

---

**The Orthodox Church in the Arab World 700-1700: An Anthology of Sources**

Samuel Noble and Alexander Treiger

DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014, 355 pages.

---

Recent tragic events that occurred in Syria and Iraq have once more turned our attention to the rich Christian heritage of the Middle East. Inadequately known or studied in Turkey, Christian Arabic (and Syriac) studies is a steadily growing field and has many things to offer various academic disciplines such as church history, patristics, Arabic and Islamic philosophy, kalām, Christian-Muslim relations, Semitics and Byzantine studies. English readers

are fortunate to have a collection of texts in different genres taken from the Arab Orthodox (or ‘Melkite’ in medieval times) tradition which deserves particular interest on many accounts. This important task was accomplished by two researchers known for their personal and academic enthusiasm for the conservation of this tradition. By introducing “the Antiochene Graeco-Arabic translation movement” (or making it better known) to the field in their previous publications, Noble and Treiger have already drawn our attention to the literary activities which took place in the Orthodox community of Antioch in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, in *the Orthodox Church in the Arab World*, they cover a broader area both in region (and time period) and in content due to the strong and close connections of Palestine and its environs to Antioch and their firsthand importance for the Arab Christian tradition on a whole.

By including a foreword by Ephrem Kyriakos, the Metropolitan of Tripoli, al-Kura and Dependencies of the Church of Antioch in *the Orthodox Church in the Arab World*, Noble and Treiger reveal their interest in keeping the -Arab-Orthodox tradition alive and in contact with real life. In the introduction, they not only give a full historical account of Arab Christianity with helpful subtitles and a brief literature review –and “A Bibliographical Guide to Arab Orthodox Christianity” in the appendix– but also discuss the problems of terminology and the disregard shown to the subject by church historians or a kind of “cultural amnesia” that Arab Christians were exposed to. Special attention is given to the Abbasid period in which the Christian Arabic literature began to prosper, and the Byzantine reconquest of Antioch in 969 that witnessed a renaissance of Byzantine literature, mostly ethical and philosophical, in Arabic. The figures whose writings are included in the anthology and the genres their texts belong to are placed in a historical framework throughout the introduction. The editors have chosen texts dealing with “theology, hagiography, church history, religious polemic, devotional poetry, and ascetical literature”, some of which exist only in their Arabic versions or are introduced in English for the first time in this work. These texts are presented to the reader with comprehensive descriptions made by notable specialists.

The anthology begins with excerpts from a text well-known to those who study Christian Arabic theology, *Risāla difāiyya fī l-‘aqāid al-masīḥiyya* (An Apology for the Christian Faith) as it is called by Mark N. Swanson who gives an elaborate description of the text and related discussions. Dating back to the 8<sup>th</sup> century, this text is the earliest Christian apology written in an Arabic which is definitely rich in Qur’anic vocabulary and Islamic terminology. John C. Lamoreaux introduces us to Theodore Abū Qurra’s (d. later than 816)

*Theologus Autodidactus* in which the prominent Chalcedonian theologian explains the way to find the true religion or the role played by human reason in human-divine relations. It is for the benefit of the reader to have excerpts from this text since the bishop of Harran is much more known for his works that deal with the veneration of icons, human free will or epistemology, whereas in *Theologus* he provides us with a philosophical and theological work written in a similar way to that of Ḥayy ibn Yaḡzān. Another text with a background which is enriched in Islamic terminology is introduced by Krisztina Szilagyı. This anonymous 9<sup>th</sup> century work is a historical but fictional account of a disputation taken place between the monk Abraham of Tiberias and the emir ‘Abd al-Raḡmān al-Hāshimī and three other Muslim debaters. By looking at its widespread use among Arabic-speaking Christians and its victorious end for the monk, it is possible to suggest that *Mujādala al-rāhib Ibrāhīm al-Ṭabarānī* (The Disputation of the Monk Abraham of Tiberias) must have played the role of an apology and martyrology for those Christians who, by the rapid growth of Islam, found themselves both in defense of their faith and totally embedded in the Arab culture.

Three short examples of another genre are presented with Lamoreaux’s introduction and translation. It is hagiography or biographies of saints mostly interwoven with folkloric elements. Considering their daily use and popularity, these stories of holy men and women must have played a significant role in the development and preservation of an Arab Christian identity. The Arab Orthodox hagiographical writings are particularly important for their links with the Byzantine and Islamic tradition. Although they did not receive the attention they deserved from their Muslim and Byzantine contemporaries, Arab Christian historians such as Sa‘īd ibn al-Baṭrīq (d. 940) and Yaḡyā ibn Sa‘īd (d. ca. 1066) are recognized more than other Arab Christian writers. Lamoreaux introduces another historian from the same period whose *Chronicle* gives us valuable information about the diversity of religious views in Syria. What makes Agapius of Manbij’s (d. after 942) world history special is his discussion of the Jewish corruption of the Old Testament and its use by Syriac-speaking Christians.

Christian Arabic literature does not consist only of prose texts as Samuel Noble shows us in his approach to Sulaymān al-Ghazzī (d. after 1027) and his works. Al-Ghazzī’s religious poetry or *Diwān*, which can also be classified as an ascetical work, is a valuable source to gain insight into his personal turbulences, great learning and zeal to explain the Trinitarian doctrine and Christology in orthodox terms. In addition to his career as a bishop, Sulaymān wrote esoteric essays in which he addresses theological subjects

with particular attention to their cosmological aspects and in a manner that reminds one of the writings of Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ.

In the following chapter, the same author makes a vivid description of an impressive figure who “can be seen as the meeting point of two ‘Hellenisms’: the Hellenism of Byzantium and the Hellenism of the Muslim caliphate”. With his eloquency in Greek and Arabic, ‘Abdallāh ibn al-Faḍl al-Anṭākī (d. after 1052) not only produced excellent translations of patristic Greek texts but also composed original works in Arabic which combined the patristic tradition (and the Greek philosophy) with Arabic thought. Noble’s translations of ‘Abdallāh’s essay on the soul and free will and his refutation of astrology give insights into the character of the above mentioned translation movement that emerged in Antioch in the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The same environment produced the Arabic translation of an interesting Greek text which is about spiritual life or the journey of the human mind after the Fall. *The Noetic Paradise* or *al-Firdaws al-Aqlī* can be seen as an ethical text and takes theosis or the union with God as its main conception. Theosis is an essential part of the Orthodox thought and a possible meeting point on which the Eastern and Western churches can build bridges as modern theologians from both sides have been discussing. In Alexander Treiger’s excerpts from four different parts of the work, the reader can catch a glimpse of what this conception should have meant for Arabic-speaking Christians of medieval times.

By an apt choice, the editors included Treiger’s translation of Agathon of Homs’s (d. ca. 1150) apology for his resignation from his post, and from this we obtain a fair idea of the reasons behind the schism between Rome and the Eastern Church and the irregularities or “blasphemies” that emerged among the clergy of Homs. As a competent theologian, Agathon weaves certain theological subjects into his approach to the nature of priesthood and the principles of Christian canon law. One of the eminent scholars of Christian Arabic studies, Sidney H. Griffith, presents us the profile of an early 13<sup>th</sup> century Orthodox theologian and his widely known *Letter to a Muslim Friend*. In a possibly fictional setting, Paul of Antioch or the bishop of Sidon deals with critical theological and philosophical subjects and defends Orthodox Christianity from a Christian perspective, but in an idiom rich in Qur’anic vocabulary.

Towards the end, *the Orthodox Church in the Arab World* contains the stories of two Melkite clergymen from the 17<sup>th</sup> century: Macarius Ibn al-Za’im (d. 1672) and his son, Paul of Aleppo (d. 1669). The patriarch of the

Orthodox Church of Antioch is mainly known for his travels to Romania, Ukraine, Russia and Georgia to raise money for his church and his efforts to correct the Arabic liturgical books in use on the basis of their Greek equivalents. Nikolaj Serikoff chose to translate four texts from the patriarch's corpus which mainly consists of translations, excerpts and commentaries: the part of his *Notebook* that deals with the Arabic meanings of some Greek names of the saints, two short treatises about the sign of the cross and the hierarchical blessings and the second of his two letters written for Louis XIV. As Ioana Feodorov who provides excerpts from the records of Paul's seven-year journey to Eastern Europe aptly indicates, the tenacity of the patriarchate of Antioch to be in contact with Orthodox communities and raise awareness about Arabic-speaking Christians living under Ottoman rule became more prominent with Paul. His *Journal* gives valuable information about the post-Byzantine Orthodox world.

*The Orthodox Church in the Arab World* can function both as an introduction and as a textbook or reader. However, the uninformed reader would require some background in the history of Eastern Christianity, the medieval Middle East and Arabic philosophy. Specialists would acknowledge the value of this much-needed work and hope for its counterparts to appear in other fields like Syriac studies or in corresponding areas regarding the miaphysite and diaphysite churches in the Islamicate world. Considering the unedited manuscripts and interesting topics waiting to be studied, there is still much to do in this field and besides its significance for Christian-Muslim relations, Christian Arabic texts are interesting enough per se. We hope that future patristic and Byzantine scholars and Arabists will do justice to Christian Arabic thought and secure its place in intellectual history.

**Elif Tokay**

(PhD, İstanbul University Faculty of Theology)