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Christian Theology and the Qurʾān

THIS BOOK AIMS TO answer the question of whether or not Christians are justified in making positive apologetic use of the Qurʾān in Arabic-speaking contexts. The originality of my approach, generally speaking, is that I seek to answer the question not solely on the basis of biblical and theological arguments, which I do address, but by examining the question from the perspective of how some Christians residing within the world of Islam treat it. Western evangelical treatments of this issue usually address it by discussing what constitutes sound missional practices for evangelicals bringing the gospel to Muslims. While my treatment does contribute to the ongoing discussion of contextually appropriate methods of evangelizing and theologizing in Islamic contexts, I believe it is vitally important to examine this issue from the perspective of Christians who have lived in the world of Islam for centuries and who continue to write and explain their theology in the language of the Qurʾān—Arabic. Many western Christians assume that Christian history in the East ends with John of Damascus (d. ca. 749). Few are aware of the cultural, intellectual, and theological achievements of Arabic-speaking Christians residing within the world of Islam. Moreover, few are aware of the benefits that those investigating contemporary theological and missiological questions, such as the apologetic use of the Qurʾān, can glean from this under-utilized source of the global church's history.

This chapter briefly surveys the history of Arabic Christianity with a focus on Christian approaches to the Qurʾān and developments within Islamic theology that set the agenda for the first few generations of Christian theologians composing their theology and apologetic responses to

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Islam in Arabic. Understanding this history demonstrates the pervasive influence of the Qurʾān on all religious discourse in Arabic. It also highlights some of the challenges facing those Christians who would venture to write their theology in the language of the Qurʾān. After surveying this history, I situate the problem this work addresses within both western evangelical missiology and the emerging global theological discourse brought about by the expansion of the Christian faith in the global South and East. The basic contention of the book is that there is biblical, historical, and theological justification for Christians who make positive use of the Qurʾān when discussing the Bible and Christian doctrines in Arabic-speaking milieus. This introduction investigates some of the historical factors that elucidate and lend support to this position.

THE STORY OF ARABIC CHRISTIANITY

Arabic Christianity in Pre-Islamic Times

The story of Arabic Christianity begins in the New Testament on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit falls on those who hear Peter proclaim the gospel. The event is theologically important for its link to Babel and the “undoing” of the effects of humanity’s collective rebellion against God in Genesis 11. God effects this “undoing” not through the un-confusing of human languages, but through the uniting of people from an array of ethno-linguistic groups by their common faith in Abraham’s seed—Jesus. Among the people groups explicitly mentioned in Acts 2 are the Arabs: “And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia . . . both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and *Arabians*—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:8–9, 11, *italics added*). The only other mention of Arabia in the New Testament is in connection with Paul’s journey there after his conversion (cf. Gal 1:15–17). Eckhard Schnabel argues that Paul’s purpose in going to Arabia was to propagate the Christian faith. And there is reason to believe that Paul was successful. As Schnabel points out, “The aggressive reaction of Nabatean [i.e., Arab] officials who want to eliminate Paul suggests that people had been converted in noticeable numbers, provoking unrest in various cities that caused the intervention of the Nabatean king.”¹

1. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 64.

Historical records reveal that the first leader to convert to Christianity and proclaim his nation as a Christian nation was an Arab—King Abgar the Great of Edessa ca. 200.² Edessa became the spiritual capital for Syriac Christianity during the first two centuries of Christian history, and like King Abgar, some of these early “Syriac” Christians were actually Arabs. Arabic at this time was a spoken language by many in the region; nevertheless, it was not a *written* language until after the emergence of Islam. Most Arab Christians would have prayed in Greek or Syriac.³

According to Irfan Shahid, there were three centers for Arabic Christianity that existed prior to the rise of Islam. The first was al-Jabiya, located on the Golan Heights, capital of the famed Ghassānid tribe. The Ghassānids accepted Monophysitism in the sixth century during the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Anastasius I (d. 519). The second major center for Arabic Christianity was the city of Najrān, located in the southwestern part of the Arabian Peninsula. Christianity entered this area sometime during the fifth century.⁴ The third center for Arabic Christianity was Ḥīra, located in southern Iraq. After the Roman conquest of Edessa in 243, there was a shift in the center of Arab political power to Mesopotamia. Ḥīra became the capital of the Lakhmīd dynasty, which lasted roughly three centuries. Shahid considers this era a “Golden Period” in Arab Christian history.⁵ Located as it was under Sasanian control, the Christianity that flourished in Ḥīra was Nestorianism, the only branch of the faith shown periodic tolerance within the territories controlled by the predominantly Zoroastrian Persians.

Among the more notable Arab clergy in pre-Islamic times was the Monophysite bishop Jacob al-Barādaʿī (d. 577). Paradoxically, he was

2. Shahid, “Arab Christianity before the Rise of Islam,” 435; cf. also Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century*; Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*; Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*. For more on the general history of Christianity in the Middle East, see Atiya, *History of Eastern Christianity*.

3. Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic but it is written in a different script.

4. Najrān is famous in Muslim sources for reportedly sending a Christian delegation to Muḥammad in 631 in order to negotiate a peace treaty, one year before his death. Additionally, according to the traditional sources, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 644), the second caliph to rule after Muḥammad’s death, relocated the Christians from Najrān to Mesopotamia under pretext that Muḥammad had declared it unadvisable for two religions to be present in the Peninsula. The historicity of the Najrān delegation account is questionable. For more, see Reynolds, *Emergence*, 45–47.

5. Shahid, “Arab Christianity,” 440.

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ordained in the mid sixth-century with the help of the Empress Theodora (d. 548). Theodora was a proponent of Monophysitism, but she was the wife of the Emperor Justinian I (d. 565) who himself was a major proponent of Chalcedonian orthodoxy in Syria-Palestine. The Western Syriac-speaking Monophysites of what is today known as the Syrian Orthodox Church were known by the eponym “Jacobites” throughout much of the Middle Ages, preserving the memory of their Arab predecessor, Jacob al-Barādaʿī.⁶

Monastic movements were key to the spread of Christianity in this early period. Monasticism has its roots in Egypt with the famous anchorite monk Antony (d. 356), although most scholars identify Euthymius (d. 473) as the founder of monasticism in Syria-Palestine.⁷ Euthymius and other monks played a key role in establishing churches among the peoples of this area, including the Arabs. This activity had the support of Bishop Juvenal of Jerusalem (f. 422–58). He instituted the “diocese of the tents” for the Arab tribes of the Judean wilderness and eventually consecrated an Arab, Sheikh Buṭrus (or “Peter”), over these tribes.⁸ Buṭrus was present at the Council of Ephesus in 431 and was a member of the commission that interviewed Nestorius.⁹

It is notable that for all the missionary activity among the Arab tribes prior to the advent of Islam, there does not appear to be any evidence

6. Latourette reports that Jacob al-Barādaʿī (Jacob Baradaeus) was responsible for consecrating “two patriarchs, eighty-nine bishops, and a hundred thousand priests.” Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 2:265.

7. Britton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, “Monasticism in the Holy Land,” 272.

8. Trimmingham records the account of how this took place: “One day an Arab shaikh with a party of nomads turned up at the laura and demanded to see Euthymius. Theoctistus explained to them that he only came down from his cave high up the cliff at weekends, and he suggested that they should wait a day or two. But the shaikh insisted. He brought forward his son Terebon, who was paralyzed on his right side, and told him the following story. The persecution undertaken at the end of the reign of Yazdagird I of Persia against the Christians within his dominions had caused many to seek refuge in Roman territory. The Persian authorities tried to stop this movement and sought the co-operation of the Arab tribes of their frontier zone. One powerful shaikh called Aspebet refused to hand over such refugees to Persian vengeance, but rather facilitated their flight The shaikh . . . told Theoctistus all this. He said the Persian magi had been unable to cure his son, and that the boy himself, having appealed to Christ, saw a gorge and a long-bearded, white-haired monk. On this story being relayed to Euthymius, he consented to leave his retreat and break his silence to pray for the boy, who was healed. The shaikh received the baptismal name of Peter, Buṭrus in Arabic.” Trimmingham, *Christianity among the Arabs*, 109–10.

9. Ibid.

of written translations of the Bible into Arabic during this period.¹⁰ As mentioned, the ecclesiastical languages used by Arab Christians prior to Islam and even during the first Islamic century were primarily Greek, Aramaic, and Syriac.¹¹

Arabic Christianity in Early Islamic Times

Sidney Griffith points out that as a result of the Islamic conquests during the first half of the seventh century, upwards of “50 percent of the world’s confessing Christians from the mid-seventh to the end of the eleventh centuries found themselves living under Muslim rule.”¹² Islam appeared at a time when many of these Christian communities were still defining their ecclesiastical identities in light of the Christological controversies of the fifth and sixth centuries. As noted, Chalcedonian orthodoxy had been heavily advocated by Justinian I in the decades prior to the advent of Islam and was widespread in Syria-Palestine; however, most of the Christian communities in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the surrounding areas were either Monophysites or Nestorians. Both communities were predominantly Syriac-speaking though the Monophysites in Egypt used Coptic. The Chalcedonians were primarily Greek-speakers, but there were also Aramaic/Syriac-speakers as evidenced by their activity in the monasteries of Palestine.¹³ Over time, each of the groups became identified as three distinct ecclesiastical communities: the Melkites (i.e., Chalcedonians), the Western Syriac-speaking Jacobites (i.e., Monophysites), and the Eastern Syriac-speaking Nestorians (i.e., the Church of the East). Of these, the Melkites were the first community to adopt Arabic as both their daily and ecclesiastical language under Islam.¹⁴

Many Christians in the region regarded the invasion by Arab armies in the first half of the seventh century as punishment by God for their sins. Abdul-Massih Saadi notes that on Christmas Eve 639 the Melkite

10. Arbache surveys the evidence for pre-Islamic translations of the Bible into Arabic and concludes that they only began to appear after the Arabic alphabet was fixed under the Umayyad Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (d. 705). See Arbache, “Bible et liturgie chez les arabes chrétiens,” 37–48.

11. For more on the transition from these languages to Arabic by Middle Eastern Christian communities, see Griffith, “Aramaic to Arabic,” 11–31.

12. Griffith, *Shadow*, 11.

13. See Griffith’s discussion in, “Aramaic to Arabic,” 13–16.

14. For a brief discussion of how Arabic became the *lingua franca* of Melkite Christians during the early Islamic period, see Blau, “Melkite Arabic,” 14–16.

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Patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronius (d. ca. 640), encouraged his people to repent so that God might remove the “occupation of the Ishmaelites.”¹⁵ Others saw their presence as divine punishment for doctrinal errors. Overall, however, there was a sense among many Christians that the presence of the Arabs was temporary.

The earliest documented encounter of a Christian and Muslim¹⁶ is the dialogue that took place ca. 644 between a Muslim Emir and the Jacobite Patriarch, John of Sedra (d. 648). The document consists of seven questions put to the Patriarch by the Muslim Emir. The Emir indicates that he accepts the Torah and he raises a number of questions about the Scriptures; however, there is no reference to the Qurʾān. Saadi states this could be an indication that it was not yet in circulation.¹⁷ Griffith notes that John’s responses to the seven questions by the Muslim Emir probably constitute the earliest Christian response to Islam. He says that they “embody the substance of the Islamic critique of Christianity and in one form or another and would be the questions Christian apologists in the world of Islam would be answering for centuries to come.”¹⁸

Although the Qurʾān accuses Jews and Christians of distorting (*ḥarrafa*) or concealing (*katama*) the message of the Bible (*tahrīf maʾnawī*),¹⁹ it seems that Christians in the seventh and early eight centuries did not fully realize the implications of this accusation. Nearly all of the earliest examples of Christian-Muslim encounters are marked by appeals, on the part of the Christians, to various verses in the Bible as an apologetic strategy for defending their faith and doctrines. These scriptural *testimonia* are taken from both testaments and are frequently used to present a cumulative case for the veracity of Christian doctrines. This mode of argumentation is known as “scriptural reasoning” and is characteristic of many early Christian responses to Islam, whether in Greek,

15. Saadi, “Nascent Islam,” 219.

16. Saadi notes that the terms used to refer to the Arabs (or “Muslims”) during this early period varied. Among the Syriac terms are *mhaggrayê*, “immigrants” (*muhājirūn* in Arabic), and *ṭayyāyê*. *Ibid.*, 217–18. See also Donner’s discussion of the meaning of the term *muslim* in the Qurʾān and its inclusiveness of pious Christians and Jews in the early “Believers movement” in Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 68–74.

17. Saadi, “Nascent Islam,” 220.

18. Griffith, *Shadow*, 36. For an introduction to the text and an English translation, see Newman, *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 7–46; cf. also Bertaina’s discussion and analysis of the text in Bertaina, “Theodore Abū Qurra in Debate at the Court of Caliph al-Maʾmūn,” 123–39.

19. Cf., e.g., Q 2:75, 146; 4:46; 5:13, 41.

Syriac, or Arabic.²⁰ Use of this apologetic method demonstrates that, in early dialogues and controversies over Christian doctrines, scriptural reasoning carried weight among both Christians and Muslims. However, as the Qurʾān's accusation of scriptural tampering became more widespread and the full-blown Islamic doctrine of textual corruption (*tahrīf lafzī* or *tahrīf al-naṣṣ*) was developed, the appeal to scriptural authority began to carry less weight.²¹ Parallel with this was the growing sophistication of Muslim theologians in their appropriation of Greek thought and ways of constructing rational arguments. As a result, employment of scriptural reasoning by both Christians and Muslims decreased. Slowly, rational argumentation began to supplement and eventually supersede scriptural argumentation, even though in many apologetic and polemical works they are used together.

Samir Khalil Samir identifies four basic phases in the development of Arabic Christian apologetics. The first phase stretches from the mid-eighth to the mid-ninth centuries and is noted for the frequent use of biblical and qurʾānic citations. The Melkite theologian, Theodore Abū Qurra (d. ca. 830), is representative of this phase.²² A mix of biblical citations along with philosophical reasoning characterizes the second phase, which stretches from the mid-ninth century to the beginning of the tenth. It is represented by Christian theologians such as the Nestorian, ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī (d. 850).²³ The third phase is primarily philosophical and is represented by the Jacobite, Yaḥyā b. ʿAdī (d. 974).²⁴ Samir characterizes the fourth and final phase as being spiritual and humanistic in nature. This phase is represented by the Nestorian, Elia of Nisibis (d. 1043).²⁵

20. See Bertina's description of three forms of scriptural reasoning in Bertina, *Dialogues*, 224.

21. Nickel has shown that the tampering motif developed gradually in Muslim polemical literature. Moreover, he shows that it developed in response to an external narrative structure (i.e., an external theological structure) that Qurʾān exegetes brought to the verses that touch on this theme. Within that narrative structure, Jews and Christians are depicted as rejecting Muḥammad's claim to prophethood and tampering with their Scriptures in order to remove any references to his predicted coming. See Nickel, *Narratives of Tampering*. For more on this topic, see Accad, "Corruption and/or Misinterpretation," 67–97; Saeed, "The Charge of Distortion," 419–36.

22. Abū Qurra's debate with the Muslim theologians in the *majlis* of al-Ma'mūn is examined in chapter three of this book.

23. See below for a discussion of al-Baṣrī's use of the "attribute apology."

24. For more, see Endress, *The Works of Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī*.

25. Samir, "Earliest Arab Apology," 109–14.

Under the Arabizing and Islamicizing campaigns of the Umayyad Caliphs, ‘Abd al-Malik (d. 705) and his son al-Walīd (d. 715), policies were implemented that were designed to diminish, if not erase, Christian influence from the public sphere. As a result, Christians increasingly felt the pressure of social discrimination. Evidence of this is apparent in the writings from this period.²⁶ Muslim rulers, however, found justification for their policies in the Qurʾān: “Fight those who believe not in God and the Last Day and do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden—such men as practice not the religion of truth, being of those who have been given the Book—until they pay the tribute [*jizya*] out of hand and have been humbled” (Q 9:29).²⁷ Texts like this were used to provide a legal basis for classifying Jews and Christians as *dhimmīs*, or subjugated peoples, and requiring them to pay a tribute tax for protection. This protection included allowing Christians to continue governance of their own internal affairs, according to the canon laws of each ecclesiastical community,²⁸ but the public sphere was now under the control of Islam. Although, historically, policies of this sort were enforced irregularly throughout the various Islamic empires, the overall effect was a diminishing of Christian influence and presence in the public domain.²⁹

Over time, Christian communities were increasingly faced with a number of their fold who converted to Islam. Conversion elevated one’s status from a subjugated person (*dhimmī*) to someone with normal rights and privileges. Thus, by the late part of the eighth century conversion increasingly became an appealing option for many of the social elite among Jews, Christians, and others.³⁰ This reality, combined with the Qurʾān’s critique of the Christian teaching about God, forced Christian leaders to offer pastoral, apologetic, and polemical responses to the challenges facing their communities. Initially, these responses manifested themselves in the translation of liturgical and theological works from Syriac and

26. E.g., see Reinink’s investigation of the shock many Christians felt at being conquered by a seemingly inferior people in Reinink, “Early Christian Reactions,” 227–41.

27. Unless noted otherwise, translations from the Qurʾān are from Arberry with occasional modifications to update the language. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*.

28. The qurʾānic basis for this is found in Q 5:47.

29. For more, see Ye’or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity*. For an exploration of the historical development of discriminatory policies towards non-Muslims in what became known as the “Covenant of ‘Umar,” see Tritton, *The Caliphs and Their Non-Muslim Subjects*.

30. Bulliet has investigated the rates of conversion and the time it took for Muslims to become the majority in the areas under their control in Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam*.

Greek into Arabic. But it was not long before Christians from each of the three ecclesiastical communities began authoring original compositions in Arabic. Most notable in this regard are the aforementioned theologians, Theodore Abū Qurra and ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī, as well as the Jacobite theologian, Abū Rāʾiṭa al-Takritī (d. ca. 835).³¹ Each of these theologians produced original works that contained within them the seeds of a contextualized Arabic Christian apologetic theology.³²

THE CHALLENGE OF A QURʾĀNIC AGENDA FOR ARABIC CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

The Linguistic Challenge

The adoption of Arabic as a language for theological expression by Christians during the eighth and ninth centuries brought with it a number of challenges. By this time the terminology and concepts used for religious discourse in Arabic had already been permeated with Islamic religious significance. Terms like *hudā* (guidance), *tawḥīd* (unicity or oneness), *shakhṣ* (person), *walad* (child), *ibn* (son), *nabī* (prophet), and *rasūl* (messenger), to name just a few, came to have fixed meanings derived from the Qurʾān and developed within the distinct theological frameworks of the burgeoning class of Muslim *mutakallimūn* (theologians) and *mufasssīrūn* (Qurʾān exegetes and commentators).

Hudā is what God promised to guide humanity on the “straight path” (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*).³³ It represents the primordial *sharīʿa* (legal code) given to Adam and Eve³⁴ to guide them after God commanded them to be “cast down” (imper. *ihbiṭū*, dual *ihbiṭā*) to the earth when they disobeyed his command not to eat from the tree.³⁵ At the heart of the guidance God gave to humanity is the message of *tawḥīd*—the monadic

31. For more on al-Takritī’s life and works, see Keating, *Defending the “People of Truth.”*

32. Griffith, *Shadow*, 21.

33. Cf. e.g., Q 1:6, 5:16.

34. Eve is not mentioned by name in the Qurʾān but the use of the dual in texts like Q 2:35–36 implies she is known. This is an example of qurʾānic allusion to biblical persona about whom the Qurʾān assumes its audience is knowledgeable.

35. *Hudā* becomes the qurʾānic “solution” to the “fall” in Q 2:30–38; 20:115–24. But the language used to describe the “fall” in the Qurʾān is much weaker than that found in the Bible as are the consequences of Adam’s (and Eve’s) sin (cf. Q 7:11–25; 15:26–39; 17:61–63; 18:50; 38:71–75). For more, see Curry, “Mission to Muslims,” 224–26.

unity of God.³⁶ From time immemorial, the role of God’s prophets and messengers,³⁷ from Adam to Muḥammad,³⁸ has always been to warn and guide humanity by faithfully declaring to them the central message of *tawḥīd*. Indeed, later Muslim *mutakallimūn* and *mufasssirūn* assume that the Qurʾān’s emphasis on God’s unity is the central message of all previous revelation (i.e., the Bible).³⁹ *Shakhṣ* refers to a person, or more properly, an individual, with all of the attendant corporeal qualities characteristic of individuals, and could not, at least in the *mutakallim*’s mind, be used to refer to a quality attributable to one aspect of God’s nature and not to the whole of it.⁴⁰ The nouns *ibn* and *walad* (along with form I of the verb,

36. The term *tawḥīd* does not appear in the Qurʾān, though later Qurʾān exegetes and Muslim theologians developed the doctrine of *tawḥīd* from verses like Q 2:163; 12:39; 112. Badawi and Haleem note that four forms of the root *و/ح/د* occur 68 times in the Qurʾān: *waḥd* six times, *wāḥid* 30 times, *wāḥida* 31 times, and *waḥīd* once. Badawi and Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary*, 1041.

37. Although it is not entirely clear in the Qurʾān itself, many classical Muslim theologians and commentators distinguished between prophets and messengers. In its classical formulation, “messengers” are understood as those who were given a “book” (*kitāb*) consisting of a “message” (*risāla*). “Prophets” are those who acted in history as “warners” to inform people of *tawḥīd* and call people to repentance or face God’s impending judgment, but they were not given a book or message in the form of written revelation. Cf. e.g., Q 4:163–65. Bijlefeld has cast doubt on this distinction. See Bijlefeld, “A Prophet and More Than a Prophet?” 1–28.

38. The supposed proper name of the Muslim prophet—“Muḥammad”—(“praised one”) appears only four times in the Qurʾān (Q 3:144; 33:40; 47:2; 48:29). Together, the paucity of non-Islamic references to the Muslim prophet and the unreliability of Muslim historical sources have led scholars like Reynolds to question whether Qurʾān’s use of the term constitutes a proper name or a messianic epithet. See Reynolds, *Biblical Subtext*, 185–99; Reynolds, “Remembering Muḥammad,” 188–206.

39. The Qurʾān refers to the Bible as “scripture” (*kitāb*) and differentiates between the *Tawrāt* (i.e., Torah), *Injil* (i.e., Gospel), and *Zabūr* (i.e., Psalms). The Bible’s status as intact and authoritative revelation from God is assumed in the Qurʾān as evidenced by its use of terms like “revealed” (*awḥā*) and “sent down” (form II, *nazzala*; form IV, *anzala*, or the passive *unzila*) when referring to the Bible. These are the same terms the Qurʾān uses in self-referential discourse about its status as divine revelation (cf. e.g., Q 3:3; 4:163–66; 5:43–68, *et passim*). For more on the Qurʾān’s notion of “scripture” and areas of continuity and discontinuity with the Bible and other works, see Madigan, *The Qurʾān’s Self Image*; Jeffery, *The Qurʾān as Scripture*.

40. The term *shakhṣ* does not appear in the Qurʾān in this sense. The term and the concept of God’s personhood did, however, develop into a point of contention in later Christian-Muslim disputation literature. An example of this is Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī’s (d. 1013) attack on the terms Christians employ to explain the notion of hypostasis in his “Refutation of the Christians” (Thomas, *Christian Doctrines*, 169). When speaking of the hypostases some Christians opted to use an Arabic calque (sing. *uqnūm*, pl.

walada, “he/it birthed,” and its passive form, *wulida*, “he/it was birthed”) carry the connotation of physical lineage, thereby excluding any figurative use of these terms for indicating that God might have a “Son.”⁴¹

These and other terms are imbedded within the Qurʾān’s particular hermeneutical horizons and act, in a subversive manner, to counter the religious significance Christians might tie to these words. This fact posed a tremendous challenge for the first Christians who ventured to write their theology in Arabic during the early ‘Abbāsīd era (750–1258), and continues to do so today. How were (and are) they to employ the language of the Qurʾān, which Muslims considered the apogee of divine revelation, to articulate a Christian worldview? What terms were (and are) to be used to discuss certain theological realities such as the triune nature of God or the uniting of the divine with the human in Christ?

Inevitably, the choices Christian theologians made in this regard would be influenced by the parameters and concerns set for the discussion by the Qurʾān and nascent Islamic theology. Indeed, these parameters formed a hermeneutical circle within which Christians were pressed to operate. Griffith explains:

That the Qurʾān set the parameters in the Arabic-speaking world for the discussion of important religious doctrines, even Christian ones, can be seen in the structures of the Christian *kalām*.⁴² For example, the doctrine of the Incarnation is often put forward in the framework of a Qurʾānic prophetology, while the doctrine of the Trinity is inevitably discussed in terms of the *ṣifāt Allāh*, the beautiful names (*al-asmāʾ al-Husnā*) of God as one finds them in the Qurʾān. Similarly, the collection of testimonies from the scriptures to the veracity of Christian teachings and interpretations, gathered from Torah, Prophets, Psalms and Gospel, the scriptures as they are mentioned in the Qurʾān, assumed a major importance in Arab Christian texts. It is not

aqānīm) on a Syriac loanword (sing. *qnōmā*, pl. *qnōmē*) to refer the three persons of the Godhead. For more on the background and selection of this terminology by Arab Christian theologians, see Griffith, “The Concept of al-Uqnūm,” 187–91.

41. Cf. Q 112:3. This does not, however, completely rule out the figurative use of the term *ibn* since it is used quite frequently in the Qurʾān to refer to the generic “wayward one” (*ibn al-sabīl*; lit. “son of the road”) without any sense of physical lineage. Cf. e.g., Q 2:215, *et passim*.

42. “*Kalām*” (lit. “speech”) refers to the dialectical mode of Islamic theological discourse that developed as a response both to internecine conflicts in the nascent Muslim community and Muslim disputation with Jews and Christians. See further discussion below.

that Arab Christians did not draw on their earlier traditions in Greek, Syriac, and Coptic to support their creed in the face of new challenges. In fact, many of their difficulties stemmed precisely from their efforts to translate the terms of the traditional doctrinal formulae into Arabic in such a way that the connotations of the Arabic words would not belie their intentions. But overall there swayed the ever-present need to present their ideas within the confines of what we might call the hermeneutical circle of the Qurʾān. In a very real way it determined the possibilities of religious discourse in Arabic in the world of Islam.⁴³

The early ‘Abbāsīd era was a period when Muslims became increasingly eager to validate their beliefs in light of the challenges put forward by their more numerous and philosophically advanced Christian subjects. Intellectual and theological cross-pollination were rampant during this early period, and it is within this matrix that Islamic theology, *‘ilm al-kalām*, originated and matured.

The Challenge of Islamic Theology

There are two views regarding the origins of *kalām* (i.e., Islamic dialectical theology) and its relation to Christian theological discourse about the nature of God. Josef van Ess represents the first view.⁴⁴ He rejects the notion that Christian theology or theologians directly influenced the manner and style of Muslim theological reasoning. Van Ess believes that *kalām* simply evolved around the time of ‘Abd al-Malik (d. 705) when Muslims were arguing over such issues as God’s decrees and the qualifications for Caliph. He bases his view on an investigation of Greek texts as well as early Qadarite and Murj’ite texts—texts authored in Arabic.⁴⁵

43. Griffith, “Arab Christian Texts,” 218.

44. According to van Ess, “Kalām in Arabic is not defined by reference to its contents as, theo-logia, something about God, a logos about God, but is defined in terms of its stylistic form, the dialectical method of argumentation.” Van Ess, “Islamic Theology,” 105. Gardet shares a similar view to that of van Ess in Gardet, “Ilm al-Kalām,” 1141.

45. Generally speaking, the Qadarites are those who affirmed humanity’s ability to make meaningful choices (i.e., free will). The Murj’ites advocated a position of delayed judgment when it came to determining who was a true believer, particularly political leaders who were accused of having committed “grave sin,” thereby excluding themselves from leadership of the Muslim community. Both movements are associated with early theo-political controversies in Islamic history. However, van Ess’s focus in this particular study is not on the contents or the theological positions espoused in these documents but on the form of their argumentation.

After investigating them he concludes that “Muslim civilization did not slowly develop the art of theology and especially of *kalām*, but rather grew up with it.”⁴⁶ He believes that *kalām* developed as a part of a landscape that had always included discussions on theological issues: “There was something like a common stock of ideas, but there does not seem to have been any ‘influence’ in the sense that the Muslims were awakened to a certain problem by Christian counter arguments and that they consciously rectified their position in order to avoid being molested again.”⁴⁷

Michael Cook offers an alternative view. He situates the origins of the *kalām* within the context of Greek and Syriac examples of theological disputation comparable to the Arabic treatises investigated by van Ess. Cook criticizes van Ess for limiting himself to Greek and Arabic materials while overlooking the Syriac “questions and answers” genre.⁴⁸ In Cook’s mind, these provide a convincing source of Muslim borrowing. He finds evidence for this in a set of monothelite (i.e., Maronite) treatises written against a group of dyothelites (i.e., Melkites). According to him, the dating of these sets of questions and answers makes it “implausible that we have in these texts a Maronite borrowing of Muslim *kalām*.”⁴⁹ Cook demonstrates this through an investigation of linguistic constructions found in Syriac texts and then compares them with similar constructions in Arabic. He also finds similar constructs in the intra-Christian dialectical argumentation between Chalcedonians, Monophysites, and Nestorians. In the end, Cook concludes that Muslim-borrowing from Christians probably did take place, and it most likely occurred in Syria. He speculates regarding how this happened, mentioning the polemical pressure of Christianity, a thesis put forth by C. H. Becker,⁵⁰ and the influence of Christian converts to Islam. Cook finds validity in both theses and does

46. Van Ess, “Beginnings,” 90.

47. Ibid., 99. Thomas seems to be in agreement with van Ess regarding the origins of *kalām*. He even argues that Christians borrowed *kalām* methods from the *mutakallimūn*. He states, “John of Damascus’ dismissal in the mid second/eighth century of Muhammad as a fraud and the Qurʾān as an ignorant imitation of the Bible gave way in the third/ninth century to attempts by Arabic-speaking Christians to articulate their doctrines in terms of the distinctive *kalām* logic that Muslim intellectuals were currently employing.” Despite their valiant efforts at contextualizing their faith utilizing *kalām* methods, Thomas believes Christians “actually failed to understand fully what they were about.” Thomas, *Christian Doctrines*, 3.

48. Cf. Daiber, “Masā’il wa Adjwiba,” 636.

49. Cook, “The Origins of ‘Kalām,’” 35; cf. Cook, *Early Muslim Dogma*.

50. Becker “Christian Polemic,” 241–57.

not rule either of them out. He also offers a Syriac origin for the term *kalām* itself. Cook's conclusions make it apparent that *kalām* does in fact have its roots in Christian dialectical theology. He also provides insight regarding the extent to which the sectarian milieu of the late seventh and eighth centuries influenced the style and content of each community's theology as well as the apologetic approaches each adopted in order to defend their respective beliefs.

Among the early controversies that occupied Muslim *mutkallimūn* was the ontological status of God's attributes and the createdness of the Qurʾān. Undergirding these two issues is the notion that if God's attributes are posited to be eternal, then it is reasonable to argue that the Qurʾān itself, as God's speech, is eternal and thence uncreated. All Muslims affirmed that the Qurʾān was God's speech; however, there was a controversy over how the Qurʾān related to the *attribute* of speech, which must be eternal because God is eternal. Since the Qurʾān contains information about historical events and people, some Muslims reasoned that God had determined these beforehand. However, there are also verses that seem to indicate the Qurʾān has some sort of preexistence.⁵¹ The issue was over how Muslims were to reconcile this position with their belief in the eternity of God. For those who came to assert the eternity and uncreatedness of the Qurʾān, they made a logical connection between their position in this regard and God's attribute of speech.⁵²

Clearly, the discussion over God's attributes and the createdness/uncreatedness of God's Word (i.e., the Qurʾān) has a precursor in Christian discussions over the divinity and preexistence of the divine *logos*—Christ.⁵³ Tied to this discussion is the Qurʾān's designation of Christ as the "Word of God" and "a Spirit from him" (Q 3:45; 4:171a).⁵⁴ Forging a connection, many early Christian theologians sought to establish

51. Cf., e.g., Q 85:21–22.

52. For more on the background of this topic, see Watt, *Formative Period*, 179; 242–46. See also the discussion in chapter three.

53. Becker asserts this ["Christian Polemic," 250–51] as does Wolfson. Although Wolfson's works have been criticized for going too far in suggesting a Christian origin for nearly every development in early Islamic theology, they are insightful in terms of the theological parallels he identifies as well as the various sources he investigates in his study of *kalām*. See e.g., Wolfson, "Attributes," 1–18; Wolfson, "Philosophical Implications," 73–80; Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Kalam*.

54. O'Shaughnessy's study on the notion of the "word of God" as it relates to Christ in the Qurʾān remains helpful for understanding this designation in context. See O'Shaughnessy, *Koranic Concept*.

conceptual congruence for a defense of Christ's divinity by referencing these two verses. By affirming that God's Word is eternal and identifying Christ as God's Word (something the Qurʾān advances), Christians could affirm Christ's divinity and accuse those who objected to it of believing there was a time when God was without his Word. For many Christian theologians, this line of argumentation paved the way for them to express their Christology in a manner that comported with their Muslim surroundings.

Contextualized Christian Apologetics in the Arab-Muslim Milieu

At the heart of Islam's challenge to Christian doctrines is the denial of two core tenets of the Christian faith, the Trinity and Incarnation.⁵⁵ The Christian theologians who chose to respond to this challenge defended Christianity through a variety of approaches. Some were involved in debates,⁵⁶ while others engaged in an exchange of letters between leaders.⁵⁷ Still others wrote systematic treatises wherein they sought to provide both rational and scripturally based explanations of Christian doctrines. Others supplemented rational and scriptural reasoning with allusions to or full quotes from the Qurʾān. In rare cases, some Christians "built their apologetic arguments in behalf of Christianity on certain interpretations of particular verses from Islamic scripture."⁵⁸ A few were ostensibly willing to place the Qurʾān on the same level as the Bible, while still maintaining orthodox positions on the Trinity and Incarnation.⁵⁹

For their part, notable Muslim polemicists, such as Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq (d. 861), al-Nāshī' al-Akbar (d. 906), Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013), and ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 1025), among others, reduced their explanations of Christianity to a refutation of Trinity and Incarnation.⁶⁰ The

55. Cf., e.g., Q 4:171b; 5:17, 72–73, 116; 9:30–31; 19:35; 23:91; 25:2; 112:3–4.

56. For an examination of this apologetic strategy, see Griffith, "The Monk in the Emir's *Majlis*," 13–65.

57. The most notable in this regard is the ninth century correspondence between the Christian al-Kindī and the Muslim al-Hāshimī, which circulated widely in both the East and West. See Griffith, *Shadow*, 86–88, and the discussion below.

58. Griffith, "Arab Christian Texts," 204.

59. The anonymous tract entitled by Griffith, "*Answers for the Shaykh*," presents a highly contextualized (syncretized?) defense of the Trinity and hypostatic union. Its author frequently quotes from the Qurʾān in the context of offering reasons from "revelation" for believing these doctrines. See Griffith, "*Answers for the Shaykh*," 277–309.

60. In addition to providing editions of their polemical texts in Arabic with English

reason for this was the obvious challenge the Trinity and Incarnation posed to the monadic conceptualization of God's unity (*tawhīd*) that is at the center of the Islam's proclamation. Commenting on al-Bāqillānī, David Thomas notes that "al-Bāqillānī uses Christianity. . . to show that as an alternative to Islam it is wrong. And like many other anti-Christian polemicists of this period he does this by attacking the Trinity and Incarnation, the two doctrines that threaten to compromise the Islamic doctrine of God."⁶¹

Most of the attacks the Muslim *mutakallimūn* carried out on Christianity and Christian doctrines were at the abstract level. They extracted doctrines like the Trinity and Incarnation from the Bible's narrative context within which those doctrines are developed and recast them as an assemblage of propositions that were then subject to critique by *kalām* methods.⁶² Their method in this regard was undoubtedly influenced by the way the Qurʾān itself refers to Christian doctrines like the Trinity or the divinity of Christ in an elliptical manner.

In light of this, one of the main approaches Christian theologians developed for explaining the divinity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity was the attribute apology. The attribute apology is an apologetic strategy that appears unique to Arabic-speaking Christians living in the world of Islam. It was devised in the context of the intra-Muslim debate over God's attributes mentioned previously. Mark Swanson gives a succinct explanation of the general strategy as follows:

1. the assimilation of the trinitarian hypostases to the attributes of God, in particular attributes that are given in, or deducible from, the Qurʾān; 2. the claim that the point of the doctrine of the Trinity is the affirmation that (1) God is (2) living and (3) speaking (knowing, wise, etc.); or, in other versions, that God is (1) an essence, or existing, (2) living, and (3) speaking (knowing, wise, etc.); 3. when necessary, the affirmation that each «adjectival» attribute (e.g., existing, living, speaking) corresponds to a nominal form (existence, life, speech) which is a reality in

translations, Thomas gives helpful biographical information and introductions to al-Nāshī, al-Bāqillānī, and ʿAbd al-Jabbār in Thomas, *Christian Doctrines*, 19–34, 119–41, 205–24.

61. *Ibid.*, 126.

62. Thomas provides a survey of the history of the literature produced by Christians in defense of these two doctrines and Muslim critiques of them in Thomas, *Christian Doctrines*, 1–18. See also the introductions to the following two works: Warrāq, *Anti-Christian Polemic*; Warrāq, *Early Muslim Polemic*.

God; 4. the correlation of the biblical names «Father», «Son,» and «Holy Spirit» with the attributes discussed, e.g., the Father is the Existence (al-wuğūd), the Son is the Speech (an-nuṭq), and the Holy Spirit is the Life (al-ḥayāt); 5. an argument as to why the hypostases are only three in number.⁶³

While John of Damascus may have been the first Christian theologian to suggest explaining the Trinity in terms of the divine attributes,⁶⁴ other theologians writing in Arabic seized upon the idea to build a contextualized defense of the doctrine. Among the more sophisticated versions of the attribute apology is that of the Nestorian theologian, 'Ammār al-Baṣrī. Al-Baṣrī's intention, according to Griffith, was "to utilize the discussion of the divine attributes to defend the reasonableness of the doctrine of the Trinity."⁶⁵ He offers the attribute apology as a solution to the linguistic dilemma faced by his contemporary Muslim *mutakallimūn* when they spoke of God. Al-Baṣrī believed that the locus of the problem for the *mutakallimūn* in understanding Christian discourse about the Trinity and Jesus' status within the Godhead had to do with their assumption that the physical aspects of generation, characteristic of humans, obtained when Christians spoke of God as "Father" and Jesus as his "Son." They could not tolerate attributing "fatherhood" or "sonship" to "persons" within the Godhead since these terms were qualities attributable to created beings not God. This, in turn, led to an inversion in the way they assessed Christian discourse about God. God's attributes, "knowing," "living," "speaking," etc., were thought to apply to God metaphorically when, in fact, according to al-Baṣrī, it is the other way around. They belong to God essentially and to humans metaphorically:

. . . it is not legitimate for us, just because we see them [i.e., the attributes] as originated (*muḥdathatan*), since we are ourselves originated, to say that they belong to the Creator as originated. Rather, since they belong to the Creator in actual reality (*bil-ḥaқиqah*), and to us only on loan (*bil-isti'arah*) from Him, we must say that they belong to Him eternally (*azaliyyatan*).⁶⁶

63. Swanson, "Are Hypostases Attributes?," 239–40.

64. See Sahas's description of John's explanation of the Trinity in Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 78–84; cf. also Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 486. I am assuming that John is the author of chapter 101 in his *Fount of Knowledge* though some scholars question this.

65. Griffith, "The Concept of al-Uqnūm," 183.

66. Griffith "Ammār al-Baṣrī's Kitāb al-Burhān," 173; for the Arabic, see Hayek, *Ammār*, 59.

For al-Baṣrī, it is inappropriate to equate the particularities of God’s essence (e.g., “fatherhood” and “sonship”) with the “appurtenances of human, bodily generation, which bespeak imperfection.”⁶⁷ In this way, al-Baṣrī presents the doctrine of the Trinity as a solution to the linguistic dilemma faced by the Muslim *mutakallimūn*, whom he depicts as explicitly trying to avoid the Trinity.⁶⁸ In a later generation, the Jacobite theologian and philosopher, Yaḥyā b. ‘Adī, would defend the Trinity along similar lines.⁶⁹

Christian Approaches to the Qurʾān

In his investigation of Christian approaches to the exegesis of the Qurʾān from the eighth to the twelfth centuries, Paul Khoury notes that Christian apologetic responses to Islam were oftentimes characterized not by appeals to tradition, but by appeals to Scripture—to the Bible and the Qurʾān. Khoury identifies several ways in which Christian theologians employed qurʾānic passages in their apologetics. These include the use of texts to demonstrate the veracity of Christian practices, criteria for what constitutes true religion, and the use of texts to defend Christian belief in both the Trinity and the Incarnation. He points out that Christian apologetic use of the Qurʾān was frequently countered by Muslim arguments to the effect that Christian use of their book implied its divine character.⁷⁰ Christians replied to these arguments in a number of ways, chief among them was questioning the Qurʾān’s origins.

In the earliest documents that record Christian encounters with the Qurʾān, there is evidence that many of the Christians were uncertain regarding its composition. Griffith notes that in ca. 720 a monk of Bêt Ḥālê is reported as distinguishing between the Qurʾān and *sūrat al-baqara*, the second *sūra* of the Qurʾān.⁷¹ Similarly, John of Damascus, writing in Greek in the mid-eighth century, spoke of the Muslims possessing a “book” (βιβλίον), but he refers to several *sūras* independently as “scripture” (ἡ γραφή), giving the indication that he believed them to be separate works.⁷² John also categorized Islam as a heresy and the Qurʾān

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid., 171.

69. Cf. ‘Adī, *Jawāb ‘an Radd Abī ‘Isā al-Warrāq*.

70. Khoury, *Exégèse chrétienne du Coran*, 7–12.

71. Griffith, “Arab Christian Texts,” 205–6.

72. Ibid., 206.

as “preposterous.”⁷³ Moreover, he attributes Muḥammad’s theology in the Qurʾān to an Arian monk.⁷⁴ Christians eventually developed the idea that Muḥammad had contact with a heretical Christian monk into a full polemical argument, naming the monk Sergius Baḥīrā and making him responsible for the Qurʾān.⁷⁵

However, by the ninth century things began to change. As Mark Swanson notes, “arabophone Christians were learning to pray using Qurʾānic turns of phrase; to relate to God’s dealing with humankind in narrative filled with Qurʾānic echoes.”⁷⁶ This Arabization (and Islami-cization) of Christianity prompted many Christian theologians to offer apologetic and polemical responses. In doing so, however, each ecclesiastical community and their theologians made use of the Qurʾān. And this should not come as a surprise given the context within which they were residing. Nevertheless, “no medieval Christian apologist would allow the Qurʾān entire freedom to speak.”⁷⁷ Over time they developed a spectrum of approaches to the Qurʾān ranging from polemical attacks to more irenic approaches that included qurʾānic allusions, intertextual echoes, and quotes designed to resonate with their audience while upholding the author’s belief in the veracity of Christianity.

On the polemical end of this spectrum is the well-known, though probably fictitious, correspondence between a Christian and a Muslim, *Risālat al-Kindī* (*The Apology of al-Kindī*). Composed in Arabic some-time during the ninth century and translated into Latin from Garshūnī⁷⁸ in 1141, this work contains a forceful attack on many of the central tenets of the Islamic faith, including a frontal attack on the origins, collection, redaction, and language of the Qurʾān.⁷⁹ At the other end of the spectrum is the eighth or ninth century letter from an anonymous Melkite monk

73. Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 89.

74. *Ibid.*, 73–74.

75. Griffith, “Arab Christian Texts,” 206–10; cf. Griffith, “Muḥammad and the Monk Baḥīrā,” 146–74. Roggema argues that the Baḥīrā legend developed in the middle of the eighth century. See Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 5.

76. Swanson, “Beyond Prooftexting,” 319.

77. *Ibid.*, 318.

78. Garshūnī (or Karshūnī) is Arabic written in Syriac letters.

79. For an English translation of the text itself, see Newman, *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 381–545. For a recent discussion of authorship and an extensive bibliography of the various manuscripts and scholarly studies on the text, see Bottini, “The Apology of al-Kindī,” 1:585–94.

to a Muslim sheikh in Jerusalem. Griffith has entitled the letter, “*Answers for the Shaykh*.”⁸⁰ What is interesting in this letter is the way the author defends his belief in the Trinity and Incarnation on the basis of references to *kutub Allāh* (“God’s books”), i.e., the Bible and Qurʾān. There is no polemical attack; the author offers simple allusions and references to “revelation,” giving one the impression that in discussions of Christian doctrines like the Trinity and Incarnation, “the Qurʾān somehow participated virtually as an equal partner in a revelatory discourse.”⁸¹

Despite the ambiguity regarding the revelatory status of the Qurʾān in “*Answers for the Shaykh*,” overall there is very little indication that Christian writers during the first several centuries of Christian-Muslim dialogue and debate accepted the Qurʾān as revelation from God. Commenting on the use of the Qurʾān in the eighth century text, *On the Triune Nature of God* (one of the theological treatises to be analyzed in this book), Griffith states:

So the question arises, does he [the anonymous author] consider the Qurʾān a revealed scripture on par with the Law, the Prophets, the Psalms, and the Gospel? While the answer to this question is surely “No,” given the fact that throughout the treatise arguments from the Bible and Christian tradition are adduced expressly to respond to the challenge of Islamic teaching, nevertheless the fact remains that the prominence of the Qurʾān’s influence in the work does testify to the Muslim scripture’s active currency even among Christians in the Arabic-speaking community of eighth-century Palestine. And the author obviously thought that his quotations from the Qurʾān would have some probative value for his apologetic purposes.⁸²

In his analysis of this and other texts, Griffith demonstrates that Christian adoption of Arabic as a theological language resulted in a degree of Islamicization in the diction and phraseology of early Arabic Christian theology. Words, phrases, and even (in rare cases) the rhymed prose style (*sajʿ*) of the Qurʾān “suffused the religious conscious” of many Christian theologians writing in Arabic.⁸³ These developments reveal the

80. For a description of the letter and relevant bibliography, see Salah et al., “Masāʾil wa ajwiba ‘aqliyya wa-ilāhiyya,” 1:661–63.

81. Griffith, “*Answers to the Shaykh*,” 303. Obviously, if this is the case, a position of this sort is untenable for evangelicals.

82. Griffith, *Shadow*, 56.

83. Griffith, “Arab Christian Texts,” 204.

extent to which the Qurʾān had “set the agenda” for Christians writing theology in Arabic.⁸⁴ Indeed, the whole shape and orientation of Christian theology authored within the world of Islam was impacted by the necessity of having to take Islamic frames of reference into account and defend the faith from the burgeoning class of Muslim *mutakallimūn* who, taking their cue from the Qurʾān, set out to attack the central tenets of the Christian faith.⁸⁵ Keating explains:

The shift to Arabic forced Christian apologists to contend with the difficulties it presented as a language. Whereas John of Damascus had composed his summary of Christian doctrine and the “heresy” of Islam in the first half of the eighth century in Greek . . . later writers were confronted with the problem of translating complex ideas and doctrines into an idiom that explicitly precluded their basic premises, and in the beginning, had not yet acquired the vocabulary necessary for such an enterprise. The problem was thrown into relief when Christians tried to articulate ideas in terminology already dominated by *Qurʾānic* images.⁸⁶

It is important to mention that irenic approaches to the Qurʾān were not limited to Arabic-speaking Christians.⁸⁷ In the Latin West, Riccoldo of Monte Croce (d. 1320), author of the widely read and translated polemic against Islam, *Contra legem sarracenorum*, offered what Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) termed a “righteous interpretation” of the Qurʾān that enabled one to “sift” through what was false and what was true.⁸⁸ Thomas Burman notes that despite the vitriol found in Riccoldo’s work, one also finds that “the Qurʾān is not entirely a catalogue of error and deceit . . .” At times, Riccoldo strikes an irenic tone and demonstrates “that there is much in the Qurʾān that can be used by Christians to argue—as he does

84. Griffith, *Shadow*, 56.

85. For a discussion of how these phenomena shaped the theological orientation of Syriac and Arabic Christian texts from first ‘Abbasid century, see Griffith, “The Prophet Muhammad,” 99–146.

86. Keating, *Defending the “People of Truth,”* 23–24.

87. For a historical overview of western (i.e., European) evaluations and responses to Islam, including missionary strategies, see Tolán, *Saracens*.

88. Nicolas was known for his irenic approach both to Jews and Muslims, all the while arguing for the truth of Christianity. For more see Biechler, “Christian Humanism,” 1–14.

in his tract—for the primacy of the Bible, and the veracity of the core Christian beliefs in the Trinity and Incarnation.”⁸⁹

In the modern period, many evangelicals residing in or originating from Muslim majority countries, such as Abdul-Haqq,⁹⁰ Fouad Accad,⁹¹ and Raouf Ghattas,⁹² argue that Muslims have misinterpreted the Qurʾān in numerous places and that when certain verses are interpreted correctly they affirm many of the beliefs to which Christians adhere. But this type of approach to the Qurʾān poses a number of questions. What constitutes a “correct” reading of the Qurʾān? Can Christians interpret the meanings of select Qurʾānic verses apart from the history of their interpretation developed within the classical corpus of Muslim *tafsīr* literature?⁹³ Can they use the Qurʾān in any way to support their doctrines? If they do, are they implicitly elevating the status of the Qurʾān to that of the Bible? What is the apologetic strategy envisioned by Christians who make positive use of the Qurʾān?

89. Burman, “Polemic, Philology, and Ambivalence,” 182.

90. Abdul-Haqq, *Sharing Your Faith*, 39, *et passim*.

91. Accad, *Building Bridges*, 59–62, *et passim*.

92. Ghattas and Ghattas, *Guide to the Qurʾān*, 32, *et passim*.

93. “*Tafsīr*” refers to the genre of classical exegetical and interpretive literature on the Qurʾān. The word itself is the verbal noun of form II of the verb *fassara* (“to interpret”) and corresponds to the Hebrew cognate in the piʿel פָּרַשׁ. Norman Calder provides a good description of *tafsīr*: “*Tafsīr* is a literary genre with definable formal characteristics. The most fundamental of these is the presence of the complete canonical text of the Qurʾān (or at least a significant chunk of it), segmented for purposes of comment, and dealt with in canonical order. In a work of *tafsīr*, passages of comment invariably follow canonical segments. Canon and segmentation, lemma and comment: where these are not systematically present, then a work is not an example of the central tradition of *tafsīr*, though it may belong to the margins of that tradition. This formal structure is so fundamental as to require no exemplification.” See Calder, “*Tafsīr*,” 101. Over the centuries, the body of *tafsīr* literature developed into an enormous corpus. Today it is generally believed that this corpus contains the final and authoritative interpretation of the Qurʾān’s meaning. The problem, however, is that the methods for interpreting the Qurʾān employed by various *mufasssīrūn* have varied throughout the centuries and, in many cases, they fail to understand the meaning of many passages. See the discussion in chapter five.