

Beyond empire I: Eastern Christianities from the Persian to the Turkish conquest, 604–1071

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This chapter traces the history of the churches of the eastern and southeastern coasts of the Mediterranean sea, northeastern Africa, the Arabian peninsula, Persia, Transcaucasia, and eastern Asia Minor, as well as the development of their theological thought. Particular attention will be dedicated to the Christian cultures of Syriac and Armenian traditions.

We must begin by recalling that, towards the end of the sixth century, two chief kinds of ecclesiastical communities could be distinguished in the Byzantine East, each with its own clergy.¹ On the one hand, there were the churches centered on the hellenophone cities, which were characterized by their special bond to the ongoing theological elaborations of Byzantium which perpetuated classical Greek philosophical categories. On the other, there were the churches attached above all to the ascetic traditions moulded in the two cradles of Christian monasticism, Egypt and Syria. Their followers were particularly receptive to the non-Chalcedonian Christology which viewed Christ's humanity primarily as the instrument of divine activity in the world. Those who had rejected the *Definition* of the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) were later called by their opponents "monophysites" (i.e., those who believe in "one only nature," *monê physis*). To avoid this pejorative name, it is preferable to call them "miaphysites" recalling the formula *mia physis tou Theou Logou sesarkômenê*, "One incarnate nature of God the Word,"² which had originally been proposed by Apollinarius of Laodicea (d. c. 390), then adopted and reinterpreted by Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), and inherited from him by the non-Chalcedonians. Thus we shall distinguish them from the "dyophysites" who professed Christ "in two natures" (*en dyo physeis*): the Church of the East, which had rejected the Council of Ephesus (431) and was consequently

¹ See Rousseau in this volume and also Maraval, "L'échec en Orient."

² Cyril of Alexandria, *Contra Nestorium*, *Epistula* 40, *Epistula* 45, and *Epistula* 46.

called by its opponents “Nestorian” (hereafter, Eastern dyophysites), and from the Byzantine Church.

Non-Chalcedonians and Chalcedonians on the eve of the Persian conquest

By the end of the sixth century, in spite of the imperial persecutions, the miaphysites constituted the majority in the Syriac-speaking regions of the Anatolike diocese, which lay to the east of the river Labotes and the Amanus mountains: in Euphratensis, Osrhoene, Mesopotamia, in the countryside of Antioch and Apamea, as well as in Arabia. In these areas the Syriac monasteries functioned as intellectual and spiritual epicenters. The influence exercised by the Syriac divines also proved decisive for the determination of the Armenian Church’s Christological position during the course of the sixth century. The hellenophone Chalcedonian communities, by contrast, represented the majority in western Syria and Palestine and especially in the coastal cities. Their intellectual centers were situated in Jerusalem and in the monastic enclaves of the Judean desert, where Greek literary and theological traditions were especially cultivated.

The situation in Egypt was comparable to Syria: the Chalcedonian faith had been accepted or enforced mainly in the cities, which were culturally and linguistically Greek. In them the Chalcedonian patriarchs – the only prelates recognized by the emperor – enjoyed unrivaled sway. The Coptic monks, however, supported by the rural population, were largely opposed to the innovative Christological language introduced by the Council of Chalcedon. The recusant miaphysite prelates thus found refuge in the Coptic monasteries situated far from the administrative centers of the empire. The most important of these were located in the Wadi Natrun, in the oasis of Fayum, in the Western desert, in Upper Egypt, to the north of the Asyut, and in the Eastern desert. The rural areas of Upper Egypt were all miaphysite strongholds. During the second half of the sixth century, Coptic missionaries advanced up the Nile, allowing the miaphysite faith to become the prevalent form of Christianity in Nubia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia.

The Syro-Mesopotamian desert, through which ran the frontier between Byzantium and the Persian Empire, was inhabited by Arab tribes.³ The Ghasanid confederation – the dominant group of Byzantine Arab *foederati* – owed their miaphysitism to Empress Theodora (d. 548) and Jacob Baradaeus (Bishop

³ Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs*, 922–48.

of Edessa in exile, fl. 542–78), and took an active part in spreading Christianity in the Arabian peninsula. The Ghassanids constituted a buffer kingdom between Byzantium and the Lakhmid Arab confederation (of East Syrian allegiance) which was based on the western bank of the lower Euphrates, where it served as the Sasanians' frontier guard. The relationship between Byzantium and the Ghassanids deteriorated after the empire embraced the Chalcedonian doctrine. When, in 584–85, the Emperor Maurice cut subsidies to the Ghassanids, their confederation fell apart. The Byzantines' weakening support of the *foederati* was later to strengthen Islam's attraction as the Arab national religion.

The bishops ordained by Jacob Baradaeus for Asia Minor, Syria (where they constituted the church later known as "Jacobite"), and Egypt were almost exclusively of monastic origin, and in the following centuries the miaphysite hierarchies were to maintain a decidedly monastic character. The monastic background of the miaphysite churches facilitated their survival under Islamic domination: the persecutions of non-Muslims were particularly devastating in the urban areas where the caliphate's governors resided, whereas the Christian communities of the remoter districts often succeeded in escaping direct control. In the following centuries the miaphysite monasteries were able to cultivate learning and to develop new literary and spiritual traditions both in Syriac and Coptic.

Non-Chalcedonian churches and the Church of the East: two Christologies in synopsis

Divergent conceptions of the Incarnation, which were articulated in opposition to the theology adopted by the empire, stood at the core of the distinctive doctrinal and cultural identities of the churches of Syria, Egypt, Persia, and Armenia and were to play a decisive role in their history during the seventh century.

Christology of the Church of the East

The Christology of the Church of the East derived from the Antiochene exegetical tradition. It had as its supporting structure the historical dimension of revelation. In the light of Heb. 10.5–7, stress was laid on Christ's integral humanity as the culminating point of God's salvific activity. In the light of Luke 2.40, 52, it accentuated the gradual character of divine revelation in the world and, following the exegesis of Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428), suggested a progressive unification of the two natures, divine and human, in the course of

Christ's life. For this reason the Church of the East's theological discourses insisted upon duality in reference to the divinity and humanity of Christ.

At the beginning of the seventh century, the language of two *qnome* was promoted by Babai the Great (d. 628) and subsequently adopted by the Church of the East as its official teaching. The term *qnome* had an ancient history, but in the texts of the period under discussion it may be interpreted as "concrete existence," that is, the individual instance of a particular nature. The *Definition* of the assembly of bishops of 612 (presumably held at Seleucia-Ctesiphon) contained the phrase "Christ is two natures and two *qnome*" and expressed two main concerns. Its theological concern, by distinguishing between divinity and humanity, intended to maintain the perfect transcendence of the former and avoid any idea of its suffering. The other concern was soteriological. By designating Christ's humanity, side by side with his divinity, as *qnome*, the Church of the East intended to affirm its integral character, for Christ was the new Adam, the stem of new humankind (1 Cor. 15.45–49). Viewed from this perspective, humankind may acquire the hope of resurrection from the dead because, in Christ, it was the human being who is in him, the new Adam, who died and rose, but it was the God who is in him who raised him up. To affirm "one incarnate nature of God the Word"⁴ was to declare that those who are not consubstantial with God cannot be saved. This concern clearly emerges from the writings of Narsai (399–502) and Catholicos George (c. 680) as well as from the Oriental Synodicon edited by Catholicos Timothy I (780–823).⁵ Moreover, according to Timothy I, to affirm that Christ's humanity is the common nature of humankind allows us to attribute to it the individual human names found in the Prophets, such as "slave" or "servant," and thus to affirm its mortality, but God the Son, who had united it to himself, gradually subjected it to his will and rendered it immortal.⁶

The high degree of autonomy reserved for Christ's humanity in East Syrian Christology permitted this church to inscribe the Son of Man in various religious traditions: Christianity thus was presented to different Asian cultures with wide flexibility. For example, the inscription composed by the eastern dyophysite monk Adam in Chinese and Syriac in 781 near Chang'an, the capital of the Chinese Tang dynasty, borrowed numerous Taoist, Confucian, Buddhist, and Manichean expressions in order to explain the Christian doctrine.⁷

4 See above, note 2.

5 Brock, "Christology of the Church," 165–76.

6 Timothy I, *Epistula de incarnatione*, 186, 1.13–23.

7 Pelliot, *L'inscription nestorienne*, 95–146.

Christology of the non-Chalcedonian churches

At the opposite pole stood the miaphysite Christology whose origins went back to the exegetical tradition of Alexandria.⁸ Beginning with Origen, the Alexandrians interpreted Scripture in the framework of the Platonic distinction between two levels of reality, the sensible and the intelligible, of which the former was the latter's image. This distinction also provided the key for a sacramental interpretation of the universe and of man. Christ's humanity was conceived of merely as a channel of God's revelation in the finite world. In the light of several biblical theophanies (Isa. 29.5; Mal. 3.1; Luke 2.13; Acts 9.3; 22.6), this tradition insisted upon the atemporal and immediate character of divine revelation as "Heavens torn apart" (Mark 1.10). In the light of John 1.14, the miaphysites were above all concerned to affirm the uninterrupted unity of the divine subject in Christ, sole actor of salvation, thus speaking of two births of the only Son of God. The above-quoted miaphysite formula expressed the union of divinity and humanity in Christ "asymmetrically": it allowed the understanding of the events of Christ's earthly life and his deeds as the "incarnate" extension of God's salvific activity in the world.

The controversy concerning the incorruptibility of Christ's body before the Resurrection, which had been opened by Julian of Halicarnassus and Severus of Antioch around 520, continued to divide the miaphysites for several centuries. The Council of Mantzikert, convoked in 726 at the joint initiative of the Armenian Catholicos John of Ōjun (717–28) and the West Syrian Patriarch Athanasius III (724–40), formulated an intermediate position: by assuming "decayed and corruptible" humanity, the Son of God rendered it "incorruptible." Incorruptibility did not mean, however, that Christ was exempt from the weaknesses of the human condition including the sufferings of the Passion. Yet Christ suffered not by inevitability but by sovereign divine decision. The acts of Mantzikert are one of the most important inter-ecclesial agreements achieved in the history of theological ideas, especially in view of the fact that the search for harmony was not promoted by any overarching authority seeking political cohesion. In Egypt, the quarrels between the various miaphysite groups persisted longer than elsewhere. Patriarchs Jacob (819–30) and Shenuda I (859–80) succeeded in dissolving the last groups that professed apthartodocetism (the doctrine that rejected the reality of Christ's human sufferings) only at the beginning of the ninth century.

8 Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus*, 7–35, 53–59.

The exclusion of apthartodocetism allowed the Armenian Church to stabilize its Christological position.⁹ According to John of Ōjun, the affirmations of oneness and duality in Christ formed an antinomic pair of which each member was equally important and served to balance the other.¹⁰ Following Cyril of Alexandria,¹¹ the miaphysites refused to attribute the same ontological status to the spheres of *theologia* (concerned with God's eternal being, including the begetting before all ages) and of *oikonomia* (concerned with God's action within the created order, including the birth at Bethlehem). To the mind of Xosrovik the Translator (d. c. 730), it was one thing to consider Christ's humanity in its own right and another to examine it in its union with the Creator's hypostasis: "The Lord's body is human by nature, but divine by union."¹² The humanity assumed by God, although integral, no longer belonged to a man, hence this humanity is *Divine*. According to Isaac Mrut (c. 820–c. 890), "Christ has manifested to the world his *paternal* nature united to his *maternal* nature," that is, the "nature" whose subject is God the Father united to the "nature" whose subject is the *Theotokos*. In this way the Armenian divines linked their Christological language to the creedal theology of Nicaea I, which first defined Christ as "begotten of the Father" and only later spoke of him as "incarnate of the Virgin." Thus the miaphysites maintained the ancient kerygmatic character of Christological discourse, placing the Incarnation in the soteriological perspective and considering it as a sovereign act of the Trinity.

The miaphysites rejected the conceptualization proposed by the Council of Chalcedon which had conceived of Christ's divinity and humanity as *two* comparable entities belonging to one and the same category of *nature*, and which later were also construed as active principles discernible in the Savior. As a consequence, in the domain of ethics and social organization, the miaphysites have always remained extraneous to the distinction, later developed in Byzantine and Roman churches, between the spheres of spiritual and profane activities.

Christian communities during the last Sasanian conquest (604–24)

Following the deposition and murder of Emperor Maurice in 602, King of Kings Chosroes II (590–628) soon succeeded in regaining Persian territories lost to the Byzantines.¹³ Between 604 and 611, the Sasanian army directed successful

9 Dorfmann-Lazarev, *Arméniens et Byzantins*, 96–129.

10 John of Ōjun, *Sermon*, 57.

11 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentarii in Iohannem* 2, 10.15, 232.

12 Xosrovik T'argmanič', "Chapter I," 50, 54.

13 Dagron, "L'église," 13–24.

campaigns in Armenia (thence proceeding to Georgia), Upper Mesopotamia, Syria, and Cappadocia. Antioch and Apamea were occupied in 610, Emesa in 611, Damascus and Tarsus in 613. Thus Syria was cut off from the empire. In 614 Jerusalem was sacked, the Chalcedonian population slaughtered, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher burned, and the relic of the True Cross carried off to Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the Persian capital. This last had a particularly demoralizing effect on Byzantium and was interpreted by many as an apocalyptic event. Shortly afterwards Tarsus and Cilicia were occupied. Alexandria fell in 619, and by 620 Africa was conquered as far as Ethiopia to the south and Libya to the west.

The Chalcedonian clergy, whom the invaders associated with their enemy, were expelled from Mesopotamia and Syria. Those Christians who had been at variance with the imperial church became, in the eyes of the Persians, potential allies.¹⁴ The miaphysites, who had been driven underground by the imperial regime, did not oppose the invaders and occasionally welcomed them, seeing in the Persians liberation from the emperor's persecution. Since Jacob Baradaeus's time the miaphysites had expanded into the Persian lands and now represented the dominant Christian group in the territories controlled by the King of Kings. Consequently, Chosroes chose to rely on them in order to consolidate his conquests. He allowed them to establish church structures in the conquered territories, to recover their goods confiscated by the imperial administration, to take over the abandoned sacred buildings of the Chalcedonians, and to build new churches.

The Persian reconquest facilitated the formal condemnation of the Chalcedonian doctrine in Armenia in 607. Thereafter the Church of *Atuank'* (Caucasian Albania) succumbed progressively to confessional and cultural dependence on the Armenian Church.¹⁵ In Georgia, by contrast, where Persian control was looser, the local church was able to affirm its pro-Byzantine religious affiliation in an effort to escape Armenian tutelage. Thus in the years 608–10, the schism between the Armenian and Georgian churches was consummated. In southern Mesopotamia Chosroes II seems to have supported the dominance of the Church of the East.¹⁶ Chosroes' benevolence toward his Christian subjects did not endure, however, and when, in 625, the Persian army began losing battles to the Byzantines, the king turned against both eastern dyophysites and miaphysites.

¹⁴ Flusin, "Église," 667–705.

¹⁵ Mahé, "L'église arménienne," 462–74, 507–509.

¹⁶ Winkler, "Zeitalter der Sassaniden," 38–42.

The advent of Heraclius and monenergism (616–38)

When the Emperor Heraclius (610–41)¹⁷ undertook to recover the lands lost to the Persians, the support of the Christians of this area appeared to him – as to Chosroes several years before – of the utmost strategic importance. That assistance, however, could be obtained only as the result of doctrinal reconciliation. As in the age of Justinian, Heraclius’s eastern politics therefore depended on a Christological settlement. Of all the opponents of imperial orthodoxy living in Persia, the theological effort of the emperor – who was of Armenian descent and presumably bilingual – was directed above all to the miaphysites. They were more numerous than the “Nestorians” in the lands lost to the Persians, and their theology was closer to imperial orthodoxy, especially after the Fifth Ecumenical Council which had proposed a rereading of the Chalcedonian *Definition* in the light of the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria.

Towards 616 Patriarch Sergius of Constantinople (610–38) – who was of Syrian miaphysite descent and a close friend of Heraclius – proposed a definition of the unity of the concrete activity (*energeia*) of the incarnate Logos in the hopes of persuading the miaphysites to accept the *Definition* of Chalcedon. If the activity were attributed not to the nature but rather to the hypostasis, the doctrine of one single activity could serve as a point of convergence of the two opposing sides, for there was no dissension between the miaphysites and the Chalcedonians concerning Christ’s single hypostasis. It would allow the viewing of Christ’s two natures not in the perspective of their divergent potentialities, but rather of their coming together into one single hypostasis, of which the single activity was the manifestation. To sustain his view, Sergius could notably draw on Cyril of Alexandria and Dionysius the Areopagite (end of the fifth century) who were respected both by miaphysites and Chalcedonians.¹⁸ In Cyril’s view, on account of the hypostatic union, which implied the definition of Christ’s humanity as the Word’s own, the Word’s divine action took the form of human acts. The doctrine of one single activity was consequently accepted by numerous bishops and abbots in the eastern provinces, and by 622 Sergius had won Heraclius over to what came later to be known as monenergism.

Heraclius began his major counteroffensive against Persia in 624, and by 629 succeeded in restoring the Emperor Maurice’s frontier. Thus the miaphysites, who had enjoyed relative freedom under Persian rule, found themselves once again subjected to a hostile emperor. In 630 Heraclius personally reinstated in

¹⁷ Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 100–299.

¹⁸ Cyril of Alexandria, *Scholia de incarnatione Unigeniti* 2, p. 221; Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *Epistola* 4, p. 161, l. 9.

Jerusalem the True Cross, which had been rescued from Persian possession by Heraclius's four Armenian generals. After this event, which was deeply felt by all of the Christian communities, the Byzantine ruler conceived a new project for reuniting Christendom. The empire urgently needed to secure confessional unity in order to consolidate the reconquest of the East.

Military success encouraged Heraclius to envisage negotiations not only with the miaphysites but also with the Church of the East, which was the best established and most influential Christian community of Persia. At the time, this church was enjoying a phase of rapid expansion and was incorporating large numbers of converts from Zoroastrianism and from various polytheistic religions of Arabia, Asia, and China. On the eve of the Muslim conquest the missions of the Church of the East were by far the widest spread amongst all Christian churches. In 630 Heraclius met Catholicos Išō'yahb̄ II at Berrhoea (Aleppo). The catholicos celebrated a liturgy in the presence of the emperor and a group of Byzantine bishops, and the sovereign himself received communion from his hands. The division, however, between the Byzantine Church and the Church of the East was to prove too great, and the precipitate reunion was immediately contested amongst the East Syrians and soon broke down.

Heraclius next turned to the miaphysites and succeeded in winning numerous bishops and hegumens to the cause of monenergism. The Syro-Byzantine council of 631 at Mabbug (Hierapolis), the Armeno-Byzantine council of 632–33 at Karin (Theodosiopolis), and the council of 633 at Alexandria achieved reunion with the Byzantine church of the three miaphysite churches on the bases of monenergist formulae. Nevertheless, following the negotiations of the agreements, many in Syria, Palestine, and especially in Egypt refused to accept Chalcedon in spite of their acceptance of monenergism. Heraclius then attempted to impose imperial orthodoxy by force and inaugurated violent persecution against the intransigent miaphysites. However, the newly elected Chalcedonian patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronius (634–38), organized opposition to monenergism, and the emperor, now contested by both miaphysites and Chalcedonians, found himself obliged to terminate his initiative in 638.

The Arab conquest (630–56) and monothelitism

In the same year that Heraclius triumphantly restored the True Cross to Jerusalem, Muslim troops conquered Mecca and, advancing up the Arab peninsula, confronted the troops of the Byzantine and Sasanian Arab client tribes. In several instances they succeeded in gaining the support of the miaphysite and eastern dyophysite Arab populations and in converting them to the new

religion. In late 633 Muslim troops began to penetrate into southern Palestine and Nabatea, where the imperial forces, weakened by the recent wars against the Persians, were unable to resist. After years of Persian occupation, the region's institutional, economic, and ideological links with Byzantium had been weakened, and its populations were not inclined to resist the new conquerors. Damascus was captured in 635, Antioch in 637, and Jerusalem in 638. Caesarea, the last Byzantine coastal stronghold in Palestine, fell in 640–41.

As the Arabs rapidly advanced, Heraclius made a last, unsuccessful attempt at Christian reunion in the hopes of gaining the loyalty and support of the miaphysites. At the end of 638 he published the *Ekthesis* composed by Patriarch Sergius and drafted by Pyrrhus of Chrysopolis, which forbade the affirmation of either “one” or “two” activities, but nevertheless reaffirmed that all activity proceeds from the divine Logos. In this way it attempted to maintain the logic of monenergism whilst avoiding the expression that had scandalized Sophronius's party. To emphasize the unity of the incarnate Logos, the “one single will” in Christ was also affirmed, thus introducing a new term into the Christological discourse. Yet the *Ekthesis* was rejected by the larger part of the miaphysite East. The Armenian divine Stephen of Siwnik^c (c. 680–735) was later to epitomize the discussion: “Christ accomplished his Father's deed by means of his body . . . [and] because of the divinity of his nature he reveals through his activity that his body is equal in power [to his divinity].”¹⁹

After the invasion of Palestine and Syria, the Arabs vigorously engaged the Persians. By 640 the conquest of Mesopotamia was completed, and in 641 central Armenia was invaded and its capital, Duin, was pillaged and its population massacred. The army then marched on to Georgia which was subdued within a few years. Advances into Egypt resulted in Byzantine withdrawal from Alexandria in September 642 and the opening of routes for further Arab advances, southward along the Nile Valley and westward along the African coast. Soon after, the Muslim army penetrated beyond Aswān and made its first incursions into Nubia. In 642, and again in 652, the Nubian kingdoms succeeded in resisting the Islamic forces, and the treaty which was later signed between the caliphate and the Nubians recognized the sovereignty of the latter.

By 642 the Arabs completed their takeover of the Christian East, thus nullifying the ecclesiastical politics of Heraclius. As a result of less than ten years of warfare, the ancient Roman provinces of Palestine, Syria, and Egypt, together with their predominantly miaphysite populations, were cut off from the political body of Christendom. Byzantium lost the Holy Land, three patriarchal

19 Stephen of Siwnik^c, *Response*, 441–42.

sees, and the intellectual centers which, for three and a half centuries, had generated reflection on the person of the Savior, and witnessed violent conflicts between Christologically opposed thinkers, factions, and populations. The Sixth Ecumenical Council, held at Constantinople in 680–81, at which the “monophysite” communities were not even considered, was to end the long era of Christological debates within the empire.

“Monothelitism,” however, the doctrine of a single will in Christ, found enduring support in central Syria, especially at Edessa, Hierapolis, Berrhoea, and Emesa, and the later reversal of the imperial doctrine was not to be accepted by all of the Antiochene Chalcedonians. In 727, the Syriac monastery of Saint Marun near Apamea, unwilling to recognize the teaching of the Sixth Council, seceded from the Antiochene Patriarchate, together with the adjacent parishes over which it exercised influence. In 742, when the Chalcedonians of Syria were authorized by the caliph to elect a patriarch, the church was split into two, the monothelite “Maronite” Church and the church professing the imperial doctrine and thus called “Melkite,” that is, “royal.”

The rise of Islam and the status of Christians in Islamic society

As in the case of the Sasanian conquest a quarter of a century before, the persecutions of dissenters on the part of imperial authorities facilitated the swift Islamic takeover of the Byzantine East. In 634 the miaphysites were not inclined to resist the monotheist Arabs any more than the “pagan,” “fire-worshipping” Persians. In the earliest stage of Islam the affiliation of the new religious teaching to the texts of the Bible and Apocrypha was manifest to Christians, and some even placed their hope of eschatological liberation in the army of the Prophet of Islam.

The conquerors shaped a radically new system of social relations, which, in its fundamental characteristics, was to last until the end of the Ottoman sultanate in 1922, and, in the case of certain Christian communities, until the present day. It conferred specific features on the Christians’ relationships with the rulers and influenced the formation of distinctive identities among them, with respect to individual ethos and spirituality. Its origins lay in the self-understanding of the nascent religion in the social and religious environment of the Near East and particularly in the way it envisaged its relations with the Christianity present in the Arabian peninsula from ancient times. Muḥammad viewed his teaching as the “rediscovered” primordial monotheistic religion proper to humankind. The Qur’ān (7.157; 61.6; 6.92) states in fact that before

sending the Arabs the definitive message of submission (*Islām*), God had sent analogous, although less complete, “Books” to the Jews and to Christians, in which Muḥammad’s coming had also been predicted.²⁰ On this ground the Qur’ān, and the Muslim law developed from it, distinguished two categories among the conquered populations. The “polytheists” were subject to obligatory conversion or enslavement, whereas the “Detainers of the Book,” *Ahl al-kitāb*, were formally tolerated. The term “Book” was used to designate the Pentateuch, the Psalter, and the Gospels, perceived above all as legal texts, and their “Detainers” were Jews and Christians. The Qur’ān (62.27; 5.82–84) presents the Christians in a more favorable light than the Jews and even affirms that the people most friendly toward Muslims are to be found among Christians, whose devotional attitudes and moral virtues are also praised.

Muḥammad’s failure to engage Christians in his “Community of Believers,” followed by the military resistance which the Muslim troops encountered from the Arab Christian tribes, conditioned, however, the Qur’ān’s ultimately negative attitude toward Christianity. In many places (3.78; 5.13; 2.59,75) the Qur’ān condemns the doctrines of Jews and Christians as falsifications of the authentic instructions in the true universal monotheistic religion, which had been given to them in the past. According to the Qur’ān (18.4–5; 5.17; 4.171), the Jewish and Christian Scriptures are not identical with the portions of the heavenly “Book” transmitted to Moses and Jesus, but reflect the erroneous imagination of Jews and Christians, which ultimately makes them disobedient to God and blasphemous. Yet the Qur’ān shows no direct acquaintance with the canonical books of the Bible. In the following centuries, the doctrinal contrasts between “Nestorians,” various miaphysite factions, Maronites, and Melkites, as well as the Christians’ general tendency to doctrinal controversies and sectarianism, which were familiar to the Muslims, sometimes provided grounds to suspect them of worshipping different gods.

In several instances (4.169; 5.76–77; 9.31; 17.111; 19.36; 23.93; 25.2) the Qur’ān applies to Christians the term *mushrikūn*, “associators,” which elsewhere in the Qur’ān is the normal term for polytheists – those committing the worst of sins by worshipping “associates” along with God. It is against this background that we should consider the Qur’ān’s direct injunction “to fight against those to whom the Scriptures have been given . . . until they pay tribute [*jizya*] out of hand and are utterly humiliated” (9.29–35). This precept is dated to the end of Muḥammad’s prophetic activity, that is, following the conquest of Mecca in 630, after Muslim troops had already confronted the Christian populations of

²⁰ Thomas, “Early Muslim Responses.”

Yemen, northwestern Arabia, and Nabatea, and shortly before his death in 632. It probably reflects the conditions of the truce offered by the Muslims to the inhabitants of the conquered cities. The later pacts of submission, which the defeated cities were forced to sign with their Islamic conquerors, followed the pattern set by Muḥammad.

The Christian communities of the Near East under caliphal rule

The general principles of the treatment of the non-Muslims, on which the Islamic state's legislation later drew, were thus shaped in the course of the first *Djihad*. The legal convention that regulated relationships between the Islamic power and the subdued "Detainers of the Book," *dhimma*, defined the latter's obligations and the former's guarantee of security. Thus it conferred on the "Detainers of the Book" who recognized the Islamic domination and were disposed to pay the *jizya* (a progressive *tributum capitis*) the status of "Conventional Population," *dhimmi*.²¹ The conventions knew a variety of formulations: to the extent that divergent attitudes among the different ethno-confessional groups inhabiting the conquered regions persisted, the new masters treated each community differently.²² The Arab Christians, whom the Muslims at first recognized as kin, were granted certain privileges in paying tribute. The eastern dyophysite polemics against the Theopaschite language (i.e., language that attributed Christ's sufferings and death to God the Son) used by the miaphysites seemed to the Muslims to point in the same direction as their own rejection of Jesus's divinity. Consequently, the eastern dyophysite version of Christianity, in Muslim eyes, stood closer to the true religion, hence the Syriac Church of the East was also granted a privileged place amongst the Christian communities. At any time, however, all Christian subjects of the caliphs might be associated with the rival empire, and announcements of Byzantine victories on the distant Anatolian frontier were often accompanied by massacres of Christians in the caliphate, especially in northern Syria and Egypt.

Since non-Muslims were tolerated in the land of Islam as "Detainers of the Book," it was their patriarchs or catholicos who were recognized as the legal chiefs responsible to the Islamic authority. Religious structures were thus the only form of autonomy left to *dhimmi*, while they were deprived of the capacity to give their religions political dimension. The caliphate supported the

²¹ Rubin, *Dhimmi and Others*, 116–24; on Arabic Christianities, see Griffith in this volume.

²² Troupeau, "Églises et chrétiens," 375–456, 407–11.

jurisdiction of the churches, seeing in them institutions able to assure civil control over the conquered populations. The accumulation of civil responsibilities in the hands of the prelates transformed them into political figures unparalleled elsewhere. Within their communities, the patriarchs also acquired the moral authority of protectors against the exactions of a hostile state and the authority of national leaders. In the case of the miaphysite Syrians, Copts, and Armenians, the triple role of their leaders stimulated a transformation of the anti-Chalcedonian confession into an integral element of ethnic identity. This transformation was not inconsistent with the miaphysites' doctrinal views: the confluence of religious, civil, and national prerogatives in the figures of the miaphysite patriarchs was rather in harmony with the monenergist Christology generally adopted by these churches.

However, the prelates enjoyed only limited immunities, and the caliphs exercised absolute power over their lives. From the eighth century on, the caliphs also exercised increasing influence in the nominations of the prelates of the Syrians and Copts. The "Conventional Populations" found all external manifestations of their cult prohibited, including the construction of new sacred buildings, as well as the reconstruction of ruined ones. In reality, the last injunction was often interpreted as a proscription of any kind of church repair. Prohibiting every kind of missionary activity in the land of Islam further strengthened the association between confessional and ethnic identities and encouraged conservative attitudes among Christians. Moreover, any innovation in the *dhimmi*'s way of life was considered as a further deviation from the originally revealed laws by which the "Detainers of the Book" were expected to abide.

The destruction caused by the war of conquest and the control maintained by the caliphate over communications between different churches contributed to the reciprocal isolation of the various Christian cultures. However, while in certain regions this caused the extinction of Christianity, in others it created conditions for the original development of local traditions based on native languages. On the southern borders of the caliphate, for example, the autonomous Nubian and Ethiopian kings assumed important ecclesiastical responsibilities which accentuated the link between religious and national identity and also conditioned the survival of Christianity in their countries. By the end of the seventh century the Nubian kings recognized the authority of the Alexandrian patriarch, and in Nubia in the following decades the miaphysite faith was to prevail over the Chalcedonian, owing to the proximity of Alexandria and to the absence of contacts with the empire. Moreover, the Nubian kings on various occasions were able to exercise pressure upon the caliphate in order to protect

their Coptic coreligionists from the caliphs' exactions. However, the obstacles placed by the caliphate on communication between the Alexandrian patriarchate and the Nubian kingdoms, as well as the Muslim colonization of the Red Sea coasts of Africa (as, later, of the Ethiopian plateau) contributed, from the ninth century, to the weakening of Christianity in Nubia and, a century later, to a long period of decay in the ancient Christian kingdom of Axum in the Eritrean highlands.²³

Another example may be drawn from the northern borders of the caliphate, where the Georgian Church acquired in the middle of the seventh century an effective autocephaly which a century later was officially recognized by the Melkite patriarch of Antioch. Thereafter, the existence of an ancient literary tradition in the national language rendered possible the development of a distinct culture in Georgia.²⁴ In Armenia, literary activity in the national language had continued practically uninterrupted ever since the invention of the Armenian alphabet in 406. The Melkite communities, concentrated in the urban areas of the patriarchates of Antioch and Jerusalem and deprived of easy communication with the hellenophone empire, were the first amongst the Christian communities to adopt, already in the course of the eighth century, the conquerors' language in their writing. Although in the course of the ninth century the Arabic language was also introduced into the writing of the East Syrians and, later, of the West Syrians and Maronites, Syriac has always remained the liturgical language of these communities. As for Egypt, in the course of the ninth century the monastery of St. Macarius in the Wadi Natrun adopted the Bohairic Coptic dialect of Lower Egypt, which thus supplanted the ancient Sahidic dialect of Upper Egypt. Although from the middle of the tenth century on Arabic was progressively introduced into Coptic Church writing, Bohairic has ever since remained the liturgical language of the Coptic Church.

The Muslim conquerors mainly aspired to convert Arabs, and during the greater part of the Umayyad period (661–749) the idea of Arab ethnic identity prevailed over the universalistic trend dominant in the Qur'ān (4.79; 7.158; 34.28). Conversion to Islam of non-Arabs was often obstructed, particularly during the age of the early Umayyads, because it would reduce the income of the caliphate's treasury.²⁵ The Arab tribes experienced the heaviest pressure to convert and most of the bishoprics of the Arabian peninsula and the Persian Gulf were extinguished toward the last quarter of the seventh century. Although most of them abandoned Christianity by the end of the eighth

²³ Cuoq, *Islamisation*, 9–63.

²⁴ Martin-Hisard, "Christianisme et église," 554 ff., 576–84.

²⁵ Waardenburg, *Muslims and Others*, 97–98.

century, a portion of the Lakhmids, who shared the confession of the Church of the East favored by the caliphate, remained Christian at least until the beginning of the eleventh century. Also a small section of the miaphysite Taghlibids, a nomadic Arab tribe of Upper Mesopotamia, remained Christian throughout the Abbasid period.

During most of the Umayyad period, high capitation was a major cause of defection from the Christian faith. The Caliph 'Umar II (717–20) significantly augmented the *jizya*, began to oust the *dhimmī* from administrative positions, and prohibited them from testifying in court. He also seems to have been the first caliph to prescribe external discriminatory signs for the *dhimmī*. These were meant to express their humiliated position and to induce their conversion to Islam. In the later centuries the payment of *jizya* was usually accomplished as a public rite, meant to express, according to Muslim jurists, the humiliation of the *dhimmī*.²⁶ Under these conditions, social pressure became as important a reason for Christian defections as the burden of tribute, especially under the caliphs who reinforced the discriminatory signs and vexatious rites. By the second half of the eighth century the conversions to Islam reached significant proportions. Nevertheless, in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Mesopotamia, Christian populations remained in the majority at least until that time and in some rural and mountainous areas for much longer. Furthermore, for more than two centuries following the Arab conquest, the administrative and medical professions in the caliphate were still dominated by non-Muslims.

The gradual augmentation of the *jizya* (towards 868 it was double that of the previous period) provoked several revolts, the fiercest in Egypt and Armenia. In Egypt, the drastic impoverishment of the Coptic Church caused the introduction of simony. The worst persecutions befell Christians under the Umayyad 'Umar II, the Abbasid al-Mutawakkil (847–61), and the Fatimid al-Ḥākim (996–1021). The hardening exactions during the Abbasid period (750–1258) increased the hostility of Christians toward the religion of Muḥammad. No longer did they associate him with the biblical patriarchs and prophets as they had done in the early period. The deteriorating conditions of the *dhimmī* under the Abbasids, particularly during Byzantine advances in Asia Minor, provoked their emigration from Armenia and Syria to Byzantium and Georgia, and from Arabia and Egypt to Nubia and Ethiopia. Many communities took refuge in mountainous regions.²⁷

The progressive installation of Muslim populations, first on the periphery of Christian cities and then at their centers, intensified the contacts between

²⁶ Fattal, *Le statut légal*, 264–91.

²⁷ Morony, "Age of Conversions," 135–50.

Muslims and Christians and created more occasions for conversions to Islam. It also resulted in the abandonment by Christians of numerous inhabited centers and in the Islamicization of vast regions. The steadiest decline in numbers occurred among the Melkites, and especially among those who resided outside Palestine, for linguistically they represented the most Arabicized group. By the time of the Byzantine reconquest, Christians had become a minority in most of the cities of the eastern Mediterranean region. In certain places, the Christian communities were completely extinguished either as a result of conversion to Islam (especially in the cities) or of emigration (especially in areas adjacent to frontiers). Nevertheless, in spite of the efforts of the Umayyads to integrate Jerusalem into Islam by the construction of two important mosques in 691 and in 705–15, the city remained the focal point of pilgrimage for Christians of all confessions. In 1009, Caliph al-Ḥākim ordered the demolition of the complex of the Holy Sepulcher. Three years later, however, in 1012, the new governor of Syria allowed its reconstruction. The complex was entirely restored with Byzantine help between 1027 and 1048.

In the caliphate and beyond: two cases

The Church of the East and its missions

The Church of the East was chiefly established in Upper and Middle Mesopotamia, and it was there that it was also able to offer the most effective resistance to Islam.²⁸ The East Syrians were upholders of the ancient medical tradition of Gundeshapur and served numerous caliphs as physicians. This essential role played by the East Syrians at the courts of the caliphs was one of the reasons for the privileged position enjoyed by their catholicoi. Under the first Umayyads, the East Syrians were able to found several new monasteries, an exceptional accomplishment for other Christian communities. The size of the East Syrian population in the Baghdad region, where the Abbasids established their new capital, as well as their importance in the social life of the city, conferred on them an influential position in the new administration and enabled Catholicos Timothy I to transfer the seat of the catholicosate to the capital. As a result the East Syrian catholicoi, the only Christian prelates allowed to reside in Baghdad, often functioned as general representatives at the court of the caliphs for all the Christian communities.²⁹

²⁸ Baum, "Zeitalter der Araber," 43–74.

²⁹ Fiey, *Chrétiens syriaques*.

For several centuries following the Arab conquest, Gundeshapur, Nisibis, and Merv continued as intellectual centers of the Church of the East, where a notable and varied literature was produced. Inheritors of the exegetical school of Antioch, the East Syrians bequeathed to posterity important exegetical works, among which a particular place is occupied by the biblical commentary of Iṣuʿdad of Merv. The writings of Isaac of Nineveh (second half of the seventh century), a hermit in the Khuzistan mountains, were to cross the confessional frontiers and to be translated into Greek, Georgian, Geʿez, and Slavonic. The works of John of Dalyatha (mid-eighth century), a monk of the Qardu mountains, were popular not only among East Syrians, but also among the Syriac, Coptic, and Ethiopian miaphysites despite their author having been accused of Sabellianism and Messalianism.

Three features of the Church of the East conditioned the dynamism of its missions: its internal life was not bound to any state structure and its members were used to living among non-Christians, while its theology was the least formulaic and the most flexible of the Christian confessions. Between the fourth and seventh centuries, the East Syrians spread Christianity southeastward, to Arabia, Socotra, the Maldiv Islands, India, Ceylon, and Malaysia, and northeastward, to Bactria, Sogdia, Choresmia, and Turkestan, by the eighth century reaching as far as Tibet, Lake Balkash, and, by the eleventh century, Lake Baikal. This missionary activity was supported by the translation of numerous texts into Pahlavi, Sogdian, and Turkic languages. In 635 the missionaries of Catholicos Iṣoʿyahb II reached China where two metropolitan sees were established. Catholicos Ṣaliba (714–28) appointed metropolitans for Media, Sīstān, and Sogdiana, and Catholicos Timothy I for the southern Caspian provinces, Makran, Tibet, China, and eastern Turkestan. In China, the Imperial Edict of 638 allowed the preaching of the “Persian religion,” that is, Christianity.³⁰ By the turn of the millennium more than five hundred writings had been translated from Syriac and Sogdian into Chinese. Nevertheless, Christianity was never able to achieve in the Far East the success of Manicheism or Zoroastrianism. Chinese persecutions against monks of all foreign religions began in 843–45. Without exterior support, foreign religions in China and Tibet were bound to decline, yet the eastern dyophysite communities survived in the steppes of western China under Tibetan domination, reemerging in the late tenth century under the Liao dynasty.

³⁰ Riboud, “Tang.”

The churches of Transcaucasia

Although the first Arab invasions into Armenia began in 640, and in 693 direct control over Transcaucasia was established, the countries of this region maintained considerable autonomy until c. 699–701, when the province of Armīniya was created, incorporating Armenia, eastern Georgia, and Ałuank' into the caliphate. Thereafter the Arabs attempted several times to suppress the traditional Armenian aristocracy, yet they never succeeded in creating a coordinated administrative system in the area. Georgia, on account of its remote position, was generally spared the repression that was to befall Armenia. The caliphate failed to achieve firm control beyond the Kura, and this allowed Georgia to continue the Christianization of the isolated mountainous regions of the Great Caucasus where Christianity had been unknown until the seventh century.³¹

The Armenian and Georgian princes had never completely lost their political importance, and in the first half of the ninth century, when the power of Baghdad began to weaken, they were able to restore the semi-autonomous principalities which, in the course of several decades, acquired ever greater independence. In 885 the caliphate recognized the royal title of the Armenian Bagratide Prince Ašot and in 888, of the Georgian Bagratide Prince Adarnarseh. The Transcaucasian princes promoted cenobitic monastic foundations on their estates by offering them protection and generous gifts.³² The Armenian and Georgian monasteries attracted the population of the surrounding regions, becoming nuclei for the repopulation of deserted territories, and for economic development and learning. The erudite Anania of Narek (tenth century) worked in the monastic school of Narek close to the southern shore of Lake Van, as did his disciple, the poet Gregory of Narek (c. 945–1010), whose *Book of Lamentations* has left a particularly profound stamp on Armenian spirituality.

From the Byzantine reconquests to the battle of
Mantzikert (926–1071)

The Byzantine army crossed the Euphrates between 873 and 883, and early in the tenth century the political influence of the empire was extended over the greater part of Armenia. Between the years 926 and 944, under the command of General John Courcouas (Armenian Gurgēn), the Byzantine army, which included an important number of Armenians, seized Melitene (934) and advanced northward beyond Lake Van and southward to Syria. In 949 it

³¹ Martin-Hisard, "Christianisme et église," 561.

³² Mahé, "L'église arménienne," 513–17; Martin-Hisard, "Christianisme et église," 567–71.

occupied Karin and in 966 annexed the Armenian principality of Tarōn. Advancing through Cilicia, the Byzantines next occupied northern Syria and in 967–69 conquered Antioch. In 974 they entered Mesopotamia and in 975 moved into northern Palestine.

The conquest of Armenia and Syria was accompanied by the implantation of imperial orthodoxy and by the creation of Chalcedonian bishoprics. Together with the Melkite hierarchy, Greek and Bulgarian governors renewed persecutions of the predominantly miaphysite population. After the reconquest of Antioch, close imperial control over the Melkite Church was established. As earlier in Jerusalem, so now also at Antioch, Byzantine canonical practices and the Greek rite were imposed. In the course of the tenth century, the Byzantine rite celebrated in Greek prevailed also in Alexandria.

The occupied Armenian principalities were incorporated into the imperial provincial system. The new administration and its mercenary troops supplanted the hereditary rulers who had been the traditional defenders against the successive invasions of the country. The annexation of the Armenian territories by the empire was accompanied by forced extradition of the Armenian population to Cappadocia, a region decimated by Arab–Byzantine warfare. Thus Armenia was gradually deprived of its traditional administrative structure, of its confessional cohesion, and of a significant part of its population. Previously Armenia had often acted as a buffer state: its capacity for any resistance to future invasions was now drastically reduced. The politics adopted by the empire in Armenia thus facilitated the rapid Seljuk conquest of Asia Minor a century later.

Between the years 1011 and 1064, the Byzantine army gradually extended its hold over the larger part of Armenia, stopping just short of Duin. As the Seljuk Turks multiplied their incursions into the region, the Armenians and Syrians, unwilling to convert to the Chalcedonian faith, were regularly persecuted, particularly by Constantine IX Monomachus (1042–55) and Constantine X Ducas (1059–67). As a result, many Armenians deserted from the Byzantine army. In 1045, the Armenian king, Gagik II, was forced by the emperor to surrender his capital of Ani and to choose honorable exile. The next year, Catholicos Peter I was imprisoned by the Byzantines and subsequently brought to Constantinople. But it was easier for the Byzantines to take Ani from the Armenians than to defend it from the Turks: the former Armenian capital fell to the Seljuks in 1064. In 1071 the unprepared Byzantine army lost the battle at Mantzikert, and two years later the Turks began their systematic occupation of central Anatolia. This opened a new era of political and religious change in the Near East.

Conclusion

At no moment after the Council of Chalcedon was the Christian church able to achieve its vision of unity. In this contested environment, the Persian and then Arab conquests perpetuated the extant divisions of doctrine and allegiance. Moreover the spread of Islam exercised lasting influence upon the character of the Christian cultures of the Near East. Throughout the eastern Mediterranean and Near East, conquest, conflict, and persecution gave the churches of this area the impulse to anchor their identities upon the figures of their first fathers and upon the teachings handed down by them. Attachment to their autochthonous origins allowed these churches to overcome the disruptions of their history, and can thus be recognized as one of their distinguishing features. Under hostile regimes, the religious concerns of Christians were above all dedicated to the maintenance of the ancient traditions of their communities, to justifications of the points of their Creed which were contested by Muslims (such as the authenticity of the Scriptures and the divinity of Christ), and to the preservation of the memory of their martyrs. The formation of national churches made possible the survival of Christianity in the caliphate, and anticipated similar developments among the churches of Byzantine tradition under Ottoman rule. The Islamic conquest thus contributed to the maintenance of specific characteristics of each of the various Christian cultures of the Near East, while the Byzantine Church, as later also the Roman Church, tended to ever greater uniformity.³³

³³ The author wishes to express his gratitude to Professors Bernadette Martin-Hisard, John Lindsay-Opie, and Andrew Louth, and to Father Timothy Gorham, for their suggestions made for this chapter.

