped three Gods instead of the one God. Christians responded to this claim by comparing the Trinity to the sun. The sun has a cause, the sun itself, and its effects, its rays and heat. Likewise, the Trinity is one substance but it is experienced in a threefold manner—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁶⁶
3. **God created man with the freedom of choice.** Some Muslims objected the Christian view that God created Adam knowing in advance that he would fail and fall into sin. Christian apologists responded to this objection by claiming that God gave humanity a choice between life and death. If God did not allow Adam to choose, he would defeat the purpose of creation and impede his goodness towards Adam. In the same way, God

⁶⁵ Abjar Bahkou, *Defending Christian Faith The Fifth Part of the Christian Apology of Gerasimus* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 103.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

created wine and iron knowing that man would misuse them for drunkenness and violence.⁶⁷

4. **The passion of Christ proves God's attributes.** Muslims criticized Christians for believing that Jesus's death was necessary for human salvation. Could not an all-powerful God save humanity without sacrifice? Christian apologists responded, "The purpose of our savior is not to save use by might and coercion but by justice and fairness." The passion of Christ utilizes all four of God's attributes—mercy, wisdom, justice, and power—instead of just simply power.⁶⁸
5. **God fulfilled the law given to Moses through Jesus.** Muslims were confused why God would give laws to Moses only to change and abolish the laws with Christ. Christians argued that Christ did not change or abolish the laws, but came to fulfill them. Christ came to direct people towards the heart of the law, not to change the divinely-inspired laws themselves.⁶⁹
6. **Before Christ, the prophets of God were limited to a certain region.** Muslims lambasted the Christian portrayal of Moses as limited and God's favoring of Israel. They believed that every prophet, included Moses, should 1) preach to the whole world, 2) perform miracles, 3) speak commonly know languages. The Christian Moses did not preach to the whole world nor spoke a common language. God's favoring of Israel over other tribes and the regionality of Moses seemed to contradict Christianity's universal

⁶⁷ Ibid., 114.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 118.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 123.

claims. Christian apologist responded by saying that this was proof in the deficient of the law. Christ is necessary to fulfill the law and make it universal.⁷⁰

2.3.3 Transformation of Christian Writings

In general, one of the most notable transformations was the reorientation of apologetics. Christian apologies under Abbasid Rule shifted from an inward focus to an external focus.⁷¹ Where most Syriac Christians had focused on internal Christian debates in the preceding centuries (note the various Christian divisions in the region i.e. Jacobites, Melkites, Nestorians, etc.), Christians were forced to look outward with their writing. As evidenced by the examples above, the first Christian scholars who wrote in Arabic wrote with Islam at the center of their considerations.

The translation of Christian doctrine into Arabic was more than a shift in language, but a transition in Christian thought. Najib George Awad explained: “The Church was not only translating its thinking, but actually reforming or even transforming it too.”⁷² As evidenced by the examples above, the church was thinking about concepts in an entirely new way as it defended itself against a new religious challenge. This analysis shows how Christians were not only adjusting to Arabic, but being transformed by the language and the culture of the Arabs. Christian thought had previously been transformed by Greek thought, which now, combined with Arabic, was presenting a new form of thought that would have been previously unfathomable. Syriac Christians were in a unique position that

⁷⁰ Ibid., 132.

⁷¹ Keating and Takrītī, *Defending The “people of Truth” in the Early Islamic Period*, 21.

⁷² Najib George Awad, *Orthodoxy in Arabic Terms: A Study of Theodore Abu Qurrah’s Theology in Its Islamic Context* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 76.

made them pioneers in new theological thought and valuable subjects of the Abbasid Empires intellectual zenith.

2.3.4 Christians Under Abbasid Rule

The Abbasid Caliphate shifted governance from Damascus to Mesopotamia halfway through the middle of the eighth century. The newly established Abbasid capital, Baghdad, required specialized labor, from translators to doctors. Syriac Christians had already established an educational tradition that produced renowned intellectuals in literature, science, and medicine. The Abbasid Empire recognized the educational strength of their Christian subjects and sought to exploit for their benefit. In 763, for example, Caliph al-Mansur (714 AD- 775 AD) called upon East Syriac physicians to direct the hospital in Baghdad.⁷³ This example proves the advanced level of education that Christians had in the eighth century. Christians became more involved in the Abbasid society as leading intellectuals and scholars.

Syriac Christian medical doctors exemplified the degree that of what Christians became valorized under Abbasid Rule. Within the first two decades of Abbasid Rule, Christians had begun the translation movement of Christian intellectuals and scholars. One of the first Christian translators under Abbasid Rule, Abu Yahya al-Batriq (working 769-806), began translating as early as 769 AD.⁷⁴ Translators like al-Batriq, had a major advantage over other Arab translators. Syriac Christians had previously translated Greek works into Syriac. At the start of the ninth century, Christians began translating those works

⁷³ Badr et al., *Christianity*, 509.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 508.

into Arabic.⁷⁵ The first translations were simple tasks for Syriac Christians. They only had to transfer the Syriac translations into Arabic because they had already been translated from Greek. The translation movement began within twenty years of the start of the Abbasid Caliphate and became more pronounced within one-hundred years.

2.3.5 House of Wisdom (*Bayt al-Hikmah*)

The zenith of the translation movement occurred nearly a century after the founding of the Abbasid Caliphate. In 832 AD, Caliph al-Ma'mun, founded the House of Wisdom (*Bayt al-Hikmah*). The establishment of his renowned center for learning was designed to translate knowledge from different cultures into Arabic. Al-Ma'mun placed the Persian Sahl ibn Harran (d. 912) and the East Syriac physician Yuhanna ibn Masawayh (777-857) in charge of the establishment.⁷⁶ His choice of a Christian and a Persian shows the accepted importance of Christians during the translation movement. Christians were connected to different cultures and able to translate their cultural knowledge into Arabic wisdom. The Syriac Christians of Levant were crucial in the translation of Greek literature into Arabic

Greek literature written in Arabic was often acquired by the means of double translation via the Levant. In other words, the literature moved from Greek to Syriac and then from Syriac to Arabic.⁷⁷ Hellenistic thought (philosophical, medical, and mathematical) was transmitted from “Alexandria to Antioch, then to Merv and Harran, and finally to Baghdad.”⁷⁸ The translation movement, led by the *Bayt al-Hikma* in Baghdad, involved the Syriac Christians of the Levant. The literature that had been translated for

⁷⁵ Ibid., 512–513.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 505.

⁷⁷ John Meyendorff, “Byzantine Views of Islam,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 18 (Georgetown, Washington, DC: 1964): 115.

⁷⁸ Badr, et al., *Christianity*, 503.

centuries from Greek was vital to the intellectual prosperity of the Abbasid Empire. Christians had the unique ability to work through different languages and cultures.

There were many notable Christians intellectuals during the translate movement that served as essential contributors to the advance of the Abbasid Golden Age. However, the most renowned director of the *Bayt al-Hikma* was Hunayn ibn Ishaq (809-873) who translated over 150 books from Greek into Arabic. The books he translated dealt with “Medicine, Philosophy, Astronomy, Mathematics, Magic, and even the Old Testament.”⁷⁹ These books provided the Abbasid Caliphate with rational thought and logical construction, which forwarded the empire’s intellectual capabilities. Interestingly, al-Ishaq preferred Syriac over Arabic for its syntax and ability to accommodate scientific thought.⁸⁰ He recognized the significance of translating scientific literature into Arabic but felt his Christian language was more adapted to scientific thought. Al-Ishaq’s comments display the Christian perspective that recognized the value in translating literature into Arabic but continued to revere Christian tradition.

With the assistance of Christians, the translation movement lasted for almost two centuries and achieved the translation into Arabic of “almost all non-literary and non-historical secular Greek books that were available throughout the Eastern Byzantine Empire and the Near East.”⁸¹ These translations connected the Abbasid Caliphate with the rest of the world and placed them in a unique position at the crossroads of civilization. It is important to note that none of the translations to Arabic were literary, theatrical, or

⁷⁹ Gaudeul, *Encounters & Clashes*, 26.

⁸⁰ Douglas Pratt et al., eds., *The Character of Christian-Muslim Encounter: Essays in Honour of David Thomas*, History of Christian-Muslim relations volume 25 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Publisher, 2015), 90.

⁸¹ Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ‘Abbāsīd society(2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries)* (London: Routledge, 1998), 1–2.

theological because only the sciences were deemed useful by the Muslim rulers and non-threatening to faith.⁸² While Christians were able to use the Arabic language to attack Islam and defend their own religion, Muslims were most affected by the translated thought from Greece. Rational and logical thought pushed Muslims to attack Christians with rational arguments, but also apply the same rational arguments to their own faith.

2.4 The Role of Muslims

The translation movement not only affected Christians, but also transformed Islamic thought and Muslim-Christian relations. This section will identify: 1) how various Muslim groups responded to and appropriated the translation movement and 2) how Muslim leaders responded to the translation movement.

2.4.1 Mutakalims and Mu'tazilites

Beyond benefiting Christians as a source of employment and knowledge, the translation movement benefited Muslim groups such as the *mutakalims* who appropriated ancient Greek philosophers to refute Christianity. They argued that Christianity was an inferior religion because it rejected philosophy.⁸³ They saw Christianity as an illogical faith that placed an emphasis on unrealistic truths. They argued that Islam was a more logical tradition that supported the Qur'anic revelation. The *mutakalims* arguments were pervasive during the first Abbasid period and garnered a response from Christians apologists. Awad, in the book *Orthodoxy in Arabic Terms*, argues that Theodore Abu

⁸² Gaudeul, *Encounters & Clashes*, 26.

⁸³ Awad, *Orthodoxy in Arabic Terms*, 74–75.

Qurrah's specific goal with his apologetics is to respond to the *mutakallims*.⁸⁴ When Abu Qurrah responded to Islam and defended the Christian faith, he takes note of the logical arguments made by the *mutakallimun*. Interestingly, Muslims used Greek thought from the translation movement to both attack Christianity and question their own faith.

With the start of the Abbasid Dynasty, we see the incorporation of Aristotelian logic and metaphysics in the arguments of Christians and Muslims alike. Some Muslim groups followed the lead of Christian translators and began their own translation efforts like the *Mu'tazilites*.⁸⁵ The *Mu'tazilites*, a group of Muslim scholars who challenged traditional views using Greek logic, were strongly influenced by Christian thinkers, who brought philosophy and natural theology to an Islamic religion based solely on revelation.⁸⁶ The *Mu'tazilites* were influenced by Greek thought and began to forward rational ideas about the origins of the Qur'an. They believed the Qur'an was created by God. Orthodox belief, on the other hand, held that the Qur'an was the uncreated speech of God.⁸⁷ The logical order of God and his word suggests that the word follows God. This view challenged traditional thought and garnered both positive and negative response. Internal challenges to Islam caused controversy in the Abbasid Empire and elucidated the significance of different Muslim rulers.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 88.

⁸⁵ Jean Jacques Waardenburg, *Muslims and Others: Relations in Context*, vol. 41., Religion and reason (New York: De Gruyter, 2003), 137–138.

⁸⁶ Badr et al., *Christianity*, 514.

⁸⁷ John Azumah, "Incarnation and Translation in Christian and Islamic Thought," David Emmanuel Singh, ed., *Jesus and the Incarnation: Reflections of Christians from Islamic Contexts* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 63.

2.4.2 Significance of Rulers

While Islam ultimately benefited from the syncretism of Islam and Greek thought, the convergence of ideas had consequences. Greek thought was the impetus for thinkers like the *mutakallimun* and the *Mu'tazilites*.⁸⁸ These groups challenged Islamic “orthodoxy,” leading to outbursts of violence. Caliph al-Mutawakkil (822-866), unlike his predecessor al-Ma'mun, saw the translation movement as the source of heterodox teachings. He believed that groups like the *mu'tazilites* compromised the integrity of Islam and were dangerous.

Al-Mutawakkil's personal views on religious orthodoxy led to violence committed against Muslim groups he deemed heterodox, scientific institutions, and non-Muslims. In 852 AD, al-Mutawakkil closed down the *Bayt al-Hikma* and actively supported the persecution of Christians.⁸⁹ He aggressively attempted to destroy what he deemed as sources of heterodoxy in order to restore Islamic orthodoxy. Al-Mutawakkil, as compared to al-Ma'mun, represents the dichotomy and significance of Muslim rule under Abbasid Rule. Where one leader supported the intellectual enlightenment of his empire by compromising religious orthodoxy, another restored religious orthodoxy at the price of scientific advancement and religious pluralism.

2.5 Continued Influence of the Translation Movement

Despite al-Mutawakkil's crackdown on the House of Wisdom, the translation movement continued to define the first two centuries of the Abbasid Empire. This section will explore

⁸⁸ Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment: The Gunning Lectures*, (London: Routledge, 1968), 215–216.

⁸⁹ Gaudeul, *Encounters & Clashes*, 26.

the continued legacy of the translation movement and the successes and failures of Christians during this time.

2.5.1 Legacy of the Translation Movement

The translation movement resumed during the late-ninth century and tenth century and featured exchanges between Christians and Muslims. For example, Ibn al-Tayyib (980-1034) was a Christian physician, philosopher, and theologian who taught Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (980-1037) and was the last master of the Aristotelian School of Baghdad in the tenth century.⁹⁰ Christians like Ibn al-Tayyib continued to hold prestigious positions in the field of education towards the end of the first Abbasid Caliphate. Ibn al-Tayyib's famous pupil, Ibn Sina was one of the most prominent Muslim intellectuals at the beginning of the second Abbasid period. As evidenced by Ibn Sina's autobiography, he was familiar with, and influenced by, the works of Aristotle.⁹¹ In particular, he wrestled with the meaning of *Metaphysics* and found it an enlightening and transformative book as soon as he engaged the implications of its contents. Thinkers like Ibn Sina blended Muslim and non-Muslim traditions, made possible by Syriac Christians, and instilled an intellectual legacy for the Abbasid Empire.

The Abbasid Empire was, at the time, the world's most expansive and powerful empire. For the first time since Alexander the Great, Egypt and the Fertile Crescent were linked with Persia and India.⁹² The Abbasids connected the many of the world's great hubs and smoothly transferred information from the Mediterranean to Persia (and beyond).

⁹⁰ Badr, et al., *Christianity*, 518–519.

⁹¹ Bernard Lewis, ed., *Islam: From the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 180.

⁹² Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, 11–12.

Towards the end of the first Abbasid period, Buldan Al-Ya'qubi (d. 897), an Arab historian, wrote that Baghdad was the “center of the world,” a view shared by many other scholars.⁹³ This statement speaks to the relevance of the Abbasid Empire and its centrality in conveying ancient wisdom. Al-Ya'qubi is referencing the Greek scholars of ancient times with this statement. He recognizes Baghdad as the principle center on earth and a continuation of ancient wisdom from the Greeks to the Arabs.

2.5.2 *Christian Successes*

The most far reaching and seminal success of the translation movement was the progressive improvement of Muslim-Christian relations. The translation movement brought Christians and Muslims together with a shared desire to expand Greek science, philosophy, and medicine.⁹⁴ Although the positivity of this relationship was dynamic and subject to change with each successive ruler, language and science proved to be a substantive common ground for mutual encounters between Muslim and Christian intellectuals during this period.

The translation movement was also a boon to intra-faith relations within the Christian community. Prior to Islamic rule, various Christian communities remained unequivocally divided in the Middle East. While Christian communities remained separate under Abbasid Rule, there were increased levels of noticeable linguistic and cultural exchange among Christians from different denominations who shared a common experience under Muslim rule.⁹⁵ The translation movement brought divided Christian

⁹³ Lewis, *Islam*, 70.

⁹⁴ Ricks, *Early Arabic Christian Contributions to Trinitarian Theology*, 1.

⁹⁵ Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, 15.

branches together with the shared goal of working towards codifying scientific understanding. Christians also sensed a shared burden of responding to Islam, instead of dwelling on relatively minor intra-faith discrepancies.

Finally, the translation movement provided a unique forum for Christians to respond to Islam in new ways and enriched their theological discourse. Towards the end of the thirteenth century, nearly 300 years after the first Abbasid period, Gerasimus, a Christian theologian, responds to Islam in a way that mirrors Christian thought from the ninth century. Gerasimus's apologetic is a spiritual humanistic approach. The apology presents the Christian faith in a clear logical manner similar to a Greek Aristotelian style.⁹⁶ Gerasimus was able to put his apology into the language of the Qur'an so that it could be employed by both Muslims and Christians in conversation.⁹⁷ Gerasimus's apologetic shows the obvious influence of Greek thought, the use of Arabic language, the response to Islam, and a charitable ecumenical approach to Christian faith. Each of these aspects are storied legacies of the translation movement of the first Abbasid period and a helpful marker of Christian success under tenuous situations of persecution and marginalization.

2.5.3 *Christian Failures*

The gradually corrosive dwindling of Christianity under Muslim rule sheds light on many of the failures of Christians under Abbasid Rule. The biggest failure of Christianity under Abbasid Rule is the lack of a complete and accessible Bible translation. Christians made no attempt to translate the Bible into Arabic, failing to access Arabic-speaking peoples.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Abjar Bahkou, "The True Religion in the Apology of Gerasimus "The Complete Book of the Healing Meanings," Rome: *Parole l'Orient* (2016): 82.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁹⁸ Keating and Takrītī, *Defending The "people of Truth" in the Early Islamic Period*, 22.

In the Christian tradition, those who guarded orthodoxy were uneasy and uncertain about the benefit of scriptural translation.⁹⁹ Syriac was seen as a language that connected Christians to the true religion and the intent of the sacred texts. However, the lack of an accessible Arabic translation made Christian claims inaccessible for most of the Abbasid Empire's Arabic speaking population. Apologies for Christian faith in Arabic provided a strong defense for the religion, but a translation of the Bible would have been a strong offensive for the Christian front. Today, translation work on the Bible has made it more accessible to Arab non-Christians than ever before.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter highlighted Muslim-Christian thought and relations during the Abbasid translation movement (750-950). It discussed: 1) the origins of the movement, 2) the role of Christians, 3) the role of Muslims, 4) the legacy of the movement, and 5) concluding points regarding contemporary implications.

⁹⁹ Singh, *Jesus and the Incarnation*, 69.

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CHAPTER NUMBER 3

Learning from the Past

The First Abbasid Period teaches us about the nature of Muslim-Christian relations and how this dynamic relationship continues today. In Roland E. Miller's book, *Muslims and the Gospel: Bridging the Gap*, he claims that learning from the lessons of the past is itself a helpful bridge between Christian and Muslim understanding.¹⁰⁰ The past can be a powerful tool in the future of Muslim-Christian relations. This chapter will unpack how we can learn from: 1) the early sources on Muslim-Christian relations, 2) the differentiation of Islam and Christianity, 3) Christian responses to Islamic hegemony, 4) the transition from Umayyad to Abbasid Rule, 5) the translation movement during the Abbasid Golden Age, and 6) Muslim and Christian translators. The chapter will conclude with broad points needed in navigating Muslim-Christian relations.

3.1 Learning from the Early Sources

The earliest sources on Muslim-Christian relations provide an intricate picture of the first interactions. From the early sources, we can learn 1) about the weaknesses of the Christian community, 2) the significance of history in remembering the universality of the church, and 3) the objective of the Christian mission.

¹⁰⁰ Roland E. Miller, *Muslims and the Gospel: Bridging the Gap: A Reflection on Christian Sharing* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2005), 180.

- 1) The early Christian communities in the Middle East are largely forgotten by many Christians today because they were overcome by the Islamic advance. Christians of the medieval Middle East had several weaknesses that William Montgomery Watt concluded that being too closely associated with the Byzantine Empire, too abstract and beyond the grasp of ordinary Christians, and too fractured amongst various denominations.¹⁰¹ Many Christians of the Levant were dependent on the Byzantine Empire for protection and identity. The past also teaches us to present our faith practically for the sake of all Christians. Presenting faith in Christ as abstract and esoteric alienates ordinary people from a personal relationship with Christ and should be avoided. Finally, the Christians in the Middle East were susceptible to Islam because they were fractured by their beliefs. While there are many truthful expressions of faith in Christ, Christians must remember to celebrate common faith in Christ. In Mark 9, Jesus tells his disciples, “whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:40). The disciples were initially concerned when they saw someone casting out demons in the name of Jesus who was not one of the disciples. Although the person in question acted outside of the disciples “denomination,” Jesus supported the individual’s ministry because he acted in the name of Christ. Finding mutuality in our common beliefs in Christ’s healing an example of Christian unity.
- 2) The early sources on Muslim-Christian relations are also a reminder: 1) of the universality of the church and 2) for how Christians should deal with worldly failure. Philip Jenkins argues for more study on the “theology of extinction.” How do we

¹⁰¹ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misperceptions* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), 7.

reconcile with the fact that churches fail to survive?¹⁰² Jenkins offers encouragement; “The divine does not necessarily work according to our concepts of time.”¹⁰³ God works through both failure and success and is unbound by the constrictions of time. Jenkins’ conclusions are practical learning points for Christians. By studying Christian history in the Middle East, we learn that the Christ event is central to every Christ community regardless of time and place. The Christian church diminished in the East, thus, Jenkins calls for a theology of extinction. We must be prepared to experience failure in this worldly realm while believing that God has a greater purpose and works through all things.

- 3) Finally, the earliest Syriac sources remind Christians of the true objective of faith. Christians are not called to be successful in the world regarding finances, intelligence, or arguments; Christians are called to love. Kenneth Cragg asserts: “The Christian mission is not a calculus of success, but an obligation in love.”¹⁰⁴ Christian populations began to diminish under early Arab-Muslim rulers; however, statistics do not make or unmake the church. The church and its members are obligated to love God and their neighbors; not to turn faith into a calculated science. When studying the first Muslim-Christian relations, we should learn from the mistakes of historical Christians, but their errors have no impact on the credibility of the Christian faith today. Christians have always been called to love; it is the only obligation that truly matters.

¹⁰² Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia- and How It Died*, 1st ed. (New York: Harperone, 2008), 251.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁰⁴ Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 305.

3.2 Learning from the Differentiation of Islam and Christianity

While early source materials indicate that the first Muslim-Christian encounters were varied and difficult to define, the two faiths began to differentiate themselves over the next 300 years. Today, the lessons of this differentiation of faith coincides in recognizing the commonalities of Christians and Muslims as well as some of the possible pitfalls of encounter.

First, Christians and Muslims shared much in common during their first defining historical and intellectual interactions. While tolerance may be seen as an anachronistic term to describe early Muslim-Christian relations, one can get a sense for the “connected cultures, shared histories, and religious interdependence.”¹⁰⁵ The commonalities between Christians and Muslims reminds readers today of a shared heritage and may also provide avenues for thoughtful remembrance and deeper dialogue. Christianity and Islam were born in similar cultures and were raised together. The two faiths share a lot in common and are indebted to each other for their appearance today.

Despite cultural, historical, and religious commonality, the first historical relationships were often harmed by mutual assumptions of and deep suspicions about the other faith. The first relations were disputatious rather than evangelical because Christians and Muslims defined each other as being heretical.¹⁰⁶ By deeming each other as entirely beyond God’s authentic revelation, Christians and Muslims distanced interaction and probably harmed future relations. Christians today can learn from this by studying Islam before labeling it as heretical. In fact, it becomes difficult to define Islam the more it is

¹⁰⁵ Michael Philip Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 185.

¹⁰⁶ Miller, *Muslims and the Gospel*, 183.

considered in a historical as well as missiological, theological, and relational context. Islam is not monolithic and, much like Christianity, it defies simplistic generalizations. Therefore, to promote amicable dialogue and meaningful understanding, Christians and Muslims should recognize prior assumptions, prejudices, and misunderstanding to speak with the other faith with a greater degree of truthfulness and respect.

3.3 Learning from Christian Responses to the Dome of the Rock

The Dome of the Rock, as Sidney Griffith explains, was a pivotal event for Muslim-Christian relations and the differentiation of the two faiths.¹⁰⁷ The Dome of the Rock stands in Jerusalem to this day and remains still a significant source of controversy and contention. It rises in stark opposition to Christianity and Judaism; declaring the superiority of the Islamic faith over vanquished religious peoples. As previously discussed, Christians initially responded to the construction Dome of the Rock with apocalyptic literature as they envisioned the structure as a physical sign of the end times. After 200 years, Christian writers under Abbasid Rule gradually began to reinterpret the meaning of the Dome of the Rock and the value of Islamic hegemony as actually being a form of liberation from Byzantine oppression on heterodox Christian beliefs. In this way, divergent Christian responses to the physical Dome of the Rock assured a bipolar nature with responses prone to extremity and bereft of nuance.

The Dome of the Rock has been seen as a symbol of the separation and continuity between Islam and Christianity. Writing about the two mosques overlooking the Garden of Gethsemane, Cragg observes, “Through all their history, since the minarets were raised,

¹⁰⁷ Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 32.

the two faiths have been that near, that far.”¹⁰⁸ Christians have a difficult task of communicating and coexisting with Islam. The Dome reminds Christians of the differences between Christians and Muslims, but its location also reminds Christians of their obligation to love others as love one another. Located in such close proximity to the Garden of Gethsemane and Golgotha, the Dome serves as a reminder of the challenges earth that Christians face. Christians are obligated to love, no matter the circumstances.

3.4 Learning from Umayyad and Abbasid Rule

The Dome of the Rock was built during the Umayyad period, which came to end within a hundred years of its completion. Afterwards, the Abbasids, treated Christians differently than had the Umayyads. For one, the Abbasids had a better political relationship with their Christian subjects, which is instructive for those seeking to better interfaith interactions on our modern context.

Muslim-Christian relations have failed in the past because the two faiths have been mutually mistreated and persecuted under political structures. For Muslim-Christian relations to flourish, there should be a clear stand against political exclusivism.¹⁰⁹ While political exclusivism is challenging to avoid, the most harmonious relationships between Muslims and Christians have often been accomplished in politically neutral and safe environments. During the first Abbasid Period, both Christians and Muslims were valued for their intellectual and cultural contributions to society. Christians were highly respected for their work as skilled translators and trusted academics. The political inclusion of

¹⁰⁸ Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, 325.

¹⁰⁹ Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 262.

Christians into the Abbasid society helped foster Muslim-Christian relations. The Abbasid Empire was relatively more inclusive of Christians than its Umayyad predecessors. Treating Muslims today as political equals despite religious differences, is a lesson to be generated from the past. From history it becomes obvious that the most successful relations and therefore successful empires have been built on political inclusivity.

3.5 Learning from the Translation Movement

The most compelling legacy of the First Abbasid period for Muslim-Christian relations was the translation movement. This movement incorporated both Muslims and Christians together into society and in sustainable academic circles. This offers lessons for today because of 1) the thoughtful debate, nuanced it inspired, 2) the mutuality between Muslims and Christians during this era, and 3) the possibility to discover commonalities between these two major faith traditions.

3.5.1 Thoughtful Debate

Thoughtful debate between Muslims and Christians during the translation movement sprang from logical arguments learned from ancient Greek philosophy. Logical argument structures allowed Muslims and Christians to debate theological issues within a common, accepted framework. However, such logical arguments had their obvious limitations. Roland Miller writes: “The divine Truth of self-giving love is really supra-logical.”¹¹⁰ While the translation movement brought freshness to the Muslim-Christian debate, logical arguments consistently failed entirely bridge interfaith barriers. One good example of this

¹¹⁰ Miller, *Muslims and the Gospel*, 190.

problem comes from Timothy I (727-823). He writes of his dialogue with Caliph Mahdi, “Argumentation as an approach must reckon with the fact that every argument produces a counter-argument, and every proof a counter-proof.”¹¹¹ Timothy’s arguments with the Caliph often encountered deaf ears because the logical framework provided an avenue for counter-argument and counter-proof. Regardless, mutual admiration for logical debate enabled Timothy I to present his beliefs in respectful dialogue alongside entrenched Islamic thought. Logic provided a helpful platform for the dissemination of Christian beliefs into an otherwise resistant Islamic society. Thus, debate strengthened the Christian communities in the Abbasid Empire and emboldened its successful encounters with Muslims.

While debates between Muslims and Christians may seem repetitive, there is significant progress apparent through these formal mechanisms. Recently, academic departments such as Islamic and Religious Studies have promoted dialogue.¹¹² The legacy of the translation movement continues today in universities across the world. Overall, “Discourse about the truth,” or debates and apologies, are a constructive part of Muslim-Christian relations that encourage dialogue.¹¹³ Dialogue between Muslims and Christians is becoming more prevalent in academic settings leading to a healthier relationship between Muslim and Christian scholars. The legacy of the translation movement reminds people today that dialogue is needed in academic circles as well as in everyday encounters. Without consistent dialogue, Christians and Muslims grow increasingly ignorant to each other’s’ beliefs. An obviously unhealthy relationship between Muslims and Christians

¹¹¹ Ibid., 189.

¹¹² Clinton Bennett, *Understanding Christian-Muslim Relations* (London; New York: Continuum, 2008), 213.

¹¹³ Volf, *Allah*, 259.

today is partially due to a lack of respectful and intellectual dialogue built on a shared logical foundation.

3.5.2 *Mutual Experience*

During the translation movement, Christians and Muslims were essential to the Abbasid society. When writing about the translation movement and the Abbasid Golden Age, it is not possible for scholars to ignore the significant contributions of both Christians and Muslims working together towards similar ends and objectives.¹¹⁴ Historians of church and mosque history have the duty of documenting the shared experience of Muslims and Christians during the first Abbasid period to preserve their cherished memory and explore its possible ramifications for today's interactions.

The shared intellectual and religious history discussed in this research can be used to support a "Islamo-Christian" heritage promoting "peaceful and mutually respectful *Convivencia* in the future."¹¹⁵ Some scholars use the term *Convivencia*, or coexistence, to describe an idealistic standard of Muslim-Christian relations, referring to the period of Muslim-Christian relations in Umayyad Spain. In this era, Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived in relative peace and harmony. The legitimacy of this peace is debated, but it remains for many an ideal standard for future Muslim-Christian relations. By studying the relationship between Muslims and Christians during the translation movement I am arguing that readers today can also extrapolate lessons of mutuality and coexistence between these two faith communities. Muslims and Christians will continue to inhabit this earth together

¹¹⁴ Amira K Bennison, *Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the 'Abbasid Empire*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 182–202.

¹¹⁵ Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 4.

and it is imperative to recognize the long history of mutuality and coexistence in order to define the future.

3.5.3 Discovering Commonalities

The Abbasid translation movement was one of the first moments in history when Christians and Muslims debated their faith in a common language and within an agreed upon framework. While debate revealed differences between the two religions, it also uncovered common beliefs about the oneness and goodness of God. Recognizing commonalities of God may provide a shared moral framework between Muslims and Christians.¹¹⁶ Today, Muslims and Christians work within a common moral framework, but without the constructive legacy of the translation movement this would not have been as apparent. It should be recognized that the common beliefs about God shared by Muslims and Christians are helpful to foster dialogue. Starting conversation on common ground rooted in historic legacies is an often forgotten and little explored skill for Christians relating to Muslims.

There are four daunting aspects in interfaith encounters with Muslims. Roland Miller writes that: “the immensity of Islam, the mystery of Islam, the history of bad relations between Christians and Muslims, and mutual understandings.”¹¹⁷ Islam today, as it may have been the case for Christians in the first Abbasid Period, is immensely diverse. To some, it seems overbearing and unconquerable. By carefully studying Islam and building gracious relationships with Muslims, Christians can uncover the religion’s mystery. While the history of Muslim-Christian relations is littered with problematic patches of disengagement, this grave history is also home to mutual collaboration and

¹¹⁶ Volf, *Allah*, 259–260.

¹¹⁷ Miller, *Muslims and the Gospel*, 12.

positive relationships. Finally, after understanding the similarities between Islam and Christianity, Muslims and Christians, it is useful to deal accordingly with the similarities. Similarities can be a valuable tool for meaningful dialogue, but they also can endanger the Christian message if Christians fail to stay firm in their faith. Both Muslims and Christians should be willing to concede what is cultural or superfluous in our faith and maintain what is essential. Being a Christian in a world that also is the home to over a billion Muslims, calls for both flexibility and resoluteness.

3.6 Learning from Christian and Muslim Translators

The translation movement of the first Abbasid period was made possible by Christian and Muslim translators who regularly interacted with one another. The translation movement improved dialogue between Christians and Muslims, but also between different Christian denominations. Potentially modern-day lessons from Christian and Muslim translators are to 1) promote Muslim-Christian relations over shared vocations and 2) avoid disagreements over faith misunderstandings.

3.6.1 Examples of Theological Thought

While Christians had previously developed theological thought with the help of Greek philosophy, the practice was relative new for Islam. The development of *'ilm al-kalam* was and the *mutakallimun* were indebted to Christian theology and interreligious discourse.¹¹⁸ Christians provided Muslims with some of the basis for developing religious thought. This helpful exchange of information was made possible by Christians and Muslims sharing

¹¹⁸ Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 158.

vocational aspirations. It can help in the contemporary period to appreciate that the exchange of information can happen in a multitude of circumstances. Hopefully, the respectful exchange of information and intellectual ideals between Muslims and Christians leads to better dialogue and sense of mutual understanding.

3.6.2 Examples of Theological Disagreement

The translation movement was generally positive for Muslim-Christian relations (at least relatively to previous periods of interactions), but it was also sometimes harmful for intra-Christian relations. Arabic may have helped communication between different Christian denominations, but it also allowed for theological confrontation.¹¹⁹ Christians from around the Abbasid Empire were now linked together by a common language. Thought from the Jacobite, Melkite, and Nestorian churches was distributed across the empire for both the benefit and detriment of Christianity. It probably encouraged some ecumenical thought, but it also led to intra-Christian polemics defending regional expressions of Christianity. Often, intra-faith controversy surround issues that are not essential to salvation and the most central tenants of a given faith. Disagreements over scriptural interpretation and religious practices may well distract from a deeper mission of loving others. Christians and Muslims should maintain their focus on fostering relationships with others in order to approach the world in a less hostile way

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 157.

3.7 Conclusion: Keys to Future Relations

This chapter teaches us valuable truths about Muslim-Christian relations during the first Abbasid Period and in our own contemporary context. Below are three important lessons:

- 1) **Muslim-Christian relations are dynamic and subject to change.** This dynamism was best represented during the first Abbasid period by al-Ma'mun and al-Mutawakkil. Although both rulers led the Abbasid Caliphate during the first half of the ninth century, they had completely different approaches to their Christian subjects. This difference should remind contemporary readers that governments and rulers are hugely significant regarding the relationship between Muslims and Christians. It is not necessarily that Muslims and Christians be seen as bipolar forces in constant opposition, but that relations are subject to change and, furthermore, the choices of those in power may significantly influence the nature of relations.
- 2) **Muslim-Christian relations are transformed by language.** During the translation movement, both the Muslim and Christian faiths were transformed through language. Language was used as a powerful tool to transfer information across religious and cultural barriers. For Christians in the twenty-first century, it is imperative to remember the value of language in communicating with different cultures and faiths. The present lack of respectful understanding between many Muslims and Christians may often derive from a lack of linguistic and cultural mutuality leading to a lack of meaningful encounters. Christians during the first Abbasid period made a meaningful impact in Christian history by assimilating into Muslim society and building relationships despite hardship.

3) Rationalism and secular thought redefine religious tradition. In other words, **religious adaptability is key in cultures that transform over time**. Both Christianity and Islam during the Abbasid period adapted to remain relevant. Muslims adopted Greek thought to respond to Christianity and Christians adopted Islamic concepts to respond to Islam. It is vital to remember, especially today, that religious ideas must adapt to remain relevant. Christians, as explained by Abu Qurrah, are not limited to a single language or method of explanation. Both Christianity and Islam claim to be universal faiths with a multitude of truthful expressions. Embracing the diversity of both faiths is essential for the continued strength of the world's faith communities.

Finally, our relationships with Muslims should engage us to consider our personal relationship with God as well. Clinton Bennett writes:

The fact that Islam and Christianity do not always agree can remind Muslims and Christians that God is ultimately beyond number, beyond language, beyond fallible and finite human understanding. Yet I also believe that this God reveals enough about God's-self to enable us to enter into a meaningful relationship with God. This is the meaning of revelation, the drawing back, by God, of the divine curtain.¹²⁰

Bennett's quote reminds us that the one true God of heaven and earth is ultimately in control. God has revealed his divine plan in the past and will continue to guide the future. God has a plan for Muslims and Christians alike and calls us to be in a long, relational, and respectful community; and able to live together in peace.

¹²⁰ Bennett, *Understanding Christian-Muslim Relations*, 216.

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CONCLUSION

What Have We Learned?

The Journey: From Early Interactions to Meaningful Encounters

This thesis described early Muslim-Christian relations during the first Abbasid Period to provide valuable lessons on contemporary relations. I began with the Arab conquest and the first Muslim-Christian relations to describe the initial situation and suggest the difficulty in defining early Islam. After showing the development of Islam from the perspective of Christians, I pointed to two key events—the Pact of Umar and the construction of the Dome of the Rock—which began the process of differentiating Islam from Christianity. Christians responded to the Dome of the Rock in various ways. Initially, Christians responded to the Dome of the Rock with apocalyptic literature. Later, Christians reinterpreted the Arab conquest with a more positive view seeing it as a liberation from Byzantine oppression. By the end of the Umayyad period, Christianity and Islam had emerged as two distinct religions with Muslims claiming superiority despite a Christian majority.

Under Abbasid Rule, Christians were more involved in the society and political structure due to their intellectual value. Christians were some of the first translators at the start of the translation movement. Christians had already been translating Greek works into Syriac thus creating Arabic translations from the Syriac was relatively easy. Christians began to adopt the Arabic language and formulate theological works, apologies, and polemics in Arabic. In fact, many theologians utilized the Arabic language and Greek

thought in their arguments. Muslims adopted Greek thought into their own religious writing opening a dialogue with Christians. Both Christians and Muslims were able to interact and respond to the other's religion using the same argument framework. Although this period of Abbasid Rule was not a utopian era of Muslim-Christian tolerance, it did provide avenues for meaningful encounters.

What we Learned

This thesis sought to utilize the history of Muslim-Christian encounters under Abbasid Rule to understand contemporary Muslim-Christian relations. First, the early sources on Muslim Christian encounters teach us about the weaknesses of the Christian community, the significance of history in remembering the global church, and the true objective of the Christian mission. Contemporary Christians can learn from the mistakes of the churches that encountered Islam and be encouraged by their successes. The early sources help us remember that the Christian message spread to more than just Europe and was truly a global event. Finally, Christians are called to love and other missions should come secondarily.

Second, the differentiation of Islam and Christian under Umayyad Rule may teach us about the significant commonalities between Muslims and Christians and also the pitfalls of encounter. Christians and Muslims share common religious origins and, therefore, practice, beliefs, and expressions of faith. This is important to remember when establishing common ground with a Muslim. The pitfalls of encounter are most often assumptions about the other's religion. The differentiation of the two religions teaches us to enter encounters by bracketing off preconceptions of another's faith instead of alienating their beliefs.

Third, we can learn from Christian response to the Dome of the Rock because of their bipolar nature. Both extremes—responding with apocalyptic literature and with rose colored glasses—to Arab-Muslim hegemony are dangerous. Christians should remain balanced in their approach to Islam recognizing both the positive and negative aspects of the relationship.

Fourth, Christians can learn about Muslim-Christian relations and politics with the transition from Umayyad to Abbasid Rule. The Abbasid Empire was generally more inclusive than the Umayyad Empire which led to a healthier relationship between Muslims and Christians and a more productive society. In recent years, the United States has enacted policy that makes the nation more exclusive to Muslims. From history, we learn this does little to promote healthy interreligious relations and limits the opportunity for Muslims to hear about Christ.

Fifth, the translation movement can teach us about the power of thoughtful debate, the mutuality between Christians, and our common views on God. Using Greek thought as a framework, Christians and Muslims were able to debate their faith on common ground. This led to more meaningful understanding between the two religions. The fact that Christians worked alongside Muslim intellectuals also promoted mutuality among the faiths and reminds us to join together with Muslims in society. Finally, mutuality and thoughtful debate led Muslims and Christians to agree on some characteristics of God. Both Muslims and Christians have a common view of God, which should be cultivated for the benefit of relations.

Last, the work of Muslim and Christian translators teaches the value of being in community with Muslims and the dangers of disagreement. Through translation, Muslims

and Christians enjoyed a better sense of community and fellowship than in the preceding century. This should reinforce the idea that Christians and Muslims should partake in community together to foster healthy relations. The Christian translators also remind us of the harm of intra-faith disagreement. Christians need to remain united when tackling difficult issues in the world rather than bicker over small details in the grand scheme of things.

Open Perspectives

In conclusion, this thesis hopes to foster a greater awareness of the history and contemporary implications of Muslim-Christian relations. My keys to understanding Muslim-Christian relations are: 1) religious adaptability is key in cultures that transform over time, 2) Muslim-Christian relations are transformed by language and 3) Muslim-Christian relations are dynamic and subject to change. These three points help to summarize the lessons we learn from the early encounters between Muslims and Christians. While *Convivencia* may be too idealistic, perhaps we can, at the very least, better understand our religious neighbors by remembering our common history.

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