

INTRODUCTION

The history of encounters between Christians and Muslims in the lands of Greater Syria, the *bilād al-Shām* of the times before national boundaries, is older than that in almost any other part of the Islamic world. In fact, if there is any historical recollection preserved in the ancient account of the meeting between the boy Muḥammad and the Christian hermit Baḥīrā, it may even paradoxically be regarded as predating the appearance of Islam itself.

When it is remembered that Muḥammad went on trading journeys into Greater Syria as a young merchant, and in later life recounted his experience of being taken by night to Jerusalem and from there ascending to heaven, and that he led the first Muslim prayers in the direction of that city until he was given a new *qibla*, it will be seen that Syria was closely bound up with the life of the Prophet and his early community. The expeditions after his death set out north for Syria, and the Battle of Yarmūk in 15/636 was the first decisive meeting between Muslim Arab and Christian Byzantine armies. When Mu‘āwīya established his capital at Damascus in 41/661, Greater Syria came under a Muslim government and, with the exception of the Crusader kingdoms in the sixth/twelfth and seventh/thirteenth centuries, it remained so until the twentieth century. Its Christian populations learned to accept and survive under Muslim rule, and were frequently free to make their own contribution to the life of wider society. They loyally defended their beliefs and religious practices, but in part gradually came under the linguistic and cultural influence of their rulers. From the long and intimate experience of encounters distinctive forms of Christianity developed.

Christian and Muslim interaction in Greater Syria was an appropriate theme for the third in the series of Woodbrooke-Mingana Symposiums on Arab Christianity and Islam. This series of Symposiums is intended to honour Dr Alphonse Mingana (1878–1937), the Iraqi priest who contributed substantially to scholarship on Christianity in the Middle East in the early part of the last century, and brought to Woodbrooke College the collection of Syriac and Arabic Christian manuscripts that bear his name (they are now preserved in the Orchard Learning Resources Centre at Selly Oak).¹ With a general focus upon Arab Christianity and Islam in the pre-Ottoman period, the Symposiums

¹ Mingana's life has been summed up by S. K. Samir, *Alphonse Mingana 1878–1937*, Birmingham 1990 (Occasional Paper No. 7).

have previously dealt with “Christian Arabic Apologetics during the ‘Abbasid Period (750–1258)” (1990), and “Coptic Arabic Christianity before the Ottomans: Text and Context” (1994). The papers from both these Symposiums have been published.²

Between 7 and 11 September 1998, a group of students, researchers and scholars met in the intimate surroundings of Woodbrooke College, Selly Oak, Birmingham, where Mingana had temporarily lived, for the third Symposium on the theme of “Arab Christianity in *Bilād al-Shām* in the pre-Ottoman Period”. They listened to and discussed the papers collected in this volume. These papers touch on aspects of the encounters between Christians and Muslims in Greater Syria from the beginnings of Islam to the eighth/fourteenth century, and they show the great complexity of interactions between the faiths, the considerable intellectual interdependence that developed between them, and the continuing polemical edge that persisted in the written records they produced. While they do not in any sense tell the history of Christian-Muslim relations in Greater Syria, they attest to the richness and surprisingly lively story of Christians through the centuries of the Umayyad, ‘Abbasid and succeeding dynasties.

The papers are arranged in the rough chronological order of their subjects. Sidney Griffith’s chapter defends the thesis that the Christian community known as the Melkites came into being in response to pressures exerted mainly within the early Islamic world. Here Christians felt compelled to state what they believed as clearly as they were able, and in this process those who remained loyal to the Chalcedonian tradition distinguished themselves from their main rivals the ‘Jacobites’ and ‘Nestorians’. He examines polemical works of the two major proponents of the early Islamic ‘Melkite’ community, John of Damascus and Theodore Abū Qurra, and the latter’s ‘Jacobite’ rival Ḥabīb Ibn Khidma Abū Rā’īṭa, and demonstrates that their controversial arguments arose from their intention to define themselves from other Christians within the wider context of the alien faith. As such they are not so much continuities of the conciliar period as products of the new era in which oriental Christianity achieved its own identity.

Barbara Roggema’s study of quotations from the Qur’an included in a longer Christian version of the Bahīrā story shows eloquently how Christians in the early ‘Abbasid era ingeniously attempted to neutralise the text of Muslim scripture by attributing many of its teachings to the

² See *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid period (750–1258)*, edited by S. K. Samir and J. S. Nielsen, Leiden, 1994; and *Medieval Encounters* 2, 1996, edited by D. Thomas.

Christian who recognised and, in their eyes, taught Muḥammad. Her examination demonstrates both the thorough acquaintance that Christians had with the Qur'an and their awareness of discussions among Muslims about interpretation problems. They put this knowledge to use in order to defend their own position in terms of the Qur'an itself.

In his contribution Samir Khalil surveys references to the Prophet Muḥammad in seven Christian authors from the second/eighth to the seventh/thirteenth century. He finds a considerable amount of knowledge about the Prophet's life and activities, but more importantly serious attempts to explain his religious significance outside Islam. While no one actually calls him a prophet in so many words, and there is more or less consensus that he himself was the author of the Qur'an, there are enough carefully formulated words of praise to show that he was thought by some, at least, to have a measure of divine approval.

These qualified acknowledgements of Muḥammad are put into perspective by Mark Swanson's re-examination of the account of the martyrdom of Qays al-Ghassānī, who became the monk 'Abd al-Masīḥ, from the third/ninth century. After setting it in its historical and literary context, he argues that the purpose of this account was to give moral encouragement to its Christian readers, by showing first the difference between Christianity and Islam, then that the way of return was open to those who had gone over to the rival faith, and thirdly that martyrdom should not be sought for self glorification, but accepted in God's good time. The story is both a mild criticism of more unrestrained retellings of martyrdoms and a stark witness to the routine hostility between Christians and Muslims at this time.

Lawrence Conrad's account of the career of the Christian physician Ibn Buṭlān casts Christian-Muslim relations at this time in yet another light. This fifth/eleventh century Nestorian travelled widely in the Middle East through both the Islamic and Byzantine empires, and made friends as well as professional enemies among Christians and Muslims alike. His extant writings reveal him as a man who had no religious or denominational axe to grind, but rather one who felt at ease in society and looked on its religious diversity with liberal open-mindedness. It is not certain that his experiences and outlook were typical of Christians in his time, and he may have accentuated his Arab identity and thus found as much in common with Muslims as with fellow-Christian intellectuals. Nevertheless, his recollected experiences show the wide possibilities open to anyone with professional ability, and make plain that religious loyalties were sometimes quite unimportant.

By contrast with this individual case study, Seta Dadoyan's chapter is a wide-ranging discussion of the activities of Armenian Christians in Syria between the fourth/tenth and sixth/twelfth centuries. Her careful

searching through previously known texts and assembling together of fragmentary references leads her to detect a whole substratum of activity by bands of Armenian mercenaries and clan groups. These often operated on the edge of established society, but from time to time, through the weakness of central government or their own political manoeuvring, they were able to play a part in the major events of their region, and sometimes influence their course. Despite being largely ignored by the chroniclers of Greater Syria, the part played in Syrian history by these unpredictable insurgents, who veered between their ancestral faith and Islam, is not to be underestimated.

Lucy-Anne Hunt's chapter is a study of some illustrated folios attributable to a Syriac lectionary of the seventh/thirteenth century, and probably originating from a monastery in Ṭūr ʿAbdīn. Their style and subject matter are closely similar to other contemporary lectionaries which have survived intact, and also bear affinities with illustrations in Muslim works from the area of the same time. They are a small but eloquent witness of the cultural influences which Christian artists came under, and also of the continuing liveliness of religious art among Syrian churches in the turbulent period of the Crusades.

The last contribution, by David Thomas, is a study of arguments in a letter by the Melkite Bishop Paul of Antioch which attempt to demonstrate how the Qur'an both confirms cardinal Christian beliefs, and is no more than a secondary witness to them. This letter set off incensed reactions among Muslims in the seventh/thirteenth and eighth/fourteenth centuries. Some years after it was written an unknown Cypriot editor attempted to tone down its acerbities. His alterations, which are also examined here, show how he sought to make the letter less unpalatable to Muslim recipients. Both the original and the later edited version attest to supreme confidence among Syrian Christians at this time, as well as thorough knowledge of the Qur'an, not to speak of bitter almost provocative hostility between followers of the two rival faiths.

This varied collection sets out to do no more than show facets of Syrian Christian life under medieval Islam. If the different chapters point to any one conclusion, it is that Christianity reacted quickly to the Muslim presence, and came gradually to respond and accommodate to its increasing cultural and intellectual influence, though it never lost confidence in its own patrimony and preserved this with firmness and verve.

The task of editing the papers was assisted greatly by the authors' readiness to make minor revisions in their papers, and promptness in answering queries. The practicalities were almost entirely managed by Carol Bebawi, whose unflagging efficiency and care alleviated many of the pains that editing can inflict. With this work she has completed the

task of overseeing the running of the Symposium in 1998, and increased the participants' debt to her.

The Third Woodbrooke-Mingana Symposium was honoured by the presence of Mor Gregorios Yuhanna Ibrahim, Syrian Orthodox Archbishop of Aleppo. As well as participating in the discussions, he also opened the proceedings, when he spoke about the continuing life of Christians in Syria. The speech he made at the ceremony is included as a Foreword to this collection.