

# THEOLOGICAL FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO THE RISE OF ISLAM IN CHRISTIAN CONTEXTS

Joe M. Allen III

## Introduction

For half a millennium, Christianity flourished across Arabia and North Africa. Theologians such as Justin Martyr from Judea, John Chrysostom from Syrian Antioch, and Tertullian, Athanasius, and Augustine from North Africa profoundly shaped Christian theology. In the seventh and eighth centuries, Arabs, united by their newfound faith in Islam, began to spread out from Arabia. Massive swaths of Arabia and North Africa, which had long been bastions of Christianity, came under Arab control. The Arabs conquered an area larger than the Persian or Roman Empires had ever controlled. Over time, Islam replaced Christianity as the dominant religion in these places.

## Purpose and Significance

Generations of historians have sought to understand the dynamics at work in the Arab expansion and the decline of Christianity in Arabia and North Africa. Some have emphasized political and military factors, others economic or social factors, and each of these factors played a role.<sup>1</sup> Yet these reasons fail to adequately explain the decline of Christianity under Islam because, as Moffett notes, Christianity had “known the weight of these burdens longer than any Christian community anywhere in the world” and yet “had survived with vigor.”<sup>2</sup>

This paper highlights the role of theology in a community’s acceptance or rejection of Islam. The thesis of this paper is that the *lack* of a Bible in the local language and *non*-Trinitarian doctrine led some Christian communities to accept Islam more rapidly than communities that possessed the Bible in their language and held to Nicene orthodoxy. These variables provide explanatory power as to why some communities quickly assimilated with Islam and others survived longer under Muslim rule.<sup>3</sup> While the arrival of Muslim armies did not cause the

---

<sup>1</sup> Christian C. Sahner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 38–40.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia: Beginnings to 1500*, vol. 1 (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 360–61.

<sup>3</sup> Historians used to speak of the total disappearance of Christianity under Islam. Recently, scholars have highlighted evidence that some Christian communities continued under Islamic rule. For example, Mark A. Handley, “Disputing the End of African Christianity,” in *Vandals, Romans and Berbers: New Perspectives on Late*

immediate or total collapse of Christianity as previously thought, historians still must account for the large numbers of Christians who came to embrace Islam in a relatively short amount of time.

In addition to refining our historical understanding, this investigation has lasting significance for missiologists and Christian leaders who wish to learn from the events that led to the widespread loss of faith among many Christian communities in late antiquity. These lessons can serve the contemporary church by illustrating how to protect modern churches from apostasy when confronted by intense, external pressures.

### **Heretical Influences on the Development of Islam**

Similarities between heretical forms of Christianity and Islamic theology give plausibility to the theory that heretical Christians would find Islam less abrasive than orthodox Christians. One of the earliest Christian perspectives of Islam comes from John of Damascus. In his diatribe against Islam, John of Damascus “attributes the origins of Muhammad’s heresy to the malign influence of an Arian monk.”<sup>4</sup> Although the Qur’an contains stories from the Bible, no Arabic translation of the Bible existed at the time of Muhammad.<sup>5</sup> Apocryphal texts, however, such as *The Protoevangelium of James*, *The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, and the *Infancy Story of Thomas* did exist in pre-Islamic times.<sup>6</sup> Unorthodox Christian sects, which proliferated in Arabia

---

*Antique North Africa* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2004), 291–310. He shows that correspondence between the Papal authorities in Rome and Christians in North Africa continued until at least the twelfth century. That these communities were in communion with the Roman Church indicates that the surviving communities were not Arian.

<sup>4</sup> John of Damascus, *Writings*, trans. Fredrick H. Chase, Jr., vol. 37 *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 153; Bronwen Neil, “The Earliest Greek Understandings of Islam: John of Damascus and Theophanes the Confessor,” in *Religious Conflict from Early Christianity to the Rise of Islam*, ed. Wendy Mayer and Bronwen Neil (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), 219.

<sup>5</sup> Hikmat Kashouh, *The Arabic Versions of the Gospels: The Manuscripts and Their Families* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 319–24, suggests parts of the Gospels predate the Qur’an in Arabic, but Robinson, who represents the common view, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, 17, states, “It is unlikely that the canonical Christian scriptures or other Christian writings were translated into Arabic before the rise of Islam.” Cf. Fouad Elias Accad, *Building Bridges: Christianity and Islam* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997), 40; Sarah Leila Hussein, “Early Christian Explanations of the Trinity in Arabic in the Context of Muslim Theology” (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2011), 35; Imad N. Shehadeh, “Do Muslims and Christians Believe in the Same God?” *BSac* 161 (2004): 17; Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 236; Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, 330; Robert Frank Ramey, “The Soteriology of Islam” (ThM thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1959), 17, grieves the absence of a Bible in Arabic in the seventh century. He speculates about an alternative history in which Muhammad had access to the Bible in his language, “It is hard to imagine what the spiritual condition of the Moslem world would be today if Mohammed had been presented the true doctrine of the Trinity and of the Person and work of Christ.”

<sup>6</sup> Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 19. Robinson sees similarities between the Qur’an’s representation of Jesus and these apocryphal texts—texts that taught unorthodox Christologies. He writes, “Some features of the Qur’anic representation of Jesus which cannot be traced to the canonical gospels or to the *Diatesseron* are reminiscent of the apocryphal infancy gospels.” Strange Mariological

at the time of Muhammad, used these extra-canonical Christian texts and held to a broad range of heretical notions about the Trinity.<sup>7</sup> The Qur'an's polemic against the Trinity appears to be a reaction against groups that venerated Mary and elevated her to the level of a deity.<sup>8</sup> Robinson offers a helpful summary, "It is arguable that the Qur'an sides at times with the Nestorians and at times with the Monophysites but attempts to resolve the differences between them by insisting that neither of them are right about the person of Christ."<sup>9</sup>

Islam made itself attractive to heretical Christian sects by paying homage to Jesus while denying his deity. Muhammad's genius, *inter alia*, lay in his ability to syncretize his system with other faiths.<sup>10</sup> Muslims go to lengths to affirm their respect for Jesus, often pronouncing "Peace

---

heresies had also entered the Arabian Peninsula by the time of Muhammad. Robinson writes, "The fourth-century Christian heresiologist Epiphanius mentions the Antideco-Marianites who worshipped Mary as a goddess. It is possibly they who are envisaged in the Qur'anic insinuation that Christians deified both Jesus and his mother."

<sup>7</sup> Robinson, 18–21. Although the Nestorian position contended with Chalcedonian Christology and not Nicene Trinitarianism, such doctrinal nuances do not seem to have been clear in Muhammad's mind. Heretical groups, such as "radically anti-Trinitarian Jewish sects, the Ebionites and Elkesaites, were active in Arabia." Cf. Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, 236, writes, "Misconceptions as to the Trinity and Jesus make clear that Muhammad was hardly in a position to know firsthand the authentic Christianity of the New Testament." By the sixth and seventh centuries, sizable groups of Nestorians and Monophysites occupied the Arabian Peninsula and sent missionaries to propagate their message. Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), Kindle edition, ch. 1, "The End of Global Christianity." Monophysitism is the belief that Jesus had only one nature, and Nestorianism is the belief that Jesus has two natures that are not united. Both beliefs fall outside the bounds of the Chalcedonian definition (451 C.E.) of Christology. To avoid the idea that Mary gave birth to God or that God suffered on the cross, Nestorians maintain a strong distinction between the man Jesus, who was born and died, and the divine Jesus, who walked on water and raised the dead. Youssef Courbage and Philippe Fargues, *Christians and Jews under Islam*, trans. Judy Marbo (London: I.B.Tauris, 1997), 4; Fouad Elias Accad, *Building Bridges: Christianity and Islam* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997), 40; John L. Esposito, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 310. William A. Bower records, "The Nestorians had a great influence in the Middle East at the time when Islam arose, and the Jacobites, who were monophysites, were influential in Arabia." William A. Bower, "The Christology of Islam" (ThM thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1955), 18.

<sup>8</sup> Robinson, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Robinson, 20, says, "The Qur'an's insinuation that Christians took Jesus and Mary as deities in addition to God (5:116) may therefore echo Nestorian anti-Orthodox polemic." Cf. John Anthony McGuckin, *The Path of Christianity: The First Thousand Years* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 632. "In agreement with the Nestorians it stresses the full humanity of Jesus and Mary. In agreement with the Monophysites it emphasizes that God is One. In opposition to both it rejects all Trinitarian language and all talk of divine Sonship no matter how it is understood." Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, 20. In Q al-Māida 5:116–7, Muhammad denounces the notion of Jesus and Mary as competing gods beside Allah. Lyle L. Vander Werff attributes these strains of thought to Muhammad's interactions with Nestorians and Jews who misrepresented Christianity to him, in *Christian Mission to Muslims: The Record: Anglican and Reformed Approaches in India and the near East, 1800–1938* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> G. Francis S. Gray, "The Decline and Survival of Christianity in Asia," *IRM* 42 (1953): 400. George Fry, *CT* (1969), 4, "Islam takes the principles, personalities, events, and promises of sacred history and revises and uses this familiar material in a manner foreign to the spirit and letter of primitive Christianity. This new synthesis is presented to the world as the pristine revelation of God. It is precisely at this point that Islam becomes Christianity's greatest theological challenge, for it is the oldest and most widespread surviving revision of the Gospel."

be upon him,” when they say his name.<sup>11</sup> The result is that the Qur’anic presentation of Jesus is, what Cragg calls, “confusion about confusions.”<sup>12</sup> Muhammad’s interactions with heretical groups not only failed to provide him an accurate picture of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, but they also repelled him with their distortions.<sup>13</sup> Tisdall makes a devastating judgment about the effect of Christian heresy on the history of Islam,

We must not therefore forget that Muhammad was never brought into contact with pure Gospel Christianity; and it is largely to the false forms which the faith had then almost universally assumed that the rise of Islam is really due, since repulsion from these prevented Muhammad from ever really seeking to discover the truth contained in the Gospel, and thus impelled him to found a new and anti-Christian religion.<sup>14</sup>

### Arab Conquests and the Rise of Islam

Muhammad and his followers achieved a series of unlikely victories on the battlefield, which Muslims and non-Muslims alike interpreted as evidence of divine authentication of Islam and judgment on the “Romans.”<sup>15</sup> Before he died around 632, Muhammad had most of Arabia

---

<sup>11</sup> The Qur’an mentions Jesus (*Isa*) many times. Qamar-ul Huda, “Knowledge of Allah and the Islamic View of Other Religions,” *TS* 64 (2003): 298, says, “He is mentioned in 15 chapters and 93 verses. The proper name in Arabic for Jesus is ‘Isā, which occurs 25 times in the Qur’an.”

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), 28, quoted in Timothy George, “Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?” in *God the Holy Trinity: Reflections on Christian Faith and Practice*, ed. Timothy George (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 96. Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 212, adds that Christian groups like “monophysites, whose formulations of trinitarian doctrine emphasized Christ’s single nature, or Nestorians, who emphasized Christ’s human nature and played down his divinity,” were more compatible with Islam.

<sup>13</sup> William St. Clair Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur’an* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1905), 139–40, comments, “Lamentable indeed is the reflection that so small a portion of the fair form of Christianity was disclosed by the ecclesiastics and monks of Syria, and that little how altered and distorted! Instead of the simple majesty of the Gospels—as a revelation of God reconciling mankind to Himself through His Son—the sacred dogma of the Trinity was forced upon the traveler with the misleading and offensive zeal of Eutychian and Jacobite partisanship, and the worship of Mary exhibited in so gross a form as to leave the impression upon the mind of Muhammad that she was held to be a goddess, if not the third Person and consort of the Deity. It must surely have been by such blasphemous extravagances that Muhammad was repelled from the true doctrine of Jesus as the Son of God, and led to regard Him only as Jesus, son of Mary, the sole title by which He is spoken of in the Qur’an.”

<sup>14</sup> Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur’an*, 140; George, “Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?” 41, quotes Gairdner, who laments, “Islam was a perpetual reminder to Christendom of the latter’s failure truly to represent her Lord. For if she had done so, Muhammad would have been a Christian.” Gairdner may have overstated his case, but he rightly judged that the spread of heresy left the Christian community theologically weak and unable to present a compelling, majestic picture of Christ to Muhammad.

<sup>15</sup> Esposito, *Islam*, 9, writes, “For Muslims ... God had sanctioned and assisted His soldiers (Quran 3:123, 8:42ff) in victory.” Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity: The Thousand Years of Uncertainty*, 3rd ed., vol. 2 (New York: Harper, 1938), 290, observes, “It must be said that forcible conversions from Christianity to Islam were the exception and not the rule. To be sure, such conversions occurred often and in large numbers. Yet the majority of the accessions of Christians to Islam must be attributed to other causes. The most powerful and frequent were, at the outset, a loss of faith in Christianity wrought by the military victories of Islam

under his control. The Caliphs, or *successors*, ruled in the name of Muhammad and ostensibly continued his intentions to establish Islam as a universal religion. Ibn Ishaq, Muhammad's primary biographer, tells a story from the latter part of Muhammad's life about the prophet sending letters to Heraclius, the Emperor of Byzantium, and the Persian emperor Khosrow instructing them to convert to Islam. This letter, of questionable authenticity, along with scattered instructions in the Qur'an, gave the early leaders of Islam justification to conquer beyond the borders of Arabia.

Two years after Muhammad's death, a band of Arab-Muslim warriors, under the direction of Abu-Bakr, successfully sacked the cities and towns from Gaza as far north as Cesarea.<sup>16</sup> Palestine, Syria, and Mesopotamia fell in rapid succession. Egypt fell to Arabs a mere seven years after Muhammad's death. In 643, Arabs took control of Lybia and breeched the walls of Carthage in 698. Iran, home to the Sasanian Empire, the Zoroastrian religion, and a large minority of Nestorian Christians, fell to the Arabs in about 654. In 711, Arabs invaded Spain and conquered it after seven more years. In less than 120 years after Muhammad's death, Arab control spanned from Afghanistan in the east to Spain in the west. Griffith estimates that "fifty percent of the world's confessing Christians from the mid-seventh to the end of the eleventh centuries found themselves living under Muslim rule."<sup>17</sup> The subjugated people were called *dhimmi*s and reduced to second or third-class citizens.

In the popular imagination, Islam spread by the sword.<sup>18</sup> This misconception comes from a failure to distinguish the Arab conquests from the Islamization of those lands. As modern

---

and the conviction that the divine favour must be with the latter, followed later by the desire to escape the discriminatory taxation and the inferior social status which were the lot of Christians under the Moslem rulers." Cf. Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1925) 160–1; Mazhar-ul-Haq, *A Short History of Islam: From the Rise of Islam to the Fall of Baghdad, 571 A.D. to 1258 A.D.*, 2nd ed. (Lahore, Pakistan: Bookland, 1977), 67; Laurence Edward Browne, *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia from the Time of Muhammad till the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 184–85.

<sup>16</sup> Bat Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude* (Cranberry, NJ: Associated University Press, 1996). "Four thousand Jewish, Christian, and Samaritan peasants who defended their land were massacred."

<sup>17</sup> Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam, Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton Univ Pr, 2008), 11.

<sup>18</sup> Gibbon, Edward. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. IX, chapt. L (London: Vernor, Hood, and Sharpe, 1806), 218. Gibbon describes Muhammad as a military leader who spread Islam by means of military conquest. He writes, "While the state was exhausted by the Persian war, and the church was distracted by the Nestorian and Monophysite sects, Mahomet, with the sword in one hand and the Koran in the other, erected his throne on the ruins of Christianity and of Rome." Subsequent historians have noted the glaring impossibility of Gibbon's characterization because Muhammad could not have held the Qur'an in one hand because it was only published as a book after his death. John Moorhead, "The Earliest Christian Theological Response to

historians refine their understanding of Islam’s momentous rise in Christian contexts, they have retreated from earlier tropes that tended to conflate the Arab conquests with the rise of Islam.<sup>19</sup> Although the two events are closely intertwined, both in the sense that Islam unified and fortified the Arabian tribes into a potent military force and in the sense that the Arabian conquerors brought Islam with them wherever they went, it is important to separate the Arab conquests from the Islamization of the lands they conquered. While Arab Muslims took control of a vast empire with astonishing speed, they ruled as a minority for decades—and in some places for centuries—until Islam came to dominate the religious and social landscape. The Arab invaders found remarkable success on the battlefield, so the *introduction* of Islam to Christian lands was rapid. The *acceptance* of Islam by the locals, however, happened at varying rates depending on different factors.<sup>20</sup> In some cases, mass conversion to Islam happened almost concurrent with a region’s surrender to the Arab armies. In other cases, a small minority of Muslim Arabs ruled a majority Christian population for decades or centuries. When one distinguishes the Arab conquests from the acceptance of Islam, it becomes clear that Islam did not directly spread by the sword, but Arab dominion did.”<sup>21</sup>

Sahner paints a more realistic—and more complex—picture of the post-conquest situation.<sup>22</sup> He does not “discount the fact that the Islamic empire was forged in the cauldron of conquest, which, like all wars, imposed suffering and deprivation on native populations, including Christians.”<sup>23</sup> Nor does he “discount the fact that Muslims and Christians made antagonistic and mutually exclusive claims about the nature of God or that Muslims enjoyed

---

Islam,” *Religion* (1981) 11, 265–274, points out that the charge that Islam spread as a function of the sword is very ancient. A medieval manuscript records a confrontation between a Nestorian church leader named Anajesus and the third Umayyad Caliph ‘Abd-al-Malik, who died in 705, in which Anajesus remarks that the Arab empire was “established by the sword and not a faith confirmed by miracles, as the Christian faith and the old law of Moses.” Subsequent historians have noted the glaring impossibility of Gibbon’s characterization because Muhammad could not have held the Qur’an in one hand because it was only published as a book after his death. Of course, the charge that Islam spread as a function of the sword is very ancient. A medieval manuscript records a confrontation between a Nestorian church leader named Anajesus and the third Umayyad Caliph ‘Abd-al-Malik, who died in 705, in which Anajesus remarks that the Arab empire was “established by the sword and not a faith confirmed by miracles, as the Christian faith and the old law of Moses.”

<sup>19</sup> Robert G. Hoyland, *In God’s Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire*, Ancient Warfare and Civilization (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

<sup>21</sup> William J. Hamblin and Daniel Peterson, “Arabs, Not Islam, Spread by the Sword,” *Deseret News*, June 2, 2012, <https://www.deseret.com/2012/6/2/20416147/arabs-not-islam-spread-by-the-sword>.

<sup>22</sup> Christian C. Sahner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 5–6.

<sup>23</sup> Sahner, 6.

privileged access to political, social, and economic power, which they used to marginalize their competitors.”<sup>24</sup> Yet Sahner’s reading of the historical record leads him to conclude, “Private, nonstate violence against non-Muslims was not a major feature of the postconquest period, nor was forced conversion.”<sup>25</sup> He continues, “On balance, the Umayyads and ‘Abbasids were not much interested in persecuting Christians, at least systematically.... [They] allowed them to live as they wished provided they paid the *jizya* (the poll tax imposed on non-Muslims).”<sup>26</sup> Some sources indicate that the vanquished people welcomed Muslim rule because they believed that their situation would improve. Perhaps surprisingly, some early Muslim rulers discouraged conversion to Islam, realizing that their tax revenue would dwindle as the number of taxable non-Muslims dwindled. Ultimately, discouraging conversion proved difficult because conversion enabled *dhimmi*s to escape hardship and to find significant opportunities for economic and social advancement.

Of course, much depends on the definition of “forced conversion.” Fairbairn remarks that “the key ingredient in the conquests was not the use of force, but the threat of force.”<sup>27</sup> Yet, one is hard-pressed to see how the threat of force does not count as force. If forced conversion means a choice between conversion or death, then, according to this definition one may deny that the Arabs forced many to convert. If, on the other hand, forced conversion involved heavy financial and social pressure from the Muslim government, then few people voluntarily converted. In fact, as one scholar contends, “Payment of tribute and submission to Islamic law or the ... enslavement of survivors—is, in its very terms, a contravention of the principle of religious freedom.”<sup>28</sup> Muslim rulers imposed various forms of discrimination against non-Muslims, such as requiring them to wear a sash of a certain color, or distinctive clothing or turbans. In some places, the Muslim government prohibited non-Muslims from riding a horse astride and only

---

<sup>24</sup> Sahner, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Sahner, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Sahner, 5–6. The Arab conquests, however, did not significantly differ from the standards of warfare in that time period. The imposition of the *jizya* came as no surprise, as the Byzantines, Vandals, and Romans also required tribute from those under their rule. See Ye’or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity*, 52, Ye’or writes that “massacre or slavery of the vanquished peoples, burning, pillage, destruction, and the claiming of tribute were the common practices during the period under consideration of every army whether Greek, Latin, or Slav.”

<sup>27</sup> Donald Fairbairn, *The Global Church: The First Eight Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021), 320.

<sup>28</sup> Bat Ye’or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude* (Cranberry, NJ: Associated University Press, 1996), 88. On page 52, Ye’or contends that the doctrine of *jihad* gave the Arab-Muslim armies justification for conquering. She writes, “The Arabs, stirred by their profound belief and the conviction of belonging to an elite nation, superior to all others (Koran 3:106), put them into practice, feeling that they were thereby fulfilling a religious duty and executing the will of Allah.”

allowed riding donkeys side-saddle or walking.<sup>29</sup> An account from the eighth century tells how caliph al-Mansur began branding non-Muslims, not as a measure to force conversion but as a way to account for all the taxpayers in his dominion.<sup>30</sup> Such measures did not result in conversions but rather in large portions of the populace fleeing his jurisdictions.

### Voluntary Conversions to Islam

Much recent scholarship confutes the charge that Islam spread by the sword by pointing out that the historical record contains many instances of peaceful, voluntary conversions to Islam. According to Bell, “The Arabs within the Peninsula seem to have gone over from Christianity to Islam without much hesitation or regret. The same applies very largely to the Arabs of Syria.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the pattern holds true as Christians in North Africa encountered Muslims from Arabia.

Sheer force or violence cannot explain why so many Christians converted to Islam. Scholars like Zaehner, Küng, and Ezzati blame the doctrine of the Trinity for the mass conversion of Christians to Islam during the first two centuries after Muhammad. Zaehner writes,

That the vast majority of Christians overrun by the Muslim armies happily adopted the new faith was due probably much less to coercion than to the fact that they had no difficulty in accepting the new monotheism, which was not bedeviled by those intractable mysteries concerning the Person and nature of Christ and the unintelligible doctrine of the Holy Trinity that seemed to bring back polytheism by the back door, but which offered them a God, wholly simple and wholly One, whom they were required to serve reverently and who would infallibly reward their faith on the Day of Judgment. This they could do with the better grace since the new religion did not bid them renounce Jesus, the

---

<sup>29</sup> Ye’or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity*, 79, writes, “When traveling, it was compulsory in the Middle Ages for *dhimmi*s to bear the *jizya* receipt, a piece of parchment worn round the neck or a seal worn on the wrist or on the chest; a *dhimmi* traveling without this receipt risked death. The seal of the *jizya*, characteristic of the *dhimmi*, was soon regarded as a stigma. In the Ottoman Empire, the receipt had to be produced at the demand of tax collectors on pain of immediate imprisonment, for the *dhimmi*s were easily recognizable by their distinctive costume and could be controlled in the street.”

<sup>30</sup> Christians paid the Muslim rulers taxes just as they had paid their former rulers. In other cases, Christians faced harsh treatment. The *Zuqnin Chronicle*, the work of a Monophysite chronicler, describes the caliph al-Mansur’s (754–75) efforts to systematically extract full taxation from the *dhimmi* population in Mesopotamia. His plan involved branding non-Muslims on their necks, foreheads, hands, chests, and backs to identify taxpayers.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1925). J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1990), 311, writes, “Arabs in general offered no resistance that came from the heart when an Arab monotheistic religion, that related itself to the natural conditions of an Arab community ... was proclaimed and imposed by one of themselves.” In the early years of the Muslim expansion, Arabs faced more pressure to convert to Islam than non-Arabs. See Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, 336–37.



Messiah, and his mother, Mary, but rather commanded them to hold them in high esteem.<sup>32</sup>

Ezzati concurs, “While various Christian sects were arguing about the most irrelevant and trivial points of Christian doctrines and trying hard to solve or define the question of ‘Trinity’ and make it appeal to the hearts of the people, many Christians grew tired and bored with the arguments and preferred to accept the plain monotheism of Islam.”<sup>33</sup> While Zaehner, Küng, and Ezzati identify confusion over the Trinity as a key reason for conversion to Islamic Unitarianism, they fail to dig into how responses of Christians who held to the orthodox position differed from the responses of those who held heretical positions. A detailed examination reveals that the theologies of different Christian communities led them to respond to Islam in different ways.

### **The Rise of Islam in Arabia**

Various Christian sects sought refuge in the deserts of Arabia as they fled persecution from Roman or Byzantine-sanctioned orthodoxy.<sup>34</sup> Moffett notes that “a significant weakness in the early Christian missions in Arabia [was] that the major areas of Christian strength on the eve of the rise of Islam were all foreign dominated.... The Christian faith retained a foreign tinge in the Arabian peninsula. Nowhere was it able to establish an authentic Arabian base. It had not yet even translated the Scriptures into Arabic.”<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> R. C. Zaehner, “Why Not Islam?” *RelS* 11 (1975): 179, observes the same thing. Likewise, Küng sees the relative simplicity of Islamic theology, over against Trinitarian doctrine of orthodox Christianity, as a contributing factor to Islam’s ascension over Christianity in many places. He argues, “The positive contribution of Islam—compared with dogmatic Christianity and its belief in the Trinity and the incarnation—is its lesser complexity and its doctrine, which is more rational and in some respects illuminating. There is no question that this greater simplicity had a decisive influence on so many Christians who converted to Islam, leading to the almost complete disappearance of Christianity, from the countries in which it originated (the Middle East and North Africa). It also often represents a reason for conversion to Islam.” Hans Küng, *Islam: Past, Present and Future* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 486.

<sup>33</sup> A. Ezzati, *The Spread of Islam: The Contributing Factors* (London: Islamic College for Advanced Studies Press, 2002), 97, writes, “They preferred the prophethood of a human being (Muhammad) to the divinity and Godhead of Jesus, or Monophysite, or Unitarianism. Islam replaced complexity of religious doctrines with simplicity, trinity with unity, divinity of man with manliness and humanity, superstition with plain facts, empty theological discussions with concrete observation and fundamental analysis. The rationality of Islamic teachings especially theology very possibly attracted many thinkers of other religions. The shortcomings of other religions compared to Islam has been acknowledged by non-Muslim scholars as a factor for the spread of Islam.”

<sup>34</sup> Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, 17. “Certainly Orthodox Christianity can have had little appeal to the Arabs, for it was associated with Byzantine imperialism, but Monophysitism and Nestorianism were diffused by the Christianised and semi-Christianised tribes in the north and were also actively propagated by missionaries.”

<sup>35</sup> Moffett, *Christianity in Asia*, 281.

Arab Christians did not have widespread access to the Bible in their language until about 867, effectively cutting them off from biblical theology prior to that point.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, Islam offered Arabs a religion that glorified their mother tongue and provided a scripture in their mother tongue. Furthermore, locals viewed the Trinitarian doctrine, which their Byzantine overlords endorsed and enforced, as a tool of oppression, so they were open to accept anti-Trinitarian alternatives.

As Islam spread north, it encountered the Ghassanid kingdom, a client state of Rome, that served as a buffer between the border of the Empire in Syria and the wilds of Arabia. At the apex of the Ghassanid church in the sixth century, 89 bishops, and 100,000 priests served more than 1,200 churches.<sup>37</sup> The Ghassans had previously embraced Monophysitism, which put them at odds with the Byzantines.

Syrian and Greek-speaking Christians in southern Palestine were officially part of the Byzantine Empire, but culturally more akin to Arabs. Many of these communities were primed to accept a prophet from among their own people, a preacher of monotheism who shared their cultural affinity, and a man who could serve as a strong man in the face of Byzantine power. Bell writes, “Although the Ghassanid tribe remained staunch Christians after Islam, it is nonetheless true that the rigorous Monophysitism that they promulgated, with its emphasis on the single nature of Christ and its simpler version of Christianity compared to Byzantine orthodoxy, made the rapid spread of Islam much easier when it did come.”<sup>38</sup> This situation contrasts with the situation of the Chalcedonian Christians of Palestine. According to Schick, based on his study of architectural ruins in Palestine, among the predominately Chalcedonian Christians of Palestine,<sup>39</sup> there were “only a few cases of [conversion from] Christianity to Islam.”<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Refer to the discussion in footnote 6. R. H. Kilgour, “Arabic Versions of the Bible,” *The Muslim World* 6 (Oct 1916): 383, writes, “Those who believe that a vernacular Bible spells strength for the Christian Church cannot help wondering whether the whole course of the world’s history might not have been altered had the rich testimony of God’s Word been earlier available for the Arabic people in their own tongue.”

<sup>37</sup> Warwick Ball, *Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire* (London: Routledge, 2000), 105.

<sup>38</sup> Ball, *Rome in the East*, 105.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Schick, *The Christians Communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic Rule: A Historical and Archaeological Study* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin, 1995), 9.

<sup>40</sup> Schick, *The Christian Communities in Palestine*, 81–82.

## Persia

As Islam spread east into Persia, it encountered non-Greek-speaking Nestorian Christians who had lived as a minority community among a majority Zoroastrian population. This Christian community had faced persecution from their Persian rulers and hoped for more leniency from the Arab invaders. In fact, many found that their situation did improve under Arab rule.

The Nestorian Church not only continued under Arab rule but grew. Moffett records the addition of eight new archbishoprics as late as the tenth century, but by that point, Islam was too thoroughly entrenched for Christianity to make a comeback.<sup>41</sup> Conversion was unidirectional. One could become Muslim, but under Islamic law, apostasy from Islam was a capital crime.<sup>42</sup> Muslim law required the child born to a couple of mixed religious faiths to be considered Muslim, if either the father or the mother was Muslim.<sup>43</sup> The inevitability of demographic shifts spelled the decline of Christianity in Persia.

## Egypt

As Islam spread west into Egypt, it encountered minimal military resistance. Kennedy writes, “The arrival of the Muslims seems to have been seen by at least some of the Copts as an opportunity to cast off the authority of the hated Romans.”<sup>44</sup>

Egypt provides an example of the importance of distinguishing conquest from conversion. Kennedy writes, “Of all the early Muslim conquests, that of Egypt was the swiftest and most complete. Within a space of two years, the country had come entirely under Arab rule. Even more remarkably, it has remained under Muslim rule ever since. Seldom in history can so massive a political change have happened so swiftly and been so long-lasting.”<sup>45</sup> The conversion of the majority of Egyptians, in contrast, happened much more gradually.

---

<sup>41</sup> Moffett, *Christianity in Asia*, 359.

<sup>42</sup> Moffett, *Christianity in Asia*, 347.

<sup>43</sup> Moffett, *Christianity in Asia*, 357.

<sup>44</sup> Hugh N. Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In* (Da Capo; Perseus, 2007), 148. Ibn Abd al-Hakam’s *Futūh* recounts that the Coptic Patriarch Benjamin instructed his followers to welcome the Arab armies. The Coptic bishop John of Nikiū writes favorably about the Amr’s treatment of the Christians under his rule. “He exacted the taxes which had been determined upon but he took none of the property of the churches, and he committed no act of spoliation or plunder, and he preserved them throughout all his days.”

<sup>45</sup> Kennedy, 165.

Wilkin writes, “The Bible was translated into Coptic, and a language that had been spoken largely by peasants and the lower classes became a literary language.”<sup>46</sup> He continues, “The rejection of the Council of Chalcedon coupled with the emergence of a distinctive Egyptian, or Coptic, national Christian culture, set Egyptian Christianity on a course independent of the imperial Church. These developments would alienate Egypt from Constantinople, but after the Muslim conquest, their deep attachment to the Coptic language and culture gave Christians in Egypt the wherewithal to persevere, albeit in reduced numbers, under Muslim rule.”<sup>47</sup> In short, the presence of a Bible in the local language was crucial to preserving a remnant of Christians under Muslim rule.

### **Nubia**

The Nubian Kingdom was located in what is now the southern part of Egypt and northern Sudan. Athanasius of Alexandria helped Christianity take root among the Nubians in the fourth century. When the Muslims invaded in the seventh century, the Nubian kingdom was strong enough to repel them and force an armistice. The treaty lasted for six hundred years. Wilkin says, “Nubian Christian culture reached its zenith in the tenth century. With their own language and cultural traditions, the Nubians were able to resist Muslim advances and remain independent far longer than most territories in the Middle East.”<sup>48</sup> The form of Christianity that prevailed in Nubia was Trinitarian. Wilkin recounts, “Islam eventually established a strong presence in the northern part of the country. By the twelfth century Christianity in Nubia was in decline, and by the fifteenth century the Nubian language had largely given way to Arabic.”<sup>49</sup> Again, we see the presence of an indigenized, Trinitarian Christianity as a key ingredient in maintaining Christianity in the face of pressure from Islam.

### **Ethiopia**

Ethiopia serves as the most potent illustration of the power of an indigenous Bible and Trinitarian theology to protect against apostasy. Ethiopian Christianity largely developed

---

<sup>46</sup> Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 206.

<sup>47</sup> Wilken, 211–12.

<sup>48</sup> Wilken, 213.

<sup>49</sup> Wilken, 213.

independently of Roman and Byzantine Christianity. The Ethiopian church was not politically or financially dependent on foreign powers. They did not conduct their liturgy in Latin or Greek, but in a local language called Ge‘ez. They were aware of theological differences between the Chalcedonians and their own Miaphysite understanding of the nature of Christ. Strauss points out that both ancient and modern Ethiopian languages lack a distinction between nature and person, which is central to the Chalcedonian position that unites the divine and human natures in the single person of Christ.<sup>50</sup> From the Ethiopian point of view, Chalcedon appears Nestorian and heretical. Although they adhered to Miaphysite Christology, their theology was unambiguously Trinitarian. Additionally, Ethiopian Christianity bears all the marks of a thoroughly mature Christianity including the Scriptures, church structure, liturgy, rituals, and not insignificantly, creeds. Wilkin observes, “Even though it was in the cultural orbit of Arabia, it was never conquered by the Muslims.... Ethiopia is the only nation in the Middle East that withstood the advance of Islam and did not become subject to Muslim rule.”<sup>51</sup>

### **North Africa**

A fiercely independent streak characterized the people in North Africa. The Berbers, who suffered defeat at the hands of Rome in Carthage in 146 BC, harbored a deep-seated animosity toward their overlords. During the first three centuries after Christ, adherence to Christianity became a way to defy the Roman Empire. With the rise of Constantine and a government-sanctioned church, North Africans demonstrated their defiance by turning to the teaching of Donatus. Donatists viewed themselves as the true church in opposition to the Roman church, which they saw as polluted by treasonous and cowardly priests. Despite sharp censure by Cyprian and Augustine, Donatism remained popular in North Africa, especially among the rural Berber people.

The elite city-dwellers, called Romano-Berbers, benefited from contact with Rome. They adopted Hellenistic culture and spoke Latin. The Roman Church supplied bishops who practiced the liturgy in Latin. Inscriptions, surviving literature, and architectural evidence indicate that North African city churches performed services in Latin, making the official doctrines of the

---

<sup>50</sup> Steve Strauss, “Creeds, Confessions, and Global Theologizing: A Case Study in Comparative Christologies: Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity,” in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids, 2006), 140–56.

<sup>51</sup> Wilken, *The First Thousand Years*, 220.

church largely inaccessible to the masses who spoke local languages. Additionally, as Wilken notes, “There is no evidence of translations of the Bible into local [Berber] languages.”<sup>52</sup> He adds, “Evidence for an indigenous Christian culture in North Africa is slim.”<sup>53</sup> In the fifth century, the Germanic Vandals swept into North Africa and made an alliance with the Berbers. The Vandals brought with them their version of Arianism. Botha and Schoen maintain that North African Christians, particularly the Berbers, also had a superficial faith in Christ.<sup>54</sup>

Vandal Arianism presented itself as a plausible and accessible alternative to the theology of the Roman Empire. Roman theology seemed oppressive because the government often took violent steps to enforce theological conformity. Arianism cultivated a portrayal of Jesus amenable to the Muslim presentation of Jesus so that when Muslims arrived, venerating Jesus as a prophet, but denying his divine status as the Son of God, the Arian Christians considered the Muslim doctrine compatible with their pre-existing beliefs.

By the time Muhammad began preaching his version of monotheism, many Christians in Arabia and North Africa had long held to a version of anti-Nicene Arianism known as Vandal Arianism.<sup>55</sup> Vandal Arianism was an iteration of the Arian heresy. The Arian heresy denied the deity of Christ and understood Jesus in terms of an exalted human. The Vandal conception differed from the refined philosophical Greek Arianism that conceived of Jesus as slightly less than divine, the most exalted creature.<sup>56</sup> This conception of Jesus as an exalted man seemed compatible with the Muslim conception of Jesus as a venerable prophet. Jenkins comments, “Conversion was all the easier because, in these early centuries, Islam bore a much closer resemblance to Christianity than it would in later eras, making the transition less radical.”<sup>57</sup> A profusion of non-Trinitarian theology among many churches in North Africa predisposed many Christians to accept Islam’s version of monotheism and the Muslim portrayal of Jesus.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Wilken, 320.

<sup>53</sup> Wilken, 320. Cf. Ulrich Schoen, “The Death of a Church: Remarks on the Presumed Reasons for the Disappearance of the ‘First Church’ in North West Africa,” *Theological Review* 2, no. 1 (April 1979): 3–20.

<sup>54</sup> Botha, “The Extinction of the Church in North Africa”; Schoen, “The Death of a Church.”

<sup>55</sup> C. J. Speel II, “The Disappearance of Christianity from North Africa in the Wake of the Rise of Islam,” *Church History* 29 (1960): 379–97.

<sup>56</sup> Charles Archibald Anderson Scott, *Ulfilas, Apostle of the Goths* (Cambridge: Macmillan and Bowes, 1885), 105–6.

<sup>57</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 31.

<sup>58</sup> Q al-E-Imran 3:59, “The similitude of Jesus before Allah is as that of Adam; He created him from dust, then said to him: ‘Be.’ And he was.” Muhammad ‘Ata’ur-Rahim and Ahmad Thomson, *Jesus: Prophet of Islam*, rev. (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1995), 5, write, “In North Africa and West Asia the teachings of Arius were

In Latourette's view, "The Arian attitude, with its tendency toward a Christology more nearly akin to that of the Moslems, facilitated conversion."<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Speel contends that "feebleness of the Christian faith" sped the capitulation of Christians to Islam.<sup>60</sup> He argues that Arianism opened the door for Islamic Christology because this heresy was "remarkably similar to Islam."<sup>61</sup> Speel specifically identifies Vandal Arianism as the belief system that "provided an effective transitional stage between Trinitarianism and Islam."<sup>62</sup> Recently, Hendley dismissed Speel's thesis but offers little in the way of direct counter-arguments or evidence.<sup>63</sup> Hendley successfully demonstrates the ongoing presence of Christianity in North Africa under Muslim rule until the Almohads in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but he makes no distinction between Arian and Nicene Christianity, leaving Speel's thesis intact.

Speel makes the critical observation that anti-Trinitarian Christians accepted Islam much more readily than Trinitarian Christians. He writes, "Conversions to Islam were nearly always at the cost of non-Christian religions and non-Trinitarian Christianity."<sup>64</sup> In his observation, "Conversions from *Trinitarian* Christianity to Islam were the exception and not the rule."<sup>65</sup> In contrast, "Conversions from Christianity of the ... Arian type were numerous."<sup>66</sup> Arian Christianity reveals less resilience to pressure from Islam than Trinitarian forms of Christianity.

After the fall of Carthage in 697, the church in North Africa, both Arian and Trinitarian, went into steep decline, but whereas Arianism vanished, Trinitarian Christianity persisted, albeit in a much-reduced state. Lapidus states, "Whereas there had been two hundred bishoprics in North Africa at the time of the Muslim incursion, by 1076 there were only three."<sup>67</sup> These three bishops were Trinitarian and sent to serve Trinitarian congregations. Widespread neglect of

---

accepted by the majority of the people who readily embraced Islam when it later came to them. Because they had held to the doctrine of One-God and the pure teaching of Jesus, they recognised Islam as the truth." For this reason, Islam considers Christianity *praeparatio Islamica* (preparation for Islam), which is ironic because some Christian thinkers view Islam as *preparatio evangelica*.

<sup>59</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity: The Thousand Years of Uncertainty*, 3rd ed., vol. 2 (New York: Harper, 1938), 306.

<sup>60</sup> Speel II, "The Disappearance of Christianity," 382.

<sup>61</sup> Speel II, 387, 393.

<sup>62</sup> Speel II, 381.

<sup>63</sup> Hendley, "Disputing the End of African Christianity," 294–95.

<sup>64</sup> Speel II, "The Disappearance of Christianity," 393.

<sup>65</sup> Speel II, 393 (*italics original*).

<sup>66</sup> Speel II, 393 (*italics original*). Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 22, observes that Chalcedonian churches, and to a lesser degree Monophysite churches, survived in Arabia whereas Nestorian churches were almost completely obliterated by Islam.

<sup>67</sup> Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 378.

Trinitarian doctrine and low levels of catechesis compounded “theological uncertainty” among the Christian communities. After chronicling the decline in the number of orthodox pastors in North Africa leading up to the Muslim invasion, Tilley concludes, “Little wonder then that Islam made inroads in North Africa as nowhere else in Christian lands. Repeated challenges to episcopal authority proved too much for the bishops, and their number and influence declined. In this power vacuum, North Africans lacked the leadership necessary to maintain widespread allegiance to Christianity.”<sup>68</sup> By the twelfth century, Christianity of any form had disappeared from North Africa.

### Spain

When Islam moved farther west into Spain in 711, the Muslims found many among the populace who accepted their message. Arianism created a favorable atmosphere in Spain for the incoming Muslims.<sup>69</sup> In Spain, the pattern of Arianism opening the door for Christians to convert to Islam continued. Muslims ruled Spain until the sixteenth century when Roman Catholic rulers from the northern part of Spain reconquered the Iberian Peninsula.

### Martyrs and Apologetics

Two additional pieces of evidence speak to the type of Christianity that survived under Islam, namely, the theological persuasion of the Christian martyrs, and the theology of the apologetic and polemical works written against Islam. Drawing from a plethora of sources, Sahner identifies “roughly 270 new martyrs from the early Islamic period if we compile all the saints mentioned in hagiography, liturgical calendars, and chronicles.”<sup>70</sup> Sahner’s study reveals that Chalcedonian or Melkite Christians suffered martyrdom more than other groups. He

---

<sup>68</sup> Maureen A Tilley, “The Collapse of a Collegial Church: North African Christianity on the Eve of Islam,” *TS* 62 (2001): 3–22. Lilliane Ennabli, quoted in Handley, “Disputing the End of African Christianity,” 308. After studying 2,416 Christian inscriptions in Carthage, Ennabli concludes that none were written after 650 AD, around the time of the Arab invasion.

<sup>69</sup> Bilal Cleland, “Islam and Unitarians,” *Tell Me About Islam* (blog), February 4, 2013, <https://tellmeaboutislam.com/islam-and-unitarians-by-bilal-cleland/>, writes, “The culture of Arianism had also remained strong in the minds of the people and the clergy. For the first time in the spread of Islam, large numbers of clergy accepted Muhammad as a prophet, a stunning example to their laity. While many remained Christian, large numbers of locals became Muslims.”

<sup>70</sup> Sahner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam*, 2–5. “In this world, public executions had a performative function and were designed to instill obedience in the massive and potentially recalcitrant non-Muslim population.... To ensure that conversion and assimilation went exclusively in the direction of Islam, Muslim officials executed the most flagrant boundary-crossers, and Christians, in turn, revered some of these as saints.”



observes, “The abundance of Melkite saints stands in sharp contrast to the dearth of martyrs from other denominations.”<sup>71</sup> Hoyland finds only one account of a Nestorian martyr under early Islam and one Syrian monophysite (Jacobite) martyr near the end of the eighth century.<sup>72</sup> A close examination of every known martyr under Islam highlights the importance of orthodox Trinitarianism because not one Arian exists among the known martyrs. One can identify every martyr as Trinitarian, either by their direct confession of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit or by implication of their church affiliation. The evidence suggests that Arians were not willing to be martyred for their faith.

The literary record also provides a glimpse into the theology of the Christian communities that persisted under Muslim rule. Many of the surviving apologetic and polemical works address Muslim misunderstandings of the Trinity and accusations that Christians commit the sin of *shirk*, that is, associating other beings alongside Allah. Notable examples of surviving Christian works addressing Islam include works by Timothy I of Bagdad, a Nestorian, and Theodore Abū Qurrah, a Chalcedonian. Of the existing Christian apologetic and polemic writings from the first two centuries after Muhammad, not one comes from the pen of an Arian writer. Nestorians, Chalcedonians, and Monophysites, who differed sharply on the nature of Jesus Christ, but generally held to a Trinitarian conception of God, maintained a presence under Islam for many years, while Arians did not.

### Conclusion

From a historical perspective, this research suggests an arresting conclusion: the lack of a Bible and heretical beliefs about the Trinity left the Christian communities in Arabia vulnerable to apostatizing to Islam. The Christians in Arabia, North Africa, and Spain frequently faced the decision to abandon allegiance to Christ or suffer terribly. For many, their theology left them too weak to endure the pressure from Islam. A lack of catechesis in the orthodox doctrines of Christianity weakened the logical link between the gospel and the Trinity.<sup>73</sup> Without a distinctive

---

<sup>71</sup> Sahner, 227.

<sup>72</sup> Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1997), 376.

<sup>73</sup> G. Francis S. Gray, “The Decline and Survival of Christianity in Asia,” *IRM* 42 (1953): 400. George Fry, *CT* (1969), 403, 403, remarks, “Their doctrine was sometimes mistaken, or at any rate weak, and this was a handicap to them.” Cf. F. Crawford Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity: St. Margaret’s Lectures on the Syriac-Speaking Church* (London: John Murray, 1904), 189, attributes the collapse of the Syriac-speaking church in part to Islam to

Trinitarian theology, heterodox Christians saw no compelling reason to bear the steep cost of remaining loyal to the one God who is eternally the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.<sup>74</sup> Only those communities with an indigenous Bible and a Trinitarian theology showed any possibility of survival. The history of the first two centuries of Islam serves as a vivid illustration for modern Christians of the necessity of Bible translation and Trinitarian theology for a lasting faith.

---

their sink into heresy and “intellectual cowardice.” Moffett ties the deterioration of Christianity to the decline of vibrant evangelism and missions. He writes, “If Christians were no longer evangelizing and the monasteries no longer producing missionaries, the decline might well be fatal.” Moffett, *Christianity in Asia*, 361.

<sup>74</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1955), 172, likewise blames nominal Christianity for its collapse to Islam. He writes, “A large number of nominal Christians who had so fiercely quarreled with each other about unfruitful subtleties of their creeds, surrendered their faith to the conqueror.”