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Author(s): J. L. Boojamra

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CHRISTIANITY IN GREATER SYRIA : SURRENDER AND SURVIVAL

INTRODUCTION

One example of the survival of a minority belief system in the context of a hostile and more powerful faith system is Christianity in Greater Syria after the Islamic conquest (632-641) (1). Greater Syria is a geographical area, extending from the Taurus Mountains in the northwest to Sinai and from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates, occasionally crossing into Mesopotamia, and the upper Arabian peninsula (2). Islam, a politico-religious reality, will be viewed as “majority” in terms of “power”, and, eventually, numbers. The subject of the paper is precisely where, how, and when Chalcedonian Orthodox Christians survived as a faith community within the “nation” of Islam.

The various Christian Churches of Greater Syria remained intellectually significant well into the twentieth century, albeit a significance depending on their venue, leaders, and relationships to outside powers. How the Orthodox Church survived, along with other and increasingly less significant Christian bodies, during the first three hundred years of Islamic power will be the subject of this paper (3). Although the study will remain within the geo-political limits of Greater Syria, I will venture into Georgia, Armenia, and Coptic Egypt for the sake of comparison (4).

(1) See J.L. BOOJAMRA, *Christianity in Greater Syria After Islam*, in *Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 35 (1991), p. 240, where the status of Syrian Christianity is discussed.

(2) It is to be noted here that the use of the term Greater Syria is equivocal, with significant political overtones for the modern Arab Islamic. I am using it in its geographical sense. K. CRAGG, *The Arab Christian : A History in the Middle East*, Louisville, 1991, pp. 160-162.

(3) M. GERVERS and R. BIKHAZI, *Conversion and Continuity : Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth to Eighteenth Century*, in *Papers in Medieval Studies*, 9, Toronto, 1990.

(4) I will venture into the Maghreb, the territories west of the Egyptian desert, to highlight the rapid demise of Christianity with the failure of leadership. BOOJAMRA, *Christianity, passim*. See M. TALBI, *Le christianisme maghrébin de la conquête musulmane à sa disparition. Une tentative d'explication*, in GERVERS, p. 351, at p. 346.

Although it is difficult to determine population figures during the seventh century for Syria and Palestine, the population was somewhere around four or five million, with Palestine having approximately one million people (5). The population was divided among Monophysite Jacobites, Armenians, and Copts, Chalcedonian Orthodox, Nestorians, and Jews. Christians were in the majority and apparently remained so well into the eleventh century (6).

Before the Islamic conquest of Syria opposition to Byzantine power expressed itself in heterodoxy, particularly Nestorianism, Monophysitism, and Manichaeism. While they existed as more than opposition "groups", opposition was one of their defining socio-political features, and focused hostility on Chalcedonian Orthodoxy, supported by the imperial Church at Constantinople. The empire could wield its power through the deployment troops from numerous garrisons in Egypt, and Syria, including Arab tribal foederati. The Christianity of Greater Syria was the ecclesiastical life blood of the Byzantine east during the conciliar period and constituted the main part of the so-called Eastern Church until the Nestorians (7) (431) and Monophysites (451) split in the fifth century.

Trying to reintegrate the area into the empire, Heraklios issued his *Ekthesis* (638), promulgating Monothelitism and its corollary Monenergism as the official policy of the Byzantine Empire. This was followed by his successor Constans II's promulgation of the *Typos* in 648 which forbade any discussion of the dynamic within the person of Jesus Christ (8).

The Jacobites were the most numerous Christians, but had developed no strong administrative structure despite the brilliant leadership as that of Severos of Antioch (638) and Jacob Baradaeus in the sixth

(5) A.N. POLIAK, *L'arabisation de l'Orient sémitique*, in *Revue des Études Islamiques*, 12 (1938), pp. 35-63. See for this period and the subject of conversion N. LEVTZION, *Conversion to Islam in Syria and Palestine*, in GERVERS, pp. 289-311, at pp. 289-311.

(6) G. OSTROGORSKY, *History of the Byzantine State*, trans. by J. HUSSEY, New Brunswick, 1969, p. 104

(7) See W.F. MACOMBER, *The Theological Synthesis of Cyrus of Edessa, an East Syrian Theologian of the Mid-Sixth Century*, in *OCP*, 30 (1964), p. 5. The role of Christology in the East Syrian ascetic writers, such as Isaac of Nineveh, was minimal.

(8) Imperial persecution of these non-conformists, along with their physical and financial exhaustion from the seemingly endless war with Persia, left the Syrian population disaffected with Constantinople. See reference is G. DOWNEY, *A History of Antioch in Syria*, Princeton, 1974, p. 577, n. 57

century. Although they managed an extensive ecclesiastical organization, especially after Jacob Baradaeus' tireless and even humorous efforts, they had no political backing or strong hierarchical leadership. The Jacobite Church was weakened by internecine conflicts and a lack of centralized organization under a universally recognized patriarchate⁽⁹⁾. They were a church directed by "holy men", in a long tradition, common to Aramaic/Syriac Christianity⁽¹⁰⁾. The Chalcedonians eventually gained recognition and majority in Greater Syria in the eighth century as the Monophysites lost numbers and influence. The Jacobites continued in significant concentrations in northeastern Syria⁽¹¹⁾. What did not change, however, was their hostility to the Chalcedonian Church, identified with Constantinople's policies and interests.

Heraklios' military and religious policies exhausted and alienated the Christian population. These elements would play a major role in the history and historiography of surrender and survival in the area. Religious dissidents bent Byzantine ecclesiastical and foreign policy out of shape and exhausted the empire. Unable to be mainstreamed into the ecclesiastical life of the Church, dissidents facilitated the rapid spread of Islam after 632 in Greater Syria. It was Islam that disrupted Mediterranean unity and, finally, effectively reduced the Byzantine Church to the Balkans and Anatolia. Byzantine Christianity lost its struggle to hold on to Monophysites and Nestorians as well as its universal character⁽¹²⁾.

In the course of the seventh century, the land which we have referred to as Syria, or Bilad al-Sham, "the land of the Shem", was conquered by the Arabs of the south and absorbed into Dar al-Islam, the "nation

(9) MICHAEL THE SYRIAN, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, patriarche jacobite d'Antioch*, trans. by J.-B. CHABOT, Paris, 1899-1910, vol. 3, pp. 153-157. During the caliphate of al-Mehdi, who supported a centralized Jacobite patriarchate, many of their churches were destroyed.

(10) S.A. HARVEY, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis*, Berkeley, 1990, *passim*.

(11) During this period Jacobites were more open to Greek theological and liturgical influence and this constitutes an important transition period in their Christology and practice. Even though they may have changed some of their belief structures, the Byzantine polemic continued in the same vein. See Symeon of Thessalonica's fifteenth-century condemnation of a practice no longer in use; discussion of the issue is found in J.L. BOOJAMRA, *Cluster Ordinations: An Investigation into an Ecclesiastical Non-Issue*, in *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, 32 (1988), pp. 72-87, in which a Byzantine polemicist continued to charge them with pre-Islamic practices. It is doubtful that they continued in their practice of multiple ordinations.

(12) K. SALIBI, *Syria under Islam (634-1097)*, Delmar, p. 30, n. 7.

of Islam". After the Muslim conquest between 632 and 641 and for over 1300 years Greater Syria came under the control of one Muslim regime after another. The traditional Patriarchates of Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria bounced back and forth between Byzantines (969), Turks (1084), Crusaders (1098), Byzantines, and Ottomans. The predominant populations of the area were most likely ethnic Arab, speaking Aramaic and Syriac⁽¹³⁾. The predicament of the indigenous Christian population was facing for the first time a belief system, in many ways similar to theirs, which was aggressive, hostile, and driven by the *jihad*.

THE RISE OF ISLAM

There is no formal history of the Arabs before Islam⁽¹⁴⁾. It is the chronicler Hisham ben Mohammed al-Kalbi (737-820) who was the first Arab and Muslim to write a history of pre-Islamic Arabs. Hisham ignored the Christian past that was vibrant throughout the southern and western regions of the peninsula. The Arabic language took on a new dynamism, beyond its traditional poetic limitations⁽¹⁵⁾. This had an immediate impact on the population of Greater Syria and the nature and rate of both surrender and survival among the indigenous Arab Christian population⁽¹⁶⁾. The Arabic language, however, became identified with the faith of Mohammed. The relationship and distinction between Islamization and Arabization will be a key distinction in the process of surrender and survival of the Christian communities in Greater Syria. The latter will become the medium for the development of a vigorous Arabophone Church.

Between 610 and 630 a development took place in the central Hijaz which was to be of great consequences for the general course of Church history. Into this pagan, Jewish, and Christian environment Mohammed, the son of a camel-driver, was born about 570. Mohammed ibn Abdallah, a respectable 40 year old Quraysh merchant began to preach a new religion with a zeal that amazed his colleagues in Mecca.

(13) J.S. TRIMMINGHAM, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, London and New York, 1979, pp. 224-225.

(14) See A.A. DURI, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, ed. and trans. L. CONRAD, Princeton, 1983, pp. 14 and 20.

(15) LEVTZION, p. 290

(16) I. SHAHID, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century*, Washington, 1984, pp. 1-7.

Mohammed, persecuted, left Mecca in 622 with his followers in what is called the Hijra (migration) and escaped north to the oasis town of Yatrib, a Jewish center, which he renamed Medina (the City of the Apostle). Some of his Meccan followers made their way to Ethiopia for refuge, indicative of the close ties between the faith of the two territories. For purposes of understanding surrender and survival, Mohammed did not organize a “Church” but a new politico-religious society (*umma*) dedicated to the rule of the Quran (= recitation), revealed randomly over a twenty-year period by the Archangel Gabriel to Mohammed personally, privately, and usually in dreams (17).

Mohammed who was no doubt influenced by Christian and Jewish monotheism, denounced Arabian paganism and all polytheism as error. The Medina Jewish community, however, did not receive his teaching ; angered, he turned from Jerusalem to Mecca as the locus of Islam. From Medina Mohammed “invited” Arabs to abandon their pagan ways and submit to Allah, the God of Abraham and Jesus. Moreover, Medina was strategically located on the main road to Damascus and all of Syria, so that he could strangle the main Meccan caravan routes. In 630, Mohammed occupied Mecca and the last member of the Quraysh tribe submitted to Islam. Mohammed died in 632 and was buried in Medina.

The empire Mohammed established, the Caliphate (*khilafah* = succession), soon moved through the medieval world, Jews and Christians were subjected to the same “invitation”, all the more seriously extended as Islam was the restoration of the “original” teaching of Abraham and Jesus. Arab tribes, indigenous to Greater Syria, figured prominently in early Muslim Christian battles (18). The Arab tribal foederati, on whom the Umayyads rested their power in the *jund* (military recruiting territory), were recruited principally from the same groups from which the Byzantines drew their recruits (19). Tribal solidarity, an important constant in religious and military developments, and their Christianity, had been important to the Byzantine power and the uniqueness of Syria in the spread of Islam. The disastrous battle of Yarmuk, August 20, 636, proved to be decisive. In 637

(17) J. GLUBB, *The Life and Times of Muhammad*, New York, 1970, p. 231.

(18) SHAHID, pp. 10-11.

(19) They fought on the side of the Abbasids at the crucial battle against Ali at Siffin in 657 ; see SALIBI, p. 25.

Jerusalem fell. In August 638, the Byzantines lost Antioch and the territory to the Taurus Mountains. After 641, the remnants of the Byzantine army retreated across the Taurus Mountains into Anatolia. It was clear that the possession of Syria and particularly Antioch, Heraklios headquarters, was of major importance to Byzantine military defenses ; the Caliphate, similarly considered it essential and strongly garrisoned it, unlike other newly conquered areas. Islam held on to the city for three hundred years (20).

THE STATUS OF CHRISTIANS

The Quran only required that Muslims maintain public adherence to the will of God on earth, not to compel Islam on Christians and Jews into the *umma*. This is of particular significance for the discussion of surrender and survival. The Christians held relatively equivocal positions in the new Muslim *umma* and faith : were they to be viewed as “nearest to the believers” (Quran 5 : 82) or “to be brought low as unbelievers” (Quran 9 : 29)? Both positions could be justified by the Quranic references. They were defined as the *ahl al-Kittab*, “the people of the book”, and were merely subjected to the *jizya*, or head tax, and *kharaj*, or poll (land) tax. Christianity and Judaism became *dhimmi*, protected peoples. Muslim rulers adhered to the “covenant” (*dhimmi*) between Muslims and “the people of the Book”. This *dhimmi* status guaranteed their security of life, property, churches, and worship in return for the payment of the *jizya* (21). Jews and Christians, however, while tolerated and guaranteed freedom of worship, were not guaranteed the full pleasures of paradise nor the rights of citizens, such as fighting for the “nation of Islam”. The same, however, liberality never applied to the so-called *al-mushrikeen*, worshippers of idols ; idolatry was not a religion and pious Muslims were required to convert or kill pagans and idolaters.

(20) See AL-BALADHURI, p. 227, trans. by P. HITI, *The Origins of the Islamic State*, New York, 1916.

(21) The *jizya* was a classic “poll tax” *kharaj*, “a land tax”. Some authors treat them as separate, while others treat them as the same tax ; on the latter opinion see R. HADDAD, *Syrian Christians in a Muslim Society*, Westport, 1970, p. 37, n. 46 and 48. Others treat them as separate, see G. ANAWATI, *Christian Communities in Egypt*, in GERVERS, p. 239. See also SALIBI, *Syria*, p. 25, where the two taxes are distinct ; the *kharaj* fell on agricultural estates.

Muawiyah and the Umayyad dynasty (661-750) situated itself more centrally at Damascus. The Umayyads were monarchic, following the Persian and Byzantine patterns, and less religious and more secular. The latter point allowed the Christians a great deal of freedom as the Umayyad consolidated their power at Damascus, within the borders of Greater Syria (22). *Dar al-Islam* yet needed the skills of its Christian merchants and civil servants. The Umayyads were relatively tolerant (23), with the exceptions noted above. The fortunes of the Chalcedonians, however, would take a turn for the worse with the fall of their patrons, the Umayyads, and the arrival of al-Mehdi (775-785), the infamous third Abbasid caliph. With the Abbasids Islam was more clearly defined as a religious phenomenon.

Islam being the only "true religion", all peoples had to surrender (*al-Islam*) to Allah and the caliphate (Quran 3 : 19). Formally, therefore, there is no compulsion in religion (Quran 2 : 256), but Christians were not to be left peacefully to themselves, but to be continually "invited" (*da'wah*) to join the umma, the "nation of Islam". Any compulsion directed at Christians was derived from the Quranic reference to Muslims as guarantors of public adherence to the will of Allah on earth (Quran 3 : 110) (24). Christians were, *de jure*, second-class citizens. Initially, at least, the *kharaj* and the *jizya* were used to support the expansive movement of Muslim troops, while keeping them from settling in and disrupting civil services and production. An increase in conversions and settlement would have decreased social and economic stability. The Umayyad caliphate was no going to let this happen (25).

Confirming the tolerant tone of the Quran was the famous Covenant of Omar (634-644) : "concerning the people of the *dhimmih* of God and His Messenger that he fulfill their covenant. He should fight in their defense. Nor should they be charged beyond their capacity" (26).

(22) The Hijaz was not to play a significant role in international affairs until the rise of the Saudis.

(23) See the *History of Mar Ahudemme*, in *PO*, 3 (1909), pp. 19-22. Their Christianity is reflected in their stand with other foederati under Heraclius against Muslim Arabs. Some became renegades in Qinnasrin, Aleppo, and Chalcidice.

(24) HASHIMI/KINDI, p. 35 ; A. ABEL, *L'apologie d'al-Kindi et sa place dans la polémique islamo-chrétienne*, in *Atti della Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*, 361 (1963), pp. 501-523.

(25) GLUBB, p. 387.

(26) Quoted in M.M. AYOUB, *The Islamic Context of Muslim-Christian Relations*,

RELATIONS WITH CHRISTIANS

The fate of Christians living under a triumphant Islam was a mixed one, subject to time, place, and whim. Nasrallah writes that “durant tout le califat omayyade, le traitement et le statut des chrétiens présentèrent des contradictions et furent apparemment déterminés par la politique ou la caprice personnel” (27). The early Caliphate tolerated Christians, although there were isolated instances of persecution associated with the initial conquest and consolidation. The canonical capitation tax, along with various non-canonical market taxes accounted for much of the fiscal revenue from the cities and towns, a revenue that all but the most pious caliphs were reluctant to lose by conversions (28). In addition to group or tribal conversions, there were early individual conversions and population transfers, particularly in towns and cities. In some cases where the people who could not afford the *jizya* and the *khrađj*, whole towns might convert, priest, church, and people (29)!

While tolerance tended to characterize Islam, the twelfth-century Jacobite patriarch Michael the Syrian recorded outbursts against Christians during the Umayyad period (661-750), such as Abd al-Malik’s (685-705) removing the crosses from all of the churches, al-Walid’s ordering the destruction of churches constructed after Islam, and al-Yazid’s (720-724) infamous withdrawing of icons and statues from churches in the caliphate at the urging of Jews (30). Omar (II) ben Abd al-Aziz (717-720), conspicuous among the Umayyads for his piety and missionary concerns, was the first to enact discriminatory legislation against the *dhimmih* by which Christians were excluded from public office, required to wear distinctive clothing, ride without saddles, and erect no new churches. An exodus followed to mountainous

in GERVERS, p. 477. If as AL-BALADHURI, p. 103, claims, Omar was responsible for deportation of intransigent Christians and violent anti-Christian policies in Palestine, it is difficult to explain why Arabophone Christianity had its birth there. See D. CONSTANTELOS, *The Muslim Conquest of the Near East as Revealed in the Greek Sources of the Seventh and Eighth Centuries*, in *Byzantion*, 42 (1972), p. 349.

(27) P.J. NASRALLAH, *Saint Jean de Damas*, Beirut, 1950, p. 41.

(28) If left in the hands of the original non-Muslim owners, land was subject to taxation. See R. SOUTHERN, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, Grand Rapids, 1970.

(29) M. MORONY, *The Age of Conversion : A Reassessment*, in GERVERS, p. 137.

(30) MICHAEL THE SYRIAN, vol. 2, pp. 475, 481 and 489.

Lebanon and the coast. The Abbasid al-Mutawakkil in 849-850 forbid the children of *dhimmih* to attend Muslim schools or to have Muslim teachers⁽³¹⁾. Of course there were violent acts, but these were acts typical of any superior/inferior social situation ; it was certainly not a conquest “by blood and sword”.

Islam had no great immediate effect on the Church of Greater Syria and it is not by accident that John of Damascus’ grandfather opened the gates of Damascus to the Muslims as a government official and that John was himself a civil servant. Hence, the reception given to the advancing Islamic army by the towns such as Shayzar on the Orontes whose people, in the words of the historian al-Baladuri, “accompanied by players on tambourines and singers, and bowed down before him, welcomed the commander”⁽³²⁾. Al Baladuri offers a series of “conversion” or “surrender” accounts : “The people of Tabalah Jurash surrendered/converted (*islama*) without a fight. So the messenger of God... let them act freely in their surrender. On the people of the book in the two places he placed a tax”⁽³³⁾. On moving into the northern Syrian plateau and making peace, the commander Abu Ubaydah called an Arab tribe to Islam and “some of them converted”. Others persisted in their Christianity⁽³⁴⁾. The conquest was accompanied by the relatively peaceful surrender of towns and villages, the majority of the population remained in tact (including for the most part indigenous bishops) and simply transferred their allegiance from one overlord to another. The Jewish community played a similar role in Jerusalem and Palestine. The native inhabitants felt that the incoming regime had to be an improvement over the exploitation, persecution, and taxation of the Byzantine administration.

Christian life continued after the invasion and the Monastery of St. Jacob, near Qara, is witness to this⁽³⁵⁾. Qara was 54 miles north

(31) AL-TABARI, *Tarikh al-Rasul wa al-Muluk*, Cairo, 1960-1968, vol. 2, p. 172. The Muslims found it practical to extend *dhimmih* status to a third group, the Zoroastrians of Persia, and some other minor pagan communities. This suggests that the desire to tax was greater than the desire to convert.

(32) AHMAD AL-BALADHURI, *Futuh al-Buldan*, ed. S. MUNAJJID, 2 vols. Cairo, 1956, vol. 1, p. 459.

(33) AL-BALADHURI, p. 71.

(34) AL-BALADHURI, p.172. BULLIET admits that the number of conversion stories is far too small to drawn any significant conclusion, p. 128. He offers a fascinating outline of a schematic of conversion in his normative book *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period : An Essay in Quantitative History*, Cambridge, 1979.

(35) GRIFFITH, *Summa*, in GERVERS, p. 25.

of Damascus and remained Christian until conquered by Baibars in 1266, when the population was enslaved or slaughtered. The Aramaic Chalcedonians were in the villages and countryside⁽³⁶⁾. Christianity and Islam coexisted side-by-side, with the Cathedral of the Holy Cross at Rusafa having a mosque in its courtyard well into the thirteenth century⁽³⁷⁾. The survival of the town and monastery indicates the tenacity of Christianity at least 600 years after Islam. The Muslims and Christians, for instance, shared holidays, especially those associated with nature cycles. Among these were Pascha, Christmas, and special regional feasts such as St. Barbara and St. George, when crops were sown⁽³⁸⁾. Bar Hebraeus makes it clear that in the first century of the caliphate, the Christian Arabs of Greater Syria had no difficulty in building new churches⁽³⁹⁾.

While Islam possessed a need to expand, it had no missionary theology. It left the native Christian and Jewish population alone and the accounts of mass conversions are conspicuous by their absence from sources. There is actually little known about the conversion process in the Muslim religion. It was a movement into the umma⁽⁴⁰⁾. On the other hand, the process of Christian conversion has been one of the most dramatic elements in Church history from the time of St. Paul's blinding experience (Acts 9 : 1-7) and Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions* (397-401)⁽⁴¹⁾. Unlike the New Testament texts, it is almost impossible, other than the Tawhid, the fundamental first principle of the Unity of God, to locate passages of the Quran that would have been used for speedy conversion or instruction. The Quran, however, was not itself available in a reliable written form until relatively late⁽⁴²⁾. The significance of this for western researchers is the radical difference it represents from the Christian pattern and the difficulty its presents in determining the number, nature, and quality of the conversion process⁽⁴³⁾.

(36) J. CHRYSOSTOM, pp. 386-400, preached in Antioch and had to have simultaneous translations into Aramaic. See JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *On the Statues*, nos. 19 and 21 (*Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, ser. 2), Grand Rapids, vol. 9, pp. 482-483.

(37) LEVTZION, p. 292.

(38) H. DAJANI-SHAKEEL, *Natives and Franks in Palestine : Perceptions and Interaction*, in GERVERS, p. 162

(39) G. ABU AL-FARAJ BAR HEBRAEUS, *The Chronography*, 2 vols, ed. and trans. by E. BUDGE, London, 1932 ; see HADDAD, *Syrian Christian*, p. 15.

(40) BULLIET, *Conversion*, p. 123

(41) BULLIET, *Conversion*, p.123.

(42) P. CRONE and M. COOK, *Hagarism : The Making of the Islamic World*, Cambridge, 1977.

(43) W. PFAFF, *Reflections : Islam and The West*, in *The New Yorker*, January 28,

The location of actual conversions is complicated by the use of the terms such as *islama* that could be applied to both “conversion” and “surrender”. Hence, the issue of the number and quality of converts or conquered is not open to qualitative or quantitative analysis (44). Little effort was made by chroniclers to distinguish between their meanings as the concern of the Quran was submission to the “nation” of believers. There appears to have been no formal conversion process (45), no initiation rite, no registration with a local clergyman, so typical to the Christian historian in preaching, catechesis, and the catechumenate (46). There were no outward signs of conversion, a constant reference point in Christian apologetics and history. Many Christians simply became Muslims by default, finding a local sponsor, and reciting the Tawhid (creed).

Suspecting indigenous Christians of being pro-Byzantine, the Muslims instituted a policy of restricting their freedom in Syria, especially after the collapse of Iconoclasm (726-780, 815-843) and the restoration of harmony between the Syrian and Byzantine Churches (47). In 757, during the new Abbasid caliphate, the patriarch Theodore, suspected of relations with the Byzantine court, was exiled by the caliph (48). By the time the Christians were restored to harmony with Constantinople, the Muslim *shariah*, common law, had come to define the place of Christians within Islam (49). Fortunately, by the time Chalcedonians were in communion with Constantinople, the Caliphate often had to deal with, and needed the support of, the Byzantine empire

1991, p. 86 ; here precisely is the crisis for the Arab Christian community and particularly the Orthodox, which tends to be non-militant.

(44) Bell, *Introduction to the Quran*, Edinburgh, 1953, p. 108.

(45) BULLIET, *Conversion*, p. 123.

(46) T. W. ARNOLD, *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith*, London, reprint 1935, pp. 1-10 and 211-212, has noted some formal missionary activity among the Ismaeli sect among Jews and Christians, as well as Muslims.

(47) If the caliph needed, as he often did, the political aid of Byzantine emperors, treatments of the Chalcedonian Christians improved.

(48) THEOPHANES, p. 119.

(49) BUKHARI, vol. I, p. 185. Much as the Jews were tolerated in the Middle Ages as proof of Jewish inferiority and the superiority of the Christian Gospel. On the toleration of minority belief systems as confirmation of the majority's position, see D. TIMMER, *Biblical Exegesis and the Jewish-Christian Controversy in the Early Twelfth Century*, in *Church History*, 58 (1989) pp. 309-320.

and had to treat the Chalcedonians gingerly⁽⁵⁰⁾. The Chalcedonians benefited from an external and powerful patron, the Byzantine emperor.

As late as the eighth century, Christian officials, such as John of Damascus, were still employed in an official capacity by the caliphate. Even the language of the divans, the bureaus, and registers remained for a time Greek. It was under al-Malik and his son al-Walid (705-15) that the Muslim empire enjoyed its earliest golden age. Arabic replaced Greek in government bureaus and on Umayyad coins⁽⁵¹⁾. With some exceptions, Muslims demonstrated restraint and even respect towards their Christian subjects, while pouring money into the medieval economy for building trades and artisans.

THEOLOGICAL CONFRONTATION

The core of Islamic missionary outreach is the “invitation” to surrender/convert (*islam*) to the will of God (Quran 3 : 110). The central content of the Islamic message is the Surat al-Tawhid, the belief in and worship of one God, who is “unique and self-existent, who neither begets nor is begotten and who has neither taken a consort nor a son, and unto whom there is no equal” (Quran sura 112 : 1-4).

Islam’s simplicity and apparent resemblance to Christianity was another element that confused the issue of surrender and survival. Other than being a revealed religion and monotheistic, it had few parallels to the relatively complicated history of Christian scripture, organization, clergy, theology⁽⁵²⁾, missiology, initiation rites, or conversion⁽⁵³⁾. Islam during approximately the first one hundred and fifty years did not have a clearly formed or well-defined theology or structure. It was developing, much as early Christianity had done, in controversy with its opponents and dissidents. On the issue of surrender and survival, the Christians clearly held the advantage over Islam after hundreds

(50) See H. KENNEDY, *The Melkite Church from the Islamic Conquest to the Crusades: Continuity and Adaptation in Byzantine Legacy*, in the *Seventeenth International Byzantine Congress*, New Rochelle, 1986, p. 338.

(51) See photos of Omayyid coins struck in Damascus under Abd al-Malek (685-705), bearing the image of the cross in NASRALLAH, p. 42. JEAN DAMASCENE, *Écrits sur l’Islam*, ed. and com. R. LE COZ, Paris, 1992 (SC, 383), p. 34.

(52) Factors which to the modern period make it difficult to understand the Muslim communities and countries. See PFAFF, pp. 83-88.

(53) The early leaders were so confident that an early caliph called on the world leaders, including the victorious Heraclios, to submit to Islam.

of years of formalizing its own theology through debate, a polemical tradition the benefits of which Islam did not enjoy.

What is significant is that for the Christian *mutakallimun* (controversialists), the Arabic language, shaped as it was by the Quran, became the polemical medium. Quranic vocabulary and agenda shaped a new and unique manner of both formulating and defending the belief structures of the Chalcedonian Church in an Arabic idiom. The *mutakallimun* did more than simply translate traditional Christian doctrines and practices into Arabic. The topics selected represented the religious agenda of the Islam and not traditional Greek theological polemic rooted in Platonic, neo-Platonic, and Aristotelian methodology⁽⁵⁴⁾. What gave Christian polemicists time to organize was the fact that the Arabic language in the first one hundred and fifty years of Islam had not yet acquired the technical capacity to express science, theology, and philosophy in as precise a manner as Greek⁽⁵⁵⁾. The outline, however, of the discussions of the Arab Christian writers such as Anastasios, Theodore Abu-Qurra, and al-Kindi⁽⁵⁶⁾ is constructed on Muslim issues — the unity of God, fatalism, predestination, the reality of the incarnation and crucifixion, the place of Mary, and the use of images⁽⁵⁷⁾.

The Islam of the first caliphs was inchoate and it was the Jews and Christians of the period and the region, especially those Arabophones, who helped shape Muslim theology and practice. Early Islam formulated its own belief structure in reaction to Christianity. The relationship between John of Damascus' defense of Christ as the living Word and Islam's internal debate over the Quran as the "created" or "uncreated word" of God cannot be missed⁽⁵⁸⁾. Neither is it coincidental that Mutazilism and Iconoclasm developed at the same time, both as reactions to anthropomorphism⁽⁵⁹⁾. For instance, while Islam main-

(54) S. GRIFFITH, *Faith and Reason in Christian Kalam: Theodore abu Qurrah on Discerning the True Religion*, in SAMIR, pp. 3-5.

(55) A. HOURANI, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Cambridge, 1991, p. 76.

(56) AL-HASHIMI and AL-KINDI, *risalat 'Abd Allah b. Isma'il al-Hashimi ila 'Abd al-Masih b. Ishaq al-Kindi Yad'uhu biha ila al-Islam wa Risalat 'Abd al-Masih ila al-Hashimi Yaruddu biha 'alayhi wa Yad'uhu ila al-Nasraniyyah*, ed. A. TIEN, London, 1885.

(57) Quran, Sura al-Nursa 4 : 157.

(58) CRAGG, *The Arab Christian*, Louisville, 1991, p. 78.

(59) R. HADDAD, *Iconoclasm and Mu'tazila: the Politics of Anthropomorphism*, in *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 27 (1982), pp. 287-305.

tained the tradition (*hadith*) that human representations were not acceptable, the prohibition did not appear in the Quran. Islamic artists were careful to limit their representational art to manuscripts, by their nature of limited circulation and less likely to draw the attention of Muslim authorities. It was not uncommon to find Muslim manuscript illustrations containing human representations at a later date⁽⁶⁰⁾. There was an allelogenic relationship, similar to that between first-century Christianity and Judaism⁽⁶¹⁾. Aping the New Testament accounts of Jesus, it was not long before Islamic polemicists had embellished Mohammed's life with miracles not found in the Quran⁽⁶²⁾. Even more strong is the conclusion of Nasrallah: "La polémique du Damascène et de ses continuateurs força les penseurs musulmans à s'initier à la philosophie aristotélicienne"⁽⁶³⁾. These encounters among the *mutakallimun* gave birth to Islamic theology as we know it.

ELEMENTS OF SURRENDER AND SURVIVAL

The population of Greater Syria was large and the arrival of numbers of conquering Muslim Arab invaders did make conversion an option. Despite the large number of invaders, Syria represented a unique area in the establishment of the "nation" of Islam where Christianity survived for a variety of reasons as a political and theological community. 1) Syria possessed a strong episcopal hierarchy, especially the Chaldean Christians. 2) The patriarchal and Omayyad caliphates, for a variety of reasons, wanted Syria left alone and urged troops to move on and not settle in the territory of Greater Syria. 3) There was no

(60) These were, of course, relatively small and few in number, seen by few people. See, for instance, Edinburgh University Library MS 161, 10v^o of al-Biruni, al-Athar al-baqiyah, dating from 1307. The illustration portrays Jesus riding a donkey and Mohammed, a camel. To my point here is the fact that, with the exception of the turbans, the style is clearly Byzantine iconographic. See *Sacred Arts Journal*, 13 (March, 1992), cover and title page. On what I consider the over-developed treatment of Islamic iconoclasm, see A. ISSA, *Islamic Religious Painting and the Christian Icon*, in *Sacred Arts Journal*, 11 (1990), p. 150.

(61) A. SEGAL, *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World*, Cambridge, 1986, pp. 142-162.

(62) D. SAHAS, *The Formation of Later Islamic Doctrines as a Response to Byzantine Polemics: the Miracles of Mohammed*, in *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 27 (1982), pp. 307-24.

(63) NASRALLAH, pp. 177-178. Both al-Mehdi (775-785) and Harun al-Rashid (786-809) enjoyed and encouraged aulic free debates between Christians and Muslims.

necessity to conversion of Christians and Jews to Islam, but merely to maintain "good order" in the *umma*. 4) The Syrian Christians maintained contact with their "Orthodox" fellows in Constantinople and the sociological viability of the Chalcedonian Arab community enabled faith survival. 5) Finally, while many historians of conversion have treated the Arab leitmotif of the area as a stimulant to conversion, paradoxically the common Arab element had the opposite effect of giving birth to a Arabophone Church, free from Greek ecclesiastical imperialism and well-adapted to confront and blend in with the "nation" of Islam.

CONVERSIONS

Conversions did take place in small numbers over a considerably long period of time that can be described categories of assimilation, accommodation, and equilibration. By assimilation the indigenous population meets the new faith and integrates its structure into their existing belief system, as with the apologia of John of Damascus ; in the stage of accommodation, the Syrian Christian population was able to recognize Islam, despite their kinship with the invaders and use of Arabic, as a distinct and different religion ; this was clear in the apologist Theodore Abu Qurra at the turn of the ninth century. Finally, equilibration, is the actual conversion from or recommitment to the original faith structure. In this context, they may equilibrate by resolving the dissonance in favor of converting and becoming Muslims, rejecting the old belief structure, or by reaffirming it, accepting the position of *dhimmih* (64). The likelihood of the latter happening was all the greater as the viability and plausibility of the belief structure increase in the mind of the group or its members. Viability, and its concomitant plausibility, of belief structure is in direct proportion to the size, concentration, activity, and integrity of the believing community.

(64) On the correspondence between the Piagetian triad of assimilation, accommodation, and equilibration and cognitive dissonance, see on "cognitive dissonance" W.W. MEISSNER, S. J., *Group Dynamics in the Religious Life*, South Bend, 1965, pp. 100-107.

1) *The "stabilitas episcopi"*

The indigenous Christians of Greater Syria tended to cling to their Christian faith, whatever its variety, despite their ethnic kinship with the invaders. The faith communities, did however, tend to break down when there was a heavy concentration of Greeks civil servants and churchmen, who were more flexible in their options.

The system also broke down, however, as the number of Christian fearing the *jizya* and the deficits of the *dhimmih* either migrated to Byzantine territory, especially officials, troops, and much of the Greek population, or converted to Islam⁽⁶⁵⁾. The only real population shifts of any number were the newly arriving peninsular tribes and the departing Byzantine troops and Greek and hellenized officials⁽⁶⁶⁾. There is an account of the imposition of the *jizya* in Beirut in 639 and the subsequent departure of the Greeks, including the bishop, and the settlement of Muslims in their stead⁽⁶⁷⁾. Beirut's was the fate of many urban areas in Syria, where the Muslim population grew most rapidly, either by migration or conversion. We can assume that in some cases bishops were killed as potential leaders of opposition ; Theophanes, tending to report the dark side of the Muslim occupation and outbreaks of fanaticism, notes that Bishop Thomarikos of Homs (Emessa) was burned alive in 666⁽⁶⁸⁾. The loss of episcopal leadership in the Hellenized cities was critical to the maintenance of the faith structure. Similarly, the presence of the Arab bishops, with their distinctive garb, was an obvious maintenance of Church and served as an identity indicator. As Shahid has made tediously clear in his two brilliant

(65) The *mawali* system by which non-Arab converts to Islam had to become associated as clients (*mawali*) of some recognized Arab tribe, was never really applied in Syria where the original population was largely Arab or could easily claim Arab descent by virtue of its long association with neighboring Arabs. See BULLIET, *Conversions*, pp. 126-127.

(66) CHARON, *Origine*, p. 82, writes : "l'héllénisation n'a été que superficielle". He adds that the hellenization was confirmed "surtout en soldats, en administrateurs et en marchands. La population dans laquelle ils se sont mélangés à la population araméenne n'a pu être que minime". CHARON, p. 89.

(67) SALIH IBN YAHYA, *Tarikh byrut*, ed. F. HANES and K. SALIBI, Beirut, 1965, pp. 8-9. Antioch was again in Byzantine hands between 969 and 1084, before being lost to the Seljuk Muslims, during which time the patriarch was in residence. BOOJAMRA, *Greater Syria*, p. 226, n. 9 ; SALIBI, p. 20.

(68) THEOPHANES, *The Chronicle of Theophanes*, trans. TURTLEDOVE, Philadelphia, 1982, p. 48.

studies, the bishops in the rural regions tended to be Arabs, non-hellenized, and stable in their "dioceses" (69), since at least the fourth century. Such was the case with the famous and contemporary George, consecrated as bishop of the Arabs of east Syria at Akoula in the late-seventh century (70).

Contrary to eastern canon law, bishops in greater Syria were often mobile, not tied to a particular urban area, and administered the ecclesiastical life tribes or camps (*paremboloi*). During the second half of the eighth century, the Muslim policy towards Christians changed radically. The patriarch's position, on the other hand, remained in place or took up titular residence in Constantinople. His fortunes in Antioch depended on the threat posed by the Byzantines to the caliphate and/or the Byzantine possession of western Syria as between 969 and 1084. Constantinople assumed more and more control over the fortunes of the Churches of Antioch and Jerusalem as they lost their freedom of action. Yet the very presence of episcopal leadership and Islam's predisposition to control through the millet system, the Christians were able to maintain their identity through the viability and plausibility structure of their belief system. The later was very much rooted in the stability of leadership.

The move to Damascus could have been a major threat to the local Christians had it not been for the Umayyads need for trained civil servants and their lack of theological and evangelical policy. Given the fact that the Byzantine troops and government officials migrated to Byzantine territory, it is safe to assume that the bishop, traditionally remaining with their flocks, became the local leaders. Such a conclusion would parallel the experience of the Latin west in the fourth through seventh centuries, the Byzantine experience in the Balkans after the Slav and Avar invasions of the sixth and seventh centuries, and the Anatolian exodus with the Ottoman onslaught in the fourteenth century (71).

The caliphate, however, copied the already successful Persian millet (= *dhimmih*) system, by which the towns and dissenting groups were

(69) SHAHID, p. 78.

(70) Reported in SHAHID, p. 442, n. 436.

(71) J.L. BOOJAMRA, *The Church and Ecclesiastical Reform*, Thessalonica, 1980. See Canon 37 of the Council in Trullo on Balkan Bishops absent from their sees after the Slav and Avar invasions of the seventh century, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ser. 2, vol. 14, Grand Rapids, 1899, p. 323.

organized under and responsible to the religious leader of the camp or village. The faithful bishop effectively became the *defensores civitas* for the Christian population, representing the interest of the indigenous Christian population and providing them with the leadership to maintain their faith communities. After May 11, 1453, the Ottoman empire initially vested the Patriarch of Constantinople with responsibility for the political, social, and religious behavior of all Christians in the empire (72).

The Muslims controlled the ecclesiastical life of the Patriarchates of Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria ; they often maintained control by permitting or denying the clergy and people of Antioch the right to elect a new patriarch. Very often the patriarchate was allowed to rest vacant. Election being prevented, Antioch was vacant between 702-742, when Stephen was elected following a twenty-year hiatus after the execution of his predecessor Alexander II (695-702) (73). The see was again filled by the new Theophylactos, at the will of the caliph Merwan II (744-750), when Stephen died (74). One can only imagine the value of a cooperative patriarch in a millet system !

2) *The integrity of the Syrian population*

The caliphs had allowed the Arab troops to raid freely and then move in to organize the random process into a conquest. The invading troops, however, were encouraged to move on and continue their conquests rather than settle. The surrender of the Byzantine garrisons and the consequent departure of the Greek officials and troops left urban communities in decline, especially coastal cities where decline was evidenced by a reduction in Mediterranean trade (75). Much of

(72) S.H. MOFFETT, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, San Francisco, 1992, p. 344. See LEVTZION, p. 306, quoting A. LINDER, (Hebrew text), *The Christian Communities in Jerusalem*, in *The History of Jerusalem*, Jerusalem, 1987, pp. 97-132. He claims that the patriarch of Antioch was recognized as the head of the community and given an administrative position in the eleventh century ; he offers no direct reference to this. It probably took place much earlier when the Muslims adopted the Persian millet system for organizing dissident minorities. The Byzantines controlled much of Antioch for the eleventh century, 969-1084 ; if the claim is true, it demonstrates what a powerful patron can do to maintain the validity structure of a deficit faith group. SALIBI, p. 27.

(73) THEOPHANES, p. 107. Bar Hebraeus supports this vacancy, 2 : 27. Similarly, Christopher (960-966) was also executed by the Caliph.

(74) THEOPHANES, p. 111 and p. 116.

(75) H. PIRENNE, *Mohammad and Charlemagne*, Brussels, 1937, *passim*. Pirenne's

the area fell into disrepair. In the northern Syrian massif, there are presently 750 abandoned Christian sites identified ⁽⁷⁶⁾. As the Muslims moved into Greater Syria, there were no great shifts initially in the indigenous population ; the early caliphs did not want major settlements of peninsular Arabs in Greater Syria. The caliphs' attempts to keep their troops moving into new territory were designed to maintain stability — bureaucratic services, the shipyards, the farms, and trade routes — as well as continue the momentum of the conquest.

The Umayyads took great care, however, to keep the incoming Muslim troops from settling in commercial and agricultural areas, if they were allowed to settle at all ⁽⁷⁷⁾. The visit of the Caliph Omar to Palestine in 638 was apparently aimed at restricting the Muslim armies and minimizing their destruction, settlement, and urban dislocation ⁽⁷⁸⁾. His policy aimed to make Muslims in the conquered lands a religio-military aristocracy, keeping them free from such pursuits as agriculture, industry, and maritime trade, which kept them from settling Lebanon and coastal Syria.

The Muslims who initially managed to stay in Greater Syria did so in small numbers, settled side-by-side with the already existing Christians, or in areas abandoned by those who fled. The majority of Christians, however, remained, having no place to go and perceiving no immediate threat, since ethnically they shared a kinship with the "invaders". With an inchoate Islam being the only perceivable difference the religion of their Muslim overlords was not immediately threatening. They were occasionally persecuted but rarely violently absorbed into Islam. It is more likely that through assimilation and accommodation they became integrated into Islam as a social and then a religious reality. While there were conversion and persecutions, there are no records of wholesale, mass, or forced conversion of any significance. The stability of the area's faith structures was directly related to the failure

thesis is not entirely without credibility ; the author suggests ecclesiastical implications here.

(76) See J.-M. CHARBONNIER, *L'Occident à la rencontre de l'Orient*, in *Syrie : mémoire et civilisation*, Paris, 1993, pp. 38-39 : "La densité d'églises villageoises, de baptistères et de couvents dans cette région démontre la puissance de la vie religieuse dans les campagnes".

(77) Under Muawiyah (661-685) there was an exceptional population shift of Persian Muslims from the east to Lebanon and Syria to protect against a possible naval invasion and to launch an attack on Constantinople in 654-655. See THEOPHANES, p. 44.

(78) See reference in LEVTZION, p. 292.

of Muslim settlements and the presence of an indigenous Arab hierarchy, the foundations of an Arabophone Church. It was simply too hard to distinguish Christian and Jews from Muslims — a common Arabophone culture was developing.

The indigenous Christians were beginning to see themselves as part of a larger Arab culture, into which the indigenous population could blend. There was strong pressures to join the dominant group for social, economic, and political reasons. The common Arab background could account for both the processes of conversion and forming an integral Arab Christian community. While some Syrian Arabs fought for the Byzantines, others aided the Muslims by their own attacks on the Byzantine outposts along the march regions where the Byzantine foederati had maintained marginal loyalty. Many of these tribes supporting the Muslims were Christians and had little difficulty transferring loyalty ⁽⁷⁹⁾. As the conquest gained momentum, the forces of the Arabs came to be incorporated, along with local levies from various parts of Arabia, into the army of Islam, although many remained Christians ; the use of Christian troops, however, did not last long and was rejected by the Abbasids after 750.

3) *Rate of Conversion and Mass Conversion*

The traditional view regarding conversion of Christians of Greater Syria to Islam is that it occurred within the first century of the conquest. This initial “passover” of Syria, to maintain military momentum and Syrian prosperity, enabled the indigenous Christians, especially the Orthodox Chalcedonians, to consolidate their position ecclesiastically and polemically. This would show up in the late-eighth and ninth centuries in the brilliance of Arab polemics, theology, and translations.

By the late-tenth century the historian al-Muqaddisi wrote that the northern part of Greater Syria, al-Sham, contained numerous non-Muslims and that Christians tended to serve as scribes and physicians and the Jews as jewelers, tanners, and bankers ⁽⁸⁰⁾. Yet it is difficult to find ways to determine numbers as studies have shown. Things are easier to assert than to demonstrate ⁽⁸¹⁾. What is clear is that Christians

(79) SHAHID, pp. 10-11.

(80) MOHAMMED AL-MUQADDASI, quoted in DJANI-SAKEEL in GERVERS, pp. 161-184.

(81) MORONY, p. 146

were in the majority in the time of the crusades, especially in the north-west of Syria, around Aleppo, Edessa, and Antioch; in northeastern Syria and Mesopotamia Islam came to predominate. It was precisely this area that maintained the tightest bond with the Byzantine empire, under whose control it fell after 969⁽⁸²⁾. Christians were less numerous in the south, except in Lebanon, the Holy Land, and Gaza. The Norman Seawulf visited the holy land in 1102-1103 and makes note of a community of Greek monks in the area of the Tower of David; a second group of three hundred Orthodox monks lived in the monastery of St. Saba near Jerusalem⁽⁸³⁾.

Among the most conservative conclusions is that of Lammens⁽⁸⁴⁾ who maintains that by the end of the first Muslim century slightly more than 200,000 people had been converted in Syria out of a population of four million. It is estimated that while in 800 Iraq about 18% of the population was Muslim, by 882 it was over 50% of the population⁽⁸⁵⁾. Levtzion concludes that by 975 68% of the conversion process in eastern Iraq was completed. About the same rates were evident, he concludes, in Iran between 762 and 875⁽⁸⁶⁾. Over the first three centuries, conversion was neither uniform in time, place, nor rate⁽⁸⁷⁾. According to Richard Bulliet, the years 791-888 were the years during which as much as 38% may have been converted⁽⁸⁸⁾. Since conversions did occur the researcher must go beyond numbers, which cannot be accurately determined, to the sociological phenomena of plausibility and viability structures in considering the process of

(82) LEVTZION, p. 306. This occupation is indicative of the Byzantine obsession with North Syria and especially Antioch. See J. PRAWER, *The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem*, London, 1972.

(83) SEAWULF, *The Pilgrimage of Seawulf to Jerusalem and the Holy Land*, ed. C. W. WILSON, London, 1895. The Orthodox apparently fared better in the attack on the city in 1100 since they had their own quarter near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

(84) P. LAMMENS, *La Syrie, Précis historique*, Beirut, 1921, pp. 120-121.

(85) See BULLIET's brilliant work *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: an Essay in Quantitative History*, Cambridge, MA, 1979, p. 17 and pp. 80-91; W. HADDAD, *Continuity*, p. 35.

(86) See Omar II above, 15. In addition, conversion from Zoroastrianism, was more common as its imperial foundation had been destroyed with the collapse of the Sassanid Persian to the Caliphate.

(87) W. HADDAD, *Continuity and Change in Religious Adherence: Ninth Century Baghdad*, in GERVERS, p. 35.

(88) BULLIET, *Conversion*, p. 76.

Islamization. It is important to point out that Bulliet's 1979 publication of a conversion curve was based on research in Iran, and applied to Spain ; it specifically excluded Arabs and tribal peoples and was based on the statistical analysis of name changes. It was his exclusion of tribal groups and Arabs which effectively excludes Syria from the study's conclusion (89).

It is from this angle of the decreasing viability of the Christian community sociologically and the increasing plausibility of Islamic faith structures that Bulliet's "band-wagon" effect might be raised. Groups will tend to be stable and sustaining if they are large, active, firmly committed, contiguous, or have outside support, minimizing "band-wagoning". Hence, the Zoroastrians did not survive once their Persian patronage was removed. Syria was the contrary, where Chalcedonian Orthodox survived in direct proportion to the power and influence of Byzantine patronage. On the other hand, the Armenians and Georgians (90) identified their very nation with their belief structure and to give that up would be to give up their identity. For the Chalcedonian, as their numbers declined the negative effect became exponential and not just arithmetic, the community lost viability and plausibility.

The traditional discussion of "mass conversions" has been altered, with the most conservative scholars pushing it to a later period (91). Morony suggests that scholars give up the notion of "mass conversion" and "age of conversions" as undemonstrable (92). One of Richard Bulliet's most interesting conclusions is that the abundant literature of medieval Islam does not include much information on conversion and then he questions whether a "proper" history of conversions can even be written (93). Bulliet set the completion of the process, that is more than a majority, between 861 and 1105 for Greater Syria (94).

(89) MORONY, p. 138, referring to BULLIET's famous *Conversion*, which focused on a quantitative study and by definition excluded Syria which was predominantly Arab.

(90) H. MANANDEAN, *Les invasions arabes en Arménie*, in *Byzantion*, 18 (1948), pp. 163-166.

(91) The belief in early mass conversions was summarized by T. W. ARNOLD, *passim*. Likewise the conversion of Spain was assumed to have been largely completed just after the conquest. It is difficult to demonstrate any pattern or any instances of mass conversions as CONSTANTELOS, p. 345, suggests when he refers to "massive Islamization".

(92) MORONY, pp. 135-136.

(93) BULLIET, *Conversion*, p. 123.

(94) BULLIET, *Conversion*, pp. 123-125. Bulliet's work was based on genealogies and the use of Arabic names.

Although conversion was often accompanied with anxiety because of the reversibility of the emotional process (95). There was, of course, no such anxiety in Islam : the process was irreversible!

a) Bulliet concludes that one of the indicators of mass conversion to Islam is Arabization, represented by onomastic research — the appearance of Arab names in familial genealogies in Iran. His study excluded Arabs and tribal peoples. We are precisely dealing with Arabs, Arab names, and tribes in Greater Syria. In addition, his conclusion that “Arabic names” mark “the generation of conversions” is suspect because it assumes a particular period of conversions and the significance of names in determining that “period”, particularly five-part Arab names (96). Levtzion supported this approach and maintained that only through a survey of nine centuries of onomastic, demographic, ethnic, and cultural studies can we discern changes in religious allegiance. Unfortunately, the unreliable nature of sociological proofs in Greater Syria rests in an Arab culture and language shared by both Christians, Jews, and Muslims. It is difficult to show more psychological “accommodation” by the use of names ; no conclusion regarding equilibration can be drawn. It is possible and probable that the use of names meant nothing. Even if there were an increase in certain name use, it would symbolize nothing more than the Christian community’s accommodation to Islam.

It is simply too hard to distinguish Christians and Jews from Muslims in the common Arabophone culture that was developing and the flexibility of using “names” as identity indicators. In addition, if names are a significant identity indicator, then it would be easy enough to feign conversion by assuming a “typically” Muslim name. Islam, primarily behavioral, was a religion that was easy to mimic without actually accepting. It is interesting that while the process of accommodating Islam was condemned vigorously by contemporary Arab Christian apologists, none of them refers to “names” as typical of the process.

b) By comparison the conversion process took much longer in Egypt, especially upper, than in Greater Syria because there was no underlying Arabic cultural/linguistic elements ; it occurred more rapidly where the Copts were accessible to Arab Muslim troops in Lower Egypt.

(95) MORRISON, p. 19.

(96) BULLIET, *Conversion*, p. 128.

Arabization diffused from the military settlements that typified the policy of the Umayyads, especially with some 10,000 soldiers at al-Fustat (Cairo), near ancient Babylon⁽⁹⁷⁾. There were no such large military settlements in other non-Arab areas such as Iran or Pakistan ; in those countries the population was more readily converted because of the lack of firmly rooted Christianity associated with an ethnic group or an independent power structure. None possesses populations as tightly bound to their faith as the ethnic Copts, who, following the sociological formula suggested, converted in fewer numbers due to the plausibility structured rooted in their size, concentration, and activity. Although Egypt became integrated into the Islamic world and was cut off from Christian Byzantium more thoroughly than Syria, the Copts stayed closely attached to their religious structure, with monasticism at its center. Egyptian nationalism expressed itself in Coptic language and its opposition to Byzantine governance and Chalcedonian Christianity. In Egypt, in spite of the *jizya*, there were no mass conversions during the Umayyad period⁽⁹⁸⁾.

The conversion process in Egypt is a convenient point of comparison with Syria. While the Copts did not have imperial patronage, they did have a strong monastic tradition that enabled Christianity to maintain a plausibility structure and produce an Arab Christian literature by the tenth century⁽⁹⁹⁾. It was only under the Mamluks, between 1291 and 1354, that large number of Copts converted under pressure from the Muslim faithful who resented their political and economic prominence⁽¹⁰⁰⁾.

The predominant explanation given by Christians and Jews suggests convenience, inducement by social pressure, economic advantage, professional status, and so forth. These conversions were specifically due to fear of discrimination, persecution, or the onerous poll tax or *jizya*. The poll tax was the reason for conversion claimed by the

(97) G. ANAWATI, *Christian Communities in Egypt in the Middle Ages*, in GERVERS, p. 237.

(98) See D. DENNETT, *Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam*, Cambridge, p. 32.

(99) The literature is dealt with in ANAWATI, *Christian Communities in Egypt*, in GERVERS, pp. 244-250.

(100) See D. LITTLE, *Coptic Conversion to Islam under Bahri Mamluks, 692-755/1293-1354*, in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 39 (1976), pp. 552-569.

Nestorian Patriarch Ishoyabh (101). Support for this was based on tax rolls for Iraq and Egypt, from which rolls it is concluded that most Christians converted between the reigns of Uthman (644-56) and Muawiyah (660-680) (102). In addition, the desire for advancement in public office played a role through membership in the ruling *umma*. The Caliph al-Mamun (813-833) was not at all surprised that many of his officials had converted merely to secure their positions, but Islam, he knew, would have their children (103). The Nestorian Chronicler Mari ben Sulayman notes that many Christians converted to Islam in the late tenth century due to persecution and the corruption of their own clergy (104). No one treats the reference as genuine, but many writers have admitted that backsliding Christians may have converted at the pious examples of Muslims in the face of a corrupt Christian clergy and hierarchy, both weakening the sociological plausibility of their "former" belief system. The crusaders and the blood bath which they wrought put the Christians at a clear disadvantage. The number of conversions increased as the relationship between Christians and Muslims became "hostile" (105). From a Muslim point of view it was the crusades that left "Islam more militant, less tolerant, and more self centered" (106).

c) The accounts of forced and tribal conversions are conspicuous by their almost complete absence (107). As we have already seen, the

(101) MORONY, p. 141. Also Y. SAEKI, *The Nestorian Movements in China*, London, 1916.

(102) See the "Summary" in MORONY, pp. 135-150.

(103) See W. HADDAD, *Continuity*, in GERVERS, pp. 33-53, who describes the attitude of Umar II (717-720) and his efforts to convert non-believers to Islam.

(104) ARNOLD, p. 777.

(105) A. ATIYA, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, London, 1980 ; this relatively well established view has been reiterated recently in a new wave of studies on Greater Syria, see LEVTZION, p. 304. The crusaders, however, tended to treat the Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike since they all looked alike and were effectively infidels.

(106) P. HITTI, *The Impact of the Crusades on Muslim Lands*, in K. SETTON, *History of the Crusades*, Madison WI, 1985, vol. 1, p. 49.

(107) The reverse is not unheard of. In one account, noted in secondary literature, a Muslim tribe became Christian. But no source is referenced. See HANNA HIRDAAN AL-KHOURI, *al-Akhbar al-Shaheeya 'an al-'Iyaal al-Marja'youneeeya wa'l-Taymeeya*, Beirut, n.d., p. 783, which describes the conversion of the Jamra Arabs (tribe) who had come into Syria in the Islamic wave from the Hijaz. They settled near al-Sham, then al-Beqaa, and then Aitha al-Fakhaar. In Aitha they became Christians and in the fifteenth century moved to the village of Kfeir. Although the book is undated, it is commonly available in several Arab Orthodox parishes in North America.

question of “mass”, group, or “age of” conversion terminology cannot be demonstrated. When the Caliph al-Mehdi, the third of the Abbasid rulers, came to northern Syria, the Christian Tanukhid expected that they would be left much as they had been under the Umayyads, prior to 750. In 780, the Tanukhid riders, went out to meet al-Mehdi. In addition to gifts they carried with them, they called out to him, “We are your maternal uncles, O Commander of the Faithful”. Hisham notes that, after al-Mehdi saw this entourage, he was enraged and was determined that not a single Christian should remain among the Tanukhid. Ignoring the *sharia*, the sacred law of Islam, which allowed Arab Christians to remain *dhimmih*, he had their *sayyid*, Layth ibn Mahatta, beheaded ; the remainder of the males soon became Muslims. Al-Mehdi suitably demoralized the remaining Tanukhids, Christian foederati of northern Syria. The *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bar Hebraeus + 1286) says that al-Mehdi, also “pulled down the churches that had been built in [since] the time of the Arabs and he destroyed the churches of the Chalcedonians that were in Aleppo” (108). In addition, he had tattooed on the hands of the Christians in Greek the word Qinnasrin, their locale. Michael the Syrian’s (+ 1199) account moralizes on the suffering of the Tanukhids and considers their just fate punishment for their Chalcedonianism. The women apparently did not apostatize, but served the churches for a long time, apparently many of the Tanukhids remaining Christian until at least the 12th century (109). Perhaps the nature of the tribal social structure abhorred apostasy (110).

According to al-Tabari, in the 8th century northern Syria was the home of the Manichaeans to whom al-Mehdi then turned his sword in an orgy of executions (111). The nature of tribal solidarity becomes an issue in surrender and survival when the nature of their cohesion is factored into the process. Since tribal sociology abhors disunity and extols loyalty to the sayyid, the tribe tends to behave as an organism in its religious affiliation, an affiliation having less to do with theology

(108) BAR HEBRAEUS, vol. 1, pp. 116-117. It may have been that only a group of Tanukhids converted on the occasion of Mehdi’s dramatic demonstrations and, for instance, those of Aleppo remained Orthodox Chalcedonians.

(109) MICHAEL THE SYRIAN, 2, p. 412. In the late tenth century the Byzantines reoccupied northern Syria and there is good indication that they attempted to force conversions ; they occupied the territory between 969 and 1084.

(110) BULLIET, p. 129.

(111) AL-BALADURI, p. 172.

than with sociology. It is just as true to say that tribes tended to hold onto Christianity as a group.

When tribal conversions did take place, they were, by the nature of tribal sociology, nominal, depending as they did on the nature and personality of the sayyid or "chief" (112). Cities and towns were effected in the same manner as tribes, several converting as entities. There are later instances of wholesale conversions ; in the seventeenth century, the Christian population was still significantly numerous and mimics earlier periods for which we possess a dearth of evidence. The patriarch Makarios III al-Zaim (1648-1672), known as a sincere reformer of the corruption so common among minority groups under the Ottoman Porte, sought to stem the conversions to Islam. These conversions were fostered by the heavy Muslim taxation and Christian fasting and other rigorous practices that they perceived as burdensome. Euthymios al-Sayfi, Metropolitan of Sidon, reported that the combination of poverty, taxes, mixed marriages, and the large number of Christian "fast" days was "forcing conversions". Euthymios reported the Orthodox faithful complained that three-fourths of the year was fast days. He reports to Makarios that Christians in the area of Hama and Cilicia were accepting Islam. One village in particular, Ayn Tina, had a population of five hundred Christians who because of their poverty and taxes asked for Makarios' blessing to eat dairy products during the fast so as not to waste food. Makarios refused and the entire village converted to Islam, with the four priests becoming imams and the church building a mosque (113). Similarly, in the seventeenth century, the Christians of Gaza complained to Makarios about their heavy taxation ; their taxes were based on the population of 435 peasants, four hundred of whom had apparently already converted to avoid the taxes, pauperizing the remaining forty families on whom the entire burden for the *jizya* fell. They threatened to convert, like their fellow villagers, and Makarios succeeded in having their taxes lowered to those representing one hundred and forty one people.

d) Bulliet turns to individual conversion stories to distill the history of the process of interaction between Muslim and Christian, noting that most of them were individual accounts and contained no elements of transformation, personal religious experiences, or commitment. Rather they

(112) SHAHID, p. 354, n. 432.

(113) HADDAD, p. 23.

were phrased in political, social, and economic terms of equilibration into Dar al-Islam⁽¹¹⁴⁾. The personal conversion stories which Bulliet has collected say little or nothing about preaching, dramatic metanoias, or interventions *deus ex machina*.

Here sociological phenomena take over in direct proportion to size, concentration, and activity of the given community, be it Orthodox, Jacobite or Nestorian, become and the categories of plausibility and viability normative for survival. Conversions and the rate of conversions would depend heavily on time and place, and Bulliet's band-wagon effect⁽¹¹⁵⁾.

Bulliet treats four individual conversion stories, which are few and very telling in their lack of correspondence with traditional Christian conversion motifs. "The conversion stories themselves reinforce the impression that change of religion may not have been particularly momentous for the convert"⁽¹¹⁶⁾. Three of the stories revolved around social status more than religion⁽¹¹⁷⁾. The amazing thing in these conversion stories is that not one gives any indication of a systematic conversion effort on the part of the Islamic *umma* or *ulama*. None refers to supernatural interventions, "spiritual" experiences, or encounter with the transcendent ; neither are their accounts of famous missionaries such as Boniface, Patrick, nor Cyril and Methodios. The individual Christians who converted did so on their own for a variety of reasons, usually equilibrating for a social, economic, or political reason.

4) The cases of individual conversions are significant by their social character. There is, for instance, only one major convert to Islam who wrote and became an active apologist ; al-Tabari wrote during the reign of al-Mutawakkil (847-861). He was aware that as late as the mid-ninth century the Muslims did not yet have a formal polemical or missiological

(114) The question of the Byzantine reaction to Islam has been dealt with before by, for instance, MEYENDORFF, *Byzantine Views of Islam, Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church*, Crestwood, 1982, pp. 89-114, and S. VRYONIS, *Byzantium and Islam, Seventh-Seventeenth Century*, in *Byzantium : its Internal History and Relations with the Muslim World*, London, 1971 (No. 9, Variorum).

(115) P. BERGER, *A Rumor of Angels*, Garden City, 1970, pp. 36-38 ; for a sociological development of this with regard to "world maintenance" in a minority context, see J. BOOJAMRA, *Foundations of Christian Education*, Crestwood, 1989, chap. 2.

(116) BULLIET, *Conversion*, p. 127.

(117) See BULLIET, *Conversion*, p. 127, analysis of the social elements of conversions.

approach to Christians or an instructional process to follow up which the Church had had in place since the early second century. He defined, however, what he personally found convincing about Islam⁽¹¹⁸⁾. Bulliet warns again that “a complete collection of conversion stories will still be far too small to permit one to write a history of early conversions to Islam”⁽¹¹⁹⁾. Unfortunately, this is the same conclusion that Bulliet has reached regarding mass, group, or tribal conversions.

5) Ethnically, the population of Syrian was predominantly Arab⁽¹²⁰⁾; by the early ninth century, Arabic replaced Aramaic as the language of the territory, with Syriac limited to the Jacobite and Maronite liturgies⁽¹²¹⁾.

The Arabic of the Quran, which while not identical to Aramaic, or its dialect Syriac, was, however, its cognate. A significant percentage of the population was Arabic, with Greek-speaking confined to the cities. Prior to this period, there were witnesses to the large number of Arabs in Greater Syria; Theodoret of Cyrrhus (+ 428), for instance, in his “History of the Monks of Syria” describes thousands of Ismaelites (Arabs) converting at the foot of St. Symeon’s column⁽¹²²⁾. Even after the removal of the caliphal capital to Damascus, the city remained predominantly Arab Christian⁽¹²³⁾. The process of socialization, here referred to as Arabization in contradistinction to Islamization, was a slow process, which by definition is difficult to describe for Greater Syria. This disagrees with Bulliet who concludes that conversions were so slow because the indigenous population did not speak Arabic⁽¹²⁴⁾. We do know that the population in the main spoke Aramaic and Syriac, with many of Christian tribes speaking Arabic. The reason for the pace of conversion is other than linguistic in Syria. Bulliet has noted the ease

(118) ALI BEN SAHL RABBAN AL-TABARI, *Kitab al-Din wa al-Dawlah*, ed. A. MINGANA, Cairo, 1923.

(119) BULLIET, *Conversion*, p. 128. Bulliet’s 1979 research created a conversion curve for Iran and applied it to Spain. It has little to do with Syria, and has little to do with tribal communities or Arabs.

(120) TRIMMINGHAM, pp. 7-8.

(121) SALIBI, p. 27.

(122) THEODORET OF CYRRHUS, *History of the Monks of Syria*, in *SC*, 257, Paris, 1979, chap. 26 : 13, p. 191. On the movement of Arabs into Greater Syria from the seventh century BC, see TRIMMINGHAM, pp. 7-21.

(123) CHARBONNIER, p. 41

(124) BULLIET, *Conversion*, pp. 130-131.

with which Christians could adapt appearances, as noted in the use of names, in an Islamic behavioral environment. In addition, “a remarkable uniform set of social behaviors emerged that made the Middle East, as a whole, appear Muslim in character despite the continued viability of non-Muslim communities” (125). Much was shared in common, given the fact that Islam was so behaviorally oriented and centered on the use of a common Arabic language.

To highlight the role of the development of Arabophone literature in the transformation and survival of Christian is the case of “obsolescent” manuscripts. If a manuscript was no longer of use or in use, its text could be erased and the velum reused. A twice written manuscript makes the point of the developing Arabophone church (126). These so-called “palimpsests” made written materials available to later generations from the crude “stuff” of earlier manuscripts. Manuscripts of the British Library #17210 and 17211 together form a treatise in Syriac by Severus of Antioch against John Grammaticus, written in the eighth and ninth century. Forty eight sheaves of the Gospel of St. Luke, five of Euclid, and four thousand lines of Homer, all in Greek and dating from the sixth century, were erased. There was little use for Greek manuscripts after the Arab conquest ; the Christian had made the transition to Arabic and Syria easily enough. The relatively facile switch to Arabic and Syriac for formal texts was a major element in the survival and growth of Christian intellectual life after the Muslim conquest.

No doubt, however, many Christians “acted” their way out of the Church and into the “established order” in a slow process of equilibration. The Muslim creed is simple enough, that with a reservation of intention, any Christian could affirm the existence of a single God and Mohammed as one of His messengers, without too much difficulty of conscience. While Arabization was clearly accelerated in Greater Syria after 641, Arabization was necessary but by no means sufficient to Islamization.

As Christians became increasingly identified with Arab society, of which most of the Greater Syrian population was already cognate, it became easy to find social and religious validation in the Islamic *umma* (127). Clearly, Arabization preceded Islamization, but had a life

(125) BULLIET, *Conversion*, p. 131.

(126) T. S. PATTIE, *Manuscripts of the Bible : Greek Bibles in the British Library*, London, 1975, revised 1995, p. 33 and p. 34.

(127) LEVTZION, p. 298.

of its own. Muslims and Christians lived closely together in communities and this often led to the blending of the Christians into the Muslim social fabric in a confusion of identity indicators in what might be called equilibration. At the same time, it cut the Arab Christian Church off from its western coreligionists who actually lost track of it.

Arabization did not always encourage Islamization. It encouraged the opposite in certain places, such as Palestine that was the heart of a viable Arabophone Church, which enabled the Christians to develop liturgical, theological, and polemical literature with which to maintain the plausibility of the belief structure against the Muslim power structure.

Christianity survived in Greater Syria because of several specific factors : 1) the integrity of the Arab Christian community indigenous to the area ; 2) the social integration of the Syrian Arab Christians into the Muslim society ; 3) the failure of the Muslims to aggressively proselytize the Christians ; and 4) the ethnic identification of the indigenous population with the new arrival in the seventh century. There yet remains to be considered the nature of the polemic which developed between the two faith co-habiting the same territory and the ability of the Chalcedonian Christians to maintain an intellectual leadership in a hostile religious environment.

St. Vladimir's Theological Seminary. J. L. BOOJAMRA, Ph.D.